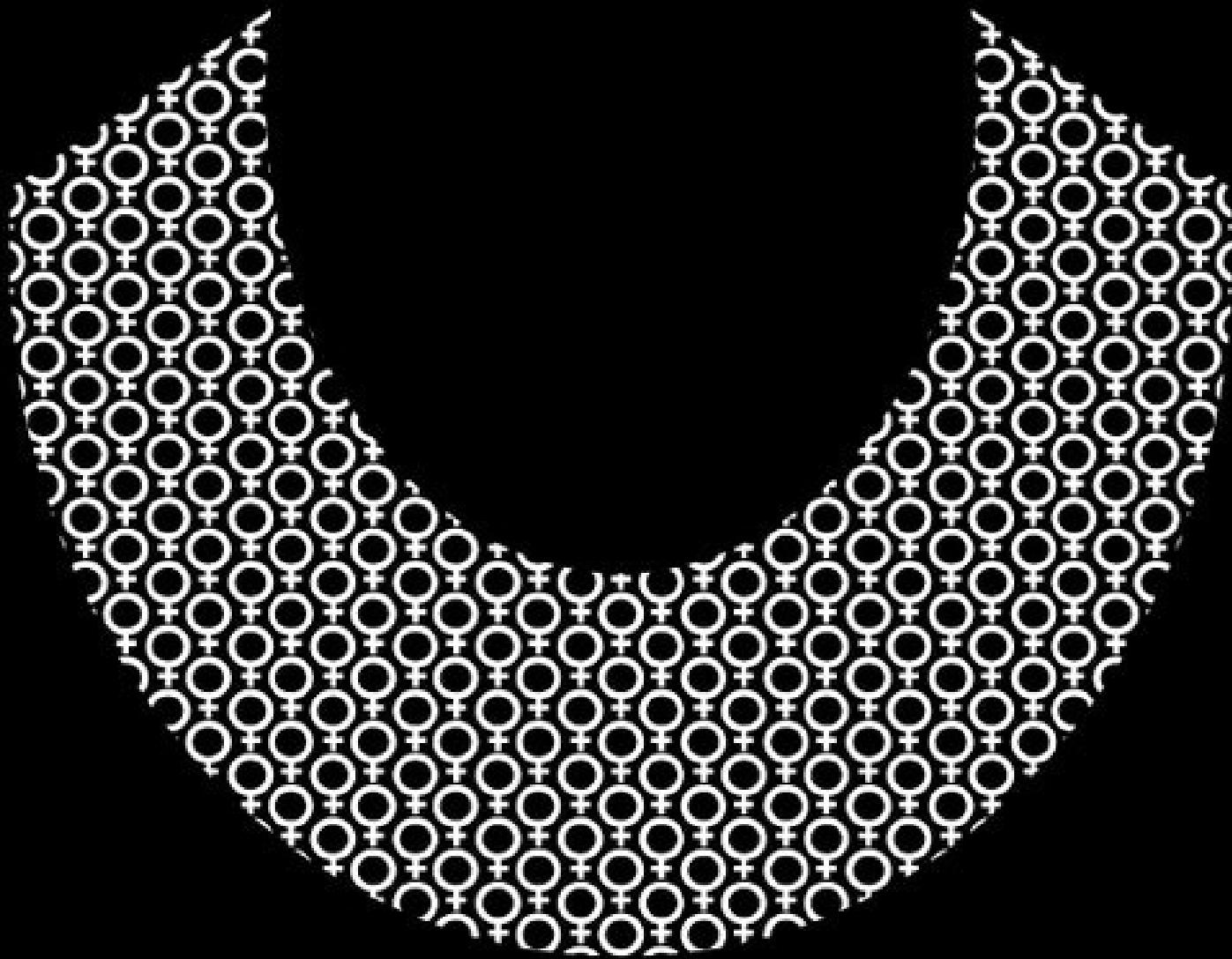


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# Why Private Eyes Are Everywhere Now

Private investigators have been touted as an antidote to corruption and a force for transparency. But they've also become another weapon in the hands of corporate interests.

By [Patrick Radden Keefe](#)

September 28, 2020



One day in 2016, a Manhattan private investigator named Tyler Maroney went to doorstep a seasoned criminal. In this era of the ubiquitous smartphone, even an unscheduled call can feel like an intrusion; showing up unannounced at someone's *house* can seem outright belligerent, and a bit antique. But Maroney, who is a careful student of human interaction, figured it's easier to hang up on someone than it is to slam a door in his face. The man he was looking for, Bill Antoni (a pseudonym), had a rap sheet that included charges for assault, burglary, and attempted manslaughter. He had recently been released from prison, and Maroney consulted a proprietary database to find his new address. When Maroney arrived at Antoni's apartment building, he found that the buzzer was on the fritz, so he waited until another tenant walked out, then slipped inside. As he was climbing the stairs, Maroney ran into a man who was walking out. He had tattooed arms and wore a gold chain around his neck.

"Mr. Antoni?" Maroney said.

In such encounters, some investigators adopt what is known as a "pretext," telling a fib about the purpose of their visit, or assuming a fake identity. Occasionally, the ruse is more elaborate, involving a fictitious business, with phony business cards, e-mail addresses, and social-media accounts. But Maroney takes a dim view of such subterfuge. "I'm a private detective," he said to Antoni. "I'm here to ask for your help on a case."

He had rehearsed this overture, hoping to make Antoni feel enlisted, rather than antagonized. "My client is a man who spent more than ten years in prison for a crime he did not commit," Maroney said. "He was a victim of police misconduct, and you may have information that can help."

Antoni had a sideline as a police informant, and, two decades earlier, he had offered sworn testimony to help convict Maroney's client of murder. Now the man was suing city authorities, and his attorneys hired Maroney, who runs a detective agency called QRI, to find the jailhouse snitch and see if he might recant.

Antoni invited his visitor in. A good sign. Prior to becoming a private investigator, Maroney had worked as a journalist, and he had an eye for detail. Surveying the apartment, he noticed moldings blurred by layers of accumulated paint, a CCTV camera, and, on a table, a holstered Glock. One wall was

decorated with a homemade collage of J.F.K. memorabilia: photos of Jackie Kennedy, Hyannis Port, the grassy knoll. Unprompted, Antoni declared, “Kennedy was the last great American.” And, when he said that, Maroney knew: this guy was going to talk.

People talk to a detective for different reasons. Sometimes they want absolution, or credit, or justice. Sometimes they’re lonely, seduced by a sympathetic ear. Antoni revealed that he had been induced to supply fraudulent testimony in the case by crooked cops who offered him a break on his prison sentence. Maroney’s client ended up receiving nearly ten million dollars in a settlement. A third of that went to the lawyers. Maroney’s firm got seventy-five thousand dollars.

More than thirty thousand private investigators now work in the United States, Maroney reports in his new book, “[The Modern Detective: How Corporate Intelligence Is Reshaping the World](#)” (Riverhead). They engage in a dizzying variety of low-profile intrigue: tracking missing people, tailing cheating spouses, recovering looted assets, vetting job applicants and multibillion-dollar deals, spying on one corporation at the behest of another, ferreting out investment strategies for hedge funds, compiling opposition research. Contemporary private eyes, Maroney explains, are often “refugees from other industries,” including law enforcement, journalism, accounting, and academia. One hallmark of the business is discretion—like spy agencies, private eyes must often keep their greatest triumphs secret—so it is notable that Maroney would write a book like this. In a disclaimer, he says that he has had to change names and alter some details, presumably to protect client confidentiality. But “The Modern Detective” is not an exposé. It is part memoir, part how-to guide, a celebration of the analytical and interpersonal intelligence that makes a great investigator. When Maroney showed up for work at the giant detective firm Kroll, back in 2005, he e-mailed an executive to ask where that executive’s office was, hoping to introduce himself.



*"Wow! So far I've burned a hundred and forty thousand calories today."*  
Cartoon by Lonnie Millsap

“You’re an investigator now,” the man replied. “Find me.”

The private eye has been a staple of popular culture for so long that it can be difficult to disentangle the fictional archetype from the real thing, and part of Maroney’s aim in his book is to demythologize his vocation. This is a tricky undertaking, not least because the very notion of a private investigator first flourished not in the real world but in fiction. In 1841, before the word “detective” had even been coined, Edgar Allan Poe introduced the character of Auguste Dupin, a Parisian gentleman with “an unusual reasoning power,” who solves a grisly double homicide in [“The Murders in the Rue Morgue.”](#) Dupin—who is thought to have been modelled on a real-life Frenchman, Eugène-François Vidocq—is a private citizen with a prodigious intellect, remarkable skills of observation, and time on his hands, cracking cases that stump the local constabulary. Dupin appeared in three Poe stories, and was the progenitor of Sherlock Holmes, Miss Marple, and all who followed.

A decade after Dupin’s début, an Illinois barrelmaker named Allan Pinkerton established his own detective agency, in the eighteen-fifties. Pinkerton was the real thing: he investigated counterfeiters and train robbers, and adopted a corporate insignia featuring an unblinking eye and the words “WE NEVER SLEEP.” He began expanding the Pinkerton National Detective Agency, and eventually it employed thousands of agents across the country. For a time, the U.S. Justice Department outsourced its investigative work to the Pinkertons, and the firm provided a model for both the Secret Service and the F.B.I. Still, Pinkerton was prone to a little mythologizing himself. He published eighteen volumes of pulp fiction and embroidered nonfiction, with titles such as “Strikers, Communists, Tramps, and Detectives” (1878) and “Cornered at Last: A Detective Story” (1892).

The most famous veteran of the Pinkertons was [Dashiell Hammett](#), who joined the agency in Baltimore, in 1915, and eventually migrated to California. Hammett worked as a Pinkerton operative on and off for seven years, and then quit to become a writer. His [fictional detectives](#), including the nameless sleuth known as the Continental Op, in “Red Harvest” (1929), and Sam Spade, in “The Maltese Falcon” (1930), signified a departure from the genteel protagonists of Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie. Hardboiled detective fiction, as Raymond Chandler once explained, sought to “get murder away from the upper

classes, the weekend house party and the vicar's rose-garden, and back to the people who are really good at it." To the jaded private dicks of Hammett and Chandler, the job was not some intellectual fancy, much less a noble calling. It was a job, and a dirty one at that.

Tyler Maroney's career trajectory was the opposite of Hammett's: he worked as a writer for a decade, for *Fortune* and other magazines, before a chance encounter brought him to Kroll. The founder of the company, Jules Kroll, is a legendary figure, the Allan Pinkerton of his day, who worked as a prosecutor in New York in the nineteen-sixties before establishing his own shop, in 1972. Kroll was deeply attuned to the iconography of his industry, and allergic to the image of the stereotypical sleuth with his trenchcoat and fedora, prowling the shadows like a bottom-feeder. If anything, Kroll seemed eager to restore to the profession the patrician aura of Auguste Dupin; he dressed like the corporate titans he hoped to cultivate as clients. Kroll got his start combatting extortion and fraud, but his business thrived on the more prosaic fields of due diligence, background checks, and corporate compliance. As these services became essential for white-shoe law firms and Wall Street banks, the company grew into a juggernaut, with offices all over the world, and gave birth to a new industry: corporate intelligence. (The year before Maroney started working there, the firm was acquired by Marsh & McLennan, for \$1.9 billion.)

Globalization, deregulation, and rapid technological change have combined to create new threats and opportunities, Maroney observes, and, in his telling, a capable private investigator can assist the client in navigating this treacherous environment. More and more of our personal information is now readily available online, a vulnerability that has been a boon for the investigations business. As discreet subcontractors, detectives may be largely invisible in our contemporary landscape, but they have become "indispensable," Maroney argues, adding, "We are everywhere." In one passage that is both thrilling and unsettling, he describes the logistical challenges associated with stalking a target who is moving through a city, and suggests that on any given weekday in midtown Manhattan "there are, I would estimate, dozens of surveillance teams shadowing people."

As Maroney sees it, the sort of old-school gumshoe work he has undertaken to help exonerate the wrongly convicted hasn't been replaced, only augmented, by technology. He details the workings of today's hybrid tradecraft with bracing authority. In one chapter, he describes making an after-hours visit to the

Manhattan office of a private-equity fund, accompanied by a forensic technician named Louis. The fund has invited the investigators to its office, under cover of night, to scan the hard drive of an unsuspecting managing director. Louis photographs the computer cables and the proximity of the chair to the desk, documenting a still-life that he will reassemble once his work is done. Then he removes the hard drive and mirrors it, eating a Clif bar and drinking a latte from the break room while he waits. What might seem like an egregious invasion of the employee's privacy is, in fact, perfectly legal, Maroney explains, because the computer belongs to the employer. It emerges that the managing director has been planning to defraud the fund by having it invest in a company in which he holds a secret stake. None of us, Maroney advises, "should use our employers' systems for personal use (especially if it's criminal)."

Many private investigators come from the clandestine intelligence services. One of the most notable was [Christopher Steele](#), who worked for M.I.6 before establishing the London-based business-intelligence firm Orbis, and preparing a dossier on connections between the Russian government and Donald Trump's 2016 campaign. Maroney argues, however, that the work of the modern detective shouldn't be mistaken for a privatized form of espionage. "The tool kit available to private investigators is considerably less potent than the one available to spies and cops and prosecutors," he writes. "We cannot flip witnesses, blackmail agents, develop confidential informants, bug phones, offer protection, send subpoenas, or bribe sources." Indeed, when veterans of spy agencies and law enforcement transition to the private sector, a standard lament is that they have been stripped of the invasive powers that they had come to take for granted as agents of the state.

There are private investigators, of course, who find the old techniques irresistible and continue to employ them, often in contravention of the law. Some, Maroney says, "exploit shady reputations to attract clients with shallow morals and deep pockets." Working on behalf of Harvey Weinstein, the Israeli firm [Black Cube](#), which was founded by two former spies, routinely engaged in pretexting—creating false identities and fictitious companies—and, according to the book "[Catch and Kill: Lies, Spies, and a Conspiracy to Protect Predators](#)," by my colleague Ronan Farrow, may have relied on unlawful surveillance techniques. (Black Cube denies this.) After Uber hired the private intelligence firm Ergo to investigate people who were suing the company, a federal judge described the investigators' tactics as "blatantly fraudulent and arguably criminal."

In Maroney's view, a firm that resorts to such conduct does a disservice to its "clients, to the industry, and to society." Most private investigators work within the rules, he says, and those constraints require them to be "more creative." At times, "The Modern Detective" can read like a promotional brochure, depicting investigators as "painstaking and nimble, law-abiding and enterprising, imaginative and deliberate—all to ensure our clients get the hidden information they need." Indeed, Maroney writes that one of his purposes is "to demonstrate that our services are necessary throughout the ecosystem of global transactions and disputes."

It's certainly true that this ecosystem is becoming increasingly opaque. In another new book, "[Kleptopia: How Dirty Money Is Conquering the World](#)" (Harper), the journalist Tom Burgis depicts an unsavory coalition of corrupt strongmen, artful criminals, and rapacious élites who, abetted by a network of accountants, lawyers, and other professional facilitators, have managed to pillage money on a grand scale and hide it abroad. When millions of confidential files from the Panamanian law firm Mossack Fonseca were leaked to the press, in 2016, Burgis observes, it was as if someone had flicked on the lights: suddenly the public could see the outrageous self-dealing that had been happening all along, in the dark. "From Australia to Argentina, Iceland to Rwanda, presidents, prime ministers and their advisers and confidants, intelligence chiefs, generals, ministers, legislators and central bankers had chosen to store their money not among their compatriots but within the global financial secrecy system," he writes. The leaked files revealed that a hundred and forty political leaders held money in front companies. The monetization of public office, Burgis believes, is no longer an aberration but often the very "purpose of seeking that office." The techniques of financial obfuscation have grown so sophisticated that theft is easy, and, for the thief who hires the right advisers, impunity is all but assured.

Jules Kroll has claimed that the role of his industry is to "keep the fish tank clean," and Maroney makes a compelling case that the private detective is an antidote to the prevailing trends of financial malfeasance, a check on corruption and fraud, and a force for transparency and accountability. In one delightful chapter, he tells the story of Michael and Linda Mastro, an elderly couple from Washington State, who, facing bankruptcy and a stampede of pissed-off creditors, shipped their Range Rover to Portugal, boarded a private jet with their beloved Shih Tzus, and fled the United States. Maroney recounts how a pair of patient, charming investigators managed to track the couple to Annecy, in the French Alps, and then, in a moment of inspiration, paid a visit to the poshest

veterinarian in town and showed him a photograph of Michael Mastro. (“Find the dogs, and you find the man.”) With the help of the investigators, who were working on behalf of the Mastros’ creditors, authorities were ultimately able to recover twenty-four million dollars in assets. Asset recovery is a major staple of the business. Maroney notes that Kroll helped to repatriate the plundered riches of dictators like Saddam Hussein and Jean-Claude (Baby Doc) Duvalier. In a 2009 Profile in this magazine, Kroll told a story about how Baby Doc’s assets were not so difficult to trace, because he paid for them by check. “Apartment in Trump Tower?” he said, pantomiming the dictator writing out a check in longhand. “‘Trump . . . Tower.’”

Yet Donald Trump is now President; transparency and accountability could hardly be described as on the upswing. On the contrary, the wealthy and powerful are ever more capable of gaming the financial and legal systems to compound their own advantages. This is one nagging dissonance at the heart of Maroney’s book. He tells us that his firm, QRI, specializes in “investigations that seek to benefit the public interest: reforming the criminal justice system, holding corrupt government officials accountable, exposing financial crimes, fighting the causes of climate change.” And, indeed, this one small firm boasts a laudable record of such work. But how typical is it?

In a 2010 book, “[Broker, Trader, Lawyer, Spy: The Secret World of Corporate Espionage](#),” Eamon Javers takes a more jaundiced view of the industry, depicting private investigators as an accoutrement of corporate power, a tribe of highly skilled mercenaries who seem mostly untroubled by matters of moral conscience and ready, even eager, to flout the law, gaining access to personal phone bills and banking records. Maroney is dismissive of this characterization, suggesting that Javers cherry-picked sensational anecdotes. “My colleagues and I work hard to maintain integrity, and I would argue that private investigators benefit the public good in sharp contrast to our reputations,” he writes. But he also mentions that roughly “once a month” someone asks him to break the law. And, because the detective business is frequently an adversarial one, the professional ethics of the trade differ, in significant ways, from conventional ethics. An investigator can follow every legal and ethical guideline and still be doing the wrong thing. When Tyler Shultz, an employee at Theranos, attempted to blow the whistle on fraud inside the tech startup, the company had him followed by private eyes. If investigators sometimes function as agents of transparency, they also sometimes do the opposite, seeking not to clean the fish tank but to muddy it. It depends on the client—and the detective.

Hackers, who have some affinities with private eyes, are often distinguished as either “white hat” (law-abiding and scrupulous) or “black hat” (neither of those things). Maroney, decrying “the misperception that private eyes are amoral rule flouters who deploy dark arts,” points out that private investigators are generally hired not directly by clients but by “lawyers, including the world’s savviest and most ethical.” Still, there’s little comfort in the fact that Black Cube was engaged to surveil and intimidate journalists not by Harvey Weinstein but by the celebrated attorney David Boies. (Boies, who also represented Theranos, has said that he regrets his handling of the Black Cube contract.) Lawyers, even the world’s savviest, can be prone to a certain ethical flexibility.



malm

When the rapper Meek Mill was nineteen years old, in 2007, he was living in a house at 2204 South Hemberger Street, in Philadelphia, where several of his cousins also resided. Some of them were in the drug business. Meek was pursuing another line of work—he wanted to be a rapper—but he did carry a gun, illegally. He walked out of the house one evening and spotted a team of cops approaching. According to Meek, he immediately placed his gun on the sidewalk, but the cops rushed him, bundling him into the house and beating him mercilessly. In a photo taken not long afterward, his face is lumpy and bandaged, his left eye swollen shut. The next day, Meek was charged with aggravated assault, possession with intent to deliver crack cocaine, and seventeen other charges. Most damagingly, the cops maintained that, when they approached, he pointed his gun at them. To Meek, this was a laughable assertion. He was a young Black man. Had he pointed his weapon at advancing police officers, he would almost certainly be dead. But one of the cops, Reginald Graham, testified to that version of events, and a judge sentenced Meek to prison, which was followed by a decade of probation.

He was released after eight months, and continued to pursue his music career, with considerable success. He worked with Rick Ross and with Jay-Z, both kingmakers in the hip-hop industry. But he was still on parole, and the judge who had sentenced him, Genece Brinkley, seemed to take a fanatically punitive interest in curtailing his new career. Even as Meek travelled the country on tour, he was obliged to seek preapproval from parole authorities for his movements. When he slipped up, even in small ways, Judge Brinkley would haul him back into court. Eventually, in 2017, after a string of trivial violations, she sent him back to state prison with a new sentence of between two and four years. Meek Mill was thirty now. He had a son, and a thriving music career. Jay-Z [wrote](#) an Op-Ed in the *Times*, arguing that Meek’s plight was emblematic of how the criminal-justice system “entraps and harasses hundreds of thousands of black people every day.”

Among fans online, a #FreeMeek movement arose. The rapper was now represented by top-shelf criminal defense counsel, and his lawyers turned to Tyler Maroney’s firm, QRI. Maroney, working with a colleague, Luke Brindle-Khym, compiled a dossier of evidence on Judge Brinkley, revealing a pattern of vindictive behavior. The judge, it turned out, was also a serial litigant, who had initiated dozens of lawsuits on the slightest of pretexts. Meek’s attorneys demanded that she recuse herself from the case, but she wouldn’t. So the

investigators decided to reëxamine the original arrest at 2204 South Hemberger Street. The cops had shown up that night with a search warrant, which they had obtained after claiming to have witnessed Meek Mill selling drugs on a street corner and then returning to the house. Yet, when Maroney and Brindle-Khym reënacted the scene that the cops described, the angles and the vantage points didn't add up; it seemed unlikely that the police could have made a positive identification. Nor did the report's description of the drug seller mention his having braids, which Meek did at the time—a conspicuous identifying feature.

When the investigators looked into Reginald Graham, the officer who had written the search warrant and testified against Meek, they discovered that he had subsequently left the police force after an internal investigation found that he had stolen money and then lied about it. Another disgraced ex-officer told them that Graham had been part of a ring of Philadelphia cops who robbed drug dealers. (Graham has denied the allegation.) After this information was brought to light, Meek was released from prison, five months into his sentence, and an appeals court ultimately overturned his conviction. He pleaded guilty to a single weapons charge, and is now free of court supervision for the first time in his adult life.

"We are traditionally hired by criminal defense lawyers to counter the unparalleled resources of prosecutors," Maroney writes, and the Meek Mill case would seem to illustrate why private investigators are indispensable to righting the wrongs of the criminal-justice system—a system that ensnared a young Black man until investigators were able to expose corruption, and free him. But, of course, the acclaimed rapper had become precisely the sort of wealthy, expertly advised individual who can avail himself of such tools. Maroney suggests that "the most indigent among us" also benefit from investigators, and that "federal and state governments often not only provide defendants with lawyers but also subsidize investigators, among other experts, to support a legal defense." Realistically, though, extensive investigative resources are mainly a prerogative of the privileged. In certain cases, investigators may help remedy the imbalances of our justice system on behalf of the powerless. But their deployment mostly ends up reinforcing these inequities. One wonders how Meek Mill might have fared had he been able to hire a topnotch investigator back when he was a poor Philly kid of nineteen.

In a 1949 essay, the social critic David T. Bazelon argued that Dashiell Hammett's real subject was "the ascendancy of the job in the lives of

Americans.” Where Sherlock Holmes was “essentially an English gentleman acting to preserve a moral way of life,” Hammett’s world is one in which “the moral and social base is gone.” Hammett’s investigators are morally pliable, less assured that there is anything edifying about their professional exertions. These men aren’t “doing their duty,” Bazelon writes. “They are merely *doing*.”

Bazelon—who later wrote speeches for a federal judge, his uncle, famed for expanding the rights of criminal defendants—describes the Hammett gumshoe as a job holder whose adventures “begin with an assignment and end when he has completed it.” (The same structure holds for each of Maroney’s chapters.) The hardboiled detective knows that there are no guarantees about a client’s moral worth, and, indeed, he frequently finds himself working for the bad guy. So Hammett’s detectives approach their professional obligations in a spirit of weary detachment. The “*moral* problem—the matter of individual responsibility or decision-making in a situation where society has defaulted morally—is never even faced, much less resolved,” Bazelon writes. “The question of doing or not doing a job competently seems to have replaced the whole larger question of good and evil.”

Maroney acknowledges that investigators “do not always choose their clients.” He discloses that he was once hired to conduct dozens of interviews just so that his interview subjects would report to their boss that a private eye had been asking about him. “I was, in essence, used as a tool for intimidation,” he writes. And he describes uncovering criminal wrongdoing in an investigation, only to learn subsequently that a client has, for one reason or another, chosen not to act upon the information. Investigators can pledge to follow the law; they can regulate their own conduct by adhering to a finely honed ethical code. But, like Hammett’s detectives, they answer to clients, and the client is in control. The professionalization of the industry means that personal values are, necessarily, sublimated to corporate objectives. The investigator is no longer an amateur, like Dupin, or a morally conflicted lone gun, like Spade, but an instrument of the check writer. Often, the detective, hired by a law firm or some other intermediary, does not even know who the client is. Maroney appears to have succeeded in fashioning a righteous career. Still, the typical modern investigator combines impressive technocratic ability with conspicuously limited moral agency.

When Hammett talked about Sam Spade, he said that his character had “no original”—that he was not based on any actual investigator. Rather, he was an

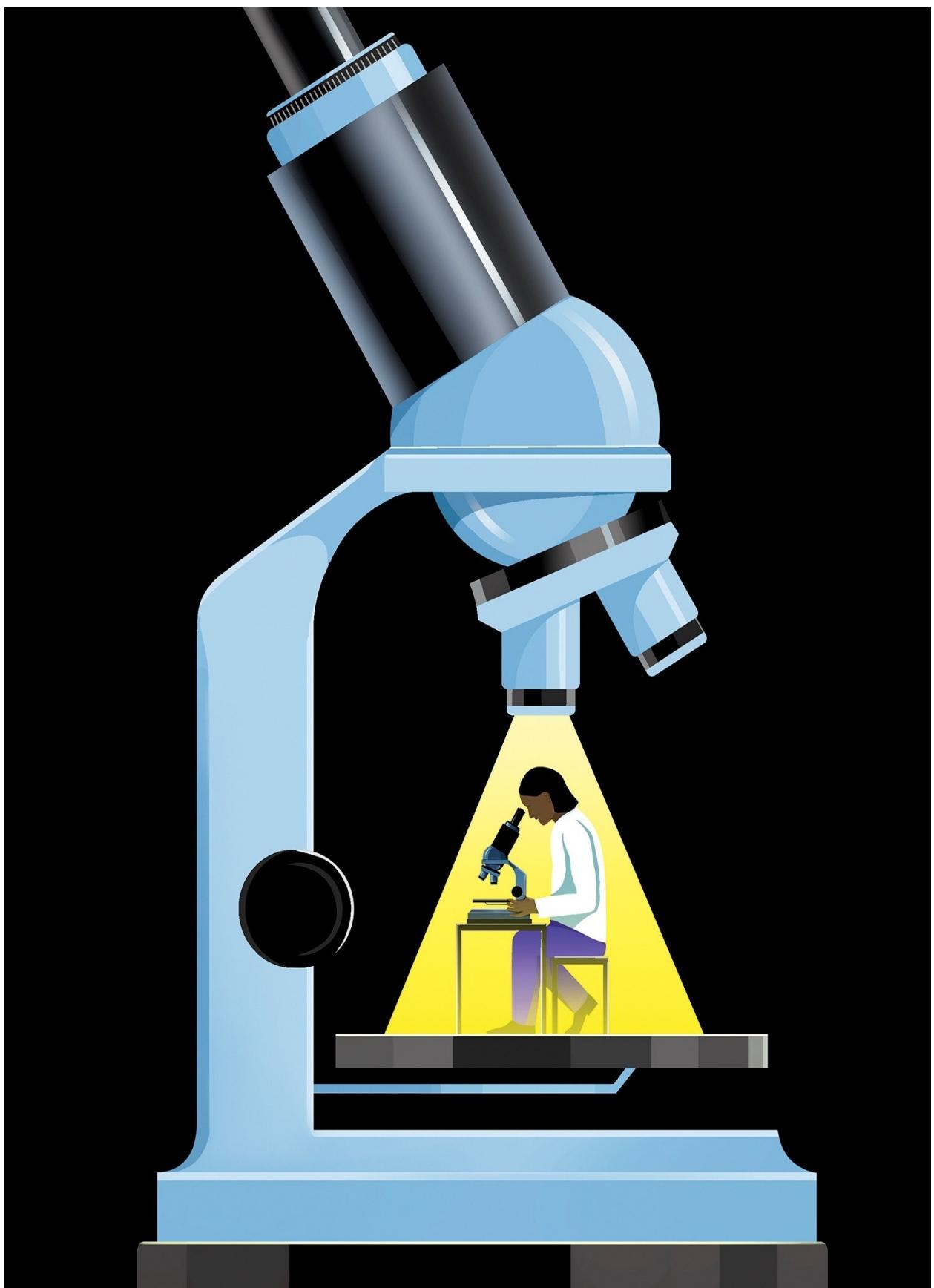
ideal. “He is what most of the private detectives I worked with would like to have been,” Hammett said. It takes nothing away from Maroney’s fascinating account to say that the gap between the profession’s noblest aspirations and its customary activities is a subject worth investigating. ♦

# How Does Science Really Work?

Science is objective. Scientists are not. Can an “iron rule” explain how they’ve changed the world anyway?

By [Joshua Rothman](#)

September 28, 2020



When I was a kid, I'd sometimes spend the day with my dad in his lab, at the National Institutes of Health. For a few hours I'd read, while eating vending-machine crackers and drinking Diet Coke. I'd spend the rest of the time at a lab bench, pipetting—using a long glass eyedropper to draw water out of one set of test tubes and drip it, carefully, into another.

I was seven, eight, maybe nine years old. Still, the lab was an interesting place for me. I understood, loosely, that my dad was investigating addiction in the brain. He believed that it depended on the way certain chemicals bind to certain receptors. To study this, the scientists in his lab performed experiments on rats, then killed them and analyzed their brains. On one of my visits, a lab tech named Victor reached into a centrifuge and removed a large container filled with foamy pink liquid. “Brain juice!” he said, pretending to drink it.

Often, though, we were there on weekends, and were the only ones in the lab. The corridors were dim and quiet, the rooms mostly dark and deserted; the metal and linoleum surfaces were beige, gray, white, and green, relieved, occasionally, by a knob or button made of vivid red or blue plastic. Hulking machines stood on the counters—ugly but, according to my dad, incredibly expensive. Chemical showers and eyewash stations loomed; sometimes, in a distant room, a dot-matrix printer burped. In the sci-fi novels I devoured, labs were gleaming and futuristic. But my dad's seemed worn-in, workaday, more “Alien” than “2001.” I knew that the experiments done there took years and could come to nothing. As I pipetted, I watched my dad in his office, poring over statistical printouts—a miner in the mountains of knowledge.

Later, in college and afterward, I got to see the glamorous side of science. Some researchers had offices with sweeping views, and schedules coördinated by multiple assistants. They wore tailored clothes, spoke to large audiences, and debated ideas in fancy restaurants. Their rivalries, as they described them, evoked titanic struggles from the history of science—Darwin versus Owen, [Galileo](#) versus the Pope—in which rationalist grit overpowered bias and folly. Science, in this world, was a form of exploratory combat, in which flexible minds stretched to encompass the truth, pushing against the limits of what was known and thought. It was an enterprise that demanded total human engagement. Even aesthetics mattered. “You live and breathe paradox and contradiction, but you can no more see the beauty of them than the fish can see the beauty of the water,” Niels Bohr tells Werner Heisenberg, in Michael Frayn’s quantum-physics

play, “Copenhagen.”

Reading, seeing, learning all of this, I wanted to be a scientist. So why did I find the actual work of science so boring? In college science courses, I had occasional bursts of mind-expanding insight. For the most part, though, I was tortured by drudgery. In my senior year, I bonded with my biology professor during field work and in the lab, but found the writing of lab reports so dreary that, after consulting the grading rubric on the syllabus, I decided not to do them. I performed well enough on the exams to get a D—the minimum grade that would allow me to graduate.

Recorded history is five thousand years old. Modern science, which has been with us for just four centuries, has remade its trajectory. We are no smarter individually than our medieval ancestors, but we benefit, as a civilization, from antibiotics and electronics, vitamins and vaccines, synthetic materials and weather forecasts; we comprehend our place in the universe with an exactness that was once unimaginable. I’d found that science was two-faced: simultaneously thrilling and tedious, all-encompassing and narrow. And yet this was clearly an asset, not a flaw. Something about that combination had changed the world completely.

In “[The Knowledge Machine: How Irrationality Created Modern Science](#)” (Liveright), Michael Strevens, a philosopher at New York University, aims to identify that special something. Strevens is a philosopher of science—a scholar charged with analyzing how scientific knowledge is generated. Philosophers of science tend to irritate practicing scientists, to whom science already makes complete sense. It doesn’t make sense to Strevens. “Science is an alien thought form,” he writes; that’s why so many civilizations rose and fell before it was invented. In his view, we downplay its weirdness, perhaps because its success is so fundamental to our continued existence. He promises to serve as “the P. T. Barnum of the laboratory, unveiling the monstrosity that lies at the heart of modern science.”

In school, one learns about “the scientific method”—usually a straightforward set of steps, along the lines of “ask a question, propose a hypothesis, perform an experiment, analyze the results.” That method works in the classroom, where students are basically told what questions to pursue. But real scientists must come up with their own questions, finding new routes through a much vaster landscape.



Mads

*“It’s an epic tale of love, loss, and the human condition, and it will accompany my online recipe for chicken cacciatore.”*  
Cartoon by Madeline Horwath

Since science began, there has been disagreement about how those routes are charted. Two twentieth-century philosophers of science, [Karl Popper](#) and Thomas Kuhn, are widely held to have offered the best accounts of this process. Popper maintained that scientists proceed by “falsifying” scientific claims—by trying to prove theories wrong. Kuhn, on the other hand, believed that scientists work to prove theories right, exploring and extending them until further progress becomes impossible. These two accounts rest on divergent visions of the scientific temperament. For Popper, Strevens writes, “scientific inquiry is essentially a process of disproof, and scientists are the disprovers, the debunkers, the destroyers.” Kuhn’s scientists, by contrast, are faddish true believers who promulgate received wisdom until they are forced to attempt a “paradigm shift”—a painful rethinking of their basic assumptions.

Working scientists tend to prefer Popper to Kuhn. But Strevens thinks that both theorists failed to capture what makes science historically distinctive and singularly effective. To illustrate, he tells the story of Roger Guillemin and Andrew Schally, two “rival endocrinologists” who shared a Nobel Prize in 1977 for discovering the molecular structure of TRH—a hormone, produced in the hypothalamus, that helps regulate the release of other hormones and so shapes many aspects of our lives. Mapping the hormone’s structure, Strevens explains, was an “epic slog” that lasted more than a decade, during which “literally tons of brain tissue, obtained from sheep or pigs, had to be mashed up and processed.” Guillemin and Schally, who were racing each other to analyze TRH—they crossed the finish line simultaneously—weren’t weirdos who loved animal brains. They gritted their teeth through the work. “Nobody before had to process millions of hypothalami,” Schally said. “The key factor is not the money, it’s the will . . . the brutal force of putting in sixty hours a week for a year to get one million fragments.”

Looking back on the project, Schally attributed their success to their outsider status. “Guillemin and I, we are immigrants, obscure little doctors, we fought our way to the top,” he said. But Strevens points out that “many important scientific studies have required of their practitioners a degree of single-mindedness that is quite inhuman.” It’s not just brain juice that demands such commitment. Scientists have dedicated entire careers to the painstaking refinement of delicate instruments, to the digging up of bone fragments, to the gathering of statistics about variations in the beaks of finches. Uncertain of success, they toil in an

obscurity that will deepen into futility if their work doesn't pan out.

"Science is boring," Strevens writes. "Readers of popular science see the 1 percent: the intriguing phenomena, the provocative theories, the dramatic experimental refutations or verifications." But, he says,

behind these achievements . . . are long hours, days, months of tedious laboratory labor. The single greatest obstacle to successful science is the difficulty of persuading brilliant minds to give up the intellectual pleasures of continual speculation and debate, theorizing and arguing, and to turn instead to a life consisting almost entirely of the production of experimental data.

The allocation of vast human resources to the measurement of possibly inconsequential minutiae is what makes science truly unprecedented in history. Why do scientists agree to this scheme? Why do some of the world's most intelligent people sign on for a lifetime of pipetting?

Strevens thinks that they do it because they have no choice. They are constrained by a central regulation that governs science, which he calls the "iron rule of explanation." The rule is simple: it tells scientists that, "if they are to participate in the scientific enterprise, they must uncover or generate new evidence to argue with"; from there, they must "conduct all disputes with reference to empirical evidence alone." Compared with the theories proposed by Popper and Kuhn, Strevens's rule can feel obvious and underpowered. That's because it isn't intellectual but procedural. "The iron rule is focused not on what scientists think," he writes, "but on what arguments they can make in their official communications." Still, he maintains, it is "the key to science's success," because it "channels hope, anger, envy, ambition, resentment—all the fires fuming in the human heart—to one end: the production of empirical evidence."

Strevens arrives at the idea of the iron rule in a Popperian way: by disproving the other theories about how scientific knowledge is created. The problem isn't that Popper and Kuhn are completely wrong. It's that scientists, as a group, don't pursue any single intellectual strategy consistently. Exploring a number of case studies—including the controversies over continental drift, spontaneous generation, and the theory of relativity—Strevens shows scientists exerting themselves intellectually in a variety of ways, as smart, ambitious people usually do. Sometimes they seek to falsify theories, sometimes to prove them;

sometimes they're informed by preexisting or contextual views, and at other times they try to rule narrowly, based on the evidence at hand.

Like everybody else, scientists view questions through the lenses of taste, personality, affiliation, and experience. In 1912, a young meteorologist and champion balloonist named Alfred Wegener proposed that the continents had once fit together but then drifted apart. His theory, which drew on a global survey of coastlines and continental shelves, made sense of the fact that the same sorts of rocks and fossilized animals often appeared on distant shores. Opponents of Wegener's theory, led by the eminent paleontologist George Gaylord Simpson, pointed out that he had no explanation for how the continents had moved. A rational non-scientist might have stayed neutral until more evidence had come in. But geologists had a professional obligation to take sides. Europeans, Strevens reports, tended to back Wegener, who was German, while scholars in the United States often preferred Simpson, who was American. Outsiders to the field were often more receptive to the concept of continental drift than established scientists, who considered its incompleteness a fatal flaw.

Strevens's point isn't that these scientists were doing anything wrong. If they had biases and perspectives, he writes, "that's how human thinking works." His point is that, despite their heated partiality, the papers they published consisted solely of data about rocks. Ultimately, in fact, it was good that the geologists had a "splendid variety" of somewhat arbitrary opinions: progress in science requires partisans, because only they have "the motivation to perform years or even decades of necessary experimental work." It's just that these partisans must channel their energies into empirical observation. The iron rule, Strevens writes, "has a valuable by-product, and that by-product is data."

