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Goings On

The Metropolitan Opera Delves Into Comic Books

Also: Long-running culture podcasts having a moment, David Byrne's art-rock palette, Robert Rauschenberg's photographs, and more.

By Jane Bua, Vince Aletti, Brian Seibert, Zoë Hopkins, Sheldon Pearce, Richard Brody, Helen Shaw, Sarah Larson, and Rachel Syme

September 19, 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.***

In the year 2000, when cinema's most recent Batman was George Clooney and the first movie in the Marvel Cinematic Universe was eight years away, Michael Chabon published the novel "The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay." The book was about two cousins in nineteen-forties New York City—one finding refuge after fleeing Nazi-occupied Prague, the other trying to make a name for himself as a writer. Together, they embark on a comic-book venture, centering their stories on an antifascist superhero called the Escapist. The narrative, vividly written and ripe with visual dynamism, is now adapted for opera: **"The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay"** opens the Metropolitan Opera's season, on Sept. 21, directed by the Met vet Bartlett Sher, with a libretto by Gene Scheer—a leading expert in big-book operas—and a score composed by Mason Bates.

“The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay” opens at the Met Opera on Sept. 21.Illustration by Simon Bailly

The production develops three primary worlds from the original story. One is Europe: “We’re in Prague, we’re on the battlefields in France, we’re in a boxcar train to a concentration camp,” the set designer Jenny Melville, of 59 Studio, explained. “That’s all represented in this grainy, black-and-white look.” The setting’s gravity is also reflected in the music: Bates includes haunting strings, spindly mandolin, and gritty analog synthesizers, along with Wagnerian tubas, a nod to Adolf Hitler’s composer of choice. The second world is New York City, where the cousins pursue their artistic endeavors. “New York is much more realistic,” Melville said. “It’s the one area where we used very naturalistic props.” The music that soundtracks this atmosphere focusses on a big-band sound, highlighting “saxophones and swagger,” as Bates put it, and is set to tunes in F-sharp major—an homage to Irving Berlin’s affection for the key—which makes for a vibrant aural palette. The final world is that of the comic: where the audience sees the process of creation, from first sketch to printed product, in bright-colored digital projections, and the score is characterized by synthetic sounds and chromatic tonality. “It’s less about one key than about this phantasmagoric mix of electronica and Technicolor orchestration,” Bates explained.

But, though they each have their own signposts, the three worlds are not so removed from one another. Trauma and escapism necessarily interweave, as do their corresponding artistic elements—when someone jumps off a bridge in Europe, for example, their figure shapeshifts into a projected sketch. In 2025, a story that asks what it means to create amid tyrannical politics feels

especially relevant. “We look for a force of good when we’re looking at authoritarianism,” Bates said. “Unfortunately, that hasn’t really changed since the nineteen-forties.” Another thing that hasn’t changed is the ability of art to offer an avenue for humanity, a means for trauma to give way to something with a kernel of beauty and hope. As Chabon wrote, escape from reality is a worthy challenge.—*Jane Bua*

About Town

Art

Although Robert Rauschenberg often used photographs in his paintings, prints, and assemblages, many were pictures cut or copied from newspapers and magazines—the media was always a key part of his message. But the artist also took and incorporated his own photographs, and **“Robert Rauschenberg’s New York: Pictures from the Real World,”** at the Museum of the City of New York, focusses on those pictures and the wider range of black-and-white images he made in the city. His photos are full of quick glances and incidental moments: torn posters, a bare bulb, a tattooed arm. “[H]ow marvelous it is to have an excuse to just look at everything,” Rauschenberg said. In his hungry eye, everything deserves and rewards our attention.—*Vince Aletti (Through April 19.)*

Dance

A few years ago, when a long-abandoned power station on Brooklyn’s Gowanus Canal was refashioned into Powerhouse Arts, a chicly industrial space for visual artists, the graffiti that covered the walls was largely kept intact. That helps make it the perfect setting for **“Skatepark,”** the first show in the new Powerhouse: International arts festival. The Danish choreographer Mette Ingvartsen equips a crew of skateboarders and roller-skaters with the ramps and rails they need, plus instruments and

microphones to rev up a punk vibe. Round and round they go, falling and trying again, weaving in and out of one another's paths and modelling coexistence in the hidden rules they follow.—*Brian Seibert (Powerhouse Arts; Sept. 25-27.)*

Art

An image from "Bodies in Dissent," from 2021.Photograph courtesy the artist

I don't always know where I am in the films of **Ufuoma Essi**, just that I'm always somewhere haunted. *MOMA* presents two works by Essi that interrogate the way memory—and all its eerie perturbations—moves through Black bodies. In "Half Memory," from 2024—inspired by Toni Morrison's notion of "rememory," describing recurrent flickers of traumatized memory in the Black psyche—Essi's Super 8 camera ushers viewers through carefully observed slices of San Francisco, New York, Paris. The grain and grit of the film lend the aesthetic touch of the archive—it's as if we're looking at the present through the eyes of a ghost. When it erupts into mesmerizing abstract fulgurations of color, it's as if the film itself has imploded under the force of all the memories held therein.—*Zoë Hopkins (MOMA; through Oct. 13.)*

Art Rock

When **David Byrne** joined Olivia Rodrigo to perform "Burning Down the House" at this year's Governors Ball, it was just another reminder of the rich and quirky musical life he's led. The singer-songwriter and guitarist has often used his work to bridge creative mediums, both with his new-wave band Talking Heads and beyond—highlighted by the seminal 1984 concert

film “Stop Making Sense.” Across his numerous albums outside the band, Byrne has continued to expand a lively art-rock palette. His cross-platform “Reasons to Be Cheerful” project encompassed a website and a lecture series, and was connected to an album, “American Utopia,” and a Broadway show. For his latest project—“Who Is the Sky?” with Ghost Train Orchestra—he promises an immersive live-storytelling experience.—*Sheldon Pearce (Radio City Music Hall; Sept. 30-Oct. 1, Oct. 10-11.)*

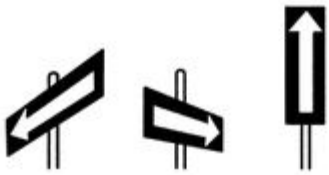
Movies

Charles Grodin and Cybill Shepherd in “The Heartbreak Kid.”Photograph from Archive Photos / Stringer / Getty

There’s a missing link in the handful of films for which Elaine May has lately won long-overdue acclaim as a director: **“The Heartbreak Kid,”** from 1972, which hasn’t been reissued because of rights issues. Charles Grodin stars as a schlubby New Yorker who, during a Miami Beach honeymoon, dumps his awkward bride (Jeannie Berlin, May’s daughter) for a breezy Minnesota socialite (Cybill Shepherd) whose father (Eddie Albert) he then has to face. Working with a script by Neil Simon, May turns its tightly wound comedy into an uproarious, bitterly ironic vision of self-liberation and the pursuit of happiness. Berlin and Albert were nominated for Oscars; fittingly, the movie is being shown at the Museum of the Moving Image in a 35-mm. print borrowed from the Academy Film Archive.—*Richard Brody (Sept. 27-28.)*

Off Off Broadway

In Eisa Davis's choreopoem **"The Essentialisn't"** the artist-composer-performer makes new work out of old ideas of Black womanhood, sometimes by mocking clichés—she gets the audience to scream-sing a "Dreamgirls" riff—and sometimes by remaking them. At the beginning of her dreamy performance, Davis plunges into a tall tank of water, murmuring "darkness be my friend": she will return several times to water metaphors, which can represent both the Middle Passage and a ritual benediction. Between episodes, she asks versions of the question, "Can you be Black and not perform?" She sings several elliptical answers, accompanying herself on electric keyboard: many are call-and-response numbers with her co-performers Princess Jacob and Jamella Cross; others are quiet, inward-turning affirmations, such as "Blackness minus narrative equals us."—*Helen Shaw (HERE; through Sept. 28.)*



Pick Three

Sarah Larson on colossal culture podcasts having a moment.

This season, in a cosmic convergence of radio waves, several of our mightiest long-running culture series—some of which predate the podcast itself—are observing milestones at once. The series below are, respectively, changing, ending, or celebrating carrying on; beyond those, "This American Life" turns thirty and "Fresh Air," incredibly, just turned *fifty*. (Terry Gross's recent appearance on "Talk Easy with Sam Fragoso" is a must-listen.) All have near-endless back catalogues; all are endlessly listenable.

Illustration by Jimmy Simpson

1. The beloved British polymath and broadcasting legend *Melvyn Bragg*, who joined the BBC in 1961, recently stepped down from his show **"In Our Time,"** which, since 1998, has delved into matters of science, art, and far, far beyond, informed by academics moderated with Bragg's great brio. In characteristic fashion, some of Bragg's last episodes explore dragons, civility, and the evolution of lungs.

2. "WTF with Marc Maron" helped define the podcast form, starting in 2009, as Maron soul-searched and mea-culpaed his way through old beefs with fellow-comedians; he evolved into one of the best interviewers in the business. Autumn brings the end of "WTF" and a documentary about Maron, "Are We Good?"

3. "Kreative Kontrol," an insightful labor-of-love interview podcast by the Edmonton-based journalist and music enthusiast Vish Khanna, marked its thousandth episode this summer. Khanna's passion and depth of knowledge have yielded many coups, including notable interviews with the Silver Jews' David Berman, in 2019, and with all the members of Fugazi, in 2024.

What to Watch

Rachel Syme on a movie-series companion to the Met's "Superfine" exhibition.

September is unofficially Fashion Month in New York. The runway shows stomp through, along with the attendant canapé-dotted parties and slick brand events. Magazines drop their thickest, glossiest issues. There is an energized, back-to-school vigor around shopping—nubbly sweaters of all colors tempt passersby from well-composed store windows. This year, even a movie theatre is getting in on the stylish mood: Metrograph, on the Lower East Side, hosts a weekend film series, complete with talkbacks and special guests, called "**Starving for Beauty!: Superfine Stories on Screen**" (Sept. 20-21), a companion to "Superfine," the Metropolitan Museum's current Costume Institute exhibition exploring Black dandyism in fashion. (The exhibition's curator, Monica L. Miller, put the series together.) Here are the five films on view.

A scene from "The Gospel According to André."Photograph from Dustin Pittman / Penske Media / REX / Shutterstock

"The Gospel According to André" (2017, Kate Novack)

When André Leon Talley died, in 2022, the fashion world lost one of its most charismatic and fascinating figures. Talley, a brilliant bon vivant and the first Black man to serve as creative director of *Vogue*, was a kind of caped crusader for high fashion (quite literally; his cape collection was

legendary). Talley was a staunch advocate for designers and their craft, even as he often critiqued the industry at large for its clubbish exclusivity.

“Black Is . . . Black Ain’t” (1995, Marlon Riggs)

The director put his own story at the center of this wide-ranging documentary about the diversity of Black experience in America. While making it, Riggs was battling *AIDS*, and the film’s meta-narrative, about whether he will survive to see it finished, lends the work a poignant urgency. The film won the 1995 Filmmakers Trophy at Sundance, but Riggs was not there to accept it; he died in 1994.

“Looking for Langston” (1989, Isaac Julien)

This gorgeous black-and-white exploration of the Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes expands into a wider meditation on queer Black identity. Julien used archival footage from the nineteen-twenties, intercut with the writing of Hughes, James Baldwin, and others, to show the connection between artists across time, both in speakeasies and on the page.

“Dressed Like Kings” (2007, Stacey Holman)

Holman’s short documentary digs into the subculture of *oswenka* (or “swank”) pageants in South Africa, in which men parade in their finest clothes in pursuit of being named “Best Dressed.”

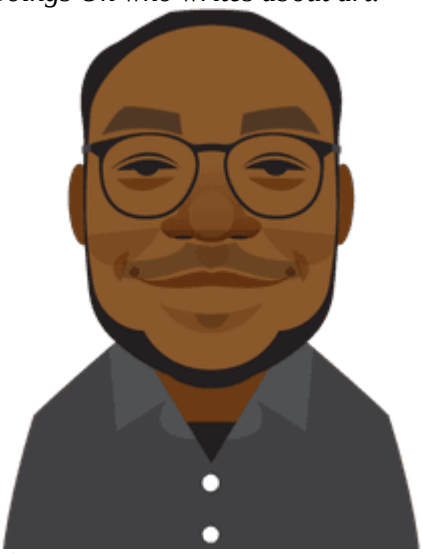
“Portrait of Jason” (1967, Shirley Clarke)

A riveting documentary that is part monologue, part character study, part confrontation, this cult classic, shot in the course of twelve hours in Clarke’s apartment at the Chelsea Hotel, features a long, meandering conversation with Jason Holliday, a gay street hustler and aspiring cabaret performer who is a talker par excellence. Jason alternately romances the camera and spars with it; you will leave with your head spinning.

P.S. Good stuff on the internet:

- *Reading through a bad feeling*
- *Ping-Pong with Paul Newman and Robert Redford*
- *The ants who broke evolution*

Jane Bua 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."
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.
Zoë Hopkins is a contributor to Goings On who writes about art.



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."

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

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

Rachel Syme is a staff writer at The New Yorker. She has covered Hollywood, style, and other cultural subjects since 2012. She is the author of "Syme's Letter Writer," about the joys of handwritten correspondence.

The Food Scene

A Tiny Cambodian Spot Packs an Outsized Punch

Bong, in Crown Heights, combines chaotic party energy with thrillingly funky cooking.

By Helen Rosner

September 14, 2025

With acid-green walls and a thumping hip-hop playlist, Bong draws you in before you've even set foot through the door.Photographs by Lanna Apisukh for The New Yorker

You're reading the Food Scene newsletter, Helen Rosner's guide to what, where, and how to eat. ***Sign up to receive it in your inbox.***

Bong, a new, itsy-bitsy, absolutely electrifying Cambodian restaurant in Crown Heights, has more energy even while you're waiting on the sidewalk for your table to be ready than most spots can muster on their most lit-up nights of the year. For the three evenings a week that it's open, the whole operation, in a modest storefront on a residential corner, is shimmeringly alive. The cooks are half dancing in the open kitchen as they slice and stir-fry. The customers all seem wildly in love with one another. Inside, the light bouncing off the acid-green walls makes everyone's faces appear traced with neon. The thumping bass of the hip-hop playlist reverberates through the dining room and rolls out through the open door to reach the diners seated at bistro tables out front. Even a half block away, the air smells sweet

and bright, like seared shellfish, sharp vinegar, and the blistery green of sizzling herbs.

Bong (the name comes from a Khmer term of kinship and respect) is run by the Cambodian chef Chakriya Un, who was born in a Thai refugee camp and grew up in the U.S., and her partner, Alexander Chaparro, who emigrated from Venezuela. For eight years, Un operated Kreung, an acclaimed pop-up whose explorations of flavor and memory were a proving ground for many of the dishes now on Bong's menu. The lineup is tight—a party of four could (and should!) order the whole thing. In addition to offering a survey of Khmer cuisine, with its strong flavors and sour ferments, the restaurant also pays homage to Un's own family, particularly her mother, Kim Eng Mann, or Mama Kim, who can sometimes be spotted working in the kitchen. She developed the recipe for the *cha kapiek*, a bracing dip in which a symphonic, funky fermented-shrimp paste is pounded with fresh shrimp and peanuts; it's served with a mound of satisfyingly crinkle-cut crudités and seed-studded shrimp chips. Mama Kim's namesake lobster (listed with the minimal description "IYKYK") is a magnificent mountain of crustacean legs and claws, the pieces stir-fried with oodles of slivered ginger and a sweet-spicy herbaceous paste, made by Mama Kim, that clings, slurpably, to the meat and drips juicily onto a pile of rice below. A toothsome hanger steak is crowned with a dynamic *tuk kreung*—a blend of eggplant, chiles, and another paste made with fish that Mama Kim catches herself.

Chakriya Un, who runs the restaurant with her partner, Alexander Chaparro, was working the kitchen right up until the recent birth of their child.

Almost everything on the menu is thrilling. Even what fails to be thrilling, such as a fairly floppy green salad that I tried on one visit, manages to be at least interesting. (The dressing on that salad was afire with Kampot peppercorns, a hard-to-find Cambodian variety that has a tealike flowery astringence.) Another salad of chewy-crisp pork jowl and sliced melon is zingy with garlic and pickle-tart. The round sweetness of squid, fried in a light-as-air batter, is magnified by intensely floral curry leaves and a salty snowfall of shaved cured egg yolk. A bone-in pork chop, thick as a dictionary, tender as can be, and drowning in a luscious mess of charred tomatoes marinated in a sugar-lime-fish-sauce concoction, features every shade of sour and sweet.

Helen, Help Me!

E-mail your questions about dining, eating, and anything food-related, and Helen may respond in a future newsletter.

Along with Mama Kim's lobster, a dish about which I have had literal dreams, my favorite thing on the menu was the whole fried fish—dorade, on one visit, the skin crackly and dusted with toasted rice powder—which eyeballs you lasciviously from an oval plate. Its flesh is scored into diamonds, the way you might slice a lattice into the fat end of a pork shoulder; it's visually striking and functionally quite useful, creating perfect little pull-off morsels ready to be dipped in sour-tamarind sauce and wrapped up in a lettuce leaf with Vietnamese coriander and *diếp cá* (a punchy herb known as fish mint). Here, perhaps, the chaotic-party energy of the place could have used a little focus, or been channelled into a brief anatomy spiel: I saw way too many tables dive ecstatically into the fried fish—and then, too happily, allow their plates to be cleared away without realizing that, if you flip the creature over, there's an entire second serving to be found on the other side.

It's doubly a shame to miss the second half of the fish simply because a seat at white-hot, tiny Bong is, at the moment, a terribly precious thing. For most of Bong's opening months, Un and Chaparro have been ever present in the tiny space, Chaparro working the front of house and Un, gloriously pregnant, in the kitchen. As a newish parent myself, still very much obsessed with the oddness and wonder and misery of human gestation, I found Un's physical presence in the restaurant incredibly moving—I can't think of another time I've seen someone who is visibly expecting working in a restaurant, let alone the chef and owner and engine of a place. After the very recent birth of their child, Un has taken a break from the all-consuming demands of restaurateuring to attend to the entirely distinct all-consuming demands of early parenthood. The restaurant remains open, run by Un's talented kitchen team, with Un, Chaparro, and Mama Kim dropping in occasionally; the food remains sharp and bright and deep and exhilarating, the mood vivacious and young and loud and polychromatic. What a thing it is to bring life into this world! ♦

Helen Rosner, a staff writer at The New Yorker, received a 2025 James Beard Award for her Profile of the food personality Padma Lakshmi.

The Talk of the Town

- **Seeing Enemies Everywhere**
  The government’s working definition of “hate speech” now seems to include anything that offends Donald Trump personally—including late-night comedy.
- **Mahmoud Khalil, Back Home**
  Cooking his mother’s maqluba recipe, the Palestinian activist describes his detention in Louisiana: losing fifteen pounds and a cleaning contest with pizza as a prize.
- **Jeremy Irons’s Walk of Fame**
  The “Morning Show” actor strolls the theatre district, remembering his star turn in Tom Stoppard’s “The Real Thing” and recalling the way Mike Nichols always joked that he was Jewish.
- **Jeanine Tesori, Young-Adult Whisperer**
  The award-winning composer of “Fun Home” gave her Juilliard students a prompt for a song-writing assignment: “How do you view the world?”
- **New York Civil Servants Strut Their Stuff**
  Andrew Cuomo, Carolyn Maloney, and other public officials hit the runway in a bipartisan Fashion Week defile. Naomi Campbell for comptroller?

Comment

Seeing Enemies Everywhere

The government's working definition of "hate speech" now seems to include anything that offends Donald Trump personally—including late-night comedy.

By Jonathan Blitzer

September 20, 2025

Photo illustration by Cristiana Couceiro; Source photographs from Getty

Following the tragic death of the conservative activist Charlie Kirk, the line between eulogy and blame wore swiftly and predictably thin. By Monday afternoon, five days after Kirk's murder, it was threadbare. If the encouragement of political dissent is a part of Kirk's legacy, as his supporters have insisted, the actual practice of it isn't tolerated much at the moment. His podcast continued, on schedule, with a series of guest hosts. One was Vice-President J. D. Vance, who declared that national unity wasn't possible while people were "celebrating" Kirk's death. The available evidence suggests that Kirk's alleged killer, a twenty-two-year-old man from Utah without any clear political affiliation, acted alone. But Vance

already had a unified theory of the case, and he brought on Stephen Miller, the White House's most fervent ideologue, to help him lay it out. The killing, in their telling, was the direct result of a coördinated and well-financed network of leftist organizations that "foments, facilitates, and engages in violence." Vance and Miller spoke as if this were a truism. It is now apparently up to members of the Trump Administration to decide who, in criticizing Kirk's lifework, might somehow be condoning his death.

As an example, Vance called out an essay in *The Nation* that assails Kirk's views on women, homosexuality, and affirmative action. "It made it through the editors, and, of course, liberal billionaires rewarded that attack," Vance said. By "attack," was he referring to the murder, or to the writer's withering appraisal of Kirk's positions? It scarcely mattered. The Open Society Foundations and the Ford Foundation, bêtes noires of the political right, were to blame. Miller, meanwhile, vowed that "we are going to channel all of the anger that we have over the organized campaign that led to this assassination to uproot and dismantle these terrorist networks." Evidently, he hadn't read a 2024 study from the Department of Justice which found that "the number of far-right attacks continues to outpace all other types of terrorism and domestic violent extremism"; in recent days, it was taken down from the department's website.

The first nine months of Donald Trump's second term have been a breakneck exercise in rebranding those disfavored by the White House as enemies of the state. Such enemies can have many faces, and the government has gained increasing latitude in picking them out to serve its agenda. The week of Kirk's death, the Supreme Court issued a ruling that allowed federal immigration agents conducting "roving" patrols in Los Angeles to arrest residents on the basis of their race or ethnicity, or just if they're speaking Spanish in a Home Depot parking lot. At the same time, the Justice Department is devising its own means to target anyone who opposes the President's immigration policies. In August, it moved to fine Joshua Schroeder, a lawyer in California who unsuccessfully fought a client's deportation in court, for making what the government claimed were "myriad meritless contentions" and "knowing or reckless misrepresentations." He appears to be the first attorney sanctioned under a

memo, signed by the President in March, to penalize lawyers or firms that pursued what the government deemed “unreasonable” cases against it.

Last week, the Justice Department advanced its prosecution of LaMonica McIver, a Democratic congresswoman from Newark, whom the Administration has accused of “assaulting” a federal agent outside an immigration jail in May—a charge she denies. She was arrested along with Ras Baraka, the mayor of Newark. (The charges against him, for trespassing, were dropped.) According to footage from an agent’s body camera, the officer who arrested Baraka said that the order had come from Todd Blanche, Trump’s former personal lawyer and now the No. 2 at the Justice Department.

In a CNN interview after Kirk’s death, Blanche also argued that a group of women who had recently protested against Trump when he was dining out in Washington could be prosecuted under the *RICO* Act, a law typically used against gangs and organized-crime groups. Blanche’s boss, the Attorney General, Pam Bondi, said that she would “absolutely target” people who engaged in “hate speech.” On Tuesday, Jonathan Karl, a correspondent for ABC, asked Trump what Bondi had meant. “She’ll probably go after people like you, because you treat me so unfairly,” Trump said. “You have a lot of hate in your heart. Maybe they will come after ABC. Well, ABC paid me sixteen million dollars recently for a form of hate speech.” The government’s working definition of “hate speech” now seems to include anything that offends the President personally. Last week, he sued the *Times* for fifteen billion dollars for publishing articles that, among other things, credited the producer Mark Burnett, rather than Trump himself, for the success of “The Apprentice”; on Friday, a federal judge dismissed the suit.

The legal underpinnings of Trump’s threats have always been dubious, but his bullying, as a tactic of intimidation, is succeeding spectacularly. Trump hates being laughed at, and comedians who once enjoyed the armor of celebrity are finding that their corporate employers would rather sacrifice the First Amendment than risk retaliation. The late-night host Jimmy Kimmel had offered his condolences to Kirk’s family and called the shooting “horrible and monstrous.” But, on Wednesday, ABC suspended

him indefinitely for a segment in which he likened Trump's conspicuously detached response to the murder to how a "four-year-old mourns a goldfish." Aboard Air Force One the next day, Trump told reporters that TV networks on which he is criticized are "an arm of the Democrat Party" and could have their broadcasting licenses revoked.

Weaponizing Kirk's murder to vilify opponents practically guarantees that the cycle of recriminations will continue and that the public debate, such as it is, will be emptied of anything resembling facts. A Democratic legislator in Minnesota was murdered, along with her husband, earlier this year. In 2022, an attacker looking for Nancy Pelosi, the former Speaker of the House, assaulted her husband with a hammer. Neither of these calamities negated the gravity of the two assassination attempts made against Trump last year; rather, each act made the others more upsetting.

The idea that speech or thought contrary to the government line could trigger punishment is the dream of autocrats. Eventually, it makes enemies of everyone. When Barack Obama weighed in, on Tuesday, to state that he could abhor Kirk's killing yet still oppose his world view—including the suggestion that Obama's "wife or Justice Jackson does not have adequate brain-processing power" to be taken seriously—it felt both anodyne and radical. Administration officials and Republican members of Congress were calling on constituents to report unsavory comments they might have seen or heard about Kirk. It may be only a matter of time before even plain truths like Obama's cause offense, or worse. ♦

Jonathan Blitzer is a staff writer at The New Yorker. His book, "Everyone Who Is Gone Is Here," received the Hillman Prize and the Robert F. Kennedy Book Award in 2025.

Locals Dept.

Mahmoud Khalil, Back Home

Cooking his mother’s maqluba recipe, the Palestinian activist describes his detention in Louisiana: losing fifteen pounds and a cleaning contest with pizza as a prize.

By Dan Greene

September 22, 2025

Illustration by João Fazenda

Maqluba, in Arabic, means “upside down.” It’s also the name of a pilaf dish popular in the Levant: a pot of rice, vegetables, meat, and potatoes, coagulated and flipped into a stout cylinder. Mahmoud Khalil, the Palestinian activist and recent Columbia graduate whom the Trump

Administration has spent months trying to deport, makes it using his mother's recipe. "Hers just tastes, I don't know . . . better?" Khalil said the other day. "Every time I cook it, it tastes a little different."

Khalil, wearing a T-shirt reading "*FOR LAND & LIBERATION*," stood barefoot while paring an eggplant in the kitchen of the Brooklyn apartment he moved into last month. His previous relocations made headlines: in March, plainclothes federal agents arrested him in his Morningside Heights building and shipped him to Louisiana in hopes of expelling him from the country. Citing an obscure provision of a 1952 law, the government accused Khalil, a legal permanent U.S. resident, of undermining American foreign policy through his criticism of the war in Gaza. He was confined for a hundred and four days, until a judge ordered his release on bail. (Last week, an immigration judge ordered that his deportation go through; Khalil plans to appeal.) During that time, Khalil's wife, Noor Abdalla, gave birth to their son, Deen. Khalil could only listen on the phone.

Abdalla and Deen were in Michigan, visiting her family. "With a newborn, our No. 1 criteria was in-unit washer-dryer," Khalil said of their apartment search, stirring some sizzling onions.

The new neighbors have been friendly, Khalil said. In detention, some dorm-mates were standoffish. "They were seeing all these things online and these labels from the Administration," he said. They were shocked to learn that he had a green card. "Most of them had been chasing that for years," he said, "thinking a green card would mean safety."

He added bay leaves and anise to some chicken in another pan. In detention, he said, he lost fifteen pounds. "We're not asking for hotel-level food," he said. "But they can do better. It's so bland." TV made it worse."You see advertisements—a nice burger, Chipotle," he said. "That was like torture." At one point, there was a cleaning contest. The winning dorm got a pizza party. "We didn't win," he said, sounding plaintive.

Khalil did note one culinary highlight. The day after listening to Deen's birth, he was sitting on his bunk. A Russian dissident he had befriended —"He left after Navalny died, and he found himself in prison here," he said —approached, holding a mound of mashed-together mess-hall

confectionaries, congealed with milk and topped with dried fruit: a cake. “That was one of the nicest moments,” he recalled.

Deen, he explained, chopping cauliflower, means “faith” in Arabic. “And in Hebrew it means ‘law,’ ” he added. For a five-month-old, Deen sleeps well. “He’s very quiet,” he said. “Sometimes Noor and I are surprised how nice he is. Like, it’s O.K., you can cry.”

Given the political climate and Khalil’s visibility, his public jaunts worry his wife; she discourages him from taking the subway. “It’s tiring to be vigilant all the time,” he said. On the plus side, a waiter who recognized him recently comped his brunch. On a shelf sat another gift from a well-wisher: a glass flask painted with flowers, doves, and the words “*FREE MAHMOUD KHALIL*.” He rotated it to reveal his likeness. “That’s the creepy part,” he said, replacing it words-outward. “I hide it.”

It was time to transfer the rice, vegetables, meat, and potatoes into one pot. The key was for the latter two to line the bottom. “They can resist more heat,” he said. Outside, bells chimed four o’clock. That evening, Khalil would catch a train to D.C. for a series of lobbying meetings. He mentioned the Administration’s recent plans to take over the district’s Union Station. “I didn’t know they could do that,” he said.

Khalil wrapped the pot in a towel and moved it to a dining table. “This is the most important part,” he announced. “Now you find out if you cooked it well or not—if it’s watery or stays together.” He covered the pot with a large dish, then quickly flipped it: the maqluba had a lightly browned outer rim and was all in one piece. “Yes, yes,” he said. Steam rushed upward. He made sure to take a photo for his wife. ♦

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

Career Arcs

Jeremy Irons’s Walk of Fame

The “Morning Show” actor strolls the theatre district, remembering his star turn in Tom Stoppard’s “The Real Thing” and recalling the way Mike Nichols always joked that he was Jewish.

By David Kamp

September 22, 2025

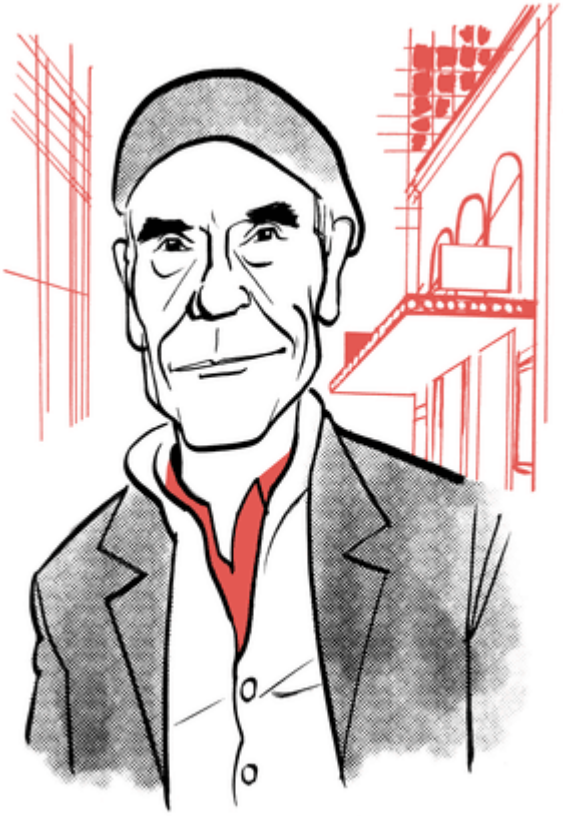


Illustration by João Fazenda

In Shubert Alley, which runs between West Forty-fourth and Forty-fifth Streets, Jeremy Irons, dressed in a tweed cap turned backward and three artfully arranged layers of European workwear, pointed to a patch of asphalt beneath the marquee of the Booth Theatre. “This is where I used to argue

with the police that I should be allowed to park my motorcycle. But they made me put it in the damn car park up the street," he said.

Irons was reminiscing about his Broadway début, in Tom Stoppard's "The Real Thing" forty-one years ago. The production was mounted in the Plymouth, next door to the Booth, which is now the Schoenfeld Theatre. "That was my dressing room," Irons said, pointing to a small window high above the stage door. Pointing to an even smaller window, he said, "That was my loo." Motioning one flight up, he said, "And that's where Glenn was."

Glenn Close was Irons's co-star in "The Real Thing." It was a bravura production fired by star power, with Mike Nichols directing and the up-and-comers Christine Baranski, Peter Gallagher, and Cynthia Nixon in supporting roles. Stoppard had sought out Irons for the original London production, but he had already committed to a screen adaptation of Ibsen's "The Wild Duck," to be filmed in Australia. While there, he received a disquieting bulletin: "I heard that Meryl Streep and Kevin Kline had gone to see the London show. I thought, Well, fuck that. So I called my agent, Robby Lantz, and said, 'If you don't get me that role, I'm leaving.' "

Irons's persistence was rewarded: he and Close both won Tonys in 1984, capping a glorious early-eighties run that also saw him achieve television stardom as the swoonsome Charles Ryder in the miniseries "Brideshead Revisited" and film stardom opposite Streep in "The French Lieutenant's Woman."

Irons still rates "The Real Thing" as his favorite acting gig. He seldom gets to New York anymore, dividing his time between houses in Ireland and England that he shares with his wife, the actress Sinéad Cusack. In the theatre district, he exulted in simply walking around and looking up at the marquees. "I'm sorry to have missed the Ava Gardner show," he said, referring to "Ava: The Secret Conversations," written by and starring Elizabeth McGovern.

Gardner, like Lana Turner and Barbara Stanwyck, did a lot of TV work late in her career, often on nighttime soaps like "Dynasty" and "Falcon Crest."

“Sort of like me on ‘The Morning Show,’ ” Irons said with a mordant smile.He turned seventy-seven this month, concurrent with the return of Apple TV+’s drama about an *A.M.* news program. In the new season, its fourth, he plays the father of Jennifer Aniston’s tightly wound news anchor. His character, Martin Levy, is an imperious professor of law, not so different from John Houseman’s Charles W. Kingsfield, Jr., in “The Paper Chase,” albeit a bit more handsome and mean.

Although he is barely twenty years older than Aniston, Irons said, “I am accepting of where I’m put.” He went on, “You always feel twenty-two, and then you realize you’re not anymore. I knew the change was going to happen, from playing the lead to playing the dad parts. I’m happy with that.”

Martin Levy is also, by Irons’s reckoning, the first Jewish character he has played, although he does not infuse the professor with any particularly Jewish mannerisms. “He’s thoroughly assimilated,” he said.

However, thinking back to “The Real Thing,” Irons recalled that Nichols, who was Jewish, kept up a peculiar running shtick in which he maintained that Irons, raised in the Church of England, was also Jewish. When the play was in its Boston-tryout phase, Close told him a story about how she had enthused over his performance to Nichols during a car ride. Nichols responded, “Yeah, he’s wonderful, considering he’s Jewish.”

Years later, Nichols was developing the film “Wolf,” whose lead role ultimately went to Jack Nicholson. Irons recalled, “I said to Mike, ‘I’d really like to do that one,’ and he said, ‘You’re too Jewish.’ ”

From his coat, Irons retrieved a pouch of loose tobacco, brown cigarette papers, and a small mounted roller he uses to skin up his own smokes. Out of the roller came a slim cylinder that looked like a baby cheroot. He lit it and took a drag. Another memory returned to him: “Mike used to call me not Jeremy but Jerome. Which I loved.” ♦

David Kamp is the author of “Sunny Days: The Children’s Television Revolution That Changed America.”

Backstage Dept.

Jeanine Tesori, Young-Adult Whisperer

The award-winning composer of “Fun Home” gave her Juilliard students a prompt for a song-writing assignment: “How do you view the world?”

By Jane Bua

September 22, 2025

Illustration by João Fazenda

How do great artists get their start? The misty-eyed will say it all begins with a dream. At Juilliard, it takes a bit more than that. On a recent gray evening, a group of drama students were in their sixth hour of rehearsals for

a concert at Joe's Pub. An upright piano, several music stands, and a Gretsch drum set were globbed together in a tiny, all-white room that could pass for a sanitarium. Loose lyric sheets littered the floor. The air was tropical. The door bore a sign with the words "Tesori Sessions."

"Tesori" was the composer Jeanine Tesori, two-time Tony winner and Obi-Wan Kenobi of the workshop. As students buzzed about the room, grabbing pencils and tuning guitars, she leaned against a back wall with one foot up, as if ready to push off.

"O.K., let's do it!" Tesori shouted. One member of the group, Joel Wenhardt, from Southern California, shuffled to the piano and flopped down on the bench. He had on circus-tent-striped pants and a hat that said "*Juilliard Athletics: Undefeated Since 1905*."

There was some confusion about the sheet music. Wenhardt stared at his pages, puzzled. "I think a jazz musician wrote these chords," he mumbled.

"Let's just go through it once so we can knock it out," Tesori repeated over the chatter. She wore a typical rehearsal getup: track pants and a baggy T-shirt. A botanical tattoo crawled up her arm, and her hair was piled on top of her head.

Four participants finally settled into their places to run through a song by Langston Lee, a twenty-year-old from Austin, Texas, who'd won Best Actor at the Jimmy Awards (a national high-school musical-theatre competition) in 2023. (Other winners include Reneé Rapp and Andrew Barth Feldman, who have since toe-tapped their way to Broadway and beyond.)

Lee, who wore a crisp button-down and jeans, tossed his wavy hair, letting strands fall around his face as he adjusted his acoustic-guitar strap. With a deep breath and a glance at the guitarist to his right, he began:

> I've been looking at flowers
> While I walk down Fifty-third
> Just the ones that you preferred

Lee picked the strings with ease, swaying as his velvety voice rang out. The other guitarist's eyes shot nervously between her stand and Lee's. She strummed, then winced.

"O.K., let's stop for a second," Tesori interrupted. "Does everybody have the same chord chart for this?"

"My chord chart is on a different lyric sheet," the pianist announced, his slouch forming a perfect "C" shape.

"Yeah, we just got new lyrics," a stage manager said.

Tesori replied with a skeptical "Okaaaay."

The students started working on their songs back in December. Tesori had given them a lofty theme to chew on: How do you view the world? "It's really an introduction to an inner life," she explained. ("She's very evolutionary," Damian Woetzel, the president of Juilliard, said.)

Cartoon by Jeremy Nguyen

Lee's song, "See It Now," was about falling in love. He had never composed with a guitar before but had picked it up on the fly to try something fresh. "I was just placing my fingers wherever," he said with a shrug. His playing was pristine.

So that everyone could hear the right notes, Tesori said, “Langston, you sing it once all the way through.” The other musicians looked relieved.

Lee cleared his throat and placed his fingers back on the frets:

> I’ve been looking at flowers
> While I walk down Fifty-third

Tesori bobbed her head and waved her arms, conductor style, with the music. She started singing quiet harmonies and snapping her fingers. The pianist, unable to resist, snuck in a few twinkling flourishes. The confused guitarist tried out a couple of moves, too.

“Those are some interesting Schoenberg versions of a chord,” Tesori said to the guitarist. “Which I kind of dig, but not at the moment.”

