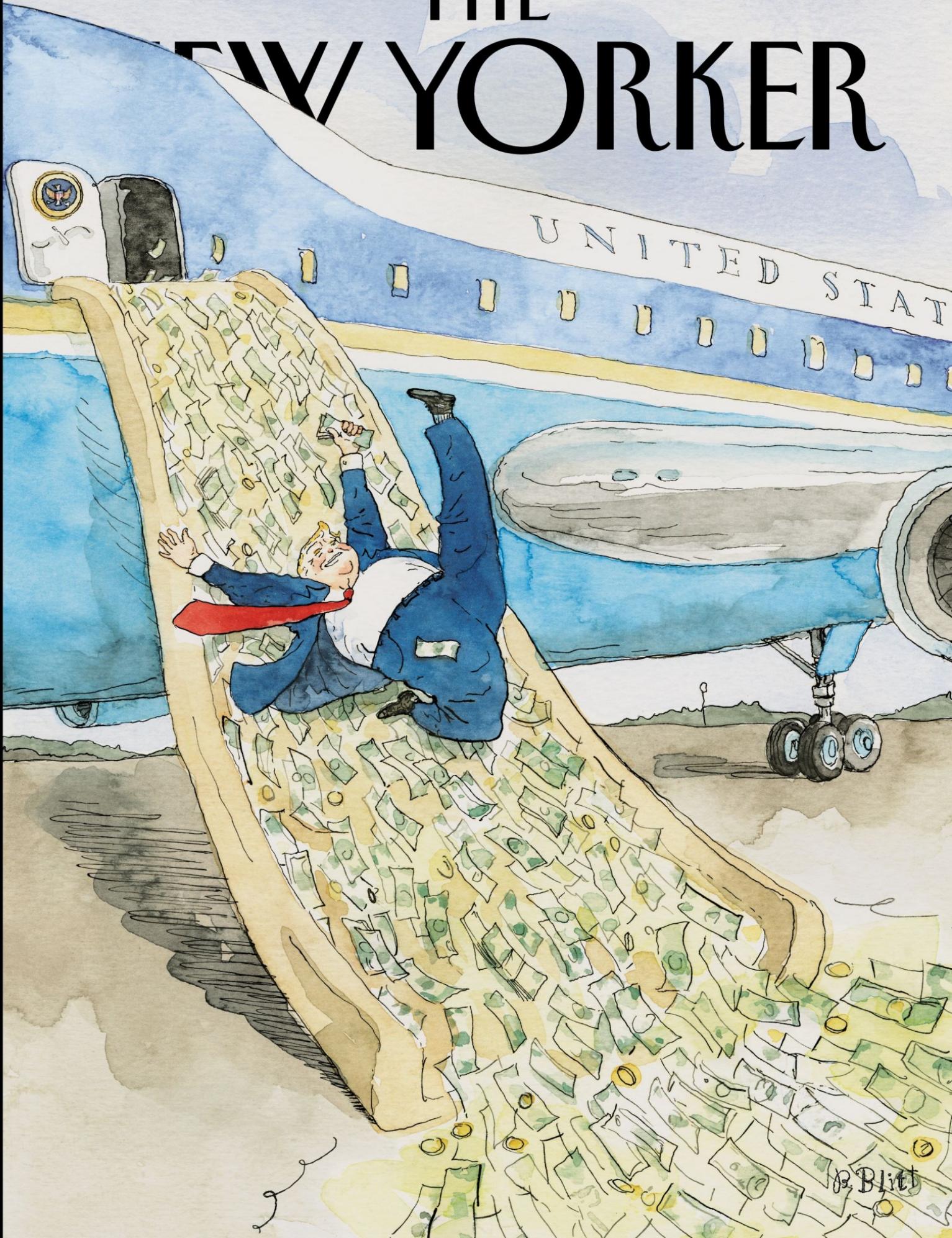


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# THE NEW YORKER



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# The New Yorker Magazine

[May 19]

- [Goings On](#)
- [The Talk of the Town](#)
- [Reporting & Essays](#)
- [Takes](#)
- [Shouts & Murmurs](#)
- [Fiction](#)
- [The Critics](#)
- [Poems](#)
- [Cartoons](#)
- [Puzzles & Games](#)

## Goings On

- **Hilton Als on the Visionary World of Alva Rogers**

By Hilton Als, Dan Stahl, Jane Bua, Vince Aletti, Sheldon Pearce, Richard Brody, Brian Seibert, and Marella Gayla | Also: The great Malian photographer Malick Sidibé, East L.A. Latinas in “Real Women Have Curves,” a Maria Callas look-alike contest in a cemetery, and more.

- **Sigrid Nunez on the Beauty of Narrative Restraint**

The award-winning author of “The Friend” explains why some of the recent books that she admires most are ones in which not much happens.

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# Hilton Als on the Visionary World of Alva Rogers

*Also: The great Malian photographer Malick Sidibé, East L.A. Latinas in “Real Women Have Curves,” a Maria Callas look-alike contest in a cemetery, and more.*

*By [Hilton Als](#), [Dan Stahl](#), [Jane Bua](#), [Vince Aletti](#), [Sheldon Pearce](#), [Richard Brody](#), [Brian Seibert](#), and [Marella Gayla](#)*

*May 16, 2025*

*[You’re reading the Goings On newsletter, a guide to what we’re watching, listening to, and doing this week. Sign up to receive it in your inbox.](#)*

**I met Alva Rogers years ago**, through a mutual friend, and her various incarnations—actress, singer, artistic director, writer, puppeteer—have always been remarkable to me. As a young woman, Rogers posed for the artist Lorna Simpson, and is the subject of Simpson’s photograph-based piece “Waterbearer” (1986), along with other early works, and, of course, she was the nominal star of Julie Dash’s film “Daughters of the Dust” (1991), a fascinating evocation of Gullah culture in South Carolina. All of these works—all of these genres—that have been supportive of Rogers being looked at have informed her own work: she knows what the experience of being *in* a narrative feels like and uses that knowledge as a creator of her own projects.



*Alva Rogers in “The Harlem Doll Palace.”*

*Photograph by Richard Termine*

That's just one of the experiences you'll take away from her new show, **“The Harlem Doll Palace”** (at [HERE](#), May 21-June 1), presented as part of HERE’s Dream Music Puppetry Program, under the aegis of the artistic director and master puppeteer Basil Twist. In the piece, which Rogers, now sixty-five, wrote and stars in, we enter a world behind a pink door, in a three-story Harlem brownstone, presided over by a woman whom habitués call Aunt Len. She keeps what she refers to as a “dollection”—a collection of dolls that love her and want to keep her from harm, including death. As played by Rogers (and supported by the puppeteers Ash Winkfield, who also directs, Mecca Akbar, Thalya David, Charlotte Lily Gaspard, and Marcella Murray, with music by Bruce Monroe), Len conveys the wisdom of the artist as visionary—which Rogers, who has always been a storyteller, projects through the musicality of her voice and her large, expressive eyes that see everything, especially the intimacy of the world she creates from the inside out.—*Hilton Als*



## About Town

Broadway

In the musicalization of “**Real Women Have Curves**”—a 1990 play that was adapted into a hit 2002 film—the women at an East L.A. sewing factory comprise a variety of body types. One sweltering day, they strip to their skivvies and sing exuberantly about who they are. But who are they? The show, in a well-intentioned valorization of Latinidad, flattens several characters into hardworking brown heroines or callous white villains. The Mexican American protagonist, Ana (Tatianna Córdoba) has just graduated high school and is helping out at the factory—her sister’s business—while also interning at a local newspaper and trying not to let down her self-sacrificing mother (Justina Machado). The performances, songs (by Joy Huerta and Benjamin Velez), and direction (Sergio Trujillo) are no subtler than the story.—*Dan Stahl ([James Earl Jones](#); open run.)*

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## Classical

Do you have thick eyebrows, bewitching eyes, and the magnetism of a tortured prima donna? Or do you just like graveyards and good music? If so, **Death of Classical** has the event for you: an evening honoring the late soprano Maria Callas. Sip on cocktails and nibble on snacks as you listen to some swing jazz by a headstone. Then partake in—or, if you’re not feeling particularly diva-ish, merely observe—a Callas look-alike contest, hosted by the drag artist and singer Creatine Price (but likely unattended by Angelina Jolie). The end of the night will bring to life some of Callas’s arias of choice, sung by members of the Met Opera’s Lindemann Young Artist Development Program.—*Jane Bua ([Green-Wood Cemetery](#); May 23.)*

**For more:** read Will Crutchfield on the “[stormy, capricious diva.](#)”

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## Art



*“Grand griot N’Diaye,” 1979/2004*

*Photograph © Malick Sidibé / Courtesy the Estate of Malick Sidibé / Jack Shainman Gallery;  
Photograph by Dan Bradica Studio*

**Malick Sidibé**, the great Malian photographer, who died in 2016, was popular and much in demand in Bamako, Mali’s capital, where his studio was based. Formal and informal portraits were his stock-in-trade, but he also photographed christenings, dance parties, and picnics at the beach; a large group of images in this new show, “Regardez-Moi,” are of married couples, flanked by friends and family. A celebratory mood is emphasized by traditional decorative frames, reverse-painted on glass by local artists, that surround the images with loosely drawn flowers and leaves. Made at a time when Mali was going through a period of post-colonial exuberance and political unease, even the most casual of Sidibé’s images are charged with a sense of pride and determination: a vision of Africa at its most optimistic.—*Vince Aletti ([Jack Shainman](#); through May 31.)*

**For more:** read Siobhán Bohnacker on [a visit to Sidibé’s house](#), in the heart of Bamako.

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## Art Rock

The most recent **Squid** album, “Cowards,” from February, feels like more compelling evidence of the band’s relentless forward motion. Across three prowling records, the Brighton post-punks have established themselves as restless voyagers inspired by modal jazz and krautrock, J.G. Ballard and David Lynch. The band’s début, “Bright Green Field” (2021), bent urgent political concerns into an imagined dystopian landscape, and the follow-up, “O Monolith” (2023), opted for a distorted, free-roaming art-rock arcana. “Cowards” captures an already strange band at its strangest and most exhilarating, and at its most fantastical and conceptual, too. The album is a compilation of nightmarish myths reckoning with evil made manifest, from cannibalism to cults. With each song, Squid conceives a new fable.—

*Sheldon Pearce ([Warsaw](#); May 23.)*

**For more:** read Pearce on why Squid’s music is [so weirdly listenable](#).

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## Movies



*Hideko Takamine and Noboru Nakaya.*

*Photograph courtesy © 1962 Toho Co. Ltd.*

The director Mikio Naruse—whose extensive career, from the thirties to the sixties, was centered on the social and economic oppressions of women in Japanese society—is the subject of a two-part, thirty-film retrospective, running through May 31 at Japan Society and starting up again on June 5 at Metrograph. One of the highlights, “**A Wanderer’s Notebook**,” from 1962,

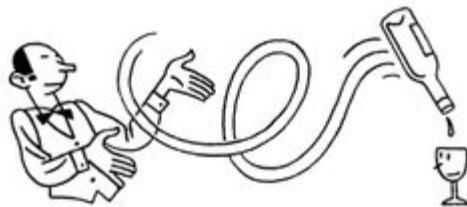
is both a credo and a summation: it's based on an autobiographical novel by Fumiko Hayashi, whose work Naruse adapted in six films. Hideko Takamine stars as Fumiko, a poor young woman who does manual labor and works as a bar hostess while writing poetry and prose that confront her struggle to survive alongside the feckless and brutal men in her life. The movie is one of the great cinematic visions of an artistic vocation and the passions that energize it.—Richard Brody ([Japan Society](#); May 23.)

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## Dance

The ace tap dancer **Ayodele Casel** fell in love with her art in the nineteen-nineties, when, led by Savion Glover, hoofing was catching up with the sounds and attitudes of hip-hop. In her new show “Ayodele Casel: The Remix,” she looks back at that era, but also at what’s happened since. The program is partly a retrospective, reviving some of her earliest choreographic efforts alongside more recent pieces, such as an excerpt from her work on the 2022 Broadway revival of “Funny Girl.” As usual, the star is generous, sharing both the stage and the roles of choreographer and composer with a cast of similarly spirited dancers and musicians.—Brian Seibert ([Joyce Theatre](#); May 28-June 8.)

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## Bar Tab

*Marella Gayla gets reacquainted with the natural-wine-bar genre.*

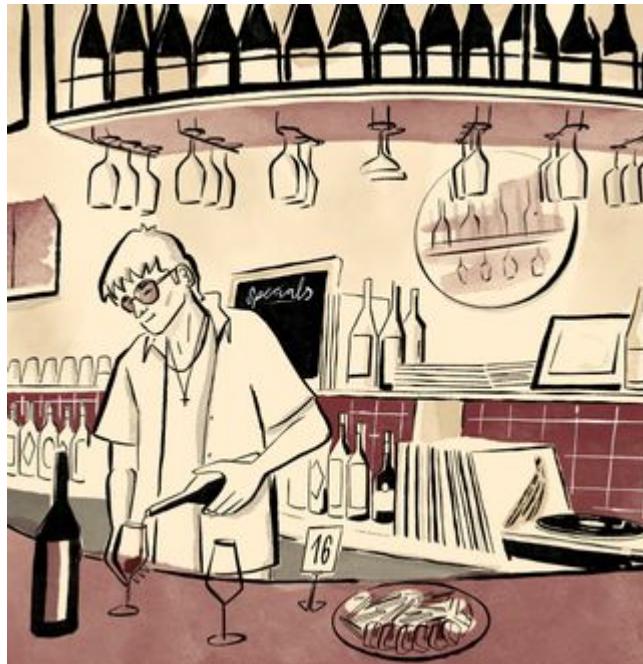


Illustration by Patricia Bolaños

If the phrase “natural wine bar in Brooklyn” comes laden with clichés, **Liar Liar**, in Gowanus, reacquaints you with the genre’s pleasures: eclectic light fixtures emit a warm, flattering glow; archly dressed bartenders preside over a record player, spinning seventies funk and early-two-thousands indie; kombucha-esque wines are served in cute talismanic tasting glasses. The short, compulsively likable dinner menu includes a saucy Caesar salad, showered with bread crumbs; a thirty-six-dollar steak frites that comfortably feeds two; and a fudgy pot de crème coiffed with salty whipped cream. As the bar’s standing room filled on a recent Friday evening, staffers deftly caucused with patrons, who hovered expectantly in their best spring jackets. “I really don’t want to behave at all,” a lithe woman in a corduroy jumpsuit and flat sandals confided to two friends, as the most socially forceful member of their quartet lobbied for a booth. An urbane middle-aged couple was summoned to the bar for prime seats just as the man was pulling up a BBC video about barnacle geese, a species that nests on high cliffs and whose flightless newborns fling themselves hundreds of feet to reunite with their grazing parents. Once seated, the man propped his phone against a candle, so that a neighboring solo drinker could watch, too. There was a looser scene on a weeknight, when a round of frosty Martinis, a sampling of cloudy, tart orange wines, and a peppery bottle of red, shared with two colleagues, seemed less like a life-style

statement and more like a bold recommitment to the very act of living. The after-work crowd included a few sophisticated children and their adults, a clique of male creative directors, and, once the room thinned out, a bespectacled couple slow dancing to the opening bars of LCD Soundsystem's "Dance Yrself Clean."

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### P.S. Good stuff on the Internet:

- [Till the wheels fall off](#)
- [Spring break is eternal](#)
- [Gwyneth Paltrow on step-parenting](#)



[Hilton Als](#), a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, won the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for criticism. He is the editor of "[God Made My Face: A Collective Portrait of James Baldwin](#)."

[Dan Stahl](#) is a member of *The New Yorker*'s editorial staff.

[Jane Buja](#) is a member of *The New Yorker*'s editorial staff who covers classical music for *Goings On*. Previously, she wrote for *Pitchfork*.

[Vince Aletti](#) is a photography critic and the author of "[Issues: A History of Photography in Fashion Magazines](#)."



[Sheldon Pearce](#) is a music writer for *The New Yorker's Goings On* newsletter.



[Richard Brody](#), a film critic, began writing for *The New Yorker* in 1999. He is the author of [“Everything Is Cinema: The Working Life of Jean-Luc Godard.”](#)

[Brian Seibert](#) has been contributing to *The New Yorker* since 2002. He is the author of “[What the Eye Hears: A History of Tap Dancing,](#)” which won an Anisfield-Wolf Book Award. His writing appears in the *New York Times* and the *New York Review of Books*. A Guggenheim fellow, he teaches at Yale University.

[Marella Gayla](#) is a member of *The New Yorker's* editorial staff.

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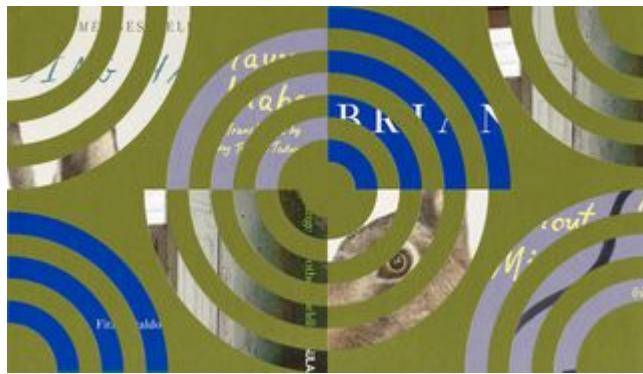
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**[Book Currents](#)**

# Sigrid Nunez on the Beauty of Narrative Restraint

The award-winning author of “The Friend” explains why some of the recent books that she admires most are ones in which not much happens.

May 7, 2025



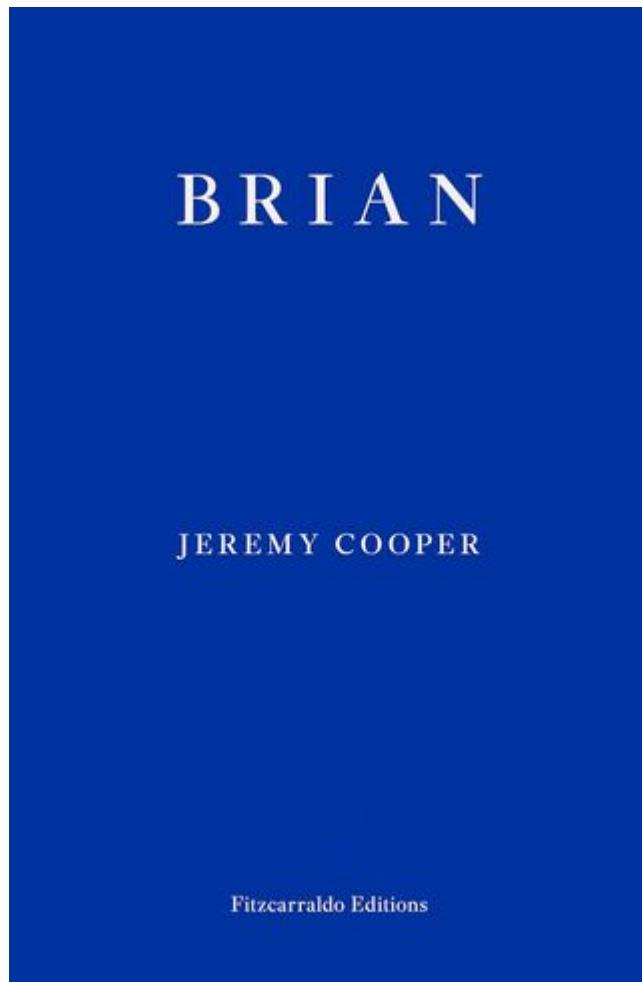
*Illustration by Chantal Jahchan*

You’re reading Book Currents, a weekly column in which notable figures share what they’re reading. Sign up for the Goings On newsletter to receive their selections, and other cultural recommendations, in your inbox.

“Plot, shmot,” the writer and editor William Maxwell once said to John Updike. Sigrid Nunez couldn’t agree more. She used to tell her students, “You don’t need a plot, but you do need a story.” But what makes a story? “If you have an interesting character who is having some kind of experience, you have the makings of a story.” People sometimes dismiss plotless narratives as “quiet” books in which not much happens, but, as Nunez notes, “thinking is doing.” To illustrate her point, Nunez shared some thoughts with us about four recent quiet books that she not only enjoyed but admires. Her comments have been edited and condensed.

## Brian

*by Jeremy Cooper*



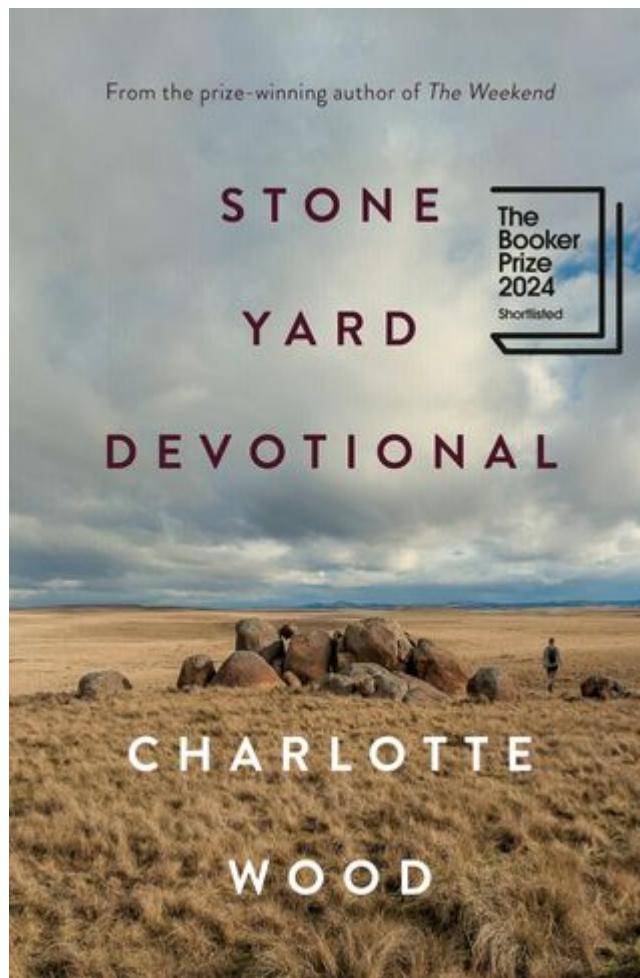
[Amazon| Bookshop](#)

Brian is a thirtysomething council worker in London who has always led a solitary life, one marked by an obsessive adherence to routine. One day, having decided that he should do something to feel less alone, he becomes a member of the British Film Institute (B.F.I.). Over the years, up to and beyond his retirement, he devotes as much time as possible to watching everything from genre films to Hollywood classics. Indeed, the B.F.I. becomes the center of Brian's existence, providing consistent pleasure and intellectual stimulation. It's "only in the cinema that he became a person," and it's at the B.F.I. that Brian finds acceptance among a small group of other dedicated regulars.

Cooper does a superb job of inhabiting this singular character's point of view, and of deftly weaving into the narrative Brian's thoughts and feelings about the films he sees. I was delighted by the book's gentle humor and lucid prose style, and I can think of no finer exploration of what can happen when a person is fully open and attentive to art, and how a shared passion for art can connect people to one another.

## Stone Yard Devotional

by Charlotte Wood



[Amazon](#) | [Bookshop](#)

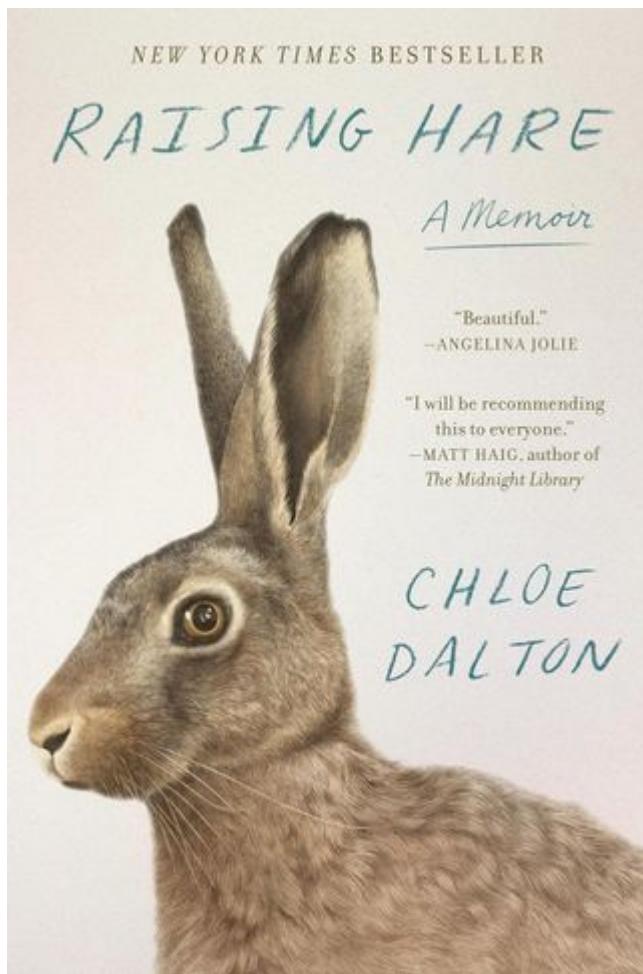
The unnamed narrator and main character of this novel is a middle-aged woman from Sydney who is caught in a moral crisis. She has lost faith in the efficacy of her work as a wildlife conservationist and in humanity's

ability to halt the devastations caused by climate change. She leaves her job and her husband and, although an atheist, retreats to a convent in New South Wales. Maybe there she can make some sense of the world.

One of the biggest questions that she finds herself contemplating is whether it's possible for a person to live without causing harm. The nuns she observes come closest to that ideal, but a mouse plague of Biblical proportions leaves them no choice but to kill—and not always painlessly. Though the narrator cannot find answers, Wood reminds us of the necessity of seriously thinking about such questions. Her exquisite meditations on dread and disillusionment about the future, familiar to many of us, had, for me, a heartening and consoling force.

## Raising Hare

*by Chloe Dalton*



[Amazon](#) | [Bookshop](#)

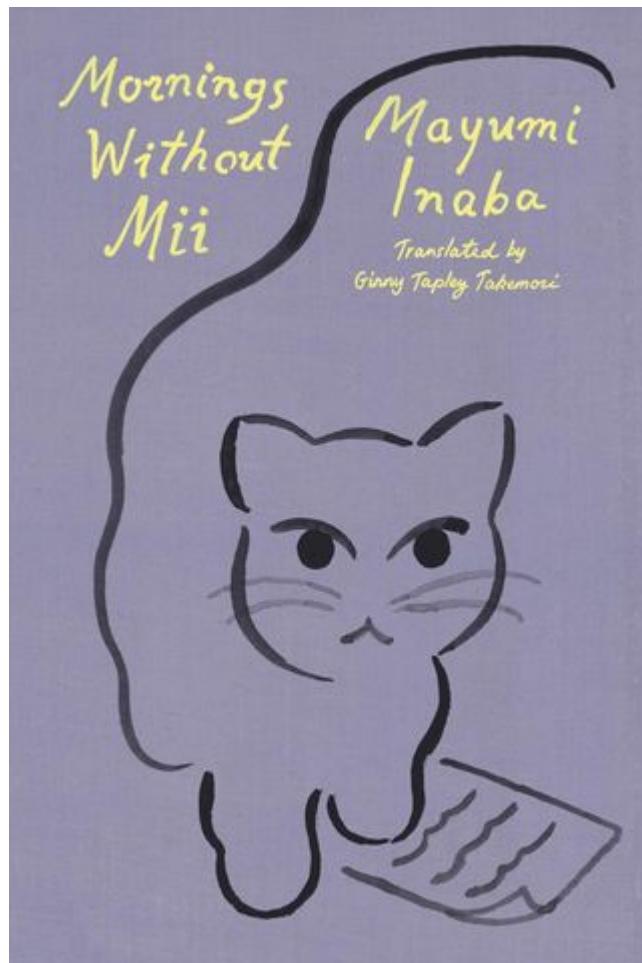
During the pandemic, Chloe Dalton, a London-based writer and a foreign-policy specialist, retreated to her home in the English countryside. There, she finds a newborn hare and assumes the challenging job of caring for it while also attempting to preserve its wild nature. She doesn't name it, touches it as little as possible, and arranges for it to have access to both her house and the outdoors. It's the hare that sets the terms of their relationship, and the many inconveniences it poses bring Dalton no regrets but, rather, intense satisfaction and joy.

Observing the hare—its intelligence, resilience, and dignity—Dalton develops a deeper appreciation for nature, and she begins questioning her attitude toward other parts of her life, such as her profession. The memoir includes lovely illustrations by Denise Nestor and many fascinating details about hares which Dalton draws from natural history, folklore, art, and

literature. In a troubled time, perhaps the greatest gift she receives from the hare is a sense of peace: “The atmosphere of calm suffused by her throughout the house lingers even when she is gone.” Reading the book had much the same effect on me.

## Mornings Without Mii

*by Mayumi Inaba, translated from the Japanese by Ginny Tapley Takemori*



[Amazon](#) | [Bookshop](#)

One day in 1977, the poet and novelist Mayumi Inaba finds a kitten, “a little ball of fluff,” stuck in a hole in a fence. She takes it home, names it Mii, and it becomes her cherished companion for the next twenty years. During that time, Inaba’s life goes through many changes, including a divorce—from a man who, though not a bad husband, never gave her the kind of

gratification that she derives from Mii—and her development as a prize-winning writer.

Mainly a biography of Mii, the book is also a great love story, one that gathers strength as the beloved begins to decline and Inaba is forced to prepare herself for the inevitable devastating loss. The most affecting parts of the memoir are Inaba's descriptions of her intimate caretaking of Mii through a series of increasingly grim geriatric ailments. Like "Raising Hare," this memoir reveals the profound respect, and compassion, that a friendship with an animal can inspire in a human being.

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| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

# The Talk of the Town

- **The Stakes of the Birthright-Citizenship Case**

By Ruth Marcus | The Trump Administration is trying to use the case to stop lower-court judges from issuing “nationwide injunctions” against its unconstitutional executive orders.

- **Ricky Cobb Finds Himself on Fox**

By Nick Paumgarten | A former community-college sociology professor, who broke into comedy as the Super 70s Sports guy on Twitter, drops by for a spot on “Gutfeld!”

- **The Macrons’ Familial Macarons**

By Lauren Collins | Brigitte Macron’s grand-nephew Jean-Baptise Trogneux, a sixth-generation chocolatier, opens the inaugural Paris outpost of his clan’s famous sweet shop.

- **Sam Amidon Visits Vanished Spaces**

By Robert Sullivan | The experimental folk musician and a music historian wander around SoHo in search of long-lost friends and neighbors.

- **Depression-Era Dolls for Trump-Tariff-Era Children**

By Ali Fitzgerald | Some toy ideas for kids lamenting their new two-doll allowance, including Dusty the Dust Bowl, Potato Princess, and more.

[Comment](#)

# The Stakes of the Birthright-Citizenship Case

The Trump Administration is trying to use the case to stop lower-court judges from issuing “nationwide injunctions” against its unconstitutional executive orders.

By [Ruth Marcus](#)

May 17, 2025



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

An hour into the oral arguments in the birthright-citizenship case at the Supreme Court last Thursday, Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson offered a tart

summary of the Trump Administration’s playbook in what will surely be its losing bid to end the constitutional guarantee. “Your argument,” Jackson told D. John Sauer, the Solicitor General, would “turn our justice system” into a “‘catch me if you can’ kind of regime,” in which “everybody has to have a lawyer and file a lawsuit in order for the government to stop violating people’s rights.” Jackson kept going: “I don’t understand how that is remotely consistent with the rule of law.”

Her diagnosis applies beyond the birthright-citizenship case. The Trump Administration has unleashed a torrent of unconstitutional executive orders and other questionable legal actions; with many of them, its goal seems less to win in the end than to inflict as much damage as possible along the way. That is why it is so determined to use the birthright-citizenship case to stop lower-court judges from issuing “nationwide injunctions”—orders that block Administration policies from taking effect across the country while their legality is hashed out in court. Lower courts, Sauer argued to the Justices, must limit their rulings to the individual parties in the case before them. Others who are harmed by the policies need to find ways to bring their own suits—unless and until the Supreme Court steps in with a definitive ruling. In other words, “catch me if you can.”

On Inauguration Day, shortly after taking an oath to defend the Constitution, Donald Trump sought to rewrite the document by executive fiat. He signed an order that purported to eliminate birthright citizenship for children without a parent who is a U.S. citizen or a permanent resident. (The order applies to children born in the United States more than thirty days after its issuance.) His action violated the clear language of the Fourteenth Amendment, which states, “All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States.” It contravened a 1940 federal law codifying that protection. It ignored a hundred-and-twenty-seven-year-old Supreme Court precedent making clear that the guarantee applies to the children of noncitizens, and also subsequent rulings reaffirming and expanding that view. “So, as far as I see it, this order violates four Supreme Court precedents,” Justice Sonia Sotomayor told Sauer.

But Thursday's arguments, in cases that were brought by blue states, by immigrants'-rights groups, and by individual pregnant women, weren't really about birthright citizenship; the Trump Administration could have pressed the Justices to tackle that issue, but it chose not to. Instead, the unusual mid-May session, after regular oral arguments had finished for the term, focussed on the technical matter of injunctions. That is an issue on which the Administration has a far stronger argument, although, for the reasons Jackson outlined, an unconvincing one, at least when it comes to birthright citizenship.

Nationwide injunctions have been around for years but didn't become a regular occurrence until 2015. Back then, they were a thorn in the side of a Democratic Administration, as Texas challenged Barack Obama's executive order granting legal protections to Dreamers, undocumented immigrants who had been brought to the United States as children. A federal judge appointed by George W. Bush issued an injunction against the program—not just in Texas but nationwide. That ruling opened the spigots: twelve such injunctions were issued during the Obama Administration, sixty-four during the first Trump Administration, and fourteen during the first three years of the Biden Administration, according to a 2024 *Harvard Law Review* study. But the first months of the second Trump Administration have made that pace look leisurely: Sauer told the Justices that the Administration has been hit with forty nationwide orders.

Questions about the practice were exacerbated by litigants' blatant forum shopping, filing lawsuits in liberal areas when seeking to block Republican Presidents and in conservative jurisdictions to challenge the policies of Democratic Presidents. According to the Harvard study, fifty-nine of the sixty-four injunctions against Trump during his first term were issued by judges appointed by Democrats; all fourteen against Biden came from Republican-nominated judges. This is not a good look for the judiciary, and it is a problem for Administrations of both parties. Among those who have criticized the use of such orders are Trump's Attorney General William Barr and Biden's Solicitor General, Elizabeth Prelogar.

But although there are legitimate questions about whether lower-court judges have overstepped, there are also, as Thursday's arguments

illustrated, situations in which broad injunctions may be necessary. And birthright citizenship is particularly ill-suited as a vehicle for curbing them. Citizenship is, by definition, a national issue. It makes little sense to have a patchwork nation in which, while the question wends its way through the courts, children born in one state are citizens and those born in another are not.

“Look, there are all kinds of abuses of nationwide injunctions,” Justice Elena Kagan told Sauer. But, she added, “let’s just assume you’re dead wrong” about ending birthright citizenship. “Does every single person that is affected by this [executive order] have to bring their own suit? Are there alternatives? How long does it take?” Kagan warned that the Administration could game the system by simply not appealing to the high court. Sauer suggested that plaintiffs could try bringing class-action suits—which the government would probably oppose. He also said that there should be “appropriate percolation” through the federal courts. His argument wasn’t helped by his unsettling assertion that the government might not even consider itself bound to follow rulings issued against it within the same appellate circuit. Sounding incredulous, Amy Coney Barrett asked, “Are you really going to answer Justice Kagan by saying there’s no way to do this expeditiously?”

Justice Neil Gorsuch, who has been one of the sharpest critics of nationwide injunctions, seemed similarly eager to move quickly to the business of birthright citizenship. No Justice, not even the most conservative, expressed a hint of sympathy for eliminating it. And, by the end of the two-hour-and-sixteen-minute session, it seemed as though the Justices might be thinking that they had blundered by getting sucked into the injunction debate. They had substituted a hard question for an easy call: that, Trump notwithstanding, birthright citizenship is the law of the land. ♦

*Ruth Marcus is a former columnist for the Washington Post and the author of “[Supreme Ambition: Brett Kavanaugh and the Conservative Takeover](#).”*

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# Ricky Cobb Finds Himself on Fox

A former community-college sociology professor, who broke into comedy as the Super 70s Sports guy on Twitter, drops by for a spot on “Gutfeld!”

By [Nick Paumgarten](#)

May 19, 2025



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

In 2014, Ricky Cobb was a sociology professor at Moraine Valley Community College, outside Chicago. Reared in Horse Cave, Kentucky, fatherless since the age of five, Cobb was now forty-two, with five daughters, and in the middle of his second divorce. To keep his students, and himself, interested, he cracked a lot of jokes; by his accounting, twenty

per cent of his lecture material was basically standup. Cobb decided to hone his comedy chops on Twitter, in the vague hope that someone might notice and give him a shot. He set up an account called Super 70s Sports, and on New Year's Day, 2015, after a year of dithering, he fully committed to the bit.

The bit was posting archival photos from Gen X's formative years, together with wisecracks about how life was better/tougher/cooler/randier back then. A TV-stereo combo with a pull-out turntable: "Welcome to the future, motherfucker." A view from the driver's seat of an old Buick: "Now that's a goddamn dashboard." An old photo of Joe Torre, in Cardinals cap and sideburns, with his eyes rolling back: "Pop quiz: Joe Torre is a) running a 103-degree fever b) getting blown c) getting blown while running a 103-degree fever." Lung darts, heaters, dirt bikes: it was a nostalgia flex, and a thumbing of the nose to what was once known as political correctness. To source his material, Cobb punched random terms into Google, as though working a slot machine. His audience grew to more than three-quarters of a million.

In 2019, Jimmy Kimmel, a fan, reached out, and four years later they launched "The Super Maximum Retro Show," on Vice TV, in which a panel of dudes in recliners riffed on images and clips. Cobb appeared several times as a panelist. Super 70s guy had a look: long straight hair with a middle part, and a bushy beard. Still, the show was not renewed.

Last year, Cobb got a call from Gary Schreier, the managing editor of OutKick, the upstart conservative-leaning sports network founded by Clay Travis and now owned by Fox. He offered Cobb a time slot. Cobb quit his teaching job and, last August, débuted "The Ricky Cobb Show"—he and guests talk sports and news—on OutKick. And so, amid the noise and smoke of the culture wars, Cobb's quaintly reactionary act intersected with vituperative Trumpian revanchism, and Cobb became a conservative TV personality.

The other day, Cobb flew to Manhattan for a guest appearance on "Gutfeld!," the popular evening talk show, on Fox News. The taping, in the afternoon, before a live audience, was in Fox's Studio D, on West Forty-seventh Street. After some patter from the hype man, Greg Gutfeld came

out and read *MAGA*-dad jokes off a teleprompter, and teed up his four guests: a comedian named Michael Loftus, the anarchist troll Michael Malice, the former MTV v.j. Kennedy, and Cobb, who wore a Chicago Blackhawks hockey jersey.

Cobb smiled away Gutfeld's japes about his resemblance to an Allman brother and about the Native American logo on his shirt ("Don't cancel me," Cobb said), and then efficiently delivered his bites, with his Kentucky drawl, about the fecklessness of the Democrats. "They've got ideas. They've just got the wrong ideas," he said. "Best thing Wes Moore has going for him is that nobody knows who the hell he is." Around the horn they went. Kennedy floated sending Joe Scarborough to Guantánamo; Loftus invited David Brooks for a beatdown from his buddies in Tennessee; Malice cheered the idea of muzzling women: "Shut 'em all up." An early Super 70s fan, installed in the front row, queasily yearned for quips about the days of dirt bikes and cigarette machines, or even for those days themselves.

