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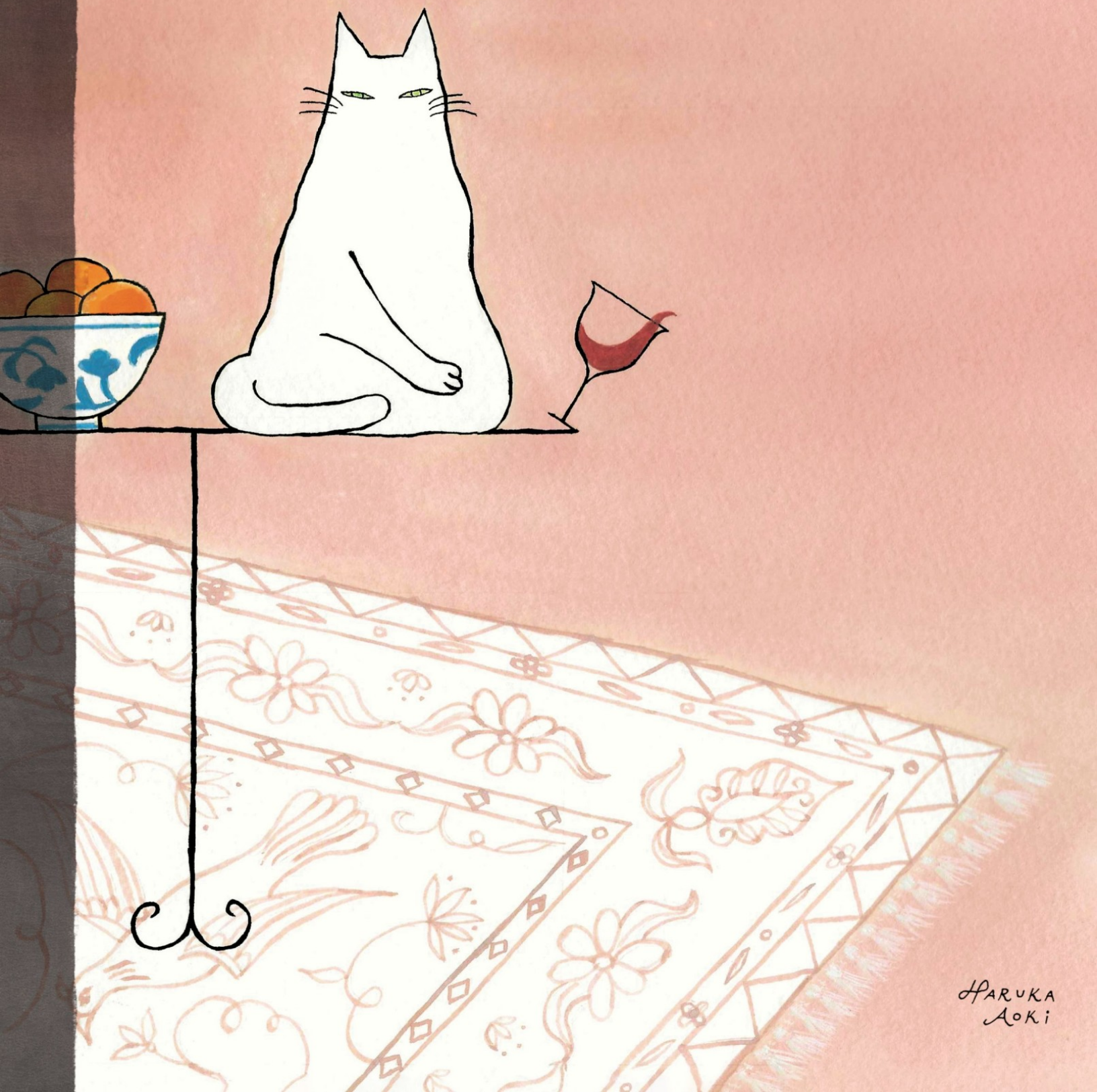

HARUKA AOKI

The New Yorker Magazine

[Jun 09]

Goings On

- **How American Photography Came Into Its Own**
  By Vince Aletti | A sprawling exhibit at the Met charts the medium’s era of busy development.

Photo Booth

How American Photography Came Into Its Own

A sprawling exhibit at the Met charts the medium’s era of busy development.

By Vince Aletti

May 24, 2025

Studio Photographer at Work. Salted paper print from glass negative, circa 1855.Photographs courtesy The Metropolitan Museum of Art

“The New Art: American Photography, 1839–1910,” at the Metropolitan Museum of Art through July 20th, is a big, sprawling show of work from the medium’s era of busy development, as one format improved on and eclipsed another, and photography became a popular art. The show’s charting of the technical and scientific refinements that led from unique

daguerreotypes to reproducible cartes de visite and stereographs help ground what could have been a dry and academic exhibition in a sense of discovery. The photographers, including a slew of amateurs and “unknown makers,” were literally taking the medium into their own hands and exploring the possibilities of a new form of expression, a new way of seeing.

Roller Skate and Boot. Albumen silver print from glass negative, 1860s.

By focussing on work made in America, “The New Art” also charts a country and a democracy defining itself bit by bit. Because a daguerreotype was the unique result of a painstaking and expensive process—wall text describes an “image formed on the surface of a silver-plated sheet of copper fumed with iodine” and “developed with hot mercury vapors”—its use was

usually reserved for studio portraiture. Posed before a painted backdrop, with drapery and props that suggest a stuffy funeral parlor, lawyers, businessmen, and society matrons, dressed as if for a wedding reception, remained absolutely still for as long as it took to fix an image, typically twenty to forty seconds at the time most of these examples were made. Each finished plate, as reflective as a mirror, was presented in a brass mat, often hinged to a silk or velvet-lined panel that closed to form a book-like case, not unlike a cosmetic compact. The Met's selection—from a private collection amassed by the American photography dealer William L. Schaeffer, and now a "promised gift" to the Met—nods to the format's association with establishment wealth and power while showcasing a decidedly democratic range of subjects: a farmer with his tools, a blacksmith behind his anvil, a dapper young man with a rooster, and two children in postmortem portraits, laid out for formal viewing.

In the beginning, photography was largely a specialists' medium, the domain of a few inventors and commercial studios. Although the daguerreotype required a high level of expertise, the process made the medium accessible to a wider range of enthusiasts. The works on view at the Met have a remarkable depth and presence, and their handsome presentation emphasizes their appeal as keepsakes. Not everyone could make a daguerreotype, but nearly everyone could own one. By the turn of the century, photography had found a proud, comfortable place in the American home.

The earliest photography was voracious and encyclopedic. There was a whole world of things that had never been seen in this particular, startlingly realistic way. People were especially intrigued by imperial, foreign, and exotic subjects: queens, presidents, and maharajahs; Gothic cathedrals, volcanic mountains, the pyramids, a herd of elephants, a rickshaw. But, as the medium became more accessible, it also became more personal. People wanted to see themselves and people like them. Photographs became not just documents but mementos, and the memories they preserved were treasured and passed on. Photographers also took note of the entirely ordinary and ephemeral things around them: a shelf of glassware, a broom in a courtyard, a tree, a leaf. This is especially evident as the show builds from format to format—including tintypes, ambrotypes, paper prints, and

stereographs, each an improvement on the last where the maker's control was concerned. Although a number of images are credited to known studios or established photographers like Alice Austen, Carleton Watkins, Mathew Brady, and Eadweard Muybridge, there are no trophies here, and much of the modern work is by little-known or unknown makers. The best curators are not just connoisseurs or experts in their fields; they have something undefinable, something that "taste" doesn't really cover—an understanding, sympathetic, and discerning eye that sees beyond the surface to something emotional and hard to pin down. "The New Art," curated by Jeff Rosenheim, the reliably sharp and witty head curator of the museum's department of photographs, is full of pictures chosen for what they convey about their moment in history: Atlanta in ruins in 1866, the shattered façade of a building that barely survived the San Francisco earthquake, the scars of a formerly enslaved man in the famous image "The Scourged Back."

But the vernacular and ahistorical images are what give the show its rich, tangy flavor. One favorite is Austen's dreamy image of a group of men and women lounging in the woods by a lake in the summer of 1888; dappled sunlight gives the image echoes of Monet. Many of the pictures have a surreal or a comic edge: a study of a woman's leather boot strapped onto a roller skate; a stereo view of a stack of giant hailstones; an alarming portrait of Isaac W. Sprague, the "Living Skeleton." One picture shows a child standing next to a display of astronomical instruments—a readymade that Yves Tanguy would have envied. All history should be this surprising and engaging, a leisurely guided tour expertly arranged and wide open to discovery.

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

The Talk of the Town

- **The Victims of the Trump Administration’s China-Bashing**
  By Michael Luo | A Cold War-era report is a reminder of how long suspicion has trailed people of Chinese descent in the U.S.
- **How Many Naomis Does It Take to Deconstruct “Doppelganger”?**
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- **A First Kiss from America’s First Woman in Space**
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- **The Meatpacking District Packs It In**
  By Ian Frazier | As the market prepares to vacate the West Village, a veteran meatpacker recalls the area in the days of fat-slicked cobblestones, before the Whitney and the High Line.

Comment

The Victims of the Trump Administration's China-Bashing

A Cold War-era report is a reminder of how long suspicion has trailed people of Chinese descent in the U.S.

By Michael Luo

June 8, 2025

Photo illustration by Cristiana Couceiro; Source photographs from Getty

Everett F. Drumright, the American consul-general in Hong Kong, believed that the United States was confronting a grave threat to its national security. It was 1955, and the consular officers were being besieged by Chinese people seeking to flee the mainland and immigrate to the U.S., claiming that they were American citizens through a parent. According to Drumright, virtually all of them were relying on fictitious documents. He issued an eighty-nine-page report, laden with racist insinuations and filled with alarm about the infiltration of the country by "Chinese Communist agents," in

which he warned that China was poised to exploit America's immigration system "to the service of her purposes alone."

Soon after Drumright submitted his report, federal prosecutors embarked on a wide-ranging probe of the Chinese community. In New York, prosecutors announced that they had uncovered a vast criminal scheme that had smuggled into the U.S. thousands of immigrants, including Communist agents with "concealed skills," planted, as one newspaper put it, by the "Red Chinese government." Prosecutors ultimately brought cases against nearly sixty defendants—laundrymen, dishwashers, and others—on assorted immigration-fraud charges. Yet the findings revealed nothing like the elaborate espionage operation that Drumright had laid out.

Late last month, Secretary of State Marco Rubio announced that the Trump Administration would begin "aggressively revoking" the visas of Chinese students, including those studying in "critical fields" and those "with connections to the Chinese Communist Party." (The Party has some ninety-nine million members and is intertwined with nearly all aspects of Chinese life.) The announcement is the latest effort in the Administration's apparent attempt to force a rupture between China and the U.S. In April, it imposed punitive new tariffs on China, only to pause them, as the two nations agreed to continue trade negotiations. (Last Thursday, President Trump said that he and China's leader, Xi Jinping, had "a very good phone call" and would hold a new round of talks.) At the end of May, Trump officials blocked exports to China of certain technologies, including those related to jet engines and semiconductors. In another move that seems calculated to send a message to Beijing, the Justice Department announced charges last week against two researchers—"citizens of the People's Republic of China"—for allegedly smuggling into the country last summer a fungus that causes "head blight" in grains and, prosecutors said, is a "potential agroterrorism weapon."

The Drumright report is a reminder of how long suspicion has trailed people of Chinese descent in the U.S. Donald Trump, during his first term, reportedly said, referring to China, that "almost every student that comes over to this country is a spy." A recent survey by the Asian American

Foundation found that forty per cent of Americans believe that Asian Americans are more loyal to their countries of origin than to the U.S.

Chinese citizens studying in the U.S. have long provided a connection between the two countries. In 1854, Yung Wing became the first Chinese graduate of an American university, earning a diploma from Yale. In 1872, with the support of the Qing government, he established the Chinese Educational Mission, which brought a hundred and twenty Chinese pupils to New England. In 1881, as anger over immigration rose, Chinese officials shuttered the mission. The following year, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, barring laborers from entering the country. A coterie of missionaries, diplomats, and business leaders pressed to ease entry for students. By the early twentieth century, hundreds of Chinese students were on American campuses. When Mao Zedong's Communist Party seized power, in 1949, nearly four thousand found themselves stranded in the U.S. and suddenly objects of suspicion. Federal agents subjected them to interrogations and even incarceration. It took several years before the hysteria faded. In 1965, a sweeping new law finally placed Chinese—and other Asian—immigrants on equal footing with everyone else trying to enter the U.S. In 1979, Deng Xiaoping, set on modernizing his nation, restored diplomatic relations between the countries, and Chinese students began arriving in earnest. Their numbers surged again in the mid-aughts, as China's increasingly robust economy became integrated with the global economic order.

Today, there are two hundred and seventy-seven thousand Chinese students in America. Many of them were children during the aughts, when China's market was opening up. Liwei Zhang—not his real name—was born in Beijing, the son of a police officer and a nurse. When Zhang was four, his parents bought him a boxed set of Disney DVDs, and he watched them all. His favorite was "Winnie the Pooh." When he got older, he binged television shows like "How I Met Your Mother" and "Breaking Bad."

Zhang's English improved rapidly, and all that TV-watching influenced his world view. He came to understand that people in other countries lived differently from those in China, ruled by an authoritarian regime. He enrolled in a prestigious university near his home, but bridled at the

required propagandistic classes. For his junior year, he won a scholarship to attend a university in California, where he thrived. He returned to Beijing resolving to apply to graduate school in the U.S., only for the pandemic to intervene. Eventually, he enrolled in a journalism program on the West Coast. After getting his degree, he landed a job at the school, taking advantage of a special extension of his student visa for additional training in his field.

Earlier this year, Zhang started seeing reports on Chinese social media of students whose visas were cancelled and whose legal status had been terminated. Word spread that many of them had previously had encounters with the legal system, even for a minor infraction. (In late April, federal officials revealed that they had run students' names through a computerized index that includes criminal-history information.) A few years ago, Zhang got a speeding ticket. Now he worried that this made him vulnerable. He said that he and his peers feel a "constant sense of panic."

The United States' diplomatic approach to China has long oscillated between conflicting credos—either that it represents an existential threat on the geopolitical stage or that it should be engaged as a potential partner. President Trump's dial is perpetually set on bellicose. Last Wednesday, he issued a proclamation targeting international students at Harvard, in which he repeatedly invoked the Chinese menace and accused China and other "foreign adversaries" of "exploiting the student visa program for improper purposes." The alarm rings familiar, and so does the cost of overreach. ♦

Michael Luo is an executive editor at The New Yorker. His first book, "Strangers in the Land: Exclusion, Belonging, and the Epic Story of the Chinese in America," was published in April, 2025.

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Meetup

How Many Naomis Does It Take to Deconstruct “Doppelganger”?

Inspired by Naomi Klein’s best-seller about the headache of being confused with Naomi Wolf, Naomi Becker decided to have a Prospect Park picnic for her fellow-Naomis.

By Jane Bua

June 9, 2025

Illustration by João Fazenda

At any given moment, there may well be a number of people named Naomi scattered across Prospect Park’s five hundred-odd acres. But, on a recent cloudy Saturday afternoon, the population peaked on a patch of grass labelled “Barbecue Area.” Sitting in a duck-duck-goose circle, on top of colorful blankets, were citizens tall and short, young and slightly older—all with one common denominator.

“I’ve never met another Naomi!” one said, looking around the group.

“I’m really bad with names, so this is such a relief,” another said.

“Should we do introductions?”

“I’m Naomi. I work in software.”

“I’m Naomi. I’m a student at Barnard.”

“I’m Naomi. I work in employee relations, but I’m going to law school in the fall!” Congratulations rippled around the circle.

“I sell wine for an importer.”

“I’m a writer.”

Also a writer? The Naomi who inspired this council: the author and activist Naomi Klein. In her book “Doppelganger,” Klein talks about being frequently mistaken for Naomi Wolf, the third-wave feminist turned anti-vax conspiracy theorist. “I read the back cover and I thought, This would be really fun to talk about with other Naomis,” Naomi Becker, the meetup’s organizer, said.

Back in March, Becker, a thirty-one-year-old data manager at an immigration-advocacy organization, started putting up flyers that read “Is Your Name Naomi?,” inviting Naomis (and Nomis and Noemis and Naomys) to discuss the book and the name that inspired it. The flyer included a map with an arrow pointing to a vague spot.

“I was very grateful for the sign,” one said, referring to a piece of cardboard with “*NAOMI*” sketched in black marker, which Becker had propped on a nearby fence. She had also designed a bingo board with Naomi-themed squares: “Find a Naomi who goes by their middle name.” “Find a Naomi who prefers savory over sweet.” “Find a Naomi who saw Beyoncé this week.” “Find a Naomi who moved to New York within the past year.”

“Where is everybody from?”

“I’m from Houston.”

“I was born in Eritrea, but I grew up in Arkansas.”

One Naomi hailed from Kyoto, where the name is written with a character for “beauty.”

“I always go by the Japanese definition versus other definitions, like ‘pleasant,’ ” another Naomi, a barista, said. “I’d rather be beautiful.”

Becker, who wore two-tone glasses and dangly crescent-moon earrings, made efforts to steer conversation toward Klein’s book. “Should we talk about it?” she asked eagerly.

“I’m twelve pages in,” one admitted.

“I didn’t read it.”

Becker herself had only finished it that morning. “It’s quite grim,” she told the group. “Sorry for everyone that’s been traumatized.”

“Could someone run through the book structure?” a negligent Naomi asked.

“It’s about Naomi Wolf and how she kind of went off the rails,” Becker began. “It goes into *Covid*, and how we had this opportunity to reinvent the world and that just didn’t happen—in part, Naomi Klein’s thesis is, due to Naomi Wolf’s misinformation.”

But, before anyone could chime in, someone walked up to the group.

“Are you Naomi?”

“I am!”

Ultimately, general Naomi-hood seemed to be a more appealing subject.

“Is anyone here left-handed?” Silence. “O.K., statistically normal.”

Nicknames: “Does anyone have people that call them I-moan, like ‘Naomi’ backwards?”

Worst pronunciation: “In elementary school, a kid called me Wyoming.”

“I’ve gotten Natalie and Nicole.”

“Those are the ones you find on the key chains,” someone responded.

An awkward silence settled over the group. It was relieved by the appearance of another woman, who’d hesitantly approached the mosaic of blankets.

“Are you Naomi?”

“I’m Naomi!”

About an hour and a half in, clouds had thinned and the sun was cutting through keyholes. Attempts at book discussion had petered out. A few late Naomis had straggled in, and the group had divided into smaller units to chitchat. Topics abounded: Scotland, dating, 9/11, perfume, Turkish delight. One Naomi had just published a novel set in Philadelphia. “Our next meetup can be for your book!” another replied.

Some passersby eyed the group. “Maybe they’re all named Naomi, but they’re too shy to join,” someone said.

Soon, disbanding was under way. One by one, the Naomis bid a bittersweet adieu to their doppelgängers.

“I feel like we’re breaking up!” one exclaimed on the way out.

A lone Naomi once again, Becker folded up her orange checked blanket. “I’m delighted,” she said. The afternoon was a success—even if Naomi Klein herself never showed. Becker had reached out to her via her website. She didn’t bother reaching out to Klein’s unsavory double, Naomi Wolf.

Word of the event did reach Klein, from more than six different sources. She passed along her thanks, but said that she was unable to pop down from Canada. Klein was wary of the concept, anyway. “I’ve had enough trouble dealing with one other Naomi,” she said. “Twenty Naomis might be my worst nightmare.” ♦

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

Visiting Dignitary

Jacinda Ardern’s Overseas Experience

New Zealand’s ex-Prime Minister, an anti-Trump icon during *COVID*, revisited her impoverished New York days, when she slept on a couch and loitered at the Strand.

By Andrew Marantz

June 9, 2025

Illustration by João Fazenda

When Stephen Colbert landed in New Zealand in 2019, his ride from the airport was Jacinda Ardern, the Prime Minister. They filmed a segment in her car, greeting rubberneckers and singing “Bohemian Rhapsody”; the

filming continued at her house, culminating in a barbecue with the second most important woman in the country, Lorde. (Peter Jackson, the third member of the Kiwi Power Trinity, appeared on “Colbert” later that week.) Those were Ardern’s glory days. She was in her thirties, the youngest Prime Minister in New Zealand’s history. Her brand at the time was something like the Obama of the antipodes: a liberal media darling, icon of the global anti-Trump resistance, transitioning smoothly from lofty oratory to easygoing relatability. After a mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, Obama gave a poignant speech and called for an assault-weapons ban, which didn’t pass; after a mass shooting at two mosques in Christchurch, Ardern gave a poignant speech and called for an assault-weapons ban, which did. At the U.N. General Assembly, Trump rambled from the lectern (“My Administration has accomplished more than almost any Administration”); Ardern sat next to her fiancé, Clark Gayford, who held their newborn in his arms.

Then came *COVID*, and New Zealand’s lockdowns—unusually effective, but also unusually draconian. They were popular for a while, but then protesters set up camp outside Parliament. Ardern’s approval rating plummeted. In 2023, she declined to run for a third term. (“I no longer have enough in the tank.”) Since then, she has settled for being the Right Honorable Dame Jacinda Ardern, with a fellowship at Harvard’s Kennedy School. She lives in Cambridge with Gayford, who is now her husband, and their daughter, Neve, who is now six. “She’s a really good traveller, and we’ve taken her on the Acela to New York a few times,” Ardern said the other day, stepping out of a black S.U.V. near Union Square. “Last time, we bought her a little Statue of Liberty souvenir—the kind that makes noise when you squeeze it—which I regretted immediately.”

Ardern, wearing a jean jacket and white Chuck Taylors, was in town to promote her new memoir, “A Different Kind of Power,” and a new documentary about her time in office, called “Prime Minister.” Much of the footage was filmed at home, by Gayford, and the movie includes a few glimpses that only an in-house cinematographer could have captured (Ardern putting Neve down in her crib, then curling up in bed to read stacks of public-health reports; Ardern in a bathrobe, looking exhausted, saying, “Today, we’re basically going to close the borders”). Late in the film, while

she picks out what to wear to her resignation speech, Gayford, from behind the camera, floats the idea that she could have stayed in the job longer if only she had learned to delegate more. Ardern, with a cockeyed glare, suggests that he strike his “full-blown mansplain” from the record. “The doco isn’t the most fun thing for me to watch,” she said. “I’m glad it exists, for posterity, but I’m not sure how eager I am to rewatch it.”

“I’m extremely confident about your case now that breaking the law doesn’t carry the stigma that it used to.”
Cartoon by David Sipress

She ducked into the Strand and breezed past a table of new nonfiction, where her own book was displayed, with her toothy grin on the cover. “That isn’t why I came here, I swear,” she said, heading for the basement. “The poetry was down here, if I recall.” For many young New Zealanders, an O.E., or “overseas experience,” is a rite of passage. Ardern spent hers, in 2005, sleeping on a friend’s couch in Park Slope. “She was an organizer with a local trade union, and I didn’t have a job,” Ardern said. She volunteered at a soup kitchen, walked around listening to “too much James Blunt,” and browsed in bookstores, reading inventory she couldn’t afford to buy. “There was also a bialy place I absolutely fell in love with,” she said. “And I got this”—an earring in her tragus, the cartilage near her jawbone —“so I guess I still carry around a bit of New York with me.”

The poetry section had moved upstairs; she found it and leafed through some classics—Pablo Neruda, Wisława Szymborska. (Once the anti-Trump, always the anti-Trump.) In the travel section, she spotted another old favorite, “Endurance: Shackleton’s Incredible Voyage.” (Even this had a promotional tie-in: “Prime Minister” features footage of Ardern trekking through Antarctica, in support of climate-change research.)

She bought a copy and walked east. Finishing a cup of coffee, she made for a trash can, then hesitated. “Will this be recycled?” she said. “The cup is fully compostable.” A block later, a white-haired old lady elbowed her out of the way. Only in New York. “I was walking pretty slowly,” Ardern said. “So that’s on me.” ♦

Andrew Marantz is a staff writer at The New Yorker and the author of “Antisocial: Online Extremists, Techno-Utopians, and the Hijacking of the American Conversation.”

Trailblazer Dept.

A First Kiss from America’s First Woman in Space

Tam O’Shaughnessy came out as Sally Ride’s partner of twenty-seven years when she wrote of the relationship in Ride’s obituary.

By Michael Schulman

June 9, 2025

Illustration by João Fazenda

The other day, amid throngs of schoolkids, a septuagenarian woman with a puff of gray hair, in a black turtleneck and pearl earrings, stepped into the Rose Center for Earth and Space. “I remember coming here in the early

nineties," the woman, Tam O'Shaughnessy, said. "When we came, no one recognized Sally. It was perfect for her. We were just two citizens." Sally was Sally Ride, who in 1983 became the first American woman in space. O'Shaughnessy was her partner of twenty-seven years, a fact that became public only when Ride died, in 2012, and O'Shaughnessy wrote herself into the obituary.

O'Shaughnessy tells the full story of their relationship in a National Geographic documentary, "Sally," which is due out next week. "She was a pretty hard-core introvert," O'Shaughnessy said. "I'm an introvert, but I think I like people more than Sally did." She stood on a walkway surrounding the planetarium sphere. She and Ride met when they were twelve and thirteen, respectively, at a tennis tournament in Redlands, California. "We were standing in line, and I noticed this young girl ahead of me," she recalled. "When the line started moving forward, she suddenly rose up on her toes and walked on her toes a few steps. It just cracked me up. I thought it was the funniest, quirkiest thing I'd ever seen."

They became friends and remained in touch. Ride went to Stanford to study physics; O'Shaughnessy joined the first-ever professional women's tennis circuit, the Virginia Slims. Watching a Swedish tennis player on the court one day, she realized that she was having what she called "very gay" feelings. Buoyed by the gay-liberation movement, she came out as queer. Ride, meanwhile, was selected by *NASA*'s Astronaut Corps, in 1978, and married her fellow-astronaut Steven Hawley, in 1982. But she and O'Shaughnessy were still orbiting each other. As Ride was preparing to go to space, O'Shaughnessy said, "she called to say hi, and to say, 'You want to come to my launch?' " O'Shaughnessy watched the shuttle take off from a mile or two away, as one of Ride's fifty guests. "We could hear Mission Control counting off. People had picnic baskets out on the grass. When the countdown got to 'Ten . . . nine . . . eight,' everybody got so excited."

Ride's expedition made her a household name, but she hated fame—in contrast to Katy Perry and the other pop-culture space tourists on Lauren Sánchez's recent Blue Origin flight. "That was ridiculous," O'Shaughnessy said. "Sally always liked the *work*. She never did things for the awards or the celebrity."

In 1985, Ride visited O’Shaughnessy in Atlanta, where she was studying biology. They sat on a couch near O’Shaughnessy’s cocker spaniel. “I bent over to pet her, and I felt Sally’s hand on my lower back,” she recalled. “It was a little bit of a surprise, because friends don’t typically do that! I turned to look at her eyes, and she looked like she was in love. We kissed, and it was basically all over.”

Ride divorced Hawley, and after a few years O’Shaughnessy moved to La Jolla to live with her. But Ride remained closeted even to friends, which frustrated O’Shaughnessy. “We did everything together,” she said. “But she just never uttered the words ‘Come meet my partner, Tam.’ ” They co-wrote children’s books and, in 2001, founded Sally Ride Science, a science-education company. “We made the conscious decision not to be open to the public,” O’Shaughnessy went on, passing a display about atoms and quarks. “Sally had some *quarks*, that’s for sure,” she said, laughing. “I wanted her to be open with people she cared about. I could care less if the rest of the world knew. I understood she had a lot to lose.”

In 2011, Ride found out that she had pancreatic cancer. The couple became certified domestic partners, to insure hospital-visitation rights. “We had a notary come over. Then we had our traditional beer and saltine crackers with melted Brie,” O’Shaughnessy said. As Ride was dying, O’Shaughnessy asked how to identify herself to the world. Ride answered, “You decide.” “I wrote the obituary a few days before Sally died, for our website,” she said. “And then it went viral.”

She paused at a model of the moon and caressed its craters. When Ride talked about being in space, she recalled looking back at Earth’s atmosphere. “She’d describe it as this thin, fuzzy blue line, almost like the fuzz on a tennis ball,” O’Shaughnessy said. “The way she would always describe being in space is that she loved floating free.” ♦

Michael Schulman, a staff writer, has contributed to The New Yorker since 2006. He is the author of "Oscar Wars: A History of Hollywood in Gold, Sweat, and Tears" and "Her Again: Becoming Meryl Streep."

Endangered Species

The Meatpacking District Packs It In

As the market prepares to vacate the West Village, a veteran meatpacker recalls the area in the days of fat-slicked cobblestones, before the Whitney and the High Line.

By Ian Frazier

June 9, 2025

Illustration by João Fazenda

You pronounce John T. Jobbagy's last name with the accent on the first syllable: "*Joe*-bagee." The two "b"s sound like one and the "g" is hard. It's

not the kind of name you run into every day. Like all surnames ending in “agy,” “Jobbagy” is Hungarian. The family has worked in Manhattan’s meatpacking district for a hundred and twenty-five years. As his forebears did, Jobbagy arrives at work at four in the morning. He makes the two-mile trip from his apartment, in Stuyvesant Town, by car and does not drive much beyond that. His Lexus is twelve years old and has about eighteen thousand miles on it.

Jobbagy runs J.T. Jobbagy, Inc., whose packinghouse is near the corner of Little West Twelfth Street and Washington Street, by the far western end of Fourteenth. He is tall, long-armed and -legged, and totally at home in the neighborhood (fist bumps, quick conversations with passersby). He serves as the president of the Gansevoort Market Co-op. The other morning, Jobbagy, dressed in jeans and a light-brown ball cap, had breakfast with Jeffrey LeFrancois, the executive director of the Meatpacking District Management Association. The two met at Hector’s, a longtime local diner, and talked, while a guy they’d asked to join them, who brought along a notebook, tried to keep up.

Outside it was pouring. Jobbagy said that on days like this you hated to get wet on your way to work, and then to have to stand all day in a thirty-three-degree meat locker. LeFrancois, who wore a well-tailored suit with a pocket square, comes from northeastern Connecticut, on the far side of the line that divides the state’s Yankees fans from its Red Sox fans. Although he’s been a New Yorker for years, he could never root for the Yankees, he said. The blocks around Gansevoort Street have housed New York’s meat suppliers since the nineteenth century. When the city temporarily declined in the nineteen-seventies, the area remained a busy market, with some residential use. The person with the notebook had lived on Gansevoort Street in 1974 and remembered the cobblestones slick with fat and the wee-hours prostitution.

Now the raindrop splashes in the cobblestones’ puddles could have been a sign of the place itself effervescing into a new state of being. By this fall, all the meatpacking firms will be gone—relocated to the huge wholesale-market space at Hunts Point, in the Bronx, and to Red Hook, in Brooklyn. LeFrancois and Jobbagy batted the neighborhood’s sequential high points

back and forth. It started to become fashionable in the eighties. Certain clubs and restaurants led the way. The meat cutters would show up for work just as many of the clubgoers were going home. Pastis, Keith McNally's restaurant, became an anchor. Two local guys had the idea of turning the derelict elevated railroad tracks into a garden walkway—the High Line. Jobbagy said, "When the High Line came in, in early 2009, the place exploded."

LeFrancois said, "The neighborhood began getting millions of visitors a year. I saw Gwyneth Paltrow sitting at an outdoor table." In 2015, the Whitney Museum relocated to Gansevoort Street.

"Before the Whitney made that decision, they asked us, the meatpackers, if we were comfortable with it. We were, but we appreciated that they asked," Jobbagy said.

LeFrancois picked up the check, and Jobbagy took the person with the notebook to his packinghouse. Under the marquee were railings for sliding carcasses in off trucks, and garlands of sharp, shiny meat hooks hung at the ready. Inside the meat locker itself, among the hanging half carcasses, it was cold, claustrophobic, and terrifying.

Back on the street, Jobbagy said that he would not be moving to Hunts Point. "I'm going to retire, and close J.T. Jobbagy down," he said. "I'll be sixty-nine this year, and I've been in the market since I started working for my dad when I was fourteen. Look at Fourteenth Street here—it's more than sixty feet wide, with twenty feet of sidewalk. The semi trucks used to back up to the buildings of both sides. A single lane of traffic could barely get between them. The trucks came from Illinois, Iowa, Nebraska, Colorado, and Kansas. Huge, burly guys were tossing full carcasses out the backs. The underground refrigeration system was cooling all the buildings, hundreds of meat cutters were filling orders for stores and restaurants all over the city, delivery vans coming and going—you've never seen anything like it."