Tesori, who is sixty-three and started in musical theatre as a nineteen-year-old Long Island girl, is somewhat of a young-adult whisperer; she’s scored many projects about finding yourself: “Fun Home,” “Kimberly Akimbo,” “Shrek: The Musical.” She’s still alert to the struggles of early talent. “Everybody is afraid,” she said. “I was not formed by seventeen at all. I could barely handle a bus pass.”

She called a short break. The students shuffled into the hall, where the temperature was ten degrees cooler. “That room is super fucked,” Tesori said. But the smallness was apt. “You can’t really hide when you sing,” she said. “That’s why I never do karaoke.”

After an adequate bit of leg stretching, the group reconvened to run through the entire Joe’s Pub lineup. One student sang a heartfelt ballad about pineapples as her classmates rocked invisible pineapples in their arms. “That’s how you do it!” Tesori yelled.

The guitarist from Lee’s song stepped up to perform her own original tune. “Anyone got a french fry I could use as a cigarette?” she asked, with a Southern drawl.

“I’ve got a cigarette,” Wenhardt called out from the piano.

Over a foot-stomping blues beat, the guitarist crooned that she is “only attracted to disaster.”

“You sound fucking amazing,” Tesori proclaimed.

Another song called for a sing-along with the audience.“Let the paint smear on the canvas,” Tesori cryptically advised. Knowing nods around the room. ♦

Jane Bua is a member of The New Yorker’s editorial staff who covers classical music for Goings On. Previously, she wrote for Pitchfork.

Runway Dept.

New York Civil Servants Strut Their Stuff

Andrew Cuomo, Carolyn Maloney, and other public officials hit the runway in a bipartisan Fashion Week defile. Naomi Campbell for comptroller?

By Henry Alford

September 22, 2025

Illustration by João Fazenda

The mission: attend “Style Across the Aisle,” a Fashion Week spectacle wherein local politicians walk the runway wearing clothes mostly made by up-and-coming designers from their districts, and determine which of the

models exhibits the most diva-like behavior. Which official, be they elected or appointed, is most likely to throw a phone at an assistant while screaming, “I am not wearing more khaki!”? Who, in short, is the civil-servant Naomi Campbell?

“I think there’ll be many models with diva behavior,” Joann Ariola, the City Council minority leader, said the week before the event, which benefitted Witness to Mass Incarceration, a nonprofit dedicated to fostering economic independence for formerly incarcerated people. Yet, leading up to the show, the squawks from the models sounded more like practical concerns than diva demands. Ariola herself was practicing wearing a higher heel than normal. Althea Stevens, a councilwoman from the South Bronx, told her designer, Lisne Bautista, that her full-length gown needed to be taken in because she’d lost weight. David Paterson, the seventy-one-year-old former governor of New York, who is mostly blind, worried about navigating the runway. “If they tell me to go first, I may end up anywhere,” he said. “I might walk out the building.”

The venue was the Beaux Arts lobby of Surrogate’s Court, near City Hall, recognizable to any “Law & Order” fan. The day of the show, thirty-three models, each bearing or wearing their runway outfit, reported for hair and makeup to a third-floor room with vending machines in it. The Manhattan borough president, Mark Levine, removed himself from diva consideration on arrival. “I had to say ‘I’m a model’ on my way in,” he admitted. “And I nearly choked.” The former congresswoman Carolyn Maloney, celebrated for having worn a Fire Department of New York jacket in her official portrait, edged closer to diva status. Modelling a soft leather biker jacket by Karolina Zmarlak with a veil over her face, she commented to a reporter that the fashion show was “inside baseball” and then entreated him to quote her on that, adding, “Interesting observation, right?” The assemblyman Al Taylor, dressed in a gray pin-striped suit by Rachel Richardson, and accessorized with a rhinestone brooch and a pink pocket square, was enjoying himself. “This is fun,” he said. “We’re in Surrogate’s Court and I’m not doing a paternity test!”

Asked where he stood on the diva scale, the assemblyman Eddie Gibbs, the first formerly incarcerated member of the Legislature, put on a pink fedora

and said, “There may be some masculinity from me, a thug, walking down the runway.” Across the room, the New York State inspector general, Lucy Lang, told a makeup artist, “I’m not one to turn down false eyelashes.”

A bystander informed Paterson that Eric Adams had recently taken a poke at Andrew Cuomo, one of his rivals in the mayor’s race, for participating in the fashion show. (Adams, his rep told the *Post*, has “a city to run, not a runway.”) Paterson shrugged. “Last time I looked at the polls,” he said, “Adams was behind Undecided.”

Cuomo arrived fashionably late-ish, dressed in a blue suit by Gina Newman, so a special hair-and-makeup station was created for him in the hallway. “I have to walk very gently and slowly,” he said, uncertainly. “I’m afraid I’ll wrinkle my suit. You know that moment when everything is just right? This is it.”

The show itself was a thumpingly loud affair marked by cheering. Councilwoman Stevens fluttered and snapped a folding fan. Cuomo repeatedly flashed the shiny lining of his jacket, which was printed with images of Marilyn Monroe and Joe DiMaggio; backstage, he said of the Queens borough president Donovan Richards’s ensemble, “Queens get the money!” Assemblyman Gibbs brought the swagger, even if his kelly-green suit was giving Mayor McCheese. And Paterson, looking punkish in denim streetwear, shocked the room by launching into a half handstand mid-runway. “I was going to do a front flip, but when I put my hands down they slipped,” he said.

Paterson seemed to have the diva crown clinched until Curtis Sliwa, the founder of the Guardian Angels and another mayoral hopeful, showed up in his red beret. Having never held office, he was ineligible to walk, yet he had a few saucy words to say about his rival. “He thinks he’s King Cuomo,” Sliwa said. “Always the last to get there and the first to leave.” Meow: the new Naomi. ♦

Henry Alford, a humorist and a journalist, has contributed to The New Yorker since 1998. He is the author of the Joni Mitchell biography “I Dream of Joni.”

Reporting & Essays

- **The Art of the Impersonal Essay**
  In my experience, every kind of writing requires some kind of self-soothing Jedi mind trick, and, when it comes to essay composition, the rectangle is mine.
- **If A.I. Can Diagnose Patients, What Are Doctors For?**
  Large language models are transforming medicine—but the technology comes with side effects.
- **My House Burned in the L.A. Fires. What Happens Now?**
  A devastated community fights for rebirth.
- **The Exacting Magic of Film Restoration**
  Each year, at a festival in Bologna, movies that were once lost or damaged come back to life.

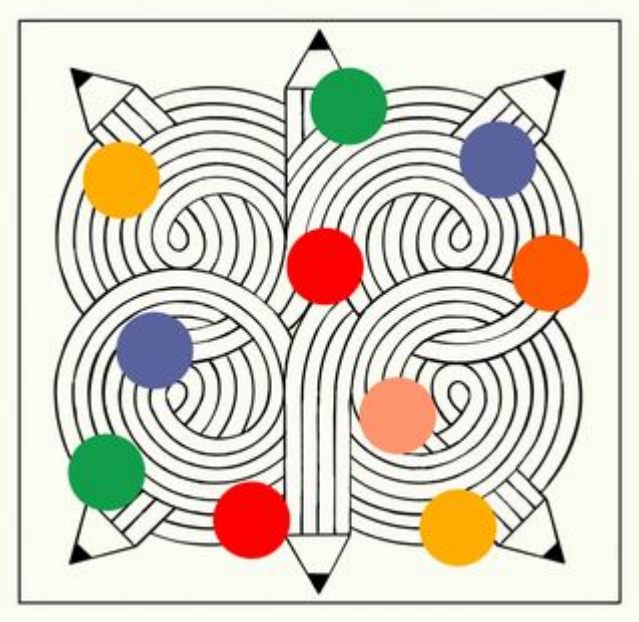
Life and Letters

The Art of the Impersonal Essay

In my experience, every kind of writing requires some kind of self-soothing Jedi mind trick, and, when it comes to essay composition, the rectangle is mine.

By Zadie Smith

September 22, 2025



What had seemed an impossible task transformed into a practical matter of six little arrows.Illustration by Pierre Buttin

The first essay anybody writes is for school. Same here. But the only examples I remember are the ones I wrote at the end, in my A-level exams. One compared Hitler to Stalin. Another, Martin Luther King, Jr., to Malcolm X. I was proudest of the essay that considered whether the poet John Milton—pace William Blake—was “of the devil’s party without knowing it.” I did well on those standardized tests, but even passing was far from a foregone conclusion. I’d screwed up my mocks, the year before, smoking too much weed and studying rarely. Since then, I’d cleaned up my act—a bit—but was still overwhelmed by the task before me. My *entire*

future rested on a few essays written in the school hall under a three-hour time constraint? *Really*? In the nineties, this was what we called “the meritocracy.” As a system of evaluation, it favored the bold and the brash, laid waste to the rest, and was irrelevant to the rich, whose schools drilled essay technique into the student body from Day One. In a school like mine, exams came as a surprise. Up to that point, we’d basically thought of school as a social event, a sort of mixer for a diverse group of teen-agers, many of whom had only recently arrived in the country—like a mini U.N., but with easier access to psychedelics. Almost half the school was felled at the first hurdle, leaving after G.C.S.E.s, aged just sixteen. (For G.C.S.E.s, you usually studied about nine subjects; for A-levels, only three.) Those of us who survived struggled on, trying to jump through meritocracy’s narrowing hoops. If you couldn’t do maths and had trouble with the hard sciences, each hoop came with an essay topic attached. (I did English, History, and Theatre Studies.) The stakes were presented as not just high but existential. You had to produce a thousand effective words on the rise of the Chartists—or else! What did “else” mean? Never earning more than minimum wage, never getting out of your mum’s flat, never “making something of yourself.” My anxiety about all this was paralyzing me.

Then something happened. An English teacher took me aside and drew a rectangle on a piece of paper, placed a shooting arrow on each corner of the rectangle, plus one halfway along the horizontal top line, and a final arrow, in the same position, down below. “Six points,” this teacher said. “Going clockwise, first arrow is the introduction, last arrow is the conclusion. Got that?” I got that. He continued, “Second arrow is you basically developing whatever you said in the intro. Third arrow is you either developing the point further or playing devil’s advocate. Fourth arrow, you’re starting to see the finish line, so start winding down, start summarizing. Fifth arrow, you’re one step closer to finished, so repeat the earlier stuff but with variations. Sixth arrow, you’re on the home straight: you’ve reached the conclusion. Bob’s your uncle. That’s really all there is to it.” I had the sense I was being let into this overworked teacher’s inner sanctum, that he had drawn this little six-arrowed rectangle himself, upon his own exam papers, long ago. “Oh, and remember to put the title of the essay in that box. That’ll keep you focussed.”

I was seventeen when this priceless piece of advice came my way. I'm now almost fifty, and although I don't often draw out the rectangle anymore, this charming and simple blueprint is buried deep in my cerebral cortex, lit up like the flux capacitor in "Back to the Future." I still use it. Still think about it every time I sit down to write one of these things you are reading right now. I continue to admire its impersonal and ruthless forward thrust. And, when I walked into those dreaded A-levels, that little doodle was the first thing I did, directly onto the desk, and with immediate results. My breathing slowed. I felt calm. *Bob's your uncle*. What had seemed an impossible task transformed into a practical matter of six little arrows, radiating around a central concept. And arrows one and six were already settled! (I still write the opening and last lines of an essay first.) *So now this is really just a four-arrow affair*? In my experience, every kind of writing requires some kind of self-soothing Jedi mind trick, and, when it comes to essay composition, this rectangle is mine.

My next formative experience of "essaying" came in college. I remained a devotee of the impersonal rectangle method, but it was now 1994, I was coming of age at the end of history, and the personal was all that appeared to be left on the intellectual scene. Consequently, I pivoted, and my first essay for my English degree was an impassioned account of what literature had meant to me, as a young girl in London, during the eighties, a concept that I animated by turning all the writers who had been important to me—including the dead ones—into characters having dinner with me, who then commenced discussing all the ways their writing had affected me, Zadie, personally, and how I, specifically, felt about it. I was crazy about this essay. I ran across the quad and pushed it under my professor's office door in the middle of the night. Two days later, it was returned with a solitary comment: *This is not an essay*.

I was crushed, but I shouldn't have been surprised. As a response, it was perfectly representative of "The Cambridge Mind," which was the title of a book I'd found in a junk shop and had purchased the summer before I "went up" to King's College, in an attempt to comprehend what I would soon be dealing with. By the mid-nineties, the mind you were encouraged to develop, at King's, was basically unchanged from the one students were expected to form in the mid-fifteen-hundreds. (The college was founded by

Henry VI in 1441.) A discursive, objective, ironical, philosophical, elegant, rational mind. I was none of those things. I was expressive, messy, chaotic, and increasingly infuriated. A lot of my fury was directed at the university itself. The more I heard about the prior lives of my fellow-students, the more enraged I became. I hadn't known that there existed schools from which a clear majority of the kids waltzed into the British equivalent of the Ivy League, year upon year, without fail. How could they all have "merited" it? And why did there seem to be so many Bertie Woosters and so few Alan Turings? I'd been told a different story: that, every year, two or three exceptionally bright kids out of a school of two thousand—or a whole village!—wrote the best essays and therefore went on to the best universities. (An immorality in and of itself, but at least comprehensible to the pathetic teen-age striver I was back then.) As it turned out, it was never really about the essays. This wasn't about merit. The very few black and brown students, the small clusters of state-school kids, the even tinier smattering of working-class kids from outside London or the home counties—we were just the exceptions that proved the rule. My sudden and total exposure to this truth left me feeling demented. Impostor syndrome doesn't begin to cover it. In my first year, I had a minor breakdown, and failed my exams simply by entering the room and writing . . . nothing. No essay on Gawain and his Green Knight. No essay on anything. I just sat there for three hours looking at the blank page, and then I left.

My whole college career might have gone that way. But, in my second year, exposure to a trio of great essayists changed the course of my life. One of them was my own professor Peter De Bolla, he of "This is not an essay." The others were the two Tonys—Tanner and Judt—neither of whom I ever met. All three had been "Kingsmen," but what all these men really had in common, in my mind, was class. Insofar as they came from a class that I almost recognized. Tony Tanner's mother trained to be a teacher, and he went to the local grammar school. Tony Judt was the son of a hairdresser who grew up above the salon where both his parents worked. Pete, meanwhile, was the son of a man who left both home and school at nine and became a butcher. It did not seem a coincidence, to me, that all three wrote with anger and precision and wit about the role of literary culture within class systems. Their essays inspired me: literature was a living concern in their work, not an animated bourgeois dinner party. I read Judt

on the political irresponsibility of Sartre, and Tanner on the sly political insights of Jane Austen. I listened to Pete on the role of the poor in the landscapes and the imaginations of the rich. I started thinking about my essays differently. It wasn't about what Andrew Marvell meant to me, personally. It was about what Andrew Marvell's "The Garden" revealed about the English attitude to land and capital. I developed a different sense of what an essay could be. I understood all three men to be "personal essayists" in the sense that they cared passionately about their subjects, but they themselves were rarely figures in any particular piece; their energies were directed elsewhere. And I followed their example, channelling my furies into coolly expressed explication, description, analysis. In the dissertation I wrote for my finals, I ended up literally following Pete's lead, depicting as vividly as I could the economic structures and class hierarchies concealed within the design of an aristocratic English garden. (What does a ha-ha fence hide? The fact that the land has been worked by laborers.) But my tone? Controlled. Impersonal.

That tone, for better or worse, has stayed with me. I was trained to write like this, and I write like this. I just can't bleed out onto the page as some people do, or use all caps or italics to express emotion, even when I know it's what's expected and that many people not only prefer it but see it as a sign of authenticity. The essay-writing habits of my school days have never left me. I find I still don't want people to relate to what I'm saying in an essay, or even be moved by the way I say it. (With fiction, I feel the opposite.) I just want to think out loud about the things that matter most to me.

H*ow can I tell what I think till I see what I say*? That's another Kingsman: E. M. Forster. I understand what he means, but in me the process is inverted. Because, in fact, I am usually immediately swayed by whatever intellectual fashion is in the air, and a first draft of any essay is more often than not a cynical and dutiful rehashing of the argument du jour. But, after an hour or so of that, I see what I have said and realize I don't actually think any of that. I reread. I frown. Delete. I try again, this time allowing myself to think honestly, aloud, a process that will involve the various strands of my thought arguing with one another, as they inevitably tend to do. Full disclosure: these strands are drawn, essentially, from four big isms.

Feminism, existentialism, socialism, and humanism. Only the first is still fashionable, and the last has been so debased, misused, and weaponized over the centuries as to be almost unspeakable in polite company. Still, these were the ideas that formed me as a teen-ager, and they linger on in the way I think and write. No matter what the topic in the rectangle may be, they lie in wait, nudging me, correcting me, *reminding* me of what it is I really think. What I actually believe.

In practice, they are like an annoying quad of parental figures, tutting if they spy me, for example, treating a living being as a means rather than an end—even rhetorically, even for a moment—or sighing dolefully when I use that totalizing term "the people," which can obscure at least as much as it illuminates. They make every essay a battle. The existentialist who sits at my desk feels we are each individually thrown into the deep end of existence and tasked with swimming, and that this is a terrifying and heavy task. But both the socialist and the feminist are aware that not all bodies of water are created equal. (Some are crystalline, chlorinated pools surrounded by high fences. Some are swamps you wouldn't want to dip a toe in.) The humanist, meanwhile, feels that if you're going to insist on clean water for all, and on the justice of that demand, then you'll probably need to explain why you make no exceptions to the word "all"—despite the very many differences between people, despite their separate histories and experiences—and to make this case in a language that is, at root, non-metaphysical. (A metaphysical and sacred language might do the job just as well, but, be warned, it'll alienate the atheists.) Now, what's all this about water? That's the novelist within the essayist, who loves a metaphor and senses that a metaphor will tend to be more comprehensible to the general reader than a thousand pages of closely argued Thomas Piketty.

And I do write my essays for the general reader. They're no more directed at the Bed-Stuy grad student in a polycule than at the overworked Delhi nurse or the rich Lagos lawyer. Though I've never wanted any reader (or anyone, really) to "relate" to me, exactly, I *have* always wanted to be "in relation," which is different. We aren't required to be like one another or even to like one another to be in relation. We just need to be willing to create and enter spaces in which solidarity is one of the possibilities. For many readers, of course, solidarity may still prove impossible. It may be

impractical, unthinkable, a betrayal of their own systems of thought, or simply “cringe.” But I try to write in such a way that the possibility persists. That’s what the practice of essaying *is*, to me: a stumbling attempt to re-create, in language, a common space, one that is open to all. It’s in that optimistic spot that I set out my stall, yes, and my ideas and arguments such as they are, sure, but without demanding to see anyone’s identifying papers in the opening paragraph. Because that’s one thing I’ve learned, over the years. Sometimes, in order to create this more open space, you have to loosen your hold on your beloved isms.

If it were up to me, for example, I would very happily switch that rickety, always ill-fitting term “humanism” with something broader, more capacious. A bright, shiny neologism that would still place human flourishing at the center of our social and political processes, but which also encompassed the supremacy of all living things—including the natural world. As a philosophy, it would stand in pointed opposition to the current faith in the supremacy of machines, and of capital. Philoanimism? But the name is not good. (I’d be glad to hear alternative options!) It would be the work of many hands, this discourse, and it would understand that in these fractious times, although our commonalities may prove dispiritingly tiny or difficult to locate, they still exist. We’ve managed to locate them before, and not so long ago, using language as our compass. For example, the most inspiring (to me) political slogan of the past twenty years managed to create a common space in a single phrase: “the ninety-nine per cent.”

Sometimes the very act of seeking solidarity is characterized merely as the pursuit of “common ground,” a destination easily disparaged as a middling, nowhere, apolitical place. At other times, it is suspected of being a happy-clappy zone of magical thinking, where people have to pretend to be the same and to have experienced identical things in order to work together. I’d rather think of it as “the commons.” And when I sit down to essay I find it helpful to remind myself of the radical historical roots of that concept. I picture the blasted heath of the nineteenth century, a piece of open land that is about to be fenced in by the forces of capital, but upon which a large crowd has gathered, precisely to protest the coming enclosure. But not only that. A variety of overlapping causes are represented in that space, although they are all fundamentally concerned with freedom. Abolitionists,

suffragists, trade unionists, working people, and the poor are present in abundance, alongside some land-reform radicals you might call socialist Christians, and, yes, O.K., a few old Chartists. Plus some anti-vaxxers, a smattering of Jacobites, and a couple of millenarians. (That's the trouble with no fences: anybody can turn up.) Today, on the commons, all of these people have gathered to oppose a common enemy—the landowner—but disputation and debate are still everywhere, and you, the next speaker to get on the platform, must now decide how to address this huge crowd. You might have a very specific aim in mind: a particular argument, a singular cause, a deep desire to convert or sway. But you are not in your living room, your church, your meeting hall, or your corner of the internet. You are on a soapbox on the commons; anybody might be standing in front of you. Will you be so open and broad as to say not very much at all? Or so targeted that you are, practically speaking, talking to yourself? It's complicated. Some rhetoric will definitely be necessary. You'll need to warm them up before you lay it on 'em. And you can never forget that all around you is an explosion of alterity: people with their own unique histories, traumas, memories, hopes, fears. But this multiplicity needn't shift your commitments—it may even intensify them.

Imagine, for example, an early-nineteenth-century lady abolitionist, standing in cold weather, listening to a labor activist. He is arguing for expanding the franchise from a propertied élite—male, of course—to all workingmen, but not once does he mention the vote for women. My imagined abolitionist grows colder—and angrier. But the gentleman's blinkered position might also prompt her into a new form of solidarity, nudging her toward the realization that arguing for the mere "liberty" of the enslaved, as she does, is insufficient: her call, too, must include a demand for their full enfranchisement. The next time this lady abolitionist of mine steps onto the commons, she may find herself more willing to stand on her rectangular box and make the connection between many forms of disenfranchisement, which, though they may appear dissimilar, have their crucial points of continuity. After all, one thing workingmen, women, and almost all of the enslaved had in common, on the commons, was the fact that none of them could vote. (A point of convergence that Robert Wedderburn—essayist and preacher, and the son of an enslaved Jamaican woman—noted frequently.)

What kind of discourse can draw out such analogies while simultaneously acknowledging and preserving difference? (An enslaved man is not in the same situation as a laboring peasant.) What kind of language will model and leave open the possibility of solidarity, even if it is solidarity of the most pragmatic and temporal kind? The speaker will have to be open, clear, somewhat artful. They'll have to be relatively succinct, making their argument in no more than, say, six sections. Their speech will be impassioned but expansive, and I think it helps a bit if it has a little elegance, enabling arguments to glide straight past the listener's habitual defenses, although this gliding—like a duck crossing a pond—will usually involve a lot of frantic paddling down below, just out of sight. A complex performance, then. Because the crowd is complicated. Because *life* is complicated. Any essay that includes the line "It's really very simple" is never going to be the essay for me. Nothing concerning human life is simple. Not aesthetics, not politics, not gender, not race, not history, not memory, not love.

"To essay" is, of course, to try. My version of trying involves expressing ideas in a mode open enough, I hope, that readers feel they are trying them out alongside me. While I try, I am also striving to remain engaged (and engaging) yet impersonal, because although the personal is certainly interesting and human and vivid, it also strikes me as somewhat narrow and private and partial. Consequently, the word "we" appears in my essays pretty frequently. This isn't because I imagine I speak for many, or expect that my views might be applied to all, but because I'm looking for the sliver of ground where that "we" is applicable. Because once you find that sweet spot you can build upon it. It's the existentialist at my desk who is best placed to find that spot. She says to herself: *Almost* all of the people I know (and I myself) have experienced pain. And *absolutely* all of the people I know (and I myself) will die.

These two facts, one almost total and the other universal, represent the firmest "we" I know, and have occupied my imagination since I was a teen. That was the moment when the fact that we were all death-facing and pain-adjacent first dawned, and seemed to make it perfectly obvious, for example, that the death penalty was a monstrosity, and prison usually a conceptual mistake, in which the most common crime was poverty. It was

not until I got to college that I met people who, facing the same fundamental facts—pain, death—had come to what they considered to be perfectly reasonable but very different conclusions. I met people who believed in such a thing as “the criminal mentality.” I met people who thought poverty was primarily a sign of laziness or a lack of ambition. What once appeared simple turned complex. My beliefs remained, but the idea that they were or should be “perfectly obvious” to all—that’s what evaporated.

Aside from the fact that I never meant to be an essayist in the first place, one detail that has surprised me most during the past twenty years is that I have, in fact, written more personally in the essay form than I ever expected or intended. Still, as I look back on my “I,” across so many essays, I notice that the person typing out this “I” remains very hard to pin down, even for me. For starters, it’s never quite the same “I” who’s typing the word “I,” because of the way time works. Because of the way life is. I have been, for example, very single and very married. I’ve been poor, middle class, and wealthy. I’ve loved women, I’ve loved men, but loved no one for their gender specifically—it’s always been a consequence of who they were. Sometimes I’ve sat at my desk dressed like Joan Crawford. Other times, like someone who has come to fix your sink. I’ve sat there utterly childless and then very much full of child, or with a child in a Moses basket at my feet. I’ve been the mother of a British citizen and then the mother of an American. As a semi-public person, I’ve been the subject of various projections, and watched unrecognizable versions of “me” circulate in the digital sphere, far beyond my control. But I also remain who and what I have always been: a biracial black woman, born in the northwest corner of London, to a Jamaican mother and an English father. I personally feel like an outsider who belongs nowhere—and have never really minded this fact—but in the commons of my essays I understand that many or even most of my readers feel otherwise about this thorny matter of “belonging,” so I am often trying to write the kinds of sentences that remember this key fact, too.

If my own “I” remains a various thing—as I have written about too often—it is its very variousness that forces me to acknowledge the points of continuity: the fundamentals. What I honestly believe, as a human being. Every version of me is a pacifist. Every version believes that human life is

sacred—despite the fact that the word “sacred” is most often used as a weapon in the arguments of conservatives, and remains basically inadmissible within the four isms that have done the most to form me. (But that’s a novelist for you. We can’t function on isms alone.) Every version of me knows that education, health care, housing, clean water, and sufficient food are rights and not privileges, and should be provided within a commons that is itself secured beyond the whims of the market. Yet to say these things is (in my view) really to say the bare minimum: it is almost saying nothing at all. The only significance of these beliefs, to me, when I am essaying, is that they are pretty much immovable, and whether I am reviewing a movie, describing a painting, arguing a point, or considering an idea, they represent the solid sides of my damn rectangle, no matter what the title in the center turns out to be. ♦

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Brave New World Dept.

If A.I. Can Diagnose Patients, What Are Doctors For?

Large language models are transforming medicine—but the technology comes with side effects.

By Dhruv Khullar

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“I’m worried these tools will erode my ability to make an independent diagnosis,” a medical student said.Illustration by Petra Péterffy

In 2017, Matthew Williams, a thirtysomething software engineer with an athletic build and a bald head, went for a long bike ride in the hills of San Francisco. Afterward, at dinner with some friends, he ordered a hamburger, fries, and a milkshake. Midway through the meal, he felt so full that he had to ask someone to drive him home. That night, Williams awoke with a sharp pain in his abdomen that he worried was appendicitis. He went to a nearby emergency clinic, where doctors told him that he was probably constipated. They gave him some laxatives and sent him on his way.

A few hours later, Williams's pain intensified. He vomited and felt as though his stomach might burst. A friend took him to a hospital, where a CT scan revealed cecal volvulus—a medical emergency in which part of the intestine twists in on itself, cutting off the digestive tract. The previous medical team had missed the condition, and may even have exacerbated it by giving him laxatives. Williams was rushed to the operating room, where surgeons removed about six feet of his intestines.

After recovering from surgery, Williams began to experience severe diarrhea almost every time he ate. Doctors told him that his bowel just needed time to heal. "It got to the point where I couldn't go out, because I would constantly eat something that would make me sick," he said. During the next few years, Williams saw a series of nutritionists and gastroenterologists—eight clinicians in total—but none could pinpoint the reason for his symptoms. "Doctors are sometimes just, like, 'Are you not dying? O.K., then come back another time,' " he said. Williams largely restricted his diet to eggs, rice, applesauce, and sourdough bread. "You don't understand how much food is a part of life—socially, culturally—until you can't eat it anymore," he told me. "It's awkward to be on a date and explain why you can't get the mozzarella sticks. When your food is bland, your life becomes bland, too."

In 2023, on a whim, Williams entered his medical history into ChatGPT. "I have lost most of my ileum and my cecal valve, why might the following foods cause gastrointestinal distress," he typed, and then listed some of the worst offenders. Within seconds, the A.I. pointed to three potential triggers for his symptoms: fatty foods, fermentable fibres, and foods high in oxalate. Oxalate, a compound found in leafy greens and a variety of other foods, is normally broken down by parts of the G.I. tract that Williams had lost; he'd never heard of it, not even from his doctors. He asked the A.I. for a list of high-oxalate foods and was stunned. "It listed every single food that made me the sickest," he said—spinach, almonds, chocolate, soy, and more than a dozen others. "It's like it had been following me around, taking notes." Williams brought the information to a nutritionist, who crafted a diet based on the oxalate content of foods. His symptoms improved, and his meals grew more varied. Williams no longer needs to know the location of the nearest bathroom at all times. "I have my life back," he said.

During my medical training, I revered senior physicians who, through some alchemy of knowledge and gestalt, always seemed to home in on the clue that cracked the case: the unusual shape of a patient's nails; an occupational hazard from decades before; an overlooked blood test. What algorithm was running in these physicians' minds? Could I load it into my own? In the future, however, diagnosis may increasingly become a computer science. Surveys have suggested that many people are more confident in A.I. diagnoses than in those rendered by professionals. Meanwhile, in the United States alone, misdiagnosis disables hundreds of thousands of people each year; autopsy studies suggest that it contributes to perhaps one in every ten deaths. If Williams hadn't ignored his initial diagnosis, he might have been among them. "I trust A.I. more than doctors," he said. "I don't think I'm the only one."

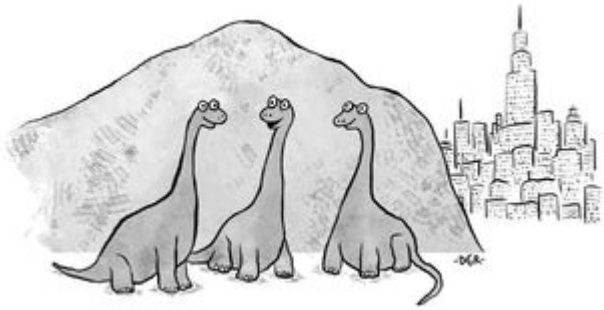
In the early nineteen-hundreds, Richard Cabot, a physician at Massachusetts General Hospital, started holding seminars to demonstrate clinical reasoning for trainees. An expert physician would be given a former patient's file and would probe for more detail about the case. If the information had been available during the patient's real-life hospitalization, it was revealed. Gradually, the physician would edge toward a diagnosis that could be compared with whatever the pathologists had ultimately concluded, often during an autopsy. Clinicopathological conferences, or C.P.C.s, as they came to be known, grew to be so popular that *The New England Journal of Medicine* has published transcripts of them for more than a century. They represent a gold standard of diagnostic reasoning: if you can solve a C.P.C., you can solve almost any case.

C.P.C.s also inspired many efforts to teach medicine to machines. In the late fifties, a computer scientist and a radiologist grouped cases by symptoms and diseases. They proposed that a computer program could analyze the cases using mathematical tools such as logic and game theory. "Computers are especially suited to help the physician collect and process clinical information and remind him of diagnoses which he might have overlooked," they wrote in a landmark *Science* paper. In the seventies, a computer scientist at the University of Pittsburgh developed a program called *INTERNIST-1*, based on a series of conversations with a brilliant and intimidating physician named Jack Myers. (Myers was known as Black

Jack, because he failed so many new doctors during their board exams.) Myers “chose a goodly number” of C.P.C.s to show how he reasoned; *INTERNIST-1* eventually performed as well as some doctors did on a variety of cases. But details of a case had to be painstakingly entered into the computer, so each analysis could take more than an hour. Researchers concluded that “the present form of the program was not sufficiently reliable for clinical applications.”

Then came large language models. Last year, Arjun Manrai, a computer scientist at Harvard, and Thomas Buckley, a doctoral student in the university’s new A.I. in Medicine program, started work on an education-and-research tool that was supposed to be capable of solving virtually any C.P.C. It needed to be able to cite the literature, explain its rationale, and help doctors think through a difficult case. Manrai and Buckley developed a custom version of o3, an advanced “reasoning model” from OpenAI, which takes the time to break complex problems into intermediate steps before responding. A process known as retrieval-augmented generation, or *RAG*, pulls data from external sources before the A.I. crafts its answer. Their model is a bit like a student consulting a textbook to write a paper rather than writing from memory. They named the A.I. CaBot, in honor of the inventor of C.P.C.s.

In July, I travelled to Harvard’s Countway Library of Medicine to witness a face-off between CaBot and an expert diagnostician. The event brought to mind the 1997 chess match between the grand master Garry Kasparov and Deep Blue, the I.B.M. supercomputer that ultimately defeated him. I walked past the skull of Phineas Gage, a patient who famously survived an explosion that propelled an iron rod through his head. Then I came to a large conference room where dozens of students, doctors, and researchers sat, chattering excitedly. Daniel Restrepo, an internist at Massachusetts General Hospital who had been one of my classmates in residency, would be competing against CaBot. I remembered Restrepo as someone for whom diagnostic reasoning was like an Olympic sport; he sometimes read textbooks while I napped during overnight shifts, and he regularly ran to the laboratory to personally inspect a patient’s urine sample.



“All right, now, on the count of three, we jump out and yell, ‘Surprise! We’re not extinct!’ ”
Cartoon by Dahlia Gallin Ramirez

Manrai, a genial man with short black hair, works on a floor of Countway that was once home to library stacks. Now it is occupied by a bay of computers. He introduced the day’s case. “Today, we’re here to see Dr. CaBot,” he said. He described a forty-one-year-old man who had come to the hospital after about ten days of fevers, body aches, and swollen ankles. The man had a painful rash on his shins and had fainted twice. A few months earlier, doctors had placed a stent in his heart. A CT scan showed lung nodules and enlarged lymph nodes in the man’s chest.

Restrepo, who was wearing professorial glasses and a dark suit, went first. The opening move toward a diagnosis, he said, was defining the problem: “If you crystallize it into a clear and concise statement, your brain will have an easier way of solving that problem.” He stressed three questions: Who was the patient? How quickly did the condition arise? And which symptoms constituted a syndrome? Some symptoms would hang together; others were likely to be distractions. “Despite getting all that other data, this is actually what I think is salient,” he said, showing the audience four key symptoms on a Venn diagram. They pointed him to three diagnostic categories: lymphoma, infection, and autoimmune disease.

The man’s symptoms had arisen too rapidly for lymphoma. “Tempo, tempo, tempo!” Restrepo said. An unusual infection seemed unlikely—the man was born in the U.S., he wasn’t immunocompromised, and he wasn’t known to have visited high-risk places. And it wouldn’t explain his joint pain. “What do I know that causes fever, arthritis, hilar adenopathy, and a lower-extremity rash all at the same time?” Restrepo finally said. “Löfgren syndrome.” Löfgren is a rare manifestation of sarcoidosis, an inflammatory

condition. We learned that the man had received steroids, which suppress inflammation, while in the hospital. He'd improved, suggesting that the diagnosis was correct. The audience clapped.

Manrai returned to the podium. Restrepo had been given six weeks to prepare his presentation, he explained with a smile. "Dr. CaBot got six minutes," he said. A slide, generated by the A.I., appeared on the screen. It was titled "When Ankles, Nodes, and Syncope Collide." Manrai pressed Play and took a seat. A woman's voice—warm and casual, but professional—filled the room. "Good morning, everyone," it said. "I'm Dr. CaBot, and, um, we have what I think is a really instructive case that links dermatology, rheumatology, pulmonology, and even cardiology. So, let's jump right in."

The voice, whose style and cadence were indistinguishable from those of human doctors, began to review the patient's medications and medical history. "No exotic exposures," CaBot said. "Just life in urban New England, with a cat that scratched him six months ago—which, you know, I keep in the back of my mind, but I'm not married to it!" The audience laughed. The model seemed to have sifted through the case for information that it deemed most relevant. "The joints are the star of the show," it said. It highlighted small nodules that lined some lymphatic vessels in the man's lungs, as seen in the CT scan. "Note how they track along the fissures," CaBot observed.

The A.I. generated an array of possible diagnoses, pointing out the strengths and weaknesses of each one. It noted that the patient had high levels of C-reactive protein, a biomarker of inflammation that is sometimes associated with autoimmune conditions. "Putting it together," CaBot said, "the single best fit is acute sarcoidosis, manifesting as Löfgren syndrome." For a moment the audience was silent. Then a murmur rippled through the room. A frontier seemed to have been crossed.

For a long time, when I've tried to imagine A.I. performing the complex cognitive work of doctors, I've asked, How could it? The demonstration forced me to confront the opposite question: How could it not? CaBot had occasionally hit a wrong note—for instance, pronouncing "hilar" as "hee-lar" instead of "high-lur"—and it advised more aggressive management than Restrepo had, including a lymph-node biopsy. (Most experts don't

consider a biopsy necessary, but the man's real-life medical team had considered one.) Still, the presentation had been astonishingly good—better than many I had sat through during my medical education. And it had been created in the time that it takes me to brew a cup of coffee.

CaBot's success was at odds with what some patients experience when they consult chatbots. One recent study found that OpenAI's GPT-4 answered open-ended medical questions incorrectly about two-thirds of the time. In another, GPT-3.5 misdiagnosed more than eighty per cent of complex pediatric cases. Meanwhile, leading large language models have become much less likely to include disclaimers in their responses. One analysis found that, in 2022, more than a quarter of responses to health-related queries included something like "I am not qualified to give medical advice." This year, only one per cent did. In a new survey, about a fifth of Americans said that they've taken medical advice from A.I. that later proved to be incorrect. Earlier this year, a poison-control center in Arizona reported a drop in total call volume but a rise in severely poisoned patients. The center's director suggested that A.I. tools might have steered people away from medical attention. Chatbots also create serious privacy concerns: once your medical information enters the chat, it no longer belongs to you. Last year, Elon Musk encouraged users of X to upload their medical images to Grok, the platform's A.I., for "analysis." The company was later found to have made hundreds of thousands of chat transcripts accessible to search engines, often without permission.

Annals of Internal Medicine: Clinical Cases, a peer-reviewed medical journal, recently published an instructive example. A sixty-year-old man who was concerned about how much salt, or sodium chloride, he was eating asked ChatGPT for possible substitutes. The A.I. suggested bromide, an early anti-seizure medication that causes neurological and psychiatric issues when it accumulates in the body. The man ordered some online; within months, he was in an emergency room, believing that his neighbor was trying to poison him. He felt a profound thirst but grew paranoid when he was offered water. Blood testing showed a bromide level that was hundreds of times above normal. He started to hallucinate and tried to flee the hospital. Doctors placed him on an involuntary psychiatric hold. When they replicated his query in ChatGPT, it again suggested bromide.