When the taping was done, the audience filed out, sated, to the accompaniment of "War Pigs." Cobb posed for photos and then ducked into Langan's, the shiny reincarnation of the *Post*'s old favorite pub, where he ordered a cider, on ice. "I'm not much of a beer guy," he said. He is a big Joni Mitchell fan. "It's admittedly a little off-brand for Grizzly Adams to be listening to 'Blue.' "

He didn't want to dwell on the way his act had taken (or been subsumed by) a harder partisan turn, or on the relationship, if any, between playful nostalgia and mossbacked resentment. A reference to "A Face in the Crowd" seemed to offend him.

His ripest take on "Gutfeld!" may merely have been calling Joe Biden a "human Roomba," but adjacency has its harms. "I'm an independent," he said. "I try not to say anything I don't believe. I don't say things just for attention. I'd hate myself if I did that."

He reckoned that in most matters, if people could get a beer, or a cider, together and share a laugh, they'd find they have more in common than not. "I'm just looking to not have to worry about being on Skid Row when I'm

seventy-five years old,” he said. “I’m just a guy. A guy who shouldn’t be here.” ♦



*[Nick Paumgarten](#), a staff writer, has contributed to The New Yorker since 2000.*

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| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

**Moving on Up**

# The Macrons' Familial Macarons

Brigitte Macron's grand-nephew Jean-Baptise Trogneux, a sixth-generation chocolatier, opens the inaugural Paris outpost of his clan's famous sweet shop.

By [Lauren Collins](#)

May 19, 2025



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

An immemorial theme of French literature, *la montée à Paris*—the ascent to Paris—doesn't come off as an overly recommendable move. “It is always the same old story, year after year,” the grizzled journalist Lousteau warns Lucien de Rubempré, Balzac’s striving poet, freshly arrived from Angoulême. “The same eager rush to Paris from the provinces; the same, not to say a growing, number of beardless, ambitious boys,” staking their savings on success in the capital, only to finish “in some trench where

failures lie.” Rubempré’s Paris career ends in the Conciergerie, where he hangs himself from a window with a fashionable black silk tie.

Emmanuel Macron’s political conquests have, however, provided a contemporary counterexample to provincial defeat in the big city, perhaps serving as inspiration to his grand-nephew-in-law Jean-Baptiste Trogneux. Both men come from Amiens. Trogneux is a sixth-generation confectioner and chocolatier. Following his great-great-great-grandfather Jean-Baptiste, his great-great-grandfather Jean, his great-grandfather Jean, his grandfather Jean-Claude (Brigitte Macron’s brother), and his father, Jean-Alexandre, he presides over the family candy shop, known, unsurprisingly, as Jean Trogneux. “Our reputation extends from Amiens, Arras, Le Touquet, Lille, Saint-Quentin . . . ,” the company’s website boasts. (This is a bit like spanning from Pittsburgh to Sheboygan.) Last month, Trogneux broke with a hundred and fifty-three years’ precedent, ascending to Paris—from Amiens, it’s actually more of a descent—to open a boutique in the Ninth Arrondissement.

Like Balzac’s newcomers, Trogneux is young and ambitious, if not smooth-cheeked. A visitor found him at the shop the other morning in jeans, a white band-collared shirt, and New Balance sneakers, with some stubble on his chin. He recounted the history of the *maison*: how the first Jean was an assistant in a bakery; how he fell in love with a saleswoman; how they decided to open their own store, promoting a regional delicacy called the macaron of Amiens. “When I say ‘macaron,’ I’m pretty sure that the first thing that pops into your mind is what we call the ‘Parisian macaron,’ with the colorful shell, right?” Trogneux said. “But in France there is more than ten kinds of macaron.”

The common factor, he explained, is the almond—the main ingredient of the Amiens macaron, along with sugar, honey, and egg whites. He plucked a sample, wrapped in gold foil, from a glossy red box. “I haven’t touched the recipe, but I’m working on the packaging,” he said. His macarons are plateau-shaped and look a little like cornbread. Trogneux continued, “In France, it’s super annoying when you have a Parisian going, ‘Oh, you’re from the provinces?’ You’re, like, ‘O.K., I don’t live in Paris—I’m nobody?’ ”



*"Let the example of my fluke success guide nearly all of you to crushing disappointment."*  
Cartoon by Tom Toro

Trogneux was motivated to venture into Paris by the success of his boutique in Le Touquet, a northern beach resort popular with well-off Parisians. He has made a few concessions to the market—simplifying the shop’s décor and replacing chocolate replicas of the Amiens cathedral and the Perret Tower, the tallest building in Amiens, with Sacré-Cœurs and Eiffel Towers. Still, amid the minimalist offerings of neighborhood competitors such as Alain Ducasse, the Trogneux fare stands out: giant, bug-eyed bunny rabbits for Easter; a hazelnut spread called Trogrella. (The company once produced Minions-like chocolates called Trognions.)

“I’m pretty surprised by how many people know us,” Trogneux said. “But we have something that you might be aware of—the relationship with the Presidential family?” Of course the visitor knew that Brigitte Macron (née Trogneux) was a member of a “grand family of chocolatiers,” as *Le Parisien* once wrote, poking fun at the fact that a daughter of macaron-makers had grown up to become Madame Macron. And the visitor had noticed the resemblance Brigitte bears to her ancestors, whose portraits hang in a “mini-museum” on a wall of the new store. (Two women were convicted of defamation for circulating a transphobic conspiracy theory that Brigitte Macron is, in fact, one of her brothers after a gender reassignment.)

Trogneux kept going. “A few years ago, it was a bit of a difficult situation for them, in the family, because Jean-Claude was a bit conservative,” he recalled. “When Brigitte arrived and presented her boyfriend, who was twenty years younger, it was a little tense during Christmas dinner.” In

2018, during the *gilets jaunes* movement, anti-Macron protesters attacked the Trogneux stores across the North of France. Five years later, protesters angry with Macron’s retirement reforms beat up Jean-Baptiste, leaving him with two broken ribs. He said he’d been planning to hold off on opening in Paris until 2027, when Macron will be out of office, but the assault emboldened him.

Trogneux sought a location on the Rue des Martyrs, in one of the city’s most Macron-friendly arrondissements. His great-aunt Brigitte made an after-hours visit to the boutique the day after it opened. (“She really liked the new concept.”) “We have security guards that can be here in five minutes,” he admitted, yet Paris has not been as complicated as he feared. “To be honest, I thought we were going to be targeted, that we’d get tagged or have stuff written on the window,” he said. “But so far, so good.” He is already looking for a second location. ♦



[Lauren Collins](#) has been a staff writer at *The New Yorker* since 2008. She is the author of “[When in French: Love in a Second Language](#).”

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[Time Travel Dept.](#)

# Sam Amidon Visits Vanished Spaces

The experimental folk musician and a music historian wander around SoHo in search of long-lost friends and neighbors.

By [Robert Sullivan](#)

May 19, 2025



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

Sam Amidon is a folk musician whose albums test the limits of his job title; they feature fiddle tunes and clawhammer banjo as well as synthesizers and improvisations with such musicians as the late drummer Milford Graves. Amidon lives in London but the other day was in town for a gig at Public Records, in Brooklyn, for his new LP, “Salt River,” a collaboration with Sam Gendel, an L.A.-based saxophonist, that features covers of tunes by musicians Amidon views as influences. “I grew up with, like, no pop,” he

said. “We had one Cyndi Lauper cassette, ‘True Colors’—loved that—and one Talking Heads tape, and everything else was fiddles and contra-dance music.”

Some of the artists covered on “Salt River”—Yoko Ono, Ornette Coleman—formerly lived or played in and around SoHo, and, as an exercise in time travel, Amidon met up there with Jesse Rifkin, a music historian who recently published a book called “This Must Be the Place: Music, Community and Vanished Spaces in New York City.”

When Rifkin greeted Amidon, who is forty-three, on Thompson Street, they realized that they’d overlapped at Sarah Lawrence twenty years earlier. The first stop on their tour was a storefront on Prince Street, where Ornette Coleman recorded his album “Friends and Neighbors,” live, in 1970, in what was then his loft. On his version of the title song, Coleman plays fiddle as his loft guests sing. On Amidon’s cover, Gendel plays an Indonesian oboe as Amidon sings over a field recording of some friends eating dinner.

“This is it,” Rifkin said, looking at the façade of a branch of Faherty, the clothing store. “Coleman wasn’t performing anywhere, because he was really mad about intermediaries taking large cuts from his earnings. So getting this building was, like, ‘I’m gonna open this venue and just do whatever I want.’ ”

Amidon peered through the window into the shop. A sales associate waved the two men inside, and soon they were schooling her in Coleman-iana.

She nodded along, then asked, “Are you familiar with the brand?” Amidon tried to describe the way Coleman dressed—“a fashion guy.”

“I don’t know why, but I keep thinking he looks like Miles Davis,” the sales associate said.

“No,” Amidon said. “He wore more sweaters.”

Rifkin noticed some exposed brick in the back of the store. “So that brick wall,” he said. “That’s what, like, *remains*.”

Next stop: 80 Wooster Street, the site of the artist George Maciunas's original Fluxus house, now an outpost of the RealReal, a website selling pre-owned fashion. As shoppers milled, Rifkin explained how, in the nineteen-sixties, manufacturing businesses abandoned SoHo, because Robert Moses planned to put a highway there. Maciunas used grants to buy up spaces, calling them Fluxushouse Cooperatives, which he intended to turn into Fluxcity, an artists' Utopia. "George was the father of SoHo," Rifkin said. "Though in the end he allegedly got in trouble with the Mob." (Rifkin's book describes Maciunas chasing a building inspector with a samurai sword.) He went on, "And the ground floor was Jonas Mekas's Film-Makers' Cinematheque. It's where Philip Glass premiered minimalism, basically."

"No way," Amidon said. "I played with Jonas Mekas at the Serpentine Gallery, in London."

On the corner of Broome and Wooster, Rifkin pointed out the 1891 Romanesque Revival warehouse that, in the early seventies, became the performance space the Kitchen. "Arthur Russell books the Modern Lovers here," he said, "and everyone was, like, 'How dare you book a rock band!'" (Amidon will perform as part of an Arthur Russell retrospective in August, on Little Island.)

They moved on to 112 Greene Street, the site of Gordon Matta-Clark's gallery, which then turned into a recording studio and is now a Stella McCartney store. "The history of this building is insane," Rifkin said. "Kurtis Blow did 'The Breaks' down there. The first Run-DMC album happened there. Public Enemy did 'Nation of Millions,' 'Fear of a Black Planet.' Tribe Called Quest did 'Low End Theory,' and then also Sonic Youth did 'Daydream Nation' and 'Goo.' "

Next was the Greene Street studio of Ray Mortenson, an eighty-year-old photographer who, in 1968, bought a disused wax-fruit factory from George Maciunas. "George was a character," Mortenson said. "He rarely slept. He lived on West Broadway in a tiny little apartment. But George was a dreamer. He was Lithuanian. He was kind of inspired by a lot of the best of communism, the best of socialism, the idealism, the hope. He was a very positive guy—so positive that he got himself into a lot of trouble."

On the way out, Amidon considered Maciunas. “If you’re going to be, like, a center of that kind of energy, people are going to get pissed off,” he said. “But it’s really easy to *not* do it. It’s much harder to *do* stuff.” On Chambers Street, they stopped at an abandoned-looking fifth-floor walkup, where Yoko Ono staged concerts in 1961. Amidon looked as if he’d had a revelation. “They’re all people whose work, especially Yoko and Ornette, really connects with the idea of community, which is so central to folk music,” he said. “Even though they also did these things that are considered very avant-garde, there was just something in the spirit of them—like elders who were leading us, and trying to connect.” ♦

*Robert Sullivan* is the author of books including “[\*Double Exposure\*](#).”

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| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

[Sketchpad](#)

# Depression-Era Dolls for Trump-Tariff-Era Children

*Some toy ideas for kids lamenting their new two-doll allowance, including Dusty the Dust Bowl, Potato Princess, and more.*

By [Ali Fitzgerald](#)

May 19, 2025

Trump, on Tariffs, Says “Maybe the Children Will Have 2 Dolls Instead of 30.”

—*Headline in the Times*



*Ali Fitzgerald*, an artist and a writer, first contributed to *The New Yorker* in 2016. She writes the comic column “America!” and is the author of the graphic novel *Squeak Chatter Bark*.

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# Reporting & Essays

- **[This Is Your Priest on Drugs](#)**

By Michael Pollan | Dozens of religious leaders experienced magic mushrooms in a university study. Many are now evangelists for psychedelics.

- **[A Secret Trove of Rare Guitars Heads to the Met](#)**

By Nick Paumgarten | For decades, an obsessive duo of guitar guys has been amassing a definitive collection. The art these objects created changed the world.

- **[Is Jeff Bezos Selling Out the Washington Post?](#)**

By Clare Malone | How the paper that brought down Richard Nixon is struggling to survive the second term of Donald Trump.

- **[Escape from Khartoum](#)**

By Nicolas Niarchos | A family of nine's desperate attempt to find safety in Sudan.

[\*\*Dept. of Psychopharmacology\*\*](#)

# This Is Your Priest on Drugs

Dozens of religious leaders experienced magic mushrooms in a university study. Many are now evangelists for psychedelics.

By [Michael Pollan](#)

May 19, 2025



*Researchers at Johns Hopkins and N.Y.U. gave psilocybin to Christian and Jewish clergy members, an Islamic leader, and a Zen Buddhist roshi. Photo illustration by David Samuel Stern*

In October, 2015, Hunt Priest, then a minister at Emmanuel Episcopal Church on Mercer Island, in Washington State, was flipping through *The Christian Century*, a progressive Protestant magazine, when an advertisement caught his eye: “Seeking Clergy to Take Part in a Research Study of Psilocybin and Sacred Experience.” Psilocybin is a hallucinogenic compound found in certain mushrooms; researchers at Johns Hopkins University and N.Y.U. wanted to administer it to religious leaders who had “an interest in further exploring and developing their spiritual lives.”

Priest, a slight, bearded, and disarmingly open man from small-town Kentucky, grew up in a Protestant churchgoing family and felt a religious

calling as a teen-ager. He went to work for Delta Air Lines, but he told me that, in his thirties, “I began to feel something was missing in my spiritual life.” He started reading Buddhist texts, including Thích Nhất Hạnh’s “Living Buddha, Living Christ,” which eventually steered him back toward Christianity. At thirty-seven, he entered seminary.

By the time Priest saw the ad, he was burned out. He ministered to an affluent bedroom community near Seattle and felt that his work had become “more about institutional administration and maintenance. That will wrench the spirituality out of most people.” He had never experienced psychedelics —a requirement for participation in the study—and had heard some horror stories. Still, he had always been curious. The study was at respected universities, and legal. *Why the hell would I not do this?* he thought. He began the arduous process of qualifying to participate: a series of phone calls, long questionnaires, in-person interviews in Baltimore, and a medical exam.

The team behind the ad included Roland Griffiths and William Richards, Hopkins scholars who had contributed to the so-called renaissance of psychedelic research, which began around the turn of the millennium. Griffiths, a psychopharmacologist, first became interested in psychedelics after he had a mystical experience while meditating. That day, he encountered “something way, way beyond a material world view that I can’t really talk to my colleagues about, because it involves metaphors or assumptions that I’m really uncomfortable with as a scientist,” he told me in 2014. His most influential research focussed on therapeutic applications of psychedelics. In a 2016 paper published in the *Journal of Psychopharmacology*, Griffiths, Richards, and several other scientists reported that psilocybin could help treat fear and anxiety in cancer patients; the study has been cited more than a thousand times. Numerous clinical trials of psilocybin, MDMA, and other psychedelics followed.

I first encountered the small community of psychedelic researchers while writing about the cancer study for this magazine. I met many more when I wrote a book about their work, and since then I’ve argued that psychedelics have the potential to treat mental illness and teach us about the mind. In 2020, I helped establish a psychedelic research center at U.C. Berkeley and,

after I learned that Griffiths was dying of cancer, I donated to a new chaired professorship that he considered a part of his legacy.

Along the way, I learned that in 2012 Richards and Anthony Bossis, a clinical psychologist at N.Y.U., had started discussing psychedelics and religion. “To me, these experiences can be spiritual,” Bossis told me, when we met in his Manhattan office. The researchers set out to answer several questions. Would psychedelic experiences enhance the well-being and vocation of religious leaders, as compared with study participants in a control group who were still waiting for a session? Would the experience renew their faith, or make them question it?

The group secured financial support from several major funders in the psychedelic world, including T. Cody Swift, a philanthropist who has a master’s degree in existential-phenomenological psychology, and Carey and Claudia Turnbull, who have funded studies and invested in companies that are pursuing psychedelic medical treatments. Swift and Claudia Turnbull both went on to participate in the research—Swift by interviewing participants and writing a narrative account of their sessions, and Turnbull by facilitating sessions at Johns Hopkins.

Priest was ultimately accepted into the study, alongside about thirty other religious leaders, including a Catholic priest, a Baptist Biblical scholar, several rabbis, an Islamic leader, and a Zen Buddhist roshi. (The joke about walking into a bar almost writes itself.) Priest was one of four Episcopalians. The final sample, like the demographics of the study team, skewed white (ninety-seven per cent), Christian (seventy-six per cent), and male (sixty-nine per cent). Recruitment, through ads and direct outreach to religious communities, proved difficult, especially for religions such as Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism; religious proscriptions against mind-altering substances may have played a role. Finding willing rabbis, however, was easy—the challenge was finding ones who were “psychedelically naïve.”

Scientifically speaking, the study had serious limitations, many of them acknowledged by its authors. The sample was small, self-selecting, and unrepresentative, several faiths were not included, and there was no placebo control. “Expectancy effects” can also have a profound impact on

psychedelic research, and a case can be made that participants were primed to have a certain kind of experience. On questionnaires filled out months after their sessions, for example, participants were asked about their “sacred experience.” Andrew Gelman, a statistician at Columbia who is an expert on study design, read a draft of the paper that resulted from the study and told me in an e-mail, “I guess the punch line is that if you enroll people in a study and tell them they’re gonna have a sacred experience, then some people will have a sacred experience.” Zac Kamenetz, a Berkeley-based rabbi who participated in the study, also told me that the language used by some researchers, as well as the music played during sessions (the playlist included Enya, a Christmas choral work, “Om Namah Shivaya,” and lots of Bach), betrayed a distinctly Christian slant.

As an odd sort of ethnography, though, the study tells a provocative story. It’s not often that a group of clergy members recount a high-dose psilocybin trip. Would people steeped in theology and religious practice offer uniquely informed or nuanced accounts of mystical experiences? Would they encounter imagery or symbolism from their faiths—or might their experiences point to something more universal, a common core shared by all religions? Among participants who had two sessions, the researchers found that a striking number—seventy-nine per cent—reported that the experience had enriched their prayer, their effectiveness in their vocation, and their sense of the sacred in daily life. Ninety-six per cent rated their first encounters with psilocybin as being among the top five most spiritually significant experiences of their lives.

Perhaps the most intriguing question went unmentioned in the scientific paper, although it came to mind for many study participants. At a time when organized religion has been struggling with declining membership, especially among the young, could carefully prepared and guided psychedelic experiences—whether for clergy or for members of their congregations—have the potential to spark a revival of interest in religion? This is a controversial idea, so I was surprised to hear Priest and several other participants say that they believed they could. Most of the researchers were more circumspect, but Richards—an infectiously cheerful clinical psychologist who is now in his eighties—was happy to entertain the possibility. Before Richards completed a Ph.D. in counselling, he earned

master's degrees in divinity and theology. Psychedelics "can give new life to the dogma, by helping people understand where the dogma came from," he told me at his home, in West Baltimore. "One way to look at psychedelics is as revelation happening in the present." Then, perhaps mindful of the potential for religious or scientific backlash, he added, "Let's not frighten the horses!"

Richards's convictions, and his aspirations for psychedelics, prompt questions about the objectivity of such research. Rick Strassman, a psychiatrist at the University of New Mexico who conducted psychedelic research in the early nineties, suggested to me that at least some of the researchers came to the study with "a mission" to demonstrate the spiritual and psychological value of psilocybin. He pointed to the risk of selection bias: those who volunteer are likely to be "spiritually hungering for a mystical experience," which increases the chance that they will have one. "I would not think that a stodgy Talmudic scholar would want to participate," he told me. "For them, it's the word and the law. Spiritual experience alone is not that important." In 2020, Matthew Johnson, a Johns Hopkins researcher and a co-author of the religious-leaders study, made similar warnings in an article titled "Consciousness, Religion, and Gurus: Pitfalls of Psychedelic Medicine." He wrote of "scientists and clinicians imposing their personal religious or spiritual beliefs on the practice of psychedelic medicine."



*"I can do this the quick way or the dun-dun, dun-dun, dun-dun way."*  
Cartoon by Benjamin Schwartz

When Priest stepped into the psychedelic-session room at Johns Hopkins, he felt both excited and anxious. The vibe of the space was more living room than clinic; it had a cozy couch for participants to lie on, vaguely spiritual-looking art work on the walls, and a small statue of the Buddha on a bookshelf. Richards, who has a wide, toothy grin, was one of two facilitators, or “guides,” present to supervise the experience. Priest told me that, before he took the blue capsule that Richards offered him in an incense burner shaped like a chalice, he admitted to feeling nervous. He couldn’t recall exactly what Richards said in response, but he remembered the message that he received: You should be nervous. You’re about to meet God.

The cross-pollination of religion and psychedelics has a long history. In the psychedelic community, it is virtually an article of faith that hallucinogenic plants and fungi played a role in the visions and mystical experiences that helped give rise to some religions. The Eleusinian Mysteries, the annual rite honoring Demeter that was performed in Greece for nearly two thousand years, climaxed with the consumption of a potion called the *kykeon*, which was said to give participants visions of the afterlife and enable them to commune with their ancestors. Albert Hofmann, the Swiss chemist who discovered LSD, in 1938, suspected that the recipe included ergot, the fungus on which his discovery was based. (Demeter is the goddess of agriculture and fertility; ergot grows on grain.)

In the New World, peyote, psilocybin mushrooms, and the seeds of the ololiuqui—a type of morning glory—have had sacramental uses for millennia. In the early aughts, scientists dated two specimens of peyote, found in a cave near the Rio Grande, at more than five thousand years old. After Spanish colonizers arrived, the Catholic Church banned the use of mushrooms in Aztec rituals; the Nahuatl word for them—*teonanácatl*—translates roughly as “flesh of the gods,” which must have sounded like a direct challenge to the Christian sacrament. The practice continued underground, however, and similar customs persist today.

The U.S. banned peyote in the late nineteenth century, but the Native American Church, which fuses Indigenous and Christian beliefs, fought a prolonged legal and legislative battle for the right to use the peyote cactus

in its ceremonies. The effort ended successfully in 1993, when Congress passed the Religious Freedom Restoration Act. Since then, two churches that originated in Brazil have secured the right to use ayahuasca during ceremonies in the U.S. Psychedelic churches, some sincere in their spiritual convictions and others not so much, are opening at an accelerated rate. Lawyers in the newly formed Psychedelic Bar Association say that this trend has been encouraged by the Supreme Court's expansive approach to religious liberty.

In 1962, Walter Pahnke, a Harvard graduate student who studied under the psychologist and psychedelic advocate Timothy Leary, administered either a pill containing psilocybin or a placebo to twenty volunteers, mostly Protestant divinity students. The volunteers then sat in the basement of Marsh Chapel, at Boston University, and listened to a Good Friday sermon piped in from the pulpit above them. Of the ten volunteers who received the drug, eight reported powerful mystical experiences. In the placebo group, one did. The researchers' definition of mysticism mirrored the one in "The Varieties of Religious Experience," a 1902 collection of lectures by the psychologist and philosopher William James, who experimented with nitrous oxide. James associated mystical experiences with a sense of well-being, timelessness, ineffability, and unity with "ultimate reality."

Pahnke's published research failed to mention that, as participants recalled years later, one person fled the chapel and headed toward Commonwealth Avenue, possibly to spread the word of Jesus to passersby; he had to be restrained and given an injection of the antipsychotic Thorazine. Another participant, Huston Smith, was a leading scholar of religion. "Until the Good Friday Experiment," he told an interviewer in 1996, "I had had no direct personal encounter with Him/Her/It."

Griffiths, Richards, and their colleagues were inspired in part by the Good Friday Experiment. In a study published in 2006, they administered psilocybin to several dozen volunteers, who then filled out surveys that included a "Mystical Experience Questionnaire." The questionnaire drew on Pahnke's experiment and James's writings. The researchers ultimately concluded that psilocybin could reliably occasion mystical experiences.

Priest's psychedelic journey at Johns Hopkins followed norms that have become common in modern psychedelic research: After several preparatory sessions with two guides, the participant swallows the capsule, lies down on a couch, and dons a pair of headphones and an eye mask, to encourage an inward focus. The facilitators say little, but share words of advice or comfort if the experience turns frightening; "in and through" is a common refrain. Although touch is considered a boundary violation in conventional psychotherapy, psychedelic therapists sometimes offer a hand to hold or a pat on the shoulder. Consent for touch is discussed in advance and reiterated in the moment; participants and facilitators also rehearse touch beforehand. After the Hopkins and N.Y.U. sessions, participants filled out multiple questionnaires and wrote a narrative of their experience. The next day, they returned for an "integration session," to help make sense of what can be a confusing experience. They could also participate in a follow-up psilocybin session. Of the twenty-nine participants who completed a first session, five did not return for a second.

Like virtually all the religious leaders I spoke with, Priest reported an encounter with the divine. His session began with gorgeous visuals—fractal patterns that reminded him of mosaics in a mosque. Then a spiralling current of electricity seemed to take up residence in his left thigh. He felt it move powerfully up his body and lodge in his throat. "I thought my Adam's apple was about to explode," he told me. Both guides could sense his distress and one reached out to comfort him. (Priest later spoke publicly about a guide touching his head, which drew criticism online, but a university review of video recordings contradicted Priest's account.)

To Priest, the touch felt like the ritual Christian gesture of the laying on of hands. He remembers a guide holding his feet as the electrical sensation intensified. "It blew out of the top of my head, and then I started making these sounds that felt religious and spiritual and sacred," Priest recalled. "I realized I was speaking in tongues, which I had never done before. Speaking in tongues is not an Episcopal sort of thing."

Looking back, Priest described the experience in distinctly religious, but not strictly Christian, terms. "I would say now that my throat chakra had been blocked for a long time," he said. "I just felt blocked in what I was

preaching.” Priest described the quality of his encounter with the divine as “erotic.” So did a couple of other participants; one talked about having “a spiritual orgasm.” Priest also spoke of a reversal of gender roles. “The divine felt more masculine, and I felt like I was experiencing it the way a woman would,” he told me. “It felt so foreign to me as a man that I felt this must be how a woman experiences sexuality.” After the session, a friend came to pick Priest up and was surprised to find his face flushed. “I looked completely different,” Priest said. “I was like a new creation.”

Not everyone in the study left their session with such theological clarity. A Catholic priest from Mexico told me about hearing directly from Jesus, but a Protestant minister said with a shrug that “there was nothing particularly Christian about it.” The Buddhist roshi told me that her experience was “not life-altering” but led her “into a completely nonconceptual realm,” which she could find no words to describe. Rita Powell, now the Episcopal chaplain at Harvard, declined a second session, because her first, at N.Y.U., brought her face to face with “the abyss.” Speaking about her experience on a Harvard panel about psychedelics and religion, Powell said that her facilitators had not prepared her for something so dark. One of them “kept trying to reassure me that experiences of psilocybin were good, and beautiful, and unitive,” she said. “It seemed like kind of sloppy hippie stuff about love and harmony.” She said that, at one point in her session, she was “nowhere”: “There was neither color nor its absence. There was no form, or its absence. There was not fear. There was not joy. There was not revelation. There was nothing.” She described it as “maybe the hardest thing I had done in my life,” something that took her to “the furthest limit of human capacity.”

A peer-reviewed academic paper, “Effects of psilocybin on religious and spiritual attitudes and behaviors in clergy from various major world religions,” appears in *Psychedelic Medicine* this month. Its senior authors are Bossis and Stephen Ross, a psychiatry professor at N.Y.U. Swift, the funder who helped debrief some of the participants, also sent me a narrative account that highlights themes from sixteen interviews. It reads almost like a psychedelic oral history. Interviewees tended to report “authentic spiritual or religious experiences,” the account notes. A priest is quoted as saying, “I wasn’t dreaming, I wasn’t imagining, I wasn’t hallucinating.” Many

participants likened their experience to those of historical and scriptural figures. “I was able to experience what the mystics were for some reason able to experience spontaneously,” a pastor said. “I don’t think that . . . my experience was less than theirs.” According to the interviews, the divine was not usually embodied or visible but, rather, felt as a presence that suffused reality, or as a sense of oneness. “I realize my very pulse is God, my very breath is God,” a rabbi said.

Several participants were surprised to encounter imagery or dogma outside their own faith. A Congregationalist minister described turning into an Aztec god and then the Hindu god Shiva. No one I spoke to, not even the rabbis, described seeing the stereotypical God of the Old Testament. And many of the religious leaders, men and women alike, experienced the divine as a feminine presence. Participants characterized God as “soothing,” “maternal,” or “womb-like.” A United Methodist pastor from Alabama called this “mind-blowing.” (Jaime Clark-Soles, the Baptist Biblical scholar in the study, told me, “God struck me as a Jewish mother at one point, which is funny, since I’m a Jesus follower.”) One of Priest’s fellow-Episcopalians, a man, reported, “I had a total deconstruction of patriarchal religion.”

It was common for participants to gain an appreciation for religions other than their own. “All the truths are in all the religions,” one rabbi said. “The active ingredients are all the same.” A Congregationalist who previously had little patience for charismatic expressions of Christianity—“the hands in the air, the talking, speaking in tongues, and all the weirdness”—observed after his session that “pathways towards the truth are even more varied than I thought.” Some felt a marked tension between the conventions of their faith and the immediacy of their psilocybin experience. “I think I have less tolerance for institutional religion now,” a Presbyterian minister is quoted as saying. “There are other ways to connect with the divine.” Here was the entire history of world religions in a nutshell: orthodoxy and authority in tension with the direct spiritual experience of the individual.

Sughra Ahmed, the only Muslim in the religious-leaders study, told me that she was petrified before her first session. Like many others, she was apprehensive about what she would learn about herself. She also feared that

her participation would be considered taboo in her community of British Muslims. “Would they think I was bringing shame on us as a people?” she told me. She asked that the researchers obscure her identity in their papers, and for years she spoke to no one about her experience. But more recently she concluded that, for the sake of her personal authenticity, she needed to go on the record.

Ahmed, who is in her forties, has a round, open face and speaks in complete paragraphs. She grew up in the North of England, the daughter of immigrant Pakistanis. She went to the mosque after school every day; her parents prayed at home and fasted for Ramadan. She studied English language and literature at university and was working in I.T. when 9/11 happened. Determined to better understand both the roots of Islam and the sudden surge of prejudice—she remembered people treating her “as a security threat” when she was boarding a bus—she earned a graduate degree in Islamic studies. For a time, she wore the hijab. She was the first woman to chair the Islamic Society of Britain, and then became an associate dean for religious life at Stanford, leading prayers and preaching ecumenically at a church on campus.

Ahmed describes herself using a feminine honorific given to religious scholars or teachers: *ustadha*. She volunteered for the study in part because her faith wasn’t represented among the participants. “Someone had to be the Muslim seat at the table,” she told me. But, as the only Muslim, she felt that participating meant “stepping into a space not designed with you in mind.” She had also read that psychedelics had shown promise in the treatment of trauma, which the Muslim community knows something about.

Early in her first session, Ahmed told me, she felt God right behind her. “Like, if I turned around, I would bump into God,” she said. “There’s a verse in the Quran in which God says, ‘I’m closer to you than your jugular vein.’ The jugular is the life-giving source. God was with me the whole time.” For her, God was neither masculine nor feminine. “God was above gender, above everything . . . an existence, not a figure,” she said. “And God was love.” Her epiphany was a familiar psychedelic trope, but that did not make it any less profound. “It was just mind-blowingly clear how wrong we have it as human beings, and how we need to nurture love, to put

it at the center of our engagement with humanity and animals and the planet,” she told me.

Ahmed said that, during her second session, “it dawned on me that the womb is the center of everything.” The memory still makes her heart beat faster, she said. “How incredibly glorious that women should have this exclusively and not anybody else! So why don’t we have a culture where we drop down at the feet of these women in awe and love and respect?” When I asked whether some Muslims would regard these ideas as heretical, she laughed. Not in her reading of Islamic scripture, which often accords women great respect—but yes, she said, in some Muslim cultures they might. “In Islam, we prostrate to God and no one else,” she said.

For years after her psilocybin sessions, Ahmed felt unmoored, as though she were struggling to regain her sense of equipoise and purpose. In her community, those who knew about psychedelics tended to lump them in with other illicit drugs. She felt that she could not talk with anybody, not even her family, about her experience, even though it was one of the most important in her life. She also felt that the team at Hopkins hadn’t done enough to help her make sense of the experience. She called the sessions “extractive”—“they were extracting data for the study”—and wished she’d had a chance to process them with people who looked like her. She found herself drifting away from prayers and rituals, and what little tolerance she’d had for misogyny and patriarchy was gone.

Yet, as her relationship with God became less formal, it became more direct. “I feel a closeness to God, even to this day, that I’ve never experienced before,” she told me. She said that, after the sessions, “I would be in conversation with God when I was going down the stairs or getting on the bus or going into a meeting. We would chitchat. It’s a two-way conversation.”

Many of the religious leaders experienced a change that was both personal and professional. Several reported that attendance at services was up. An Eastern Orthodox priest, who requested a pseudonym so he could speak freely, told me a particularly dramatic story of recommitting to his church. Father Gregory, as I’ll call him, is a burly man with a salt-and-pepper beard who looks more like a big-city cop than like a stereotypical clergyman. He

told me that, when he was a teen-ager, his father, on his deathbed, “sought the comfort of a priest, and had a conversion moment.” After witnessing that, Gregory made the decision to join the priesthood and took a vow of celibacy. Over time, however, he grew frustrated with the Church. “I was not only burned out but I wanted to burn other people,” he told me. “I struggled with Church politics and bureaucracy. I was a bitter person, someone other people would avoid. I had gotten stuck in this cycle of anger, frustration, pornography, isolation, and was kind of spinning out of control.” He knew nothing about psychedelics or psychedelic-assisted therapy until he heard about the study.

Gregory said that his first psilocybin session, at N.Y.U., “was the beginning of my softening—what I think of as the de-callousing of my heart.” During the session, he felt that he was laid out on a stone slab in the tomb of Christ, covered in rose petals. “I realized I was dying, but it wasn’t sad and I wasn’t afraid,” he told me. “My body had died, but love was still in it and love would survive my death.” This was God’s love, he understood, and it felt unexpectedly sensual—which, for a celibate priest, “was very dangerous territory.” At first, he tried to hold back; he kept getting up and removing his eye mask and headphones to quell the intensity of the experience. But eventually he let go. “It was ecstatic,” he said. “I was making love to love.” It was disarming to hear a priest I’d only just met say such things without a whisper of irony, doubt, or embarrassment. He told me that at one point, rather than interrupt the powerful feelings washing over him with a trip to the bathroom, he released his bladder.

A mentor in the Church hierarchy quickly perceived that Gregory had changed and asked what had happened. “I don’t think I really believed in what I had been doing,” Gregory told me. “I hated the liturgy. Dreaded it. It was mechanical, something I put on a mask to do. But now it’s a lot more meaningful and satisfying.” I asked him how he understood the fact that this change was occasioned by a little blue capsule. “It came through a pill, but the pill was touched—blessed—by God,” he said. “People can be salvaged.” His remarks echoed something that Roger Joslin, a study participant who serves two Episcopal congregations on Long Island, told me. “I’m more awake,” Joslin said. “I just am. The experience made me a better person and a better priest.” Joslin is in his seventies, but he has

shelved plans to retire; he argued that pastors have a role to play in helping parishioners make sense of psychedelic experiences, even while psychedelics are illegal. “I don’t want to leave them to corporate America or to the therapists,” he told me. “Why should we be left out of these spiritual experiences? I thought we were in that business!”



*“I like to finish exercising early so I can spend the rest of the day not exercising.”*  
Cartoon by P. C. Vey

No one has taken this idea further than Hunt Priest. In November, 2020, after becoming the pastor at an Episcopal church in Georgia, he went on a retreat in the Texas desert with some friends. “I spent a day trying to figure out what my role in life was going to be,” he told me. In his view, he was part of an institution that was failing to satisfy its members’ spiritual needs. “Driving to church, I pass the yoga studio, where people are lined up on Sunday morning,” he told me. No such crowd was clamoring to get into church services. He called yoga an “embodied spiritual practice” and pointed to his forehead. “We’re all stuck up here,” he said.

Priest decided to leave his job and start an organization called Ligare, which in Latin means “to tie” or “to bind.” Swift, the study funder, had interviewed Priest; his family foundation eventually contributed twenty-five thousand dollars. On its website, Ligare describes itself as a Christian psychedelic society that believes “psychedelics may be used sacramentally as a way of experiencing God’s grace.”

Over time, many faiths pivot from a focus on direct spiritual experience, such as encounters with God or moments of transcendence, to a focus on tradition and belief. “We’re dealing with a kind of desert of experience in American religious life,” Charles Stang, a professor of early Christian thought at Harvard Divinity School, told me. “That’s not normal in the history of religion.” He finds psychedelics interesting because of their focus on experience. But he emphasized that spiritual experiences can be much more challenging than the ones the researchers were advertising—less like Priest’s sensation of the divine moving through him and more like Powell’s encounter with nothingness. “It can involve a God that actually spurns you, or an encounter with God’s unknowability, or with the annihilating nonexistence of the abyss,” Stang said. “That’s a very different kind of mystical experience than the warm, loving embrace, which seems to be what this study is pushing.”

Ariel Goldberg, a rabbi and a psychotherapist in Maryland, told me that lasting religious experiences come from years of “striving for understanding and wrestling with God.” He added, “This is not to say that psychedelics can’t play a role in that process, but it’s a limited role.” His remark made me think of Huston Smith, the scholar and Good Friday Experiment participant, who once observed that a spiritual experience is different from a spiritual life. “We Americans are always looking for a shortcut,” Goldberg said.

Priest contends that psychedelics can be more easily folded into established faiths than shaped into a religion of their own. “I already have a church, and I think we have something to offer,” he said. In the spring of 2022, Ligare took thirteen Christian ministers and five trained facilitators to the Netherlands, where some forms of psilocybin are legal. “Institutional religion has a lot to learn from psychedelics,” Priest told Don Lattin, a reporter who has written extensively about religion and psychedelics. “And the psychedelic community has a lot to learn from organized religion.” He told me that the gathering, which lasted five days, was “a very normal Christian retreat . . . except there was this big experience with psilocybin truffles halfway through it.”

Priest and I had our conversation over lunch in 2023, in Denver, where we were both speakers at a conference called Psychedelic Science. More than ten thousand psychedelic researchers, entrepreneurs, therapists, and so-called psychonauts were there. So was Sughra Ahmed. Also in Denver were Jaime Clark-Soles, the Baptist scholar—she is now writing a book called “Psychedelics and Soul Care: What Christians Need to Know”—and Zac Kamenetz, the rabbi from Berkeley. All were on panels about psychedelics and religion.