Behind him, mannequins in dresses leaned in the window of a boutique. "I used to wonder if my family's journey was a straight line or a circle," he went on. "Today, I'm at the same place where my grandfather got his first

job when he came ashore from Ellis Island, a hundred and twenty-five years ago. Now I know that the journey is a circle. I'm ending where he began." ♦

Ian Frazier, a staff writer at The New Yorker, is the author of "Paradise Bronx: The Life and Times of New York's Greatest Borough."

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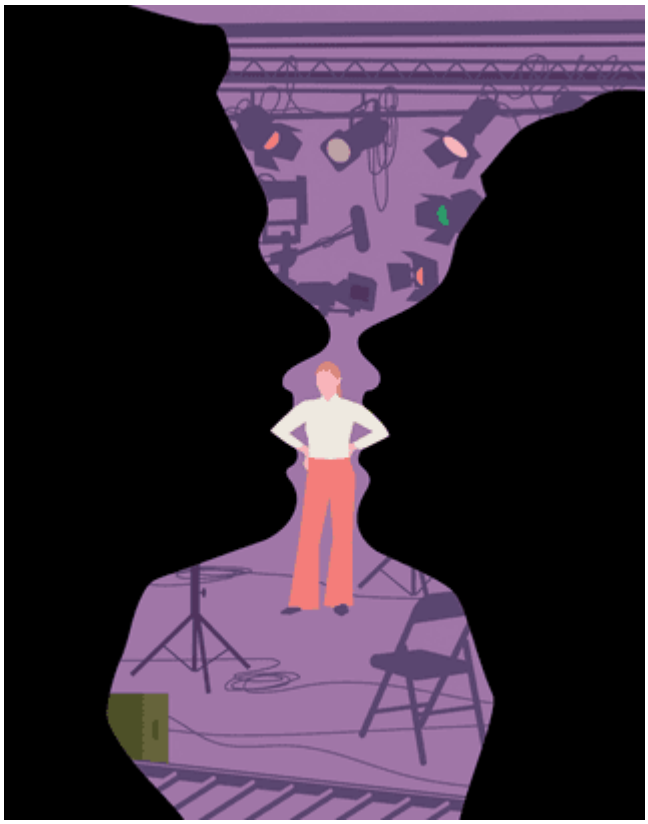
Annals of Hollywood

How I Learned to Become an Intimacy Coördinator

At a sex-choreography workshop, a writer learned about Instant Chemistry exercises, penis pouches, and nudity riders to train for Hollywood's most controversial job.

By Jennifer Wilson

June 9, 2025



Instead of "kiss," one might say, "close the distance between your mouths."Illustration by Ben Wiseman

Earlier this year—Valentine's Day weekend, to be precise—I found myself sitting on the floor of a loft in downtown Los Angeles with eight other adults, learning how to fake an orgasm. We had been told to make three

“oo” sounds punctuated by a sharp inhale. Next, we bit our lower lips and exhaled on the letter “V.” “Vuh, vuh, *vuhhhhhhh*,” we harmonized. After a few rounds of this, I started feeling out of breath. A scene from “Barbarella” in which Jane Fonda’s character, strapped into an orgasmatron by a mad scientist, nearly expires from pleasure flashed before my eyes. At the front of the room was our conductor, Yehuda Duenyas, a lithe fifty-one-year-old in a pewter-colored sweatshirt that matched his graying faux-hawk. After our final exhale, he leaped up from a stool and gave each of us a fist bump, adding a heartfelt “Good work!”

I was participating in a four-day sex-choreography workshop run by CINTIMA, which Duenyas co-founded in 2023. It is one of twelve certification programs accredited by *SAG-AFTRA* to train intimacy coördinators. It is a new job—so new, in fact, that the union offers a definition on its website: “an advocate, a liaison between actors and production, and a movement coach and/or choreographer” of sex scenes. My CINTIMA classmates were hoping to join a rapidly professionalizing field. In April, for example, the Intimacy Professional Summit, a three-day conference in Minneapolis for intimacy coördinators, featured panels such as “Sex Parties, Orgies, and Other Large Scenes” and, for those interested in depicting, say, Regency-era raunch, “Romancing the Past.”

Just seven years ago, the picture was quite different. It was January of 2018, during the early, eruptive months of the #MeToo movement. James Franco —days after wearing a Time’s Up pin at the Golden Globes—was publicly accused of sexual misconduct by several women, including two from his Studio 4 acting school, where he taught a class on sex scenes. They told the Los Angeles *Times* that, among other accusations, the actor removed actresses’ genital guards during scenes of simulated oral sex. (Franco denied the allegations and later settled a class-action lawsuit, brought by the students, for $2.2 million.) At the time, he was starring in the HBO series “The Deuce,” about the rise of the pornography industry in New York City in the nineteen-seventies.

Executives at HBO learned about a woman in New York City who was calling herself an “intimacy coordinator.” Alicia Rodis had been a fight director who had developed a specialty in choreographing sexual-assault

scenes after working on Off Off Broadway productions such as “The Rape of Lucrece.” The network asked Rodis to implement safety protocols on set. The producer “sounded like he was calling a prostitute,” she told me. “He said, ‘I see that you offer a service, and I think we need this service.’ He was, like, ‘I promise, I’m a producer.’ ” Soon, news stories about Franco’s misconduct were eclipsed by ones about Rodis’s hiring. “How Do You Play a Porn Star in the #MeToo Era? With Help from an ‘Intimacy Director,’ ” read one headline in the New York *Times*.

In October, HBO announced that all its productions would be staffed with an intimacy coördinator. Six months earlier, Netflix had hired its first intimacy coördinator—Ita O’Brien, a movement professor in the U.K.—for the teen sex comedy “Sex Education.” Claire Warden, a fight choreographer, became Broadway’s first, working with Audra McDonald and Michael Shannon on “Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune,” a bedroom play about two New Yorkers who consider extending their one-night stand.

What was once a curio of a career was on its way to becoming an industry standard—and an object of intense public fascination and borderline-prurient media attention. “Did you work with an intimacy coördinator?” became a common press-tour question. *Us Weekly* even compiled a listicle, “Everything Celebrities Have Said About Working with Intimacy Coordinators on TV and Movie Sets”; Emma Stone called working with one on “Poor Things” “extremely, extremely meaningful.” In contrast, Michael Caine told the *Daily Mail*, “In my day you just did the love scene and got on with it.” The role became an irresistible late-night punch line. In 2022, Chris Pine, on “The Late Late Show with James Corden,” spoke about filming a sex scene in “All the Old Knives” with his co-star Thandiwe Newton and having “this little woman tapping you on the shoulder going, ‘No, I don’t think you would wrap your arm around her quite like that,’ and giving you notes on how to have sex, essentially.” Corden quipped, “I would actually quite like this in my marriage.” (He’s in luck: O’Brien, Pine’s intimacy coördinator, just published “Intimacy: A Field Guide to Finding Connection and Feeling Your Deep Desires,” with a foreword by Gillian Anderson.)

Since then, the conversation around intimacy coördinators has grown spikier. In December, in an “Actors on Actors” interview with Pamela Anderson for *Variety*, Mikey Madison said that she and her “Anora” co-star Mark Eydelshteyn had turned down the director’s offer of an intimacy coördinator. Madison had wanted to “keep things small,” she said, and suggested that one hadn’t been necessary precisely because she was playing a sex worker: “It’s just what she has to do. So I think I also, as an actress, approached it in a way of it being a job.” The clip went viral, with many commenters criticizing the director, Sean Baker, for not insisting on an intimacy coördinator given the film’s subject matter. Controversy flared again in March, when Gwyneth Paltrow, while promoting her upcoming movie “Marty Supreme,” told *Vanity Fair* that being given specific choreography for sex scenes (“ ‘O.K., and then he’s going to put his hand *here*’ ”) would make her feel “very stifled.” A few days later, the *Guardian* published an op-ed titled “#YouToo, Gwyneth Paltrow?”

Intimacy coördinators are one of the most visible “wins” of the #MeToo movement. It’s no surprise that the public has begun to perceive a director’s or a star’s attitude toward them as a proxy for his or her attitude about consent and abuse of power. *How fair was that*? I wondered, mid-fake orgasm. To supporters, intimacy coördination was part of a necessary cultural reset. To critics, it was a cynical H.R. maneuver, there to shield studios from lawsuits. What kind of work was this job actually doing?

Walking into the loft in L.A., I had been greeted by Duenyas and his two co-founders—Jaclyn Chantel, an intimacy coördinator who worked on “Westworld” and the “American Gigolo” reboot, and Jimanekia Eborn, a sex educator and the host of the podcast “Trauma Queen.” Eborn was drinking from a water bottle covered in stickers of vibrators and a decal of a vulva with the words “Clean is not a smell.”

I recognized them from CINTIMA’s required online training, which consisted of sixty hours of video across three modules. The first reviewed what kinds of scenes call for an intimacy coördinator. “A secretive longing glance across the table, while it could be a fire moment and while definitely intimate, wouldn’t necessarily be under the purview of our jobs,” Duenyas

explained onscreen, unless an actor “was to slide their foot up the other actor’s leg and press it into their crotch.”

The second module offered “Sex Ed.” CINTIMA prides itself on insuring its trainees are comfortable with the language of various sexual subcultures; at the end of the module a quiz asked questions such as “What is the primary reason people engage in Edge Play?” (Not to be confused with edging.) The last module covered contracts, preproduction meetings, and pay scales. (Intimacy coördinators are encouraged to quote the union rate for stunt coördinators—twelve hundred and fifty dollars a day.) There was also a section about on-set “intimacy kits,” which basically consist of what you’d pack for a high-stakes first date: mints, deodorant, camel-toe concealers (a.k.a. front-wedgie inserts).

Soon, the other trainees filed in. I thought they might be crunchy types, like doulas there to birth a new, gentler Hollywood. In fact, most were already working in production—art direction, wardrobe. A woman in her early twenties named Grace had been a hair-and-makeup assistant; when, on set, she saw two preteen actresses having to kiss each other with their parents watching, she decided to become an advocate for less mortifying working conditions.

For one of our first in-person lessons, we gathered around a table lined with silver mannequin torsos. Scattered beneath them was the latest in barely-there wardrobe technology—strapless thongs, penis pouches, pasties. (Duenyas’s background is in experimental theatre and burlesque; he used to strip at the Box, an erotic night club in New York, where he became known for a saucy routine involving a mannequin leg.) He recommended a brand of flesh-toned body tape called K-Tape, noting that it also came in green and could thus be easily painted out in postproduction. “Are the pouches one size fits all?” Giselle, a cheery woman in her forties from Yorkshire, England, asked. “No, there are different pouch profiles,” Duenyas replied diplomatically.

Cartoon by Will McPhail

“Whenever I tell people I’m taking this course, they ask me what happens if an actor gets an erection,” Grace said. This was the perfect segue to a discussion of barriers. These were meant to “reduce sensation,” Duenyas explained, gesturing to a small, partly deflated Pilates ball.

Duenyas then had us take turns choreographing one another in group sex scenes. There were eight cis women and a trans man, but we would be assigned rotating gender roles. Emily, a set decorator from Colorado, directed me to lie down with my head underneath a chair, where a Swiss trainee named Nathalie had taken a seat. At Emily’s direction, Grace placed a Pilates ball on my pelvis and started grinding on it while simulating oral sex on Nathalie. I realized I had forgotten to ask if Grace’s character had a vagina. Duenyas had told us that we could pretend to stimulate our partner’s clitoris by making a “pinching salt” motion. Emily called cut and bent down to check on me: “You look lost.” We all started laughing. I had killed the mood.

One of the first things intimacy coördinators do after being hired is request the script and identify scenes that might require their involvement. When it comes to sex, scripts can be both explicit and vague. In CINTIMA’s online course, Sarah Scott, the intimacy coördinator for the HBO sports drama “Winning Time: The Rise of the Lakers Dynasty,” referred to a sex scene between Jerry West and a woman he meets at a motel bar. The script says, “The pounding knocks an oil painting off its hook. It topples, but they keep going, unabated, leaving it all out on the floor.” Scott asked the director for

help interpreting the sports metaphors: “Do we witness a climax?” An intimacy coördinator can’t leave anything to the imagination.

We practiced having those same sorts of conversations with directors, using a script from the horror movie “Roommate Wanted,” which Duenyas had worked on. Nathalie went first, pretending to be a newly hired intimacy coördinator. “This scene reads, ‘Two women come out of the room half naked,’ ” she said. “Which half?”

Then we did “actor calls,” during which intimacy coördinators gauge how much a performer is willing to do onscreen. Grace was nervous. “The stakes of getting it wrong are so high,” she explained. We all knew stories of actors feeling blindsided. Sharon Stone revealed in her memoir, “The Beauty of Living Twice,” from 2021, that while filming the infamous scene from Paul Verhoeven’s “Basic Instinct” in which her character uncrosses her legs—referred to as “the most paused moment in movie history”—she had been asked by the crew to remove her panties, because they were reflecting the light. She didn’t know, until a pre-release screening, that her vulva would be visible. “I went to the projection booth, slapped Paul across the face, left, went to my car, and called my lawyer,” she writes. (Verhoeven has denied Stone’s version of events.) But sometimes it’s a question of interpretation. During the filming of Paul Haggis’s “Crash,” the actress Thandiwe Newton did not realize that her co-star Matt Dillon, playing a police officer, was going to simulate violating her in a pat-down scene. She has said that she thought the term “finger-fuck” in the script was “ironic.” An intimacy coördinator would have clarified.

Grace asked Chantel, who was playing an actress, if she was O.K. appearing nude. Chantel shook her head. “O.K., what about the *story* of nudity?” Grace continued, referring to the use of strategically placed bedsheets. Other questions: “How do you feel about simulating an orgasm?” and “Do you have any allergies?” (If an actor has a shellfish allergy, say, the intimacy coördinator will insure that his co-star doesn’t have shrimp for lunch.) The intimacy coördinator then generates a nudity rider. “You can revoke your consent at any time, but then production has the right to use a body double,” Grace told Chantel. “Though the body double can’t do anything you didn’t agree to do in the original rider.”

“Could a director change their mind?” one trainee asked. “Look, if Werner Herzog were here, he’d be, like, ‘This is fucking ridiculous, film is the art of the moment, storyboards are for the weak,’ ” Duenyas said. But intimacy coördinators are not the enemies of spontaneity, he maintained. “There are protocols in place, though.” Any new sex scenes require a new nudity rider, which actors must receive forty-eight hours in advance.

Duenyas adheres to the forty-eight-hour rule even when it’s the actor who is pushing for more than originally consented to. “Because, when they come down from that high, they might think, *Why did I do that*?” he said. “*Why did I take my pants off*?”

Before intimacy coördinator was an IMDb credit, the task of putting actors at ease before sex scenes largely fell to directors. In 2007, during the filming of “Atonement,” Joe Wright played “Come to Me,” by Mark Lanegan and PJ Harvey, to set the mood before James McAvoy pinned Keira Knightley against a stack of library books—and then yelled, “Keira, wank him off!” Taking a different approach, Luca Guadagnino leaves the room. “I describe everything, but then I go,” he told *Variety*, of working with Timothée Chalamet and Armie Hammer in “Call Me by Your Name,” from 2017. “They have to make love with the camera.”

Occasionally, directors have brought in professionals. Lilly and Lana Wachowski hired the journalist Susie Bright to work on the nineties lesbian thriller “Bound” after reading her memoir “Susie Sexpert’s Lesbian Sex World.” Credited as a technical consultant, Bright recommended more closeups during a scene in which Gina Gershon, as a hot plumber named Corky, fixes Jennifer Tilly’s sink. “I was like, ‘Lesbian hands are lesbian cock,’ ” she told *Slate* last year. (“I mean, any dyke knows this,” she said to me.) In 2012, the Broadway performer and choreographer Michael Arnold was hired by Martin Scorsese to block a gay orgy scene in “The Wolf of Wall Street.” Arnold’s pitch to the director: “As the camera pans by, we land on a naked butt, and the butler, who is giving someone oral sex, pops his head out.” Arnold told me, “It was not a time to be shy.”

But the practice of intimacy coördination as we know it began in 2006, when a graduate student in theatre at Virginia Commonwealth University named Tonia Sina was cast in a school production of Steve Martin’s 1993

play, “Picasso at the Lapin Agile.” She had the role of Suzanne, a “beautiful young heartbreaker” who has a fling with the painter, but she and the actor playing Picasso weren’t clicking. “The director said, ‘This is awful. You guys need to practice,’ ” Sina told me. That night, alone in the theatre, they whispered their lines between kisses. “It was not acting anymore,” she said. “We got very confused.” The two left their partners only to break up after the play’s run—what’s known in the business as a showmance.

“There had to be a better way,” Sina recalled thinking. There were choreographers for fight scenes, so why not sex scenes? She decided to make the question the subject of her thesis, “Intimate Encounters: Staging Intimacy and Sensuality.” In one chapter, Sina adapted choreography used to stage mass battles for an orgy scene at the Department of Motor Vehicles. She called it “Fantasy at the D.M.V.”

How did she land on the word “intimacy”? I asked. “How the hell is a university going to hire a sex choreographer?” she said. “The word ‘sex’ couldn’t be in it.” After graduate school, Sina began offering a workshop titled “Intimacy for the Stage” at colleges and small theatre companies. In 2017, her work caught the attention of the playwright Jillian Keiley, who hired Sina as the “intimacy director” for Anne Carson’s “Bakkhai,” at the Stratford Festival. In Keiley’s staging, Dionysus gives King Pentheus (Gordon S. Miller) the ability to experience female arousal. Sina coached Miller on how to simulate a clitoral orgasm, even making a voice recording for him to echo. “I was so glad I didn’t have to be the one to do that,” Keiley told me.

By then, Sina had founded a nonprofit called Intimacy Directors International with two other women—Siobhan Richardson, a movement coach, and Rodis, who had been doing some informal intimacy coördination for a stunt program at N.Y.U.’s film school. I.D.I. had a “janky website,” as Sina put it, but it was enough to get noticed by HBO.

After the L.A. *Times* published its story about Franco, David Simon, a creator of “The Deuce,” released a statement clarifying that there had been no complaints on set against the actor, who had also directed several episodes. Privately, the show’s lead actress, Emily Meade, threatened to quit. She didn’t want to be implicated in a message that she felt downplayed

the allegations, she told me. The network asked what it could do to persuade her to stay. Meade had never heard of an intimacy coördinator, but she requested “an objective party to make sure everybody’s O.K.” during the sex scenes. Reflecting on it now, she can’t believe the network said yes. “It was a sliding-doors moment that I don’t think would have happened at any other time and place,” she told me.

Rodis met with each actor individually and then took their concerns to the director, as is now common practice. She also helped with “silly aspects,” Meade said, like bringing the actress kneepads for a blow-job scene.

That October, when HBO announced it would staff every production with an intimacy coördinator, the network had to get creative—colleges were not exactly graduating intimacy majors. Amanda Blumenthal, who had just completed a course at Somatica, an institute in Berkeley, California, that trains sex-and-relationship coaches, was hired after her mother, an HBO executive, mentioned that the network was looking for “this thing called an intimacy coördinator” on a new show, “Euphoria.” Mam Smith, a former stunt performer, was brought in to work on the third season of “Westworld.” Smith told me, “On my first day, there were two hundred naked extras, all painted blue, and they had to be wet, because the story was that their characters had been in cold storage.” Smith made sure that there were warming tents and requested additional wardrobe crew to hand out robes.

By 2019, intimacy coördinators were even working with actors *playing* intimacy coördinators. In “High Maintenance,” an anthology series that aired on HBO, about New Yorkers who have the same weed guy, a character named Kym (Abigail Bengson) choreographs two actors (Nick Kroll and Rebecca Hall) portraying a campaign manager and a politician having sex in a field office. “How do we want to get to this desk?” Kym asks them. On HBO’s “The Idol,” Lily-Rose Depp, playing a troubled pop star, is so annoyed by the intimacy coördinator trying to enforce a nudity rider for a photo shoot that her team locks him in a closet.

Things were moving quickly, perhaps too quickly. “There was a fear that this whole thing was going to get scrapped if we let the wrong person in,” Rodis told me. One aspiring intimacy coördinator suggested that

productions set aside spare rooms for people to masturbate in after sex scenes. “I was, like, ‘Oh, no, no, no. We’re at work,’ ” Rodis said.

In 2019, the actress Gabrielle Carteris, then the president of *SAG-AFTRA*, got nervous that the splashy headlines about sex choreographers for movie stars were going to attract the other kind of bad actor. She and the union’s executive director, David White, convened a series of meetings with more than a dozen intimacy coördinators—Rodis, Blumenthal, and Duenyas among them—to draft a list of official protocols for the position, such as safeguarding “closed sets” and reviewing final cuts to check compliance with nudity riders. Carteris also established a registry to aid producers in identifying qualified candidates, whom the union defined as someone who had spent sixty days on a *SAG-AFTRA* set as an intimacy coördinator. “We wanted to create a standard that could be upheld,” she told me. “I didn’t want it to be where anybody could do this.”

But others saw the registry as gatekeeping, and some feared that producers would prefer intimacy coördinators who had undergone a pricey *SAG*-approved training program (rather than learning on smaller jobs or student films). Chelsea Pace, an intimacy coördinator and a former movement professor at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, worried that the competition to get onto Hollywood sets would lead to a certification gold rush. “There were a lot of people, like myself, who had years of experience choreographing intimacy and now had to spend thousands of dollars to get a star on their folder that said, ‘Hey, you’re eligible to do this now,’ ” Pace said.

Professionalization also changed the tenor of the job. In 2015, Duenyas had worked on the Thomas Bradshaw play “Fulfillment”—about a lawyer sleeping with a co-worker—as a sex choreographer. “It felt really fun to call it that, because there’s so much shame around sex,” Duenyas said to me, sounding nostalgic.

In 1980, the director Francis Ford Coppola hired Constance Penley, a Berkeley Ph.D. candidate and an editor of a feminist film journal, as a research assistant on “One from the Heart,” a Vegas-set musical romance. The script included a sex scene, and Coppola asked Penley to identify what the best ones had in common. Coppola, Penley told me, “gave me an office

at Zoetrope and a telex that I could use to call whomever I wanted and say, ‘Francis wants to know, What is the most erotic scene in film?’ ” Susan Sontag said that for her it was the wind blowing through Barbara Stanwyck’s hair at the end of “The Bitter Tea of General Yen.”

After reviewing hundreds of films, Penley gave Coppola a report that outlined two main criteria for a good erotic scene. First, the characters are not *supposed* to have sex. “There has to be some big difference between the two,” she said, one that makes their encounter unlikely. Second, one or both of the characters is “under threat of death.” As an example, Penley offered the sex scene between Linda Hamilton and Michael Biehn in “The Terminator,” in which the latter plays a man from 2029 who has travelled back in time to rescue Hamilton’s character from a cyborg assassin played by Arnold Schwarzenegger. “If you see it out of context, it’s O.K.,” she said. “But when you know he’s from the future and they’re being hunted, it’s really, really hot.”

My favorite sex scene, I realized, fit the formula. In “Out of Sight,” Jennifer Lopez, as Detective Karen Sisco, finally comes face to face, at a hotel bar, with George Clooney’s Jack Foley, a handsome bank robber she has been trailing. There’s an implausible pairing and the likelihood of a shoot-out dénouement, and so when Sisco tells him, “You really wear that suit,” it’s obvious that it will soon be coming off.

Penley’s formula also helped me see why certain scenes without a hint of sex still felt suffused with erotic energy. In Claire Denis’s “Stars at Noon,” Margaret Qualley plays a righteous American journalist in Nicaragua who falls for a naïve British oil executive (Joe Alwyn) unwittingly in the way of an American plot to control the industry. Their lovers-on-the-lam sex scenes did nothing for me. Yet when Qualley’s character, thinking she’s finally lost the couple’s tail, walks into a dilapidated restaurant and spies Benny Safdie in a C.I.A.-issued Hawaiian shirt, and he asks, “Do you mind sitting down and watching me eat my breakfast?,” I was rapt. I called Denis in Paris, and she seemed to confirm Penley’s hypothesis. “They are both defending something, but they’re on the opposite side,” she said. Plus, she added, “There’s something so sexy about saying, ‘You’re with the wrong guy.’ ”

“I finally became a butterfly, and everyone’s already asking what’s next.”
Cartoon by Elisabeth McNair

But intimacy coördinators believe that, even after a script’s narrative has been determined, they can augment erotic tension through sex choreography, which I learned has a vocabulary all its own. On a dry-erase board, Duenyas had written a glossary of technical terms from Chelsea Pace’s textbook, “Staging Sex: Best Practices, Tools, and Techniques for Theatrical Intimacy.” The first word was “distance.” (An intimacy coördinator would not say “make out” but, rather, “close the distance between your mouths.”) Another term was “shapes.” (Instead of telling an actor to “grind on” his co-star, one might say, “make a figure eight with your hips.”) Shapes, Duenyas told us, “are when you can really start telling stories.”

I spoke to the British intimacy coördinator Ita O’Brien about her work on the Hulu adaptation of Sally Rooney’s “Normal People,” specifically a nine-minute sex scene between the characters Connell (Paul Mescal) and Marianne (Daisy Edgar-Jones), two Irish teen-agers from different social sets who are having a clandestine affair. O’Brien said that she worked with Mescal to simulate putting on a condom so that it looked as realistic as possible. “Details are important,” O’Brien told me. Sex scenes, too, must have narrative continuity. “The amount of times I see shows where someone just rolls over—it’s, like, ‘Hold on a minute. A penis penetrated someone here,’ ” she said. “You’ve got to have a beat where it appears that they withdraw—this is a real bugbear of mine.”

“Are you comfortable participating in the exercises?” Duenyas had asked me before I arrived in L.A. “Absolutely,” I told him, without really asking myself if that was true. I was a journalist. How could I face my war-

correspondent colleagues if I walked off an assignment because I was too anxious to simulate cunnilingus on a bunch of friendly white women in yoga pants?

But then Duenyas had us do an exercise called Instant Chemistry, designed by Sina. (She thought of it as a technique to create that mysterious dynamic without having a self-destructive affair with your co-star.) We had to find a partner, line up on opposite sides of the studio, and stare into each other's eyes. I paired off with Laura, an actress whose most recent role was as a nun in the body-horror film "Immaculate," alongside Sydney Sweeney. I now had to imagine her on the day she was born.

"Visualize the room," Duenyas said. "What time of year was it? Was the sun shining?" I pictured infant Laura on a bright summer day, her tiny, perfect head on her mother's breast. We all took a step forward. "Next, picture your partner at their fifth-birthday party." I saw little Laura, overwhelmed, in a crowded apartment filled with unruly children. Another step. Next, we envisioned our partner's first kiss, first love, and first big heartbreak. As I pictured Laura on a bed, crying at the news that her college boyfriend was going to take a job in another country, our faces were just a few inches apart. Was she going to kiss me? Did I want her to? Why did I have to be partnered with someone who looked like Monica Bellucci?

In 2023, the actor Penn Badgley revealed on his podcast, "Podcrushed," that he had asked the creator of his Netflix hit, "You," if he could stop doing intimate scenes altogether. "That aspect of the job, that mercurial boundary—has always been something that I actually don't want to play with at all," he told *Variety*. Badgley's comments were poorly received. Wasn't that an actor's job? Some feel that there is already too little sex in film and TV, and last year a study commissioned by *The Economist* found an almost forty-per-cent drop in erotic content in American films since 2000—leaving porn to make up the difference. In response, the Toronto *Sun* asked, "Has the onscreen sex scene gasped its last climactic breath?"

But I had seen the power of the mind to trick the body. I didn't envy the CINTIMA trainees having to manage such complicated feelings, if they even get the chance. Like all the *SAG-AFTRA* protocols, the "actor calls" we practiced during the training are a recommendation, not a requirement.

Some actors refuse to do them, putting intimacy coördinators in the difficult position of having to defy talent. Sarah Scott, the “Winning Time” intimacy coördinator, told me that she attempts to make contact anyway: “I will call that actor to check in, even if it serves me not to.”

Intimacy coördinators are part of the gig economy and thus susceptible to the same forces they are hired to mitigate. “We talk about the power dynamics that actors are under,” Jessica Steinrock, the C.E.O. of Intimacy Directors and Coordinators, the largest training program in the industry, said. “We are also under a significant amount of power dynamics.” She went on, “At the end of the day, sticking up for an actor and saying, ‘Hey, no, we can’t film this’—there’s a real chance that we’re going to get fired, and there’s really nothing we can do about it.”

Tanya Horeck, a professor of film and feminist media at Anglia Ruskin University, in the U.K., who researches intimacy coördination and “care in the media industry,” told me that a number of her subjects have reported arriving on set only to be “shoved into a corner so production could check a box.” Horeck said that Hollywood often uses intimacy coördinators as a form of “care-washing,” a term for when a company presents itself as concerned for employee well-being while actually making few substantive changes.

Intimacy coördinators unionized under *SAG-AFTRA* in late 2024, but they are still preparing to negotiate a contract with the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers. An eventual contract will help clarify what intimacy coördinators do and do not do. Duenyas has had production staff approach him on set looking for relationship advice. “We’re not therapists,” he commented. Occasionally, the confusion stems from intimacy coördinators themselves. Some insist they are there to protect not just cast but also crew. However, another intimacy coördinator disagreed, citing different union protocols.“ We’re not trained to keep *everyone* safe,” that person said. “I think this is something people started adding out of fear for job security.”

There have been similar internal clashes over how this new industry should address diversity. A census taken in 2022 by *The Journal of Consent-Based Performance* found that seventy-nine per cent of intimacy coördinators

identify as white. Efforts to rectify racial disparities have resulted in intimacy coördinators who specialize in “culturally competent intimacy,” which did not always strike me as a terribly accurate term. I interviewed Michela Carattini, the founder of Key Intimate Scenes, a *SAG-AFTRA*-accredited training program in Australia. Carattini, who grew up in Germany, identifies as “mixed (Indigenous Panamanian and Anglo-Celtic Australian).” The program’s website lists among its specialties “African Intimacy,” “First Nations Intimacy,” and “Latin American Intimacy.” I asked Carattini for an example of the latter. “In Latin cultures, you know, physical intimacy can be like a dance, and can have aspects of our dancing and our cultural sense of rhythm within it,” she told me. (I later mentioned this to a Jewish friend, who joked, “I wonder if I fuck like Schoenberg.”)

The intimacy coördinators I spoke to tended to vacillate, even during the course of a single conversation, between wanting to convey that everything was great and wanting to let me know how much was wrong. They needed more support—assistants, better workplace protections—but that entailed revealing the limitations of their role at a time when they feel especially vulnerable. I was surprised to hear how deeply the “Anora” controversy had affected them. That a film about sex workers could win five Oscars without hiring an intimacy coördinator made many of them anxious that other productions would follow suit. At first, I thought that seemed paranoid, especially since, as of 2023, *SAG-AFTRA* requires productions to make “best efforts” to hire an intimacy coördinator when germane to the material or requested by a performer. But just as the D.E.I.-consultant job market, which boomed after the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, has cratered under Donald Trump’s second Administration, it did not seem impossible that Hollywood’s new industry, likewise propped up by a movement, could vanish.

Recently, news broke that a stunt double who worked on the set of “Horizon 2,” a Western directed by Kevin Costner, was suing him and the film’s producers for having her perform a rape scene with no intimacy coördinator present and without the requisite forty-eight hours’ notice. (Costner, whose lawyer has denied the legitimacy of the claims, did not respond to a request for comment.)

The actress Emily Meade has worked only sporadically since “The Deuce.” She fears that it’s because she called “the sex police,” as some in Hollywood refer to intimacy coördinators. Nonetheless, she said, “it’s not something I regret. It’s something I still have pride in, but there’s a lot of pain around that pride.”

I thought of an observation that Duenyas had made in the workshop. “I want to push against this idea that we’re there to make people comfortable,” he said. “Performance is professionalized discomfort. We’re there to help actors succumb to it.” Intimacy coördinators have unsettled something, in Hollywood and in us, and maybe that’s what their job is ultimately about. Chelsea Pace never asks her actors if they’re comfortable: “Because they might not be, and a lot of actors aren’t interested in being *comfortable*. They *want* to push themselves in their art.” Also, she noted, “You usually have something stuck to your pelvic area. That’s not comfy.” ♦

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

American Chronicles

The Forgotten Inventor of the Sitcom

Gertrude Berg's "The Goldbergs" was a bold, beloved portrait of a Jewish family. Then the blacklist obliterated her legacy.

