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Comment

Charlie Kirk’s Murder and the Crisis of Political Violence

After a shooting with obvious political resonance, news about the perpetrator’s motives rarely brings clarity.

By Benjamin Wallace-Wells

September 11, 2025

Photo illustration by Cristiana Couceiro; Source photograph from Getty

Three thousand people attended the Turning Point USA event at which Charlie Kirk spoke on Wednesday, on an outdoor green at Utah Valley University. The sheer size of that crowd—in the morning, at a school in a suburb of Provo, and even if some were there to protest—is just another piece of evidence that Kirk, in his years-long campaign to inspire a hard-right turn among people in their teens and twenties, had built a formidable movement. There was a Q. & A. portion, and someone asked how many transgender Americans had been mass shooters in the past decade, to which Kirk replied, “Too many.” The person next asked, “Do you know how many

mass shooters there have been in America over the last ten years?" Kirk said, "Counting or not counting gang violence?" Then, in videos, there is a single, audible crack, and Kirk's body jerks and then goes limp. In the audience, heads turn: someone had shot him, apparently from an elevated position about a hundred and fifty yards away. Soon, Kirk's spokesman announced that he had been killed. He was thirty-one, and left behind a wife and two young children. President Trump, a close ally, ordered all flags flown at half-staff until Sunday evening.

Kirk's death was brutal, and tragic. It also had the effect that terrorists aim for, of spreading political panic. In the immediate aftermath of a killing with obvious political resonance, there is a period of nervous foreboding, as the public waits for news of the perpetrator's identity and for any hints of what might have motivated the terrible act, and braces for the recriminations to come. But, as often as not, information brings no clarity. We have a fairly good sense of the politics that motivated Luigi Mangione, the accused killer of the UnitedHealthcare C.E.O., and James Fields, who sped his car into a crowd of counter-protesters at the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, killing a young woman.

But attempts to define the political motives of Thomas Crooks (who tried to kill Trump last summer, in Butler, Pennsylvania), or of Cody Balmer (who has been charged with firebombing Governor Josh Shapiro's official residence, in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, in April), or even of Vance Boelter (the longtime anti-abortion activist who, in June, allegedly killed one Minnesota state lawmaker, along with her husband, and tried to kill another) quickly become ensnared in the problems of their apparent mental illness or a more basic incoherence. Robin Westman, who stands accused of shooting and killing two children at a Catholic church in Minneapolis last month (and whose transgender identity was the focus of many right-wing media reports), had written "Kill Donald Trump" on some weapons, and neo-Nazi slogans ("Jew gas" and "6 million wasn't enough") on others, and expressed alignment with the Sandy Hook shooter, Adam Lanza. The motives were strange and idiosyncratic enough that they couldn't easily be blamed on any one partisan side.

The effect of these violent acts on politics has been easier to track. Shortly after the news of Kirk's shooting, the former Obama Administration official and liberal pundit Tommy Vietor echoed a common sentiment when he wrote on social media, "Political violence is evil and indefensible. It's a cancer that will feed off itself and spread." If that is right—if violence is contagious—then that is because each act generates its own responsive pattern of fear. The news itself in recent years has been a catalogue of the ubiquity of political aggression and anticipatory dread. In 2022, a man arrived at Brett Kavanaugh's home with a Glock and padded boots; later that year, a man broke into Nancy Pelosi's home and tried to murder her husband with a hammer. Threats against members of Congress have also escalated significantly in the past decade. The Republican senator Lisa Murkowski, of Alaska, said at a conference this summer, "I'm oftentimes very anxious myself about using my voice, because retaliation is real." After the shootings of lawmakers in Minnesota, the Democratic congressman Greg Landsman told the *Times* that every time he went out on the campaign trail he was haunted by a vision of himself lying murdered. "It's still in my head. I don't think it will go away," he said.

What politicians can control is how they respond. Speaking from the Oval Office on Wednesday evening, Trump denounced his perceived enemies. "For years, those on the radical left have compared wonderful Americans like Charlie to Nazis and the world's worst mass murderers and criminals," he said, and vowed to find those he deemed responsible for "political violence, including the organizations that fund it and support it." Unlike Barack Obama, who sang "Amazing Grace" at a funeral after the mass shooting at Charleston's Mother Emanuel church, Trump made no gesture toward common national feeling; he limited his litany of victims to those with whom he is aligned. The man sitting at the Resolute desk and blaming his enemies for political demonization—for acting "in the most hateful and despicable way"—had earlier in the week promoted a new campaign of *ICE* raids in Chicago with a social-media post featuring himself as Robert Duvall's character in "Apocalypse Now" and the tag line " 'I love the smell of deportations in the morning . . .' Chicago about to find out why it's called the Department of WAR." That aggression, combined with Kirk's shooting, seemed to be literalizing the culture war, in real time.

The footage of Kirk's murder is horrifying. His head flops; blood gushes from his neck. At a press conference afterward, the university's police chief, who had just six officers to protect the crowd of three thousand, said, "You try to get your bases covered, and unfortunately, today, we didn't." It is hard to blame him. The ubiquity of weapons and the ease with which just about anyone can get them has made the protection of human lives increasingly difficult. That the threat of political violence is so endemic is one reason that what was once true of Trump's movement is increasingly true of the country: it is distrustful, and feeling imperilled. In Utah, the people closest to the stage threw themselves to the ground quickly, and then so did hundreds of others, as they realized what was happening, in a wave that moved outward from Kirk. It was a visual manifestation of fear, spreading. ♦

Benjamin Wallace-Wells began contributing to The New Yorker in 2006 and joined the magazine as a staff writer in 2015. He writes about American politics and society.

The Musical Life

Debbie Gibson’s Pavarotti Period

The eighties pop princess returns to the Metropolitan Opera, where she sang in the Children’s Chorus, and shows off her new memoir, “Eternally Electric.”

By Sarah Larson

September 15, 2025

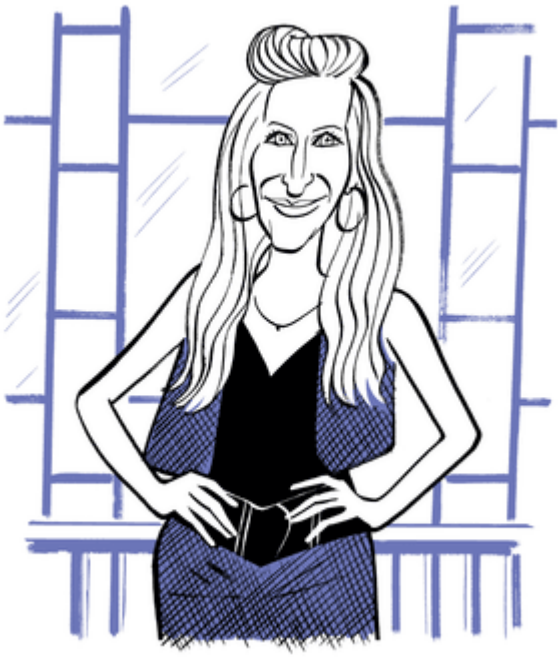

Illustration by João Fazenda

At age sixteen, in 1987, Debbie Gibson, of Merrick, Long Island, released her début album of original pop songs, “Out of the Blue,” which went triple platinum. At seventeen, she became the youngest artist in history to write, perform, and produce a *Billboard* No. 1 single; at eighteen, she tied Bruce Springsteen for *ASCAP’s* Songwriter of the Year. Before that, she was a fairly normal, if precocious, suburban kid. Recently, Gibson, now fifty-five, visited the Metropolitan Opera House, which plays a supporting role in her

new memoir, “Eternally Electric.” Gibson, who is energetic and youthful, often sings snippets of songs (“Pink Pony Club,” “Copacabana,” “Raspberry Beret”) to illustrate points, and she zipped around in high-heeled sandals and a combo of biceps-flaunting sleeveless top and flared pants. “This is so incredible and surreal—I haven’t walked through this since I was thirteen,” she said at the stage door. She entered a long, tiled corridor; inside, the acoustics instantly brightened. “In this hallway, I was crossing paths with Luciano Pavarotti,” Gibson recalled. “He was warming up. Can you imagine how it was reverberating? He just literally did, like, a ‘*MAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHH*!’ ” She sang a booming, sustained D, with vibrato. “Just one big note,” she said.

At ten, Gibson joined the Met’s Children’s Chorus, where she sang alongside current and future opera stars and appeared in “La Bohème,” “Le Rossignol,” and “Hansel and Gretel.” (At school, she liked to wear a red Met Opera sweatshirt and an “*I* ❤️ *OPERA*” pin; classmates teased her by singing “Figaro, Figaro, Figaro.”) “There had just been that big, like, murder at the Met”—in 1980, when a stagehand killed a violinist—“and we were always, like, scaring ourselves walking past the costume rack: ‘Oh, my God, somebody can jump out!’ ” She popped into a lounge and greeted the young opera professionals inside. “Hi! I’m Debbie Gibson, and I used to sing here, in the Children’s Chorus.” She opened her memoir and showed them a photograph of herself as a child, smiling alongside Plácido Domingo, in his Rodolfo costume. “We were warned within an inch of our lives not to bother the artists,” she told them. But, with a friend acting as lookout, “I just walked right over and knocked on the door,” she said, pointing to a dressing room. “He was, like, ‘Come in, come in!’ in that gorgeous Spanish accent. There I was in my turtleneck.” Her impression was that Domingo and “all the artists—because I eventually met everybody—thought it was really cool that a little kid was interested in them and the opera.”

Gibson proceeded to the Children’s Chorus room, where two staffers welcomed her to poke through the costume racks. She admired an old hat and then gasped. “I think this was my skirt!” she said. She held up a checked skirt—urchin clothing for “La Bohème”—whose beige-and-tan print resembled the vest and pants she had on. “I must have channelled this

today!” she said. What do the kids do in “La Bohème”? “We go, ‘*Aranci, ninnoli! Caldi marroni e caramelle! Su, corriamo, su, corriamo! Datteri, aranci, latte di cocco, caldi marroni!*’ ” she sang, in a plucky soprano. (“Oranges, trinkets! Chestnuts and caramels. Come on, let’s run!,” etc.) Also, “We had to freeze a lot.” She peered at a photograph of a city scene from “La Bohème.” “I was, like, up in there,” she said, indicating an upper level. “In a brown petticoat with the bonnet and the whole thing. I had a giant chocolate-chip cookie.”

In the red-carpeted grand entrance, Gibson admired the newly cleaned chandeliers (“So glamorous! Where was I getting *that* in Merrick, Long Island?”) and then crept into the performance hall. Onstage, singers stood in front of a brutalist “Don Giovanni” set, singing in a Sitzprobe rehearsal of Mason Bates’s “Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay.” Their voices were gorgeous and impressively expansive. “Sitzprobe is one of my favorite things,” Gibson whispered. “It’s just really about the music. The first time I heard the orchestra in ‘Grease’ in the West End was just riveting.” The 1993 London production in which she co-starred “was so grand, and those orchestrations were so big and cinematic. It opened on me and Craig McLachlan on opposite balconies, doing ‘Oh, Sandy,’ ‘Oh, Danny,’ and then Rizzo came forward with her cigarette.” She mimed vampy smoking.

Backstage, Gibson admired a dress from “Turandot” and reminisced about favorite props: Parpignol’s toy cart, the gingerbread suits in “Hansel and Gretel.” The vocalizing onstage stopped, and the “Kavalier & Clay” singers, taking a break, streamed through the wings.

“Bravo, bravo!” Gibson said, clapping. Dimitri Pittas, a tenor, approached her.

“I was born in 1977, and you were such an incredible part of growing up,” he said. “All of the girls wanted to be you.” She showed him the Domingo picture and told him about ignoring the directive to avoid bugging the artists. “Like what I just did to you?” he said, beaming. “It doesn’t change.” ♦

Sarah Larson, a staff writer, has been contributing to The New Yorker since 2007.

Tarzan Dept.

Bouldering Beside the Harlem River Drive

After learning to climb by scaling his family's Park Slope town house, a nineteen-year-old likes to tackle the ledges of upper Manhattan, unless the cops get in the way.

By D. T. Max

September 15, 2025

Illustration by João Fazenda

Four hundred and fifty million years ago, vast continents collided, squeezing shale into schist to form Coogan's Bluff, in Highbridge Park, in

northern Manhattan. A few weeks ago, Sam Lerner Dreamer, aged nineteen, set out to climb one of its faces. “It’s tall and pretty cool,” he said. “And I think I could do it in a day.” Bouldering—climbing smaller rock formations without a rope or harness—is a cerebral sport. Charting a route to the top is known as figuring out the boulder’s “problem.” Lerner Dreamer’s rock problem would be a good one: the formation has an overhang, widely spread-out handholds, and a treacherous top.

Lerner Dreamer has the ringlets and soft eyes of a young Jesse Eisenberg, but long ropy biceps and the hands of a Gripmaster fan. He is the author of Gunks Apps’s New York City Bouldering, an online guide. It was begun by another boulderer, but, about two years ago, Lerner Dreamer, who grew up climbing the face of his family’s house in Prospect Park South, took it over. He has since added more than five hundred and fifty problems, at least a hundred and ninety-four for which he believes he’s made the “F.A.,” boulderese for “first ascent.”

The bluff has a storied history—for decades it served as free bleachers for anyone who wanted to watch New York’s baseball Giants play. But almost sixty years ago the city tore down the stadium and replaced it with the Polo Grounds Towers. Lerner Dreamer and Coogan’s Bluff themselves had a bit of a grudge match. Last summer he almost reached the top but ejected onto his crash pads because it was, he said, “too sketchy”—too full of loose stones—to climb onto.

At around noon, he skateboarded to the subway from his parents’ home. He wore slides and a T-shirt and had his crash pads sandwiching him front and rear, like an old-time newsboy. Problem 1: he had lost his brush for the summit. After a pit stop at a hardware store in Harlem, he got back on the subway, ascended from the 155th Street C stop, and dumped his pads, along with his chalk and his skateboard, at the foot of the bluff. Problem 2: how to get up to the top to clean it. He walked along the sidewalk over shards of broken car windows to where the sheer wall relented. Facing the bluff, he threw a rope toward the top; it fell back down. He threw it backward over his head. Success. He started scrambling up.

Problem 3: the Fuzz! A patrol car with flashing lights pulled up. Two of New York’s finest, suborder Thirty-third Precinct, peered into the bracken

above their heads and asked Lerner Dreamer what he was doing. If you practice a minor-market outdoor sport in New York, you know your rights. Lerner Dreamer immediately called back that climbing was permitted in city parks, “except if specified not.” As he was nearly at the top, he pointed out, it was safer for him to finish going up. Enter a second police car, bearing a lieutenant. One patrol officer, on the radio with the Parks Department, confirmed that Lerner Dreamer was good to climb as long as he did no damage. The lieutenant, alas, offered some contrary information. “Believe it or not, it’s illegal to climb a *tree* in New York City,” he added.

During the debate on the ground, Lerner Dreamer was nowhere in evidence. “He’s Tarzan!” the officer said. “I can’t see him anymore.” The lieutenant noted that Lerner Dreamer could face confiscation of his gear, or even arrest, if he climbed public rocks; all heads craned north searching for the cherub-faced climber. As the seconds ticked by, everyone cooled off a bit. The boulder, for one thing, was only some twenty feet high. At last the lieutenant relented—sort of.

“If he wants to go climb in a park where people can’t see him, then that’s fine,” he said. In other words, not here, right off the Harlem River Driveway, where he could fall on pedestrians. The squad cars slouched away.

Lerner Dreamer’s curls reappeared above the rock now. He worried that the cops would drive by again. His cellphone had somehow fallen out of his pocket on the bluff, and that was more than a problem. It was a real hassle. He was heading back to college in Colorado in a week, but New York is where he loves to climb, despite the watchful eyes. While trying to find his phone, he developed a Plan B that no one could object to. “I saw a boulder on the path,” he said. “It’s got seven different problems.” ♦

D. T. Max has been a staff writer at The New Yorker since 2010. His books include "The Family That Couldn't Sleep: A Medical Mystery" and "Finale: Late Conversations with Stephen Sondheim."

Fallout Dept.

Duck, Cover, and Pass: The Atomic Bowl

A former Crawdaddy editor produced a documentary on a peculiar postwar military football game in Nagasaki.

By Zach Helfand

September 15, 2025

Illustration by João Fazenda

In 1972, Greg Mitchell was an editor at *Crawdaddy*, the proto-rock magazine, when someone called his desk. “It was some fast-talking manager, who said, ‘I’ve got this hot act. We’re getting a big press entourage, taking you all up to Sing Sing prison,’ ” Mitchell recalled. The act was playing for the inmates to début his new band. “I thought, *Well, I don’t care about this guy, but I get to go to Sing Sing*,” Mitchell said. He

and Peter Knobler, the magazine's editor-in-chief, rode along in the band's van. The manager was Mike Appel. The act was Bruce Springsteen. Nobody else showed up. "Greetings from Asbury Park" came out soon after, and Mitchell and Knobler wanted Springsteen for *Crawdaddy*'s cover. "The staff revolted: 'You can't put him on the cover, it'll kill the magazine.' So we ended up with Loggins and Messina."

Afterward, Mitchell became the editor of *Nuclear Times*, the disarmament magazine, despite having no nuclear background other than some extravagant atomic-bomb drills in junior high in the fifties. "This air-raid signal would go, and you would go out in the hallway," Mitchell said. "They would call out, 'There are four casualties in Room 203!' And these kids would carry stretchers around with fake injured on it." Nowadays, he covers both music and nukes. "I am really the perfect boomer for this," he said. "It's duck and cover and rock and roll."

Mitchell's latest duck-and-cover project is a documentary, now airing on PBS, called "The Atomic Bowl," which details a New Year's Day football game put on by the U.S. military in a killing field in Nagasaki, a few months after America dropped the atomic bombs. The makeshift stadium was outside the charred ruins of a middle school, where a hundred and fifty-two students and thirteen teachers had been killed; the walls had messages, from dying kids to their parents, written in blood. The military convened marching bands and appointed a Navy lieutenant, Bill Osmanski, a fullback for the Chicago Bears, to captain the Isahaya Tigers, and a Marine Corps lieutenant, Angelo Bertelli, a Heisman-winning quarterback at Notre Dame, to lead the Nagasaki Bears. A few locals attended and watched in baffled horror. The Tigers won, 14–13.

The other day, Mitchell was at Poster House to check out an exhibition called "Fallout: Atoms for War & Peace." He wore a green button-down and frameless eyeglasses. At seventy-seven, he was the oldest person there; a couple of museumgoers occasionally asked him nuclear-culture questions. The exhibition documented the nuclear industry's rebranding after the bomb. A company called General Dynamics offered propaganda prints, whose brutalist beauty and cryptic, utopian slogans ("Worlds without end," "Basic forces," "Weather control") reminded Mitchell of "Severance." "No

tiny numbers, though," he said. Some people used to collect the posters. "It was like baseball cards," he explained.

Baseball is another perfect boomer intersection. "I played on a joint *Nuclear Times–The Nation* softball team in Central Park in the eighties," Mitchell said. "And I wrote this book about coaching my son in Little League that, amazingly, was optioned by Tom Hanks, who was gonna play me." Forty years ago, he wrote about the eeriness of attending a Hiroshima Carp baseball game, in a stadium right next to ground zero.

He paused in front of a booklet called "*PROTECT AND SURVIVE*" with fallout-shelter instructions. "We had canned food stored down in a concrete basement, but we never did have a fallout shelter," Mitchell said. "We just liked to buy in bulk. I grew up in Niagara Falls, which was a major missile base, a major Air Force base, practically the chemical-producing capital of the country. We used to think, *Wow, we live in such an important city, we must be one of the top ten targets for the Soviets!* It was almost pride."

No one talked about Hiroshima or Nagasaki, and Mitchell has found himself drawn to stories that have been willfully forgotten. The Atomic Bowl was big news at the time, but, aside from a few accounts, including from the writings of William W. Watt, a soldier turned poet and professor, and the images of Shunichi Mori, a local newsman whose two children were killed in the blast, memory of the game disappeared. "Was there a sense of shame?" Mitchell said. "Or was it simply the usual 'We don't care about Nagasaki'?" Researching the film, he discovered a similar military event, also erased from memory: the Nagasaki Miss Atom Bomb beauty pageant.

"The son of Angelo Bertelli was in Sonic Youth—Bob Bert," Mitchell went on. "His father never talked to him about it, ever. Literally, the only thing was, years later, Angelo Bertelli had one quote about how he and Osmanski had agreed to end the game in a tie, and Osmanski kicked an extra point to win it. It still rankled him. That was the takeaway: It should've ended in a tie." ♦

Zach Helfand is a staff writer at The New Yorker.

Then and Now Dept.

Where the Waters Once Flowed

A local photographer tracks down the ghosts of former springs and wells in New York City.

By Robert Sullivan

September 15, 2025

Illustration by João Fazenda

In the late eighteen-nineties, when the New Croton Aqueduct was just beginning to pipe water into the Bronx from Westchester, James Reuel Smith, a wealthy classicist with a passion for cataloguing, used a bicycle to survey the springs and wells of Manhattan and the Bronx. The tone of the resulting book, “Springs and Wells of Manhattan and the Bronx,” published posthumously in 1938, shifts between romantic reverie (“The water is cold and very pleasant”—a spring in West Harlem) and, as the street grid expanded, apocalyptic dread. The old water sources were, Smith wrote,

“disappearing from sight with such celerity that it is merely a matter of months when there will be none whatever left in view upon Manhattan island.”

“When I first started to read his book in the library, I thought, *This guy is a nut job*,” Stanley Greenberg, a Brooklyn-based photographer, said the other day. “But then I thought, *I have to do the exact same thing*.” Which was why Greenberg, who is sixty-eight, was standing on the corner of Clifford Place and Walton Avenue, in the Morris Heights section of the Bronx. He had on black shorts, a black shirt, and a black cycling hat, and he was zip-tying a poster-size copy of one of Smith’s old photos to the crossbars of some scaffolding. Since May, he’s put up nearly a hundred of Smith’s photos, in upper Manhattan and the Bronx, “near the spot where each spring was,” he said. Smith’s 1897 Walton Avenue photo shows a pool encircled with stones; his caption reads, “The overflow from these springs finds its way into the marsh which is about to be drained by a sewer now under construction.”

Hanging the photos is the second part of a project that Greenberg began in 2016, when he set out to rephotograph the locations of all the springs and wells described by Smith, on foot or by bike. In 2021, Greenberg published a four-hundred-and-ninety-six-page book that combines Smith’s befores with his contemporary afters, the overlap offering provocative serendipities: a drain where a well once was, a fire hydrant at a former water-pump site. Naturally, most of Greenberg’s pictures show dry land, though not all. “There’s still a spring in Central Park, near Eighty-second Street, and I did find some other springs in the northern part of the Park that Smith had photographed,” he said. “Up in St. Nicholas Park, the springs were rearranged when they built the modern water tunnel in the nineteen-teens. But when you see a stairway and there’s water flowing down it, if it’s not right after a rain, then that’s a spring.”

On a recent summer day, Greenberg moved through the Bronx with the brisk authority of a biker who has little time for automobiles, methodically checking the map on his phone, pulling copies of Smith’s photos from his backpack, watching for construction sheds. “The city will take the photos down, and so will landlords, but they seem to last longest on these sheds,”

he said. Many of the photographs have already disappeared, though a friend recently spotted one that had been posted in June, at Broadway and 108th Street, outside a closed bagel shop. “I don’t care,” Greenberg said. “I just want to post them all.”

“Can you not talk to me until dinner? I don’t want to burn through any good conversation at home.” Cartoon by Daniel Kanhai

As he walked the hills of Morris Heights, he described growing up in the Flatlands section of Brooklyn and attending Stuyvesant High School in the seventies; his father dropped him off at the subway, then drove on to Fort Hamilton High School, where he was an art teacher and an administrator. The elder Greenberg taught his son photography in their basement bathroom; after college, the younger Greenberg entered city government, first in the Parks Department and later in the Department of Cultural Affairs. After his father died suddenly, of an aneurysm—“He was about to retire and intended to return to painting,” Greenberg said—he took up photography full time, making images of overlooked spaces, locations gleaned though his city work. With “Waterworks,” a book published in 2003, he became the James Reuel Smith of today.

“There’s a willow,” Greenberg said. (Willow trees often indicate underground streams.) He was pointing to a community garden on the way to Jerome Avenue, where he attached another Smith photo near a car-repair shop. “When the aqueduct first went in, not everybody was able to get water from it,” he said. He posted a photo of a well surrounded by forest. Outside a laundromat on West Burnside Avenue, an open fire hydrant made

a Las Vegas-worthy fountain that cooled passersby. Greenberg hung an image of a spring that, in 1898, was, by Smith's account, preferred to the newly introduced Croton water. "Children may be constantly seen making pilgrimages from the surrounding houses with pitchers, milk cans, and what not," Smith wrote.

A man walked out of a shelter down the street with some questions. "*¿Qué es esto*?" he asked. There was a rush of gesticulations, with Greenberg speaking in English. "Ah," the man finally said, "*¡Agua natural del mundo*!" ♦

Robert Sullivan is the author of books including "Double Exposure."

Reporting & Essays

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  Lifelong lessons in yearning and style.
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  The founder of “House Inhabit” has grown her audience during the second Trump Administration with political gossip and what she calls “quality conspiracy.”
- **Inside Uniqlo’s Quest for Global Dominance**
  The brand conceives of itself as a distribution system for utopian values as much as a clothing company. Can it become the world’s biggest clothing manufacturer?
- **Is the Sagrada Família a Masterpiece or Kitsch?**
  In the century since Antoni Gaudí died, his wild design has been obsessively realized, creating the world’s tallest church—and an endlessly debated icon.
- **New Yorker Covers, Brought to Life!**
  To celebrate the magazine’s hundredth anniversary, photographers collaborated with Spike Lee, Julia Garner, Sadie Sink, and other notable figures to update covers from the archive.

Personal History

What I Wanted, What I Got

Lifelong lessons in yearning and style.

By Rachel Kushner

September 14, 2025

The author, wearing a dress sewn by her mother, in her back yard in Eugene, Oregon, in 1976.Photograph courtesy the author

My mother recently confessed to me that, when I was a child, my paternal grandmother periodically sent me new clothes from a department store in New York City, outfits that I never saw. My mother regularly intercepted the packages, returned the items, and used the money to buy food for our family. So many decades after the fact, we both laughed. My mother had guessed correctly that, rather than feeling betrayed, I'd be amused to learn belatedly of yet another example of her resourcefulness—along with the plywood furniture she built for us, the inventive meals she made for us using government cheese, the cookware she acquired by saving up Green Stamps—in the years when she and my father were just barely getting by.

Not all my grandmother's packages were intercepted, so I know that I would have wanted what she sent, would have revelled in the novelty of receiving matching items with the tags still on, perhaps from Danskin, her preferred brand, layered in tissue paper and giving off that special new-clothes smell (on account of formaldehyde, they now tell us). But the story of my mother exchanging those gifts for cash is itself special. Deprivations of various kinds were my sentimental education, or so I've come to believe. As a child, I almost never got any clothes I wanted. I took pleasure in clothes all the same. My relationship to them was built on yearning, on a sort of not-yet reverie that mere possession, simply having things, could never have offered me.

The clothes that my brother and I wore as children, growing up in Eugene, Oregon, were typically hand-me-downs or from Goodwill. The parents of an older girl named Sarah Summers—the very name still carries a shiver of excitement—gave me her old clothes from time to time, in washed, folded stacks that were permeated with a middle-class laundry fragrance, the smell of another world, better than my own. (We were hippies: weird soap, everything line-dried, dingy, stiff.) There was a pink hooded raincoat with a softly flocked lining that I cherished. It made me feel like "Sarah Summers," a person of whom I strangely have no actual memory, except that she was my brother's friend and later moved away. If my brother or I requested some specific garment that we could not find used—I remember him wanting a "disco shirt" for the junior-high dance—our mother would propose that she get the pattern and sew it. We sewed our own pajamas on her Singer Featherweight, and mine had one leg that was narrow and the other wide.

In 1976, when I was seven, I constantly wore a T-shirt that I had got at the Lane County Fair, from a booth where you could choose your own iron-on from those displayed (so many possibilities!), and the color of shirt you preferred. I chose an image of Farrah Fawcett, a famous photograph of her in a one-piece red bathing suit, on a kid-size yellow T-shirt. I think that what I loved most about that shirt was how the red of her bathing suit contrasted with the yellow of the T-shirt fabric, which was soft and thin. But, also, there was something about her posture that I liked. She was so contained. She had conformed her body to the dimensions of the

photograph. Her hair was like a work of art. Maybe I didn't think those things at the time. Perhaps I chose Farrah because she reflected what people admired in the seventies: feathered hair, big smiles full of white teeth, suntans. Our county fair, an annual late-summer event, was itself a pageant of glossy teen-age girls, mini-Farrahs in their tube tops and bell-bottoms, golden hair down their backs like palomino ponies.

I wore my Farrah T-shirt for a year, day in and day out, before someone, an adult, I don't remember who, told me that it wasn't "appropriate," because of Farrah Fawcett's visible nipple under the fabric of her swimsuit. I was suddenly ashamed; the joy of my shirt, poof, gone. Now it strikes me that what makes a child's innocence so burningly real, so heart-pricking, is the way in which it's rarely "pure," and is more often a misinterpretation: I probably sensed that there was power in this Farrah image; I simply didn't know that it was sexual power. I didn't yet know about sex, or that I should someday try to figure out how to become a sex object, instead of wearing one on my shirt. My confusion was a kind of protective glory, if a temporary one.

Unlike Farrah, I was fair-skinned with auburn hair of an unusual shade that seemed incredibly unfortunate. My hair was thick, which my mother said was a desirable quality, but its body only accentuated the choppy and uneven look of the chin-length haircuts she insisted on and inexpertly provided in our kitchen. (She believed that my hair was so thick because she kept it short; never mind that hers was also thick, and allowed to be long.) Old ladies said that my hair color looked artificial and asked me, admiringly, or maybe teasingly, what henna I used. Other kids, whose opinions mattered most, were not impressed. I had freckles to go with my auburn hair, and I didn't like my face on account of them. I would wander the aisles of Woolworth's in downtown Eugene, studying women's beauty products, and secretly bought a cream called Porcelana that advertised itself as effective at removing "sun freckles." It didn't work, but now it occurs to me that the cream's promise to erase freckles was, at least unconsciously, construed as a promise to erase my face and give me a different one, perhaps more like Barbie's. I had a Barbie Beauty Center, which was a giant Barbie "head," whose neck was supported by a pink plastic tray for storing the makeup that came with her and could be applied to her face. The wavy

blond tresses on the crown of her skull had the magical ability to grow longer when you tugged on them, and, if you tugged harder, to roll back into her skull, like the cord of a vacuum cleaner. I could never look like Barbie, whose features were those of an infant. But I could focus on her, practice on her, revere her as the godhead in my bedroom.

The popular girl at my elementary school—let's call her Denise—was not blond like Barbie but pretty in a conventional manner I envied. She had brown hair, skin that tanned easily, and a confident personality. In a town of loggers, hippies, and students, Denise's father was a doctor. Although her family was probably just comfortably middle class, they seemed, in contrast to the rest of us, fabulously and deliriously wealthy. Almost everyone at school was on the free-lunch program, as my brother and I were. Many kids lived in modest and identical units of university-subsidized student housing. Denise's family was out on a foothill in a large, modern ranch house. Her mother, a housewife, dropped her off at school in a Mercedes.

Kids in Eugene had paper routes, or collected bottles and cans for the deposit refunds. The year I turned eight, I worked, through a school apprenticeship program, at a bakery. Like my brother, who two years later worked at a restaurant managed by a friend of our mother's, I was compensated with food because paying us money would have been illegal. Denise got an allowance and seemingly whatever she asked for. She wore new jeans often. I still remember the brand: they were called Luv-its. I once asked her where she'd got her new Luv-its, which had red satin hearts sewn on the back pockets. "You can't afford them," she said. The thing about bullying is that the bully typically has no memory of it later, while the wounded party never forgets. Denise told other kids that there was nothing to eat at our house, if you went there to play after school. This was true, unless you were in the mood for bread with corn syrup slathered on it. She said that my brother and I didn't bathe regularly. Also true, but hey, Denise, you know what? I still don't like to get wet. An obsession with cleanliness was one of the things my proud mother relegated to middle-class anxiety. People who had nice stuff, full fridges, showered daily—that was *common*, which we were not.

My brother and I were generally allowed one new pair of shoes a year, purchased in late summer before school began—inexpensive sneakers, such as Jox by Thom McAn, or irregular samples of familiar brands from the discount-shoe outlet, pairs of Nikes or Adidases that had some factory defect. My brother could not make it an entire year without developing holes in the soles of his tennis shoes. When he complained of wet feet—this was Oregon, where it rained a lot—he was given a product called Shoe Goo and told to patch his shoes to make them last. He was not happy about getting Shoe Goo instead of shoes, which were always a source of friction at our house. That we grew out of them was treated almost like a kind of youthful defiance, obnoxious and inconsiderate. Wearing them out was even worse. A memory that I still, churlishly, can't quite get over involves my desire for clogs the summer before fourth grade. It was the late seventies, and clogs were madly popular. Every girl in my elementary school wanted them. My mother found a lime-green pair at Goodwill and brought them home. I was terribly disappointed. Clogs were supposed to be earth-toned. Denise's were the shiny rich brown of horse chestnuts, with a leather braid over the instep. Maybe we can try to dye these, my mother said. I abandoned them to our rotted back porch, where banana slugs roamed.

Later that year, after seeing the film "American Graffiti," I decided that I wanted to be "fifties." I rolled up my pants to simulate pedal pushers and wore them that way to school. "Why are your pants rolled up like that?" a girl asked me. I said it was fifties style. "No, it's not," she replied. Everyone made fun of me—this was the unpleasant spring of fourth grade, when Denise got a group of girls to pick on me as their extracurricular—but I continued to try to be fifties. My mother told me about "pin curls" as a fifties thing, and I used crisscrossed bobby pins to hold my wetted hair in place and slept like that. I was trying to get my hair to look like Candy Clark's in "American Graffiti," poofy and playful. The effect was disastrous, my hair crimped weirdly, with sections shooting out in different directions like the discordant notes of an orchestra tuning up. I later bought pink sponge rollers at Woolworth's and slept in those, unconcerned about them pressing into my scalp because the discomfort would be worth it; the rollers themselves even *looked* fifties. The results were no better than before. I went to school with crazy hair. "You keep trying that even though it never works," a member of the Denise gang said to me.