This year, Ahmed quit her job to focus on an organization she founded, Ruhani, which plans to host psychedelic retreats and create a specifically Muslim “container” for psychedelic experiences. Kamenetz, who had worked at the Jewish Community Center of San Francisco, launched a group called Shefa, which will serve Jews who are interested in psychedelics—including “Hasids going to Friday-night services tripping on mushrooms,” Kamenetz said—by placing their experiences in a Jewish framework. Shefa, too, is funded in part by T. Cody Swift. “Political safety required Jews, by and large, to give up their more mystical and ecstatic practices, both at home and in the synagogue, in order to look more like their Protestant neighbors,” Kamenetz said. He argued that psychedelics could help bring Jewish mysticism back. Such perspectives clearly resonated at the conference. After one panel, a woman stepped up to the microphone and said, “I would go back to church if I knew my priest had done this!”

Nearly a decade has passed since the first religious leaders were given psilocybin. One reason for the delay in publication is that two people, one linked to Ligare and one affiliated with the study, made accusations of ethical lapses surrounding the research. Reverend Joe Welker, a Presbyterian pastor in Vermont who was once an intern at Ligare, published a critique of the study on Substack, writing that it was “part of a strategy to integrate psychedelics into mainstream religion,” and reached out to the Johns Hopkins Institutional Review Board, which is charged with protecting participants in human trials. (Fifteen of the participants signed an open letter disagreeing with Welker.) Johnson, the Hopkins researcher who co-authored the paper, had concerns that Roland Griffiths wanted psychedelic research to influence religious groups, and contacted the I.R.B.

After an audit and a review that lasted more than a year, the I.R.B. told the study's authors that it had identified several instances of "serious non-compliance" with its policies and procedures, including conflicts of interest. It found, in part, that the researchers had failed to accurately report their funding sources and did not secure I.R.B. approval for two members of the research team, one of whom was a funder (presumably Turnbull). In addition, it failed to report that a registered researcher (presumably Swift) was also a funder. The I.R.B. reported its findings to the F.D.A. and said that the study team would need to disclose them. "All research performed across Johns Hopkins is expected to meet the highest standards for integrity," the I.R.B. said in a statement to *The New Yorker*. "When concerns were raised about this study, which was not federally funded, we immediately responded and conducted a comprehensive investigation."

Stephen Ross, at N.Y.U., acknowledged that these entanglements were inappropriate. "A donor shouldn't be conducting research. It looks like paying to play," he told me. The fact that Swift gave money to Ligare and Shefa "fits into conspiracy theories that we're all colluding to create a psychedelic religion." (Ross described himself as a Jewish atheist.) "I was not aware that my dual role wasn't reported to the I.R.B.," Swift told me. "We had always planned to disclose it in the paper." Alta Charo, a bioethicist who served on the I.R.B. of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and who is not affiliated with the study, told me that a funder who participates in the research process "introduces the potential for bias, conscious or unconscious, that goes beyond the biases that all researchers have."

When I first asked Griffiths about participants I might interview, he did not mention Zac Kamenetz or Hunt Priest. Later, I asked why, and was told that they were "outliers." Perhaps the researchers didn't want to stoke the narrative that some study participants have become advocates, even evangelists, for religious uses of psychedelics. Yet the only sense in which Priest and Kamenetz are outliers is that they left jobs in religious institutions to establish formal psychedelic organizations. "It is fascinating that such a high percentage of them have decided to make psychedelics a real interest beyond the study," Swift told me. The researchers seemed divided on whether this was a good thing. All stressed that it was never their

intention to inject psychedelics into organized religion. Yet some, such as Swift and Richards, have been openly supportive of that effort. (Richards has spoken at a public Ligare event.)

Other co-authors seemed more anxious about the aftermath. “I’ve been worried from the beginning,” Ross told me. “Could this be something that really angers organized religion?” Griffiths died in October, 2023, but when we spoke at his home, in suburban Baltimore, a few months before that, he expressed concern about the “implication that we should be introducing psychedelics into religion.” He told me that psychedelics have great potential, but he worried that if they spread too rapidly they could have unforeseen and potentially disastrous consequences, including the kind of backlash that brought psychedelic research to a halt in the sixties. “We need to be cautious,” he said, and later added, “You don’t want to mess too quickly with the institutional structures that support the entire culture.” Here, he sounded considerably more careful than he had a few years earlier, when he routinely spoke of psychedelics as important for the survival of the species. (When I asked Kamenetz if he could imagine a backlash, he joked, “‘Experiment Inspires Weird Drug Clergy’—there’s your headline.”)

I reached out to Elaine Pagels, a historian and a professor of religion at Princeton, for a reality check. In her 2018 memoir, “*Why Religion?*,” Pagels wrote about taking LSD with her husband, the late physicist Heinz Pagels, in 1969, when she was in her twenties. “The experience was astonishing and ecstatic,” she told me in an e-mail. “After several hours when I was too absorbed to speak, I said, ‘I guess that solves the death problem.’ We both laughed.” In subsequent decades, Pagels didn’t closely follow developments in psychedelic research, but her interest was rekindled when Anthony Bossis reached out to her with questions about psychedelics in antiquity. *Psychedelic Medicine* later invited her to write a commentary about the religious-leaders study. “I think the use of these chemicals under appropriate conditions can be enormously beneficial,” she told me. “At the same time, they can be nearly catastrophic for some.”

Pagels has written extensively about the early years of Christianity, when religious leaders suppressed followers who were more mystical. In certain ways, clergy who embrace psychedelic rituals resemble the second- and

third-century Christians that Pagels has written about, many of whom believed that revelation was potentially available to everyone, that God had a feminine dimension, and that it's possible for individuals to experience God directly.

Organized religion often opposes such figures. Religions can't survive if they're wide open to the claims of every individual with supposed experience of the divine. "You can't have people going around saying, 'God told me to do this or that,'" Pagels told me. "Because you can really go off the rails." Even so, she was heartened by the depth and passion exhibited by many of the religious leaders in the study. "Traditions can become fossilized," she said. Religious institutions will need to be "enlivened and reimagined and transformed" if they are to survive and serve people today. "It's like art," she added. "We don't just stay with the art of the fifteenth century. People are still making paintings!" ♦

*Michael Pollan* teaches creative writing at Harvard. His books include "[How to Change Your Mind](#)" and "[This Is Your Mind on Plants](#)."

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[\*\*Onward and Upward with the Arts\*\*](#)

# A Secret Trove of Rare Guitars Heads to the Met

For decades, an obsessive duo of guitar guys has been amassing a definitive collection. The art these objects created changed the world.

By [Nick Paumgarten](#)

May 19, 2025



*Leo Fender's solid-body prototype is among the nearly six hundred instruments donated to the Met, tracing the influence of the twentieth-century guitar on American culture. Photographs by Hannah Whitaker for The New Yorker*

In 2007, Jayson Dobney, an Iowan with a master's degree in the history of musical instruments, from the University of South Dakota, moved to New

York to be a curator in the department of musical instruments at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. For decades, there had been whispers in guitar circles of a vast trove of twentieth-century guitars, in private hands, somewhere in the tri-state area—an El Dorado of coveted Strats and Les Pauls and Martins of impeccable provenance. Even in Vermillion, South Dakota, Dobney had heard the rumors. Coming east, he wanted to learn more, especially because the Met’s instruments department, for all its heirlooms (the world’s oldest piano, three Stradivarius violins, a Mayan double whistle), possessed almost nothing from the twentieth century.

In 2011, Dobney put together an exhibition celebrating the work of the Italian American luthiers who had designed and built the archtop guitars beloved by jazz musicians. Seeking objects for the show, he met a record producer and guitar maven named Perry Margouleff, who said that he might have a few instruments to share, as an anonymous lender. Dobney visited a warehouse outside the city where, in a reception area, Margouleff showed him eight guitars. “It was so secretive that when I, as a curator of the Met, came to visit, I had no idea what was actually there. I just saw those eight guitars,” Dobney told me recently.

Unseen that day was the rest of the collection, the one that so many people had wondered about. Also unseen: the man who owns it, Dirk Ziff, a wealthy publishing heir and financier with a reputation, too, as a connoisseur and a guitarist who had recorded and toured with Carly Simon. Few people were aware that the two men had spent decades working together to assemble what is now recognized as the world’s finest collection of vintage guitars.

Dobney had some insight into the power that such objects might possess. Early in his Met tenure, Dobney, whose thesis at South Dakota was titled “Innovations in American Snare Drums: 1850–1920,” got Ringo Starr to lend the museum his gold-plated Ludwig snare (given to him by Ludwig, after the Beatles’ 1964 appearance on “The Ed Sullivan Show” juiced sales). “Everyone was shocked that there was a line out the door just of people who wanted to get their photo taken with a little drum in a case,” Dobney said.

He finally met Ziff in 2019, when Ziff came to the museum for a private tour of “Play It Loud,” an exhibition of totemic rock instruments, which was a collaboration between the Met and the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. Ziff and Margouleff had lent eleven guitars, and Margouleff had also wrangled the instruments (and coöperation) of Jimmy Page, Keith Richards, Eric Clapton, and Eddie Van Halen. Ziff and Dobney spent hours together, talking gear. Margouleff had long believed that the Ziff collection should be shared with the public and had floated the idea of building a museum, but Ziff preferred a low profile, and patience. “We’ll get to that,” he would say. Generally, the big institutions looked down on guitars. Margouleff told me, “After the Guggenheim did an exhibition on the art of the motorcycle, I said to the guy there, ‘You should do guitars.’ He said, ‘Over my dead body.’ As Jimmy Page says, guitars were tarred by the brush of rock and roll. We’d been told no so many times. We really needed a museum to ask *us*.”



*A J-50 acoustic guitar made by Gibson in 1955 and played by Mississippi John Hurt.*

“Play It Loud” was among the most well-attended exhibitions in the museum’s history. Max Hollein, who had started as the Met’s director the

year before, had a mandate to modernize the programming and attract a new generation of visitors and donors. A few months after the show closed, Hollein made a trip to the warehouse. This time, Ziff and Margouleff opened the vault.

“That was my eureka moment,” Hollein told me. “The collection blew me away. I thought, *This should and must be at the Met.*” The guitar, he said, is “one of the most—if not the most—iconic American objects of the twentieth century.”

Last year, Ziff and Margouleff donated the collection to the Met. In the spring of 2027, the museum will open a permanent gallery devoted to the evolution and cultural impact of the American guitar.

One Sunday last month, I paid a visit to the warehouse, in a light-industrial area. “You were never here,” Margouleff said, ushering me inside. It was his winking way of confirming that I’d honor a promise not to reveal its location. Margouleff had on jeans and a faded Crocker Motorcycles T-shirt. He has sideburns and long gray hair, and wears honey-tinted, oversized Jackie O. glasses. He carries himself with the assurance of a man who knows his business and can fix anything and has met a certain subset of everybody—that is, all the people he’d want to meet, which is another way of saying he has more than one Bob Dylan story. He doesn’t suffer fools or jerks, has exacting standards in matters luthieristic and otherwise (Italian food, wine, manners, business dealings), and since childhood has considered himself essentially unemployable. He’s a car buff, too, and built a dune buggy when he was nine. One of his measures of character is the degree to which you truly care about guitars, but he is not a snob. He wants everyone to play, even poorly. He is married (he and his wife live in Connecticut) but has never wanted kids. The guitars are his children.

Margouleff led me through a tidy workshop and into a reception area with a kitchenette and a wall of a half-dozen supersized Vox amps. “No one knows what’s in the collection,” he said. “We try to keep it as private as humanly possible. Sometimes people reach out to me and offer me something, and I think, *You’re trying to sell me something I already own.*” Ziff once got a call from a dealer offering him the highly coveted “Brock Burst” 1959 Les Paul Custom, named for a collector. The dealer asked for half the money up

front, not knowing that Ziff already had the Brock Burst under the bed he was sitting on.

Margouleff's pronouns tend to blur ownership and agency. Sometimes when he says "I," he means "we," as in he and Ziff, or really "he," as in just Ziff. A patron-steward dynamic pertains. In the early days, Margouleff's counterparts doubted that "Dirk Ziff" even existed. Ziff isn't merely the moneybags, but he has another life: family, high finance, various passions and enterprises. (He is the principal owner of the World Surf League, the governing body of pro surfing.) Margouleff is the guy on the ground. One collector referred to him as "Dirk's guitar pimp." Margouleff would prefer "guitarcheologist."

"I am the owner, and technically the gift to the Met is from me," Ziff said. "But I think of it as a gift from both of us, because we have done this together, over the course of almost forty years."

Margouleff was nine years old when, in 1969, his brother, who was eighteen, took him from their home on Long Island to the Fillmore East to see the Who perform "Tommy." The music was galvanizing, but what really seized his soul was the sight and sound of Pete Townshend's red Gibson SG Special. "I was abducted by the guitar," Margouleff likes to say.

A week later, Margouleff's brother persuaded their parents to take them back to the city, to Manny's Music, on the stretch of West Forty-eighth Street known as Music Row. They emerged with an SG like Townshend's. By the time Margouleff was twelve, he was a regular glass-fogger on Music Row. He noticed some things. One was that the used guitars at We Buy Guitars sounded better than the new ones across the street at Manny's and yet cost less than half as much. The rock guitarists he admired seemed to prefer the older ones, too. Another was that the sight of those used guitars hanging there on bailing wire, strung up by their headstocks, knocking against one another, filled him with sadness, of a kind that others might feel when encountering a box of abandoned puppies. He thought, *I have to save them. I have to find them good homes.*



*"He had a quick temper, but who in these parts does not?"*

*Cartoon by Frank Cotham*

That summer, Margouleff earned just enough working construction to purchase his first collectible guitar, a 1963 Gibson Johnny Smith archtop, for eleven hundred dollars, from a local buff named Russell Hirsch, who became his first guitar mentor. A year later, Margouleff tracked down a 1963 Gibson Firebird, like the one he'd seen Johnny Winter play at the Beacon. By the time Margouleff was fourteen, he'd worked his way into the good graces of the infamously cantankerous shop owners on Music Row, and had infiltrated the tessellation of men, most of them a decade or more his senior, who shared his ardor for used guitars that were not yet considered vintage, or even particularly collectible. He began driving up and down the East Coast, without a license but with an ever more refined sense of which instruments were worth saving, and at what price. By sixteen, he was running a brisk trade—selling his instruments only when necessary, to raise money to buy better ones. He decided to commit to guitars full time. "You have to stay in school," his English teacher said. Then, when he told her he was clearing as much as a thousand dollars a week, she said, "Drop out of school."

Margouleff's father, the chief of nuclear medicine at North Shore Hospital, was appalled. "You'll wind up as a homeless person pumping gas," he told his son. With the impetuousness of youth, and the conviction of the convert, Margouleff left home and moved to Manhattan. He got work as an assistant engineer at Sundragon Studios, where the Ramones, Talking Heads, and David Johansen, among others, cut albums. (Margouleff eventually started a

line of amps, called Sundragon, with Jimmy Page.) It was more than a dozen years before he spoke to his father again.

By the time his peers were graduating from college, Margouleff had bought and sold around a thousand guitars. He'd travelled all over the world, hunting down instruments and soaking up expertise. He had a sideline exporting vintage guitars to Europe. He'd befriended Les Paul and was producing tracks for Ronnie Wood, with guest appearances from Keith Richards and Bob Dylan. Eventually, he opened Pie Studios, on Long Island, where he recorded the Rolling Stones, Brian May, Cyndi Lauper, and Cheap Trick. It beat schoolwork, or pumping gas.

One night in 1983, at a birthday party at Tortilla Flats, in the West Village, Margouleff was introduced to a teen-age guitar player who wanted to buy a Marshall amp. Margouleff sold him one, and they started hanging out.

The teen was Dirk Ziff, one of three sons of William Ziff, the chairman and owner of Ziff Davis, the magazine publisher. The company sold off its hobbyist and travel titles in 1984, and its computer magazines ten years later, when it became clear that the sons didn't want to run the business. The sons, led by Dirk, allocated the proceeds to an array of investments, including in the burgeoning hedge-fund sector. It was, as they say, a good trade. Dirk Ziff is now worth almost seven billion dollars, according to *Forbes*.

As it happens, Ziff had also seen the Who perform "Tommy," in 1970, at the Metropolitan Opera House, with his father and his uncle. He was six. As the lights went down, his uncle said, "Prepare to have your mind blown." It was. (At the warehouse, Margouleff showed me the red SG that Pete Townshend smashed up that night.) Ziff got his first guitar at Manny's: a Japanese copy of a Sunburst Les Paul, for ninety-nine bucks. As a student at Trinity, a private high school on the Upper West Side, he played in a few rock bands when it seemed as if every other kid in Manhattan was swapping Black Sabbath and Led Zeppelin riffs. Before long, Ziff had serious chops, and ideas about becoming a professional musician. But after college, with the family fortune to look after, he embarked on a Wall Street career.

Margouleff helped Ziff build a recording studio at his parents' estate, in Pawling, New York. He also sold Ziff a black 1968 Les Paul Custom for seven hundred dollars, Ziff's first vintage guitar. Ziff took it with him to see Paul himself play live, at Fat Tuesday's. Backstage, Paul appraised Ziff's instrument—"Oh, an old one"—and then, with an awl, scratched an inscription into the clear coat (but not through the finish) on the back: "To Dirk, Keep picking. Les Paul." Ziff showed this, triumphantly, to Margouleff, who was aghast that he'd damaged the instrument.

"I thought the relationship was over," Ziff said. "I maintained my belief that the guitar was enhanced. Eventually, Perry came around."

In 1987, Margouleff, back in New York after a few years in Europe playing guitar in the band the Pretty Things, proposed a new venture to Ziff: with Ziff's capital, they could assemble a peerless collection of vintage guitars. "These are essential parts of musical history and incredible works of art," he said. "If we don't build a collection, it'll never happen, and everything will be dispersed." The moment was ripe. Others were catching on to the value and the superior craftsmanship of older guitars. Japanese collectors were circling. Still, prices were reasonable, and Margouleff knew more than anyone which guitars were where.



*The prototype signature model made for Chet Atkins, by Gretsch, in 1955.*

“I thought of it as Noah’s ark,” Margouleff said. “I was doing this for the guitar, and not for me.” Ziff, in spite of some family skepticism toward Margouleff and his scheme, agreed.

“Are you ready?” Margouleff asked at the warehouse. He unlocked a door, and immediately a thick, corky scent hit me, the emanation of hundreds of aging guitars—the great variety of hardwoods, the glue and paint and lacquer, the oxidation of strings and coils, the leather straps and handles, and the sarcophagal musk of the cases themselves. Guitar collectors know and savor this smell. Margouleff has thought of hiring a perfumer to try to re-create it. “When someone brings me a guitar, the first thing I do is smell it,” he said. “Smell is a fingerprint. It’s how I tell if it’s real or not.”

Receding into the warm amber light of the warehouse’s middle distance, on both sides and a few tiers, were red-carpeted shelves of old cases packed as snug as library stacks. Here was a Beinecke of guitars. Margouleff

explained the sorting system—make, model, serial number, with a chronological overlay. Gibsons, Fenders, Martins, Gretsches, D'Angelicos. In the open floor space were Oriental carpets, black leather couches and club chairs, dozens of vintage amps, coffee-table books, and an old Schwinn Sting Ray with a banana seat. It was not so much man cave as man arsenal, teeming yet tidy, the lair of a latter-day Count of Monte Cristo. The temperature stayed at sixty-eight, humidity at fifty per cent. Photography was forbidden.

The lion's share of the collection—almost six hundred instruments—was destined for the Met. A hundred and seventy-three had already travelled there last spring. (An earthquake hit when they finished loading the U-Haul.) Two more shipments were scheduled.

"The collection presents a representation of the American guitar that is pretty much complete," Margouleff said. "There's nowhere else on planet Earth where this exists."

Margouleff, who built out the warehouse himself, keeps some of his own collectibles here, too. He produced a battered guitar in a display case, with "Do Not Touch" scrawled on the body and the headstock snapped off. This was Old Yellow, the longtime test guitar at Manny's, which customers used to compare amplifiers. Another Rosebud. "Everyone handled that guitar," Margouleff said. "Jimi Hendrix, Jimmy Page, Eric Clapton. It's the first guitar I ever saw in a music store. When Manny's got sold to Sam Ash, they hung it on the wall. And then Sam Ash went bankrupt. I finally got to buy it." In this case, "I" meant "I."

He retreated through the guitar sanctuary, killing lights and setting alarms. "Now, with the Met gift, the world is going to know we're doing this," he said. "It's like trying to convince people that there are pyramids. It's one thing to say, 'There are pyramids.' It's another to show them the pyramids."

Medieval arms and armor, Shaker furniture, Chinese porcelain, Byzantine reliquary—such objects, well represented at the Met, are industrial art of another time and kind, a marriage of form and function, ornament and use. But one trait differentiates the music department. "The guitar is an object of art that's used to create art," Margouleff said at the Met one day.

“That’s the tagline for our collection,” Dobney replied.



*A Gibson Flying V played by Neil Young in the seventies and a Gibson Explorer from 1958.*

“It’s like having an exhibit of paintbrushes.”

“Except the guitars exhibit a higher art and artistry themselves—first, as objects. There’s high-quality craftsmanship, but it’s different. The guitar is the object of the people. We always talk about it as ‘the people’s instrument.’ American music is bottom-up. So many art forms are top-down. It’s different from the rest of our instruments collection, which is often for the élite.”

A central thesis of the guitar collection is that the art these art objects created changed the world. Guitar-based American music begat the dominant pop music of the past century, which in turn was the leading edge of American pop culture’s global conquest, or, if you’re feeling patriotic, its benefaction. The guitar, by transitive property, broke down racial and class barriers, fought tyranny, freed up minds and bodies. “This machine kills fascists,” Woody Guthrie scrawled on the body of his acoustic. It didn’t kill them all. But it is hard to deny that the pinnacle and most optimistic incarnation of American culture is its music—the great melting pot of styles and genres and sounds. The guitar probably had more to do with this than any other instrument, especially once you count the electric bass, the machine that moves behinds.

“No guitar, and the world’s a different place,” Ziff said.

To a certain generation—perhaps that of the current donor class—this argument connects. For others, it may not. For every stodgy conservator who might consider the guitar a tawdry, lowbrow diversion, there’s a cultural critic who dismisses it as an object of boomer nostalgia, about as musically relevant in this post-rockist era as the harpsichord. Let them cancel each other out, while Taylor Swift strums and the dad-rock back catalogue keeps the recording industry afloat. Max Hollein, anyway, refutes the idea that the collection is a bid for museum attendance, or for trendy attention. “Us doing this has nothing to do honestly with, Oh, we need to bring more people in the door,” he said.

Dan Kershaw, the Met’s exhibition-design manager, told me that, when the gallery opens, he hopes to show as many as a hundred and fifty guitars at a time, rotating objects in and out. But, he said, “we don’t want it to look like a guitar store.” The space, on a narrow mezzanine in the American Wing, presents challenges. “I’m glomming on to every inch the museum will let me have,” Kershaw added. “I don’t think all the curators are delighted.”

“This is a complex institution,” Hollein told me. “If you buy a contemporary work of art, I’m not sure everyone here applauds. The Met is put together of a multitude of different people, curators who speak with different voices about what art is. A contemporary curator has a very different idea of what art is than someone from Arms and Armor.”

Kershaw designed “Play It Loud,” both at the Met and at the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, and noted that, at the Met, the wall text describing each item tended to deëmphasize the musician it was associated with. “At the Hall of Fame, it was all about who played it,” he said. “Here, it was manufacturer, craftsman, materials, date, then the musician.” This reflected the museum’s emphasis, which dovetails with that of the donors, on the object, not the celebrity provenance.

“Perry and I are not interested in memorabilia,” Ziff said. “It’s about a guitar’s place in the arc of the story, not about who played it.”



A Sunburst Les Paul from 1959—the “Keithburst” that Keith Richards played during the Rolling Stones’ appearance on “The Ed Sullivan Show,” in 1964.

When people think of a guitar collector, they might imagine either a player who has a relentless desire for new toys or a rich souvenir hunter, like Jim Irsay, the owner of the Indianapolis Colts, who has amassed a trove of Americana, including an impressive array of rock-star guitars. (Margouleff cops to coveting at least one of them, the “going electric” Strat that Dylan played at Newport in 1965; Irsay outbid him, paying more than nine hundred thousand dollars.) Ziff isn’t that guy.

There’s another kind of guitar guy: he played growing up, and now, in middle age, ramps it up again and goes down the hole. Pandemic, empty nest, dwindling appetite for new friends and maybe even for the old ones, too. The guitar, like golf, invites solipsistic dissolution masquerading as self-actualization. Or perhaps it’s the other way around. See the weekender in his basement, wearing pressed khakis and a Montauk hoodie, with his new Stevie Ray Vaughan Strat and his Fender Twin Reverb amp, working out the riffs in “Voodoo Chile” or “Midnight Rambler.” Or else hunched

over his phone, spamming friends with audio selfies and guilt-inducing invitations to his Friday-night dad-band bar set. I have a lot of friends who will take this description personally. I don't ask them to watch me play tennis.

Ziff isn't that guy, either. From the outset, he and Margouleff wanted the collection to tell the story of the guitar in America, from Christian Frederick Martin's arrival on these shores, in 1833, to the antebellum Spanish flamenco craze; from the invention of the Hawaiian lap steel guitar, before the turn of the century, and its influence on country music and the blues to, most prominently, the guitar's electrification, with an emphasis on its development and design in the years following the Second World War, the golden age of Fender and Gibson.

"Automobiles and guitars are manufactured objects," Margouleff said. But "no two guitars are identical—less so than with, say, Chippendale. Nowadays, they may be, with modern manufacturing. But that's why we don't have the magic anymore." He talked about the Gibson acoustic guitars made in Kalamazoo, Michigan, during the war. These so-called Banner guitars, prized for their unique sound and feel, were made by women, whose touch, the theory goes, produced a different, superior instrument.

"It's not just Gibson," Dobney said. "We have a scholar here as a fellow who is studying the many Mexican American women who built Fender guitars during the golden age. They were winding the pickup coils, because they had the skills from being seamstresses to do this handwork." Some connoisseurs say they can differentiate between the sound of each woman's pickups.

It might pain a punker's heart to see private wealth and institutionalized high culture sanctify and cordon off these old troublemaker tools. Guitars should be played, not hoarded, or stranded in vitrines. But Ziff and Margouleff were adamant that these guitars be played. When visitors have passed through, Margouleff has been the one to set up the guitars—adjusting the action and pickups and intonation. The Met is figuring out how best to make them available to visiting musicians, recording artists, and maybe even students. (Andrés Segovia's guitars were donated to the Met, in 1986, under the condition that no one ever play them.) The exhibit

won't be a petting zoo; the public won't be plucking strings or fiddling with knobs. But the collection is very much alive.

One afternoon in March, I met Margouleff on the Met's front steps, and we entered the Egyptian galleries, where, just past two ancient statues of the lion-headed goddess Sakhmet, a side door led into one stem in the museum's vast root system: a suite of offices and then a storage room, with linoleum flooring, fluorescent lights, and, on two walls, shelves stacked with guitars, almost all in their original cases. This was the first tranche of the Ziff collection.

Dobney, sweet-natured and solicitous—or else anxious, when civilians are bumping around the vault—presided with a colleague named Daniel Wheeldon, who pulled on a pair of blue nitrile gloves. Margouleff did his best to defer to the new owners as they conducted a show-and-tell, selecting more than a dozen guitars to delineate the story the collection purports to convey. “Perry knows everything,” Dobney said. “Daniel and I are getting close.”

Even though the bulk of the Ziff collection is from the twentieth century, it contains some earlier artifacts. The first piece Wheeldon produced, out of an elegant rosewood case, was a primitive gut-strung Martin acoustic, believed to be a presentation model for the 1853 Crystal Palace Exhibition, in what is now Bryant Park—a forerunner of the more affordable parlor guitars that proliferated with the arrival of mail-order catalogues in the late eighteen-hundreds. The next specimen was: the first production model of a 1924 Gibson L-5 archtop, signed by its designer, Lloyd Loar. It had steel strings, f-holes, and the so-called sunburst finish that guitars would have for a century to come.



*Cartoon by Avi Steinberg*

"If you looked at an automobile in 1924 and then looked at one today, it would be completely unrecognizable, the change is so dramatic," Margouleff said. "If you went to a music store today and bought a new Gibson L-5, it might look identical to this one, in every way. They had it right from Day One." Steel strings, louder than gut, enabled guitars to move out of the parlor and into public performance spaces. The larger the audience, the louder the instruments needed to be.

"That's the overarching story here, this American need for volume," Dobney said. "Bigger audiences, bigger impacts. The phonograph, the radio, and then electric guitars. You know, 'Hear me!'"

"And 'Look at me,'" Margouleff said. "Les Paul used to say he chose guitar because if you play piano, you're stuck behind the piano. If you play saxophone, you can't sing and play at the same time. If you want to be a performer in the front, the guitar is a romantic thing and an extension of the person. You hold it next to your body, you're embracing it, as you use it to tell your story. It's almost like a tango dancer dancing with his partner."

The guitar, as people often remark, suggests the shape of a woman and yet is often wielded as a kind of phallic substitute. Either way, it is fondled with two hands. For some, the lasciviousness adds to the appeal. For others, it's a turnoff. The guitar face, that soloist's expression of orgasmic delight, whether it be sincere or affected, can contain and project all that is poignant or debauched about virtuosity's lewd self-regard. It can be hard to keep a straight face, even when you're playing air guitar.

The guitars kept coming, like pitches at a batting cage. Before long, we reached the heart of the collection, the dawn of the solid-body electric guitar and, eventually, of rock and roll. “These guitars were really for music that didn’t even exist yet,” Margouleff said. Wheeldon presented the “Klunker,” an Epiphone Zephyr DeLuxe that, in 1941, Les Paul modified to be essentially a solid-body—he bolted a steel bar into the body and sealed the f-holes. Later, Gibson, which Paul endorsed, insisted that he put a Gibson decal on the headstock. But the case read “Mary Ford,” who was Paul’s wife and partner, and an ace as well. “Mary and Sister Rosetta Tharpe were the first two female rock stars,” Margouleff said. “The instrument itself isn’t sexist.” Add Mother Maybelle Carter and Elizabeth Cotten to this particular Mt. Shredmore, and the story of the guitar is no longer as dude-centric as conventional wisdom deems it to be.

The next solid-body specimen was designed in Downey, California, in 1948, by a motorcycle builder and racer named Paul Bigsby. Merle Travis, the country-and-Western hot shot, had asked Bigsby for an electric guitar with the sustain of a Hawaiian lap steel guitar. “Bigsby built everything, including all the casting, the inlay, winding the pickup coils,” Margouleff said. Downey was where Leo Fender first saw Travis playing a Bigsby guitar, which he then copied, to produce a prototype of the classic Fenders. Opening a battered case, Wheeldon unveiled the prototype, its white body paint chipped—an object not nearly as elaborate as the Bigsby and yet, in light of the Telecasters and Stratocasters to come, possibly more august. Next up was an original Fender Esquire and then an early Stratocaster prototype, with a half-melted pick guard. Its materials had been “self-destructing.” “There was a lot of trial and error with the plastics,” Margouleff said. “They were working with volatile chemicals and man-made junk. There’s a reason Stradivariuses are still here. They’re made entirely of wood.” A pristine 1954 Strat was next, its shape as familiar and enduring as that of a spoon.

But the cream of the collection, and Ziff’s particular obsession, was the Les Pauls of the late fifties, which, when they débuted, did not sell well. Wheeldon presented a 1959 Sunburst model, its cherry-red finish faded to yellow. This was the “Keithburst,” which Keith Richards played on “The Ed Sullivan Show,” the Rolling Stones’ (and, it is believed, the Sunburst’s)

first appearance on American television, in 1964. “This was not a popular instrument at the time,” Margouleff said. “It was out of production.” He contends that Richards must have bought it in New York, on Music Row, though Richards has said that he got it in London. (In the early nineteen-fifties, the British government imposed import restrictions that affected American guitars, so they were uncommon in the U.K.) In England, Richards apparently shared it with Eric Clapton and Jimmy Page, among others, whetting their appetites for the older American instruments.

In all, 1964 was a fateful year for the guitar. After the Beatles’ appearance on “The Ed Sullivan Show,” every kid in America wanted one. “The companies couldn’t keep up with the demand,” Margouleff said. “The process got industrialized, mechanized, homogenized. The instruments were designed by accountants. The bean counters ruined everything. All the guitars they made after that were junk.”

Margouleff handed me the Keithburst and, plugging it into a small amp, urged me to play. One grows accustomed to never touching the art, but I hit some open chords, the few I know. By gum, whether it was the instrument itself or the ghosts of fingers past, the sound was rich and sassy, and moved me to make faces.



*The second solid-body guitar made by Paul Bigsby, in 1948, in Downey, California.*

This spring, the Met hosted a couple of private concerts for museum donors, with the performers playing Ziff guitars. The first night, it was the singer-songwriter Rosanne Cash and her husband, John Leventhal. Two weeks later, it was Steve Miller with Ernie Sites, the “Yodeling Cowboy.” A few days before their performance, Miller and Sites visited the storage room, along with the curators and other staff, to get acquainted with the instruments and choose a few to play. A dozen or so guitars were arranged on stands in a semicircle. Space was scarce. As everyone got settled, Miller’s wife asked Margouleff if the guitars had been his. “I built the collection,” he replied. “My friend funded it.”

Miller played the intro to “The Joker,” and sang, “Some people call me the space cowboy, some call me the gangster of love,” then stopped and swapped guitars. He and Sites tried different ones, handing them back and forth, replacing them on their stands, as Wheeldon and Dobney looked on nervously. Margouleff sat along a wall, posture stiff, restraining himself from saying something about Sites’s jean jacket. The metal buttons might

scratch the guitars. Not his children anymore. Finally, Dobney spoke up: “Ernie, can I get you to take off your jacket?”

“Whoever has set up these guitars, I have a bunch of guitars that could use some help,” Miller said. Margouleff, who had set them up, said nothing.

Miller, who is eighty-one, is on the visiting committee of the musical-instruments department. He owns some four hundred guitars, though mostly newer and more customized ones than Ziff’s. Like Ziff and Margouleff, he’s coy about his collection’s whereabouts. When he brings people to see it, he instructs them, “Tell everybody you saw this collection in Los Angeles.” (It is not in Los Angeles.)

Miller told me, “When I heard about this big collection of Dirk’s, I was, like, Yeah, I’ve seen some pretty big collections. But this one was serious and scholarly. They were so far ahead of the game, so much smarter than everybody. In the eighties, I was going, ‘Five thousand dollars for a Stratocaster? Fuck you, I can buy a brand-new one for two-fifty!’ ” These days, the old Strat might sell for fifty thousand dollars.

Now, playing these museum guitars, he was stunned by the tones coming out of them. Each axe got him going: “It sounds like a guitar that was made this morning.” “That’s the nicest G chord I’ve ever heard.” “Brazilian hardwood—beautiful, man.”

“Box ’em up, we’ll take ’em,” Sites said.

With Les Paul’s Klunker flat on his lap, Miller, who is Paul’s godson, fiddled with knobs and teased out wild noises. “I can’t believe how good these pickups sound,” he said. “Les made them on the counter in the kitchen. He gave me some before he died.”

Miller asked about a rare Fender: “Can I just look at it?”

Margouleff gestured toward Dobney and said, “It’s up to him.”

“Can we record with some of these, ever?” Miller asked.

“Sure,” Dobney said. “We’ll talk.”

Miller shook his head. “Man, I’ll bet they don’t have this much fun in the Greco-Roman-sculpture department.”

“Who knows what they do,” a Met conservator said, under his breath. ♦



*[Nick Paumgarten](#)*, a staff writer, has contributed to *The New Yorker* since 2000.

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# Is Jeff Bezos Selling Out the Washington Post?

How the paper that brought down Richard Nixon is struggling to survive the second term of Donald Trump.

By [Clare Malone](#)

May 12, 2025



*"Bezos is trying to do a real job with the Washington Post," Trump has said, "and that wasn't happening before."* Photo illustration by Cristiana Couceiro; Source photographs from The Washington Post / Getty; Samir Hussein / Getty

On a cold evening in March, a month and a half into the second Trump Administration, a crowd gathered in the Terrace Theatre at the John

F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, in Washington, D.C. Warren Buffett, the billionaire C.E.O. of Berkshire Hathaway, was hosting a screening party for “*Becoming Katharine Graham*,” a new documentary celebrating the career of the *Washington Post*’s legendary publisher. Guests included Bill Gates, Bill Murray, the former Secretary of State Antony Blinken, the Democratic senator Amy Klobuchar, and Bob Woodward, who, along with Carl Bernstein, broke the stories of Richard Nixon’s Watergate scandal that came to define the paper’s golden age.

I had passed the Watergate Hotel on my way to the party. It sits alongside the Kennedy Center, on the bank of the Potomac River. The pair of buildings, each a cream-colored behemoth, were completed in the early nineteen-seventies, a fabled era in the capital, when Presidents feared journalists and the bipartisan élite dined together on lobster bisque and gossip. Katharine Graham, quiet, wry, and patrician, was then one of the most powerful women in America. She not only ran the *Post*’s business operations—following in the footsteps of her father, Eugene Meyer, and her husband, Phil Graham—but convened members of the Washington establishment around her dinner table in Georgetown, that “tiny kingdom,” as Phil Graham once called it.

A few weeks earlier, Donald Trump had launched a hostile takeover of the Kennedy Center, naming himself its chair and ending a spirit of bipartisanship that had long reigned in one of D.C.’s most cherished cultural institutions. The center cancelled a performance by the Gay Men’s Chorus of Washington, D.C., and expressed an eagerness to book “*Cats*.” Now, as the lights dimmed, Graham’s son Don, dressed in a sports coat and New Balance sneakers, stepped up to the lectern. His mother, he said, “had to stand up to one President who had carried forty-nine states, and who truly, as you are about to see, wanted to use the government to destroy her newspaper and her company.”

Nixon’s Attorney General once told Bernstein that “Katie Graham’s gonna get her tit caught in a big fat wringer,” but Don Graham was likely also alluding to more recent events. He had succeeded his mother as the *Post*’s publisher, overseeing the paper’s business side for three decades before it was sold, in 2013, to the founder of Amazon, Jeff Bezos. Three years later,

just before the 2016 Presidential election, Bezos said that Trump’s calls for retribution and his unwillingness to concede defeat “erodes our democracy around the edges.” But, in the weeks before the 2024 election, Bezos didn’t allow the *Post* to endorse a Presidential candidate—the editors had planned to back Kamala Harris—breaking with the paper’s long-standing tradition. After the election, he attended Trump’s Inauguration, to which his company donated a million dollars. Days before the Kennedy Center screening, Bezos announced another major shift at the paper. The Opinions section would feature pieces “in support and defense of two pillars: personal liberties and free markets,” and “viewpoints opposing those pillars will be left to be published by others.”

In the days of Woodward and Bernstein, the *Post*’s remit had seemed clear: to hold the nation’s most powerful officials to account. Now its journalists were shaken not just by what some saw as Bezos’s capitulation to Trump but by a broader identity crisis at the paper. Those who could find work elsewhere left. In January, a former executive editor, Leonard Downie, Jr., and a former managing editor, Robert Kaiser, wrote in an e-mail to Bezos, “In our experience going back to the early 1960s, morale at The Post has never been lower.” Bezos never replied.

After the film, guests drifted to a reception in a large gallery, where Woodward soon confronted Bill Murray. Murray had recently said on Joe Rogan’s podcast that he was so dismayed after reading “like, five pages” of “*Wired*,” Woodward’s 1984 book about Murray’s old friend John Belushi, that he thought, *Oh, my God. They framed Nixon.* At the reception, Woodward interrupted a conversation Murray was having with Klobuchar to defend his work. “Sometimes we learn by talking,” Woodward said. Murray turned away; Buffett’s publicist quickly intervened. Afterward, more than one attendee described the reception—which featured hot appetizers, white orchids, and a roomful of septuagenarians—as a wake for the Graham family’s *Post*.