By Emily Nussbaum

June 9, 2025

Berg's show began in 1929, on radio, becoming a huge hit. It moved to TV in 1949.Photograph from CBS Photo Archive / Getty

On May 9, 1954, on the set of the CBS game show "What's My Line?," the week's "mystery celebrity" strolled past a panel of blindfolded judges and, to a roar from the studio audience, wrote her name on the chalkboard: *Gertrude Berg*. A zaftig woman with warm, expressive eyes and a dumpling nose, Berg was dressed with Park Avenue flair, in a regal fur stole and three

strands of pearls. Onscreen, a caption displayed the name she was better known by, that of a fictional character who, for a quarter of a century, had been as iconic as Groucho Marx and as beloved as Mickey Mouse: the irresistible, Yiddish-accented, malaprop-prone Bronx housewife Molly Goldberg, hollering “Yoo-hoo, is anybody?” into her tenement airshaft, the social network of its day.

The past year had been a difficult one for Berg, then fifty-four, whose family show “The Goldbergs”—originally titled “The Rise of the Goldbergs”—débuted in 1929 as a radio serial that bounced between networks before settling on CBS, becoming a national sensation. During the Depression and the Second World War, Berg had beavered away at an astonishing pace, producing, writing, directing, and starring in thousands of episodes about a hardworking Jewish immigrant family. In the process, she’d become a multimedia mogul, with an advice column called “Mama Talks,” a comic strip, a best-selling cookbook, and even a line of housedresses for full-figured women. In a national poll in *Good Housekeeping*, Berg was ranked America’s second most admired woman, bested only by another liberal firebrand, Eleanor Roosevelt.

In 1945, Berg’s radio show ended—and four years later she rebooted it as a television sitcom on CBS, during the loosey-goosey early days of the medium, when shows still aired live and were run by advertisers. Working with General Foods, she flacked Sanka decaffeinated coffee in character as Molly, boosting the brand’s sales; in 1951, she won the first Emmy for Best Actress, beating out Imogene Coca, Helen Hayes, and Betty White. Television was about to transform the culture, and Berg was poised to become one of its greatest luminaries.

Instead, just three years later, her life’s work was in peril. In 1950, as the McCarthy era descended, an ideological cage dropped over the industry, terrorizing a community of liberal-minded creators, among them Philip Loeb, the actor who played Molly’s husband, Jake, on “The Goldbergs.” Loeb had his name printed in “Red Channels,” the notorious anti-Communist snitch book. For a year and a half, Berg fought hard for Loeb, refusing her sponsor’s demands that she fire him, but CBS dropped the show, and in the end she gave in. “The Goldbergs” was now airing on the

more marginal DuMont network, with a new sponsor and a new Jake. Another family sitcom had taken Berg's old Monday-night slot on CBS: "I Love Lucy," starring Lucille Ball, the First Lady of television.

On "What's My Line?," Berg gave little indication that anything had gone wrong. When one of the panelists, the actress Faye Emerson, who'd noticed the extended applause at Berg's entrance, asked, "Are you someone very much in the public eye?," Berg scored laughs by answering in the high, breathy voice of an upper-crust Brahmin: "*Rahther!*"

"Have you appeared regularly on television?" Emerson asked.

"On and off, yes," Berg replied. She then added, nearly inaudibly, a sly zinger: "Depending on the sponsor's disposition."

Yes, Berg said, she'd been on the stage; she'd made a movie, too. And, yes, she said, her eyes sparkling, her character was famous for her accent. After a few false leads, the TV host Steve Allen blurted out the correct answer: "Is it Molly Goldberg?" Delighted, the panelists asked Berg for a treat, a taste of her character's voice.

"Vot do you want me to say, dahlink?" Berg shot back, channelling her alter ego with a grin. Before she left the stage, the panelists rose up to shake her hand. For a moment more, Gertrude Berg was still the apple of America's eye.

In the just-so story that Americans learn about television, it all started in the fifties, with Lucy Ricardo wailing "Waaaahhh!" in her brownstone on East Sixty-eighth Street. The family sitcom was the mass medium's primal format, the source of both brash marital farces like "I Love Lucy" and "The Honeymooners" and blander offerings like "Father Knows Best" and "The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet," placid fantasias of white suburban conformity, with rock-jawed commuter dads and moms vacuuming in pearls. Each decade, new neighbors moved in: in the seventies, the Bunkers and the Brady Bunch; in the eighties, the Cosbys and the Conners. The small screen became a mirror that your own family could gaze at, to catch a glimpse of another family, seated on their own sofa, in front of their own TV.

The Goldbergs were the first of these reflections. Sweet, sharp, and a little schmaltzy, the show was set in a world of Jewish immigrants—rag-trade workers, bighearted housewives, crowds of cousins and assimilated children crammed into tenement kitchens, with kreplach sizzling on the skillet. Yet, despite the cultural specificity, Molly, Jake, and their children, Rosalie and Sammy (known as Sameleh), were portrayed not as ethnic exotics or vaudevillian "types" but as ordinary Americans, patriotic and emotionally relatable—a provocative idea in a period when Jews were widely viewed as outsiders at best, subversives at worst.

When "The Goldbergs" disappeared, so did the legacy of Berg herself, the first "showrunner" of any gender and a life-style influencer fifty years before Oprah or Martha Stewart. By 2013, the memory of Berg had been so fully eclipsed that when ABC launched a new family sitcom called "The Goldbergs"—written by the unrelated Adam F. Goldberg and based on his adolescence in nineteen-eighties suburban Philadelphia—few people even registered the echo. Berg, like many Jews of her generation—including my own grandmother Malka, known as Molly, who passed through Ellis Island the year "The Goldbergs" débuted on the radio—had been a fierce optimist about America, a true believer in cultural progress and in a democracy that opened its heart to new arrivals. But, in the end, Berg's life became proof of a darker truth, one that is newly relevant in the Trump era: doors that swing open can also slam shut.

There have been a few attempts, in recent years, to fly Berg's flag again, including a 2007 scholarly biography by Glenn D. Smith, Jr., and, in 2009, Aviva Kempner's lively, affectionate documentary "Yoo-Hoo, Mrs. Goldberg," featuring interviews with Berg's family and colleagues. In 2021, Jennifer Keishin Armstrong published the excellent "When Women Invented Television," which skillfully wove Berg's story into those of three other neglected innovators: Irna Phillips, the creator of the soap opera; the Black jazz chanteuse and DuMont-network TV host Hazel Scott; and Betty White (less forgotten, although few people know she basically invented the TV talk show).

Still, on a frigid January day, as I leafed through Berg's archive, at Syracuse University, her story felt peculiarly like a cold case—or like a symptom of a

stroke, a gap in shared memory. Why had she been forgotten, when her peers had lingered on as nostalgic figures, totems of a safer, simpler time? In her papers, there were thick scrapbooks of Christmas cards, many from fellow-celebrities—Berg clearly adored Christmas. There were piles of fan mail, from both Jewish and non-Jewish fans, often addressed to Molly Goldberg. There were more intimate notes, too, addressed to her birth name, Tillie Edelstein, documents so fragile that they flaked when I lifted them up, snowing on the page.

“Do you realize how lucky we are to be able to walk to work?”
Cartoon by Michael Maslin

Born in 1899, Tillie grew up in a Jewish neighborhood in Harlem, the daughter of Jake Edelstein, a speculator who owned a run-down Catskills hotel called Fleischmanns, and his doting, fragile wife, Dinah. In “Molly and Me,” Berg’s 1961 memoir, she portrays her relatives—mavericks like her tinsmith grandfather, Mordecai, who fled persecution in Poland and kept a secret still for making schnapps—as a crew of cheerful self-mythologizers, eager to bend an anecdote to make it more romantic, less tragic. Berg shared that tendency: in the book, she never mentions her older brother, Charles, who died of diphtheria at around the age of seven, devastating her parents. (Her mother had a nervous breakdown; her father kept the telegram announcing Charles’s death in his pocket for the rest of his life.) Instead, Berg sticks to her joyful summers at her father’s hotel, where she ran the theatre program, performing a fortune-teller act on rainy days and, beginning at fourteen, staging sketches based on hotel gossip. These stories starred Maltke Talnitzky, a woman in her fifties with a lousy husband and a lot of legal troubles. (Many of the hotel’s guests were lawyers.)

Among those summer guests was Tillie's future husband, Lew Berg, a British chemical engineer, who impressed Tillie with his posh accent. ("He said 'whilst' and 'hence' and 'shed-yule,' " she marvels in "Molly and Me.") The couple married when she was nineteen and he was twenty-nine, then moved, for three miserable years, to the Deep South, where Lew worked as the chief technologist of a Louisiana sugar plantation. To her relief, the refinery burned down, giving the couple an excuse to settle in New York. And then, shortly after the birth of her second child, in 1926, Berg made a grand leap, changing her name to Gertrude—more Park Avenue, less Harlem—and diving into show business.

With her husband's support (he typed up her scripts throughout her career), the newly minted Gertrude Berg hustled for jobs, scoring odd gigs like a role narrating a Yiddish-language Christmas-cookie ad aimed at Jewish consumers. She also sold four episodes of her first radio show, "Effie and Laura," a serial about two shopgirls in the Bronx talking about the meaning of life. It was an audacious concept—a proto-"Laverne & Shirley," it likely aced the Bechdel test more than fifty years before it was invented—but the show became Berg's first lesson in power. The network, offended by one of Laura's cynical zingers, that marriages are not made in Heaven, axed the show after a single episode.

Luckily, Berg was busy polishing another script, this one starring a Maltke-ish heroine, only younger and luckier in love. According to a story Berg loved to tell, her handwritten script for "The Rise of the Goldbergs" was illegible, so an executive asked her to read it to him—and then, charmed, insisted that she play the lead. (On one occasion, she claimed that had been her plan all along.) The first episode aired a month after the stock-market crash of 1929, perfect timing for a story about a family struggling to stay afloat. Berg got up at six to write scripts, perfecting each detail, down to the authentic sizzle of eggs on the stove. In the course of fifteen years, "The Goldbergs" expanded to include some two hundred characters, with lively figures such as the querulous Uncle David, obsessed with his doctor son, Solly. At its height, the serial reached ten million listeners, airing multiple times per day.

The heart of the show was Berg's performance as the redoubtable Molly, a meddler and a chatterbox but also the show's moral heroine, a problem solver energized by the troubles of others. In the pilot episode, Jake, a dress cutter, needs money to go into business for himself. Molly saves the day, grabbing a teapot from a closet, where she's been saving a secret stash of cash. Loving and resourceful, Molly was both an homage to Berg's relatives and a compensatory fantasy, a contrast to Berg's own grief-stricken mother, who became mired in a lifelong depression. Berg herself wasn't much like Molly: she didn't cook, clean, or even read Hebrew. (Lew taught her the Yiddish script for that cookie commercial, phonetically.) A secular highbrow, she read Russian novels and owned a Picasso; her workaholic devotion to her fictional family strained her relationship with her daughter, Harriet. Still, like Molly, Berg had a deep, empathetic curiosity, an extrovert's urge to explore the world around her: to find new plots, she sneaked down to the Lower East Side to eavesdrop, once joining a women's group under an assumed name.

From the start, the character of Molly Goldberg made some listeners nervous. Was the portrayal a form of minstrelsy, like the crude blackface dialect humor of "Amos 'n' Andy," the only radio show with higher ratings? But, if Molly was a trope, she was also a corrective to an earlier stereotype, that of the mournful, self-abnegating "Yiddishe mama": the saintly shtetl survivor in the 1927 talkie "The Jazz Singer"; the humble bubbe of Sophie Tucker's signature song, "My Yiddishe Momme"; the anxious mama bird in the 1938 poem "Oyfn Veg Shteyt a Boym," so terrified her child will freeze that she weighs him down with scarves and hats until he can't lift his wings. Like this sorority of martyrs, Molly sacrificed, scrimped, and saved. But she was also full of joy, appetite, and opinion; she was more of a *baleboste*, the Yiddish term for a powerhouse, a do-everything. She took up space, instead of shrinking.

So did Berg—and her left-leaning politics were part of that force. In the mid-thirties, she renegotiated her contracts to gain greater creative control; increasingly, she filled the show's dialogue with pro-worker, pro-New Deal themes. At a time when the demagogue Father Coughlin was flooding the radio with antisemitic hate speech, Berg offered counterprogramming. In 1933, Berg ran what amounted to a Very Special Episode: a full Seder, sung

by a real cantor, which Pepsodent, her sponsor, agreed to air without ads. The P.R. move paid off: one telegram read, "*JUST AS PEPSODENT ACTS AS A DISINFECTANT SO DOES YOUR BROADCASTING TO DISPEL HATRED AND BRINGS HUMANITY CLOSER TOGETHER*." Six years later, Berg aired an even more pointed Seder episode, in which a thug threw a rock through the Goldbergs' window—a reference to Kristallnacht, which had occurred a few months earlier. At the Seder, Molly compared liberatory ideas to the wind, an invisible force that blows everywhere and can't be contained, even in the face of fascism.

Jewish listeners wrote her letters full of pride—some kept the radio on during their own Seders. One joked, darkly, that she hoped "The Goldbergs" wouldn't encourage her neighborhood's "Hitlerites." But non-Jewish fans wrote to Berg, too, with a complex parasocial intimacy, often confiding their feelings about her "race." A Mrs. W. D. Arena wrote that, "having been thrown in with them" during travels in Colorado, she had "learned to esteem them very highly"; a woman whose daughter worked at a hospital assured Berg that poor Jewish patients were the most appreciative demographic. An especially prolific Episcopalian superfan named C. M. Falconer weighed in on the show's plots, like a modern recapper, and spun out several hair-raising theories about the roots of Jewish men's business savvy. Frank R. Jennings, from Chicago, sweetly mimicked Molly's accent in a postscript: "Please excuse it the typewriter, it aint so well to-day yet and don't ask it me vhy, I don't know vhy."

For both sets of fans, it mattered that the show was made by Jews. "I believe you're really truly Jewish," one viewer enthused; another described a debate over Berg's ethnicity with her husband, who thought she might be faking it. Still, the question of authenticity was a sensitive one: in 1933, after Berg dropped a Gentile actress who had been temporarily filling in for the girl who played Rosalie, the actress's mother complained to Pepsodent, leading the right-wing gossip columnist Walter Winchell to denounce Berg: "Hitler victims using Hitler methods? Shame!"

The scandal stung, as bad publicity always did. In radio, advertisers had the final say. But Berg had a weapon of her own. Despite strong ratings, "The Goldbergs" faced cancellation several times: her bosses (including, and

often especially, the Jewish ones) had never been fully at ease with the show's ethnic bluntness or its politics. Each time, Berg stayed on top with the help of her fans: once, early in the serial's run, after she skipped a few episodes because she got sick, thousands of worried letters poured in. As the media historian Carol Stabile wrote in her 2008 lecture "Red Networks: Women Writers and the Broadcast Blacklist," "Only its popularity among listeners, which Berg herself repeatedly leveraged in support of the program, kept it on the air."

"The Goldbergs" was cancelled in 1945, supposedly because of low ratings, although Berg's family suspected that politics were a factor—a memo had gone around CBS which listed Berg, who had stumped for F.D.R., as one of the President's boosters. For a while, Berg hovered in show-biz limbo, developing other projects, including a "Negro show" and an adaptation of the comic strip "Penny," about a Wasp teen-ager. She'd already tried out "House of Glass," in which she played a very different character: the hotel manager Bessie Glass, a "crisp modern exponent of efficiency" running a family business in the Catskills. But by then it was hard for her fans to accept her as anyone but Molly.

In 1948, Berg staged "Me and Molly," a Broadway play, and then approached the newly established television networks with a reboot of "The Goldbergs," reinvented as a sitcom. Televisions were still pricey gadgets, and the audience was small and urbane; nearly everything on the air was adapted from radio, theatre, and vaudeville. With such attractive I.P., Berg was confident that she'd get the go-ahead, but, to her shock, she found no takers, even at CBS. With Molly-ish moxie, she pushed back, insisting on a meeting with her old CBS boss, William S. Paley. He relented, and Berg was proved right almost immediately: when "The Goldbergs" débuted on TV, on January 10, 1949, it became a smash hit, with General Foods signing on shortly after.

Berg radiated charisma onscreen, opening each episode perched in Molly's tenement window, confiding directly to the home viewer about Sanka's benefits: "The sleep is left in!" Live television was even more breakneck than making radio—it was like mounting a brand-new Broadway play each week—but the long hours paid off, as Berg helped forge the key elements

of TV comedy, down to neighbors bursting through doorways. There was a kinetic spark between Berg and Loeb, evoking the warmth of a long marriage, at once skeptical and tender. Eli Mintz, a Yiddish-theatre star, played Uncle David with a high, wheedling voice, his hands a blur of gesticulation, and the Goldberg children were portrayed by Gentile actors, including the endearing Arlene (Fuzzy) McQuade as the preteen Rosalie, a studious girl with a sleek bob. In the series' signature shot, neighbors gossiped from their windows across the airshaft, their voices overlapping. These sequences highlighted Molly's gift for speaking, as she often said, "from *our* family to *your* family."

Only a handful of these early episodes still exist, preserved on kinescope, created by filming a TV screen. In one, which aired in September, 1949, the Goldbergs get a new, neglectful landlord. As Molly and Jake argue about the best way to confront the problem, Jake—in high dudgeon, waving his finger like a baton—makes the case for a rent strike, tearing up his rent check and calling for a building-wide protest. (As he fulminates, he throws in his own Mollypropism: "Ignorance is nine-tenths of the law!") Molly, the house moderate, lobbies to treat the landlord like "a person," giving him a birthday cake. It's played as wacky farce, with Uncle David's voice interrupting Molly's sweet talk with gibes about broken elevators, but it's unmissably political. And though Molly's humanism usually saves the day, this time Jake has a point: aiming for a compromise, Molly accidentally negotiates the rent up by two dollars.

As with much TV from this period, there's a lovable amateurism to the entire endeavor: in one comic sequence, a housepainter slaps a series of new colors on the wall, a joke that doesn't land (probably because color TV was still five years off). Still, the episode captures the show's rich tonal blend, its combination of screwball comedy and sincere concern with the daily troubles of working people, the small dramas that add up to a life. The show's focus on workers' rights extended behind the scenes: Berg hired left-wing firebrands like Burl Ives and Garson Kanin as guest stars, and she crossed the color line on both radio and TV, hiring the Black actress and civil-rights activist Fredi Washington. In 1950, "The Goldbergs" also helped lead a technician's strike, forcing CBS to substitute other programming. Berg herself was a millionaire, with a home on Park Avenue

and an estate in Bedford Hills. But her project was a magnet for a different crowd: the bohemian set who frequented Café Society, an integrated night club in Greenwich Village. In the late forties, when television was itself an unpainted wall, it still felt possible for these idealists to define the medium, to tell the types of stories that got censored in Hollywood.

The cast of "The Goldbergs." Philip Loeb, at right, never recovered after anti-Communists targeted him and pushed him out of the job.Photograph by George Karger / Getty

That artistic circle included Loeb, an established actor and director who had played Jake on Broadway. A First World War veteran who'd co-written a Marx Brothers movie, Loeb was a pro-union activist devoted to improving the lives of theatre workers. He was a natural target during the second Red Scare—McCarthyism—which began in the late forties, spearheaded by a group of ex-F.B.I. agents who operated under the name American Business Consultants. In 1947, these former G-men started publishing a newsletter called *Counterattack*, a sort of anti-Communist burn book focussed on the film industry; in theory, their targets were Communist Party members, but in practice the net extended to anyone who supported Black civil rights or unionization, anyone suspected of being gay or of spreading "subversive" ideas. When Congress called these targets to testify in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee (*HUAC*), a group of defiant creators, the Hollywood Ten, refused to "name names." They got blacklisted, and were jailed for contempt of Congress. Hundreds of artists fled to Europe or went into hiding, working under pseudonyms.

Television, still a small industry, wasn't yet a significant target. In fact, in 1949, when American Business Consultants leaned on General Foods and CBS executives, threatening to feature Loeb's name if they didn't agree to subscribe to *Counterattack*, they simply said no. A year later, everything changed. At the time, "The Goldbergs" was flying high: Berg had been nominated for Best Actress, and the cast filmed a spinoff movie, "Molly," in Los Angeles, during their summer break. Then the axe fell. In June, *Counterattack* had released the book "Red Channels: The Report of Communist Influence in Radio and Television," adorned with the image of a red hand clutching a black microphone. It was an amateurish compilation of innuendos presented as fact, the Libs of TikTok of its time. Between its covers was a list of a hundred and fifty-one people in the entertainment industry, many of them on CBS. Loeb was on the list.

The document had no legal force, but that didn't matter: suddenly, anyone in "Red Channels" was in danger, along with anyone associated with those people. In September, General Foods gave Berg two days to fire Philip Loeb. He rejected the idea of a buyout—he wanted to fight, he told her—and she supported him, hugging him and telling him, "I will stick by you." For a year and a half, Berg held to that promise, stalling, negotiating with her network bosses and her sponsors, hoping the crisis would blow over. Just as she had in the past, Berg used her loyal audience as a tool, threatening to launch a national boycott of General Foods. The threat worked, but the reprieve was temporary.

As the pressure built, Berg got desperate. At one point, she approached Cardinal Francis Spellman, who was New York's most infamous power broker. A prominent anti-Communist, Spellman moonlighted as a fixer during the blacklist era—and he'd purportedly helped to rescue Lena Horne and Harry Belafonte, as a favor to the TV host Ed Sullivan, who was Catholic. Berg, however, got nowhere: Spellman simply strung her along.

CBS had dropped "The Goldbergs" by then, replacing it with "I Love Lucy," which had been scheduled to run as a companion to Berg's show. Berg jumped over to NBC, but no sponsor would sign up with Loeb in the cast. Finally, in January, 1952, she gave in. Loeb got a generous deal, ninety per cent of his salary for the run of the show—money he desperately

needed, as the sole support of a schizophrenic son who lived in a mental institution. He released a statement that let Berg off the hook; in response, she released a supportive statement saying that she had never believed he was a Communist. Still, it was a painful split. Loeb, unable to work, living with the family of his friend and fellow blacklist victim Zero Mostel, sank into despondency. In 1955, he checked into the Taft Hotel and took an overdose of pills, killing himself.

In “When Women Invented Television,” Armstrong describes her own visit to the Syracuse archive, where she found one slim folder dedicated to Loeb. She struggles to imagine a better ending to the story, another way out. Could Berg have launched that boycott, instead of merely threatening to do so? What if she had joined forces with other targets, like Hazel Scott, a star at Café Society who, like many Black artists, had her name printed in “Red Channels,” and had her own tragic downfall? Would the McCarthy era have been cut short? Or would “The Goldbergs” have simply been cancelled faster—particularly after CBS, once the most liberal network, started requiring its staff to sign loyalty oaths? Loeb’s blacklisting, Armstrong writes, became “one of the first, and most ominous, signs of the conformity that television would demand.”

By the time “The Goldbergs” aired its last episode, in 1956, Berg had absorbed the lessons of her age. In the show’s final year, she expressed this Realpolitik simply, in an interview in *Commentary*: “You see, darling, I don’t bring up anything that will bother people. That’s very important. Unions, politics, fund-raising, Zionism, socialism, inter-group relations. I don’t stress them. And, after all, aren’t all such things secondary to daily family living?” The Goldbergs were Jewish, but they weren’t “defensive” about it, she explained—nor were they “especially aware of” their ethnicity. Moreover, the actors who played Rosalie and Sammy were “just average-looking young people, not Jewish.” Although the show had once been called “The Rise of the Goldbergs,” Jake would never make it big, the way his creator had. “I keep things average,” Berg noted. “I don’t want to lose friends.”

At this point, “The Goldbergs” was airing in syndication, watered down by network notes. The family had moved to a Connecticut suburb, tellingly

called Haverville, where Molly looked like an ethnic outsider, with no airshaft to yell into; Jake had been recast with new actors—first Harold J. Stone, then Robert H. Harris—who exuded a cooler, more distant air, closer to the dad on “Father Knows Best.” In 1952, the newspaper columnist John Crosby, his era’s shrewdest observer of radio and television, had written a biting dispatch, describing the rebooted series as “mighty subdued, its earning power diminished, its chief male actor missing, its format extensively rearranged.” Crosby had sympathy for Berg’s vexing situation, but more for Loeb, whom he portrayed as tragically isolated, having been dropped by an industry so wary of controversy that it didn’t even have the guts to fire him: “Sponsors didn’t fight; they simply melted away until Loeb was out of the picture.”

In its final years, new themes had begun to leach into “The Goldbergs,” among them a Freudian tendency to blame mothers. “Our beautiful Rosalie a duckling? I gave her a complex,” Molly moans, in an episode in which her daughter wants a nose job. Terrified that her “nag, nag, nag” has risked causing her “subconscious psyche” to “get a trauma,” Molly showers Rosalie with praise, then schemes with the plastic surgeon to get her daughter to change her mind. It’s a playful, twisty plot, but one overflowing with contradictions, not least the fact that Rosalie is played by McQuade, whose nose is a button. When Molly asks, again and again, “So what’s wrong with Rosalie’s nose?,” no one says, “It looks too Jewish”—in Haverville, some things couldn’t be said.

Berg never stopped working, always seeking fresh outlets for her talents. In 1959, she played a Russian mother whose son is dinged by antisemitic quotas in “The World of Sholom Aleichem,” a joyful independent television production directed by and cast with blacklisted artists, including Mostel. The same year, she broke through on Broadway, winning a Tony for “A Majority of One,” where she played a Jewish widow who has a romance with a Japanese man. In 1961, Berg got her last shot at television, in a show called “Mrs. G. Goes to College”—watery gruel, in which Berg played Sarah Green, a sort of magical Jewess among clean-cut coeds. That year, she published her memoir, “Molly and Me,” co-written with her son, Cherney, her frequent collaborator. In the book, she celebrates her standoff with Paley, but makes no mention of the blacklist. There is only one

sentence about Loeb, who is described simply as “a veteran of Broadway and the movies.”

By this point, the space for a Molly Goldberg had narrowed, like a dress cut too small. The television industry was sexist and ageist; once “The Goldbergs” was gone, it was also resistant to anything that executives deemed “too Jewish.” As David Zurawik points out in the book “The Jews of Prime Time,” there wasn’t another explicitly Jewish main character on prime-time network television until 1972. Berg’s most beloved creation struck assimilated Jewish sophisticates as a corny throwback: the architect Frank Goldberg changed his name to Gehry because his wife hated the association.

Meanwhile, the Yiddishe mama had made a comeback, in a sinister new form. In the work of Jewish artists such as Woody Allen and Philip Roth, she was reduced to a punch line—and, worse, demoted to a walk-on. By the nineteen-sixties, Jewish women were rarely portrayed as protagonists, and, when they did show up, it was often as cruel stereotypes: the spoiled princess, the homely *meeskite*, the castrating mother. In 1965, America’s biggest nonfiction best-seller was a satirical self-help book by Dan Greenburg, “How to Be a Jewish Mother,” full of hacky gags. The last time Berg’s fans heard her voice, she was speaking Greenburg’s lines on the record album of the book. A Broadway adaptation of the book was in the works; after Berg’s death, from heart failure, in 1966, the Yiddish-theatre legend Molly Picon took the role.

I was searching for that album on Spotify when I stumbled across an interview that Berg had done shortly before she died, seemingly the only record of an interaction between the producer and her clearest historical peer, Lucille Ball. There had been a few other pioneering female showrunners, such as Peg Lynch, whose witty sitcom “Ethel and Albert” débuted on TV not long after “The Goldbergs.” But solidarity didn’t come easily in a culture that trained women to see one another as competition: Lynch, a stylish, younger go-getter from Minnesota, disliked Berg, who she felt had snubbed her at W.G.A. meetings, possibly because Lynch had stolen Berg’s TV director Walter Hart to oversee her show—or maybe because Lynch, who owned the rights to her show, saw no use for a union.

So I was excited to hear what Berg had to say to Ball, the genius comedienne who had triumphed in her wake. At the time of the interview, Ball was starring in her second sitcom, “The Lucy Show,” and, during breaks in production, recording breezy, brief episodes of a radio show called “Let’s Talk to Lucy,” in which she interviewed stars like Mitzi Gaynor. A few minutes in, Ball called her guest “Molly,” then caught her mistake, but Berg reassured her that everyone did that. “I scarcely know where one begins and the other ends,” she said. “It’s very gratifying to know that a character that you created thirty-two years ago still is alive, you see? That makes me very happy. She is a dear person, Molly.”

After some chat about Berg’s teen years at Fleischmanns, Lucy turned the talk, rather abruptly, to domestic life: “What does your home life consist of these days, Gertrude?” Berg described her love of travel, her trips to Los Angeles. She had a play in the works; a musical, too—a full slate, it felt like. But somehow the dialogue kept veering, compulsively, back to their roles as wives and mothers.

“There should be more discipline,” Berg said to Ball.

“Do you think that the husband should be absolute boss of the household?” Ball asked, encouragingly.

Berg answered in the affirmative: “I think that makes a tremendous difference.”

They were two of the wealthiest, most ingenious businesswomen in America. Berg had invented the family sitcom, almost single-handedly, on the cusp of the Great Depression, then translated it for the small screen; Ball had turned the genre into a juggernaut, helped shift the format’s production to Los Angeles, and innovated the rerun and the three-camera method. Each had played an iconic housewife, although Molly stood in fascinating contrast with Lucy Ricardo: the former was a fixer, the latter a firecracker, prone to fits of mischievous rage, then spanked into submission by her bandleader husband. Both women had survived the McCarthy era: in 1953, Ball had met with *HUAC* about her 1936 voter registration as a Communist, claiming she had done so to appease her socialist grandfather.

(Her husband and co-star, Desi Arnaz, allegedly told their studio audience, “The only thing red about Lucy is her hair, and even that’s not legitimate.”)

None of those subjects made it into the conversation. Instead, Ball asked if Berg thought, as Ball herself did, that “a great many men have relinquished —not even reluctantly—but just sort of . . . let go of the reins.”

“Well, because the women have taken over!” Berg said. “Women are out there, career women, are out in the world—I think that has a great deal to do with it. Women are embarrassed when they say, ‘I’m just a hausfrau!’ ”

“They *shouldn’t* be!” Ball said.

“*Certainly* they shouldn’t be!” Berg said. “What is greater than the career of raising a family?”

Listening to the exchange made me feel uneasy, the way I often do lately. It felt like a performance, although it was hard to say for whom it was intended. Housewives who might resent their success? Men who controlled their industry? Each other? There’s history, and then there’s what’s missing from history—what got cut in the edit, suppressed from the conversation. Berg’s story faded for many reasons, including the fact that most episodes of her show didn’t air in reruns. Perhaps she simply died too young to be reclaimed by the next generation of women and celebrated as a role model.

But there was also the fact that, despite her remarkable accomplishments, Berg’s life couldn’t be easily packaged as a feel-good story—nostalgia for a more innocent time, the way fifties sitcoms were, decades later, treated as documentaries, their narrow portraits of the American family repurposed by conservatives as if they were a real, shared childhood memory. In her memoir, Berg had trimmed the worst bits out, and, as the decades passed, so did the people around her. And who could blame them? At the height of the blacklist, network executives had been cowardly; sponsors had folded without hesitation. It happens all the time, these days, everywhere you look: at universities, newspapers, law firms. Hard times don’t make easy history. But liberatory ideas, like the wind, blow everywhere. ♦

Emily Nussbaum, a staff writer, won the Pulitzer Prize for criticism in 2016. She is the author of "I Like to Watch: Arguing My Way Through The TV Revolution" and "Cue The Sun!: The Invention of Reality TV."

Letter from Israel

A Palestinian Doctor in Israel Helps People on Both Sides

Lina Qasem Hassan treated victims of October 7th. She also publicly condemned the war in Gaza—a stance that imperilled her job.

By Eyal Press

June 9, 2025

Qasem Hassan, near her home, in Tamra, Israel. She says her mother imbued her with the belief "that all people are equal and that human pain is universal."Photographs by Adam Rouhana for The New Yorker

In October, 2023, a few days after Hamas's attack on Israel, a physician named Lina Qasem Hassan filled her car with medical supplies and drove from her home, in Tamra, a town in northern Israel, to the David Dead Sea Resort and Spa, in Ein Bokek. Tourism was about to nosedive throughout the country, but the resort was busy, scrambling to accommodate hundreds of evacuees who had just arrived from Kibbutz Be'eri, one of the communities near the Gaza Strip which Hamas had struck.