Our school play that year, just my luck, was “Bye Bye Birdie,” a musical about an Elvis-like singer who is drafted into the Army. My mother sewed me a ruffled skirt with a floral pattern, probably from fabric she’d scrounged up for free somewhere, and an acetate-and-voile “crinoline” to go under it. I finally felt fifties, even though I was given no lines in the play. I was just background and chorus. Denise, a talented singer and dancer, was a lead. At our dress rehearsal, the other girls said that only poodle skirts like the ones their mothers had sewn them were fifties, and that mine wasn’t right. I felt sad for my skirt, and for my mother, who had put so much effort into making it. But, by that time, I had learned the “Bye Bye Birdie” songs, and I didn’t think the play was so great, not like “American Graffiti,” which contained a world I would willingly seek out. I would find that good-looking hoodlum with the yellow Deuce Coupe, whose name was John, and who rolled his pack of cigarettes in his T-shirt sleeve. I would find a way to live in his reality, where he and people like him floated on attitude, with cars that had the power to back it up. In the meantime, I rolled a box of raisins from the school cafeteria into my T-shirt sleeve, as if they were Marlboro Reds. I played my cassette of the “American Graffiti” soundtrack over and over, especially the song “Runaway.” When Del Shannon sang in his tortured, smoky voice that he was “a-walkin’ in the rain,” I, too, was a-walkin’ in the rain. I was walking toward my future, toward my plan to become a moody teen-ager.

At the end of fourth grade, after several weeks of Denise and her gang following me around at school, imitating my requests that they leave me alone, I lunged at her. We tumbled into a fight, mostly scratching and pulling hair. We attended an alternative public school with a radical hippie pedagogy, where I was “tried by a jury of my peers,” and suspended for a week, because I’d taken the first swing. When I returned to school, something had burned away. Denise, with a fingernail-shaped gouge under one eye, approached me in the hall and was nice.

That summer, she and I went down to the Willamette River, where older kids hung out, and swam through the rapids under the bridge, something I was forbidden to do but did anyway. We pretended to smoke with safety matches, the long ones used for lighting a pilot, and then graduated to trying actual cigarettes, Kools, which I purchased from a machine in the Atrium

shopping complex downtown; we took puffs without inhaling and decided they were gross. I was about to turn ten. Whenever the Bee Gees' "More Than a Woman," from the "Saturday Night Fever" soundtrack, came on the radio, I was enraptured. I'd seen the movie with my brother. It was rated R, and so my mother, giving in to my brother's pleading, had pretended to come with us, bought three tickets, but then left us to watch it by ourselves. There was a rape scene and a rumble scene, both of which terribly upset me, but still I wanted to be "more than a woman," like in the song, or at least an almost-woman—anything but what I was, a mere kid. I owned a curling iron and feathered my hair. I wanted makeup, but wasn't yet allowed to wear it. I clip-clopped around the house in my mother's chipped old Dr. Scholl's, thinking they sounded like high heels. I longed for real high heels and became obsessed with a pair I'd seen on display at Burch's Shoes.

Burch's, where Denise bought her clogs, was out at Valley River Center, an indoor mall on the outskirts of town. I told my mother that I'd picked out my back-to-school shoes for fifth grade, and, to my surprise, she agreed to go with me to look at them. My mother loathed the mall and everything it stood for and never went there. I went often, always alone, even at age nine. That was how life was for a child in the seventies, at least in Eugene. On weekends, I would pay my bus fare and ride out to Valley River Center to wander, gazing into shopwindows and browsing the racks at the department stores. There was a lunch counter with scalloped paper menus, where I ordered clam chowder and felt mature and independent. The shoes from Burch's that I had come to covet on these excursions were Candie's-brand slip-on sandals. They had a three-inch wooden heel. The upholstered foot bed and toe strap were of burgundy suède. That rich color, the soft texture of the suède, stirred in me all the promise of autumn, of a new school year, of a chance to have instead of to want—in other words, to finally *be*.

Those solitary hours I spent at Valley River Center, attempting to escape the waiting room of childhood by staring at lady mannequins with their magically arched feet and inhuman aplomb, perhaps explain why I have a special love for movie scenes in which women look at department-store displays. Barbara Loden in "Wanda" (1970), for instance, examining a stiff but smartly turned-out mannequin, with a look of both pathetic admiration

—the character herself is a penniless drifter—and ironic distance: the mannequin projects poise and vitality but is unconvincingly lifelike, and Loden's character knows it. In Kent Mackenzie's film "The Exiles," from 1961, Yvonne, a young Apache woman living in Los Angeles, wanders, pregnant, while her boyfriend drinks with his rockabilly pals. It's night when she stops to gaze at the illuminated display of a dress shop downtown. As she studies a housewifely mannequin whose tiny waist seems grimly sadistic, she muses in voice-over about how she always wanted to leave the reservation, to go someplace where someone would make her "feel different, be happier."

For our outing to the mall, my mother wore short shorts she had sewn for herself and a top she had woven on her loom, the top semi-see-through, her underarm and leg hair on display. With her slim figure and her long red hair, she probably looked amazing, but because I had already learned something about the status quo in the world outside my family, I assessed her distance from convention and was mortified. Only once had I seen her dress in a way that conformed to my sense of how she should look: she was going to the bank to try to get some kind of loan, and she wore a tight pencil skirt with nylons and heels, and her leather biker jacket, which was a petite size and fitted. That jacket, which had a red satin lining and a label from Sears, had been left at my aunt's house in Oakland when some bikers came through. My mother looked so chic and sexy in it, with the tight skirt. I don't know if she got the loan.

My shoes were still in the window at Burch's, at the center of the display, with clogs around them on lower platforms, also-rans to my winner. When I pointed to the Candie's, my mother was confused.

"*Those*? But they're for a grown woman."

"I was also anticipating a more aquatic setting."
Cartoon by Johnny DiNapoli

I was dumbfounded. Not so much by her response as by my own foolishness. I'd convinced myself that, in saying yes to Valley River Center,

my mother was saying yes to my dreams. But I was still in elementary school, and she was not going to buy me these high-heeled shoes.

My memory is that she didn't humiliate me and, instead, argued against the shoes on practical terms: they'd be immediately trashed in the rainy season, my feet would hurt, and so forth. But the lesson I took was that childhood was going to continue at its interminably slow pace.

The psychoanalyst Adam Phillips, in his book "Missing Out: In Praise of the Unlived Life," says that he is struck by how often people in psychoanalytic treatment talk about experiences they have not had, "and how authoritatively, with what passion and conviction, they talk about what they have missed out on." His book is a meditation on the gap between the lives we live and the ones we imagine for ourselves. "We are made to feel special," he says, "then we are expected to enjoy a world in which we are not." We remain special, he goes on, "if only to ourselves, in our (imaginary) unlived lives." I missed out on the Candie's, but missing out is not necessarily a bad thing. Having everything we want would leave us nothing to desire, to hope for, to expect. We need both the reassuring delusion of what we imagine, and a reality that can't deliver it. Life's pleasures are, in part, pleasures we never partake in.

Although Phillips doesn't apply the paradigm of missing out explicitly to our notions of beauty, or of style as the means to achieving it, reading his book convinced me that this daily habit of getting dressed, getting a new chance to be, or to appear, in some way that we long ago decided we should be, or deserved to be, or wanted to be, allows us to live a fruitful double life, both the one that never happens and the one that always does. It's a way to practice for reality and also reality itself, a dress rehearsal and the performance.

Phillips goes on to describe a patient of his, a child who longed to be bigger, and who believed, as I did, "that being an adult is the solution to being a child." In fifth grade, I did get a kid's version of high heels, sandals with a clunky wood platform of an inch or two, a brand called Bare Traps, which dug into my feet and made them bleed, though that did not deter me from wearing them.

That year, I had a crush on my brother's friend whom I'll call Sandy, who had dark feathered hair that fell in waves to his shoulders, and rode around town on his bicycle, shirtless in white painter's overalls. He was four years older, and the first kid I knew to sport hickeys on his neck. Once, I came home after school and went into my room to do a headstand, which was my daily home-from-school ritual. Such habits structured my inner reality in a superstitious manner: I *had* to do a headstand when I got home. That day, when I lowered myself to the floor and looked up, I saw that Sandy was lying on my bed, propped on one elbow. "Well, hello," he said, as if greeting a lover. He'd decided to play a trick on me, probably thought it was funny that a ten-year-old had a crush on him. I realized that my feelings were no more likely to be reciprocated than those I might have for a movie star on a poster.

When I saw the movie "Little Darlings," I was primed to worship Matt Dillon's character, because he reminded me of Sandy. He and his love interest in the film (played by Kristy McNichol) are two streetwise beauties in jeans and jean jackets, even if McNichol's character is secretly not as tough as she claims. I wanted McNichol's tomboy style. By that time, my family had moved to San Francisco, where kids dressed in work pants and thermal shirts, with "derby" jackets that had a seam around the shoulders and a paisley-print lining. The most striking girl in our neighborhood, whose name was Damie, wore black Ben Davis jeans with a matching black vest and had a carabiner with a litter of keys on it dangling from her belt loop. I asked my mom for black Dickie's chinos. I learned to pilfer rock T-shirts from the barrel by the front door of the Record Factory. One weekend, a girl I'd met in my neighborhood invited me to "get ready" at her house. We were eleven and going to a kegger. I was wearing the black cotton Mary Jane-style slippers we called "Chinese shoes," which cost a couple of dollars and had buckles that instantly broke and had to be replaced with safety pins. It was better to be in tennies, for running from the cops. "Try these," the girl said, handing me a pair of nicely worn-in white Converse high-tops that she'd pulled from her closet. I put them on and stood before her full-length mirror.

"Wow," she said, "you look so much more . . . *into life*."

To feel into life and to look it: it's what you want when you're young, the real solution to the problem of being a child, a way to access the promise of experience. The into-life-ness of adolescence meant not having to wait any longer. My dream of becoming a woman was exchanged for a different fantasy, a kind of eternal world of teen-agers, who had nothing but contempt for adults. If the girls in San Francisco wore heels, they chose platform heels with a flat sole, such as those made by Cherokee, which Damie wore with striped athletic socks. If girls carried a purse, they hid a Buck knife inside it. In their tight satin pants, they hocked loogies, flicked cigarette butts. Every feminine accoutrement and sexualizing modality had to be undermined by an attempt at toughness, a practice that seems, from this distance, to have been a way of making the unsustainable world of youth feel endless. The focus was on now, on later today, or this weekend. It was never next year, my future, my life to come.

The Converse high-tops were so transporting that I was reluctant to give them back to the girl I'd borrowed them from. When she stopped by our building unannounced, to try to retrieve them, and hollered up, I ducked out of view, under the window ledge. It seems that I've had this habit my whole life. When I find a garment that has the magic, that makes me the person I aspire to be, I cling and refuse to let go. In my early twenties, I became attached to a thin, worn-out T-shirt that said "Joy Division" on it in wonky finger paint. My friend Deirdre had made it for herself at camp as a teen-ager. I borrowed it and never gave it back, wore it from roughly 1991 until 2008, when it finally disintegrated. By that time, it had faded from black to a waxy lavender color. Deirdre, meanwhile, ended up with my mother's Sears biker jacket, which I gave to her, but later wished I'd kept even though I would wear a biker jacket now only if I were actually on a motorcycle, and I no longer ride. Biker jackets are meant to imply an edge that the wearer seldom has, because the wearer is anybody who buys one. The other night, I was at an avant-garde music performance whose audience was filled with people from CalArts, where the biker jacket is still au courant. The man next to me kept his on for the entire program, and each time he moved it squeaked loudly, making the biker jacket not just a pose but a theatrical disturbance.

And yet I did wear a leather jacket all through middle school, and it didn't feel corny at all. It wasn't a biker jacket but a blazer, dark purple-brown, in size extra small, with daintily puffed shoulders. It hangs now in the closet of my childhood bedroom, dotted with mold from the dampness of the Sunset District of San Francisco, saved by my mother as an archival garment in the museum of my childhood. I got it on Canal Street in the summer of 1980, after sixth grade, while staying with a friend from Eugene who had moved to New York City with her mom. They lived on Mulberry Street, in Little Italy. My grandmother, the one who sent the department-store clothes, had given me thirty dollars to buy a dress to wear to a dance performance I was to attend with her at Lincoln Center. I went to Canal Street and spent the money on the leather jacket and then wore it to the performance. My grandmother was upset. I didn't care. I didn't care about dance, and, more significantly, I felt aligned with myself in that tough little jacket, and this was a million times better than dressing up.

I still search for that feeling of alignment in my clothes, a sensation of "rightness" between inner life and outer. Even at home alone, even in my pajamas, I pursue that feeling. For my wedding day, in 2007, I bought a fancy dress but changed my mind the morning we were set to go to City Hall and put on the same old elastic-waist skirt I'd been wearing every day for a month. (I was five months pregnant, and the skirt was comfortable on my belly.) Dressing up, for me, should never require me to leave my zone of "rightness." Every day is a new chance to accurately fix the coördinates of my appearance in clothes, to make tiny adjustments, as if focussing a lens. Every day is the day I put on the costume that I have spent my entire life cultivating.

I did eventually return the Converse high-tops, and moved on to wanting Wallabees-style suède shoes—not Clarks but a cheaper brand that could be purchased at a work-wear outlet called GET on San Francisco's Sloat Boulevard. My mother took me, and, when I showed her the shoes I'd picked out, she said they looked like what hoodlums wore. By that point, I *was* a hoodlum, but this was not the angle I pushed. I don't recall if I succeeded in getting those shoes. The irony is that now I wear them every day, in the more expensive version, actual Clarks.

By the time I got to high school, I shoplifted most of my clothes. Not for the thrill but to get what I felt I needed, in order to dress the way I wanted to. In Fiorucci or Guess jeans, in clothes made by Esprit. There were awkward years, of teased hair, frosted lipstick, a halfheartedly New Wave phase, a failed attempt to look like Madonna in the "Borderline" video. When I was in college, at U.C. Berkeley, there was an interim when I tried to look preppy, in white Keds and polo shirts, in order to blend in, in a world where no one was dressed to run from the cops, where people were going to football games and fraternity parties. The preppy phase was short-lived, and then I was dyeing my hair purple and wearing black. By the time I graduated from Berkeley, I was back in San Francisco, and dressed to tend bar, to be on display, in silver leggings or vintage tuxedo pants with Doc Martens, a thrifted waistcoat over a lace bra.

You study the world when you're young, the same way I studied window displays. You concentrate on what you think you want, and, eventually, you refine this want to a style, your taste. This process takes time. The style I seem to have arrived at in adulthood, and to have maintained for the past thirty years, is some fictionalized version of who I thought I was, or hoped to be, at thirteen or fourteen. It's a system of parts that can be reassembled, but, ideally, not replicated by anyone else.

When my Clarks wear out, I order new ones, identical to the ones I'm replacing. I wear Levis, the same pair day after day after day, for years on end. I wear a denim shirt, always the same one. Under it, a Led Zeppelin T-shirt handed down from my teen-age son, who outgrew it. Or, lately, a vintage yellow T-shirt that says "Women miners can dig it too." At thirteen, I aimed for a blend of Kristy McNichol and Matt Dillon as they looked in "Little Darlings." On some level, I believe I'm achieving that now, at the age of fifty-six, having completed my reverse adolescence, which others call menopause. I'm a tomboy again. I'm dressed for the kegger that hasn't happened yet. Our nostalgia, after all, is for some version of the past that did not occur. If I dress up, I wear a suit. If the occasion is formal, I wear a tuxedo. I might choose heels, but never if they rob me of my alignment. I'm a woman, and more than, in the sense that I've finished the work of distilling my gender, my image, in an attempt to recognize myself. I'm free of all that, and finally, simply, *into life*.

Children want to change, as Adam Phillips asserts, but adults want to stay the same. I have no regrets about my eagerness to flee childhood in order to get to the future. If I had loved myself as I was, I might not be who I am. This is the cunning of reason. We long to change and eventually do. Who is to say that the longing wasn't the most purposeful agent of that change? It's the things I wanted and never got, the way I focussed in an almost religious manner on idealized scenes, that prove to me now that I really did have a childhood. Childhood is a strange and slightly melancholy dream from which you finally awake. You're there. An adult. You've made it. ♦

Rachel Kushner is the author of "Creation Lake," which was shortlisted for the 2024 Booker Prize, and other books.

Profiles

How Jessica Reed Kraus Went from Mommy Blogger to *MAHA* Maven

The founder of “House Inhabit” has grown her audience during the second Trump Administration with political gossip and what she calls “quality conspiracy.”

By Clare Malone

September 15, 2025

Kraus in her Laguna Beach office. “Part of what I do is not overthink everything,” she says. “I write what I like.”Photographs by Jeff Minton for The New Yorker

In mid-February, on the day that the Senate confirmed Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., as Secretary of Health and Human Services, Del Bigtree, an anti-vaccine activist who had served as the communications director of Kennedy's Presidential campaign, hosted an event at the National Press Club, in Washington, D.C. Bigtree was now the C.E.O. of the advocacy group *MAHA* Action, and the National Press Club event, where members of the media gathered in a modest room with a small stage, was a celebration of sorts—the so-called Make America Healthy Again movement had just installed its figurehead as the most powerful public-health official in the country. The Republican senator Ron Johnson, a skeptic of the *COVID* vaccine and an early supporter of Kennedy's nomination, introduced Bigtree, calling him "a man who has been engaged in radical transparency" and, as a result, had been "vilified and ridiculed." At the podium, Bigtree derided the assembled press. "You have been the spreaders of misinformation," he said. "You have gotten it wrong, and America is still waiting for an apology."

Jessica Reed Kraus, the forty-five-year-old writer behind the popular Instagram and Substack accounts "House Inhabit," was sitting on the floor a few feet away, live-streaming Bigtree's speech. Her site, which grew out of a blog about motherhood and home décor, had become perhaps the most popular chronicler of Kennedy's rise, offering half a million Substack followers an inside look at the Secretary's new life in the upper echelons of the American right. For the Inauguration, she carpooled from the airport with Kennedy's daughter Kyra, and her post recapping that weekend's *MAHA* Ball struck a triumphant note. "I retreated to my table, just behind Bobby and Cheryl, who arrived trailed by a sea of flashing lights," she wrote beneath a photo showing Kennedy in a tux and his wife, the actress Cheryl Hines, in formfitting lamé. "Their presence—poised and magnetic—felt uniquely symbolic surrounded by a crowd maligned and mocked for their convictions."

Kraus, a recent convert to right-wing politics—she voted for Hillary Clinton in 2016—doesn't look like a *MAGA* conservative. A petite brunette with clear blue eyes, a pert nose, and an easy manner, she favors oversized shirts and menswear-inspired suits. Before her year on the campaign trail, she told me, she'd never worn a blazer. "I think the expectation to sort of match the

occasion was hard for someone who lives in California and doesn't really wear makeup or shoes," she said. The first time I met her in person, at a gala for New York's Young Republican Club, she wore a sleek suit with a bow tie and heels, drank a vodka Martini, and called Nigel Farage "cute."

At the National Press Club, she had on a green plaid jacket with trousers and a pair of Jessica Simpson pumps, which she soon shucked off. At one point during Bigtree's speech, Calley Means, one of Kennedy's advisers, appeared. Kraus crossed the room to give him a hug. She had previously raised suspicions on Substack that Means, a former food-and-drug lobbyist, and his younger sister, Casey—a medical-residency dropout who is now Donald Trump's nominee for U.S. Surgeon General—were "industry plants sent to shift focus from vaccine safety to the more palatable concept of 'food as medicine.' " But she had since reversed course, writing that "upon closer examination, their mission appears rooted in personal conviction, shaped by profound loss, educational disillusionment, and a shared determination to transform healthcare." Now, as Kraus directed Means to pose for a Polaroid, they discussed the evening's festivities and promised to keep in touch.

"Everyone thinks they're her best friend," Denise Bovee, a photographer for Kraus's Substack, told me after the press conference, as the three of us sipped drinks at the Willard Hotel's bar. Kraus and Bovee, who look and act like sisters, met more than a decade ago, when they were both young mothers in Southern California. When Kraus decided to hit the campaign trail, she invited Bovee to come along, both for the company—"When you're on the road for a year, it could be depressing"—and because she envisioned coverage that looked like Tina Brown's *Vanity Fair*. "I wanted everything to look cool and pretty," Kraus said. "What I think is cool, she thinks is cool." Now the pair reapplied their lip gloss and checked their phones. "Where is the party tonight?" Kraus dictated into her texting app.

Kraus noted that her Instagram stories, which, she says, can generate more than a hundred million monthly views, were being reposted by Hines. ("Congratulations *MAHA* army!!!! We did it!!!" Kraus had written in one that day.) Last September, when news broke that another friend of Kraus's, the journalist Olivia Nuzzi, had exchanged intimate texts with Kennedy,

Kraus wrote a Substack post accusing Nuzzi of ensnaring Kennedy and insulted her looks on Instagram. “I was so mean to her,” Kraus told me. The pair remain friends, and Nuzzi has visited Kraus at her home in San Clemente. I asked Kraus how she could still be friendly with both Kennedy’s wife and the woman with whom he’d had a digital affair. “I think it all comes back to trust,” Kraus said. “I mean, obviously, I know a lot about a lot of these things, but I’m not out to ruin anyone for fun.”

As the sun went down and the bar filled up, Kraus and Bovee returned to their rooms to nap before the next event, a *MAHA* Action dinner at a downtown D.C. steak house. In the restaurant’s dimly lit private dining room, I spotted Bigtree, Means, and Kennedy’s former campaign chief of staff, Brigid Rasmussen. Kraus and Bovee showed up late with Sean Spicer, Trump’s first press secretary. Ice-filled seafood platters landed on the tables. Kraus ordered a Martini with olives and got a download of the confirmation hearing from Rasmussen, who had been in the Senate gallery that day. “They didn’t let us have our phones in there,” she said. “No purse, ChapStick, nothing.” Kraus seemed incredulous: “No ChapStick?!”

Dinner talk turned to TV makeup and Palm Beach beauty standards —“You’d better be skinny, with fillers, and a spray tan,” Kraus said—and eventually settled on childhood vaccinations. The mothers at the table—Kraus, Bovee, and Jessica Perno, a Texas-based compliance officer who’s been involved with *MAHA* Action—were all alarmed about newborns receiving hepatitis-B inoculations. “Why are we vaccinating them as babies?” Kraus, who has four sons, said. Her oldest son had been inoculated on schedule, but she had waited with her other children. “I didn’t do Hayes until he was five years old,” she said. (Mothers with the hepatitis-B virus can pass it on to their children during birth.)

“Dreading school is good practice for when you grow up and dread work.”
Cartoon by Barbara Smaller

Bigtree stood and offered a toast. “Robert Kennedy, Jr., is H.H.S. Secretary,” he said. “It’s one of the most epic, disrupting moments in political history, and certainly in the history of this country.” He thanked the assembled group, singling out Means, who, he said, deserved credit for “reaching out and bringing in the food issue, which was such a great cover to get Bobby all the way through.” The room erupted with guffaws.

Later, Spicer told me, “All due respect, but if it were my event I would have been, like, ‘What the fuck are you doing bringing a reporter to a dinner?’ ” But Kraus is determinedly unfiltered, dedicated to giving her readers, many of whom are mothers, a behind-the-scenes view of Kennedy’s world—and of the space that she occupies within it. Her own contribution to mainstreaming his message, she told me, shouldn’t be underestimated: “I don’t think he gets what I’ve really done for him.”

Kraus is not a health freak, nor is she a dogmatic conservative. She’s pro-choice and supports gay rights, but she also embraces many of Trump’s immigration policies. She rejects both established vaccine science and the mainstream media’s treatment of shifting gender dynamics. Her writing delves into all these issues, but she is most interested in gossip and what she calls “quality conspiracy.” “My goal is to simplify everything,” she told me. “I don’t have a political audience. I’m not writing for Washington, D.C.”

Kraus grew up in Corona, California, the third of four kids. In the winter of 1986, her father, a heavy-equipment operator, killed himself. Kraus, who was six years old, says that she didn't speak to anyone outside of the family for a year after his death, a condition doctors diagnosed as elective mutism. She spent much of her childhood in therapy and was, in her words, "a funny, neurotic, and precocious child well liked by teachers." She was also obsessed with pop culture and loved to write. Her mother, who had worked as a waitress but stayed at home after her husband's death, encouraged her interests. "She would take me to poetry readings, concerts, movies—no censorship," Kraus told me. "And here I am."

Kraus met her husband, Mike, when they were still in high school. He was in a band—their first date was to a Guitar Center in Hollywood. "He looked like a bleached Bob Dylan," she later wrote in a Valentine's Day post on Instagram. After high school, Mike got a union construction job and Kraus enrolled at Cal State Fullerton, where she majored in English. At twenty-five, Kraus was working at a Starbucks and had just been accepted to a teaching-certification program when she found out that she was pregnant. Her first son, Arlo, was born in 2005. Her second pregnancy ended in a late-term miscarriage, and she spent her third on bed rest, scrolling through TMZ and an online forum for women dealing with the fallout from pregnancy loss. The forum, she has written, "saved my sanity by giving me a place to empty my thoughts where I knew they would be nourished."

In 2011, Kraus joined Instagram and started a Blogspot, writing under the name Mrs. Habit. She posted photos of Mike, their sons, and their home, a modest Spanish-style bungalow in Corona. There were kiddie pools in the yard and vintage VW buses in the driveway. The children, often barefoot, had long hair and skateboarded or showed off their art. "Surely there are toilets to clean, bills to pay, kids to rinse, chores to cross off and a little bit of party planning begging for my attention this bleak, boorish Friday afternoon," Kraus wrote in a post from 2011, "but Mama, she ain't hearing any of it."

Elsewhere online, wellness culture was exploding. Goop, Gwyneth Paltrow's e-mail newsletter turned e-commerce platform, monetized an all-natural life style, promoting raw-goat-milk cleanses and expensive organic

cosmetics. (Paltrow recently told *Vanity Fair* that she was “very fascinated” by the *MAHA* movement.) Jessica Alba founded her line of Honest organic baby products in 2012. A sage-scented influencer ecosystem took hold, epitomized by the likes of Amanda Chantal Bacon, the creator of Moon Juice, and the smoothie-bowl queen Lee Tilghman, in which mostly left-leaning women with beautiful homes, flexible work schedules, and steadfast yoga practices rejected the conventional wisdom of a condescending, male-dominated medical establishment. Kraus focussed mostly on family and interior design, but she mimicked both the aesthetic and the politics of wellness Instagram. When Hillary Clinton lost the 2016 Presidential election, Kraus posted a black-and-white selfie with the caption “Thank you @hillaryclinton for fighting so hard, for so long, to lead us this far.” During Trump’s first Inauguration, Kraus flew to D.C. to take part in the Women’s March.

That year, she and her husband bought a low-slung ranch home in San Clemente, an upscale beach town in Orange County, and renovated it themselves. Kraus documented the process online. The result—a gleaming-white minimalist interior that Kraus said was inspired by Leonard Cohen’s house on the Greek island of Hydra—garnered coverage in design blogs. She partnered with Samsung and the clothing brand Dôen, whose flowing dresses she often wore in her photos. Kraus told me that it was a personal decision to widen her focus beyond motherhood. “At a certain point, the kids were getting older, and they’re aware, and they have their own issues,” she said. “I don’t want to ever interfere with their confidence by how I present them online.”

Offline, Kraus was experiencing her first misgivings about liberal orthodoxy. During the 2018 Supreme Court confirmation hearings for Brett Kavanaugh, in which Christine Blasey Ford accused him of sexually assaulting her four decades earlier, Kraus wrote that she tried to speak with a friend about her discomfort with the “believe all women” ethos. She had known girls in high school who had lied about assaults, Kraus said; as the mother of four sons, she worried about the possibility that they could be falsely accused. “Why can’t it be ‘listen to all women’?” she asked. The friend reacted poorly. “Eventually, she stopped calling altogether,” Kraus wrote. “Space for conversation I knew was shrinking.”

“I don’t have a political audience,” Kraus says. “I’m not writing for Washington, D.C.”

Kraus was primed for a political shift when *COVID* hit. “I’d watch live news, and I’d see how they would take Trump’s clips out of context,” she said. “I was really forced to confront what I trusted, because I could see the spin happening in real time.” California beaches were closed; skate parks were filled with sand. “They came and bulldozed the bike jumps my boys built in, like, a secret field,” Kraus said. “We couldn’t hike where we would normally hike.”

Orange County, one of the more conservative parts of the California coast, became a hotbed of lockdown protests. In San Clemente, crowds gathered to burn face masks. Kraus, who told me that she thought masks were “insane,” had started to read about natural immunity and was alarmed to learn that certain doctors were being “censored.” She ultimately chose not to vaccinate her children against *COVID*, a decision that angered her mother, with whom Kraus and two of her siblings no longer speak. “I think

she couldn’t understand why we wouldn’t just get the shot,” Kraus said. “I mean, of course, it’s more complicated than that, but that’s kind of what triggered the last fight.” (Kraus’s mother said their falling out was more personal: “I wasn’t being treated right.”)

Kraus was still maintaining a liberal façade online. When protests erupted after the death of George Floyd, in the spring of 2020, she captioned a video of Tracy Chapman singing “Fast Car” with a riff about “Getting comfortable with being uncomfortable.” Her husband, meanwhile, was adopting increasingly right-wing views. Later that summer, she discovered that he had left four clapping-hands emojis on a transphobic post by the conservative pundit Candace Owens. Kraus was apoplectic. The fight, she wrote, “ended with me out front in a bathrobe yelling like a mad woman as he almost laughed his way to his truck. ‘When I lose all of my jobs, we know who to blame!’ I shouted as he started to drive away.”

Kraus’s prediction came true. That fall, another influencer reposted Mike’s comment; Kraus lost thousands of followers, along with brand deals and “gifted dresses in the mail.” To amuse herself, she started posting about the sordid tabloid narratives of figures such as John F. Kennedy, Jr., Monica Lewinsky, and Prince Harry’s ex-girlfriend Chelsy Davy. It was a radical departure from the chic, clean-surfaced content she had been sharing for years. “I was, like, I don’t care anymore what the internet thinks,” Kraus said. “I just kept losing followers. I thought I was crashing, but I was having so much fun.”

Late this spring, I travelled to Laguna Beach to see Kraus. It was chilly and overcast, but bougainvillea were blooming, the locals were tan, and preteen boys were playing hacky sack in the street—nature and mankind performing a live-action tableau of California well-being. Kraus’s office is in a rust-red, two-story retail building a stone’s throw from the beach. A large American flag flew from the porch railing, and “House Inhabit” was painted in large white letters above the brand’s slogan, which Kraus adopted a few years ago: “*MEDIA FOR THE PEOPLE, BY THE PEOPLE.*”

When I walked in, Kraus and her niece Alicia Tang, who works as her assistant, were discussing ads that needed to be posted—one for headphones and another for a holistic-food app. The office was light-filled

and airy, with a wooden swing dangling from the ceiling. Two big-screen TVs played Fox News, and large racks filled with vintage issues of *Life* and *Esquire* lined one of the walls. By the entryway, Kraus had hung Julian Wasser's portrait of Joan Didion smoking a cigarette beside a Corvette; in the bathroom, near a tissue box adorned with a shirtless picture of R.F.K., Jr., there was a framed excerpt from Didion's essay "Self-Respect."

Kraus sat at a pale-wood desk, a lit candle and a black crystal not far from her reach. Her eyes were obscured behind dark-green sunglasses, and she occasionally sipped a saffron latte; as we spoke, her fingers never left her phone. At one point, she took a call from Nicholas Tartaglione, Jeffrey Epstein's former cellmate at the Metropolitan Correctional Center in Manhattan. She has written multiple posts about Tartaglione, a former cop turned drug dealer who was convicted of kidnapping and murdering four men, positing that he was framed. He is now seeking a Presidential pardon, an effort that did not appear to be going well. "Trump is known as the pardon President," Kraus said soothingly into the phone. After a few minutes, she said goodbye. Later, I asked her how many inmates she was talking to for various stories. She thought for a moment. "Four?"

The top cities for "House Inhabit" followers are San Diego, Los Angeles, Houston, and New York, making its audience a highly desirable demographic for advertisers. "Women who are of prime consumer age," Kraus told me. "These are the women who shop." "House Inhabit" 's website sells T-shirts, hoodies, and other merchandise with slogans such as "*Drill Baby Drill*" and "*Orwell Warned Us*." Tang later told me that advertising brings in an average of twenty thousand dollars per month, and Kraus said that her annual revenue from Substack subscribers is more than a million dollars. "There's things that cater and appeal to them, right?" Kraus said of her readers. "Gossip and conspiracies."

She's made a point of delivering both of those things. Kraus, an early member of the #FreeBritney movement, was in a Los Angeles courtroom in June of 2021, when Spears called in to ask to be released from her conservatorship. Kraus described the scene in her Instagram stories, adding her own Venmo information to her profile to solicit donations—a way for her followers to help Kraus stay on the story. She made more than twenty

thousand dollars in a day. “I realized there was money in doing it,” she told me.

Later that year, when Ghislaine Maxwell, Epstein’s former girlfriend, went on trial in Manhattan for sex trafficking, Kraus flew to New York. “Mike’s, like, ‘Oh, you should just go—I’ll watch the kids,’ ” Kraus said. She got to the courtroom each day around 4 *A.M.* to secure a spot inside. Maxwell, a former British socialite who had been accused of procuring and grooming underage girls for Epstein’s abuse, fascinated Kraus. In Instagram stories, she unspooled the life of Maxwell’s father—a media magnate whose untimely death on his yacht, in 1991, had aroused suspicions of foul play—and concluded that Maxwell was unjustly taking the fall for Epstein. “That was the case that taught me how I was going to approach the role of an independent journalist,” Kraus told me. “I’ve been harassed endlessly over saying that she’s a scapegoat and that I don’t think her trial was fair.”

One friend admonished Kraus for writing too much about Maxwell’s hair and appearance, but her sympathetic coverage got clicks; she gained a hundred thousand followers in the first two weeks of the trial. Kraus later developed some sources on the case, interviewing anonymous victims and travelling to Maxwell’s old haunts and homes. “The bailiffs would come up to me and be, like, ‘Oh, my wife’s following you,’ ” she said. “It made trial coverage cool again.” The journalist Vicky Ward, whom Kraus befriended during the Maxwell trial, told me that one of Kraus’s strengths is that she’s “a completely free spirit” and “not beholden to anyone.”

In Laguna Beach, I asked why Kraus seemed attracted to controversial people. “They’re so amusing,” she told me. “I think it’s funny. I want to be amused.” Afterward, in a Substack post, she returned to my question, saying she’d given me the answer that she thought would look good in print. “The truth is,” she wrote, “I’ve always been drawn to the defiant and the disgraced women who shape culture, only to be entirely devoured by it. Tabloid obsessions with complicated backstories are always the most alluring subjects.”

Kraus’s real breakthrough came in the spring of 2022, when she began covering Johnny Depp’s lawsuit against his ex-wife Amber Heard. Depp had sued Heard for defamation after she recounted, in a Washington *Post*

opinion piece, the reprisals she'd faced for speaking publicly about an abusive relationship, claiming that the piece was unmistakably about him. The trial, which was televised, revealed details about the two stars' sex lives, drug use, and competing allegations of domestic abuse. Kraus leaned toward Depp's side of the story, writing that his "addictions, vices and ugly text messages are not what's on trial here." She became friendly with his legal team; during the proceedings, she received a surprise phone call from Depp. As she later recalled on Substack, Depp told her, "I don't know you . . . but I know, just by the words you use and the aesthetic in your work, that I trust you."

