



The Atlantic
EST. 1857



The Murdoch Wars

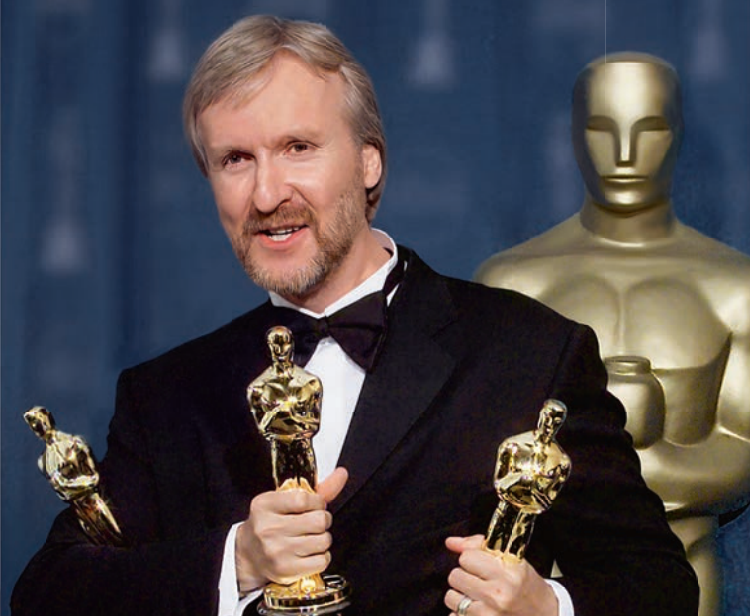
Lachlan, James, and the battle for Rupert's empire

By McKay Coppins



REACH FOR THE CROWN





THE DAY-DATE

OSCARS


ROLEX

FOR AN OFFICIAL ROLEX JEWELER VISIT [ROLEX.COM](https://www.rolex.com)
ROLEX  OYSTER PERPETUAL AND DAY-DATE ARE ® TRADEMARKS. NEW YORK

Not all AIs are created equal.

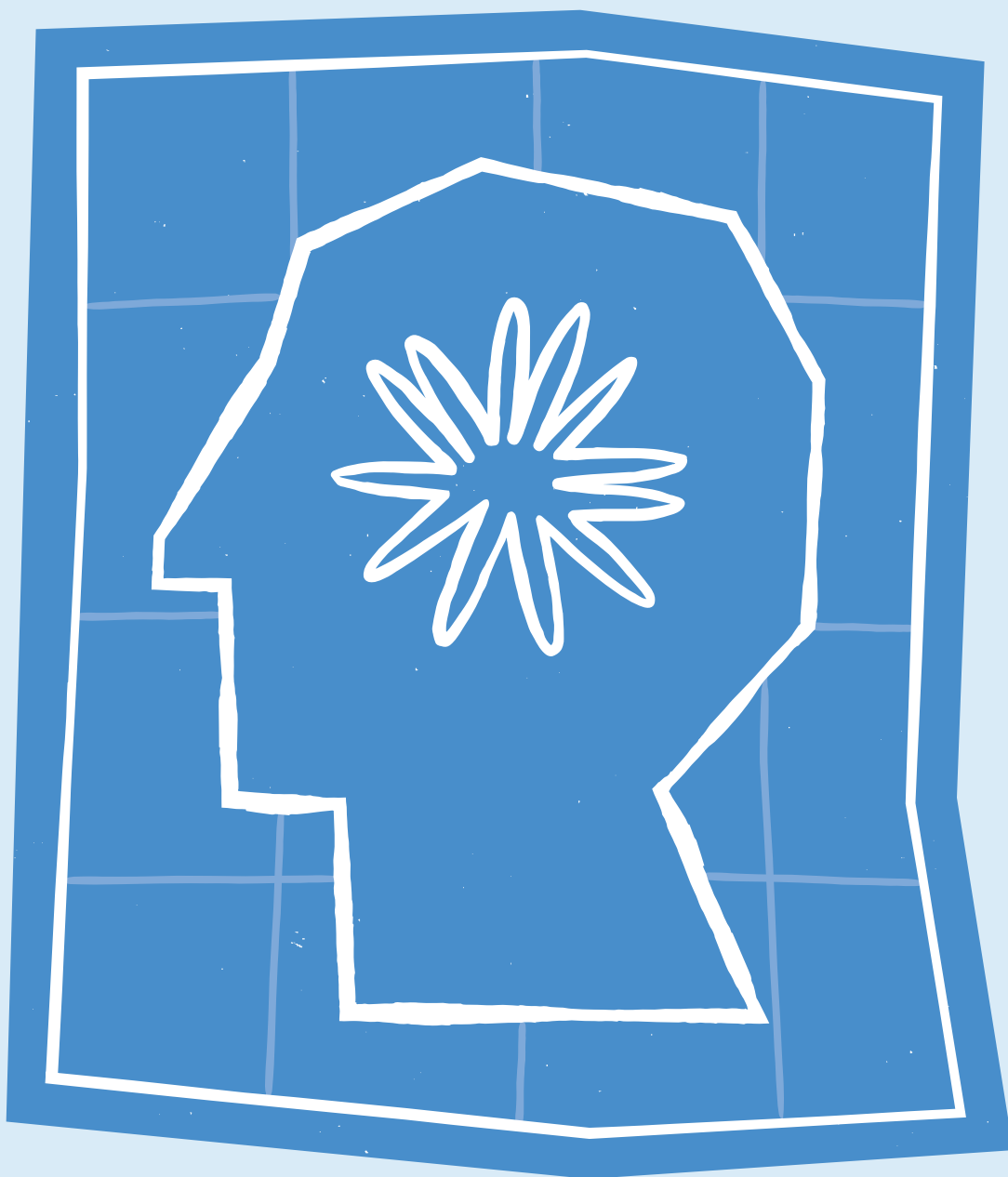
It's just the spark of an idea, but in the quantum playground of your mind, a single synapse can unfold a universe of creative possibilities.

Enter Claude: your AI companion, built by trust & safety experts.

Code, write, analyze, create—
all with an AI as trustworthy as
it is powerful.

Claude was designed with humanity at its core.
See what's possible with you and Claude at claude.com





Soft botics

The background of the slide is an underwater photograph. In the lower half, a blue, segmented softbot with a hexagonal body and four flexible, tube-like arms is resting on a light-colored, porous rock. The water is clear and blue, with sunlight rays filtering down from the surface.

SILENT AND EFFECTIVE

Our AI powered robots mimic natural organisms and do not disturb sea life. They operate without motors and move and sense silently, without creating noise or acoustic traces to interfere with the environment.

Softbotic systems are ideal for tracking the health and quality of water and are used by national and international oceanographic agencies. They can also be made biodegradable to eliminate waste and protect the natural environment.

Bringing robotics into everyday life.

Carnegie Mellon University
College of Engineering

Learn more at: **softbotics.org**.



Features

48

THE GIRLS OF SUMMER

By Kaitlyn Tiffany

*Women have always
loved America's
pastime. It has never
loved them back.*

24

COVER STORY

Growing Up Murdoch

*Inside the family fight that
will determine the future of
conservative media*

By McKay Coppins

62

Turtleboy Will Not Be Stopped

*A profane blogger believes
an innocent woman is being
framed for murder. He'll
do anything to prove he's
right—and terrorize anyone
who says he's wrong.*

By Chris Heath

Warming up before a game at the Yankees' Women's Mini-Fantasy Baseball Camp

Front

8
The Commons
Discussion & Debate

Dispatches

13
OPENING ARGUMENT
The Era of Might Makes Right
In the MAGA vision of the national interest, America will be more like Russia, China, and Iran.
By George Packer

18
POLITICS
The Fear Economy
How Trump is exploiting American capitalism for personal power
By Jonathan Chait

22
FOOD
Kosher Salt Is Actually Just Big Salt
How did it become so popular?
By Ellen Cushing

Culture & Critics

76
OMNIVORE
The Internet Can Still Be Good
Reddit, of all places, suggests how.
By Adrienne LaFrance

80
BOOKS
Was Integration the Wrong Goal?
Why some mainstream Black intellectuals are giving up on Brown v. Board of Education
By Justin Driver

84
BOOKS
The Last Great Yiddish Novel
Chaim Grade's Sons and Daughters rescues a destroyed world.
By Judith Shulevitz

88
BOOKS
The Cranky Visionary
Albert Barnes believed in the liberating power of art—but you had to look at it his way.
By Susan Tallman

92
The Court Hummed With Suitors
A poem by Sandra Lim

Back

94
ESSAY
On Track
The time I spent working on the railroad changed the course of my life.
By Graydon Carter

100
Caleb's Inferno
A crossword by Caleb Madison

On the Cover

PHOTOGRAPH BY
RON GALELLA /
GETTY

NEW SECRETS OF ANCIENT EGYPT – GROUNDBREAKING DISCOVERIES

A ROYAL EVENING WITH DR. ZAHY HAWASS



THE WORLD'S MOST FAMOUS ARCHAEOLOGIST

USA & CANADA GRAND LECTURE TOUR
MAY – AUGUST 2025



THE LOST PYRAMID • MISSING ROYAL TOMBS • NEW FINDS AT THE VALLEY OF THE KINGS • PROGRESS IN THE GOLDEN CITY



THE SEARCH FOR CLEOPATRA'S TOMB • SECRET ROOMS IN THE GREAT PYRAMID • KING TUT'S UNTOLD SECRETS • & MORE REVELATIONS!

Discover the greatest secrets of the Land of the Pharaohs! The time has come for the legendary Dr. Zahi Hawass to unveil ancient Egyptian mysteries that were lost for millennia.

The real-life Indiana Jones returns to North America to share the latest discoveries, reveal groundbreaking finds drawn from his most recent excavations and make the most thrilling announcements of his remarkable career. **This event will make history – live on stage – and you won't want to miss it!**

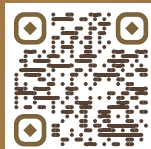
Join Dr. Hawass for a captivating all-new multimedia presentation prepared exclusively for this historic tour. Stay after the lecture for a Q&A session and a book signing.

Seats are limited – Register now

www.ZahiLectures.com

contact@zahilectures.com

646-757-1717



May 1 Phoenix, AZ
May 3 Los Angeles, CA
May 6 San Diego, CA
May 9 Las Vegas, NV
May 11 Oakland, CA
May 14 Portland, OR
May 18 Seattle, WA
May 22 Denver, CO
May 25 Austin, TX
May 27 Oklahoma City, OK
May 29 Dallas, TX
June 1 New Orleans, LA
June 5 Tampa, FL
June 7 Orlando, FL
June 11 Nashville, TN
June 14 Atlanta, GA
June 16 St. Louis, MO

June 18 Charlotte, NC
June 21 Pittsburgh, PA
June 25 Columbus, OH
June 28 Chicago, IL
June 30 Minneapolis, MN
July 3 Cleveland, OH
July 6 Indianapolis, IN
July 9 Boston, MA
July 12 Baltimore, MD
July 16 Virginia Beach, VA
July 19 New York, NY
July 21 Philadelphia, PA
July 23 Washington, DC
July 26 Vancouver, BC – Canada
July 30 Toronto, ON – Canada
August 2 Montreal, QC – Canada



THE COMMONS

DISCUSSION
&
DEBATE

The Anti-Social Century

*Americans are
now spending more
time alone than ever,
Derek Thompson wrote
in the February issue.
It's changing our
personalities, our
politics, and even our
relationship to reality.*

Letters

D

Derek Thompson's article resonated with me deeply, but I think he missed one key reason people stay at home: financial necessity. As a 28-year-old raised on TV, I often succumb to the urge to binge my favorite shows at home because it feels more comfortable than going out. And as an early-career social worker with a small salary and little disposable income, staying home also feels more responsible. With the cost of everything—dinner, drinks, concert tickets—on the rise, I have to

pick and choose where to spend my money outside the house. Even hosting a gathering and providing snacks can be costly. Especially during the cold winter months, it's challenging to find cheap things to do with other people.

How should municipalities counter the anti-social century? I think offering free spaces and activities for the public would be a good place to start. And maybe I'll start talking with strangers on the train.

Alexandra Lubbe
St. Louis, Mo.

As a Boomer who came of age in the '60s, I recall how my hometown, Nashville, closed public swimming pools to avoid giving minorities equal access. No doubt, the erosion of a broader social cohesion began as taxpayers willingly—and sometimes enthusiastically—supported the demise of the vital infrastructure that Derek Thompson highlights.

Mark Forrester
Elkton, Md.

"The Anti-Social Century" is a much-needed update on our national alienation from one another. I've always thought that the foundational work on this subject was Philip Slater's *The Pursuit of Loneliness: American Culture at the Breaking Point*, published in 1970. I read it a few years after it came out, as a college student, and I felt that no book did more to explain the cultural and economic forces that lead to our individual isolation. Slater would be appalled but perhaps not surprised to see how the trends he identified in the previous century have escalated in this one. Among other things, he noted that our obsessive devotion to rugged individualism separates us not only from one another, but from nature itself. "We feel that nature has no business claiming a connection with us," he wrote, "and perhaps one day we will prove ourselves correct." Some 50

GOOD SONGS COME FROM LOVE. GREAT SONGS COME FROM HEARTBREAK.

**"Warm, nostalgic, totally engrossing.
I loved this novel."**

—Liz Moore, (*The God of the Woods*)

**"Tender as a
ballad and
pleasureable
as a pop song."**

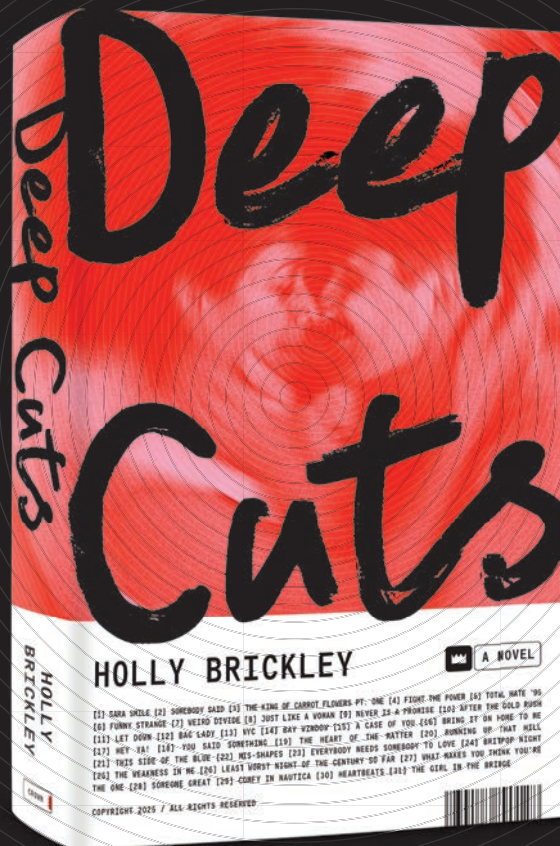
—Coco Mellors
(*Blue Sisters*)

**"Fizzy,
moving,
endlessly
smart."**

—Claire Dederer
(*Monsters: A Fan's Dilemma*)

**"Prepare
to fall
in love."**

—Gillian
McAllister
(*Wrong Place Wrong Time*)



**"Incredibly
special."**

—Beth O'Leary
(*The Flatshare*)

**"Grabs you
in an
instant."**

—Miranda Cowley
Heller
(*The Paper Palace*)

**"Brickley
is the real
thing, and
so is
Deep Cuts."**

—Peter Ames Carlin
(*Bruce*)

AVAILABLE NOW WHEREVER BOOKS ARE SOLD

SCAN TO
START
READING



Penguin Random House collects
and processes your personal
information. See our Notice at
Collection and Privacy Policy at
prh.com/notice.

LISTEN TO THE PLAYLIST AT

DEEPCUTSBOOK.COM

@HOLLYBRICK AND @CROWNPUBLISHING

CROWN

years later, we seem to be well on our way to fulfilling Slater's dark prophecy.

Scott Sparling
Lake Oswego, Ore.

After I retired from a career that involved regular human interaction, my wife noticed that I wasn't experiencing the relaxation usually associated with retirement; instead, I was unsettled. She suggested that I try driving for Uber, and it's made a huge difference in my life. Driving has become my personal answer to isolation, and it's a hobby I intend to pursue as long as practical.

I'm amazed by how many people of all backgrounds enjoy engaging with a stranger. As I drive, we share small slices of our lives and usually part with an elevated sense of contentment. The notable exceptions to this rule are high-school-age kids, who I've noticed struggle to have easy conversations. It's sad because, although we share a city, we have little insight into one another's daily reality, into how our lives intersect outside the Uber experience. I sense that there is a lot to learn and understand.

Harry David Snook
Madison, Wis.

I live in western North Carolina, in an area devastated by Hurricane Helene. A few miles down the road, the Swannanoa River rose so quickly that people I knew had to swim out of their windows to survive.

I'm not as plugged in as most people. But when the storm hit and the phone towers went down, I finally met

my neighbors for the first time since I moved to my street two years ago. Without technology, everyone went outside. In that new landscape, we cared for one another, and I need you to know how beautiful that was: When emergency radio broadcasts replaced our phones, we learned our neighbors' names.

I don't mean to diminish the lives lost or the landscapes irrevocably altered, but it's hard not to mourn that post-flood camaraderie now that everyone has shut themselves away again. Helene brought about a different world. Perhaps calamities have the power to momentarily suspend the sickness of American modernity that Derek Thompson so aptly describes. It did for us, if only briefly.

McKinnon Brenholtz
Black Mountain, N.C.

I am 27, and I fall on the cusp of Gen Z and Millennial, not quite fitting into either generational category. I spent my childhood playing outside and on the internet. When I was a teenager, social media was just beginning to become popular. I was shy in school and found myself becoming isolated in the 2010s, retreating into online spaces to find friendship. I stayed lonely and online until adulthood, when a sudden interest in and love of hiking propelled me outside and into the "real world." Since then, I have joined a religious community and become dear friends with my neighbors; I strike up conversations with strangers on planes and in public. My life could not be more different, and when I reflect

on the time I spent alone and online, I think of how wonderful my life could have been if I had dared to move outside my comfort zone sooner.

When I speak with friends my age, so many of them acknowledge that we are better off cultivating relationships offline—and yet we all still spend so much time online. My hope is that community organizing and free public spaces will become more common as we all look around and realize that none of us is happy with the status quo.

Christina Tavella
Boston, Mass.

DEREK THOMPSON REPLIES:

I think the most important point of my article is exactly what Christina Tavella notes in closing. The anti-social century is, among other things, a story of the vast gulf between

our stated and revealed preferences—the lives we say we want and the lives we lead. Very few people will tell you that the way they wish to spend the scarce hours and days of their lives is to be more alone with each passing year, or to spend more time with their screens and less time with their friends and families. The fact that we choose aloneness over and over again suggests that aloneness is serving us, in some way. But I strongly believe that it is serving our shallow desire for convenience rather than our deeper need for connection and meaning. We have built a culture organized around the frictionless acquisition of dopamine. Are we sure we're meant to do that?

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 this month's cover story, "Growing Up Murdoch" (p. 24), McKay Coppins reports on the bitter fight within the Murdoch family to control its media empire. For our cover image, we selected a 1987 photograph of the Murdochs. Rupert Murdoch and Anna, his second wife, pose with 16-year-old Lachlan (*left*) and 14-year-old James (*right*) at an event at Sotheby's in New York City. Today the brothers are on opposite sides of a legal battle to determine the future of the family business—and conservative media.

— Lucy Murray Willis, *Photo Editor*

Corrections: "I Am Still Mad to Write" (March) originally stated that, after an accident in Rome, Hanif Kureishi came to consciousness a paraplegic. In fact, he came to consciousness a tetraplegic. "Why the COVID Deniers Won" (March) misstated the U.S.'s gross public debt in 2017 and early 2025. The debt was about \$20 trillion in January 2017 and more than \$36 trillion in early 2025, not about \$20 billion and nearly \$36 billion, respectively.



3X YOUR IMPACT WITH HEIFER INTERNATIONAL

YOUR GIFT OF A GOAT PROVIDES:

- Hands-on training to grow a healthy herd
- Veterinary supplies and materials to build a pen
- Connections to other goat farmers
- Training in sustainable farming practices
- Support from our animal experts
- A goat!

Your generosity empowers women like Margret Wantege in Uganda to build a brighter future. When you give through Heifer International, farmers like Margret receive the livestock, training and resources they need to become entrepreneurs — allowing them to increase their income, break gender norms and lift their families out of poverty.

And now, your gift will go even further! Thanks to a special match, every dollar you give will be matched with two more for triple the impact.

**MULTIPLY YOUR IMPACT TODAY AT
HEIFER.ORG/ATLANTIC**



PROMOTION

A **NEW** STAGE FOR BIG IDEAS

The Atlantic Festival

NOW IN NYC.

SEPTEMBER 18-20, 2025

PERELMAN PERFORMING ARTS CENTER
(PAC NYC)

IN-PERSON AND VIRTUAL PASSES
ON SALE THIS SUMMER

After 16 years of bringing *The Atlantic's* journalism to life onstage in Washington, D.C., we are bringing The Atlantic Festival to the cultural capital of the world, New York City. Experience dynamic conversations with the boldest thinkers and cultural luminaries, exclusive book talks and film screenings, and engaging performances. You don't want to miss the chance to *meet great minds who don't think alike*.

UNDERWRITERS

TITLE:

 Microsoft

SUPPORTING:

 Allstate

WASHINGTON
DC
WASHINGTON.DC

Genentech
A Member of the Roche Group

MacArthur
Foundation



SIGN UP FOR UPDATES AT
[THEATLANTICFESTIVAL.COM](https://theatlanticfestival.com)

DISPATCHES

OPENING ARGUMENT

THE ERA OF MIGHT MAKES RIGHT

*In the MAGA vision of
the national interest,
America will be more like
Russia, China, and Iran.*

BY GEORGE PACKER

The best way to dismantle the federal government, then repurpose it as a tool of personal power and ideological warfare, is to start with the soft targets. Entitlements and defense, which comprise more than half of federal spending and a large share of its fraud and waste, enjoy too much support for Elon Musk to roll them up easily. But nothing is less popular than sending taxpayers' money to unknown people in poor, faraway countries that might be rife with corruption. Americans dislike foreign aid so much that they wrongly believe it consumes at least a quarter of the budget (in the previous fiscal year, aid constituted barely 1 percent). President

John F. Kennedy understood the problem, and after creating the United States Agency for International Development, in 1961, he told his advisers: “We hope we can tie this whole concept of aid to the safety of the United States. That is the reason we give aid. The test is whether it will serve the United States. Aid is not a good word. Perhaps we can describe it better as ‘Mutual Assistance.’” At another meeting, Kennedy suggested “International Security.”

USAID continued for the next six decades because leaders of both parties believed that ending polio, preventing famine, stabilizing poor countries, strengthening democracies, and opening new markets served the United States. But on January 20, within hours of his inauguration, President Donald Trump signed an executive order that froze foreign aid. USAID was instructed to stop nearly all work. Its Washington headquarters was occupied and sensitive data were seized by whiz kids from Musk’s Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE. One of their elder members, a 25-year-old software engineer and Matt Gaetz fan named Gavin Kliger, acquired an official email address to instruct the staff of USAID to stay home.

Contractors were fired and employees were placed on indefinite leave; those on overseas missions were given 30 days to return to the States with their families. Under orders to remain silent, they used pseudonyms on encrypted chats to inform the outside world of what was going on. When I spoke on Signal with government employees, they sounded as if they were in Moscow or Tehran. “It felt like it

went very authoritarian very quickly,” one civil servant told me. “You have to watch everything you say and do in a way that is gross.”

The website [usaid.gov](https://www.usaid.gov) vanished, then reappeared with a bare-bones announcement of the organization’s dismemberment, followed by the message “Thank you for your service.” A veteran USAID official called it “brutal—from some 20-year-old idiot who doesn’t know anything. What the fuck do you know about my service?” A curtain fell over the public information that could have served to challenge the outpouring of lies and distortions from the White House and from Musk, who called USAID “a criminal organization” and “evil.” If you looked into the charges, nearly all turned out to be outright falsehoods, highly misleading, or isolated examples of the kind of stupid, wasteful programs that exist in any organization.

A grant for hundreds of ethnic-minority students from Myanmar to attend universities throughout Southeast Asia became a propaganda tool in the hands of the wrecking crew because it went under the name “Diversity and Inclusion Scholarship Program”—as if the money were going to a “woke” bureaucracy, not to Rohingya refugees from the military regime’s genocide. The orthodoxy of a previous administration required the terminology; the orthodoxy of the new one has ended the students’ education and forced them to return to the country that oppressed them. One of Trump’s executive orders is called “Defending Women Against Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government”; meanwhile,

the administration suspended the online education of nearly 1,000 women in Afghanistan who had been studying undetected by the Taliban with funding from the State Department.

But hardly anyone in this country knows these things. Contesting Musk’s algorithmically boosted lies on X with the tools of a reporter is like fighting a wildfire with a garden hose.

With no workforce or funding, USAID’s efforts around the world—vaccine campaigns in Nepal, HIV-drug distribution in Nigeria, nutrition for starving children in Sudanese refugee camps—were forced to end. Secretary of State Marco Rubio (who championed USAID as a senator and now, as the agency’s acting head, is its executioner) issued a waiver for lifesaving programs. But it proved almost meaningless, because the people needed to run the programs were locked out of their computers, had no way to communicate, and feared punishment if they kept working.

The heedlessness of the aid wreckers recalls Nick Carraway’s description in *The Great Gatsby* of Tom and Daisy Buchanan: “They were careless people, Tom and Daisy—they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made.” An agency of 10,000 employees is shrinking to about 300 and, despite its statutory independence, being dissolved into the State Department. The veteran USAID official I spoke with foresaw a skeletal operation reduced to health and food assistance, with everything else—education, the environment, governance, economic development—gone.

But even basic humanitarian programs will be nearly impossible to sustain with the numbers that the administration envisions—for example, 12 staff members for all of Africa.

“This is the infrastructure and architecture that has given us a doubling of the human lifespan,” Atul Gawande, the writer and surgeon who was the most recent, and perhaps last, head of the agency’s Bureau for Global Health, told me. “Taking it down kills people.”

TRUMP AND MUSK’S destruction of USAID was a trial blitzkrieg: Send tanks and bombers into defenseless Poland to see what works before turning on the Western powers. The assault provided a model for eviscerating the rest of the federal bureaucracy. It also demonstrated the radicalism of Trump’s view of America’s role in the world.

Every president from Franklin D. Roosevelt to Barack Obama understood that American power was enhanced, not threatened, by attaching it to alliances, institutions, and values that the American people support, such as freedom, pluralism, and humanitarianism. This was the common idea behind Harry Truman’s Marshall Plan for postwar Europe, Kennedy’s establishment of USAID, Jimmy Carter’s creation of the U.S. refugee program, and George W. Bush’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief. These weren’t simple acts of generosity. They were designed to prevent chaos and misery from overwhelming other countries and, eventually, harming our own. They expanded American influence by attraction rather than coercion, showing people around the world that the

Leviathan could benefit them, too. Political scientists call this “soft power.”

Every president betrayed these ideas in one way or another, making U.S. foreign policy a fat target for criticism at home and abroad, by the left and the right. Kennedy used foreign aid to wage a bloody counterinsurgency in South Vietnam; Carter put human rights at the center of his policy and then toasted the repressive shah of Iran; Bush, claiming to be spreading democracy to the Middle East, seriously damaged America’s global legitimacy. USAID antagonized host governments and local populations with its arrogance and bloat. “We had a hand in our own destruction,” one longtime official told me. “We threw money in areas we didn’t need to.”

But the alternative to the hypocrisies of soft power and the postwar liberal order was never going to be a chastened, humbler American foreign policy—neither the left’s fantasy of a plus-size Norway nor the right’s of a return to the isolationist 1920s. The U.S. is far too big, strong, and messianic for voluntary diminishment. The choice for this superpower is between enlightened self-interest, with all its blind spots and failures, and raw coercion.

Trump is showing what raw coercion looks like. Rather than negotiate with Canada and Mexico, impose U.S. demands with tariffs; rather than strengthen NATO, undermine it and threaten a conflict with one of its smallest, most benign member countries; rather than review

aid programs for their efficacy, shut them down, slander the people who make them work, and shrug at the humanitarian catastrophe that follows. The deeper reason for the extinction event at USAID is Trump’s contempt for anything that looks like cooperation between the strong and the weak. “America First” is more imperialist than isolationist, which is why William McKinley,

rules-based order abroad—and replacing them with a simple test: “What’s in it for me?” He’s unilaterally disarming America of its soft power, making the United States no different from China, Russia, or Iran. This is why the gutting of USAID has received propaganda assistance and glowing reviews from Beijing, Moscow, and Tehran.

Transactional logic has an obvious appeal. Dispensing

Colombia into allowing deportation flights to land there was like the assault on USAID—an easy demonstration project. His domination of the propaganda sphere allows him to convince the public of victories even where, as with Canada, there was never much of a dispute to begin with. If NATO dissolved while the U.S. grabbed Greenland, many Americans would regard it as a net win: We’d save

money and gain a strategic chunk of the North Atlantic while freeing ourselves of an obligation whose benefit to us wasn’t entirely clear.

It isn’t obvious why funding the education of oppressed Burmese students serves our national interest. It’s easier to see the advantages of strong-arming weak countries into giving in to our demands. If this creates resentment, well, who said gratitude mattered between nations? Strength has its own attractive force. A sizable cohort of Americans have made their peace with Trump, not because he tempered his cruelty and checked his abuses but because he is at the height of his power and is using it without restraint. This is called power worship. The Russian invasion of Ukraine won Vladimir Putin a certain admiration in coun-

tries of the global South, as well as among MAGA Americans, while Joe Biden’s appeals to democratic values seemed pallid and hypocritical. The law of “might makes right” is the political norm in most countries. Trump needs no explaining in Nigeria or India.

Coercion also depends on the American people’s shortsightedness and incuriosity.



not George Washington or John Quincy Adams, is Donald Trump’s new presidential hero. He’s using a techno-futurist billionaire to return America to the late 19th century, when the civil service was a patronage network and great-power doctrine held that “might makes right.” He’s ridding himself and the country of restraining codes—the rule of law at home, the

with the annoying niceties of multilateral partnerships and foreign aid brings a kind of clarity to international relations, showing where the real muscle is, like a strip-down before a wrestling match. Set loose, the U.S. might be strong enough to work its will on weaker friends and neighbors, or at least claim to do so. Trump’s threat of tariffs to intimidate

Trump's flood of executive orders and Musk's assault on the federal government are intended to create such chaos that not even the insiders most affected understand what's happening. An inattentive public might simply see a Washington melee—the disrupters against the bureaucrats. Short of going to war, if the U.S. starts behaving like the great powers of earlier centuries and the rival powers of our own, how many Americans will notice a difference in their own lives?

ACCORDING TO RUBIO, the purpose of the aid pause is to weed out programs that don't advance "core national interests." Gawande compared the process to stopping a plane in midair and firing the crew in order to conduct a review of the airline industry. But the light of the bonfire burning in Washington makes it easier to see how soft power actually works—how most aid programs do serve the national interest. Shutting down African health programs makes monitoring the recent outbreak of Ebola in Uganda, and preventing its spread from that region to the rest of the world, nearly impossible. In many countries, the end of aid opens the door wider to predatory Chinese loans and propaganda. As one USAID official explained: "My job literally was countering China, providing development assistance in a much nicer, kinder, partnership way to local people who were being pressured and had their arms twisted." When 70 Afghan students in central Asia, mostly women, had their scholarships to American universities suddenly suspended and in some cases their plane tickets canceled, the values

of freedom and open inquiry lost a bit of their attractiveness. The American college administrator responsible for the students told me, "Young people who are sympathetic to the United States and share our best values are not only not being welcomed; they're having the door slammed in their faces."

Most Americans don't want to believe that their government is taking lifesaving medicine away from sick people in Africa, or betraying Afghans who sacrificed for this country. They might disapprove of foreign aid, but they want starving children to be fed. This native generosity explains why Trump and Musk have gone to such lengths to clog the internet with falsehoods and hide the consequences of their cruelty. The only obstacle to ending American soft power isn't Congress, the bureaucracy, or the courts, but public opinion.

One of the country's most popular programs is the resettlement of refugees. For decades, ordinary American citizens have welcomed the world's most persecuted and desperate people—European Jews after World War II, Vietnamese after the fall of Saigon, Afghans after the fall of Kabul. Refugees are in a separate category from most immigrants: After years of waiting and vetting by U.S. and international agencies, they come here legally, with local sponsors. But Trump and his adviser Stephen Miller see them as no different from migrants crossing the southern border. The flurry of executive orders and memos has halted the processing of all refugees and ended funding for resettlement. The story has received little attention.

Here's what the program's shutdown means: I spoke with an Afghan special-forces captain who served alongside Americans—when Kabul was about to fall in 2021, he prevented armed Taliban at the airport from seizing U.S. weaponry, but he was left behind during the evacuation.

A SENSE OF
LOYALTY AND
COMPASSION IS
AT THE CORE
OF AMERICAN
NATIONAL
PRIDE, AND
ITS BETRAYAL
EXACTS A
COST THAT
CAN'T BE EASILY
MEASURED.

Arrested by the new regime, the captain was imprisoned for seven months and suffered regular and severe torture, including the amputation of a testicle. He managed to escape with his family to Pakistan in 2023 and was near the end of being processed as a refugee when Trump took office. He had heard Trump criticize the Biden administration for leaving military equipment behind in Afghanistan. Because he had worked to prevent that from happening, he told me, "that gave me a hope that the new administration would value my work and look at me as a valuable person, a person who is aligned with all the administration is hoping to achieve, and that would give a chance for my kids and family to be moved out safely." Biden's ineptitude stranded the captain once;

Trump's coldheartedness is doing it again.

A sense of loyalty and compassion isn't extraneous to American identity; it is at the core of national pride, and its betrayal exacts a cost that can't be easily measured. The Biden administration created a program called Welcome Corps that allows ordinary Americans to act as resettlement agencies. (My wife and I participated in it.) In Pennsylvania, a retiree named Chuck Pugh formed a sponsor group to bring an Afghan family here, and the final medical exam was completed just before Inauguration Day. When resettlement was abruptly ended, Pugh found himself wondering, *Who are we? I know what I want to think, but I'm just not sure.* The sponsor group includes Pugh's sister, Virginia Mirra. She and her husband are devout Christians and ardent Trump supporters. In early February, when I asked her how she felt about the suspension of the refugee program, she sounded surprised, and disappointed—she hadn't heard the news. "I feel sad about that," she said. "It does bother me. It's starting to sink in. With these people in danger, I would wonder if there would be an exception made for them. How would we go about that?" Her husband frequently sends American-flag lapel pins to Trump, and I suggested that he write the president about the Afghan family. "I will talk to my husband tonight," Mirra said. "And I will continue to pray that the Lord will protect them and bring them to this country by some means. I do believe in miracles." *A*

George Packer is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

Less metal. Same mettle.