Qasem Hassan, a family-medicine physician, came to help at a clinic that had been set up on the hotel's grounds. She was soon dressing the wounds of injured people and dispensing pills to evacuees who had fled their homes without their medication. The lobby, she told me recently, resembled a

refugee camp, with donated clothes scattered in piles and shell-shocked families walking around aimlessly. Yet some of the new guests acted eerily normal, “taking towels and going to the swimming pool,” Qasem Hassan recalled. “It looked like they didn’t realize what they’d been through.” The clinic stayed open for nearly two weeks. Every day, members of the kibbutz gathered in a banquet hall to hear updates about neighbors who had been kidnapped or murdered or were still missing. Sometimes the names of multiple family members were read aloud. (Ninety-seven civilians were killed at Kibbutz Be’eri on October 7th.) Although Qasem Hassan was accustomed to treating people who had suffered trauma, the experience tested her emotional endurance. “We had to be there to assist people who couldn’t stand the situation,” she said.

The atmosphere would have been difficult for any Israeli physician, but for Qasem Hassan the challenge was compounded by her background and identity. She is a Palestinian citizen of a country that, in 2018, passed a law affirming that the right to self-determination was “unique to the Jewish people”; the law also made Hebrew the country’s sole official language, downgrading the status of Arabic. Israel had since installed the most right-wing government in its history, a coalition of hard-liners and extremists who were not likely to temper the rage, or the desire for revenge, that Qasem Hassan feared the October 7th attack would unleash—not just toward Hamas fighters but toward Palestinian citizens of Israel and residents of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. In subsequent months, reports on the suffering of Gazans were drowned out in Israel by coverage of the hostages’ plight. But for Qasem Hassan the agony was immediate. On October 7th, while she was still at home in Tamra, she heard a piercing cry. It was her sister-in-law, who lived next door; she had just learned from a news report that her brother, Marwan Abu Reda, a paramedic in Gaza, had been killed when an Israeli rocket struck an ambulance in which he was travelling. Qasem Hassan had met Abu Reda and visited his family. He often sent her holiday cards. That evening, Qasem Hassan cooked dinner for her relatives and grieved with them. “It was terrible,” she said.

The clinic at the hotel was a collaborative effort that Qasem Hassan had launched with her peers at Physicians for Human Rights Israel, a nonprofit whose board she chairs. The organization, founded in 1988, produces

reports on sometimes contentious subjects; a recent one claimed that Israeli prisons were systematically denying medical care to Palestinian detainees, resulting in a “widespread scabies infection,” among other problems. (The Israel Prison Service did not respond to a request for comment.) The group also provides medical care to people who lack access to it, both in the occupied territories and at a clinic in Jaffa that serves immigrants, asylum seekers, and refugees. In fact, at the time of the October 7th attack, Qasem Hassan and other P.H.R.I. members had been planning to visit Gaza the following week. With access to Gaza cut off, Qasem Hassan instead joined an emergency-response team and went to the Dead Sea, for reasons both personal and philosophical. “You can’t divide human pain,” she told Palestinian friends who questioned why she went to the hotel as the bombardment of Gaza intensified. “Whether you are Israeli or Palestinian, it’s the same pain.”

Before leaving the Dead Sea area, Qasem Hassan texted a photograph to a group of colleagues at a medical clinic where she worked, in Kiryat Bialik, a town on the outskirts of Haifa. It showed her standing in a white coat next to her fellow-volunteers. She added a note: “In the P.H.R.I. clinic we set up at the David hotel for evacuees from Kibbutz Be’eri.”

“Very nice!” a Jewish nurse at the clinic texted back. “Human rights for Israelis only!”

“For all people,” Qasem Hassan replied.

“Certainly not!” the nurse responded. “Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and anyone who collaborates with them don’t have rights, because they are not human beings.”

“For all innocent people,” Qasem Hassan texted.

Qasem Hassan would soon stop expressing herself so freely. Shortly after she returned to Tamra, where she lived with her husband, a sociologist named Sharaf, and their four children, a wave of arrests and investigations swept Israel. Dozens of Palestinian citizens were accused of inciting terrorism, often based solely on their social-media posts. To Jewish Israelis, the crackdown might have seemed like a necessary precaution after the

worst massacre in their nation's history. But it felt like unwarranted harassment to many of the targets, including Abed Samara, the head of the cardiac intensive-care unit at Hasharon Hospital, in Petah Tikva, who was suspended without warning for social-media posts that some interpreted as pro-Hamas, and for allegedly replacing his profile picture on Facebook with a Hamas flag after October 7th. According to *Haaretz*, the allegation was false—the image was of an Islamic flag, and it had been on Samara's Facebook page since 2022. But, once the accusation spread, Samara was barraged with threats. He ended up resigning from the hospital, where he'd worked for fifteen years.

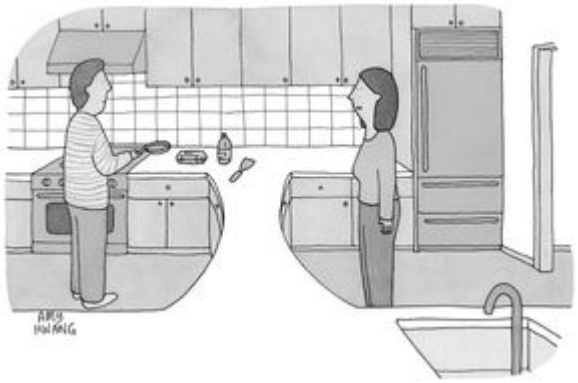
Qasem Hassan, who had sometimes posted opinions about politics on social media, stopped doing so, and she avoided discussing the war at work. But she kept her leadership role at P.H.R.I., which occasionally required her to speak to journalists. In February, 2024, she appeared on Channel 12, a popular Israeli news outlet, to discuss the humanitarian situation in Gaza. In an interview with Arad Nir, who hosts a program on international affairs, Qasem Hassan said that Israel had intentionally targeted Gaza's hospitals, in violation of the Geneva Conventions, which accord medical facilities a special protected status. Nir pushed back, arguing that Hamas used these hospitals as command centers to launch deadly attacks on Israel. Qasem Hassan replied that this claim had not been verified by a third party, and that targeting health-care facilities violated international law.

As Qasem Hassan was aware, such views were rarely voiced on Israeli television. A couple of months later, three of her patients, who'd heard the interview, sent a letter to her employer, Clalit, Israel's largest health-care organization. The statements she'd made about the bombing of Gaza's hospitals were proof, they wrote, that her heart was "with her murderous Palestinian brethren." The patients called for Qasem Hassan to be suspended "in light of her solidarity with, and support for, Hamas."

Many sectors of Israeli society, such as the public-school system, are highly segregated. But, in Israel's hospitals and health clinics, Palestinian employees actually have an outsized presence. In 2023, twenty-five per cent of doctors in Israel were Arab—more than double the level in 2010—as were twenty-seven per cent of nurses and forty-nine per cent of

pharmacists. The Israeli medical system could scarcely function without them. After October 7th, a rabbi named Meir Shmueli released a YouTube video in which he portrayed this development as a dire threat. “Do you know how many Arab doctors, may their names be erased, are in the hospitals?” Shmueli asked. He claimed that these doctors were “killing Jewish patients,” a baseless charge that Zion Hagay, the chairman of the Israeli Medical Association, denounced. Such talk could “ignite a war within us,” Hagay warned, hailing the country’s health-care system as a “beacon of coexistence and tolerance where Jewish and Arab medical professionals work side by side from day to day and have one oath and one goal: saving lives.”

In recent years, many Jewish Israelis who might have entered the medical field have instead gravitated to the tech industry, sometimes after serving in intelligence units of the Israel Defense Forces. (Most Arab citizens are not required to serve in the military, and rarely do so.) Thabet Abu Rass, a political geographer at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, told me that Palestinians have rushed to fill the resulting openings in medicine. Abu Rass, an expert on Israel’s Palestinian minority, did not downplay the level of racism in his country. “If we take the issue of land and planning, there are over thirty different discriminatory laws within the system,” he said. “The discrimination in Israeli society is very structural.” But he noted that Israel has some striking contradictory tendencies. In recent years, the government has invested tens of millions of dollars in scholarships for Palestinian students seeking to attend universities, as a way of addressing poverty and unemployment in Arab communities. Abu Rass, a member of the steering committee that oversaw this initiative, told me that the number of Palestinian citizens seeking advanced degrees grew from twenty-four thousand in 2010 to sixty-four thousand last year.



“Sometimes I wish we hadn’t installed a kitchen isthmus.”
Cartoon by Amy Hwang

In 2016, two nonprofits, the Israel Religious Action Center and the Israel Movement for Reform and Progressive Judaism, published “Heroes of Health,” a report heralding these changes. A photograph on the cover showed a group of medical workers holding up signs—some in Hebrew, others in Arabic—that read “Jews and Arabs Refuse to Be Enemies.” That year, a Pew survey found that nearly half of Jewish Israelis supported expelling Arabs from the country. The report argued that a spirit of collaboration and openness nevertheless prevailed in the field of health care. A physician named Suheir Assadi was quoted as saying, “I feel free in this system and I feel that I can develop and do anything.” Medicine, the report suggested, was a neutral space that hospital administrators kept insulated from the headlines—which, that year, were dominated by stories about stabbings of Jews on sidewalks and in markets. Such acts of violence (and retaliatory shootings by Israeli security forces) were not discussed at work, according to administrators at several hospitals. Osnat Levtzion-Korach, the director of Hadassah Mt. Scopus Hospital, in Jerusalem, said that medical staff were expected to “leave the politics at the door.”

In 2018, Guy Shalev, an Israeli anthropologist who is now the executive director of P.H.R.I., published a dissertation arguing that this egalitarian ethos was a fiction. While doing field work at two Israeli hospitals, he discovered that Jewish doctors routinely discussed politics. Only Palestinians had to avoid such talk, he found. To have any chance of getting promoted, a Palestinian medical student noted, people like him needed to convince their superiors that they were *aravim tovim,* or “good Arabs.” (The student in question had been arrested at a protest when he was a teen-ager,

but had scrupulously avoided such activity ever since.) Although medicine offered Palestinian citizens an “entry ticket” into Israeli society, Shalev concluded, it came at the cost of having to mute their identities.

In a study published this past February, Ghada Majadli, a policy analyst at Al-Shabaka, a Palestinian think tank, argued that this burden has grown heavier since October 7th, as the atmosphere in Israeli hospitals has become more overtly nationalistic. A Palestinian doctor told Majadli that, at a staff meeting, a Jewish colleague said, “Let them annihilate Gaza” while staring at him. Many of Majadli’s subjects feared that pushing back on dehumanizing comments about Palestinians would cause them to be accused of disloyalty—or of supporting Hamas.

From an early age, Qasem Hassan was encouraged to speak her mind. She grew up in Nazareth, Israel’s largest Arab city. Both her parents were teachers, and her mother and aunts all earned advanced degrees. They were among the first Muslim girls from Nazareth to go to college, Qasem Hassan told me, reflecting their father’s belief that Palestinian citizens of Israel couldn’t afford to waste the opportunities offered by education. As a young girl, Qasem Hassan absorbed the same message from her mother, who drilled her with puzzles and brain exercises.

As Qasem Hassan got older, she received an equally formative political education. Her mother took her to rallies at a public square in Nazareth, where she heard speeches by the famous Palestinians Emile Habibi, a novelist and a member of the Knesset, and Tawfiq Zayyad, a poet and the mayor of Nazareth. (Her mother even made her memorize one of Zayyad’s poems, which she then recited onstage in front of local dignitaries, including the author.) The political culture of Nazareth was dominated by Hadash, an alliance of the Israeli Communist Party and several left-wing groups which championed socialism and Arab-Jewish coöperation. These values were shared by Qasem Hassan’s mother, who appeared at strikes even though teachers were not supposed to join picket lines. “She wasn’t afraid,” Qasem Hassan said.

After finishing high school, Qasem Hassan enrolled in Hebrew University’s medical program, inspired by the fact that a beloved aunt had died suddenly, at the age of thirty-one, from a cause that had never been

determined. In 2000, during Qasem Hassan's third year, the second intifada began after the breakdown of peace talks at Camp David. That October, Palestinian citizens of Israel flooded the streets in support of the uprising. The Israeli police opened fire on protesters, killing thirteen people, among them Asel Asleh, the brother of a medical student in the class below Qasem Hassan's. Political activity was barred on the campus of Hebrew University Medical School, Qasem Hassan and her fellow-activists were told. Qasem Hassan, who was among the leaders of an organization called the Committee of Palestinian Students, challenged this policy. At one point, she asked the school's dean to explain why he'd said nothing after Asleh was shot.

The events of October, 2000, confirmed Qasem Hassan's belief that doctors needed to speak out about social issues that affected human health, from police violence to systemic discrimination. Like many members of her generation, she became radicalized, bristling at efforts to promote intergroup coöperation which masked discrimination and inequality.

During her time in medical school, however, Qasem Hassan found a mentor in David Applebaum, an ordained rabbi and an emergency-medicine doctor who was known for rushing to the scenes of suicide bombings to tend to the victims. Applebaum ran a clinic, Terem, that provided urgent care in an ultra-Orthodox community; Qasem Hassan started working there on Saturdays, when Jewish staff observed the Sabbath. Qasem Hassan suspected that she and Applebaum held radically different views on most aspects of the Israel-Palestine conflict, including Jewish settlers, several of whom worked at the clinic. But she admired his compassion. In 2003, when he and his daughter were killed in a suicide attack at a café, she was shocked and saddened.

It was unnerving to be studying in Jerusalem during the second intifada. "Every coffee shop was a danger," Qasem Hassan said. To earn money, she worked at a restaurant in a mall where fans of the soccer team Beitar Jerusalem, who are notorious for their anti-Arab racism, sometimes celebrated after games. Qasem Hassan would hear them chant "*Mavet la'aravim!*"—"Death to Arabs!" Although Qasem Hassan did not wear a

hijab and spoke Hebrew so well that people sometimes assumed she was Jewish, she was terrified of being outed and attacked.

Qasem Hassan administers to an elderly patient in Tamra.

One day at the Terem clinic, a woman humiliated a Palestinian colleague of Qasem Hassan's by saying, "Don't touch my child—you're Arab!" At a different facility, Qasem Hassan overheard a nurse say, after an Arab patient had given birth, "Ah, you've brought us another terrorist." Palestinian medical residents faced extra obstacles when competing for positions in such fields as obstetrics and gynecology, which was Qasem Hassan's preference. She had strong grades and recommendations, yet she had a hard time finding a hospital that would admit her to its program. She later switched to family medicine, and was accepted at the Carmel Medical Center, in Haifa.

Not long after Qasem Hassan graduated from medical school, her mother died, of cancer. At the memorial, Qasem Hassan spoke about the moral values that had been instilled in her. In 2016, she decided to act on them by appearing before the Israeli Knesset to testify about the segregation of Jewish and Palestinian mothers in maternity wards. A scandal had erupted after Israel Public Radio aired a report on the practice, which is forbidden by Israel's health ministry. The controversy grew when Bezalel Smotrich—then a far-right Knesset member, today Israel's finance minister—affirmed that maternity wards *should* be segregated. "It is natural for my wife to not want to lie next to somebody who just gave birth to a baby that might want to murder her baby in 20 years," he tweeted. At the Knesset hearing, various hospital administrators insisted that pregnant women had been separated only to respect cultural preferences. (It was noted that Orthodox women might not want someone next to them watching TV on the Sabbath.) But Qasem Hassan testified that she had frequently seen Palestinian patients receive separate, and demeaning, treatment, including on occasions when doctors who did not speak Arabic summoned male custodial workers to ask women about their sexual histories.

Back in medical school, Qasem Hassan had been doing a rotation in a pediatric ward when she'd overheard an exchange between a Palestinian woman from the West Bank and a Jewish doctor. The woman said that she had to cross a checkpoint to get to the hospital, and asked for a letter that she could present to the soldiers there, who often gave her trouble. The doctor provided the letter, and also advised her to contact Physicians for Human Rights Israel. Qasem Hassan had never heard of the organization. She rushed to a computer and found its website. She soon became a regular volunteer.

Qasem Hassan was shaken when she heard that some of her patients had written a joint letter accusing her of being a Hamas supporter, but she was not entirely surprised. After finishing her family-medicine residency, she'd spent a decade working at a clinic in a prosperous neighborhood of Kiryat Bialik. In 2022, she moved to her current clinic, which is in a poorer area; she was eager to serve a less privileged population, but the neighborhood surrounding the new clinic was fiercely conservative.

Qasem Hassan responded to the joint letter by sending Clalit photographs of herself treating evacuees from Kibbutz Be’eri. She also sent a link to a radio interview that she’d given shortly after October 7th in which she condemned both Hamas’s attacks and Israel’s retaliation in Gaza as war crimes. Clalit, after a review, decided to dismiss the complaint against Qasem Hassan. She was relieved, but the Clalit representative who relayed this news to her then noted that her accusers, unappeased, were threatening to stage a protest or go to the media. (The letter’s authors declined to speak with me.) Other patients warned her that they’d heard negative talk about her in the neighborhood surrounding the clinic; this prompted a security guard from Clalit to offer to walk her to her car at night. Sometime later, another patient at the clinic angrily confronted her about her support for the rights of Palestinian prisoners, and told her to move to an Arab country.

After this encounter, Qasem Hassan shut her office door and cried. Privately, she wondered if she could continue working in such an environment. But she didn’t quit. One morning in February, I visited the clinic, a low-slung building with metal bars over its windows. I passed through a hallway decorated with Israeli flags on my way to Qasem Hassan’s office, a small room appointed with family photographs and gifts that patients had given her: a Gaudí figurine from Barcelona, a souvenir from Dubai.

Qasem Hassan, who is forty-seven, with chin-length brown curls and a poised bearing, told me that, after the joint complaint was submitted to Clalit, her biggest fear was that a critical mass of patients offended by her politics would switch to other doctors, as the authors of the letter had done. Since her salary depended on the number of people she treated, this could upend her ability to earn a living. She also worried that Clalit might fire her, or that the controversy would damage her relationships with patients to whom she felt close, many of them with backgrounds that were radically different from hers.

One day, she invited me to accompany her on some home visits. Our first stop was the residence of an elderly couple, Holocaust survivors she’d been treating since 2014. They sat slumped in recliners in the living room of their apartment. The husband greeted Qasem Hassan with a warm smile. His

wife was less animated. For years, she'd struggled with depression, a condition that she attributed to the murder of most of her immediate family during the Holocaust, when she was a child in Romania. After I shared that my maternal grandparents were Holocaust survivors from Romania, the man said, "My wife—they killed two sisters and an older brother and another." Qasem Hassan asked the woman if she still thought about what had happened. "Of course," she replied. Then she fell silent.

Afterward, in the car, Qasem Hassan said that she kept trying to get the woman to talk more about her past, since her refusal to do so seemed to exacerbate her suffering. Qasem Hassan had personal experience with victims who were wary of discussing traumatic experiences. During the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, seven hundred and fifty thousand Palestinians were expelled from Israel or fled their homes in fear; in the Arab community, this is known as the Nakba, or "catastrophe." Another hundred and fifty thousand became citizens of Israel. Many of these "'48 Palestinians" were also dispossessed, including Qasem Hassan's father, whose family was evicted from the village of Tira. Qasem Hassan told me that her father belonged to the generation of Palestinians who were afraid to talk about the Nakba, a fear reinforced by the fact that Israel kept Arab towns under military rule until 1966, and treated their inhabitants as an enemy within.

Before Qasem Hassan visited the home of her next patient, she pulled over at the crest of a hill and led me down a path to an open field strewn with rocks. These were the ruins of a cemetery in Al-Damun, a Palestinian village that, according to several historians, was destroyed by the Israeli Army in 1948. The village's fifteen hundred inhabitants fled, among them the family of Qasem Hassan's husband, who went to Lebanon before eventually returning to the region and settling in Tamra. Qasem Hassan and her husband had taken their wedding photographs by the village's ruins. She showed me a well that had once supplied Al-Damun with water.

After visiting the cemetery, we continued along a highway that bisects the Galilee. As we passed Tamra, Qasem Hassan pointed out a restaurant and an auto-repair shop—locals sometimes said that these were the only reasons Jewish Israelis visited the town. " 'We come to Tamra to eat the food, to fix the car—this is coexistence!' " she said, laughing. In the towns where her

Jewish patients lived, Qasem Hassan told me, the roads were smoothly paved and children played in parks. In Arab towns, there were few parks, and so children played in rutted streets. Discriminatory land policies had allowed Jewish municipalities to expand while places like Tamra grew ever more constricted.

The next house call Qasem Hassan made was in an Arab town called Kabul. After welcoming us inside, three women in head scarves plied us with cashews, dried fruit, and scented coffee. They were the daughters of Qasem Hassan's patient, a woman in her seventies. While Qasem Hassan examined her in another room, I spoke to the patient's husband. A small man with a white beard, he told me that in his youth he'd taught himself to weave and to paint tiles; because of these skills, he had managed to earn enough to raise five sons and five daughters. When I asked where he was originally from, he said Al-Damun, the razed town that Qasem Hassan and I had just left. Then he gestured toward the TV, which showed footage of children wading through rubble in Gaza, and said that it reminded him of his own youth. He was born in 1946, he said, and although he was too young to remember the 1948 war, he vividly recalled its aftermath, when his father was expelled to Jordan and he and his siblings were destitute. "I cried—I wanted bread," he said. "No father, no bread."

In addition to having a roster of patients, Qasem Hassan co-taught a medical-ethics class affiliated with the Technion Israel Institute of Technology, in Haifa. One day in May, 2024, the theme of the lesson was the challenge of preserving the dignity of patients. The students were given an article from *Haaretz* about a doctor who'd served at Sde Teiman, a facility in the Negev Desert that, after October 7th, was used to detain alleged Hamas fighters and other suspects taken from Gaza. In a letter sent to Israel's health and defense ministers and its attorney general, the doctor wrote that he'd seen detainees blindfolded, made to wear diapers, and placed in painful constraints—conditions that, in his view, violated the Incarceration of Unlawful Combatants Law, which Israel amended in 2023. "Just this week, two prisoners had their legs amputated due to handcuff injuries, which unfortunately is a routine event," the doctor stated. This was in "violation of Israeli law, and perhaps worse for me as a doctor, in the violation of my basic commitment to patients." In a statement, the I.D.F.

told me that any mistreatment of detainees is “strictly prohibited,” and that “concrete allegations” of abuse are investigated.

The class discussion was tense. A medical resident, who was of Palestinian heritage, said that he didn’t want to talk about the subject because he feared that it was too inflammatory and divisive; several Jewish students said that they shared his concerns. Another resident, a Jewish reservist who had served at Sde Teiman, insisted that during his time there the detainees had been treated appropriately and given proper medical care.

A week later, Qasem Hassan learned that the School for Continuing Medical Education in Family Medicine, which oversaw the ethics course, had received a letter from several residents in the class. In the letter, a copy of which I obtained, the students criticized the *Haaretz* article as biased. They also accused Qasem Hassan of dismissing the concerns of the resident who had served in Sde Teiman and of abusing her authority by imposing her political agenda on them.

Three days later, another group of students submitted a reply. They acknowledged that the topic was emotionally charged, but they insisted that the conversation had been respectful, and that the reservist had been encouraged to express his views. They also questioned why only Qasem Hassan had been singled out for blame—the class had two Jewish instructors as well, Gila Yakov, a medical ethicist, and Amos Ritter, a family-medicine doctor. (Ritter was not present that day, but he had helped prepare the lesson.) The letter was signed by four Palestinian residents.

Cartoon by Roz Chast

The course had been visited by controversy before. Years earlier, after Qasem Hassan brought in a speaker from P.H.R.I. who used the term "occupied territories," some students raised objections. Ritter, who admires Qasem Hassan's outspokenness, told me that, ever since then, "Lina has been marked as a left extremist." Now Qasem Hassan and her colleagues were summoned to meet with Adi Ivzori-Erel and Merav Sudarsky, who lead the academic program at the continuing-education school. The teaching of explosive issues should be coördinated with the school's leaders in advance, the instructors were told, and the lessons should draw on scientific papers, not on articles in *Haaretz*, which, in Israel, is widely seen as left-wing. Ivzori-Erel and Sudarsky reiterated this in a statement to me. "While addressing sensitive topics is not prohibited, such discussions should rely on balanced, non-partisan academic sources," they wrote. This was not the first time that concerns had been raised about "political bias in ethical discussions within the course," they added. Yakov told me that, in hindsight, she wished the discussion had not focussed on the *Haaretz* article—it had, she said, "led some students, both Jewish and Arab, to experience it as a political debate rather than an ethical one."

In Qasem Hassan's view, bias was not the issue—rather, the fact of prisoner mistreatment had made some students uncomfortable. Since that day in class, she noted, far more graphic accounts of abuse at Sde Teiman had emerged, including an incident, caught on video, in which a group of

soldiers appeared to sexually assault a male detainee with a baton. The faculty overseeing the course, she felt, wanted to muzzle discussion of a disturbing reality, which was itself a political choice. Qasem Hassan also felt that she'd been subjected to a double standard. Back in November, 2023, Mordechai Alperin, the head of the family-medicine program, had signed an open letter endorsing the bombing of hospitals in Gaza that, the signatories said, were being used by Hamas. Nobody had accused him of political bias, though several Palestinian students had privately complained to Qasem Hassan about it. (In a text, Alperin told me he doubted that the open letter had had any impact on the situation in Gaza, and argued that "there is no place for politics in the medical system." Ivzori-Erel and Sudarsky noted that Alperin's action did not take place "within the framework of the program.")

Qasem Hassan had taught the ethics class for seven years. She had recently learned that Technion would award her a diploma for excellence in teaching. But she no longer wanted to teach the ethics class. "I can't teach medical ethics with a sword on my neck," she said.

Qasem Hassan's concern for the dignity of patients in extreme situations evolved from her work with P.H.R.I. For years, she'd served as a doctor for Palestinian prisoners who launched hunger strikes to protest being held under administrative detention, meaning that they had not been charged with a crime or granted a trial. It was one way she could express solidarity with Palestinians who were denied the rights and protections that Israeli citizens had. Another way was dispensing care at the mobile clinics that P.H.R.I. operated in the occupied territories. (The conditions that Qasem Hassan witnessed on these expeditions helped convince her that Israel's sixteen-year blockade of Gaza had turned the territory into an open-air prison, a situation that was bound to explode at some point.)

In early March, I met Qasem Hassan and a group of medics at a gas station in Tayibe, an Arab town near the Green Line, which separates Israel from the West Bank. A black van had been loaded with donations and supplies, and Qasem Hassan added a bag of winter clothing that two of her children had outgrown. After crossing a checkpoint, we followed a road flanked by sloping hills toward Danaba, a town near Tulkarm, where Israel had

launched a major military operation in January. Its aim, according to Smotrich, the finance minister, had been to root out militants and bolster "protection of settlements and settlers." The campaign had displaced forty thousand Palestinians—according to some analysts, the most in the West Bank since the Six-Day War, in 1967.

The van stopped outside a white concrete building facing a courtyard decorated with a mural of the Smurfs. It was a girls' school. After the supplies were unloaded, Qasem Hassan pulled a medical smock over her black jacket and entered a classroom decorated with diagrams of the digestive system. A throng of patients had amassed outside. For several hours, Qasem Hassan tended to their medical needs, a task made harder by the fact that many had fled Tulkarm without any possessions. A diabetic man with mud-flecked shoes told her that he was missing both his insulin and his eyeglasses. A woman in a gray hijab said that she suffered from depression and anxiety but didn't know what prescriptions she needed, because she'd left her medicine behind when soldiers evicted her from her home. Then she showed Qasem Hassan a picture of her son, which dangled from a chain around her neck. The son, a young man in his twenties, had been shot and killed by a soldier four months earlier, she said. She provided no additional context, but her grief was palpable. Qasem Hassan held her hand, which was trembling, and wrote out a prescription for her.

An elderly man in a dark *thobe* shuffled into the room, pushing a walker. He was with his daughter, who told Qasem Hassan that he had myasthenia gravis, an autoimmune disease. The man waved three fingers in the air, one for each of the times he'd become a refugee: 1948, 1967, 2025.

The last patient left at around 2 *P.M.*—it was the start of Ramadan, and everyone wanted to get home before sundown. Qasem Hassan sighed and admitted, "I can't take any more of these stories."

On the way back to Tayibe, we passed a hilltop where some caravans were visible. It was a settlement outpost, built with the Israeli government's tacit consent. From Tayibe, I got a ride back to the Tel Aviv area with Daniel Solomon, one of the other physicians who volunteered at the mobile clinic. Solomon, an Italian Jew who moved to Israel in 2012, works at a hospital in a politically conservative town. The staff is mixed, and when the focus is on

treating patients everyone gets along. “There is definitely some degree of coexistence,” he told me. But, as in most hospitals, the majority of the leadership positions are held by Jews, he said, adding that since October 7th the atmosphere had grown jingoistic. At the hospital’s entrance, staff had hung a banner bearing the slogan “One People: Together We Win.” A whiteboard and some markers were placed next to it, so that people could write messages. In no time, Solomon said, someone had written “Flatten Gaza” alongside “*Am Yisrael Chai!*” (“The People of Israel Live!”)

That evening, I visited Tel Aviv’s Democracy Square, where anti-government protests are held every Saturday. The demonstrations began in January, 2023, in response to a plan by the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to limit the Supreme Court’s power. More recently, the organizers have been targeting the government’s failure to secure the release of all October 7th hostages, and the willingness of Netanyahu to appease his right-wing coalition partners by prolonging the war.

The streets were crowded with demonstrators, some of whom were dressed in “Crime Minister” sweatshirts, a reference to Netanyahu’s corruption trial, which centers on accusations that he accepted lavish bribes and discussed doing political favors for a media company in exchange for positive coverage. Others wore hats bearing the words “End This Fucking War.” The mood was more sombre at Hostages Square, near the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, reflecting the week’s events. A few days earlier, a funeral had been held for Kfir and Ariel Bibas, two children who were abducted on October 7th and died while in captivity. There had also been mounting indications (soon borne out) that the current ceasefire with Hamas would unravel. The protesters waved Israeli flags and held up signs—“59 More To Go,” a reference to the hostages still in Gaza—in both English and Hebrew. I did not see any signs in Arabic. Tamar Hermann, a senior fellow at the Israel Democracy Institute, told me that Arab citizens had been absent from the start. “One of the main concerns of the protesters was to show that they are very patriotic, that they served in the Army, that they are Zionists,” she said. “The inclusion of Arabs could have painted them as leftists, as collaborators and whatnot, so although certain Arab leaders were invited, they were not the more outspoken leaders. It was *not* a joint Jewish-Arab protest.”

Hassan Jabareen, the director of Adalah, a human-rights organization, told me that after October 7th Palestinian citizens concerned about the infliction of collective punishment on Gaza led a demonstration in the northern town of Umm Al-Fahm. A hundred police officers made eleven arrests. Since then, he said, licenses for protests in the north had been denied. Meanwhile, Netanyahu announced that the war now had four fronts: Gaza, Lebanon, the West Bank, and “within.” Scores of Palestinian citizens were brought before disciplinary committees or hauled into custody for alleged incitement.

Fears of internal violence weren’t unreasonable. In May, 2021, riots had erupted in some mixed cities, sparked partly in response to a government effort to evict Palestinian families from their homes in Sheikh Jarrah, a neighborhood in East Jerusalem. The lack of bloody clashes in those cities after October 7th suggests that the Hamas attack didn’t inflame the same divisions, and might even have initially fostered solidarity across ethnic lines. Two scholars at the University of Haifa, Doron Navot and Hanna Diab, are conducting a research project for which they have interviewed dozens of Palestinian citizens—teachers, lawyers, doctors, journalists. Their subjects’ statements provide some evidence to support this notion. Many of them said that immediately after October 7th they felt sympathy for the victims, some of whom were residents of their own communities. “We lost people,” a Bedouin from the Negev said. But being treated as an enemy soon created alienation and resentment. “I go into Jewish schools and hear the students whispering that I’m Arab,” one subject said. “This is racism that existed before October 7th, but now it’s out in the open.”

“Dad went out for cigarettes and beer . . . and he brought back enough for the whole family!” Cartoon by Maddie Dai

In January, 2024, aChord, an Israeli nonprofit that studies social psychology, released the results of a survey showing that, among Jewish Israelis, there had been a sharp rise in anger, fear, and hatred toward Arabs. Ron Gerlitz, aChord’s director, told me that it would have been surprising “if we *didn’t* see this.” Recent surveys indicate that the animosity has levelled off. But Gerlitz said another aChord survey found that almost sixty per cent of Jewish Israelis believe it’s illegitimate to identify as both Israeli and Palestinian. The message, Gerlitz said, was that Arabs in Israel “can’t *be* Israelis” unless they disavow a core part of themselves.