Kraus was hardly alone in her anti-Heard stance. On social media, the actress was often painted as a liar and a loose cannon. The intensity of the vitriol directed against her seemed like a backlash to the #MeToo movement's admonitions to believe all women. "My commentary matched what most people were thinking," Kraus told me. "I just don't think she was likable to the public. It was a very toxic relationship, but he shouldn't have his career ruined when they're guilty of the same thing."

The following year, Kraus recalled, Courtney Love, whom she had met during the Depp trial, told her that Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., was planning to announce a run for President. (A representative for Love said that this was inaccurate.) "She's friends with his daughter," Kraus said of Love. "She always knows what's happening before it's happening."

Kennedy, who, during the pandemic, had been deplatformed for spreading misinformation about vaccines on social media, was a classic Kraus character: a punch line in élite circles who had become a prophet in conspiracy-minded corners of the internet. Kraus was immediately intrigued: "I was, like, 'Oh, that's the guy that my friends all liked during *COVID*.' "

In April of 2023, when Trump was indicted in Manhattan for falsifying business records in connection to hush-money payments to the former adult-film star Stormy Daniels, Kraus travelled to New York City. "I'm, like, 'I should cover politics, because it's going to be crazy if a Kennedy's running and we have Trump,' " she said. "I was going to apply the same formula that worked for these trials to politics."

That June, Kraus posted an old photo of Kennedy standing in front of his family's Cape Cod compound, holding an owl. "Someone's working hard for my vote," she wrote, adding an owl emoji. During the Maxwell trial, she told me, "I started reading about owls, and it was, like, a sign of intuition and following your intuition." The post got more than nineteen thousand likes. Kennedy himself reached out. "Nobody liked him at this point," Kraus said. "He was so happy."

Kennedy's team invited her to his home in Los Angeles. Kraus, who has a photo album on her phone devoted to what she calls "shirtless Kennedys showing off toned torsos in various boating scenes around Cape Cod," was starstruck. But she soon realized that the purpose of the meeting was to get her to film an endorsement video. When she resisted, Kennedy grew annoyed and scolded his campaign staff. "He's, like, 'I thought you said she knew what she was doing!' " Kraus recalled. "And they're, like, 'She does know what she's doing. This isn't what she does!' " Finally, Kennedy asked about her audience—did they like his wife? "He's, like, 'Cheryl! Cheryl!' walking around the house," Kraus said. "And I'm, like, 'This guy is really weird. I don't like him.' " (A spokesperson for Kennedy did not respond to a request for comment.)

But the campaign kept inviting her to events. "I'm, like, 'O.K., I'll just go on the road and I'll follow him for now, because he's the only one offering access,' " Kraus said. "And then that was popular right away." A photo of Kraus and Kennedy got forty-two thousand Instagram likes, and her three-part Substack recap of their first few meetings received hundreds of comments. ("Literally silent screaming for you right now!" one reader wrote.) In November, Kraus was a guest at the Kennedy compound on Cape Cod, along with Mike and their nine-year-old son, Hayes. "It's like all of a sudden I woke up one day and said, 'I'm doing politics,' and then I was on the road," Kraus said. "I just never came home." Tang, her assistant, estimated that Kraus had taken fifty trips in the past year.

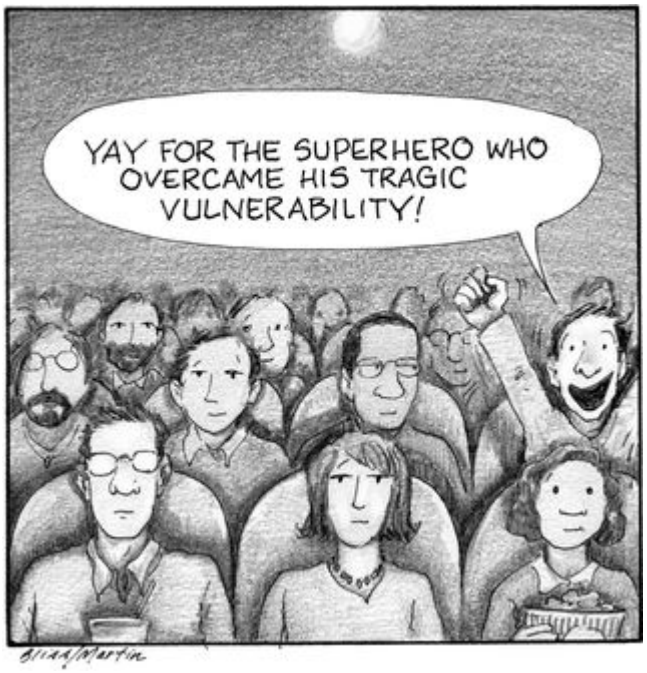
Kraus's campaign coverage was, in many ways, one long party report. In 2024, she spent New Year's in Aspen with the Kennedy family. That January, she was in Hawaii, where Bovee photographed the candidate and his son Finn posing playfully underwater. "He's very likable," Kraus said of

Kennedy. “He’s seventy-one, but he can seem very young and like he’s seeing the world through young eyes.” She grew close to the campaign staff, and her posts became more adulatory. After joining Kennedy for a San Diego sailboat outing, which she called “poetically endearing,” she wrote, “Of all of his appearances, it’s events like these that serve as a scenic metaphor for Kennedy’s vision, turning the tide on current politics, shifting the course away from corporate greed, and hoping people will vote out of hope—not fear.”

The Trump campaign began to notice that Kraus’s posts offered a way to charm a certain kind of swing voter. In February, nine months before the election, she and Bovee were invited to Mar-a-Lago. They stayed in the Tower Suite and attended Trump’s Super Bowl watch party, a private event where Kraus archly observed what she called *MAGA*’s “dedication to beauty.” “I’m an aesthetic snob,” she told me. “I think Republicans need a lot of help with their image.”

But Kraus increasingly agreed with their politics. She started posting more often about the Trumps, publishing text messages from Don, Jr., that refuted claims that Trump had never attended his children’s graduations. That May, she made a pilgrimage to Trump’s childhood home in Queens, with Nuzzi as her guide.

Kraus’s coverage unlocked a new level of access. Previously, she and her family had met Tulsi Gabbard, who has since become Trump’s director of National Intelligence, for acai bowls on the north shore of Oahu. Now Kraus was visiting the former Disney C.E.O. Michael Eisner’s property in Malibu and Lachlan Murdoch’s home in Beverly Hills. “He was so nice,” Kraus said of Murdoch. “It was, like, some event, and it was off record, so I couldn’t say I was there.” Kraus and Bovee often tag-teamed parties. “People trusted us together,” Bovee said. “I was a fly on the wall. I would just snap pictures of who we were talking to and what we were doing.” Kraus would discreetly take notes on her phone. “People, for the most part, they just forgot—they didn’t think of me as media,” she said. “So I got away with a lot. I realized I was at a lot of events where media wasn’t allowed.”



Cartoon by Harry Bliss and Steve Martin

For months, pundits had debated whether Kennedy's campaign would spoil things for the Democrats or for the Republicans. Kennedy himself had found his way to anti-vaccine activism through his work as an environmentalist, advocating to keep water clean from mercury and other pollutants. But by August, when Kennedy dropped out, it had become clear that vaccine skepticism was a more comfortable fit within the Trump coalition. The Kennedy campaign's website had sold "*MAKE FRYING OIL TALLOW AGAIN*" hats, a reference to the movement to avoid supposedly toxic seed oils—canola, corn, sunflower—commonly used in American cooking. Now green hats bearing the "*MAHA*" logo were rolled out.

Kraus made no secret of her affinity for Trump. When Kennedy endorsed him, Kraus posted a picture of the pair with the caption "TRUMP KENNEDY = UNITY. You know I fought hard for this." Kraus began posting photos of herself with Don, Jr., and his family—she'd gone shopping with his girlfriend, Bettina Anderson—and publishing Substacks with titles like "Women Across America Just Fell in Love With JD Vance." Her coverage of a "MAGA flotilla" in Florida included an interview with one of Trump's grandchildren. "Everyone is so beautiful," one commenter wrote. "Looks like a Ralph Lauren ad." Kraus was often vague about the policy implications of another Trump Presidency, but her posts made clear

that she thought the *MAGA* crowd was fun at a party. “A lot of people think that I made Kennedy supporters comfortable with his alignment with Trump,” she told me.

By Election Day, she was firmly entrenched in Trump world. This past New Year’s, as Trump was preparing to return to the White House, Kraus attended a party at the home of the billionaire right-wing tech investor Peter Thiel. “The Miami power gays are something else,” she wrote in a text to her nine-year-old son. “We’re eating lobster on a boat while a man hovers over the water with sparks flying from his boots. Fireworks at midnight. I’ll send you photos later!”

In late February, Kraus was invited to the White House, along with fourteen other right-wing influencers, including Mike Cernovich and Chaya Raichik, of Libs of TikTok, to receive a binder from the Justice Department labelled “The Epstein Files: Phase 1.” Kraus was photographed walking out of the meeting wearing a checkered suit and a hat that read “*Trump was right about everything*.” The event was seen as a case of the Administration mainstreaming fringe conspiracy theorists. But it soon became apparent that the binders contained little new information about the Epstein case. “I think it was a stunt gone wrong,” Kraus said, noting that she considered only a few of the invitees, herself included, to be experts on the Epstein case. “Some of these online conspiracy theorists constantly need to spin everything into something that’s more exciting.” (For the record, Kraus thinks that Epstein died by suicide.)

Since Kennedy’s confirmation party, her friendship with Bovee had unravelled, following a fight at a dinner event. “The night of our big falling out, my daughter and colleagues were there, and she had an outburst,” Bovee told me, declining to go into further detail. “And I just said, ‘I’m never speaking to you again.’ ” Kraus later posted an angry Substack chat, which she has since deleted, claiming that Bovee had driven Kraus’s son “in a car with someone drunk.” Bovee replied in an emotional Instagram video. “I love her family and we’re very close,” Bovee said, crying. “I’m just a regular person. I’ve made mistakes. But to have someone you’ve given years to and have shared intimate things—we were best friends.”

After the D.O.J. distributed its Epstein binders, *The Bulwark*, a never-Trump news site, released a podcast episode that mocked Kraus's White House appearance. She wrote a scathing response on Substack. "I was in a very vulnerable space," she told me. "Part of what I do is not overthink everything, so I will write whatever I've been feeling that week." Her post accused the podcast of minimizing her work—"my Instagram story slides pull 200 to 300 million views monthly," she wrote, "numbers that dwarf most network news broadcasts." She also claimed that the podcast targeted her as a woman. "God forbid they let a mother-slash-lifestyle-blogger into the elite corner of the presidential press pool to relay information to the masses," she wrote. She lashed out at more established right-wing figures. Tucker Carlson was "hard to take seriously these days," and "Megyn Kelly and Candace Owens—two of the most prominent women in male-dominated media—are clearly pivoting." She added, "Both are leaning into narratives that resonate with women. Celebrity scandals. Political gossip. Interpersonal drama." Kraus's tone sounded territorial.

Owens, who was then devoting much of her airtime to the legal drama between Blake Lively and Justin Baldoni, responded to Kraus on Instagram. "Her argument is that everyone is trying to just be her," Owens wrote. "It's a lot to take in." Kraus, who was in D.C., fired back: "I'm at the White House. I'll respond when I'm not shadowing the president? Lol Thank you." The pair went back and forth in story and live format until Owens brought up the recent disintegration of Kraus's relationship with Bovee. Kraus said that the feud with Owens had "made me look at all of these people differently. It's like its own media. But it's not media I really trust." (Owens told me, "No one ever knows what she is talking about. Jessica Reed Kraus is unwell.")

This summer, when the Trump Administration abruptly declared that "no further disclosure would be appropriate or warranted" in the Epstein case, the story became a fixture of the mainstream press. Flight records show that Trump flew on Epstein's private plane, which was nicknamed the Lolita Express. Kennedy has said that he, too, flew on Epstein's jet. Kraus felt that her contributions to the coverage—a deeper theory as to why Maxwell was used as a scapegoat, with plenty of speculation about the past actions of Bill Clinton—weren't being sufficiently recognized. "What I've uncovered as

exclusives have been completely ignored by the media," she said. "It is hurtful to get miscast as a hack." (Recently, a fellow-Substacker, Michael Tracey, accused Kraus of plagiarizing his work in a couple of her Epstein posts, one of which was subsequently removed. In a newsletter, Kraus apologized, saying that she had made "an honest but careless mistake" in one instance, but denied that she had done so in another.)

More broadly, Kraus was feeling "really sort of depressed with the public," she told me. "I don't think they like to read anymore. They want really short videos that are going to shock them." Even her most devoted readers seemed to have unrealistic expectations. "People, especially in my audience, really crave conspiracy," she said. "So, when you give them a more boring version of it, they tend to turn on you." Kraus had posted a photograph of herself with Trump, Vance, and Kennedy in the Oval Office; a commenter wrote, "I don't understand how you can support these men. Especially when 2 of them were on Epstein's plane. After everything you taught us about Epstein, is that just thrown to the side now? I'm so confused."

Kraus's popularity had stemmed from her beginnings making life-style content for middle-aged moms with cash to burn. Much of the creator economy, which Goldman Sachs estimates is worth around two hundred and fifty billion dollars, is dominated by women selling images of upscale motherhood. Kraus had moved from messy boys and clean California interiors to opulent parties, posh hotels, and various D.C. hearing rooms, but her coverage still attracted large audiences of women. "I found you while trying to figure out where Princess Kate was," one commenter recently wrote, "but stayed because you opened my eyes to what was going on with our government, health and politics." Another was less generous: "Man, this is all going to be fascinating to look back on in a couple years when you realize how much you were used and bamboozled."

Kraus has taken issue with the current Administration. She wrote a "tariff debate for dummies" post to walk readers through Trump's trade war, but, she told me, "I want to believe he knows what he's doing, but I think it's really risky." She liked the President's immigration policies but not the White House's A.S.M.R. parody video of men being deported to a

Salvadoran prison, or the posting of an A.I.-generated vision of a Trump-run Gaza. “I don’t like tacky things,” Kraus said.

Her opinion of Kennedy, too, she told me, had “changed over time.” Kennedy has fired ten thousand H.H.S. employees, cancelled five hundred million dollars in mRNA research—the technology that allowed for the rapid development of a *COVID* vaccine—and replaced the health experts on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s vaccine-advisory panel with seven new advisers, most of whom are vaccine skeptics. In August, after the agency’s head reportedly refused to accept the panel’s new restrictions on certain vaccines, Kennedy moved to fire her. Three other leaders at the agency resigned in protest. The C.D.C. no longer recommends the *COVID* vaccine for pregnant women—who are at higher risk of severe illness—and the F.D.A., in approving the latest shot, authorized its use only for people who are over the age of sixty-five or suffering from underlying conditions. “I think, over all, in five months he’s done an incredible job,” Kraus said of Kennedy. “I think he’s gotten more done than any Health Secretary in the past.”

But Kraus’s view of him hadn’t been affected by his policies—it was more “layered,” she said. “Right now, I’ve gotten pretty close to the center of it all, and I am just trying to figure out what I think about politicians in general.” She didn’t really “feel a part of any movement,” *MAHA* or otherwise, she said. “I just write what I like.” Her motivation, she told me, had always been “this is a good story, he’s a good subject. This is an interesting time in politics, and he’s letting me be a part of it in a very intimate way. And that’s all I cared about.” I pressed further. Had her opinion of Kennedy changed because of his personal actions? “Uh, no comment,” Kraus said. ♦

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Annals of Fashion

Inside Uniqlo’s Quest for Global Dominance

The brand conceives of itself as a distribution system for utopian values as much as a clothing company. Can it become the world’s biggest clothing manufacturer?

By Lauren Collins

September 15, 2025

Uniqlo, founded in Japan in 1984, is the universal donor of fashion, intended to go with any aesthetic.Photographs by Bobby Doherty for The New Yorker

This year’s Super Bowl was largely forgettable as an athletic contest, but it lives on in fashion history thanks to Kendrick Lamar, who presided over the halftime show in black leather gloves, a varsity jacket, and a pair of bleached-out, quad-accentuating low-rise denim flares. Fashion commentators declared that Lamar had achieved the impossible—reviving a style of pants widely believed to be lost to time and the liquidation of Wet Seal. Searches for “flared jeans” soared by five thousand per cent following

the performance. *The Cut* declared that the pants, a twelve-hundred-dollar design from Celine, “stole the show.”

Lamar’s backup dancers wore red, blue, and white casual wear. One commentator theorized that they represented American gangs—the Bloods, the Crips, and the Ku Klux Klan. Others saw references to prison jumpsuits, or even to “the sperm guys in that Woody Allen movie.” (More prosaically, the dancers formed the shape of an American flag.) The costumes were the perfect nondescript counterpoint to Lamar’s trend-launching look. One would have been hard pressed to identify them until Uniqlo piped up on social media, claiming some of the white tops as its “Uniqlo U AIRism Cotton Oversized” T-shirts.

Uniqlo is a clothing company based in Tokyo. It was founded, in 1984, by Tadashi Yanai, who still serves as its C.E.O., and who is now the second-richest man in Japan. Last year, Fast Retailing—the holding company that controls Uniqlo—had its best year ever, generating close to twenty billion dollars in revenue and three billion dollars in profit. It has become the world’s third-largest apparel manufacturer and retailer, trailing only H&M and Inditex, the parent company of Zara, although Fast Retailing is growing more rapidly than both of them. The company’s annual report declares that “the ultimate goal is to become the best-loved, No. 1 brand among customers worldwide.”

In April, Uniqlo’s humble mid-calf sock, which costs less than four dollars a pair, ranked eighth on Lyst’s quarterly index of fashion’s “hottest products”—the most affordable item ever to appear on the list. “The colors are exactly right and it’s inexpensive, but you feel like you’re not necessarily exploiting a seven-year-old in Bangladesh to get it,” Tariro Makoni, who writes the newsletter *Trademarked,* told me. “Uniqlo is kind of like Everlane without the moral superiority and H&M without the ickiness.”

Mothers are as likely to wear Uniqlo as their daughters, or, for that matter, their spouses or grandchildren. Fashion people snap up Uniqlo collaborations with luxury brands such as JW Anderson and Lemaire, while normies know that they can find the same UV-protective jackets there year after year. Even royals apparently appreciate the brand’s combination of

understated style and conspicuous thrift. This spring, when Meghan Markle launched a ShopMy page, providing affiliate links to “a handpicked and curated collection of the things I love,” she included the company’s cotton trenchcoat. One of Bad Bunny’s stylists, meanwhile, recently told the L.A. *Times* in an interview that his favorite look he has created for the musician involved a red jacket, purchased at a Puerto Rico mall, and Uniqlo pants. It was an inadvertent moment of *unibare*—a Japanese word for the moment when someone realizes you’re wearing Uniqlo and not a more expensive brand. “I could have sworn it was designer,” the interviewer gushed about the look. “My mind is blown.”

Uniqlo is the universal donor of fashion, intended to go with any life style or aesthetic. “You can kind of project your own reality onto Uniqlo,” Laura Reilly, who writes the newsletter *Magasin*, said. The clothes are not exactly forgettable, but they possess a simplicity that can verge on self-effacement. “We don’t expect or even want that our customer would wear head-to-toe Uniqlo,” Gary Conway, a member of the company’s communications team, told me when I visited the brand’s Tokyo headquarters this spring. Yanai—universally referred to within Uniqlo as Mr. Yanai, in the style of a Mr. Sinatra or a Mrs. Prada—has said, “We believe that individuality comes not from clothes, but the people wearing them.”

You will never see a logo on a Uniqlo garment. Nor a sequin or a ruffle. “No lace,” Uniqlo’s creative director, Clare Waight Keller, told me. “Not even an asymmetrical neckline.” Waight Keller joined Uniqlo last year, after leading European luxury houses including Chloé and Givenchy. “The Zaras and COSes and H&Ms of the world, their whole sort of ambition is to be fashion,” she said. “Uniqlo is much more about a sense of timelessness.” Elizabeth Paton, the fashion editor of the *Financial Times*, told me, “Uniqlo is one of the few brands that has this global stranglehold on consumer culture.” She continued, “They’re equipping people in everything you can see, and everything you can’t see, even the underlayers. They’re offering that everyday, every-possible-solution approach, the way that *IKEA* did for the home.”

In our conversations, Waight Keller sounded almost giddy to be designing clothing for sweaty humans rather than climate-controlled closets—to be

creating for the masses with their body masses and social, cultural, generational, geographical, and meteorological needs. “The democracy of Uniqlo is what’s so appealing and why I came to the company,” she told me. She added, “My entire career, I never fitted on a model bigger than a size small.” One of Waight Keller’s first moves was to strike a certain color from the Uniqlo palette—a “very violety” purple that was “very challenging on so many people.” She explained, “I instinctively knew that that is not a Uniqlo language, because it can’t work across all skin tones.”

Uniqlo has more than twenty-five hundred stores in Asia, Europe, and North America. One in four Japanese people is said to own a Uniqlo puffer jacket. “People think of Uniqlo like Toyota or Sony,” Kaoru Imajo, the director of the Japan Fashion Week Organization, told me. “Yes, they make clothes, but it’s bigger than that.” A popular recent TikTok video showed a young guy in Singapore picking up the same Uniqlo AIRism T-shirt in eight different colors. (The shirt is made of a proprietary blend that purportedly wicks sweat so that wearers “don’t need to worry about odors.”) Uniqlo responded to the excitement by releasing three Singapore-exclusive hues, at which point the country’s biggest newspaper anointed the T-shirt as the “national uniform.”

The ecological implications of manufacturing at this scale are staggering. Uniqlo won’t say how many pieces it produces annually, but more than a decade ago, when the company had less than half the stores it has now, it boasted of producing six hundred million items a year. Executives strenuously object to the notion that Uniqlo is fast fashion, citing improvements in manufacturing and pointing out that their garments are “emotionally sustainable,” remaining desirable for years. Uniqlo offers far fewer styles than its competitors—around six thousand a year, compared with Zara’s nine thousand and Shein’s hundred and sixty-five thousand, according to one study. Nevertheless, there is a fundamental conflict between the company’s goal of continual expansion and its gestures toward sustainability: it’s not the shelf life of Uniqlo’s garments that poses environmental problems so much as it is the number of shelves.

The company insists that the more people who wear Uniqlo, the better the world will be. It calls its clothing LifeWear—“clothing that improves

people's lives," "a link between our world and the next generation," and "where art and science meet." Numerous people at Uniqlo attempted to explain the LifeWear concept to me, but the more they did the less I understood. What was clear is that Uniqlo conceives of itself as a distribution system for utopian values, replete with mantras and koans, as much as a clothing company. Uniqlo, Yanai told me, "is Made for All. Therefore, we must strive to be relevant and loved by everyone around the world." The brand's sheer ubiquity lends some credence to the notion that the company is changing the world through ninety-nine-dollar cashmere sweaters. John Jay, Uniqlo's president of global creative, told me, "Everyone thinks we're just some company that makes khakis and polo shirts, but we're a radical brand."

Uniqlo's headquarters occupy a two-hundred-thousand-square-foot former warehouse in Ariake, a postindustrial neighborhood on a peninsula of reclaimed land overlooking Tokyo Bay. "I used to go running here," Conway, from the communications team, said, when I arrived on a breezy morning in April.

The facility is known as Uniqlo City, both because of its size and because of its layout, which mimics an urban grid, with "neighborhoods" and "streets." Its opening, in 2017, marked the beginning of a new era in Uniqlo's self-mythology, known as the Ariake Project. The facility's designer, Brad Cloepfil, of Allied Works Architecture, told me that the aim of the project was "to rethink the company's entire work culture" and "literally to try to turn it from a somewhat traditional Japanese company into a global workplace."

Inside, the building was spare and gleaming: high ceilings, blond wood, large windows. A Noguchi paper lamp with three black dots offered a stray decorative touch. Conway, an amiable Australian, ushered me into a reception area and asked me to sign a form agreeing not to take pictures. It was product-review week, when Uniqlo employees from around the world converge on Uniqlo City to finalize the lineup for the coming season. The deliberate pace of Uniqlo's design process makes it an outlier. Whereas a business model like Shein's relies on rushing out the latest microtrends (sardine-print sundresses, fringed boots for Beyoncé concertgoers) in as few

as five to seven days, Uniqlo begins planning its range up to a year in advance.

The company has mastered the “hero product,” churning out such hits as the Round Mini Shoulder Bag ($24.90), a nylon cross-body pack that went viral in April, 2022, when an Englishwoman named Caitlin Phillimore posted about the shocking number of things that she could fit inside: lip balm, wallet, keys, phone charger, hair clip, headphones, camera, perfume, EpiPen, an entire pack of Fox’s chocolate Viennese biscuits. “It’s giving Mary Poppins!” a commenter enthused. Uniqlo later featured Phillimore in *LifeWear*, the company’s magazine. “The way I see it, having UNIQLO in your wardrobe takes the headaches out of fashion,” she wrote.

At headquarters, Conway and I took an elevator to the sixth floor. “This is uptown,” he said, leading me along one of the building’s “streets”—a corridor three times the length of a Manhattan block, paved in blue-gray slate. “Now we’re reaching midtown,” he explained. We passed a “space of learning” called the Answer Lab, with videos touting the innovative design of the company’s bras, and an attractive, well-lit room lined with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves.

“All cities have a library,” Conway said. “This is ours.”

We moved on to the in-house coffee shop, where Robert Johnson’s “King of the Delta Blues Singers”—part of a vinyl collection curated by a Portland record store—was playing on a vintage record player. There was an auditorium known as the Great Hall, inspired by a Kabuki theatre, and a cavernous, empty Portrait Hall panelled in dark wood, where we viewed life-size photographs of Uniqlo ambassadors—all of them male athletes, including Roger Federer, the wheelchair-tennis player Shingo Kunieda, and the golf pro Adam Scott. In August, the company announced that the actor Cate Blanchett was joining the roster. She seems to have already imbibed the company ethos, proclaiming that she is “energised by the opportunity to help UNIQLO advance important aspects of its LifeWear philosophy.”

In a warehouse downstairs, I had read, a fleet of large robots was sorting products. (The company has reportedly eliminated ninety per cent of the warehouse’s human staff.) Somewhere on the premises was also a full-scale

mockup store, but Conway informed me that I would be unable to tour it because it was stocked with top-secret prototypes. As the “Severance” vibes intensified, Mr. Yanai-isms rattled through my head: “I believe only companies that contribute to society will last,” “Change or die.” I asked Conway about Uniqlo’s philosophy, and why a clothing company should aspire to improve human existence. Couldn’t it just make nice clothes? “I think, even internally, we’ve asked ourselves, What is it that’s different about us?” Conway replied. “LifeWear is the main difference.”

People who know Uniqlo well are fond of noting the distinctively Japanese aspects of the company. They mention its *takumi* teams, made up of veteran textile artisans who visit far-flung factories to offer instruction in the fine points of dyeing and sewing. They talk about how its stores benefit from *omotenashi*, the Japanese culture of perfectly calibrated hospitality, and *yonobi*, the practice of infusing banal things with beauty. *Ken’yaku*, a commitment to frugality, is detectable in a corporate culture that frowns on perks or frills. Michael Emmerich, a professor of Japanese literature at U.C.L.A. and a translator of the eleventh-century novel “The Tale of Genji,” co-authored the LifeWear messaging for Uniqlo. He admitted that it was deliberately enigmatic, saying that he wanted customers to “stop a moment and engage with language.” He also recalled spending a day touring stores with Kazumi Yanai, one of Mr. Yanai’s two sons, both of whom are senior executives at Fast Retailing: “At a certain point, he said, ‘Did you know we’re not allowed to use taxis, so I have to pay for this myself?’ ”

“They started off free-range. Now they’re just plain wild.”
Cartoon by Kaamran Hafeez

Executives are proud of the way that Japanese principles influence the company's practices, but they don't consider Uniqlo a Japanese company per se. Yanai has likened Uniqlo to K-pop, an industry that is oriented toward "what will be popular worldwide, rather than focussing on uniquely Korean characteristics." Uniqlo's dream of total demographic penetration, the writer W. David Marx has observed, "means minimizing cultural codes" to create "nationless clothes" that are viable in every region.

Conway led me to the company's R. & D. workshop. A woman sat at a sewing machine, working on a child's striped onesie, while a colleague, Utsuno Tomoya, stood in front of industrial-sized washers and dryers, running loads of cashmere sweaters to see how they stood up under different cycles. "We're trying to figure out how to achieve our target hand feeling," Tomoya explained. "We want them to be soft, but very physically stable." On a chart, workers had recorded the ideal temperatures and treatments for various colors.

The pride of Ariake is its on-site Customer Center. "It looks like a call center, but we don't call it a call center," Conway said, stopping next to a closed door. "We don't outsource." Last year, Customer Centers worldwide took in thirty-one million "pieces of information," fielding telephone inquiries, answering e-mails, monitoring conversations on social media, and gathering in-store feedback. "A lot of it's gold," Conway said. Call centers typically enforce strict time limits, but Uniqlo encourages its operators to keep engaging for as long as a customer wants.

It was one such conversation, with a Japanese housewife, that alerted Uniqlo to the fact that customers often wore the brand's Ultra Light Down Jackets indoors, to save on heating, and that they wanted the sleeves to be snug enough that, when pushed up to the elbows, they wouldn't slip down while washing dishes. The company applies a sociological attention to the gestures and dilemmas of people's daily routines; once harvested, these insights are quickly incorporated into product designs. After noticing that more people were commuting by bicycle, designers tweaked the brand's windproof jacket, shortening its length and tightening the sleeves to prevent air from blowing up a rider's arms. If Uniqlo's ideas about virtuous design cycles hold true, these improvements should facilitate even more two-

wheeled commutes. Waight Keller told me that Uniqlo's "favorite term is V.O.C., which means 'voice of customer.' " She admitted that she often lurks online, reading customer comments on the brand's site.

This practice dates back to the nineteen-nineties, when Uniqlo ran an ad in Japanese newspapers called "One Million Yen for Bad-mouthing Uniqlo," inviting customers to bitch and gripe. No issue is too minor: faced with complaints that a particular black skinny jean tended to emerge from the dryer covered with lint, Uniqlo developed a lint-repellent coating. When clients said that Uniqlo's merino wool was too scratchy, the company developed a new "super soft" yarn. A special technology fills the fibres with air, per Uniqlo, in the same way that air is "whipped into egg whites to achieve the light and fluffy texture in a great soufflé." One can now buy more than twenty items in Soufflé Yarn.

In 1949, when Tadashi Yanai was born in the small coal-mining city of Ube, Japan was still an occupied country. "It was very poor," Yanai once told the *Financial Times*. His home town, he has said, reminded him of Cwm Rhondda, the desolate Welsh village in John Ford's 1941 film "How Green Was My Valley." Chocolate and coffee were "aspirational" goods. When the local mines closed, many of Yanai's friends and their families left the city.

At mid-century, Japanese people had been wearing Western-style clothing for only about eighty years. The Tokugawa shogunate, from 1603 to 1868, long upheld a policy of national seclusion, sealing Japan's borders and culture from outside influence. When the subsequent Meiji government enacted reforms intended to "modernize" the country, soldiers were issued uniforms inspired by the French Army; the Haircut Edict of 1871 instructed samurai to abandon the traditional *chonmage* topknot and cut their hair short. Yet the masses continued much as before. According to Yayoi Motohashi, a fashion historian at the Kyoto Institute of Technology, "While there was some increase in the wearing of Western-style clothing after World War I, particularly among upper-class or upper-middle-class women in urban areas, kimono remained the norm for most people well until World War II."

The Second World War left Japan devastated, but the seven-year occupation that followed inevitably fostered exposure and, for some, a certain

attraction to American culture. “In those years of acute hunger and scarcity, the material comfort of the Americans was simply staggering to behold,” the historian John W. Dower writes in “Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II.” Amid textile shortages, Japanese veterans continued wearing threadbare flight suits, and families found clothes by scouring the black market.

Yanai’s parents owned a run-of-the-mill men’s-clothing store. The family lived above the shop. Eventually, they opened a second, more casual store. It stocked a brand called VAN Jacket, which, alongside such magazines as *Otoko no Fukushoku* and *Heibon Punch*, helped to launch a craze for *ametora*—an abbreviation for “American traditional,” a mode of preppy dressing that became influential in postwar Japan. In “Ametora: How Japan Saved American Style,” W. David Marx writes that such styles “arrived in Japan over the course of several decades, transformed the look of Japanese society, and boomeranged back to influence global style.”

In the United States, the Ivy League look was synonymous with conservatism, but in Japan it represented a rebellion against traditional mores. In advance of the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, police swept the streets of Ginza, a fashionable neighborhood in Tokyo, for members of a group of style-conscious students known as the Miyuki Tribe. Their offense was hanging around the neighborhood dressed like Princeton sophomores. The police, Marx writes, “stopped anyone in a button-down shirt and John F. Kennedy haircut,” insuring that foreign visitors returned home without “lurid tales of misbehaving Japanese teenagers in shrunken cotton trousers.” Yanai, undeterred, was the first kid at his high school to wear a white button-down and Converse sneakers.

Yanai enrolled at Waseda University, in Tokyo, majoring in economics and politics, but student protests cancelled classes for more than a year. In 1968, with his education at a standstill, he set off on a trip funded by his parents. “I wanted to travel abroad because I was curious about the way the world outside of Japan worked and what kind of lifestyles people had,” he told the South Korean publication *Magazine B*. He caught an American President Lines cruise to Hawaii, hopped over to San Francisco, and then rode

Greyhound buses across the United States. (He has a model of the cruise ship in his office.)

In 1972, having graduated from college, Yanai started working at the family's shop. Two years later, he officially took over the business. Every night, he recorded the day's sales in a handwritten ledger, poring over it until he could recognize trends. After he ordered the clerks at the store to discontinue the unprofitable practice of extending credit on suits, all but one of them quit. In 1984, he opened a larger store, in Hiroshima: Unique Clothing Warehouse. He may have lifted the name, without permission, from New York City's beloved Unique Clothing Warehouse, which stood on Broadway and Eighth Street from 1973 to 1991 and is remembered for, among other things, employing Jean-Michel Basquiat before he became famous.

Uniclo, as the company was originally known, offered a multitude of brands at bargain prices. "*NON SEX NON AGE NON SIZE*" read a slogan that Yanai himself painted in colorful letters on the front of the company's second store. Yanai soon switched to manufacturing his own products. Many of them drew from the *ametora* tradition—which by then had expanded to include other "American" styles such as outdoor wear—a heritage that continues to inform the company's offerings. "It's that reductive, nonchalant, unadorned basic," Marx told me. "For instance, a Shetland sweater—what Uniqlo does is to take that spirit and then try to create a sweater that is technically the best, most sweaterlike sweater than can be worn by anyone in the world."