After CaBot's presentation, one of Manrai's collaborators, a doctor at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center named Adam Rodman, got up to share a few remarks. Rodman leads Harvard's efforts to integrate generative A.I. into its medical-school curriculum. He noted that both Restrepo and CaBot had used a process called differential diagnosis, which begins by considering all potential explanations and then systematically rules out those which don't fit. But whereas Restrepo had emphasized the patient's constellation of symptoms—"he took the syndromic approach," Rodman said—CaBot had zoomed in on the lung nodules, something that most doctors probably would not do. "One of the things that Dr. CaBot decided to do very early on was say, 'Hey, look at this CT scan, look at how these nodules are in a lymphatic distribution. I'm going to build a differential on this!" Rodman said. The A.I. had called out the absence of lung cavitations that might have suggested tuberculosis; it had emphasized subtle imaging findings that Restrepo hadn't even mentioned. CaBot's process was recognizable to humans, Rodman observed, but it had different strengths. "Because it encodes so much more information, it picked up these items to build its checklist that very few humans would have," he said. When Manrai and his colleagues tested the A.I. on several hundred recent C.P.C.s, it correctly solved about sixty per cent of them, a significantly higher proportion than doctors solved in a prior study.

Learning how to deploy A.I. in the medical field, Rodman told me later, will require a science of its own. Last year, he co-authored a study in which some doctors solved cases with help from ChatGPT. They performed no better than doctors who didn't use the chatbot. The chatbot alone, however, solved the cases more accurately than the humans. In a follow-up study, Rodman's team suggested specific ways of using A.I.: they asked some doctors to read the A.I.'s opinion before they analyzed cases, and told others to give A.I. their working diagnosis and ask for a second opinion. This time, both groups diagnosed patients more accurately than humans alone did. The first group proved faster and more effective at proposing next steps. When the chatbot went second, however, it frequently "disobeyed" an instruction to ignore what the doctors had concluded. It seemed to cheat, by anchoring its analysis to the doctor's existing diagnosis.

Systems that strategically combine human and A.I. capabilities have been described as centaurs; Rodman's research suggests that they have promise in medicine. But if A.I. tools remain imperfect and humans lose the ability to function without them—a risk known as "cognitive de-skilling"—then, in Rodman's words, "we're screwed." In a recent study, gastroenterologists who used A.I. to detect polyps during colonoscopies got significantly worse at finding polyps themselves. "If you're a betting person, you should train doctors who know how to use A.I. but also know how to think," Rodman said.

It seems inevitable that the future of medicine will involve A.I., and medical schools are already encouraging students to use large language models. "I'm worried these tools will erode my ability to make an independent diagnosis," Benjamin Popokh, a medical student at University of Texas Southwestern, told me. Popokh decided to become a doctor after a twelve-year-old cousin died of a brain tumor. On a recent rotation, his professors asked his class to work through a case using A.I. tools such as ChatGPT and OpenEvidence, an increasingly popular medical L.L.M. that provides free access to health-care professionals. Each chatbot correctly diagnosed a blood clot in the lungs. "There was no control group," Popokh said, meaning that none of the students worked through the case unassisted. For a time, Popokh found himself using A.I. after virtually every patient encounter. "I started to feel dirty presenting my thoughts to attending physicians, knowing they were actually the A.I.'s thoughts," he told me. One day, as he left the hospital, he had an unsettling realization: he hadn't thought about a single patient independently that day. He decided that, from then on, he would force himself to settle on a diagnosis before consulting artificial intelligence. "I went to medical school to become a real, capital-'D' doctor," he told me. "If all you do is plug symptoms into an A.I., are you still a doctor, or are you just slightly better at prompting A.I. than your patients?"

A few weeks after the CaBot demonstration, Manrai gave me access to the model. It was trained on C.P.C.s from *The New England Journal of Medicine;* I first tested it on cases from the *JAMA* network, a family of leading medical journals. It made accurate diagnoses of patients with a variety of conditions, including rashes, lumps, growths, and muscle loss,

with a small number of exceptions: it mistook one type of tumor for another and misdiagnosed a viral mouth ulcer as cancer. (ChatGPT, in comparison, misdiagnosed about half the cases I gave it, mistaking cancer for an infection and an allergic reaction for an autoimmune condition.) Real patients do not present as carefully curated case studies, however, and I wanted to see how CaBot would respond to the kinds of situations that doctors actually encounter.

I gave CaBot the broad stokes of what Matthew Williams had experienced: bike ride, dinner, abdominal pain, vomiting, two emergency-department visits. I didn't organize the information in the way that a doctor would. Alarmingly, when CaBot generated one of its crisp presentations, the slides were full of made-up lab values, vital signs, and exam findings. "Abdomen looks distended up top," the A.I. said, incorrectly. "When you rock him gently, you hear that classic succussion splash—liquid sloshing in a closed container." CaBot even conjured up a report of a CT scan that supposedly showed Williams's bloated stomach. It arrived at a mistaken diagnosis of gastric volvulus: a twisting of the stomach, not the bowel.

I tried giving CaBot a formal summary of Williams's second emergency visit, as detailed by the doctors who saw him, and this produced a very different result—presumably because they had more data, sorted by salience. The patient's hemoglobin level had plummeted; his white cells, or leukocytes, had multiplied; he was doubled over in pain. This time, CaBot latched on to the pertinent data and did not seem to make anything up. "Strangulation indicators—constant pain, leukocytosis, dropping hemoglobin—are all flashing at us," it said. CaBot diagnosed an obstruction in the small intestines, possibly owing to volvulus or a hernia. "Get surgery involved early," it said. Technically, CaBot was slightly off the mark: Williams's problem arose in the large, not the small, intestine. But the next steps would have been virtually identical. A surgeon would have found the intestinal knot.

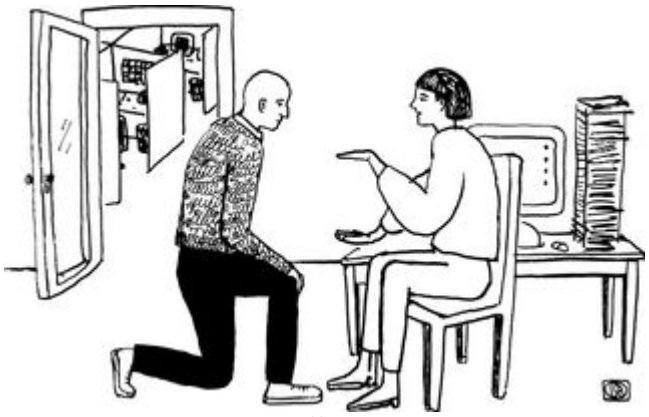
Talking to CaBot was both empowering and unnerving. I felt as though I could now receive a second opinion, in any specialty, anytime I wanted. But only with vigilance and medical training could I take full advantage of its abilities—and detect its mistakes. A.I. models can sound like Ph.D.s, even

while making grade-school errors in judgment. Chatbots can't examine patients, and they're known to struggle with open-ended queries. Their output gets better when you emphasize what's most important, but most people aren't trained to sort symptoms in that way. A person with chest pain might be experiencing acid reflux, inflammation, or a heart attack; a doctor would ask whether the pain happens when they eat, when they walk, or when they're lying in bed. If the person leans forward, does the pain worsen or lessen? Sometimes we listen for phrases that dramatically increase the odds of a particular condition. "Worst headache of my life" may mean brain hemorrhage; "curtain over my eye" suggests a retinal-artery blockage. The difference between A.I. and earlier diagnostic technologies is like the difference between a power saw and a hacksaw. But a user who's not careful could cut off a finger.

Attend enough clinicopathological conferences, or watch enough episodes of "House," and every medical case starts to sound like a mystery to be solved. Lisa Sanders, the doctor at the center of the *Times Magazine* column and Netflix series "Diagnosis," has compared her work to that of Sherlock Holmes. But the daily practice of medicine is often far more routine and repetitive. On a rotation at a V.A. hospital during my training, for example, I felt less like Sherlock than like Sisyphus. Virtually every patient, it seemed, presented with some combination of emphysema, heart failure, diabetes, chronic kidney disease, and high blood pressure. I became acquainted with a new phrase—"likely multifactorial," which meant that there were several explanations for what the patient was experiencing—and I looked for ways to address one condition without exacerbating another. (Draining fluid to relieve an overloaded heart, for example, can easily dehydrate the kidneys.) Sometimes a precise diagnosis was beside the point; a patient might come in with shortness of breath and low oxygen levels and be treated for chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, heart failure, and pneumonia. Sometimes we never figured out which had caused a given episode—yet we could help the patient feel better and send him home. Asking an A.I. to diagnose him would not have offered us much clarity; in practice, there was no neat and satisfying solution.

Tasking an A.I. with solving a medical case makes the mistake of "starting with the end," according to Gurpreet Dhaliwal, a physician at the University

of California, San Francisco, whom the *Times* once described as “one of the most skillful clinical diagnosticians in practice.” In Dhaliwal’s view, doctors are better off asking A.I. for help with “wayfinding”: instead of asking what sickened a patient, a doctor could ask a model to identify trends in the patient’s trajectory, along with important details that the doctor might have missed. The model would not give the doctor orders to follow; instead, it might alert her to a recent study, propose a helpful blood test, or unearth a lab result in a decades-old medical record. Dhaliwal’s vision for medical A.I. recognizes the difference between diagnosing people and competently caring for them. “Just because you have a Japanese-English dictionary in your desk doesn’t mean you’re fluent in Japanese,” he told me.



“I don’t care what they call it—I need my iced coffee to be at least this tall.”
Cartoon by Lauren Simkin Berke

CaBot remains experimental, but other A.I. tools are already shaping patient care. ChatGPT is blocked on my hospital’s network, but I and many of my colleagues use OpenEvidence. The platform has licensing agreements with top medical journals and says it complies with the patient-privacy law *HIPAA*. Each of its answers cites a set of peer- reviewed articles, sometimes including an exact figure or a verbatim quote from a relevant paper, to prevent hallucinations. When I gave OpenEvidence a recent case, it didn’t immediately try to solve the mystery but, rather, asked me a series of clarifying questions.

Penda Health, a network of medical clinics in Kenya, treats an enormous range of patients, from newborns sickened by malaria to construction workers who have fallen off buildings. Kenya has long struggled with a limited health-care infrastructure. Penda recently began using AI Consult, a

tool that employs OpenAI models and runs in the background while clinicians record medical histories, order tests, and prescribe medicines. A clinician who overlooks a patient's anemia would get an alert to consider ordering an iron test; another, treating a child with diarrhea, might be advised to forgo antibiotics in favor of an oral rehydration solution and zinc supplements.

An evaluation of the program, which was conducted in collaboration with OpenAI and has not been peer-reviewed, reported that clinicians who used AI Consult made sixteen per cent fewer diagnostic errors and thirteen per cent fewer treatment errors. They seemed to learn from the program: the number of safety alerts dropped significantly over time. AI Consult made mistakes; in testing, it confused a cough syrup for an antibiotic of a similar name. The absolute number of medical errors at Penda also remained high—at times because clinicians ignored the model's advice. "They know that this patient doesn't necessarily need an antibiotic, but they also know that the patient really wants it," Robert Korom, Penda's chief medical officer, said. Still, a Penda clinician deemed the program a "tremendous improvement." Its success may have come from its focus not on diagnosis but on helping clinicians navigate the possibilities.

A similar principle could guide patients. If A.I. tools continue to misdiagnose and hallucinate, we might not want them to diagnose us at all. Yet we could ask them to rate the urgency of our symptoms, and to list the range of conditions that could explain them, with some sense of which ones are most likely. A patient could inquire about "red-flag symptoms"—warning signs that would indicate a more serious condition—and about which trusted sources the A.I. is drawing on. A chatbot that gets details wrong could still help you consider what to ask at your next appointment. And it could aid you in decoding your doctor's advice.

Jorie Bresnahan, whose ninety-five-year-old mother was recently hospitalized for heart failure, told me that in order to keep track of her mother's care she made audio recordings when doctors, nurses, and therapists explained treatments and procedures. The conversations were dizzying, and A.I.-generated transcripts "just looked like a mess," she said. But when she uploaded the transcripts to ChatGPT, it imposed coherence

and highlighted details she'd overlooked. Bresnahan and her sisters, who lived far away, could then talk to the chatbot about her mother's condition. After her mother left the hospital, Bresnahan put the A.I. in voice mode, so that her mother could ask it questions, too. "She thought it was very charming," Bresnahan told me. "She started calling him Trevor."

Bresnahan eventually caught the chatbot mixing up dates and hallucinating blood-pressure readings; as a result, she had trouble figuring out if a new medication was causing fluctuations. In some conversations, ChatGPT even seemed to confuse her mother's conditions with health issues that Bresnahan herself had experienced and inquired about. "I'm thinking, *I have scoliosis—she doesn't!*" Bresnahan told me. Such errors are endemic to the current crop of large language models. And yet it was obvious that, in many respects, ChatGPT was helping orient Bresnahan in a bewildering medical system. "It was like having a doctor willing to spend an unlimited amount of time with you," she said. "It talked you through what was going on at whatever level of sophistication you needed. And it helped formulate questions for when we actually saw the doctor, so we could make the most of our time together."

Many medical questions—perhaps most of them—do not have a right answer. Is another round of chemotherapy worth the punishing side effects? Should you place your ailing grandfather on a ventilator? For a recent paper, Manrai and his colleagues told an A.I. to adopt the perspective of a pediatric endocrinologist. They asked it to write a letter on behalf of a fourteen-year-old boy whose height was in the tenth percentile for his age group, requesting insurance approval for growth-hormone injections. The case wasn't clear-cut—such injections come with rare but meaningful risks, and they can cost thousands of dollars per month. "I strongly recommend initiating growth hormone therapy as soon as possible," the letter said. But, when the model was asked to review the letter from the perspective of an insurance representative, it said, "We regret to inform you that we cannot approve the request. . . . The clinical evidence does not demonstrate a clear medical necessity." In this sense, A.I. is different from virtually every other diagnostic technology: its results change depending on what you ask of it. (Imagine a *COVID* test that argues both sides.) This, the authors conclude, is one of the reasons that we need doctors.

But the capriciousness of A.I. could also be turned into an asset. Patients and doctors alike could think of A.I. not as a way to solve mysteries but as a way to gather clues. An A.I. could argue for and against the elective surgery that you're considering; it could explain why your physical therapist and your orthopedic surgeon tell different stories about your back pain, and how you might weigh their divergent recommendations. In this role, chatbots would become a means of exploration: a place to start, not a place to end. At their best, they would steer you through—not away from—the medical system.

Here is one more case. Not long ago, I had dinner with a doctor friend who was looking gaunt and pale. I'll call him Jason. He told me that the previous month, about a week after a picnic with his family, he'd lost his appetite and developed intense nausea and diarrhea. The symptoms got better and then worse again; he'd lost nearly ten pounds, and some of his family members had reported similar symptoms. Finally, Jason, who had once told me that he was "obsessed with not becoming an A.I. Luddite," consulted ChatGPT as he would a gastroenterologist. The chatbot listed several possible causes, but focussed on cyclospora, a parasite that multiplies in fresh produce and generally needs about a week to mature. Waxing and waning illness was common, possibly owing to the parasite's life cycle. Jason saw his doctor; a test confirmed the diagnosis. He and his family started treatment, and their symptoms improved.

I hadn't thought much about cyclospora since medical school; the A.I. had pinpointed a diagnosis that might have escaped me. But, Jason argued, the chatbot's success depended on the way he'd described the case. He'd used his own clinical judgment to decide which details seemed salient: the picnic, the week's delay, the waxing and waning symptoms, the character of his stools. Later, I logged in to ChatGPT and recapitulated Jason's symptoms in a more general way, as I imagined a typical patient would. I mentioned a gap between the picnic and the start of the symptoms, the cyclical nature of the illness, and the sick family members, but I omitted the character of the stools and the degree of weight loss. This time, the chatbot suggested that the illness might be related to gastroenteritis and irritable bowel syndrome; it didn't mention cyclospora at all.

People who suspect that they have a cyclospora infection should see a doctor. “If left untreated, symptoms can go on for months,” the Cleveland Clinic says online. “This puts you at risk of severe dehydration and other complications.” When I told ChatGPT that I was suffering from Jason’s mystery symptoms, however, it said that I’d probably be fine without medical attention. “You don’t have to go through this alone,” it said. “I’ll be here for you.” ♦

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Letter from California

My House Burned in the L.A. Fires. What Happens Now?

A devastated community fights for rebirth.

By Dana Goodyear

September 22, 2025

The Palisades Fire destroyed thousands of houses, along with schools, churches, restaurants, and shops. Can these neighborhoods rebuild? Or has the state exhausted its ability to live with natural disasters?Video by Mike Lindle for The New Yorker

I grew up moving, so often that I sometimes lost count: New Jersey, Ohio, London, Maryland, Missouri, New Hampshire, Connecticut, and Hong Kong by the time I was eighteen. When I left New York to join my soon-to-be husband, Billy, in Los Angeles, at the beginning of 2005, it occurred to me that I had never lived anywhere longer than seven years.

In L.A., the pattern held—from one neighborhood to another, until I started to think I had an internal atomic clock. Then, in 2019, Billy and I landed with our two children, aged seven and nine, on a breezy bluff between the Pacific Ocean and the Santa Monica Mountains.

Technically a neighborhood of Los Angeles, Pacific Palisades stood apart, an extra ten minutes' drive from civilization, on the last stretch of Sunset Boulevard before it plunges to the sea. In a forgetful, self-erasing city like Los Angeles, the Palisades prized its history and its sense of place.

The town was founded in the nineteen-twenties by a community of utopia-minded Methodists. An old map indicates what the early residents thought of their chosen site, with regions marked as the Land of Milk and Honey and the Garden of the Gods. The threat of fire—the dark side of those mountains and the wind—was seemingly ignored. The community's pitch for growth was "Bring the children here."

In the wake of the Methodists came artists: actors, musicians, magicians, and writers. The mind reader Frances Usher and her illusionist husband, Harry, lived there; Will Rogers, a prolific entertainer, liked to ride over from his ranch in the neighboring canyon. During the war, European intellectuals fleeing Nazi persecution turned the Palisades into an “American Weimar.” (Thomas Mann’s wife, Katia, wrote, “In California we saw more German writers than we had in Munich.”) The designers Ray and Charles Eames built their Mondrian-style home studio, Case Study House #8, in the Palisades. Inside, they kept a tumbleweed collected on their journey from Chicago to L.A.

In some ways, the Palisades that I moved to felt trapped in time, an eddy in the urban turbulence. (The Zip Code is more than twice as white as the rest of L.A., and older, with a quarter of its residents over the age of sixty-five.) The first time I went grocery shopping there, I was amazed to see a lady out of Cheever, in a thin quilted vest and narrow Belgian loafers, putting cottage cheese and club soda in her cart. One of the few unhoused people you ever saw was Margaret, a woman with long gray hair, who, rumor had it, slept in a Mercedes station wagon and had attended a prestigious college on the East Coast.

In other ways, the neighborhood was startlingly of our time. In 2018, Rick Caruso, the developer of the Grove, a shopping center that reportedly attracts more visitors than Disneyland, opened the Palisades Village, an open-air mall with a small commons, where the grass was painted Kelly green and speakers piped in Sinatra, a curious mix of ready-made luxury and manufactured nostalgia. When a Saint Laurent opened, it was flanked by security guards, making me wistful for the Amazon bookstore that had previously occupied the spot.

We lived close to the center of town, in a thirty-block area known as the Alphabets, because the streets were laid out in alphabetical order. The Methodists intended it for widows and retired ministers, and the lots were modestly sized, with houses set close. Raymond Chandler had lived in a one-story bungalow in the Alphabets when he published two of the stories that became “The Big Sleep.” At the time we moved in, the bungalow was, surprisingly, intact, but many of the original houses had been replaced by

larger ones in an array of styles that Randy Young, a local historian, calls Starter Castle, Pali-Cod, and Château Taco Bell.

Our house, at the corner of Hartzell and Carey, had an arched doorway framing a sinuous Chinese elm. You couldn’t see the ocean, but you could feel how close it was. In the afternoons, my son’s room was suffused with annunciatory orange-gold light so full and present that it felt three-dimensional. Before long, he and a pack of friends were riding their bikes to the bluffs at sundown to find its source.

Cartoon by Zachary Kanin

Billy, who’d once said that if we ever moved to the suburbs he’d have to get a face tattoo, hung a rope swing from the elm, and we got a puppy. Our daughter never stopped missing the smaller, snugger place where she’d been born, but soon the house on Hartzell dominated her memories: swinging in the elm, making Rube Goldbergs on the kitchen floor, racing down the sidewalk with the dog.

The Palisades was a place that projected continuity, a place where people stayed. My neighbors on one side, a three-generation family, had owned their house since the eighties; another neighbor, catty-corner, had moved back into his childhood home. I started to imagine being old in this neighborhood, a weird thought. What if my atomic clock had stopped, and we never moved again? I pictured my children coming home to the house on Hartzell with their own children for some future Thanksgiving.

One day, I spotted Caleb and Mary Jo Deschanel out walking. Caleb, a cinematographer, is eighty-one years old, six feet one and lean, with a neat

cap of graying hair and a uniform in shades of black and charcoal; Mary Jo is seventy-nine, a scant five feet, an actress who dresses whimsically in a felt hat and round red glasses, a skirt, petticoat, wool jacket, and fingerless gloves.

We fell into conversation and, over time, became friends. The Deschanels had moved to the edge of the Alphabets in the spring of 1984, when their daughters, the actresses Emily and Zooey, were seven and four. Their house, a 1928 Spanish Colonial Revival on Chautauqua Boulevard, was the second house built on the street, and as far as they knew they were the third family to live in it.

One of Zooey's childhood friends called the house, which was built on bedrock, "the church." In the living room, high ceilings were supported by wooden beams, and a Gothic arch led to a sunroom, where the girls liked to put on plays. Zooey remembers that she was hosting a slumber party when the Northridge earthquake struck. A single pitcher broke. "It felt like the safest house in the world," she told me.

On January 7th, the first Tuesday of 2025, Mary Jo went out for a walk at 6 *A.M.* Later in the morning, she had a doctor's appointment in Beverly Hills, to get an injection for a back problem. Believing she'd need anesthesia, she removed her jewelry, including her wedding band, and left the house in Uggs.

As they got in the car, Caleb noticed smoke in the distance. This was nothing new; over the decades, the nearby mountains had occasionally caught fire, and they'd been forced to evacuate, without consequence. But on this morning he hesitated, obeying an obscure impulse. "There was something inside me that said, Eh, you know, I'll just run back," he told me. He grabbed a hard drive where he stores his photographs—a lifetime's work—and they left. On the way to Beverly Hills, they noticed fire engines heading the opposite direction, but they have lived in Los Angeles for sixty years and didn't give it another thought.

By the following day, the Palisades and the historic community of Altadena, in the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains northeast of downtown, had

been obliterated, in the most destructive urban wildfires in Southern California history.

For days, the National Weather Service had been issuing increasingly strident warnings. *"HEADS UP!!!"* the local office posted on X the day before the fires. *"A LIFE-THREATENING, DESTRUCTIVE,* Widespread Windstorm is expected Tue afternoon-Weds morning." Ariel Cohen, the meteorologist in charge, told me that, in his decades with the service, he had never issued such a dire warning with so much confidence.

Troubling signs had begun to constellate several days earlier. An unusually intense and persistent low-pressure system building over the Sierra Madre Occidental was creating strong winds across Southern California. Phasing with gusty winds coming out of the Great Basin—the infamous Santa Anas, forever associated with fire—the air surged through the mountain ranges, heating up, drying out, and driving to the coast. "That's how you make the worst possible storm," Cohen, who started his career in Tornado Alley, said. "They're not actual tornadoes, but they're like tornado winds, causing the fires to just grow explosively." After a year without rain, Cohen said, the windstorm was poised to deliver "the ceiling level of impact."

The Palisades Fire started at ten-thirty in the morning, in the wilderness above a hillside development called the Highlands. That morning, Josephine Carter, a security officer at the Getty Villa, a museum of classical antiquities in a remote part of the Palisades, was posted alone at the back gate. A little before noon, she saw the smoke. "The wind was just blowing, blowing, blowing," she said. "Then, before you know it, I saw real fire, and it was steady coming toward me."

Carter called her supervisor, who brought her back to the main building. For the next six hours, Carter helped secure buildings, evacuate staff, and extinguish spot fires. Anwar Weaver, who has worked alongside Carter for twenty-six years, put out some fifteen fires, using an extinguisher and, at times, a water bottle. The flames surged around the buildings, igniting Italian cypresses, the tapered trees that insurance agents call Roman candles, for their propensity to burn. In the neighborhoods around the Getty, houses were burning. "It was very apocalyptic," Weaver, who is tall, with a long white beard, told me. "But going home was actually the scariest part."

At six o’clock, several of the museum’s security staff were considering whether to attempt an escape. By then, the fire had burned more than a thousand acres, and the winds were starting to whip; smoke blotted out the setting sun, and the power in the area was down. Carter called her daughter, in Las Vegas, who had been watching the news. She said, “Mom, be safe, be careful. Whatever you have to do, make the right decision.”

Carter got into her car, a Toyota Corolla, and Weaver followed, in a Dodge Charger. In a caravan with their colleagues, they headed out the back gate. As they moved slowly toward Sunset Boulevard in the pitch black, all they could see was fire: at the Chabad school, at the mini-mall, overtaking the Subway. At Pacific Coast Highway, they turned south and found more fire. “I didn’t know how we were going to make it,” Carter said. All around her, houses and trees were in flames. “I couldn’t see any lights. It was dark. The fire was on both sides, and me driving my car so low, I felt that if I touched my window it would burn my hand.”

When visibility became too poor to continue, Carter stopped in the middle of the road. One by one, her colleagues slowed to a stop behind her. Wind rocked their cars. Weaver looked to his left and saw a fireball coming at him. “It hit so hard and quick that it warmed the car up instantly,” he said. The next day, a neighbor who had evacuated with the group informed him that his car had been engulfed.

Though much of the surrounding area was devastated, the Getty survived the Palisades Fire without significant damage. When I visited later, the place was buzzing with employees of a remediation company called Servpro, wearing yellow vests and driving around in vans marked with the slogan “Like it never even happened.” For Carter, though, it’s more accurate to say that it’s still happening. For weeks after her escape, she was startled awake from a plotless dream of fire, and when she makes her rounds at work the images play out before her eyes. “I can see it right now,” she said. “This is something you never forget.”

The museum, commissioned by the crude-oil magnate J. Paul Getty, is a replica of the Villa dei Papiri, a sprawling mansion in Herculaneum, a fashionable suburb on the Bay of Naples, a dozen miles from Pompeii. The villa, and the town, were buried when Mt. Vesuvius erupted in 79 A.D.

“You know we were asking for trouble when Mr. Getty built something that had already been covered with ash two thousand years ago,” Les Borsay, the Getty’s emergency-planning specialist, told me during my visit. Inside the museum, he showed me where the doors and windows had been taped to prevent fire debris from entering. We stopped at a temperature-controlled room containing the Getty Bronze, a sculpture of a ringletted Greek youth with a wrestler’s build. Burnished oxblood red, with patches of green oxidation, the sculpture was fished out of the Adriatic in the nineteen-sixties. “He’s particularly sensitive,” Borsay told me. But, like everything else, the sculpture was unscathed. “Most of the objects in the collection are by nature indestructible,” he joked. “They’ve been fire-tested.”

There is only one surviving eyewitness account of the volcanic eruption that destroyed Pompeii and Herculaneum. It was written a quarter century after the fact by Pliny the Younger, who at the time of the explosion was a seventeen-year-old in the nearby town of Misenum. He described how the ground began to shake, the sea sucked back, and fire lit up the sky. As he and his mother ran for their lives, she begged him to abandon her and save himself; he grabbed her hand, refusing. Their neighbors were screaming. He believed that “the whole world was dying with me,” he wrote. In the pallid light of morning, he was “terrified to see everything changed, buried deep in ashes like snowdrifts.”

Scavengers returned to Pompeii, but Herculaneum was abandoned. The fleeing suburbanites left behind jewelry, perfume, documents, half-eaten meals, a baby in a cradle. Forgotten under sixty-five feet of pumice and ash, Herculaneum wasn’t rediscovered until the eighteenth century, and the original Villa dei Papiri has still not been fully excavated.

The Herculaneans were utterly surprised by the catastrophe that ended life as they knew it. To them, Vesuvius formed a shady green backdrop where grapes and olives grew—Martial called it the “haunt of Venus,” playground of Bacchus and the Satyrs. The volcano’s last major eruption had been in the Bronze Age, more than two thousand years earlier, and who could remember back that far?

Shortly before Christmas, Billy announced that he knew what he wanted for a gift: a new mug for his morning coffee. He loves birds, so I found a pair

of cheeky bird-shaped porcelain espresso cups with gold beaks. But the cups, ordered too late, arrived after Christmas, and since I had already gotten him a bird feeder with a wildlife camera attached, I decided to return them.

That's what I was doing as the Palisades caught fire. Billy had come with me, so we were together when we heard from our kids. They were watching smoke billow over the Palisades from the yard at their school, a few miles away.

At the UPS store, the man working the counter told me that a woman from the Highlands had come in, saying that her house was on fire and that people were abandoning their cars and running for their lives on Palisades Drive, a few miles away. I made a mental note to check on my friend who lived there when I got home. I mailed my package, and later that night or the following morning the UPS store burned down.

As we approached our house, I noticed that the flock of small green parrots that often congregated in a tree across the street had flooded the sky, along with dozens of crows. They didn't belong together. "It's pretty freaky up here," I texted a friend, who had offered to pick my daughter up from school. We agreed that the girls' basketball game would likely be cancelled.

Recalling the next hour is like watching a split screen. My mind was listing the things we'd need to pack for a two- or three-day evacuation—p.j.s, toothbrushes, charging cords. My body was telling me to bolt. A few months later, I met a woman who described this same phenomenon, with proof: she had watched herself on her security-camera footage, puttering around, gathering unimportant things, while reassuring herself, aloud, that she would survive.

Torn and agitated, I dashed from room to room. I thought about the time we had evacuated several years earlier and I'd left tulips in a vase, the stink of their decaying stems when we returned. Should I try to find some flowers to throw away? From the hall closet, I took the emergency go bag I had diligently packed after that experience.

“You let it breathe too long.”
Cartoon by Joe Dator

I left behind my journals, photo albums, an alpaca blanket from my father, a pastel of my mother playing chess with my sister and me when we were small. Most of my jewelry (my engagement ring and everything Billy had given me in twenty years of birthdays and anniversaries) was locked in a fireproof safe that I’d recently installed. I left it, thinking it would be better off there than in a hotel. The one piece of art I took was a painting my daughter had made depicting the Lois Lowry book “The Giver,” a seventh-grade assignment: it was due on Thursday.

In the front entryway, at the foot of the stairs, I looked at Billy’s piano. The air felt charged with something harsher than sunlight. The dog voiced a sharp bark I’d never heard before. I put her on a leash. Driving away, I felt a sensation of being high above myself, with a lightness in my chest, as in a flying dream. I sat on Sunset Boulevard for two hours, inching east out of the Palisades.

That first night, we went to a hotel near the beach in Santa Monica. The scene in the lobby yawed from hysteric to melancholic and back—hundreds of people surrounded by tote bags and dogs, trading rumors, bleak jokes, and fragments of actual news. I ran into an acquaintance whose wife had died fifteen months before. He had taken her ashes and not much else. The Alphabets were as good as gone, he said. I didn’t blame him for thinking that—he was primed for the worst—but I didn’t believe him. We lived three

blocks from a firehouse. The Alphabets would never burn. These were mantras I had repeated to the kids and to myself throughout the years.

We retreated to our room, and the four of us sat on the bed with our dog, waiting for news. We opened the app for the bird camera, the hit of Christmas. There was no signal. Around 6:45 *P.M.*, Billy's phone rang—the alarm company, telling us our burglar alarm was going off. My son called 911. Everyone was calling 911.

I got a text that a friend's house, a block from mine, had caught fire. It was the house where my daughter had her first sleepover, and where she sometimes did Zoom school during the *COVID* lockdown. Later, my friend showed me clips from her Ring camera. Through the fish-eye lens I'd stood on the other side of countless times, I watched as streams of red-hot embers coursed down the street like rats from a ship, and a figure, seemingly a firefighter, passed by on foot. He was alone, with no visible equipment. All around, the trees were on fire, and the houses across the street flared as if possessed.

I know how fires work, I told the kids. I've been reporting on fires since I moved to Los Angeles, twenty years ago. They don't take every house. Just before 10 *P.M.*, our upstairs smoke detector and glass-break alarms went off, and the alarm company called again. We asked them to dispatch the fire department, standard protocol; they said they couldn't get through to the firehouse. The lines were all engaged.

Our alarms kept sounding, alternately registering movement (who or what was moving?) and smoke. The transcript I requested later from the alarm company becomes repetitive after a certain point: smoke, smoke, smoke, smoke, smoke. At 11:51 *P.M.*, the system stopped communicating. The final signal from our house was one of my son's AirTags, "last seen" at 3:22 *A.M.*

Twelve people died in the Palisades Fire. Six thousand eight hundred and thirty-one structures burned down, including schools, churches, grocery stores, shops, banks, restaurants, and more than fifty-five hundred homes. The school where my son attended kindergarten was destroyed, as was the

elementary school next to it, whose burned carcass loomed over its welcome sign: “*This* Is Childhood.”

The Methodist church, a white wedding cake built in 1929, was a total loss; the town’s oldest commercial building, a grand colonnaded structure from 1924, looked like the Roman Forum, arches yawning around a central void. (The Eames house, happily, survived.) Together, the Palisades Fire and the Eaton Fire, which ravaged Altadena and took nineteen lives, are estimated to have caused as much as fifty billion dollars’ worth of damage and destroyed more than sixteen thousand buildings.

Every house on my block burned to the ground. It got so hot that the water boiled in our small swimming pool, turning the concrete pink. The birds-eye view, captured by news helicopters, looked like the aftermath of an aerial bombardment, all gray.

When I went back to the neighborhood a week later, it was a mangled, flattened field as far as I could see in every direction. I drove right past my address and had to circle back. The Chinese elm was standing, the rope swing swaying in a light breeze. But the tree looked strange, highlighted with that familiar orange-gold light in a way I didn’t recognize. The sun, I realized, was hitting the tree from the east. That had never happened before, because our house had stood in the way. I followed the light as it washed over the inside of the arched entrance, filling the space where our front door had been. The effect was Romantic, reminiscent of an ancient church on the cover of a Penguin edition of Coleridge. I felt briefly, absurdly house-proud of my ruin.

On the other side of the arch was a breathtaking pit of plaster, nails, burned beams, and splattered tar. I could make out only a few shapes: chimneys, a sturdy metal table base, the twisted helix of a wrought-iron bannister. I walked around the side. The brick perimeter wall was intact, as was the wooden gate.

Luckily, I had my key. I opened the gate and entered the back yard. To my right was the pit. To my left, our garage, which was somehow still standing. The paint around the door was blistered, and the mat was charred black. I peered through the dusty, unbroken windows. Inside, it could almost have

been the day before the fire. A treadmill, countless books, the couches where several teen-agers had been sprawled out last time I checked. I stepped inside and discovered a purgatory of ash, with a lung-aching reek.

Back at the hotel, I gathered the kids for the opening of the go bag, Christmas morning all over again. I was going to be the Mary Poppins of preparedness. I'm not sure what I thought was in the backpack. E.U. work visas? A stack of gold bars? I unzipped it. There was ninety-five dollars in small bills, some hand sanitizer, and a Swiss Army knife. They looked at me and laughed.

How had this happened? My son and his friend, members of a group chat of newly homeless Palisades kids, were sitting on the bed at the hotel, discussing it. The friend said she had heard a rumor that the fire was started by two older boys she kind of knew, playing with matches and a Lysol can.

The actual cause is still under investigation, but one plausible theory contends that misbehaving teen-agers may in fact have been involved. In the early hours of January 1st, Highlands residents reported hearing fireworks and seeing a flash, just before a brush fire broke out in the hills above their neighborhood. Six days later, the Palisades Fire flared up, in what looked to be the exact same spot. The coincidence suggested that a smoldering root or ember, not fully extinguished, might have been resuscitated by the dry wind.

However the blaze started, there wasn't enough water available to put it out. The Los Angeles *Times* reported that the Santa Ynez Reservoir, which serves the Palisades, had been drained nearly a year earlier for repairs, causing tens of millions of gallons of freshwater to be dumped into the sea.

On the day of the fire, the Palisades was mainly supplied by a reservoir miles away in Bel-Air, which fed three tanks holding about a million gallons each. As the warned-of winds gained strength—an anemometer in the Santa Monica Mountains clocked a ninety-eight-mile-an-hour gust—the fire spread aggressively, and hydrants soon ran dry. (This is a core contention of a mass tort that we, along with thousands of our neighbors, joined.) The Los Angeles Department of Water and Power maintains that the issue wasn't a lack of water but a lack of pressure, created by

extraordinary demand, and that the system worked as designed, because it was never intended to extinguish a wind-driven urban wildfire in the time of climate change.

Cartoon by Roz Chast

In mid-January, I stopped by the fire station three blocks from my house. It was a hub of life in a dead zone, with volunteers and firemen coming in and out, greeting each other with over-caffeinated cheer. A fireman named Eric Gonzalez told me that he had been on duty on January 7th, fighting the fire near the Highlands, when he heard that there were houses burning in the Alphabets, near the station. He got in his truck, alone, and headed there. As he approached the station, he could see the glow. “I drove two streets down, looked to the left, and there’s two houses totally involved in fire,” he told me. “I’m, like, ‘Shit, we’re in trouble.’ Where it was, and where the wind was blowing, we’re in the direct path.”

Engines arrived and attempted to save houses at the end of the block. “They had to retreat over here to the fire station, because the fire truck almost burned up,” Gonzalez said. “Everything was burning around us. Everything was on fire.”

He showed me a video that he'd taken outside the station in the early hours of January 8th. Flaming palm fronds heaved back and forth across the frame, and embers streaked the air. The wind had a shape, pulling and yanking chaotically like ocean currents working plants on the seafloor. The hydrants that the firemen were drawing from ran dry in the middle of the fight, Gonzalez said, and his colleagues had to leave the station in search of water. It was all they could do to save the firehouse; the neighborhood never stood a chance. He gave me a breakfast sandwich and wished me luck.

The Deschanels and their young daughters, Emily and Zooey, moved to the Palisades in 1984. Zooey grew up thinking that her family had "the safest house in the world."Photograph from Caleb Deschanel

The scale of the displacement was hard to quantify. At its peak, hundreds of thousands of people were evacuated from their homes. Hotels, apartments, guest houses, couches—everything was full. Between them, my kids had dozens of friends whose houses had burned.