One of the participants in Navot and Diab’s study told them, “The Palestinian in Israel lives in constant tension between a desire to belong to the broader society and the realization that this belonging is always conditional.” Others said that they no longer wanted to belong, and felt that their citizenship was worthless. Navot and Diab draw a distinction between having formal citizenship rights, which Palestinians in Israel have, and *being* a citizen. “You can have citizenship rights without being a citizen because society excludes you or terrifies you or doesn’t recognize you,” Navot told me. “If you go to work or to your university and you are terrified to speak up, you may have citizenship rights but not *feel* like a citizen.” Aside from fear, the dominant emotions their subjects expressed were disappointment and anguish, fuelled by the widespread indifference they sensed from the Jewish public toward the horrors occurring in Gaza, where more than fifty thousand residents have been killed and millions have been displaced. Navot told me that nearly all the subjects of the study had expected Israel to respond harshly to the October 7th attack. “And they accepted this,” he said. “But they didn’t expect that so many Jewish Israelis would support the continuity of the reaction for such a long time. They are shocked by this, and it is one of the reasons they don’t talk—it’s not only that they are afraid but that they feel there is no one to talk to.”

I heard echoes of this from a Palestinian citizen of Israel I met one evening in Haifa. After October 7th, she locked her social-media accounts and stopped communicating directly with friends in Gaza, worried that even a benign text could make her the target of an investigation. “I understand

what October 7th meant to the Jewish community—I understand their fears," she said. "But I can't understand losing your humanity." In the past, few Palestinian citizens of Israel even considered leaving the country, emphasizing the principle of *sumud*, or "steadfastness," and the imperative to remain on ancestral land. But the woman told me that many people she knew were planning to relocate; indeed, she and her husband were considering emigrating from Israel next year, once their daughter graduated from high school. "I can't see a future here," she said. In this sense, they had something in common with Jewish Israelis, thousands of whom have immigrated to Europe since October 7th because they felt despair about the future.

"This is where I belong," Qasem Hassan told me in Tamra, where she and Sharaf reside with their children in a house bordered by olive trees. Every year, Sharaf's aunts harvest the trees, which supply the family with food and oil. His family doesn't have legal title to all of their land. The government hasn't accepted their claim to it, even though they've lived there for many decades; at one point, they were forced to pay the government a fee to prevent their house from being demolished.

Living in Tamra isn't easy. There are virtually no parks in the town, so when Qasem Hassan's two young daughters want to play in one she often drives them all the way to Kiryat Bialik. Another local problem is crime, which has soared in recent years, fuelled by gangs and, many residents feel, by the deliberate neglect of the police, which since 2022 has been run, except for a short break, by Israel's national-security minister, Itamar Ben-Gvir, an ultranationalist and unapologetic racist.

But Qasem Hassan wasn't going anywhere, even as she acknowledged feeling increasingly isolated, not only from her Jewish peers but also from some of her fellow-Palestinians, including family members. Her older brother, a successful economist, and her sister, a government lawyer, have repeatedly warned her that her outspokenness could damage not only her career but theirs.

Qasem Hassan has also heard this from her father, who lives in Nazareth. She visits him often, in part to check on his health; he suffers from pulmonary fibrosis. One afternoon, she brought me along, stopping on the

way to buy *knafeh*, a cheese pastry. When we arrived, her father was lying on a maroon couch in the living room, with a plastic breathing tube attached to his nose. He told me that he was a graduate of Mikveh Yisrael, an agricultural school that prided itself on educating the pioneers of the Zionist movement. At the same time, he noted, “I lived those ’48 years, and I saw the war with my eyes. I lived in Tira, in the triangle, near Kfar Saba. And until *now*”—tears welled in his eyes—“I can’t grasp how another people could throw me from my house and live in my place.”

Qasem Hassan told me that her father would sometimes express pride after hearing her on the radio talking about human rights. But then he’d urge her to censor herself. Qasem Hassan understood his conflicting impulses. “He’s a Nakba survivor, and he’s afraid,” she said. Lately, though, she hadn’t always been apprising her family of her media appearances. “I don’t want these comments,” she said. “I need support.” She summarized her dilemma: “If I speak up, I might damage someone—myself, the people around me. If I don’t speak up, I can’t live. This is what gives me purpose.”

Since October 7th, a source of comfort to Qasem Hassan has been the devotion of patients she’d feared would abandon her—people like Ellen and Shlomo, who live in Kiryat Bialik. Ellen, aged eighty-two, is originally from Philadelphia, and is the daughter of a passionate Zionist. Shlomo is a Sabra—an Israeli native—who grew up in Tel Aviv. They both told me that they adored Qasem Hassan. After Qasem Hassan discovered that Ellen had an atrioventricular block, she helped her get a pacemaker before the specialist who could perform the surgery left for the weekend. “I know she saved my life,” Ellen said. She and Shlomo were aware of Qasem Hassan’s political beliefs, which Qasem Hassan told me she didn’t conceal from her patients. (“I can’t hide who I am.”) Shlomo said to me, “We know she’s active.” It had never affected the quality of the care they received. “She doesn’t look at your color or your views,” Ellen said. “She just cares about you as a person.”

Qasem Hassan also leaned on such colleagues as Daphna Shochat, a Jewish endocrinologist I met in Jaffa, outside the office of Physicians for Human Rights Israel. She and Qasem Hassan were there to record videos that would accompany a new P.H.R.I. report, which incorporated interviews

with twenty-four Palestinian medical professionals who had been held at Israeli detention facilities, where many of them said they had been tortured. According to the report, most had been captured while working in hospitals in Gaza, not while plotting acts of terrorism. (Both the Israel Prison Service and the I.D.F. denied the report's allegations; the I.D.F. said that it detained only people "suspected of involvement in terrorist activities.")

Qasem Hassan and Shochat—the granddaughter of Yafa Yarkoni, a legendary Israeli singer—were close, and their friendship had affirmed Qasem Hassan's belief in the importance of forging alliances with Jewish Israelis who shared her values. Shochat, for her part, was impressed by the courage shown by Qasem Hassan, who was far more vulnerable to attack than were P.H.R.I.'s Jewish members, and by her gentle fierceness. "She somehow manages to say things as they are, without apologizing, without compromising, and without losing her dignity and compassion," Shochat said. She quoted the poet Leah Goldberg—"Even in a time of war, the value of love is greater than the value of murder"—and said, "Lina really embodies that."

Qasem Hassan was aware that plenty of people viewed her less flatteringly, including people in the Arab world who have seen Israel's Palestinian citizens as betrayers. "We are *not*," she insisted. "We are the people that stayed on our lands, we are the natives, and we had to pay a price for that." She was constantly navigating encounters that pulled at the different strands of her identity. One day, a reservist came to the Kiryat Bialik clinic; he was experiencing P.T.S.D. after serving in Gaza. What would Qasem Hassan's sister-in-law—the one whose brother was killed by an air strike—think of her helping him? Qasem Hassan pushed this thought aside and offered him care. "I never judge my patients," she said, though she admitted that "it's not easy." It helped that Qasem Hassan believed that the violence of the conflict harmed not only the victims but also the perpetrators. In her view, a reservist with P.T.S.D. "is also a kind of victim."

In recent weeks, Qasem Hassan told me, criticism of the Gaza war had intensified in Israel. She noted an editorial that the former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert published on May 27th, in which he declared, "What we are doing in Gaza now is a war of devastation: indiscriminate, limitless, cruel."

At the same time, Qasem Hassan was deeply concerned about a bill advancing through the Knesset. It proposed that foreign donations to human-rights groups—which are currently untaxed—be taxed at a rate of eighty per cent, a change that could cut P.H.R.I.'s budget by more than a third.

Qasem Hassan also continued to feel frustrated by the strictures surrounding the discussion of certain subjects at work. One day in February, she learned that the clinic would be decorated with orange balloons, in honor of Kfir and Ariel Bibas, the child hostages who had died, whose hair had been reddish orange. Their deaths appalled Qasem Hassan. "They are babies," she told me. At the same time, she went on, "there are seventeen *thousand* children in Gaza who were killed, and no one really recognizes that it's a crime to kill them."

This is what Qasem Hassan had feared from the start—that the horrific violence inflicted on Israelis on October 7th would be used to justify a war without limits, dehumanizing all Palestinians. As a result, she had sometimes asked herself if going to the Dead Sea after October 7th had been the right decision. She ultimately decided that she was proud of it. She told me, "I did it for myself, because it put to the test the idea I was raised on—that all people are equal and that human pain is universal." She paused. "I did it for myself and also for my daughters. I wanted them to understand that a human being is a human being." ♦

Eyal Press has been writing for The New Yorker since 2014 and became a contributing writer in 2023. He is a Puffin Foundation Fellow at the Type Media Center.

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Profiles

Jenny Saville, the Body Artist

The British painter has dedicated her career to depicting human flesh, especially that of women, with deep empathy.

By Rebecca Mead

June 9, 2025

Saville, in Oxford. Unlike a portraitist, she focusses on the human head and face and body, rather than on an individual.Photograph by Thomas Duffield for The New Yorker

In March, an exhibition of works by Jenny Saville, the British artist known for her large-scale figurative paintings, went on display at the Albertina Museum, in Vienna. The day before the opening, Saville visited the galleries to inspect the completed hang. The show, titled “Gaze,” included several works in which Saville had sought to explore the fractured experience of life in the digital era. “I have had a fascination for quite a while now with how we live these different realities,” she explained. “If you

sit on a bus or take the subway, everybody's on a device. So you've got this sort of mundane, lived reality, and then this screened reality. If you've got twenty people on the subway train, those twenty people are probably all over the globe, or even in outer space. Those realities exist all the time. You just move in and out, seemingly seamlessly."

We looked at a series of three paintings, titled "Fates." Each depicted a woman seated in a chair mounted on a stone plinth. They had been completed in 2018, and at the time, Saville told me, she "had been looking at images of ancient goddesses." The figures had the monumentality of classical sculpture, but they lacked the corporal integrity expected from such forms. In "Fate 2," the figure sat with her right leg cocked, her foot balanced on the opposite knee—but there was also a third leg, which hung over the arm of the chair. The figure's midsection was scrambled into colored marks, a belly button indicated by a scrawl of black on pink. "Fate 3" also depicted a female body, but with a pregnant belly and pendulous breasts, her intimidating scale exaggerated by the viewer's lowered vantage point. A pair of legs was tucked beneath her, while a third haunch and leg extended to her right. The surfeit of limbs suggested the temporal and spatial layering of experience which has become central to the way we see and live today. The "Fate" paintings conveyed an impulse toward motion, capturing the restlessness inherent in a human body—particularly a body that is building up the flesh and blood and bone of another body within its own. The paintings offered technically accomplished realism—Saville can paint a puckered nipple so lifelike that it makes you want to turn up the heat—combined with gestural abstraction. Her female figures were large in their art-historical scope as well as in their scale, evoking not just the classical tradition but also canonical modernist works by Pablo Picasso and Willem de Kooning.

At the same time, the paintings reached back visually into Saville's own catalogue. Now fifty-five, she achieved acclaim when she was in her early twenties for another series of paintings focussing on the female body, some of which she made while still an undergraduate, at the Glasgow School of Art. She had been precocious in her painterly virtuosity, particularly in the depiction of human flesh, with its mottled colors and variable textures, the swell of muscle and the yielding dimples of fat. Among these early works

was “Propped” (1992), a seven-foot-by-six-foot canvas on which Saville had depicted a towering female nude perched atop a stool, her legs wrapped around a pedestal-like base. The figure’s ample bosom poured forth, but it was not the painting’s focal point; the viewer’s eye was drawn instead to meaty, jutting knees and sturdy thighs, into which were dug tensed, strong fingers. “Propped” had been the centerpiece of Saville’s graduation exhibition, where it was displayed opposite a mirror. In the reflection, an onlooker could read words by Luce Irigaray, the French feminist philosopher, which Saville had etched, in reverse, into the oil paint with the tip of a brush: “If we continue to speak in this sameness—speak as men have spoken for centuries, we will fail each other.”

Not long after Saville’s student show, the London *Times Saturday Review* published an article about emerging British artists and included a photograph of “Propped,” before which stood its comparatively diminutive creator. (Her work was characterized as “breathtakingly accomplished,” with “a fierce feminist message.”) The painting caught the eye of Charles Saatchi, at the time the most prominent collector of contemporary art in Britain. He swiftly acquired it, along with several of Saville’s other student works, and also provided funding to support her for a year and a half while she made paintings for her first solo gallery show, in January, 1994.

“Propped,” a seven-foot-by-six-foot canvas, was completed in 1992, while Saville was an undergraduate. The painting was soon acquired by Charles Saatchi, at the time the most prominent collector of contemporary art in Britain.Art work © Jenny Saville / Courtesy Gagosian

In these and many subsequent works, Saville took on one of the principal themes of Western art since the Renaissance: the naked female form. But she represented it in a manner that had never quite been seen before. Unlike the works of Rubens or Rembrandt or Lucian Freud, all of whose influences on Saville were clear, her paintings showed what it was like to *occupy* a female body, rather than to appraise it from an easel. Saville was her own model for “Propped,” and early interviewers were surprised to discover that she was, and remains, a compactly built woman—the imposing scale of the painting was a trick of perspective.

Some critics found Saville’s approach off-putting: a male interviewer for the *Independent* questioned why her depictions of women seemed intent on “making them look so horrible.” “I’m not painting disgusting, big women. I’m painting women who’ve been made to think they are big and disgusting,” Saville told him, her point having been proved. Others were more nuanced in their reactions. In 1994, the critic Sarah Kent wrote an assessment of “Branded” (1992), in which a large female nude grasps a roll of belly fat in what Kent notes could be a gesture of defiance, or of self-

loathing. Across the figure's flesh, Saville had scrawled various words, including "*supportive*," "*decorative*," and "*irrational*." The figure, Kent wrote, "is occupied by an intelligence that makes us ashamed at our responses, and dismayed at our shame." Kent's judgment of the significance of Saville's work prevailed: in 2018, "Propped" went up for auction at Sotheby's in London, and it sold for the equivalent of $12.4 million—at the time, the record price paid at auction for a work by a living female artist.

At the Albertina, Saville acknowledged that the "Fates" paintings were excursions in deconstructing the robust figurative tradition in which she had so definitively inserted herself with "Propped." She sounded slightly unsure of her success in the endeavor. "I don't really like postmodernism," she told me. "I've never made work that analyzes painting in itself too much." She mused, "It's not that I don't *like* these pictures, it's just that they are a slight experimentation." Still, in their allusion to the art of venerable precursors, the "Fates" series was as fearless in its ambition as her undergraduate efforts had been. When I mentioned that the trio of paintings brought to mind Francis Bacon's smeary triptychs of seated figures—these include his celebrated "Three Studies of Lucian Freud"—Saville said, "Yeah, I love Francis Bacon. I definitely feel I've got a kind of crew of artists that I go around with, and belong in the conversation with, hopefully."

Later this month, museumgoers in London will have the opportunity to assess the artist's œuvre with "Jenny Saville: The Anatomy of Painting," a major exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery. It is, somewhat surprisingly, the first time that a museum in the British capital has dedicated a solo show to Saville. Nicholas Cullinan, the former director of the gallery, who is now the director of the British Museum, told me, "She's produced, since the early nineties, an extraordinary body of work that keeps developing and growing and maturing, and in some ways has been overlooked, from a museum perspective." In October, the show will travel to the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth.

The National Portrait Gallery is not an obvious institution to mount a Saville retrospective, given that it was established, in the mid-nineteenth century, to collect pictures of "the most eminent persons in British history," with a bigger emphasis on the subject of a work than on its creator.

Although Saville often paints closeups of heads, she rarely paints portraits, in the sense of making images of named, recognizable people. At the outset of her career, she decided that she didn't want to be associated with conventional portraiture, which seemed old-fashioned. She focussed on the human head and face and body, rather than on the individual. Many of her paintings have been self-portraits, in a manner of speaking—her own rounded cheeks, full lips, and big eyes have been discernible in her work for decades. But she speaks of lending her face and body to herself as a matter of convenience; her subjectivity is not her subject.

In Vienna, the exhibition included several depictions of heads as giant as those in a Chuck Close painting. But the images were much less clinical. Saville explained, "I work to have as much empathy in those heads as I can. They are particular to this person. The paintings are not usually using a person for other ideas—they are not as dissociated as that." In the "Fates" canvases, or in various other works in which multiple bodies are layered and limbs are repeated, Saville's purpose is not to induce estrangement. "I don't have an intention of saying, 'Right, I am going to make a piece where somebody has three legs,' " she said. "But, if you look at the Titian painting in the Met of Venus and Adonis, and the way he's composed it, it's like there's a triangle of legs. That's a really amazing rhythm. I'm not doing it to create a monstrous setup, or to disturb a sense of order. It's really to put *more* humanity into it."

Saville lives in Oxford, where she has three studios: one devoted to drawing, another to painting, and a warehouse in which she can undertake very large-scale works. She divides her time between Oxford and a home in London, and she has also acquired an apartment in New York City.

I visited Saville in her painting studio earlier this year. Tucked down a side road, the building was anonymous, without a doorbell or a knocker, its purpose betrayed only by a slight smear of reddish paint on the front door. Saville is intensely private about her spaces, and about works in progress; Stefan Ratibor, the director of the London branch of Gagosian, the gallery that has represented her for nearly three decades, told me that he'd visited her studio on just two occasions. The photographer Sally Mann, who has spent time there, documenting Saville at work, told me, "She reminds me in

a certain way of how Cy Twombly would work—he was sort of a magpie, picking up a stain on a newspaper, or whatever inspired him. She's a lot like that—she goes from oil sticks to oil paints to watercolors."

Saville led me through a small office area, where a desk was piled with books: collections of Greek myths, a volume about death and resurrection in art, a catalogue from a recent Jean-Michel Basquiat show at Gagosian. On the wall above the desk, a ripped-out page showing Velázquez's portrait of Pope Innocent X had been taped above an image of four Warhol silk screens of Elizabeth Taylor—these were reference materials for past or present works. Just outside the office was a courtyard garden, equipped with a table and chairs, where Saville and I sat in bright spring sunlight to talk.

As Saville's near-contemporary, I first became aware of her work in the nineties, and her presentation of the female body struck me as a bracing challenge to normative standards of feminine beauty and behavior. Like Saville, I'd been simultaneously reading feminist critical theory and magazines that recommended dieting or liposuction. Before meeting her, I'd looked back at early interviews she'd given, and I'd been struck by the confidence with which she had articulated the critique her work offered. "The history of art has been dominated by men," she told one male interlocutor. "I paint women as most women see themselves. I try to catch their identity, their skin, their hair, their heat, their leakiness." Her paintings, she said at the time, were not intended to be didactic. They were intended to provoke discussion: "What is beauty? Beauty is usually the male image of the female body. My women are beautiful in their individuality."

“Fate 1” (2018) evokes not just the classical tradition but also canonical modernist works by Pablo Picasso and Willem de Kooning.Art work © Jenny Saville / Courtesy Gagosian; Photograph by Mike Bruce

These days, Saville is less eager—or, perhaps, less obliged—to offer declarative interpretations of her work. In our conversations, she was friendly but a little guarded, and occasionally she appeared braced to be misunderstood. She mentioned more than once that she felt her work had sometimes been subjected to wayward analysis: its anatomical verity had been interpreted as a form of violence, and that had never been her intention. Of her early paintings, she told me, “I remember being shocked at the hyperbolic language that was attached to them, in terms of the fatness —‘blubbernauts,’ or whatever,” she said. “I didn’t have ‘fat is a feminist issue’ in my head. I didn’t want to make narrative paintings, so any narrative had to be in the flesh, or in the body. And a bigger body has a narrative of getting to that size, so that narrative in itself was quite interesting. But I can’t say it was necessarily from a feminist standpoint.”

Saville became most animated while talking about paint itself. Her early command of the medium has matured into a self-assured mastery. In the studio, several canvases were in varying stages of completion. There was a large image of a swan-necked young woman with a snub nose and a fleshy mouth, her lower lip sagging slightly on one side, as if she’d just wiped it

with the back of her hand. A pair of portraits leaned side by side against a wall. Both heads featured the brownish-pink and ruddy purple brushstrokes that Saville often uses to depict flesh, but she'd also used oil sticks, made of solidified paint, to vigorously mark the heads with lines as vividly yellow and blue and orange as in a Warhol print. The bright colors were actually underpainting, she explained, and would be layered over with more realistic flesh tones; but some of the underpainting would remain exposed, imbuing the work with an almost hidden energy and light. This method, she said, had been influenced by her research into the Greek myth in which the princess Danaë is impregnated by Zeus, who takes the form of a shower of gold. The myth had inspired many works by Old Masters, including several paintings by Titian. Saville had been exploring ways to visually capture the moment of conception. "How do you find the painterly language to depict that myth from a female perspective?" she said.

Some of Saville's experiments with bright underpainting were on display at the Albertina. Under the influence of religious imagery from the early Renaissance, she had incorporated cerulean and gold lines into depictions of several female figures. In one such work, the gold underpainting recalled Byzantine iconography, and a blue line piercing the subject's cheekbone and emerging from her nostril evoked the way that, in some devotional paintings of the Annunciation from the fifteenth century, the Virgin is struck by a heavenly beam of light that enters through her window or doorway. "I use this technique a lot now—of going through heads with yellow or gold and then rebuilding over the top," she explained. "There's a sort of force, or tension, that gets embedded within the painting." Flourishes of this type, she said, "kind of creep in, even from looking at graffiti marks with rhythms—or calligraphy. Shapes wrapping around."

For palettes, Saville uses a pair of long, glass-topped trolleys on wheels, onto which she squeezes deposits of oil paint. When she is working, she stands between the trolleys, a setup that she adopted after visiting de Kooning's studio, on Long Island, a few years after the painter's death, in 1997. "I spent hours there, and that was a really formative experience," she told me. She added that, when she first saw his work, at *MoMA*, she experienced a sense of recognition, seeing her own passion for manipulating paint reflected in his: "The twists and turns, the reverses, the

scrape-offs.” In the Long Island studio, she could see how de Kooning made recipes for his paint-color mixes, and how he used house-painters’ brushes to achieve certain sweeping effects on the canvas. “I thought, Oh, *that’s* how you got the paint to behave that way—because you had *that* bowl, with *that* mixing.” She added, “Many things about the way he worked absolutely changed the way I worked. I think I was able to shortcut a lot of development.”

“His bark is worse than his Machiavellian scheming.”
Cartoon by Ellis Rosen

Saville never met de Kooning, but she did develop a friendship with his peer Cy Twombly, and she considers the freedom of line developed by Abstract Expressionists in America to be as much of an influence on her work as the more obvious precursors of British twentieth-century portraiture: Freud, Bacon, Frank Auerbach. Twombly also shaped Saville’s approach to living. “I went to a lot of Cy’s shows, and watched the way he was, and the way he lived, and the way he travelled,” she told me. “They showed a very international way of being an artist which was very different from a kitchen-sink, British, gray way of being a painter—like Frank Auerbach taking a sandwich in a bag down to the studio every day. Cy would be taking a boat down the Nile.”

Unlike many artists of her professional stature, Saville does not use assistants other than her partner, the artist Paul McPhail, whom she met at art school in Glasgow, where he also made fleshy, figurative paintings and

portraits. “He’s washed a lot of brushes,” Saville told me appreciatively. She paints very slowly, sometimes setting works aside for months or years before returning to them. Ratibor, her London gallerist, said, “She’s incredibly precise about her process, and there’s handsome demand with limited supply.”

Even though Saville’s artistic practice is focussed on the human body, she does not use live sitters, preferring to work from photographs. In this, she has some distinguished antecedents: Bacon used photographs when painting portraits of people familiar to him, because, he told the critic David Sylvester, “I don’t want to practise before them the injury that I do to them in my work.” Freud, however, regarded the making of his portraits as a kind of collaboration, albeit one in which he was the dominant partner, and he required his sitters to attend sessions in his studio for months on end. “The subject must be kept under closest observation,” he once explained. “If this is done, day and night, the subject—he, she, or it—will eventually reveal the *all* without which selection itself is not possible.”

This dictum has never resonated with Saville; indeed, she told me, photography allows her to see what a studio encounter cannot. She explained, “You can capture things about the way the body moves, or the interaction of different bodies, that you just couldn’t get if you said, ‘Can you hold this pose for two hours?’ ” Earlier in her career, she used a Hasselblad film camera to capture the raw visual material from which to construct a painting. In the past decade or so, she has embraced digital photography. Subjects come to her studio for photography sessions that can last several hours; during that time, she told me, their physicality unfolds. “The way bodies naturally move—you have to learn to go with it, because they literally take up shapes that you couldn’t even imagine,” she said. “I just sit there, and speak to them, or let them speak, and they will put arms and knees in forms that you just couldn’t get close to. If you said, ‘Hold still,’ and you wanted to make a painting directly from life, you would never get that specific level of humanity.”

Saville also feels that the presence of a sitter would get in the way of what she is trying to put down on a canvas, which often dwells closer to abstraction than to realism. On another work under way in her studio, the

figure was barely visible: a lurid ear, parted lips, a nostril. The shape of the head was obscured by energetic sweeps of the brush in black and blue, with a splash of yellow bursting from the area where a jawbone had been, and might be again. “This one is more in its abstract incarnation,” Saville said. “It’s got really nice areas and elements, but there are two disparate languages, and they are too far apart. There’s not enough human there yet, so I have to keep going until I bring that out.” Her ambition, she said, was to fuse the languages of realism and abstraction—“to get to the realism of our human nature.” She continued, “I have never been able to give up the figure, really. I feel like I’d be throwing the towel in if I did that. That’s not against abstract painting—I love abstract painting. But I think what makes *my* painting is the tension between those things. That’s a powerful space to work in, between those two elements. If I can get that right, it feels good, and it’s worth the journey.”

Saville was born in Cambridge, England. The second of four children, she had a peripatetic childhood; her father was a school administrator, and the family later moved from the south of the country to Yorkshire, in the north. Her mother was an elementary-school teacher, a job that gave Saville easy access to arts-and-crafts materials. An important early influence was an uncle, Paul Saville, an artist who also taught at a private school in Oxford. He provided Jenny with her first set of paints, and gave her tasks that cultivated her technical skills and powers of observation, such as making a drawing of a hedge in the family garden every day for a year. He also took her abroad to look at art—to Italy, where she visited Florence, Venice, and Mantua, and to Amsterdam, where she was exposed not just to the art of Rembrandt but to his studio, which was restored as a museum in the early twentieth century. Saville learned how the position of a canvas between a window and a hearth had informed Rembrandt’s depiction of light, with the coldness of the daylight contrasting with the incandescent warmth of the fire. Today, she can identify more complexity in the muddy background of a Rembrandt canvas than most people could articulate about the faces of his subjects. The studio museum showed Saville “the nuts and bolts of an artist’s life,” she told me. “It made me feel like the things I was doing, making paintings in my room, was a way I could live.”

Paul Saville had gone to art school in Glasgow, and, in 1988, Jenny followed in his footsteps, drawn by the institution's strong commitment to painting. Lucian Freud had recently had a show at the Southbank Centre, in London, and Saville recalled to me that "everybody had a Freud catalogue at their feet when they were painting." Even so, young British artists in those years were principally concentrated on other forms of art, such as video and performance. Saville said, "You almost had to apologize to be a painter at that time"—painting was seen as belonging to an outmoded, hierarchical, and patriarchal tradition. "If you were doing anything interesting, you were almost always not making a painting, and certainly not a figurative painting," she said.

While in college, Saville spent a semester abroad at the University of Cincinnati, where, in contrast to her curriculum in Glasgow, she was able to take classes in other disciplines, including in the Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies department. Saville became hooked on feminist critical theory, familiarizing herself with the work of Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, and Luce Irigaray, among others. The criticism that she read was much more concerned with analyzing literature than it was with interrogating the visual arts, however, and when she returned to Glasgow she set about finding a visual language to express some of that theory. One of the results was "Propped." Saville said, "I liked painting a nude body, which was very frowned on in feminist studies—'Where's the gaze?,' all that kind of debate. That conflict is what made that painting work."

Some Saville nudes from this period seemed to resist the boundaries of the canvas. "Trace," which Saville made under the early support of Saatchi, is filled to the edges with a bulky, mottled body seen from behind, imprinted with the lingering marks of a too-tight bra and panties. "Plan," from 1993, plays a different visual game: it turns a woman's flesh into a vast landscape marked with contour lines, like those on a topographical map. The image was suggested, Saville has explained, by the markings that plastic surgeons make before performing liposuction. "I had friends who were drawing on the edges of their body, of where they wanted the boundary of the body to be—they wanted to diet until they reached that line," she told me. "I thought that was a fascinating desire—what's making especially women feel like this?" Saville did not herself have body-image issues or an

obsession with weight loss: “Actually, I thought it was a bit of a waste of time—all the books you could read, all the things you could do.”

“Chapter (for Linda Nochlin)” (2016-18). Saville started drawing her son soon after he was born, in an effort to portray what she has called the “unsentimental truth” of early childhood. “He was this whirlwind of limbs and slipping torso,” she has said. “A drawing of a singular body just didn’t seem enough to communicate this torrent of human movement.”Art work © Jenny Saville / Courtesy Gagosian; Photograph by Robert McKeever

In 1997, both “Trace” and “Plan” were included in the “Sensation” show, at the Royal Academy of Arts in London, which presented Saatchi’s collection of art by young British artists. The show, displaying many works that contained sexual imagery, was a scandalous success. Compared with the Chapman Brothers’ perverse child mannequins, which had penises for noses, or Tracey Emin’s “Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995”—a tent embroidered and appliquéd with the names of dozens of lovers—Saville’s skillfully modelled figures spoke more quietly, large and naked though they were. Some critics praised Saville’s aesthetic distance from her “Sensation” peers. The critic Brian Sewell, writing in the *Evening Standard*, excoriated the show’s “assemblage of freaks, frauds and feeble failures,” reserving his sole compliment for Saville, who, he said, “avoids the childish pornographic trap, and sustains her promise as a serious painter of female flesh.”

By the time the “Sensation” show came to the Brooklyn Museum, in 1999, Saville had already been taken on by Larry Gagosian, who became her dealer when she was twenty-six. “There was something new in her work that I hadn’t seen before from any other artist,” Gagosian told me. “For a young painter, it was kind of audacious.” He went on, “You look at the scale of the work, and this kind of small woman—it made it kind of amazing, in a way, that she painted on that scale, with that confidence, and with that power.” For his own collection, Gagosian bought a large painting called “Hyphen,” which was a double portrait. He has sometimes displayed the canvas in one of his homes. “It needs a big room,” he told me.

Saville demurred when asked about her fearlessness in making grand-scale paintings while so young. “It was an era when you’d hear about Anselm Kiefer putting a wing of an airplane on a canvas, so my nine-foot-by-seven-foot canvas was not so big compared to that,” she told me, dryly. “I don’t think I am courageous to make large-scale paintings. I just make them the scale I think they need to be.”

Much in the way that earlier artists, including Rembrandt, attended autopsies to learn more about human anatomy, Saville visited a New York clinic to observe a plastic surgeon transforming patients’ bodies. This led to a 1999 work in which at least three different images of a head and torso are painted on top of one another. It is named for a plastic-surgery technique called the Rubens flap, used in breast reconstruction; the term is a reference to the voluptuous figures in Rubens’s work. Saville said, “The language of plastic surgery was really interesting, because people had a fictional idea of what their normality was, which was not what they were. ‘If only I could get this chin done like this, or my nose like this, I would be more of myself.’ ”

Her interest, she insists, was less political than anthropological; her paintings were intended neither to excoriate nor to endorse the kinds of bodies they represented, nor to validate or condemn the choices made by their inhabitants. In the late nineties, Saville met Del LaGrace Volcano, a queer visual artist who is intersex. Saville made a painting of Volcano, called “Matrix,” that mirrors the composition of Gustave Courbet’s homage to the vagina, “L’Origine du Monde.” But, unlike Courbet’s work, which

does not include the model's head, Saville's canvas extends beyond a sprawled nude torso and exposed pudendum to include Volcano's goateed, mustachioed visage. In the early two-thousands, Saville made a portrait of a Colombian trans sex worker named Carla. "It challenged my judgment on every single level to see a penis and breasts in the same body," Saville told me in Vienna, where the Albertina show includes one of the resulting works, "Transvestite Paint Study." ("Transvestite," Saville noted to me, was Carla's term of choice.)

