DECEMBER 2020
THEATLANTIC.COM

THE TECH ISSUE

The Atlantic
EST. 1857

The Last Children *of* Down Syndrome

Prenatal testing is changing who gets born and who doesn't. This is just the beginning.

By Sarah Zhang

UNDERWATER EXPLORATION PIONEER
SYLVIA EARLE

EXPLORER
GHISLAIN BARDOUT

THE NEW GENERATION SUBMARINER

Built for divers in 1953, the Submariner soon set the standard, making it the ultimate watch for underwater exploration. A symbol of waterproofness and reliability, the iconic design transcended its original purpose. While remaining true to its diving heritage, the Submariner also became the watch of choice on land, and the perfect companion to mark the memorable moments in the lives of its wearers. Now, with a new 41 mm case and a next generation movement, the story of the Submariner continues.

#Perpetual

UNDERWATER PHOTOGRAPHER
DAVID DOUBILET

ROLEX GLIDELOCK
EXTENSION SYSTEM

CALIBER 3230

OYSTER PERPETUAL SUBMARINER

ROLEX

Will the world always be this unpredictable?

Will my portfolio weather the storm?
How can I be sure?

UBS

For some of life's questions, you're not alone.
Together we can find an answer.

ubs.com/lifegoals

UNCERTAIN About the Future?

FROM THE ECONOMY to politics and the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, we live in a time of widespread uncertainty. The future seems to hold more questions than answers: *Will I or someone I love get sick? Are my job and investments secure? What will the election results mean? And when will things feel normal again?*

Not knowing what tomorrow will bring creates physical and emotional stress. The good news? There's a proven way to cope: Make a plan. "That will give you at least a modicum of control in your life, which helps to undermine that feeling of uncertainty," says Alison Holman, a psychology professor at UC Irvine. "The steps you take now can help you move forward to the future."

What uncertainty does to ...

YOUR BRAIN

Activity increases in brain areas associated with fear and hypervigilance. Persistent uncertainty can alter the brain's architecture and increase the long-term risk of depression and cognitive impairment.

YOUR BODY

A cascade of stress hormones released as part of the fight-or-flight response makes us sweaty, dilates our pupils, quickens our breathing, and tenses our muscles. When uncertainty is highest, our stress measures max out.

YOUR THINKING

We become more reluctant to take risks and less likely to focus on future rewards. Our perception of time changes: The present seems endless, and we feel cut off from the past and future.

YOUR FEELINGS

Future ambiguity creates worry and unease. In fact, research shows that waiting for the outcomes of tumor biopsies and fertility treatments generates more anxiety than receiving a diagnosis or result does.

IN THE KITCHEN of their Ohio home, Craig and Heather Wargawsky have a wall-size calendar. In early March, it was full for the next two months with work trips, family vacations, their son's tennis matches, and their daughter's high-school graduation.

The pandemic scuttled those plans, leaving the calendar blank. "I would write *June-ish* just for fun," Heather says. "But it meant nothing. And we didn't know how long any of this would last."

Like many others, Craig and Heather, both teachers, found themselves in unexpected territory—marooned with their children at home, working remotely, and feeling anxious as COVID-19 turned everyday life upside down.

Then the value of their retirement investments dropped alongside a stock-market slide that began in late February and continued into late March. Craig says, "That messed with our heads. It's like, 'Oh my goodness, what just happened? And what is *going* to happen?'"

That reaction isn't unique. Humans are biologically hardwired to find uncertainty stressful; in psychological experiments, people prefer suffering a strong electric shock immediately to waiting up to 15 minutes for a milder jolt.

"We have this very complex system of emotions because they do things for us," says Kate Sweeny, a psychology professor at UC Riverside. "They motivate us to act in ways that are beneficial for our well-being and survival. If you're too comfortable with uncertainty, then you won't work to resolve it—and many more bad things could happen."

HOW TO COPE? One of the most effective strategies is also counterintuitive: When the future seems unpredictable, start planning for it.

The key, experts say, is setting achievable goals and realistic expectations for what you can accomplish in the short and long term—all of which can help lessen the physical and emotional stress that uncertainty creates.

"People can move from a sense of fear to a sense of engagement if they feel like they have a plan—a vision of the future based on what matters to them—and are moving forward," says Equitable President Nick Lane. "That reduces anxiety. It moves people from 'I can't do this' to 'I can.'"

The Wargawskys can relate. At the height of their worries, the couple had a long conversation with Angela Anderson, their longtime financial professional. "We talked through all the what-ifs, what they would do, and how they would still be taken care of," says Anderson, a financial professional with Equitable Advisors. "Fear feeds on fear. Sometimes we all need reminders of what we can and can't control."

Craig and Heather are now focusing on the former. Though the pandemic continues, the family's calendar is filling up again, each haircut and dental appointment a step toward a more certain future.

"There are so many things not in our hands," Craig says. "So you can't stress about every single situation. This pandemic is teaching us to take things in smaller steps."

Make a Plan

Visit **TheAtlantic.com/Uncertainty** to learn more about why uncertainty can be stressful—and what you can do to cope.

~~UN~~CERTAINTY

Unclear, unsure, unsettled. These are the emotions of millions of Americans today.

That's why you have a financial professional and your financial professional has Equitable.

Together, we can help turn uncertainty into certainty with courage, strength and wisdom, so you can achieve your financial well-being.

Learn more at equitable.com/wellbeing.

EQUITABLE

Advice • Protection • Retirement

THE ART OF WINE
THE TECHNOLOGY OF PRESERVATION

The LG SIGNATURE Wine Cellar marries form and function, bringing together Optimal Preservation Technology™ with Multi-Temperature Control to keep Cabernet Sauvignon pleasantly cool while Champagne is delightfully cold, all wrapped in a sleek Textured Steel™ cabinet. Welcome to the bold new world of LG SIGNATURE.

THE ART OF ESSENCE
Find yours at **www.LGSIGNATURE.com**

LG SIGNATURE
WINE CELLAR

OF NO PARTY OR CLIQUE

VOL. 326–NO. 5 DECEMBER 2020 CONTENTS

Features

Cover Story

Sally Dybkjær Andersson, age 6, is one of very few children in Denmark with Down syndrome. Since universal prenatal screening was introduced in 2004, the number of children in the country born with the syndrome has fallen sharply. In 2019, it was just 18.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JULIA SELLMANN

On the Cover

PHOTOGRAPH BY JULIA SELLMANN

THE ART OF WONDER
THE TECHNOLOGY OF OLED 8K

The world's first and largest 88-inch 8K OLED TV is a breakthrough in form and function.
With millions of self-lit pixels, perfect black and intense color, what you see becomes
more expressive and what you experience becomes more realistic.
Welcome to the bold new world of LG SIGNATURE.

THE ART OF ESSENCE
Find yours at **www.LGSIGNATURE.com**

LG SIGNATURE
OLED 8K

The Constitution Counted My Great-Great-Grandfather as Three-Fifths of a Free Person

In the October issue, Danielle Allen wrote about why she loves the flawed document anyway.

Letters

Danielle Allen says of James Wilson, "We have nonetheless all but forgotten him."

It is true that Wilson was one of the most influential members of the Philadelphia Convention, where the Constitution was forged, and is now rarely mentioned in our history. But his legacy lives on in the Electoral College, a Frankensteinian institution that has caused the U.S. nothing but trouble for the past 200-some-odd years.

Wilson's proposal that the people elect the president directly was considered impractical by many of the delegates, because suffrage was not universal and varied from state to state. It also meant that powerful Virginia would lose influence, because its vast population of enslaved people wouldn't be allowed to vote.

Wilson then came up with a scheme in which states would be divided into districts that would vote for electors, who would later meet to vote for president. This solved the suffrage issue, because each state would be able to decide who could vote without affecting the influence of that state based on the actual size of its electorate.

Every four years, when we worry that a candidate whom the majority of people don't want will somehow manage to become president, we should remember James Wilson, and the institution he helped build.

David Weintraub
Edison, N.J.

Danielle Allen writes, "The executive has a veto over legislation, but it can be overruled by a two-thirds vote in each house of Congress, which means that an executive decision (on legislation) emanating from support of a bare majority of the people cannot overrule a view emanating from a supermajority of the country."

But because of the way we elect presidents, via the Electoral College, a majority of the vote is not in fact required to become president, as evidenced twice in just the past five elections. And because every state, regardless of population, is afforded exactly two representatives in the Senate, neither is a "supermajority of the country" required to achieve a two-thirds majority of that legislative body. The combined population of all six New England states, which is fewer than 15 million, is less than half that of California alone, barely more than half that of Texas, and less than the populations of Florida and New York. So it is not entirely correct to say that "support of a bare majority of the people

DELL Technologies

Our advisors listen, so you know you've been heard.

When you talk to a Dell Technologies Advisor, they're focused on you — to provide tailored solutions on everything from laptops to the cloud, to keep your Small Business ready for what's next.

Call one today at **855-341-5261**
Dell.com/SmallBusinessPartner

Breaking the boundaries of performance for thin and light laptops
Vostro 15 5502 with up to an 11th Gen Intel® Core™ i7 processor
Starting at $849

intel CORE i7

cannot overrule a view emanating from a supermajority of the country."

Drew Hindes
Colchester, Vt.

As are many in our society, I'm experiencing incredible angst over the attempted destruction of our federal institutions and practices by the current administration and its enablers. Ms. Allen's article has given me faith in our future. The article is both poetry and history lesson. Each word is essential, and shows how the possibility of great change is built into our system of government. I thank her for her writing.

Elizabeth Winter
Ashburn, Va.

How Disaster Shaped the Modern City

Visionary responses to calamities have changed urban life for the better, Derek Thompson argued in October.

Derek Thompson's article implies that the December 1835 fire in New York City spawned the Croton Aqueduct. But in fact, a popular vote in April of that year overwhelmingly approved the proposed aqueduct, detailed plans for which had been developed after cholera killed more than 3,500 New Yorkers (one in 70) in 1832 and shocked the city into creating a proper water supply. The fire, which destroyed much property but killed only two people, served merely as affirmation of a process well under way. None of which is to deny that COVID-19 may well yield long-term benefits.

Gerard Koeppel
Author, *Water for Gotham: A History*
New York, N.Y.

Derek Thompson focused on how the 1871 Chicago fire led to our city developing skyscrapers. The fire also led to something else I'm proud to be a part of: In 1872, a group of singers formed the Apollo Musical Club of Chicago to bring hope and music back to the burned city. Now called the Apollo Chorus of Chicago, we are the oldest performing-arts organization in the city. Our 150th anniversary season begins in July.

David Braverman
President, Apollo Chorus of Chicago
Chicago, Ill.

Corrections

"The Constitution Counted My Great-Great-Grandfather as Three-Fifths of a Free Person" (October) implied that the adoption of the three-fifths clause constituted the Great Compromise. The Great Compromise was a broader agreement. The article also stated that the executive veto of legislation can be overridden by a two-thirds vote of the Senate. In fact, an override requires a two-thirds vote by both houses of Congress.

"Last Exit" (November) referred to "Boss" William Tweed as a New York City mayor. He was not mayor of New York.

To respond to *Atlantic* articles or submit author questions to The Commons, please email letters@theatlantic.com. Include your full name, city, and state.

Behind the Cover: In our December cover story, Sarah Zhang investigates how scientific advances in prenatal testing have created hard choices for parents. For the cover, the photographer Julia Sellmann captured a tender moment: 6-year-old Elea, who has Down syndrome, relaxing into her mother, who is reading to Elea from one of her favorite books. This quiet, intimate, and intricate scene adds dimension to the medical lens through which disability is often seen.

— Luise Stauss, *Director of Photography*

Q • & • A

The devastation of the coronavirus and the recent surge in support for Black Lives Matter have presented the United States with its best opportunity in 150 years to belatedly fulfill its promise as a multiracial democracy, Adam Serwer argued in October ("The Next Reconstruction"). Here, he responds to questions about his essay.

Q: You wrote about the surge in public support for Black Lives Matter over the summer. But that support has since dropped, according to the Pew Research Center. (Overall, 55 percent of adults supported the movement in September, down from 67 percent in June.) What do you think accounts for the shift?

A: It's unsurprising that support would drop, given the nature of partisan polarization right now and how much time Republicans and conservative media have devoted to attacking Black Lives Matter. But the fact that there is majority support for a Black-rights movement in America is unusual, historically speaking. The civil-rights movement in the 1960s did not have consistent majority support—in fact, majorities were constantly saying that activists were harming their own cause rather than helping it.

Q: What are the most common misconceptions about Reconstruction you've encountered?

A: I haven't encountered misconceptions so much as a lack of understanding about how profoundly the aftermath of the Civil War shaped the country America is today. Cultural memory of Reconstruction has actually shifted profoundly in my lifetime—a few decades ago many people were still romanticizing the white southern reaction and dismissing what the emancipated and the Radical Republicans tried to do, which was create a true multiracial democracy.

EDITORIAL OFFICES & CORRESPONDENCE *The Atlantic* considers unsolicited manuscripts, fiction or nonfiction, and mail for the Letters column. Manuscripts will not be returned. For instructions on sending manuscripts via email, see theatlantic.com/faq. By submitting a letter, you agree to let us use it, as well as your full name, city, and state, in our magazine and/or on our website. We may edit for clarity. CUSTOMER SERVICE & REPRINTS Please direct all subscription queries and orders to: +1 855-940-0585. For expedited customer service, please call between 9 a.m. and 6 p.m. ET, Monday through Friday. You may also write to: *Atlantic* Customer Care, P.O. Box 37564, Boone, IA 50037-0564. Reprint requests should be made to Sisk at 410-754-8219 or atlanticbackissue@siskfs.com. A discount rate is available for students and educators. Please visit theatlantic.com/subscribe/academic. ADVERTISING OFFICES *The Atlantic*, 60 Madison Avenue, Suite 800, New York, NY 10010, 646-539-6700.

"We share a client-focused philosophy with First Republic. They understand what we need to grow."

BLEND

Nima Ghamsari, Founder and CEO

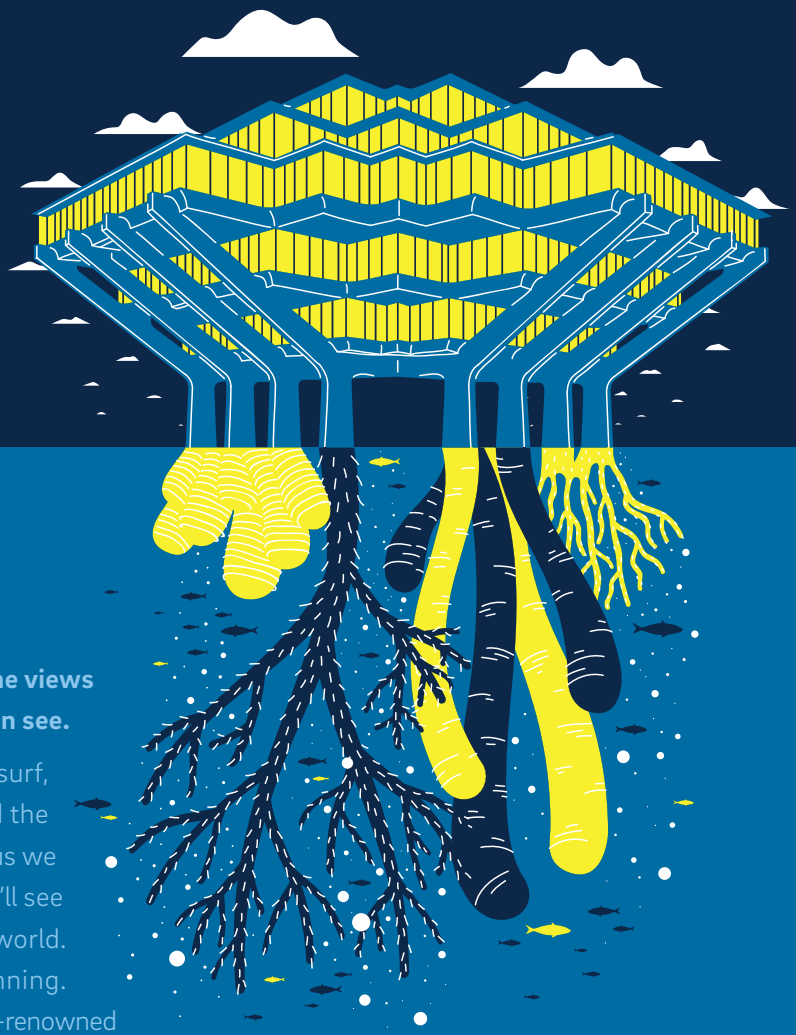
FIRST REPUBLIC BANK

It's a privilege to serve you®

(855) 886-4824 | firstrepublic.com | New York Stock Exchange symbol: FRC

MEMBER FDIC AND EQUAL HOUSING LENDER

LOOK DEEPER



Come for the views no one else can see.

Peel back the surf, the sand and the beautiful campus we call home, and you'll see a whole other world. One equally stunning. Because here, world-renowned professors, Nobel laureates and students reimagine what's possible. Their collaboration has transformed oil rigs into reefs and reshaped international law. Over half a century of invention — and reinvention — has allowed our students to achieve the unimaginable. Picture what you might discover at ***the No. 1 public university in the nation.***

UC San Diego

lookdeeper.ucsd.edu

"Washington Monthly," 2020

DISPATCHES

OPENING ARGUMENT

SCHOOL WASN'T SO GREAT BEFORE COVID, EITHER

Yes, remote schooling has been a misery—but it's offering a rare chance to rethink early education entirely.

BY ERIKA CHRISTAKIS

The litany of tragedies and inconveniences visited upon Americans by COVID-19 is long, but one of the more pronounced sources of misery for parents has been pandemic schooling. The logistical gymnastics necessary to balance work and school when all the crucial resources—time, physical space, internet bandwidth, emotional reserves—are limited have pushed many to the point of despair.

Pandemic school is clearly not working well, especially for younger children—and it's all but impossible for the 20 percent

of American students who lack access to the technology needed for remote learning. But what parents are coming to understand about their kids' education—glimpsed through Zoom windows and "asynchronous" classwork—is that school was not always working so great before COVID-19 either. Like a tsunami that pulls away from the coast, leaving an exposed stretch of land, the pandemic has revealed long-standing inattention to children's developmental needs—needs as basic as exercise, outdoor time, conversation, play, even sleep. All of the challenges of educating young children that we have minimized for years have suddenly appeared like flotsam on a beach at low tide, reeking and impossible to ignore. Parents are not only seeing how flawed and glitch-riddled remote teaching is—they're discovering that many of the problems of remote schooling are merely exacerbations of problems with in-person schooling.

It's remarkable how little schools have changed over time; most public elementary schools are stuck with a model that hasn't evolved to reflect advances in cognitive science and our understanding of human development. When I walked into my 10-year-old son's fourth-grade classroom a year ago, it looked almost exactly like my now-28-year-old son's classroom in 2001, which in turn looked strikingly like my own fourth-grade classroom in 1972. They all had the same configuration of desks, cubbies, and rigidly grade-specific accoutrements. The school schedule also remains much the same: 35 hours of weekly instructional time for about 180 days. The same homework, too, despite the growing wealth of evidence suggesting that homework for elementary-school children (aside from nightly reading) offers minimal or no benefits. Elementary education also values relatively superficial learning that's too focused on achieving mastery of shallow (but test-friendly) skills unmoored from real content knowledge or critical thinking. School hours are marked by disruptions and noise as students shift, mostly en masse and in age-stratified groups, from one strictly demarcated topic or task to another. Many educators and child-development experts believe that some of the still-standard features of pre-K and elementary education—age and ability cohorts, short classroom periods, confinement mostly indoors—are not working for many children. And much of what *has* changed—less face time with teachers, assignments on iPads or computers, a narrowed curriculum—has arguably made things worse.

As distance learning has (literally) brought home these realities about how we educate young children, an opportunity to do things better presents itself—not just for the duration of the pandemic but afterward as well.

EVER SINCE it became clear last spring that school closures would be protracted, we've heard an outpouring of concern about potential learning loss and other serious costs for kids, including undetected child abuse and hunger. For a sizable fraction of children—those with disabilities whose educational needs can't be met remotely, and the millions of kids eligible for free or reduced-price lunch who weren't fed during the spring and summer—that concern has obvious merit. A McKinsey analysis concluded that if remote learning continues into 2021, students will suffer an average of seven months of "learning loss"—in essence, they'll be seven months behind in mastering certain concepts and skills. Latino and Black students will fall a little further behind, McKinsey found, and low-income students will lose more than a year. A report out of the Brookings Institution in the spring projected that an extended break from in-person school could cause a "COVID Slide," in which third-to-eighth-grade students could lose a substantial portion of the progress they would have been expected to make in math and reading.

The effect of these potential learning setbacks should not be underestimated. But the picture gets murkier when we consider that many children, from a variety of backgrounds, seem to be coping quite well without traditional school. Some are even continuing to make learning gains. For instance, the Brookings study predicted that the top quarter of students would still advance in reading. "I think a huge part of [some students' work improving] is that we've dramatically ratcheted down the total workload in order to make tasks accessible rather than overwhelming," Mark Gardner, a high-school English teacher in Washington State, told the education website *Edutopia*. Some students are doing "unexpectedly well," according to *The Hechinger Report*, in part because it has been easier for them to remain focused on learning.

Many kids are also happier and less stressed than they were while sitting in a classroom. Some students are even excelling, as the superintendent of the L.A. public-school system told the *Los Angeles Times*. Survey results from a demographically representative sample of American families conducted in the spring revealed that 43 percent of parents agreed with the statement "My child is less stressed now than before school closed." (Only 29 percent disagreed.) Some children have been freed from bullying (school-based bullying has been reported by 20 percent of 12-to-18-year-olds). One teacher told *Edutopia* that students are thriving because high-stakes-testing pressure has been eased during the pandemic. A recently published survey suggests that the more flexible schedules afforded by pandemic schooling are allowing teenagers to get enough sleep for the first time. And as Steven Mintz, the author of *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood*, has put it, the pandemic has given students "opportunities to grow and develop in ways that would have been impossible in more 'normal' times."

We know the pandemic has created or exacerbated mental-health problems for many children. But what's less appreciated is that pre-pandemic schooling was already contributing to such problems. One large study from this year found that students reported feeling less happy while at school than in any other location. Another found that emergency psychiatric visits between 2009 and 2012 more than doubled when school was in session compared with during the summer and vacations. While the adult

suicide rate has historically peaked in summer, the recent increase in youth suicides has shown the opposite pattern, with suicides dropping off in the summer and climbing when kids are back in school. Researchers have found that elementary-school students' levels of the stress hormone cortisol become elevated during the school year. Peter Gray, a psychology professor at Boston College who studies these issues, says that if school were a drug, it would not receive FDA approval.

Both long-standing instructional practices and more recent changes in curriculum may have contributed to these problems. For instance, traditionally age-stratified classrooms, which most people take for granted, represent an unnatural and potentially unhealthy way of organizing children's lives, experts now believe. Angela Duckworth, a University of Pennsylvania psychologist and the author of *Grit*, hypothesizes that the age segregation of schools can contribute to competition and stress. In a mixed-age group, she told me, "the 10-year-old takes the hand of the 5-year-old and looks both ways crossing the street. The 5-year-old looks up to the 10-year-old with admiration and trust, and does as they are told. In contrast, when you throw hundreds of kids of exactly the same age together, attention goes, unhelpfully, to comparisons within the group: Who is smartest? Who is fastest? Who is prettiest?" This steers children's values away from kindness, trust, and community and toward status competition, which can generate stress and bullying. This effect may be more potent than it used to be, because children spend more time away from their home and neighborhood than in previous generations.

Experts across the educational and ideological spectrums agree that a curriculum rich in literature, civics, history, and the arts is essential for strong reading, critical-thinking, and writing skills. But schools have—quite irrationally—abandoned this

breadth in favor of stripped-down programs focused on narrow testing metrics. Five years after the shift to high-stakes testing under the No Child Left Behind Act, which was signed in 2002, a survey of a national sample of school districts found that nearly two-thirds of school districts had dramatically increased language-arts or math time while almost half had reduced time spent on social studies, science, art, music, physical education, lunch, or recess. "Special" classes, such as music—as well as periods like recess, physical education, and even lunch—provide children with important opportunities for emotional growth and independent learning. For many children, they are what make school bearable. (In one intriguing natural experiment, researchers observed that ADHD diagnoses spiked dramatically in tandem with the timing of states' adoption of high-stakes-testing policies; another study found that being in kindergarten was a significant risk factor for receiving an ADHD diagnosis compared with same-age children who remained in preschool for an extra year.)

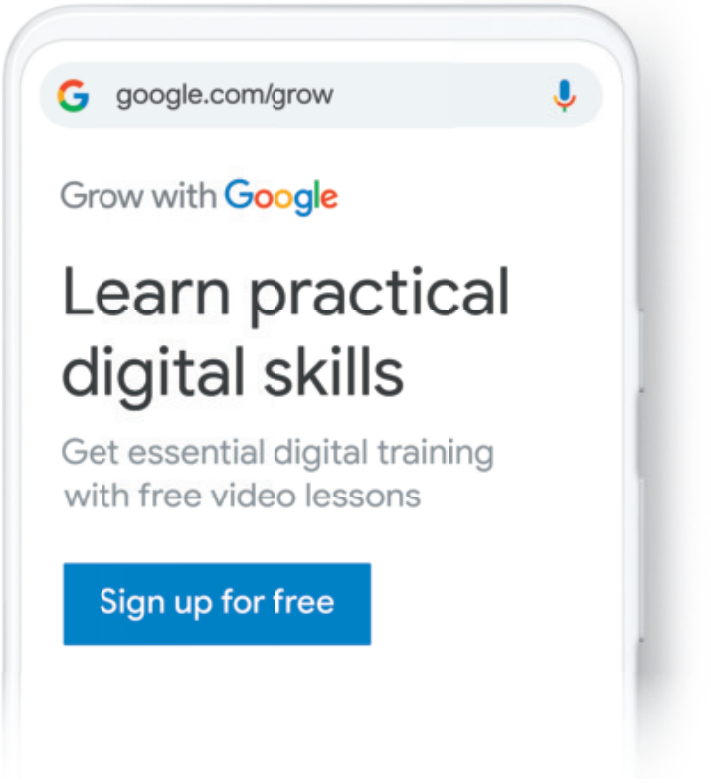
Pandemic Zoom classes have also revealed the extent to which the teaching of young children today relies on flawed classroom approaches—teachers talking too much, kids not enough. But developmental scientists and educators have long known that academic outcomes in the later elementary-school years are built on a foundation of authentic, conversational language and on the nurturing of meaningful relationships in early childhood. Early learning is fundamentally a social process, during which the architecture of the developing brain is constructed from emotional connections with trusted caregivers and friends. One study, from 2011, found that preschool teachers' use of sophisticated, responsive language during children's free play predicted better fourth-grade reading-comprehension outcomes. Many studies have shown the value of face-to-face, empathic teaching styles for language development in infants and young children. In general, children experience greater academic and social gains in classrooms where teachers are emotionally attuned to them—bending down to chat spontaneously and meaningfully, and following curricula that encourage physical, collaborative, open-ended play.

One of the many ironies of contemporary education is that as we learn more about the importance of emotional connection and face-to-face communication in early brain development, we seem ever more invested in technological quick fixes—"self-monitored" math lessons on iPads and the like—that take young children away from the adults charged

ILLUSTRATION BY DANIELLE DEL PLATO

Google

Helping job seekers with free digital skills training



Find free tools and resources to grow your career at **google.com/grow**

After being laid off, Danette Matthews wanted to make herself more marketable. As she began her search for a new job, she turned to the Applied Digital Skills program from Google.

By taking the Applied Digital Skills lessons, Danette learned essential digital skills ranging from data analysis to research and communication.

Now that she's finished the program, Danette feels ready to compete.

with teaching them. What parents are seeing on Zoom is not a radical departure from what goes on in regular pre-K and elementary-school classrooms, but rather a virtual extension of that.

FOR ALL ITS challenges, the pandemic presents an opportunity to rethink school entirely. What should we be demanding?

A good start would be to include a broader and deeper curriculum with more chances for children to explore, play, and build relationships with peers and teachers. Schools should also be in the business of fostering curiosity and a love of learning in all children, or at a minimum not impeding the development of those traits. This is a low educational bar but one that is too often not cleared, as the millions of American adults who are functionally illiterate might suggest.

But the most obvious demand should be for more time outside. In a pandemic, the reasons for doing this are clear: Outdoor transmission of COVID-19 has been shown to be far less likely than indoor spread. But outdoor learning has myriad benefits even without a public-health emergency. Years of accumulating evidence reveal concretely measurable benefits of nature-based learning and outdoor time for young children. For instance, multiple studies have shown that providing children with nature-based experiences reduces the frequency of ADHD symptoms in both the immediate and longer terms. Another study found that children who received science instruction outdoors learned more than those who received it only in a classroom. Yet despite what we know about nature's positive impact on mental health, attention span, academic outcomes, physical fitness, and self-regulation, outdoor time is too often seen as a quirky and marginal add-on, rather than as central to the learning process itself.

Early in the 20th century, tuberculosis outbreaks led many American schools to successfully adopt outdoor teaching. Nowadays, a host of new obstacles stand in the way: perceptions about lack of neighborhood safety; access to outdoor spaces; teacher know-how; adult buy-in; and concerns about extreme climate and air quality, especially for students attending schools in western states. But the biggest obstacle is a lack of will and imagination. The limited national discourse about alternative learning venues still seems to be rooted in the presumption that indoor lessons can be transposed either to the outdoors or to the internet with a few tweaks here and there, using the same curriculum, the same learning goals, the same expectations, and—lest we forget—the same questionable outcome measures. We shouldn't be surprised when teaching approaches that didn't serve all children well in traditional in-person classrooms are even less successful when applied online or to outdoor classrooms.

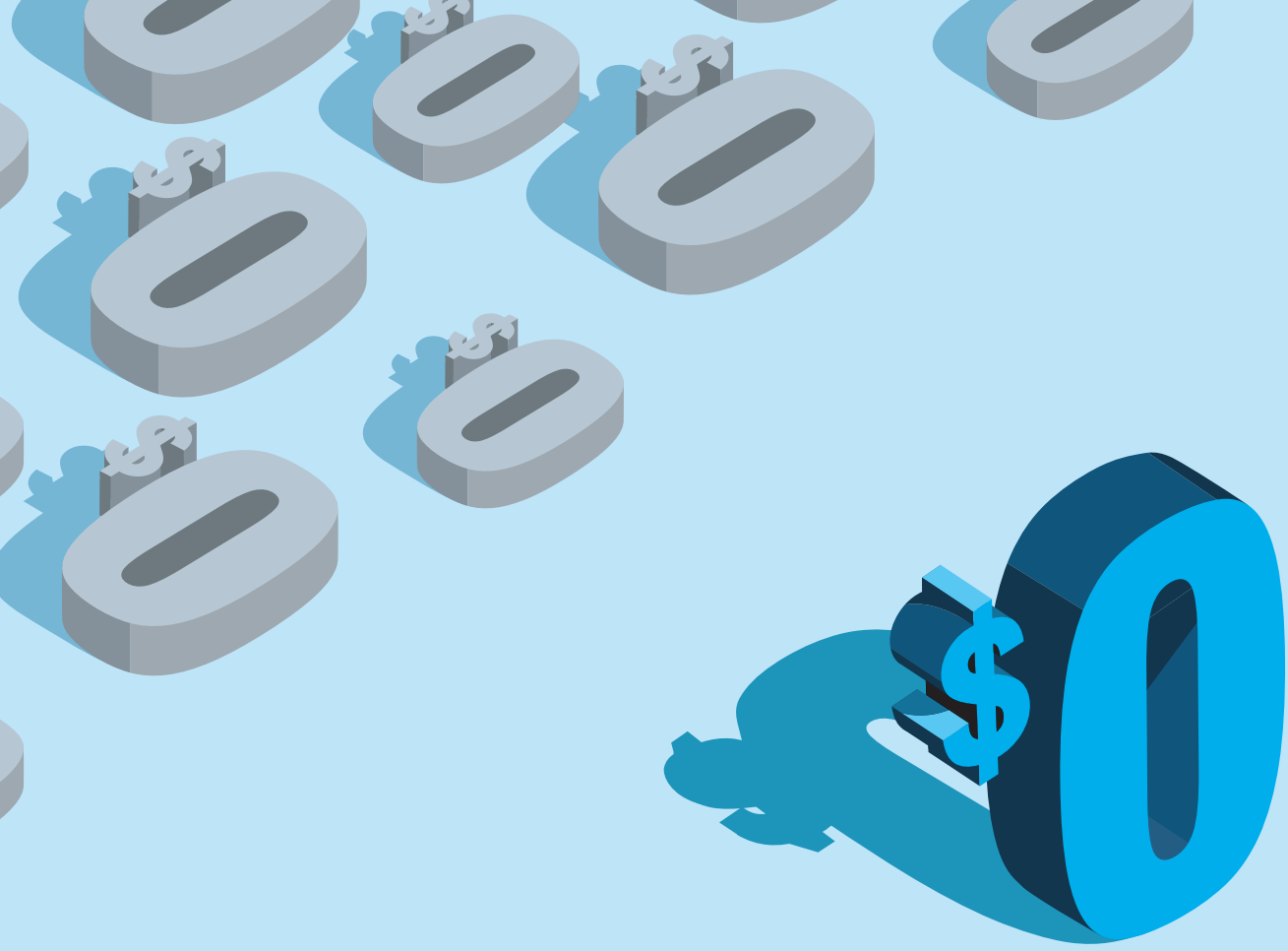
Here's what we should have done last spring—and a radical proposal for what we could still do for the balance of the 2020–21 school year: What if we give every kid in kindergarten through sixth grade in America the option to spend the academic year engaged primarily outdoors in a kind of "pandemic camp" instead of traditional school? The focus would be on achievement that is not narrowly academic—physical challenges; acts of service; and the development of self-regulation, independence, and friendship. Academic goals would also be part of the program; you can learn a lot of science while roaming a municipal park. But the emphasis would be on creating a new set of challenges for students to master, not on an ersatz version of school as we know it. We could suspend state-mandated testing for a year. We could replace the standard playbook with a new one that rejects the cognitive and emotional harm done to children who sit in taped-off squares in a mask all day and that values instead the broadest definition of learning. Among other benefits, spending money on universal year-round summer camp would do more to help poor kids close the achievement gap than would spending it on remedial phonics lessons.

> THE PSYCHOLOGIST PETER GRAY SAYS THAT IF SCHOOL WERE A DRUG, IT WOULD NOT RECEIVE FDA APPROVAL.

Finally, one thing the pandemic has highlighted is the abiding tension between schools' custodial function (warehousing children for the day, feeding them and keeping them safe, so their parents can work) and their educational function (actually teaching children). Too often, when we talk about "school" we really mean "child care"—and also nutrition, medical care, mental-health services, and social-skills support. Some teachers routinely purchase and wash clothes for their neediest students. Some even become foster parents to them. Modern family life is complex, and it's tempting to keep asking schools to assume more and more responsibilities. But the more we ask schools to expand beyond their core mission, the harder it becomes to discern which aspects of schooling are educationally effective. Schools can and should help mitigate harm to disadvantaged kids, but they cannot be a panacea for children in dangerous or neglectful home environments. Issues like livable wages and the absence of affordable child care are distinct from questions about learning, and we can't keep commingling them.

If the parental frustrations kindled by pandemic schooling can be converted into political energy, that could ultimately yield much-needed reforms in both schools and their surrounding communities, the health of which is essential to children's growth. As we muddle through the COVID-19 era yearning for a return to something close to normal, we shouldn't squander this occasion to imagine how much better "normal" could be. *A*

Erika Christakis is an early-childhood educator and the author of The Importance of Being Little: What Young Children Really Need From Grownups.



Other firms offer zero.
Schwab offers you so much more.

From day one, when others raised commissions, we lowered them. Now we've gone even further, with zero dollar online commissions for stocks, ETFs and options trades that come with 24/7 customer support and Schwab's Satisfaction Guarantee. It's time to change to a modern approach to wealth management.

charles SCHWAB

Learn more at **Schwab.com**

Own your tomorrow.

The standard online $0 commission does not apply to large block transactions requiring special handling, restricted stock transactions, trades placed directly on a foreign exchange, transaction-fee mutual funds, futures, or fixed income investments. Options trades will be subject to the standard $.65 per-contract fee. Exchange process, ADR, foreign transaction fees for trades placed on the US OTC market, and Stock Borrow fees still apply. See the Charles Schwab Pricing Guide for Individual Investors for full fee and commission schedules. Multiple leg options strategies will involve multiple per-contract fees.

If you are not completely satisfied for any reason, at your request Charles Schwab & Co., Inc. ("Schwab"), Charles Schwab Bank ("Schwab Bank"), or another Schwab affiliate, as applicable, will refund any eligible fee related to your concern within the required time frames. Schwab reserves the right to change or terminate the guarantee at any time. Go to schwab.com/satisfaction to learn what's included and how it works.

WE ARE LIVING IN MIKE PONDSMITH'S DARK FUTURE

The creator of Cyberpunk considers a world that has caught up to his imagination.

BY DARRYN KING

About 30 years ago, in Santa Cruz, California, a man named Mike Pondsmith laid out a prophecy for the then-distant future—the year 2020.

It was a future teeming with tech. He envisioned the dizzying data-winds of cyberspace, gigantic holographic video screens, bioengineered wheat-powered metro cars, and, everywhere you looked, the gleam of polychrome cyberoptic eyes. In his future, some of the populace suffered from an affliction he dubbed "technoshock"—an inability to cope with technology's incursions into their lives.

He called that vision Cyberpunk. Cyberpunk 2020 was the second edition of the world he'd imagined in 1988, when he created the Cyberpunk franchise. Now filling 50 books comprising more than 5,000 pages crammed with minutiae, it's surely one of the most extensively and fastidiously imagined worlds in fiction. And in its themes and particulars, it can feel startlingly like nonfiction today.

If you haven't heard of Pondsmith and his work, it's because he operates in what may as well be an alternate reality: the thriving but still terrifically niche medium of tabletop games. As the founder and lead designer of R. Talsorian Games, one of the most prominent Black-owned and -operated tabletop-game companies in the country, he has designed several franchises. But *Cyberpunk: The Roleplaying Game of the Dark Future* is his magnum opus, sort of like Dungeons & Dragons, with the swords and sorcery swapped for silicon and cyberspace. Pondsmith's favorite way of summing up the essence of

ILLUSTRATION BY LAUREN TAMAKI

the genre: "It's 'let's pretend,' with rules."

Now a much wider audience is finally getting a good look at what Pondsmith has been imagining this whole time, with a new video game adapted from his life's work. Due out on December 10, Cyberpunk 2077 is one of the most lustfully anticipated games in recent memory. Trailers depict a seedy, retro-futuristic playground, a sprawling world dense with detail and packed with violence and mayhem. Fans and reviewers are excited about seemingly endless player choice (players can customize their genitals) and dozens of hours of immersive, do-whatever-the-hell-you-want game play. It stars a digital likeness of Keanu Reeves as Johnny Silverhand, a rock-star revolutionary who sports a tactical vest, leather pants, aviator sunglasses, and a metal arm.

Pondsmith, now in his 60s, has been known to wear his own cyberpunk uniform: black leather jacket, black jeans, motorcycle boots, mirror shades. Today, at home in the suburbs of Seattle, he's in a black T-shirt and regular spectacles. It's fitting that we're speaking over Zoom, the kind of now-ubiquitous telepresence technology that felt futuristic in *Blade Runner* in 1982.

"Writing," Pondsmith tells me, "is a lot like basically eating a pound of dough, a whole pepperoni, a couple of pounds of mozzarella, and a bunch of spices, then throwing up a pizza." It takes a lot of work to make an unreal world feel real.

For eight years, the Polish video-game developer CD Projekt Red has likewise been consumed with the task of making Pondsmith's world feel authentic on-screen. In 2012, when the studio first contacted R. Talsorian Games about adapting Cyberpunk, Pondsmith paid a visit to the Warsaw headquarters expecting the operation, he has joked, to consist of "four guys and a goat." Instead, Pondsmith met a team with epic ambitions, well on the way to becoming what it is now—one of the most valuable gaming companies in Europe.

Like the tabletop games before it, Cyberpunk 2077 asks serious-minded questions about the place of technology in society. "Technology is sort of like the magic of this world," the game's director and the head of studio, Adam Badowski, says of his understanding of Pondsmith's core themes. It "grants massive amounts of power to those who possess it. Governments, corporations, and the ultrarich all use it as a means of keeping their place at the top of the food chain, while dominating society and keeping down the individual. But what if powerful technology gets into the hands of individuals who wish to use it to fight for themselves, for their personal freedom and independence, to take their fears head-on?"