-less than what, same as what? Ah! A brand that listens to its customers. A watch that sounds like it has been improved for no extra cost. And it looks like and has similar features to that Rolex I like – think I'll find out more as this could be my kind of watch

Do your research.

 **Christopher
Ward**



Book a
showroom
appointment

christopherward.com



View the
watch

THE FEAR ECONOMY

How Trump is exploiting American capitalism for personal power

BY JONATHAN CHAIT

A quarter century ago, Vladimir Putin gathered 21 of Russia's top oligarchs in the Kremlin to let them know that he, not they, held power in Russia. The young Russian president (not yet for life) informed them that they could keep the wealth they'd amassed if they complied with his political goals. Partnership with Putin held out the prospect of safety, and even greater riches. "We received confirmation," an attendee named Mikhail B. Khodorkovsky said, "that the development of Russian business is one of the state's top priorities."

Most of the oligarchs submitted, but those who didn't went to prison or into exile, lest they fall prey to the country's epidemic of window-plunging deaths. (Khodorkovsky was imprisoned, putatively for fraud and tax evasion, but really for supporting independent media and opposition parties.) Since then, affinity for Putin has been a *sine qua non* of high-level economic success in Russia.

An eerily reminiscent scene played out late last year at Mar-a-Lago, Donald Trump's Winter Palace, where Stephen Miller, one of Trump's loyalty enforcers, met with Meta's

CEO, Mark Zuckerberg. The weather was more pleasant, and presumably neither party contemplated defenestration as a settlement alternative, but many other details seemed to echo. "Mr. Miller told Mr. Zuckerberg that he had an opportunity to help reform America, but it would be on President-elect Donald J. Trump's terms," *The New York Times* reported. Because Trump had recently warned, "We are watching [Zuckerberg] closely, and if he does anything illegal" during Trump's second term, "he will spend the rest of his life in prison," this opportunity must have sounded enticing. Zuckerberg indicated that he would not in any way obstruct Trump's agenda, according to the *Times*, and foisted blame for any prior offenses onto subordinates.

By the time Trump assumed power, Zuckerberg was lavishing him with praise. "We now have a U.S. administration that is proud of our leading companies," he gushed of the man who had once threatened him with prison, "that prioritizes American technology winning. And that will defend our values and interests abroad." His rehabilitation complete, Zuckerberg assumed a place of pride at Trump's inauguration, alongside Jeff Bezos,

Elon Musk, and other titans of industry. His eyes were now on the future, and the promised Trumpian Golden Age.

THE PRESIDENT'S PUBLIC communion with the business titans who have submitted to him has been analyzed as a signal of his authoritarianism and his alliance with the rich. But it also reveals another emerging aspect of Trumpism: his rejection of the capitalist principles that ultimately generate prosperity.

Trump has never believed in the invisible hand—in leaving people alone to pursue self-interest in a free market; in letting market forces allocate capital and arbitrate any given company's success or failure. Nor does he even believe in traditional mercantilist protection. He believes, like Putin, in political control of the economy's commanding heights—success for those executives and companies who please him, failure for those who don't. And he seems to be seeking that control more actively than he did in 2016.

Already, Trump's words and actions have brought about a psychological transformation within the executive class. Presidents and business leaders have sometimes tangled, or formed partnerships, but the

combination of fear and solicitude that Trump now commands is wholly new.

After the election, *The Wall Street Journal* reported, businesses began looking at steps such as "buying the Trump family's cryptocurrency token" and scrubbing their websites of Democratic-friendly language. Stanley Black & Decker took down an old post-insurrection statement saying it would "use our voice to advocate for our democracy and a peaceful transition of power," and donated \$1 million to Trump's inauguration fund. A steel executive hoping to win Trump's approval to purchase U.S. Steel held a press conference in Butler, Pennsylvania—a holy site in the MAGA universe since the assassination attempt at a rally there in July—where he declared, "America First!"

Bezos has not renewed his financial support for the Science Based Targets initiative, which works with businesses looking to cut emissions. After Trump gave Musk, the largest donor to his campaign, a limitless portfolio to reshape federal policy, businesses began to see Musk's commercial empire as a route to political favor too, as the *Financial Times* noted in February. Visa struck a payment-processing deal with Musk's controversial social-media site, X, while Amazon boosted its planned marketing there. Musk's former rivals hastily reconsidered their rivalries: JPMorgan Chase dropped a lawsuit against Tesla (the company said the timing was coincidental), and Jamie Dimon announced on CNBC that he had "hugged it out" with Musk after a long feud.

The *Journal*, as America's most prominent business paper, has documented this

cultural transformation in remarkably clear terms. Sentences like this began appearing regularly after the election: “Executives across the corporate sphere are working to get in the good graces of the new administration” (November). “Titans of the business world are rushing to make inroads with the president-elect, gambling that personal relationships with the next occupant of the Oval Office will help their bottom lines and spare them from Trump’s wrath” (December). “Companies seeking Trump’s favor have plenty to gain” (January). The newspaper that American capitalists consult to find out how to run their businesses is informing them that they must gain Trump’s favor if they want to get ahead.

It would be naive to depict this behavior as totally novel. For decades, big companies have spent great sums on lobbying, and their executives

have long made pilgrimages to Washington to advance their interests. And they’ve often gotten results.

But Trump appears to be ushering in a change not only in the degree of government favoritism, but also in kind. And the velocity of the transformation, coming as it does alongside a cascade of tumbling norms, can obscure how differently he is operating.

The change can be seen most blatantly in the media industry, which has drawn Trump’s gaze more than any other. Bezos, the owner of *The Washington Post*, and Patrick Soon-Shiong, who owns the *Los Angeles Times*, spiked endorsements of Kamala Harris, claiming they would give off the appearance of bias, but then after the election made personal statements praising Trump or his Cabinet picks, as if that somehow wouldn’t. Since then, several major companies have

settled lawsuits that Trump had brought against them, and that likely would have been defeated if not laughed out of court. ABC, owned by Disney, donated \$15 million to Trump’s presidential library to settle his complaint that George Stephanopoulos had described Trump as having been found liable for rape (he was found liable for sexual abuse). After incoming Federal Communications Commission Chair Brendan Carr warned Paramount executives that their merger bid could be at risk because of Trump’s anger at CBS, which Paramount owns, the network reportedly began talks to settle a frivolous \$10 billion lawsuit complaining that *60 Minutes* had edited out unflattering portions of its interview with Harris. Even after the presiding judge expressed extreme skepticism at the merits of Trump’s lawsuit against Meta for suspending him from

Facebook after the January 6 insurrection—a right it clearly possessed as a private entity—Zuckerberg offered up \$25 million in penance.

Putting the screws to media owners in particular, especially early on, seems to follow the same playbook that Putin and other strongmen have used to consolidate their power. So does finding opportunities for personal enrichment along the way. (Putin, a lifelong public servant, has become one of the world’s wealthiest men.) Filing weak or groundless lawsuits and expecting his targets to settle for fear of government retribution appears to be a perfectly legal way for Trump to collect baksheesh.

ALTHOUGH TRUMP HAS so far devoted the most attention to media businesses, he has not ignored the broader economy. Every economic-policy decision he makes is a potential weapon to punish dissent or reward his friends, beginning with tariffs.

Trump has never described himself as a free-market purist, and his enthusiasm for levying imports is his best-known deviation from his party’s traditional economic philosophy. This impulse is often described as a protectionist instinct, aimed at helping shield key industries or American businesses generally. But in fact, Trump’s tariff strategy, if you want to call it that, hardly advances any coherent economic goal. He has threatened tariffs on countries for non-economic reasons, and levied tariffs on industrial inputs, such as aluminum and copper, that make American industries less, not more, competitive by raising their costs. Trump apparently



believes that tariffs are borne by foreigners, and are therefore an untapped source of free money from overseas. He enjoys the idea of using them as levers to extract diplomatic concessions as well.

But Trump has also used tariffs to gain personal and political leverage over American businesses. During his first term, Trump levied broad tariffs and then entertained a parade of executives pleading for exemptions, which his administration doled out at its whim. The Office of the United States Trade Representative fielded more than 50,000 requests from domestic businesses for exceptions to the tariffs on Chinese goods alone, while the Commerce Department sifted through almost half a million waiver requests. Trump's decisions were often arbitrary—Bibles got a tariff exception, on the apparent basis that their costs needed to stay low, but textbooks did not.

One study of the exceptions, published by the *Journal of Financial and Quantitative Analysis*, found that firms that had donated to Trump or hired staff from his administration were more likely to receive tariff exceptions. The tariffs, and the ability to hand out exceptions without any oversight or method, were “a very effective spoils system allowing the administration of the day to reward its political friends and punish its enemies,” the authors concluded.

A 2019 investigation by the Commerce Department's inspector general reported “the appearance of improper influence in decision-making” in the waiver process. In his second term, Trump has managed to solve this problem—if you define *problem* as the

exposure of corruption rather than its existence—by firing, to date, the inspectors general at 18 federal agencies, including Commerce.

Trump's greatest advantage in this regard is that he has never professed adherence to any standard of fairness. When he discusses his plans to regulate businesses, or reward them with tax breaks, he does so in nakedly transactional terms. The business community understands that every decision the federal government makes, whether it involves antitrust enforcement or taxation or criminal justice, will be meted out on the basis of Trump's political and personal whims. Trump does not even pretend otherwise, because the pretense would undermine his power.

PRESIDENTS MAY NOT be angels. But they used to follow a general presumption of leaving the task of picking winners and losers to the private sector. They likewise observed a wall between public and private interest that we can barely recognize today.

Seventy-two years ago, President Dwight Eisenhower selected Charlie Wilson, the head of General Motors, as his defense secretary. Skeptical members of Congress quizzed Wilson as to how he would put aside residual loyalty to his former company. Wilson confessed, “For years I thought what was good for the country was good for General Motors, and vice versa.” The confession scandalized the country. Although Wilson was trying to say that General Motors benefited from national prosperity, the very possibility that he might conflate the interests of his former

employer with those of the country was beyond the pale.

At the moment, large swaths of government policy are being dictated by the current CEO of a car company. And yet it is unfathomable that the Trump administration

TRUMP BRINGS
TOGETHER
THE LEAST
ATTRACTIVE
ELEMENTS OF
CAPITALISM
AND SOCIALISM,
FUSING HEAVY-
HANDED STATE
CONTROL
WITH HIGH
INEQUALITY.

would deem Elon Musk's dual role unethical, let alone demand that he step down from Tesla and his other companies as a condition of public service. Musk, like Trump, respects no distinction between his personal financial interests, those of his political party, and those of the country. The seamless connection between political power and personal wealth tells everybody who belongs to the upper class or aspires to it that their safest path is to join the ruling clique.

This is alarming for any number of reasons. But, not least among them, it violates the key precept of any free-enterprise system: that market competition dictates which businesses succeed or fail. Through innovation and creative destruction, this kind of competition yields national prosperity.

The nature of Trump's economic vision—populist? nationalist? traditional

conservative?—has been the subject of endless debate. The reality is that he brings together the least attractive elements of capitalism and socialism, fusing heavy-handed state control with high inequality, and entrenching a set of oligarchs who serve simultaneously as the ruling party's victims and co-conspirators. The more that political favor displaces market competition as the basis of corporate success, the worse things will get.

It may seem to Americans influenced by Trump's well-crafted persona as a business genius or lulled by the record of his first term (when he inherited a growing economy) that he will bring some pro-business magic to his second term. Yet favoring incumbent businesses (as long as they stay on his good side) is not the same as favoring healthy free markets. Putin is in some ways a great ally of Russian business, and the country's economic elite supports him, but Russia's economy should be seen by intelligent advocates of capitalism as a vision of hell.

The end point of Trump's vision for the economy would be unrecognizable to generations of innovators. It would sacrifice the openness and opportunity that make America the most enticing destination for entrepreneurs across the world, while locking into place and even celebrating excesses of wealth. If Americans think that by empowering Trump, they have traded away some of their equality, civic decency, and political freedom for prosperity, we may find one day that we have sacrificed them all. *A*

Jonathan Chait is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

The Atlantic is proud to be the national media partner for The New Orleans Book Festival at Tulane University.



MARDI GRAS *for the* MIND

**W. KAMAU BELL | CONNIE CHUNG | ANTHONY FAUCI, MD
DORIS KEARNS GOODWIN | JOHN GRISHAM | WALTER
ISAACSON | SHARON MCMAHON | CASEY MCQUISTON | IMANI
PERRY | GEN. DAVID H. PETRAEUS | NATE SILVER | BRYAN
STEVENSON | TARA WESTOVER | BOB WOODWARD & MORE!**


The **NEW
ORLEANS
BOOK
FESTIVAL**
at Tulane University

Book it!
**MARCH
27 | 28 | 29
2025**



Visit bookfest.tulane.edu for the author lineup, Family Day information, updates & more!    @nolabookfest

KOSHER SALT IS ACTUALLY JUST BIG SALT

How did it become so popular?

BY ELLEN CUSHING

When I was a child, in the 1990s, there was only one kind of salt; we called it “salt.” It came in a blue cylindrical container—you probably know the one—and we dumped it into pasta water and decanted it into shakers. I didn’t know that any other kind existed, and the women who taught me to cook didn’t seem to, either: *Joy of Cooking*, *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, and *Moosewood Cookbook* all call, simply, for “salt” in their recipes.

But about a decade ago, I started buying coarse kosher salt instead of the fine, uniform, iodized table salt I’d grown up with. I do not remember why. As my friends grew up and started building their own pantries, many of them also made kosher salt their default. These days, *The New York Times* calls explicitly for kosher salt in nearly all of its recipes, as does *Bon Appétit*. Two of the most influential cookbooks of the past decade, *The Food Lab*, by J. Kenji López-Alt,

and *Salt, Fat, Acid, Heat*, by Samin Nosrat, both devote paragraphs to the benefits of kosher over table salt. It is now “the lingua franca of restaurant kitchens”—as Mark Bitterman, who has written four books about cooking with salt, put it—and a cheffy shibboleth in home kitchens, too. You can find Diamond Crystal, the coolest brand, in the background of the famously verisimilitudinous restaurant show *The Bear*, and on cooking influencers’ beautiful countertops; in 2023, when Trader Joe’s started carrying it, chef Reddit exploded in enthusiastic all caps.

Pretty much everyone eats salt, every day, and it’s different now. Yet even kosher salt’s most fervent converts may not entirely understand *how* it’s different.

Kosher salt, like all salt, is NaCl—sodium ions electrostatically bound with chloride ions and arranged in a crystal formation. Unlike certain specialty salts, it doesn’t have unique properties by virtue of its provenance; it’s not collected from the coast

of France or mined from a mountain in Pakistan. Kosher salt is just big salt.

It’s also more expensive than table salt. You might assume that this is because it has been manufactured according to a stringent set of religious rules. But much iodized table salt is kosher—that is, prepared in adherence with Jewish dietary law—and what we call “kosher salt” isn’t categorically kosher: If you’re feeling pedantic, the right term would be “koshering salt,” because its oversize, craggy crystals are best for drawing the blood out of animals during kosher slaughter.

America’s great salt swap began in the 1980s, when farmers’-market culture and the health-food movement helped American chefs acquaint themselves with specialty ingredients, Bitterman told me: Himalayan pink salt; “bad-ass, real good” *fleur de sel* from France.

But by and large, chefs settled on kosher as their go-to. They did this for a reason so unbelievably basic that I laughed out loud when I first heard it: Kosher salt is easier to pick up. “Table salt is too hard to pinch,” Adam Ragusea, a food YouTuber, told me. “I mean, just try it. Anyone who’s reading, just try it. Just pick it up ... It’s a pain in the ass, and it’s messy.”

Kosher salt is simply better for the way chefs tend to season their food, which is frequently, and without measuring, by eye and by feel. No one wants to be fiddling with a teaspoon on the line at a busy restaurant during the dinner rush. “You can really feel it sort of touching your fingers, and leaving your fingers,” Chris Morocco, the food director at *Bon Appétit* and *Epicurious*,

told me, whereas finer salt “has a tendency to want to slip away.”

Kosher salt’s migration to home kitchens started in the late ’90s, when the Food Network became a cultural force. Its big crystals suddenly had an added benefit: They look great being pinched out of a saltcellar and flung around on television, or at least better than table salt does being juddered out of a shaker. (Ina Garten, one of the network’s early celebrities, has described Diamond Crystal kosher salt as “always perfect.”) As television turned chefs into celebrities, their fans began trying to emulate them at home.

At the same time, recipes, like the rest of media, were moving online, and their tone was changing. Older cookbooks, Morocco told me, assumed a lot of knowledge on the part of their readers: “Recipe language was very terse. They were not really holding your hand too much.” Online, recipe writers had unlimited space, a broader potential audience, and a business imperative to build a relationship with their readers. So their guidance became chattier and more descriptive, designed for a home cook who was eager to learn—and who could hold recipe developers more immediately accountable, yelling about bland soup or bad bakes in the comments section.

“Salt to taste,” which had for decades been a standard instruction in most savory recipes, gave way to specific measurements. But different salts have different densities, meaning a teaspoon of one brand can be recipe-ruiningly saltier than that of another. So recipe developers needed to be able to recommend a standard salt. Being chefs, they already liked kosher. In 2011, *Bon Appétit*,

which was then becoming a major resource for Millennials teaching themselves how to cook, adopted Diamond Crystal as its house salt.

This is all a little funny. Restaurant chefs started using kosher precisely because it was easy to use *without* measuring—now home cooks are measuring it out by the teaspoon. And a movement that espoused seeking the ideal ingredients for every dish resulted in widespread adoption of a one-size-fits-all salt.

IN DOING SO, modern cooking has inadvertently all but abandoned one of the most significant public-health advances in history. A few years ago, a 6-year-old girl showed up at a medical clinic in Providence, Rhode Island, her neck so swollen that it looked like she'd swallowed a grapefruit whole. After a series of tests, doctors figured it out: She was iodine-deficient. Her thyroid—the butterfly-shaped gland that is responsible for just about everything the body does, and which requires iodine to function—had swelled in an attempt to capture any microgram of iodine it could from her bloodstream.

For centuries, thyroid dysfunction was endemic; millions of people around the world suffered from slow heartbeats, weakness, muscle fatigue, sluggish metabolism, and brain fog. When, in 1924, American manufacturers introduced artificially iodized salts, it was a miracle, right there on the shelf in the grocery store. Within a few years, the thyroids of the developed world were working again.

Recently, however, doctors have started reporting more cases of iodine-deficient hypothyroidism—and our salt



preferences may be at least partially to blame. Kosher salt, as you have probably guessed, does not contain iodine. Neither do most ultraprocessed foods, the main vehicle by which most people in this not-exactly-sodium-deficient country take in salt.

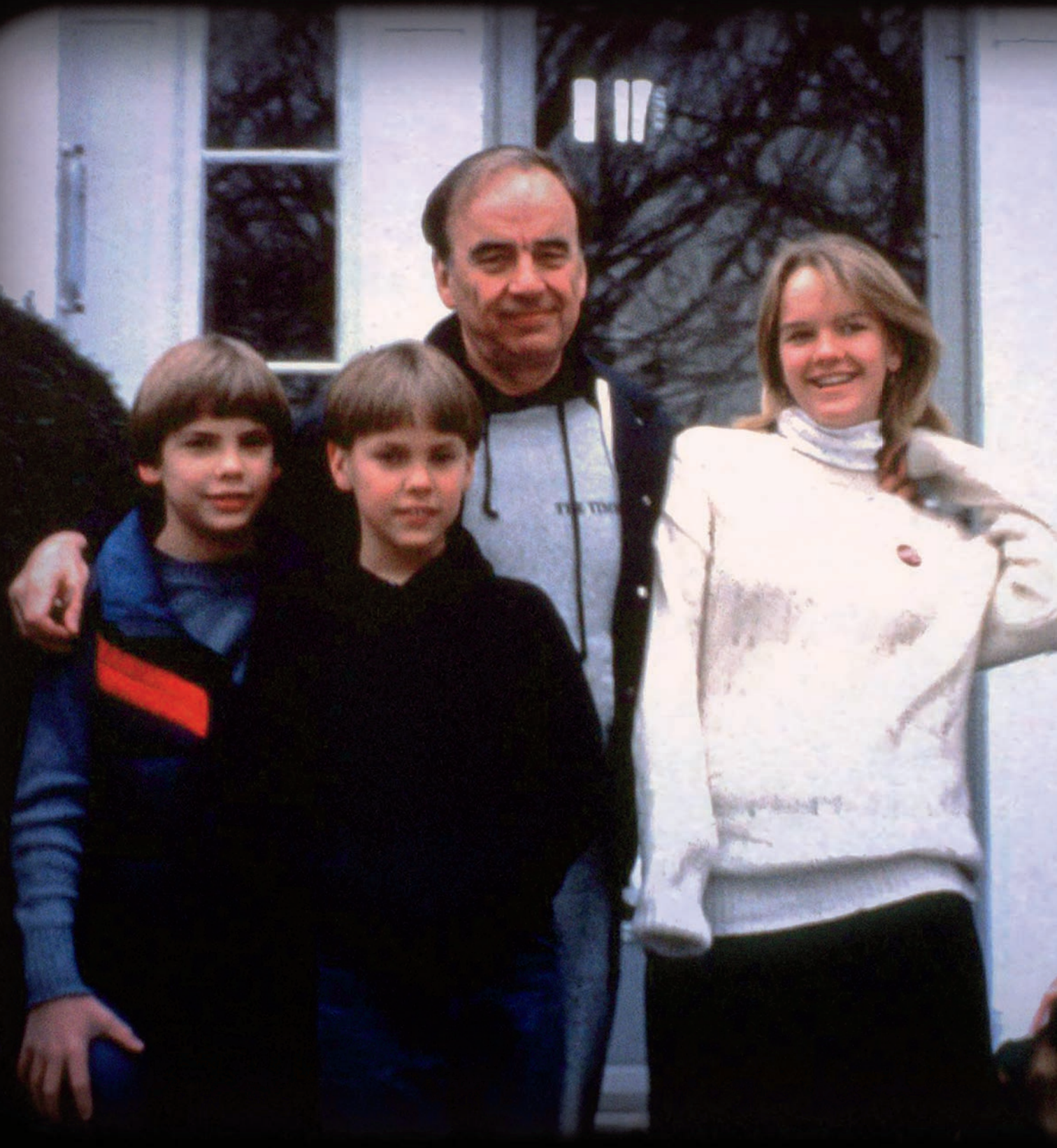
Iodine deficiency can be serious, but is eminently treatable. (Pregnant women should be particularly attentive to their iodine levels, the UCLA endocrinologist Angela Leung told me, because deficiency can result in birth defects.) The 21st-century rise in hypothyroidism might therefore be less a cause for alarm than a chance to

rethink our contemporary salt orthodoxy. Kosher's dominance, to hear Bitterman tell it, "doesn't come out of magic or merit—it's cookbook writers and chef culture, a weird confluence of circumstances brainwashing everyone at the same time." What's great for chefs may not be great for home cooks. Kosher salt isn't inherently better, and in some cases may be worse.

I've now spent hours on the phone with salt connoisseurs—at one point, Bitterman earnestly described a certain type as "luscious" and "warm"—and have come around to the view that we should all be more open to using different salts for

different purposes, in the same way that well-outfitted cooks might keep different types of olive oil on hand. Flaky *fleur de sel* is great for finishing dishes; flavored salt is perfect on popcorn. And for everyday cooking, iodized table salt is just as good as kosher—preferable, even, if you're worried about your iodine levels. Sure, all the recipes now call for kosher salt, but a solution exists: Ignore the instructions and season intuitively. Like a real chef would. *A*

Ellen Cushing is a staff writer at The Atlantic.



Inside the family fight that will determine the future of conservative media

BY MCKAY COPPINS



Growing Up Murdoch

James Murdoch was seated at a conference table in a Manhattan law office in March 2024 when he realized he was witnessing the final dissolution of his family.

Three months earlier, his father, Rupert, had told James and his sisters that he was rewriting the family trust to grant his elder son, Lachlan, full control of the Murdoch empire after his death, rather than splitting it equally among his four oldest children. The amendment was part of a secret plan that the patriarch's allies had code-named "Project Family Harmony."

Rupert's shocking decision was the climax of a succession battle that had pitted James and Lachlan, born just 15 months apart, against each other essentially their entire lives. (Their older sisters, Prudence and Elisabeth, had never been serious contenders to run the business: "He is a misogynist," James said of his father.)

Rupert believed that he had no choice but to take aggressive action. He was 92 years old, and was certain that James was plotting with his sisters to seize control of the family's companies as soon as he died, after which they would defang his conservative media empire and destroy his life's work.

He was right that his younger son did not share his vision for the family business. James had come to see Fox News as a blight on his family's name and a menace to American democracy. He believed that drastic changes were needed to save the companies from the consequences of his father's reckless mismanagement. ("If lying to your audience is how you juice ratings," he would tell me, "a good culture wouldn't do that.") Determined to retain a voice in the business, James and his older sisters had moved to block Rupert from changing the trust.

The legal drama was set to play out far from public view, in a Reno probate court—Nevada is known for its flexible estate laws—but it had global significance: The trial would determine who controlled the most powerful conservative media force in the world, one that had toppled governments and delivered Donald Trump to the White House. For the Murdochs, the stakes were also intensely personal. Depositions and discovery were surfacing years of painful secrets—intra-family

scheming and manipulation, lies and leaking and devious betrayals. James and Rupert had barely spoken in years.

In the communications that emerged during the discovery process, James had learned how his father talked about him to the rest of the family—how calculating and manipulative he could be. When a packet of documents that James's lawyer had requested arrived from Rupert, it came with a handwritten note: *Dear James, Still time to talk? Love, Dad. P.S.: Love to see my grandchildren one day.* James, who could not remember the last time Rupert had taken an interest in his grandchildren, didn't bother to reply.

Now, at the Manhattan law office, James sat across the table from his father and prepared to be deposed. For nearly five hours, Rupert's attorney asked James a series of withering questions.

Have you ever done anything successful on your own?

Why were you too busy to say "Happy birthday" to your father when he turned 90?

Does it strike you that, in your account, everything that goes wrong is always somebody else's fault?

At one point, the attorney referred to James and his sisters as "white, privileged,

multibillionaire trust-fund babies." At another, he read an unsourced passage from a book about the Murdochs to suggest that James was a conniving saboteur.

James did his best to concentrate, but he couldn't help stealing glances at his father. Rupert sat slouched and silent throughout the deposition, staring inscrutably at his younger son. Every so often, though, he would pick up his phone and type. Finally, James realized why. "He was texting the lawyer questions to ask," James told me. "How fucking twisted is that?"

When the session ended, Rupert left the conference room without saying a word.

JAMES MURDOCH LIKES to think of himself as a student of dynastic dysfunction. He quotes Shakespeare and cites Roman imperial history in casual conversation. He is not sure he agrees with Tolstoy's dictum—"All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." Because when he surveys the literature on families wrecked by wealth and power, he mostly sees the same sad patterns in endless repetition.

The contours of his own family's story are familiar to the point of cliché—the legacy-obsessed patriarch slipping into



THE FIGHT OVER
THE TRUST WAS
THE CULMINATION
OF A DECADES-
LONG STORY—
ONE THAT JAMES
DECIDED HE WAS
FINALLY READY
TO TELL.

*In 1960, at age 29,
Rupert Murdoch acquired
the Daily Mirror, a
Sydney tabloid, as part
of his aggressive expansion
of the news business he'd
inherited from his father.*

senescence and paranoia, the courtiers whispering in his ear, the siblings squabbling over their portion of the kingdom. “It’s all been written down many, many times,” he said. “The real tragedy is that no one in my family doing this bothered to pay attention.”

There had always been rumors about James—his more liberal politics, his rifts with Rupert—but over two decades as an executive at News Corp and Fox, he’d played the good soldier and loyal son. He’d even been groomed at various points to be his father’s successor. Then, in 2020, he abruptly resigned from News Corp’s board of directors in a short letter citing “disagreements over certain editorial content” and “other strategic decisions.” James had never fully explained what led to this decision, and when I approached him in early 2024, I hoped he might be ready to elaborate.

I didn’t yet know that the Murdochs were in the midst of a private meltdown over the family trust. But the trial, I would learn, was really the culmination of a decades-long story—one that James decided he was finally ready to tell.

Over the next year, he and his wife, Kathryn, told me about the mind games at a Murdoch family–counseling retreat, and all the ways that Rupert had devised to pit his sons against each other. They detailed the cynical deliberations that had led the family’s news outlets to support Brexit and Trump, and the machinations that various family members had undertaken to get one another fired or subpoenaed or humiliated in the press.

Some of these stories felt strangely familiar, having appeared in slightly altered forms on *Succession*, the HBO drama about a fictionalized family very much resembling the Murdochs. James had never watched the series; he’d tried the first episode, but found it too painful. But other members of the Murdoch clan were obsessed with the show; certain scenes and storylines seemed uncannily true to life. Throughout my reporting, I heard constant speculation about which family members might secretly have leaked to the show’s writers. James and Kathryn, I was told, thought his sister Liz was responsible. Liz swore she wasn’t, though for a while

she was convinced that her ex-husband was talking with the writers—and in fact she later learned that he’d repeatedly offered his services, but the showrunner, Jesse Armstrong, had declined. Armstrong told me that he and his writers simply drew on press reports. “I think there’s a bit of psychodrama around this sort of thing,” he told me.

Airing the dirty laundry didn’t come naturally to James. In our conversations, he vacillated between seething anger toward his father and an odd kind of protectiveness. Trim and neatly dressed, he spoke in an even, British-inflected staccato that seemed to belie a subcutaneous anxiety. Sometimes, when I would ask him about a particularly painful episode with his father, he would find that the dishes suddenly needed clearing.

Kathryn often took on the role of taskmaster. In one meeting, James began our interview by speaking rapidly for 11 straight minutes about the adaptive cruise control on his Tesla, and the new venture he was launching with Art Basel, and his daughter’s summer internship working with giraffe conservationists in Zimbabwe. Finally, Kathryn interjected. “Sweetheart,” she said firmly. “I think you need to take a breath, take a sip of water, and maybe we should just talk about what we want to talk about.”

James had long ago internalized the edict that you never talk to reporters about the family. This was an inviolable rule of Rupert’s—one of the first things Kathryn had learned when she and James started dating. James hated the books and articles written by professional Murdoch chroniclers, which he mockingly referred to as “the canon.” It wasn’t until his father’s texts and emails came out in the trust litigation that James realized just how many insidious stories over the years—the ones that portrayed Kathryn as a meddling “former model” and James as a liberal dilettante—had been planted by Rupert’s camp. The revelation was liberating.

The couple’s motives in talking to me were surely mixed. Sometimes, they seemed fueled by raw anger at what they see as Rupert’s betrayal. Other times, they seemed preoccupied with reputation management—eager to present

themselves as evolved, socially conscious billionaires, and distance themselves from certain unfortunate associations with the Murdoch name. (Rupert and Lachlan declined to be interviewed for this story, but a spokesperson objected to what he called a “litany of falsehoods,” noting that they came “from someone who no longer works for the companies but still benefits from them financially.”)

James also seemed compelled, in part, by a desire to add his chapter to the literature of family dysfunction, in hopes that some future family might take the lessons more seriously than his own had. During our first meeting, he told me about a document that one of his father’s lawyers had written, which included a quote from *King Lear*: “How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is to have a thankless child.”

James and Kathryn found it darkly amusing. Did Rupert and his lawyers not realize that the famous line uttered by the mad king is aimed at Cordelia, who turns out to be Lear’s only honest daughter?

“The whole point is that the crazy old man doesn’t know that Cordelia is telling him the truth,” Kathryn told me.

Her husband studied a spot on the table in front of him.

RUPERT’S MEDIA EMPIRE has its own mythology, one that every Murdoch learns at an early age. The story begins during World War I, when a young reporter named Keith Arthur Murdoch visits Australian soldiers fighting in Gallipoli. There, Keith learns that the campaign has been a secret disaster. His countrymen are dying by the thousands, serving as cannon fodder for the British military. Press reports are supposed to be submitted to military censors, but Keith—exhibiting a rebellious streak and a nose for a great story—smuggles out news of the slaughter in an 8,000-word letter. The dispatch circulates widely in Australia, sparking public outrage, changing the course of the Gallipoli campaign, and turning Keith into a national hero. When he dies, in 1952, he leaves a newspaper in the coastal city of Adelaide to his 21-year-old son, Rupert, hoping to plant a dynasty.

Rupert graduates from Oxford and returns to Australia in a hurry to turn his inheritance into an empire. He conquers

the country’s media landscape in a reckless scramble, buying one newspaper and leveraging it to finance the debt for the next. He gobbles up TV stations too. Murdoch outlets become known for an irresistible mix of sports, scandal, and populist outrage; some observers will later call him the inventor of the modern tabloid. By the time he’s 40, he is the most powerful media figure in Australia, eventually controlling two-thirds of the country’s newspaper market.

Rupert discovers that one of the great pleasures of being a press baron is wielding political power. After he arrives on Fleet Street, in the late ’60s, he buys a pair of popular British papers and uses them to successfully campaign for Margaret Thatcher, who later clears a regulatory path for Rupert to expand his British TV holdings. When he turns his attention to the U.S., he uses his acquisition of the *New York Post* to befriend an up-and-coming GOP operative running Ronald Reagan’s New York campaign. He works with Roger Stone to shape the candidate’s image, helping Reagan carry the state.

In the New York media world, Rupert’s conservative politics are held in suspicion,

Rupert and Anna Murdoch in 1977 with (left to right) Liz, Lachlan, and James



and his rapid pace of acquisitions—which include *New York* magazine and *The Village Voice*—is alarming. He appears on the cover of *Time* in 1977, his head pasted onto the body of King Kong, above a screaming tabloid-style headline: EXTRA!!! AUSSIE PRESS LORD TERRIFIES GOTHAM. But Rupert doesn't care about popularity; he takes a certain arch delight in his nefarious reputation.

Once Reagan is in office, his administration waives a rule against owning TV stations and newspapers in the same market, allowing Rupert to launch his own TV network in America. Analysts call him foolish for trying to take on CBS, NBC, and ABC. But Rupert fills Fox's prime-time lineup with provocations—sitcoms about dysfunctional families (*The Simpsons*, *Married ... With Children*); pulpy crime shows (*Cops*, *America's Most Wanted*)—and the network is an unexpected hit. He defies expectations again when he decides to challenge CNN's cable dominance by launching a right-wing news channel.

Amid all the empire building that follows—the movie studio, *The Wall Street Journal*, HarperCollins, the push into Asia—Rupert insists on treating News Corp like a family business, drawing his children into his professional world at every opportunity. At breakfast, he spreads the day's newspapers across the table, and gives his children a master class for budding media moguls. Family dinners feature visits from politicians and dignitaries. He takes his children on tours of printing presses, and gives them internships at his newspapers.