At the time, trans identity and trans bodies were little acknowledged by mainstream culture. "When I first showed those paintings, people were saying, 'Did you make that up? That's actually a real body?' " Saville recalled. The works are not voyeuristic, nor are they pious celebrations of a marginalized identity; Saville insists that, as with her paintings of full-bodied women, she didn't mean these images to be polemical. "I've never made these paintings saying, 'This is a good way to live,' or 'This isn't,' " she told me. (Reached by e-mail, Volcano said that "Matrix" participates in "the pathologization of intersex and non-binary bodies by focusing on the 'discovery' of mixed sex characteristics by doctors. Regardless of Jenny's good intentions, 'Matrix' reproduces the intersex body as a public spectacle and thereby reinforces the status quo.") In 2005, in an interview with the historian Simon Schama, Saville acknowledged that she had been "searching for a body that was between genders," adding, "I wanted to paint a visual passage through gender—a kind of gender landscape." Her recollection of painting Carla was still fresh, and she used charged, almost erotic language to explain how she had applied intense color in the genital area, then run together several tones on the thigh. "I got them all really oily," she said. She felt that she had only "one shot" with her brush to "keep the color clean but slide them together and create the thrusting dynamic of this leg lifting up." Some white paint dripped across the thigh; rather than clean it up, she realized that it contributed a useful tension. "In that thigh, I had more about sex than the whole penis put together," she told Schama. The story was in the paint.

About a decade after Saville became an internationally recognized artist, almost on a whim she bought a huge apartment in a crumbling eighteenth-century palazzo in Palermo, Sicily. She immersed herself in that city's

multilayered history, with its legacy of Byzantine, Arabic, and Norman art and culture. “Here I can be as close to Rubens as I am to Tracey Emin,” she told the *Guardian* in 2005. A monograph, published by Rizzoli, documents some of her source material during this period: pages torn from dental textbooks on oral lesions, photographs from medical reference books about elephantiasis, faces bruised or bloodied from violence or surgery, Velázquez’s vermillion-clad Pope. The paintings she was making at this time often had a brutal frankness, approaching the boundary where human flesh is revealed to be animal meat. She even painted animal meat: a work called “Suspension,” which at first sight appears to be of a mass of human flesh, is on closer examination the carcass of a headless pig lying on its side, with a trotter limply extended. The image is part odalisque, part massacre, and as red as a Pope’s vestments. “When you see the inside of the body, the half-inch thickness of flesh, there’s a realization that it’s a tangible substance, so paint mixed a flesh color suddenly becomes a kind of human paste,” Saville said in an interview published in the book. She also approvingly cited a famous quote from de Kooning: “Flesh was the reason why oil painting was invented.”

In the late two-thousands, Saville gained a knowledge of flesh unavailable to de Kooning—or to Rubens or Velázquez or Rembrandt or Bacon or Freud—when she became pregnant. In 2007, she gave birth to a son, Arturo. The next year, her daughter, Iris, was born. Shortly before Iris’s arrival, the director of the Oratorio di San Lorenzo, a Baroque chapel in Palermo’s historic center, suggested that Saville make a work to fit inside an empty frame above the altar, previously the site of a Caravaggio painting of the Nativity that had been stolen in 1969 and never recovered. Saville had a friend photograph Iris’s birth and used the images to guide her work. A preparatory sketch showed a bloodied infant in the moment immediately after delivery, being held aloft by a midwife, umbilical cord still attached. The image embodied the convulsive drama of childbirth that is occluded in a traditionally peaceable Nativity scene—“Giving birth is like being in a Francis Bacon painting,” Saville once said. The infant’s suspended posture hinted at the forthcoming violence of the Crucifixion. The painting was never realized; a replica of the lost work was commissioned instead.

By the time Arturo was a toddler and Iris an infant, the family had settled full time in Oxford. After years of being consumed by her art (“My life is subservient to painting—I can’t find a substitute for it in the world,” she’d told the *Guardian*), Saville became absorbed in motherhood. “I remember going in the studio and having a few hours, and I almost couldn’t do anything,” she told me. “When your children feel pain, *you* feel pain. That shocked me. If they cried, you almost feel it inside—you actually are physically linked with them. It’s incredibly animalistic.” But she soon discovered that being a parent didn’t diminish her creativity; rather, it offered a tremendous stimulus. For an artist who had spent decades studying and painting the human body, the opportunity to observe the evolving bodies of her children was fascinating, all the more so because their flesh had been generated by her own. “Just watching them grow was so exciting, watching them jump in the bath, or the way they moved around, or the way their bodies were constantly changing,” she said. “They were these human beings that were very mobile, running around, and that became very visually exciting. And the level of love was so beautiful—I felt all these things were circulating in me.”

Artists who are also mothers have sometimes found inspiration in their children: Berthe Morisot, the Impressionist, made many tender paintings and drawings of her daughter, Julie, reading or sewing or gazing out a window; Sally Mann took photographs of her children for a decade. But, in the Old Master paintings in which Saville had steeped herself, representations of children, especially in religious imagery, often missed something essential about their nature, and about the ways in which maternal care taxes even the most devoted. (Raphael’s “Madonna del Prato,” which hangs in Vienna’s Kunsthistorisches Museum, a short distance from the Albertina, shows a mother of Christ who is remarkably serene given that she is in charge of two toddlers, one of whom is holding a skinny cross sharp enough to take someone’s eye out.) The only image Saville could think of that captured anything close to her experience of the unpredictable movement of childish bodies was a pen-and-ink drawing by Rembrandt which shows a mother struggling to control the wailing toddler in her arms, his shift risen up and a kicked-off shoe flying through the air.

Saville started drawing her son soon after he was born, in an effort to portray what she has called the “unsentimental truth” of early childhood. “He was this whirlwind of limbs and slipping torso as I carried him, which was so exciting,” she told Mann in a 2018 interview. “A drawing of a singular body just didn’t seem enough to communicate this torrent of human movement.” Saville made works that not only alluded to Renaissance paintings of the Madonna and Child but also referenced imagery from drawings by Leonardo and Michelangelo. Saville, using photographs of herself holding her son, layered images onto one another to depict the ceaselessly evolving experience of mothering.

“Stare” (2004-05). Saville’s investigations into how flesh works have led her to use medical textbooks and sometimes lurid images as the starting place for her pictures.Art work © Jenny Saville / Courtesy Gagosian

Initially, Saville wasn’t sure she wanted to exhibit these works. Having put so much effort into being taken as seriously as her male precursors, she was fearful of a perceived diminishment. “I had other artists telling me, ‘Wow, if you show these, you are really saying, “*Mother*,” ’ ” she said. “I thought, if I *don’t* do that, what does it say about the legitimacy of being female, or being a mother? That’s part of our whole human story. Or what does it

mean about me, if I resist it? Yes, I still take myself seriously as an artist, but I have had this whole other bit of life."

Some critics were indeed harsh. The psychoanalytic art critic Donald Kuspit, reviewing one show of Saville's mother-and-child drawings and paintings in *Artforum,* spent less time evaluating her brushstrokes than judging her maternal competence, writing of the depicted mother-child dyad that "their bond is precarious and uncertain" and suggesting that "the mothers in her paintings have profound ambivalence toward their children." Saville still bristles at the interpretation. "If there's a crying child, that had beauty, too, in terms of acceptance of them in all their forms," she told me. "I said to myself, 'I can't see that anywhere in art history—that acceptance of the way a child can be sleepy or crying. Why don't we see that?' But I've seen that read as I don't like my kids."

Included in the Albertina show was a large-scale drawing of a mother and child rendered in charcoal on canvas; the composition was based on multiple images that Saville had made of herself and her son. As we looked at the drawing together, Saville explained, "If I land the foot *here* and then another foot *there* and there's a hand *here*—all of a sudden it starts to create an anchored kind of balance." The work was titled "Chapter (for Linda Nochlin)." Nochlin, who died in 2017, was a pioneering feminist art critic. In 1971, she wrote an article provocatively titled "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" She argued that feminists, rather than fetishizing exceptions to the masculine dominance of art history—Artemisia Gentileschi, Angelica Kauffman—should acknowledge the deficit induced by historic exclusion of women from art academies and museums, and focus instead on bringing about structural change. "What is important is that women face up to the reality of their history and of their present situation, without making excuses or puffing mediocrity," Nochlin wrote. Nochlin had been an early champion of Saville's work, writing in 2000 in *Art in America* of her "brilliant and relentless embodiment of our worst anxieties about our own corporeality and gender," and arguing that "no other artist in recent memory has combined empathy and distance with such visual and emotional impact." In subsequent years, Saville and Nochlin became friends. "She was a multifaceted character," Saville told me. "She loved ballet, Manet, as well as feminism."

“I can’t feel a pulse—but, to be fair, I haven’t been able to feel anything since Janice left me.” Cartoon by Jon Adams

In the charcoal drawing at the Albertina, the child was not a baby but a boy of about twelve, with heavy dangling limbs and a drooping head. To my mind—the mind of a mother whose son, like Saville’s, is now a young adult—the image offered a poignant evocation of parenting a boy through the transition from unself-conscious childhood to early adolescence, the body of a onetime babe in arms now easily outspanning that of his mother. The drawing referred not just to imagery of the Madonna and her infant but also to Michelangelo’s Pietà, with its grown male body lying dead across his mother’s lap. Saville’s palimpsests of charcoal offered a concentrated representation of the maternal journey, with the rewards of nurture and the pain of sacrifice present in the same instant. “I try to combine love, tragedy, different emotions in the same picture,” Saville said. “That’s when they become like human maps. Can you have multiple emotions in the same picture, where when you look over here you feel this, and when you look over here you feel another way? And can you span that trajectory of life in the same image?” She went on, “There’s a sense that the whole composition cannot exist in real life. But, when you first look at it, is there a sort of believability, a suspended reality that is *more* real?”

Saville is close to her children, who are now in their mid- to late teens, and she has continued to draw and paint them with their supportive assent. In 2020-21, she made a large painting of Iris’s head, her full lips parted and one side of her face bathed in a wash of prismatic color. “When I have depicted them, I feel a level of beauty that I haven’t experienced to the same depth with other picture-making I did before I had them,” Saville said.

“They gave me a lot of permission for beauty.” If Saville’s early work challenged the viewer to reconsider received ideas of what makes an attractive body, or even an acceptable one—and if her investigation into how flesh works led her to use medical textbooks and sometimes lurid images as the starting place for her pictures—her recent paintings of large heads ravish the onlooker. “I have learned that, when you work with very dramatic imagery and you’re making a painting of that, the paint can’t get beyond the image,” she told me when I visited her studio. “ And so I have learned that working with a more simple portrait means the paint can be more visually exciting, and can be a more joyful thing to do.”

In late May, a few weeks before the opening of the show at the National Portrait Gallery, I met Saville around the corner, at the National Gallery, to look at some of the work that has informed her artistic practice. We began with Leonardo, whose Burlington House Cartoon—a charcoal-on-paper drawing of the Virgin and Child along with St. Anne and the toddler John the Baptist—hangs in its own small room, dimly lit in order to insure the work’s preservation. When Saville was a child, her parents inherited a small reproduction of the image, and it had always fascinated her. “I liked how you couldn’t really tell whose leg belonged to whom, and how it became a kind of collective image,” she said. As our eyes adjusted to the darkness, Saville’s commentary illuminated the artist’s technical accomplishment: the way Leonardo had made a knee appear to come forward from the flat surface of the paper; how the rhythms of certain gestures led the eye around the composition; how, within a monochrome palette, he had achieved emotional effects with differentiated tone. “If you look up close, it’s very warm on the eyelid, because he uses the inner glow of the paper as the warmth of the eye, and then on the cheek he uses this white, which gives the translucence of the flesh,” Saville said, adding, “There’s such an act of love in the making, too. It is so cared for, in the bringing out of that form. The depiction of the knee—there has to be love embodied in the process of doing that.”

We moved on to a spacious gallery devoted to the work of Titian, and stopped before three large canvases based on tales from Ovid’s Metamorphoses. At the center was “The Death of Actaeon,” in which Actaeon, having disturbed the goddess Diana while she is bathing, is killed

by his own hounds. Titian was in his eighties when he began the painting, and it remained unfinished at his death. Saville pointed to places where Titian was harnessing long-developed methods: the light falling on Diana's forearm, the negative space between the trees in the background. "Look at the way the dog is depicted," Saville said. "He delineates the underbelly with just one dark stroke. He's painted that cloth in carmine, and that water, and the transition of different aspects of fauna, or flesh, so much in his life that he's developed a kind of shorthand way of doing it. You take more liberties. It becomes more playful. You know what works, and what doesn't."

In a nearby gallery, Saville stopped before a portrait of Philip IV of Spain, by Velázquez, and remarked at the skill with which the artist had made a curl of light-brown hair lift from the monarch's brow. "All his flesh is one," Saville observed. "When you are making a portrait, you have to make sure everything joins together, even though we've socially named these parts of the head separately, like eyebrows, for example," she said. "That's what makes Velázquez's paintings so poignant, because he's able to bring that flesh together."

We sat down on a bench before the Velázquez portraits. "There are rules when you make a picture, if you want it to have three dimensions," Saville said. "There's definitely a rational way of working if you want a chin to go out, for example, or you want a neck to sit behind a chin." She went on, "There's a level of rationalism required in order to do that. But you can also have a sort of suggestive poetic nature within it."

Around us, other museumgoers paused before the paintings; sometimes a visitor took a photograph of a canvas before moving on. Until recently, Saville was an avid user of an iPhone camera, documenting shapes or colors or shadows that she came across, with a mind toward incorporating them into her work. The classical plinths on which the figures in her "Fates" paintings sat were derived from images of blocks that she had seen on a vacation to the Greek island of Delos. Lately, though, she has tried to keep her iPhone in her pocket. "Instead of taking a photo of something, I just stop and *look*," she told me at her studio. "Because we are on screens all the time, it's quite an enriching thing to do to stop and hold that memory. It's

almost like an experience is not complete now unless you take a photograph of it. And I told myself, ‘Maybe there’s something missing in that.’ ”

Saville explained that seeing the pink of a flower against the green of a leaf in her garden will sometimes inform which oils she mixes onto her glass palettes, or which pastel she selects from the box. “The way a lemon sits on a marble table with a shadow—why is that so beautiful? As I have got older, the more beautiful things are what I have become attracted to,” she said. “If you’d asked me when I was twenty-five, ‘Are you interested in flowers?,’ I would have laughed, because it would seem such a cliché. But, in fact, they are so powerfully beautiful.”

Saville doesn’t rule out where these new interests might lead her. In Greece, she painted sunsets to study the transition of light to use for portraiture; she might yet try painting still-lifes. Nevertheless, she always goes back to the birth of her own fascination with flesh. “I’m very committed as a figurative painter that paints portraits and bodies,” she said. “That’s a lot, just that subject. That’s a lifetime’s work.” ♦

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

Takes

- **Ina Garten on Calvin Tomkins's Profile of Julia Child**
  By Ina Garten | The outlines of her biography—the cookbooks, the TV stardom—are familiar to many of us. Tomkins captures what set her apart.

Takes

Ina Garten on Calvin Tomkins's Profile of Julia Child

By Ina Garten

June 8, 2025

December 23, 1974

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

By 1974, when Calvin Tomkins wrote his definitive Profile of Julia Child, she had published both volumes of the wildly successful "Mastering the Art of French Cooking," and was twelve years into her television show, "The French Chef," on public television in Boston. Tomkins captures what made Julia so popular—both the force of her personality and her ability to make people believe that a proper bœuf bourguignon could change their lives. Julia made it look easy, but, as Tomkins shows us, behind the scenes no one worked harder. His descriptions of her cooking demonstrations across the country convey how exhausting they must have been, and how critical they were to her success. Julia believed deeply in the joy that comes from

cooking a French dish and genuinely wanted viewers to share her enthusiasm.

The origin story has, of course, become famous: Julia discovered French cuisine in 1948, when her husband, Paul, a State Department officer, was assigned to the American Embassy in Paris. It was just after the Second World War, a time of prosperity and innovation in the U.S. Working women had been the backbone of the economy during the fighting, and they now considered cooking at home a chore that they'd prefer to replace with frozen TV dinners, baking mixes, and Chef Boyardee. Even in the nineteen-sixties, when Julia began publishing cookbooks, no one—and I mean no one—was looking for a recipe that required hunting for ingredients in three grocery stores and a cheese shop, or, worse, one that called for ingredients that were actually recipes in themselves, such as "2 cups homemade fish stock" and "1 tablespoon demi-glace." The recipes in "Mastering the Art of French Cooking" were long and complicated. Alfred A. Knopf, Julia's publisher, famously said that he'd eat his hat if anyone bought a book with that title. But, by the time of her *New Yorker* Profile, Knopf had sold one and a quarter million copies of the first volume alone, and Julia had single-handedly and permanently changed the form.

In 1962, after the Childs moved to Boston, Julia had casually invented the TV cooking show: as Tomkins notes, she brought a copper bowl, some eggs, and a whisk to the local public-television station, where she was scheduled as a guest for a standard sit-down interview. Instead, she made an omelette on the air, and the segment proved so popular that the channel offered her a regular show. Having changed the cookbook world, she would now break ground by teaching people how to cook on TV.

These are details many of us know. But Tomkins vividly captures the sense of authenticity that set Julia apart. In the sixties, TV was mostly news programs hosted by male anchors such as Walter Cronkite, scripted entertainment like "The Dick Van Dyke Show," talk and variety series, and cartoons. Rarely did anyone bring to television Julia's big, warm personality and joie de vivre, which blazed through our little black-and-white screens (before later transitioning, of course, to color). She wasn't there to sell you anything or to become famous. In fact, Tomkins reports,

Julia gave the earnings from her cooking demonstrations to WGBH, the station that had launched her TV career. She was on the road because she was so joyful about cooking and so connected to her viewers that she wanted them to feel the same satisfaction she experienced making a soufflé or a spun-sugar cage. She was like an irrepressible child, and her unscripted enthusiasm and delight were contagious.

We talk about authenticity so much today that it has become a cliché, but the term truly applied to Julia, and the quality endeared her to millions. People have often speculated about whether she radiated ease on television because she was slightly drunk when she was filming (not true!), but, as Tomkins wrote, “It may be that real spontaneity has become so rare that it requires an explanation.” If someone forgot to leave the butter out overnight for a cake, Julia, instead of getting flummoxed, would say, “Well, here’s what you do when that happens.” She paved the way for those who followed her, including me. Beyond explaining the basics of cooking in her extraordinary books, she invented a career in food that virtually didn’t exist before she came along, making it possible, sixty-five years later, for me to have the privilege of teaching people how to be joyful about the kitchen. For that, I will be forever grateful. ♦

Read the original story.

Cooking with Julia Child

Her tendency to slap and sniff and taste everything without losing a shred of her dignity was there from the beginning.

Ina Garten is a cookbook author and the host of the show "Be My Guest with Ina Garten." Her memoir, "Be Ready When the Luck Happens," came out in 2024.

Shouts & Murmurs

- **Redditors: Immigrants Keep Kidnapping My Wife!!**
  By Mike O’Brien | What to do about the human-trafficking illegal who absconds with my wife once a week and then drops her at home at dawn? Help!

Shouts & Murmurs

Redditors: Immigrants Keep Kidnapping My Wife!!

By Mike O'Brien

June 9, 2025

Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez

r/Advice
u/Skinny_Kyle_82381
Uncomfortable Immigrant Situation

Immigrants keep taking my wife for up to twenty-four hours, and no one is helping! Police won't do anything. I'm asking this community for advice on this situation!! I feel powerless! She's the mother of my children, and she keeps getting kidnapped! *Please help me end this nightmare!!*

The most recent example: last night, my wife got called in to her real-estate job for an all-nighter, which anyone who knows the real-estate game will tell you is fairly common. So she put on a dress and lipstick and started walking to her office. But then I noticed a red flag: a Mini Cooper pulled up down the block, and she got in the passenger side! I was able to get a decent

look at the driver, and, sure enough, he was an illegal immigrant!! My stomach filled with acid!

I have a knack for detective work for a reason that, legally, we shouldn't go into, so I knew that I should do a Find My Phone on her phone. I drove to where it indicated she was, which turned out to be an Indian restaurant.

The immigrant had taken her to her favorite restaurant! Was this a death-row last-meal thing? Or, worse, would he make her eat ten entrées and then she'd be "Gluttony" in his series of seven-deadly-sins killings!?! I stared at him through the window as he cackled with laughter, rolling his eyes back like a shark.

I know what you may be thinking. And, yes, I acknowledge that it's entirely possible that the whole thing was just him messing with my head. That he chose that specific restaurant because he knew that I hate Indian food and refuse to go there. And perhaps he even knew that that was one of our biggest fights. He was sticking it to me.

It's possible that this illegal son of a bitch had bugged my house and had been listening to every word I'd said for months, and he was now going to take my wife to do all the things I don't like doing, until I go insane.

After dinner, he drove her to the river. He made quick, unexpected turns in an unsuccessful attempt to shake me. I'd learned to track people because of a private situation that forced me to develop excellent manhunt skills.

They ate cotton candy and sat on a bench. The illegal pointed to the water, likely showing her where he was going to drown her. But she just laughed in his face! I felt so proud of her. She probably said something like "You'll never drown me in that river, you dirty immigrant! Women in our country are strong and read books and have strong husbands who protect us. The clock is ticking on your sick and twisted time on this planet!"

The guy smiled at that, probably not understanding a goddam word. Then he decided that it was time to leave. Maybe he sensed that I was watching and that he couldn't go through with the final sacrifice or something.

This time, he was able to lose me, using a nasty gang trick where you turn left just as a light turns red. I'd thought I'd become impossible to shake, for reasons I won't go into. . . . Fine, full disclosure: I'd had to develop reconnaissance skills when I was gathering intel for my unlawful-termination suit against Best Buy after my Asian boss fired me basically just for being white and peeing in a dryer.

Anyway, the next morning, I woke to find that I had clearly scared him enough that he'd delivered my wife back to my doorstep at dawn and had not completed his evil task.

She came upstairs and crawled into bed and spooned me from behind, complaining about real-estate hours. But the immigrant had gotten sloppy and had dropped her off in a "There's no crying in pickleball" T-shirt he'd probably tossed at her after hours of torture.

It felt nice to have her warm body pushed against mine, but I knew it was time for a difficult conversation.

"I know you're lying," I said, once she'd finished talking about work. "I know that, once a week, an immigrant kidnaps you and shows you where he's going to drown you."

There was a long pause, and then she said, "You're right. And the deal is, he won't sell me to the cartels if we just keep cool about it."

Then she went back to spooning me and rubbing my belly, which was making a lot of noises. And I couldn't help but think, *I'm the luckiest son of a bitch on earth.*

So . . . you can see my dilemma. I don't like having her go off with a human-trafficking illegal once a week, but if I rock the boat he might speed up his timeline and sell her now!

DELICATE SITUATION!! ADVICE?? ♦

Mike O'Brien has written for and appeared on "Saturday Night Live," and he created the sitcom "A.P. Bio."

Fiction

- **“The Queen of Bad Influences”**
  By Jim Shepard | It is possible I’m too flexible for virtue and too virtuous for villainy.

Fiction

The Queen of Bad Influences

By Jim Shepard

June 8, 2025

Illustration by Naï Zakharia.

Throughout her childhood, Constance called the gorse that grew on the hillsides above her house “honey-bottle,” and gathered fistfuls of it despite the spines, so that her hands would smell of it, a smell that seemed to combine oatmeal and hot metal and sun. The smell was somewhat a solace when it came to her devastating shyness, a shyness that so galled her mother that when Constance retreated into sniffing her fingers in public her mother could hardly restrain herself from swatting her daughter’s hands from her nose.

Her older sisters had no such inhibitions and considered Constance a minor mortification, while she understood their high spirits to be a manic display of an unhappiness that their mother viewed as a necessary part of their social success.

She agonized through birthday parties. She refused school games. She perambulated the fringes of family gatherings, setting everyone’s teeth on edge. Her most vivid recollections of childhood seemed unconnected, like lighted rooms scattered across a city, and she had decided that the most painful felt only distantly related to her.

When she hadn’t been absent-minded she had been diffident, and when she hadn’t been diffident she had presented as vacant. It was in no way clear to her how she had evolved into a moderately confident young woman of twenty.

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

Most of the girls she knew had married before they discovered what they themselves were really like, a decision that seemed to have generated neither harm nor joy. She marvelled at those few other acquaintances who carried themselves as if marked by fate at birth, young women whose decisiveness called to mind Joan of Arc, or Florence Nightingale, or Elizabeth Garrett Anderson.

Unlike those worthy role models, she had not been one for overcoming insuperable difficulties, and yet she *had* retained her stubbornness, despite her certainty that her path would have been altogether more congenial without it.

Her mother found her daughter's cowardice in the face of strangers a secret disgrace, but Constance also had a father who was happy with her and with their time together, and that likely had been her salvation. Only he in her first twenty years had really mitigated her loneliness, though even in his presence she remained as wary as one being stalked.

At her school, girls had been allowed to go for solitary walks without their attendant mistresses, and she had gone out on many. She had told herself stories while walking, and that spectacle had caused her classmates to call her Mad Connie.

When she had been preparing to leave home for her first term, while emptying out her drawers she came across a list she had drawn up on her tenth birthday, titled "My Best Friends." It was a column of two names, which included her father and the jackdaw nesting in their chimney, and next to the number three she had scrawled a series of question marks.

Podcast: The Writer's Voice
Listen to Jim Shepard read "The Queen of Bad Influences."

That first term, secret notes signed with pseudonyms had been all the rage, and she had chosen Isolde in honor of the wildly romantic lithograph that hung beside her mother's dressing table, but then had been baffled as to whom she would correspond with. She had combatted her subsequent despair with what she imagined to be a clear-eyed acceptance of the impossibility of real intimacy between individuals. She had shared that insight with her mother in one unguarded letter, and her mother had written back that she should beware of queer spells and fits. And so Constance had remained grimly convinced that she was entirely alone when it came to facing such quandaries.

Still, she had feared that, alone, she was missing what opportunities there were to educate oneself for life. She had imagined strolls in which she and a friend might discuss kingship in history, or subjects of topical interest, or gossip, but had come to believe that such things were not for her to experience. She had asked her roommate at one point during their Sunday reading hours if she liked Walter Scott, and the roommate had answered after a pause that when younger she had enjoyed any number of sentimental

works. And through such buffetings Constance's little ketch had run aground.

On her last day of school, the visiting luminary's address had centered on the pitfalls of smoking and drinking, leaving her disappointed at having had to listen to something meaningless when she had hoped for something interesting. Her disappointment had been compounded by a despondency at still not having made a friend. She had begun occasionally walking and exchanging information with a girl named Prue, but had found it hard to dispel the notion that the girl had approached her only because she was leaving as well.

When she was seventeen, her mother had taken her to a play in which it transpired that a young woman had kissed a man to whom she was not engaged, and her mother had bent close and assured her that such things never happened in real life. Even so, in her exercise books Constance had listed details concerning the kind of boy who might monopolize her affections.

She had finished school in May, and in June had her coming out, accompanied by her mother through the tedium of formal dances, where she had been keenly aware of the number of potential partners who, once introduced, did not return—most of Gloucestershire, it felt like—so that dance after dance ended with her sitting against the wall with her mother.

Her sisters recorded every anti-Catholic remark as a measure of all they had to overcome in social terms, but she doubted that her religion was the main impediment in her case. She had no gift for flirtation, and it hadn't helped that when she had encountered someone intriguing she had been so startled by her own attraction to that person that she had focussed on maintaining her composure. One young man who suffered through her silence had finally begged her to have some champagne, hoping that might induce her to say *something*. She had tried the champagne, and it hadn't. And with every disastrous evening her mother had refrained from making any comparison between her and her sisters.

Constance resolved that she had thought enough about boys for the time being. It was like expecting figs from thistles and then blaming the thistles

for the absence of fruit. The one young man who had professed to be genuinely taken with her (after just a few short conversations) also claimed to be more an antique Roman than a modern drudge, and further insisted that their country's high-water mark had been Alfred the Great, to which Constance responded that it was 1913, not 886, and that she hoped that in the event of future encounters they might find better things to discuss. He had reminded her of a boy from the village she'd known as a child who had always surprised her with his awful impulses, like roasting sparrows over a candle.

She would be realistic enough to cut her hopes according to her cloth. She had now been a bridesmaid for three of her cousins. And she found a sort of refuge in her memory of a prayer of St. Teresa of Avila's: God, consider that we do not understand ourselves, and that we do not know what we want, and so are infinitely far from what we desire.

Though her mother's expectation seemed to be that she not aspire to too much and instead remain useful in some homely and simple way, Constance wished to develop in full measure what she imagined to be the three preconditions of happiness—courage, selflessness, and discipline—holding before herself a remark of Florence Nightingale's she had once read, that women dreamed until they no longer had the strength to do so. Her aunt had been part of the suffrage movement, and her cousins lamented that the instant they complained about it she went straight off and burned a letter box and got herself thrown in jail. As a fifteen-year-old, Constance had been dazzled by the newspaper accounts of the "Votes for Women" procession at Charing Cross, with thousands of women carrying banners celebrating everyone from Madame Curie and George Eliot to Boadicea. But then this past June a suffragette had thrown herself before the King's horse at the Derby and had suffered terrible injuries and died; her father had proclaimed the woman's behavior appalling, and she had been ashamed of her mixed feelings when reading of the woman's coffin being escorted through the streets of London by all those thousands wearing their purple and white.

She wanted to do something to make someone glad they knew her, to make some place the better for her having been there. Who was to say there wasn't some vein in her that was not being worked?

And then it happened that her father's dissatisfaction with the candidates he interviewed for the position of confidential secretary made him announce at their dinner table that he would like to try her. When she asked, after an awkward and thrilled silence, if it could really be true that she was more qualified than those other men and women, he explained that really the matter turned on the issue of trust. Her mother, after her own nettled silence, reminded him of just some of the many disadvantages of taking on a daughter in such a role, and he acknowledged each, then added that they were nonetheless dwarfed by that one advantage. He concluded that it was her position if she wanted it, and her mother gave her an oblique look and dropped the matter. And she swithered for a few days but always knew she would take it.

She had henceforth been present at all of her father's meetings and interviews, and it had been an education. He required from her careful notes and logistics but soon also took to soliciting her impressions afterward, and she was gratified to discover that her instincts were largely his when it came to his various employees and associates. His associates' views on the subject of her qualifications were far from hidden, but she turned out to be so rare a phenomenon in their world that most found her too exotic to disdain. Soon she had under her a clerk and a typist to assist with her clerical work, and she found that, as it became clear that shyness would be of little use in negotiating this world, during her workday she put it aside. She still at that point had formed no particular friendships, but felt satisfied that she *had* presented herself as friendly in a general way. She devoted herself to reading, though she gave up on the sorts of romances in which the heroine's mournful face was always fixed in a look of self-abnegation. And she thought there had to be people somewhere among whom she could sit and carp and still be counted as a familiar.

Her father's was a coal-trading concern a short ride from their home outside Sharpness, on the River Severn, with Wales comprising all of those hills to the west, and on Saturdays, after organizing the week's correspondence in the office, she began taking strolls in the little park near the railway bridge. It was never very crowded. And on one Saturday so stifling the omnibus horses had been fitted with straw hats for the heat, she came across a striking young woman aslant in a little canvas chair under some elms, absorbed in a pocket edition of "Adam Bede."

“You’re staring,” the woman noted, startling her.

“And remember, if at first you don’t succeed, the internet will let you know immediately.”
Cartoon by Pia Guerra and Ian Boothby

“My apologies,” Constance said.

“You’re just going to stand in the sun?” the woman asked. She added that this was the sort of heat in which even ladies could not succeed in looking comfortable.

And so Constance joined her under the elms. The woman introduced herself as Minna Royden, and in the remarks they exchanged about Eliot’s early works gave evidence of a fluid intelligence. She seemed to return all looks with her head at a disconcerting angle, and when Constance finally confessed, after one of their lengthier pauses, that she must be going, the woman’s look of bemusement haunted her for days.

They exchanged greetings each Saturday after that, with Constance lingering longer and longer before moving on. It transpired that Minna was from Dursley and held the position of legal secretary, and when she first invited Constance to extend their conversation at a Saturday lunch, Constance’s courage failed her, but three weeks later, when she offered again, they found themselves, after rather a long walk, at a new little restaurant that had been a coal cellar before being glorified by paint.