Countless Palisades families lost their homes and their children's schools, which were now reconstituting on the vacant floors of office towers off Olympic Boulevard. (The students at Palisades Charter High School ended up moving into a defunct Sears in downtown Santa Monica.) Friends of ours scattered all over the city, and some left L.A. entirely. Shortly after the fire, I saw a familiar-looking woman at the post-office branch where the Palisades mail was being sent. She'd lived up near the Getty Villa, and her house was gone. Where will you live? I asked. "We're moving back to Connecticut on Wednesday," she said. "Byeeee!"

Billy and I tried to make a two-week plan, a two-month plan, and a two-year plan, but some days we could barely figure out a meal. We were in constant motion, birds in a storm, unable to get purchase. On the phone, my mother asked me delicately if we would consider a move back East. It did seem possible that Los Angeles would never be the same. I'd been to ancient cities, puzzled over ball courts and ziggurats. Each had reached a crisis point and failed. I had thought about it a million times in the parking garages of L.A.: One day this will be a mysterious ruin. Were we witnessing the beginning of an irreversible decline?

In Los Angeles in 2025, the sign of a man who had lost all his belongings was an incongruous pair of Alo athletic socks. (Alo, like many companies with ties to the city, gave away copious amounts of clothing after the fires; for a time, my son was in Alo head to toe, looking abstracted as a mannequin behind glass.) When I went to see the Deschanels in their new apartment, Caleb was wearing the socks.

The apartment was in a tower on Wilshire Boulevard, with cloudless views out toward the ocean, like a high-end dental office. Encountering the Deschanels there was like meeting them in a dream. Was Mary Jo about to paint fluoride on my teeth?

When Mary Jo emerged from her doctor's appointment on January 7th, the Palisades had been placed under mandatory evacuation, and she and Caleb couldn't return. A few days later, Caleb went to the house and saw that it and everything inside was gone. Digging through the rubble, he found the remains of a safe that had been in his office. The Leica cameras he kept in there were warped and melted and covered in moondust.

Travelling the world for work, Caleb and Mary Jo had accumulated an idiosyncratic collection of ceramics, lithographs, paintings, masks, and photographs. They had a picture of a room at the Biltmore Estate, in North Carolina, where Caleb filmed "Being There." Mary Jo had her great-grandmother's Bible from eighteen-fifties Ireland. Their library contained thousands of volumes gathered for research on films Caleb shot, from "The Black Stallion" to "The Passion of the Christ." (When Zooey's young children heard that their grandparents' house had burned down, one of them

lamented, “All those DVDs! Some of them were over a hundred years old.”)

A lifetime of experiences was embodied in the contents of their home, and the loss threatened a form of amnesia. “It’s really easy to say that it’s materialistic to worry about all those things, but, in an odd way, the objects and the paintings have a direct connection to memories,” Caleb said. “They’re the mnemonic devices in your life.”

Like seventy per cent of homeowners surveyed in the Palisades, the Deschanels were underinsured. In September, State Farm, California’s largest home insurer, which had covered them for more than four decades, dropped their homeowner’s policy. Along with many other major insurers, State Farm has been retreating from the California market for several years. In March of 2024, it discontinued seventy-two thousand policies in the state.

Rejected by private insurers because of wildfire danger, the Deschanels had been forced to rely on a state program called the California *FAIR* Plan, which provides a maximum payout of three million dollars, significantly less than what their house was worth. (According to the L.A. *Times*, at the time of the fires the program had nearly six billion dollars’ worth of exposure in the neighborhood and only a few hundred million dollars in reserve.)

“I’m only doing this for a school project on common courtesy.”
Cartoon by Edward Koren

Zooey told me that she and Emily had made it their mission to restore stability to their parents. They were such rooted people; now they were

severed from their routines. Caleb, who took a sunrise picture most mornings of his life, had no way to document the day. Mary Jo couldn't walk, because the air was bad, and she had lost her sourdough starter. "My mom has to bake to feel normal," Zooey told me. "My dad needs a camera. They need clothes." She found crinolines, hats, and round glasses for Mary Jo and dark jeans and cardigans for Caleb. Friends with whom Mary Jo had shared starter over the years now shared it back. As soon as she could bake again, Zooey noticed, her mother's anxiety began to ebb.

At the apartment on Wilshire, Mary Jo had a fresh loaf in the kitchen. She cut a slice and placed it in a toaster shaped like R2-D2. The toaster, and many of their other housewares, had come in a care package from George Lucas's production facility Skywalker Ranch.

"People say it's like a death, but it isn't like a death exactly, because a person is a different kind of energy," Mary Jo said. The R2-D2 chirped, signalling that the toast was done. "But it *is* an energy."

Caleb mentioned that he and Mary Jo were awaiting word on a safe-deposit box they'd rented at the Chase branch in the Palisades. The bank had burned down, but they were hoping that their belongings might have been preserved.

Eventually, Chase gave them an appointment to collect their box, and I met them at a shuttered bank branch in a strip mall off Venice Boulevard, miles from the Palisades. The windows were darkened, and the building was partly boarded up, its A.T.M. disabled.

Mary Jo, recovering from another back procedure, walked gingerly across the parking lot. She had on a skirt, wool stockings, a cardigan, and, in her one concession to the warm weather, a straw hat. Caleb, beside her, had an empty backpack from Skywalker Ranch slung over his shoulder.

They seemed defended against disappointment. "I have no expectation at all, and I don't feel anything," Mary Jo said. "It's just an odd thing I'm doing today." Caleb agreed. "We waited so long, and now I don't even care," he said.

The door opened, and a nervous-looking woman came out, carrying a metal box wrapped in a kitchen trash bag. The Deschanels showed their I.D.s and went inside. They emerged ten minutes later, looking dazed. “Everything was O.K.,” Caleb said. Health-care directives, heirlooms, their house deed, a festive Thai princess ring—all pristine. The Skywalker Ranch backpack hung heavier on his shoulder.

The ongoing existence of objects they had not seen or thought about in years was curious. They didn’t know quite what to do with the windfall; after a lifetime of collecting, they’d become minimalists. “I think your brain gets reshuffled,” Caleb said. “It’s almost like you have a different life experience than you had before. You now have different values.” Losing things, it turned out, didn’t make you want more things. “I’m more fearful of losing them again,” he said. “I almost would rather get rid of them.”

Hydrogen cyanide, hydrogen fluoride, hydrogen chloride, asbestos, lead, benzene, styrene: they were in the ash and in the air. Pulmonologists warned of a wave of lung cancers in the coming years (as with the 9/11 firefighters). Our pediatrician sent an e-mail explaining that the air-quality index, which measures the particulate matter from regular wildfires, would not account for the toxic compounds associated with structure fires. For those, she wrote, “there is no specific measure.” The water was polluted, too. When the hydrants ran dry, the loss of pressure caused ashy water to backflow into the lines. A large area adjacent to the fire was placed under a “do not drink and do not boil” notice.

The death toll kept rising. Stories circulated about heart attacks and suicides, and about elderly people who had given up, exhausted. A recent study suggests that there were more than four hundred excess deaths in Los Angeles County in the first month after the fire, attributable to stress, interrupted medical care, declining mental health, and poor air quality.

With the air choked by chemicals and ash, the sunsets were flamboyantly intense. Trying to find something positive to say, I talked about them constantly. Finally, the rain began, a chilly veil that blew through the open-air passages of a hotel built for perpetual sunshine. Unfortunate prebooked tourists and business travellers started to arrive. In the elevator, they’d glance at the unkempt locals in the bad outfits and avert their eyes.

Eventually, it seemed, it was just our family and our new best friend, the nineties supermodel Carolyn Murphy, eating guac in the lobby every day at four. I started greeting the valet attendant by saying, “Still here!”

The author and her family around the time that they moved into their house, in 2019. When they evacuated, they left their mementos behind.Photograph by Heidi Zumbrun

It was hard, in close quarters, not to eavesdrop, and I didn’t try that hard. My son and his friends would walk themselves through their “perfect Pali night.” It’s a Friday, after school, in our garage; they head to Flour, a pizza place in town, find more kids they know; they go to the bluffs. . . .

Early in our stay, I’d asked an employee to show us how to escape if the building caught fire. Parts of Santa Monica were then under mandatory evacuation, and I worried that we might need to flee our refuge. After that, I noticed that my daughter refused to unpack the clothes that friends had been dropping off for her; she wanted to be able to leave in an instant.

She got horribly sick with bronchitis, surely from the air. My son wasn’t doing well, either, worried all the time. “Mom, do you think the dog will live to be a hundred?” he asked, meaning fourteen—his age—in human years. I said it was possible, if we took good care of her. He was quiet. “It’s so weird that things start to deteriorate as they get old.” Like what? I asked. “Like people,” he said. “Not stuff, actually. People.”

One day, I got a call from *FEMA*. It started like this: “How are you surviving today, ma’am?” (Probably safer than “How are you doing?”) The government worker told me I was on the “total-destruction list.” That had an appealingly heavy-metal ring.

Some insurers, heeding a call for mercy by the California insurance commissioner, waived the requirement for customers to submit an itemized list of everything they'd lost. Not ours. In order to fill out my "Total Loss Memory Book," a spreadsheet sent by the public adjuster we hired to help us navigate our claim, I was going to have to get granular.

I had videos of Hartzell on my phone, made after researching a fire-insurance story that I never wrote. (We have to wait for a big fire, I'd argued.) Now I used them to research my own life. In the clips, I seem impatient, like someone scanning a yard sale for bargains. I almost blow right past the wall in my bedroom where the baby pictures are: Billy holding our son's six-month-old hand; our daughter's round eyes and rosy face. Slow down, I want to scream, you won't ever see this again. When the videos ended, I was bottomed out with despair. I had experienced this feeling once before, at twenty-five. A few weeks after my father died suddenly, I'd awakened from a dream in which he was alive. Just let me go back!

Among the losses were the contents of the fireproof safe, which wasn't actually fireproof; the documents inside were incinerated and the jewelry reduced to scorched fragments. I turned my attention to another missing item: a velvet-lined box containing my grandmother's wedding silver. The youngest of her grandchildren, I was born two months after she died. I was the only one who never met her, and I have no idea how I ended up with it. I had rarely used the silver, but now I fixated on finding a way to retrieve it from the rubble.

The pattern, Shell & Thread, was a Tiffany workhorse, introduced around the turn of the century. A line (the thread) traced the utensils' edges; each handle bore a stylized scallop shell, the kind Venus was born on. The knife blades were rounded and symmetrical, more like tongue depressors than cutting tools. A fork in your hand felt profound, with a dull glow I remembered from setting the table on special occasions as a kid. The handles were monogrammed with my grandmother's initials.

The idea of her, as the gentlest being, had haunted my childhood. She was from Denver, and when I was in college my father built a cabin in the Rockies, near where she had spent summers. At family dinners there, he

would mistily say her grace: “Thank you for the things we eat. Thank you for the birds that sing. Thank you for the wind that blows. Thank you, God, for everything.”

These days, our family dinners consisted of takeout from a paper bag. But that prayer started coming back to me, a ghost whispering in my ear, trying to make me say thank you. I was mad at the wind. I was even mad, ludicrously, when an old friend wrote to say he’d “caught wind of” our situation. I had so much to do, but I was thinking about the grandmother I had never met. I was thinking that, even though I knew California people plunge their heirlooms in the pool when they evacuate, I had not. I’d let her wedding silver burn.

At the beginning of March, we went back to the house as a family for the first time. With its animating force leaked out, it was corpse-like, caving. There was a dead crow in the street. My son stood alone and looked up at the sky where his room had been.

After a few minutes, Billy took the kids to get breakfast; I stayed back with the two men we had hired to dig in the rubble. They had brought their own portable changing room, from which they emerged wearing white Tyvek suits, hard hats, and orange safety vests. I stood at the side of the pit. At my feet was a melted blue blob, the bird camera.

Using shovels, the excavators turned over pieces of the house. Before long, one of them held up a piece of metal victoriously. It was part of a bronze casting of “The Three Graces,” by my relative Charles Cary Rumsey, a sculptor in the early twentieth century.

The Graces, naked, entwined attendants of Venus, classically represent beauty, joy, and abundance. Here was a single grace, separated from her sisters. The bronze had blackened and grown florid with green and white spots. Headless, armless, her deep spinal canal resolving into a pear-shaped bum, she looked ready for a hot date with the Getty Bronze. She gave me hope for the silver.

On my phone, I looked up the melting points of various metals. Gold, 1,945 degrees. Silver, 1,762. Bronze, 1,675. The diggers pulled up a pile of forks.

I could see immediately by their swooping handles that they were from a Crate & Barrel set that we'd bought and regretted. The sideboard where we'd stashed them had evaporated. That was also where we kept my grandmother's silver. I pictured it all together, buried under chunks of wall, waiting to be rescued. But after three hours the excavators had not found it, and I called off the dig.

One of my friends moved back into her fire-damaged house as soon as the evacuation order lifted: single mom, two kids, no choice. Others, who had signed short-term leases well away from the burning mountains—West Hollywood, Playa Vista, the Valley, anywhere flat and far—began to return. Since the fire, I had thought periodically of Margaret, the woman with the long gray hair who lived in her car, and then one day I thought I saw her, near a Whole Foods in Santa Monica. I went back a few times, hoping to learn how she'd been managing, but I didn't spot her again.

In the first three months, my family moved ten times, from hotel to hotel to Airbnb. In March, we rented the home of a woman from my book group; we could stay for three months, until her kids came home from college and started summer jobs. Everyone asked us what we were doing, but we were still hovering, no plan. I got a trampoline from Sam's Club and installed it in the borrowed yard. If we couldn't land, we could at least jump.

Spring came. I'd been waiting all winter for an explosion of mustard, poppies, and lupine, but the mountains stayed brown. When they finally popped, in late April, I met up with Tim Becker, a horticulturalist at the Theodore Payne Foundation, which promotes native plants. Becker specializes in "fire followers," plants whose life cycles are adapted to wildfire, and he had agreed to take me on a field trip to look for some.

The ecology of Southern California evolved with fire. Research indicates that before European settlement chaparral fires occurred every fifty to a hundred and fifty years. To some indigenous plants, wildfire signals opportunity: a nutritious phosphorus and potassium dump in the soil and, with competitors burned out, better access to sun, rain, and pollinators. Becker, a gung-ho plant spotter, was hoping for a bumper year.

“Can you try to catch our waiter’s eye?”
Cartoon by Michael Maslin

“Our target species is a *Papaver californicum*, a fire poppy,” he said. “That’s the crème.” Fire poppies are rare, germinating only in the presence of karrikins, a chemical compound in smoke, which awakens them from dormancy. Dark orange, wrinkly, with white centers, they were valued by California’s Indigenous peoples for their pain-killing properties.

We headed to Will Rogers State Historic Park, in the Palisades. It was still closed to the public, so we were accompanied by a docent, Mary Calvaresi, from California State Parks. The fire had ripped through the park, a hundred-and-eighty-six-acre parcel in the Santa Monica Mountains where Rogers lived until his death, in a plane crash, in 1935. His polo field, green-and-white stables, and sprawling ranch house had survived fires in 1938 and 1978. Now only the polo field remained. We walked past the house, a heap of charred timber and a chimney, surrounded by caution tape. Where the stables had been was blank space.

At the bottom of the trail, Becker spotted sweet-smelling large-flowered phacelia (a purple-petalled beauty causing contact dermatitis) and tiny purple vining snapdragons. He swooned. “California is the best place to bot,” he said.

We hiked uphill, through swaths of yucca and chamise resprouting from the crown, then turned left, toward the lookout known as Inspiration Point,

where the view opens up to encompass the coast as far south as Palos Verdes and east past downtown to the San Gabriels. (To my kids, hike-averse when they were younger, it will always be Desperation Point, goal of forced marches on Christmas afternoons.)

There, on a rocky slope surrounded by wild cucumbers and onions, we saw a bright flash: four deep-orange crepe-paper petals quavering on a stem so narrow it looked as if it had been drawn with a sharp colored pencil. “I told you we’d get it!” Becker exclaimed. “Boom. Fire poppy.” He shook his head in amazement. Dozens more covered the slope, doubled over with their buds dangling, about to burst.

Looping back, we passed through an allée of partly burned eucalyptus trees, highly flammable invasives planted by Will Rogers. Calvaresi said that, before the park reopened, a decision would have to be made about the trees. These “widow-makers,” as she called them, were significant cultural artifacts, but they were not at all suited to a landscape prone to fire. Their charred bark was peeling off in curls, like terra-cotta tiles.

At the side of the trail, Becker pointed out a house finch perched on a burnt branch. He ventured that the birds seemed to be thriving in the park. There was nowhere for their prey to hide, and they had plenty of new habitat. Calvaresi tilted her head and said that, actually, they’d be among the species most affected. “Smoke drives the birds out to the ocean,” she said. “They’re just trying to get as far and high as they can, and, the next thing they know, they’re over the ocean, and they have no energy to come back.”

In the last stretch of our hike, I heard a bone-grinding whine with a backbeat of beeping. As we rounded a bend and looked across the polo fields, I saw what it was. Dump trucks containing concrete cleared from lots in the Palisades were lining up before a mill, which was crushing it into gravel. There was a mound, some thirty feet high, of gray-brown, dusty stone. My neighbors’ homes.

Before the fire, I wrote regularly about the risks of living in the wilderness-urban interface. I met brave, half-crazy frontierspeople who rebuilt, sometimes more than once, when they got burned out of their beloved homes. I admired their resolve but I didn’t relate to it, and after the

interviews were done I retreated gratefully to my basic suburban existence. *We* didn't live in the W.U.I., as far as I was concerned. We lived in a neighborhood that had been settled a hundred years ago by idealists whose buildings stood as a testament to endurance in a young city constantly under revision.

As I tortured myself by looking at images of our previous life, I was startled to notice that every so often the run of kid pictures and dog pictures and dinner-party pictures was punctuated with a run of fire photographs. Malibu, Brentwood, Malibu again. We were surrounded, but I was too zoomed in to see.

One memory in particular taunted me. Not long after moving to the Palisades, I had heard about a trail you could access from the top of Chautauqua Boulevard, above the Deschanels' house. During the first spring of the pandemic, when the county's official hiking trails were closed, we set out with the kids to find it.

We climbed the hill and made our way around a locked gate, on a well-worn pedestrian path that led past a huge open expanse: the Pacific Palisades Reservoir, which had been emptied in 2013. The old reservoir flicked at the edge of my consciousness—like hearing your parents fighting but not grasping the stakes. It did not occur to me to think about water. I was mostly worried about trespassing on L.A.D.W.P. property. In a few moments, we were in a tangled green world of dense brush, lizards, prickly pears, and, as we climbed higher, magnificent views of houses splayed out on a broad terrace above the sea. I had brought my children to live at the base of a Californian Mt. Vesuvius, taken note of an empty reservoir, and looked past it to admire the view.

I later learned that the L.A.D.W.P. had begun refilling the Palisades Reservoir in 2024, to use as a replacement source while the much larger Santa Ynez Reservoir was being repaired. But it, too, had required repairs, and officials gave up on the plan, claiming that structural issues posed a risk to nearby homes. As the reservoir was being drained, according to the online community paper *Circling the News*, residents saw water gushing downhill through the Alphabets.

After the fire, a prevailing narrative held that nothing could have been done to save the Palisades—that there was no way to prepare, that you can't stop the wind. That because it was unprecedented it was impossible to prevent, or even to contemplate. These arguments enraged me. Can we all now agree that precedent has been set, is being set, year after year, by California fires, Florida hurricanes, and Texas floods?

There was a notable exception to the devastation in the Palisades. Rick Caruso had built his mall with fire-resistant methods and materials; when the fire started, he fought it with a private team, using private water. I went to see the mall for myself: building after building of holiday windows filled with Isabel Marant dresses, Diptyque candles, and stacks of black-and-white gift boxes from Chanel, deserted and more or less pristine. Eight tankers full of water were still lined up on the street.

At first, I found the intact mall upsetting. These easily replaced objects that literally belonged to no one were visibly unharmed, while people's homes and all their beloved possessions were dust. In time, I realized that what made me angry was not that these things had survived but that survival was possible. The story of an unavoidable catastrophe was false.

Caruso has announced that he will reopen the mall in 2026. How and when the community will come back is harder to predict. In my neighborhood group chat, sentiment about the Palisades remains strong, enhanced by the pain of seeing it disappear, and there are frequent expressions of solidarity. But there is also a lot of uncertainty and angst.

The Alphabets, so thoroughly razed, seems uniquely vulnerable to wholesale reënvisioning. As developers buy lots from desperate or over-it sellers, my neighbors have grown distressed. Under a state law that permits single-family lots to be split, one buyer submitted plans for a duplex on Hartzell; more density could follow. The neighbors fear that the Alphabets might turn into something fundamentally different. With more people, the dangers of living in a high-risk fire zone with insufficient evacuation routes will surely grow.

Officials have been less than reassuring. Not long ago, Anthony Marrone, the chief of the L.A. County Fire Department, revealed a new strategy for

combatting fire: having homeowners defend their own properties. “There are not enough firefighters or fire engines to adequately defend every structure in the path of the fire, and there will never be,” he told a local CBS reporter.

Engineering a return to a devastated neighborhood is a financial and emotional drain. When the Deschanels got paid out by the California fair Plan, they had to make a decision: take the money and invest it somewhere else or fight their way back. Like the objects it had once contained, the house was a mnemonic device, a vault of memories: Zooey’s preschool graduation, baby showers, birthday parties, dinner parties, every holiday. After a series of family meetings and conversations with their neighbors of forty years, they decided to rebuild. “They love that neighborhood, they love that dirt, they love their view,” Zooey told me. “In a few years, they can be back in there.”

Zooey’s fiancé, Jonathan Scott, is overseeing the construction. (He’s one of the Property Brothers, twins with a renovation business and a show on HGTV.) When he breaks ground, in October, he plans to fix a few old-fashioned features (the washer and dryer had previously been outside, down a flight of stairs) and improve the basement, but otherwise the house will look exactly as it did before.

Inside the walls, however, it will be a completely different entity. Rather than wood framing, Scott is going to use a metal truss system with a foam core, surrounded by concrete. “You shotcrete the inside and the outside,” he told me. “The entire shell is essentially fireproof.” There will be an A.I.-based system to mist the interior and another to prevent flooding. The house is designed to be a prototype for resiliency, impervious to earthquakes, hurricanes, termites, and, of course, wildfires.

This method of construction, Scott said, takes about a third as long as wood framing. That means it will be finished while much of the rest of the neighborhood is still in a state of suspense. Caleb told me he was comfortable being among the first to return. “I suddenly thought, Well, it was the second house built on Chautauqua,” he said. “It wouldn’t be terrible to have it rebuilt before the rest.”

By the beginning of June, the Army Corps of Engineers had mostly completed debris removal in the Palisades; by the end of the summer, it would be done. Throughout the Alphabets, the home sites were now empty lots, as neat and patient as fields waiting to be sown.

“It’s spooky,” Randy Young, the historian, told me. “I can tell you the exact date the Palisades is right now. It’s 1925.” He showed me an old picture of the Alphabets, looking toward Chautauqua. It was a plain—unpeopled, with only a few structures and wide-open spaces in between. To a student of the past, it was thrilling, and also unnerving. Time had turned abruptly back.

In the end, we got to live on Hartzell for just six years. We all loved the house differently, but it meant the same thing to each of us: home. For me, it was the first place I’d lived since childhood that I could not imagine leaving. If I’d had a tumbleweed, I would have hung it from the rafters there.

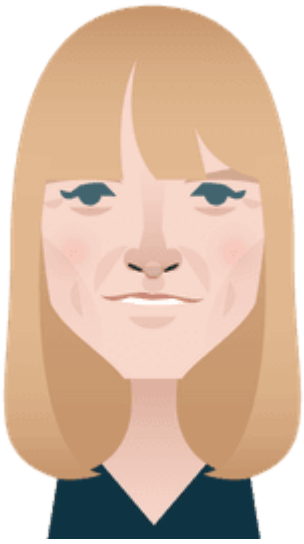
We have begun the process of rebuilding, but it will take years. The kids are now fifteen and thirteen. How old will they be when we are done? Will it be any safer there? In the meantime, we found a house to rent not far from the Palisades. It’s close enough to have that same soft, rounded light in the afternoon but hopefully far enough away from what will eventually be a massive construction site, with who knows what toxins clinging to the dust.

Ours was one of the last lots cleared on the street. By the time the day finally came, school was out for summer, and I was no longer obsessed with rescuing the silver or anything else from the rubble. I wanted to mark the occasion by planting poppy seeds. I looked at the pit one last time. My children’s baby teeth were in that dirt, along with the silver, glass, and stone.

As the bulldozer started its oddly dainty work, I went over to the pile of Crate & Barrel silverware I’d left there months before. I was grinding some seeds into the soil in front of the metal heap with the toe of my boot when something caught my eye. Among the swooping handles were several long, flat blades shaped like tongue depressors. They were charred black, and the handles with my grandmother’s initials had broken off and vanished, but

they were unmistakably her knives. I moved the metal around, counting. They were all there.

An incongruous fact about my grandmother is that she was born in Los Angeles, down the coast from my former house, several years before the founding of the Palisades. No one seems to know why she was born there, and I don't know of anyone in the family who has been born in Los Angeles since. Except, of course, for my two children: fire-adapted Californians, figuring out how to survive in the place that they are from. ♦



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Onward and Upward with the Arts

The Exacting Magic of Film Restoration

Each year, at a festival in Bologna, movies that were once lost or damaged come back to life.

By Anthony Lane

September 22, 2025

The Fondazione Cineteca di Bologna's restoration laboratory specializes in healing films that have been damaged by time.Photographs by Matteo de Mayda for The New Yorker

One of the blessings of Bologna, in northern Italy, is that it knows how to ride a heat wave. The city, which is the capital of the Emilia-Romagna region, is rich in porticoes—elegant arcaded structures that line the streets and allow the panting pedestrian, at any point, to flee the sunlight's blaze and seek shade. In all, according to *Unesco*, Bologna boasts more than

thirty-eight miles of porticoes, and they promote a pleasing illusion that you are simultaneously inside and outside. A tip for anyone designing a metropolis from scratch: start with a portico, and take it from there.

On Thursday, June 26th, the temperature in Bologna reached more than ninety-eight degrees. Stepping out, into the glare, was like hitting a wall. Even as dusk descended, people lined up to gulp from public fountains (another blessing), to fill their water bottles, or to splash their bare skin. Far from thinning out, the crowds grew denser as the hours passed, borne toward the Piazza Maggiore, the main square of the city's historic center, as if on a tide. There, beside the shiplike hulk of the Basilica of San Petronio —which is a work in progress, the foundation stone having been laid in 1390, and which somebody really should get around to finishing one of these days—was a vast white screen. Rows of ticketed seating were ranged before it, like pews in a nave. Alternatively, you could lounge, for free, on the marble steps of the basilica, or grab a table outside at one of the restaurants on the opposite side of the piazza. The best ice-cream parlor, around the corner, stayed open till midnight, allowing you to cool your throat with an almond-milk granita. (It comes with a spoon *and* a straw, so that you can slurp it up as it softens. Pleasure, in these parts, is a serious business.) In short, here was a halcyon arena for a thoroughly normal experience: going out to the movies.

Bologna is the site of an annual festival called Il Cinema Ritrovato—literally, "refound cinema," although for movie buffs a more fitting translation would be "paradise regained." Run under the auspices of the Fondazione Cineteca di Bologna, a major film archive, it specializes in the shock of the old: films that have been forgotten, overlooked, undervalued, truncated by studios, or damaged by time, and that are asking to be brought back into the light. Resurrection, as often as not, means restoration, and one of the festival's many missions is to showcase, and to explore, the painstaking ways in which wounded films can be healed. Some of the healing is undertaken locally, at a restoration laboratory owned by the Cineteca. Basically, if movies were people, whether foreign or Italian-born, Bologna is where they would choose to live.

A hundred years after “The Gold Rush” ’s première, a version restored at the Cineteca was screened around the world.

The festival has been running since 1986. Back then, it was a quiet, five-day affair, taking place in December, and Gian Luca Farinelli—a founder of the event and now one of its four co-directors, as well as the over-all director of the Cineteca—reckoned that he was personally acquainted with most of the folks who turned up. Not until 1995 did the festival switch to summer, and with the change of season came a chance to show movies in the open air. The first film to be screened in the Piazza Maggiore that year was the 1922 “Nosferatu,” with the long-fingered, sleep-ravaging Max Schreck as the vampire. Think of watching *that* alfresco, beside a sacred edifice, while trying to digest your *tortellini in brodo*. Over time, the festival has swelled, and in 2025, for its thirty-ninth incarnation, it sprawled languidly across the last week of June. At ten venues around the city, outdoors and indoors, more than four hundred films were shown, drawing a hundred and forty thousand spectators, some of whom even Farinelli may not have known.

The movies on offer in Bologna this year spanned a hectic century. I caught everything from a burst of short films by the great French pioneer Georges Méliès, dating from 1905, to “A History of Violence,” David Cronenberg’s equally eruptive masterwork of 2005. (The equivalent leap in painting would take you from Picasso’s “Boy with a Pipe,” a rich bloom of his Rose Period, to Gerhard Richter’s “September,” a veiled meditation on the events of 9/11. Is the path from the playful destined to lead to the murderous?) There was a series devoted to the American director Lewis Milestone, including the sound and silent versions of his most famous project, “All Quiet on the Western Front” (1930). Brighter by far was a bouquet of Katharine Hepburn movies; if you want to know where on Earth people will line up for last-minute tickets to “Sylvia Scarlett,” her 1935 cross-dressing comedy with Cary Grant, at half past eleven on a Monday morning, the answer can only be Bologna.

It was in the Piazza Maggiore that the festival came to a head. There, every night at nine-forty-five, we were treated to a movie (in almost every case, a freshly restored classic) and summoned to the verge of hallucination. To be part of an apprehensive throng, enfolded in warm starlit darkness, gazing up at *another* throng—the scientists who gather at the climax of “Close Encounters of the Third Kind,” watching the skies—was to feel the membrane between the movie and its viewers dissolve. If the mother ship that rises at the end, glowing like a fairground carrousel, had appeared from behind the screen and continued its voyage into the Italian heavens, I, for one, would not have been remotely surprised.

Why, then, did the screening of June 26th stand out? Because of its perfect symmetry. A hundred years earlier, to the day, Charlie Chaplin’s “The Gold Rush,” which he wrote, directed, and starred in, had its première at Grauman’s Egyptian Theatre, in Hollywood. To mark the centenary, it was screened once again at Grauman’s, with playbills costing twenty-five cents, as they did back in 1925, and at more than five hundred other cinemas worldwide, from the Arman Kino, in Almaty, Kazakhstan, to the Grand Theatre in Shanghai. (The Chinese director Jia Zhang-ke had himself photographed in front of a boot, with a greedy grin, holding a knife and fork: a tribute to the movie’s most nourishing scene.) Viewers in Kyiv had a choice of two venues, Zhovten and Kino 42, in which to see the film, thus

demonstrating that the Chaplinesque spirit of defiance is alive and kicking. Best of all, “The Gold Rush” was screened, to an audience of thousands, in the Piazza Maggiore.

“The Gold Rush” belongs in Bologna, because it is there, in the laboratory at the Cineteca, that it has recently been restored. Such was the lustre of the results, at the evening showing, that there was no sense of our being in the presence of the antique; for all practical purposes, we were watching a new release. There was also a live accompaniment—Chaplin’s own score for the movie, restored, adapted, and conducted by Timothy Brock, with the Orchestra del Teatro Comunale di Bologna. Among those applauding at the end was Carmen Chaplin, one of the director’s granddaughters, and even heretics, whose faith in Chaplin is fickle, will have been swept along. You couldn’t help wondering what Chaplin might have made of such an occasion. Given that his appetite for the adulation of the masses knew no bounds, would he not have stood and wept in euphoric gratification? As a matter of fact, no. He would have taken one glance at the screen and called his lawyers.

There is no such film as “The Gold Rush.” That is to say, there is no one pure ur-movie, unblemished and incontestable. When first released, in 1925, it was a silent picture, lasting ninety-five minutes and concluding with a kiss. It seemed complete, dramatically satisfying, and not to be tinkered with. Chaplin, however, being as natural a tinkerer as he was a tramp, returned to the film and, in 1942, brought forth a new version, with multiple trims, his musical score, and, most controversial of all, a spoken narration. The speaker, of course, was Chaplin himself. In a strange puritanical gesture, the kiss was cut.

In itself, such revisiting is hardly unusual. In the autumn of his life, Henry James went back to many of his novels and short stories, submitting them to revisions sufficiently far-reaching to keep scholars happily squabbling forever. Chaplin, unsurprisingly, was made of tougher stuff. Not content with producing the later version of “The Gold Rush,” he set about insuring that the earlier one was blocked to public view. An affidavit from the mid-nineteen-fifties clarifies his plan:

> I decided that the old silent version of 1925 was no longer to be used, and ordered the destruction of the original negative and fine grain thereof.

No Mob boss, cheerfully decreeing that an inconvenient witness be rubbed out, could be more resolute. It's as if Henry James had made the rounds of leading booksellers, shotgun in hand, and told them that any first editions of "The Wings of the Dove" still flapping around would be blasted out of existence. And what was served up to us now, in the Piazza Maggiore? The 1925 movie, with the music of 1942. Don't tell Charlie.

"We got distracted again."
Cartoon by Avi Steinberg

That affidavit was among the documents shown during a panel discussion on the morning after the triumphant screening of "The Gold Rush." It's fair to say that there is no lack of documentation; the Cineteca is home to the Chaplin Project, which has digitized the filmmaker's personal archive, permitting online access to more than a hundred and eighty thousand pages of Chapliniana. If you badly need to consult a telegram of 1916 from his half brother Sydney ("Charlie in very depressed condition for past two weeks"), you know where to go. The archive, however, is only part of the project; its primary responsibility has been to restore all of Chaplin's films. The little fellow made more than eighty of them, which suggests that the depression didn't weigh him down too long.

One of the earliest duties of any restorer is to round up the copies or portions of a film, in a variety of states, that have been scattered far and wide. For the latest restoration of “The Gold Rush,” this entailed reaching out to United Artists’ Japanese division; the Bundesarchiv, in Germany; the British Film Institute, in London; *MoMA* and the *gem* film library, in New York; the Blackhawk collection, at U.C.L.A.; and the Filmoteca de Catalunya, in Spain. From the first of these sources came a duplicate negative (“dupe neg,” in the lingo of the trade), which supplied almost seventy-seven per cent of the material. From the last of them came a positive print, which provided a mere .07 per cent, lasting fewer than five seconds—the lone anchovy, so to speak, that you lay atop your spectacular sandwich, having raided the fridge for every possible ingredient.

The hunt for movies that are missing, believed lost, or absent without leave is one of the more demanding thrills of the restorer’s mission. It can be a matter of salvation. Cecilia Cenciarelli, a co-director of the Bologna festival, remembers flying to Taipei in 2009 in search of films by the Taiwanese director Edward Yang, who had died in 2007. There she found reels of “A Brighter Summer Day” (1991), one of his finest films, left in an office in a “big black garbage bag. The elements were there, covered in mold.” The movie had become, as Cenciarelli said to me, “an urgent patient,” and the job of resuscitating it was shared by the Cineteca and the Film Foundation’s World Cinema Project, which was created by Martin Scorsese in the year of Yang’s death. The same partnership dealt with Tomás Gutiérrez Alea’s “Memories of Underdevelopment,” a startling Cuban movie from 1968—“It grabs my heart every time I watch it,” Cenciarelli says. Colleagues in Cuba told her that it was “liquefying under our eyes.” The regime of Fidel Castro was still in place, and just getting the movie out of the country was an adventure. A guy with a visa had to fly the decaying reels to Mexico City, taking up three seats on the plane.

A more recent *trouvaille* was in Chile, where, in January, 2023, a cinema researcher named Jaime Córdova was alerted to reels of film that were sitting in a warehouse and waiting to be trashed. He rescued them and, during a cursory inspection of the contents, found images of Abraham Lincoln. Further inquiries established that the movie was “The Scarlet Drop,” from 1918, which was directed by John Ford and hitherto

considered lost. It stars Harry Carey, a stalwart of Ford's films and, before that, of D. W. Griffith's. Restored in Chile, "The Scarlet Drop" was shown this year at the festival in Bologna, its zest unimpaired, although one of its five reels is missing. Maybe that will turn up, too, before long, in Helsinki or Manila. The quest goes on.

So, what awaits the urgent patient—the movie that is plucked from imminent death? If possible, intensive care. In Bologna, this means a spell at L'Immagine Ritrovata, the laboratory that adjoins the Cineteca. To take a tour of the place, as I did in late May, is to be met by a confounding breadth of activities. You begin by observing skilled manual labor and wind up, an hour or so later, in twilit and temperature-controlled rooms, listening to a soft chorus of beeps and hums. To master the mysteries of film restoration, I guess, would consume your life.

My first port of call was a workbench commanded by Marianna de Sanctis, who wore white gloves, like a conjuror or a croupier. In front of her were two rotating spools, the size of paella dishes, fixed flat upon the bench; by turning a wheel at her side, she wound a reel of negative film from one spool to the other, pausing to examine its condition. The scrutiny was made easier, here and there, by placing the strip of film on black velvet, against which the negative showed up as positive. And, oh, the thousand natural shocks that film is heir to! Scratches, tears, and "perforation loss"—sprockets missing on one or both sides of the frame. Some injuries could be treated with tape, including a special perforated kind. "Of course, we have to put the tape on without any bubbles or dust," de Sanctis said. "Repair is important, but also we have to try to avoid too much intervention," she told me. "The less we do, the better."

The film that she was attending to as we spoke was "Bitter Rice" (1949), which was due to be screened at the festival, in June. Starring a teen-age Silvana Mangano as one of a host of women who are dispatched to the rice harvest in the valley of the River Po, the movie is a near-mythological item in the resurgence of Italian cinema after the war. At the laboratory, multiple reels of the film, each in an old metal can, were piled in stacks. Labels stuck to each can indicated, in English, the state of the contents. The one for the reel on which de Sanctis was working, for instance, told a sad story of

degradation. An “X” was inked in the last of three little boxes: “Slight/Physical Decay,” “Average Decay,” and “Strong Decay.” Another box marked where on the reel the trouble lay: “Head,” “Centre,” or “Tail.” If only mortal decline could be registered with equal efficiency, we would all be saved an awful lot of fuss.

To follow the workflow at L’Immagine Ritrovata is to be reminded afresh of the tangibility of film, not to mention its fallibility. Nitrate film stock, which was used in the industry from the eighteen-nineties to the mid-twentieth century, and which was responsible for many of the most beautiful movies on record, is also insanely flammable. Beauty comes at a cost. Acetate film, which succeeded nitrate, is far more stable, though not without its flaws, and I was delighted, in Bologna, to learn about “vinegar syndrome,” which is not, as you might suppose, a fancy excuse for a bad temper but a reference to acetate’s tendency to shrink, buckle, and give off a sour acid smell. Whether the acidity level rises if the footage in question contains an image of W. C. Fields I am, as yet, unable to ascertain.