By the nineteen-nineties, Uniclo had expanded to more than a hundred locations, many of them barnlike roadside emporiums where customers could pull in and grab a pack of underwear. (Uniqlo still operates this type of store in Japan and other countries.) In 1988, Yanai established a subsidiary in Hong Kong, where a clerk accidentally transcribed the name as Uniqlo. "Let's keep it," Yanai said, figuring that the spelling had a certain dynamism. Japan was in a deep recession, but Uniqlo kept growing, offering bargains for the struggling masses and discretion for better-off consumers in an era that frowned upon conspicuous consumption.

For the company, 1998 was a turning point: the Year of the Fleece. “At that point, fleece was kind of seen as a male, countryside thing,” Motohashi said. “It was not particularly fashionable.” Despite the material’s reputation, it was relatively expensive. Uniqlo saw an opportunity to transform fleece jackets from frumpy technical gear into a stylish, affordable basic by manufacturing at scale. In Japan, people still remember television commercials featuring an overhead conveyor belt bearing vivid jackets in fifty colors: mint, lavender, cornflower blue, clementine orange, lime green. In 2000, the company sold twenty-six million of these eighteen-dollar fleeces in Japan, enough to clothe more than twenty per cent of the country’s population.

Uniqlo opened its first U.S. store in 2005, at a regional mall in Edison, New Jersey. A thirty-six-thousand-square-foot flagship store, in SoHo—the largest single-brand fashion outpost in the neighborhood—followed the next year. The idea was to flood the zone of American retail, alerting the Cheesecake Factory diner and the Dean & DeLuca shopper alike to the arrival of a new, ambitious clothier. “If I opened a very small store, no one would ever pay attention,” Yanai told the *Times*. “We have to open in a big way, to make people recognize who we are.”

New York shoppers embraced Uniqlo. One finance guy bought T-shirts, socks, and underwear so regularly that staff wondered whether he had just stopped doing laundry. Skinny jeans were taking off, and a hipster clientele appreciated the unusually narrow cut of the brand’s denim. Fixated on cracking the American market, Yanai tried unsuccessfully to buy the high-end retailer Barneys; two years later, rumors abounded that he was trying to acquire Gap. (No such deal ever materialized, but Fast Retailing did end up buying American companies such as Theory and J Brand.) In 2009, Uniqlo pulled off a “fashion miracle,” as *The Cut* later wrote, persuading the reclusive German designer Jil Sander to create a collection, called +J. By 2010, Uniqlo was so popular in the city that *New York* proclaimed it the “hottest retailer,” labelling its customers “Uniqlones.”

Elsewhere in America, the company’s strategy wasn’t working. Mall shoppers favored familiar names over an unknown Japanese brand that shunned logos, ignored trends, and rarely marked down prices. Customers

also struggled with unforgiving cuts unsuited to larger American bodies. Yanai's autobiography is called "One Win Nine Losses," a reference to his penchant for learning from mistakes. But the botched American rollout represented a different order of defeat. "The U.S. was my biggest failure," he told *Time*.

With losses mounting, Uniqlo closed some of its U.S. stores. In the early twenty-tens, it shifted its focus in the U.S. to building flagship stores in high-traffic urban locations. Recently, the company announced an aggressive plan to expand from a hundred and six North American stores to two hundred by 2027, venturing into new regions. Last year, it opened its first stores in Texas, where online sales had been particularly strong.

Uniqlo has adjusted its sizing for the U.S. market—an American small is closest to a Japanese medium—but frustrations still arise. When *Essence* recently posted a cover featuring Michael B. Jordan and Ryan Coogler in crisp white AIRism Oversized T-shirts, several commenters rued the fact that Uniqlo stores don't stock sizes bigger than XL. (XXL and XXXL are available only online.) And the company remains under the radar in many parts of the country. "I think they're really going to have to do some marketing," Cathaleen Chen, who covers retail for *The Business of Fashion*, told me. "Most people don't know what a Uniqlo television ad looks like." Even so, the company finally seems to be making serious inroads: last year, revenues in the North American market increased by more than thirty per cent.

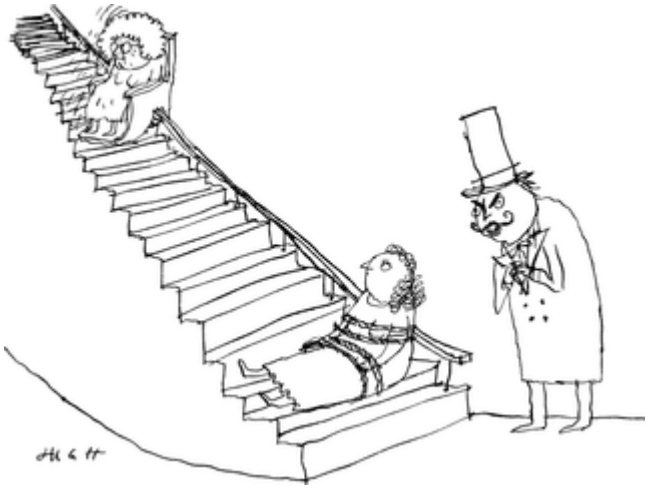
The store is the palace of the Uniqlo kingdom. "We call our head offices 'store-support centers,' " Conway told me, as we toured a newly renovated Uniqlo in the Tokyo neighborhood of Asakusa. Japan has sixteen official holidays a year, but Uniqlo executives don't take those days off, in solidarity with the store staff who have to work. Even some senior executives have started their careers on the shop floor, learning how to restock shelves and fold jeans in a very specific way (inseam tucked, legs doubled over so that the label is visible). According to Uniqlo's *zen'in keiei* philosophy, "Everybody is a manager."

A large red paper lantern bearing Uniqlo's logo hung from the ceiling, resembling one that hangs at the Kaminarimon, or Thunder Gate, which

serves as the entrance to Sensoji, the famous nearby temple. At a customization and repair counter, people flipped through binders of motifs—penguins, sushi, cherry blossoms, a special Asakusa logo recalling a votive slip—that they could have embroidered on a bag or a cardigan. “We don’t want to be a chain store,” Conway said of the local touches. Other shoppers perused a display of traditional sake casks or purchased T-shirts celebrating neighborhood artisans—paper-makers; a bakery specializing in *melonpan*, a crispy sweet bun—as drum-and-flute music from Asakusa’s annual festival played over the sound system.

The shirts, available only at the Asakusa store, were part of a program that Uniqlo calls UT, which issues graphic T-shirts enabled by a dizzying array of licensing deals: Studio Ghibli, Picasso, Disney, Peanuts, Sylvanian Families, Coca-Cola, Hello Kitty, Andy Warhol, manga heroes, adorable kittens poking their heads through pieces of toast. I had always had trouble getting my head around UT because I could never figure out what Warhol had to do with Uniqlo (and also because, outside the Uniqlo universe, the letters “UT” are most often followed by an “I”). But the line is wildly popular—the launch of a collaboration with the street artist KAWS sparked a frenzy in China in 2019, with shoppers crawling under shutters, removing clothes from mannequins, and putting one another in headlocks to get the shirts before they were gone.

Under normal circumstances, the Uniqlo shopper should walk into a store and feel a sense of overwhelming abundance. Such is the logic behind Uniqlo’s power walls of thousands of sweaters on shelves that reach so high you fear that they might bust right through the ceiling, like Willy Wonka’s elevator. The display is arranged according to a precise formula, with sizes increasing from floor to ceiling, and colors darkening from left to right, as well as from the entrance to the back of the store.



Cartoon by Roland High

Each pile is assessed for tidiness multiple times a day, using a five-rank grading system. A “B” grade might mean that a green blouse has found its way into a blue stack, while “D” is reserved for serious cases like a completely empty stack, or items that have fallen on the ground. Like *IKEA*, which intentionally musses and jumbles its displays, Uniqlo believes that volume is the catalyst of consumer desire. Conway explained, “We want everything to appear fully stocked all the time.”

Customer service at Uniqlo is unobtrusive, whether because of *omotenashi* principles or because of a desire to save on labor. At the Paris flagship store, near where I live, there is pedagogical signage everywhere, but it is consistently difficult to find a person to answer a question. “We try not to harass the customer,” Conway told me. “We try to give them space to look and touch and feel the clothes and, you know, enjoy the store without being bothered.” Apparently, one of Yanai’s inspirations for this hands-off style of service was a visit that he made to a university co-op during a trip to the U.S.; Uniqlo now trains employees to sell clothes like they are selling books, letting customers browse freely.

In the Asakusa store, a customer walked past.

“Do you need a basket?” a sales associate inquired.

Conway told me that this strategy gives customers “a chance to say, ‘I don’t need a basket, but I need help with a sweater.’ It’s an indirect way to initiate

communication—low pressure, because you're offered something specific versus asking, 'Can I help you?' "

At one point, Uniqlo was said to have a rule that obliged cashiers to complete every transaction in a minute or less. Now many Uniqlo stores use R.F.I.D. technology for checkout, allowing customers to simply chuck their items into a bin and pay within seconds, no scanning required. It's such a frictionless experience that it can feel, for better or for worse, as if you didn't pay at all. The tags also transmit data back to Uniqlo, which, per the *Wall Street Journal*, uses the information in "improving the accuracy of inventory in stores, adjusting production based on demand, and getting more visibility into its supply chain."

Since the pandemic, Uniqlo has doubled down on physical stores. Last year, e-commerce accounted for only fifteen per cent of sales. The company has made some effort to improve its multi-channel outreach, via Instagram and TikTok, but, as Sarah Shapiro wrote recently in *Puck*, "the company's neglect of their digital storefront" remains "an unacceptable pain point for a company with more than $20 billion in annual revenue."

Customers complain that Uniqlo's website is difficult to navigate, that it's cluttered, that it requires too much scrolling. Coveted collaborations are hard to locate. These issues can be particularly off-putting to American customers, who have come to expect a seamless online experience tailored to their cultural preferences. "I felt like I was signing up for a dating app," an acquaintance recounted to me, saying that she'd had to create an account just to buy some socks.

Shapiro told me about an industry term called "rage clicks," referring to instances when a customer "has to click the same button multiple times and gets really annoyed." She continued, "On a regular site, you say, 'O.K., what were our rage clicks this week?' That is something I assume Uniqlo's not doing, because for me the whole site is a rage click." Still, she wrote, "when Uniqlo finally modernizes online shopping to match their products, I think they'll capture the American consumer they've been chasing all along."

Clare Waight Keller travels to Tokyo eight times a year, but the rest of the time she works from London, where she lives. In May, I visited her at Uniqlo's offices there, in an unremarkable building off Regent Street. When I arrived, she was sitting on a rolling chair in a conference room. Vintage fabric samples—tweeds, linens, a sky-blue poplin with white contrail stripes—hung from a rack against a wall. She had her iPad out and was drinking iced coffee from a plastic cup.

"I'm working on some color adds," she explained. In the past, she told me, a lot of Uniqlo's colors "were either a little too vivid and maybe a bit too hot or too sad." The company had traditionally hesitated to include browns in its product range, but in her first year, after nixing the violet, Waight Keller introduced mocha brown, chocolaty brown, and a winey brown that looked like it had been poured from a decanter. "Translating those really rich, beautiful colors into something like a sweatsuit—nobody had seen it, especially in the Asian market," she said.

Waight Keller was dressed in full Uniqlo : C, an "elevated LifeWear essentials" line that she designs alongside the main collection. She wore a navy-blue hooded pin-striped parka in lightweight cotton, paired with a belted pencil skirt, in the same pattern, that hit at mid-calf. I had wanted to buy the same outfit, but it had sold out before I'd managed to. "Did you know you had a hit?" I asked Waight Keller. She replied, "Yeah, honestly, it's this kind of thing where I design it and then I'm, like, 'That's on *my* order list.' "

Uniqlo brought on Waight Keller, who famously designed Meghan Markle's wedding dress, in part to improve its offerings for women. "She was just such a clever choice," Paton told me. "She's an insider, and the idea that someone who could design a royal wedding gown and helm iconic fashion houses is now designing your wardrobe basics? They're managing to position themselves in the minds of their consumers as somehow elevated from their European rivals." The pitch, Waight Keller said, was "We want that element of fashion to come in." Challenges abounded. "The skirts business was a disaster," she recalled. "And the same with dresses. I think they'd always approached dresses as, like, T-shirts. And I just said, 'You know, we need to do things with the waist.' "

These weak spots were, she said, partially a product of the company's history. "Mr. Yanai came up in menswear, and he has that sort of disciplined item-by-item approach," Waight Keller said. "Women's is completely different, and it has a much more emotional element to it. Men go in and say, 'I need a shirt this season.' Women go in and say, 'I need an outfit.' "

At the same time that Waight Keller has been working to change some aspects of Uniqlo, Uniqlo has changed her way of working. "In luxury, we often look at putting on a lot of details to make something special," she said. "Uniqlo is all about softness, it's all about comfort and distilling the design down to the simplest, perfected form." At Uniqlo, there will be no high-flown show notes, no hemline diktats, no Loulou de la Falaise mood boards followed by, the next season, a turn toward grunge.

The company is nonetheless fastidious about the fundamental details. For example, Waight Keller explained, Uniqlo finishes every zipper track with a small piece of fabric known as a "garage." It keeps gunk out of the device and protects against abrasion. Other fixes are invisible. "You know our signature Ultra Light Down?" Yuki Katsuta, Uniqlo's global head of research and design, asked me. "Every season, we spend months talking about how we can make it ten or twenty grams lighter."

Last year, Waight Keller noticed that Uniqlo didn't offer any V-neck sweaters, so she included one in the Uniqlo : C collection. "I saw Mr. Yanai, and he was, like, 'Why did that sell?' " Waight Keller recalled. "I said that the V had the perfect pitch of proportion. I would describe it as a V-neck for a crewneck person." They decided to introduce V-necks into the main range, but not before performing a study in which they enlisted models to try every type of collar that the company offers—button-down, straight, polo, camp, etc.—underneath the new product. Recently, designers also made millimetric adjustments to the best-selling AIRism T-shirt, tweaking the shirt's inner seams to insure that the neckline would lie flatter, with no bumps. "These are the sort of subtleties that an average customer would never detect," Waight Keller said. "But the concept is that you walk into the shop, you take the T-shirt, you pull it over your head, and it just sits perfectly."

Uniqlo sells the same products around the globe, but certain local considerations influence the design. “Plaid, for example, is difficult,” Waight Keller said. “Japan prefers small checks, while the rest of the world prefers big checks.” Sunglasses need to be somewhat transparent in Japan, she told me, since dark lenses are viewed with suspicion. Japanese women are unlikely to buy a shirt that shows a lot of cleavage. “There’s a specific neck drop that you don’t go below,” Waight Keller said. “It’s maybe twenty-three centimetres, so mid-chest.” Recently, she designed a polyamide bag, envisioning it as a laptop tote. It sold out within ten minutes in South Korea, where word had spread that it was the perfect size for a motorbike helmet.

When Waight Keller isn’t working, she travels: to Amsterdam, Shanghai, Kyoto, Nara. A colleague had told me that she was constantly snapping images of interestingly dressed people on the street. I asked if I could see someone who had caught her eye. She pulled out her phone and scrolled to a shot, taken in Seoul, of a young woman wearing heather-gray sweatpants embellished with cursive lettering (“*LOVE NEVER FELT SO GOOD*”) down the left leg. She wore the pants with bulbous black clogs, two hoodies—black and gray, hoods up—and a fluffy bomber jacket. After taking the picture, Waight Keller immediately forwarded it to her team as a reference. “It’s all about proportion,” she explained.

A typical order at a Uniqlo factory is a million units. For this and other reasons, Uniqlo claims that its factories aren’t like other factories. “We don’t really do short runs and see you later,” Conway told me on a visit to the Fast Retailing Innovation Factory, a state-of-the-art facility that Uniqlo has operated in Tokyo since 2021 as a joint venture with the knitting-machine manufacturer Shima Seiki. When we arrived, we were greeted by Utsuno Tomoya, the R. & D. manager, who asked us to take off our shoes and put on backless slippers.

Tomoya led us onto a factory floor, where employees were working at machines that produce a variety of seamless knits. The machines whizzed and whirred. They were running twenty-four hours a day, but the Innovation Factory’s output is feeble compared with that of Uniqlo’s subcontractors in countries such as Thailand, Vietnam, Bangladesh, China, and Indonesia.

“We make twenty-four hundred garments a day,” Tomoya explained. “They can make nineteen thousand.”

The employees were working on a batch of women’s chocolate-brown 3D Knit Soufflé Yarn Skirts (size M) and forest-green 3D Knit polo shirts (size XL). After the machines pumped out the items, the clothes were sent, ten at time, to be examined for flaws. At an inspection station, a woman in pigtails and a surgical mask was in the process of checking a green polo. She draped it over two upright illuminated cones—think lightsabres mounted on a lazy Susan—scrutinizing the fabric for snags and holes. As we watched, a chimelike tune filled the room. “Five minutes until break,” Tomoya said. We walked past an electronics locker, to which employees surrender their phones before their eight-hour shifts.

After knitting and inspection, the items went upstairs for washing. They came out thicker and fluffier than before. Each item was then tagged, ironed, and inspected again. In a corner of the warehouse, a woman was examining a Soufflé skirt. She pulled it apart, as though kneading dough, and let it bounce back to its usual shape. Then she did the same with the hem, revealing that the machine had missed a stitch. The woman marked the offending area with red thread and put it aside, to be sent to the factory’s repair sector. The skirts that passed muster would be put through a metal detector—to insure that there were no stray needles—then folded, packed, and shipped out to the port on trucks. The music chimed again: break time.

So is Uniqlo fast fashion or not? The company’s foundational secret, executives say, lies in its tightly focussed product line, which enables it to buy and develop fabric in enormous quantities. This puts the company in a uniquely advantageous negotiating position, allowing it to offer better quality at lower prices. “We are misunderstood as a fast fashion brand, we are the opposite,” Kazumi Yanai recently declared.

It is true that Uniqlo has made concrete efforts to be more sustainable. It has, for example, pledged to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions in stores and offices by ninety per cent before 2030, and it is already halfway to that target. Eighteen per cent of the company’s clothing is made from recycled or other climate-friendly materials. Inspired by the leaves of the lotus plant, Uniqlo came up with a natural way to repel water from rain gear, an

innovation more in demand than ever as customers push to phase out PFAS. Uniqlo says that it doesn't burn or dump unsold inventory, and that it has directed approximately sixty million pieces of clothing toward emergency aid, in addition to donating thirty-eight million dollars to support programs run by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

But much of what Fast Retailing says about its deep commitment to creating timeless clothes is undercut by the fact that it also owns GU, a lower-priced sister brand. Pronounced "jee-you," GU offers "trend-driven styles" and "rapid turnaround times from design to retail"—with, presumably, rapid turnaround times from retail to landfill as well. And the scale of Uniqlo's operations, not to mention its quest for endless expansion, makes real sustainability an impossibility. Maxine Bédat, the director of a sustainability think tank called the New Standard Institute, told me, "While Uniqlo has made some strides, it's part of an industry-wide problem that piecemeal initiatives can't resolve."

According to the latest available data, from a 2016 McKinsey report, the average consumer buys sixty per cent more clothes than she did about fifteen years ago, and keeps them for half as long. Thirty per cent of the clothes manufactured in a given year are never sold, much less worn. The question of whether or not Uniqlo is fast fashion or sustainable fashion or ethical fashion has perhaps become irrelevant in a world in which fashion—no modifier needed—is increasingly culpable for the ravaging of the planet.

The likelihood of Uniqlo fulfilling its global ambitions depends in large part on whether it is, at long last, able to conquer the American market. Will U.S. customers submit to the notion that dressing like everyone else has its benefits? In fashion, as in politics, collectivism might make life better, but individualism often prevails.

The company also has a cultural goal: "to democratize art for all." For more than a decade, Uniqlo has sponsored free public programs at *MOMA*, the Tate Modern, the Louvre, and Boston's Museum of Fine Arts. In exchange, the company burnishes its halo of high-mindedness, receives the right to feature famous works on its T-shirts, and gets to stage events in empty galleries or under an iconic glass pyramid, furthering the idea that its interests lie in Life as much as in Wear.

On one such night in May, Uniqlo gathered a crowd at the Tate Modern, in London, to bestow awards for the UT Grand Prix, an annual competition in which people around the world vie to design a Uniqlo shirt. About a hundred people packed into the museum's private cinema to hear the results —five winners out of some ten thousand entries—while munching popcorn from little striped cartons.

"Can I do something to help that won't take you twenty minutes to show me how to do?"
Cartoon by William Haefeli

I was impressed by Ahn Do Eun, a seventeen-year-old student from South Korea, who was the youngest winner, for an abstract submission—yellow splotches, pink streaks, smeary pepperoni reds—that she called "The Pizza I Want to Eat." Unlike her adult competitors, she was wearing a suit, with her hair sharply parted in the middle. She got up on the stage and read shyly from her phone: "One day, I got told off by my dad. I was feeling so sad and angry, but, even in that moment, I wanted a pizza. The toppings are my emotions."

Afterward, there was prosecco and a d.j. in the museum's atrium, the center of which was given over to Louise Bourgeois's soaring steel spider, "Maman." Lingering by one of its attenuated, knobby legs, I struck up a conversation with a quiet, conservatively dressed man. He was wearing a Uniqlo lapel pin, in the manner of an American politician's flag. It was Koji Yanai, one of Yanai's sons.

I told him that I was writing a story about Uniqlo and asked if there was anything about the company that he thought was misunderstood. "In the past, we haven't always been good at telling our story," he said. "But most

apparel brands are not existing like us.” I had heard Uniqlo executives compare the company to Apple, releasing gradual updates each season, “like iPhone 4, iPhone 5,” or to a supermarket of clothing, serving daily needs. Koji preferred another, even further-reaching metaphor. “We want to be the infrastructure of clothing,” he said. “Water, gas, electricity, and Uniqlo.”

Mr. Yanai long vowed that he would step down as C.E.O. when he turned seventy, but, in 2019, his birthday came and went uneventfully. In 2023, he theoretically ceded control of day-to-day operations to a longtime deputy, but, by all accounts, he is still vigorously involved in decision-making at every level. Inside Uniqlo, he commands an admiring cult of personality. He famously starts his workday at seven, leaving by four to spend time with his wife.

I met Yanai in Paris, during Fashion Week, in the fall of 2024. Uniqlo had rented an exhibition space just off the prestigious Place Vendôme, and was staging a fortieth-anniversary retrospective called “The Art and Science of LifeWear.” In one area of the exhibit, you could “touch the tech”—it’s surprisingly fun to plunge your hand into a vat of imitation down. The company’s events tend to skew earnest for fashion, and this one was no exception, beginning with an address by Yanai—translated live from Japanese, via headsets—featuring various charts and graphs. “We are living in the greatest time of change in history at a speed unlike any time of previous revolution,” he declared. This was followed by a forty-five-minute conversation between Waight Keller and Roger Federer dedicated to the question “What Makes Life Better?” (Waight Keller: “Inspiration.” Federer: “Kindness.”) There were mentions of “electrolyte membranes” and “carbon-fibre solutions.”

After the presentation, I was spirited away for a brief audience with Yanai at Uniqlo’s nearby offices. Diplomatic levels of protocol were in effect, implemented by a team of handlers. In a bright room, Yanai was seated on a low couch flanked by a formally dressed interpreter. Yanai had a crewcut and wire-rimmed glasses. He was wearing a dark-blue suit, with a pocket square and a polka-dot tie. “You don’t really see anyone dressed in a suit

these days," he said, laughing. "This is very outdated. But, as the host, we wanted to be polite."

Outside the company, Yanai comes across as a game and almost impish corporate prophet. I asked if he could give me a concrete example of Uniqlo clothing making life better. He responded by pulling a laminated card from his jacket pocket:

> Uniqlo is the **elements** of style.
> Uniqlo is a **toolbox** for living.
> Uniqlo is clothes that suit **your values**.
> Uniqlo is how the **future** dresses.
> Uniqlo is **beauty** in hyperpracticality.
> Uniqlo is clothing in the **absolute**.

Half jokingly, I asked if I could keep the card. I was surprised when he agreed. I walked away thinking I'd extracted some truth so dear to Yanai that he literally keeps it close to his breast.

Later, I came across a 2012 article in *Forbes* in which the writer describes receiving a laminated card from Yanai in just the same fashion. Yanai, it turned out, was practicing not diplomacy but something more like royal manners, meeting all comers with smooth little business cards in the same way that Queen Elizabeth II was said to respond to every conversational sally with "Quite." In a sense, it was the perfect Uniqlo gesture—elegant, inexpensive, made for no one and everyone at the same time. ♦

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Letter from Barcelona

The Sagrada Família Takes Its Final Shape

In the century since Antoni Gaudí died, his wild design has been obsessively realized, creating the world's tallest church—and an endlessly debated icon.

By D. T. Max

September 15, 2025

The church, as seen in July, 2025. The Catalan architect wanted the Sagrada Família, begun in 1882, to be constructed one section at a time, to allow designers who came after him a chance to make their stylistic mark. His aesthetic, though, is so unusual that any divergence could feel like vandalism.Photographs by Paolo Pellegrin / Magnum for The New Yorker

The Sagrada Família is an immense, unfinished church in Barcelona, begun in 1882 on what was once outlying farmland and is now the city's center. When I last visited the building, in July, it was nine inches away from being the tallest in the city. Less than two weeks later, when a ring beam to support the base of a cross was added to its biggest tower, dedicated to Jesus, the church surpassed the city's two highest skyscrapers, both of which stand at five hundred and five feet tall. The sandstone basilica will reach its full height, however, only once the cross—which is fifty-five feet tall and made of fluted steel—is installed atop the tower, later this month. This addition will also make it the tallest church in the world. But Antoni Gaudí, the Catalan architect who spent forty-three years working on the

Sagrada Família, did not think that his work should compete with God's, so the basilica will remain a few feet lower than the iconic peak of Montjuïc.

Gaudí's structure is a head-spinning mixture of morphing geometrical forms, many inspired by nature. Its conical Art Nouveau pinnacles have the lumpy beauty of sandcastles. Building such an unusual church has been a famously slow project, even in a country where, to American eyes, many things move without haste. "*Això dura més que les obres de la Sagrada Família*"—"This is taking longer than building the Sagrada Família"—is a Catalan phrase one hears on the streets of Barcelona. Gaudí was confident that his vision would one day be fulfilled. "Providence will provide," he assured a student. The Sagrada Família was founded as an expiatory church, meaning that it would be financed by prayerful donations from people atoning for their sins.

Pretty quickly, this pay-to-pray arrangement gave way to a less ecclesiastical approach. In 1915, the Sagrada Família started charging a visitor's fee—currently twenty-six euros. It is now the largest tourist attraction on the Iberian Peninsula, drawing more people than the Museo del Prado, in Madrid. Last year, nearly five million visitors came to see the basilica's dizzyingly decorated interior; another nineteen million milled around outside, probably because they could not get tickets, and gazed at its equally ornate façade, with its Byzantine-looking tiling, windows shaped like honeycomb cells, and clumps of multicolored ceramic grapes. Last year, the church took in almost a hundred and thirty-four million euros. Buoyed by a tourism boom that began with the Barcelona Olympics, in 1992, and paused only for the *COVID*-19 pandemic, the site may be one of the only large construction projects in the world which pays for itself. In recent years, the Sagrada Família has collected far more money than it has spent.

Gaudí's original plan called for a church with eighteen towers. In addition to the Jesus tower, another would be dedicated to Mary, with bluish granite ornaments meant to evoke her iconic cloak; there would also be spires for each of the four Evangelists and the twelve apostles. The towers would be held up by columns that soared upward through the church's nave. Starting from polygonal bases, the columns would become cylindrical as they rose,

curving gracefully, like trees bent by the wind, before splitting into branches and ending in jagged clumps of leaves at the vault.

By 1977, just eight of the apostles' towers had been built, along with parts of the main structure, but the church still had no roof or columns, and the floor was dirt. For a time, construction seemed to slow down further. In 1984, *National Geographic* noted that there were "few workers remaining on a job that could take another century."

Recently, under Jordi Faulí, the site's ninth and current chief architect, who was appointed in 2012, things have moved much faster. The first time I visited the Sagrada Família, in 2016, the roof was finally done and the floor was in, though the eight apostles still had no company in the sky. When I returned the next year, the tower devoted to Mary was halfway up. Today, the church has fourteen towers, including the four dedicated to the Evangelists and the nearly finished structure celebrating Jesus. One might also count the massive cranes that insistently loom over the church, pulling up stone cladding, ceramic bunches of yellow wheat and red persimmons, and porta-potties. More than a thousand people currently work on the management and construction of the Sagrada Família, and the yearly building budget is forty-five million euros. (Official church publications put last year's total costs at eighty-six million.)

Until the Episcopal Diocese of New York halted the construction of St. John the Divine, in 1993, that cathedral had trained generations of artisans in the medieval art of stonecutting. Unfinished rocks are still a familiar sight on its Morningside Heights grounds. In the nineties, by contrast, the Sagrada Família team began using software originally created for aerospace design to model Gaudí's complex shapes. They then routed the plans to machines at various quarries which used diamond-tipped blades to cut rocks with precision.

“Ooh, where’d you get the classic ‘boyfriend fit’ jeans?”
Cartoon by Liana Finck

This innovation preceded Faulí’s stewardship—it was the brainchild of an architect from New Zealand who became an enthusiast of the project in the seventies—but nearly everything that the staff does now involves digital tools. The designs for the towers’ mosaic tiles, which Gaudí constructed by hand from ceramic shards, are workshopped and finalized using 3-D-design software called Rhinoceros. The church’s stone elements are incorporated the way Frank Gehry clads a museum: by affixing pre-assembled panels to an underlying structure. This method leaves behind a clear twenty-first-century trace—telltale grid lines where the panels have been fitted together—but it has allowed the team to build sections at ten times the previous pace. The project has become a model of techno-ecclesiasticism. Gaudí famously declared, “My client is not in a hurry,” but Faulí and those around him seem to be.

When will it all be done? The installation of the cross on the Jesus tower, by establishing the church’s signature profile, will be a momentous event in the basilica’s history. But one of the building’s façades is still a temporary wall, lacking the elaborate statues and adornments that will one day garland it. In the twenty-tens, the governing board of the Sagrada Família put in place an unrealistic deadline of 2026 for finishing the entire project; though officials have become vaguer about an end date, the sense that the building has been fast-tracked remains. “It does put additional pressure,” Faulí told me. “But it also helps, because you have a common goal.”

For Catalans, the whirring activity at the Sagrada Família has become a symbol of their can-do culture. Earlier this year, Angelina Torres, a hundred-and-twelve-year-old woman who has lived her whole life in Barcelona, told a Catalan news channel what the workers of her childhood had promised her as they did the construction: “We will build a church Catalonia will be proud of.”

Faulí, who is in his mid-sixties, is small, with a gray beard, and often wears a rumpled dark suit with an open-necked shirt. He speaks Spanish softly and quickly, with a light Catalan accent. He and his team work beneath a vaulted concrete ceiling in offices next to where Gaudí’s studio once was, on the west side of the basilica. When Faulí ponders the design intricacies of the building, he clasps his hands behind his back—Gaudí’s own characteristic pose. Faulí joined the Sagrada Família as a junior architect in 1990, and has spent his whole professional life working on the church. He is a practicing Catholic—he describes himself as “a believer with all the failings of a human being”—but he told me that what most excited him about the Sagrada Família job was “that it was unique—I learned as I went.” He was hired after Jordi Bonet, then the chief architect, asked him if he could draw a column that began as a ten-sided polygon and transformed into a cylinder. This was a trademark form of Gaudí’s, but no such columns had yet been added to the basilica. Faulí drew the figure off the top of his head. “I just had to understand the geometry,” he recalled. “I based it on the mathematical formulas that you use to draw the points of a parabola.”

Faulí has always been in awe of Gaudí. “He was a complete architect in all the aspects of architecture—construction, structure, light, forms of space,” he told me. “Even today, I like to look at his drawings. I like to look at his models, study them. Each model has a form that, in the end, expresses a meaning, a *feeling*.” When Faulí was working under Bonet, the goal was to have the central structure, the nave, done by 2010. That timetable was met. Pope Benedict came and led a Mass for several thousand people.

Faulí now runs a team of eleven architects, and also negotiates the politics of a project that has numerous stakeholders. A board of prominent locals, titularly headed by Barcelona’s archbishop, controls the disbursement of money. There are committees on art, music, liturgy, and theology. City

officials, for their part, decide questions of land usage. The enterprise is nearly E.U.-level in its complexity.

Most of Gaudí's drawings and mockups were lost during the Spanish Civil War, so a lot of Faulí's job is trying to establish what *el mestre* wanted. When Gaudí died, in 1926, only about ten to fifteen per cent of the basilica had been built. To varying degrees, he had laid out how he envisaged much of the rest of the church. His successors could extrapolate the details from Gaudí's recorded wishes or from his existing body of work. But a final chunk—including the design of stained-glass windows, the exact shape and materials of the towers, and the placement of ornamentation and art work inside the church and on much of its exterior—was almost entirely up to the architects who followed him.

Gaudí encouraged creative license—at least up to a point. He compared the Sagrada Família to a medieval cathedral whose design sometimes improved through the generations. César Martinell, a disciple of Gaudí's, published a book that quoted him remarking, in 1915, that, by "doing it this way, one's possible mistakes are corrected by others." Gaudí cited the cathedral in the northern Spanish city of León, where "an apse was finished poorly, and in the seventeenth century they put in a beautiful Baroque altarpiece!" His decision to construct the Sagrada Família in a modular fashion, one section at a time, was meant to allow those who came after him a chance to make subsequent portions on their own.

Gaudí's aesthetic, though, is so unusual that any divergence could feel like vandalism. Faulí takes a conservative approach. He makes frequent recourse to the published record of what Gaudí imagined for the basilica, which is slight. Faulí keeps two books in his office: the memoir by Martinell, "Gaudí and the Sagrada Família" (1951), and "The Temple of Sagrada Família" (1929), by another student of Gaudí's, Isidre Puig Boada. Together, the books represent a sort of "Sayings of Chairman Gaudí," and both contain foldout pages with overviews of the basilica. Faulí also has blowups of about ten grainy black-and-white photographs that were taken in Gaudí's workshop. Faulí explained, "We're not his disciples, because that's not possible. But we are his successors, without doubt. Most of all, we're his collaborators."