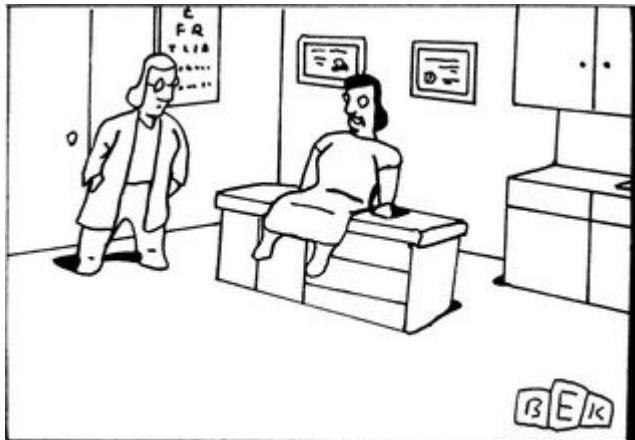
The paper’s current leadership was noticeably absent. Will Lewis, a former executive at Rupert Murdoch’s Dow Jones, whom Bezos had appointed as the paper’s publisher in early 2024, had R.S.V.P.’d that he would attend and then asked to see the guest list. (Lewis denies asking to see the guest list.)

He and the *Post*'s editor, Matt Murray, a recent arrival from the *Wall Street Journal*, had ultimately stayed away. Bezos was out of town, preferring instead to attend the Academy Awards with his fiancée, the journalist Lauren Sánchez.

Bezos was always seen as a somewhat distant owner. Amazon's holdings now include Whole Foods, Zappos, the streaming site Twitch, and M-G-M Studios. Blue Origin, Bezos's aerospace company, is a direct competitor of Elon Musk's SpaceX in the race to privatize space travel. "He was sort of like a helicopter parent," a former longtime employee at one of Bezos's businesses told me, "giving a lot of direction on a Wednesday and then leaving us to pick up the pieces." Still, no one seemed to know what his current vision for the *Post* might be. "In some ways, this is all a story about Jeff and how he changed over the course of his ownership and really became a different person with huge implications for the institution," one former top editor told me. A journalist who knows Bezos said, "He's on an intellectual journey. Wherever he lands, he's thinking. Whatever it is, it's a mind at work."

At the end of 2012, Don Graham and his niece Katharine Weymouth, then the *Post*'s publisher, met at the Bombay Club, a restaurant near the White House that was especially popular during the Clinton era, to discuss the paper's finances. The *Post* was entering its seventh year of declining revenue, and, for the first time, they were considering the possibility of selling. "We asked ourselves if we thought our small public company was still the best place for the newspaper," Graham said at the time.

The *Post* had been in the family since 1933, when Eugene Meyer, a former chairman of the Federal Reserve, bought it at auction. The Grahams, like the Sulzberger family, which has owned the *New York Times* for more than a century, viewed the paper not just as a business but as a civic trust. Don and his mother were fixtures in the *Post*'s headquarters on Fifteenth Street; Don seemed to know everyone's name—reporters, receptionists, custodians. For years, the *Post* was a thriving regional monopoly, servicing one of the country's wealthiest and most educated metropolitan areas.



*"So I'm in perfect health except for the mysterious back pains, constant anxiety, and never being able to sleep."*

*Cartoon by Bruce Eric Kaplan*

The emergence of the internet threatened all that. In August, 1992, Kaiser, the managing editor, returned from a conference in Japan and wrote a memo to the paper's leadership about the coming upheaval. "The Post is not in a pot of water, and we're smarter than the average frog," he said. "But we do find ourselves swimming in an electronic sea where we could eventually be devoured—or ignored as an unnecessary anachronism." Within a decade, Craigslist had decimated the industry's classified-ad revenues. In 2003, another *Post* managing editor, Steve Coll, proposed a plan to reconfigure the newsroom to adapt to the internet and use the paper's name recognition to become more national in scope. Don Graham rejected the idea, saying that he wanted to maintain the paper's local identity. Its strategy eventually became "For and about Washington."

What followed was years of shrinking print circulation punctuated by a series of staff buyouts. In 2007, a pair of *Post* staffers defected to found *Politico*, a digital news outlet that covered official Washington. Graham offered to partner with them in the new venture, but they declined. "It was clear that the age of expansion and conquering the world had ended, and it was not clear how we were going to turn it around," Eugene Robinson, a longtime *Post* editor and columnist, said. Martin Baron, who became the paper's executive editor in 2013, told me that, when he took the job, he expected to oversee additional cuts: "It looked like that's what it was going to be like, year after year."

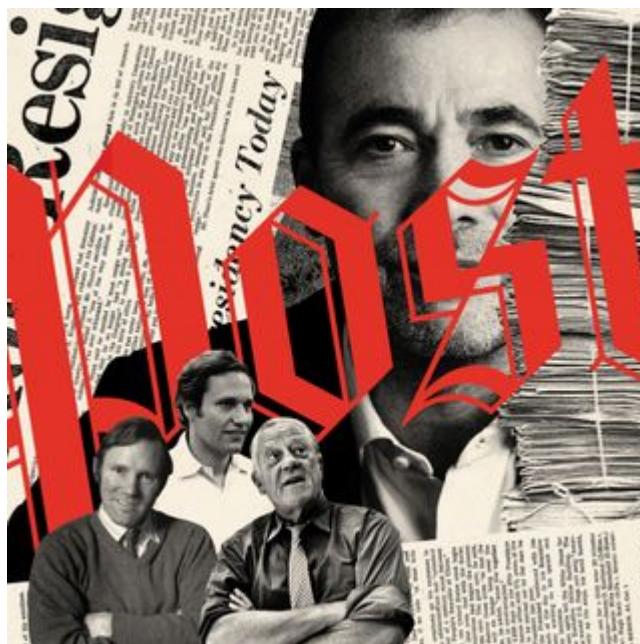
Graham was heartbroken about the prospect of selling the *Post*, but he viewed a sale to a worthy owner as a final act of service. Warren Buffett—who has been a friend of the Graham family’s since the early nineteen-seventies, when he bailed out the *Post*—recommended Bezos as a potential buyer. At the time, Bezos was worth \$27.2 billion—about a tenth of his current net worth—but still living a relatively low-key life in Seattle. He was married to MacKenzie Scott, a Princeton-educated novelist, with whom he had four children. In a 2013 *Vogue* article about Scott, who was promoting a new novel, Bezos called her “resourceful, smart, brainy, and hot.” He liked to shop for her clothes. Scott drove the *Vogue* writer around Seattle in her minivan and talked about avoiding the limelight. “Jeff is the opposite of me,” she said. “He likes to meet people. He’s a very social guy.”

Graham and Bezos met to discuss a sale at the Sun Valley Conference, an annual retreat in Idaho that is popularly known as a “summer camp for billionaires.” Graham emphasized that owning a newspaper came with a particular set of challenges. Bezos’s businesses could be hurt by association; the paper’s journalists would likely report on him. But for Bezos, who had made his fortune in part by siphoning revenue from local bookstores, buying the *Post* seemed like an act of redemption. Baron told me that Bezos, the adopted son of a Cuban immigrant, felt a sincere commitment to the paper’s mission. “I think Bezos fundamentally believes in the country and believes in democracy and thought it was an important institution,” he said. Ultimately, Bezos purchased the paper for two hundred and fifty million dollars.

Many *Post* staff members were initially skeptical of the new owner. “The case against Jeff Bezos,” Ezra Klein wrote on the *Post*’s Wonkblog, was that “Amazon’s political interests extend across everything from state sales taxes to the minimum wage to trade with China.” Bezos wrote a letter that was published in the paper, seeking to reassure readers and his new employees alike of his good intentions. “The values of The Post do not need changing,” he said. “The paper’s duty will remain to its readers and not to the private interests of its owners.”

Baron, who had edited the Boston *Globe* during its “Spotlight” investigation into the Catholic Church’s child-sexual-abuse coverup, ran the

newsroom. Fred Hiatt led the paper's Opinions section, a position he'd held for more than two decades. Hiatt was widely admired for, as one colleague put it, "an unassuming nature coupled with an unassailable intellect." His section was center left on domestic issues and tilted more to the right on foreign affairs; Bezos, according to a *Post* report at the time, had said that "his political views were already in line with those of The Post's editorial page." Members of the newsroom researched Bezos's past political contributions and found that he and Scott had donated to a gay-rights group in the state of Washington. "So people sort of took him to be a liberal with a libertarian streak," Cameron Barr, a former senior managing editor, told me.



Don Graham, Bob Woodward, Ben Bradlee, and the current publisher of the Post, Will Lewis. Photo illustration by Cristiana Couceiro; Source Photographs from Getty; © Warner Bros. / Everett

During Bezos's first year as owner, he was heavily involved in the development of a tablet app for the paper, which the company called Project Rainbow. "He showed up and he said that he thought mobile was the future," one former business-side staffer told me. "He believed that we needed to compete by building a real national product." Bezos was often less assured when it came to understanding the newspaper's history and culture. In October, 2014, Ben Bradlee, the *Post*'s editor during the seventies and eighties, died, at the age of ninety-three. Bezos did not plan to attend the funeral, which was to be held at the Washington National Cathedral. According to Baron's memoir, "Collision of Power: Trump,

Bezos, and the Washington Post,” Woodward sent Bezos an e-mail: “Understand you’re not coming to the Bradlee funeral. He was the soul of the institution that’s now yours.” Bezos hopped on his private jet and flew to Washington. “You could see him absorbing that he was buying not just a technological toy, but that he had bought a national treasure,” one funeral attendee told me. “In retrospect, it was a powerful moment.”

That same year, the *Post*’s Tehran bureau chief, Jason Rezaian, was imprisoned on espionage charges in Iran. When he and his wife were finally allowed to leave the country, in January, 2016, Bezos met them in Germany and flew them back to the U.S. on his plane, dropping them off in Key West for an all-expenses-paid vacation. A few days later, Rezaian appeared at the opening ceremony for the *Post*’s new headquarters on K Street, a sleek, light-filled space. “Important institutions like the *Post* have an essence, they have a heart, they have a core,” Bezos said at the event, “and if you wanted that to change, you’d be crazy.” Still, he sought to avoid unchecked nostalgia. “I’m a huge fan of leaning into the future,” he said. “Too much glamorizing of the past would certainly lead to paralysis.”

During the 2016 Presidential campaign, as Trump’s antics made headlines around the world, newspapers such as the *Times* and the *Post* quickly attracted more readers—the “Trump bump,” as the phenomenon came to be called. From the start, Bezos, as the proprietor of what Trump dubbed a “fake news” outlet, was a frequent target of the Republican nominee’s. In December, 2015, Trump tweeted that “the @washingtonpost loses money (a deduction) and gives owner @JeffBezos power to screw public on low taxation of @Amazon! Big tax shelter.” Bezos, according to Brad Stone’s 2021 book, “Amazon Unbound,” sent an e-mail to his head of communications: “Feel like I should have a witty retort. Useful opportunity (patriotic duty) to do my part to deflate this guy who would be a scary prez. I’m an inexperienced trash talker but I’m willing to learn. :) Ideas?” Hours later, Bezos tweeted, “Finally trashed by @realDonaldTrump. Will still reserve him a seat on the Blue Origin rocket. #sendDonaldtospace.”

Weeks before the election, the *Post* broke the story of Trump’s lewd comment to “Access Hollywood” ’s host Billy Bush about grabbing women’s genitals. Many of the paper’s blockbuster reports during the

campaign covered Trump's past business dealings in Russia and Russian interference in the election, a line of inquiry that only intensified after Trump's victory. Soon after the Inauguration, the *Post* debuted a new motto, "Democracy Dies in Darkness," a favorite saying of Bob Woodward's that was seen as a direct rebuke of the new President. (MacKenzie Scott had called an earlier option—"A Free People Demand to Know"—a "Frankenslogan.") Behind the scenes, though, Bezos seemed to urge caution. Baron, in his book, writes that "in the days before Trump took office" Bezos had asked Hiatt, the opinion editor, to show "support for Trump on whatever issues he could."

Otherwise, Bezos never interfered in newsroom decision-making, a distance that won him the affection of his paper's journalists. At a *Post* event in 2016, Baron asked Bezos if he thought Trump was "now threatening to put one of your body parts through a wringer." Bezos said that he had "a lot of very sensitive and vulnerable body parts but, if need be, they can all go through the wringer rather than do the wrong thing." Later, Bezos installed an antique wringer in one of the paper's conference rooms.

Bezos's ownership of the *Post* was creating complications for his other businesses. Amazon held a large contract with the government to handle cloud computing for intelligence agencies, and it was in the running for a similar contract with the Pentagon worth ten billion dollars. In 2018, a source told Axios that Trump was "obsessed" with Amazon and had considered bringing an antitrust suit against the company and changing its tax status. The following year, Amazon lost the Pentagon's cloud-computing contract to Microsoft. Amazon filed a lawsuit claiming that Trump had improperly pressured Defense Department officials on the decision. The Pentagon eventually scrapped the original contract and announced that, instead, Google, Oracle, Microsoft, and Amazon would compete for parts of it on an ongoing basis. On paper, Robinson told me, Bezos had paid two hundred and fifty million dollars for the *Post*—"but, really, he paid ten billion."

On October 2, 2018, Jamal Khashoggi, a Saudi Arabian dissident who, after leaving his home country, had become an opinion columnist for the *Post*, disappeared while visiting the Saudi Embassy in Istanbul. "Let me know

what I can do to help,” Bezos told the *Post*’s publisher at the time, Fred Ryan. The C.I.A. later concluded that the Saudi crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, had ordered the killing of Khashoggi, whose body was reportedly dismembered with a bone saw and carried out of the Embassy in suitcases. Trump’s son-in-law Jared Kushner had established close ties to the crown prince; the Administration was criticized for not doing more to pursue the perpetrators. The *Post*’s coverage of Khashoggi’s murder, which included breaking the news of the C.I.A.’s findings, earned the paper a spot as a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for public service. But Bezos didn’t speak publicly about the incident until a year later, at a memorial event held on the anniversary of Khashoggi’s death. As CNBC reported, Amazon Web Services had been working on a deal to set up data centers in Saudi Arabia. Baron told me that, on such matters, Bezos often offered public comment only when explicitly asked to do so.

Privately, Bezos seemed to be undergoing an evolution. Whereas once he had been physically unprepossessing, he was now, thanks to regular cardio and weight-lifting sessions with a celebrity trainer, roped with muscle. He invariably showed off his new biceps and pecs by wearing a tight T-shirt. Close associates joked with him about his transformation, but it seemed more than skin-deep. In 2016, Amazon Studios distributed “Manchester by the Sea,” which was nominated for Best Picture at the Academy Awards. Bezos attended the ceremony for the first time. Seeing him in the thrall of Hollywood was perplexing, the former longtime employee said, and “honestly, hilarious. I was just, like, ‘Who is this guy?’ ”

The biggest change of all was personal. On January 9, 2019, Bezos announced that, “after a long period of loving exploration and trial separation,” he and Scott were filing for divorce. The following day, the *National Enquirer* published a story that exposed his affair with Sánchez, a former television news reporter who was married to Patrick Whitesell, the executive chairman of the talent agency Endeavor; an accompanying photo caption identified Bezos as the “owner of *The Washington Post*.” Trump tweeted with apparent glee, “So sorry to hear the news about Jeff Bozo being taken down by a competitor whose reporting, I understand, is far more accurate than the reporting in his lobbyist newspaper, the Amazon *Washington Post*.”

A month later, in a post on Medium, Bezos accused the *National Enquirer* of blackmail. He seemed to imply that the Saudis, and perhaps Trump, who was a friend of the *National Enquirer*'s publisher David Pecker, were behind the leaking of some private texts. "It's unavoidable that certain powerful people who experience Washington Post news coverage will wrongly conclude I am their enemy," Bezos wrote. (It was later reported that Sánchez's brother, Michael, had sold the texts to the *National Enquirer* for two hundred thousand dollars, which he denies.) Bezos went on to assure readers that "my stewardship of The Post and my support of its mission, which will remain unswerving, is something I will be most proud of when I'm 90 and reviewing my life, if I'm lucky enough to live that long, regardless of any complexities it creates for me."

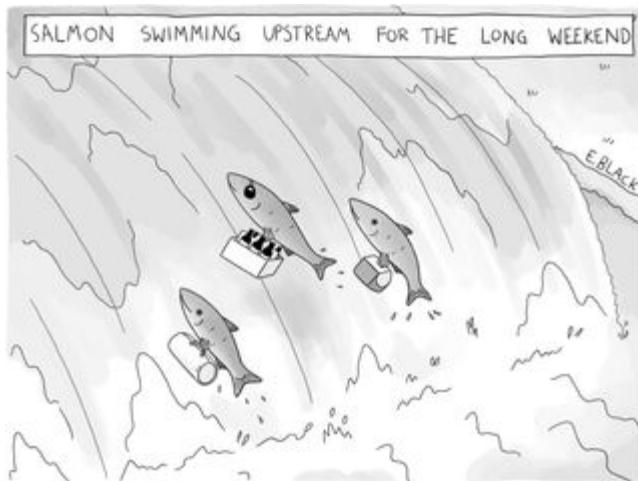
Less than a week after Biden was sworn in to office, in 2021, Baron announced that he would retire, a decision he had been contemplating for months. By then, the *Post* had close to three million digital subscribers; the newsroom employed more than a thousand journalists, nearly twice as many as when Baron started at the paper. "The Post is well positioned for the future," he wrote in a letter to the newsroom. "We have now created a truly national and international news organization." Baron's tone projected confidence, but today many staff members view his departure as a critical turning point. "Marty Baron was the last editor of the *Post* able to communicate a clear editorial vision for it," one former reporter told me.

When Trump lost the 2020 election, Bezos posted a picture on Instagram of a grinning Joe Biden and Kamala Harris, and wrote, "Unity, empathy, and decency are not characteristics of a bygone era." But readers who had obsessively tracked Trump's four convulsive years in office were ready to tune out the relative normalcy of the Biden White House; the *Post* lost about three hundred thousand subscribers in the first year of Biden's Presidency. Some in the newsroom had warned that, to prepare for the end of Trump's term, the *Post* needed to diversify its offerings—what Fred Ryan, the publisher, called a "bundle strategy"—in a manner similar to the *Times*, which had expanded its business through apps dedicated to cooking and games. Baron told me that he had begun to worry about the *Post*'s business model in the aftermath of the 2018 midterms, when it became clear that Trump might lose the general election. "I thought that we needed to

bring Bezos in for a big strategy discussion,” he said. The meeting never happened.

In May, 2021, Sally Buzbee, who previously ran the Associated Press, was named the paper’s new executive editor. She had led an international newsroom, but staffers worried that she wouldn’t be able to imprint a new identity on the paper. “Sally was a wire-service person,” the former *Post* reporter said. “She spoke of each story as an autonomous thing, and the voice of the whole project started to get lost.”

That December, Hiatt, the opinion editor, died unexpectedly, of cardiac arrest, at the age of sixty-six. Seven months later, David Shipley, who had run Bloomberg Opinion and the *Times* editorial page, took over the job; the *Post*’s writeup of the hire noted that he was the “second top editor to be appointed by publisher Fred Ryan from outside the newspaper.” Many sensed that Ryan, a former aide in the Reagan White House and Bezos’s main contact at the paper, was eager to assert himself. “Fred felt like the newsroom was not the newsroom he really wanted,” a former longtime editor said. “I think some of that was personal—he just didn’t like a lot of people.”



Cartoon by Ellie Black

Bezos, meanwhile, was becoming a far more public figure. Back in 2014, he had said, “I like to be at home. I like to be in the office. I feel disconnected from the office if I’m travelling a lot.” Now he and Sánchez were photographed having dinner in New York and Miami, shopping on St.

Barts, wearing coördinated stripes at Wimbledon, and hosting a disco-themed New Year’s Eve party. In 2016, Bezos had purchased the largest private home in D.C., for twenty-three million dollars. Jean Case, the wife of an AOL founder, had told the magazine *Washingtonian* that Bezos and Scott were going to “revive the legacy of Kay Graham and her great socializing—bringing smart, interesting people together in a social context.” By the time the house made its début, in January, 2020, it was Sánchez, not Scott, who served as Bezos’s co-host for a black-tie gathering attended by Kellyanne Conway, Jerome Powell, Jared Kushner, and Ivanka Trump. The home, one person told *Washingtonian*, was “very theatrical.” Someone else who has visited told me that the house has the feel of a museum; Bezos has on display, among other rare collectibles, a lock from the Watergate break-in.

Bezos had stepped down as C.E.O. of Amazon in 2021, handing off its day-to-day operations to Andy Jassy, one of his longtime deputies. The following year, the American Innovation and Choice Online Act, a bill that would have blocked online retailers from featuring their own brands’ goods and services more prominently on their platforms, passed out of the Senate Judiciary Committee with bipartisan support. Industry groups representing the likes of Amazon and Google launched a thirty-six-million-dollar ad campaign claiming that the bill would “threaten our fragile economic recovery.” The tech companies’ attitude, a former Senate staffer told me, was “We’re not here to negotiate. We are here to crush this thing and murder anyone who even thinks about voting for it.” The bill never made it to the Senate floor.

The Biden Administration had appointed Lina Khan, the author of a 2017 *Yale Law Journal* article titled “Amazon’s Antitrust Paradox,” to be the chair of the Federal Trade Commission. Khan’s paper had argued that, given Amazon’s ubiquity in American life, the company should either be subject to strong antitrust enforcement or be regulated like a public utility. Shortly after Khan was confirmed by the Senate, Amazon filed a motion requesting that she recuse herself from regulatory actions involving the company. Instead, her agency aggressively pursued a number of open investigations into Amazon’s business practices. “Some of these companies and executives were used to a certain degree of legal immunity,” Khan told

me. “So, when we started enforcing the law, it seemed to trigger a deep hysteria and backlash.”

Jay Carney, a former White House press secretary for Barack Obama, headed Amazon’s communications team, but the company’s relations with the Biden Administration and other Democratic politicians deteriorated. Biden met with labor leaders who supported Amazon workers’ unionization drive. Leading Party figures, such as Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders, routinely criticized the company’s reach. At one point, when a Democratic backbencher, Mark Pocan, of Wisconsin, tweeted about the company’s workers feeling so pressured to make timely deliveries that they skipped bathroom breaks, the Amazon News account responded, “You don’t really believe the peeing in bottles thing, do you?” (The company later apologized for the tweet.)

In 2023, the F.T.C. and seventeen state attorneys general brought a suit against Amazon, claiming that it was illegally maintaining monopoly power. Bezos felt a sense of betrayal. “Jeff really stuck his neck out, in his view, in the first Trump term, and weathered all that heat and criticism,” a longtime *Post* staffer said. “And his thanks for that from the Biden Administration is to have Lina Khan unleashed on him.” Last year, the billionaire investor Marc Andreessen, a friend of Bezos’s who once gave generously to Democrats, announced that he would back Trump. In a recent interview with the *Times*, Andreessen said his cohort believed that the Biden Administration had targeted the tech industry “in a very broad-based way.” There were, he said, “lots and lots of underground peer-to-peer discussions” about how things had gone “off the rails.”

In January, 2023, Bezos made a rare visit to the *Post* offices, sitting for a series of one-on-one meetings with a small number of the paper’s journalists. The company was in dire financial straits, set to lose money for the first time in years. Ryan had shuttered the newspaper’s Sunday magazine in late November, and, two weeks later, held a town hall with staff where he announced that a round of layoffs would be coming. The newsroom’s journalists, many of whom were members of the Washington Post Guild, the paper’s union, responded with increasingly pointed questions about Ryan’s leadership. “We’re not going to turn the town hall

into a grievance session for the Guild,” he said, before abruptly exiting the stage. A video of Ryan’s retreat went viral. Afterward, Woodward sent a note to Bezos, telling him his involvement at the paper was needed.

Bezos set out to prove himself an attentive listener. During his meetings with *Post* journalists, he took copious notes in a leather-bound notebook, stopping occasionally to confirm that he understood certain points. One journalist who met with him said that he seemed interested in making acquisitions to rapidly expand the *Post*’s audience. Another was surprised by how out of touch he seemed with the paper. “He is isolated, and he hasn’t done the work to engage and be a hands-on owner,” the journalist said. “If you are going to own a media property right now, you need to be all in and understand the landscape.”

For years, most of Bezos’s ideas for the *Post* seemed based on his experience at Amazon. “He said, ‘I’d rather have two hundred million subscribers paying ten dollars a year than a smaller number paying a higher price,’ ” another former editor told me. “Just supersize the number. That was always his idea of a really successful digital news organization.” But, at a time when mainstream media outlets are widely distrusted, the number of people who want to pay for quality news in America is distinctly smaller than the number of those who want to order two-ply toilet paper that will arrive the next day. “For such a smart, accomplished guy, who has owned the business for as long as he has,” one person who’s had conversations with Bezos about the paper said, “he is too timid about the operating levers he can pull and too ambitious about the commercial reach of the paper.”

After his visit, Bezos had the thought, one person with knowledge of internal conversations said, that “the American media was too coastal, and that the *Washington Post* needed to get out of Washington.” He initiated what came to be called Project America, which explored ideas such as getting Substack writers from other U.S. cities to write a few times a month, or working with regional publications to license or co-publish stories. None of the initiatives have yet been launched, but Project America marked a new level of involvement for Bezos. “Fred Hiatt’s death was, in hindsight, even more of a catastrophe than it seemed,” a longtime staffer told me. Shipley, the Opinions section’s new editor, “understandably thought it would help

everyone if Jeff were more engaged.” Instead, the staffer went on, “Bezos grabbed it with both hands.”

In June, 2023, Ryan stepped down as publisher. Patty Stonesifer, a former Microsoft executive who had run the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation—and who has served on the Amazon board since 1997—replaced him as interim C.E.O. According to another former *Post* reporter, Stonesifer was shocked at the state of the paper’s business: “She felt Fred was either delusional or he was really ignorant about what the future of the paper looked like.” (Stonesifer denies questioning Ryan’s competence, saying he had a “solid grasp on the facts.”) That October, the *Post* announced that it would be cutting an additional two hundred and forty jobs. “I have come to think of her,” a *Post* reporter said of Stonesifer, “as the minister of death.”

In November, 2023, after a months-long search, Bezos announced that Will Lewis, the former publisher of the *Wall Street Journal* and a veteran of Murdoch’s London tabloid empire, would be the new publisher of the *Washington Post*. The decision alarmed many in the paper’s orbit. Robert Kaiser, the former managing editor, said that he raised concerns about Lewis with Stonesifer. “I tried to explain to Patty that there was a huge gulf of cultures between British journalism and American journalism,” Kaiser told me. “It was very hard to imagine that a British journalist with Lewis’s biography—having been a Murdoch flunky—would ever win the respect of American journalists.”

Lewis had spent the early part of his career as a mergers-and-acquisitions reporter at the *Financial Times*, where his editor in New York was an Australian named Robert Thomson, who is now the C.E.O. of Murdoch’s News Corp. In 2006, at the age of thirty-seven, Lewis became the youngest-ever editor of the *Daily Telegraph*, which he overhauled to become more digitally focussed, creating a weeklong training program in a dummy newsroom. “It was an old, staid conservative newspaper,” one former *Telegraph* reporter said. “The readership was retired military and their wives, and Will turned it into a scoop-getting competitive newspaper.”

Lewis, who was raised in a middle-class home in a suburb of London, became a minor celebrity in the British press. His brother, Simon, had served as Queen Elizabeth’s communications secretary and went on to work

for Gordon Brown, the British Prime Minister. At the *Telegraph*, Lewis had “a clique of mannish guys,” the former reporter said, and a reputation for hard drinking. *Private Eye* nicknamed him “Thirsty” Will Lewis, but the *Guardian* noted, “No one has ever seen him drunk, late for work, or anything less than intensely focused.” A person who has known Lewis for decades described him to me as a “wide boy”—British slang for someone who survives by his wits, often on the wrong side of right.

In 2010, Lewis was hired by News International, a subsidiary of News Corp, where he reported directly to the company’s chief executive, Rebekah Brooks. She and Lewis were friends; Brooks had attended Lewis’s fortieth-birthday party at a London pub, a casual bash featuring karaoke and a high-powered guest list that included the future Prime Minister David Cameron. At the time, Scotland Yard was investigating accusations that reporters at two of the company’s papers, *News of the World* and the *Sun*, had illegally hacked into the phones of politicians, celebrities, royals, and even a dead teen-age girl. Lewis, who was seen as “untainted,” according to a longtime colleague, was tapped to help contain the situation. Later, the *New York Times* reported that Scotland Yard suspected, according to internal documents, that News International was attempting to “steer the investigation into a very narrow remit,” by directing investigators to look at certain journalists and “steering the investigation away from other journalists and editors.”

In 2014, Brooks—a protégé of Murdoch’s—was cleared of hacking charges. But a News International editor named Andy Coulson was sentenced to eighteen months in prison. That year, Lewis got a promotion, moving to a role as publisher of the *Wall Street Journal* and C.E.O. of News Corp’s Dow Jones division, where he worked under Thomson, his former editor. Lewis oversaw rapid growth at the paper—during his tenure, the *Wall Street Journal* increased its digital-subscriber numbers from seven hundred thousand to more than two million—and in 2020 he was on a shortlist to become the next director general of the BBC. During the hiring process, documents emerged in lawsuits brought by dozens of individuals, including Prince Harry and Hugh Grant, who claimed that News International papers had illegally hacked their phones. The documents alleged that, while the company was being investigated, Lewis had

approved a plan that resulted in the deletion of millions of e-mails from News International's servers. Lewis has denied any illegal conduct. A month after the revelations, the BBC job went to another candidate.

Instead, Lewis helped found a news startup focussed on Gen Z and launched his own public-relations consultancy. He reportedly advised then Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who held a series of parties at 10 Downing Street during the *COVID* pandemic, when lockdown rules were in place. According to the *Guardian*, after news of the Prime Minister's infractions surfaced, Lewis recommended that Johnson and others "clean up" their phones. Both Lewis and Johnson have said that the story is untrue. Johnson later recommended Lewis for a knighthood, which he received in 2023.

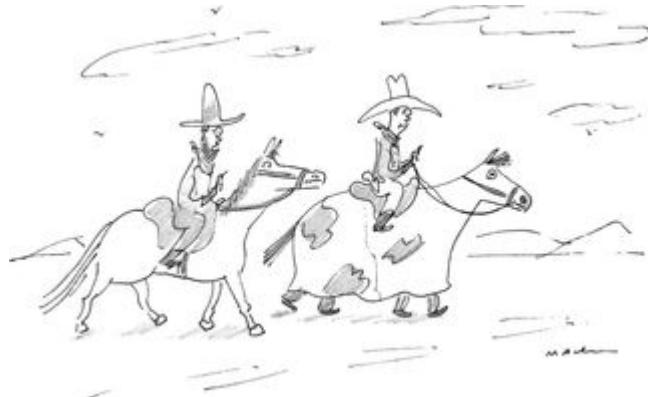
That same year, Lewis was involved in an attempt to buy the *Telegraph*. In an interview with Bloomberg, he said that he had "significant expressions of interest from a wide range of potential backers." The *Daily Beast* reported that one of the prospective investors he solicited was Jeff Bezos, which both Lewis and Bezos have denied. In any event, Lewis aborted his bid after Bezos hired him to run the *Washington Post*.

When Lewis started at the *Post*, in January, 2024, he held a town-hall meeting to introduce himself. Karen DeYoung, a journalist who had been at the paper for nearly fifty years, "was, like, 'We know everyone loves the accent,' but basically don't bullshit us," one of the former *Post* reporters told me. Still, Lewis was largely successful in early attempts to win over the newsroom. He sent detailed notes of praise for articles and sat in a glass office near the reporters and editors. "The *Post* is a very personable, tactile newsroom—people are friends," one of the former *Post* reporters said. "Will brought back this chummy feeling."

Sally Quinn, a former *Post* writer and the widow of Ben Bradlee, invited Lewis into her Georgetown social sphere. People liked his wife, Rebecca, she said—"an Emma Thompson type." One of the couple's children worked for Maggie Hassan, a Democratic senator from New Hampshire, and was already living in D.C. Lewis and his wife purchased a Colonial Williamsburg-style house in a tucked-away corner of Georgetown for seven million dollars. Lewis told the *Evening Standard* of his plans for the *Post*

—“We’re going to get our swagger back”—and attributed his rise to a “fear of being found out and getting up every day at five.”

Lewis had grand ambitions. “He very quickly declared that he soon wanted to have three million subscribers,” a former staffer said. He began hosting “say-it sessions,” where staff members were encouraged to describe what they thought the company was doing wrong. Many of them were simply eager to do anything that might help turn around the business. “Everything felt like a gimmick,” a former editor said. “You could tell there was a lot of bullshit, but maybe we needed that.”



*“Sure, my horse talks to me, but not as much as your horse talks to you.”*  
Cartoon by Michael Maslin

Some early moves rankled the *Post*’s staff. Lewis made a troika of former Dow Jones strategists part of his close-knit executive team. His chief of staff appeared on the paper’s masthead one day without any internal announcement. Lewis also had his own communications staffer in London, who operated independently of the *Post*’s publicity department. (Recently, the *Post*’s chief communications officer resigned, reportedly owing to repeated clashes with Lewis.)

At Bezos’s behest, Lewis actively began searching for acquisition opportunities. Less than a month into his tenure, he sat for an interview with Ben Smith, the co-founder of the news site *Semafor*. As they began their conversation, Lewis appeared to propose some sort of partnership, telling Smith, “If we want to do something together, we should find a way to do some business.” Smith responded, “This is the wrong meeting.” Lewis was undeterred: “I think us partnering with startups and people in early phases is really good for us.” Later, Smith told me that Lewis never followed up. “I

don't think he was joking—Will is always trying to do some kind of deal,” Smith said. “Obviously, we would have been open to talking.”

Around the same time, Lewis and Buzbee travelled to Davos. According to one person with knowledge of the incident, as Buzbee was on her way to an early-morning meeting that she and Lewis had scheduled with top leadership of Microsoft to discuss, among other things, issues concerning A.I., she received a message from Lewis saying that he was sick and that Buzbee should attend solo. She was rattled that he would miss such an important meeting; the previous month, the *Times* had sued Microsoft and OpenAI for copyright infringement. A few hours later, Lewis appeared at another Davos event, in high spirits.

Meanwhile, tensions between Lewis and the newsroom were escalating. In March, the *Post* ran a story about the News International lawsuits in London; it later emerged that Lewis had put pressure on Buzbee not to run it, but Lewis has denied this. Matea Gold, a well-regarded managing editor, had initially overseen the Lewis reporting. Later, Cameron Barr, the former senior managing editor, was brought in and given final say over edits on stories about Lewis. A person who spoke with Lewis last year told me that Lewis thought American journalists were “obsessed with their own drama.”

That May, Lewis held a town-hall meeting announcing the “build it” phase of his strategy. The *Post*, he said, had lost seventy-seven million dollars the previous year. The paper would be moving toward a system that allowed readers to pay to access single articles, enabled by what he called “frictionless payments.” The paper would also be rolling out Post Pro and Post Plus, payment tiers that mimicked offerings from *Politico* and *Punchbowl News*, which charge a premium for industry-specific news stories. (Lewis has also been pursuing an acquisition of *Punchbowl News*.)

Eleven days later, the *Times* reported on a number of changes taking place at the *Post*. Lewis dashed off a note to the staff, confirming the story’s details: Buzbee was leaving her job as executive editor, and the *Post* was launching what he called a third newsroom, which would focus on producing service journalism and content for social media. “We’re all kind of, like, ‘What the fuck, a third newsroom? What are you talking about?’ ” one of the former reporters told me. Buzbee, who disagreed with the

restructure, had been offered the job of running it. Seeing the move as a demotion, she had refused. Now she was out.

The next day, Lewis gathered the staff and introduced Matt Murray, the former editor-in-chief of the *Wall Street Journal*, who, he said, would be leading the newsroom through the election. A former colleague of Lewis's from the *Telegraph*, Robert Winnett, would then take over as executive editor. "The cynical interpretation is that it sort of feels like you chose two of your buddies," Ashley Parker, one of the paper's White House correspondents, told Lewis. "And now we have four white men running three newsrooms." (Parker later left the *Post*, along with several others, for *The Atlantic*.) Caroline Kitchener, a Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist, pressed Lewis about whether he had interviewed any women or people of color for the job. Lewis erupted. "If you don't like the way I'm doing things, you can feel free to leave," he said. (Kitchener now works at the *Times*.) Later in the meeting, Lewis said, "We are losing large amounts of money. Your audience has halved in recent years. People are not reading your stuff, right? I can't sugarcoat it anymore. So I've had to take decisive, urgent action to set us on a different path, sourcing talent that I have worked with that are the best of the best."

Many journalists I spoke with described the moment as a mask falling away. "That was when it felt like we had entered a whole new era," one of the former editors said. "It's when I would say everybody started communicating with each other on Signal, rather than Slack."

NPR's media correspondent David Folkenflik later revealed that Lewis had attempted to persuade him not to run a story on the British lawsuits, and had offered in exchange an exclusive interview on the *Post*'s business plan—a quid pro quo that was a clear violation of journalistic ethics. In a story in the *Post*, which reported on Lewis's efforts to get Buzbee not to publish stories about the lawsuits, he was quoted calling Folkenflik "an activist, not a journalist." Lewis claimed the account of his meetings with Buzbee was "inaccurate," as part of a parsing denial that disturbed many in the newsroom. "To have the publisher of the *Washington Post* playing some bullshit fucking game like that in our own paper was deeply embarrassing and troubling, because that's what we do for a living," another former *Post*

reporter told me. “We go after powerful people who then come back with bullshit that is transparently deceptive, and then we blow it up.”

Within days, a team of reporters at the *Post* published a piece about Winnett, the incoming executive editor, that detailed how, as a journalist at Britain’s *Sunday Times*, he had worked with a trained actor who sometimes misrepresented himself to obtain information for stories. Winnett opted to walk away from the position. Bezos sent a note to the *Post*’s internal newsletter voicing implicit support for Lewis. “Team—I know you’ve already heard this from Will, but I wanted to also weigh in directly: the journalistic standards and ethics at The Post will not change,” Bezos wrote. “The world is evolving rapidly and we do need to change as a business. With your support, we’ll do that and lead this great institution into the future.”

Since last June, Lewis has gone into what a number of *Post* staffers described as a state of hiding. His relationship with Murray, the interim editor, suffered. “I know Will was very upset with Matt for the *Post*’s coverage and for some period of time wouldn’t talk to Matt,” a former senior editor at the *Post* told me. (Both Murray and Lewis deny this, though eventually Murray instituted a policy discouraging the paper from covering itself.) Rumors began circulating about Lewis drinking heavily in social settings. “One thing that has damaged him internally is that his drinking is widely known in the newsroom,” the former senior editor said. “It’s literally something his employees joke about.” (Lewis declined multiple requests to speak with me.)

That spring, Bezos and Sánchez purchased their third property on Indian Creek Island, in Miami-Dade County, where their neighbors include Jared Kushner and Ivanka Trump. Sánchez is also friends with Donald Trump, Jr.,’s girlfriend, Bettina Anderson, a Palm Beach socialite. Bezos and Sánchez spent much of the summer island-hopping in the Mediterranean on Koru, a five-hundred-million-dollar superyacht whose name refers to a Maori symbol for new beginnings. They were joined at one point by Kim Kardashian, whose mother, Kris Jenner, had previously been spotted at Coachella with Sánchez and Bezos. (Sánchez and Kardashian employ the same publicist.) Sánchez is described by those who know her as warm and

charming, with deep connections in the entertainment industry. “I think Lauren is very influential,” the former senior editor told me. “Maybe not in the hands-on decisions throughout the *Post*, but certainly in the orientation of it.”