Science is often described as "self-correcting": it's said that bad data and wrong conclusions are rooted out by other scientists, who present contrary findings. But Strevens thinks that the iron rule is often more important than overt correction. He tells the story of Arthur Eddington, an English astronomer who, in 1919, sailed to the island of Príncipe, off the west coast of Africa, to observe and photograph the position of a group of stars during a total eclipse of the sun. Eddington's observations were expected to either confirm or falsify Einstein's theory of general relativity, which predicted that the sun's gravity would bend the path of light, subtly shifting the stellar pattern. For reasons having to do with weather and equipment, the evidence collected by Eddington—and by his colleague Frank Dyson, who had taken similar photographs in Sobral, Brazil—

was inconclusive; some of their images were blurry, and so failed to resolve the matter definitively. Eddington pressed ahead anyway: the expedition report he published with Dyson contained detailed calculations and numerical tables that, they argued, showed that Einstein was right.

At the time, many physicists and astronomers were skeptical of the findings. Everyone knew that Eddington “wanted very much for Einstein’s theory to be true,” Strevens writes, “both because of its profound mathematical beauty” and because of Eddington’s “ardent internationalist desire to dissolve the rancor that had some Britons calling for a postwar boycott of German science.” (As a Quaker and an avowed pacifist, Eddington believed that scientific progress could be “a bond transcending human differences.”) All the same, Eddington was never really refuted. Other astronomers, driven by the iron rule, were already planning their own studies, and “the great preponderance of the resulting measurements fit Einsteinian physics better than Newtonian physics.” It’s partly by generating data on such a vast scale, Strevens argues, that the iron rule can power science’s knowledge machine: “Opinions converge not because bad data is corrected but because it is swamped.”

Why did the iron rule emerge when it did? Strevens takes us back to the Thirty Years’ War, which concluded with the Peace of Westphalia, in 1648. The war weakened religious loyalties and strengthened national ones. Afterward, he writes, what mattered most “was that you were English or French”; whether you were Anglican or Catholic became “your private concern.” Two regimes arose: in the spiritual realm, the will of God held sway, while in the civic one the decrees of the state were paramount. As Isaac Newton wrote, “The laws of God & the laws of man are to be kept distinct.” These new, “nonoverlapping spheres of obligation,” Strevens argues, were what made it possible to imagine the iron rule. The rule simply proposed the creation of a third sphere: in addition to God and state, there would now be science.

In the single-sphered, pre-scientific world, thinkers tended to inquire into everything at once. Often, they arrived at conclusions about nature that were fascinating, visionary, and wrong. Looking back, we usually fault such thinkers for being insufficiently methodical and empirical. But Strevens tells a more charitable story: it was only natural for intelligent people who were free of the rule’s strictures to attempt a kind of holistic, systematic inquiry that was, in many ways, more demanding. It never occurred to them to ask if they might illuminate more collectively by thinking about less individually.

It's in this context, Strevens suggests, that we should understand the story of René Descartes, the philosopher and mathematician who, among other things, invented the system of plotting points and lines on a grid. In his first book, "[The World](#)," completed in 1633, Descartes, who was then in his late thirties, offered a sprawling account of the universe, explaining how vision works, how muscles move, how plants grow, how gravity functions, and how God set everything spinning in the first place. Today, the ambition of treatises like "The World" strikes us as absurd. But Strevens imagines how, to someone in Descartes's time, the iron rule would have seemed "unreasonably closed-minded." Since ancient Greece, it had been obvious that the best thinking was cross-disciplinary, capable of knitting together "poetry, music, drama, philosophy, democracy, mathematics," and other elevating human disciplines. We're still accustomed to the idea that a truly flourishing intellect is a well-rounded one. And, by this standard, Strevens says, the iron rule looks like "an irrational way to inquire into the underlying structure of things"; it seems to demand the upsetting "suppression of human nature." (Perhaps it's as compensation that, today, so many scientists seem to pursue their hobbies—woodworking, sailing, ballroom dancing—with such avidity.) Descartes, in short, would have had good reasons for resisting a law that narrowed the grounds of disputation, or that encouraged what Strevens describes as "doing rather than thinking."



*"If I leave them in there with a bottle, I can usually get a little time for myself."*  
Cartoon by Benjamin Schwartz

In fact, the iron rule offered scientists a more supple vision of progress. Before its arrival, intellectual life was conducted in grand gestures. Descartes's book was meant to be a complete overhaul of what had preceded it; its fate, had science not arisen, would have been replacement by some equally expansive system. The iron rule broke that pattern. Strevens sees its earliest expression in Francis Bacon's "[The New Organon](#)," a foundational text of the Scientific Revolution, published in 1620. Bacon argued that thinkers must set aside their "idols," relying, instead, only on evidence they could verify. This dictum gave scientists a new way of responding to one another's work: gathering data. But it also changed what counted as progress. In the past, a theory about the world was deemed valid when it was complete—when God, light, muscles, plants, and the planets cohered. The iron rule allowed scientists to step away from the quest for completeness.

The consequences of this shift would become apparent only with time. In 1713, Isaac Newton appended a postscript to the second edition of his "[Principia](#)," the treatise in which he first laid out the three laws of motion and the theory of universal gravitation. "I have not as yet been able to deduce from phenomena the reason for these properties of gravity, and I do not feign hypotheses," he wrote. "It is enough that gravity really exists and acts according to the laws that we have set forth." What mattered, to Newton and his contemporaries, was his theory's empirical, predictive power—that it was "sufficient to explain all the motions of the heavenly bodies and of our sea."

Descartes would have found this attitude ridiculous. He had been playing a deep game—trying to explain, at a fundamental level, how the universe fit together. Newton, by those lights, had failed to explain anything: he himself admitted that he had no sense of how gravity did its work or fit into the whole; he'd merely produced equations that predicted observations. If he'd made progress, it was only by changing the rules of the game, redefining wide-ranging inquiry as a private pastime, rather than official business. And yet, by authorizing what Strevens calls "shallow explanation," the iron rule offered an empirical bridge across a conceptual chasm. Work could continue, and understanding could be acquired on the other side. In this way, shallowness was actually more powerful than depth.

We seem to be crossing a similar bridge today. Quantum theory—which tells us

that subatomic particles can be “entangled” across vast distances, and in multiple places at the same time—makes intuitive sense to pretty much nobody. Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg, who argued in Copenhagen (and in “Copenhagen”), agreed on one interpretation of the theory, according to which the universe is essentially probabilistic; Albert Einstein took the opposite view. Eight decades later, it’s still unclear what the theory means. The confusion most of us feel about it is echoed, in a higher register, among physicists, who argue about whether there are many worlds or one.

Without the iron rule, Strevens writes, physicists confronted with such a theory would have found themselves at an impasse. They would have argued endlessly about quantum metaphysics. Following the iron rule, they can make progress empirically even though they are uncertain conceptually. Individual researchers still passionately disagree about what quantum theory means. But that hasn’t stopped them from using it for practical purposes—computer chips, MRI machines, G.P.S. networks, and other technologies rely on quantum physics. It hasn’t prevented universities and governments from spending billions of dollars on huge machines that further explore the quantum world. Even as we wait to understand the theory, we can refine it, one decimal place at a time.

Compared with other stories about the invention and success of science, “The Knowledge Machine” is unusually parsimonious. Other theorists have explained science by charting a sweeping revolution in the human mind; inevitably, they’ve become mired in a long-running debate about how objective scientists really are. One group of theorists, the rationalists, has argued that science is a new way of thinking, and that the scientist is a new kind of thinker—dispassionate to an uncommon degree. As evidence against this view, another group, the subjectivists, points out that scientists are as hopelessly biased as the rest of us. To this group, the aloofness of science is a smoke screen behind which the inevitable emotions and ideologies hide.

Strevens offers a more modest story. The iron rule—“a kind of speech code”—simply created a new way of communicating, and it’s this new way of communicating that created science. The subjectivists are right, he admits, inasmuch as scientists are regular people with a “need to win” and a “determination to come out on top.” But they are wrong to think that subjectivity compromises the scientific enterprise. On the contrary, once subjectivity is channelled by the iron rule, it becomes a vital component of the knowledge machine. It’s this redirected subjectivity—to come out on top, you must follow

the iron rule!—that solves science’s “problem of motivation,” giving scientists no choice but “to pursue a single experiment relentlessly, to the last measurable digit, when that digit might be quite meaningless.”

On one level, it’s ironic to find a philosopher—a professional talker—arguing that science was born when philosophical talk was exiled to the pub. On another, it makes sense that a philosopher would be attuned to the power of how we talk and argue. If it really was a speech code that instigated “the extraordinary attention to process and detail that makes science the supreme discriminator and destroyer of false ideas,” then the peculiar rigidity of scientific writing—Strevens describes it as “sterilized”—isn’t a symptom of the scientific mind-set but its cause. Etiquette is what has created the modern world.

Does Strevens’s story have implications outside of science? Today, we think a lot about speech—about its power to frame, normalize, empower, and harm. In our political discourse, we value unfiltered authenticity; from our journalism, we demand moral clarity. Often, we bring our whole selves into what we say. And yet we may be missing something important about how speech drives behavior. At least in science, Strevens tells us, “the appearance of objectivity” has turned out to be “as important as the real thing.” Perhaps speech codes can be building materials for knowledge machines. In that case, our conversations can still be fiery and wide-ranging. But we should write those lab reports, too. ♦

# How to Misread Jane Austen

The novelist was a keen observer of her time. Now readers want to make her a mirror of our own.

By [Louis Menand](#)

September 28, 2020



“What would Jane Austen say?” is a fun game to play, but the truth is that we have no idea. For a writer of her renown, the biographical record is unusually thin. No notebooks or diaries survive. After Austen died, in 1817, her sister, Cassandra, destroyed or censored most of Jane’s letters to her, and after their brother Francis’s death his daughter destroyed all of Jane’s letters to him.

The letters that remain are not especially “Austenian,” and they can be a little hard-hearted and judgy, which does not match very well the image of Austen in the pious biographical sketch written by her brother Henry, shortly after her death, or in the [memoir](#) by her nephew James Edward Austen-Leigh, published more than fifty years later, which is mainly family oral remembrance, and in which she is “dear Aunt Jane.”

The [novels](#) are not much help, either. Besides the usual difficulties involved in trying to extract a moral from works of literature, there is the problem of Austen’s irony. She is not just representing characters in her novels; she is representing the discursive bubble those characters inhabit, and she almost never steps outside that bubble. She is always ventriloquizing. Virginia Woolf compared her to Shakespeare: “She flatters and cajoles you with the promise of intimacy and then, at the last moment, there is the same blankness. Are those Jane Austen’s eyes or is it a glass, a mirror, a silver spoon held up in the sun?”

Instead of asking what Austen is trying to tell us, we might ask what she’s trying to show us. But the answer to that seems to be: It depends on who’s looking. In her lifetime, Austen was popular with a certain class of readers, the fashionable and well-off, who enjoyed her novels, particularly “Pride and Prejudice,” as comedies of manners. They got the jokes, and you always feel good about an author when you are in on her jokes.

But Austen was hardly a best-seller, and by the eighteen-twenties her books were often out of print. The critical line on her, even from admirers like Sir Walter Scott, was that she was a miniaturist specializing in an exceedingly narrow sector of British society, the landed gentry. Everyone agreed that she captured that world with astonishing precision; not everyone felt that it was a world worth capturing. “A carefully fenced, highly cultivated garden with neat borders and delicate flowers,” Charlotte Brontë described “[Pride and Prejudice](#)” to a friend. “I should hardly like to live with her ladies and gentlemen in their elegant but confined houses.”

Queen Victoria was a fan (a taste, possibly the only one, she shared with B. B. King), and after the publication of Austen-Leigh's memoir, in 1869, Austen enjoyed a revival. What had put off readers like Charlotte Brontë now became the basis of her appeal. Her books transported readers to a simpler time and place. They were escapist fiction. Winston Churchill had "Pride and Prejudice" read aloud to him when he was recovering from pneumonia during the Second World War. "What calm lives they had, those people!" was his thought. "No worries about the French Revolution, or the crashing struggle of the Napoleonic Wars. Only manners controlling natural passion so far as they could, together with cultured explanations of any mischances."

The suggestion that Austen might have had anything critical to say about those people would have spoiled the illusion. "She is absolutely at peace with her most comfortable world," Virginia Woolf's father, Leslie Stephen, explained. "She never even hints at a suspicion that squires and parsons of the English type are not an essential part of the order of things."

Still, there were readers who detected an edge. Woolf was one. "I would rather not find myself in the room alone with her," she wrote. The British critic D. W. Harding, in 1939, proposed that Austen's books were enjoyed "by precisely the sort of people whom she disliked; she is a literary classic of the society which attitudes like hers, held widely enough, would undermine." The title of his essay was "Regulated Hatred." Lionel Trilling, in 1955, called Austen "an agent of the Terror," meaning that she is merciless in forcing us to confront our moral weaknesses.

Today, there are two Austens, with, probably, a fair amount of overlap: the recreational reader's Austen and the English professor's Austen. For the recreational reader, the novels are courtship stories, and the attraction is the strong women characters who, despite the best efforts of rivals and relations to screw things up, always succeed in making the catch. "Boy meets girl, girl gets boy" is the bumper-sticker version.

This category of reader presumably makes up a big part of the audience for the movie and television adaptations, a steady stream of entertainment product that shows no signs of slowing. Since 1995, there have been at least one screen adaptation of "Northanger Abbey," two of "Sense and Sensibility," two of "Mansfield Park," two of "Persuasion," three of "Pride and Prejudice," and four of "Emma." "[Lady Susan](#)," a short epistolary novel Austen wrote when she was

eighteen, was made into a movie by Whit Stillman in 2016, and last year Andrew Davies adapted Austen’s last novel, “[Sanditon](#),” into a miniseries, even though she had finished only eleven chapters of it (about a fifth) before she died.

The English professor likes the strong women, too, and watches the adaptations (with a learned and critical eye). But the professor thinks that the novels are about things that people like Churchill and Leslie Stephen thought they leave out: the French Revolution, slavery, the empire, patriarchy, the rights of women. Those subjects might not be in the foreground, but that’s because they were not inside the English gentry’s bubble. The slave trade was not something that ladies and gentlemen talked about—particularly if they had some financial connection to it, as several of Austen’s characters seem to. There are plenty of hints in the books about what is going on in the larger world. Those hints must be there for a reason.

But what is the reason? Do the novels have a political subtext? Since there are few signs of unconventional political views in the biographical record, one approach is to separate Austen from her novels—what she believed from what she wrote. In “[Jane Austen: Writing, Society, Politics](#)” (Oxford), for example, Tom Keymer, who teaches at the University of Toronto, explains that Austen was a novelist “in whom an implicitly Tory world view is frequently interrogated or disrupted by destabilizing ironies and eruptions of satirical anger that are no less real for the elegance and wit of their expression.”

Literature professors love the notion of texts “interrogating” things; I am a literature professor, and I have certainly used that line. But, in this case, it feels like fence-straddling. It asks us to accept an Austen who is somehow simultaneously conservative as a person and subversive as a writer. Keymer says things like “The courtship plot that structures all six of Austen’s published novels, though sometimes held to imply her endorsement of a patriarchal status quo, is equally a means of exploring themes of female disempowerment.” It’s hard to see how the novels can be “equally” endorsements of patriarchy and criticisms of it.

Keymer doesn’t mention Helena Kelly’s “[Jane Austen, the Secret Radical](#)” (2016), but, in some respects, his little book, which is a somewhat cautious introduction to reading Austen, rather than a full-dress critical appraisal, could be thought of as a response to hers. Kelly, as her title suggests, has no trouble naming Austen’s politics. Austen lived, after all, in an age of revolutions, and

Kelly thinks that her novels are “as revolutionary, at their heart, as anything that Wollstonecraft or Tom Paine wrote.” They just have to be read “the right way.”

“The right way” means treating the brief glimpses Austen gives us of life outside her characters’ social circles—and, once you start looking, you see them all over the place—as pieces of a puzzle that, when assembled, reveals what is really going on. Kelly makes a case, for example, that passing references in “[Emma](#)” to ditches and hedges, along with a scrap of conversation about relocating a public path, are meant to signal to us that Emma’s neighbor and future husband, Mr. Knightley, is engaged in an aggressive campaign to enclose his land—that is, to fence it off in order to prevent local people from exercising the “rights of common.”

This was the right to enter private land for specified purposes, such as grazing, fishing, foraging, gathering firewood, and so on, and for many people in rural England it helped make ends meet. Kelly cites the scholar Ruth Perry as calculating that access to private lands (as virtually all lands in England were) essentially doubled the income of farming families. Once those lands were legally enclosed, however, it became a crime to trespass on them. Kelly thinks that the poultry thieves who steal Mrs. Weston’s turkeys at the end of “Emma” are meant to show us the economic damage being caused by Mr. Knightley’s enclosures. Why else would Austen have put them in her story? The plot does not require turkey thieves.

Kelly’s Mr. Knightley, in short, is a heartless landowner intent on building a private fiefdom. She thinks the reason he marries Emma is that he wants to absorb her property, one of the few parcels of land around Highbury he does not already own, into his estate. Keymer would not object to this line of interpretation, presumably—“implication, not explication, was Austen’s way,” he says—but would be reluctant to conclude that it means that Austen was a revolutionary.

In “[30 Great Myths About Jane Austen](#)” (Wiley Blackwell), two eminent Austen scholars, Claudia L. Johnson, from Princeton, and Clara Tuite, from the University of Melbourne, take on some of the characterizations of Austen in general circulation: “There is no sex in Jane Austen’s novels,” “Jane Austen was unconscious of her art,” “Jane Austen’s novels are about good manners,” and twenty-seven more.

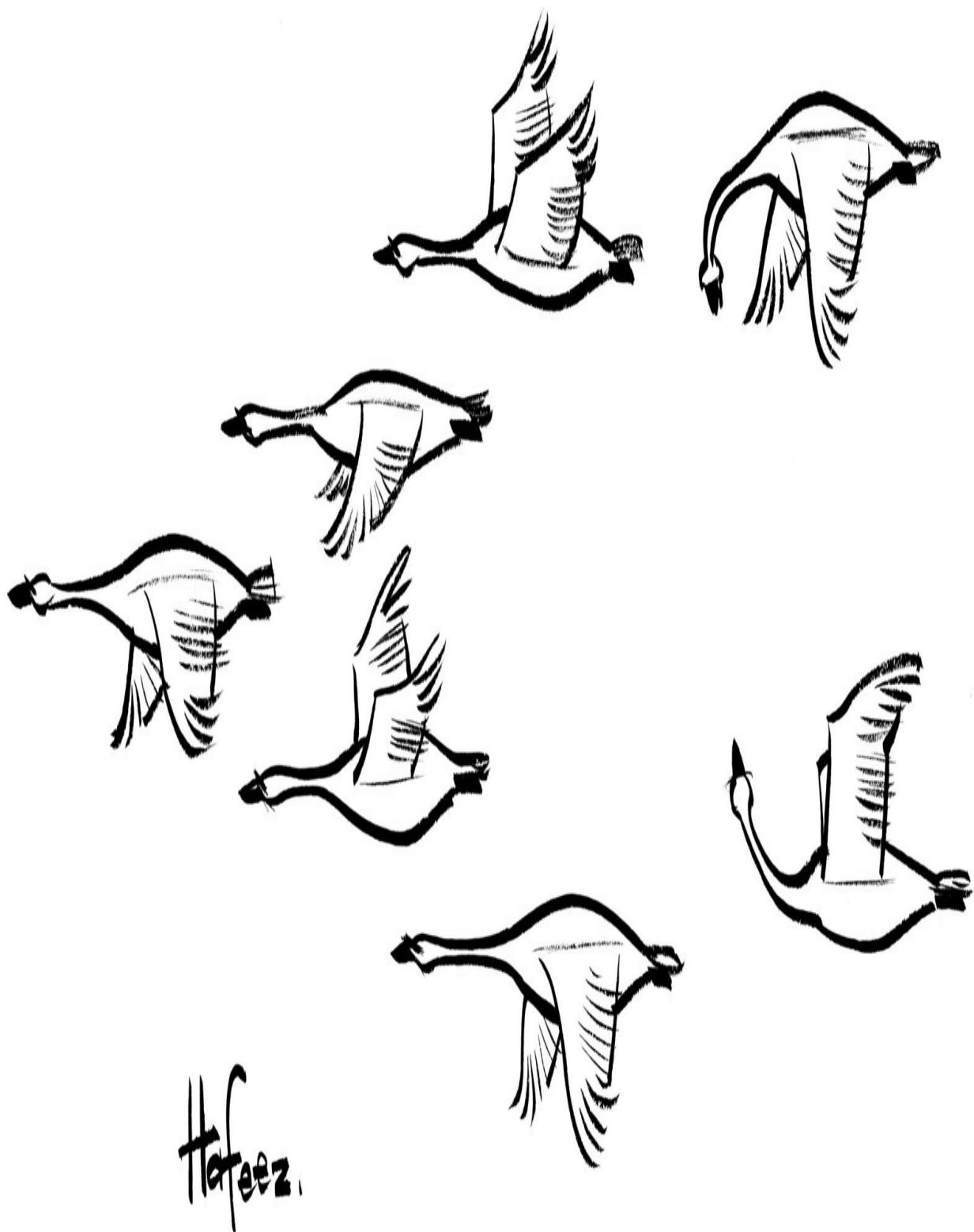
The book is not an exercise in pure debunking (as entertaining as that would have been), because Johnson and Tuite hold the view that although some of these myths—“Jane Austen disapproved of the theatre,” for instance—are demonstrably false, many have become inseparable from the way Austen is read and received. The scholars’ point is that even mistaken assumptions about Austen reveal something in her work that is worth digging into.

The belief that Austen was hostile to the theatre comes from “[Mansfield Park](#),” whose plot turns on a private theatrical that the novel’s prudish protagonist, Fanny Price, considers objectionable, because it permits people to simulate passions that, in real life, would be illicit. And Fanny proves to be right—one of the amateur actors later runs off with another man’s wife, a woman he had flirted with when they were rehearsing, ruining her reputation.

But we know that Austen loved going to the theatre (she also loved to dance), and that she enjoyed composing and acting in private theatricals organized by her siblings—which makes for an interesting interpretive problem. What is Austen trying to show us about the theatre in “Mansfield Park”? And this turns out to be very hard to pin down.

Like Keymer, Johnson and Tuite are therefore sometimes led into critical impasses, points at which an interpretation can be argued either way. In a chapter on “Jane Austen was a feminist/Jane Austen was not a feminist,” for example, they propose that “both elements of this myth are true and untrue.” Maybe this is the best that can be said on the subject, but it is not a premise that gets us very far.

Johnson and Tuite think that the reason we keep running into conundrums like these is that readers project their own views onto Austen. Some readers want to see a feminist, and other readers prefer to see a writer who does not make it her business to question the status quo. “Because Austen herself is such a mythic, beloved figure,” they explain, “many readers have tended to align her with their own yearnings, social outlooks, and dispositions.”



"We tried forming a collective—no leader, no structure, no power dynamics—but we just ended up flying in a circle over Winnipeg."  
Cartoon by Kaamran Hafeez

Surely this is backward. Isn't it because Austen's texts are so indeterminate that

she is beloved by people who come to her with different prejudices and expectations? And isn't her mythic stature produced by her writing, rather than projected by her readers? Isn't inscrutability part of the intention? That we don't know much about Austen from her letters (or from what we have of them) suggests that she didn't want people to know much about her, period.

All of Austen's novels are about misinterpretation, about people reading other people incorrectly. Catherine Morland, in "[Northanger Abbey](#)," reads General Tilney wrong. Elizabeth Bennet reads Mr. Darcy wrong. Marianne Dashwood, in "[Sense and Sensibility](#)," gets Willoughby wrong, and Edmund Bertram, in "Mansfield Park," gets Mary Crawford wrong. Emma gets everybody wrong. There might be a warning to the reader here: do not think that you are getting it right, either.

"Emma," for instance, is the only mature novel Austen named for a character, and that is because the entire narrative, except for one chapter, is from Emma's point of view. The novel is therefore Emma's story, the story of a young woman who, after considering herself rather too good for the marriage game, ends up marrying the most eligible man in town. Mr. Knightley also happens to be the brother of Emma's sister's husband, and, whether it was his intention or not, the marriage does further strengthen the union of their two estates. The Knightleys and the Woodhouses are now one family. The marital outcome consolidates the existing social order. No boats are being rocked.

Many readers also feel, with Emma's marriage to Mr. Knightley, a sense of moral closure. For the spark is lit when he reproves her for a rather mild insult to Miss Bates, a woman who belongs to their social class but has lost almost all her income. Being called out for this breach of etiquette is what sets Emma on a path of reappraisal and makes her vow to be a better person, which turns out to be a person who falls in love with her reprobate. Proper manners, behaving in a way appropriate to one's status, is what holds the order in place.

The ending of "Emma" therefore might seem to confirm the belief that Austen is a conservative at heart: this is how she likes things to turn out. But there is another marriage plot in "Emma." It involves a secret engagement between Jane, an orphan with no prospects, and Frank, the son of a local man (Mr. Weston) who has been adopted and raised by the Churchills, a wealthy family with houses in Yorkshire and London and its environs.

Frank stands to inherit the Churchill estate, but could be cut off if he marries a penniless woman like Jane over the objections of Mrs. Churchill. Frank and Jane both show up in Highbury, and much of the action is driven by Frank's attempts to see Jane without raising suspicions that they are lovers. There are clues all along, but we miss or misinterpret them because Emma misses and misinterprets them. Emma thinks that Frank is courting her, but he's only using her as a distraction.

In the end, Frank and Jane's difficulties are overcome, and they marry. They will probably be much richer than Emma and Mr. Knightley, and they don't have to spend the rest of their lives in provincial Highbury. It's an outcome with a completely different spin. Jane and Frank weren't born to their fortune, and they haven't really earned it. They just lucked out. Meanwhile, Frank has violated all the canons of proper behavior. He is not who he pretends to be. He lies to everyone; he toys with Emma's affections; he torments his fiancée by making a show of ignoring her. And yet he gets the girl and the houses. What's the lesson there?

The people who read Austen for the romance and the people who read Austen for the sociology are both reading her correctly, because Austen understands courtship as an attempt to achieve the maximum point of intersection between love and money. Characters who are in the marriage game just for love, like Marianne Dashwood, in "Sense and Sensibility," are likely to get burned. Characters in it just for the money, like Maria Bertram, in "Mansfield Park," are likely to be unhappy.

It's possible for the parties to settle for considerably less than the maximum, as Mr. Collins and Charlotte Lucas do, in "Pride and Prejudice." She desperately needs a husband for financial reasons; he needs a wife for professional ones. She knows that he's an unctuous creep, and that he proposed to Elizabeth Bennet a day before he propositioned her. And he knows that she knows it. But they establish a modus vivendi. They are fine with setting the love curve at zero.

That's not good enough, though, for leading characters like Elizabeth Bennet, Elinor Dashwood, and Fanny Price. However dire their financial situation, and in every case it's pretty dire, they want to marry for love. Mr. Darcy is fabulously wealthy, and Elizabeth, when her father dies, will have almost nothing, but she has no hesitation rejecting his first marriage proposal, because she hates him.

What is exceptional about Austen as a novelist is that she tells us exactly how much money each of her characters has. She gives us far more information than Dickens, who was at least as obsessed with class and income as she was, or George Eliot. We know not merely that Elizabeth will be poor when her father dies. We know precisely what her income will be: forty pounds a year. We also know why Elizabeth's prospects are so grim: because her father has neglected to plan for his daughters. He has almost no savings, and his property is entailed to the closest male heir—who happens to be the egregious Mr. Collins.

For British readers in the nineteenth century, these numbers conveyed very specific information. Most American readers today probably gloss over them. We don't know what it signifies to have *x* number of pounds a year. When we read, in "Emma," that "the charming Augusta Hawkins, in addition to all the usual advantages of perfect beauty and merit, was in possession of an independent fortune, of so many thousands as would always be called ten," we can tell there is a joke there, and we might even chuckle fake-knowingly, but we aren't in on it.

That's because we don't know what Austen's nineteenth-century readers would have known, which is that a fortune of ten thousand pounds represents the minimum point on the money curve. Those ten thousand pounds would be invested in government bonds with an effective rate of five per cent. And, if you had five hundred pounds a year and no dependents, you could live comfortably and did not need to work.

Most of Austen's characters who are on the marriage market want to do better than five hundred a year, of course. Augusta Hawkins needn't worry; in addition to her own fortune, she has her marriage to the local vicar, who has an income from tithes. According to Ivan Nottingham, one of the people who have studied Austen and money, with a thousand pounds a year you could afford a comfortable life with a staff of three female servants, a coachman, a footman, a carriage, and horses.

The movie and television adaptations often make a point of showing us just how many servants are around all the time, although in the Keira Knightley "Pride and Prejudice," released in 2005, the financial condition of the Bennets is made to appear rather shabby. They are shown to live in a ramshackle house with chickens in the yard, and we see few servants. But the family in the novel is actually quite well off. They have a cook, a housekeeper, a butler, a footman, a

coachman, horses, and two maids. The Bennets' problem is not a lack of assets; it's mismanagement.

Few female characters in Austen have the kind of money that Emma does. She has thirty thousand pounds, and along with her sister she will inherit the family house. Mr. Darcy's income is ten thousand *a year*. He is not the richest character in Austen. Mr. Rushworth, in "Mansfield Park," has twelve thousand a year. (Mr. Rushworth is also a complete chucklehead; he is the man Maria Bertram makes the mistake of marrying.) Those were very large incomes. They place Darcy and Rushworth in the top one per cent of households in Austen's Britain, even though neither man is a peer.

We can put all these numbers in perspective by noting that the average annual income in Britain was thirty pounds. (Thirty pounds was the typical salary for a governess, the fate that awaits Jane, in "Emma," if she fails to marry.) Farmworkers had an annual income of around twenty pounds. Men working in paper mills could make about sixty pounds a year. Women workers were paid much less. People who were forced by debt to live in the poorhouse had to subsist on six and half pounds a year, paid from parish taxes.

These levels of inequality persisted through most of the nineteenth century, a period that saw almost no over-all inflation—which is why readers would have known how to “decode” the economic profiles of Austen’s characters. In the Sherlock Holmes story “The Sign of the Four,” published in 1890, Dr. Watson tells the woman who stands to inherit a trove of rare gems, “You will have a couple of hundred thousand. . . . An annuity of ten thousand pounds. There will be few richer young ladies in England. Is it not glorious?” The math is the same as it is in “Pride and Prejudice.”

So is the wealth distribution. In Austen’s day, the top ten per cent of households in Britain owned eighty-five per cent of the national wealth, and the top one per cent, the Darcys and the Rushworths, owned fifty-five per cent. The bottom half owned nothing. If we are inclined to raise an eyebrow at these figures, we should remember that in the United States today the top one per cent of households own more than thirty per cent of the wealth, the top ten per cent about seventy per cent, and the bottom half less than two per cent.

Where Charlotte Brontë and Leslie Stephen went wrong was in assuming that the world of the Woodhouses and the Knightleys, the Bingleys and the Bertrams,

was Jane Austen's world, that she was writing about her own social circle. But Austen did not belong to that circle. She knew and observed people in it, of course, but her own family belonged to what is called the "pseudo-gentry"—families that lived like the gentry, had the gentry's taste and manners, and often married into the gentry, but depended on a male family member with a job to maintain their style of life.

Austen's father, George, was the rector of two Anglican parishes, from which he earned, from the combined tithes, two hundred and ten pounds a year. To add to this extremely modest income, the family also sold farm produce, and George and his wife, Cassandra, ran a school for boys out of their house. In 1797, Claire Tomalin tells us in her biography of Jane Austen, the family bought a carriage; in 1798, they had to give it up. In 1800, the farm brought in almost three hundred pounds, but tithes fell, owing to a depression. The Austens, a family of ten, seem rarely to have broken the five-hundred-pound mark.

When clergymen died, the Church made no provisions for their families, and when George Austen died, in 1805, Jane, her sister, and her mother were left with enough capital to pay them two hundred pounds a year. Otherwise, they depended on contributions from the brothers; they lived in a small cottage on the estate of one brother, Edward. Jane's total income from the four books she published in her lifetime was six hundred and eighty-four pounds. Jane Austen was not "comfortable" in the world of her novels, because she did not live in that world.

Does this mean that she was pressing her nose against the glass, imagining a life she was largely excluded from? Or does it mean that she could see with the clarity and unsentimentality of the outsider the fatuity of those people and the injustices and inequalities their comforts were built on? We can only guess. ♦

[October 5, 2020 Issue](#)

## **Briefly Noted**

“Ellis Island,” “Think Least of Death,” “The Appointment,” and “His Only Wife.”

September 28, 2020

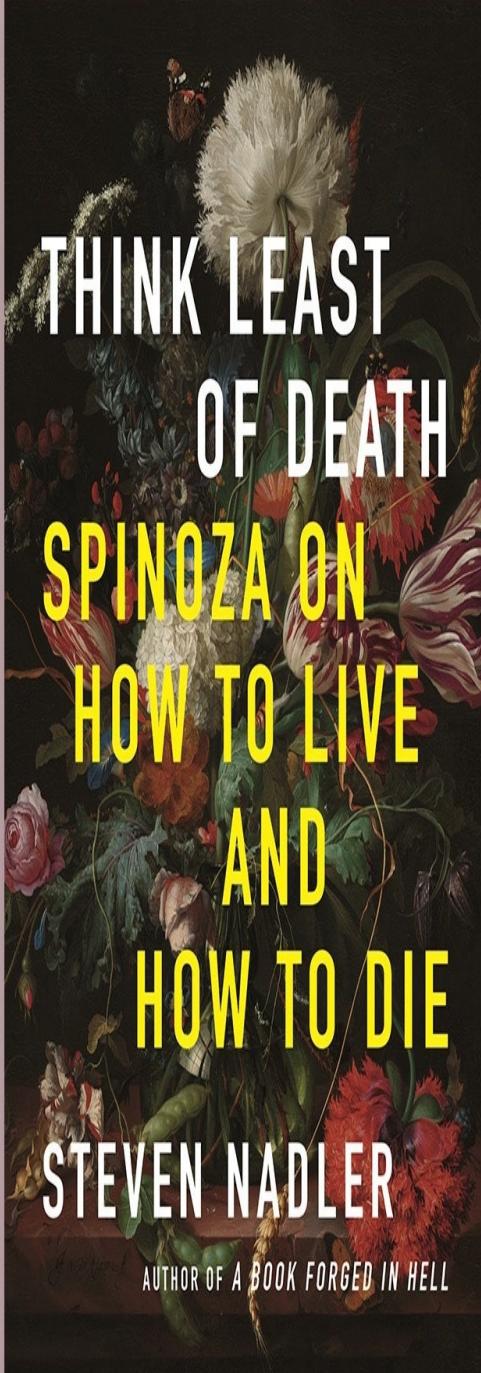
Małgorzata  
Szejnert

# ELLIS ISLAND

A PEOPLE'S HISTORY



[\*\*Ellis Island\*\*](#), by Małgorzata Szejnert, translated from the Polish by Sean Gasper Bye (*Scribe*). This “people’s history” comprises intimate views of Ellis Island both from immigrants and from staff, including doctors, social workers, commissioners, and interpreters (among them the future mayor Fiorello LaGuardia). Policies were shaped by anti-Semitism, fear of Communism, and xenophobia, and monthly immigration quotas in the twenties led to “a peculiar type of boat race” in New York Harbor, as ships rushed to deliver their passengers. Szejnert also records the idealism and the compassion of those employed there—such as the social worker who gave new arrivals stylish American clothing—many of whom were immigrants themselves.

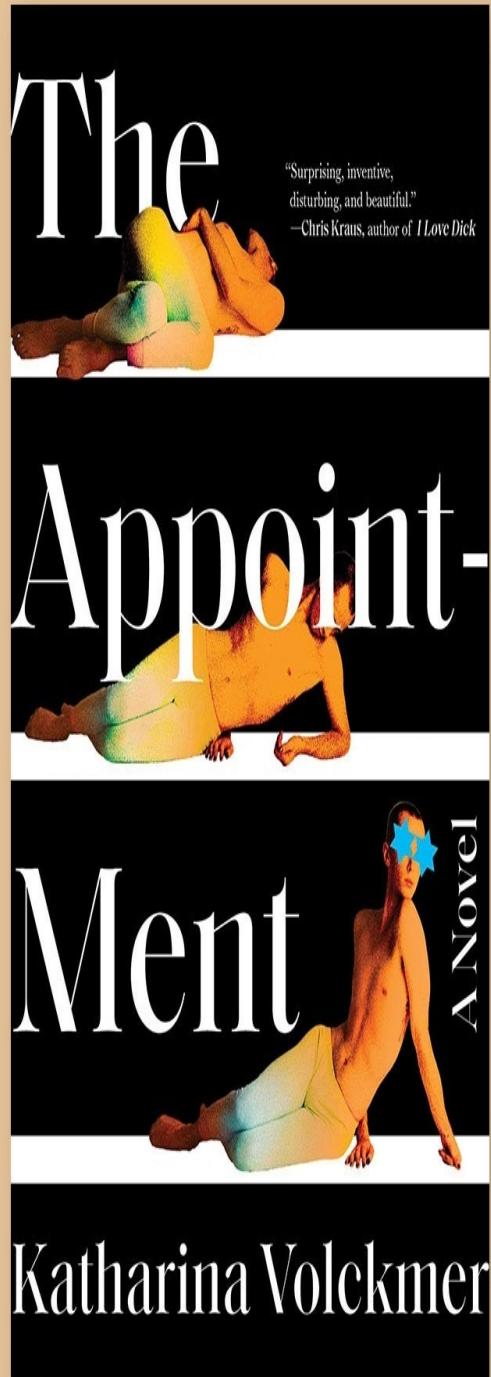


THINK LEAST  
OF DEATH  
SPINOZA ON  
HOW TO LIVE  
AND  
HOW TO DIE

STEVEN NADLER

AUTHOR OF *A BOOK FORGED IN HELL*

**Think Least of Death**, by Steven Nadler (*Princeton*). Aiming to extract life lessons from the philosophy of Spinoza, this vibrant study focusses on the concept of “homo liber,” or the free person, a supremely rational figure continually striving for power and virtue. Often considered an impossible ideal, homo liber, in Nadler’s reading, becomes a universal, accessible model of ethical living. Addressing Spinoza’s view of the mind as an “agonistic arena,” in which ideas based on truth compete with ones based on incomplete or false knowledge, Nadler argues that we can enable virtue simply by seeking truth. While the reverse also holds—false knowledge deprives us of the necessary basis for rational, virtuous action—Spinoza’s work serves as a hopeful, timely statement of what the truth-seeking individual can accomplish.