Gaudí, who was born into a modest family of coppersmiths in 1852, had just graduated from architecture school when he became part of a movement known as Catalan modernism—a style characterized by the use of organic shapes and bright, broken ceramic tiling that have the feel of classical ruins revived. In the early eighteen-eighties, he began receiving commissions for mansions, which he gave the bejewelled sheen of a Klimt painting. Gaudí, who never married, was soon in demand socially; an elegant dresser, he was popular with members of society, with whom he chatted at parties but whom he came to regard warily. “After flattery usually comes deceit,” one of his assistants remembered Gaudí saying. Gaudí’s religious convictions did not make him more tractable in relation to ecclesiastical authorities. In 1902, the Bishop of Mallorca asked him to redesign the interior of the island’s cathedral. Part of his plans included building wooden pulpits that, to some viewers, resembled streetcars. “What had you imagined?” Gaudí remarked. “They’re nice-looking. And useful.” (The cathedral soon switched to another architect.)

Gaudí’s secular and sacred impulses overlapped. He put sculptural reliefs of saints on the façade of an apartment building and a rooftop cross on a private home. He would pray to the Virgin of Montserrat for guidance about whether to accept secular commissions. (According to his contemporary Apel•les Mestres, the Virgin always told Gaudí yes.) He designed a small church outside Barcelona which made use of building materials taken from a factory, covering the windows with grills made from parts of looms.

Gaudí’s designs made him a cynosure in Barcelona. During Lent, the Catalan papers followed his fast like a soccer match. But his combination of vanguard style and traditional religiosity made him an uncomfortable outlier in Catalonia, which in the early years of the twentieth century became fiercely split between conservative Catholics on one side and anarchists on the other. In 1909, anarchists burned several churches. Around this time, Gaudí was overseeing the building of the Casa Milà, a sumptuously curvaceous apartment building in Barcelona. He initially planned to crown the rooftop with a sculpture of the Virgin Mary surrounded by angels. His client, wary of attracting anarchist wrath, told him to revise the plan. Gaudí was so furious that he never undertook a private commission again.

Instead, he focussed on a much different project: a basilica that was to rise on the outskirts of the burgeoning city. He wasn't the project's original architect—a more conventional designer, Francisco de Paula del Villar, had quit after a budget dispute. Gaudí pushed the plans in a radical direction. The world, he believed, had seen enough ogival windows and flying buttresses on cathedrals. "Let us have architecture without archeology," he proclaimed. The project eventually became Gaudí's sole obsession. With the basilica, he saw an opportunity to use innovative forms to express traditional ideas—he became the Gerard Manley Hopkins of architecture. He imagined a Bible made in stone: the façades would tell the story of Jesus, from the Nativity to the Passion to the Resurrection.

According to Puig Boada, when Gaudí started working on the Sagrada Família, he would arrive at the site each day in a carriage, wearing a short beige overcoat with large boots, and peremptorily give orders without dismounting. But as he worked on the church his taste for finery declined; his clothes fell into tatters, and he held them together with safety pins and elastic. "He looked like a beggar," Faulí said. In 1925, Gaudí began living in his workshop at the Sagrada Família site, so that he could devote all his time to the project.

On June 7, 1926, after Gaudí's workday ended, he set out toward a church in the Gothic Quarter where he liked to say evening prayers. " He was always thinking about the Sagrada Família when he was walking," Faulí told me. As Gaudí crossed a street, he saw a tram coming—and, as Faulí tells the story, he threw himself backward only to have "another one hit him." Gaudí fell to the ground with a severe head wound and several broken ribs. Bystanders, likely assuming that he was a vagrant, shied away from helping.

He died three days later, at the age of seventy-three. "In Barcelona a genius has died!" proclaimed the newspaper *La Veu de Catalunya*. "In Barcelona a saint has passed away! Even the stones cry for him." *La Vanguardia* was more astringent: "The marvellous artist of the Sagrada Família has ceased to exist. And how? In the most vulgar way. A victim of a tram accident."

With the hundredth anniversary of Gaudí's "vulgar" demise approaching, Faulí agreed to let me observe the progress he and his team were making on

the site. I first met him in May, 2024. He greeted me outside the basilica. Church officials had by then rescinded their unkeepable promise to finish by 2026, blaming delays caused by the pandemic. Faulí explained to me that the current goal was to have the Jesus tower complete by the end of 2025, so that the full height of the building could be celebrated on the centenary of Gaudí's death. "Done" would be a state of mind.

To my eyes, the building looked nearly finished, but Faulí suggested that I look at the side of the church where Gaudí had wanted to depict the history of humanity, from Adam and Eve to the Last Judgment. It had no façade, narthex, portal, angel statues, or stone credos. Metal fencing covered some of the exterior. During the pandemic, Faulí had spent some time on a treatment, but the design was still being worked on; half his team was focussed on it now. How long would the façade take to complete? He startled me with the answer: "I would say maybe twelve years."

Faulí, who has his own *família*—a wife and a daughter—was sixty-four at the time. Would he still be around when the Sagrada Família was truly done? "*Lo que Díos quiera*," he replied—"Whatever God wishes." At one point, we peered over the shoulder of one of his architects, who was designing a snail-shaped stairwell for the unfinished façade on a computer. Faulí pointed at the screen and explained, "It's a curling staircase to get you to the roof, but you also have a vertical column with electricity and data lines, which also plays a structural role, because it will help fuse the walls of the nave to the façade."

Faulí and I crossed the Plaça de Gaudí, to the northeast of the church. It was a touristic melee. Influencers were posing for TikToks with the towers as their background. Above them loomed the Nativity façade, the only one that Gaudí had come close to finishing. It's a fever dream of ecclesiastically symbolic ornaments. There are stone renderings of a turtle and a tortoise, to connote the stability of the cosmos, and a donkey—Gaudí ordered that a living animal be hoisted in a sling up the façade, so that he could capture the beast's form more accurately. ("It is mad to try to represent a fictional object," he once wrote in his journal.) The slaughter of the innocents that follows the birth of Jesus in the Book of Matthew is depicted by limp infants that Gaudí modelled on casts of actual stillborn babies.

“We’re going to need the siege ladder, sire.”
Cartoon by Frank Cotham

The entirety of the façade seems more poured than carved. As we walked toward the building, a mother remarked to her child that the Nativity figures “look like they’re melting.” The effect was enhanced by the erosion caused by a century of pollution on the sandstone, which was originally obtained from Montjuïc. There is now netting on some of the towers built during Gaudí’s lifetime, to facilitate restoration. Even as Faulí finishes one part of the church, he has to fix older ones.

A drawing published in the Puig Boada book had proposed that the basilica be surrounded by a large, open, star-shaped space. Instead, the plaza was hectic with hawkers; a Burger King and a store called Cannabis Shop were in view. Faulí looked like a host who was wondering whether he shouldn’t have pared the guest list. “There used to be a bit more than two million visitors a year, but now it’s nearly five,” he said, almost apologetically. Still, he felt that something special happened to everyone who beheld the soaring church. “I really believe they all leave here with something new inside,” he said.

Gaudí had planned for parishioners to enter through the façade depicting the history of humankind. “He wanted the entrance to be taller than the nave,” Faulí said. Congregants would begin their journeys toward God by climbing a grand staircase. Building it—the final phase of the project—will likely require knocking down some adjacent apartment buildings and displacing residents. (A member of Sagrada Família’s governing board recently said that their proposed expansion would displace around two hundred families.) Barcelona’s municipal government, which has been contending with a housing crisis that stems, in part, from the conversion of many apartments into Airbnbs, has yet to decide whether to allow the demolition, but Sagrada Família officials are resolute. “We will carry out the will of Antoni Gaudí to the end,” the director general of the Sagrada Família, Xavier Martínez, told the Catalan News Agency earlier this year. The deputy mayor of Barcelona countered in *El Nacional* that a definitive solution would have to “guarantee the right of residency.” Some residents have placed plaintive banners on their balconies: “Our Houses Are Legal,” “My Life Is Here—They Want to Knock It Down.” Jaume Solé Janer, the secretary of the board of the Sagrada Família, promised me that an agreement on the staircase would be reached “soon,” but Salvador Barroso, who leads a group of local residents, indicated otherwise: “We want the Sagrada Família to stay in its area. We want to stay in ours.” (When I asked someone close to the project how apartments could have been built on a site clearly intended for the Sagrada Família, he made a “bribe” gesture.)

For now, visitors enter the church through a makeshift side entrance in the Nativity façade. There is also a small access point on the opposite side, under the Passion façade. Faulí ushered me through this entrance and into the nave.

It was 4 *p.m.* on a weekday in May, and the huge space held a Grand Central-like variety of visitors, many of them pointing at the crazy quilt of Gaudí’s embellishments. I noticed that the columns in the nave all seemed to lean disconcertingly. Faulí said that Gaudí had designed them to rise at various slight angles—he’d imagined them as giant versions of the canes that weary pilgrims prop themselves up with. Sunlight was pouring through the west side of the church, whose windows are made of panes of vibrant stained glass that play off Gaudí’s ceramic shards, bathing everything in

intense shades of orange, red, and gold. Even the TikTokers seemed charged with the grandeur of God.

Discreetly embedded in one corner of the nave was a glass elevator, which is used only for special events. Faulí led me to it, saying, “We’re going up into the forest.” We came out on a third-floor loggia and looked out at bough level, where the stone trunks of the support columns split off into branches. “Gaudí spent two years studying columns,” Faulí said. He noted that some of the columns had six sides at their base, others eight, ten, or twelve. We looked more closely at several columns that held up the crowning Jesus tower; they were taller and thicker, and made of porphyry, a purplish stone. Within this diversity was an underlying symmetry. “Their height is ten times the diameter,” Faulí said.

What at first glance seemed like an architectural free-for-all boiled down to a few geometric forms that Gaudí used over and over: paraboloids (the shape of satellite dishes), ellipsoids (footballs), helicoids (spiralling ramps), and especially hyperboloids (hourglasses). There were hundreds of hyperboloids in the upper reaches of the Sagrada Família, including in skylights amid the canopy of foliage. All of these forms had a geometric unity—they all involved twisting straight lines to create curved structures that were both strong and economical to build, because no actual curves had to be molded. In Martinell’s book, Gaudí is quoted explaining his love of another form that is prominent in the stonework, the hyperbolic paraboloid, which is the shape of a saddle: “The surface is a perfect representation of the Holy Trinity, as it is born from two infinite straight lines and a third also infinite that unites the other two.” The fundamental grammar clearly pleased Faulí, too. He pointed out some “knots” on the stone trees, and explained proudly that they were ellipsoids.

Combining such unusual shapes had not been easy. Faulí mentioned that what seemed flawless to my eyes sometimes actually wasn’t. “There are some columns that maybe should have been made a little differently, in terms of their geometry,” he said. “But they’re done.” The altar was accessed, oddly, by eleven stairs. And the colors of the stone sometimes looked discordant—the quarries at Montjuïc had closed in 1957. Now sandstone comes from half a dozen quarries around the world, including in

Cantabria and Scotland. In addition, the church has utilized materials from a variety of demolished buildings, including a century-old sports stadium that was being remodelled. The Sagrada Família will ultimately use two hundred thousand tons of stone, likely more than any other church in the world.

We made our way along the inside wall of the Nativity façade, a mixture of old yellowing stone and newer white additions. Faulí showed me where Gaudí had begun building a traditional Gothic rib to support the vault. As time went on, however, he grew bolder, designing a catenary arch on top that held weight in a novel way. An architect on Faulí's team joked that this arch was a bit of *chulería*—a word meaning "peacocking." It was Gaudí's way of announcing that he was building something revolutionary.

We also visited the choir loft, on the third floor. Some perky-looking musical notes, in brass, were affixed to railings. They seemed a little unsubtle, even for Gaudí. I asked Faulí whose idea they were. He smiled. "Those are ours," he said. "The idea is that music will remain here even without singers."

To help explain Gaudí's geometries, he pulled out of his pocket a little teaching device—a cat's cradle of string with a circular top and base. He gave it a sharp twist and the cylinder morphed into a hyperboloid. Faulí told me that he wanted me to see the most impressive example of a hyperboloid the church had. To do so, we had to go farther up, beyond the public areas. He handed me an orange hard hat. (Faulí's is white and sits Dukakis-like on his small head.)

We rode a rickety external construction elevator and exited onto a landing stage. From this platform, a hundred and fifty feet in the air, several towers began their ascent. We walked through a large open space with a temporary floor; it would eventually be the city's highest amphitheatre—"a meeting place for groups of young people," Faulí posited. "Religious lectures, for instance."

We next had to crawl through a small passageway where workmen were using hammers to disassemble a crane. "Can you stop for a minute?" Faulí

asked gently in Catalan. The workmen complied, and Faulí got down and scuttled through the opening. I followed.

Suddenly, we were standing inside the Mary tower, which is four hundred and fifty-two feet tall. Its walls were white—the color of purity—and the interior was brightly illuminated by eight hundred triangular windows of translucent white glass. The windows, Faulí later explained, were a scaled-up version of ones Gaudí had made for the sacristy, a section of Sagrada Família for which the architect had made a complete model.

The tower was a cone that narrowed to a point as it ascended. At the center of its circular base was a glimmering white hyperboloid, a gigantic stone object that looked like a cooling tower at a nuclear power plant. The hyperboloid had no top or bottom—it was a skylight that opened onto the nave below. Through this aperture, sunlight could filter all the way down to the church floor.

Thousands of people attended Gaudí's funeral, which was held at the Sagrada Família. Nearby balconies were draped with black ribbons. His coffin was placed inside the crypt of the church. He had left behind detailed plans, dozens of models, and countless drawings in his workshop. They sketched out not just the rest of the structure of the basilica but also design elements for the interior and the façades. Domènec Sugrañes, one of Gaudí's disciples, was named the site's next architect.

Building continued, but a decade later Spain tumbled into civil war. In July, 1936, anarchists took over Barcelona, with churches again in their sights. The Sagrada Família initially escaped damage; according to George Orwell, who joined a Republican faction in the conflict, the fighters seemed to have recognized its artistic value. But later that month anarchists burst onto the church grounds. According to Faulí, they torched the apartment of the chaplain, Mosén Gil Parés, which was just below Gaudí's old studio, with the models. "Then the studio collapsed," Faulí told me. "And, maybe, when they saw the broken models, they broke them more." The plaster maquettes were smashed into tiny pieces. Later, the anarchists found and shot Gil Parés.

“Management wants you to write something upbeat for the stockholders’ meeting.”
Cartoon by Mick Stevens

Faulí and I were now in a warehouse catty-corner to the church, in one of two rooms that held a total of a hundred wooden crates. They contained what remained of Gaudí’s models. The crates had numbers stencilled on them and were piled to the ceiling. After the looting of 1936, Gaudí’s disciples had risked their lives to sweep up the master’s workshop, saving whatever they could.

“There are eight thousand pieces here,” Faulí said of the storage rooms. He picked up a largely intact mold of the giant cross that would crown the Jesus tower; the model was about four inches long. He pointed to its blunt fluted edges and tapering sides, which were reminiscent of a jet fuselage. Many other pieces were unrecognizable. Over the past century, generations of specialists have tried to put Gaudí’s models back together. They have had some successes: in the museum of the Sagrada Família, there is a restored two-foot-high mockup of the sacristy. Some grayish pieces—likely darkened by smoke—are original; lighter plaster prosthetics fill in missing places. The sacristy model was about sixty per cent reconstruction, aided by geometric principles and photographs taken of the model before the war. Faulí said that his team was still coming across fragments of Gaudí’s work on the Sagrada Família grounds. Sometimes these discoveries caused them to redo their work. In the early two-thousands, his team had taken a first shot at the ten-foot-high bundles of wheat that adorn some of the windows. Then, under the floor of the cloister, they found one modelled by Gaudí and his team. “Gaudí’s was better,” Faulí acknowledged. They removed their wheat and hoisted up replacements.

Some critics think that Faulí has been too faithful to Gaudí's designs; others think that he hasn't been faithful enough. In any case, Gaudí's vision was never universally liked. In the early nineteen-twenties, the architect Louis Sullivan called the Sagrada Família "the greatest piece of creative architecture in the last twenty-five years," but others accused Gaudí of self-conscious showiness. Orwell called the church "one of the most hideous buildings in the world." Picasso was likewise dubious, once recommending that someone "send Gaudí and the Sagrada Família to hell."

Many who admired what Gaudí built in his lifetime came to think that finishing the work to the architect's standards was simply impossible. The inevitable result, they feared, would be a behemoth of kitsch. In 1965, a group of architects, including Le Corbusier, wrote an open letter asking that construction be stopped. A decade later, the critic Antoni Bonet declared that it was a mistake to treat as holy writ the sort of books and photographs that I saw Faulí clutching, because Gaudí constantly rethought his project: "His mind-set was purely creative, which meant that the very sketches he had made himself were becoming outdated." More recently, the influential Catalan city planner Oriol Bohigas denounced the building as "a worldwide embarrassment." The architecture critic Rowan Moore has condemned the decision to keep building, writing in the *Guardian* that "Gaudí's architecture was, living and responsive, whereas posthumous simulation of his ideas makes them fixed and lifeless."

When I brought up similar criticisms to Faulí, he said that the detractors were often "poorly informed," especially about Gaudí's desires. The master had wanted a finished church, Faulí believes, not a monument to his genius.

In the late eighties, one of Faulí's predecessors aroused particular ire after he commissioned Josep Maria Subirachs, a Catalan artist, to create dozens of sculptures for the site. Subirachs was adamant that he would not engage in pastiche, and his figurative style was angular and severe. I noticed Subirachs's work in the nave when I saw a black-bronze statue of St. George that looked like Darth Vader. (One critic compared Subirachs's style to "the arrogant superhero art of Stalinism.") On the Passion façade, Subirachs had sculpted a Jesus so sepulchral that he resembled a skeleton. The clash between Subirachs's style and Gaudí's was painful. In 1990, a

group of artists held a protest at the site, urging him to stop before he sculpted again. (Subirachs continued designing pieces for the basilica.) Faulí himself added a cross, as Gaudí had wanted, on top of Subirachs's designs for the Passion entrance. Faulí is diplomatic about Subriachs and a peacemaker by nature. The person close to the project told me that this quality often served Faulí well—"the archbishop thinks he's a marvel"—but added that his soft spot as a manager was an eagerness to make happy "the young people who tell him, 'Let's put elevators in all the towers.' "

Faulí's approach has some prominent supporters. Bjarke Ingels, the Danish architect, told me that Gaudí's work in Barcelona is what made him want to design buildings, and that he loves how the Sagrada Família has been shepherded nearly to completion. "I do really feel when you go there—even though you can sense as you pass through the wings that you're passing through the decades—that it does come together as an incredible, organic work of art," he said. "You end up with something that feels relevant and faithful to the source." Last year, Ingels said, he visited the basilica and went high up into the rafters, where he admired some vaults with overlapping tiling that no one would ever see. He noted, "Some of these rooftops, even though only partially accessible, are sort of some of the most beautiful parts of the project. But that's because that's what God would see."

This past summer, Faulí told me that the cross on the Jesus tower would soon be raised, so in July I returned to Barcelona. In his office, I saw a stained-glass window showing a figure with the unmistakably intense visage and jutting beard of Gaudí. Faulí was evasive about what its destination was, but it seemed likely to be installed in the church, to honor the master. (Gaudí is also on his way to beatification, the late Pope Francis having commemorated his "heroic virtues" earlier this year.)

Faulí wanted me to see the top of the Jesus tower and the final version of the cross whose mold I had seen in the warehouse across the street. Before we ascended, he pulled out a yellowing document that Gaudí had authorized in the years before his death. It was a solicitation to help raise funds—he evidently didn't trust as much in Providence as he had suggested. The text had offered Faulí more clues about the architect's wishes for the

site. He read aloud part of Gaudí's pitch that promised the Jesus tower's cross would have "four grooved arms" and be made with glass, so that "during the day it will reflect the light of the sun." By night, electric spotlights would project "beams of light over the city."

Though Gaudí's fund-raising circular had specified the cross's appearance, and the model in the warehouse had survived, how to actually build it and which materials to use had been up to Faulí and his team. When a huge object is being created to go on top of a tower that will get buffeted by strong winds, even small decisions can have big consequences. Mauricio Cortés, the architect in charge of the cross, explained to me that he wasn't sure something this large could have been added safely in Gaudí's time. To keep the hundred-and-ten-ton cross in place on the spire, he planned to use an improved variety of reinforced concrete that is four times stronger than standard versions.

We headed to the roof of the nave, where the base of the cross was being constructed. It had four legs that projected outward, like those on a lunar module. Once it was finished, a crane would place the base atop the Jesus tower.

A nearby crane was, eerily, lifting a portable office cubicle. It was breezy, and the cubicle nearly smashed into a cluster of grapes attached to a nearby spire. Members of a German team that had manufactured the cross were present, supervising Catalan workers who were preparing to install it. Faulí explained, "Every step we take with it, we have to resolve difficulties, because everything is new."

We began mounting vertiginous stairs that spiralled up the Jesus tower's interior. An artist on Faulí's team had designed the color on the wall to go from blue to white, as if you were rising into Heaven. Workers had marked their progress by taping pieces of paper with the numbers of various steps on the wall: "285," "296." The stairs would eventually circle around an elevator shaft. We looked down and saw the base of the cross, now a hundred feet below us. One day, visitors would be able to ascend the tower and enjoy a commanding view of sprawling Barcelona.

As we kept climbing, it was impossible not to think of what kind of city the tower was going to look down on. Gaudí believed that faith was essential: “Man without religion is a man with spiritual failings, a mutilated man,” he once said. This is a different era, one less reverential of spiritual authority. When Pope Benedict blessed the church, in 2010, gay activists organized a protest outside. The money being poured into this challenging combination of art and technology is meant to restore a faith that, at least in Barcelona, seems to have no chance of being rekindled. A 2019 survey found that barely half of Barcelonans identified as Catholic, and only ten per cent of those said that they practiced. Who, then, is the Sagrada Família really for? One obvious answer is tourists. Barcelona today is an overrun pleasure destination, with estimates of more than thirty million visitors a year.

The Sagrada Família also can’t justify itself entirely on aesthetic grounds. In the one tower that Gaudí built, that of St. Barnabas, order and disorder engage in a glorious battle. The towers that have been built in recent years have a digital precision that can seem antiseptic: a certain joy is missing. They feel less human. More important, in the nearly hundred and fifty years it has taken for the church to assume its final form, Gaudí’s once revolutionary aesthetic no longer looks futuristic. Early critics of the Sagrada Família accused Gaudí of being too over the top, but his commitment to visual abundance has become a universal aspect of pop culture—think of the ornate C.G.I. cityscapes in “Black Panther” or the “Star Wars” films. In this era, ogival windows and flying buttresses would be more bracing than yet another thicket of computerized-looking shapes. We can never see the Sagrada Família the way Gaudí would have wished: as a shock that strips away our quotidian selves and sends us vaulting toward something purer and holier. Some tourists intuit this depletion when they visit. A blogger named teejaygee came to see Gaudí’s work in 2009 and felt that it seemed very familiar. “Walt Disney must have visited here and been inspired,” she wrote.

The Sagrada Família’s image can be seen everywhere in Barcelona, including on postcards—likely A.I.-generated—that display the wrong number of towers (and put them in the wrong places). A plastic model of the basilica sits in the window of the city’s Lego store, and a Catalan confectioner has built a three-hundred-and-sixty-eight-pound scale model of

the finished church out of dark chocolate. Ed Sheeran has a Sagrada Família tattoo on his stomach. What a fearsome thing it is to be on the world's bucket list.

Faulí led me up a vertical catwalk to a small deck that encircled the Jesus tower. We had made it to the very top. Six workers were gathered around the spire. Several were pumping liquid concrete into gaps between the pre-cut stone panels. Another was preparing to put on some white enamel tiles. The part of the Sagrada Família where we stood was just a week old. Above us was the sky. ♦

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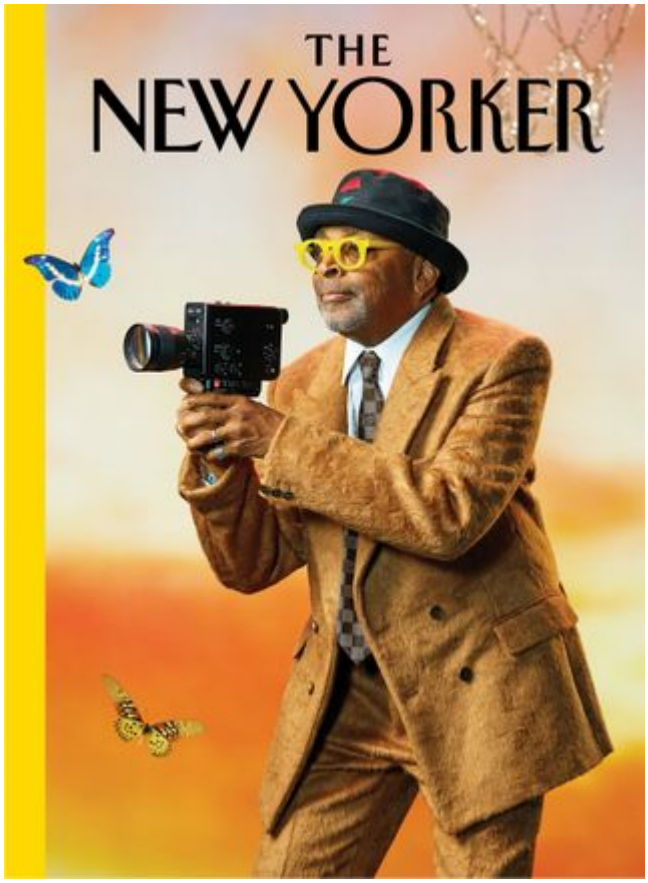
Portfolio

Covers, Live!

Six photographers reinterpret covers from the New Yorker archive.

September 15, 2025



Spike Lee, filmmaker. Original cover (below) by Rea Irvin, February 21, 1925.Photograph by Awol Erizku for The New Yorker

In the hundred-year history of *The New Yorker*, photography has appeared on the cover exactly twice. For the magazine's seventy-fifth anniversary, in 2000, the dog-loving portraitist William Wegman dressed up one of his Weimaraners as Eustace Tilley, our dandyish mascot, originally drawn by Rea Irvin. (The butterfly that canine Eustace studies through his monocle also has a dog's head.) But no human had broken the barrier until last month, when Cindy Sherman's image of herself as Eustace covered a

special issue on the culture industry. Otherwise, what distinguishes *New Yorker* covers is the imaginative reach of pen and paintbrush: political metaphors (Lady Liberty walking a tightrope), whimsical New York street scenes, daydreaming cats. Every week comes a work of art.

But what if those images could spring to life, like Pygmalion's statue? For *The New Yorker's* centenary, the magazine asked six photographers to reinterpret covers from our archives as flesh-and-blood portraits, starring familiar faces. The role of Eustace went, this time around, to Spike Lee, who traded in the classic monocle for a movie camera. After all, isn't Eustace a kind of filmmaker, zooming in for an extreme closeup of the butterfly? The artist Awol Erizku, known for turning Manet and Vermeer paintings into contemporary Black portraiture, posed Lee under a golden basketball net. Rea Irvin, meet the ultimate Knicks fan.

Covers from the Jazz Age hold a glamorous mystique that proved especially enticing. Marilyn Minter adapted Barbara Shermund's 1925 image of a goddess-like woman in grape-cluster earrings; Minter shot the actor Sadie

Sink through glass, creating a dreamy haze. Julian de Miskey's winking illustration of a soirée of cigarette-smoking swells in top hats and pearls, from 1930—what Great Depression?—was interpreted for a new age of glitter and doom by Alex Prager, featuring the actor and musician Sophie Thatcher and her identical twin, the artist Ellie Thatcher. And Stanley W. Reynolds's 1926 depiction of a sailor canoodling with his lass struck Collier Schorr as resonant in an era of renewed discrimination against trans service members. In Schorr's photograph, the duo, played by Julia Garner and Cole Escola, is more ambiguous, more gender-flouting, projecting an air of affectionate defiance. (An extra connection: Garner's father, the artist Thomas Garner, has illustrated for *The New Yorker*.)

Jump ahead a few decades. Charles Saxon, a frequent contributor of *New Yorker* covers from 1959 until the late eighties, tended to draw besuited businessmen, but in 1974, when he was in his fifties, he rendered a gaggle of young bell-bottomed bohemians, perched at the base of a flagpole as if posing for a group photo. (You can almost smell the pot and patchouli oil.) To re-create the image, Ryan McGinley photographed some friends, including the countercultural comedian Julio Torres, at the New York Botanical Garden, in the Bronx, observing them less as curiosities than as peers. And Camila Falquez, whose subjects have included Zendaya and Kamala Harris, shot the Oscar-winning performer Ariana DeBose as the discerning woman with a magnifying glass drawn by Lorenzo Mattotti in 1999. None of these portraits go for detail-for-detail accuracy. Think of them as an elaborate game of dress-up, a century and change in the making.

—Michael Schulman

Casting: Lauren Tabach-Bank (DeBose, Garner, Sink). **Costume Design / Styling:** Dara Allen (Escola, Garner); Molly Dickson (Sink); Matthew Henson (Lee); Shirley Kurata (Thatchers); Erin Walsh (DeBose). **Set Design:** Kadu Lennox (Escola, Garner); Florencia Martin (Thatchers). **Prop Styling:** JJ Chan (Lee); Marianna Peragallo (Sink); Damien Vaughan Shippee (DeBose). **Hair:** Cheryl Bergamy-Rosa (DeBose); Anthony Campbell (Sink); Bobby Eliot (Garner); Anne Morgan (Thatchers); Walton Nunez (Torres et al.); Tina Outen (Escola). **Makeup:** Angela Di Carlo (Torres et al.); Tina Roesler Kerwin (Thatchers); Yumi Lee (Escola, Garner); Vincent Oquendo (DeBose); Mary Wiles (Sink). **Manicure:** Gina

Oh (DeBose); Mo Qin (Sink). **Wardrobe:** Louis Vuitton suit (Lee); Chopard earrings, in hair (Sink); Jean Paul Gaultier top (DeBose); Rodarte dresses (Thatchers). **Location:** New York Botanical Garden (Torres et al.).

Takes

- **Jennifer Wilson on Susan Orlean's "Orchid Fever"**
  The writer worried that the story was "too niche, too odd," the crime of flower theft "too minor." To think, I had loved it for precisely those qualities.

Takes

Jennifer Wilson on Susan Orlean’s “Orchid Fever”

By Jennifer Wilson

September 14, 2025

January 23, 1995

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.*

In high school, I waited tables on weekends at a restaurant in the tony Chestnut Hill section of Philadelphia, where framed covers of *The New Yorker* hung on the walls. That's how I first encountered the magazine, and so I associated it with the moneyed clientele of genteel tastes who ordered items then exotic to me: ricotta blintzes, croque-monsieurs, frittatas.

Then, one night, I went to see "Adaptation," a new movie that was playing at one of the art-house theatres downtown. I vaguely recall a friend describing it as "meta"—superlative praise for a moody teen. The movie is, in part, about the labor pains of its creator, the screenwriter Charlie Kaufman. Kaufman had been hired to adapt "The Orchid Thief," a book by Susan Orlean based on her *New Yorker* profile of an orchid poacher. Feeling stuck, Kaufman wrote himself into the script. In the movie, Kaufman (Nicolas Cage) complains to his agent, "I can't structure this. It's that sprawling *New Yorker* shit." Kaufman, and Cage as Kaufman, also made Orlean's interactions with the flower snatcher, John Laroche—a genius in Florida redneck clothing (Mylar wraparound sunglasses, tropical T-shirt, etc.)—a subplot.

In one scene, Orlean (Meryl Streep) finds Laroche (Chris Cooper) outside a Miami courthouse where he has just finished testifying in his own defense—or, more accurately, bragging about his research on "the asexual micropropagation of orchids under aseptic cultures," a self-satisfied smile revealing his missing front teeth. He gives Orlean, pen and pad in hand, a quote for the record: "I don't care what goes on here. I'm right, and I'll take it all the way to the Supreme Court, cuz that judge can screw herself." As Orlean jots down that last bit, Laroche looks shocked—but also a little charmed. "That for real would go in?" he asks. I wondered the same thing. Maybe there was something more to this magazine than wall art for the well-heeled.

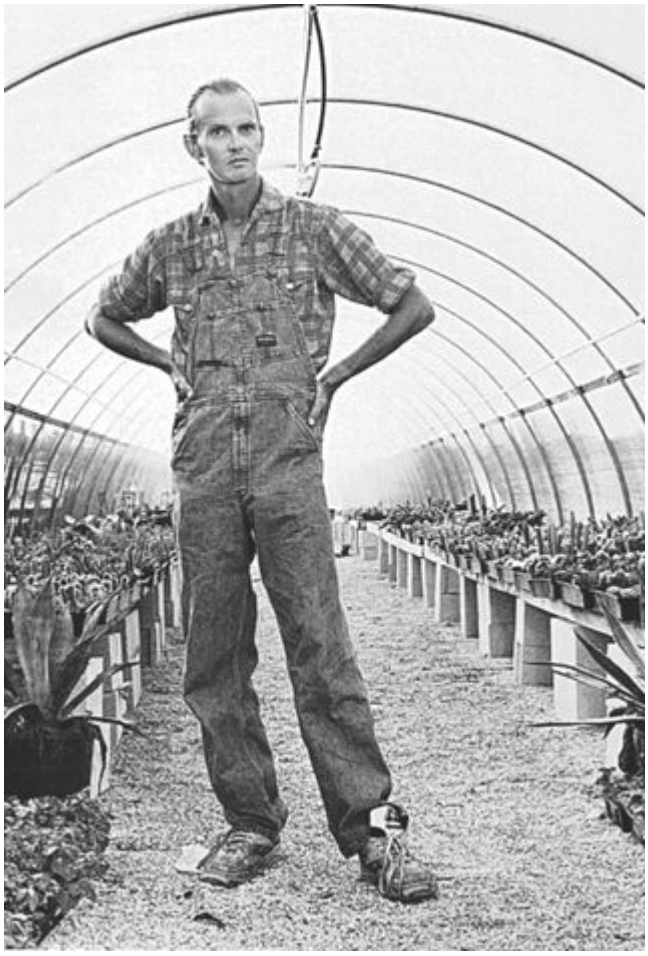
I took my tip money and ran to the bookstore to buy "The Orchid Thief," and eventually I tracked down "Orchid Fever," the original article. The colorful rejoinder to the judge wasn't in there, but I did find what might indeed be called "sprawling *New Yorker* shit." The meandering sections were and remain my favorite, like the long aside in which Orlean imagines millions of orchid seeds, "as fine as gunpowder," floating their way from

South America via air currents: “Winds blowing into Florida drop seeds in swimming pools and barbecue pits and on highways and shuffleboard courts and hotel parking lots and the roofs of office buildings, and also in places that are tranquil and damp and warm, where the seeds can germinate and grow.” I could almost feel something small and alive on my skin as I read it. Kaufman’s decision to have the onscreen Orlean and Laroche fall in love wouldn’t pass fact checking, but it indirectly captures the stormy sensuality of Orlean’s prose, her tendency to linger over details as if hovering inappropriately. The *Brassolaeliocattleya* orchid pictured on an American Orchid Society Visa card bares “a reddish lip as full and shapely as a handbag,” she writes. The swamp where Laroche was arrested is home to grass “so dry that the friction from a car can set it on fire.” Orlean’s article taught me that the place where a tree branch meets the trunk is called a “crotch.”