Curing these maladies is a delicate task, with a set of tools and potions to match. De Sanctis was armed with Q-tips, glue, isopropyl alcohol, lemon oil, and eucalyptus oil (handy for removing any adhesive residue from the surface of a film); a separate room, devoted to slowing or reversing chemical deterioration, gave me an odd sense of having wandered into a witch’s kitchen. Little rolls of film, no bigger than hockey pucks, sat inside a large glass pot, under a lid, together with silica gel. A label on the front read “Desiccation treatment.” Different threats—damp, humidity, heat, old age, and so on—call for different defenses, and another pot was labelled “Softening treatment (camphor).” I was frankly disappointed not to come across a brain in a jar.

After the gluing, the taping, and the chemistry lesson, it was time for the washing—or, to be exact, for an introduction to the BSF Hydra. This is a magnificent beast, made by a British company, Cinetech, and its job is to clean film. To the movie-maddened eye, it resembles one of those machines that you see in the background of a Bond film, at the core of a villain’s lair, being operated by a random scientist in a white coat. (Needless to say, the poor sap can expect to be vaporized, thanks to 007, in a giant fireball.) The

cleaning is done with a noncombustible solvent, plus a complex array of capstans, rollers, and “soft nap Dacron buffers,” zipping through as much as a hundred feet of film per minute. At L’Immagine Ritrovata, the Hydra also represents a border: the line at which the care of film as physical stuff, by hand, approaches its end. Beyond lies further alchemy, as film is transmuted into digital form.

The first of the digital chores is scanning. Enter a room suffused with dark-blue luminescence, as if you were diving in a grotto, and you are greeted by the Arriscan, another benevolent monster, which emits regular pulses of light. Up to five frames per second can be scanned, and there is an exciting option called “wetgate,” which sounds like a scandal involving a congressman in a hot tub. In fact, as Cenciarelli explained to me, it has a salutary effect: “The emulsion is so scratched, and the lines are so deep, that basically it’s scanned very slowly under liquid that fills in those wrinkles, like wrinkles on human skin.” Botox for movies!

Next up is comparison (which entails a frame-by-frame analysis of the sources, in low-resolution digital files), followed by digital cleaning and retouching. The latter, in place of solvents and soft buffers, deploys costly software programs that sound like cheap perfumes—Phoenix, Diamant, and “Revival by Blackmagic.” Still to come: 2K and 4K color correction, mastering, subtitling, sound restoration, and a glass of sweet wine to go with your dessert. And don’t forget the Arrilasers, machines that allow digital images to be recorded onto 35-mm. film, thus allowing you, in style, to come full circle.

Of all these stages in the process, color correction is the one most likely to baffle the lay intruder—the untutored innocent who doesn’t understand, say, what the hell colors have to do with a black-and-white movie, and why they may need correcting. The truth is that subtleties of tonal range, not least brightness and contrast, can be adjusted by the corrector-in-chief. At the laboratory, I watched Simone Castelli, who sat at a wide console, facing a screen on which appeared a scene from “Tout Ça Ne Vaut Pas l’Amour” (1931), a comedy directed by Jacques Tourneur. (Eleven years later, in Hollywood, he made “Cat People.” Quite a jump.) In the center of the console were three domed knobs; as Castelli turned these, ever so gently,

with the finesse of a safecracker, the impact of the images was altered. The black of a man's jacket grew funereally dark. This brief modification was enough to ruffle the conscience of a film critic. When we praise a movie for being visually rich and, for good measure, savor that richness for its deliberate emotional intent, are we doing anything more than reacting to a tweak? What does it say about the force of a film that it can literally be dialled up and down? As Cenciarelli said of the restorative process, "After all those years, there are so many philosophical bells that ring."

For expert advice on these niceties, I assumed, no authority would be of greater assistance than the director of the film that is being restored, if he or she is still alive. Wrong. Céline Pozzi, a manager at L'Immagine Ritrovata, laughed at my naïveté. Directors, apparently, can be a problem. "For example, Wong Kar-wai. He had this special neon look on his films, and he wanted to change it and get away from that cold light," Pozzi told me. "He said, 'I'm not the person I was at the time. I've changed. I have the right to change the film.' " Shades of Chaplin in 1942. All the more reason, Pozzi added, to get a movie scanned: "Preservation is always the base of everything. Then you can have discussions. If you are *clear* in your aim about the restoration, that's the most important thing."

One person who has pondered these conundrums as much as anybody is Ross Lipman, who was the senior film preservationist at the U.C.L.A. Film & Television Archive for seventeen years. He now runs his own company, Corpus Fluxus, and has recently written a book, "The Archival Impermanence Project," about the methods and the implications of restoring film. The title may have the tang of a prog-rock album, but the book is witty, minutely detailed, and braced by common sense—a welcome gift in an often obsessive environment. The funniest bit is a footnote, in which Lipman directs us to a tiny corner of professional dissent. "At a fundamental level, even the light passing through the projectors has changed, as modern 35mm projectors use xenon bulbs with different characteristics than traditional carbon arcs," he writes. "Carbon arc enthusiasts in fact represent a highly specialized subgroup within the extended archival film community." I like to think of fights breaking out in projection booths as rival gangs, the Xenons and the Arcs, come to bitter blows.

Cartoon by Joline Jourdain

The moral of these quarrels is that the past really *is* another country, and that we can never live there. At best, we can pay a courtesy call. That is why, if you have any interest in the collision of old and new, in any field of endeavor—architecture, archeology, sexuality, table manners—I recommend "The Gray Zone," a particular chapter of Lipman's book. He defines the zone as "that uncharted territory where a preservationist needs to make decisions when there is no definitive guide left by the filmmakers." In such circumstances, he adds, authenticity is impossible. He prefers to ask if a restoration is *faithful*.

Lipman is graced with a talent to enthuse. He was in Bologna, at this year's festival, partly to lecture on a restored version of "Killer of Sheep," Charles Burnett's modest, barely plotted, yet devastating portrait of nineteen-seventies working-class Black life in Watts. The movie was shot for a pittance, on 16-mm., over a number of years, on the streets of South Central Los Angeles; few members of the cast were professional actors. It finally had its première in 1978, and you might presume that what was screened then would logically be the truest and the most dependable version of the film. That might be so, Lipman argues, for high-end Hollywood products, but not for a low-budget independent movie like Burnett's:

> In this case, emulating an old release print is preserving the work not of the filmmaker but whoever worked the night shift at Deluxe Labs on a given night in 1975.

It was by returning to the original camera negative that Lipman found a wealth of visual information; the face of a boy being chided by his father, in the movie's opening shot, stood out more lucidly than before. Lipman was thereby able to draw the movie out of the gray zone—perceptibly so, as he proved in Bologna by showing two versions of certain sequences side by side. Flat, drizzly grays, not least in shots of sidewalks and roadways, acquired a bite and a depth that they had previously lacked. "We are adding nothing to the film that wasn't there already," Lipman said to me. "We are rendering it better." The extra clarity suits the characters, whose feelings, though verging on despair, are anything but flat. (The movie is as much about children at play as it is about adults at work.) Should you wish to see the fruits of that rejuvenation, "Killer of Sheep" is now on Blu-ray, in the Criterion Collection, although, if you get the opportunity to catch it at the cinema, do not hesitate. To judge by the screening that I attended in Bologna, the movie should carry a health warning: as it ends, to the sound of Dinah Washington singing "Unforgettable"—a song not heard in that spot until the recent restoration—you may be reduced to a wreck.

The most remarkable thing that I saw, and listened to, at the festival arrived on a Sunday afternoon in the Sala Mastroianni, one of the smaller screening venues. Bearing the title "Le Raid Paris-Monte Carlo en Automobile," it was among the batch of Georges Méliès movies—squibs and sketches, blissfully distant from our modern conception of a feature film. Made in 1905, crammed with comedy players, and hand-tinted with blurts of rough color, the film purports to show a car being driven by King Leopold II of Belgium, who is depicted as a fool behind the wheel. (He was known for immeasurably worse crimes, too, as any historian of the Belgian Congo can confirm, yet somehow that knowledge sharpens the farce.) At one point, we see a policeman being run over, flattened, and then inflated back to life with a pump.

The print of the film came from the Cinémathèque Française, and was accompanied with brio by a pianist, John Sweeney—but not by a pianist

alone. Research suggests that some of Méliès's work had been buoyed up by a *boniment*. The word is untranslatable, but it means something more than a commentary or a narrative. Rather, it's a kind of ecstatic patter, near to the brink of Dada, and in the case of "Le Raid," in Bologna, it was delivered with whoops, ululations, and ineffable glee by the actress Julie Linquette. Here was *son et lumière* with a vengeance, and it induced a weird historical vertigo: Were we not being spun back in time and granted a chance, however brief, to hook up with the original audience? Did we not drink in this fizzy little movie as they had drunk it, a hundred and twenty years ago?

To ask such questions is to confront the most nagging issue that arises, intractably, from all efforts to restore or reconstruct. You can play a Bach cantata on original instruments; you can perform it in the Thomaskirche, in Leipzig, say, where it was first heard; but whether you can swap places with its first auditors is another matter. Without their Lutheran piety, and their immersion in the liturgical calendar of the church year, can one ever hope to grasp the place that a cantata occupied in their mind's ear, as it were, and in the pattern of their lives? Likewise, in a lighter mode, I can kid myself that I enjoyed "Le Raid" just as a Parisian would have done in 1905; as likely as not, though, we were laughing at different jokes.

Much of the restoration process is centered on the care of film as physical stuff.

Doubts of this sort in no way lessened the merriment of Bologna; if anything, they galvanized it, as we hurtled from one throwback to the next. In a courtyard strung with lights, at a late-night showing of “ ’A Santanotte,” a Neapolitan film from 1922, I kept glancing away from the fervid melodrama to admire the projector behind me: a steampunk dream, built in Milan in the nineteen-thirties, which appeared to be made from a trash can, half a dozen alarm clocks, and two bicycle wheels. It emitted a bright plume of smoke, as if miniature furnaces were being stoked within. The whole festival was a maelstrom of time travel, and the more specific the destination, I discovered, the more heady the plunge into the past. Nothing was more rapturous, for example, than a Czech film called “Erotikon,” and the rapture was spiced by the realization that we were the first audience to see it in its proper form since an initial showing in February, 1929. By the time of its public release, in the summer of that year, it had been censored. Only now, lovingly restored, was it free to unfurl the full, gasping glory of its title.

What boosted the thrill was the setting. “Erotikon” showed at Modernissimo, an underground movie theatre a few yards from the Piazza Maggiore. A cinema had existed there since 1915, and, a little more than a century later, it was reborn, in a fond flourish of Art Deco. In a lyrical conceit, showtimes are announced on a departure board, as if a movie were something that you run to catch, like a train. In the auditorium, each of the red velvet seats is crowned with a movie-gilded name, in gold. Steven Spielberg abuts Meryl Streep. For “Erotikon,” I sat on Ennio Morricone (Stefania Sandrelli, alas, was already taken), though the most enviable perch, surely, is the one marked “Fratelli Marx”—a single seat for all four brothers, squashed together. Werner Herzog I would tend to avoid, unless you want to get eaten by a bear halfway through the screening. The Modernissimo runs a year-round repertory program, and the prices are a steal. On a regular day, a student will pay less than five and a half dollars for a ticket.

That’s an important bargain, because Bologna is a student hub, and then some. College education began there in 1088; no university in the world has been functioning, continuously, for so long. By tradition, Bologna has been referred to as “learned and fat,” in homage to its blend of scholarship and gastronomy. It is also lauded as *la città rossa*, or the red city—first, because of its distinctive brickwork, and, second, because of the leftist hue of its politics. In the nineteen-sixties and seventies, it was a stronghold of the Italian Communist Party. One of the authorities’ stated aims was the preservation of Bologna’s historic center, the idea being that to preserve was not to ossify but to invigorate, for the benefit of the inhabitants. As for buildings, so for venerable films. The argument for a collectivist culture endures, according to Farinelli, the director of the Cineteca. “Bologna is a kind of laboratory, almost an experiment,” he told me, adding that, believe it or not, local schoolkids are educated in the history of cinema. Even a mayor from a center-right party, elected in 1999, was a passionate movie buff; he urged Farinelli to lay on *more* screenings in the Piazza Maggiore. Some towns have all the luck.

There is a murky risk that old movies will attract old people, who, as a rule, like nothing better than to rummage through their recollections of being overwhelmed by something half a century ago. Yet the audience at “Close

Encounters” and “The Gold Rush” was by no means composed of nostalgists alone. So youthful, indeed, was the atmosphere at the festival that I seriously considered checking into the Cineteca laboratory and having my sprockets glued. It was in 2010 or so that Farinelli began to notice a shift in the average festivalgoer. “There was more attention from a younger audience,” he said, “whether it was from the university or, in general, from more openness toward the cinema.” Could it be that their needs were not being met in the multiplex? After *Covid*, the trend became more pronounced—“a renewed interest in film, actual celluloid film.” It was, he told me, “as if digital was now in the past.”

The Arriscan can scan up to five frames per second, transmuting film into digital form.

There is another major bonus of Il Cinema Ritrovato: no baloney in Bologna. “No red carpets,” as Farinelli says. No stars are required to dress up and parade for the cameras or to answer fumbling questions from the press; no juries haggle over prizes; and, above all, there is no obligation to observe the highly suspect principle that the latest thing is bound to be the best. Yet something else is in play. At the majority of film festivals, you can’t help asking: What do they know of movies who only movies know? In Venice, say, it would take so little initiative to break off from motion pictures and treat your tired eyes to the balm of pictures that don’t move—some of the loveliest ever painted. But almost nobody does. In Bologna, however, the films feel embedded in the bustle of the place, competing for sensory attention. Everything around you stakes an equal claim.

Hence the afternoon that I spent, near the end of the festival, in the church of Santa Maria della Vita, pretty much felled by a work of art in the sacristy. It's a lamentation scene, created in terra-cotta, in the second half of the fifteenth century, by Niccolò dell'Arca, the details of whose career are sparse. This is his unquestioned masterpiece: seven life-size figures—the body of Jesus; the kneeling Nicodemus (or, some say, Joseph of Arimathea); St. John, who tries and fails not to weep; and *four* Marys. Mouths gape. Hands are wrung together or flung wide. Garments flutter violently in an invisible wind. The entire tableau was described by the Italian poet and playwright Gabriele D'Annunzio as "a scream of stone." What could conceivably compete with that?

The response came a few hours later, in the Piazza Maggiore, with a screening of "Strike" (1925), directed by Sergei Eisenstein when he was only twenty-six. As propaganda, his tale of Russian factory laborers who throw down their tools and suffer the consequences was never subtle, but as a visual onslaught it has lost not a dash of its strength. The closeups of faces, hugely magnified on the Piazza's screen—noble workers and boisterous bosses alike—could, in a certain light, be viewed as Expressionist updates of dell'Arca for a post-religious age, barrelling toward a dangerous new faith. Things change. Terra-cotta yields to celluloid, celluloid to digital magic, and the Revolution to *la dolce vita*, on a meltingly hot night in an old red city. Power to the people, with ice cream at midnight! Taste it and see. Not everything in the world is going to hell. ♦

Anthony Lane is a staff writer at The New Yorker and the author of "Nobody's Perfect."

Takes

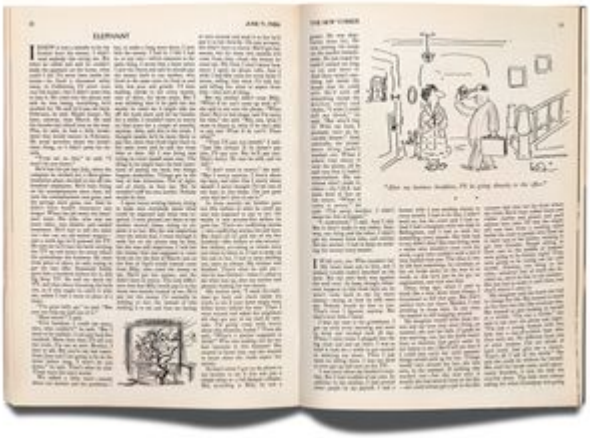
- **Rivka Galchen on Raymond Carver’s “Elephant”**
  The author on the New Yorker story that inspired her story “Unreasonable.”

Takes

Rivka Galchen on Raymond Carver’s “Elephant”

By Rivka Galchen

September 21, 2025



June 9, 1986

To celebrate its centenary, The New Yorker invited fiction writers to contribute stories inspired by works from the archive, then to explain why

those works inspired them. Sign up to receive the latest Takes directly in your inbox.

The structure of "Elephant," one of Raymond Carver's last stories, is simple, but the emotional effect is outsized, numinous, convincing, and comic. It opens with the narrator's brother calling him to ask for money. His mother, "poor and greedy," also needs some, as does his daughter, who was living in Bellingham with two kids and "a swine who wouldn't even look for work," and his son, in college in New Hampshire, who says he will deal drugs or rob a bank if he can't get money from his dad. That's the first part of the story. In the next section, the headwinds intensify. The brother's plans for paying him back have fallen through, the mother says it's not in the cards for her to save for a rainy day, the daughter's trailer is robbed, and the son wants help moving to Germany to avoid the materialist society of the U.S., where you can't even have a conversation, he complains, without money coming up. Then, though the narrator's situation doesn't shift—except maybe to get worse—he feels, somehow, different. "I decided to write her a letter that evening and tell her I was rooting for her," he says of his daughter. "My mother was alive and more or less in good health, and I felt lucky there, too."

When I wrote "Unreasonable," I was interested in (among other things) better understanding, artistically and emotionally, what made that change credible. I also wondered how a different sort of narrator would think her way through her own ongoing storm. In my nonfiction writing, I have lengthy conversations with a lot of scientists. One of those scientists recently explained why something was unlikely to happen, "given our current macro-environment"—the cuts in funding that followed the election of Donald Trump. That phrasing stayed with me. I put my character into that "macro-environment," and also gave her the shifting pressure systems of two children, students, and colleagues. Not long ago, I read scientific research about the varied dialects and disposition of bees—so I realized that my character studied bees. She was someone who could take seriously the mind of a creature smaller than a penny, or someone who, maybe, felt smaller than a penny herself.

Read Rivka Galchen's new story "Unreasonable."

In “Elephant,” the shift in the narrator’s mood follows two dreams, one of them reassuring and the other distressing. In the first, he is a child riding on his father’s shoulders (“I was high off the ground, but I wasn’t afraid”) and he becomes aware of the steady grip his father has on his ankles; he imagines that his father is an elephant. In the second dream, the narrator is an adult: “I found myself in the company of some other people—people I didn’t know—and the next thing that happened was that I was kicking the window out of my son’s car and threatening his life, as I did once, a long time ago.” When he wakes up, he recalls that in the dream someone had offered him whiskey. “Drinking that whiskey was the thing that scared me,” the narrator relates. “Compared to that, everything else was a picnic.”

The emotional transformation of the narrator has the cadence of Alcoholics Anonymous about it. He is gently, hesitantly, grateful. He wishes his son and brother and daughter and mother well. On his walk to work, he starts to whistle. (“I felt I had the right to whistle if I wanted to.”) A guy from work pulls over and offers him a ride in his car, whose velocity he is keen to show off. The narrator is still moving into a wind, but there’s at least the brief feeling that the wind comes from speeding forward into an adventure. I wondered what sort of transfiguration or transformation my character might be open to—or if she would be open to one at all. I wasn’t sure what past and present experiences might precipitate one, or how they might intrude into her consciousness.

“Elephant” is crowded with threes. The brother makes three main appearances, as do the mother, the daughter, and the son. Those triples discipline the story’s structure. They also prime me—and I think most readers—to seek out a third even for things that appear only twice. There are only two dreams, and only two mentions of his father. But in the story’s ending, I see ghostly thirds of both these elements. Those mystical, fairy-tale threes—I wanted those, also, to fall into my own story. ♦

Read the original story.

Elephant

I knew it was a mistake to let my brother have the money.

Rivka Galchen, a staff writer at The New Yorker, has contributed fiction and nonfiction since 2008. Her books include the novel "Everyone Knows Your Mother Is a Witch."

Shouts & Murmurs

- **R.F.K., Jr.: A Day in the Life**
  Why riding underneath the car is safer than riding inside the car, and other neato things to learn from the Secretary of Health and Human Services.

Shouts & Murmurs

R.F.K., Jr.: A Day in the Life

By John Kenney

September 22, 2025

Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez

> By promoting suspicions about the institutions he oversees, critics say Robert F. Kennedy Jr. is jeopardizing public health. He says he is pursuing transparency.
>
> —*The Times.*

Upon waking each morning, I open my drapes, remove the tinfoil over the windows, and stare directly at the sun for thirty to forty-five minutes until everything goes white and I can no longer see, which is when you know it's working. I'm not exactly sure what's working, but I know it is and I know it's been proved.

Cheryl loves to drive, so I'm the passenger most days. But not *in* the passenger seat. Not a lot of people know this, but the inside of the car is more dangerous than the outside. So what I've been doing for some time is lying on a sled I've attached to the undercarriage of the car. People ask "Isn't that dangerous?" and I laugh, because it's ten times safer than inside

the car. And they say, “No, seriously, that seems incredibly dangerous,” and I’m, like, “You don’t get it.” I literally have the study on my office desk, or maybe in a drawer, and maybe it’s a new study and it’s out of Yemen and it disproves every “safety” feature that companies like Volvo claim is good for you. Yes, the Swedes are oddly beautiful, but they are known liars about safety.

Now, instead of coffee, I make a smoothie with protein powder, kale, wheatgrass, honey, a banana, two AA batteries, and a few pumps of WD-40. Several new studies have shown that petroleum distillates are hugely beneficial to humans. (I have the studies here somewhere.) Not only do I notice increased suppleness in my joints, but the hinge on the basement door no longer squeaks when I touch it, and on some days I’m able to tune in to a baseball game through my fillings.

The word “aspirin” comes from the German word meaning “what an asshole I am for taking this.” That’s true, and I have a document, in German, that proves it. The document is written in High German, I’m told, and not Swiss German. I recently learned that there is no such thing as Swiss German. Which I believe, as I once flew to Zurich, and guess what? We never landed. You know why? Zurich doesn’t exist. How can it exist if no one is there and no one is speaking a language that doesn’t exist?

I was recently on a podcast called “That’s the Craziest Fucking Thing I’ve Ever Heard but It Might Be True,” and I was asked if I had any regrets. I really have only two. One is that I wish the United States had won the Second World War, which we didn’t, and I can prove it with a report I have but don’t have with me at the moment. The other regret is that I wish I’d gone to Yale and sung in the Whiffenpoofs. But, then, I recently learned that singing is the leading cause of heart disease in America and we really have to stop singing, especially the schoolchildren.

Lunch is a lie. So I don’t eat it. There’s no proof that there is “lunch.” People say, “Wait, what are you talking about?” And I say, “I think it’s pretty obvious.” Look right here. I have the study. Not on me, but I have it. I may have left it under the car, but here’s what I know for a fact. There’s breakfast, and we have proof of that, and there’s dinner, and we have proof of that. But there has never been proof of lunch. And people say, “Seriously,

what the fuck are you even talking about?” And I feel bad that they don’t get it, so what I’ll do sometimes is I’ll go into the break room at Health and Human Services and someone will be eating and I’ll hold up their sandwich and ask, “What is this?” And it’s usually this kid named Warren, and he hates it when you touch his food, but I’m the Secretary, so whatever. And I say, “Warren, what is this?” And he’ll say, “My lunch?” And I’ll say, “Warren, what is this?” And he’ll say, “A ham-and-cheese sandwich?” And I’ll say, “Don’t be stupid, Warren. What even is lunch? Are Hall & Oates lunch or a band that never should have split up?” And he’ll just stare at me, but deep down I think he understands what I’m saying because by this point he’s slowly backing away and crying a bit and then asks if he can go home for the day, which he can’t. Because what even is home? ♦

John Kenney has contributed to the magazine since 1999. His books include the novel “I See You’ve Called In Dead.”

Fiction

- **“Unreasonable”**
  I was raised to believe that no human is inherently evil, that evil is a surface disturbance caused by fear, misunderstanding, or ignorance. I’m now reconsidering.

Fiction

Unreasonable

By Rivka Galchen

September 21, 2025

Photo illustration by Stephen Doyle

The nearness of bees, and of other things that agitate most people, calms me. My father had three daughters and he ate watermelon with slices of cheese on the porch and he said once, over watermelon, that he was very lucky to have three girls: one beautiful, one kind, and one intelligent. Classification is a laudable scientific instinct. The ways in which the labelling and sorting don't quite work are the glory of the process, a form of inquiry through which you catch sight of your errors and then reconsider, revise, or dispose of your categories. My father's fairy-tale pronouncement was many years ago now. I have only two daughters: an industrious, loving, and optimistic twenty-one-year-old and a funny, joyful, and resilient ten-year-old. Maybe I have a third daughter: my work.

The author on the *New Yorker* story that inspired her story.

Or maybe the third daughter is me? It's been a disorienting time. Are any of us beautiful, kind, or intelligent anymore? I was raised to believe that no human is inherently evil, that evil is a surface disturbance caused by underlying fear (F), misunderstanding (M), or ignorance (I). I'm now reconsidering. Maybe evil is a spiritual substance in and of itself. Not downstream from F, M, or I. Perhaps the mother of them. I am writing this mental note to myself while at our lab meeting, which is long and cookie-less.

The head of the lab, Bogdan, moved here from Serbia a quarter century ago. He grows peppers in tomato tins on his office windowsill, and he has gathered us to discuss what he has termed the current macro-environment. It has been decreed, he tells us, that we must turn away three of the five Ph.D. candidates we've accepted. The federal funding for the Bee Diversity and Native Pollinator Surveys has been cancelled, though there is still state-level funding. The funding for the Sub-Saharan Pollinator Project is frozen, not cancelled, but it is unlikely to be unfrozen in time for us to make use of the hundred-and-seventy-seven bee boxes currently in the field, in anticipation of the late spring and summer. The project on the diversity and frequency of pathogens in wild solitary bees—which is funded mostly through the Department of Agriculture—is also on hold, even though hundreds of the bees in question have already been tagged with tiny radio trackers. Bogdan has made an emergency application to the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, but—he throws up his hands. What do people think?

The discussion topics that follow include but are not limited to: petitions as efficient ways for the F.B.I. to generate target lists; the importance of keeping mum; the importance of speaking out; the weakness and careerism of Democrats; being in the Ukrainian Girl Scouts and getting dropped off in the woods with three other fourteen-year-olds for three days, without food; a nephew who is a television cameraman for a news show.

That a collaborative hive is the essence of bee-ness is a common misconception. Not all species of bees are social. But it's true that the majesty of honeycomb architecture, the future-oriented labor of transforming nectar into honey, even the decadence of male bees doing nothing much other than lounging about like upper-class Romans at a bathhouse and occasionally interrupting this to lunge at a queen—people like that stuff. They see (with reasonable accuracy) a functioning, harmonious community, a golden reflection of human potential. O.K. But, of the twenty thousand or so species of bees, about eighteen thousand are solitary. None of the solitary bees make honey. Some live underground. Solitary bees also merit interest, study, respect, etc., and it's not because I'm disconsolate that I mention them.

Bogdan concludes the meeting by extending to me a special thank-you for speaking with the spring intern. I have not spoken with the spring intern, I tell him. Bogdan tells me that this is an advance thank-you and that I will be telling the spring intern that there is no longer a spring internship. Why me? I ask. Bogdan says that he drew my name from a jar containing numerous names.

When I open my laptop after the meeting, a cartwheeling panda crosses the screen, followed by a smiling stick figure wearing a hat. My ten-year-old daughter's iPad has an on-again, off-again relationship with my laptop. I click and accept and manage and agree, and this process reveals that she has been playing an online game themed around wolves, the base game of which includes eighty-four achievements. In-app purchases can unlock up to a hundred and twenty-three achievements. The goals of the players are to take over territory and raise pups, and if you can get other players to howl all together—it's a coöperative game—then your stamina increases. There are gems, stars, sidekicks, food caches, a wolf store run by gnomes, and a player named M who does not seem to be ten years old—or am I being paranoid

and projecting urban myths about the ubiquity of canny pedophiles? My daughter has achieved a forty-four-day streak, during which she played for a hundred and seventy-one hours. She has Violet Tundra Wolf status, which is eleven tiers below Spirit of Cave Wolf, a Pleistocene-era wolf species now extinct.

So that explains it.

Podcast: The Writer's Voice
Listen to Rivka Galchen read "Unreasonable."

These past five weeks, this daughter—the funny, joyful, resilient one—has been slumping around saying that she needs more time to relax. Before, if you asked her how basketball practice was, she would say it was great, or awesome. If you said it was time to leave for robotics, she would say we should hurry because she didn't want to be late. She would ask for yarn or tracing paper, she would assemble her figurines into battle scenes, and for my birthday she gave me a drawing of "what you would look like if you were a cat." Then this turn: spending more time in her room with the door closed, saying she is desperate for peace and quiet; telling me, after she came along to a lab potluck, that I owed her majorly. (We have potlucks on the first Friday of the month. She usually loves them, on account of the reliable presence of homemade iced sugar cookies with silver sprinkles, and also because Bogdan asks her questions about her "studies," as he calls them.) I interpreted her behavioral shift as an indication of a rise in whatever hormone it is that rises in girls around this time. My aversion to primate biology is strong. A mind must economize. Re the wolf app, however, I am not unfamiliar with the mood- and priority-altering powers of addiction.

Bogdan comes into my office and tells me that the intern has arrived and that this might be a good time. A good time? I say.

He answers by leaving the room.

Bogdan is not a bad man. He is a bee man. But I suspect that for reasons connected to his being a Serb of his generation he is a tough guy and maybe, on some level, beyond good and evil.

Our last intern avoided eye contact. The one before that wore headphones and a dark T-shirt. This one stands up and shakes my hand. He is so excited to meet me, he says. The whole internship is exciting. He was blown away by what he learned in Bogdan's class about honeybee decision-making. It is so wild, he says, that honeybees can make collective decisions, like about where to build a new home—how they share their ideas and debate and work through their differences.

I point out that much of the lab's focus is on solitary bees.

That sounds epic, the intern says. And he knows it sounds silly, but he also likes how bees put behind them the carnivorous ways of their wasp ancestors, that they recognized the bounty that is all around us—

There are some carnivorous bees, I say. For example, the vulture bee.

That's awesome, he says. He adds, Hey, have you ever been stung? I know that's a cliché question. . . .

I take a seat and invite him to do the same. I've never been stung, I say. When I was eleven—the age my younger daughter will soon be—I discovered an old cabinet in a mildewy back room of the church where I sang in the choir. The cabinet door had a large V where the paint had peeled off, and I thought it looked like a seagull. Something sticky was dripping out of the cabinet. I pulled at the silvery handle of the door. Inside was a civilization of thousands, and a honeycomb. I didn't startle. Not one of the bees stung me.

The intern says that he had intuited that I had that kind of wild inner peace. He has hazel eyes with a pie wedge of brown iris, like my twenty-one-year-old does. My twenty-one-year-old, who has been sluggish and teary for weeks, since she and a boy who always wears a cantaloupe-colored hoodie broke up. She's unemployed. There are no jobs, she tells me, especially for new graduates like her. The unemployment rate is 4.1 per cent, I want to tell her. I want to explain that this is a very low percentage.

I say to the intern, The funding for your internship has been cut. Not by the university—by the government. The government has cut it. Yes, yes, the

intern quickly says, I've read about the cuts. It's horrible. What it means for you, I say, is that your internship is over. He pauses. O.K., he says. You should ask for the decision to be communicated to you in writing, I want to advise him. You should feel free to ask for information about the precise basis of your termination. You should ask about the money. You do not have to be so polite. Is it just me, or is it hard to know what to say to young people right now? About the world, I mean.

The spring intern says, O.K. Wow. O.K. I guess I'd better go then!

I'm sorry, I say. An instant later, I am already thinking about my ten-year-old.

When I pick her up from school and ask her about the wolf app, she says she will delete it. She says it right away. She doesn't argue in favor of keeping the game. She must be relieved by this intervention. I promise, Mom, she says. O.K., I should have remembered that this girl is funny, joyful, and resilient. When she was three, and we were in the gift shop of a small zoo, I told her she could choose one stuffed animal, and she chose a plush largemouth bass. Humans have what are termed K-selected reproductive strategies, which means: our young grow slowly, there are few of them, they are heavily invested in by their parents, and they have long life spans. A queen bee, in contrast, will lay two thousand eggs, but there's little attention given to any one of her young. We would usually term this an r-selected reproductive strategy—the opposite of a K-selected reproductive strategy—though more than half survive, as the larvae are fed by their older sisters. Compare this with a largemouth bass, who lays tens of thousands of eggs, of which only a small fraction of one per cent become adults. The K and r categories are hazy, imperfect.

Many people are bored by this kind of information, I know. But my ten-year-old, historically, loves such things.

When we get home, the twenty-one-year-old is lying on the sofa, in the same position she was in this morning—apparently, although I did not diagram it—but there are two seltzer cans on the ground near her and the room smells like coconut-mango smoothie. That's O.K. Although some worker bees leave the nest seventeen times a day and others only once or twice, the so-called

lazy bees ultimately bring in about the same amount of nectar as the others. The thinking is that it's metabolically expensive to be intelligent, so the more intelligent bees tire quickly, but when they do venture out, they are very good at finding nectar, and after that they lie low for the remainder of the day. That's one idea, anyhow. It doesn't cast a flattering light on me. My work ethic is that of the dim bees.

My routine these days is to drop off the ten-year-old at home with the twenty-one-year-old and then return to the lab. You could play Boggle, I suggest, as I leave. I am already thinking about my bees.

I'm teaching a subset of them to overcome a two-step obstacle to obtaining a sugar reward. They might be able to figure out one step on their own, but a sequence of steps—someone has to teach them that, unless they're geniuses, I suppose. What I want to see is if bees to whom I haven't taught the two-step trick will be able to learn it by watching their trained peers—whether bees can pass on ideas among themselves, and across generations. Whether they have culture, like crows do. I mean, I myself know that bees have inner lives and personalities and culture. But I'm trying to persuade other people to see them that way. I can cite much supporting evidence, some of it old, some of it generated by our lab's research. It's not only that individual bees have distinct foraging habits and varying problem-solving abilities. Bees even have optimism and pessimism (I would argue). If a bee has a bad experience, like being shaken in a jar, that bee is less likely to pursue a treat in situations where there's a fifty-fifty chance of getting what it wants. Untraumatized bees are more likely to take a chance. This remarkable work came from England, a place with, I think, a no-nonsense ethology culture. Spend enough time with bees and, if you are open-minded—if you are sufficiently possessed of true scientific spirit—you begin to see them as feeling individuals. Bogdan, who researches bee visual processing and bee intelligence, anesthetizes bees before dissection as a matter of protocol, though he is not required to by the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee. He respects them, as beings.

It is almost seven o'clock by the time I return home. The twenty-one-year-old is talking on the phone, and the ten-year-old is asleep on the sofa, her iPad clutched in her hands, her mouth slightly open. I see that she has played another hundred and twenty-seven minutes. I delete the app. I find a

category called Games and Entertainment, and I delete every single game and entertainment, and I activate a timer lock that makes the iPad unusable for anything except reading for twenty-three hours and fifty-nine minutes a day. I am angry and frightened. These are drugs we're dealing with. I download and print opinion pieces by people who have designed addictive video games and who say they would never, ever let their children use them.

The loudness of the printer gets the twenty-one-year-old off the sofa. She says she doesn't want to hurt my feelings but she needs to be honest with me, honest about the kind of difficulties I have imposed upon her. For example, I never taught her how to cook or iron or help with dishes after supper, and it is this lack of basic grownup skills that caused her to lose the one person on the planet who understood her, the one person who was like her, who appeared normal but who on the inside was an alien. There are other aliens, but she is not compatible with them, because they look weird and act weird; their weirdness isn't private, like hers is, and his is. She is also upset with me because when she was in the eighth grade I showed her a video of the bird-of-paradise courting ritual, and that gave her a really distorted understanding of what to expect from love, and what to expect of herself, and it just generally got her started in life on the wrong foot. But it was O.K., I was only human, and she wasn't going to be one of those people who devote a lifetime to thinking through how their mothers failed them.

Thatta girl, I want to say. I can be clear-sighted and tough, too, even if I'm not a Serb. I would never label one daughter as beautiful and one as kind and one as intelligent, because my culture is not my dad's. But if I were to hear such a pronouncement about my girls, I would know that my older daughter was the one being categorized as beautiful. This quality has hobbled her; in effect, it has blunted the development of compensatory strengths. In any case, I'm focussed on the ten-year-old. I wake her up.

You go to your room for half an hour, right now, until I tell you when the time is up, I say, like my dad used to. And, while you're up there, I'd like you to read these. I give her the printouts of the articles about how video games are drugs. If she's old enough to do drugs, she's old enough to read about drugs. I'm not punishing you, I tell her. I'm giving you a chance to be alone. Being alone can be restorative. This, too, is something I learned from my dad. During a family trip to Philadelphia, he told us that the Quakers

believed, or maybe still did, that if freed from evil influences a person could more easily maintain the light of goodness within them and come closer to God. This idea was the noble origin of solitary confinement for prisoners. On that trip, we bought a knickknack: a small figurine of three monkeys. One monkey with its hands covering its eyes, another with its hands covering its mouth, and a third with its hands covering its ears. The nipples on the monkeys had more texture and realism than suited me. Were the monkeys party to some evil that they were intent upon ignoring? Or were they refusing to speak, hear, or see it so as not to increase evil's presence in the world? In short: were these monkeys mafiosi or aspiring Buddhas? Not long after that trip, when a bad asthma attack put me in the hospital, on steroids, the three monkeys came to me in a vision-dream-nightmare. I was on a school bus with them, and they were laughing and one was holding a pillow against my face, smothering me, and the thought came to me, as if written on the wall in blood, that they were not monkeys—they were chimpanzees! Everyone was operating on the erroneous and perilous footing that they were monkeys. But why? What was going on? It was these sorts of irritations, I have come to believe, that turned me into a scientist.

After half an hour has passed, I tell the ten-year-old she can leave her room. She does so without comment.

The next morning, she opens her purged iPad while eating a raspberry Popsicle for breakfast. She glances up at me. She sees what I've wrought, the virtual scorched earth, but she won't acknowledge it. There was nothing else to eat in the house, she says of her Popsicle. When I mention that there are oranges, she tells me that I picked the wrong oranges, the ones that aren't sweet, and that I am always buying her the wrong size shoes, too, they are never comfortable, and she hadn't wanted to say anything before but now she needs to tell me, and also do I remember the time with her ingrown toenail that I said would heal itself and it didn't heal itself, it got worse and worse, and do I remember when I had her come out to the field when bee swarms were happening, to learn, and it was awful, and also that time I told her to hurry across the street and there was a bus coming and she could have been killed?