# The

"Surprising, inventive,  
disturbing, and beautiful."  
—Chris Kraus, author of *I Love Dick*

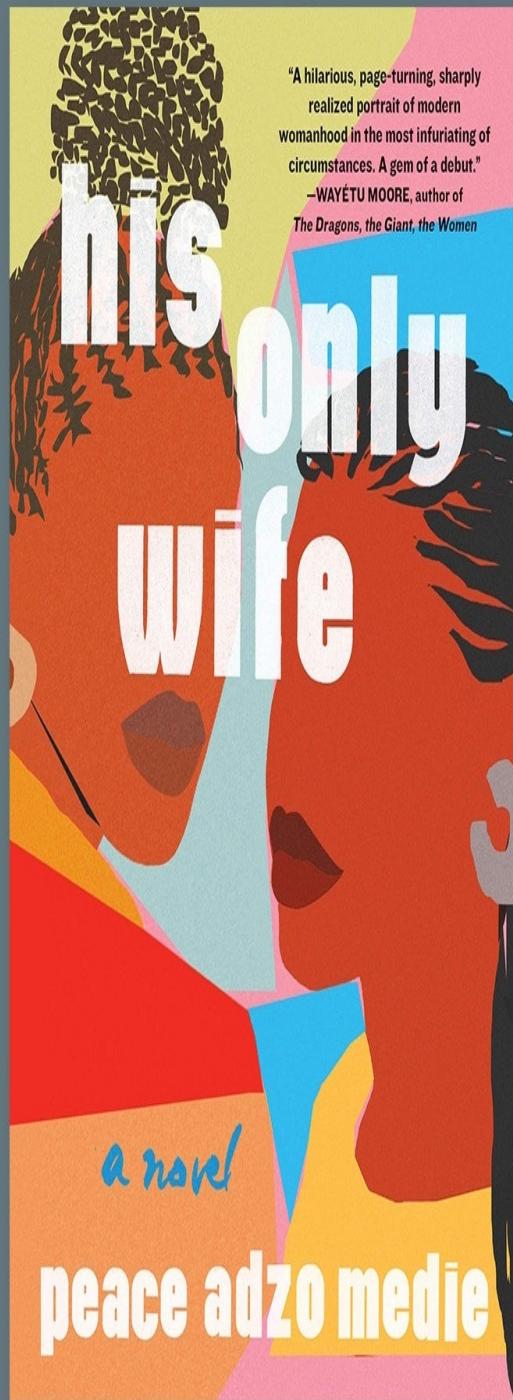
# Appoint-

# Ment

A Novel

Katharina Volckmer

**The Appointment**, by Katharina Volckmer (*Avid Reader*). In this transgressive, darkly funny novel, a German woman living in London launches into an incendiary monologue during a gynecological examination. Beginning with a dream of Hitler, she touches on subjects such as the efficacy of sex robots, German complacency, the sham of heterosexual love, and the deficiencies of the therapist she was required to see after threatening to attack someone with a stapler at a previous job. As her rant gathers steam, she recounts her failed relationship with a painter named K. and her struggles with her sense of identity. The novel gleefully rushes into excruciating territory, asserting that “the only true comfort we can find in life is to be free from our own lies.”



**His Only Wife**, by Peace Adzo Medie (Algonquin). “Elikem married me in absentia,” Afi, a young Ghanaian woman of humble origins, explains at the start of this engaging début novel. The wedding has been arranged by the groom’s exceedingly wealthy family, who hope to end his relationship with another woman, of whom they disapprove. “You have to learn to fight for your husband,” Afi’s new mother-in-law instructs. Things begin to seem like a fairy tale when Eli turns out to be handsome and kind, and even encourages Afi’s career in fashion design. Still, he will not give up the other woman. Afi is no class warrior—“Only rich people could afford the types of clothes I wanted to make,” she says—but she gradually develops into a woman able to demand what she wants.

# Dance

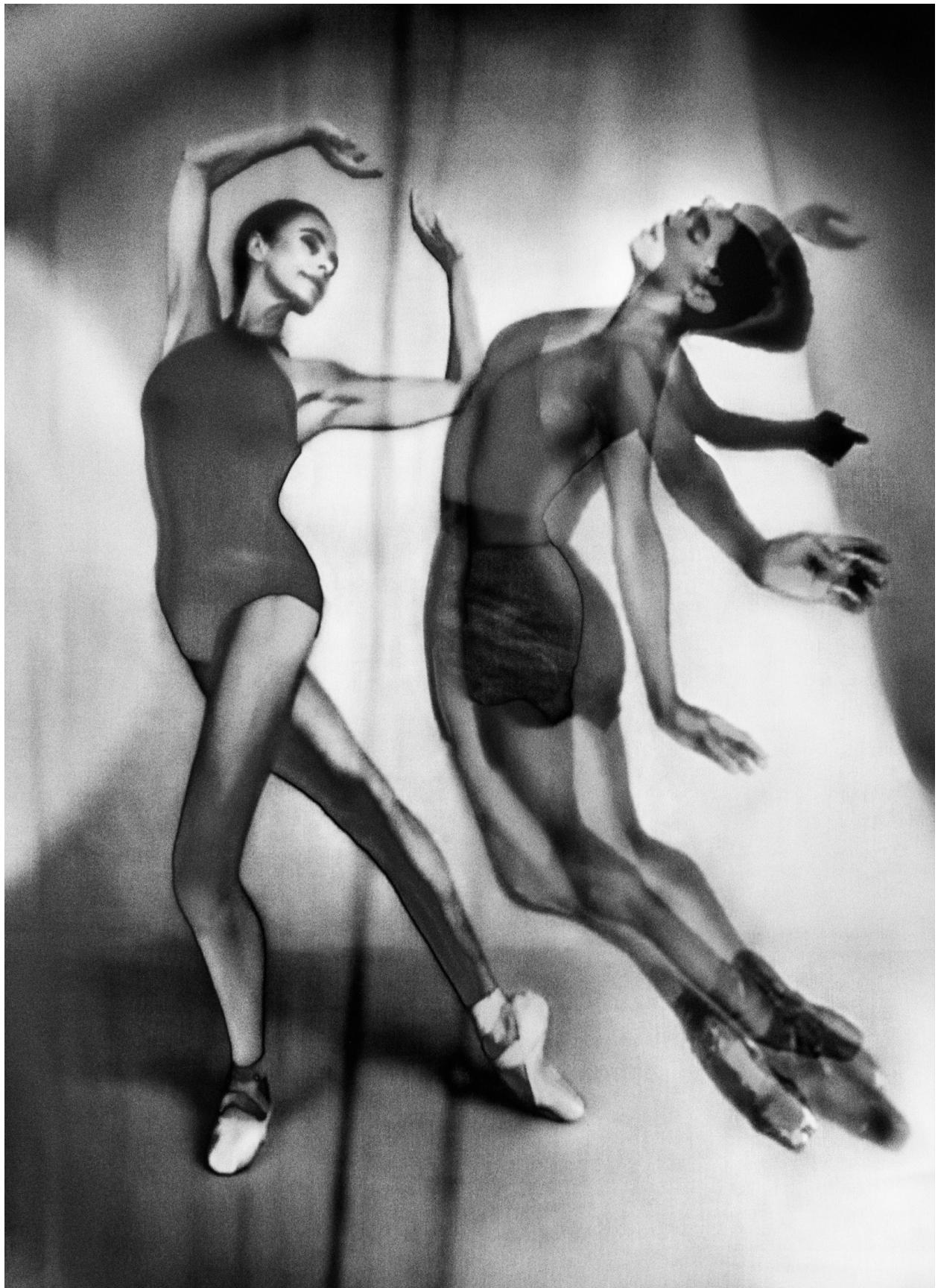
- [Misty Copeland and Alessandra Ferri on Dancing the Role of Juliet](#)

[October 5, 2020 Issue](#)

# **Misty Copeland and Alessandra Ferri on Dancing the Role of Juliet**

In a conversation from City Center's "Studio 5," the ballerinas discuss how the coveted part in "Romeo and Juliet" has been reimagined through the years.

September 25, 2020



*Photo illustration by Elizaveta Porodina for The New Yorker*

Ask any young dancer what role she fervently desires, and she's likely to say Juliet in "Romeo and Juliet." Some ballerinas, such as **Alessandra Ferri** (above, left), dance this role their entire careers, reimagining the character each time: braver, more vulnerable, stronger. American Ballet Theatre's **Misty Copeland** (above, right) danced Juliet for the first time five years ago, with a whiff of teenage willfulness. In a City Center "Studio 5" conversation, online Sept. 30-Oct. 6, the two ballerinas discuss how their approaches to Juliet have changed over time.

# **Fiction**

- [“Rainbows”](#)

# Rainbows

By [Joseph O'Neill](#)

September 28, 2020



*Audio:* Joseph O'Neill reads.

I came to this country—from Ireland, at the age of twenty-three—unaware of the existence of mentors. I’m certain that I had never heard the word “mentee.” The words in Ireland were not exactly the same as the words in America. When a classmate told me that she was going to meet her “mentor,” I had to ask her to explain. In America, she informed me, there was a social practice in which an older, experienced person donated time and knowledge to a younger, relatively foolish person in order to help the latter better understand the world’s perils and pathways. I was filled with a suspicion that bordered on disbelief. I probably said, “Ah, go away.” Ireland has changed, everyone tells me, and maybe this sort of suspiciousness is no longer current. I doubt it, however.

I audited an undergraduate class in anthropology. I needed a break from the dreariness and difficulty of my master’s degree, which was in applied analytics. The class was titled Animals & People. The pet, the pest, the hunting asset, livestock, the endangered animal: we investigated the social and ideological aspects of these phenomena. I found it interesting. I may not have been an anthropologist, but I did own a kitten. The professor whose class this was, Paola Visintin, became my mentor.

Let me say that Paola was my elder by almost twenty years but was cool in a way that made professors closer to me in age seem gauche and youthless. Her style was important to me. She was thin, of course. She wore her brown hair in a slightly scruffy shoulder-length cut, with bangs, and she casually wore clothes by Martin Margiela—including a deconstructed gray wool jacket that I thought about for years with a feeling of bitter loss. Margiela, a recluse of great mystique, was rumored to be Paola’s personal friend, and that was about the coolest thing possible. Mystique was important to me at that time, and some nationalities had more mystique than others. Paola was Italian, from Trieste—a city, she once suggested to me, that still belonged to an invisible Austria-Hungary. She was left-wing to a degree that seemed almost unlawful. She emanated a worldliness in which significant intellectual and sexual powers converged. She spoke with a strong and beautiful Italian accent. She was unafraid.

### [Joseph O’Neill on mentors and perspective.](#)

Our relationship began when I asked if it would be O.K. for me, a mere auditor,

to see her during “office hours” (another new concept). She agreed, on the condition that we meet at a coffee shop on West 141st Street. This was near her apartment, the precise location of which, it was somehow understood, would never be mine to know. Of course, I found out. We met about six times over the course of two years, always at my instigation, always at the same coffee shop. We sat at a particular table in the smoking section. I was honored that she made time to see me, and I speculated that the honor had to do with a shared European identity. Paola seemed to be well disposed toward Ireland, a country, she once told me, that was incomparably supplied with rainbows. Exactly what we discussed I no longer recall, but I have a surviving sense of the excitement I felt when travelling to those meetings from Brooklyn. Many quandaries and crossroads characterized my life in those days, and I took pleasure in telling Paola about them. There was a lot to talk about, it seemed to me. I had not yet found a career, or love, or a home, or money.

Simply to think about the foregoing—all of it, even the departure from Ireland—for some reason fills me with shame.

The meeting that I think about was our last one.

Paola was already at the coffee shop when I arrived. She immediately asked, “What has happened?”

With tears in my eyes, I outlined the events of the night before. Certain details were too embarrassing and awful to relate, especially the details of how I’d come to find myself in the situation that produced what had happened, details that made me furious not only at my personal weakness but also at my naïve and counterproductive upbringing in rural County Limerick.

Paola wasn’t one to offer solutions. Her conversational practice was austere and consistent: she listened, she asked specific questions, and she took seriously what one had to say. When she lit a cigarette, it usually meant that she was about to offer her thoughts. These were always brief. She seemed to have disdain for her own opinions. More than once she cast doubt on the very idea of wisdom, which made her seem wiser than ever.

Therefore I put my question to her with no real expectation of receiving an answer. “Should I report him?” I asked.

“Report?”

“Yes,” I said. “To the authorities.”

“The authorities?” I had the impression that a private joke was passing through her thoughts. “I have a better idea, Clodagh,” she said, stubbing out her cigarette. “Now, listen to me very carefully.” She looked squarely into my eyes. “Are you listening?” I nodded. She had never been so definite. She said, “Get over it.”

My kitten grew into a cat, turned into an old lady, died. The obstetrician lifted a red-blue creature from behind a blue paper curtain—and, flash, the creature, Aoife, turned eighteen. This last milestone was reached in the final semester of her senior year, in January.

One Monday evening in February, my husband, Ian, became aware that our daughter was involved in a prolonged phone drama in her bedroom. He knocked on her door and went in. Aoife, who had been crying, told him that a boy at her school was harassing her. Harassing as in doing what? Ian asked. Aoife told him harassing as in direct-messaging her on Instagram after she’d told him more than once to stop, harassing as in following her around at school all day long and making her dread going anywhere. Following you around? Ian asked. Why? Dad, he’s obsessed, Aoife said. Ian asked Aoife if she wanted him to call the parents of this boy, James. Aoife told him that she did not want him to do that. I’ll take care of it, Aoife said. O.K., Ian said.

I was in Columbus, working, when Ian reported this conversation. I told him, “I don’t know any James. Keep an eye on her. I’ll handle it tomorrow.” By the time I landed in New York, early on Tuesday evening, there had been further developments. In the taxi home, I called Ian and learned that our daughter had not gone to school that day. She had contacted the school to explain her absence and stated that she felt fearful about going in so long as James Wang was there.

“James is James Wang?” I said.

The school had asked Aoife if she wished to file a complaint.

I said, “A complaint? What kind of complaint?”

“There’s a complaints procedure, apparently,” Ian said. “There are regulations.”

“Go on,” I said.

After consulting with a friend—

“Which friend?” I asked.

“Some friend, I don’t know,” Ian said.

“Go on,” I said. Ian didn’t keep track of the friends. I did. My money was on Mei.

—Aoife had told the school that, yes, she wished to file an official complaint for harassment and intimidation against James Wang. She wouldn’t go to school unless he was stopped.

I was nearly home. “I’ll talk to her,” I said.

“I’m not sure she wants to discuss it right now,” Ian said.

I have spent twenty years in business talking to people, almost all of them men, who have not wanted to talk to me or, if they have, then not about the things I’ve wanted to talk about. This skill of making people talk to me against their will comes in handy in relation to my daughter. Aoife is a sensible girl, a very good student, but she is headstrong and furtive about certain things, and sometimes the issue must be forced. The issue is almost always the same: what the facts of her life are, and what she is minded to do about those facts, and whether what she’s minded to do will or won’t serve her interests.

When I got home I said, “Where is she?”

Ian said, “She has some friends with her right now. In her bedroom.”

“Who?” I was hanging up my coat.

“Some girlfriends,” Ian said helplessly.

I knocked on Aoife’s door and went in. She and Mei and Sophie were sitting on the bed, backs to the wall, looking at Aoife’s phone. “Hey, guys,” I said.

The visitors understood me. After some demonstrative hugging, Mei and Sophie left.

I had wanted Aoife to tell me the facts, because I was sure that Ian had not been told the whole story, but when I sat down next to my daughter I took her into my arms and said, “I know, love, I know,” as if I already knew the facts.

Aoife’s guidance counsellor was Ms. Vincenzullo. I rang her that night. There was some difficulty getting hold of her private number, but I got there. I explained that Aoife was distressed and feared returning to school. Ms. Vincenzullo said that she was aware of the situation. I insisted that precautions be taken to protect our daughter. Ian was sitting nearby, listening. I told Ms. Vincenzullo that we, Aoife’s parents, would be watching the school very closely. I said this ominously. My experience has been that American institutions respond only to the danger of litigation. That is awful, if you think about it. I said to Ms. Vincenzullo, “An unsafe environment for our child is not an option.” That was my language.

“Aoife will be safe,” Ms. Vincenzullo said. “James will be absent for a while.”

The next day, Aoife went back to school. I offered to drive her there, but she said she would be O.K. She was right about that. The boy, James Wang, didn’t bother her again. The authorities had done their job.

For about ten years we had been using a nearby laundromat. Their full-service wash was efficient and, for a small extra charge, they would deliver clean, folded clothes to your home. If you were a regular customer, like our family, they’d stick a tag on your bag that said “V.I.P.”

The business was operated by a family from somewhere in the interior of China—I can’t remember the place they once told me. The husband was a cheerful simpleton who barked at customers in very basic English and played practical jokes with the laundry bags. The wife was obviously a lot smarter and spoke much better English. It seemed incredible that she was married to the husband, but needs must, I suppose. Even though I never asked them their names, I came to know the family well enough. They lived in an old tenement building just a block from ours. They employed various friends and relations, most intriguingly a teen-age girl—she had been farmed out to the couple, I suspected, as used to be common in Ireland—who gradually transitioned into a good-looking, mannish young person. If this had caused any major problems, I didn’t see it. These people had other things to worry about.

The couple had one child—a son. I met him when he was five or six years old. He'd sit under a table among laundry bags, absorbed by a gaming console. You'd see him there at all hours. His father told me that the boy was No. 1 in his class at math. That seemed unlikely, given that he always appeared to be in the laundromat, playing video games. But time proved the father right: a few years later, he proudly informed me that his son was the only student in his year to test into a specialized high school. I was thrilled. I had watched the lad grow up. I had seen him working the begloomed washing machines on sunny afternoons and, after he turned twelve, making weekend deliveries. How many times had I buzzed him up to our floor? A hundred? Two hundred? I had seen his parents working night and day for their boy. The laundromat stayed open from seven in the morning until ten at night, every day of the year save New Year's Day. What a triumph for the family.

One Sunday, I stopped by the laundromat. The bag of whites we'd dropped off two weeks earlier hadn't been delivered. I wanted to check up on it.

The laundromat presented a familiar and reassuring drama, with a double stroller occupied by a pair of oversized children, some harassed moms, a dishevelled man, and two hipsters. In the dimness at the back, behind a table piled high with bags, the mother and the trans or nonbinary young person were going through a basket heaped with clean brights. I surveyed the bags stacked up against the wall. When I didn't see mine, I asked the mother, "The purple one?"

She whispered something to the young person, whose shortish black-and-purple hair had been fixed into cute little tufts. This person went into the storage room and brought out my sack. The tag on it said "V.I.P. \$30." When I got out my wallet, the mother made a gesture of refusal. "No—no money," she said.

I was insistent, however. This was the first time that they'd failed to deliver as promised. That was hardly a reason not to pay.

The mother said, "No money. You don't come back here again. Finished." She stood with her hands clenched at her sides.

I didn't understand. I looked to the young person for guidance, but the person was examining me as if I were the curious specimen.

"Your family bad to my son," the mother said. "Please get out now."

“Your son?” I said. What was she talking about?

“You know my son—James,” the mother said.

“James?” I said—and, to my horror, I understood.

Unconsciously I had slung my bag over my shoulder. Now it was too heavy. I put it down. I said, “I didn’t know. I had no idea. I’m so sorry.” I wished I knew her name. Then I realized that I did know her name. “Mrs. Wang,” I said, “I didn’t know.”

“I tell the school, This big year for college. Grades important. James study hard. I tell the school, James sixteen. Junior. Doesn’t know girls. Not one kiss. The school not listen. Suspend him.” More aggressively Mrs. Wang went on, “Your daughter senior. Eighteen years old. Grades done. College application done. Everything easy.” I tried to reply, but she kept going. James’s grades had crashed. He was shunned by his friends. He didn’t want to go back to school. They took him to a doctor, and the doctor said he was suicidal. “What we do now?” she said to me. “You tell me what we do now.”

Her husband peeked out from behind the screen at the very back, then hid again.

“I’m very sorry, Mrs. Wang,” I said.

The mother smiled bitterly. “Easy to say.”

These things have a limit. The mother had every right to be upset, but I was not going to be forced into a conversation of this kind. “James will be fine,” I said. “You’ll see.” I hoisted my bag over my shoulder like Santa.

“Your family finished here,” Mrs. Wang said. “I protect James.”

The bag was heavier than ever. After a short block, the muscles in my hands and fingers burned. I put the bag down and called Aoife.

I could tell from her voice that she’d been sleeping. “It’s noon,” I said. “Up, please.”

She muttered something.

“Listen to me,” I said. “Why didn’t you say it was the boy from the laundromat who was bothering you?”

“I did tell you,” she lied.

“You told us it was James Wang. Why didn’t you say who he was?”

“I thought you knew,” she said. “Anyway, why does it matter?”

I said, “We could have sorted this out with his parents. We didn’t need to bring the school into it. We could have handled it family to family.”

Aoife said nothing.

“What happened to him, exactly? Was he suspended? Aoife? Hello?”

“What?” she said angrily.

“How long was he suspended for?”

“I don’t know.”



A NAIAD AND A DRYAD EXCHANGING THEIR MIXED-UP MAIL

“Well, estimate.” I was raging. There were so many things I had to stop myself from saying to her.

“I don’t know, Mom,” she shouted. “Maybe two weeks. Mom, he’s a creep. He kept following me around. Not just at the school—around here, too. Ask Mei.”

“Tell me exactly what he did,” I said.

My daughter told me that James had been stalking her. He would hang around the subway station until she appeared and then get on the train with her, sometimes in the same car. He’d walk behind her on the way home, always keeping her in his sights, never overtaking her. He started to show up wherever she went at school—the hallways, the food truck where she bought lunch. He was always there, hanging around, staring at her. Aoife told him repeatedly to leave her alone, but he didn’t comply. He messaged her on Instagram, and after she blocked him he messaged her again from a friend’s account.

“How many messages?” I said.

“I don’t know, Mom. Two.”

“What did they say?”

“Just dumb stuff. ‘You’re pretty.’ ” She had raised her voice again. “This is someone who comes into my home, Mom.” One time, she told me, she had instructed James through the intercom to leave the washing in the lobby. When she went down to collect it, he was still there, waiting for her. According to Aoife, he had a very weird, threatening look in his eye. “He’s seen my bras, Mom,” she yelled through the phone. “He’s kept some of my panties, I know he has, there’s two at least that are missing. He’s a weirdo. He shouldn’t be working with people’s private things.”

“O.K.,” I said. “Thanks.” I know when my daughter is lying and when she isn’t. The missing-panties detail was absurd, but the rest of it added up. It didn’t add up to much, to my mind, because James was a child. He had feelings that he couldn’t understand or manage. The important thing was that I was informed. Information enables action.

Right there, on the sidewalk, I called Ms. Vincenzullo. It was a Sunday, but it

couldn't wait. That is my core skill, I believe: making phone calls promptly and persistently. It is a surprisingly rare skill. I left a message. I wasn't optimistic about hearing back.

But Ms. Vincenzullo did ring back, right away. It took me by surprise. I hesitated to accept the call.

The action I'd had in mind was to advocate on behalf of James and to ask if the complaint could be struck from his record. But I knew how American organizations worked. It was a dark wood of decision trees. Either Aoife had had a well-founded grievance or she hadn't. Either she would have to retract her complaint or the school would have to retract its decision. The school would not retract, and neither, I knew, would my daughter, nor would I advise her to. To admit to second thoughts would be to invite trouble.

Everything was a mess, everything was wrong. I didn't answer Ms. Vincenzullo.

The laundry bag hadn't grown any lighter. I had two blocks to go. Men and women were striding past me. Cars and trucks were hurtling down the avenue. I struggled onward. In Ireland, if I needed a lift, I had had only to raise a hand at the side of the lane and someone, usually a stranger, almost always a man, would stop and bring me closer to my destination.

When I got home, Aoife was ensconced in her bedroom. Later she emerged in order to leave the house and see friends. Ian came back in the early evening, bearing takeout. He set out the paper plates and split two pairs of chopsticks. He helped himself to a huge portion of everything. I joined him at the table but ignored the food. I said, "There's something I need to tell you. I don't know where to begin." With that I began.

Afterward Ian said, "Jesus Christ—that's the kid? He looks like he's thirteen."

Ian rarely sees me distraught. I don't like it when he does.

"Hey," he said. "It's going to be O.K."

He was asking me to fantasize. He was asking me to invent a world made up of different facts.

"We did what we had to do," Ian bullishly continued. "We protected our

daughter. What the school did or didn't do—well, that's the school's business."

This was American of him—the obsession with liability. I wanted to tell him, Either you do the right thing or you do the wrong thing.

But I said nothing. Some things can't be usefully discussed. At nine o'clock, I went to bed. Later that week, Ian found us a new laundromat. Later that year, Aoife got into Wesleyan. In the fall, we drove her up to Middletown in a rented van big enough to accommodate her bicycle and her mini-fridge and her cello.

We had a client in Albany. It was my job to travel up there once or twice a month. I went by train, along the Hudson River. The three-hour journey goes by quickly, because the river is always differently beautiful. I like it best on those still, gray mornings when you raise your eyes from your laptop and the water is as tranquil as the floor of a palace. The return trip, especially in the winter dark, feels long and dreary. I usually try to get more work done.

I was at the Albany station one night in early March, waiting for the train, when I saw a figure in an ankle-length wool coat and a wool pompom hat standing alone at the end of the platform. She was smoking a cigarette. Then the Maple Leaf, come all the way from Toronto, arrived with lights blazing and two conductors gallantly teetering in open doorways. The figure slowly approached, hands held behind her back, contemplating the ground. She was content to be the last passenger to board. I knew that silhouette from somewhere. Looking more closely, I saw the face of Paola Visintin.

A train car's small staircase fell out with a thud. I sprang up the metal steps and turned left and kept going down the aisle until I reached the front of the train. I didn't want her to see me. I believe that I was embarrassed about what I'd turned into—a middle-aged, slightly overweight American woman in business attire, with no mystique and no Margiela. This wasn't an ordinary emotion for me. My self-accusations are usually about day-to-day failings. I have no large regrets about what I have made of my life. It is a worthwhile life. It is a worthwhile body, too.

Soon my panic was replaced by a contrary feeling: a euphoric, almost romantic desire to talk with Paola. Contemporaneously I understood that what I wanted wasn't only to reconnect with my old mentor but to inhabit the self I had been when I was Irish and young. This was also unusual. Looking backward isn't a

trait of mine. It requires a kind of courage that I don't have and don't want.

Hastily I Googled Paola and learned that she had left Columbia, currently taught at SUNY Albany, and had published a book titled "The Urbane" (2007). Then I got to my feet and walked along the aisle, scanning the passengers to my left and right. They had come from mythic upstate places—Syracuse, Rome, Utica—and yet here they sat like ordinary twenty-first-century mortals, watching movies or trying to sleep. I reached the café car. Paola sat alone at a table, reading a book in French. Her free hand held a bottle of beer.

I continued to the bar, got a drink, and came back. "May I sit here?" I said.

Paola glanced upward and said, "Of course."

Her hair was darker than ever, but finer and cut a little shorter. Silver roots gleamed at the parting. She wore a black cashmere sweater and a bracelet made of large gold links. Her face had the wrinkles of a long-term smoker. She was thin, thin. She hadn't recognized me.

I stirred my double Bloody Mary with self-confidence. I said joyfully, "Paola, it's me. Clodagh."

Paola looked up from her book. She removed her reading glasses. She was having difficulty placing me. "Ah, yes—Clodagh."

"How are you, Paola?"

With a wry motion of the eyes and mouth, she signalled that everything was as well as could be expected. She said, "So how has your life turned out?"

I laughed. It was a thrilling question from a thrilling questioner. To answer Paola, to hear myself narrate how things had gone for me, made my life seem coherent and adventurous. The scene felt charmed. Our conversation on a speeding and brilliant Amtrak train was linked, as distant events are linked in a folktale, to those long-ago conversations on 141st Street. Somewhere south of Rhinecliff, I offered to buy the drinks. Paola pointed at the remnants of my Bloody Mary and said, "I'll have one of those." I was proud. I had influenced her.

When I returned from the bar, two men at the neighboring table laughed

coarsely. Paola and I glanced at them—big, overloud, beer-drinking, sprawling white guys in their fifties—then looked away. There was no need to spell out the politics of the situation, and indeed our conversation had been happily free of any mention of the stupid, evil President. I was conscious that I had no real sense of what Paola’s ideas on that topic might be. She had never been someone to think what everybody else was thinking.

Over our Bloody Marys, I found myself telling her the story of Aoife and James. She listened, as of old, with calm interest. She expressed curiosity about the technicalities of the complaint procedure—“Does the school write the rules, or is it the Department of Education?”—but otherwise said very little.

When I was done, Paola raised her eyebrows. After a few moments she said, “Aoife must be an Irish name. It’s beautiful.”

This oblique response was in character, but I needed more from her. Surely she saw how ashamed and anguished I was.

The men across the aisle broke out once again into noisy laughter. It drew Paola’s attention. “Have you noticed,” she said suddenly, “how degenerate the so-called Irish and Italians are in this country? It really is quite interesting.” Her voice was almost certainly audible to the two men, although I didn’t dare look to see if they were listening. How tenaciously, Paola said, Irish- and Italian-Americans clung to their so-called heritage, and yet how little resemblance their mores and outlooks bore to those in the old countries. There was, she said, a certain pathos in the situation of communities morally misshapen, presumably, by their ancestors’ brutalizing experience of poverty, emigration, and assimilation. Notable, also, was the recent and deepening fusion of these two ethnic groups by intermarriage, which had had the effect of creating a hybrid identity founded on comical and grotesque notions of racial self-worth. She was thinking of writing something about it. It would involve, Paola said, a lot of research on Long Island, a part of the country that had long fascinated her.

She said with a small smile, “You look puzzled, Clodagh.”

Was she testing me? Did she suspect me of Irish-American degeneracy? I felt under scrutiny—that I’d disappointed her, with my story of my business career and my maternal ups and downs. Had she always been such a snob?

“Sorry,” I said. “I was distracted. This thing with the boy from the

laundromat . . .” I shook my head.

Paola asked, “He’s not making trouble anymore?”

“Well—Aoife’s at college. We’ve had no contact.”

“So it’s a happy ending,” she said.

Was she being ironic? Was she bored? “It isn’t Aoife I’m worried about,” I said. “It’s James. He’s got a suspension on his record. For sexual harassment, of all things.”

Paola rattled the ice cubes in her plastic glass. “He will be fine. He will survive. People survive, Clodagh.” She drained what was left of her drink. Her hand had drifted to her book.

She was condescending to me, and the encounter now felt fully anachronistic. I wasn’t that girl from Newcastle West, and Paola was no longer the cool professor who jingled keys to an enigmatic adult world. My former self would have wanted to know what she was thinking—about me, about everything—would have wanted to assure her that I wasn’t in the habit of ambushing near-strangers with autobiographical monologues. But I felt sorry for her, this childless, too-thin woman in her sixties who couldn’t quit smoking and was still interested in her air of mystery.

I finished my drink and smiled. Quite amiably I said, “It was very nice to see you, Paola.”

“Goodbye, Clodagh,” Paola said, just as amiably. Giving nothing away, she smiled once again. She picked up her book.

I went back to my seat. The train stormed on and on. Time stormed onward, too. In the spring, I went into our local Duane Reade. There I ran into someone I didn’t want to see.

The checkout staff—one woman—had temporarily absented herself, and this had resulted in a long line of customers that wound around belt barriers and from there into an aisle enclosed by tall racks. I joined the line and waited. Soon enough everyone shuffled forward, and I progressed beyond the racks and into the open area with the barriers. Facing me in the winding line, in effect

approaching me on my right, was Mrs. Wang.

There was no question of fleeing. You make your bed and you lie in it.

Away from that hot, dark laundry, she looked a lot younger. She was in her mid-thirties, I realized. Then a movement of the line placed us alongside each other. We exchanged polite nods.

“Hello, Mrs. Wang,” I said. “How is your family?”

“Good,” she said. “Your family?”

“Good, thank you,” I said.

She gave me a more searching look. She said, “Your daughter good?”

“Yes,” I said. I forced myself to utter the sentence “How is James?”

“Good,” she said. “Accepted by No. 1 college.” She smiled. It was an amazing smile. She said, “University of Pennsylvania. Ivy League.”

“Congratulations,” I said. “He’s a good lad.”

Mrs. Wang said, “Yes. Work hard.” Then the line quickened and she was called forward to make payment.

When Ian came home that evening, I told him that I wanted to visit Ireland again, to see my brother.

“Sure,” he said. “It was fun last time.”

The last time had been when Aoife was four years old. She was anxious about going, until I promised her that we’d see rainbows. After that she would not stop talking about the rainbows of Ireland. It worried Ian a little. “There had better be rainbows,” he said.

“There will be,” I said. But I was worried, too.

On the airplane, Aoife asked me, “Are rainbows real?” She was suspicious.

“They are,” I said.

We landed at Shannon in the morning. In the rental car, Aoife was wide awake and inspecting the sky. It was a windy spring day, with white and gray and blue clouds speeding in from the west.

We had not been driving for more than a few minutes when Ian said, “Aoife, look.”

A rainbow faintly showed above the estuary. “Rainbow,” Aoife shouted.

We drove from County Clare into Limerick, then back out toward Newcastle West. There were so many rainbows that we stopped looking for them before we reached Adare. ♦

By [Willing Davidson](#)

## **On Television**

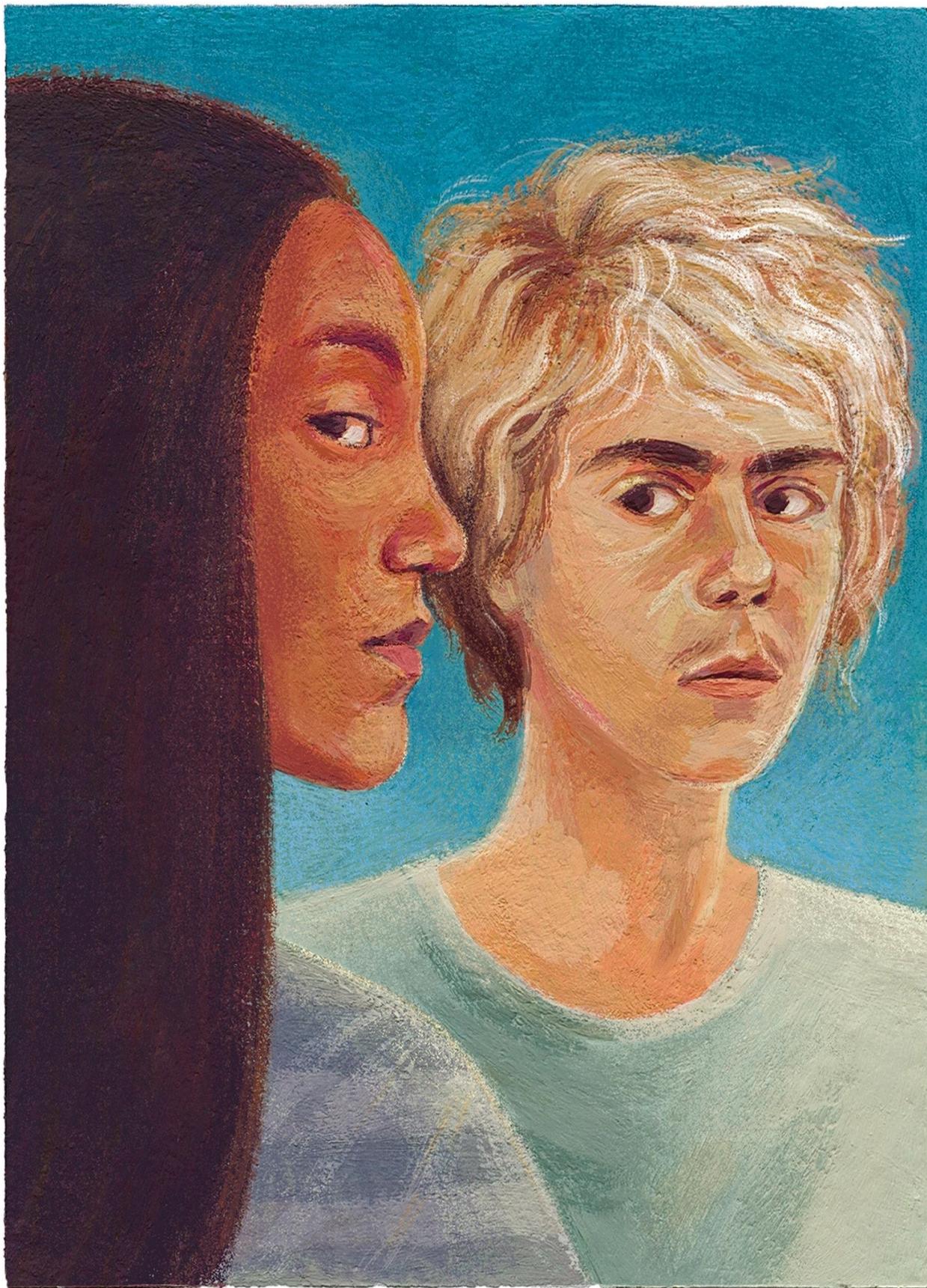
- [The Search for Kindred Spirits in “We Are Who We Are,” on HBO](#)

# The Search for Kindred Spirits in “We Are Who We Are,” on HBO

Luca Guadagnino’s series is set on a military base that is charmed, foreboding, and thrumming with sex—a metaphor for the lives of the teen-agers who live there.

By [Doreen St. Félix](#)

September 28, 2020



The luggage of a stylish New York City boy of fourteen has been sent to the wrong destination. The airline may as well have run off with one of his limbs. In the pilot of [Luca Guadagnino](#)'s HBO drama, "We Are Who We Are," Fraser Wilson, played by Jack Dylan Grazer, is already jumpy, in designer leopard-print fleece shorts, but now his behavior builds to a tantrum in an Italian airport, as he combs his painted nails through a lock of bleached hair. His mother, Sarah ([Chloë Sevigny](#)), and her wife, Maggie (Alice Braga), are vaguely embarrassed but unfazed. Sarah, knowing her son, nurses him with the nip of alcohol he demands. "Thank you, Mommy," he says.

Should we be disturbed? A viewer might ready herself for a study of the out-of-control American male. Fraser, withdrawn and pouty, moves with an exaggerated physical unease. There is something unnerving about him, the way he digs his dirty fingers into a cake given to his family as a welcome to their new Italian home, and leans against a wall at his new high school, mouth half open, surreptitiously photographing another student. The object of his curiosity, Caitlin Poythress (Jordan Kristine Seamón), shoots him a knowing look—and, in that teasing moment, the true subject of "We Are Who We Are" comes into focus.

Guadagnino's affecting [adaptation](#) of André Aciman's gay coming-of-age love story, "[Call Me by Your Name](#)," made him an unlikely favorite among American teens, and his first foray into television revisits similarly languorous terrain. Like Timothée Chalamet's Elio, Fraser is filmed with an elegiac appreciation for his youthful, gangly limbs and pale skin. Guadagnino, a location fetishist, has set "We Are Who We Are" on a U.S. Army base in Chioggia, where Sarah has been named commander. It is both America and not. The year is 2016; at times, we glimpse, on television screens in cafeterias and living rooms, news reports of [Hillary Clinton](#) and [Donald Trump](#) on the campaign trail. But the first four episodes of the series display an almost swaggering lack of interest in military politics. Instead, the sun-drenched grounds of the base—a zone at once foreboding, charmed, and humming with sex—are a metaphor for the predicament of the American teen-agers who live there with their parents.