Orlean, in her forthcoming autobiography, “Joyride,” writes about coming up with the idea for “Orchid Fever.” It was 1994, and Tina Brown was in her second full year as *The New Yorker’s* editor, after leaving *Vanity Fair*. Orlean wanted to impress her new, celebrity-oriented boss and worried that the story was “too niche, too odd,” the crime of orchid poaching “too minor.” To think, I had loved the article for precisely those qualities; someone had waded through swamps, deciphered Latin, and gained the trust of egomaniacal horticulturalists, all for my passing delight. It made me feel rich, even though I was still wiping ketchup off tables.

And I had, in a sense, touched a luxury item. The article’s title, “Orchid Fever,” is a translation of “orchidelirium,” the Victorian-era frenzy for rare, pricey orchids. Orlean, in her memoir, compares herself to an orchid thief, “dispatched by readers to retrieve stories from the outer world.” I picked one up and read it, never imagining that I’d join the hunt. ♦

Read the original story.



[Orchid Fever]

How seductive are orchids? Connoisseurs spare nothing for a rare bloom—the issue in a battle between Florida, the Seminoles, and a man with a passion.

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.

Shouts & Murmurs

- **How Other Things End**
  With apologies to T. S. Eliot, clocking the dénouement of your kid’s bedtime ritual, the energy-drink craze, and your career, to name a few.

Shouts & Murmurs

How Other Things End

By Reuven Perlman

September 15, 2025

Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez

> This is the way the world ends
> Not with a bang but a whimper.
>
> —*T. S. Eliot*

This is how the text exchange ends.
Not with an explicit farewell but with a two-day pause followed by a thumbs-up-emoji reaction.

This is how the career ends.
Not with a retirement party and a gold watch but with a second career in the gig economy.

This is how doing laundry ends.
Not with crisp, clean bedding but with your sheet coming out of the dryer balled up in your duvet cover, still soaking wet.

This is how dinner in your thirties ends.
Not with a satisfying dessert but with a single square of dark chocolate snapped off a seventy-five-per-cent-cacao bar from Whole Foods. O.K., maybe two squares . . . What the heck—it's Friday.

This is how the smartphone era ends.
Not with a cultural rethink of the role that technology plays in our lives but with scrolling past a video of Jonathan Haidt musing about the harm of narrative-free content to watch a clip of a broccoli-haired teen-ager punching his grandpa in the back while Hozier sings, "I take my whiskey neat."

This is how the "couch to 5K" ends.
Not with a 5K but with shin splints.

This is how the budget-reconciliation process ends.
Not with a reconciled budget but with Congress deciding that lowering Peter Thiel's effective tax rate to zero per cent is a budgetary issue.

This is how your kid's bedtime ritual ends.
Not with your kid falling asleep but with you falling asleep. Every time.

This is how cigarette addiction ends.
Not with a life free of addiction but with a frankly humiliating Zyn habit.

This is how your personal fashion journey ends.
Not with an expressive and personal style—the curated wardrobe of someone who knows their age but who also isn't afraid of taking risks—but with you becoming someone who wears REI pants on date night.

This is how the telehealth visit ends.
Not with your medical issue being fully addressed but with a referral to a local clinic for a non-telehealth visit that will be billed separately.

This is how the convenient-health-food revolution ends.
Not with accessible nutritious food for all but with twenty-three-dollar grab-and-go salads.

This is how the A.I. era ends.
Not with a thoughtful plan to distribute surplus value to all of humanity but with Elon Musk purchasing the Atlantic Ocean.

This is how physical therapy ends.
Not with the resolution of your shoulder thing but with a list of exercises you have to do for the rest of your life to avoid the return of your shoulder thing.

This is how your Notes-app to-do list ends.
Not with an ambitious yet attainable goal for the day but with something absolutely tragic—in both its scope and its expression—like “Write a novel!! Today (for real this time). DO IT.”

This is how the high-school reunion ends.
Not with a soft note of nostalgia but with you buckling your seat belt, turning to your spouse, and saying, “Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

This is how the energy-drink craze ends.
Not with the return of coffee culture but with a new lineup from a YouTube prankster called PUMP energy which contains six hundred milligrams of caffeine per can, in flavors like Lemonade Ice Nicotine and Strawberry Sports-Betting.

This is how the world ends.
Not with a whimper but with a siren wail that long ago converted to white noise in our collective hearing; a global tinnitus like the hum of a fridge; the quiet roar of the Greenland ice sheet slipping into the Musk Ocean.

This is how “Love Island” ends.
Apparently it doesn’t? ♦

Reuven Perlman has contributed humor pieces to The New Yorker since 2020.

Fiction

- **“The Pool”**
  If I’d been oblivious to the multidimensional dangers seething below the surface of suburban life, the kids and the pool and the hillside out back brought them home to me.

Fiction

The Pool

By T. Coraghessan Boyle

September 14, 2025

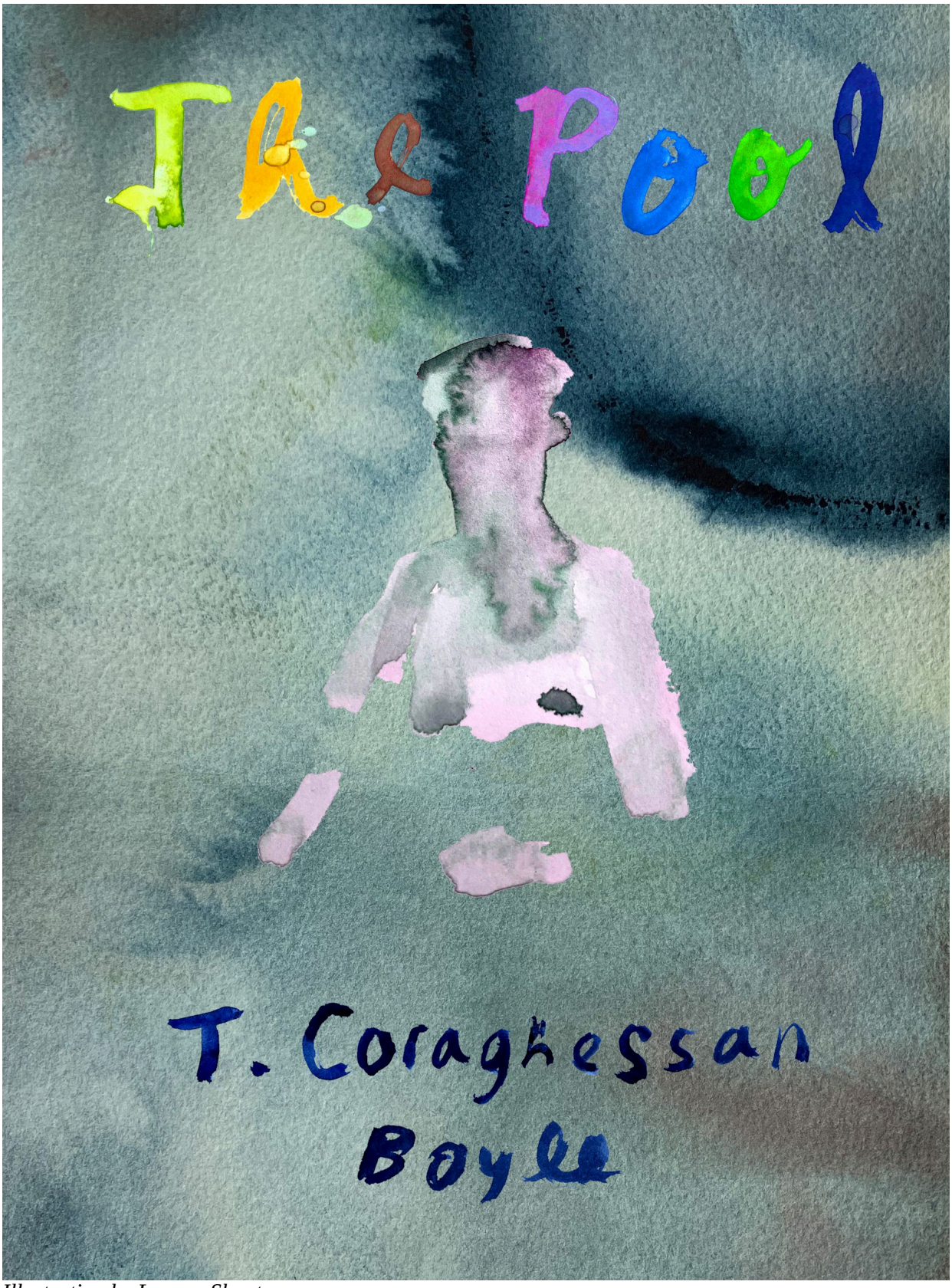


Illustration by Leanne Shapton

We'd never had a pool before, but the house came with one, which was part of its appeal, at least in my eyes. We were in our early thirties then, with two children—Molly, four, and Jordan, two—and we were moving because we needed more space, not to mention a better neighborhood, with better schools. Lacey, who was pregnant with our third and final child, said she was worried about the kids drowning in the pool, though there was a standard six-foot wrought-iron fence around the entire thing, with two self-locking gates, one just off the patio and the other at the far end, where the diving board was. I could already picture myself afloat on a rubber raft, a tall gin-and-tonic balanced just over my navel while the birds harmonized in the trees and the sun ran a firm, hot hand down the length of my body. "The kids aren't going to drown," I said.

She liked the house, I could see that. We were in the empty living room, pacing back and forth, invested in the fantasy of how it would look with our furniture in it—where the couch would go, the easy chairs and coffee table, that sort of thing. There was a flowering hedge around the fence, and I told her I'd remove it myself so that we'd have a clear view of the pool from both the living room and the kitchen. "There's no way the kids could get in there, but, even if they did, we'd be able to see them, right? And the first thing, the very first thing, is to teach them to swim."

The house, wood-frame with a low brick façade in front, bracketed the back-yard pool, with upstairs bedrooms at both ends. Behind the pool was the steep canted slab of a hillside, which, as we were to discover, acted as a reflector to hammer us with heat all summer long. What was up there? Brush that had to be cleared, by law, every spring when it dried up and turned flammable—one more worry. It was also the province of gophers and lizards and an arm-thick gopher snake I found one morning stretched out all the way from the flower bed to the pool coping, a good six and a half feet. I left it there, for lack of an alternative. I didn't tell Lacey about it.

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

Before we put in an offer, we went to see the house a second time, and we took the kids along so that they could indulge in the fantasy, too—the big yard, the big bedrooms, the level spot under the trees in back, where we would set up a new jungle gym they'd get to pick out themselves. The real-

estate agent, a woman in her forties who dressed like a fashion model and must have spent an hour each morning on her hair and makeup, followed us around, inside and out, talking the place up and apprising us of all the other potential bidders out there (“because this property is a steal, it really is”).

It needed paint, of course, not because the existing paint job was in such bad shape but as a way of impressing our own taste on the place—or Lacey’s, that is. She was especially insistent on that score, though for my money it was perfectly adequate the way it was. We had a friend, Malcolm, who was more or less a professional housepainter (more when he was out of cash, less when he was flush and haunting the bars, hustling eight ball and darts), and we asked him if he’d do the job, with the proviso that I’d help after work and on weekends. Lacey picked the colors. Malcolm and I sanded and painted.

We threw a party soon after we moved in, just as the days were beginning to heat up, and we told everybody to bring swimsuits. “Our first pool party,” I said to my wife, riding a swell of pride. None of our friends had a pool. Or a house, for that matter. None of them had parents who were willing or able to loan them the money for a down payment, as Lacey’s parents had done for us. We were in the newly painted kitchen (Navajo white, with cabinets two shades darker). I crossed the room to hold her in my arms, the hard bump of her pregnancy right there to emphasize the covenant between us.

What was a pool party, anyway? Not like something out of Cheever, with caterers and valet parking and Brahmins standing around in dry trunks with Martinis in their hands. Just a party, with bare feet and over-chlorinated water, guests who brought wine and beer and housewarming gifts while I seared chops and chicken parts on the grill. We didn’t have outdoor speakers, so I opened the living-room windows and cranked the music to encourage people to dance.

Malcolm and his wife, Julia, were the first to arrive. They came in through the far gate, which led directly out to the driveway in front, Julia with both arms wrapped around a potted cycad and Malcolm with a bottle of Glenfiddich 12, still in its ceremonial box, tucked under one arm. It was an expensive gift, and I appreciated the gesture, though, in a way, I’d paid for it myself, since Malcolm was clearly milking the job by this point, the exterior of the house only half finished after a full month’s work. He was doing the

most precise of precise jobs, caulking and filling and sanding and re-sanding as if every strip of wood he exposed were an archeological treasure, and that was just what we wanted, wasn't it?

"Perfect," I said, taking the Glenfiddich from him with elaborate care. "This ought to hold us."

"At least it's a start, right?" His hair—blond and swept up like Bowie's—caught the sun, his gold incisor glinting behind his grin (the upshot of a dental emergency along the Hippie Trail in Goa). He was in shorts and flip-flops and he'd draped an aloha shirt over one of his paint-stained tees by way of dressing up. His being here—scraping, sanding, painting, sitting across the table from us for dinner most nights—had been one of the joys of the past few weeks, a way of staving off the tension of moving and the sameness of the routine with the kids and the meals and the bedtime stories and all the rest. He and I stayed up late, long after Lacey had gone to bed, talking and laughing and sipping Scotch, no ice, no chaser.

Podcast: The Writer's Voice
Listen to T. Coraghessan Boyle read "The Pool."

"Where should I put this?" Julia asked, cradling the earthenware pot to her chest, the fronds obscuring her face. She was wearing a pair of thong sandals, her toenails painted turquoise for the party, and there was a smear of potting soil at the waistband of her pale-yellow shorts. I was fixated in the moment on her bare legs and feet, pretty legs, pretty feet, the sun on the pool like a dream of all the good things that had ever happened to me, and it was Lacey who said, "Here, let me help you with that," but Julia had already settled the matter by squatting down to set the pot on the coping. She straightened up, clapping the dirt from her hands, then bent to rinse them in the pool. That she'd had to haul the plant in from the car instead of Malcolm was no surprise: he liked to arrive in style, the bringer of single-malt Scotch, not vegetation.

What we hadn't noticed, as excited as we were over the arrival of the first guests at our first pool party, was that our daughter had managed to snatch hold of the patio gate as it was swinging shut behind my wife and dart into the verboten pool area, her little brother right on her heels. All of a sudden,

here they were, springing up off their toes and squealing over Malcolm and Julia. It gave me pause, a freeze-frame in the cinematic progression of things, but it was all right because we were there to watch over them—four adults, and others coming.

But then, in that very instant, the outer gate pushed open again and here were more guests, old friends shouting out witticisms and offering up platters of devilled eggs and three-bean salad and chips and salsa and sweating bottles of beer and white wine, and, as we mindlessly rushed to greet them, Jordan, the two-year-old, bumped up against the potted plant that had appeared there only sixty seconds before, lost his balance, and tipped over into the pool.

How to describe that moment? Two seconds, three, all of us immobilized in shock while my son, the toddler, went down like a ship's anchor, all the way down through nine feet of water to the dappled sloping bottom. He didn't cry out, didn't work his limbs—as my wife and I had been teaching him to do in the shallow end when we held him in the basket of our interlinked arms—didn't do anything but sink. Malcolm was the first to dive in and I was right behind him, my brain shut down and my limbs and heart and stoppered lungs taking over, and the picture I saw, blurred and chlorine-tinted, was of Malcolm with my son pressed to him, already rocketing to the surface in a train of bubbles.

"I turned thirty, and they were just . . . there."
Cartoon by Benjamin Schwartz

Amazingly, Jordan didn't sputter or choke or sob, at least not right away, not until Lacey had him in her arms and he saw the looks on our faces. He'd somehow expelled all his breath, poised there on the bottom like a miniature statue of the Buddha, and hadn't thought to breathe in till he'd broken the surface again. It was a game to him, the same one he played in the bathtub (sink into the porcelain depths and hold your breath as long as you can stand it), but in the tub all he had to do was sit up to reclaim the air.

This was how the party kicked off, with a scare that had no consequences other than my insisting that the kids wear their miniature orange life jackets for the rest of the day—or, no, forever—and the drinking and carousing and cannonballing into the pool wasn't merely celebratory but triumphal, because the shadow had tested us and passed on. Even those who arrived later, who hadn't witnessed the tipping of the balance, couldn't stop talking about it. We were lucky, that's what they said. One of our friends, Josie, who was just out of law school, informed us that, in legal terms, a pool was an "attractive nuisance," and it wasn't just our own kids we had to worry about. "My advice?" she said. "Drain it and pave it over." I looked right into her eyes and smiled. "Very funny," I said.

But it was a party, a true party, a great party. The music thumped. People danced. We got wet and wet all over again. After the third or fourth drink, with the rich scent of grilled meat hanging over everything, Malcolm made a game of calling Jordan to him, swinging him up on his lap, and proclaiming, "You're going to grow up to be a pearl diver and make your parents rich, you know that? You want to be a pearl diver, don't you? Down there on the bottom of the ocean, fighting off sharks and narwhals?"

Jordan didn't know what narwhals were—or, for that matter, pearls. But he knew sharks, and sharks made him grin all the wider. "Yes," he said. "Yes!"

The pool had been built at the same time as the house, of concrete block sprayed with gunite and finished in a pale sculpted plaster you could run your hand over beneath the water to feel its faintly granulated smoothness and solidity. I loved the look of it at night, when the four big circular lights set just below the waterline made it seem like an exotic lagoon on a continent yet to be explored. You could gaze down through the successive planes of light and picture yourself, vastly reduced, as an undersea explorer,

a miniature Cousteau, and that was magical and hilarious, too, because I was drinking too much back then and smoking too much weed and fantasizing came naturally to me. How many nights did I sit out there reading by the glow of the patio light, a glass in one hand, a blunt in the other, or just staring down into the water as if I could read that as well? Too many, Lacey would say, especially when I had trouble getting up for work in the morning, but if you look at it another way, the way I look at it now, the answer is *Not enough*. Those nights! The sky, bellied with smog, glowed ever so faintly, as bats careened over the water in quest of insects and I rattled the ice in my glass. The heat held, even at midnight, and the house was so hot that I made a practice of plunging into the pool just before climbing into bed beside my sleeping wife.

One morning, it must have been a weekend, because I was home, Lacey looked out the window and saw something floundering in the pool. Or not floundering, not exactly, but struggling to cling to the rippled plastic hose attached to the pool's vacuum. "It's some kind of animal," she said. "Quick, we've got to rescue it, *quick!*"

I didn't feel like rescuing anything. I just wanted my coffee and bagel and the newspaper. I got up from the table and looked out the window, and there it was, a white patch of fur, pink toes, naked tail. "It's a possum," I said.

"Is that what it is? I thought they were bigger than that."

"It's a baby," I said.

There was the sound, from the other end of the house, of the kids' cartoons cranking away on the TV, and, thinking fleas, ticks, rabies, I decided that there was no reason to get them involved. I put a finger to my lips and we both slipped out the door and tiptoed across the patio and into the pool area, where I reached for the skimmer, lifted the thing out of the water, and set it down on the coping. It was the size of a kitten and too traumatized to show us its teeth or hiss or anything else; it just crouched there, trembling. Before I could stop her, Lacey had scooped it up in a pool towel and was pressing it to her chest. "I wonder what it eats," she said.

So we had a pet. I told Lacey it was illegal to keep wildlife, but she didn't listen to me, and once the kids realized what was going on there was no turning back.

"Shouldn't we just let it go out there in the weeds?" I tried. "Where its mother can find it?"

It lasted a week, fleas vivid against the thin white hairs of its face. Lacey went to Petco for flea powder and kibble—"Everything eats kibble," she said—and tried feeding it warm milk from one of the plastic baby bottles Jordan had graduated from not so long before. It seemed to appreciate that, but there was the inevitable morning when it lay rigid in its cardboard box. I didn't say "I told you so" or "Maybe it's just playing possum," because at this juncture none of us, not even Lacey, had that much invested in it. We buried it ceremonially out back in the overgrown lot, and when I found the next one, a week later, I just flipped it over the fence and into the weeds where it belonged.

There was a succession of pool parties that summer, the temperature routinely hitting a hundred and more, and our friends took it for granted that something would be going on at our place, no matter the day of the week. We didn't really organize anything beyond a phone call or two, and most nights dinner was takeout burritos or pizza served straight from the box. We couldn't keep enough ice in the house, what with everybody drinking gin-and-tonics and, when we were feeling ambitious, mint juleps. We got so used to seeing our friends in Speedos and bikinis we wouldn't have recognized them with their clothes on, and that was all right, that was just the way life was, because it was summer and we were the ones with the pool, and, if Lacey sometimes had to go to bed early, we tried to keep the noise down as much as possible. She was pregnant, after all, and showing in a way that was like a biology lesson right there in your face. If she needed extra rest, no one begrudged her that, least of all me.

One evening, after the sun had burned itself out and the shadows around the pool were beginning to deepen, Malcolm and Julia showed up with a friend we'd never seen before, a guy our age with a full beard, hair trailing down his back, and enough strings of beads to open a stall at the art walk out on the boulevard. They were carrying takeout bags of what proved to be Indian

food—naan bread, samosas, vindaloo, lamb kebabs, basmati rice—and it smelled like a culinary revolution. There were five or six of us already lounging in the pool chairs. I don't remember exactly who was there that night, other than Josie, who was showing off her new shrinking bikini.

The friend's name was Jeremy, and he went straight to my wife for a full-body hug, then held her at arm's length. "Little mama," he said, and turned to the rest of us with a grin. "What could be more righteous? Tell me, huh?"

I took an instant dislike to him.

What made things worse, at least from my point of view, was the way Julia fussed over him—Jeremy this and Jeremy that, and did he want another beer, another samosa? It turned out that she and Malcolm hadn't seen him in two years, not since the three of them had lived together in an ashram in Goa, blissed out and channelling the connectivity of the universe, not to mention expanding their minds with the ganja that was apparently as free as the air over there. They'd been inseparable, in Julia's telling, and from the look on Malcolm's face I could tell this was no metaphor. Were they going to have another go-around? Was that what this was all about? But what did I care? My own wife was lying there splayed across the chaise longue as if she were going to give birth in the next ten minutes, and the closest I'd ever come to India was three days in Hawaii.

The food was good, a real cut above the usual pool fare, and we feasted till we could eat no more. The heat pressed down on us like an electric blanket and we leaped in and out of the pool till my wife took the kids in to bed and Jeremy broke out his hash pipe and treated us to the real deal he'd brought back with him from India, and, yes (wink, wink), he was in the import-export business.

The music thumped away, though at reduced volume, the bats performed their acrobatics over the pool, the hash pipe glowed, people began to yawn. Before long, there were only five of us left: Julia, Jeremy, and me, still sprawled in the pool chairs, and Malcolm and Josie, who'd disappeared into the house, where we could just make out their heads above the back of the couch in the living room. They were sitting close, shoulder to shoulder, and having one of those intense free-form discourses about things like

molecules, the cosmos, and reincarnation that you tend to have when you're stoned. Julia hardly noticed. She was stroking Jeremy's hand, her fingers like hungry little animals, and I began to feel awkward, in my own house, at my own party. That was the thing about the pool—it was sensual, deeply sensual—and my wife, bloated, titanic, was in our bedroom, asleep, and the kids were asleep, too, in the back bedroom, presided over by the grinning cartoon figures on the wallpaper that Malcolm had put up, and where did that leave me?

Just to say something, to distract myself, I turned to Jeremy and asked him where he was from.

"Originally?"

I nodded.

"A little town you probably never heard of."

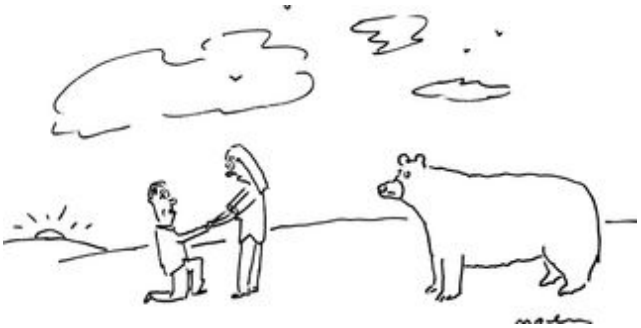
"You grew up in New York—upstate, right?" Julia said, turning to him.

This was where things began to float away from me, not because of what I'd been smoking but because he named the very town I'd grown up in, the coincidence of coincidences. "You've got to be kidding," I said, thinking they were playing a joke on me, but it was no joke, and it went deeper still, the big world reduced to the smallest *molecule*, because he kept narrowing it down till it turned out he'd grown up in the same development that I had and attended the same elementary school, albeit two grades behind me, and I realized that I must have been in his orbit a hundred times without knowing it, and he in mine, and here he was, on the coping of my pool in suburban Los Angeles on a smoggy, low-hung night in my thirty-second year alive on this planet. Still stranger—how had he come to be here, wrapped in his wet hair and Varanasi beads, while Julia pulsed and glowed beside him like a firefly? It was because she'd met Malcolm at a party in London and they'd gone on together to one particular ashram out of the dozens in Goa and formed a bond—a threesome—with this apprentice sadhu from Emery Hill Gardens in Peterskill, New York, and Lacey and I had met Julia at a party, another party, at someone else's house, whose name I couldn't even remember.

I had my story, a small-world story that still amazes me to this day, but, once I had it and had exclaimed and clapped and hooted over it, I felt as if I'd let all the air out of my body and sunk to the cool plaster bottom of the pool beside the ghost image of my son. I pushed myself up and walked into the house, past Malcolm and Josie getting increasingly familiar on the couch, and on up the stairs to the bedroom, where I stretched out on the sweaty sheets beside my sleeping wife and kept right on dreaming.

And Jeremy? I never saw him again in my life.

We'd lived in apartments ever since we'd got married, a succession of them, and, if I'd been oblivious to the multidimensional dangers seething below the surface of suburban life, the kids and the pool and the hillside out back brought them home to me. If there was a six-foot gopher snake roaming the property, why not a rattlesnake, too? Or a nest of them? And scorpions, what about scorpions? The house had been fumigated when it changed hands, as per contractual obligation, but what of the yard and the weed lot behind it? Trapdoor spiders, black widows, recluses. Not to mention poison oak and killer bees and the potential for the hillside to give way and crush everything below it. One searing afternoon, when Lacey and the kids were out somewhere and I was absorbing nature through my pores in the embrace of a pool chair, G. & T. in hand, chest and limbs smeared with Coppertone, I glanced up at a flash of sudden movement and saw a roadrunner, with its punk crown and jutting tail feathers, tiptoeing along the top of the fence, a counterweight to my paranoia—roadrunners ate snakes, didn't they? Weren't they sacred to some Indian tribe or another? Shouldn't I have felt blessed?



"Margot, will you help me scare away the bear?"
Cartoon by Michael Maslin

I did. But then Lacey was back with the kids, banging around in the kitchen, and the first of the evening's friends and acquaintances began to show up

and the blessedness passed, as had the roadrunner, hyperactive and vigilant and always on the make, gone off to seek somebody else's snakes.

This was around the time of the tree incident, by the way, which, though it doesn't relate directly to the pool, does in a subtextual sort of way. Lacey and I were going out (to a party at somebody else's place, for a change), we were dressed in our finest, and the babysitter was already established in front of the TV with the kids, and, while I knew that at some point the towering blue gum out front was going to drop the massive branch that projected over the driveway at a forty-five-degree angle, I hadn't got around to dealing with it, but I made sure to park the car in the garage at night to avoid having it crushed in the event.

Well, here was the event. I'd backed the car out to the end of the driveway, beyond reach of the fatal branch, and while waiting for Lacey, who was running late, who was always running late, late as a condition and fixture of her life, I ducked behind the gate to the pool for just the briefest fraction of a moment to relieve myself without having to go back in the house and risk stirring up the kids. Over the top of the fence, I saw Lacey crossing the driveway to the car, clipping along in her sandals, the world a beautiful place, the sun drifting west and not a breath of wind, and here it came, here came the eventuality that was as clear and present a danger as the pool itself, the fracturing of the branch as sudden and loud as the clap of the cymbal that brings you back to life at the end of a soporific symphony. "Run!" I shouted to my eight-months-pregnant wife.

She ran. But in her confusion she ran toward the branch, not away from it, and when it came down it was so intensely intimate as to slap at her right foot and whip across her baby bump like a colossal broom, scattering a whole forest of twigs and leaves in the driveway, and yet here we were lucky, too, always lucky—six inches more and we wouldn't have had Danny, our youngest, in our lives. Or worse: it could have hit Lacey dead-on and I'd have been left a widower with two motherless kids to nurture, and though I try my best, I've never been much of a nurturer. But that didn't happen and the upshot was that we had another story to tell. Lacey limped into the party and our friends, solicitous, found an Ace bandage for her and a bag of ice, and she put her foot up and told the story, over and over, playing it for comic effect. It was slapstick. Real-life slapstick. And the thing was, that branch

could have fallen anytime, at midnight or three in the morning, or never at all. The next day, I hired a crew to cut it up for the fireplace and sweep their blowers across the pavement till there wasn't a trace of it left.

Malcolm never finished painting the house—it just got to be too much for him. At some point, Lacey's brother, Carl, a sophomore at Cal Poly, came to stay with us for a week and took it upon himself to paint the remaining areas for the cost of the paint and two cases of beer. In Malcolm's defense, all the prep work had already been done, and he was going through some changes at the time, which, it soon became clear, had to do with Jeremy. And Julia. On the night Lacey's water broke, he was at the house with us, for moral support but also because on some level he belonged here more than in his own apartment, where the white sadhu from Emery Hill Gardens had established himself as an immovable marker in the dead geographic center of the living-room couch.

"You do know," Malcolm said, "there are only two times when you're legitimately allowed to exceed the speed limit." Lacey was in the bathroom. Her go bag sat by the front door. Malcolm had assured me that he was all in for babysitting, for as long as it took. I was energized, if slightly buzzed on weed and the beers I'd knocked back, and nervous, of course—everything hanging in the balance, the mysteries and dangers of obstetrics, the roll of the dice.

"Rushing your wife to the hospital when she's about to give birth—that's got to be one of them, right?"

He grinned. Set down his beer on the coffee table. "Do you know what the second is?"

I shook my head.

"When you just have to blow the carbon off your spark plugs."

I did speed on the way to the hospital, though Lacey kept telling me to slow down, because speeding was a way of exerting control where I had none, of crushing doubt and anxiety with a jerk of the wheel and a scream of underinflated tires. Lacey was right, though. Everything was fine, everything

normal, so normal, in fact, and so fine, that after I dropped her at the emergency entrance and found a parking spot and made my way up to the second floor, where all the delivering was taking place, she'd already given birth. Which meant that I'd missed my opportunity to be in the room with her and observe the process up close, as I'd done with Molly and Jordan. I was fine with that. I'd already witnessed the miracle of birth, its blood and secretions and unidentifiable flecks of biological matter and the probing insectoid eyes of the masked nurses, twice—and that was two times too many for me. The baby was normal. My wife was normal. I was normal.

It was two in the morning. They were keeping Lacey and the baby—a boy, nameless as yet, though Lacey wanted to name him after her father, Daniel, and I was leaning toward Rufus—in the hospital overnight. Forty minutes after that I was home, having observed the posted speed limit all the way. Malcolm was right there waiting for me out by the pool, with three bottles of champagne in a party cooler. We embraced, exchanged the essential dialogue, then popped the first cork, sending it in a high arc over the fence and into the weeds.

How was I feeling? Like a father who'd never wanted to be a father in the first place, an advocate of the birth control that had failed him three times now, but who was on for the ride, no matter what. And for love, love, too—you've got to factor that in.

"Congratulations, man," Malcolm said, hugging me to him, and I tried to derail whatever this was—joy, sorrow, fear—with a joke, but that wasn't working so I chugged my glass of champagne, swung around, and dove into the pool.

After the first bottle was gone, we popped the corks on the other two and drank straight from the necks of the bottles, as if they were supersized beers, and then I did something that still makes me shrink inside after all these years. "The roof," I said, and Malcolm, not catching my drift, at least at first, said, "What are you talking about?"

The roof of the master bedroom, sloping, shingled, twenty or maybe twenty-five feet above the pool area, was accessible through the bedroom window, or, when the painting was under way, from the ladder, but there was no

ladder there now. Lacey and I had decided when we moved in that no one, under any circumstances, stone sober or inebriated or latently suicidal, would actually take it into his head to jump from the roof, clear the six-foot expanse of concrete walkway below, and plunge like a cliff diver into the pool. No one would do that. Uh-uh. No way. The slightest miscalculation would be fatal, or even worse, far worse, leave you in a wheelchair for the rest of your life.

Malcolm followed me up the stairs, both of us barefoot and dripping in our wet trunks. Downstairs, at the other end of the house, the kids were asleep in their beds, and Lacey was all the way across town in the hospital with their new brother. I lifted the sash and we climbed out onto the roof. It was a moment. The big blue gum out front clawed at the darkness, the hillside in back sank into a void of shadow, and the sky grinned its canescent grin. I was a homeowner, the father of three, but I wasn't done, not yet. I made the leap, hooting and kicking my legs as if I were bicycling on air, and the water rushed up to take me. ♦

T. Coraghessan Boyle is the author of the story collection "I Walk Between the Raindrops" (2022) and the novel "No Way Home" (2026), among other books.

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Pop Music

Bad Bunny’s Puerto Rican Homecoming

The Latin-trap performer is probably the most important pop musician of our time. Key to his success is that the bigger he gets, the more local he seems.

By Kelefa Sanneh

September 15, 2025

During his recent residency in San Juan, Bad Bunny seemed both startled and delighted to find himself reincarnated as a part-time salsero.Illustration by Ricardo Diseño

In 2016, a sinuous remix of a track called “Diles” began pulsing its way through streaming services and night clubs. It featured a handful of Puerto Rican performers, but the main one was an emerging hitmaker with a silly name and a serious voice: Bad Bunny. His real name is Benito Antonio Martínez Ocasio; his stage name, as fans later learned, was inspired by a childhood photograph that captured him, scowling, in a rabbit costume. And his voice was doleful and elegant: he sang (and sometimes rapped) with a plainsong solemnity, even when the rhythms and the lyrics suggested mischief, as they often did. *Diles* means “tell them,” and in this case Bad Bunny was urging a woman to tell her friends precisely how well he had treated her. “*Dice que le gusta hacerlo con mis temas de trap*,” he sang: “She says she likes to do it to my trap tracks.” This was both a sexual boast and a musical one. A newish style known as Latin trap was ascendant in Puerto Rico, and Bad Bunny was declaring himself one of its leading exponents.