The 2024 Presidential campaign was under way, and Lewis, Shipley, and others on the *Post*’s opinion pages were trying to speak with Bezos. An attempt to meet with him in late spring was waylaid, in part, by the fallout from Lewis’s disastrous all-hands meeting. In July, according to Axios, Bezos had a phone call with Trump, in which he recommended that the former President pick Doug Burgum, then the governor of North Dakota, as his running mate. In August, after Biden had dropped out of the race and Harris replaced him as the Democratic nominee, the opinion leadership was told that Bezos’s schedule was full until late September.

At that point, Shipley and two deputies flew to Miami to meet with Bezos and Lewis; the paper’s endorsement wasn’t on the agenda, but Bezos expressed mild curiosity about why the paper needed to endorse a candidate at all. Murray also met with Bezos and Lewis in Miami and later told other editors that Bezos wanted the paper to “widen its aperture,” one person said. “Jeff apparently started pulling up the *Atlantic* app and was saying, ‘Why don’t we do these stories?’ It was almost like someone who descended from another world.” Bezos had said that he wanted the *Post* to broaden its appeal, but he was pointing to a magazine with a targeted audience. Bezos also mentioned that he thought more firefighters from Nebraska should be reading the *Post*. (Bezos declined to speak with me.)

Just two weeks before the election, Bezos decided that he didn’t want the paper to endorse either candidate. Shipley tried to change his mind—given the timing, it would appear as if Bezos were bowing to Trump. Lewis, whose daughter was then working for the Harris campaign, announced the paper’s decision not to make an endorsement. The news was met with predictable outrage. “This is cowardice, with democracy as its casualty,” Baron, the former executive editor, wrote on X. “@realdonaldtrump will see this as an invitation to further intimidate owner @jeffbezos (and others). Disturbing spinelessness at an institution famed for courage.” Almost overnight, two hundred and fifty thousand *Post* subscribers cancelled their

subscriptions. On the day of the announcement, the C.E.O. of Blue Origin met briefly with Trump after one of Trump's rallies. Bezos has said that the two events were unrelated.

In an op-ed for the *Post*, Bezos attempted to explain his decision. He acknowledged that the announcement was poorly timed, and attributed this to "inadequate planning." But the larger issue, he said, was Americans' distrust in media. "We must be accurate, and we must be believed to be accurate," he wrote. "It's a bitter pill to swallow, but we are failing on the second requirement." Bezos's words seemed pointedly directed at his own newsroom: "It would be easy to blame others for our long and continuing fall in credibility (and, therefore, decline in impact), but a victim mentality will not help. Complaining is not a strategy."

The paper still hadn't decided on an executive editor after Winnett's appointment fell through. Gold, who had helped run the coverage of the News International lawsuits, was vying for the position. When it was decided that she would not advance in the process, Wayne Connell, the head of H.R., not Lewis, delivered the news. The top candidate, Clifford Levy, a deputy managing editor at the *Times*, withdrew his name from consideration. No other outside candidates remained, leaving Murray as the de-facto leader. Lewis never officially announced that Murray had the job. Instead, a *Times* reporter wrote in early January that Murray, in response to a question at a meeting, had confirmed that he would continue on as the head editor.

Since 1983, the *Post* has held the annual Eugene Meyer Awards to honor staff across the organization, from reporters and editors to print-plant managers. "The whole point of the Eugene Meyer Awards is about the whole company as a community and all the departments that have to work together," one *Post* journalist said. "It's so that everyone understands all the other pieces. And it really makes you feel a part of something special." When the Grahams presided over the awards, the event had the feeling of a family holiday party.

Last year, awards were given, but without a company-wide ceremony. Staff members were upset. One person called it part of Lewis's "De-Grahamification" of the *Post*. The newsroom decided to host an informal

gathering anyway, assembling just before Christmas. The tone was sombre. Sally Jenkins and Dan Balz, two longtime staffers, became emotional, talking about what the paper had meant to them. Lewis, who had only occasionally been seen in the newsroom since the previous spring's all-hands meeting, did not attend.

Instead, in January, he hosted a small dinner for the awardees in one of the building's private suites. Lewis skipped the cocktail hour, but spoke during the seated dinner about how the paper's recent innovations had made it the envy of its competitors. Earlier in the month, the *Post* had débuted a new internal mission statement—"Riveting Storytelling for All of America"—and the paper's chief strategy officer, Suzi Watford, had laid out a "Big Hairy Audacious Goal" of generating two hundred million "paying users" through a flexible payment system and "distribution partnerships." When I spoke with Watford, she said that such targets are typically attached to a ten-year horizon; the *Post* wasn't attaching any hard time horizons.

News websites such as those of CNN and the *Times* are often visited by more than a hundred million users in a month, but a slim margin of them are paying subscribers. The *Post* currently has about 2.5 million digital subscribers; the *Times* has 11.4 million. One of the former *Post* editors called the idea of generating two hundred million paying users "intellectually dishonest," in part because it sidestepped the issue of who the *Post* thought its audience should be. Bezos, in his op-ed about the Presidential endorsement, had said that the *Post* and the *Times* "talk only to a certain elite"—but a certain élite is also who is most willing to pay for news. Going forward, Watford said, "I think we will have a much broader appeal."

Don Graham had been invited to the event as a nod to the paper's legacy. He rose to speak and gave a history of the awards. Then he went off script. Graham, who is eighty and still worth half a billion dollars, had not tried to be involved in the *Post*'s leadership decisions, he said. But during the past few months many staff members had reached out to him. Morale, he said, was low. Lewis, sitting nearby, stared at his place setting. "It was such a wild moment," one attendee told me.

Dozens of staffers have left the *Post* in recent months. Earlier this year, after Philip Rucker, a Pulitzer Prize-winning editor, received an offer from CNN, Lewis scheduled a meeting with him. It was supposed to be a final attempt to keep a high-profile journalist, but Lewis cancelled at the last minute. Hundreds of staff members had sent a letter to Bezos that day, asking him to intervene at the paper. “We are deeply alarmed by recent leadership decisions that have led readers to question the integrity of this institution, broken with a tradition of transparency and prompted some of our most distinguished colleagues to leave, with more departures imminent,” the authors wrote.

One person who has had conversations with the *Post*’s leadership said that Lewis and his top deputies now speak of the newsroom with “vitriol.” “They were constantly infantilizing them and constantly talking about how they needed to be disciplined,” the person said. (A spokesperson for the *Post* denied this, saying that Lewis has “tremendous respect and appreciation for his colleagues.”) In exit interviews, meanwhile, staff members have attributed their departures to Lewis’s lack of a discernible plan for the paper. “The idea that the newsroom is the reason for the *Post*’s struggles is unfair,” one former top editor said. “The newsroom is not always its own best friend, but Will somehow convinced Jeff that it is the problem, when really there is no business strategy.” Murray acknowledged to one departing staffer, “Will has his challenges.”

Bezos has not visited the paper since before the election. The day after Trump won, he posted on X, “Big congratulations to our 45th and now 47th President on an extraordinary political comeback and decisive victory. No nation has bigger opportunities. Wishing @realDonaldTrump all success in leading and uniting the America we all love.” A few weeks later, at the *Times*’ DealBook Summit, in New York, he told the journalist Andrew Ross Sorkin that Trump was “calmer than he was the first time, and more confident, more settled.” Bezos was “optimistic” that Trump seemed “to have a lot of energy around reducing regulation.” Sorkin asked Bezos how he planned to fix the *Post*. “I have a bunch of ideas, and I’m working on that right now,” Bezos said. “So we’ll see. You know, we saved the *Washington Post* once. This will be the second time.”

Just before Christmas, Bezos and Sánchez dined with Trump and his wife, Melania, at Mar-a-Lago. During the meal, according to the *Wall Street Journal*, Melania told Bezos and Sánchez about a documentary project she was developing based on her own life. Two weeks later, Amazon licensed the film for forty million dollars, nearly three times more than the company had ever spent on a documentary. As much as twenty-eight million dollars of the licensing fee will go directly to the First Lady.

In late February—after Trump pardoned the defendants of the January 6th riot, announced tariffs on Canada, Mexico, and China, and signed executive orders banning diversity initiatives in the federal government, denying the existence of transgender people and barring them from serving in the military, overturning birthright citizenship, and declaring a national emergency at the southern border—Bezos announced the new direction of the Opinions section. “I’m confident that free markets and personal liberties are right for America,” Bezos wrote in a note to the staff. “I also believe these viewpoints are underserved in the current market of ideas and news opinion.” Shipley, the section’s editor, stepped down. That evening, Bezos had dinner with Trump.

In the aftermath of Bezos’s announcement, the *Post* moved to shut down dissenting opinions. A column about the directive by Erik Wemple, the *Post*’s media critic, was reportedly killed. Ruth Marcus, a columnist who had worked at the paper for more than four decades, left after Lewis killed a piece that was critical of Bezos’s instructions. (Marcus later wrote about the experience for *The New Yorker*.) Eugene Robinson also quit, writing, “The announced ‘significant shift’ in our section’s mission has spurred me to decide that it’s time for my next chapter.”

When Bezos was first contemplating changes to the *Post*’s Opinions section, he discussed the issue with Barry Diller, the media mogul who, alongside Murdoch, helped found the Fox Broadcasting Company. “I did speak extensively with him when he was thinking of adopting a more refined, let’s call it, editorial policy,” Diller told me. The new focus, Diller said, reflected views that Bezos has long held. But there was also a risk, Diller acknowledged. Bezos’s motivations could be misconstrued as pursuing an “evenhanded relationship with a new and potentially dangerous

Administration.” That, unfortunately or not for Bezos, seems to have come to pass. “I’ve gotten to know him, and I think he’s trying to do a real job,” Trump said of Bezos in March. “Jeff Bezos is trying to do a real job with the *Washington Post*, and that wasn’t happening before.”

Bezos has yet to clarify what, exactly, a focus on “free markets and personal liberties” might mean for the *Post*’s Opinions section. He and Sánchez are both devoted readers of Bari Weiss’s *Free Press*, a Substack publication that espouses a broadly anti-woke ideology. Last year, the couple hosted a book party for the author Jonathan Haidt, which was attended by Kardashian, John Legend, and Tom Hanks; Weiss moderated the evening’s conversation. Matthew Continetti, a conservative columnist at the *Free Press*, is rumored to be in the running to become the *Post*’s next opinion editor. Katherine Mangu-Ward, the editor of *Reason*, a libertarian monthly, has also been interviewed for the job. (*Reason*’s slogan is “Free Minds and Free Markets.”) Watford told me, “I’m really excited about being very transparent about what the opinion pages will stand for.”

In April, Bezos sent Sánchez, a licensed helicopter pilot, to space for eleven minutes on the first all-female space mission since 1963. That same month, the U.S. Space Force announced that it had awarded the largest share of its launch contracts, worth nearly six billion dollars, to Elon Musk’s SpaceX. Musk, the head of Trump’s Department of Government Efficiency, has overseen a chaotic and unprecedented slashing of federal jobs and programs, and has also expressed skepticism about the need to send spacecraft to the moon. Blue Origin has a \$3.4-billion contract to build and test a lunar lander for NASA.

The *Post*, despite an exodus of high-profile talent, has remained competitive during the second Trump Administration, breaking stories on *DOGE* and the excesses of the White House’s immigration crackdown. As a longtime *Post* reporter told me, “There’s just something really freaking heroic about this group that is nailing exclusives while so many editors and role models have gone.”

In May, the *Post* won two Pulitzer Prizes, including one for the work of the editorial cartoonist Ann Telnaes. Telnaes had resigned in January, after her sketch of a group of tech and media moguls, including Bezos, prostrating

themselves before Trump was rejected. (In a statement, Shipley said that the sketch was turned down because the paper had already assigned two columns about the same subject. “The only bias was against repetition,” he said.) Lewis didn’t show up to the Pulitzer announcement in the newsroom. Murray told the assembled staff that he was away on a long-planned trip.

For Bezos, being on Trump’s good side has its benefits. Back in 2017, Trump tweeted that Amazon’s arrangement with the Postal Service was “making Amazon richer and the Post Office dumber and poorer.” Recently, the *Post* reported that a leading candidate for Postmaster General had been the head of a trade group that represents Amazon. After Trump announced a new round of steep tariffs on China and other U.S. trading partners, Amazon was reportedly considering a feature that would reveal how much the policy increased the prices of goods. Karoline Leavitt, the White House press secretary, called the move a “hostile and political act.” Bezos and Trump soon spoke. “I asked him about it,” Trump told NBC’s Kristen Welker. “He said, ‘Well, I don’t want to do that,’ and he took it off immediately.” The Trump Administration now has the authority to settle the F.T.C.’s case against Amazon, which is scheduled to go to trial in October, 2026.

There has been some speculation that Bezos might sell the *Post*, but he recently told one interested buyer that it is not for sale. “He doesn’t really care what people think of him,” Baron, the former executive editor, told me. Last year, after deciding to block the paper’s endorsement, Bezos wrote, “You can see my wealth and business interests as a bulwark against intimidation, or you can see them as a web of conflicting interests. Only my own principles can tip the balance from one to the other. I assure you that my views here are, in fact, principled.” Still, he added, “you are of course free to make your own determination.” ♦



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| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

[\*\*A Reporter at Large\*\*](#)

# Escape from Khartoum

A family of nine's desperate attempt to find safety in Sudan.

By [\*\*Nicolas Niarchos\*\*](#)

May 19, 2025



*A camp for displaced persons in the Nuba Mountains. Wanis and Intisar would feel safe there, even if conditions were grim. The journey was some five hundred miles, on roads frequently controlled by armed rebels. Photograph by Moises Saman / Magnum*

Like most civilians in Sudan, Wanis and his wife, Intisar, were unprepared when war broke out in Khartoum. The first day of fighting, April 15, 2023, was a Saturday. They'd planned to visit a cousin of Wanis's who was

undergoing treatment for diabetes at a hospital in Bahri, a neighborhood on the eastern side of the sprawling capital. Intisar and Wanis lived in Ombada, a western suburb; to visit the cousin, they'd have to cross the Nile, which bisects the city.

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While preparing to leave, they learned that there had been clashes at the airport between Sudan's Army and a paramilitary group, the Rapid Support Forces. Wanis worked as a courier at the airport, and wondered if the fighting would put his job in jeopardy. The R.S.F. soldiers, who followed a wealthy general known as Hemedti, were engaged in a contest of raw power against Sudan's de-facto leader, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan.

Intisar proposed cancelling the hospital visit, fearing that they might be targeted for violence by the warring groups, each of which was led by Arabs. Both Wanis and Intisar belonged to the Nuba people, a Black population long persecuted by Sudanese Arab leaders. But Wanis was undaunted.

Wanis had arrived in Khartoum from the Nuba Mountains, in the south, in 1993, and landed a job in a cookie factory. He met Intisar nine years later. She had come from the same region and had found work on a plot of farmland outside the city. Wanis was smitten after just one encounter, and he instructed his brother to tell Intisar that he wanted to marry her. At first, she declined: she needed the permission of her family, and they were in the Nuba Mountains, unreachable by phone. When Wanis next saw her, he told her, "No problem." Intisar liked his directness. *He's quick in his responses and he has nothing to hide*, she thought. *He is humble. This man has a good heart.*

A few months later, Intisar travelled to see her parents, and Wanis accompanied her. He introduced himself to Intisar's parents and offered a dowry—four cows, twelve goats, and the equivalent of twenty dollars. Intisar's parents agreed to arrange a wedding. After the ceremony, Wanis and Intisar stayed up all night dancing. Then they returned north to Khartoum, to start a new life together.

When fighting broke out in the capital, the couple had been married for twenty-three years and had seven children. The area where they lived was poor, with spottily paved streets. Their friend Nafisa, a Nuba schoolteacher, told me that whenever the Arabs developed an area non-Arab Black populations were moved “somewhere else—to a marginal place where there are no services.”

Wanis and Intisar had nonetheless built a haven for their family in Ombada. Intisar, who was thirty-eight, was jovial and well known around the neighborhood for having two pairs of twins. Wanis was tall and charming, a fifty-six-year-old with old-fashioned manners. They lived in a single-story house with a zinc roof, elegant wood furniture, two rooms with verandas, and a salon with a large flat-screen TV, on which Intisar enjoyed watching Bollywood romances. Nafisa told me that Wanis worked tirelessly at his courier job and was more “financially stable” than most. She said of the house, “It was very beautiful. Wanis had a house made from bricks. . . . He even had *fans*.”

Wanis saw his situation differently. His monthly salary was about three hundred and sixty dollars—hardly a fortune, even in a poor country like Sudan. “I wasn’t saving,” he told me. “The money would go for school fees, food, things that my children wanted.”

That morning, Wanis left the house alone. While he headed east, by minibus, the R.S.F. fighters seized control of the airport. Shortly afterward, the Republican Palace, the seat of Sudan’s government, also fell.

Wanis made it to the hospital, but his visit with his cousin was interrupted by frequent gunfire. He tried to call home, but the phone network had gone down. In Ombada, Intisar heard from their children that warplanes were dropping bombs. She saw clouds of black smoke across the Nile. Intisar and Wanis are Christian, and the children began to pray for Wanis’s safety.

At the hospital, Wanis heard the explosions getting closer. At around 1 p.m., shots began hitting the building. Wanis and his cousin dived under a bed. Three hours later, Wanis got a phone signal, but he couldn’t reach Intisar. He called a relative who lived in their neighborhood and said, “Tell them

I'm still at the hospital." The relative soon phoned him back: Wanis's wife and children were safe.

When night fell, Wanis crept outside, flattening himself against walls to avoid being spotted by fighters. He arrived at a station where minibuses were departing for Ombada. That morning, he'd paid less than a dollar to cross the city. Now the price was nearly seven dollars.

The R.S.F. was still gaining ground, and its troops were pushing into Ombada. At around 9 p.m., amid ferocious shelling, Wanis arrived home. *God has protected him*, Intisar thought. She fell asleep as Wanis listened to the tumult outside. He feared that if they stayed in Khartoum all of them would die. The airport had been heavily damaged in the fighting, and the R.S.F. now controlled it, so returning to work was out of the question. With seven kids, he had limited options. The family's only realistic way out was a long bus ride to the Nuba Mountains, where they still had relatives. But Wanis couldn't yet afford nine tickets, which collectively cost about fifteen hundred dollars. And the route would take his family through the heart of the conflict.

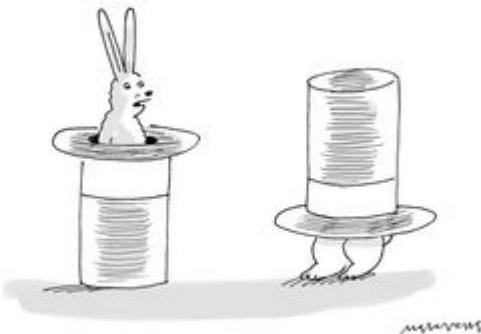
In Sudan's current civil war—its third since gaining its independence from Britain and Egypt, in 1956—casualty estimates range from sixty thousand to a hundred and fifty thousand. The country has few resources to count the dead, however, so the true death toll may never be known. Since 2024, Sudan has also been in a state of famine, in part because the fighting has impeded the dissemination of humanitarian relief. In addition to the R.S.F., at least sixteen militias are vying for power. The R.S.F. has exploited the chaos to ferry gold—which is extensively mined in Sudan—out of the country, making it the wealthiest militia by far. (As Sudan has deteriorated, the global price of gold has soared, recently reaching all-time highs.)

Hemedti, the R.S.F. warlord, is an Arab Sudanese who was born Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo to a camel-herding people who moved between Darfur and Chad, Sudan's neighbor to the west. Now in his fifties, Hemedti has become a billionaire, mostly thanks to the R.S.F.'s black-market trading of gold. He has close ties with the United Arab Emirates—a prime destination for the precious metal. Jérôme Tubiana, an adviser on refugee issues for Doctors Without Borders, has met Hemedti twice. "He's more a businessman than a

politician, and more a businessman than a warlord,” Tubiana said. “He was compelled to become a politician and a warlord by his tribe—and by the feeling that his business will not grow if he’s not also investing in the military and political fields.”

Arab supremacy is one of the R.S.F.’s animating ideas, and non-Arab Sudanese have increasingly become targets of racially motivated violence. According to Tom Perriello, the special envoy for Sudan during the Biden Administration, the R.S.F. has even poisoned non-Arab civilians in some parts of the country, reportedly by lacing bags of flour with fertilizer. (The Trump Administration hasn’t named a new envoy.)

According to a recent United Nations report, the “sheer scale of sexual violence” committed by the various combatants in Sudan is “staggering.” Mona Rishmawi, a member of the U.N.’s Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Sudan, told me, “We documented violations from both sides, from Sudanese Armed Forces and the R.S.F., but the kinds of violations that we documented by the R.S.F. were extremely severe. We are talking about systematic looting, systematic rape—it’s not incidental.” In November, the Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa reported that women in the Sudanese state of Al-Gezira, south of Khartoum, were dying by suicide to avoid being raped. Tapiwa Gomo, an official from the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, told me, “I’ve never been in a country where you find all the indicators at the worst level. Sudan is in that place—worst food crisis, worst hunger crisis, worst learning crisis, worst children’s crisis, worst displacement crisis, worst protection crisis.”



*“Some folks just aren’t cut out for show business, Arnold.”*  
Cartoon by Mick Stevens

Sudan’s civil war has also become a proxy conflict among regional actors. The U.A.E. has secretly shipped weapons to the R.S.F. by disguising them as humanitarian aid. Amgad Fareid Eltayeb, a Sudanese human-rights advocate, told me that the U.A.E.’s interventions were “prolonging suffering and prolonging the war.” (The Emirati Ambassador in Washington did not respond to requests for comment.) Saudi Arabia and Egypt, meanwhile, appear to be supporting the Sudanese government, which has also received weapons from Iran.

I visited Sudan late last year, spending two weeks in the province of South Kordofan, which includes the Nuba Mountains. Three-quarters of a million displaced persons, mostly from Darfur and Khartoum, have fled to the area. I travelled there with Jean-Baptiste Gallopin and Belkis Wille, war-crimes investigators with Human Rights Watch. Gallopin, a tall Frenchman, and Wille, a sandy-haired Swiss Turkish researcher, have tried to bring global attention to the conflict, which has received markedly less coverage than the wars in Ukraine and Gaza. In May, 2024, they released a report on mass atrocities committed by the R.S.F. in Darfur, which they reconstructed using hundreds of testimonies. An absence of electricity and cellphone coverage in Darfur, they noted, had allowed the R.S.F. to murder ten to fifteen thousand civilians without the world noticing. There had been “the perfect conditions for an attack without accountability,” Wille told me.

Gallopin and Wille had heard reports that racism against the Nuba was also leading to mass killings in South Kordofan. I followed them as they travelled through thick mud on snake-infested roads to visit camps for displaced persons. They conducted nearly a hundred interviews, which they later cross-referenced with satellite imagery of towns and villages that had been burned. Eventually, they concluded that members of the R.S.F. had been involved in many crimes against humanity in South Kordofan, where they levelled villages, “looted, raped women and girls, and killed men and boys who tried to intervene.”

Two months ago, the Sudanese Armed Forces took back the Presidential Palace, but conditions in the capital remain extremely dangerous, and the government’s recapture of Khartoum has led to an escalation of fighting throughout the country, as the R.S.F. struggles to rebound. Recently, the R.S.F. was accused of slaughtering more than a hundred civilians in Nahud, a city in the south. The R.S.F. has also acquired new weaponry, including exploding drones that were recently used to decimate the country’s main port.

Gallopin and Wille, in their Darfur report, called for “a civilian-protection mission for Sudan” composed of international peacekeepers. But when I spoke with Perriello, the former U.S. envoy, he said that there’s no will—in Khartoum or internationally—for such a move. “Sudan’s warring generals don’t want to concede power to an armed peacekeeping mission,” he said.

A spokesperson for the U.S. State Department told me that the Trump Administration is “focussed on resolving the crisis in Sudan,” adding, “We continue to engage with key regional and like-minded partners to urge the R.S.F. and the Sudanese Armed Forces to cease hostilities, allow unhindered humanitarian access to all parts of the country, protect civilians, and take steps toward a negotiated peace through inclusive dialogue. All external actors must cease military support to the belligerents.” The International Crisis Group, a think tank based in Brussels, recently warned that if the war in Sudan continues unabated it “could lead the country to fragment” into yet more pieces.

On the second day of the war, Intisar and Wanis took their children to church, even though fighting continued nearby. They were intimately

involved with their local branch of the Sudanese Church of Christ. Wanis said that, after the government had blocked construction of a church a few years earlier, they'd helped the group buy a different plot of land. When Father Yaagoub, the priest, gave his sermons, Wanis said, "it felt like he was speaking directly to you—God gave him this gift."

During the church service, a Sudanese-government plane dropped bombs nearby. "There were flames, there was smoke," Intisar told me. The R.S.F. began firing anti-aircraft weapons, and the Army responded with mortars, which fell among civilian homes. The family spent much of the day at home, hiding under their beds. "When we turned on our TV, we found that Khartoum had been destroyed," Wanis remembered. "It was a disaster."

Wanis and Intisar agreed that they had to leave the capital. But fighting had broken out across Sudan, and reports of atrocities were filtering in from the countryside: mass rapes, mass executions, torture. The couple's older twins, Tawfik and Tibian, who were twelve, began having nightmares in which men came to kill them. Tibian stopped eating.

Although every civilian was affected by the conflict, the non-Arab population was particularly at risk. A Sudanese women's-rights activist told me that "women from African ethnicities were the first who were targeted and raped in the early days of the war."

Two days after Khartoum erupted into violence, a plane strafed the Ombada church when Intisar was inside. Then she heard that a neighbor had been raped. Intisar became afraid even of going to the market. R.S.F. soldiers were entering homes and stealing gold, televisions, furniture. "If we tried to talk to them, they would shoot us," Intisar recalled. One day that May, she saw R.S.F. fighters stop a man who was driving through the neighborhood. They demanded his car. He refused, and they shot him. When bystanders tried to help the dying man, they were shot, too.

Wanis and Intisar had hoped that the fighting would end quickly, but it continued into the summer. Food and water grew scarce. Wanis gave most of what he could procure to his wife and kids. His blood pressure skyrocketed, and his entire body trembled whenever R.S.F. fighters began

shooting nearby. “If anyone gets the chance to leave, get out of here!” he advised others.

Intisar saw hunger hollowing out her husband’s cheeks. Fear was chiselling away at his faith. “We are not alone,” she reassured him. “God is with us.”

“I haven’t forgotten God, but in this situation how can we get food?” he said, with exasperation. “How are we going to survive like this?”

Some five hundred miles to the south, Wanis knew, a group composed mainly of Nuba rebels had gathered in the mountains and created a haven for civilians. One of his brothers, who had remained in the Nuba Mountains, assured him that the family would be largely out of danger there. But Wanis worried that they’d waited too long to escape. International workers had been evacuated in the first days of the conflict, but the roads leading out of the city were now controlled by soldiers, militiamen, and bandits.

Horrible things had indeed happened to people who’d travelled on the roads to the south. When the conflict broke out, Mudathir, a father of three who sang at Intisar and Wanis’s church, had been attending a Bible camp in the Nuba Mountains. He’d taken a bus with other attendees to return to Khartoum. At an R.S.F. checkpoint, he’d been stripped naked, forced to sit on thorns, and stabbed in his pelvis and buttocks. R.S.F. fighters had threatened to kill him and all the other Nuba travelling with him. At the last minute, an R.S.F. leader told the soldiers not to execute civilians. He saved Mudathir’s life.

Wanis decided that, despite the dangers of the southern route, the only realistic destination was the Nuba Mountains. Life in Egypt would be safer, but border authorities were charging astronomical sums for visas. He was determined to amass the fifteen hundred dollars for the bus tickets, but it was too dangerous for him to leave the house, let alone find a job.

In desperation, he reached out to Ismat, his old boss, who had fled to Dubai. “Are you still there?” Ismat asked.

Wanis replied, “I couldn’t find a way to get to go out, because I don’t have money.”

“How can I send you money?” Ismat asked.

Wanis expressed gratitude and replied that Ismat could use a money-transfer app called Bankak. But Sudan now had cellphone service only from 5 a.m. to 8 a.m. A Bankak agent in the city could help him receive the money transfer, but to meet him Wanis would have to cross through contested territory.

That evening, there was intense fighting between the Army and the R.S.F, but Wanis slipped outside anyway. “Even if you went at night, it was terrible,” Intisar told me. “He risked himself.” It felt like the weather had changed—exploded ordnance had made the summer air even hotter. The streets reeked of the metallic smell of gunpowder, and the heavy smoke set Wanis coughing.

He zigzagged his way to the house of the Bankak agent, who helped him receive an electronic transfer of fifteen hundred dollars from Ismat. Wanis thanked his former boss again. Then he rushed home to tell Intisar that they could finally afford to flee.

Sudan was one of the first sub-Saharan African countries to win its independence. But its British and Egyptian colonizers left behind a volatile mixture of ethnicities and resentments—and virtually unpoliceable desert borders. Sudan was then Africa’s largest country. Its northeastern population was heavily Arab, and its southern and western populations consisted mainly of non-Arabs. In 2011, much of the south officially broke off to form the new nation of South Sudan. What remained of Sudan was ethnically split. Regions such as Darfur and the Nuba Mountains had many Muslims, but other areas were largely animist and Christian. Khartoum was a little more cosmopolitan, but Arabs unquestionably held the power in the capital.

“Sudan” derives from the Arab word for “black,” but in the racialized vocabulary of the country Arabs have come to be called *ahmar*, or “red,” and people with black skin *azrag*, or “blue.” Racial animosities date to the

era of the Arabian slave trade. Khartoum was founded as a slave market, in 1821, and Arabs continued to raid southern areas, including the Nuba Mountains, for human chattel long after the practice was outlawed, in 1924. Slave raids were reported in Sudan as late as the early two-thousands, and the Arabic word *abid*—“slave”—is a common racial slur used to describe Black Sudanese.

The R.S.F.’s roots lie in a militia from western Sudan called the janjaweed, which Omar al-Bashir, the country’s dictator from 1989 to 2019, cynically aligned with to eliminate resistance to his rule. In 2003, after civilian unrest broke out in Darfur, the Sudanese Army and the janjaweed killed some fifty thousand non-Arab Darfuris. (Another quarter of a million people died of related causes, including starvation.) In 2008, the International Criminal Court started issuing arrest warrants for the perpetrators of the massacres in Darfur.

Among the Arabs who joined the janjaweed was Hemedti. With the encouragement of the Bashir regime, Hemedti’s nomadic group claimed land that had traditionally belonged to the Fur, a non-Arab population. (Hemedti has claimed that he joined the janjaweed only after non-Arabs raided his family’s camel herd.)

The government armed the janjaweed with modern weapons and vehicles. In 2006, Hemedti led brutal raids on the Fur. His fighters mass-raped women and crushed men with their vehicles. In 2009, Bashir’s government rewarded Hemedti for fighting Darfuri insurgents by making him a security adviser.

After South Sudan declared independence, the regions bordering the breakaway country remained restive, and the Bashir regime began deploying a new paramilitary force there. Its members had been recruited from among the janjaweed of Darfur, and its leader was Hemedti. The government named this paramilitary the Rapid Support Forces. “They gave them heavy weapons, modern weapons,” Wanis remembered. Soon, he noticed that R.S.F. soldiers were even guarding the Army’s headquarters, in Khartoum.

Alex de Waal, the executive director of the World Peace Foundation and a scholar of modern Sudan, told me, “Bashir really turned Hemedti into a celebrity of the new militarism.” But the government wasn’t always able to manage the R.S.F. In Darfur, the two forces fought for control of checkpoints—which made significant profits through shakedowns. In 2015, R.S.F. soldiers who’d been sent to pacify the people in the Nuba Mountains mutinied, commandeered some hundred and fifty trucks, and took off for their home bases in Darfur.

The same year, a coalition that included Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E. attacked Yemen’s Houthi rebels. Air strikes were not enough to defeat the Yemenis, but the Saudi Arabians and the Emiratis were loath to have their armies engage in ground combat. So they turned to Sudan. Bashir sent forces from both the Army and the R.S.F. to Yemen in return for payment. As many as forty thousand R.S.F. fighters were deployed.

Hemedti cashed in on his newfound leverage with the Emiratis. In Darfur, he seized Jabal Amer, a mountain with rich seams of gold, and virtually all the mine’s product ended up in the U.A.E. According to Global Witness, an anti-corruption N.G.O., Hemedti used shell companies to funnel the profits from gold trading back to the R.S.F.

In 2019, Hemedti sent R.S.F. fighters to Libya to support an Emirati-backed general in the war there. After being paid forty million dollars by an unknown benefactor, he travelled to Dubai and bought six hundred Toyotas that could be mounted with machine guns. Meanwhile, tens of billions of dollars’ worth of gold was being funnelled to the U.A.E. each year, a significant portion of it through companies linked to Hemedti.

While Hemedti was becoming a warlord, a dour intelligence colonel named Abdel Fattah al-Burhan was climbing the ranks of the Sudanese Army. Bashir had deployed Burhan to West Darfur, where some of the regime’s worst massacres of civilians had occurred.

In 2019, the Bashir regime collapsed after thousands of people marched in the streets, demanding a less repressive and more ethnically inclusive government. Among them were Wanis and Nafisa, the Nuba schoolteacher.

When a technocratic caretaker President was installed, Wanis was overjoyed.



*“Remember when pockets in our dresses made us happy?”*

Cartoon by Amy Hwang

Nafisa, however, understood that Arab supremacists continued to hold sway in the capital. Despite Sudan’s new government, the real power clearly lay with Hemedti and Burhan, who now commanded the Army. The soldiers who had committed the worst excesses against non-Arabs in Darfur and in the Nuba Mountains had more power than ever.

In 2021, the R.S.F. and the Army overthrew the civilian-caretaker government. Burhan and Hemedti initially shared power, but their alliance quickly fell apart, in part because the R.S.F., with its racist ideology, was angry that Nuba men had been allowed to join the Army. Moreover, Hemedti felt that Burhan, who is from a town overlooking the Nile, did not respect nomads like him. A person who has been involved in negotiations to end the current conflict told me, “You can feel when you talk to Hemedti that he has that feeling—like *he*’s the real victim. He wasn’t allowed into the country club. He was looked down on by the other guys, and he went out and showed them: ‘I’m a better general and a better businessman, *and* I’m better diplomatically.’ ” Hemedti’s petty resentments had led to all-out war.

Mudathir, the man who had returned from the Bible camp, was also determined to take his family south. He’d used only leaves and traditional

remedies to heal his stab wounds—getting proper medical care had become almost impossible. The R.S.F. was regularly raiding his neighborhood at night, killing, stealing, and raping. He even heard a rumor that Black people were being killed for their organs. “Let’s go to Nuba Mountains,” his daughters said to him. “If we stay here, we will die.” (The R.S.F did not respond to several e-mails, but it has previously blamed the mass killings on outlaws engaging in “tribal conflict.”)

On June 17th, Mudathir heard a commotion outside his house. R.S.F. fighters in khaki uniforms were stealing a man’s money. “Then they raped him,” Mudathir said. “They passed him from one to another.”

Once the fighters left, Mudathir ran out to help the man. But the soldiers returned, carrying a can of gasoline. “Why are you bothering with this man?” one fighter asked.

“He’s a human being, just like me,” Mudathir replied.

The fighters poured fuel on the man. Mudathir tried to stop them, but they were armed. The man was weeping as the fighters set him on fire. A soldier warned Mudathir, “Your turn is coming.”

Mudathir went back inside. A few hours later, a neighbor called out to him. R.S.F. fighters in five Land Cruisers had pulled up on their street, saying that they had come to kill Mudathir. Panicked, Mudathir gathered his three daughters. But he couldn’t find his wife, and he was afraid to shout for her. He and his daughters silently scaled the neighbor’s wall. The neighbor told Mudathir to hide under a bed, behind two jerricans of wine. He wedged his lanky frame into the hiding spot and prayed for his wife.

The R.S.F. searched Mudathir’s house, and, failing to find him, abducted his wife. That evening, an announcement was made over the megaphone of the local mosque: “Any Nuba must leave. We want to clean the country.” The R.S.F. was ostensibly carrying out an operation to rid the neighborhood of people who sympathized with its opponents, but it was targeting only one ethnicity.

Mudathir faced a dreadful choice: stay behind and search for his wife, risking his and his children's lives, or flee to safety. He decided to save his children. By 8 a.m., he and his girls were on a bus heading south.

Intisar and Wanis made their final preparations to escape. Intisar was devastated to be abandoning their home, but she also understood that the city as they knew it was gone. "Khartoum has nothing," she said. Everyone's belongings were stuffed into two suitcases and one smaller bag. Wanis had heard that R.S.F. soldiers, many of whom were illiterate, might mistake Sudanese national I.D.s—which feature the state emblem, a bird carrying a shield—for Army I.D.s, so everyone's cards were left behind. Intisar lamented that she couldn't bring her beloved cooking pots and angel figurines. "We'll get these things," Wanis told her. "God will give us everything."

Before dawn on August 6th, Intisar, Wanis, and their seven children went to the bus station. The proprietor of the bus line, a Nuba named Sharif, collected fares in cash. About seventy people crowded onto a vehicle intended for forty-five. Sharif had amassed more than thirty-three hundred dollars from the travellers—a fortune in an immiserated country.

Before Wanis climbed on board, he put one of the suitcases in a pile of luggage on the ground. Suddenly, half a dozen R.S.F. fighters arrived at the station, demanding money from the passengers. One of Sharif's employees asked why they were taking the bus fares of people who were trying to flee. A fighter grabbed the employee by the neck. "Shoot this man!" another soldier cried. A shot rang out.

Wanis, watching through the bus window, saw that the bullet had missed the employee. Instead, it had struck a child, who lay dead on the street. The R.S.F. troopers continued to fire. The driver kicked the bus into gear and sped off. The suitcases were still on the ground.

The road south from Khartoum was a black tarmac strip through flat scrubland. August is the rainy season, and the countryside was boggy. The bus carrying Wanis's family passed through several R.S.F. checkpoints without incident. *Perhaps the trip will be easy after all*, Wanis thought.

At midday, the driver announced that the bus had a mechanical issue. He pulled over at a rest stop and told the families that they could grab a snack for their children. Through the bus window, Wanis saw scores of uniformed R.S.F. fighters and numerous vehicles mounted with heavy guns.

The soldiers ordered everyone off the bus, and told the men to get on their knees. When an elderly passenger protested that he was too old, the fighters beat him with a whip. Wanis kept his eyes lowered. There was nobody around who could hold the R.S.F. troopers to account.

A man wearing a captain's triple stars addressed the passengers: "If there are any soldiers here, we need them to talk *before* we find them." He told the men to remove their shirts, and ran his fingers over their bare shoulders —perhaps looking for bruises caused by rifle recoil.

The captain began questioning Wanis in an Arabic dialect that Wanis barely understood: "Where are you going?"

"The Nuba Mountains."

"Why? Most people flee to Egypt or abroad."

"This is my land. If I die, I will die in my land."

The captain ordered Wanis to lie down. Wanis's children began crying and shouting, "Father!" The captain beat Wanis, bashing his head repeatedly. "You Nuba people, you stand with the Army," the captain said. Wanis kept repeating that he wasn't a soldier.

After the captain was done abusing Wanis, he let him board the bus, but not before telling him, "We're supposed to kill you like dogs."

A few hours later, at an R.S.F. checkpoint outside the town of El-Obeid, the men on the bus were again ordered out. Fighters began thrashing the passengers with camel-hide whips. But a senior trooper intervened. "We were supposed to rape you, to use you," one of the soldiers told the women as they climbed back onto the bus. "But we didn't, because he came to defend you." It was the same checkpoint where Mudathir—the Bible-camp

attendee—had been saved by the kind R.S.F. trooper. Wanis didn’t know if it had been the same man.