After years of development featuring an attention to detail verging on the maniacal, the result, Pondsmith said, "looked like it had walked out of my brain."

THE SON OF a psychologist and a U.S. Air Force officer, Pondsmith spent the first 18 years of his life shuttling around with the military. It gave him an uncommonly panoramic perspective for a young person, and the ability to quickly adapt to whatever surroundings he found himself in. His imagination roved widely too. He became addicted to stories, the more transporting the better: Isaac Asimov's science fiction, Robert A. Heinlein's juvenile novels, Edgar Rice Burroughs's *Barsoom* series.

Before settling in Santa Cruz for much of the '80s, he studied psychology and graphic design at UC Davis. He was a charismatic geek, afflicted, he admits, with "an excess of personality." He listened to Queen before the band was big, pored over the pages of Marvel comics, and dreamed of working as a set-and-prop designer for Lucasfilm. He also played Dungeons & Dragons, though he was much less interested in the game itself than in one of his fellow gamers, his future wife and R. Talsorian Games' business manager, Lisa.

At his local games and hardware store, he picked up a science-fiction role-playing game called Traveller; the tactile memory of its hefty black box would stay with him. He enjoyed the game so much that he started tinkering with it, as one would with a beloved car. Soon he was creating his own tabletop games and working as a graphic designer on video games. While running a typesetting shop at the University of California, he raised $500 and published his first title, Mekton. The game was inspired by Japanese comics and anime, and populated by giant monster-fighting machines. It was followed by an oddball one-off called Teenagers From Outer Space. He suddenly found himself running his own tabletop-games company, with a crew of writers, illustrators, and designers eager to help him realize his far-fetched visions.

Then Pondsmith discovered the genre of cyberpunk. He loved the unanswered questions and ambiguities of Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*—could software have a soul? Like a good tabletop game, the film left a whole lot to the imagination. Pondsmith then devoured Walter Jon Williams's *Hardwired*, a novel that begins with the image of a car apparently driving itself.

Cyberpunk suited Pondsmith, who himself enjoyed making far-out predictions. "He always seemed a few years ahead of the rest of us," says Will Moss, a former member of the Cyberpunk writing team. "I remember sitting in his house in Aptos. He was holding up a paperback book and inviting us all to imagine a world in which everyone carried a computer that size. Obvious now, but in those days, when a 'portable' computer was the size and weight of a suitcase full of rocks, this was a fairly mind-blowing idea, and we all thought it was purest science fiction."

Pondsmith's technique, then as now, was to let his imagination fully off the leash and then hone his ideas with research, which usually meant interrogating a neurosurgeon or an Army paramedic, or driving to Vegas and trying out a bunch of automatic weapons. Cyberpunk was dense with just the kinds of finicky details that films like *Blade Runner* couldn't accommodate, the type of sci-fi that goes to the trouble of explaining, to quote one sourcebook, that "a Winchester 458 Magnum Super X … delivers 4,712 foot-pounds of energy direct

from the muzzle (that drops off to 1,200 ft-lbs past the first 500 yards)."

IN 1988, when R. Talsorian Games released the original Cyberpunk, the genre as a whole held the seductive allure of freshly unboxed hardware. In novels, films, comic books, and more, artists were tapping into the excitement and anxieties about the century's brave new worlds of artificial intelligence, cyborgs, video games, and the internet. The granddaddy of the movement, the writer William Gibson, was fascinated by the way young people's nervous systems seemed to interact with the video-arcade games they played. It's no surprise that reading the psychedelic technobabble of his debut novel, *Neuromancer*, is like having your brain rewired.

But the genre didn't suggest that tech would solve all the moral and social ills of the world. Instead, it laid out a dystopian vision in which ubiquitous tech was an awesome tool of disruption and oppression, and the nimble-fingered hacker was a warrior-outlaw battling corrupt forces. The word *hacker* itself seems to carry a whiff of punk rebellion, its implied sophistication contrasting with a denotation of smashing and severing. Eventually, what began as a literary movement felt like a social one, an entire digitally savvy counterculture.

Lately, the genre's gotten a reboot, with shows such as *Black Mirror*, *Westworld*, *Mr. Robot*, *Upload*, and *Altered Carbon*; films such as *Upgrade*, *Ghost in the Shell*, *Blade Runner 2049*, and *Alita: Battle Angel*; and countless other media offering their take on the clash between technology and human nature. And no wonder. In the news and on the streets, isn't this the world envisioned by cyberpunk's progenitors? Eye-transfixing apps mining our minds for data; hacktivists, cyberterrorists, division-sowing bots; Big Tech monitoring our movements; the facial-recognition company Clearview AI scouring our social-media photos.

Much of 2020, Pondsmith admits, would feel right at home in the pages of a Cyberpunk sourcebook. His early visions, coincidentally, also featured a devastating airborne plague and blood-red skies. "The running joke among my friends and family is, 'Okay, Mike, it's turning out the way you described it,'" he said. "'Think happy thoughts.'" When we spoke in July, Black Lives Matter protests were raging across the country. "We've got a lot of people who feel like it's out of control and they cannot affect their own destiny," he said. "I think cyberpunk is in a lot of ways an articulation of that frustration."

As civil unrest erupted this year, powerful technologies were marshaled to monitor it and tamp it down. U.S. Customs and Border Protection surveilled protesters with a military-grade drone. Activists feared that police were using facial-recognition technology and intercepting smartphone communications with cellular-tower-impersonating stingray devices (IMSI-catchers).

But, as cyberpunk predicted, some tech also became handy weapons in the fight against surveillance. Protesters encrypted texts, anonymized photographs, tuned in to live audio feeds on smartphone police-scanner apps—or, in the case of the unrest in Hong Kong last year, shone laser pointers at surveillance cameras and police officers alike. Hackers hijacked police-radio frequencies; they obtained 269 gigabytes of law-enforcement agencies' data, including police and FBI reports, which a group known as Distributed Denial of Secrets published on its website. In February, headlines announced the creation of a cyberpunk-looking ultrasonic bracelet that would allow users to jam the microphones in smart speakers.

PONDSMITH ULTIMATELY SETS OUT TO ENTERTAIN, NOT PREACH. "A GAME IS A TOY FOR HAVING FUN."

"We are finding ways to utilize technology to free ourselves," Pondsmith said. "Think about this phone. You can use this cellphone to gossip. You can use this cellphone to tell lies. You can use this cellphone to tell some really great jokes. You can use this cellphone to expose corruption, inequality, bad behavior. What's important is that we actively think about how we use it, how it affects our lives and our societies, and learn from it."

Amid the pessimism that largely permeates the broader genre, Cyberpunk reveals Pondsmith to be something of an optimist—at least relatively speaking. In his own words, the game tells players to "grab the wheel, steal the power, break the strangleholds of the corrupt and gun down the thugs they sent to crush you"—and potentially make the "Dark Future" a brighter one. Or, as he told me more prosaically, "if you want a better future, you'd better get off your butt and make it." It was that implicit message, Pondsmith guesses, that made the game a hit in the first place.

In his work, Pondsmith ultimately sets out to entertain, not preach. "A game is a toy for having fun," he said. Even so, he knows that a game, like any story, can affect how we relate to the world. "Almost every story invites you to ask yourself, *How would I fit into this story? What would I do? Could I be the hero?*"

When we spoke, Pondsmith still hadn't played a final version of Cyberpunk 2077. But he told me he got a kick out of playing sections of the unfinished game. He enjoyed just perusing the in-game world, eavesdropping on its inhabitants—a flaneur strolling through his own creation. "I walk around. I go where I'm not supposed to go. I stand on street corners.

"It's great, because there are moments where somebody walks by. And they're having a real conversation. And I listen in. Just as I would on a real street. I'm thinking, *Well, it's not my business … but it does sound like an interesting story.*" And suddenly, Pondsmith is feeling inspired again. "I'm thinking, *Hmm. Maybe I can add this to the pizza.*" *A*

Darryn King is a writer based in New York.

Introducing ATEM Mini

The compact television studio that lets you create presentation videos and live streams!

Blackmagic Design is a leader in video for the television industry, and now you can create your own streaming videos with ATEM Mini. Simply connect HDMI cameras, computers or even microphones. Then push the buttons on the panel to switch video sources just like a professional broadcaster! You can even add titles, picture in picture overlays and mix audio! Then live stream to Zoom, Skype or YouTube!

Create Training and Educational Videos

ATEM Mini's includes everything you need. All the buttons are positioned on the front panel so it's very easy to learn. There are 4 HDMI video inputs for connecting cameras and computers, plus a USB output that looks like a webcam so you can connect to Zoom or Skype. ATEM Software Control for Mac and PC is also included, which allows access to more advanced "broadcast" features!

Use Professional Video Effects

ATEM Mini is really a professional broadcast switcher used by television stations. This means it has professional effects such as a DVE for picture in picture effects commonly used for commentating over a computer slide show. There are titles for presenter names, wipe effects for transitioning between sources and a green screen keyer for replacing backgrounds with graphics.

Live Stream Training and Conferences

The ATEM Mini Pro model has a built in hardware streaming engine for live streaming via its ethernet connection. This means you can live stream to YouTube, Facebook and Teams in much better quality and with perfectly smooth motion. You can even connect a hard disk or flash storage to the USB connection and record your stream for upload later!

Monitor all Video Inputs!

With so many cameras, computers and effects, things can get busy fast! The ATEM Mini Pro model features a "multiview" that lets you see all cameras, titles and program, plus streaming and recording status all on a single TV or monitor. There are even tally indicators to show when a camera is on air! Only ATEM Mini is a true professional television studio in a small compact design!

ATEM Mini **$295***
ATEM Mini Pro **$595***
ATEM Software Control ..... **Free**

Learn more at www.blackmagicdesign.com

*Price subject to change.

Blackmagicdesign

THERE'S NO STOPPING SANTA

The middle of a global pandemic might seem like a good time to cut back on holiday excess. But then, we live in America.

BY AMANDA MULL

We knew the doors were about to open when "Ride of the Valkyries" began to boom over the public-address system. By 4 a.m. on Black Friday in Athens, Georgia, several hundred people had lined up outside Best Buy in the predawn chill, supervised by police straddling motorcycles and ambassadors from a local Chick-fil-A handing out free breakfast biscuits wrapped in foil. Our most dedicated patrons had been sitting outside in folding chairs since the day before.

At the front of the line, some people clutched sheets of paper handed out by managers guaranteeing a deeply discounted laptop or camera. (Best Buy devised this ticketing system during my tenure as a salesperson in the mid-2000s to avoid the sort of stampede that makes the news every year.) But many more people had come out in the middle of the night, not to buy a particular product, but to bear witness to the bacchanal of extreme shopping itself and maybe pick up a $5 DVD. I'm still not sure whether, in the *Apocalypse Now* scene that "Ride of the Valkyries" was intended to evoke, the store's employees were supposed to be the soldiers in helicopters or the Vietnamese villagers below.

There were no near-death experiences during the three years that I helped open Best Buy on Black Friday, even if the occasional shopper was overcome with holiday spirit and tackled a palletful of discounted Blu-ray players. The mornings were busy, but they crackled with a mildly perverse consumerist conviviality. For most of the people who thronged the store, the wee-hours shopping trip was as much a part of their Thanksgiving tradition as turkey. Store employees feasted, too—it was the one day of the year when my Best Buy location acknowledged how backbreaking retail work is, stocking our break room with a free lunch of fried chicken and macaroni and cheese. My co-workers and I jockeyed for those opening shifts because the eight hours always flew by—a wild reprieve from the everyday monotony for employees and even shoppers. It was a frankenholiday, pieced together from leftover parts of Thanksgiving and Christmas, but with a life of its own.

Despite ages of hand-wringing from both ends of the political spectrum—either the annual carnival of consumerism is obscene and wasteful, or gifts shouldn't supplant Jesus as the reason for the season—holiday shopping has metastasized. *Black Friday* is now more of a euphemism for weeks of pre-Thanksgiving sales than a reference to a fixed moment in time. Every year, it seems to get bigger, as do the gestures of those pushing against it. Nordstrom, for one, has used its store windows in the weeks before Thanksgiving to promise shoppers it won't jump the gun on Christmas decorations, while the big-box stores have begun opening on Thanksgiving itself, cannibalizing the holiday that once formed Black Friday's pretext. (Amid this year's pandemic, Best Buy has joined other major retailers in announcing that it will be closed on Thanksgiving.)

This is where, in this year of all years, I should solemnly

PHOTOGRAPH BY JASON FULFORD AND TAMARA SHOPSIN

intone that things will be—will *have to* be—different. So much about holiday shopping seems impossible, or at least ill-advised: the crowds, the exorbitant expenditures, the elderly mall Santas greeting an endless stream of stuffy-nosed children. Retail and delivery workers have already been pushed past the breaking point in their "essential" jobs, and shipping delays and inventory shortages have dogged stores since March. If any of the hand-wringers really wanted to sever Christmas from consumerism, now would be the time. But the Ghost of Christmas Past has much to tell us about what we should expect this year, and shopping isn't going anywhere.

PEOPLE OFTEN IDENTIFY holiday profligacy as a modern problem, hastened by malls and chain stores and online shopping. But the history of indulgent celebrations and the scolds trying to end them is the history of civilization itself. Russell Belk, a researcher who studies consumer culture at York University, in Ontario, dates the fight over Christmas waste all the way back to the ancient Roman holiday of Saturnalia, a days-long December feast and the predecessor of Christmas. "There were complaints at the time that it was too materialistic, that people were hosting banquets for their friends and spending lavish amounts of money and they shouldn't be doing that," he told me.

For American and British Christmas in particular, another set of scolds helped get us into this shopping mess in the first place. Before the Victorian era, the Christmas season was considered a time not so much to exchange gifts but to eat, drink, and be merry, "a little like Mardi Gras," says Leigh Eric Schmidt, a historian of American religion and the author of *Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays*. Those celebrations were beloved by working people, who got a break between Christmas and New Year's from the informal subsistence labor that characterized their agrarian lifestyle.

But in the newly industrialized cities of the late 19th century, the drunken, leisurely December holidays began to change. "Once some of those traditions are in more urban settings, where there's a more discernible working class, they're increasingly seen by the middle class and elites as more dangerous and destructive," Schmidt told me. The interests of business and religious leaders aligned, and they endeavored to recast the winter holiday as pious and family-centric, revolving around the home instead of the tavern. They also pushed to shorten the holiday break—more Americans now had bosses, and those bosses wanted them back at work.

The rebranding of Christmas was an unmitigated success. And in turn, the holiday that the capitalist and merchant classes once deemed a threat to productivity had become "an incredible opportunity to promote consumption" of newly available mass-market goods, Schmidt said. Department stores also stoked demand, decorating their windows to make them destinations unto themselves. Macy's and Marshall Field's and Saks became temples for a new kind of religious observance: buying, buying, buying to fulfill the promise of Christmas.

IN AMERICA, the economic, the religious, and the patriotic can't be easily separated. Dell deChant, a religion professor at the University of South Florida and the author of *The Sacred Santa: Religious Dimensions of Consumer Culture*, calls Christmas "a huge ritual celebration honoring the economy and feeding the economy." God, country, and cash are particularly tightly entwined during a year when America's leaders can't stop telling us that keeping the economy humming is our sacred duty.

THE HISTORY OF INDULGENT CELEBRATIONS AND THE SCOLDS TRYING TO END THEM IS THE HISTORY OF CIVILIZATION ITSELF.

Even in normal times, Christmas is essential to that effort—the moniker "Black Friday" has murky origins, but it stuck around to mark the day when consumer spending is said to finally push American retailers to annual profitability, or "into the black." (Whether this actually happens is highly debatable.) During the Great Depression, arguably a time similar to our own, President Franklin D. Roosevelt went so far as to move the date of Thanksgiving by a full week to lengthen the shopping season.

Granted, certain aspects of Christmas won't be the same in 2020. Many of us won't be able to travel great distances to visit our families, and older relatives might not be able to see much of anyone at all. Two hundred thousand people and counting are gone, and millions of others have lost the income that funds bounteous celebrations. Still, deChant believes that the drive to create as much of the old Christmas feeling as possible will likely be strong.

"Christmas is a great normalizing experience—it's powerful in terms of our personal and cultural identity," he says. "If we're not able to consume, then, to a certain extent, we're marginalized—within the culture, as well as in our own minds." For many Americans who don't celebrate Christmas, sitting out the foofaraw while the whole country conducts Christmas consumption is an annual dose of alienation. For people who normally participate but suddenly find themselves unable to do so, the sense of detachment might even be more piercing for its novelty. Buying not just gifts, but decorations, sweets, and the trappings of a Christmas feast are deeply entrenched customs, and many Americans will want to hang on to those rituals in a world where so much else has been disrupted. For some, keeping Christmas, as a transformed Scrooge put it, will feel profoundly comforting. For others, the wish to do Christmas right will be tinged with defiance. Think we can't buy gifts galore and decorate like busy little elves straight through a disaster? Think again. *A*

Amanda Mull is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

The C60 Sapphire: The product of English imagination and Swiss precision. (Good job it wasn't the other way around.)

We don't wish to stereotype, but we just can't do what the Swiss do so brilliantly. And vice versa. Together, though, we're a case of 1+1=3. So, having envisaged a professional-grade dive watch combined with a breath-taking aesthetic, we entrusted our Swiss team with the engineering. Take the dial: pure sapphire crystal. Creating it takes 28 separate operations. And it's machined to 0.6mm precisely. (Thin enough to see the Sellita 200-1 automatic movement within.) With a translucent blue glow, it's even more beautiful than we imagined. And an object lesson in sticking to what you are good at.
christopherward.com

Christopher Ward

Ingeniously English.
Unsurprisingly Swiss.

DEATH OF A SMALL BUSINESS

"I'm more than just my store," my father told me. And yet, for nearly his entire adult life, all of his decisions had argued the opposite.

BY FRANCESCA MARI

The first time I looked at my father's Yelp reviews, I choked up. They were not all positive, and of course I read the worst ones first. My dad, Frank, runs a high-fidelity audio-video store in San Francisco and also repairs the brands he sells. One reviewer gave him one star, noting that his turntables had sat in the shop for five weeks, untouched. It brought me back to all the school nights when we stayed at the store until 9 p.m. so he could finish a job that was overdue. Another guy complained that when he called, my dad picked up blurting, "What do you want? I'm vvvvvveeeerrrryyyy busy." I remember hearing him do that once when I was a kid. He was on hold with the bank or a supplier, and the second line kept ringing. I was aghast. "Well, I hope you are sooooooooo busy that people do not EVER go to your store," this reviewer wrote.

But the haters were in the minority. His clients included George Moscone ("very down-to-earth," my dad said) and Walt's daughter Diane Disney Miller ("short like Minnie Mouse and kind to everyone"). "Frank is the man!!" one customer wrote. "He is the only one I believed I could trust with a delicate and expensive job—and boy was I right." "Will try to find good value for someone who isn't a cognoscenti about audio," another said. "Been going to him for 30 years. Never would go anywhere else." A "neighborhood gem."

And then there was a review from someone who hadn't bought a thing from my dad. He'd locked himself out of his car and wrote to thank my dad for letting him use the store's phone. Would an employee at Walmart do that? Could they? Big-box stores are designed such that the workers rarely see the outside. They aren't part of "the ballet of the good city sidewalk" that Jane Jacobs wrote about in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. In the mid-century Greenwich Village that she immortalized, grocers held keys and packages for neighbors, and candy-store clerks kept an eye on kids. Even the drinkers who gathered under the gooey orange lights outside the White Horse Tavern kept the street safe by keeping it occupied. When I first read the book 15 years ago, I told my dad to pick up a copy, which he diligently did, from the bookshop up the street. It was the first book he'd read since he started at the store, in 1975.

IN THE LATE '60S, my dad would gather his high-school friends in his bedroom in San Francisco to play with different turntables. After they left, he'd Windex their fingerprints off the cabinets and glass, a habit that his mother proudly reported to her friends. In his spare time, he took things apart and put them back together—clocks, radios, amplifiers—and to support himself during college, he got a repair job at an audio-video store. He wanted to be a radio DJ, and he hosted a weekly show for the College of San Mateo's NPR affiliate. But when I ask him what he played, he can't remember. The station allowed only "middle-of-the-road music." And for him, the sound quality was just as important as the artists.

He moved from the repair room at the audio-video store to the sales floor—a somewhat pompous description of a 15-by-25-foot room with sea-foam-colored carpet and soundproof sliding-glass doors. One day, a nurse walked in and he sold her a VCR. He called her a couple of times to ask if it worked okay and then finally asked her out, to the Dickens Fair (where everything—and everyone—is out of a Charles Dickens novel). His sister worked there and had comped him a couple of tickets. Seven years later, that nurse, who was seven years older than my dad, gave birth to me. In the late '80s, Frank became a co-owner of the store, and in the '90s, he bought out the founder.

For 45 years, that store, Harmony Audio Video, has been my dad's life: the reason he left home early every day, the reason he was chronically late to pick me up from school, the reason he didn't take a single vacation for 25 years. Growing up, the store was my life too: From the time my mom's breast cancer metastasized when I was in second grade (she died when I was 10), I hung out in the back after school until 7 or 8, before we drove 40 minutes home on coastal Highway 1 to slightly more affordable El Granada. Keeping me with him at work meant he didn't have to pay for child care. In exchange, he basically ceded the store's second phone line to me for conversations with classmates and friends. If he was with a client and I had a question, I had to write it on a note card—one of the hundreds of blank neon mailers on which he listed monthly specials.

The store put me through private school in San Francisco (with an assist from financial aid). And it got me a summer job pipetting chemicals into test tubes in high school (a scientist

at a blood lab was one of his customers). I'm not going to say the store was a community linchpin—nobody *needs* really nice speakers or crystal-clear flatscreen TVs—but it was a node through which different strata interacted: doctors, tech VPs, working-class Italians from North Beach like my dad, who were into fast cars and fancy speakers, as well as the musicians and video guys he employed and for whom he set up profit-sharing plans.

That nobody *needs* speakers and TVs was something I was righteous about as a kid. The deluxe education that my mom sought out, and my dad proudly supported, produced an insufferable 12-year-old. Television, I'd determined, was a waste, and I took every opportunity to tell my father that what he was doing was, well, *nonessential*, as we might now say. At one point, my dad told me that I shouldn't feel any pressure to one day take a job at the store, which was touching because it was so abundantly clear that I never would. My mom always wished that she'd done something other than nursing, and I knew he wanted me to find a career I loved.

What my dad also didn't need to say was that he liked his work. He loved sitting a customer down in the Eames-knockoff recliner in the sound room and blasting music or a movie—*Terminator 2*, *Independence Day*, *The Rock*—in surround sound, subwoofer rumbling. This was the soundtrack of my childhood. He relished equipment that faithfully generated the geometries of noise, prickly sounds and round ones, sharp sounds and sonorous ones. He read *Stereophile* and other trade publications cover to cover, invested in new products, learned how they worked. He was quick to adopt technologies that would later become ubiquitous: CDs, DVDs, Bluetooth, streaming, Sonos. (Not every bet paid off. Remember laser discs? He has cabinets full of them.) The advantage and disadvantage of a business like his is that the technology is always advancing, giving customers something to chase but leaving the owner always running to catch up.

I suspect the other reason for my reflexive resistance to the store is that it made me a witness to my dad's vulnerability. In the early 2000s, when I was in high school, he aimed to sell an average of $2,000 worth of equipment a day—and he did. But "average" meant good days and bad ones. Occasionally, a doctor bought an entire custom home-theater system after perusing for an hour. Other days, a lawyer would ask dozens of questions before declaring that he was heading to Best Buy. Or Lou Reed might walk in, insult the Tchaikovsky playing over the speakers, buy $700 Grado headphones for a recording session at Skywalker Ranch, and then have an assistant return them once it was done.

Frank Mari and his store

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CARLOS CHAVARRÍA

Sundays and Mondays, his days off, were the slowest. Too often, he'd call in and learn that not a single sale had been made.

It hadn't always been this way. My dad started at the store during the heyday of performance audio. Certain high-end lines were sold only through authorized dealers, whom the companies paid to educate. Yamaha sent my dad to the Bahamas and B&W sent him to its factory in England, a trip that remains one of his fondest memories. He took my mother—there was a tourist program for significant others, almost entirely women. Before the internet, high-fidelity audio-video companies coordinated with countless independent dealers. After the internet, which multiplied the possible paths to consumers, not so much. The last conference my dad attended was in Phoenix, in the mid-'90s. He brought back a bonsai cactus, which, 20 years later, is thriving—unlike anything else in the industry.

IF YOU LISTENED to American politicians, you might think the government lavishes support on small businesses. But that has long been more rhetoric than reality. The last time robust federal legislation boosted independent retailers was in the mid-1930s (and whether it was actually good policy is another question). The Robinson-Patman Act prohibited growers, manufacturers, and wholesalers from giving discounts to chains for large-quantity purchases, even though those savings were often passed on to consumers in the form of lower prices. "There are a great many people who feel that if we are to preserve democracy in government, in America," Representative Wright Patman declared, "we have got to preserve a democracy in business operation." Shortly thereafter, Congress passed another pro-small-business law, forbidding predatory pricing—selling goods at gross discounts to quash the competition.

Yet the price-setting legislation mostly failed, because large merchants simply stocked slightly different products. It also led to the rise of sophisticated corporate lobbying. In 1938, Patman proposed a graduated federal tax on retailers operating in multiple states. In response, the grocery chain A&P—later accused of predatory pricing—ran ads in 1,300 newspapers denouncing the tax and emphasizing its low prices. The bill died.

The same year, President Franklin D. Roosevelt hosted a conference in Washington, D.C., for 1,000 small-business owners, hoping to gain their backing for the New Deal. But the beauty of the small-business owner—a stubborn, sometimes radical independence—was also a political weakness. It was impossible to get the group to reach consensus on anything.

The number of small businesses would ebb and flow in the decades that followed. But since the 1960s, courts hearing antitrust cases have tilted in favor of ensuring low prices for consumers rather than preserving competing companies' access to the market. From 1997 to 2007, the revenue share of the 50 largest corporations increased in three-quarters of industries. Low prices might sound great, but the result, compounded over half a century, is economic inequality so stark that many workers are too poor to afford them.

BEST BUY was once my dad's No. 1 nemesis. Every Monday, the only day we drove straight home after school (it being one of my dad's days off), we passed the huge blue box via the Central Freeway. My dad almost always made a snide comment about "built to break" electronics and harried employees.

> THAT NOBODY *NEEDS* SPEAKERS AND TVS WAS SOMETHING I WAS RIGHTEOUS ABOUT AS A KID.

Nonetheless, working 12 hours a day, he could still take home close to $100,000 a year in the early 2000s.

Then came the iPhone and the ubiquity of online shopping. The internet wasn't all bad for my dad. It enabled him to get outdated parts on eBay and to search audiophile forums for tips on tricky repairs. With a few clicks, he could also see the big-box stores' prices and endeavor to beat them. But many consumers were content to stream music on their laptop, as tinny as the sound might be. And generally, the industry began to tilt more heavily against small retailers. Amazon amassed power, sowing an expectation of overnight shipping and ultralow prices—though the bargains often didn't last. ("I looked up web prices as a point of comparison and found Harmony's pegging most prices at a dollar less than what Amazon's asking," one customer wrote on my dad's Yelp page.) Amazon's real triumph is a monopoly not on pricing but on our imagination.

For 35 years, Harmony was open seven days a week, but in the years after the Great Recession, Frank decided to close on Mondays, and eventually Sundays too. His full-time employees slowly peeled off. One retired and another moved into film editing; my dad didn't replace them. When I was growing up, it was rare for anyone to run the store alone. Over the past decade, it's become the norm. A retired friend of my dad's comes in to help and hang out, billing just for the hours he's needed. The only thing that's made my dad a bit of money is custom installation—emphasis on *a bit*. Postindustrial America is a service economy; there are the rich and those who serve them. Last year, in San Francisco, a city flush with tech wealth, my dad paid himself only $12,000, preferring to reinvest in the store and dip into his retirement funds to pay his bills.

So things were already tight when the pandemic hit. On March 17, the Bay Area became the first region in the U.S. to institute a shelter-in-place order, breaking my dad's 45-year routine—for his safety. But he couldn't stop himself from driving to the store almost every day, which was allowed because repair work was considered an essential service. He kept the lights off and the front door locked and went to the back, where he tinkered with soundboards and soldering equipment.

After applying for the first round of Paycheck Protection Program funding, my dad learned that the government had run out of funds.

If you have never tried an Oatgurt before, you may feel like you need to compare it to something similar, like say regular yogurt, in order to help you decide if you would like to try it.

The problem with that approach is that Oatgurt is not yogurt, because yogurt is made with dairy and has no oats, while Oatgurt is made with oats and has no dairy.

So unfortunately you are out of luck by subjecting Oatgurt to a traditional comparison model. However, once you've tried it and realize it's pretty hard to tell the difference from regular yogurt, then you have all kinds of options to compare our Oatgurt to each other. For example, black cherry is my personal favorite.

Administered by major banks, the program tended to favor the large corporations they'd already worked with. Harvard University, Ruth's Chris Steak House, Shake Shack, and various hospitality companies controlled by the Trump megadonor Monty Bennett got tens of millions from the first distribution; countless small businesses were told there was no money left. (These big organizations returned the funds, tail between legs, only after public outcry and refinements to federal regulations to prevent this kind of exploitation.)

Adding insult to injury, Congress used the CARES Act, which instituted the PPP loans, to pass $174 billion worth of tax breaks that had long been on real-estate-developer, private-equity, and corporate wish lists. "There is no real public-interest lobby on these kind of obscure corporate tax provisions," the *New York Times* reporter Jesse Drucker told NPR's Terry Gross at the time. Only a small number of tax lobbyists even understand them. This was just one more example of a system that's come to favor the big over the small.

Throughout the pandemic, my dad has continued to pay the few people left on his payroll, including a former salesman who writes a lively biweekly newsletter (complete with a movie review!). Otherwise, his overhead was low. Still, 60 days into the pandemic, he realized that the store would run out of money by the end of the month.

He considered applying for the second PPP distribution—but he was overwhelmed by the information requested and the changing rules. (So were others. Four hours before the program would have closed on June 30, with small businesses still suffering but with $130 billion unspent, the Senate extended the application deadline by five weeks.) In mid-May, my dad, who has never been a reasonable man, reasonably said, "I'm one of the last performance-audio guys. Why am I going to bang my head against the wall like an idiot? It's time to go bye-bye."

Frank Mari's repair room

At the age of 68, he filed for Social Security and told me he was preparing to close for good.

I'd pleaded with him to consider retiring for the past couple of years, but now, as he told me his decision over the phone, I struggled to keep my composure. Looked at a certain way, my dad was one of the lucky ones. He'd contributed to retirement accounts and was of retirement age. Yet it felt like an ignoble end to four and a half decades of work. "I'm more than just my store," he told me. And yet, for nearly his entire adult life, all of his decisions had argued the opposite.

Then, on Monday, June 15, San Francisco permitted indoor retail to reopen, following safety protocols. My dad was closed Mondays, but he couldn't miss the grand opening, so he worked six days straight, no pay. (He hadn't cut himself a check from the store since January.) His instincts were good. Wireless speakers had been selling out during the pandemic, but he had plenty in stock, and people a little older than me, my dad said, were keen to support a local store. His loyal customers—people he has known for decades, people whose kids, careers, and concerns he takes an interest in—delighted my dad by dropping in, mask on, hair long, some almost unrecognizable, telling him they wouldn't buy anywhere else.

More than 400,000 small businesses have closed since the start of the pandemic and many thousands more are at risk, according to the Brookings Institution–affiliated Hamilton Project. Mom-and-pop stores across the country are liquidating, breaking their leases, putting up handwritten goodbyes. "We are sad and sorry that it is time to say *zai jian* (until we meet again)," read a sign at San Francisco's dim sum institution Ton Kiang. "Over the years, you shared your weddings and anniversaries with us, celebrated and had us host your life passages and family gatherings … We will always treasure these moments and value your friendship."

How many of these businesses will eventually be replaced, and what will be lost if they aren't? It's easy to compare prices. It's harder to put a value on the cranky independence of small-business owners, or their collective importance to community spirit and even the American idea. "What astonishes me in the United States is not so much the marvelous grandeur of some undertakings as the innumerable multitude of small ones," Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in 1835.

My dad, so happy to be back, acted like he'd never told me that he was folding up shop. He was in retail (bad), but the products he was selling were for the home (good). For now, for at least a little while longer, he'd be cranking up the volume in the sound room, where he belonged. *A*

Francesca Mari is a writer based in Providence, Rhode Island.

How do you deliver joy to millions of children around the world in less than 24 hours?

Santa Claus
CEO of the North Pole

servicenow

The smarter way to workflow™

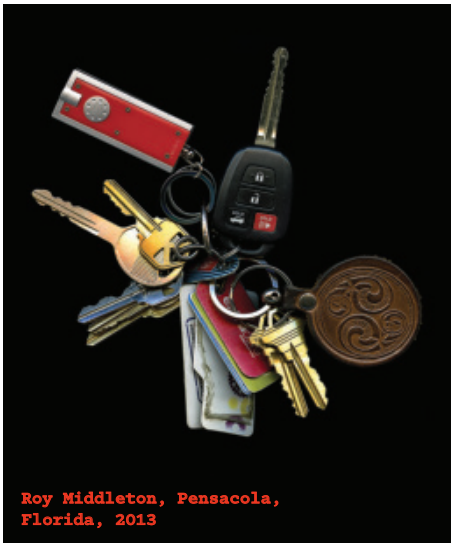
Ready for work to work better? Our digital workflows are here to bring simplicity to your complexity and transform how work gets done across your enterprise. Whatever your business is facing, let's workflow it.

Let's workflow it.

Rumain Brisbon, Phoenix, Arizona, 2014

Andre Burgess, Queens, New York, 1997

Philando Castile, Falcon Heights, Minnesota, 2016

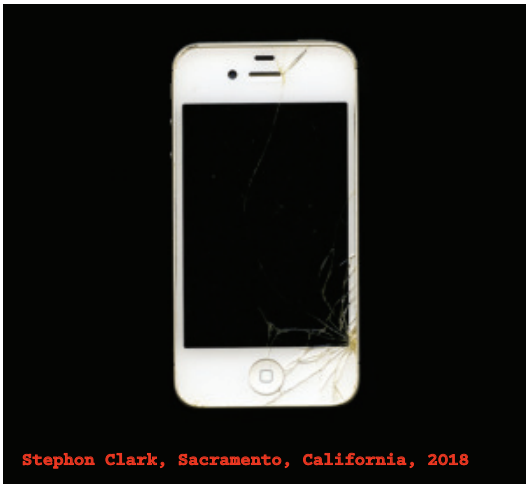


Roy Middleton, Pensacola, Florida, 2013

Alfred Olango, El Cajon, California, 2016

Charles Kinsey, North Miami, Florida, 2016

Levar Jones, Columbia, South Carolina, 2014



Stephon Clark, Sacramento, California, 2018

Khiel Coppin, Brooklyn, New York, 2007

It Wasn't a Gun

Photographs by Amber N. Ford

A hairbrush. A set of keys. A pill bottle. A candy bar. Each of these everyday items is an unlikely weapon. And yet each is an object that was held by a Black man, woman, or child when they were killed or injured at the hands of police. Amber N. Ford's series *Mistaken Identity* is a record of the wounds incurred and a requiem for the lives lost.

Stephon Clark was holding a cellphone when police shot him in Sacramento, California, in 2018. Philando Castile was reaching for his wallet, to produce his driver's license during a traffic stop, when a cop shot him in Falcon Heights, Minnesota, in 2016. Twelve-year-old Tamir Rice was playing with a toy pellet gun in a Cleveland park when police shot him in 2014.

Ford, who is a native Ohioan, said Rice's death was a breaking point for her. She pored over his story, and others like it, then mined her community for found art.

For *Mistaken Identity*, Ford told me, "I tried my best to pick objects that either I or my friends or family members already had in their possession. So, they're real-life, lived-in, used objects that were already around me." Primarily a portrait photographer, she deliberately stepped outside her normal artistic practice, scanning the objects with the scanner's lid open in a dark room. This method made the stark black background even more severe and hinted at the colorless void that emerges when a loved one dies.

"I hope that in my lifetime I will see policing done differently, where officers can truly de-escalate situations," Ford said. Until then, her work functions as a material archive.

— Allissa V. Richardson

Michael Jones, Brooklyn, New York, 1998

Discover your perfect match this holiday season.

There's a goat, chicken or even an alpaca waiting for you. And once you make a connection, that animal will be sent to a family in need to become a life-changing resource. Discover you match today and help save lives tomorrow.

HEIFER® INTERNATIONAL

Discover your match at **Heifer.org/Atlantic**


10:30 AM
heifermatch
Gil Goat
Yes, I'm scruffy. But I also help provide nutritious milk, cheese and yogurt for families in need to consume and sell for critical income. Let's connect today and start making a difference.
2' 6"
Capricorn

THE LAST CHILDREN OF DOWN SYNDROME

PRENATAL TESTING IS CHANGING WHO GETS BORN AND WHO DOESN'T. THIS IS JUST THE BEGINNING.

BY SARAH ZHANG

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JULIA SELLMANN

Every few weeks or so, Grete Fält-Hansen gets a call from a stranger asking a question for the first time: What is it like to raise a child with Down syndrome?

Sometimes the caller is a pregnant woman, deciding whether to have an abortion. Sometimes a husband and wife are on the line, the two of them in agonizing disagreement. Once, Fält-Hansen remembers, it was a couple who had waited for their prenatal screening to come back normal before announcing the pregnancy to friends and family. "We wanted to wait," they'd told their loved ones, "because if it had Down syndrome, we would have had an abortion." They called Fält-Hansen after their daughter was born—with slanted eyes, a flattened nose, and, most unmistakable, the extra copy of chromosome 21 that defines Down syndrome. They were afraid their friends and family would now think they didn't love their daughter—so heavy are the moral judgments that accompany wanting or not wanting to bring a child with a disability into the world.

All of these people get in touch with Fält-Hansen, a 54-year-old schoolteacher, because she heads Landsforeningen Downs Syndrom, or the National Down Syndrome Association, in Denmark, and because she herself has an 18-year-old son, Karl Emil, with Down syndrome. Karl Emil was diagnosed after he was born. She remembers how fragile he felt in her arms and how she worried about his health, but mostly, she remembers, "I thought he was *so* cute." Two years after he was born, in 2004, Denmark became one of the first countries in the world to offer prenatal Down syndrome screening to every pregnant woman, regardless of age or other risk factors. Nearly all expecting mothers choose to take the test; of those who get a Down syndrome diagnosis, more than 95 percent choose to abort.

Denmark is not on its surface particularly hostile to disability. People with Down syndrome are entitled to health care, education, even money for the special shoes that fit their wider, more flexible feet. If you ask Danes about the syndrome, they're likely to bring up Morten and Peter, two friends with Down syndrome who starred in popular TV programs where they cracked jokes and dissected soccer games. Yet a gulf seems to separate the publicly expressed attitudes and private decisions. Since universal screening was introduced, the number of children born with Down syndrome has fallen sharply. In 2019, only 18 were born in the entire country. (About 6,000 children with Down syndrome are born in the U.S. each year.)

Fält-Hansen is in the strange position of leading an organization likely to have fewer and fewer new members. The goal of her conversations with expecting parents, she says, is not to sway them against abortion; she fully supports a woman's right to choose. These conversations are meant to fill in the texture of daily life missing both from the well-meaning cliché that "people with Down syndrome are always happy" and from the litany of possible symptoms provided by doctors upon diagnosis: intellectual disability, low muscle tone, heart defects, gastrointestinal defects, immune disorders, arthritis, obesity, leukemia, dementia. She might explain that, yes, Karl Emil can read. His notebooks are full of poetry written in his careful, sturdy handwriting. He needed physical and speech therapy when he was young. He loves music—his gold-rimmed glasses are modeled after his favorite Danish pop star's. He gets cranky sometimes, like all teens do.

One phone call might stretch into several; some people even come to meet her son. In the end, some join the association with their child. Others, she never hears from again.

These parents come to Fält-Hansen because they are faced with a choice—one made possible by technology that peers at the DNA of unborn children. Down syndrome is frequently called the "canary in the coal mine" for selective reproduction. It was one of the first genetic conditions to be routinely screened for in utero, and it remains the most morally troubling because it is among the least severe. It is very much compatible with life—even a long, happy life.