It is wrong to think of bees as lacking inner lives, dreams, fears, anger. I am thinking primarily of the worker bees, which is to say the female bees,

because they are the ones who set out every day. When one meets a bee out in the world, as opposed to in the hive, it's almost always a female. For this reason, most of what we know about bees is about female bees, because they are easier to see, easier to study. Male bees likely have inner lives as well—they may also be dim or bright, optimistic or pessimistic—but we have so little observational data about them. Some researchers have held on to the idea that they are simple layabouts who exist only to fertilize a queen. Myself, I agree with those who say that's a metabolically very expensive approach to maintaining a cache of genetic variance. After mating season, male bees' sisters no longer provide them much nectar; they let their brothers waste away, and at a certain point escort them to the hive's entrance and toss them out like old loaves. Something is missing in our understanding of the males. That seems clearer to me than ever. And yet the abundance of our knowledge about the females has only increased their ineffability.

Each week in my graduate seminar, a different student presents on the week's reading. This week, a gentle, pale boy is presenting on Martin Lindauer, who made foundational observations about scout bees—the bees who search out sites to build new hives. Lindauer was born in a Bavarian village, one of the youngest of fifteen children. At age seventeen, he was conscripted to dig trenches for Hitler's army. After a bit of that, he was sent to the Russian front, where he was hit by shrapnel and dispatched back to Munich for care. One of his physicians suggested he sit in on lectures given at the University of Munich by Karl von Frisch, who studied fish and bees and had come to prominence with controversial work suggesting that bees could see color, something that now seems obvious but at the time was vigorously contested. Lindauer said he was healed by von Frisch's lectures. He said they put him in touch with a new world, a humane one.

“I howled at the moon, too, when I was your age. But nothing much came of it.”
Cartoon by Liza Donnelly

The presenting student begins: He was a Nazi soldier, so there’s that. His big work was with how did bee swarms know where they were going. He would wait around for the bees to swarm and then chase them across town. That seems like pretty poor experimental design to me today, but he did make some cool observations, and no experiment is ever perfect.

He continues confidently, following what looks to be a printout of bullet points. My pedagogical philosophy prioritizes minimizing the inevitable authority assigned to the instructor, and this means that I make every effort not to interrupt or derail students, but on this occasion an impulse overwhelms my philosophy and I ask him how he would have followed the swarms.

He says with radio taggers maybe.

The girl next to him remarks that our modern practice of refrigerating bees for sedation and then marking them with paint or superglued trackers is not exactly keeping one’s fingerprints off experimental results. Then another girl says she doesn’t think they had taggers way back when.

The boy presenter nods agreeably. Anyhow, what’s cool is the Zen part when he stood still and just watched the swarm for hours and hours until they

made their move, he says. He noticed that some bees would leave the group and then return with soot on them, or with flour, or bits of red clay. And they didn't have pollen on them. And they weren't carrying nectar. And that was weird, and what is weird is always worth thinking about. That's really the big thing that I got from this guy. He finishes his presentation by saying that it was that weirdness that gave Lindauer the idea that, when bees left the swarm, they were scouting sites for a new home—a chimney, maybe, near a bread factory, somewhere with clay—

Western honeybees are central-place foragers, the first girl interrupts, and starts talking about the behavioral consequences of having a home rather than living as a nomad. She says that's what makes these honeybees so brainy—they have to not only find food, sometimes miles away, but also be able to find their way back home and explain to their sisters what they found and where, and, like, she herself can't even, like, visit her best friend without Google Maps.

Um, yes, the presenting boy says. That's what I was going to say.

When the class ends, someone in a cantaloupe hoodie is waiting for me outside the seminar room. It's my twenty-one-year-old's former boyfriend, the alien. He shakes my hand and says he isn't angry with me. But, at the same time, I am angry, he adds. He says he is not freaked out but also is freaked out, and that he isn't saying I'm responsible but also, if someone is responsible, it would be me.

You're not a quantitative thinker, are you? I want to say to him. As I walk him over to my office, I am thinking that why anyone finds anyone else attractive is more mysterious than is usually acknowledged. My beautiful daughter! The cantaloupe alien sits down on the sofa, and I sit behind my desk. He says that he ran into my daughter at the taco place, and that seemed normal, and he cares for her as a person. And then he saw her at the all-night ninepin-bowling place, and he still thought, Well, maybe that happens. And then he saw her on a bench outside his cousin's apartment. That's when he searched his backpack. It was like one of those Swedish thriller-horror films, he says. He reaches into his pocket and unwraps from aluminum foil a very small coppery coil attached to a plastic rectangle.

That’s curious, I say. It’s a small radio tracker. I had lunch a few years back with the man who designed this particular model. He had French onion soup and didn’t use a napkin. I have superglued thousands of his trackers onto the backs of chilled, sleepy bees before sending them back out into their world. This must be a mistake or confusion, I say. There are so many of these lying around the house, I say. The coil might have caught on his hoodie. Or his shoelace. Or was packed into his bag by accident along with a book, or a sock, or a decorative charm.

Yeah, I don’t think so, he says.

He’s chewing on the aglet of his hoodie’s drawstring like a preschooler. He closes his hand over the tracker. I’m thinking, Has my daughter tracked that he’s right here right now? She will be so angry with me if so.

The alien is saying that he was raised not to get police involved in stuff like this but rather to work things out person to person, through communication, compassion, and understanding.

Yes, I say to him, it’s very commendable that he has come to see me. And it is! Meanwhile, he is looking at the three-monkeys figurine on my desk. You like the monkeys, I remark, deliberately not calling them what they really are, which is chimpanzees. He tells me that he’s seen monkeys playing poker, but not this.

O.K., I say, getting up. Thank you so much for coming by. Let me see if I can get to the bottom of this. I take the tracker—the evidence—from him.

When he is out of sight, I am overwhelmed with a need to lie down on the sofa. I’m not a lie-down person, I’m a do-many-things person. But maybe I am not a person to be classified. It is wrong to classify people. At least sometimes. For example, my twenty-one-year-old daughter, the one who seems to have committed a crime, or certainly a wrong, is a person named Heidi. She spent years drawing lions. She still has her box of things that are yellow that she collected over the years. I was once so lovesick that I switched schools to get away from the person I thought about from morning to night. That young man in my seminar; the alien my daughter loves; that too-pliant fired intern—aren’t they trying to reimagine manhood? The

generally acknowledged truth that the world is going to hell should remind us that we do not currently live in Hell. I have three daughters, and my three daughters all have a mom—that's nice. As I lie on the sofa attempting to untangle many knots in my mind, and to get all the wolves to howl together, as an ensemble, Bogdan knocks and enters. Could we have a word? he says. In my office.

Bogdan and I enter the elevator. He presses the button for the second floor. It does not require great intelligence to suspect that the word he will have with me is a word relevant to my no longer having a job. My mind begins responding in advance. I will say: Who authorized this? Could I have it in writing? Why me rather than others? I won't take this lying down, Bogdan. What about food security? Did drawing names from a jar constitute an ethical reason to throw someone overboard? Are you aware that the unemployment rate is high?

I am unpersuaded by my words, all of which seem off, false. Maybe the truth is simple and beyond Bogdan's powers of explanation: I am not kind or beautiful or intelligent enough.

Back in Sunday school, a few days after the choir-practice finding of the bee civilization—which was relocated by a fireman and a bee hobbyist—the teacher instructed us to make a list of all the words we might have for God, for what we thought he was like: cruel, good, powerful, vengeful, all-loving, tall. The teacher was young, handsome, often wore a pink button-down. Good, he said to the class, writing one adjective after another on the chalkboard, even those that were less than flattering to the Almighty. Chalk dust glinted like pollen or asbestos in the sunshine coming through the window. Had any of us given the correct word? The teacher said, Every word on this list is wrong! He paused, assessed our faces. Because God is inconceivable, he said. Whatever word we thought of—anything we could come up with—would be just one more thing that God was not. What God was: not any of the thoughts that we or anyone else had, ever, not even this one. I did like that. I can't say I believed or even understood it, but it gave me a little shiver of pleasure, the way that learning about the UV vision of bees—their peculiar world—had given me a shiver of pleasure when my fourth-grade teacher, the strict and marvellous Mrs. Burns, who I know is no longer alive, told us about it. O.K. Well, I am going to walk into Bogdan's

office and tell him that I care for him and respect him but that he has disappointed me. Or maybe I am going to be forgiving? His choices are not of his making, this man who grows his own peppers in the unfavorable conditions of his windowsill. Is he even my adversary? There is so much talk about the one who casts the first stone, but doubt should surround the casting of even the second and third and hundredth stones.

Bogdan has no sofa in his office, only chairs and a desk. First, a drink, he says. He sets out a bottle of plum liquor and two small glasses, one tinted pink and with a green stem, the other clear but rimmed with blue and shaped like a doll-house goblet. He tells me that he has been hearing good things about the beaches of Albania.

I tell him I don't know anything about them.

He takes a sip, I take a sip. The drink tastes like clover and hot chile. My daughters still sometimes drink grapefruit seltzer from glasses like these, I don't know why, it is a thing between them. It is not a good idea to think about my daughters when I am trying to find my anger. The thought of being separated from my third daughter, my work—too terrible for words.

O.K., he says. Well, I have a proposal. An ask. He wants me, he says, to finish up the two protocols he has going on, the one with the broken-belted bumblebees and the one with the American bumblebees. He takes another sip—a gulp, really. He has finished his drink and is now pouring himself another.

Why are you saying this? I ask.

He says that I am trustworthy and sensitive to details, that I am a gifted scientist, that I am not as loony as other people. I will understand that he doesn't want his bees to have lived a limited and caged life for no reason. His position is being eliminated, he explains. He is out of here. It is O.K.! I shouldn't worry about him. He's thinking that he'll book a flight to Tirana, because of what he has heard about the beaches, which he has never seen. He will have a swim in the Ionian Sea, and then decide what to do next. No hasty moves. Rather, reliable rolling-waves moves, predictably unpredictable, patterned but not in a way that repeats.

I also like that about waves, I say. And sand.

He says that he loves swimming in cold water, so May is a good time, even April.

I say, You look happy?

I am, he says. It'll wear off. How are your girls?

I take another sip of the fiery fermented sugar water. I inform him that Heidi is lovesick and out of her mind and that Grace has been swallowed by a wolf gaming app.

He laughs. That's excellent, he says. You're lucky. I'm remembering that Bogdan once taught my girls to whistle through their hands in a way that sounded like a warbler.

You're not afraid?

Of the sea?

I was more thinking of the world, just generally.

He says that is nonsense. He says he's a happy, enraged, and curious person, but not a fearful one. He says that even if he dies tomorrow he will feel he's had more than is reasonable to ask for. That's why he has nothing to fear. He could have died in infancy. He could have been born a bee, lived only a year. The world could have not existed at all. If you asked him the question, as a scientist, Is it more likely that existence is possible or impossible, more likely that there is something versus there being nothing, he would answer that nothing is far, far more likely, asymptotically approaching total certainty. He would add that it would be radically unreasonable to come to any other conclusion. And yet it would be the wrong conclusion. Anyhow, that is his idea for now. It sounds like something my dad would have said. ♦

Rivka Galchen, a staff writer at The New Yorker, has contributed fiction and nonfiction since 2008. Her books include the novel "Everyone Knows Your Mother Is a Witch."

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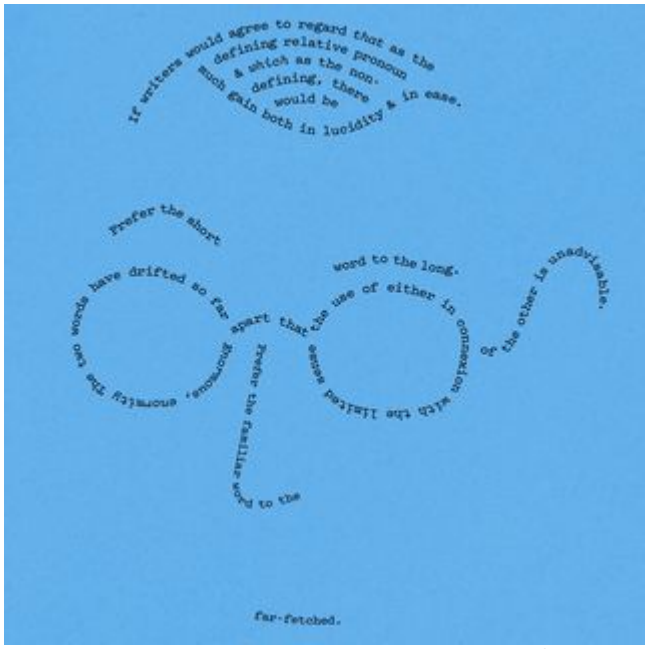
A Critic at Large

The Autocrat of English Usage

Henry W. Fowler believed he knew how sentences should read—and his judgments have shaped *The New Yorker's* style for a century.

By Ben Yagoda

September 22, 2025



Henry W. Fowler was opinionated but no pedant; it was his hatred of pretension and love of precision that drew Harold Ross, The New Yorker's founding editor, to elevate his proposals into policy.Illustration by Jack Smyth

In 1940, St. Clair McKelway typed a memo to William Shawn, *The New Yorker's* managing editor for fact. McKelway was writing a six-part Profile of Walter Winchell for the magazine, and he was unhappy that, in two places in the piece, an editor had changed the word "but" to "however." He made his case for a page and a half, and concluded, "But is a hell of a good word and we shouldn't high hat it. . . . In three letters it says a little of however, and also be that as it may, and also here's something you weren't expecting and a number of other phrases along that line." He signed the memo "St. Fowler McKelway."

The “Fowler” was a joking reference to Henry W. Fowler, who, though not a saint in the magazine’s corridors, was certainly a great authority when it came to matters of grammar and style. A few years earlier, Wolcott Gibbs, another editor, had put together an internal document for new members of the staff titled “Theory and Practice of Editing *New Yorker* Articles.” It was a numbered list of thirty-one strictures, and in the penultimate one Gibbs wrote, “Fowler’s *English Usage* is our reference book. But don’t be precious about it.”

The source of what Kenneth Tynan later called the magazine’s “Fowler fixation” was Harold Ross, who’d dreamed up the idea of *The New Yorker* and brought it into being in 1925. Fowler’s “A Dictionary of Modern English Usage” was published the following year, and Ross seized on it enthusiastically. (The book is usually referred to as “Modern English Usage” or simply as “Fowler,” in the eponymous manner of Hoyle or Roget.) An E. B. White Notes and Comment piece from the late nineteen-forties shows just how strongly the editor continued to feel. Ross—unnamed, merely described as “a tall, parched man”—sees a copy of the book on the writer’s desk, picks it up, and thumbs through favorite passages. “ ‘Greatest collection of essays and opinions ever assembled between covers,’ he shouted, ‘including a truly masterful study of *that* and *which*,’ ” White recounted. “ ‘That’s the business that really fascinates me. . . . I got so excited once I had the pages photostatted.’ ” Thomas Kunkel, Ross’s biographer, reported that, from time to time, Ross would read the “that” and “which” entries for relaxation.

Despite the manual’s exalted reputation, the magazine’s style sometimes diverged from its prescriptions. In spelling, Fowler favored “judgement”; *The New Yorker* has “judgment.” And, whereas *The New Yorker’s* most famous style choice is probably the diaeresis in a word like “coöperate,” Fowler was against it, preferring the clean “cooperate.” But the magazine fell in line on other matters, including doubling the “l” in “travelled” and “marvellous,” banning the word “transpire” to mean “happen,” and placing a comma after the penultimate item in a series. (Fowler wanted a comma after the final item as well, giving the example “Every man, woman, & child, was killed.” Neither *The New Yorker* nor, as far as I know, any other publication followed him there.)

And then there was the “that”/“which” business. Fowler actually has more than eight pages on “that” and eleven on “which,” but the part that set Ross’s heart racing concerned the use of the words as relative pronouns—that is, in linking a noun or a noun phrase with a clause that either defines it or merely describes it. Non-defining, or descriptive, clauses unquestionably demand “which” and a comma, as in “He loves his new car, which cost thirty-four thousand dollars.” But, when Fowler was writing, both “that” and “which” were commonly used in defining clauses—e.g., “Congress passed a quarter of the bills that [or which] came before it.” This indeterminacy bothered his tidy sensibilities, and he modestly put forth a proposal: “If writers would agree to regard *that* as the defining relative pronoun, & *which* as the non-defining, there would be much gain both in lucidity & in ease. Some there are who follow this principle now; but it would be idle to pretend that it is the practice either of most or of the best writers.” (Fowler had so much to say in “Modern English Usage,” and, indeed, in his letters, that it made sense to save two characters by using an ampersand instead of writing the word “and.”)

Ross and his colleagues later elevated the proposal into policy, and, in part through *The New Yorker’s* influence, it came to be viewed by most authorities in the United States as a rule. (Although Fowler was an Englishman, the rule has more sway in the U.S. than in Britain.) In the magazine’s archives, held by the New York Public Library, it is touching to come upon a tear sheet of a Phyllis McGinley poem titled “Text for Today,” which was published in the March 31, 1951, issue. In the line “That petrel which refused to perish,” Ross circled the word “which,” and to the page he attached a typed comment: “In prose we would prefer *that*, so why not in verse?” (As it happens, The New Yorker would evolve a preference for “which” after phrases with demonstratives, such as “That petrel.”)

Near the end of that year, Ross died, at the age of fifty-nine. In his obituary, which marked the first time his name appeared in the magazine, White wrote, “He came equipped with not much knowledge and only two books—Webster’s Dictionary and Fowler’s ‘Modern English Usage.’ These books were his history, his geography, his literature, his art, his music, his everything.”

“Modern English Usage” had a long and rather winding path to publication. “Another scheme that has attractions is that of an idiom dictionary—that is, one that would give only such words as are in sufficiently general use to have acquired numerous senses or constructions & consequently to be liable to misuse,” Fowler wrote, in his neat and confident hand, in a letter to R. W. Chapman, of the Oxford University Press, dated June 20, 1909. “We should assume a cheerful attitude of infallibility, & confine ourselves to present-day usage; for instance, we should give no quarter to *masterful* in the sense of *masterly*.”

Fowler’s command of usage was indeed masterly (“masterful,” to him, should mean imperious or strong-willed), but his origins were unprepossessing. He was born in 1858 and grew up southeast of London in Royal Tunbridge Wells, a spa town that his biographer, Jenny McMorris, describes as the “epitome of genteelness.” His father, Robert, was a Cambridge graduate and a schoolmaster who died in 1879, leaving a modest estate, of which Henry, the eldest of eight children, was an executor. At the time of his father’s death, Henry was a student at Balliol College, Oxford; perhaps because of his difficult family circumstances, his academic record wasn’t distinguished.

After Oxford, he followed in his father’s footsteps and became a schoolmaster himself, teaching Latin, Greek, and English. The classroom, however, did not suit him—he was too shy and reserved. The natural move would have been a promotion to housemaster, but that job required preparing the boys for confirmation in the Church of England; Fowler, an atheist, knew that he could not do that in good conscience. So, in 1899, he resigned and moved to London with the ambition of becoming “a small essayist issuing occasional small volumes & paying their small expenses till such time as their small merits should be great enough to pay their own.” Three years on, not even one small volume had appeared. Fowler had published several pieces in magazines and newspapers, but from these, according to McMorris, he was earning only about thirty pounds a year, the equivalent of about six thousand dollars today.

Fowler also had an annual inheritance of a hundred and twenty pounds, and yet, even for a bachelor of his modest needs, the income wasn’t a lot. In

1903, he decided to move from the capital to Guernsey, in the Channel Islands, where his younger brother Francis (Frank to family and friends) was living. The move pleased Fowler, not least because of the lovely setting it provided for his long-standing habit—begun when he was an undergraduate at Oxford—of running each morning to a convenient body of water and taking a vigorous swim.

Fowler's "we" in his letter to Chapman wasn't editorial, much less royal; it referred to Frank and himself. In 1903, the two had embarked on a translation of the Greek satirist Lucian for Oxford. They followed that with what Fowler described as "a sort of English composition manual, from the negative point of view, for journalists and amateur writers." The book, titled "The King's English," was published in 1906 and was a success both in sales and in influence. It fell out of print in the nineteen-thirties, having been eclipsed by "Modern English Usage," but it laid down many of the later book's best-known judgments, including its defense of splitting infinitives and of ending sentences with prepositions, and its vigorous condemnation of what the brothers had termed "elegant variation." This is the "cheap ornament," still cherished by sportswriters, of clumsily inserting a synonym or a near-synonym to avoid repeating a word or a name. ("The fleet-footed second-sacker slugged a four-bagger.") "The King's English" also introduced the idea of using "that," and never "which," before defining clauses.

In subsequent letters to Chapman and his Oxford colleagues, Fowler—who, in 1908, surprised most of those who knew him by getting married, on his fiftieth birthday—refined the "idiom dictionary" idea. It would be, he wrote, a "glossary" that would encompass, "without making an unwieldy volume, the hard-worked words that form the staple of general talk & writing; their varieties of meaning, liabilities to misuse, difference from synonyms, right & wrong constructions, special collocations, & so forth." He noted that the press's immense Oxford English Dictionary, or O.E.D.—which at the time had reached only the letter "P"—was "very chary of pronouncements on the unidiomatic; we irresponsible nobodies should be both more courageous & more directly concerned in the matter."

Because Chapman and his colleagues felt that what the brothers were proposing was still too unwieldy, Fowler, in a May, 1911, letter, proffered "a much more modest scheme"—a volume that was to be negative, not positive, and "only warns against the unidiomatic." He added that "besides the particular words treated in alphabetical order we shall have some short general articles, placed alphabetically among them." He supposed that the book would be about a hundred and sixty thousand words long and would take about a year to finish. (Both estimates were optimistic, but the latter was off on the scale of the Big Dig projections.)

The idea met with Oxford's approval, and a fee of a hundred and fifty pounds was agreed on, to be paid in four installments, as each quarter of the book was completed. At the start, Henry labored alone, and Frank applied himself to another joint project, an abridgment of the O.E.D. The plan was that, when one brother was halfway through, they would trade. Initial progress was swift. Fowler wrote to Oxford in October, "I am filling my pages too fast," and he regretfully predicted that he would have to make some cuts: "Not to tell people that *altogether* is different from *all together*, or nail *alright* & *all-right* to the counter, or distinguish *accessary* from *accessory*, or help *chorale* to remain disyllabic, or give help on *gladiolus* & *amateur*, seems a pity."

Fowler needn't have worried; he ended up treating all the aforementioned words. Indeed, the book kept expanding as the months passed, and as a result the finish line didn't seem to be getting any closer. After three years, the brothers had received only the first payment of thirty-seven pounds and ten shillings, and hadn't reached the trade-off point of their respective projects. Progress was soon further delayed. Great Britain declared war against Germany in August, 1914, and, the following April, Henry, at age fifty-six, and Frank, at forty-four, both enlisted in a military unit known as the Sportsman's Battalion, which had been given permission by the War Office to recruit men older than the enlistment age who, as one source at the time put it, "by reason of their life as sportsmen, were fit and hard."

In December, the brothers were sent to the front in France, but did not see combat. About six months later, Henry was discharged, but work on the book was delayed yet again—he took a temporary position as a teacher at

his old school (schoolmasters were in short supply because of the war), and, subsequently, he had to care for Frank, whose health problems were aggravated during his service and who would die from tuberculosis in 1918. After a spate of less profound domestic complications and annoyances, Henry took up his brother's work on the O.E.D. abridgment; it was published in 1924, under the title "The Pocket Oxford English Dictionary," and has been in print ever since.

He soon started again on the usage book. Yet, the more it grew, the worse his remuneration got, whether prorated by time expended or text produced. By the end of the war, he still hadn't made enough progress to earn his second payment. In a letter to Chapman, he calculated that, based on his current pace, he would be earning only ten shillings a week until he completed the book. Chapman increased the fee to two hundred pounds and sent along a check for twelve pounds and ten shillings, to bring the first installment up to an even fifty.

"A Dictionary of Modern English Usage" was finally published in April, 1926, at a length of seven hundred and forty-two tightly packed pages, comprising more than four hundred thousand words. It was dedicated to Frank. "I think of it as it should have been," Fowler wrote on the dedication page, "with its prolixities docked, its dullnesses enlivened, its fads eliminated, its truth multiplied. He had a nimbler wit, a better sense of proportion, and a more open mind, than his twelve-year-older partner."

Even as a solo effort, "Modern English Usage" was an immediate success. The *Times* of London called it "fascinating, formidable," and the *Observer* deemed it "probably the most remarkable book ever devoted to the art of expression in English." It sold about sixty thousand copies in its first year, and an American edition came out in its second. In time, it acquired many enthusiasts in addition to Harold Ross. One was Winston Churchill, who, having received a memo about plans for the invasion of Normandy, responded, "Why must you write *intensive* here? *Intense* is the right word. You should read Fowler's *Modern English Usage* on the use of the two words."

Fowler promptly moved on to another O.E.D. spinoff project. He was now sixty-eight years old, and his wife, Jessie, was in poor health; Chapman

offered to pay for a servant to help with the household labor. Fowler sent back a brisk reply:

> My half-hour from 7.00 to 7.30 this morning was spent in (1) a two-mile run along the road, (2) a swim in my next-door neighbor's pond —exactly as some 48 years ago. . . . That I am still in condition for such freaks I attribute to having had for nearly 30 years no servants to reduce me to a sedentary & all-literary existence. And now you seem to say: Let us give you a servant, & the means of slow suicide & quick lexicography. Not if I know it; I must go my slow way.

The way got slower. Jessie died in 1930, and Fowler lost the use of one eye and then most of his vision in the other—a crippling blow. Late in 1933, he contracted pneumonia, and he died the day after Christmas. Of the many tributes and appreciations that poured forth, he might have found the least fault with the one in the *Sunday Times*, which described him as having "overflowing humour and a most delicate wit, and a perfect genius for precise and memorable statement." (Even there, he might have deleted the intensifiers "most" and "perfect.")

For Oxford, which retained the copyright to "Modern English Usage," the book has been among the biggest publishing bargains of all time. Fowler's compensation, in addition to the two-hundred-pound fee, consisted of a fifty-pound annual courtesy payment from 1927 to the year of his death. This for a book that sold some half a million copies through the nineteen-fifties and has been updated three times since 1965. Each version has had a different editor and new content, but the title of every edition prominently bears the name Fowler.

A striking feature of "Modern English Usage" is its several thousand quotations of a sentence or two, most of them illustrating poor usage. Fowler evidently clipped them from published sources, mainly newspapers, an amazing feat in the pre-internet age. (One imagines his fingers got so black from this task that not even the daily plunge could remove the ink.) Some of the quotes could have been written yesterday. (Under "*ELEGANT VARIATION*": "They spend a few months longer in their winter home than in their summer habitat.") Others summon a vanished world:

> “Mr Basil Sydney played the Duke quite ably; & the flood of flowers & enthusiasm was terrific.”
>
> “The Dukes of Grafton in the old days were almost invariably Lords-Lieutenant of Suffolk & Northamptonshire, but though the deceased held neither office his influence in Northamptonshire & West Suffolk was considerable.”
>
> “Were it not for its liking for game eggs, the badger could not but be considered other than a harmless animal.”

In “The Language Wars” (2011), Henry Hitchings writes that Fowler is “part of that nimbus of Englishness that includes a fondness for flowers and animals, brass bands, cups of milky tea, net curtains, collecting stamps, village cricket, the quiz and the crossword, invisible suburbs, invented traditions and pugnacious insularity.” The last bit, pegging Fowler as a priggish Mrs. Grundy—or an “instinctive grammatical moraliser,” as one contemporary, the linguist Otto Jespersen, put it—is, to some extent, deserved. Certainly, Fowler was no anything-goes descriptivist, and the range and pungency of the epithets he applied to what he saw as semantic blunders or “slovenly” (a favorite term) vogue words are notable. “Bureaucrat” is “barbarous”; “it depends” unfollowed by “upon” is “indefensible”; “recrudescence” is “disgusting”; “orotund” is “at once a monstrosity in its form & a pedantry in its use”; “meticulous” in the sense of “careful” is “wicked” and “ludicrous”; using “phenomenal” to mean “remarkable, extraordinary, or prodigious . . . is a sin against the English language.”

Large parts of “Modern English Usage” are dated, sometimes to the point of unintelligibility; a reader today would be hard-pressed to see the issue with some of those usages, or with such other bugbears as “amoral,” “demean,” “forceful,” “idiosyncratic,” “coastal,” “mentality,” and “pacifist.” What has aged most unattractively is Fowler’s view of women, and of considerations of gender in language. He harrumphs that “*clever* is much misused, especially in feminine conversation,” and that “*nice* . . . has been too great a favourite with the ladies, who have charmed out of it all its individuality & converted it into a mere diffuser of vague & mild agreeableness.” In the entry “*FEMININE DESIGNATIONS*,” he asserts that “everyone knows the

inconvenience of being uncertain whether a doctor is a man or a woman; hesitation in establishing the word *doctress* is amazing in a people regarded as nothing if not practical." He also endorses "teacheress," "singeress," and "danceress."

Fowler has opinions about pronouns, too. For a sentence starting "As anybody can see for . . ." he envisions three possible ways to proceed: (a) "himself or herself," (b) "themselves," or (c) "himself." He reflects:

> No-one who can help it chooses A; it is correct, & is sometimes necessary, but it is so clumsy as to be ridiculous except when explicitness is urgent, & it usually sounds like a bit of pedantic humour. B is the popular solution; it sets the literary man's teeth on edge. . . . C is here recommended. It involves the convention that where the matter of sex is not conspicuous or important *he & his* shall be allowed to represent a person instead of a man.

The book contains multitudes. A lot of it consists of extremely meticulous —sorry, *punctilious*—grammatical train-spotting, such as an eight-page entry on "*INVERSION*": that is, putting the verb before the noun in sentences like "Why should I?" and " 'Hello,' said she." And perhaps a couple of hundred pages are taken up with entries presenting preferred spelling and pronunciations, in many cases of words that have fallen by the wayside.

Fowler's verdicts on correctness are sometimes surprising. In the introduction to Oxford's 2010 reprint of "Modern English Usage," David Crystal, a linguist and a prolific writer on language, noted, "I have encountered people who inveigh against the split infinitive, prepositions at the end of sentences, and opening a sentence with *but*—to take just three topics—and who cite *Modern English Usage* in their support, evidently unaware of Fowler's strong condemnation of their pedantry." Fowler made short work of other cherished "rules," labelling some of them fetishes or superstitions. He approved of using "decimate" to mean destroying a large portion of something (not necessarily killing a tenth of enemy forces), of "anxious" to mean "eager," and of separating the adverb "only" from a word or phrase that it is modifying. ("I have only three dollars" is stiff; "I only have three dollars" is fine.) It was O.K. by him to say, "It wasn't me,"

and to use the possessive relative pronoun “whose” for inanimate objects. He observed, “Good writing is surely difficult enough without the forbidding of things that have historical grammar, & present intelligibility, & obvious convenience, on their side.” It’s a pity, he said, that schools and publishers don’t accept “ain’t” in interrogatives. (“I’m right, ain’t I?”)

True to his original conception for the book, Fowler was attuned to the idiomatic—to what’s “natural for a normal Englishman to say or write.” (The word “normal” and the suffix “-man” are doing a lot of work here.) Idioms have earned a place at the table by having established themselves over time, even if they don’t technically pass grammatical muster. To remark that one will “try and do something” was, he said, to employ “an idiom that should be not discountenanced, but used when it comes natural.” “Natural” was perhaps Fowler’s favorite word of approbation; letting his freak flag fly, he was fond of using the flatted adverb form rather than the buttoned-up “naturally.”

If Oxford is interested in extracting a bit more profit out of Fowler’s work, it might consider putting together a (highly) abridged version, called something like “Fowler on Writing.” His general advice to people attempting to craft humane, precise, and literate prose has scarcely aged, and his own bracing style still informs and delights. It would be hard to improve on his most famous entry. About “elegant variation”—the effort to avoid repeating a word by stretching for an alternative—he wrote that its “real victims, first terrorized by a misunderstood taboo, next fascinated by a newly discovered ingenuity, & finally addicted to an incurable vice, are the minor novelists & the reporters. There are few literary faults so widely prevalent, & this book will not have been written in vain if the present article should heal any sufferer of his infirmity.”

And there are the pearls strewn throughout. To quote just one more, Fowler wrote that “the prose writer’s best guide to rhythm” is

> an instinct for the difference between what sounds right & what sounds wrong. It is an instinct cultivable by those on whom nature has not bestowed it, but on one condition only—that they will make a practice of reading aloud. That test soon divides matter, even for a far from

> sensitive ear, into what reads well & what reads tamely, haltingly, jerkily, lopsidedly, top-heavily, or otherwise badly.

Boiled down, Fowler's writing advice amounts to three principles. First, be mindful of the reactions and needs of the reader. Second, don't use worn-out gimmicks (especially when you're trying to be funny) or "hackneyed phrases." Fowler doesn't call these "clichés," probably because the word came from French and was unusual enough at the time to violate his third, and most important, tenet: don't show off. His conception of this vice was broad. He considered fancy words like "beverage" and "emporium" to be "pompous ornaments"; to write "individual" when you mean "person" is an "illiteracy." He observed, "Those who run to long words are mainly the unskilful & tasteless; they confuse pomposity with dignity, flaccidity with ease, & bulk with force."

Nor could Fowler countenance people who insist on the original pronunciation of foreign words, like "van Gogh" or "Budapest," rather than the way they are commonly said. "Display of superior knowledge," he wrote, "is as great a vulgarity as display of superior wealth—greater, indeed." Fowler certainly was a moralizer, just maybe not in the way Jespersen meant.

Post-Ross, Fowler continued to have an influence on *The New Yorker*. The next editor, William Shawn, admired the book, as did Katharine White, who served as a fiction editor from the magazine's early days to her retirement, in 1960. In the mid-fifties, White wrote to a new contributor, John Updike, who was on a yearlong fellowship at Oxford, about his use of punctuation in a poem that the magazine had accepted:

> There is no precedent for your use of the three colons, I'm afraid, and we feel that they would just be misleading. Colons, as Fowler says, are used to "deliver the goods." I suppose you do own and read Fowler's "English Usage." If you don't, I recommend it as one of the funniest and most useful books in the language. We follow Fowler on usage.

Updike responded, "Yes, I do own a copy of Fowler, but along with my parents, pet cat, rubber basketball, and other steadying influences, I left it in America." White then typed out the entry on colons and mailed it to the

young writer. The poem, “Player Piano,” appeared in the December 4, 1954, issue, punctuated solely by commas, periods, and two semicolons.

Sixteen years later, White looked over their old correspondence and wrote to Updike, apologetically, “My pedantic and petty queries and wrangles, mostly over punctuation, make me blush with shame. My only excuse is that Ross had died only two years before I bought your first manuscript and we were still under his aura and the absolute rule of ‘Fowler’s English Usage’—a book I still go back to, and am amused by, to this day.”

Fowler’s grip remained firm, if not unyielding, in large part owing to Eleanor Gould Packard, known as Miss Gould, who was a *New Yorker* copy editor and, eventually, the magazine’s Grammarian, from 1945 to 1999. Mary Norris, who worked with her for many years, once wrote that Fowler was Miss Gould’s “bible.” I take that to mean bible not as vessel of literal truth but as powerful totem or talisman. Thinking about it that way invests meaning in an anecdote Norris related about a member of the copy department so affronted by something a colleague had done that she was inspired to pick up an object and hurl it in that colleague’s general direction. The object she chose was “A Dictionary of Modern English Usage.” ♦

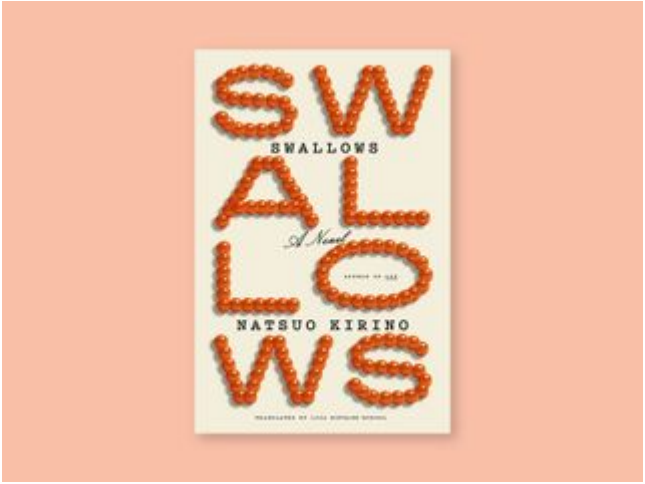
Ben Yagoda is the author of “About Town: The New Yorker and the World It Made” and the novel “Alias O. Henry,” among other books.

Books

Briefly Noted

“Swallows,” “Information Age,” “Cryptic,” and “No Sense in Wishing.”

September 22, 2025



Swallows, *by Natsuo Kirino, translated from the Japanese by Lisa Hofmann-Kuroda (Knopf).* This acerbic novel explores the ramifications of a controversial topic in Japan: surrogacy. (Although the practice is legal there, it is widely regarded with skepticism.) Riki, the protagonist, is a twenty-nine-year-old woman from the countryside who is struggling financially in Tokyo. Desperate for stability, she decides to become a surrogate for a rich, artistic couple. But she quickly starts to resent the wife’s desire to control Riki’s body, and she is wary of the husband’s attempts to show feminist solidarity. As Riki navigates conception and pregnancy under the couple’s gaze, she comes to feel that even their good intentions and a substantial paycheck can’t alleviate a sense of exploitation. As she tells the couple, “I just don’t want to be treated like a machine.”

Information Age, *by Cora Lewis (Joyland Editions)*. Observations, snippets of dialogue, and wry anecdotes make up this laconic novel, which focusses on the life of a young woman in New York. The woman works as a reporter for a news website, where she covers such subjects as “the celebrity candidate” and “the ‘unusual animal’ beat,” and is trailed by doubts about the journalistic enterprise. As she wonders whether she is a “hack” or is simply subject to “a profound alienation from the production and dissemination of information,” the novel becomes a subtle meditation on the difference between what can and cannot be communicated, ultimately suggesting that intimate moments are the most difficult to capture and convey.