This is his animating motivation, he insists, his conglomerate's entire reason for being. He loves his children, and he wants to leave them an inheritance that means something, just as his father did for him. "I don't know any son of any prominent media family who hasn't wanted to follow in the footsteps of his forebears," he says. "It's just too great a life."

But there is one episode that often gets left out of the official mythology. In the early '90s, News Corp is in trouble, the result of a debt crisis brought on by Rupert's relentless expansion. It has lost the confidence of the markets, its share price

is depressed, and it is nearing bankruptcy. Rupert sees an opportunity in the crisis.

Before dying, it turns out, his father placed his newspaper holdings in a trust and divided control equally among his wife and four children. Although Rupert has run the company all these years, he's never truly owned it. Now, he decides, it's time for that to change.

Taking advantage of the low stock price, he informs his mother and siblings that he is ready to buy them out: He makes clear that he is not interested in negotiating. When the family meets to discuss the matter, his biographer Michael Wolff will later report, Rupert's mother "buries her head in her arms on the boardroom table."

In Rupert's conception of the family empire, the empire always takes precedence over the family.

THE UPPER EAST SIDE penthouse where James spent his childhood had a private elevator entrance and a butler named George and panoramic views of Central Park. But kids want their fathers, and James's was busy. "Is Daddy going deaf?" he once asked his mother, Anna, when he was young. "No," she replied, "he's just not listening." Those storied bonding moments at the breakfast table were less rituals than special occasions, as far as James recalls. His parents moved to Los Angeles when he was around 16 and left James behind in Manhattan to attend the elite Horace Mann School. He would go long stretches without seeing them. When Rupert did come to town, striding into the penthouse in his double-breasted suits, talking about important things with a gaggle of employees, it felt almost like spotting a celebrity.

In the roles assigned to the Murdoch children when they were young, Prue was the peacemaking older sister from Rupert's first marriage; Liz, the temperamental artist. The two boys were treated almost like twins—rivals in the unspoken competition for Rupert's approval. Lachlan was the golden boy, the elder son and heir apparent, rugged and charismatic and self-consciously emulative of his father. James, the intense, cerebral kid who bleached his hair and pierced his ears and provoked his father at the dinner table with contrarian questions, was typecast as the rebel.

"IS DADDY GOING DEAF?" JAMES ONCE ASKED HIS MOTHER WHEN HE WAS YOUNG. "NO," SHE REPLIED, "HE'S JUST NOT LISTENING."

James bristles at the caricature now, but he admits that he was “not an easy son.” He got into trouble at school, and demonstrated a lack of interest in his father’s work that could reasonably be construed as disdain. When, at 14, James interned at Rupert’s Australian newspapers, he fell asleep during a press conference, and a photo of the snoozing scion wound up in the rival *Sydney Morning Herald*.

As a teenager, James spent summers at an archaeological site in Italy, digging holes alongside a bohemian collection of grad students, artists, and antiquities scholars. When they tried to provoke him with questions about politics, he responded simply, “I’m not my father.” He loved the work, and the freedom that came with it. Richard Hodges, who oversaw the excavation, thought James would make a worthy protégé, but he knew it wouldn’t happen. “His father wouldn’t have allowed him to do that,” Hodges told me.

Still, the fact that Lachlan was the obvious successor gave James room to shape his own identity in those years. After graduating from high school in 1991, he enrolled at Harvard, where he got a tattoo, grew a beard, and began drawing a satiric comic strip for *The Lampoon* called “Albrecht the Atypical Hun,” about a kindly, poetry-loving World War I-era German who feels excluded because he doesn’t enjoy war crimes. James dropped out his senior year and moved to New York to start a hip-hop label with his friends. The offices for Rawkus Records featured a poster of Chairman Mao.

He met Kathryn Hufschmid in 1997, when he was 24, aboard a charter flight to Fiji, where he, his brother, and an assortment of models, surfers, and Australian bodybuilders planned to spend a long weekend on a yacht. It wasn’t really James’s scene, but he was happy to find himself sitting next to a quiet, pretty blonde who shared his love of the Salman Rushdie novel *Midnight’s Children*. “We hardly saw them the whole weekend,” recalls Joe Cross, a friend who was on the trip. “They’d surface for meals.”

Kathryn was living in Australia at the time, and James was in New York, so for their second date, they met halfway, in Hawaii. For their third, James invited



Kathryn to meet his family on his father’s 158-foot superyacht, *Morning Glory*, off the coast of Australia. They were already talking seriously about their future, and the trip was a chance for Kathryn to see what she’d be getting into.

The experience was enlightening. She caught Rupert cheating at Monopoly (he just smirked and shrugged), and observed constant sniping—at one point, Anna got up and left a family dinner in tears. Lachlan had brought along his latest girlfriend. When they got into an argument, Kathryn recalled, Lachlan shaved his head, jumped off the boat, and swam to shore. “He has a weird, dramatic side,” James told me. (A spokesperson for Lachlan denied James’s version of events.)

Kathryn had grown up the only child of a single mother in Oregon, and left home at 15 to pursue modeling. She wasn’t scared off by this big, noisy, disputatious family—the prospect of having a family at all appealed to her. And she left a good impression: After the trip, Rupert urged James to propose as quickly as possible. They were married at a small ceremony in Connecticut, where James read Pablo Neruda and Kathryn read James Joyce.

“She was very fond of Rupert, and she’s a very loyal person,” Chloe Hooper, a longtime friend of the couple’s, told me. “I don’t think she ever anticipated that 25 years later, she would be in this ideological knife fight with them.”

Rupert, Lachlan, and James at News Corp’s annual general meeting in 2002

LACHLAN WAS THE ONE ON THE SUCCESSION TRACK—IMMERSING HIMSELF IN THE TABLOID BUSINESS SO BELOVED BY HIS FATHER.

ON JUNE 25, 1999, guests boarded the *Morning Glory*, now anchored in New York Harbor, to watch Rupert Murdoch marry Wendi Deng.

Rupert had finalized his divorce from Anna, his wife of nearly 32 years, just 17 days earlier, and both James and Lachlan objected to their father's new marriage. The brothers believed that Deng, an executive at a News Corp subsidiary in Hong Kong, couldn't be trusted, and suspected that she might even have ties to Chinese intelligence. (Deng has denied this, but James's suspicion never died. More than two decades later, Kathryn would joke that Deng used "CCP-issued burner phones" to evade a subpoena in the trust litigation. A spokesperson for Lachlan denied that he objected to the marriage or had suspicions about Deng.)

It was a time of broad upheaval for the family. Liz had split from her husband and taken up with Matthew Freud—an intense, unnervingly slick PR executive from London (and a great-grandson of Sigmund). The Murdochs, always skeptical of interlopers, were especially wary of Freud, with his constant flaunting of social connections and his gleeful loutishness. The first time Kathryn met him, she recalls, he started the conversation by trying to convince her that it was morally defensible for a man to cheat on his pregnant wife.

At the wedding, Rupert gave a long, glowing speech about his new wife, while a barefoot Deng looked on adoringly. James and Kathryn parked themselves by a bucket of caviar and got drunk.

James had joined the family business a few years earlier, after Rupert bought Rawkus Records and folded it into News Corp's fledgling music and new-media group. James's title, head of "digital publishing," was not an especially exalted one at a dead-tree media company. Lachlan was the one on the succession track—immersing himself in the tabloid business so beloved by his father and eventually apprenticing with the chief operating officer.

Before long, the New York City headquarters started to feel a bit cramped for both of the boss's sons. At board meetings, James—ferociously analytical and eager to one-up his older brother—would freely

challenge Lachlan, picking apart his logic and questioning his ideas. Lachlan, for all his easygoing confidence, was not as articulate as James—he had struggled with dyslexia and spent time in speech therapy as a kid—and sometimes grew flustered. The feuding was awkward for others in the room, but Rupert rarely stepped in to break them up.

In 2000, Rupert decided to give James a new assignment that would take him to Hong Kong. James had recently worked with his mother to impose some semblance of peace on the family. During the divorce, Anna had asked her younger son to meet with her. She told him she was prepared to give up half of the money to which she was entitled in exchange for alterations to the family trust. Anna had seen the way Rupert played the kids off one another, how he picked favorites, how their lives risked becoming consumed with a never-ending quest for the crown. What she wanted was an arrangement that would split the family fortune—and the empire—evenly among the four children once Rupert was gone.

With James acting as mediator, his parents reached an agreement. The trust would now give Rupert four votes and each of his four children one. When he died, his votes would disappear and control of the company would be split among Prue, Liz, Lachlan, and James.

"The idea," James would later recall ruefully, "was that it would incentivize us to cooperate."

IN HONG KONG, James found that he thrived working 8,000 miles away from his father. He began repeating, almost like a mantra, a Chinese proverb: "The mountains are high and the emperor is far away."

He had been sent to turn around Star, an Asian satellite-TV company that had lost \$200 million since News Corp bought it, in 1993, and was mired in mismanagement. The job had been presented as a big opportunity, but it looked to some like a suicide mission for a green 27-year-old.

James's first move was to pivot Star's growth strategy from Hong Kong to India. He ordered an overhaul of Star's Indian programming, commissioning mass-market shows in regional languages.

After Star debuted an Indian version of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*, James built on the prime-time success by ordering a series of splashy Hindi-language dramas. Two years after he arrived at Star, the company turned a profit.

James's success in Asia came as something of a surprise back at News Corp headquarters, people familiar with the company told me. "I have to be honest," James recalled one board member telling him, "I didn't think you had it in you."

A promotion came in 2003, when James was named CEO of British Sky Broadcasting, a large satellite-TV company in which News Corp owned a 39 percent stake. His arrival in London was noisy and unwelcome. Rupert, whose down-market tabloids had earned him the nickname the Dirty Digger, was a villainous figure in Britain, and the appointment of his son to run a major British broadcaster prompted howls of nepotism and a sharp backlash in the market. On the day James made his first major presentation to investors, Sky's share price dropped nearly 20 percent.

Sky was profitable, but stagnant. Among Brits, it was widely seen as a price-gouging service that bought Premier League soccer rights and ransomed them to resentful subscribers. Its internal culture was macho and belligerent. The predominant mentality, James recalled, was "Everybody hates us and we don't care."

Early on, James laid out his vision for a new, respectable Sky. The company was going to have a set of "values," he told executives, and would adopt the best practices of a modern workplace. "All these grumpy, old English guys were looking around like, 'What the fuck is this guy talking about?'" James told me.

He pushed out Sky's CFO and several other executives. After hearing that an employee had gotten drunk at a Royal Television Society banquet and thrown a dinner roll at the former director-general of the BBC, James ordered a manager to sack him. James told me that when the manager resisted, he had to explain why "being a dick in public when you're an ambassador for the company" was a fireable offense.

Under James's leadership, Sky's brand image improved and subscriber numbers



*“WAS THIS MORE
BUSINESS OR
PERSONAL?”
I ASKED. “THERE’S
NO DIFFERENCE
IN THIS FAMILY,”
JAMES SAID.*

grew. “He took what was this Aussie-inflected cowboy operation, and turned it into a respected, high-growth company,” Matthew Anderson, an executive who worked with James at Sky, told me.

But James could feel Rupert’s ambivalence. He had succeeded in large part by rejecting the corporate ethos cultivated by his father. Rupert had a well-known management *modus operandi*: Hire aggressive executives, give them their own fiefdoms, and let them run wild. It was central to the Murdoch mythology—the empire built on instinct, run by a shrewd band of self-styled pirates and gamblers.

In London and New York, James told me, the pattern was the same: Nobody seemed to listen to the in-house lawyers if they could help it, and human resources was an afterthought at best. “When I’d say things like ‘compliance,’ they’d be like, ‘Oh my God, he uses business-school speak!’” James recalled. “And it’s like, ‘No, it’s the English language, and it’s kind of an important idea.’”

Rupert, for his part, seemed to resent his son for what he saw as a preoccupation with respectability, according to former News Corp employees. His misgivings were exacerbated by his apparent belief that Kathryn had indoctrinated James in fashionable left-of-center politics. The caricature periodically popped up in press coverage of the family: the witchy, liberal daughter-in-law casting a spell on Rupert’s impressionable son.

It was true that Kathryn was becoming more political. An awakening came, of all places, at a News Corp retreat in Pebble Beach, California, where she listened to Al Gore deliver his famous presentation on climate change. Soon after that, Kathryn went to work for the Clinton Climate Initiative. She also became more outspoken while sparring with her in-laws.

Once, during an argument over gay marriage, Rupert asserted that allowing same-sex couples to wed would be an affront to the institution.

Some people would say the same thing about divorce, Kathryn told her father-in-law. Rupert was then on his third wife.

Still, Rupert couldn’t afford to push away his younger son. Lachlan had left the company in 2005 after a series of

confrontations with his father’s lieutenants in New York. The final indignity came when Lachlan, who was in charge of Fox’s TV stations, delayed green-lighting a police series developed by Roger Ailes, the CEO of Fox News. Ailes went over Lachlan’s head to Rupert, who reportedly told him, “Do the show. Don’t listen to Lachlan.” After years of being undermined by his father, who seemed conspicuously uneager to retire, Lachlan had had enough. He resigned and moved his family back to Australia.

With Lachlan effectively taking himself out of the running, James was the new successor in training. In 2007, he resigned his post at Sky to take a major promotion running all of News Corp’s operations in Asia and Europe. James’s domain would be larger than ever.

THE JAMES MURDOCH who moved into News Corp’s corner office in London was all but unrecognizable to many who had known him earlier in life. He’d always been a “bundle of pent-up energy,” as one former employee put it to me, but now he was brash and cocksure. He charged into a rival newspaper’s office to castigate the editor for running an ad campaign critical of his family. He insinuated himself with major shareholders and dined privately with David Cameron. To some observers, he looked like a boy trying on his father’s sport coat, but James clearly felt like he was on a hot streak.

He assembled a team of loyal deputies— young men in dark suits and open collars who were similarly fluent in M.B.A. jargon—and launched an ambitious bid to acquire the part of Sky that News Corp didn’t already own. If completed, this would be the largest acquisition in the company’s history. By all appearances, James was establishing a rival power center on his side of the Atlantic—and he could sense that his growing confidence agitated his father.

In the 2008 biography for which he interviewed Rupert and his children at length, Michael Wolff noted an odd dynamic forming between James and Rupert around this time. James seemed to be deliberately cultivating a public persona modeled after his father’s—but rather than

*James Murdoch at the offices
of his investment firm,
Lupa Systems, in New York
City, December 2024*

bringing the two men closer, the performance appeared to threaten Rupert. “His father is obviously proud,” Wolff wrote, “even perhaps slightly afraid of him.”

Then one day in 2010, Rupert did something out of character: He invited his adult children to a family-counseling retreat in Australia. He explained that he’d hired a therapist who specialized in families like theirs, and said he believed the guy could help them.

The retreat was held at the Murdoch family’s ancestral ranch in Cavan Station, a 25,000-acre farm a few hundred miles from Sydney where Merino sheep roam the plains and kangaroos have to be culled. The purpose was not ostensibly to discuss succession planning, James recalled, but rather how they would “behave with each other.” (“Was this more business or personal?” I asked. “There’s no difference in this family,” he said.)

Lately, Rupert had been talking with Liz about acquiring her production company, Shine Group. James didn’t think his sister should sell—she’d turned Shine, which produced megahits such as *The Biggest Loser* and *MasterChef*, into a success all by herself. Why let their father get his claws in it?

“My father was always trying to pull everyone into the company so that he could manipulate them against each other,” James told me.

The therapist began by sitting down with each Murdoch individually to get their view of what was wrong with the family. James, skeptical of the exercise, remembers telling him, “There’s some stuff you don’t need to pick at—nothing good is going to come of it.”

Sure enough, when the therapist convened the family, the session devolved into posturing, gaslighting, and recriminations. Everybody was spinning stories to garner strategic sympathy and advance their own agenda, James and Kathryn told me. “I think that the shrink was outmatched,” Kathryn said.

“It was a car crash,” James said. “Everyone was more alienated from each other at the end.”

Not long after that weekend, a mention of the Murdochs’ family therapy made it into *Vanity Fair*. Whoever leaked the story described a loving, supportive

experience: James’s siblings advocating for their little brother, eager to help him strengthen his relationship with their father so that he’d be ready to take over the business one day. When I read this account to James, he scoffed.

The family-trust litigation had recently led him to some very different conclusions about the purpose of that strange retreat. His siblings, he’d come to believe, had grown irritated by his successful run at News Corp. Perhaps watching their little brother strut around like a boy-king—unsupervised by the king himself—had bred resentment. In any case, he believed, they’d been agitating for Rupert to rein in James. The family counseling was, James now believed, primarily an effort to get control of him.

At the end of the retreat, Liz told me, she offered to draft what she called a “family constitution”—an attempt to codify the values by which the newly therapized Murdochs would comport themselves. The document, titled “Murdoch Principles,” was passed back and forth between Liz and James, and eventually signed by all four siblings in February 2011. It contained a series of bullet-pointed aspirations:

“We commit to undertake active dialog with each other at all times and to relentlessly communicate openly, with trust and humility.”

“We agree not to delegate to anyone matters of family communication.”

“We will be vigilant of and defend against divisiveness, either between us or that which could infiltrate from without.”

Within months, the Murdochs would be at each other’s throats.

IN 2002, A British teenager named Milly Dowler went missing. Her disappearance became a national fixation; after a six-month search, she was found dead. Nearly a decade later, on July 4, 2011, *The Guardian* published an explosive story, reporting that journalists at the Murdoch-owned *News of the World* tabloid had directed a private investigator to hack into Dowler’s voicemail before publishing the contents of some of the victim’s messages.

The *Guardian* article was followed by a cascade of stories alleging that *News of*

the World had also hacked the families of soldiers killed in Afghanistan and Iraq, relatives of victims of the 2005 London bombing, and the mother of an 8-year-old girl who was murdered by a pedophile. As the allegations piled up, James huddled with executives and lawyers to figure out how serious the issue was. He had never paid close attention to the company’s newspapers in London; they were his father’s preoccupation.

The alleged hacking had taken place before the newspapers were his responsibility. But James had made a decision three years earlier that now tied him directly to the scandal. In 2008, just six months after starting his new job, he’d signed off on a settlement with Gordon Taylor, a soccer executive who’d sued the company for hacking his cellphone. It didn’t seem like a big deal to James at the time—a reporter had gone rogue, a deal had been reached, and employees who knew more about the matter than he did had advised him to authorize the payment. When executives later presented him with evidence of widespread phone-hacking at *News of the World*, his approval of the Taylor settlement started to look like a cover-up. Over Rupert’s objections, James said, he instructed the company’s lawyers to call the police and hand over everything they had. (A spokesperson for Rupert disputed James’s account.)

Shortly after the *Guardian* story broke, James called his father to say they needed to shut down *News of the World*—the company’s most widely read newspaper—to contain the crisis. Rupert was not happy. He saw the scandal as an attack by his competitors—and the way to deal with an attack was to fight back. He instructed his son not to say a word to the press, James recalled. He’d be in London soon.

In the meantime, James became the public face of the scandal. Paparazzi camped outside his house. Pundits speculated that James might face a prison sentence. Every time Kathryn heard a siren in the distance, she was briefly gripped with a panic that the police were coming to arrest her husband.

“This is crazy!” she recalled telling James. “You cannot just sit here and hide!” He had to take control of the story.



James and Rupert appeared before a parliamentary committee about the News of the World phone-hacking scandal in July 2011.

“My father won’t let me,” he said.

Rupert’s arrival in London only made things worse. While James worked with his team on a damage-control strategy—including firings, internal compliance reforms, and an ad campaign apologizing to the public—Rupert was freelancing. He went around London answering reporters’ shouted questions, and paid a surprise visit to Milly Dowler’s parents. He told a *Wall Street Journal* reporter that he was “getting annoyed” with all the negative publicity, generating yet another round of negative publicity.

James was alarmed. His father looked frail and confused—nothing like the decisive, towering figure he’d long admired and tangled with. He remembers calling Lachlan in Australia and fretting, “Dude, our old man has gone crazy. This is terrible.”

To quell the public’s outrage, someone high up at the company would have to resign. To James, the obvious choice was Rebekah Brooks, the former *News of the World* editor who now oversaw the Murdochs’ British newspapers. But Rupert loved Brooks, and insisted that he prized loyalty. “I don’t throw people under a bus,” he reportedly said.

James’s sister had a different idea. Liz, who lived in London and had sold Shine to News Corp earlier that year, had been

a constant presence throughout the crisis, offering advice and comfort to their father. At one point, while talking with Rupert in the office he’d commandeered as a war room, she made the case that a member of the family would have to take the fall—and that person should be James. He’d already been planning to leave Europe to work under News Corp’s chief operating officer in New York. Why not reframe his resignation as a kind of Murdoch mea culpa?

Rupert said he’d think about it. The next day, he told Liz he liked the idea.

Then he added, “Go tell him.”

Liz obediently made her way down the hall to James’s office. “I was chatting with Dad, and we think the only way to stop the noise is for you to step down,” she recalled telling him. James was irate. He knew his father hated familial confrontation, but this represented a new level of cowardice. He told Liz that if their father wanted to fire him, he’d have to do it himself.

The episode did lasting damage to James and Liz’s relationship. When anonymously sourced stories appeared in the press painting James as the chief villain in the phone-hacking saga, he suspected that Liz’s camp was behind them. And when Liz’s production company was dismantled and merged

EVERY TIME KATHRYN HEARD A SIREN IN THE DISTANCE, SHE WAS BRIEFLY GRIPPED WITH A PANIC THAT THE POLICE WERE COMING TO ARREST HER HUSBAND.

with two other companies in 2014, she believed it was her brother exacting revenge. The siblings barely spoke for years. More than a decade later, Liz would tell me that she couldn't believe she'd sacrificed her relationship with James in her quest for her father's approval. "It's one of the greatest regrets of my life," she said.

James eventually came to understand that Rupert and Liz weren't the only ones trying to scapegoat him. He told me that Liz's then-husband, Freud, had used his extensive media contacts to wage a concerted leak campaign against him with the apparent goal of making Liz the new favored successor so that he could play puppet master. (The couple divorced in 2014. Kathryn, reflecting on his behavior throughout the marriage, told me, "I cannot exaggerate what a terrible person he is." Freud did not respond to requests for comment.)

How much responsibility did James bear for the bungling of the phone-hacking scandal? Two *News of the World* employees would claim under oath that they'd told him about evidence that the practice went beyond one rogue reporter and a private investigator, and that he'd ignored them. James notes that a parliamentary committee later found that the pair had made misleading statements about other aspects of the phone-hacking scandal, and maintains that his employees hid evidence from him. A parliamentary investigation found that James was, if nothing else, guilty of "an astonishing lack of curiosity."

What's clear is that James took the brunt of the blame. On July 19, 2011, he appeared alongside his father at a high-profile parliamentary inquiry. James tried to read from the statement he'd prepared with the company's lawyers, but Rupert cut him off to intone, "This is the most humble day of my life." Later, when Rupert was asked why he hadn't fired a reporter accused of phone-hacking, he said, "I had never heard of him," and then added, "I think my son can perhaps answer that in more detail."

James left London in disgrace in 2012 and moved back to New York, having resigned from his job as executive chairman of the Murdochs' British publishing

unit as well as his chairmanship at Sky. His role as deputy chief operating officer of News Corp had been presented publicly as a promotion, but in reality he was on a short leash—toiling in the company's headquarters under the watchful eye of his father.

FOURTEEN YEARS LATER, the phone-hacking episode remains an obsession for James. It was the moment everything began to unravel, and his appetite for relitigation seems bottomless: the hit pieces that had gotten key facts wrong, the politicians and competitors who'd maligned him for sport. But whenever I'd ask about his father's role in it all, he'd clam up. I began to wonder if he was actually protecting Rupert.

One afternoon in the spring of 2024, James, Kathryn, and I sat at the dining-room table in the couple's grand country home in Connecticut, and I tried to get him to tell me the story again, this time without skipping the parts about his father. He kept standing up to clear the table, or asking if anyone wanted coffee, or suggesting that we move into the living room. At one point, he trailed off mid-sentence and nodded vacantly toward a window. "We had a bear in those little trees last year," he said, to no one in particular.

Finally, Kathryn volunteered her version of events. For as long as she'd been in the family, she argued, Rupert had tried to force his two sons into a rigged competition. "He was pitting them against each other," she said, "but there was always going to be one winner." Every promotion James had gotten was, in Kathryn's view, an invitation to fail, so that Rupert could validate his first choice of successor. When the phone-hacking scandal hit, Kathryn told me, "they could finally force a failure" on James.

This sounded a bit conspiratorial to me, and I wondered if James would quibble with it. Instead, he just shrugged. "I mean, you take your lumps, right?" he said. "It's life."

I wanted to press him on this point—to suggest that it might not actually be normal for your father to conspire to destroy your career and place you in legal jeopardy in order to give your job to your older brother. But James surely knew all this. Maybe he

just didn't want to dwell on his father's cruelty, or the fact that he'd never been the favorite. James wasn't protecting Rupert, I realized. He was protecting himself.

ON APRIL 22, 2015, James pulled up to the Lambs Club, a Midtown restaurant popular among media executives. He was scheduled to depart that afternoon for Indonesia, but he'd been asked to make time for a quick lunch with Lachlan and Chase Carey, one of Rupert's most trusted lieutenants. He wasn't expecting an ambush.

Four years after the phone-hacking scandal, the fallout was still being felt. Hundreds of victims had come forward, and millions in settlements had been paid. At least 15 employees had been charged with hacking crimes. The company had been forced to drop its bid for Sky, and Rupert, in order to protect his most valuable brands, had split his empire in two, with the newspapers and HarperCollins under the News Corp umbrella and the U.S. TV and film assets housed in a separate company, 21st Century Fox. (Rupert remained chairman of both companies.)

James believed, however, that he was still the only plausible successor. Lachlan was happily cocooned in Australia. He and his wife, Sarah, a former host of *Australia's Next Top Model*, were a Sydney power couple. Rupert had made it clear in recent years that when the time came, James would become CEO of Fox while Lachlan maintained a symbolic chairmanship role from Australia. After years of succession drama, it seemed the Murdochs had finally come to an understanding.

But James sensed that something strange was going on as soon as he sat down at the Lambs Club. Finally, Lachlan and Carey came out with it: Lachlan would be returning to the U.S. to become CEO of Fox, and James was going to report to him.

James, stunned, tried to keep his voice steady. "No, I'm not going to do that," he remembers telling them. They could run the company without him.

He walked out and headed straight to the airport. For the duration of his trip, he ignored texts and phone calls from his father and brother. James felt that he'd earned the top job after nearly two

decades of work—a belief he'd thought his father shared. To discover now that Rupert had been talking with Lachlan about coming back and claiming his rightful spot as heir apparent was too much to take. There was simply no way he was going to work under his brother.

As rumors of James's resignation spread through the companies, anxiety started to set in, former employees of Fox and News Corp told me. James, for all his shortcomings, was the only Murdoch son who knew anything about the business. One former executive told me that losing James would have been “a disaster.”

By the time James got back to the U.S., Rupert had retreated: James would become CEO as planned, and Lachlan would be named chairman. It would all be announced that summer.

James agreed to stay. But as the announcement neared, he told me, he began to suspect that he'd been played. First, Lachlan announced that he and his family were moving from Sydney to Los Angeles. Then he began setting up an office on the Fox studio lot. By the time the reorganization was announced in June, the bait and switch was complete: Lachlan was not taking a passive figurehead role; he was going to be executive co-chairman, a title he would share with Rupert. James and Lachlan would be running the company together.

THE FOX NEWS PRIME-TIME LINEUP BECAME A FOUR- HOUR TRUMP COMMERCIAL.

Why didn't James quit? He told me that he was guided by a lesson from the *Divine Comedy*. At the gateway to hell, Dante encounters a character believed to be Pope Celestine V, who in life had abdicated the papacy to live as a hermit. His choice had been celebrated for its holiness and purity, but Dante deems him a coward for allowing evil to enter the Church in his absence.

To James, the meaning was clear: If you have a chance to wield power for good and choose to walk away, you're responsible for what comes next.

IN JUNE 2016, days before Britain was scheduled to vote on Brexit, James attended a News Corp board meeting in London. The once-fringe idea of the country leaving the European Union had, in recent months, gotten a major boost from the Murdoch press. *The Sun* ran stories warning of the “GREAT MIGRANT SWINDLE” being perpetrated by EU bureaucrats in Brussels. *The Sunday Times* endorsed the referendum and gave favorable coverage to Boris Johnson, the floppy-haired member of Parliament, as he campaigned for the Leave cause in a bright-red “battle bus.” Opponents argued that the referendum's passage would have dire economic consequences—but that side of the story was no fun. The Brexit movement made great copy.

At a lunch before the meeting, James was chatting with top editors, executives, and directors at News Corp when Johnson himself dropped in. He cracked jokes and regaled the group with stories from the campaign trail. When someone asked him if the referendum would pass, Johnson smirked: *We'll see!*

“It struck me that everyone was just having a laugh,” James recalled. “Nobody thought it was going to win, including Johnson.”

James noticed a similar attitude in the early coverage of Donald Trump's 2016 campaign by the Murdochs' outlets. Like most everyone else in his orbit, James had initially regarded Trump as a sideshow. But as the candidate took off, the attitude among people inside Fox and News Corp was illuminating.

James had assumed, perhaps naively, that his older brother—Princeton-educated world traveler that he was—would balk



*Roger Ailes
in 2005*

when Trump, say, proposed banning Muslims from entering the country. But whenever James mentioned one of these outrages, Lachlan would bristle. “He immediately went to this nasty, knee-jerk, anti-Hillary stance,” James recalled. “I was sort of taken aback.” As time went on, James said, he was surprised by the degree to which his brother was apparently willing to indulge “reactionary” and “white nationalist” ideas. (A spokesperson for Lachlan called this characterization false.) James never would have suspected affable, dilettantish Lachlan of being a secret ideologue.

Even more surprising to James was that his father seemed to have no ideology at all. He’d thought his father was a devoted free-marketeer, an internationalist who supported American global power, and a believer in immigration as a source of industry and ingenuity. His brand of conservatism seemed miles apart from Trump’s—and indeed, for the first few months of the campaign, Rupert was openly scornful of the candidate. He told James that if Trump won, it would “be the end of the Republican Party,” and when Fox News hosted the first debate of the GOP primaries, he reportedly ordered Megyn Kelly, one of the moderators, to hit Trump hard. But once it became clear that Trump’s appeal to Rupert’s audience was enduring, Rupert pivoted.

The Wall Street Journal’s editorial page, a bastion of Reagan-Thatcherite conservatism, started running editorials defending Trump’s policies. The Fox News prime-time lineup became a four-hour Trump commercial. Rupert’s beloved *New York Post* ran covers celebrating Trump’s shredding of liberal pieties. There was no intellectually consistent way to reconcile the about-face. It was, James realized, just power and profit and mischief all the way down.

“There’s this tabloid culture that’s contrarian for the sake of it, and delights in poking people in the eye,” James said. “At its worst, it metastasizes into something nasty and scary and manipulative.” Press these cynical Trump boosters for a defense, he told me, and they would say something like “He’s not going to be president anyway—what’s the harm?” He compared the outlets to Paul von Hindenburg, the German president who in

1933 inadvertently enabled Hitler’s rise to power, earning himself the nickname “Undertaker of the Republic.”

“I underestimated the ability of a profit motive to make people do terrible things—to make companies do terrible things,” James later told me.

Then, in July, James thought he saw an opportunity to intervene. He and Lachlan were in Sun Valley, Idaho, for the annual Allen & Company media conference when news broke that Ailes was being sued by the Fox anchor Gretchen Carlson for sexual harassment. Rather than simply issue a statement of support for Ailes and wait for the litigation to resolve, James and Lachlan decided that the company should contract an outside law firm to conduct its own internal investigation.

This was not an obvious call: Ailes had built Fox News into the single most profitable asset in the Murdoch empire, and Rupert had rewarded him with wide latitude and loyalty. But Rupert was unreachable at the moment—flying back from France, where he’d been vacationing with his fourth wife, Jerry Hall—which meant that James and Lachlan had a brief

*“IF YOU’RE NOT
GOING TO STAND
UP AGAINST NAZIS,”
KATHRYN FINALLY
ASKED JAMES,
“WHO ARE YOU
GOING TO STAND
UP AGAINST?”*

*Kathryn and Rupert with
Wendi Deng in 1999*



JOHN VAN HASSELT / SYGMA / GETTY

window to act. Together, they decided to approve the investigation before their father's plane landed.

Over the next two weeks, dozens of allegations would surface against Ailes. Ailes had reportedly demanded oral sex from women at work, and promised career advancement in exchange for sexual favors. (A lawyer for Ailes called the allegations false.) James wanted to fire him immediately, but Rupert insisted that it was better to let him resign.

To replace Ailes, James wanted to hire David Rhodes, the president of CBS News, who'd gotten his start at Fox News. He thought Rhodes could clean up the network's culture and instill more rigorous editorial standards. Lachlan was fiercely opposed. After letting the brothers squabble for a while, Rupert announced that he would run Fox News himself as interim CEO.

To James, the result was predictably catastrophic. Under Rupert's nominal supervision, the Fox News talent was free to run wild. Tucker Carlson, whom Murdoch had promoted to prime time, began airing monologues about the racist "Great Replacement" conspiracy theory (aided by a head writer for the show who was later revealed to be posting racist content under an online pseudonym). Other hosts publicly sounded off about the injustice of the accusations against Ailes.

In January 2017, the anchor Bill O'Reilly settled a \$32 million lawsuit with a former on-air analyst who'd accused him of sexual harassment. When news of the payout became public later that year, Rupert and his sons said they hadn't been privy to the dollar figure, but they did know a settlement had been reached, and had decided to renew O'Reilly's contract anyway.

In June 2017, British regulators punted on approving the Murdochs' second bid for Sky, James's longtime dream acquisition. The regulators cited antitrust concerns, but James thought he knew the real reason: He was now presiding over a company that was known around the world as a scandal-ridden propaganda machine for Donald Trump.

JAMES AND LACHLAN tried to project unity as they ran Fox together. But in

reality, James told me, the power-sharing was a disaster. Inside the company, Lachlan hated any suggestion that his younger brother was the more seasoned executive. And James grew exasperated by Lachlan's certainty about the ins and outs of a company he'd left a decade ago. "You don't develop the capabilities necessary for running large, complicated companies by osmosis," James said.

Both brothers, who were based on opposite coasts, had to sign off on every major decision, James said—and Lachlan was often conspicuously unavailable when needed. He skipped meetings, and would go days without responding to certain texts and emails from James. People who observed the brothers' dynamic were mystified. "It was like parallel play," a former employee told me, "but one of them wasn't playing."

Then, in August 2017, torch-bearing white supremacists marched through Charlottesville, Virginia, chanting, "Jews will not replace us!" In the days that followed, the cable-news channel that James ostensibly ran spent hours defending Trump, who had asserted that there were "very fine people" marching with the neo-Nazis.