Nine years later, it’s clear that Bad Bunny had good reason for his immodesty, at least when it came to music. In the course of six deliriously good solo albums, he established himself first as Latin trap’s breakout success and then as something else altogether: a stylish and unpredictable star with no real precursor or peer. He may be the most popular Spanish-language singer of all time, and he is probably the most important musician in the world right now—the person future generations will point to when they talk about what the early twenty-twenties sounded like. (“Un Verano sin Ti,” from 2022, is the most listened-to album in the history of Spotify, and last month one of Bad Bunny’s songs became the first track released in 2025 to reach a billion Spotify streams.) He has moonlighted as a professional wrestler (WrestleMania 37) and worked as an actor (“Bullet Train,” “Happy Gilmore 2,” “Caught Stealing”); he has spent time with a Kardashian (Kendall Jenner) and collaborated with fashion brands (Adidas sneakers, Calvin Klein underwear). But one of the keys to his success is that the bigger he gets, the more local he seems. This summer, he was home in Puerto Rico, playing a thirty-show residency at the island’s largest indoor venue, the José Miguel Agrelot Coliseum, which holds nearly twenty thousand people.

On a steamy, rain-swept Saturday night in August, as Hurricane Erin blustered offshore, the show started with dozens of dancers and drummers in traditional Puerto Rican dress. Bad Bunny emerged wearing something less traditional: a shearling hat, which made him look as if he had just arrived from someplace cold and was happy to be home. This was, of course, a celebration, but one made sweeter and more memorable by an underlying sense of ambivalence. The name of the residency is “No Me Quiero Ir de Aquí,” or “I Don’t Want to Leave Here,” a sentiment often expressed by peripatetic celebrities. (A few albums ago, Bad Bunny taunted an unnamed rival with a couplet that translates as “Nobody knows you, not even in your barrio / Yesterday I was with LeBron, and also DiCaprio.”) In this arena, “here” was actually two places. There was a main stage covered in greenery and mist, to evoke an unspoiled hillside. And, toward the back of the arena, there was a squat pink casita that was hosting a raucous house party. During a thunderous track called “Safaera,” Bad Bunny delivered the lyrics from the casita roof, while one of the revellers below danced so vigorously with a decorative plant that he seemed to be trying to pollinate it.

The two stages represented the twin impulses behind Bad Bunny’s glorious recent album, “DeBÍ TiRAR MáS FOToS” (“I Should Have Taken More Photos”), which enriches state-of-the-art tracks with infusions of salsa and other, older Puerto Rican styles. When he ascended the synthetic hillside to sing “PIToRRO DE COCO,” a tribute to homegrown music and homemade alcohol, he was accompanied by a cuatro, a ten-string guitar used in *jíbaro* music, and he brandished a jar that looked as if it contained the moonshine for which the song is named. Bad Bunny’s low-key delivery somehow makes his big hooks even hookier, and he loves to exploit the contrast between his equanimous voice and his boisterous music. All night, he seemed to generate his own microclimate, as if he were at least fifteen degrees cooler than anyone else in the arena. Which might help explain the shearling hat.

Before there was Latin trap, Puerto Rico was transfixed by reggaetón, a swaggering style based on a loping, staccato beat known as *dembow*, which derives from dancehall reggae. (The name comes from “Dem Bow,” a 1990 track by Shabba Ranks that helped popularize this rhythm.) In the two-

thousands, the reggaetón explosion made stars of brash Puerto Rican performers like Daddy Yankee and Don Omar, who also happened to be rivals. Latin trap, which draws both its name and its sound from the thumping-and-ticking hip-hop of the American South, is slower and woozier, and in some ways more flexible. In the early days, Latin trap was associated with sex and violence. A few months before the "Diles" remix was released, Anuel AA, one of the movement's defining voices, was arrested; he was later sentenced to thirty months in prison for unlawful firearm possession. Bad Bunny drew from both Latin trap and reggaetón, but he took a markedly introspective approach; in "Soy Peor" ("I'm Worse"), one of the songs that made him a star, he sang about buying a gun, but only so he could assassinate Cupid, to avenge his broken heart.

From the start, Bad Bunny nurtured a bohemian image; most of his fans merely shrugged when, in the 2018 video for "Estamos Bien" ("We're Good"), he showed off fingernails painted bright blue. More recently, he has emerged as a political advocate, flying the light-blue version of the Puerto Rican flag, which is associated with the island's independence movement, and speaking out against the New Progressive Party, or P.N.P., which supports Puerto Rican statehood. The P.N.P. was in charge in 2017, when Hurricane Maria killed nearly three thousand people and led to a months-long blackout in parts of the island. (In 2022, he released "El Apagón," or "The Blackout," a truculent and profane expression of Puerto Rican pride. It starts with ancestral bomba drums and then explodes into a late-night rave; like many Bad Bunny songs, it is formally inventive while feeling casual and intuitive.) Last year, Bad Bunny paid to erect a number of digital billboards, one of which read "*VOTAR PNP ES VOTAR POR LA CORRUPCIÓN*." It turns out that local politics is just about the only world that he has failed to conquer: last fall, Jenniffer González-Colón, the P.N.P. candidate, was elected governor of Puerto Rico. She declined to attend any of the Bad Bunny shows, although she acknowledged that the residency represented a "great opportunity" for the island, because it drew tourists from around the world.

Tourism, in fact, was one of the night's main themes. Tickets for the first nine concerts were sold in person, at various locations on the island, and reserved exclusively for locals. But many of the rest seemed to go to

visitors, who reportedly made San Juan's hotels and restaurants measurably busier than they were last summer; Moody's recently announced a slight upgrade to its economic forecast for Puerto Rico, citing a Bad Bunny-induced stimulus. On this rainy August night, there were plenty of American accents to be heard in the arena; concertgoers were given lanyards with light-up emblems in the shape of cameras, which evoked the album title while also making everyone look like a tourist. The set included "TURiSTA," a downcast acoustic ballad about a lover who wants to see only the fun parts of the singer's life. (The lyrics don't specify whether this particular tourist is visiting from Calabasas.) And it also included "LO QUE LE PASÓ A HAWAii," an uneasy warning addressed to all of Puerto Rico, with a chorus that translates as "I don't want them to do to you what they did to Hawaii." Bad Bunny let the bad vibes linger for a moment, then brought out a fiery salsa orchestra to dispel them. By the time he got to "DtMF," the rousing title track from the new album, the refrain was evolving from a lament into a celebration: "I should have taken more photos when I had you / I should have given you more kisses and hugs, whenever I could." At least a few of the locals had tears in their eyes. The next morning, Bad Bunny retweeted a news story about how wind from Hurricane Erin had knocked out power to about a hundred and fifty thousand homes on the island.

Bad Bunny had the good fortune to launch his career just as interest in Latin music was spiking: in 2017, less than a year after "Diles," the Puerto Rican singer Luis Fonsi released "Despacito," a pop-reggaetón song featuring Daddy Yankee which became one of the decade's biggest worldwide hits and demonstrated that U.S. listeners weren't necessarily unwilling to sing along with a song in Spanish. At the same time, streaming services, which lump together listeners from around the globe, provide a useful reminder that Anglophones constitute a distinct minority of the international music audience. Bad Bunny has sometimes swerved away from traditional Puerto Rican sounds—his début album, "X 100PRE," from 2018, included "Tenemos Que Hablar," a surprisingly effective emo-trap song driven by the sound of an electric guitar. These days, he is swerving back, and at the Coliseum he seemed both startled and delighted to find himself reincarnated as a part-time *salsero*.

Throughout his residency, Bad Bunny has filled his casita with guests from Puerto Rico and elsewhere, turning the floor of the arena into a kind of cultural hub of the Americas. On this night in August, the V.I.P.s hanging out on the ersatz front porch included the actor Jon Hamm, the local comedian Raymond Arrieta, the Mexican American singers Becky G and Ivan Cornejo, and the reggaetón hitmaker De la Ghetto, who performed a short set of his own. Thanks in large part to Bad Bunny, Puerto Rican music is now a global phenomenon: you can hear his influence in the pop songs of Quevedo, a Latin-trap-inspired singer from Spain; in the echoey, propulsive tracks of Cris MJ, from Chile; in the danceable but bittersweet music of Beéle, from Colombia, whose intoxicating new album, “BORONDO,” draws inspiration from San Juan, Kingston, Lagos, and beyond. But, right now, none of this music sounds like competition; it sounds, instead, like more proof that Bad Bunny’s legacy is still growing, and that his era isn’t over yet. ♦

Kelefa Sanneh has been a staff writer at The New Yorker since 2008. He is the author of “Major Labels: A History of Popular Music in Seven Genres.”

A Critic at Large

What to Make of the Mother Who Made You

A new memoir by Arundhati Roy, about a formidable matriarch, joins a host of recent books in which daughters reckon with mothers who are too much, not enough, or both at once.

By Rebecca Mead

September 3, 2025

Arundhati Roy with her brother, Lalith Kumar Christopher Roy, and her mother, Mary Roy, in front of their house in Ooty, India, in 1963.Photograph courtesy Arundhati Roy

It is hard to overstate the literary impact, in 1997, of Arundhati Roy's début novel, "The God of Small Things." A family drama set in a small town in Kerala, in southern India, it was evocatively specific in its narrative, centered on twins whose mother—an erratic, imperious woman of exceptional gifts and unsalvable injuries—had been scandalously married, and more scandalously divorced. At the same time, the book achieved universality in its themes: the entanglements of kinship, the restrictions

imposed by class and gender, the hazards of star-crossed love. Lyrical, comic, and intricately wrought, the novel won the Booker Prize, earned Roy a fortune in advances and foreign rights, and went on to sell millions of copies in dozens of languages.

If readers assumed that another novel would swiftly follow, Roy, then thirty-five, flouted their expectation; she didn't publish a second novel —"The Ministry of Utmost Happiness"—until 2017. In the meantime, she devoted her energies and her international renown to political writing in India, taking on the expansion of the country's nuclear arsenal, the despoliation of rivers and forests in the name of development, the brutalities inflicted on women, and the suppression of cultural pluralism in the name of Hindu supremacy. (She also established a trust, funded in part by a portion of her royalties, that supports activists, journalists, and teachers.) "My Seditious Heart," a collection of her nonfiction work which was published in 2019, runs to more than a thousand pages and offers scarcely a glimpse of autobiography. A rare disclosure comes in a book-length essay called "Walking with the Comrades," her report on time spent among Maoist rebels in the forests of central India. "The day before I left, my mother called, sounding sleepy," Roy recalls. " 'I've been thinking,' she said, with a mother's weird instinct, 'what this country needs is a revolution.' "

With her new book, "Mother Mary Comes to Me" (Scribner), Roy turns to her mother, Mary Roy, whom she calls her "most enthralling subject" and her "gangster." In addition to rearing Arundhati and her older brother alone, in defiance of both family and society, Mary founded an enduring educational establishment and was so persistent an activist that a landmark legal ruling bears her name. For years, Arundhati was estranged from her mother, yet she was never free of her. She struggled against her mother's dictates even as she remained entwined with her, not unlike an unborn child straining against the walls of the womb, fists and feet pressing for freedom from the very body on which she depends.

What We're Reading

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Some daughters manage to avoid developing a complicated agon with their mothers, but those lucky daughters, it would seem, seldom become novelists. For the rest, the struggle is formative. It may involve the daughter's feeling not only that her mother can read her mind but that she has written it. Roy recalls her mother's hypercritical gaze as an act both of creation and of demolition: "It felt as though she had cut me out—cut my shape out—of a picture book with a sharp pair of scissors and then torn me up." She learned early the futility of trying to please or appease. What she absorbed instead was the power of unyielding dissent. From the moment Roy could walk, she was marching in step with a formidable rebel.

Readers of "The God of Small Things" will recognize the outlines. Like Rahel and Estha, the novel's twins, Roy was the child of a mixed marriage: a father from a Hindu family and a mother from a Syrian Christian minority that prized its aloofness. Ammu, the twins' mother, marries young to escape a violent home life, then returns when her husband's drinking makes the marriage untenable. Mary Roy, too, married to flee violence—her father, a civil servant under the British, beat his wife and whipped his children—only to find that her husband was an incorrigible drunk. Before her children were five, she had left him, taking them to a holiday cottage littered with her father's discarded formal clothing and shared with an eccentric English tenant who "wore her hair in a high, puffy style, which made us wonder what was hidden inside it. Wasps, we thought." Eventually, Mary retreated to her family's ancestral house in Kerala, presided over by an almost blind grandmother, a censorious great-aunt, and a Rhodes Scholar uncle who held forth at dinner about Dionysus. All would be transmuted, lightly, into fiction.

In “The God of Small Things,” it is Ammu’s illicit love for a low-caste younger man that sets in motion the tragic event at the novel’s center. That romance was invented. As Roy notes, the one boundary that her mother never crossed, so far as she knew, was “sexual probity.” Mary’s fervor lay elsewhere. She was intellectual, combative, and indignant at the structural disadvantages that she faced. Her name endures in Indian law: Mary Roy Etc. v. State of Kerala and Others, a 1986 Supreme Court decision that struck down her community’s practice of granting sons a larger share of inheritance. Trained as a teacher before marriage, she co-founded a school in the small town of Kottayam when Arundhati was seven, presiding over it with charismatic, autocratic force. She even required her children to address her the way the other students did, as Mrs. Roy—a title that Roy uses for the better part of the book.

Mrs. Roy’s pedagogy was strikingly unconventional. When she discovered boys teasing girls about their changing bodies, she convened an assembly, dispatched two culprits to fetch her Maidenform undergarment, and then held it up before the school: “This is a bra. All women wear them. Your mother wears them. Your sisters will too, soon enough. If it excites you so much, you are very welcome to keep mine.” But Mrs. Roy’s fearlessness as a shaper of the minds and morals of children curdled into cruelty when it came to her own offspring. Her son’s middling grades infuriated her. “You’re ugly and stupid. If I were you, I’d kill myself,” she told him when he was a teen-ager. Arundhati fared better in school, but any praise that she received was shadowed by her brother’s humiliation. “Since then, for me, all personal achievement comes with a sense of foreboding,” she writes. “On the occasions when I am toasted or applauded, I always feel that someone else, someone quiet, is being beaten in the other room. If you pause to think about it, it’s true, someone is.”

At sixteen, Roy left for Delhi to study architecture, inspired by Laurie Baker, the British-born proponent of tropical modernism, whom her mother had recruited to design school buildings. In Delhi, Roy was, as she puts it, “the opposite of what Syrian Christian girls were meant to be—I was thin and dark and risky.” Within two years, she had broken with her mother. Before a visit home, she confessed that she had a boyfriend; her mother’s fury was volcanic. “Insults washed over me like a tide,” Roy recalls. “Apart

from the usual ones, the additional theme of course was ‘whore’ and ‘prostitute.’ ” (She got off lightly, she mordantly notes, compared with the family dog, which her mother had shot after it mated with a stray—“a kind of honor killing.”) The rupture was decisive. Back in Delhi, Roy lived first in a squat, then in a hut next to a fourteenth-century fortress wall, with “open drains into which children practiced aiming their shit.” By graduation, at twenty-one, she writes, she had “become a strange person, of a somewhat vagrant disposition . . . a small person with spikes.”

Roy’s spikiness is an abiding characteristic in the account she gives of the years that came between her studies and her emergence as a novelist. Just as she maintained her distance from her mother, she pushed away lovers and kept other intimates at bay. Even when she met the man she eventually married—the filmmaker Pradip Krishen, with whom she worked as an actress and a collaborator—she remained vigilantly isolate. She began to write, searching for her own language: “I needed to hunt it down like prey. Disembowel it, eat it. . . . It was out there somewhere, a live language-animal, a striped and spotted thing, grazing, waiting for me the predator.” When she was in her mid-twenties, she and her mother managed a fragile rapprochement, but the severance remained, and this gave her time and space to write “The God of Small Things.” The novel, published to immediate controversy in India—an obscenity suit was filed over its portrayal of an intercaste romance—offended her Syrian Christian kin, who grumbled about misrepresentation. Mrs. Roy hosted the book’s launch at her school, then, characteristically, talked all the way through her daughter’s reading. “She presented me and, in the same breath, undermined me,” Roy recalls.

“Mother Mary Comes to Me” was written in the wake of Mary Roy’s death, in 2022, after years of illness. There is nothing subdued or conciliatory in its account of the brutal transfer of power which comes when a parent is failing and a child assumes command. During a hospital stay, Roy’s enfeebled mother fixates on the caste and religious affiliations of the doctors treating her—the sort of thing that will be familiar to anyone who has cringed at a diminished elder’s unfiltered prejudices. Roy, whose own life of activism on behalf of India’s marginalized mirrors her mother’s crusade for education and women’s rights, is seized by a rage comparable to

that of her mother at her most extreme, and smashes a chair down in the hospital room. “Her body jerked. I could literally see the sound traveling through it,” Roy writes. “I thought I had killed her. But I hadn’t. I had only killed something in myself.”

The moment crystallizes a theme that runs through all of Roy’s work: how politics and social order shape, and often warp, our capacities for love and empathy. She describes “those knotted feelings, all that twisted, matted anger, the fetid threads of caste and feudal hierarchy that slither into our souls even in our most intimate moments of insanity, vulnerability, and mortality. . . . Do we have to kill our own mothers to exorcise this horror that lives inside us?”

Other daughters, other mothers. The novelist and commentator Molly Jong-Fast doesn’t quite confess to matricidal fantasies in her memoir, “How to Lose Your Mother,” but she is self-aware about how a domineering mother might drive even the most loving of daughters to violence, if only on the page. Born in 1978, Jong-Fast is the daughter of Erica Jong, who, five years earlier, became an international avatar of second-wave feminism with “Fear of Flying,” the novel that immortalized the “zipless fuck.” “Now think about being the offspring of the person who wrote that,” Jong-Fast quips. “And pour one out for me.”

Like Roy, she depicts life inside a confounding dyad: her mother, a world-class narcissist, proclaimed her daughter’s specialness while betraying disappointment at everything about her. Erica Jong plundered her daughter’s childhood for material—in a children’s book about divorce, she had a four-year-old, Molly-shaped character complain, “I think divorce is dumb because I never remember where I left my underpants”—yet sent the actual child away to live for long stretches with a nanny. Later, Jong would describe this as “benign neglect.” Her daughter eventually corrected her: “It was just neglect neglect. Benign makes it sound intentional. Stop *saying* that.”

“She learned that from me.”
Cartoon by Amy Hwang

Jong-Fast’s book is a valediction, like “Mother Mary Comes to Me,” but a necessarily compromised one: it was written not cleanly after Jong’s death but messily during her descent into alcoholism and dementia. There are bottles of wine consumed in a day, and shit in the bed. Jong-Fast shoulders the duties of caring for her mother and her ailing stepfather—or of guiltily hiring others to do so—while also tending to her husband, who has been diagnosed with cancer. It’s a lot. Her portrait of her mother is unflinching and often grotesque. “When I arrived at her apartment, she was wearing a half-open hot-pink bathrobe,” she recalls. “I wish I could report this was a new thing, but every man I’ve ever dated has seen my mother naked. She’s always wearing a half-open bathrobe.”

After a lifetime of playing the mini-adult to her elders—Jong-Fast got sober as a teen-ager; her mother and stepfather then found her “hopelessly square”—she manages a modicum of forgiveness toward Erica. “I wish I’d asked her why, if she loved me so much, she didn’t ever want to spend time with me,” she writes. Then comes the reckoning, discomforting to any writer who has ever closed a study door on a child’s high-pitched imprecations: “In her view, she *did* spend time with me—in her head, in her writing, in the world she inhabited. I *was* there. I may have felt she was slightly allergic to me, but to her, she was spending time with the most important version of me.”

What if your mother isn't a monster? Even then, she may loom monumental—"hard to capture fully," as Jill Bialosky writes of her mother, Iris, in "The End Is the Beginning." "I suppose all mothers are," Bialosky continues. "Larger than life, they leave their shadows and absences." Bialosky calls her mother "never ordinary," and indeed Iris's life bore more than its share of tragedy. She lost her own mother at nine, was widowed in her twenties with three small daughters, and later endured the suicide of her youngest child at twenty-one—the subject of Bialosky's earlier memoir, "History of a Suicide." What gives the new book its resonance, though, is not the extremity of catastrophe but the ordinariness of Iris's passage through the tempo of her times—the stirrings of feminism, the whole-foods dawning of the hippie era—which Bialosky chronicles in flashes with an Annie Ernaux-like lens, locating the individual in the general. She wonders whether her mother envied her daughters their generational freedoms, but concludes bleakly, "I am not sure she felt she was capable of ambition."

Bialosky seeks to excavate her mother's past through a reverse chronology: she starts at the end, with a nod to T. S. Eliot's "Four Quartets," and tracks Iris's life back to its origins. The book opens with a FaceTime funeral, in March, 2020. Then come the years of decline in a nursing home, where Iris cannot dress or use the toilet unassisted. "We noticed the aide neglected to put on her bra, and her bosom had fallen to her belly," Bialosky observes of one encounter. (The late-life indignities of the once nurturing maternal body recur across the genre. Arundhati Roy recalls the round-the-clock helpers who cared for Mary Roy in her final years. "The amber cake of translucent Pears soap looked as big as a brick in her hands," she writes of one. "For her to lift and hold up my mother's breasts was something of an endeavor, and all the women, including my mother, would laugh about it.") It's honorable to insist that others acknowledge a loved one's distinct identity even when age and disease have reduced that loved one to her most basic, primal aspects. But outsiders may never share a daughter's recognition."There is a screamer in one room on Iris's new floor, and a wailer in another," Bialosky writes—diminishing the humanity of other people's parents even as she strives to preserve her own mother's.

Not every elegy comes in the form of a dying fall. "This Is Your Mother," by the first-time author Erika J. Simpson, moves with a quick, incessant

urgency, much like the vibrating phone that opens an early chapter, on an August evening in 2013. On the line is Simpson's maternal aunt, calling to say that her mother's cancer has returned—it's her fifth bout—and that this time it's everywhere: Sallie Carol has two months to live. Shuttling between past and present, Simpson traces her mother's hardscrabble journey as the daughter of North Carolina sharecroppers who excels in school and becomes a teacher, then a mother, then a single mother of two. Erika, her younger daughter, is an accidental pregnancy, born despite Sallie Carol's brain tumor—her first cancer. Erika's childhood is steeped in instability: Sallie Carol evades rent payments, cons taxi-drivers, and teaches her daughters the art of "*reverse Robin Hooding*, in which you challenge the poor to give to the poor if they're working for the rich." After driving a car off a lot without paying for it, Sallie Carol spends a year in jail, where she is diagnosed with breast cancer. Later, she shows a prepubescent Erika the results of her surgery: "Her right breast came out like normal, answering gravity, full and brown. The other was stiff. Something new. Sculpted. It still looked like brown flesh, but artificially formed."

How to bring about the necessary separation from a mother like this? With difficulty. Simpson goes away to college, in Chicago, though not without her mother raiding her personal loan. In what turn out to be Sallie Carol's final weeks, Simpson stays in Chicago to celebrate Thanksgiving with her boyfriend and her roommate—partly for lack of cash, partly for lack of emotional capacity. "It will be nice to create a sense of family," Simpson writes. "The three of you who chose to leave your mothers in other states can now boast about how family is what you make it while taking hits off a bong." Through all the chaos, though, Sallie Carol endows her daughter with the most valuable of inheritances: the certainty of being fiercely loved. During Christmas one year, when there was no money for a tree or decorations, mother and daughters taped leaves and pine cones to a paper cutout of a tree affixed to the living-room wall. "It was your favorite Christmas," Simpson tells her younger self. "All the magic was her."

Childhood is a time of enchantment, and a mother is a daughter's first sorceress—omnipotent, enthralling, sometimes alarmingly so. In "The Wanderer's Curse," Jennifer Hope Choi reckons with her mother's waywardness by invoking a term from Korean folklore, yeokmasal, which

connotes a fated yearning for nomadism. Divorced and in middle age, Choi's mother is seized by wanderlust, setting out for Alaska, then drifting through a series of short-term stays elsewhere. "It appeared as if her many relocations had been occasioned through the magic of transposition; each house contained the same select objects: the porcelain stash box from Shanghai, a tiny toucan painted atop a white feather from Costa Rica, license plates from the trail of states she'd left in her wake," Choi writes.

The daughter, meanwhile, seeks to diagnose her own unsettled condition, as the improvisatory life of a twentysomething in New York City—a janky apartment on Allen Street, a job sorting porn DVDs at Kim's Video—evolves, past the age of thirty, into something less charming. "Friends had ascended various professional tracks," she writes. "When I allowed myself to pause and snap-to, I was startled to the point of bewilderment: The rest of the world had carried on with life, yet I had only managed to grow older."

A stint living with her mother in Columbia, South Carolina, where Choi works at the local library and tends to wait lists for James Patterson novels and other beach reads, provides a sobering reality check for someone with literary ambitions: "You know what people weren't clamoring for? Contemporary literary writing. Least of all creative nonfiction." The arrangement also revives buried memories: the daily trauma that she suffered as an infant when her mother would rise from their shared bed to leave for work. "I lay awake panicked my mother would leave me forever," she recalls. "Then she returned and the universe realigned, my simple world made whole again."

To write one's way out of the incapacitating dependence of daughterhood into autonomy means shedding the unquestioning fidelity of a child. With luck, a daughter discovers another kind of faithfulness. Arundhati Roy's reckoning with Mrs. Roy succeeds partly through the kind of comic reframing familiar from her fiction. "I grew up in a cult," she writes. "A good cult, a fabulous one even, but a cult nevertheless, in which the outside world was a fuzzy entity, and in the inside world, unquestioning obedience and frequently demonstrated adoration of the Mother Guru were the basic requirements for membership." But what if a woman grows up not in a metaphorical cult but in a real one? "The House of My Mother," by Shari

Franke, is one of those books you can bet there's a wait list for at the local library: a tell-all account by the eldest child of the Mormon momfluencer Ruby Franke, whose vlog series, "8 Passengers," started out as a lucrative leveraging of domestic life and ended with a prison sentence for child abuse.

Shari's book, written with the help of a ghostwriter, will strike many readers as a companion volume to the Hulu documentary series "Devil in the Family," which charts how Ruby's hyper-disciplinary parenting devolved into an all-American nightmare of corporal punishment, prepper rations, and guns. Another monstrous figure stalks both book and series: the sadistic family counsellor Jodi Hildebrandt, who insists to the teen-age Shari that even infants must be humbled. "You think a baby doesn't know how to manipulate?" Hildebrandt says. "How to get what it wants?" Shari escapes, but not without realizing that her mother's malevolence has permanently marked her sense of self. "No child should ever have to earn a parent's affection," she writes. "And no amount of achievement can ever fill the void where unconditional love should be."

Just as Roy admits that she thinks of her mother primarily as Mrs. Roy, Franke withholds intimacy by referring to her mother only by her given name. "I did consult my bishop about the possibility of encountering Ruby in the celestial afterlife, should she make it there, somehow," Franke, who remains a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, writes. "He assured me I'm under no obligation to acknowledge or engage with her whatsoever." It's startling, in the acknowledgments, to see Franke offer thanks "to Mom and Dad and all my other chosen family"—until one realizes that "Mom and Dad" are in fact her high-school teacher Mr. Haymond and his wife, who gave her refuge. Midway through Franke's harrowing narrative, she recounts the moment when she asked the Haymonds if she might call them by those names. "Of course you can," Mrs. Haymond said. "I would be honored for you to call me Mom."

When the facts are unbearable, it's natural to escape into fiction. But invention can take one only so far. Roy, writing not of a repudiated monster but of the person whose presence shaped every contour of her own life, describes the disarray that followed her mother's death: "That first night in

a Mrs. Roy-less world, I spun unanchored in space with no coordinates. I had constructed myself around her. I had grown into the peculiar shape that I am to accommodate her. I had never wanted to defeat her, never wanted to win. I had always wanted her to go out like a queen. And now that she had, I didn't make sense to myself anymore." It's a recurring paradox in these memoirs—a daughter's liberation is trailed by disorientation, her sense of self inseparable from the story of the mother who, through tyranny or tenderness, made it possible. ♦

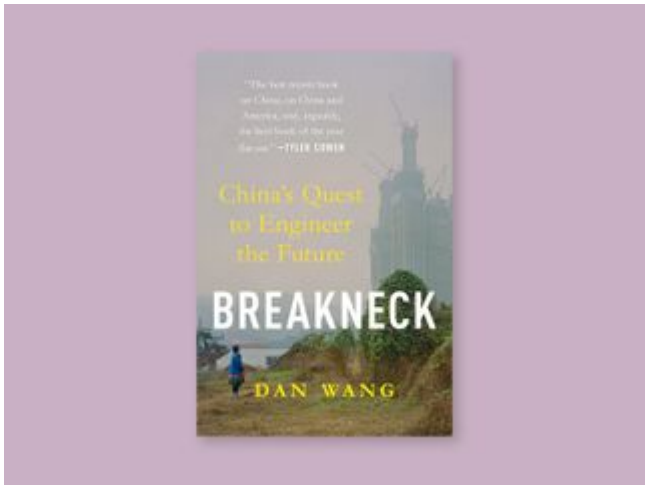
Rebecca Mead joined The New Yorker as a staff writer in 1997. Her books include "Home/Land: A Memoir of Departure and Return."

Books

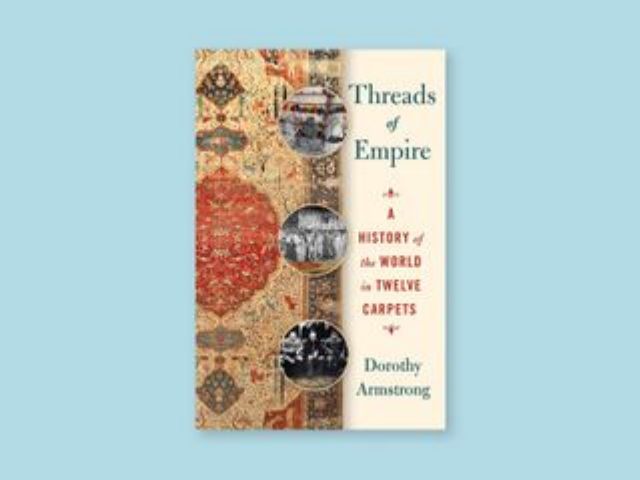
Briefly Noted

“Breakneck,” “Threads of Empire,” “God and Sex,” and “Dominion.”

September 15, 2025



Breakneck, *by Dan Wang (Norton)*. In recent decades, as China has laid down vast networks of high-speed rail and thrown up shimmering cities, Americans have developed a deepening sense that their own country struggles to get things done. In this ambitious account, Wang, a technology analyst with a journalist’s eye for color, uses studies of Chinese innovation to show how the two countries’ diverging paths and pathologies can be traced to their political cultures. Chinese leaders tend to be engineers who are capable of grand projects but liable to run roughshod over individual rights. The U.S., on the other hand, has become a society of lawyers, better at miring public infrastructure in proceduralism than at creating it. China’s example can remind Americans to treasure their country’s pluralism, Wang suggests, while also teaching them something about how to build.



Threads of Empire, *by Dorothy Armstrong (St. Martin's)*. Carpets are "some of the world's greatest symbols of authority and control," Armstrong, a scholar of material culture, argues in this vivid history. She makes her case through profiles of twelve noteworthy specimens, including one frozen in the tomb of a Scythian chieftain; one photographed under the feet of Churchill, Stalin, and Roosevelt at the Yalta Conference, in 1945; and one crafted into a coat for a feudal Japanese warlord. The stories are fraught with violence and colonialism: Persian rugs, for instance, gained their glittering reputation in part from Victorian-era racial hierarchies. But Armstrong draws attention to the carpets' original weavers, often female and illiterate, whose artistry remains a source of awe.

What We're Reading

Illustration by Ben Hickey

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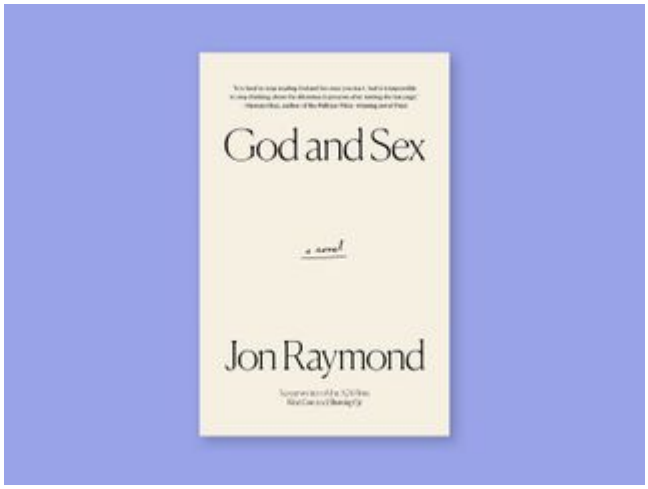

God and Sex, *by Jon Raymond (Simon & Schuster)*. In this lush novel, which reconsiders the meaning of an "act of God," a moderately successful writer of New Age nonfiction decides to focus his next treatise on trees. As he conducts research, he insinuates himself into the lives of an ecology professor and his wife, soon beginning an affair with the latter. The writer and the professor's wife (whose dalliances Raymond renders through a series of rather explicit coital vignettes) discover that they may have a transcendent connection, but then a forest fire seems to take the wife's life. In the wake of catastrophe, the writer's ambiguous relationship to God begins to reveal itself.

Dominion, *by Addie E. Citchens (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)*. This début novel of Southern small-town life considers the hypocrisies forged in patriarchy's crucible and the difficulty of reckoning with a father's sins. Priscilla, the proud yet put-upon matriarch of the most powerful family in

Dominion, Mississippi, and a quiet teen-ager named Diamond, whose future is as uncertain as her childhood has been tumultuous, share a love for the town’s golden boy, who is Priscilla’s son. The young man’s beauty, musical talents, and athletic prowess, however, belie volatile currents of desire and rage, which will eventually scandalize the community and unsettle Priscilla and Diamond’s faiths.

Books

How Jane Birkin Handled the Problem of Beauty

She possessed a mysterious charisma and a seemingly effortless sense of style. Both obscured her relentless, often painful search for meaning.

By Anahid Nersessian

September 15, 2025

In “It Girl: The Life and Legacy of Jane Birkin,” the actress emerges as a glamorous, self-interrogating personality, both like and unlike her public image.Photograph by Jean-Louis Atlan / Sygma / Getty

In Agnès Varda’s film “Jane B. par Agnès V.,” from 1988, a nearly forty-year-old Jane Birkin, dressed in jeans, a white T-shirt, and a tweed blazer, her messy brown hair pinned back, sits in front of the Eiffel Tower and dumps out the contents of her purse. The purse, which she helped design, is named for her: it’s the Birkin bag, by Hermès, one of the most famous accessories in the world. Inside are loose papers, notebooks, a tube of Maybelline’s Great Lash mascara, a copy of Dostoyevsky’s “The Gambler,” a Swiss Army knife, pens and markers, a roll of tape. “Well,” Birkin says, in heavily accented French, “did you learn anything about me from seeing my bag?” Then a grin: “Even if we reveal everything, we don’t show much.”