Staring at the flat grassland from the bus window, Wanis could see Jabal al-Dair, a cluster of rocky peaks, glimmering in the distance. If they avoided disaster, by the next day he and his family would be safe among their own people in the lush, rolling landscape of the Nuba range. The area had long been a refuge for the Nuba, many of whom are descendants of people who were pushed out of other parts of Sudan by Arab raiders.

When Sudan was colonized, in the nineteenth century, British administrators saw the Nuba as noble savages, and closed off the Nuba Mountains in a bid to preserve “primitive” traditions. As a result, when Sudan declared independence the area remained poorly developed and had few schools. The Arabs leading the new country viewed the Nuba—and most southerners—as backward.

Sudanese in the south began to rebel against the north in the nineteen-fifties. Nuba farmers initially didn’t participate, but after racially discriminatory laws were passed, in the early eighties, they joined the fight, led by a group called the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement, or S.P.L.M. In 1983, the country’s second civil war broke out.

Around this time, Chevron discovered oil in the Nuba Mountains. In 1989, Omar al-Bashir, who had just taken power, became determined to quell the restive Nuba region, in no small part because he wanted to exploit its natural resources.

Wanis was then living in the mountain village of Al-Geney. He’d begun helping his father with the family farm, taking cattle out to graze and cultivating the soil. The Nuba were traditionally agrarian, but by the late twentieth century raising cattle had become an important part of their livelihood. Wanis’s father, Kafitera, told him, “You need to be wealthy and have cows, goats, and chickens.”

Arab raiders began to besiege the village. One night, Wanis was awakened by gunshots coming from the nearby compound of Kafitera’s brother-in-law. Wanis ran over and saw that a wooden fence was on fire. His relative

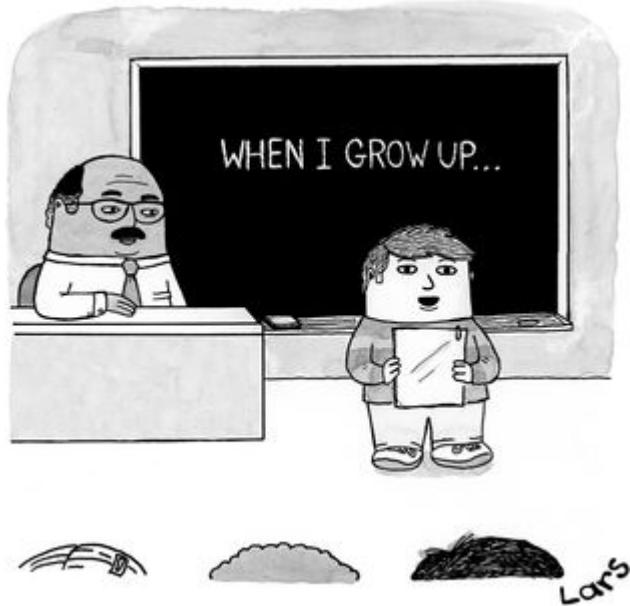
was lying dead on the floor of the barn, a pool of blood surrounding his chest. After killing him, Arab raiders had stolen about a dozen cattle, including a fat milking cow.

Throughout the year, Wanis heard gunfire around his village. Arab raiders burned entire settlements. As the violence increased, Wanis and his family moved from their village to Dilling, a lowland town of sixty thousand people. Reports that terrible things were happening to the Nuba filtered in from the mountains. Wanis used a shortwave radio to tune in to rebel broadcasts from Ethiopia. John Garang De Mabior, a southern rebel with a Ph.D. in economics from Iowa State University, spoke of a “New Sudan” in which all ethnicities would be treated equally—an idea that resonated deeply with Wanis.

In 1992, the government pressured Muslim clerics to declare a holy war against Nuba who opposed the regime. A former security chief in the region said in an interview that “the ongoing order to the troops is to kill anything that is alive . . . to destroy everything, to burn the area, so that nothing can exist there.” Nuba men were herded into “peace camps,” where they died of starvation and disease, and women were forced into marriages with Arabs.

During the second civil war, which lasted until 2005, an estimated six hundred thousand Nuba died, from violence, famine, or disease. But the rebels held on, despite almost no outside support. It’s a matter of intense pride for the Nuba today that the Bashir regime failed to perpetrate a genocide against them.

The bus entered Al-Rahad, a railway hub near a large river basin. It was stopped at another R.S.F. checkpoint, and troopers searched the travellers. Wanis had a Samsung A13 phone and some cash; the troopers confiscated both. “If they found something nice, they took it,” Wanis said. After collecting the loot, the troopers allowed the bus to leave town, but one warned the passengers, “If you go into a mouse’s hole, we’ll reach you. If you go to the ends of the earth, we’ll reach you. You just ran from death in Khartoum. But, even in the Nuba Mountains, you’ll find death.”



*"I want to raise corporate profit margins through cost-cutting measures and revenue-optimization strategies!"*

*Cartoon by Lars Kenseth*

Intisar was miserable—everything she owned had been stolen. After a while, though, she saw the first Nuba peaks. “I saw my mountains, and I felt that it is not so important,” she said. “I cheered up and realized that the clothes were nothing.”

The bus stopped for the night in a Nuba village. It had been two days since Intisar, Wanis, and their children had eaten a proper meal. The villagers brought them porridge and water. The children were so traumatized that they could barely stomach food, but they were touched by the generosity.

The next morning, the bus continued further into the mountains, beyond areas controlled by the R.S.F. The passengers were now in territory held by the S.P.L.M.-N.—an offshoot of the rebel group that had formed in the eighties. (The original S.P.L.M. now governs South Sudan.) The S.P.L.M.-N.’s leader, Abdelaziz al-Hilu, still adheres to Garang’s vision of a multiethnic New Sudan.

Wanis was happy to be in an S.P.L.M.-N. stronghold. He had kept a secret from most of his friends and family: in 2005, while he and Intisar were starting a family in Khartoum, he had joined the S.P.L.M. At the time, the

country was relaxing restrictions on freedom of expression. He studied a fifteen-point program, inspired by Garang's thinking, that included plans to develop the country industrially and encourage good governance, and he taught the program to newer recruits. In 2011, the Army raided S.P.L.M. offices and arrested members. Wanis had been careful not to provide the S.P.L.M. with his full identity, so the police never targeted him. After the arrests, Wanis kept his head down and focussed on work and church, but he still believed in a New Sudan.

Even in the mountains, the R.S.F. remained an active threat to the Nuba. In late 2022, fighters from the group had attacked civilians near the mountain town of Kadugli. Jérôme Tubiana, the Doctors Without Borders adviser, told me, "The tribalization of the conflict in Sudan is even more obvious in the Nuba Mountains than in Darfur." Noura, a tea seller in Kadugli, told me that racist Arab Sudanese had "abused Nuba people in the market," adding, "When you worked, sometimes they didn't even give you money. They just treated us like slaves." She said that her employer, an Arab, had tried to slip poison into her food.

The bus dropped off Wanis and his family at a camp for displaced persons called Al-Hilu, for the S.P.L.M.-N. leader. It had only rudimentary provisions for sanitation and shelter. As he and Intisar settled in with their children, they were urged not to worry about material possessions. "The things that have been taken from you are not a big problem," a representative of a local aid group told them. "The most important thing is your spirit." But it was hard not to think of food. The fighting and the displacement caused by the civil war have led to mass starvation in Sudan. Between seven hundred thousand and a million displaced Sudanese have fled to the mountain region, perhaps doubling the population there. Feeding so many people with only locally grown crops is impossible. In Dilami County, which I visited with the Human Rights Watch researchers, an official said that twenty-eight thousand displaced persons were living in six camps. It was dangerous to venture outside them: the territory is being contested by government forces, the R.S.F., and the S.P.L.M.-N. (Making matters even more fraught, Abdelaziz al-Hilu, the S.P.L.M.-N. leader, recently made an uneasy tactical alliance with the R.S.F.)

Al-Hilu is just north of a mountain pocked with caves. Intisar told me that she had grown up in this area. When she was a child, her family had hidden out in the caves during government raids. Now she was back with Wanis and six of their seven children. (Their oldest, the nineteen-year-old Takwa, had travelled farther into rebel-held territory to look for a job.) Conditions were grim. Stick-thin children filled the air with moaning and crying; their bellies were swollen. Their parents scraped what little they could out of the earth.

Intisar and Wanis's children had never been to the Nuba Mountains and knew little of their family's roots, and at first they were scared of the local people. Southern rebels were known as *anyanya*, or "snake venom," and children in Khartoum had gossiped that the *anyanya* were a savage mixture of animal and human. One of Intisar's children said to her, "People told us that the *anyanya* have tails, but these people don't have tails."

Wanis had become a camp representative who interfaced with relief organizations, and he was trying to negotiate more supplies of Plumpy'Nut, a peanut-based food that can stave off severe malnutrition in children. At the time, a major source of Plumpy'Nut was U.S.A.I.D., which the Trump Administration has since gutted. (The State Department spokesperson said that the Administration is reviewing its aid package to Sudan in order to make it more "effective, efficient, and aligned with U.S. interests," and insisted that other donors must step in so that an "outsized burden will not continue to fall on American taxpayers.") But little humanitarian aid can cross the front lines. Juma Idris Kuku, the regional director of the S.P.L.M.-N.'s humanitarian wing, told me that in September, 2024, more than four hundred people starved to death in territory controlled by the group. Near the town of Kauda, I visited the Mother of Mercy hospital, where an American surgeon, Tom Catena, has worked since 2008. "It's been five to ten times our usual numbers of malnourished kids," he said.

Other parts of Sudan may be even worse off. In August, 2024, the U.N. confirmed that Darfur's Zamzam refugee camp—which has a population of half a million—had passed famine thresholds. Many experts believe it is only because of incomplete data that the U.N. has not declared a famine in virtually every region of Sudan. Each party in the conflict has restricted

humanitarian aid. The U.N. has been largely ineffective at pressuring the government to allow aid into contested regions. A U.N. representative told me that “there is a weaponization of hunger and starvation,” adding that the organization could deliver aid only if safety was assured for humanitarian workers—and even then it needed the Sudanese government’s approval.

Although living in Al-Hilu was not easy, Wanis was grateful to be there. “I’m so very pleased to be home with my people, my community,” he said. At the same time, his children often had to subsist on boiled “leaves, beans, and grasses.” The camp didn’t even have a water pump. Fuel was absurdly expensive. Still, anything was better than returning to Khartoum. “I have organized myself to stay here,” he said. “My kids blame me for moving to the capital. They told me, ‘You have such a beautiful land, and you let us stay *there*? ’ ”

When we met, Wanis was emaciated, his neatly pressed shirt hanging baggily over his frame. His plastic flip-flops were worn out. Nafisa, the schoolteacher, is also at the camp, and barely recognized him when he first arrived.

While at Al-Hilu, I met Nada, a woman in her thirties who was singing and skipping for the amusement of three children. She was the sister of Mudathir, the man whose wife had been kidnapped in Khartoum. Nada wore a long black robe and held her belly gently with her right hand.

She invited me to her hut, made of sticks lashed together with plastic sheeting. I asked about her escape from the capital, and she broke down while talking about her experience at an R.S.F. checkpoint. “They do bad things to you,” she said.

The next day, Mudathir, who was also at Al-Hilu, told me that armed men at the stop had raped her. Nine months later, in February, 2024, Nada had given birth to a boy, whom she named Kalu. Not long afterward, she sensed that she was carrying another child, and went to the doctor. She was told that the pregnancy was a phantom. “There is a problem in her head,” Mudathir said.

I asked Mudathir about his wife. He said that he still didn't know if she was alive. "I just pray," he said.

On another day, Wanis greeted me with a pained look and indicated that I should follow him. We trudged past long grass and skeletal huts and arrived at a small compound, where we heard sobbing. Inside, about a dozen people had gathered around a woman in a faded red-green-and-yellow veil. The woman's eight-year-old son, Najim al-Din, had died shortly before dawn. The previous evening, he had been so starved that he could barely stand.

A man with a scruffy beard, wearing a Hawaiian shirt, approached me: Najim al-Din's uncle Issam. The boy's father, Issam said, had been killed when R.S.F. fighters raided his town, Habilia, in January, 2024. The R.S.F. had lined up Nuba civilians and executed them. Some fifteen thousand people had since fled, including Issam, who had been shot in the hand by fighters. He showed me a finger with a chunk missing.

Wanis and I later walked to Najim al-Din's grave, which was on a hillock surrounded by trees and grass. A man in a white robe named Adam joined us. He was also from Habilia, and he knew Najim al-Din's family. He had dug the boy's grave. Adam said that Hemediti was the man most responsible for what the Nuba had endured.

Adam told us that he had begun digging at sunrise. Fresh branches had been placed atop the earth. Pink flowers blossomed on the stump of a nearby tree. In the background, the mountains rose over the swaying grass. ♦

*Nicolas Niarhos* has contributed to *The New Yorker* since 2014 and received a 2023 Edward R. Murrow Award for his work on the *New Yorker Radio Hour*. He is the author of “[\*The Elements of Power\*](#).”

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# Takes

- **[Mark Singer on John Bainbridge’s “The Super-Americans”](#)**

By Mark Singer | As an Oklahoman, I knew too well the Texan behaviors that Bainbridge anatomized.

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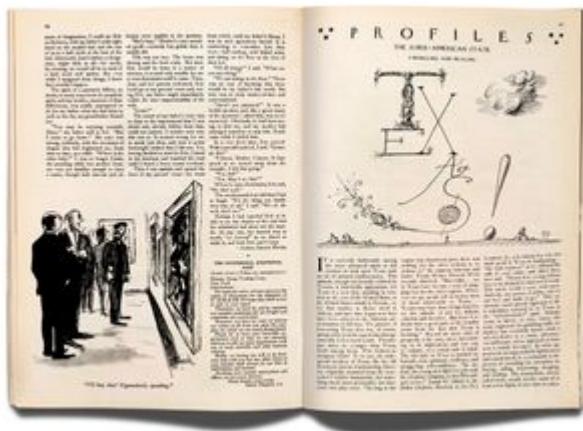
[Takes](#)

# Mark Singer on John Bainbridge's “The Super-Americans”



By [Mark Singer](#)

May 18, 2025



March 11, 1961

[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 1974, a staffer at *The New Yorker* whom I'd met once called to say that the magazine's editor, William Shawn, wanted to see me. This was unexpected. I was twenty-three, living in Connecticut, working for another publication. I'd grown up in a family that nobody would've described as bookish, and I'd been reading *The New Yorker* for months, not years. On the train to Grand Central, I crammed James Thurber's "[The Years with Ross](#)," unable to fathom why I'd been brought in. Mr. Shawn, it turned out, had liked a lengthy Norman Mailer parody that I'd inserted into my college thesis, to pad it out; I'd shared it with someone who'd shared it with Shawn. He offered me a job as a Talk of the Town reporter. Afterward, panic leached into my elation. Hadn't Mr. Shawn considered that an aptitude for parody might indicate (as I knew to be the case) that I lacked a voice of my own?

My new office was on the same floor as the magazine's archive, and I was encouraged to graze among black binders containing the work of staff writers. I blissfully plodded through the collections of deceased greats, along with the work of many writers still in, or not far past, their primes. Among the latter was John Bainbridge, an author of deadpan, droll Profiles and reported pieces. A self-effacing Midwesterner turned Anglophile, he had recently expatriated to Bath, England. One of his masterly, unshowy gems was "[Toots's World](#)," a 1950 Profile of Toots Shor, a gregarious and bibulous saloonkeeper and restaurateur whose circle of pals included Joe DiMaggio, Frank Sinatra, Chief Justice Earl Warren, and a multitude of loyal patrons (a.k.a. "crumb bums") unbothered by Shor's liberally dispensed insults. Bainbridge, an assiduous listener who, according to his editor Gardner Botsford, "could get the Sphinx to talk," had a pitch-perfect ear for dialogue: "Drinkin'—that's my way of prayin' "; "You know what a senator is to me? A guy who makes a hundred fifty bucks a week."

A decade later, the magazine published a [series](#) of [articles](#) that became "[The Super-Americans](#)," Bainbridge's best-known book, which Botsford described as a "reduction of the entire state of Texas into one elegant, funny, perceptive volume." Bainbridge had uprooted his family and moved to Texas for nearly a year, and he came to believe that the condescension with which many Americans regard Texans was a form of self-loathing: "The faults of Texas, as they are recorded by most visitors, are scarcely

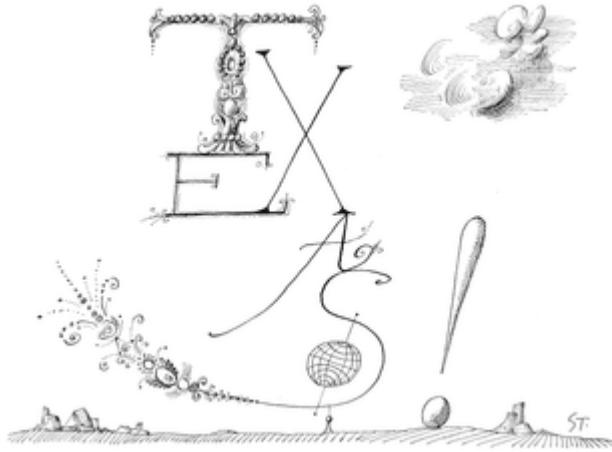
unfamiliar, for they are the same ones that Europeans have been taxing us with for some three hundred years: boastfulness, cultural underdevelopment, materialism, and all the rest. In enough ways to make it interesting, Texas is a mirror in which Americans see themselves reflected, not life-sized but, as in a distorting mirror, bigger than life.”

With wry, anthropological detachment, Bainbridge focussed on the excesses of the Super-American archetype—his now quaint shorthand was “millionaires”—who believed in unfettered capitalism, racial segregation, material ostentation, minimal taxation, and male entitlement, and who had an aggressive intolerance for any federal encroachments upon their state. (He quotes from the *Dallas News*: “Texas is a country in itself. It started out that way, and, in resources, tastes, spirit, and aspiration, it is a land apart.”) Though “The Super-Americans” had a wide readership, I felt that I was a member of its target audience. Having grown up in Oklahoma, a state dominated by the petroleum industry and infected with a boosterism that was basically Texas wannabe-ism, I knew too well the attitudes that Bainbridge anatomized.

In 1982, I sent Bainbridge a fan letter, and I received a warm reply. Five years later, while reporting in England, I spent a congenial afternoon with him. Among the topics we discussed was how I had by then uprooted my own family and repatriated to Oklahoma, for a year and a half, to report and write [my first book](#) (about the failure of a small bank, which helped trigger the bust of an oil-and-gas boom). John and I never saw each other again, but we corresponded occasionally; when he died, in 1992, I wrote his obituary for the magazine, our shared home. It felt like the least I could do.



[\*\*Read the original story.\*\*](#)



## The Super-American State—I: Wheeling and Dealing

Texas embodies America, and the state's millionaires embody Texas.

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*An earlier version of this article misquoted a line in a piece by John Bainbridge.*



Mark Singer has been a staff writer at *The New Yorker* since 1974 and is the author of “[Trump and Me.](#)”

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# Shouts & Murmurs

- **[Production Meeting](#)**

By Larry David | Not so different from a Trump Cabinet meeting. Jeff Garlin: “When we’re in a scene together, I’m just watching you in awe.” Susie Essman: “How lucky we are to be in the presence of such a genius.”

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[\*\*Shouts & Murmurs\*\*](#)

# Production Meeting

By [\*\*Larry David\*\*](#)

May 19, 2025



*Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez*

Before filming each episode of “Curb Your Enthusiasm,” we held a production meeting. These are similar in format to a Presidential Cabinet meeting. The heads of each department, the producers, and the cast would sit around a big conference table and make comments on any and all things regarding the show. Only one of those meetings was taped. The transcript:

*LARRY DAVID:* Welcome, everyone. The ratings came in for last week's show, and they were through the roof. Numbers you would not have believed were possible. They're saying a hundred million, maybe more. Could be two hundred million. Nobody's ever seen anything like it. Just tremendous. And so many stars want to be in it. The biggest stars—Tom Hanks. Leo. Margot Robbie, who's so beautiful. What a beautiful girl. She's Australian, you know. You wouldn't believe how popular “Curb” is there. All over the world. And in New York it's crazy—I can't even walk down the street. I have to be carried in a suitcase. O.K., let's go around the room. Jeff, you start.

*JEFF GARLIN (actor):* I thought last week's show was amazing and I've never seen you funnier. I mean, you're always funny, but you went into the comedy stratosphere. When we're in a scene together, I'm just watching you in awe. I truly do not know how you do it. So honored to be a part of this.

*L.D.:* Thank you, Jeff. Susie?

*SUSIE ESSMAN (actor):* Jeff, you took the words right out of my mouth. But what I find most surprising, which isn't talked about very much, is how handsome you are, Larry. Your comedy is so brilliant that people overlook the fact that there's a stunning man behind it. I have no doubt that you could've been a big movie star, if you chose to do that. Fortunately for us and the world, you chose comedy. I think I speak for everyone here when I say how lucky we are to be in the presence of such a genius.

*L.D.:* Well, I've always felt that my looks were underrated. Sometimes I'll catch a reflection in a store window and say to myself, "What a gorgeous man!" And then I realize it's me. Crazy! O.K., let's hear from J.B.

*J. B. SMOOVE (actor):* Man, you have no idea how much you've done for me. I used to hate white people—and then I met you. How can I hate white people if you're white? You are a good, white man. And, if I were a white man, I'd want to be you. You are the Martin Luther King of comedy.

*L.D.:* I was a great admirer of his. And many people have told me he would've been a big fan of mine. Laura?

*LAURA STREICHER (executive producer):* If I ever think about a person who I hope never dies, it's you. And what I know—and what most people don't know—is how charitable you are. (*To the group*) He doesn't tell anyone, but I happen to know that every Saturday he goes to hospitals and nursing homes—and just by the sheer force of his personality makes everyone feel better.

*L.D.:* I told you that in confidence.

*L.S.*: But people need to know. On the set we call you Mr. Larry Rogers because of how sweet and kind you are.

*L.D.*: Big fan of mine. Next?

*JEFF SCHAFFER (director)*: The impact you've had on comedy all over the world—and on other planets, if they're observing us—is profound. And if, in fact, the aliens are watching the show, they're getting the most valuable life lessons imaginable. Every day with you is a master class in comedy, but getting to know you has been the greatest blessing of my life.

*L.D.*: Thank you, Jeff. Leslie?

*LESLIE SCHILLING (costume designer)*: I have perhaps the best job on this production. When you come out of the dressing room wearing something I picked out, I feel like I'm going to faint. Susie said earlier that no one talks about your face. Well, it bothers me even more that nobody talks about your body. The word "perfect" comes to mind, the way things just drape on you. You easily could've been a model.

*L.D.*: I had offers, but everyone told me how hilarious I was, so I chose comedy. Do I regret it? Honestly, sometimes I do. I could've been a great model, because I have a tremendous metabolism. I can eat anything I want and not gain weight. It's a rare trait. Helen?

*HELEN KALOGNOMOS (makeup)*: Leslie thinks she's lucky to do your wardrobe. Imagine how I feel getting to do your makeup—because I get to stare at that face every day for twenty minutes. The reality is, you don't even need makeup. You have such beautiful skin. Full confession: I could be done in five minutes, but I really try to drag it out. And sometimes you even talk to me. I'll tell my friends, "Larry David talked to me today." Anyway, I've ordered a new concealer for you from France. It's very expensive, and the show refused to pay for it, so I'm paying for it out of my own pocket. I don't care.

*L.D.*: So nice of you. I hope it's not cakey.

(*A woman bursts into the room.*)

*WOMAN:* There you are! I want my money, asshole!

*L.D.:* Hey, we're in a production meeting here. What are you talking about?

*WOMAN:* You promised me you'd pay for my abortion and I never heard from you again!

*L.D.:* I don't even know you! You're crazy!

*WOMAN:* You gave me a venereal disease and ruined my life! I'm going to kill you!

*L.D.:* Somebody stop her! Get that knife! Help! (*Tape ends.*) ♦

*Larry David* created, co-wrote, and starred in “Curb Your Enthusiasm” and is a co-creator of “Seinfeld.” He has contributed to *The New Yorker* since 2011.

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| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

# Fiction

- **“Fairy Pools”**

By Patricia Lockwood | There is an exchange, she thought. Something passes between this life and the next that allows you to be here for a while.

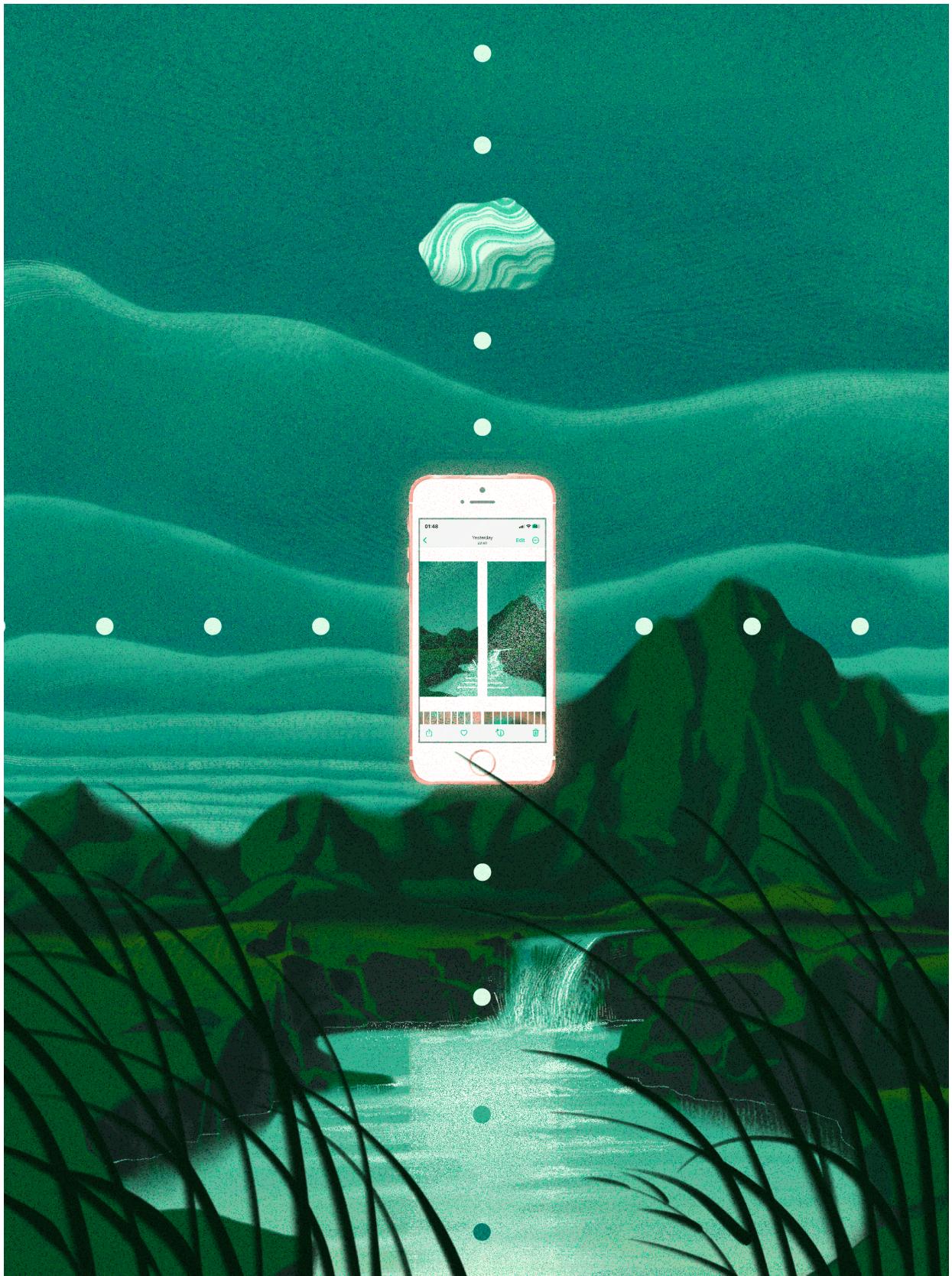
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[Fiction](#)

# Fairy Pools

By [Patricia Lockwood](#)

May 18, 2025



*Illustration by Raven Jiang*

As soon as she touched down in Scotland, she believed in fairies. No, as soon as the rock and velvet of Inverness rushed up to her where she was falling, a long way through the hagstone hole of a cloud, and she plunged down into the center of the cloud and stayed there. You used to set a child out for them, she thought, and was caught in the arms and awoke on the green hillside.

“Sco’land,” she heard her mother say, in a voice weak from lack of iced tea—they were barely alive after five hours on the runway in Chicago and another ten in the air. “It’s not the first real day,” her husband kept reminding them. After a short stay in Inverness that night, they would go on to Skye tomorrow. He jangled a set of keys. In Ireland, two years before, it had transpired that her husband, a contrarian, was born to drive on the wrong side of the road, while her mother, a worse contrarian—whom she had defeated by marrying the former—planned to drag them all to Hell that way. “I’ll drive,” he told her mother now, very loudly, “and you sit on the passenger side and slam your foot to the floor whenever I get too close to a low stone wall.” “Deal,” her mother agreed. She would also provide commentary, and throw in those sharp little gasps for free.

[Read an interview with the author for the story behind the story.](#)

As for her, she was silent and let herself be carried on and on toward the green hillside. The trees corresponded to an obsessive high-school reading of “The White Goddess.” The sheep were spray-painted according to who owned them. Actual lambs frisked in the fields, on legs like little girls’. Wait, she thought, am I confused about changelings? You put them out—did you get anything back? Or they were taken from you in the night, and you woke up one morning . . .

Her sister sat apart from her in the rental car. Her head was full of the Child, her child, who’d been lost to them all just that January. From time to time she saw her sister flicking through pictures on her phone with a chipped hot-pink manicure, so quickly that the Child appeared to be alive. It was as if her sister were smoothing a forehead, or touching away an eyelash, or wiping milk from a mouth, and once again the whole life was in motion.

“Wide load,” she heard her mother saying to the asses of the sheep, as if they were women.

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Upon arrival at the hotel, instead of taking pictures of the North Sea she took pictures of elk bellowing on the walls and a little guy who appeared to be penetrating his bagpipes. This was her typical routine in other countries—to first take pictures of their pictures. It was a way of entering into the spirit, as was eating the complimentary oatcakes that had been left in your room, with its conscious and unconscious plaids: light, shadow, her hand crossed over her sister’s, and that life called through-the-window.

Which called them out. She picked up a stone from the shore of the North Sea, with a ring of mica around the top, flashing like the city on the water, and they piled into the car to go looking for it, wrapped in a series of preposterous scarves. When she thought of changelings, wasn’t it mostly of the way they were wrapped—in rough gray cloth, with a triangle of face shining through?

Between the time her mother had gone into her hotel room and the time she reappeared in the hall, her jeans had become wet. They would not dry for the rest of the trip. The wetness came to represent, in their minds, the iced tea she could never get. “Tea . . . with ice?” she would ask hopefully, making a series of gestures to communicate the concept of iced tea, and would be brought a cup with three cubes in it by someone who looked almost medically concerned.

“Tea . . . with ice?” she asked at the Jamaican restaurant, holding up her hands like shocked daisies next to her eyes. They had gone to three or four places before finding one that was open. The chef, in a white hat, laughed and entered her mother’s conspiracy.

The night flowed like just-struck oil outside the windows; she tried to fix the details of it in her mind. She never remembered the first night in another country—it was as if the change in altitude threw her off, or she really had touched down in another world. The restaurant, she would not remember later, was actually called Kool Runnings.

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

[Listen to Patricia Lockwood read “Fairy Pools.”](#)

Back at the hotel bar, the bartender told them the lamentable story of Irn-Bru. It had once been sweeter; now it was less sweet. There were petitions, and people hoarding it by the case in their flats. She ordered a can from him to make friends, for she saw no other way of doing it. Scottish bartenders had been given the opposite instructions to American ones. The taste, a pink electrocution of the tongue, was indescribable—and there was a version that was more so? She decided that if she were presented with a petition she would sign it. And also support Scottish independence, if that was correct. Maybe, now that they were friends, she could ask the bartender. But “Tea . . . with ice?” her mother asked him, and the chance was gone.

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And so that was Loch Ness? She followed her sister through the ruins of the castle that overlooked it, taking pictures of her in empty windows. Her gold hair whipped. Her pink lipstick, drawn far beyond the outline of her mouth, smiled without her. People had really lived here. Could you still surprise someone’s breathing near the ceiling, as you could upstairs in her sister’s house? How long did that last?

Her husband rubbed his hands. Finally, a country where the women were wearing enough cloth, and where the wind persisted in exposing the tips of their ears. He had turned to pure itinerary: his mind was full of mileage, national parks, famed distilleries, tallest peaks. At this point he believed he was Scottish—everywhere they went they saw bald heads that looked like his. “One of me!” he would cry, pointing them out. A country full of thousands, and she had reached out and taken one. She fondled the mica stone. Maybe the soul was just that dearness nestled in the center of the body, like a chosen pebble in the palm of a hand. When you held someone, it was that dearness you felt, that chosenness.

And he was dear. He would sniff the air and stop the car and say, “Macbeth lived here.” He knew where there was Red Bull and where there might be ice—three cubes of it—for her mother. In the car, they played a game of Would You Rather, except they misremembered it as I Would Never. This

limited things somewhat. Her husband won easily. “I would NEVER do that!” he kept shouting, and then put down another point for himself.

He had done all this to rinse her sister’s mind of pain. Pain was one of the things he could not stand, along with Muppets and receipts, which were endocrine disrupters. “No, thank you,” he said to the man at the gas station when he purchased four cans of the less sweet Irn-Bru. “Keep moving,” he told them all, in his long, striding body. One foot in front of the other, or die.

She did what she always did in a car: looked out the window, trusted, and let herself be carried along. The easiest life to imagine was the life of the postman. The easiest life to imagine was the life of the man who ran the ferry. The easiest life to imagine was that of a child, in the castle that sat on the shore of Loch Ness, where the water was full, it was true, of little slipping necks. You could just grab on.

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They took turns reading aloud from Wikipedia: about fighting hares, the symbology of thistles, which time of year the heather bloomed. The list of historical guys who actually believed in fairies was pretty long, she told them on the way to Glenbrittle. Her husband would have to update her entry to say that she had joined it.

“Did you ever see a fairy’s funeral, madam?” said Blake to a lady who happened to sit next to him. “Never, sir!” said the lady. “I have,” said Blake, “but not before last night.” And he went on to tell how, in his garden, he had seen “a procession of creatures of the size and colour of green and grey grasshoppers, bearing a body laid out on a rose-leaf, which they buried with songs, and then disappeared.”

The Fairy Pools had been poured down. The walk up was like a slow exploration of the skeleton of an animal, whose life was reenacted here and there by plunges of crystal water. There were natural bridges, caves heaped with uniform gray treasure, keyholes of bloodstone-colored water, raindrops on the lens, trees clinging to cliffs, the falls too fast for cameras, like fairies, and the long natural stairs that her sister climbed. People spoke every language. Europeans, who knew which laws to disregard, were stripping off

their clothes and swimming. You could pose with a Red Bull next to the tallest waterfall and make it seem like you were peeing. A perfect place.

They drank the water. Her husband sat on the edge of the deepest pool, which touched the center of the earth, and scooped it into a survivalist water filter he had bought on the internet. “This will let you drink water from ANYWHERE, in any situation,” he had told her intensely when it arrived in the mail. More and more of these situations were arising. As a child, she had watched Kevin Costner drink his own freshly distilled piss in “Waterworld” and just assumed it was something she would have to do as an adult, for the world would be different. They all drank a long swallow of the cool clear water, which was somehow inflected with the word “green.” It went clear into the center of her, through the hagstone hole and the natural arch, plunging down the stairs of living rock. Inside her, Europeans stripped and splashed. “Now we are refreshed,” he said. “Now we can go on.”

Twenty pictures in her photo roll later, her sister’s phone disappeared. Her black-and-white scarf and her rose-gold phone, with the Child’s whole short life on it. It had been in the hospital with them, in her right hand, always. It had been what the next phone would not be, a warm eyewitness. Her sister was holding it in one picture, and then she wasn’t, a bald mountain behind her, her face closed, impassable; there and then gone.

“I can find it,” she told her sister, desperate. She always had. Five dollars in a parking lot, when that was real money.

But there had been a switch. When she went up, the pools had looked one way, but when she came down again, searching for the rose-gold phone, they looked another way—as if they were a story that needed to be told in order, from the beginning, without leaving anything out. Maybe this place was like the world—you could travel through it only once. She rolled her ankle on the rocks. An hour passed, and then another. “As soon as we get back in cellphone range,” her husband kept telling them, “we can just call . . .” But no one listened. Her sister’s sere hair went among the grasses; her head was full of the Child.

“We shouldn’t have drunk the water,” they would say later. It had angered the fairies—no, not angered. They had simply demanded something in

exchange. But as soon as they saw what was on the phone—the face, the flicking motion—they'd know it was too much. They would give it back and keep only the scarf, which was just from Target.

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She fondled the mica stone. It stayed in her right hand, always. She had picked up others along the way: on the shore of Loch Ness, while bouldering in Sligachan, and at the roadside stop where a horse had lifted up her sweater to nuzzle her belly as if he loved her. Maybe she was preparing to build a cairn, which, in their miniature versions, were everywhere. They snagged her eye, always. How did they stand? The balancing of the tallest cairns seemed to indicate that there were properties of physics we did not understand, or else they had been overruled by the earth's desire to be surprising.

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*Cartoon by Roz Chast*

The feeling that she was not quite herself began as they approached Glenfinnan. Her body went ahead of her into the church, rippling with

bottle-brown light. Irn-Bru, she thought. Sign the petition. Her eyes, floating a little in their sockets, went on looking: a vase with two daffodils, a statue begging for money, a historical plaque next to photos of water damage on the pillars, which at one point had had to be replaced. “Not an easy task considering the size and weight of the stones, and the height!” the plaque yelled. “We never want to see this again.” Ha ha, she heard herself saying, and placed a coin in the little plaster purse.

The feeling intensified at the Information Center, where she found herself sliding down the wall with headphones on while listening to an interminable murder ballad. It came to her: she was being murdered. The bridge overhead was bearing down on her. The church was falling toward her with its spire. Her skin, in the bathroom mirror—we never want to see this again, she thought. “Where have you been?” her husband asked, when she emerged twenty minutes later. It was strange to know that when something was really wrong with her no one would be able to tell.

“Faster,” she told them in a monotone, as her husband sped the car toward the castle. Something was going to happen; she didn’t know what. After they checked in, she sat with the others for ten minutes on the terrace, from which they could see the sun spilling like Chardonnay into the spread of the hills. The landscape appeared to her as one in which she was being hunted. “Good night,” she told them formally, in the monotone, and went upstairs. Something was going to happen.

A maid came to the door and asked her if she wanted something untranslatable. Her mouth, pale in a cameo face, formed the words several times. “I cannot understand you,” she finally said, weeping. Then, as she closed the door, it came to her: *turndown service*. A little chocolate in the center of the pillow. The maid was Eastern European, and all at once she felt, like four segments of an orange, the rotation of the world that had brought her here, and she stumbled out into the hall to say that it wasn’t the accent, it was a problem with all language. . . .

Bathroom, she thought. I live in the bathroom, and she went to press her face against the rug. Why were the Fairy Pools so green, she wondered, and rose to her knees, and ejected a long green waterfall into the trash can. *Shall not mine true love staye with me when I am hurling*, she thought, for she had

suddenly remembered about the existence of Old English. What was under her legs now, what was carrying her to the bed—it was the old mistaken movement of the word “moor.” Arranging her head in the center of the pillow like a mint, she took a series of pictures as proof: she would show them all later, how close to death she had come. And leaned over like a cliff to release another waterfall.