The show is thinly plotted. Gulfs of silence open between characters, punctuated by clipped, sweetly evasive dialogue; too much chatter would spoil the atmosphere of discovery and experimentation. The opening episodes are a garland of short ballets in which the young actors plunge into the sea, strap themselves into harnesses for a verboten turn on the base's zip line, and decorate

one another with paintball guns. A scene in a *discoteca* recalls a similar melancholic night in “Call Me by Your Name.” The attention to young bodies feels almost dangerous; the matriarchal presence of Chloë Sevigny, who made her débüt in [Larry Clark](#)’s unsettling 1995 film, “Kids,” is fitting. In one sequence, Caitlin quietly reads a book while, in the background, we hear a group of soldiers laughingly discuss what seems to have been a gang rape.

Guadagnino’s sumptuous tastes fold naturally into the obsessions of Fraser, who, far from home, doubles down on his identity as an aesthete. When his lost luggage finally arrives, he screws up his face in frantic joy at the sight of his clothes. The classical-inspired score, by [Dev Hynes](#), rustling with wind instruments and synth, is so hip that it hurts. In one scene, which roils with tender, unspoken kink, a young soldier at the base library commends Fraser for choosing a collection of poetry by [Ocean Vuong](#).

Fraser finds a kindred spirit in Caitlin, who, after asking whether he had a girlfriend back in New York, immediately calls him out on his lie. She has her own secret. Grazer and Seamón are lovely to watch as their characters enter what seems to be a platonic relationship premised on their gentle recognition of each other’s nascent queerness. The terrain of the show expands, in the second episode, to reconsider Fraser’s first days on the base from the perspective of Caitlin, the daughter of Richard (Scott Mescudi, a.k.a. Kid Cudi), a brooding military man, and Jenny (Faith Alabi), a Nigerian-American who eases her homesickness by watching Chicago weather reports. Caitlin frequents a bar in town, where she hides her long hair under a cap and deepens her voice. Fraser tends to her self-discovery, sending her packages of men’s clothes. When he tells her what “transgender” means, she is at first confused and then awed. The other kids, unable to comprehend the intimacy between the two, dismiss them as lovers.

The writing of this relationship is spare but confident; by contrast, the secondary story lines are sometimes attenuated. As a commander, Sarah is enigmatic, charismatic, and a little blank; as a mother, she is needy and desirous. At one point, Fraser slaps her; another time, after she accidentally cuts herself while opening a moving box, he tends to her wound by sucking on it. What are we to make of this Freudian intensity? Race plays a role in the series, too, albeit a familiar one. I felt queasy about the characterizations of Richard and his son, Danny (Spence Moore II), as repressed and angry.

The fourth episode, a modern twist on an age-old wartime plot, features an unexpectedly moving bacchanal. The strapping teen-ager Craig (Corey Knight), Danny's best friend, has recently joined the Army. On the last day before his deployment, he impulsively asks a local Italian girl, Valentina (Beatrice Barichella), to marry him, and she accepts. Fraser delights in dressing the boys according to the wedding's theme, although he pretends to be annoyed: "How do you expect me to pull off this level of Hawaiian-ness on such short notice?" A minister at the base conducts the nuptials, before the kids break into the villa of a rich Russian in town, wrecking the place and, under purple lights, drunkenly grinding on one another. It's a transportive panorama of sexual exploration, frank but not caustic, voyeuristic but not leering, innocent and provocative. "Yo, I don't even know how to dance to this, man," Danny murmurs, as Frank Ocean's "Nikes" plays. "Hey," Craig says, encouraging his friend. "This is my wedding." Danny heeds him; after all, his friend will be gone in the morning.

Another period piece débuting this month is, by contrast, a regurgitation of an American nightmare. In Showtime's two-part series "The Comey Rule," based on the former F.B.I. director [James Comey](#)'s 2018 memoir, "[A Higher Loyalty](#)," and written and directed by Billy Ray, loyalty is part of the problem. The show is an ornate table read of the book. It follows Comey as he belatedly realizes the ramifications of his investigation into Hillary Clinton's e-mails and attempts to do his job under the new President, who, over a shrimp dinner at the White House, in the series' climactic scene, demands, yes, his loyalty.

The chief irritant of the show is the knee-jerk splicing of the dramatic action with cable-news footage documenting Comey's no-good, very bad time in the Administration. (As [Stephen Colbert](#) says in one clip, "I just don't know what to think about James Comey. First, he seems like the good guy, then he seems like the bad guy.") The technique, apparently meant to convey the show's fidelity to real life, ends up feeling like a failure of imagination. Rather than letting loose a little, crafting an original psychological portrait of this inscrutable, high-ranking functionary, Ray gives us a series of labored impressions. There is Jeff Daniels as Comey, a true-blue bureaucrat who would never think of skipping the line at the office cafeteria, and who says things to his wife like "Tracy, I wanted to stop the bad guys"; Kingsley Ben-Adir's robotic [Barack Obama](#); and Holly Hunter's erect [Sally Yates](#), Diet Coke in hand. The list goes, almost interminably, on. Brendan Gleeson's totally ridiculous Donald Trump, performed down an octave, is arguably the strongest performance for being less oppressively accurate. Even when Comey stars in his own drama, he is outdone. ♦

# **Onward and Upward with the Arts**

- [A Fuller Picture of Artemisia Gentileschi](#)

# A Fuller Picture of Artemisia Gentileschi

The pioneering painter survived a rape, but scholars are pushing against the idea that her work was defined by it—and celebrating her rich harnessing of motherhood, passion, and ambition.

By [Rebecca Mead](#)

September 28, 2020



The story of Susanna and the Elders, related in the Book of Daniel, was a popular subject for artists in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and no wonder. Susanna, a virtuous, beautiful young woman, is bathing in her garden while two older men spy on her. The men suddenly accost her and demand that she submit to rape; if she resists, they warn, they will ruin her reputation by claiming that they caught her with a lover. The tale offered painters an irresistible opportunity to replicate a similar kind of voyeurism. [Tintoretto](#) depicted the scene several times; in a version painted in the fifteen-fifties, which hangs in Vienna's Kunsthistorisches Museum, he portrayed Susanna as serene and abstracted, towelling a raised foot and regarding herself in a mirror, unaware of a bald man who is concealed behind a rose trellis and peering between her parted thighs. In a treatment by Rubens from half a century later, on display at the Borghese Gallery, in Rome, Susanna is shown reaching for a shawl, realizing with horror that she has been exposed to two leering men. Sometimes the violence threatened against Susanna is indicated in the tableau: in a version by Ludovico Carracci that hangs in the National Gallery in London, one of the elders is tugging at Susanna's robe, pulling it off her body. Giuseppe Cesari (known as Cavaliere d'Arpino) made a painting that enlists the viewer's participation in the lasciviousness it represents: its naked subject looks almost seductively out from the canvas, coolly brushing her golden hair.

A very different Susanna is offered by Artemisia Gentileschi, who was born in Rome in 1593, and who painted the scene in 1610, when she was seventeen. In her version, two men emerge from behind a marble balustrade, violently interrupting Susanna's ablutions. Her head and her body torque away from the onlookers as she raises a hand toward them, in what looks like ineffectual self-defense. Strikingly, her other hand shields her face. Perhaps this Susanna does not want the men to identify her or see her anguish; it's equally likely that she does not want to lay eyes on her persecutors. In its composition, execution, and psychological insight, the painting is remarkably sophisticated for a girl in her teens. As the scholar Mary Garrard noted, in a 1989 appraisal titled "[Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art](#)," the painting represents an art-historical innovation: it is the first time in which sexual predation is depicted from the point of view of the predicated. With this painting, and with many other works that followed, Artemisia claimed women's resistance of sexual oppression as a legitimate subject of art.

As one of the first women to forge a successful career as a painter, Artemisia

was celebrated internationally in her lifetime, but her reputation languished after her death. This was partly owing to fashion: her naturalistic mode of painting went out of style, in favor of a more classical approach. Seventeenth-century scholars barely mentioned her. When she registered, it was as a footnote to her father, Orazio Gentileschi, a well-regarded artist who specialized in the kind of historical and mythological scenes in vogue at the time. (Academics tend to refer to Artemisia by her first name, in order to distinguish her from her father.) Her work received little substantial critical attention until the early twentieth century, when Roberto Longhi, the Italian art historian, wrote a grudging assessment, calling her “the only woman in Italy who ever understood what painting was, both colors, impasto, and other essentials.”

In the second half of the twentieth century, Artemisia was reconsidered. A turning point was the inclusion of half a dozen of her works, among them the 1610 “Susanna and the Elders,” in a landmark survey, “Women Artists: 1550-1950”; curated by the art historians Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin, it opened at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1976, later travelling to the Brooklyn Museum. Although individual works of Artemisia’s had been on view in museums, this was the first time they were seen as a group, their cumulative power recognized. In the years since, Artemisia has come to be counted among the most important Baroque artists, especially after a 2001 show at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, which [explored](#) her work alongside that of her father. This October, a retrospective exhibition at the National Gallery in London will bring together about thirty of her pieces, from museums and private collections across Europe and the United States.

The show, whose opening was delayed by the coronavirus pandemic, is organized in broad chronological order, and features Artemisia’s most significant achievements. (More than a hundred and thirty works have been ascribed to her hand, but only about half that number are universally agreed to be hers.) Among the paintings included is “Self-Portrait as St. Catherine of Alexandria,” from the National Gallery’s collection, in which the subject gazes at the viewer, her brow dimpled in concentration, while wearing a gauzy turban and other finery. The painting, recently rediscovered, was acquired by the museum in 2018, for nearly four and a half million dollars. It is only the twenty-first work by a female artist to enter the gallery’s collection.

The reëvaluation of Artemisia’s work has included a newfound appreciation of her technical skill, especially her command of chiaroscuro—a heightened

juxtaposition of light and shadow. Chiaroscuro is most commonly associated with Caravaggio, who was an acquaintance of Artemisia's father, and whom she may have encountered as a young adolescent. (Caravaggio notoriously fled Rome in 1606, after killing another man in a duel.) One of Artemisia's greatest paintings, "Judith and Her Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes" (completed in the sixteen-twenties, and now owned by the Detroit Institute of Arts), offers a masterly execution of the technique, with its subjects illuminated, mid-action, by raking lamplight. In the background are virtuosic examples of still-life painting: a burnished brass candlestick, a draped velvet curtain.

Letizia Treves, the curator of the forthcoming National Gallery show, notes, "In Artemisia's lifetime, she had a kind of pan-European celebrity that places her on a level with later artists such as Rubens or Van Dyck." Treves cautions, however, against overstating Artemisia's place in the Baroque pantheon. Artemisia was an artist who adapted to fashion rather than setting it. "I can't name a single Artemisia follower," Treves says. Of course, this may well have been connected to her gender: what male artist of the period would have acknowledged being her disciple?

Artemisia's reëmergence is also tied to a greater awareness of her life story, which was at least as eventful as that of Caravaggio. In 1611, the year after she painted "Susanna and the Elders," Artemisia was raped by a friend of Orazio's: the artist Agostino Tassi. The assault has inevitably, and often reductively, been the lens through which her artistic accomplishments have been viewed. The sometimes savage themes of her paintings have been interpreted as expressions of wrathful catharsis. The fascination with her work on these terms is understandable, given the continued prevalence of sexual violence against women, and the dismissal of women's accounts of it. In 2018, when [Brett Kavanaugh](#) was elevated to the Supreme Court despite the testimony of Christine Blasey Ford, who said that Kavanaugh had assaulted her when they were both teen-agers, a particularly bloody work by Artemisia—"Judith Beheading Holofernes," which hangs in the Uffizi Gallery, in Florence—was widely shared on the Internet, as commentary. It shows the Biblical heroine with her sleeves rolled up over muscular arms, her mouth set, deftly butchering the Assyrian general.



*"You really think they'll come back to the hill after they've gotten used to working remotely?"*  
Cartoon by Kendra Allenby

Artemisia's life story has inspired more than one fictional reimagining, beginning in 1947, with a work by Anna Banti—the pen name of the Italian novelist and critic Lucia Lopresti, who was married to Roberto Longhi. (Susan Sontag, in an admiring [essay](#) from 2004, wrote that Banti's protagonist is “liberated by disgrace.”) A 1997 film, by the French director Agnès Merlet, made the questionable suggestion that Tassi was a partially welcome seducer. Five years later, the American writer Susan Vreeland published a [novel](#) that hewed to the feminist line of Artemisia's rape as a defining trauma. (“I stepped up two steps and took my usual seat opposite Agostino Tassi, my father's friend and collaborator. My rapist. . . . His black hair and beard were overgrown and wild. His face, more handsome than he deserved, had the color and hardness of a bronze sculpture.”) Joy McCullough's 2018 novel, “[Blood Water Paint](#),” captured Artemisia's perspective in charged language:

the woman in the bath  
is no exalted doll.  
She is all light and terror,  
the Susanna I finally summon  
from stories,  
from first fire,  
and finally,  
from paint mixed with  
my own sweat.

A raft of recent papers by academics, however, have objected to portraying Artemisia as if she herself were a two-dimensional mythological figure—a victim exacting revenge through brushwork. As more of her personal history is unearthed by scholars, a more complex picture emerges. And Artemisia's art is increasingly being appreciated for the knowingness with which she made use of elements of her life—not just sexual violation but also motherhood, erotic passion, and professional ambition. Artemisia recognized that being a woman offered her a rare perspective and authority on many artistic subjects. “You will find the spirit of Caesar in the soul of a woman,” she once assured a patron. Such insight makes Artemisia feel, four hundred years after she lived, like one of our more self-aware contemporaries.

Artemisia had a sheltered childhood, in the most literal sense of the term: as a

girl, she spent most of her time within the walls of her family home, as Rome's streets were not considered a safe or appropriate space for her to journey through alone. She was the eldest child in her family, with three younger brothers; at the age of twelve, she became their principal caregiver when her mother, Prudentia di Montone, died, in childbirth. Artemisia received no academic education and was functionally illiterate until her twenties, when she finally had the opportunity to learn to read and write—the latter never without error. But as a child she was allowed to draw, and her gifts were noted early on. As Orazio wrote to one of his patrons, the Grand Duchess of Tuscany, in 1612, she "has in three years become so skilled that I can venture to say that today she has no peer."

Artemisia served an apprenticeship in her father's studio, with his paintings as her primary exemplars. Unlike male aspiring artists, she was unable to visit many of the churches and public buildings where the work of contemporaries had been commissioned, but in her local church, Santa Maria del Popolo, on the Piazza del Popolo, she would have seen two remarkable Caravaggio paintings: "Crucifixion of St. Peter," in which the elderly martyr is being raised, upside down, on a cross, and "Conversion on the Way to Damascus," in which a young, muscled St. Paul is sprawled on the ground after receiving a heavenly vision. Artemisia had access to Orazio's materials and to his models. She is thought to have sat herself for Orazio's "Young Woman with a Violin (St. Cecilia)," painted around 1612, which shows a musician with a cleft chin, a rounded cheek, and an alert expression.

She would have learned to reproduce her own features, too, with the use of a mirror. The fact that Artemisia's female characters often are, like her, russet-haired, with full cheeks, has led many of her paintings to be described as self-portraiture. Even Artemisia's male figures have sometimes been linked with the female visage characteristic of her work. In 2018, a painting that shows David sitting triumphantly next to Goliath's severed head—long attributed to the Baroque artist Giovanni Francesco Guerrieri—came to auction. A collector at an auction in Munich acquired it for just a hundred and nineteen thousand dollars; in a subsequent forensic examination of the canvas, the London-based conservator Simon Gillespie discovered Artemisia's signature on the hilt of David's sword. Given Artemisia's recent auction history, the work is now likely worth several million dollars. In an essay published this past March in the arts journal *The Burlington Magazine*, the scholar Gianni Papi suggests that the figure of David "projects the distinctive proud and cool virility we find in so

many of Gentileschi's heroines," and persuasively compares the defiant expression of the Biblical hero to that of an apparent self-portrait that can be found in the Palazzo Barberini, in Rome.

Letizia Treves, of the National Gallery, told me that Artemisia's face "has been read into every heroine she ever painted," adding, "I don't think she's *every* Judith or Susanna." Treves argues that it is Artemisia's depiction of female bodies, rather than her replication of her own face, that most strongly expresses her understanding of what it was like to be a woman. "The way she portrays the female body is very naturalistic—more so than her father's," Treves said. "This is someone who really knows the hang of a woman's breast—who has a real sense of how a woman's body behaves." In a pioneering 1968 essay, the art historian R. Ward Bissell wrote of the "uncompromising sensuality" of the recumbent nude depicted in "Cleopatra" (1611-12), describing the figure's physique as "almost animalistic." Treves particularly admires Artemisia's representation of the nude female body in "Danaë" (c. 1612), which is now in the St. Louis Art Museum. Creases around the figure's armpits and swells in the stomach reveal an awareness of the way a woman's flesh settles and subsides. By contrast, Orazio's "Danaë and the Shower of Gold," painted in the early sixteen-twenties and now at the Getty, features bed linens so realistic that the viewer feels she could climb between them, but the princess's breasts defy gravity with an almost comical perkiness.

Although the young Artemisia remained largely cloistered in her father's studio, she was nonetheless vulnerable to attack there by Tassi, a successful artist; some scholars suggest that Orazio had engaged him to tutor Artemisia on perspective. (In "Blood Water Paint," McCullough plausibly suggests that Artemisia was, in part, a victim of her father's professional opportunism: Orazio hoped that Tassi would bring him in on a commission.) The decision to publicly accuse Tassi of rape was made not by Artemisia but by her father, who sought to force Tassi to marry her. The official record of the trial, which is housed at the Archivio di Stato, in Rome, includes Artemisia's vivid account of her ordeal. Tassi, she claims, pushed her inside her bedroom and locked the door. "He then threw me onto the edge of the bed, pushing me with a hand on my breast, and he put a knee between my thighs to prevent me from closing them," reads a translation provided by Mary Garrard in her 1989 book. Tassi placed a hand over Artemisia's mouth to stop her from screaming; she fought back, clawing at his face and hair. In the struggle, she grabbed Tassi's penis so roughly that she tore his flesh. Afterward, she grabbed a knife from a table drawer and said, "I'd like

to kill you with this knife because you have dishonored me.” Tassi opened his coat and taunted her by saying, “Here I am.” Artemisia hurled the knife at him. “He shielded himself,” she tells her interrogator. “Otherwise I would have hurt him and might easily have killed him.”

The Roman archive contains trial transcripts for other women who were raped. Elizabeth Cohen, a scholar who has examined the transcripts, argues that the crime of rape had a different cultural connotation than it does now, and was understood less as a violent act against a woman than as a besmirching of her family’s honor. Cohen contends that characterizations of Artemisia as an outraged proto-feminist, with even her early art expressing enraged resistance, are anachronistic. A seventeenth-century woman would not have conceived of her body with the “corporeal essentialism” that a woman does today, Cohen writes: “Artemisia spoke of her body during the trial, but as the material upon which a socially significant offense had been committed.” According to the transcript, at least, Artemisia’s outrage is couched in terms of having been dishonored, rather than having been assaulted. After Tassi raped her, he immediately assured her that he would marry her, and she reports that “with this good promise I felt calmer,” and confirms that, believing his nuptial pledge, she consented to have sex with him on numerous occasions thereafter.

Orazio’s goal of coercing Tassi into making good on his word to marry Artemisia would be unthinkable in a rape trial today. Artemisia’s testimony was, for the most part, by the book: she knew, or had been instructed on, which points she needed to make in order to meet the standards for conviction. Like other unmarried accusers of rapists, she was obliged to undergo examination by a midwife, to verify that she was no longer a virgin. Nonetheless, the force of Artemisia’s character emerges. At the time, to insure that rape accusations were truthful, alleged victims were required to submit to a form of torture: cords were wrapped around their hands and tightened like thumbscrews. “It is true, it is true, it is true,” she repeated as the cords were tightened. The transcript notes that she interrupted her litany to address Tassi directly, with a mordantly ironic reference to the bindings around her fingers: “*This is the ring that you give me, and these are your promises.*”

Tassi was found guilty but he was sentenced only to a brief period of exile, which he ignored. He did not have to marry Artemisia—it emerged in the courtroom that he had already married someone else. During the trial, her father arranged for her to marry Pierantonio Stiattesi, a minor artist in Florence.

Stiattesi was the brother of Giovanni Battista Stiattesi, a friend of Orazio's who had testified against Tassi in the trial, asserting that he had confessed to having taken Artemisia's virginity. Artemisia apparently found her husband something of a nonentity, and after about a decade together they separated; most traces of Stiattesi have since been lost. Nevertheless, the betrothal, intended to remove her from the city of her scandalous past, was the making of Artemisia. It gave her an opportunity to establish herself as an artist independent of her father, and her status as a married woman offered her something she had never truly experienced: liberty.

Arriving in Florence in the winter of 1612-13, Artemisia initially set up her studio in the house of her father-in-law, a tailor. Over time, she seems to have established a studio apart from the family home, where, among other things, she could more easily work on large-scale canvases. Embarking on a period of abundant creativity, she executed several of the paintings for which she served as her own model—among them “Self-Portrait as a Lute Player,” which hangs in the Wadsworth Atheneum, in Hartford, Connecticut. Some art historians believe that this work was commissioned by the Grand Duke Cosimo II de’ Medici, in whose collection it was later recorded. The Duke’s eye would have been drawn to the sensitivity and animation of the face, but also to the delicacy and articulation of the hands, shown mid-strum on the instrument.

In July, 1616, Artemisia became the first woman to be admitted to the prestigious Accademia delle Arti del Disegno. With the respectability of marriage guaranteeing her the freedom to circulate socially, she got to know intellectuals, performers, and other artists, including Galileo and the poet Michelangelo Buonarroti the Younger, a great-nephew of the Renaissance master. The poet commissioned her to paint part of the ceiling in a gallery dedicated to Michelangelo at the family estate. Her contribution, “Allegory of Inclination,” depicts a female nude sitting on a tuft of cloud.

Around the time she moved to Florence, she made her first iteration of Judith beheading Holofernes, which can now be seen in the Capodimonte Museum, in Naples. In this version and in the one at the Uffizi, a maid-servant, Abra, forcefully holds Holofernes down while Judith confidently hacks away at his neck. Treves says of the paintings, “Artemisia is subverting a well-known traditional subject and empowering the women in a way that hasn’t been done before.” (The painting at the Uffizi, now prominently on display there, was for decades hidden from public view, presumably on the ground that it was

distasteful. The nineteenth-century art historian Anna Brownell Jameson wrote of wishing for “the privilege of burning it to ashes.”) Treves says that Artemisia’s renderings of the tale offer “a picture of sisterhood—of these two women doing this extraordinary thing.” By contrast, Caravaggio’s treatment of the story, in a work that hangs in the Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Antica, in Rome, focusses on the horrified face of Holofernes, and depicts Judith as a pallid girl gingerly holding a sword and grasping her foe’s curly hair at arm’s length. She hardly seems to have the oomph required for decapitation.

Artemisia bore five children, between the years of 1613 and 1618, making her execution of large-scale paintings during that period all the more impressive. It was not just a matter of physical endurance: three of her children died in infancy, and a fourth, Cristofano, born in 1615, died before the age of five. Only her daughter, Prudenzia, born in 1617 and named for Artemisia’s mother, lived into adulthood. Such repeated maternal loss—and the risk that successive pregnancies then posed to a woman’s life—is unimaginable today. Twenty-odd years after the birth of her children, Artemisia received a commission from Philip IV of Spain to paint a Biblical work, “The Birth of St. John the Baptist.” Artists from Tintoretto to Murillo had painted the scene, but Artemisia’s version underlines her intimacy with the dynamics of the birthing room. She depicts a capable cluster of midwives—sleeves pushed up, basins in hand—tending to the infant while his mother, Elizabeth, lies wan and exhausted, barely visible in the dim background.



NGOZI

*"I don't even know what a cat-eat-cat world would look like!"*  
Cartoon by Ngozi Ukazu

The turmoil of Artemisia's early life—and the remarkable evidence of it that survives—has inevitably overshadowed the less sensational, and less documented, narrative of what followed. Nevertheless, her later career was extraordinary, and it is reasonable to conclude that the fact of having been raped was less significant to Artemisia's sense of self than some of her modern champions have suggested. She swiftly became recognized as one of the most accomplished artists of her day, and retained her preëminence for decades; she was often strapped for cash, however, and never stopped hustling for commissions. (Her assurance that her work demonstrated the “spirit of Caesar” was delivered, in part, to justify a painting’s high price.) Artemisia, for all her renown, rarely painted for public spaces. She did little work for the Church, although an early Madonna and Child, painted around 1613, the year her first child was born, suggests what she might have done had churches commissioned devotional themes from her. Mary swoons, eyes closed, as the infant Jesus reaches for her cheek, his eyes locked on her face with palpably needy attachment.

After half a dozen years in Florence, Artemisia returned to Rome. The city’s census report of 1624 suggests that she and her husband had by then parted, and that she was self-supporting. She began associating with Flemish, Dutch, and French painters who also lived in Rome. Treves suggests, “It may be she was hanging out with the foreigners because she felt a bit like an outsider herself.”

In the late sixteen-twenties, Artemisia went to Venice, seeking fresh patronage. In 1630, she settled in Naples. She received commissions from, among others, the Infanta María of Spain, who was spending time in the city. Artemisia cultivated such ladies of the court with gifts of beautiful gloves, which she had sent from Rome. Naples became her base for much of the rest of her life, although she disliked the city, which was crowded, poor, and violent. In a letter to Andrea Cioli, a minister at the Medici court, she complained of “the warlike tumults, the badness of life, and the expense of things.” In the next two decades, she continued to secure influential clients among the Italian nobility and foreign royal houses. Her paintings entered the collections of the Grand Duke of Tuscany, King Philip IV of Spain, and King Charles I of England. Much remains unknown about her later life, though, including the date and cause of her death. Artemisia’s final documented act is a payment made in Naples in August, 1654, against an overdue tax bill. She was reputed to have been buried in the city’s

Church of San Giovanni dei Fiorentini, her grave marked by a stone inscribed, simply, “*HEIC ARTIMISIA*”: “Here lies Artemisia.” But any such stone had disappeared by the time the information was written down, in 1812, by the Italian historian Alessandro da Morrona, and the church was destroyed in the twentieth century. Given the absence of later documentation, scholars theorize that Artemisia died in 1656, when the plague swept through Naples, killing a hundred and fifty thousand residents—half the city’s population.

Her last known dated work, from 1652, is a large canvas in which she revisits Susanna and the Elders, one of her earliest themes and one to which she had returned repeatedly. As in the 1610 version, Susanna is seated on a balustrade, but this time there is a tenebrous sky, rather than a clear blue one. In this iteration, she does not turn away from the two onlookers: she faces them. The painting was rediscovered a dozen years ago by Adelina Modesti, a professor who found it, badly damaged, in the archive of the Pinacoteca Nazionale, in Bologna. In a monograph, Modesti argues that Susanna’s raised left arm and uplifted hand deflect the elders’ “intrusive male gazes” from her body, which is draped in translucent fabric. It could be argued, though, that this Susanna draws the elders’ attention away from her body not by blocking their gaze but by meeting it with her own—staring at them just as they stare at her, and obliging them to acknowledge her as a human being.

Increasingly, Artemisia is celebrated less for her handling of private trauma than for her adept management of her public persona. Throughout her career, she demonstrated a sophisticated comprehension of the way her unusual status as a woman added to the value of her paintings. On a formal level, her representation of herself in the guise of different characters and genders prefigures such postmodern artists as Cindy Sherman. Unlike Sherman, however, Artemisia had few female peers. She was not the only woman working as an artist during the early seventeenth century: a slightly older contemporary was the northern-Italian portraitist Fede Galizia, born in 1578, whose father, like Artemisia’s, was also a painter. But Artemisia must often have felt singular. In a series of letters written to one of her most important patrons, the collector Antonio Ruffo, she wittily referred to her gender: “A woman’s name raises doubts until her work is seen,” and, regarding a work in progress, “I will show Your Illustrious Lordship what a woman can do.” In 2001, the scholar Elizabeth Cropper wrote, “We will never understand Artemisia Gentileschi as a painter if we cannot accept that she was not supposed to be a painter at all, and that her own sense of herself—not to mention others’ views of her—as an independent woman, as a marvel, a *stupor*

*mundi*, as worthy of immortal fame and historical celebration, was entirely justified.” On art-adjacent blogs, Artemisia’s strength and occasionally obnoxious self-assurance are held forth as her most essential qualities. She has become, as the Internet term of approval has it, a badass bitch.

Recent research has also complicated the understanding of Artemisia’s moral character, rendering her less blandly heroic. In 2011, the art historian Francesco Solinas was exploring the archive of the Frescobaldis, a Florentine banking dynasty, when he discovered a cache of letters written by Artemisia, including some sent to Francesco Maria Maringhi, a Florentine nobleman. It turned out that she had had a torrid affair with Maringhi when she was in her mid-twenties, and five years into her marriage. Several of the letters are included in the National Gallery show; in the exhibition’s catalogue, Solinas writes that they “reveal a passionate, adventurous and even libertine way of life.” In one letter, Artemisia addresses Maringhi as “my dearest heart”; in another, she chastises him for writing only two lines to her—“which if you loved me would have gone on forever.” In a third, she refers to a self-portrait in Maringhi’s possession and warns him not to masturbate in front of it. (Sadly, the exact portrait is not identified.) In the same letter, she saltily expresses her satisfaction that he has not taken any other lovers, other than his “right hand, envied by me so much, for it possesses that which I cannot possess myself.”

Another work by Artemisia that has only recently been rediscovered, having been in a private collection in France, is “Mary Magdalene in Ecstasy” (c. 1620-25). The subject reclines voluptuously, her eyes closed, her face turned up to the light, a silky white chemise slipping carelessly from her ample shoulder. The painting, which ostensibly depicts Mary Magdalene in the reveries of devotion, is less spiritual than erotic: her interlaced fingers may be motionless, but her slight smile seems labile, indicating that Artemisia understood a woman’s sensuality from the inside out.

The Frescobaldi archive also contains correspondence written to Maringhi by Artemisia’s husband, Stiattesi. Evidently, he was aware of the liaison, and hoped that her highly placed lover would help advance her career. In one letter, Stiattesi apologizes to Maringhi that Artemisia cannot write to him herself; their house, he explains, is perpetually full of cardinals and princes, and she is so busy that she barely has time to eat. Solinas describes Artemisia as “extraordinarily courageous, manifestly unscrupulous, opportunistic and ambitious.” Art historians now contend that the energy and the passion that can be glimpsed in

her letters—and even in her testimony at the rape trial—are the same qualities that infuse her work with such vitality.

Artemisia's fame in feminist circles started with the dissemination of her bloodiest and most distressing images. Her variations on the theme of the murderous Judith remain irresistible iconography, and her differing treatments of Susanna offer a forceful lesson about the power of the apparently powerless. (In the Bible, Susanna does not submit to rape, and, in a trial, the elders' scandalous accusations against her are proved false.) Such tales of resistance remain as riveting, and as necessary, in the twenty-first century as they were in the seventeenth.

But, in recent years, Artemisia's academic admirers have turned their attention to one of her quieter paintings. In the late sixteen-thirties, Artemisia travelled to England, where her father had become a court painter. Several works that she painted there entered the Royal Collection, among them “Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting,” also known as “*La Pittura*.” Such works traditionally depict the allegorical figure as a woman. In Artemisia’s version, which will be prominently placed in the National Gallery exhibition, the woman has abundant, mussed hair and plump cheeks, a brown apron tied around her waist and the billowing green silk sleeves of her dress pushed up past her elbows. Rather than looking out of the frame, as is typical with self-portraits, the figure is looking at a prepared canvas, with a raised brush in one hand and a palette in the other. She bends forward, not elegantly but with the command of an experienced artist. As scholars have pointed out, no male artist could have attempted this clever visual doubling, in which Artemisia combined a realistic portrait of herself at work with an allegorical representation of the art form that she so ardently and successfully pursued. This is an Artemisia for today: accomplished, original, and contentedly absorbed in her vocation. ♦

# **Personal History**

- [My Three Fathers](#)

# **My Three Fathers**

My problems were never ones of scarcity. I suffered from abundance.

By [Ann Patchett](#)

September 28, 2020



Marriage has always proved irresistible to my family. We try and fail and try again, somehow maintaining our belief in an institution that has made fools of us all. I've married twice; so has my sister. Our mother had three husbands. None of us intended this to happen. We meant to stick our landing on the first try, but we stumbled. My parents divorced when I was five. My mother and my stepfather Mike had their final parting when I was twenty-four. She married Darrell when I was twenty-seven, and they stayed together until he died, in 2018, when I was fifty-four. My problems were never ones of scarcity. I suffered from abundance, too much and too many. There are worse problems to have.

The second time that my sister, Heather, married, in 2005, she wanted a real wedding. She and her new husband, Bill, threw a terrific party in a barn that had been fancied up and turned into an event space. My husband, Karl, and I had eloped a few months before, and those beautiful words of love and commitment were still fresh. We drank the champagne, danced in a line, blew soap bubbles into the night sky above the bride and groom. Only my former stepfather, Mike, was sullen. His third marriage was nearing its end, and he was in love with my mother again. But my mother was happy with Darrell, so Mike danced with me for most of the night.

My father, who had always hated Mike, hated him less now that he, too, had lost my mother. Now my father contented himself with simply hating my mother, even though thirty-six years had passed since she had left him for Mike, in 1969. Beneath the glow of the little white lights that were draped over the ceiling's crossbeams, my stepfather's love for my mother and my father's hatred of her looked remarkably similar.

Darrell noticed none of this. Eight weeks earlier, he had fallen down the brick stairs that led to the back door of the house where he lived with my mother and fractured several vertebrae. He was wearing a brace beneath his suit, beneath his clerical gown. He was a retired Presbyterian minister, and he officiated at my sister's wedding, despite the pain it caused him to walk and stand and breathe. He hung on through the dinner and then got a ride home.

But the story I want to tell happens just after the wedding and before the reception began, while the photographs were being taken. Or it happened months before that, when I first realized that all three of my mother's husbands were going to be at Heather's wedding—the family equivalent of a total solar eclipse.

I wanted a picture of that.

I called my father first, since I pegged him as the one most likely to say no, but he surprised me. Sure, he said, fine. He didn't care.

Then I asked Mike, who would have found a way to get me the North Star had I wanted it. Although he hesitated, he said yes as well. He didn't like the idea, but as far as I was concerned he didn't have to like it. It would take two minutes.



Darrell had never met my father, and had met my stepfather only once, in passing. Unlike my father and Mike, Darrell owed me nothing, but he said he'd do it.

The wedding took place in September, on a day that was clear and bright and still a little warm. After Heather and Bill had been photographed with every possible configuration of family and friends, I lined my mother's husbands up together. In one picture, it's just the three of them in their dark suits, and in another I am with them in my garnet bridesmaid's dress. Darrell holds up one of my hands, Mike holds the other, and my father, in the middle, has his hand on my waist. My father is the handsome one, the one whose face registers genuine happiness for the day. Darrell is smiling bravely, his posture very straight in his back brace. And Mike looks as if he'd leap out of the frame the second I let go of his hand.

"We were all standing there waiting on the photographer," my father told me later on the phone. "And Mike said, 'You know what she's doing, don't you? She's going to wait until the three of us are dead and then she's going to write about us. This is the picture that will run with the piece.' " My father said that the idea hadn't occurred to him, and it wouldn't have occurred to Darrell, but, as soon as Mike said it, they knew he was right.

He was right. That was exactly what I meant to do. That is exactly what I'm doing now.

The three fathers died in the order in which my mother had married them, and in the inverse order of their health. My father went first, even though he had made a religion of the elliptical trainer, the treadmill, the NordicTrack. He spent four slow years dying of a neurological disease called progressive supranuclear palsy, which, in the end, confined him to a wheelchair. His wife took care of him at home, a herculean task that allowed him to die in the comfort of their bed.

Mike spent his last two years living with his older daughter, Tina, who gave him all the love and attention he had denied her as a child. Mike made death look easy. Six weeks after he received a diagnosis of kidney failure, he went gently in his sleep.

Darrell made death hard. He hadn't been well for decades. After his broken

back, there was a series of splintering falls, a terrible car accident, a shunt for hydrocephalus, and two kinds of cancer. But he kept on living. Sitting by Darrell's bed in the assisted-living center where he spent his final, excruciating years, I remembered the photograph. He was the last, and the one who had played the smallest role in my life. I held his skeletal hand and thought about what I would write after he died.

But when his death came I found I didn't want to think about Darrell anymore. I didn't want to think about any of them. I had—along with my sister and my stepsisters, my mother and my stepmother—spent so many years seeing them through and then seeing them out. I went back to empty out Darrell's room the night he died. I hauled the unopened cases of Depends and Ensure to the community room for anyone who wanted them, and then I carted his paperbacks and impossibly large shoes to Goodwill. When I was done, I was done with all of it.

In 1974, my father signed up to buy the “100 Greatest Books of All Time” from the Franklin Library. He went for the full leather option—silk-moiré endpapers, sewn-in satin-ribbon bookmarks, every edge of every page gilded in 22k. gold. When the people at the Franklin Library came up with this monthly subscription service, my father was the sort of customer they had in mind. He didn't intend to just buy the books; he intended to read them. He intended to be the kind of person who sat in his home library full of leather-bound books with embossed spines, reading “The Return of the Native.” Month after month, year after year, he spent a lot of money in order to be that person.

My father had grown up the third of seven children. He was born in 1931, and was the first of the Patchetts to have been born in this country. His parents had left England to find work in California, and after a long haul of nothing—it was the Depression—his father landed a job as a machinist at Columbia Pictures. But when the set builders went on strike he went with them in solidarity and was blackballed from working in the studio system again. My grandfather became a janitor at the *Los Angeles Times*, a filthy job because of the ink that got on everyone's hands. Later, he was able to get my grandmother a job in the cafeteria there. The family of nine shared a three-bedroom house on Council Street, near Echo Park. My father slept in a narrow bed on the back porch.

When my father got out of the Navy, he moved back to Council Street and worked in a liquor store for a couple of years, while repeatedly applying to the

Los Angeles Police Department. He kept being rejected because a doctor said that there was something wrong with his heart, until finally another doctor said that there was nothing wrong with his heart. He became a police officer. He married my mother, a beautiful nurse. They had two daughters and bought a house on Rossmoyne Avenue, in Glendale. Then my mother fell in love with Mike, who was a doctor at the hospital where she worked, and when he moved to Tennessee she packed us up and followed him there.

Without us, my father rented out the house on Rossmoyne and returned to his father's house on Council Street and his bed on the porch. My sister and I flew from Nashville to visit for a week every summer. After the yearly purchase of two plane tickets for us, he used what was left of his savings to take us to Disneyland or Knott's Berry Farm, but the place we all liked best was Forest Lawn. Forest Lawn was free. We would bring a lunch and walk the paths through the exemplary grass to see where the movie stars were buried, then we would go and stand in the crisp, cold air of the flower shop, which looked like a summer retreat for hobbits. The place smelled overwhelmingly of carnations, a scent I still associate with those happy afternoons in the cemetery.