The forces of scientific progress are now marching toward ever more testing to detect ever more genetic conditions. Recent advances in genetics provoke anxieties about a future where parents choose what kind of child to have, or not have. But that hypothetical future is already here. It's been here for an entire generation.

Fält-Hansen says the calls she receives are about information, helping parents make a truly informed decision. But they are also moments of seeking, of asking fundamental questions about parenthood. Do you ever wonder, I asked her, about the families who end up choosing an abortion? Do you feel like you failed to prove that your life—and your child's life—is worth choosing? She told me she doesn't think about it this way anymore. But in the beginning, she said, she did worry: "What if they don't like my son?"

• • •

IN JANUARY, I took a train from Copenhagen south to the small town of Vordingborg, where Grete, Karl Emil, and his 30-year-old sister, Ann Katrine Kristensen, met me at the station. The three of them formed a phalanx of dark coats waving hello. The weather was typical of January—cold, gray, blustery—but Karl Emil pulled me over to the ice-cream shop, where he wanted to tell me he knew the employees. His favorite ice-cream flavor, he said, was licorice. "That's very Danish!" I said. Grete and Ann Katrine translated. Then he zagged over to a men's clothing store and struck up a conversation with the clerk, who had just seen Karl Emil interviewed on a Danish children's program with his girlfriend, Chloe. "You didn't tell me you had a girlfriend," the clerk teased. Karl Emil laughed, mischievous and proud.

Elea Aarsø, 6, shown with her father and her sister (and in the opening spread), is the youngest of five children. Her parents opted out of the prenatal screening for Down syndrome because, though they support the right to abortion, they knew they would have the baby either way.

We sat down at a café, and Grete gave her phone to Karl Emil to busy himself with while we spoke in English. He took selfies; his mother, sister, and I began to talk about Down syndrome and the country's prenatal-screening program. At one point, Grete was reminded of a documentary that had sparked an outcry in Denmark. She reclaimed her phone to look up the title: *Død Over Downs* ("Death to Down Syndrome"). When Karl Emil read over her shoulder, his face crumpled. He curled into the corner and refused to look at us. He had understood, obviously, and the distress was plain on his face.

Grete looked up at me: "He reacts because he can read."

"He must be aware of the debate?" I asked, which felt perverse to even say. *So he's aware there are people who don't want people like him to be born?* Yes, she said; her family has always been open with him. As a kid, he was proud of having Down syndrome. It was one of the things that made him uniquely Karl Emil. But as a teenager, he became annoyed and embarrassed. He could tell he was different. "He actually asked me, at some point, if it was because of Down syndrome that he sometimes didn't understand things," Grete said. "I just told him honestly: Yes." As he's gotten older, she said, he's made his peace with it. This arc felt familiar. It's the arc of growing up, in which our self-assuredness as young children gets upended in the storms of adolescence, but eventually, hopefully, we come to accept who we are.

The decisions parents make after prenatal testing are private and individual ones. But when the decisions so overwhelmingly swing one way—to abort—it does seem to reflect something more: an entire society's judgment about the lives of people with Down syndrome. That's what I saw reflected in Karl Emil's face.

Denmark is unusual for the universality of its screening program and the comprehensiveness of its data, but the pattern of high abortion rates after a Down syndrome diagnosis holds true across Western Europe and, to a somewhat lesser extent, in the United States. In wealthy countries, it seems to be at once the best and the worst time for Down syndrome. Better health care has more than doubled life expectancy. Better

access to education means most children with Down syndrome will learn to read and write. Few people speak publicly about wanting to "eliminate" Down syndrome. Yet individual choices are adding up to something very close to that.

In the 1980s, as prenatal screening for Down syndrome became common, the anthropologist Rayna Rapp described the parents on the frontier of reproductive technology as "moral pioneers." Suddenly, a new power was thrust into the hands of ordinary people—the power to decide what kind of life is worth bringing into the world.

The medical field has also been grappling with its ability to offer this power. "If no one with Down syndrome had ever existed or ever would exist—is that a terrible thing? I don't know," says Laura Hercher, a genetic counselor and the director of student research at Sarah Lawrence College. If you take the health complications linked to Down syndrome, such as increased likelihood of early-onset Alzheimer's, leukemia, and heart defects, she told me, "I don't think anyone would argue that those are good things."

But she went on. "If our world didn't have people with special needs and these vulnerabilities," she asked, "would we be missing a part of our humanity?"

• • •

SIXTY-ONE YEARS AGO, the first known prenatal test for a genetic disorder in the world took place in Copenhagen. The patient was a 27-year-old woman who was a carrier for hemophilia, a rare and severe bleeding disorder that is passed from mothers to sons. She had already given birth to one infant boy, who lived for just five hours. The obstetrician who delivered the baby, Fritz Fuchs, told her to come back if she ever became pregnant again. And in 1959, according to the published case study, she did come back, saying she couldn't go through with her pregnancy if she was carrying another son.

Fuchs had been thinking about what to do. Along with a cytologist named Povl Riis, he'd been experimenting with using fetal cells floating in the yellow amniotic fluid that fills the womb to determine a baby's sex. A boy would have a 50 percent risk of inheriting hemophilia; a girl would have almost no risk. But first they needed some amniotic fluid. Fuchs eased a long needle into the woman's abdomen; Riis studied the cells under a microscope. It was a girl.

Suddenly, a new power was thrust into the hands of ordinary people—the power to decide what kind of life is worth bringing into the world.

The woman gave birth to a daughter a few months later. If the baby had been a boy, though, she was prepared to have an abortion—which was legal under Danish law at the time on "eugenic grounds" for fetuses at risk for severe mental or physical illness, according to Riis and Fuchs's paper describing the case. They acknowledged the possible danger of sticking a needle in the abdomen of a pregnant woman, but wrote that it was justified "because the method seems to be useful in preventive eugenics."

That word, *eugenics*, today evokes images that are specific and heinous: forced sterilization of the "feebleminded" in early-20th-century America, which in turn inspired the racial hygiene of the Nazis, who gassed or otherwise killed tens of thousands of people with disabilities, many of them children. But eugenics was once a mainstream scientific pursuit, and eugenicists believed that they were bettering humanity. Denmark, too, drew inspiration from the U.S., and it passed a sterilization law in 1929. Over the next 21 years, 5,940 people were sterilized in Denmark, the majority because they were "mentally retarded." Those who resisted sterilization were threatened with institutionalization.

Eugenics in Denmark never became as systematic and violent as it did in Germany, but the policies came out of similar underlying goals: improving the health of a nation by preventing the birth of those deemed to be burdens on society. The term *eugenics* eventually fell out of favor, but in the 1970s, when Denmark began offering prenatal testing for Down syndrome to mothers over the age of 35, it was discussed in the context of saving money—as in, the testing cost was less than that of institutionalizing a child with a disability for life. The stated purpose was "to prevent birth of children with severe, lifelong disability."

That language too has long since changed; in 1994, the stated purpose of the testing became "to offer women a choice." Activists like Fält-Hansen have also pushed back against the subtle and not-so-subtle ways that the medical system encourages women to choose abortion. Some Danish parents told me that doctors automatically assumed they would want to schedule an abortion, as if there was really no other option. This is no longer the case, says Puk Sandager, a fetal-medicine specialist at Aarhus University Hospital. Ten years ago, doctors—especially older doctors—were more likely to expect parents to terminate, she told me. "And now we do not expect anything." The National Down Syndrome Association has also worked with doctors to alter the language they use with patients—"probability" instead of "risk," "chromosome aberration" instead of "chromosome error." And, of course, hospitals now connect expecting parents with people like Fält-Hansen to have those conversations about what it's like to raise a child with Down syndrome.

Perhaps all of this has had some effect, though it's hard to say. The number of babies born to parents who chose to continue a pregnancy after a prenatal diagnosis of Down syndrome in Denmark has ranged from zero to 13 a year since universal screening was introduced. In 2019, there were seven. (Eleven other babies were born to parents who either declined the test or got a false negative, making the total number of babies born with Down syndrome last year 18.)

Opposite page: *Karl Emil Fält-Hansen, who is 18, lives with his family in the small town of Vordingborg, Denmark.*

Why so few? "Looking at it from the outside, a country like Denmark, if you want to raise a child with Down syndrome, this is a good environment," says Stina Lou, an anthropologist who has studied how parents make decisions after a prenatal diagnosis of a fetal anomaly. Since 2011, she has embedded in the fetal-medicine unit at Aarhus University Hospital, one of the largest hospitals in Denmark, where she has shadowed Sandager and other doctors.

Under the 2004 guidelines, all pregnant women in Denmark are offered a combined screening in the first trimester, which includes blood tests and an ultrasound. These data points, along with maternal age, are used to calculate the odds of Down syndrome. The high-probability patients are offered a more invasive diagnostic test using DNA either from the fetal cells floating in the amniotic fluid (amniocentesis) or from placental tissue (chorionic villus sampling). Both require sticking a needle or catheter into the womb and come with a small risk of miscarriage. More recently, hospitals have started offering noninvasive prenatal testing, which uses fragments of fetal DNA floating in the mother's blood. That option has not become popular in Denmark, though, probably because the invasive tests can pick up a suite of genetic disorders in addition to Down syndrome. More diseases ruled out, more peace of mind.

But Lou was interested in the times when the tests did not provide peace of mind, when they in fact provided the opposite. In a study of 21 women who chose abortion after a prenatal diagnosis of Down syndrome, she found that they had tended to base their decisions on worst-case scenarios. An extra copy of chromosome 21 can cause a variety of symptoms, the severity of which is not known until birth or even later. Most people with Down syndrome learn to read and write. Others are nonverbal. Some do not have heart defects. Others spend months or even years in and out of the hospital to fix a heart valve. Most have healthy digestive systems. Others lack the nerve endings needed to anticipate bowel movements, necessitating more surgeries, possibly even a stoma bag or diapers. The women who chose abortion feared the worst possible outcomes. Some even grieved the possibility of aborting a child who might have had a mild form of Down syndrome. But in the end, Lou told me, "the uncertainty just becomes too much."

This emphasis on uncertainty came up when I spoke with David Wasserman, a bioethicist at the U.S. National Institutes of Health who, along with his collaborator Adrienne Asch, has written some of the most pointed critiques of selective abortion. (Asch died in 2013.) They argued that prenatal testing has the effect of reducing an unborn child to a single aspect—Down syndrome, for example—and making parents judge the child's life on that alone. Wasserman told me he didn't think that most

Stina Lou, an anthropologist, studies the decisions prospective parents make after a prenatal diagnosis of an anomaly.

parents who make these decisions are seeking perfection. Rather, he said, "there's profound risk aversion."

It's hard to know for sure whether the people in Lou's study decided to abort for the reasons they gave or if these were retrospective justifications. But when Lou subsequently interviewed parents who had made the unusual choice to continue a pregnancy after a Down syndrome diagnosis, she found them more willing to embrace uncertainty.

Parents of children with Down syndrome have described to me the initial process of mourning the child they thought they would have: the child whom they were going to

walk down the aisle, who was going to graduate from college, who was going to become president. None of this is guaranteed with any kid, of course, but while most parents go through a slow realignment of expectations over the years, prenatal testing was a rapid plummet into disappointment—all those dreams, however unrealistic, evaporating at once. And then the doctors present you with a long list of medical conditions associated with Down syndrome. Think about it this way, Karl Emil's sister, Ann Katrine, said: "If you handed any expecting parent a whole list of everything their child could possibly encounter during their entire life span—illnesses and stuff like that—then anyone would be scared."

"Nobody would have a baby," Grete said.

• • •

A PECULIAR EFFECT of Denmark's universal-screening program and high abortion rate for Down syndrome is that a fair number of babies born with Down syndrome are born to parents who essentially got a false negative. Their first-trimester screening results said their odds were very low—so low that they needed no invasive follow-up testing. They simply went on with what they thought was an ordinary pregnancy. In other words, like the couple Grete once counseled, these are parents who might have chosen to abort, had they known.

The day after I met Grete, I attended a meeting of the local Copenhagen Down syndrome group. The woman who invited me, Louise Aarsø, had a then-5-year-old daughter with Down syndrome, Elea. Aarsø and her husband had made the unusual choice to opt out of screening. Though they support the right to abortion, they knew they would want to have the baby either way. At the meeting, two of the seven other families told me their prenatal screening had suggested extremely low odds. At birth, they were surprised. A few others said they had chosen to continue the pregnancy despite a high probability for Down syndrome. Ulla Hartmann, whose son Ditlev was 18, noted that he was born before the national screening program began. "We're very thankful we didn't know, because we had two twin boys when I got pregnant with Ditlev and I really don't think we would have been, 'Okay, let's take this challenge when we have these monkeys up in the curtains,'" she told me. "But you grow with the challenge."

Daniel Christensen was one of the parents who had been told the odds of Down syndrome were very low, something like 1 in 1,500. He and his wife didn't have to make a choice, and when he thinks back on it, he said, "what scares me the most is actually how little we knew about Down syndrome." What would the basis of their choice have been? Their son August is 4 now, with a twin sister, who Christensen half-jokingly said was "almost normal." The other parents laughed. "Nobody's normal," he said.

Then the woman to my right spoke; she asked me not to use her name. She wore a green blouse, and her blond hair was pulled into a ponytail. When we all turned to her, I noticed that she had begun to tear up. "Now I'm moved from all the stories; I'm a little …" She paused to catch her breath. "My answer is not that beautiful." The Down syndrome odds for her son, she said, were 1 in 969.

"You remember the exact number?" I asked.

"Yeah, I do. I went back to the papers." The probability was low enough that she didn't think about it after he was born. "On the one hand I saw the problems. And on the other hand he was perfect." It took four months for him to get diagnosed with Down syndrome. He is 6 now, and he cannot speak. It frustrates him, she said. He fights with his brother and sister. He bites because he cannot express himself. "This has just been *so many times*, and you never feel safe." Her experience is not representative of all children with Down syndrome; lack of impulse control is common, but violence is not. Her point, though, was that the image of a happy-go-lucky child so often featured in the media is not always representative either. She wouldn't have chosen this life: "We would have asked for an abortion if we knew."

Another parent chimed in, and the conversation hopscotched to a related topic and then another until it had moved on entirely. At the end of the meeting, as others stood and gathered their coats, I turned to the woman again because I was still shocked that she was willing to say what she'd said. Her admission seemed to violate an unspoken code of motherhood.

Of course, she said, "it's shameful if I say these things." She loves her child, because how can a mother not? "But you love a person that hits you, bites you? If you have a husband that bites you, you can say goodbye … but if you have a child that hits you, you can't do anything. You can't just say, 'I don't want to be in a relationship.' Because it's your child." To have a child is to begin a relationship that you cannot sever. It is supposed to be unconditional, which is perhaps what most troubles us about selective abortion—it's an admission that the relationship can in fact be conditional.

• • •

PARENTING IS A PLUNGE into the unknown and the uncontrollable. It is beautiful in this way, but also daunting.

In the cold, scientific realm of biology, reproduction begins with a random genetic shuffling—an act of fate, if you were to be less cold, more poetic. The 23 pairs of chromosomes in our cells line up so that the DNA we inherited from our mother and father can be remixed and divided into sets of 23 single chromosomes. Each egg or sperm gets one such set. In women, this chromosomal division begins, remarkably, when they themselves are fetuses in *their* mother's womb. The chromosomes freeze in place for 20, 30, even 40-plus years as the fetus becomes a baby, a girl, a woman. The cycle finishes only when the egg is fertilized. During the intervening years, the proteins holding chromosomes together can degrade, resulting in eggs with too many or too few chromosomes. This is the biological mechanism behind most cases of Down syndrome—95 percent of people born with an extra copy of chromosome 21 inherited it from their mother. And this is why the syndrome is often, though not always, linked to the age of the mother.

In the interviews I've conducted, and in interviews Lou and researchers across the U.S. have conducted, the choice of what to do after a prenatal test

fell disproportionately on mothers. There were fathers who agonized over the choice too, but mothers usually bore most of the burden. There is a feminist explanation (my body, my choice) and a less feminist one (family is still primarily the domain of women), but it's true either way. And in making these decisions, many of the women seemed to anticipate the judgment they would face.

Lou told me she had wanted to interview women who chose abortion after a Down syndrome diagnosis because they're a silent majority. They are rarely interviewed in the media, and rarely willing to be interviewed. Danes are quite open about abortion—astonishingly so to my American ears—but abortions for a fetal anomaly, and especially Down syndrome, are different. They still carry a stigma. "I think it's because we as a society like to think of ourselves as inclusive," Lou said. "We are a rich society, and we think it's important that different types of people should be here." And for some of the women who end up choosing abortion, "their own self-understanding is a little shaken, because they have to accept they aren't the kind of person like they thought," she said. They were not the type of person who would choose to have a child with a disability.

For the women in Lou's study, ending a pregnancy after a prenatal diagnosis was very different from ending an unwanted pregnancy. These were almost all wanted pregnancies, in some cases very much wanted pregnancies following long struggles with infertility. The decision to abort was not taken lightly. One Danish woman I'll call "L" told me how terrible it was to feel her baby inside her once she'd made the decision to terminate. In the hospital bed, she began sobbing so hard, the staff had difficulty sedating her. The depth of her emotions surprised her, because she was so sure of her decision. The abortion was two years ago, and she doesn't think about it much anymore. But recounting it on the phone, she began crying again.

She was disappointed to find so little in the media about the experiences of women like her. "It felt right for me, and I have no regrets at all," she told me, but it also feels like "you're doing something wrong." L is a filmmaker, and she wanted to make a documentary about choosing abortion after a Down syndrome diagnosis. She even thought she would share her own story. But she hadn't been able to find a couple willing to be in this documentary, and she wasn't ready to put herself out there alone.

When Rayna Rapp, the anthropologist who coined the term *moral pioneers*, interviewed parents undergoing prenatal testing in New York in the 1980s and '90s, she noticed a certain preoccupation among certain women. Her subjects represented a reasonably diverse slice of the city, but middle-class white women especially seemed fixated on the idea of "selfishness." The women she interviewed were among the first in their families to forgo homemaking for paid work; they had not just jobs but *careers* that were central to their identity. With birth control, they were having fewer children and having them later. They had more reproductive autonomy than women had ever had in human history. (Rapp herself came to this research after having an abortion because of Down syndrome when she became pregnant as a 36-year-old professor.) "Medical technology transforms their 'choices' on an individual level, allowing them, like their male partners, to imagine voluntary limits to their commitments to their children," Rapp wrote in her book *Testing Women, Testing the Fetus*.

But exercising those "voluntary limits" on motherhood—choosing not to have a child with a disability out of fear for how it might affect one's career, for example—becomes judged as "selfishness." Medical technology can offer women a choice, but it does not instantly transform the society around them. It does not dismantle the expectation that women are the primary caregivers or erase the ideal of a good mother as one who places no limits on her devotion to her children.

The centrality of choice to feminism also brings it into uncomfortable conflict with the disability-rights movement. Anti-abortion-rights activists in the U.S. have seized on this to introduce bills banning selective abortion for Down syndrome in several states. Feminist disability scholars have attempted to resolve the conflict by arguing that the choice is not a real choice at all. "The decision to abort a fetus with a disability even because it 'just seems too difficult' must be respected," Marsha Saxton, the director of research at the World Institute on Disability, wrote in 1998. But Saxton calls it a choice made "under duress," arguing that a woman faced with this decision is still constrained today—by popular misconceptions that make life with a disability out to be worse than it actually is and by a society that is hostile to people with disabilities.

"I have guilt for not being the kind of person who could parent this particular type of special need," one woman said. "Guilt, guilt, guilt."

And when fewer people with disabilities are born, it becomes harder for the ones who *are* born to live a good life, argues Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, a bioethicist and professor emerita at Emory University. Fewer people with disabilities means fewer services, fewer therapies, fewer resources. But she also recognizes how this logic pins the entire weight of an inclusive society on individual women.

No wonder, then, that "choice" can feel like a burden. In one small study of women in the U.S. who chose abortion after a diagnosis of a fetal anomaly, two-thirds said they'd hoped—or even prayed—for a miscarriage instead. It's not that they wanted their husbands, their doctors, or their lawmakers to tell them what to do, but they recognized that choice comes with responsibility and invites judgment. "I have guilt for not being the kind of person who could parent this particular type of special need," said one woman in the study. "Guilt, guilt, guilt."

The introduction of a choice reshapes the terrain on which we all stand. To opt out of testing is to become someone who *chose* to opt out. To test and end a pregnancy because of Down syndrome is to become someone who *chose* not to have a child with a disability. To test and continue the pregnancy after

A Danish woman who chose abortion after a prenatal diagnosis of Down syndrome said she was disappointed to find so little in the media about women who had made the same decision.

a Down syndrome diagnosis is to become someone who *chose* to have a child with a disability. Each choice puts you behind one demarcating line or another. There is no neutral ground, except perhaps in hoping that the test comes back negative and you never have to choose what's next.

What kind of choice is this, if what you hope is to not have to choose at all?

• • •

DOWN SYNDROME IS unlikely to ever disappear from the world completely. As women wait longer to have children, the incidence of pregnancies with an extra copy of chromosome 21 is going up. Prenatal testing can also in rare cases be wrong, and some parents will choose not to abort or not to test at all. Others will not have access to abortion.

In the United States—which has no national health-care system, no government mandate to offer prenatal screening—the best estimate for the termination rate after a diagnosis of Down syndrome is 67 percent. But that number conceals stark differences within the country. One study found higher rates of termination in the West and Northeast and among mothers who are highly educated. "On the Upper East Side of Manhattan, it's going to be completely different than in Alabama," said Laura Hercher, the genetic counselor.

These differences worry Hercher. If only the wealthy can afford to routinely screen out certain genetic conditions, then those conditions can become proxies of class. They can become, in other words, *other people's problems*. Hercher worries about an empathy gap in a world where the well-off feel insulated from sickness and disability.

For those with the money, the possibilities of genetic selection are expanding. The leading edge is preimplantation genetic testing (PGT) of embryos created through in vitro fertilization, which altogether can cost tens of thousands of dollars. Labs now offer testing for a menu of genetic conditions—most of them rare and severe conditions such as Tay-Sachs disease, cystic fibrosis, and phenylketonuria—allowing parents to select healthy embryos for implantation in the womb. Scientists have also started trying to understand more common conditions that are influenced by hundreds or even thousands of genes: diabetes, heart disease, high cholesterol, cancer, and—much more controversially—mental illness and autism. In late 2018, Genomic Prediction, a company in New Jersey, began offering to screen embryos for risk of hundreds of conditions, including schizophrenia and intellectual disability, though it has since quietly backtracked on the latter. The one test customers keep asking for, the company's chief scientific officer told me, is for autism. The science isn't there yet, but the demand is.

The politics of prenatal testing for Down syndrome and abortion are currently yoked together by necessity: The only intervention offered for a prenatal test that finds Down syndrome is an abortion. But modern reproduction is opening up more ways for parents to choose what kind of child to have. PGT is one example. Sperm banks, too, now offer detailed donor profiles delineating eye color, hair color, education; they also screen donors for genetic disorders. Several parents have sued sperm banks after discovering that

their donor may have undesirable genes, in cases where their children developed conditions such as autism or a degenerative nerve disease. In September, the Georgia Supreme Court ruled that one such case, in which a sperm donor had hidden his history of mental illness, could move forward. The "deceptive trade practices" of a sperm bank that misrepresented its donor-screening process, the court ruled, could "essentially amount to ordinary consumer fraud."

Garland-Thomson calls this commercialization of reproduction "velvet eugenics"—*velvet* for the soft, subtle way it encourages the eradication of disability. Like the Velvet Revolution from which she takes the term, it's accomplished without overt violence. But it also takes on another connotation as human reproduction becomes more and more subject to consumer choice: *velvet*, as in quality, high-caliber, premium-tier. Wouldn't you want only the best for your baby—one you're already spending tens of thousands of dollars on IVF to conceive? "It turns people into products," Garland-Thomson says.

• • •

NONE OF THIS suggests that testing should be entirely abandoned. Most parents choosing genetic testing are seeking to spare their children real physical suffering. Tay-Sachs disease, for example, is caused by mutations in the *HEXA* gene, which causes the destruction of neurons in the brain and spinal cord. At about three to six months old, babies begin losing motor skills, then their vision and hearing. They develop seizures and paralysis. Most do not live past childhood. There is no cure.

In the world of genetic testing, Tay-Sachs is a success story. It has been nearly eliminated through a combination of prenatal testing of fetuses; preimplantation testing of embryos; and, in the Ashkenazi Jewish population, where the mutation is especially prevalent, carrier screening to discourage marriages between people who might together pass on the mutation. The flip side of this success is that having a baby with the disease is no longer simple misfortune because nothing could have been done. It can be seen instead as a failure of personal responsibility.

Fertility doctors have spoken to me passionately about expanding access to IVF for parents who are fertile but who might use embryo screening to prevent passing on serious diseases. In a world where IVF becomes less expensive and less hard on a woman's body, this might very well become the responsible thing to do. And if you're already going through all this to screen for one disease, why not avail yourself of the whole menu of tests? The hypothetical that Karl Emil's sister imagined, in which a child's every risk is laid out, feels closer than ever. How do you choose between one embryo with a slightly elevated risk of schizophrenia and another with a moderate risk of breast cancer?

How do you choose between one embryo with a slightly elevated risk of schizophrenia and another with a moderate risk of breast cancer?

Not surprisingly, those advocating for preimplantation genetic testing prefer to keep the conversation focused on monogenic diseases, where single gene mutations have severe health effects. Talk of minimizing the risk of conditions like diabetes and mental illness—which are also heavily influenced by environment—quickly turns to designer babies. "Why do we want to go there?" says David Sable, a former IVF doctor who is now a venture capitalist specializing in life sciences. "Start with the most scientifically straightforward, the monogenic diseases—cystic fibrosis, sickle cell anemia, hemophilia—where you could define very specifically what the benefit is."

What about Down syndrome, then, I asked, which can be much less severe than those diseases but is routinely screened for anyway? His answer surprised me, considering that he has spent much of his career working with labs that count chromosomes: "The concept of counting chromosomes as a definitive indicator of the truth—I think we're going to look back on that and say, 'Oh my God, we were so misguided.'" Consider the sex chromosomes, he said. "We've locked ourselves into this male-female binary that we enforced with XX and XY." But it's not nearly so neat. Babies born XX can have male reproductive organs; those born XY can have female reproductive organs. And others can be born with an unusual number of sex chromosomes like X, XXY, XYY, XXYY, XXXX, the effects of which range widely in severity. Some might never know there's anything unusual in their chromosomes at all.

When Rayna Rapp was researching prenatal testing back in the '80s and '90s, she came across multiple sets of parents who chose to abort a fetus with a sex-chromosome anomaly out of fear that it could lead to homosexuality—never mind that there is no known link. They also worried that a boy who didn't conform to XY wouldn't be masculine enough. Reading about their anxieties 30 years later, I could sense how much the ground had moved under our feet. Of course, some parents might still have the same fears, but today the boundaries of "normal" for gender and sexuality encompass much more than the narrow band of three decades ago. A child who is neither XX nor XY can fit into today's world much more easily than in a rigidly gender-binary one.

Both sex-chromosome anomalies and Down syndrome were early targets of prenatal testing—not because they are the most dangerous conditions but because they were the easiest to test for. It's just counting chromosomes. As science moves past this relatively rudimentary technique, Sable mused, "the term *Down syndrome* is probably going to go away at some point, because we may find that having that third 21 chromosome maybe does not carry a predictable level of suffering or altered function." Indeed, most pregnancies with a third copy of chromosome 21 end as miscarriages. Only about 20 percent survive to birth, and the people who are born have a wide range

August Bryde Christensen, who is 4, was born after his parents were told that the odds of Down syndrome were extremely low. His father says he's relieved they didn't know.

of intellectual disabilities and physical ailments. How can an extra chromosome 21 be incompatible with life in some cases and in other cases result in a boy, like one I met, who can read and write and perform wicked juggling tricks with his diabolo? Clearly, something more than just an extra chromosome is going on.

As genetic testing has become more widespread, it has revealed just how many other genetic anomalies many of us live with—not only extra or missing chromosomes, but whole chunks of chromosome getting deleted, chunks duplicated, chunks stuck onto a different chromosome altogether, mutations that should be deadly but that show up in the healthy adult in front of you. Every person carries a set of mutations unique to them. This is why new and rare genetic diseases are so hard to diagnose—if you compare a person's DNA with a reference genome, you come up with hundreds of thousands of differences, most of them utterly irrelevant to the disease. What, then, is normal? Genetic testing, as a medical service, is used to enforce the boundaries of "normal" by screening out the anomalous, but seeing all the anomalies that are compatible with life might actually expand our understanding of normal. "It's expanded mine," Sable told me.

Sable offered this up as a general observation. He didn't think he was qualified to speculate on what this meant for the future of Down syndrome screening, but I found this conversation about genetics unexpectedly resonant with something parents had told me. David Perry, a writer in Minnesota whose 13-year-old son has Down syndrome, said he disliked how people with Down syndrome are portrayed as angelic and cute; he found it flattening and dehumanizing. He pointed instead to the way the neurodiversity movement has worked to bring autism and ADHD into the realm of normal neurological variation. "We need more kinds of normal," another father, Johannes Dybkjær Andersson, a musician and creative director in Copenhagen, said. "That's a good thing, when people show up in our lives"—as his daughter, Sally, did six years ago—"and they are just normal in a totally different way." Her brain processes the world

differently than his does. She is unfiltered and open. Many parents have told me how this quality can be awkward or disruptive at times, but it can also break the stifling bounds of social propriety.

Stephanie Meredith, the director of the National Center for Prenatal and Postnatal Resources at the University of Kentucky, told me of the time her 20-year-old son saw his sister collide with another player on the basketball court. She hit the ground so hard that an audible crack went through the gym. Before Meredith could react, her son had already leapt from the bleachers and picked his sister up. "He wasn't worried about the rules; he wasn't worried about decorum. It was just responding and taking care of her," Meredith told me. She had recently been asked a simple but probing question: What was she most proud of about her son that was not an achievement or a milestone? The incident on the basketball court was one that came to mind. "It doesn't have to do with accomplishment," she said. "It has to do with caring about another human being."

That question had stayed with Meredith—and it stayed with me—because of how subtly yet powerfully it reframes what parents should value in their children: not grades or basketball trophies or college-acceptance letters or any of the things parents usually brag about. By doing so, it opens the door to a world less obsessed with achievement. Meredith pointed out that Down syndrome is defined and diagnosed by a medical system made up of people who have to be highly successful to get there, who likely base part of their identity on their intelligence. This is the system giving parents the tools to decide what kind of children to have. Might it be biased on the question of whose lives have value?

• • •

WHEN MARY WASSERMAN gave birth to her son, Michael, in 1961, kids with Down syndrome in America were still routinely sent to state institutions. She remembers the doctor announcing, "It's a mongoloid idiot"—the term used before chromosome counting became common—and telling her "it" should go to the state institution right away. Wasserman had volunteered for a week at such an institution in high school, and she would never forget the sights, the sounds, the *smells*. The children were soiled, uncared for, unnurtured. In defiance of her doctor, she took Michael home.

The early years were not easy for Wasserman, who was a divorced mother for much of Michael's childhood. She worked to support them both. There weren't really any formal day cares then, and the women who ran informal ones out of their homes didn't want Michael. "The other mothers were not comfortable," one of them told her after his first week. Others rejected him outright. She hired private babysitters, but Michael didn't have playmates. It wasn't until he was 8, when a school for kids with disabilities opened nearby, that Michael went to school for the first time.

Michael is 59 now. The life of a child born with Down syndrome today is very different. State institutions closed down after exposés of the unsanitary and cruel conditions that Wasserman had glimpsed as a high-school student. After children with disabilities go home from the hospital today, they have access to a bevy of speech, physical, and occupational therapies from the government—usually at no cost to families. Public schools are required to provide equal access to education for kids with disabilities. In 1990, the Americans With Disabilities Act prohibited discrimination in employment, public transportation, day cares, and other businesses. Inclusion has made people with disabilities a visible and normal part of society; instead of being hidden away in institutions, they live among everyone else. Thanks to the activism of parents like Wasserman, all of these changes have taken place in her son's lifetime.

Does she wish Michael had had the opportunities that kids have now? "Well," she says, "I think maybe in some ways it was easier for us." Of course the therapies would have helped Michael. But there's more pressure on kids and parents today. She wasn't shuttling Michael to appointments or fighting with the school to get him included in general classes or helping him apply to the college programs that have now proliferated for students with intellectual disabilities. "It was less stressful for us than it is today," she says. Raising a child with a disability has become a lot more intensive—not unlike raising any child.

I can't count how many times, in the course of reporting this story, people remarked to me, "You know, people with Down syndrome work and go to college now!" This is an important corrective to the low expectations that persist and a poignant reminder of how a transforming society has transformed the lives of people with Down syndrome. But it also does not capture the full range of experiences, especially for people whose disabilities are more serious and those whose families do not have money and connections. Jobs and college are achievements worth celebrating—like any kid's milestones—but I've wondered why we so often need to point to achievements for evidence that the lives of people with Down syndrome are meaningful.

When I had asked Grete Fält-Hansen what it was like to open up her life to parents trying to decide what to do after a prenatal diagnosis of Down syndrome, I suppose I was asking her what it was like to open up her life to the judgment of those parents—and also of me, a journalist, who was here asking the same questions. As she told me, she had worried at first that people might not like her son. But she understands now how different each family's circumstances can be and how difficult the choice can be. "I feel sad about thinking about pregnant women and the fathers, that they are met with this choice. It's almost impossible," she said. "Therefore, I don't judge them."

Karl Emil had grown bored while we talked in English. He tugged on Grete's hair and smiled sheepishly to remind us that he was still there, that the stakes of our conversation were very real and very human. *A*

Opposite page: *Grete Fält-Hansen and her son, Karl Emil, have met many expecting parents who are deciding what to do after a prenatal diagnosis of Down syndrome.*

Sarah Zhang is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

PETER TURCHIN BELIEVES HE HAS DISCOVERED IRON LAWS THAT DICTATE THE RISE AND FALL OF CIVILIZATIONS. HE PREDICTS A DIRE DECADE FOR THE UNITED STATES.

THE HISTORIAN WHO SEES THE FUTURE

BY GRAEME WOOD

ILLUSTRATION BY NICOLAS ORTEGA

Peter Turchin, one of the world's experts on pine beetles and possibly also on human beings, met me reluctantly this summer on the campus of the University of Connecticut at Storrs, where he teaches. Like many people during the pandemic, he preferred to limit his human contact. He also doubted whether human contact would have much value anyway, when his mathematical models could already tell me everything I needed to know.

But he had to leave his office sometime. ("One way you know I am Russian is that I cannot think sitting down," he told me. "I have to go for a walk.") Neither of us had seen much of anyone since the pandemic had closed the country several months before. The campus was quiet. "A week ago, it was even more like a neutron bomb hit," Turchin said. Animals were timidly reclaiming the campus, he said: squirrels, woodchucks, deer, even an occasional red-tailed hawk. During our walk, groundskeepers and a few kids on skateboards were the only other representatives of the human population in sight.

The year 2020 has been kind to Turchin, for many of the same reasons it has been hell for the rest of us. Cities on fire, elected leaders endorsing violence, homicides surging—to a normal American, these are apocalyptic signs. To Turchin, they indicate that his models, which incorporate thousands of years of data about human history, are working. ("Not all of human history," he corrected me once. "Just the last 10,000 years.") He has been warning for a decade that a few key social and political trends portend an "age of discord," civil unrest and carnage worse than most Americans have experienced. In 2010, he predicted that the unrest would get serious around 2020, and that it wouldn't let up until those social and political trends reversed. Havoc at the level of the late 1960s and early '70s is the best-case scenario; all-out civil war is the worst.

The fundamental problems, he says, are a dark triad of social maladies: a bloated elite class, with too few elite jobs to go around; declining living standards among the general population; and a government that can't cover its financial positions. His models, which track these factors in other societies across history, are too complicated to explain in a nontechnical publication. But they've succeeded in impressing writers for nontechnical publications, and have won him comparisons to other authors of "megahistories," such as Jared Diamond and Yuval Noah Harari. The *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat had once found Turchin's historical modeling unpersuasive, but 2020 made him a believer: "At this point," Douthat recently admitted on a podcast, "I feel like you have to pay a little more attention to him."

Diamond and Harari aimed to describe the history of humanity. Turchin looks into a distant, science-fiction future for peers. In *War and Peace and War* (2006), his most accessible book, he likens himself to Hari Seldon, the "maverick mathematician" of Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* series, who can foretell the rise and fall of empires. In those 10,000 years' worth of data, Turchin believes he has found iron laws that dictate the fates of human societies.

The fate of our own society, he says, is not going to be pretty, at least in the near term. "It's too late," he told me as we passed Mirror Lake, which UConn's website describes as a favorite place for students to "read, relax, or ride on the wooden swing." The problems are deep and structural—not the type that the tedious process of democratic change can fix in time to forestall mayhem. Turchin likens America to a huge ship headed directly for an iceberg: "If you have a discussion among the crew about which way to turn, you will not turn in time, and you hit the iceberg directly." The past 10 years or so have been discussion. That sickening crunch you now hear—steel twisting, rivets popping—is the sound of the ship hitting the iceberg.

"We are almost guaranteed" five hellish years, Turchin predicts, and likely a decade or more. The problem, he says, is that there are too many people like me. "You are *ruling class*," he said, with no more rancor than if he had informed me that I had brown hair, or a slightly newer iPhone than his. Of the three factors driving social violence, Turchin stresses most heavily "elite overproduction"—the tendency of a society's ruling classes to grow faster than the number of positions for their members to fill. One way for a ruling class to grow is biologically—think of Saudi Arabia, where princes and princesses are born faster than royal roles can be created for them. In the United States, elites overproduce themselves through economic and educational upward mobility: More and more people get rich, and more and more get educated. Neither of these sounds bad on its own. Don't we want everyone to be rich and educated? The problems begin when money and Harvard degrees become like royal titles in Saudi Arabia. If lots of people have them, but only some have real power, the ones who don't have power eventually turn on the ones who do.

In the United States, Turchin told me, you can see more and more aspirants fighting for a single job at, say, a prestigious law firm, or in an influential government sinecure, or (here it got personal) at a national magazine. Perhaps seeing the holes in my T-shirt, Turchin noted that a person can be part of an ideological elite rather than an economic one. (He doesn't view himself as a member of either. A professor reaches at most a few hundred students, he told me. "You reach hundreds of thousands.") Elite jobs do not multiply as fast as elites do. There are still only 100 Senate seats, but more people than ever have enough money or degrees to think they should be running the country. "You have a situation now where there are many more elites fighting for the same position, and some portion of them will convert to counter-elites," Turchin said.

Donald Trump, for example, may appear elite (rich father, Wharton degree, gilded commodes), but Trumpism is a counter-elite movement. His government is packed with credentialed nobodies who were shut out of previous administrations,

sometimes for good reasons and sometimes because the Groton-Yale establishment simply didn't have any vacancies. Trump's former adviser and chief strategist Steve Bannon, Turchin said, is a "paradigmatic example" of a counter-elite. He grew up working-class, went to Harvard Business School, and got rich as an investment banker and by owning a small stake in the syndication rights to *Seinfeld*. None of that translated to political power until he allied himself with the common people. "He was a counter-elite who used Trump to break through, to put the white working males back in charge," Turchin said.

Elite overproduction creates counter-elites, and counter-elites look for allies among the commoners. If commoners' living standards slip—not relative to the elites, but relative to what they had before—they accept the overtures of the counter-elites and start oiling the axles of their tumbrels. Commoners' lives grow worse, and the few who try to pull themselves onto the elite lifeboat are pushed back into the water by those already aboard. The final trigger of impending collapse, Turchin says, tends to be state insolvency. At some point rising insecurity becomes expensive. The elites have to pacify unhappy citizens with handouts and freebies—and when these run out, they have to police dissent and oppress people. Eventually the state exhausts all short-term solutions, and what was heretofore a coherent civilization disintegrates.

Turchin's prognostications would be easier to dismiss as barstool theorizing if the disintegration were not happening now, roughly as the Seer of Storrs foretold 10 years ago. If the next 10 years are as seismic as he says they will be, his insights will have to be accounted for by historians and social scientists—assuming, of course, that there are still universities left to employ such people.