James wanted to say something to his employees about Charlottesville. But he also knew how it would look to his father and brother: pious, nagging James once again shoving his personal politics in everyone's face. He dreaded the prospect of arm-wrestling with Lachlan over every word in the statement, as the brothers had earlier that year when they issued a company-wide memo responding to Trump's travel ban. (James had wanted to reassure their Muslim employees and oppose the policy; Lachlan insisted on watering it down.) Maybe, James thought, it wasn't even worth trying this time.

Finally, Kathryn asked a clarifying question: "If you're not going to stand up against Nazis, who are you going to stand up against?"

James decided to put out his own statement without consulting Rupert or Lachlan. In an email sent to friends, and promptly leaked to the press, he denounced the protesters in Charlottesville as well as Trump's reaction to them.

"I can't even believe I have to write this: standing up to Nazis is essential; there are no good Nazis," he wrote. He and Kathryn would be donating \$1 million to the Anti-Defamation League, and he encouraged others to join them.

The couple thought Rupert might speak out, too. He had long considered himself a proud opponent of anti-Semitism, and had even once been honored by the ADL. But Rupert remained silent, as did Lachlan.

By the fall, James wanted out. The situation with his brother was becoming untenable. Lachlan had no interest in James's reforms, and James could no longer look away from the effect that Fox News was having on both U.S. politics and the reputation of the broader Murdoch enterprise.

Around this time, Rupert began talking with Disney's chairman, Bob Iger, about a potential sale of the 21st Century Fox film and TV studio. After decades of empire building, Rupert was coming to terms with the fact that Fox wasn't big enough to compete in the streaming wars with Netflix, Apple, and Amazon. Better to whittle down the company to his first love—news—and cash out on everything else.

James knew a sale would give him cover to leave the company without causing too much speculation about the family's growing rifts. It would also mean a payday for major shareholders, himself and his siblings included. He threw himself into the negotiations.

As the Disney deal took shape, however, Lachlan became more and more hostile to it. He grumbled that he'd moved his family from Australia to Los Angeles so he could preside over a proper media empire. Now they wanted to off-load its most glamorous asset and leave him with a collection of shrinking TV stations, cable channels, newspapers, and book imprints that, according to one former News Corp employee, he referred to as "ShitCo."

Over dinner one night at Gramercy Tavern with James and Rupert, Lachlan—usually so friendly and unflappable—lost his temper. He shouted threats and ranted about his opposition to the deal, James recalled. Before storming out of the restaurant, Lachlan delivered an ultimatum: If you go through with this deal, he told Rupert, "you will not have a son."

Then he turned to James and added, “And you won’t have a brother.”

Years later, when James looked back on Lachlan’s prophecy, he would call it an “Oracle of Delphi moment.” In the end, a brother and son would be lost—just not the one they thought. (A spokesperson for Lachlan called James’s version of events false, and denied that Lachlan used the term *ShitCo*.)

The deal closed on March 20, 2019: Disney would purchase 21st Century Fox for \$71.3 billion. As an apparent concession to Lachlan, the studio lot—where he kept his office and rock-climbing wall—would remain in the Murdochs’ possession. Within a few years, the price that James helped negotiate would be widely seen on Wall Street as a coup, with some analysts estimating that Disney had overpaid by as much as \$20 billion. James and his siblings each received roughly \$2 billion.

The day the deal closed, James and Kathryn contributed \$100 million to their foundation. Its offices were in Lower Manhattan, two floors above James’s new investment firm, Lupa Systems. The firm was named after the she-wolf in Roman mythology who nurses the twin boys Remus and Romulus—one of whom goes on to kill the other to become the first king of Rome.

IN JANUARY 2020, a reporter for the *Daily Beast* reached out to James. Australia was experiencing a devastating series of bushfires that were widely seen as a consequence of climate change—but in the Murdochs’ Australian news outlets, that notion was treated as absurd. The *Daily Beast* reporter wanted to know what James thought of the coverage. It was the kind of question he’d always ignored—but this time felt different.

Since stepping down as CEO of 21st Century Fox, James had retained his seat on the News Corp board. But now that he was no longer heir apparent, he found, his father’s courtiers and loyalists did not appear to be gripped by his views. One day, while sitting in a board meeting, he’d begun making a list of all of the investments, reforms, and initiatives he’d pushed for, only to be shot down or ignored. Looking at the list, and around the table, he thought, *What am I doing here?*

James had his spokesperson give the *Daily Beast* a statement: “Kathryn and James’ views on climate are well established and their frustration with some of the News Corp and Fox coverage of the topic is also well known. They are particularly disappointed with the ongoing denial among the news outlets in Australia given obvious evidence to the contrary.”

The quote angered the News Corp board. In May, James was told that if he didn’t resign his board seat, he risked being voted off—an outcome he’d expected. He resigned.

A wave of media speculation followed. Dynastic drama was in the ether; *Succession* was gearing up for its third season. The show’s popularity had created a life-imitating-art-imitating-life phenomenon: All the fictionalized on-screen scheming led to conjecture in the press about real-life scheming among the Murdochs, which seemed in turn to induce higher levels of paranoia within the family.

Observers had long understood that Liz and Prue were liberals who disagreed with the rightward tilt of Rupert’s outlets, while Lachlan was a man made in his father’s image. James was always the unknown variable. Now that he was adopting a publicly antagonistic posture, pundits were predicting that he and his sisters would team up once Rupert died, boot their brother from the corner office, and finally domesticate News Corp. Words like *coup* were getting tossed around in the press, and Rupert suspected that James himself was working to promote the narrative. (According to James, Rupert didn’t think Liz or Prue could possibly have been the ringleaders. “He doesn’t believe his adult daughters are capable of making decisions,” James told me.)

James would later tell me the idea was ridiculous. No secret conspiracy existed among him and his sisters, he insisted. Besides, if they were plotting a coup, why would James want it broadcast in the press?

But disabusing his father of this conspiracy theory wasn’t easy, because the two men were no longer speaking. Their estrangement hadn’t been a conscious choice. James had simply found that there wasn’t much to say to each other anymore—work had always been the foundation of their relationship. Now

SUCCESSION’S
POPULARITY
CREATED A LIFE-
IMITATING-ART-
IMITATING-LIFE
PHENOMENON.



*Lachlan and James
at the 2016 Allen &
Company media conference
in Sun Valley, Idaho,
where they learned that
Ailes was being sued for
sexual harassment*

Rupert's perception of his younger son was shaped more by what he read. James was becoming a problem.

James was still finding it difficult to stay away from the family business. In 2022, Rupert announced plans to recombine Fox and News Corp, and asked his four oldest children to sign a letter recommending the merger. They were to promise, among other things, not to sell any of the companies' assets, regardless of how much was being offered.

Surely it wasn't in shareholders' best interest, James thought, to uniformly rule out any future offer. His sisters, and the directors who managed their trust, shared his concern. But when one of the directors, Richard Oldfield, raised it on an email thread, Rupert erupted.

"Sorry Richard! This has been a family dominated business for seventy years," he wrote. "It would be a disaster for at least the US and Australia if these assets fell into the wrong hands." Rupert believed that

a transaction that gave liberals control of any piece of his empire would amount to an intolerable blow to his legacy.

But James was worried that the recombined company would be less valuable than it was divided in two. Before signing the letter, he requested additional information about the directors' fiduciary responsibilities in the matter. Rupert responded by griping that James and his sisters were throwing up legal obstacles and told Liz that he might just "ram it through."

The boards for Fox and News Corp had set up committees to study the merger, and James decided to write them each a letter detailing his concerns. James heard that the letters infuriated his father and brother. But he was vindicated, in January 2023, when Rupert was forced to abandon the merger amid a revolt by shareholders. More vindication came a few months later, when Fox announced a \$787.5 million settlement with Dominion Voting Systems. In the weeks after the 2020 election, Fox

News had repeatedly aired false claims that Dominion's voting machines had rigged the election against Donald Trump. Now, as a result of the reckless conspiracizing, the network's parent company was paying one of the largest-known defamation settlements in history.

THE FINAL PHASE of the Murdoch-family crack-up, as best James could tell, began with a woman named Siobhan McKenna.

A longtime friend and confidant of Lachlan's, McKenna served as his managing director in the family trust. Her fierce loyalty had helped make her one of the most powerful media executives in Australia—CEO of News Corp's Australian broadcasting arm, chair of the Australia Post, and managing partner at Lachlan's private investment firm.

In the summer of 2023, McKenna approached Lachlan with a proposition: She believed she could devise a plan that secured Lachlan's future control of the companies and permanently sidelined James without necessitating an expensive buyout. Lachlan, intrigued, told her to start working on it. (McKenna did not respond to requests for comment.)

On September 14, 2023, Rupert, Lachlan, and a consortium of Fox and News Corp executives gathered to hear McKenna's pitch for Project Family Harmony. The family trust, they all agreed, was untenable as it was currently structured.

Lachlan had by now spent years building the case to his father that James was plotting a coup. In the fall of 2022, an unauthorized biography of Lachlan had been published in Australia containing an incendiary quote from an anonymous source about James's purported plans: "Lachlan gets fired the day Rupert dies." When the quote made international headlines, Lachlan told Rupert that James's camp was responsible. A few months later, in January 2023, the *Financial Times* ran a story detailing "how the scions could battle for control" of the family trust after Rupert was gone. Once again, Lachlan pointed the finger at his brother.

As it turned out, according to evidence that would later surface at trial, James had no involvement in either story—but

Lachlan did. It was McKenna who had, with Lachlan's approval, spent more than 14 hours giving anonymous interviews to the biographer. And Brian Nick, an executive at Fox, had anonymously briefed the *Financial Times*. (Nick denied providing information to the *Financial Times*.) But to Rupert, the stories only confirmed that he needed to act decisively.

In October 2023, Kathryn told James that she thought he should reach out to his father and brother. They'd barely spoken in years, and though she didn't yet know about their plans for the trust, she worried that Rupert and Lachlan were sinking too deep into their own conspiracy theories. James never got around to calling them. Later, he would wish he'd taken her advice.

Over several weeks that fall, the participants in Project Family Harmony explored a range of aggressive options to neutralize James. PowerPoints were prepared; legal memos were produced. James was rarely invoked by name in these materials; he was referred to as "the troublesome beneficiary."

Rupert ultimately decided that the best course was to negate the voting power of James and his sisters. To do this, Rupert would have to amend the Murdoch family trust to give Lachlan unilateral control after he died. And because the trust was irrevocable, with amendments allowed only if they were in the interest of the beneficiaries, Rupert would have to show, in effect, that disenfranchising three of his children was actually best for them.

McKenna drafted talking points for Rupert to use when discussing the amendment with his children. New directors were also secretly recruited to the trust, including Bill Barr, the two-time attorney general and a personal friend of Rupert's, and a pair of lawyers who had scant experience with trust management but had the advantage of being politically connected in Nevada, where the inevitable litigation would play out.

Meanwhile, James and his sisters—unaware of Rupert and Lachlan's plotting—were making plans of their own. On September 20, 2023, they met in London to discuss arrangements for after their father's death. Liz's managing director, Mark Devereux, had realized that the Murdochs didn't have a logistical plan

for such a scenario. Who would release a statement? What would it say? What kind of funeral did Rupert want? A plan had been drawn up and code-named "Project Bridge," after the protocols developed for Queen Elizabeth II's death.

In London, as the siblings talked through the details, their conversation turned to the long-term future of the companies. Prue asked James if he wanted to return as an executive, but he told her he had no interest.

In late November, James, Liz, and Prue were invited to join a "special meeting" on Zoom to discuss the trust. When Liz found out what Rupert and Lachlan were about to do, she texted Lachlan and pleaded with him not to go through with it. "Today is about Dad's wishes," Lachlan responded. "It shouldn't be difficult or controversial. Love you."

A less dysfunctional family, James and Kathryn told me, might have tried to have a normal conversation about their differences. Instead, in the Zoom meeting, on December 6, Rupert, surrounded by lawyers, read robotically from a script. Lachlan busied himself at an off-screen laptop and didn't even look at the camera.

EARLY ON THE morning of September 16, 2024, a fleet of black SUVs pulled up to the copper-domed Washoe County Courthouse in Reno. James and Kathryn stepped out of their car and made their way up the steps alongside Liz and Prue. About 30 minutes later, another convoy appeared, this one carrying Rupert and Lachlan. The Murdochs had coordinated their arrival times to ensure that they didn't have to see one another outside the courtroom. Nobody wanted the half a dozen camera crews to capture evidence of the hostility that now defined their family.

James and his sisters had filed their objection shortly after learning about their father's amendment. The process had revealed, among other things, just how far apart James and his father were in their visions for the family's media outlets. During James's confrontational deposition, for instance, one of Rupert's lawyers suggested that the success of Fox News derived from its willingness to pander to its viewers, sometimes at the expense of basic journalistic standards.

*RUPERT WAS
EXCUSED FROM
THE COURTROOM
AFTER TESTIFYING
ON THE FIRST
DAY. "HE CLAIMED
THAT HE WAS
SICK, BUT I THINK
IT WAS COWARDICE,"
JAMES SAID.*

Isn't it true that Fox is the top cable-news outlet because it respects its audience and gives them what they want? the lawyer asked him.

I would disagree with the idea that respect and giving people what they want are the same thing, James countered.

But the lawyer didn't seem interested in the distinction. *Are you aware that Fox News lost a significant part of its audience when it called Arizona for Biden in 2020?* he asked. James said he was. *And you know that Fox won back most of that audience through its election-denial coverage, right?* the lawyer said.

Now, for the next six days, the two sides would make their case in court, testifying about some of the most painful episodes in the Murdoch family's history as they wrestled over control of the empire. Rupert didn't stick around to watch it—he was excused from the courtroom after testifying on the second day. “He claimed that he was sick, but I think it was cowardice,” James told me.

The trial was closed to the press and public, and because Kathryn was not a party to the litigation, she waited in an anteroom with Liz's and Prue's husbands. After long days of testimony, the families would convene at a Lake Tahoe house that James and Kathryn were borrowing from friends (“There are no good hotels in Reno,” she told me) and recap the day's events over glasses of wine. Sometimes there were dramatic reenactments; other times they indulged in gallows humor. They searched Google for Edmund Gorman, the Nevada probate commissioner overseeing the proceedings, hoping to ascertain any biographical details that might reveal his sympathies. He was frustratingly unreadable during the trial: They knew he wore polka-dot bow ties under his robes, and someone had reported seeing him once leave the courthouse in a loud purple sport coat. They learned that he was a duck hunter, and that he'd served on the board of the Reno Jazz Orchestra. This last fact prompted James to observe to his sisters, “He can't be that bad.”

James had resolved to approach the trial in a spirit of combat. “I'm good at that,” he told me later. “Stiffen your spine, harden your tummy.” Walking into the courtroom each day, past the scrum

of reporters, he wore an expression of solemn professionalism. But it was harder than he'd expected to maintain personal detachment when the people on the other side of the courtroom were his father and brother. Watching these men he'd known his whole life, men he'd loved, he couldn't escape one thought: *How did we let it come to this?*

On the third day of the trial, James took the stand to testify. When he recounted the dinner at which Lachlan effectively ended their relationship over the proposed Disney deal, James surprised himself by starting to cry. But the memory didn't seem to have the same effect on his brother, James told me: When Lachlan was asked if he had in fact told James he wouldn't have a brother anymore if they pursued the sale, Lachlan responded flatly, “I don't recall.”

A month after the trial's conclusion, while the commissioner was still deliberating, James decided to reach out to his father. The trial had gone well for him and his sisters; their lawyers were confident.

Still, he knew the damage to his family might never be undone. Thanksgiving was approaching, and James was feeling sentimental. Maybe, he thought, his father might be open to a personal appeal, especially now that he looked to be on the verge of defeat.

James, Liz, and Prue wrote their father a letter suggesting an alternative course. “Thanksgiving and Christmas are upon us and the three of us wanted to reach out to you personally to say that we miss you and love you,” they wrote. “Over and above any other feelings all of us may have—of upset and shock—our unifying emotion is sorrow and grief.”

Maybe they could try to talk things out without lawyers and probate commissioners—and reach a compromise they all agreed on: “We are asking you with love to find a way to put an end to this destructive judicial path so that we can have a chance to heal as a collaborative and loving family.”

A couple of days later, Rupert wrote back. He'd read his children's testimony

*Liz and Rupert
in Cheltenham,
England, in 2011*



from the trial twice over. “Only to conclude that I was right,” he told them. He instructed them to have their lawyers contact his if they wanted to talk further. “Much love, Dad.”

On December 7, the commissioner issued his ruling. Rupert and Lachlan had lost.

THE COMMISSIONER’S DECISION placed the fate of the Murdoch assets back in the same holding pattern it had been in for years. Barring a successful appeal, control of the companies would, in all likelihood, one day be split evenly among the four oldest children. Only now Rupert’s heirs were more divided than ever, with the chosen successor on one side, and his three alienated siblings on the other. What exactly that would mean for the empire was a question that wouldn’t be answered until their father died.

In the meantime, James and Kathryn have focused on projects of their own.

It’s hard to look at the couple’s political and philanthropic work, which Kathryn manages, without sensing an attempt at public repentance. They have given millions to Democratic campaigns and tens of millions to climate-change initiatives, and funded research on disinformation and political extremism. In 2021, Kathryn persuaded dozens of “democracy reform” groups to coalesce around the push for open primaries and ranked-choice voting, funding successful ballot initiatives in Alaska and Washington, D.C. James, meanwhile, is once again doing business in India, where he has invested in one of the country’s largest media companies. He has also bought large stakes in the Tribeca Film Festival and Art Basel.

What would the Murdochs’ conservative news outlets look like if James had his way? This had become a central question in the legal battle over the trust; Rupert and Lachlan argue that James would sink the companies’ value by changing the outlets’ politics.

James and Kathryn were usually cautious when I asked about changes they would want to see at the family’s news outlets. But I got glimpses of their thinking. Once, over dinner in Washington, Kathryn told me she wasn’t sure if Fox



JINGYU LIN FOR THE ATLANTIC

James and Kathryn in New York, December 2024



RUPERT MURDOCH
WILL, DESPITE
HIS MOST FERVENT
WISHES, DIE
ONE DAY. HE WILL
LEAVE BEHIND
A FAMILY AT WAR
WITH ITSELF.

News could still be reformed. “It doesn’t have a clear purpose in the ecosystem anymore,” she said.

On another occasion, I asked James if *The Wall Street Journal*’s editorial page might serve as a model for a more responsible Fox News. He winced and said he hoped they could do better than that. At various points, both of them mentioned their investment in *The Bulwark*, which was founded as an organ of Never Trump conservatism, as proof that they weren’t categorically averse to “center right” media—though, of course, reinventing Fox News in *The Bulwark*’s image might be the surest path to a viewer revolt.

The one thing James has said consistently is that any reforms he might seek would focus on corporate and editorial governance, not political orientation. Fox News, he thought, could still report from a conservative perspective without, say, giving a platform to unqualified doctors to spread medical misinformation during a pandemic, or misrepresenting an oil-company shill as an expert on climate change. James believed this wasn’t just the right thing to do, but the fiscally prudent one: Allowing Trump’s former lawyer Sidney Powell on air to spread voting-machine conspiracy theories had already cost Fox three-quarters of a billion dollars, and an even larger defamation suit was still pending. (James stressed that reforming the outlets would require support from the board.)

For now, James is left struggling to answer the question he found himself asking in the courtroom—how did we let it come to this? His 93-year-old father will, despite his most fervent wishes, die one day. And when he does, he will leave behind a family at war with itself—a bevy of estranged children and ex-wives exchanging awkward greetings at an expensive funeral.

Last year, James told me, he reread *Memoirs of Hadrian*, Marguerite Yourcenar’s 1951 novel about the titular second-century emperor of Rome. “I hate to use Roman emperors as a metaphor, because it’s totally douchey,” he told me in a moment of self-deprecating clarity. But when he came across a passage about a dying ruler in search of an heir, James felt that he suddenly understood

something about his father. He committed the paragraph to memory, and quoted it repeatedly in the time we spent together. Hadrian’s imperial predecessor is “refusing to face his end.” Hadrian pities him: “We were too different for him to find in me what most people who have wielded total authority seek desperately on their deathbeds, a docile successor pledged in advance to the same methods, and even to the same errors.”

For decades, James realized, Rupert had tried to turn his children into vehicles for dynastic ambition—walking nodes of immortality. In the process, he’d wrecked the family. Now, at 52, James seems as if he is trying to disentangle himself from the character he once played in the Murdoch story.

One day late this past fall, I met James in his office. The trust trial had recently concluded, and he was tired and uncharacteristically disheveled—bags under his eyes, hair askew. He recounted the beats of the courtroom drama in between stifled yawns, but eventually lost interest. He seemed to have something else on his mind. He told me about a commencement speech he’d once given at a small university in Europe, where he told the graduates never to get themselves into a position where other people were defining success for them. It was good advice, he thought, and he wondered how his life would have been different if he’d taken it himself.

“My kind of regret—” he began, before hastily correcting himself. “I try not to have regrets, because I’m so lucky.” His eyes drifted toward the window, and for a moment, he looked strangely small at the end of the long conference-room table, almost like a little boy. “I used to paint a lot,” he told me. “I thought about being an architect. I did film animation in school.”

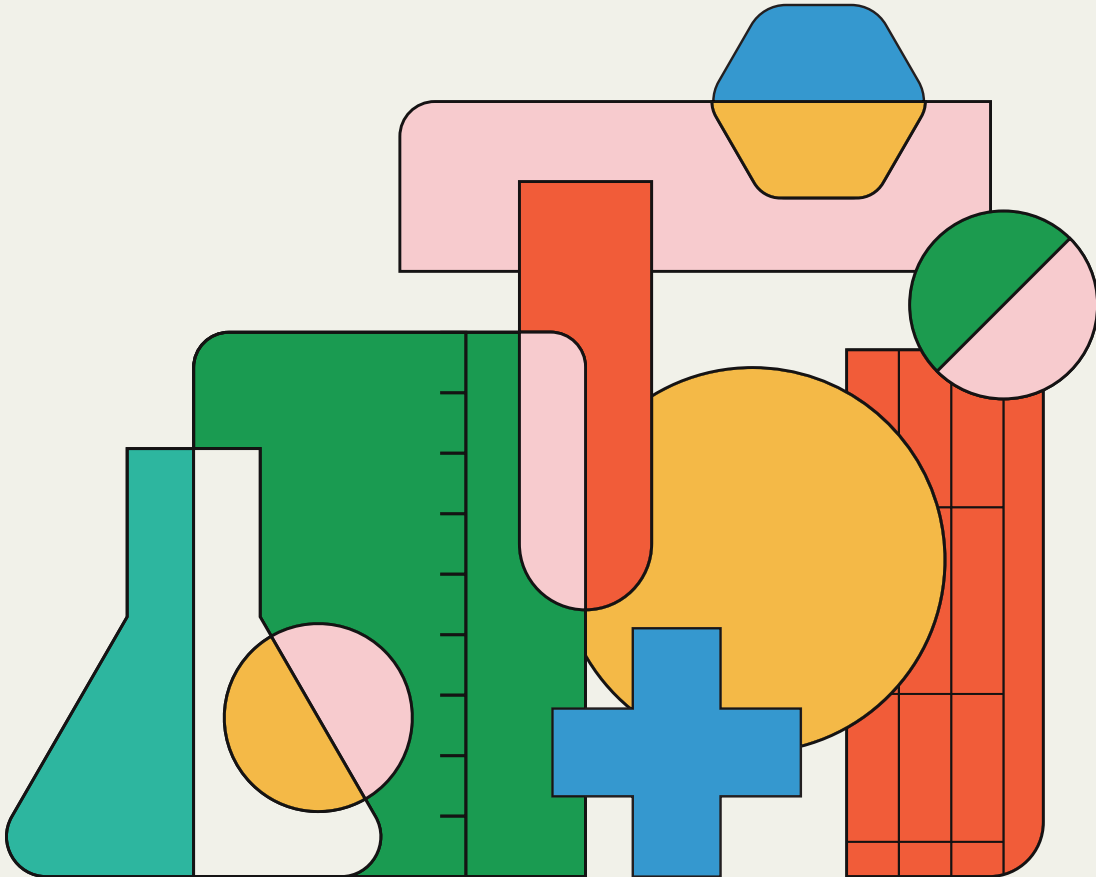
He was struggling to express what he wanted to say. “I had a story—” he tried, but started over. “In my head, there were so many—” He stopped again, and seemed to give up.

Maybe it was hopeless. Maybe nobody wanted to hear a rich heir from a powerful family complain about his father. History had plenty of those. *A*

McKay Coppins is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

PROMOTION

The Atlantic's HEALTH SUMMIT



APRIL 8, 2025 | BOSTON, MA & VIRTUAL

The Atlantic's Health Summit returns for our annual exploration of the urgent issues reshaping the health-care landscape. Hear from medical experts, scientists, entrepreneurs, health-care leaders, and advocates navigating the complexities and opportunities presented by this pivotal moment in health care.



REGISTER NOW AT
[THEATLANTIC.COM/HEALTHSUMMIT](https://theatlantic.com/healthsummit)

UNDERWRITTEN BY

Lilly
A MEDICINE COMPANY





PHOTOGRAPHS BY ZACK WITTMAN

The Girls of Summer

WOMEN HAVE ALWAYS LOVED
AMERICA'S PASTIME. IT HAS
NEVER LOVED THEM BACK.

By Kaitlyn Tiffany

E

Everybody knows the secret of life. The secret of life is: Keep your eye on the ball.

I'm borrowing that from a 1998 song by America's sweetheart, Faith Hill, but if you don't know the song, you still know that simple truth. You also know that to fail is to strike out; to fail valiantly is to go down swinging; to be surprised is to be thrown a curveball; to help a buddy out is to go to bat for him; and to succeed brilliantly is to knock one out of the park. And even if you haven't seen *A League of Their Own*, or have somehow missed Jennifer Garner's Capital One ads, you've probably heard the maxim "There's no crying in baseball."

In January, I was standing in the locker room of George M. Steinbrenner Field, in Tampa, next to my teammates, whom I had met only the night before. When we heard the immortal words of Tom Hanks as Jimmy Dugan, the aggrieved manager of the Rockford Peaches women's baseball team, piping out of a nearby speaker, we recognized them and laughed. Then we clapped (or took out our phones for photos) as Len Milcowitz, the field coordinator and unofficial emcee of the weekend, emerged wearing a full Peaches uniform to drive home the point. He'd worn it in our honor, he said. "You represent the true spirit of baseball in this country, period," he told us.

By that he meant that we were here only for the love of the game. As women, it was true, we could have no other motive, such as being signed by a team or even reliving high-school glory days. In fact, we had paid about \$2,500 for the privilege. There were 87 of us, divided into six teams. This was the first full day of the 2025 Women's Mini-Fantasy Camp, an annual event advertised with retro panache: "Ladies, opportunity is finally

knocking and your chance to experience life as a New York Yankee is here."

Though many Major League Baseball teams host fantasy camps for men, only the Yankees and the Boston Red Sox have offered them for women. This year's camp was more immersive than usual. On top of receiving full uniforms (to keep!) and access to ice baths and physical therapists and real Yankees catering (memorably good pot roast), we were technically playing in a major-league stadium: The Tampa Bay Rays will be using the Yankees' spring-training facility this year for their home games because Hurricane Milton took the roof off Tropicana Field.

Over the course of two days we would play 35 innings of baseball—five games of seven innings apiece, coached by former Yankees, whom camp employees referred to by the official title of "Legends." I had several good reasons to be nervous. A friend had encouraged me to read George Plimpton's 1961 book, *Out of My League*, which is about him pitching to major-league players at an All-Star exhibition game for a story in *Sports Illustrated*. I did read it, and that's how I learned that Plimpton had been "a fanatic about pitching" while in school. I, in contrast, had never played baseball at all, despite being completely obsessed with watching it (at the stadium, on TV, on my phone while at work or at weddings). And I had not trained as much as I'd meant to in the weeks leading up to the camp—I'd gone to the batting cages a few times, played catch with my dad, and done several squats, but it was winter and it got dark at 4 p.m. It had been hard to work baseball into my days.

The other problem was that I don't like the New York Yankees. When I signed up for the camp, I hadn't thought this would be much of an issue. But then my favorite team, the New York Mets, signed the Yankees' superstar Juan Soto out from under them, and my situation became politically sticky. When I tested a reveal of my Mets fandom to a friendly seeming woman on the shuttle bus to the opening dinner, she shushed me sharply, and for my own good.

So I kept quiet. And in this way, it was easy to get along with my assigned teammates, and it was easy to have a

good time, even though our team name was the Pinstripes, which really rubbed the Yankees of it all right in a girl's face. Our roster ranged in age from 24 to 70, and in experience from Division I softball to, well, me. Two women who'd gone to school together in New Jersey were there celebrating their 60th birthdays—Nina Kaplan, a Boca Raton mother of four who had never played baseball before, and Elizabeth Osder, who goes by Bitsy, a Los Angeles media executive who holds a place in baseball history. On April 21, 1974, she appeared on the front page of the New York *Daily News* when she became one of the first girls legally permitted to join a Little League baseball team, in New Jersey.

Everyone was there for fun, and so was I, but I was also there because I wanted to briefly see a real-life staging of something that is still mostly a dream and that most people associate only with a 30-year-old Hollywood movie. There's no crying in baseball, and there are no women in baseball either.

Sure, girls can play on Little League baseball teams, as Bitsy did, with boys. They can play on high-school baseball teams with boys. A scant few of them have even played on college baseball teams with boys. But they don't get their own teams. There is no such thing as high-school or college baseball for women. There is no such thing as professional baseball for women, apart from a World Cup team that is assembled and disassembled every few years. Not only is this the baffling reality; it's a baffling reality that hardly anybody talks about.

After the World Series ended in October, with nothing to look forward to but the long and empty months before the next baseball season, I settled in to watch Ken Burns's 1994 documentary, *Baseball*, which is broken up into nine episodes. "There are only three things that America will be known for 2,000 years from now when they study this civilization," the writer Gerald Early says in the first one. "The Constitution, jazz music, and baseball. They're the three most beautifully designed things this culture has ever produced." Well, women aren't constrained in their enjoyment of jazz, or of the Constitution (for now), but ...



*Opening pages: The first day of the New York Yankees Women's Mini-Fantasy Baseball Camp in Tampa in January.
Above: Players stretch before a game.*

Over the nights that I spent being thoroughly entertained by the documentary, I nevertheless felt a pit in my stomach that got deeper and deeper. Burns very explicitly articulates the sport as being foundational to our culture and reflective of our society's ideals. The game is democratic because it's fair, egalitarian because it's simple, and perfectly designed because its creators—energetic, imaginative people—arrived at the measurements for the diamond as if through divine inspiration. Baseball rewards commitment and reveals character; it loves rule-benders but judges cheaters. It has lofty goals and serious expectations, but it allows for theatricality and fun. It glorifies teamwork (double plays, rallies, sacrifices, and even sign-stealing are collaborative) but also reveres the hero (when a man comes up to bat, he comes up alone). It provides a convenient excuse to eat a hot dog.

Women play basketball, which is almost as old as baseball but has never carried the same level of cultural significance, and they play soccer, which is not predominantly an American game. They play hockey and lacrosse. They don't play the vulgar, stupid sport of football, but nobody should. Yet they play basically everything else—every sport ever invented, even the weird ones. For no obvious or practical or logical reason, they are allowed to love, but almost never to play, baseball. They don't get to play America's game.

ACTUALLY, CONTRARY TO some of my sweeping statements, in baseball's earliest days, women were eager to play and sometimes allowed to do so. Several women's colleges had baseball teams in the mid-to-late 1800s—by 1875, Vassar had a number of them, including the Sure-Pops and the Daisy-Clippers. The all-Black, all-women Dolly Vardens barnstormed in the

1880s as some of the first documented professional women baseball players; their history, largely forgotten, has been revived by the historian Leslie Heaphy, a co-editor of 2006's *Encyclopedia of Women and Baseball* (which she is updating).

But doctors were convinced, or so they said, that physical activity could render women infertile or even kill them. In 1867, a nationally syndicated newspaper story blamed baseball-playing for a young woman's death from typhoid. One of the best-known baseball players in the country at the time, John Montgomery Ward, then of the New York Giants, wrote in his 1888 book, *Base-Ball: How to Become a Player*, "Base-ball in its mildest form is essentially a robust game, and it would require an elastic imagination to conceive of little girls possessed of physical powers such as its play demands." When the game became big business at the turn of the 20th century, women were welcomed at the ballpark as



The author at bat, George M. Steinbrenner Field

spectators. Their presence was thought to help civilize the environs and increase the likelihood of entire families becoming fans and spending money on the sport. But that welcome didn't extend to the diamond.

A few months ago, I had a long call with the historian Jennifer Ring, the author of the 2009 book *Stolen Bases: Why American Girls Don't Play Baseball*. We talked about her work for a while, and then we talked about how much we love baseball. For many years, she said, she'd felt alienated from the game and angry that her daughter, who was an excellent player, had run out of options and was forced to abandon the sport. "There was probably a decade of my life where I was just too pissed off to even watch baseball," she said. But Ring grew up a fan of the Los Angeles Dodgers, and she'd recently been roped back in by their World Series run and by the otherworldly superstar Shohei Ohtani. "I watched again this year, and it's still the game I love," she told me. "It's brilliant. And the best players are just thrilling to watch."

Of course, hardly anyone resembles Ohtani, even in Major League Baseball. Mookie Betts, another Dodger great, is nothing like him. He's seven inches shorter and at least 30 pounds lighter, and plays multiple defensive positions with charisma and flair. Ohtani, one of the best hitters and pitchers to have ever lived, is faintly aloof and carries himself woodenly (and has a fantastic head of hair). "It's the people's game because it calls for a variety of different kinds of body types and skills," Ring pointed out. There are smaller and faster men in the middle infield; bigger guys at the corners; pitchers who look like Gumby dolls and pitchers who look like they belong to the Teamsters. All of this diversity gives the lie to the suggestion that women physically cannot play.

But this is a storied idea that has been repeated across generations. In the mid-1920s, the all-female Philadelphia Bobbies were completing a barnstorming tour of Japan, where they surprised journalists, impressed fans, and received celebrity treatment. Back home, girls were being encouraged to play a version of baseball, with a larger ball and a smaller field, that would be more suitable for them—a game variously known as kitten ball, playground



Members of the Rockford Peaches, 1944. The team was part of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League, created by the Chicago Cubs owner and chewing-gum mogul Philip K. Wrigley.

ball, diamond ball, and mush ball, and originally invented in the winter months to be played by men, indoors. The game is now called softball. The details were laid out by Gladys E. Palmer in *Baseball for Girls and Women*, published in 1929. Palmer was an early advocate for girls' athletics, but her attitudes were still of their time. She offered advice on how to throw properly (girls "do not have a natural aptitude for throwing, which all boys have from early childhood") and discouraged girls and women from sliding. As Palmer acknowledged, the version of the game she promoted was meant to be "less strenuous."

That word, *strenuous*, comes up often. It was used by A. G. Spalding, an early baseball executive who also founded the country's first sporting-goods empire, when he said that a woman was free to wave her handkerchief and root for the home team, but that "neither our wives, our sisters, our daughters, nor our sweethearts, may play Base Ball on the field ... Base Ball is too strenuous for woman-kind." The same word was used against the 17-year-old pitching phenom Jackie Mitchell, who was signed by the Minor League Chattanooga Lookouts (and who struck out Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig in a 1931 exhibition game). The baseball

commissioner, Kenesaw Mountain Landis, reportedly voided Mitchell's contract, explaining that the baseball life was "too strenuous" for women.

ONE OF MY great loyalties, odd though it is for even me to contemplate, is to Brett Baty, a 25-year-old from Texas who was a first-round draft pick for the Mets in 2019 and was supposed to be their third baseman of the future. We have essentially nothing in common, obviously.

But something about his story has grabbed me. Baty hit a home run in his first major-league at-bat, in front of his family and against a hated division rival, but he's never been able to string enough of those moments together. He has flashes of brilliance, and then he gets rattled by something. He starts making mistakes and looking bewildered. He loses his head. Then he goes down to the minors and plays with such dignity and grace. He wears the ugly promotional jerseys they make you wear at that level, and he hits some more home runs and learns a new defensive position in case that will help his chances of being called back up. Last year, his best friend, Mark Vientos, ended up taking the job that was supposed to be his and has excelled at it. In the playoffs, during which Vientos broke

the Mets' record for postseason runs batted in, the camera cut to Baty, watching from the dugout, whenever his friend did something great, and he was always, with no hesitation, ecstatic.

Then, in the offseason, another insult and injury: His jersey number, 22, just happened to be the one that the superstar Juan Soto wanted, and the Mets reportedly had promised it to him in his \$765 million contract. Soto may have gone through the ceremony of offering Baty a fancy present, such as a watch or a car, in exchange for the number, as players typically do in these situations, but it wasn't immediately clear that he had. I took exception to this even though hardly anybody else—just a few other fans on social media—seemed to care. Are we not owed dignity even when we're kind of a flop?

That's a long way of explaining how my career as third baseman (baseperson?) for the Pinstripes began and ended. Though I had no experience, I reasoned that I was young and fairly coordinated, and I wanted to try my hand at the hot corner.

Our first game was on one of the Yankees' many practice fields, against another fantasy-camp team, the Bombers. When I walked out in my uniform, I felt like a ballplayer. I thought I'd watched enough of the game on television—almost every night for half of the year—to know what to do, at least basically. I quickly handled the first ball that a Bomber hit down the line to me, and I stood up with plenty of time to throw the runner out. But when I heaved the ball across the infield, it fell far short of the first baseman and way off line. The same thing happened with the next ball that came to me. And the next. My team was down by two runs at the end of the first inning.

Then came my time to bat, which was my true fear. I had to be called back and reminded to put on a batting helmet. I panicked and momentarily forgot which side of the plate I was supposed to stand on. It came to me just in time, but I struck out on three pitches. Our coaches were throwing to us, and they were not trying to strike us out. They were "trying to hit your bats," as they put it.

After this, I sat in the dugout and watched the other women watch the



The Racine Belles and South Bend Blue Sox, both of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League, face off in 1947.

Yankees shortstop, Anthony Volpe, who was working out on a field behind us. ("He wasn't very friendly," one of them complained mildly, after admitting that she had more or less been catcalling him.) I moved to center field after a few more wild throws, and Kaley Sullivan, a 30-year-old police officer from California, took over third base. One ball slipped past her, and I scooped it up and threw it back to her; she stepped on the base and made the out. This was a highlight of my life, but in my next at-bat, I managed only two foul tips before striking out again. We lost the game 9–4 and mollified ourselves by saying we would work out the kinks in the afternoon.

At lunch, I sat next to Leslie Konsig, a 42-year-old insurance representative and plainly the best athlete on our team, who had been making plays at shortstop as reliably as I had seen the guys do it on TV. It was difficult to look anywhere other than at her on the field. She wore her dark hair in a single braid, smiled easily at everyone, and moved with the ease that comes with total competence. She treated us all like real ballplayers—meaning she was a bit more specific and direct at times than our actual coaches.

Leslie was there with her friend Lainey Archenault, 43, an animated woman with a strong Jersey accent. They are both moms, and they play together on a New Jersey softball team called the Sluggers; Lainey conspired with Leslie's wife to sign

her up for the camp as a surprise. Lainey, I learned, is a die-hard Yankees fan who has been watching almost every single game for as long as she can remember. She clocked immediately that I'd chosen the jersey number 0 in reference to the somewhat random relief pitcher Adam Ottavino, who grew up in Brooklyn near where I live and who played for the Yankees in 2019 and 2020. (More recently, he played for the Mets.) Though she has coached her son's 10-and-under travel baseball team, this was the first time she'd played a game of baseball instead of softball. Growing up, she told me, she'd been obsessed with Don Mattingly—she was left-handed, as he is, so she'd hoped to be a first baseman, as he was. But she's petite, so that wasn't in the cards. Instead, she was put in the outfield, which she now prefers, because you get to watch a whole game unfold in front of you.

By contrast, Leslie didn't care much about the Yankees. She was wearing the number 22 and had no idea that it was a sore spot for Yankees fans who were mourning Soto's betrayal. "I'm more here to play," she told me. "To feel, like, what it is to be on the field, wear these uniforms, use the amenities." She'd been the only girl on her Little League team, and she'd played until high school, when she had to switch to softball. But Leslie still had a Yankees-fan story: She'd gone to the 1996 World Series with her dad and his friends, and they were so overcome by giddiness

that they'd even included her, at age 14, in the celebratory cigars.

This set off some table-wide chatter about the most recent World Series, which the Yankees lost to the Dodgers in somewhat humiliating fashion, capped off by a disastrous error-riddled inning that saw a five-run lead evaporate in the decisive Game 5. "We played better than they did, today," Bitsy Osder said.

High on camaraderie, I went into the afternoon games confident that I could improve my performance. For the second game, we were on the main field—an intimidating change of venue, as this meant music blaring over the loudspeakers while we warmed up, use of the giant scoreboard, and an announcer to read off our names as we went up to bat.

We were quickly down by three, but my teammates rallied for five runs in the fourth inning, and we ended up winning 7–3. The rally was exhilarating—I was Brett Baty in the dugout. Again, I contributed no hits. I had been dropped to the bottom of the batting order. But I

pinch-ran for a teammate and accepted my status as role player. This time, at least, I hit a grounder and was thrown out, rather than just flailing at the plate.

Before our third and final game of the day, back on the practice fields, we got a pep talk. One of our coaches, or Legends, was Ray Burris, a journeyman pitcher who played with the Yankees in 1979. (At dinner, he let us each hold the American League Championship ring he'd been awarded in 2012 as a pitching coach in the Detroit Tigers organization.) He sat us down and said: "You're as good as your last game, and you're as bad as your first game." We were not to get big heads.

In the third game, we scored four in the top of the first, but the other team, the Captains, scored five in the bottom. I misplayed a ball in the outfield and then stepped on it, shooting it into foul territory, where it skidded away across the dirt. I made a base-running error (as a pinch runner) and I twisted myself up underneath a fly ball and felt my back wrench as it dropped behind me.

Then Leslie hit an inside-the-park home run—assisted by two, or possibly four, defensive errors by the other team—and we went wild. But the Captains rallied again in the bottom of the sixth for another five runs and then we were down again, 10–6. My teammates worked a gritty top of the seventh, in our final chance to score. They brought in two runs, making it 10–8. I stared at the lineup card in horror as what was about to happen came together in my mind: I was going to be the last woman up. Two outs, bases loaded. If I hit the ball, we could tie the game—or even win, if there were two, or possibly four, defensive errors.

I swung at the first pitch and missed. I let the second pitch go by—ball. I swung and missed at a third pitch. I could feel humiliation a breath away. Then I nicked a foul ball. I could hardly believe the moment was still happening. Then, on the next pitch, I heard what was not quite a crack but was still the perfect sound of bat on ball. We were playing with wooden

bats, not the metal ones they have at batting cages, which sound tinny and awful and jangle your hands. I ran in a dead sprint, made it to first base, and didn't see the ball anywhere. I was safe!

But then I turned around and saw that the pitcher had fielded the ball, which had been nothing more than an infield roller, and had thrown it to the catcher for the force play at home.

I'd made the last out and the game was over.

IN THE EARLY '70S, several Major League teams hosted Hot Pants Days, which offered free admission to women who came to the stadium wearing short-shorts. Also at



Nina Kaplan, a Boca Raton mother of four who had never played baseball before, hustles to first.

that time, Little League teams that allowed girls to play could be threatened with revocation of their charters.

Maria Pepe grew up in an apartment complex in Hoboken, New Jersey, that was full of children, mostly boys. Whenever she was done with her homework, she would join them in playing slap ball, stickball, Wiffle ball, and any other variation of baseball they could make work. “From a young age, maybe 7 years old, I just started playing, and I loved it,” she told me. In 1972, she tried out for Little League and made the Young Democrats team. She pitched three games before angry parents reported her team to Little League’s national office; the league threatened to take away the charter that covered all Hoboken teams, so Pepe’s coach came over to her house and took back her uniform. He let her keep her cap.

The National Organization for Women picked up her case in the spring of 1972, filing a complaint with the New Jersey Division on Civil Rights. This caused a big to-do, and newspapers and radio followed the case closely, though Pepe’s parents helped her tune a lot of it out. She did vaguely know that a court was hearing arguments regarding the density of her bones as compared with boys’ bones, presented by Creighton J. Hale, Little League’s executive vice president and director of research. (This argument was based on a Japanese study of cadavers and another about skiing accidents, both of which included only adult bones.) Hale also presented a hypothesis that being hit by a ball could cause breast cancer in girls. Little League’s other arguments were impressively circular. One was that there was no sense in allowing girls to play baseball, because they would not have future opportunities to play it professionally. Another was that the Little League national charter, which specified its purpose as developing “qualities of citizenship, sportsmanship, and manhood,” would be contradicted by the inclusion of girls.

Judge Sylvia Pressler found these arguments unconvincing. “Little League is as American as hot dogs and apple pie,” she wrote in her ruling. There was no good reason why “that piece of public

Americana should be withheld from girls.” Little League did not acquiesce easily. The organization filed an appeal, which it lost. But by this time, Pepe was too old to play.

My teammate Bitsy said that Pepe “took the arrows” for her. Bitsy was one of the first sign-ups, and so news of her first game for the Englewood Orioles was printed in papers across the country. She struck out in her first at-bat, but then drew a walk and scored a run. She was described by the *Daily News* as “all mouth,” challenging the umpires and instructing her teammates on what to do. She jokes that she thinks her fly was open in one of the newspaper photos.

Now easing into retirement, Bitsy plays in two L.A. leagues just for fun. Like many young kids, she fantasized about playing for the New York Yankees. “By the grace of Maria Pepe and the New Jersey Supreme Court,” she told me, “I was able to sustain that fantasy a little longer.” She considers her Little League experience a blessing. She was accepted by her teammates and she had a blast. “I am a very positive, glass-half-full person,” she told me. “I just think my whole outlook in life would have been different if they had said no to me.”

For the past 50 years, Little League hasn’t said no to girls who love baseball, but it has set them up to be a minority. Instead of encouraging girls to play baseball after the court decision, Little League encouraged softball for girls and made that their primary option. This example was followed by high schools and colleges, which offer only softball teams for girls and young women. And even if you’re good enough to play with the boys in high school, how do you stick it out, knowing that you could get a college scholarship for softball if you switched?

“Anybody who knows the two games knows they are not equivalent,” Leslie Heaphy, the historian, told me. Softball has a bigger ball and underhand pitching, as well as a smaller diamond, a closer fence, and a different style of play that is both faster and simpler. Both are great games, but our culture has accepted a false equivalency, she argued. It’s “just a way of never having to address the issue that women want to play baseball [and]

should be allowed to. It should be open to anybody.”

Jennifer Ring pointed out that the number of girls playing on boys’ high-school baseball teams hasn’t changed for decades—it hovers between 1,000 and 2,000 out of a total of nearly half a million. In recent years, Little League has held events to honor “Girls With Game,” as they call girls who play baseball or softball. But when I wrote to ask how many girls currently play baseball in Little League International, Kevin Fountain, the organization’s senior director of communications, wrote back to say that the information wasn’t available. He could only say that 32 percent of Little League participants—across baseball and softball—are female.

Thinking it might be a matter of a statistic being difficult to calculate for some reason, I wrote back and asked for a couple of alternatives. Could he tell me how many baseball teams have girls on them? Could he tell me whether any Little League baseball teams are girls-only? He could not.

In an earlier email, he’d sent me a link to an article about the Maria Pepe Little League Baseball Legacy Series, which was played for the first time in 2024, in Williamsport, Pennsylvania. I noticed that the visiting girls stayed in dorms in the Dr. Creighton J. Hale International Grove—a complex named for the man who’d once argued that they would ruin the sport if they ever picked up a bat. He eventually regretted this position, and when he met Pepe later in life, he told her that his granddaughter had begun playing ball.

THROUGHOUT THE WEEKEND, I had several conversations with women about a new Women’s Pro Baseball League, which was announced in October and is set to debut in 2026. “If it’s within driving distance, I’m going to every game,” Vicky Leone, a retired 58-year-old mother of two, told me.

Vicky was a regular at the camp—one of its pillars. Her team, the Bombers, which went undefeated over the weekend, was largely made up of women who had been playing together for years.



The author loosens up before a game.

When I ran into her at dinner one night, she was wearing a onesie covered in the face of her team's coach, the former Yankees second baseman Homer Bush. She told me that in 2017, during her third year at the camp, she'd asked one of the Legends, Orlando Hernández, a former Yankees pitcher otherwise known as El Duque, to throw her a real fastball. She has no idea how fast he threw it, but she somehow made contact, and hit it out of George M. Steinbrenner Field.

"I guess I timed it just right," Vicky told me. "I didn't even realize it went over the fence." A player on the opposing team had to yell at her to stop sprinting as she rounded second, and when she got back to the dugout, her own teammates were losing their minds. A camp employee went and found the ball, and Hernández signed it for her. She still doesn't know how it happened—"the baseball gods" intervened.

Vicky plays in three different softball leagues all year round, but playing baseball at camp for one weekend a year

is important to her. "We're like a sisterhood," she said. Her teammates, many of whom are roughly her age, are all part of a generation of women who were snubbed by baseball. She grew up wanting to play and would often be dismissed with an *Isn't that cute?* When she got older, she would talk about baseball, and boys would ignore her. When she started coaching baseball, parents didn't want their sons to be assigned to her team.

Now she sees girls playing in the Little League World Series and has heard about the professional women's league starting next year. "Sometimes I feel—I wish I was born now and not then, just so I could be a part of that." But she has more enthusiasm than regret. "I would love to be a coach there, even an assistant coach, keeping book, whatever; I would love to do that," she told me. "Am I going to? Probably not. But, you know, it's a dream, and everybody's got a dream."

The idea for the Women's Pro Baseball League was announced with a bare-bones

press release. It revealed that the league would start next year with six teams "predominantly in the Northeast," and that it had been co-founded by a lawyer, Keith Stein, alongside Justine Siegal, a well-known figure in the world of women's baseball. Siegal grew up playing and then became a coach. She's best known as the first woman to have pitched a major-league batting practice and for creating the nonprofit Baseball for All, which promotes girls' participation in the sport.

"My whole life has been about getting girls involved in baseball," Siegal told me when we spoke in December. She is a co-owner of the new league, in charge of baseball operations, and will likely be its first commissioner. She rattled off part of her to-do list: The WPBL will need scouts, try-outs, contracts, stadiums. It will need to create a culture of girls' baseball from scratch. And so, most important, it will need time and serious backing. Even with the patronage of the NBA, it took decades for the WNBA to reach the levels of interest it has

today. The Professional Women's Hockey League, which also started with six teams just last year, is wholly owned by the chairman of the Dodgers and his wife; they can afford to wait while it finds its footing. A new baseball league will similarly need team owners who are able to front huge costs and are willing to commit to something that might not be profitable for the foreseeable future.

Siegal described her vision for the league by comparing it to Angel City FC, the women's soccer team in Los Angeles. The fan base isn't enormous, but it's big enough. "The place is packed; it's electric. And the athletes are being treated well, making money. They don't need a second job. And girls know that it's possible that they, too, could become a professional player."

The only real precedent for a women's baseball league is the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League, the subject of *A League of Their Own*. The league was created by the Chicago Cubs owner and chewing-gum mogul Philip K. Wrigley in 1943 to keep baseball alive as an entertainment industry while many of its brightest stars went to fight in World War II. He was initially the sole owner of the entire league, which was based in the Midwest and rostered only white women.

The league gave hundreds of women the opportunity to play baseball, and it put on some great games that impressed even seasoned baseball professionals and sportswriters. But there was always a tension, as depicted in the movie, between the gimmick and the game. The league had strict rules about feminine appearance and behavior—players wore skirts, went to charm school, and were taught to scratch at bars of soap to remove the dirt under their fingernails. The league was disbanded in 1954, and the idea was largely forgotten until the release of *A League of Their Own*.

The movie inspired a very brief period of trial and error. A women's league based on the West Coast played a season and a half before its owner pulled the plug over low attendance, and the Coors Brewing Company sponsored the Colorado Silver Bullets, a barnstorming team managed by the beloved knuckleball pitcher Phil Niekro. "Give them the time all the

men have had in this country to play, and you're going to find a lot of good baseball players," Niekro told *The New York Times* after the team's first year (they went 6–38). The Bullets put on some great games and improved to a winning record in their fourth year. But marketing stunts are not meant for longevity and the Bullets, too, did not last.

The U.S. does have a national women's baseball team, which was featured in the 2024 documentary *See Her Be Her*. That team competes every two to three years in a Women's Baseball World Cup, which the U.S. last won in 2006; Japan, which dominates in women's baseball, has been the champion in the past seven contests. Americans are far behind.

See Her Be Her, which aired on the MLB Network the week of the World Series, demonstrated the support that women's baseball has been able to garner among former major-league stars, including Ichiro Suzuki and Cal Ripken Jr. Ripken, whose 21-year playing career with the Baltimore Orioles ended in 2001, is a member of one of the most famous baseball families in American history. During his own Hall of Fame career, he played alongside his brother Billy and was managed by his father, Cal Ripken Sr. His sister, Ellie, never got to play, though he describes her as throwing harder than he did as a child and growing into a massively talented athlete in other sports.

Ripken told me that he and his teammates had watched the Silver Bullets play exhibition games. "I always looked out there and saw my sister and thought, *Wouldn't my sister love to do this?*" I didn't sense that he was putting on a show—more like it was flatly obvious to someone whose whole life is baseball that everyone should get a chance to enjoy playing it. "I wouldn't say we were surprised, but our eyes would open, saying, 'Man, these girls are really good,'" he said. "To try to figure out why that didn't blossom at that time—sometimes they say good ideas, it's a matter of timing. Maybe this is the right timing now."

ON SATURDAY MORNING at baseball camp, my beautiful Pinstripes took the lead quickly in our first game, which we won 6–2; again, I did not contribute a single hit.



My worst fear was realized as my teammates began to notice—or, probably, they had already noticed, and it just became impossible for them to credibly ignore—that I was by far the worst baseball player on our team. This inspired them to acts of kindness, such as high



The Pinstripes celebrate a victory in their last game of the weekend.

ZACK WEITMAN FOR THE ATLANTIC

fives when I had done nothing to earn them and vociferous cheering whenever I was at the plate.

In the buffet line at lunch, Ray, our coach, tried to get at the root of my problem, which he diagnosed as mental. I told him about Brett Baty and his many

struggles, and though he clearly had no idea who I was talking about or why I was so fixated on him, he seemed to agree that Baty and I had a similar problem, and it was in our brains. “What are you thinking when you’re up there?” he asked me. “I’m thinking, *I hope I don’t miss the ball*,” I told

him in the spirit of honesty, even though I was already 100 percent sure that this was not the correct thing to be thinking. Ray kindly told me that this was not the correct thing to be thinking.

I never wanted to be a baseball player and my performance at baseball camp

doesn't matter. These games, however, were meaningful to women who, by playing them, were making peace with their childhood fantasies after many, many years. One such person was my teammate Susie McNamara, who at 53 years old was attending her third camp. One evening, she told me that she was doing so this time to mark the end of chemo treatments, which she'd finished two months prior. But the first time she came, in 2011, she'd wanted to prove something.

Susie grew up in a baseball family. Her grandfather played for the Yankees' farm team the Newark Bears. Her father was a police officer but also owned a baseball-card shop in Lambertville, New Jersey. He convinced everyone that it would be safe for her to start playing T-ball when she was 4 years old, and, later, that she could play Little League baseball with the boys. She was teased in school, she remembered, for wearing a baseball cap all the time ("It wasn't, like, a fashion statement," the way it is now) and for dreaming of being a Yankee.

She had to give that up when she was 12, and her primary option was softball. She would go on to play for Mount St. Mary's, a Division I school in Maryland, but the coaching was terrible and the experience was miserable. Her sophomore year, the team's record was one win, 31 losses. "I bet that one felt really good, though," I suggested, but I was wrong. "That one broke my heart," she said.

When she showed up at camp the first time, she thought of it as her opportunity to demonstrate what she could do. The Legends that year included one of her heroes, Bucky Dent, who stopped and stared theatrically when she made an impressive play at third base. She also remembers Darryl Strawberry standing over her after she made a diving backhanded catch in foul territory and screaming, "That was outstanding!" She thought that weekend was probably the best she'd ever played in her life.

In our final game, against the Bambinos, the Pinstripes were on fire. The other women had perfected the team's defense over the course of the weekend—it didn't hurt that I didn't touch the ball once—and the only thing left for us to accomplish

was a hit from me. I was not the only one who felt this way. Others said it, including Leslie, who told me, "I'm committed to you getting a hit." (And Lainey, who said, "Let's go, Ottavino!")

In my first at-bat, I swung on the first pitch and something happened. The ball dribbled up the first-base line and the first baseman scooped it up easily, tagging me as I passed. But a run scored! No hits, but one RBI!

After taking the lead in that inning, we were winning for the entire game, so the pressure on me—from that angle—was quite low. In my second at-bat, my team cheered wildly for me on every pitch. I hit the ball just foul down the first-base line, felt a momentary jolt of hope because of the hard contact, and then struck out. In my third and final at-bat, my team cheered wildly for me again, and I struck out again. "Next year!" I announced, in a voice that was supposed to be playful and make everybody feel less awkward, but actually sounded childish and a bit unhinged.

It was ridiculous how upset I was. I was shocked at myself. I hadn't been expecting it, but the admonition of "no crying in baseball" became suddenly relevant—I had to duck into the tunnel for a few seconds to regain my composure. My teammates, who were geniuses, politely ignored me for five minutes. And then our careers as New York Yankees were over. We had won our final game and went home with a record of three wins and two losses, which you might notice is a .600 winning percentage, higher than that of the actual Yankees last year. We drank Miller Lite in the locker room and swapped phone numbers.

I texted my college roommate from Staten Island that I would mail her all the Yankees merchandise that had been included in the price of admission. I texted my boyfriend that I had a new appreciation for the game and was humbled. I texted my dad, "One RBI!" There's no crying in baseball, and the other thing they're always saying is that baseball is a game of failure. If you have a really good batting average, you're failing about 70 percent of the time. Most women, like most men who try the game of baseball, aren't up to it. They crumble, like me, and

like Brett Baty has in the past, though I am confident he will not do so this year.

AT THE START of her book, Jennifer Ring mentions the Burns baseball documentary, noting that it is more than 18 hours long but spends just a few minutes on women playing baseball in the 1800s, and then another few on the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League in the 1940s and '50s.

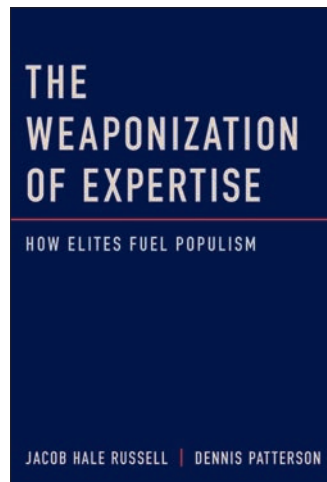
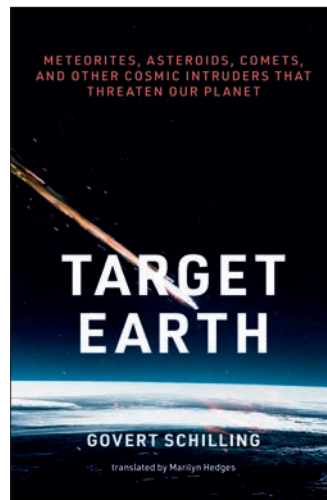
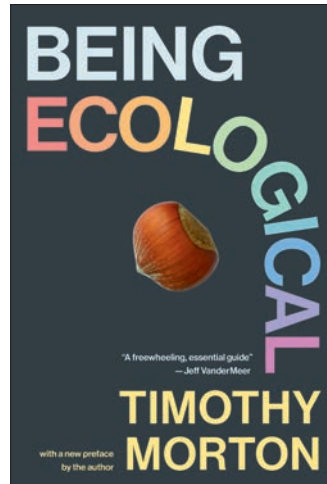
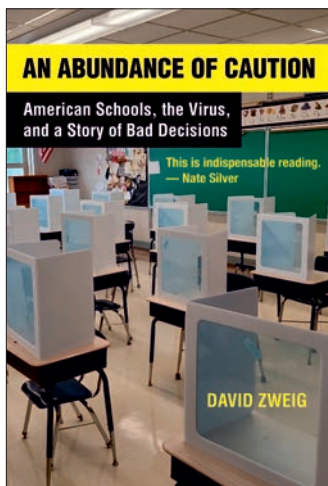
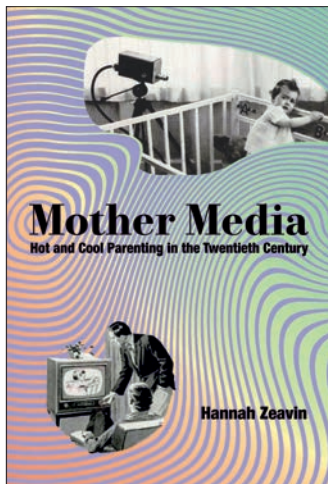
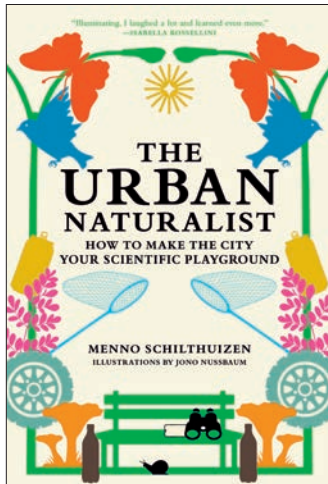
This is particularly strange because the episode about the '60s and '70s touches on other issues of the day—Vietnam, civil rights, social unrest—but makes no mention of NOW's involvement in the Little League legal battle, which would seem to fit in fairly naturally. *Baseball* is the definitive story of the game in this country, which is why Ring brings it up. "He's including it in his history, but he's giving it the position that he thinks it deserves."

Baseball is for the fastidious—a game in which everything matters. Reflecting in 1981 on the past 50 years of his life as a fan, Roger Angell wrote: "All of us who have followed the game with intensity have found ourselves transformed into walking memory banks, humming with games won, games lost, batting averages and earned-run averages, games started and games saved, 'magic numbers,' final standings, lifetime marks, Series, seasons, decades, epochs."

Every play is recorded. Every pitch is remembered. It all counts. Every mistake. Every miracle. You can hear the delight and shock in an announcer's voice when they see something that has somehow never happened before in the history of millions of plays. If you watch enough baseball, you can just feel when something is *really* something. (Baty's three-run homer at Tropicana Field, which disappeared into the late, great ceiling and never came down?) In a game in which everything matters, in which we who love it wish to see every possible outcome unfold, how can we stomach the absence of women's baseball? *A*

Kaitlyn Tiffany is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

Uncover the next big idea from the MIT Press



The Urban Naturalist

Menno Schilthuis

A manifesto—and a field guide—for a new dawn of natural history, practiced by community scientists in their own urban jungle.

Being Ecological

Timothy Morton

The must-have guide to ecology—with no information dumping, guilt inducing, or preaching to the choir.

Mother Media

Hannah Zeavin

An essential history for understanding how we mother now, and how motherhood itself became a medium.

Target Earth

Govert Schilling

What we need to know about the extraterrestrial matter constantly bombarding our planet—from microscopic space debris to meteorites, comets, and asteroids.

An Abundance of Caution

David Zweig

A searing indictment of the American public health, media, and political establishments' decision-making process behind pandemic school closures.

The Weaponization of Expertise

Jacob Hale Russell
and Dennis Patterson

Experts are not infallible. Explore how treating them as such has given rise to the populism that all-knowing experts and their elite oterie decry.



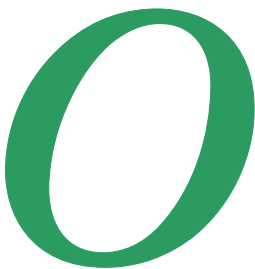
***TURTLEBOY
WILL NOT
BE STOPPED***

A profane blogger
believes an innocent
woman is being
framed for murder.
He'll do anything to
prove he's right—and
terrorize anyone who
says he's wrong.

BY CHRIS HEATH

Photographs by
Lila Barth





n overpasses and by roadsides they gather, holding banners and placards. In the early days, only a few people showed up, congregating at chosen times and scattered locations around Boston. But their cause has grown and their numbers have swelled. For

Labor Day 2024, plans were made for “standouts,” as the organizers called them, in more than 70 places—all over Massachusetts, yes, but also in Ohio, Kansas, Florida, California, and elsewhere.

These assemblies are the most visible manifestation of what is usually referred to as the Free Karen Read movement. If in the fullness of time it will seem strange that such unity and passion should have been mustered in defense of a 45-year-old Massachusetts financial analyst and adjunct college professor accused of killing her police-officer boyfriend by backing into him with her car ... well, not to these people gathered today. Young and old, and nearly always dressed in something pink, they joyfully express their shared belief to passing motorists through slogan: most often just FREE KAREN READ, though sometimes the signs convey more grandiose sentiments—LIBERTY AND JUSTICE FOR ALL, STOP THE CORRUPTION, INJUSTICE THRIVES IN SILENCE. And some are impenetrable to anyone not already following the case’s legal intricacies and surrounding hoopla: BUTT-DIALS GALORE, COLIN WAS IN THE HOUSE, WHERE’S CHLOE?

In most assessments, a large part of the credit for how all of this has come to be—or, according to the haters and detractors (and there are plenty), the blame for it—belongs to a man named Aidan Kearney. I met Kearney early one May morning last year outside the Norfolk County Superior Court in Dedham, just southwest of Boston, a month into Read’s trial for, among other things, second-degree murder. It was raining, so we sought shelter on the steps of the Registry of Deeds, across the road. A gaggle of Free Karen Read protesters were already beginning to congregate a block or so away, though they were required to keep themselves outside a judge-ordained 200-foot buffer zone. Because of the pink dress code among FKR supporters, the effect is as if, at a seemingly random point on a Dedham street, a color filter kicks in.

Kearney isn’t one for small talk, and he was soon in full flow. “It’s so obvious that she’s innocent,” he told me. “The critics will say ‘Oh, he’s like a cult leader—he’s brainwashing these people.’ I assure you, I am not that charming. These are educated people that are getting into this story because they’re not stupid. And they look at all the facts of this case, and they’re like, ‘It’s undeniable that this is a cover-up.’” He gestured toward the gradually swelling cohort in the distance. “These people are out here every day. Rain or shine, it doesn’t matter.”

As we spoke, a woman standing nearby interjected.

“Sorry, I’m not eavesdropping, but I’m eavesdropping,” she said, then asked us: “So are you with them?”

“I’m the leader,” Kearney said evenly.

“You’re the leader?” she said.

“Yeah,” he replied. “I’m Turtleboy.”



N THE MORNING of January 29, 2022, not long after 6 a.m., the body of a 46-year-old man was found in the snow outside a house in the Boston suburb of Canton. His name was John O’Keefe, and he was an officer with the Boston

Police Department. Three days later, an explanation was offered for how he had come to die there. It was reported that O’Keefe had been drinking early the night before with his girlfriend, Karen Read, and that, not long after midnight, she had driven him to a gathering at the home of another police officer, Brian Albert. Read said she’d dropped O’Keefe off in front of the house and driven away. But prosecutors were now implying that she had backed into him with her car. To Kearney, reading the news reports at the time, the story seemed clear enough. “I remember I was like, *That’s sad for her*,” he said. “And him. Because it was framed in the media as an accident—this horrible accident.”

Kearney is from Worcester, about an hour’s drive from Canton, and for the first 11 years of his adult life, he was a history teacher; he still rhapsodizes about how much he liked teaching lessons on World War II and the civil-rights movement. Eventually he would marry another teacher, and have two children. But he also became a kind of citizen-blogger, in the beginning mostly concentrating on Boston sports and matters around Worcester, at AidanFromWorcester.com. He wasn’t afraid to rub people the wrong way, specializing in calling out perceived hypocrisies, and gleefully relishing any chance to cut against political correctness.

As his audience and his reputation grew, these two roles, teacher and internet provocateur, proved incompatible. In an attempt to make his blogging anonymous, he adopted the name Turtleboy, but when the secret didn’t hold, his choice was made: He would be a full-time blogger.

As Turtleboy, Kearney made enemies aplenty, but he also gathered a lot of followers who liked what he was saying and doing, and the unfiltered way in which he did it. Before too long, he was making a healthy living via digital advertising and merchandise sales, as well as donations and subscriptions. When he first read about Read and the death of O’Keefe in early 2022, he sized up its possibilities as a story. Kearney is instinctively pro-police—“I’m a ‘Back the blue’ guy”—and the death of a police officer seemed like a subject with Turtleboy potential. “But I didn’t write about it, because I’m like, *Well, I don’t really have a strong opinion on this*,” he recalls. “It’s like: *What a tragedy. This guy gets killed. I couldn’t imagine living with the guilt of accidentally running your boyfriend over and then not knowing it. And then I totally forgot about the story.*”

In the summer of 2022, while Kearney wasn’t paying attention, the charges against Read were upgraded from manslaughter to second-degree murder. Evidence had emerged suggesting that the couple’s relationship had been fraught, and that Read and O’Keefe had been arguing; Read was now accused of knowingly

hitting O’Keefe, with an intent to kill him. Kearney still didn’t take notice in April 2023, when the defense filing laid out a detailed counternarrative, arguing that Read was being framed, and that O’Keefe had actually been murdered by those in the house he was visiting.

By that point, the story had more or less vanished from public consciousness: I couldn’t find a single mainstream-media mention of Read and O’Keefe in the six months leading up to the April 2023 filing. Even these new defense assertions generated only a smattering of stories in Massachusetts newspapers.

That week, Kearney was preoccupied with what, back then, was fairly typical Turtleboy fare. He’d faced down what he called “An Antifa Child Drag Queen Mob”; he’d interposed himself in a dispute involving parents who had claimed that their child was facing racist abuse at a cheer gym; he’d set up the latest installment of his annual Turtleboy Ratchet Madness competition, in which his followers would vote, round by round, to name the worst of the “ratchets”—hypocrites, spongers, and other miscreants—his blog had identified in the previous year; and he had documented, or intervened in, sundry other disputes, while also describing how he had been swatted twice that week, with the police arriving at his home to follow up on bogus reports from Turtleboy haters that Kearney was suicidal.

That was what Kearney’s life was like. More than two years earlier, after some personal turbulence had prompted him to reassess his approach, he’d announced a wish to change gears. “I still love the ratchet stuff and always will,” he’d said. “But at the end of the day I’m more interested in exposing people who actually matter, rather than going the Jerry Springer route ... I don’t want [my kids] to grow up and think their father pays the bills by writing a vulgar, smut-filled blog. I feel like it’s possible to make the same points I’ve always made while avoiding usage of *jizz donkeys* and *spunk guzzlers*. Plus, my favorite stories are the ones that expose corrupt systems in power.” He had gone on to write some stories in that genre, but so far the adjustment appeared to have been modest. Now another chance presented itself.

At lunchtime on April 17, 2023, a retired police officer named Brian Johnson sent Kearney the following message on Facebook:

Hi, not sure if you’re following the case of Boston police officer, John O’Keefe death but here is a recent motion. John was a great guy. Started his career in Duxbury. His sister passed away and he adopted his niece and nephew. My sources tell me that Brian Albert, a Boston police K9 officer, is a loose cannon. His dog mysteriously disappeared and he’s since sold his house. It looks to me like the girlfriend was set up. Something’s not right.

Johnson attached a PDF of the defense motion, then followed up with: “Oops, I left out that John was found with bite marks.”

Kearney says that his reaction to reading the defense filing was: “Holy shit, this is story-of-the-century stuff.” Early that evening, as he worked on an article about the Read case for the Turtleboy blog, he posted on social media, as a preview, the first words he would write about it:

I am currently working on perhaps the craziest story I’ve ever written, involving a Boston cop possibly being involved in murdering another cop, followed by an elaborate coverup designed to frame the murdered cop’s girlfriend ... My jaw is currently on the floor.

He tweeted that he hoped to have the story out that night.

A follower immediately contacted him. She explained that she’d been in touch with a confidant of Read’s named Natalie Berschneider Wiweke, and she connected them via Facebook.

Throughout the evening, as Kearney continued to write, he bombarded Wiweke with questions and requests, and Wiweke, who seemed supremely well informed on the minutiae of the case, provided him with material.

A few hours later, Kearney published his post, several thousand words long: “Canton Cover-Up Part 1: Corrupt State Trooper Helps Boston Cop Coverup Murder of Fellow Officer, Frame Innocent Girlfriend.” (Two of the many ways that Kearney’s work practices deviate from conventional journalism are his speed to

certainity, and his full-throated advocacy.) From this first outpouring, he was all in: “Karen Read is a completely innocent woman, wrongly charged by corrupt cops who would see her rot in prison in order to cover up a murder of a fellow officer.”

Going forward, there would now be two completely different and competing versions of Read’s story. The narrative conveyed in the prosecution’s public filings ran along these lines: After an evening of heavy drinking, Read set off in her car with O’Keefe, whom she had been dating for about two years, heading for an after-party. They were texted the address of their destination, 34 Fairview Road, by a woman named Jennifer McCabe, whose brother-in-law Brian Albert, a Boston police officer, lived there. Sometime after midnight, McCabe saw what she believed to be Read’s Lexus pull up outside the house, then, sometime later, pull away. Just before five in the morning, McCabe received a call from Read,

**“KAREN READ IS
A COMPLETELY
INNOCENT
WOMAN, WRONGLY
CHARGED BY
CORRUPT COPS
WHO WOULD
SEE HER ROT IN
PRISON IN ORDER
TO COVER UP
A MURDER
OF A FELLOW
OFFICER.”**



Top: Karen Read listens to testimony during her murder trial, May 13, 2024. Bottom: A photo of Read and the man she is accused of killing, the Boston police officer John O'Keefe, which the defense presented at trial.

distraught and hysterical, saying she was looking for O'Keefe. Read and McCabe soon met up at McCabe's house, and headed out to search for O'Keefe. Along the way, Read asked McCabe, "Could I have hit him?" and mentioned that her car had a cracked taillight. Approaching 34 Fairview Road, Read spotted a body even though McCabe couldn't immediately see it in the snow. She screamed and ran over, then began CPR; she also twice yelled at McCabe to Google *How long do you have to be left outside to die of hypothermia?* (Searches to this effect were found on McCabe's phone.) One of the firefighters who responded to the emergency call spoke with Read at the scene and reported her saying, "I hit him, I hit him, I hit him." O'Keefe's autopsy determined that his death had been caused by a combination of blunt-force trauma to the head and hypothermia. Pieces of broken taillight subsequently found at the scene matched the missing pieces from Read's Lexus.

O'Keefe's teenage niece, who lived at O'Keefe's home, where Read often slept over, reported overhearing O'Keefe tell Read a week earlier that their relationship was unhealthy and had run its course. Text messages between the couple that week further documented this strain. After Read left 34 Fairview Road that

night, she had called and texted O'Keefe multiple times. In one voice message, she screamed that she hated him.

The prosecution's implied narrative was clear: After an argument outside 34 Fairview Road, Read had drunkenly reversed her Lexus into O'Keefe, who had been sufficiently incapacitated that he didn't move, and subsequently died of hypothermia. Her actions in the hours that followed were a combination of self-incrimination ("I hit him") and cover-up.

Diving deep into the defense's recent filing, complemented by his own supplementary research, Kearney laid out a very different narrative. He poured scorn upon the notion that O'Keefe's stated injuries—"six bloodied lacerations varying in length on O'Keefe's right arm ... from his forearm to his bicep"; "cut to the right eyelid of the victim"; "two swollen black eyes"; "cut to left side of nose"; "approximately two inch laceration to the back of the head"; "multiple skull fractures"—were consistent with the impact from a reversing car. He also focused on what would become a talisman for those convinced of Read's innocence: According to the defense expert called to do a forensic analysis of McCabe's phone, McCabe had initially Googled the phrase *hos [sic] long to die in cold* at 2:27 a.m., several hours *before* she and Read returned to 34 Fairview and discovered O'Keefe's body, and then had taken steps to delete this and other incriminating information from her phone. If true, this seemed impossible to square with the prosecution's version of what had happened.

Presented as similarly complicating for the prosecution's narrative was O'Keefe's iPhone data from that night. According to the defense, the Apple Health app showed O'Keefe in the vicinity of 34 Fairview Road between 12:21 and 12:24, taking 80 steps and climbing the equivalent of three floors. (The Albert residence has three floors.) Between 12:31 and 12:32, O'Keefe apparently took 36 more steps. This also fits poorly with the notion that he was hit by Read's car and never entered the house.

Kearney, drawing on the defense's assertions, proposed an alternative version of events: Read had dropped O'Keefe off at 34 Fairview Road, then watched him enter the house from her car; when he didn't answer her calls once inside, she left. By Kearney's reckoning, there were 11 people already in the house. One of them was Brian Albert's then-18-year-old nephew, Colin—a "notorious hothead" and "out of control meathead," according to Kearney; Colin had appeared on social media after O'Keefe's death with visible abrasions on his knuckles. Kearney suggested that soon after entering the house, O'Keefe got into a physical confrontation with Colin Albert, and that his uncle Brian, a trained mixed-martial-arts fighter, joined in. The altercation riled up the family's German shepherd, Chloe, who in Kearney's telling caused the injuries to O'Keefe's arm. (The implication, which Kearney hadn't yet spelled out, was that a fatally injured O'Keefe was then dumped outside on the lawn.)

All 11 people in the house, Kearney argued, must have either witnessed or been aware of the murder of John O'Keefe. It was McCabe, Kearney asserted, who suggested to Read that she might have hit O'Keefe, and falsely suggested that Read appeared to spot O'Keefe's body before she could have realistically seen it. Echoing the defense's case, Kearney argued that McCabe connivingly

repeated the *how long to die in cold* search on her phone so that she could pretend that this had been at Read's request in the moment, all in an attempt to disguise the fact that McCabe herself had made that same search hours earlier, before Read even knew that O'Keefe's body was lying in the snow.

Kearney also detailed the preexisting relationship between the lead investigator on the case, Michael Proctor, and the McCabe and Albert families; the defense's evidence that the initial crime report was changed; and the fact that crucial pieces of taillight were recovered from the crime scene not on the morning of O'Keefe's death but much later, after Read's car was in police possession. He argued that the taillight was actually broken in an incident captured on O'Keefe's Ring camera when Read, heading out to search for him in the morning, clipped O'Keefe's car as she backed out. Kearney also noted that the Alberts had gotten rid of their dog, Chloe, four months after O'Keefe's death and had then sold the house—"yet additional evidence of consciousness of guilt," in the words of the defense. At the end of his article, Kearney recommended that "Trooper Proctor, Brian Albert, Colin Albert, and Jennifer McCabe should all spend [a] significant amount of time in jail, and two of them should be charged with murder."

Those Kearney implicated would later dispute almost everything he suggested. During the trial, both Colin and Brian would deny that O'Keefe had ever entered the house that night or that they fought him. Brian Albert would testify that getting rid of Chloe and selling his home had nothing to do with O'Keefe's death. Jennifer McCabe would deny deleting any calls or searches on her phone and any involvement in a cover-up, and would tell the court that she "never would have left John O'Keefe out in the cold to die." For his part, Michael Proctor admitted to having a personal relationship with Brian Albert's brother and his wife, but he denied that this influenced the investigation in any way.

Still, plenty of people found Kearney's narrative compelling. "I published it," Kearney told me, "and it, like, broke the website. I had to upgrade my servers." His YouTube broadcast the next evening, in which he again went through this material, drew far more viewers than ever before. He had titled the initial article "Part 1" because he realized that this was one of those stories that might require more than a single dive; occasionally in the past, his blog had returned to an interesting story four or five times. But this story just kept going: As of this writing, his series about Read has nearly 500 installments, complemented by hundreds of lengthy YouTube broadcasts. "I rarely have time for anything else now," he told me when we first met. "Every day, I'd wake up and I wouldn't know what I was going to write about. Now I do. I'm going to write about Karen Read."

As Kearney's audience grew, he relentlessly seeded the idea that a great injustice was taking place, and Read was its victim. Kearney is not shy about taking credit for the effect he's had. During Read's trial, he would declare, "You never would have heard of this trial without me."

Kearney's detractors—there were many even before he started writing about Read, and they have grown in number and fervor since—point out that he was not the first person to write about the story, suggesting that he is taking credit for causing

something when all he did was sail in its slipstream. Maybe. But there's a solid argument that the whole public discourse around the trial—not just the heightened interest in it but the galvanizing of a small movement of people committed to defending Read against what they believed was an imminent injustice—was catalyzed mainly by his interventions.

K

KEARNEY LIKES TO SAY that he is three things at once—a journalist, an activist, and an entertainer. Here are two particularly vivid examples of his rather unorthodox approach to covering the Read case.

First: On June 5, 2023, he turned up unannounced in the bleachers at a high-school lacrosse game where Jennifer McCabe and her family were watching their daughter play. "Why did you Google *How long to die in cold*, Jen?" Kearney asked, as he filmed everything. "I'm just curious." McCabe sat there, a pained smile on her face, head turned toward the game, as Kearney repeated this question seven times. Told that he was bothering people, he retorted: "Well, they killed a cop. She's a cop killer! These are cop killers! You know they're cop killers, right?" When I asked Kearney what he was thinking as he filmed this, he replied, "*This is great content. And also, I'm glad somebody's saying something to her.*"

Second: On July 22, 2023, he convened a "Rolling Rally," in which he led a convoy of supporters on a tour of the Canton area, stopping at the crime scene, the police station, the courthouse, and the homes of those he claimed were implicated in John O'Keefe's death, livestreaming all the while, and reciting the facts as he believed them through a bullhorn outside each property. Several dozen enthusiastic supporters can be seen on the video; Kearney has claimed that as many as 300 participated across the day. From the video footage, this Rolling Rally's apparent atmosphere was less that of a vengeful mob than of a lively campaigners' day out, though I imagine that distinction might seem moot to its targets. The first stop was the house Brian Albert had moved into after selling 34 Fairview Road. Standing outside, Kearney proclaimed through the bullhorn, "I do kind of feel bad for the neighbors. But, sorry, murderers moved in, so it's unfortunate."

Putting aside questions about the legality of these actions, it's times like these when Turtleboy's certainty is most striking. Especially when you consider just how deeply horrible these actions would be if he's wrong.

The first time I met Kearney, we had the following conversation:

You'd agree that if Karen Read didn't do this, then this is a horrendous thing that she's been put through.

"Yeah. Definitely. Yeah, I mean, it goes without saying."

But conversely, do you agree that if the people you're pointing your finger at didn't do it, then they're being put through a pretty horrendous experience?

"Yeah, but there's no way they didn't do it. If there was any way possible that he was not killed inside 34 Fairview Road, I would not be taking the position I am. If I thought there was a 1 percent chance that he was not killed inside that house, I would not be taking the position I am. I'm 100 percent that he was killed inside that house."

But to say that there's a zero percent chance of the state's narrative being true, or some version of it being true, is a pretty hard-core determination.

"I think it's the most logical determination."

What if it isn't?

"I can't answer that question, because it's impossible for it not to be true. If I say, 'Well, then I'd feel bad,' then it makes the reader believe that I think this is a possibility. I don't. I've never been so sure of anything in my whole life. I would literally bet everything I've ever owned on the fact that he was inside that house and beaten up."

KEARNEY SEEMS TO HAVE a traditional reporter's dogged obsessiveness in search of evidence, sources, and telling details. But from the start, he has also frequently seemed to have the best information on the Read case, particularly about details that strengthened the defense's argument.

In the second half of 2023, as the case drew more coverage and as Kearney's role in both popularizing it and turning public opinion in Read's favor gained notice, he was sometimes asked whether he was colluding with Read or her defense team. He would deny any direct dealings with Read. That denial was, Kearney now acknowledges, a lie. Not long after he was connected via Facebook to Read's friend Natalie Berschneider Wiweke, in April 2023, he became aware that his source was more than simply well informed: She was channeling messages from Read—in fact, Kearney said Wiweke was "nothing but a copy-and-paste for Karen." A few weeks after his first article, Kearney and Read began to communicate directly. Just how often they did so was revealed when Read's phone was seized by state police in January 2024. Over seven and a half months, from May 7 to December 21, 2023, 189 calls, cumulatively lasting more than 40 hours, were logged between Kearney and Read. Beyond that were all the text messages and some calls they had exchanged on Signal.

"Yeah, I denied it," Kearney told me. "Because I didn't have her permission. She was an anonymous source." He sees nothing to apologize for. "I'm a journalist writing a story," he argued. "This is the subject of the story. She's allowed to talk to me." What this was, he maintained, was just him doing his job well. "I had the best source of information. She could give me information that no other journalist could get ahold of. And none of it was illegal."

Yet even if everything Kearney has done is legal, many of his critics have suggested that he's either knowingly or unknowingly being exploited by a murderer to sway public opinion and bolster her defense—that, as Kearney put it, "the dastardly Karen Read was like the grand puppet master of this whole thing." Or maybe even, in a more nuanced way, that Read had managed to find a patsy smart and motivated enough—but also credulous enough—to carry her water farther than she could have ever dreamed possible. All she'd needed to do was sketch out a plausible framework within which she might be innocent; with his unstoppable drive, Kearney had filled in the gaps.

Kearney dismisses all such possibilities. He is adamant that he has neither accepted anything Read has told him uncritically, nor



Aidan Kearney poses with Turtleboy fans outside the courthouse.

allowed himself to be steered into writing what she wanted him to write. "If anyone can show any evidence that Karen Read has been dishonest with me or is somehow hiding something, I will blast her," he told me. "I would just rip Karen to shreds. But she always brings evidence to back up everything she's saying." (Read and her attorneys did not respond to requests to comment for this story.)

When I first met him, Kearney brought up, unbidden, a related accusation. "This is the car they think Karen Read's brother bought for me," he said as we approached a 2023 Lexus RX 350, parked among the pink FKR battalion outside the courthouse. Read's brother works for a Lexus dealership. Kearney said that his bank records were pulled to investigate, but that nothing was found, because there was nothing to find. (Kearney also tweeted a copy of his \$59,186.56 purchase contract.) The reality, he said, is more prosaic: "I am making more money than I used to. But I'm not being paid by Karen Read. I'm being paid by people like you're seeing there"—he gestured at the pink-clad crowd—"that buy T-shirts and donate and buy subscriptions and everything like that. I'm doing something and I'm doing it well, and it's paying off."

KEARNEY COULDN'T HAVE IMAGINED all the repercussions this story would have for his own life. It is a peculiar irony that while Read has thus far spent only a single night in jail—on the night of her arrest, February 1, 2022, three days after O'Keefe's death—Kearney, the loudest supporter of the Free Karen Read movement, has served 60 days behind bars during the unfolding of the case.

Exactly how that happened—well, that takes a little explaining.

Toward the end of August 2023, the Norfolk County district attorney, Michael Morrissey, issued a lengthy video statement that appeared to be a direct response to Kearney's activities. "The harassment of witnesses in the murder prosecution of Karen Read

is absolutely baseless,” he said. “It should be an outrage to any decent person—and it needs to stop.”

Kearney, predictably, was far from impressed. He livestreamed a response from his car as he watched Morrissey’s video. “No, it doesn’t need to stop—it needs to accelerate, baby ... It’s not gonna stop; it’s gonna go a million times harder than it did before. Woo!” Before signing off, Kearney added: “You are my enemy, Michael Morrissey—just know that. I will not rest until you are completely destroyed.”

Only later did Kearney come to see Morrissey’s video in a somewhat different light. “That was my one and only warning to cut the shit or else I was going to jail,” he told me. “That video was for me.”

On the morning of Wednesday, October 11, 2023, Kearney had just seen his two children onto the school bus when he was arrested, brought to court in handcuffs, and then released on bail. He would be charged with a list of crimes—most significantly, eight felony counts of witness intimidation, each carrying a potential 10-year sentence. (More charges were subsequently added.) Among the many episodes referred to in the charges were the lacrosse game and the Rolling Rally.

“It sounds very serious on paper,” Kearney told me. “But my attorney is just not the least bit worried.” In legal filings, his primary lawyer characterized Kearney’s work as “peaceful investigative journalism, satire, and political hyperbole.”

Kearney argued that these charges have been deliberately engineered to discredit him, “because my reporting has been so effective in galvanizing public support for Karen Read.” He elaborated: “The reason they charged me with witness intimidation isn’t to convict me. They know everything I’ve done is legal and free speech and protected. The reason is so that they can just point to me and say, ‘You believe that guy? He’s charged with 16 felonies. He’s a bad person.’”

The conventional legal advice, if you’ve been charged with something, is not to repeat or compound or talk about the alleged offenses, at least until the matter is resolved. This is not the Turtleboy way. Each time a new prosecution document has spelled out his supposedly criminal words and deeds, Kearney has gone through it on one of his live broadcasts, paragraph by paragraph, justifying everything. Partly this is business pragmatism—“I’m paid to talk, so I have to”—but he says it’s a matter of principle, too. The way Kearney sees it, when he confronts those who were at Brian Albert’s house that night, he is facing down those who abuse their power. “These people are all thugs and bullies and mean girls. And somebody, for once, is standing up to them.”

Kearney’s own case has been moving slowly through the courts; any resolution is not expected until later this year. This might quite reasonably leave one wondering how, then, Kearney has already spent 60 days in jail. The explanation requires a detour into Kearney’s sometimes messy personal life. His current career

sat poorly with his wife, Julie. “She married a teacher,” he told me. Turtleboy “is not what she signed up for, and I get it.” Kearney was reluctant to clarify too much, but various stories he’s told about his life in recent years seem to involve relationships with other women. He has referred to “sneaking around, living this double life I shouldn’t have been living.”

Toward the end of 2023, Kearney was in a relationship with a woman named Lindsey Gaetani. Then they split up. The exact details of what took place between them are contested in court filings, and are also poisonously debated on social media to this day. (There is a fecund online ecosystem devoted to poring over Kearney’s perceived evils—the “anti-Turtleboy industrial complex,” he calls it. He says one of his lawyers told him, “I thought Alex Jones was the most hated client I ever had until I had you.”)

What is undisputed is that, some weeks after their relationship had notionally ended, Kearney visited Gaetani’s home. Each

would offer a very different account of who initiated this meeting, and of what took place during it. Kearney says that she asked him over to discuss a summons she had received relating to the Read case, and believes he has evidence that suggests she was deliberately colluding with the police to entrap him; Gaetani alleges that he assaulted her. Kearney strongly denies this. Problem is, if you are already on bail when you face an accusation like this, your bail may be revoked, and that’s what happened.

On December 26, his 42nd birthday, Kearney was taken to Norfolk County Jail. Against his wishes, he was placed in isolation—“because

of my high profile,” he told me. Kearney has been on Adderall for nearing 20 years, and now he had to do without; that adjustment was difficult: “I couldn’t stay awake during the day. And because of that, I couldn’t sleep at night.” He missed his son’s first basketball game. He missed his daughter’s cheer competitions. (He told his kids that he was away for work. “In a way, I was.”)

But Kearney says prison was not so bad. He ran five or more miles a day, and he read: *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which he hadn’t liked in high school but did now; *The Happiest Man on Earth*, about a centenarian Holocaust survivor; then *1984*. He also began to build a relationship with a Read supporter named Meredith

**IT IS A PECULIAR
IRONY THAT
WHILE READ HAS
THUS FAR SPENT
ONLY A SINGLE
NIGHT IN JAIL,
KEARNEY, THE
LOUDEST
SUPPORTER
OF THE FREE
KAREN READ
MOVEMENT, HAS
SERVED 60 DAYS
BEHIND BARS
DURING THE
UNFOLDING OF
THE CASE.**

O'Neil, who'd sent him supportive messages. By the time he was released, they were a couple. Soon afterward, the assault-and-battery charge that had triggered his bail revocation was dropped. (It could still be refiled, but has not been as of this writing.)

"You put me in jail for 60 fucking days—big deal," he declared on one of his broadcasts after he was released. "I lost 10 pounds ... I got close to my parents. I built new relationships. I met a much better girl. Like, life is so much better now. It's, like, one of the best things that ever happened to me. All I do is win. I hope they know that. Putting me in jail turned out to be one of the best things that ever happened to me. So thank you, motherfucker." And he raised two middle fingers.

That's the face Kearney seems most comfortable presenting to the world. Still, his first night out of jail, when he went to bed on his wife's couch for probably the final time (they have since divorced), and he couldn't sleep, and he kept looking at his kids' photos on the wall, and thinking about how he would never leave them again, he reconsidered everything. For the first time, he found himself wondering: Should he stop writing about Read? "Because look at what's at risk right there," he told me. "Like, I could lose them. Nothing's worth that, you know? Should I just stop?"

H E DIDN'T STOP. The incessant episodes about the Canton "cover-up" and YouTube live broadcasts soon resumed. On Thursday evenings, Kearney does a private broadcast for members of his Turtle Club. (Cheapest membership level: \$15 a month.)

Being Turtleboy has been very profitable for Kearney. *Boston* magazine recently estimated that he earns \$45,000 to \$50,000 a month. He doesn't explicitly dispute this, but notes that he has operating expenses, as well as a quarter-million dollars in legal fees. To explain how *Boston* came up with those numbers, he told me the writer simply estimated a figure based on his roughly 2,000 paying subscribers. When I pointed out that he had other revenue streams too—his website advertising and a wide range of merchandise (you can get a Free Karen Read pet hoodie in a range of sizes and colors, and a pink Free Karen Read baby onesie), as well as potential movie and book deals—he said that he had no clear sense of what he was earning. "I'm not a money guy," he said. "I'm a content guy."

One evening last June, I joined Kearney as he prepared to deliver his Turtle Club broadcast from his girlfriend's Boston apartment. Seconds before going live, he took his seat, slipped a Turtleboy cap on his head, and started streaming.

After more than an hour of monologuing, he started reading out what he calls Turtlechats: People send him money—typically \$5 to \$20, though sometimes more—and in return, Kearney reads out their questions or comments. There's apparently an understood etiquette here, one best not to fall afoul of. Seeing one message, he said sternly to the camera: "You can't send a dollar. If you send a dollar, I ain't reading your shit. It's insulting."

In response, a message soon came through from someone named Ben taking exception to this, informing Kearney, "You lost me bro." What happened next reflects something fundamental about Kearney. Instead of brushing off Ben's message, Kearney escalated dramatically.

"Let me be very clear, Ben. I couldn't be happier to lose you. I hope you never come back and watch any of my shows again. I actually fucking hate you with every ounce of my being, and I'd be proud to have you unsubscribe to the channel."

Kearney has brought the same hyper-incendiary instincts to his coverage of the trial. When I visited him last May, he had just been



banned from YouTube for a week because of an online poll he'd posted asking his followers a question about the trial's most recent two witnesses: "Who is the bigger piece of shit?" He told me he is just using his platform to say out loud what regular people watching the trial stream are thinking. "It's guy-on-the-street talk," he said, adding: "I'm rough around the edges, certainly. I have a potty mouth. My mother is always telling me to tone it down, and I'd like to. It's something I'm working on." Perhaps not that hard, though. Here's a brief excerpt—not even the worst part—from his livestreamed commentary about the testimony of a witness named Julie Nagel:

This is a goddamn murder trial. There's an innocent woman whose life is on the line. And all these townie fucking whores can do is get up on the stand and lie their fucking asses off. I hope you burn in eternal hell because that's where you fucking belong, you stupid fat cow. You deserve to be fat and disgusting, because you disgust me.

But even as he's delivering crude, derogatory commentary like this, he's also providing cogent, detailed, and deeply knowledgeable analysis of the trial. This is a man who, on and off camera, can pivot in an instant from saying things like "townie fucking whores" to offering a deconstruction of subtle contradictions in testimony, or

As the prosecution presented its case at trial, Kearney appeared to grow even more confident that Read would be found not guilty. It was not hard to see things his way. Day after day, witnesses for the prosecution seemed to be brought to the stand less for purposes of showing how and why Read was responsible for O'Keefe's death than to undermine the defense's alternative theory that O'Keefe was killed inside 34 Fairview Road. I told Kearney that I assumed there must be some careful but as-yet-unveiled prosecutory plan at work, but Kearney was skeptical, never wavering from what he told me the day we met: "This is going to be the quickest acquittal you've ever seen."

KEARNEY'S **NOM DE BLOG** comes from an infamous statue in the center of his hometown, one with its own messy history. The Burnside Fountain, now found on the southeast corner of Worcester Common, was built in the early 20th century, and features a bronze statue that the sculptor who was commissioned to construct it, Charles Harvey, named *Boy With a Turtle*. His design depicted a naked boy holding a hawksbill sea turtle. As he undertook the work in his New York studio, Harvey apparently heard voices, sometimes said to have come from the unfinished statue itself, telling him to kill himself. Heeding them, he went to the bank of the Bronx River and slit his throat. Another artist completed the statue.

But that is not why Harvey's final work became famous. It's not entirely clear whether Harvey's intention was to depict a boy riding a turtle upon the seas or to capture the moment of releasing a turtle into the wild. But one scenario easily comes to mind for many observers. As Kearney succinctly put it: "The statue obviously looks like a boy having sex with a turtle."

The idea to use the name Turtleboy was not Kearney's own. Inviting suggestions for what to call a new iteration of his blog in 2013, which at the time he intended to be anonymous, he considered "Word From the Woo" (*Woo* being a local term for "Worcester") and "Jogger Blogger." Then a follower proposed "Turtleboy Sports." Kearney knew immediately that it was right—"What better name for a Worcester guy? Turtleboy!"

His followers soon became known by the name they have to this day: Turtle Riders. When I asked Kearney why, he said, "Well, it's better than Turtle Fuckers."

One day in the first week of June, a trial half day, Kearney and I arranged to talk at lunchtime while he drove back to Worcester to see his kids after school. But when he emerged from the courtroom, he asked whether I minded if we made a detour. Some Turtle Riders were gathering for lunch.

At first I couldn't understand why they'd chosen a restaurant nearly half an hour's drive from the courthouse. Then it became clear: The Turtle Riders' chosen meeting place was the Waterfall Bar and Grille in Canton, the final place where Karen Read and John O'Keefe drank together on January 28, 2022. It's where

Left: Free Turtleboy hats are among the abundant trial-related merchandise for sale. Right: The statue that inspired Kearney's pseudonym, on Worcester Common, in Massachusetts.

explaining how the last famous and controversial trial at the Norfolk courthouse was of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, the Italian anarchists convicted of murder and executed in the 1920s. "Sacco and Vanzetti didn't have Karen Read's lawyers," he says.

they mingled with Brian Albert and several others who would soon head to Albert's home.

But that's not all I would see on our drive.

"By the way," Kearney said as we neared Canton, "do you want to see 34 Fairview Road?"

He took a left turn, and soon we arrived. "They say she was parked right here," he said, "and that John just stood back there by the flagpole, and that she gunned it in reverse and hit him."

Kearney is fond of experiments and reenactments, both for his own edification and to create content for his viewers. In September 2023, he had come here in his Lexus and tried to duplicate what the prosecution said Read did based on its interpretation of data from her fancier 2021 Lexus LX 570: abruptly reverse 62 feet and reach a speed of 24 miles an hour. Kearney said that despite multiple tries, his best "pedal to the metal" attempt couldn't get him above 19 miles an hour. He pointed to a spot some distance from the curb. "That's where John's body was found."

As we talked through various scenarios, a car pulled up in the middle of the street, right next to us.

"Oh my God!" screamed one of the two women in the car.

"Shut up!" screamed the other. "We were just fucking talking about you!"

They couldn't believe what they'd chanced upon: Turtleboy, in the flesh, at the geographic epicenter of their obsession.

"Nice to meet you," he said, in a way that seemed both friendly and designed to chill the temperature a little. When they asked for a photo, he got out of the car and posed with them.

At the Waterfall, he knew most of the people joining for lunch—maybe a couple dozen Turtle Riders who seemed to be part of some informal inner circle—and he didn't grandstand at all. Instead, Kearney sat at the edge of the room, talking quietly with whoever came by but making no pronouncements. This wasn't bullhorn Turtleboy.

On the next morning's "bus-stop live," he told the Turtle Riders about me and what I'd gotten to see while hanging out with him and his crowd: "He got a taste of Turtle World." He said I'd seen "how cool these people are. And, the lies that have been spread about who we are and what we do—and that we're dangerous and bloodthirsty, and, you know, intimidating witnesses. We're not about that, man. We've never been about that."

JUNE 10, 2024—day 22 of testimony in the Read trial—began with Kearney tweeting photos of the gathered FKR protesters at dawn, with this message: "Sometimes I can't believe I created this movement, but I'm really glad I did." Early in the day's proceedings, taking exception to the latest ruling by Judge Beverly Cannone—who, in Turtleboy world, is only ever referred to as "Auntie Bev"—he tweeted, "Auntie Bev is being extra cunt today." One darkly comic measure of how much influence Kearney has had on this trial is that this affection for giving offensive nicknames to people he doesn't like leached out of the sideshow and into the official trial record. One of the police investigators, Yuri Bukhenik, had been mischievously rechristened by Kearney as "Bukkake," the term for a very specific multiperson sexual act; on the stand,

a witness named Julie Albert, Brian Albert's sister-in-law, referred to Bukhenik from the witness box as "Trooper Bukkake." "Everybody in the courthouse looked at me," Kearney said afterward. "It was so satisfying, because I'm like, 'Oh, she listens to my show.'"

Kearney's intemperate Auntie Bev comment was soon forgotten, because the time had come for the lead police investigator in the case, Michael Proctor, to take the stand. Another complexity in this case was that, unbeknownst to the jury, there had been a federal grand-jury investigation into the Read investigation—a step toward justice, if you're a Read supporter, or a misguided fishing expedition that the Read side somehow manipulated into existence, if you're not. And although no charges have been filed as a result of this grand jury, it unearthed material that consequently became available in Read's trial—including some deeply problematic private text messages sent by the lead investigator.

After inviting Proctor to share the details of the police investigation, the state's attorney led him through much of this problematic material. It was a remarkable spectacle—the prosecution guiding its own witness toward such unhelpful testimony—but presumably the attorney had calculated that all of this would have been even more devastating if first presented by the defense. Still, the effect of this material was incendiary: In a volley of texts to friends, family, and colleagues, Proctor had referred to Read as, among other things, "a whack job cunt," "a nutbag," and "retarded"; he'd also joked about looking for nudes of her on her phone, and mocked her medical history. "She's got a leaky balloon knot," he texted, presumably in reference to her Crohn's disease. "Leaks poo." Most of the crudest texts didn't speak directly to Read's guilt or innocence, but when combined with other unprofessional asides—"Nope, home owner is a Boston cop," he'd texted to a friend, in a way that could be read as implying that Brian Albert was consequently beyond investigation—they appeared corrosive to the prosecution's case.

Kearney certainly thought so. "You can't truly appreciate how OVER this trial is," he tweeted from the courtroom, "unless you see the faces of the jurors while Proctor reads these text messages."

Media coverage of the trial grew and grew, in tandem with a teeming online scrum in which Read's innocence or guilt was incessantly debated. It was apparently easy to survey the same morass of evidence and then with fierce assurance come to completely different conclusions. Almost everyone seemed to be sure of the truth, and to think that anyone who didn't agree with them was a fool.

As the trial neared its end, Kearney retained complete confidence that Read would be fully acquitted. But he was also clearly exhausted. "I'm kind of looking forward to it being over," he had told me earlier. "I'm Karen Read—ed out. I enjoy the professional success I've had from it, but I don't enjoy the stress that I've gotten from all these charges."

Arguably the most significant testimony came in the trial's final days. The prosecution's vehicular-crash expert argued that O'Keefe's injuries were consistent with impact from a reversing car (though his explanation of exactly how O'Keefe had been hit, and how his body had ended up where it was found, seemed murky), and its digital-forensics experts argued that the 2:27 time stamp associated with the words *hos long to die in cold* on Jennifer McCabe's phone was actually tied to when the tab was first opened (to search for



basketball scores), not when the potentially incriminating phrase was typed; they also testified that there was no evidence of deliberate data deletion. The defense pushed back hard.

On June 21, day 29 of testimony, just before 11 a.m., the defense began to present its case. Read's attorneys called a snowplow driver who said that when he drove by 34 Fairview at about 2:45 in the morning, he saw nothing on the lawn where O'Keefe's body was later found, suggesting that the body had been placed there

afterward; a doctor who argued that the marks on O'Keefe's arm were dog bites; a digital-forensics expert who maintained that the *hos long* ... search did indeed occur around 2:27 a.m.; a forensic pathologist who testified that O'Keefe's injuries were not consistent with being hit by a car at 24 miles an hour; and two accident-reconstruction experts who testified that the damage both to the car and to O'Keefe didn't tally with the kind of collision proposed by the prosecution. Scarcely a day after it started, the defense rested.

Kearney, who had been studying the jury members' reactions over the past few weeks, told me he thought there was a 70 percent chance that they would issue the inevitable not-guilty verdict after less than a day's deliberation. There was just a 30 percent chance that they would need a second day, he said. No other outcome seemed conceivable to him.

But the first day passed, and then the second, and then the third. Now it was the weekend. And before the jury reconvened, two things happened. First, on Saturday, Kearney's mother, who had pancreatic cancer, died. The second event, Kearney learned about only as jury deliberations resumed on Monday morning. A person contacted Kearney via Facebook to say that the police were at Kearney's parents' house in Worcester. Kearney called his father, who told him why: At 8:30 that morning, one of Kearney's brothers had stepped out of the house and found a large turtle hanging by its neck on a rope from the porch railing. Dead. The turtle had "what appeared to be a gun shot wound on the back of the shell," according to the police report, "and an exit wound ... near its belly." Kearney's father, the police report went on to say, "explained that his son, Aidan

Aidan Kearney at home outside Worcester, Massachusetts, where he blogs and livestreams on his various Turtleboy platforms about the Karen Read murder trial, October 2, 2024

Kearney, is Turtle Boy; a popular article writer. Mr. Kearney also mentioned that he and his family have been the victims of harassment for some time now due to his son's occupation, but nothing to the extent of today's incident."

Kearney's father sent him a photo. He immediately began speculating about who was responsible, throwing out different public accusations. "There's no shortage of people who I think would do this," Kearney told me. As of this writing, the dead-turtle investigation remains unsolved.

O **N MONDAY**, after the jury had sent several notes suggesting that it was at an impasse, the judge declared a mistrial. Kearney was deflated. Though one can make a strong argument that, absent Kearney's involvement, Karen Read would have been much more likely to have been found guilty, he took little succor in that.

A new trial was scheduled for this past January, then deferred until April. But in the weeks following the trial, an extraordinary thing happened. Read had been facing three separate charges. A number of jurors came forward to say that they had unanimously agreed to acquit Read on the most serious charge—second-degree murder—as well as the charge of leaving the scene of a crime; they had reached an impasse only on the lesser manslaughter charge (where a majority of them favored a guilty verdict). But during the court proceedings, no one had asked them if they'd reached unanimity on any of the individual charges. Read's legal team argued that she could not be fairly tried again on these charges, as this would be double jeopardy; the prosecution argued that as no such verdicts had been officially recorded, double jeopardy did not apply. The issue is working its way through the courts.

After recovering from his initial dismay at the mistrial, Kearney carried on undeterred. He conducted new field experiments, explored new angles, and covered every new development. He got a juror to speak on the record about the deliberations. According to this juror, those who believed Read guilty of manslaughter focused on how drunk she'd been, and on the acceleration data from the car; those who believed her not guilty did not buy that O'Keefe's injuries could have been caused by a collision with a reversing car. Many of the issues Kearney considered most important—the alleged 2:27 a.m. Google search, the Apple Health data suggesting that O'Keefe had gone into the house, Officer Proctor's prior relationship with the Albert family—were apparently not central to their deliberations. "I'm in this world where I consume Karen Read content every day, and we all know it like the back of our hand," he told me. "But the people deciding the case didn't really seem to know it that well, if that makes sense."

On a livestream shortly after speaking with the juror, Kearney let rip. Yes, the jury had unanimously taken murder off the table, but how could any sentient juror have believed what he now knew some of them did? If you were to question any of the jurors who voted guilty on the manslaughter charge about whether they would have staked their children's lives on that verdict being correct, he asked rhetorically, what would they say? "Would you bet your children's lives on that fact, that Karen Read's guilty? Would

you? Would you? Because I would bet anyone's—like, literally anyone's—life that Karen Read is not guilty and not think twice about it ... I'm that fucking positive." He couldn't understand how the jurors who'd considered Read guilty of anything could think otherwise. "I hope they burn in hell, to be perfectly honest with you, those people. I really do. They're fucking terrible people."

K **EARNEY AND READ** had stopped talking just before he was imprisoned, in December 2023, and some trial commentators had speculated that she was done with him. But on June 6 of last year, when I met him after court, he told me, "I actually talked to Karen for the first time in six months today," and explained how he'd asked her a question outside court about foot-age of her car's taillight, and she'd answered him with a big smile.

Kearney told me that he and Read resumed private contact a few days after that conversation in the street. The ice broke on June 10, the day of Michael Proctor's catastrophic testimony. "I sent her a message on Signal, and I just said, 'Good day. Now the whole world knows what an asshole he is.'" Read replied, concurring. "That reinvigorated conversation between the two of us," he said. Now they're back in more regular communication. "We just discuss various things about the trial and our thoughts on it," he said. "My thoughts on it, basically."

When Kearney sometimes talks about the cause of defending Read's innocence as a kind of calling, he can sound jarringly grandiose. If he were to allow his arrest on "trumped-up, ridiculous charges" to cause him to back off, he told me one day, "I feel like I would be almost disrespecting everything our Founding Fathers believed in and risked their lives for. Our Founding Fathers were rich, all of them. And so they had the most to lose. People like Benjamin Franklin, John Adams. They could have just gotten along under British rule. They would have been fine. But ... principles mattered with these people. And when they signed the Declaration of Independence, they knew that it was probably a 90 percent chance they had just signed their own death warrant. But it was worth it. It was worth it to abolitionists. To people like Martin Luther King. The great people in American history are the people who risked their own well-being for something bigger than themselves. I'm not comparing myself to them ..."

People listening to that are going to say, "So you're saying there's a lineage: Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Martin Luther King ... Turtleboy?"

"Yeah, well, I think what's happening with Karen Read is along those lines ... Obviously this is a smaller scale. I'm not George Washington. But I just feel like you have to speak up about this."

And so on he goes—fighting his own witness-intimidation charges while chronicling, with renewed intensity, each twist in the Karen Read saga. "I'm going to ride this out as long as I can," he told me, "because it's my thing." *A*

Chris Heath is a contributing writer at The Atlantic. He is the author of No Road Leading Back—An Improbable Escape From the Nazis and the Tangled Way We Tell the Story of the Holocaust.

ADVERTISEMENT

Donald Trump



With the stroke of his pen, Trump cut off millions of dollars in aid to organizations that provide reproductive health services to women with no other options for care. Help us fill the gap.

Donate to Choose Choice. Now.

msiunitedstates.org

 **MSI**
**REPRODUCTIVE
CHOICES**

Culture & Critics

OMNIVORE

The Internet Can Still Be Good

*Reddit, of all places,
suggests how.*

By Adrienne LaFrance

In the ever-expanding universe of obsolete sounds, few can compare to the confident yawp of a dial-up modem. Back in the early days, the internet was slow, but we didn't know it yet. Or at least we didn't care. And why should we have? The stuff of the web was organic, something you had to plant and then harvest. It took time. Websites popped up like wildflowers. Far-flung enthusiasts found one another, but gradually. Nobody owned the web,



SHUTTERSTOCK; BURAZIN / GETTY

and everybody did. It was open, and everything seemed possible. Everything *was* possible. Maybe it still is.

Strange things are happening online these days. Strange *bad*, clearly. But also strange *good*. One unexpected development is that Reddit, long dogged by a reputation for mischief and mayhem, has achieved a kind of mass appeal. If you ask your friends where they've been hanging out online lately, you're likely to hear some of them say *Reddit, actually*, perhaps with a tinge of surprise.

Reddit's founders didn't set out to save the web. College roommates Steve Huffman and Alexis Ohanian wanted to create a mobile food-ordering service. But their idea didn't make sense, at least not at the time. It was 2005; the iPhone didn't exist yet. So they built something else, no less ambitious: a site that promised to be "the front page of the internet." Reddit was a place to share all manner of memes, photographs, questions, embarrassing stories, and ideas. Users could upvote posts into internet virality, or sometimes infamy. Eventually, they built their own communities, known as subreddits.

For the first decade of its existence, Reddit was not exactly a respectable place to hang out. Like its spiritual cousin 4chan, Reddit was primarily known for, among other things, creepshots, revenge porn, abject racism, anti-Semitism, and violent misogyny. Endearing corners of Reddit existed, but you couldn't get to them without stumbling over some seriously disturbing material.

Some of that disturbing material is still there if you look for it, but lately, the gross stuff has been crowded out by the good stuff, and more and more people have congregated on Reddit. Last year the company went public, saw a huge swell in audience, and became profitable for the first time in its history. And though its runaway growth slowed last quarter, Reddit says it now has more than 100 million daily users and more than 100,000 active communities.

The joy of Reddit comes from it being simultaneously niche and expansive—like an infinite world's fair of subcultures, fandoms, support groups, and curiosities. There seems to be a subreddit for everyone and everything. There are mainstream subreddits with popular appeal, such as r/askscience (26 million users) and r/technology (18 million users). But there are also more esoteric forums, such as r/rentnerzeigenaufdinge, the German-language subreddit that's devoted to context-free photos of retirees pointing at random things. (That group's stated purpose: *Hier bekommen alte Menschen die Bühne, die sie verdienen*. "Here, old people get the stage they deserve.") There's r/notblueberry, where people share images of berries that are not blueberries, which other people often warn them not to eat. Some subreddits exist just to

The joy of Reddit comes from it being simultaneously niche and expansive—like an infinite world's fair of subcultures.

deliver a punch line, like r/Lurkers, a community with more than 41,000 members in which no one posts anything at all.

Asking someone where they spend time on Reddit opens a window onto their personality that can be surprisingly intimate. Here, I'll go: I love r/whatisit, where users share photos of confusing objects they encounter; r/Honolulu, which is a mix of island news and extremely local references; r/tipofmytongue, where people ask for help finding or identifying "un-googleable" songs, movies, books, or other scraps of cultural memory; r/metropolis, dedicated entirely to Fritz Lang's 1927 film of the same name; and r/MildlyVandalised, a place to share milquetoast visual pranks, such as a shelf of *World Book Encyclopedias* rearranged so their spines lined up to say WEIRD COCK. (Reddit may be less hateful these days, but it is still juvenile.)

There is a subreddit where violinists gently correct one another's bow holds, a subreddit for rowers where people compare erg scores, and a subreddit for people who are honest-to-God allergic to the cold and trade tips about which antihistamine regimen works best. One subreddit is for people who encounter cookie cutters whose shapes they cannot decipher. The responses reliably entail a mix of sincere sleuthing to find the answer and ridiculously creative and crude joke guesses.

Not everything on Reddit is merely cute, of course. I have lost count of the number of friends who have mentioned to me that they add the word *Reddit* to their Google searches—a shortcut to the place where they know they'll find the best information online. Google, once the unsurpassed King of Search, has become hostile to its users, surfacing hilariously unhelpful AI responses (including telling people to eat rocks and glue) and making it woefully difficult to retrieve credible information, even when you know exactly what source you're looking for. Reddit, by contrast, offers truly specialized knowledge for every need. It provides travel tips to every conceivable destination and practical advice for every imaginable home-improvement project. One friend told me about using Reddit to find the right tension for his tennis-racket strings and the best embroiderer for a custom hockey jersey. And although the wisdom of the crowd is not fact-checked, Reddit's culture tends to be equal parts generous and skeptical—meaning that good, or at least helpful, information often rises to the top.

Recently, on the r/creepy subreddit, someone posted about having found a tiny skeleton under the floorboards in their house. "Am I cursed for eternity now?" they wanted to know. The top reply came from someone who explained that they were a zoo-archaeologist and could therefore be "95% certain

this is a mouse skeleton,” and offered to send their own photo of a mouse skeleton for reference. “Hell yeah,” someone else chimed in. “Ask a random question and get an answer from someone who specializes in the exact niche. Amazing.”

HOW DID THIS HAPPEN? How did Reddit go from being a disgusting fever swamp to an oasis of happiness, expertise, exuberance? Excising the most egregious subreddits was the first step, and not an uncontroversial one. Good and necessary free-speech debates followed. But the site has always given its users more control than other major social platforms. Reddit’s moderators are almost exclusively volunteers, and they are power users. They set the rules for the subreddits they run, and they tend to take their job seriously. The subreddit *r/AskHistorians* has a reputation for being one of the most heavily moderated communities on Reddit—rather than deleting some comments, it seems to delete most of them. If you don’t like that, and there are plenty of people who don’t, you can join another subreddit for history buffs. Or start your own.

On Reddit, it’s people—not the platform—who decide what any one community should be. (Reddit does still ban whole subreddits sometimes, as it did recently with a group posting violent threats.) Even the most ridiculous forums make their expectations known. In the subreddit *r/DivorcedBirds*, which is for sharing images of birds that “look like serial monogamists,” moderators specify the following: “Please post pictures of birds who look like they are twice divorced (or more!) and an original caption about their backstory.” Also: No photos of “human women”; no art, paintings, or Photoshop; and “no dead birds.”

Giving users this much control over a major social platform is basically unheard-of anymore. It’s a throwback to the early web, when people had to tend to the sites they wanted to be a part of, and it’s a stark contrast to the way other social-media sites have evolved.

Reddit is surging at a time when much of the rest of the social web has curdled. The mainstream platforms are overrun with a combination of bots, bigots, and bad AI, especially because platforms such as X and Facebook have declared that the substance of what people post is of no concern to them. Which is how we got to the point that Reddit, of all places, has developed a reputation as a force for good, or at least a force for reminding people of the promise of a decentralized open web.

The social giants that worship at the altar of megascale—Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, X—have chosen to do so at the expense of humanity. They train their algorithms to feed people the things that make them angry and afraid and keep them scrolling.

Reddit has its own ambitions for exponential growth, but so far it has managed to retain a small-group feeling while still operating at scale.

The question is whether this is a sustainable model. What if this golden moment for Reddit is not a renaissance but a last hurrah—one final reminder of what could have been, before a tsunami of AI wipes out the places that once sparkled with humanity? Reddit recently unveiled its own AI product, Reddit Answers, to the disgust of many of its users. And some long-time users worry that something essential will be lost as normies flock to the platform.

For now, though, Reddit remains wildly original and startlingly generous, which is to say, deeply and gorgeously human. It provides connection to others, stokes curiosity, and—at least in some subreddits—leaves you with a feeling of time well spent, a rarity on other social platforms. Because as different as each Reddit community is, every good subreddit is irrepressibly captivating for the same reason: the people.

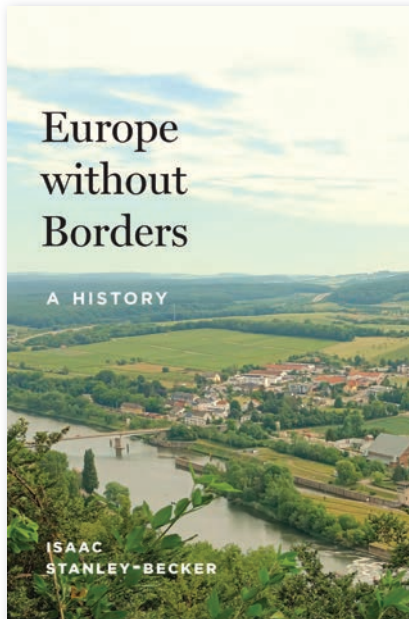
Recently, someone posted a question on *r/AskReddit*: “What have you done on this platform that you’re most proud of?” The answers ranged from earnest to irreverent. People described feeling good about having used Reddit to read more, and to challenge their understanding of the world. Others praised themselves for not posting mean comments when they had the impulse to. One person described having spent two years on a guitar subreddit learning 100 different solos. Another described how they’d posted a cookbook of reverse-engineered Panda Express recipes to the delight of other users (though not, apparently, to the delight of Panda Express). Somebody else felt proud of having taught fellow Redditors how to open a box filled with packing peanuts without making a mess. One wrote: “I’ve been helping strangers with their various math questions for over ten years!” Another: “I make people laugh from time to time.”

What Reddit does, it turns out, is give people a space that they can create and collectively control, and where they can ask one another question after question after question, in every possible permutation. The place is flooded with expertise and genuine wisdom, and it’s filthy with rabbit holes. But the only two questions that people ever really ask on Reddit, if you think about it, are these: *Am I alone? Am I okay?* And after all these years, in subreddit after subreddit, no matter what the topic at hand is, the same answers keep coming: *You aren’t alone. And you might not be okay. But we’re here.* *A*

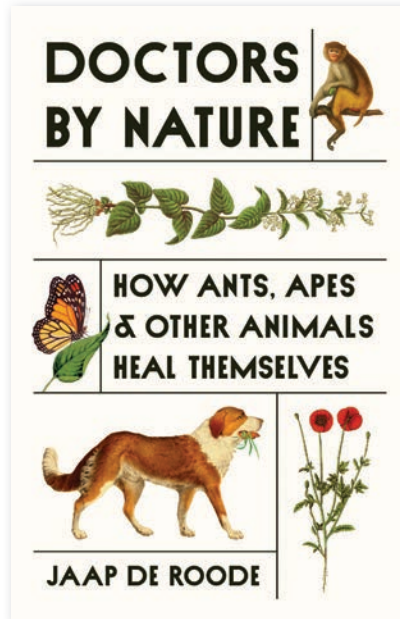
*For now,
Reddit remains
wildly original
and startlingly
generous,
which is to say,
deeply and
gorgeously
human.*

Adrienne LaFrance is the executive editor of The Atlantic.

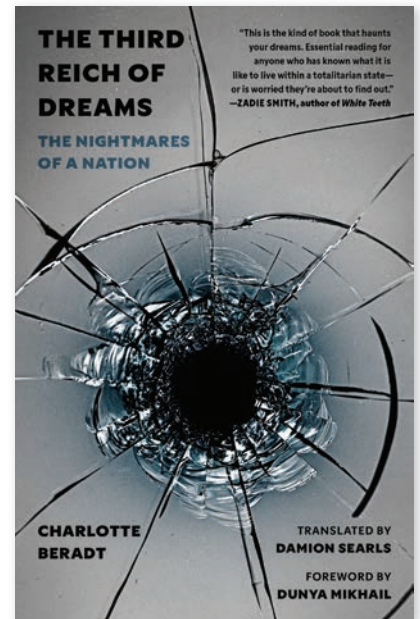
New from Princeton University Press



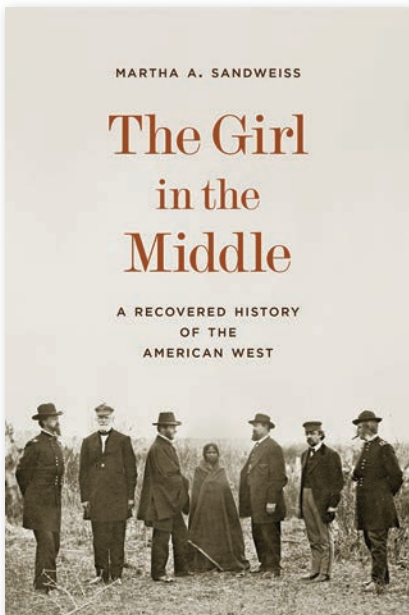
“*[Europe Without Borders]* not only functions as an engaging study of Europe’s past, but also as an explanation of its present condition.”
—Tim Brinkhoff, *Jacobin*



“This eye-opening book will forever change how you view the intelligence and ingenuity of our fellow creatures.”
—Neil Shubin, author of *Your Inner Fish*



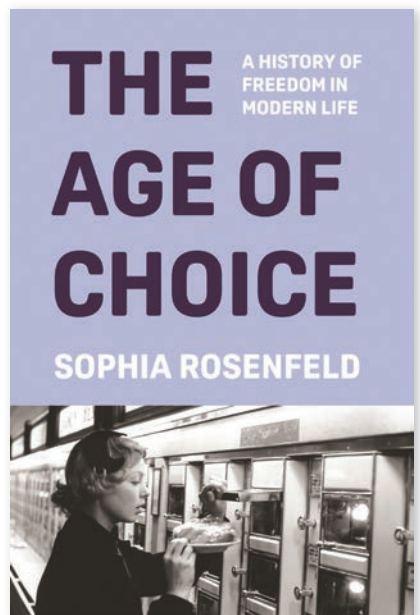
“Essential reading for anyone who has known what it is like to live within a totalitarian state—or is worried they’re about to find out.”
—Zadie Smith, author of *White Teeth*



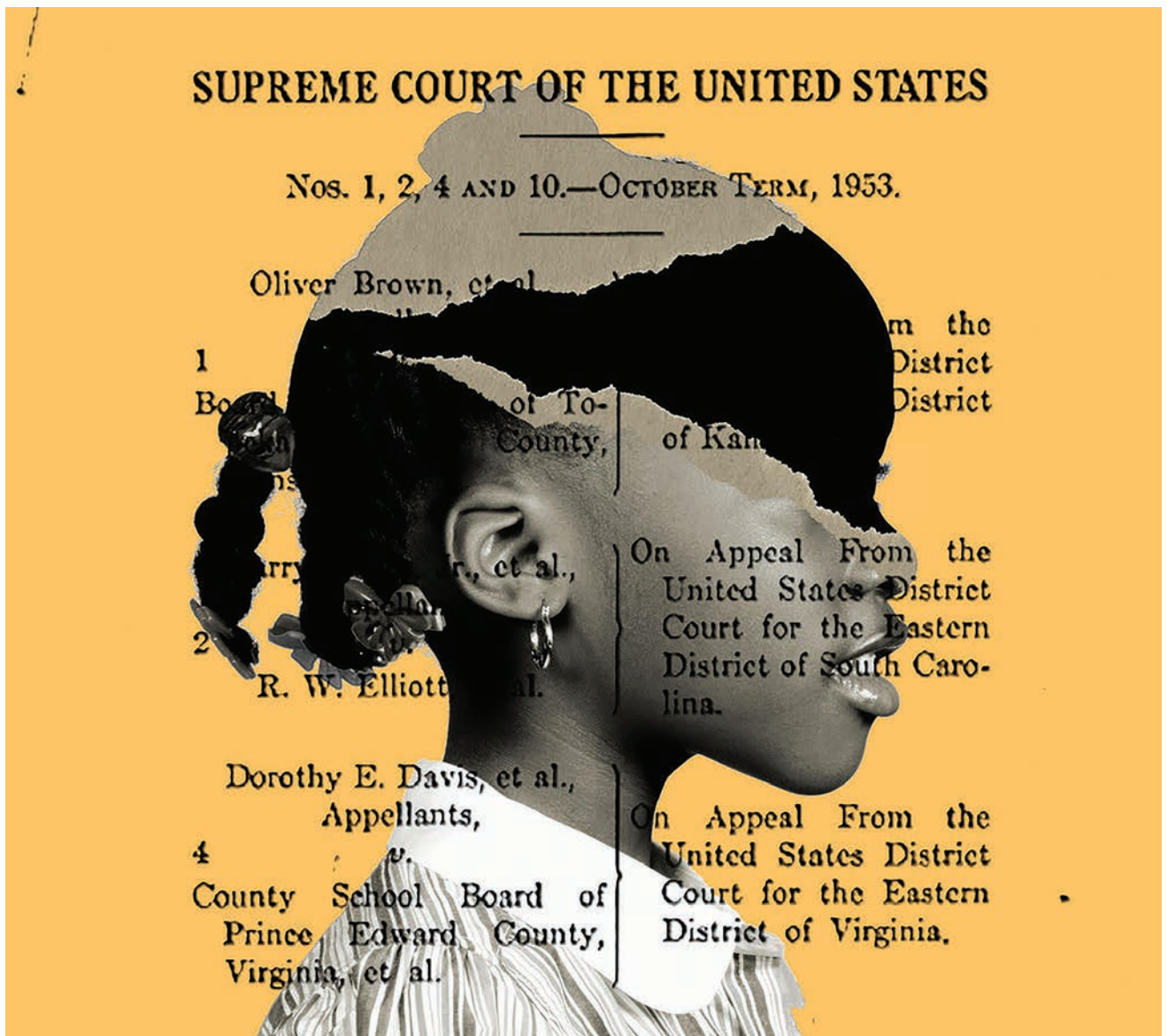
“Thoroughly researched and beautifully written, this book both teases the brain and pulls at the heart.”
—Elliott West, author of *Continental Reckoning*



“A bombshell. This book exploded my previously firmly held beliefs about Covid prevention.”
—Jane Mansbridge, Harvard University



“How the experience of choosing...[became] the hallmark, at least in liberal, democratic societies, of any life worth living.”
—Stephen Greenblatt, *New York Times*



BOOKS

Was Integration the Wrong Goal?

Why some mainstream Black intellectuals are giving up on Brown v. Board of Education

By Justin Driver

On May 17, 1954, a nervous 45-year-old lawyer named Thurgood Marshall took a seat in the Supreme Court's gallery. The founder and director of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund hoped to learn that he had prevailed in his pivotal case. When Chief Justice Earl Warren announced the Court's opinion in *Brown v. Board of Education*, Marshall could not have known that he had also won what is still widely considered the most significant legal decision in American history. Hearing Warren declare "that in the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place" delivered Marshall into a state of euphoria. "I was so happy, I was numb," he said. After exiting the

SEAN DE BURCA / GETTY; NATIONAL ARCHIVES

courtroom, he joyously swung a small boy atop his shoulders and galloped around the austere marble hall. Later, he told reporters, “It is the greatest victory we ever had.”

For Marshall, the “we” who triumphed in *Brown* surely referred not only, or even primarily, to himself and his Legal Defense Fund colleagues, but to the entire Black race, on whose behalf they’d toiled. And Black Americans did indeed find *Brown* exhilarating. Harlem’s *Amsterdam News*, echoing Marshall, called *Brown* “the greatest victory for the Negro people since the Emancipation Proclamation.” W. E. B. Du Bois stated, “I have seen the impossible happen. It did happen on May 17, 1954.” When Oliver Brown learned of the outcome in the lawsuit bearing his surname, he gathered his family near, and credited divine providence: “Thanks be to God for this.” Martin Luther King Jr. encouraged Montgomery’s activists in 1955 by invoking *Brown*: “If we are wrong, then the Supreme Court of this nation is wrong. If we are wrong, the Constitution of the United States is wrong. If we are wrong, God Almighty is wrong.” Many Black people viewed the opinion with such awe and reverence that for years afterward, they threw parties on May 17 to celebrate *Brown*’s anniversary.

Over time, however, some began questioning what exactly made *Brown* worthy of celebration. In 1965, Malcolm X in his autobiography voiced an early criticism of *Brown*: It had yielded precious little school desegregation over the previous decade. Calling the decision “one of the greatest magical feats ever performed in America,” he contended that the Court’s “masters of legal phraseology” had used “trickery and magic that told Negroes they were desegregated—Hooray! Hooray!—and at the same time ... told whites ‘Here are your loopholes.’”

But that criticism paled in comparison with the anti-*Brown* denunciation in Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton’s *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* two years later. They condemned not *Brown*’s implementation, but its orientation. The fundamental aim of integration must be abandoned because it was driven by the “assumption that there is nothing of value in the black community,” they maintained.

To sprinkle black children among white pupils in outlying schools is at best a stop-gap measure. The goal is not to take black children out of the black community and expose them to white middle-class values; the goal is to build and strengthen the black community.

Although Black skeptics of the integration ideal originated on the far left, Black conservatives—including the economist Thomas Sowell—have more recently ventured related critiques. The most prominent example is Marshall’s successor on the Supreme

Court, Justice Clarence Thomas. In 1995, four years after joining the Court, Thomas issued a blistering opinion that opened, “It never ceases to amaze me that the courts are so willing to assume that anything that is predominantly black must be inferior.”

Desperate efforts to promote school integration, Thomas argued, stemmed from the misperception that identifiably Black schools were somehow doomed to fail because of their racial composition. “There is no reason to think that black students cannot learn as well when surrounded by members of their own race as when they are in an integrated environment,” he wrote. Taking a page from *Black Power*’s communal emphasis, Thomas argued that “black schools can function as the center and symbol of black communities, and provide examples of independent black leadership, success, and achievement.” In a 2007 opinion, he extolled Washington, D.C.’s all-Black Dunbar High School—which sent dozens of graduates to the Ivy League and its ilk during the early 20th century—as a paragon of Black excellence.

In the 2000s, as *Brown* crept toward its 50th anniversary, Derrick Bell of the NYU School of Law went so far as to allege that the opinion had been wrongly decided. For Bell, who had sharpened his skills as an LDF lawyer, *Brown*’s “integration ethic centralizes whiteness. White bodies are represented as somehow exuding an intrinsic value that percolates into the ‘hearts and minds’ of black children.” Warren’s opinion in the case should have affirmed *Plessy v. Ferguson*’s “separate but equal” regime, Bell wrote, but it should have insisted on genuine equality of expenditures, rather than permitting the sham equality of yore that consigned Black students to shoddy classrooms in dilapidated buildings. He acknowledged, though, that his jaundiced account put him at odds with dominant American legal and cultural attitudes: “The *Brown* decision,” he noted, “has become so sacrosanct in law and in the beliefs of most Americans that any critic is deemed wrongheaded, even a traitor to the cause.”

IN HER NEW BOOK, *Integrated: How American Schools Failed Black Children*, Noliwe Rooks adds to a growing literature that challenges the portrayal of the decision as “a significant civil rights-era win.” Rooks, the chair of the Africana-studies department at Brown University, offers an unusual blend of historical examination and family memoir that generally amplifies the concerns articulated by prior desegregation discontents. The result merits careful attention not for its innovative arguments, but as an impassioned, arresting example of how *Brown* skepticism, which initially gained traction on the fringes of Black life, has come to hold considerable appeal within the Black intellectual mainstream.

The Brown decision, Rooks writes, should be viewed as “an attack on Black schools, politics, and communities.”

As recently as midway through the first Trump administration, Rooks would have placed herself firmly in the traditional pro-*Brown* camp, convinced that addressing racial inequality in education could best be pursued through integration. But traveling a few years ago to promote a book that criticized how private schools often thwart meaningful racial integration, she repeatedly encountered audience members who disparaged her core embrace of integration. Again and again, she heard from Black parents that “the trauma their children experienced in predominantly white schools and from white teachers was sometimes more harmful than the undereducation occurring in segregated schools.”

The onslaught dislodged Rooks’s faith in the value of contemporary integration, and even of *Brown* itself. She now exhibits the convert’s zeal. *Brown*, she writes, should be viewed as “an attack on Black schools, politics, and communities, which meant it was an attack on the pillars of Black life.” For some Black citizens, the decision acted as “a wrecking ball that crashed through their communities and, like a pendulum, continues to swing.”

Rooks emphasizes the plight of Black educators, who disproportionately lost their positions in *Brown*’s aftermath because of school consolidations. Before *Brown*, she argues, “Black teachers did not see themselves as just teaching music, reading, or science, but also as activists, organizers, and freedom fighters who dreamed of and fought for an equitable world for future generations”; they served as models who showed “Black children how to fight for respect and societal change.”

Endorsing one of *Black Power*’s analogies, she maintains that school integration meant that “as small a number as possible of Black children were, like pepper on popcorn, lightly sprinkled atop wealthy, white school environments, while most others were left behind.” Even for those ostensibly fortunate few flecks of pepper, Rooks insists, providing the white world’s seasoning turned out to be a highly uncertain, dangerous endeavor. She uses her father’s disastrous experiences with integration to examine what she regards as the perils of the entire enterprise. After excelling in all-Black educational environments, including as an undergraduate at Howard University, Milton Rooks became one of a very small number of Black students to enroll at the Golden Gate University School of Law in the early 1960s.

Sent by his hopeful parents “over that racial wall,” Milton encountered hostility from white professors, who doubted his intellectual capacity, Rooks recounts, and “spit him back up like a piece of meat poorly digested.” She asserts that the ordeal not only prompted him to drop out of law school but also spurred his descent into alcoholism. Rooks extrapolates further, writing:

INTEGRATED:
HOW AMERICAN
SCHOOLS FAILED
BLACK CHILDREN

Noliwe Rooks

PANTHEON

Milton’s experience reflected the trauma Black students suffered as they desegregated public schools in states above the Mason-Dixon Line, where displays of racism were often mocking, disdainful, pitying, and sword sharp in their ability to cut the unsuspecting into tiny bits. It destroyed confidence, shook will, sowed doubt, murdered souls—quietly, sure, but still as completely as could a mob of white racists setting their cowardice, rage, and anger loose upon the defenseless.

The harms that contemporary integrated educational environments inflict upon Black students can be tantamount, in her view, to the harms imposed upon the many Black students who are forced to attend monoracial, woeful urban high schools. To make this point, Rooks recounts her own struggle to correct the misplacement of her son, Jelani, in a low-level math class in Princeton, New Jersey’s public-school system during the aughts (when she taught at Princeton University). She witnessed other Black parents meet with a similar lack of support in guiding their children to the academically demanding courses that could propel them to elite colleges. In Jelani’s case, she had evidence that teachers’ “feelings were hardening against him.” He led a life of relative safety and economic privilege, and felt at ease among his white classmates and friends, she allows, even as she also stresses that what he “experienced wasn’t the violence of poverty; it was something else equally devastating”:

We knew that poor, working-class, or urban communities were not the only places where Black boys are terrorized and traumatized. We knew that the unfamiliarity of his white friends with any other Black people would one day become an issue in our home. We knew that guns were not the only way to murder a soul.

Frustrated with Princeton’s public schools, Rooks eventually enrolled Jelani in an elite private high school where, she notes, he also endured racial harassment—and from which he graduated before making his way to Amherst College.

SEVEN DECADES have now elapsed since the Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown*. Given the stubbornly persistent phenomenon of underperforming predominantly Black schools throughout the nation, arguing that *Brown*’s potential has been fully realized would be absurd. Regrettably, the Warren Court declined to advance the most powerful conception of *Brown* when it had the opportunity to do so: Its infamously vague “all deliberate speed” approach allowed state and local implementation to be delayed and opposed for far too long. In its turn, the Burger Court

provided an emaciated conception of *Brown's* meaning, one that permitted many non-southern jurisdictions to avoid pursuing desegregation programs. Rooks deftly sketches this lamentable, sobering history.

Disenchantment with *Brown's* educational efficacy is thus entirely understandable. Yet to suggest that the Supreme Court did not go far enough, fast enough in galvanizing racially constructive change in American schools after *Brown* is one thing. To suggest that *Brown* somehow took a wrong turn is quite another.