What We’re Reading

Illustration by Ben Hickey

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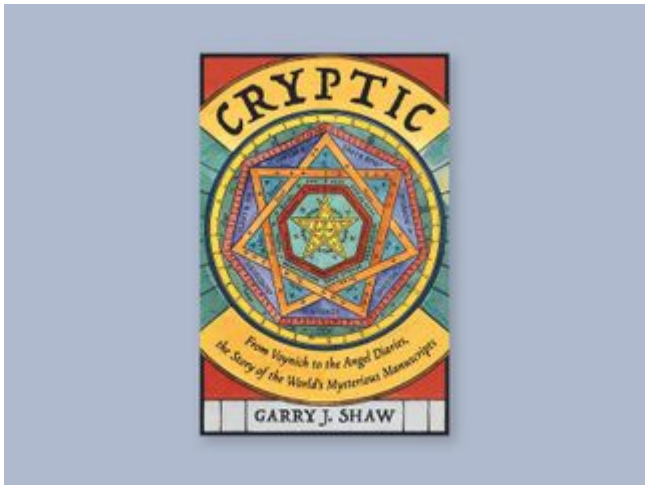
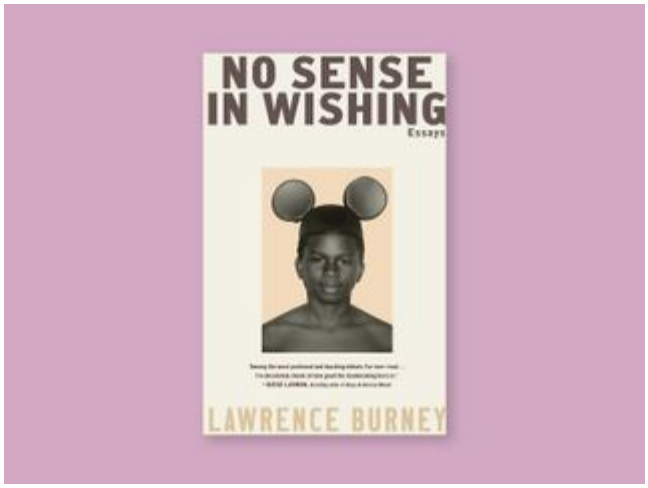


Cryptic, *by Garry J. Shaw (Yale)*. Language's ability both to reveal and to conceal is at the heart of this engrossing history of medieval encoded and encrypted manuscripts. Shaw outlines various motivations for engaging in "performative secrecy" in the creation of a text, from a desire to prevent powerful forms of knowledge (such as alchemy or medicine) from falling into the wrong hands to a simple love of intellectual puzzles. Some texts claiming divine inspiration, such as John Dee's celestial script and Hildegard of Bingen's "Unknown Tongue," are perhaps purposefully indecipherable. Shaw also considers the mysterious Voynich manuscript, from the fifteenth century, which has never been decoded and which some contend is a hoax with no decryptable meaning.



No Sense in Wishing, *by Lawrence Burney (Atria)*. "Though they do take place, happy endings are not common in the human experience," Burney, a music critic, writes—and yet this earnest and engaging essay collection

winds its way to such an ending. Burney grew up working class in Baltimore, endured his father’s fits of rage, pulled shifts at soul-crushing jobs to support his daughter, and lost sight in one eye from injuries in a car accident. But, as the book relates, his love of Black music from his home town and elsewhere pulled him through. At a concert by the New York rapper MIKE, the author finds himself “thankful for being alive” at a time when Black musicians outside the mainstream “can thrive.”

Books

Reading the New Pynchon Novel in a Pynchonesque America

“Shadow Ticket,” Pynchon’s first book in a dozen years, unfolds its conspiracies in Depression-era Milwaukee and beyond, but it lands in a moment when reality seems to have caught up with his fictions.

By Kathryn Schulz

September 22, 2025

From Prohibition-era Milwaukee to the Carpathians, “Shadow Ticket” features nefarious cheese merchants, a missing heiress, a misplaced U-boat, clarinetists, motorcyclists, and schemes within schemes—along with a hardboiled detective trying to keep up.Illustration by Bill Bragg

America, circa now. Things, most of which have been weird for a while, are getting distinctly weirder. The President of the United States is busy redecorating the White House and bent on buying Greenland. A new wonder drug is making people skinny. Domestic affairs are increasingly controlled by an upstart political entity whose official status is murky but whose powers are all but limitless: *DOGE*, or the Department of Government Efficiency, which was started by a multibillionaire with a

sideline in unusual forms of transportation—rocket ships, Cybertrucks, Hyperloops—and named for an internet meme featuring the Comic Sans typeface and a Shiba Inu. Tens of millions of people, followers of a mysterious figure known only by the letter “Q,” believe that many of the nation’s leaders are involved in a global child-sex-trafficking ring that will one day be crushed in an all-encompassing, all-cleansing event called The Event.

Talking dogs, strange vehicles, conspiracy theories, stupid acronyms: life imitates cult fiction, apparently, and somewhere along the line our reality started to resemble, with uncanny specificity, the collected works of Thomas Pynchon. This is not a welcome development, as even his greatest fans would affirm. For sixty-two years—beginning in 1963, with the publication of “V.,” and picking up momentum ten years later, with “Gravity’s Rainbow”—the author has been offering up worlds that seem much like our own except weirder and more lawless, with respect to both criminal activity and physics. The ambient atmosphere in Pynchon’s fiction is one of secrecy and bamboozlement, the purported stakes are generally sky-high but silly, like an armed game of Go Fish, and the possibility of violence on an epic scale is often rocketing, sometimes in the Wernher von Braun sense, directly toward you. Opinions vary on the merits and pleasures of these books, but no one, it seems safe to say, has ever yearned to live in the worlds they depict.

Yet here we are—and here comes “Shadow Ticket” (Penguin Press), the first new work by Pynchon in a dozen years. Although the author is eighty-eight years old, his intellect, at least on the evidence of this book, remains undiminished, which is to say, it is still panoptic, exciting, abstruse, distractible, and, for good or ill, unrestrained. But, if his powers are not dulled, neither are they pointed; even if you squint, it’s difficult to determine whether “Shadow Ticket” is a commentary on our current era—or, anyway, more of a commentary than, say, “Gravity’s Rainbow,” which was published half a century ago.

What We’re Reading

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This will disappoint any fans who were hoping for a rousing Pynchon riposte to our depressingly Pynchonesque era, but it's hardly a problem. Literature has no obligation to be responsive to the times; indeed, at its best it often isn't, which is why "timeless" is such lofty, if hackneyed, praise. But it does raise a question. If our reigning artist of paranoid convictions, of high crimes and deep states, of the peculiar combination of depravity and absurdity found in those who lust for power—if that guy hasn't made use of the present political moment to craft a satire or a survival manual or a swan song or even an "I told you so," then what has he come here, after a long silence and in all likelihood for the last time, to tell us?

"Shadow Ticket" is set in 1932, in the middle of the Great Depression and during the waning days of Prohibition, though no one in the book seems particularly hard up for money or booze. The first half takes place in Milwaukee, where unofficial power is divided between the Italian Mafia, spilling over from nearby Chicago, and the city's long-standing German population, large swaths of which are falling under the spell of that ascendant political figure back in the home country, Adolf Hitler.

Our hero, however, is loyal to neither group, a fact that might be inferred from his name, Hicks McTaggart. Like Doc Sportello, in "Inherent Vice," and Lew Basnight in "Against the Day" (who, aging but unreconstructed, makes an appearance in this new book), Hicks is that classic staple of fiction, a hardboiled detective with a softer side. A former union buster who took the "busting" part literally enough to make a lot of labor activists bleed, he is so reformed by the time we meet him that he's vaguely Buddhist, and practically a family man: he has a girlfriend of sorts, a lounge singer named April Randazzo—the two met because Hicks, despite his slab-

of-beef self-presentation, is a first-class swing dancer—and a sidekick who doubles as a surrogate son, a sweet-tempered juvenile delinquent named Skeet Wheeler. He also has a steady job, working for a detective agency called Unamalgamated Ops, where—see again that soft spot—he generally takes on the kind of two-bit clients whose desperation is inversely proportional to their ability to pay for his services.

This is a source of annoyance to Hicks's boss, who wants to assign him to a different kind of case—or, as it's known in the business, a ticket, so called for the paperwork that comes with accepting a job. This one involves the disappearance of the semi-scandalous young heiress Daphne Airmont, who's the daughter of Bruno Airmont, a dairy tycoon—we're in Wisconsin, remember?—so ruthless and felonious that he is known as the Al Capone of Cheese. Bruno himself is preëxistingly missing, having vanished some years earlier, when things started getting uncomfortably hot in the cheese underworld. Now Daphne, unhappily affianced, has run off with one Hop Wingdale, a clarinet player for a band called the Klezmopolitans, and her mother and her would-be future husband have engaged Unamalgamated Ops to bring her home.

That's plenty of lift to get a story off the ground—but this is a Pynchon novel, so why have one reason a hero must go on a journey when you could have four? Elsewhere in Milwaukee, someone has blown up a truck belonging to a small-time booze runner, and Hicks learns that the cops plan to pin the job on him. Not long after, he discovers that April is two-timing him with a local mafioso named Don Peppino Infernacci, who is not the type to deal honorably with a romantic rival. Meanwhile, some F.B.I. agents, having concluded that Hicks is neither a Bolshevik nor a Nazi, want to hire him to serve his country, by which they might mean fighting Hitler but might also mean sabotaging the political career of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, plus anyone else "to the left of Herbert Hoover." Should he not want the job, they pleasantly inform him, the Bureau will happily make room for him at a federal penitentiary down in Georgia.

What Hicks longs to do, in the face of these multidirectional threats to life and liberty, is persuade April to run away with him, hitchhiking from Wisconsin to who knows where, like a pair of Depression-era hoboes, out

of range of anyone who wishes them ill. Instead, he reluctantly agrees to go to New York to look for Daphne, figuring a short spell out of town will cool things off. Alas, by then the cheese heiress has skipped the country, and one Mickey Finn later our gumshoe comes to consciousness aboard an eastbound ship on the Atlantic. Soon, we have swapped Milwaukee for the shattered fragments of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire, from Budapest clear out to the Carpathians, as Hicks's pursuit of Daphne slowly turns into something else: the shadow ticket of the title, a search for other things and people, one of them, two of them, six million of them, who have gone missing, or soon will.

It goes without saying that I am leaving out almost everything. As anyone who has ever written about Pynchon knows, his books are all but impossible to summarize, partly because plot, per se, seldom seems like the point and partly because of the sheer quantity of stuff going on, even in a relatively compact book like "Shadow Ticket," which is considerably shorter than its predecessors except "The Crying of Lot 49." Pynchon is sometimes compared to Melville, for his ambition and maximalism, and to Nabokov, for his love of wordplay and artifice, but his closest artistic kin is Hieronymus Bosch, and each of his novels is a kind of "Garden of Earthly Delights": crammed full of figures both realistic and fantastical, many of them engaged in morally compromising behavior, all of them presumably serving some overarching but endlessly debatable organizing principle. For readers, much of the aesthetic experience of engaging with either artist involves simply attending to this profusion of details, the infinitely diverse offspring of technical excellence and an inexhaustible imagination.

Consider the character of Thessalie Wayward, a successful stage mentalist until the Depression and the talkies killed off vaudeville. Now she's working as a secretary at Unamalgamated Ops and, off the books, for the Milwaukee police, whose officers turn to her when they fail to solve their cases by more conventional means. Her area of expertise is "ass and app"—that is, asporting and apporting, the sudden disappearance or appearance of objects seemingly from thin air, as she explains to Hicks at a lunch meeting during which she never cedes the upper hand. Although Thessalie herself basically vanishes after this four-page scene, it would be churlish to suggest that she's superfluous, not because she paves a few linear feet of plot

(Budapest turns out to be ass-and-app central) but because, like Bosch's ice-skating platypus, she's one of a kind and wonderfully drawn.

These lavishly created miniatures take every possible form: characters, plot devices, props, settings, scenes. There is a bar in Budapest whose variously bizarre and thuggish clientele calls to mind the "Star Wars" cantina. There is a First World War U-boat that somehow glides from underneath Lake Michigan all the way to Croatia, commandeered by its captain, post-Armistice, for new and clandestine uses. I could go on; Pynchon does, with unstoppable and quasi-manic energy. At one point, inside the diner where Hicks and Thessalie meet up, we see "lunch dramas passing like storm fronts, pies in glass cases slowly losing their *a.m.* allure, grill artists taking care of various counterside chores while whatever they're flipping is in midair rotating end over end"—that's the author, of course, staging a sly cameo for himself, confident that he can do ten things at once and still catch the omelette on its way down.

"I'm not an extrovert, I'm just an introvert who can't stand being alone with her thoughts."
Cartoon by Emily Flake

And, sometimes, he can. The first page of "Shadow Ticket" is a master class in skills many writers won't master in a lifetime: tone, rhythm, pacing, how to establish a character, how to prime a narrative engine, how to convince your reader in six paragraphs or fewer that you know what you're doing. Much of the rest of the book is propelled forward, or whichever direction

it’s going, by long stretches of fast-paced dialogue, and Pynchon’s ear for the way people actually speak is unerring. (“Whole different tax bracket up there in Shorewood, you people, ain’t it.”) His comedic sense is considerably more fallible—“Shadow Ticket” is not the first of his novels with a sophomoric smegma joke—but, when it lands, it lands. One character has a pig for a spirit animal. Another describes the port city now known as Rijeka as “the Milwaukee of the Adriatic.” The Al Capone of Cheese, meeting the real Al Capone, asks, “And what is it *you’re* the Al Capone of again?”

As for pace, “Shadow Ticket” reads like one of its subplots, about the Trans-Trianon 2000, a two-thousand-kilometre motorcycle circuit through the disputed territories of Central Europe, all speed and vroom. Uncharacteristically for Pynchon, the book never eddies off to explore some branch of science or mathematics or philosophy, and the moments when it slows down enough to let the reader actually look around are few and far between—a pity, because, when he wants to, Pynchon is wonderful at showing us the world. Here is a Nazi front disguised as a bowling alley, in the outer reaches of Milwaukee, the wintry Wisconsin night lit up for miles by the sign outside: “four or five different colors from deep violet to blood orange, bowling balls flickering left to right, pins scattering, reassembling, again and again, silently except for an electrical drone fading up slowly louder the closer you get to it.”

For the duration of that sentence, Pynchon is less Bosch than Edward Hopper, making us feel this scene by making us see it: the night and the neon, the gust of loneliness, the dangerous electric edge. On the whole, though, the author is not in the business of making anyone feel things. (The shining exception to this rule is “Mason & Dixon,” the only one of his novels that is not merely brilliant but also character-driven, thematically lucid, and profoundly moving.) His customary genre is farce—the rest of his characters are subordinate to the absurd situations they find themselves in—and his customary mode is that of the comic book, full color but two-dimensional. At one point, someone hands Hicks a live bomb on the streets of Milwaukee, which he barely manages to chuck into a fishing hole on iced-over Lake Michigan before it goes kaboom; later, a pair of spies escape a near-assassination in Transylvania by climbing the mooring lines of a

departing zeppelin. In both cases, you can practically see the Benday dots and speech balloons. And the emotional register of the book stays mostly within the realm of the comic book, too: the good guys are good-guy-proofed against mortal danger; the bad guys are sinister but not frightening. Even the literal Nazis are never chilling, though they are sometimes chillin'. (Over beer and bratwurst: "We're National Socialists, ain't it? So—we're socializing. Try it, you might have fun.")

For a while, all this is perfectly enjoyable—Elmore Leonard meets Stan Lee, a kind of Technicolor noir. But, the further into "Shadow Ticket" you get, the more it starts to suffer, as many of Pynchon's later novels do, from the presence of its predecessors. Consider the cheese underworld, a sphere of criminality so consummately Pynchonesque that it reads like self-parody. In who else's fiction would you find price-fixing on the Wisconsin Cheese Exchange, bandits invading creameries up and down America's Cheese Corridor, innumerable nefarious purveyors of counterfeit Emmental and Gruyère?

More important: What is all this doing in *this* work of fiction? From the beginning, Pynchon has put his readers in the position of his characters, encouraging us to see hidden significance and obscure connections within (and, later, among) his books, and as a result to grow steadily more paranoid with each passing page. Surely, we're supposed to think, this cheese business must mean something—maybe even, as Pynchon teases, "something more geopolitical, some grand face-off between the cheese-based or colonialist powers, basically northwest Europe, and the vast teeming cheeselessness of Asia." Or maybe Pynchon, who nearly killed off one of the title characters of "Mason & Dixon" with a giant wheel of Gloucester, is what you might call lactose intolerant. Or maybe he just thought it would be funny to write about the big cheese of Big Cheese.

Your appetite might differ, but for me, nine novels in, all this code-cracking and jigsaw-puzzling is no longer thrilling. The same goes for the other bells and whistles of Pynchon's style; even a seventy-million-trick pony is still a trick pony, and much of what once seemed clever in his canon now seems tiresome. You will find, in "Shadow Ticket," countless texts within the text, including the usual LP's worth of songs—"Midnight in Milwaukee," "Bye-

Bye to Budapest.” (“Boo, hoo, hooo-dapest,” the singer croons.) You will find golems. You will find ghosts. You will find, if you bother to investigate, real-life oddities poached from the past because they come across like pure Pynchon invention—among them Clara Rockmore, a famous theremin player (Pynchon presumably appreciates her name), and a shoe-store X-ray machine for superior fittings, which not only really existed but really was produced by a Milwaukee company. You will find the aforementioned weird forms of transportation: that appropriated U-boat, an autogiro, an enormous motorcycle built to accommodate three German sleight-of-hand artists—Schnucki, Dieter, and Heinz, who collectively sound like a Minnesota personal-injury firm. And you will find, inevitably, characters with stranger names: Dr. Swampscott Vobe, Assistant Special Agent in Charge T. P. O’Grizbee, the noted illusionist or possibly genuine article Zoltán von Kiss. (As for our nomenclaturally modest hero, Hicks McTaggart, he is presumably named for J. M. E. McTaggart, an influential British philosopher who espoused the quasi-Pynchonesque beliefs that time is an illusion and that the human soul, connected to others of its kind by love, is the fundamental unit of reality.)

This one-man-band blare never quiets, but the music darkens considerably toward the end of “Shadow Ticket.” Jew hatred spreads and intensifies, Europe becomes a place to flee, and unrest over the price of milk in the United States results in a coup in which F.D.R. is toppled and General Douglas MacArthur seizes power. Stuck in exile, Hicks takes up with a motorcycle-riding Hungarian hottie but longs for Milwaukee, where the air smells like grilled bratwurst and sounds like accordion lessons and life “seldom gets more serious than somebody stole somebody’s fish.”

By then, I longed for Milwaukee, too—for the antic early pages of “Shadow Ticket,” when something coherent seemed to be forming beneath the fun. Instead, we get a darkness that is not just moral but epistemological. A suicide in a Budapest bathroom, a secret community of people sexually attracted to tasteless lamps, a movie plot entirely about violence and overeating: this stuff isn’t Bosch; it’s bosh—absurdity for absurdity’s sake, with no discernible aesthetic or intellectual purpose.

Patches of unintelligibility are nothing new in Pynchon, but usually a coherent world view gleams upward from the murk. Modern life, in his grim estimation, is entirely controlled by capitalism and technology, forces relentlessly destructive to the human soul. Those who perceive this total control are prone to paranoia, leaving them mistrustful and lonely, while those who seek to profit from it are dragged into depravity. You can't beat this system and you shouldn't join it, so the only option is to somehow duck out of its range. That's why Pynchon is drawn to drifters and dropouts, to borderlands and hidden worlds, like the Zone in "Gravity's Rainbow," and the interior of the hollow earth in "Mason & Dixon" and "Against the Day."

You can see the outlines of this world view in "Shadow Ticket," where capitalism Got Milk, the cheese is radioactive (really), and fugitives retreat to strange pockets of freedom, including a secret Indian reservation ("mentioned only once in a rider in a phantom treaty") and that rogue U-boat ("an encapsulated volume of pre-Fascist space-time"). But the grab bag of parts—cheese barons, Nazis—never comes together, and the old obsessions never acquire new force. In Pynchon's best works, his bleakness is brightened, in both senses—illuminated and made lighter—by the sweep of his vision and his affection for his fallible, foolhardy, well-meaning, wildly outmatched main characters. One finishes those books unclear on the particulars but certain that this whole wild world was built to teach us something, which is pretty much the human condition.

No such experience attends the completion of "Shadow Ticket." The book ends with a letter from Skeet Wheeler, that bit player last seen a hundred and seventy-five pages ago, who writes to his former mentor to say that he's setting off to ride the rails westward with his sweetheart, as Hicks had once longed to leave town with April. The revolt that reconfigured America goes unmentioned. If Skeet cares, he doesn't let on; he's just looking forward to catching the next train.

Is this act of riding off into the sunset ironic, a comment, as with "Mason & Dixon," on the evils committed in America by the allure of westward expansion? Or is it what Hicks should have done many plot twists ago—escape the forces scheming to control him by running away with the woman he loves? Or is it just Pynchon turning around in the saddle to wave

farewell? Who knows. The ticket, the shadow ticket, “Shadow Ticket”: all these remain unresolved, leaving us with the enduring hope of the Pynchon universe, that everything in it means something. At some point, though, meaning that is sufficiently cryptic becomes indistinguishable from no meaning at all. ♦

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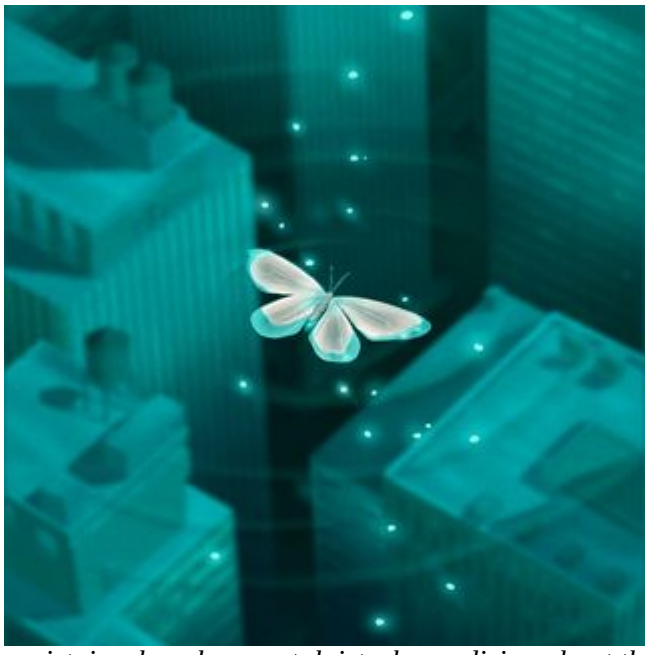
Books

Ian McEwan Casts the Climate Crisis as a Story of Adultery

His new novel, “What We Can Know,” imagines the historians of the twenty-second century, who long for the world that they’ve missed out on.

By Katy Waldman

September 22, 2025



Tom Metcalfe, the protagonist, is a hopeless nostalgist, rhapsodizing about the year 2010.Illustration by Grace J. Kim

At the start of “What We Can Know,” Ian McEwan’s eighteenth novel, the year is 2119 and the humanities are still in crisis. Thomas Metcalfe, a scholar of the literature of 1990 to 2030, props up his lectures with jokes and colorful animations; he and his colleague Rose, who is also his lover, speak to students in “cheery sing-song voices, as if addressing a pre-school class.” Midway through the twenty-first century, a nuclear disaster sent tsunamis curling over the continents, sinking New York and Rotterdam and turning the United Kingdom into an archipelago. With much of the past

decomposing underwater, it's hard to blame young people for preferring "things that are new, like the latest toys and novelties of Nigerian pop culture," Tom reflects. He imagines the inner monologues of his students, sitting listlessly through a seminar on "The Politics and Literature of the Inundation": "The past was peopled by idiots. Big deal. The matter was dead."

For Tom—a man easily carried off by obsession, emotion, or reverie—not much ever really dies. He is fixated on a dinner party that took place in October of 2014, at the country home of the poet Francis Blundy, an eminence rivalled only by Seamus Heaney. The evening, later known as the "Second Immortal Dinner," drew a glamorous group that included Blundy's editor, his sister, and a journalist who profiled him in "a magazine called *Vanity Fair*." The occasion was the birthday of Blundy's wife, Vivien. That night, Blundy recited a sonnet cycle, "A Corona for Vivien," exalting their love and the natural world. Only one copy of the poem existed. Entrusted to Vivien, it has since been lost. The mystery gnaws at Tom: Was the work suppressed? E-mails, texts, social-media posts, and memoirs from the party suggest that "A Corona for Vivien" was a masterpiece—"the words, the images, the unearthly music of their ruthless truth, bore the listeners away, as if in a dream." The poem comes to symbolize the unattainability of a bygone world, "more beautiful," in Tom's view, "for not being known."

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This elusiveness is all the more alluring given that twenty-second-century researchers have access to a mountain of detail—the ephemera of our digital lives, preserved in Nigerian data centers. “We have robbed the past of its privacy,” Tom recalls his dean saying. Tom knows Francis’s favorite snack (an apple), has scanned Vivien’s browsing history, and can watch “the daily news that troubled her contemporaries, the diverting scandals, the ancient sporting triumphs.” Much of the novel’s charm lies in its re-creation of our era as seen from the future. (A luthier’s fortunes improve after he meets “a member of the famous group Radiohead.”) A hopeless nostalgist, Tom rhapsodizes about the glories of 2010, the effect at once amusing and chastening. “To have been alive then in those resourceful raucous times, when the sea stood off at a respectful distance, when you could walk in any direction as far as you liked and keep your feet dry,” he laments. The air was “purer and less radioactive” then; the average life span had not yet dropped to sixty-two. For McEwan, whose tone often tends toward the elegiac, Tom is a useful self-deprecation, and a didactic mouthpiece: Readers, he seems to say, appreciate what you have.

At seventy-seven, McEwan, who has been adorned with his native Britain’s rarest honors, enjoys something like Stuart Sapphire status. His later fiction has tilted topical—“Saturday” on 9/11, “Solar” on the climate crisis, “Machines Like Me” on A.I.—and embraced high-concept conceits, most conspicuously in “Nutshell,” narrated by a fetus modelled on Hamlet. Yet he has always filtered his philosophical preoccupations through the prism of domestic drama. “What We Can Know” feels like a direct descendant of “Atonement,” McEwan’s most beloved work, where an illicit relationship generates unexpected tremors, and fantasy and memory rush into the gaps between facts.

The new book suggests that human beings have always been declinist, underselling the riches of the present and romanticizing what earlier generations merely made do with. The “Second Immortal Dinner,” Tom explains, pales beside the first, which took place in 1817, at the home of the painter Ben Haydon, and featured Wordsworth, Keats, Leigh Hunt, and Charles Lamb. “There was no one at the Blundys’ that evening who could have matched Leigh Hunt or Keats” or “competed with Wordsworth for learning, memorised verse or force of personality,” Tom concedes. Yet the

Romantics themselves were prone to feeling that they'd missed out on something. In Coleridge's "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison," addressed to Lamb, an injury keeps the poet from joining his friends at a waterfall. He resigns himself to the humbler attractions of his garden. ("Yet still the solitary humble-bee / Sings in the bean-flower!") Today his evocations of "transparent foliage" and "a deep radiance" laid "full on the ancient ivy" are admired as glimpses of nature at its height.

But, if yearning for lost splendor blinds people to what they have (TLC might have told Coleridge not to go chasing waterfalls), the opposite risk is letting forgetfulness stunt the imagination. "As natural beauty declines over the years, so too, unnoticed, do standards of beauty," Tom observes. It is no small loss that the Blundys could step into a garden alive with "fifty-seven resident species" of butterfly, while the archipelago dwellers of 2119 count only eight. The oceans of Tom's day—"vast beds of undulating sea grasses"—are nothing like Vivien's "seas whose cold depths contained cod, mackerel, hake, shad and sprat, pollock and three-bearded rockling." So who is right, the students, who plant themselves in the now, or the forlorn historian? Are the tides that have overrun McEwan's novel—the "hostile sea" obscuring the face of the earth—oblivion or memory?

It's never wise to underestimate the minor characters at a dinner party. One of the Blundys' guests, Mary Sheldrake, is a successful novelist—"almost a national treasure," McEwan wickedly notes—celebrated for her minimal, affectless style and abstract themes. On the publicity circuit, she stirs controversy by denouncing the traditional novel as a "paradigm of higher gossip." Until modernism, she insists, fiction was merely "love, marriage, adultery, contested wills—the stuff of neighbourly fascination."

In the second half of "What We Can Know," the speculative scaffolding falls away and the perspective shifts to Vivien's. Here, McEwan leans into dishy melodrama, embracing what Mary would call "the amoral, easy-living ways of conventional fictional realism." After giving so much space to Tom's idealizations of the past, McEwan seems intent on some puncturing. Francis proves ripe for deflation: as the novel unfolds, he emerges not only as monstrously narcissistic but also as something of a fraud. The "Corona" is "fakery," one guest realizes; Francis, who indulges

in a climate-change-denying rant shortly before his recitation, “had no love for the things his poem seemed to love.” Vivien is startled that he “would want to imagine a life, evoked in such detail, in which they freely roamed, adoring nature’s plenitude. . . . It was as if he was beguiling her with all that was missing from their marriage.”

Unhappy unions loom large in the novel, which teems with adultery. When we first meet Mary, she has just discovered that her husband, Graham, has been cheating. Though his infidelity enrages her, it eases her own guilty conscience: she’s cheating, too. The decline of Vivien’s first husband, who suffered from dementia, prompts a series of affairs—of convenience, passion, and revenge. Few characters prove immune. Even Rose steps out, sleeping with a graduate student, partly because Tom won’t stop pining for Vivien, his inaccessible ghost.

These ruptures serve the novel’s larger project of demystification. Books about global warming often seem wary of beauty, evoking it only as fleeting and inconstant. Good things—whether the first blush of love or Bengal tigers—are always making false promises to endure. McEwan suggests that high-flown poetry may not be the best vehicle for understanding ourselves or the planet; something grubbier, more sordid, is required. History is one alternative, but how should it be practiced? Tom and Rose diverge. Rose, writing a monograph on the failure of realism to capture the climate crisis between 2015 and 2030, proposes that historians should cleave to facts. Tom, by contrast, argues for a more imaginative reconstruction of what has been lost, the kind of history that fills in silences. “Unprofessional to make things up,” he thinks, “arid not to.” They agree, at least, on the power of experiential detail. “The everyday life of, say, a mid-twenty-first-century junior doctor as told by her digital traffic, recording her week,” Tom says, “can arouse even the dullest of our students into an acceptance of shared humanity across an immensity of time.”

With this passage, McEwan’s gossipy details snap into focus. To wrest the climate crisis into a form we can grasp, he casts his elegy and protest as a novel of adultery. What does it mean to be faithful in a relationship? How do you achieve reciprocity? Tom’s doomed desire for Vivien—and for her vanished twenty-first-century world—shows how people in the future may

yearn for the past, though the past itself proves neglectful and careless of the future. The “ancients” of 2014—“ignorant, squalid and destructive louts”—kept no faith with their descendants or with the earth. They wrote poems about love and nature, but didn’t mean them. Their infidelities have left the people of 2119 trapped between loving the expansive *then* and the depreciated *now*. The characters in “What We Can Know” are betrayers: they can’t celebrate the sublimity of what they’ve lost without devaluing what they still have, nor honor the current moment without diminishing the scale of their loss.

In a 1969 essay, Mary McCarthy wrote that literature often cast nature as an “unmoved spectator of human grief.” The relationship, she suggested, was asymmetrical: artists lavished devotion on mountains and moonbeams that did not love them back. McEwan’s view is starker. We are the homewreckers. We broke faith first, and yet many of our contemporaries deny the breach. That idea of denial lends the novel’s title an extra ironic bite. What we *can* know is far more than what we do. ♦

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

Books

The Uses and Abuses of “Antisemitism”

How a term coined to describe a nineteenth-century politics of exclusion would become a diagnosis, a political cudgel, and a rallying cry.

By Ian Buruma

September 22, 2025

Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi war criminal, taking an oath on May 5, 1961, during his trial in front of an Israeli court in Jerusalem. In his opening speech, the prosecutor, Gideon Hausner, said that he was not standing alone: “With me are six million accusers.”Photograph from AFP / Getty

Exactly who the Jews are—often a fraught question—has rarely been a mystery to their enemies. Stalin cast them as “rootless cosmopolitans” colluding with “American imperialists” to undermine the Soviet Union. In Hitler’s fevered imagination, they were bacilli infecting the healthy “Aryan” race. They have been denounced as lecherous predators and as omnipotent conspirators, as arch-Bolsheviks and arch-capitalists. Increasingly, these days, “Jew” is conflated with “Zionist,” which, as a term

of opprobrium, can mean anything from “settler colonialist” to “fascist” to “racist.” The older sense of Zionism—establishing a Jewish state to shield Jews from persecution—has largely slipped from view.

Of course, opposition to Zionism does not itself amount to antisemitism. And right-wing politicians who accuse pro-Palestinian students of antisemitism are hardly credible arbiters. The Trump Administration, which poses as a defender of Jews, has nurtured links to antisemitic extremists; Trump himself has dined with outspoken Holocaust deniers and once said that neo-Nazi marchers raging against Jewish “replacement” of non-Jewish whites included “some very fine people.” A hard-right government full of blood-and-soil nationalists which claims to be the protector of a Jewish minority would once have seemed very peculiar indeed.

When words lose their original meanings and are repurposed as verbal cudgels, the public sphere becomes a jungle of denunciation, intimidation, and even violence. Right-wing politicians who label all critics of Israel antisemites are the mirror image of those who assume that all Jews are Zionists and all Zionists are racists. One of the many virtues of Mark Mazower’s excellent and timely “On Antisemitism” (Penguin Press) is his effort to restore historical context to a word that has become a generic term of condemnation.

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There are Jews who believe that non-Jews have always hated Jews and always will. In this view, antisemitism is unique, permanent, and unchanging. Benzion Netanyahu, the great historian of the Spanish Inquisition, saw Jewish history as a "history of Holocausts." His son Benjamin, the Israeli Prime Minister, dismisses all criticism of the country's violence against Palestinians as just another instance of *sinat Yisrael*, the age-old "hatred of Israel." His self-appointed role is to protect Jews from another Holocaust, even if the whole world condemns him. Indeed, especially if the whole world condemns him, for that will only bolster his conviction that those who criticize his policies do so "because of the simple fact that we exist."

Mazower, a scrupulous historian, disagrees. Antisemitism is far from new, he observes, but the nature of this hostility has changed radically over time. In his survey of antisemitism, Mazower largely skips over the religious prejudices of pre-modern Christians. Like Hannah Arendt before him, he treats Jew-hatred as a consequence of European modernity, which gathered force in the late nineteenth century, when many nation-states were formed. This was an age of political parties, newspapers, high finance, and the rule of law. In much of Europe, emancipated Jews were now citizens in large cities, with equal rights, and no longer minority subjects of noble houses.

That equality, and the diminishment of obvious markers—peculiar clothes, a strange language, obscure traditions—could be disturbing, and not just to conservative rabbis who saw their authority fading. It represented, for some, an infiltration of untrustworthy outsiders into the mainstream. Not everyone welcomed the liberal, more egalitarian states that emerged from the French and American Revolutions. French conservatives longed for the ancien régime of church and monarchy, German nationalists for a community rooted in native soil. How one viewed the Jews had everything to do with one's view of the modern state. The term "antisemitism" was coined in 1879 by the German agitator Wilhelm Marr in his campaign to reverse Jewish emancipation. Mazower sees in this "a kind of counterreaction to the accelerated rhythms of modern times that held out the promise of a better life, a return to older and more familiar ways."

In the eighteen-nineties, this tension came to a dramatic head in France with the Dreyfus Affair, when Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a Jew, was wrongly convicted of treason. France had been humiliated in 1871 by Prussia in a foolish war of its own making, and Dreyfus, accused of passing military secrets to the Germans, was a convenient scapegoat in a time of national malaise. Wealthy, multilingual, and born in the Franco-German Alsace, he fit the stereotype of the cosmopolitan Jew, whose patriotism was always in doubt.

But more was at stake. Dreyfus became the lightning rod in a clash between two visions of France. The Dreyfusards, his defenders, were largely liberal supporters of the secular, democratic Republic; the anti-Dreyfusards were mostly Roman Catholic reactionaries who despised everything the modern state represented. They hated liberals, leftists, cosmopolitans, and Jews, though not necessarily in that order.

Although Dreyfus was eventually exonerated, the pairing of Jews with cosmopolitan liberalism endured. Left-wing antisemitism, which cast Jews as greedy capitalists, existed as well, especially in France, but Jew-baiting remained primarily a right-wing pursuit, the work of illiberal nativists who saw a tiny minority as polluting the purity of their racial or religious communities. Amid the nineteenth-century tension between nation and state, those who sided with the nation included many antisemites. Before the Holocaust, this could pass among conservatives as a respectable position.

One witness to the Dreyfus Affair was Theodor Herzl, a liberal, assimilated, secular Austro-Hungarian Jew who covered the trial in Paris as a journalist. Watching Dreyfus stripped of his rank before a jeering crowd, Herzl (about whom Mazower has surprisingly little to say) concluded that the only way Jews could live in safety was to establish a nation-state of their own. He sensed the danger of surging nationalist sentiment in the crumbling Austro-Hungarian Empire. Jews under Emperor Franz Joseph had no nation to fall back on, unlike the Czechs or the Hungarians. The empire had offered all its subjects a degree of protection, which is why Jews were among Franz Joseph's last and most loyal supporters. Joseph Roth, a Galician-born Jewish novelist, wrote "The Radetzky March" (1932) as an elegy to that

lost world. Once the empire collapsed, after the First World War, Jews became prime targets for nationalists.

The twilight of empire was also a time of conspiracy theories about international Jewish cabals, said to manipulate power through money and shadowy networks in order to rule the world. The Russian fabrication “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion,” published in 1903, stirred agitation in many countries, though not always to the same effect. After staging an incursion into Siberia in 1918, the Japanese—introduced to “The Protocols” by the local population—became so persuaded of Jewish power that they later shielded Jews in Asia from Nazi deportations. Such a formidable people, they reasoned, had to be kept on one’s side.

Their view was partly molded by the fact that Jacob Schiff, a Jewish banker in New York, had helped to finance Japan’s war with Russia in 1905. A similar calculation surfaced during the First World War, when Allied powers sought Jewish financial aid. Mazower suggests that this influenced Arthur Balfour, the British Foreign Secretary, who in 1917 pledged support for “the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people.” Not all Jews welcomed the gesture. J. H. Levy, a British economist, argued that if “we proclaim ourselves aliens . . . I am at a loss to understand on what ground we can cry out that we are being unjustly treated as foreigners.” In his view, “the one thing that Zionism seems likely to attain is the manufacture of a logical basis for anti-semitism.”

The battle in France, and elsewhere, between two concepts of the state—one liberal and democratic, the other rooted in blood, faith, and soil—was mirrored in Jewish responses to antisemitism. One answer was to build a Jewish state; the other, to fight for the emancipation of all oppressed people through universalist, often left-wing, politics. Karl Marx imagined that the “Jewish question” would vanish once the proletariat ruled. For many Jewish immigrants in the United States, Marxism would, in the twentieth century, replace Judaism as a common faith.

Alas, Jewish skeptics of Zionism who preferred to think of themselves as cosmopolitans found no reprieve. Antisemites denounced Jews both as capitalists and as communists—two creeds international in scope. Businessmen and revolutionaries alike tended to disregard borders. Hitler

was obsessed with the notion of “Judeo-Bolshevism.” Joseph Goebbels, his propaganda minister, claimed that “only in the brain of a nomad who is without nation, race, or country could this satanism have been hatched.”