Our father reclaimed the Rossmoyne house when he married our stepmother, and she made the place a loving home where we were always welcome. The Franklin Library extended its offerings beyond a hundred, and my father bought those latecomers as well. For every book, there was a slim pamphlet that included an overview of the text and some study questions to consider. It soon became clear that my father was not going to get through the "Oresteia" one month and "The Decameron" the next, but he faithfully read the pamphlets and stored them in the small box that had been sent for this purpose. He believed he would catch up eventually, if not while on vacation then once he retired. He wanted to read the books, and he wanted the books to be read.

He was all too happy when, during our summer visits, I sat down with "The Red Badge of Courage" or "Pride and Prejudice." He let me take his copy of "Anna Karenina" to the condo that he and my stepmother had bought in Port Hueneme, up the coast from Los Angeles. I sat in the living room reading day after day and wouldn't go to the beach.

This father, you might think, is the perfect father for a writer. To which I would say, yes and no.



syn

*"In theory, I love fall, but in practice it's three months of dreading the approaching winter."*  
Cartoon by Sofia Warren

For all his love of books, my father believed that no child would develop properly without the ability to play volleyball. Even on the beaches of Southern California, I doubted whether this was true, but, at the Catholic girls' school my sister and I attended in Nashville, I was sure he was wrong. From the other side of the country, our father tried to shape us. He had better luck with Heather, who was three and a half years older than me and thus had had three and a half more years to spend with him. When he gave her instructions on what classes to take and what clubs to sign up for and how many sit-ups to do every night, she listened. When I was nine, he sent Heather a volleyball net and a ball and ten dollars, which was her payment for forcing me to play. She was to be his emissary and my coach, but we fought like wolves in those days. She strung the net up from the carport to the fence and then took it down, because you can lead your sister to the volleyball net but you cannot make her spike.

My father wanted me to be athletic. He wanted me to be on teams, join clubs, start clubs. He wanted me to run for office in any organization that held elections. He wanted me to audition, volunteer, be a part of something, submit. When I claimed to have no interest in a high-school sorority he was pushing, he told me to become a member of that organization, rise through the ranks, and then change the system from within. He wanted me to infiltrate.

What mattered, he told me, was being well rounded, but there was nothing well rounded about me. I told him I was going to be a writer. My father didn't mind my reading—he was a reader—but he told me that there was no way I was going to be a writer. "Someday you'll get divorced," he said when I was in high school. "You'll have a couple of kids to support. You're not going to be able to do that writing." I couldn't be so selfish, he was saying. I had to think about what was best for those kids. It doesn't take a bucket of insight to figure out where this was coming from.

My father wanted me to be a dental hygienist, though whenever he came back from vacation he would tell me how much fun I'd have working on a cruise ship. I might have killed him had we lived in the same house, or he might have killed me, but long-distance phone calls were expensive in those days and we talked only once a month. He wanted my sister to go to law school, and she took his instructions to heart. She was the smart one, my sister, an excellent student. But when he gave me advice I held the phone away from my ear. You are a duck, I

would tell myself. This is rain.

I'm older now than my father was then. There are so many ways to think about these conversations in the aftermath of time. Maybe he was trying to save me from suffering. He remembered his father walking through Los Angeles all day looking for work with a sandwich in his pocket and a wife and seven children back on Council Street. He remembered working in a liquor store after the Navy, sleeping on the porch. Wouldn't he want to spare me that? Maybe all he could do was operate within the confines of the world he knew: Catholicism, the Navy, the police department. Captains gave orders and sailors went to sea. Who was I but a swabbie? He'd taken orders and I would take orders. No one can exist on paper and pens, without anyone to tell her when to get up and what to eat and where to go and when to sleep.

But I was a writer and nothing else, and to miss seeing me as such was to miss me altogether. I wrote and read and read and wrote. I stacked every egg I was ever given into a single basket. I can see how that would be unnerving for a parent.

Did I tell you that I loved my father, that he loved me? Contrary to popular belief, love does not require understanding in order to thrive. My father made me laugh more often than he made me want to strangle him. When I was an adult, we hashed out articles we read in *The New Yorker*. We listened to arias and tried to guess the composers. There were the times, the very happiest times, when we sat on the two linen sofas that faced each other in the Rossmoyne house, drank gin-and-tonics, and read Yeats aloud, passing the leather-bound volume back and forth. "Who will go drive with Fergus now, / And pierce the deep wood's woven shade, / And dance upon the level shore?" "This one," he would say, and read me "The Lake Isle of Innisfree." Then he would hand me the book, and I would say, "This one."

But he also dragged my sister and me to the alley behind the grocery store at 6 A.M. so that we could hit tennis balls against the back wall of Ralphs.

I was no better at tennis than I was at volleyball, but my sister hit and hit and hit. Every time he sent me down the alley to retrieve the scattered balls, I thought, I'll show you. I will not hit or play or join or score, but I will write and I will show you.

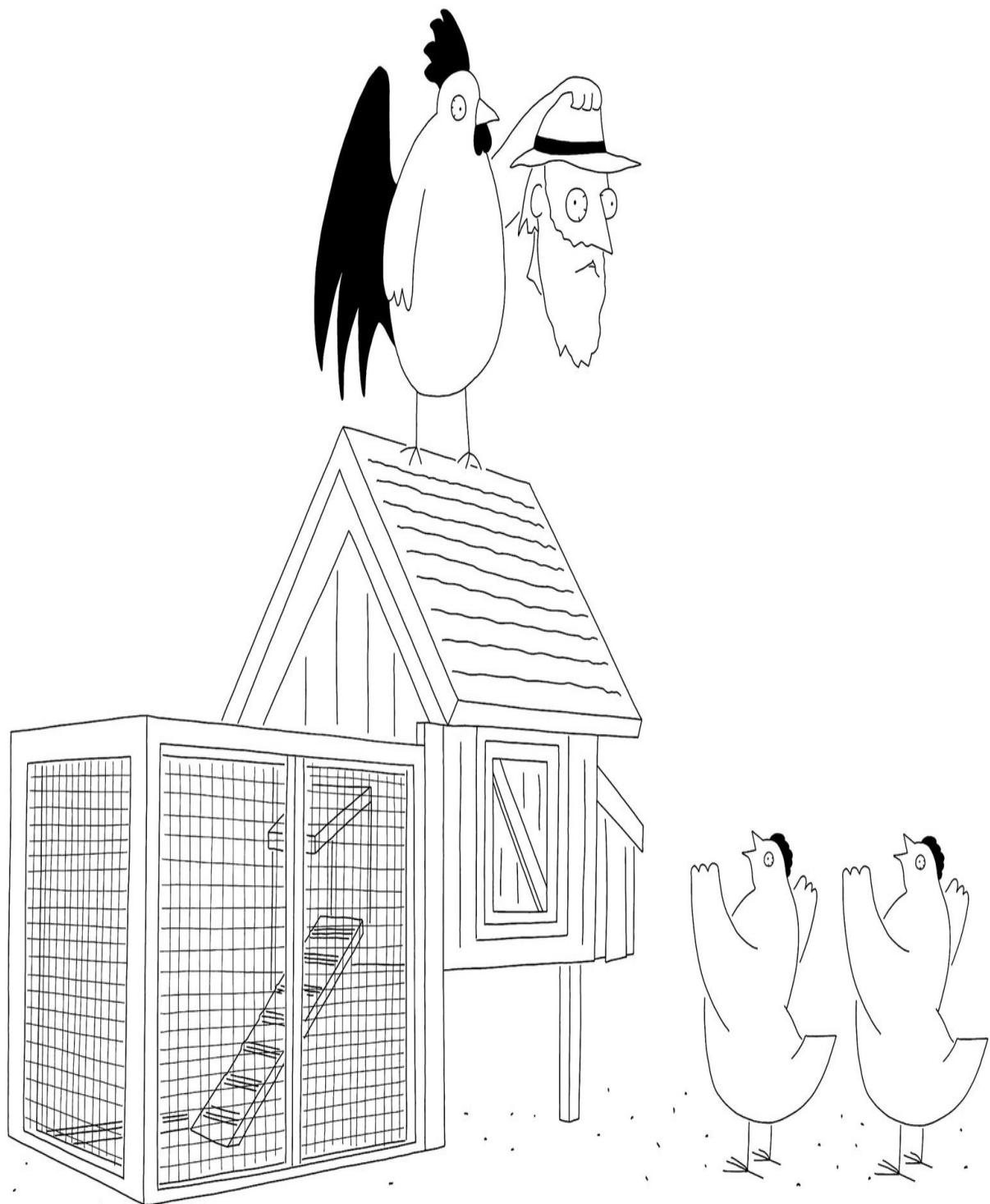
It turns out that having someone who believed in my failure more than in my success kept me alert. It made me fierce. Without ever meaning to, my father taught me at an early age to give up on the idea of approval. I wish I could bottle that freedom now and give it to every young writer I meet, with an extra bottle for the women.

I got an M.F.A. from Iowa, a handful of fellowships, a smattering of prizes. I published stories, articles, three novels, and still he sent me notices for summer work on cruise ships. I had no money and never asked for any. I lived in a tiny apartment and drove an old car. I wrote and waited for my father to see what it meant to me. My father read my books in manuscript. He helped me with research. He enjoyed my work. But he had been so sure that I was going to fail at this thing, and he didn't like to be wrong.

What finally tipped the balance in my favor was something I'd never expected to happen: I became rich. "Rich" is a useless word, since everyone has her own definition. Mine is this: I had so much money that I no longer knew exactly, down to the last dollar, how much I had. I had written a book about opera and terrorism in South America that had become very successful, and, after that, my father changed his tune. "I used to tell her she should be a dental hygienist," he would say, dropping his arm over my shoulder when I gave readings in Los Angeles and all the Patchetts and their friends and families were in attendance. "Good thing she never listens to me."

Mike had four children with his first wife. He left them in Los Angeles when he took my mother and my sister and me to Nashville. "Six kids," he would say when we were alone, "and you're the only one I'll never have to worry about." The first time he said that, I was probably eight, and he continued to repeat this message in one way or another for the rest of his life. Did he actually see something in me when I was a straw-haired, spindly child, or did I become successful because he repeated it with the certainty of an oracle: You Will Be the Winner?

The way I would win—Mike was positive about this—was by being a writer. Years before he bought me my first typewriter, he would say, "One of these days I'm going to open up one of your books and it's going to say 'To Mike Glasscock.' "



CHICKEN COUP

sdf

Of course, that could never happen. It would have killed my father if I dedicated a book to Mike. These were the issues I wrestled with in middle school.

You might think there's a beautiful sort of justice in this—my father and my stepfather being equally certain of their opposing views of my future. My reward for having a father who knew I would fail was having another father who was sure I'd succeed. A good theory, except for the fact that my stepfather was crazy, and my father was utterly sane.

“Crazy” is another sloppy word, like “rich.” It’s all a matter of reference. My stepfather was by any measure a successful man, a surgeon who lectured all over the world and was sent the most difficult cases in the specialized field of neurotology. He flew a helicopter, rode motorcycles. He bought a farm thirty miles outside town, with a gate and a long gravel driveway. He had a water system installed and sank a gas tank, by which I mean we had a gas pump next to the carport in case all the filling stations were abruptly closed. He buried gold coins under the marigolds and hauled cartons of dehydrated food and jugs of water up to the attic. Every house we lived in was filled with guns: guns holstered under chairs, in bedside tables, behind clock faces, in air-conditioning vents. The *Playboy* magazines stayed out on the coffee table in the living room, while the hard stuff smoldered on the top shelf of the bedroom closet, where all the children found it. My stepfather broke plates and put his fist through hollow doors, and he thought I was the Second Coming of Christ.

Mike bought great books monthly as well, and, like my father, he got them in full leather. Mike liked sets. Sets of Shakespeare, of Dickens. There was a cunning little set of Chekhov stories that sat on his desk while he read Ian Fleming and James Clavell. He taught me how to play chess, drive a car, throw a knife, develop black-and-white photographs. He taught all of us how to shoot—rifles, shotguns, handguns—then how to take those guns apart to clean them. He made us practice grabbing the gun from beneath the chair in the living room in case someone was trying to kidnap us.

Mike liked to take me to the hospital with him on weekends. While he went to see his patients, he would leave me in the doctors’ lounge, where I’d spend the morning reading books and eating powdered-sugar doughnuts and drinking Orange Crush. He’d leave me in the car for an hour while he stopped at an apartment where one of his nurses lived. Driving home, he’d tell me the sad

stories of his childhood, his teen-age parents who eventually shipped him off to live with his grandparents, the love he desired and never received. He spent his days slicing tumors out of people's brains. He came home with bruises under his eyes from leaning into a microscope for twelve or fourteen hours at a stretch. He was financially responsible for two wives and six children. He invested in racehorses and oil wells, with no knowledge of how either of those enterprises worked. He took up sculpture and fencing. He rebuilt a houseboat in our driveway. He spent five mornings a week in analysis, for more years than should be legal. All he wanted was to be a writer.

I remember being home from college and Mike and me watching Olivier's "King Lear." When the credits rolled, one frame said "By William Shakespeare." "That's all I want," Mike said to me, pointing at the television. "That three or four hundred years from now people will watch something on television that says 'By Michael Glasscock.' "

Mike started getting serious about writing short stories after we left the farm, when I was in junior high. He worked on them endlessly, by which I mean he wrote many, many stories but almost never wrote a second draft. He would scrawl them out on yellow legal pads as fast as a court reporter, give them to his secretary to type, and then give them to me to read. Even then, I knew they were awful, but how was I supposed to tell him that?

I learned how to tell him that. Through time and volume, he wore my manners away. "You can't have eight pages of someone getting into the shower!" I said. "Undressing, pulling back the shower curtain, turning the water on, waiting for the water to get hot. Nobody cares! It doesn't move your story along." And he would cross out the shower scene, have his secretary retype the story, and then give it back to me to read again.

Mike worked so hard at everything he did. He believed that writing was something that could be mastered by brute force. He started writing novels on the weekends. Sometimes he dictated them, had them typed, and sent them to me without ever reading them himself.

I started reading those novels when I was in college, which he paid for me to attend. One of the only real fights I remember us having was when I told him that he couldn't pay for me to go to graduate school. I had got a financial-aid package that required me to teach literature, but he didn't want me teaching. He

didn't want me to have any sort of job. He wanted to believe that we were sharing the education, that I would go and learn and bring the wisdom back, because he was too busy to go to Iowa himself.

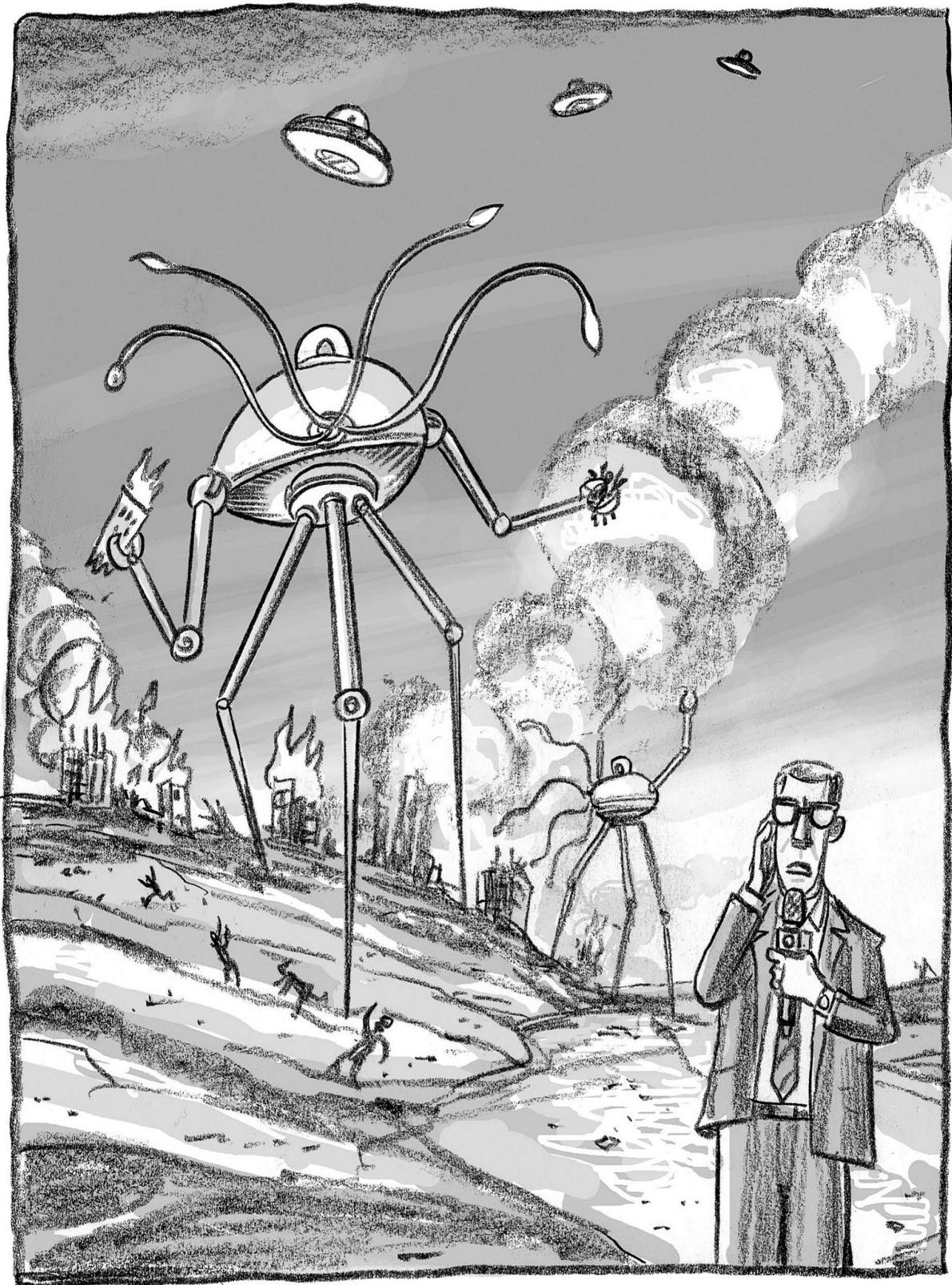
Mike believed in me completely and, in return, I read his novels. How many of them were there? Thirty? Forty? I have no idea. Some were as long as five hundred pages, printed out on creamy résumé paper and bound at Kinko's. I cannot begin to calculate how much of my reading life was lost to those books and their world populated with big-breasted blondes and long-haired brunettes, men with guns and helicopters and piles of cash. When bodies were mutilated, his writing slowed to insure medical accuracy. There was so much sex, so many car crashes. Over the years, I tried every tack: I did line edits. I did no line edits. I told him he couldn't waste my time like this. I tried to be encouraging. I stuffed the manuscripts into trash cans in airports and said nothing. For years, I refused to read them, and then I relented because he was so certain that the one he had just finished was different. It wasn't different. Of course, some of these bricks landed on my sister, on my stepsisters, and maybe one or two on my stepbrothers, but the crushing majority found their way to my doorstep (FedEx overnight) because I was the writer. "This would be child abuse," I said to my husband one night, as I sat on the couch with a manuscript in my lap. "Except I'm fifty-two."

Mike never stopped writing, and he never stopped trying to get an agent and a contract. He paid to have five of his books published. They were the better ones, and still they were awful. He asked if he could do a reading at the bookstore I co-own in Nashville, and I said yes. All his friends and old patients came, all the doctors he had trained, but he wasn't happy. He wanted what I had.

I first met Mike when I was five. He and my mother were together most, though not all, of the time until I was twenty-four. He and I remained close until he died, at eighty-four. He settled as he aged. He became kinder, easier, a better listener. "Who is this wonderful man?" my stepsister Tina would say of him then. "And what have you done with my father?" His writing never improved.

I grew up in the weather of his insanity, and yet the gifts he gave me are legion. Not only did he make me believe that I was going to be a writer, he made me believe that this was the prize that topped all other prizes. Through his own strange example, he taught me about work. If this man with an all-consuming job, six children, endless hobbies, and numerous affairs could find the time to

write so many books, even horrible books, I should be able to organize myself for productivity. He taught me that to ask people to read my work was to ask them to give me their time, and so I resolved never to ask anyone to read anything until I had done every last thing I could to make it better. Eudora Welty can show you what perfection looks like, but twenty thousand pages of bad fiction read over the course of a life can teach you what not to do. What a time-saver that turned out to be!



KUPER

*"Same old same old. Back to you, Jim."*  
Cartoon by Peter Kuper

I was twenty-seven when my mother married her third husband. The very idea of it exhausted me. She didn't see either of her first two husbands anymore, but both men were central in my life: my father wanting me to be more like him, my stepfather wanting to be more like me. I didn't want to figure out my place in the new family landscape. After all, I was grown and gone, married and divorced myself. But I wanted my mother to be happy. However trying her first two marriages had been for me, they had been devastating for her. I put on my best dress and went to the wedding.

Darrell was easy. That was evident right from the start. He knew how to cook. He liked to garden. He had good relationships with his three grown children. He brought very little into the marriage: a clock that had belonged to his grandfather, a few framed pictures. He unpacked several boxes of books, most of them theological in nature, all of them read, many annotated in pencil, none bound in leather. Darrell was not a Franklin Library sort of guy, and he didn't care about my writing at all.

Or he did care, but in the same way that he cared about Heather's job as a development officer for a liberal-arts college. He had a son who was the editor of a newspaper, a son who was a doctor, a daughter who was a Realtor. He seemed to be equally impressed with all of us. When he read one of my books or came to a reading, he would give me a hug afterward and say, "Aren't you a wonder," which was also what he said when I picked up Italian food for dinner or helped clean out the garage. I heard him say it to his children and to his grandchildren and to my mother. "Aren't you a wonder." It was a statement, not a question, and, as many times as he said it, it never sounded like a stock phrase.

It was as if he saw us separately, equally, and found the wonder in each of us. I cannot imagine Darrell being interested in how much money I made or where I went or whom I knew, and yet I always believed that he cared about my happiness. If he had any gaping holes in his life, I was never, for an instant, made to feel that they were mine to fill. I knew Darrell for thirty years. After he retired, when my mother was still working, we occasionally went to the movies together. When he stopped driving, I would drive him around. In all the time I knew him, I can remember him raising his voice to me only twice. The first time was when we were sorting through the contents of the basement before a move and I told him that he had to get rid of his lifetime collection of *Mother Jones*

magazines, which filled a series of giant, weighty, vinyl-covered binders. He told me that the magazines were none of my business, and he was right. The second time, in the same basement, where we had gone to wait out a tornado, I finally said I'd had enough, I was going home. We have a lot of tornado warnings in Tennessee. It would be easy to spend all spring in the basement. But he yelled at me and told me that I wasn't going upstairs. Again, he was right. That was the full extent of our conflict.

I sat by Darrell's hospital bed many times over the years, as he was at the intersection of bad health and bad luck for as long as I knew him, but on the whole I didn't do much for him. His sons lived in other states, but his daughter never failed to show up for the things that daughters are called on to do. He had my mother. There was little need for me.

I don't know how my life might have gone if Darrell had been my father, or if he had been the stepfather I grew up with. It's hard for me to imagine that he would have opposed my writing or been zealously in favor of it. But, coming in as a third father at a point in my life when I most decidedly did not need a third father, he gave me a wonderful gift: he didn't see me as my work, nor did he see me as an extension of my mother. He let me be just one more person around a crowded table, a valued addition.

Darrell was forever falling. His son-in-law would come to pick him up off the floor. The fire department would come. He broke ribs; there were compression fractures in his spine. He wouldn't eat and dwindled to a pile of bones that made us question how life was sustained. The story went on like this for years, and much of his sweetness was worn away by terrible pain. When my mother could no longer care for him on her own, she put him into assisted living. She went to see him every day. He lived and lived and lived, and then he died. It can be hard to remember what someone once meant to you in the wake of so much suffering.

Our father died when my sister and I were on a plane going out to California to say goodbye to him. He was still there in the bed when we arrived, and we kissed him.

All six of the children got to see Mike in his last week. The book I had dedicated to him was printed just in time and I showed him the page that said "To Mike Glasscock." He'd wanted a green burial, and we took his body to a stretch of woods set aside for that purpose, and we buried him ourselves, shovelling dirt

for hours, taking breaks, singing all the songs he liked. “As I walked out in the streets of Laredo, as I walked out in Laredo one day.”

What’s so easy for me to see now that all of them are gone, what was so impossible for me to see at the time, was that they were only occasionally thinking of me, and I was only occasionally thinking of them. From each of the fathers I took the things I needed, and then I turned them into stories—my father gave me strength, Mike gave me adoration, Darrell gave me acceptance—and while those stories are true, so many thousands of other stories are equally true, like all the nights in the kitchen of the Rossmoyne house when my father came home from work, a gun holstered on the back of his belt beneath his suit jacket, and I stood on his shoes so we could dance, my father singing and swaying us back and forth, “Embrace me, my sweet embraceable you.” Dear God, how I loved him. How he loved me!

And there is Mike, taking me to a nearby farm to pick out a pig for my ninth birthday. I had read “Charlotte’s Web” a dozen times and begged to have a pig of my own. He sat me up on a fence and all the piglets ran by and I pointed to the runt. The farmer dropped the small pig in a burlap sack and knotted it, and Mike put the thrashing, squealing sack in the back seat of the car and drove us home. I had never been so happy, because now I was a girl like Fern, and Mike had never been so happy, because he had never made anyone this happy in all his life.

Then I think of Darrell, with his family, his children and their spouses and their children, my mother, my sister and her children, our husbands, all of us around the dining-room table in the house he shared with my mother, everyone laughing. There had never been so many people in that house before and the chaos and the conversations turned into a kind of light, and I, who was always looking to slip away, wanted to stay. ♦

## **Podcast Dept.**

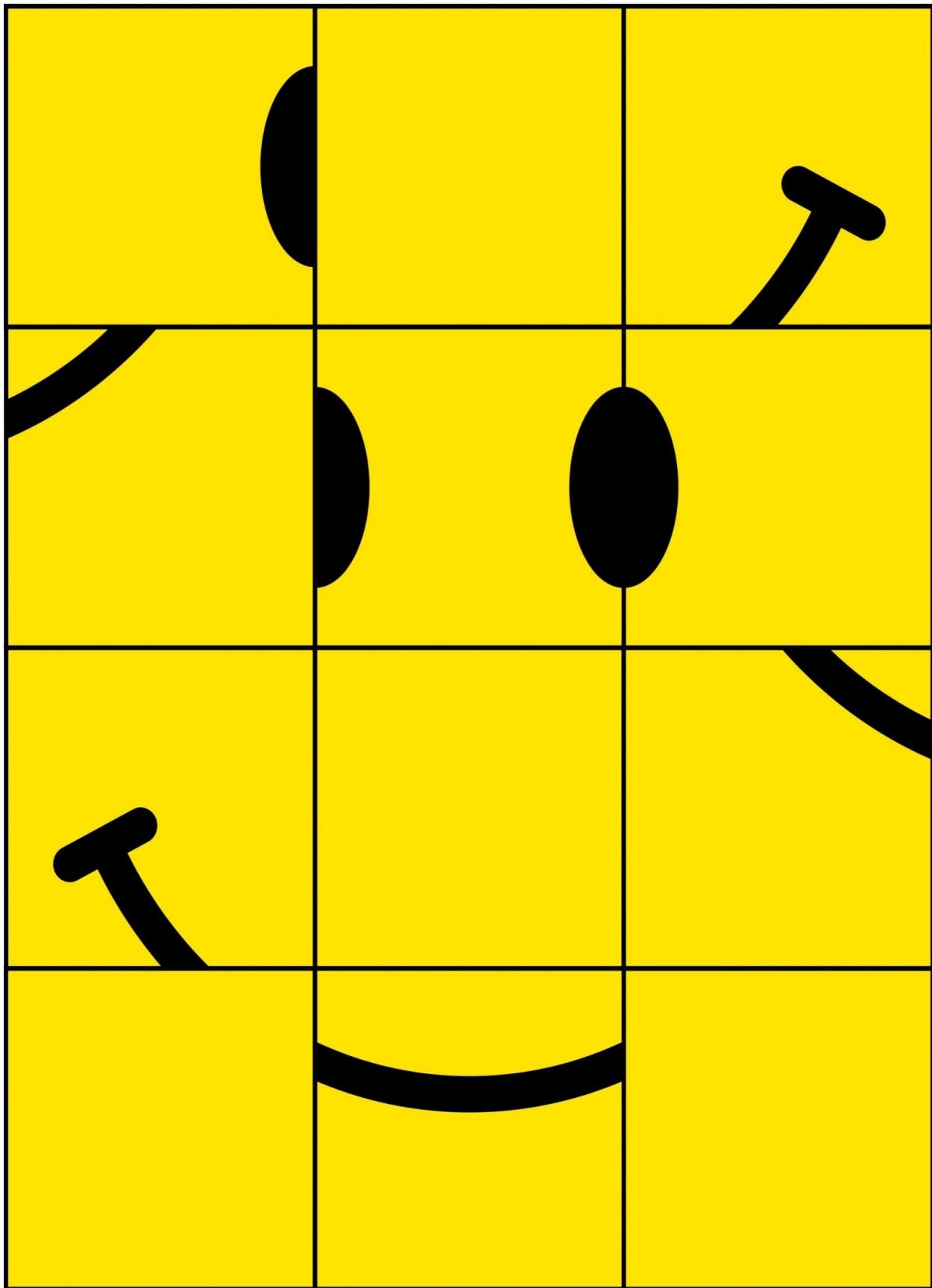
- [Can Podcasts Improve Our Well-Being?](#)

# Can Podcasts Improve Our Well-Being?

“The Happiness Lab” is part of a wave of positive-psychology audio that takes a quantitative view of the quest to be happy.

By [Alexandra Schwartz](#)

September 28, 2020



Doris Lessing hated recorded music. She feared it. She thought that music might addle people's brains so much that it would drive them to kill, to torture, to maim. "Is it possible—and I know this mad hypothesis is asking for ridicule—that we are poisoning ourselves with music?" she wrote, in 1994. Lessing recognized that making such a powerful, intoxicating substance—one that shamans use to create magical moods, that generals use to inspire soldiers to go to war, that priests use to rouse their congregations to devotion—instantly available to anyone and everyone had to be, at the least, a very big deal in the course of human history.

What would Lessing have made of the podcast revolution? We walk around with plugs the size of shelled peanuts in our ears, listening to the people we invite to live inside our heads. The power of the medium is immense. It used to be that in order to preach you needed a pulpit or a TV or radio show, or at least a soapbox. Now all you need is an Internet connection—and, preferably, the support of one of the well-funded companies that have sprung up to develop the genre, like Pineapple Street Media or Pushkin Industries, which was founded, in 2018, by Jacob Weisberg and Malcolm Gladwell. Only a few years ago, Alex Blumberg, a radio producer who was a regular presence on "This American Life," made a podcast, "StartUp," whose first season followed him as he tried to found his own podcasting company. In an early pitch to an investor, he was all but laughed out of the room. The show featured Blumberg's agonized conversations with his wife about his decision to potentially flush their family's financial future down the drain. He is currently sitting pretty as the C.E.O. of Gimlet Media, which he sold to Spotify, last year, for two hundred and thirty million dollars. There is a prospecting feel to the podcast industry, a rush to mine the gold of our thinly stretched attention before it runs out for good. Podcasts these days are rife with brightly voiced ads for other podcasts. Anyone can be a podcaster: novelists, journalists, comedians, professors, actors, scientists, plus a nice smattering of conspiracy theorists and self-appointed demagogues. It's like starting a garage band, but without the element of cool.

I have listened to podcasts for a number of years, but I usually come back to the same half-dozen. The hosts are my friends now, though they don't know it, and every so often I get sick of indulging their banter without being asked what I think. In the hope of inviting some new people into my mind, I went looking for podcasts on a very podcast-y subject: happiness. Self-improvement is big in the podcast world, which makes sense for a medium that is supremely conducive to

telling other people what to think and do. There are well-being podcasts galore, but the ones that seemed most worthy of consideration for limited listening time are hosted by psychologists and neuroscientists who have professional purchase on the subject.

Laurie Santos, the host of “The Happiness Lab,” which is produced by Pushkin, is an upbeat Yale psychologist whose course Psychology and the Good Life is the most popular class in the college’s three-hundred-year history. (When it was first offered, in 2018, nearly a quarter of the school’s undergraduates enrolled.) One reason for such popularity is obvious: like the rest of us, but more so, undergrads are under-rested and overworked, and need help making their lives more of a joy and less of a misery. Another reason becomes clear when you listen to the podcast: the class is a gut.

Santos started her podcast last year; before that, she taught similar material on Coursera. (Some of her students’ parents may find their happiness levels dipping when they realize that a version of the instruction they are paying for is widely available for free.) In each segment, she employs the magazine writer’s time-honored strategy of opening with a sharp, specific story that introduces the general theme. In the show’s second season, which began in April, the Georgetown neuroscientist Abigail Marsh’s experience of being rescued by a stranger from a near-death incident on a highway leads to an exploration of altruism and its inverse, psychopathy. An encounter with an exterminator inspires an examination of what makes a job worthwhile; a mother’s horrified realization that she has been gazing at her phone rather than at her newborn’s face raises the question of distraction, and how to avoid it.

Along the way, we are taught various happiness techniques—better to put your phone away during dinner than to leave it lying face down on the table, where it can still tempt you with its siren call—and told about studies in the field of hedonics, like one in which subjects were handed money and told to either keep it or give it away. (The givers turned out to be happier, at the end of the day, than the keepers.) I have now heard this study referred to on other podcasts about happiness, with its results invariably presented as counterintuitive. Didn’t the Beatles figure out that you can’t buy love? Recent episodes of “The Happiness Lab” feature an ad for Chanel’s J12 watch, the price of which can run as high as fifty thousand dollars. If you’d like to experience true happiness, try giving one of those away to me.

“The Science of Happiness” is hosted by Dacher Keltner, a psychologist who runs Berkeley’s Greater Good Science Center, which co-produces his podcast with PRX. The show, currently in its sixth season, is straightforward about its self-help proposition; episodes have alluring titles like “Do You Want to Be More Patient?” and “How to Love People You Don’t Like.” The answer, to these and other conundrums, seems to involve becoming more mindful, which Keltner’s guests accomplish through a range of meditation techniques available on the Greater Good Web site. Keltner’s show has a looser format than Santos’s mainly scripted one; he invites subjects to choose a happiness practice, kibbitzes with them about their experience of it for ten or fifteen minutes, and then does a skim of the science involved.

The conversations go on a little too long, and you get the feeling that these people—who have spent a few minutes of their day observing a tree, in an effort to relax enough not to kill their whiny children—are being polite. In one episode, the interviewee, the disabled violinist Gaelynn Lea, describes her distress at being put at risk of contracting the coronavirus by people who refused to wear a mask. She tried a loving-kindness meditation that involved wishing for the happiness of the people you love, and of those you really don’t. One day, as she approached the second category, Mitch McConnell popped into her head, which should be enough to put anyone off loving-kindness meditations. I prefer a strategy for coping with the stress of “time famine” that was suggested on “The Happiness Lab.” The guest, Tom Hodgkinson, a writer who somehow makes a living by encouraging people to be more idle, told Santos to remove her earbuds once in a while. Listen to the birds sing; take a nap. I followed his advice, and did not regret it.

Listeners seem to enjoy these podcasts. Their iTunes ratings are high. They have similar strong points; both hosts are accomplished and likable, and you tend to learn a little something, even if you already knew it. (You probably understood that too much of a good thing reduces your pleasure in it; now you can call that the “hedonic treadmill.”) And they have similar flaws. The main one, I’m sorry to say, is that they are boring. An oddity of the scientific approach to happiness is that it can seem, to the laypeople among us, to be reinventing a wheel that has been turned, for thousands of years, by the world’s great religions, philosophers, novelists, and poets. Santos recognizes this; the show is currently in a “mini-season” that deals with thinkers such as Aristotle, Plato, Epictetus, and the Buddha. (There is some kind of hello-fellow-kids pact among podcasters to use only the cheesiest contemporary jargon. Wisdom from the ancients translates, in

Santos's words, to "old-school tips"; the journalist Dan Harris, who hosts the podcast "Ten Percent Happier," refers to Buddhism's Four Noble Truths as a "listicle.") In fact, Buddhism, with its acknowledgment of the reality of suffering, seems to be what is often missing from these podcasts' evaluative, quantitative view of happiness. They could use a little sand in their oyster—an appreciation of life's rougher qualities which brings its beauty into relief.

This is the point of the highly enjoyable first episode of the novelist Hari Kunzru's new podcast, "Into the Zone," which proposes, in the sweeping, vague language of podcast promotion, to be about "opposites." The opposites, in this case, are the Frankfurt School philosopher Theodor Adorno, and Norman Vincent Peale, the "Power of Positive Thinking" guru. The theme that ties the two together is California, the positive-psychology capital of the world, where Adorno lived as an émigré during the Second World War. That this story has been told before doesn't make it any less of a pleasure to hear Kunzru, together with a fellow-Brit, the writer Geoff Dyer, knock around Venice Beach, trying to understand how the sober, dialectically minded author of "*Minima Moralia*" (subtitle: "Reflections from Damaged Life") could have taken such pleasure in being chauffeured around the West Coast by his wife, Gretel, in a Ford they called their "Little Aladdin." Adorno, it turns out, was, like Lessing, suspicious of popular music. He considered it a tool of power—as Kunzru says, "something that lulled the listener, urging them to consume instead of provoking a genuine emotional or intellectual response." We should be careful what we listen to, Adorno thought. He was right. ♦

## Poems

- [\*\*I Sit Outside in Low Late-Afternoon Light to Feel Earth Call to Me\*\*](#)
- [\*\*Family as a Western in Which No One Talks\*\*](#)

[October 5, 2020 Issue](#)

# I Sit Outside in Low Late-Afternoon Light to Feel Earth Call to Me

By [Tracy K. Smith](#)

September 28, 2020

*Audio: Read by the author.*

I wish it would grab me by the ankles and pull.  
I wish its shadow would dance up close, closing in.

When I close my eyes a presence forms, backs away.  
I float above a lake, am dragged back

from a portion of sky. Down, down, the falling doesn't end.  
Every marked body must descend.

Is the world intended for me? Not just me but  
the we that fills me? Our shadows reel and dart.

Our blood simmers, stirred back. What if  
the world has never had—will never have—our backs?

The world has never had—will never have—our backs.  
Our blood simmers, stirred back. What if

the we that fills me, our shadows real and dark,  
is the world intended for me? Not just me but

every marked body must descend  
from a portion of sky. Down, down, the falling doesn't end.

I float above a lake, am dragged back  
when I close my eyes. A presence forms, backs away.

I wish its shadow would dance up close, closing in.  
I wish it would grab me by the ankles and pull.