Their waiter's indolence meant a long wait even for menus, yet neither of them let drop a word of complaint. They discovered they each had two sisters, and Minna said about her older one that their father claimed she thought with her mouth, and about her younger one that she was the sort that could go on for days about her luncheon cutlet. Of her schooling Minna said that she was mostly remembered for her impertinences in the presence of eminent scholars, and that at gatherings in general her comments seemed to attract a sideways cautious glance. They shared their dislike for the coming-out dances, though Minna asked with some pleasure if Constance remembered the whispering sound the train of her first long dress made on the stairs.

They seemed to share a spirit of mutiny. Minna said she knew a number of the new dances, like the turkey trot and the chicken scramble. They got on the subject of sex, and Minna asked if it really mattered how people acted in the bedroom as long as they didn't do it in the street and frighten the horses. She called it fortunate that their waiter had been so delinquent, since they hadn't had to chat about the food, and she seemed to be the sort of person who when it poured down rain noted that it was good for the ducks. And, by the time they parted, Constance was convinced that the fact that many of her new friend's virtues were unconventional was an additional appeal, and that, when it came to nurturing acquaintances, it was important to work to keep hope alive.

Two years later, she snatched at that same promise of hope as she spiralled downward swallowing water until she remembered to close her mouth, and surfaced as part of a loose floating island of people and debris. In the melee of the ship's sinking, she'd been able to find neither her father nor Minna before the deck lurched and the green water was up to her thighs with a stunning jolt of cold, and she'd just had time to unhook her skirt so its voluminousness wouldn't hinder her when the water swamped her chest and she'd been sucked down. Beside her on the chaotic surface now was what looked like the shattered bow of a collapsible boat, and she clung to it. One of the funnels of the great liner blotted out part of the sky, and its stern was high in the air. It seemed that all she saw in the water were children, everywhere, and in their shrieking and wailing they raised a mass of waving arms. She started pulling the closest of them to her and directing their hands

to the easy grip of the boat's gunwale, and she could feel others clinging to her from behind.

A month earlier, she and Minna had teased her father mercilessly for having chosen such a small ship for the passage to New York, since the result had been ten long days made yet more dreary by enforced blackouts so complete that even smokers had not been allowed on deck after sundown. And she and Minna had then advocated, since it was a business trip and much of the cost could be justified, for travelling on something swifter on the return voyage, in order not to miss the best weeks of the year in terms of the weather back home, and so, despite the warnings that the German Embassy had issued, he had booked them two second-class cabins—one for himself and Constance, and one for Minna—on the starboard side of the great Cunard liner Lusitania.

A quarter of an hour before she'd been pitched into the water, she and Minna had been arm in arm at the open-air café at the end of the Boat Deck, a location that had become one of their favorites because of its wicker chairs and minor thicket of potted plants, and because on the second day out they had sighted from there an entire pod of porpoises that had brought a crowd to the railings above and below them. And as they leaned together over the rail on a gloriously sunny afternoon, elbows touching, Minna talked of how happy she was with their time together and Constance spied a narrow white turmoil on the surface arrowing toward them. From above, someone shouted, "Torpedo coming, starboard side!," and they heard the scuttle of feet before the concussion lifted the ship from the water and soaked them in a column of white spray. They came to themselves to find they'd been knocked to their bellies on the deck. Constance felt as though she'd been showered with hot cinders, and there was broken glass around them, and a woman's shoe beside her cheek.

The debris cloud billowed away to the stern, now tilted high above the ship's Marconi wires. Other clouds of hot steam issued up from below. Some of those who had been near the café's entrance had been thrown down the stairs.

The ship's list was already so pronounced that the drawer of the café's cash register was slung open, and the pair were passed by officers and stewards

hurrying to their boat stations, their arms out to each side like customers negotiating the tumbling barrel of a fun house. She and Minna helped each other to their feet, and because of the list had to set one foot on the deck and the other on the bulkhead. Constance exclaimed about her father, still at lunch, and Minna cried that she would fetch the life jackets from her cabin and meet them at the lifeboat station below.

But Constance got only a short way down the stairs to find her father before being forced backward by the crush of third-class passengers sweeping up from the Main Deck, and when she instead turned to find Minna she was pummelled by those surging the other way. She persevered and got as far as the nursery on the Shelter Deck before being further impeded by the mothers unable to find their children in the tumult. And as the ship rolled further and she was pitched into the sea, she registered that Minna had gone back not only for their life jackets but for the cameo keepsake that had been Constance's first real gift to her.

The cameo featured what they had decided was the perfect likeness of the heroine of a story that Minna had written when she was eleven. A December evening well into their friendship, Minna had shared with Constance the memory of having been scolded for telling her sisters a bedtime story titled "The Earl Fell Into the Moat," and then had shown Constance the handwritten and illustrated "Saga of Queen Ren," about a twelve-year-old queen sailing around the world to find the perfect kingdom for her subjects. Minna said that she had carried the thing on for quite a while until she had got tired of it and left the poor girl floating mid-ocean.

Some nine months before they travelled to America together with Constance's father, Constance had presented the cameo, to great effect, on Minna's birthday. The following day, they had surprised themselves with a squabble. They had undertaken a blackberrying expedition to the hedgerows along the river and Minna had asked after her work, and Constance had answered that more than the usual had recently been heaped upon her shoulders, which had been fine, though it always left her feeling behind. Minna had not responded, and Constance had found herself in a strange state of mind, drawn as she was in many different directions. Her friend's small attentions filled her with pleasure, and yet there had been any number of instances when a few unflattering words had rankled for weeks.

Why *did* she herself keep silent? Overcoming the reticence at the heart of her shyness was like scaling a cliff only to discover another view of the real summit farther off.

“I dote on you too much, I sometimes fret,” she said, surprising them both.

Minna stopped in her tracks and said that *she* had feared that instead of fitting herself to some great task she had been drifting along daydreaming about her friend. When, after a stymied pause, Constance confessed that she liked to appear indifferent while feeling otherwise, Minna let it go, and then noted grimly a few minutes later the way that they were perhaps *all* strangers to their best selves.

She added, “Do you know what I have written over my desk?” And then she recited part of a poem of R. L. Stevenson’s: “Wealth I seek not, hope nor love / Nor a friend to know me; / All I seek, the heaven above / And the road below me.”

“And yet last week I rose in the middle of the night to write you that I would have given a good deal to see you at just that moment,” Minna lamented. “And that, if I could have, I would have wanted to kiss you, very specially.”

Where they were stopped, they could make out deep in the hedge a mother blackbird on her nest, tracking them with her bright black eyes. And each registered the other’s contention with the hard-hearted energy of her own physical craving.

When they finally regarded each other again, it was with increasing frankness. Constance volunteered that there had been many nights when she also had been too roused to sleep, and had tossed about for hours.

“I’m not suggesting I’m the wronged and desperate heroine,” Minna said sharply.

“I’m not sure what you *are* suggesting,” Constance responded, with some sharpness of her own. And they exchanged vexed glances helplessly.

And finally Minna seemed to deflate, and conceded that the whole thing reminded her of how she used to fear that nothing seemed ideal when you

got too near to it.

“Which whole thing?” Constance asked.

But Minna shook her head, and took Constance’s hand. And Constance clasped hers a moment, and then let it go, noting that Minna didn’t seek her hand again, while they concluded in silence what they both later agreed was an unexpectedly troubled outing.

She had led her floating daisy chain of children far enough away from the immense ship that when it went down and all sorts of swimmers and debris were drawn into the great funnels, the horror seemed more remote. Soon after the vast curve of the stern submerged, they were jounced by the rumble of an underwater detonation, and a colossal surge of foaming ocean boiled up, with corpses and wreckage spinning up from below, and the resulting wave pushed Constance and the children even farther away.

Perhaps her father was in a boat. Perhaps Minna was as well. Or they were elsewhere on the great floating island of people and debris. She worked to master her panic about them the way she worked to master the cold.

The children’s cries were mostly whimpers and calls for their parents, and one by one they gave in and let go, and after the first few times Constance made no effort to pull them back. One little girl floated like a tether between Constance’s sleeve and an infant face down in its life jacket. Others bobbed about just beyond her reach like water lilies.

Even in the sun of the cloudless day the cold went to her marrow. She could see a few lifeboats laboring back and forth in the distance and held out the hope that one might reach them soon.

She became aware that *she* was weeping, and *she* was moaning, *Minna* and *Father*, *Minna* and *Father*, over and over, and stirred finally to discover the rest of the children gone. The great mass of which she was a part had begun to evanesce with the current. The cold gradually caused her to lose her grip, and she was registering the sunlight’s brightness from beneath the surface when the bumper of a lifeboat slid past and she raised up her hand and caught it, and was pulled into the boat.

A week or so before their squabble, soon after Constance had purchased the cameo but before she had presented it, she had stayed over at Minna's house. The rest of the family had gone away for a short holiday. Minna had begged off, and with the house to themselves they had spent a riotous and regressive evening dancing about and shouting and sometimes going to sleep. They had shared Minna's bed and in the morning Minna had remarked apropos of nothing on how important the body was. She said that another summer morning a few years before, when her father was away, she had come down to breakfast perfectly naked just to hear her sisters scream. She laughed that her conduct had been shocking enough, but far worse was the pleasure she took in recalling it. She added that her mother's response had been that while usually the culprits were French novels, Minna had shown that any middle-class Englishwoman could assault her own decency. And that her mother had also recalled that even as a child Minna had particularly enjoyed books in which none of the children behaved well.

"I cherish you as my Queen of Bad Influences," Constance observed.

"I'm not much in that regard," Minna responded. "Though it is possible I'm too flexible for virtue and too virtuous for villainy."

After a silence in which they hunted for each other's hands beneath the coverlet, Constance suggested they save up and go to Rome together. She would look after all the practical matters while Minna wandered about and admired columns.

They could keep a journal of the trip, Minna said, and write of things that they had never spoken of before, in pages that were to be burned at once.

Constance agreed, with audible enthusiasm. And then they fell into a silence that felt to her equal parts contented and unmoored.

Later, at the breakfast table, Minna remarked on how long she had wished for a friend with whom she could share something beyond the ordinary aspect of things, and compared it to plucking leaves and grasses from a thicket and coming away with a handful of flowers. Constance listed all the ways in which Minna had taught her to be more forthright and thoughtful

and affectionate. And Minna wondered if they would stay as close as they were now throughout their future marriages.

“Throughout *your* marriage, you mean,” Constance told her. “*I’ll* die an old maid.”

“Your father will find some young man for you,” Minna said. “Someone who can cope with your many indispositions.”

“Or at least understand my peculiarities better than most,” Constance agreed. And they sobered at the thought of such a man, and gave their attention to their toast and tomatoes.

It was all about love and respect and patience, they later agreed, while washing and drying their dishes.

“I do sometimes pinch myself at the portion we’ve been allotted,” Constance confided to her. And then, fired by her own courage, she put her cheek to her friend’s and kept it there, so that they might more fully appreciate this bounty they had been offered, or had gathered, together.

She found herself face down in a tangle of shoes and boots, and someone was working her arms to pump the water from her lungs. She was helped to a sitting position squeezed between two weeping men, one of whom was rowing. She swayed there until a fishing smack bumped alongside and took on the lifeboat’s passengers. Once seated on the smack, she noticed other lifeboats bobbing nearby, all far from full. Her boots were gone and the deck slippery with fish scales, and one of the fishermen looked aghast at her condition. Next to her, someone’s head was bandaged with someone else’s handkerchief and bled through it immediately. She was given some warm sugared tea. More people crowded onto the smack from other lifeboats. When she was strong enough, she joined others at the railings, scanning and scanning the waves. Someone said something to her, but she was so chilled she was unable to respond.

That same voice said they had sunk close to a town on the Irish coast and were headed there now. All around them passed other boats steaming the opposite way. She remembered Minna beside her, the bright sunshine, the

glassy sea, and some of that animation they felt which overtook passengers when nearing port. Then she closed her eyes to the juddering of the engines beneath her.

She was helped up the gangway once the boat had docked. It was announced that the recovered had been taken to the next wharf over, and there was her father among them, his face blank with shock. She was jolted to her knees by the sight, and it was only when she got so close she was nearly staring him in the face that he seemed to recognize her.

“Then I jiggle the handle just to make sure it’s locked.”
Cartoon by Jimmy Craig

After the maelstrom of their reunion, he agreed to wait with her for the other boats coming in, and shared his blanket. Someone else gave her some men’s galoshes. Around midnight, they were put up at the Queen’s Hotel and helped into bed and given hot-water jars. Despite her fatigue, she couldn’t keep herself from keening, and throughout the night at any noise in the hall she came awake again.

They spent four days checking the hospitals and other hotels and private homes that had taken in survivors, as well as the lists at the newly constituted Cunard office, before her father finally asked if she wished to go to the post office to wire Minna’s family. Her hand shook so badly on the form that he had to steady it, and she could write only that they were still looking and that not all hope was lost.

Corpses were continually being unloaded on the wharves, so every day there were those ordeals. The quantity was staggering, and she remembered Minna's remark that a single stroll around the Promenade Deck covered a quarter of a mile. By then, all of the retrieved lifeboats had been drawn up quayside, and seemed to be functioning as an exhibit. The shopwindows were filled with notices of the missing, to which they added their own: a young woman of twenty-six years, with dark-brown hair and brown eyes, very pretty. Constance added the cameo at the end of the description.

Until the last minute it hadn't even been certain that Minna would accompany them to America. They had had a falling out that made their squabble on the blackberrying expedition trivial in comparison. Constance termed it a falling out when she sought to minimize it for herself even as she registered that the more apt term might be betrayal.

Minna had explained that her refusal to play to others' follies had made her current situation at the legal offices increasingly untenable, and had suggested that she might find a new position in the consortium that Constance's father was helping to organize, at the government's request, to coördinate the supply of munitions from the United States. That was the main reason for the trip to America, besides her father's efforts to locate new markets for his coal, and Constance had surprised herself with her lack of enthusiasm for Minna's request, a lack she neither understood nor examined. The closest she came to comprehending it was to attribute it to the fierceness with which she prioritized her father's interests, but that hardly explained her reticence, since Minna would likely be welcomed by both her father and his associates. Constance had been further irked when Minna, without having consulted her, importuned her father about the consortium during a visit to Constance at home, and he volunteered that perhaps Minna could attend the lunch he and Constance were having the following Friday with a young man who ran a sulfur-and-potassium concern. It was agreed that Minna would meet Constance at home and proceed from there. And when that Friday Constance found herself alone at the appointed hour, she declined to answer the door for a full twenty minutes until Minna went away. At the luncheon, she pleaded ignorance and then was told the following evening by her father that Minna had encountered him coming out of his office and had again put herself forward for the consortium. And she and Minna had then been out of

touch until Minna intercepted her on a walk in the park near the railway bridge, waiting in the same canvas chair under the same elms.

This time Minna stayed in her chair, and remarked in a low voice that she had spent more years than she should have hoping for liberality from those for whom it was apparently impossible. “Did you know my grandfather’s only response to my father’s birth was supposedly ‘Well, I see nothing for him but the workhouse’?” she asked. “And yet my father built a career in business.”

“Do you see why I’m so disappointed?” she asked when Constance failed to respond.

Constance was aware of others around them observing the scene.

“I expect people to act in their self-interest,” Minna added. “But *not* to be so ignorant of what that self-interest is.”

“I don’t have any explanation, for you or myself,” Constance finally said, with a flatness that surprised her.

“I would have thought my request would have seemed to you happy news,” Minna said. “Not a burden.”

Constance remembered her sister reminding her once that boys did a lot of hurtful things just from a lack of thought. “There was something about it that caused me to fear,” she was able to say. She meant that something had seemed to threaten what they had together, or what she had found in Minna, but she didn’t elaborate.

Minna surveyed her expression. “Well, that puts me in mind of the way the rich choose to believe that the poor endanger them rather than the other way round,” she said.

But Constance offered no more in her own defense, for all her mortification.

“What a wretched lot of shrivelled creatures we could all become by and by,” Minna finally remarked, looking away. “And imagine where we might

be headed, without our regard for one another.” She waited, and then refused to offer any more.

And after Constance had made her apologies, and took her leave, she listed for herself on the remainder of her walk those aspects of the desolation her friend was asking her to imagine: a return to the realm of the empty and the lonely, the self-stymieing and unnatural.

On the fifth day, she could no longer rise and dress herself for a morning of checking corpses, and her father found her to be feverish. She was diagnosed as having bronchial pneumonia and spent the next two weeks in bed. The woman who changed her linens reported bodies washing ashore from the Garrettstown strand to the mudflats all along the adjoining bays. Her father seemed largely restored, though he moved with a more uncertain gait, and after the first week she had to coax him to persist in inspecting the latest recoveries, even as she gleaned from his reports how dreadful a task it had become. She tried to scrub away the smudges and marks that persisted on her thighs and torso and discovered them to be bruises. There was still some black oil in her hair. And at the end of those two weeks her father informed her, with the same kindness she recalled from childhood when she’d thrown a tantrum, that he had made arrangements for their return home.

Four years later, on the anniversary of the Armistice, she sat in her childhood bedroom on the morning of her wedding and listened to the unreliable clock in the church’s steeple, a local embarrassment, toll the wrong hours. She had not slept. The young man she was marrying was quiet and grateful for her attentions and her father liked him very well. She had spent the night remembering a morning before there’d been any squabbles, when under a hot sun she had led Minna up the hills behind her house, where the world was gorse and sky. And Minna had referred to the weather as April weather: rain and sunshine together. They passed mowing machines several fields over. Dragonflies, blue with black markings. Starlings swooping up other insects disturbed by the browsing cattle.

While they walked, they talked about their ideas of Heaven, Constance joking that she hoped it would be a place with plenty of music and nothing to do, and Minna countering that she imagined an endless gratified communion of kindred spirits. Minna talked about her family, and, even as

happy as Constance was, she sensed a dangerous coolness stealing over her. X was unhappy, Y was feeling poorly, and Z was unwell. The previous night, a toad had been discovered jumping about in the hall. Minna took her arm and teased her for not listening, and Constance joked in response that in fact she sometimes felt she listened so closely that she heard almost nothing. She encouraged Minna to continue to share her difficulties, even though Constance usually kept hers to herself, and then acknowledged that *that* hadn't been news since the hobble skirt had vanished.

Minna stopped and took both of Constance's hands. "Is it a contentious point that we share the most with those we cherish most?" she asked.

It certainly shouldn't be, Constance responded. But such sharing wasn't always conducive to peace of mind.

"Peace of mind!" Minna exclaimed. And they continued their walk. Toward its completion, Minna said with real regret that she could only assume that she didn't live as calmly with unresponsiveness as Constance and the rest of the world.

And Constance knew even then that the best love acknowledged the groping effort of the erring will. And she was ashamed even then of her disbelief when Minna went on to claim that she felt sure there was a great and real happiness waiting for them somewhere. She remembered hoping that gazing at Minna was reply enough, and hoping, too, that her friend's singularity would guarantee her transformation as well. Constance remembered Minna articulating for her the formula she had found so useful in business: state what you want, then why you want it, and then how you propose to get it.

And Constance had refused that invitation. It put her in mind of two images from her last minutes on the Lusitania: the first, a woman and her infant sliding down the canted deck past men who stepped out of their way, and the second, a foursome of young women confronting a port-side lifeboat released from its tethers and swinging wide of the deck because of the ship's tilt, and those women watching others succeed and then still pronouncing themselves unwilling to make that leap. ♦

This is drawn from "The Queen of Bad Influences and Other Stories."
Jim Shepard first contributed to The New Yorker in 1987.

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Books

What Did the Pop Culture of the Two-Thousands Do to Millennial Women?

“Girl on Girl,” by the critic Sophie Gilbert, is the latest and most ambitious in a series of consciousness-raising-style reappraisals of the decade’s formative texts.

By Dayna Tortorici

June 9, 2025

Gilbert charges the sweaty, high-contrast work of Terry Richardson and the sexed-up ads of Abercrombie & Fitch with bringing porn’s aesthetics into the mainstream.Photo illustration by Chantal Jahchan; Source photographs from Getty

In 1969, Vivian Gornick was assigned by the *Village Voice* to write about the "women's libbers" gathering in downtown Manhattan. Gornick set out never having heard of women's liberation. She returned one week later a convert. What happened in the interval was the dawning of what second-wave feminists called feminist consciousness: the growing conviction that how things were for women were not how they had to be. Often, this insight arose in conversation with other women, in consciousness-raising groups. Comparing notes on the parts of their lives once thought too personal to merit political analysis—love, sex, housework, marriage, motherhood—they found their "symptoms of private unhappiness," in Gornick's words, "so powerfully and so consistently duplicated among women that perhaps these symptoms could be ascribed to *cultural* causes as to psychological ones." Reflecting on one's life in a consciousness-raising session, Gornick wrote, was "rather like shaking a kaleidoscope and watching all the same pieces rearrange themselves into an altogether *other* picture."

Making sense of this new picture involved a kind of reappraisal. What voices, loud or soft, had convinced women of their own inferiority for so long? What myths, scripts, and stories had predisposed them to accept the limitations placed on them from within and without? What alternate ways of living could be gleaned from the past? "Contemporary feminism is bound up with a profound rereading of the culture," Gornick wrote years later. "We read the novels we grew up on as though for the first time, we sit up late watching the movies of our childhood, we turn again to familiar memoirs and biographies of distinguished men and women." Adrienne Rich, in 1972, wrote that "re-vision," the task of "entering an old text from a new critical direction," was "an act of survival" for women: "Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves."

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Gornick and Rich were building on a foundation laid by the second wave's earliest texts. In "The Second Sex," published in 1949, Simone de Beauvoir wrote that girls were not born women but learned to become them, starting in childhood from fairy tales. ("To be happy, she has to be loved; to be loved, she has to await love. Woman is Sleeping Beauty, Donkey Skin, Cinderella, Snow White, the one who receives and endures.") In "The Feminine Mystique," from 1963, Betty Friedan argued that the image of the modern American woman that "shapes women's lives" and "mirrors their dreams" is created "by the women's magazines, by advertisements, television, movies, novels." Owing in large part to the second wave's influence, it is now axiomatic among feminists that women are shaped by the culture that surrounds them. The hopeful belief that follows is that confronting one's cultural influences—identifying them, analyzing them, and exposing how their assumptions shore up a society of male supremacy—can rob them of their power to indoctrinate.

During the past few years, a new decade has emerged as an object of consciousness-raising-style reappraisal, as millennial women entering their thirties and forties look back at the era in which they came of age: the two-thousands. Memoirs by Britney Spears and Paris Hilton, both published in 2023, followed a major shift in public opinion about the treatment of female celebrities as the grim details of Spears's conservatorship prompted critics to reconsider her plight. What if starlets like Spears were not happy collaborators in a patriarchal order but scapegoats who had been exploited for profit, pushed to the brink by an insatiable audience, and forced to bear the misogynistic projections of an entire country? In a review of "The Woman in Me," Spears's memoir, the *Times* critic Amanda Hess described what it felt like to rewatch the singer's 2007 "comeback" performance at

the MTV Video Music Awards sixteen years after it aired. What Hess had remembered as an amusing disaster was more like “found footage in a horror movie,” she wrote. “I saw a new mother being forced to do a sexy dance for America . . . to inform whether she got to keep her children.”

Meanwhile, on social media, videos about two-thousands diet culture have become regular viral fare. A favored template rolls a clip from a paradigmatic text of the era—“Bridget Jones’s Diary,” “The Devil Wears Prada,” “America’s Next Top Model,” a live performance by Jessica Simpson—as a contemporary viewer reacts with hand-over-mouth shock to the unbridled disgust displayed toward any woman larger than a size 2. Recent essay collections like Emmeline Clein’s “Dead Weight: Essays on Hunger and Harm” and Colette Shade’s “Y2K: How the 2000s Became Everything” draw a straight line from the media that millennials consumed in girlhood to the eating disorders they developed as teens. “All the magazines talked about how to lose weight and get toned, praising the celebrities who did these things and criticizing celebrities who didn’t,” Shade writes. It wasn’t a leap to conclude that thinness “was socially prized.” Clein puts it even more bluntly, asking what message a teen-age girl was “supposed to get, if not that the body lent so much ink and paper is one she, the nonfamous girl, should aspire to emulate?”

Into this broader context of cultural reassessment comes “Girl on Girl: How Pop Culture Turned a Generation of Women Against Themselves” (Penguin Press), by the critic Sophie Gilbert—the latest and most ambitious of the feminist reappraisals of the two-thousands. Born in the early eighties, Gilbert, a staff writer at *The Atlantic*, is an “elder millennial,” a near age-mate of Spears. She turned sixteen in 1999, the year that the singer appeared on the cover of *Rolling Stone* in her underwear and that “American Beauty”—“a movie in which a middle-aged man has recurring sexual fantasies about his teenage daughter’s best friend,” in Gilbert’s words—débuted to critical acclaim. In an *Atlantic* article adapted from the book, Gilbert writes that she did not begin to question how coming of age in this hypersexualized, internet-enabled environment had affected her until a few months into the coronavirus pandemic, when she gave birth to twins. Motherhood prompted “a breakdown of self,” as she put it in an interview with Hess. When she went back to work, she was drawn to stories about

how culture shaped identity. Soon, she noticed that contemporary culture was shifting around her in alarming ways. Dobbs v. Jackson had overturned Roe v. Wade. Young women were cooing on TikTok about becoming trad wives and stay-at-home girlfriends. Young men were idolizing Andrew Tate, an accused rapist and an open anti-feminist who once appeared on "Big Brother." "Indie sleaze" was back. It all reminded her of the two-thousands, "when feminism felt just as nebulous and inert, squashed by a cultural explosion of jokey extremity and technicolor objectification. This was the environment that millennial women were raised in." She "came to believe that we couldn't move forward without fully reckoning with how the culture of the aughts had defined us."

Gilbert presents a handful of media as being particularly formative for the decade. She charges fashion photography—the sweaty, high-contrast work of Terry Richardson and the sexed-up ads of Abercrombie & Fitch, American Apparel, and Victoria's Secret—with bringing porn aesthetics into the mainstream and holding up the nineties beauty standard of ultra-thinness ("concave hips and jutting chest bones"), only this time with breasts. Paparazzi photography, then at the peak of its market value and the nadir of its ethical sense, reaffirmed the public's belief that it had a right to access and pick apart young celebrities' personal lives. Remember "upskirt" photos? "Adult men would lie on the ground while young female stars were stepping out of cars to try to capture what was essentially nonconsensual pornography," Gilbert writes. "When the photographers succeeded, it was unfailingly their subjects who were shamed."

Rounding out Gilbert's canon is reality television, still in its "human zoo" phase of putting people in outlandish or humiliating situations with few guardrails ("Big Brother," "Extreme Makeover," "The Bachelor," "Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire?"), along with two types of teen film, the horror movie and the male-centric sex comedy, both of which proliferated in the wake of the late-nineties blockbusters "Scream" and "American Pie."

Important but less central to Gilbert's inquiry are the websites and magazines that ran provocative editorials (*Dazed*), publicized celebrity sex tapes and paparazzi photos scrutinizing women's gaffes and flaws (TMZ,

Perez Hilton, *Us Weekly*, the U.K. magazine *Heat*), and allowed male writers to deride the teen girls they profiled while ogling their developing bodies (*Rolling Stone* was a repeat offender). All circled the same themes: surveillance, body image, sadism, hyperfemininity, male (heterosexual) desire and women's obligation to fulfill it. Thrumming beneath them, informing their values and their visual vocabulary, Gilbert argues, was porn.

"The title 'Girl on Girl' "—a play on the porn genre in which two or more women have sex—"was initially supposed to be a joke," Gilbert writes, "a wry nod to all the ways in which women seemed to have been turned against themselves and each other, handicapped as a collective force over the course of my adult life." The more material she dredged up in her research, however, the more apt the title felt. Aided by the internet, porn in the two-thousands "seemed to have filtered its way through absolutely everything in mass media." The resulting pornification of pop culture taught girls her age that power for women was "sexual in nature," contingent on being attractive and able to cater to men's contradictory wants. "There was only one way to exist in public, and it was a trap," Gilbert writes. "Seventeen-year-olds were expected to be sexy virgins, girls with porn-star looks and purity rings, able to sell anything to any demographic." Meanwhile, the mainstreaming of pornographic aesthetics drove porn itself toward more violent extremes to maintain its edge. That increasingly hardcore turn "trained a good amount of our popular culture" to "see women as objects—as things to silence, restrain, fetishize, or brutalize." Taken as a whole, the pornified media of the two-thousands created a toxic atmosphere of "recreational misogyny" which led girls to believe that "sex was our currency, our objectification was empowering, and we were a joke"—a lesson that Gilbert says millennial women "internalized with rigor," to the detriment of their collective power.

Gilbert's assessment of the era is damning, and likely to resonate with readers of her generation. I came of age in the two-thousands, a few years behind Gilbert, and though I cannot speak for all in my cohort, I can say that certain behaviors were not uncommon. It was not uncommon for girls to starve themselves to be thin, or to wield images of emaciated celebrities as a tool of dietary self-discipline. It was not uncommon to slut-shame other women, to fat-shame other women, to feel the shame of being fat or slutty

yourself, or to resort to self-harm to cope with that shame. It was not uncommon to want to be “one of the guys,” but also insanely, impossibly hot, so that all the guys also wanted to sleep with you. (Why settle for one form of male approval when you can have two?) It was not uncommon to laugh at men’s cruel jokes to win their affection, and it was not uncommon to redirect that cruelty toward other women to avoid becoming the target. It was not uncommon to consent to sex you didn’t really want to have, to prioritize a male partner’s sexual experience far above your own, or to pretend to be straight or straighter than you were. And it was not uncommon to do all these things at the expense of literally any other more life-affirming or world-expanding pursuit.

But Gilbert is oddly silent on this pitiful bouquet of pick-me behaviors in “Girl on Girl.” Though the book is laced with suggestive personal asides and hypothetical questions that gesture at the ill effects of pop culture on young women, it doesn’t include an account of how women actually responded to the material it so assiduously documents. “Every magazine I read during my teens and twenties, every TV show featuring a doe-eyed teenage star with visible clavicles, seemed to contain the same message: *shrink*,” Gilbert writes. Did she try to shrink? She doesn’t say; she mostly declines to write about herself, even as “Girl on Girl” is built on the authority of her experience. “When I was pitching this book to publishers, virtually every editor I met with had the same request: Could I make myself more of a presence?” she says in a chapter on first-person women’s writing from the twenty-tens. She implies that those publishers were seeking the enticements of confessional writing, but the note may have been more methodological: *someone’s* personal experience has to bear out her argument that “pop culture turned a generation of women against themselves,” as her subtitle has it. If she doesn’t want to offer her own experience as evidence, whose will she point to instead?

The answer appears to be: nobody’s. It’s interesting to compare “Girl on Girl” with Ariel Levy’s 2005 book, “Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture,” which covered some of the same territory and to which Gilbert makes passing reference. “We’d *earned* the right to look at Playboy; we were *empowered* enough to get Brazilian bikini waxes,” Levy writes, describing the mood of the moment. “Women had come so far, I

learned, we no longer needed to worry about objectification or misogyny. Instead, it was time for us to join the frat party of pop culture, where men had been enjoying themselves all along." Like "The Feminine Mystique" before it, "Female Chauvinist Pigs" turns on anecdotes—journalism as amateur sociology. Levy interviewed fifty young people between the ages of twelve and eighteen, most of whom seemed to be white, coastal private-school students or teens at a suburban mall. The girls told her that they were watching their weight, giving oral sex (never receiving), and competing to "dress the skankiest."

Gilbert, by contrast, doesn't conduct any interviews. "Girl on Girl" cites a handful of studies, but few pertain to women's behavior. A 2013 study by the social psychologist Rachel M. Calogero—which concludes, in Gilbert's words, that "the more women were prone to self-objectification . . . the less inclined they were toward activism and the pursuit of social justice"—is the most concrete example she gives of how women reacted to sexist media. The removal of the protagonist from this story—the viewer who perceives and acts in response—gives the book an elusive, lopsided quality. On the one hand, it is an exhaustive account, a formidably thorough excavation of pop-cultural artifacts whose disdain toward women is often stunningly blunt. (Terry Richardson's advice to aspiring models: "It's not who you know, it's who you blow. I don't have a hole in my jeans for nothing.") On the other hand, it is a strangely untethered document, evidence marshalled for an unknown case: a long list of causes in search of a presumed effect.

Reading "Girl on Girl" as a member of its target audience is a conflicting experience, alternately tedious and engrossing, unpleasant and therapeutic. It's refreshing to be reminded that one does not know history just because one lived through it. I remembered, for instance, that Jennifer Lopez had worn a plunging green jungle-print dress to the 2000 Grammy Awards, but I was not aware that the dress had been "the most popular search query Google had seen to date" or that it had inspired the company to make Google Images. Nor did I know that YouTube was created after one of its founders was frustrated by how long it took him to find an online clip of Janet Jackson's nipple-exposing "wardrobe malfunction" during the 2004 Super Bowl halftime show. Lust is the father of invention.

I would have gone to my grave peacefully had I never been reminded of the smug, horny entitlement of young men in the two-thousands—the Tucker Maxes and Adam Carollas—or the pressure I felt to find their humor funny or smart. I did not enjoy being reacquainted with male journalists' gratuitous comments about teen girls' breasts in *Rolling Stone*, or the haranguing of diet books like "Skinny Bitch" ("You need to exercise, you lazy shit"). I had repressed all memory of the ghastly reality-TV show "The Swan," in which desperate and body-dysmorphic women undergo a series of plastic surgeries and are then assessed by a panel of judges so that one may be crowned "the swan" among ugly ducklings. In Gilbert's hands, reappraising the decade from a feminist perspective is more an exercise in cataloguing than in analysis: the ideology of the era is not subtle, and its narratives don't need decoding. The collected material makes a persuasive case for self-forgiveness. If you contorted or disfigured yourself to fit into this moment, the book seems to say—if you "participated in your own oppression" by getting the memo and acting on it—don't blame yourself. This was the water; you were just a fish.

Less persuasive are the conclusions Gilbert draws about porn. There's a whiff of something old school in them, a half-buried paranoia about pornography's role in women's diminished power in the United States that recalls the feminist anti-porn line of the nineteen-eighties. "I'm not remotely opposed to porn," Gilbert writes in "Girl on Girl," but in the *Atlantic* excerpt the same disclaimer appears in a different form. "I am not opposed to porn on principle," she writes there:

> Some of it is liberating; some of it is ethical; a tiny amount of it is even devoted to understanding female desire in a universe built on the male gaze and money shots. Still, in studying porn's long cultural shadow, I've come to agree with the radical feminist Andrea Dworkin, who wrote in 1981 that "pornography incarnates male supremacy. It is the DNA of male dominance." Porn has undeniably changed how people have sex, as researchers and anyone who has even fleeting experience with dating apps can attest. But it has also changed our culture and, in doing so, has filtered into our subconscious minds, beyond the reach of rationality and reason. We are all living in the world porn made.

That last sentence quotes the leading anti-porn lawyer Catharine MacKinnon almost verbatim. (“We are living in the world pornography has made,” she wrote in a *Times* op-ed opposing OnlyFans, in 2021.) Gilbert doesn’t propose legal constraints on porn production, as Dworkin and MacKinnon did, and she claims to be “not interested in kink-shaming”—a sharp turn from the standard anti-porn condemnation of B.D.S.M. She’s mostly curious, she writes, “about how culture conditions desire, and what it means that the impulse to inflict violence on women is often blindly sanctioned in a sexual context in ways it would never be otherwise.” Still, so menacing a presence is porn in “Girl on Girl”—always “filtering through” the membrane that shields the world of mainstream representation from the shadow realm of the illicit—that it’s hard to avoid the conclusion that Gilbert shares Dworkin’s and MacKinnon’s disproportionate emphasis on its cultural power.

Parts of “Girl on Girl” echo the anti-porn tradition’s simplified “monkey see, monkey do” theory of reception, which tends to see causation where correlation is more likely. (There is plenty of evidence that sadistic men watch sadistic porn, less evidence that sadistic porn creates sadistic men.) And, like many anti-porn writers, Gilbert dwells on porn’s more violent offerings, as if the extremes express the truth of the medium more than its bread-and-butter fare. An especially brutal passage describes a documentary featuring the sadist pornographer Max Hardcore, who, Gilbert notes, is “notorious for abusing women with gynecological instruments, dressing them up as children, choking them with his penis to the point of blackout, spitting saliva and phlegm in their mouths, and inserting Sharpie markers into their rectums, with which he has them write, ‘I am a little fuck hole.’ ” It’s an extreme example; Gilbert quotes a porn actress who describes buyers of Max Hardcore films as “very near the edge.” But Gilbert offers it as representative of porn’s violent turn, which, she argues, inspired a parallel trend toward sadism and misogyny in mainstream culture.

In the new century, Gilbert writes, “porn’s mores” could be detected in men’s magazines like *Maxim*, Russell Brand’s standup joke about “cock-gagging” (something he would later be accused of doing to a sixteen-year-old), and the torture photos taken at Abu Ghraib prison by American soldiers in 2004. By the time 2007 rolled around—a year Gilbert singles out

as particularly rough for women in the public eye, from Lindsay Lohan and Anna Nicole Smith to Britney Spears and Hillary Clinton, who had just announced her run for President—the public was inured to spectacles of female suffering and emotional breakdown. It had even been primed to enjoy them, as entertainment.

It's a tempting thesis—the sudden availability of free internet porn must have had *some* effect on culture—but its explanatory power extends only so far. Gilbert's signature move of lining up suggestive juxtapositions and stepping back so that the reader may connect the dots fails here, as it does elsewhere in the book, because what is she saying, really? That hardcore porn was responsible for Brand's abuse, for the paparazzi's harassment of Spears, and, further down the line, for the rise of Donald Trump and the overturning of Roe v. Wade? Gilbert wouldn't stand behind such outsized claims, which is why she doesn't make them. But she seems equally reluctant to see porn as anything but the master key to male supremacy. Possessing neither the ambition of the Dworkin-MacKinnonites nor the materialism of their socialist and Third Worldist contemporaries who traced the source of women's oppression elsewhere—to racism, colonialism, and economic inequality—Gilbert's argument finds itself at a dead end. Porn may be "the DNA of male dominance," as Dworkin put it, or it may not. Either way, Gilbert implies, there's no stopping it.

"I wanted to write this book because I was truly stunned by the reversal of *Roe v. Wade* in 2022," Gilbert writes. But no amount of sifting through the cultural artifacts of the two-thousands can explain the retrenchment of the Trump era. The story of how Roe v. Wade was overturned is not a story of ideology disseminated from pop culture, let alone of hardcore pornography infecting the mind of the populace; it's a story about dark money, legal strategy, and the slow, incremental way the anti-abortion movement made the procedure harder and harder to access until conservatives finally hijacked the Supreme Court. In other words, it's a story about politics.

When the audit known as feminist revision became a feature of feminist theory, it was never intended to eclipse in importance the activity known as praxis: organizing, taking over institutions, seizing power to make lasting changes in policy and law. Betty Friedan wrote "The Feminine Mystique,"

but she also co-founded the National Organization for Women. Simone de Beauvoir wrote “The Second Sex,” but she also wrote the Manifesto of the 343, which demanded free access to birth control and the right to have an abortion. Vivian Gornick concluded her *Village Voice* article by announcing the formation of New York Radical Women and other feminist groups then taking shape “in New York, in Cambridge, in Chicago, in New Haven, in Washington, in San Francisco, in East Podunk—yes! believe it!,” which readers could track down and join. There is little comparable sense of agency or possibility in “Girl on Girl.” Gilbert alludes to collective power, but remains hazy on what it is to be used for, and ends her book looking out onto a familiar cramped horizon. Representation matters, she tells us, and, if we can rewrite our limiting storytelling models, we can remake the world. Yes, representation matters, but culture alone can’t do the work of politics, and neither can cultural critique. Gilbert is right that it makes a difference what we see. More important, though, is what we do. ♦

Dayna Tortorici, a co-editor of n+1 since 2014, has written for outlets including the Guardian and The Atlantic.

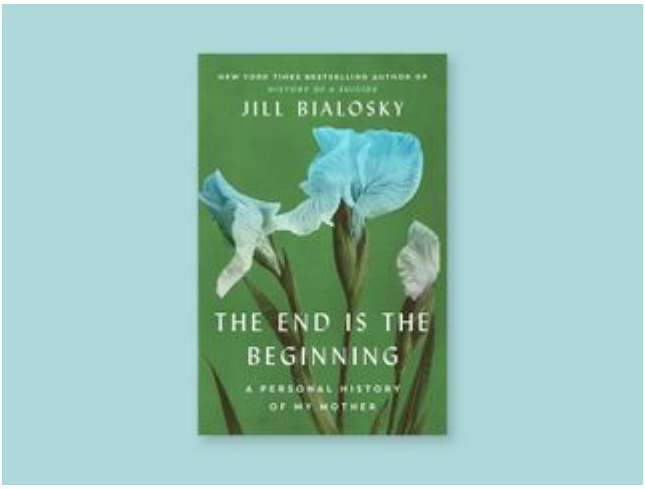
Books

Briefly Noted

“Apocalypse,” “The End Is the Beginning,” “The Book of Records,” and “The River Is Waiting.”

June 9, 2025

Apocalypse, *by Lizzie Wade (Harper).* In recent decades, technological advances have transformed the field of archeology, allowing for the sequencing of ancient DNA and the tracing of long-ago migrations. Drawing on a trove of data, Wade zeroes in on what she terms “apocalypses,” moments in history when “rapid, collective loss” has forced a society to radically change its way of life. “Change” is the key word: Wade argues that certain examples—the climate disasters that displaced Mayans, the fallout from the Black Death—show that nothing has ever fully ended. Nor do apocalypses result in uniformly negative change; as she points out, numerous egalitarian political movements were born of catastrophe.



The End Is the Beginning, *by Jill Bialosky (Washington Square)*. Told in reverse chronological order, this affecting book relates Bialosky's experiences caring for her dying mother, Iris. The narrative begins immediately after Iris's death, following long battles with depression and Alzheimer's. Over the preceding decade, Bialosky makes torturous decisions regarding her mother's care. As time recedes, Iris, a mere sketch in the opening chapters, emerges as a richly realized character. Bialosky excels in capturing the nuances of providing end-of-life care to a loved one, and offers astute observations on what the old and infirm want: "To be viewed as they are, as human beings who have led full lives."

What We're Reading

Illustration by Ben Hickey

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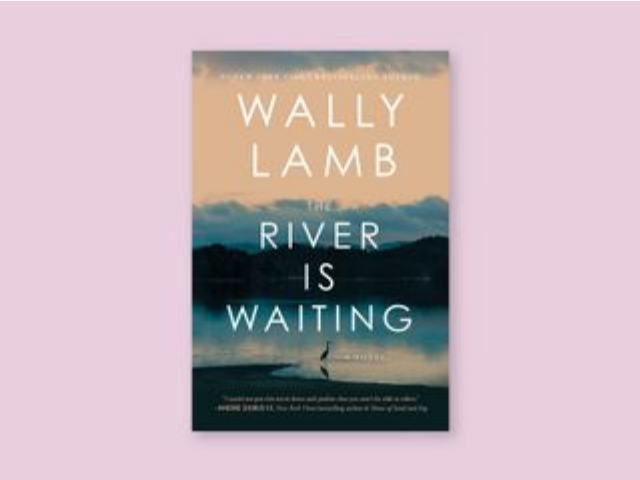
The Book of Records, *by Madeleine Thien (Norton)*. The protagonist of this beguiling novel, Lina, lives with her father in a realm seemingly unbound by ordinary time. “Other centuries were falling down on us like rain through the trees,” she muses. Lina, who is eleven at the book’s start, and her father have fled severe flooding on the Chinese mainland, and now dwell in a mysterious place known as the Sea. Other travellers, who come and go, tell them stories of Hannah Arendt, Baruch Spinoza, and the Tang-dynasty poet Du Fu, which become intertwined with Lina’s days and years. Ultimately, the novel is a meditation on the sheer force of longing—for a lost home, lost loved ones, a future that will never be attained. “A person is not what they know,” one of Lina’s fellow-travellers says. “A person is what they yearn for.”



The River Is Waiting, *by Wally Lamb (S&S/Marysue Rucci)*. This immersive novel of redemption, by a New York *Times* best-selling novelist,

follows a stay-at-home father who gets into a car accident that kills one of his children. After blood tests indicate that the father had consumed alcohol and a prescription anti-anxiety drug before he started driving, he is convicted of manslaughter. When he begins a three-year prison sentence, the plot loses its sharp corners, and the book proceeds to loosely observe his days. Throughout, the novel chips away at its foundational questions: Does there exist a punishment equal to the atrocity of killing one's child? And how should one weigh having been a good parent prior to committing a grave mistake?

Books

The Wizard Behind Hollywood's Golden Age

How Irving Thalberg helped turn M-G-M into the world's most famous movie studio—and gave the film business a new sense of artistry and scale.

By Adam Gopnik

June 9, 2025

Louis B. Mayer sending off Irving Thalberg and the M-G-M star Norma Shearer on their honeymoon.Photograph from Hulton Archive / Getty

The afterlife of the great American movie moguls is uncertain. Way back when, you might one day be on the cover of *Time*, the next day lost to time. Some who were once famous and feared, like Harry Cohn, of Columbia Pictures, have vanished into the sands. Sam Goldwyn persists only after

having been made into a Yogi Berra, good for sideways wisdom—“Include me out,” and so on. But Irving Thalberg, the head of production at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer during the nineteen-twenties and thirties, left a lasting echo, in part because he died young enough to be remembered romantically, but mostly because he was the model for the title character of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s unfinished novel “The Last Tycoon” (1941). Indeed, Kenneth Turan’s “Louis B. Mayer and Irving Thalberg: The Whole Equation,” from Yale University Press’s Jewish Lives series, takes its subtitle from Fitzgerald’s posthumously published roman à clef. “Not a half dozen men have been able to keep the whole equation of pictures in their heads,” Fitzgerald’s narrator, Cecilia Brady, the daughter of a character based on the studio’s boss, Mayer (his ethnicity switched from Jewish to Irish), explains of the Thalberg character, who can.

Thalberg produced some three or four hundred movies in his years at M-G-M, ranging from big pictures like “Mutiny on the Bounty” to the Marx Brothers’ late-career hit, “A Night at the Opera,” though he left his name on almost none. (“Praise you give yourself is worthless,” he said.) It was Fitzgerald who fixed Thalberg, as Monroe Stahr, in the world’s imagination as a type: the sensitive boy genius who knew the secrets of storytelling in a new technology and tried patiently to share them with a stuffy literary establishment. The type endures into our own tech era.

Fitzgerald, with the fair-minded detachment he applied to all the crises in his life, was enthralled by Thalberg in part because the writer ruefully accepted that film was replacing fiction. “I saw that the novel, which at my maturity was the strongest and supplest medium for conveying thought and emotion from one human being to another, was becoming subordinated to a mechanical and communal art,” he wrote in “The Crack-Up.” By “communal,” he meant not only the studio system’s grinding collaborations—five or six writers on a single script—but also the audience’s shared, almost churchlike, experience: hundreds gathered in a single building, often the most beautiful in town, silent together in the dark. In this new order, a boy genius who could make the mechanical art feel meaningful would be as central an American figure as the novelist had once been.

What We’re Reading

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Nor was this a wholly projected fantasy. Samuel Marx, one of the lesser but more trusted producers on the lot, once wrote that “Thalberg looked on literary rules as if through the lens of a camera, exchanging the patterns on a printed page for the pictures he envisioned on the screen.” We want to believe that *someone* knows how to exchange the set of patterns on the page for the pictures on a screen, and Thalberg’s legend speaks to that urge.

Turan, who spent many years as a Los Angeles *Times* movie critic, sees that, since show business is a business, Thalberg makes sense only within a kind of twin-star system, orbiting Mayer, his partner and more narrowly money-minded corporate superior. Mayer, in the world of Hollywood myth, is noted for lacking exactly the refinement that Thalberg is celebrated for, and so together they create the aura of a premonitory Vito-and-Michael relationship, though they were separated in age by only fifteen years. Mayer’s taste “was primitive and mawkish, even for those rather primitive and mawkish days,” Budd Schulberg, a screenwriter and novelist who had known him since childhood, wrote. Mayer craved formulas; after “Forty-second Street” was a hit for another studio, he told the great wit Herman Mankiewicz that he wanted “Forty-third Street,” “Forty-fourth Street,” and “Forty-fifth Street,” adding, “Don’t come to me with anything new!” But Thalberg, we’re told, wanted pictures that were singular and inimitable. “When Mayer came roaring out of the preview of the Clark Gable–Joan Crawford starrer ‘Possessed’ wanting an immediate sequel,” Marx recounted, “Thalberg said, ‘Sure, L.B., and we’ll call it ‘Repossessed,’ then turned his attention to more original notions.”

Some of the difference between the men came down to background. Irving Thalberg, born in 1899, grew up in the genteel Brooklyn of German-Jewish doctors and rabbis, a world apart from Mayer's rougher caste of Eastern European Jews hustling for scrap metal in cold maritime Canada. Both entered the movie industry when it was still New York-based, and the first generation of Jewish movie men—many with thick Yiddish accents who'd stumbled into show business—still held sway. As Garson Kanin dramatized in his 1979 novel "Moviola," some got into the business simply because their "long stores"—drygoods shops on the Lower East Side with deep interiors—could double as makeshift movie houses. Thalberg, a lover of theatre and books, found work with one of them, Carl Laemmle, and, after absorbing all he could, latched on to Mayer, who took him under his wing and brought him to Los Angeles.

Marcus Loew was a member of that first generation, who, owning a chain of theatres, went west to see whether he could get involved in actually making movies—like a modern-day tech tycoon with a platform looking for product. Loew was made the mark in a kind of confidence game, Schulberg recalls, with Thalberg and Mayer putting on a show of activity at the failing Louis B. Mayer Productions that nonetheless impressed the Hollywood innocent. His father, B. P. Schulberg, felt betrayed by Mayer; the two had been planning to start their own production company before Mayer allowed Loew to "prevail" on him to run the new, combined outfit. B.P. rose to the top ranks of Paramount, but he never got over Mayer's treachery; if he died suddenly, he declared, he wanted someone to blow his ashes in Mayer's face.

Thalberg was a wunderkind, and one of the tricks of being a wunderkind is to leverage a youthful aura—selling the *Kind* to increase the *Wunder*. Norma Shearer, an M-G-M star who became his wife, told the tale of meeting him for the first time and taking him for a demure office boy. Though she represented this as a lovably artless self-presentation, Thalberg obviously knew the effect he was having. Mankiewicz, who co-wrote "Citizen Kane," said of him, "Thalberg celebrated his twenty-sixth birthday today with bigger celebration than last year's twenty-sixth birthday. Plans bigger twenty-sixth birthday celebration next year."

Bill Walsh, the sage football coach—and very much the Thalberg of the N.F.L.—once said that “rising to the occasion” really means executing normally while everyone else panics. This came naturally to Thalberg, whose first major triumph at M-G-M, in 1924, was rescuing an over-budget production of “Ben-Hur” in Rome, where cast and crew were treating the shoot as an extended holiday. “The location had become a sinkhole of graft and lust,” Irene Selznick, Mayer’s daughter, recalled once, in an interview with this magazine. Seeing that the film’s structure was sound, Thalberg, with Mayer’s backing, calmly brought it home and re-started in Hollywood. He spent even more, building a vast set for the chariot race and championing an ingenious special-effects trick: tiny dolls suspended on a matte painting to stand in for the Colosseum crowd.

The wisdom Thalberg showed then was double: he recognized that a strong story that has worked before (“Ben-Hur” had been a best-selling novel and a successful stage play) will probably work again, and that pulling the plug on a vexed but basically sound project may save money in the moment but cost more later. Along with that insight came several others, all as persuasive now as then, including that someone who had once been a significant force, or hitmaker, was unlikely to have lost his or her talent, and just needed a new deal and frame. This is why he was eager to keep Buster Keaton and the Marx Brothers in the movies when everyone else thought they were washed up.

That didn’t make him a soft touch. He fired Erich von Stroheim from “Greed,” the first of the “Heaven’s Gate”-style crises that litter Hollywood history—a runaway production being filmed far from Hollywood under the control of a mad artist-director. Stroheim delivered a nine-hour version; Thalberg had it cut to two. The hard call was not knowing when to stop spending but knowing what was worth spending on and what wasn’t. Again and again, he kept faith with projects even as the budgets rose if he thought them worth doing and likely to draw an audience. “If it’s good, it’s good; if it isn’t, it isn’t,” he said flatly of another expensive project, “Grand Hotel.” “The only way to save a lot of money is not to make it.”

The real difference between Mayer and Thalberg, it becomes clear, was not that one was classy and one was not; it was that they had different theories,

still alive today, about how to make the most money possible in the entertainment business. Mayer believed in reliable formulas, endlessly repeated for predictable profit; Thalberg believed that the entertainment business is a gold-rush, bonanza enterprise, in which one very big hit can make up for minor failures, many small successes can't make up for the absence of a very big hit, and the big hit tends to be the new thing splendidly done. A wise tycoon tries to anticipate where the audience wants to go and get there first.

The sheer Jewishness of Thalberg, Mayer, and the other studio heads is a subject that has been much turned over; Turan, writing a book for a series on Jewish lives, naturally puts it front and center. At a time when it was considered perfectly fair to mock Jews in power as Jews—Samuel Marx, for instance, was described in a 1932 *Fortune* profile of M-G-M as "an intelligent Hebrew with a Neanderthal forehead"—they were unapologetically of their kind. One might have expected Mayer, given how desperately he wanted to be accepted by the likes of Herbert Hoover, to be a timid or "self-hating" Jew. Not a bit of it: in fact, his father presided over the Mayer family table at night wearing a yarmulke and pursued his own obsessions as a Torah scholar by day. And when Norma Shearer and Thalberg wed, she felt compelled to convert, taking Hebrew lessons and immersing herself in a mikvah, explaining, with hilarious artlessness, "I decided that I had no particular religious convictions—that I could find it in the Jewish faith." (Thalberg's very Jewish Jewish mother, Henrietta, was a constant presence at home.)

So, though the imaginative world the moguls presided over was, with few exceptions, cleansed of Jewishness, the real lives they led were obdurately Jewish. This duality—publicly shaping an industry that hid Jewishness while privately remaining steeped in it—mirrors the larger duality of Thalberg's career. Ostensibly a master of high-minded refinement, he was at the same time an unrelenting pragmatist, a drygoods merchant in a Greek tunic, every bit as inclined to judge beaux arts by box-office as his boss.

“Keep stalling.”
Cartoon by Benjamin Schwartz

How good was he at it, really? The anti-Thalberg case has been made many times, by those who see him as a cynical salesman of limited if real gifts, chief among them a knack for making people believe he was something more than that. Indeed, it long ago became a settled view of American movie criticism that the work of the lesser studios—the Astaire-Rogers musicals at R.K.O., or the crime melodramas of Warner Bros. that eventually evolved into the genre French critics dubbed “noir”—resonates in ways that the cautious prestige productions of M-G-M do not.

The film historian Mark A. Vieira tried to rescue Thalberg’s reputation, a decade and a half ago, in a diligently detailed and fair-minded study of what Thalberg really did, called “Thalberg: Boy Wonder to Producer Prince.” The recounting of Thalberg’s process—a stenographer kept notes on several story meetings, which Vieira reproduces—tells much. Thalberg’s attention to detail is hugely impressive; you see why writers loved him. Working on something called “Blondie of the Follies,” in 1932, he probed the failures of the script and supplied some bracing realism. “All that drama of the father’s [outrage] is so false,” he says of this unprepossessing project.

> He’s just a beast. You can’t make a great drama of a father’s love for a daughter who’s going to pieces if she really isn’t going to pieces. Not in 1932. The story you told me today was about a family girl who goes out and gets everything she wants, but her father is mistaken. He thinks that she has given up her virginity. It’s too simple now. It hasn’t the feeling of life. You see my point, don’t you?

Working on “Grand Hotel,” Thalberg went over the footage “almost angle by angle,” Turan relates. “No specific was too small for him. He wanted, for instance, to open a scene with Grusinskaya—the Garbo character—‘sweeping into the lobby, flowers preceding her,’ so the audience knows she’s had a triumph.”

Thalberg’s passionate concern for details could make you miss the truth that they were pretty much all he cared about. In the end, his beautiful story solutions are formulaic fixes laid over those details, meant to do little more than the eternal work of cajoling the audience into rooting for the leading players. They didn’t like the hero because he slept with another man’s wife? Make it another man’s sister. They didn’t like the boxer losing the bout and then losing his life? Have him win the bout and then die. In every case, narrative savvy comes to sound suspiciously like allegiance to the obvious formula, only with the obvious formula so thoughtfully considered that it seems to return as original insight. He was a confidence man who truly had confidence in his confidences. “In an industry where so few have the courage of their convictions,” he said, “I saw that if I made them do it my way, they’d never know if their way would have been better.”

It could pay off. Of all the movies he produced, the Clark Gable–Charles Laughton “Mutiny on the Bounty,” from 1935, may best display his virtues, since he made it, intently, while recovering from a heart attack and supervising relatively few other projects. At first, every moment feels studied and false—when two boys on a Portsmouth dock kick their legs, you can pretty much hear the director telling them to do it. Yet soon one is overcome by Charles Laughton’s creepy, convincing portrayal of Captain Bligh’s sadomasochism: most of the first fifteen minutes is taken up with floggings and other shipboard disciplining of half-naked men, shown in detail while Laughton looks on with long-lipped lasciviousness. In fact, sublimated sexual perversity seems an overlooked ingredient in the classy Thalberg formula. Laughton does something similar in another Thalberg production, “The Barretts of Wimpole Street,” in which, as Elizabeth Barrett’s dad, and under Thalberg’s specific guidance, he makes clear his incestuous attraction to his daughter; the lesbian undercurrent in the Garbo vehicle “Queen Christina” was also wholeheartedly encouraged by Thalberg. (“Handled with taste it would give us very interesting scenes,” he

urged.) The films of the Thalberg system that seem most alive now have an erotic core: the “Thin Man” series with Myrna Loy and William Powell, for instance—or, in a campier way, the “Tarzan” movies, which are absurd but feature the still unmatched, and often nearly nude, pairing of Johnny Weissmuller and Maureen O’Sullivan.

In “Mutiny,” the arrival in Tahiti is offered with much less *National Geographic* leering than one would expect, and more dignity than such “exotic” moments were usually given at the time. The provident sensuality of the Polynesian culture is played very straight; there’s even a tender, anthropological turn about the number of words for “look” in Polynesian. The movie is never racist: “The native woman, as you choose to call her,” Gable says of his lover, witheringly, to a British officer. Polynesian civilization is dramatized as superior to the straitened and brutal British one. You might still rather watch Gable unleashed in something as energetic and instinctively, lightheartedly poetic as Frank Capra’s “It Happened One Night,” for which he was “loaned out” to Columbia, but you see as well that Thalberg’s taste and intelligence really were raising the brow of popular entertainment.

Which returns us to Fitzgerald’s novel. The best parts of “The Last Tycoon” concern screenwriting and moviemaking, including the touching sequence about Stahr’s longing to re-create his love for Minna with her look-alike Kathleen. Yet these persuasive quiet bits sit within the larger shape of a book that was meant to be melodramatic and violent. The novel, as Fitzgerald planned it, was supposed to climax with the Mayer and Thalberg characters hiring hit men to murder each other. It seems bizarrely improbable to us now, but it seemed to Fitzgerald the logical outcome of the mix of moguls and mobsters that he had experienced in Hollywood. Indeed, Fitzgerald, who died in 1940, was prescient about the forthcoming tumult—the eventual Hollywood strike mixed, as in his novel, actual Communists with Red-baiting anti-Communists as the Mob looked on and profited.

Part of what startled Fitzgerald’s generation about their studio experience was how near at hand the real bad guys could be. This helps explain the culture shock that runs through Hollywood memoirs by S. J. Perelman and others; they were used to making commercial art, but not to the brutal truths

of American commerce being made so brutal. It would be hard to imagine a novel of the same period in which Bennett Cerf, the Random House co-founder, is about to whack his star editor, Saxe Commins. In Hollywood, the Mob hovered closer to the surface—Robert S. Bader's recent biography of Zeppo Marx tells us that the most harmless-seeming Marx brother actually served as a front for Israel (Icepick Willie) Alderman in a Las Vegas casino deal, and argues that he was engaged in a Hollywood jewelry-heist ring. If Zeppo was mobbed up, who wasn't? Yet, in the end, violence was rare. After Mayer and Thalberg did at last have a bitter falling out—over money, predictably—they eventually wrote each other letters of apology, with the manipulative father-son hysterics of a novel by Philip Roth, not Mario Puzo. The horse's heads are kept for the movies.

The real reason for the enduring Thalberg myth has less to do with any of this than with that perennial idea, which fascinated Fitzgerald as it does us, that there are *secrets* of storytelling, to which a few are privy. Yet good Hollywood films have more or less a single story. Raise the stakes, place insuperable obstacles before the protagonist, have the protagonist somehow surmount them while becoming braver *and* better. What works for Dorothy works for Rocky. In truth, we may follow stories, but we respond to themes; the story is just the tonality in which those themes are played. A producer with story sense may remind the composer that a dominant seventh must resolve to the tonic, that every major has its relative minor. But it's not the chord changes we remember—it's the melody. No one can recall the ins and outs of Salozzo's drug scheme in "The Godfather," but we remember Pacino's face in closeup: we come for the story, stay for the sublimations.

Genres never quite die, but they do change in function as others rise. Going to the movies is now nearly as niche a practice as attending a concert of instrumentalists playing German music. Oscar winners are pleading for the movie theatre in Los Angeles the way European conductors once pleaded for concert halls in Milwaukee. If Thalberg understood one new thing, however, it was that moving pictures, even those crafted by many hands, escape their makers' purpose and resonate on their own. The most memorable scene in Fitzgerald's novel involves Stahr spinning, for a disgruntled British playwright named Boxley, a meaningless scenario. A girl comes into a room:

> “She has two dimes and a nickel—and a cardboard match box. She leaves the nickel on the desk, puts the two dimes back into her purse and takes her black gloves to the stove, opens it and puts them inside . . . just as she lights the match you glance around very suddenly and see that there’s another man in the office, watching every move the girl makes—”
>
> Stahr paused. He picked up his keys and put them in his pocket.
>
> “Go on,” said Boxley smiling. “What happens?”
>
> “I don’t know,” said Stahr. “I was just making pictures.”

The pun lands nicely, making pictures being all he does, but it points to a truth: images fascinate us for their own sake. Christian Marclay’s avant-garde masterpiece, “The Clock,” recently on view at *MOMA*, illustrates the point: it’s made of disconnected moments across a century of film, each clip linked only by the presence of a clock marking a minute of the day. We can watch for hours, needing nothing more than the flow of time and the play of faces. We don’t really care what happens next; we care what happens. As Thalberg understood, we see unspooling images as dreams even when they’re meant as dramas. Watching the best of the M-G-M tradition—“The Wizard of Oz,” “The Band Wagon”—we sense something deeper, more primal, than we find on the page or the stage. We are stirred when reading of flying monkeys, but we are haunted when we see them on a screen. Our imaginations demand wider screens and stranger affects than our lives provide. Making pictures is what our minds do naturally with the fragments of our experience. Of this truth, money, and movies, might still be made. ♦

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

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Poems

The Terminal

By Rick Barot

June 9, 2025

I want a face like that of the man who sets up his small table, chair, and worn typewriter in a corner of the bus terminal in the center of the enormous city and types the letters of the illiterate. They stand next to him, in a posture of awkward confession, carefully giving him the words. They pay him by the sheet, and for the stamp on the envelope, and the envelope. Because they cannot read what is on the page after the letter is finished, they do not know about the mistakes he makes and lets go without correction, or the corrections he makes to their grammar. He has done this for many years, near the man who polishes shoes, near the woman who sells boiled peanuts. His face is as placid as a god's, affixing a category to each letter. Money, infidelity, illness, despair, longing, gossip, grief—the way we identify saints by the things that tortured them.

Rick Barot published his fifth poetry collection, "Moving the Bones," in 2024. He directs the Rainier Writing Workshop, in Tacoma.

Poems

Murmuration

By Rae Armantrout

June 9, 2025

They take shapes
in air
like a scarf trick.

Look, girls, shape
folds over
and pulls through itself

so that
first becomes last
and an end

becomes a fresh start
in an instant.

Their flock is made
of thousands

as our bodies
are made of cells—

but a murmuration's more
elastic. It's wide

open to suggestion.

Rae Armantrout, a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, is the author of "Go Figure," among other books.

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Crossword

The Crossword: Tuesday, June 3, 2025

A moderately challenging puzzle.

By Wyna Liu

June 3, 2025

Wyna Liu, a crossword editor for the New York Times and the writer of its game Connections, began contributing puzzles to The New Yorker in 2020.