Jochen Hellbeck, a historian of Russia, argues in his arresting and deeply researched new book, “World Enemy No. 1” (Penguin Press), that Hitler’s paranoia about Judeo-Bolshevism was the chief cause of the Holocaust. Hitler sought to annihilate the Jews, Hellbeck writes, because he needed to destroy Bolshevism. The German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, in this reading, turned all Jews into Bolsheviks. Hellbeck makes much of the virtues of Marxist internationalism—perhaps a little too much. He claims that anti-racism was a prominent feature of Soviet life, and that the heroic resistance to Nazi Germany was driven mainly by Communist conviction.

Hellbeck’s thesis is interesting but overstated. Stalin, mainly for political reasons, was hardly a friend of the Jews. Jews were purged from the Soviet Foreign Ministry in 1939, when the Soviet Union signed a pact with Nazi Germany, and antisemitic show trials followed not long after Germany’s defeat. Soviet propaganda, in any case, cast the war against Germany in patriotic, not ideological, terms. People fought for Mother Russia more readily than for Stalin or Marx.

Hitler’s idée fixe about Judeo-Bolshevism was real enough, but so was his belief that Roosevelt and Churchill were puppets of “finance Jewry.” He was convinced that Washington and London were “Jewified.” This had been a common belief among nativists and racists. Houston Stewart Chamberlain—who was born British, became a German citizen, married Richard Wagner’s daughter, and admired Hitler—was among those who saw the U.K. and the U.S. as horribly tainted by their immigrant populations. The far greater savagery of the Nazi war against Soviet citizens, compared with that against the Anglo-American Allies, had less to do with ideology than with race: the peoples of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe were, in Nazi eyes, “inferior races,” rather than merely dupes of those rich, all-powerful Jews.

What shifted the balance between a universalist fight against antisemitism and the drive for a Jewish homeland was the Holocaust. For hundreds of thousands of survivors—languishing in displaced-persons camps, homeless

and unwelcome almost everywhere—Palestine was the only refuge. An idea had become a necessity. The State of Israel, founded in 1948, was meant to answer centuries of humiliation and exclusion which had culminated in mass murder. But it would take time before allegiance to Israel and remembrance of the Holocaust became twin pillars of Jewish identity, in Israel and abroad.

“I’d settle for Caprese, but I’d really love to get into theatre criticism.”
Cartoon by Olivia Noble

Israel’s first Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, had little interest in dwelling on Europe’s recent catastrophes. He wanted to raise a new kind of Jew, the heroic son or daughter of the ancient soil. In a conversation with Nahum Goldmann, a founder of the World Jewish Congress, Ben-Gurion admitted that Israel’s conflict with the Arabs had nothing to do with the Holocaust, and everything to do with land. Yet he still invoked the Nazi analogy for public effect: on the eve of the Suez crisis, in 1955, he told the Knesset that “Nazi dogma” was “being sounded anew on the banks of the Nile.”

Many Jews from Europe and the Middle East moved to the new state out of idealism or desperation. Most Jews in the diaspora, though, did not yet see Israel’s fate as bound up with their own. Whatever Gentiles might have thought in private, the Nazis had made overt antisemitism unfashionable, even odious. As Mazower notes, “American Jews benefitted from postwar prosperity and joined in the consumerist boom and the joys of suburban life.”

Ben-Gurion nonetheless cast Israel early on as the homeland of all Jews. In 1952, his government declared, “The State of Israel regards itself as the

creation of the entire Jewish people." He saw the trial of Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi administrator of the Holocaust, held in Jerusalem, in 1961, as an opportunity to tether Israel's fortunes to the memory of genocide. In his opening speech, the prosecutor, Gideon Hausner, said that he was not standing alone: "With me are six million accusers." Hannah Arendt, who was present, wrote that the trial was meant to show young Israelis "what it meant to live among non-Jews, to convince them that only in Israel could a Jew be safe and live an honorable life."

Mazower might have said more about this moment. The larger message was aimed not just at Israelis but at Jews everywhere: a threat to Israel was a threat to all Jews. Still, perhaps he is right not to overstate its impact. Diasporic Jews still vastly outnumbered Israeli Jews, and Jewish activists were prominent in the American civil-rights movement, keeping alive the liberal-left, universalist approach to fighting racial prejudice. Arendt, for one, disapproved of using the Eichmann trial for the purposes of Israeli state propaganda. She thought that Eichmann should have been tried by an international court, since his complicity in genocide was a crime against humanity, not just against the Jews.

A decisive shift came in 1967, when Israel defeated its Arab neighbors in the Six-Day War and occupied Arab lands in the West Bank, the Golan Heights, Gaza, and Jerusalem. Jews, especially in the United States, felt a new solidarity with the Jewish state. They took pride in Israeli prowess on the battlefield, and this time—more than during the Eichmann trial—the traumas of the past came into play. Mazower cites the sociologist Marshall Sklare, who studied a generic Chicago suburb that he calls "Lakeville." The response there, Sklare wrote, reflected the sense that its Jews had been spared the Holocaust "by fortunate circumstance." But now the Middle East war "brought to the forefront of consciousness the possibility of a repetition of that history—the possibility of another Holocaust."

Loyalty to Israel could easily be reconciled with loyalty to the United States. Holocaust remembrance could even be seen as an aspect of American patriotism—hence, later, the Holocaust Memorial Museum on the Mall in Washington, D.C. Not only Israel but the United States would protect Jews against another Shoah.

Assimilation, intermarriage, the move away from Jewish neighborhoods, and the weakening of religious ties all made the fate of Israel and the memory of the Holocaust more central to secular Jewish identity. Since the nineteen-sixties, both Jews and non-Jews, especially in Germany, came to see the Second World War through the lens of the Holocaust. Memoirs, monuments, films, and history projects brought it into public view. As Black Americans called for remembrance of slavery to forge political solidarity, Jews could turn to the Holocaust as a source of collective recognition.

Only after the 1967 war, Mazower writes, did American Jews begin to "embrace the idea of the Holocaust not merely as history but as a warning for the future and an integral part of their sense of themselves." Once threats to Israel were cast as existential threats to Jews everywhere, the line between antisemitism and criticism of Israel, or of Zionism itself, began to blur. In Mazower's words, "The era in which antisemitism could be discussed without reference to Israel was about to end."

He rightly calls "preposterous" the claim that American universities are hotbeds of institutionalized antisemitism. Still, to adapt an old Jewish joke, some anti-Zionists dislike Israel a little more than is necessary. Much of this, too, goes back to 1967. Especially once Israel occupied Arab lands beyond the 1948 borders, the Palestinian struggle was folded into a global fight against colonialism and neocolonialism. Since colonialism is often treated as the West's original sin, Israel was made to bear the guilt of five centuries of European empire. The state had not been founded to build an empire—Jews had no imperial metropole—but the settlement of Jewish communities on Arab land after 1967 did turn Palestinians into colonial subjects of a kind.

To describe the occupied territories as representing "apartheid" or "settler colonialism" may be contentious, but it is not, in itself, antisemitic. Calling the mass killing of civilians in Gaza a genocide is contentious as well, but even patriotic Israelis disgusted by their own government have begun to use the term. David Grossman, the novelist and longtime critic of Israeli politics, and a humanist in the liberal Jewish tradition, recently told an interviewer that he could not help but do so.

Still, there's reason for unease when critics of Israel use the Holocaust as a rhetorical weapon against the Jewish state. Mazower describes Jew-hatred as largely a right-wing phenomenon, but placards showing Anne Frank in a kaffiyeh or Stars of David defaced with swastikas send a blunt message: Jews are as bad as Nazis. Such gestures predate Netanyahu's current government. In 2002, the Portuguese novelist José Saramago compared the plight of Palestinians in Ramallah to that of Jews in Auschwitz. Such comparisons are too easily drawn, with too much self-righteousness, as though the guilt for what was done to the Jews could be lightened just a little by likening them to their own murderers. As the German Jewish journalist Henryk Broder once said, "The Germans will never forgive the Jews for Auschwitz."

At the same time, something strange has happened to the State of Israel. Ben-Gurion was a hard man, who never denied that Jewish settlement would involve violence. Even he might have been shocked, though, to see an Israeli government bent on ethnic cleansing through bombing and starvation. Grossman, reflecting on the brutality unleashed under Netanyahu, traces this, too, back to 1967: "The occupation has corrupted us. . . . We've become very strong militarily, and we've fallen into the temptation that comes with our absolute power: the idea that we can do anything we want."

Perhaps the rot set in earlier. Moderate, left-wing political Zionists never intended Israeli politics to be shaped by racist aggression. From Herzl onward, many of them hoped for a peaceful modus vivendi with the Arab population; a dwindling number of liberals still dream of a two-state solution. Harder-line thinkers dismissed the idea from the start. Ze'ev Jabotinsky, the father of revisionist Zionism—a more militant, maximalist current within the movement—argued in 1923 that there could be "no voluntary agreement between ourselves and the Palestine Arabs," because there was no "solitary instance of any colonization being carried on with the consent of the native population."

Jabotinsky would probably have agreed with today's campus protesters that Zionism is a colonial enterprise. What he might not have foreseen is that Israel would one day become a model for politicians of the far right in

Europe and the United States. Viktor Orbán, the Hungarian Prime Minister, enjoys warm relations with Netanyahu, each lavishing praise on the other, even as Orbán traffics in antisemitic conspiracy theories drawn straight from "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion." The anti-Dreyfusards, one suspects, would find more to like in the current State of Israel than the Dreyfusards would.

When Shimon Peres lost the 1996 election to Netanyahu, he is said to have remarked, "The Israelis lost, the Jews won." He seems to have meant that Israel had split into two nations, like France in the Dreyfus era: "Israelis" as citizens of a modern state, "the Jews" as members of a blood-and-soil community. It was one way to describe the collapse of secular, left-of-center politics in Israel.

What's clear is that traditional roles have been oddly reversed. The Jewish state has embraced ethno-nationalism, while many of its international critics, including quite a few Jews, claim to fight for the oppressed everywhere. To call all these critics antisemites makes no sense. What about the effort to apply the label to figures such as Mahmoud Khalil? Khalil, a former Columbia University graduate student (and a green-card holder), was arrested by *ICE* officers in March for his role in pro-Palestinian protests on campus and locked up for more than a hundred days. Trump tweeted that he was a "Radical Foreign Pro-Hamas Student," warning of more arrests of those engaged in "pro-terrorist, anti-Semitic, anti-American activity."

In fact, Khalil had been negotiating on behalf of Columbia University Apartheid Divest, a group that sees Israel's violence against Palestinians as part of a global system of capitalist, colonialist, racist oppression. "Palestine," in its view, "is the vanguard for our collective liberation. . . . We support freedom and justice for the Palestinian people, and for all people."

This may sound simplistic or wrongheaded, but it is not antisemitic. Indeed, it fits squarely within the left-liberal, universalist tradition of Jewish resistance to antisemitism. Khalil himself—a Syrian-born Palestinian married to an American—might even be called a rootless cosmopolitan. That he should have been jailed by an "America First" Administration in

defense of a government filled with racists who condone the killing and starving of civilians is damaging to the United States, disastrous for the Palestinians, not good for Israel, and certainly bad for the Jews. ♦

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The Theatre

Yasmina Reza’s “Art” Feeds Our Appetite for Argument as Entertainment

Bobby Cannavale, James Corden, and Neil Patrick Harris play friends who spar over almost everything.

By Helen Shaw

September 18, 2025

In the Parisian writer’s 1994 play, taste becomes a signifier of identity, virtue, and power.Illustration by Madison Ketcham

Is there anything left of the old concept of debate? The practice of good-faith argument feels harder and harder to find, even as bad-faith confrontation thrives. The whole process of civic debate now seems locked in a rage-baiting pantomime, its outcomes measured not in productive thinking but in “engagement metrics” registered by separate, furious publics.

The revival of Yasmina Reza's "Art," from 1994—directed at the Music Box by Scott Ellis in a production starring James Corden, Neil Patrick Harris, and Bobby Cannavale—offers a hint about how the discourse got so out of hand. Not much happens in "Art": three bourgeois friends disagree on a matter of taste, and, instead of talking normally about it over a drink, they make increasingly savage personal attacks whenever they meet. Reza, a Parisian playwright and novelist, won a Tony for "Art" in 1998 and another for her even sluggier slugfest, "God of Carnage," in 2009. In these influential insult comedies, translated from the French by Christopher Hampton, Reza satirizes the vapidity and pettiness of the upper-middle class; the more her characters rail at one another, the more they seem like puppets in a contemporary Punch-and-Judy show.

"Art" was a mile marker in the last quarter-century's march toward bad-faith argument as popular entertainment, which is another way of saying—I can't laugh at it now. The setup, at least, is tidily comic. Serge (Harris), a shallow dermatologist with deep pockets, pays three hundred thousand dollars for a white-on-white minimalist painting. It's by an artist, he says proudly, collected by the Centre Pompidou, but when he shows the canvas off to his longtime friend, the aeronautical engineer Marc (Cannavale), Marc says it's "shit." The two then badger their go-along-to-get-along friend Yvan (Corden) for his opinion, maybe because they're tired of hearing him complain about his upcoming marriage. Yvan, who has recently landed in the stationery business, arrives onstage while delivering a bravura monologue about wedding-invitation drama, by far the funniest moment in this production. It also momentarily unites his bickering friends: "Why do you let yourself be fucked over by all these women?" Marc asks, as Serge nods. At least Serge and Marc will always have misogyny.

The "art" (Reza's title was originally meant to appear in quotation marks) exists as a thin pretext for the trio's quarrels, and so the play operates at its own level of light abstraction. We're not actually meant to believe that people behave this way. Serge hauls his purportedly costly canvas on- and offstage, clearly not worried that he might clip a doorframe. (It's a prop, and Harris treats it like a prop.) Reza's stage directions call for a setting that's as "stripped down and neutral as possible," which the set designer, David Rockwell, has interpreted as a bland, gray Sartrean antechamber. (Hell is

finding out what your friends say about you.) The painting becomes a metaphorical screen against which the play can project its critique of taste as a signifier of identity, virtue, and power. Marc, for instance, has always believed that he is the alpha dog of the trio, but that status is threatened when he can't bully the others into submission. "You should never leave your friends unchaperoned," he says. They might form their own opinions.

According to a profile by Judith Thurman in this magazine, Reza finished "Art" in six weeks because she writes "improvising as I go along, not thinking too much." That's sometimes apparent. The play grows repetitive, and we have time to conclude that, if it were a real situation, someone would surely leave such a tiresome battle royale. To keep the melee going, Reza must continually throw her characters at one another, like a cockfighter pushing her birds back into the ring. Harris and Cannavale are flatter and less confident here than I've ever seen them. Only Corden, whose last stage performance in New York was in the hyperkinetic Richard Bean commedia dell'arte adaptation "One Man, Two Guvnors," has the clowning chops to pull off what, in its bones, is a farce. At one point, Yvan decides that he ought to leave, but he's not quite sure whether he will, and Corden puts him into a hilariously indecisive spin, as if Yvan is stuck in an invisible revolving door.

In 1994, Reza was making hay from the idea that there is no inherent, pre-social self that truly "likes" an object. She was writing in an intellectual atmosphere deeply influenced by the literary critic René Girard, who proposed the theory of mimetic desire. "Man is the creature who does not know what to desire, and he turns to others in order to make up his mind," Girard observed. Yet she could just as easily have been composing "Art" today, staring down at her white page under the harsh glare of the internet panopticon. Online, you hear constant echoes of Marc's suspicion that opinion is just another currency to garner status. To like or not to like? Perhaps you can tell that I didn't much like "Art," but I was intrigued, at least, by the feeling that Reza and her spiky play couldn't care less.

Dial the clock back another hundred years or so and you find the ne plus ultra in using the theatre as a boxing ring: Henrik Ibsen, the father of both theatrical realism and the play of ideas, who crashed opposing paradigms

together in his dramas to see which would win. In “A Doll’s House,” he set a woman’s duty to her family against the needs of her unconstrained spirit; in “An Enemy of the People,” he pitched a doctor’s duty to public health against a community’s economic comfort. In those two well-known plays, Ibsen favored the individuals over society, and so we think of him as the creator of truthful, uncompromising heroes, puncturing the hypocrisy of nineteenth-century Norway.

But Ibsen never settled on a single thesis. In “The Wild Duck,” from 1884, he made the truthful, uncompromising character into the monster of the piece. That monster is Gregers Werle (Alexander Hurt), who returns to his home town only to find that his childhood friend Hjalmar Ekdal (a superbly comic Nick Westrate) has been living in a fool’s paradise. Hjalmar’s wife, Gina (Melanie Field), has long hidden a past entanglement with Werle’s wealthy father, Håkon (Robert Stanton), the revelation of which would tear their marriage apart. Their adoring fourteen-year-old daughter, Hedvig (Maaike Laanstra-Corn), believes her layabout father to be a great inventor, but this, too, is a comforting lie. Ibsen here paints one of his most beautiful (and strange) portraits of a delusional but deeply loving household. Inside a room in their apartment, Hjalmar, his father (David Patrick Kelly), and Hedvig have built a shabby, shadowy simulacrum of the northern woods for a wild duck with a damaged wing. This hidden Eden satisfies them all—at least until the zealot Gregers, intent on exposing Hjalmar’s illusions, slithers in.

The production, directed by Simon Godwin from a version by David Eldridge, takes a while to find itself, perhaps because Ibsen dumps exposition into an unbearably clunky first scene or because the play doesn’t introduce its heart, Hedvig, for nearly half an hour. The child, of course, will be the one who pays the price for Gregers’s truth-telling, as he destroys the foundation of her parents’ relationship. The astonishing Laanstra-Corn does not play Hedvig purely as an innocent; there’s something as dangerous and emotionally labile in her shocked face as there is in Gregers’s explosive outbursts. Yet only the audience seems to be able to see how the adults’ toxicity is building up inside her mind and how—since she will not hate her father—she is coming to hate herself.

Theatres don’t perform “The Wild Duck” as much as, say, “A Doll’s House,” maybe because it’s terribly, terribly sad. To me, though, it’s the most honest of Ibsen’s plays. Here, the great theatrical advocate of wisdom-through-argument admits that argument itself has treacherous ramifications. Debate’s cut and thrust can be easily misunderstood by the young, Ibsen says—especially by those who turn its violence on themselves. ♦

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

On Television

“The Lowdown” Is a Noir for Our Era

Sterlin Harjo’s new series, starring Ethan Hawke as a citizen journalist determined to expose the crimes of the élite, is at once rollicking and timely.

By Inkoo Kang

September 22, 2025

Even amid a colorful ensemble, the motormouthed Lee Raybon stands out.Illustration by Kristian Hammerstad

Some actors you can watch doing the same thing over and over again. Cary Grant built a career on smirking suavity; Cate Blanchett has made an art form of falling apart with tragic intensity. Lately, Ethan Hawke has joined their ranks: the onetime Gen X heartthrob has reinvented himself in middle age as a character actor with impeccable taste in auteurist projects. His specialty is now the heedless hero whose certainty about his righteousness drives him to extremes. In Paul Schrader’s 2017 film, “First Reformed,” the

actor was spellbinding as a clergyman radicalized by environmental destruction, which he regards as humanity's defilement of God's creation. Hawke then delivered one of the best TV performances of the past decade as the militant abolitionist John Brown in the 2020 adaptation of James McBride's novel "The Good Lord Bird." The archetype is, of course, familiar—but Hawke imbues each of these characters with infectious zeal and a solemn, even sacred, severity.

The new series "The Lowdown," on FX, offers him another role in that irresistible mold. Its creator, the Native American writer and director Sterlin Harjo, has worked with Hawke before, on his landmark show "Reservation Dogs"; here, Hawke is cast as an indefatigable Tulsa journalist named Lee Raybon. From the start, it's evident that Lee's single-minded pursuit of the truth comes at a personal cost. His wife has left him, and his relationship with his thirteen-year-old daughter, Francis (Ryan Kiera Armstrong), is correspondingly shaky. His income, such as it is, is cobbled together from bookselling, freelance reporting, and flipping the odd work of art. He routinely gets beaten or abducted by subjects who resent his coverage. But Lee is the kind of crusader who inspires more bemusement than admiration from those around him. When a neo-Nazi breaks into his home, burns him with a cigarette, and rails against his "shitty fucking newspaper," he can't help but reply, "It's a long-form magazine!" Even a loyal reader of his work says, with a sigh, "There's nothing worse than a white man who cares."

Lee is loosely based on the self-taught historian Lee Roy Chapman, a citizen journalist who unearthed the involvement of one of Tulsa's founding fathers, Tate Brady, in the city's 1921 race massacre. Chapman, who died in 2015, at the age of forty-six, was a friend of Harjo's, as well as a colleague of his at the Oklahoma-based This Land Press. Like the character he inspired, Chapman was a Jack-of-all-trades and a dealer of rare books. But the similarities more or less end there. "The Lowdown" is a noir above all else, and the fictional Lee is unfettered by basic journalistic ethics: when he finds a stack of hundred-dollar bills in a skinhead's car, he has no qualms about treating it like a winning lottery ticket.

The show opens with the death of Dale Washberg (Tim Blake Nelson), the black sheep in a powerful Tulsa family, whose brother, Donald (Kyle

MacLachlan), is in the midst of a gubernatorial run. We hear, but don't see, the fatal gunshot. Though Dale's passing is ruled a suicide, it becomes apparent that plenty of people had reason to want him gone. Lee, who's just published an exposé about the Washbergs' ill-gotten wealth, is eager to write a follow-up. His editor advises against it. Lee's no tough guy: he's enough of an aesthete to recognize a Joe Brainard painting on a supper-club wall. But, as the genre demands, he keeps trying to get closer to the center of the action.

"The Lowdown" is a more conventional outing than "Reservation Dogs," which was energized by its formal unpredictability. Lee's adventures hew closer to a sun-drenched "Fargo," adhering to the beats of a traditional crime drama—albeit a stylish one—with professional hit men and hard-won clues. Dale, who was closeted at the time of his death, leaves behind notes stashed inside his treasured first-edition books hinting that his wife (Jeanne Tripplehorn) may have had something to do with his ostensible suicide. Donald also stood to benefit from his brother's disappearance. Lee, in turn, becomes obsessed with finding Dale's killer, and his investigation garners unwanted attention from neo-Nazi thugs and the fleece-vested moneymen who employ them. It also makes him a persona non grata among the Washbergs, particularly after he crashes a memorial for Dale in search of leads. As Lee is kicked out by security for picking a fight with Donald, he screams, accurately, if not quite justifiably, "A vote for Donald Washberg is a vote for white supremacy!"

In recent years, Oklahoma has emerged as a pop-cultural locus for America's hidden racial sins. The 2019 HBO miniseries "Watchmen" and Martin Scorsese's 2023 film, "Killers of the Flower Moon," address not only the state's history of murderously displacing Black and Native communities but also the systematic erasure of such atrocities. ("Watchmen" depicts the race massacre that Chapman investigated, in which white rioters killed as many as three hundred Black residents and decimated their once prosperous neighborhood.) "The Lowdown," at least in the five episodes allotted to critics, doesn't dig as deep as those earlier works; Harjo's show seems more focussed on visual flair, with a brown-toned palette that nods to the New Hollywood era and helps collapse the past and the present. Still, the series deftly links Donald's political agenda

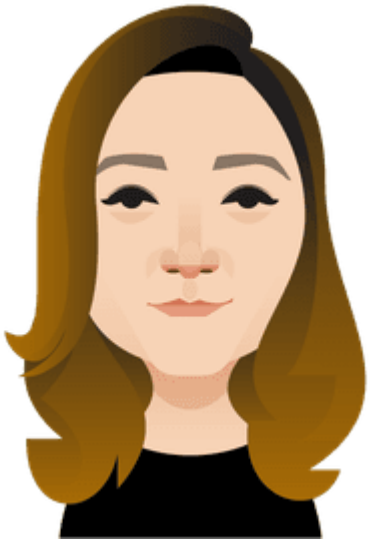
to a centuries-long struggle: the latest instance of élites embracing both official and extralegal violence to consolidate power.

Harjo, with his eye for human eccentricities, lends a pulse to stock types—chief among them a poetry-loving private investigator named Marty (Keith David). Gradually, as on “Reservation Dogs,” a crew of kooks, knuckleheads, ne’er-do-wells, and melancholics takes shape. The rapper Killer Mike makes the most of his limited screen time as the no-nonsense publisher of a local tabloid that prints Lee’s more lowbrow, retaliatory material, including the mug shots and criminal histories of some goons who assaulted him. A pair of freshly paroled cousins, supposedly affiliated with the Indian mafia, become Lee’s unlikely (and highly ineffectual) security guards; when he asks them to dispose of a vehicle that could tie him to a double murder, they set it on fire, then use the wreckage as the backdrop for a music video. And we get a glimpse of Lee’s life before the Washbergs when a former colleague, Wendell (Peter Dinklage), ropes him into an annual ritual that involves confessing their shortcomings in remembrance of a fallen friend. It’s the kind of sequence at which Harjo, whose previous series illustrated the layers of grief and guilt that bind survivors of a tragedy, excels. Noting Wendell’s depression and resentment, Lee confesses, “It’s scary to be your friend.” The self-destructive Lee’s loved ones might say the same about him.

One of “The Lowdown” ’s principal charms is watching Lee figure out which of his oddball connections will unlock the truth about Dale’s final days. Keenly aware of the divisions within Tulsa, he adopts various guises to earn the trust of potential sources; at one point, talking to the mother of a murdered white supremacist, he relies on a Confederate-flag tattoo to signal fellow-feeling. The costumes are the stuff of cinematic fantasy, but they also speak to Lee’s bone-deep familiarity with his beloved, troubled city. Hawke’s undoctored visage—a welcome anomaly in Hollywood—sells that, too, his grooved face and scraggly teeth suggesting a life lived more roughly than it had to be.

Even amid such a colorful ensemble, the motormouthed Lee stands out. His daughter initially dismisses him as a “failed writer,” but she soon gets swept up in the thrill of the chase, and later praises his journalism: “The way you

write about Tulsa . . . there's bad things about it, but, underneath, it's really good." Harjo, who still lives and works there, clearly shares his hero's affection for the city—and the recognition of both facets is central to the show's appeal. Lee is convinced that he's serving Tulsa by confronting its darkness. His job, he says, is "to set off a flare, kick up the rocks, and see what the roaches do at night." He's not the only one transfixed by the sight. ♦



Inkoo Kang, a staff writer, has been a television critic for The New Yorker since 2022.

The Current Cinema

“A Big Bold Beautiful Journey” Is None of Those Things

Kogonada’s fantasy film, starring Colin Farrell and Margot Robbie, suggests that a great directorial talent is losing his way.

By Richard Brody

September 18, 2025

In Kogonada’s new film, Colin Farrell and Margot Robbie try gamely to overcome the thinness with which their characters have been imagined.Illustration by Karlotta Freier

If movies were given scores as figure skaters are, fantasy would start with a high rating for technical difficulty. The landings of the genre are hard to stick, because fantasy, by definition, isn’t rooted in experience. No one has lived on a distant planet, in the far future, or any place where dragons or wizards rule—so, kudos to anyone who can make such realms feel truly lived in. “A Big Bold Beautiful Journey,” directed by Kogonada and written by Seth Reiss, offers a framework of fantasy that’s daringly extreme yet closely connected to ordinary realities. The story involves everyday people who need supernatural assistance to consider and appreciate their own lives. In this regard, it’s related, if distantly, to “It’s a Wonderful Life,” even if, in keeping with modern times, the angel who intervenes isn’t a kindly old gent but an interactive digital device.

Colin Farrell plays David Langley, a single man living in an unnamed city who's about to drive to a wedding but finds his car ticketed and booted. Lo and behold, he notices a sign conveniently affixed to a wall, advertising "The Car Rental Agency," as if it were the city's only one. The agency is housed in a vast, nearly empty building, where a pair of eccentric employees—a cashier (Phoebe Waller-Bridge) and a mechanic (Kevin Kline)—have only one kind of car to rent, a 1994 Saturn. They push David to get the supplementary G.P.S., and it turns out that they're contriving more than just an extra sale. The G.P.S. voice (Jodie Turner-Smith), interactive and seemingly sentient, guides David into the adventure of the title, and he shares this adventure with Sarah Myers (Margot Robbie), a woman whom he meets at the wedding and who's driving a Saturn from the same agency.

Their connection at the wedding seals their destiny, even though it's thwarted in the short term by a set of hurdles: David has been disappointed by too many women; Sarah has broken too many men's hearts. (She even self-shames as a serial cheater.) Their G.P.S.-guided journey is transparently devised to overcome their resistance to each other—by way of reconciling them to themselves. The G.P.S. voice directs both Sarah and David through a variety of landscapes containing magical doors that they must open and pass through, disappearing as they cross the thresholds and emerging in places and situations from earlier in their lives.

These episodes, mostly from their youth and mostly traumatic, are the source of Sarah's and David's negative views of romance, and of themselves. The most elaborate of them brings David back to the age of fifteen, when he was a theatre kid doing a star turn singing and dancing in a high-school production of "How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying." A girl in the cast rebuffed his declaration of love, throwing him for an enduring romantic loop. The most melodramatic return to the past finds Sarah, at the age of nineteen, arriving at a hospital an hour after her long-ailing mother has died—and blaming herself because it was a tryst that made her late. When David and Sarah go back to these early experiences, the actors' appearances are unchanged, but other characters interact with them as if they are younger versions of themselves. There are tricks, though: David meets his father (Hamish Linklater) shortly after his own

birth and meets his own teen-age self (Yuvi Hecht); Sarah and David attend the same wedding twice under different sets of circumstances.

Incarnating these flashbacks as parallel worlds brings a winning audacity to "A Big Bold Beautiful Journey." But the effect is undone by the lack of specificity with which the characters are presented, both in their current existence and in their backstories. They are ciphers, offering Farrell and Robbie none of the burrs and thorns of personality to bring texture, none of the interests and activities that flesh out a character. Nietzsche wrote that "a profession is the backbone of life," but, if the lead characters of "A Big Bold Beautiful Journey" have jobs, they are not specified. Backboneless, they slip through the film as inchoate blobs of emotion, which the script's psychobabble does little to shape. In rendering David and Sarah archetypal, the film makes them abstract and thus inconsequential. Farrell and Robbie soldier on gamely—as do several other fine actors, including Linklater, as David's father, and Lily Rabe, as Sarah's mother—trying to infuse the characters with heart and soul. The characters' faults, however, lie not in their stars but in themselves.

Kogonada's highly distinctive film career took off in 2012, with a series of critically incisive video essays on such subjects as Alfred Hitchcock, Wes Anderson, neorealism, and Yasujirō Ozu, which rapidly established him as a key figure in cinephile circles. (Kogonada, who is Korean American, adapted his pseudonym from the name of the Japanese screenwriter and longtime Ozu collaborator Kogo Noda.) Next, he wrote and directed the dramatic feature "Columbus" (2017), which is among the most notable films of the past decade—not only an engaging drama but also a work of insightful criticism and of documentary contemplation. Set in Columbus, Indiana, a city known for its unusual concentration of distinguished modern architecture, it's centered on Casey, a teen-age girl with a difficult family background whose aesthetic passion has been awakened by the city's masterworks. Kogonada anchored this intellectual coming-of-age story in keenly perceptive images of the city's buildings, as if seen through Casey's mind's eye, lending detailed and specific material reality to Casey's inner life.

When I saw Kogonada's next feature, "After Yang," from 2021, I worried. It's a futuristic story involving a humanoid robot who lives with (and surveils) a human family, but who also harbors a humanlike sensibility, which reveals itself in an affinity for photography. Like "Columbus," "After Yang" was dramatically and emotionally rooted in a sense of beauty; the visually obsessed robot is something of a relative to Casey. But, whereas Kogonada's observations in "Columbus" teemed with the textures of great architecture and of the city life it inspires, "After Yang" took place in a drastically abstracted world, which, for all the film's thoughtful and suave production design, felt bare and synthetic. The characters in the film, too, lacked the complexities and surprises of ordinary life, just as the dystopia in which it's set remains largely theoretical. If Kogonada wanted to evoke the inner impoverishment of an artificial-intelligence future, he succeeded, but it wasn't clear whether this was intentional or a by-product of the thinness with which this society was imagined and evoked.

I hoped that, whatever Kogonada did next, he would find his way back to a more concrete world, populated by the sort of people he might actually know, in a place he could explore—or that, if he continued with fantasy, he'd develop it in more granular detail. Sadly, the artifices of "A Big Bold Beautiful Journey" are more extreme than those of "After Yang" and also less specific, drawing Kogonada farther from the wellspring of his artistry. The new film tries to connect its phantasmagorical elements to regular middle-class lives, but the attempt serves both aspects poorly. The fantastic is used to sketch out familiar story lines, but the metaphysical premise remains as vague as the dramatic stakes in the lives of the characters. There's no sense of who's behind the car agency or why it exists; the movie offers no more clarity to its supernatural schemes than to its protagonists' practical circumstances.

The refinement of Kogonada's direction is never in question, but, paradoxically, it may make things worse. A less deft or more vulgar filmmaker might have endowed the formulaic emotions with an element of camp, thus at least bringing some energy and intensity to the proceedings. But the tastefulness of Kogonada's realization keeps the brazen absurdities of plot masked in sleek understatement rather than gleefully exaggerating them. The movie is nearly humorless, lacking both scripted laughs and the

unintended kind. The director adorns the screen with tangy touches of design—clothing and umbrellas in mellow primary colors, muted lighting that evokes alternative worlds with a shadowlike evanescence—but these visual tones are wasted on settings that feel as generic and stereotyped as A.I. imagery.

The result is a movie thinned out almost to the point of total insubstantiality—as close to a non-experience as I've had at the movies in a while. Once, after I'd panned a movie, a friend asked whether I was suggesting that she not see it; I said no, I was suggesting that she not enjoy it. Almost always, a movie worth critiquing at length, even negatively, is one worth seeing. Not "A Big Bold Beautiful Journey"; if the movie theatre had an ejector seat like James Bond's Aston Martin, I'd have pressed the button. At least in this regard, "A Big Bold Beautiful Journey" is an exceptional movie. ♦

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."

Poems

- **“What I Might Sing”**
  “Last Friday, I was thinking of Whitney Houston, / and, because of you, I was thinking too of America.”
- **“The Race”**
  “Who’s that on his bike / Tears on cold cheeks.”
- **“Black Walnuts”**
  “Black walnuts hitting a barn roof / Fairly rapped the morning.”

Poems

What I Might Sing

By Donika Kelly

September 22, 2025

Last Friday, I was thinking of Whitney Houston,
and, because of you, I was thinking too of America,
what I might sing of it. In elementary school,

I pledged allegiance, the opening words
still the fastest way for me to find my right hand,

for my right hand to find my heart. I struggled
to say *indivisible*—not *individual* or *invisible* but
the opposite of both. Over thirty years ago

in my home town, when I was a child
in elementary school, faithful in my recitation

to the flag, the L.A.P.D. pounded into a man's body
on the side of the freeway, caught on tape,
the camera candid, the verdict not guilty,

my neighborhood ablaze, the smoke visible
from the kitchen window and on TV.

They peeled open, too, the loose fist
of my family: my father and uncle and uncle
and my aunt's boyfriend, Virgil, almost an uncle,

and who else besides—the fist black, the state blue,
the flag limp in the classroom's corner—

monotonous metonymy. For as long as I lived
in Arkansas, my great-aunt, now eighty-eight,
who was born and will die just off Highway 79—

my great-aunt, who has a mind, mind you,
worked the polls. Before I talked with her

last Sunday I'd imagined some politic
romance, a fantasy of a Black woman, a mother
at Pleasant Home Methodist A.M.E., who remembers

Jim Crow: the peanut gallery, the back doors,
the lost jobs, big money gone, but she's still here—

I imagined her practicing her franchise,
volunteering her time, to my mind righteous.
Well. Come to find out that she didn't vote

until she was in her thirties, for Kennedy.
Come to find out that after she was fired

from Sno-White Cleaners, after thirty years
of service and no pension—well. $125
a day to work the polls, primary or general,

was decent enough; the white woman
who my aunt called an *overseer*

kind enough. The money still necessary
after my Uncle June died last year,
but the position gone, the overseer gone—

the two of us a chorus of *wells*. I was thinking
of Whitney, on the train this last Friday,

having scrolled past that video of the L.A.P.D.,
refusing to revisit the first time I saw
the machine of the state doing its oldest work.

I was remembering Whitney singing
“The Star-Spangled Banner,” her white

tracksuit, the sweat under the lights,
above her lip, her vibrato jaw—but, *Why*
was she singing? I was remembering

America, thinking of you, on my rumble home,
the anthem I used to sing along to, my hand

finding my heart because I was young
and yielded to most things. And, still, listen:
Whitney sang the shit out of that song.

Marvin, too, the year I was born, his shades
a mirror. This poem a mirror

I keep turning away from. All parts,
no whole, and damn near nothing
worth standing for.

This is drawn from “The Natural Order of Things.”

Donika Kelly is the author of the poetry collections “The Natural Order of Things,” “Bestiary,” and “The Renunciations.” She teaches at the University of Iowa.

Poems

The Race

By Seamus Heaney

September 22, 2025

The race at Clarke’s Mill
Its quick surly gleam
Under brick walls and willows

Blackwater trench
Channel of lavish
All in the ear

A hiss then and rip
Of wheels on wet tarmac
Like hot steam let off

Along the Broagh Road
Who’s that on his bike
Tears on cold cheeks

A grandfather dead
Little more than an hour
Him first with the news

Most odd to be crying
And pedalling hard
The breath of fresh air

As old as the hills
Full in his face
His eye on the road

—Seamus Heaney (1939-2013)

This is drawn from "The Poems of Seamus Heaney."

Seamus Heaney, who died in 2013, was a Nobel Prize-winning poet and translator. "The Poems of Seamus Heaney" (2025) is a volume of his collected verse.

Poems

Black Walnuts

By Seamus Heaney

September 22, 2025

Black walnuts hitting a barn roof
Fairly rapped the morning.
Massachusetts,
Autumn. Orioles and pumpkins.
And the crack of those round shells
Like a hardwood mallet hammering a wedge
Into the moment, splitting it ever open

Up ahead, letting it travel with us,
Us into it, articulated
Ongoing: whatever was to happen next
Anticipated as half-consciously
As the smack of the next mailed walnut
On the roof, but at exactly what

Interval none of us could tell.

—Seamus Heaney (1939-2013)

This is drawn from "The Poems of Seamus Heaney."

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Cartoons

- **Cartoon Caption Contest**
  Submit a caption, plus vote on other entries and finalists.
- **Cartoons from the Issue**
  Drawings from the September 29, 2025, magazine.

Puzzles & Games

- **The Crossword: Wednesday, September 17, 2025**
  A beginner-friendly puzzle.

Crossword

The Crossword: Wednesday, September 17, 2025

A beginner-friendly puzzle.

By Patrick Berry
September 17, 2025

Patrick Berry has been publishing puzzles since 1993 and lives in Athens, Georgia.