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# Goings On

- **Summer Culture Preview**
  By Shauna Lyon, Inkoo Kang, Jillian Steinhauer, Marina Harss, Sheldon Pearce, Fergus McIntosh, Richard Brody, and Helen Shaw | What’s happening this season in TV, movies, music, art, theatre, and dance.

**Goings On**

# Summer Culture Preview

*What's happening this season in TV, movies, music, art, theatre, and dance.*

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

*May 23, 2025*

**Shauna Lyon**
Goings On editor

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

**Whether you are one** with the sun or in love with your A.C. unit, summer has plenty in store for you that doesn't involve a small screen. New York City abounds with alfresco events—including a robust Little Island slate, pop divas at Governor's Ball, and Gustavo Dudamel's New York Philharmonic in parks across the boroughs—as well as plenty of shows offering protection from the elements, from the blockbuster (Vermeer, the ballerina Olga Smirnova, Brad Pitt in "F1 the Movie") to the quirky (P. D. Q. Bach, LaRussell, Taylor Mac adapting Molière). Of course, you have permission to occasionally stay home, if only to check out the new TV shows by Lena Dunham or Raphael Bob-Waksberg (the creator of "BoJack Horseman)," or the latest season of "The Bear." With the longer days and a sultry summer pace, there's plenty of time to soak it all in.

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# Television

*Illustrations by Danny Miller*

**Tech Billionaires, Hawaiian History, Murder Mysteries**

Many of the summer's most anticipated TV projects hail from the medium's leading auteurs and hitmakers. The season kicks off with "Succession" creator Jesse Armstrong's HBO movie **"Mountainhead"** (May 31), in which a quartet of tech billionaires—played by Jason Schwartzman, Steve Carrell, Ramy Youssef, and Cory Michael Smith—watch the world burn down from an isolated, snowy retreat and question their roles and responsibilities in the crisis. That network's former *enfant terrible*, Lena Dunham, makes the transition to Netflix with her latest series, **"Too Much"** (July 10). Dunham, whose series "Girls" has found a steady afterlife, is sure to generate chatter with a semi-autobiographical rom-com that stars the "Hacks" breakout Megan Stalter as a burned-out New Yorker who moves to London and quickly falls for a man she suspects she should run from.

Also on Netflix, the "BoJack Horseman" creator Raphael Bob-Waksberg reunites with that series' beloved production designer, Lisa Hanawalt, for their latest adult animated series, **"Long Story Short"** (Aug. 22). Since the

end of “BoJack,” Bob-Waksberg co-created the underwatched Amazon drama “Undone,” about a woman who transports through time and different realities to explore her family history. The more comedic “Long Story Short” also tells a family saga by leaping back and forth between eras. On FX, the prolific showrunner Noah Hawley propels the audience nearly a century into the future with **“Alien: Earth”** (Aug. 12), a prequel series set in the “Alien” universe that imagines the first encounter between humanity and the titular extraterrestrials.

Jason Momoa, who played Aquaman in the D.C. superhero movies, joins the ranks of series creators with the ambitious historical drama **“Chief of War”** (Aug. 1). Momoa, who shares creator credits with Thomas Pa’a Sibbett, headlines this Apple TV+ miniseries, about Hawaii’s unification and colonization, playing Ka’iana, a real-life eighteenth-century warrior. On the cozier side, the streaming service attempts to recapture the magic of “Ted Lasso” with the Owen Wilson vehicle **“Stick”** (June 4). Wilson plays a Lasso-ian sportsman—a sweet, sad former pro-golfer—who finds a new calling in coaching an amateur (Peter Dager) with extraordinary promise but a tough home life.

As feels right amid the heat and stickiness of summer, there’s no shortage of murder mysteries in the next few months. They come in an array of flavors. Julianne Moore and Sydney Sweeney play it serious as a mother and daughter bound by a secret in the Apple TV+ movie **“Echo Valley”** (June 13), while Shudder/AMC+ serves up killings with a wink in the satirical miniseries **“Hell Motel”** (June 17), in which true-crime aficionados keep turning up dead. It can vie with the fourth season of **“The Bear”** (June 25), on FX and Hulu, for the loudest screaming and the handiest knifework.—*Inkoo Kang*

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# Art

**Vermeer’s Ladies, Hilma af Klint’s Botanicals**

Summer is generally a quiet time in the art world, so it makes sense that the highlights of the season are more low-key gems than splashy blockbusters. Foremost among them is the Drawing Center’s **“In the Medium of Life: The Drawings of Beauford Delaney”** (opening May 30), a survey of the work of a great but still underappreciated artist. You may know of the African American modernist through his longtime friendship with James Baldwin, who once wrote, “I learned about light from Beauford Delaney.” Indeed, the artist’s portraits, landscapes, and abstractions are luminous and buoyant with color—a technical feat as much as an emotional one, as Delaney struggled with poverty, racism, mental illness, and his own homosexuality. This exhibition should go some way toward giving him his due.

The Jewish Museum also revisits a contemporary forebear, with **“Ben Shahn, On Nonconformity”** (May 23). Shahn, a Lithuanian Jew who grew up in Brooklyn, was a lifelong socially committed artist; his best-known work is a series of gouache paintings dramatizing the fate of the Italian-immigrant anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti. This retrospective celebrates the breadth of Shahn’s vision by adding his rarely seen posters, prints, and photographs. Part of what makes Shahn fascinating—and ripe for this moment—is the way he turned his relentless quest for justice into a brushy, almost delicate style that was wholly his own.

From the Jewish Museum, it’s a short walk to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where the annual, much-discussed Costume Institute exhibition is on view. This year’s edition, **“Superfine: Tailoring Black Style,”** takes a long historical look at Black dandyism, with objects ranging from Frederick Douglass’s tailcoat to the fashion journalist André Leon Talley’s caftans. While you’re at the Met, stop by **“Lorna Simpson: Source Notes.”** You

may have seen her pioneering photography-and-text pieces, which focus on the emotional experiences of Black women, but this is the first survey of Simpson's more recent paintings.

Further down Fifth Avenue, the recently renovated Frick Collection is mounting a big exhibition that's actually quite small—the first outing in the museum's new special-exhibitions gallery. **"Vermeer's Love Letters"** (June 18) features just three paintings by the Old Master, all depicting ladies with their maids and with letters of some kind. It's a portal to the domestic lives and social relationships of women in the seventeenth century, which are recurrent themes in Vermeer's œuvre.

There's another intimate powerhouse of a show at the Museum of Modern Art. **"Hilma af Klint: What Stands Behind the Flowers"** displays a never-before-seen portfolio of forty-six botanical drawings by the Swedish pioneer of abstraction, whose fame has continued to grow since a groundbreaking 2018 survey of her work at the Guggenheim. These delicate watercolors feature careful studies accompanied by geometric diagrams and written notes. Viewers who know af Klint for her iconic mystical paintings will discover a different dimension of her practice. For those seeking a more contemporary take on nature—and a rather more fraught one—the International Center of Photography has **"Edward Burtynsky: The Great Acceleration"** (June 19), a survey of the photographer's often awe-inspiring large-format pictures that document humanity's impact on the Earth.

On the hottest days, when you can't bring yourself to look too closely or think too hard, head to the Brooklyn Museum for **"Christian Marclay: Doors"** (June 13). A multimedia artist and composer, Marclay sparked a cultural craze when his film "The Clock" débuted, in 2010; it mesmerized huge crowds with clips of clocks taken from movies and TV and masterfully edited into a twenty-four-hour, real-time montage. "Doors" only runs for an hour, on a loop, but does something similar with its subject, making meaning from pop culture's transitional moments by turning them into the main attraction.—*Jillian Steinhauer*

# Dance

**Ballet Luminaries, Alfresco Dance Parties**

In the summer, we tout the joys of outdoor dance. It is, indeed, magical to watch the sun sink over the Hudson while getting your groove on at a d.j.-led dance party on **Little Island** (Aug. 1-12); or to hold one's tango partner close under the giant disco ball dangling above Lincoln Center Plaza, for one of many themed social-dance events during **Summer for the City** (July 11-Aug. 9).

But, let's be honest, most great dance happens indoors, in temperature-controlled spaces far from mosquitoes. **American Ballet Theatre** moves into the Metropolitan Opera House (June 10-July 19), bringing big ballet spectacles like "Swan Lake" and "Giselle." A good reason to revisit the latter is a rare appearance by the guest artist **Olga Smirnova** (June 21), an extraordinary ballerina, formerly of the Bolshoi, who took a principled stand against the Russian invasion of Ukraine and is now based at the Dutch National Ballet. Another highlight is Christopher Wheeldon's elegant précis of Shakespeare's **"The Winter's Tale"** (July 1-5), in which a horrific deed is expiated, and a daughter is lost and then found.

The Joyce's summer season includes the **Paul Taylor Dance Company** (June 17-22), reviving an intriguing pair of early works that have been reconstructed using archival video and notes. They include "Tablet," from 1960, with colorful costumes (and face paint) by Ellsworth Kelly, for which Pina Bausch was in the original cast. The **Mark Morris Dance Group** (July 15-26) brings two new dances—including "You've Got to Be Modernistic," set to music by the piano innovator James P. Johnson,

reinterpreted by the jazz pianist Ethan Iverson—and “The Muir” (2010), a suite of bittersweet vignettes set to Scottish songs adapted by Beethoven, such as the naïf “Sally in Our Alley.” The Joyce’s summer closes with a program of short works by **Jerome Robbins** (Aug. 12-17), curated by the New York City Ballet luminary **Tiler Peck** and danced by members of A.B.T., N.Y.C.B., and the Paris Opera. Peck herself becomes the first woman to perform the solo “A Suite of Dances,” which was created in 1994, for none other than Baryshnikov.

The country’s oldest summer dance festival, Jacob’s Pillow, returns to the Berkshires (June 25-Aug. 24) with a packed schedule that includes visits by Indigenous Enterprise (dancing outdoors! on July 10), a young troupe vibrantly bringing the ancient dances of Native American nations into the twenty-first century; and the mesmerizing “Touch of RED,” by Shamel Pitts (Aug. 6-10), a sexually fraught pas de deux for two men that draws from boxing, club dance, krump, and Fred and Ginger. It will be performed at the newly rebuilt Doris Duke Theatre, the original structure of which was lost in 2020 to a fire.—*Marina Harss*

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# Contemporary Music

**Pop Savants, Rhiannon Giddens, Weird Al**

Summer gets a jump start with the 2025 edition of the **Governors Ball** (June 6-8), led by the ascendant rap auteur **Tyler, the Creator**; the gutsy pop-rock savant **Olivia Rodrigo**; and the Irish soul man **Hozier.** The season gets in full swing the following week with the jazz harpist **Brandee Younger** at Blue Note (June 9); the chamber-pop innovator **Perfume Genius** on his “Glory” tour, at Brooklyn Paramount (June 10); and the dance-music vet **Crystal Waters,** at 3 Dollar Bill (June 12).

Tyler, the Creator, with four solo shows in July—two at Madison Square Garden (14-15) and two at Barclays Center (17-18)—leads an assorted cast of performers through both arenas. At M.S.G.: the comedy musician **Weird Al Yankovic** (July 12); the belligerent rap duo **Run the Jewels** (July 16); the glitter-pop prima donna **Kesha** (July 23); rock legends **the Who** (Aug.

30); and **Lady Gaga,** a star reborn with the gloriously messy March album, “Mayhem” (Aug. 22-23, 26-27). At Barclays: the tumbling sing-song rapper **Lil Baby,** on his “WHAM” tour (June 18); the R. & B. singer **Keyshia Cole** (July 12); the reconceptualized **Linkin Park,** looking to escape the shadow of the late singer Chester Bennington (July 29); and the Afrobeats trailblazer **Davido** (July 31).

Artists new and old settle into more intimate venues. **U.S. Girls,** the art-pop project of the musician Meghan Remy, celebrates the upcoming album “Scratch It,” out June 20, at Bowery Ballroom (June 25). At Le Poisson Rouge, on June 27, the prolific lyricist **Boldy James** samples his trove of recently released LPs—six this year alone—and, a day later, fixtures of hip-hop’s mixtape economy **Jeezy** and the d.j. **Drama** take on the historic Apollo Theatre. One of the defining New York City bands of the two-thousands, **the Yeah Yeah Yeahs,** returns home for a trio of shows celebrating twenty-five years with reimagined versions of fan favorites (Beacon Theatre; July 28-30). In Brooklyn, the misfits of alternative and indie scenes reign. The alt-rocker Sabrina Teitelbaum, who performs as **Blondshell,** crashes in with the new album “If You Asked for a Picture,” at Brooklyn Steel (June 20). At Pioneer Works, noise music extends to its poles: the droning of **Godspeed You! Black Emperor** (June 25-26) and the experimental sounds of **Deerhoof** (June 28). On July 15 and 16, **Kurt Vile** opens for the **Pixies** at Brooklyn Paramount. Over at Market Hotel, the buoyant Bay Area rapper **LaRussell** continues his mission to “make rap fun again” (July 27).

The season’s outdoor shows are no less bracing. The roots revivalist **Rhiannon Giddens** headlines a free concert for Central Park’s SummerStage (June 25). On July 18, the Canadian dream-pop band **Men I Trust** unveils music from two new albums, “Equus Asinus” and “Equus Caballus,” at Prospect Park Bandshell. A slew of ambitious rock pairings hit the Rooftop at Pier 17: **Primus** with special guest **Ty Segall** (July 21); **Drive-By Truckers** and **Deer Tick,** on the “Charm & Decadence” tour (July 25); and co-headliners **Guster** and the **Mountain Goats** (July 31). And across two sets at Under the K Bridge Park (Aug. 1-2), the English d.j. and producer **Jamie xx** runs through the 2024 album “In Waves,” his first in nearly a decade.—*Sheldon Pearce*

# Classical Music

**Powerhouse Baritones, Orchestras in the Park**

Three months of free and low-cost programming claps back at the idea that anyone with the money, or the sense, flees New York in the summer. At Lincoln Center, a takeover by the **American Modern Opera Company** leads off with “The Comet/Poppea,” a startling mash-up of Monteverdi’s 1643 Roman drama and a 1920 sci-fi short by W. E. B. Du Bois, starring the bass-baritone **Davóne Tines** and the countertenor **Anthony Roth Costanzo,** with new music by the composer George Lewis (June 18-21). In the same precincts, Karen Kamensek conducts the **Lincoln Center Festival Orchestra** in a program that includes Golijov’s “Three Songs for Soprano and Orchestra,” sung by **Gabriella Reyes** (Aug. 1-2); and the string quartet **Brooklyn Rider** reunites with the composer and *kamancheh* player **Kayhan Kalhor** to perform his “Silent City” (Aug. 7-9).

Outdoor concerts make up in ambiance what they lack in acoustics. The Naumburg Orchestral Concerts, in Central Park, host a series of punchy midsize ensembles, starting with **the Knights** (June 10); the **New York Philharmonic,** conducted by Gustavo Dudamel, makes its annual rounds, playing in Central, Van Cortlandt, Prospect, and Cunningham parks (June 4-6, 7). At Little Island, **Roomful of Teeth** premières “The Lights,” a new setting of Ben Lerner poems by Matt Aucoin (Aug. 2-3). The Time:Spans festival brings new-music mainstays including the violinist **Miranda Cuckson** (Aug. 11) and the flautist **Claire Chase** (Aug. 19) to the DiMenna

Center; and the **Chamber Music Society** presents six twenty-dollar concerts at Alice Tully Hall (July).

Still, it's nice to get out of town. Those who prefer their Baroque opera straight up might head to **Caramoor,** in Westchester, for "Pimpinone & Ino" (June 29)—a pairing, by the **Boston Early Music Festival,** of an opera and a cantata by Telemann—or for **Capella Mediterranea's** semi-staged "L'Incoronazione di Poppea" (July 12). The **Bard Music Festival** showcases the neoclassical Czech composer Bohuslav Martinů (Aug. 8-17), and the **Glimmerglass Festival** premières "The House on Mango Street," adapted by Derek Bermel and Sandra Cisneros from Cisneros's much-loved novel (opens July 18). At the **Boston Symphony Orchestra's** summer home in Tanglewood, Massachusetts, the powerhouse baritone **Bryn Terfel** sings Scarpia in a concert performance of "Tosca" (July 19), and **Emanuel Ax** premières John Williams's first piano concerto (July 26). But, if you think travel's a drag, the "Schleptet" by **P. D. Q. Bach**—the comic alter ego of the late composer Peter Schickele, who will be remembered in a memorial concert at the Society for Ethical Culture (June 2)—may be just the thing.—*Fergus McIntosh*

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# Movies

**Action Sequels, the Chill of Alienation**

Summer's usual action-franchise sequels come in a range of formats, including a spinoff that builds its marketing into the title: **"From the World of John Wick: Ballerina"** (June 6), starring Ana de Armas as a dancer who trains to be an assassin and joins the underground network in which the franchise hero (Keanu Reeves) also serves. Anjelica Huston, Gabriel Byrne, Ian McShane, and the late Lance Reddick (in his final role) co-star. There's

a new Clark Kent en route, played by David Corenswet, in James Gunn's **"Superman"** (July 11), co-starring Rachel Brosnahan as Lois Lane and Nicholas Hoult as the villainous Lex Luthor. **"Jurassic World Rebirth"** (July 2), directed by Gareth Edwards, stars Scarlett Johansson, Mahershala Ali, and Jonathan Bailey, and involves a pharmaceutical company's secret machinations to acquire dinosaur DNA. Pedro Pascal, Vanessa Kirby, Joseph Quinn, and Ebon Moss-Bachrach headline **"The Fantastic Four: First Steps"** (July 25), directed by Matt Shakman.

Sequels arrive in other genres, too; zombie films are represented by **"28 Years Later"** (June 20), about the apocalyptic results of a lab-leaked virus; it stars Jodie Comer and Aaron Taylor-Johnson, and reunites the director Danny Boyle and the screenwriter Alex Garland, from the first film in the cycle. In **"M3GAN 2.0"** (June 27), the first installment's A.I.-equipped doll with a violent streak is now harnessed for military uses; Allison Williams and Violet McGraw return in the lead roles, and Gerard Johnstone again directs. Comedy is represented with **"The Naked Gun"** (Aug. 1)—back after thirty-one years—directed by Akiva Schaffer and starring Liam Neeson as Lt. Frank -Drebin, Jr., the son of the earlier entries' hapless detective. **"Freakier Friday"** (Aug. 8), directed by Nisha Ganatra, brings back Jamie Lee Curtis and Lindsay Lohan for a body-switching plot that now involves a third generation, portrayed by Julia Butters.

High-stakes competition makes for high drama in **"F1 the Movie"** (June 27), directed by Joseph Kosinski, starring Brad Pitt as a Formula One driver who is forced out of action by a grave accident and is recruited to train a younger driver (Damson Idris). Albert Serra's documentary **"Afternoons of Solitude"** (June 27) follows the Peruvian bullfighter Andrés Roca Rey over the course of three years of corridas. **"Wild Diamond"** (July 11), the first feature directed by Agathe Riedinger, stars Malou Khebizi as a young woman in a small French town who struggles fiercely to be cast in a reality-TV show.

The summer of love is heralded by Celine Song's second feature, **"Materialists"** (June 13), a romantic comedy, starring Dakota Johnson, Pedro Pascal, and Chris Evans, about a matchmaker who is torn between a rich man and a poor one. Johnson returns in **"Splitsville"** (Aug. 22), the

story of two married couples, one facing divorce, the other practicing polyamory; it's directed by Michael Angelo Covino, who co-stars with his co-screenwriter, Kyle Marvin, and Adria Arjona. **"Oh, Hi!"** (July 25) is also a rom-com, directed by Sophie Brooks, about a couple (Molly Gordon and Logan Lerman) whose weekend road trip veers into breakup territory and leads to an act of revenge.

Chills of alienation thread through upcoming releases, as in Neo Sora's dystopian drama **"Happyend"** (June 20), set in Tokyo in the near future, in which the friendship between two high-school students is put to the test by the threat of an earthquake and a repressive regime of surveillance. Eva Victor wrote, directed, and stars in **"Sorry, Baby"** (June 27), a drama about a professor who is attempting to cope with the trauma of a sexual assault that occurred at the college where she studied and where she teaches; Naomi Ackie co-stars. **"Eddington"** (July 18), directed by Ari Aster, is set in mid-2020, in a New Mexico town where a liberal mayor (Pedro Pascal) and a conservative sheriff (Joaquin Phoenix) clash amid conflicting views of the *COVID* pandemic and the murder of George Floyd; Emma Stone and Austin Butler co-star.—*Richard Brody*

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# The Theatre

**The Delacorte Returns, Tennessee on Ice**

When people refer to the theatre "season," they usually mean the combined fall-winter-spring, when most Tony Award-eligible productions open. But there's a secret, better season: summer. The fairest months still boast their share of Hollywood glitz, and so Jean Smart stars in Jamie Wax's **"Call Me Izzy,"** at Studio 54 (previews begin May 24); John Krasinski plays **"Angry Alan,"** in Penelope Skinner's dissection of getting lost online, at the Seaview Studio (May 23); and Helena Bonham Carter's disembodied voice narrates the immersive **"Viola's Room,"** at the Shed (June 17).

Summer is primarily precious, though, for its playwrights. Donald Margulies's marital meditation **"Lunar Eclipse"** comes to Second Stage (through June 22); Taylor Mac converts Molière's "Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme" into **"Prosperous Fools,"** at Theatre for a New Audience (June 1); Jordan Tannahill débuts a metatheatrical queer-futurist manifesto, **"Prince Faggot"** (Playwrights Horizons; May 30); Abby Rosebrock's twisted rom-com **"Lowcountry"** occupies the Atlantic (June 4); Emmanuelle Mattana's high-school-debate satire **"Trophy Boys"** pops up at MCC (June 5); and Charles Randolph-Wright's Afghanistan romance **"Duke and Roya"** plays the Lortel (June 10). New-play connoisseurs never miss Clubbed Thumb's Summerworks festival, which includes Mara

Nelson-Greenberg's **"Not Not Jane's,"** (June 2) and Ro Reddick's **"Cold War Choir Practice"** (June 19). July is quiet, apart from Crystal Skillman's gonzo magic play **"Open"** at the WP (July 8), but August has Sophie McIntosh's abuse drama **"Road Kills"** at the Paradise Factory (Aug. 15) and Romina Paula's **"The Whole of Time"** at the Brick (Aug. 22).

Musicals mostly skip the dog days. But Ken Davenport and AnnMarie Milazzo mount their bio-musical of Joy Mangano, the inventor of a self-wringing mop, **"Joy,"** at the Laura Pels (June 21); Laurence O'Keefe and Kevin Murphy's **"Heathers,"** from 2014, returns (New World Stages; June 22); and, on Broadway, the unkillable ABBA jukebox lark **"Mamma Mia!"** returns to the Winter Garden (Aug. 2). "Here," as someone Swedish once sang, "I go again."

Outside, you have more options. Little Island's gorgeous amphitheatre hosts a number of buzzy productions, including Kate Tarker's new take on John Gay's "The Beggar's Opera," **"The Counterfeit Opera"** (May 29-June 15), Lee Breuer and Bob Telson's **"The Gospel at Colonus**" (July 8-26), and a communal musical celebration called **"The Tune-Up,"** by Suzan-Lori Parks (July 30-Aug. 3). The Public's Shakespeare in the Park resumes in the newly renovated Delacorte, which hosts **"Twelfth Night,"** starring the swoon-worthy Lupita Nyong'o and Sandra Oh, directed by Saheem Ali. Other alfresco offerings include Will Power's reworking of a Trojan War tale, **"Memnon,"** for the Classical Theatre of Harlem, in Marcus Garvey Park (July 5-27), and the brand-new performing-arts series **Sugar, Sugar!,** in Brooklyn's Domino Park (June 4-28), which hosts the thrilling experimental artists Nile Harris, Lena Engelstein, Lisa Fagan, and Tiresias.

The nearby Hudson Valley Shakespeare—a jaunt on the Metro-North to Garrison, New York—rotates Thornton Wilder's jolly farce (and "Hello, Dolly!" inspiration) **"The Matchmaker"** and Shakespeare's **"The Comedy of Errors"** (June 6-Aug. 3); Dave Malloy's song cycle about technological addiction **"Octet"** ends their summer on a meditative note (Aug. 11-Sept. 7). A slightly longer trip will get you to Massachusetts for the Williamstown Theatre Festival (July 17-Aug. 3), which presents Pamela Anderson in Tennessee Williams's surreal **"Camino Real"**; William Jackson Harper and

Chris Messina in Williams's prison drama **"Not About Nightingales";** a new piece from the festival's creative director, Jeremy O. Harris, called **"Spirit of the People"**; and the director Will Davis's tribute to Williams, choreographed for ice-skaters. Maybe save that last one for the summer's hottest day—and sit as close to the rink as possible.—*Helen Shaw*

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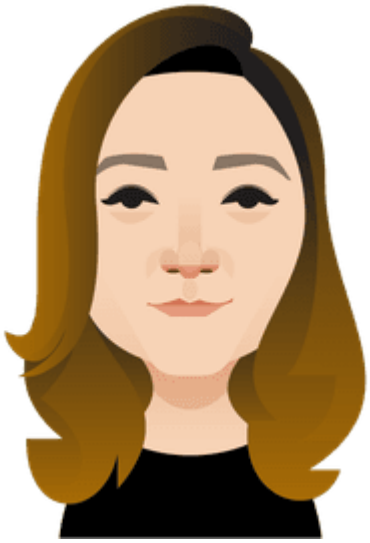
## P.S. Good stuff on the Internet:

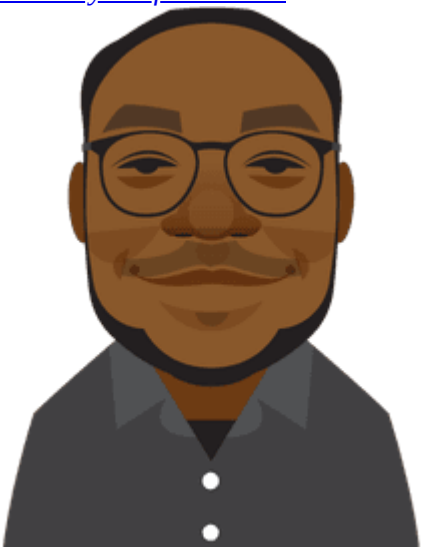
- *Carving digital initials*
- *Rich man, poor man, Canadian*
- *Obscure islands*

*Shauna Lyon is the editor of Goings On.*



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

*Jillian Steinhauer received a 2023 Rabkin Prize for visual-arts writing. She teaches in the Journalism and Design program at the New School.*
*Marina Harss has been contributing dance coverage to The New Yorker since 2004. She is the author of "The Boy from Kyiv: Alexei Ratmansky's Life in Ballet."*



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

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# The Talk of the Town

- **A Tumultuous Spring Semester Finally Comes to a Close**
  By Jelani Cobb | The biggest mistake that some universities have made is to presume that the White House is operating in good faith. It is not.
- **Knicks in Six? Ask Fran Lebowitz, Alison Roman, and Spike Lee**
  By Zach Helfand | Before Game One against the Pacers, predictions rolled in from some under-the-radar fans: Peter Gelb, George Santos, Julian Casablancas, and a clarinettist at the New York Philharmonic.
- **Inspired by “The Crucible,” Miniatures, and “Harriet the Spy”**
  By Sarah Larson | Kimberly Belflower, the writer of the Tony-nominated play “John Proctor Is the Villain,” starring Sadie Sink, admires doll houses and pays tribute to a childhood hero.
- **Should Men Even Have Friends?**
  By Dan Greene | Andrew DeYoung, the writer-director of the cringe comedy “Friendship,” talks about working with his real-life buddies Tim Robinson and Paul Rudd, and the sinkhole of male bonding.
- **Annie DiRusso Sings and Tells**
  By Amanda Petrusich | The twenty-five-year-old singer-songwriter sets her mind on finding a good substitute for the F-word (“smash”? “bone”?) before an appearance on “Kimmel.”

**Comment**

# A Tumultuous Spring Semester Finally Comes to a Close

The biggest mistake that some universities have made is to presume that the White House is operating in good faith. It is not.

**By Jelani Cobb**

May 25, 2025

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

On a morning in May, Mordecai Johnson, the president of Howard University, testified before a congressional subcommittee about the prevalence of far-left ideas among his faculty and students. Given that the federal government has historically provided funding for the university's budget, through an annual allocation, Johnson had a difficult choice to make. He could respond to representatives' questions with a defense of the free exchange of ideas (and risk them holding up the allocation) or take the safer path of conceding their criticisms and promising to work to insure that the thinking on campus better aligned with putatively American values.

Johnson’s dilemma will be familiar to anyone who has observed higher education in this country during the harrowing academic year that is now coming to a close. Spring is typically a joyous time on campus, when graduating students celebrate having overcome whatever challenges they may have faced along the way. This month, administrators and faculty are likely equally relieved to have made it through. That, in fact, has been the prevailing sentiment since December of 2023, when Republicans in the House of Representatives—citing harassment and, in some cases, even the physical assault of Jewish students on campuses, in the wake of the October 7th attacks in Israel—began summoning university presidents to appear before committees, where they were berated and belittled. Those appearances prefaced the subsequent resignations of the leaders of Harvard University, Columbia University, and the University of Pennsylvania, all of them women. Johnson’s appearance, however, occurred not in the current wave of federal overreach but in May of 1935, amid a feverish preoccupation with communism in academia. The hearings of these presidents are separated by nearly a century of history, yet their quandaries are strikingly similar.

Academic freedom in the United States has found itself periodically under siege. In March, Ellen Schrecker, a historian and the author of “No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities,” spoke via Zoom to deans at Columbia (including myself) about government repression on college campuses in the nineteen-fifties. Schrecker, who has taught at both Columbia and Harvard and retired as a professor at Yeshiva University, emphasized the severity of the current climate. “I’ve studied McCarthyism’s impact on higher education for fifty years,” she said. “What’s happening now is worse.” This is in part because universities today are far more beholden to the federal government. The explosive expansion of higher education that began after the Second World War was underwritten by federal dollars. So members of Congress, and President Trump, too, have leverage that demagogues who preceded them could only dream of.

In March, the Trump Administration threatened to cancel fifty-one million dollars in federal grants to Columbia. Days later, that amount was increased to four hundred million, and the university received a letter demanding a

series of changes to internal operations as a prerequisite for discussions about restoring the funding. The university, which also saw four of its students targeted by the Administration for their political views—one, Mahmoud Khalil, remains in detention—has largely complied. But, on Thursday, the Administration declared that Columbia had acted with "deliberate indifference" toward the harassment of Jewish students, violating civil-rights law.

In April, an even more stringent letter was sent to Harvard, which responded by suing over its demands in federal court. The Administration halted 2.2 billion dollars in grants to the university, then another four hundred and fifty million, and has threatened to rescind the school's tax-exempt status. Last Thursday, the Department of Homeland Security took the extraordinary step of terminating Harvard's certification to enroll international students; Harvard is suing the D.H.S., and a federal judge has halted the department's effort. The Administration had also announced that it would investigate sixty institutions and initiated seemingly arbitrary cuts at schools such as Johns Hopkins, which had eight hundred million dollars in grants rescinded. A resource-sharing pact among the eighteen universities of the Big Ten Conference has been proposed, in order to provide mutual support should any of them be targeted.

The Administration has relied on two pretexts to justify these incursions. It has used the language of rooting out antisemitism to rationalize actions that at best have tangential connections to that cause. The rescinded grants have been clustered in areas that include climate-change research or that use terms such as "diversity" in proposals. It further strains credulity to argue that curtailing a university's ability to conduct cancer or Alzheimer's research is an appropriate strategy to correct alleged religious bias. Meanwhile, NPR reported last month that three officials in the government have "close ties to antisemitic extremists." This news dovetails with previous events, such as Trump welcoming the prominent antisemites Nick Fuentes and Kanye West to his home for dinner.

The incursions also take place amid a conservative insistence on greater "viewpoint diversity." This push comes just as measures enacted to protect other kinds of diversity are being overturned. The Supreme Court's 1978

Bakke decision invalidated racial quotas at the University of California, but held that affirmative action was constitutional, and experts have long since acknowledged that racial diversity fosters a wider range of viewpoints. The threats to rescind Harvard's tax-exempt status represent a similar inversion of history: the government first used the tactic decades ago against institutions such as Bob Jones University, a conservative Christian school that banned interracial couples on campus. The biggest mistake that some universities have made in responding to the White House has been to presume that it is operating in good faith. It is not. Efforts to engage with it have yielded escalating punishments and leadership turnover but little by way of concession.

Mordecai Johnson was a Black man leading an academic institution during Jim Crow when representatives from an almost entirely white Congress asked him whether professors with radical sympathies should be allowed to teach at Howard. Yet he firmly said that he would sooner shut down his university than allow anyone to dictate what its students could or could not learn. The principle at play—that without free inquiry there is no basis for a university to exist—still applies. ♦

*Jelani Cobb, a staff writer at The New Yorker and the dean of the Columbia Journalism School, is an editor, with David Remnick, of "The Matter of Black Lives," an anthology on race in America.*

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**Prognostication Dept.**

# Knicks in Six? Ask Fran Lebowitz, Alison Roman, and Spike Lee

Before Game One against the Pacers, predictions rolled in from some under-the-radar fans: Peter Gelb, George Santos, Julian Casablancas, and a clarinettist at the New York Philharmonic.

**By Zach Helfand**

May 24, 2025

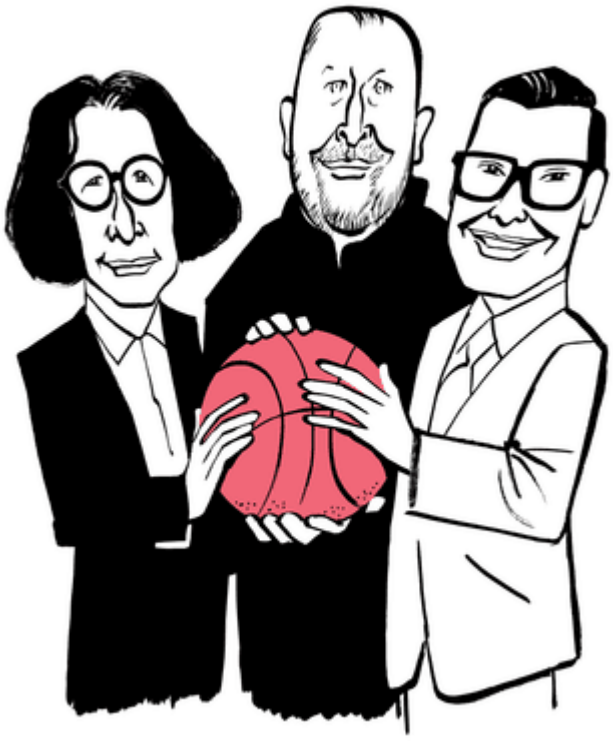

*Illustration by João Fazenda*

At the beginning of the N.B.A.’s Eastern Conference Finals, Knicks fans of all varieties were ready once again to risk emotional ruin:

“Lawd have mercy we are goin’ to da promise land. Us in six.”—Spike Lee, film director.

“For the next month, I am a sincere convert, bowing before the greatness of these Knicks. The Knicks are simply the most dynamic, passionate team left standing. This is a team any sports fan has to love. Knicks in six.”—Bill de Blasio, former mayor, Celtics fan.

“I was at both series when the Knicks won their championships in 1970 and ’73. Particularly the first time they won, with the lineup of Frazier and Willis Reed and DeBusschere and Bradley and Dick Barnett, that was the most selfless, brilliant team. I get that same sense of camaraderie with this Knicks team. That’s what’s been missing. Obviously, talent, too. But they’ve never really meshed in the way this team has. The key to the series is the tempo. If the Knicks are able to control the tempo, and if they hit their shots, they should win in seven games.”—Peter Gelb, general manager, Metropolitan Opera.

“Knicks in six. Unless Reggie Miller comes out of retirement, then Knicks in seven.”—Alison Roman, food writer.

“If the Knicks spread the ball around like the Pacers do and guard the three-point line, we should be good. Great matchup for Karl-Anthony Towns. Knicks in seven.”—Matthew Collier, special-education teacher, George Westinghouse Career and Technical Education High School, Brooklyn.

“They can’t stop Jalen Brunson. Knicks in five!”—Lynaea, fourteen, student, Westinghouse High.

“Ferocious beats slick. Knicks in seven.”—Donald Moss, psychoanalyst.

“Knicks in five. I was at the Reggie Miller game with my late dad. I haven’t uttered the words ‘safe lead’ since.”—Anthony Weiner, politician.

“Not only is it playoff season, it’s Manhattanhenge season. On May 28th at 8:13 *P.M.*, the day before Game Five, the sun will set perfectly framed on one side by M.S.G. on Thirty-fourth Street. We’re hoping this is when the city will get cosmically charged up and the Eastern Conference series will

turn in our favor. Knicks in six.”—Jackie Faherty, astrophysicist, American Museum of Natural History.

“With Jalen Brunson’s clutch scoring, K.A.T. from both the three-point line and the paint, Bridges and O.G. anchoring both ends of the floor, Mitch dominating the offensive boards, McBride contributing on both offense and defense off the bench, and Josh Hart’s non-stop hustle, this team has the grit and the chemistry. The Knicks will take this series in six games.”—Julie Eichner, manager, Union Square Cafe.

“I’m rooting for Jalen Brunson to become the greatest Knick ever. I say they win it all . . . next year. Pacers in four.”—Julian Casablancas, singer.

“These teams are strange mirrors—each reflecting what the other dreads. The Garden’s going to shake its roof off, but the series will hinge on the breaks of the game: some second-quarter scramble, some mid-range miss, some road game no one wants to remember. Knicks in seven.”—Rowan Ricardo Phillips, poet.

“As New Yorkers, we eat adversity for breakfast. Brunson, O.G., and Hart will find a way to pull it out. I believe we will make it to the finals for the first time since ’99. Knicks in six.”—Benjamin Adler, associate principal clarinet, New York Philharmonic.

“The Knicks vs. the Pacers

or

NY vs. Indiana

We already won.”—Fran Lebowitz, writer.

“The Pacers have a really fast-paced game, but I think Jalen Brunson’s the real deal. My prediction is the Knicks in six.”—Sunil Rao, director of interventional cardiology, N.Y.U. Langone.

“I’ve had season tickets since the beginning of the beautiful ’69-’70 season. We had seats in the tenth row beneath the basket. The game started and the

referee handed the ball to DeBusschere, and I remember looking down at the court and thinking, *There's no place in the whole world I'd rather be*. I hope the Knicks are going to win, but I don't want to jinx it."—Joe Crowley, ninety-one, grandfather.

"My first game was when I was six. One time I got to talk to Jalen Brunson. I asked, 'Does Thibodeau ever smile?' And he laughed and said, 'Very rarely, but yes, sometimes.' After I talked to him, I felt, like, everything. I was running around. My eyes got watery. I got way more flexible for some reason. I was sweating. It's gonna be close, but, I mean, if you were, like, who's better, Brunson or Haliburton—what would you say? Brunson. I think in Game Six the Knicks are gonna win."—Calvin Crowley, eight and a half, grandson.

"As a lifelong Knicks fan, this is a first, to see them win anything. I believe they will perform as they have been but will lose at the end, keeping with their decades-long track record. They'll do six hard-fought games."—George Santos, politician. ♦

*Zach Helfand is a staff writer at The New Yorker.*

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**The Boards**

# Inspired by “The Crucible,” Miniatures, and “Harriet the Spy”

Kimberly Belflower, the writer of the Tony-nominated play “John Proctor Is the Villain,” starring Sadie Sink, admires doll houses and pays tribute to a childhood hero.

**By Sarah Larson**

May 26, 2025

*Illustration by João Fazenda*

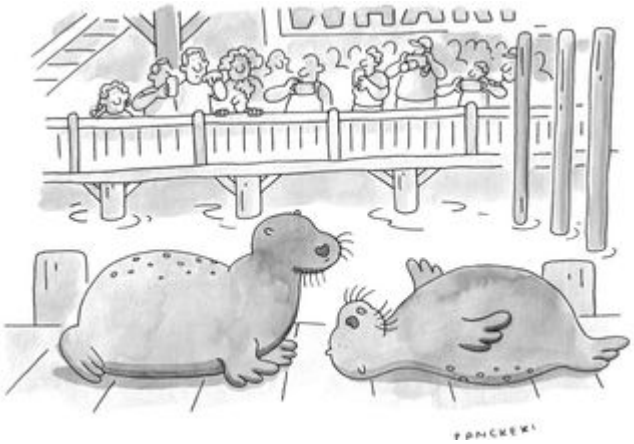
The searing, funny “John Proctor Is the Villain,” which has been nominated for seven Tonys, including Best Play, centers on five boisterously articulate teen girls reading “The Crucible” in an honors English class in rural Georgia; a key moment features cathartic dancing to “Green Light,” by Lorde. The rare non-musical Broadway show that inspires rapturous teen

hollering, “John Proctor” can seem to generate a giddy, righteous energy loop among the actors, the much discussed Salem-witch-trial girls, and the audience. Offstage, young fans flock to the play’s author, Kimberly Belflower, hoping to connect. (“She’s our Tennessee Williams,” Natasha Katz, the play’s lighting designer, observed one night, watching a line form.) On a recent sunny day, Belflower, who is thirty-seven, headed to a favorite old haunt: Tiny Doll House, a shop on East Seventy-eighth Street. “I think my girlhood lives, like, really large and feels very, very potent and clear to me,” she said. She’s tall, with glasses, springy brown hair, and a quality of joyful expansiveness. She wore a patterned blue skirt and top and old-school Adidases. Admiring a little dining-room set, she said, “I love tiny things so, so, so much!” and hiked up her skirt. “Not to immediately show off my leg tattoo, but this is my childhood doll house, with my kitten on it,” she said. “Literally right after we got her, she was climbing around the doll-house porch. I was, like, ‘I’m going to explode. This is the greatest thing I’ve ever seen.’ ”

Belflower, who grew up in Georgia, lives in Atlanta with her partner, Dan Stemmerman, and teaches playwriting at Emory. She’s been in Manhattan for the play’s duration—her longest stint in the city since her twenties, when she had day jobs (bookstore clerk, nanny), connected with fellow-artists, and saw as much theatre as she could. The doll-house shop reminded her of Annie Baker’s play “John,” which features a miniatures-loving protagonist: “She says, like, ‘When there’s too much small stuff I get so excited that I start to grind my teeth.’ That’s how I feel.” Belflower loves set models, too. Her play takes place in a school “built in the fifties, when ‘The Crucible’ premièred—there are these layers of time in the classroom.”

Belflower’s other tattoos depict Ramona Quimby, Matilda, and Harriet the Spy. After admiring more miniatures (“Teen-agers!” “Mice!”), she bought a tiny basket and a tiny cake, then walked to Harriet the Spy’s hangout, Carl Schurz Park. Growing up, Belflower had assumed that Louise Fitzhugh, who wrote and illustrated “Harriet the Spy,” was a New Yorker. She later learned that Fitzhugh was a Southerner (no wonder Harriet loved tomato sandwiches—“Such a Southern thing,” Belflower said) who’d had a lonely childhood but found happiness in New York. Harriet played a game called Town in the dirt; Belflower, while her brother climbed trees, “would be

holding a rock and a stick, making them talk to each other.” Belflower’s home town is much like the one in “John Proctor”: it had two stoplights, no bookstore, twelve Baptist churches, and an emphasis on “purity culture.” Despite good friends and a supportive family, she, too, felt like a misfit. Reading and theatre helped. (She based Beth, the play’s apologizing overachiever, on her younger self.)



*“I just wish we could nude sunbathe one time without the paparazzi showing up.”*
*Cartoon by Drew Panckeri*

Belflower eventually got an M.F.A. in playwriting at U.T. Austin. “There’s a poetry to the way that teen-age girls talk,” she said, walking along the park’s esplanade. “The repetitions and the apologies and the ‘like’s and the ‘um’s and the kind of, like, finding the circuitous path to the thing you want to say.” There’s a timelessness in that speech, she went on, as well as “the cultural references and finding yourself in the things you’re consuming.” Behind her, a teen-age boy and girl were having a sprinting contest. “Fast like the Flash!” the boy yelled. Belflower found a plaque honoring Harriet the Spy and beamed at it, taking a picture.

Motifs of ecstatic teen dancing appear in both “The Crucible” and “John Proctor.” “There is something so ancient and primal with women and dancing,” Belflower said; in high school, she and her friends made up dances all the time. An “Aha!” moment came when she first heard “Green Light,” in her office at U.T. “It just immediately did something wild to me,” she said. She listened on repeat, then went to teach a class and had her students listen to it. “Structurally, it’s doing something so interesting—rebelling against these established rules and the math of pop songs, both

sonically and lyrically," she said. The song evokes what it's like "to go through something painful or dramatic and get out on the other side and be, like, 'Oh, I'm going to make something from that.' "

At the Tonys, Belflower's youth will be reflected in several forms. Two close friends from her early New York era, Andrew Durand and Taylor Trensch, are fellow-nominees; her date is her "theatre best friend" from high school. "We made a pact when we were teen-agers in his bedroom in Cleveland, Georgia, that if one of us ever got nominated for a Tony we would bring each other," she said, laughing. "And so—it's happening!" ♦

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

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**The Pictures**

# Should Men Even Have Friends?

Andrew DeYoung, the writer-director of the cringe comedy “Friendship,” talks about working with his real-life buddies Tim Robinson and Paul Rudd, and the sinkhole of male bonding.

**By Dan Greene**

May 26, 2025

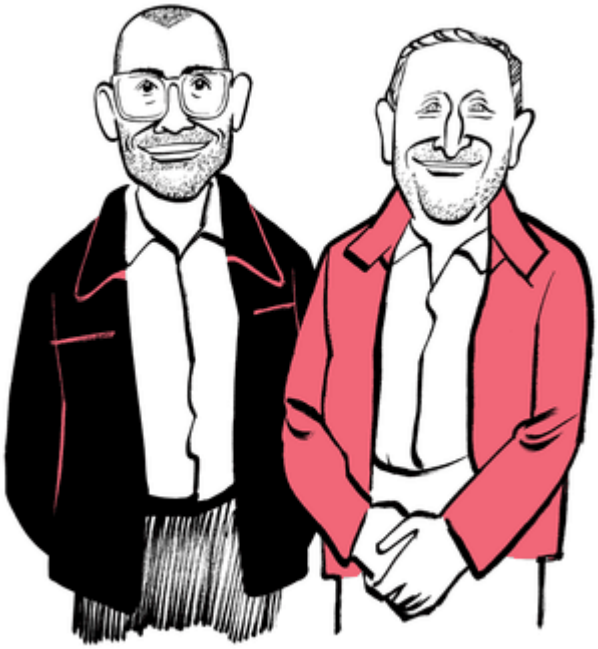

*Illustration by João Fazenda*

Hollywood loves edifying tales of male friendship. Woody saves Buzz. Harold and Kumar go to White Castle. Bill and Ted excel on their adventure. For his début feature, a dark comedy with “Friendship” as its very title, the writer and director Andrew DeYoung wanted to manage expectations. The film’s tagline: “Men shouldn’t have friends.” “It’s funny and dumb, and it’s not cute,” he explained the other day, in Greenpoint. “I was, like, ‘We *can’t* let this be cute.’ ”

DeYoung, wearing clear-framed glasses and a navy button-down over a T-shirt, was spending a beautiful afternoon indoors, at Sunshine Laundromat and Pinball. In “Friendship,” Tim Robinson stars as the sort of pariah familiar to fans of his Netflix series, “I Think You Should Leave”—socially maladroit and desperate, prone to cataclysm. His character, Craig, lives a staid suburban life until he befriends a magnetically cool neighbor named Austin, played by Paul Rudd. They bond the ways men often do: beer, cigs, trespassing. But Austin soon calls it all off, and Craig’s crash-out doesn’t stop until the credits roll. “It’s so painful when someone has the maturity to be direct,” DeYoung said. “We’re so avoidant as a culture that it’s shocking when someone is clearly, like: ‘*No*.’ And I respect the hell out of it.”

A few years ago, in a similar social situation, DeYoung got no such clarity. After befriending a colleague on a project, he hit the guy up to hang out. The guy blew him off. “I saw myself kind of spinning out,” DeYoung said. Once he got a grip, he wrote a screenplay inspired by the experience. He realized that Robinson, an actual friend, whom he’d met at the wedding of the comedians Aidy Bryant and Conner O’Malley, had to play the lead. “Tim’s very alive,” DeYoung said. “There are some performers, like Chris Farley, who just pierce through your defenses.”

In the arcade, young men hunched over machines ringing with beeps and dings, and DeYoung considered the so-called crisis of masculinity. “It feels like the fascistic turn we’re experiencing now is a response to the invitation to vulnerability in the culture,” he said. “We’re in a hyper-stimulated world, so it makes sense to go to the right, because it gives you at least a sense of control. Ideally, Craig embodies some of that rage of not knowing how to connect, yet deeply wanting to.”

He approached a “Jaws” machine, which was equipped with a miniature pop-out shark. “This is sick,” he said, sliding quarters into its slot and eying a dripping container of chum. “We gotta get the blood bucket,” he said. No dice. The talk turned to superhero franchises. DeYoung isn’t much of a fan. (In “Friendship,” Craig suggests seeing a new Marvel film—“It’s supposed to be *nuts*”—with an enthusiasm that reads as damning.) “I mean, *growing up*, those things were awesome,” DeYoung said.

A trio of twentysomething dudes—two in Hawaiian shirts, one in all black—walked in, a lone girl in tow. The all-black one took up a position in front of a Metallica machine. One of the others mimed palming the girl's rear while the third snapped a photo. In DeYoung's film, Craig tries, and fails, to keep up with his new pal's social circle. "It's so lonely when you're invited to or around a friend group that knows each other well and how quickly they're just doing their thing, like they're speaking another language," DeYoung said. "Even if they're nice and trying to bring you in, there's an alienating quality to it."

He went on, "Friend groups go on weekend trips together that destroy things. It's all guys you're used to spending four hours at a time with, and then you go away for three days. Especially if there's alcohol, the wheels start to come off. It's a different kind of pressure. The masks start to slip."

The twentysomethings nearby had started to compare dating-app experiences. "I was, like, 'So you were born after 9/11?' " one said. "Gen Z girls don't like when you ask that."

Before "Friendship," DeYoung, who is based in L.A., established himself as a director of TV shows ("PEN15," "The Other Two," "Dave"). He had just wrapped his second week of directing Robinson's upcoming HBO series, "The Chair Company." DeYoung was concerned, before "Friendship," that working with Robinson might affect their relationship. "I never talked to him directly about it," he said. "Staying honest and transparent with each other, with the stress, you make it out even closer." Generally, he said, his friendships develop in less pressured circumstances. "Just going over, talking about movies, talking shit," he said. "No adventures. That's all I want: just fuckin' around and hanging out." ♦

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

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Singer-Songwriter Dept.

# Annie DiRusso Sings and Tells

The twenty-five-year-old singer-songwriter sets her mind on finding a good substitute for the F-word (“smash”? “bone”?) before an appearance on “Kimmel.”

**By Amanda Petrusich**

May 26, 2025


*Illustration by João Fazenda*

The singer and guitarist Annie DiRusso was recently back in Croton-on-Hudson, the sleepy Hudson River town where she was brought up. DiRusso, who is twenty-five, was preparing for an appearance on “Jimmy Kimmel Live!” and trying to rework the lyrics to “Legs,” a new single, so that it might be suitable for network television.

Much of the pleasure of DiRusso's songwriting is in its frankness. "My favorite music is always when I'm, like, *Wow, I've had that exact thought before, but never in my life would I have said it out loud*," she said. She was leaning on a picnic table near the New Croton Dam, a three-hundred-foot, hand-hewn structure that, upon its completion, in 1906, was the tallest dam in the world. She had on a faded black off-the-shoulder top and wore her hair in choppy bangs. "I wouldn't say I'm very confrontational in my everyday life," she said, watching sheets of water cascade over granite. "I think I'm honest, but maybe not to this degree. The songs are my chance to figure out how I'm feeling."

That afternoon, she was having trouble finding a satisfying substitute for the word "fuck" to sing on Kimmel. "Legs" is a propulsive and dissonant pop-punk song about an intoxicating romantic entanglement—a situationship, to use the parlance of the era—that might undo her sanity. "We kiss like we're talking," DiRusso sings, her voice clear yet full of longing. The guitars scrape; the chorus pummels:

> I am loosening my grip
> I don't give a shit
> If we fuck or we date
> I'm not making myself sick

The new word needed bite; at the very least, it needed to be funny. She mulled the virtues of "smash," and briefly considered "bone," before deciding to punt on the first chorus ("I don't give aaaaaa / If we f— or we date," she would sing) and submit to being bleeped on the second.

DiRusso, whose début album, "Super Pedestrian," was released in March, grew up listening to Taylor Swift, One Direction, and Paramore, although, on "Legs," it's hard not to hear echoes of Liz Phair's "Fuck and Run," a sad-girl banger from 1993. ("And what ever happened to a boyfriend? / The kind of guy who makes love cause he's in it?")

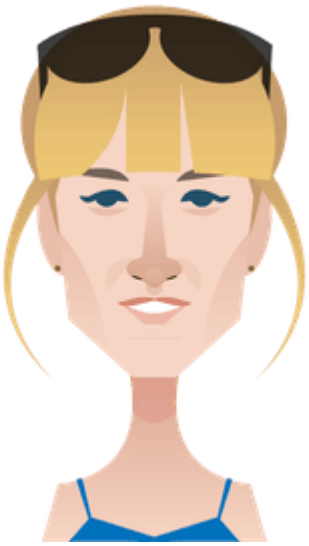
Lately, she has been working on how to balance her private life with the confessional nature of her work. "I'm dating right now," she said. "I just kind of started seeing someone, ish. Second date yesterday." She identifies as queer. "From the moment I started making music, everyone assumed I

was gay," she said. "Even though I'm using male pronouns all the time! People were still, like, 'That's such a gay song. It's about unrequited love and a specific type of yearning.' I didn't really understand that."

DiRusso is also trying to figure out whether it might be advantageous to self-censor in her lyrics. "I don't want to do that," she said. "I've talked to all my songwriter friends to get their takes on this. Everyone's, like, 'There's really no answer of where the line is.' Some people are just ruthless about it, which I can really respect, because it's a song—it doesn't belong to anyone. But then I've had moments where I'm, like, *Really*? *Is this going to be my life*? *I'm going to write revealing or bitchy things about people that I love, and then release them*? *And disconnect from my relationships*?"

After leaving the dam, she stopped in at the Blue Pig, an ice-cream shop where she worked when she was fourteen. She ducked behind the counter. "I feel very comfortable back here," she said, scooping up a few samples. She used her paychecks to buy an electric guitar. "I loved interacting with customers," she said. "It's a very social job. Let's just say the tips were rollin' if I was behind the dipping cabinet!"

Her parents, who live around the corner, have been supportive of her career, even when she sings about the more toothsome details of her personal life. "My dad only cares when I say 'fuck.' There's something happening in his brain that doesn't let him understand how much I'm talking about sex," she said. "My mom will be, like, 'Oh, my God!' She'll call things out in front of my dad. 'You're talking about giving head!' I can see her relating it to her own ex-boyfriends. My dad just pretends to zone out." The tiresome boys in DiRusso's songs—with their insecurities and their misery—seem to be timeless. "Yeah," she said, with a laugh. "Everyone's got a guy." ♦



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

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# Reporting & Essays

- **Returning to the Scene of My Brutal Rape**
  By Sarah Beckwith | By the canal, I felt an overwhelming and visceral sense that I had stumbled upon the place where a man had raped me at knifepoint forty years earlier.
- **The Radical Development of an Entirely New Painkiller**
  By Rivka Galchen | The opioid crisis has made it even more urgent to come up with novel approaches to treating suffering. Finally there's something effective.
- **Donald Trump's Politics of Plunder**
  By Evan Osnos | The greed of the new Administration has galvanized America's aspiring oligarchs—and their opponents.
- **Patti LuPone Is Done with Broadway—and Almost Everything Else**
  By Michael Schulman | The seventy-six-year-old theatre diva, famed and feared for her salty bravado, dishes on Hal Prince, her non-friendship with Audra McDonald, and sexy but dumb New York Rangers.

**Personal History**

# Returning to the Scene of My Brutal Rape

By the canal, I felt an overwhelming and visceral sense that I had stumbled upon the place where a man had raped me at knifepoint forty years earlier.

**By Sarah Beckwith**

May 26, 2025

*Illustration by Isabel Seliger*

A woman is running. In the path, a man appears as if from nowhere. He is masked and he holds a knife. What are her choices? On one side is the canal and on the other a high, impassable fence, aluminum and concrete. She can run back to where she came from, but he will be faster and quicker. Perhaps she will be lucky, and some cyclist or walker will show up and the man might vanish as quickly as he had appeared. She calculates her chances of surviving. At this moment, they don't seem good. Perhaps he wants to rape her without taking her life? Perhaps her desire to live will lead her to undergo whatever the man wants, hoping it will be short of death. Would a

struggle, an attempt to escape, make him angry enough to wield that knife to stab or slash her? Her rapid thoughts and instincts are in the hope of life. The base tone of them all: a man who wants to rape her could be careless enough of her to kill her. In this, she turns out to be right, not just psychologically and ethically but as a matter of history.

She, her. I am avoiding the first person. I, me. *I* was raped. This happened to *me*.

Almost forty years after I was raped, I happened upon the place where it occurred. I was on a walk. Some genius loci, some presentiment told me that I was very near, if not at, a place my body remembered.

I was raped at knifepoint along a canal towpath in the East End of London in the summer of 1984. I did not realize until recently—prompted by that strange spirit of place to do my own research—that the man who raped me was likely to be John Francis Duffy, who may have raped as many as seventy women at knifepoint across London from 1982 to 1986. Some of these attacks were perpetrated with David Mulcahy, with whom he formed a duo that became known as the Railway Killers. Duffy and Mulcahy raped and murdered Alison Day on December 29, 1985, near Hackney Wick, within walking distance of where I had been raped eighteen months earlier. In 1986, they murdered Maartje Tamboezer in Horsley, near Guildford, and Anne Lock in Brookmans Park, Hertfordshire.

“Two bodies with one brain, soulmates,” is how one intended victim described the attackers’ silent choreography of nods and glances and mutual understanding. It was an eerie distortion of Aristotle’s definition of friendship: “one soul dwelling in two bodies.” Duffy raped on his own; Mulcahy apparently did not. For the murders, it was always the two of them. This was an aspect that fascinated forensic psychologists. Their double act had begun at secondary school, in North London, where Mulcahy protected the diminutive Duffy from bullies. From the beginning, they apprenticed themselves in cruelty. It moved them to hilarity to club a hedgehog to death. They stole cars and went on joyrides; they got a kick out of spooking couples on Hampstead Heath, and cornering girls to grope and grab them. When did the inexorable escalation happen? It is not clear exactly when they expanded their repertoire of violation.

Duffy's mode of domination was rape. Mulcahy was reportedly more excited by the extremes of fear that he could instill in his victims. He prolonged their terror by striking them, marching them to other locations before raping them; he enjoyed watching them perform dangerous feats he would improvise. He forced Alison Day to walk across a narrow outer ledge of an iron bridge over a canal. He sought to control Duffy, too, by deepening his involvement in cruelty. Often, the two men gagged the women. One looked out, the other raped; they decided who should go first with a toss of a coin. They wore balaclavas and carried knives and used various methods to distract and overpower their victims. They chose spots near railway lines whose edgelands, tracks, and exit paths they had meticulously researched. According to Duffy's later testimony, Mulcahy talked about the "god-like feeling" he had when he committed murder. They developed a crude method of covering up their crimes: they would ask their victims to wipe themselves down with tissues, which the pair later burned. They both brought boxes of Swan Vestas matches, and Mulcahy stuck strips of tape inside his jacket to silence their victims. After murdering the women, they sometimes set fire to them to destroy "evidence."

It is possible that Mulcahy pushed Duffy into murder to deepen his complicity. On December 29, 1985, Mulcahy used Duffy's first name in front of Alison Day. They might have feared she could identify them, but Mulcahy's need for violence and terror had intensified, too, so he may not have needed any reason to escalate things. "We are in it together. We have got to do this together," Duffy later said, recalling Mulcahy's exhortations, his insistence. Both of them twisted the tourniquet that Mulcahy had made from Alison Day's blouse before they cast her into the water.

Operation *HART*—short for Harley's Area Rape Team, after Superintendent Ian Harley, who led it—an inquiry into a series of rapes that had been taking place across London, was disbanded in 1983, because of a lack of progress and funds. It was reconstituted, the following year, when investigators discovered more connections among the cases. In time, John Hurst, a police officer in Guildford who was investigating the murder of Maartje Tamboezer, and Charlie Farquhar, an officer in Romford investigating the murder of Alison Day, realized that there were similarities in the murders which had not been revealed to the press, and that both

murders could be linked to the rapes. DNA testing was in its infancy; indeed, it was first used in a criminal case in 1986, in England. Computer databases were not yet widely shared among local authorities.

For a long time, I did not realize my part in the narrative. The decision to report the rape was taken out of my hands. The man on the towpath had grabbed the keys to my flat and told me that he knew where I lived. Less than a hundred yards on, around a bend in the path, there was a lockkeeper's cottage, and the lockkeeper saw me as I walked in shock toward the cottage. He asked me what was wrong. When I told him, he rushed off to search for the man, and his wife ushered me into their home. Despite my protestations—the rapist had said he could find me—the lockkeeper phoned the police, and I was taken to the Bow Road Police Station. I made a statement. They took swabs from all the entrances to my body; they took my clothes as evidence. Will I get them back? I asked forlornly.

But after that I heard nothing from the police for two years, until I was called to an identification parade, or police lineup, in Guildford, in November, 1986. By then, I was living and working in a new city. Two coppers in an unmarked car, cheery, burly, aftershave competing, picked me up from my home and drove me to a police station a hundred and fifty-odd miles away. I had little to go on—the balaclava my rapist had worn had largely concealed him. But I hoped that confronting him in the lineup might prompt some identifying memory: I had seen his inflamed face, scarred by old acne, flushed with excitement, when, in an unbearably incongruous gesture, he had momentarily pulled up his mask to kiss me.

I remembered his cheap trainers, white but dirty. I remembered the smell of him. He smelled as if he came from an institution—a rancid undertone and the harsh detergents used to bleach it out. Afterward, I realized it might have been the smell of unlaundered poverty. Perhaps I would smell him again and so single him out. I trusted that I would simply know when I stood in front of him, for in those days no glass screened the men from the women who hoped to recognize them. You met in the same space and breathed the same air again. I remember the distant curiosity of some of the men in the lineup; they seemed so casually divorced from our fears and our

hopes. To my chagrin and frustration, I failed to identify the man who raped me, though I learned later that he was there.

Much later, when I read Simon Farquhar's book "A Dangerous Place: The Story of the Railway Murders," I discovered that five women in the Guildford lineup that I was part of had identified John Francis Duffy. A fourteen-year-old girl, face streaming with tears, had gone right up to him and pointed at him.

Before the identification parade, they put all the raped women together in a room. I can't recall exact numbers, but the room was full. I later read that twenty-seven women had been linked by Operation *HART*. Some of us had been raped by one man; others by two men acting together. The numbers cannot communicate what happened to this woman, to that woman, to each and every one. But they show the importunity, the scale. Even after one of the most extensive investigations in modern English history, the police can't know for certain exactly how many women the pair raped. Duffy kept thirty-seven sets of keys, perhaps including mine, as souvenirs.

I am now astonished that they gathered us all in the same room before we were called, one by one, to attempt our identifications, but if they had not done so I would never have heard a story that I have held in my heart ever since. I remember her as a young woman, and since I myself was young then—twenty-five—she must have been several years younger than me. She had been dragged and pushed by two men into a copse on Hampstead Heath. As she entered the dark woods, where the ground, I imagine, was sloped and full of tangled tree roots, she tripped and began to fall. The smaller man was the one holding her and pulling her along. But, as she tripped, he supported her and stopped her from falling. The young woman said that the small one then argued with the big man and persuaded him to let her go. I like to think that for a transforming moment he had experienced himself in a different way. He was a savior, not a rapist, and he could not harm her.


*“Do you prefer to have something stuck in your teeth for the rest of the day or something disappointingly bland?”*
*Cartoon by Sarah Kempa*

After the lineup, I once more heard nothing. I was not given the man’s name or told whether he had been caught. I did not read the red-top papers that covered Duffy’s trial or see the more discreet notices in the broadsheet papers, so I had no idea that the man I had been called in to identify was tried at the Old Bailey—or, as it’s formally known, the Central Criminal Court of England and Wales—and convicted and sentenced to life, in 1988, for five rapes and for the murders of Maartje Tamboezer and Alison Day. (He was acquitted of the rape and murder of Anne Lock.) In 1989, I left Britain and took a job in the United States, teaching medieval English literature, still knowing nothing about his arrest, trial, and conviction.

Here is how I discovered my part in this story. In September, 2023, on a visit to the U.K., I was walking the Capital Ring, an ingeniously composed seventy-eight-mile route circumnavigating London’s center, with my niece. The trail traverses parks, woodlands, pastures, and cemeteries. It’s an urban walk, of course—passing great Victorian terraces, the suburbs spawned by the Tube lines of the thirties and forties, the docklands hugging the Thames and its arteries, once the commercial hub of maritime traffic and seaborne trade. Inside the Woolwich Foot Tunnel, the Sweet Thames, singing softly, flows over and over you. The route casually encompasses the palatial follies of rich men from long ago and the built hallucinations of more recent

architects—bulbous, curvy, fantastic. It incorporates sudden drops into the uncanny silence of the waterways and canals with their locks, joins, and channels, with their cold smells, coots, and dragonflies.

We walked the ring in stages, as the weather and our schedules permitted. We had taken to linking two or three sections together for treks that lasted a leisurely day. On this particular morning, we planned to begin in Stoke Newington, in North London, and head south and east via Hackney Wick; these eight or so miles skirt the canalized section of the River Lea, as it branches out into the myriad channels that make up the area known as Bow Backs. There's a complex lock system—Bow Locks—that links the industrial trading routes with the Lea. The warehouses that line the canals are being converted into luxury flats and artist studios. Any barges are now kept for love or for living. In the summer, open-air pubs are lively with Pimm's-fuelled laughter. The path passes the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park on its left, part of the massive reconstruction of the entire area undertaken, at the millennium, for the London Olympics of 2012. Anish Kapoor and Cecil Balmond's Orbit pushes into the East London skyline, with its deliberate counterpoint of wobble and structure.

I've reconstructed the exact geography retrospectively. At the time, my niece was reading the maps, and I had no idea where, exactly, I was. I knew only that I was vaguely near my former home in Bow. Our walk was a saunter, a delightful, wayward, exploratory street haunting, to use Virginia Woolf's term for the adventure and discovery of walking in the city. We emerge from our houses, she says, and "the shell-like covering which our souls have secreted to house themselves, to make for themselves a shape distinct from others, is broken, and there is left of all of these wrinkles and roughnesses a central oyster of perceptiveness, an enormous eye."

It is this deeply pleasurable way of being that the rapist interrupts. And now your enormous eye must be watchful, forever on the alert; the exhilarating self-forgetfulness that allows the world to reveal itself to you has disappeared. Now the place you are in might obscure a threat, a menace you must hold in mind. The world is no longer yours to behold or to share in. The philosopher Susan Brison, in her book "Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self," writes that after suffering a nearly fatal assault and

rape, in France, in 1990, she felt as if she had a “perceptual deficit”: a “hazardous lack of eyes in the back of my head.”

My niece and I had turned off a stretch of path, and we were stopping to readjust our packs, to have a drink of water by the scrubby borders of the canal. I felt an overwhelming and visceral sense—through my stomach, through my skin—that I had stumbled upon the place where a man had raped me. I kept this feeling to myself, saying nothing. The feeling was too large, too unmanageable. I did not yet know what to do with it, how to answer the body’s unmistakable call.

After that day, I started to read about the rapes in London in the eighties. It was only then that I began to suspect that my rapist was John Francis Duffy. Of everything I read, Simon Farquhar’s book was the most detailed account of the Railway Killers and the most sensitive to their victims. Farquhar is the son of Charlie Farquhar, who investigated Alison Day’s murder. His book was written after the death of his father, in 2012, and is dedicated to him.

I learned how Duffy was caught. He had a history of domestic violence—he’d assaulted his ex-wife and her boyfriend—that had placed him on a list of sex offenders. It was also known that he, like one of the rapists, had Type A blood and was a secretor, meaning his blood-type antigens were secreted into bodily fluids such as saliva, tears, mucus, and semen; he was the one-thousand-five-hundred-and-ninety-fourth such man on the police’s list. A rape in Mill Hill provided the police with a decent photofit likeness of him. (I remembered the process of working with the photofit artist myself, as I tried to piece together a composite face from assorted photographs of eyes and noses and hairlines, a task the balaclava had made hopeless.) After another rape, of a fourteen-year-old near Watford Junction, Duffy was put under surveillance. The police arrested him on suspicion of murder. Questioning proved futile, so investigators searched for hard evidence. In his home, the police discovered a large collection of knives, a manual containing instructions on garrotting, and a box of Swan Vestas matches stuffed with blue tissues used for cleaning up after the messy business of rape. In his parents’ house, investigators also found a ball of string like the type that had been used in the murder of Maartje Tamboezer.

The police knew that there was a second man, and they strongly suspected Mulcahy. He was arrested on several occasions but released each time for lack of forensic evidence and eyewitness testimony, and because of alibis he'd fabricated. Duffy did not reveal his partner's part in the rapes and murders, and Mulcahy somehow escaped identification by his victims. In the mid-nineties, a detective named Les Bolland, who had worked on Anne Lock's murder inquiry for the Hertfordshire police, decided to pay Duffy a visit at Whitemoor, a Category A men's prison in Cambridgeshire. After his arrest, Duffy had faked amnesia and sought asylum in a psychiatric hospital, where doctors prevented the police from interrogating him, but the pretense of the amnesia was exposed at the trial by his ex-wife and a friend. He did, apparently, experience some real amnesia during the first years of his imprisonment. In Bolland's judgment, Duffy was fearful of unlocking the past and thus naming and confronting his acts. The visit prompted nightmares for Duffy. He dreamed repeatedly, according to later notes taken by Jenny Cutler, the head of forensic psychology at Whitemoor, of a girl being pursued along a towpath. That is Simon Farquhar's locution: "being pursued." Where is Duffy in this dream logic? And where are we, the ones he pursued along the edgelands?

The Railway Killers called their carefully planned pursuits of women "hunting." It was, as Duffy said in court, "a bit of a joke, a bit of a game." They would play Michael Jackson's song "Thriller" to get in the mood. "It's close to midnight / And something evil's lurking in the dark," it begins, and it ends with histrionic, manic laughter. This was the prelude to their chase. They planned the locations as entrapments, making sure there were no easy exits or escape routes.

Duffy's dreams were nightmares, chronic, insufferable: there must have been at least an unconscious identification with the "prey." The nightmares disturbed him enough that he requested psychiatric help. Cutler spoke to him throughout a period of two years. During this time, he confessed to more rapes. "There is a lot of self-hate for what I have done," he later testified. "I feel a lot of guilt. I have raped and killed young ladies. I accept that. I am not trying to shift the blame. I did what I did." The accents of remorse are elliptical, inarticulate. Is his strangely courteous "ladies" his

stab at rendering some respect back to his victims, some odd belated courtesy owed and owned?

Duffy had been told that he would never be released from prison because of what the police described as the “extreme nature of the offences.” He began talking to Cutler about his accomplice. She asked him where his other half was serving his term, and Duffy revealed Mulcahy’s identity and said that he was still at large.

The police brought Mulcahy in for questioning about a string of rapes, similar to those of the Railway Killers, that had been taking place along the same canal paths. Mulcahy, aware that he had no involvement in these, willingly gave the police a hair sample, not suspecting that it would be used to connect him with the attacks of the eighties. Investigators located the clothing of two eighteen-year-old Danish au pairs who’d been raped on Hampstead Heath by two men in 1984. One set of trousers and underwear matched Mulcahy’s DNA, and the other matched Duffy’s, corroborating his confession.

Taken to the original crime scenes, Duffy verified the details of the crimes with alarming precision. Police legwork broke Mulcahy’s alibis, and advances in technology could now reveal his fingerprints on tape used to cover the mouths of his victims. The police could not find evidence of other rapes or murders committed by Mulcahy in the eleven years since Duffy was imprisoned. Duffy was tried again, in 1999, for seventeen further crimes he’d confessed to. (He’d also admitted his guilt in the murder of Anne Lock but escaped justice because of the double-jeopardy rule.) Mulcahy’s trial took place in 2000, and Duffy was a key witness for the prosecution. In February, 2001, Mulcahy was convicted on fifteen counts, which included the murders of Alison Day, Maartje Tamboezer, and Anne Lock. He, too, was sentenced to life in prison.

Stunned, I drew a time chart and fitted my rape into their prolific pattern and into the time line of the police investigation. I mourned the three women they had killed. I understood how close my fate was to theirs.

In 1984, my body healed from its invasion quite quickly. The wounds closed; the bruising lessened and then disappeared. But I was left with other

aftereffects of my encounter with unfathomable badness, or—in the bald precision of Judge Michael Hyam, who presided over Mulcahy's trial —"desolating wickedness."

Shortly after I was raped, I came across a description of a man sitting on a woman he had just raped, so that he could more easily tie his shoelaces. My rapist did not sit on me to tie his shoelaces. But the man sitting on the woman as if she were a log lodged in my mind as the most fitting, the most accurate image for the peculiar experience of being of so little account. Indeed, it almost seemed as if it had happened to me, so precisely did it encapsulate the rapist's indifference and oblivion to my being. But it is euphemistic to call the rapist's attitude indifferent or oblivious unless these words also capture the horror of being nothinged. My rapist was not merely oblivious to me, to the idea that I had a life to lead as had he. My degradation was not a side effect of his assault but its point. It was this sheer ability to ruin and despoil, to decide whether I should live or die, that made him feel he could take the place of God. Such force was as intoxicating to him as it was annihilating to me. To be raped is to confront this particular evil, a staining, ineradicable harm that is not reducible to physical, or even psychological, trauma.

When I was raped, I was a graduate student at King's College London, writing a dissertation on medieval women mystics who in channelling God's voice found their own, forming the first women's literature in English. After the rape, I immersed myself in ethical and philosophical investigations of sexual violence. I wanted my experience answered or rendered, the moral harm of rape named and acknowledged. Forty years later, I returned with some urgency to this task.

A predominant definition of rape is sex without consent. Susan Brison points out that the notion of violation is built into our understanding of the acts of murder and theft, but this understanding of violation fails when rape is defined as sex without consent. Did you consent to be punched in the jaw? Did you consent to have your company embezzled? Is theft gift-giving minus consent, she asks, or is murder assisted suicide minus consent? Why in rape alone is violation not utterly embedded in how we define it?

It is as if our linguistic resources veer from a panicked vengefulness to a melodramatic sentimentality, or to a shallow and terrible misprision. Let's think about those two words—"consent" and "sex"—so central to rape's legal lexicon in a philosophical context. They rely on an entrenched idea of a concertedly autonomous individual and the rights that accrue to him or her. In acting without my "consent," my rapist has "denied me my autonomy"; he has "violated my rights." This is anemic, bathetic. He did not violate my rights; he violated me. The language assumes an altogether contractual understanding of the relations among human beings, as if an identity were intact or secure outside our encounters. "Soul murder" comes the closest to my understanding of the harm inflicted. It was the term used by Daniel Paul Schreber, the subject of a case study by Freud, and, again, by Leonard Shengold in his searing 1989 book on child abuse. I prefer to say that my rapist was soul-blind. He could not see my soul in my body. And the human body, as the twentieth-century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein has said, is the best picture of the human soul.

As for *sex* without consent, no raped woman would approximate anything in the experience of rape to sex. Did I "have sex" with the rapist without my consent? Did he "have sex" with me? This ought to sound parodic. Under what understanding of sex could this even be conceivable, let alone the gold standard for judicial definition? The rapist invades our bodies against the background and possibilities of our loves, against the intimate, trusting, and wondrous ways we may welcome passionate embraces, rapture, the chance of betrayal, tears, and laughter. The rapist forces himself into us, onto us. But we do not share anything with the rapist. I remember the revolting incongruence of my rapist wishing to kiss me as if we were lovers. He did not "have sex" with me. "The problem is that the injury of rape lies in the meaning of the act to its victim," the legal scholar Catharine A. MacKinnon writes, "but the standard for its criminality lies in the meaning of the act to its assailant."

The body is a moral form, as the philosopher J. M. Bernstein has articulated, because of our dependence on one another to sustain our sense of humanity. The violent rapist understands this; it is how he undoes us. He rams through the integrity of our bodies and souls. It's as though the rapist is saying, "There is no inside of you I cannot reach."

My rapist's hint that he knew where I lived and his theft of the keys to my home were intended to terrorize me. Who knows whether I would have reported the rape at all if the lockkeeper had not done so? The attempt to silence is a way of cutting off connection with others, thus cutting off the very possibility of acknowledgment.

How was I acknowledged in the immediate aftermath? I was raped by a stranger, and I was believed. I never suffered the failure to credit my words which besets so many women raped by men they know. The doctor who swabbed me for evidence of the rape discussed the thesis I was then writing, as if—amazingly—I had something to say. The first woman from a rape crisis center I talked with on the phone the night of my rape was a lawyer and also a rape survivor. I learned from her that it was possible to go on, that there was life after rape. But a second woman, whom I visited in person at the rape crisis center, wanted me to talk about the rape in a way that I could not. I was so matter-of-fact, she said. She kept pressing me: What did I actually feel? So much, but nothing I could or yet wanted to say, and not now to her. I had to accept, I recall her saying, that all men were rapists. In 1975, Susan Brownmiller had given rape a history in her feminist classic, "Against Our Will": rape is "nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear." I had read it, too; I understood where this canard came from in the feminist literature, but as an act of counselling it was a disaster. I do not blame the volunteer: perhaps this mantra protected her from her own history of harm.

As for me, I had to learn—I wanted to learn—that not all men were rapists. The rapist's mask made him Everyman. He could have been anybody. He had said he knew where I lived. He saw me, but I did not see him. I did not know who he was. Was he the man staring at me so intently on the Tube or the one I imagined was following me home?

In the summer of 2024, troubled by the memory of my rape, I turned to the work of Simone Weil. Born in Paris in 1909, to Jewish parents, Weil was a philosopher, an activist, and a kind of ascetic-mystic who revered Greek tragedy and Homer. She wrote aphoristically and with astonishing originality until dying, in 1943, at the age of thirty-four, of cardiac failure brought on, in part, by her extreme and principled asceticism. In Weil's

work, I found a language for the kind of harm done to me. In her essay “La Personne et le Sacré” (or “Human Personality” in its English translation), written in London during the Second World War, she shows the limitations of the language of rights without the prior concept of obligation. The tone in which rights are demanded is, she claims, a tone of contention and haggling, and it smacks of commerce. “Suppose,” she writes, “the devil were bargaining for the soul of some poor wretch, and someone, moved by pity, should step in and say to the devil: ‘It is a shame for you to bid so low; the commodity is worth at least twice as much.’ ”

The precious value of a life, she contends, is not derived from a man’s personality; it is “him, this man, no more and no less.” She poses a question: If I feel like poking out someone’s eyes, as the Duke of Cornwall does to the Duke of Gloucester in “King Lear,” what stops me? Her reply is breathtaking: “What would stay [my hand] is the knowledge that if someone were to put out his eyes, his soul would be lacerated by the thought that harm was being done to him.” What is sacred in every human being is a natural expectation we have from infancy that good and not evil will be done to us: “There is nothing sacred except the good and what pertains to the good.” Yet this profound and almost childlike presumption is not sounded in the language of rights; it is, in fact, obscured in it.

When we perceive sacrilege—as we might, she says, in the debasing, demoralizing conditions of factory labor—our recognition of it cannot be fully voiced in the clamoring for rights but, rather, might be heard and seen in the revolt of the whole being. Think here, Weil says, of a young girl whom someone is trying to force into a brothel. Her fierce and desperate cry is one of hope coming from the bottom of the heart: it is the impulse and outrage of her being. It expresses pure affront and sacrilege. That cry —“Why has someone done evil to me?”—Weil says, is never wrong.


*“I’ll be summering in my room—see you in September.”*
*Cartoon by Barbara Smaller*

In sociological and legal parlance, there is little talk of evil. Perhaps it appears in the sentencing words of judges, in their shocked tones and occasional outrage. It is exclaimed with barely concealed delight in the mock scandal of the tabloids—yet there it merely tames and sentimentalizes. But Weil’s invocation of evil exactly identifies a major part of the moral harm of rape: “When harm is done to a man, real evil enters into him; not merely pain and suffering, but the actual horror of evil.” Of course I want to add (to cry out!), “When harm is done to a woman, real evil enters into her . . . the actual horror of evil.” Out of an evil encounter, I starved for the good, and when I found it articulated in Weil’s work I thought it beautiful.

My rapist, before he attacked me, asked me the time. It was one reason I suspected it had been Duffy; I later read that this was one of his signatures. What time is it? He could not possibly have wanted to know: it was a distraction technique, incongruously paired with the knife he wielded in front of me, the mask that obscured all but his glittering eyes. I have no idea whether the rape took minutes or hours, because there was no knowing the time. Then, when I found myself back at the scene of the crime, it was as if time present and time past, as T. S. Eliot puts it in “Four Quartets,” were “both perhaps present in time future / And time future contained in time past.”

When the young woman tripped on Hampstead Heath, when the smaller man—Duffy, I now believe—saved her from her fall, he was acting in

response to her rapid grasping of his hand, out of her natural and unreasoned expectation that he would prevent the harm of her falling. He was acting, if you like, by an instinct he could not or did not abort. For that moment, he was aware of her as a fellow-human, one who might be cherished and protected, one who could suffer as he, too, could. No wonder he could not rape her. This momentary pause, this saving interruption of the headlong, breathless trajectory of rape or murder, admitted a kind of compassion, pity, even tenderness, halting injustice in its tracks. “Force” is Weil’s word for “the ability to turn a human being into a thing.” Force is what can kill, or what can and sometimes does not kill but “hangs, poised and ready,” over the head of the creature it can kill. Here, that force, intoxicating for the one who imagines he wields it, crushing for those who must submit to it, was poised and paused. The girl’s hope that she might not be harmed, her wordless appeal to him, was answered, showing the depth of the expectation of goodness and the naturalness of the response.

I kept remembering this story as I braced myself to research the Railway Killers. I kept feeling that we cannot even discern the shape of evil without a primordial good, without that natural sense of justice we are born with.

Because my body had so urgently reminded me of what had happened in that spot by the canal, I wished to locate it—in space, in time, in the long reach of its impact. I decided to return there, not accidentally but purposefully. What did I want? I had found a place in a devastating story which was surely a reprieve—I was not killed! I lived! But the sheer luck and chance of my escape brought into focus how close I was to not existing.

In the many years since the rape, I had driven over Bow numerous times on the large flyover, or overpass, built in the late sixties, but I had not been back to Bow itself. Now I pored over maps to figure out the longitude and latitude at which I was raped.

My home in the eighties was in a block of former council flats managed by a housing co-op. The flyover whizzed nearby. Bow was run-down then. The population had fallen since the local docks had closed: St Katharine Docks, the London Docks, the Surrey Docks, and, finally, the Royal Docks, in 1981, a year or so before I arrived. Large companies and small and dirty riverside businesses shut up shop, leaving scrub and wasteland. The area

was pocked with the post-industrial ruins of deserted warehouses and lots. It had the vacancy of departed life.

The few remaining Victorian terraces were squats or derelict. The block I lived in was riven with racial violence. I remember a recent arrival from Pakistan drunkenly berating himself as he hit his own back: “I’m a bloody Paki.” Welcome to England. One night, Fred, one of the few white residents left on the estate, would chase his partner, Mary; the next night, after heavy drinking at the pub, it would be Mary chasing Fred, a knife in hand, through the courtyard and along the balconies that linked the flats. And then there was us—the earnest students, some of us fresh from uni, some trying to model a different kind of community.

In the summer of 2024, though, you can buy a cortado and a treat for your dog at the little coffee shop by the Tube station’s exit. I’d had the naïve idea that I would be able to return to the Bow Road Police Station to talk to someone who might help me locate my police report. Naturally, the station was closed to the public. A phone number sent a caller straight to a central phone-triage service. Did I know my case number? The kindly people on the other end had probably not yet been born when I was raped.

There were more dead ends as I tried to find the path to the canal. I crossed a huge intersection under the flyover, picking my way through the traffic, navigating the massive pillars of the overpass, where, rumor has it, one of the victims of the Kray twins, notorious gangsters of the nineteen-fifties and sixties, is immured in the concrete. But, once across, I kept finding that the pathways led to new construction sites where entry was prohibited. I could see the interlocking waterways from the street but could not get onto the towpath.

A woman walked by, and I told her I used to live here but could not remember how to reach the canal. Of course I concealed the reason for my journey, the confused palpitations and self-doubts that made me feel that I was half mad to return. Oh, yes, it’s really nice down there, she said, you’ll see some barges and a little café farther on. It all sounded so pleasantly normal. Nevertheless, as I found the concealed pathway and the bridge she had pointed out, I felt invisible walls closing in on me. There was indeed a fence on my right side and the canal to the left, and the path wove under the

railway lines that crisscrossed overhead. But my outsized feelings of enclosure and entrapment were the tunnel vision of a forty-year-old fear crashing through my long and studied insulation. Sounds at my back startled me—a cyclist, a couple of walkers. I was having difficulty remembering whether the rapist had appeared before me or behind me.

Eventually, I saw a man polishing the brass handles on his impressively kitted-out barge. Is there a lock near here? Yes, it is just around the corner. I was almost at the place. A few yards on, I stood in front of a map of the waterways: the natural and the man-made, the soft-banked river and the even edges of the canal. And there, right there, staring stupidly at the map, hiding my face from casual passersby, I wept for my unraped self: hopeful, expectant, ardent for encounter, anticipating adventure, only not this one. My tears surprised me—they were utterly involuntary. Later on, I thought of Milton's Adam and Eve leaving Eden in "Paradise Lost": "Some natural tears they dropped, but wiped them soon." I was once not raped, and then I had to accept that I was.

Not far from the map, two young men were raising money for the Canal & River Trust. They showed me what the waterways looked like before the Trust cleaned them up. The pictures captured the lifeless water full of debris and silt, stagnant, clotted and scabbed with rubbish. As if to explain my tears, I blurted out my story to these young strangers: once, a long time ago, I was raped nearby. What was I thinking? One of the men—who can blame him—was flummoxed. What was the etiquette for this meeting? But the other man, with saving compassion and gentle gravity, said, "Oh, I am so sorry that happened to you." It was perfect, and it was enough.

But where was the lockkeeper's cottage? I could not see it. I asked them whether there had ever been a lockkeeper's house here. Yes, they said, it's fenced off now and privately owned, behind that tall hedgerow—you can take a peek through the chink in the gate. Some things loom larger and some diminish in memory. There it was, more august and grand than I remembered, but tangibly there. I gave an extravagant donation to the Canal & River Trust and asked them the way to Hackney Wick station. It was time to leave, to go back from the underworld of my history to the life I have made since then.

After that journey, I had a dream. In 1923, William Butler Yeats composed a savage sonnet called “Leda and the Swan.” In the poem, Zeus, taking the form of a swan, grasps with “his indifferent beak” Leda, the Spartan queen, and rapes her, his “great wings beating still / Above the staggering girl.” He holds “her helpless breast upon his breast.” In my dream, Zeus’ powerful webbed hind limbs hold me tightly, and my helpless breast beats against his strong light rib cage. I am Leda. But then, in the wondrous logic of dream, still held by Zeus, I am the swan. My oily feathers slick his grip. I slip away so forcefully, so rapidly, that he is left clutching the empty air. I dive deep down into water as it rushes past my impervious body, and now I am flying into the sky as the drops condense around me. I am nothing solid but disseminated into the great and welcoming world around me. ♦

*Sarah Beckwith is the author of “Shakespeare and Loss: The Late, Great Tragedies.”*

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**Annals of Medicine**

# The Radical Development of an Entirely New Painkiller

The opioid crisis has made it even more urgent to come up with novel approaches to treating suffering. Finally there’s something effective.

**By Rivka Galchen**

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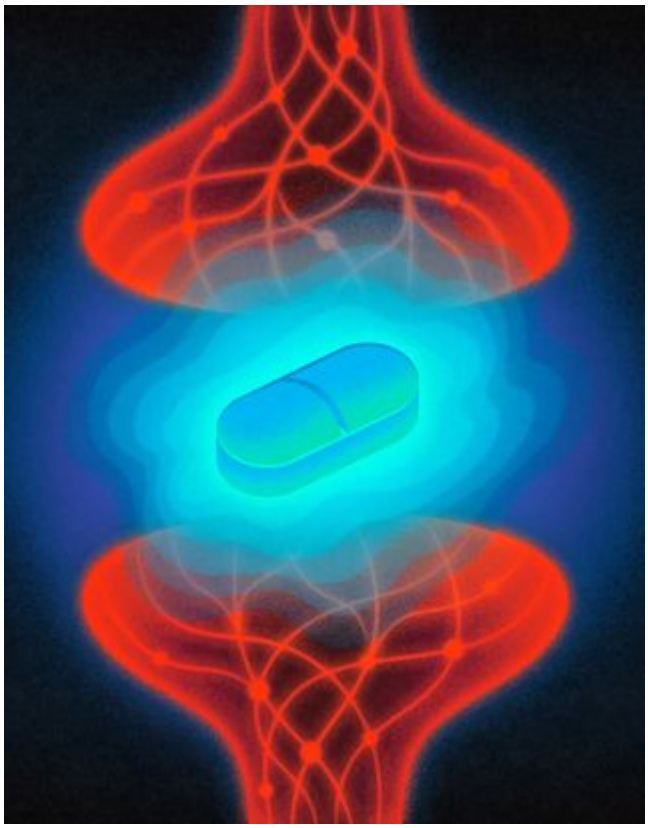

*Suzetrigine, sold as Journavx, takes a new approach, avoiding opioid sensors in the brain; instead, it cuts off pain before it even gets there.Illustration by Ariel Davis*

Pain might flicker, flash, prickle, drill, lancinate, pinch, cramp, tug, scald, sear, or itch. It might be blinding, or gruelling, or annoying, and it might, additionally, radiate, squeeze, or tear with an intensity that is mild, distressing, or excruciating. Yet understanding someone else’s pain is like

understanding another person's dream. The dreamer searches out the right words to communicate it; the words are always insufficient and imprecise. In 1971, the psychologist Ronald Melzack developed a vocabulary for pain, to make communication less cloudy. His McGill Pain Questionnaire, versions of which are still in use today, comprises seventy-eight words, divided into twenty groups, with an additional five words to describe intensity and nine to describe pain's relationship to time, from transient to intermittent to constant. Not included in the M.P.Q. is the language that Friedrich Nietzsche used in describing the migraines that afflicted him: "I have given a name to my pain and call it 'dog.' It is just as faithful, just as obtrusive and shameless, just as entertaining, just as clever as any other dog."

Specific words for pain can correlate with the underlying causes of it—and different causes point to different approaches to relief. A steroid injection might help with a slipped disk, Tylenol with injuries from a fall, a dark room with a migraine, and a hot-water bottle with a stomach ache, unless the stomach ache is caused by appendicitis, which calls for a more radical remedy. The ancients had as wondrous and occasionally questionable a mixture of notions as we have, and also knew, as we do, that not all pains respond to the same remedies. Dioscorides of Anazarbus, a first-century Greek physician, recommended treating hip pain with mountain-goat droppings on oil-soaked wool; for anesthesia, he suggested boiled mandrake root or Memphitic stone, and for migraines an unguent of roses, applied to the temples and forehead. Pliny reported the use of a mole's tooth as an aid for human toothache. Some eighteen hundred years later, Nietzsche had his migraines treated with leeches applied to his ears.

These remedies were imperfect, and the path to finding them was uncertain. In the nineteenth century, pain and fever were treated with sodium salicylate, but the drug could cause nausea and a ringing in the ears, so a chemist for Friedrich Bayer & Co. thought it would be worth trying variants on salicylic acid. He concocted the acetylsalicylic acid that we call aspirin. Other painkillers followed more zigzagging paths. In 1886, two German physicians decided to try naphthalene as a treatment for a patient with worms and a fever; the worms were unfazed, but the fever dropped. The physicians discovered that the pharmacist had accidentally given them the

wrong substance, the later identification of which led to the development of acetaminophen, or Tylenol. The common epilepsy drug carbamazepine was developed to treat the shooting nerve pain of trigeminal neuralgia, which is described as feeling like a hatchet to the head and is often called the suicide pain.

Physicians today have a number of ways of categorizing pain and its causes, and the categories often overlap. Rheumatoid arthritis is an example of inflammatory pain, and also of chronic pain. Nerve damage or malfunction —like sciatica—is neuropathic pain, whereas the pain you appropriately feel when you close a door on your thumb is nociceptive pain. Surgery, broken bones, burns—that's acute pain. The pain associated with cancer, and with cancer treatment, is another category. It tends not to be sufficiently ameliorated by any available drugs—though the standard of care is to treat it with opioids.

We have tended to get in trouble when we mismatch pains and painkillers. Opioids and opiates have been particularly vexed. Historians disagree about how long humans have been using opium. One relatively early data point comes from the tenth-century Persian polymath al-Razi: "I have heard amazing accounts, amongst which is the following: the physician . . . prescribed for gout a potion prepared with two mithqals of colchicum, half a dirham of opium, and three dirhams of sugar. This drug is said to be effective within the hour, but I need to verify this." Thomas De Quincey, the nineteenth-century English essayist, famously offered a firsthand account of his laudanum addiction in "Confessions of an English Opium-Eater." One chapter is titled "The Pleasures of Opium," and another "The Pains of Opium"; he goes into the pains more extensively, the pleasures more seductively. Today, the opioids Percocet and Vicodin are often prescribed for acute pain, which they are very good at alleviating. They are also prescribed for chronic pain, which is estimated to affect around fifty million Americans. This is trickier: a meta-study has concluded that they aren't particularly helpful for such pain. They're also not much good for neuropathic pain. The not inconsequential effectiveness of placebos should be considered, too, when thinking about how best to treat pain. Patients in clinical trials are sometimes asked to keep a pain diary, and it turns out that

the keeping of the diary itself can diminish the intensity of pain and improve one's mood.

The risks of addiction and overdose make prescribing opioids not unlike sending someone home with a gun. More than two million people in the United States are believed to have an opioid-use disorder, and last year more than fifty thousand died from overdoses. The risk of addiction for any particular person can't be confidently predicted, but studies show that some seven per cent of people who are prescribed opioids after an operation are still refilling their prescriptions three months later. Opioids are miserable in other ways: they leave users sleepy, confused, and constipated. But what else is there to give? "The last twenty years have been quite depressing to be a pain researcher," Todd Bertoch, an anesthesiologist who has overseen more than a hundred and fifty clinical trials, told me. "Everybody was waiting for a magic non-opioid opioid—something that wasn't an opioid, but behaved just like one." Now, at last, there is something substantially new.

Geoff Woods, a clinical geneticist working at St. James's University Hospital, in Leeds, wasn't thinking about pain. It was the late nineteen-nineties, and he kept seeing a rare form of microcephaly—undersized heads—in Yorkshire's Pakistani-immigrant community, most of whom came from Mirpur. (Woods is now at Cambridge.) "They were always saying, 'Oh, we've got a cousin back in Pakistan with the same condition,' " Woods told me. Woods knew that this suggested a genetic basis. If he could see the cousins—take their medical histories, speak with multiple family members, obtain blood samples—he would have a better chance of identifying the underlying genes.

Woods started to spend a few weeks every year working in clinics in and around Mirpur and meeting with the extended families of his patients from Yorkshire. On one visit, doctors told him about a child who worried them. They suspected that he had a genetic condition, and they were curious to get Woods's opinion. The boy was well known as a street performer. He would stab his arms with a knife, or walk on hot coals. "And then he would come to casualty, and they would patch him up," Woods recalled being told. He was usually brought in by his overwhelmed mother, who wished that she

could talk some sense into him. The boy said that he couldn't feel pain. Woods agreed to see him on his next visit to Pakistan.

Woods knew of cases of people who didn't feel pain, but those cases were marked by excessive sweating and increased infections—they seemed clinically different. He told me that, at the time, few researchers really believed that some people were simply born unable to feel pain. It would have sounded like a fable, or like the Grimms' fairy tale about the boy who didn't know fear. When Woods returned to Pakistan, the clinicians told him that the boy, on his fourteenth birthday, had jumped from the roof of a house to show off for his friends. He had been brought to the hospital unconscious and died a short time later. "I think it was at that stage that it stopped being a mythical disease for me," Woods said. "I hadn't got it—that, if you feel pain, well, there are some things you would normally not do because you know it's going to hurt." Now we know that there is a condition known as congenital insensitivity to pain. Woods met other people in the region who had experiences similar to those of the child who died. "The boys, about half of them end up killing themselves by their early twenties, just doing the craziest things that normally pain would have taught you not to do," he said. "The girls are sensible. They are hypervigilant. They know they're at great risk of terrible problems and are very careful." Woods eventually discovered that all these people had mutations in the SCN9A gene, which is involved in the production of tiny passageways, found in cell membranes, which regulate the flow of sodium ions into and out of cells, and are thus crucial in sending electrical signals. Nerves use such signals to communicate pain to your brain.

Around the same time, Stephen Waxman, a professor of neurology, neuroscience, and pharmacology at Yale's medical school, received a phone call about a neighborhood in Alabama where many people preferred to walk barefoot, or wore open-toed sandals and liked stepping in cold puddles. Some of them said that their hands and feet felt like they were on fire, and that this was true of family members going back at least five generations. "These people feel excruciating, burning, scalding pain in response to mild warmth—wearing a sweater, wearing shoes, going outside when it's seventy-two degrees Fahrenheit," Waxman told me. Their condition is known as inherited erythromelalgia or "Man on Fire" syndrome. Waxman

sent a team from his lab to Alabama to meet both affected and unaffected family members, and to collect DNA samples. All the affected members, and none of the unaffected ones, had the same mutation of the SCN9A gene—the gene that Woods had identified as altered in the Pakistanis who couldn't feel pain.

"I assigned a team of skilled Ph.D. physiologists who worked around the clock," trying to figure out what changes the mutation produced, Waxman recalled. The neuroscientist Sulayman Dib-Hajj, also at Yale, inserted the mutant SCN9A gene into neurons. The neurons "were firing like a machine gun when they should have been silent," Waxman said. The sodium channels were too easily activated. "And suddenly we knew why these people were on fire when they should be feeling mildly warm," Waxman said. The genetic mutation associated with inherited erythromelalgia is what is called a "gain of function" mutation. There can also be "loss of function" mutations—that's what the people who felt no pain had.

Woods's and Waxman's work suggested a potential target for a novel painkiller. Opioids target the parts of the brain that *receive* pain signals. A drug acting on sodium channels might mitigate the *sending* of pain signals.

"We know that, in radios and computers, electricity is carried by electrons through wires," Chris Miller, a professor emeritus of biochemistry at Brandeis University, explained to me. "In biological systems, it's carried by ions via ion channels." Miller has spent decades studying how the channels work. "I don't really care what these molecules do for human health—I just find them such fascinating entities. A nerve spike will zoom down an axon to the tune of one hundred metres per second." He compared that with other bodily systems, like hormones, which effect changes over minutes to hours. It is only relatively recently that we began to understand in much detail how the channels in our nerves work. In August, 1939, the British physiologist Alan Hodgkin and his student Andrew Huxley (Aldous's half brother) examined squid giant axons, which are up to a thousand times thicker than typical human nerve fibres and thus easier to study. Hodgkin and Huxley used fine electrodes to look for voltage differences across axons, and within a few weeks had exciting preliminary results—but then Hitler invaded Poland. Their work was put on hold for about seven years. (Hodgkin went

into radar development.) In 1946, before modern computers or microelectrodes, Hodgkin and Huxley designed clever experiments from a few basic measurements that allowed them to conclude that the nerve cells must have ion channels embedded in them, regulating the flow of current. (We now know that there are channels specific to five kinds of ions—sodium, calcium, potassium, chloride, and hydrogen ions—that generate electrical signals in nerves and other cells.) “They couldn’t see the channels,” Waxman said, with admiration. “They had no idea of their structure. Yet they predicted their presence and their properties with great prescience.”

A decade earlier, an anesthetizing compound that acted on sodium channels had been found—though it wasn’t understood that it was sodium channels it was acting on. Researching a mutated strain of barley, scientists at Stockholm University tried synthesizing substances that lent the plant pest resistance. The testing method was of its time. “One of them tests a compound on his tongue, and his tongue goes numb,” John Wood, a professor of molecular neurobiology at University College London, whom Woods describes as “the doyen of sodium channels,” told me. During the war, the Swedish anesthesiologist Torsten Gordh ran a small trial using his medical students as subjects. As compensation, he offered them a choice of a copy of his Ph.D. dissertation or a pack of cigarettes. Half the students were given the compound, half were given the placebo, and most took the cigarettes. The results were conclusive: the substance killed pain. “That’s the origin of lidocaine,” Wood told me. “It’s a Swedish fairy tale.”

When applied locally, lidocaine was a marvellous anesthetic. It worked especially well for dental procedures. But, if you took enough of it to knock out pain in your whole body, it could kill you. Postwar anesthesiologists and dentists knew not to give the drug systemically, but they didn’t yet fully understand that it worked by acting on sodium channels, which are found in pain-sensing neurons, as well as in muscles in the heart, and in the brain. Lidocaine blocks all the sodium channels, everywhere in the body. Your heart muscles fail to contract, your brain goes quiet. Researchers realized that if you want to design a painkiller that you can administer systemically and safely, it needs to block only some kinds of channels, and only in specific locations.

The genetic mutations that the patients of both Waxman and Woods had affect a sodium channel called NaV1.7, which is predominantly found in peripheral pain-sensing neurons. A drug interrupting pain signalling before it ever reached the brain would likely lack the addictiveness of opioids. “We all went crazy, because people without NaV1.7 were pain-free but otherwise normal,” Wood, the doyen of sodium channels, told me. “It was unbelievably exciting.” All that researchers had to do was to make a compound that affected only that sodium channel. Well, actually, that would be very difficult, but still. “The genetic validation for NaV1.7 was knock-your-socks-off strong,” Waxman said. NaV1.7 was the perfect target. “But there’s a catch in the story,” Wood said.


*Cartoon by Natalie Horberg*

Waxman’s lab started with a small trial of a drug that targeted the NaV1.7 sodium channels. Five people with inherited erythromelalgia participated. “We saw an encouraging response,” Waxman recalled. The drug advanced to a trial involving dozens of patients with other conditions at multiple sites. But, in the large trial, researchers “did not see a signal of efficacy,” Waxman said. It could be that the drug did block NaV1.7 channels, but that the dose was insufficient; or that the drug didn’t distribute to the right locations in the body; or that NaV1.7 blocking worked on some forms of pain but not others. And there was yet another possibility. “Pain is important for survival, so it makes sense that the mechanism of pain signalling has redundancy at the molecular level to make it robust,” Bruce Bean, a sodium-channel researcher at Harvard, told me. NaV1.7 was out of favor.

But it wasn’t the only promising sodium channel. A toxin found in the puffer fish, that marine creature that resembles a devilish massage-therapy ball, affects six of the nine known sodium channels. During their research into pain, Wood and his team discovered that mice in which they had disabled the gene for NaV1.8—a channel that the puffer-fish toxin does not block—felt much less pain. The researchers were thrilled. They formed a company and quickly raised eight million British pounds in support.

But they, too, encountered difficulties. Wood said, “We were all set to go into toxicity studies”—and then they ran out of money, then merged with another company, which also ran out of money. A further discouragement: by 2015, it became known that some people with Brugada syndrome, in which the heart may abruptly stop, had mutations in the gene that encodes NaV1.8. It wasn’t clear whether a substance that blocked NaV1.8 would precipitate such a problem, but it was a serious concern. “We thought, Oh, that’s no good,” Wood said. Many researchers put NaV1.8 behind them. But the cell biologist Paul Negulescu, who had started looking into it in 1998, continued working.

In college, at Berkeley, Negulescu had initially studied history. “Then, as a junior, I took a physiology class where a professor explained how the kidney worked,” he told me. “It was all about keeping sodium ions and chloride ions and potassium ions in balance.” The kidney, a tremendously under-celebrated organ, basically does four-dimensional sudoku with ions. “I was just in awe of the genius of nature. It just clicked in my head—this is amazing.” He volunteered in an ion-channel lab as an undergrad, and later, as a Ph.D. student in physiology, collaborated with the professor on research; when the professor started a company, Negulescu joined it, and in 2001 it was bought by Vertex Pharmaceuticals, where he is now a senior vice-president. In 2019, Negulescu’s team received F.D.A. approval for Trikafta, a drug for cystic fibrosis which works on the faulty chloride channels responsible for the disease. A patient who starts taking the drug as a teen-ager has a life expectancy of more than eighty years—nearly twice the span of someone whose disease is managed with supportive-care treatments only. “We like ion channels,” Negulescu said. “We think they’re really good drug targets. They just require a lot of care and attention to how you measure them.”

The papers that Wood's team published on the role of the NaV1.8 channel in pain signalling were a major inspiration for Negulescu to turn his attention to sodium channels and pain. "Each sodium-channel type has its own personality," he said. "They open at different voltages. They remain open for different lengths of time. They evolved to perform in certain ways in certain tissues." NaV1.8 channels open and close up to twenty times a second. "So we had to catch them in the act," he said.

In trying to find a molecule that would inhibit NaV1.8, one might surmise that likely compounds would have shapes similar to those of lidocaine or of other anesthetics. But, Negulescu said, "We didn't want to rely only on our intuition about what chemical classes might work." His team aimed to be "agnostic," remaining open to unforeseen possibilities. This approach would not have been feasible even a few years earlier, because of limits on how many lab tests could be done in a reasonable window of time. But Negulescu's team had developed a new technology that allowed them to screen compounds much more quickly; it was like buying tens of thousands of lottery tickets, instead of a few hundred. Eventually, they discovered a previously undescribed class of molecules that looked promising—a process that took about ten years.

Ideally, one wants a drug that is highly selective—like Cinderella's glass slipper, it fits the intended target and not a whole range of feet—and potent. An early version of an NaV1.8 blocker developed by Negulescu's team was selective and fairly potent. But, in drug development, adverbs like "fairly" won't do. Years of "optimization" followed. When I asked Negulescu to explain what optimization was like, day by day, he said, "Painful. It's iterative learning. There's the hypothesis: this is what we think would improve the potency of the molecule, or the selectivity of it." Synthetic chemists then make the compounds they think might improve efficacy, and the lab team tests them quickly—"within hours"—then sends the data back to the synthetic chemists. I asked Negulescu how many compounds his team screened. "Hundreds of thousands," he said. Then he said it again. "Hundreds of thousands." Millions were screened to find the class of molecules, and then there were another ten thousand or so screenings done in the optimization process. Negulescu recalled encountering one of the chemists holding a tray in the hallway outside a lab: "I asked him, 'Are

there some important compounds in there?' He looked at me and said, 'Paul, they're all important.' " After more than twenty years, they had a potent and extremely selective compound, called suzetrigine. And it wasn't making people sick. The time had come to bring it to a large-scale clinical trial.

Establishing a painkiller's efficacy is trickier than, for example, seeing whether a blood-pressure drug is effective. There's a reason that the McGill Pain Questionnaire had seventy-eight words. Todd Bertoch ran the Phase III clinical trials for suzetrigine. "It's a very high bar in pain research, to show effectiveness," Bertoch said. "Some of the drugs don't reach that bar, not because they're not great drugs but because the models are imperfect and our statistical approaches are imperfect." Terms like "moderate" and "uncomfortable" don't offer the precision of, say, 135 and 150. As Negulescu put it, "There's no pain-o-meter."

Two large-scale Phase III clinical trials on suzetrigine have been completed so far. One looked at 1,118 patients following an abdominoplasty, and another at 1,073 patients following a bunionectomy; both are procedures after which people experience acute pain. Participants were given either suzetrigine, Vicodin, or a placebo, and were monitored for forty-eight hours. A smaller trial looked at suzetrigine versus a placebo in two hundred and two patients with sciatica, a nerve pain. In the sciatica study, suzetrigine worked about the same as the placebo. However, for the abdominoplasty and bunionectomy patients, suzetrigine worked as well as Vicodin and better than a placebo. And more patients reported side effects on the placebo than on suzetrigine. In January, suzetrigine, under the name Journavx, became the first new non-opioid painkiller in more than twenty years to receive F.D.A. approval for acute-pain treatment.

This has occasioned enormous celebration, which can at first glance be difficult to understand, since the results seem modest: the comparison is to a relatively weak opioid, and it remains unclear if Journavx will be helpful with chronic pain, cancer pain, or neuropathic pain. Additionally, the drug costs fifteen dollars a pill. Insurance plans and assistance programs can lower the price, but it is still much more expensive than the pennies-per-pill option of a generic opioid.

Yet scientists working in pain research described the underlying scientific achievement as “a magisterial first step,” “just marvellous,” and “the holy grail.” “This proves the concept,” Waxman told me. “My expectation is that there may be next-generation medications that work even better.” Painkillers that alleviate chronic and neuropathic pain are especially needed. A Phase III clinical trial of suzetrigine for diabetic peripheral neuropathy is under way, and the F.D.A. granted the drug a Breakthrough Therapy designation for the treatment of such pain, which should speed the drug’s potential approval.

“I don’t think there’s a miracle drug that’s going to replace opioids—and suzetrigine isn’t that drug—but what we’re doing is chipping away,” Bertoch said. “Before suzetrigine, if acetaminophen and an *NSAID* were insufficient, my next step was a mild to moderate-strength opioid. Now I can kick the opioid can down the road.” Bertoch said that early in his career a mentor told him, about opioids, that, “as long as someone had real pain, they can’t become addicted. Obviously, that’s been proven completely wrong.” And the correction on opioid prescribing has precipitated a new problem—pain going undertreated or untreated. “We need something else to fill that gap,” Bertoch said. “We’re not just talking about addiction—we’re talking about people who are suffering and can’t get the pain medicine they need.” He went on, “Ultimately, I think we are going to be able to find a place where, if opioids are needed, it’s going to be rare.”

In the laboratory, more compounds continue to be screened. “We keep mining,” Negulescu told me. “It’s never over—there’s always more to learn.” He, too, sees suzetrigine as a kind of first step, and believes that “our future NaV1.8 molecules will probably be even more potent.” He and others are looking both at blocking NaV1.7 and at combining the blocking of NaV1.7 and NaV1.8.

Waxman has continued to follow his Man on Fire patients. He noticed something curious, which later proved revelatory. There were two mother-son pairs in which both mother and son had the same pain-causing NaV1.7 genetic mutation but the mother experienced much less pain than expected. The “pain-resilient” mothers, it turned out, had a further mutation, one that affected not a sodium channel but a potassium channel. This new channel

was involved in dampening pain signals. The mothers have one mutation that makes the neuron hyperactive and another that mutes it. “So, in addition to sodium channels, which are the batteries that produce the signalling, we’re looking at potassium channels, which are the brakes,” Waxman said.

“Pain is not our enemy,” Negulescu told me. “We’re not trying to get rid of pain. But we’re trying to get rid of needless suffering.” Woods had made a similar point, in reflecting on his work with patients who can’t feel pain: “Pain has this great function. It allows you to understand what your body can and can’t do. It allows you to learn how to modulate your activities and become graceful.” Melzack, of the McGill Pain Questionnaire, considered pain “one of the most fascinating problems in psychology.” In his book “The Puzzle of Pain,” he thinks through mechanisms by which the mind might be doing its magical work of modulating pain signals. He gives the example of a football player who injures his shin while playing, but doesn’t feel pain until later, when he takes off his sock in the locker room and sees blood. It’s not mind over matter—it’s mind *and* matter.

And not all pain arrives as a message received from peripheral pain-sensing nerves. “More Die of Heartbreak” is one of the few novels by Saul Bellow whose title doesn’t include the main character’s name or role, making it seem as if the central character is heartbreak itself. “The only pain they ever suffer is emotional pain, which is interesting,” Woods said to me, of his patients who feel no physical pain. That’s one of the reasons he finds the diagnosis of congenital insensitivity to pain to be a bit misleading. “They know what pain is. They just don’t know what it is physically,” he said. When Woods made this observation, it at first confused me. Emotional pain and physical pain appear so categorically different that it seems odd that we use the same word to describe them. And yet the extent of the common language for emotional and physical pain is itself remarkable: crushing sadness, pangs of guilt, wrenching news, the need for something to kill the pain. In thinking about why any given person becomes addicted to opioids, we aren’t thinking only about pains for which we might first try extra-strength Tylenol. Edward Kessler writes in his poem “Pain”:

There are days when you wish your pain
Would hunker down on a toe or finger,
Some extremity you could do without,
Instead of wandering around the universe,
Calling itself fancy names like *Angst*. ♦

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

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**The Political Scene**

# Donald Trump’s Politics of Plunder

The greed of the new Administration has galvanized America’s aspiring oligarchs—and their opponents.

**By Evan Osnos**

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*The White House’s exchange of influence for money is so frank that one lobbying veteran called it “outer-borough Mafia shit.”Photo illustration by Ricardo Tomás*

To understand the vagaries of power in Washington, pay attention to where the powerful congregate. When Teddy Roosevelt was ascending, he could be found at the Metropolitan Club, a blue-blood hangout where he and his fellow-members planned the Spanish-American War. The more literary-minded might prefer the Cosmos Club, which hangs up portraits of members who win the Nobel Prize. (Thirty-six, so far.) The late Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg enjoyed the City Tavern Club, a modest, threadbare

place with monthly dues on the order of two hundred dollars. The club closed last year, for lack of funds.

When Donald Trump returned to the White House this winter, members of his circle set about creating an establishment that might suit their preferences. The President's oldest son, Don, Jr., was among the founders of a members-only society called the Executive Branch, open by invitation to those who can pay initiation fees of as much as half a million dollars. One founding member, David Sacks, a Silicon Valley tycoon who serves as the Administration's A.I. and crypto czar, explained, "We wanted to create something new, hipper, and Trump-aligned." The location has yet to be announced, but Sacks promised that the club would provide like-minded members with a sanctuary, where they wouldn't have to encounter a "fake-news reporter" or anyone else "we don't know and we don't trust."

The Executive Branch, which has a coat of arms that combines a bald eagle with a monogram of the club's initials, offers a home to those who stand astride the *MAGA* ledger—the people who both fund Trump's initiatives and profit from them. A number of the co-owners are, like Don, Jr., known less for their achievements in business than for their proximity to Trump. They include the cryptocurrency entrepreneurs Zach and Alex Witkoff, whose father, Steve, is Trump's Middle East envoy, and Omeed Malik, a founder of 1789 Capital, a venture-capital firm that named Don, Jr., as a partner. (In April, Malik was appointed to the board of the government-backed mortgage firm Fannie Mae.)

Last month, Sacks co-hosted a launch party at the Occidental, a venerable restaurant near the White House where political operatives once worked to defuse the Cuban missile crisis over crab cakes and pork chops. The place was done up in Trump's customary mode, evoking a pricey wedding on the Jersey shore: caviar bumps for arriving guests, designated spaces for V.I.P.s and V.V.I.P.s, and seafood arrayed on a table-size ice sculpture topped with the club's initials.

The guest list included an extraordinary range of officials from the new Administration. Lobbyists from the pharmaceutical and finance industries were pleased to find themselves in close quarters with the Secretary of State, the Attorney General, and the director of National Intelligence, as

well as the chairs of the Federal Trade Commission, the Federal Communications Commission, and the Securities and Exchange Commission. One attendee later described it as an improvement over the scene at the Trump International Hotel, which was popular during the first term. “That was *open*,” the guest told me. “You could find Rudy”—Giuliani—“pretty tipsy on any given night, holding court in the lobby.” The new club has higher barriers to entry. “It’s a sign of how Trump has filled his Administration with people who can actually afford that,” the guest said. “It felt like a White House party, to be honest.”

Outside Washington, the founding of the Executive Branch was greeted less warmly. The former New Hampshire governor Chris Sununu, who voted for Trump twice but occasionally criticizes him, derided the club as a “money grab.” On X, a user wrote that “those who supported *MAGA* now feel we have been played.” Marcy Kaptur, a Democratic representative from Ohio, invoked the excesses of Nero, and called the club a “grotesque portrait of ruling billionaires.”

Historically, ruling billionaires have tried to avoid such portraits. (A publicist for J. P. Morgan used to say that he was “paid to keep the bank out of the press.”) But the Trump Presidency has embraced an unusually open marriage of politics and profit. Official filings revealed that his Inauguration fund set a new record by collecting some two hundred and fifty million dollars from corporations, C.E.O.s, and other large donors. The biggest donation, five million dollars, came from a major poultry producer called Pilgrim’s Pride. A few months later, Trump’s Agriculture Secretary delighted the industry by agreeing not to increase salmonella testing and promising to cut “unnecessary bureaucracy.” By then, Trump had already fired the director of the Office of Government Ethics and the head of the Office of Special Counsel, which investigates whistle-blower complaints.

Even seasoned practitioners of Washington pay-to-play have been startled by the new rules for buying influence. In December, a seat at a group dinner at Mar-a-Lago could be had for a million-dollar contribution to *MAGA* Inc., a super *PAC* that serves as a war chest for the midterms. More recently, one-on-one conversations with the President have become available for five million. The return on investment is uncertain, a government-affairs

executive told me: “What if he’s in a bad mood? You have no clue where the money is eventually going.” Another lobbying veteran described the frank exchange as “outer-borough Mafia shit.”

Trump has sold influence so briskly that the political machinery cannot keep up. After he was offered a four-hundred-million-dollar gift from the government of Qatar—an airplane so opulent that it was dubbed the “palace in the sky”—Dan Pfeiffer, a former White House communications director, called it “the most brazenly corrupt move by any President in U.S. history, and it’s not close.” Less than a day later, a crypto venture owned by the Trump family auctioned off a dinner with the President at one of his golf clubs. The family profited from the crypto auction twice over: from fees, which have so far netted them and their partners three hundred and twenty million dollars, and from their own stash of Trump-branded coins, which had grown in value to $4.1 billion even before the auction was complete.

The President has received tributes from a parade of wealthy patrons. Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon and the owner of the Washington *Post*, once said that he “would be humiliated to interfere” in journalistic decisions; in February, he ordered the paper’s opinion section, which had featured criticisms of Trump, to focus on promoting “personal liberties and free markets.” Amazon committed forty million dollars to a documentary on Melania Trump, who stood to gain a reported twenty-eight million dollars from the deal.

Mark Zuckerberg, the C.E.O. of Meta, dined at Mar-a-Lago, then scuttled his company’s fact-checking system and settled a lawsuit with Trump by agreeing to pay him twenty-five million dollars. Not long afterward, Zuckerberg bought a mansion near the White House; his company even paid sponsorship fees for the White House Easter Egg Roll. But nobody has blended his empire with Trump’s more than the world’s richest person, Elon Musk. After spending nearly three hundred million dollars on the election, he was given vast powers to reshape the government, as well as access to an office in the White House complex and, occasionally, an overnight berth in the Lincoln Bedroom.

In a matter of weeks, the flood of cash swirling around the White House swamped whatever bulwarks against corruption remained in American law

and culture. There have always been wealthy donors, of course. But a decade ago no one on earth had more than a hundred billion dollars. Now, according to *Forbes*, at least fifteen people have surpassed that mark. Since Trump first took office, Musk's net worth has grown from roughly ten billion dollars to more than four hundred billion.

The ultra-rich have captured more of America's wealth than even the nineteenth-century tycoons of the Gilded Age. Scholars who study inequality as far back as the Neolithic period struggle to find precedents. Tim Kerig, an archeologist who directs the Museum Alzey, in Germany, told me, "The people who built the Egyptian pyramids were probably in a less unequal society." He suggested that today's richest people are simply accumulating too much wealth for the system to contain. "The economic and technical evolution is much faster than the social, mental, and ideological evolution," he said. "We had no time to adapt to all those billionaires."

Two decades ago, Jeffrey Winters, a political-science professor at Northwestern University, started teaching a course called Oligarchs and Elites. His students at the time considered this exotic terrain. One protested, "Russia has oligarchs. America has rich people." But over the years Winters noticed a shift in his students, accelerated by the Supreme Court's decision, in 2010, to remove limits on political contributions. "The challenge really became convincing any of them that the United States was still a democracy," Winters said. "They argued that oligarchs dominated everything that matters."

Many Americans today espouse two seemingly opposed sentiments toward the very rich: resentment and aspiration. In a 2024 Harris poll, fifty-nine per cent of respondents said that billionaires are making society more unfair, and a nearly identical number said that they hoped to become billionaires themselves. There is a growing sense that only those who belong to the club can thrive. New investment vehicles allow people to copy the portfolios of Congress members, on the theory that lawmakers have an edge that the rest of us do not. The rapper Kendrick Lamar secured his status as a liberal icon by using the Super Bowl halftime show to protest the unfairness of

American life. He also released an ode to “more money, more power, more freedom,” which centers on the refrain “I deserve it all.”

Winters, looking across history, believes that the U.S. has reached “peak oligarchic power,” a time when “the rules of the political process make it possible for wealth to shape the outcomes and agenda.” He added, “It’s so undeniably visible now that it’s no longer possible to say we have rich people and other countries have oligarchs.”

*“Perhaps gallery walls should be left to galleries.”*
*Cartoon by William Haefeli*

Oligarchy, in Aristotle’s formulation, is “when men of property have the government in their hands.” It is a pattern as old as civilization. In ancient Mesopotamia, those who mastered irrigation amassed more crops and consequently more power. Later, the coin of the realm was livestock; in Old English, the word *feoh* meant both “cattle” and “wealth.” (You can still hear a trace of that history in the English word “feudal.”) Early oligarchs did not enjoy sedate life styles. As the anthropologist Timothy Earle writes, leaders of this type “rarely died in bed; they were killed in battles of rebellion and conquest or were assassinated by their close affiliates.”

In Winters’s book “Oligarchy,” he offers a typology. Medieval Europe was riven by violent competitions among “warring” oligarchies, in which each baron had his own castle, soldiers, and territory. These arrangements (later

practiced in certain Mafia strongholds of New Jersey) were costly and stressful, so they tended to evolve toward “ruling” oligarchies, in which the participants agreed to put down their weapons and govern collectively. This was generally a more profitable state of affairs, until the members of the coalition could no longer resist fighting one another.

The nascent United States had its own share of oligarchs, as voting was reserved for white men who held property. But it was a “civil” oligarchy, in which the wealthiest citizens supported the state, because it protected their interests and because they profited more under the rule of law. If the rule of law collapses, though, a civil oligarchy can become a “sultanistic” oligarchy, in which the ultra-wealthy consent to be ruled by one of their own—an “oligarch-in-chief,” in Winters’s phrase.

A prime example of a sultanistic oligarch is Ferdinand Marcos, the President of the Philippines from 1965 to 1986. Marcos was a dogged kleptocrat, estimated to have stolen as much as ten billion dollars during his tenure. On an official salary of $13,500, he secured for his family at least four skyscrapers in Manhattan and a set of Old Master paintings. His wife, Imelda, was known for amassing thousands of pairs of shoes—a habit so distinctive that few people recall she also tried to buy Tiffany & Co.

As Winters notes, oligarchs of this category govern through “fear and rewards.” Marcos subdued the business community by strategically deploying permits and broadcast licenses. He made a special example of Eugenio Lopez, the country’s richest man and the owner of the Manila *Chronicle*, by breaking up an empire estimated at four hundred million dollars. After a few years, there was little boundary between the President’s financial assets and the nation’s. Marcos gave the sugar industry to one of his former fraternity brothers, and turned over the banana business to another friend. As Marcos’s pals mismanaged their holdings, the country sank into its worst recession since the Second World War.

Oligarchs-in-chief don’t like to retire, because civilian life leaves them vulnerable to retribution from those they ejected from their club. But in 1986, after three years of public protests, the Marcoses fled into exile, with a planeload of jewels, cash, and gold bars. In time, their allies rewrote enough history that, after Ferdinand died, Imelda was able to return home

and eventually got elected to Congress. In 2022, after a relentless disinformation campaign that cast the Marcos years as a “golden age,” their son became President. Their perfidy is memorialized in the English language, though. Alfred McCoy, a historian at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, told me, “Marcos’s corruption led to the creation of the term ‘crony capitalism.’ It’s a useful term to describe the Trump era.”

As Trump’s second term took shape, he rarely missed a chance to remind Americans of the powers at his disposal, to reward and to punish. The new F.C.C. chairman, Brendan Carr, who demonstrated his loyalty by wearing a gold lapel pin shaped like Trump’s head, launched investigations of all the major broadcasting companies—except for Fox. He dismissed suggestions of partisanship by saying, “If you are a broadcast and you don’t want to serve the public interest, you are free to turn your license in, and you can go podcast.”

Soon afterward, Trump pardoned a fellow billionaire felon, Trevor Milton, an electric-truck-maker convicted of defrauding investors. (In a promotional video, Milton had showcased a speeding prototype that was, in fact, rolling downhill.) Milton and his wife had donated $1.8 million to Trump’s campaign, and hired a lawyer who happened to be the brother of Trump’s Attorney General, Pam Bondi. The pardon spared him restitution payments estimated at six hundred and eighty million dollars. Trump claimed that Milton had been targeted for his political views. Speaking of himself in the third person, the President said, “He supported Trump, he liked Trump. I didn’t know him, but he liked him.”

Trump’s executive branch—the government version—also wasted no time in aiding Musk’s businesses. The Commerce Department is considering his Starlink internet service for a forty-two-billion-dollar expansion of rural broadband; the Defense Department may enlist SpaceX to help build a missile-defense project called the Golden Dome. Musk, in turn, has found moments when his business needs aligned with Trump’s political needs. As a major recipient of Pentagon contracts, Musk took a special interest in defending the nomination of Pete Hegseth, a former Fox News host, as Secretary of Defense. After Senator Joni Ernst, an Iowa Republican,

expressed doubts about Hegseth, a political group tied to Musk ran digital ads against her. Ernst fell in line.

But not everyone was ready to comply. On April 7th, as a cold rain fell on Washington, a couple of hundred people gathered in a hotel ballroom near Dupont Circle, in a spirit of genteel resistance. The Patriotic Millionaires, a society of prosperous Americans concerned about rising inequality, were meeting to discuss, as the conference banner put it, “How to Beat the Broligarchs.” This being Washington, the decorations featured an eagle in flight, but, unlike the eagle on the Executive Branch club’s insignia, this one clutched photos of Musk, Bezos, and Zuckerberg, dressed in tuxedos.

For fifteen years, the Patriotic Millionaires have waged an earnest battle to persuade wealthy people to lobby for higher taxes on themselves. This has often been a lonesome endeavor, but Trump’s assault on democracy, financed by some of America’s richest people, has fortified the group’s arguments. Scott Ellis, a member who used to run a consulting group at Hewlett-Packard, told me that even skeptical peers in Silicon Valley had become increasingly receptive. “Some friends used to humor me, but they’re listening more,” he said.

Members, and prospective recruits, had flown in from around the country. They heard from lawyers who are suing to force Musk’s team to reveal internal documents, and from political organizers facilitating protests against the slashing of government services. Onstage, Erica Payne, the group’s founder, a former Democratic strategist with a Wharton M.B.A., put up a slide of survey results suggesting that the movement might find supporters among both Democrats and Republicans. “Nobody on either side is happy!” she said. “The only people who are happy are the people at the very tippy-top.” She ticked through some tax policies, crafted by lobbyists, that patently benefit the very rich. “If you own a yacht, two Picassos, and a room full of gold coins, you pay less in property taxes than some person who owns a two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand-dollar house in a small town in Ohio,” she said. Some outcomes are even more startling. In 2020, according to ProPublica, at least eighteen billionaires filed tax returns so deftly assembled that they were eligible for pandemic stimulus checks.

When Bezos was worth eighteen billion dollars, back in 2011, he qualified for a child tax credit.

Just when the gathering was beginning to sound like a progressive political rally, Payne drew a distinction: “We’re not going to talk about all this stuff that everybody else wants to talk about . . . transgender, L.G.B.T.Q., guns—everything that makes everybody get mad.” She declared, “This is always about money.” In the 2004 election, according to Americans for Tax Fairness, billionaires gave thirteen million dollars in political contributions; twenty years later, the country’s richest families spent more than two hundred times that much. Payne told the crowd, “There’s a point where money is no longer money. It is power—and they’re using that power to screw life up for everybody else.”

How much is too much? The investor Warren Buffett, who has what he calls “an almost incomprehensible sum” of money, plans to leave his children enough to “do *anything* but not enough that they can do *nothing*.” Yet Buffett faces an unusual problem: his fortune, by sheer algebraic momentum, grows faster than he can give it away. Though he has donated at least sixty billion dollars, he is still worth a hundred and sixty billion. (Not an absolutist, Buffett has kept his private jet, which he named the Indefensible.)

In 1965, during Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty, the government established the concept of a poverty line, to help design policies that promote human flourishing. (The line now stands at about thirty-two thousand dollars a year for a family of four.) Alan Davis, a member of the Patriotic Millionaires, maintains that we should also be concerned with the “extreme-wealth line”—a degree of affluence past which it becomes impossible to avoid societal harm.

A few days after the group’s meeting, I visited Davis at his house in Jordan Park, a San Francisco neighborhood of lush gardens and quiet streets. Davis, who is tall and patrician, with swept-back white hair, led the way to a sitting room decorated with handblown glass. He told me that his parents had built a fortune in the insurance industry, but that he had grown up uneasy about having so much money. During a cruise that stopped in Caracas, Venezuela, as the family dined at a posh club, Davis found himself

preoccupied with the surrounding poverty. “I’m looking at a hill with cardboard houses, and it really got to me,” he said. “It became an issue with my parents. Like, ‘What side are we on?’ ”

During the pandemic, Davis launched an initiative called the Crisis Charitable Commitment, which urged philanthropists to accelerate their giving, but it strained to recruit members. Spurred partly by that disappointment, he went on to found the Excessive Wealth Disorder Institute, dedicated to fighting what it calls “compulsive greed.” One of its recent publications offers tips, built on focus-group data, for talking to “persuadable” voters about raising taxes on the rich. (Do suggest “simplifying the tax system and eliminating loopholes.” Don’t engage in “categorical villainization of the wealthy.”)

Davis, who has since left the institute to focus on more assertive tactics, argues that economic inequality harms not just the poor but also the rich, by inflaming divisions, stress, and status anxiety. He hears about it from friends all the time—the father priced out of tickets to the Giants “because a billionaire is paying a centimillionaire to hit a ball”; the wife who dreads her husband’s role in the Young Presidents’ Organization because, Davis said, “he has made a shitload of money but is seated next to a guy who’s made a shitload-plus.”

Patriotic Millionaires is lobbying Congress on what the group calls the Anti-Oligarch Act, which proposes ways to prevent “dynastic” levels of inheritance. Davis knows the arguments against wealth taxes—people will cheat or move; innovators will stop taking risks—but he believes that a balance between good and harm might be struck by aggressively taxing fortunes above fifty million dollars. Why fifty million? At that level, he explained, “you can’t own the Picasso, but you have enough money where you could have every museum director take you on a private tour.” He added, “We’re trying to get people to think of the American Dream differently—that you can do anything, but you can’t *own* everything.”

In May, Trump floated the possibility of increasing taxes on the rich, musing that it might make for “good politics.” But the “big, beautiful” bill that enshrined his Administration’s agenda left the top tax rate unchanged. Instead, it offered concessions to Trump’s wealthiest supporters, including a

tech-friendly provision to prevent states from regulating A.I. and a tax cut, paid for partly with cuts to Medicaid and food stamps, that steered sixty per cent of the benefits to the top twenty per cent of Americans.

Trump and Musk had already advanced proposals to privatize more of the government by selling off public buildings, handing over weather forecasting to private operators, and dispensing federal lands to real-estate developers and fossil-fuel producers. At times, the Administration seemed to be testing how much destruction Americans would tolerate, if it was packaged as tough-minded business wisdom. After the introduction of tariffs tanked the stock market and vaporized trillions of dollars of value, the Treasury Secretary, Scott Bessent, a former hedge-fund manager worth at least half a billion dollars, said bluffly that Americans weren't looking at "day-to-day fluctuations" in their retirement accounts. Musk, while overseeing the firing of tens of thousands of people, called Social Security "a Ponzi scheme" and said that the "fundamental weakness of Western civilization is empathy."

But eventually Musk found the limits of the public's tolerance for belligerence. After he handed out million-dollar checks to voters in a Wisconsin Supreme Court race, his candidate lost by double digits. His company Tesla posted a seventy-one-per-cent drop in profits, as buyers recoiled. He also critiqued Trump's tariff policy, referring to one of its principal authors as a "moron" and "dumber than a sack of bricks." Musk retreated from Washington, but he left behind damage that will likely be felt for decades—not only the gutting of programs dedicated to foreign aid, public health, and national service but also harm to America's moral credibility. After Musk bragged about feeding the U.S. Agency for International Development to the "wood chipper," the agency predicted that the cuts would lead to millions of deaths in places where its programs had provided care. Bill Gates told a reporter, "The picture of the world's richest man killing the world's poorest children is not a pretty one."

On April 14th, Blue Origin, Bezos's rocket company, launched an all-female crew on a ten-minute journey into space. Bezos seemed to regard the trip—led by his fiancée, Lauren Sánchez—as an act of public service. When asked a few years ago how he planned to "do good" with his fortune,

he said, “The only way that I can see to deploy this much financial resource is by converting my Amazon winnings into space travel.”

His company positioned the launch as a tribute to women in science, but the message grew muddled in preflight publicity. One passenger, the pop star Katy Perry, announced that the crew intended to “put the ‘ass’ in ‘astronaut.’ ” Though the ship returned safely, the over-all reception was not positive. Press accounts described it as a gluttonous commercial stunt; in a rare point of agreement between left- and right-wing media, the conservative talk-show host Megyn Kelly mocked what she called the “Mission to Collect Selfies in ‘Space,’ ” while the *Guardian* decried a “perverse funeral for the America that once enabled both scientific advancement and feminist progress.”

Viewers of the launch’s live stream were reminded that seats on future flights were available for purchase. Blue Origin required a deposit of a hundred and fifty thousand dollars, with an unnamed balance presumably due later. It was easy to wonder who, exactly, the potential buyers were. The country as a whole has never been wealthier; at the start of 2025, the total assets held by American households reached a historic peak. But these figures are skewed by giant fortunes at the top. Roughly half of Americans cannot afford a thousand-dollar emergency expense, and the bottom two-thirds are nearly as pessimistic about their prospects as they were during the 2008 financial crisis. Barbara F. Walter, a professor at the University of California, San Diego, who specializes in political instability, told me, “Americans don’t believe we all have to be equal in terms of wealth, but we’ve been taught that we are equal politically, and the oligarchs are seen as taking that right away. That creates a feeling of being permanently politically excluded—and that, we know from quantitative studies, motivates people to organize.”

A day after the Blue Origin spaceflight, Senator Bernie Sanders made a stop on his “Fighting Oligarchy” speaking tour, which he began in the weeks following Trump’s return to Washington. Sanders was focussed on Republican territory, and that afternoon’s appearance was at a community college in Folsom, which contains one of the rare pockets of conservative voters in Northern California. Situated where the Central Valley rises into

the Sierra foothills, Folsom still houses the prison made famous in the Johnny Cash song “Folsom Prison Blues,” but these days the biggest employer is Intel. Palm-shaded neighborhoods radiate affluent calm.

*“You gotta watch this house. If you’re not careful, the dog will rush out and read you his poetry.” Cartoon by Tim Hamilton*

When I arrived, an advertising plane was overhead, towing a banner that read, “*FOLSOM IS TRUMP COUNTRY*!” But, with the event several hours off, the line of attendees gathered to protest Trump’s Presidency already stretched down the road and out of sight. The organizers had moved the speech from a smaller venue to a track-and-field complex as big as three football fields. It was shaping up to be a crowd of thirty thousand, more than a third of the city’s population. Venders were selling pins tailored to the moment. One read, “*F* Elon and the Felon.*” Another had the word “oligarchy” in the Monopoly font, along with a cartoon plutocrat in a top hat.

I joined Sanders backstage, in a windowless office near the locker rooms. He was slumped in a desk chair—wisps of white hair, the familiar rumpled blue Oxford shirt—and looked exhausted after a day of events across the state. But when he started talking about the crowds his eyes widened, and his finger poked the air for emphasis. The first sign that his tour might excite the public came on the opening day, in Omaha, where the organizers switched venues to accommodate a rush of attendees and still had to turn hundreds more away. In Iowa, he said, “I had to do two separate speeches, because it was an overflow crowd.” On a stop in Salt Lake City, twenty

thousand people showed up. “In Nampa, Idaho, we had twelve thousand, in the most conservative state in America,” he said. “It’s just a stunning sight.”

Very little of what Sanders said onstage was new material. Thirty-five years ago, shortly after leaving office as the mayor of Burlington, he warned a reporter against the perils of oligarchy and insisted, “The rich and the powerful cannot continue to get everything!” But back then he wasn’t drawing crowds of thirty thousand people. “It’s one thing for me to talk about oligarchy as an abstraction,” he told me. “Trump has made it clear. He has said it loudly and clearly: we are a government of billionaires.”

Senator Elissa Slotkin, a Michigan Democrat, had urged her party to stop using the term “oligarchy,” saying that it would not resonate beyond the coasts. Sanders, citing the scale of his crowds, responded that “the American people are not quite as dumb as Ms. Slotkin thinks they are.” During my visit, he did not hide his satisfaction that the largest political rallies in America were for an eighty-three-year-old socialist who had twice lost his bid for the Presidential nomination. “What bothers me most about the failure of the Democratic Party,” he said, was a reluctance “to acknowledge reality.” Democrats, in his view, congratulated the Biden Administration for having lowered the price of insulin, then wondered why people voted for Trump. “You want to know why people are angry?” he said. “They are hurting! They can’t go to the grocery store and buy food for the kids that they want, they can’t pay their rent, they can’t afford health care.”

At the heart of Sanders’s tour was his long-held hope to build a “class-based effort” that crossed party lines. In the eighteenth century, Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote that, during times of extreme inequality, the wealthy distract those who might resent them by fostering a “mutual hatred and distrust, by setting the rights and interests of one against those of another.” It was the essence of Trump’s politics—the knowledge that desperate people feel powerful when they can “look more below than above them,” and so “domination becomes dearer to them than independence.”

Outside, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the congresswoman from New York, was warming up the crowd. She mocked the banner overhead that declared this was Trump country. “It sure don’t look like it today,” she said. “I think

this is *our* country.” As the crowd cheered, it wasn’t hard to see why some Democrats have taken to asking whether Ocasio-Cortez could be the next leader of a party groping for direction. For the moment, though, her support did not reach far beyond progressives. Republicans had spent years framing her as the avatar of identity politics and language policing. A poll published a day later by YouGov gave her a favorability rating that placed her eighteen points behind Sanders—even with Trump, but trailing J. D. Vance.

Sanders took the stage to the strains of “Power to the People,” offered gruff thanks, and set to work. After decades of broad systemic critiques, he now had the advantage of a target with a face and a name. “Elon owns more wealth than the bottom fifty per cent of households in America,” Sanders shouted. “That, brothers and sisters, is insane!” I was reminded of the tips from the Excessive Wealth Disorder Institute, about avoiding “categorical villainization of the wealthy.” Subtlety is probably never going to be Sanders’s style, but it didn’t seem to matter. As he spoke, the line of attendees was still winding out the entrance to the stadium. Others were peering through fences and watching from neighboring hillsides.

When I talked to people in the crowd, I was struck by how many were at their first Sanders rally. One of them, Stephen Jackson, a retired home builder, told me, “I know a lot of Republicans that are really sorry that they voted the way they did. They were hoping it would just be better for business, less government. They’re seeing the total opposite.” He went on, “Musk is not there because he’s trying to lower the government’s spending. And everybody can see it.” In a country where the two dominant parties agree on scarcely anything, the collective exasperation with Musk generated unusual consensus. “Republicans and Democrats are on the same roller coaster,” Jackson said, “and everybody’s thinking, *Where’s the seat belts*? Well, we got rid of the seat belts, because it saves money.”

Half a century after Trump started selling the illusion of exclusivity—through casinos, mail-order steaks, and a bogus university—his family has finally discovered what people will pay for most exorbitantly: access to the top of the U.S. government. The open practice of crony capitalism is pushing America toward a reckoning between two paths, one in which oligarchy comes to be seen as normal and one in which it does not. McCoy,

the historian, sketched the first scenario. “The standards for propriety of those holding office will be diminished,” he said. “It will lower the bar on what we expect from our public servants.” If the current economic trend continues, the effect will be severe. In the next four decades, according to the tax expert Bob Lord, the top .00001 per cent of Americans (about nineteen people, at current population) will increase their share of the nation’s wealth tenfold, from 1.8 per cent to eighteen per cent. In other words, if Washington pretends that Trump’s corruption is not connected to a deeper imbalance of power, the oligarchs win.

Even for those who benefit from the current arrangement, it is not without risk. In the short run, using money to buy power and power to make money may shield them from Trump’s rages. But they are also investing their sultan with immense power. “What happens to business élites who align with autocrats?” Barbara Walter said. “It doesn’t end well.” After Russian tycoons helped Vladimir Putin cement his rule, he grew worried about empowering competitors, so he jailed some and exiled others, giving their empires to new loyalists. “The party is great while it’s happening, but there’s a really terrible hangover at the end, and they don’t seem to consider this, even as Russian oligarchs are being thrown out of windows,” Walter went on. “That’s all I want to say to these tech entrepreneurs. The data shows that autocracies don’t do well economically, so the dictator needs resources to survive, and eventually the pots of money that these oligarchs are sitting on become quite attractive.”

Sultanistic oligarchies have inherent fragilities. The élites must submit to a version of what scholars call the “authoritarian bargain”: the leader agrees to defend their wealth against legal challenges and calls for redistribution, in return for payoffs and political fealty. Élites who do not adequately submit are often destroyed—but leaders who fail to protect the élite are also prone to be overthrown.

Oligarchs can also be vulnerable to civil society. Popular movements in South Africa, Ukraine, and the Philippines demonstrate a pattern: sustained pressure—cross-class protests, labor strikes, investigative reporting—can chip away at self-enriching, inept regimes. When a crack appears, in the form of a recession, a botched show of force, or an élite split, the ruling

order must reform, bargain, or collapse. But in places like Egypt and Russia, where civic forces are demoralized or divided, oligarchs can hang on with daunting endurance.

If politics can help solve America's inequities, it will not happen quickly. Seventeen years passed between when Mark Twain coined the phrase "the gilded age" and when the country enshrined its first law against monopolies, in 1890. Even that was only a limited success. A few years later, the United States tried to establish an income tax, but it was derided as part of a "communist march," and the Supreme Court struck it down. Eventually, the ultra-rich brought trouble on themselves by ignoring public anger. (At a notable party of the time, held in a Manhattan ballroom, a host brought in dozens of horses with champagne in the saddlebags, so that his guests could dine on horseback.) The income tax was finally implemented in 1913—after nearly two decades of concerted activism.

Benjamin Page, a Northwestern political scientist who has studied attitudes on inequality, told me, "It's a mistake to say nothing can be done." The social movement of the eighteen-nineties revealed how to "dilute and equalize oligarchy power with citizen power." He went on, "If enough people are angry enough, it becomes feasible to think about what institutions, rules, and arrangements could be changed that would actually make a big difference."

In politics and business, leaders become so insulated from unflattering truths that they blunder into igniting public outrage, a pattern sometimes called "autocratic backfire." When oligarchs start to see their winnings as evidence of all-encompassing brilliance—rather than a combination of specific acumen, timing, government contracts, and luck—they can get grandiose. Richard White, a Stanford historian who specializes in the Gilded Age, said, "They cannot manage things as complex as they try to manage. I think Elon Musk's implosion is an example that things just slip out of their control very, very quickly."

In April, protests around the country surprised even the organizers with their scale; in Washington, there were a hundred thousand demonstrators, quintuple the projections. Trump, who was golfing that day, did not comment on the protesters, and Musk dismissed them as "puppets." But

their presence, like the crowds lining up to hear Sanders speak, raises the prospect that an angry public may unite, even if some of them are ultimately less interested in eating the rich than in joining them at the table. During the Gilded Age, White said, “the oligarchs allowed people to have a set of common targets. There was no common solution then, and I don’t think there will be a common solution now. But when you can agree that *this is not working*, *this is not fair*, *this is not right*—then you can get a movement.” ♦

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**Profiles**

# Patti LuPone Is Done with Broadway—and Almost Everything Else

The seventy-six-year-old theatre diva, famed and feared for her salty bravado, dishes on Hal Prince, her non-friendship with Audra McDonald, and sexy but dumb New York Rangers.

**By Michael Schulman**

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*“People ask, Why am I a gay icon?” LuPone said. “I think they see a struggle in me, or how I’ve overcome a struggle.”Photographs by Ruven Afanador for The New Yorker; Styling by Bernat Buscato; Hair by Peter Gray; Makeup by Melissa Silver*

Patti LuPone stood in a midtown recording studio one spring afternoon, talking to Carrie Bradshaw. LuPone, who descends from what she calls Sicilian peasant stock, had filmed an arc on the upcoming season of “And Just Like That . . . ,” as the Italian mama of Giuseppe (Sebastiano Pigazzi), the young boyfriend of Carrie’s gay pal Anthony (Mario Cantone). She was now recording some dialogue tweaks in postproduction. On a monitor, her character, Gianna, was greeting Carrie at a party. At the microphone, LuPone tried out different line readings: “Ciao.” (Imperious.) “Ciao!” (Warm.) “Ciao-ciao!” (Sprightly.)

“Just fill it up a little bit,” the showrunner, Michael Patrick King, instructed.

“I like your dress *verrry* much. *Verrry* pretty,” LuPone purred in an Italian accent.

“Shit, now I have to call the Writers Guild,” King joked, about her ad-lib. They moved on to a scene in which Gianna spars with Anthony in his apartment. King had written LuPone a saucy exit line: “*Questo corridoio puzza*,” which translates to “This hallway stinks.” LuPone gave him options, punching her “P”s: “*Questo corridoio puzza!*” (Pugnacious.) “*Questo corridoio puzza.*” (Droll.) “*Questo corridoio puzza! Ugh!*” (Revolted.) When they wrapped, King told her, “You are a delight.”

“Thank you for including me, honest to God,” LuPone said. “And just, you know, *think* of me. Because I don’t want to be onstage anymore. *Period*.”

This was almost like a queen proclaiming her abdication. LuPone is Broadway’s reigning grande dame, with a big voice and an even bigger mouth. She’s one of the city’s last living broads: brassy, belty, and profane, with the ferocity of a bullet train coming right at you. She’s as famous for playing musical theatre’s iron ladies—Eva Perón in “Evita,” Rose in “Gypsy”—as she is for her offstage rumbles. She’s fought with Andrew Lloyd Webber, who in the nineties replaced her with Glenn Close in his musical “Sunset Boulevard.” (LuPone trashed her dressing room, sued his company, and used part of the settlement to build herself a pool, which she christened the Andrew Lloyd Webber Memorial Swimming Pool.) She’s fought with co-stars. (In her memoir, she called Bill Smitrovich, who played her husband on the TV drama “Life Goes On,” a “thoroughly

distasteful man.” Smitrovich: “She’s a very, very guileful woman.”) She has even fought with audience members. She once palmed a cellphone from a texter’s hand, mid-play. In 2022, during a talkback for the musical “Company,” she berated a spectator, “Put your mask over your nose. . . . That is the rule. If you don’t want to follow the rule, *get the fuck out!*” Ask her about Madonna (“a movie killer”) or “Real Housewives” (“I really don’t want to know about those trashy lives”), and you’ll get a zinger worthy of Bette Davis—one of her heroines, along with Édith Piaf. (“I prefer the flawed to the perfect,” she told me.) Her bluntness has made her a kind of urban folk hero. On the Tony Awards red carpet in 2017, she declared that she would never perform for President Trump. Asked why, she responded, “Because I hate the motherfucker, how’s that?” The clip went viral.

At seventy-six, LuPone has acquired an unlikely cool factor. Since winning her second Tony—for “Gypsy,” in 2008—she’s played herself on “Glee” and “Girls,” a bathhouse singer on “American Horror Story,” and an occultist on “Penny Dreadful,” and she’s voiced a yellow giant on the cult sitcom “Steven Universe” and a socialite mouse on “BoJack Horseman.” The indie director Ari Aster cast her as a harridan mother in “Beau Is Afraid,” and last year she joined the Marvel Cinematic Universe, as a witch in “Agatha All Along.” “She doesn’t give a shit about what anyone thinks,” her coven-mate Aubrey Plaza told me. Last fall, Plaza ended up living in her apartment, at LuPone’s urging, while making her Off Broadway début. “She basically kept me alive,” Plaza said. “I would wake up, and she would be making me soup. One morning, she was carving a turkey, and she would go, ‘Doll, I have to go out of town for some gigs, but I’m gonna carve this up and put it in the fridge, and you’re gonna make sandwiches with it throughout the week.’ ”

Bridget Everett, the raunchy alt-cabaret performer who starred in HBO’s “Somebody Somewhere,” met LuPone through the director and lyricist Scott Wittman. LuPone brought Everett onstage at Carnegie Hall for a duet, and they’re now developing a double act called “Knockouts.” “You think of her as the greatest living Broadway legend,” Everett told me. “You don’t think of her as a person. So when, all of a sudden, you’re out in the country

and she hops in the pool buck naked, you're, like, 'O.K., there's Patti LuPone! Let's roll.' "

After her dubbing session, LuPone collected her crocodile purse and got into an S.U.V. on Eighth Avenue. As it lurched past the theatre district, she explained why she is, at least for now, done with Broadway. "I'm so *angry* at whoever choked the stem right in the middle by making Times Square a pedestrian mall," she said. When she was starring in "Company,"LuPone would carry a bullhorn and yell at pedestrians from her car window. "It's impossible for us to get to work," she told me. "And I said that *years* ago. So I start work angry. I can't get to my theatre, because of the traffic pattern, because of the arrogance of the people in the streets. It's a road. Get *out* of the *street*."

She preferred the gritty old New York of the sixties and seventies, when she moved from Long Island to make her name. Sure, the city was broke. Sure, there were muggers. (Once, when a stranger groped her friend near Grant's Tomb, LuPone turned "she-lion"—her word—and shrieked at the guy until he fled into Riverside Park.) Sure, she heard a "scream of death" one night outside her window, in Chelsea, and knew that somebody was getting murdered. But the city was "bankrupt, dangerous, and *creative*," she insisted. Now it's all gone corporate, including the theatre, which she worries has reverted to "the gaiety phase of Broadway, when it was just follies and Ziegfeld girls."

*“Well, I'm gonna use bricks, but I'm getting a huge vicarious thrill from your plan.”*
*Cartoon by Hartley Lin*

She’s even angrier at the rest of the country. She told me, more than once, that the Trumpified Kennedy Center “should get blown up.” In the S.U.V., apropos the current Administration, she pronounced, “*Leave*. *New York*. *Alone*. Make it its own country. I mean, is there any other city in America that’s as diverse, as in-your-face? It’s a live-or-die city, it really is. Stick it out or leave.” The car dropped her off at a restaurant on the Upper West Side. She asked for sherry—she’d discovered it while doing “Les Misérables” in England in the eighties—but the bartender said that they didn’t carry it, so she settled for a glass of rosé, with a side of ice cubes.

In person, LuPone is fun-seeking and dishy. She recalled one of her first trips into Manhattan, to see Saint-Saëns’s “Samson and Delilah” at the Met. “They were two of the fattest people I’ve ever seen onstage,” she told me. “There was a bed, two *very* large singers, a male and a female, and a bowl of fruit on the bed. And all I could concentrate on was that bowl of fruit and when they were gonna knock it to the floor.” She let out a big, booming “*HA!*”

LuPone was snapped out of her reverie by two chatty young women at the next table. “The whole city is so fucking loud,” she groused. “People have forgotten that they’re in public.” She leaned over to ask them, politely but firmly, “Ladies, excuse me, do you mind keeping it down just a little bit? We’re trying to have a *conversation*.” They obeyed.

LuPone ordered a fried artichoke, sliced in half. “I have a love-hate relationship with New York, because of what it forces you to *face*,” she went on. She likes that New Yorkers can sniff out a bullshitter, but her intolerance to bullshit gets her into trouble. “On a woman, they don’t like that smell,” she said. “People ask, Why am I a gay icon? I go, Don’t ask me. Ask them. But I think they see a struggle in me, or how I’ve overcome a struggle. What else am I going to do?”

She picked apart the artichoke with her fingers. “I’ve been *punished* for wondering what was going on since I was four,” she said, again punching her “P”s. “The question was always ‘Why?’ The answer was not permitted.

To this day, if I express myself in a way that somebody doesn't like, they will say, 'Oh, that's Patti.' " She lowered her voice and narrowed her eyes, like a tigress ready to pounce. "What the *fuck* are you talking about? What do you know about me, that you can say, 'Well, that's Patti'? And yet I never stopped asking the question 'Why?' "

LuPone bristles when people call her a diva, which they do often. "I know what I'm worth to a production," she said, her lips skewing diagonally in agitation. "I know that I'm box-office. Don't nickel-and-dime me before you put me onstage. Don't treat me like a piece of shit. Because, at this point, if you don't value me, why am I there?"

If LuPone is the New Yorkiest of Broadway stars, it's not just because of her powerhouse voice. It's because she fights her own battles, the way the city makes you fight through rush-hour crowds. But she didn't ask for it to be this way. "Why do I have to fight?" she asked herself, tearing out the artichoke's heart. "What am I learning in this life that I'm atoning for from the last one? What is it that forces me to fight? *Seriously*. Why wasn't it easier?"

LuPone's many oft-recounted struggles began at four years old, when she wandered off her family's property, in Northport, Long Island, to visit a friend. Crossing a field, she got sidetracked by some birds and butterflies. "They're looking all over the place for you!" her friend's father yelled when she arrived. "When I got home, I saw police cars and fire engines, and I hid under my bed," she recalled. "When they found me, I got a serious spanking with no explanation. There was no dialogue. You did the wrong thing—smack, smack. But *why*?"

The LuPones lived on an apple orchard amid subdivided farmland. Northport back then was a small fishing village—at one point, the mayor was also the funeral director—with boggy wetlands and rocky bluffs overlooking the bay. Johnny Carson would sometimes moor his yacht there, and LuPone would buzz it with her father's boat, shouting, "Johnny! Hi!" It was a bucolic place to grow up, but LuPone sensed a menacing energy, what she called the town's "deep underbelly."

A furtive darkness ran in her family, too. Her mother's parents, the Pattis (her first name is her mother's maiden name), were immigrant bootleggers; their sewing room had removable floorboards to hide whiskey. Late in life, LuPone learned that her maternal grandfather had been murdered in 1927, possibly with her grandmother's collusion; one newspaper reported that his body had been found "in a pool of blood caused by three wounds in his head." "All I knew was that, growing up, every Sunday, my mother would call my grandmother, and the two of them would talk in Italian, and my mother would be crying her eyes out," LuPone said. *Why*?

Her father, Orlando, was the principal of her elementary school, and her mother, who went by Pat, "played the part of a Long Island housewife," LuPone said; being a principal's wife required "a hostess element, a façade, because she had to entertain the teachers." Once, overhearing her parents fight, LuPone packed her books in a suitcase, stood at the kitchen door, and declared, "Goodbye, cruel world!" Her parents divorced when she was twelve, after Pat discovered that Orlando was having an affair with a substitute teacher. LuPone remembers her mother herding her and her older twin brothers, Bobby and Billy, into a car and driving to a nearby town. "We snuck up to this house and looked in the basement window, and there was my dad sitting in a chair and this woman sitting at his knees, and my mother put her fist through the cellar window," she said. She didn't see her father again for decades.

"My brothers were freaked out more than I was," LuPone recalled. "I said to Bobby, 'Honey, we're free to pursue show business now!' Daddy wanted us to be teachers. I was, like, 'No thanks.' " Pat drove her daughter to voice lessons, informing her that her great-grandaunt was the nineteenth-century coloratura Adelina Patti. LuPone and her brothers had a dance group, the LuPone Trio, which performed on Ted Mack's "The Original Amateur Hour." "They had an adagio act," her childhood friend Philip Caggiano said. "Bobby would heave Patti into the air, and Billy would catch her." At school, she immersed herself in music, singing Haydn with the chorus and playing sousaphone in the marching band. "I remember, in the cafeteria of our junior high school, saying, 'I want to sing just like Earl Wrightson,' " Caggiano recalled. "And Patti said, 'I want to sing like Patti LuPone.' "

She knew that she had a Broadway-sized voice, but she was a “closet rocker, or a closet groupie,” she said. One New Year’s Eve, she and a friend drove upstate to Saugerties in a blizzard to “find the Band—and we got *so close*.” She moved to Manhattan at eighteen and spent a year partying at discothèques, then joined the inaugural class of the drama division at Juilliard, where her brother Bobby had studied dance. The drama program was run by the legendary actor-producer John Houseman, who had worked with Orson Welles. LuPone said, “John Houseman went out and found thirty-six of the craziest people he could find, to see whether he could strip down their personalities and create a ‘Juilliard actor.’ ”

The training was incoherent. One teacher would espouse one method—René Auberjonois told them, “Acting is fucking”—only to land a gig and be replaced by another teacher with a conflicting method. Of the original class, thirteen graduated. “They wanted to throw me out of school, so they threw all sorts of roles in my direction to make me fail as an actor—but what they did was train one actor in versatility,” LuPone likes to say. Houseman criticized her diction, calling her Flannel Mouth—hence her compensatory overenunciation—and once told her that she had “the smell of the gallows.” (It was a compliment, but she was too intimidated to ask what it meant.) “I cried myself to sleep every night my first year,” she said.

Her third year, three “advanced” students joined the class. One was Kevin Kline. “I took an instant dislike to him,” LuPone recalled. “He looked like Pinocchio to me. He had skinny legs, and he was tall, and I didn’t really see the handsomeness.” That changed one day in art-appreciation class, when they sat together in the back and started “feeling each other up,” LuPone said. Their turbulent on-and-off relationship lasted seven years. “He was a Lothario,” she recalled. “It was a painful relationship. I was his girlfriend when he wanted me to be his girlfriend, but, if there was somebody else, he would break up with me and go out with that person. And I, for some reason, stuck it out—until I couldn’t stick it out anymore.” Kline remembered the relationship as “fraught.” “We fought all the time,” he told me. “In the company, we were known as the Strindbergs.”

After graduation, in 1972, the drama class formed a repertory troupe called the Acting Company. They’d do comedy of manners in Saratoga, Chekhov

in Omaha. “Patti was always pissed that, whenever there was a whore to play, she usually got the whore’s part,” her classmate Sam Tsoutsouvas remembered. The troupe also played Broadway, where, in 1975, LuPone and Kline starred in the musical “The Robber Bridegroom.” She received her first Tony nomination the same season that her brother Bobby was nominated for playing the director in “A Chorus Line.” After four years, she and ten other company members rebelled against their overseers and quit en masse, “like America breaking away from the British Empire,” Tsoutsouvas said.

While touring, LuPone had met the young playwright David Mamet, who cast her, Kline, and Tsoutsouvas in his play “All Men Are Whores,” at Yale Cabaret. LuPone felt at home with Mamet’s dialogue; its raw aggression gave language to her own. “The writing, once I understood the rhythm, became the easiest thing to speak,” she said. “I learned more about acting from David Mamet than I learned in four years at Juilliard.” Despite their divergent politics—Mamet has gone *MAGA*—their collaboration has endured. In response to several written questions, Mamet sent me back the following: “Opening night on Broadway of ‘The Old Neighborhood,’ I was looking for Patti around 7 *P.M.* and found her onstage asleep in the kitchen counter of the set. I understood it as a Sicilian Panic Attack.”

In 1979, LuPone won the role of Eva Perón, the power-hungry First Lady of Argentina, in Andrew Lloyd Webber’s musical “Evita.” It was, she recalled, a “vitriolic experience.” The score was so punishing that she blew out her voice days before the L.A. tryout; a doctor told her that her vocal cords looked like raw hamburger meat. The director, Hal Prince, wanted her to play Eva as cold and unsmiling, contrary to her instincts. She had a matinée alternate who she was convinced was gunning for her job, and some of the dancers kept telling her how Elaine Paige had done the part in London. “I said, ‘Stop right there. Let me figure it out for myself,’ ” she recalled. “So I made enemies in rehearsal.” This, she believes, forged her reputation as a prima donna. “I had maybe three allies in the company,” she said. “It was Beirut from my dressing room to the stage. I had no support. I faced this trial by fire by myself.”

I spoke to a former “Evita” chorus boy who remembered LuPone as “a bit of a mess and undisciplined and driving Hal crazy.” But he also told a story that validated her sense of being messed with. After a rainy day of rehearsal, he shared a taxi with her, and they became chummy. Then Prince’s general manager ordered him to keep his distance from the leading lady. “I was very upset. I thought it had come from Patti—that I had offended her. So, from that minute on, I absolutely iced her. In retrospect, I realized they wanted to control her by isolating her.”


*“We all feel like your book-club selection was a little selfish, Mark.”*
*Cartoon by Asher Perlman*

The show made LuPone an overnight star. She won the Tony, and everyone from Ava Gardner to Andy Warhol flocked to her dressing room. But she never made peace with the pain. “They say it’s the way you learn,” she said. “But is it necessary? It hurt so much.”

One way she coped with the stress was hockey. On Sunday nights, when “Evita” was dark, LuPone would go to Rangers games at Madison Square Garden, where, the *Times* reported, in 1982, she became a “regular in Section 27AA,” right behind the opposition net. She had a standing invitation from a cousin of her neighbors back in Northport, David Ingraham, whom she called a “Quaker slash arbitrage stockbroker slash high roller.” “It was high Greek drama right before my very eyes,” she recalled. “They were gladiators!” Because she was on strict vocal rest

offstage, she'd pound the boards without screaming, using her voice only when she was asked to perform the national anthem.

"It's a great spectator sport," she told me. "Baseball bores the shit out of me—so slow. Football: I don't get it, except I like them in their nice, tight spandex and their dreadlocks." She did a Mae West shimmy.

LuPone would party with the hockey players, and they'd come see her shows. Ulf Nilsson, then a Rangers center from Sweden, told me, "If it was a face-off at her end, I could smile and more or less say hello to her while I was playing." LuPone and Nilsson became close; he was the only player who put in his bio that he loved the theatre. "I probably saw 'Evita' about ten times," he said. "And once I was allowed to stay right behind the stage!" (The former chorus boy remembered that the athletes LuPone had invited to watch from the wings blocked the actors' entrances, infuriating the cast.)

The press couldn't get enough of Broadway's breakout star mingling with New York's home team, and rumors spread that LuPone was dating the Rangers' curly-haired Adonis Ron Duguay. LuPone says they were just acquaintances. (She did date an Edmonton Oiler who broke her heart.) But she remembers berating Duguay when he went to "Evita" and spent part of the show flirting with his agent at the bar. He's now dating Sarah Palin. "They're perfect for each other," LuPone told me. "They're two of the stupidest human beings on the face of the earth." Then she paused. "How do you say stupid without saying stupid? He's a box of bricks." ("Wow, that's hurtful," Duguay said, when I reached him by phone, adding, "I can't imagine living my life being so hateful that way.")

One morning, LuPone called me and asked, "What are you doing tomorrow night?" Within minutes, she'd used her hockey connections to get us V.I.P. tickets to see the Rangers play against the Toronto Maple Leafs. "Seven-o'clock puck drop," she told me in a voice memo. We met at a private dining room high in Madison Square Garden. Steve Schirripa, who played Bobby Bacala on "The Sopranos," was sitting at the next table and gave LuPone a big hello. (Her brother Bobby, who died in 2022, played Tony Soprano's neighbor Bruce Cusamano.) She tried to order a sherry—no dice. "Nobody has sherry!" she moaned.

LuPone had brought along Pat White, who became her longtime backstage dresser after the 1987 revival of “Anything Goes.” I remembered White from LuPone’s Tony speech for “Gypsy,” in which she thanked “my very own Thelma Ritter, friend, and wrangler, Pat, who gives me a shot every single night. I don’t know what’s in it, but I’m giving the performance of my life!” (The shot joke was White’s idea.) “The people who have become star dressers know how to anticipate—and how to *defuse*,” LuPone said, drawing out the “Z” sound. “A lot of things can upset the equilibrium of an actor, and musicals, in my opinion, are by their very nature a vicious beast.”

White, a reserved woman in her sixties with a thick Massachusetts accent, agreed. During “Sweeney Todd,” in 2005, White would read out their horoscopes from the *Post* while LuPone got made up. One night, LuPone realized that White was reading her the wrong horoscope, and White admitted, “If yours is bad, I just read you the best one out of all of them.”

After dinner, we were escorted to the ice: second row, behind the Toronto bench. “I’m so happy!” LuPone said, giddy, sipping rosé out of a plastic cup through a straw. Her son, Josh, had told her to keep an eye on the Leafs’ No. 34, Auston Matthews. She reapplied her lipstick as the teams skated out. “I’m going to root for whoever wins,” she said.

A tenor who had been on Broadway in “The Phantom of the Opera” came out to sing the anthems. LuPone stood and sang along to “O Canada” but grimaced at “The Star-Spangled Banner,” which she finds too martial and hard to sing. “Good luck with *this* one, Mister,” she grumbled, declining to join in.

“I predict the Leafs winning,” she said as the game began, citing her “Sicilian witch instinct.” Nilsson had told me that acting and hockey are similar, because both require focus. But LuPone didn’t see much overlap. “It was all sex appeal,” she recalled of her hockey fixation. “It was rare to have anything in common except for the party that we were going to.” Soon she was shouting at the players, “Take your clothes off, boys! Naked hockey! No cups—I want full frontal! *HA!*”

“They have to wear skates,” White chimed in. “And the helmets.”

LuPone grunted, “Does anyone still wear a hat?”

The Leafs scored, and she cheered. Less so for the Rangers—she’d been turned off by all the U.S.A. jingoism. She also disapproved of the jumbotron (“Don’t tell me how I should feel”) and the fan contests during commercial breaks (“Too much shit going on”). After the first period, with the Leafs ahead 2–1, she retired to a V.I.P. lounge and recalled her “Evita” days. At curtain call, she said, her applause would dip after the ovation for Mandy Patinkin, who played the populist narrator Che. “I had to convince myself it was because I was so good in the part that they couldn’t make up their minds how they felt about me,” she said. “People thought I was a blond bitch, a fascist, a Nazi sympathizer.” To make herself feel better, she started performing a midnight cabaret act on Saturdays after the show, at the Chelsea club Les Mouches. She would cover Petula Clark and Patti Smith and let her wild side run free: “It was a desire for people to see who I really was.”

During the second period of the hockey game, she got restless. “The fighting is so stupid,” she groaned, as two players brawled. “They look like idiots.” The Leafs scored again, and she wiggled two fingers above her head—her Sicilian witch antennae. I asked her if her affinity for the away team echoed her struggle to win over the audience as Evita. “I gravitate toward the unexpected one, I really do,” she said. At the second intermission, with the Leafs up 4–2, the announcer welcomed a couple of excited children who had won rides on the Zambonis. “Who gives a shit?” LuPone bellowed. She had an early flight, so she left.

“Let me know who wins,” she deadpanned.

One evening, LuPone was onstage at Symphony Space, on the Upper West Side, warming up with the piano. She ran through “Fever,” “Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered,” and “Anything Goes,” but there was a good chance that she wouldn’t perform any of them. The concert, “Songs from a Hat,” was designed like a parlor game: spectators would reach into a top hat and pull out numbered cards, and LuPone would sing the corresponding songs—mostly showstoppers she’d claimed over her career, such as “Don’t Cry for Me Argentina” or “The Ladies Who Lunch.”

An hour later, she reappeared in a glittery black dress. The format cast LuPone as a woman up for a dare. “I have no idea what I’m going to sing,” she told the crowd, “and it’s the most fun I have onstage.” A woman in the front row picked No. 5. “Oh, God,” LuPone said. “I did this show on Broadway—for two weeks.” It was “As Long As He Needs Me,” from “Oliver!” She had starred in a failed revival in 1984, her first Broadway show after “Evita.”

Her eighties career had its ups and downs. She left “Evita” after twenty-one months, because “I lost my sense of humor,” she said. She declined an offer to play Lady Macbeth at Lincoln Center—“I said, ‘Haven’t I just been playing her for two years?’ ”—and instead went into “As You Like It” at the Guthrie, in Minneapolis, because she wanted to work with the Romanian director Liviu Ciulei. (During that show’s run, she got kicked out of Prince’s night club after she screamed at some people who were booing her cousin’s punk band.) She played Harrison Ford’s sister in “Witness,” but Hollywood’s interest in her was intermittent. At one point, she starred in a dead-end TV pilot as a singing ghost who haunts a laundromat. Nearly a dozen fizzled plays after “Evita,” she was cast as Fantine in the Royal Shakespeare Company’s première of “Les Misérables,” in London. It was a runaway hit, but she chose not to remain with the show when it went to Broadway, because her experience with the R.S.C. was so perfect that she didn’t want to taint it. “I’ve never known whether I’ve made the right decision,” she told the Symphony Space crowd, when someone picked “I Dreamed a Dream” from the hat.

*“I was dealt the hard hand, in everything. So I say, This life is about figuring that out. The next life is going to be easier.”*

In 1989, she went to L.A. to star in the ABC drama “Life Goes On,” as the suburban mother of a son with Down syndrome. “For four years,” she wrote in her memoir, “I played a docile mom in a patriarchal family.” By the series’s end, she was bored silly and no longer on speaking terms with her onscreen husband. Scott Wittman was helping her devise a solo act when she landed what seemed like the part of a lifetime: Norma Desmond in the musical version of “Sunset Boulevard.”

It turned out to be the biggest debacle of her career. Her London reviews were mixed; Frank Rich, in the *Times*, called her “miscast and unmoving.” Meanwhile, Lloyd Webber had cast Glenn Close in a concurrent L.A. production—LuPone thought it was a ploy to gin up a rivalry—and Close’s wraithlike approach won raves. LuPone was contracted to follow the role to Broadway, but she found out from Liz Smith’s column that she was being dumped for Close. The repudiation, mirroring Hollywood’s abandonment of Norma, only deepened her remaining performances in London. “I’d felt

rejection, but not *that* kind of rejection," LuPone said. Years later, at a Kennedy Center tribute to Barbara Cook, Close took a seat next to LuPone. "She said, 'I had nothing to do with it,' " LuPone recalled. "I wanted to go, 'Bullshit, bitch!' "

The recovery was hard. LuPone took out her fury on her husband, Matt Johnston. "It almost broke up our marriage," she said. (They'd met when she was playing Lady Bird Johnson in a TV movie and he was a camera assistant; they married on the set of "Anything Goes.") She went on Prozac. After a hike one day, a blood vessel in her left vocal cord burst, and she needed surgery and intensive rehabilitation. "It's almost like she had to start from scratch," recalled Wittman, who directed her in a 1995 concert run, "Patti LuPone on Broadway."

Despite stray successes—a stint as Maria Callas in the play "Master Class"; a topless role in Spike Lee's "Summer of Sam"—by the early two-thousands her agents couldn't get her seen for a TV pilot. Her comeback came courtesy of Stephen Sondheim. They had socialized in Connecticut, where both had houses, but, she said, "I thought he hated me." (He once slammed a door in her face.) Sondheim liked getting stoned in her barn with her husband. She played Mrs. Lovett in an acclaimed Broadway revival of "Sweeney Todd"—the actors played their own instruments, allowing LuPone to show off her tuba chops—and then Madame Rose, the mother of all stage mothers, in "Gypsy." She brought brass and rage and woundedness to Rose, a woman whose struggles, much like LuPone's, are as self-perpetuated as they are riveting.

Heading into her sixties, LuPone was on a high, her salty bravado now part of her legend. During her penultimate performance in "Gypsy," she stopped the show to scold a photographer: "How dare you? Who do you think you *are*?" (The photos were part of a planned magazine feature, but whatever.) Her newfound cachet, coupled with her adventurous tastes, brought her to unexpected places. Jac Schaeffer, the creator of "Agatha All Along," was looking for a "Patti LuPone type" before realizing that she could get the real thing. "She's infiltrated all these counterculture spaces," Schaeffer said. Ari Aster cast her as Joaquin Phoenix's mother, Mona, in "Beau Is Afraid" after seeing her on Broadway in Mamet's "The Anarchist." "I'd written for Mona

an endless, withering monologue that was meant to be very theatrical and histrionic and grandiloquent, while also being born of a real deep pain and anger," Aster told me. "Her sudden appearance also needed to function as something of a punch line, and having the architect of Beau's misery be Patti LuPone really made me laugh."

Since the eighties, LuPone has been based in Connecticut. Years ago, she and Johnston got a flock of chickens and named them Marilyn, Rita, Eartha, Foghorn Leghorn, and the Fabulous Miller Sisters (Pia, Alexandra, and Marie-Chantal). All but three were massacred in a raccoon attack. "It was horrific," LuPone said. "There was blood and feathers and guts all over the place when my husband heard me screaming. He came down in this Victoria's Secret underwear, barefoot. We looked in the hen hut, and there was the raccoon, basically looking at us, going, 'I ain't finished.' "

In the city, where LuPone is the apex predator, she keeps a sparsely decorated apartment on Central Park West, the site of raucous New Year's Eve parties. The guest list runs from John McEnroe to Cole Escola. "I asked her, 'What's the vibe of the party?' " Aubrey Plaza recalled. "She went, 'Oh, you know, cops and showgirls.' " It was at this apartment that I met her one Saturday at noon, bearing a bottle of sherry.

LuPone had laid out strawberries, chocolates, and nuts. "Look at our little spread, dahling," she said, with mock grandeur. She'd just returned from the *GLAAD* Awards, in L.A., after which she hit a gay bar with the trans TikTok star Dylan Mulvaney.

"I talk to myself a lot," she told me. "Why? Don't ask me. But I actually talked about Hal Prince in my head today." The conversation was about how he had tormented her during "Evita." "That stuff doesn't go away. It sits there, going, *Why, why, why*?" As much as quarrelsome defiance has become part of her persona, it was striking to hear that it lingers even when she's alone with her thoughts. As she sipped her sherry, a lifetime of grievance and self-pity—all evidence of her success to the contrary—seemed to well up in her. "I was dealt the hard hand, in everything," she lamented. "So I say, This life is about figuring that out. The next life is going to be easier."

She went on, “We start in life vulnerable. Then we are accosted. And then we put up the barriers. We put up the armor. I’ve never lost my vulnerability, so the shock continues. I firmly believe this: it’s better to fail, because you learn so much more. If you are anointed, you have nowhere to go. Failure makes you investigate. Failure moves you to the next step.”

In the meantime, the battles were unrelenting. She had told me, about co-starring with Mia Farrow in the two-woman play “The Roommate” last fall, “There was a little bit of bullshit that went down, and then I washed my hands of a couple of people in the business.” One of them, I found out later, was a press agent who, after an offstage blowup, grabbed a bottle of champagne from his office and gave it to LuPone to make amends; he did not realize that the label read “Happy Opening, Sunset Boulevard.” “The Roommate” shared a wall with a neighboring show, “Hell’s Kitchen,” the Alicia Keys musical, and sound would bleed through. At her stage manager’s suggestion, LuPone called Robert Wankel, the head of the Shubert Organization, and asked him if he could fix the noise problem. Once it was taken care of, she sent thank-you flowers to the musical’s crew. She was surprised, then, when Kecia Lewis, an actress in “Hell’s Kitchen,” posted a video on Instagram, speaking as one “veteran” to another, and called LuPone’s actions “bullying,” “racially microaggressive,” and “rooted in privilege,” because she had labelled “a Black show loud.”

“*Oh, my God*,” LuPone said, balking, when I brought up the incident. “Here’s the problem. She calls herself a veteran? Let’s find out how many Broadway shows Kecia Lewis has done, because she doesn’t know what the fuck she’s talking about.” She Googled. “She’s done seven. I’ve done thirty-one. Don’t call yourself a vet, bitch.” (The correct numbers are actually ten and twenty-eight, but who’s counting?) She explained, of the noise problem, “This is not unusual on Broadway. This happens all the time when walls are shared.”

I mentioned that Audra McDonald—the Tony-decorated Broadway star—had given the video supportive emojis. “Exactly,” LuPone said. “And I thought, *You should know better*. That’s typical of Audra. She’s not a friend”—hard “D.” The two singers had some long-ago rift, LuPone said, but she didn’t want to elaborate. When I asked what she had thought of

McDonald’s current production of “Gypsy,” she stared at me, in silence, for fifteen seconds. Then she turned to the window and sighed, “What a beautiful day.”

It was. In Central Park, New Yorkers were strolling among the apple blossoms. “Oh, people sitting by themselves, lonely as hell,” LuPone observed, peering from her window. “*HA!* Just lonely as hell out there.” She was ready for a nap. As I walked out, she announced, “I, my dahling, am taking to my bed.” ♦

*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.”*

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# Takes

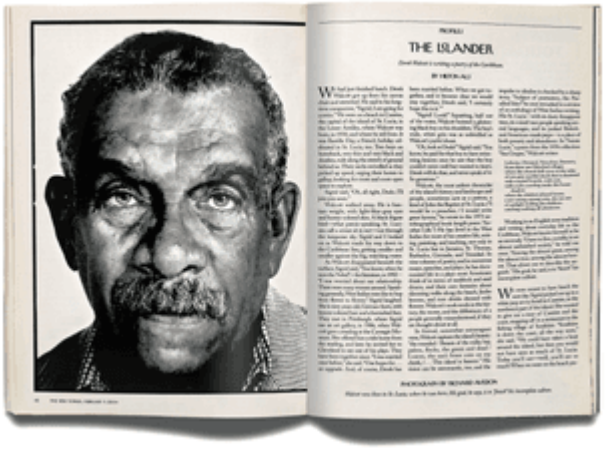
- **Julian Lucas on Hilton Als's "The Islander"**
  By Julian Lucas | The reporter's casually piercing, coolly amused Profile of Derek Walcott introduced me to a man whose poetry I had read and whose behavior I hadn't expected.

**Takes**

# Julian Lucas on Hilton Als's "The Islander"

***By Julian Lucas***

*May 25, 2025*




*February 1, 2004*

***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.*

The literary Profile comes into the world facing a double skepticism. Most people don't care enough about books to read about authors—unlike, say, pop stars or tech titans. And those who do care often look down their noses at the genre, which Roland Barthes mocked as a relatable fantasy for middle-class readers anxious to be told that the great novelist enjoys "his pajamas and his cheeses," too. Fiction, of course, is already based on ransacking everyday life. But poetry is supposed to come from the soul, tradition, and psychic tremors too minute and particular to be grasped by a journalist on assignment. Or so I thought in college, when I took a break from annotating Derek Walcott's "Omeros" to read Hilton Als's 2004 Profile of its author in this magazine.

It was called "The Islander," and it left me shipwrecked. At the time, I was writing a thesis on "Omeros"—a verse epic set in Walcott's native St. Lucia which traces a Biblical arc from slavery and Native genocide to the multicultural modern Caribbean. Walcott was a god to me, and his book a sacred text. Then Als's casually piercing, coolly amused dispatch from the island introduced me to a man I hadn't expected: a moody, tantrum-prone patriarch, whose cantankerous charm hardly concealed the fact that being history's most successful St. Lucian had gone to his formidably mustachioed head. Walcott chases kids away from his easel (they were criticizing his watercolors); at lunch, he not only flirts, mid-interview, with a giggling waitress but bends her over his knee and spanks her: "You want lash!"

I, too, felt struck. But my admiration for the portrayal swiftly salved my disenchantment with the portrayed. I was already familiar with Als's uncannily intimate style of psychoanalytic portraiture, having read his affectionate Profile of Missy Elliott and his passionately vexed essay on Prince's coyness about identity. Now he was showing me the power of detached yet irreverent curiosity. Others might have written a moralizing takedown of Walcott, who'd lost out on university jobs for sexually harassing students, or a dutiful hagiography. Als simply arrived on the beach—sunglasses and folding chair in hand—and set out to discover how such an imperfect man wrote such extraordinary work.

The Profile is framed by a long day's drive to a volcano, which I now recognize as the making-do of a reporter who couldn't get any other scenes. Yet the island is full of noises. We hear the poet's disdain for the tourist's gaze in a cutting remark to his German-born partner, Sigrid, and the fierce love of home behind his mission to " 'finish' his incomplete culture" in his joyful shout as he lifts a smiling boy onto his shoulders at the beach. Als's own identity, as the Black gay son of Caribbean immigrants, invisibly informs his rendering of the older man's proud, brittle masculinity, as well as the poignancy of his celebrity-induced estrangement from the ordinary islanders he'd made a point of remaining among. In one revealing exchange, Walcott quarrels with a fruit seller:

> He reached for a fruit that he remembered from his childhood. It was a *pomme arac*, red and specked and shaped like a guava.
>
> Walcott said, "When we were boys, we used to throw stones to catch this fruit from the tree." He rubbed it tenderly.
>
> "Don't touch that," the fruit seller said. She was black and old and fierce.
>
> Walcott blushed.
>
> "Then why is the damn thing out there?" he asked sharply.
>
> "To buy."
>
> "Then I buy," he said, and reprimanded her in patois for scolding him.
>
> Walcott bit into the *pomme arac.* "We have to wash it first, Dodo!" Sigrid said. Walcott turned away from the fruit seller and looked at the sea, and the woman turned away from him.

The petulant outburst ripens to a vision of Edenic bittersweetness, a cameo-size glimpse of a man who so loved the island of his childhood that he grew too big for it. I eventually met Als, who became a friend and a mentor, and Walcott, who was exactly as described. (It was for his annual birthday party in St. Lucia, where he cracked dirty jokes and made a group of former

students recite Auden on cue.) Having now written more than a few Profiles, I still wrestle with the line between a subject's life and a subject's work. But I never forget the *pomme arac's* lesson: Roland Barthes was wrong about watching writers eat. ♦

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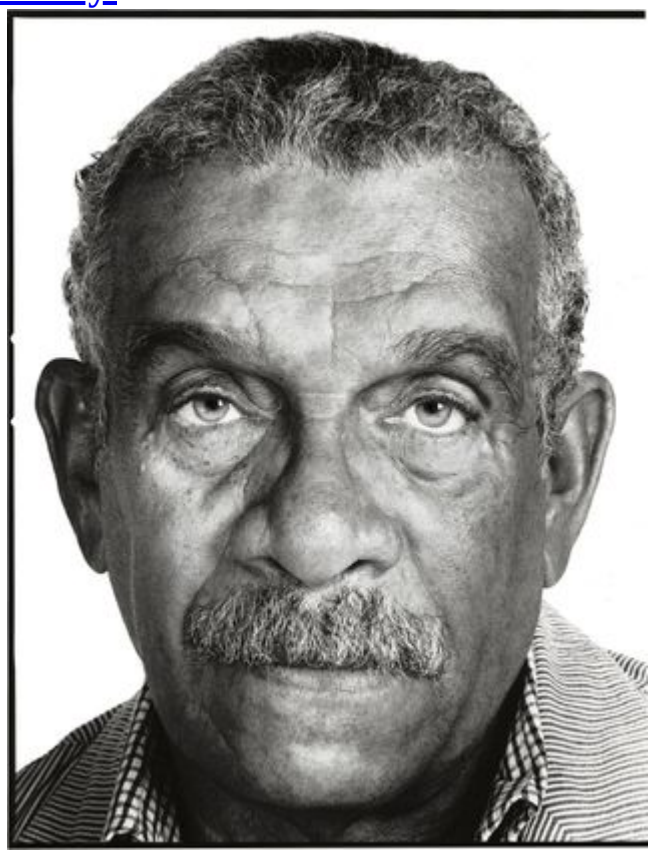
**Read the original story.**



The Islander

*Julian Lucas, a staff writer, began contributing to The New Yorker in 2018.*

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# Shouts & Murmurs

- **Pete Hegseth’s Day**
  By Teddy Wayne | One venti vanilla latte with two per cent and extra foam, please. I’m the one overseeing the F/A-18 Hornets conducting sorties over the Aegean Sea in T minus thirty minutes.

**Shouts & Murmurs**

# Pete Hegseth’s Day

***By Teddy Wayne***
*May 26, 2025*

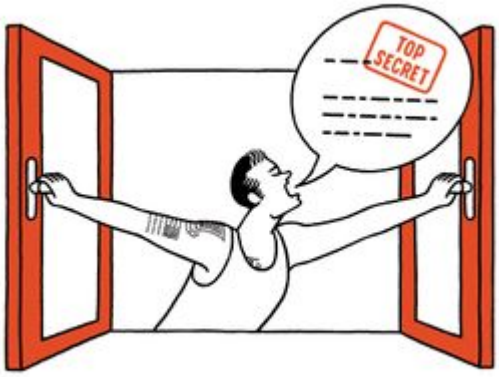


*Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez*

> The previously unreported existence of a second Signal chat in which Mr. Hegseth shared highly sensitive military information is the latest in a series of developments that have put his management and judgment under scrutiny.
>
> *—The Times.*

**School drop-off**
***HEGSETH:*** Here you go, champ. Work hard, behave yourself, and first missiles launch at oh nine fifteen hours in Orange Zone 4.
***CHILD:*** What did you say?
***HEGSETH:*** All affected personnel are to be on heightened alert for the Hellfire launch at oh nine fifteen hours.
***CHILD:*** Ah. I thought you said oh nine *fifty*, which was yesterday’s Harpoon launch, and you always say—
***HEGSETH*** and ***CHILD:*** “Never repeat launch times on consecutive days,

because it confuses Grandma in the family group text."
*Hegseth ruffles his child's hair.*

**Starbucks**
***HEGSETH****:* Venti blonde vanilla latte with two per cent, extra foam, and four syrup pumps.
***BARISTA:*** Anything else?
***HEGSETH*** (*winces like he's restraining himself*): No.
***BARISTA:*** Name?
***HEGSETH:*** Pete. (*Pauses.*) Hegseth. (*Tilts head slightly for a reaction.*)
***BARISTA****:* Five minutes, Pete.
***HEGSETH:*** It's a common name, so, if there's another Pete, I'm the one overseeing the F/A-18 Hornets conducting *CAP* and strike sorties over the Aegean Sea in T minus thirty minutes.
*Barista writes down all information on coffee cup..*
***HEGSETH:*** That's Aegean with an "A-e."

**Therapy**
***HEGSETH:*** Whatever I say in here is private, right?
***THERAPIST:*** I'm bound by doctor-patient confidentiality, unless what you say poses a threat of immediate harm to others.
***HEGSETH****:* What if it poses a threat of harm to *ISIL* combatants in the Aldhubat Quarter of Mosul?
***THERAPIST:*** Well, I suppose in that case—
***HEGSETH:*** And dawn isn't exactly *immediate*.
***THERAPIST:*** That's beyond my purview. Now, last week we were talking about your anger issues.
***HEGSETH:*** I guess they started with my dad.
***THERAPIST:*** Your father?
***HEGSETH:*** Yeah, my old man. (*A single tear rolls down his cheek.*) Three-three degrees, twenty minutes north, four-three degrees, nine minutes east. (*Exhales cathartically*.) You don't need to do the confidentiality thing if you don't feel like it.

**Supermarket**
***CLASSMATE:*** Pete Hegseth! Haven't seen you since high school!
***HEGSETH:*** How's it hanging, Kemosabe? ***CLASSMATE:*** Same old same

old. Of course, I know everything *you've* been up to.
***HEGSETH:*** Well, not *everything*. (*Smiles with pursed lips, raises eyebrows, bobs head to indicate possession of a juicy secret he's dying to tell someone.*) Let me add you to this Signal chat called "Indo-Pacific Theatre—Da Boyeeezzz."
***CLASSMATE:*** Um, I don't think I should be on that.
***HEGSETH:*** It's cool, trust me.
***CLASSMATE:*** I really don't want to get in trouble for—
***HEGSETH*** ("*accidentally*" *stumbles, holds up phone to classmate's face, and exposes Notes app document titled "TOP Secret—No Girls Allowed!!!*"): Oh, no, I've inadvertently revealed my super-classified military stuff, which any civilian would acknowledge is next-level sick!

**Press conference**
***JOURNALIST****:* Did you share war plans with people without proper clearance?
***HEGSETH:*** War plans? Absolutely not.
***JOURNALIST****:* What would you call shouting in the D.M.V., "I'm not saying that *CENTCOM* is authorizing a force-projection exercise in the northern Arabian Gulf just before the start of 'Fox and Friends,' but I'm not *not* saying it"?
***HEGSETH:*** Did I mention it would include amphibious landing rehearsals, coördinated air support from Carrier Air Wing 7, and joint interdiction missions against high-value maritime targets? Nope.
***JOURNALIST****:* So when would it technically be "war plans"?
***HEGSETH:*** What else do you want to know, guys? That the *PIN* to enter my office at the Pentagon is 0606—my birthday? That the nuclear launch codes are in my desk drawer, the unlocked one labelled "Nuclear Launch Codes (Don't Lose)"? How's about that my daughter has a serious crush on Tommy Jenkins, but she won't make the disclosure until she has verified intel from his best friend that he like-likes her and doesn't just like her as a friend?
***JOURNALIST****:* You're revealing, in a press conference, that your daughter has a crush on Timmy Jenkins?
***HEGSETH*** (*sighs*): *Tommy* Jenkins—get your facts straight, fellas. No further questions until after tomorrow's H-bomb attack.

***JOURNALIST:*** There’s going to be a *hydrogen-bomb* attack tomorrow?
***HEGSETH:*** And you just leaked it. This is why no one trusts the media. ♦

*Teddy Wayne, a novelist and a screenwriter, is the author of “The Winner,” among other books.*

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# Fiction

- **“Love of My Days”**
  By Louise Erdrich | She knew who the man was, knew a bullet furrow when she saw one.

Fiction

# Love of My Days

**By Louise Erdrich**

May 25, 2025

*Illustration by Bill Bragg*

This happened on the table-flat plains before most farms had telephones. So these incidents came about because news travelled slow. Early one morning, Jake Weir went to town to see about a mixture of grains for his horses. When he returned to his farm and went into the house, he saw a stranger sitting at his table.

“What are you doing here?”

Both men said this at the same time.

“This is my house,” said Weir.

“You are mistaken,” said the stranger.

“I must ask you to leave,” said Weir.

“You’re the one who should leave.”

“I guess I’ll have to go back to town and get the sheriff.”

“Go get him then. I don’t care.”

The man stood up. He wasn’t large or threatening, or red-haired or dark-haired or blond. Everything about him was middling—hair, height, face, age. Weir was confused by the man’s unusual conviction, though. He half believed that the man did own the place, although he himself had bought it the previous year. Yet maybe there was some odd reason that the man had a claim. Weir got back into his good black buggy and turned around. So responsive were his two horses that he barely needed to shift his grip on the reins. He made good time and easily located the sheriff, who was at the courthouse in the presence of a judge. Weir explained the predicament, found he was in the right, and proceeded to obtain a warrant for eviction. Sheriff Flower and Deputy Otto Ponath drove out to Weir’s farmstead, with Weir following along in his buggy. By then a thin wet snow was coming down. As they entered the yard, the front door of the house gaped open, but when the horses stopped the door swung shut. The men climbed down off their rigs, and Sheriff Flower approached the house.

“May I come in and dry my feet?” he asked.

“There’s no place in here to dry your feet” was the reply.

“Well, then,” said Flower, “I want to feed my team.”

“Go to the stable and feed your team. I don’t care.”

Both men listened hard on either side of the door.

“I know who you are,” said the voice from inside, at last. “You’re Flower, the sheriff.”

“Well, who are you?” Flower asked.

Something in the sheriff’s tone deeply aggravated and frightened the man behind the door.

“I am John Timble.” The voice wavered, then gathered. “I am above the state. I am a detective. A Pinkerton.”

“All right, John. Come out,” said Flower. He lifted his revolver and stepped warily off the porch.

Out John came with a rifle on his hip. He pulled the trigger, then dropped the gun as if in alarm. The sheriff’s death was swift but not instantaneous. He still had time to fire. Later on, it was found that Flower’s bullet had struck Timble’s hand, which would have thrown off the murderer’s aim if Timble hadn’t fired in that deadly instant in which one man has desperate certainty and owns surprise. The shot startled Weir’s team of horses and they veered in unison toward the barn. Attempting to vault onto the driving seat, Weir went head first into the buggy box so that his legs were pumping in the air. The man who thought he was above the state retrieved the rifle and fired shots at Weir’s legs, sending bullets through his overshoe and cuff. The buggy stopped before a fence. Up came John Timble.

“Get out. I just want the team.”

The murderer jumped onto the seat, taking up the reins as he covered Weir with the rifle. Weir pushed himself out of the buggy and stepped away, looking not at the rifle but at his two horses. Timble drove around the yard once, and Weir watched the killer closely as he made off with the horses. At least the man knew what he was doing. Weir and Ponath ran to help Sheriff Flower but found that there was no life in him.

“What are we to do now?” said Ponath.

“You’re the deputy,” said Weir.

He went into the house and took the quilt off his bed. The two men carried Flower to the sheriff’s wagon, his body sagging dreadfully between them. They hoisted him into the wagon bed, and Weir covered him with the quilt. The men tried to hurry to town to sound the alarm, but Flower’s spooked and jangled horses seesawed back and forth. The left horse just wanted to shamble along, while the right horse pulled with frantic jerks. They weren’t even the same size.

Weir was in back with the body. His teeth rattled and he felt as if his head were going to burst. He kept tucking the quilt down over Flower’s face. He did this tenderly. He’d stood with Flower a few years before when a certain town element had tried to oust him, and now Flower had given his life in an encounter that seemed pointless and altogether Weir’s fault. He might have done a better job than Ponath with the driving, but he couldn’t leave Flower. It took them nearly a full hour to travel the seven miles, and a bit more time for Ponath to get straight the wording of the alert.

“*John Timble has killed Sheriff Flower and is running fugitive. Take him alive or dead. He is known to be armed with*”—here Ponath consulted Weir, whose weapon in Timble’s hands had killed the sheriff—“*a .38-calibre Winchester*.”

“He has plenty of ammunition,” Weir added, thinking of recent purchases he’d left in the kitchen, heat coming to his face, “and the fastest driving team in the whole damn county.”

His team consisted of the best possible combination—a mare and her foal, now a four-year-old gelding. He'd got the mare at auction for a song, no, a short tune. No one had known what she was. But Weir had seen it. Quarter horse, mustang, and possibly Morgan. Dark and wonderful. The four-year-old had a dim white streak down his back. The mare was persnickety sometimes, but her offspring always steadied her. They ran in balance and paced themselves to any deficiency in the other's mood. He'd trained them up until their gaits were matched so perfectly that sometimes he had trouble breathing for the joy.

Weir was sick about the sheriff, no question, but now the undertaker had him and there was nothing to be done. He turned his attention to what had happened and was glad the murderer, who'd been wearing Weir's best hat, his blue shirt, and his other jacket, hadn't killed him, too. However, he was beginning to regret not putting up a struggle when the man took the reins into his hands. He kept thinking back to how Timble had circled the yard before pulling onto the road. The murderer had a light and certain touch with the horses and drove pretty well, considering he'd just ended a sheriff's life.

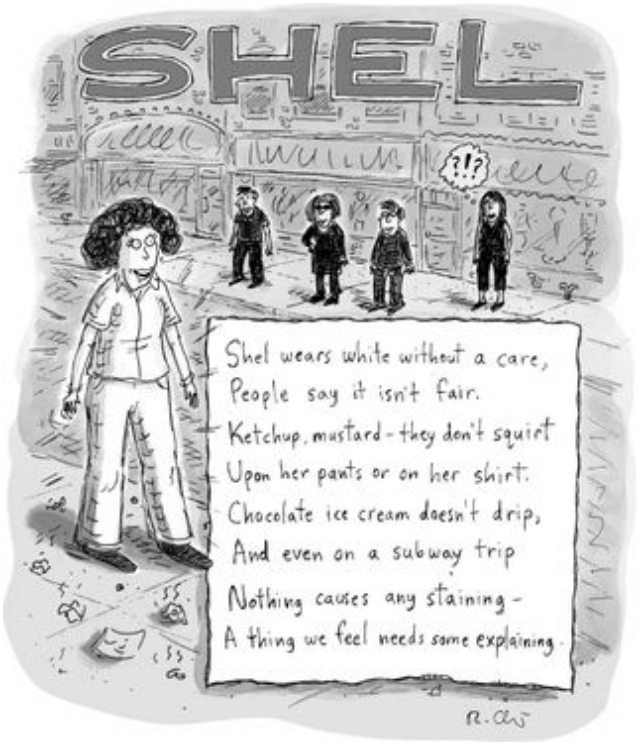
Scores of men posse'd up when they got the alert. Some on horses, some in wagons. Some marched back and forth in front of their houses and farms. It was a cold December afternoon, and it would be a cold night for those patrolling the roads and crossings. But a warm night for John Timble.

Ten days after H. W. Cherian moved his family onto a farmstead south of Tabor, he heard someone drive into the yard. H.W. had been putting in order his request for a bank loan, while his wife, Karlet, finished up a bit of midnight baking. Holding a kerosene lamp, he opened the kitchen door and spoke to a well-mannered man who had become lost in his quest to find a nearby farm. The man stepped down from the buggy with a pleasant gesture.

"I can sleep with my team in the barn if you'd give us shelter and a little food," said the man. "John Timble." He held out his hand for a shake. "My hope is that we might be neighbors." H.W. did not know the farm the man said he was looking for but explained that he'd been there only a short while.

"Luck upon you," said Timble.

Cherian thanked him.




*Cartoon by Roz Chast*

“A man can make a lot of money,” Timble observed.

“Looks like you did pretty well for yourself,” said H.W., shining the lamp on the good buggy and handsome team.

“So I have,” said Timble.

They walked into the house, and Timble nodded to Karlet. She noted that his hat and jacket were good but his trousers and shoes worn out. She recognized the farm he’d spoken of as the one her family had once owned, belonging now to someone named Weir.

“Torn on a rough board,” said Timble, opening his palm.

Karlet went to her cupboard and found a clean rag to use as a bandage and a tot of whiskey to give the man and to wash out the injury. She knew who the man was, knew a bullet furrow when she saw one. The house had no phone; whatever trouble there was she could ignore for now. So she gave him the

last of the chicken. It was a thick piece of chicken, tender and well cooked, sandwiched between two generously buttered slices of hot bread. That night John Timble slept well, on the hard kitchen floor, with a throbbing hand and the rifle beneath his blanket, but also with a warm place in his belly and the scent of still cooling bread around him. The next morning, he helped H.W. care for his stock and accepted Karlet's invitation to stay for breakfast with the family.

"I know how you like your eggs cooked," she told Timble.

The two children were setting plates down on the table. At their mother's words they spun toward her, not wondering how she could already know how their guest might like his eggs but mute with disappointment that he had been offered the eggs. Timble cast his gaze down, hid his smile.

"I don't need an egg," he said.

He'd found out while helping with the chores that a slaughtering weasel had got into the henhouse through a crack. In the heat of its bloodlust, the weasel had killed the entire flock. The hens now existed in jars packed and canned on a cellar shelf. Soup from the carcass of the one chicken that the family had spared itself bubbled on the stove, he could smell it, but eggs were few anyway in December and eggs there would be no more.

I will eat an egg soon enough, thought Timble.

Now the scent and sizzle of salt pork filled the house and soon large pieces of bread fried in the fat appeared. There was also porridge and strong hot coffee. Timble thought of the blood that had bloomed on the sheriff's chest and he asked for another cup. He drank that down.

"I must leave now," he said.

He put coins from his inner vest into the children's hands, then picked up the rifle. I was cornered but I am no killer, he thought, as he and the farmer new to the area walked out. The problem now was that he'd got himself too far south, instead of heading west toward the coteau. The problem also was that there'd been new snow and he was easy to track. The problem for a while was that he kept losing his grip on his thoughts. He'd worked on these very

farms when they had belonged to other men. He'd worked any job he could find and secured wealth for the landowners. After felling trees in northern Wisconsin, he had suddenly hopped a train back to this valley, where he'd spent the ardor of his youth. His ideas were jumbled. He'd slept cold in camps near the railroad with the hobos and the yeggers until he'd become a yegger, too. After he'd arrived in the valley, he had found himself walking to the first farm he knew, and then the next and the next in this limitless place. He hoped that the sheriff, whom he'd noticed buying licorice drops just the other day, wasn't mortally hurt.

The men took care with the buggy. As H. W. Cherian stroked the mare, he noticed the new tack.

"These horses are sheer gorgeous," he said.

They stood back to admire their rich depth of brown. Had Cherian lived there even a few more weeks he would have known who had reared and trained the team. Timble nodded his thanks, gathered up the reins, and swept his finger from his forehead to say goodbye. And all the while he and H.W., still warm from their breakfast, were being watched by two very cold men.

Weir and his friend Hartig were hiding a couple of hundred yards beyond the farmstead. They had been out all night tracking the murderer. Just an hour ago, Weir had recognized the marks of his own buggy wheels and the shoes on his horses. From a stand of trees on the east edge of the farm, they were waiting to get the jump on Timble. Weir had watched the killer lead his horses to the buggy. To his satisfaction and relief, he saw Timble harness the team back in the same position as the day before. By this he knew the man didn't want to monkey with the setup. That was the satisfaction. The relief was because the gelding's distinction was a paddle foot. In the wrong position, he might have cut his mother's foreleg in a wild chase, should such an awful situation come about. Weir prayed it would not. He breathed fervently, trying to calm himself. He and Hartig were armed only with revolvers. They meant to stop Timble as he passed them, if he set out east. To their intense disappointment, Timble headed west.

The two men rolled into the farmyard and told the family about the killed sheriff and the stolen team. H.W. was aghast, stood outside slapping his arms

as the men drove off after Timble. As Karlet well knew, a bullet had made a deep groove in the outlaw's palm. His was a hand thickened by labor, but his control of the horses and even his aim could still be spoiled. She went back to her wash. Even after it was all over, she didn't tell anyone what she knew, especially not her husband, who'd failed to repair the henhouse when they moved in. She didn't tell her children, either, but she did tell her grandchildren. They asked her to tell them many times, in fact, about the murderer who'd worked on her father's farm and who, the next time she saw him, ate the last of the weasel-killed chicken in a sandwich. She told how, the next morning, he had refused the eggs and given the children, who became their parents, coins. Karlet knew how he'd earned the coins or used to earn them—he had kept stock, pitched hay, plowed, managed the threshing teams, dug a well that had collapsed and nearly killed him. It had seemed from his matched horses and nice shirt that he'd come up in the world, and she was sorry that was not true.

Why did I say that I was a Pinkerton man? Timble asked himself this question when he noticed the wagon following. Why did I say that I was above the state? Those words had sounded fine and strong but they had belonged to a different man. A man who would take offense at the sheriff's reedy voice. No more than that. Timble's dry fury had grabbed him like a hungry spirit. In fact, he had been very hungry at the time. Now he was well fed. The wagon behind him dropped away. The road flowed along like milk pouring from a jug. He forgot what he had done. The packed snow was hard and clean, lightly dusted over. The sun was brilliant and mild on the western hills, where hardly anybody lived except Sioux Indians. Timble started thinking that he didn't want to creep up on Indians. Eventually, he turned around. He headed back toward the men who were hunting him.

Every town and most farms along the way now had the alert. Farmers were up their windmills and atop their barns and in other spots of vantage, scouting for Timble. Men were out with every variety of weapon. They were swarming along the border between Wakazonta and White Rock. A man named Budack stopped the wagon that Weir was driving and threw his carbine rifle to Hartig.

"Let's keep our heads," said Weir, alarmed. "Don't go blasting away around my horses."

“Don’t worry,” said Hartig.

“Let me take your place,” said Budack to Weir.

“No.”

Budack reached up with his powerful skinny arms, grabbed Weir’s jacket, and wrenched him off the seat. Hartig snatched up the reins, putting down the rifle. Then Budack vaulted on in Weir’s place, yelling “Git! Git!” He found the whip and used it, so that Hartig was hard put to steady the wagon. Budack picked up the rifle. He had seen Timble driving toward the crossing just ahead. The horses jumped forward. Weir ran behind the wagon. From a distance, he saw his buggy and horses with Timble driving make the crossing, and heard the shooting start.

Must be that I killed Flower, thought Timble. Now he was travelling along the snow-blown fields, past little outcrops and section roads. Again he left behind the wagon that was after him and enjoyed the flow of peace along the reins. There’d never been anything like this before in his life and he didn’t want it to end. Therefore, he hadn’t stopped when he saw men along the road trying to flag him down. He’d just sailed through the crossing and over the frozen sloughs beyond. He hadn’t thought why, but as soon as the wagons drew near again he knew. Hanging was not for a man such as himself. He was meant to drive marvellous creatures. And not yet had he asked of them the utmost! Once the shooting started up, however, he slapped the reins down lightly and thrilled to the heat of power in his hands. The horses were flying like hawks and he knew this country well, having worked these farms; if he could shake his pursuers again he wanted to visit the rolling country and small rivers just east of White Rock. He wanted to see the tall winter jackrabbits bouncing across the snow. The road faltered, and he let the horses pick their way along. He’d make up the distance, he believed, and if cornered again he still had time to kill himself.

Budack did the shooting and used his cavalry rifle. He’d been seventeen years old serving during the last of the Indian Wars. He considered himself afraid of nothing, though to tell the truth he’d only guarded starving stragglers and left when the buffalo soldiers turned everything upside down. When they relieved his company down in Sisseton, he’d quit. Since that

time, decades had passed and he'd tried everything he could think of to get a job as sheriff or deputy sheriff or any kind of official in any town at all, but people had turned away—as if there were something about him.

It was not until he threw down Weir and leaped up beside Hartig that he got his chance. He would do anything to bring down a criminal. He was furious that they'd let the man skim by. It nearly maddened him. He tried to hang on and kept shooting, reloading, shooting, whether or not he was in range. Hartig side-eyed him and told him to settle. There was rough road ahead, and they gained ground on the buggy. At one point, Weir's horses had to turn nearly sideways on the broken path. Budack had the rifle on his shoulder in that moment. He took the shot. And to bring down his man he aimed for the horse.

Why haven't they managed to shoot me yet? Timble puzzled as he went off on foot, walked and ran, stopping occasionally to try to kill the man who had jumped down to pursue him. Budack was an eager devil. He'd even fired a bullet that grazed Timble's scalp and knocked him down for a moment. Timble entered the big White Rock ravine with plenty of ammunition. The trees were glowing with hoarfrost down there, picked out golden by the low rays of sunlight. He'd got hauled out of caved earth once and went from dead to living. The years since had been gravy. Oh, it was good to be above ground. Today was like one of those dances he'd been at from time to time, where, just when you mean to leave, the music and the lights pick up. But you can't stay. Someone is waiting, he thought. I know what I had. Milk pouring from a jug. I will never have the like of that drive again. I know these farms. Ate well in my life. I've no complaint except for want of land. Yet, that bread! And also, yet. Who would take such an evil shot? Horses pull for each other and he could see the one on the left was bred from the one on the right, and they'd no call to shoot a son's mother.

A soundless drench of colors smote Timble.

Once the tack and harness were untangled, the son lifted himself away from his mother. He stood alone as he was being rubbed dry with hay. When half of you is gone, the half left behind begins its long descent into a cold strange barn. No matter how warm you get you are never warm and no matter how much you eat you are never full. You are out of harness but somehow pulling

the entire weight. At least the authority came to him. Cradled his jaw, kept running the brush along his back, made the sounds they make when they must stand up to a loss. It wasn't enough, but the man stayed near and made noises, *why if only and why and if only and if only why*—all sorts of nonsense—and gave shape to the suffering.

After the colors cleared away, Timble was surprised to see Beatril walking toward him over the snow. She was wearing her summer dress of rose pink with tiny checks; her sleeves were rolled up over her strong tanned forearms and she was wiping her hands on her apron, as if she'd just washed them. She was walking quickly, purposefully, but not running, so he didn't think that he'd been hit very badly. Her brown hair was loose, as if she'd just washed that, too. Her hair was blowing about her shoulders and as she got near to him she smiled.

"I seen your sister this very morning," he said to her.

As if this were an ordinary meeting, she made an exasperated face that was nonetheless full of love. Her fractious sister, Karlet, had been a favorite of their conversation. Each of the daughters had a name that began with the letters of the name their father had chosen, upended by the letters that their mother had insisted upon. Beatril was the oldest, then Nantiv, and at last Karlet. The farm had failed three years in a row, and they had moved to town, renting out the house and land, leaving Timble to hunt down jobs and hop trains to follow the harvest. He'd got stuck in Nebraska. Upon his return, he found that Beatril had contracted typhus and died of it. He'd walked back to the train and kept moving—east, west, and, of course, south down the harvest corridor. How the years passed. The things he'd seen and done. But he remembered best the year that he and Beatril found that she was for him and he was for her. (He'd remembered everything, times over, bucking along in boxcars.) How they'd shared a jug of ginger water in the heat of the day, how she shook off her apron and laid out a picnic of bread and apples. Before he left, they lay down in the brittle yellow grass and watched grasshoppers spring from tip to tip above their heads. In the peace of early twilight they had turned to each other.

"Love of my days."

He had said it to her then and he said it to her now. Someone's boots squeaked on the snow. Budack loomed over them, his revolver out. Kneeling beside Timble, Beatril grasped his hand and said, "Don't mind him." ♦

*Louise Erdrich is the author of books including "The Mighty Red" (2024) and the Pulitzer Prize-winning "The Night Watchman" (2020).*

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# The Critics

- **William F. Buckley, Jr., and the Invention of American Conservatism**
  By Louis Menand | A new biography traces the ascent of a man who made the postwar right at once urbane, combative, and camera-ready.
- **Briefly Noted**
  “When It All Burns,” “William Blake and the Sea Monsters of Love,” “The Emperor of Gladness,” and “The Words of Dr. L.”
- **The Self-Taught Cook Who Mastered the Flour Tortilla**
  By Hannah Goldfield | Some of the best Sonoran-style tortillas in the U.S. are being made far from the border, in a college town forty miles outside Kansas City.
- **“Your Friends and Neighbors” and the Perils of the Rich-People-Suck Genre**
  By Inkoo Kang | The Apple TV+ series, starring Jon Hamm as a hedge funder turned thief, serves up luxury porn in the guise of social critique.
- **Hugh Jackman and Liev Schreiber Star in a Pair of Psychosexual Slugfests**
  By Helen Shaw | The spirit of August Strindberg infuses Hannah Moscovitch’s “Sexual Misconduct of the Middle Classes” and Jen Silverman’s adaptation of “Creditors.”
- **“Mission: Impossible—The Final Reckoning” Goes Hard on Valediction**
  By Justin Chang | The eighth (and perhaps the last) installment in the epochal Tom Cruise vehicle suffers from self-indulgent gravitas, but the best sequences are a model of action cinema at its purest.

**Books**

# William F. Buckley, Jr., and the Invention of American Conservatism

*A new biography traces the ascent of a man who made the postwar right at once urbane, combative, and camera-ready.*

***By Louis Menand***

*May 26, 2025*

*His ambition was to be, above all, a writer. But Buckley's true celebrity derived from being a show unto himself.Photograph by Jan Lukas*

The January 31, 1983, issue of *The New Yorker* carried the first installment of a two-part article titled "Overdrive." The piece was autobiographical, written in the form of a journal covering a week in the life of the author, who was William F. Buckley, Jr. It began:

> *Monday*
>
> Gloria Cervantes, our Mexican-American cook, brought my lunch in on a tray: two pieces of whole-wheat toast, each topped with tuna fish and then with a cheese something that my wife, Pat, read about somewhere; a salad; a half bottle of Côte Rôtie (I remember the name of the wine only because it's the one I have in half bottles), and coffee.

Thus deliciously launched, the article proceeded, over many pages (it was the age of print; magazines had many pages), to tell its readers about the steps the author took to have his limousine customized; his recent purchase of a thirty-six-foot sloop, the Patito; his annual ski vacations in Gstaad; his basement Jacuzzi and thirty-foot swimming pool ("the most beautiful indoor swimming pool this side of Pompeii"); his loyal driver, Jerry, a retired New York City fireman ("In fifteen years, I have never heard him complain—not even about his brain-damaged but apparently contented daughter, whom he permits to sit with him in the front seat, but only on weekends and when the car is empty or I alone occupy it"); and Pat Buckley's bespoke Bloody Mary mix, which calls for Campbell's Beef Broth. Accept no substitutes.

Along the way, names are dropped with a gilded clatter:

> I think it's probably true to say that no one in the world knows *both* John Kenneth Galbraith and Milton Friedman better than I do.
>
> David Niven bounds over, and we embrace, French style, and gabble as we walk into the sunroom.
>
> Tonight, Pat and I (and others) are guests of Joseph and Estée Lauder at a benefit for the New York City Ballet at the New York State Theatre.
>
> Timothy Leary called, but didn't leave a return number. (That often happens.)

Buckley was a political opinionator—that was pretty much his sole occupation—and "Overdrive" is designed, as the title suggests, to allow us to ride along during the impressively busy yet somehow effortless (one senses a large staff toiling in the background) routine of a man who wrote three nationally syndicated newspaper columns a week; edited a biweekly political magazine (*National Review*); hosted a weekly public-affairs television show ("Firing Line"); published, in the course of his lifetime, some fifty books, or things sold as books; and was constantly flying off to speaking engagements around the country, up to seventy of them a year.

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At a time when the unemployment rate topped ten per cent, "Overdrive" had Buckley enjoying his half bottles and his sloop—and perpetually mulling over the contents of the always imminent next column, speech, or television program. And so, interspersed with the personal and social vignettes, there is a sprinkling of debaters' points and soundbites.

The juxtapositions can be a bit startling. For example:

> It is much easier to convey the image of a single child or mother blasted to eternity as a result of the bombing in Vietnam than successfully to communicate the quality of life of Ivan Denisovich multiplied by a factor of ten to fifteen million in a camp to which CBS cameras have no access.

Then, in the very next sentence:

> I completed my notes and ate the perfect chicken sandwich Gloria Cervantes brought me, with a glass of cool white wine. Pat came in, en route to her lunch, and we discussed the weekend plans, and she told me *now don't forget* that my black tie and cummerbund were in the pocket of my tux, and I promised I'd remember, and walked down the stairs with her, saw her out, and dangled for a minute over the harpsichord.

The *harpsichord*? It was, we learn, “proclaimed . . . the finest ever made by John Challis, that shy little harpsichord-maker with Parkinson’s disease, who twice, before dying, in 1974, came to tune and voice the instrument.” It’s all believable, because you can’t make this stuff up.

“Overdrive” was actually the fourth memoir Buckley published in *The New Yorker*. They are all a little cringey, but they meant a lot to Buckley, because he regarded *The New Yorker* as the cynosure of good writing (no dispute there) and considered himself to be, above all, a writer. As he was no doubt at some level aware, a lot of his political writing was either hot takes on topics he was not always terribly well informed about or, in longer form, cobbled-together work. He had a knack for sounding knowledgeable, but he disliked doing research. He bragged that he could write a newspaper column in twenty minutes and a whole book while on vacation in Gstaad—probably not things one should say publicly.

“Overdrive” was catnip to parodists. Prudence Crowther’s sendup, in *The New York Review of Books*, began, “At 6 *AM* Carmina Burana, our serf, tiptoes in with my tray. She is small, mute, and as usual radiant with contentment, which we love. I nod warmly but say nothing.” Still, Buckley knew how to turn a phrase, and “Overdrive” is written with panache. This (one hopes) was what appealed to the magazine’s editor, William Shawn, who personally edited Buckley’s pieces. They are fun to read. Buckley was often imitated, but at heart he was inimitable. Who else could segue fluidly from a dead Vietnamese mother not just to a harpsichord but to a harpsichord-maker with Parkinson’s?

And people liked him—even people, and he was friends with many, who did not share his politics. Although he was ruthless as a debater and rarely pulled a punch, offstage he was thoughtful, generous, and warm, not only to the celebrities of whose acquaintance he boasted but to the people he worked with and who worked for him. On “Firing Line,” he especially enjoyed debating adversaries who, like him, were performers: Norman Mailer, Germaine Greer, Christopher Hitchens. He counted Zero Mostel, who was once blacklisted as a suspected Communist, a good friend.

Buckley’s financial circumstances—he eventually made money as a writer, but his parents were wealthy and his wife’s parents were even wealthier—

allowed him to be a bon vivant, and he invited others to share in his version of the good life, about which he saw no reason to pretend embarrassment. Although he gave advice to political candidates, and worked closely with a few, he knew that, at bottom, he was an entertainer, not a thinker or a politician. In 1965, near the height of his celebrity, he ran for mayor of New York City. Asked by reporters what he would do if he won, he said, "Demand a recount."

But "Overdrive" was not just a lark. Behind the swagger and the nonchalance, there was a point that Buckley was somewhat desperately trying to make. For he drops one name more assiduously than all the others:

> The telephone operator says would I hang on for a minute, which I do, and presently my old friend the Commander-in-Chief is on the line.

This was, of course, Ronald Reagan, then in the second year of his Presidency.

A friendship between a man who presented as a cornball high-school football coach and a man who presented as an overgrown preppie seems improbable. For Reagan genuinely was a cornball. He kept a jar of jelly beans on his desk in the Oval Office, and he began every day by reading the comic strips. He did not make himself out to be a sophisticate. And Buckley was genuinely a preppie. No one would have thought to call him "the Gipper." During the mayoral race, it emerged that Buckley didn't know who Mickey Mantle was—and Mantle was still playing.

But five columns of "Overdrive" are devoted to an account of Buckley accompanying Nancy Reagan, Ron, Jr., and Ron's wife, Doria, to the eight-and-a-half-hour Royal Shakespeare production of "Nicholas Nickleby" on Broadway. ("Everything about going to the theatre with a First Lady is made enormously easy—no tickets to buy or crowds to thread through." Sweet.) Along the way, we learn that the Reagans spent the Thanksgiving of 1976 at the Buckley family home, where the men played touch football.

In fact, Buckley and Reagan seem to have had a bona-fide friendship. As is often the way with bona-fide friendships, it was also a friendship of mutual convenience. Reagan was a regular reader of *National Review*, and he was

undoubtedly happy to have the political support of an erudite East Coast socialite who used big words and went to Yale, someone whose alliance might convince Republican blue bloods that a former sportscaster, movie actor, and television pitchman was their kind of Republican. And, as the editor of a diehard conservative publication, Buckley also protected Reagan on the far right, or as far right as it was seemly for him to go.

For Buckley, who'd had to struggle to pretend that Richard Nixon was a true conservative—at least Nixon was anti-Communist, he used to tell himself, but then Nixon went to China and broke Buckley's heart—Reagan's election was a consummation he had labored thirty years in the political wilderness to bring about. Reagan was the pot of gold at the end of Buckley's rainbow. He could forgive a few jelly beans. "Overdrive" may have been as understated a way as Buckley could find to claim his share of the credit for Reagan's success.

That story, the triumph of twentieth-century American conservatism, with Buckley in a starring role, is the story Sam Tanenhaus tells in "Buckley: The Life and the Revolution That Changed America" (Random House)—a long (a thousand pages, though it reads shorter), well-written, and intelligent take, both critical and admiring, on a complicated man. The book is a history of postwar American political life in the form of a biography of one of its actors. One relives a lot, and one learns a lot.

"He gave us Reagan" is the standard narrative line on Buckley. It is the line in John Judis's earlier biography, "William F. Buckley: Patron Saint of the Conservatives" (1988), also a very good book. Still, we are left wondering whether the rainbow hasn't actually landed us in a very different sort of pot.

"It simply happens to be the case that I have never in my entire life been without servants, maids, and chauffeurs," Buckley wrote, responding to those who rolled their eyes at "Overdrive." The Buckleys are associated with Connecticut, where he grew up (Sharon), went to college (New Haven), and spent his married life (Stamford). But the family was Southern, and it helps to see them that way.

The Bushes moved from Connecticut to Texas; the Buckleys went the other direction. William F. Buckley, Sr.—Will—was a Texan (his father was a

sheriff) who made a fortune in oil, first in Mexico, then in Venezuela. His wife, Aloise Steiner, came from Louisiana. Both were devout Catholics. They settled in Sharon when Will opened a New York office.

Their house, called Great Elm, was grand and well staffed. Will lived in the city during the week and travelled often. The children—there were eventually ten; Bill was the sixth—saw little of him, though when he was around he loomed large. Aloise was, Tanenhaus writes, “ever just out of reach,” and the children relied on their nannies. Bill’s was Mexican, and he spoke Spanish before English. He was sent to school in Paris at age six, where he picked up French, and in Britain at seven. Hence the much imitated, never quite placeable accent.

The Buckleys also owned a former plantation in Camden, South Carolina—Kamchatka, once the home of a Confederate general—which they visited regularly and where they felt more at ease than in Yankee New England. South Carolina was, needless to say, a Jim Crow state. A family friend recalled visiting in 1949 and seeing “black people trimming the hedges, tipping their hats.” For several years in the nineteen-fifties, the family quietly supported a local paper aligned with the segregationist White Citizens’ Council. The Buckleys were known for being generous to their Black help. They were genteel segregationists.

Will Buckley’s antisemitism, by contrast, was not genteel. “He despised Jews with an intensity he made no effort to conceal,” Tanenhaus writes. He saw them as Communists and money-grubbers, and the children absorbed the message. One night in 1937, four of Bill’s older siblings burned a cross outside a Jewish resort in Amenia, New York. Bill was upset that he hadn’t been included. He later dismissed it as “a Halloween prank.” This was four years into the Third Reich.

To Will, Communists were a greater threat than Nazis. He opposed U.S. entry into the Second World War, was an isolationist, and belonged to the America First Committee. Another America Firster, Charles Lindbergh, a eugenicist and a champion of the white race, was a family hero.

Bill attended the Millbrook School, served nearly two years in the Army (the war ended before he could be sent overseas), and entered Yale in 1946.

He thrived. He became the chairman of the *Yale Daily News*, a member of Skull and Bones, and a champion debater. Tanenhaus calls him “the uncrowned king of the Yale campus.” In 1950, the year he graduated, he married Pat Taylor, the Sorbonne-educated daughter of a Canadian industrialist.

Having inherited his father’s uncompromising politics, Buckley liked posing as a right-wing radical—a reputation he would cement with the publication of his first book, “God and Man at Yale,” an attack on the liberalism of the Yale professoriat. But that reputation for radicalism was a little misleading. When Buckley arrived, a quarter of Yale students were legacies, and a third had gone to prep schools. In 1948, eighty-eight per cent supported Thomas E. Dewey for President; four per cent backed Harry Truman. Conservative opinion had plenty of room to breathe at Yale. What set Buckley apart was less his politics than his Catholicism.

“God and Man at Yale,” published and promoted with financial help from Will Buckley, likely made a bigger splash than its author expected—certainly bigger than it deserved. It’s a highly ad-hominem affair, naming names and calling for the dismissal of professors who didn’t promote Christianity as the true religion or capitalism as the proper economic system—professors whom Buckley accused of orchestrating “a deft, left-wing manipulation of an insensate and tractable student body.”

To the defense that such faculty were protected by academic freedom, Buckley replied that academic freedom was a “hoax.” Yale, he argued, had its own orthodoxy—secularism and collectivism—and alumni should force a purge by threatening to withhold donations.


*“They’re onto our good-cop, bad-cop trick. One of you will have to love-bomb and one of you will have to neg.”*
*Cartoon by Maddie Dai*

The book is sloppy, but the Yale administration overreacted. It arranged for McGeorge Bundy, an alumnus, to write a takedown in *The Atlantic Monthly*, where Bundy called Buckley “a twisted and ignorant young man.” A print controversy erupted, and within weeks “God and Man at Yale” was a New York *Times* best-seller, and “William F. Buckley, Jr.” had become a brand. The book remains in print seventy-four years later.

Buckley’s next project was a four-hundred-page defense of Joe McCarthy, co-written with L. Brent Bozell, his Yale classmate and brother-in-law. “McCarthy and His Enemies: The Record and Its Meaning” appeared in March, 1954, just as McCarthy was at the height of his powers, harassing the federal government with claims of Communist infiltration. (Buckley and Bozell sent him an advance copy of the book. “It’s too intellectual for me,” McCarthy said.)

They were careful not to defend McCarthy the man—an alcoholic, a fabricator, a political thug whose inquisitions destroyed reputations but yielded no convicted spies. They instead defended “McCarthyism” as “a movement around which men of good will and stern morality may close ranks.” They called for the Communist Party to be outlawed (it never has been), and stopped just short of arguing that expressing Communist ideas should be a crime.

But a month after the book's release the Army-McCarthy hearings began—a televised spectacle that effectively ended McCarthy's career. Eight months later, the Senate censured him, and he was finished. The book was widely panned.

Buckley was undaunted. A year later—again with financial help from his father—he started *National Review*. He recruited reliable anti-Communists, including James Burnham, a former Trotskyist whose book "The Managerial Revolution" was a big influence on George Orwell's "1984," and Whittaker Chambers, an ex-Communist who had named Alger Hiss as a Soviet spy in the case that launched Nixon's career. (Tanenhaus is the author of a well-regarded biography of Chambers.)

But Buckley also welcomed literary talent to his pages: Joan Didion, Arlene Croce, Garry Wills, George Will, the literary critic Hugh Kenner, and John Leonard, a Harvard dropout who joined *National Review* at nineteen and went on to become a legendary editor of the *Times Book Review.*

It was lonely on the right in the postwar years. Eisenhower didn't dismantle the New Deal bureaucracy or take hard-line measures against the Soviets. The first sign that conservatism might gain national traction came in 1964, when Barry Goldwater ran for President.

*National Review* embraced Goldwater. Bozell ghostwrote his campaign book, "The Conscience of a Conservative," a hit with college students. But Goldwater was crushed in the general election, winning just 38.5 per cent of the vote. The man who crushed him, Lyndon B. Johnson, working with a Democratic Congress, expanded the federal government even further. Early in the decade, the youth had looked as if they might swing right. They swung left instead.

Despite these headwinds, in April, 1966, Buckley launched "Firing Line." One of his first guests was Norman Thomas, probably the best-known socialist in America. He had run for President six times. (Thomas was eighty-one, and Buckley was aggressive and belittling—not a great start.) The show would remain on the air for thirty-three years, a television record for a program of its kind.

“Firing Line” never made a profit. (Neither did *National Review*.) The audience was small, and for a portion of its run the show was carried on PBS—awkward, since its host was generally an opponent of government spending. But it is fair, if a little oxymoronic, to call “Firing Line” a serious effort at political entertainment.

Much of success in life is owed to quickness, and Buckley was quick. Debate was his preferred medium of exposition, and he would take on anyone who could talk back to him. People who could not bored him. The liberal activist Allard Lowenstein was on his show nine times. Eldridge Cleaver, Huey Newton, Muhammad Ali, and Jesse Jackson were all guests. So was George Wallace, although Buckley hated Wallace and refused to shake his hand. You did not see people like that on television very often in the days before cable. The commercial networks would have pulled the plug on Eldridge Cleaver very fast.

And the rumpled, rubber-faced manner, the popping eyes, the languorous drawl, the charmingly wicked grin he flashed when he thought he had scored a kill—Buckley was a show unto himself. Tanenhaus calls him a “performing ideologue.” He was compared to Andy Warhol, and some observers detected an element of camp. What other conservative intellectual in those years had telegenic powers like that? Heather Hendershot, in “Open to Debate” (2016), a smart book with a light touch, calls “Firing Line” a “gateway drug to conservatism.” It kept conservative ideas alive, and Buckley visible, in a liberal decade.

It’s interesting, therefore, that Buckley owes much of his lasting celebrity to two debates he lost—one with James Baldwin, at Cambridge University, in 1965, and one with Gore Vidal, at the 1968 Democratic National Convention. In the first, he was outclassed; in the second, he lost his cool.

Buckley had stated his position on civil rights in 1957, in a *National Review* editorial headlined “Why the South Must Prevail” (“South” meaning, of course, white people). The question, he wrote,

> is whether the White community in the South is entitled to take such measures as are necessary to prevail, politically and culturally, in areas where it does not predominate numerically? The sobering answer is

> *Yes*—the White community is so entitled because, for the time being, it is the advanced race.

In 1963, when Baldwin's "The Fire Next Time" came out (much of it was serialized in *The New Yorker*), Buckley published a column titled "A Call to Lynch the White God," in which he called Baldwin "an eloquent menace," a revolutionary, and an America-hater. And, in December, 1964, five months after the passage of the Civil Rights Act, *National Review* ran a cover story entitled "Negroes, Intelligence and Prejudice." It concluded that, whatever the reasons for racial differences, biological or environmental, "the needs of Negro children would be met best . . . by separate education."

Buckley disapproved of civil disobedience and regarded Martin Luther King, Jr., as a criminal. "Word should be gently got to the non-violent avenger Dr. King," he once wrote, "that in the unlikely event that he succeeds in mobilizing his legions, they will be most efficiently, indeed most zestfully repressed."

At Cambridge, Buckley vastly underrated Baldwin's skills in debate. Baldwin had been a child preacher in Harlem; like his friend Dr. King, he knew how to read a room. The topic of the debate was "The American dream is at the expense of the American Negro," a subject custom-made for Baldwin. He used a rhetorical device that many members of subordinated groups have used: he made himself into the personification of a people. "*I* picked the cotton," he declared at the climax of his speech. "*I* carried it to the market, and *I* built the railroads under someone else's whip for nothing. For nothing." Baldwin spoke for twenty-four minutes and was given a two-minute standing ovation from an overflow audience.

Buckley was on next, and he was clearly shaken. He plainly did not know what to do with an opponent who had transformed himself into an entire race, and much of his response was an attack on Baldwin (who had completely ignored Buckley)—as though the history of slavery and Jim Crow could be addressed by finding things to criticize in Baldwin's books. As was the custom, a vote was taken after the debate: Baldwin 544, Buckley 164. Buckley never let it go. He always claimed that the debate was a setup by anti-Americans. He may have lost the vote, he told Garry Wills a few years later, but "I never gave one goddam *inch*."

The Buckley-Vidal fiasco came about because ABC, in those days the poorest network, could not afford complete coverage of the Democratic National Convention, and so it enlisted Buckley and Vidal as rival commentators on the proceedings. The gimmick worked as a ratings booster; Tanenhaus says that ABC drew as many as ten million viewers a night. Otherwise, it was poor casting. Neither man cared about the reputation of ABC, and they already hated each other. They'd had a run-in on Jack Paar's "Tonight Show" in 1962 that left Buckley bitter. He felt that Vidal and Paar had ganged up on him.

The 1968 Convention was, of course, the scene of the Chicago police clash with antiwar protesters, and the riots became a subject for Vidal and Buckley's debate. At one point, Vidal called Buckley a "crypto-Nazi," and got the reaction he hoped for. "Now listen, you queer," Buckley shouted. "Stop calling me a crypto-Nazi or I'll sock you in your goddam face and you'll stay plastered." Vidal stared at Buckley during this outburst with the expression of a cat that has just swallowed a very large canary. He could barely believe his luck. They were contracted to do one more night on the air; ABC separated them with a curtain.

In 1968, the Republican Party was still dominated by liberals like Nelson Rockefeller and John Lindsay. Buckley loathed Lindsay, a fellow-Yalie. One of the reasons—possibly the main reason—he ran for mayor of New York City on the Conservative Party ticket was to throw the race to the Democrat, Abe Beame. (Lindsay won anyway.) Meanwhile, the civil-rights movement split the Democratic coalition—its Southern wing peeled off, never to return—and Vietnam fractured the liberals. It was just enough for Richard Nixon to win the Presidency in an election where George Wallace carried five states.

Buckley was involved in the Nixon campaign and, after Nixon was elected, consorted with Nixon's national-security adviser, Henry Kissinger, whom he had known since 1954. Buckley sensed that Nixon was playing him, that he only pretended to listen to his advice. Kissinger certainly played him, as he played everybody. He kept Buckley on board by convincing him that getting out of Vietnam and opening relations with China weren't betrayals of the anti-Communist cause. Kissinger, too, knew how to perform.

Besides, Buckley counted Kissinger a friend, and he was loyal to friends. This would become a problem for him with Watergate. After graduating from Yale, Buckley had served briefly in the C.I.A. with Howard Hunt, who ran the White House's dirty-tricks operation, and he knew more about the affair than he let on. Nixon's resignation, in 1974, must have come as something of a relief.

Buckley had first met Ronald Reagan in 1961, and saw him again in 1965—the year Buckley lost the mayoral race and the year before Reagan was elected governor of California. Unlike Goldwater and Nixon, Reagan was a political novice, and, when he began planning to run for the White House, he sought Buckley out. Like most of us, Buckley liked being sought out. A relationship began. Unlike Nixon and Goldwater, Reagan had telegenic powers, too. He looked to be a bandwagon worth boarding. He ran against Gerald Ford in the primaries in 1976, which put his name on the political map. In 1980, he cruised to the nomination and defeated Jimmy Carter in the general election, carrying forty-four states. Over the rainbow?

Not exactly. Tanenhaus's book devotes eight hundred and thirty-five pages to Buckley's life up to Reagan's first term and just thirty pages to the rest. Buckley died in 2008. Some twenty-five years are nearly missing. (Judis's biography has the same lopsided shape, but he wrote it when Buckley was still alive.) It wasn't as though Buckley was inactive, but he was no longer at the center of American political life. He was no longer interesting.

This may be because, once he identified with the establishment, Buckley lost his outsider's edge. It may be because the New Right that was associated with Reaganism looked on Buckley with suspicion. It may be because the liberal punching bags of the nineteen-fifties and sixties were gone, replaced by neoliberals like Bill Clinton, who made for a more elusive target. But somehow Buckley seemed to have found himself on the shelf.

Buckley's political philosophy was always simple. He stated it in the preface to "God and Man at Yale":

> I myself believe that the duel between Christianity and atheism is the most important in the world. I further believe that the struggle between

> individualism and collectivism is the same struggle reproduced on another level.

That was what he meant by conservatism. He did not develop his views much from there. He was very good at picking apart other people's political programs, but he did not have a program of his own.

Buckley was suave, and he mellowed somewhat in his later years, but at heart he was a zealot. Many of his political positions align today not with Reagan but with Trump. You might think he would be offended by the bullying and thuggishness of the Trump Administration, but McCarthy was a bully and a thug, and Buckley never repudiated him. He was opposed to government programs and, in theory, at least, he would have taken pleasure in watching the federal bureaucracy destroyed. (Reagan, for all his "the government is the problem" talk, did not eliminate a single major federal program in his eight years in office.) Buckley would certainly have approved of putting universities into government receivership and purging the leftists. That's what he had urged in "God and Man at Yale."

In foreign affairs, Buckley was essentially an isolationist, except where Communism was involved, in which cases he was a military maximalist: he advocated using nuclear weapons in Vietnam and wanted the government to declare war on Cuba. He thought that Black people complained too much, that the federal government should stay out of race relations, and that Black leaders were tearing down America. He supported South African apartheid, and thought that opposition to it, which he termed "black racism," was being fomented by Communists. Asked when he thought Africans would be ready for independence from colonial rule, he said, only semi-facetiously, "When they stop eating each other."

He tried for years to write a serious work of political thought, but eventually he realized that he was a pit bull, not a poodle. He did start writing such a book, but he seems to have completed only about ten thousand words before giving up. It was to be called "The Revolt Against the Masses," and its argument was that the vote should be restricted to the educated classes—government by an élite.

Buckley believed that the great threat to civilization was egalitarianism. He once said that the suffering of the man who lost his “Mona Lisa” was no less than the suffering of the man who has to sleep under a bridge. He was personally generous to the underprivileged. He just thought that they should not be allowed to participate in the political process. Since democracy is pretty much the essence of the American experiment, it seems fair to say that Buckley was, at bottom, anti-American.

This is often the case with people who make a big show of patriotism. We can “make America great again”—if we only get rid of due process, or judicial review, or the separation of powers, or birthright citizenship, or the freedom of the press. We might be great if we got rid of some or all of those things. But we would no longer be America. ♦

*Louis Menand is a staff writer at The New Yorker. His books include “The Free World: Art and Thought in the Cold War,” released in 2021, and “The Metaphysical Club,” which was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for history.*

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**Books**

# Briefly Noted

*“When It All Burns,” “William Blake and the Sea Monsters of Love,” “The Emperor of Gladness,” and “The Words of Dr. L.”*

*May 26, 2025*


**When It All Burns**, *by Jordan Thomas (Riverhead)*. Centered on the author’s experience with an élite team of firefighters, this analysis of California’s wildfires entwines an account of the state’s 2021 fire season with an appraisal of its record of fire suppression. Thomas, who is also an anthropologist, contends that flawed environmental policy, climate-change denial, corporate profiteering, and the genocide of Indigenous people—who, through controlled burning, nurtured a biodiverse landscape largely protected from destruction—established the conditions for today’s calamitous “megafires.” Wedding anthropological research and elegant descriptions of the natural world, Thomas builds an argument for a clear solution: “igniting more of the land.”


**William Blake and the Sea Monsters of Love**, *by Philip Hoare (Pegasus).* The artist, poet, and printmaker William Blake, who fused word and image in such visionary works as “Songs of Innocence and of Experience,” lived through the French, American, and industrial revolutions. Though Hoare’s book takes up the events of Blake’s life—including his marriage and his lack of commercial success—it is not so much a cradle-to-grave account as it is a compendium of his influence on other artists and thinkers, from Derek Jarman to Iris Murdoch to James Joyce to the pre-Raphaelites. Hoare celebrates Blake and his “fantastical ideas,” and relates his own awe as he seeks out the artist’s surviving prints and looks through a pair of the man’s spectacles.

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## What We’re Reading

*Illustration by Ben Hickey*

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

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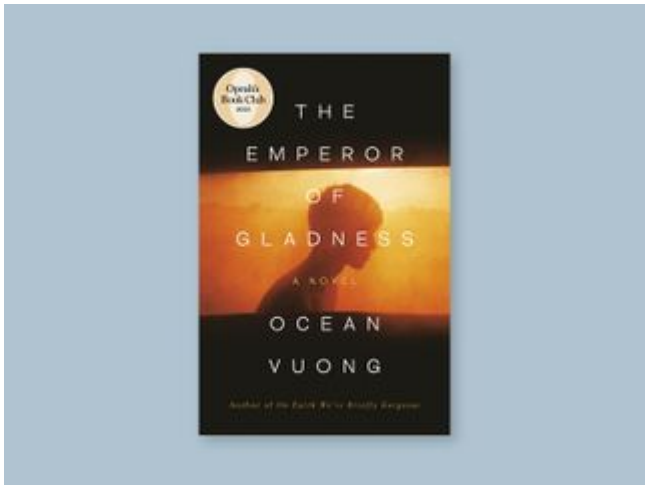
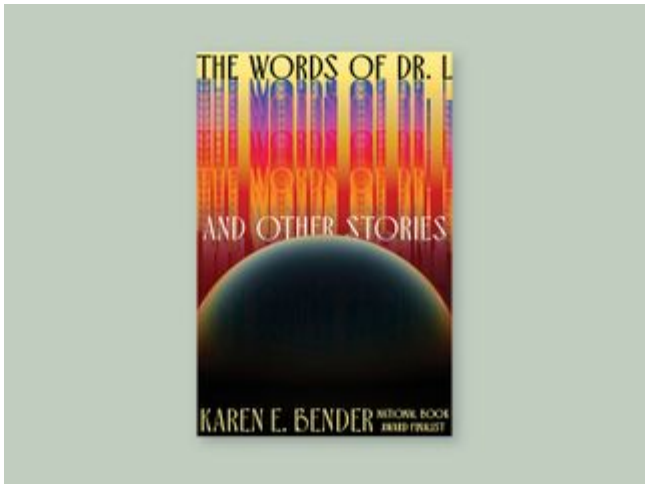



**The Emperor of Gladness**, *by Ocean Vuong (Penguin Press)*. In this novel, a Vietnamese American writer best known for his poetry draws on his own experiences as a fast-food worker. Vuong's protagonist, Hai, is a drug-addicted college dropout living in the fictional town of East Gladness, Connecticut. After he forms an unlikely bond with an elderly widow from Lithuania, whose house he moves into, he begins working at a fast-food restaurant, HomeMarket, where all of the employees are, like him, searching for some kind of home. The novel brims with feeling for these figures, who, though scorned by society, belong to it nonetheless. As Hai tells another character, being flawed "is actually what's most common. It's the majority of who we are, what everybody is."




**The Words of Dr. L**, *by Karen E. Bender (Counterpoint)*. These often speculative stories take place in worlds in which troubling features of our own are amplified. In one, a young woman living under laws "enforcing

motherhood” searches for incantatory words that will end her pregnancy. In another, people “unduly burdened” by feelings of shame have those feelings excised by “noninvasive laser technology” and transferred to shameless government officials, in a societal gambit to improve governance. Beyond the collection’s interest in political commentary, what most animates it is familial heartache. In a particularly affecting tale, the protagonist sees her ailing father and truly grasps that parents and children are “together just temporarily.”

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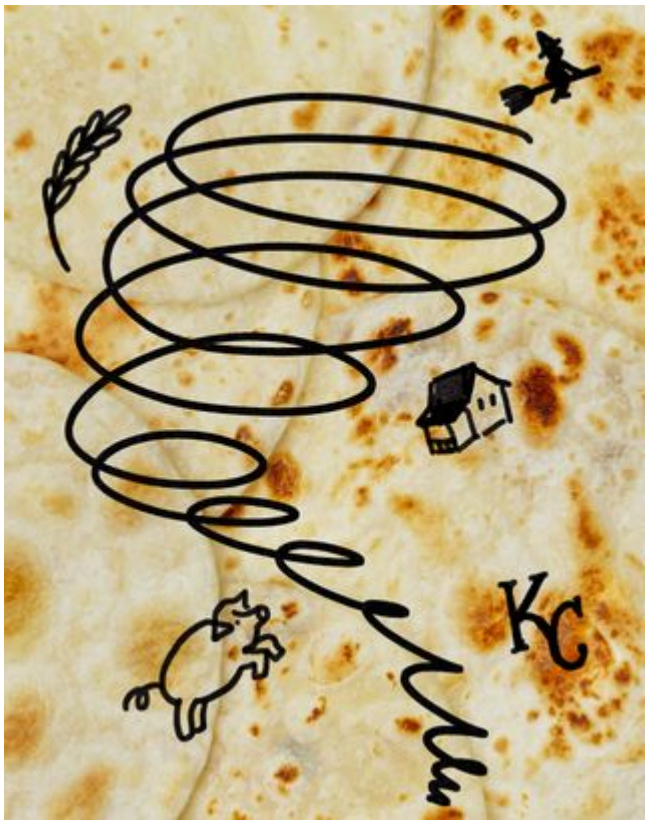
**On and Off the Menu**

# The Self-Taught Cook Who Mastered the Flour Tortilla

Some of the best Sonoran-style tortillas in the U.S. are being made far from the border, in a college town forty miles outside Kansas City.

**By Hannah Goldfield**

May 26, 2025




*Sonoran tortillas are marked by "gauziness—I can see the sun through them," a connoisseur said.Photo illustration by Jason Fulford and Tamara Shopsin*

As a kid growing up in Hermosillo, the biggest city in the arid northern Mexican state of Sonora, Ruben Leal took the region's signature flour tortillas for granted. You could find them not only in tortillerias—where veteran makers would flip them, sometimes bare-handed, on a ripping-hot

*comal*—but also at any of the city's *abbarotes*, or corner stores, where "they have fresh ones that the tortilla lady dropped off early in the morning," Leal told me. *Tortillas de harina*, made with freshly milled wheat and pork fat or vegetable shortening, were essential for staples like tacos, burritos, and *caramelos*—a Sonoran quesadilla made with carne asada—but they were also delicious enough to eat plain.

In 2002, Leal moved to Tucson, where he studied marketing at the University of Arizona and met the woman he would marry. They moved to Austin, where Leal got his tortilla fix at the Texas grocery chain H-E-B, which makes them fresh. A few years later, the couple moved again, this time to Lawrence, Kansas, a college town some forty miles west of Kansas City, not far from where Leal's wife grew up. The area's Mexican population is relatively small, and the dish known as the "Kansas City taco" is a mid-century relic: a deep-fried, hard corn shell with ground beef, shredded lettuce, and cheese powder. "I kept getting farther away from the border and the tortillas kept getting worse," Leal told me recently, standing in the Lawrence headquarters of his company, Caramelo, which has lately emerged as one of the best producers of tortillas in the U.S.

In the center of a cavernous room, an employee was loading dozens of golf-ball-size mounds of dough into an enormous machine reminiscent of an early printing press, outfitted with hot steel plates that flattened and cooked them, then spat the finished products onto a long mesh conveyor belt. A floor fan cooled the tortillas—Caramelo produces some fifteen thousand flour tortillas a day—as they were ferried to a packaging station. Leal, who is forty, tall, and broad-shouldered, with a pair of delicate nose rings and a low ponytail, plucked one off the belt and handed it to me. It steamed gently as I bit into it—stretchy, supple, and gossamer-thin, pocked with bubbles and rich with the creamy tang of animal fat.

The night before, I'd eaten a burrito, made with a Caramelo tortilla, at a Kansas City restaurant called Tacos Valentina. I told Leal that the tortilla—which was charred and filled with beans and chile-colorado-stewed pork—was almost as flaky as a laminated French pastry. Leal, laughing, said, "Yeah, some people call them the croissants of tortillas." His machinery is customized to allow for exacting temperature control. "Because our tortillas

are very specific, a lot of machines don’t like them,” he said. “They puff up really easily, because of the water and fat content.” Containing the heat means that the tortillas keep their structural integrity, though, to Leal’s chagrin, it sacrifices the burnished freckles you’d see on a handmade version.

Leal decided to try making his own tortillas in 2014, on a day when he felt particularly homesick and bored by his job, as an administrator in the chemistry department at the University of Kansas. His first attempt, guided by a YouTube video, missed the mark on both flavor and texture, but he got the general idea: mix, roll, flatten, cook. “I didn’t know I liked working with food until I moved to Kansas,” he told me. As he experimented with different proportions of flour, water, salt, and fat, he became obsessed. After his mother died, in 2016, he claimed an old tabletop electric tortilla press from her kitchen in Hermosillo; the tool gave his tortillas the uniform shape and texture he’d been looking for, and also allowed him to dramatically increase his output. He began to wonder if he could sell them.

Before he had bags or a logo, Leal met with buyers at the Merc, Lawrence’s coöperative grocery store, toting a tortilla warmer full of freshly cooked samples. The buyers immediately agreed to start carrying them. Not long afterward, he offered samples to Alejandra de la Fuente, a native of Mexico City and the chef and owner of a Kansas City restaurant called Red Kitchen. She had been hunting as far as Denver for a fresh flour tortilla that met her standards, and was on the verge of giving up. “As soon as he pulled out the tortilla, I was, like, ‘That’s exactly what I was looking for,’ ” she told me. Soon, Leal was on the hook for dozens of tortillas a week. After clocking out from his day job, he would spend hours at a rented commercial kitchen, and then continue making tortillas at home, sometimes until 2 *a.m.* “My wife was, like, ‘Why is it so smoky in here?’ ” he recalled. (They’re now amicably divorced.)

Today, Leal supplies tortillas to restaurants, specialty shops, and home cooks around the country, in a range of sizes and made with a variety of fats, including avocado oil and duck fat. Many of his clients are in New York, including the Mexican master chef Enrique Olvera, who uses them at Esse Taco, his Brooklyn taqueria, for burritos stuffed with grilled rib eye or

smoked mushrooms. When I asked Olvera what he liked about the Caramelo tortilla, he shrugged as if it were obvious. “It’s like getting a warm hug from your grandmother,” he said. Leal told me proudly, “One of the most flattering things is that restaurants from Mexico are setting up businesses in the U.S., and they’re reaching out to us for tortillas. And they even tell us that ours are better than what they’re getting down there.”

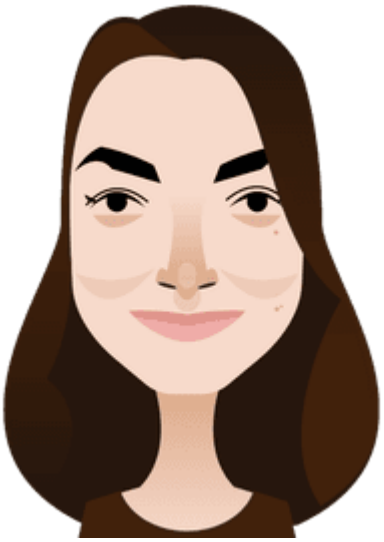
For much of my life, I was a corn-tortilla partisan. All the exceptional tortillas I’d eaten were made from sweet, nutty masa, the base for the tantalizingly restrained tacos you might get at a street cart, with just a scattering of carnitas, onions, and cilantro. I associated flour tortillas with maximalist dishes at middling Tex-Mex restaurants, and with the “ethnic” aisle at the grocery store, where the offerings are mostly pale and doughy, packed with preservatives that rob them of texture and flavor. That changed when I visited a taqueria in L.A. called Sonoratown, opened in 2016 by Jennifer Feltham and her husband, Teodoro Diaz-Rodriguez, Jr., a native of Sonora. (The name also refers to the bygone L.A. neighborhood of Sonoratown, where a community of Mexican immigrants settled after the Gold Rush.) The tortillas there, made with flour that Feltham was commuting to Mexico every week or so to buy, redefined the form for me: chewy and pliable, so thin they were nearly transparent, salty and shiny with luscious pork fat. To eat only one would have felt like torture.

Feltham and Diaz-Rodriguez have bonded with Leal over their shared passion. “I’m drawn to people that are obsessed with one thing, like the guy who does our chorizo,” Feltham told me. “When we first met, he was, like, ‘I’d love to have a girlfriend, but I have so much chorizo drying in my apartment right now that I wouldn’t have anywhere to bring her.’ ” As tacos have become central to U.S. food culture, they’ve come to inspire the kind of connoisseurship once reserved for wine and cheese. José Ralat, who serves as *Texas Monthly’s* taco editor, is one such expert. He told me that a defining quality of a Sonoran tortilla is “gauziness—I can see the sun through them.” Recounting a recent visit to Hermosillo, he said, “The tortillas there are an amazing vessel, because they’re so thin yet so strong. They bear so much weight, not only with the food but with the history.”

In pre-colonial Mexico, corn was beloved by, and even sacred to, Indigenous populations, including the Aztecs. But Spanish settlers favored wheat, which was native to the Fertile Crescent, and which they associated with the Eucharist. In northern Mexico, this bias, combined with a climate that was better suited to growing wheat than corn, resulted in the ascendance of the flour tortilla. Across the border in Texas, and in other parts of the Southwest, flour tortillas bear a range of regional quirks. Ralat described “the equally beautiful, thick, chewy, futon-like San Antonio tortilla,” which he likened, affectionately, to warm laundry.

As it happens, Leal is not the only producer of Sonoran-style tortillas in the Kansas City area. By coincidence, Marissa Gencarelli, who was born and raised in Obregón, the second-biggest city in Sonora, started a tortilleria in 2016, called Yoli, with her husband, Mark, a Kansas City native. The two companies seem to enjoy a healthy sense of competition, on which both founders, in Midwestern form, politely declined to comment. The Gencarellis started with corn. After they added flour to their repertoire, Leal added corn to his. Both companies recently began offering *totopos*, or corn chips, which share shelf space at the Merc. Last fall, the Gencarellis, who won a James Beard award in 2023, introduced a café and shop called Yoli Loncheria; Leal is preparing to open his own burrito counter, called Ignacio, after his Mexican hairless dog.

Gencarelli told me that she sees similarities between Kansas City and Obregón, both of which have “a little burr in their belly” from being in the shadows of bigger cities, and are known for agriculture, especially wheat. “The temperament is very similar, confident but understated,” she said. “Like, yeah—laugh about us, tell us that we’re flyover country, but it’s O.K. We know what we got.” Leal has remained in Lawrence for practical reasons—he and his ex have two children, and it’s cheaper to keep up with mounting demand for his tortillas than it would be in Austin or New York—but he’s come to see it as home. During my visit, Leal and I drove in his vintage Jeep to 1900 Barker, a coffee shop on Lawrence’s main drag. Leal got what he described as “a McDonald’s breakfast sandwich on steroids.” I tried to order a breakfast burrito, made with a Caramelo tortilla, but they were sold out. Leal confessed that he “very rarely” eats tortillas these days. “They’re here now,” he said, laughing, “so I’m used to it.” ♦



*Hannah Goldfield, a staff writer covering restaurants and food culture, received a 2024 James Beard Award for her Profile of the chef Kwame Onwuachi.*

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**On Television**

# “Your Friends and Neighbors” and the Perils of the Rich-People-Suck Genre

The Apple TV+ series, starring Jon Hamm as a hedge funder turned thief, serves up luxury porn in the guise of social critique.

**By Inkoo Kang**

May 26, 2025


*Jon Hamm stars in a new Apple TV+ drama, created by Jonathan Tropper.Illustration by Louise Pomeroy*

The first episode of the new Apple TV+ drama “Your Friends and Neighbors” takes pains to explain how one can rake in master-of-the-universe money yet never feel financially secure. Jon Hamm stars as Andrew Cooper, known as Coop, a hedge-fund guy who finds that alimony, child support, a mortgage, an apartment rental, and private-school tuition are draining his bank accounts faster than he can replenish them. And that’s before he loses his job. After he’s unceremoniously ousted by his firm and contractually barred from similar employment for two years, each new expense feels like a punch to the gut. Dropping off his teen-age son at the home of his ex-wife, Mel (Amanda Peet), Coop learns that he’s on the hook for a new drum set (nearly eighteen hundred dollars) for the boy and three sessions of a skin treatment (forty-five hundred) for their daughter. A

neighbor signs Coop up for two tables at a cancer benefit (thirty grand apiece). Coop could say no. Instead, he decides to maintain his life style by stealing from his social circle, figuring everyone has too much to miss what he refers to as “piles of forgotten wealth just lying around in drawers where they were doing no one any good.”

In “Mad Men,” Hamm played a maestro of bullshit, a silver-tongued Madison Avenue copywriter who turns slide-projector trays into carrousels and soda into an elixir for world peace. Coop is Don Draper’s inverse: he’s the only one among his Connecticut country-club set who sees through the hype. Once determined to keep up with the Joneses, Coop now delights in pulling one over on them, snatching their Cartier bracelets and Patek Philippe watches while they’re on vacation or at their children’s tennis matches. Not that he’s new to deception; he’s in a furtive situationship with a woman named Sam (Olivia Munn), a friend of Mel’s who’s going through a divorce. The local cops aren’t too interested in the mini crime spike—it’s grim having to track down baubles with price tags that exceed your annual salary—until Sam’s husband turns up dead.

Hamm, who had trouble finding a new groove after “Mad Men,” is perfectly cast as Coop, who, like Don Draper, constantly looks both imperious and ill at ease. His performance is the show’s main asset. Otherwise, “Your Friends and Neighbors,” created by Jonathan Tropper, is more notable for its shortcomings than its pleasures. Across nine episodes, it squanders a great premise by shoehorning in that most rote of genres, the murder mystery, and by failing to meaningfully develop its secondary characters. The sole exception may be a Bronx pawnshop owner, Lu (a fantastically weary Randy Danson), to whom Coop sells his stolen goods. When Coop tries to negotiate a higher price for one of his purloined Pateks, she calmly dresses him down: “You’re a man who buys and sells things he never touches. You assign value out of your ass. Your skill is in selling that value to other rich schmucks.” No one knows better than a pawnshop owner how little value has to do with worth.

Other recent shows about the ethically challenged rich, such as “Succession” and “The White Lotus,” have emphasized their characters’ elaborate personality disorders along with the trappings of the high life.

“Your Friends and Neighbors” flips the formula, to unsatisfying effect. Coop and Mel, despite their nauseating wealth, are meant to be emotionally relatable: former college sweethearts who can’t admit to themselves that they still love each other. The show gestures toward a remarriage plot, but it’s hard to know how much to invest in the possibility; Mel’s foibles, including her anger issues, serve more to drive the plot forward than to deepen her as a character. There’s also an antiseptic quality to much of the town’s luxury. Coop’s former family home, in a neighborhood where houses regularly cost eight figures, is a gray monstrosity, and parties in the community are occasions for exhausting one-upmanship.

Throughout the season, Coop holds forth in voice-over monologues long on faux profundity, mannered phrasings, and lists. Reluctantly attending a party that Mel’s new boyfriend (Mark Tallman) throws for his guy friends, Coop catalogues the men’s tastes—“Scotch, cigars, smoked meats, custom golf clubs, high-end escorts”—and observes, unnecessarily, that these commodities arise from “entire industries built to cash in on the quiet desperation of rich, middle-aged men.” The only person there whom Coop actually likes is his financial adviser, Barney (Hoon Lee), who later confides that his marriage has become so defined by consumerism that spending now feels like a “bodily function”: “We eat, we drink, we buy all this shit. Then we talk about the shit we bought, and then we talk about the other shit we’re gonna buy, and then we go buy that.”

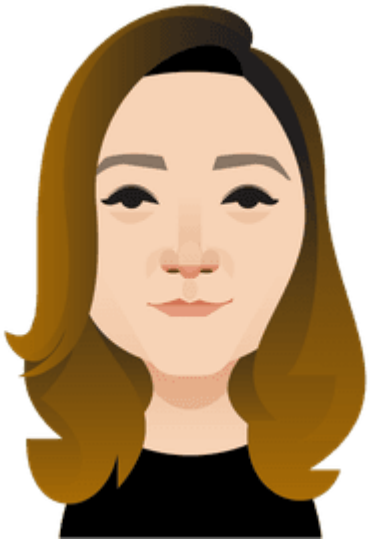
Inevitably, such expressions of anti-materialist anomie run up against the need to seduce viewers with expensive objects. Coop drives a sleek black Maserati, which at one point is filmed from below, with the vehicle rushing toward the camera—a shot that wouldn’t be out of place in a car commercial. (True, the trunk pops open at random times, but, with Hamm behind the wheel, the brand comes out just fine.) Similarly, the specialness of the items Coop steals—a Birkin bag, a Richard Mille timepiece, a bottle of Domaine d’Auvenay wine, a Lichtenstein painting—must be explicated at length. Coop purports to disillusion viewers, but he is simultaneously creating a list of objects for us to covet—the kinds of possessions that signal to other affluent people that one has made it. The overwhelming reaction that the series elicits, then, is not sympathy but cognitive dissonance.

How to account for the spate of TV series about rich people being terrible? By now, it's become a genre unto itself, all but synonymous with HBO's drama division. Gawping at lavishness isn't new, of course—"Dallas" and "Dynasty" dominated the airwaves during the greed-is-good eighties—but the tone has changed. In shows like "Big Little Lies" and "The Undoing," the characters are glamorous, in the way we assume the rich are, but also unhappy and oblivious. I used to think that the underpinnings of this world view were rather Protestant: you could be materialistic, but you had to endure some moralizing about it. Wanting had to be tempered by shame. But it's equally possible that depicting opulence is an area where TV, which is steadily losing audience share to YouTube and TikTok, can still outperform its competitors. Influencers have made social media a platform for wealth porn, but their videos still fall short of what Hollywood budgets and finesse can offer—an experience that transports instead of merely tantalizing.

The inescapability of the genre certainly feels symptomatic of our times, when oligarchs can buy their way into power and men like Coop never had to pay for the damage to the economy and to the middle class which the financial crisis wrought. More than that, though, such shows pander to our heightened consciousness about these issues. By now, when terms like "inequality" and "one-per-center" have become buzzwords, exposing the panoply of ways that money can warp relationships seems less like daring social commentary than like preaching to a choir that craves both moral superiority and stuff.

Speaking of stuff, "The White Lotus," perhaps now the poster child for the rich-people-suck genre, raised eyebrows this spring, when the third season was accompanied by branded collaborations with a dozen retailers, including Banana Republic, H&M, Away, and CB2. It might seem like hypocrisy to treat the show's noxious characters as aspirational, but you can be a cynic and still be a loyal customer. Coop notes that his country club, where dues are a hundred thousand dollars a year, keeps its membership rolls full not by providing frills but by stoking fear of what it might mean to *not* belong. The club operates by "social extortion," he says, but "seeing it for what it was never stopped me from falling in line with all the other

suckers.” You might be able to see through Apple’s marketing, too, but the corporation doesn’t mind, as long as you’re still buying. ♦



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

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**The Theatre**

# Hugh Jackman and Liev Schreiber Star in a Pair of Psychosexual Slugfests

The spirit of August Strindberg infuses Hannah Moscovitch's "Sexual Misconduct of the Middle Classes" and Jen Silverman's adaptation of "Creditors."

**By Helen Shaw**

May 22, 2025

*The Tony-winning actors each take on a play about toxic masculinity at the Minetta Lane Theatre.Illustration by Aliz Buzas*

"The new wine has burst the old bottles," the playwright August Strindberg wrote, in a bullish preface to his 1888 play "Miss Julie," setting out a catalogue of revolutionary theatrical principles. Outdated conventions needed to be cleared away, Strindberg said. To make modern, naturalistic

plays, there could be no more immense proscenium spaces, painted backdrops, or intermissions. The playwright needed intimacy to ensorcell his audience, and intervals between acts might allow theatregoers to escape the “suggestive influence of the author-hypnotist.” In this manifesto, and in his spate of character-driven masterpieces written in 1887 and 1888—“Miss Julie,” “The Father,” “Creditors”—Strindberg essentially invented the small-cast, ninety-minute psychosexual slugfest.

Earlier this year, the actor Hugh Jackman, the producer Sonia Friedman, and the director Ian Rickson returned to that hundred-and-forty-year-old experiment—the less-is-more, small-stage ethic—by forming TOGETHER, a company whose début offerings are being presented by Audible in its compact Minetta Lane Theatre, Off Broadway. The season consists of Hannah Moscovitch’s Strindbergesque “Sexual Misconduct of the Middle Classes,” from 2020, and Strindberg’s “Creditors,” newly adapted by Jen Silverman. Rickson stages both plays with elegant restraint, arranging just a few bits of furniture in front of a bare brick wall. Despite the productions’ aesthetic modesty, these are starry projects: Jackman performs in “Sexual Misconduct” with Ella Beatty as his foil; in “Creditors,” Liev Schreiber faces off against Maggie Siff and Justice Smith. The plays appear in alternating repertory, arranged for their casts’ convenience. (Jackman, for instance, is simultaneously in residence at Radio City Music Hall.) It’s surely a coincidence that Jackman and Schreiber, both Tony winners, once played the comic-book nemeses Wolverine and Sabretooth, but their history does give the whole big-men-downtown enterprise a further sense of Strindbergian competition.

In Moscovitch’s “Sexual Misconduct of the Middle Classes,” Jackman plays Jon, a college professor in the midst of a marital separation, who finds himself entranced by a student in a red coat, Annie (Beatty), who sits in the front row of his class. As Jon narrates his increasing obsession with her, Rickson has Jackman approach the audience, exerting his familiar self-deprecating charm. He asks with jovial concern if the people in the balcony can hear him, and, whenever Jon takes a wrong step, he assures us, speaking in the third person, of his reluctance to go further. After Annie shows up on his porch, Jon ushers the nineteen-year-old inside, and the

audience sucks in its breath. Jackman holds up his hands in mock surrender: “Well, this, he recognized, was *very bad*.”

Jon frequently tells us how brilliant and capable Annie is, but in her breathy pauses she seems more like a person stunned into incomprehension. Jon primarily worries that he is treating Annie as a figure in a story—her red coat certainly suggests that he is a wolf. The very first anecdote he shares sets us to wondering if, despite his constant self-questioning, he might not be a good guy. “A few weeks ago, the janitor forgot to unlock the men’s toilet before office hours,” Jon says. “So he’d had to urinate into his thermos.” The symbolism isn’t subtle.

Considered minute by minute, this “Sexual Misconduct” is a strangely pleasant experience, one that dodges discomfort, to its eventual cost. Jackman and Beatty create little heat between them—he seems to be working harder to seduce the audience than to entice the girl—and Beatty, in a drifting and interior performance, enacts the script’s many ellipses by letting her mouth drop open, sometimes pursing it noiselessly, like a fish. Jackman, ever the movie star, never permits Jon so much as a hint of corruption, not even when Beatty takes control of the narration. Jon’s idea of himself (menschy, bewildered, kind) therefore overwhelms Annie’s picture of him as a sinkhole in her life.

Moscovitch, in an interview about her play for the CBC, drew parallels between the Jon-Annie relationship and the Clinton-Lewinsky affair—in both, questions abound about the limits of consensuality when a man sleeps with a young woman who has far less power. Moscovitch says she chose the word “misconduct” for the title to skewer the characterization of such encounters as sexual peccadilloes, rather than, as she believes, episodes of coercion or assault. The play is slippery on this point. Moscovitch uses the structure of Strindbergian psychodrama—woman versus man—to reveal a gap in language itself. In her construction, nothing Annie says, including her statements of desire, indicates whether she’s actually able to consent.

Strindberg’s mid-career outpouring of tragedies about couples in existential conflict emerged during a troubled, violent period in his life, when his marriage was falling apart. These often virulently anti-woman plays, which became his most famous and influential, revealed his deranged sense of

marital grievance. (To give a sense of how well adjusted he was, in 1887 he wrote a friend about having his sexual equipment measured by a doctor at a brothel, after which he haughtily informed his wife, “The screw is not necessarily too small because the nut is too big.”) An obsession with dominance carried over into his work. Strindberg used—and popularized—a zero-sum, prosecutorial, winner-take-all approach to relationships as his dramatic engine. More than a century later, you often see that same mechanism at work, in feminist psychodramas, too. Moscovitch’s play asks us to reason backward from all the damage done, and it arrives at an awful place, one reminiscent of Strindberg’s own hell, where a woman’s word can’t be trusted, even by the woman herself.

In the more vividly acted “Creditors,” Jen Silverman at first seems to maintain Strindberg’s dramatic pattern. At an isolated hotel, a charismatic older man, Gustav (Schreiber), talks to a young artist, Adi (Smith), luring him toward greater and deeper confidences. Adi (called Adolf in the original) has a wife, Tekla (Siff), who has written a book about her first marriage. As Gustav probes Adi about his sex life, we realize that Gustav is in fact Tekla’s first husband. This is hardly a spoiler; Gustav’s lies wouldn’t trick a kitten.

But Adi, played by Smith with cashmere softness, doesn’t figure it out. Instead, he gives way to the older man’s influence, taking his advice to mistrust and abuse his wife, as Gustav eavesdrops next door. Where Silverman radically departs from Strindberg’s bitter play is in their portrait of Tekla, who is a spikily delightful self-starter instead of the idiot-monster of the original. Siff—who was one of the finest Beatrices I’ve ever seen in “Much Ado About Nothing,” in 2013—strikes sparks off both her stage husbands, until the small theatre almost glows.

The play really belongs to Schreiber, though. One of his great gifts as an actor is the way he manipulates our impression of his height and his looming, linebacker bulk. Sometimes he uses his size for comedy: Gustav spends a lot of his time hunched in a too-small leather club chair, rolling cigarettes—*very tiny cigarettes, Dr. Freud*—and peering at his targets through the smoke. His voice rumbles hypnotically with eerie subharmonics, and it’s only when he gets up and comes close to either Adi

or Tekla that we see how massive the guy is, either to drag along as baggage or to climb like a wall.

Strindberg's title refers to the debt he believes Tekla owes Gustav, the man who "shaped" her, but Silverman—whose plays include last year's unlikely Broadway romance "The Roommate"—reveals all such debts to be misogynist rubbish. Adi hurts Tekla, and Gustav might be a sociopath. But Silverman's version moves beyond Strindberg's toxic blame game to explore the erotic vulnerability of each member of the ménage, as well as the animal forces that draw them together in new configurations. Is that a more honest portrayal of sexual dynamics than Jon and Annie's? It's certainly a more involving one. Strindberg would not have enjoyed Silverman's scuppering of the hetero-masculine prerogative, but he might have responded to the ecstatic surrender of it. When Strindberg invented this form, he didn't just expect us to *drink* the new wine—he wanted us to get drunk. ♦

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

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**The Current Cinema**

# “Mission: Impossible—The Final Reckoning” Goes Hard on Valediction

*The eighth (and perhaps the last) installment in the epochal Tom Cruise vehicle suffers from self-indulgent gravitas, but the best sequences are a model of action cinema at its purest.*

***By Justin Chang***

*May 21, 2025*

*Tom Cruise stars in Christopher McQuarrie’s film.Illustration by Harol Bustos*

“Mission: Impossible—The Final Reckoning” has a running time of just under three hours. Within those three hours, alas, I’d say that Tom Cruise has a running time of only a minute or two. For those of us who’ve grown fond of Cruise the cardio demon, this is dispiriting news: what a letdown after “Mission: Impossible—Ghost Protocol” (2011), in which he raced heroically through the blinding fury of a Dubai sandstorm. And who could forget the blissful London chase sequence from “Mission: Impossible—Fallout” (2018), in which Cruise spent a whole seven minutes tearing up the geometric staircase at St. Paul’s, then sprinting, like an unusually stiff-backed cheetah, across one rooftop after another?

Cruise does go for another brisk London jog in “The Final Reckoning,” and, although he’s had tougher workouts, he seems intent, as ever, on outrunning time itself—an idea literalized by the sight of Big Ben glowing in the distance, ticking away the seconds until doomsday. Cruise’s character, the Impossible Mission Force agent extraordinaire Ethan Hunt, has a bomb that needs defusing; a beloved teammate, Luther (Ving Rhames), who needs rescuing; and an artificially intelligent nemesis, the Entity, to banish to the pits of cyberhell. But for Cruise the actor, who turns sixty-three in July, running has become more than a means to a narrative end. He does it for the same reasons he scales skyscrapers, plunges into watery depths, and dangles from renegade aircraft: to cast aside any hint of creeping senescence, and to remind us what an honest-to-God movie star is willing to risk for our entertainment. And that means something in a Hollywood that now caters to puny screens and punier visions, outsourcing the finer mechanics of action filmmaking to the visual-effects department. (Is it any wonder that A.I. is this movie’s supervillain?) Cruise means to turn back the clock in more than one sense. He may be older and puffier around the eyes than in 1996, when the first “Mission: Impossible” film was released. But he still dives headlong into each adventure as if it were his personal fountain of youth.

But has that fountain now run dry? “The Final Reckoning” is Cruise’s eighth “Mission: Impossible” outing and—assuming the title isn’t wearing a rubber mask—perhaps his last. The script, which the director, Christopher McQuarrie, co-wrote with Erik Jendresen, too often sags under the weight of end-times portents; even for a series that treats global destruction as an occupational hazard, the mood has never been quite this oppressively doomy. The Entity, which McQuarrie introduced in “Mission: Impossible—Dead Reckoning Part One” (2023), has now conquered all of cyberspace, and thus become more pernicious, more deadly, and more tedious to summarize than ever. It has endangered world economies, unleashed plagues of misinformation, and even spawned a powerful cult that seeks to hasten humanity’s end. Paris (Pom Klementieff), herself a former servant of the Entity who has since joined Ethan’s team, murmurs, “It is written,” as if the techno-apocalypse had been foretold, eons ago, in the e-book of Revelation.

Is the Entity a metaphorical variant of Trumpism? At least one of Ethan's lines—"It wants us divided"—presumably means to make us wonder. Yet the "Mission: Impossible" movies, for all their invocations of statecraft, terrorism, and impending nuclear catastrophe, have generally danced nimbly around real-world geopolitics. You'd have to go back to J. J. Abrams's "Mission: Impossible III" (2006) and its implicit critique of George W. Bush-era torture tactics, to find the last Cruise missile that made contact with a real-world target. Still, "The Final Reckoning," unwittingly or not, pushes back against a few Trumpist idiocies. For starters, the President of the United States is a Black woman, Erika Sloane (Angela Bassett), and her poised, empathetic leadership strikes a utopian chord even under dystopian circumstances. If anyone cracks a nasty D.E.I. joke, I didn't hear it above the din of propellers, gunfire, and earnest war-room speechifying.

And then there's the itinerary. Like most of its predecessors, "The Final Reckoning" was shot outside the U.S.—locations include the U.K., Malta, Norway, and South Africa—and thus represents exactly the kind of Hollywood-branded, internationally filmed mega-production that would suffer should Trump make good on his recent promise to impose tariffs on films shot abroad. A movie needn't be a work of art—and "The Final Reckoning," the baggiest, least satisfying film of the McQuarrie quartet, falls well short of the mark—to lay bare the anti-art implications of an America First agenda. There's a reason we describe great cinema as transporting. To cut us off from the thrill of crossing borders and soaring over distant landscapes would deny us a fundamental pleasure of moviegoing.

About halfway through "The Final Reckoning," as Ethan descends into the frigid depths of the Bering Sea, something overdue and wonderful happens: the movie falls silent. Until now, there has been a chatty overabundance of micro-logistics, even for a "Mission: Impossible" movie: there are aircraft carriers to be commandeered, secret coördinates to be transmitted, and laws of physics to be preposterously circumvented. (Also, fine actors playing top government and military leaders to be acknowledged, including Nick Offerman, Janet McTeer, Hannah Waddingham, and, most impressively, as a submarine captain, Tramell Tillman.) So much information is laid out—

and so much emphasis placed on risks, stakes, and disastrous potential outcomes—that you strongly suspect only a fraction of it will matter in the end, and you're right. For perhaps the first time in McQuarrie's assured handling of these movies—for my money, "Rogue Nation" (2015) remains the underappreciated best of the lot—he makes the mistake of detailing the action so thoroughly in advance that actually dramatizing it becomes almost superfluous.

But, finally, the expository blather dies away, and the mission is upon us: Ethan Hunt, meet shipwrecked submarine. His aim is to retrieve a chunk of hardware holding lines of digital code (it is written!) with the power to override and perhaps defeat the Entity for good. For a few spellbinding minutes, Cruise does everything he could possibly do underwater, short of singing "Eat your heart out, James Cameron" into his oxygen tube. He sloshes his way through waterlogged chambers, juggles unexploded Russian torpedoes, and, in a delightful and probably unintended homage to "Risky Business" (1983), briefly swim-dances in his underwear. It's action cinema at its purest and most existential: "The Ethan Hunt for Red October."

For all the dangerous missions that Hunt has embarked on solo, I can't recall one that has conveyed such a primordial sense of abandonment. For a moment, Lalo Schifrin's irresistible theme is a distant memory, and the fate of humanity really does seem to rest on the shoulders of the most unreachable man on the planet. Such loneliness is another I.M.F. occupational hazard, but a self-imposed one: again and again, both "Reckoning" movies emphasize that Ethan's most heroic virtue—his refusal to sacrifice his teammates for the greater good—is simultaneously his gravest weakness. It explains why, beyond a valedictory sense of full-circle symmetry, McQuarrie piles on so many callbacks to the first "Mission: Impossible" film, in which Ethan's teammates were murdered before his very eyes—a formative trauma that he seemed to forget for long stretches of the series, but which has been selectively retrieved, like sublimated source code, for this movie's narrative purposes.

More than once, McQuarrie splices in an indelible image from the 1996 film: a knife falling into a top-secret vault, the blade embedding itself in a

desk. It's a reminder that the director of that movie, Brian De Palma, remains the series' most intuitive visual stylist and most concise storyteller. Not that I craved concision from McQuarrie's film; God knows he and Cruise have earned their double-decker climax. But, amid the brooding sprawl, I wanted less big-screen doomscrolling, less self-indulgent gravitas, and less of the unspeakably boring villain Gabriel (Esai Morales), who bears the name of an archangel but never achieves the stature of an archenemy. There are also far too many repetitions of the I.M.F. creed —"We live and die in the shadows, for those we hold close and for those we never meet"—which soon starts to sound like greeting-card John le Carré.

I also wanted more from the teammates whom Ethan professes to care about so much—particularly the women, with no shade intended to Luther or Benji (Simon Pegg). I suspect that the apocalypse will rob more than a few of us of our wits and personalities, but must our movies be so willing to prove the point? As Grace, the wily pickpocket who joined Ethan's team in "Dead Reckoning," Hayley Atwell has been stripped of humor and playfulness. And I missed the vicious verve of the still formidable, now reformed Paris, although I suspect that Klementieff's days as an action star are just beginning. What new adventures could bring out—and deepen—her combustible mix of vulnerability and ferocity? Finding that out will be her mission, and I choose to expect it. ♦

*Justin Chang is a film critic at The New Yorker. He won the 2024 Pulitzer Prize for criticism.*

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# Poems

- **“Even Here It Is Happening”**
  By Ada Limón | “It’s mustard color, the dress— / I must wear it like a uniform.”
- **“The Inheritance”**
  By Li-Young Lee | “Mother, your hair / has fallen / for the last time, / and I can’t raise it up.”

**Poems**

# Even Here It Is Happening

***By Ada Limón***

*May 26, 2025*

And so I iron the dress,
the steamed wool smelling
of schoolboys in the always-falling rain.

It's mustard color, the dress—
I must wear it like a uniform.

Sometimes someone sees
a loneliness in me, but what

it is is a need to be alone, out
there—out there falling in gray air.

The clouds aren't clean, covering
for smoke, yet we point to clouds
as if it is our job. Oh god,

what if all I've done is guard
myself against despair?

*This is drawn from "Startlement: New and Selected Poems."*

*Ada Limón served as the twenty-fourth U.S. Poet Laureate. Her books include "Startlement: New and Selected Poems" (2025).*

**Poems**

# The Inheritance

***By Li-Young Lee***

*May 26, 2025*

Mother, your hair
has fallen
for the last time,
and I can’t raise it up.
And I can’t put it down.

I can’t leave it on the ground.
The ground is too crowded with the living,
too teeming with the dead.

I can’t store it in the sky. The sky’s too full
of birds and clouds and airplanes.

And the seas are full of mountains
and creatures and ships coming and going.

And, as long as earth turns,
all of the seasons are full of days.

There’s no place to lay your hair down.

Sleep won’t have it.
Your hair whispers too many secrets and stories.

Night doesn’t want it.
There are no stars your hair won’t swallow.

When you were alive,
you gathered it, bound it, and piled it,

to balance on the top of your head.
A small black urn, it shone.
Later, it shone white.

But your hair has come undone
once and for all time,
and what was one
now is many.

What started at your crown
now has no beginning.

What stopped at your waist
now has no end.

Now can’t be collected or dispersed.
Now neither story nor song can comb or weigh.
Now has no measure or address.
Now can’t be counted or left out.

And I can’t carry it.
And I can’t put it down.

*This is drawn from “I Ask My Mother to Sing: Mother Poems of Li-Young Lee.”*

*Li-Young Lee received the 2024 Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize. His books include “The Invention of the Darling” and “I Ask My Mother to Sing.”*

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# Cartoons

- **Cartoons from the Issue**
  By Tom Toro, Benjamin Schwartz, P. C. Vey, Frank Cotham, Avi Steinberg, Bruce Eric Kaplan, Ellie Black, Michael Maslin, Mick Stevens, Amy Hwang, Lars Kenseth, Roz Chast, and David Sipress | Drawings from the June 2, 2025, magazine.

# Puzzles & Games

- **The Crossword: Wednesday, May 21, 2025**
  By Caitlin Reid | A beginner-friendly puzzle.

**Crossword**

# The Crossword: Wednesday, May 21, 2025

*A beginner-friendly puzzle.*

***By Caitlin Reid***

*May 21, 2025*

*Caitlin Reid has been constructing crosswords since 2017. Her puzzles have appeared in the Times, the Wall Street Journal, and USA Today.*