[October 5, 2020 Issue](#)

# Family as a Western in Which No One Talks

By [Jacob Sunderlin](#)

September 28, 2020

*Audio: Read by the author.*

We had to take away our uncle's shotguns  
but Big Kev, my cousin, is formerly a Midas  
Muffler tech, unemployed,

& not discussing it. He guns  
his rebuilt truck to say it: everything broken

gets fixed. You can feel there are good bones inside the shit  
cosmetics, detouring down-canyon  
where Crazy Horse

planned raids against Custer & where  
Big Kev comes to boulder impossible

angles in a lifted Jeep. We're cousins, which means we're killing  
an hour flat-backed, not talking, looking straight  
up into North American sky, one cloud

like Randy Savage, the Macho Man,  
dropping his big elbow on a sky

I can't say is like the sky Crazy Horse saw,  
since it's hazed with contrail  
& carbon. He rode his horse fast

down each grade & walked it slow  
up the next, Custer close behind,

I read somewhere. Their horses'

tongues dry as snakes.  
Back in Kearney, I tried to listen

to Kev's kid out in the chicken yard  
gathering eggs in a Happy Meal

box. She already looks  
through wire fence like she is looking  
through a rifle sight at a wolf

licking its paws in a bowl of dust, looking through it  
into what she thinks

she knows. Some of the eggs she finds are  
tucked in shit.  
Some are full of blood.

# **Pop Music**

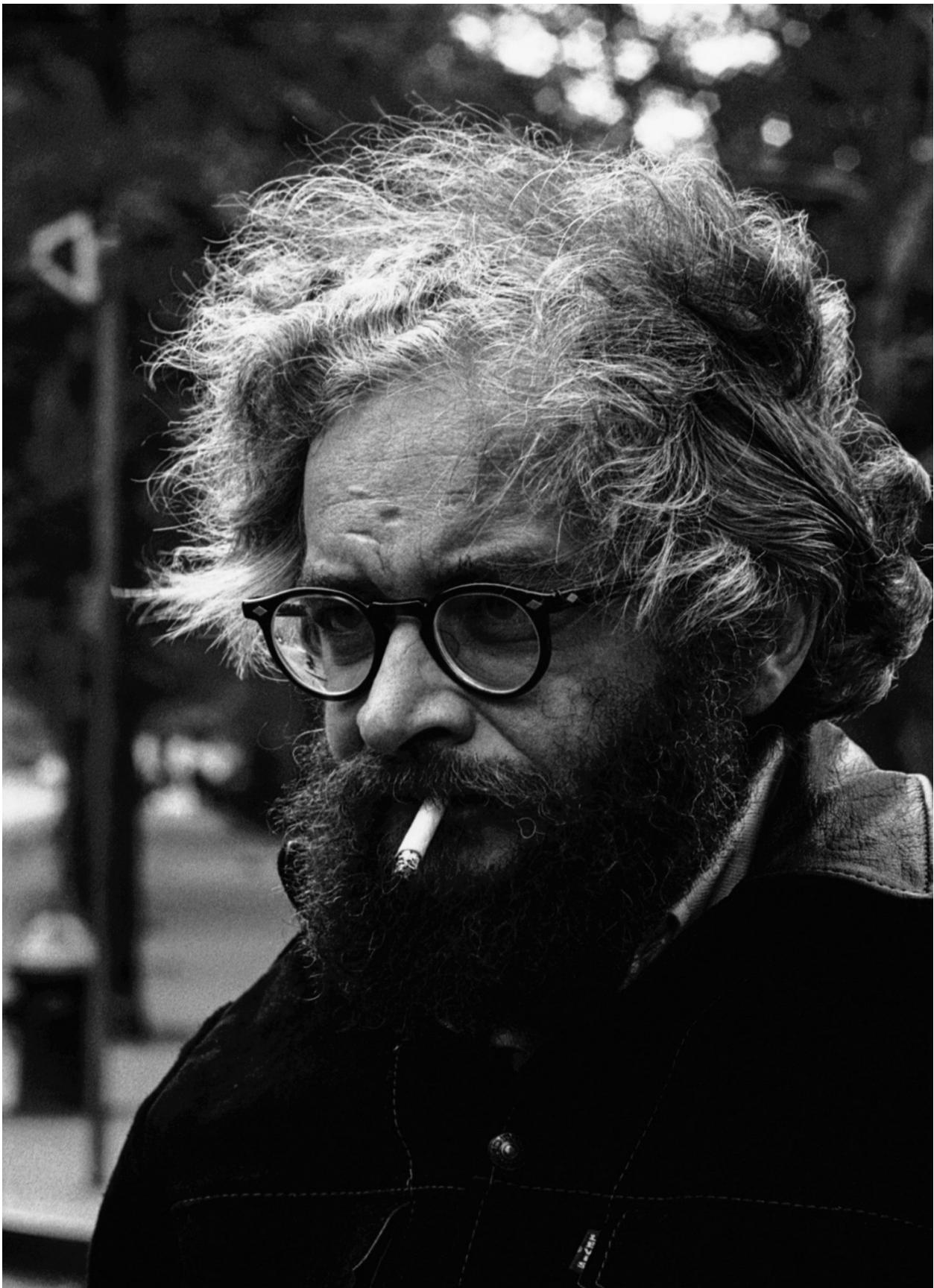
- [Harry Smith's Musical Catalogue of Human Experience](#)

# **Harry Smith's Musical Catalogue of Human Experience**

“The Anthology of American Folk Music” is probably the most significant example of how a particular collector’s preferences can shape a canon.

By [Amanda Petrusich](#)

September 28, 2020



In 1951, the record collector Harry Smith met with Moe Asch, a co-founder of Folkways Records, to see if Asch would buy all or part of his collection. Smith, who was born in Portland, Oregon, in 1923, and died in 1991, was an eccentric polymath. He painted, made experimental films, practiced occult alchemy (he was ordained in the Ecclesia Gnostica Catholica, a spiritual group affiliated with the magician and self-appointed prophet Aleister Crowley), and believed that the careful accumulation and ordering of things could bring about new knowledge. “All my projects are only attempts to build up a series of objects that allow some sort of generalizations to be made,” he said, in 1968. Smith collected all sorts of stuff: paper airplanes, Ukrainian Easter eggs, figures he made by looping or weaving lengths of string, anything shaped like a hamburger, and thousands, if not tens of thousands, of 78-r.p.m. records, ten-inch platters introduced around the beginning of the twentieth century that contain about three minutes of music on each side. The first 78 Smith bought was by the Mississippi-born blues guitarist Tommy McClennan. “It sounded strange—and I looked for others,” he said.

Like many serious collectors of arcane but precious objects, Smith could be irascible, mean, and single-minded to the point of psychopathy. There are stories of his thieving, particularly when he believed that an item would be better off in his care. He never married, drank to unconsciousness, went absolutely nuts if anyone talked while he was playing a record, and, according to his friend [Allen Ginsberg](#), kept “several years’ deposits of his semen” in the back of his freezer for “alchemical purposes.”

In addition to buying records from Smith, Asch tasked him with compiling “[The Anthology of American Folk Music](#),” a six-LP compendium of vernacular songs recorded in the United States between 1926 and 1934. In an interview with the magazine [Sing Out!](#), from 1972, Asch said that Smith “understood the content of the records. He knew their relationship to folk music, their relationship to English Literature, and their relationship to the world.” Smith’s “Anthology” was derived from his personal collection, and made up of eighty-four tracks, broken into three groups: social music, ballads, and songs. Within those categories, Smith relished the juxtaposition of regional styles. A single LP might contain an Acadian one-step, a Delta blues, a lonesome Appalachian ballad, and a Sacred Harp hymn. Each of the three sleeves was printed in a different color and featured a drawing of a celestial monochord—a single-stringed dulcimer, tuned by the hand of God—taken from “De Musica Mundana,” a book by the

Elizabethan alchemist Robert Fludd, from 1618.

“The Anthology of American Folk Music” is probably the most significant example of how a particular collector’s preferences can guide (if not dictate) a historical canon. Obscure records tend to survive only when there are collectors willing to seek out and preserve them. Most early recording masters were either destroyed or melted down for reuse, so the pressed and sold records became the only material evidence of these performances. If a record is lost to time or circumstance—78s are made from a shellac compound that is brittle and shatters easily—the performance is effectively erased.

It makes many people anxious that record collectors have come to be the default custodians of this music. (The question of who owns the music, and how the descendants of the performers should be compensated if a reissue generates revenue, is also complicated. Many of these songs are variations on traditional compositions with no single author, and many rural musicians signed their rights over to the recording company or to the record executive who recruited them.) Yet Smith’s singular vision for the “Anthology”—his particular and irregular cosmology—is part of what makes it such a fascinating artifact.

The set ultimately became one of the central texts of the folk revival, guiding artists including [Woody Guthrie](#), [Joan Baez](#), and [Bob Dylan](#). “I’d match the ‘Anthology’ up against any other single compendium of important information ever assembled,” the guitarist John Fahey once wrote. Despite its title, the “Anthology” is not comprehensive. It did not contain any music from Native Americans or recent European immigrants, and there are no Spanish-language songs, although they were popular along the southern border. Some folklorists and musicologists found the “Anthology” inherently faulty, because Smith used commercial recordings, and it was believed that only field recordings could represent authentic folk music. Yet the songs on the “Anthology” still work as a dizzying catalogue of human experience. Love, lust, rage, determination, malice, envy, heartache, exhaustion, joy—it’s hard to think of a feeling that is not represented here. Sixty-eight years on, the “Anthology” remains powerful evidence of the depth and fury of early American folk songs.

Serious fans of the set tend to discuss it in ecstatic terms. I’ve often cited it as foundational in the development of my own taste—a work that unlocks other works. Once, in a strange fury of obsession, I spent several months on the lower level of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, trying to track

down Smith's own 78s, some of which he had sold to the library before he died. Smith believed that objects have power; I thought there might be something to learn from holding those records in my hands. I came up short, in the end—they may have been pilfered from the archives, or simply been mixed in with the general collection.

During the 1991 Grammys telecast, the Recording Academy gave Smith a Chairman's Merit Award, for his “ongoing insight into the relationship between artistry and society, and his deep commitment to presenting folk music as a vehicle for social change.” At the time, Smith was working as the “shaman-in-residence” at Naropa University, in Colorado. In a video of his short acceptance speech, his scraggly gray hair is gathered into a ponytail. He seems vaguely amused but happy. “My dreams came true,” Smith says. “I saw America changed through music.”

This fall, the “Anthology” is being revisited twice. Dust-to-Digital, an Atlanta-based label that specializes in the meticulous resuscitation and repackaging of historical recordings, is releasing [The Harry Smith B-Sides](#), a boxed set containing the flip sides of every 78 Smith used for the “Anthology.” In addition, the Harry Smith Archives is rereleasing two films, both from 2006: [The Old, Weird America](#), a documentary about the legacy of Smith’s work, and [The Harry Smith Project Live](#), which includes highlights from five tribute concerts, featuring artists such as Beck, Sonic Youth, Elvis Costello, Nick Cave, and Kate and Anna McGarrigle, all playing songs from the “Anthology.”

In a filmed introduction to “The Harry Smith Project Live,” the producer and curator Hal Willner, who died earlier this year of complications from *COVID-19*, describes the five shows as “happenings,” an allusion to Fluxus and other avant-garde art movements that emphasized process above all else. Willner is sitting in a recording studio, holding a battered banjo and a marionette. “I’m sure you’ll love some of it, I’m sure you’ll hate some of it,” he says. “But you’ll be a different person once this is over.” One of my favorite appearances is by [Lou Reed](#), who covers “See That My Grave Is Kept Clean,” a blues song recorded by Blind Lemon Jefferson in 1928. Many country-blues songs already have a mesmeric, almost ghostly quality; Reed adds dissonance and drone, turning the song into a meandering dirge. The performance lasts for more than seven minutes, growing deeper and more hypnotic as it goes on. By the time Reed arrives at Jefferson’s fifth verse—“Have you ever heard a coffin sound?”—I start to feel as if my own soul has departed my body. The release also contains a

minute or so of footage of Smith, speaking on an enormous portable phone and declaring, in a nasal lilt, a kind of mission statement: “Perfection may be perfect, but to hell with it.”

“The Harry Smith B-Sides,” which was produced by Eli Smith, Lance Ledbetter, April Ledbetter, and John Cohen, was first conceived of by the collector Robert Nobley, who was known for his ability to revive cracked 78s with, as Lance Ledbetter writes in the set’s introduction, “nothing more than a tube of model airplane glue and a toothpick.” In 2004, Nobley self-released, on CD-R, two compilations of some of the B-sides from the “Anthology,” titled “Anthology of American Folk Music, Other Sides Vol. 1 and 2,” and sold them via mail order. Ledbetter was intrigued. “If the featured recordings are so remarkable, there’s an excellent chance that the song on the other side by the same artist probably isn’t half bad,” he writes.

Nobley died in 2005; in 2013, Eli Smith and Cohen got in touch with Ledbetter, the founder of Dust-to-Digital, about issuing a more complete version of the project. It took them several years to secure permissions from copyright holders, and even now the music can exist only on compact disk and vinyl—the licenses do not allow for streaming or downloads. In June, the producers chose to omit three tracks, because they use racist language. The set was already finished, and the decision required the remanufacturing of three of the four disks. “In our seventeen-year history, we have never published tracks with racist lyrics,” April Ledbetter, a co-director of Dust-to-Digital, told me. “Our intent to adhere to the concept for the project is what led to the recordings being included in the first place. I am thankful that we had the time to realize what a mistake that would have been, and the ability to do something about it.”

In a way, “The Harry Smith B-Sides” is a thought experiment. The “Anthology” is potent mostly because of Smith’s vision—his taste, his aesthetic, his fussy sequencing—which makes a mirror-image compilation of the sides he rejected a novelty of sorts. But I have found it to be just as moving, haunting, and profound as the original. In some cases, the producers were able to acquire cleaner source copies, resulting in especially rich audio. Smith chose Henry Thomas’s “Old Country Stomp” for the “Anthology,” but its flip side, “Bull Doze Blues,” is uncommonly beautiful—lonesome and giddy at the same time. Lance Ledbetter described it to me as “one of the very finest recordings ever made.” Most 78s exist in varying stages of degradation, but when a clean copy is properly engineered and transferred there’s something uncanny about how intimate it

feels. I've never heard Thomas—who recorded twenty-four songs between 1927 and 1929, and who probably died in 1930—sound quite so close.

Some selections have changed the way I think about the original side. Bascom Lamar Lunsford's rendition of the folk song "I Wish I Was a Mole in the Ground" is one of the most confounding and fascinating tracks on the "Anthology." Its narrator expresses a deep desire to be turned into a mole, or maybe a lizard. "He wants to be delivered from his life and to be changed into a creature insignificant and despised," the critic Greil Marcus wrote, in "Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century." "He wants to see nothing and to be seen by no one. He wants to destroy the world and to survive it." The record's flip side, "Mountain Dew," is an earnest appreciation of bootleg liquor. Lunsford—who was born in Mars Hill, North Carolina, in 1882, and performed in formal dress to combat stereotypes about Appalachia—also worked as a lawyer, and during Prohibition he frequently defended moonshiners. "They call it that old mountain dew, and those who refuse it are few," Lunsford sings, strumming a banjo. There's a narrative consonance between the two sides of the record—a hungering for oblivion. Smith loved these simple points of communion. He believed in interconnectedness—that every piece of art contains every piece of art.

Over the years, critics have famously described Smith's collection as "old" and "weird," which is not exactly inaccurate. Yet many of the performers included on the "Anthology" (Mississippi John Hurt, Dock Boggs, the Carter Family) were still alive and working when it was released, and, although some of the tracks may initially be inscrutable to modern ears (the lyrics can be idiosyncratic, the recording technology imprecise), they open up over time. There's a lot of bleating, croaking, hollering, screeching, and moaning, which might goad a new listener into reexamining her notions of what constitutes professional singing. As Eli Smith writes, these performers "by necessity had a very different relationship to nature, family, work, play, food, consumerism, money, et cetera. . . . It does not feel alienated." He goes on to describe the set as "an esoteric beacon, broadcasting outside of our dysfunctional culture system."

The liner notes for the "Anthology," written by Harry Smith, included punchy, all-caps summaries of each track's narrative arc, presented as newspaper headlines. The notes can be as indecipherable and compelling as the songs themselves. For "The Harry Smith B-Sides," the producers enlisted a crew of musicians and writers (including me) to compose similar notes. The set also

includes an essay by Cohen, a folklorist, photographer, filmmaker, and member of the New Lost City Ramblers, who died of cancer in September, 2019. Cohen first met Harry Smith in 1962, at New York's Folklore Center. In a conversation at the Chelsea Hotel, in 1968, Smith told Cohen, "I intuitively decided I wanted to collect records. After that had been determined, what was then decided to be good or bad was based on a comparison of that record to other records." How many 78s did Smith listen to before he chose the eighty-four songs that make up the "Anthology"? Based on the enduring resonance of the collection—the way these songs, played in this order, still seem able to rearrange a person's entire world view—one gets the sense that it was probably a lot.

A few years before Moe Asch's death, he asked the Smithsonian Institution if it might be interested in acquiring the Folkways catalogue. Asch's best and most audacious requirement was that all of the label's more than two thousand releases—which range from seminal albums by Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, and Leadbelly to a recording of insects chewing, walking, and flying—remain in print indefinitely. The Smithsonian agreed, and, in 1987, the Folkways archive became part of the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, in Washington, D.C.

The "Anthology" was first released on compact disk in 1997. Prior to that, a person could mail a check to the Folkways office and request that an archivist transfer it to CD or cassette. Or one could attempt to hunt down the original LPs in used-record shops or at flea markets. The set's rarity somehow felt congruous with its self-styled mythology. It was talismanic; you had to put in some work before you got to hear it. When I finally got my hands on a copy, in the late nineties, I found that listening to it was a metaphysical experience, insofar as it seemed to bend the rules of space and time. Discovering new music often feels like that—it's as if you have come upon a secret room in a house that you have occupied for years.

Because the "Anthology" was literally encased in an occult symbol—the single string of the celestial monochord is meant to connect Heaven and earth—it seemed possible that others might feel the otherworldly trance I often fell into while listening to the collection. Maybe Smith was giving us permission to be rhapsodic about the experience—to finally submit to what Ginsberg once called "burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo." To accept music as magic. ♦

## Profiles

- [Marilynne Robinson's Essential American Stories](#)

# Marilynne Robinson's Essential American Stories

The author of "Housekeeping," "Gilead," and, now, "Jack" looks to history not just for the origins of America's ailments but for their remedy, too.

By [Casey Cep](#)

September 25, 2020



It is the only one left. A hundred years ago, Robert Frost bought a ninety-acre farm near South Shaftsbury, Vermont; it came with an old stone house and a pair of barns, but he also wanted an orchard, so he planted hundreds of apple trees. Time and wind and winter storms have had their way with them, and today only one remains.

Earlier this summer, Marilynne Robinson followed a path through the fallow field that used to be Frost's orchard, then looked for a long time at the last of his plantings. She does not generally like visiting the houses of writers gone from this world. "They feel like mausoleums," she says. "I prefer to think of my favorite writers off somewhere writing." Because of the pandemic, though, it had been months since she had left her summer house, by a lake in Saratoga Springs, so she was open to an adventure. She ambled around the farmhouse and its grounds, looking at Frost's books and through his windows, studying his barns, recalling her grandfather's flower gardens while photographing the poet's, and admiring a bronze statue of Frost before posing obligingly beside it.

But it was the apple tree that seemed particularly charged in Robinson's presence. More trunk than tree, barren except for a single branch with a few withered attempts at fruit, its shadow was barely longer than hers. As a writer, Robinson is a direct descendant of Frost, carrying on his tradition of careful, democratic observations of this country's landscapes and its people, perpetually keeping one eye on the eternal and the other on the everyday. As a Calvinist, she has spent a lot of her life thinking about apple trees.

This one seemed very far from Eden, but Robinson is accustomed to tending gardens that others have forsaken. She has devoted her life to reconsidering figures whom history has seen fit to forget or malign, and recovering ideas long misinterpreted or neglected. Her writing is best understood as a grand project of restoration, aesthetic as well as political, which she has undertaken in the past four decades in six works of nonfiction and five novels, including a new one this fall. "Jack" is the fourth novel in Robinson's Gilead series, an intergenerational saga of race, religion, family, and forgiveness centered on a small Iowa town. But it is not accurate to call it a sequel or a prequel. Rather, this book and the others—"Gilead," "Home," and "Lila"—are more like the Gospels, telling the same story four different ways.

Although Robinson began her career by writing a book she believed was

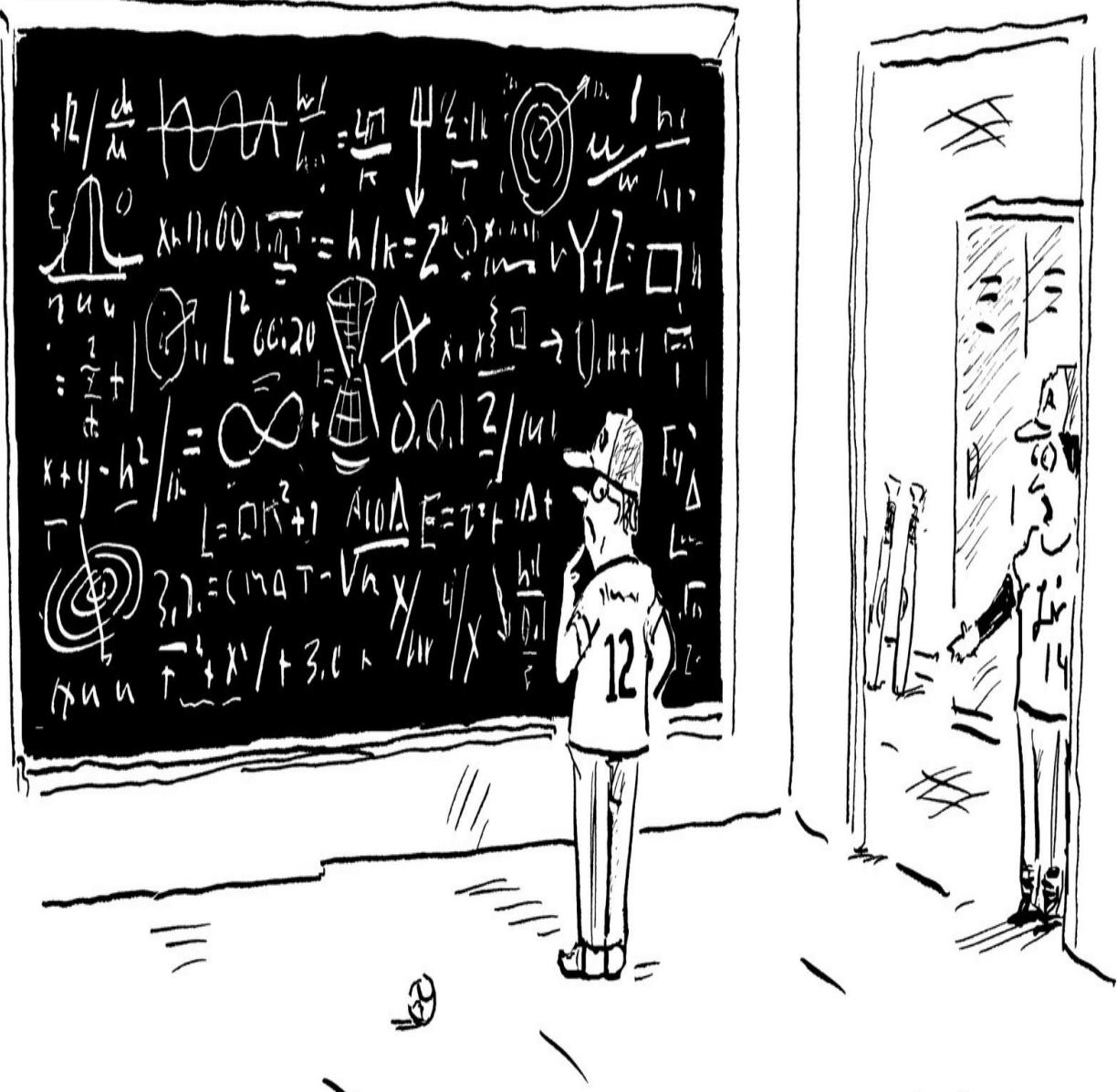
unpublishable, and has persisted in writing books she believes are unfashionable, she has earned the Pulitzer Prize and the National Humanities Medal, the praise of Presidents and archbishops, and an audience as devoted to her work as mystics are to visions. At seventy-six, she is still trying to convince the rest of us that her habit of looking backward isn't retrograde but radical, and that this country's history, so often seen now as the source of our discontents, contains their remedy, too.

Last fall, at the end of a day spent working on "Jack," Robinson sat down for an improvised dinner at her home in Iowa City, where she has lived for three decades and where she taught at the Iowa Writers' Workshop until she retired, four years ago. She considered the day a success because she had perfected a single sentence. "I feel that everything has to be structurally integral, and that, if I write even one sentence that does not feel right, it's a flawed structure," she says. Robinson has converted her dining room into something like a rare-books library, its long table covered in enormous seventeenth-century volumes of John Foxe's "Actes and Monuments," and the cushions and blankets that protect them, so she had arranged small dishes of crackers and cheese and assorted tarts in the kitchen. The result seemed like something out of a Louisa May Alcott novel, she observed. Then she clarified that it actually was out of an Alcott novel—"An Old-Fashioned Girl," which features an unconventional meal in a sculptor's studio, a scene Robinson has always cherished for its depiction of the freedom of the artistic life.

Robinson read Alcott as a child, the way many American girls do; she also read "Moby-Dick," at age nine. Born during the Second World War, she was brought up in the Idaho Panhandle, where her family had lived for four generations. Just about the only thing that wasn't rationed at the time was books, and Melville's unruly opus was one of her favorites: an endless font for the vocabulary lists she liked to compile, and a metaphysical primer for making sense of the world. When she wrote her first novel, decades later, her nickname for the manuscript was "Moby-Jane," and the conversation between it and Melville is obvious from the opening sentence: "My name is Ruth."

That book's actual title is "Housekeeping," which, Robinson points out, might just as easily have been the title of Thoreau's "Walden," another influence. Like "Walden," "Housekeeping" is concerned with how the self stands in relation to society. Ruth and her younger sister, Lucille, have been abandoned by their mother and left at their family's homestead, where they are raised by a series of

female relatives—first their grandmother, then two great-aunts, and finally their mother’s eccentric sister, Sylvie. Lucille follows the path of respectability, apprenticing herself to her home-economics teacher, while Ruth ventures farther and farther into the wilderness around and within her.



SIPRESSI

*"Figured out who should bat cleanup yet, Skipper?"*  
Cartoon by David Sipress

What Melville did with a whaling ship and an ocean, Robinson does with a family home and a lake. "We both drowned a lot of people," she says, laughing. With her serene gravitas, Robinson can seem somewhat like a benevolent mountain, but her sense of humor is quick and abundant. "Housekeeping" is an epic made from the domestic, a depiction of childhood that takes seriously the strangeness of being a sentient creature in the world. Robinson shared the novel with a writer friend, who found it remarkable and sent it along to his agent, Ellen Levine. Levine read the manuscript on a dreary day at a dreary hotel while accompanying her husband to a medical conference and found that it changed the weather. "It was just transporting," she says. "The language and the feeling of it was haunting and beautiful." She has represented Robinson for more than forty years.

As much as she loved the book, Levine warned Robinson that she was not sure anyone would publish it; when Farrar, Straus & Giroux decided to do so, the publisher warned them that it might attract very little in the way of readers or reviews. Robinson's editor thought some revisions might help, but she agreed to only two changes: striking a passage about a lumberyard deemed too lyrical, and changing a dog's name from Hitler to Brutus. When "Housekeeping" came out, in 1981, Doris Lessing declared that "every sentence is a delight" and Walker Percy called its prose "as sharp and clear as light and air and water." Anatole Broyard, in his review for the *Times*, wrote, "Here's a first novel that sounds as if the author has been treasuring it up all her life, waiting for it to form itself. It's as if, in writing it, she broke through the ordinary human condition with all its dissatisfactions, and achieved a kind of transfiguration."

Broyard was right about the patience that had gone into the book's composition. Robinson had been gathering ideas and metaphors for her novel for more than a dozen years, collecting them on loose-leaf paper and in spiral notebooks that she squirrelled away in the drawer of a sideboard. "Housekeeping" is not autobiographical, but writing it required summoning her Western roots, calling forth a place where she had not lived in nearly two decades. "I would close the shutters," she says, "and sit in this very dark room and try to remember."

Robinson is once again sitting in darkness recalling her childhood; the windows in her kitchen have long since gone black, but she has not yet turned on a light. "I'm a sort of twilight person," she says, getting up to make coffee before

settling back into conversation. She spent much of her childhood in the town of Sandpoint, in the shadow of the Bitterroot, Cabinet, and Selkirk Mountains, on the banks of Lake Pend Oreille, where her uncle drowned in a sailing accident before she was born. In “Housekeeping,” that lake appears as Fingerbone, which has claimed the girls’ mother in a suicide and their grandfather in one of literature’s most memorable train wrecks: “The disaster took place midway through a moonless night. The train, which was black and sleek and elegant, and was called the Fireball, had pulled more than halfway across the bridge when the engine nosed over toward the lake and then the rest of the train slid after it into the water like a weasel sliding off a rock.”

The tallest building in Sandpoint was a grain elevator, and, historically, the half of Robinson’s family who weren’t ranchers were farmers. Her father, John, worked in the lumber industry, first as a logger—Robinson remembers him smelling of pitch and sawdust—then as a field representative, moving his family all around Idaho, and briefly to the East Coast, before settling in Coeur d’Alene, where Robinson graduated from high school. Her mother, Ellen, was a formal and exacting homemaker. Robinson’s brother, David, two years older, decided early that he was going to become a painter and declared that she should be a poet. He told her once that God is a sphere whose center is everywhere but whose circumference is nowhere, a sentence she never forgot, partly because it reflected her own experience of holiness and partly because it demonstrated something of increasing interest to her: how to capture the ineffable in language.

Robinson was a pious child, but her parents, who were Presbyterians, did not go to church often. What services she did attend she mostly spent pushing the coins for her offering into the tips of her white gloves to give herself toad fingers. But she recalls feeling God’s presence everywhere: in the pooled creeks where tender new trees rose up from drowned logs; in the curious basalt columns that seemed like ancient temples; and in the lake, nearly fifty miles long and almost twelve hundred feet deep, cold and dark, like mystery itself. The Idaho of her childhood was a strikingly quiet place, its people reticent, its landscapes romantic; beauty was a given no matter which direction you looked.

When Robinson was not quite twelve, she and her family were in an automobile accident. Another driver crossed the center line, totalling their car, injuring both of her parents, breaking her brother’s leg, and leaving her with a concussion. All four of them were hospitalized. The crash was so traumatic that Robinson does not drive, creating a rare dependency in someone who is otherwise almost

entirely self-sufficient. Already in childhood she was comfortable with solitude, even with loneliness; her needs, including her need for other people, were remarkably limited. One of Robinson's schoolteachers told her that "one must make one's mind a good companion, because you live with it every minute of your life," advice that she either took to heart or never required.

At eighteen, Robinson followed David, a senior at Brown, to Rhode Island, enrolling at the university's sister school, Pembroke College. It was the early sixties, and she found herself ideologically adrift: too serious-minded for the countercultures embraced by some of her peers, and unmoved by the Freudian theories espoused by some of her professors and the behavioralism advanced by others. She and David took long, meandering walks around Providence, undeterred by rain or snow, ruining their hats and shoes, discussing aesthetics and ethics. When David graduated, he went to Yale for a doctorate in art history, and, once Robinson had mastered the train schedule, they continued their walks in New Haven.

Robinson still likes to walk while thinking and talking. One day, strolling through the stately oak savanna of Rochester Cemetery, in one of Iowa's last remaining patches of native prairie, she narrates the ecology of the area and some of its human history, pointing out the generations of headstones hidden among a tiny sea of hills. She is formidably erudite but punctuates her speech with the surprisingly sweet refrain "you know?" The answer is almost always no —no, we do not know much about the Albigensians or the Waldensians, have nothing to say about the migratory habits of pelicans, had no idea that the first English translator of Philipp Melanchthon's systematics was an African-American philosopher named Charles Leander Hill, have not read Marlowe's translations of Ovid, have read the first volume of Calvin's "Institutes" but, alas, not all of the second. But "you know?" is less a question than an assurance, part of why Robinson was a beloved teacher: there is a lot we do not already know, but no limit to what we could learn, and no reason to underestimate one another.

In other ways, too, Robinson is a patient guide. A stop in Stone City, named for the area's many limestone quarries, near where Grant Wood painted, is followed by one at Anamosa State Penitentiary, which prisoners built from the limestone, and where Robinson recounts her own experiences teaching and meeting with the incarcerated. Next is a visit to the Herbert Hoover National Historic Site, where, before entering, she lingers in the parking lot to discuss the miracles in the Synoptic Gospels, and, upon exiting, returns to the same topic, which leads

her to a distinction she draws between the religious imaginations of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Emily Dickinson.

Robinson's own religious imagination took shape during her sophomore year of college, when a philosophy professor assigned Jonathan Edwards's "The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended." The treatise contains a footnote that changed her life; in it, Edwards observes that although moonlight seems permanent, its brightness is renewed continuously. Believers often say that God meets them where they are and speaks to them in voices they can understand, so perhaps it is fitting that Robinson found her own revelation in a seldom read yet much maligned two-hundred-year-old book. An eighteenth-century evangelist articulated what she had always felt: that existence is miraculous, that at any moment the luminousness of the world could be revoked but is instead sustained.

Another truth revealed itself in that encounter: that history is not always a fair judge of character. Edwards had been reduced in the popular imagination to the censorious preacher of a single sermon, but the man who once called us "sinners in the hands of an angry God" spent a lifetime pointing out that we are creatures in the embrace of a tender and generous one, too. Likewise, Robinson came to see Edwards's fellow-Puritans not as finger-wagging prudes but as radical political reformers who preached, even if they did not always live up to, a social ethic with strict expectations around charity—a tradition of Christian liberalism and economic justice rarely acknowledged today.

Robinson thought about going into the ministry, but when she did not get a scholarship for seminary she returned to the West, for graduate studies in English at the University of Washington, where she wrote a dissertation on "Henry VI, Part II." (Characteristically, she was drawn to one of Shakespeare's least-known and least-loved plays.) While there, Robinson married another student, whom she met in a seminar on the literature of the American South, and their first son was born not long afterward. When her husband got a job as a professor at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, in 1970, the family moved from Seattle to the Pioneer Valley, where their second son was born. The marriage ended two decades later; she does not speak of the divorce, or of the man to whom she was married. But she loves to talk about motherhood and her children, and she describes bringing them up as the most sustained act of attention she could imagine. "When you watch a child grow, it is pure consciousness coming into being," she says. "It's beautiful, complex, and inexhaustible. You learn so much about the mind, how language develops and memory works."

Robinson says that she “aspired to mythic status as a mother,” although the mothers of mythology are a mixed bunch, and her own mother was a source of some consternation. Both of her parents were very conservative, and the gap between their politics and hers grew over time. Robinson’s relationship with her mother was interesting, but not easy. Her mother prized respectability above all, and for a while Robinson seemed to strive for that standard. She recalls winter mornings in Massachusetts when she got up early to bake, so that the house smelled of fresh bread when the boys awoke, and summer afternoons when they gathered gooseberries from the back yard to make pies, and hours spent tending the flower gardens that adorned their white clapboard house on a maple-shaded road. But Robinson had an outlet for her ambition that her mother never did: around the edges of all that domestic activity, she was turning herself into a novelist.



*"Someday, son, all this will be dust, swept from the earth by disaster, or by war, or simply the cruel passage of time itself, forgotten by history as another puny and futile effort of man. But, yes, before that I suppose it will be yours."*

*Cartoon by Emily Flake*

“I don’t ever remember her writing,” Robinson’s younger son, Joseph, says, “but I do remember playing with my brother a lot, so it must have been happening then, while we played, or maybe while we slept. It was this other life she had, because when we were children, and she was home with us, she interacted with us all the time—down on the floor with us, in the yard with us. Whatever she is doing, my mother is not distracted.”

Robinson felt that she and her brother grew close because of the isolation of their childhood; wanting the same for her own children, she took them to Brittany for a year, in 1978, while she and her husband taught at the Université de Haute Bretagne. “We were the only Americans—it was really something,” her older son, James, recalled. “We went to this rural school, and people made such a big deal about us.” Because of a higher-education strike, Robinson had plenty of time to work on “Housekeeping.” “I was probably the only person in France thinking of Idaho,” she says.

The experiment abroad was so successful that the family did it again in 1983, when both parents taught at the University of Kent. By then, “Housekeeping” had been out in the world for two years; another twenty-one would pass before Robinson published her second novel. But she never stopped writing, and it was while living in Canterbury that she found the subject for her next book—an exposé inspired by daily news coverage of nuclear pollution from a plant on the northwest coast of England called Sellafield.

“It’s my most important book,” Robinson says of “Mother Country: Britain, the Welfare State and Nuclear Pollution.” “If I had to choose, and I could only publish one book, ‘Mother Country’ would be it.” This is a surprising preference, since many of Robinson’s readers have never heard of it. “I was clipping these articles, reading about plutonium and cancer rates,” Robinson recalls. “Everyone seemed to know what was going on, but no one seemed to be doing anything about it. So when we came back to America I didn’t even really unpack, I just started writing about it.”

Although her journalism up to that point included little more than a few columns and a profile of John Cheever for her college newspaper, Robinson quickly wrote a magazine article, which Levine placed with *Harper’s* in early 1985. Farrar, Straus & Giroux then commissioned a book on the subject, in which

Robinson drastically scaled up her argument. The latter half of “Mother Country” is an expansion of the article, an account of the nuclear program at Sellafield and its literal and figurative fallout—including an indictment of environmental activists with Greenpeace UK and Friends of the Earth, who Robinson felt were complicit in covering up the extent of the catastrophe. The first half is something else entirely: a thoroughgoing and thoroughly scathing political and social history of modern England.

As Robinson saw it, the roots of the Sellafield crisis lay in failures of political economy and moral reasoning which went back to the sixteenth century and the beginnings of the Poor Laws. While the developed world grandstanded about the superiority of its scientists and its social order, she alleged, one of its leading nations was poisoning its own people for profit. “My attack will seem ill-tempered and eccentric, a veering toward anarchy, the unsettling emergence of lady novelist as *petroleuse*,” she wrote. “I am angry to the depths of my soul that the earth has been so injured.”

The reviews were mixed. Some critics challenged her conclusions and the facts on which she had based them, while others seemed affronted that an American would presume to criticize the nuclear program of any other country and by the claim that Britain’s political foundations were so compromised. Although the book was a finalist for the National Book Award in the United States, Greenpeace UK sued Robinson for libel, and, when she refused to remove the passages in question, the book was banned in Britain.

For Robinson, the book’s reception was evidence of the very cultural hubris she had diagnosed, and only confirmed her sense that the economic interests of the ruling few routinely inflict tragedy on everyone else, with nuclear pollution being simply the most recent and potentially most disastrous iteration. The state had failed its citizens, advocacy groups had failed the public, and an entire civilization had cosseted itself in a deluded sense of its own rectitude. Only the individual conscience could be trusted, she concluded, and moral courage would often place individuals at odds with society.

So far, at least, “Mother Country” has not joined the ranks of “Silent Spring” or “The Other America.” But, if the book did not change the world, it did change the course of Robinson’s career. After its publication, she began writing long, tendentious essays about the things she thought were worth thinking about: “Puritans and Prigs,” “Decline,” “Slander,” “The Tyranny of Petty Coercion.”

Robinson has published five essay collections, four of them in the past ten years. Like “Mother Country,” the essays bear a trace of the high-school debater who could leave other students trembling: Robinson does not suffer fools, or foes, or sometimes, it must be said, friends. Even those who admire her can leave an argument feeling a little singed.

“Mother Country” also helped determine the future of Robinson’s fiction. After the Sellafield lawsuit, she sought solace in historical examples of people whose moral clarity was disregarded by their contemporaries. She read about Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church in Nazi Germany, then turned her attention to the life and work of abolitionists in the United States. The year after “Mother Country” was published, Robinson accepted the job in Iowa, and, once in the Midwest, began exploring a constellation of colleges those abolitionists had built, among them Grinnell, Oberlin, Carleton, and Knox. Many of these institutions were integrated by race or gender or both—an egalitarianism so radical that a century later it took federal courts and the National Guard to enforce it elsewhere—and Robinson wondered what had happened to the visionary impulses behind them. The Second Great Awakening began as a broad movement for social and moral reform and spread across the entire frontier, only to be snuffed out after a single generation and misremembered today as nothing but an outburst of cultish religious enthusiasm.

What puzzled Robinson was not the moral clarity of the abolitionists but how the communities they established could so quickly abandon their ideological origins. This was Jonathan Edwards all over again: historical figures, flawed because they are human but full of promise for the same reason, who are maligned, underestimated, or forgotten. We often say that those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it, but that suggests that all we can learn from history is its errors and its failures. Robinson believes this to be a dangerously incomplete understanding, one that distorts our sense of the present and limits the possibilities of the future by overstating our own wisdom and overlooking the visionaries of earlier generations. “It is important to be serious and accurate about history,” she says. “It seems to me much of what is said today is shallow and empty and false. I believe in the origins of things, reading primary texts themselves—reading the things many people pretend to have read, or don’t even think need to be read because we all supposedly know what they say.”

This conviction was evident in Robinson’s seminars at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, and remains so today in her lectures around the world. She has

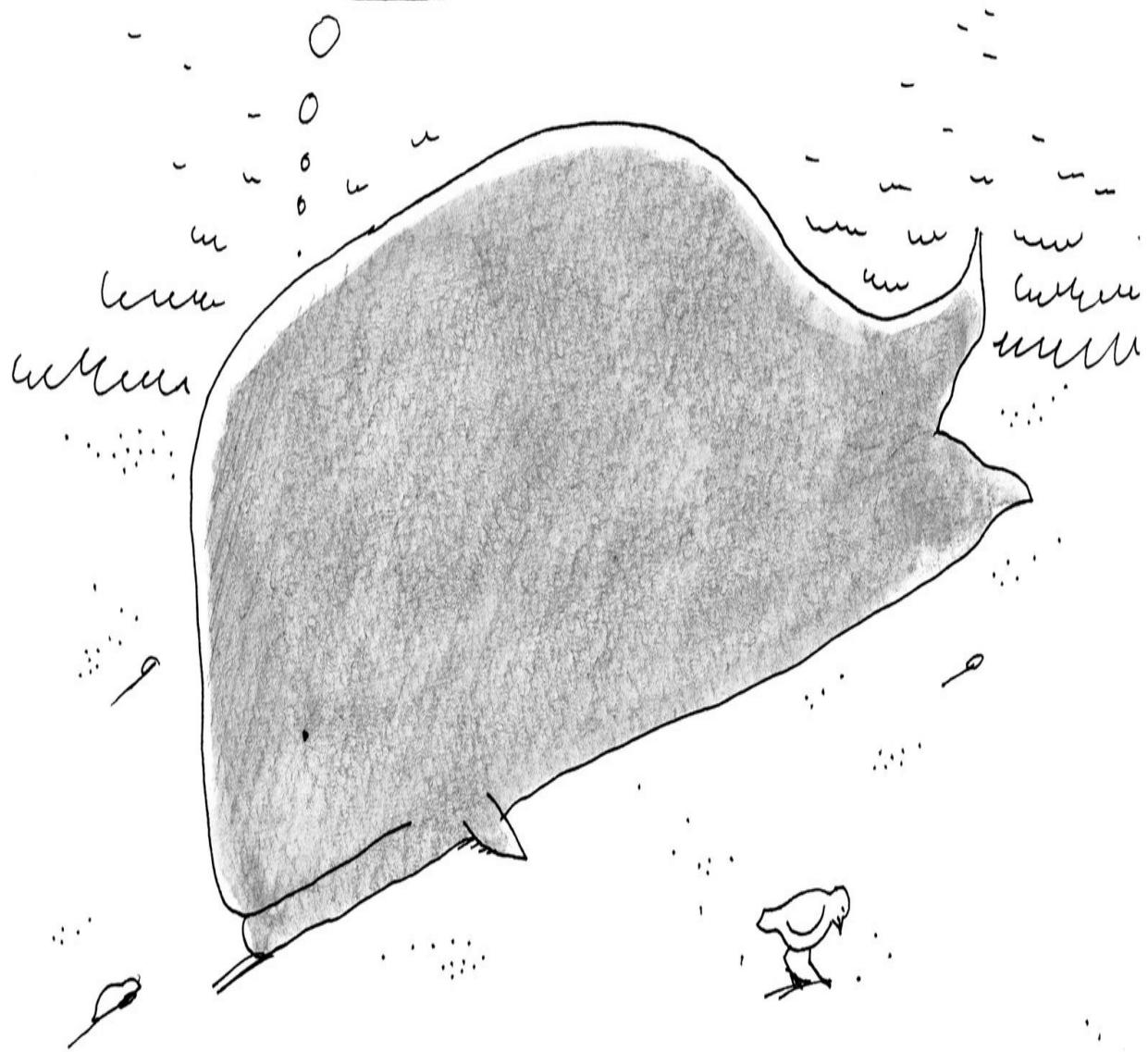
assigned Calvin and Edwards when teaching Melville, read all of Sidney in order to talk about Shakespeare's sonnets, and constructed her critiques of modern scientism from close readings of Darwin, Nietzsche, and Freud. She pursues the same project at her Congregational church, where she advocates for the reading of texts like John Winthrop's "A Model of Christian Charity" while also calling for more outreach to immigrants and multilingual carols for children.

Robinson has been a member of her church for almost as long as she's lived in Iowa. She can regularly be found arranging the flowers in the sanctuary, socializing during coffee hour, and bowing her head during the Prayers of the People. Occasionally, she has preached exegetically rich sermons on, among other things, economics, scriptural language, and grace. Those sermons are sometimes disarmingly personal. "I have never been much good at the things most people do," she confesses in one of them, before describing the single day she spent as a waitress—a spectacular failure, in which she spilled soup on a customer and was banished to the kitchen, where an older waitress, taking pity on her, tried to give her that day's tips. Robinson likens the waitress's offer to the widow's mite, in the Gospels: "a gift made freely, in contempt of circumstance." Yet she felt that she could not accept it, and struggles still with the question of whether she should have done so. She credits the waitress with teaching her that generosity is "a casting off of the constraints of prudence and self-interest." In that respect, she notes, it "is so like an art that I think it may actually be the impulse behind art."

Robinson is a gifted preacher, and when, after two decades, she finally started writing another novel, it was because she had begun to hear the voice of a Congregationalist minister. He was an old man, and she sensed that he was writing something at his desk while a young child played at his feet. This turned out to be the Reverend John Ames, drafting a letter to his son, a miracle from a late-in-life marriage—so late that he fears his heart condition will kill him before he can teach the boy so much as the Ten Commandments or their family's history. "It came easily, like he was telling me the story, and all I had to do was listen," she recalls, pointing to a grassy bank beside the Iowa River not far from her old office, where, eighteen months after she first heard the reverend's voice, the novel's final pages came together. A plain patch of riverbank, near one of the university's footbridges, it is akin to many of the places Robinson conjures in her work: simple, yet rendered beautiful by our attention. "I don't mean that I was ever seized, or that what I experienced was a vision," she says, "but I felt engaged by the character—his voice, his mind. I liked listening to him. He was

such good company that I missed him when I had finished writing."

NEXT TIME I'LL  
BRING A BOOK.



MATHEWS

That book, “Gilead,” which was published in 2004, definitively established Robinson as one of the world’s greatest living novelists. Her nonfiction had taken on the thunderous tones of a prophet, but in her fiction she found the range of the psalmist, sometimes gentle, sometimes wild, and always full of empathy and wonder. “I have a bicameral mind,” she says, explaining that her lectures and essays are a way of “aerating” ideas that often originate in agitation or outrage, whereas the novels are a different exercise entirely. The essays are the most explicit expression of her ideas, the novels the most elegant. “With any piece of fiction, any work of literature, the assumption is that a human life matters,” Robinson says. For her, this is a theological commitment, a reflection of her belief in the *Imago Dei*: the value of each of us, inclusive of our faults. “That is why I love my characters. I can only write about characters I love.”

“Gilead” is sometimes mistaken for nothing more than a plainspoken novel about good-hearted religious people in a small Midwestern town. But, in reality, it is the morally demanding result of Robinson’s encounter with the abolitionists. She modelled the eponymous town of Gilead on the real town of Tabor, Iowa, which was founded by clergymen who created a college and maintained a stop on the Underground Railroad. The narrator’s grandfather, also a Reverend John Ames, was a radical abolitionist who went west to the Kansas Territory from Maine in the decades before the Civil War. At the time, that territory was the site of violent clashes between Border Ruffians, who wanted slavery to be legal there after statehood, and Free-Staters, who wanted to outlaw it; somewhere between fifty and two hundred people died in the conflict, which became known as Bleeding Kansas. After his stint there, the first John Ames settled in Iowa, where he preached with a pistol in his belt, wore shirts bloodied from battle, gave John Brown sanctuary in his church, and served as a chaplain in the Union Army. His son, the second Reverend John Ames, was a pacifist who rejected his father’s zealotry, recoiling from the violence of the First World War and quarrelling with his father over Christian ethics.

Something always comes between fathers and sons, but what divides these two has divided all of Christendom: whether to turn our swords into plowshares or take them up in a just war. Asked one Fourth of July to speak during the town celebration, the elder Ames makes the case for the latter path: “When I was a young man the Lord came to me and put His hand just here on my right shoulder. I can feel it still. And He spoke to me, very clearly. The words went right through me. He says, Free the captive.” Others heard the same call, he

continues, and they answered it courageously, often at their own peril. “General Grant once called Iowa the shining star of radicalism,” he says. “But what is left here in Iowa? What is left here in Gilead? Dust. Dust and ashes.”

It is from the third Reverend John Ames, inheritor of both visions of the Christian life, that we learn the fate of his grandfather. Around the same time as that scorching and sorrowful oration, a Black church in town was burned, forcing out the last of Gilead’s Black citizens; heartbroken, the “wild-haired, one-eyed, scrawny old fellow with a crooked beard, like a paintbrush left to dry with lacquer in it,” returned to Kansas and died there alone.

That would be plot enough, a recounting of three generations of the Ames family, but for Robinson it is only prologue. “Love is holy,” the third Ames tells his young son, “because it is like grace—the worthiness of its object is never really what matters.” This conviction, which Robinson shares, is tested in the pastor not by his father or grandfather but by his godson, Jack, a ne’er-do-well who has spent his life vexing his own father, a Presbyterian minister named John Boughton, who is Ames’s best friend. Boughton has eight children, but Jack is his prodigal son, and the two pastors have spent much of their friendship puzzling over him. So inexplicable is the boy’s character—a youthful tendency to lie, more serious transgressions in adulthood—that Ames contemplates the possibility that he botched Jack’s baptism. This one troubled soul, so beloved by both men, makes them revise their theologies constantly, for what kind of Heaven would accept the likes of Jack? Yet how could it be Heaven for the Boughtons if Jack wasn’t there?

“So many people tell me about their Jack, about how they love someone who is difficult or who has done some awful thing,” Robinson says. She is walking across the Sutliff Bridge over the Cedar River, midway through a tour illustrating where the Iowa of her life meets the Iowa of her imagination. She pauses to listen to the wind whistling through the trusses, noting how much it sounds like a musical instrument, before returning to the subject of prodigals. “I believe the parable is about grace, not forgiveness,” she says. In the Gospel of Luke, “the father loves his son and embraces him right away, not after any kind of exchange or apology. I don’t think that is forgiveness—that is grace.”

But Jack has not only come home for a blessing; he has brought judgment, too. For almost all of “Gilead,” we trust the temperate Reverend Ames, especially when it comes to the status of Jack’s soul. In the final few pages, though, we see

how easily self-righteousness can cloud anyone's vision: Jack, whose full name is John Ames Boughton, turns out to be the closest thing to a true inheritor of the moral clarity of the original John Ames. "Gilead" is set in the nineteen-fifties, in the early days of what Robinson calls the Third Great Awakening—the civil-rights movement. Unbeknownst to anyone in Gilead, or to readers until the final pages, Jack has fallen in love with and married a Black woman, and he returns home alone to see whether the town will receive his interracial family. Although the anti-miscegenation laws that were passed when Iowa was a territory were not adopted when it became a state, it is unclear, in the novel as in life, whether its star might still shine, as Grant says, or if the first Reverend Ames was right, and all that radicalism has turned to dust and ashes.

In 2005, "Gilead" won the Pulitzer Prize. A few years later, Barack Obama, then the junior senator from Illinois, read it during his first campaign for the Presidency. He thought he would learn more about Iowa, but he was moved to learn more about America. In Robinson, Obama found a writer who loves this country as much as he does, and in the same way: both see a profound beauty in the ongoing, collective effort to become a more perfect union. "There's something old-fashioned about Marilynne," Obama says, describing Robinson as "unashamed to reach for big themes and big questions—about how we give our lives purpose, and how we deal with death and what it means to be redeemed from the mistakes and flaws of our lives. There's a fundamental compassion and a deep humanity rather than cynicism about people that runs contrary to what a lot of our art these days reflects."

The year Obama was elected, Robinson published another novel, "Home," which retold the story of "Gilead" from the perspective of Glory, one of Jack's sisters—and, in doing so, demonstrated how little we sometimes know about the sufferings and tribulations of even those closest to us. It was with "Home" that the scope of Robinson's Gilead series began to emerge—the way it shared not just the metaphysics of Frost and Melville but also the intergenerational geography of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County. Six years later, Robinson published another novel, "Lila," which goes back in time to introduce Ames's wife, a child of the Dust Bowl whose life has been marked by extreme privation. Lila is the mirror image of Jack: someone with every reason to be bad who instead is inexplicably good. She meets her future husband when she walks into his church, and in their first conversation confides, "I just been wondering lately why things happen the way they do." He replies, "I've been wondering about that more or less my whole life." There are thirty-five years and an unimaginable

gulf of education and opportunity between them, but the Reverend Ames falls in love. Like all the Gilead novels, “Lila” is almost shockingly beautiful, tender where it is a love story, and bracing when it raises the existential questions that consume its protagonists.

A year after “Lila” was published, President Obama delivered the eulogy for Clementa Pinckney, a state legislator from South Carolina who was murdered, along with eight others, by a white supremacist while attending a Bible study at the Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston. Robinson and Obama had begun a correspondence, and in the eulogy the President quoted one of the novelist’s letters to him, as he spoke of calling, even in a time of extremity and anguish, on “that reservoir of goodness, beyond, and of another kind, that we are able to do each other in the ordinary course of things.”

A few months later, Robinson and Obama met for a public conversation at the Iowa State Library, in Des Moines. Although she taught for more than thirty years, Robinson does not have much of an interrogative mode; she learns by reading and observation, in both cases through sustained acts of attention rather than overt inquisition. And so their planned conversation turned into the President interviewing the novelist; the questioner-in-chief listened as Robinson spoke about fear, faith, public education, and what she regards as the necessary features of a functioning democracy and a good life. In return, she almost willfully refused to ask him anything—trusting, as she always does, that if someone, even the President, has anything to say he will say it.

Over time, Robinson has become linked to Obama the way Whitman is tied to Lincoln and Kennedy is to Frost. “Marilynne’s politics are reflective of a view that I share,” Obama says, “that the ideals and the values of America at their best promise the capacity for us to live together despite our differences, and that those values and ideals are not discredited by our failures to live up to them. It just means that we’ve got to work harder.” Both look to the past and see not only evil and tragedy but also a North Star: the “self-evident” truth that all of us are created equal and endowed by our creator with inalienable rights. “It is likely that we will constantly fall short of these ideals and these values, and yet it is still worthwhile to try to live up to them. Marilynne’s faith and my own says we’re sinners and we’re mortal and confused and afraid and clumsy and we hurt people, but that doesn’t mean that we can’t try to do better.” Both, Obama says, “take seriously the project of trying to live right, and that’s true for individuals

and that's true for the country."

Robinson's most recent essay, published in *The New York Review of Books* in June, was titled "What Kind of Country Do We Want?" The title of her most recent collection is "What Are We Doing Here?" For someone not inclined to ask questions, those sharp queries reflect an urgency that Robinson feels more and more. "I am too old to mince words," she writes in the preface to the book; the author is now the same age John Ames was when he began writing a letter to his son. Robinson fainted last fall in church, but the cause turned out to be a common thyroid condition, easily treated. "Nothing to worry about," she said, one evening this summer, in the darkening silence at her house in Saratoga Springs. For all her concerns about the world, Robinson is seldom concerned about herself. "I am not an anxious person," she says, "about death or anything else."

Robinson started "Jack" in Iowa but finished it in Saratoga Springs, which is also where her children and their families gather for Christmas. James, a computer programmer, lives in Iowa City with his wife, while Joseph, a museum director, has settled in California with his family after a spell in Queens, where Robinson moved briefly to help out after her first grandchild was born. Photographs of family decorate both of her houses, and her granddaughter's smiling face provides the background on her phone. "There is something wonderful about the family, about the way the institution perpetuates itself," she says. "I did not expect that, but I look at my grandchildren, and I think, How wonderful. And then, one day, one of the children calls and he is baking a rhubarb pie like we did when they were young and like my mother did, and I think, That is it, the generations."



*"Even though we're far apart, at least we can still scream incoherently at the same moon."*  
Cartoon by Suerynn Lee

Robinson still talks regularly with David, her brother, who fulfilled his own childhood prophecy of becoming a painter. Retired from the faculty of the University of Virginia, where he spent two decades producing a seven-hundred-page comparative history of world art, he lives with his family in Charlottesville and paints bright, complex still-lifes. He also paints the occasional portrait, including one of his little sister, made not long after she finished “Housekeeping,” in which she looks like a cross between Isabel Archer and Whistler’s Mother.

Still, despite her closeness with her family, Robinson has long led a strikingly autonomous life. “There was teaching, and there are deadlines for talks or things, but mostly I have control of my time, and what I do with it is keep to myself,” she says. “I am grateful for my life, for my time. I read and think. I have been privileged to do almost exclusively what I want.” She wakes up with a couple of cups of coffee, reads at least one and usually two newspapers, and then settles into writing, often while listening to music. (The soundtrack for “Housekeeping” was Bessie Smith; “Jack” was written with a contemporary-gospel station playing in the background.) She generally writes her fiction by hand in spiral notebooks and her nonfiction on her laptop. She can go weeks without opening the mail, and, if she likes a movie, she may see it four times. Before the coronavirus, her only regular socializing was her weekly church service (lately on Vimeo), though a few very close friends managed to draw her out, usually at their invitation and sometimes at their insistence. Two of her friends from Iowa City have a long-standing Scrabble game with Robinson that she loses gracefully, despite her knack for playing unexpected words like “eft”—which, “you know?” is a juvenile newt. Ellen Levine recalled taking Robinson to the races in Saratoga Springs, where they bet on horses based only on their names and spent their serendipitous if modest winnings on ice cream. Another day, they picked blackberries, which they carried by making little baskets out of their T-shirts. “I remember Marilynne saying what we were doing was ‘cousinish’—what a perfect word.”

The pandemic prevented visits from family and friends this spring, which gave Robinson more time to finish “Jack.” She is now working on a lecture for the seven-hundredth anniversary of Dante’s death, a sermon for the four-hundredth anniversary of the first worship service at Plymouth, a book about Shakespeare, a book about the Old Testament, and a collection of essays on Christology. She

does not yet know if there will be another novel in the Gilead series. Robinson has closely followed the protests occasioned by the murder of George Floyd, and has been heartened by them, because, she says, they “reveal the actual authority in this country: the people.” She has been concerned for a long time that we have turned against the Third Great Awakening—that we have been nurturing our fears and starving our virtues, neglecting the poor, abusing the vulnerable, and failing not only the generations that will come after us but also those that came before.

All these concerns are written into “Jack,” though the book’s immediate origins are much like those of “Gilead.” “I heard these two people walking around in the dark,” Robinson says. “I heard them talking in this sort of otherworldly environment, and they were talking freely in the way that people do when they are killing time.” The voices turned out to belong to Jack Boughton and his future wife, Della Miles. They were wandering through a graveyard in St. Louis, falling in love as they talked about perception, predestination, angels, Emily Post, “Hamlet,” Deuteronomy, and doomsday. In frequently subtle ways, the three earlier novels all revolved around Boughton’s prodigal son; now, finally, here was Jack’s own story. “I always knew that Jack was the loneliest man in the world,” Robinson says, as night fills the floor-to-ceiling windows of her home, the lake barely visible now except where boat lights blink in the distance. The next day, visiting the Robert Frost Stone House Museum, she recites a bit of one of the poet’s sonnets, which she uses in the book to explicate Jack’s troubled soul: “I have been one acquainted with the night / I have walked out in rain—and back in rain.”

But not even Jack can stay lonely forever. In this new novel, his darkness is lit by Della, the daughter of a Methodist minister, who has left her family in Tennessee to take a teaching job in Missouri, at the first Black high school west of the Mississippi River. In that same sonnet, Frost refers to “one luminary clock against the sky” which “proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right,” and poor Jack is caught in a love neither entirely impossible nor entirely possible in his place and time. Interracial marriage is still illegal in St. Louis, and Della’s parents are followers of Marcus Garvey. No one in the Miles family is heartened by the appearance of a wayward white atheist in Della’s life.

Della, too, knows the danger she is in—whether walking down the street with her lover, eating with him in public, or entering his boarding house. And that is without even considering the troubles brought specifically by Jack, who trails

trouble everywhere. “I have never heard of a white man who got so little good out of being a white man,” Della says. Newly released from prison—for once, he has been convicted of a crime he didn’t commit—Jack has resolved not only to stay sober but to accomplish something even harder: to do no harm.

Robinson observes a distinction between an author who knows about his characters—which is to say, who knows what they say and what they do—and an author who can “feel reality on a set of nerves somehow not quite his own.” Her own such gift was already obvious, perhaps most of all in her rendering of Lila Ames, but it has become even more impressive with Jack, whose shame and fear of hope we feel for ourselves, and whose prodigality, at times baffling in the earlier books, is now ours to experience from the inside. Acutely aware of his own failings, Jack wants to warn Della off, and so he describes himself to her as the incarnation of his father’s worst fears. That man of God, he says, “was uneasy with the thought that there might be dark certainty in the universe somewhere, sentence passed, doom sealed, and a soul at his very dinner table lost irretrievably before it had even stopped outgrowing its shoes.” Were you that bad, Della wonders? Yes, Jack tells her—and yet there is nothing to be done after that night in the cemetery, when, like Shakespearean lovers, their fates are sealed.

One of the many beauties of “Jack” is the way that it aligns our sympathies so fully with its terribly difficult protagonist by presenting him as both Robinson and Della see him. “Once in a lifetime,” Della tells Jack, “you look at a stranger and you see a soul, a glorious presence out of place in the world. And if you love God, every choice is made for you. There is no turning away. You’ve seen the mystery—you’ve seen what life is about. What it’s for. And a soul has no earthly qualities, no history among the things of this world, no guilt or injury or failure. No more than a flame would have. There is nothing to be said about it except that it is a holy human soul. And it is a miracle when you recognize it.”

This is Robinson’s entire cosmology: the world is self-evidently miraculous, but only rarely do we pay it the attention it deserves. Robinson calls her style of writing cosmic realism, a patient chronicling of the astonishing nature of existence. Her attentiveness to creation at every level is what makes her fiction so convincing: she sees everything, including us. “I believe that all literature is acknowledgment,” she says. “Literature says this is what sadness feels like and this is what holiness feels like, and people feel acknowledged in what they already feel.”

The final scene of “Jack” is set in one of the most famously contested spaces of the civil-rights movement. In the hands of a lesser novelist it would seem unconvincing or contrived, but in Robinson’s hands it is revelatory. Jack and Della are together yet necessarily apart, seated on a segregated bus. They have decided against their families and in favor of each other, and Della is pregnant with their child, who everyone worries will have a more difficult life than either of his parents. We know from “Gilead” that, in eight years, Jack will find the courage to return home to Iowa, after a two-decade absence, and will appeal to his namesake for help convincing his father and the rest of the town to accept his wife and son. And we know that there will be another twinned generation of these two families, in the form of two boys named Robbie: Robert Ames, the son of the elderly John Ames, and Robert Boughton Miles, Jack and Della’s little boy. But, for now, Robinson leaves the lovers in motion, in the middle of their own lives, in the middle of history.

It is in this moment that we realize that Marilynne Robinson’s grand restoration project includes one of the oldest but most misunderstood stories we tell about ourselves. Like Adam and Eve, Jack and Della are banished, but they are banished together, and that is enough of a miracle that Jack reconsiders what he has always thought about Genesis: that the fallenness it describes is his lot in life, and our lot in the universe. Too often, he now thinks, we attend to only “half of the primal catastrophe,” focussing on what was lost in the garden while forgetting what was gained. But, Robinson insists, “guilt and grace met together,” for in eating from the tree of knowledge we did not only learn about evil. We also learned about goodness. ♦

## **Shouts & Murmurs**

- [\*\*A Karen Defends Her Kind\*\*](#)

October 5, 2020 Issue

# The K-Word

By [Paul Rudnick](#)

September 28, 2020



My name is Karen Applebart, and, as you can imagine, I'm disturbed by the use of my first name to stereotype supposedly entitled and enraged suburban white women, a subgroup that, in reality, has only helped the world by shaving the heads of all those moms who bring store-bought cupcakes to bake sales. I've become so upset by this "Karen" nonsense that yesterday I dressed Koren, my eight-month-old son, as a congressperson, sent him a hundred and twelve obscenity-filled e-mails concerning bike lanes, and left him out on the lawn overnight.

I'm not a "Karen." Last week, at Target, an elderly woman called me Karen just because I wasn't wearing a mask (owing to my diagnosed fear of resembling a 1963 Buick Imperial), so I kicked over her walker and took the cash and credit cards from her wallet. I was so incensed, I didn't realize that she was my mother.

How did this "Karen" libel begin? I've heard differing origin stories, but I know it didn't start with me, and certainly not at my daughter Karenelle's eighth-birthday party, where I threw all the gifts that cost under a hundred dollars in the pool, and warned the little girls, whom I'd paid to attend, that if they insisted on playing tag they could lose an eye. And when, later, I handed those eyes over to their parents, in baggies with chips of dry ice, those parents thanked me.

I'm an easygoing, accepting person, despite the restraining orders from multiple parties who tried to argue that street parking spaces are "open to everyone." After the "Karen" stuff started, I wondered if I should change my name. I even consulted a lawyer and discussed the issue, until he looked at his watch and I called 911 to report him for spying on me with his bow-tie camera and attempting to sex-traffic my poodle, Karenelle 2. I try to empathize with my fellow-man, unless of course I'm standing behind him in line, causing me to scream, "But I was in front of you in my dream!"

At one point, I decided to own my Karenhood, with a vanity license plate reading "KAREN SKAN," a "Save the Karens, You Stupid Kayleighs" bumper sticker, and a small assault weapon I only use against salespeople who refuse to let me return underwear just because I'm wearing it. I also held a Karen Konvention, which didn't go well, since a majority of the Karens in attendance claimed to have a medical condition that caused them to grab five gift bags at once.

A stab at creating a group Karen agenda devolved into the following list of declarations: “Well, no one tips me for being a supermom”; “I don’t need to go up a size, I need to speak to the Secretary of State”; “I’ve been waiting almost twelve seconds”; and “I’m entitled to a discount because of my mother’s inability to praise my gifts as a poet.” A brawl broke out after one Karen called another Karen “such a total Karen, I’m not even kidding,” and three Karens feuded over which one was the first to have been banned from Starbucks for life. I abandoned ship after all the Karens started screeching in unison, “I left the receipt in my other purse, the one that a foreign-born teen-ager must have stolen from my Jeep Cherokee while I was browsing for tie-dyed jeggings and gingham Keds!”

All this Karen discrimination has taken a severe emotional toll. Last night, as I was making love with my husband, I shouted, “I need to start seeing your more attractive brother!” At my job, as a customer-service representative for Verizon, I kept yelling at callers, “And this is my problem why?” And at an outdoor yoga class, when the woman beside me smiled and started stretching, I took her hostage with a machete until a SWAT team found me a bottle of my second-favorite lilac-vanilla bodywash, which was discontinued four years ago.

Fine. I’m not just Karen. I’m *a* Karen. I want what I want when I want it. I’m under a great deal of stress, just from pulling my hair into a ponytail and putting on a visor stained with self-tanner. I need to be seen and heard and told that I’m not required to follow any store policies on account of my prescription Ace bandage, my three souvenir tote bags from different cruise lines, and the tattoo of Wonder Woman on my ankle that covers the tattoo of my first husband’s name, which turned out to be an alias. But if you call me a Karen while I’m trying to compare diet almond milks, that will trigger me, and I will mangle every Paisley, Addison, and Crishell in my path. ♦

## Sketchbook

- The insomnia remedies that Mitch McConnell, Lindsey Graham, and other lawmakers turn to when anxiety or conscience gets in the way.

[October 5, 2020 Issue](#)

# How Do They Sleep at Night?

By [Barry Blitt](#)

September 28, 2020

## **Tables for Two**

- [Burmese Food and a Hopeful Vision at Yun Café & Asian Mart](#)

[October 5, 2020 Issue](#)

## Burmese Food and a Hopeful Vision at Yun Café & Asian Mart

The café's owners opened their new location at a time when other businesses were closing—but customers are coming in for umami-rich salads made with fermented tea leaves or tart green mango.

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

September 25, 2020



Just outside the entrance to Yun Café & Asian Mart are two small folding tables, at which I can't exactly recommend sitting, and not only because of the pandemic. Yun Café, which opened in August, is subterranean, at the bottom of a set of stairs leading to the Jackson Heights–Roosevelt Avenue subway station. Even in a more relaxed era, most people would find the atmosphere lacking, although it's fun to be reminded that the city contains a whole universe underground; the café faces a tiny bodega and is within spitting distance (but don't, and wear a mask) of a barbershop.



*Because of its location, the family who opened Yun initially conceived of the café as a quick stop for rushed commuters; they have been surprised, instead, to find themselves catering to adventurous eaters seeking out Burmese food. Photograph by Zachary Zavislak for The New Yorker*

Luckily, you can sit at other tables upstairs, en plein air on a lively plaza, or take your food to go. Most everything here travels well; without much of a kitchen, the tiny café is limited largely to sandwiches and cold salads, specifically Burmese salads, which are the clear draw of the place. Yun's married owners, Tin Ko Naing and Thidar Kyaw, are from Myanmar, where salad is a pillar of the cuisine; the year-round average temperature is eighty degrees.



*Salads—and sandwiches and smoothies—are made to order behind a counter at the back of the shop. Photograph by Zachary Zavislak for The New Yorker*

You could liken Burmese food to cuisines that use similar ingredients and flavors, including Thai, Vietnamese, Indian, and Chinese. But it might be more useful to home in on what sets it apart: *laphet*, for one, fermented tea leaves that are eaten instead of brewed. For Yun's version of *laphet thoke*, or tea-leaf salad, the leaves, darkest green and imparting of a deep vegetal funk, are mixed with shredded cabbage, thinly sliced red and green tomatoes, coins of garlic so caramelized they look like golden raisins, roasted soy nuts and peanuts, sesame oil, snips of fiery green chili, dried shrimp, fish sauce, and lemon juice. Umami on umami on umami.



*A few hot dishes are prepared off-site and warmed up on a hot plate, including the broth that gets poured over a salad of samosas. Photograph by Zachary Zavislak for The New Yorker*

Brightly astringent fermented ginger replaces the *laphet* in another salad. In others you'll find shreds of tart green papaya, or green mango; a tangle of thick yellow egg noodles or white-rice vermicelli; shaggy morsels of chicken or neat cubes of tripe; wedges of house-made tofu or fish cake. A samosa "salad" turns out to be more of a soup, for which the tricornered pastries are smashed open, mashed potato and chickpea spilling out, topped with mint and cabbage, and bathed in a thick golden broth, heady with garam masala, that gets warmed on a hot plate if you want to eat it right away and packed in a separate container if you don't. The same goes for the lemongrass-and-chili-laced fish stock that's the base of the *mohinga*, a noodle soup that's considered Myanmar's national dish and is traditionally served for breakfast.



*Shelves are lined with packaged snacks, plus canned and jarred goods, many imported from Myanmar, Thailand, and Taiwan. Photograph by Zachary Zavislak for The New Yorker*

Naing and Kyaw, whose twenty-three-year-old daughter, Yun, helps run Yun Café, did not intend to open a Burmese restaurant, least of all during a global pandemic. In Myanmar, they owned a restaurant and, later, a tea shop, but in 2008 they left for Singapore, where Naing worked as an engineer. In 2014, Kyaw immigrated to the U.S., got her real-estate license, and took over a cheap lease in a shopping arcade in Jackson Heights, selling mostly drygoods imported from Myanmar. Business was never great, because of the isolated location, and when her husband and daughter followed her, two years ago, they talked about looking for a space with better foot traffic. It wasn't until May of this year that they found one they could afford.

"Everybody around us was, like, 'This does not sound like a good idea, everybody's struggling, people are closing, and you want to open? No one is taking the trains,' " Yun told me recently. "But things will go back to normal one day," she said. "If we can just hold up until then, we should be fine." Initially, they planned to focus on coffee, smoothies, sandwiches—"good for rushing," Yun explained. It was Kyaw's idea to add Burmese salads, which made Yun and her father skeptical at first. "We were, like, 'Nobody knows Burmese food.' But then we thought, Let's have a little corner," she said. "Then we opened the store, and people were coming for the Burmese food." (*Burmese salads and soups \$3-\$15.*) ♦

## The Stakes

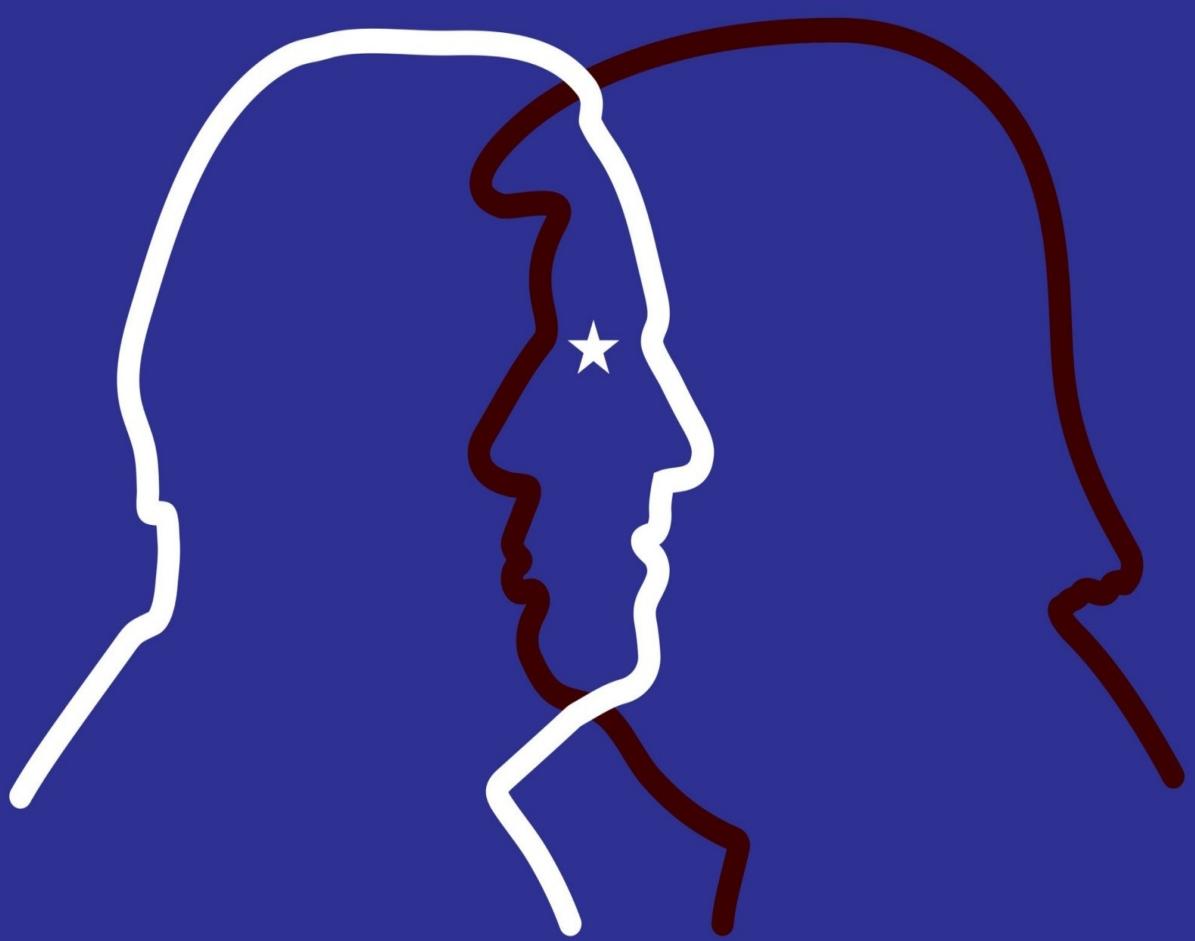
- [The New Yorker Endorses a Biden Presidency](#)
- [Controlling the Pandemic Is the First Step Toward Rescuing a Failed System](#)
- [Biden Can Rise to the Challenge of Our Climate Emergency](#)
- [Ending Trump's Assault on the Rule of Law](#)
- [Biden's Moral Imperative to Safeguard Civil Rights](#)
- [Biden Will Restore America's Moral Leadership](#)

# The New Yorker Endorses a Biden Presidency

It would be a relief simply to have a President who doesn't abuse the office as a colossal grift. But a new President must also address the failures that have been festering in American life for decades.

By [The Editors](#)

September 28, 2020



On November 8, 2016, [Donald John Trump](#), a shady real-estate pitchman and reality-TV host from New York, was elected the forty-fifth President of the United States. The distinguishing features of his character—bigotry, deceit, narcissism—were as evident during the 2016 campaign as they are now. But, though many more voters supported his opponent, the Trump Presidency had to be endured. Contempt has been at the core of his time in office: contempt for the Constitution; contempt for truth and dissent; contempt for women and people of color; contempt for champions of civil rights as great as [John Lewis](#) and [Ruth Bader Ginsburg](#). Trump's contempt for science and the basic welfare of Americans is so profound that, through an enraging combination of incompetence, indifference, and stupidity, he has failed to meet the pitiless demands of a viral pandemic. The national death toll is more than two hundred thousand.

The pandemic has also laid bare the inequities, corruptions, and cruelties of our political life—features that the Administration did not originate but which it has magnified and exploited. The lack of universal health care; the shrivelling of critical government agencies, regulations, and protections; the persistence of sharp racial disparities in wealth and in health; the unwillingness to deal with the clear danger of climate change—these have all contributed to the dire redefinition of “American exceptionalism.”

## Biden's Top Priority

How he must protect public health if he wins.

In an established autocracy—like [Vladimir Putin](#)'s Russia, [Recep Tayyip Erdoan](#)'s Turkey, or [Mohammed bin Salman](#)'s Saudi Arabia—it is nearly impossible to criticize or to investigate the autocrat. In the liminal condition in which we now live, with public institutions threatened but not yet defeated by an elected President, the would-be autocrat must still face the indignities of journalism, legal inquiry, and popular opposition. He must also face an open election. The polls suggest that [Joe Biden](#) currently leads the 2020 Presidential race. We suffer no delusions: Trump has on his side demagogic skill and ruthlessness, a willingness to break any norm or law in order to win. Nevertheless, we hope that Biden will displace him by a margin that prevents prolonged dispute or the kind of civil unrest that Trump appears to relish. Ideally, Biden will have an opportunity to govern with Democratic majorities in

both the House and the Senate, which would vastly increase his chances of passing legislation to confront the nation's array of crises.

In March, 1933, as Franklin Roosevelt approached his first Inauguration, the country was submerged in the Great Depression. It was a dark time of breadlines and Hoovervilles. The unemployment rate was around twenty-five per cent. At first, Roosevelt's crucial contribution to national solidarity and the restoration of the economy was his clarity and his optimism. "This Nation is asking for action, and action now," he declared in his Inaugural Address. In the next hundred days, he proceeded with bracing resolution, initiating the legislation that laid the foundation for the New Deal, economic recovery, and a more humane and activist government than the Republic had ever known.

There is no underestimating the craving for restorative calm. It would surely be a relief simply to have a President who is not a chronic liar, someone who doesn't abuse the office as a colossal grift. It would be a relief to have a President who is reflexively devoted to democratic institutions and refuses to make common cause with white nationalists, QAnon, and other inhabitants of the lunatic fringe. It is true that Biden is not a transcendent speaker or a towering intellect. Yet he has the capacity to convey genuineness and fellow-feeling to a wide range of Americans. "We're in this together," the phrase heard so often during the pandemic, has routinely been traduced by an ethos of selfishness exemplified by the President himself. At his best, Biden has the potential to appeal to the country in an emotionally honest way that might help to engender a greater sense of social cohesion, compassion, and mutual respect.

But a new President must also address the failures and the inequalities that have been festering in American life for decades. He must reckon immediately with an environmental crisis that is already upon us and cannot be conquered with a vaccine. Biden, during his long career in the Senate, was hardly a consistent and ardent progressive. On issues as varied as criminal justice and foreign policy, his record and his judgment were mixed. In recent months, he seems to have acknowledged to a far greater degree than he had before the depths of the country's systemic failings; he relies for advice, to be sure, on a great many Party regulars, but he has also reached out to politicians like Senator Bernie Sanders, who ran distinctly to his left, and to the wave of protesters, for ideas and inspiration. Biden will govern best if, like F.D.R., he is attuned to voices and experts who understand the need for profound changes in policy.

It's worth remembering that on the day after Trump's Inauguration millions of Americans flooded the streets of cities and towns across the country. The Women's March was one of the largest single-day protests in the history of the United States. Since then, there have been mass demonstrations for environmental protection, gun control, racial and gender equality, universal health care. The [Black Lives Matter](#) protests have been inspiring not only because of their scale and persistence but because of their diversity and the support they've received from countless millions who have stayed at home.

Biden ran in the primaries as a moderate. If he wins the Presidency, he will have to govern with boldness, urgency, tenacity, and creativity. In the face of such challenges, realism and radicalism are not so far apart. Raging fires and rising seas will not respond to pallid proclamations. It is encouraging that Biden has lately been talking in specific terms about job creation and industrial policy, voting rights, higher pay for teachers, police reform, raising the minimum wage, ambitious environmental policy, and serious measures to reduce the dismaying gaps in wealth and opportunity.

In what follows, you'll read a set of briefs concerning just some of the crises that a new Administration will have to confront and what it must do in order to repair the damage done and shift the moral arc of a troubled nation. ♦

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## Why Biden Must Win

- Biden has committed to building an infrastructure that would support public health and equitable medical care. [Controlling the pandemic is the first step toward rescuing a failed system.](#)
- [Biden can rise to the challenge of the climate emergency.](#) This year's devastating wildfires illustrate how high the costs of failing to deal with climate change already are.
- [Protecting voting rights](#) is an essential step that Biden must take to repair our democracy after Trump's assault on the rule of law. But it is only the first one.
- Trump has cultivated an atmosphere of brazen racism and supported the networks of intolerance that are furthering it. [A Biden Administration will have a moral imperative to safeguard civil rights.](#)
- Imagine a President determined to combat the destruction of democracy.

## Biden will restore the most fundamental principles of American leadership.

By [Atul Gawande](#)

By [Elizabeth Kolbert](#)

By [Jeffrey Toobin](#)

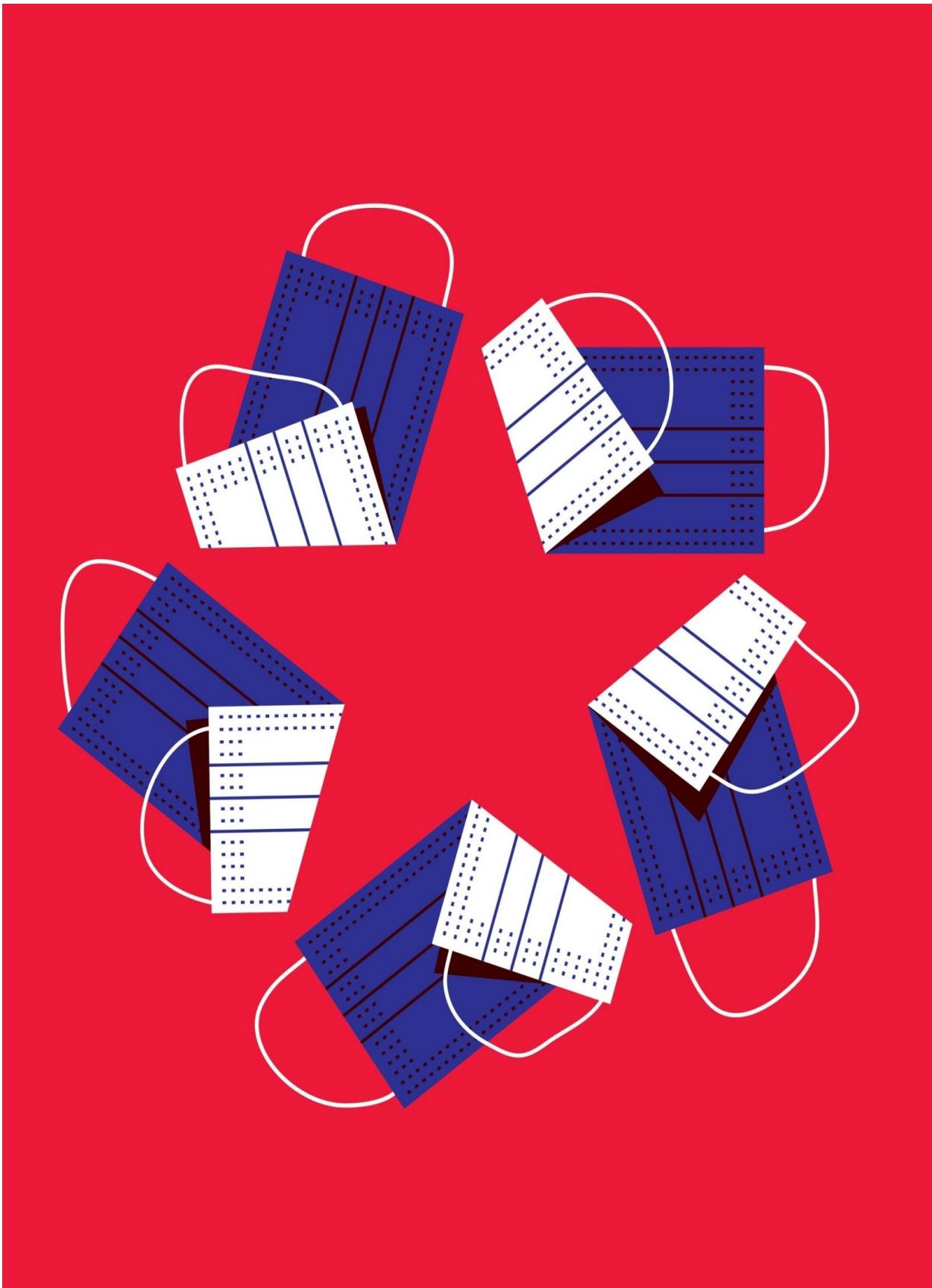
By [Jelani Cobb](#)

# **Controlling the Pandemic Is the First Step Toward Rescuing a Failed System**

Joe Biden has committed to building an infrastructure that would support public health and equitable medical care—not only during this pandemic but during the next one.

By [Atul Gawande](#)

September 28, 2020



The top priority for the next President is clear: control the [pandemic](#). This isn't just a matter of containing an ongoing threat. It's also a crucial step toward addressing the larger failures of the nation's health-care system.

Since January 20th, when the first *COVID-19* case was identified in the United States, President Trump has squandered every opportunity to fight the coronavirus. This country's public-health expertise is unparalleled, and one would have expected it to have helped lead the global response, as it did with [Ebola](#). Instead, the President has promoted [quack cures](#), mocked [mask-wearing](#), committed to withdrawing from the World Health Organization, and demanded that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Food and Drug Administration show fealty to him rather than to science. Between Memorial Day and Labor Day, the number of confirmed cases in the U.S. quadrupled, from one and a half million to more than six million. In parts of the country, infections continue to spread unabated. By Inauguration Day, our one-year coronavirus anniversary, the death toll will likely exceed three hundred thousand.

## **Why Biden Must Win**

Read our endorsement.

We know what measures are needed to combat the virus: a national mask mandate (we should get mask-wearing, which remains lax in many states, above eighty per cent); investment in making [testing](#) free, timely, and widely available; and the mobilization of public-health teams to trace, test, and isolate contacts of positive cases. (Reopening bars and other high-risk settings must be the last step, not the first, where infection rates are high.) Once clinical trials establish that a vaccine is safe and effective, the President must be trusted to distribute it on the basis of need, not political caprice. And, critically, we need to assemble a modern public-health infrastructure that can support testing, treatments, and supplies not only for this pandemic but for the next one. Joe Biden has committed to doing exactly this. To reëstablish pandemic management as a national function instead of one carried out disjointedly among the states, he would launch a Pandemic Testing Board and a P.P.E.-production program to insure plentiful supplies; adhere to transparent criteria for vaccine approval and distribution; and expand the C.D.C.'s scientific team that tracks outbreaks around the world, including in China.

The deeper dysfunctions of our health-care system would have an equally urgent claim to the attentions of a Biden Administration. The pandemic has clearly shown that the entire country is weakened when large segments of the population lack adequate medical coverage. This country cannot continue to tolerate the severe disparities we have—based on neighborhood, education, or skin color—in life expectancy, medical debt, access to mental-health or dental care, the ability to fill prescriptions, having a regular doctor, or simply having enough to eat. The [Affordable Care Act](#) reduced the number of uninsured by forty per cent, but twelve states, including Texas and Florida, still refuse the Medicaid funding that the bill provided to cover uninsured residents living in poverty. Even before the pandemic, forty-five per cent of working-age Americans either had no insurance or had insurance that carried deductibles and copays so high that they couldn't afford medical care anyway.

The central error of our system has been attaching our health care to where we work. A company-sponsored insurance plan for a family adds an average of fifteen thousand dollars to the annual cost of employing a worker—effectively levying a fifty-per-cent tax on a fifteen-dollar-an-hour position. We're all but paying employers to outsource or automate people's jobs. The result is to make both work and health care less secure and more fragmented—and to deepen our inequalities.

That's visible in the tragic increase, during the past few decades, in so-called [deaths of despair](#)—from suicide, opioids, and alcohol-related disease—which have produced an unprecedented decline in life expectancy for non-college-educated whites. Trump vowed to address opioid deaths, but fatal overdoses hit a record high last year, and have continued to climb since the onset of the *COVID-19* pandemic. This trend appears to reflect a generational loss of stable work and earnings for people without a four-year degree—a situation that our broken health system has gravely exacerbated. Fixing economic and racial inequality isn't possible without fixing health care.

Our major health-policy issues will not all be solved in the next four years. A fractious Democratic Party has temporarily united in an effort to defeat Trump, but it remains divided on health care. Many Democrats would jettison Obamacare in favor of Medicare for All; Biden's plan would build on Obamacare by lowering the Medicare eligibility age to sixty, and providing a public option enabling people to obtain coverage from a government plan. The Republican Party has developed no health-care strategy except to attack any

solution that would deliver on the guiding tenet of medicine, not to mention of the Constitution: that all lives have equal worth.

Yet progress must be made. During the pandemic, we have seen a frightening willingness to regard some people as expendable, including the elderly and many essential workers, who are disproportionately Black, Latino, and low-income. The Obama Presidency launched with the swelling hope of a country finally unified in the belief that we are all created equal; a Biden Presidency would begin with a more sober sense of the opposition that meaningful reform must overcome. But this realism may yet provide the basis for lasting advancement. Repairing our systems of medical care and public health isn't an elective procedure. The afflictions of our body politic threaten the well-being of us all. ♦

By [Elizabeth Kolbert](#)

By [Jeffrey Toobin](#)

By [Jelani Cobb](#)

By [Susan B. Glasser](#)

# **Biden Can Rise to the Challenge of Our Climate Emergency**

This year's devastating wildfires illustrate how high the costs of failing to deal with climate change will be.

By [Elizabeth Kolbert](#)

September 28, 2020



It is no exaggeration to say that what the next President does—or doesn’t do—on [climate change](#) will affect the world for millennia to come. [Joe Biden](#) has said that, on Day One of his Administration, he will rejoin the [Paris climate accord](#). That’s an important first step. It would signal that the United States intends to become, once again, a responsible member of the global community. At the same time, it would commit the White House to delivering a plan to substantially reduce America’s [emissions](#). ([Donald Trump](#) shredded the plan that the Obama Administration submitted in the lead-up to Paris, in 2015.)

The new Administration should immediately issue an executive order rescinding a stack of Trump’s executive orders. These include one that directed federal agencies to review any rules that “potentially burden” oil, natural-gas, and coal companies, and another that opened millions of acres of U.S. waters to potential oil and gas drilling. (A few weeks ago, in a naked bid for votes, the President declared a moratorium on drilling off the coast of three Republican-led states: Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina.) Another executive order should direct the Secretary of the Interior to halt the sale of leases for oil and gas drilling on public lands.

## **Why Biden Must Win**

Read our endorsement.

A Biden Administration should also move to restore key Obama-era regulations that the Trump Administration has been scrapping. Among other things, these regulations were aimed at limiting greenhouse-gas emissions from power plants, cars and light trucks, and leaky oil and gas wells. The process of rewriting the regulations, as the *Times* noted recently, will “take patience and discipline.” That’s in part because, even as the Trump Administration was gutting the rules, it was gutting the agencies responsible for formulating them. The death of [Ruth Bader Ginsburg](#) may make the task even more difficult, as a more right-leaning Supreme Court could overturn the key decision, *Massachusetts v. E.P.A.*, from 2007, on which the regulations are based.

In July, Biden offered a plan for tackling climate change and promoting environmental justice. As many commentators pointed out at the time, the plan was a good deal more aggressive than the one he offered during the primary campaign, and credit for this goes to the young activists who pushed him to be

bolder. (*The Washington Post* called it the “most ambitious blueprint released by a major party nominee.”) Several of its key elements can be accomplished by executive action. These include: directing agencies to promote clean energy through their purchases of vehicles and equipment; establishing more rigorous efficiency standards for household appliances; creating a new Environmental and Climate Justice Division in the Justice Department; and convening a climate summit of world leaders. Biden should take all these steps expeditiously.

Much of Biden’s plan will require congressional support, and it’s here that a new Administration would have to show even more discipline and focus. The coronavirus pandemic, for all the death and destruction it has caused, will likely give the new Administration an opportunity to spend a great deal of money, in the form of another stimulus package. Biden must be clear—and adamant—about his priorities. It’s essential that funding for new infrastructure be targeted at projects that will reduce greenhouse-gas emissions, and that stimulus money not go to projects that will, either directly or indirectly, encourage fossil-fuel use. (According to a recent analysis by the Rhodium Group, a private research organization, only one per cent of the \$2.4 trillion in U.S. stimulus spending that it evaluated has been earmarked for projects that could remotely be counted as green.) Spending should be aimed at five broad goals: decarbonizing the power sector, expanding the nation’s public-transportation systems, accelerating the transition to electric vehicles, improving building efficiency, and reducing emissions from manufacturing. And stimulus money needs to be spent not just effectively but equitably. Communities most vulnerable to climate change should see the greatest benefits, in the form of projects that create jobs or more resilient neighborhoods, or, optimally, both.

Biden’s most explicit goal is also the most difficult to attain: eliminating carbon emissions from electricity production in the U.S. by 2035. (As an analyst recently observed, this goal “teeters between achievable and aspirational.”) Currently, just seventeen per cent of the country’s electricity is generated from renewable sources—mostly wind and hydro—and another twenty per cent comes from nuclear plants. Electrifying the nation’s cars and buses will put considerable new demands on the grid, meaning that much more carbon-free power will be needed.

In 2009, when Biden became Vice-President, the Democrats controlled both houses of Congress. The Obama Administration decided to take on health care first; the thinking was that climate-change legislation would come next. But the

fight over Obamacare consumed so much of the new President's political capital that there was no "next," and the Democrats lost control of the House in 2010. So much has gone wrong since then on so many fronts that it's easy to imagine climate change again being relegated to the to-do list. But there isn't time for that.

For the past thirty years, the fossil-fuel industry and its allies have blocked efforts to address climate change. Their claim—sullied by blatant self-interest—is that the country can't afford to do what it would take to make a real difference. That claim has never made any sense: drowned cities and ruined croplands aren't exactly good for business. This fall's devastating wildfires in the West further illustrate how high the costs of failing to deal with climate change will be.

At this peculiar and desperate moment, it's just possible that some of the tired old arguments in favor of inaction have also been reduced to ashes. At least, so let us hope. ♦

By [Atul Gawande](#)

By [Jeffrey Toobin](#)

By [Jelani Cobb](#)

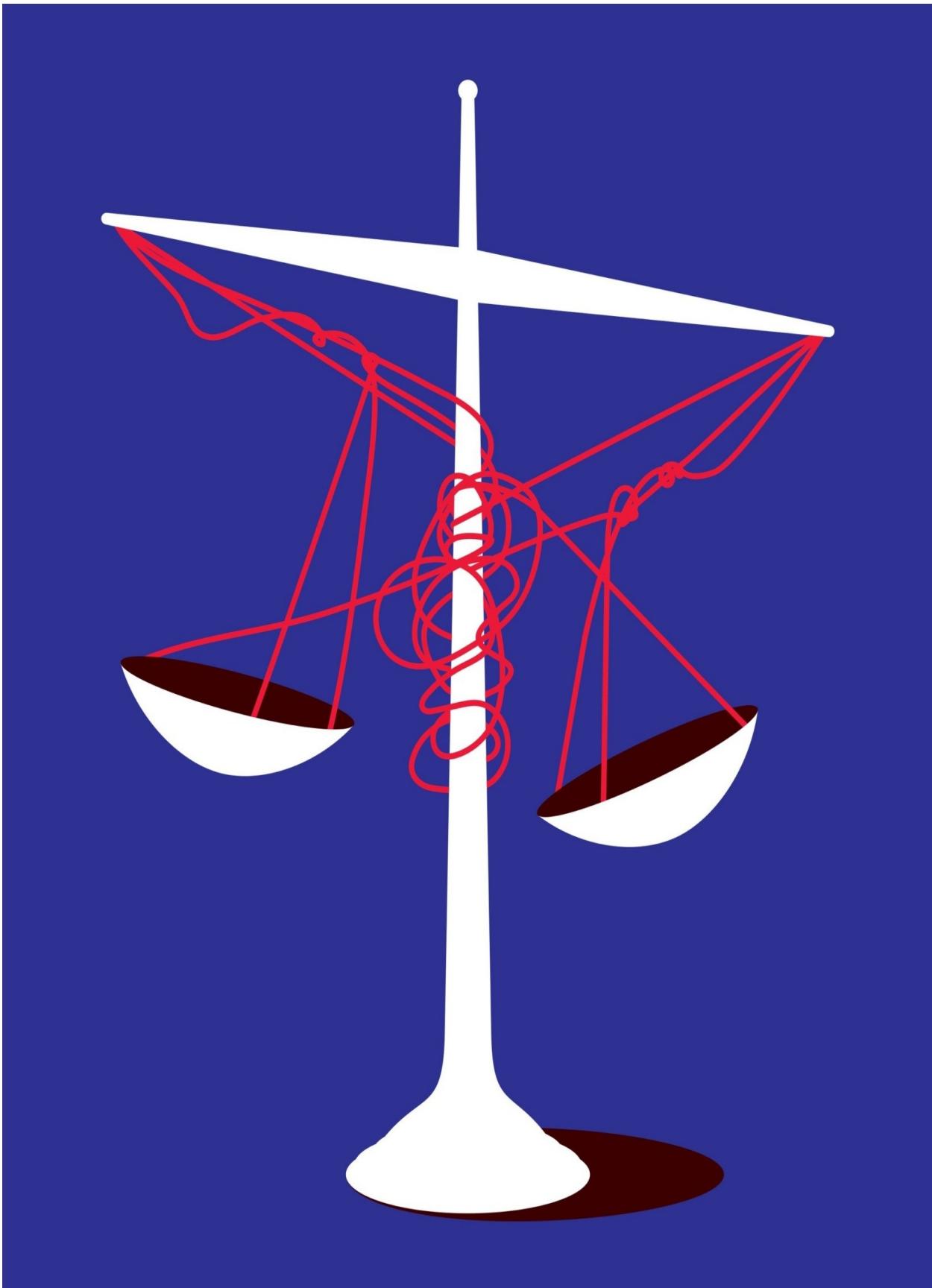
By [Susan B. Glasser](#)

# **Ending Trump's Assault on the Rule of Law**

Protecting voting rights is an essential step that Biden must take to repair our democracy. But it is only the first one.

By [Jeffrey Toobin](#)

September 28, 2020



[Donald Trump](#), both in his own behavior and in the policies of his Administration, has waged war on the rule of law. The tragedy of the [coronavirus pandemic](#) has absorbed the nation's attention for most of 2020, so it's easy to forget that Trump was [impeached](#) by the House of Representatives less than a year ago—and that he deserved to be. Trump's withholding of congressionally appropriated assistance to [Ukraine](#), in an attempt to extract from its government damaging information and propaganda about the Biden family, was precisely the kind of offense that the Framers intended impeachment to address. Trump's defiance of Congress's right to investigate his wrongdoing was another proper ground for his removal.

Trump's Ukraine misadventure followed the conduct that the special counsel [Robert S. Mueller III](#) detailed in [his report](#) about the 2016 campaign and its aftermath. The Mueller report, now an even more distant memory, suggested that the President committed repeated acts of criminal obstruction of justice, which were at least as serious as those which led to Richard Nixon's resignation. The failure of the Ukraine scandal or the Mueller investigation to bring about Trump's removal speaks more to the craven state of the contemporary Republican Party, which has blindly supported its leader, than to the evident merits of the case against him.

## **Why Biden Must Win**

Read our endorsement.

But Trump's departure alone will not be nearly enough to restore the rule of law, and the changes necessary to achieve that must begin with the foundational right in a democracy: the right to vote. Since well before Trump's Presidency, the Republican Party has been committed to limiting the franchise. The Supreme Court's shameful decision in *Shelby County v. Holder*, in 2013, crippled the [Voting Rights Act](#) of 1965, and invited Republican-dominated states to undo the progress made since the passage of the nation's most important civil-rights law. In transparent attempts to prevent the poor and people of color from going to the polls, Republicans have relied on spurious arguments about the possibility of voter fraud (a nearly nonexistent problem) to impose photo-identification requirements at polling places and to limit absentee and early voting. Trump, especially during the current campaign, has made the situation worse, in particular by attempting to sabotage the U.S. Postal Service, which will bear the

burden of delivering ballots in the year of the coronavirus.

A Biden Administration could begin to address these issues right away. The House of Representatives has already passed a revision of the Voting Rights Act, which is now named for [John Lewis](#), the late Georgia congressman, who devoted much of his life to winning and preserving the right to vote. The act would restore the process known as “preclearance,” in which jurisdictions with histories of discrimination must justify their changes in electoral practices. And it would empower the Attorney General to grant immediate relief when states attempt to limit the vote. The new law would need a Department of Justice committed to its enforcement; fortunately, Biden, who has a long history of supporting voting rights, could be expected to replace the lamentable [William Barr](#) with an Attorney General who is a strong advocate for democratic values.

A renewed Voting Rights Act, along with all other legislation in a Biden era, will, of course, have to pass in the Senate, too. It now seems possible that the Democrats will retake control of that chamber, and thus end the sinister reign of Mitch McConnell as Majority Leader. But majority control won’t suffice, owing to the ubiquity of the filibuster. Even in the best of circumstances, the Senate has a dubious connection to representative democracy, which is why Wyoming and California have the same number of senators. But the filibuster allows just forty-one senators, who may represent a great deal less than forty-one per cent of the population, to stymie legislation indefinitely. And although Democrats have made use of the filibuster in recent years, it’s clear that they, as the party of activist government, will always suffer more from this procedural roadblock. Sooner rather than later, a new majority should revise the Senate rules and abolish this relic once and for all.

Control of the judiciary has been an animating force in the Trump Administration, as the President and the Majority Leader have demonstrated with astounding cynicism. After [Antonin Scalia](#) died, in February, 2016, McConnell prevented a vote on [Merrick Garland](#), President Obama’s nominee to replace Scalia on the Supreme Court, by inventing a rule that no Court confirmations should take place during a Presidential-election year. That seat went to Neil Gorsuch, and his nomination was followed by that of [Brett Kavanaugh](#). Now, after the death of [Ruth Bader Ginsburg](#), Trump and [McConnell](#) are violating the principle used to thwart Garland and attempting to install a new Justice, even though early voting in this Presidential election is already under way.

Democrats in the Senate may not be able to prevent the confirmation of a third Trump Justice, but if they win back the majority, and Biden is elected, they should take a hard line. Trump has filled the lower courts with conservative ideologues who will use their lifetime posts to limit the rights of women and the L.G.B.T.Q. community, and (as ever) to attack the voting rights of people of color. Biden should pay the same close attention to the judiciary, appointing judges who will undo some of the damage and, while he's at it, initiate legislation to expand the federal judiciary, which has remained essentially the same size for decades.

Control of the courts would be the pivot on which much of Biden's agenda would turn. Thanks to the [Citizens United](#) decision and related cases, anonymous donors were able to spend millions of dollars to help confirm Gorsuch and Kavanaugh. That was, in part, because conservatives wanted to push their reactionary social agenda, but the money was meant to purchase far more. With great but incomplete success, conservatives have used the courts to hamstring the administrative state. Many of Obama's initiatives have been challenged in the courts, including those on health care, labor law, immigration, and climate change. The initiatives of a President Biden would be, too. So Biden should invest political capital in quickly filling the lower courts with progressive, distinguished (and young) women and men. As the great Chief Justice John Marshall said, more than two centuries ago, "It is emphatically the province and duty of the judicial department"—now called the judicial branch—"to say what the law is." A new Administration should act with this still urgent insight in mind. ♦

By [Atul Gawande](#)

By [Elizabeth Kolbert](#)

By [Jelani Cobb](#)

By [Susan B. Glasser](#)

# **Biden's Moral Imperative to Safeguard Civil Rights**

Trump has cultivated a climate of brazen racism. A Biden Administration must take on the networks of intolerance that are furthering it.

By [Jelani Cobb](#)

September 28, 2020



The Trump era has been a golden age for forces hostile to the civil rights of African-Americans, women, Latinos, Muslims, and members of the L.G.B.T.Q. community. The racial conflagrations of the past year seem like the logical product of [Donald Trump](#)'s brand of belligerent leadership. At the same time, these events have galvanized Black voters, whose support is the very reason that [Joe Biden](#) was able to win the Democratic Presidential nomination. During the primaries, Biden also benefitted from his proximity to President [Barack Obama](#), yet his understanding of race seems to have been equally shaped by what has followed Obama's tenure. The current climate of brazen racism, which, on more than one occasion, has turned violent, is, in part, a direct reaction to the simple fact that a Black man held the Oval Office for two terms, and Biden has consistently criticized Trump for his role in inciting the hostility.

As President, Biden would not give comfort to [white nationalists](#), encourage intolerance, or further inflame racial animosities. But, to undo the damage that has been done, his Administration would need to immediately confront white-nationalist terrorism and work to disrupt the networks that enable it. Both the Trump White House and the Republican Party have largely ignored the problem. After Trump's election, the House of Representatives' Committee on Homeland Security did not hold a hearing on domestic terrorism until May, 2019, shortly after the Democrats regained control of that chamber. Earlier this month, Politico [reported](#) on a draft Department of Homeland Security report that predicted that white supremacists will be the "most persistent and lethal threat" in the United States for at least the next year. That threat warrants a coördinated strategy from the D.H.S., the Treasury Department, and the Department of Justice, including the F.B.I. Biden would need to appoint a Secretary of Homeland Security who would make this kind of interagency coöperation a priority.

## **Why Biden Must Win**

Read our endorsement.

A broad landscape of other policies and laws affecting civil rights and equality must be addressed. Biden has promised to sign a new [Voting Rights Act](#), and, if the Democrats gain control of the Senate, he should push for its quick passage. He should also urge the Senate to pass the [For the People Act](#), which has cleared the House and would, among other things, guarantee voting rights for former felons, establish safeguards against partisan gerrymandering, and restrict voter-

roll purges, all of which would remedy inequities that disadvantage minority voters disproportionately. These actions would be politic as well as morally correct, insuring that the Democratic Party's most reliable base will be able to vote unimpeded in the 2022 midterms.

Throughout the campaign, Biden has been criticized for his authorship of the 1994 crime bill, which contained provisions, such as the onerous three-strikes rule for violent-felony convictions, that have most deeply affected people of color. But that liability could become an opportunity. Biden should call for Congress to repeal the crime bill, a suggestion that Senator [Elizabeth Warren](#) made part of her campaign. The more useful provisions, such as the Violence Against Women Act, parts of which expired last year, and the federal consent-decree program, which empowered the Justice Department to provide oversight for troubled police departments—and which [Jeff Sessions](#) effectively ended just before he stepped down as Attorney General—should be reauthorized and updated to reflect what we've learned about these issues since 1994. And that needs to happen soon: the coronavirus pandemic is reportedly contributing to an increase in domestic violence; and the absence of Justice Department oversight of the police, along with Trump's explicit endorsement of excessive police force, factored into the circumstances that led, in May, to the death of [George Floyd](#).

The recession brought on by the pandemic has, in addition, had an unequal impact on communities of color. Between January and April of this year, the unemployment rate for white Americans rose from three per cent to fourteen per cent; for African-Americans and Latinos, whose previous unemployment rates were six per cent and five per cent, respectively, the numbers surged to sixteen and almost nineteen per cent. Biden has proposed investing thirty billion dollars in a small-business program, which would alleviate job losses. But such a measure should acknowledge the disparate impact of the crisis, perhaps by recognizing those who live and work in the hardest-hit Zip Codes. Considering that the Payroll Protection Program turned into a corporate giveaway, a Biden Administration would have a degree of cover in arguing for such a new approach.

The [coronavirus crisis](#) has also revealed the high-risk, low-reward nature of much essential work in this country. This spring, cities were sustained by frontline health-care workers, who have been widely, and justly, hailed as heroes. But those cities also relied on the efforts of grocers, cashiers, food-delivery people, warehouse employees, and many others. In August, the United Food and

Commercial Workers International Union reported that there had been more than thirty-six thousand cases of *COVID-19* and two hundred and fifty deaths among food workers. According to a study from the Center for Economic and Policy Research, frontline industries are disproportionately represented by women and African-Americans. The federal minimum wage should be raised to benefit those workers, who continue to risk their lives to do jobs whose value we are only belatedly acknowledging. For their sake, and that of tens of millions of other Americans, Biden must also fight to defend the signature legislation of his term as Vice-President, the Affordable Care Act.

The past six months have made it painfully clear that there is no such thing as a discrete crisis. A health-care emergency can quickly become a recession, which can engender crises of unemployment and domestic violence. The cumulative effects of the Trump Administration's revanchist public policies have not only exacerbated these problems but also assured that they would fall most heavily on those with the fewest resources to shoulder them. Electing Biden would not be a panacea, but doing so is the only practical and moral option to start solving our gravest issues. ♦

By [Atul Gawande](#)

By [Elizabeth Kolbert](#)

By [Jeffrey Toobin](#)

By [Susan B. Glasser](#)

# **Biden Will Restore America's Moral Leadership**

Imagine a President determined to do something about the destruction of democracy.

By [Susan B. Glasser](#)

September 28, 2020



After nearly four years of the [Trump Administration](#), the American-led liberal international order is barely functioning. William J. Burns, who served as Deputy Secretary of State in the Obama years, defines the foreign-policy options for a Biden Administration in three words: retrenchment, restoration, and reinvention. Biden's campaign has, at times, promised all those approaches, but [Biden himself](#), by instinct, experience, and political temperament, is a restorationist. He is running to make America America again. Undoing Donald Trump is his passion project, at home and abroad.

Early in 2019, the former Vice-President spoke at the Munich Security Conference to offer what now might be considered a mission statement for a Biden Presidency. "We will be back," he said. "Don't have any doubt." The applause from European officials, who have been stunned by Trump's characterizations of the [European Union](#) as a "foe" and of [NATO](#) as "obsolete," was loud and enthusiastic. Trump has consistently demonstrated hostility toward America's friends and admiration for its authoritarian adversaries. He has decided to withdraw from a number of international commitments, among them the [Paris climate](#) accord, the [Iran nuclear deal](#), the United Nations Human Rights Council, the World Health Organization, and the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces and Open-Skies Treaties, two agreements that have endured since late in the Cold War. Biden has said that, among his first acts on January 20th, he would rejoin the Paris accord, and he would almost certainly reaffirm many of the other commitments that Trump has broken. As part of his pledge to confront the [coronavirus](#) pandemic, Biden should immediately recommit to the W.H.O. and support the international vaccine consortium that Trump has rejected. There is no restoration of U.S. foreign-policy leadership without offering leadership on the world's most pressing crisis.

## **Why Biden Must Win**

Read our endorsement.

Historically, an American President's first trip has been to Mexico or Canada, to show how this country values the friendship of its closest neighbors. Trump's first trip was to the intolerant, monarchical petro-state of Saudi Arabia, where he danced a sword dance and assured his hosts that he was "not here to lecture" them. Biden should renounce Trump's build-the-wall demagoguery toward Mexico, and reinstate the tradition by visiting both that nation and Canada.

Biden has also pledged to hold a summit of global democracies in his first year, signalling that a commitment to universal freedoms and human rights will once more be a foundation of U.S. foreign policy. It's hard to see what he might achieve from the gathering, though it surely will help with America's abysmal approval rating in much of the rest of the world. According to a recent Pew Global Attitudes Survey, Trump is thought less likely to do the right thing with regard to international relations than even Russia's [Vladimir Putin](#) and China's [Xi Jinping](#).

Putin has confounded three American Presidents, in the course of two decades, with his vision of a resurgent Russia prevailing over the "obsolete" liberalism of the West. Successive rounds of sanctions have not deterred his ambition, and neither has Trump's cringeworthy praise tempered it. ("Hopefully someday, maybe he'll be a friend," Trump said, before meeting Putin in Helsinki.) Biden will be eager to take on Putin, but something more than additional sanctions is required if he is to impose real consequences for [Russian interference](#) in U.S. elections, the [poisoning of Alexei Navalny](#), Putin's leading domestic political rival, and the illegal [annexation](#) of Ukrainian territory. Within weeks of the Inauguration, Biden would face a key test, as the *New Start* arms-control pact with Russia, which was negotiated with the Obama Administration, is set to expire in February. This may be a situation where restoration is not enough; a renewal of the pact or at least an extension of it ought to come with a meaningful new commitment to hold Putin accountable.

China already looms as the great foreign-policy debate of future Administrations. The previous U.S. strategy of encouraging China's peaceful rise, embraced by Presidents from Nixon to Obama, is now widely thought by Democrats and Republicans alike to have run its course. "The era of engagement with China has come to an unceremonious close," Biden's campaign advisers Jake Sullivan and Kurt Campbell wrote last fall, in *Foreign Affairs*. But Biden finds himself leading a party that disagrees about what this means: will he reject the tariffs that Trump has made the centerpiece of his China policy? Notably, Biden has yet to promise a return to the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the free-trade agreement negotiated by Obama, which Trump torpedoed. This may be the first of many examples where there is no going back to Obama-era policies. Would Biden try to rejoin the Iran nuclear deal, a landmark of Obama's legacy, now that Iran has taken steps toward re-starting aspects of its nuclear program? Would he attempt to reverse other Trump acts, and move the U.S. Embassy in Israel out of Jerusalem, or cease to recognize Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights?

Like Obama and Trump, Biden would enter office promising an end to the “endless wars” of the post-9/11 era. But even if the United States finally manages to leave Afghanistan, Iraq, and the rest of the Middle East, Biden may not slash the enormous U.S. defense budget, as many Americans would expect him to do. The new reality of adversarial competition with China is such that Biden may well have to prepare for a Cold War-style conflict with that nation. Already, he has made clear that he intends to press Beijing on human rights more than Trump ever has, at a time when it is quashing freedoms in Hong Kong and interning more than a million ethnic Uyghurs.

Trump, no less than Putin and Xi have done with their own countries, has repositioned the United States as a power engaged in cynical Realpolitik. Imagine a President determined to actually do something to combat the destruction of democracy around the world. Biden would not be able to reëstablish the moral leadership of the West merely by talking about a values-based foreign policy. But he has to start somewhere. Being the un-Trump is a good place to do it. ♦

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