Arugula, she thought. I’m going to die alone in a Scottish castle because people have gotten too good for iceberg lettuce. Then remembered the Jamaican restaurant that the chef had kept open for them on that first night, bringing them mussels and baby clams and the firm cheeks of something that had no name. Could be, she thought, remembering how her husband always insisted she had a shellfish allergy, which she would not, or could not, accept. But she kept coming back to the coldest water in the world, which had gone down into the center of her, which belonged then and now to the fairies.

Fucking survivalists, she thought. Fancy cups. Bug-eating. No respect. They think they’re preparing for any contingency, but they have no idea. They think regional camo will protect them. They think they’re ready to leave the weak ones behind in the woods. They think there’ll be *no money*.

Her body was so heavy. The Child was in all her limbs. She was carrying her through thickets and over green hills, laying her down nowhere, or else she would be taken. If she could feel her, as she had never before been able to feel anybody on this earth, it was because the Child was the right size. Why had no one been the right size before?

The door opened. A shape passed by her, neatly tied up her arugula, and made it disappear.

Downstairs on the fairy-tale terrace, over an exorbitant Scottish cheese board, her mother and husband and sister were all screaming at one another. Her mother had misread something about the Property Brothers on the internet and was insisting that they were being persecuted for being Christian. Their show had been cancelled, she shouted, because of their embrace of the true faith! Her husband explained that they were Canadians, and Canadians didn’t have faith. But she got redder and redder, believing

that he was concealing reality from her. It was the Property Brothers, and they had lost it all! That was the sort of mistake people made now. It was hard to know how much to yell at her about it, because one day she would die. Also, she had taken care of the Child. You had to think of her hands cupping the large head, and how one day the Child had let her head fall forward, it seemed purposefully, so that her open mouth landed smack against her grandmother's cheek. They decided to call that a kiss, for narrative purposes. They made many such decisions in those days.

Gossip was the life of a castle, and by the next morning everyone knew. “Are you all right?” a series of pale, cameo-faced women asked her, bending tenderly over her at breakfast. Any one of them could have been the woman at the door, trying to give her the mint that she could not receive. Her mother, too, looked a little green around the edges. The Brothers, meekly, were not mentioned. She thought of the phrase “throwing up your toenails.” She thought of her mother counting hers—though it had been her husband who came in the end, hadn’t it, tiptoeing out of the castle at midnight with a bag of homemade pesto in one hand.

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They stopped at a store where the owner had decorated his display cases with blocks of movable type, and her sister asked if he would sell her four letters of it, but he wouldn’t. That was what was smallest in the world, she thought, not atoms but movable type, and you could not buy four letters of it for any price. “Thank you anyway,” her sister said politely. “My daughter,” she said, turning away and walking past the case again, where by some chance the atoms actually spelled out the Child’s name.

“Let’s turn here,” her husband said thoughtfully, as they passed a sign that said “*rob roy*.” What about him? they all wondered. Hadn’t he been the guy in the film? Played by Liam Neeson—before he made a whole career of his children being taken—with the big blouse, and maybe he shouted “FREEDOM!”? It was his grave.

Everyone who had been there before them seemed to know, and had left coins and scraps of tartan and white daffodils for him. The headstone read “*Macgregor despite Them*,” which was even more confusing. The daffodils,

her husband reported, might have been because of Wordsworth, who had written a long poem about coming here once.

Forgive me if the phrase be strong  
A poet worthy of Rob Roy  
Must scorn a timid song.

“Whatever that means,” he said, looking at his phone. The movie poster was two people breathing into each other’s mouth. Flashing sword fights. Land disputes, and nighttime raids, and what looked to be a long male ponytail. “One of the most famous figures in Scottish history.” “Wait—really?” they asked one another. The hand of anonymity closed around them, squeezed. Was it possible that only a name could be passed down?

Her mother stalked the perimeter of the grave, faced with a philosophical question: how to take pictures of the ass of a ghost. “We should commemorate him,” her sister said solemnly. A bridge stretched between the place where the body was buried and where it was not, and she and her sister walked over it arm in arm. They peed in the woods behind the church, thereby linking themselves bodily with Rob Roy forever. They would remember him now, whoever he was, whatever he had done.

And, far and near, through vale and hill,  
Are faces that attest the same;  
The proud heart flashing through the eyes,  
At sound of Rob Roy’s name.

A year later, she would find herself obsessively revising a hundred and fifty words she had written about this experience: the grave, the daffodils, the peeing in the glen—the church that was just a door in the air—but she could not make it mean anything, and she did not know why. “He was a Property Brother,” she said in the end, and put one of her stones on the name on the grave.

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On Isle Maree, local tradition held that insanity could be cured by towing someone around the island behind a boat. Oh, good, she thought, easy. But

local tradition also held that “nothing must ever be taken from the island, be it even a pebble from the shore, lest the insanity formerly ‘cured’ there return to the outside world.” Oh, no, she thought, hard. Isle Maree was famous for the Wish Tree, an oak that had been hammered so full of pennies that it had died of copper poisoning. Many things still stood that way, hammered full of wishes.

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A certain percentage of the people now visiting Scotland appeared to be sex tourists. Her husband was one of them, and he insisted that they stop at the Clava Cairns to see the standing stones. “It’s not a full ring,” he told them, with resignation, “but we’ll take what we can get.” The stones were supposed to carry you back in time, and she had hardly laid a hand on the tallest one before she felt herself back in time, casting a shadow to say three o’clock. Cows stood fogged on the opposite hillside, still belonging to the Bronze Age. The sky touched the tops of their heads, like the corner of the ceiling in her sister’s house where the breathing still went on.

It was the last real day. It was the cairn she walked into, with its heart dug out. It was the party of Victorians she stared at for a long time, on the informational plaque. They were happy; they had done a good day’s work, with pickaxes and cucumber sandwiches. The sun had consented to fall, for a time, through the particular patterns of their lace. It was terrible to be a tourist, she thought, but after death you didn’t feel like a tourist anymore. You were a current of the air. You went everywhere. Into people’s mouths and out.

“Oh, my God, I think I found it,” she said, going through her photos.

She’d been sure that it had happened between pictures, but, when she went back, she could pinpoint the moment her sister had set the scarf and the phone down. Her dark and wind-whipped figure turned away, facing into the distance, toward the foot of the Black Cuillin mountains. Giants heaved above her, and she was small. And there it was: a loose little heap of pattern behind her, and the glint of the rose-gold phone.

“I can’t believe we got it back,” her sister said softly, spreading two fingers apart to zoom in. When they finally made it into range, and called the number—she had to be the one to call, her husband was driving, her sister couldn’t speak, and her mother’s jeans were wet—someone actually answered, as her husband all along had promised would happen. “I have it,” the woman said. “It’s safe.” She was driving it to the police station in Portree at that moment—the Child on her lap, with a triangle of face showing. “I love you,” she said simply to the woman on the phone, who understood her perfectly.

“An American would never,” her husband said, happy. He had scored another point in the game.

But her breath would not stay inside her, as if it were pushing the wind. *I begged them to give it back, and they did.* There is an exchange, she thought. Something passes between this life and the next that allows you to be here for a while; the Fairy Pools don’t look the same on the way down as on the way up; and you walk through this world only once. She had drunk the coldest water in the world and thrown it up again green. No one could say she hadn’t really been here.

In her head she signed the petition for Scottish independence; in her head she signed the petition for Irn-Bru to be sweet again. In her head she stacked a cairn. In her head she lifted the hard heart out of a grave. The last thing she would do, before she left Scotland, was to stumble out of her hotel, in a straight line like a sleepwalker, and set the stone with the ring of mica in the knothole of a tree—not understanding why she was doing it, crying when she realized it was gone. She walked through the world. The exchange rate stood. Everyone must pay. ♦

*This is drawn from “[Will There Ever Be Another You.](#)”*

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# The Critics

- **R.F.K., Jr., Anthony Fauci, and the Revolt Against Expertise**

By Daniel Immerwahr | It used to be progressives who distrusted the experts. What happened?

- **How Barry Diller Stayed on Top**

By Adam Gopnik | In his new memoir, the media mogul recalls a career built as much on serendipity as on strategy.

- **Briefly Noted**

“Valley of Forgetting,” by Jennie Erin Smith; “The Lost Orchid,” by Sarah Bilston; “The Director,” by Daniel Kehlmann; and “Happiness Forever,” by Adelaide Faith.

- **Pavement Inspires a Strange, Loving Bio-Pic**

By Hua Hsu | The band was willfully ironic and averse to canonization. An aggressively heady new movie it inspired, “Pavements,” thumbs its nose at the epic rock bio-pic.

- **The Dissonant Howl of “Salome”**

By Alex Ross | Two New York productions of Strauss’s opera reposition its necrophiliac protagonist as a perverse instrument of justice.

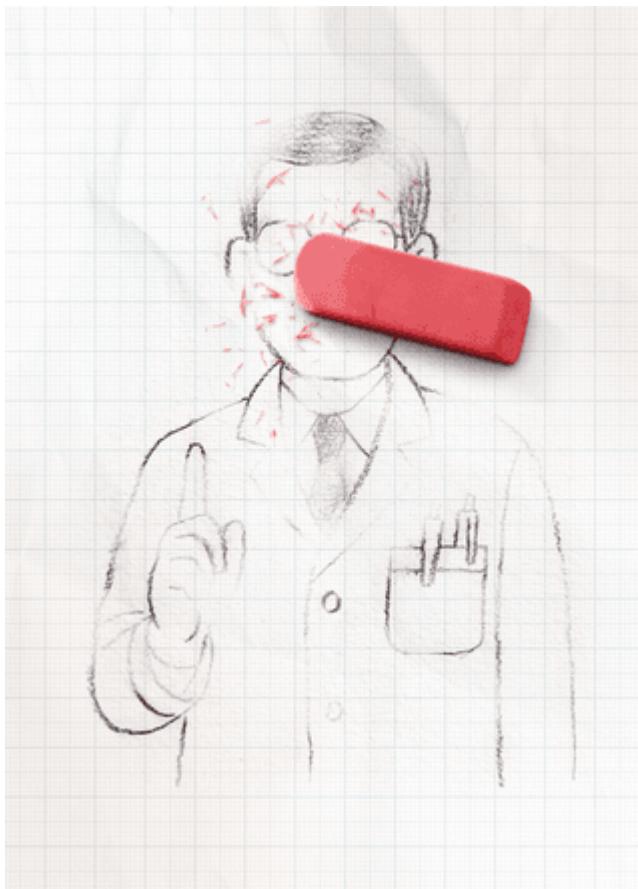
[A Critic at Large](#)

# R.F.K., Jr., Anthony Fauci, and the Revolt Against Expertise

It used to be progressives who distrusted the experts. What happened?

By [Daniel Immerwahr](#)

May 19, 2025



*When uncertainty collides with urgency, authorities enter the fray and issue judgment. But tentative conclusions proclaimed by the powerful can harden into orthodoxies.* Photo illustration by Javier Jaén

The Cabinet confirmation hearings have been agonizing for congressional Democrats, who have watched in horror as Donald Trump has pushed through one outlandish candidate after another. Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., the

vaccine skeptic nominated for Secretary of Health and Human Services, was among the most hair-raising. “Vaccinating children is unethical,” he has written. Unable to prevent Kennedy from becoming the country’s top health official, Democrats could only use his hearing to showcase their values. Liberals stand for science. The G.O.P. stands for drinking bleach, freaking out about Satanist pedophiles, and blaming wildfires on Jewish space lasers.

To Elizabeth Warren, Kennedy was an “anti-science conspiracy peddler.” Vaccines, 9/11, 5G networks, pasteurization, fluoride, AIDS, lab leaks, electoral theft, assassinations—“he’s nuts on a *lot* of fronts,” the New York Post’s editorial board concluded. The reporter Peter Bergen once asked Kennedy if there was any major event in the past decades for which he did accept the official explanation. The moon landing, Kennedy replied. He believed that one. But, even here, he had an idiosyncratic (and impeccably Kennedyesque) explanation. “I went skiing with Buzz Aldrin every year,” he said. “I knew the astronauts.”

So Kennedy was a wide target. Yet, awkwardly for this firing squad, he had until recently been one of their own. He spoke at the 2004 Democratic National Convention. Two years later, he appeared on the cover of *Vanity Fair* with Al Gore, Julia Roberts, and George Clooney as a member of the “Green Team.” (“Robert F. Kennedy Jr. is one of the most respected environmental advocates in the country,” the accompanying article explained.) In 2008, Barack Obama reportedly considered nominating him to head the Environmental Protection Agency.

Compounding the awkwardness, the thing that Democrats hated about Kennedy now was the thing they’d liked about him before: his willingness to accuse large corporations and lax regulators of poisoning people. He’d sued oil and coal companies. He’d campaigned with Cesar Chavez against pesticides and with Erin Brockovich against a gas company. In a 2004 article for *The Nation*, he had chastised the “flat-earthers within the Bush Administration” for engaging in a “campaign to suppress science” around climate change. It was only after he published a book making similar arguments against vaccine manufacturers, in 2014, that liberals turned on him. Kennedy found their faith in pharmaceutical firms baffling. “These are the same companies that gave us the opioid epidemic,” he said.

As Kennedy's opponents saw it, the difference was that, regarding vaccines, he had lost his mind. At the confirmation hearing, Bernie Sanders invoked "sixteen studies done by scientists and doctors all over the world saying that vaccines do not cause autism." Kennedy was unfazed. "Look at the I.O.M. assessment of those sixteen studies, Senator," he replied, referring to the Institute of Medicine.

Sanders batted this away. "You have said, 'The COVID vaccine was the deadliest vaccine ever made.' "

"The reason I said that, Senator Sanders, is because there were more reports on the VAERS system," Kennedy explained, referring to the Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System, which collects self-reported data. "There were more reports of injuries and deaths than any, than all other vaccines combined."

Sanders continued: "You disagree with the scientific community that—"

"Oh, I just, I'm agnostic, because we don't have the science to make that determination."

Citing evidence, ignoring appeals to authority, reserving judgment, demanding more research—these are potentially exhausting traits in a conversational partner, but they're also marks of a scientific mind. Rather than being "anti-science," Kennedy seems enchanted by it. His accusatory book "The Real Anthony Fauci" (2021) is packed with discussions of clinical studies, and it bears a blurb from a Nobel-winning virologist. (Anyone worried about the lack of public appetite for complex writing should contemplate the fact that this nearly five-hundred-page, data-drenched work of nonfiction has sold more than a million copies.) Kennedy has published two books with the subtitle "Let the Science Speak."

If Democrats had hoped for a showdown between learning and ignorance, this wasn't it. It looked more like learning versus learning, with each side dug in and lobbing citations toward the opposing trench. Kennedy's rise represents a growing epistemological rift in the country. Increasingly, "left" and "right" don't just describe divergent political judgments but also sealed-off understandings of what is true and how we know it. For all his

unfounded beliefs and suspicions, Kennedy's revolt isn't against research but against the power long held by scientific insiders like Fauci. And in this he might have a point.

Why do these heated battles over knowledge arise? The sociologist Gil Eyal offers a compelling account in "The Crisis of Expertise" (2019). We imagine science as an open-ended pursuit in which doubt is encouraged, new evidence is welcomed, and theories are revisable. The basic sciences operate roughly like that. But "regulatory science," in which conclusions are required on a deadline, works differently. A drug must be approved or not, a level of pollution pronounced safe or not. In these circumstances, Eyal explains, the authorities must at some point close the case, push errant facts aside, and draw a line. Such moments generate "inevitable friction."

Eyal's theory about certain sciences rings true for intellectual life generally. There's not much hostility toward experts in unhurried realms of inquiry like numismatics or number theory. It's when uncertainty collides with urgency that the authorities enter the fray, convene commissions, and issue findings. Those who accept the sanctioned conclusions gain official backing. Those who don't are ruled out of bounds. No longer recognized as colleagues with legitimate hypotheses, they risk being treated as crackpots, deniers, and conspiracy theorists.

Drawing a line is necessary: at some point, you have to declare that the Holocaust happened, that vaccines don't cause autism, and that climate change is real. The philosopher Bernard Williams noted that science isn't a free market of ideas but a managed one; without filters against cranks, trolls, and merchants of doubt, knowledge production "would grind to a halt." But in science, and in intellectual inquiry more broadly, where you draw the line matters enormously. Keep things too open and you're endlessly debating whether Bush did 9/11. Close them too quickly, though, and you turn hasty, uncertain conclusions into orthodoxies. You also marginalize too many intelligent people, who will be strongly encouraged to challenge your legitimacy by seizing on your missteps, broadcasting your hypocrisies, and waving counter-evidence in your face.

That could be the story of the past six decades. The nineteen-sixties started as a high point in trusting experts. John F. Kennedy was a popular Harvard-

trained, Pulitzer Prize-winning author who stacked his Administration with intellectuals. Nearly four-fifths of Americans, when polled in the early sixties, said that they trusted the government to do the right thing at least most of the time. (That number now hovers near one-fifth.)

Not everyone basked in the light, though. In 1963, the historian Richard Hofstadter gave a perceptive lecture about the “paranoid style in American politics,” the tendency toward “heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy.” The next day, J.F.K. himself turned to the topic. He warned of those who adhered to “doctrines wholly unrelated to reality” and spread “ignorance and misinformation.” Or at least he planned to issue that warning. En route to giving his intended speech at the Dallas Trade Mart, the President was shot twice and killed.

The man arrested, Lee Harvey Oswald, had defected to the Soviet Union and then, oddly, re-defected back to the United States. Oswald professed innocence—“I’m just a patsy,” he told the press—but was himself murdered before he could further explain. Was some larger plot afoot? “I thought it was a conspiracy and I raised that question,” Kennedy’s successor, Lyndon Baines Johnson, recalled. “Nearly everyone that was with me raised it.”

But a full, public airing threatened to reveal the C.I.A.’s machinations and the F.B.I.’s incompetence. Worse, intimations of foreign involvement might trigger a nuclear war, Johnson warned. He convened an investigatory body, the Warren Commission, to defeat these dangerous speculations. (He told one commissioner that forty million might die if accusations against Cuba and the U.S.S.R. weren’t refuted.) The point of the investigation, for Johnson, wasn’t to uncover new facts but to shore up the official story, which was that Oswald alone was guilty.

Oswald might indeed have acted alone. But the commission’s march to that conclusion reassured few. Johnson himself didn’t believe it, and, by 1967, nearly two-thirds of the country shared his doubts. (As two-thirds do today.) This wasn’t an idle disagreement: to suspect a conspiracy was to suspect a coverup. The government’s determination to wrap the matter up neatly relegated the bulk of voters to the paranoid fringe. Ensuing events vindicated their suspicions. In 1967, amid revelations of napalmed villages, C.I.A. misdeeds, and official mendacity, Noam Chomsky influentially

declared that the true responsibility of intellectuals wasn't to advise policymakers but to "expose the lies of government"—lies he associated particularly with the Kennedy Administration's experts.

Even the establishment distrusted the establishment. Shortly after the assassination, Robert F. Kennedy—the Attorney General and the brother of the President—asked Allen Dulles, the former director of Central Intelligence, if the C.I.A. was behind it. (It wasn't, Dulles assured him.) A month later, R.F.K. shared with the historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., his concern that Fidel Castro or the Mob was involved. Still, R.F.K. was hesitant to probe. Schlesinger felt that he feared the psychological toll of walking down that unlit path. Whatever the reason, R.F.K. held his tongue. And, five years after his brother, he, too, was gunned down.

Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., was nine when his uncle was murdered and fourteen when his father was. Even in his youth, he recalled, he doubted that Oswald had acted alone. But, where his father had hesitated, he charged ahead. He came to see evidence of C.I.A. involvement as "so insurmountable" that it lay "beyond any reasonable doubt."

The Kennedy assassination sent dark suspicions swirling through the national psyche. Distrust of experts crescendoed again in the nineteen-eighties, with the appearance of a mysterious new disease. In 1981, as otherwise healthy gay men started dying of unexpected cancers and infections, a government immunologist named Anthony Fauci pushed aside his other research to focus on the puzzling malady. Fauci sent off his first article on the subject late that year, when there were only two hundred and ninety recognized cases. Still, he warned that the syndrome, soon to be called *AIDS*, was "of essentially epidemic proportions for a particular segment of our society."

Fauci's early research positioned him as the government's central figure in crafting *AIDS* policy, with considerable power to decide which treatments would be tested. This made him an intense focus of activists, who distrusted his judgments. In 1990, the *AIDS* Coalition to Unleash Power, or *ACT UP*, stormed the National Institutes of Health campus where Fauci worked. They carried caskets with the words "Fuck you, Fauci" and burned him in effigy.

David France's "How to Survive a Plague" (2016) describes this clash between insiders and outsiders. *ACT UP*'s slogan was "Drugs Into Bodies," but prominent members like Larry Kramer were skeptical of AZT, the drug Fauci was focussing on, and pushed for alternatives. "In the absence of adequate health care, we have learned to become our own clinicians, researchers, lobbyists, drug smugglers, pharmacists," the activist Derek Hodel explained. A drug called Compound Q, derived from a cucumber-like plant, seemed promising; Kramer declared it a cure. Patients sourced it from Asia and received infusions at "guerrilla cliniQs." When Fauci declined to test it, the advocate Marty Delaney recruited physicians, an ethics panel, and a lawyer to run secret drug trials.

AZT turned out to be crucial to the first antiretroviral cocktails, whereas Compound Q was abandoned because of its dangerous side effects. Still, Fauci proved willing, with time, to accept off-road researchers as collaborators, not cranks. (It surely helped that the citizen scientists tended to be well-educated white men. "Would the government have listened to dykes, street queens, and women of color?" the movement veteran Sarah Schulman asks in her 2021 history, "Let the Record Show.") Before long, Fauci was describing *ACT UP* members as "intelligent, gifted, articulate people coming up with good, creative ideas."

It was a triumph of trust. *ACT UP* pushed the reluctant F.D.A. to approve aerosolized pentamidine, a vital treatment for a deadly opportunistic lung infection, and to allow fast-track access to experimental medicines for those not in formal drug trials. These hard-won victories saved lives. "Scientists themselves do not have a lock on correctness," Fauci conceded. "Activists bring a special insight."



*"Things fall apart. The center cannot hold. Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world. Details at eleven."*

Cartoon by David Sipress

Over the years, friendships blossomed. Fauci established the Martin Delaney Collaboratories at the N.I.H. for H.I.V.-cure research, and delivered a eulogy at Delaney's memorial service. In 1988, Kramer had called Fauci a "FUCKING SON OF A BITCH OF A DUMB IDIOT" and a "murderer" in an open letter. Yet, when he was dying, in 2020, he told Fauci that he loved him. "I love you, too, Larry," Fauci replied, through tears.

This doesn't mean no lines were drawn. As the causes of and most effective treatments for *AIDS* came into view, Fauci and many prominent activists closed ranks against heterodox theories. The publisher Charles Ortleb, whose gay biweekly, the *New York Native*, had offered the most comprehensive coverage of *AIDS* available, rejected the idea that H.I.V. caused *AIDS* as a Big Pharma lie. For this and related heresies, *ACT UP* ostracized Ortleb and boycotted his paper. Fauci felt Ortleb's type of skepticism to be "so preposterous" that it didn't merit debate. Shortly after *ACT UP*'s victories in the nineteen-nineties, the word "denialism" entered common parlance, largely in reference to nonconformist beliefs regarding *AIDS*.

Which skeptical views merit consideration? Which are denialism? Those questions haunted the Kennedy assassination and the early *AIDS* crisis, and they returned with *COVID-19*. As before, the gravity of the situation reduced tolerance for open-ended inquiry. "Doubt is a cardinal virtue in the sciences, which advance through skeptics' willingness to question the

experts,” the *Washington Post*’s Peter Jamison wrote. “But it can be disastrous in public health, which depends on people’s willingness to trust those same experts.”

The experts would require a lot of trust, because they were recommending astonishing measures. It was no small thing to issue stay-at-home orders, shut schools, close businesses, and mandate masks. But early reports from China, where authorities were physically sealing off apartment buildings, were encouraging about the efficacy of such tactics.

It was a moment of choice—did you trust experts or not?—and there was a clear partisan skew. The previous Democratic President, Obama, had been a Harvard-trained law professor who had used the word “smart” to justify his policies more than nine hundred times. The sitting Republican President, Trump, was a blunt businessman who had declined to nominate a science adviser for more than a year and a half.

For liberals, veneration of expertise became a shibboleth. The ubiquitous “In this house, we believe . . .” signs usually included “science is real” as an article of faith. There was something “deeply ironic” about formulating the support for science as a religious creed, Jacob Hale Russell and Dennis Patterson observe in “The Weaponization of Expertise” (*M.I.T.*). But this support veered toward dogma, and had a pope: Fauci, or St. Anthony Fauci, as votive candles bearing his likeness called him. “Attacks on me, quite frankly, are attacks on science,” Fauci declared.

If there was an apostate, it was Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. The “F” stands for Francis, as in St. Francis of Assisi, about whom Kennedy has written a children’s book. Kennedy admires St. Francis for choosing to live among people with leprosy. Since becoming a pariah himself, after his vaccine-safety crusade, Kennedy has warmed to other spurned beliefs, no matter their plausibility. He has publicly contemplated whether cellphones cause cancer, tainted tap water leads to “sexual dysphoria,” and the white trails behind airplanes contain toxic chemicals. Although claiming not to be a doubter himself, Kennedy devoted two chapters of one of his books to airing “legitimate queries” about whether H.I.V. causes AIDS.

Already a professional heretic, Kennedy became the pandemic's leading skeptic. Lockdowns were authoritarian, masks were pointless, vaccines were unsafe. An expensive antiviral drug Fauci backed, remdesivir, was "deadly," whereas two off-patent, cheap drugs—hydroxychloroquine and ivermectin—had shown "staggering, life-saving efficacy." And *COVID-19* probably came not from a wet market but from the Wuhan Institute of Virology, where (this part is true) scientists funded by Fauci's National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases had modified bat viruses to experiment on. Kennedy raised the "ironic possibility" that Fauci, having warned about pandemics that never materialized, finally decided to create one.

In his suspicion of pharmaceutical firms, support for unsanctioned drugs, and wild accusations against Fauci, R.F.K., Jr., resembled *ACT UP*'s Larry Kramer. But Kennedy didn't receive the Kramer treatment. Rather, his ideas were treated like contagious diseases. YouTube removed videos of him; Instagram cancelled his account. Although "The Real Anthony Fauci" was an energetically researched best-seller on an important topic by a well-known author, it was nearly impossible to find a review of it in a major periodical. Russell and Patterson regard such deplatformings as "intellectual tyranny."

A popular subreddit, r/HermanCainAward, featured screenshots from the social-media accounts of people who, like the politician Herman Cain, had spoken against the medical orthodoxy and then died of *COVID*. Comments were gleeful and marbled with élite scorn toward "spreadnecks." ("Another 6th grade educated gravy neck." "Bye fatty." To a deceased mother of four: "Rest in piss.") At its peak, in late 2020, the subreddit—essentially a snuff website—had nearly a million daily visitors.

There was a reason that medical dissent stirred so much hostility. People were dying, and the urge to take swift, decisive action was overwhelming. Anyone refusing to go along was an impediment, or, worse, a vector. It was a panicked moment, when erroneous ideas could actually kill.

Still, enforcing a "consensus" risks purging the countervailing views that make intellectual inquiry work. Fauci and his colleagues had benefitted

from the adversarial pressure of *ACT UP*. Yet they had little patience for *COVID* activists. Did this closed-mindedness lead them into error?

“In Covid’s Wake” (Princeton), by the Princeton political scientists Stephen Macedo and Frances Lee, offers a revelatory look back on the pandemic. Its conclusions are devastating to both the left and the right; most of us got big things wrong. (I certainly did.) Given this omnidirectional confusion, the imposition of a tight orthodoxy—more J.F.K. assassination than *AIDS* crisis—retrospectively seems to be one of the most unfortunate choices in a sea of them.

The establishment’s rigidity is most evident with respect to *COVID*’s origins. Might it have come from the Wuhan laboratory that was experimenting with bat viruses? This was “so friggin’ likely to have happened because they were already doing this kind of work and the molecular data is fully consistent with that scenario,” the biologist Kristian Andersen wrote to colleagues investigating the matter in early 2020. Yet blaming the lab risked angering China, stoking racism, and embarrassing U.S. health agencies that had funded the Wuhan research. After hearing from Andersen’s group, Fauci declared the lab-leak possibility to be “in the realm of conspiracy theories without any scientific basis.” With Fauci’s guidance, Andersen’s group published a paper that declared, “We do not believe that any type of laboratory-based scenario is plausible.” Facebook duly banned lab-leak posts. (By the end of Joe Biden’s Administration, the F.B.I. and the Department of Energy had cautiously accepted the lab-leak hypothesis.)

What of the establishment’s other positions? The U.S. pattern of “one country, fifty regulatory environments” allows Macedo and Lee to compare the effects of different policies. Vaccination clearly worked, which is why blue states generally had lower *COVID* death rates. But in the eleven months before vaccines were available it was another story. Macedo and Lee examine how quickly states adopted lockdowns, how long lockdowns lasted, how often public schools closed, and how generally stringent restrictions were. Some of these measures might have lessened the burdens on crowded hospitals in the early weeks, but it’s chastening to learn that none of them visibly affected pre-vaccine death rates over all. People in

California, where public-school classes were rarely held in person, were roughly as likely to die from *COVID* as those in Florida, a beacon of openness. Before vaccines, blue-state mortality was in fact higher, though not enough to be statistically significant.

And masks? They worked in laboratories, especially N95s fitted properly and changed frequently. (Masks used for too long clog with moisture from breathing, and the air moves around them.) Yet everyday practice was nowhere near that ideal. Although masks and other precautions seem to have virtually obliterated the 2020-21 seasonal flu, evidence that mask recommendations or mandates helped protect against *COVID* at the population level is “extremely limited,” Macedo and Lee write.

In their rush to “follow the science,” as Biden pledged, policymakers adopted what the former N.I.H. director Francis Collins called the public-health mind-set. “You attach infinite value to stopping the disease,” Collins remorsefully explained. “You attach a zero value to whether this actually totally disrupts people’s lives, ruins the economy, and has many kids kept out of school in a way that they never quite recovered.” Even non-*COVID* health risks, like cancers left undiagnosed as a result of missed screenings, drop from consideration.

This was regrettable, because the costs of closures were crushing. Small businesses were decimated. The government, taking in less and paying out far more, entered a new level of debt, fuelling inflation. Education foundered, substance abuse spiked, and mental health frayed. Macedo and Lee note, among other alarming indicators, a “huge surge in firearm sales.”

Were there better options? Sweden defied the trend toward closure and, it now appears, ultimately had the lowest excess death rate in Europe. Yet when forty-six scientists and doctors issued the Great Barrington Declaration, warning of lockdowns’ “devastating effects” and proposing a Swedish-style strategy for the U.S., Collins wrote to Fauci and others to urge a “quick and devastating take down” of the premises of these “fringe epidemiologists.” Reddit removed links to the declaration, and Facebook briefly took down its page. (We now know that technology firms were coördinating with federal officials.)

Why were the authorities so resistant to taking the costs of lockdowns seriously? Perhaps because élites were insulated from them. The well-off were more likely to have children in private schools, which largely stayed open, and to have jobs that could be done remotely. Sheltering in place, R.F.K., Jr., charged, was a “prolonged pajama party for upper-crust Americans who could afford DoorDash food deliveries.” It went differently for those cooking the food and making the deliveries. Working-class people were more likely to go to work while their children stayed home. Or they were if they still had jobs; the lockdowns caused widespread layoffs. When people protested the stay-at-home orders, though, hundreds of health experts signed a letter condemning the demonstrations as “rooted in white nationalism.”

The *covid* victims mocked on r/HermanCainAward spurned vaccines and said foolish things. But they also said things that, in hindsight, don’t seem far off: closures and mask mandates accomplished little, their costs were unconscionable, the virus was likely lab-born, and inconvenient facts were being suppressed. Sidelining people who voiced those views aroused righteous wrath. For years, R.F.K., Jr., had been content to fulminate and litigate. In 2023, he ran for President. “This is what happens when you censor somebody for eighteen years,” Kennedy fumed during his announcement speech. “I got a lot to talk about.”

Kennedy started his campaign as a Democrat and ended it as a Trump supporter. Did he carry part of his substantial base toward *MAGA*? Either way, Trump was ultimately the pandemic’s clear winner. Inflation, fury at élites, and disdain for experts propelled his reëlection. “I am your retribution,” he promised.

There are two ways to replace an orthodoxy: with openness or with another orthodoxy. Trump’s most meaningful gesture toward transparency has been ordering documents concerning the assassinations of the two Kennedys and of Martin Luther King, Jr., to be declassified. So far, though, the data dump has revealed no major secrets, just unredacted Social Security numbers.

Far more of the Administration’s energy has gone toward vengeance. “We have to honestly and aggressively attack the universities,” J. D. Vance has said, and the Administration has slashed research funding to disfavored

institutions. Trump has demanded that Smithsonian museums remove material evincing “improper” ideologies. ICE is snatching up students because of their political views. R.F.K., Jr.’s “let the science speak” crusade is now lashed to the most science-smothering Administration in U.S. history.

Kennedy’s needling belligerence and openness to unpopular views served him well as a skeptic. They have served him terribly in his new role as Secretary of Health and Human Services, though. In his brief tenure, he has insulted autistic people, made false claims about vaccines’ dangers, and responded to a measles outbreak by touting cod-liver oil as a treatment. Moreover, Kennedy has faithfully carried out Trump’s war on science, firing thousands of H.H.S. officials and terminating studies, including into antiviral drugs for future pandemics.

Truth grows from the “tilled, agitated, and upturned soils of debate,” Kennedy has written. “Doubt, skepticism, questioning, and dissent are its fertilizers.” An excellent thought, Mr. Secretary, which someone should try sharing with the President. You go first. ♦



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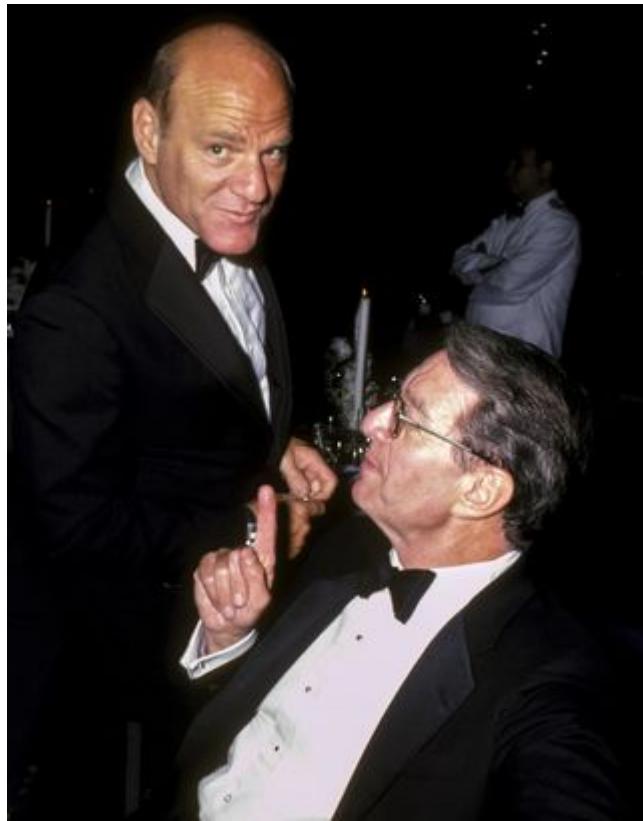
**Books**

# How Barry Diller Stayed on Top

In his new memoir, the media mogul recalls a career built as much on serendipity as on strategy.

By [Adam Gopnik](#)

May 19, 2025



Diller at the Pierre Hotel in 1986 with Martin Davis. From Paramount Pictures to the Home Shopping Network and I.A.C., Diller's trajectory traces the arc of changes that, for good or ill, reshaped the media world. Photograph by Ron Galella / Getty

Why do we read the memoirs of aging entertainment tycoons, long after the entertainments that made the tycoon a tycoon have largely been shelved and forgotten? The easy answer is that they offer brushes with celebrities. Yet in books like Barry Diller's new memoir, "Who Knew" (Simon & Schuster), the actors are treated in a by-the-way manner, like addled accessories to the

tycoon's ambition, or, at best, like coddled children who squabble and sleep in the back seat while the tycoon, dad-like, drives and navigates.

What such books really offer is a glimpse into the micro-mechanics of consumer capitalism, in forms that are still eccentric enough to be entertaining. At the supermarket, seeing that Lindt has introduced a lime-flavored chocolate bar, we might assume that it's a playful experiment in taste. In fact, it's doubtless the result of years of testing and boardroom brinkmanship: fierce debates over which lime additive will survive on the shelf, and equally fierce arguments back in Switzerland over how far line extensions can go before they dilute the core brand. That new bar isn't just competing with the offerings of rival companies; it's fighting for space alongside other Lindt products, including an alarming pistachio-filled one that claims to be "Dubai style."

With show business, though, the knowledge that everything is engineered through such minute, maddening decisions somehow feels heartening, like learning how a magic trick works. And, though Diller's memoir recounts, sometimes movingly, his emergence as a gay man in a hostile world and details the long transition from old media to the internet, the book's greatest pleasures are its lime chocolate bars. To take one instance, those of us who came of age in the sixties or seventies may dimly recall the ABC Movie of the Week: low-budget made-for-TV films that often had more energy than the static series of the time, if only because their setups were so simply stated. One vaguely remembers being spellbound by a feature about blind people surviving a plane crash and making their way down a mountain.

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Then one reads that the ABC Movie of the Week, far from being a weary corporate exhalation from a monolithic ABC, was Diller's own creation, conceived when he was still a junior executive. It had to be fought for against intense internal resistance, broke every rule of television programming at the time, and required Diller to build a kind of sub-studio within the network, complete with its own development and marketing arms. That vaguely remembered movie about blind people descending a mountain—"Seven in Darkness"!—was actually the first of the made-for-TV films, and, in Diller's not entirely impartial telling, it marked the birth of the high-concept movie, which, he says, "dominated the movie business for twenty years, until sequels and franchises and the Marvel Universe subsumed all."

The success of the Movie of the Week set Diller free to launch the now quaintly named "novel for television." The first of these was an adaptation of a middling book by Leon Uris. Diller admits that he chose it because it was the only one anyone would let him buy, but from that compromise sprang the now dominant format of the limited series. What feels like inevitability or accident turns out to have been born of planning and purpose.

Diller is a good narrator of his own life, though reading him naturally raises the question of how reliable any of us are when assessing our effect on the world. He was the child of what must have been the most emotionally recessive Jewish family in history—possibly the only unhappy Jewish household in which no one ever yelled, "I'm the one who suffers most!" or "Someday you'll be a parent, and then you'll know what it's like!" His affluent Beverly Hills childhood was closed and silent. "The formality of

my relationship to both my parents still astounds me,” he writes. “That they never, all my life, ever, asked me a personal question seems unbelievable, but is true.” He recounts, with feeling, the childhood traumas that shaped him—chief among them an abusive older brother who became a heroin addict in his teens and remained one. Diller came away, in his own view, eager to please but socially isolated, an outsider, even a bit of an outcast. (Nora Ephron, a fellow-student, fired him from the school newspaper at Beverly Hills High.) Yet, when he does become a success, the mega-mogul Lew Wasserman joshingly reminds Diller that a young Barry once beat Wasserman’s wife in gin rummy. One feels sure that the temper of the adults’ gin table was not, as Diller thought, “Poor Barry!,” but, in fact, “Watch out for that kid!”