Throughout “Jane B.,” Varda draws attention to the elusiveness of her subject. Birkin, a British-born actress and singer best known, then as now,

for the raunchy pop songs she recorded with her lover Serge Gainsbourg, comes across as both open and enigmatic, singular in a way that is hard to parse. Her beauty is undeniable, but its borders are vague. Proud of her own eccentricity, she is also shy and awkward, with the voice of a little girl—hushed, rushed, and airy. Varda dresses her up as Joan of Arc, Caravaggio's Bacchus, the Virgin Mary, a cowboy, and a flamenco dancer, as if to suggest that Birkin's mystery is itself a symbol, one as important to modern culture as Renaissance painting and the mother of Christ.

Birkin, who died in 2023, had "it": an undefinable, unmistakable glamour that shifts our collective sense of what's cool, or at least of what's worth paying attention to. Easily mingling English reserve and European sensuality, she had a sweetness that set her apart from contemporaries such as the bombshell Brigitte Bardot or the edgier Anna Karina. "She wasn't a hippie," the journalist Marisa Meltzer writes in her new biography, "It Girl: The Life and Legacy of Jane Birkin" (Atria), "but rather a rising star from the upper class," someone who radiated privilege even when she dressed down. One of the first celebrities to be regularly photographed in her everyday clothes, Birkin was an early icon of street style, traipsing around Paris in sneakers and rumpled sweaters, wicker basket in hand. The outfits could be easily mimicked and therefore easily marketed. Today, when social-media influencers praise "the French-girl look"—wispy bangs, minimal makeup, bluejeans, *marinière* tops—the look they have in mind is hers.

What We're Reading

Discover notable new fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.

Birkin, Meltzer writes, was “nonchalance personified.” If this was not exactly an illusion, neither was it the whole story. A lifelong depressive, Birkin often thought about—and at least once attempted—suicide. Her diaries, two volumes of which have been published, reveal a wonderful writer, lyrical and self-lacerating. They also reveal her struggles with the costs and compromises of the It Girl role, how it left her feeling as though she had—as she puts it in Varda’s film—“no exceptional talents” to offset her fast-fleeting youth. What Birkin did have is je ne sais quoi, to her misfortune as much as to her advantage. After all, being famous for your ineffable qualities is perilously close to being famous for no reason.

Jane Mallory Birkin was born in London on December 14, 1946. Her father, David Birkin, came from a well-heeled military family. During his time in the Royal Navy, he helped support the French Resistance, smuggling members of de Gaulle’s government-in-exile between Dartmouth and the Brittany coast. Judy Campbell, Jane’s mother, was a film and theatre actress, a close collaborator of Noël Coward’s, and enough of a celebrity that, according to Birkin, when she and David married their wedding was filmed by a news crew. Although she worked steadily until her death, in 2004, the demands of raising three children—Jane, along with her older brother, Andrew, and her younger sister, Linda—took a toll on Campbell’s career. “My father swore that she could go on as an actress,” Jane recalled. “Promises, promises!”

All three Birkin siblings went into the arts. Andrew became a screenwriter and director, Linda a sculptor. Their childhood was happy, though Jane had the requisite dismal experience at an English boarding school, where she lasted three years before her parents let her come home. In the early pages of her diaries, begun when she was ten, she is serious and introspective. “Am I really alive?” she wonders. “Is this all a dream?” Some days later: “I feel fed up, I don’t want to dance, don’t want to do anything. It’s horrid, everything is horrid. I feel like a lump of coal on the side of the road, a very busy road.”

At fifteen, Jane became smitten with a middle-aged man named Alan, an “arty type” who lived across the street from her, in Chelsea. David Birkin let his daughter spend time at Alan’s apartment, certain he could see

everything from the family's balcony. Then Alan moved. "He invited me to his place, a basement," Jane would say later.

> I'd had too much red wine to drink for dinner—he drank whiskey and we ate ratatouille. He lay beside me and tried to get on top of me. I said it was the wrong time of the month, and he said it didn't matter. I found that a bit disgusting and I ran away. . . . I went to my room and swallowed all the Junior Aspirin that I'd saved just in case. My sister found me at four in the morning, deathly pale. She told Ma. Stomach pump. Ma slapped me and was right to do so. Ever since I've always hated whiskey and ratatouille.

Afterward, Birkin wrote a poem called "Suicide Lost," in which she presents herself as "a child who's frightened to live . . . a person who can't find a way out." If Alan was the first arty, abusive man to whom she found herself drawn, he would by no means be the last.

After her suicide attempt, Birkin's parents sent her to a finishing school in Paris, where she learned some French and hung around Versailles, the Louvre, and the Jeu de Paume. "I like poor Toulouse-Lautrec," Birkin wrote in her diary. "He's sad and the vulgarity and patchiness of life comes out in his painting." In 1964, she returned to England and decided to pursue acting, winning a role, in Graham Greene's play "Carving a Statue," as "a deaf-and-dumb girl who, after being seduced by a doctor is squashed by a bus and left for dead." Her next part was in a musical comedy titled "Passion Flower Hotel." The film's composer, John Barry, had written the music for two James Bond films; he would go on to score nine more, and to win five Academy Awards for his work on movies including "Out of Africa" and "Dances with Wolves." Birkin was seventeen; Barry was thirty. When she turned eighteen, they married.

The relationship was a disaster from the start. In Birkin's account, Barry was cruel, a philanderer who taunted her with his pursuit of other women, leaving her to wallow in what she called "the silence of loneliness in the rebuke of the quietness of unanswered questions." Meanwhile, Birkin's star was on the rise. In 1966, she made a memorable appearance in Michelangelo Antonioni's "Blow-Up," as one of two models who roll around naked with a hot-shot photographer. She landed a small profile in

Vogue, which praised her “wide, wondering hazel eyes.” Already, there was a growing distance between Birkin’s image and her interior; under her pillow, she kept a stick of eyeliner, so that her husband wouldn’t see her “tiny, piggy eyes” when he woke up. One night, when Barry came home bragging that he’d had dinner with an attractive blond actress, Birkin smashed raw eggs into the sink and scratched her legs until they bled.

On April 8, 1967, Kate Barry was born. Birkin adored the baby but was tortured by her husband’s coldness. “People *DO* want me,” she wrote in her diary. “I want every bit of it, I *WANT* it all. But I really only want it from John because I love him and it seems he is destroying me as he has everybody else.” When Kate was three months old, Birkin received a phone call from her father. Barry had been seen in a hotel, in Rome, with another woman. With a bassinet in one hand and a suitcase in the other, Birkin left her marital home and moved in with her parents. “Lie awake / And dream of stopping,” one of her poems from this period reads. “Dream of ending / Dream of dying.”

How did this fragile young woman become “The Emancipated Venus of the New Age,” as the Belgian magazine *Ciné Télé Revue* dubbed her in 1969? Birkin was desperate for love, and when she got it she blossomed. A year earlier, in May, 1968, she had met Gainsbourg, a famous singer-songwriter and an established playboy, on the set of the romantic comedy “Slogan.” He was recovering from a breakup with Brigitte Bardot, Birkin was recovering from the breakup of her marriage, and all of France was about to be thrown into the heady days of a student uprising, when huge labor strikes brought the country to a standstill. Neither Gainsbourg nor Birkin was impressed. “He was Russian!” Birkin told *Le Monde*, in 2013. “It seemed anecdotal compared to the October Revolution.”

Cartoon by Roz Chast

The Birkin of the Gainsbourg years is the one we know best, the It Girl of Meltzer's title. According to Elinor Glyn, who popularized the concept in her 1927 novel, "It," the quality couldn't be reduced to mere sex appeal. "The most exact description," she told an interviewer, is "some curious magnetism, and it always comes with people who are perfectly, perfectly self-confident . . . indifferent to everything and everybody." In the blockbuster silent film "It," based on Glyn's novel, Clara Bow plays Betty Lou Spence, a spirited shopgirl who attracts the attention of her wealthy boss when she's seen on the town in a chic flapper look reworked from a shabby day dress. Slicing off her sailor collar to create a deep-V neckline and attaching some fake flowers to her hip, Betty Lou marches out her tenement apartment and into a fancy restaurant with her head high, pointedly unbothered by the looks she gets from upper-crust diners.

Birkin projected just this sort of youthful insouciance. Skinny and flat-chested, with big teeth and a galumphing walk, she was no pinup and knew it. She styled herself, Meltzer notes, "in contrast to the quintessential French women of the time": instead of hip-hugging dresses and high heels, there were Repetto flats, denim cutoffs, soft knits, and crocheted crop tops.

The look was improvisational yet elegant, a perfect match for shifting social and sartorial trends. If a young Parisienne in the nineteen-twenties could feel liberated by the loose tailoring and comfortable fabrics of Coco Chanel's new suits, Birkin's generation wanted something even less restrictive. "I don't care much about expensive couture clothes," Birkin told *Women's Wear Daily*, in 1969. "I like the floppy look of Saint Laurent."

And yet Birkin was far from the self-reliant gamine embodied by Clara Bow. According to Meltzer, Birkin seemed unable "to cultivate much sense of self outside of her relationships with men and her children." At first, life with Gainsbourg was idyllic. Shacked up on the Rue de Verneuil with Kate and another baby, Charlotte, on the way, they became a bohemian power couple. They took Kate, dressed in Baby Dior, to casinos and bought a house in Normandy, where they went boating with the children. Being Birkin's partner was an ego boost for Gainsbourg, who had never been conventionally handsome and whose heavy drinking and smoking had aged him prematurely. (He had his first heart attack at forty-five and would die of another, at sixty-two.) "When they tell me I'm ugly," he crows on his song "Des Laids des Laids," from 1979, "I laugh softly, so as not to wake you up."

Gainsbourg doted on Birkin and their girls, but he also went through periods of being, in Birkin's words, "systematically drunk"—and, at times, violent. "I was too abusive," Meltzer quotes him saying. "I came home completely pissed, I beat her. When she gave me an earful, I didn't like it: two seconds too much and bam!" Birkin's diaries suggest a man who was insecure, moody, and controlling:

> Everything revolves around him, his films, his records, his life, the rest mustn't change, neither the children nor me, orders at table, hard words, and unfair on Kate, this masculine superiority that dominates everything, that arranges everything, the house must be just so and no other way, the children are growing but they mustn't change. He's like that. And if there's a revolt, I'm the one who's sick or changed, or good for nothing.

"When I'm depressed," she admitted, "I sometimes want to die very much and by his hand. Why not? I'm so tired of the complication of living."

In 1979, Birkin began an affair with the filmmaker Jacques Doillon, who was thirty-five to her thirty-two—an invigorating change from Gainsbourg, eighteen years her senior. The new relationship promised something less complicated, more harmonious. “I want a house full of sunlight,” she wrote, “nothing forbidden, no more orders.” She took Kate and Charlotte to a hotel, leaving Gainsbourg behind but not yet formalizing things with Doillon. The two men were “like complementary bookstands,” she wrote. “Let go one and you slide, let go both and you fall. . . . So there I am, stubbornly living my life as best I can without either.” This period of independence was short-lived. Soon, she and Doillon moved in together, and in 1982 their daughter, Lou, was born. Gainsbourg sent her a gift basket full of baby clothes, from “Papa Deux.”

It was around this time that Birkin made her most celebrated contribution to fashion. On an Air France flight, she found herself seated next to Jean-Louis Dumas, the chief executive of Hermès. As Birkin struggled to stow her signature wicker basket, spilling its contents, Dumas suggested that she needed a new bag. This prompted Birkin to complain that she couldn’t find one that both looked good and held all her stuff. She recalled sketching a roomy, wedgelike design on the back of an air-sickness bag. Dumas took the design to his studio, tweaked it, and the Birkin was born. Current models can sell for more than four hundred thousand dollars; in July, at Sotheby’s, the prototype went for ten million. It was the second most valuable fashion item ever sold at auction, behind only Dorothy’s slippers.

The arrival of the Birkin bag marked the beginning of a more creatively fulfilling period for its namesake. She continued to work in film, earning César nominations for Best Actress for her work in Doillon’s “La Pirate” (1984) and Best Supporting Actress in “La Belle Noiseuse” (1991), Jacques Rivette’s drama about a painter who becomes infatuated with a younger woman, to the chagrin of his wife and former muse, played by Birkin. Her most significant achievement, however, was a series of concerts, in 1987, at the Bataclan, the Paris theatre that would become the site of a terrorist attack, in 2015. For Birkin, the performances represented a passage between her gangly, passive youth and a more confident middle age, a transition she announced, characteristically, through her style. “I cut my hair off like a

boy, I wore men's clothes," she said later. "I only wanted people to hear the music and the words. It was fantastic."

For Birkin, getting older meant a kind of invisibility, a prospect that at once unnerved and elated her. At a Lincoln Center screening of "Jane B. par Agnès V.," in 2016, she explained—in that same girlish voice—that she had agreed to do the film because she'd felt that, on the eve of turning forty, she could now be convincing as "any old person," no longer defined by her famous face. It's an extraordinary remark. For one thing, the whole purpose of the movie is to offer a portrait of Birkin as her specific, unprecedented self. More to the point, the Jane Birkin who appears before Varda's camera is inimitably stunning, and the one who sat on the stage at Lincoln Center—nearly seventy years old, in a gray frock coat, hair unbrushed, spectacles perched on the edge of her nose—was just as magnetic, with a gravity and a self-possession that have only enhanced her charm.

Meltzer is not quite sure how to handle this phase of Birkin's life. On the one hand, she paints her as a Nancy Meyers-ish heroine, channelling Diane Keaton in slacks and blazers, "ready to focus back on her own self as she ages." There is a sentence that describes Birkin's choice to forgo plastic surgery as "an almost anti-capitalist way of rebelling against gender norms." On the other hand, she seems to consider Birkin's aging as a process of subtraction. But, if the elder Birkin became "less classically pretty," she also lived long enough to prove that her beauty was something enduring, even primordial.

For evidence, see Charlotte Gainsbourg's 2021 documentary, "Jane by Charlotte," a sequel of sorts to Varda's film. Critics were mixed on it, with the *Times* calling it "defiantly insular." Meltzer writes, "Charlotte said the theme of the film was a daughter looking for her mother, which is accurate but doesn't mean it was an artistic success." In reality, "Jane by Charlotte" is a cinematic essay on beauty, as Gainsbourg uses her camera to stroke, squeeze, and caress Birkin's body, lingering on her gnarled hands, the play of light over her cheekbones, her feet in Converse sneakers.

Gainsbourg shoots her mother as if she were a medieval sculpture of a sad but radiant saint whom the passage of time only ennobles. She shoots her, in other words, as a human being who has something most human beings do

not—an accent of grace. Singing onstage at New York's Beacon Theatre or puttering around her house in Brittany, Birkin appears shorter and stouter, with thin lips and sunspots. She moves slowly, in recovery from treatment for leukemia and from an immense trauma—the death, perhaps by suicide, of her daughter Kate, in 2013. When you look at her, you experience a sense not of loss but of revelation. She is a person of substance, of mettle hard-earned. This is how lovely she always was, or, rather, was always going to be. ♦

Anahid Nersessian, a former poetry editor of Granta, is the author of "Keats's Odes: A Lover's Discourse."

The Art World

In Philadelphia's Calder Gardens, a Dynasty Comes Home

A new sanctuary on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway assembles a deliberately whimsical variety of materials, where sculpture moves and is moved in turn.

By Adam Gopnik

September 15, 2025

Herzog & de Meuron has designed a deliberately "irrational" exhibition space, set largely below the Parkway and sheathed in reflecting steel, so that the building mirrors the gardens around it rather than asserting its own profile.Photographs by Justin Kaneps for The New Yorker / Art works © 2025 Calder Foundation / ARS

Philadelphia has always had a brotherly weakness for artistic dynasties. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries came the Peales, with the patriarch Charles and his three painting sons, tellingly christened Raphaelle, Rembrandt, and Rubens. Then came the Morans, luminous nineteenth-century landscapists, among whom was a daughter, Elizabeth. Most famously, there are the Calders, grandfather, father, and son—all,

confusingly, named Alexander—whose sculpted work has ornamented the city for more than a century. The elder Calder made the statue of William Penn that crowns City Hall, a monument that caps the city's skyline—with a long-enforced rule that no building could rise above Billy Penn's hat—but is distinguished, too, for radiating the benevolent dignity of a man of peace rather than the anxious arrogance of a warrior. The next Calder created the beautiful "Fountain of the Three Rivers," on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, with voluptuous allegorical figures of the Delaware, the Schuylkill, and the Wissahickon. Best known of all is the grandson, "Sandy" Calder, the master of the mobile and stabile, who until now has been only sporadically represented in his home town.

That's meant to be remedied by Calder Gardens, a new institution taking shape in a half-buried berm on the Parkway, not far from that paternal fountain. The site joins a civic row of culture—the Franklin Institute (science), the Free Library (books), the Rodin Museum (tormented figures), and the Barnes (eccentric juxtapositions of modern art and Pennsylvania Dutch ironwork). At the top of the drive, a Greek-temple art museum presides, its most recent cultural icon—Sylvester Stallone as Rocky—tactfully tucked out of sight.

Though the gardens honor the full Calder lineage, their focus is on the twentieth-century inheritor. They avoid the trap of the monographic mausoleum—the now familiar single-artist shrine that can make the work feel lonely in its completeness rather than alive in its variety. Herzog & de Meuron has designed a deliberately "irrational" exhibition space, set largely below the Parkway and sheathed in reflecting steel, so that the building vanishes into air (as architects like to say), mirroring the gardens around it rather than asserting its own profile. Those gardens, intended to be untamed, animating, and informal, are the work of Piet Oudolf, the creator of the High Line plantings, in New York. Though unfinished on a recent Monday visit, the gardens already promise to grow into wild abundance.

As one enters and descends, the space unfolds in a purposefully whimsical range of materials. Volcanic-seeming black rock lines a catacomblike stairway, punctuated by a single glass window framing a lone Calder. Tiered seats lead down into a viewing area that doubles as an amphitheatre for

lectures or performances. Though buried, the sometimes monumental forms of the exhibition space rise convexly, lifting upward, while light from the Parkway pours in through floor-to-ceiling windows. Even underground, one feels enlarged, not entombed. And there's nothing tomblike about the constant rumble of traffic from the boulevard outside.

The Calder legacy is well represented today by Alexander S. C. Rower, the current holder of the Sandy moniker (he's a Calder on his mother's side), who welcomed visitors to the new site by confessing that he had once thought of calling it a "hypogeum"—a term for a subterranean temple or chamber. "I don't mean an altar to my grandfather," he quickly added, "but a place for reflection and reconnection to essence. Not a house of relics, not a memorial. A sacred space for self-cultivation." In his sixties and taut with nervous energy, Sandy Rower knew his grandfather well and had been welcome in the studio—so long as he, too, was at work. ("Not on homework!" he said. "If you were working with your hands, it was O.K. You could make a sword!") He now tries to carry his grandfather's vision forward to members of the next generation, introducing them to an art multivalent and unfixed, that moves to open minds. Leading his visitors through the new installation, he treats it less as the museum it is not intended to be—or even the "cultural space" it advertises itself as—than as an underground menagerie of eccentric animals, each with a temperament of its own. The mobiles are Rower's untamable creatures, swinging close to heads, shaking and shimmering unpredictably. He delights in their waywardness with the proud wariness of a zookeeper showing off his exotic charges.

"I love to dispel the bizarre things that people make up about my grandfather," Rower said, among them the claim that the mobiles were *engineered*. "When he was a boy, my grandfather grew up with a studio in his father's studio, and he had an intuitive sense of engineering. And then, later, his parents didn't want him to suffer as an artist does, his father being a sculptor and his mom a painter. A friend was going to study mechanical engineering at Stevens Institute—but that program was to teach you to be an executive. You learned some engineering. So his 'engineering' background can be overstated. In any case, he said he would have made mobiles without engineering at all. None of these are 'engineered' objects.

The outdoor works, yes, become engineered for safety and ribs and structure, but they're always governed by aesthetic choices."

He went on, "The gussets and bolts were designed by my grandfather. You can take even the biggest stabile completely apart and reassemble it. One of the really unusual things about Calder sculptures is that they're all *demountable*—even the hundred-foot-tall ones. Now, mobiles are not supposed to move, except when they do. They're not mechanized. The poetry happens between the objects—the negative space is where the art happens. And they're not motorized! They respond not to motors but to the presence of people near them."

It's true, too. In the intimate studiolike space of the new installation, a mobile begins to stir as you pass, elegantly or uneasily, shifting with the faintest disturbance. Speak softly and it moves. "See?" Rower urged. "It's moving ever so slightly, it's moving away from us—it was moving toward us a second ago, then it stopped, and now it's moving. One of the most magical things that can happen to a mobile is you look at it and it's static. Then you look away. Then you look back and it's in a different position! It's as if it somehow moved while you weren't observing it, but it is at rest again. Like a living thing. That interplay between its being in motion is what makes it so wonderful and what makes it pertinent today, because it's not a frozen document of a moment in someone else's past. All of Picasso's paintings are self-portraits, how he's feeling about the person and the moment and the day, and it's frozen and fixed. It's the opposite here, because it's not about his emotion. It's really about your emotion."

The Calders for the new installation will rotate in, on loan from collections around the world, with strong pieces arriving from Brazil and Taiwan for the opening. (A planned side exhibit will also honor previous Calder generations; it will include an early bronze model of the Penn statue.) The works of Rower's grandfather, taken together, have an accidental, artisanal air—more like toys improvised and reassembled than objects weighed down by deliberation.

Spending time among many, one becomes acutely aware of their sheer variety. Despite the generic titles, each has its own character. One mobile, a cluster of white leaf shapes strung along long horizontal arcs, has the aloof

grace of an albino peacock, turning with a gavotte rhythm. Another, also built from white disks on a bending wire, evokes a mechanized Japanese cherry tree, its circles—perched high on a narrow stem—not revolving so much as brushing quickly past one another. A third, of black orbs and half-moons, is less exquisite than immense, recalling the Surrealist impulse to conjure alternate universes out of abstract forms.

Each leaf in each mobile is handwrought. The closer one looks, the more their differences surface, creating a delicate tension between the playful evocation of machine-made parts and the palpable evidence of the human touch. A paradox of modern and pre-modern art appears: father and grandfather, though realists and "classicists," produced work to be fabricated by assistants from fixed models, as Jeff Koons does now, while the modernist, machine-loving son worked wholly by instinct. The mobiles stir like birds or trees; the stabiles squat, grumpy and irregular, like walruses.

In this time of Kulturkampf, there is something moving about Calder's belated institutionalization. Long dismissed as a sideshow in American art, a toymaker rather than a prophet, he reminds us of art's primary role, which is not to issue statements but to make things—evocative things, funny things, beautiful things, trivial things. Things that may shimmy and shake, but things nonetheless, not ideological assertions.

"I'm working on a book about Calder and Duchamp," Rower said. "They were the best of friends, even though they seem to be opposites, the cerebral chess player and the circus ringmaster. But that's the point. They both hated the idea of any kind of official art." That such harmony could exist between an object-maker like Calder and an object-denier like Duchamp, who dreamed of an art made only of ideas, suggests that the engines of art are always oscillating. Calder's work reminds us that the space between animated creation and abstract concept can be as small as a whisper of wind, and that the cosmic and the comic are only a single sibilant sound apart. ♦

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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The Theatre

The Return of Tarell Alvin McCraney’s Masterpiece, “The Brothers Size”

A gifted cast elevates the poetic drama at the Shed.

By Helen Shaw

September 11, 2025

André Holland and Alani iLongwe star in McCraney’s play.Illustration by Jovana Mugoša

At the beginning of Tarell Alvin McCraney’s poetic drama “The Brothers Size,” now at the Shed, one of the play’s three actors pours white sand—or is it salt?—in a circle on the otherwise empty stage. This ceremonial ring

becomes an in-the-round playing area, and, as the performers enter and exit it, their feet scuff the particles, sending dust up to drift in the light.

Two of the men are brothers, bickering in their shared Louisiana home: the irrepressible Oshoosi Size (Alani iLongwe), who has only recently returned from prison, and his strict older sibling, Ogun Size (André Holland), who can't stop hassling him. The heat is stultifying, and Oshoosi, still on probation, is "just trying to live easy"—but Ogun wants his brother up early, working in Ogun's car shop, pulling his weight, avoiding the law. A third man, the alluring Elegba (Malcolm Mays), makes their two-body system even more unstable. Oshoosi dearly needed Elegba's friendship in prison, but, outside it, he seems a bit too dangerous, a bit too knowing.

McCraney's characters do occasionally know things beyond themselves; they may not exist merely in the here and now. Ogun, Oshoosi, and Elegba are all the names of Yoruba orishas—Ogun is the deity of iron and war, Oshoosi is associated with the hunt, and the trickster Elegba opens the gates between worlds. As the three men narrate their story, they also dance (Juel D. Lane is the choreographer), leaping over one another or lining up for a synchronized number—part polyrhythmic stepping, part game of tag—accompanied by an onstage drummer (Munir Zakee). Sometimes the characters speak their own stage directions and offer their own metaphors. "Elegba enters, drifting, like the moon," Mays says of his character's gleaming and magnetic presence, which exerts a pull on Oshoosi that waxes and wanes.

McCraney, who is the artistic director of the Geffen Playhouse, in L.A., is most widely known for writing "In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue," an unpublished play that became the source for "Moonlight," Barry Jenkins's Oscar-winning film, from 2016, about a queer Black boy whose friend both reaches for and betrays him. (In a sequence of the film set in adulthood, Holland, a frequent collaborator of McCraney's, plays that seductive friend.)

To the theatre world, though, it was "The Brothers Size" that made McCraney's name. In 2007, when he was still a playwriting student at Yale, the Under the Radar festival and the Foundry Theatre decided to bring "The Brothers Size," originally performed as a class assignment in 2005, to New

York’s Public Theatre. The play, which McCraney composed as part of a larger series called “The Brother/Sister Plays,” was an instant hit at the festival; it joined the Public’s regular season later that year, and was also produced in London, where it was nominated for an Olivier. In many ways, the show at the Shed feels like a return. McCraney is co-directing alongside Bijan Sheibani, who directed the London début as well as a version of this production at the Geffen last year. And certainly some of its most striking elements—such as the sand circle—have survived all the way from the Yale première, which was directed by McCraney’s classmate Tea Alagić.

Back then, “The Brothers Size” was a youthful shout, an opening salvo from a writer in his twenties who would clearly go on to do important things. That sense of stardom-on-the-cusp extended to the actors involved: Brian Tyree Henry came with the show from Yale to Under the Radar as the production’s Oshoosi, and a (then) little-known Holland played Elegba in a 2009 remounting, again at the Public. The play’s combination of rapid-fire fraternal shit-talking and word-drunk monologues set off actors’ individual talents the way black velvet sets off pearls.

It felt fresh in other ways, too. A few dramas that decade had touched on incarceration—Stephen Adly Guirgis’s “Jesus Hopped the ‘A’ Train,” for instance—but none had dealt so evocatively with probation. “The Brothers Size,” by blurring the boundaries between dream and waking, makes us feel Oshoosi’s legal purgatory, an existence that is simultaneously free and not free. To keep the audience in a similar limbo, the play suggests existential fluidity: Oshoosi believes he has a doppelgänger somewhere in Madagascar (“I need to be out there looking for the ‘me’s,” he says), and when Elegba takes Oshoosi down to the bayou—a landscape half land, half water—he reminds him of the erotic liberty they found together . . . in prison.

Twenty years have done something wonderful to McCraney’s play. It now feels more like an assured masterpiece than the first work of a prodigy; here, polished to a deep lustre, is the finest exertion of McCraney’s talents, elevated by a cast with staggering gifts. Holland’s self-effacing tiredness as Ogun is deliberately unshowy, and, while the actor’s name appears above the title in the program, he cedes the limelight to both Mays, who gives the graceful, flirtatious performance of a lifetime, and to iLongwe, who grows

more radiant and funny as Oshoosi's frustration with his brother sharpens. A certain inelegant hastiness in the plot has been resolved by treating the monologues almost as arias, giving them each an equal sense of grandeur, like the relentless finale of a fireworks display.

There is a little danger in the speed and ease of the actors' speech, since it can be easy to mishear them amid McCraney's slippery wordplay. But even that bewitched me. When Elegba tells Ogun about the terror Oshoosi endured in prison at night, he demonstrates how he reached out to him. "You know not where the hand will lead you," Elegba says. "If it's the good guard lead you back to your cell . . . if it ain't . . . " Mays inflects Elegba's speech with Creole syncopation, and I heard him say "the good god" rather than "the good guard." I had been pondering that image—heartbroken Elegba unsure if he is a good god or a bad one—for a full day before I was corrected by the script. But "The Brothers Size" has room for that sort of thing. Every thought is brother to another.

If all that fraught masculinity in midtown is too much for you, the divine feminine is hanging out downtown at the Performing Garage in the shape of "Honor," one of the artist Suzanne Bocanegra's superb slide-lecture-style performances. The show, originally commissioned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, consists of one woman's discursive, often hilarious presentation, nominally on the museum's sixteenth-century "Honor" tapestry, a "Where's Waldo?"-style allegorical array of nearly seventy characters, including Judith, Penelope, and Constantine. Really, though, Bocanegra's show explores the issues that the tapestry raises in her magpie mind—women as symbols of virtue; state torture and its associated spectacle; a Texas beauty pageant. Rather than speak to us directly, Bocanegra (a Rome Prize-winning artist herself) sits to one side of the stage, murmuring the text into a microphone. Meanwhile, the actor Lili Taylor channels her from center stage, reciting what she hears in her earpiece and advancing the slides.

"Honor" reminds me of the old John Berger television series "Ways of Seeing," from the BBC—it shifts your gaze from the art work to the museum wall, and then to the social structure *behind* the wall. Sometimes Bocanegra accomplishes this by zooming in for a closeup on material

innovation (the anonymous weavers of “Honor” created slashes in the fabric to make mouths), or by describing the development of her own art passions, from the Girl Scouts to her youthful obsession with Hansel and Gretel to the crucified Jesus in her childhood church. Taylor’s voice varies in degrees of remove from droll to dry, but she’s often telling us about suffering: the Girl Scouts’ founder’s marital humiliation; the Grimms’ fairy-tale children abandoned to starvation in the woods; Christ in torment. Somehow all these threads gather together in a video of Bocanegra’s mother, her first sewing teacher, busily crocheting in an armchair. That video, Taylor says—dispassionately, kindly, smiling a little—was taken shortly before Bocanegra’s mother died. No wonder the artist needs a second self to speak to us. Grief makes a hole, but memory makes a stitch. ♦

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

Poems

- **“Above Plakias, Crete”**
  “You will see a small, white chapel on the ridgeline miles away.”
- **“Our Elsewhere”**
  “I wanted to tell you about what it’s like here now, / I wrote to my friend David.”

Poems

Above Plakias, Crete

By Fred Marchant

September 15, 2025

You will see a small, white chapel on the ridgeline miles away,
the sun bearing down, the building a fleck of light, a cement hut,

with room for an icon, a red votive candle, and for one or two
believers to kneel. Around you the parched land and empty sky

point less to the idea of death and more to labors in the afterlife.
You follow the footpath crossing the brush, the rocky pastures,

and the urge to climb begins to feel as necessary as the next breath.
When you pass a tree half burnt long ago, the soil is soft

enough to remind you of the flesh you have loved and been loved
by in return. The scent of sage and thyme gathers round you,

and the brown goats lolling under the shade tree stare at you,
wondering if you understand what you have come to and why.

You feel certain you are near, but the light is so severe and unrelieved
that what you are looking for now seems impossible to find.

Fred Marchant is the author of the poetry collection "Said Not Said," among other books.

Poems

Our Elsewhere

By Maxine Scates

September 15, 2025

I wanted to tell you about what it's like here now,
I wrote to my friend David, who had lived
three houses down the street, but whose
mother was a war bride and whose family
had moved back to England. I didn't tell him
how the announcement came over the P.A.
in fourth-period Typing. I didn't tell him
how we went to the movies that night
at the Paradise Theatre and the cashier, angry
and crying, asked us why we hadn't stayed
home. I wanted to tell him about Jackie,
how brave she was and how we were doing,
because I was a part of a we he was no longer
part of and was still years away from
knowing I lived in a country that was not
at all what I'd been taught it was. I don't
know if I ever sent the letter. I do know he
never wrote back, and today I'm still doing
what I've done on spring days for years as I slide
the Pennsylvania bluestone around in the mud
to form the trail once again washed away
by winter rains. At night, the dizzying decrees
roll through my brain, which I guess makes
waking up into these days of stomach-dropping
dread where I'm still moving the stones
a relief as we become one with all the many
elsewheres of history we failed to imagine

we'd too become. Our elsewhere—if I were
writing David now, most of our lives would
have already unspooled, yet maybe he still
remembers the street we lived on, the G.I. loan
houses, all of us white like their vision of
the fifties they'd return us to where only whites
got those loans, the still wounded fathers,
the depths of their violence, the mothers who'd
worked in defense plants during the war who
went back to work when we started school,
the unspoken fear of the bombs we had already
dropped hanging over everything, that one
bright light which would send us scurrying under
our desks never realizing we'd be dead before
we got there. Yesterday, when I called the cable
company to complain about my bill going up, I
spoke with a young woman, who, when I asked,
was not allowed to tell me where she lived, but
she did tell me she could see the Pyramids. It was
three-thirty in the morning her time. She kept
saying, *No worries, we can fix this*, eager to keep
one more cable customer in America happy. She
spoke five languages, Arabic, English, French,
and two I didn't catch when the connection broke
for a second. When she returned, I asked if she
was a student, and she said she'd be in class hours
later, after her shift ended. Before we hung up,
she asked how I was doing, and though I knew
it was not what she was asking about, I told her
nobody I know likes what is happening here. Later,
I recalled how, when we'd said the same to a taxi
driver in Italy years ago on the verge of the invasion
of Iraq, he'd replied, *That's what you all say*. And
then, since they tell you the call may be recorded,
I wondered if we'd been talking too much, and if
she was going to get into trouble, and thought of
the Alexa speaker we bought for my mother to help

her make phone calls which we now use to listen
to the news every morning, and how she calls out
all the way from the kitchen some nights when
we’re talking down in the living room to tell us
she can’t quite hear what we’re saying.

Maxine Scates is a poet whose books include “My Wilderness.”

Cartoons

- **Cartoon Caption Contest**
  Submit a caption, plus vote on other entries and finalists.
- **Cartoons from the Issue**
  Drawings from the September 22, 2025, magazine.

Puzzles & Games

- **The Crossword: Tuesday, September 9, 2025**
  Today's theme: Matchy-matchy.

Crossword

The Crossword: Tuesday, September 9, 2025

Today's theme: Matchy-matchy.

By Adam Wagner

September 9, 2025

Adam Wagner is a creative lead at Patreon, as well as a keeper of about twenty thousand honeybees.