Turchin was born in 1957 in Obninsk, Russia, a city built by the Soviet state as a kind of nerd heaven, where scientists could collaborate and live together. His father, Valentin, was a physicist and political dissident, and his mother, Tatiana, had trained as a geologist. They moved to Moscow when he was 7 and in 1978 fled to New York as political refugees. There they quickly found a community that spoke the household language, which was science. Valentin taught at the City University of New York, and Peter studied biology at NYU and earned a zoology doctorate from Duke.

Turchin wrote a dissertation on the Mexican bean beetle, a cute, ladybug-like pest that feasts on legumes in areas between the United States and Guatemala. When Turchin began his research, in the early 1980s, ecology was evolving in a way that some fields already had. The old way to study bugs was to collect them and describe them: count their legs, measure their bellies, and pin them to pieces of particleboard for future reference. (Go to the Natural History Museum in London, and in the old storerooms you can still see the shelves of bell jars and cases of specimens.) In the '70s, the Australian physicist Robert May had turned his attention to ecology and helped transform it into a mathematical science whose tools included supercomputers along with butterfly nets and bottle traps. Yet in the early days of his career, Turchin told me, "the majority of ecologists were still quite math-phobic."

Turchin did, in fact, do fieldwork, but he contributed to ecology primarily by collecting and using data to model the dynamics of populations—for example, determining why a pine-beetle population might take over a forest, or why that same population might decline. (He also worked on moths, voles, and lemmings.)

In the late '90s, disaster struck: Turchin realized that he knew everything he ever wanted to know about beetles. He compares himself to Thomasina Coverly, the girl genius in the Tom Stoppard play *Arcadia*, who obsessed about the life cycles of grouse and other creatures around her Derbyshire country house. Stoppard's character had the disadvantage of living a century and a half before the development of chaos theory. "She gave up because it was just too complicated," Turchin said. "I gave up because I solved the problem."

Turchin published one final monograph, *Complex Population Dynamics: A Theoretical/Empirical Synthesis* (2003), then broke the news to his UConn colleagues that he would be saying a permanent sayonara to the field, although he would continue to draw a salary as a tenured professor in their department. (He no longer gets raises, but he told me he was already "at a comfortable level, and, you know, you don't need so much money.") "Usually a midlife crisis means you divorce your old wife and marry a graduate student," Turchin said. "I divorced an old science and married a new one."

One of his last papers appeared in the journal *Oikos*. "Does population ecology have general laws?" Turchin asked. Most ecologists said no: Populations have their own dynamics, and each situation is different. Pine beetles reproduce, run amok, and ravage a forest for pine-beetle reasons, but that does not mean mosquito or tick populations will rise and fall according to the same rhythms. Turchin suggested that "there are several very general law-like propositions" that could be applied to ecology. After its long adolescence of collecting and cataloging, ecology had enough data to describe these universal laws—and to stop pretending that every species had its own idiosyncrasies. "Ecologists know

TURCHIN'S PROGNOSTICATIONS WOULD BE EASIER TO DISMISS AS BARSTOOL THEORIZING IF THEY WEREN'T PLAYING OUT NOW, ROUGHLY AS HE FORETOLD 10 YEARS AGO.

these laws and should call them laws," he said. Turchin proposed, for example, that populations of organisms grow or decline exponentially, not linearly. This is why if you buy two guinea pigs, you will soon have not just a few more guinea pigs but a home—and then a neighborhood—full of the damn things (as long as you keep feeding them). This law is simple enough to be understood by a high-school math student, and it describes the fortunes of everything from ticks to starlings to camels. The laws Turchin applied to ecology—and his insistence on calling them laws—generated respectful controversy at the time. Now they are cited in textbooks.

Having left ecology, Turchin began similar research that attempted to formulate general laws for a different animal species: human beings. He'd long had a hobbyist's interest in history. But he also had a predator's instinct to survey the savanna of human knowledge and pounce on the weakest prey. "All sciences go through this transition to mathematization," Turchin told me. "When I had my midlife crisis, I was looking for a subject where I could help with this transition to a mathematized science. There was only one left, and that was history."

Historians read books, letters, and other texts. Occasionally, if they are archaeologically inclined, they dig up potsherds and coins. But to Turchin, relying solely on these methods was the equivalent of studying bugs by pinning them to particleboard and counting their antennae. If the historians weren't going to usher in a mathematical revolution themselves, he would storm their departments and do it for them.

"There is a longstanding debate among scientists and philosophers as to whether history has general laws," he and a co-author wrote in *Secular Cycles* (2009). "A basic premise of our study is that historical societies can be studied with the same methods physicists and biologists used to study natural systems." Turchin founded a journal, *Cliodynamics*, dedicated to "the search for general principles explaining the functioning and dynamics of historical societies." (The term is his coinage; Clio is the muse of history.) He had already announced the discipline's arrival in an article in *Nature*, where he likened historians reluctant to build general principles to his colleagues in biology "who care most for the private life of warblers." "Let history continue to focus on the particular," he wrote. Cliodynamics would be a new science. While historians dusted bell jars in the basement of the university, Turchin and his followers would be upstairs, answering the big questions.

To seed the journal's research, Turchin masterminded a digital archive of historical and archaeological data. The coding of its records requires finesse, he told me, because (for example) the method of determining the size of the elite-aspirant class of medieval France might differ from the measure of the same class in the present-day United States. (For medieval France, a proxy is the membership in its noble class, which became glutted with second and third sons who had no castles or manors to rule over. One American proxy, Turchin says, is the number of lawyers.) But once the data are entered, after vetting by Turchin and specialists in the historical period under review, they offer quick and powerful suggestions about historical phenomena.

Historians of religion have long pondered the relationship between the rise of complex civilization and the belief in gods—especially "moralizing gods," the kind who scold you for sinning. Last year, Turchin and a dozen co-authors mined the database ("records from 414 societies that span the past 10,000 years from 30 regions around the world, using 51 measures of social complexity and 4 measures of supernatural enforcement of morality") to answer the question conclusively. They found that complex societies *are* more likely to have moralizing gods, but the gods tend to start their scolding after the societies get complex, not before. As the database expands, it will attempt to remove more questions from the realm of humanistic speculation and sock them away in a drawer marked ANSWERED.

One of Turchin's most unwelcome conclusions is that complex societies arise through war. The effect of war is to reward communities that organize themselves to fight and survive, and it tends to wipe out ones that are simple and small-scale. "No one wants to accept that we live in the societies we do"—rich, complex ones with universities and museums and philosophy and art—"because of an ugly thing like war," he said. But the data are clear: Darwinian processes select for complex societies because they kill off simpler ones. The notion that democracy finds its strength in its essential goodness and moral improvement over its rival systems is likewise fanciful. Instead, democratic societies flourish because they have a memory of being nearly obliterated by an external enemy. They avoided extinction only through collective action, and the memory of that collective action makes democratic politics easier to conduct in the present, Turchin said. "There is a very close correlation between adopting democratic institutions and having to fight a war for survival."

Also unwelcome: the conclusion that civil unrest might soon be upon us, and might reach the point of shattering the country. In 2012, Turchin published an analysis of political violence in the United States, again starting with a database. He classified 1,590 incidents—riots, lynchings, any political event that killed at least one person—from 1780 to 2010. Some periods were placid and others bloody, with peaks of brutality in 1870, 1920, and 1970, a 50-year cycle. Turchin excludes the ultimate violent incident, the Civil War, as a "sui generis event." The exclusion may seem suspicious, but to a statistician, "trimming outliers" is standard practice. Historians and journalists, by contrast, tend to *focus* on outliers—because they are interesting—and sometimes miss grander trends.

Certain aspects of this cyclical view require relearning portions of American history, with special attention paid to the numbers of elites. The industrialization of the North, starting in the mid-19th century, Turchin says, made huge numbers of people rich. The elite herd was culled during the Civil War, which killed off or impoverished the southern slaveholding class, and during Reconstruction, when America experienced a wave of assassinations of Republican politicians. (The most famous of these was the assassination of James A. Garfield, the 20th president of the United States, by a lawyer who had demanded but not received a political appointment.) It wasn't until the Progressive reforms of the 1920s, and later

PHOTOGRAPH BY MALIKE SIDIBE

Peter Turchin, photographed in Connecticut's Natchaug State Forest in October. The former ecologist seeks to apply mathematical rigor to the study of human history.

the New Deal, that elite overproduction actually slowed, at least for a time.

This oscillation between violence and peace, with elite overproduction as the first horseman of the recurring American apocalypse, inspired Turchin's 2020 prediction. In 2010, when *Nature* surveyed scientists about their predictions for the coming decade, most took the survey as an invitation to self-promote and rhapsodize, dreamily, about coming advances in their fields. Turchin retorted with his prophecy of doom and said that nothing short of fundamental change would stop another violent turn.

Turchin's prescriptions are, as a whole, vague and unclassifiable. Some sound like ideas that might have come from Senator Elizabeth Warren—tax the elites until there are fewer of them—while others, such as a call to reduce immigration to keep wages high for American workers, resemble Trumpian protectionism. Other policies are simply heretical. He opposes credential-oriented higher education, for example, which he says is a way of mass-producing elites without also mass-producing elite jobs for them to occupy. Architects of such polices, he told me, are "creating surplus elites, and some become counter-elites." A smarter approach would be to keep the elite numbers small, and the real wages of the general population on a constant rise.

How to do that? Turchin says he doesn't really know, and it isn't his job to know. "I don't really think in terms of specific policy," he told me. "We need to stop the runaway process of elite overproduction, but I don't know what will work to do that, and nobody else does. Do you increase taxation? Raise the minimum wage? Universal basic income?" He conceded that each of these possibilities would have unpredictable effects. He recalled a story he'd heard back when he was still an ecologist: The Forest Service had once implemented a plan to reduce the population of bark beetles with pesticide—only to find that the pesticide killed off the beetles' predators even more effectively than it killed the beetles. The intervention resulted in more beetles than before. The lesson, he said, was to practice "adaptive management," changing and modulating your approach as you go.

Eventually, Turchin hopes, our understanding of historical dynamics will mature to the point that no government will make policy without reflecting on whether it is hurtling toward a mathematically preordained disaster. He says he could imagine an Asimovian agency that keeps tabs on leading indicators and advises accordingly. It would be like the Federal Reserve, but instead of monitoring inflation and controlling monetary supply, it would be tasked with averting total civilizational collapse.

Historians have not, as a whole, accepted Turchin's terms of surrender graciously. Since at least the 19th century, the discipline has embraced the idea that history is irreducibly complex, and by now most historians believe that the diversity of human activity will foil any attempt to come up with general laws, especially predictive ones. (As Jo Guldi, a historian at Southern Methodist University, put it to me, "Some historians regard Turchin the way astronomers regard Nostradamus.") Instead, each historical event must be lovingly described, and its idiosyncrasies understood to be limited in relevance to other events. The idea that one thing causes another, and that the causal pattern can tell you about sequences of events in another place or century, is foreign territory.

One might even say that what defines history as a humanistic enterprise is the belief that it is not governed by scientific laws—that the working parts of human societies are not like billiard balls, which, if arranged at certain angles and struck with a certain amount of force, will invariably crack just so and roll toward a corner pocket of war, or a side pocket of peace. Turchin counters that he has heard claims of irreducible complexity before, and that steady application of the scientific method has succeeded in managing that complexity. Consider, he says, the concept of temperature—something so obviously quantifiable now that we laugh at the idea that it's too vague to measure. "Back before people knew what temperature was, the best thing you could do is to say you're hot or cold," Turchin told me. The concept depended on many factors: wind, humidity, ordinary human differences in perception. Now we have thermometers. Turchin wants to invent a thermometer for human societies that will measure when they are likely to boil over into war.

One social scientist who can speak to Turchin in his own mathematical argot is Dingxin Zhao, a sociology professor at the University of Chicago who is—incredibly—also a former mathematical ecologist. (He earned a doctorate modeling carrot-weevil population dynamics before earning a second doctorate in Chinese political sociology.) "I came from a natural-science background," Zhao told me, "and in a way I am sympathetic to Turchin. If you come to social science from natural sciences, you have a powerful way of looking at the world. But you may also make big mistakes."

Zhao said that human beings are just much more complicated than bugs. "Biological species don't strategize in a very flexible way," he told me. After millennia of evolutionary R&D, a woodpecker will come up with ingenious ways to stick its beak into a tree in search of food. It might even have social characteristics—an alpha woodpecker might strong-wing beta woodpeckers into giving it first dibs

EVENTUALLY, TURCHIN HOPES, NO GOVERNMENT WILL MAKE POLICY WITHOUT REFLECTING ON WHETHER IT IS HURTLING TOWARD A MATHEMATICALLY PREORDAINED DISASTER.

LifeStraw®
by VESTERGAARD

Design meets protection

LifeStraw Home

Advanced water filter pitcher

FILTERS

- Lead, mercury & heavy metals
- Bacteria & parasites
- Chemicals (PFAS, pesticides & herbicides)
- Microplastics

YOUR PURCHASE HAS IMPACT

For every LifeStraw product purchased, a child in need receives safe water for an entire school year.

www.lifestraw.com

AWARD-WINNING FILTRATION

gia global innovation awards
home + housewares
product design excellence
2020 GLOBAL HONOREE

GOLD AWARD 2019

reddot award 2019
winner

on the tastiest termites. But humans are much wilier social creatures, Zhao said. A woodpecker will eat a termite, but it "will not explain that he is doing so because it is his divine right." Humans pull ideological power moves like this all the time, Zhao said, and to understand "the decisions of a Donald Trump, or a Xi Jinping," a natural scientist has to incorporate the myriad complexities of human strategy, emotion, and belief. "I made that change," Zhao told me, "and Peter Turchin has not."

Turchin is nonetheless filling a historiographical niche left empty by academic historians with allergies not just to science but to a wide-angle view of the past. He places himself in a Russian tradition prone to thinking sweeping, Tolstoyan thoughts about the path of history. By comparison, American historians mostly look like micro-historians. Few would dare to write a history of the United States, let alone one of human civilization. Turchin's approach is also Russian, or post-Soviet, in its rejection of the Marxist theory of historical progress that had been the official ideology of the Soviet state. When the U.S.S.R. collapsed, so too did the requirement that historical writing acknowledge international communism as the condition toward which the arc of history was bending. Turchin dropped ideology altogether, he says: Rather than bending toward progress, the arc in his view bends all the way back on itself, in a never-ending loop of boom and bust. This puts him at odds with American historians, many of whom harbor an unspoken faith that liberal democracy is the end state of all history.

Writing history in this sweeping, cyclical way is easier if you are trained outside the field. "If you look at who is doing these megahistories, more often than not, it's not actual historians," Walter Scheidel, an actual historian at Stanford, told me. (Scheidel, whose books span millennia, takes Turchin's work seriously and has even co-written a paper with him.) Instead they come from scientific fields where these taboos do not dominate. The genre's most famous book, *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (1997), beheld 13,000 years of human history in a single volume. Its author, Jared Diamond, spent the first half of his career as one of the world's foremost experts on the physiology of the gallbladder. Steven Pinker, a cognitive psychologist who studies how children acquire parts of speech, has written a megahistory about the decline of violence across thousands of years, and about human flourishing since the Enlightenment. Most historians I asked about these men—and for some reason megahistory is nearly always a male pursuit—used terms like *laughingstock* and *patently tendentious* to describe them.

Pinker retorts that historians are resentful of the attention "disciplinary carpetbaggers" like himself have received for applying scientific methods to the humanities and coming up with conclusions that had eluded the old methods. He is skeptical of Turchin's claims about historical cycles, but he believes in data-driven historical inquiry. "Given the noisiness of human behavior and the prevalence of cognitive biases, it's easy to delude oneself about a historical period or trend by picking whichever event suits one's narrative," he says. The only answer is to use large data sets. Pinker thanks traditional historians for their work collating these data sets; he told me in an email that they "deserve extraordinary admiration for their original research ('brushing the mouse shit off moldy court records in the basement of town halls,' as one historian put it to me)." He calls not for surrender but for a truce. "There's no reason that traditional history and data science can't merge into a cooperative enterprise," Pinker wrote. "Knowing stuff is hard; we need to use every available tool."

Guldi, the Southern Methodist University professor, is one scholar who has embraced tools previously scorned by historians. She is a pioneer of data-driven history that considers timescales beyond a human lifetime. Her primary technique is the mining of texts—for example, sifting through the millions and millions of words captured in parliamentary debate in order to understand the history of land use in the final century of the British empire. Guldi may seem a potential recruit to cliodynamics, but her approach to data sets is grounded in the traditional methods of the humanities. She counts the frequency of words, rather than trying to find ways to compare big, fuzzy categories among civilizations. Turchin's conclusions are only as good as his databases, she told me, and any database that tries to code something as complex as who constitutes a society's elites—then tries to make like-to-like comparisons across millennia and oceans—will meet with skepticism from traditional historians, who deny that the subject to which they have devoted their lives can be expressed in Excel format. Turchin's data are also limited to big-picture characteristics observed over 10,000 years, or about 200 lifetimes. By scientific standards, a sample size of 200 is small, even if it is all humanity has.

Yet 200 lifetimes is at least more ambitious than the average historical purview of only one. And the reward for that ambition—in addition to the bragging rights for having potentially explained everything that has ever happened to human beings—includes something every writer wants: an audience. Thinking small rarely gets you quoted in *The New York Times*. Turchin has not yet attracted the mass audiences of a Diamond, Pinker, or Harari. But he has lured connoisseurs of political catastrophe, journalists and pundits looking for big answers to pressing questions, and true believers in the power of science to conquer uncertainty and improve the world. He has certainly outsold most beetle experts.

If he is right, it is hard to see how history will avoid assimilating his insights—if it can avoid being abolished by them. Privately, some historians have told me they consider the tools he uses powerful, if a little crude. Cliodynamics is now on a long list of methods that arrived on the scene promising to revolutionize history. Many were fads, but some survived that stage to take their rightful place in an expanding historiographical tool kit. Turchin's methods have already shown their power. Cliodynamics offers scientific hypotheses, and human history will give us more and more opportunities to check its predictions—revealing whether Peter Turchin is a Hari Seldon or a mere Nostradamus. For my own sake, there are few thinkers whom I am more eager to see proved wrong. *A*

Graeme Wood is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

DON'T WAIT. VACCINATE!

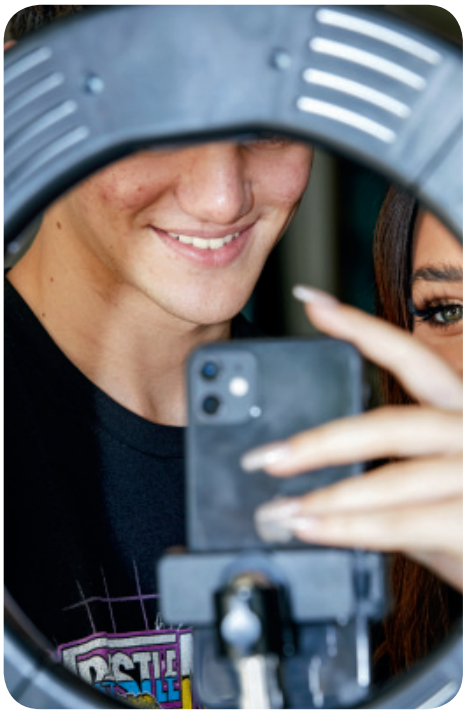
Vaccination can help make the moments that matter possible, by helping stop the spread of vaccine-preventable diseases and saving millions of lives globally each year.

Every moment matters. This flu season, talk to your doctor or pharmacist about all recommended vaccines.

BroughtByVaccines.com

gsk

THE HARDEST-WORKING



ON TIKTOK, TEENS ARE BOTH THE PRODUCERS AND THE CONSUMERS OF AN IRREPRESSIBLE NEW WORLD OF ENTERTAINMENT. NO MEDIUM HAS EVER EMERGED SO QUICKLY OR CLEAVED A GENERATION FROM ITS ELDERS SO COMPLETELY.

CAN THE GOOD TIMES LAST?

KIDS IN SHOW BUSINESS

BY RACHEL MONROE

THE TECH ISSUE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL SCHMELLING

COLLAB DAY

at Clubhouse Beverly Hills was scheduled to start at 2 p.m., but that time came and went and the mansion was still as sleepy as a college dorm on Saturday morning. In one of the house's four living rooms, an enormous oil painting of George Washington loomed over a pale leather couch. A whiteboard listed ideas for future TikTok videos: shooting range, wine tasting, go-karts, Joshua Tree. Outside, by the sparkling pool, the lawn was studded with statues of Greek gods and human-size hamster balls.

In the kitchen, Casius Dean, an 18-year-old from Hawaii who moved to Los Angeles on his coronavirus stimulus check and is now a full-time photographer at the house, told me that the weekly collab days are an occasion for "people with different levels of social media to create together." A videographer breezed through on his way to Starbucks. "The girls don't even have their makeup on," he said, rolling his eyes. The only one who appeared ready was Teala Dunn, the house's oldest resident at 23, who was wandering around the mansion in a bright-turquoise bikini. As a child, Teala had played a kidnapped girl on *Law & Order: SVU* and voiced a bunny in a Disney movie. But those were the old ways to build a career in entertainment. Her TikToks, many of which are about how she has a lot of bikinis but can't swim, have been viewed more than half a billion times. Teala enlisted Dean to take pictures of her by the pool, where she tossed her hair and tilted her chin at various angles. After a few minutes, she grabbed his phone and squinted at the images. "These are *everything*," she said.

A rotating cast of 12 influencers lives in Clubhouse Beverly Hills, their every move documented by three full-time media staff. A real-estate developer, Amir Ben-Yohanan, pays the rent and supplies the creators with whatever gear they need to make content: tripods, ring lights, dirt bikes, pool floats shaped like flamingos. In exchange, the residents make several TikToks a day. "I would compare it to a Hollywood studio," Ben-Yohanan told me. "The only difference here is the influencers live in the studio." That, and the movies are a maximum of one minute long.

Teen culture used to be a subset of mass culture; kids may have watched different television shows and movies than their parents, but they were still watching television and going to the multiplex. These days, if you talk to a teenager, you'll find that they seem to exist in an entirely separate entertainment universe, one in which they're both the consumers and the producers of the content. As early as 2014, young people were more likely to admire YouTubers than traditional Hollywood celebrities. By 2017, 71 percent of teenagers reported watching three or more hours of video on their smartphone a day. TikTok surpassed 2 billion downloads in the spring, and the pandemic only accelerated its ascendance: As schools closed and children quarantined with their parents, the app claimed an even greater share of teen attention.

Over the summer, TikTok faced an improbable foe, the president of the United States, who, citing privacy concerns, threatened a ban or forced sale of the Chinese-owned app. Yet Donald Trump's war on TikTok did little, if anything, to slow its growth. In the third quarter of 2020, it was downloaded nearly 200 million times worldwide, more than any other app, even Zoom.

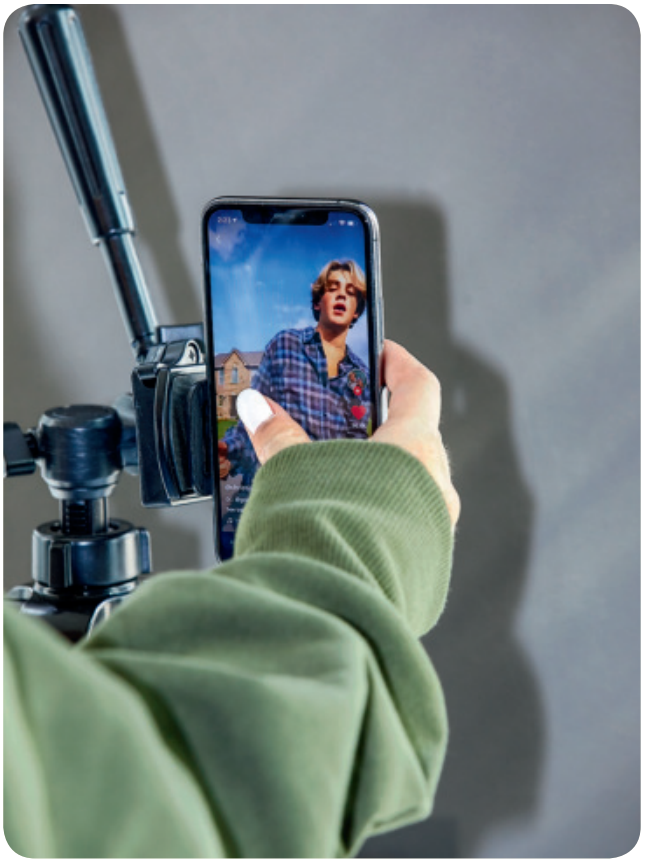
Magazines and gossip websites began covering its stars alongside, or instead of, traditional Hollywood stars. "You don't see the typical celebrity, because they're not doing films, they're not on the red carpet, they're not doing anything—they're with their family or whatever," Morgan Riddle, who was at the time the head of brand development for Clubhouse Beverly Hills, told me in August. "In these content houses, we have a full media team. So in the weirdest way, the pandemic has benefited us in that we've all been cooped up and no one has anything to do except make content."

By 3:30, the house was beginning to fill up with young people, few if any wearing masks. Some came from other creator mansions that are part of the larger Clubhouse family: Clubhouse Next (for up-and-coming creators), Clubhouse FTB ("for the boys"), Not a Content House (an all-girls house for younger creators). Girls brought plus-ones, boys brought plus-ones, plus-ones brought plus-ones. Kids on the cusp of social-media fame had flown in from Georgia or North Carolina to boost their profiles by making content with bigger creators. A tiny girl in ripped jeans, a white crop top, and impeccable makeup turned out to be Coco Quinn, a YouTuber and TikToker who is, according to the Gen Z encyclopedia FamousBirthdays.com, the second-most-popular 12-year-old in the country.

The crowd spilled out onto the patio and the lawn surrounding the pool. The girls claimed the tripods and broke into small groups to film themselves dancing. They wore outfits optimized for movement—sweatpants, crop tops, sneakers. Several of the older ones drank from plastic cups filled to the brim with rosé. They all knew the dance trends that were popular on TikTok that week and performed them over and over again until the energy was right, tweaking the hand gestures to put their own spin on the moves. The air was full of a purposeful, pep-rally enthusiasm. Inside, a catering company served up unlimited poke bowls. Teala watched Coco swivel her hips. "I wish I was 12," she said with a sigh.

A cluster of boys stood on the patio, discussing legal documents. The influencer contract for one agency was "like 80 pages," a 17-year-old complained. Another boy was grateful he'd checked with a lawyer before completing his paperwork. "It had me for perpetuity," he explained. "You have to know what you're signing."

The major gossip that day was about Sway House, a content mansion populated by a crew of rowdy, photogenic boys ages 17 to 21. The Sway guys had been hosting enormous parties despite Los Angeles County's prohibition against gatherings of any kind. One week earlier, the county's public-health director had warned of "explosive growth" in coronavirus cases among young people; 18-to-29-year-olds had a higher case rate than any other age group. Mayor Eric Garcetti had just disconnected Sway House's electricity. "Despite several warnings, this house has turned into a nightclub in the hills," he said in a statement. The house's most famous member, Bryce Hall, responded by adding a new hoodie to his Party Animal merch line; it featured a shattered light bulb and the phrase LIGHTS OUT.



Previous spread and above: *TikTokers making videos at Clubhouse Beverly Hills in October. A rotating cast of influencers lives in the house. "When you have three people in a video together, that's what users want," one TikTok observer explained. "The content does so much better."*

The Clubhouse collab day, several people assured me, wasn't a party; it was work. By late afternoon, there were more than 50 people hugging and dancing and laughing, with still no masks in sight. "It's hard because our job puts us in touch with so many people," one girl told me. "If you're in social media, you *have to* collaborate."

When a group of boys began jumping off the roof into the pool, I decided it was time to go. More kids were filing into the mansion, and the long driveway was packed with nearly two dozen cars, with more crowding the surrounding street. A masked woman was moving slowly down the sidewalk, writing them all parking tickets.

In November 2017, the Chinese tech company ByteDance acquired Musical.ly, a social-media app whose content consisted primarily of teenage girls lip-synching. Musical.ly was widely considered cringey; the videos were too eager, too nakedly attention-seeking. When ByteDance merged Musical.ly with its own video-sharing platform, TikTok, in August 2018, the newer app was initially tainted with the older one's reputation. Compilations of awkward TikToks—furries dancing, Goth tweens emoting—circulated on YouTube and Twitter. In a world dominated by a handful of tech companies that tend to either squeeze out or acquire any viable competition, the new app seemed unlikely to expand beyond a niche audience. "I was skeptical. I didn't know if TikTok was going to evaporate," Evan Britton, the founder of Famous Birthdays, told me. "I was shocked by how quickly it grew."

Ahlyssa Velasquez joined TikTok in 2019. That summer, when she arrived for her freshman year of college, girls she didn't know would run up to her and say, Oh my God, it's TikTok girl!

Ahlyssa Velasquez, a redheaded theater kid from Avondale, Arizona, began posting TikToks as @itsahlyssa in 2019, during her senior year of high school. She didn't mind that people made fun of the app; she felt like an outsider anyway, so who cared? Posting a 15-second TikTok was less work than making a YouTube video and less filtered and posed than Instagram. TikTok videos had a cozy, bedroom vibe (though many TikTokers prefer to film in the bathroom, where the lighting is more flattering). Kids filmed themselves doing what they've been doing for ages—singing, dancing, pranking their siblings, mocking their parents—but now they had a potential audience of millions. ByteDance was willing to dig deep to build that audience: The company reportedly spent nearly $1 billion on advertising for TikTok in 2018, largely on other social platforms.

Young women were among the first to cotton on to TikTok's appeal. At a time when other social-media platforms were embroiled in political scandals, TikTok emphasized fun and entertainment; its stated mission is to "inspire creativity and bring joy" to users. This commitment to lightheartedness can be refreshing as well as disconcerting. When ByteDance was accused of suppressing posts about prodemocracy protests in Hong Kong, the company claimed that there was no censorship—those posts just weren't as interesting to users as viral dance challenges.

The app's central feature is the For You page, or FYP, a personalized content feed in the form of an endless scroll of videos. The FYP relies heavily on passive personalization; an algorithm learns what you like by analyzing your viewing patterns and rapidly adjusting the feed to suit your tastes. By watching TikTok videos, you're training the algorithm to entertain you—and the results are extremely, sometimes uncannily, compelling. The app can seem to know what you want better than you do. Part of the pleasure of TikTok is seeing what unexpected subculture the FYP will serve up for you that day. (Friends and acquaintances I surveyed have recently been steered toward militant-child-socialist TikTok, attractive-ceramicist TikTok, and Draco Malfoy fan-fiction TikTok.) For creators, the app provides sophisticated video-editing tools, as well as a library of sounds and songs to riff on. The platform's commitment to prioritizing engagement makes it "weirdly meritocratic," Eugene Wei, a tech executive and blogger, told me. Celebrities and influencers weren't the only ones getting the views; on TikTok, anyone could go viral.

After her high-school graduation, Ahlyssa went to VidCon, an annual convention in Anaheim, California, for creators and fans of video content. While the big YouTube stars spent much of the weekend talking on panels, the TikTokers had more time to engage with fans. A lot of them asked Ahlyssa to be in their videos; she had distinctive flaming-red hair and a sunny, easygoing disposition—plus, she knew all the dances. By the time she flew home, she had nearly 700,000 followers. Over the course of a weekend, she'd gone from being a fan to being low-key famous.

The content on TikTok is fueled by memes—dance challenges, joke formats, or sound clips that users repeat and parody. To people unfamiliar with the app, TikTok can seem like a bewildering onslaught of trends and in-jokes. This self-referential quality

HARRY TOOHEY

makes it particularly suited to teen culture; watching memes cycle through TikTok reminded me of how swiftly certain pieces of playground lore, like the "pen15 club," rocketed around my middle school in the pre-social-media era. The memes mutate so quickly that if you log off for a week—or a day—you'll return to an incomprehensible world. *Why is everyone posting about being possessed by an owl?* Better, perhaps, to never log off at all.

When Ahlyssa started college at the University of Arizona in August 2019, she got busy with her sorority and stopped posting as much. But then a funny thing began to happen. At parties, drunk girls she didn't know ran up to her: *Oh my God, it's TikTok girl!* The app seemed to have crossed some invisible threshold of popularity. Her sorority sisters were obsessed; when she went home for Christmas break, all her friends wanted to do was post dances. "When Charli started growing big, that's when it really popped off," Ahlyssa told me. "Everyone downloaded the app to figure out who this person named Charli was."

A year ago, Charli D'Amelio lived in suburban Connecticut, in a roomy stone house with homey sayings on plaques in the kitchen. She was a high-school sophomore who loved *Judge Judy* and scary movies; on weekends, her mom drove her to dance competitions. Then, over the course of a few heady months, she became wildly, inexplicably famous. In March of this year, two months before her 16th birthday, Charli officially became the most popular person on TikTok. As of October, she had 94 million followers on the platform—about 6 million more than Rihanna has on Instagram or Taylor Swift has on Twitter. Now when Boomers want to reach the youth, they call Charli—as Ohio Governor Mike DeWine did in March, enlisting her for a social-media campaign encouraging young people to socially distance. Famous Birthdays' Evan Britton told me that Charli's fame is an indication of TikTok's move from the fringes of youth culture to the mainstream. "J.Lo asked Charli to be in her music video. She's interested in Charli's audience, and not vice versa," he told me. "That's how you know it's broken through."

Charli often says that she has no idea why she, of all people, was anointed with TikTok stardom. She downloaded the app in May 2019 at her friends' urging. Some of her first videos were filmed horizontally—better for showing off traditional dance moves, but not at all how TikTok was meant to be used. She quickly adapted to the app and became one of thousands of girls posting videos of themselves dancing. Two months later, a relatively unremarkable post—a duet, or side-by-side response, to a dance video by @move_with_joy, a woman who makes easy dances—blew up.

WHEN I ASKED CHARLI D'AMELIO WHAT MADE A GOOD TIKTOK DANCE, SHE ANSWERED WITHOUT HESITATION: "FACIAL EXPRESSIONS."

The app has had its share of one-hit wonders, but Charli kept adding followers at a rapid clip. Her success was, in part, an accident of timing. Many of TikTok's earliest stars had cut their teeth on YouTube or Vine, the beloved short-form video app that was shut down in 2017. By mid-2019, though, TikTok had grown enough that it was primed to create a breakout star of its own, and that was bound to happen during the summer, when kids are out of school. (The second-most-followed TikToker, 20-year-old Addison Rae Easterling, posted her first viral video shortly after Charli's.)

As Charli's follower count grew, her popularity acquired a reflexive quality; essentially, she became a meme for other TikTokers to react to. There was a flurry of *I don't get why Charli is so popular* posts, followed by backlash-to-the-backlash videos tagged #teamcharli and #unproblematicqueen. "It became a runaway feedback loop," Wei explained. "The more controversy there was about why she was popular, the more popular she became."

By the fall, kids were coming up to Charli and asking for pictures. Her older sister, Dixie, started posting on TikTok in October and promptly gained millions of followers too. (Gen Z stardom is big on siblings, and particularly twins.) Strangers filmed the family when they went out for ice cream. It was an adolescent's nightmare/dream—*everyone is looking at me*. "Every other TikTok rn is about @charlidamelio," Taylor Lorenz, a *New York Times* reporter and expert chronicler of Gen Z trends, tweeted last November. That month, Charli switched to an online school that allowed for a more flexible schedule. Soon, Charli, Dixie, and their parents, Heidi and Marc, were traveling to the West Coast nearly every week to hang out with other TikTokers and explore business opportunities. In May, the family—including their four cheerful, extroverted dogs, Rebel, Cali, Cody, and Belle—relocated to Los Angeles.

This summer, I met the D'Amelios at their current home, a starkly contemporary mansion in the Hollywood Hills. In one corner of the open-plan living room loomed a large black sculpture that looked like a shiny fish-man; the kitchen was spotless and intimidatingly white. The real-estate upgrade coincided with a similar update to Charli's image. On TikTok, I had noticed her looking like a sleeker version of herself, her nails and lashes always done. In person, though, she was soft-spoken and appeared small in an oversize hoodie; I felt acutely aware that she was a child.

When I asked her which milestones had meant the most to her, Dixie piped in: "I feel like 100,000 is the last time you got, like, *Oh my God*."

"When did I hit 80 [million]?" Charli said. "Like, yesterday? I cried because I got nervous—why are there so many people …"

She trailed off, as if even completing the sentence was too overwhelming. By the time this story is published, she'll likely have hit the 100 million mark.

Charli's appeal is tied to her ability to be both relatable and aspirational. She manages to telegraph an ordinary kind of specialness; she's the pretty babysitter, or the captain of the field-hockey team. (About 80 percent of her followers are female.) Although she's danced competitively since kindergarten, on TikTok her moves have an offhand, casual quality. People sometimes wonder why more skillful dancers aren't more famous than Charli, which misses the point entirely—her fans appreciate that she dances in a way that's approachable.

Charli and Dixie have also deftly managed to avoid scandal. The D'Amelio sisters told me that their careful approach to social media predates their fame. "My friends would post whatever they were doing, and I wouldn't even post if I went to a party," Dixie said. "It just kind of worked out in a way that we've always been protecting our brands."

The sisters avoid lip-synching profanities, for the most part, and don't participate in trends that strike them as questionable, like last spring's "mugshot challenge." The week of my visit, TikTok (and the world) was obsessed with "WAP," Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion's delightfully profane song about, well, vaginal lubrication. The most popular dance to the song, which was created by Brian Esperon, a dancer and choreographer from Guam, involved "lots of twerking," according to Charli, and her mother had declared it off-limits.

"The whole internet wants Charli to do it," Dixie said.

"I mean, I *can* do it. I'm just not allowed to … show the people," Charli said. She looked down and away, and for a minute she seemed like any other teenager teetering between obedience and rebellion.

Dance videos—the dominant form of "straight," or mainstream, TikTok—have been key to Charli's rise, and to the success of the platform. TikTok dances fit the constraints of the medium, typically involving front-facing upper-body movements and hand motions referencing the lyrics, sometimes in a playfully naughty way: Draw a heart in the air when lyrics reference love; roll your hips when they're about getting it on. What you do with your face is just as important as what you do with your body. When I asked Charli what made a good TikTok dance, she answered without hesitation: "Facial expressions." As she dances, she grins, she purses her lips; for a second, she looks angry enough to hit you, then she breaks into a sweet smile.

Lily Kind, the associate director of the Philadelphia studio Urban Movement Arts, told me that she considers TikTok dance a form of folk dance, drawing from adolescent-girl culture and Black vernacular dance traditions: hand-clapping games like Miss Mary Mack; earlier pop-music fad dances, to songs like "Macarena" and Soulja Boy's "Crank That"; double Dutch; and even vaudeville-era routines. "It's engaged and playful with the viewer. It's all about improvisational composition and one-upping each other—you did this; now I'm going to twist it, flip it, and reverse it. All of that is part of the legacy of Black dance in the U.S.," Kind said.

The legacy of Black dance in this country, of course, has also been coopted and commodified. This effect is exacerbated by TikTok's structure, which encourages a kind of contextless sharing and repurposing and, at its worst, the 21st-century minstrelsy known as "digital blackface." "If you look at some of the dances on TikTok—the Mop, the Nae Nae, the Hit Dem Folks, the Woah—they were dances that young Black folks have done in parking lots, at cookouts, at home. Then they fall into the TikTok hemisphere and become something else," says Michele Byrd-McPhee, the founder and executive director of the Ladies of Hip-Hop Festival.

Last December, Charli saw a TikTok of two kids dancing to the Atlanta rapper K Camp's "Lottery (Renegade)." She hadn't seen the dance before and assumed they had made it up. "I did the guy version of the dance, and I guess that caught on," she told me. The Renegade was more complex and faster-paced than many TikTok dances; after Charli's post, it became enormously popular. High-school students held Renegade dance battles. Lizzo did the Renegade; so did Kourtney Kardashian and her son, and Alex Rodriguez (badly) and his daughter. Videos tagged #renegade have been viewed 2.2 billion times.

Though Charli never claimed credit for coming up with the dance, it became informally associated with her. The dance's creator was actually Jalaiah Harmon, a Black 15-year-old from suburban Atlanta. Like Charli, Jalaiah had taken dance classes from a young age, and regularly filmed herself dancing in her room. She was goofing around before dance class one day when she came up with the Renegade choreography. She posted it to Instagram, where it got several thousand views. The dance eventually made its way to TikTok, where it arrived without context or credit, another meme appearing from the void. Jalaiah felt both proud and frustrated as she watched it take off. "I was commenting under people's posts, telling them I made the dance, but they didn't really believe it, because I didn't have much of a following on TikTok," she told me.

As the dance continued to spread across the app, Jalaiah claimed credit for it in a video that gradually gained traction. When Taylor Lorenz told Jalaiah's story in the *Times*, Charli's comments were flooded with people accusing her of being a thief. But Jalaiah wasn't out to shame Charli so much as let the world know the dance was her invention. "Jalaiah has always defended Charli. The way TikTok was set up, it was hard to figure out who started" the Renegade dance trend, Stefanie Harmon, Jalaiah's mother, told me.

Getting credit has made a meaningful difference in Jalaiah's life; she's since been hired to work with Samsung and American Eagle, and appeared on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* and in a music video for Sufjan Stevens. In February, Jalaiah, Charli, and Addison Rae Easterling attended the NBA All-Star Game and posted a video in which they all did the Renegade; a few hours later, Jalaiah performed the dance during the halftime show.

Kudzi Chikumbu, TikTok's director of creator community, told me that the company is working on better ways to attribute original dances. In the meantime, the Renegade scandal has inspired users to come up with their own solution: citing dance creators in video captions. "Now it's so normalized; when you do a dance, you give credit, and if you don't know who made it, then you just ask," Charli said.

Left to right: *Charli D'Amelio, Addison Rae Easterling, and Jalaiah Harmon. After D'Amelio was criticized for popularizing the Renegade dance that Harmon had created, the girls performed it together during the NBA All-Star Weekend in February.*

KENA KRUTSINGER / NBAE / GETTY

This year, the D'Amelios have focused on establishing themselves as the first family of TikTok. Marc, an entrepreneur and onetime Republican candidate for the Connecticut state Senate, has more than 7 million followers; his TikTok bio now identifies him as "CEO of The D'Amelio Family." Heidi, a former model, has more than 6 million followers. Their brand—*nice, relatable family!*—doesn't seem far from reality; in person, they have an easy affection for one another. Casius Dean, the Clubhouse photographer, told me that he'd recently had dinner with the D'Amelios. "I haven't felt a home environment in so long," he told me, sounding wistful. "It made me forget about social media for a minute."

Unlike some young TikTokers who are negotiating the world of viral fame more or less on their own, Charli has benefited from having business-savvy parents. "I work in New York City," Marc told me. "I've been around brands my entire career." The family has signed with United Talent Agency, which manages its growing ventures. In October, the co-head of UTA's digital-talent division announced that he was leaving the agency to become president of D'Amelio Family Enterprises, the family's attempt to establish itself as a media company. Between them, the D'Amelio sisters have a podcast, a book, a hit single, and several ad campaigns. Charli, who has repeatedly pledged her love for Dunkin' in unsponsored posts, now has a signature drink at the chain (cold brew with whole milk and three pumps of caramel swirl). This summer, *Forbes* estimated that Charli and Dixie were the second- and third-highest-earning TikTokers, after Addison, netting an estimated $6.9 million from mid-2019 to mid-2020.

That's a lot of money, though it's a fraction of what J.Lo makes in a year. Eager, perhaps, for the kind of recognition, and remuneration, that older entertainment media can provide, the family has started documenting their lives in professionally filmed and edited YouTube videos that feel like test runs for a future reality-TV show. A recent video tracked Charli's quest to get Dixie a pair of $32,000 Dior sneakers for her 19th birthday. The video involves classic reality-TV plot points (a prank, a surprise reveal), but Dixie doesn't externalize her reactions; instead, she gets quiet. The more I watched their YouTube videos, the more I realized that both sisters, though they are accustomed to opening their lives up to viewers, still have a slightly interior quality, some part of their personalities that they keep to themselves. This seems good for their mental health, although not, perhaps, for ratings.

Shortly after my visit, Charli posted two versions of the "WAP" dance. In the first, she doesn't appear at all. Instead, the camera is trained on her friends' faces. We're meant to understand that she's offscreen, doing the dance for their delighted, scandalized eyes only. In the second, she performs a slow, balletic interpretation of the dance. The videos were peak TikTok—savvy, creative, playful. They've been viewed more than 100 million times each.

A couple of years ago, Amir Ben-Yohanan, the Clubhouse investor, noticed that his four kids were "obsessed," first with Musical.ly and then with TikTok. "Like many adults, I looked down on it. I thought they were just messing around, dancing. It didn't seem very serious," Ben-Yohanan told me. When his family moved to Los Angeles in 2019, though, he began to meet people who had turned social media into a lucrative career. "It seemed to me like the Gold Rush, like the Wild West," he said. And as far as he could tell, the kids were running the show: "They were doing everything, creating the content, engaging in brand deals, doing the marketing, doing the PR."

Hype House, a content house that Charli and Dixie were briefly affiliated with, is a prime example. The loose collective of about a dozen teenagers and 20-somethings rented a Hollywood mansion late last year; within weeks, videos tagged #hypehouse had more than 100 million views. Since the heady days of Vine, influencers have seen the benefit of living and working together. But TikTok, where fame arrives swiftly and is particularly social, pushed the trend into overdrive. "When you have three people in a video together, that's what users want—the content does so much better," Evan Britton explained. "Traditional Hollywood wasn't like

that. People might've acted together, but they didn't need to be together for their brand."

Life at Hype House looks like a teenage dream. Members appear to make a living off flirting, dancing, and pranking one another; their jobs are, essentially, to maintain their popularity. No one ever seems to cook; the house gets 15 or 20 Postmates and Uber Eats deliveries a day. The group's relentlessly viral posts helped establish the aesthetic of straight TikTok—young, pretty, mostly white people dancing. (The platform has many stranger, older, less white, queerer, and more absurdist pockets, though they tend to get less traction.)

Shortly afterward came Sway House, the content mansion of "dudes being guys," as Bryce Hall has put it. While straight TikTok's version of femininity—sweet, coy, lots of bare midriffs—is familiar, the Sway guys veer from fratty aggression to "eboy" sensitivity to boy-band earnestness to ambiguously ironic homoeroticism.

TikTok's popular crowd cemented its fame this spring, when everyone else was stuck at home. I can trace my own overconsumption to late March. The more I was afraid to leave my house, the more I became unexpectedly invested in the love lives and shifting friendship alliances of TikTok's young stars: Were Dixie and Noah a thing? Did Addison unfollow Bryce? My own social universe offered no gossip; of all the pandemic losses, this was the most trivial, but I nonetheless felt it acutely. The TikTokers stepped in to fill that void. "The drama has been popping off way more during quarantine, for sure," one of the teenage founders of First Ever Tiktok Shaderoom, a popular social-media gossip account, told me. There were breakups, angry neighbors, arrests, lawsuits—all of which fed the content machine. "It's like back in the day with the Kardashians on TV. The audience knew every week there's going to be something crazy that goes down," Josh Richards, one of the founding members of Sway House, told me.

The popular kids of TikTok project an image of easygoing fun and success. Part of the pleasure of their videos is the implicit promise that you, too, could be just a viral moment away from joining them, hanging around a mansion and earning money by posting content. An influx of kids has moved to L.A. to make a go of it.

Ben-Yohanan, who had no previous experience in Hollywood, said he started the Clubhouse group as an attempt to professionalize the booming content-house scene. Even so, it's sometimes hard to know who, if anyone, is in charge. Many young influencers are managed by people barely older than they are. At least one Clubhouse manager is just 20; TalentX Entertainment, the company behind Sway House, is run in part by grizzled veterans of new media, which is to say 23-year-old YouTubers.

Earlier this year, Ahlyssa Velasquez dropped out of the University of Arizona to focus on making TikTok videos full-time. She was the first influencer to move into Clubhouse Next, which was decidedly less glam than Clubhouse Beverly Hills—10 residents shared the five-bedroom house. As house manager, she was responsible for getting everyone out of bed and keeping track of everyone's content quotas. "People think, *Oh she lives in this big mansion and just posts 15-second videos*," she told me. "It's a lot harder than it looks."

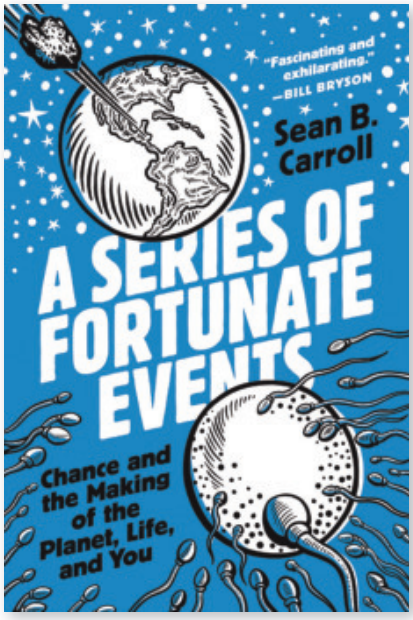
And the margins are leaner than you might think: While TikTok may have captured Gen Z's attention, brands have been slower to advertise on the platform, and the fees they offer for promotional TikToks are typically less than what they pay on Instagram. Influencers with 1 million TikTok followers can make about $500 to $2,000 for a sponsored post. After seven months, Ahlyssa left Clubhouse Next, which was dropped from the Clubhouse family because it didn't generate enough revenue.

TIKTOK STARS HAVE GROWN UP IN A WORLD WHERE FAME CAN ARRIVE IN AN INSTANT, BUT ALSO DISAPPEAR OVERNIGHT.

In the old model of celebrity, stars were propped up by studios and agencies with a stake in their enduring appeal. TikTok's young stars have grown up in a world where fame can arrive in an instant, but also disappear overnight. Trends come and go swiftly; even platforms don't last. (The 21-year-old Bryce, who got his start on the live-streaming platform YouNow six years ago, has already outlasted three of the sites where he used to post.) A few TikTok creators are being assimilated into larger, older, more stable forms of media; others will hustle to keep up until they lose touch, or just lose interest.

I spoke with Ahlyssa this fall, when much of California was on fire and Trump was once again threatening to ban TikTok. Terms of a potential deal with Oracle got more convoluted by the day. Ahlyssa told me that she wasn't following the story too closely. She had been on TikTok for only a year and a half, but she was already nostalgic for the old days, before posting was her job, before all of her friends were influencers. Back then, she would scroll through her FYP and see all sorts of different people doing all sorts of different things. Back then, the app had felt like an engine of surprise and delight—anything could happen, anyone could blow up. Now it felt like the same people over and over again: Charli, Hype House, Addison, Sway House. She loved them all, but maybe it would be good if everyone had to start fresh. "TikTok is the platform I started on," she said, "but I'm ready for the next one."*A*

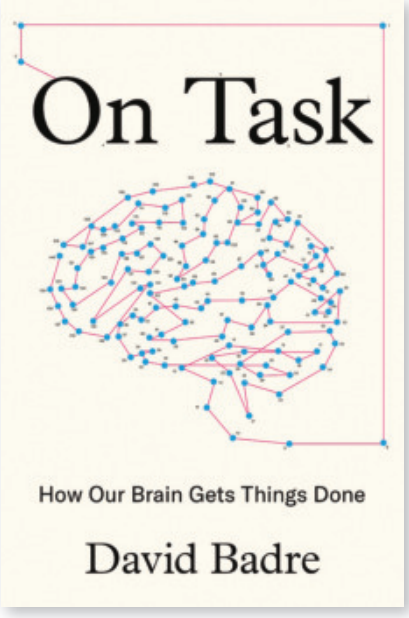
Rachel Monroe is a contributing writer at The Atlantic *and the author of* Savage Appetites: Four True Stories of Women, Crime, and Obsession.



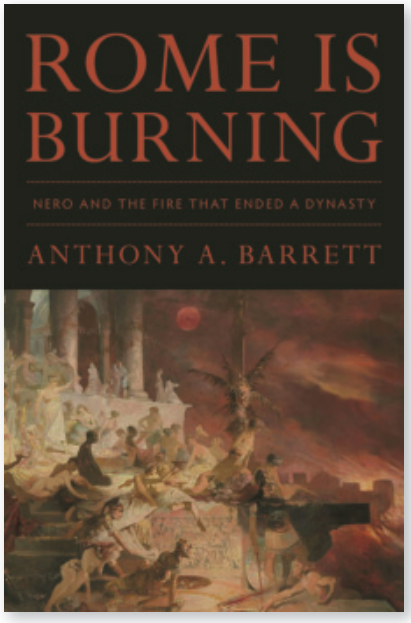
"Fascinating and exhilarating
—Sean B. Carroll at his very best."
—Bill Bryson, author of
The Body: A Guide for Occupants

"The most sweeping and persuasive account yet of the worldwide threat to democracy posed by the resurgent white power movement and other far-right activists."
—Kathleen Belew, author of
Bring the War Home

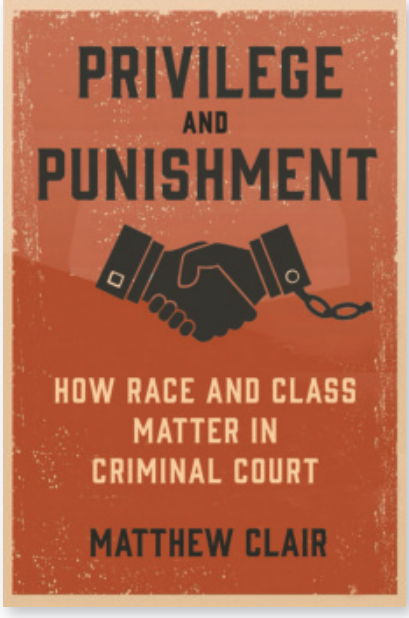
"Drawing on Suny's unique expertise in both Marxism and the history of the Caucasus, this illuminating book is destined to become a classic."
—Sheila Fitzpatrick, author of
On Stalin's Team



"Getting things done is essential to success in life. *On Task* provides a highly entertaining and informative look into how the brain accomplishes this crucial feat."
—Daniel L. Schacter, Harvard University and author of *The Seven Sins of Memory*



"A thorough, high-quality work on Emperor Nero and the fire that destroyed Rome in 64 CE. . . . Sure to be the most enduring treatment of this major historical event for some time."
—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review



"A powerful, beautifully written account of how the criminal court system treats some individuals like clients and others like criminals. Matthew Clair's book is a must-read for anyone interested in reforming the criminal legal system."
—Patrick Sharkey, author of *Uneasy Peace*

WHEN A CHILD IS A WEAPON

FAMILY COURTS ARE OFTEN AT A LOSS WHEN ONE PARENT TURNS A CHILD AGAINST THE OTHER IN A DIVORCE. SOME JUDGES ARE FORCING KIDS TO ATTEND "REUNIFICATION CAMPS" WITH THE MOM OR DAD THEY HATE.

• BY BARBARA BRADLEY HAGERTY

PHOTO ILLUSTRATIONS BY KENSUKE KOIKE

If life were fair, Benjamin and his sister, Olivia, would be spending this sunny July day fishing with their father and riding bikes around the small town in northern Ontario that they consider home. Instead, they are trapped in a townhouse in an ersatz Alpine village with a therapist and the mother they loathe, along with her partner and his two sons.

The day begins at 9 a.m., when a blond, middle-aged woman greets them by the unlit fireplace in the living room. She's the therapist, and she tells the kids that while they're here at the Family Bridges program, in a resort community two hours north of Toronto, they'll watch some videos; learn to discuss problems as a family; and, of course, play a little miniature golf, shop in the village. Benjamin, a gangly 15-year-old, gazes out the sliding-glass doors, watching enviously as hikers ascend the gently sloping Blue Mountain. *This isn't a vacation*, he thinks. *This is an internment camp for brainwashing.*

The kids are sitting in a semicircle in front of a large television screen with the therapist and Randy Rand, the founder of Family Bridges. Their mom, Meredith, and her partner, Eli, have positioned dining-room chairs on the edge of the group, watching for any signs of softening in the children's flinty anger. (All of the children's and parents' names in this article have been changed.) The therapist cues up a well-known optical illusion, the drawing that morphs between the profile of a young lady and an old woman. Things can look like one thing and be another, she suggests in her gentle voice. *Shut up!* thinks Olivia, who at 13 is as self-possessed as her brother is awkward. *We're not buying a word of this.*

Benjamin and Olivia know what they know. Since their parents divorced in 2008, their mom has dragged their dad, Scott, to court and drained his bank account—he's told them all about it. They've heard from him, too, that their mother suffers from depression, that she was once addicted to prescription drugs, that she cares less about them than she does about the students at the school where she teaches. All they want is to live with him full-time, but she won't let them.

Later, the therapist asks Benjamin and Olivia to watch a video of some basketball players passing a ball back and forth. Count the passes, she instructs. The big reveal: The two siblings missed the person in a gorilla suit walking through the crowd. When you focus on one narrative, the therapist says, you miss important information. As the four-day program unfolds, she becomes more direct, urging the pair to rethink their assumptions. Perhaps their father is deliberately turning them against their mother, she says, introducing an idea called "parental alienation." While their dad is painting their mother as narcissistic and selfish, maybe those traits actually belong to him?

Through it all, the children remain impassive, serving up correct but shallow answers to any question they're asked—"false compliance," the therapist would call it if she were lecturing her colleagues. Olivia and Benjamin are supposed to be within sight of an adult at all times, but in a rare moment alone, they manage to commiserate. "Dad's still our favorite, right?" Olivia whispers. "We're not letting them crack us."

Benjamin shakes his head. "We're not falling for it."

But then on the third day, when the therapist asks Benjamin to describe his relationship with his dad, he walks out to the patio, plunks down in a chair, and puts his head in his hands. Olivia follows, holding his hand as he cries. A breakthrough, the therapist assumes, a partial unraveling of the psychological ropes that bind them to their father.

Or not. "I miss Dad so much," Benjamin says to himself. "When is this going to end?"

BENJAMIN AND OLIVIA found themselves at the Blue Mountain Resort because two weeks earlier, on June 20, 2014, an Ontario family-court judge had concluded that their father was waging an "all-out campaign to … alienate them from their mother," a campaign so unrelenting that it qualified as psychological abuse. "This is one of the most egregious examples I have come across in my 23 years as a judge," she observed, before issuing a dramatic ruling. She gave temporary sole custody of the children to Meredith, barred Scott from contacting them, and allowed Meredith to enroll them in treatment of her choosing. Meredith opted for the four days at Blue Mountain on the recommendation of the therapist running the intervention, who'd seen Meredith for several years in her individual practice.

Parental alienation is the term of art for an extreme form of common behavior among divorced or divorcing couples. Even the most well-intentioned parents can occasionally find themselves denigrating their ex in front of the kids, or playing on their children's affections to punish a former spouse. While most manage to check the temptation to use the children to lash out at an ex, a subset doesn't. These people can't or won't stop trying to prejudice their children against their former partner.

Underlying this simple description of a recognizable phenomenon is a series of complicated questions that family courts struggle to settle. How much ugly invective, interference,

HOW CAN YOU KNOW FOR SURE THAT CHILDREN WHO ARE CONDEMNING A PARENT ARE DISTORTING THE TRUTH? WHAT IF THEIR MOTHER OR FATHER ACTUALLY IS NEGLECTING OR ABUSING THEM?

and trash-talking counts as too much? How can you know for sure that children who are condemning a parent are distorting the truth? What if their mother or father actually is neglecting or abusing them? If a court manages to determine that a child has been wrongly turned against a parent, can anything be done to reverse the situation without causing additional damage? Olivia and Benjamin went more or less willingly to the Family Bridges weekend with their mother, but I watched a harrowing video of an adolescent boy being taken to a similar program. "Stop! Don't touch me!" the child shrieks as two burly guys carry

OPENING SPREAD: COURTESY OF KENSUKE KOIKE

him out of the courthouse toward a waiting car. "Help me!" he yells, before the car door is slammed shut, muffling his screams.

MORE THAN 200 people filled the chilly ballroom of a DoubleTree hotel in Philadelphia in fall 2019, some typing furiously on their laptops, some hugging and whispering to one another, a few crying quietly as they listened to presentations at the Third International Conference of the Parental Alienation Study Group. In the past four decades, the diagnosis and treatment of parental alienation has grown into a small industry with a corps of therapists, academics, and attorneys. In one session after another, attendees heard about the tactics of alienators, such as forcing them to choose between Mom and Dad and so-called gatekeeping, or preventing children from seeing the other parent. Researchers described the signs of alienation, including a child waging "a campaign of denigration" against a parent, or spurning that parent for "absurd or frivolous reasons"—a rejection that eventually may extend to friends and relatives, even the family dog. Therapists laid out the psychological harm done to children in these situations (depression, trouble with later intimate relationships) while lawyers mapped out legal strategies to combat the problem, including the nuclear option: winning a change of custody and requiring the child to attend a reunification program with the disliked parent.

No one knows how common severe alienation is. The Vanderbilt University professor emeritus William Bernet, a psychiatrist who serves as an expert witness on behalf of people arguing that they've been victims of the phenomenon, estimates that there are 370,000 alienated children in the United States. But his figure is a rough extrapolation based on another rough figure, the annual number of high-conflict divorces. On Facebook, several parental-alienation groups have membership in the thousands. One night I joined a monthly conference call featuring alienation experts organized by a North Carolina grandmother; more than 1,000 people dialed in from around the world.

I interviewed nearly 50 people who maintain that their children have been poisoned against them, eventually focusing on a dozen families in which a judge had switched custody to the "targeted" parent. The parents I spoke with asked to remain anonymous, for fear that the former spouse would retaliate, or that the publicity would snap the fragile bond they had restored with their child.

One girl, Kate, told me that after her dad moved out, her mother put a box of needles in the back seat of the car and warned that her father, a surgeon, planned to inject both of them with drugs. Kate was 7 years old. She loved her dad, but why would her mom lie to her? Eventually, she dreaded sleeping at her father's house. "I would have terrible nightmares of my dad with drugs, trying to kill me," she said. "I would practice holding my breath under the covers, in case I ever had to pretend to be dead." As Kate entered her teens, she came to believe it was her mother, not her father, who presented the danger, and now, on court order, she lives with her dad.

After the parents of Rebecca separated when she was 12, her mother would beg her and her two younger siblings to refuse to visit their dad. "She'd say, 'I don't know what to do with myself when you guys are gone. I just sit in bed the whole time.'" When Rebecca complied, "my mom would be like, 'I'm so proud of you. Let's go shopping.'" Her mother, and her mother's extended family, convinced the girl that her dad didn't care about her, because he rarely took her to swim practice, helped her with homework, or gave her gifts. "And I was like, 'Oh my God, yeah, he is such an asshole,'" she told me. On those rare occasions when Rebecca did visit her father, her mother directed her to take pictures of emails and legal documents, or read through his text messages. Within the space of a few months, she had turned against her father and was firmly on her mother's side. After Rebecca's parents spent upwards of $1 million on therapy and legal fees, a judge granted full custody to her dad, and Rebecca has reconciled with him.

A handful of studies have tried to delineate the psychological profiles of alienating parents, and suggested that they're more narcissistic than average and prone to "primitive defenses." One woman deemed an alienating parent by a judge agreed to talk with me, somewhat to my surprise. I met Linda on a cold day last fall at a public library overlooking Lake Michigan. An animated, striking woman, she wore a black running outfit, her white-blond hair pulled into a ponytail. According to the judge, this mother of two had discouraged her son from spending time with his father and refused to go to court-mandated therapy herself. She told her adolescent children that she had cheated on their father because she was "looking for love" from a "strong man." Her son grew belligerent with his dad, calling him "an atrocious father" and worrying that he would leave the kids "penniless" because he had remarried. (The father was paying some $12,000 a month in child and spousal support, and had agreed to cover future college expenses.)

Linda didn't dispute these details. She told me that she had been driven to such lengths after her ex started privileging his new wife's children over his own. "I am a female bear protecting two cubs, okay?" she said. "Let's not mess with the den." She didn't encourage her children to have a warm relationship with their dad, she admitted, but she never intended to sever them from him. "I was fighting to wake him up. In my bull-in-the-china-shop way, I wanted to fix him as a parent. I can't say I regret who I was." After we finished the interview, Linda seemed giddy, as if she had successfully made her case.

The judge, of course, rejected Linda's version of events. "Whether out of anxiety, jealousy, greed, [or] outright hostility," he ruled, "she engaged in despicable and unjustified behavior, harming the children in the process." He fined her $350 and ruled that she must pay her ex-husband's attorney's fees, but he opined that a civil-contempt sanction "is a little like convicting Al Capone of tax evasion." The only reason he wasn't putting Linda in jail, he wrote, was because her ex-husband had asked him not to.

IT'S UNCLEAR WHY Scott, who'd been a stay-at-home dad before he and Meredith divorced, fought so hard to turn Olivia and Benjamin against their mother. No psychological records were introduced in court to illuminate his thinking. I agreed not to interview him because Meredith and her children feared that if I talked to him, he might follow through on threats he'd made to harm his ex-wife. In an affidavit filed with the family court, however, Scott maintained that "a vast majority of [Meredith's] concerns are simply misstatements of events or exaggerations."

About 12 years ago, with the divorce pending, Scott moved from the Toronto suburbs to his hometown a few hundred miles away. His children, then 7 and 9, joined him after school let out, where they say they spent the days playing outside and the evenings listening to their dad catalog their mom's faults. His soliloquies ranged from the banal to the baroque. Their mom was a terrible cook—look how much weight they were losing! In college, she had befriended a man who murdered a young woman—Meredith was complicit and knew where the body was buried.

Close to midnight, Scott liked to show Benjamin and Olivia informational videos about mental disorders such as depression and narcissism. One of his go-tos was *Welcome Back, Pluto*, which illustrates how one parent can undermine the other. Every few minutes he would pause the video and say, "See! This is what your mother does!" Twelve years later, Olivia still distinctly remembers sitting on the couch, watching the yellow numbers on the digital clock click over to 1 a.m., 2 a.m.—one time, 3:32 a.m. "I'm 7. I just want to go to bed." With their father the only source of information, how were the children to distinguish fact from slander? "We're two kids in this little town," Benjamin tells me. "You couldn't escape."

On the children's first night back in Toronto after two months with their father, Meredith was rubbing Olivia's back and telling her a bedtime story. Her daughter turned and looked up at her. "You're not my real mother," she said quietly. "This isn't my real home. We want to go live with Dad."

Meredith went numb, but assured herself that Scott's hold on the children would attenuate once the children started school; after all, they stayed with him only during breaks. But she had not counted on the telephone. Every night at 6 o'clock sharp, he called. The kids would drop everything—dinner, playing with friends, homework, even their own birthday parties—to talk with their father for as long as two hours. "Part of it was him indoctrinating us," Benjamin says. "Another part was him taking time out of Mom's day, because she was only home in the evenings."

In those calls, Scott continued to accuse their mother of every sort of negligence. She was endangering them by letting them bike to a nearby shopping plaza, or mistreating them by allowing them to eat lunch at school rather than fixing them a hot meal at home. Whenever Olivia or Benjamin praised Meredith or contradicted him, Scott grew sullen and threatened to hang up. Their father's voice drowned out all others. "He was always talking in the back of your head, whispering, whispering," Olivia tells me. "*What would Dad say in this instance?* It just became so instinctive."

Some of it might have been laughable to Meredith had the impact not been so painful. Scott coached the children to respond to every question with a mention of him. What do you want for breakfast? We want breakfast at *Dad's*. What do you want for Christmas? We want to go to *Dad's*. Why did Olivia hate Toronto so much? her mother asked once. "The traffic, the busy lifestyle!" the 8-year-old blurted.

Meredith tells me that she hid her miserable family life. She was ashamed, she says. What kind of parent has no relationship with her children? Often at lunch, her colleagues would describe their family vacations, and all the funny little things their kids said. Meredith would smile vaguely. *I love my kids so much*, she'd think. *How is it that they despise me?*

NO ONE in the child-welfare world doubts that one parent can torpedo the other's relationship with a son or daughter. But there is a huge debate over whether parental alienation is a diagnosable disorder like anxiety or depression, and if so, what kinds of interventions are appropriate. Part of the controversy springs from the concept's tainted origins. In the 1980s, the child psychiatrist Richard Gardner defined the characteristics of what he called "parental-alienation syndrome," and then traveled the country testifying in custody cases—almost always on behalf of men, many accused of sexual abuse. He argued that the men were innocent victims of "vengeful former wives" and "hysterical mothers." A therapist must have a "thick skin and be able to tolerate the shrieks and claims" of abuse, Gardner went on. "It is therapeutic to say, 'That didn't happen! So let's go and talk about real things, like your next visit with your father.'" Anyway, he claimed, "there is a bit of pedophilia in every one of us," declaring that children are naturally sexual and may sometimes "seduce" an adult. His advocacy on behalf of men brought solace to fathers'-rights groups and sparked fury among feminists.

Gardner committed suicide in 2003. But his ideas live on, and those who believe in them say that while the messenger may have been seriously flawed, the condition he identified is real. As proof, they point to a growing body of research that defines parental alienation's indicators and treatment. The problem, says the University of Toronto social-work professor Michael Saini, is that almost all of the studies—he analyzed five dozen of the best in 2016—are really just "clinical opinions or personal impressions." The samples are small and nonrandom; participants are often recruited through internet postings or word of mouth. Saini is convinced that children are sometimes alienated from parents but concluded that until researchers can better answer the question *Why is the child rejecting the parent?*, "we could be doing more harm than good."

That question is central, and it's shadowed by the fear that parents, most often men, could be using parental alienation to hide physical or sexual abuse. While alienation believers maintain that they've developed criteria to distinguish alienation from legitimate estrangement, the concepts aren't precise or objective, says Joan Meier, a clinical-law professor and the director of the National Family Violence Law Center at the George Washington University Law School. "These are things that Gardner invented out of his head." For instance, Meier told me, when a child insists that she's telling the truth about her neglectful mother, that's often taken as a sign that she's lying—she doth protest too much. And alienation believers seem to discount the possibility that seemingly insignificant reasons for denouncing a parent might mask a darker issue, according to Meier. It's easy for a boy to say he's mad at his father for not letting him play in the softball game last weekend, Meier said. "It's harder to talk about the time he made you take off your clothes and did weird things with you."

In one recently published analysis of 27 "turned around" custody disputes—in which a court initially rejected allegations of child physical or sexual abuse that were later found to be valid—more

COURTESY OF KENSUKE KOIKE

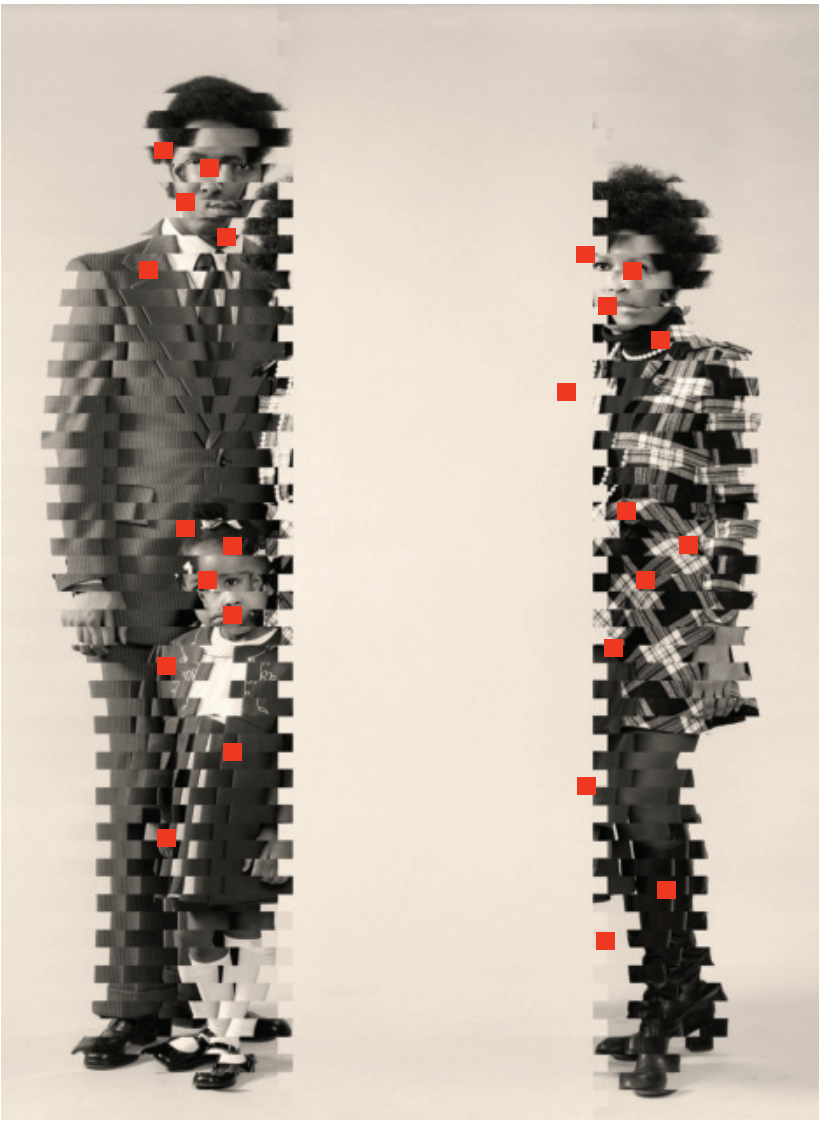
MINE HE'S MINE HE'S MINE HE'S MINE HE'S MINE HE'S MI

than a third of the mothers were alleged to have induced "Parental Alienation Disorder" in their kids. PAD is essentially another name for Gardner's parental-alienation syndrome, and it continues to be referenced in legal proceedings. In fact, there is some evidence that courts have been turning to the concept more frequently in recent years. This is happening despite the fact that efforts to have it included in the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, released in 2013, were rebuffed because, as a letter of protest from 56 prominent therapists and doctors asserted at the time, the theory behind it is "flawed … simplistic and misleading." The bottom line is that Meier and company think most people who charge alienation are using it as a cover for abuse. When that isn't true, they say, both parents usually are contributing to the harmful dynamic, and the solution has to be some form of individual or family therapy for everyone involved.

That may be so in run-of-the-mill divorces, but therapy actually cements the hostility in alienation cases, argues Ashish Joshi, an attorney who represents unfavored parents. Joshi says he has witnessed variations of this scenario repeatedly: After months or years of manipulation, a boy truly believes that his father is evil, and he says during family therapy that he doesn't want to visit his dad, because he's mean and angry all the time. "What are you talking about?" the father responds. "I'm not mean." At which point, the therapist intervenes and tells the father to stop protesting, to validate his child's feelings. "And there never comes a time when the child says, 'Okay. I've had my say. Thank you for listening. We can start afresh,'" Joshi contends. "The complaints never end." And now a professional has reified them.

"Unfavored" parents usually fare no better in family court, says the attorney and psychologist Demosthenes Lorandos, a co-editor of *Parental Alienation: Science and Law*. Judges don't know how to evaluate this sort of case, he says, and they rely on their usual "tool set": mediation, negotiation, deciding who gets the house or the silverware or the mileage points. "They're horse-trading and trying to get people to work things out, and that does not work on this problem."

Ginger Gentile, a filmmaker who made a documentary called *Erasing Family* about young adults reuniting with a once-estranged parent, says the plodding nature of legal proceedings works in alienators' favor. Even when the court ends up ruling that a child has been coerced into shunning one parent, if the kid still doesn't want to have contact with that parent, "the judge is like: 'What am I going to do? Put a 16-year-old in handcuffs?'" The custody battle ends only when the child ages out of the system at age 18, Gentile says, or the family experiences a dramatic crisis.



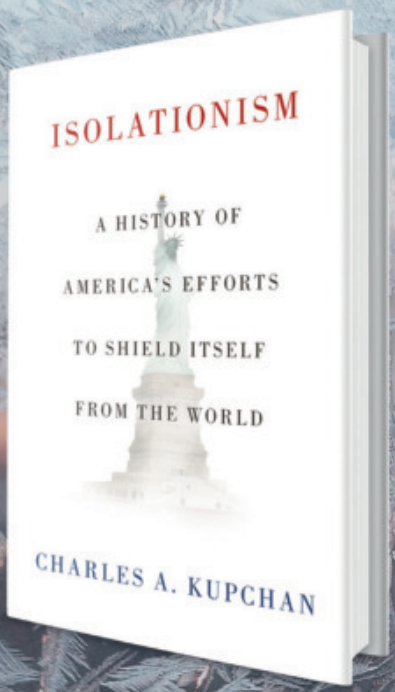
GETTY

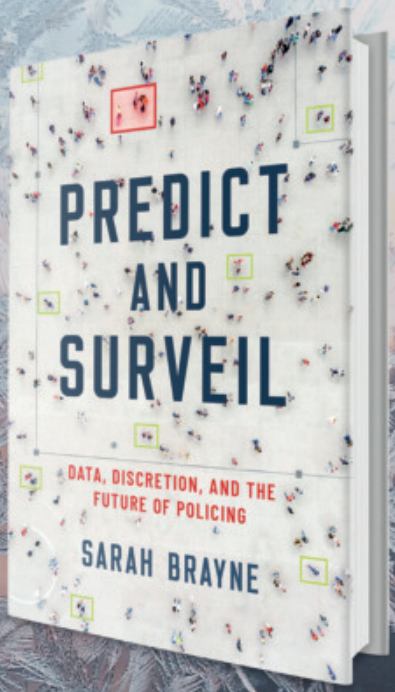
Such a crisis befell Meredith and her children in the spring of 2013. She discovered that Scott had arranged for his son, who was just finishing eighth grade, to go to a legal-aid office and change his residency from Toronto to his father's town. (Scott claimed that it was the boy's idea to hire a lawyer and leave Toronto.) When Meredith confronted Benjamin, he became unglued. "You fucking bitch!" Meredith recalls her son yelling. "You spoiled everything." Around this time, Benjamin also wrote a short story, titled "Death's Joy," in which he described stabbing to death his mother and Eli, carving RUINED on his own chest, and then drowning himself in Lake Ontario. Meredith sought an emergency court order to stop the children from visiting their father that summer, for fear she'd never get them back. The judge denied it, allowing the children to visit their dad in August, stating that "withholding them from dad's life may be doing more harm than good in the long run." He also said that the daily phone calls with Scott could continue.

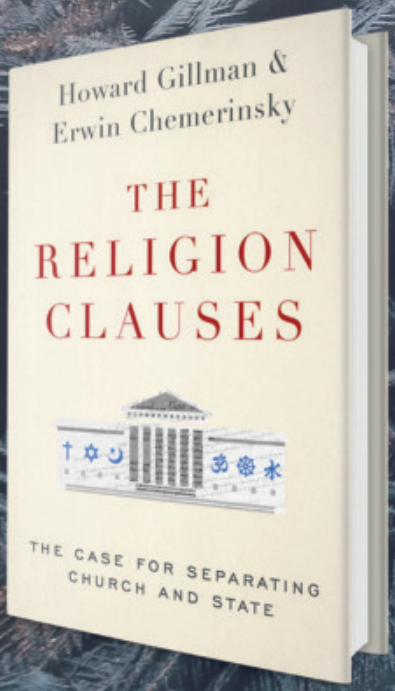
Another year would pass as Benjamin became depressed. Meredith tried to get him into therapy, but Scott foiled her efforts. Finally, in 2014 she persuaded a judge to block contact with her

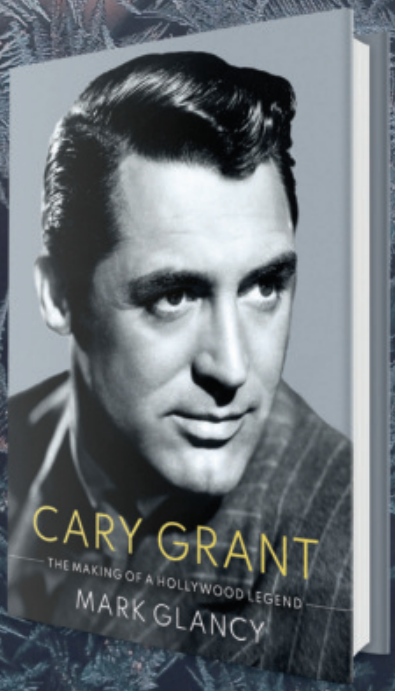
ENGAGING BOOKS

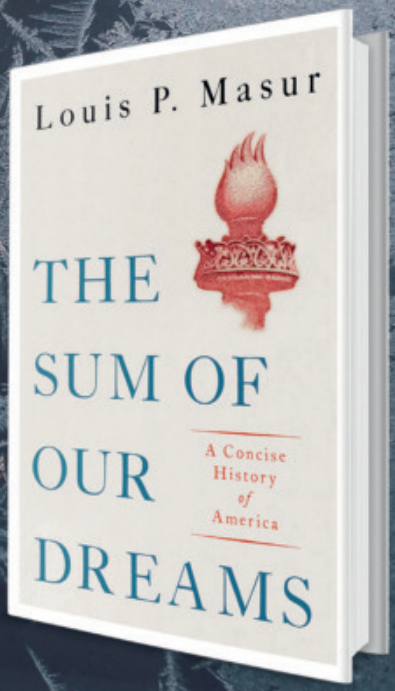
FOR EVERY READER











Available wherever books are sold
Please visit us at www.oup.com/academic

Follow us at /OUPAcademic @OUPAcademic

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

ex for 90 days to allow her and the children to attend a reunification program. Scott warned that "their resentment toward [their mother] will heighten and the damage to their relationship with her will be irreparable." Meredith was willing to take that gamble.

FAMILY BRIDGES IS the largest program of its kind in North America, but it operates outside the mainstream of psychological treatment. Until recently, it had no website; its four-day workshops take place in hotels and resorts, and they're not cheap. The minimum fee is $20,000, but add to that room, board, transportation for family members—and, sometimes, the cost of hiring security personnel to escort resistant children—and the tab can run upwards of $30,000.

During their time at Blue Mountain, Benjamin and Olivia didn't let on that they were having doubts about their dad. Olivia was stopped short by a movie called *The Wave*, about a schoolteacher who coaxes his students to join a fictional youth movement as an experiment to demonstrate how easy it is to fall under the thrall of cult leaders and dictators like Hitler. "Never in my life had I questioned what he said," she tells me of her father. "It was terrifying, because if it's all wrong, your life is flipped upside down." For Benjamin, the dissonance began with the very video that Scott had shown them to try to discredit their mother: *Welcome Back, Pluto*. Watching it in the condo, Benjamin thought, *Wait, that's what Dad does with us*. "It just slowly unraveled from there," he says.

Driving home with her children sitting mutely in the back seat, Meredith worried that the workshop had failed, expensively. To cover the legal fees, assorted therapists, and Family Bridges, she and Eli nearly maxed out a $150,000 line of credit. But while Benjamin and Olivia remained testy and distant at first, Meredith realized that they had stopped echoing their father's demands and complaints. Without the nightly calls from Scott, his voice faded. "I could just kind of sit at home and play video games like a 15-year-old kid," Benjamin says. "I thought, *I can just chill without [Dad] breathing down my neck every five seconds*." In late summer, Meredith noticed tiny displays of affection—a hug, a thank-you, a pleasant conversation over dinner. In October, for the first time in six years, Benjamin said, "I love you, Mom." Olivia followed a couple of weeks later. "I cried and cried," Meredith tells me, her voice breaking. "I just remember thinking, *They're here again! These are the kids I knew*."

Family Bridges connected me with seven other families who, like Meredith and her kids, swore that nothing—no amount of love, reasoning, or punishment—came close to repairing the rupture until they attended the workshops. One dad compared it to treating cancer. "You know that chemotherapy is going to make their hair fall out. You know that they're going to throw up violently," he told me. "But you still do it, because you love your baby." He'd reconciled with his daughter, who is in college and flourishing.

In a recent survey of 83 severely alienated children who attended a Family Bridges workshop, Richard Warshak, a clinical psychologist, reported that three-quarters rated their relationship with their unfavored parent "somewhat" or "much" better at the end. "I think a good part of the success is that the children really don't fully hate the parent they're claiming to hate," says Warshak, who wrote *Divorce Poison: How to Protect Your Family From Bad-Mouthing and Brainwashing*. "Their love has gone underground, and they just need a place where they can reconnect with their love for a parent, and where it can become normalized."

Although his study was peer-reviewed, it has the same kinds of limits as much of the alienation research. Warshak is not a neutral observer, having once participated in Family Bridges workshops as a psychologist. And there was no follow-up to see if the reconciliation endured beyond the hotel parking lot, nor any effort to tease out whether the kids could have been lying. "Are we really to believe that spending four days in a camp is going to dramatically change one's cognitions, one's idea of relationships?" asks the University of Toronto's Saini.

Many of the "success" stories cited by reunification proponents contain a certain irony. When the programs seem to work, as often as not the children switch allegiances, cutting off the formerly favored parent and embracing the unfavored one. It's all or nothing. Even the language the reunified children use—"abuse," "poisoning"—slides off one parent and onto the other. Perhaps these children eventually settle into a loving relationship with both Mom and Dad, but as yet there are no studies suggesting as much.

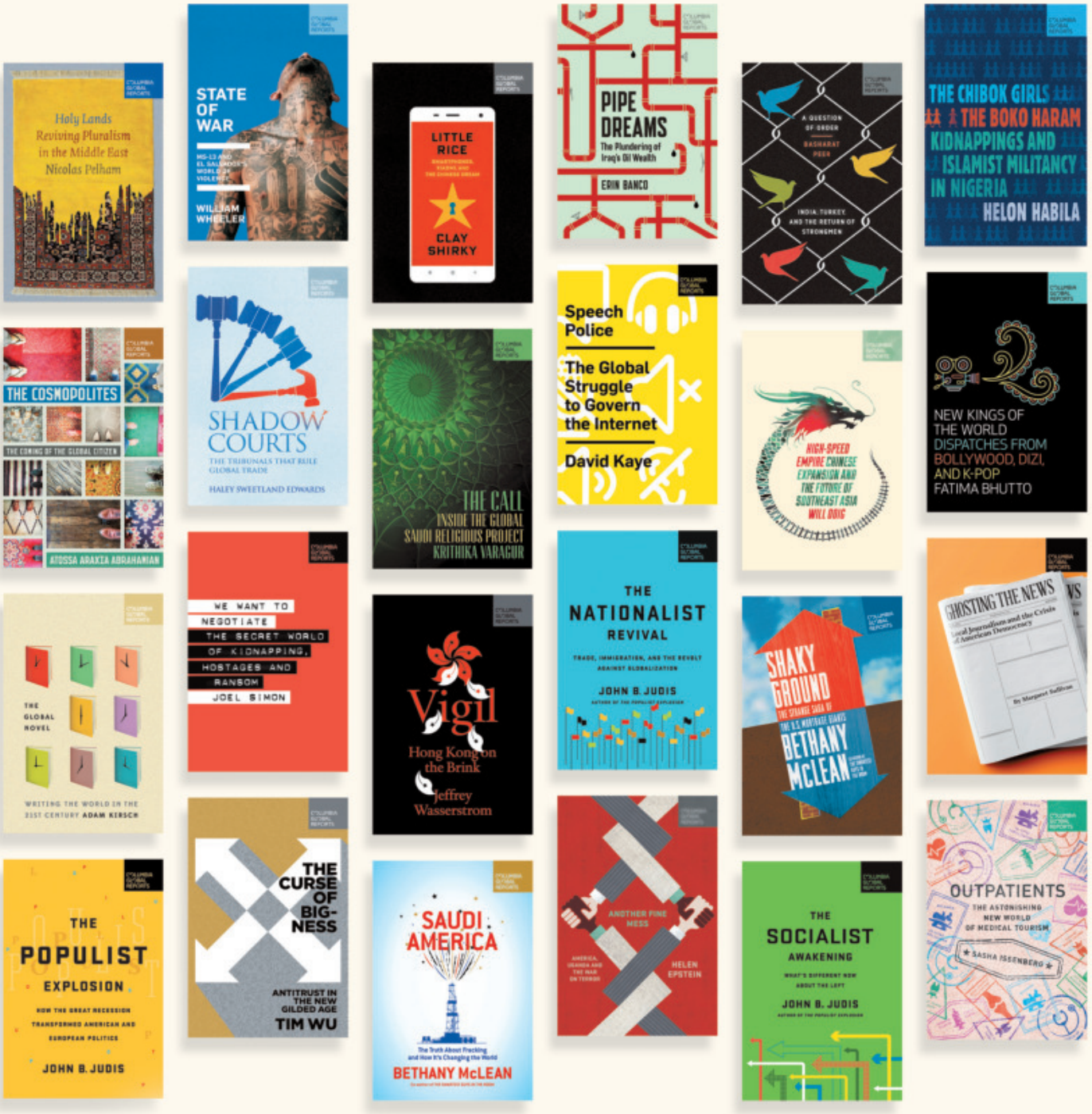
Robert Geffner, the founder of the Institute on Violence, Abuse and Trauma, says reunification programs contravene settled science on childhood emotional trauma. Is suddenly snatching a kid from his or her most secure attachment really the best treatment plan? he asks. "We're going to drill into them the error of their ways and confront them until they submit. So we're now taking that trauma and kicking it up to a whole new dimension."

Critics like Geffner also point out that Randy Rand, Family Bridges' founder, is not a practicing psychologist. His license is inactive, a result of disciplinary action taken against him by the California Board of Psychology in 2009 based on two complaints. In one, the board concluded that Rand had had a contentious and unprofessional relationship with the mother in a high-conflict divorce, although he was supposed to be serving as an impartial adjudicator. In the second case, the board found that he'd given an expert opinion to a judge about a child he'd never personally evaluated.

Rand still participates in interventions, however, because he promotes Family Bridges as an "educational" rather than a "therapeutic" program. (He declined to comment for this article.) Geffner, not surprisingly, scoffs at this distinction—and calls reunification programs like Family Bridges "torture camp for kids."

Gabriel and Mia would no doubt agree. In 2007, when they were 10 and 9, respectively, their parents' marriage began to deteriorate, and the two gravitated toward their father. He was more laid-back, gentler, easier to live with, they thought, and not only did he never denigrate their mom, he always insisted they stay with her during her parenting times, no matter how the siblings protested.

But in December 2011, a family-court judge in New Jersey called them into his chambers. He had witnessed every twist in the bitter custody case and said he found the proof of alienation overwhelming: The children had accused their mom of trying to strangle Mia, without evidence. (Gabriel later suggested to me that they'd been exaggerating.) They parroted their father, throwing around references to things like their "constitutional rights," and during



5 COLUMBIA GLOBAL REPORTS

OUT IN FRONT

Celebrating five years of being out in front on underreported issues

Columbia Global Reports is a nonprofit publisher at Columbia University.
Visit us at globalreports.columbia.edu

a therapy session, they'd launched a "barrage of insults" at their mother, fist-bumping after each one. The judge told the children that they would be leaving—immediately, from the courthouse—to attend a Family Bridges workshop in California.

When they arrived at the hotel outside San Francisco, Gabriel and his sister felt like "cornered animals," he recalls. "You just tore us away from our home, to do this program that you claim is going to fix our relationship with our mom, at the same time as stripping us away from Dad for three months. You can imagine how receptive we were to that idea." The psychologists tried to steer them to the conclusion that they'd been brainwashed, Gabriel tells me, and he and his sister "literally laughed in their faces." When defiance failed, Mia suggested they change tack, suspecting that the best way to get back home would be to tell the Family Bridges people what they wanted to hear. "I told Gabriel: 'Just fake it 'til you make it,'" Mia says. "The minute we left, we were like, 'Mother, don't speak to us.' My God, I hated her so much."

The judge ordered the father not to have contact with his children for 90 days, and then extended the ban after the three of them found ways to communicate. Eventually, he ended up being barred from seeing his kids for three years. Then, in 2014, New Jersey's appellate court vacated the trial judge's order, noting that "parental-alienation syndrome" is still an unproven and controversial theory. A few months later, when Gabriel turned 18, he moved in with his father. Mia soon followed, even though she was still a minor. Now at law school, Mia has spoken to her mother once in four years. Gabriel, however, moved back to his mother's home after college while he studied for the MCATs. He says he realized that she was doing the best she could in a stressful time. Nonetheless, he believes that Family Bridges only fueled his and his sister's antipathy toward their mother. "If they hadn't been involved, I think I would have gotten to a better place with my mom a lot sooner, and my sister would still be talking to her."

His mother, a physician, sees it differently. Were it not for Family Bridges, she says, she would not have the "robust bond" she has with her son. As for Mia? "Like everything in medicine, the treatment doesn't work in 100 percent of cases."

In addition to interviewing Mia and Gabriel, I read a first-person account by a girl who said she'd grown suicidal and cut herself when she was taken to a Family Bridges workshop at age 15; she claimed that the psychologists had threatened to ship her off to a psychiatric hospital. A young woman told me that her little sister had suffered panic attacks during the workshop; when the older girl challenged the Family Bridges therapists, they kept saying the girls would need "extra help," which she understood to mean being sent to a wilderness camp for juvenile offenders. A teenage boy wrote that he is "still emotionally damaged from the program," and that he "has difficulty connecting to others because I feel I can't trust anyone." None of these children has a relationship with the parent who brought them to the program.

OLIVIA AND BENJAMIN have not seen or spoken with their father in more than six years. Olivia, now in her second year of college double-majoring in gender studies and sociology, says she doesn't miss him: "He was abusive. He was poisoning us. Why would I want to talk to him?" We are sitting on Meredith's porch on a clear summer day, a light breeze stirring the trees. Olivia, who has long, dark hair and a raucous laugh, tells me that she struggles with anxiety and at times feels ill-equipped for adult life. Her dad's omnipresence stole the mundane moments that define childhood, she says: painting her nails or going shopping with her mom, laughing all night at slumber parties. She dared not invest deeply in friendships, in school, in her Toronto family. "How can you, when you have this whisper in your ear all the time telling you it's all meaningless, that nothing here matters?"

In a different way, Benjamin, too, lost himself. At 21, he's in his third year of college, studying psychology. His eyes are cautious and he's still very lean, swimming in his maroon T-shirt and blue jeans. His memories of his eighth- and ninth-grade years have for the most part disappeared, he says: He's forgotten the attempt to move to northern Ontario, writing the story about suicide, and the fits of rage that Meredith says ended with her son curled in a fetal position on the floor. When he reviewed the court documents and his diaries before our interview, he says, "it was almost like reading a case study on a different person."

> ONE DAD COMPARED FAMILY BRIDGES WORKSHOPS TO TREATING CANCER. "YOU KNOW THAT CHEMOTHERAPY IS GOING TO MAKE THEIR HAIR FALL OUT. YOU KNOW THAT THEY'RE GOING TO THROW UP VIOLENTLY. BUT YOU STILL DO IT, BECAUSE YOU LOVE YOUR BABY."

He says he does not miss his father. He remains angry that Scott distorted his vision of his mother and grandparents, of parenting and friendship, of his own worth—"absolutely everything." "I'm still incredibly anxious about a lot of different things," he says. He pauses for several seconds, so long that I notice the sound of wind chimes on the porch. He is staring at the floor by his feet, as he has the entire conversation. "Even now," he says softly, "you'll notice I don't make eye contact with you."

For his part, Scott could have had a relationship with his children, if he would have engaged in counseling. Instead, he walked away. Now each member of the family has a restraining order against him. Meredith worries for her safety, recalling that he told his kids he would "hunt to the ends of the Earth" anyone who took his children away, to "make them pay." Olivia and Benjamin just don't want to deal with the emotional turmoil that ensues when he's around. Therapists and lawyers say it's common for alienating parents to disappear after losing custody fights: The children were only weapons aimed at the former spouse. The children were never the point. *A*

Barbara Bradley Hagerty is a contributing writer at The Atlantic.

WORLD MEDIA AWARDS 2020

MEET THE WINNERS OF THE WORLD MEDIA AWARDS 2020

The 2020 World Media Awards celebrate the most effective multi-platform, cross-border, content-driven advertising. To see more details of the winning campaigns, go to **www.world-media-group.com/awards**

WORLD MEDIA AWARD GRAND PRIX	SONOS	BRILLIANT SOUND AT INTERSECTIONS OF CULTURE AND COOL Entered by: Vizeum & 360i, Dentsu Group
WORLD MEDIA AWARD AUTOMOTIVE	VW	FOR THE MANY, NOT THE FEW – THE ID.3 Entered by: PHD Global Business
WORLD MEDIA AWARD BRAND & MEDIA OWNER PARTNERSHIP	SAMSUNG	TV IS MAKING HISTORY AGAIN Entered by: Starcom
WORLD MEDIA AWARD CORPORATE INFLUENCER	Tech Mahindra	IN THE FUTURE Entered by: The Trust: The Wall Street Journal | Barron's Group
WORLD MEDIA AWARD FINANCIAL SERVICES	AIFC	MY KAZAKHSTAN Entered by: Astana International Financial Centre & Bloomberg Media, Bloomberg Media Studios
WORLD MEDIA AWARD LUXURY, LIFESTYLE & FASHION	Levi's	WHAT DOES PERFORMANCE MEAN TO YOU? Entered by: OMD EMEA
WORLD MEDIA AWARD MEDIA & ENTERTAINMENT	EA	FIFA20 'PLAY WRONG' Entered by: m/SIX
WORLD MEDIA AWARD TECHNOLOGY & TELECOMS	SONOS	BRILLIANT SOUND AT INTERSECTIONS OF CULTURE AND COOL Entered by: Vizeum & 360i, Dentsu Group
WORLD MEDIA AWARD TRAVEL& TOURISM	TOURISM AUSTRALIA	FROM COUNTRY TO COMPANY Entered by: UM Australia

World Media Group wmg
world-media-group.com

The Atlantic · BBC News Global · Bloomberg Media Group · Business Insider · The Economist · Forbes · Fortune · FT Financial Times · National Geographic · The New York Times · Reuters · TIME · The Wall Street Journal · The Washington Post

ASSOCIATE MEMBERS
MOAT
Smithsonian Media

OMNIVORE

The Existential Despair of *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*

Revisiting the most disturbing Christmas special

By Caitlin Flanagan

At the dawn of the 1960s, a couple of New York admen named Arthur Rankin Jr. and Jules Bass created the Christmas special. Before that, the networks hadn't been sure exactly how they should entertain children during the holiday season. They had largely come down on the side of edification, as seen in NBC's 1951 commission of a children's opera, *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, broadcast live on Christmas Eve, after which the

ILLUSTRATION BY OLIVER MUNDAY

show lived on in reruns, and—also on NBC—*Babes in Toyland*, a turn-of-the-last-century operetta based on the Mother Goose tales.

But American children of the 1960s weren't going to put up with operas and nursery rhymes. We had grown strong on orange juice, casseroles, and chewable vitamins. We weren't afraid of polio or tuberculosis—we had the Salk vaccine and the tine test. We had had one small step for mankind, 31 flavors, and 101 dalmatians. The previous decade had already established the whims of children as a legitimate market force; in two years, Wham-O had made $45 million on the Hula-Hoop. Rich guys in office buildings were taking us seriously. What did we want next?

Apparently what we wanted next was 55 minutes of Christmas-crushing despair: *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*. For more than half a century, generations of children have taken the show, which debuted in 1964, into their hearts, and for just about as long, I've been trying to avoid it. From my earliest days, the special produced in me only a fretful anxiety, leading to an eventual refusal to watch it. I couldn't really explain the problem. I knew only that the show didn't make me feel very Christmassy.

There's a lot in *Rudolph* that people don't seem to remember. At one point, the Abominable Snowmonster tries to murder Rudolph in front of his parents by smashing a giant stalactite on his head. As our gentle hero lies facedown, concussed and unresponsive, his own girlfriend—the beautiful, long-lashed Clarice—wonders aloud why the snowman won't put the little reindeer out of his misery: "Why doesn't he get it over with?" This was *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*, not *The Third Man*. Meanwhile, back at Santa's workshop—a phrase that should connote only the jolliest of associations—a dark tale is unfolding. Santa, it turns out, presides over a nonunion shop where underproducing elves are deprived of breaks and humiliated; they dream not of Christmas, but of escape. Poorly constructed toys are thrown onto a bare and frozen island, where they cry and wander. How long have they been there? A year? A thousand years? One of the toys, A Dolly for Sue, looks perfectly fine—why has she been stuck with the misfits? Rankin finally admitted the nature of Dolly's flaw in 2005, when he revealed that she suffered from "psychiatric problems." The Island of Misfit Toys, it turns out, is but another atoll in the gulag archipelago.

The source material for the show was the work of a grieving man: Robert May, a copywriter at Montgomery Ward in Chicago who, in 1939, had been asked to write a Christmas story that the department store could give away during the holiday season. While he was working on it, his young wife died of cancer. The story he wrote—its relationship to *The Night Before Christmas* (properly called *A Visit From St. Nicholas*) falling somewhere between homage and armed robbery, but who could blame him, under such circumstances?—contains a powerful evocation of loneliness. Rejected by the other reindeer, Rudolph weeps, creating a growing puddle of tears; one of the pages of the storybook is stained with his teardrops. And yet the book was a hit. May remarried and suggested to his brother-in-law, a Brill Building songwriter named Johnny Marks, that he turn it into a song, and "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" became one of the most popular Christmas carols of all time. Marks lived next door to Rankin, who optioned the song, and—with money from General Electric, which had commissioned him to make a one-hour holiday special for its GE Fantasy Hour on NBC—the work reached its ultimate realization.

Santa presides over a nonunion shop where underproducing elves are deprived of breaks and humiliated.

Rudolph is a beautiful show, a bright box full of toys that have come to life. The puppets were created in the Japanese animation studio of Tadahito Mochinaga, who traveled to a deer sanctuary in Nara to study and sketch a herd of deer before Ichiro Komuro, an artist in the studio, began to work. The reindeer puppets had long legs, felt hides, and huge, anime eyes. Snow is piled in drifts, the sky is a piercing blue, and everything has a solid, touchable quality. Just as important are the voices that the Canadian actor Billie Mae Richards created for Rudolph. There was a voice for his infancy, his boyhood, and his adolescence, all of them unguarded and gentle—a sweet vulnerability that slayed me. (It also slayed Richards: After she realized why Rankin and Bass had gone with a Canadian—to avoid paying residuals on a work that would become a monster hit—she became so angry that she rarely gave press interviews about the special.) I couldn't stand for anything bad to happen to Rudolph, but very soon it does.

OF ALL THE DISTURBING THINGS in *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*, nothing competes with Donner's rejection of his son. Donner is horrified by the nose, in a "no son of mine" kind of way. One of the numerous readings of the show is that it is a parable about the hardship faced by gay kids in mid-century America, many of whom were rejected by their fathers, their peers, and their teachers.

This theory is reified back at Santa's little forced-labor camp. We are supposed to understand that blond, dreamy-eyed Hermey wants to be a dentist, not a toy maker. (What he really wants to do, in my opinion, is join the drama club, but that might have been too much for NBC.) Foreman Elf—who, come the revolution, will not be dealt with kindly—humiliates him repeatedly. When Hermey tells him, tentatively, that he doesn't want to make toys, Foreman Elf repeats the phrase in the "sissy" voice that has haunted gay boys

NBC / GETTY

down through the ages. "Shame on you!" cry the other elves, further demoralizing Hermey. *Rudolph* thinks it teaches children to be themselves, and maybe it does. But it also teaches them how to taunt a boy who seems different. In the time-honored tradition of kids in his situation, Hermey runs away.

Elves in Santa's workshop are not supposed to be shamed, gay-bashed, and forced to run away! What kind of bullshit was this? And how could the Kool-Aid drinkers look at their Christmas toys in the same way, knowing that they might be covered in the tears of an exploited and brokenhearted elf?

But back to Donner, the one who makes the show unbearable. We meet Rudolph a few minutes after his birth; he and his mother lie resting on a bed of clean hay. Rudolph looks up, and—in the tiniest, sweetest baby voice, exactly the voice that a newborn fawn would have—says, "Pa-pa?" "Ma-ma?" Just then the red nose blinks on and off, and Santa arrives. "Aren't you the sturdy little fellow!" Santa says. ("San-ta?") He has come not to congratulate the new parents but to size up their fawn for potential usefulness. The nose flashes. "I'm sure it'll stop as soon as he grows up," Donner says urgently. "Well let's hope so if he wants to make the sleigh team someday," Santa responds. When Rudolph, now a bit older, doesn't want to wear the black rubber nose that Donner makes for him ("I don't wanna. Daddy, I don't like it. It's not very comfortable"), Donner replies, sharply, that he'll wear it and like it: "There are more important things than comfort! Self-respect!" Rudolph's father doesn't love him! He doesn't even … want him.

Rudolph, too, runs away from home, ultimately finding companionship in Hermey and a prospector named Yukon Cornelius, but he realizes that he is a danger to them because he draws the attention of the Abominable Snowmonster. One night, while the other two sleep, he slips away. In the moonlight, he steps onto an ice floe and sails away from us on the dark blue water, unloved, unwanted, and alone.

Rankin and Bass went on to make many Christmas specials, not all of them hits. *Nestor, the Long-Eared Christmas Donkey* was no *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*. And even I must admit a debt to *Rudolph*, because that show paved the way for some of the greatest holiday specials of the '60s: *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, *Dr. Seuss' How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, and (a lesser planet) *Frosty the Snowman*. I loved those shows and looked forward to them all fall. No one I knew shared my strong feelings about *Rudolph*, but that was okay; I was used to being the odd kid out. And, for once in my life, I knew I wasn't the one with the problem. *A*

Caitlin Flanagan is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

Tinnitus

By W. S. Di Piero

In Jersey's Pine Barrens crickets rub their saw-toothed wings and I'm a child.

A city child now a city man with woods between my ears behind my eyes.

Swarms, throngs, populist masses, agglomerationists, millionings.

Louisiana katydids of a wet summer night beep inside my brains.

Live theater. Intermissions. Who programmed that siren test pattern?

You cicadas and your washboard jingle bells and what's that *boing*-ing?

Mississippi mosquitoes. Maine black flies. Vermont hornets.

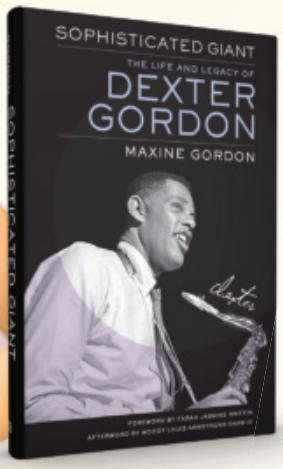
Acetylene. Blackbirds. Power lines. Aluminum foil.

All tuned up at once. My skull plates ache. Is that hail?

W. S. Di Piero's recent books are a collection of poems, The Complaints *(2019), and* Fat: New and Uncollected Prose *(2020).*

Epic Stories Make Epic Gifts

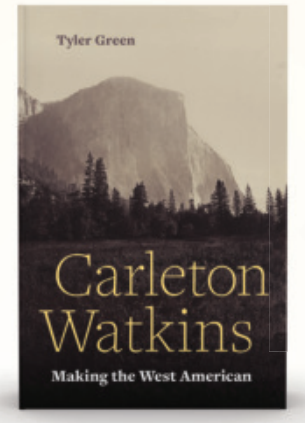
LEGENDARY ARTISTS AND THE LIVES THEY LIVED

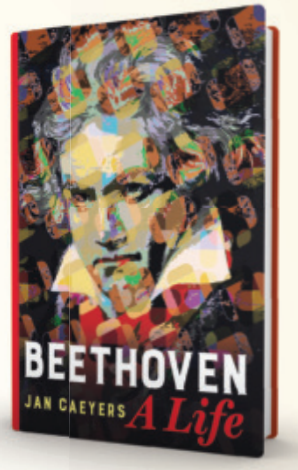


"Astutely frames the fiery daring of Dexter Gordon's generation of bebop innovators in the context of rising black consciousness and creative agency in midcentury America."
—New York Times

"A fascinating and indispensable book."
—Los Angeles Times

"Transcendent."
—Aperture





The authoritative Beethoven biography, endorsed by and produced in close collaboration with the Beethoven-Haus Bonn, in time for the 250th anniversary of Beethoven's birth.

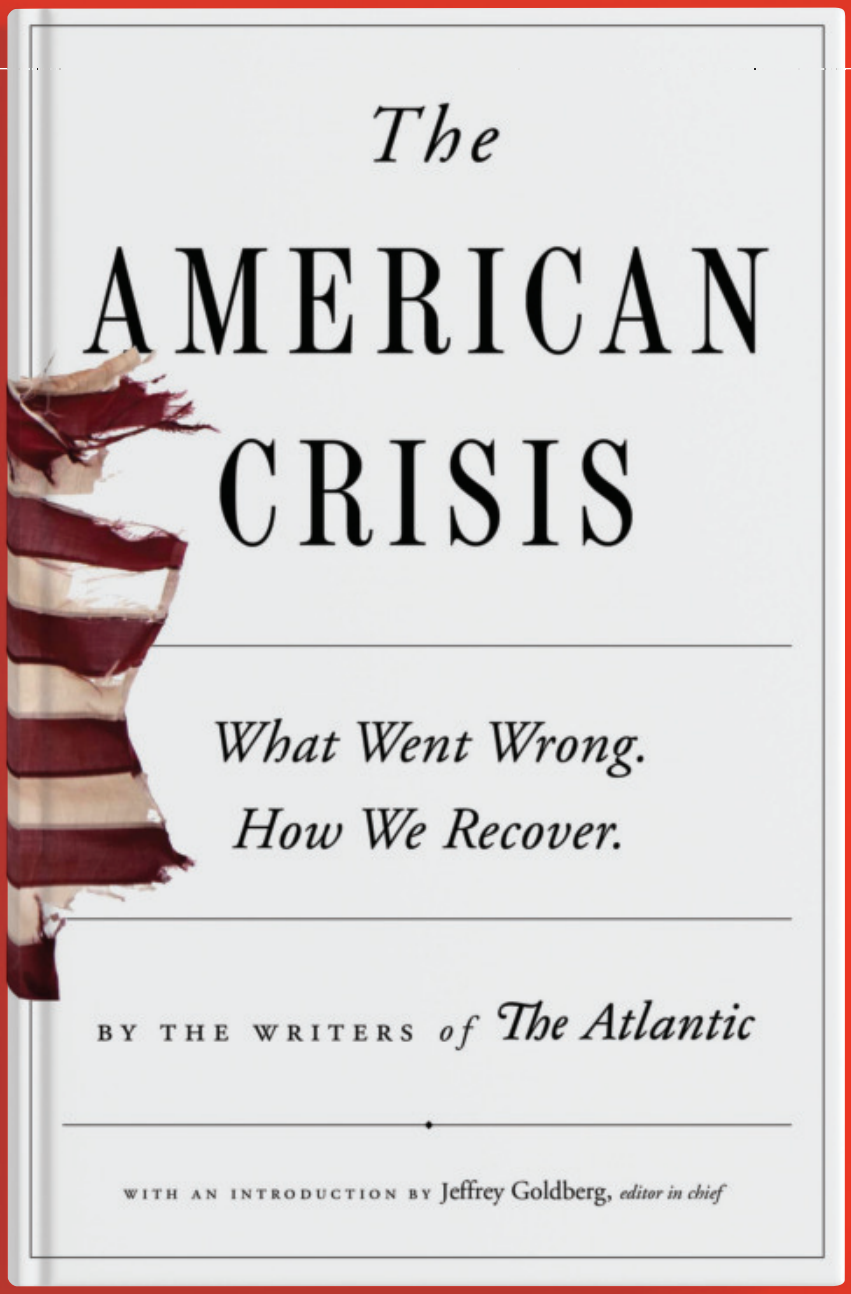
ALL BOXED UP AND READY TO GIFT

Experience *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* in all of their epic glory in this gorgeous boxed set.

"One of the great virtues of [this] translation [is] its limber fluency."
—New York Review of Books

Discover hidden city histories in Rebecca Solnit's brilliant reinvention of the atlas.

"The maps themselves are things of beauty."
—New York Times



Published by Simon & Schuster | Available for purchase online

The past four years have been among the most turbulent in U.S. history. Drawn from the pathbreaking work of *Atlantic* journalists, *The American Crisis* explores the factors that led to the present moment: racial division, economic inequality, political dysfunction, the devaluation of truth, and the unique challenge posed by President Donald Trump.

Edited by *The Atlantic*'s editor at large, Cullen Murphy, the book features new essays by editor in chief Jeffrey Goldberg and staff writer Anne Applebaum, along with work by more than three dozen *Atlantic* writers and contributors.

The American Crisis features some of the best writing from *The Atlantic*. Below are just a few of the writers in the book, along with some of their most popular stories.

As a subscriber, you have access to all of their work on TheAtlantic.com.
To start reading, create your account today.

ADAM SERWER

on the politics of racism in the Trump era

"The Coronavirus Was an Emergency Until Trump Found Out Who Was Dying" is Serwer's searing examination of America's racial contract, which deems certain lives to be of greater value than others.

GEORGE PACKER

on the decades-long decline of U.S. institutions and their vulnerability to the abuse of power

In "We Are Living in a Failed State," Packer assesses how the pandemic revealed what was already broken in America.

ANNE APPLEBAUM

on the lure of authoritarianism and the psychology of complicity

"Laura Ingraham's Descent Into Despair" is Applebaum's inquiry into why her former acquaintance, who once represented optimistic conservatism, became a doomsaying Fox News host and ardent Trump supporter.

IBRAM X. KENDI

on the history of racist ideas and the promise of anti-racist policy

"The American Nightmare" is Kendi's poignant essay on the chasm between the national narrative of the American dream and many Black Americans' lived reality.

ANNIE LOWREY

on the power of economic policy to create a more equal society

In "The Second Great Depression," Lowrey looks at the four major factors that could determine the economic legacy of the pandemic in the U.S.

Online, you'll also find:

Danielle Allen
Yoni Appelbaum
Mark Bowden
Ta-Nehisi Coates
McKay Coppins
James Fallows
Drew Gilpin Faust
Caitlin Flanagan
Franklin Foer
David Frum
Megan Garber
David A. Graham
Emma Green
Olga Khazan
Adrienne LaFrance
Vann R. Newkirk II
Jeremy Raff
Jonathan Rauch
Clint Smith
Ed Yong

Create your subscriber account today at **TheAtlantic.com/Create-account**.

TOP ROW: LEAH VARJACQUES; MICHAEL LIONSTAR; MATEUSZ SKWARCZEK. BOTTOM ROW: STEPHEN VOSS; COURTESY OF ANNIE LOWREY.

BOOKS

Bringing Politics Into the Classroom

Why it's impossible—and irresponsible—for teachers in minority communities to ignore the subject

By Clint Smith

The first day of my first year of teaching began with a bundle of nerves and a half-eaten honey bun. At 5:30 a.m., I drove from the cheap apartment I shared with five roommates to the high school in Prince George's County, Maryland, where, 22 years old and just a year out of college, I'd been hired to teach English. My trunk was full of colorful posters, flip charts, and laminated quotes from my favorite writers. I was hoping to make my stuffy, windowless classroom a more inviting space for my students.

As I drove, I practiced how I would present myself, searching for the sort of first impression that would make me seem authoritative yet approachable. Could I be the "cool" teacher, inviting students to share what was happening in their lives, but also a figure of authority? Could I be empathetic, sensitive to the difficulties transpiring in their lives, yet not let such circumstances create a spiral of low expectations? Could I emphasize the importance of doing well on the state exam, while also making sure my students knew I didn't believe that learning could be measured by a multiple-choice test on a single day of the year? I am only slightly embarrassed to say that in search of insight and inspiration, I had watched several Denzel Washington and Morgan Freeman movies in the weeks leading up to that day.

These memories came back to me while reading *Becoming a Teacher*, by Melinda D. Anderson, an education journalist based in Washington, D.C. Anderson follows LaQuisha Hall during the 2018–19 academic year, just after Hall had been named Baltimore City Public Schools Teacher of the Year, and into the following, pandemic-disrupted year. Hers was hardly a representative experience. Except that in important ways, it was.

Anderson's profile, part of a *Masters at Work* series of slim volumes, reaches back to Hall's uncertain first days in a high-school classroom, more than a decade and a half ago, to trace a transformation. A core theme of the book is a notable, and by now almost unavoidable, shift in perspective taking place among Black educators—and other teachers, too—working in places that have endured decades of systemic racism, economic disinvestment, generational poverty,

GETTY

ILLUSTRATION BY VAHRAM MURADYAN

crime, and violence. Starting out as a 21-year-old transplant from North Carolina, Hall hadn't understood what became steadily clearer to her: The work of teaching, for her and for her teenage students, was most meaningful when it was part of a larger commitment to addressing the realities of the historically oppressed and underresourced communities they were growing up in.

To be ushered by Anderson into Hall's current classroom at Carver Vocational-Technical High School is to see drawings of African masks ornamenting the wooden door, and posters of Maya Angelou's "Phenomenal Woman" and Langston Hughes's "Harlem" hanging on the walls. The library is jammed with young-adult novels by Black and Latino writers who know how to speak directly to readers navigating difficult lives, often without much support—and plenty of whom have lost friends to prison and tragic death. "West Baltimore can be a crushing place to be a Black teen," Anderson writes. In her classes, Hall calls the boys "kings" and the girls "queens." They can count on their teacher not merely to give them grand titles, but to challenge them in ways that build their confidence both as students and as citizens.

Hall is not someone who thought she was born to teach (few of us are), and she faced her share of challenges in those early days in the classroom. A college graduate unsure of her next step, she had been alerted almost by chance to a program that offered a tuition-free master's degree from Morgan State University, in Baltimore, to applicants who agreed to teach in the city's public-school system for a minimum of five years. A degree and a guaranteed job were too good to pass up. When she arrived in Baltimore to teach English, Hall told Anderson, her students could "smell fresh meat." Fairly naive about classroom management, she didn't yet appreciate the power of clear rules and expectations. Building rapport with students who sometimes mistook her niceness for meekness was hard. Figuring out lesson plans consumed entire stressful weekends. Like so many early-career teachers do, she sought a sense of control in premade syllabi, curricula, and pedagogy—overrelying on rote approaches and heavily weighted exams at the end of each unit.

But by leaning on veteran teachers for guidance, Hall gained self-assurance: She could deviate from required reading and give students the freedom to choose texts that engaged them more, she discovered, and still demand rigor. She began to see the transformative role she might be able to play, getting students to buy into the academic work she placed in front of them and, no less important, helping to change their sense of their lives. And then came the Black Lives Matter movement. As a colleague at Carver who came to count on Hall's guidance told Anderson, "I go into the classroom with the mindset: 'How can I give my students the skills and the knowledge to critique society, and then feel empowered enough to do something about it?'" Teachers like her, and like Hall, who stayed on in the classroom, resisting the churn so common to their profession, could aspire to wield real influence.

Part of me wondered if I should attempt to keep my classroom as a sort of island, set apart from the often grim realities beyond it.

Anderson doesn't mention James Baldwin's "A Talk to Teachers," but Hall was very much acting on his urgent suggestion in that 1963 essay. "Now if I were a teacher in this school, or any Negro school, and I was dealing with Negro children," Baldwin wrote, addressing a group of educators, "I would try to teach them—I would try to make them know—that those streets, those houses, those dangers, those agonies by which they are surrounded, are criminal." Note that "try." Helping students see that it is not the Black child who is a criminal, but the larger society that this child has been born into, eludes tidy teaching scripts. But Hall came to believe that striving to do that was central to her work.

In a scene that Anderson recounts, Hall seized on a local event that took place in May 2019—when the media referred to a large group of teenagers gathering at Baltimore's Inner Harbor as a "juvenile disturbance"—to have her students engage in a discussion of material far from the standard English curriculum: a reading about Kalief Browder, a teenager from New York City who spent nearly three harrowing years of physical and psychological abuse in jail on Rikers Island. He'd been accused of stealing a backpack in 2010—and then committed suicide two years after his release (and after charges were dropped). Her class also watched a news clip about the Central Park Five, the young Black and Latino teenagers who had been falsely accused of raping a white woman in 1989.

The "Socratic seminar" that followed—some students talking, others listening, then swapping places (a process intentionally aligned with Common Core standards)—reflected Baldwin's spirit. Black children in neglected places, he argued, needed to comprehend that they were not responsible for the social conditions in which they lived. They had to *understand* these realities, and develop the skills with which to navigate them, but they did not have to accept them as static, as inevitable. Hall was prodding her class to take in larger historical and social contexts, to recognize that the things they experienced in Baltimore didn't happen in isolation. "At the Inner Harbor, they called us criminals," one student said, and noted that in the Netflix series about the Central Park Five, *When They See Us*, "the cops called them animals." Another weighed in: "My brother's going to have to do time again, 5–10 years, for just being in the wrong place at the wrong time." A different student added, "The whole entire system is corrupt."

Discussions like these can sometimes get stuck, or go off track, I discovered in my own teaching, as did Hall, and even when they're as thoughtful, honest, and

robust as this one turned out to be, if a teacher isn't skilled in this sort of facilitation, they can land in bleak places. For students and their teachers, the quest is to balance the need to understand a pervasively unjust system and the need to nurture an awareness of agency. "The obligation of anyone who thinks of himself as responsible," Baldwin wrote, "is to examine society and try to change it and to fight it—at no matter what risk. This is the only hope society has. This is the only way societies change."

As an educator, I came to think that no mission was more important than this one, or more daunting. And in my early days of teaching, as much as I wanted to be the sort of educator Baldwin was calling on me to be, part of me wondered if I should attempt to keep my classroom as a sort of island, set apart from the often grim realities beyond it.

But the more time I spent with my students—almost all of them Black or Latino (many of whom were undocumented or came from mixed-status immigrant families), and more than 70 percent of them eligible for free or reduced-price lunch—the less possible and productive that approach seemed to me, as it did to Hall. "That's just how it is here, Mr. Smith," one of my students said to me, and a semicircle of matter-of-fact nods rippled across the classroom. A fellow student had just been shot and killed in a drive-by. It was not the first time a young person from the school community had been killed, and would not be the last. I had never taught the young man whose life had been taken, but I remembered the sound of his laughter—his high-spiritedness had been contagious—in the hallway between classes.

After hearing the news the night before, I had decided to scrap my original lesson plan so I could open up my classroom as a space where we could collectively mourn. Students paid tribute to their peer and expressed disgust toward the shooters. There were tears, raised voices, and monologues of grief. I had them write as we tried to find a way to heal and move forward, pushing against the fatalism so many of them justifiably felt. Indeed, within the span of the next two weeks, one student's parents were deported, another's family was evicted from their home, yet another student was arrested, and several revealed to me that they had been coming to school without having eaten the night before.

I had not been trained for this, but in the course of finding my way in class, trying to put the books I assigned into conversation with current events, I read *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, a foundational text of what is called critical pedagogy. Written in 1968 by the Brazilian philosopher and educator Paulo Freire, and translated into English in 1970, it was based on his experience teaching Brazilians living in poverty, most of them adults, how to read and write. Freire emphasized that the "struggle for their liberation" required students to recognize the stratified status quo not as a "world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform." At its best, I found as I worked with teenagers, critical pedagogy helped me appreciate that, even as students are engaged in the process of learning, they are also engaged in the project of *unlearning* so much of what they have been taught about society and about themselves. And it is in that unlearning that agency can be reclaimed.

I threw the curricular staples at my students, and as they worked at mastering unfamiliar material from other centuries, we also tied it to contemporary issues. We read Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and linked it to civic engagement. We found connections between Henry David Thoreau and contemporary political protests. Richard Wright's *Native Son* led into a discussion of mass incarceration, and of a sense of powerlessness in a society that feels like it was built to crush you. Sometimes the students' written reflections and contributions to class discussions would blow me away with their honesty and their sophisticated level of historical and political analysis. Other times, the conversation was muted, and I worried that I had given my students too much to process. But those moments of uncertainty, I thought, were better than the silence of students given too little to engage with, too few encounters with ideas that might help them better understand themselves in relation to the world.

BECOMING A TEACHER

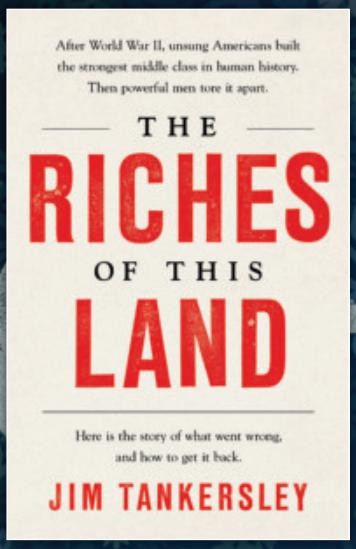
Melinda D. Anderson

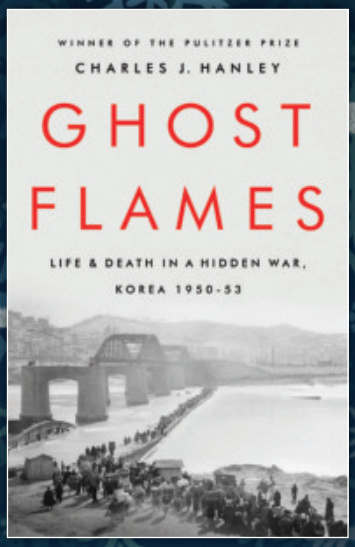
SIMON & SCHUSTER

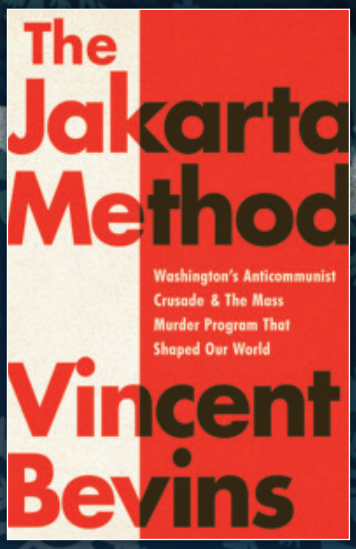
The pandemic, the protests, the economic downturn—the events of this year have made any notion of the classroom as an oasis moot. They have meant that teachers, many of them trapped on screens, are surely feeling overwhelmed and unsupported. At the same time, as I've learned by talking with teachers across the country, the compounding crises have spurred many of them to recognize the need to revamp lesson plans, to think in new ways about how to incorporate the debates over inequality that affect their students so directly. Ours is not the first time of ferment in which teaching to the test, as in the standardized variety, has seemed inadequate—and let's hope that if, or when, political urgency ebbs, pedagogical aspirations do not. As Hall puts it, too many of her students are "already up against the greatest tests that people can experience, which is surviving in a city that is out to kill them every single day, or make them look bad." Baldwin reminds us that the crucial work of educators is to fortify their students, joining them in the quest to make the society into which they were born fully account for the conditions it has created. *A*

Clint Smith is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

OPEN PRESENTS, and MINDS.

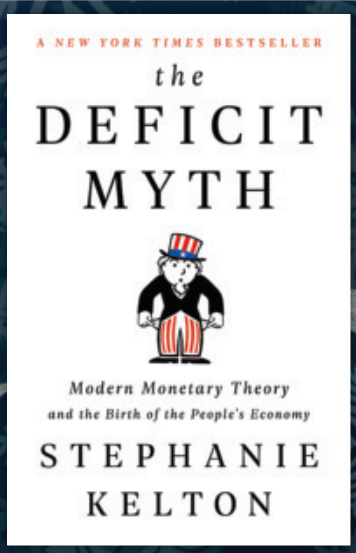






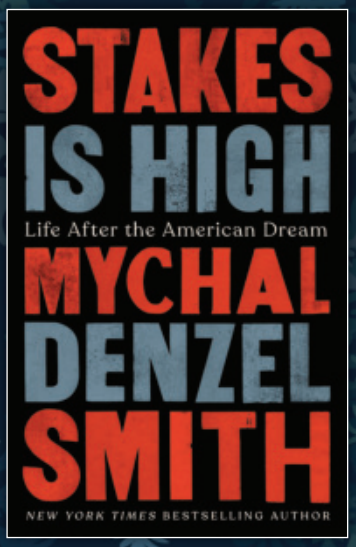
Great books *for the* holidays *from*

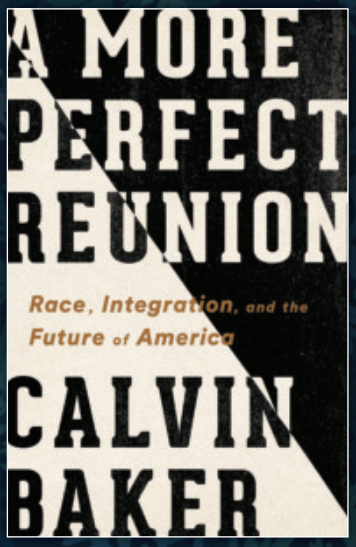
PUBLICAFFAIRS



and

BOLD TYPE BOOKS





Available in bookstores everywhere from hachette BOOK GROUP

BOOKS

The Many Lives of Adrienne Rich

Praised by W. H. Auden as neat and modest, she vowed to be passionate and radical instead.

By Stephanie Burt

In 1952, in her native Baltimore, Adrienne Rich delivered her first public lecture, "Some Influences of Poetry Upon the Course of History." She was 23. Over the next 59 years, Rich (1929–2012) would herself alter both poetry and history. As an author, a teacher, and an editor, she helped define American feminism. As a poet, she left a stack of books that are animated by anger, by self-reproach, by deep knowledge of the poetic traditions she often rejected, and by her fierce desire to be understood. She created, and illuminated, divisions—within her readers as much as among them—as she reversed and revised her life's goals.

The simplest story about those goals—and it's not wrong—presents an obedient daughter and a young mother, rewarded early for talent, radicalized in middle age. Adrienne's father, Arnold, was a prestigious pathologist at Johns Hopkins University and a WASP-passing Jewish man. An "absolute authority" in his own home, as Rich wrote, Arnold required his wife, Helen, to wear the black crepe dress he designed for her, day after day, year after year. Helen, a trained pianist and composer, threw herself into Adrienne's music lessons (she was playing Mozart by age 4); Arnold, into her literary education, neglecting her younger sister, Cynthia. When Arnold died in 1968, Hilary Holladay writes in her capacious, generous biography, *The Power of Adrienne Rich*, Rich had "spent her life becoming the accomplished poet he wanted her to be." She had also "hated him for a long time."

Rich was driven and admired, though never popular, in her all-girls high school. She enrolled at Radcliffe (then Harvard's college for women) seeking a husband and a literary career. The "self-possessed and proper" Adrienne impressed professors, among them the poet Theodore Morrison and the renowned F. O. Matthiessen, an authority on American literature and a gay socialist. She also became engaged to a graduate student in history, Sumner Powell. Before her senior year at Radcliffe, Rich had completed the manuscript W. H. Auden chose for the Yale Younger Poets prize. His foreword to *A Change of World* (1951) praised the undergraduate's "neatly and modestly" finished work. Writing to her family, Rich resolved to be "messily passionate and grand" instead.

The Yale book made Rich a well-mannered wunderkind; it also led to a Guggenheim-funded year at Oxford, with travels on the European Continent (de rigueur for her poetic generation). A poem from *The Diamond Cutters and Other Poems* (1955) suggested more unruly ferment; set at Versailles, it augured great change (such as the French Revolution) for "all good children who are

BETTMANN; RICHARD LAUTENS / TORONTO STAR / GETTY

ILLUSTRATION BY CELINA PEREIRA

all too good." Before Rich moved overseas, she left Powell cold. She then fell hard for Alfred Conrad, whose Jewish background repelled Arnold. "I didn't know a great deal about him," remembered the poet Donald Hall, who knew Rich at Harvard and Oxford, "but I knew he was an economist and I knew she loved him—and I knew that her father disapproved."

When she returned, the pair married and settled in Cambridge, where they enjoyed a Harvard-centric social world at once comfortable and stifling. "She had a script to follow," as Holladay writes: that of young faculty wife. As her first two children, David and Pablo, neared school age, Rich found herself pregnant with a third, Jacob. She nonetheless managed to enter the Boston University–based literary circles of Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath. Rich "advised Sylvia very strongly not to have children." Poems in free verse about feeling trapped in a household, about being a woman in a male-dominated world, opened *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963). In the title poem, angels tell the writer at the kitchen sink, "*Be insatiable … Save yourself; others you cannot save*."

Nonetheless, she tried. The family spent a year happily in Rotterdam, where Rich acquired her strong interest in translation; renditions of Dutch poems conclude *Necessities of Life* (1966), whose signature poem envisions New England settlers "starved, intense," "lonely," "each with his God-given secret, / spelled out through months of snow." Denied tenure twice at Harvard, Conrad in 1966 took a job at the City University of New York. Rich went with him, "vigilant mom by day, chain-smoking, hard-drinking poet by night" in Manhattan and in their vacation house in Vermont. CUNY expected Conrad's energies to go into its new doctorate program in economics. Instead, he threw himself into activism: against campus racism, for open admissions, against the Vietnam War.

Rich shared his confrontational politics. "Even to hope is to leap into the unknown," she mused in *Leaflets* (1969), "under the mocking eyes of the way things are." And yet she found it hard to share his life. She recalled in an interview, "Essential portions of me were dying." "She couldn't get him to talk to her," Holladay writes. In New York (and perhaps earlier), Rich and Conrad decided to open up their marriage, and her lovers included Robert Lowell. She had no sense of herself as attracted to women until after Conrad's death. In July 1970, Rich told him she was moving out; three months afterward, she wrote in her poem "Sources," Conrad "drove to Vermont in a rented car at dawn and shot himself."

"It's an oldfashioned, an outrageous thing," Rich mused in the 1980s, "to believe one has a 'destiny.'"

REACTIONS TO THAT LOSS, and attempts to move past it, energized *Diving Into the Wreck* (1973), a book widely recognized for its bold commitment to women's liberation. Though W. B. Yeats was no feminist, Rich's career now seems Yeatsian—early fame; complex private life (with a hinge in her 40s); shifting styles, each a reproach to the last. She could have said, as he did, that each time she changed her approach to verse, "it is myself that I remake." Holladay singles out a poem from *Wreck* called, simply, "Song," where the poet stands

> with the rowboat ice-fast on the shore
> in the last red light of the year
> that knows what it is, that knows it's neither
> ice nor mud nor winter light
> but wood, with a gift for burning

Before *Wreck*, Rich was an eminent left-wing poet. After it, she was a public figure, showing other women hurt by patriarchy, by domestic isolation, by competition, how to claim submerged selves, how to read the "book of myths / in which / our names do not appear." She had changed herself, even saved herself. Now she wanted to change the world. Holladay devotes perhaps too many pages to Rich's star turn at the 1974 National Book Awards, where she, Audre Lorde, and Alice Walker together accepted her prize on behalf of "all the women." But the fame was real: For decades, her readings filled auditoriums.

It was after *Wreck* that Rich came out, first to friends, then with her 1976 chapbook "Twenty-One Love Poems," among the first well-known openly lesbian love poems in modern America. Rich's first lesbian partners included the activist poet June Jordan and (after they sparred in print) Susan Sontag. A light sense of unaddressed controversies, of material withheld, lingers over Holladay's treatment of those years. Yet she resolves the greatest mystery in Rich's career, the identity of the lover in "Twenty-One Love Poems." The woman who inspired such passionate words, Lilly Engler, refused to come out, let alone make the romance public. And no wonder: Engler was Rich's psychiatrist—she could have lost her practice and her license. The relationship lasted less than a year. "These are the forces we had ranged within us," the love poems conclude, "within us and against us, against us and within us." Rich could have meant everything from shyness, to coyness, to therapeutic ethics, to internalized or society-wide homophobia.

By this time, the poet craved not just same-sex love, but communities made by and for women. Rich diminished or cut off contact with prominent men and refused to take questions from men in her audiences. Her poems sought historical parallels in women mountain climbers, in neglected artists, in Marie Curie. Holladay asserts, a bit defensively, that the poet was no dogmatic separatist: "All Rich wanted was a break" from men. Even before she bought a house in Massachusetts, the social and intellectual center of her life had begun to shift to

the Pioneer Valley, around Amherst and Northampton, a lesbian destination then as now. Holladay's sources for these years include Janice Raymond, whose egregiously influential 1979 book, *The Transsexual Empire*, argued that transgender women are not really women and should not exist. Rich's role in its writing—and her attitudes toward trans people (did they change?)—go unmentioned. We do, however, see Rich change her mind about other things. Once active, with Raymond and Catharine MacKinnon, in anti-pornography campaigns, Rich in 1985 switched sides: "Laws intended to punish pornographers would harm women whose sexual desires fell outside the perceived norm."

Rich owed her eminence not only to her poetry but to essays such as "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (1980), and to her book-length polemic about "motherhood as experience and institution," *Of Woman Born* (1976). Rich's copy editor for that book was a younger writer, the Jamaican poet and novelist Michelle Cliff; they fell in love. Rich settled down with Cliff for the rest of her life, first in New York; then in western Massachusetts, where the pair ran the lesbian feminist journal *Sinister Wisdom*; and from 1984 on in Santa Cruz, California. Volatile, and sometimes prickly about her lesser fame, Cliff nonetheless made a strong partner for Rich. Santa Cruz neighbors remember the couple as welcoming, warm, and reliable, and as avid fans of the sitcom *The Golden Girls*.

Anchored in life, Rich the writer remained unsatisfied, and uncompromising, in literary matters. She told the poet Hayden Carruth in 1971 of a "hunger that seems almost … to be *who I am*." Rich assembled a controversial—and wonderful—1996 edition of *Best American Poetry* with work from teenagers and prisoners (as well as from the usual poetic suspects). Devoted to an ideal of integrity, she had trouble expressing gratitude, lest any kindness seem transactional. In Holladay's telling, she kept friends close for decades, but could drop them without warning. With Carruth, it's a wonder she took so long; their "intimate, almost entirely epistolary friendship" could not survive his resistance to her feminism. Audre Lorde took on a similar role—close in every way except physical sex—in Rich's later life. "You have climbed into my poems," Rich wrote to Lorde, "and, in less visible ways, I have perhaps climbed into yours." Their friendship surfaced questions she felt she needed to ask herself about her relationships with other Black women.

Rich also asked herself what to do as a Jew. "Yom Kippur 1984" found her "trying to say / that to be with my people is my dearest wish / but that I also love strangers / that I crave separateness." Holladay remarks that Rich "made a Talmud out of her life." Capacious sequences, ragged stand-alone lyric poems, and pages that read like notebook entries, in books like *Time's Power* (1989) and *Midnight Salvage* (1999), revealed a writer still arguing with herself, trying "to give up power for the greater good," reaching out internationally, rejecting earlier efforts to speak for all women. And if the late prose turned glib, the verse remained profound. The lead poem in *Fox* (2003), dedicated to the HIV-positive poet Tory Dent, addressed readers everywhere:

> I guess you're not alone I fear you're alone
> There's, of course, poetry:
> awful bridge rising over naked air …
> I'm driving to your side
> —an intimate collusion—
> packed in the trunk my bag of foils for fencing
> with pain …
> If you have a sister I am not she
> nor your mother nor you my daughter
> nor are we lovers or any kind of couple
> except in the intensive care
> of poetry

Few readers knew Rich's own pain: It literally hurt to be her. (The "foils," above, are hypodermics.) Diagnosed at 22 with rheumatoid arthritis, she kept her condition private for decades; "acute suffering could occur at any time," Holladay writes. In 1969 she declined to attend a march, worried that she would slow her companions down. She used canes and wheelchairs beginning in the early 1980s, if not earlier; onstage, "she did not appear strong until she spoke." The New England chill made her arthritis worse—one reason Rich and Cliff chose California. In a metaphor almost too good to be true, a 1992 spinal operation required Rich to wear, all day and all night, a metal "halo screwed into her head."

The halo, of course, also meant she needed help. Rich's mature writings, verse and prose, insisted on interdependence, attacking the systems that separate women from women, rich white people from all the rest. And yet her writings stood out. "It's an oldfashioned, an outrageous thing," Rich mused in the '80s, "to believe one has a 'destiny.'" But she felt she did: "The faithful drudging child / the child at the oak desk … becomes the woman with a mission." People who have read few books of poetry have read *Diving Into the Wreck*; people otherwise untouched by feminist theory have led lives improved by her prose. And people who have read many poems, and many poets, can still find little-known gems of introspection, ways to look outside our personal bubbles, to remake ourselves, in the complexities of her work. *A*

Stephanie Burt is an English professor at Harvard and the author of Don't Read Poetry: A Book About How to Read Poems.

THE POWER OF ADRIENNE RICH: A BIOGRAPHY

Hilary Holladay

NAN A. TALESE

The Atlantic Festival

Thank you to all of our speakers, guests, and underwriters.
Visit TheAtlanticFestival.com to watch programming
from this year's event.

UNDERWRITTEN BY

FOUNDING

FACEBOOK

PRESENTING

Genentech
A Member of the Roche Group

WALTON FAMILY FOUNDATION

Hewlett Packard Enterprise

SUPPORTING

Allstate. Lilly usbank

CONTRIBUTING

AARP Real Possibilities

ExxonMobil

Bill & Melinda Gates foundation

PayPal

MacArthur Foundation

Nestlé Waters

BOOKS

Whitewashing the Great Depression

How the preeminent photographic record of the period eclipsed people of color and shaped the nation's self-image

By Sarah Boxer

Quick, name one iconic Depression-era portrait each by Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, and Russell Lee. My guess is that you'd choose Lange's *Migrant Mother*, a portrait of Florence Owens Thompson and her children taken in Nipomo, California, in 1936. For Evans, you'd probably pick a 1936 portrait of tight-lipped Allie Mae Burroughs standing before the wall of her family's cabin in Hale County, Alabama. For Lee, you might draw a blank, but you'd likely recognize his 1937 group portrait *Saturday Night in a Saloon*, showing four drinkers in Craigville, Minnesota. (It was used in the opening sequence of the TV show *Cheers*.)

What's my point? Each of the subjects in each of these pictures, produced by Farm Security Administration photographers, appears to be white. Although the photographers who worked for the FSA took many pictures of people of color—in the streets, in the fields, out of work—the Great Depression's main victims, as Americans came to visualize them, were white. And this collective portrait has contributed to the misbegotten idea, still current, that the soul of America, the real American type, is rural and white.

In one sense, the lack of diversity in classic FSA photographs comes as little surprise: The country was roughly 90 percent white during the Depression, and the FSA represented Black people in proportion to their share of the population. Yet overall representation is surely only part of the story, given that the FSA was supposed to be chronicling hardship among farmworkers. During the Depression, Black Americans made up more than half of the country's tenant farmers, sharecroppers, and farmworkers in the South. In 1932, when a quarter of white Americans were unemployed, half of Black Americans were. "In some Northern cities, whites called for African Americans to be fired from any jobs as long as there were whites out of work," according to the Library of Congress's website for teachers. And Black sharecroppers were often forced out of work by white ones. "No group was harder hit than African Americans."

Yet we've come to imagine the Great Depression as largely a white tragedy. That isn't because the FSA photographers

focused only on white subjects. If you look at the roughly 175,000 negatives in the complete FSA/Office of War Information file, now at the Library of Congress, you'll see that the photographers working for the FSA and for its predecessor, the Resettlement Administration, and its successor, the OWI, documented many people of color. Lee photographed poor Black people in Missouri, and Mexican pecan shellers in Texas. Evans photographed Black Americans out of work in Mississippi and Alabama. And Lange photographed Filipino lettuce pickers and Japanese truck farmers in California.

THE MOST DIRECT RESPONSIBILITY for the whitewashing seems to lie with the photographers' boss, Roy Stryker, who was the chief of the FSA's historical section from 1935 to 1941, and then of the OWI's photography unit. Three new books that pursue three very different subjects in very distinctive ways—*Walker Evans: Starting From Scratch*, by Svetlana Alpers; *Russell Lee: A Photographer's Life and Legacy*, by Mary Jane Appel; and *Dorothea Lange: Words & Pictures*, a Museum of Modern Art exhibition catalog—all offer evidence that FSA photographers often tangled with Stryker over matters of race.

Stryker openly worried that too much racial honesty might sink his ship at the FSA. Part of his mission at the agency was to compile a complete pictorial record of all kinds of Americans, known as "The File." The other part was to present to Congress a sympathetic portrayal of American suffering, "to document the problems of the Depression," as one photographer recalled, "so that we could justify the New Deal legislation that was designed to alleviate them."

Stryker, in other words, was a realist. And the reality was that Congress, which controlled the FSA's funds, was dominated by Southern Democrats, who, as Appel writes in her Lee biography, were "interested in preserving the racial status quo." Knowing this, Stryker and other FSA officials "were reluctant to lead the agency in a crusade against racial disparity." President Franklin D. Roosevelt himself feared the Southern Democrats. Without their support, his New Deal programs had no hope of surviving. Thus, although FDR signed an order barring discrimination in the projects sponsored by his newly founded Works Progress Administration in 1935, Appel notes that he wouldn't back "an anti-lynching campaign because he was afraid of losing his Southern Democratic base." And when the Social Security Act was passed, also in 1935, agricultural and domestic workers (who were disproportionately Black) were excluded from its benefits.

Photographs have a way of yielding surprises long after they are taken.

To tug at the Dixiecrats' heartstrings, Stryker realized that the photographs presented to them had to accentuate white suffering. Even local FSA bureaucrats "resisted the inclusion of black farmers in their public relations material," Appel writes. One FSA official in Amarillo, Texas, who claimed he was "sincerely sympathetic to all races, including Negroes," asked about a local exhibit organized by the FSA photographer Edwin Rosskam in the late 1930s: "Why was it necessary for Mr. Rosskam to use a picture of a Negro farmer on the fourth panel? Surely he had photos of German farmers, Russian farmers, Italian farmers, Irish farmers, etc."

Stryker controlled the imagery in different ways. He punched holes in negatives he didn't want to use. He also carefully steered his photographers in the field. (Their ranks included Jack Delano, Louise Rosskam, Ben Shahn, John Vachon, and Marion Post Wolcott.) As Sarah Hermanson Meister, the curator of the recent MoMA exhibit of Lange's work, writes: "One of Roy Stryker's strategies … was to give them what he called 'shooting scripts' … lists of keywords, organized by topic, which he hoped would shape their vision and draw their attention to particular signs of the times." For instance, the script he wrote to promote the need for the Farm Debt Adjustment program requested shots of a courtroom scene, a sheriff, a farmer dumping milk. The results, not altogether surprisingly, were white as milk.

TO VARYING DEGREES, the photographers followed Stryker's direction. In an interview in the 1960s, Stryker said he'd had a stable of photographers "I could trust implicitly." But there were tensions. In 1936, for example, Stryker sent Evans to Mississippi to document soil erosion and "the present state of buildings." Evans duly recorded erosion, shacks, wrecked plantation houses, and storefronts. But he also went further, taking many photos of people in the Black quarters of Vicksburg and Tupelo. He didn't seem to care that the government hadn't asked for such pictures. In 1937, Evans was fired by Stryker, who pinpointed the reason for his irritation with Evans a quarter century later: "Walker wasn't going to cooperate … I had to have people who would not only take the pictures they wanted."

The FSA leaders weren't alone in skewing the portrait of the Depression's victims. Magazine publishers did their part, too. In 1936, Evans traveled with James Agee to document the houses of three sharecropper families in Hale County for *Fortune* magazine. As Agee noted later, the magazine requested "a photographic and verbal record of the daily living and environment of an average white family of tenant farmers." Evans flouted the order, documenting both Black and white

Opposite page: *A man on the porch of a general store near Jeanerette, Louisiana, photographed in 1938 by Russell Lee*

RUSSELL LEE / LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

farmers. However, when he and Agee put together *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), which included pictures from that trip, they notably left out the pictures of Black Americans. These were added only in 1960, in a second edition. Alpers writes that Evans put in "a final section of photographs … a main street, a plantation house, black men on a sidewalk."

Lange also chafed at the racial limits. As Robert Slifkin notes in the MoMA catalog, FSA leadership instructed her to "focus attention on the plight of white victims" and to "avoid representing instances of interracial sociality." She didn't always comply. Take *Plantation Overseer and His Field Hands, Mississippi Delta* (1936), a widely circulated group portrait featuring Black farmhands looking plaintively at the camera next to a plump white overseer. When this picture appeared in the *U.S. Camera Annual* in 1939, it carried an incendiary caption, a quote from a viewer outraged at the racial oppression depicted: "Did or didn't you know slavery was abolished?"

Like Lange and Evans, Lee bridled under the selective hand of Stryker. On a 1938 visit to dozens of homes in a New Deal planned community called the Southeast Missouri Farms Project, Lee, tasked with showing the successes of the program, focused on the continuing hardships there instead. His work emphasized a group of "primitive shanties" with no electricity. The occupants there were both Black and white, and his goal, Appel points out, was to "suggest comparable levels of poverty." In two separate houses, for instance, Lee took two portraits, one of a white boy combing his hair before a mirror and one of a Black girl doing the same. Appel observes:

> Newspapers—provisional insulation or makeshift wallpaper—cover the walls. Both bureaus are cluttered and, in homes without electricity, oil lamps sit near the mirrors. As they comb their hair, both children stand barefoot on dirty wooden floors.

Although these two photographs are similar and are now filed together at the Library of Congress, they had very different fates. *Son of a Sharecropper*, the picture of the white boy, ran in many newspapers. *Sharecropper's Child*, featuring the young Black girl, was rarely seen, and Appel has found no evidence that it was ever published.

Lee's biggest rift with Stryker came in 1939, over his photographs of Mexican pecan shellers in San Antonio. By this time, the Depression was lifting and the pressures on Stryker had shifted. He needed to show Congress the results of the aid it had given to farmers—upbeat shots. But Lee kept photographing unemployed workers (mostly Mexican) and their kids waiting in food lines. He also documented the food

Top: *A Japanese mother and daughter, farmworkers in California, photographed in 1937 by Dorothea Lange.* Middle: *A Missouri sharecropper's child combing her hair, photographed in 1938 by Russell Lee, who took a similar picture of a white boy.* Bottom: *Black flood refugees in Arkansas, photographed in 1937 by Walker Evans.*

they got every two weeks for their families—"a small sack of beans and a block of butter." In response to these dismal shots, Stryker asked Lee to "start a series of pictures showing the operation and life on somewhat better farms," which Stryker himself called "glorification pictures." Lee did so, but remained focused on the downtrodden. This irritated Stryker: "I must say that I can't do much glorifying out of anything you've taken."

AS THE DEPRESSION came to an end, a wide array of FSA photographs became public. In April 1938, a large show of FSA pictures was part of New York City's "First International Photographic Exposition" at Grand Central Palace, and those photos were then picked up by the Museum of Modern Art for a national tour. Later that same year, MoMA gave Evans a solo show, "American Photographs." (This was MoMA's first-ever one-person photography exhibition.) In 1939, Lange published *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion*, a title that seems to poke fun at Stryker's giving preference to soil erosion. And then, in 1941, came *12 Million Black Voices*, written by the novelist Richard Wright and compiled by Edwin Rosskam. This book, which included photographs by Evans, Lange, and Lee, flew in the face of the American mythology that the FSA had been constructing.

Interestingly, Stryker gave the book his full support. Perhaps he was freer to do so with the economy on the mend. But clearly he remained conflicted about how to handle the race question. In 1942, upon meeting the Black photographer Gordon Parks, who had just won an FSA fellowship, Stryker sent him without his camera to see the sights in Washington, D.C., knowing full well he'd get a good dose of the city's segregated ways. When Parks returned, having been barred from all-white lunch counters and movie theaters, Stryker encouraged him to go back out with his camera, to "put a face on racism," starting with the FSA offices. In a now famous portrait, *American Gothic, Washington, D.C.*, Parks immortalized a cleaning woman at the FSA, Ella Watson, holding a mop and a broom in front of the American flag. Stryker's reaction captured his sense of caution as well as his sympathy: "My God, this can't be published, but it's a start."

During World War II, many of Stryker's FSA photographers started taking pictures at the Office of War Information, whose mission was connecting American civilians to the war effort through radio broadcasts, newspapers, photographs, and films. When, in 1942, Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, commanding the internment of anyone of Japanese descent, Lange was hired by the government's War Relocation Authority to document how the policy was being executed. "American nationalism became explicitly racialized," Linda Gordon writes in *Impounded: Dorothea Lange and the Censored Images of Japanese American Internment*. White Americans were taught to identify and turn in the Japanese, whose faces were presumed to signify "disloyalty and treachery."

Lange, who was vehemently opposed to the relocation program, made some 800 heartrending photographs of Japanese American families as they packed up their farms, businesses, and houses and were loaded onto buses and trains, tagged with numbers, and imprisoned in barracks. (She was to take "no pictures of the barbed wire or watchtowers or armed soldiers.") Clearly sympathetic to the victims of internment, Lange's photographs remained out of public view. As Gordon writes, "she was required to turn over all negatives, prints, and undeveloped film from this work—then her pictures were impounded for the duration of the war." By the time these photos became public (you can now see Lange's personal archive online at the Oakland Museum of California), the war was over. As Lange later remarked: "They had wanted a record, but not a public record."

IN THE END, though, censoring, withholding, scripting, and editing what the cameras capture can control only so much. Photographs, even those shot with a specific purpose, have a way of yielding surprises long after they are taken.

Consider *Migrant Mother*. On the day Lange took the picture, in March 1936, she was in the rain-sogged pea-pickers' camp for only 10 minutes. And she was uncharacteristically sloppy: She didn't get the name or history of the woman she photographed in a tent with her kids, and her caption went on to describe a mother so desperate for food for her family that she'd sold the tires off her car. The effect was powerful: Shortly after the photo ran in *The San Francisco News*, the U.S. government sent 20,000 pounds of food to the campsite in Nipomo. But by the time it arrived, the Migrant Mother and her kids were gone.

Four decades later, Florence Owens Thompson surfaced to tell her real story. She hadn't sold her tires to buy food, as Lange reported. She and her kids didn't live in Nipomo; they had stopped there briefly because their car had broken down. Once the car was fixed, she and her family had moved on (the car had tires). Plus, she wasn't white, as everyone had assumed. She was Cherokee, a nonwhite citizen. But no matter. Her work for the American image was already done. *A*

Sarah Boxer, a critic and cartoonist, is the author of two psychoanalytic comics, In the Floyd Archives *and* Mother May I?

WALKER EVANS: STARTING FROM SCRATCH

Svetlana Alpers

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS

RUSSELL LEE: A PHOTOGRAPHER'S LIFE AND LEGACY

Mary Jane Appel

LIVERIGHT

DOROTHEA LANGE: WORDS & PICTURES

Edited by Sarah Hermanson Meister

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

DOROTHEA LANGE; RUSSELL LEE; WALKER EVANS; LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

ESSAY

The Return of Eddie Murphy

Without a road map, he blazed a trail for Black performers, and then lost his way. Now he's back.

By David Kamp

"Ed-die! Ed-die! Ed-die!" Standing before a bank of potted poinsettias in Studio 8H of 30 Rockefeller Plaza, Eddie Murphy, the returning comedy hero, smiled serenely and took a few seconds to bask in the chant that had broken out. Then he spoke. "It's great to be back here finally, hosting *Saturday Night Live* for Christmas," he said. "This is the


KELLY
ROBINSON

last episode of 2019. But if you're Black, this is the first episode since I left back in 1984." Cue applause and knowing laughter.

Ah, the warm wave of renewed appreciation. We've witnessed this phenomenon a fair amount in recent times. Keanu Reeves, how cruel we were to mock you back when you toured with your band, Dogstar; you are an honorable and decorous man. Winona Ryder, forgive us for forever pinning the transgressions of your 20s and 30s upon you—after all, you long ago moved on to better things and *Stranger Things*. Now it's Eddie Murphy's turn.

Murphy, who will turn 60 next year, was more than a star in the 1980s, the decade in which he emerged. He was a force, incandescent with live-wire energy from the moment he was given his first speaking part on *SNL*. Over the course of mere months in 1981, the year he turned 20, Murphy debuted soon-to-be-iconic recurring characters: Buckwheat, Mister Robinson, Velvet Jones, and the prison poet Tyrone Green ("Dark and lonely on a summer night / Kill my landlord, kill my landlord / Watchdog barkin'—do he bite? / Kill my landlord, kill my landlord …").

It didn't take much longer for a leading-man film career to gather momentum, with *48 Hrs.*, *Trading Places*, and *Beverly Hills Cop* coming out in rapid succession—'82, '83, '84—and for Murphy to concurrently ascend to the pinnacle of stand-up, with his 1983 album, *Eddie Murphy: Comedian*, going gold in less than a year and winning a Grammy. The LP's companion HBO special, *Eddie Murphy: Delirious*, established what has come to be the lasting visual image of Murphy in his early-period pomp: a slim, handsome young man in a red-leather suit effortlessly commanding the huge stage of the 3,700-seat DAR Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C.

What made Murphy's rise so remarkable, beyond his youth, is that it was almost entirely self-powered: He talked his way into an *SNL* audition with no agent and no credentials from Second City, Groundlings, or any of the other prestigious comedy feeder schools; he survived the purge that eliminated all but two of the cast members from *SNL*'s disastrous 1980–81 season, the first after the departure of its creator and producer, Lorne Michaels, and the original cast; and he elevated every movie that he was in during those early years. None of the roles in that classic trio of star-making films was expressly conceived for him—*48 Hrs.* and *Trading Places* were developed with Richard Pryor in mind, and the titular protagonist of *Beverly Hills Cop* wasn't even meant to be Black, let alone funny. But it didn't matter. In those days, Murphy's charisma, ingratiating smile, and unerring comic instincts could bring any leaden, cliché-stuffed screenplay to life.

So many times over the past couple of decades, Murphy has tantalized us, appearing to be on the cusp of a triumphant return to his '80s form—to peak Eddie. For instance, in 1999, he delivered a terrific dual performance as a Tom Cruise–like movie star and his look-alike nebbishy brother in the first-rate comedy *Bowfinger*. And in 2006, he drew raves for his dramatic acting and his singing as the doomed, Jackie Wilson–like soul singer Jimmy Early in *Dreamgirls*.

But these intimations of artistic renewal never quite turned into proper comebacks. He didn't get the props he deserved (he won a Golden Globe for *Dreamgirls* but was robbed of an Oscar), and/or he didn't leverage the momentum, retreating into the haven of his profitable but formulaic *Dr. Dolittle* and *Nutty Professor* family-film franchises.

What's happening in the current wave of renewed appreciation is a symbiotic event involving performer and audience. Murphy has made a conscious and fairly recent decision to whip himself back into peak-Eddie shape. His return to *SNL* was one part of a comeback portfolio that also includes last year's *Dolemite Is My Name*, his best movie in ages, a biopic in which he stars as the lovably crude blaxploitation misfit Rudy Ray Moore. Netflix, which co-produced that film, is also underwriting Murphy's return to stand-up, having contracted with him to record a concert special—his first since 1987's *Raw*—once the coronavirus pandemic abates and Murphy is able to take his new material on the road.

Murphy has also completed the filming of *Coming 2 America*, a sequel to *Coming to America*, the award-winning comedy whose 1988 release marked the end of the peak-Eddie period. Murphy has

made several sequels in his career, many of the diminishing-returns variety (*Another 48 Hrs.*, *Beverly Hills Cop III*), but this one, originally slated to come out in December, is his most eagerly anticipated.

Which brings us to the audience's side of the comeback pact: the collective decision we've made to appreciate Murphy's cumulative contributions while he is still very much alive, in good health, and working, not yet at the standing-O, "play the entrance music slow 'cause he's got a cane" phase.

His Black fans and protégés are leading the way. During his *SNL* monologue last December, Murphy was joined onstage by Chris Rock, Dave Chappelle, Tracy Morgan, and Kenan Thompson—a living tableau of what Murphy hath wrought in comedy. Speaking with *Vanity Fair* earlier this year, Murphy noted that he is the last one standing of the Black megastars who reached the apogee of their fame and artistic success in the '80s: "The people that I knew around my age—that had impact in their areas—they're mostly … they're gone. Michael … and Prince … and Whitney, those are my contemporaries."

IN 1989, the last year of Murphy's golden decade, a young Black writer named Trey Ellis wrote an essay for the literary journal *Callaloo* in which he coined the phrase *the New Black Aesthetic*. Ellis invented it, he told me, to describe "modern Black Americans who would take influences from the broad spectrum of American culture, as opposed to the previous Black aesthetic, which was seen as protest songs, Black nationalism, or some kind of pan-Africanism." Ellis called these figures "cultural mulattoes," Black people who, on the basis of their influences, could "navigate easily in the white world"—in other words, who had crossover appeal. Murphy claimed a place in their ranks, along with the Marsalis brothers, Wynton and Branford; Prince; the playwright George C. Wolfe; the novelist Terry McMillan; the singer-songwriter Tracy Chapman; and the director Reginald Hudlin and his producer brother, Warrington.

Murphy, who grew up in the middle-class New York City suburb of Roosevelt, on Long Island, perfectly fit Ellis's description. His most obvious comedy forebear was Richard Pryor, whose 1970s albums he had committed to memory, but he was the product of all manner of Boomer-era pop-culture influences. "Eddie always said he wanted to be the Elvis of comedy, the Beatles of comedy," Rob Bartlett, one of Murphy's early stand-up partners, told me.

Murphy began doing stand-up when he was 15, insinuating himself into a mostly white comedy scene on Long Island. He worked his way into the regular rotation at a North Massapequa club called the White House Inn, whose Wednesday open-mic nights were emceed by Bartlett. The pair became fast friends—Bartlett often gave Murphy a ride to the club. Arriving in Roosevelt one evening to collect his friend, Bartlett recalled, he was let in by Murphy's mother, Lillian, who advised him to head quietly down to the basement. Bartlett saw Murphy, unaware that he was being watched, lip-synching to an Elvis Presley record. "All the moves, everything, just like he was really in the jumpsuit onstage in Vegas, doing it," Bartlett said.

Murphy, Bartlett, and a third Long Island comic, Bob Nelson, formed a short-lived act called "The Identical Triplets," in which each man would do a solo set, followed by a group improv performance. This often involved sight gags based on the trio's racial visuals: The two white guys would flank Murphy to form a "vanilla fudge" cookie, or the three men would perform a "total eclipse" routine in which Murphy slowly moved in front of Bartlett while Nelson peered at them through a pinhole in a piece of paper.

In a 1979 article about the White House Inn scene, a pre-fame Murphy, not yet 18, told *The New York Times* that he considered himself a "universal comic whose material would play equally well in front of both black and white audiences." Bartlett saw that potential, too. "I remember him doing a bit about flies, that shit was the equivalent of dope to flies—it got them high," Bartlett said. "He did the fly—*buzz*, *buzz*, *buzz*—and then there was a dealer fly who said, 'You better bring the bread, man. And I'm talking good bread, like Pepperidge *Farm*!' Then the next line killed me. The dealer fly said, '*Remember!*' It went over most people's heads, but that's the kind of thing that set him apart." (For readers under the age of 40, a ubiquitous TV ad campaign in the

'70s and '80s featured a folksy old man in a straw boater praising the baked-goods company's grandma-evocative products, concluding with the tagline "Pepperidge Farm *remembers*.")

Murphy was 19 and still working the Long Island clubs when he caught wind that the "Black slot" in *SNL*'s cast was open, because Garrett Morris was leaving. He began pestering the office of the show's talent coordinator, Neil Levy, with daily phone calls. Sometimes, Murphy got no further than Levy's secretary. But occasionally, Levy picked up his own phone and heard a buoyant, fast-talking kid on the line. "He went into this thing about how he had 18 brothers and sisters, and he was the only one who could work, and they were all counting on him to get this job. That made me laugh," Levy told me.

Still, *SNL* was not in the habit of taking unsolicited pitches from aspiring, agentless performers. Murphy, as far as Levy can recall, didn't even submit a résumé or a headshot. "There was something funny and kind of sparkling about him on the phone that made me not say 'Get lost,'" Levy said. "I thought that his persistence should be rewarded, and I thought maybe I could use him as an extra." In Levy's office, Murphy performed a short piece in which he enacted an argument among three men in Harlem, whipsawing between characters. Levy instantly recognized that Murphy had the goods.

The show's executive producer, Jean Doumanian, agreed to bring in Murphy as a featured player—a junior-varsity member of the cast—after Levy went to the mat for him. Murphy didn't have to bide his time on the JV list for long. After falling in with Barry Blaustein and David Sheffield, a pair of *SNL* writers, he developed a militant character named Raheem Abdul Muhammed. On December 6, 1980, Murphy-as-Raheem offered a "Weekend Update" commentary on an Ohio school district's mandate to integrate its high-school basketball teams with more *white* players.

"At least let us have basketball," Raheem said, unsmiling. "Is nothing sacred? Anytime we get something going good, y'all got to move in on it. In the '60s we wore platform shoes, then y'all had to wear platform shoes. In the early '70s we braided our hair, then in the late '70s you had to braid your hair. Now it's 1980, we on welfare—by the end of next year, y'all gonna be on welfare, too."

Murphy elicited whoops from the audience, a whole different species of laughter from the tiny tremors that otherwise disturbed the air of Studio 8H that dismal season. Within weeks, Murphy was promoted to full cast member. Margaret Oberman remembers Murphy as a "ridiculously wonderful" 20-year-old when she met him early in 1982. She had just been hired as an *SNL* writer by Dick Ebersol, who'd succeeded Doumanian in the spring of 1981. "All you needed to be with him was a good stenographer," Oberman told me. "Because he would come into your office and give you a character."

"You know the Rocky movies? 'You gotta get the eye of the tiger back, Rock!' I had it back then. I don't have the eye of the tiger anymore."

Robin Duke, a castmate of Murphy's from 1981 to 1984, ascribes to him a particular talent for connecting with audiences. "Eddie had a gift for working the camera and the live audience at the same time," she told me. "They both loved him, and he loved them right back. It was infectious, how happy he was onstage."

Murphy's body of *SNL* work is far more wide-ranging, strange, and inventive than people remember. Having grown up among Jewish, Irish, and Italian Americans on Long Island, he was as comfortable sending up white culture as Black. Beyond the famous Black characters that he reprised last December, his repertoire included eccentric local-TV pitchmen—the Tom Carvel–inspired Happy, proprietor of Happy's Mayonnaise Palace; and E. Eppy Doolittle, who woodenly pitched his downmarket Long Island gentlemen's club while pretending to take calls from celebrities.

Murphy even imbued a stock gay stereotype—a swishy hairdresser named Dion, a character he developed with Oberman—with remarkable tenderness and heart. His capacity for so comfortably inhabiting Dion is all the more curious given that the one major stain on the peak-Eddie period is the rank homophobia of his early stand-up work, in which he nonchalantly referred to gay men as "faggots" and made light of AIDS.

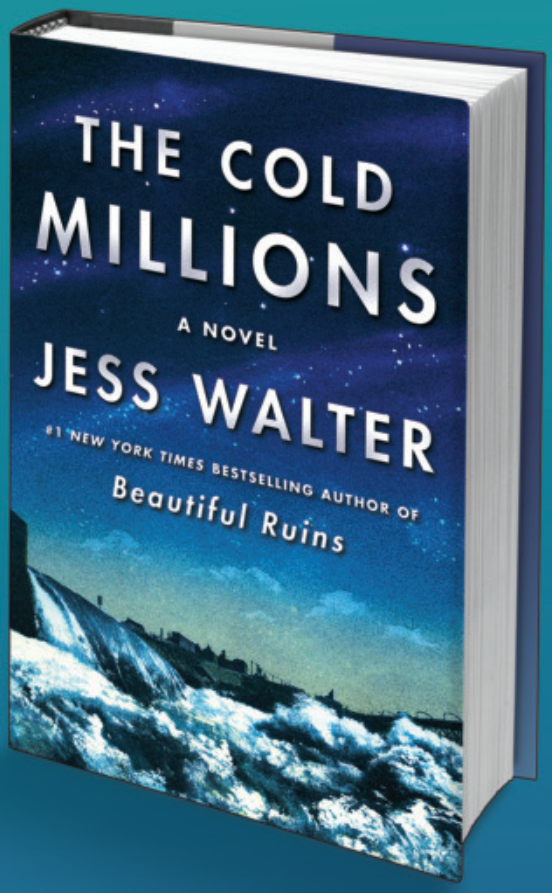
In *Delirious*—the very same set that contains his famous "Ice-Cream Man" sketch, which is almost '60s-Cosby-esque in its child's-eye view and endearing universality—Murphy joked about gay people and then joked about joking about gay people, saying, "I kid the homosexuals a lot, 'cause … they homosexuals." (Murphy apologized in 1996 for these routines.)

But Dion was lovingly portrayed, the dispenser of jokes rather than the butt of them, and his zingers—"Some woman bought the shirt I was gonna get for the Stevie Wonder concert. And I seen the bitch; she ain't even no *small*!"—are not a world away from those of Bowen Yang's improbably flamboyant Chinese government official, "trade daddy" Chen Biao, on latter-day *SNL*. It would be a fascinating, if undeniably fraught, proposition for Murphy, in his new stand-up, to sort out his complicated history with queerness.

IN 1984, with nothing left to prove, Murphy left *Saturday Night Live*. His flourishing film career was keeping him so busy that, in his final season, he had negotiated a lucrative deal to appear in only 10 of the season's 19 shows, a concession never before granted to an *SNL* cast member.

But just five years later, the peak-Eddie period was over, and Murphy was publicly longing for his *SNL* days. "In retrospect,

CRITICALLY ACCLAIMED NOVELS FROM *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHORS



"A page-turner, a postmodern experiment that reads like a potboiler, and a beautiful, lyric hymn to the power of social unrest in American history.... Jess Walter is a national treasure."
—Anthony Doerr, author of *All the Light We Cannot See*

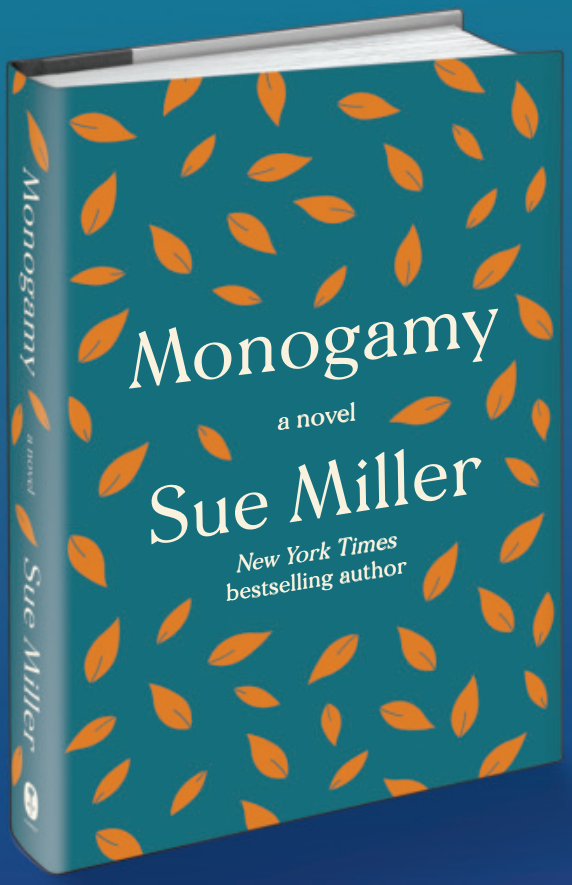
"Another home run for the author of *Beautiful Ruins*." —*People Magazine*

"A staggering achievement from a landmark writer." —*Esquire*

"An old-fashioned, slow burn of a novel."
—Richard Russo, *New York Times Book Review*

"A sensual and perceptive novel . . . Miller resists the simple scorned-wife story and instead crafts a revelatory tale of the complexities—and the absurdities—of love, infidelity, and grief."
—*O, The Oprah Magazine*

"An absorbing and meticulously crafted page-turner."
—*Boston Globe*



HARPER

Also available from HarperAudio, HarperLarge Print, and Harper ebooks. • Discover great authors, exclusive offers and more at hc.com

working on that show was the most fun I've had in my career. Now there's this onus on me—everything I do is under a magnifying glass," he told *Rolling Stone*'s Bill Zehme in 1989. "But back then it was new, and I didn't know anything about pressure. I was just having as much fun as I could. I was very creative back then, real hungry. You know the Rocky movies? 'You gotta get the eye of the tiger back, Rock!' I had it back then. I don't have the eye of the tiger anymore."

What had happened to bring him so low? For one thing, the movies that he made in the latter half of the '80s, *Coming to America* aside, simply weren't as inspired as his earlier work. The pan-Pacific caper *The Golden Child* (1986) was another picture originally written with someone else in mind (Mel Gibson, of all people), yet this time, Murphy's improvised dialogue wasn't enough to bring an inert script to life. *Beverly Hills Cop II* (1987) was merely decent, and the dismal *Another 48 Hrs.*, filmed and released in 1990, loomed on the horizon.

The movie that Murphy was making when he spoke with Zehme was *Harlem Nights*, his first (and, to this day, only) turn as a writer-director. It should have been a crowning achievement: an uptown gangster picture in which Murphy shared top billing with Pryor and his fellow icons Redd Foxx and Della Reese. But Murphy, for the first time, looked unhappy to be in a movie, swearing mirthlessly as a dead-eyed, short-fused club owner named Quick. As it turns out, he *was* unhappy. His co-lead, Pryor, cast as Quick's mentor and business partner, had experienced a terrible 1980s professionally, rife with such stinkers as *The Toy* and *Brewster's Millions*. Murphy's fantasy of a fruitful collaboration with his childhood idol was undone by his discovery that Pryor resented his success. "Richard feels that the reason his shit is the way it is is because I came along and fucked his shit up," he said in 1990.

The cultural winds were shifting, too. Murphy, the would-be "universal comic," made it big on the 1970s terms of his childhood: *SNL* stardom, mainstream-Hollywood stardom, regular visits to Johnny Carson's couch. But he was, in a sense, caught between two eras. Pryor, not yet sidelined by the multiple sclerosis that would bring his performing career to an end, held bitterly to the notion that Murphy had usurped his status as *the* Black-comic superstar. Meanwhile, in the same period in which Trey Ellis defined the New Black Aesthetic, an even newer Black consciousness was taking shape.

By the dawn of the 1990s, a wave of young Black creatives had emerged who weren't content merely to cross over; they were, in many cases, controlling the means of production and using their platforms to deliver manifestly "Black" material to a wide audience. Suddenly, getting a spot on Carson's *Tonight Show* wasn't as cool as being on Arsenio Hall's syndicated talk show, which launched in 1989. And for a brief period, Keenen Ivory Wayans's sketch show on Fox, *In Living Color*, an instant hit upon its 1990 premiere, had more heat than *Saturday Night Live*.

Chris Rock, when I interviewed him for *Vanity Fair* in 1998, looked back on this period with frustration. "I got on *S.N.L.* the year *In Living Color* came on," he said. "I felt like David Hasselhoff, selling all those records in Germany. Who gives a fuck if you're not reaching your own people?" By the time we met, Rock, like Hall, had his own eponymous program, a delightfully subversive sketch-talk hybrid on HBO that featured Grandmaster Flash scratching records and such guests as Johnnie Cochran, Marion Barry, D'Angelo, and Erykah Badu. Hall, Wayans, and Rock were all friends and protégés of Murphy's. Suddenly, they had surpassed him in relevance.

Ellis actually got to know Murphy during the early '90s, working as a rewrite man on his 1992 romantic comedy, *Boomerang*, and receiving the star's backing to develop a Harriet Tubman biopic that was never realized. He recalls Murphy in this period as a beneficent but distracted figure. "Getting him to focus and really do the work, and not just be a movie star, was a challenge," he said. "In a sense, he was a bit of a victim of his own success, similar to Whitney Houston. Once you become a crossover cultural superstar, you're not seen as a cutting-edge Black artist anymore."

The most talked-about new movie by a Black writer-director in 1989 was not Murphy's middling *Harlem Nights*, but Spike Lee's third full-length feature, *Do the Right Thing*. Its ecstatic reviews underscored the growing perception that Murphy was out of touch. *Do the Right Thing*'s credit sequence featured Rosie Perez dancing to Public Enemy's "Fight the Power," in which Chuck D assailed one of Murphy's idols: "Elvis was a hero to most / But he never meant shit to me."

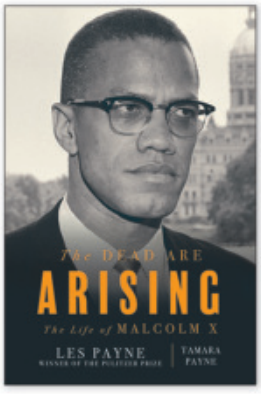
Speaking to the *Los Angeles Times* not long before *Do the Right Thing*'s release, Lee called out Murphy for not using his box-office clout to give Black people more representation in Hollywood. "I love Eddie Murphy and I'm 100 percent behind him, but if I ever get one iota of the power he has, I'm gonna raise holy (expletive) hell. Eddie has made a billion dollars for Paramount. Yet I don't see any black executives with any real power at that place," Lee said. "Eddie needs to flex his muscles in ways that can help black people get into this industry. Clout isn't just getting the best table at Spago. How's that helping your people?"

Murphy was wounded by these words, commenting for the same article, "I don't need anyone telling me how much social consciousness I should have." Indeed, he had taken a stand while presenting the Best Picture award at the previous year's Oscars. Jovially but pointedly, he noted that only three Black people had won acting awards up to that point in the Academy's nearly 60-year history. "I'll probably never win an Oscar for saying this, but hey, what the hey—I gotta say it," he said. In those days, Black actors didn't receive rousing applause from Academy Award audiences for statements like that.

In 1990, *Spin* magazine published an extraordinary Q&A in which Murphy was interviewed by none other than Lee. They didn't completely hug it out, but the two men were cordial and honest about where they differed and where they agreed. Lee copped to having "taken some bait I shouldn't have taken" in press interviews but, in his characteristic no-fucks-to-give way, critiqued Murphy's personal tastes ("What is your fascination with Elvis? I don't know any black people who like Elvis Presley") and disinclination to apply pressure to the brass at Paramount Pictures to hire more Black people, saying, "Sometimes I think you underestimate the power that you have."

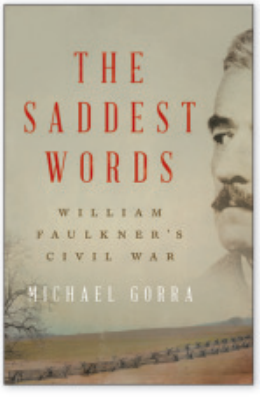
LIVERIGHT PUBLISHING

"Certainly we cannot go as far as Liveright is willing to."
—Maxwell Perkins to F. Scott Fitzgerald

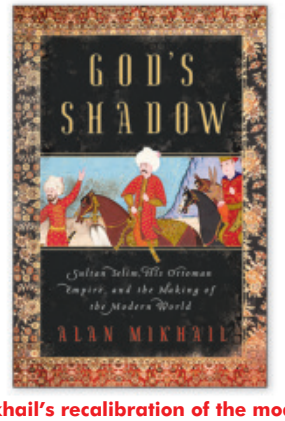


FINALIST • NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FOR NONFICTION

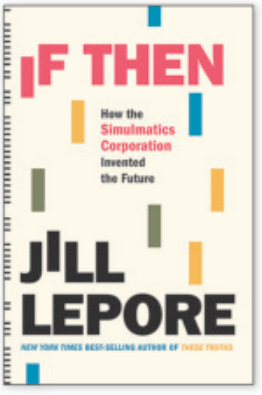
"The most lyrical and complete biography of [Malcolm X] ever written.
This book is a great read, full of original insights about an elusive figure rendered deeply human."
—David W. Blight,
winner of the Pulitzer Prize



"Rich, complex, and eloquent....
Gorra engages [with William Faulkner] as both historian and literary critic."
—Drew Gilpin Faust, *The Atlantic*

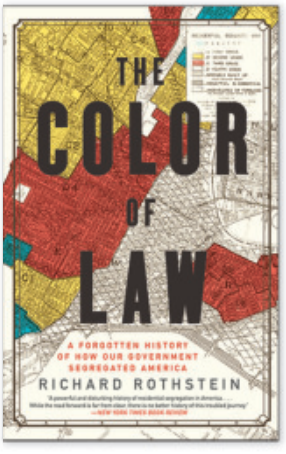


"Mikhail's recalibration of the modern era is ambitious and provocative....
A terrific guide to the Ottomans during a period of profound change."
—Peter Frankopan, *Air Mail*

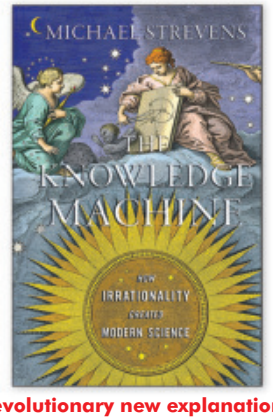


LONGLISTED • NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FOR NONFICTION

"Lepore is a brilliant and prolific historian with an eye for unusual and revealing stories, and this one is a remarkable saga."
—James Gleick,
New York Review of Books

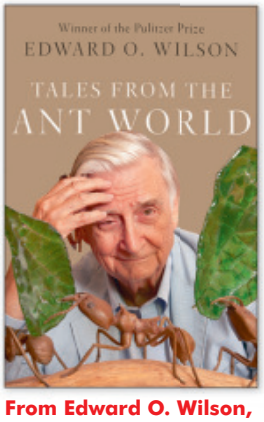


***NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER**
"There is no better history of this troubled journey than *The Color of Law*." —David Oshinsky,
New York Times Book Review



A revolutionary new explanation of science's power, and the story of how it was discovered
"Ambitious....
A provocative and fascinating book."
—Jennifer Szalai, *New York Times*

Pete Buttigieg offers a vision of the inspiring unity needed to face unique challenges in the decades ahead.
"The book offers further proof, were it needed, that [Buttigieg] has the most interesting political mind since Barack Obama."
—Charles Kaiser, *The Guardian*



From Edward O. Wilson, WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE
"In Mr Wilson ants have found not only their Darwin but also their Homer."
—*The Economist*

A bold treatise on veganism's benefits to animals, public health, and our planet.
"Peter Singer may be the most controversial philosopher alive; he is certainly among the most influential." —*The New Yorker*

Murphy, for his part, revealed to Lee how caged in he felt by his stardom, and how fearful he was of taking a more Spike-like approach to being an artist and a public figure. "What happens is, black people reach a certain level of success and … you get your own little group around you, your own people around you," he said.

> You are cut off from the rest of society and you have your own little world and the idea of sacrificing that is scary to a lot of people, 'cause a lot of people aren't in the position where they can bounce back if they lost all that shit. The scariest thing about you to me is—and the scariest thing is the thing I admire most about you—is that every black person who really stood up and said, "Fuck it, I'm about this," got dissed, killed, fucked over—everybody, from Dr. King to Ali, you know?

For all of these reasons, Murphy told Lee, "my politics are much more covert. I am very black, and I have a very strong black consciousness, but I am about gradual change and dialogue that is much more civil."

BUT GRADUAL CHANGE, or at least Murphy's interpretation of it, wasn't what audiences were interested in. In March 1991, the U.S. experienced its proto–George Floyd moment: the brutal beating of a nonresisting Black man, Rodney King, by four Los Angeles Police Department officers, captured on videotape by a civilian. Four months later, with exquisite if tragic timing, John Singleton's first movie came out. *Boyz N the Hood* spoke to the very issues that the King story had shined a light on: the fatalism of young Black men who doubted that they would live to grow old, and the belief that the LAPD, under the leadership of Daryl Gates, was a belligerent occupying force. Not long after *Boyz N the Hood* became a sensation, Murphy worked with Singleton on the nine-minute video for Michael Jackson's single "Remember the Time," in which Murphy played an Egyptian pharaoh in an opulent gold headpiece. He did little but cock his eyebrows suspiciously.

The conversation about Black film was now focused on scrappier pictures than Murphy's big-budget extravaganzas. Directorial debuts like *Boyz N the Hood*, Matty Rich's *Straight Out of Brooklyn*, and Reginald Hudlin's *House Party* all came out to acclaim within a span of 16 months. When Lee went big-budget, in 1992, it was to make *Malcolm X*. Murphy remained a star but was not, like these men, an auteur—and in his 30s, the exuberance that had propelled his stand-up, his early movies, and his semi-successful attempt at a singing career ("Party All the Time") seemed to have faded.

By the time of 1992's *Boomerang*, directed by Hudlin, Paramount Pictures was repositioning Murphy as a mature, debonair leading man. *Boomerang* has been the rightful beneficiary of revisionist praise, particularly for the strong performances by its two female leads, Robin Givens and Halle Berry. In 2019, the film became the basis for a popular BET series of the same name, developed by Lena Waithe and Ben Cory Jones. But at the time of its release, *Boomerang* received mediocre reviews and marked the beginning of a period in which Murphy's "universal comic" status waned; Black audiences remained faithful, but white moviegoers no longer rushed to see his pictures. Then came duds that pleased no one, such as *The Distinguished Gentleman* and *Vampire in Brooklyn*. People started taking notice of Murphy's losing streak.

The details of the incident with David Spade are familiar to students of *Saturday Night Live* lore. In 1995, Spade was a boyish young cast member on *SNL*. He had a running bit called "Hollywood Minute." On December 9 of that year, Spade riffed on various celebrities of the day—Heather Locklear, Antonio Banderas, Sarah Ferguson—before a headshot of Murphy appeared above his left shoulder. "Look, children, it's a falling star! Make a wish!" he said.

That's the part everyone remembers. Less remembered is that, in response to the audience's reaction, a mixture of groans and laughter, Spade doubled down. "Yes, that's right!" he said. "You make a 'Hollywood Minute' omelet, you break some eggs!"

Murphy, furious at being ridiculed on the very program that he had carried through its leanest period, gave Spade a tongue-lashing over the phone the Monday after the segment aired. And for years afterward, he distanced himself from the program. "It was like, 'Hey, come on, man, it's one thing for you guys to do a joke about some movie of mine, but my career? I'm one of you guys,'" Murphy told *Rolling Stone* in 2011. "How many people have come off this show whose careers really are fucked up, and you guys are shitting on me?"

A year after the Spade incident, the journalist Allison Samuels was keen on interviewing Murphy for *Newsweek*. At the time, Samuels was the magazine's de facto senior Black correspondent, her antennae always on high alert for a good cultural story. When she picked up word that an Eddie Murphy comeback might be in the offing, via his next film—a modern-day version of Jerry Lewis's *The Nutty Professor*—she excitedly pitched a Murphy profile to her bosses. All they were willing to give her was half a page: a single column of text.

Samuels's interview with Murphy took place in a trailer in San Francisco, where he was filming yet another soon-to-be-forgotten picture, the cop thriller *Metro*. She described the interview to me as the most intense journalistic experience of her life. "It lasted about four hours. I've never had a person be so brutally honest," she said. "He was very reflective, and I just got him when he was down on his luck."

Murphy spoke with Samuels about his regrets, such as turning down a role in *Ghostbusters*, and his struggles to navigate his early fame. He lamented the lack of a Black mentor to advise him on his career choices when he was in his early 20s. "You have to remember that there wasn't a blueprint for me then," he said. "Richard [Pryor] was having his own serious issues back then, so he couldn't really help me, and Cosby wasn't a fan of my work. I was just winging it."

Once the marathon interview was finished and Samuels was gathering her belongings—"I'd run out of tapes, of questions, of everything," she said—the conversation turned more casual. "We were talking about the industry, talking about Black Hollywood," Samuels said. "I was talking about *Newsweek*, saying how sometimes, it can be hard to get African Americans into the magazine. And then

STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION
1. Publication Title: The Atlantic. 2. Publication No.: ISSN 1072-7825. 3. Filing Date: 9/29/2020. 4. Issue Frequency: Monthly, except combined issues in Jan/Feb and July/Aug. 5. No. of Issues Published Annually: 10. 6. Annual Subscription Price: $59.99. 7. Complete Mailing Address of Known Office of Publication: 600 New Hampshire Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20037. Contact Person: Emilie Harkin. Telephone: 202-266-7000. 8. Complete Mailing Address of Headquarters or General Business Office of Publisher: The Atlantic Monthly, 600 New Hampshire Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20037. 9. Full Names and Complete Mailing Addresses of Publisher, Editor, and Managing Editor: Publisher: Hayley Romer, 60 Madison Ave., Suite 800, New York, NY 10010. Editor: Jeffrey Goldberg, 600 New Hampshire Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20037. Managing Editor: Don Peck, 600 New Hampshire Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20037. 10. Owner: Emerson Collective Investments, LLC (majority owner, beneficially owned by Laurene Powell Jobs), 555 Bryant St. #259, Palo Alto, CA 94301; Atlantic Media Inc. (minority owner, beneficially owned by David G. Bradley), 600 New Hampshire Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20037. 11. Known Bondholders, Mortgagees, and Other Security Holders Owning or Holding 1% or More of Total Amount of Bonds, Mortgages, or Other Securities: None. 12. Tax Status: Has not changed during preceding 12 months. 13. Publication Title: The Atlantic. 14. Issue Date for Circulation Data Below: October 2020.

	Average No. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months	No. Copies of Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date
15. Extent and Nature of Circulation		
a. Total Number of Copies (Net Press Run):	482,165	511,293
b. Paid Circulation (by Mail and Outside Mail)		
1) Mailed Outside-County Paid Subscriptions Stated on Form 3541:	349,656	393,278
2) Mailed In-County Paid Subscriptions Stated on Form 3541:	0	0
3) Sales Through Dealers and Carriers, Street Vendors, Counter Sales, and Other Non-USPS Paid Distribution:	40,354	41,618
4) Other Classes Mailed Through the USPS:	0	0
c. Total Paid Distribution [sum of 15b. 1), 2), 3), and 4)]:	390,010	434,896
d. Free or Nominal Rate Distribution (by Mail and Outside Mail):		
1) Outside-County as Stated on Form 3541:	6,398	6,870
2) In-County as Stated on Form 3541:	10,338	0
3) Other Classes Mailed Through the USPS:	0	0
4) Outside the Mail:	8,467	6,020
e. Total Free or Nominal Rate Distribution [sum of 15d. 1), 2), 3), and 4)]:	25,203	12,890
f. Total Distribution (sum of 15c. and e.):	415,213	447,786
g. Copies not Distributed:	66,952	63,057
h. Total (sum of 15f. and g.):	482,165	511,293
Percent Paid (15c. divided by 15f. times 100):	93.93%	97.12%
16. Electronic Copy Circulation		
a. Paid Electronic Copies	180,677	287,079
b. Total Paid Print Copies (15c) + Paid Electronic Copies (16a)	570,687	721,975
c. Total Print Distribution (15f) + Paid Electronic Copies (16a)	595,890	734,865
d. Percent Paid (Both Print + Electronic Copies) (16b divided by 16c x 100)	95.77%	98.25%

18. I certify that all information furnished on this form is true and complete. I understand that anyone who furnishes false or misleading information on this form or who omits material or information requested on the form may be subject to criminal sanctions (including fines and imprisonment) and/or civil sanctions (including civil penalties). (signature) Jeffrey Goldberg, Editor in Chief 9/29/20

he asked me how big of a story this one would be. I was honest with him. I said, 'Listen, I had a hard time convincing them that you would be a story at all.' I told him that they thought Will Smith was a bigger star, and that I'd said, 'Well, Eddie Murphy was a huge star.'"

Murphy, Samuels recalls, was stunned by this bulletin from the world of the white-dominated mainstream media: "He was like, 'You had to convince them of that?' I said, 'Yeah.' And he looked me straight in the eye and said, 'But don't they *remember*?'"

SAMUELS PROVED to be correct in intuiting that *The Nutty Professor* would be a comeback of sorts for Murphy, in that it made lots of money, spawned a sequel, and reestablished him as a bankable family-movie star. He also voiced the donkey in the *Shrek* movies, talked to animals in the *Dr. Dolittle* movies, and goofed his way through an anodyne kiddie picture called *Daddy Day Care*. But this comeback, however well it served Murphy financially and spoke to his home life as a contented dad (of 10 children, as of now), was not the comic revival that his fans were rooting for. That did not happen until *Dolemite Is My Name*.

Larry Karaszewski and Scott Alexander, the screenwriters behind the film, originally met with Murphy about doing a Rudy Ray Moore biopic in 2002. "The Rudy story was always going to be a hard-R movie, and back then, he was firmly ensconced in family land," Alexander told me. But when they approached Murphy again in 2017, "he instantly responded, 'Hell yes!'" Karaszewski told me. Karaszewski and Alexander set to work on a script that is, as the former put it, "as much a tribute to Eddie Murphy as it is to Rudy Ray Moore. We felt like there wasn't ever that one movie that combined all of his skills, be it stand-up comedy; really broad, jokey comedy; dramatic acting; and singing. We thought we could do with one movie the gigantic comeback that Eddie really deserved."

Indeed, *Dolemite Is My Name* has a meta-commentary dimension to it, with Murphy's Moore, in the film's very first scene, desperately trying to persuade a record-store DJ (Snoop Dogg) that he and his material are still relevant. That Murphy pulls off this performance with pathos, nuance, and humor—a preternatural talent persuasively playing a marginal talent—is proof that he is back in top form. So, too, is the 2019 *SNL* episode he hosted. For those of us old enough to remember watching broadcast television in 1981, Murphy's exultant romp through the show was almost a time-traveling experience. Playing one of Santa's elves in a throwaway sketch about marauding polar bears at the North Pole, Murphy, in pointy ears and candy-cane suspenders, brought the same connective energy to the camera that he had nearly 40 years before. Samuels was home for the holidays in Augusta, Georgia, when the episode aired. At 11:30 p.m., four generations of her family gathered around the TV set, as if it were the old days. "We were all so full of anticipation—we wanted this so badly for him," she said. "It was what we all had been waiting for, for him to return to the top."

Not every performer of Murphy's stature lives to enjoy revisionist adulation.

Murphy has said that he views this flurry of renewed activity as a "bookend" rather than a full-scale career relaunch—a classy settling of accounts before he retires from performance, Cary Grant–style, in his early 60s. *Coming 2 America*—as of press time, negotiations for its release were under way with Amazon Studios—carries the air of a prestige project; its screenplay is co-written by Kenya Barris, the *Black-ish* TV creator, and it was directed by Craig Brewer, who also directed *Dolemite Is My Name*. Beyond that, the only unrealized projects on Murphy's docket are the Netflix stand-up special and a proposed fourth *Beverly Hills Cop* movie. If this is it, what a way to go out.

The celebratory atmosphere that surrounds the return of peak Eddie isn't just evidence of Murphy's ability to still be funny. It's also an acknowledgment that we were too harsh in judging him, in piling undue expectations on a young man who saved a beloved TV show and blazed a trail for Black performers, all without a road map. Better to pay tribute to him for his great work than prosecute him for his flops and youthful offenses. As we've learned too often, not every performer of Murphy's stature lives to enjoy revisionist adulation.

In our conversation, Samuels rattled off to me the same litany of Black cultural icons whom Murphy mentioned earlier this year. "I always think of him in the era of Michael Jackson and Whitney and Prince—all of those people who are now gone," she said. "He reminds us of that era, but he's still here. So to see him come back in top form, still capable of everything he was capable of—it matters. It's important." *A*

David Kamp is the author, most recently, of Sunny Days: The Children's Television Revolution That Changed America.

The Atlantic (ISSN 1072-7825), recognized as the same publication under *The Atlantic Monthly* or *Atlantic Monthly* (The), is published monthly except for combined issues in January/February and July/August by The Atlantic Monthly Group, 600 New Hampshire Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20037 (202-266-6000). Periodicals postage paid at Washington, D.C., Toronto, Ont., and additional mailing offices. Postmaster: send all UAA to CFS (see DMM 707.4.12.5); NONPOSTAL AND MILITARY FACILITIES: send address corrections to Atlantic Address Change, P.O. Box 37564, Boone, IA 50037-0564. Printed in U.S.A. Subscription queries: Atlantic Customer Care, P.O. Box 37564, Boone, IA 50037-0564 (or call +1 855-940-0585). Privacy: We occasionally get reports of unauthorized third parties posing as resellers. If you receive a suspicious notification, please let us know at fraudalert@theatlantic.com. Advertising (646-539-6700) and Circulation (+1 855-940-0585): 600 New Hampshire Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20037. Subscriptions: one year $59.99 in the U.S. and poss., add $10.00 in Canada, includes GST (123209926); add $20.00 elsewhere. Canada Post Publications Mail Agreement 41385014. Canada return address: *The Atlantic*, P.O. Box 1051, Fort Erie, ON L2A 6C7. Back issues: send $15.00 per copy to *The Atlantic*, Back Issues, 1900 Industrial Park Dr., Federalsburg, MD 21632 (or call 410-754-8219). Vol. 326, No. 5, December 2020.

NORTH AMERICA'S

#1 Selling Walk-In Tub

Featuring our Exclusive Shower Package

Now you can finally have all of the soothing benefits of a relaxing warm bath, or enjoy a convenient refreshing shower while seated or standing. Introducing Safe Step Walk-In Tub's exclusive ***Shower Package!***

- ✓ First and only walk-in tub available with a customizable shower
- ✓ Fixed rainfall shower head is adjustable for your height and pivots to offer a seated shower option
- ✓ Now with 10 Hydro Jets, 16 Air Bubble Jets, and *MicroSoothe*® Advanced Air Therapy System
- ✓ High-quality tub complete with a comprehensive lifetime warranty on the entire tub
- ✓ Top-of-the-line installation and service, all included at one low, affordable price

Now you can have the best of both worlds–there isn't a better, more affordable walk-in tub!

Call today and receive exclusive savings of

$1500 OFF

Call Toll-Free 1-800-226-6722

PLUS

FREE Pat Boone Family Christmas CD *upon installation**

SAFE STEP WALK-IN TUB

www.BuySafeStep.com

1-800-226-6722

**With purchase of a new Safe Step Walk-In Tub. Not applicable with any previous walk-in tub purchase. Offer available while supplies last. No cash value.Must present offer at time of purchase.*

FINANCING AVAILABLE WITH APPROVED CREDIT

Arthritis Foundation Ease of Use™

LIFETIME LIMITED WARRANTY

BBB ACCREDITED BUSINESS

CSLB 983603 F13000002885 13HV08744300

ODE

— *to* —

FLIGHT ATTENDANTS

By James Parker

It's time to be grateful.

For the courtesy, even when (especially when) it is feigned or forced. For the big, brassy hellos as we all file onto the plane, and the smaller, lines-around-the-eyes goodbyes as we all file off again, having gotten to know one another a little better. For the canned speeches over the in-flight PA—always somehow invested with a fillip of real feeling—and the limp theater of the safety demonstration, the long-suffering puff into the tiny tube on the life jacket. For the metallic backstage atmosphere of the galley, where they sit with thrillingly off-duty faces next to plastic glasses of trembling cold water. In the air, they are charming threshold guardians; on the ground, they rush past us in a chatty flock while we're stuck in the customs line. It's time to be grateful for flight attendants.

I recently flew from Boston to London. The airport, the plane, and the flight attendants themselves were sorely afflicted with the subvirus of emptiness. The rituals were observed—the drinks trolley was trundled up and down the aisle; sad snacks were handed out—but the interactions were mask-muffled and the faces unreadable. None of those little flourishes or raised eyebrows. None of those soothing noises. We were strangers to each other. A great body of flight-attendant knowledge, of shrewdness and sympathy, saucy percipience, long acquaintance with every sort of passenger—Foot-in-Aisle Man, Sir Talks-a-Lot, Princess Wi-Fi—seemed to have been rendered inert.

It made me think. About the exquisite management of expectations that goes on up there, about everything that flight attendants do to convince you—in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary—that you are having a faintly classy experience. They minister, they mollify, they bring blankets, they do de-escalatory jiu-jitsu with alcoholics and exploding parents, and then they walk around with a plastic bag, collecting trash.

Have I been a good passenger, over the years? Not too needy? Thankful when appropriate? There was the flight where I burst into tears, with biological promptness, every 20 minutes. The flight where I wore a jacket that stank so vengefully of cat urine that the man next to me asked to change seats. The flight where, still dazed from a sleepless night in San Francisco, I looked out into the golden loft-space above the clouds and saw my whole life shining like the sun. At all times I was managed discreetly, treated respectfully; I hope I was respectful in return.

Ever seen a flight attendant burst into tears? Or encountered one who smelled of cat? It doesn't happen. In a shadowy time, in a hooded time, give me the breastplate of professional cheeriness. Give me that shiny casing of industrialized hospitality and presentability—and if it's only an inch deep, all the more heroic. *A*

James Parker is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

On it.

Ending racial injustice requires all of us to work together and take real action.

What can *you* do to help?

- Educate yourself about the history of American racism, privilege and what it means to be anti-racist.
- Commit to actions that challenge injustice and make everyone feel like they belong, such as challenging biased or racist language when you hear it.
- Vote in national and local elections to ensure your elected officials share your vision of public safety.
- Donate to organizations, campaigns and initiatives who are committed to racial justice.

love has no labels®

Let's come together to take action against racism and fight for racial justice for the Black community.

Visit lovehasnolabels.com/fightforfreedom

ad COUNCIL

The trading platform you'd build (if you built trading platforms).

Customize your view of the market so you can focus on what's important to you with thinkorswim®. Create your own indicators with thinkScript®, visualize the market with custom charting, and use personal predictions to forecast the values of stocks you care about with the Company Profile tool. And, this award-winning investing experience is now commission-free.*

See what customization can do for your trades at **tdameritrade.com/thinkorswim**

TD Ameritrade® | **Where Smart Investors Get Smarter**℠

***Applies to U.S. exchange-listed stocks, ETFs, and options. A $0.65 per contract fee applies for options trades.**

Company Profile forecasts are hypothetical, based on user-defined assumptions, and not guaranteed. All investing involves risks, including loss of principal. TD Ameritrade, Inc., member FINRA/SIPC.