Similarly, Diller writes proudly of his hatred of “research” and data-driven decision-making, and of his love of spirited communal debate—of wanting “to tear [an] idea up and down and yank it every way imaginable to find its essence, to see if it could survive such a tough Socratic process.” He goes on, “We regularly held ‘encounter sessions’ with our development executives, where we would go past exhaustion trying to eke out new ideas that we could then assign to writers.” The pressure of never knowing which Socratic argument would get you called an idiot and which would get you commended as a sharp cookie must have been ulcer-inducing. Elsewhere, he writes earnestly of his philosophy for managing employees: “Give them responsibilities before they are considered ready. Drop them in the deep end and see who struggles and who survives. Keep promoting those who survive.” This sounds like a lot more fun for the man standing poolside than for those he just threw in.

The first half of Diller’s story unfolds against what now feels like an impossibly distant era: a fixed, tycoon-driven entertainment business, which he evokes in engaging detail. He actually began in the William Morris mailroom, though he explains that, really, you rarely handled mail and mostly handled the egos of the senior agents. He hustled his way into that programming job at ABC, where he caught the attention of Charles Bluhdorn, the Austrian-born conglomerateur who ran Gulf + Western, Paramount’s parent company. In 1974, Bluhdorn lured Diller away and made him Paramount’s head—though the move had its complications.

Bluhdorn loathed the studio's incumbent president, Frank Yablans, but had locked himself into a contract that couldn't be cheaply broken. He dropped Diller right on top of him, hoping Yablans would quit. (He did.)

Television and the movies, as Diller records, had sharply different valences. Three-network TV remained a New York-based, "Mad Men"-style business, buttoned-up on the outside and dissolute within: Martinis, mistresses, and Westchester mansions. The movies, by contrast, were still being made in Hollywood by marauders and lunatics. Though an older generation of moguls was fading—Diller glimpses a once all-powerful Warner brother emerging from a bathroom with a stain on his pants—the new generation was even crazier. Diller recalls the Italian producer Dino De Laurentiis mounting a remake of "King Kong" without securing the rights, or mastering the language. "Many of his movies suffer from a basic misunderstanding of the rhythm, the tonality, the nuance of English," Diller writes, shrewdly. As for Bluhdorn, the man who elevated him, he returns again and again to pitch "his perennial idea for what he said would be the blockbuster of all time: the tale of Sitting Bull and Hitler at war with each other. Yes, true. Sitting Bull and Hitler."

Diller is, to be sure, equally hard on the filmmakers. He tells a funny story about Elaine May leaving a rough cut of "Mikey and Nicky" on the street at Lexington and Eighty-first. But he is, if anything, too hard on their work, judging movies—as he must—as a sequence of business propositions, rather than as the inevitably mixed, but often memorable, art that gets made. John Schlesinger's "The Day of the Locust" and Elia Kazan's "The Last Tycoon"—two Paramount productions from Diller's unsuccessful early tenure—are both more interesting films than he can quite admit, given their profits, or lack thereof. "It was a flop at the box office when it was released, but many people admire it now, and I was proud to have helped make it" is not a sentiment often found in these pages. Nor, perhaps, should it be. Suits are called "suits" because they wear suits, and they wear suits to blend in with the other men who wear suits. One supposes that the young Steven Spielberg wore a suit when he went to apply for a bank loan. (Nowadays the loan officer—if one were ever needed—would be disappointed if he weren't wearing a baseball cap.)

It would be nice to believe that the way to make more money in the movies is to make better movies. Yet Paramount—and, with it, Diller’s career—was saved not by prestige or taste but by John Travolta, a minor TV star who no one believed could cross over. Then his back-to-back turns in “Saturday Night Fever,” in 1977, and “Grease,” in 1978, produced enormous profits for the studio. Diller records the seismic leap in success, but he doesn’t pretend—or at least not very hard—that the movies that made him a successful mogul were any better, if not actually worse, than the ones that had left him ready to resign in shame. “Grease,” he notes, was considered a “train wreck” until it was released. The wisdom of William Goldman’s legendary verdict on Hollywood, “Nobody knows anything,” seems confirmed once again. Bad movies made a lot of money for him. Really bad movies made even more. Sometimes good movies made a lot of money (“Heaven Can Wait”), but more often they didn’t (“Reds”).

Throughout, Diller occasionally muses on the excellence of a script —“Raiders of the Lost Ark” was, he says, “perfect from the first word”—but he is, appropriately, far more preoccupied with the deal. “Raiders,” despite its script and box-office sales, still enrages him, because, as Diller tells it, George Lucas, having secured a cleverly negotiated sequel arrangement, quickly reneged. “But you made a legal and moral commitment to honor these sequel terms,” Diller protested. “Yeah, well,” Lucas replied, “it’s just not worth it for me unless I get more money.” Lucas, Diller insists, was a sanctimonious hypocrite. Like many moguls, Diller casts himself as the naïf in a room full of operators. Recalling a dubious stock transaction, he writes, “I was too Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm to even know about, much less consider, such a manipulation.” One somehow doubts that the others in the deal thought of him as too Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm, partly because the others in the deal thought that *they* were Rebecca. Injured innocence is the favored pose of the tycoon class; assumed naïveté, its pet intoxicant.

His gay life, sadly, is mostly a source of early misery and bitter feeling—a reminder of how recently, and how blessedly, homosexuality has been normalized. He was certain, for a time, that being gay was a kind of disease; facing an AIDS test in the eighties, he was seized not just by the rational fear of illness but by a larger dread of losing control. His tentative steps

toward self-acceptance are touchingly cumbersome. Fully coming out was the work of years. He speaks of an affair with, among others, Johnny Carson's stepson. As it happens, the mainstreaming of gay culture was one of the engines of his creative era. Diller doesn't say this, but it's striking that "Saturday Night Fever" took a gay subject, disco dancing—adapted from a *New York* magazine story about a working-class subculture now known to be fictional—and played it straight, projecting onto the hero an improbably heterosexual life.

When Bluhdorn died suddenly, in 1983, Martin Davis—who had helped engineer Paramount's sale to Gulf + Western back in 1966 and had risen through the ranks as Bluhdorn's shrewdest lieutenant—took over the company. Davis had little patience for the executive freedom Bluhdorn had allowed Diller. With the two men mismatched in temperament and direction, Diller was gone in a year and a half—fleeing one sinister Davis (Martin) for the arms of another, equally sinister one (Marvin), who controlled Twentieth Century Fox. Diller quickly discovered that Marvin Davis, an oil and real-estate billionaire, had hired him less as a long-term leader than as a temporary beard for a studio already in trouble. Diller soon struck a deal with Rupert Murdoch—then posing as an ingenuous newcomer to America—to buy Fox and merge it with Metromedia, a group of television stations owned by John Kluge.

Fox—though not yet Fox News—was born. From such small radioactive acorns do poisonous oaks grow. Once again, the law of serendipitous imponderables ruled: after much travail, the new network was saved solely by "The Simpsons," while Murdoch himself was later pulled back from the brink of bankruptcy almost entirely by the success of "Home Alone." Matt Groening and Macaulay Culkin have much to answer for.

The second half of the book, though far less glamorous—and far less entertaining—than the first, is arguably more significant, if only because it describes changes that, for good or ill, reshaped more of the media world. In the early nineties, in addition to launching a bid for Paramount, Diller fell, almost by accident, into running a cable outfit even he considered faintly ridiculous: QVC, a home-shopping network. "The shows," he writes, accurately, "looked as if they were produced in Poland in the 1950s." But

he spotted, early, the latent power of interactivity: the mostly middle-aged women who shopped through the channel called, wrote, and participated in the QVC world. He moved to southeastern Pennsylvania, where the network was headquartered, staying in one of those “workmanlike hotels built around suburban malls,” and commuted to New York on weekends: “Sometimes I’d go by train. I’d work late, then wait in the vast hall of the Philadelphia train station, in the cold, wearing my overcoat.” Greater love hath no tycoon than that he goes to live in southeastern Pennsylvania in pursuit of a new empire.

It was Diane von Furstenberg whose interest in promoting her dress brand on QVC led Diller to the channel, and Diller writes persuasively, even affectingly, about his relationship with and eventual marriage to her. However improbable the married love of a gay man and a straight woman might seem, their survival as a couple is proof, Diller says, of its reality, and the endurance of their loving relationship seems entirely authentic. (When she did break up with him, for several years, she chose to do it at the Pool Room of the Four Seasons—the power-lunch epicenter of the period—presumably so he could turn and greet his rivals even as he got the news. The very rich really are different from you and me.)

Before long, QVC became so profitable that Diller was able to parlay it into a series of bigger ventures—not all successful—and eventually acquired the Home Shopping Network. Though he had grasped early on that the future lay in talking back to the screen, he briefly resumed the old-media-tycoon game. We are led through the intricately improbable negotiations by which the Bronfman family, from Montreal, eager for a piece of Hollywood, managed to wrest Universal away from Lew Wasserman. The dealmaking grows so tangled that it begins to sound like something Gilbert and Sullivan might have set to marching music: one agreement “stated that all future cable channels owned by either Universal or Paramount were to be equally shared, so when Viacom bought Paramount, Universal took the position that it was entitled to own half of Viacom’s cable networks, which included MTV and Nickelodeon.”

In the long run, though, Diller kept faith with the interactive screen. And eventually—who knew this?—he became the father of Expedia, and of the

first online-dating service. These days, he has taken up the two go-to occupations of the retired super-rich: yachting and architectural philanthropy. Much of his energy now goes into building and maintaining Little Island, the odd but compelling floating flower-world moored just off the West Side Highway. Like his Morris mailroom mate David Geffen, he is admirably inclined to play the classic plutocratic role in New York, building, or at least naming, public amenities.

Throughout the book, one senses a tireless energy applied to dealmaking—and has a lingering impression that the thing being made, whether entertainment or dresses, is always a little less interesting than the money made by making it. And since, past a certain point, there's not much more money to be made, the only thing left to innovate is the way you make it. This is, of course, the first principle of capitalism, and one can hardly fault the capitalist for following it. You see this in the company that, for all the talk of disruption and new frontiers and interactive whatsits, Diller admires the most. “I don’t think there’s a business like it in all the world,” he writes. “It operates in 196 countries and has been doing so since many of those countries were founded. It’s usually the first commercial business that gets formed in emerging markets, and its worldwide political sophistication is unrivaled.” This is the Coca-Cola Company, whose business, as it has been for more than a century, is putting sugar into carbonated water that has been colored brown. *It is a great business.*

Turning the pages—strewn with inexplicably failed as well as serendipitously successful projects—one begins to suspect that William Goldman’s famous line, though it originally referred strictly to the chaotic movie business of the nineteen-seventies, may be the essential truth of all commerce. Do the people at Lindt headquarters, in Kilchberg, really know anything? Or are they, too, just guessing—prey to rumor, surprise, and the unknowable public? A brief dive into chocolate journalism reveals that among the most successful of Lindt’s line extensions was, in fact, the Dubai bar: the “Grease” of premium chocolate. Taste, though not disputable, is certainly negotiable. That is the core truth of consumer capitalism.

Who really knows anything about anything, when it comes to that? Was “Hitler vs. Sitting Bull”—Bluhdorn’s obsessive idea—really so crazy? After

all, Hitler did model his brutal invasion of the Eastern Front on America's expansion into the Western frontier. And one of the only military leaders who ever reversed the latter assault was Sitting Bull.

So what if, at some dire moment in the war—late 1941, say—someone had the crazy idea (stick with this; it may call for a few minutes of, uh, tough Socratic processing) that our last hope for defeating Hitler lay in reanimating Sitting Bull and his army through their salvaged DNA? And what if an amazing Jewish émigré scientist—Richard Dreyfuss, say—had already invented the technology? No weirder than the atomic bomb, right? And what if the only person who believed him was a lowly Army captain, played by Jessica Lange—a brilliant biologist forced to lead morning calisthenics? And what if the reconstituted Sitting Bull fell in love with Jessica but still led his army of reanimated warriors into the Ukraine to defeat the Nazis? Voilà: “Hitler vs. Sitting Bull,” the movie. Just make a decent deal for the sequel—“Sitting Bull 2: Custer’s Revenge”—and this time don’t let them wriggle out of it. ♦



[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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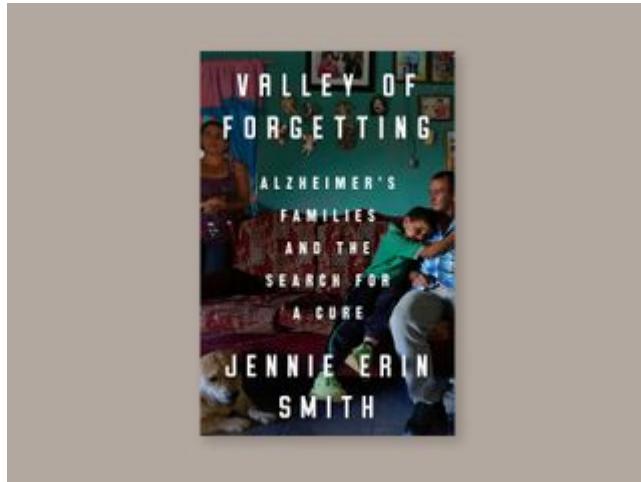
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**Books**

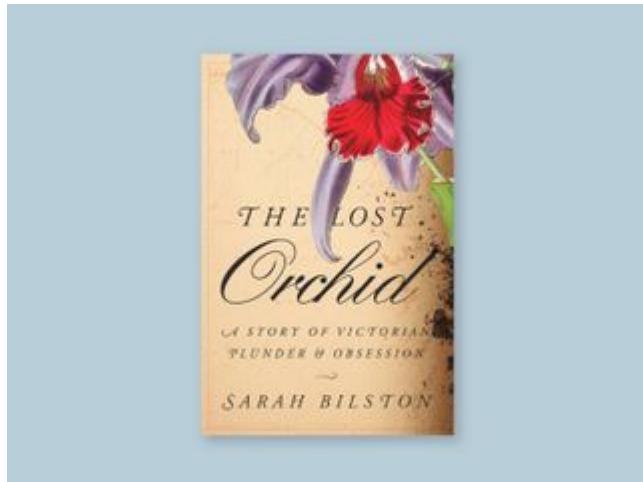
# Briefly Noted

“*Valley of Forgetting*,” “*The Lost Orchid*,” “*The Director*,” and “*Happiness Forever*.”

May 19, 2025



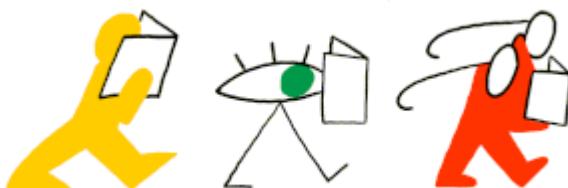
**Valley of Forgetting**, by Jennie Erin Smith (Riverhead). This stunning immersion into decades of Alzheimer’s research in Colombia follows a keen doctor, Francisco Lopera, as he and a team look at an extended family genetically predisposed to contracting the disease young, in their mid-thirties and forties. As Smith closely tracks both the scientists and their subjects, she captures the courage of those who dedicate their own suffering to science in pursuit of a precarious hope. In her handling, flat questions about the ethics of medical research are rendered in rich dimension—including, for example, whether to reveal results to study participants who were found to have the genetic mutation that may cause early-onset Alzheimer’s.



**The Lost Orchid**, by Sarah Bilston (*Harvard*). The main character of this wide-ranging history is *Cattleya labiata*, a purple-and-red orchid from Brazil. In 1818, it was taken to England, where it helped spark a mania for the flowers before seeming to disappear from the wild. Along the way, the orchid became the subject of scientific speculation (including by Charles Darwin), a fetish in the Victorian era’s burgeoning consumer culture, and an example of the excesses of imperialist extraction. Bilston draws on an extensive body of letters, newspapers, and novels to demonstrate how one rare flower could come “to signal wealth and power, or connoisseurship, or modernity, or attachment to the past, or scientific acumen”—sometimes all at once.

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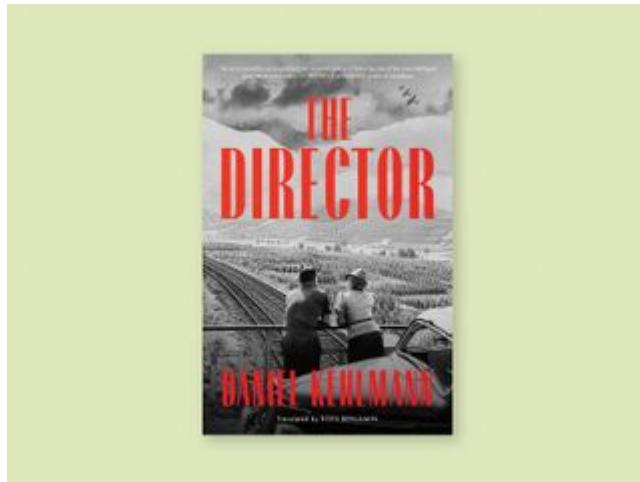
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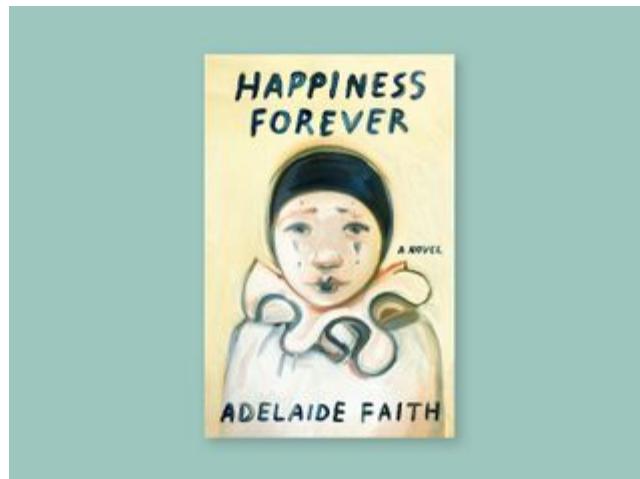
*Illustration by Ben Hickey*

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**The Director**, by Daniel Kehlmann, translated from the German by Ross Benjamin (Simon & Schuster). This lively novel examines the compromises and complicity of artists working in the face of totalitarianism through a fictional retelling of the life of the Austrian film director G. W. Pabst. In the twenties and thirties, Pabst builds a successful career in Europe—he helps to launch Greta Garbo and Louise Brooks—but in Hollywood, where he moves in 1933, he is thwarted in his attempts to make a film about “the breakdown of a civilization,” which he intends as a metaphor for the rise of Fascism. When he returns to Austria, in 1939, to care for his aging mother, he agrees to direct historical films that support the Reich’s ideals—work that irreparably stains his reputation.



**Happiness Forever**, by Adelaide Faith (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). In this spare, associative novel of projection and self-acceptance, a young woman, Sylvie, nurses an all-consuming obsession with her therapist. Simply

conjuring up the therapist's image gives her "a sense that a great freedom was close." As their weekly sessions unspool, the dark outlines of Sylvie's past are revealed—a controlling ex-boyfriend, an abusive father—and it becomes clear that her longing is driven by imagined visions of the therapist's glamorous life, situated in a "successful world" that Sylvie is convinced she doesn't deserve to enter. Though she begins with the conviction that her therapist has "already worked out the meaning of life," glimpses of her everyday life show her slowly learning to believe in the inherent value of her own existence.

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# Pavement Inspires a Strange, Loving Bio-Pic

*The band was willfully ironic and averse to canonization. An aggressively heady new movie it inspired, “Pavements,” thumbs its nose at the epic rock bio-pic.*

By [Hua Hsu](#)

May 19, 2025



“Pavements” is a true fanatic’s take, as weird as the band itself. Photograph by Gail Butensky

I once assumed that Pavement would be forgotten by later generations, just as the knowing, sarcastic wit of the nineteen-nineties came to seem passé in the two-thousands. The band’s music was ragged and dry, the work of self-referential pranksters scavenging for meaning at the tail end of rock’s imperial era. Their catalogue features a spoof of fifties lounge jazz but no dance remixes or stunt cameos; there are ramshackle songs about architecture, tennis, and the band R.E.M. but little mention of sex or rebellion. Their style became synonymous with their bandleader, Stephen Malkmus, who sang with a kind of deadpan cool, unimpressed by the world around him, including the hooky songs the group churned out. This was music about being bored by everything but language itself.

What made Pavement so out of step with its time (and ours) was its seemingly indifferent attitude toward success. If you were a certain kind of impressionable teen, casting about for pretensions to adopt as your own, Pavement's rise, in the early nineties, was thrilling. The most annoying things I've ever said were owing to a Pavement sticker on my high-school binder. What the band modelled was the possibility that you could be accepted on your own terms; failing that, you could pretend that you'd never cared to begin with.

Maybe it was always just a weaponized awkwardness, a desire to hold the world at arm's length. Malkmus and his childhood friend Scott Kannberg had grown up in Stockton, California, a Central Valley city that would have felt much farther from Bay Area cosmopolitanism than a mere eighty-minute drive. In January, 1989, Malkmus and Kannberg went to a local studio to record some songs, with little sense that they were forming a band. The studio owner, Gary Young, volunteered to play drums for them. The first EP by Pavement—the band's name was inspired by Kannberg's college courses in city planning—was praised in a circuit of small fanzines, and Young joined as the group's third member, adding an air of chaos to performances. (Though he was nearly twenty years older than his bandmates, he became famous for performing drunken headstands when he should have been playing.)

Pavement's early music was scratchy and eccentric, built on guitars that gnawed and eked their way through songs. The first three members were eventually joined by the percussionist Bob Nastanovich and the bassist Mark Ibold. In the early nineties, Pavement looked like a funny paradox, a crew of cherubs in collared shirts backed by Young, a long-haired, often shirtless showman pounding his drums. But, even if they were known for being sloppy, they never seemed like amateurs. Young was replaced by Steve West for "Crooked Rain, Crooked Rain," the band's polished breakthrough, in 1994. The members continued recording and touring until the release of "Terror Twilight," in 1999, by which time their sound had evolved into something more robust and bucolic. After exactly a decade as a band, Pavement broke up. Malkmus and Kannberg pursued solo projects, and Ibold joined Sonic Youth.

A few years ago, the director Alex Ross Perry began working on “Pavements,” a film about the group, which was released this month. The band members had little involvement, though a couple of them expressed a wariness of the “legacy trap”: they didn’t want the movie to present some fixed, triumphalist narrative. The film is ostensibly a documentary, set in 2022, when the band reunited for a tour, and it includes some typical scenes one might expect—rehearsals, old clips, interviews. But the bulk of “Pavements” takes place in an alternative America where the group is “the world’s most important & influential band,” worthy of idolatry.

To explore this other time line, Perry commissioned a musical set to Pavement’s songs, which he titled “Slanted! Enchanted!” He also wrote a serious, straightforward rock bio-pic called “Range Life” and shot scenes with the actors Joe Keery (of “Stranger Things”) and Jason Schwartzman. Lastly, Perry curated a museum show devoted to the band’s impact in this parallel world, placing real-life artifacts, such as notebooks and gig posters, alongside a fake platinum record and sham ad campaigns. To further complicate things, in the film Perry focusses mostly on behind-the-scenes stagings of these events, and the performers seem in on the joke to varying degrees. Where the “Slanted! Enchanted!” dancers talk about the musical with a kind of outsider bemusement, the “Range Life” cast always remains firmly in character, regarding Pavement as gods. In one absorbingly strange scene, Keery works with a dialect coach to nail Malkmus’s lackadaisical, slightly nasal intonation.

Trying to manage the different planes of reality in “Pavements” is mind-bending, and maybe a little pointless. (If you want a more traditional retelling of the story—albeit one heavy on puppetry—try “Louder Than You Think,” a 2023 documentary about Young.) There’s something endearingly annoying about the new film—the way an overzealous fan might make you rethink your own devotions. I went to one of the jukebox-musical shows, in Manhattan, and it was surreal. Reduced to their core melodies, the songs became deliriously sweet allegories for young love. For a moment, I wondered if I’d completely misunderstood this music for three-quarters of my life.

Last October, Pavement played its final show for the foreseeable future, at Sony Hall, a small theatre in midtown. It had been ages since anyone had seen the band in such an intimate setting. It opened with “You’re Killing Me,” the lead track on the group’s début EP, and it soon became clear that the set would be largely chronological. The evening ended with “Harness Your Hopes,” a once obscure B-side that went viral in 2017, owing to a quirk of the Spotify algorithm. It was ironic that a band formerly concerned about managing the scope of its success had been swept into the unpredictable vortices of contemporary fame. “That’s the end of our career,” Malkmus said, as the group finished the song and walked offstage.

The following night was the North American première of “Pavements,” at the New York Film Festival. Perry jokingly thanked us all for attending a special screening of “A Complete Unknown,” the Bob Dylan bio-pic from last year. It was the type of droll wisecrack one might expect from a Pavement devotee. Afterward, members of the band joined Perry onstage, looking appreciative, if also perplexed.

In fact, I did go to see “A Complete Unknown” soon after. A couple in Dylan’s core demographic stepped out during the trailers, complaining about the volume. I pretty much forgot about the movie after I left the theatre, as I’m sure many did, but I also went back to some Dylan albums I hadn’t listened to in years. It felt like this was one of the film’s primary goals—to guide our Spotify searches. I had a chilling vision of someday shielding my ears during trailers playing before bio-pics of my own teen heroes.

Just as a generation of young people now picture Timothée Chalamet’s wispy mustache when they think of Dylan, it’s likely that many fans understand N.W.A., Queen, Bob Marley, and Elvis Presley almost solely through their recent, varnished bio-pics. There are Bruce Springsteen and Michael Jackson movies due for release this year, as well as four separate Beatles ones slated for 2028. Perhaps pop-music history will soon exist only in the form of authorized, brand-managed hagiographies. Netflix recently announced that a nine-hour documentary about the complicated genius of Prince, directed by the Oscar-winner Ezra Edelman, would not be released, because of concerns raised by the artist’s estate. Even in the lower-

stakes world of publishing, a celebrity can mobilize her fan base against anything deemed unofficial. Adoring books about hip-hop musicians such as Mac Miller and De La Soul have been criticized by the artists or their estates—basically for being journalistic endeavors.

When careers are seen as intellectual property—and when, with the decline of album sales, one's back catalogue becomes an even more valuable resource—legacies will be guarded with a lawyerly vigilance. Messiness gets edited out in the name of a few key narrative turning points. The possibility that an artist today would ever offer the kind of access that Metallica gave for “Some Kind of Monster,” a 2004 documentary that famously featured the band in therapy, seems as likely as the prospect of American politicians welcoming the scrutiny of reporters.

In the absence of friction, contemporary bio-pics are just a series of boring victory laps. Intention and accidents, theft and boorish behavior: it all gets folded into the myth-serving lore. And it makes fools of us fans. The magic of pop music isn't just the star on the stage; it's how the crowd sways, and what fans do afterward with the feelings inspired by the show. All this made “Pavements” feel more exceptional. It seemed to exist adjacent to the band. A true fanatic's take, it aspires to be as heady and as weird as the band itself. Perry's aggressively clever story about Pavement is different from what mine would be, yet I recognized a fellow-traveller. In making something so intensely loving, he points out the banality of modern-day fandom, in which we're all expected to be brand ambassadors, reciting someone else's gospel.

“We're not trying to stay underground or trying to be big,” Malkmus told an interviewer in the nineties. “We're just existing.” While “Pavements” caricatures the good-versus-evil dynamic of the era's indie purism, it's also about a kind of ambivalence. Great works aren't always the result of the muse descending, and sometimes a career materializes by accident. Beautiful moments grow out of listlessness or pettiness. I went to one of Pavement's shows in 2022. I was initially wary, since some pleasures are best left in the past. But it was a delight to realize that Pavement was now a different, slightly more capable band. At one point, Malkmus held his guitar skyward like a rock idol, and I wondered if this was a joke. But it didn't

matter anymore. The band played everything a little slower, and the songs drifted through the theatre with a dazed elegance. The group had found something new in these old songs, and we were all free to change along with them, or not. ♦



*Hua Hsu* is a staff writer at *The New Yorker* and the author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning memoir “*Stay True*.” He teaches at Bard College.

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| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

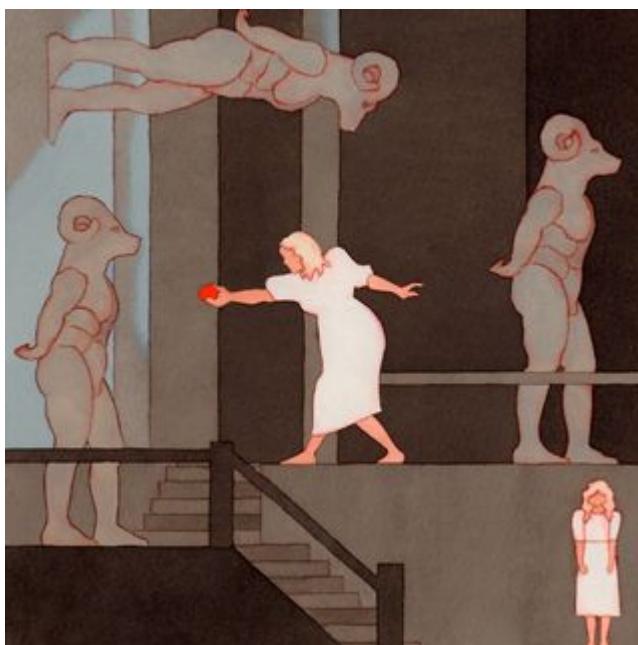
**Musical Events**

# The Dissonant Howl of “Salome”

Two New York productions of Strauss’s opera reposition its necrophiliac protagonist as a perverse instrument of justice.

By [Alex Ross](#)

May 19, 2025



*At the Met, decadence is indicated by ersatz-paganistic goings on in the background, inspired, in part, by Stanley Kubrick’s “Eyes Wide Shut.” Illustration by André Derainne*

The Biblical figure of Salome, Princess of Judea, who dances before Herod Antipas and demands the head of John the Baptist as a reward, infiltrated late-nineteenth-century culture as an agent of extreme decadence—“the goddess of immortal Hysteria,” as the novelist Joris-Karl Huysmans called her. In Oscar Wilde’s play “Salomé,” written in French in 1892, the princess goes so far as to kiss the prophet’s lifeless lips. In 1905, Richard Strauss used Wilde’s play as the basis for his opera “Salomé,” which titillated audiences all over Europe and horrified the board of the Metropolitan Opera. To a degree, the character exemplifies the misogynistic fin-de-siècle trope of women as vampiric beasts. Yet Wilde’s implicit identification with

Salome complicates matters. Hedwig Lachmann, the German poet whose incisive translation of “*Salomé*” became the libretto for Strauss’s opera, saw the princess as an “ethereal being” who feels “alienated from the raw corruption of her surroundings.” The true villain is Herod, who, in his hypocritical mixture of slobbering lust and grandstanding moralism, is a model man of power.

The voluptuous violence of Strauss’s score adds to the richness of the conception. At the turn of the last century, Strauss was experimenting with unprecedented levels of dissonance, and the grinding harmonies of “*Salome*” threaten to undermine the tonal system, as the young Arnold Schoenberg did not fail to notice. When Herod enters, the music lurches between saccharine waltz episodes and spasms of Expressionistic anarchy —a fracturing of the lingua franca. Salome, in the grisly final scene, reasserts a degree of tonal stability, but dissonant uproar resumes when Herod commands her death. The curtain has gone up on twentieth-century chaos.

New York audiences have witnessed two radically divergent views of “*Salome*” this season. The Met has marshalled its lavish resources to present its first new staging of the work since 2004: hulking sets, images of artful horror, Wagnerian voices, a monster orchestra unleashing a storm of sound. In February, Heartbeat Opera, spending a fraction of the Met’s budget, offered a riveting version of “*Salome*” on a chamber scale, using an arrangement for eight clarinettists and two percussionists which the composer Dan Schlosberg had devised for the occasion. Both productions succeeded in repositioning Salome as a perverse instrument of justice. She pushes Herod’s social order to its logical extreme, the point at which it is consumed by its own malignancy.

Claus Guth, who directed “*Salome*” at the Met, shows sympathy for the princess from the outset. Before the opera begins, we see a neglected girl playing with a doll and then throwing it to the ground. Six girls of various ages shadow Salome throughout the production, evoking a horrific childhood. They make especially unsettling appearances in a concrete-panelled dungeon below the palace, where John the Baptist, or Jochanaan, is a prisoner. Flashes of menace accumulate until, amid the orchestral melee

that introduces Salome's final monologue, we see not only Jochanaan's severed head but also his decapitated corpse. The young Salomes stand around in a daze: it is implied that Herod abused them in the same space. Given that Herod considers Jochanaan a man of God, the beheading of the prophet seems, if not justified, understandable. Whatever is deemed holy in such a place bears responsibility.

If Guth had found a comparably vivid aesthetic for the palace itself, he might have had a classic production on his hands. Alas, Herod's world is numbingly dreary, at odds with the nasty glitter of the score. The setting is Victorian, but as if covered in ash. Decadence is indicated by ersatz-paganistic goings on in the background: men wearing ram's heads, a naked maiden, spectral servants. In interviews, Guth has named Stanley Kubrick's "Eyes Wide Shut" as an inspiration—a regrettable choice, given the feebleness of the equivalent scenes in the film. High-end grotesqueries out of Fellini or Visconti would have been more apt.

The South African soprano Elza van den Heever brings formidable acting abilities to the title role, handily conveying Salome's layers of trauma and her damaged core. In the Dance of the Seven Veils, the singer remains clothed, directing the younger Salomes in a series of pantomimes that hint at what she has endured. Vocally, van den Heever falls short of the comprehensive mastery shown by Karita Mattila in the Met's previous production. On opening night, the soprano's top notes blazed out with a cool gleam, but her lower and middle registers lacked the heft needed to punch through Strauss's dense textures. Peter Mattei, as Jochanaan, had no such problem, singing with sustained strength and beauty of tone. At times, though, I wanted more emphasis on the deranged energy of the prophet's visions. Gerhard Siegel, a veteran Herod, navigated the king's tongue-twisting harangues with ease, yet he resorted to the kind of barking-and-rasping caricature that is all too familiar in "Salome" stagings. Michelle DeYoung was a somewhat stolid Herodias, Piotr Buszewski a fiercely ardent Narraboth.

Yannick Nézet-Séguin, the Met's chronically overscheduled music director, seems to lack the rehearsal time to establish distinct stylistic profiles for the operas he conducts. He plowed through "Salome" with the same plush,

effusive manner he brings to Wagner or Puccini: the score's ragged edges were blunted, its whiplash contrasts blurred. Seven seasons into his tenure at the Met, Nézet-Séguin has yet to make much of a mark. There is something faceless about his music-making; everything sounds reasonably good, but nothing sticks in the mind.

I have no idea what sort of late-night brainstorming session prompted the leaders of Heartbeat Opera to transcribe "Salome" for an ensemble dominated by clarinets, with saxophones and recorders thrown into the mix. But I imagine that the creative team was looking at the first page of the score, on which a clarinet plays a slithering bitonal scale and then a dancing figure in C-sharp minor. Why not stick with that instrument to the end? The lustrous weirdness of Strauss's music survives the experiment intact; at times, it is heightened. One masterstroke of Schlosberg's arrangement is to assign the low, groaning chords that accompany Salome's line "Ah! I have kissed your mouth, Jochanaan" to soprano recorders, which emit a maximally eerie hoot.

The show took place at Irondale, in Brooklyn. Elizabeth Dinkova, the director, moved the action to the present day, with flickering screens suggesting the surveillance apparatus of a paranoid regime. The singers used an English translation of the Lachmann text, by Tom Hammond. In an intriguing revision, the Heartbeat team expanded the role of the Page, who is besotted with the Syrian captain Narraboth, who is in turn besotted with Salome. When Narraboth kills himself in despair, Wilde has the Page deliver a sweet little eulogy for him. Strauss cut that passage, but Schlosberg wove a couple of lines from it—"He was like a brother to me, closer than a brother"—into the interlude that precedes Herod's entrance. The mezzo-soprano Melina Jaharis found an oasis of pathos in that moment, although the decision to present the character as female meant that the gay subtext fell by the wayside.

The Heartbeat cast, liberated from the need to bellow over Straussian mayhem, offered an unnervingly intimate perspective on the opera's cauldron of kink. Summer Hassan was a convincingly girlish Salome, her crisp, poised delivery mirroring Lachmann's view of the character as a disturbed innocent. Patrick Cook found in Herod the strain of queasy

lyricism that Siegel missed at the Met. Nathaniel Sullivan embodied a sinewy Jochanaan who is sorely tempted by Salome's advances. Jacob Ashworth conducted with authority. I wasn't persuaded by Dinkova's ending, in which the Page shoots the principals and then departs. Guth landed on a more haunting and ambiguous image: Salome walking into a luminous mist, leaving mad reality behind. ♦



*Alex Ross* has been *The New Yorker's* music critic since 1996. He is the author of “[Wagnerism: Art and Politics in the Shadow of Music](#).”

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| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

# Poems

- **“Last Exit”**

By Rowan Ricardo Phillips | “Yesterday bleeds in the rearview mirror / As tomorrow’s fires fan out everywhere.”

- **“Make the Audiobook Before the Book Is Made”**

By Terrance Hayes | “Each morning, stand before a steamy mirror / talking to your reflection.”

[Poems](#)

# Last Exit

By [Rowan Ricardo Phillips](#)

May 19, 2025

Lean harder on the accelerator,  
Just a little further, just a little  
Faster, through the hellgate to the highway,  
With all its molten rubber and melting

Asphalt sinking sharp and gumming the lungs.  
Yesterday bleeds in the rearview mirror  
As tomorrow's fires fan out everywhere,  
Orange-yellow echinacea rot

Purpling in the fat bulb where the void spreads,  
Like a film fuming at its reel, the screen  
Surviving as mere abstract brightness, one  
Not intended for eyes, a light for light,

Light's light, see now how beautiful it is,  
This shrinking ring of gold, the story gone,  
Leaving a knowledge that fades uniquely  
Back into the black sulk of burning things

[Rowan Ricardo Phillips](#) is the author of the poetry collection “[Silver](#),” among others.

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**Poems**

# Make the Audiobook Before the Book Is Made

By [Terrance Hayes](#)

May 19, 2025

Each morning, stand before a steamy mirror talking to your reflection. Your book of poems is being printed there. Your breath refracts into lines of poetry before it doubles back splitting into multiple echoes & directions.

The most important & unimportant poetry transpires when water & mirror separate you into layers. Where some of it is steam in the morning, some of it is clear as glass, the future arriving. Thus, the poems

may also reflect the perspective of glass you will pass throughout the day, as if a twin haunted your peripheral vision. You sit smoking when the beloved drifts toward the shower. The window is open,

a path always there. Listening feels real & surreal when you look at it like a color no one has named. Outside, the machines break down an old building to build a newer building; sunlight climbs between

coupling & uncoupling bodies. The mirrors reflecting the best poems are slightly warped so that reading feels like staring into rippling passages. The convex & concave mirrors forming

the book jacket exaggerate expressions,  
making others appear stretched, squished,  
& altered, mirroring the elasticity  
of the poems themselves. Tones & topics  
shift like light across running water.

The rain falls in the shower, sliding off  
a body it cannot cover in the rhythm  
of a strange song. You can almost hear  
inside it: a weeping. The door is closed.  
It was never closed before.

*Terrance Hayes*, a former MacArthur Fellow, is the author of “[So to Speak](#)” and “[Watch Your Language](#),” among other books.

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| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

# Cartoons

- **[Cartoon Caption Contest](#)**

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| [Next](#) | [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

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| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

| [Next](#) | [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) | [Previous](#) |

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| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

# Puzzles & Games

- **[The Crossword: Tuesday, May 13, 2025](#)**

By Will Nediger | A moderately challenging puzzle.

[\*\*Crossword\*\*](#)

# The Crossword: Tuesday, May 13, 2025

*A moderately challenging puzzle.*



By [Will Nediger](#)

May 13, 2025



[Will Nediger](#) is a crossword constructor from London, Ontario, who publishes puzzles independently under the name Bewilderingly.

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| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |