$18.99

THE NEW YORKER

JAN. 27, 2025

The New Yorker Magazine

[Jan 27]

Goings On

- **Ballet Past and Present, at New York City Ballet**
  Plus: the sadistic “Saw: The Musical”; Michael Roemer’s end-of-life documentary; and Rachel Syme on adult classes on offer in N.Y.C.

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January 17, 2025

Marina Harss
Harss has written about dance for Goings On since 2004.

Since its earliest days, New York City Ballet has shown contrasting tendencies, each aligned with the temperament of one of N.Y.B.C.'s two founding choreographers, George Balanchine and Jerome Robbins. One (Balanchine) was more abstract, more impersonal; the other (Robbins) had a greater sensitivity to the culture around him, especially that of young people. Each approach complemented the other.

Christopher Wheeldon's "From You Within Me."Photograph by Erin Baiano

It’s interesting that, decades on, a version of this is still true. The company’s two current choreographers-in-residence, Justin Peck and Alexei Ratmansky, work in contrasting modes; together they create a portrait—though not the only one—of ballet as it exists today. Following in Robbins’s footsteps, Peck has a knack for tapping into a generational mood (often one of malaise), as he proved in his dance-theatre show “Illinoise.” Ratmansky is harder to pin down, and tends to look inward, to the world of the imagination, or to ballet’s past.

The two works that New York City Ballet unveils this season (at the David H. Koch, Jan. 21-March 2) illustrate this. Peck’s new “Mystic Familiar” (premièring Jan. 29) takes its title from a lyric by the electronic musician Dan Deacon, whose music Peck has used before, most notably in his raucous piece from 2017, “The Times Are Racing.” The score for the new piece is an orchestral expansion of the song “Become a Mountain,” its lyrics invoked by a narrator who, as Deacon has said, “is trying to learn how to be self-compassionate, to live a life in the present while being able to deal with self-doubt and anxiety.” Could anything be more of the moment? Deacon will be in the pit with the orchestra, singing and playing electronic instruments. The dancers will be off pointe, many in sneakers.

In contrast, Ratmansky, whose last ballet for City Ballet (“Solitude”) was a meditation on the devastation of the war in Ukraine, where he grew up, now turns toward the complexities of classical ballet, as embodied by the nineteenth-century ballet “Paquita.” Ratmansky is a lover of archives and intricate steps. In 2014, for a company in Munich, he staged the full “Paquita,” using recondite early-twentieth-century ballet notations as a choreographic Rosetta Stone. Now he revisits just one portion of that work, the “Grand Pas” (premièring Feb. 6), a suite of brilliant dances, each of which tests the dancers’ pointework and technical prowess to the fullest. This suite has been grafted together with Balanchine’s “Minkus Pas de Trois,” from 1948, set to music from the same ballet. The resulting ballet, like the rest of the season—which also includes “Divertimento No. 15,” “Symphony in Three Movements,” “Firebird,” and “Sylvia: Pas de Deux”—will be a conversation between ballet’s past and present.

About Town

Off Off Broadway

If you enjoyed the 2004 horror film “Saw,” or any of its umpteen sequels, but yearned for some song-and-dance numbers to accompany the bloodletting, rejoice. **“Saw: The Musical”** tricks out the original plot—two men who are chained up in a warehouse bathroom, by a psychopath who subjects his victims to sadistic “games,” must solve their way out or die—with original show tunes, pansexual raunch, and lo-fi lampoonery. (One character is played by a sex doll.) The director-choreographer, Stephanie Rosenberg, leans into the camp of it all—fake blood squirts into the audience as one prisoner saws off his shackled foot while singing—and the performers gamely commit. Those familiar with the source material can admire the jokes’ specificity (“Not another flashback!”) and the shit-smeared toilet replica; others, if baffled, can just feel grateful to be alive.—*Dan Stahl (NuBox Theatre; open run.)*

Classical

The anatomy of a human mouth boasts many components, and **Roomful of Teeth** seems to have mastered all of them. For the past sixteen years, the vocal ensemble has proved that the voice is as versatile and malleable as any other instrument, if not more so. Together with the similarly cutting-edge, four-person Tambuco Percussion Ensemble, Roomful of Teeth presents a program curated by the renowned Mexican composer Gabriela Ortiz. The evening includes a world première of Ortiz’s “Canta la Piedra-Tetluikan” (translated as “The Stone Sings”), and also works by Jorge Camiruaga, Leopoldo Novoa, Steve Reich, and the celebrated Roomful member Caroline Shaw.—*Jane Bua (Carnegie Hall; Jan. 25.)*

Ambient

Photograph by Zoe Donahoe

The compositions of the experimental sound designer and electronic musician **claire rousay** have always fixated on how the texture of a space can convey emotionality. Until recently, her music largely consisted of field recordings that stretched the limits of what can be considered musical, on tracks that have earned a designation as “emo ambient” for their ability to find the overlap between mood and atmosphere. A prolific run from 2019 to 2022 helped to define a vivid, droning sound that was expressive if not lyrical. That all changed last year with the release of “Sentiment,” which focussed more on rousay’s voice and guitar. The songs have a newfound dimensionality, distorting her singing into another detail of her soundscapes. Even when her music centers her as a performer, there is just as much emphasis on the room she’s in.—*Sheldon Pearce (TV Eye; Jan. 23.)*

Dance

The Cuban contemporary-dance troupe **Malpaso Dance Company**—skilled, sympathetic, but still searching for a strong identity—returns to its home away from home, the Joyce, for the tenth time. The most notable feature of the program might be the musical guests: the López-Gavilán brothers, a pianist and a violinist who rarely get to play together, since one lives in New York and the other in Cuba. The company’s artistic director, Osnel Delgado, débuts a duet for himself and Grettel Morejón, of the Cuban National Ballet, alongside New York premières by the company member

Esteban Aguilar and the Havana-based Spanish choreographer Susana Pous. —*Brian Seibert (Joyce Theatre; Jan. 21-26.)*

Gospel

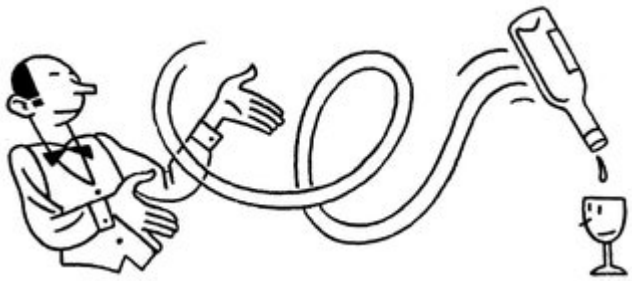
Photograph by Dervon Dixon

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., once professed that music is “a mistress of order and good manners [who] makes the people milder and gentler, more moral and more reasonable.” In this coming era—during which fear, corruption, and avarice will stand in prominence—gentleness, morality, and reason must be cherished in whatever form they can be found. On Jan. 20, Martin Luther King, Jr., Day, the **Harlem Gospel Choir** performs a selection of soul-, jazz-, and blues-inflected gospel songs at Sony Hall, commemorating the man who, adding another entry to his list of impacts, was a key inspiration behind the ensemble’s founding. The choir also performs a brunch show at the Blue Note on Jan. 26.—*J.B.*

Movies

Michael Roemer, who directed the classic independent dramas “Nothing But a Man” and “The Plot Against Harry,” followed them with the similarly original documentary **“Dying,”** from 1976. It’s centered on three terminally ill patients whom he filmed, with bracing intimacy, in their final decline. Sally, who’s in her forties, is cared for by her mother and seemingly slips away with an eerie placidity. A young couple, Harriet and Bill, provide real-life melodrama: Harriet, terrified of raising their sons alone, wishes the ailing Bill a hasty demise so that she can remarry quickly. Reverend Bryant, the minister of a predominantly Black congregation, mellow in private but

fiery in the pulpit, unites a community in death as in life. Roemer's insistent observational method eschews analytical distance in favor of raw and ferocious emotion.—*Richard Brody (Film Forum; Jan. 24-30.)*



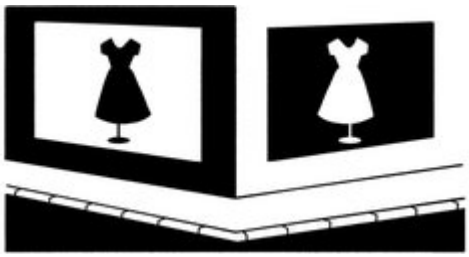
Bar Tab

Taran Dugal pairs natural wine with Vietnamese-inspired ice creams.

Illustration by Josh Cochran

Like so many of New York's timeworn thoroughfares, Forsyth Street boasts a complicated history. What is now a string of trendy boutiques and eateries straddling Chinatown and the Lower East Side was home, in the early aughts, to a vicious gang that once beat an informant with pipes "until his bones snapped," according to one U.S. Attorney. Well, out with the racketeering and in with the ice cream. **Lai Rai,** a sleek new bar on Forsyth,

is an ode to two of life’s greatest pleasures—natural wine and frozen confections. It was designed as an oasis of sorts: a laid-back, Vietnamese-inspired alternative to the stuffy wine bars dotting downtown Manhattan. “Most of the wine world is so white and male-dominated,” a bartender said to two recent patrons. “We're anything but that.” Lai Rai’s twin specialties leave little to be desired. For a rich, fruity kick, pair the Nespola (a vibrant French orange wine) with their refreshing avocado ice cream. Or, for a lighter touch, chase a couple of nutty, banana-leaf scoops with Khá, a tart and slightly nutty Hanoian rice wine. To those pitiable souls lacking a sweet tooth, fret not: a surf clam with coconut milk and the mouthwatering, Indochinese-influenced chicharrones (topped with salt and home-grown pepper from southern Vietnam) should suffice. Beware, however, of the minor disadvantages that accompany such delights. Guests who sit at the marble bar long enough may become unwitting participants in the mise-en-scène of a downtown socialite’s latest selfie, as the two patrons discovered. “I *love* the vibe here,” a scenester seated beside them squealed, all tooth-bleached elation, as she captured them in a photo. “It’s so *European!*” It was not, as a matter of fact, but ignorance is bliss, and ice cream certainly helps.



On and Off the Avenue

Rachel Syme on mind-expanding classes around town.

Whenever I consider “taking a class,” as a grown woman living in New York City, my mind immediately turns to “The Ladies Who Lunch,” the show-stopping number from Stephen Sondheim’s 1970 musical, “Company.” In that song, Joanne, a surly, vodka-pickled woman (originated on Broadway by the late, great Elaine Stritch) delivers a scathing indictment of the Manhattan leisure set, mockingly raising her Martini glass

to the “girls who stay smart” by spending their days “rushing to their classes in optical art.” Joanne’s implication—that classes are merely time-wasters for unserious dilettantes—put me off drop-in courses for years, before I realized that it is unwise to heed the life advice of a bitter lush. Non-compulsory education, as it turns out, is one of adult life’s great pleasures. The most stylish people I know are perpetual students who pursue their interests with vigor. There is something very powerful about débuting a fresh skill—artful onion chopping, swooshy penmanship, speaking French—and being able to say, “Oh, *this*? It’s from a class I’m taking.” I never hear this and think that someone is wasting time—if anything, I think they have realized that time is too precious not to spend it learning something new.

Illustration by Clara San Millan

Once you start poking around, you’ll find that New York City is *humming* with classes. Here are a few intriguing offerings, but there are hundreds more. You can take a two-hour **ikebana class with the master floral arranger Paula Tam** ($80) on the Upper East Side or in Flushing, Queens. The Center for Fiction, in Brooklyn, has a wonderful collection of reading groups both in person and online, including one devoted to **discussing “Jane Eyre”** ($188 for four sessions) and another to **reading “1984” in 2025 (**$150 for three sessions). At 92NY—which offers a full cornucopia of classes—Elizabeth White-Pultz teaches multi-week **beginner calligraphy courses** (starting at $260); or there’s a one-day **modern calligraphy workshop** at the Brooklyn Craft Company ($75). The Art Studio NY offers **“Oil Painting for Total Beginners”** ($449), whereas the Long Island City nonprofit Biotech Without Borders offers a two-day course in how to **grow**

gourmet mushrooms at home ($108.55). In Little Italy, the Miette Culinary Studio's bevy of seasonal cooking classes includes one on **how to make coq au vin** ($135) and another on **vegan Italian classics** ($135). At the Brooklyn Institute for Social Research, you can take **"Bebop and Black Modernism: An Introduction to Modern Jazz"** ($335 for four sessions), and the buzzy Clinton Hill restaurant Place des Fêtes is offering a class on **wine of the Castile and León regions** ($125). You can learn to **throw a pot at ArtShack in Bed-Stuy** ($80 for an introductory wheel class), or on the Upper East Side, at the Crafty Lounge, you can **make a chunky velvet tote bag** ($150). Here's to the girls who stay smart—aren't they a gas?

P.S. Good stuff on the Internet:

- "Margaret," by Ji Hyun Joo
- Once a prince . . .
- Bob Dylan's nemesis

The Talk of the Town

- **Climate Whiplash and Fire Come to L.A.**
  By Elizabeth Kolbert | Climate change has brought both fiercer rains and deeper droughts, leaving the city with brush like kindling—and the phenomenon is on the rise worldwide.
- **The Master Origami Artist Whose Collection Turned to Ash in Altadena**
  By Oren Peleg | As the flames approached his house and studio, Robert J. Lang had time to rescue only one piece of art work: a cuckoo clock he folded from a single sheet of paper.
- **Gary Gulman May Ask You to Re-Parent Him**
  By Andrew Marantz | The comedian, who stars a new one-man show, “Grandiloquent,” explains why he keeps returning to his childhood in Massachusetts.
- **Traversing the Metropolitan Museum’s Eight Hundred Galleries, One by One**
  By Ben McGrath | Dan and Becky Okrent spent seven years on the Met Project, a labor of love that took them from ancient Sumer to Synchronism.
- **After the Fires, a Slow Night in Hollywood**
  By Sheila Yasmin Marikar | The freeways were traffic-free, and so were hotels, where a handful of forlorn locals waited for what would come next.

Comment

Climate Whiplash and Fire Come to L.A.

Climate change has brought both fiercer rains and deeper droughts, leaving the city with brush like kindling—and the phenomenon is on the rise worldwide.

By Elizabeth Kolbert

January 19, 2025

Illustration by João Fazenda

The conflagration that became known as the Bel Air Fire broke out on the morning of November 6, 1961, in a patch of brush north of Mulholland

Drive. Fanned by Santa Ana winds, the flames jumped the drive, then spread toward the homes of the rich and famous. By the time the Los Angeles Fire Department had succeeded in putting out the blaze, more than six thousand acres had been scorched and nearly five hundred houses had been destroyed, including ones belonging to Zsa Zsa Gabor and Aldous Huxley.

Faulted for its part in the disaster, the L.A.F.D. turned to Hollywood. In 1962, it released a movie, narrated by the actor William Conrad, aimed at answering its critics. Part instructional video, part film noir, the movie opened with the sound of whistling wind and a shot of rustling vegetation. When the Santa Ana winds blow, Conrad intoned, channelling Raymond Chandler, the "atmosphere grows tense, oppressive. People tire easily, argue more. Even the suicide rate rises." According to the film, the L.A.F.D. had known that danger was coming and had positioned crews around the city. As the flames raced through the brush, the chief engineer ordered "everything available into the fire." But "everything was not enough." The streets became clogged with people trying to escape by car and on foot. Then the water ran out.

How had the situation got so out of control, the movie asked. The answer lay in precisely those qualities that made L.A. such an attractive place to live: its climate, its canyonside homes, its wild ridges accessible only by narrow roads. The whole arrangement was a "design for disaster," which was also the name the L.A.F.D. gave to the film. "These are the odds," Conrad said, in closing. "If you win, you get to keep what you already have. If you lose, fire, the winner, takes all."

The fires that have ravaged L.A. during the past two weeks—the Palisades Fire, the Eaton Fire, the Hurst Fire, the Lidia Fire, and the Sunset Fire—have broken any number of records: for acres burned, for structures destroyed, for the value of property incinerated. (The Griffith Park Fire, in 1933, remains the deadliest blaze in the city's history, with twenty-nine fatalities, but that record, too, could fall, as many victims of the recent fires probably remain unaccounted for.)

The fires also seem to be setting a new standard for finger-pointing. Some have blamed the disaster on the city's mayor, Karen Bass, who was in

Ghana when the flames started. Others—most notably Donald Trump—have lit into California's governor, Gavin Newsom. (Trump claimed that Newsom withheld water from Southern California on behalf of an endangered fish, the delta smelt, which is native to the San Francisco estuary—a claim that, as many commentators have pointed out, has no basis in reality.) Newsom, for his part, ordered an investigation into the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, which had left a reservoir in Pacific Palisades empty while it made repairs. The Los Angeles *Times* said that the L.A.F.D. had delayed calling up additional firefighters until the Palisades Fire was unmanageable. The chief of the L.A.F.D., Kristin Crowley, criticized Bass and the city council for cutting the department's budget. "The fire department needs to be properly funded," Crowley said. "It's not."

With the exception of the innocent smelt, it's likely that all the parties who have come under attack could have been better prepared, and that it would have made a difference. But only at the margins. On January 10th, while the fires were still raging out of control, several of the world's leading scientific organizations announced that global temperatures in 2024 had reached a new high. *nasa* calculated that the average for the year was 1.47 degrees Celsius (2.65 degrees Fahrenheit) above pre-industrial levels. *nasa*'s European counterpart, Copernicus, put the increase at 1.60 degrees C. (2.88 degrees F.). "Honestly, I am running out of metaphors to explain the warming we are seeing," the director of the Copernicus Climate Change Service, told reporters.

As air warms, its capacity to hold moisture rises, and the increase is not linear but exponential. Higher temperatures thus boost evaporation, with two apparently opposing results—fiercer rains and deeper droughts. Southern California has experienced both extremes in recent years: the past two winters were exceptionally wet; the summer and fall of 2024 were exceptionally dry. During the wet periods, grasses and shrubs on L.A.'s ridges and canyons thrived. In the dry seasons, the brush withered into kindling waiting to ignite. In a paper published earlier this month, a group of researchers led by Daniel Swain, a climate scientist with the California Institute for Water Resources, dubbed such swings from wet to dry "hydroclimate whiplash." The phenomenon, the paper demonstrated, is on

the rise worldwide. “I don’t see this as a failure of firefighting,” Swain said of the devastation in L.A. “I see it as a tragic lesson in the limits of what firefighting can achieve under conditions that are this extreme.”

Already, at the time of the Bel Air Fire, the spread of suburbia into the hills was a firefighter’s nightmare. Thanks to L.A.’s headlong growth, the situation today is far more treacherous. Since 1961, the population of Los Angeles County has grown by some sixty per cent. More and more people are living at the foot of mountains or along chaparral-covered canyons, in areas that the county designates “very high fire hazard severity zones.” California has strict building codes for construction in high-hazard areas, but most of the rules don’t cover older houses, and, in any event, as Patrick Baylis, an environmental economist at the University of British Columbia, recently told the Washington *Post*, with weather conditions like those in L.A. during the past few weeks, “even the best-built home can catch.”

Meanwhile, whatever progress the United States has made in limiting climate change seems likely, under Trump, either to stall or to be reversed. Last week, Trump’s nominee for Secretary of Energy, Chris Wright, who heads a fossil-fuel company, told senators at his confirmation hearing that he stood by a 2023 LinkedIn post in which he had called the link between climate change and more severe wildfires “just hype.”

To address the fire risks in L.A.—the city’s “design for disaster”—would require a kind of foresight and determination that, in 2025 in America, we know we lack. Already, to expedite rebuilding, Governor Newsom has suspended environmental-review requirements in the county. The attraction of L.A. is irresistible, and the dangers, which in a warming world will keep on growing, are, the script suggests, unavoidable. ♦

Elizabeth Kolbert, a staff writer at The New Yorker since 1999, won the 2015 Pulitzer Prize for general nonfiction for "The Sixth Extinction." She is also the author of "H Is for Hope."

After the Fire

The Master Origami Artist Whose Collection Turned to Ash in Altadena

As the flames approached his house and studio, Robert J. Lang had time to rescue only one piece of art work: a cuckoo clock he folded from a single sheet of paper.

By Oren Peleg

January 20, 2025

Illustration by João Fazenda

“The first thing you think of when you see your home engulfed in flames is, My world and future have changed,” Robert J. Lang, one of the world’s foremost origami artists and theorists, said recently. He was sitting in a small hotel room in Arcadia, California. The week prior, the house where he lived with his wife, Diane, had burned down when the Eaton Fire erupted and swept through Altadena, outside Los Angeles, with incredible speed, levelling entire neighborhoods. Robert’s studio, a separate property where he kept decades of his professional origami work—all highly flammable—along with research and personal artifacts, was also reduced to ash.

Diane walked in with their two dogs, Casey and Scout, who hopped onto the mattress and lay down. Diane, with no other place to sit in the room, joined them. “Two people offered their back yards for them to wander around in,” she said. “So, we were just in a back yard.”

The Langs had gone to sleep on a Monday night in their own bed. By Tuesday night, they were sleeping in their cars, with their many pets—the two dogs, two desert tortoises (Sal and Rhody), a Russian tortoise (Ivan), a snake (Sandy), and a tarantula (Nicki)—and the few things they could grab as they fled the inferno. The snake, tortoises, and tarantula were now being taken care of at the San Dimas Canyon Nature Center, rather than staying at the hotel. “Just to make my life simpler,” Diane, who works with the Eaton Canyon Nature Center, said.

In the early hours of Wednesday morning, Robert watched his studio burn from a nearby ridge. Then, at around 9 *A.M.*, he and Diane learned that their home was destroyed. At sixty-three years old, Robert, who was profiled in this magazine in 2007, has been designing origami for most of his life; one of his early designs, in the seventies, was an origami Jimmy Carter. He used to be a physicist, working on things like semiconductor lasers, at places such as *NASA*’s Jet Propulsion Lab, before he decided to devote his time fully to origami. The studio held much of his art, and all of his tools. The laser cutter he used to help make prototypes had melted. “It’s now a pile of metal,” he said. “A 3-D printer is now a pile of ash.” Rare paper, including fig-based paper from a tiny village in Mexico, had burned. He went on, “There were correspondence letters with other origami artists over the years that were a historical record for me and perhaps for others. And then my

exhibition collection was there. The pieces I had in *MoMA*"—a large grizzly bear, a bull moose, and a fiddler crab, all folded between 2003 and 2007—"are gone." As he evacuated, however, he was able to grab a single piece of art work, perhaps his most famous: a framed, fifteen-inch cuckoo clock folded into dazzling complexity from a single sheet of paper.

When the owners of Origamido Studio, in Massachusetts, which produces handmade origami paper, heard about the fire, they e-mailed Robert to say that they would make him more of whatever he needed. The studio is run by friends of the Langs. "They had started shutting down that studio," Diane said. "It's physically difficult work and we're all getting older, but they put it back into operation for him."

At the Langs' home, a small work shed in the back yard was the lone surviving structure. "I don't know why," he said. "It's wood. Everything else burned." He pointed at a computer monitor on a desk behind him, crammed between the bed and the wall. "That's how I got that."

Diane noted another recovered object. "The 'twice-fired' pot," she said. Robert pulled a misshapen earthenware pot from the hotel room's closet. "We saw this poking out of the ashes," he said. He flipped it over to show bubbles that had formed on the bottom, and some ash fell out. "I just dropped some asbestos onto the carpet," he said.

Diane laughed. "A strong part of our marriage has been our shared sense of humor," she said. "We've had some really good laughs in the last few days, believe it or not."

Since the fire, Robert has paused new contracts, but he has continued working from his hotel room on an ongoing collaboration with Brigham Young University to create a "big fold-up lens," made out of glass and aluminum instead of paper, that will be part of a new satellite lidar system for *NASA*. Pointing to a few simple pieces of origami near him, he added that he was "working out the structural elements" for a project with a commercial client: "I signed an N.D.A., so I can't say who."

Most of the Langs' days now are spent on details. Dealing with insurance. Filing documents of everything lost. Texting with neighbors. Walking the

dogs. Checking the weather for changes in wind. Monitoring evacuation-zone updates from the Watch Duty app. And, mainly, finding a more stable place to live.

Robert's phone rang. Their real-estate agent had a prospective rental apartment they could see that afternoon.

"Ask him about the dogs," Diane said to Robert. She explained, "We'd found a place we liked—a good vibe. But the owner said he didn't want dogs."

Robert hung up. "They take dogs," he said. "We can see it at 3 *P.M.*"

"It'll probably be for two years," Diane said. "But we'll rebuild. We still have our land. We even have the floor plans." ♦

Oren Peleg is a journalist and a screenwriter based in Los Angeles.

Laugh Dept.

Gary Gulman May Ask You to Re-Parent Him

The comedian, who stars in a new one-man show, “Grandiloquent,” explains why he keeps returning to his childhood in Massachusetts.

By Andrew Marantz

January 20, 2025

Illustration by João Fazenda

In “The Great Depresh,” Gary Gulman’s documentary-style comedy special about his lifelong struggle with depression, a camera crew follows him to his childhood home in Peabody, Massachusetts. “A happier kid you couldn’t find,” his mother recalls. “Always had a smile on his face.” Gulman, combing through keepsakes in the living room, picks up a copy—*the* copy

—of “The Lonely Tree,” a book he wrote in second grade. (First sentence: “There once was a tree that no one liked.”) Sitting next to his mother, he says, “To anybody with just a small amount of psychology knowledge, you would know this was a cry for help, an allegory.” She didn’t get it then, and it’s not clear that she fully gets it now. He laughs and pats her arm, but he doesn’t seem to be over it.

“They could be so charming, my family, but so oblivious,” he said the other day. “They were all about cutting you down to size, making sure you don’t get a big head. My therapist always tells me, ‘The audience is not your family, Gary. They’re actually *rooting* for you.’ ” At fifty-four, Gulman is often described as a comic’s comic, though he prefers to compare himself to the Silver Surfer. (“Nobody knows who he is, but the people who do know him really like him.”) He still seeks from his audience the recognition he lacked in his upbringing; this is true of most comedians, but Gulman is more overt about it. In his new one-man show, “Grandiloquent,” now at the Lucille Lortel Theatre, he tells the crowd, with a wince of sympathy, “Nowhere on your ticket did it say you’d have to re-parent me.”

“The Great Depresh” aired in 2019, on HBO, and many critics declared it one of the best specials of the year. (The Emmys and the Golden Globes, Gulman hastens to add, did not.) Then he put out another memoirish HBO special (“I grew up in an oft-ignored sector of Jewish people called ‘poor’ ”), followed by an actual memoir, “Misfit: Growing Up Awkward in the ’80s.” (On the cover, Gulman strikes a Billy Madison pose, holding a brown paper lunch bag.) Now there’s “Grandiloquent,” which again mines his elementary-school years for material. Proust had Combray, Twain had Hannibal, Missouri, and Gulman has Peabody, a middle-class Boston suburb where, as a hulking, sensitive kid in 1977, he was forced to repeat the first grade. He was already reading at an advanced level—“I knew what ‘precocious’ meant, and I knew it applied to me, and I liked it”—but his father still insisted on holding him back. “The teachers tried to talk him out of it, showed him charts and everything, but he said, ‘I know my son’—which he absolutely did not,” Gulman said. “When I talk about it onstage now I get gasps, which is gratifying, in a way, but also sort of disturbing.”

He was standing in the fiction section of Three Lives & Company, a corner bookstore in the West Village, wearing jeans and a Rush T-shirt. He is six feet six—a shelf or two taller than all the other customers—and has recently been sporting a Frank Zappa look, shoulder-length curls and a pointy Vandyke beard. He began coming to the shop after Sunday-brunch shows at the Comedy Cellar or morning games of pickup basketball at Tompkins Square Park. “I developed a ritual of getting ice cream, then coming here to browse,” he said. A solo ritual. “Not a lot of people I know with that exact combination of interests.” Gesturing toward “The Three-Body Problem,” by Liu Cixin, which became a Netflix series, he said, “I enjoy watching an adaptation of something I’ve read, because I get to be the obnoxious guy going, ‘No, no, they’re combining these two characters, it’s all wrong.’ My wife loves it when I do that.” He often returns to the Yiddish absurdists (he’s in the middle of Sholem Aleichem’s Tevye stories) and the plainspoken American humorists (“Slaughterhouse-Five,” “Letters from the Earth”). “When this show is over, my plan is to read Twain’s autobiography, then maybe ‘James,’ ” he said, referring to Percival Everett’s reworking of “Huckleberry Finn.” He spotted “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest,” with which he has a complicated relationship. When his doctor first suggested electroconvulsive therapy, he said, “I recoiled, because in my head I was imagining what everyone imagines, Jack Nicholson getting strapped down and zapped. But eventually I tried it, and it saved my life.”

He bought the book in an edition he didn’t have—Penguin Classics, with an introduction by Robert Faggen—and started up the street to the Lortel, where it was almost time to get into costume. Onstage was a teetering set of bookshelves, the spines painted in seventies suburban yellow. They were all just for show, except one: the original copy of “The Lonely Tree.” He opened it up. “He got so sad that tears came down,” it read. “They made him grow and grow and grow until he was the biggest tree in the forest.” He sat in one of the red velvet house seats, turning the pages. “Still holds up,” he said. ♦

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

Intimate Projects Dept.

Traversing the Metropolitan Museum's Eight Hundred Galleries, One by One

Dan and Becky Okrent spent seven years on the Met Project, a labor of love that took them from ancient Sumer to Synchronism.

By Ben McGrath

January 20, 2025

Illustration by João Fazenda

There are roughly eight hundred galleries that hold the permanent collection of the Met, and as of a recent Tuesday morning the married writers Dan and Becky Okrent had examined every piece in all but two. "We tried to be

largely chronological, which is to say, we began in ancient Sumer, and then we did Egypt, and then we did Greece and Rome, and then we went through the Dark Ages, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance," Dan said, as the couple arrived at Gallery 910, in the back left corner of the first floor, home to Cubism, Futurism, and Synchronism. "We stumbled into the modern contemporary work. We entered the wrong way. So we were looking at Frankenthaler and Klee and Pollock before we came down here." He added, "We're completists but not systematic."

The Met Project, as the pair took to calling it, arose seven years ago, at a time when the Okrents were contemplating retirement. A weekly crosstown bus from their Upper West Side apartment to look at some art seemed like a healthy beginning—purposeful, in an ongoing way, without feeling onerous. They were novices, delighted by the absence of lines on a Wednesday morning, only to realize that the museum was closed. Their progress was further slowed by the fact that they now spend half the year in Wellfleet, Massachusetts, and by *Covid*, and by Dan's decision to write another book. Plus their pacing was deliberate. "We read every label," Dan said, adding, "Some labellers seem to be working for the Progressive Label Party, and other labellers are art historians." He posted occasional screeds on Instagram about the first group. ("Dwight Garner says, 'Boring!' " Becky recalled, of the *Times* book critic, a friend.)

So here they were, on the project's final day, a pair of marathoners incognito among the walkabouts. Becky paused in front of a Kandinsky. "I think this has more sexual references than the label points out," she said.

"That's your mind."

"I know," Becky said. "I have a dirty mind."

"You know what I thought of, Becky, was the cave paintings at Lascaux. There's something bull-like."

And on they went, sometimes lingering in opposite corners before reconvening at a sculpture or a glass case in the middle and sharing observations. "He does facts, I do feelings," Becky said. Amid all the modernism, she declared herself "homesick for Sumer."

“That’s your favorite?” Dan asked. (His personal favorite, for the record, was Guido Reni’s painting “Charity,” circa 1630—a woman breast-feeding.)

“Well, the ancient stuff really speaks to me,” Becky said. “There’s something intimate about it. Like a message from long ago, and you just drift back in time.” She added, “I’m also—confession—like a goldfish in a fabulous bowl. The good news is I can keep going round. There’s familiarity, but you forget so much. So I might as well start back at the beginning.”

A tour guide arrived, leading a noisy pack of students. The Okrents shuffled into Gallery 908, their final gallery, and converged on Picasso’s “Woman in a Chemise in an Armchair,” where they struggled to identify some of the abstracted body parts described on the label. “I couldn’t find the raised left arm,” Dan said.

“It starts here, on her shoulder,” Becky said, turning her back to the painting and embodying the woman’s gestures. “She’s like this.”

A security guard swooped in: “Too close!”

Several Picassos later, Dan acknowledged a completist’s lament. He was starting to feel about some of the lesser Picassos the way Becky had felt about certain depictions of children in the Renaissance—not great. (“I mean, in the early Nativity scenes, Jesus is a hot dog with eyes!” she said.) Their last unseen piece was “Still Life with Checked Tablecloth,” by Juan Gris, which reminded Dan of an old college friend, John Gray: “He always referred to himself as Juan Gris. He thought he was clever.”

“That *is* clever,” Becky said.

“Have you read this label yet?” Dan asked, gesturing to the right of the painting. “I never would have found the bull’s head without this excellent label.”

“A bull’s head? Oh! The bull’s head, with a striking eye. Yeah!”

“Congratulations, darling.” Dan extended his hand.

“Thank you, dear,” Becky said. “It’s been a lovely voyage.”

On their way out, the Okrents found themselves recalling a several-thousand-year-old statue they’d both admired for its “absolutely contemporary body language,” as Dan put it, and decided to make a pit stop, to bid farewell to Memi and Sabu, “The King’s Acquaintances,” from ancient Egypt’s Fourth Dynasty. “His hand’s on her breast,” Dan noted, upon arrival. “But look at her gesture—her hand around his waist. It’s really kind of stunning.” Becky concurred, and with that they had a crosstown bus to catch, and another project to conceive. ♦

Ben McGrath has been a staff writer since 2003. His first book, “Riverman: An American Odyssey,” was released in 2022.

L.A. Postcard

After the Fires, a Slow Night in Hollywood

The freeways were traffic-free, and so were hotels, where a handful of forlorn locals waited for what would come next.

By Sheila Yasmin Marikar

January 20, 2025

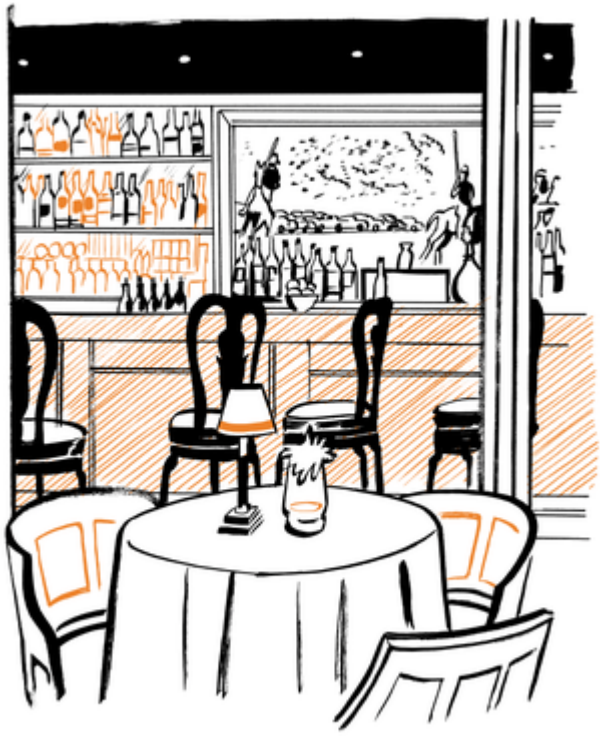


Illustration by João Fazenda

On most weekday afternoons, U.S. Route 101, which slices through the city of Los Angeles, thrums with traffic, brake lights blinking like those on a Christmas tree. Several days ago, as wildfires ravaged the city and the surrounding county, a haze of smoke filtered the sun like a silk scarf over a lamp. It was eerily smooth sailing from Silver Lake to Exit 9B, Hollywood

and Highland, near Runyon Canyon Park. The popular hiking destination had ignited the previous evening in the Sunset Fire, forcing thousands of Hollywood residents to head for other hills.

“We were packed yesterday,” a host at the Polo Lounge in the Beverly Hills Hotel said, “but now people are scrambling around,” either moving into longer-term temporary housing or returning to from whence they came.

Bar Nineteen12, on the other side of the hotel, was empty; Led Zeppelin streamed loudly from the speakers. In the lobby, a man with salt-and-pepper hair and a blue polo shirt paced. “The girls are upstairs,” he said into his phone. “We’ll do whatever you think is best.” Outside, a jumble of suitcases was stacked near a red carpet.

Three miles east, a similar scene played out. “It was a madhouse last night and this morning, people checking in and out,” a host at the Sunset Tower Hotel restaurant said. “Then, at 7:30 *a.m.*, my street was cleared for us to go back. People want to go back home.”

A colleague, a woman wearing a black N95 mask, added, “The out-of-towners went back to Texas or New York or wherever they came in from.”

The host predicted a slow night, although someone, she guessed, would eventually need a Martini. Among the few diners: an octogenarian and her descendants, a stressed-looking woman on a laptop. A man in a baseball cap and one in a sweatshirt sat, improbably, at a table on the terrace. (“No one should be breathing that air,” the host muttered.) In a booth, a woman bounced a baby on her knee.

The sun was still out when five o’clock rolled around. “I’ll have a Martini,” a man with a buzz cut said, perching on a bar stool. “Two parts gin, one part vermouth, with an olive—the way it was made back in the day.” He was joined by a woman with a topknot, who asked for the same.

A staffer in a black suit with a black pompadour came by; Martini man gave him a one-armed hug.

“It’s about my wife. I need you to find out what she thinks I did wrong.”
Cartoon by Jon Adams

“Were you really trying to hike Runyon yesterday?” the woman asked.

“That’s my thing,” the staffer said. “I would’ve gone up there, but they had it blocked off.”

Drink sipped, hamburger and chopped salad ordered, Martini man took a call. “It was insane, dude,” he said to the person on the other end. “They’re called the Santa Ana winds. They’re, like, a thing. They happen every year.”

Martini man, it turned out, worked in the alcoholic-beverage sector, and he talked business with the staffer. The bar was running perilously low on a certain Sancerre. (*Quelle horreur*.)

Martini man tapped on his phone. “We’ve got two bottles left,” he said. “You want them? Two bottles will get you somewhere.”

“Sure,” the staffer said. “Something is something, right?”

“It’s better than nothing, in a pinch.” ♦

Sheila Yasmin Marikar has been contributing to The New Yorker since 2016. She is the author of the novels “Friends in Napa” and “The Goddess Effect.”

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Onward and Upward with the Arts

Charlotte’s Place: Living with the Ghost of a Vérité Pioneer

For the filmmaker Charlotte Zwerin, being known as the “third Maysles” was both a calling card and a curse.

By Michael Schulman

January 20, 2025

Charlotte Zwerin at work on her crowning film as a solo director, “Thelonious Monk: Straight, No Chaser.”Photograph from Warner Bros. / Everett

My husband and I landed here eight years ago, in this airy, crooked apartment on the top floor of an eighteen-thirties town house in Greenwich Village, on a quiet street shaped like a bent elbow. Up a narrow staircase is a loft, with a skylight over the desk where I work. The place came with the landlord’s cast-off green divan and giraffe-print armchair; it feels like a stage set of old Greenwich Village, a bohemian garret with a fireplace. When we moved in, the neighbors called it “Charlotte’s place.” Whoever Charlotte was, we had her dining-room table.

Every home is haunted by its previous residents, but prewar apartments in the Village have particularly colorful ghosts. The neighborhood still trades on its beatnik associations, although hedge-funders have long since replaced the likes of Frank O’Hara, Lorraine Hansberry, and Jane Jacobs. If

Charlotte was haunting us, it was a friendly haunting. But who was she? From neighbors' descriptions, she sounded like a classic Village crank who had holed up here for decades. Eventually, I put the pieces together. Above the building's front door is a plaque that reads "*OWNER MICHAEL L. ZWERIN*." Some Googling brought me to the name Charlotte Zwerin. The person I uncovered was neither an obscure oddball nor a downtown luminary but someone in between: an undersung heroine of documentary film.

The first thing I found was a *Times* column from 2003, which began, "The climb to Charlotte Zwerin's top-floor atelier on the leafy end of Morton Street is so steep that Ms. Zwerin, a 71-year-old documentarian whose partnership with Albert and David Maysles yielded such monuments to cinema vérité as 'Gimme Shelter' and 'Salesman,' occasionally resorts to a mechanical chairlift to scale the penultimate flight." The occasion for the piece was a retrospective of Zwerin's work at the Museum of Modern Art, including her collaborations with the Maysles brothers, the director-producers of "Grey Gardens," and her own documentaries about Thelonious Monk and Ella Fitzgerald. She's described as "a narrow woman with a broad-planed face and wisps of gray-blond hair above aviator glasses." Sitting on a bentwood rocker in the cluttered apartment, which I immediately recognized as my own, Zwerin, the paper related, got "misty" talking about her late dachshund, Cookie, whose photograph sat on the mantel. Her "cantankerous" air was belied by a Beanie Baby collection—she'd begun with an octopus and "got addicted"—which sat beside drawings by Christo, about whom she'd made documentaries with the Maysleses. She had split with the brothers, she said, because they wouldn't let her produce: "They cast an awfully long shadow. And it came time for me to get out of it."

Zwerin died the next year, of lung cancer. The rocker, the chairlift, the Christos, and the Beanie Babies disappeared. The dining table, dotted with water stains, remained. Obituaries called her a pioneer of documentary filmmaking and a brilliant film editor, but her name was always attached to the Maysleses'. When HBO Max launched, in 2020, I noticed that it listed the directors of "Gimme Shelter"—a classic study of the Rolling Stones—as Albert and David Maysles, and I angrily tweeted at the streamer to add

Zwerin, who is the film's third director. (It did.) If I was going to live in Charlotte's place, I had to defend her turf.

Recently, I got more curious about Zwerin and the life she lived here. I dug through archives, watched as much of her œuvre as I could find, tracked down her colleagues. Some remembered her as shy; others, as prickly. "Everybody sort of feared her," Lynn Sullivan, who worked for the Maysleses, recalled. "She presented a very stony exterior. I mean, she was the third Maysles, even though a lot of people didn't know that." I learned that she was a jazz buff, a chain-smoker, and a founding mother of the vérité movement, which replaced explanatory voice-over and talking heads with fly-on-the-wall naturalism. "Those films were my inspiration," Sheila Nevins, the former president of HBO Documentary Films, told me. When I asked her if documentary was a man's world back then, she laughed and said, "It's *still* a man's world!"

This summer, the Criterion Collection will release a new edition of Zwerin's crowning achievement as a solo director, "Thelonious Monk: Straight, No Chaser," from 1988. Zwerin made her name as an editor, an invisible job when it's done well. Even more than narrative films or traditional documentaries, vérité is created in the editing room, where hours and hours of film are crafted into a coherent story. Zwerin's status as the third Maysles was both her calling card and her curse. "One of the problems with Charlotte's career is it was hard to separate her from the Maysles brothers," her friend Kate Hirson told me. "When you're working collaboratively, no one knows who's the genius. And I think, in many ways, *she* was."

"Oh, my gosh, you're in my aunt's apartment!" one of Zwerin's nieces, Laura Tesone, said, when I switched on the Zoom camera. She and her sister, Lisa, assumed that the place had been gutted and were thrilled to see it intact. Zwerin was their cool, urbane aunt. "That apartment was so much a part of her," Lisa said. "Under the stairs she had a hi-fi system and a collection of jazz records. We used to go to the jazz clubs in the Village. She knew all of the performers, and they knew her. I remember meeting Joe Williams and Wynton Marsalis."

Charlotte Mitchell was born in 1931 in Detroit, the youngest of five. Her father, the foreman at a tool-and-die plant, was part of the sitdown strikes of the thirties. (Zwerin later made a documentary about the strikes, “Sit Down and Fight,” for the PBS series “American Experience.”) Her mother, a devout Catholic, would take her to an event called “Big Band and a Movie,” which ignited her interest in music and film; she had a thing for Robert Mitchum. Charlotte got turned on to jazz by Tommy Flanagan, a Black man whom she dated when they were young, and who would go on to become a celebrated jazz pianist. “Interracial relationships were not welcomed in Detroit when they were together,” Lisa said.

Zwerin in her Greenwich Village apartment—now the author’s—sometime in the nineteen-sixties.Photograph courtesy Laura Tesone

After attending Wayne State University, Charlotte moved to New York, where her first job was editing a skin flick called “Strip Show.” (“I also had to dub some of the voices,” she recalled.) She got more respectable work as an editor at the film company Drew Associates. Its founder, Robert Drew, wanted to unchain documentary film from “lecture logic,” which he described as dull, didactic, and narrated by an authoritative “voice of doom.” He imagined documentaries as “theatre without actors,” free from interviews, underscoring, and narration. His seminal film “Primary” (1960), which follows John F. Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey as they crisscross Wisconsin, has an untethered quality that puts the viewer up close to the candidates as they ride campaign buses and shake hands with voters.

Drew Associates, the documentary scholar Bill Nichols told me, was “a petri dish, a breeding place for all of these ideas.” It attracted a new

generation of filmmakers, including Richard Leacock, D. A. Pennebaker, and Albert Maysles, who was a cameraman on “Primary.” Albert wanted to liberate the camera from the tripod, and he fashioned a thirty-pound device that he could carry on his shoulder, repositioning the viewfinder. It allowed him to roam around, filming life as it unspooled. The new genre became known as “direct cinema,” though the term would blend with its French counterpart, *cinéma vérité*, a more participatory style spearheaded by Jean Rouch.

Charlotte met the Maysles brothers through Drew Associates, but her big break came from Shirley Clarke, one of the few other women in the field. Clarke had been hired to make a film about Robert Frost, but, midway through, she got sidetracked by “The Cool World,” her groundbreaking film about a youth gang in Harlem, produced by another vérité star, Frederick Wiseman. She withdrew from the Frost documentary and turned it over to Charlotte to complete.

The film, “Robert Frost: A Lover’s Quarrel with the World,” captures the octogenarian poet speaking to students, puttering around his Vermont farm, and reciting poetry. In a scene shot at Sarah Lawrence, Frost acknowledges the “sideshow” of the cameras in the room, grousing, “It’s a false picture that represents me as always digging potatoes or saying my own poems in the woods.” Charlotte, following Clarke’s schema, kept the line in the film, which went on to win Best Documentary Feature at the 1964 Academy Awards.

By then, Charlotte was thirty-two and married to Mike Zwerin, a jazz trombonist who was running his late father’s steel company. (“Educated, willowy, ironic women often go for trombone players,” he later wrote.) He was playing in Maynard Ferguson’s big band in New York when he met Charlotte, and they moved into an apartment on Tenth Avenue, below the jazz pianist John Lewis. Mike was impressed by Charlotte’s previous relationship with Flanagan. “Following him had something to do with my falling for her,” he wrote in a memoir, “Close Enough for Jazz,” adding, “New York flourishes on such associations.”

“I’ll totally forget if you don’t add ‘Torture new guy’ to my to-do list.”
Cartoon by Eugenia Viti

In the early sixties, Lewis asked Mike to join his ensemble Orchestra U.S.A., and the Zwerins bought the town house where I live. It was close to the jazz clubs, and by 1964 Mike was writing a jazz column for the *Village Voice*. The marriage was brief. Charlotte’s niece Lisa recalled, “She said, ‘I remember coming downstairs to the kitchen one morning when we first got married, and he had left me a to-do list for the day on the fridge. I knew then that this marriage was never going to work.’ ”

In the memoir, Mike put it this way: “I may have rejected her before our marriage was unsavable just to get a good jump on rejection for a change.”

After the divorce, Charlotte kept Mike’s last name and the top half of the building; Mike sold the bottom half, and, in 1969, moved abroad to be the European editor of the *Voice*. He wound up in Paris, where he remarried and covered jazz for the *International Herald Tribune*. Charlotte, meanwhile, was riding the vérité revolution. By 1966, she was working with the Maysles brothers and dating David Maysles.

The Maysles brothers grew up in Boston, the sons of Eastern European Jewish immigrants. Albert was the cameraman; David did sound and handled the business. They were drawn to subjects who were natural performers—the producer Joseph E. Levine, the Beatles—but were zealous about upholding vérité values. “This society has become so fictional with the advent of television,” David said in 1965. “Everything seems to be fictionalized. Fantasized. There’s a need for straightforward, truthful reports.”

The next year, Zwerin edited their short “Meet Marlon Brando,” in which the star holds court with reporters while promoting his new picture, “Morituri.” Pelted with inane questions, Brando bucks against the artifice of the press junket (“I feel reduced to huckstermanship”) and flirts with female interviewers (“You’re so pretty I’m distracted by the fact you’re asking me questions”), as the Maysleses’ camera hangs back and takes it all in. After playing the New York Film Festival, the movie went unseen for years, because Brando wouldn’t sign a release.

Also in 1966, Zwerin and the Maysleses made a short about Truman Capote, for National Educational Television. Capote was about to publish “In Cold Blood,” and the brothers filmed him prattling to a *Newsweek* reporter about inventing the “nonfiction novel,” which he describes as “a genre brought about by the synthesis of journalism with fictional technique.” The Maysleses were attempting the same thing in movies.

The idea for the brothers’ next project—their first “nonfiction feature film”—came from Capote’s book editor, Joe Fox, who suggested that they shadow door-to-door salesmen. The brothers had worked as salesmen—Albert of encyclopedias and Fuller brushes, David of Avon products—and they set their sights on the four thousand Bible salesmen who roamed the country. They were intrigued, as Albert put it, by “how the Bible has become a product.”

The Mid-American Bible Company of Chicago let the brothers trail a quartet of salesmen during the winter of 1966-67. One of them, Paul (the Badger) Brennan, emerged as the film’s protagonist. With his Boston accent, craggy face, and swagger that cross-fades into desperation, he was straight out of Arthur Miller. Zwerin didn’t join the brothers in the field, but back at their headquarters, above the Ed Sullivan Theatre, on Broadway, she cut a hundred hours of footage into a shapely ninety-minute film. In the decades before editing software, this was a laborious task that required splicing frames and repeatedly running footage through big Steenbeck flatbed machines. Zwerin loved the associative logic that came from familiarity with the material: “You think of something, you go, you get the reel, and you run through it . . . and it reminds you, and then something else. The relationship comes to you that wasn’t there before.”

What she saw in the “Salesman” footage was gold, full of pathos and comedy, a sideways glimpse into the American heartland. She recalled watching Brennan hawking a “Catholic honor plan” to a skeptical housewife. “I fell out of my chair laughing,” she said. “I mean, what would they do to people who don’t pay—do they go and repossess the Bible?” One editing choice stands out. Brennan is on a train to Chicago for a sales conference, staring out the window, and we hear the voice of a salesman at the conference telling the crowd, “If a guy’s not a success, he’s got nobody to blame but himself.” Cut to the conference. The conflation gives voice to Brennan’s self-doubt, as if we’re hearing his inner monologue. “I got a lot of flak about this scene from the cinéma-vérité police,” Zwerin says, on the directors’ commentary for Criterion. “How could we know what he’s thinking?” She goes on, “Well, clearly, he’s been there before, and he knows what’s coming. So I found it a very effective way to move this thing along.”

Vérité was a new filmmaking language, and it required a new grammar of editing. “You’re finding the story in the footage,” the editor Geof Bartz told me. “Suddenly, people were shooting tons of film without a script. So the question was: How do you cut it? Because you don’t cut it in the traditional closeup, long shot, and all that kind of stuff. You have to find another style of editing it, based on what I call energy.” In “Salesman,” Zwerin intuited a structure not just for individual scenes but for the entire film, which tacks between the salesmen pitching housewives and them convening in motels to trade sales tactics over cigarettes and poker. It culminates with a scene of Brennan facing his obsolescence. “I can’t get any action out there,” he moans from a bed in a Florida motel.

With Albert Maysles (center) and David Maysles (right) in 1970, discussing their rock-and-roll landmark, "Gimme Shelter."Photograph from Stanley Bielecki Movie Collection / Getty

On "Salesman," Zwerin was credited not only as a co-editor (with David Maysles) but also as one of the directors, a decision that divided the brothers. "Al had issues with crediting anyone besides him and David, let's put it that way," Muffie Meyer, who later worked on "Grey Gardens," told me. "Charlotte had to fight—we *all* had to fight, mostly with Albert—for that credit." There were two artistic partnerships at play. Out in the field, the brothers were in synch, camera and sound fusing into one seamless observer. Back in the editing rooms, whose walls were hung with Moroccan textiles, David and Zwerin were a couple, turning raw footage into a story. "Albert never came in the edit room," Susan Froemke, who joined Maysles Films in the seventies, told me. Later in life, Albert said, "I have attention-deficit disorder in spades, so editing is something that is very difficult for me." To make a film, David needed both his brother and Zwerin.

When reporters came calling, though, they were interested only in the brothers. In 1969, as "Salesman" opened to acclaim, David and Albert sat in director's chairs on WCBS-TV's "Camera Three," as the journalist Jack Kroll asked them, "What *is* direct cinema?"

"The whole crew consists of the two of us in filming: camera and tape recorder," Albert answered. The brothers were canny self-promoters—they'd been salesmen, after all. Meyer said, "And so Charlotte kind of got forgotten, because she was shy, quiet, and not a person who tooted her own horn."

Zwerin did get some attention from her home-town paper the Detroit *Free Press*, which profiled her in connection with the film. “Once you find you can do something like ‘Salesman,’ the other kind of movie won’t stand up,” she told the writer. “It has become a dulling experience to go to the movies. Theater has been that way for a long time. It’s fake to me. But this kind of film completely overcomes the credibility problem.”

That November, the Maysleses arranged to film the Rolling Stones at Madison Square Garden. The band envisioned a concert film, along the lines of Pennebaker’s “Bob Dylan: Don’t Look Back” (1967). But the brothers, as Albert told Salon in 2000, “had a hunch it would be more than that—just what it was we didn’t know.” They followed the Stones to Boston, Florida, and Alabama, capturing Mick Jagger’s exclamation point of a body as he whipped city after city into a frenzy.

The tour ended with a free concert at the Altamont Speedway, outside San Francisco, on December 6th. Some three hundred thousand fans came, expecting a Woodstock West. The Maysleses had hired a raft of camera operators (including the young George Lucas), and they chronicled the lovefest as it went disastrously off the rails. When Jagger arrived at Altamont in a helicopter, a fan socked him in the face. The Hells Angels, whom the Stones had hired as an “honor guard”—they were paid in beer—patrolled the stage with pool cues. By nightfall, when the band finally came onstage, the crowd was unruly and chaotic. “Why are we fighting?” Jagger, in the ill-fitting role of school principal, pleaded with the spectators. As he sang “Under My Thumb,” a group of Angels attacked Meredith Hunter, a Black teen-ager in the audience. Hunter flashed a gun, and one of the Angels stabbed him to death. The cameras caught it all.

The Maysleses now had a chronicle of the fiasco that the press was declaring a death knell for the counterculture. But the Stones still had a hand in the project, and everyone involved “was afraid that the Angels were going to come after them, because they had a killing on camera,” Stephen Lighthill, who had shot the concert from stage right, told me. The brothers turned to Zwerin for help figuring out how to edit the footage. “I was in Europe,” she recalled, “and got a letter at my hotel in Paris from David saying what they had filmed, and they were very excited about it, and

would I please come back and work on the film?" The conundrum: how to square the authorized concert film they had been hired to produce with the tour's deadly turn? "For me, the hero of the making of the film is Charlotte," Lighthill said. "She realized that the real story was Altamont and what happened there."

"I think everybody felt uneasy about it," Zwerin recalled. "Certainly, it happened. You can't walk away from that." One problem was that movie audiences would likely arrive anticipating the well-publicized catastrophe. Another was that they'd want to see the Stones respond to the tragedy—and perhaps even face their own complicity. (The Hells Angel who stabbed Hunter was acquitted on the ground of self-defense.) But the Maysleses didn't do interviews. Zwerin solved both problems in a single stroke. She knew that the Stones wanted to see the rough footage before the film was assembled. Her idea: shoot the band members watching the footage and use *that* to frame the film.

"We needed a device: a way structurally to let people know what this movie was about early on," she told Salon. "Gimme Shelter" begins with Jagger arriving at Madison Square Garden, then cuts to the band viewing the footage of the concert in the editing room. "It's really hard to see this together, isn't it?" Charlie Watts, the drummer, asks David Maysles, as Zwerin loads the next reel.

Toward the end of the film, we see Jagger watching the footage of the Altamont stabbing. "Can you roll back on that, David?" he asks, and David plays it again. "Oh, it's so horrible," Jagger says, but his concern sounds perfunctory. As he skulks out of the room, Zwerin freezes the frame on his face, his eyes fixed on the camera, curiously blank. "The film doesn't absolve them," Zwerin said."It doesn't say 'you're guilty,' either." Jagger, regarded by some critics as a heedless chaos agent, later said, "You feel a responsibility. How could it all have been so silly and wrong?"—but pointed the finger at "how dreadfully the Hells Angels behaved."

Zwerin pieced together "Gimme Shelter" in a cruddy room at the Londonderry Hotel, the film cannisters piled on windowsills. (The Maysleses had a suite with a view of Hyde Park.) She woke up one morning

to find that it had snowed on the film. “So that day was spent trying to dry out all the film reels,” she recalled.

Zwerin was given a director’s credit for “Gimme Shelter,” which came out in 1970 and became a rock-and-roll landmark. But its release was shadowed by the misperception that the filmmakers had contrived the Altamont spectacle. *Rolling Stone* weighed in: “It may surprise many of the people who suffered at Altamont to discover that they were, in effect, unpaid extras in a full production color motion picture.” Despite the fact that the Maysleses’ vérité ethos prized unmediated observation, critics ran with the idea that the filmmakers had blood on their hands. In the *Times*, under the headline “Making Murder Pay?,” Vincent Canby wrote that the film raised “important moral and esthetic questions relating to ‘direct cinema.’ ” Pauline Kael, in this magazine, asked, “Is it the cinema of fact when the facts are manufactured for the cinema?” (“That’s just so farfetched,” Zwerin said in response.)

“Our menu is built around things we’re pretty sure aren’t poisonous.”
Cartoon by Emily Bernstein

By then, Zwerin and David Maysles had broken up. She was dating one of the film’s editors, Kent McKinney, who cut the slow-motion sequence of Jagger performing “Love in Vain.” David had met his future wife, Judy. When I reached Judy, she attributed the split to the fact that “David didn’t want to live and work with the same person.” She added, “I think probably David was the love of her life. The one she couldn’t have.”

Froemke agrees: “All of us felt that Charlotte and David were soul mates.” But Zwerin, nearing forty, was straining against her ties to the Maysleses. “She wanted to go off and make her own films,” Froemke said. “I think she found it very hard.” She wasn’t good at selling herself, and funding was hard to come by, even with the “Gimme Shelter” credit. “She went on an interview somewhere,” Froemke recalled, “and she came back to Maysles Films—I was a front-desk girl then—and she said, ‘They don’t believe I made the film.’ ”

Zwerin skipped the next Maysles feature, “Grey Gardens” (1975), about two eccentric relatives of Jackie Onassis, Big Edie and Little Edie Beale. “She didn’t like the footage,” Froemke, who co-edited the film, said. “And it’s probably true that she wanted to go out on her own.” Two other women, Ellen Hovde and Muffie Meyer, stepped in, editing the film with Froemke. In Old Hollywood, where cutting film had been considered akin to sewing, editing had become one realm in which women could thrive, but it had a glass ceiling. At Maysles Films, talented women excelled in the editing rooms; even when they were named co-directors, however, they never had ownership. “Grey Gardens” has four directors, but, like “Salesman” and “Gimme Shelter,” it’s remembered as a Maysles project.

There was backlash to “Grey Gardens” from critics who believed that it exploited the Beales. To some degree, the critiques were backlash to cinéma vérité, which was falling out of fashion in the disillusioned Watergate era. The idealism that had launched the movement in the sixties, promising a revolutionary authenticity, seemed naïve by the seventies, and the hand-wringing over “Gimme Shelter” had taken a toll. Zwerin, meanwhile, edited “The Shadow Catcher,” a documentary about the photographer and ethnologist Edward S. Curtis, and briefly worked on “An American Family,” Craig Gilbert’s pathbreaking PBS series, which chronicled the lives of the members of an everyday family, the Louds, anticipating reality TV. (Zwerin quit after Gilbert refused to work with three female editors whom she’d brought on.)

By the mid-seventies, Zwerin was haggling with the Maysleses over payments for “Gimme Shelter.” According to a letter from her lawyer, preserved in the Maysles archive at Columbia University, she had “received

no moneys from you on account of her profit participation." Still, when it came to editing, the Maysleses considered her first among equals. In 1977, she was working with them again, on "Running Fence," a film about the married artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude's four-year campaign to mount a temporary twenty-four-mile fence of white nylon across the California hills. The film is a fish-out-of-water caper, as two exotic art weirdos attempt to charm ranchers and perplexed local officials. Zwerin, who was captivated by the artists, made a rare visit to the filming location; the movie ends with a rapturous montage of the finished fence rippling in the breeze at dusk.

Zwerin's chance to finally direct on her own came from Courtney Sale, a gallerist who in 1982 married Steve Ross, the C.E.O. of Warner Communications. Sale hired Zwerin for "Strokes of Genius," a five-part television series about Abstract Expressionists, hosted by Dustin Hoffman. Zwerin directed two installments, one on Arshile Gorky and one on Willem de Kooning. Both segments rely on archival footage and interviews, but "De Kooning on de Kooning" ends with a splash of vérité. For an astonishing seven minutes, we observe de Kooning, in his seventies, as he paints a canvas in silence. He steps back, tilts his head, lurches in to add a slash of orange. Then he turns to his wife and says, "That looks pretty good."

The series aired on public television in 1984. Afterward, Zwerin returned to Maysles Films, where she co-directed another film about Christo and Jeanne-Claude, tracking their effort to wrap two islands in Biscayne Bay in pink fabric. The Maysleses paid their bills by shooting TV ads, and Zwerin paid hers by editing those ads. Lynn Sullivan, who assisted her on a commercial for Signet Bank, recalled, "She made a cut, and then these two advertising guys come in, and they're telling her some stuff and she's just sitting there. Then they leave, and she goes, 'Typical admen. Two guys, one ball.' "

In January, 1987, David Maysles died suddenly after a stroke, at the age of fifty-five. "Charlotte was pretty devastated," Froemke recalled. "She would sit in the front office and just mourn him." Zwerin organized the music for the memorial service: "Take It to the Limit," "I'll Be Seeing You." David had held the enterprise together, and Froemke stepped up to fill the void.

Why not Zwerin? “Oh, she was not a boss,” Sullivan said. “She was very smart, very focussed, just did her thing. And she and Albert *never* could have worked together. No mutual love there.”

David Maysles didn’t live to see Zwerin’s zenith as a solo director, “Thelonious Monk: Straight, No Chaser.” Back in 1981, the jazz aficionado Bruce Ricker had brought her fourteen hours of footage of Monk from the late sixties, shot by Michael and Christian Blackwood for a TV special that was shown once, in West Germany. Zwerin added biographical context, but the core of “Straight, No Chaser” is the enigmatic, vérité-style Blackwood footage, which captures Monk’s genius and his madness. Several times, as another musician plays, Monk stands center stage and spins in place, in febrile oneness with the music. When he does it again at an airport, you wonder if he’s simply losing his mind.

Clint Eastwood funded the film. The *Times* critic Stephen Holden, in his review, in 1989, wrote that it contained “some of the most valuable jazz sequences ever shot.” He added, “Other scenes show him explaining his compositions and chord structures, giving instructions in terse, barely intelligible growls.” Bernadine Colish, the assistant editor, told me, “It was a surprising film, because not many people had seen Monk in a situation where he was just himself.” She remembered Zwerin’s decisiveness: “Sometimes directors try everything, because they’re not sure what they’re doing or what they’re saying. But Charlotte always knew.”

By the nineties, the vérité movement had shrunk; PBS’s educational house style—archival footage, instructional talking heads—was dominant. Zwerin made “Sit Down and Fight” in 1993, followed by hour-long pieces on the film composer Tōru Takemitsu and the sculptor Isamu Noguchi. In 1999, she directed her last major work, “Ella Fitzgerald: Something to Live For,” for PBS’s “American Masters,” narrated by Tony Bennett. (She wanted Joe Williams, but he was on his deathbed.) The format was pure PBS—just what vérité had rebelled against three decades earlier—and you get the sense that, for Zwerin, it was work for hire. But she artfully uses Fitzgerald’s songbook to suggest the singer’s churning inner life. “The theme of the picture is Ella’s searching for something in her private life that she was never able to achieve,” Zwerin said, at a Museum of Television &

Radio panel. “ ‘Something to Live For’ comes right in the middle of the picture, where you begin to understand that she hasn’t found this, and she probably won’t.”

Had Zwerin found something to live for? She had a career she could call her own. She never remarried or had children, but she adored her nieces and relished her independence. “She said to me, ‘If you’re going to live alone when you’re older, you’d better like your own company,’ ” Lisa told me. She read nonfiction, kept a house in Bridgehampton, and doted on Cookie, her dachshund, until an exterminator accidentally poisoned the animal. She started working on a film about the late jazz great Tommy Flanagan, her old boyfriend. One of her regrets was that she could never quit smoking.

When she was given a diagnosis of lung cancer, the doctors estimated that she had five years left. That’s exactly how much longer she lived. Her breathing deteriorated; she installed the chairlift on the staircase. One of my downstairs neighbors was stunned to see her inhale from an oxygen tank one moment and puff on a cigarette the next. Another tenant recalled, “She told me that she had a bad cold.”

One day, Laurence Kardish, a curator in *MOMA*’s film department, got a call from Zwerin’s co-producer on “Straight, No Chaser,” who urged him, “If you want to do something while she’s alive, you should do it soon.” They arranged a retrospective, titled “Charlotte Zwerin: Some Remarkable Talents.” Zwerin helped select the films, going back to “Salesman.” If she felt vindicated, she didn’t say so at the opening. “She really believed in her work and put a lot of herself in it,” Lisa said. “That’s what meant something to her—not the fact that she was getting attention.” Seven months later, at the age of seventy-two, she died in the apartment, a glass of wine at her bedside.

Zwerin’s life ended at a time when documentaries were resurgent. Michael Moore’s “Bowling for Columbine” (2002) and “Fahrenheit 9/11” (2004) did big business, and films like “Spellbound” (2002) and “Capturing the Friedmans” (2003), which peer into nooks of human behavior, owed a debt to “Salesman” and “Gimme Shelter.” Today, people binge docuseries on HBO and Netflix. But, to the modern eye, accustomed to quick cuts and ominous underscoring, the unadorned watchfulness of classic vérité can be

jarring. Without talking heads or voice-over to nudge things along, stories are told entirely in subtext. What are we meant to see in Paul Brennan's blustery Bible pushing, or in Mick Jagger's ambiguous glare?

Writing this at Zwerin's dining-room table, it's hard not to think about how what she did overlaps with what I do. She was fascinated by how artists work, how carefully observed behavior can reveal character. It's how I think about writing a Profile. It's the small contradictions that intrigue us: the way Brando bridles at the phoniness of a junket while ogling a reporter; how Monk can sit down and play "Ugly Beauty" and then lumber off in a daze. Or how an uncompromising filmmaker in her sixties gets hooked on Beanie Babies.

Outside my window is a magnolia tree that blooms, briefly but magnificently, each spring. As I watched Zwerin's films, buds appeared, then flowered into a frothy pink show. Passersby stopped to take photos, as if a movie star were posing on the sidewalk. After two weeks, an April rain inevitably washed the petals to the ground. Did Zwerin watch the tree, too? Did she mark time by it, like I do now? She must have known when the bloom was coming, and that it would not last long. ♦

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."

Annals of Inquiry

What an Insomniac Knows

What's really going on when you can't power down?

By Adam Gopnik

January 20, 2025

Unable to secure a good night's rest, poor sleepers can search for consolation in the creative and prolific souls—the Brontës, Baudelaire, Kafka, Proust, Nabokov—who shared their affliction.Illustration by Gérard DuBois

"Are you awake?" So runs the perpetual 3 *A.M.* question of the sleepless to the seemingly slumbering partner. "No!" the partner replies, turning over and away, indicating both the fact of being awake and the state of being still asleep, unavailable for conscious activities. The insistent insomniac, desperate for a chat, usually sighs, accepts the verdict, and slumps back into sleeplessness. (Carrying on with the conversation is a path toward divorce, not the desired diversion.) The exchange, muttered by countless couples in

countless beds, reminds us that sleep is not a neat off-and-on switch but a fully human and fiendishly manifold activity: social, complex, and governed by as many psychological intricacies as any other natural act. We can be asleep and still sense that something is stirring around us, or be awake and still say “No!” and mean it.

“The importance of insomnia is so colossal that I am tempted to define man as the animal who cannot sleep,” E. M. Cioran once wrote. Sleep—which, when things go well, consumes a third of our lives—poses two opposed existential perplexities. The first is about consciousness: we know that we sleep, but cannot know that we are sleeping, since sleep is, in its nature, non-present. The second perplexity has to do with what we can, in fact, remember, and that is the experience of dreams. While engaged in the non-knowable act of sleeping, we also learn nightly that it is possible to know that we have had vivid, intense, unforgettable experiences that are, at the same time, delusions. Sleep tells us that there are black holes outside the possibility of narrative description; the dreams we have when we’re sleeping tell us that our entire existence might be a narrative fiction. “How do we know it’s not a dream?” is the perennial philosopher’s question, the red-pill dilemma. We’ve all felt that initial squeeze of relief—oh, it was just a dream!—turn into sadness: Oh, he’s not alive again. It was only a dream. And so the contradiction: we cannot narrate our experience of sleep, even though our dreams are so much our primary experience of narration that we use them as a metaphor for our most extreme actualities. “It was like a dream,” we say of something piercingly happy; “It was a nightmare,” for something piercingly sad.

Inevitably, we turn to the scientists, as medieval people to the stars, in the hope of finding truth and comfort about our unwaking states. In “Why We Sleep,” Matthew Walker, who runs the Center for Human Sleep Science, at Berkeley, offers a fine condensed account of what students of consciousness know about its absence. He is at pains to show that there’s a complex architecture of unconsciousness. It isn’t just that deep sleep is followed by *REM* sleep, or dreaming sleep; these two states firmly oscillate back and forth in the hours we are asleep. We learn not just about melatonin, as a marker of our circadian rhythm, but about adenosine, which accumulates during our waking hours and produces the “sleep pressure,” or homeostatic

sleep drive, that makes us drowsy. Caffeine, we're told, does its work by preventing adenosine from doing *its* work. (It's a powerful drug! Walker reproduces terrifying drawings of webs woven by spiders under the influence of various substances: spiders do O.K. even on LSD but go completely crazy on the strength of a couple of lattes, spinning wildly incoherent webs that would never catch a fly.)

Veteran insomniacs seeking reassurance in these pages—it's no big deal; people manage fine with minimal sleep; it gets better—will find none. Instead, we are warned that the consequences of not sleeping are even worse than we'd feared. Everything goes wrong when we don't sleep. The damage to our immune system is astounding; Walker cites a study of healthy young men that showed how a four-hour night of sleep "swept away 70 percent of the natural killer cells circulating in the immune system." Sleep-deprived mice—it seems cruel to keep even mice awake, but we do, possibly by showing them Election Night on MSNBC over and over—will have a two-hundred-per-cent increase in tumor growth. Nor is cancer the only risk. "You don't need a full night of total sleep deprivation to inflict a measurable impact on your cardiovascular system," Walker explains, delivering details with what sounds suspiciously like professional delight. "As your sleep-deprived heart beats faster, the volumetric rate of blood pumped through your vasculature increases, and with that comes the hypertensive state of your blood pressure," he writes. "Adding insult to real injury, the hypertensive strain that sleep deprivation places on your vasculature means that you can no longer repair those fracturing vessels effectively. . . . Vessels will rupture. It is a powder keg of factors, with heart

attack and stroke being the most common casualties in the explosive aftermath." That's the kind of reading that can keep you up at night.

Insomniacs tend to couple up neatly with good sleepers, but even those good sleepers are probably not sleeping as much as they should. Walker suggests that humans are made for "biphasic" sleep—that is, two sleep sessions per day. People in traditional communities where everyone naps live longer than people in modernized ones where they don't. The siesta is lifesaving. Walker even conjectures that our peculiar sleep patterns may explain our evolutionary advance. We sleep less than other primates, but get relatively more *REM* sleep, and the dreams it brings, than our monkey and ape cousins. It is during *REM* sleep, Walker insists, that we engage in "emotional processing." The mnemonic collisions during this phase forge new connections among our experiences, and we wake not merely refreshed but revived and enlightened by our re-wrought neural networks.

That's if you sleep, of course. Insomnia seems to descend, alarmingly like schizophrenia, in the late teens, when self-consciousness of all types descends. I suffered my own first serious bout with sleeplessness around the age of eighteen, when, coming home from a family voyage to Europe, my eyes would not shut. The reason was obviously jet lag, but, instead of accepting the cause, I internalized the panic.

Decades later, I recall good sleeps the way other people recall good meals. (I have luckily had too many good meals to recall almost any.) The one morning when I slept past nine; that other when the kids had to wake me at eleven. Few phobias can be quite as psychologically painful as sleeplessness. The body simply won't lose consciousness, and losing it is something that cannot be willed into existence, or, rather, into nonexistence. And so one begins to envy desperately not just the sleeping spouse but everyone in the world who is not awake, from children to the henchmen in old heist movies who are thumped on the head with the butt of a gun by Steve McQueen and immediately faint away. (Not something that can actually happen.)

The odyssey that the insomniac undergoes every night, passing from bedroom to living room and back again, is, in a curious way, a parody of sleep, as Walker depicts it, with a conscious architecture of its own. Not

being able to sleep and being awake are two distinct settings. Insomniacs seldom just get up, work for an hour, enjoy the silence of the house. This implies a state of serenity that's exactly what we don't have; if we could be that calm, we'd be asleep. No, we are inclined to seek out sleep in the same oscillating stages that sleep itself presents, even if that means walking fretfully, or listening to podcasts on early Christian history, or watching late-night television, searching out things that will be sufficiently distracting to keep us from dwelling on the fact that we are not sleeping without being so agitating as to keep us up even more.

Indeed, when two insomniacs share a house or an apartment, they are often acutely conscious of each other's affliction without seeking each other's company. Hearing the other move around, flick the light switch on and off, pound the floor, the insomniac empathizes while recognizing that to commiserate would be to bar the door to oblivion for both. For we insomniacs are not living the waking life; we are *seeking sleep*. As much as the actual sleeper in the bed beside us, we have a nightly passage that we know too well—and one that does, eventually, yield to sleep, if never enough.

Star insomniacs, for there are such people, tend to feel free to externalize their own nightly odyssey. The basketball player Wilt Chamberlain was chronically sleep-deprived. He would talk about how little sleep he'd had, and crankily, not boastfully. The nineteen-seventies were "probably the best time of his life because he had people who could stay up all night with him," a friend of his has said. "But he'd wear people out because all the rest of us had to sleep." There were compensations: he couldn't have slept with so many women—many, many thousands, he estimated—had he actually slept. (This double use of "sleep," which occurs in many languages, is a significant substitution, sex being both an alternative before and a soporific after. Perhaps he slept with so many in order to sleep alone.)

What afflicts the great star of the court can equally afflict the great star of the quad. The eminent philosopher of personhood Derek Parfit served himself a nightly concoction of pills and vodka in an effort to knock himself out. According to his biographer, David Edmonds, the druggings were accompanied by another ritual, in the pre-AirPods era, when Parfit was a

fellow at All Souls College, Oxford: “Each night, as other Fellows retired to bed, he would start playing Wagner—usually *The Ring Cycle, Tristan and Isolde*, or *Parsifal*—and the music would float across the North Quad for several hours.” Wagner *would* be a sleepless highbrow’s favorite; the long, lush, unbroken lines of music share with the white-noise hum of the air-conditioner or the thrum of the painstaking lecture the quality of being absorbing without offering undue eventfulness. It doesn’t seem to have helped Parfit any more than early Christian history has helped me.

The exasperated experts, right here, begin to fire off e-mails and D.M.s, tutting at the eminent philosopher’s obvious failures of sleep hygiene. Of *course* if you drink vodka you’ll awake at midnight! Walker, in fact, explains that one of the by-products of alcohol metabolism is a class of chemicals, known as aldehydes, that are especially prone to impede *REM* sleep. But trust us, doctor, we have tried it all. The Mayo Clinic has just published a brand-new guide to sleeping, which rehearses yet again the familiar remedies and warnings: no caffeine within nine hours of bedtime (done); no alcohol within four hours of bedtime (done); exercise, but at least two hours prior (done); no screens before bed (done). Meditation can help (it does, sort of), and calculation can comfort—see how much you’re really sleeping by keeping a record, and you’ll be vaguely encouraged that it’s more than you know. Melatonin, the cautious man’s Valium, may or may not work, and the gummies may contain much less or much more of the active ingredient than the label promises. The veteran insomniac may arrive at a neat little stack of health-food-store supplements—CBD gummies (with or without THC), L-theanine, kava, valerian root, and so on—and is perfectly aware that, more likely than not, it works, if it works, as a placebo. (One would think that placebos, to work, couldn’t be known as such, but it seems that, when we need *something* badly enough, we welcome anything.)

We are told to find consolation in the creative and prolific souls who share the affliction: the Brontës, Baudelaire, Kafka, Proust, Nabokov. Wilt Chamberlain didn’t catch a wink of sleep in Syracuse the night before his hundred-point game. But then the number of unlikable people who slept four hours or so out of twenty-four includes such dubious sorts as Napoleon and Kissinger. Is it possible that they tried, consciously or otherwise, to

sacrifice sleep for self-interest? The cognitive costs may be compensated by the careerist advantages.

The inevitable reaction to the universalizing claims of natural science is the particularizing claims of cultural history: sleep, we can be certain, will be shown to have as many cultural styles over time as the pajamas we wear, or don't wear, to enjoy it. Though food is biologically necessary, we accept that it has innumerable local styles—there may be a universal grammar of a pungent protein piled upon a neutral starch, but it encompasses everything from pizza to cassava with spiced ants. Can sleep have something like the same tribal variety? Is there a peculiarly Sri Lankan siesta, an especially Swedish kind of slumber party? Right on cue, we have Sebastian P. Klinger's "Sleep Works: Experiments in Science and Literature, 1899-1929." It's an attempt to cross the wires of experimental sleep science with those of literary production, set as the nineteenth century turned into the twentieth. A devout "culturalist," Klinger quotes approvingly the statement that there is nothing natural about going to bed, and yet if *anything* is natural—that is, common to almost the entire animal kingdom—it's sleep. Although beds in our modern sense of four-footed furniture with a springy surface may have a particular history, the familiar use of "bed" to mean something soft that animals choose to lie down on is obviously wide-reaching. Hibernating bears do not lie on jagged rocks.

The statement means, really, that the way we sleep is more inflected by our beliefs than we might think, as touched by our private yens as our public yawns. Klinger's subsequent thesis, not a terribly surprising one, is that insomnia is the consequence of the mechanization of leisure by capitalism, and that we became sleepless in the fin de siècle because we were being forced to work and shop. Insomnia is the occupational disease of enslaved mind workers, with a predictable spillover into the aesthetes who mock it yet participate in it.

But surely insomnia was, as it remains, an outlier issue—Henry Clay Frick appeared to have slept fine, and Frederick Winslow Taylor, who slept poorly as an adolescent, doesn't seem to have slept worse after he pioneered the methods of industrial efficiency. In ancient Rome, Juvenal complained about being kept up all night by the city's noise. Perhaps the special

connection between insomnia and modernity is something we *want* to be true.

“Of course your mom was there—she just took all the pictures.”
Cartoon by Diane de Ferran

Insomnia seems no more a generally modern complaint than it is a capitalist one. It is specifically a romantic complaint, which began to be heard in full right around the start of the nineteenth century and, like so many romantic complaints, became most intensified as it passed from country to city. If Shakespeare produced, in Lady Macbeth, the first great insomniac of English literature—albeit one who sees the condition as a punishment from God—it was Wordsworth who wrote our first real poem about insomnia. It’s disarming in its narrator’s search for some form of the white noise that sometimes helps the sleepless. He was trying to find pacifying country sounds even in the Lake District, the kind that are now synthesized on Spotify: “A clock of sheep that leisurely pass by, / One after one; the sound of rain, and bees / Murmuring; the fall of rivers, winds and seas, / Smooth fields, white sheets of water, and pure sky; / I’ve thought of all by turns, and still I lie / Sleepless.” What is essential is the taste to testify to the extremes of experience; Coleridge’s somnambulist and Wordsworth’s insomniac are two sides of a single phenomenon.

Klinger, to his credit, recognizes that the opposite side of the failure to sleep is the fetishization of sleep. Proust’s insomnia, though debilitating, was made, in classic wound-and-bow terms, into the engine of his art. And so with Kafka and Cioran: not being permitted to sleep by the lights of

modernity, we make a melancholy playground out of the prohibition. Klinger also points out that this era marks the birth of the sleeping pill, the Communion wafer of the new century, with all its attendant miseries. Although sleeping draughts have an ancient history—evolving into the "stupefactives" of medieval medicine and then, starting in the sixteenth century, the much consumed tincture of opium known as laudanum—the twentieth century was a time of unexampled innovation in this area.

We are soon launched into the series of hypnotics—the barbiturates, the benzodiazepines, the "Z" drugs (such as zolpidem), and, most recently, the orexin blockers (notably, Belsomra). Like the rakes in a Jane Austen novel, they all began with great charm, and then soon afterward earned the most terrible reputations. You would think we'd avoid the next generation of pills after seeing the toll extracted by the previous one, but we don't. The essayist Wilfrid Sheed wrote, in the nineteen-nineties, a funny, agonized book about his betrayal by benzo—in his case, Ativan, which promised much and ended up, in collaboration with alcohol, sending its otherwise well-balanced user off to a procession of rehabs.

Sheed called New York "the world's insomnia capital." This may be true, but what sane person would exchange the gleaming city at 3 *a.m.* for the farmhouse at 9 *P.M.*, with all the exhausted hoers and threshers briefly asleep until the next dawn's labor begins again? When our own country cousins come south from Canada, they emerge from the spare bedroom of our New York apartment hollow-eyed and sleepless, politely incapable of understanding how anyone can sleep amid the noise of ambulances and car alarms and honking cabs and city buses sweeping up the avenue right outside. Among the New Yorkers, both the good sleepers and the bad sleepers don't notice it.

What of the dreams that sleep brings? If anything is universal, it is the belief, across cultures, that dreams are parables and portents—Freud became famous in Klinger's fin-de-siècle modernity for seeking symbolic significance in dreams, but it is hard to find a single culture that does not include some version of this belief. The ancient Greeks thought that dreams held powers of prophecy; Hindus have apparently found encouragement in dreams of Lord Krishna. We want dreams to mean something, even though,

yet another slumber paradox, they mainly puzzle us by their disjuncture of logic and meaning. Thus the dream relater (there is usually only one in a relationship) always begins, “I had the strangest dream last night . . .”

To find out what the new science of dreams suggests, we have “This Is Why You Dream,” by Rahul Jandial, whose name on the dust jacket is suspiciously followed by both M.D. and Ph.D.—a good rule of reading being that the more credentials on the cover, the less convincing the claims inside. Yet Jandial’s book, though perhaps breezier and less cautious than that of the more typical sleep scientist, is filled with empirical information that may seem dreamy without ever feeling wholly hallucinated. And so we learn of the “Halle Berry neuron,” a discovery of the neuroscientist Rodrigo Quian Quiroga, who found that, in one experimental subject, a single neuron fired to the invocation, or even the mention, of Halle Berry. The larger point being made, very much in harmony with Matthew Walker’s theory of human nightly emotional processing, is that our dreams are what Jandial calls thought experiments. We focus with such neural narrowness on Halle Berry—or on Brad Pitt—because having fantasy figures play roles in the stock-theatre company of the night helps prepare us to ensnare the real thing in our waking hours.

If there seems less evidence than we might want for such a confident claim, Jandial does make a plausible case that our dreams work in tandem with our “theory of mind”—our ability to grasp that other people are thinking and feeling in the same way as ourselves. At night, we rehearse the day’s actions, and our imaginations, so to speak, ruminate through the activities of those others we have encountered as though they were our own and try to make lateral sense of them. Throughout, Jandial is arguing against the “continuity hypothesis” of dreaming—the idea that dreams are basically extensions of our daily life in coded form. Instead, he thinks that the purpose of dreams is closer to the vernacular meaning of the word: it’s what we want, not what we got—the outer edge of our imagination, not the fabric of our days rewoven.

Sometimes, to be sure, dreams are obviously rooted in anxiety. We dream repeatedly of having signed up for a course that we forgot to attend, with the exam now drawing near. This may be the mind’s simple Post-it

reminder not to do this, or anything similar. Others are more plaintively compensatory: a standard dream of New Yorkers is to have found an extra room in their apartment—a dream often elaborated with a Narnia-like act of pushing back coats and clothes to find a secret door in the back of a closet. We awake, sadly, to the same space we had before. (To this dream, one might add another, also seemingly peculiar to this city: having acquired a bigger apartment, we dream of having been forced back to the smaller one.)

But most dreams are less shapely in their signalling, tending to be the jangle of mixed-up stories and abruptly abbreviated actions which puzzle us in the morning. And so Jandial arrives at a highly hypothetical but agreeably plausible explanation, modelled, as such explanations usually are, on the most recent available model of the mind. In our case, that model is provided by artificial intelligence: when a system of machine learning becomes overly tethered to the material it is dredging and, Jandial writes, grows "too rigid and formulaic in its analysis," it proves useful to "inject 'noise' into the information used to teach the machine, deliberately corrupting the data and making the information more random." Dreams, therefore, "are much like the noise injected into the machine's data." Freeing our minds, dreams force us into new channels of possibility, which might, in their apparently surreal inconsequence, lead to the type of thinking that "looks at a problem in a completely novel way" and help us "find adaptive solutions to unexpected threats." The illogic of dreams is not a riddle to be solved but a noise that can reveal the meaningful signal. We are readied for the unexpected by the nightly experience of the inexplicable.

But there's also something to the old saying that "dreams go by contraries." Far from being continuous with our daily life, they are often compensatory. One abashed sleep scientist long ago, anticipating that the leaders of an expedition to Everest would have the most epic dreams, discovered that the meekest and most incompetent followers dreamed heroically of the summit, while others' dreams tended to be far more anxious—a Walter Mitty effect that should have been predictable to any reader of fiction. Jandial urges us to take advantage of dream disjunctions by making a conscious effort to record our unconsciousness—writing down the previous night's dreams, to which we are usually made amnesiac by the reëmergence of the "executive

function” of the brain in wakefulness, so that “retreating into our dreams can expand our minds in ways impossible in lived experience.”

On the farther shore of sleep, Jandial writes encouragingly of the willed practice of lucid dreaming—that is, of shaping our minds so that our dreams are not merely orderly but intentionally helpful. We focus on “seeing the divine,” and we’re told that some version of the divine will be seen that night, though Hindus will see Krishna and Christians Christ. The practice of lucid dreaming—for what it’s worth, it apparently can be aided by a drug called galantamine—would seem to clash with Jandial’s earlier theory of useful randomness in dreaming, but then why should dreams be any more subject to a unitary principle than any other part of life? This particular non-lucid dreamer made an effort, after reading Jandial, to dream the divine, but I kept getting instead the missed exam and the extra room in the apartment—perhaps evidence that dreams will elude the strictures of lucidity, or perhaps evidence only that, for a New Yorker, the extra room *is* the image of the divine.

A skeptic might insist that dreams have no real content at all and are more like bits and pieces of film in the cutting room of the mind. The morning-after recitation might be the dream—that is, the moment when the clips are run through the projector and we patch together a narrative. The mind, then, might *make* purpose in dreams rather than find it there. How much are those purposes affected by our situation? According to the clinical literature, prisoners in Auschwitz dreamed of continued suffering, in which the misery and horror persisted—supporting a version of the continuity hypothesis—or had positive dreams of escape that they could share with other prisoners. One prisoner after the war described a dream in which he met his murdered brother on a stream—the deep river that represents the passage from sleep to death in countless mythologies—and his brother handed him a “fiery fish.” “I can’t carry it, I can’t carry it,” the dreamer remembers crying. “You’ll carry it, you’ll carry it,” his long-gone brother insisted. The dream, he said, gave him courage and helped him survive.

Those of us stuck on the wheel of sleeplessness eventually discover what the scientists concede: that nothing is gained, past a certain point, in trying to sleep, since the one sure thing is that none of us can will ourselves to

sleep. The best remedy for insomnia, as with most things in life, is learning to live with it. In time, we come to understand that the psychological cost of stressing over sleeplessness is greater than the physical cost of not having slept, and so we adjust. The fact of not having slept turns out to be tolerable. Exhaustion gives way to normal energy, and adrenaline kicks in when we have to perform.

We cope. Is there a more dispiriting but mature reflection? Yet, on the whole, we do cope, and find comfort. Insomnia is a mark of the insubordinate imagination. On the thirteenth-century tomb of Eleanor of Aquitaine, she is shown wide awake and reading, while her dull and kingly husband sleeps for all eternity. Doubtless some medievalist will explain this as a conventional funerary trope, but one cannot help but feel, looking at it, that it is an allegory about the virtues of sleeplessness. Eleanor can read a book or, these days, scroll through her phone; her mind is secretly and subversively open.

“I simply cannot get used to the nightly betrayal of reason, humanity, genius. No matter how great my weariness, the wrench of parting with consciousness is unspeakably repulsive to me.” So declared Nabokov, and though, as often with that great exile, there is a note of overcompensating defiance in the affirmation, still, he had a point. There is glory in this view of life which involves extending its conscious moments, fighting for every second of awareness that our mortality can afford us.

The one thing the insomniac does not envy is the unconscious dead. The universe, after all, is asleep. Trees and vegetation are always slumbering, helpless at the woodman’s axe or the casual munching of a ruminant. And the great mass of inanimate matter is flattered by even being called asleep; it has no potential for animation. To be awake is to be alive. Mind racing at 3 *A.M.*, we are in tune with what may be the truly unique, only-once-in-the-universe gift of consciousness. That’s some comfort. We’ll sleep long enough soon enough. ♦

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

A Reporter at Large

Britain’s Foreign Secretary Braces for the Second Trump Age

David Lammy used to be an arch-critic of Donald Trump. Can he deal with the new Administration and reset the U.K.’s relationship with the E.U. at the same time?

By Sam Knight

January 20, 2025

“My job is to say Britain’s back,” David Lammy observes. “Britain is back on the world stage.”Photograph by Anselm Ebulue for The New Yorker

Shortly before 3 *P.M.* on a Tuesday in late September, David Lammy, the British Foreign Secretary, sat down at the blond horseshoe-shaped table of the U.N. Security Council chamber, in midtown Manhattan. It was High Level Week for world leaders at the General Assembly. Outside, on First

Avenue, the traffic was unbearable. Lammy, who is one of Britain's most prominent Black politicians, entered office this past July, when the Labour Party, under Keir Starmer, swept to power after fourteen years of Conservative government. His schedule in New York was heavy and mixed: hurried conversations with Najib Mikati, the Prime Minister of Lebanon, about the fighting between Hezbollah and Israel; a U.N. summit to address the global health risks posed by antimicrobial resistance; a "fireside chat" with the actor Benedict Cumberbatch and his wife, Sophie Hunter, an artist and a director, about salt marshes and the ineffable qualities of British soft power.

The Security Council meeting was about the war in Ukraine. A large mural in the chamber, by the Norwegian artist Per Krohg, loomed over Lammy's right shoulder. At the base, a dragon was removing a sword from its own body. "The world we see in the foreground is collapsing," Krohg explained seventy-five years ago. When the meeting began, the Russian representative, Vassily Nebenzia, spoke first, saying that he had no intention of listening to "hackneyed, cookie-cutter statements" from Ukraine's allies, and then pointedly stopped paying attention, scrolling on his phone.

Lammy likes to have an audience. Although only recently appointed to high office, he has been a Member of Parliament for Tottenham, the North London neighborhood where he grew up, for almost a quarter of a century. During the long years of Labour opposition, Lammy, who is fifty-two, hosted a call-in radio show and cultivated a significant presence online. He can sense a viral moment. When his turn came to address the meeting, he directed his words at the Kremlin and Vladimir Putin. "I speak not only as a Briton, as a Londoner, and as a Foreign Secretary," Lammy said. "But I say to the Russian representative, *on his phone as I speak*"—Lammy hit the words as if he were telling off a teen-ager—"that I stand here also as a Black man whose ancestors were taken in chains from Africa, at the barrel of a gun, to be enslaved, whose ancestors rose up and fought in a great rebellion of the enslaved." He continued, his voice rising, "Imperialism. I know it when I see it. And I will call it out for what it is."

The speech took off online. Lammy pinned a clip to his X page. After the meeting, Radosław Sikorski, Poland's Minister of Foreign Affairs, came up

and congratulated him. “That was brilliant,” Sikorski told me later. “The U.N. is mostly the so-called Global South. That’s your audience.”

I met Lammy two days later at the Ritz Diner, twenty blocks north of the U.N., in between meetings. His parents migrated to England from Guyana, a former British colony on the north coast of South America. Lammy regularly invokes the U.K.’s imperial past and his own biography, in an attempt to frame current international problems and to find points of connection. “Having a Foreign Secretary that can use the past—but use it to caution the future—this resonates well in that global chamber,” he told me.

It is Lammy’s task—at an inauspicious time—to rediscover Britain’s place in the world after years of antic inwardness, a period defined by Brexit, economic rot, and political entropy that stopped the country from having much of a foreign policy at all. (Lammy’s six Conservative predecessors since 2016 lasted an average of fifteen months in the job; four of them tried to become Prime Minister while in office.) “The world has been shocked, bemused, discombobulated, by our oscillations, our internal seesaw, our isolationism. These are not words that you would generally associate with the U.K.,” Lammy said that morning. “We’re sort of like a tortoise that suddenly turned around and pulled its head in.” Lammy is not like that. His head is out. Thickset and ebullient now, he sang in choirs as a boy and knows how to modulate voice and gesture. If he is anywhere near a table, he uses its surface for grammatical emphasis, tapping and thumping between words. “My job is to say Britain’s *back*,” he said. “Britain is *back* on the world stage.”

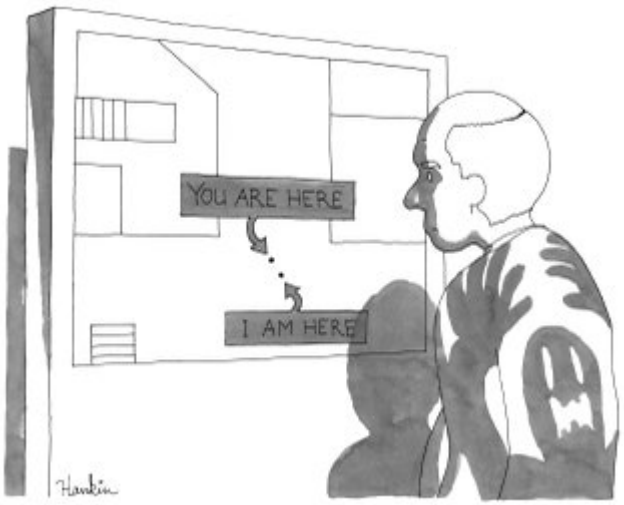
An aide interrupted, putting a plate heaped with pancakes and bacon in front of him, for a photo intended for his department’s Flickr feed. “O.K. Fine,” Lammy said, obediently picking up a knife and fork, to mime cutting into his breakfast. “God, if I ate that, I would be even fatter than I am,” he added, out of the side of his mouth. He laughed and left the food untouched.

“He makes an impression, right?” Ben Rhodes, a former speechwriter for Barack Obama and a deputy national-security adviser in Obama’s Administration, who is a friend of Lammy’s, told me. “I remember meeting him and thinking, Well, this guy’s interesting and full of vigor.”

Lammy earned a master's degree from Harvard Law School, in the mid nineteen-nineties. He got to know Obama through the school's Black alumni network and met Rhodes at Obama's campaign headquarters in Chicago, in 2007, when he was a junior minister in Tony Blair's new Labour government. During Obama's first Presidential campaign, Lammy went canvassing in Wisconsin while his wife, Nicola Green, who is an artist and a social historian, followed the candidate, making a series of prints that now hang in the Library of Congress. When we met in New York, Lammy took out his phone, on which he had a photograph of a recent handwritten note from Obama, encouraging him to "keep up the good fight" as Foreign Secretary. The two men try to have dinner when Obama passes through London. "He grew up without a father. I grew up without a father," Lammy explained. "Similar backgrounds."

Rhodes and Lammy became close after 2016, when both men were dealing with political estrangement. Rhodes was working on a memoir of Obama's Presidency and attempting to process Donald Trump's first victory, while Lammy was confronting the nationalist instincts behind the Brexit vote and his own party's leftward turn, under Jeremy Corbyn. "We were both wrestling with the same issues at that time," Rhodes said. "We were both trying to figure out what it meant to be in this kind of deep opposition."

During Trump's first term, Lammy—along with his friend Sadiq Khan, the mayor of London—became one of Britain's most prominent, and quotable, antagonists of the President. In July, 2018, Lammy joined a march protesting a Trump visit to the U.K. "The president's threats to *NATO* and the U.N. are no more logical than arson. His trade wars with the E.U. and China could trigger the next great economic crisis of our times," Lammy wrote in *Time* magazine. "Trump is not only a woman-hating, neo-Nazi-sympathizing sociopath. He is also a profound threat to the international order that has been the foundation of Western progress for so long."



Cartoon by Charlie Hankin

Lammy was at his barber's, in Tottenham, a little more than three years ago, when he saw that he had missed several calls from Starmer, Corbyn's successor as Labour leader. Starmer wanted Lammy to be the shadow Foreign Secretary in his opposition Cabinet. Not long afterward, Lammy was a guest on Rhodes's podcast. Trump came up in conversation, and Rhodes noticed a striking change in his friend's tone. "He gave this answer that was very reserved," Rhodes recalled. "And I was, like, Holy shit. This guy is already thinking about being Foreign Secretary. He kind of immediately switched off that valve." Rhodes likened Lammy to Obama in his tendency to prize the workable option ahead of his inner convictions. "Precisely *because* he believes that the danger is real," Rhodes said.

"The Americas are in my lifeblood. My family being from Guyana makes the New World very proximate to me," Lammy told me at the diner. He has family in New York, New Jersey, Florida, and Georgia. From 2021, he and his team worked assiduously to meet officials from the Biden White House and to court a possible second Trump Administration. Last February, Lammy reached out to Senator J. D. Vance at the Munich Security Conference. The men appeared at an event onstage together, agreeing conspicuously several times. Since then, Lammy has referred to Vance as his friend so often that some of his colleagues roll their eyes. (One Labour peer referred to Lammy's working-class childhood as his J. D. Vance years.) Lammy is unabashed. He said to me, of Vance, "He talks very passionately about addiction, joblessness, and a sort of cultural dislocation engulfing the

community that he grew up in. And, of course, I saw similar things in the community that I grew up in."

In New York, Lammy was reluctant to answer questions about the U.S. election, which was still six weeks away. Kamala Harris was three points ahead in the polls. His head and his heart were in contrasting places. "That's a bit hard for me," he said. When I insisted that he couldn't look upon a Trump Presidency with equanimity, he replied, "As the chief diplomat, in the end, give me democracy any day, however challenging it is, I suppose is what I am saying."

What Lammy did not say is that he had dinner plans with Trump that night. He and Starmer, along with Karen Pierce, the British Ambassador, and Sue Gray, Starmer's then chief of staff, rode the golden elevator up to the fifty-sixth floor of Trump Tower. According to two officials who were briefed on the evening, it was Lammy, rather than Starmer, who led the British charm offensive, laughing at Trump's jokes, taking a second helping of the entrée, and praising the surroundings. "The Foreign Secretary is kind of a natural at this," one of the officials said. "He knows America. He knows what kind of person this is." At one point, Trump lowered the lights to show off the skyline. "It's a beautiful view of Manhattan," Lammy told me. "It was a very, very warm evening in many, many ways."

There is no diplomatic playbook for dealing with the Trump Administration—especially not for America's closest ally, still trying to find its way in the world five years after leaving the European Union. Everyone agrees that Britain means something in international affairs, but not exactly what or why. Old empires are like old stars in the sky. You can't tell whether the light actually burned out years ago.

Lammy is not an easy politician to read. "There are so many different Davids that are sort of in one," a former adviser of his told me. But his instincts are relational, ahead of anything else. "You don't get from where I started to where I am without finding *the common ground*," Lammy told me one afternoon in his office in London, bashing the red leather blotter on his desk. "That is the No. 1 thing I am often trying to do." This is a darkening time for Lammy's brand of politics—centrist, flexible, globalist—which is in retreat almost everywhere. But he seemed energized, rather than

overwhelmed, by the task. “The history books are far from being written,” he said. “You know, we’re in the midst of it all. Let us reckon with that second Trump term.”

Lammy venerates Ernest Bevin, another working-class Labour politician, who became Britain’s Foreign Secretary in the last weeks of the Second World War. Bevin was an orphan from Somerset, who worked as a farmhand and as a truck driver until he was twenty-nine, when he emerged as a formidable trade unionist and a wartime organizer. Bevin’s grammar and politics were visceral rather than learned. Relying on what he called “the ’edgerows of experience,” Bevin helped to found *NATO* and wrangled the terms of the Marshall Plan for the reconstruction of Europe. A portrait of King George III hung in his office. “Let’s drink to him,” Dean Acheson, the U.S. Secretary of State, recalled Bevin saying, as he poured a glass of sherry. “If ’e ’adn’t been so stoopid, you wouldn’t ’ave been strong enough to come to our rescue in the war.”

“Ernie Bevin is my hero, because I’m looking at the world as it is, not as I would like it to be,” Lammy said. The last time Labour won power from the Conservatives, in 1997, the U.K.’s G.D.P. was greater than China’s and India’s combined. (Now, together, their economies are seven times larger.) Lammy campaigned hard against Brexit, which was a psychological and institutional disaster for Britain’s foreign-policy class. For forty-three years, until the referendum in 2016, officials in London had refracted every international question through the country’s simultaneous membership in the E.U. and its privileged access to U.S. power. “It was in the DNA of every Foreign Office official on any issue,” John Casson, a former Ambassador to Egypt and adviser to David Cameron, the Prime Minister who called for the Brexit vote, told me. “How can we triangulate the two in a sensible way?”

Theresa May, Cameron’s successor, set up a pair of government departments to manage Britain’s departure from the E.U. and to strike new trade deals around the world. The Foreign Office found itself largely excluded from the U.K.’s most important international negotiations since the Bevin years. “It was a trauma,” Casson said. Career officials discovered that their default mode of thinking about Britain’s place in the world was

suspect, too. “They were seen as completely unsound,” Casson continued, “by people who wanted to change the world and change how we operate.”

Britain’s Foreign Secretaries after 2016 included some of the Conservative Party’s most ardent Brexiteers, Boris Johnson and Liz Truss among them. Statecraft was replaced by stunts and nostalgia: Johnson reciting “Mandalay,” by Rudyard Kipling, on a visit to a Buddhist temple in Myanmar (“For the wind is in the palm-trees, and the temple-bells they say / Come you back, you British soldier; come you back to Mandalay!”); Truss riding on a tank. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office, which handled diplomacy, was hurriedly merged with the country’s Department for International Development, which dispensed aid. About a third of the nation’s fifteen-billion-pound overseas-aid budget was promptly repurposed to pay the housing costs of asylum seekers in the U.K.

In 2021, the combined department launched a grandiose and under-resourced “Indo-Pacific Tilt”—to project British power in Asia—and a sixty-million-pound refresh of the country’s “*GREAT*” marketing campaign, which put up posters of Harry Potter, Welsh cheese, and English soccer players in a hundred and forty-five countries around the world. Foreign Office staffers described an atmosphere of puzzlement abroad and low morale at home. “Lammy inherited a battlefield which is full of smoking hulks,” one former ambassador told me. “Just a disaster area.”

The headquarters of the combined Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office is a Victorian confection, built at the height of the British Empire, next to Downing Street. In 1877, the building was described as “a kind of national palace, or drawing room for the nation,” and it drips with alabaster, marble, and allegorical paintings showing Britannia living out her providential role in the world. In the nineteen-sixties, modernizers in both of Britain’s main political parties argued that the building should be pulled down and replaced by a more modest structure.

Lammy likes it as it is. He has a weakness for old and worn English places. “Actually, at this moment, the building is wonderful for me, because history is everywhere,” he told me one November afternoon in London. “I’m at ease with history and at ease with navigating, finding my own place within that history.” Outside, the light was failing over St. James’s Park. “I can

certainly see that some people might come in here and be rather daunted by the building. For me, in a way, it's comfort."

When Lammy was eleven years old, he won a choral scholarship to the King's (the Cathedral) School, a state-funded boarding school in Peterborough, in Cambridgeshire. The only Black pupil, he carved his name in a pew of the cathedral, which was consecrated in 1238, and appeared, in a white ruff and a red cassock, on the Christmas edition of "Songs of Praise," the BBC's flagship religious program. "I quickly learned that my insecurities, which related to my accent and my skin colour, were supposed to be hidden," Lammy wrote in "Tribes: A Search for Belonging in a Divided Society," a part memoir, part political study, which he published in 2020.

Before he became a chorister, Lammy had grown up in a red brick terraced house in Tottenham, one of five children, reared by his mother, Rose, who'd moved to London from Hopetown, a village in northeastern Guyana. Hopetown was founded in 1841 by forty-nine freed African slaves, who had bought the land—former cotton plantations—for two thousand Guyanese dollars, from James Blair, a British M.P.

Rose worked at the Camden Town Tube station and, later, as a local government official, in North London. Lammy's father, David, was also from Hopetown. He arrived in London in 1956, part of the so-called Windrush generation of West Indian immigrants—British colonial subjects who moved to the mother country after the Second World War. "They came with such a sort of brightness in their eye," Lammy told me. Dapper and charming, David, Sr., worked as a taxidermist. But he drank and his business failed. The last time Lammy saw his father was on a train platform. Lammy was twelve and heading back to boarding school. David, Sr., died in poverty in Texas in 2003.

Lammy's education inculcated in him the rituals and expectations of the British establishment. His accent changed. He avoided questions about his family. "When the school holidays came, I did not want to leave," he wrote. In October, 1985, Lammy watched the TV coverage of a riot that broke out on the Broadwater Farm Estate, a social-housing project two streets away from his house, when a Black woman died of heart failure after her

apartment was searched by the police. A white police officer was killed in the violence. Finding his teen-age identity was complicated, Lammy wrote, “when ‘Who I was’ was the very kind of otherness I was trying to escape from.”

As a young lawyer, Lammy modelled himself on Jonathan Rollins, the dashing attorney played by Blair Underwood in “L.A. Law.” Returning home after Harvard, he ran as a Labour candidate in the inaugural elections of the London Assembly, a new public-scrutiny body for the city. Simon Woolley, a co-founder of Operation Black Vote, which aimed to increase the political representation of Black communities in the U.K., remembered Lammy from this time. “He’s slick. He’s ambitious,” Woolley said. “He wants to please, but he’s no one’s fool.”

Lammy had barely served in the assembly before he was selected to stand as the M.P. for Tottenham. In April, 2000, the incumbent, Bernie Grant, died, at the age of fifty-six. Grant, who was born in Guyana, was a charismatic socialist with a national following. The choice to succeed him came down to Lammy or Grant’s white widow, Sharon. Lammy had both the credentials—he was a working-class kid from the borough—and the polish of Blair’s modernized Labour Party. When he was elected, at the age of twenty-seven, Lammy became the youngest member of the House of Commons. People wondered if he would be Britain’s first Black Prime Minister. “In all honesty, he gets elected with great fanfare,” Woolley told me. “And I think there was a bit of time when we questioned whether we got this right.”

That is because, for years, Lammy behaved like just another upwardly mobile Blairite politician. “He was . . . I don’t know what,” the Labour peer I spoke to, who worked with Lammy during the two-thousands, said. “Capable. Unexciting. Normal.” He was one of five Black M.P.s in Westminster. He made the occasional gaffe. Appearing on the BBC quiz show “Mastermind,” in 2009, Lammy was asked which English king came after Henry VIII. “Henry VII?” he replied.

When Labour lost power in 2010, Lammy turned down a junior post in the Shadow Cabinet. He finished fourth in an attempt to become the Labour candidate for London’s mayor. Then Jeremy Corbyn took over the Party.

Lammy shed his inhibitions—and found a national platform, in the media—while his future in the Party clouded over. “I think for a long time, he didn’t have David figured out,” the adviser said. “What shifted was a sense of ‘Do you know what? I’m just as good as these people. I’m just going to be me.’ ” In 2016, Lammy accepted an invitation from Cameron to lead a government review of racial bias in the British criminal-justice system. The following year, a close friend of his and his wife’s, a Gambian British artist named Khadija Saye, was killed, one of seventy-two victims of the Grenfell Tower fire in a social-housing block in West London.

That fall, the *Guardian* began reporting stories of men and women—many of them Lammy’s age, or older—who were being threatened with deportation, decades after arriving from former colonies in the Caribbean. People who migrated to Britain before 1973 and were legally resident in the country lost their jobs and housing, were denied health care and their pensions, and were stopped at the border after going on vacation and refused entry into the U.K., because of gaps in their paperwork.

The Windrush scandal, as it became known, was the product of the Conservatives’ “hostile environment” policy toward undocumented migrants. As of last year, more than seven thousand people have claimed compensation from the government. “I’ve lost count of the times I’ve been told to go home, or had my Britishness questioned,” Lammy wrote in “Tribes.” “The Windrush Scandal confirmed our worst fears.”

“Maybe he’s not a conspiracist, but he does spend a lot of time doing his own research and connecting the dots.”
Cartoon by Barbara Smaller

On April 16, 2018, Lammy prepared to speak about the injustice from the backbenches of the House of Commons. He had planned to talk about his parents, but feared that he would cry. He texted a researcher to ask when the first British ships arrived in the Caribbean—1623—and brought down his fury in a short, rhythmic, and upsetting speech. “This is a day of national shame,” Lammy thundered. “Let us call it as it is: if you lay down with dogs, you get fleas, and that is what has happened with the far-right rhetoric in this country.”

Lammy does not remember speaking the words. “In a way, it was almost like my ancestors came through me,” he said. “I was standing on their shoulders. I was powered up.” People who had known Lammy for years had a feeling of arrival. “There’s a moment in people’s political life where you can bring the whole backstory to that one moment,” Woolley told me. Rhodes draws a line between Lammy’s advocacy for the Windrush generation and what now drives him as a post-imperial Foreign Secretary. “David’s whole life has been, in part, an effort to reconcile the fact that he’s British, even though the British fucked his people over,” Rhodes told me. “And that, in miniature, is kind of what the U.K. has to do around the world.”

Lammy describes his approach to foreign policy as “progressive realism.” In an essay for *Foreign Affairs* last year, he defined this as “the pursuit of ideals without delusions about what is achievable.” Skeptics point out that progressive realism is more of a spectrum than a strategy, and that it can be used to explain almost any decision. But British officials told me that it was a helpful starting point. “You’re going to try and make the world better, but you’re going to deal with it and use tactics that rely on the world as you find it,” one explained. It’s also helpfully unthreatening to ideological opponents. “I told him as a Republican I can go halfway,” Senator James Risch, the ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, joked at an event discussing Lammy’s agenda last year. “We’re really big on realism. This progressive stuff, eh . . .”

A large part of progressive realism involves redefining worthy goals in more practical, and transactional, terms. Since taking office, Lammy has encouraged officials not to use words such as “help” or “support” or

“assistance” in their dealings with the Global South, seeking a more equal—and commercial—relationship on both sides. The change in approach comes after a precipitous falloff in the U.K.’s overseas-aid spending in recent years and is nothing like the ambitious poverty-reduction agenda of the previous Labour government. “It’s not the development of Gordon Brown and Tony Blair,” Lammy told me. “This is a world in which China’s Belt and Road has happened. This is a world in which we see Russia selling mercenaries to African countries.” He went on, “It’s about the dealmaking. It’s not just about sort of old-style paternalism. That’s just not going to cut it.”

The most pressing task for Lammy has been to undo the worst diplomatic mishaps of the Tories. In September, 2020, Boris Johnson’s government set out, in its own words, to “break international law in a very specific and limited way” in a dispute with the E.U. Shortly before taking office, Liz Truss declined to say whether President Emmanuel Macron of France was “a friend or foe.” During his premiership, Rishi Sunak threatened to remove Britain from the European Convention on Human Rights in order to implement his policy of deporting asylum seekers to Rwanda—mainly refugees who had crossed the English Channel in inflatable boats. “The trust in British politics was, I would say, close to zero,” a European diplomat told me, of the most pugnacious Brexit years.

Starmer cancelled the Rwanda plan on his first day in office, and, since then, he and Lammy have sought to restore the U.K. as a sober, law-abiding nation. In October, the new Labour government announced its intention to give up sovereignty over the Chagos Archipelago: some sixty islands, including Diego Garcia—home to an important U.S. military base—in the middle of the Indian Ocean. The deal would hand the islands to Mauritius, half a century after some two thousand Chagossians—mostly descendants of enslaved people—were removed by the British to make way for the military installation. It followed years of campaigning by exiled Chagossians, a ruling against the U.K. at the International Court of Justice, and increasing international isolation, which was partly stoked by Brexit. In May, 2019, just five countries supported Britain in a U.N. General Assembly vote on the future of the islands.

Describing the draft treaty with Mauritius in Parliament, Lammy said that the agreement "addresses the wrongs of the past," while securing Diego Garcia for the U.S. military. The proposal included a ninety-nine-year lease on Diego Garcia, plus an option to renew. "The State Department, the agencies, the Pentagon, all think this is an incredible deal," he assured me in December.

Lammy has also sought to use international law to craft British policy toward Israel and the war in Gaza. Last September, he advised his colleagues to suspend thirty export licenses (out of a total of three hundred and fifty) for sales of weapons that were being used by the Israel Defense Forces, because of a "clear risk" that they were violating international humanitarian law. Two months later, when the International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants for Israel's Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, and Defense Minister, Yoav Gallant, Britain's Attorney General, Richard Hermer—a former colleague and friend of Starmer's—said that the U.K. would comply if either man tried to enter the country. For his part, Lammy has told M.P.s that the law gives him no choice. "That does not allow me any discretion," he said.

The Conservatives' ultimate foreign-policy misstep was Brexit. On Lammy's first weekend in the job, he flew to Berlin and Stockholm, to meet his counterparts, and then to Chobielin, in northern Poland, to visit the country manor, or *dwór*, of the Polish Foreign Minister, Radosław Sikorski.

This was the beginning of what Starmer's government calls its "reset" of relations with the E.U.—not a reversal of Brexit, but a rapprochement. "There is a new atmospherics," Sikorski told me. In mid-July, the U.K. hosted forty-five European leaders, including Volodymyr Zelensky, of Ukraine, at Blenheim Palace, the birthplace of Winston Churchill, where eight hundred scones were served to the guests for tea. Starmer met Olaf Scholz, the German Chancellor, five times within three months of taking office. "The intensity of the reach-out is really remarkable," the European diplomat said. "Now we have to work on the substance."

The reset is the object of both hope and dismay. The "EU–UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement"—a.k.a. Boris Johnson's Brexit deal—which was signed in 2020, cast British businesses far outside the E.U.'s single market,

causing inevitable barriers to trade. With the threat of U.S. tariffs in the air, and a listless economy, it seems logical for a centrist British government, led by politicians who opposed Brexit, to seek closer ties once again. “The only thing they have to do, and there won’t be a list of Chagosses that make up for it, is improve relations with Europe,” Bronwen Maddox, the director of Chatham House, the London-based foreign-affairs think tank, said. “If they want growth, it’s sitting right there across the Channel. Europe is not growing very fast, but the source of Britain growing faster is there.”

And yet the reset has been oddly tentative. The only results, so far, have been the sketch of an E.U.-U.K. security pact and a bilateral deal with Germany, focussed mainly on defense and technology. Fairly modest E.U. proposals—such as coördinating veterinary standards or a youth-mobility scheme, to allow British and European students to study abroad more easily—seem too ambitious for Starmer and his Cabinet to contemplate. “There’s definitely a lot of disappointment in how the Labour government has approached the E.U. and Brussels,” Luigi Scazzieri, of the Centre for European Reform, told me.

It’s not all Britain’s fault. France and Germany are in political turmoil, and the E.U.’s prodigious decision-making architecture moves slowly. But there is an unmistakable sense that, aside from the scones and the atmospherics, neither Starmer nor Lammy knows exactly what he is asking for. “Essentially, there’s little to discuss with the E.U. until the U.K. internally sorts out what it wants as a package, and that’s not happened yet,” Scazzieri said. During last year’s election campaign, Labour leaders were concerned about losing support among pro-Brexit voters and promised not to reënter the E.U.’s single market or customs union, or to follow its freedom-of-movement migration rules—commitments that now look ultra-cautious in the light of the Party’s huge parliamentary majority. “They were a political necessity,” the Labour peer told me, of the promises. “But involving a high economic cost.”

In December, the European Council on Foreign Relations found that sixty-eight per cent of British voters—including more than half of those who had voted to leave the E.U.—would now accept both a return to the single

market and freedom of movement. “My personal feeling is that they should be a bit less afraid,” the European diplomat said.

Hovering over all these decisions—like a storm system forming off the coast—is the second Trump Administration. Lammy and his team are confident that the British government is much more prepared than it was in 2016. “We are the best-connected embassy in Washington. No one else comes close,” one aide told me. British officials have decided to model their approach, at least in part, on that of Shinzo Abe, the former Prime Minister of Japan, who was killed at a political rally in 2022. Abe was an early visitor to Trump Tower, in November, 2016, and a keen golfing partner of the President. “Pragmatic, considered, clear in his own position—but also understanding where Donald Trump was coming from” is how Lammy characterized Abe’s diplomacy. Last year, Lammy’s staff sought advice from Kenneth Weinstein, a Japan specialist at the Hudson Institute, a conservative think tank based in Washington, D.C., and a close friend of Abe’s. “My sense with President Trump is you can always get back into his good graces, if you work hard enough and offer the respect he deserves,” Weinstein said. “That’ll be the test.”

The test is ongoing. In July, Starmer was one of the few foreign leaders to call Trump after he survived an assassination attempt in Pennsylvania. The dinner at Trump Tower with Lammy in September was considered a success by the British. But there have been squalls, too. It was reported during the summer that Lammy’s team was in regular contact with the Trump campaign; Chris LaCivita, Trump’s campaign manager, dismissed the story as fake news. “Other than a perfunctory 10 min meeting there is no contact,” he wrote on X. In October, the Trump campaign filed a Federal Election Commission complaint for “blatant foreign interference” against the Labour Party, for allegedly facilitating the travel and accommodation of volunteers to work on the campaign of Kamala Harris and Tim Walz.

Weinstein flagged the Chagos Islands deal and the U.K.’s willingness to honor the I.C.C.’s arrest warrants for Israeli leaders as early points of tension with the new Administration. Both Marco Rubio, Trump’s nominee to be Secretary of State, and Mike Waltz, his choice for national-security adviser, have opposed Britain’s giving up sovereignty over Diego Garcia,

arguing that it would cede U.S. influence in the Indian Ocean to China. Conservatives in the U.K. have also expressed doubts about the plan. “The question is going to be Chagos and the I.C.C.,” Weinstein said. “And then, you know, things could spin down worse from there.”

In 2019, Kim Darroch, then the British Ambassador to the U.S., was forced to resign after his diplomatic cables about the first Trump Administration—describing it as clumsy and inept—were leaked to the press. I asked Darroch if all the careful groundwork laid by Lammy and Starmer will make any difference once Trump returns to the White House. “The short, one-word answer to all of these hopes is said with a deep tone of skepticism,” he replied. “Maybe.”

In early December, wearing white tie, Starmer spoke at the Lord Mayor’s annual banquet, in London, and disavowed the idea that Britain now faces a choice between tying itself closer to the E.U. or to a Trump-led U.S. “I reject it utterly,” he said. “Attlee did not choose between allies. Churchill did not choose.” Deriding false choices is fine for a foreign-policy speech. But since Brexit, the U.K. has been economically and strategically off compass. Until the country settles on its next long-term destination, either closer to the E.U. or firmly within America’s orbit, every confounding global problem—the climate crisis, A.I., financial regulation, a domineering China, a Trump-led trade war—will require asking which way to turn.

British officials know this and sometimes despair that their country has not found a way to be more hardheaded. “There’s no real theory of change and theory of power in the Foreign Office,” Casson, the former Ambassador, said. “There’s a sort of desire not to offend people.” Optimists sometimes envisage a post-Brexit U.K. as a “superconnector”—a kind of entrepôt, embodied by London’s financial center, court system, and expensive town houses—sheathed in a memory of empire. But realists argue that a fork in the road is coming. “Do we fold in with the U.S. and ask for something in exchange for basically backing them wholesale, in competing with China? Likewise, how close do we want to get to the E.U.?” one serving diplomat asked. “You have to make some serious choices about where the U.K. sits. That’s the big test for Lammy over the next few years.”

This past fall, I joined Lammy on a brief visit to Kyiv. At 1:42 *a.m.*, the Foreign Secretary walked down a railway platform in Przemyśl, on Poland's eastern border, and boarded a Ukrainian diplomatic train alongside Antony Blinken, the U.S. Secretary of State. Lammy has made it a point to travel with his counterparts. This was the first joint visit by Britain's and America's top diplomats in more than a decade. They were in listening mode. Zelensky had replaced half his government the previous week—the biggest reshuffle since the start of the war—and Blinken and Lammy were considering the Ukrainian request to use European Storm Shadow missiles and the U.S.-made Army Tactical Missile System (*ATACMS*) to strike targets inside Russia.

The train entered Kyiv just after the morning rush hour. The four-vehicle British convoy did its best to keep pace with the American cavalcade, as it barrelled through the streets of the city. (The U.S. State Department spends almost as much on its Embassies as the U.K. does on its entire diplomatic operation.) At a conference at the Mariyinsky Palace, to mark ten years since Russia's annexation of Crimea, Lammy once again drew on his ancestral past. "I feel personally about that battle against imperialism," he told delegates. British politicians like to describe the U.K. as Ukraine's "staunchest ally," and Lammy has taken up the rhetoric with aplomb. "Crimea will be free. Ukraine will be free," he promised. "*Slava* Ukraine." In the afternoon, Lammy visited a fire station to inspect one of sixty British fire trucks that have been given to the country. "I know you don't like the term, but you are heroes in our time," he told Yuriy Tsykenyuk, who leads a mobile rescue center that responds to missile and drone strikes.

The war in Ukraine has been a lifeline for British diplomacy. Boris Johnson, after the miasma of Brexit and his government's slapdash handling of the pandemic, seized on the U.K.'s onetime role as a protector of European security. "Britain was drowning," Dmytro Kuleba, Ukraine's Foreign Minister until last fall, told me. "The stance that the United Kingdom took, with regards to Russia's aggression against Ukraine, saved the reputation of British foreign policy."

“Careful of that rattler—he did percussion for Steely Dan once, and he’ll never shut up about it.” Cartoon by Sofia Warren

In material terms, the U.K. has been the third-largest source of military aid to Ukraine—after the U.S. and Germany—but only Johnson got a croissant made in his honor by a Kyiv pâtisserie, with a frizz of meringue to denote his messy hair. “He won all the hearts,” Kuleba said. Under the Conservatives, Britain was the first country to supply antitank weapons, battle tanks, and long-range missiles to Ukraine, along with open-ended financial assistance: some three billion pounds per year. Kuleba described a British “hunger for being first, for showing the leadership, for triggering conversations others were reluctant to do.” Labour’s approach has been much the same. “We have to stay the course. One of my jobs is to cajole, to encourage, to support, to beef up, to rally, if you like, European colleagues to Ukraine’s cause,” Lammy said. “This is existential for us.”

But the fervor and bipartisan character of Britain’s support for Ukraine does not disguise its brittleness. It is one thing to be first, but the U.K. has delivered fourteen tanks to Ukraine, less than half the number supplied by Slovenia and Croatia. (Poland has sent more than three hundred.) At one point in Kyiv, we stopped by the British Embassy. “Britain is *GREAT*” posters lined the walls. An air-conditioner dripped onto the floor. Amid a wash of previously announced funds and loan guarantees, the official press release describing Lammy’s visit disclosed a meagre twenty million pounds in additional aid, to pay for repairs to Ukraine’s electricity grid.

The U.K. tends to be spared the blame directed at other European democracies for having allowed their military power to wither. But its own has withered, too. Between 2010 and 2017, British defense spending fell by twenty-two per cent, and, although it has increased in headline terms since

then, day-to-day spending on the armed forces has continued to contract. “The U.K. has always been quite concerned with status-seeking,” Richard Whitman, a professor of politics and international relations at the University of Kent, said. That’s why the country has two aircraft carriers and a hundred-billion-pound nuclear-weapons program, but the entire British Army could fit inside Manchester United’s soccer stadium, with a few seats to spare.

Since Trump’s election, in November, various potential peace plans for Ukraine have circulated, some of which have included a demilitarized zone and a European peacekeeping force, backed by a U.S. security guarantee. But, unlike France, for example, British officials have been noticeably skittish about the possibility of deploying soldiers, under any scenario. “We are not committing U.K. troops to the theatre of action,” Lammy told reporters in late November. According to a recent study by the House of Lords International Relations and Defence Committee, the U.K. is already struggling to meet its current *NATO* obligation to field a single war-fighting division.

When I spoke to a former senior official in Trump’s first Administration about Britain’s credibility as a military partner, he recalled Jim Mattis, the former Secretary of Defense, complaining, “They just can’t get their shit together.” (In response, Mattis described the U.K. military as “grossly underfunded” but said that he “never doubted that the Brits would fight, and fight well, when the chips are down.”) The former official went on, “They have kind of skated. I think the tradition and history of the relationship is what’s permitted that to happen.” He doubted that the U.K. would be able to contribute to a European peacekeeping force in Ukraine, even if it wanted to. “It’s a conceptually good outcome,” he said. “But when told to go do it, their Minister of Defense is going to say, With what and by whom?”

In conversations with Lammy about the war, he insisted that Trump was a winner, albeit an unpredictable one, who would not sell Ukraine short, or leave Europe’s eastern border unstable. “I’m focussed on the now,” Lammy said, “to get Ukraine in the strongest possible position into 2025.” But the unambiguous—and largely unexamined—nature of the U.K.’s support for Ukraine means that there isn’t a Plan B if the dynamic of the war shifts

away from Kyiv this year. “The U.K. has a very big stake, but it doesn’t have a say,” Whitman said. “If there is the tapping on the shoulder from the Trump Administration, then that puts the U.K. in the worst of all possible worlds. It’s quite difficult to predict how the U.K. will manage that.”

Elsewhere in Europe, Russia’s recent superiority on the battlefield and Trump’s impatience with the conflict have contributed to a gloomy acceptance that Putin may be able to claim a form of victory. In late November, every Swedish household received a thirty-page booklet giving advice on what to do in case of war. Germany is mapping its underground shelters for a new emergency app. Kuleba urged the British government, and Lammy, to rediscover the diplomatic zest that the U.K. had shown in the early months of the invasion. “If the purpose to remain ‘Great’ is still valid, you have to take a different approach,” he said. Experienced British diplomats whom I spoke to, however, were skeptical that the U.K. would have any grounds to resist what the Germans call a *Diktatfrieden*—an imposed, and unsatisfying, peace—mandated by the Trump Administration. Darroch told me, “Our job is to persuade them not to do that. But I don’t think you will get Europe united.” He continued, “There is an undercurrent. Even if it looks on the surface like we are all supporting Ukraine, a lot of people are praying for this war to end.”

Lammy enjoys being the Foreign Secretary. “I’m very clear that this is the pinnacle of my career,” he told me. At a recent reception, in St. James’s Palace, he ran into Woolley, his old friend from Operation Black Vote. “He leaned in,” Woolley recounted, “and he said, ‘I’m loving it. It’s bear-trap laden, but it’s something I feel confident about doing.’ ” Woolley was impressed, to a certain extent. “There will be a point in which people will say, O.K., it’s easy to be safe, and it’s wonderful that you’ve survived,” he said. “But you’re not there for either, you’re there to move the dial.” Lammy has taken a relentless “wheels-up” approach to the job. In his first five months, he visited more than fifty countries, at a rate of one every three days. When we met one Friday in his office, he briefly forgot where he had been that week. “Moldova,” an aide supplied.

He is the diplomatic face of a curious government. In numerical terms, Labour’s majority in the House of Commons makes it one of the most

powerful British administrations of the past hundred years. Since taking office, however, it has been bumbling and unsure of itself. In October, after identifying economic growth as the country's No. 1 priority, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rachel Reeves, published a tax-raising budget that, so far, has only made matters worse. Starmer has relaunched his government at least twice. In early December, after shaking up his team in Downing Street, the Prime Minister replaced the five "missions" articulated during Labour's election campaign with six "milestones"—somewhat dour domestic-policy targets—by which he wants voters to judge the government. "Foreign policy is a little bit 'nice to have' for them," a former Party official told me, of the ultra-pragmatic inner circle that now surrounds Starmer. "Their question would be, Does it make Keir look Presidential? That leads you to quite a bad place. There's not a natural stance."

And yet, there is every reason to think Labour could rule Britain for the next ten years. And what other Western incumbent government can say that? The day after Trump's victory, when Lammy's previous remarks about him were raised in the House of Commons (sample tweet: "He is a racist KKK and Nazi sympathiser"), a spokesperson for Starmer said that Lammy would serve a full five-year term as the Foreign Secretary. "People expect this Labour government to get a second term," Lammy said. "They're looking to Britain for a degree of stability over this next decade. That's a big opportunity for us."

As Trump's Inauguration approached, the air of hopeful preparation in British foreign-policy circles gave way to something closer to concern. "The unknowns are significant," an official texted me. Attempting to decode Trump's newfound desire to acquire Greenland, Lammy sounded as if he were trying to excuse the behavior of a drunk relative at a wedding. "I think that we know from Donald Trump's first term that the intensity of his rhetoric and the unpredictability sometimes of what he said can be destabilizing," Lammy told the BBC. "It's not going to happen." Last week, an anti-extremism unit at the Home Office was reported to be investigating Elon Musk's tweets, after Musk took an avid interest in a long-standing British scandal, involving British Asian grooming gangs and child sexual abuse. Musk accused Starmer, the former prosecutor of England and Wales, of being "complicit in the *RAPE OF BRITAIN*." Lammy assured reporters,

with an air of desperation, that Musk would be confined to a “domestic portfolio” in the Trump Administration.

On January 15th, the government conceded that the Chagos Islands deal would not go ahead until it had been reviewed by Trump and his officials. The Conservative Party’s shadow Foreign Secretary, Priti Patel, crowed, “This is a complete humiliation for Keir Starmer and David Lammy.”

To somehow keep a lid on things, Starmer has chosen Peter Mandelson, a longtime ally of Blair and a former E.U. trade commissioner, as Britain’s new Ambassador to Washington. Mandelson is a deeply charming, borderline unctuous character. Shortly before he was appointed, in late December, he praised Lammy’s work so far with the incoming Administration. “Absolutely spot on,” Mandelson said. He joked about the limits of the U.K.’s latitude in international affairs. “We don’t always have to ask the question What do the Americans think, or what do the Americans want us to do? But it’s the right second or third question.” On X, LaCivita, Trump’s campaign manager, described Mandelson as an “absolute moron.”

The last time I spoke to Lammy, he was eating an early lunch at his desk. I mentioned something that John Casson, the former Ambassador and Cameron adviser, had said: that for more than seventy years, Britain’s foreign policy had been defined first by the clarity of the Cold War and then by its membership in the E.U. “We never wondered which side to be on,” Casson had observed. Now those certainties are gone. “Strategy is not really a document or a set of goals,” he had continued. “It’s a posture. It’s like sailing a boat in choppy waters—you are going to have to tack left and right, but you know you have to get over there.” I asked Lammy what was guiding him. “I think it’s pragmatic,” he replied. “I accept they are choppy waters. They *are* choppy waters,” he added, before finding his stride. “But never write off the British.” ♦

Sam Knight is a London-based staff writer at The New Yorker. His first book is "The Premonitions Bureau: A True Account of Death Foretold."

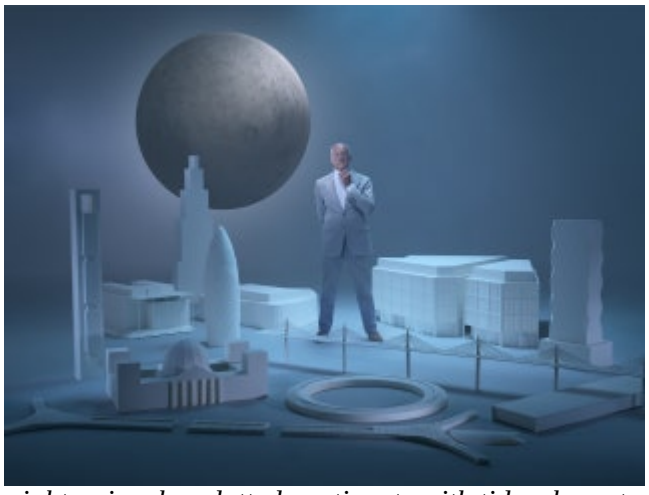
Profiles

Norman Foster’s Empire of Image Control

The British architect has built an unprecedented factory of fine design. Inside the world of the man who creates exquisite monuments for ultra-wealthy clients.

By Ian Parker

January 20, 2025



Foster, still relentless at eighty-nine, has dotted continents with tidy, elegant structures, from art galleries to airports. He is very good at designing. He’s also very good at making his colleagues not stop designing.Photograph by Julia Fullerton-Batten for The New Yorker; set design by Jaina Minton

Norman Foster, the British architect, resembles the titans he serves. His expansionist ambition and personal wealth set him alongside the leaders of such companies as JPMorgan Chase, Apple, Bloomberg, Hyundai, and the Saudi National Bank, who have hired him to design landmark office buildings of beautifully controlled, rarefied egomania. Foster’s career is now in its seventh decade. He has been given every architectural prize, for every kind of civic, cultural, and commercial building. He has also been financially rewarded in a way that no other professional architect ever has: with large homes around the world, and with many art works and exotic cars, including one previously owned by Le Corbusier. He has a namesake

foundation, in Madrid, that has begun to accept students and is halfway to being a private university. He used to pilot a helicopter to work; today, when a member of his domestic staff, dressed in white, serves coffee, she'll fold one arm behind her back. Michael Bloomberg once described his collaboration with Foster, on a European headquarters in London, as one between "a billionaire who wanted to be an architect and an architect who wanted to be a billionaire."

Foster, who since 1999 has been Lord Foster of Thames Bank, is eighty-nine, unusually fit, and very carefully dressed—suggesting a dapper gentleman on the edge of a Fellini scene. He spends part of every year on Martha's Vineyard, on a thirty-acre compound that he bought in 2011. There, on a late morning last July, he was on his second bike ride of the day. His first, at dawn, had taken him down quiet local roads for a little less than his usual thirty miles. He then returned home for video calls with some of the twenty-four hundred colleagues who, in eighteen offices in twelve countries, work at Foster + Partners, the firm he founded, where he is both a kind of brand ambassador and, still, a design leader. Foster sat at a long glass table of his own design, on which he'd arranged his paperwork, in a neat grid of neat piles. Each pile was a project then under way. Together, the piles represented real-estate investments of at least twenty billion dollars.

Foster + Partners isn't the largest architectural firm in the world, but it's by far the largest that has a Pritzker Prize winner in its name. Its best-known work includes Apple's ring-shaped headquarters, in Cupertino, California; the glass replacement dome on the Reichstag building, in Berlin; and the Hearst Tower, whose diagonally intersecting panels emerge from a six-story Art Deco stone façade in midtown Manhattan. (The firm's New York office is halfway up.) But Foster's overarching achievement is his company. He traded on a refined reputation without losing it; he built an architectural machine that could execute acclaimed, precise work at an unprecedentedly high volume. Foster was the first in the profession to dismantle the distinction between two kinds of architectural success: that of the architect-auteur (giving furrowed attention to a few exceptional projects—cathedrals and concert halls) and that of the big, anonymous corporate practice (designing the malls, towers, hospitals, and rail stations that fill up much of the space that remains). Foster's production line spits out dozens of

structures every year. These will include hospitals and rail stations but also, say, a luxury yacht, or an open-air chapel, for the Vatican, on the Venetian island of San Giorgio Maggiore.

To build a very large operation that still resembles a boutique one required decades of sustained control. Foster has controlled the work, and controlled his image, and controlled the images made by him: a Foster + Partners project will almost always have its accompanying Norman Foster sketches, often made retrospectively, rather than in the heat of design. They'll be annotated by Foster, in a spiky hand that some of his colleagues have learned to imitate. These images may show a building's future users spreading their arms above their heads, in a gesture of joyous abandon that it's hard to imagine Foster ever having made.

His architectural preferences have an impact, however subtle, on the millions of people who pass through his airports, galleries, lobbies, and Apple Stores each week: grays and whites, columns and porticoes, glass and steel. It's an architecture of orderliness and long sight lines. Foster's friend and sometime client Sir Stuart Lipton, a London property developer, recently classified the aesthetic under the approving heading of "soft modernism." These buildings rarely disappoint the people who pay for them—who pay more, but not outrageously more, than for the budget option—and they don't insult the people who use them. Not every structure produced by Foster's system is a triumph. Graham Phillips, a former managing director at Foster + Partners, recently told me that his boss once called the firm's rounded London City Hall building, completed in 2002, an "ugly fucker." (Foster denies this.) And Foster can be challenged about the ethics of certain clients, in Gulf countries and elsewhere, and on the depth of his declared commitment to sustainability. But, after all this time, surprisingly little of Foster's output seems half-baked, or absurdly pliant to the whims of wealth, and a lot of it draws you into his optimism: the work makes you glad, while you're there, that you're not somewhere else.

In the view of Carl Abbott, an American architect who was a contemporary of Foster's in graduate school, at Yale, no architect has ever designed more public buildings of significance than Foster. Bjarke Ingels, the Danish architect with a growing international practice, recently suggested to me

that “to disseminate your own sense of identity into such a large organization is an incredible feat.” He said that Foster shares with Steven Spielberg an ability to deliver “massive blockbusters that are also aesthetically and artistically successful.” (Rem Koolhaas, he added, resembled Stanley Kubrick.) Others have expressed similar thoughts, but with more regret. Piers Taylor, a British architect and writer, has argued that Foster’s dominance indicates a profession that has no place for “the quirky, the interesting, the whimsical, the brazen, the eccentric.” Admirers and critics might agree that Foster’s reach, along with his appreciation of perfect finishes—tidy, tapered edges—makes him more comparable to a product-design innovator like Apple or Volkswagen than to another architectural star. Some years ago, Foster was asked to contribute to a TV series about favorite buildings. He chose the jumbo jet.

The papers on the Martha’s Vineyard desk included sketches and computer renderings of a new stadium for Manchester United, the soccer team; a restaurant in Tuscany; a renovation of the Transamerica Pyramid, in San Francisco; and a vast mixed-use district in Seoul which would include a science museum and a concert hall. Scores of other active projects would be discussed in other meetings, on other days—including museum spaces in Bilbao, Madrid, and San Diego, and a proposal for a tower in Riyadh that, at a height of two kilometres, would be more than twice as tall as any building ever built.

Foster’s second ride was on a water-bike: a bicycle, mounted high between two parallel floats, with pedals that turn a propeller at the rear. (As I’d learned, via a firm word from Elena Ochoa Foster—an art-book publisher, with a Ph.D. in psychology, who married Norman thirty years ago, and is now Lady Foster—such a vehicle should not be called a pedal boat, or pedalo, which is something likelier to have the head of a flamingo.) Foster moved across a pond of brackish water that reaches from the bottom of his lawn to a sandbar two miles away, beyond which the ocean can be heard but not seen. He pedalled into the wind, never pausing. As Foster once put it to Stephen Bayley, a London friend, in a discussion about the unrelenting nature of his career, “You’ve got to keep going. You’ve got to keep going.”

Cartoon by Harry Bliss

On the pond, in a conversation held over the choppy water between a water-bike and a guest water-bike, Foster lost little of the reticence and formality that he has on land. He talks, as he designs, largely without irony or rhetorical heat. He has a habit of hedging—“as it were,” “in a way”—and, though his memory seems very good, he’d rather refer to himself in montage voice-over than in detailed reminiscence or reflection. (Describing early trips in America: “Whether it was Rothko, whether it was the Modern Jazz Quartet, whether it was going to Cape Canaveral . . .”) Foster expects to reach the end of his paragraphs, and talks over attempted interruptions with unmusical steeliness. “He’s not the easiest person to be with,” Bayley noted. “I think there’s a performance going on, all the time.” But, in exchanges that Foster and I had in the course of several months last year, he was always friendly, in the way of a tolerant monarch, and there was no real sign of the snappishness that his colleagues have sometimes observed: Foster once advised a young architect who’d disappointed him to become a potato farmer. (Foster doesn’t recall this.)

On the water, Foster mentioned that in 1999, while biking through a Bavarian forest shortly before a Wagner concert, he had reconsidered the firm’s published design for a new Wembley Stadium, in London. He decided that the stadium’s roof should be held up by a soaring tilted arch rather than by four masts. The displaced design was “honorable” but

unexceptional. (Similar masts could be seen above Richard Rogers's Millennium Dome, then nearing completion in East London.) When Foster proposed this revision to Ken Bates, the famously ill-humored British soccer executive who was then running the Wembley project, he sought to allay concerns about cost with a gnomic phrase that he still uses today: "Quality is an attitude of mind." Foster told me that when he next visited Bates, there was a framed quotation on the wall. " 'Quality is an attitude of mind'—Ken Bates." (Bates, now ninety-three, told me that he didn't recall this. He praised Foster's work while remembering him as "a bit bossy.")

Foster also touched on the work he'd done on the Martha's Vineyard property, which included renovating the clapboard main house, and, later, building a poolside pavilion nearby for displaying art and hanging out. Contractors had removed what Foster thought was an absurd amount of wiring running inside, and between, the property's several buildings, which include a boathouse. This infrastructure, he decided, must have been related to communications and security for President Barack Obama and his family, who took summer vacations there, between 2009 and 2011. Foster told me that when he later met Obama, at a neighbor's home, he had to resist the President's jokey pressure to be allowed to keep renting. Obama "was quite amusing about it," Foster recalled, but had to be told, "Sadly, no."

We returned to shore and walked up past the main house, largely built thirty years ago by someone who, according to the *Vineyard Gazette*, wanted a replica of the farmhouse in "Field of Dreams." We didn't spot what Elena Foster had called her "robot friend"—an autonomous lawnmower that supposedly discomforts Canada geese. After crossing a white gravel drive, we entered a tunnel of foliage, then emerged in a clearing containing the pavilion, and also Elena Foster, who was sitting outdoors on a white sofa beneath a steel roof, painted white.

Norman was wearing white and beige; Elena was all in white. She was finishing a call with Paola Foster, the older of their two children. Paola, who's working on a graduate architecture degree at Yale, was eating supper in Berlin. Her brother, Eduardo, who works in real-estate development, was in Ibiza. The siblings grew up largely in Switzerland, where Foster has claimed residency for nearly twenty years. Their mother, who is Spanish,

had earlier said that they think of themselves as “about eighty per cent British.” (In Foster’s fond phrasing, they speak “all of the languages.”) Foster has four sons from his first marriage, who are decades older, and don’t work with buildings. It’s possible that one or both of the younger children will join Foster + Partners. “All options are open,” Foster told me.

We sat by a long, dark swimming pool framed by gray wooden decking. A young woman served champagne and fried calamari. Foster mentioned a building of his, in Manchester, England, that he was proud of: a support center for cancer patients made with a pitched roof and a lot of wood, in the hope of creating a less institutional mood. This comment prompted Elena to remember a trip they’d taken fifteen years ago to a nearby part of that city. The makers of a documentary about Foster—written and presented by Deyan Sudjic, the British author of an approved Foster biography—had secured access to Foster’s childhood home. This is a two-story Victorian red-brick row house in what was, in Foster’s youth, a wholly working-class neighborhood. For the first time in decades, he’d revisited his old bedroom. It faces a railway embankment on which trains still pass, as they did in his childhood, on the main route between Manchester and London. Elena, who is energetically involved in Foster’s professional life, watched the filming that day, and recalled being surprised by his seeming equilibrium, under what she had assumed would be weighty emotions.

“Norman reacted amazingly well,” she said. “I *couldn’t do it*. I think it’s because you don’t have ghosts, Norman.”

He smiled and quietly said, “I never really thought about it.” The contrasts in the marriage can sometimes seem derived from hackneyed national stereotypes about introversion and extroversion. Elena used to host a popular Spanish TV show called “Let’s Talk About Sex.”

“I think your mum, your family, was very nice with you,” she said. She added, not unkindly, “Your tiny family.” Foster, an only child, had previously told me that he experienced his childhood “in a kind of bubble”—by which he seemed to mean self-reliant solitude more than loneliness. But he has also talked of being bullied at school. His parents died in the nineteen-seventies, and never visited a finished building designed by their son.

Foster owns work by L. S. Lowry, the twentieth-century Manchester-born artist whose best-known paintings show urban landscapes filled with dozens of small, barely differentiated figures on the move—looking a little like the people in an architectural rendering. Foster told me that steam trains used to rattle his bedroom window. He said that he could see passengers' faces, but his attention was on the engines. "I had a love affair with locomotives, all mechanical things," he said. He was delighted by cutaway illustrations showing the insides of machines. A drawing of his bedroom view was in the portfolio that secured him admission to an architecture course at the University of Manchester, in 1956, when he was twenty-one—years after he'd left school and begun working in local government.

Earlier that day, on the deck surrounding the "Field of Dreams" house, Elena had said that, when her relationship with Norman started, in the mid-nineties, she sometimes found things "hard work."

Her husband laughed but didn't look entirely comfortable: "What do you mean?"

"You were architecture, architecture," she said. She recalled once instructing him to put down his pencil and pay attention to her. Foster tends to keep a cloth-covered sketchbook nearby. He had protested that he'd been listening to her carefully, and could repeat what she'd just said. Elena replied, "I need you to *hear me with your eyes!*"

Now, by the pool, she added that things were certainly easier today. He'll greet guests, have a drink. Even on occasions when he's clearly eager to resume working, Elena said, "he's able to wait."

"Progress," Foster said.

A few years ago, Guillermo Rojas, a Spanish filmmaker then in his thirties, wrote and directed a quiet drama, "Once Again," about a woman who returns home to Seville after years of exhausting, career-building work in London. In the film, the character is an architect formerly employed at Foster + Partners. I recently asked Rojas how he'd made that decision. He replied by introducing me to his brother, Paco, who started a job at the firm about a decade ago.

Paco Rojas, who has himself returned to Seville, used to work in one of the several buildings that make up the company's riverside headquarters in Battersea, in southwest London. This is the "Thames Bank" in Foster's noble title. The company moved there in 1990, in part because it's a short walk to London's only heliport. Foster could fly in from his country home in Wiltshire; he could dash off to one site meeting after another. The offices don't close at night, or on Christmas. Once, when I met Foster there, we sat at a round table he often uses at one end of a very long, double-height room in the main building, from where it's easy to proselytize, as he has often done, for open-plan offices, open-plan libraries, and open-plan schools; his nearest co-workers were dots on the horizon.

Rojas worked mostly on Apple Stores, including one built on its own little island in a waterfront development in Singapore—a glass hemisphere that would look familiar to anyone who knows Foster's much loved reconstruction of the Reichstag, finished in 1999. Rojas described Foster as a dominant but largely unseen figure. The founder tended to appear on Rojas's floor only at moments of crisis. During such visits, Rojas said, his colleagues were unrecognizable in their quietness. "Everyone, not just my boss, but three levels higher" registered the risk of an unnecessary remark, he said. "You don't want to interrupt his thinking, or have people say you're wasting his time." A project revision might happen in a delirium of all-night and weekend work. Rojas's recollections weren't peevish—fine work was produced under these conditions. But he also saw some peers gradually change character. "You become a solid wall," he said. "It was 'Nothing is going to hurt me. Keep your insides strong.' "

I sometimes thought of Rojas when, last summer, I joined a few of Foster's video meetings with colleagues. Sometimes his interventions were specific and small-scale: he asked about the legibility of the lettering on the exterior of a school theatre in Connecticut, and about the parking lot out front. "Not to distract us now, but just consider if the neck to that car park was tightened," he said. At other times, Foster's interventions had more drama. Once, invoking Roger Ridsdill Smith, the firm's most senior structural engineer, he said of a tower design, "I think I'd pull Roger in and look at it being a balanced cantilever." I identified a catchphrase: "It's worth a study." You could almost hear the dinner reservations being cancelled.

His remarks never sounded capricious; nor did they seem unwelcome. This is the core of the business: people draw ten versions of a stairway, or a lobby, and agree to develop the best one, and then someone—possibly Lord Foster—starts to wonder about an eleventh version. Foster is very good at designing. But he's also very good at making others not stop designing.

"One minute and five seconds—that's our best mini crossword yet."
Cartoon by Daniel Kanhai

In the early sixties, when Foster was at Yale, he was surprised to discover that, unlike his classmates, he had assistants. "Without any conscious move on my part, I attracted undergraduates who would then be almost a part of my team," he told me. "People would ferret me out and say, 'Can I help?' " (Carl Abbott, Foster's Yale contemporary, confirms this.) Foster recalled a cheerful heckle he once heard while presenting a project to classmates: "Why don't you put more people on it, Norman?"

This points to the future empire. Ken Shuttleworth, a former senior colleague, now with his own practice, fell out with Foster twenty years ago, after Shuttleworth was perceived to have taken too much public credit for some of the company's turn-of-the-millennium hits—including a London office tower, shaped like a cartoon rocket ship, that is now known by almost everyone as the Gherkin, and by Foster as the "so-called Gherkin." But Shuttleworth still describes his old boss as "very charismatic, someone you'd follow off a cliff," and as a remarkably astute critic of designs. "He'd always push you beyond where you thought you needed to go," he said. Crucially, Foster understood that a good time for a radical revision (if not

the most prudent time, economically) might be long after everyone had settled on a scheme. By that point, a team of architects is fully immersed in a project's constraints and possibilities. "*That's* a good time to throw everything away and start again," Shuttleworth said.

Graham Phillips, the former managing director, joined Foster in the mid-seventies, and at first had thirty colleagues. When he left, in 2008, there were more than a thousand. He recently told me that he was as stressed out on his last day as he was on his first. The boss's scrutiny could feel relentless: "If you were senior, you could be phoned in the middle of the night." Phillips is thankful to have worked for a "creative genius," and thinks of Foster as someone who might have easily become one of the tech billionaires of our era. He's also thankful that his time at the firm is over. He struggled to remember an occasion when he'd had a conversation with Foster that wasn't directly about work. After a big competition win, when colleagues were ready to celebrate, "Norman would never relax. He'd be focussed on talking about the next meeting, the next project." For years after the headquarters moved to Battersea, Foster maintained a vast apartment on the office's top floor, which was furnished with little but a seventy-foot mural by the artist Richard Long. Phillips, speaking in an appalled tone that was only half-joking, said, "He *lived* there, above the shop. That was the terrible thing. He could just come downstairs on a Sunday morning to make sure somebody's working."

Today, Foster's vigilance is less extreme, and he supervises remotely—and, to some extent, by proxy. In our conversations, Foster sometimes wanted to discuss, and demonstrate, his continuing control. It's true that, in addition to his daily calls, Foster has long stretches in one office or another which resemble his workdays from the eighties or nineties. And his time remains heavily scheduled: once, in Madrid, I was still talking with Foster a few minutes after my understood departure time, and a partner walked into the room with my coat held open in front of him, like a bouncer ready to discuss the difference between the easy way to do this and the hard way.

But at the start of the millennium—not long after Foster survived bowel cancer and a heart attack—he began remaking his firm into something better suited to its expanding volume of commissions, and better equipped

to outlive him. He calls this period a “rebirth.” One consequence has been a withdrawal from some daily decision-making and some time to work on the foundation, which is led by him and Elena—and also to rack up cross-country-skiing marathons, and to design an art work for the new tower that his firm has designed for JPMorgan in New York.

In 2003, Foster split most of the architectural staff into six studios, and put a long-serving partner at the head of each. All six partners are based in London, and, so far, all have been men. The studios share access to the many in-house engineers, model-makers, materials experts, and other specialists. (As Foster put it to me, “Architecture is too important to be left to architects alone.”) The studios have no declared geographical or typological bias; there isn’t an airports studio, or an East Asia studio; the firm can offer new hires a reasonable promise of variety. Given the company’s size, each studio would, if standing alone, be a force in world architecture. A decade ago, while Studio 4 was leading work on the Bloomberg building in London (a million square feet; more than a billion dollars), it was also contributing to Apple Park, in California (a mile in circumference; three million square feet; an estimated cost of five billion dollars).

Foster also established a Design Board, a ten-member version of his former self—the one that haunted the office on weekends. Today, the firm starts work on forty or fifty new projects a year. The board monitors all of them, including those that will falter before being realized (after a competition loss, perhaps, or a client’s change of heart). Members query designs for three to five hours each weekday, in a Supreme Court term that never ends. As Armstrong Yakubu, who’s on the board, recently explained, “It might be: Why do you have a huge staircase? Wouldn’t it be better as a ramp?” He added, “You’d think architects should know it. They *do* know it, but they’re moving at a great pace.” He added, with good humor, that, if he has a bit less Foster in his daily life than he did thirty years ago, “it doesn’t feel like that when he’s sending you one sketch after another.” Nowadays, those sketches arrive as e-mailed or texted photographs of something he’s drawn in a sketchbook. Before, Foster used to fax, a lot. (One partner told me, “The fax was a nightmare.”)

In 2007, Foster sold a large part of his ownership in the firm to 3i, a British private-equity company, in a transaction that also created many new partners. That deal, which gave 3i forty per cent of the company, enabled investment in overseas offices, particularly in China. And it made Foster rich at a new level. The details aren't public, but the company was valued at several hundred million dollars, and Foster owned most of it. Today, after a second sale, a Canadian investment firm is the largest shareholder, with a fifty-per-cent stake, and two hundred and twenty-six Foster partners each own a slice. Recent growth has been in the Gulf. In the U.K. tax year ending in April, 2024, Foster + Partners earned more than half a billion dollars in fees, forty per cent of which was paid by Middle Eastern clients.

"Oh, man, I used to love playing with these things before they got connected to other people."
Cartoon by Hartley Lin

Around the time of the 3i deal, Foster became a legal resident of Switzerland, where he'd bought an eighteenth-century château with a view of Lake Geneva. (During this period, the family's other properties included a cliffside house that Foster had radically remodelled—with eighteen-ton sliding doors, and another Richard Long—in Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat, one of France's most expensive real-estate markets.) By then, Foster had begun spending much of the year outside the U.K. By formalizing his absence, he likely gained a tax advantage: non-resident British citizens don't pay U.K. taxes on worldwide earnings. Foster's emigration elicited some criticism,

and in 2010 a new law established that non-resident peers could no longer sit or vote in the House of Lords. (Foster had spoken in the Lords only once.)

In Foster's own framing, he's now familiar with every Foster + Partners commission, "but I get immersed in some projects more than others." Countering strong claims I'd heard to the contrary, he told me that I wouldn't be able to detect that distinction by looking at the firm's contracts—that is, you can't buy extra Norman. He added that the standard deal restrains a client's ability to refer to him in its marketing without permission. He sounded disappointed when I told him that the Mriya resort, in Crimea, a Foster + Partners design with a little Reichstag-like glass cupola at the meeting point of four wings, has a bar called the Foster Club. (The resort, owned by a now sanctioned Russian bank, was under construction when Russia invaded Crimea, in 2014, and was finished without Foster's oversight.) According to the hotel's Web site: "The city falls asleep, Foster wakes up."

Foster's personal attention to a project may derive from a personal connection. A civic-and-commercial building that's about to break ground in St. Moritz, Switzerland, is near the mountain home that he now describes as his primary residence. (The château is on the market.) There are also commissions whose cultural standing, or budget, makes it inevitable that they'll attract more of the founder's attention than—to quote Foster's Web site—"an exciting new residential development" in Dubai "that seeks to redefine luxury living."

Steve Jobs left little to chance. In August, 2008, Foster and his wife were being driven home from the Geneva airport when the London office called: "There's a Mr. Jobs, wants your personal number. Can I give it to him?" Foster said yes. A few minutes later: "I need your help in Cupertino. How quickly can you get out here?" Norman said that he'd have to check with Elena and call him back; the couple had just agreed to take a break from travelling. Elena's view was that Jobs was surely speaking to other firms—arranging a "beauty parade" of architects—and that Norman should dispatch a senior colleague. Norman called Jobs back. "I'm not talking to

anyone else!” Jobs said. Foster spoke to Elena again, and to Jobs again. The Fosters had pizza in Jobs’s kitchen two weeks later.

One morning last July, Foster was in the lobby of 383 Madison Avenue, which in recent years has served as the headquarters for JPMorgan Chase, the country’s largest bank, while Foster + Partners has been building the company a new headquarters, on the other side of Forty-seventh Street. Foster’s view to the north, across the street, was of construction-site plywood, painted dark green, behind which were heavy diagonal legs of steel.

The lobby used to look out on the base of the Union Carbide Building, a 1960 modernist skyscraper designed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. Between 2019 and 2021, that tower was dismantled, over objections made on both architectural and embodied-carbon grounds. At the time, no taller building in the world had ever been demolished, except in the 9/11 attacks. Foster + Partners’ replacement tower, at 270 Park Avenue, reached its full height in November, 2023, and became the sixth tallest in the city. It fills the block between Madison and Park, and between Forty-seventh and Forty-eighth Streets; its upper floors taper in a series of setbacks, and resemble a rising-and-falling bar graph when seen from either north or south. Foster attended a topping-out ceremony for the tower, alongside Governor Kathy Hochul, Mayor Eric Adams, and others, and addressed a crowd of workers who’d built the tower. The event, Foster had told me, was, “in the best sense, very American—very celebratory, very outgoing and chauvinistic and nationalistic.” JPMorgan intends to start moving in this summer.

David Arena, JPMorgan’s head of global real estate, who has an old-fashioned, sunny hustle about him, was with Foster in the lobby. Arena told him that he looked terrific, which was true. In the previous two weeks, Foster had been camping in Zambia, briefly in the company of the President of Zambia, and had then spent a week with Elena and their children, and some of their children’s friends, in a villa on Lake Como—the same one where, in “Succession,” Lukas Matsson receives visits from members of the Roy family. Foster was tanned and wearing a pale linen suit, navy loafers, and mustard-yellow socks. This was his attire for a site visit across the

street, but also for lunch, later, with Elena at the Grill, which used to be the bar space of the Four Seasons restaurant, in Mies van der Rohe's Seagram Building. (Foster, a longtime regular, told me that he'd first visited there as a Yale student, in a group that included James Stirling, the British architect, then teaching at the university, and Richard Rogers, Foster's British classmate and a future business partner. Twenty-five years later, the three would be the subjects of the "New Architecture" exhibition at the Royal Academy in London.)

Foster had been joined by several colleagues, but Nigel Dancey, a lead partner on the JPMorgan project, was in London, recovering from an illness. His absence was a slight complication. Foster is adept at taking easy ownership of every proposal or project. At times, this posture will derive from prolonged oversight, as was true here. At other times, Foster will be in head-of-state mode: he will have brought himself up to speed in the car carrying him from the airport to the presentation, with the kind of brinkmanship that Ken Shuttleworth used to find extraordinarily skillful, if "heart-stopping." (Shuttleworth supposes that Foster could have easily outperformed most British politicians, had he chosen that path.) Either way, Foster is never presenting himself as a design's sole author, or as a repository of knowledge about every vent and contractor deadline. So it's good for him to have a company chaperon with a thousand drawings on an iPad. Two younger partners had taken Dancey's place. These were high-achieving, mid-career architects whose contribution to the Manhattan skyline is now easily picked out from deep in Queens. But they'd never had exactly this role before, and looked nervous to the point of queasiness. At one point, one of them quietly asked their boss if he was doing it right.

As we talked, near a model of the new tower, several JPMorgan executives passed by, perhaps not by chance, and said hello. (A bystander might have judged Foster, and not the bank, to be the powerful client.) The well-wishers included Daniel Pinto, an executive junior only to the C.E.O., Jamie Dimon. "So it's almost done, right?" Pinto said, pleasantly, adding that he had some thoughts about the choice of art works on the upper floors. "We need to find the right size for the right walls," he said. Foster had already helped to secure commissions for the building from artists he has

long known, including Maya Lin and Gerhard Richter. He suggested a meeting: “Let’s find some time.”

Arena told me, “Of course, we’re risk managers, so selecting Norman as a partner was easy.” It’s fair to compliment Foster + Partners on extreme reliability, in design and execution. But Arena seemed to recognize that his praise lacked some poetry, and he added that JPMorgan had “boiled the ocean” in its search for an architect—a private competition had begun with a field of dozens. After calling Foster “arguably the greatest architect of all time,” Arena said, “When you build a building, you think: It’s going to be a sculpture! Let’s make it round, let’s make it octagonal! But Norman’s view has been, from the beginning: The street grid is orthogonal, the zoning is set up a particular way, let’s make it look like it *wants to look*, in the urban context.” (The zoning rules that first produced progressive, “wedding cake” setbacks, like those of the Chrysler Building and the Empire State Building, were rewritten long ago, but that silhouette puts you in good company.) Arena added that he and his colleagues had been impressed by a Foster + Partners tower, at 425 Park Avenue, that opened a few years ago, and is half occupied by Citadel, the hedge fund, and its trading arm. Kenneth Griffin, Citadel’s C.E.O., is now part of a team developing a third Foster tower on the strip, at 350 Park Avenue.

I later spoke to Michael Bloomberg, who remembered a call that he took from Dimon just before JPMorgan committed to Foster. Bloomberg’s low-rise, stone-clad London headquarters had opened in 2017. Bloomberg recalled, “I said, ‘Look, this guy is going to be hard to work with, because he’s got strong ideas. But, if you want somebody that really can take what you want, and translate it, he’s the guy.’ ”

We put on hard hats and walked over to the new building. It has twice the floor area of the old one, but, in addition to having a tapered top, it relents in its scale just above street level. Starting at a point about eighty feet up, the base of the tower slants inward, particularly sharply at its western and eastern ends. This should grant some breathing space for pedestrians on the avenues. It also creates engineering drama. Below where this pinching begins, thick structural columns that run down the building’s façade also turn inward, with what seems like rashness, and meet up with the others at

one of six fan-shaped junctions at ground level. Arena, keen to reassure me about the design's stability, noted that the new building used more steel at its base than its predecessor had used over all. Foster, speaking moments later, had a different agenda: he told me that he'd sold JPMorgan on the idea of diagonal bracing for the western and eastern façades by arguing in part that this would save steel.

The design for the new headquarters of JPMorgan Chase is a striking, muscular performance, suggesting a plank pose, or a car up on jacks.Art work by DBOX / Courtesy Foster + Partners

The cantilevers and the fan junctions aren't doing anything outlandish. One can find precursors of various kinds, including an unbuilt one in Foster's archive, a 1978 design for a tower that would have expanded the old Whitney Museum. But the new design is still a striking, muscular performance, suggesting a plank pose, or a car up on jacks. Foster made his international name in 1986 with a headquarters, in Hong Kong, for the Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation. He gave the building, then the most expensive in history, a remarkable (and, strictly speaking, unnecessary) skeleton of a stack of suspension bridges. Foster isn't immune to the appeal of an impeccable modernist box, but he has always been drawn to stories of engineering innovation that make an implicit claim about the possibility of progress. Such stories also give permission to new forms, while protecting designs from too strong a taint of faddishness, or of strenuous icon-making. Optimism comes naturally to Foster, and is likely to please all but the most harried, cash-strapped clients.

It's not always easy to tell a good engineering story. The firm's Millennium Bridge, in London, is a suspension footbridge in denial about being a suspension footbridge, with cables that hang from Y-shaped, slingshot

stumps rather than from taller masts, for reasons that don't seem to go far beyond Foster's stated desire to extend a "blade of light" across the Thames. (According to Angus Macdonald, a British historian of architecture and engineering, who respects some of Foster's other work, the result is "squashed up" and "hideous.") But Foster has long employed engineers, who, as he puts it, are present "at the point of creation." This hasn't always been typical of the profession: Stuart Lipton, the developer, recently contrasted Foster's engineering thoughtfulness with the approach of Jørn Utzon, who designed the Sydney Opera House but "had no idea how to deliver it." Foster, an admirer of Utzon's, described the history of the opera house as "an object lesson in how not to design."

Foster is skilled at making clients feel good about one or another technical novelty: the largest possible sheets of structural glass, an exotic new ventilation system, an arch holding up a stadium's roof. And he presses manufacturers to accommodate him. Foster's original, winning proposal for the Reichstag, which was too expensive to build, included a forty-thousand-square-foot translucent roof that covered the whole site like a tabletop. The glass elevators in the Bloomberg office operate in an unusual way that required a competition among manufacturers, and a test rig in Helsinki. The cabs are not hoisted on cables but cantilevered off the building's façade, as if being lifted and lowered by a forklift. This was important, both client and architect impressed on me, because it allowed elevator shafts that were entirely transparent and free of clutter.

When Foster spoke at the topping-out of 270 Park Avenue, he used a telling word: he described the building as a "device." His twin impulses toward sobriety and technical exhibitionism have resulted in a number of skyscrapers—including the tallest buildings in Frankfurt and Philadelphia—that prompt thoughts of handsomely encased light machinery, of *equipment.* But the JPMorgan building is a little different, in part for being darker-hued: it looks almost cast from bronze. It seems keen not to be mistaken for something sleek and silvery in a young economy. Foster, looking up at the tower from Forty-seventh Street, hinted at the complexity of discussions about which exact shade would be used for the cladding that accentuates the supporting columns and the diagonal bracing. I asked if there'd been concerns about having a bank tower of shimmering gold. "Of course,"

Foster said. Part of the pitch, now reprised for me, was to establish bronze as a material of statuary. “How do you convey values of timelessness, and have something that will truly endure over time?” he said. (I later heard a colleague of Foster’s, in a video meeting, start a sentence with “If you can sell bronze to Jamie Dimon . . .”)

We walked into the new tower’s thirty-five-thousand-square-foot lobby, where Foster’s art work will stand. Arena, using the amused, self-teasing tone of someone looking down an itemized bill for maybe three billion dollars—JPMorgan declined to confirm that reported price—reflected on the travertine that surrounds the elevator banks. “It of *course* only comes from one place in Italy—one quarry in the whole planet,” he said. “And one guy has to match the pieces. I thought you just put it up on the wall, the way it comes out of the quarry! That’s not at all what happens. There’s one Italian guy. He lays it all out in a big warehouse, piece by piece. I think he goes by one name, like Oprah.” Looking at Foster, he added, “This does not happen at this level of beauty unless you have Norman *on* you, day and night.”

A construction elevator, attached to the tower’s north side, carried us to the fifty-sixth floor. We came out into a high-ceilinged, raw area that by this summer will be a gallery and a “sky bar” for client and employee events. We were about twelve hundred feet above the street. “*This is man-made*!” Foster said. “It’s so blindingly obvious but worth repeating. Look at this!” He sounded both sincere and a little strained, suggesting that it is more natural for him to think such things than to say them. On the east side, there was no curtain wall yet—just sky, and a waist-high barrier of wire and netting. To the south, a glass panel dangled from an unseen crane; harnessed workers, high above us, were nudging it into place. “Somebody’s controlling that—and it’s within millimetres,” Foster said. Then: “Now it’s in place! We’ve only been here a minute.”

We looked out over a hazy midtown. “Chrysler, my favorite,” Foster said.

Arena joked, not quite accurately, that it was nice to “look down at all of the observation decks in the city.”

As we made our way back down, Foster said that he had never met Natalie de Blois, an architect who was key to the design of the Union Carbide Building. But he knew her building a little, recognized its strengths, and felt comfortable about its disappearance. It "*was* obsolescent," he said. "It was recirculating stale refrigerated air. Low ceilings, very little natural light, no variety of space. The question that's never raised but I think is important is: What is going to replace it? What is the idealism behind the replacement?"

In 1971, Foster was interviewed at his home, in North London, for a television arts program. He pitched himself as a problem solver working in the "beautiful-things department"; architects should "squeeze the maximum amount of joy" out of every commission. The interview's existence suggests some marketing acumen. Foster, then in his mid-thirties, had been responsible for some cool things—he'd connected two quayside warehouses in East London with a glass-faced space for dockworkers—but they were little known outside the profession. It was also an early glimpse of Foster's awkward charisma, in which ambition seems to have conquered reserve, but only just. He and his interviewer, both in suit, tie, and sideburns, sat half swallowed by a long, yellow beanbag sofa, as if to establish a Monty Python premise. The interviewer, being playful, said, "It's quite evident that you're prepared to abandon traditional ways of sitting." Foster, holding himself upright with seeming effort, two hands around one knee, said, "For years, people thought that, if they had to sit down, they had to sit on a chair." He looked like a man praying for a chair.

At the time, Graham Phillips was an architecture student in Liverpool. The country was approaching the end of a postwar boom in publicly funded construction during which swaths of architects, employed in local government, created inexpensive housing, schools, and hospitals that generally followed a modernist template of concrete, flat roofs, and limited ornament. Phillips and his classmates swooned over photographs in professional magazines that showed Foster's office, in a storefront on Fitzroy Street, in the West End. "We were gobsmacked," Phillips said recently. "It had a black-glass façade—very strange, no mullions to it—and the interior was bright green and yellow, almost fluorescent. And the doors off to the side, to storerooms or toilets, were like submarine doors, with a

big black gasket around them. And I can remember thinking, Well, that's the only place I want to work."

Cartoon by Roz Chast

As Phillips would have known from the same articles, Foster, after graduating from Yale, had spent the mid-sixties at Team 4, a practice that initially involved him; Richard Rogers and his wife, Su Rogers; and two sisters, Georgie and Wendy Cheesman. Georgie left almost immediately, and went on to have her own career. In the view of Georgie's daughter, Suke Wolton, who teaches politics at Oxford, her late mother found Foster's self-absorption a little hard to take. "She really admired Norman, but she didn't want to work with him. It was almost like she was palming him off on her sister: '*You* deal with him.' " Wendy stayed, and she and Norman married in 1964.

Wolton, like her mother, has respect for Foster, but she also has grating memories of time spent with Norman and Wendy and their young sons. "As far as he was concerned, the world was meant to be looking after him," she said. "It was 'Is it dinnertime? No? O.K., I'm off, then.' He really thought

that children should be seen and not heard.” When she was in her early teens, she told her mother that her uncle Norman was a male chauvinist pig.

Foster, whose father had been the manager of a pawnshop and later a factory worker, and whose mother worked for a while as a waitress, has explained that he had to find his own way into his career. Nobody in his family had attended college; there were no books in the house; architecture “wasn’t on the school syllabus.” This last point can be challenged: I showed Foster pages from a school notebook, full of architectural work, made by him in the late nineteen-forties, when he was thirteen. He expressed surprise about these pages—which are digitally preserved in his archive, and include architectural plans for a castle, a Tudor house, and a flat-roofed modern house with a “loggia” and a “dining recess.” A teacher had written, “An excellent notebook, keep it up.” Foster said that this schoolwork didn’t contradict his narrative of lonely architectural discovery. “There was never any connection between architecture as a school subject and the idea that one might pursue it as a profession,” he said.

Foster’s Team 4 colleagues were upper middle class and privately educated. The Cheesmans had kept horses. Foster left school at sixteen, to work as a trainee civil servant in Manchester Town Hall. Later, he paid his way through his first degree with unskilled jobs—at a movie theatre, in an auto shop—and resented it, acquiring what he once described as “a strong desire to show everyone some day.” Foster’s disadvantages were real, but the advantages of his colleagues helped to establish the firm. One of Team 4’s first commissions was a retirement home for Su Rogers’s parents. Most of the firm’s work involved elegant single-family homes. One of these, in Hertfordshire, had at its core a long, open-plan, multilevel room that steps down a gentle slope. It was used as a gruesome location in Kubrick’s “A Clockwork Orange,” where it was given a Beethoven’s Fifth doorbell.

Team 4 broke up, sourly, in 1967. Norman and Wendy set up a new firm, Foster Associates. In 1971, Richard Rogers, working with Renzo Piano, won a commission to design the Centre Pompidou, in Paris. Norman later reëstablished a cordial relationship with Rogers, and they had discussions about reuniting. When Foster recently talked about their different paths, he focussed for a moment on Rogers’s conspicuous ductwork, often painted

bright colors, and he contrasted that with his own instinct to tuck things away, efficiently; he described the narrow-bore pipes, carrying pulsing water that can either heat or cool, inside the precast concrete walls of Apple Park. Both men were sometimes said to be forging a high-tech movement in architecture, but, as Shuttleworth, who joined Foster in the seventies, put it to me, “We were more about cool boxes. Rogers was letting it all hang out.”

In one of our conversations, Foster proposed that Rogers, who died in 2021, had “a very romantic vision of what constituted a Russian Communist state.” He remembered a loud argument over dinner. Rogers, an active supporter of the British Labour Party, was certainly to Foster’s political left. But, when I recently spoke to Ruthie Rogers, a co-founder of the long-famous River Café restaurant in London, who in 1973 became Richard’s second wife, she was surprised by Foster’s memory, and noted that her husband was certainly not pro-Soviet. Still, she spoke fondly of Foster, and recalled once watching him prepare pesto. He counted out more than a hundred basil leaves, one by one. “I remember thinking, What are you doing?” she said, adding, “He cares about food, in a Norman Foster way—which is curiosity combined with ambition, perhaps.” That is, he was asking the question “If he *really got it right*, would it be the best?”

Team 4’s final major commission, which received a prize in 1967, was a handsome minimalist factory and office in Swindon, west of London, largely done with cheap off-the-shelf materials. This is the kind of achievement that’s much more often discussed among architects than executed. In the years since, Foster has frequently referred to ideals of industrialized simplicity and lightness. Quoting Buckminster Fuller, the American designer and inventor, who became a friend in his later years, Foster has made a motto of the idea of doing “more with less.” That’s a fair description of both the Swindon factory and an impressively inexpensive glass-walled office building that Foster Associates designed for I.B.M. a few years later. And it perhaps applies to one of the firm’s remarkable early achievements: an office for an insurance-brokerage company, Willis Faber & Dumas, in Ipswich, on the eastern coast of England.

What could have been a drab ten-story block surrounded by pavement instead became a low, deep, black-glass blob—reflective in the day,

glowing at night—that filled the whole lot, following the curves of medieval streets. Three open-plan floors were served by a central bank of escalators running in a continuous, waterfall-like line, resembling those which would soon be on the side of the Pompidou. There's some of this spirit in the Bloomberg building in London, done forty years later: deep floor plans shaped by centuries-old street patterns; daylight from above. In Ipswich, Foster's clients were persuaded to include a roof garden and, on the ground floor, a staff swimming pool.

Today, about a hundred twentieth-century buildings are on a British list of structures that are granted the strongest legal protections against alterations. The Willis Building is the only one designed and built in the nineteen-seventies. Because of the listing, almost nothing about the building can be changed. On a recent visit, I was shown around by employees who seemed sincerely attached to it; one of them threw himself, loudly, at the glass wall, to demonstrate its strength. Michael Hopkins, who worked with Foster in the seventies and went on to have a high-profile career of his own, can take some of the design credit. All the same, the building seems to introduce us to the young Foster, making a Midwestern road trip in Carl Abbott's Beetle or sitting at the bar of the Four Seasons: there's a feeling of American spaciousness and adventure acting on a meticulous, engineering-oriented, slightly aggrieved sensibility. As one of my guides acknowledged, Ipswich is not currently a prospering place. (I met children outside getting themselves into a screeching, happy panic by poking at a half-dead rat with a stick.) But the building was cheering and oddly undated, even though it is locked, by law, into its era. The corridors are still yellow, the carpets lime green. When the pool was shut down, in 1991, it would have been illegal to hammer it out. So it was emptied, boarded over, and carpeted. At dusk, on my visit, workers in the pension-administration department were at their desks on top of it, beside original sans-serif signs reading "Deep End."

Around the time of the beanbag interview, Foster Associates began a project that perhaps marked the end of the firm's enthusiasm for genuinely pared-down, low-cost work. The planners of Milton Keynes, a new town an hour north of London, had commissioned Foster to create public housing on a tight grid of new streets. Foster designed Beanhill: some five hundred small, single-story row houses. Despite the scale of this work, there's

nothing about it on Foster's Web site, and it's represented by a single small image at the back of a thousand-page survey of his career that was published, under Foster's direction, in 2023, to coincide with a retrospective at the Pompidou.

Shuttleworth, who didn't work on Beanhill but was very aware of it at the time, understands Foster's reticence, and is sympathetic. "There are some projects you don't talk about," he said. "We've all got a few of those. If somebody asks you, then: Yes, we *did* them. But you'd qualify how much you did and what actually happened."

The houses, built on uninsulated concrete slabs, had flat roofs, single-glazed windows, and thin walls clad in aluminum, ribbed horizontally. That cladding resembles the original exterior panels (since replaced) on what would be Foster's great critical success of the late seventies: the Sainsbury Centre, an extraordinary hangar-like gallery and art-history-faculty space at the University of East Anglia. As Foster put it to me, the Sainsbury's panels took some inspiration from Citroëns of the period—which included the Méhari, a Jeep-like car with a very modest engine. Among his dozens of cars—a 1943 Chrysler Airflow, a 1961 Jaguar E-Type—Foster has a white Méhari that he sometimes drives around Martha's Vineyard, confident that it won't break the speed limit.

To Beanhill's tenants, the readier point of visual reference was corrugated iron. "They were basically sheds," Shuttleworth said. "I think the optimism there was about the climate." The houses were prone to leaking, and to condensation: you'd wake up to wet carpets. He added that his own house —in the striking form of two nested crescents—also has flat roofs. "Luckily, I'm the client as well as the architect. So, when it leaks, I don't go and sue anybody." Because of the appearance and imperfections of the Beanhill homes, a local myth arose that they were built as temporary housing for construction workers.

Milton Keynes sued Foster Associates and its contractors. In 1984, a settlement helped pay for repairs that included replacing flat roofs with pitched ones. (One architectural journalist has called this an indignity.) Guy Ortolano, a historian at N.Y.U. who has written about Beanhill, says there is little acknowledgment today in Milton Keynes of the city's link to the

country’s most famous architect. Some Beanhill homes are now owned by their occupants, and one residence came onto the market last summer for less than a hundred and fifty thousand pounds, which made it about the cheapest house available, mobile homes excluded, anywhere near London.

One could think of Beanhill as a story of repair, adaptation, and survival. The neighborhood isn’t prosperous, but it has endured. One could imagine Foster referring to this commission—including its disappointments—in the talks he sometimes gives about cities and sustainability. He doesn’t. Foster is friendly with the Chilean architect Alejandro Aravena, who in 2016 won the Pritzker, in part for his company’s “half of a good house” initiatives, which make the best of meagre social-housing budgets by creating homes that lend themselves to D.I.Y. expansions. In a recent conversation, Aravena spoke warmly of Foster, but noted that great architects can find it hard to embrace the provisional, or “good enough.” He added, “You have to be O.K. to start a process, not deliver a product. You have to be able to lose control.”

None of that sounds like Lord Foster, basil-leaf counter. One of the small stresses of spending time with Foster is knowing that, wherever you decide to set down your bag, you’ll have made a mistake. It will be moved; someone will restore the order that existed before there was a bag on that chair. When I asked about Beanhill, Foster looked a little pained. He was unsure, he said, why the project hadn’t turned out better. “I never really got to the bottom of it.” To his credit, he didn’t refer to colleagues who’d led the design. He did note that the client’s architectural chief had been “very much in control.”

In a conversation last summer, Elena Foster talked of her husband’s extreme agitation on the night before the stunning Millau Viaduct, in central southern France, was first opened to traffic, in 2004. Designed by Foster + Partners and Michel Virlogeux, a veteran bridge specialist, the viaduct swoops over a gorge on needlelike pylons, the tallest of which is taller than any building in the country. The couple was staying in a nearby village. Elena recalled that Norman couldn’t sleep; he was tortured by his decision to make the pylons white. “He was saying, ‘White! *Why? Why? Why?* The sky is blue! It will not disappear into the landscape like I want!

Black would be better! Brown!' " (He was reassured when he saw the bridge again the next day.)

Foster, for whom "pristine" is an adjective of high praise, told me that he's rarely quite at ease in a Foster + Partners building. All he can see are things that could have been better. (I was unsurprised to hear from more than one source that Foster is a nightmarish collaborator on his own residences. David Galbraith, a Foster architect between 1989 and 1991, who later became a tech entrepreneur, recently recalled how proud he was, as a new hire, to be asked to help on the boss's Battersea apartment. A colleague reacted to Galbraith's happy news by drawing a finger across his throat.) Foster told me that one exception to his slight discomfort with his firm's finished work is the Great Court at the British Museum, whose steel-and-glass canopy casts delicate patterned shadows on the stone below. His colleague Armstrong Yakubu recalled another example. He described walking with Foster through a branch of Asprey, the luxury-goods brand, which opened in Trump Tower in 2003. Foster was delighted with it all, and for a moment was puzzled by his own delight.

"What is *exactly different* about this?" he asked Yakubu. "Well, the difference is that everything you're looking at has been handmade," Yakubu replied.

In 2002, the Foster + Partners team then working in London posed for a smiling group photograph, outdoors. Shuttleworth stood immediately to Foster's right. He was a partner and a key designer, known for his Foster-like skill as a preliminary sketcher of forms. In the early eighties, he'd moved to Hong Kong for the construction of the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank tower, the building that made the firm famous. Recalling the moment, he said that, until then, "we'd been doing three-story buildings. This was a completely different thing. We all felt that Norman might be out of his depth. But actually, you know, he was totally on it." Shuttleworth helped to set up a local team of a hundred and fifty employees. Foster pursued a straddling, bridgelike structure as a way to avoid a central service core. Graham Phillips, who also worked in Hong Kong for years, described the result as "a sledgehammer to crack a nut," but unquestionably a success.

“It’s an amazing, albeit over-the-top, piece of engineering that produced something long-lasting,” he said.

Against expectation, Foster never moved to Hong Kong. Instead, he commuted from London, at a time before direct flights, and he took up endurance exercise to make the regime survivable. (Architectural careers often don’t fully blossom until late middle age, so it’s helpful to stay alive. The world’s best-known living architects—Piano, Koolhaas, Frank Gehry, Tadao Ando—are significantly older than the best-known novelists.) Foster, from London, could seek out new work. “I was aware of so many instances where architects had won major competitions, and been completely absorbed by that project, and then afterward there was a crisis,” Foster told me. “And they had to virtually start from scratch back at home base.” Rogers, post-Pompidou, had struggled. Before the bank was finished, Foster Associates began work on its first airport terminal, at Stansted, north of London. Not long afterward, the firm started on a new airport in Hong Kong. David Galbraith, who arrived in this era, remembers an air of high glamour: Foster was driving a Porsche, and “everyone had fantastic bicycles.”

In 1989, Wendy Foster died, of cancer. She and Norman had bought land together in Battersea for a new office building. That’s where the firm moved the next year. The recession of the early nineties briefly shrank the business. Foster, fascinated by machines—and perhaps most appreciative of other people when they’re seen from an L. S. Lowry-like distance—had taken to flying gliders, and then planes. Graham Phillips, who by the early nineties had become the firm’s managing director, told me that part of his challenge in keeping the company in good shape was the cost of the founder’s helicopter and jet. “We were a practice of a hundred people!” he noted. (Foster, responding to this, talked about the opportunities created by being able to shuttle clients and colleagues around at speed.)

The company prospered, in part, by accepting commissions for spec office space—for buildings that would house unidentified future occupants, in deals put together by real-estate developers. Later, the Gherkin was this kind of commission; so was Foster’s thousand-foot-tall contribution to Hudson Yards. But, forty years ago, such work was widely judged to be

beneath the dignity of the élite firms that design opera houses and win prizes. As Shuttleworth explained, it was perceived to be “better to be working with an end user than with a developer who wants a vanilla building they can let to anybody.” Shuttleworth takes a little credit for encouraging Foster to embrace this kind of commission; the firm began with a London office building for Stuart Lipton, which was finished in the early nineties. In the subsequent decade, Shuttleworth recalled, “we earned a hundred million pounds in the London property market.”

“Poor Tom. He’s been abducted by aliens.”
Cartoon by Edward Frascino

An architect’s fees are usually expressed as a percentage of a building’s total budget. Foster has never had the lowest fees. And his budgets, then as now, tended to reflect more exotic materials and more exacting processes. As Lipton explained to me, sometimes you’re in the market for the simplest, quickest option. But he discovered a taste for being nudged into experimentation by stars such as Foster. “And, look, an architect is broadly getting a five-to-six-per-cent fee,” he said. “It’s the other ninety-five per cent that you’re worried about. Are you going to get good value? Will it be a long-term investment? Will it finish on time? Will the detailing be good?” Moreover, Lipton said, when you hire a firm like Foster + Partners, you’re simplifying your dealings with city planners. You’re buying deference, or at least open-mindedness. Michael Jones, a senior Foster architect, who had a central role in the design of the British Museum’s Great Court, and Bloomberg, and a 2009 expansion of Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts,

recently told me about a fairly radical renovation he'd done on the interior of an Edwardian house that he owns in an English seaside town. An application to local authorities didn't mention where he worked. But an official, struck by the drawings that Jones had submitted, looked him up. At the next meeting: "If you can be trusted with the British Museum, I think we can trust you with this."

There are architects whose fees are far higher than Foster's. Bjarke Ingels told me that he'd seen competition details that allowed him to compare Foster's proposed fees with those of a celebrated European competitor: the other architect asked for three times as much. In Ingels's description, Foster + Partners can be thought of as Mercedes, rather than as "hand-built Aston Martin craziness."

Sudjic, the Foster biographer, recently said that Foster's career "dissolved the barrier between the kind of architecture that architecture magazines look at and all the rest." Of course, Foster never stopped pressing for high-prestige commissions. And, in the mid-nineties, the firm won a series of major competitions, including for the Reichstag, the British Museum, and the Millennium Bridge. Foster soon won the Pritzker and was ennobled. He'd previously been knighted, and, separately, appointed for life to the Order of Merit, an élite cultural coterie of twenty-four, chosen by the reigning monarch. In this role, Foster used to regularly lunch with the Queen, along with Tom Stoppard, David Attenborough, and David Hockney. They now all meet with the King.

Foster's second marriage, to Sabiha Rumani Malik, ended in 1995. A year later, he married Elena Foster, who has told a friend that, on the couple's first date, he played her videos about Buckminster Fuller. (Norman denies this.) At this time, Foster's firm employed two hundred and fifty people; by 2004, it was six hundred. Graham Phillips, recalling this expansion—before there was a Design Board or a corporate partner—described an office a little strained by growth, and, in his view, by Ken Shuttleworth's self-reliance. Whereas most of the firm's senior architects were in constant, neurotic contact with Foster, Shuttleworth, who was experimenting with curvaceous forms, "tended to get on with it," Phillips said. As a result, some designs "slipped through the net" of review and revision, including the one for City

Hall, by the Thames. It was technically brilliant, Phillips said. Its bulbous shape allowed it to minimize direct sunlight, reducing energy costs, even as its all-glass skin enacted a metaphor of transparency. But “a lot of us in the company thought it was quite hideous,” Phillips said. “Norman didn’t like it.” Ken Livingstone, the first London mayor to use the building, called it a glass testicle. It is no longer the seat of London government, and its owners recently secured permission to radically reshape it. Similarly, the Gherkin, which has become a symbol of London, was unpopular in Battersea. “It wasn’t a pretty shape, and I don’t think Norman ever thought it was,” Phillips said.

In January, 2003, Shuttleworth gave an interview to Marcus Fairs for *Building*, a trade publication. After the conversation had touched on City Hall, Wembley, and the Gherkin—then known as Swiss Re, after its first tenant—Fairs asked Shuttleworth, “Did you design all those buildings?”

“Everything comes from the office,” Shuttleworth replied. “We work together, we’ll all be toying with ideas with Norman and the others.” He added, “Having said that, a lot of the sketches and the initial ideas have come from me. Swiss Re, for example.” He said that he’d taken the lead in the firm’s World Trade Center proposal, in which two towers touched, or “kissed,” at their summits.

“Does it bother you that your role in all these projects is rarely acknowledged?”

“Not at all. I’ve never sought publicity. I’m happy when Norman takes the credit. That’s fine. He owns the company. He’s the chairman. He had the guts to set the company up in the first place; he put his reputation on the line.”

It’s an insight into the Foster + Partners culture that these remarks registered, internally, as an outrage. As Shuttleworth recently recalled, “Everybody was a bit upset about it. I never intended to upset the apple cart. It’s just the way it came out.” He apologized to Foster and to other colleagues. Yet Phillips remembered a meeting, involving Foster and others, at which Shuttleworth’s penitence went only so far: he declined an opportunity to agree that he’d said anything that was untrue. “Norman got

up from the table and walked away and never spoke to him again," Phillips said.

Shuttleworth recalled no such scene. And he and Foster continued to communicate. But, in Shuttleworth's memory, the office atmosphere became "tetchy." By the end of the year, he'd left to set up his own firm.

In October, 2004, the Gherkin won the Stirling Prize, given annually to a single British building. The same week, the latest in a series of books cataloguing Foster's career, and compiled by the firm, was published. This volume included the 2002 group photo. But Shuttleworth was no longer standing at Foster's shoulder. He'd been moved along five places, and Phillips occupied his former spot.

Shuttleworth, who recalled this demotion with a good-natured reference to Stalin, told me that Foster must have approved this fakery, which became a small news story. At the time, the company acknowledged the edit without apology, noting that "not all key staff" were present at the original shoot. (Phillips had been out of the country.) In an e-mail, Foster recently said that the edit had been made "to ensure accuracy."

Today, Shuttleworth has moved on from the kind of architecture he did in his final years at Foster + Partners—a period when, as he puts it, he threw away his T-square. Across the profession, he said, "we were all trying to out-shape each other." He has since repented. The default should be a box. "Make them square," he told me. "Make them very low energy, not a lot of glass."

Today, when Foster talks about doing "more with less," it can sometimes be hard to see the less. He used Fuller's phrase when he was at the top of 270 Park Avenue. Foster + Partners is currently working on several airports, three of them in Saudi Arabia. It's working on other Gulf-state monuments, and various structures for Western billionaires: besides Kenneth Griffin, these include Larry Ellison, of Oracle (an Oxford research campus in his name), and Bill Ackman, the right-wing financier married to Neri Oxman, the designer (a penthouse just off Central Park West; a house on Long Island). Not long ago, a consultant who worked on the façade of the Bloomberg building in London joked to a professional associate that, given

the budget, he could have clad the building in Ferraris. British authorities recently blocked proposals for a Foster + Partners-designed observation tower, in London, right next to the Gherkin, in the form of a thousand-foot concrete Q-tip. (The firm claimed, weakly, to be driven by "a desire to take public engagement with the city to a new level.") When I asked Foster about the two-kilometre tower in Riyadh—first reported by the *Architects' Journal*, but not publicly acknowledged by the firm—he apologized for not being able to discuss it, or take me into a nearby room where renderings were on the walls. He made a couple of general observations: in towers reaching new heights, it might be possible to have "a perfect energy balance, where you're too cold at the top and too hot at the bottom—so it's a great cycle." Separately, he proposed that wind shear might not be the issue you'd imagine, because, "with altitude, the wind force reduces." (This observation was puzzling: with increasing altitude, air density decreases, but this is usually more than counterbalanced by higher wind speeds.)

Foster is an unmatched leader of architects. He can look less confident, even a bit exposed, in the role he now often assumes: that of a techno-optimistic guide to issues of sustainability and development. An oddity of Foster's public persona, as a speechmaker and an occasional writer, is that he seems to seek recognition less for what he has done—which is to have caused half of the world's most powerful people to pay for buildings that aren't depressing—and more for what he has largely not done. He talks of modular housing, or of making cities more walkable.

Foster proposed to me that there was an "ecological" argument for the Millau Viaduct, because it had reduced severe local traffic jams. That's not an ecological argument. (He later claimed that the bridge generated carbon savings by shortening a major trade route, but he did so without reference to the carbon released in making the bridge, or to the phenomenon of "induced demand," by which road improvements inspire greater road use.) Foster risks discrediting the case worth making for such a bridge—one that sets carbon costs against societal benefits that may include quieter local roads and the survival of a beautiful-things department. Several years ago, the Norman Foster Foundation attracted media coverage for proposals about drone-delivery infrastructure in the developing world. Foster's drawings showed undulating brick canopies—and no walls. The goal was to have one

of these arched “droneports” in “every small town in Africa” by 2030. No working buildings of this kind exist. When a drone-delivery company did begin operating in Rwanda, it used an ordinary-looking warehouse that can be locked up at night.

“Sorry to cut you off, but I haven’t been listening and I’d like to speak now.”
Cartoon by Asher Perlman

More recently, the foundation helped develop a prototype for emergency houses made with walls of canvas stiffened with cement. Each was projected to cost more than fifteen thousand dollars. Foster’s main rationale for this sturdy design was a claim that the average stay in a refugee camp is seventeen years. That number has currency on the Internet, and Foster repeated it to me several times, but it is wildly inflated. When challenged, Foster said that it would be more accurate to say that refugees live “under canvas” for an average of ten to fifteen years. He was now referring to a World Bank estimate, covering the period since the end of the Cold War, about the median duration of a refugee’s time in exile. But this estimate is about displacement—including people experiencing a lifetime’s displacement—and not about time “under canvas” in camps. (The foundation has recently shifted its attention to more permanent housing made in a similar way.)

In January, 2024, in Madrid, the Norman Foster Institute, a new part of the foundation, welcomed two dozen international students in a Sustainable Cities program—a one-year course for “civic leaders of the future.” Some introductory events were held at the Foundation’s town house, which holds much of Foster’s archive of drawings, sketchbooks, and models. Alongside this building, in a courtyard, stands a beautiful mirror-ceilinged pavilion, designed by Foster; the students gathered there for lectures given by Aravena, Foster, and others. The optics were odd for a sustainability gathering: the pavilion could be mistaken for an exhibition celebrating fossil fuels. A cabinet holds models of every aircraft type that Foster has ever flown, including the jets. At one end, there’s a full-scale version, commissioned by Foster, of a Dymaxion—the lozenge-shaped three-wheeled car designed by Buckminster Fuller in the nineteen-thirties, and generally understood to be a death trap. (Foster isn’t so sure.) Hanging on the longest wall is a thirty-foot model of the Beijing airport terminal, which Foster + Partners finished in 2008; measured by floor area—more than ten million square feet—it’s one of the largest buildings in the world.

Foster argued to me, not unreasonably, that, in an era when new airports are still being commissioned, “I feel that there is—it sounds too pretentious to say—a moral imperative that those buildings should be the most sustainable kinds of buildings.” And, if Foster isn’t the very greenest in his profession, he was certainly ahead of many peers when he pressed for natural light and natural ventilation in workplaces—and for a turfed roof in an English market town. The only time I heard his tone really stiffen, with colleagues, was when he supposed that they were overlooking a project’s energy-recycling opportunity. But, in the end, it might be simpler if Foster allowed himself to be credited for doing more with more—and didn’t expect us to recognize the carbon-sequestration achievement of transplanting eight thousand trees to the Apple Park campus, where there’s parking for nearly ten thousand cars. An intelligent and lavishly appointed structure that delays its obsolescence by being liked, or loved, will be less wasteful than a lemon. As Foster put it in 1971, “Value for money is negated if, at the end of the day, you create a slum.”

On Martha’s Vineyard, we had lunch on the deck of the main house. An awning above us began to retract, with a whirr, for no apparent reason. “It’s

a wind thing,” Foster said, and he overruled it with a remote control that had been laid on the tablecloth, in expectation of this. I had a moment’s thought about whether the climate-control gizmos that Foster clearly loves —such as the precious set of flaps, or “gills,” that direct fresh air into the Bloomberg building—represent a meaningful improvement over simpler heat-regulating systems. (The automated louvred shades under the partly glass roof of the Sainsbury Centre haven’t moved in twenty years, and can’t be manually operated. The lights are kept on.)

After lunch, we looked into the sunny outbuilding where Foster works. Elena went into a side room to retrieve some things from the printer, and then very gently tortured her husband by enacting casualness about exactly where on the long desk—maybe here? or here?—a document of his should be placed. Norman, pointing: “Elena, can you put it on top?” Then, more tightly: “No, there. No, no.”

The three of us then got into the Méhari and drove to a point on the other side of the pond, opposite the main house. There, on a satellite plot of land that’s a part of their property, Foster has just finished construction of a forty-three-hundred-square-foot building he’s calling the Foster Retreat. Foster’s first finished commission, also called the Retreat, was a kind of experimental garden shed: a cockpit-like room, dug into the ground and with walls of glass. Like the new Foster Retreat, it had a sloping roof and looked out over water. Built for Richard Rogers’s then in-laws, in 1964, in Cornwall, it cost five hundred pounds.

“Mice? I just saw one mouse. Maybe he’s an outcast, an introvert, a lone-ranger type.”
Cartoon by Maggie Larson

Foster got into some local trouble over the new one. He secured planning permission for a three-bedroom home. Later, neighbors noticed that the Web site of Foster’s foundation characterized the structure as a “flexible space” for “think tank sessions, workshops and seminars.” (I spoke to a local resident who, quite neutrally, called it a “convention center.”) After this discrepancy was publicized, the foundation text was edited to describe “a private residence to accommodate guests and friends of the Foster family who include fellows, collaborators and friends of the Norman Foster Foundation.” This reads like a peace treaty signed between a planning lawyer and a nonprofit tax lawyer. In Elena Foster’s summary, there was a period of “woo-woo-woo, but now everybody loves it.”

The Foster Retreat, seen from the side, is a trapezoid. Its roof slopes down quite steeply from front to back; its front wall also slopes. An external skeleton of steel, which extends beyond an inner wood-clad frame, suggests a giant toast rack. (There’s also a resemblance to the architecture at Taliesin West, Frank Lloyd Wright’s home and studio near Phoenix, Arizona.) The Foster Retreat has three small bedrooms at the back and one big convention-center space at the front, with a Maya Lin representation of the Thames on the wall.

At one end, there’s a library, decorated with a framed portrait of Buckminster Fuller. “I’ll change it to one of Norman in the future,” Elena Foster told me.

Foster pressed a button, and half a dozen blinds started descending, to cover the windows facing the water.

“Why are you putting it down, Norman?” Elena asked.

“Playing with it,” he said.

On the deck at the front, we talked about the project that has recently occupied Foster as much as any other—one that shows Foster, at nearly ninety, still inclined to fully act as the design leader on a major undertaking. A decade ago, the Hyundai Motor Group paid about ten billion dollars for a

twenty-acre site in Gangnam, Seoul, where it would build a new headquarters. Foster compared the site to Rockefeller Center, for its size and the prestige of its location. Hyundai published plans for a hundred-and-five-story tower. After that was scrapped, Foster + Partners competed to create a new master plan. By the summer of 2023, Foster told me, “We weren’t sure we’d won, but we had a pretty good suspicion.” When Foster went to a meeting in Seoul with Chung Eui-sun, Hyundai Motor Group’s chairman, he was thinking of it as an opportunity to “push it over the hill.”

Foster told me that he left that encounter feeling that he had to tear up the design and “start the project from scratch.” (In a later conversation, he reconsidered that language, for fear of seeming to disrespect his colleagues, and said instead, “I built on what had been.”) This impulse wasn’t a direct consequence of anything said in the meeting, Foster told me. Rather, as with his Bayreuth meditations about the roof of Wembley Stadium, “I took stock.” The first proposal presented a “scattering of buildings” across the site; it had not embraced what was a “very rare—not even once-in-a-lifetime—opportunity to do a total neighborhood.”

By last spring, after Foster had taken some inspiration from visits to the Mezquita-Catedral, in Córdoba, Spain, and to Le Bon Marché department store, in Paris, he and his colleagues had presented a revised scheme to Hyundai, which by then had hired the firm. There was now a more formal and Rockefeller-ish arrangement of seven buildings on three sides of a square, with a park in the middle, and a shopping mall underground. Ginkgo trees in the park would be on a grid that exactly matched a Córdoba-like forest of columns below—with each column ballooning, as it reached the ceiling, into a bowl containing the roots of the tree above. Three towers would stand in a line across one end of the site. Four much lower buildings would face one another across the ginkgos: on one side, a department store and a science museum; on the other, a conference center and a concert hall.

By the time Foster was in video calls with colleagues last summer, preparing for a meeting with Chung in Los Angeles, the three lined-up towers had, at Foster’s suggestion, become inverted ziggurats; they widened a little as they rose. On these calls, a couple of which I joined, he and half a

dozen colleagues were moving hundreds of thousands of square feet from here to there, like croupiers raking chips. In one conversation, Foster, at his long desk in Martha's Vineyard, and his colleagues, in London, processed a recent client directive: the central of the three towers, which was already planned to accommodate a hotel at its top, should have apartments above the hotel. But would this mean blocked views for hotel guests? Was the tower too hemmed in by its flanking neighbors? Should they cut off the tops of the smaller towers, and transfer that space to the lower buildings? What would this mean, structurally, for those shorter edifices? As they discussed all this, Foster made a sketch—you could hear little intakes of breath—then showed it to his camera. He'd drawn a tower with some structural drama behind its façade: its upper floors were cleaved into two, like a tuning fork.

When the team picked this up a few days later, the towers were no longer in a line. Michael Wurzel, a partner in London, said, "If this was a chess game, the queen is locked, right? So, if you bring the rooks forward, maybe one step? Suddenly, the queen is liberated in all views!"

"It's a better massing than the line of three," Foster said.

In London, the team members had placed a model on a table. Wurzel stood up and loomed over it, and then moved from one side to the other, saying, "Imagine I'm the sun."

Foster asked if the inverted-ziggurat form still made sense for the three towers. As he reminded his colleagues, he'd encouraged this idea in order to visually break up their surfaces, and to have them stand out among their neighbors. And upper floors have added commercial value. He went on, "I have no embarrassment around the fact that the inverted-ziggurat tower is something that's fascinated me since I was a student. The first version of it, so far unbuilt, was at Yale. *I* think it works." But was everyone convinced?

There was debate, and an agreement to keep debating. But Foster encouraged the team not to overburden the clients with choice at the coming meeting. "I don't think it's in their interest if we end up placing that decision in their court," he said. "We have to be quite firm in terms of what we'd recommend."

At the end of the tour of 270 Park, Foster and David Arena, the JPMorgan executive, returned to the company's temporary headquarters, and spent a few minutes talking about Foster's piece of kinetic art for the new building. It will mark his New York début as a visual artist. A few years ago, Foster conceived of a "cloud sculpture" for a planned restaurant at 425 Park Avenue, to be run by Daniel Humm, of Eleven Madison Park. But Humm's embrace of veganism scared off his would-be landlord, and these clouds were never made.

For JPMorgan, Foster has designed a set of four forty-foot tapering, fluted, bronze-clad columns, serving as flagpoles. Three of them will stand outdoors, in front of the Park Avenue entrance. The fourth will be in the lobby. The flag there will be moved by air forced out at the top of the pole. "It flutters, but is not a hologram," Foster said, happily. "It's very tangible."

As Foster had told me previously, "It sounds very simple—you squirt air up a mast." But a study in Madrid, lasting many months, and involving computer models and four alternate mockups, had shown him that it was not simple. A key issue had become the scream made by air passing through nozzles with the kind of force needed to move a flag.

As conceived by Foster, the indoor flagpole, like the outdoor ones, will be able to accept a flag of any design—and so reflect, say, the nationality of a visiting dignitary. As he now discussed with Arena, he wanted the indoor flag to flutter with a vigor, and in a direction, corresponding to conditions outside. That is: the flagpole will turn, and the force of the air being squirted from its top will be adjustable.

Foster asked Arena if JPMorgan would agree to install an anemometer, to measure wind speed and direction, on a seventeenth-floor terrace. Arena didn't love that idea—"everything is so timed out perfectly, and already approved"—and he wondered if Foster's indoor flag could instead take its data from a planned system of rooftop weather sensors. If that didn't work, then, yes, Foster could have his anemometer. (They later agreed to install one at the top of one of the outdoor flagpoles.)

Arena, perhaps recalling how often the flags in front of the old headquarters hung limply, had an anxious thought. "But we're going to let it blow inside

even when there's *no* wind?" he asked.

"To be discussed," Foster said. But he immediately relented, to Arena's relief. "Yes," he said. "As part of the surreal effect. Slight disbelief."

"It's art!" Arena agreed.

"We could make a big occasion of when the pole turns," Foster said, allowing himself a moment of whimsy. "Somebody could announce it. Somebody in uniform. A trumpet. It could be an event, a tourist attraction. The changing of the wind." ♦

An earlier version of this article misstated the location of a penthouse belonging to Bill Ackman and Neri Oxman.

Ian Parker has been a staff writer at The New Yorker since 2000.

Shouts & Murmurs

- **Millennials: Where Are They Now?**
  By Alex Baia | Once, they were everywhere—in laugh tracks for “The Big Bang Theory,” in breathless think pieces about social-media narcissism. Then—poof! Gone like yesterday’s avocado toast.

Shouts & Murmurs

Millennials: Where Are They Now?

By Alex Baia

January 20, 2025

Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez

Fame is fickle, and no one knows this better than millennials. Once, they were *everywhere*—in television laugh tracks for "The Big Bang Theory," in breathless think pieces about social-media narcissism, and acting the fool in 360p YouTube comedy videos. Then—poof! Gone like yesterday's avocado toast.

Here at BuzzCrunch, we once published more than seventy-five millennial-related listicles per hour. Now no one cares about millennials or thinks about them *at all*. Crazy, right? But what happened to these millennials who once lived large in our hearts and in our online conversations? We've hunted them down for old times' sake.

Many of them are dead.
Millennials are now very, very, very old. Although some of them are desperately hanging on to life, trapped in cubicles and still trying to pay off their grad-school loans, lots of millennials are now retired or expired. In fact, the oldest living millennial is more than a hundred years old. Time

marches on! And, while everyone else was distracted by pandemics and politics and TikTok, the cold, skeletal hand of time pulled the millennials into the abyss. Oh, snap! (That's something millennials used to shout when they were still capable of sassy, youthful excitement.)

A lot of them are stuck in limbo on dating apps.
According to our research, the male millennial mascot is a silver fox named Josh, who just turned forty, has been on six hundred and seventy first dates in the past three years, and hasn't found a woman he "vibes with." Then, there's Denise, on Bumble, whose profile says, "Most 'men' are boy-children who are intimidated by my boss-babe business. I'll only date a guy who's over 6'1", owns (doesn't lease) a helicopter, is a progressive pro-choice activist who goes to therapy weekly, and has the physique of a cowboy-lumberjack." This explains why so many millennials are still alone: they're imprisoned in their own sky castles. Oh, snap!

A huge mess of them are hiding in the ocean.
This freakin' *shook us*, but there is a secret underwater base called Brunchreef, which is home to a million millennials who have forsaken the land-based society that has barred them from middle-class homeownership. They've even adapted to their aquatic environment and grown gills. *Really cute.* Also, Taylor Lautner is their Mer-King, and he rules them benevolently. Lit!

Some of them got lost in a maze while trying to find their passion.
Millennials were the first generation to grow up with the wild idea that we all need to pursue our passion and be famous on the Internet. That idea turned into a giant hedge maze that really did a number on them. Someone forgot to tell the millennials that we can't *all* be the C.E.O. of a carbon-neutral tech startup or have a million Instagram followers. Someone has to do the very important job of guarding the doors to the server farm that runs the A.I. that writes these articles. Bazinga!

A couple of them are happy.
This is pretty out there, but we managed to track down two millennials, Ryan and Stephanie, who claim to be totally happy and satisfied with life. They run a chain of cupcake trucks—in Austin, Denver, and Brooklyn—that stayed profitable even after people got bored of cupcakes seven years

ago. Ryan and Stephanie have no debt, a healthy retirement savings, and two unmedicated kids. The family is excited to spend next summer in Amsterdam, where they will bike around, enjoy the canals, and not obsess about making more money or growing their podcast, called “Ryan and Stephanie’s Date Night Silly Stuff!” They are a real couple, and they completely satisfy each other emotionally and sexually, and we did *not* make them up. Boom shakalaka! ♦

Alex Baia, a humor-and-fiction writer, has contributed to The New Yorker’s Shouts & Murmurs since 2019.

Fiction

- **“The St. Alwynn Girls at Sea”**
  By Sheila Heti | The best thing about liking a boy was that it filled in all your time. You could lie on your bed and listen to music for an entire afternoon, daydreaming about him.

Fiction

The St. Alwynn Girls at Sea

By Sheila Heti

January 19, 2025

Photograph by Eva O’Leary for The New Yorker

There was a general sadness that day on the ship. Dani was walking listlessly from cabin to cabin, delivering little paper flyers announcing the talent show at the end of the month. She had made them the previous week; then had come news that the boys' ship would not be attending. It almost wasn't worth handing out flyers at all—almost as if the show had been cancelled. The boys' ship had changed course; it was now going to be near Gibraltar on the night of the performance—nowhere near where their ship would be, in the middle of the North Atlantic sea. Every girl in school had already heard Dani sing and knew that her voice was strong and good. The important thing was for *Sebastien* to know. Now Sebastien would never know, and it might be months before she would see him again—if she ever *would* see him again. All she had to look forward to now were his letters, and they were only delivered once a week, and no matter how closely Dani examined them, she could never have perfect confidence that he loved her, because of all his mentions of a girlfriend back home.

The best thing about liking a boy was that it filled in all your time. You could lie on your bed and listen to music for an entire afternoon, daydreaming about him, feelings travelling deliciously all throughout your body. Without a boy to like, you were liable to spend your energy spreading gossip and causing drama among the other girls, just to have something to think about and do.

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

Sebastien wasn't any normal boy. He was a technophobe. This meant that very few girls could get close to him. In person, he wore huge headphones at all times, so he was very difficult to approach. It was a big deal that he liked —or maybe liked, or at least was writing—Dani. Somehow, she had slipped through the cracks of his consciousness, which she believed to be a moral, self-protective, and upright place. Sebastien's pant legs were the perfect width. His mother was a nurse. He liked music made in generations long ago. She didn't know much more than that, but she didn't need to know much more than that. The last time she had seen him, on the girls' ship, she had experienced a sudden, warm drop in her stomach. She hadn't known of his existence before he entered the dining hall, where their eyes had met, and that was when she felt the warm drop. It was the first time a boy had made her feel that way. She had the attention deficit disorder, but she was able to

think about Sebastien for hours on end. Surely this was good for her brain. Maybe it was even making her smarter. Thinking about Sebastien, she could lose all sense of time and space.

Now Dani knocked on the door of the cabin that Lorraine and the delicate Flora shared. When Flora opened the door, Dani rushed in and fell on Flora's bunk, dramatically throwing the flyers everywhere.

"What's the point of the talent show now? You've heard the news, haven't you?" she asked them.

"Yes," Lorraine said, turning from her desk and regarding Dani with pity. Lorraine had the moral superiority of a girl who had never been in love. "Now you won't know if some boy with a girlfriend likes you."

Dani made significant eye contact with Flora. Surely *Flora* understood. The point wasn't to learn whether Sebastien liked her—*he* probably didn't even know what his feelings were. No, the point was to experience the warm drop or something similar. She was eager to have more of those same feelings, the very feelings that inspired verse and song. The point was not the pedantic collection of information. Only Lorraine would think that.

"Sebastien wouldn't be writing Dani letters if he didn't like her," Flora said. Flora was one of those rare people who had the beautiful quality of the middle pedal of a piano, as if everything that came from her, sounds and gestures, was slightly dampened or softened.

"Where's the worth in being liked by a two-timing bastard?" Lorraine asked.

Podcast: The Writer's Voice
Listen to Sheila Heti read "The St. Alwynn Girls at Sea."

This hurt Flora, whose father was a philanderer.

To put an end to the conversation, Dani stood up and began collecting her flyers off the floor. "I was just being silly. Of course he likes Erica. He went to kindergarten with Erica. Who's going to dislike someone they went to *kindergarten* with?"

A photograph of Audrey hung above her former bunk. Audrey had been Lorraine and Flora's roommate before she was dropped off in London for a movie shoot. She was a popular child actress, and she liked looking at her own face. Flora had kept the photograph up, even after Audrey left the ship. It had become a joke, but also an oracle.

"I think I'd better ask Audrey," Dani said, and she climbed the ladder to Audrey's bunk and bowed down before the picture. "Audrey, famous Audrey, speak to us from afar. What is the situation with Sebastien and Erica? Is it true love?" Even Lorraine couldn't help glancing at the picture. At that moment, a bright white beam of sunlight came in through the porthole and struck Audrey's left eye.

"It's a no! Audrey said *no!* " Dani cried joyfully, jumping down from the bunk. This confirmation of the lack of true love between Sebastien and Erica was even better than if she'd learned that the boys' ship had changed course and would be visiting their ship on the night of the show. It was so rare for Audrey to speak, and to speak as unequivocally as that!

"Oh, you want a second opinion?"
Cartoon by Benjamin Schwartz

"So what if he doesn't see you sing," Flora enthused. "He loves you, so he'll imagine it. And because he won't be seeing you in a few weeks, he'll long for you more." Flora had no idea what she was talking about. "He'll imagine you, and whatever he imagines will be much better than you actually are."

“It’s true,” Dani said. “He’ll imagine the best girl possible and think it’s me!”

“Audrey didn’t say that he loved Dani. She said it wasn’t true love with Erica.” Lorraine felt it was important to be precise. Even if she didn’t believe in the Oracle, the picture of Audrey was in her cabin, which put it under her jurisdiction.

“I wish I liked someone as much as you like Sebastien,” Flora said dreamily as Dani began to leave. She didn’t even care whether Lorraine heard. Flora was used to Lorraine’s stringent disapproval and no longer tried to hide from it.

That night, there was a mood of dismay in the dining hall. The St. Alwynn girls had been at sea for three months now. They looked gloomily into their pea soup, gloomily at their plates of meat and potatoes and peas. The chandeliers shook gently with the motion of the waves, sending shadows dancing in a nauseating rhythm all throughout the room. Lorraine felt smug. She was strong and bespectacled and had a serious expression that the other girls interpreted as an inability to adopt the carefree attitude, which was true: she *wasn’t* carefree. She was deliberate, introspective, and highly suspicious. She was glad the boys’ ship wouldn’t be visiting. She had been dreading watching the girls become so crazy in the weeks leading up to the visit, as had happened the time before. She couldn’t understand how anyone could value the attention of a boy so highly—a boy who was nothing special, which was obvious to everyone but the girl with the crush. It was bizarre that a girl could esteem one boy so highly while not caring a thing about the rest, yet be unable to see that the boy she liked was *exactly like* all the rest—just as undeserving of worry or care. It was a cognitive distortion, of which humans had so many. They had learned about this in social-studies class, but somehow only she was immune. *It’s what keeps the species going*, Lorraine understood. She felt privileged not to be at the whim of species blindness, that she could *choose* what to think.

“Girls!” their headmistress, Madame Ghislaine, called. She was standing at the teachers’ table. A hush fell over the dining hall as the girls looked up.

“There has been a rumor that the boys’ ship will not be attending the talent show,” she said, “and I must confirm this rumor as true.” Madame Ghislaine paused. “Since they won’t be coming, there’s no point in showcasing our talents.” She looked around, searching the girls’ hollow eyes for any hint of protest. Sensing only a general deflation, she concluded, “We’ll use our energies to knit socks for the soldiers instead. A talent show during wartime is a frivolity, anyway.”

It was Madame Ghislaine who had come up with the idea of bringing the girls onto a ship where they would be safe from the bombings, and, once she’d had the idea, she had called the principal of a nearby boys’ school and proposed he do the same. It was never suggested that they would charter the same ship; at that age, boys and girls had to be kept separate. Some parents preferred to keep their children at home rather than having them board a ship and be sent to sea until the war’s end. That was why a school of two hundred and sixty girls had been reduced to a school of forty-three. You’d think more parents would have wanted to take advantage of Madame Ghislaine’s solution, but many of them had chalets or homes in other countries, and simply took their children there. Only the families that did not have second homes or relations in distant lands sent their daughters onto the ship. Same with the boys’ ship, which was carrying twenty-two boys. Sebastien, of course, Greg, Terry, Jason, Raif . . . Madame Ghislaine had received a star pin from the government for coming up with the idea and implementing it. Naturally, there had been newspaper articles written about privilege and waste, about how these schools were polluting the sea, and how it was unfair. Madame Ghislaine wasn’t bothered by the articles. She cared about the girls.

The principals agreed that, for the sake of sanity, their ships should meet every month so the boys and girls could socialize, as they would have done on land. A large drawbridge sort of contraption was loaded onto the girls’ ship, and it could be unfolded in such a way that the other end landed on the boys’ ship, so the boys could walk across it. That, or they could dock in the same port. But there was a lot of paperwork involved in docking, so staying in the middle of the ocean and using the gangplank seemed best. The boys liked hearing the fighter planes thrilling through the skies, and would sneak out in the night and stand on the deck and watch the colorful lights of the planes flying overhead, but the majority of the girls had little interest in

leaving their warm beds and standing in the cold air and staring up into the sky, unless it was to search for shooting stars. It was hard to tell the difference, though, between shooting stars and planes that had been shot down and were now falling heavily into the ruby-dark sea.

Dani had terrible manners, but she was wily and could get people to do her bidding. In fact, it was probably *because* she lacked any sense of social correctness that she was able to pull off her plans. She did not feel any hesitation in manipulating the other girls. There was some higher good she always had in mind—the higher good of *things happening*. She was the one who'd told the girls that Audrey was an Oracle and had first demonstrated her use.

That evening, Flora and Dani were in the activities room, sitting on spindly chairs, explaining to Gala, Pip, and a handful of others what had happened earlier in the day. "The left eye *flashed*," Dani told them, "*immediately* after I asked if it was true love between Sebastien and Erica." Nobody needed to ask who Erica was; everyone knew she was Sebastien's girlfriend, who either was or was not standing in Dani's way.

"That doesn't mean that Audrey is an oracle," a small girl ventured.

Flora grew nervous. It was important that the girls continued to believe in the Oracle. As she wanted to one day know everything, it was necessary that she be privy to all the intimate questions that came fluttering heavily from each of the girls' hearts.

"I think it makes sense," Gala said, gently. "Signs have always appeared in the form of natural things like lightning, or birds landing somewhere. Just because it was ordinary sunlight doesn't mean we should take it any less seriously as a sign." Gala was sulkily pretty, and she loved the Greek myths. She loved them so much that it was almost revolting to the others, a sign of some deeper perversion.

"It sounds like wishful thinking to me," said Lorraine, annoyed. She thought Dani was an attention whore. "Of course Dani doesn't have a chance with Sebastien. He has a girlfriend! Is everyone here an idiot?"

“A lot of people cheat,” said Flora, who knew it from her own family. The fact that her father had cheated on her mother so flagrantly and frequently made Flora feel as if she were already sexually active, or at least had more experience than the other girls, although she had none. “Some people like having double lives. It turns them on. They don’t feel quite right unless they have a secret.”

Lorraine rolled her eyes. She could see right through Flora—the way she tried to turn her father’s affairs into some sort of tragic status for herself. “Shut up, Flora,” she said. “We’re talking about a thirteen-year-old boy, not your *father*.”

Flora, hurt, shut up.

It was time for evening prayers. The girls were in their bunks, in their linen nightgowns, and as they lay, Madame Ghislaine’s calming voice came from the ship’s loudspeakers. She began:

Now I lay me down to sleep
I pray the Lord my Soul to keep
If I die before I wake
I pray the Lord my Soul to take.

And, since she was aspiring to be a great war poet, she tried out this one:

War is cruel, war is harsh
Men die in fields
Men die in marsh,
Holy virgins out at sea
Pray to God that it might be
The end! The end!
The madness of men!
Why are we stuck here on this ship?
The madness of men!
It is no blip
Down through the ages, what do they care?
While the women stand and stare,
Shaking heads, wondering why

For medals and honors, they will fly
O’er the oceans, o’er the land
Bombing cities, bombing sand,
Merciful God, put right their heads
And warm us in our metal beds.

On Monday morning, the girls woke to the disembodied voice of Madame Ghislaine, welcoming them to the day. They had half an hour until breakfast. The girls washed their private parts in the sinks. They pulled on their bloomers and bras—those who wore them—buttoned their starched shirts, tied their ties and knotted them tightly, pulled up their blue socks and laced their oxfords, slipped into their navy tunics, and fastened their fabric belts. Some pulled on cardigans, while others wore red blazers. They brushed their hair, looking in the inadequate mirrors, then left their cabins for the dining hall. Breakfast that day was oatmeal with dried toppings, orange juice, and wilting bananas. It was the last of the bananas. They didn’t keep fresh at sea.

That morning, Flora had awoken from terrible dreams about her naked mother dying, writhing beneath a street light. Sitting at breakfast, soaked in the feeling of the dream, she felt a terrible, rising humiliation. It had been wrong to speak about her father as she had done the day before. One’s family troubles should be kept private, even if one’s classmates already knew everything. She didn’t have to keep reminding them! Obviously she kept bringing up her father because she thought it would give her a certain cachet—the cachet of maturity. But the other girls didn’t respect her for it. They didn’t think she knew more than they did or that she was sophisticated. They thought of her as slightly soiled, as if she came from a messy home. Yet somehow she believed that if she could only present the story of her father’s infidelities in the right way, she would win the approval she was looking for. But it had not once worked out! Their reactions were nowhere in the neighborhood of awe. Now she vowed, over oatmeal, to never bring him up again. Knowing she wouldn’t be able to keep this promise without some sort of cosmic help, she stood up from her plate and went over to where Dani was sitting. Although you were not supposed to get up during breakfast, there was something about Flora that was a little bit invisible, and she managed to get to Dani unnoticed.

“I need to speak to Audrey.”

“Now?”

“Yes, before class.”

“I’ll come with you,” said Dani, who had early on made the rule that, when speaking to the Oracle, one always had to have a witness.

Five minutes later, they were in Flora’s cabin.

“What do you want to ask her? Or do you want *me* to ask?” Dani secretly felt that it would work better if she, Dani, asked, but she was trying not to be too pushy. “Maybe I’d better ask,” she offered.

“All right.”

Dani began setting herself up on Audrey’s bunk. “Well?”

Flora hadn’t quite formulated her question. “I guess . . . ask her . . . if at the end of my life I will be vindicated, if this will all make sense—the way my father lived—and whether it will prove to have been a good thing . . . in a way I can’t yet understand.”

Dani bowed down before the picture, which with its sweet smile said, *Audition me!*

“Audrey, famous Audrey, speak to us from afar: Will any good come of Flora’s father being a philanderer—good for Flora, that is? Is all this leading her somewhere great?”

Cartoon by Drew Panckeri

The girls looked closely at the picture, which rippled a little bit on the left side, possibly from Dani's breath.

"I think the left side rippled," Dani said. "That's a no."

"Right. O.K. Thanks anyway."

Dani climbed down from the bunk, and they left the room together. Dani didn't know what to say. She liked to orchestrate good things, but when the good things she was orchestrating went bad, she wasn't sure what to do. She suddenly felt that none of this was her responsibility, that Flora had some bad luck attached to her. She didn't want to be near her anymore.

"Bye," Dani said and turned down a corridor toward her classroom.

Flora pushed herself into the nearest washroom, locked the door, and began to cry. The Oracle had confirmed what she had suspected all along: some bad things were simply bad and couldn't be confectioned into something sweet just because you wanted them to be. Her father was a bastard, he caused her mother to suffer, he brought shame on all of them and just didn't care. She would have to find a man like that when she was older and suffer

the same pain as her mother, because that was what the women in her family were made for: humiliation and suffering. She would find a gorgeous roué and allow him every license, and have a daughter and name her Flora, and send her to a school on the sea. And now she felt that she was not herself but her daughter, and in this way she was able to comfort herself, saying, “Silly girl, there is more to life than what the man you married—or your father—gets up to. There is a whole world outside the shame a man brings upon a woman, a world far from that. Ignore the man, forget about him, he’s smaller than a bug. You are bigger than he is. You are beautiful and bright and shining and tall.” Even though she was not tall, she did stop crying. Then she left the bathroom and went to class.

After dinner that evening, the letters were handed around. Madame Ghislaine pulled them from the canvas mailbag one by one, calling out names. The chosen girl would then rush from her seat and collect her letter, secreting it inside her pocket for later, or else she would hurry to her seat, where she would rip it open, or else she would wander slowly back to her seat, reading it as she walked. Dani was in this last camp. Receiving her envelope, she saw at once that it was from Sebastien, and, removing the letter, she scanned the page while weaving blindly between tables and chairs, knocking into one girl who, hurrying to collect her own letter, cried out, “Hey! Watch it, Dani!” Dani was bathed in glorious feelings, so she didn’t snap back. She merely glanced up and smiled vaguely.

Then she was back at her seat with her head bowed low as the other girls watched her closely, trying to guess from her expression what Sebastien had written. Dani gazed up at them. “Do you want to hear?”

They nodded intently.

“Dear Dani,” she read, in her most musical voice. “It’s another boring day on the ship. Last night we had turkey with gravy, and cake for dessert since it was Marcel’s birthday. The cake wasn’t even all that good. Marcel received a box of chocolates from his parents, and he gave some to me. I have been practicing Prince songs. Hopefully I’m getting better. Erica sent me some gum, thirty dollars, and a few paperback books that I wanted—plus a Kurt Vonnegut. Have you ever read him? I can send them when I’m done. I miss

being able to go into a corner store to buy something. I miss pizza. I miss the basketball court. But most of all, I miss Erica. Yours, Sebastien."

The girls looked blankly at one another. It was a very mysterious letter. On the one hand, he said he missed Erica. On the other, there was that "yours," and just the fact that he had written her at all. One of the girls suggested that his mention of Erica could be seen as proof of his strong feelings for Dani; he was using Erica as a mask to hide them, so as not to seem too vulnerable, too available, too needy. They generally agreed that the letter seemed to confirm the Oracle's revelation that Sebastien didn't love Erica. But, Lorraine suggested, "it's also possible to interpret the letter the other way: that he loves Erica and doesn't give a shit about Dani."

"Then why is he writing me?!" Dani shouted, slamming the letter on the table, her heart beating faster.

"Boredom, distraction, he likes to be liked, it's good for his ego to get letters from you—there's a million reasons."

Flora nodded to herself: it was even possible for Sebastien to have no feelings about Dani and *also* no feelings about Erica, but since none of the other girls had suggested this, she decided to keep quiet. Anyway, none of them would have believed it. A boy had to love *someone*, so it was either Erica or Dani. "What if there's a second girls' ship," Flora said, "and he's writing a third girl, not just Dani and Erica?"

The girls rolled their eyes. Here again was Flora with her messed-up vision of the world because of her messed-up home.

"There's not a fucking third girl he's writing!" Dani shrieked. "Why did I even read you the letter! There's a special energy between Sebastien and I, an intimacy, I can feel it!"

"Where?" Lorraine asked.

"In the feeling of it! In the handwriting! He misses pizza, he misses Erica, he misses spending money in stores. The thing he doesn't say but wants to say but is implied is that he's also missing me!"

This sounded plausible to Pip, who was willing to believe anything, as long as it was good. She was like a little yellow bird whose very being lifted all of their spirits—just the fact that someone like Pip could exist. “I think Dani’s right,” she said in her delicate voice, as if pitched with silver. “He also mentioned chocolates and cake. He’s trying to pass these good things on to Dani. Or he’s saying that she’s good, like they are.”

Lorraine cried, “You nitwit!” She was the only one who wasn’t charmed by Pip’s pure heart. “Has a boy ever sent you a letter, dummy?”

“No.”

“Then shut up! Why are you all so interested in Dani’s life? Have you nothing better to do? Dani could be reading books, she could be making out with Emma”—the reputed lesbian—“she could be knitting socks for the war effort. Instead, you’re encouraging her in this ridiculous infatuation, this colossal waste of time and energy!”

Pip looked at Lorraine with her strange, rare openness. “You really think he doesn’t like her?”

“For those of you who took a chance and waited for the express, let’s join together in a silent ‘YEAH!’ as we pass a third local on our right.”
Cartoon by Carolita Johnson

“The simplest explanation is that he loves Erica, and for whatever stupid boy reasons he’s decided to write Dani.”

Dani began breathing more shallowly, her face growing pale. The other girls crowded around her, saying that Lorraine didn't know what she was talking about; did Lorraine have a boyfriend? Was Lorraine getting letters from the boys' ship? Dani should trust the Oracle.

"Maybe we could clarify what the letter means," Flora suggested.

"No!" Lorraine cried. "You can only ask it your question once! Dani would only be asking what she asked already: whether Sebastien likes her."

"The last time she asked if Sebastien loved Erica," Flora corrected.

Dani agreed. "There's a difference. Let's go."

So Dani, Flora, and Pip left the dining hall, while Lorraine went disgustedly off to the lounge.

Back in Flora's cabin, Pip pressed her body against the wall that was farthest from Audrey's bunk. She had never seen the Oracle at work and felt a tiny bit scared.

Flora offered, "I have a candle, Dani. Maybe it would help if you held it?" Flora, who was Jewish, had a thing for lighting candles.

Dani gratefully agreed. She perched herself on Audrey's bunk, took the lit candle from Flora, and, squeezing her eyes shut, slowed down her breathing. "Audrey, famous Audrey, speak to us from afar," she intoned, as a little bubble of wax rolled down the candle and onto her palm. "Ow! Does Sebastien like-like me?"

As the three girls watched, the flame suddenly flickered, catching Audrey's right eye.

"It's a yes!" Dani cried. Pip squealed and clapped her hands, and Flora squeezed Pip's arm, laughing with relief. It wasn't that they cared so much about Sebastien; they just liked love. If Dani could get love, any of them could. It was a prize for every one of them! It was a fact of life that you couldn't learn anything from a boy, not directly. You had to ask an Oracle.

Oracles understood boys and could tell you what they were thinking. Boys had no idea, or else they were too selfish to say.

While all of this was happening, Lorraine was sitting in the lounge, watching the nightly news. Things were getting worse. More people had died, and hate was spreading in all sorts of ways. When people are being bombed from the sky, the hardest thing in the world is to not begin hating someone. Yet none of the people who had new hates felt remotely ashamed. Hating was good, for it meant you cared. It meant you were involved, whether you wanted to be or not. Being involved whether you wanted to be or not meant you had no choice, which meant you were a proper citizen. Lorraine had also been stoking hate in her heart, mainly for Dani, who had never once asked Lorraine, “What was on the nightly news?” Dani knew nothing about the world and was *determined* not to know. She was undermining the seriousness of the war with her Sebastien obsession. After the broadcast ended, Lorraine walked the halls to spread word of the latest political developments, although only the best girls cared.

Over the loudspeaker came that evening’s announcements. Madame Ghislaine predicted the weather and the wind for the next day, then closed with a new prayer that she had been working on:

> The Lord is good to boys and girls,
> He made the waves, its dips and curls,
> Let our ship or boat so sail
> Away from sharks or any peril!
> Storms and lightning, dragons, beasts,
> Let us not become the feasts
> Of birds and fishes, seagulls, sharks!
> We long for land and pools and parks,
> We thank you, Lord, for this bright day
> And pray you keep the bombs away.

Dani lay in bed, gazing up at the ceiling and thinking about Sebastien. Yesterday morning, the Oracle had said it was not true love with Erica, and that evening it had proclaimed that Sebastien like-liked her. That didn’t mean he loved her, though. And she knew that the Oracle could only tell two-thirds of the truth: the truth of the present and the truth of the past. It

could not tell the future, and tomorrow Sebastien might change his mind. She made a tent with her knees and the blanket, and, cocooning under it, turned on her flashlight. Adjusting her stationery, she clicked her pen. The best thing was to write from the spirit of the moment. If she started second-guessing herself, she would never finish the letter, and the next day the mail boat would be leaving for the boys' ship. She had to strike the right tone. But what *was* the right tone? She had to both reveal herself and talk about him—show her interest. She was always afraid of talking too much about herself and not responding enough to what he'd said, and so she began:

Dear Sebastien,

I'm so happy to hear that you were one of the lucky ones to get some chocolates from Marcel. We haven't had any chocolates arrive at our ship. And yes, I would love to read those books after you're done with them. I don't know Kurt Vonnegut. What do you think you're going to do with the thirty dollars? Is there a tuck shop on your ship? There isn't one on ours. I have been asking myself if I miss home, or my mother and father, but I don't think I do, which is very strange. Besides Erica, is there anyone else you miss? Do you think you miss her because you've known her so long, or because she's really so great? What is missing, anyway? Is it wanting to be near someone, or just remembering them in a way that makes them seem better than they actually are? I have no opinion, I'm just wondering.

Yours,

Dani

She read the letter over. It wasn't bad. It wasn't perfect, but she didn't think she was capable of doing much better. She blushed a little at the last part, hoping he wouldn't read into it any hostility toward Erica. Probably the best thing would be to seal it up so she wouldn't give herself a chance of rereading it in the morning and rejecting it. There was nothing wrong with the letter.

She turned off her flashlight. Now, in the total darkness, she began to feel herself to be a truly disgusting girl. Why was she writing a boy who had a

girlfriend? Surely Erica liked him just as much as she did—if not more. She didn't want Erica to find the letters she'd sent. Erica would say, *Who the hell is Dani*? And if Dani ever met Erica, she would have no way of justifying herself. It was obvious that she was offering herself up to him. How awful! All this, just to have some nice feelings inside her—although the nice feelings also came with the bad. In fact, exchanging letters with Sebastien probably came with *more* bad feelings than good ones. And were the good ones really so good that the bad ones were worth it? No question it was a lousy bargain. Yet here she was, another letter waiting to go, and she knew there was no reality in which she would not send it. But there was nothing else to do on the boat! There was literally nothing else to look forward to but a letter from Sebastien! Yet if she was truly the horrible person she felt herself to be, did that not also mean that *Sebastien* was horrible? Because it was *he* who had sent the first letter, and *he* who had the girlfriend. So she couldn't very well judge herself—could she?—without also judging him. But this didn't make her feel any better, because Sebastien was splendid! He was wonderful and handsome, and it was right that such an amazing boy should be on the lookout for the very best girl.

No, she didn't judge Sebastien for writing to her. She only judged herself. Her letters made her seem easy, like she was just *dying* to give him a hand job. It wasn't true, but it was surely what he thought. She tried to reconstruct the letter: Had she written anything he might construe as the desire to give him a hand job? She had talked about chocolates, she had talked about not missing her parents, she had talked about thirty dollars. Now she saw that there were ways of putting it together that just *screamed*, "I want to give you a hand job!" The more she recalled her letter, the more it seemed like the salivating, demented, desperate outburst of a complete loser—that she was basically parading herself before him, and he would read it and be horrified by the awful, shameless girl who he'd thought was a nice girl, nice enough to send a letter to. She pulled the letter out from under her pillow and tore it into as many pieces as she could. Thank God she had destroyed it! The next day, she would try again and would hopefully come across as less of a monster in that one. She couldn't believe how close she had come to shaming herself, but she felt ashamed anyway, because he had almost seen her insides.

The next morning, Dani woke half an hour before the announcements. The bright sun was streaming into the cabin. It was a perfectly nice day. She climbed down to her desk and arranged her stationery, and, as the ship made its way steadily through the sea, she swiftly and confidently wrote a much better letter than she had the night before.

> Dear Sebastien,
>
> I was so happy to hear that Marcel shared his chocolates with you! Is he a generally nice person, or was he just nice this once? No one on our ship has ever been sent chocolates, so it's impossible for me to really know the nice girls from the not-nice ones. I would love to read the Kurt Vonnegut book when you are done with it. I wonder what you're going to spend the thirty dollars on. Is there a tuck shop on your ship? There isn't one on ours. It's nice to hear that you miss Erica. She must be wonderful. Do you remember what made you fall in love with her? Why did you ask me to dance back in October? I remember how we talked about how dumb the decorations were, and I thought you really could see the world so clearly, especially when you—

She tore up the letter. "Dear Sebastien," Dani began again.

> I have tried to write you now two times and threw away both letters. It is so hard to know how to address you when I have no idea what your feelings are, or what Erica means to you. I know you said you missed her, but then why are you writing me letters?

This was off to a bad start.

> You don't have to answer that. I am just telling you what is inside my head. I was glad to hear that Marcel shared his chocolates with you, and I would love to read the books that Erica sent you once you are done with them.

She bit her pen.

> Yours,
>
> Dani

It was probably no better or worse than the other letters. She could rewrite it forever and it would likely never be satisfying, because she didn't know who Sebastien was. Was he a potential boyfriend, or just a friend, or neither? How could you write a proper letter if you didn't know your relationship to the person you were addressing, or really who they were at all? In some way, you had to just throw caution to the wind—or your letter onto a mail boat—and move on. She pulled out an envelope, folded the letter inside, wrote his name in block letters on the front, and, underneath, *THE BOYS' SHIP*. Then she hurried to breakfast and thrust the letter into the hands of Madame Ghislaine, who was just leaving the dining hall.

Over the next few weeks, Dani grew increasingly weary. Every time the letter returned to her mind, she felt she would nearly faint from shame. The strength it was taking to await Sebastien's reply was sapping all her vital energies. The situation was clearly too much for her. He was too cute and too cool. Why had she been *honest*? Had she secretly been wanting to bring their correspondence to an end?

Dani felt especially exhausted in geography class. Even at the best of times, it was hard for her to see the value of geography. Some part of her rebelled against its irrelevance to her own life. Little blocks of color, like a jumble of puzzle pieces: made-up boundaries and made-up names. It would take the force of sheer memorization—rote, heartless memorization—for her to retain a single thing.

"The chef says it's not time yet for your dinner."
Cartoon by Frank Cotham

Lorraine, by contrast, had wonderful memorization methods, which she was always trying to get the other girls to use. You had to make up a song, she would tell them, or a limerick, or a lyric, or pretend you were in a room with a bunch of strange objects: visualize picking them up and putting them down —Ethiopia, Slovakia—as you walked the room's perimeter. The whole world was interesting, was the point of education—not only what applied to your heart. But her classmates had no interest in civic life—in expanding themselves inwardly in order to be of help to the world. They believed education to be a drag. It seemed old-fashioned and from the past. Its uses appeared naïve to the girls, who felt condescending toward the ancient Greeks, who'd lived in a far less competitive world than the world that they were living in.

As Dani gazed out the classroom's portholes, hoping to see a dolphin or whale, Lorraine hoarded every detail on every map: she examined the ridges of mountains, and traced the curves of rivers and tributaries leading into the sea. She tracked the ocean currents and imagined vast, gusting breezes from north to south, confidently chilling the land. For her, a map wasn't a meaningless muddle: it was wars and territories built from men's passions. She was fascinated at how the whole world hung together so tenuously, at how tentative truces allowed life to proceed. But just look at the borders, which were always changing: no alliances could be taken for granted. She longed to be one of those people who travelled the globe, brokering deals—a diplomat. She felt she might have the touch. The touch meant sensing what countries thought they needed, and the most they were willing to give up, and to always be carefully treading that line. In a way, diplomats were like seducers, but they used their charms on entire nations, making them put out at the very edges of their reason.

After many weeks, a letter finally arrived from Sebastien. Although previously Dani had been brave enough to open his letters in public, now she nervously waited until bedtime, pulling the woollen blanket over her head, switching on her flashlight, and reading in utter privacy:

> Dear Dani,
>
> It is fair of you to ask the question you asked me in your last letter. I have been a little confused myself. Erica has been my girlfriend since

kindergarten, and we have plans to be married when we graduate from high school. Her family is happy about it and so is mine. Her parents are almost like a second set of parents to me. Erica and I are like brother and sister. It is hard to imagine loving anyone else in this way. But I am fourteen, almost. I wonder whether I was right to decide when I was six. Lately, I have been unsure. When you and I danced, I felt something that I have never felt before. I didn't want to tell you this, because I didn't know what you thought of boys, so I didn't want to scare you. But I wanted to put my whole body inside you, or for you to put your whole body inside me. I have never felt that with Erica. I wouldn't do anything like that without your permission, it was just a feeling, and one I haven't been able to forget. What do you think? Does this desire make me a terrible person? You don't have to write me back if you don't want to. Sorry, I haven't finished reading even one of the books. Erica is a much faster reader than I am. Marcel is generally nice; it wasn't just the chocolates.

Yours,

Sebastien

Dani was stunned. Would she and Sebastien have written inanities forever if she hadn't been rushed into sending him such an honest letter? The Oracle had been right! He *did* like-like her, and it wasn't true love with Erica, but some other, more brotherly kind of love. The intimacy of his letter touched her deeply, creating a delicate bubble that bound her and Sebastien across time and space. Nobody had ever written to her so beautifully before. Had she really caused those feelings in a boy? Might he become her boyfriend? Was she *ready* for a boyfriend? It would be hard for Sebastien to let Erica down, but surely it was right. Dani felt humbled, as if singled out by the heavens. Love wasn't supposed to proceed so simply, nor fate respond so readily to your wishes. She read the letter again and again, and whenever she came to the part about him wanting to be inside her, or for her to be inside him, she felt the wonderful warm drop in her stomach. She knew just what he meant, but she would never have thought to express it that way. Strangely, she found she didn't have a desire to tell anyone about the letter. Maybe it was too precious, or too beautiful, to risk even one lazy interpretation, or one cynical word, or anything that might degrade it. It might be the weirdest

thing she would ever do, but she would never speak to anyone of what Sebastien had written.

It had been Flora's misfortune to be sitting beside Yvonne when the mail boat next came, and Lorraine's good fortune to be sitting beside Flora. Yvonne sparkled quietly in her seat, reading her letter under her breath. That night in bed, Lorraine could think of nothing else. It wouldn't be pleasant, but it was clear what the right thing to do was.

The next day was lovely. The waves were shimmering in the sunlight, and it was relatively warm. Lorraine was waiting, leaning on the railing of a lower deck, when Dani passed by.

Lorraine stopped her. "You know that Sebastien is exchanging letters with Yvonne?"

"What?"

Lorraine repeated what she had said, but Dani's soul was already far away. Yvonne? Yvonne, *the prefect*? But *why*? Was it one of her duties to be writing the boys' ship? Then, suddenly, it was agonizingly clear that there was no girl more ravishing than Yvonne, and the force of Sebastien's desire overtook her. Dani pulled his letter from her pocket and shoved it violently into Lorraine's pocket, then rushed away.

Now Dani was leaning over the railing, staring out at the vast sea—the sea that would remain the sea forever, no matter what any boy did. Inside her was the growing awareness that Sebastien had only been writing *her*, *Dani*, out of a sense of duty, all the while hotly suffering a much more grownup correspondence with the incredible Yvonne. It had only taken a moment for the older girl to transform herself from someone Dani had never once thought about into the most desirable girl in the world, and Dani now imagined the two of them planning adult things, like taking a shower together. Perhaps they had already done this. How had she been so stupid as to think that because Sebastien wore headphones he was incapable of wooing other girls? Or that he didn't want to?

Now she understood the truth: a boy was nothing but the boy you made up in your head. You made up the boy you wanted—the one who would be the most lovable to you—not someone with disturbing flaws or any moral weakness. No, the slimmest of available clues would always be assembled to make an ideal boy with coolness and strength, who held you in as much esteem as you wanted to be held in. That was what the mind *did*. She hadn't known it before.

Now Lorraine was back, anxiously trying to return Sebastien's letter, saying, "Please, Dani," but Dani no longer cared. She walked off, her mind occupied with chipping away at the brick wall that was her feelings for Sebastien. He had *lied* by writing to her as though she were the desired alternative to Erica when in fact *Yvonne* had been the desired alternative. Not only had he been withholding himself the entire time, but he had actively used the sheen of seeming to reveal himself to utterly conceal himself! Everything about Sebastien had been a deceit, a masquerade.

But how could she call herself betrayed when she had known all along that he had a girlfriend? Yet there *had* been a deliberate deception: he hadn't hidden *Erica*, which meant that he knew that his love for Erica wouldn't be upsetting to Dani. He only wrote to her about Erica because they both knew she didn't matter. But his hiding of Yvonne proved that Yvonne was someone who *must* be hidden. Perhaps because she was new? But Dani had thought that *she* was new. *What a cheat!* Yet she had already known he was a cheat, for there he was, in a relationship with Erica yet sending letters to Dani. So was he not a cheat when he was writing to Dani, but now he *was* a cheat because he was writing to Yvonne? Did she not care about a person's actual character? Did she only care about coming out on top? Why was it O.K. for Erica to be lied to, but it was not O.K. when he was lying to Dani? That was it, then. That was proof. Her morality was simply: *what is good for me*.

The rain was a gentle trickle, soft as a kiss. The sky was perfectly gray, illuminated from within. Flora looked out over the guardrails but could not see the coast. The waves sounded against the boat, slow and sloshing. The next day, they would be heading north toward the Labrador Sea. She imagined their ship being welcomed by a caravan of dogs, rapidly paddling, or paddling leisurely, like her own dog in the distant waters of her childhood.

Mother and Father were far away. Flora no longer believed she would ever return home. The St. Alwynn's School for Girls would continue to sail until it reached Russia. Or China. Or Sri Lanka, where she would buy a marvellous necklace. She imagined a string of red wooden beads, ending in one giant bead in the shape of a skull, made from ancient ivory. If she found such a necklace, she would wear it for the rest of her life. It would be a "conversation piece," just as Eleanor Lindsay had—Eleanor Lindsay, her mother's friend, whose necklaces were impossible not to comment on: chunky metal, lying oddly upon her chest. She had once heard another friend of her mother's say of Eleanor Lindsay, "She doesn't wear those necklaces, those necklaces wear her!" This was something Flora thought about often—the necklace wearing the woman, like the necklace was a symbiotic creature, a barnacle upon a whale, a relatively insignificant thing that attached itself to something greater. You would think that the whale would be wearing the barnacle, but what if you considered it the other way around: that the barnacle was wearing the whale? So with Eleanor Lindsay and her statement necklaces—and one day she, too, she hoped. That would transform her life into simply a way for a statement necklace to get around. This felt wonderful, liberating, and like a far better fate than that of many women in history, who had to suffer so wildly from men.

Now the breeze was picking up, cooler against her cheeks. It was time to stop daydreaming. It was time to go back to washing the deck. Flora lifted the mop and began moving it back and forth, sloshing warm, soapy water all over the pebbly white surface. Little raindrops grazed her forehead, her ears, the tip of her nose, and it felt like an insult, like spitting, and this made her feel like crying. She hadn't cried the entire week. But she hadn't been alone until now. With the other girls, you could forget the truth of your situation. It masked the loneliness to be amidst the gossip, the Oracle, mealtimes, classes. You almost forgot what you really wanted, which was just to go home; that as much as you hated your mother and father, you actually loved them more than anyone on earth. How could it be *true*? Well, it just was. It wasn't logical. Flora was the eldest. Her brother and sister were snug at home. Every night, her mother would be sitting them down to dinner, encouraging them in their usual conversations, her sister insisting upon eating while standing, her brother picking at his meat. And here she was, so far away, and yet somehow family life was continuing, just as if Flora had never been born.

How good her classmates all were at pretending! How effortless, how convincing, so she might not have even realized it if she had not been alone and mopping. How dishonest people were!—except for the crazies. But it was what *made* you crazy, the decision to rip off the mask. It made everyone else uncomfortable. In a way, it was like calling everyone a liar if you went ahead and spoke the truth. Flora had never wanted to stand out in that way. It would be easier to wear a statement necklace than to actually speak the truth. Yet, she now saw, a statement necklace was a way of speaking the truth. It said, *I know this world we are all agreeing upon is not the truth, but I'm not going to be the one to say it—yet*. That was why she had felt a sympathy with Eleanor Lindsay. Eleanor Lindsay was the same sort of person she was. Eleanor Lindsay saw behind the curtain, too, but she didn't speak up about it, probably because she didn't have any idea of what the world should do instead of continuing its masquerade. It was wrong to rip off even one person's mask if you didn't know what should happen next. Yet there was Eleanor Lindsay, walking around in her statement necklaces, signalling, *I'm willing to be part of the next world with you, if you're willing to start it*. Probably the one who started it would need a lot of charisma, a lot of energy, a lot of strength. Flora swirled the mop, then tiredly rested it in the pail. She sat down on the lowest rung of a metal ladder that led to a still higher deck, a deck so high she hadn't once wondered where it went.

A seagull overhead cawed, and Flora glanced up. It was sailing through the air, gliding through the rain that was falling like wet kisses, salty and warm, which Flora imagined kisses to be. The raindrops were like the kisses of a thousand women on the lips of her father. When she understood the kisses as rain, for just one moment, she understood her father. Then the loneliness of all men filled her. Then she even understood Sebastien. ♦

Sheila Heti won the 2022 Governor General's Literary Award, from the Canada Council for the Arts, for her novel "Pure Colour." Her other books include "Alphabetical Diaries."

The Critics

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A Critic at Large

What if the Attention Crisis Is All a Distraction?

From the pianoforte to the smartphone, each wave of tech has sparked fears of brain rot. But the problem isn’t our ability to focus—it’s what we’re focussing on.

By Daniel Immerwahr

January 20, 2025

What’s awkward about the debate over attention is that “attention spans” aren’t something that we can measure, independent of context, across time.Illustration by David Plunkert

There are awards for the year’s best films but not for its best TikTok videos. That’s too bad, since 2024 yielded several tiny masterpieces. From

@yojairyjaimee, a flawless, minute-long re-creation of some bizarre 2009 stage patter by Kanye West (who now goes by Ye). From @accountwashackedwith50m, twelve seconds of chocolate-covered strawberries, filmed from the vantage of a saxophonist in an R. & B. band. From @notkenna, seven seconds of a dog made to look, with preposterously low-budget effects, as if it were flying on a broomstick. Such Internet gems are what the poet Patricia Lockwood has called "the sapphires of the instant"; each catches the light in a strange, hypnotic way.

Just don't stare too long. If every video is a starburst of expression, an extended TikTok session is fireworks in your face for hours. That can't be healthy, can it? In 2010, the technology writer Nicholas Carr presciently raised this concern in "The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains," a Pulitzer Prize finalist. "What the Net seems to be doing," Carr wrote, "is chipping away my capacity for concentration and contemplation." He recounted his increased difficulty reading longer works. He wrote of a highly accomplished philosophy student—indeed, a Rhodes Scholar—who didn't read books at all but gleaned what he could from Google. That student, Carr ominously asserted, "seems more the rule than the exception."

Carr set off an avalanche. Much read works about our ruined attention include Nir Eyal's "Indistractable," Johann Hari's "Stolen Focus," Cal Newport's "Deep Work," and Jenny Odell's "How to Do Nothing." Carr himself has a new book, "Superbloom," about not only distraction but all the psychological harms of the Internet. We've suffered a "fragmentation of consciousness," Carr writes, our world having been "rendered incomprehensible by information."

The Best Books of 2024

Discover the year's essential reads in fiction and nonfiction.

Read one of these books and you're unnerved. But read two more and the skeptical imp within you awakens. Haven't critics freaked out about the brain-scrambling power of everything from pianofortes to brightly colored posters? Isn't there, in fact, a long section in Plato's Phaedrus in which Socrates argues that writing will wreck people's memories?

I'm particularly fond of a hand-wringing essay by Nathaniel Hawthorne, from 1843. Hawthorne warns of the arrival of a technology so powerful that those born after it will lose the capacity for mature conversation. They will seek separate corners rather than common spaces, he prophesies. Their discussions will devolve into acrid debates, and "all mortal intercourse" will be "chilled with a fatal frost." Hawthorne's worry? The replacement of the open fireplace by the iron stove.

It's true that we've raised alarms over things that in retrospect seem mild, the Carr-hort responds, but how much solace should we take in that? Today's digital forms are obviously more addictive than their predecessors. You can even read previous grumbling as a measure of how bad things have become. Perhaps critics were correct to see danger in, say, television. If it now appears benign, that just shows how much worse current media is.

It's been fifteen years since Carr's "The Shallows." Now we have what is perhaps the most sophisticated contribution to the genre, "The Sirens' Call," by Chris Hayes, an MSNBC anchor. Hayes acknowledges the long history of such panics. Some seem laughable in hindsight, he concedes, like one in the nineteen-fifties about comic books. Yet others seem prophetic, like the early warnings about smoking. "Is the development of a global, ubiquitous, chronically connected social media world more like comic books or cigarettes?" Hayes asks.

Great question. If we take the skeptics seriously, how much of the catastrophist's argument stands? Enough, Hayes feels, that we should be gravely concerned. "We have a country full of megaphones, a crushing wall of sound, the swirling lights of a 24/7 casino blinking at us, all part of a system minutely engineered to take our attention away from us for profit," he writes. Thinking clearly and conversing reasonably under these conditions is "like trying to meditate in a strip club." The case he makes is thoughtful, informed, and disquieting. But is it convincing?

History is littered with lamentations about distraction. Swirling lights and strippers are not a new problem. What's important to note about bygone debates on the subject, though, is that they truly were debates. Not everyone felt the sky was falling, and the dissenters raised pertinent questions. Is it, in fact, good to pay attention? Whose purposes does it serve?

Such questions came up in the eighteenth century with the rise of a disruptive new commodity: the novel. Although today's critics rue our inability to get through long novels, such books were once widely regarded as the intellectual equivalent of junk food. "They fix attention so deeply, and afford so lively a pleasure, that the mind, once accustomed to them, cannot submit to the painful task of serious study," the Anglican priest Vicesimus Knox complained. Thomas Jefferson warned that once readers fell under the spell of novels—"this mass of trash"—they would lose patience for "wholsome reading." They'd suffer from "bloated imagination, sickly judgement, and disgust toward all the real business of life."

Popular writers took a different view, as the English professor Natalie M. Phillips explains in her book "Distraction." They wondered if unstraying attention was healthy. Maybe the mind required a little leaping around to do its work. "The Rambler" (1750-52) and "The Idler" (1758-60), two essay series by Samuel Johnson, exulted in such mental wandering. Johnson was constantly picking up books and just as constantly putting them down. When a friend asked whether Johnson had actually finished a book he claimed to have "looked into," he replied, "No, Sir, do *you* read books *through*?"

As the mascot of multifocality, Phillips presents Tristram Shandy, the hero of Laurence Sterne's "The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman," published between 1759 and 1767. The novel starts with Tristram's conception. His mother's sudden interjection—"Pray, my dear, have you not forgot to wind up the clock?"—at the moment of his father's sexual climax leaves Tristram congenitally scatterbrained. Even his name is the product of broken attention. It was supposed to be Trismegistus, but the maid tasked with telling the curate got distracted and forgot all but the first syllable. Tristram relates this tale of woe in a tangle of digressions, punctuated with breathless dashes.

In nine distracted volumes, Tristram never manages to narrate his life. Yet readers found his rollicking thoughts captivating. Perhaps they also found them liberating, Phillips suggests, given the tendency of traditional authorities to demand unwavering focus. “What is requisite for joining in prayer in a right manner?” a widely used Anglican catechism asked. “Close attention without wandering.”

Samuel Johnson’s dictionary noted that “to attend” had multiple meanings. The first, to focus on, was related to the second—to wait on, as a servant. A recent history of attention in the nineteenth-century United States, Caleb Smith’s “Thoreau’s Axe,” draws out this point clearly. Across centuries, thinkers have sought to fend off distraction. But the loudest calls to attention have been directed toward subordinates, schoolchildren, and women. “Atten-*TION*!” military commanders shout at their men to get them to stand straight. The arts of attention are a form of self-discipline, but they’re also ways to discipline others.

By the nineteenth century, some had grown wary of the intense forms of concentration that industrial life demanded. The psychiatrist Jean-Étienne Dominique Esquirol introduced a new diagnosis, “monomania,” which was doled out with the faddishness that A.D.H.D. is today. Esquirol felt it to be the characteristic disorder of modernity. Herman Melville made it central to “Moby-Dick,” in which Captain Ahab’s fixation on a white whale brings ruin. Hypnosis, an intense form of focus, became an object of widespread concern.

It was Paul Lafargue, Karl Marx’s Cuban-born son-in-law, who rolled this trepidation about attention into a political program. (His essays have been reissued recently by New York Review Books.) Focussing on one’s work and suppressing one’s natural instincts, Lafargue argued, in the eighteen-eighties, was no virtue. It was, rather, to “play the part of the machine” on behalf of one’s own oppressors. Revolutionary consciousness meant asserting “the right to be lazy,” Lafargue insisted. Workers of the world, relax.

One daydreams of a Lafarguean resistance, in which the youth are recruited with samizdat copies of “Tristram Shandy.” But would they read it? I assign my college students about half of what I was assigned as an undergraduate

twenty-odd years ago, and many professors have felt the need for similar scaling back. “I have been teaching in small liberal arts colleges for over 15 years now, and in the past five years, it’s as though someone flipped a switch,” the theologian Adam Kotsko writes. “Students are intimidated by anything over 10 pages and seem to walk away from readings of as little as 20 pages with no real understanding.”

Whatever thoughts past writers have had about the virtues of attention, pessimists would argue that the problem is different now. It’s as if we’re not reading books so much as the books are reading us. TikTok is particularly adept at this; you just scroll and the app learns—from your behavior, plus perhaps other information harvested from your phone—about what will keep you hooked. “I wake up in cold sweats every so often thinking, What did we bring to the world?” Tony Fadell, a co-developer of the iPhone, has said.

As a baseline, Chris Hayes points to Abraham Lincoln’s debates with Stephen A. Douglas, in the eighteen-fifties: three-hour exchanges of orations about a momentous topic, slavery. He marvels at how complex and layered the speeches were, stuffed with “parenthetical and nested clauses, with ideas that are previewed at the beginning of a sentence, left for a bit, and then returned to later.” He imagines what “sheer stamina of focus” Lincoln and Douglas’s audiences must have possessed.

Those audiences were large. Would voters flock to something similar today? Not likely, Hayes says. Information now comes in “ever-shorter little bites,” and “focus is harder and harder to sustain.” Hayes has seen this firsthand. His illuminating backstage account of cable news describes thoughtful journalists debasing themselves in their scramble to retain straying viewers. Garish graphics, loud voices, quick topic changes, and titillating stories—it’s like jangling keys to lure a dog. The more viewers get their news from apps, the harder television producers have to shake those keys.

This situation is, in some sense, our fault, as the whole system runs on our own choices. But those choices don’t always feel free. Hayes distinguishes between voluntary and compelled attention. Some things we focus on by choice; others, because of our psychological hardwiring, we find hard to

ignore. Digital tools let online platforms harness the latter, addressing our involuntary impulses rather than our higher-order desires. The algorithms deliver what we want but not, as the late philosopher Harry Frankfurt put it, “what we want to want.”

Getting what we want, not what we want to want: it could be the slogan of our times. Hayes notes that it’s not only corporations that home in on our baser instincts. Since social-media users also have access to immediate feedback, they learn what draws eyeballs, too. Years ago, Donald Trump, Elon Musk, and Kanye West had hardly anything in common. Now their pursuit of publicity has morphed them into versions of the same persona—the attention troll. And, despite ourselves, we can’t look away.

“How many more cubicles do you think he’s going to annex?”
Cartoon by Lars Kenseth

The painful twist is that climate change, the thing we really ought to focus on, “evades our attentional faculties,” Hayes writes. “It’s always been a problem,” the writer and activist Bill McKibben told him, “that the most dangerous thing on the planet is invisible, odorless, tasteless, and doesn’t actually do anything to you directly.” Global warming is the opposite of Kanye West: we want to pay attention but we don’t.

The trouble is “attention capitalism,” Hayes argues, and it has the same dehumanizing effect on consumers’ psyches as industrial capitalism has on workers’ bodies. Successful attention capitalists don’t hold our attention

with compelling material but, instead, snatch it over and over with slot-machine gimmicks. They treat us as eyeballs rather than individuals, "cracking into our minds" and leaving us twitching. "Our dominion over our own minds has been punctured," Hayes writes. "The scale of transformation we're experiencing is far more vast and more intimate than even the most panicked critics have understood."

What's awkward about this whole debate is that, though we speak freely of "attention spans," they are not the sort of thing that psychologists can measure, independent of context, across time. And studies of the ostensible harm that carrying smartphones does to cognitive abilities have been contradictory and inconclusive. A.D.H.D. diagnoses abound, but is that because the condition is growing more prevalent or the diagnosis is? U.S. labor productivity and the percentage of the population with four years or more of college have risen throughout the Internet era.

The apparent decline of reading is also not so straightforward. Print book sales are holding steady, and audiobook sales are rising. The National Center for Education Statistics has tracked a recent drop in U.S. children's reading abilities, yet that mostly coincides with the pandemic, and scores are still as good as or better than when the center started measuring, in 1971. If reading assignments at top colleges are shorter, it might be because today's hypercompetitive students are busier, rather than because they're less capable (and how many were actually doing all the reading in the old days?). What about Nicholas Carr's insistence in 2010 that a Rhodes Scholar who didn't read books heralded a post-literate future? "Of course I read books!" that Rhodes Scholar protested to another writer. Today, he holds a Ph.D. from Oxford and has written two books of his own.

After decades of the Internet, the mediascape has still not dissolved into a froth of three-second clips of orgasms, kittens, and trampoline accidents, interspersed with sports-betting ads. As the legal scholar Tim Wu argues in "The Attention Merchants," the road to distraction is not one-way. Yes, businesses seize our attention using the shiniest lures available, but people become inured and learn to ignore them. Or they recoil, which might explain why meditation, bird-watching, and vinyl records are in vogue. Technology firms, in fact, often attract users by promising to reduce

distractions, not only the daily hassles—paying bills, arranging travel—but the online onslaught, too. Google's text ads and mail filters offered respite from the early Internet's spam and pop-ups. Apple became one of the world's largest companies by selling simplicity.

Besides, distraction is relative: to be distracted from one thing is to attend to another. And any argument that people are becoming distracted must deal with the plain fact that many spend hours staring intently at their screens. What is doomscrolling if not avid reading? If people are failing to focus in some places, they're clearly succeeding in others.

One place they're succeeding is cinema, which is in a baroque phase. A leading Golden Globe winner this year, "The Brutalist," exceeds three and a half hours. The average length of a Top Ten grossing film grew by more than twenty minutes between 1993 and 2023. Hollywood's reliance on sequels and recycled intellectual property—we're a hair's breadth from a crossover in which Thor fights the Little Mermaid—may have been terrible for cinema. It has, however, made for complicated movies tightly packed with backstory and fan service.

The same goes for narrative television. It was once entertainment for the inattentive, with simple plots, broad jokes, and a tropical bird interrupting to shout about Froot Loops. Yet that changed with cable, DVDs, and streaming shows (the first hit streaming series, Netflix's "House of Cards," débuted in 2013). As writers stopped worrying about viewers losing the thread, their shows started resembling ultra-long films. Viewers responded by binge-watching, taking in hours of material in what Vince Gilligan, who created "Breaking Bad," has called "a giant inhalation."

Or consider video games, which have grown mercilessly long. Years ago, in these pages, Alex Ross described Richard Wagner's "Ring of the Nibelung," a cycle of four operas spanning about fifteen hours, as, "arguably, the most ambitious work of art ever attempted" and "unlikely to have future rivals." In 2023, Larian Studios swept the video-game awards with Baldur's Gate 3, a noticeably Wagnerian affair with rival gods, magic rings, enchanted swords, and dragons. Two hundred and forty-eight actors and some four hundred developers worked on it. Playing through Baldur's Gate 3, an unhurried, turn-based game with complex rules, can easily take

seventy-five hours, or five “Ring” cycles (and more than twice that if you’re a completist). All the same, it has sold some fifteen million copies.

Even the supposedly attention-pulverizing TikTok deserves another look. Hayes, who works in TV, treats TikTok wholly as something to watch—an algorithmically individualized idiot box. But TikTok is participatory: more than half its U.S. adult users have posted videos. Where the platform excels is not in slick content but in amateur enthusiasm, which often takes the form of trends with endless variations. To join in, TikTokers spend hours preparing elaborate dance moves, costume changes, makeup looks, lip synchs, trick shots, pranks, and trompe-l’oeil camera maneuvers.

What’s going on? The media theorist Neil Verma, in “Narrative Podcasting in an Age of Obsession,” describes the era of TikTok’s rise as beset by “obsession culture.” Online media, by broadening the scope of possible interests, have given rise to an unabashedly nerdy intellectual style. Verma focusses on the breakout podcast “Serial,” whose first season, in 2014, followed the host for hours as she pored over the details of a fifteen-year-old murder case. But deep dives into niche topics have become the norm. The wildly popular podcaster Joe Rogan runs marathon interviews, some exceeding four hours, on ancient civilizations, cosmology, and mixed martial arts. A four-hour video of the YouTuber Jenny Nicholson dissecting the design flaws of a defunct Disney World hotel has eleven million views (deservedly: it’s terrific). Hayes himself confesses to spending hours “utterly transfixed” by watching old carpets being shampooed.

Are we, in staring at carpets, ignoring weighty political matters? Hayes makes much of the Lincoln-Douglas debates, but the pair spoke without microphones to boisterous crowds numbering in the thousands, so it’s highly unlikely that their audiences followed every word. (The events included flowing alcohol.) It’s also hard to admire the moral seriousness of a debate about slavery, held on the eve of the Civil War, in which neither side proposed abolishing it. If the history of totalitarianism teaches anything, it’s that long-winded orations do not always signify political health.

Anyway, political verbosity, as measured by State of the Union addresses, has risen during the twenty-first century. Donald Trump once spoke to

CPAC for more than two hours. Famously, his digressive speeches require deep immersion in right-wing lore to comprehend. “I’ll talk about, like, nine different things, and they all come back brilliantly together,” Trump has boasted. The linguist John McWhorter has said, of Trump’s convoluted style, that “you have to almost parse it as if it was something in the Talmud.”

We blame the Internet for polarizing politics and shredding attention spans, but those tendencies actually pull in opposite directions. What’s true of culture is true of politics, too: as people diverge from the mainstream, they become obsessional and prone to scrambling down rabbit holes. Following QAnon takes the sort of born-again devotion that one expects of a K-pop fan. Democratic Socialists, vaccine skeptics, anti-Zionists, manosphere alphas—these are not people known for casual political engagement. Some may be misinformed, but they’re not uninformed: “Do your own research” is the mantra of the political periphery. Fragmentation, it turns out, yields subcultural depths. Silos are not shallows.

Hayes worries that the Internet’s political enthusiasms distract from global warming. And yet, conspicuously, it is young people, the most online of us all, who are leading the charge against climate change. The Gen Z activist Greta Thunberg is so good at publicizing the issue that media scholars write of a “Greta effect.” She’s been raising hell online since age fifteen.

If people aren’t losing focus or growing complacent, what’s the panic about? Complaints about distraction are most audible from members of the knowledge class—journalists, artists, novelists, professors. Such people must summon creativity in long, unsupervised stretches, and so they are particularly vulnerable to online interruptions. Instagram vexes them in a way that it might not vex home health aides, retail salespeople, or fast-food employees, to name the three most common types of U.S. workers.

A larger part of the knowledge-class problem is that cultural creators, especially those in legacy media, fear that smartphones will lure their audiences away. In this, they don’t seem vastly different from eighteenth-century priests decrying novels for turning women away from prayerful obedience. Is the ostensible crisis of attention, at bottom, a crisis of

authority? Is “People aren’t paying attention” just a dressed-up version of “People aren’t paying attention to *me*”?

The suspicion that all this is élite anxiety in the face of a democratizing mediascape deepens when you consider what the attentionistas want people to focus on. Generally, it’s fine art, old books, or untrammelled nature—as if they were running a Connecticut boarding school. Above all, they demand patience, the inclination to stick with things that aren’t immediately compelling or comprehensible. Patience is indeed a virtue, but a whiff of narcissism arises when commentators extoll it in others, like a husband praising an adoring wife. It places the responsibility for communication on listeners, giving speakers license to be overlong, unclear, or self-indulgent. When someone calls for audiences to be more patient, I instinctively think, Alternatively, you could be less boring.

In a sense, what attention alarmists seek is protection from a competition that they’re losing. Fair enough; the market doesn’t always deliver great results, and Hayes is right to deplore the commodification of intellectual life. But one can wonder whether ideas are less warped by the market when they are posted online to a free platform than when they are rolled into books, given bar codes, and sold in stores. It’s worth remembering that those long nineteenth-century novels we’re losing the patience to read were long for a reason: profit-seeking publishers made authors drag out their stories across multiple volumes. Market forces have been stretching, squashing, spinning, and suppressing ideas for centuries. Realistically, the choice isn’t commodified versus free but which commodity form suits best.

For Hayes, what makes the apps awful is that they operate without consent. They seize attention using tricks, leaving us helpless and stupefied. Yet even this argument, his most powerful, warrants caution. Our media have always done a weird dance with our desires. Although Hayes argues for the profound novelty of our predicament, the title of his book, “The Sirens’ Call,” alludes to a Homeric tale from antiquity, of songs too alluring to resist. This isn’t always unwelcome. Consider our highest words of praise for books—captivating, commanding, riveting, absorbing, enthralling. It’s a fantasy of surrendered agency. (“A page-turner”: the pages turn

themselves.) Oddly, the thing we deplore in others, submission, is what we most want for ourselves.

The nightmare the alarmists conjure is of a TikTok-addled screen-ager. This isn't a full picture of the present, though, and it might not reveal much about the future, either. Ours is an era of obsession as much as distraction, of long forms as much as short ones, of zeal as much as indifference. To ascribe our woes to a society-wide attention-deficit disorder is to make the wrong diagnosis.

Which is unfortunate, because our relationships to our smartphones are far from healthy. The mediascape is becoming a stormy sea of anxiety, envy, delusion, and rage. Our attention is being redirected in surprising and often worrying ways. The overheating of discourse, the rise of conspiratorial thinking, the hollowing out of shared truths: all these trends are real and deserve careful thought. The panic over lost attention is, however, a distraction. ♦

Daniel Immerwahr, a contributing writer at The New Yorker, teaches history at Northwestern University and is the author of "How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States."

Books

Briefly Noted

“American Oasis,” “Before Elvis,” “Another Man in the Street,” and “Going Home.”

January 20, 2025

American Oasis, *by Kyle Paoletta (Pantheon)*. For many Americans, the cities of the Southwest are beautiful but slightly terrifying vacation destinations. In this elegant book, Paoletta, who is from New Mexico, argues that these desert cities’ histories of survival make them ideal models for other American metropolises. Through a series of sensitive portraits of the region’s biggest cities—including Albuquerque, Phoenix, El Paso, and Las Vegas—Paoletta demonstrates how Southwesterners’ centuries of experience with extreme heat, water scarcity, and “stitching a complex social fabric” from groups of Native Americans, Hispanics, Anglos, and immigrants can impart lessons for other cities facing similar challenges.

Before Elvis, *by Preston Lauterbach (Grand Central)*. This book considers the influence on Elvis Presley of Black musicians, especially the gospel and R. & B. pioneers of the nineteen-forties and early nineteen-fifties. Drawing from both existing scholarship and firsthand reporting, Lauterbach highlights the artists who originated the songs and invented the techniques with which Presley captivated white audiences, such as Big Mama Thornton—the first singer of “Hound Dog”—and the jazz guitarist Calvin Newborn. The book also chronicles the injustices Black musical pioneers endured, including withheld copyright credits and royalties, and the racism of machine politicians like Memphis’s E. H. (Boss) Crump and the censor he hired, who was determined to ban any material that showed Black people in a positive light.

What We’re Reading

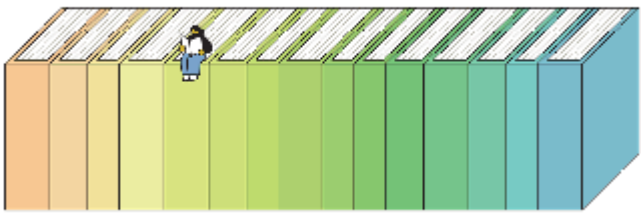


Illustration by Rose Wong

Discover notable new fiction and nonfiction.

Another Man in the Street, *by Caryl Phillips (Farrar, Straus & Giroux).* This finespun and structurally intrepid novel follows a West Indian man, set on becoming a journalist, who immigrates to London in the nineteen-sixties. As the novel skips around in time—touching down, among other moments, just before the Second World War and in Thatcher's era—it tells the stories of the immigrant and of two people he meets in London. One is a white Englishwoman who becomes his longtime partner and must, in the run-up to the millennium, reckon with obscured parts of his life. As the three grapple with various dislocations, they weigh the notion that they "must draw a veil across the past and never again attempt to peer behind it."

Going Home, *by Tom Lamont (Knopf).* At the start of this brilliantly observed début novel, Téo, a traffic-laws instructor, is babysitting the two-year-old son of his childhood friend (and lifelong crush) Lia—not knowing

that Lia, a single mother, will use the time to kill herself. When social workers dispatched after the incident deem the rules-abiding Téo to be one of the child's "better bets," he is tasked with serving as the boy's caregiver until a permanent guardian can be found. A trio of unhelpful but well-meaning figures support him: his ailing father, their temple's unpopular new rabbi, and a hedonistic friend. While teasing the reader with questions about the child's paternity, Lamont's story of a make-do family revels in the often comically porous borders of faith, home, and adulthood.

Books

Washington’s Hostess with the Mostes’

Dinner parties in the capital have long been a path to power, but Perle Mesta had her eye on a different prize.

By Thomas Mallon

January 20, 2025

Mesta was Washington’s most famous mid-twentieth-century party-giver, inspiring characters in Allen Drury’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel “Advise and Consent” (1959) and Irving Berlin’s Tony Award-winning Broadway musical “Call Me Madam” (1950).Photograph by Lisa Larsen / The LIFE Picture Collection / Shutterstock

Washington still cherishes a belief that it was long a place of bipartisan comity, of after-hours socializing during which fences were leapt and mended and the gears of the republic were lubricated with alcohol and

bonhomie. There is an element of truth to the legend. Until the late nineteen-fifties, all U.S. senators occupied a single Senate Office Building, affectionately called the S.O.B. They saw a lot of one another. But, as they and their ever-growing staffs spread out over Capitol Hill (they're now in three different buildings), senators became less likely to R.S.V.P. in the affirmative to any Washington social invitation. As Neil MacNeil and Richard A. Baker point out in their 2013 history of the Senate, "Since the 1960s, with the greater availability of high-speed jet aircraft, senators have found it convenient—or politically necessary—to return home at least weekly," not only to raise money but also to see their families, whom they often no longer bring to live in the capital.

Allen Drury's "Advise and Consent," still the most famous of Washington novels, was published in 1959, on the cusp of the changes MacNeil and Baker describe. The book features a hostess named Dolly Harrison, her first name probably an homage to both Dolley Madison and Dolly Gann, a Washington hostess of the twenties and thirties. But some of Drury's Dolly is a toned-down Perle Mesta, the capital's most famous mid-twentieth-century party-giver. Readers are told that in Dolly's "great white house amid the dark green trees"—an image that resembles Mesta's mansion—"more than one crisis has been solved." In her 1960 autobiography, "Perle: My Story," Mesta tells a tale that fits in with the productive fraternizing Drury portrays:

> Once I invited Senator Alexander Wiley and the late Senator Pat McCarran to a dinner party, knowing perfectly well that they were not even on speaking terms. I had seated Senator Wiley at my right and Senator McCarran at my left. During the first course, Senator Wiley leaned toward me and whispered in his gentle way, "Why have you got that McCarran here?" Before long, Senator McCarran nudged me and said, "What in hell have you got Wiley here for?" For a while things remained pretty frigid. Finally I looked straight ahead and said good and loud so that I could be heard the length of the table, "Well, Perle, I guess you'll just have to talk to yourself all evening." And do you know?—at the end of the evening those two men left the house arm in arm.

It’s a nice story, likely one with more charm than fact. David Brinkley, in “Washington Goes to War” (1988), provides a more fully believable description of Mesta’s chief party-giving predecessor, Evalyn Walsh McLean, who owned the Hope Diamond and, at the beginning of the nineteen-forties, hosted dinners in a big house called Friendship:

> Nasty little scenes were not unusual at Evalyn’s on those Sunday nights. She thought it dull and unproductive of social excitement to have a table of guests who always agreed with each other, and instead preferred to seat at the same table an isolationist reactionary senator and a liberal interventionist and then to stand back and wait for the screaming arguments. . . . At times, to Evalyn’s pleasure, a guest would rise from the table red in the face, fling down his napkin and stalk out.

Reality aside, it is Perle Mesta, not Evalyn McLean, whose name is still remembered, albeit a bit dimly, fifty years after her death. With political loyalties that oscillated between Republicans and Democrats, Mesta was not especially interested in amassing Washington’s usual currency, power. It was notice that she wanted, and she achieved an everlasting degree of it as “the hostess with the mostes’, ” Ethel Merman’s character in Irving Berlin’s Broadway musical “Call Me Madam” (1950). Mesta didn’t run a salon; she threw soirées. As Meryl Gordon explains in her new biography, “The Woman Who Knew Everyone” (Grand Central), “Perle wanted her guests to unwind and enjoy themselves, to look forward to seeing new entertainers and surprise performers.” Sam Rayburn, the Speaker of the House, called her Perly-Whirly. She sent her guest lists to the society pages of the city’s newspapers, and then invited the reporters themselves.

Born in 1882, Pearl Skirvin—she later Frenchified her first name to Perle—grew up in Texas and Oklahoma, where her father, whom she revered, made fortunes in land speculation, oil, and construction. The Skirvin hotel still stands in Oklahoma City, and it was there, Perle said, that she got her "first interest in politics from eavesdropping on the lobby conversations." She adopted, at least initially, her father's Republican politics, and, more lastingly, the Christian Science beliefs of her younger sister, Marguerite, who had a successful career in silent films. Perle served as Marguerite's chaperon for a number of years before marrying George Mesta, a rich industrialist, in 1917. The couple settled down outside Pittsburgh, in a plutocratic version of living above the store. "Her husband owned a ten-thousand-square-foot 1880s mansion on the bank of the Monongahela River. But the view from the picture windows was hardly scenic," Gordon writes. "The Mesta Machine Company, with manufacturing buildings on twenty acres, spewed smoke and grit into the sky."

The First World War prompted a life-changing move to Washington, when Woodrow Wilson's Administration required consultations with George about steel production. The Mestas rented a suite at the Willard Hotel, and Perle became friends with another guest, Thomas Marshall, the Vice-President remembered for saying that what the country really needed was a good five-cent cigar. She was soon going to dinners, including some of Evalyn McLean's, and then giving parties, small ones, of her own. Gordon explains, "She wasn't trying to press a political agenda. But she liked being adjacent to power and useful to George by socializing with politicians." Her husband "liked to show off his wealth," and he gave a hundred thousand dollars to the 1924 campaign of Calvin Coolidge. Though she was less conservative than George—she frequently stuck up for his workers back in Pittsburgh—Perle wouldn't back a Democratic ticket for another twenty years.

George died a month after Coolidge's Inauguration, at the age of sixty-three. His widow, only forty-two, soon enough sold the Pittsburgh mansion and moved into Washington's Mayflower Hotel. She also bounced around to the races in Saratoga Springs and the opera in New York, and shared one of Newport's baronial "cottages" with her sister. But Perle was always drawn back to Washington and to any opportunity for getting her name in

the papers. An unpleasant one arose in the late thirties, when she, her siblings, and stockholders in her father's main company waged legal war against the patriarch over questionable "financial maneuvers." Judge Alfred P. Murrah (for whom the federal building bombed by Timothy McVeigh would be named) scolded the whole Skirvin family from the bench: "You should be ashamed of yourselves." They more or less patched things up.

Into the Second World War and beyond, Mesta kept at her self-promoting hospitality. "God, she was such an obvious social climber," the ninety-nine-year-old journalist Marie Ridder recalls to Gordon. "But she was not an unkind human being. She just used her entrée and her money to do what she wanted to do. She did some very worthwhile things along the way." Mesta was a tenacious feminist and a longtime advocate of the still unpassed Equal Rights Amendment. During the New Deal, the measure was pressed by the suffragette Alice Paul but opposed by both Eleanor Roosevelt and F.D.R.'s Secretary of Labor, Frances Perkins, because it would require the repeal of certain special protections for women that were already in place. Mesta had occasional lobbying successes, such as firming up the support of a back-bench Missouri senator, Harry Truman, for the E.R.A., after which the two became friends. She also made some progress off the Hill. The acidic Alice Roosevelt Longworth, Teddy Roosevelt's eldest child, found her quite resistible at first, but over time warmed up a little. Mesta's chief rival, for decades, was the far more beautiful and soignée Gwen Cafritz, a Hungarian immigrant married to a wealthy and charitable real-estate baron. Cafritz's denunciations of her foe included a remark that Mesta had arrived in D.C. by "flying out of the outhouse." Press-wise, though, their long feud did both of them more good than harm.

Mesta's friendship with Truman, his wife, Bess, and their daughter, Margaret, was the real making of her. She supported him as the replacement for Henry Wallace on the 1944 Democratic ticket with Roosevelt, and threw a big party for him at the Sulgrave Club during his very brief Vice-Presidency. She even tried to advance Margaret's shaky career as a singer. Gordon asserts that Truman made Mesta more or less "an extended member of the family"—a claim that seems plausible given the profusion of favors she performed. Mesta hopped aboard the President's whistle-stop train during his come-from-behind campaign in 1948, and she raised the money

to keep it on the rails through Election Day. She was soon co-chairing Truman's inaugural ball, which she entered on the President's arm.

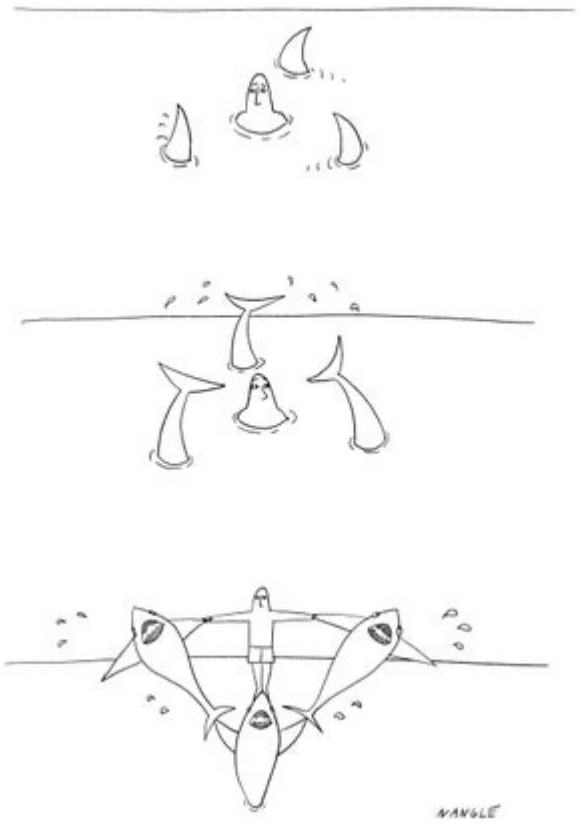
A "tangible reward," Gordon writes, was expected, and it came, in the form of a nine-hundred-and-ninety-eight-square-mile bauble known as the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg. However improbable, her nomination to be the U.S. representative there was never in any real danger—neither from one senator's complaint about her lack of qualifications nor from the fact that Mesta knocked nine years off her age in the confirmation papers she had to submit. She took along her Packard automobile and a vast amount of Coca-Cola when, in August, 1949, she sailed for Europe on the S.S. America.

Luxembourg is so small that Mesta was sent there as an envoy, not an actual ambassador. Her sustained efforts to obtain the higher title never bore fruit, but that made little difference to a public entertained by her European adventure. Mesta worked hard at the job, giving parties for war orphans and observing Luxembourg's steel production, her old life with George allowing her to demonstrate some expertise. Eleanor Roosevelt, who had viewed Mesta's appointment with disfavor, dropped into the duchy and changed her mind after seeing her in action.

By the standards of the day, Mesta was a racial progressive; she had helped integrate Truman's inaugural ball, and in Luxembourg she made a point of informing the press that she danced with Black G.I.s at the parties she regularly gave for U.S. soldiers stationed with *NATO*. However well she meant, though, she could never keep her foot far from her mouth. When, in 1965, the Black attorney and activist Patricia Roberts Harris was appointed to her old post, Mesta remarked, "I am sure people will like her. When I went to Luxembourg I took my butler and maid, who are colored, and people adored it."

Mesta's daily life at the duchy's U.S. legation was, in fact, bruising. Adopting the parlance of the time, Gordon speaks of an "enemy within"—not Communist subversives but the State Department's ordinary male career personnel who had no respect for Mesta and endlessly undermined her. (Back in Washington, the Under-Secretary of State, David Bruce, described her as "an ignoramus and a pretentious bore.") She came to despise her successive deputies, Paul West and Anthony Swezey, and attempted to take

early advantage of the “Lavender Scare,” the State Department’s nineteen-fifties purge of gay employees, by spreading word to officials back in the U.S. that Swezey was homosexual. She failed to destroy his career.



Cartoon by Jared Nangle

Seeking leverage, Mesta persistently, but to little avail, mentioned her closeness to Truman. Only toward the end of her tenure did she openly let the career men have it—first in a lengthy, in-person complaint to a visiting State Department inspector, and then in a ten-page memo to the President himself. She had genuine grievances, but her tactics were crude and curiously naïve for someone who had been in the thick of politics for so long. As the Republicans returned to power in 1953, she actually thought that Eisenhower, whom she’d entertained at her Luxembourg residence when he was *NATO*’s Supreme Allied Commander, might keep her on.

When “Call Me Madam” opened in New York, on October 12, 1950, the State Department’s professionals were determined to spoil any show-biz pleasure for their nominal boss. The character based on her, Sally Adams,

might be called “the priestess with the leastes’ protocol,” but the real Mesta was instructed not to see the show. In what sounds like a negotiated settlement, she stayed away on opening night but attended a matinée two weeks later, accompanied, at the President’s suggestion, by Bess and Margaret Truman. Some of the jokes in the show made Mesta uneasy, but she was delighted by the “imperious Foreign Service officer” with whom Sally is made to cross swords. “I thought the State Department man was just perfect,” she told the press. Mesta and the show’s star, Ethel Merman, two loud peas in the same pushy pod, became and remained fast friends.

On plenty of other social occasions, Mesta had male escorts, but she was content without a man constantly by her side. Gordon describes one “serious romance” during the early years of her widowhood—with Carl Magee, the inventor of the parking meter—but Mesta mostly lived a life without romantic tumult. Before she went off to Luxembourg, there were rumors of something afoot between her and Truman’s merry widower of a Vice-President, Alben Barkley, who had been born in a Kentucky log cabin and was seventy-one when he became the “Veep,” a coinage of his grandson’s. The press had cooked up the story chiefly for its own purposes, but it nicely synchronized with Mesta’s own continuing chase of publicity.

Mesta had no enthusiasm for the next Democratic Presidential nominee, Adlai Stevenson, and there was talk, her politics being as fungible as they were, that she might return to the Republican fold. But the Eisenhowers, once in the White House, displayed a certain wariness toward her, over some less-than-supportive remarks she was believed to have made. Cordial relations were restored, but a lunch with Mamie and a couple of White House invitations—one to a party with the Queen Mother—did not give Mesta the kind of steady centrality she craved. She kept herself in the news by touring Russia (the State Department refused her a diplomatic passport), and then by writing articles and giving lectures.

In the late fifties, she seemed to find a new Truman in Lyndon B. Johnson, ardently promoting his Presidential candidacy with a view toward restoring her own status. When she published her memoir, in the spring of 1960, she hawked both products: “Every place I was supposed to talk about my book, I plugged LBJ.” The effort proved disastrous. Once friendly with the young

congressman John F. Kennedy (she tried to fix him up with Margaret Truman), Mesta had become a back number to his family even before she threw in her lot with L.B.J. and alienated them for good. So disappointed was she by Johnson's loss of the 1960 Democratic nomination that she began to criticize both Kennedy's inexperience and Jackie's occasional failure to wear stockings in public. She went so far as to endorse Nixon, partly because he had come out in favor of the E.R.A., but also because of the age-old desire to befriend the enemy of one's enemy. Gordon seems understandably perplexed by what she calls the hostess's "social suicide" at the dawn of Camelot. The star power from which Mesta estranged herself is of such posthumous endurance that the cover of "The Woman Who Knew Everyone" features a photograph of Mesta with Jackie Kennedy before things went wrong.

After becoming the Vice-President, Johnson, mindful of Mesta's previous support, forgave her fling with Nixon, who was in some ways also the enemy of *his* enemy. He bought her mansion, Les Ormes, and populistically de-Frenchified it into the Elms. Mesta rented a grand apartment for herself on Watson Place, where she began throwing parties subsidized by the women's magazine *McCall's*, for which she was now writing a column. Gwen Cafritz even came to the first of them. The two women, with the sixties starting to swing, decided to bury the cocktail toothpick at last.

Mesta was in San Juan the day Kennedy was assassinated, and, on hearing the news, she characteristically let slip the words "I always knew it. I always said Johnson would be President some day." She supported the new President on civil rights, organizing and financing a huge outdoor concert with an interracial cast of musical performers in the wake of Washington's 1968 riots, and she supported him on Vietnam, declaring, "There is nothing dove about me." Indeed, Mesta stood by him even as things capsized to the point that she had to cancel the party she had planned to give in Chicago during the Democratic Convention later that year.

After Nixon was elected, he and Pat did extend some White House invitations to Mesta, but more often they kept a certain distance, and she had to content herself with company lower down on the Presidential pyramid. She became friendly with Judy Agnew, the wife of the Vice-

President, and saw a good deal of Nixon's personal secretary, Rose Mary Woods, with whom she shared Robert Gray, a Washington public-relations man, as a walker. She eventually found a raucous kindred spirit in Martha Mitchell—whose husband, Attorney General John N. Mitchell, was involved in the Watergate scandal—and the duo made a number of trips to New York together. (One wonders if Merman ever joined them.)

Generally sympathetic to Mesta, Gordon does tag her not only with an "insatiable need for publicity" but also with a "deep fear of becoming irrelevant." A decade after Mesta criticized Jackie Kennedy's bare legs, a reporter she invited to tea noted that the hostess, now in her late eighties, was dressed "in a blue mini-dress with white calf-length boots." Those who liked her must have cringed at the way she became a lurid Washington relic, the hostess equivalent of the toupeed senator who just can't let go. But by early 1974 Mesta was at last out of gas. She returned to Oklahoma City and died there the following year, at the age of ninety-two.

Gordon, whose previous biographical subjects include Brooke Astor and Rachel (Bunny) Mellon, does Mesta justice and a little more, sometimes allowing a researcher's enthusiasm to overestimate others' interest in the ghost she's pursuing. Mesta did make the cover of *Time* in 1949, but to say that "during the first six months of 1956 more than two thousand stories about Perle appeared in U.S. newspapers" is to say more about a vanished world of syndication than about one woman's celebrity. There's a certain chumminess, occasionally charming but often not, to Gordon's narrative: readers get told to "imagine" a scene when the documentation is too scant for a full reconstruction. When the first-person voice appears, more than two hundred and fifty pages into the volume, it feels as if the author has somehow crashed her own party, and like most hosts and guests she sometimes runs out of interesting things to say: "Things happen. If only we could roll back the clock and change the outcome. Therein lies the heartache: we can't."

Hostessing has never fully disappeared as a Washington occupation. After Perle Mesta's heyday, Evangeline Bruce, the wife of the career diplomat who pronounced Mesta an "ignoramus," gave parties in Georgetown that were more elegant and rarefied affairs than Mesta's. But the center of social

gravity eventually shifted from Bruce's drawing room to the nearby one commanded by Pamela Harriman, whose invitations, beginning in the nineteen-seventies, were all business and entirely partisan. Her efforts on behalf of Democratic candidates helped flip the Senate away from the Republicans in 1986, and seven years later she could take some of the credit for installing Bill Clinton in the White House. The substance of her contribution can be measured by her ambassadorial reward: not Luxembourg but France.

Bipartisan socializing did not fade away altogether, even in the contentious years of the Iraq War, when the best invitation in town was probably the one to Christopher Hitchens's annual after-party on the night of the White House Correspondents' dinner. From my diary for April 21, 2007: "Scalia was there, having a high old time, and so was [Paul] Wolfowitz, unaccompanied by the woman who's about to cost him his job at the World Bank." But Jerry Brown was also present that night, and appeared intrigued by someone's cross-party suggestion that, if he made another run for governor of California, he could "contrive a way to get Nancy Reagan to endorse him."

During her days in Washington, Mrs. Reagan, however much a newcomer, greatly respected the capital's establishment, bringing her husband to social affairs and cultivating friendships with Katharine Graham and Buffy Cafritz, a hostess and philanthropist who had married the nephew of Mesta's old rival. Even Presidents and First Ladies who never seemed to care much for socializing with the capital's permanent residents—the Carters generally stayed home; George W. Bush went to bed early; the Obamas had their friends come to them—dutifully went to annual entertainments like the Correspondents' dinner and the Kennedy Center Honors. During the first Trump Administration, when even the White House Christmas trees seemed to run with blood, the President never showed up at either of those moderately unifying events.

Early on in Trump I, the largest social divide ran between implacable Never Trumpers and other Republicans who fell in line with craven speed as soon as Trump won. As time went on, the city's atmosphere became so innovatively awful that some people had trouble dining out with their own

families and political brethren: doxing and flash mobs briefly made inroads into the world of nontransferrable invitations and valet parking. With the arrival of Trump II, thoughts have been turning back to the city's last complete social collapse, in 1861. At the beginning of that year, Mrs. Jefferson Davis, whose husband was preparing to resign from the Senate, went by herself to say goodbye to President James Buchanan, Senator Davis's fellow-Democrat, and described Washington as a "great mausoleum" glumly devoid of social engagements. These days in the still quiet capital, there is a feeling, spoken of by many and disputed by some, that the "disrupters" coming to town—not just rioters this time but nominees—are intent on ripping up documents far more important than whatever's left of the book of etiquette. ♦

Thomas Mallon began writing for The New Yorker in 1997. His eleventh novel, "Up with the Sun," was published in February, 2023.

The Current Cinema

The Ghost’s-Eye View of Steven Soderbergh’s “Presence”

Doing his own camerawork, the director gleefully enriches the haunted-house genre with a simple but ingenious device.

By Richard Brody

January 17, 2025

Lucy Liu stars in Steven Soderbergh’s supernatural mystery.Illustration by Clay Rodery

Although Steven Soderbergh started out as an independent filmmaker, he may be Hollywood’s last true believer. He made fine studio movies back when star-studded genre pictures were still studios’ stock-in-trade; witness “Out of Sight” (1998), “Erin Brockovich” (2000), and the “Ocean’s” trilogy (2001-07). Now that studios are focussing mainly on franchises and remakes, Soderbergh is working independently again, but he’s continuing to make the kind of genre films at which Hollywood used to excel—the heist film “Logan Lucky” (2017), the thriller “Unsane” (2018), and even “Magic Mike” (2012)—and doing so in a homespun way, with an air of playfulness and improvisation, sometimes shooting on iPhones. The cinematic house of worship may be closed, but he’s holding services at home with devotion as earnest as ever, though he can’t resist a winking acknowledgment of the homey clutter in plain sight.

In his new film, “Presence,” Soderbergh approaches domesticity with a similar blend of solemnity and whimsy—in this case, packed into the venerable genre of horror. The movie is a metaphysical mystery, a sort of American gothic in which a warm and inviting old suburban house becomes the shivery site of a haunting, a confinement, and a menace. At the start, the house in question is, to all appearances, empty—at least, it’s devoid of furniture, because it’s for sale. A real-estate agent named Cece (Julia Fox) arrives just ahead of her clients, a well-to-do family of four—parents Rebecca (Lucy Liu) and Chris (Chris Sullivan) and their teen-age children, Chloe (Callina Liang) and Tyler (Eddy Maday). Cece hints that the house, new to the market and situated in a coveted school district, will sell quickly. In mere moments, Rebecca, a hard-driving businesswoman, makes the deal.

By that point, Soderbergh has already, cannily and uncannily, established the premise of the title: the house isn’t actually empty, and the family won’t be there alone. The director conjures the house’s spectral presence by means of an unusual cinematic device that dominates the movie from start to finish: the camera embodies the perspective of that invisible character. At the very beginning of the film, the house is introduced in a single shot that peers through windows, roves from room to room, and heads downstairs. Then the scene of the sale is presented in a gliding, gyrating take that, again, ranges widely through the house; as the negotiation takes place, the camera follows the daughter upstairs and into a bedroom, where she turns and looks at the camera as if aware of being followed.

Soderbergh—doing his own cinematography, as often, under the pseudonym Peter Andrews—crafts a clever style to develop the identification of the camera’s gaze with that of the haunting spirit. For starters, the camera never goes outside. All the movie’s depicted events either take place within the house’s walls or are visible through its windows or doors, and the conspicuous oddness of this trope conveys a sense of surveillance: the spirit, though unwilling or unable to leave the house, is paying close attention to the surroundings, as well as to the doings within. Scenes unfold in extended, impulsively mobile shots, which create the impression of a ghost who is no mere passive observer but an alert and active mind. Conjuring a consciousness with a will of its own, the camera ignores conventional commercial-movie practice, sometimes leaving

characters behind as it prowls through the house, and poking into rooms to satisfy its own curiosity, for reasons that only gradually reveal their dramatic significance.

Young Chloe is soon shown to be the focus of the spirit's attention and the center of the story. Her best friend, Nadia, has recently died, in a drug-related incident, as has another teen girl from the area, and the family is under the pall of Chloe's grief. Her compassionate dad wants her to see a therapist; Rebecca and Tyler (who's a competitive swimmer with an insolent streak) are impatient with her, and even blame her for burdening the family. What's more, Tyler—perhaps sarcastically, perhaps sincerely—suggests that Chloe, too, is abusing drugs, potentially endangering his competitive focus, to say nothing of herself. As for the ghost, it is not merely watching Chloe—who has a connection to it that no other family member shares—but watching over her, as if sensing that she is in danger. Rebecca is also in some kind of trouble—she's involved in financial chicanery and other furtive dealings that, her husband knows, come with legal risks. Inevitably, of course, the dénouement, in elucidating the family story and revealing what links the siblings' rivalry to their parents' conflicts, also shows what connects Chloe with the spirit world.

"Presence" is a mystery, and a good one, which means that disclosing its revelations would spoil the fun. The film would also repay a second viewing, because details sprinkled throughout take on their meaning only in hindsight. In a way, the clearest review would suggest that you see the movie now and we'll talk later. This in itself marks the movie as a throwback: it's unapologetically plot-centered. Although the mortal backstory and the threats to the family turn out to be truly horrific, the mystery is as airtight as that of any studio-era entertainment. Yet Soderbergh's unusual method recalls another of this season's major movies, one that is much more than a tense thriller: "Nickel Boys," RaMell Ross's adaptation of the novel by Colson Whitehead, about Black teen-agers incarcerated in a brutal, segregated reform school in Florida, in the nineteen-sixties. Ross develops a method—showing the action from the two main characters' points of view in long, uninterrupted takes—that's akin to Soderbergh's device, at least superficially. But Ross employs his method to create a depth of subjectivity that matches Whitehead's language, and an

intense physicality that surpasses the familiar tropes of cinematic representation. With “Presence,” the eye of the ghost is a matter not of representation but of plot—subtract the subjective camerawork that incarnates an increasingly active spirit, and there’s no movie.

Still, Soderbergh’s premise is no mere gimmick. Working with a script by David Koepp, he infuses his dramatic mechanism with substantial themes. The dynamic of family life that the ghost witnesses is seen early on to be suspect; eventually, it comes to echo wider corruption. Soderbergh is far from a frivolous filmmaker, but he realizes both his devilishly clever premise and its serious implications with the same tight-lipped exuberance. In the depths of grief, Chloe is reading a book by Alice Hughes—the name of the author played by Meryl Streep in Soderbergh’s 2020 comedic drama, “Let Them All Talk.” That movie spotlights the conflict between Alice, a writer of literary fiction whose ostensibly personal stories are revealed to have been cribbed, and a writer of genre mysteries, whose work Alice disdains as “Styrofoam” and “jigsaw puzzles.” It’s clear where Soderbergh’s allegiances lie.

Soderbergh fills “Presence” with idiosyncratic incidentals that are piquant enough on their own but ultimately reveal their place in his free-floating puzzle. (There’s a riff involving a hundred-year-old mirror of silver nitrate—something of a surrogate for the near-magical properties of classic movies.) The story’s greater implications emerge incrementally, and along the way it can feel as if Soderbergh is infusing his clever narrative gamesmanship with a prefabricated importance. But the spectacular ending delivers a dose of philosophical heft and lends retrospective resonance to the movie’s unusual form.

With “Presence,” Soderbergh, a true believer in genre, acts like a true believer in the mysticism that this movie’s particular genre depends on. He can’t resist the ultimate temptation: the ghost, which at first moves through the house leaving no corporeal trace, eventually intervenes in the life of the household physically, drastically, and decisively. Still, this gleeful cinematic inventiveness reverberates with sincere purpose and is of a piece with the story’s explicit embrace of yet another form of belief, organized religion—specifically, Catholicism—and its confidence that higher powers are at

work in human lives. It's hardly a coincidence that Soderbergh's creative deployment of point-of-view shots echoes the work of the greatest genre filmmaker, Alfred Hitchcock, who's also one of the greatest filmmakers of Catholic inspiration. Hitchcock's point-of-view shots evoke characters looking at the world with yearning and horror, guilt and responsibility, and those are also the emotional underpinnings of Soderbergh's movie. "Presence" manifests the ultimate faith—belief in miracles—and sardonically suggests that nothing less will keep the vulnerable safe from the reach of human depravity. ♦

Richard Brody, a film critic, began writing for The New Yorker in 1999. He is the author of "Everything Is Cinema: The Working Life of Jean-Luc Godard."

Poems

- **“Hartford Hospital, November, Barack Obama Is President”**
  By Sasha Debevec-McKenney | “My grandmother rarely / called us by our real names / but you knew when she meant you.”
- **“Bargaining with the Palisades Fire, I Buy a Pack of Edible Flowers”**
  By Anna Journey | “If I swallow / each dahlia and begonia whole, will you / spare the Musch Trail in Topanga?”

Poems

Hartford Hospital, November, Barack Obama Is President

By Sasha Debevec-McKenney

January 20, 2025

My grandmother rarely
called us by our real names
but you knew when she meant you.
I was the youngest girl
so I had the most names. Yes
her sentences had always
trailed off into little mysteries to me
but when she was dying

and the doctor asked her
what month it was
she said November
and I thought oh, good,
so she isn't dying
she knows it's November.
But she didn't know the year.
And she didn't know the President.
The doctor left. It was just me,
my brother and my grandmother

and the CNN anchor saying
JFK was killed fifty years ago
this month,
my grandmother saying
do they know who shot him yet,
my brother saying no,

and death pulling its drawstring,
closing us all inside.

This is drawn from “Joy Is My Middle Name.”

Sasha Debevec-McKenney is the author of the poetry collection “Joy Is My Middle Name.”

Poems

Bargaining with the Palisades Fire, I Buy a Pack of Edible Flowers

By Anna Journey

January 20, 2025

If I eat every petal of chive blossom
and hibiscus, marigold and rose, if I swallow
each dahlia and begonia whole, will you
spare the Musch Trail in Topanga? I don't
know what to do if it burns. If I make
like a wildfire and erase this palmful of lavender,
will you leave my favorite meadow tasselled
in white sage and black mustard? May I please
keep that shaded creekside nook I named
Quail Holler? Listen, the twisted manzanitas
that gnarl through the state park with their
waxed auburn bark already recall flesh
burned to the third degree. Right now,
Chuck and Gail's house still stands
with its Spanish tile, twin writers' sheds,
and framed Sylvia Plath drawing, the flames
stopped by the choppers' water bombs
half a block from their gate. I've stopped
photographing the striped sunsets' mineral bleed
because I don't even want to *think* the word
beautiful when those black-and-fuchsia bands
deepen their geodes only due to the smoke
and debris. An ex-boyfriend once brought me
a quartz-filled rock from a gem store in Richmond
where he'd bought digital scales for the weed

Mindy drove down each month from Albany.
The safety instructions said to break
open the geodes using a clawhammer
and tube sock. This way you'd contain
the blast, the explosion's shards
wouldn't fly, and you'd still
keep both eyes to bear witness.

Anna Journey published her fourth poetry collection, "The Judas Ear," in 2022. She teaches at the University of Southern California.

Cartoons

- **Cartoon Caption Contest**
  Submit a caption, plus vote on other entries and finalists.
- **Cartoons from the Issue**
  Drawings from the January 27, 2025, magazine.

Puzzles & Games

- **The Crossword: Wednesday, January 15, 2025**
  By Caitlin Reid | A beginner-friendly puzzle.

Crossword

The Crossword: Wednesday, January 15, 2025

A beginner-friendly puzzle.

By Caitlin Reid

January 15, 2025

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