Rooks does not deny that integration succeeded in narrowing the racial achievement gap. But like other *Brown* critics, she nevertheless idealizes the era of racial segregation. Near *Integrated's* conclusion, Rooks contends that “too few of us have a memory of segregated Black schools as the beating heart of vibrant Black communities, enabling students to compose lives of harmony, melody, and rhythm and sustained Black life and dignity.” But this claim gets matters exactly backwards. The brave people who bore segregation’s brunt believed that Jim Crow represented an assault on Black life and dignity, and that *Brown* marked a sea change in Black self-conceptions.

Desegregation’s detractors routinely elevate the glory days of D.C.’s Dunbar High School, but they refuse to heed the lessons of its most distinguished graduates. Charles Hamilton Houston—Dunbar class of 1911, who went on to become valedictorian at Amherst and the *Harvard Law Review's* first Black editor—nevertheless dedicated his life to eradicating Jim Crow as an NAACP litigator and Thurgood Marshall’s mentor in his work contesting educational segregation. Sterling A. Brown—Dunbar class of 1918, who graduated from Williams College before becoming a distinguished poet and professor—nevertheless wrote the following in 1944, one decade before *Brown*:

Negroes recognize that the phrase “equal but separate accommodations” is a myth. They have known Jim Crow a long time, and they know Jim Crow means scorn and not belonging.

Much as they valued having talented, caring teachers, these men understood racial segregation intimately, and they detested it.

In the 1990s, Nelson B. Rivers III, an unheralded NAACP official from South Carolina, memorably heaved buckets of cold water on those who were beginning to wonder, “Was integration the right thing to do? Was it worth it? Was *Brown* a good decision?” Rivers dismissed such questions as “asinine,” and continued:

To this day, I can remember bus drivers pulling off and blowing smoke in my mother’s face. I can

remember the back of the bus, colored water fountains ... I can hear a cop telling me, “Take your black butt back to nigger town.” What I tell folk ... is that there are a lot of romanticists now who want to take this trip down Memory Lane, and they want to go back, and I tell the young people that anybody who wants to take you back to segregation, make sure you get a round-trip ticket because you won’t stay.

Nostalgia for the pre-*Brown* era would not exercise nearly so powerful a grip on Black America today if its adherents focused on its detailed, pervasive inhumanities rather than relying on gauzy glimpses.

No one has pressed this point more vividly than Robert L. Carter, who worked alongside Marshall at the LDF before eventually becoming a distinguished federal judge. He understood that to search for *Brown's* impact exclusively in the educational domain is mistaken. Instead, he emphasized that *Brown* fomented a broad-gauge racial revolution throughout American public life. Despite Chief Justice Warren formally writing the opinion to apply exclusively to education, its attack on segregation has—paradoxically—been most efficacious beyond that original context.

“The psychological dimensions of America’s race relations problem were completely recast” by *Brown*, Carter wrote. “Blacks were no longer supplicants seeking, pleading, begging to be treated as full-fledged members of the human race; no longer were they appealing to morality, to conscience, to white America’s better instincts,” he noted. “They were entitled to equal treatment as a right under the law; when such treatment was denied, they were being deprived—in fact robbed—of what was legally theirs. As a result, the Negro was propelled into a stance of insistent militancy.”

Even within the educational sphere, though, it is profoundly misguided to claim that Black students who attend solid, meaningfully integrated schools encounter environments as corrosive as, or worse than, those facing students trapped in ghetto schools. This damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don’t analysis suggests an entire cohort stuck in the same boat, when its many members are not even in the same ocean. The Black student marooned in a poor and violent neighborhood, with reason to fear actual murder, envies the Black student attending a rigorous, integrated school who worries about metaphorical “soul murder.” All struggles are not created equal. *A*

Justin Driver is a professor at Yale Law School and the author of The Schoolhouse Gate: Public Education, the Supreme Court, and the Battle for the American Mind.

BOOKS

The Last Great Yiddish Novel

Chaim Grade's Sons and Daughters rescues a destroyed world.

By Judith Shulevitz



The Yiddish poet Chaim Grade survived World War II by fleeing his city, Vilna, now Vilnius, and wandering through the Soviet Union and its Central Asian republics. His wife and mother stayed behind and were murdered, probably in the Ponary forest outside Vilna, along with 75,000 others, mostly Jews. After the war, Grade moved to the United States and wrote some of the best novels in the Yiddish language, all woefully little known.

Before he left for America, however, he went back to Vilna, previously a center of Eastern European Jewish cultural, intellectual, and religious life—"the Jerusalem of Lithuania." In his memoir, *My Mother's Sabbath Days*, he describes what he found there. The impossibility of conveying in ordinary Yiddish the experience of walking through the empty streets of one's eradicated civilization pushes Grade into a biblical register. His mother's home is intact, he writes, but cobwebs bar his entry "like the angels with flaming swords who barred Adam and Eve from returning to Eden."

Later, he goes to the Synagogue Courtyard. With its impressive library, ritual bath, and houses of worship great and small, it was the Lithuanian Jerusalem's functional equivalent of the Holy Temple. Now the courtyard lies in ruins, and in his anguish, Grade's voice takes on the proclamatory cadences of a prophet. Not just any prophet but, I think, Ezekiel, the subject of an early poem of his. Ezekiel did his prophesying from exile before and after the destruction of the First Temple in the Babylonian conquest of 586 B.C.E., another defining cataclysm in Jewish history. In Ezekiel's most famous vision, he sees a valley full of dried bones and, channeling the words of God, raises the bones, creating an army of the resurrected. Grade wouldn't

have encountered bones—the Nazis ordered Ponary’s corpses to be dug up and burned during the war—but from under the heaps of stones come prayers, “all the prayers that Jews have uttered for hundreds of years.” He hears them without hearing them, because what screams, he says, is the silence.

GRADE WAS BORN in 1910, came to the U.S. in 1948, and died in New York in 1982; he devoted the second half of his life to re-creating the universe wiped out in the first half. He turned to prose, a form better suited than poetry to inventorying the psychological and material conditions of a complex and divided society, and he developed an almost Flaubertian passion for detail. His main subjects were poor Jews—he himself grew up in a dark cellar behind a smithy—and the hermetic world of Lithuanian *Misnagdic* rabbis and their yeshivas, which relatively few Yiddish writers of the time knew or wrote much about. Scholarly and strict about Jewish law, *Misnagdic* Jews looked down on the anti-intellectual, antinomian mysticism of Hasidic Jews. If your image of Old World Jewry comes from Grade’s contemporary Isaac Bashevis Singer, with his kabbalists, dybbuks, and elaborate rabbinic courts, swap in Lithuanian Talmudists conducting self-critique and doing pilpul—close textual analysis—in spartan houses of study.

Grade’s father was a maskil, an intellectual who adhered to the Haskalah, or Jewish Enlightenment, movement. But the general penury that followed World War I reduced him to working as a night watchman, and he died young, leaving Grade’s mother to support herself and Grade by selling fruit. She sent him to a yeshiva mostly because she could afford it, but also because she was devout. There he was trained in musar, a particularly rigorous—you might even say puritanical—strain of *Misnagdic* Judaism.

Grade studied rabbinics into his 20s, then turned secular and became a member of Young Vilna, a now-legendary group of leftist, modernist Yiddish writers. Although he never became a practicing Jew again, he didn’t turn against his teachers and their maximalist approach. On the contrary, Grade observes their fictional counterparts with a knowing, sometimes cynical, but always loving eye. He doesn’t ridicule them, at least not unduly, nor does he apologize on their behalf, and their single-minded pursuit of Torah can be inspiring.

Grade’s novels aren’t oracular, the way the section on postwar Vilna in his memoir was. But his ambition is still biblical. I don’t think the word overreaches. The Torah, thought to have been compiled over centuries in response to catastrophes and traumas, including that same Babylonian exile, is also a product of the impulse to preserve memories and knowledge all but

lost in a calamity, lest the dispersed Jews forget who they’d been. Grade considered his undertaking a sort of holy assignment. “I’ve always found it strange that I have so little faith and yet believe, with complete faith, that Providence saved me and allowed me to live, in order to immortalize the *great generation* that I knew,” he wrote in a letter in 1977.

Another striking feature of Grade’s fiction is that it almost never acknowledges the imminent annihilation of the world it so meticulously reconstructs—as if by ignoring that obscene fact, he could annul it. “The mission of his prose after the war is to undo the Holocaust through literature, if you can imagine such a thing,” the historian David Fishman, a friend of Grade’s and lifelong champion of his work, said at a 2012 conference on the writer at the Yiddish Book Center.

The risk writers run when they set out to memorialize is that they’ll produce memorials, not literature. Grade didn’t do that. His novels jam almost too much life into their pages. That’s not a criticism, because the streets of prewar Jewish Eastern Europe also jostled and overflowed; Grade’s prose mimetically reproduces the way Jews thronged in their tight quarters. His major accomplishment, though, is at the level of the individual characters. They’re vortices of ambivalence, anxious and raw and at odds with themselves, hypercritical yet hypersensitive, repressed but not undersexed, subject to delusions of grandeur or abasement or both in turns. On the whole, they’re good people. They scheme and bicker and get on one another’s nerves, and yet they have deep family feeling, and few of his protagonists wholly free themselves from a yearning for contact with the divine. The dominant emotion in a Grade novel is tortured loyalty.

Sons and Daughters is Grade’s last novel, and the most recent of his fictional works to be translated and published. He wrote it in weekly installments that appeared in Yiddish newspapers, with intermittent interruptions, from 1965 to 1976. When he died a few years later, Grade had adapted some of the columns into the first volume of a novel, but hadn’t finished the second. Neither the first nor the uncompleted second volume saw the light of day until they were brought out this year as a single novel in an English translation by Rose Waldman.

Sons and Daughters unfolds during the early 1930s, primarily in shtetls in what was then Poland and is now mostly Lithuania and Belarus. It tells the stories of two families of rabbis that are fragmenting under the pressure of modernity. The rabbis, both of high repute, belong to different generations and display differing levels of stringency—the stricter is a grandfather; the other, his son-in-law, is more lenient but by no means lax. Both expect their own sons to become rabbis too, or at least Torah scholars, and

Grade’s fiction almost never acknowledges the imminent annihilation of the world it so meticulously reconstructs.

their daughters to marry men of the same ilk. I can't emphasize enough the intensity of the obligation felt by Jewish parents of the time to make sure that they vouchsafed a life of Torah to their children.

Predictably, the children have other ideas. One daughter, loving but stubborn, leaves for Vilna to study nursing. The youngest son, the darling of both families, upsets his father and grandfather by openly aspiring to join the *halutzim*, or Zionist pioneers; the pious Jews of the day abhorred Zionists because they had the audacity to try to found a state in the Holy Land without the intervention of the Messiah. Even worse, Zionists cast off religious strictures, dressing immodestly and eating *treyf* (nonkosher) food. The most *treyf* of the sons is not a Zionist, though. He goes to Switzerland for a doctorate in philosophy, marries a non-Jewish Swiss woman, and doesn't circumcise their son. Whether his parents realize the extent of his apostasy isn't clear. The way the family avoids talking about it, you might think that confronting it directly would kill them.

The theme of intergenerational conflict may sound familiar to anyone who is acquainted with Sholem Aleichem's canonical "Tevye the Milkman" stories, or has seen *Fiddler on the Roof*, which is based on them—or, for that matter, has read Ivan Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, or even D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*. The battle between parents and wayward children is the archetypal plot of modernization. But Grade has his own approach to it. Sholem Aleichem, the most important figure in the late-19th-century Yiddish renaissance, tells it from the father's—Tevye's—point of view. As Ruth Wisse points out in her study of Sholem Aleichem in *The Modern Jewish Canon*, all of his contemporaries writing on the same topic, in Yiddish or Hebrew or a non-Jewish language, more or less side with the rebels.

Grade doesn't wholeheartedly endorse the values of either generation, though he is slightly more sympathetic to the parents. That makes sense: Nothing strengthens the case for tradition more than its destruction. The parents draw us into their earnest struggle to repress their horror at their children's deviations from religious norms. The wife of the younger couple plays deaf and lets disturbing information slide by. Her husband, Sholem Shachne Katzenellenbogen, makes a valiant effort not to recriminate; he blames himself for his children's choices. Would that he were a simple Jew in a poor village, Sholem Shachne thinks. Then he wouldn't have spoiled his children.

His father-in-law, the more severe Rabbi Eli-Leizer Epstein, is not in the habit of second-guessing himself, and he will be harshly punished for his dogmatism by a deranged son. The son is his father's fiendish double, an antic, self-loathing imp who, loudly proclaiming

his adoration of Eli-Leizer, makes a mockery of him. This character may be Grade's most magnificently grotesque creation, half demon, half schlemiel. His get-rich schemes end in disgrace; his marriage to a wealthy heiress bankrupts and breaks her. They move back to his hometown, ostensibly to run a store selling fancy china bequeathed to her by her father (which no one in the poor village wants, and which will soon be smashed to pieces), but really to stalk his father and demolish his reputation. Eli-Leizer comes to understand that his son's aim is to hold up a hideously distorting mirror before him, "bringing him untold humiliation with the mimicking of his piety and his zealotry."

Eventually parents and children start to soften toward each other, but because Grade didn't finish the second volume, we don't know for sure whether or how he would have resolved the tensions. In any case, as readers know even if the characters don't, the Germans would occupy eastern Poland in a few short years, making all other concerns irrelevant. In the background, Grade tracks the whirlwind of history as it picks up speed. Jewish socialist youth groups parade through the marketplace and put on a tumbling show that highlights their muscular and shockingly exposed limbs (they wear shorts). More menacingly, anti-Semitic Polish-nationalist hooligans have mounting success enforcing a boycott against Jewish merchants in villages across the region. All of this really happened in the '30s.

Toward the end of the book, Grade unites life and fiction in the character of a lapsed yeshiva bocher (student) named Khlavneh who has become a Yiddish poet. He is the fiancé of Sholem Shachne's daughter, the one who went to Vilna to study nursing. Lest we fail to grasp that Khlavneh is a self-portrait, Grade drops hints. The daughter, for instance—an attractive, spirited woman, perhaps the most appealing figure in the novel—is named Bluma Rivtcha, a rhyming echo of Frumme-Liebe, the name of Grade's murdered first wife, also a nurse and also the daughter of a rabbi.

Bluma Rivtcha brings Khlavneh home to meet the family. Over Shabbos dinner, the brother who moved to Switzerland and no longer observes Jewish laws ridicules him for writing poetry in "jargon"—that is, Yiddish, the bastard language of the uneducated Jew, "a common person, an ignoramus, a boor"—rather than in Hebrew, and for thinking that he and his fellow Yiddish writers could capture the spirit and poetry of Jewish life without following Jewish law themselves. Khlavneh refutes the brother in a brilliant show of erudition, then concludes: "You hate the jargon boys and girls because they have the courage to be different from their fathers and grandfathers, even to

SONS AND
DAUGHTERS

Chaim Grade,
translated by Rose
Waldman

KNOPF

wage battles with their fathers and grandfathers, and yet, they don't run away from home." The father, who everyone thinks will be offended by a guest's outburst at the Sabbath table, laughs in delight. Grade, having fashioned a world in which the old fights mattered, now gets to win them.

IN GRADE'S LIFETIME, he was considered one of the most important living Yiddish novelists—by those who could read Yiddish. When Isaac Bashevis Singer won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1978, some fellow Yiddish writers believed it should have gone to Grade instead. (In a 1974 review, Elie Wiesel had called him "one of the great—if not the greatest—of living Yiddish novelists," and "the most authentic.") But he never received the wider recognition he deserved. In 1969, Cynthia Ozick published a short story in *Commentary* called "Envy; or, Yiddish in America," which paints a comi-tragic picture of a literary universe that has room for only one famous Yiddish writer. An obscure Yiddish poet in New York named Edelshtein rages against an old friend and enemy—Ostrover, another Yiddish writer in New York—who is internationally acclaimed for his colorful tales of love and sexual perversion, dybbuks and other folkloric creatures. In a harassing late-night call, Edelshtein howls at Ostrover that the murder of Yiddish has turned him into a ghost who doesn't even know he's dead.

Ostrover is Singer, of course, and Edelshtein could have been Grade. Some scholars think he was; others say he was modeled on another forgotten genius, the poet Jacob Glatstein. Ozick herself once said that she'd based Edelshtein at least partially on an uncle, a Hebrew poet. Whichever writer she had in mind, it was a pitch-perfect portrayal of Grade's situation. And he suffered an additional indignity: His name was posthumously all but erased by his widow, Inna. For whatever reasons, including possible mental instability, she foiled almost every attempt to publish his work, whether in Yiddish or in translation. After his death, she signed a contract with his English-language publisher Knopf to bring out *Sons and Daughters* (under a different title, *The Rabbi's House*), but then she stopped responding to the book's editor and the project stalled. His unpublished work became available to the public only after she died, in 2010.

In the four decades since Grade's death, Yiddish has had a revival. Chairs in Yiddish have been endowed at major universities. Klezmer is cool. The number of *haredim*, or ultra-Orthodox Jews, who grow up speaking Yiddish has risen and keeps rising: The *haredi* community has the highest rate of growth in the Jewish world. To be sure, none of this guarantees that Grade will finally get his due. As a rule, *haredim* don't engage with secular texts. And

When Isaac Bashevis Singer won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1978, some fellow Yiddish writers believed it should have gone to Grade instead.

many of those who learn the language in college or read it in translation are drawn to it because it's coded as politically and sexually radical. In the old days, Yiddish—especially written Yiddish—was associated with women, who were not taught Hebrew. Yiddish literature and theater had their golden age in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when a Jewish left and a Jewish avant-garde defiantly embraced the then-stigmatized dialect. Today, it appeals to some in search of an alternative Judaism: Yiddish is not Hebrew, and therefore not Israeli. In the latest twist in the singular history of Yiddish, it has become the emblematic language of Jewish diasporism, the quest to reinvent a Judaism without a Jewish homeland.

Grade's work, however, is not radical. He dabbled in socialism in Vilna, but then he encountered Soviet Communism. He wrote sympathetically about women and created formidable female characters, but his protagonists are mostly male (as is rabbinic society), and I wouldn't call him a feminist. Nor does Grade's account of life in prewar Europe support the diasporist claim that Jews would be perfectly safe without a state.

In the introduction to *Sons and Daughters*, Adam Kirsch calls it "probably the last great Yiddish novel." In all likelihood, he's right, but I like to think that a vibrant Yiddish literary culture just might emerge from the ranks of the religious, as it did in 19th-century Europe. Ex-*haredim* such as Shalom Auslander are writing remarkable memoirs and novels. Admittedly, they're in English. Any real renaissance of the Yiddish novel would require a critical mass of native Yiddish speakers and writers, who almost certainly would have to come from ultra-Orthodox enclaves—which is not unimaginable. Hasidim are already producing historical and adventure novels in Yiddish.

In 2022, the *Forward* ran an essay by Yossi Newfield, who was raised as a Hasidic Jew, about his discovery of Grade's novel *The Yeshiva*: "The struggles Grade so masterfully described between faith and doubt, between Torah and the world, in his words, *di kloyz un di gas*, were my own." Intentionally or not, Newfield echoed something Grade wrote in a letter in 1973: "The writer inside me is a thoroughly ancient Jew, while the man inside me wants to be thoroughly modern. This is my calamity, plain and simple, a struggle I cannot win." The struggle may be an affliction, but it fueled Grade's masterpieces. Who knows? The next great Yiddish novelist may be growing up in *haredi* Brooklyn right now. *A*

Judith Shulevitz is a contributing writer at The Atlantic and the author of The Sabbath World: Glimpses of a Different Order of Time.



BOOKS

The Cranky Visionary

Albert Barnes believed in the liberating power of art—but you had to look at it his way.

By Susan Tallman

Of all the ways that today's plutocrats spend their billions, founding an art museum is one of the more benign, somewhere behind eradicating malaria but ahead of eradicating democracy. The art in these museums is almost always contemporary, reflecting the dearth of available old masters along with a global chattering-classes consensus that avant-garde art is socially, intellectually, and culturally important. Few of these tycoons, though, are likely to find the stakes as agonizingly high as Albert C. Barnes did.

From 1912 to 1951, Barnes amassed one of the world's greatest private collections of modern European artwork—more Cézannes (69) and Renoirs (an absurd 181) than any other museum; Matisse's game-changing *The Joy of Life*; Seurat's extraordinary *Models*; the list goes on and on. The Barnes Foundation was officially an educational institution, but was effectively America's first museum of modern art. (The New York organization that put capital letters on those words is four years younger.) But if Barnes's collection is a model to emulate, the saga of his organization is a lesson in founder's-syndrome perils.

Coinciding with the centennial of the Barnes's opening, we have Blake Gopnik's breezy new biography of the man, *The Maverick's Museum*, and Neil L. Rudenstine's reissued history of the institution, *The House of Barnes*, first published in 2012, when its legal struggles were above-the-fold news. The two deserve to be read together, because the slippage of identity between the man, the art, and the institution provides both the melodrama and the farce of the tale.

Born into ungenteel poverty in 1872, Barnes was smart enough to gain admission to Philadelphia's selective Central High School and the University of Pennsylvania's medical school. Realizing, perhaps, that he lacked something in the bedside-manner department, he went into chemical research, and in 1902 he and his partner commercially released the anti-septic Argyrol, which became standard in American maternity wards for the prevention of perinatal infections. As a chemist, Barnes was a one-hit wonder, but Argyrol made him a fortune.

At first he used his new money in predictable ways. He built a mansion on the Main Line and named it "Lauraston" for

his wife. He bought fast cars (a passion that would be the death of him) and joined the local fox hunt. He also did less clichéd things, such as studying philosophy, reading Sigmund Freud, and supporting civil rights. A fan of the pragmatist thinkers William James and John Dewey, Barnes believed that a theory's worth was measured not by its elegance but by its consequences in the world, and he treated his Argyrol factory as a laboratory for social experimentation. He hired Black and white workers, men and women. Contra then-flourishing notions of top-down, rigidly mandated workplace "efficiency," Barnes boasted that in his factory, "each participant had evolved his or her own method of doing a particular job." The "her" in that sentence alone is noteworthy.

At the same time, Barnes was a crank of operatic grandiosity—thin-skinned, bellicose, distrustful, fickle, and vindictive. Ezra Pound described him as living in "a state of high-tension hysteria, at war with mankind." His bile could be witty, but more often traded on playground scatology, ethnic slurs, and sexual taunts. The Philadelphia Museum of Art was "a house of artistic and educational prostitution"; when a newspaper critic took offense at "the fevered passion for unclean things!" (naked people) in Barnes's collection, he sent a letter impugning her "well-recognized sexual vagaries."

Curious about art, he enlisted the advice of a high-school friend, the Ashcan School painter William Glackens, and in 1912 sent Glackens to Paris with a wish list and \$20,000 (about \$650,000 today). Finding that the Impressionists Barnes sought were costlier than anticipated, Glackens skewed modern. In the course of two weeks, he bought 33 works, including a Picasso, a Cézanne, and the first Van Gogh to enter an American collection, his spellbinding *The Postman*. When Barnes made his own trip to Paris a few months later, he spent three times the money in half the time and lived up to every stereotype the French had about American millionaires. "He did literally wave his chequebook in the air," Gertrude Stein wrote to a friend.

Modernism held attraction for someone who considered himself a pugnaciously original thinker. Collecting old art was posh and respectable, but in an America still scandalized by the sight of breasts, collecting modern art was outrageous. Within 10 years, Barnes had acquired some 700 paintings. But art to him was more than a proxy for cultural sophistication and a fat bank account. It made him feel things—intense and important things—and he would spend the rest of his life trying to map precisely how it did so.

If his obsession with Renoir's late, big-bottomed, pinheaded nudes seems "idiosyncratic in the extreme," as Rudenstine writes, it was shared by Picasso and Matisse, who prized radical departures in form. Barnes

Previous page: *The Barnes Foundation, in Philadelphia, displays its collection in symmetrical "ensembles," guided by formal characteristics such as color, line, and space.*

Ezra Pound described Barnes as living in "a state of high-tension hysteria, at war with mankind."

was a turbulent person and Renoir was his happy place, full of pretty colors and willing flesh. Cézanne appealed for different reasons. Barnes found heroism in the artist's "social strangeness," and saw it mirrored in the art: "His deformations of naturalistic appearances are akin to the brusque remarks ... which, when sociability is the rule, project new interpretations upon conventionally accepted ideas."

Barnes's eye wasn't perfect—he passed on Van Gogh's *Starry Night*—but his instincts were remarkably good. He began buying African sculpture in 1922 and amassed an important collection. He bought old masters whose agitation or distortions recalled the moderns he loved. He bought Egyptian and Greco-Roman antiquities. He bought Native American serapes and jewelry. He bought American folk art and—repudiating the distinction between "art" and "craft"—acquired quantities of handwrought hinges, keyhole plates, and door knockers, which he hung alongside the paintings. To Kenneth Clark, then the head of the National Gallery in London, he wrote that he saw "no essential esthetic difference between the forms of the great painters or sculptors, and those of the iron-workers."

None of this was quite as extraordinary as Barnes liked to pretend. The connection among folk art, handcrafts, and modernism was made by a number of curators and collectors at the time. Concerning the avant-garde, John Quinn, the visionary behind the 1913 Armory Show, was more adventurous, leaning into Cubism and Duchamp's radical experiments where Barnes balked. (Their rivalry was such that Barnes, tiring of his usual name-calling, hired private detectives to dig up dirt on Quinn.) Others were not far behind. MoMA's 2024 book *Inventing the Modern* celebrates the museum's female founders—Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, Lillie P. Bliss, and Mary Quinn Sullivan—and the energetic idealism required to get these efforts off the ground in an often hostile culture.

BARNES EXAGGERATED his temerity in the face of philistines partly because he longed to be recognized as more than just a world-class shopper. Applying his chemist's brain to locating the "scientific" principles behind his aesthetic experience, he concluded that what mattered in art was form—line, color, space, movement. Contextual data such as biographies and subject matter just distracted from the real act of looking. These formalist ideas had been articulated by various critics and art historians before Barnes, though, as usual, he took them to extremes. His 530-page "statement of principles," *The Art in Painting* (1925), includes no titles for works reproduced in the book, lest readers be led astray by subject matter.

Much more original was his application of this formalism to John Dewey's theories of experimental



Pierre-Auguste Renoir's Landscape With Figures, Near Cagnes (circa 1910) is one of the Barnes Foundation's 181 works by the artist.

education and social reform. He could cite Dewey's 1916 book *Democracy and Education* "almost chapter and verse," Gopnik tells us. Barnes was convinced that "plain people of average intelligence" could be brought to the kind of art apotheosis he had experienced, just by knowing how to look. He derided art history as a discipline and art scholars individually, but he couldn't abandon the idea that he himself had expertise other people needed.

Like many people who get a lot out of looking, Barnes was annoyed at the casual attitudes of museum visitors. When the Barnes Foundation opened its doors in 1925—in a purpose-built neoclassical building within a 12-acre arboretum adjacent to Barnes's home—its indenture permitted no posh parties and no unvetted visitors. The art would not travel or be reproduced in color. To see it, you applied to take classes in the Barnes method. It was not a museum; it was a school.

Inside, he arranged (and regularly rearranged) the collection in "ensembles" that mixed objects of different ages, origins, and functions. Most people do this at home, but Barnes's stridently symmetrical arrangements—big artworks in the middle, smaller ones to either side, formal echoes bouncing around the room—were emphatically pedagogical. In Room 15, for example, Matisse's *Red Madras Headdress* (1907)

THE
MAVERICK'S
MUSEUM:
ALBERT BARNES
AND HIS
AMERICAN
DREAM

Blake Gopnik

ECCO

THE HOUSE OF
BARNES:
THE MAN, THE
COLLECTION, THE
CONTROVERSY

*Neil L.
Rudenstine*

AMERICAN
PHILOSOPHICAL
SOCIETY PRESS

is flanked by (among other things) a pair of watery landscapes, a pair of fans, a pair of soup ladles, and a pair of pictures, each showing a woman and a dog (one of them from the hand of William Glackens's daughter, age 9). The effect is of an art-history curriculum designed by Wes Anderson.

Admission was doled out on the basis of whim and choler. Having prior expertise or impressive connections was usually a black mark: T. S. Eliot, Le Corbusier, Barnett Newman, and the heads of both MoMA and the Whitney were among the rejected. Student behavior was monitored. Questioning the method or viewing in the wrong way could get you bounced. Rumor was that Barnes and his second in command, Violette de Mazia, lurked incognito or listened through microphones for heretical conversation. Such ritualistic protocols can actually enhance the experience of viewing: Perceiving the specialness of the opportunity, people will give heightened attention. So while some Barnes students rebelled, others became acolytes.

Dewey, one of Barnes's very few lasting friends, wrote in his book *Art as Experience* that the educational work of the collection was of "a pioneer quality comparable to the best that has been done in any field during the present generation, that of science not excepted." Considering that the science of that

generation had produced antibiotics and the theory of relativity, that's quite a claim.

Fifty-three and childless when the foundation opened its doors, Barnes was not oblivious to the need to arrange its future beyond his lifetime. But his vision for it was inflexible. He unsuccessfully floated prospective partnerships to the University of Pennsylvania, Haverford College, and Sarah Lawrence College, whose exasperated president finally wrote: "You can stuff your money, your pictures, your iron work, your antiques, and the whole goddamn thing right up the Schuylkill River." Barnes then trained an affectionate eye on nearby Lincoln University—the second-oldest historically Black university in the nation, alma mater of Langston Hughes and Thurgood Marshall.

His relationship with Black culture and Black leaders was characteristically complex. He considered spirituals "America's only great music," and his admiration for African sculpture was deep. But this appreciation was often tinged with condescension. The only Black painter in his collection was not one of those artists who had been to Paris and absorbed the lessons of modernism, but the self-taught "primitive" Horace Pippin. (Similarly, the women in his collection tended toward the doe-eyed and decorative. He returned the Georgia O'Keeffes he'd bought, but kept his Marie Laurencins.)

Still, he forged a relationship with Lincoln's president, Horace Mann Bond, and in October 1950 altered the terms of succession so that Lincoln would eventually assume control of the foundation's board. This relationship, too, might well have gone south, but in July 1951 Barnes sped through a stop sign in his Packard convertible and collided with a tractor trailer.

For the next 37 years, Violette de Mazia carried the Barnes torch and guarded the Barnes gates. Admission became harder, the dogma stricter, the students fewer but more ardent. When the state forced the tax-exempt foundation to open to the public two days a week, Barnes students picketed. In 1987, the philosopher and art critic Arthur C. Danto described the sorry state of affairs—the "stunning works" imprisoned in "the sullen museum, with its musty smells and impassive custodians."

De Mazia's death, in 1988, snapped the foundation out of its torpor. That it had been careening toward insolvency now became clear, and the only paths to income—admission fees, loan shows, event rentals—were blocked by Barnes's indenture. The new Lincoln-appointed board fought to break the terms; former Barnes students fought to preserve them. The state fought to increase access; neighbors fought to restrict it. Accusations of racism and corruption bounced around. Eventually the board

Albert C. Barnes,
1872–1951



proposed moving the whole collection to a new location near the Philadelphia Museum of Art. YouTube comments below the 2009 anti-move film *The Art of the Steal* convey the ensuing outrage: "My soul cries for this loss," "Shame!!!," "I Truly hope The Philadelphia Of Art [*sic*] Burns to the ground ... art and all." If this fury seems disproportionate to the situation—a nonprofit institution in need of funds finds a way to preserve its core assets while increasing public access—it was certainly very Barnesian.

The Barnes Foundation has now been on Philadelphia's Museum Mile for more than a decade. The art is all there—Cézanne's great *The Card Players*, the many pink ladies in search of their clothes, the Wes Anderson ensembles. From ceiling vaults to baseboards, every room has been replicated as it appeared when Barnes died. But they sit in a different building, under a different set of rules.

Entry is no longer an achievement on par with getting past the bouncer at Berghain. All you have to do is cough up \$30. Inside, you can interrupt your viewing with a cup of coffee in the café or a visit to the gift shop, where you can buy a Van Gogh *Postman* mug or socks adorned with Horace Pippin's African American family at prayer (a strange choice for footwear, but maybe the logical outcome of pure formalist thought—the colors and shapes look fine on an ankle).

In other words, outside the re-created rooms, you get the standard, bustling, consumer-oriented museum experience, not arboreal serenity, and inside

the rooms, you have to put up with the presence of other people, not all of them models of rectitude. But there is nothing like it. The absence of wall texts can be a welcome relief from current museum practice. And if the ensembles depend more on visual rhyming than on ideas, they really do get you to look. If you want, you can even take classes in the Barnes method, without passing some capricious test of merit.

ARTHUR DANTO was right, though: Barnes is still remembered “for the spectacular collection of early modern art that bears his name, for the enthusiasm with which he kept people from viewing it and for the terrible temper he expended on behalf of these two projects. He was a gifted but an extremely tiresome man.” Barnes’s obvious intelligence, Gopnik observes, is “overshadowed, even eclipsed, by his real emotional and social stupidity.”

And yet, there is something gripping about his struggle, year after year, to solve the riddle of art. By all accounts, Barnes was a man with no theory of mind: Lacking any insight into the subjective worlds of other people, he found their behavior relentlessly inexplicable and infuriating. It must have been exhausting. In an essay soon after he started collecting, he wrote: “Good paintings are more satisfying companions than the best of books and infinitely more so than most very nice people.”

In art, he believed he saw the subjective experience of others—Renoir, El Greco, a Fang craftsman—made concrete and visible, even measurable. It sat still for examination. His arguments circle endlessly (Rudenshteyn rightly calls them tautological), seeking the mechanism whereby this subjectivity was transferred from one person to another via form. Each work of art, he wrote, “records a discovery and that discovery can be verified, the artist’s experience can be shared, [but] only by one who has himself learned to see.”

Like mercury, however, the objective mechanism he sought for this intuitive process always wriggled away from his touch. Look at Cézanne’s *The Card Players* or Renoir’s *Henriot Family* and you see shifting edges, unstable spaces, fragmentation, dissolution, impermanence. But in life, Rudenshteyn observes, Barnes found “ambiguity, irresolution, incompleteness, obscurity . . . impossible for him to tolerate.” His need to lock things down nearly killed the foundation that was his great life’s work. The tragedy of Barnes was that the things he could understand least held the key to what he loved most. *A*

Susan Tallman is an art historian and the author, most recently, of Kerry James Marshall: The Complete Prints: 1976–2022.

The Court Hummed With Suitors

By Sandra Lim

Four floors up, I’d look up from my work and cherish
the little arc of calm I felt from time to time.

I liked a drink, and to pose myself a problem
I could not always solve.

Now and again,
I’d bite into a lemon, to clear my head.

The acid was like a hook in my mouth: It was so sour,
I thought it must be good.

*

The one with the sewn-up face, he gave me
an electric feeling.

I got a little belly from all our drinking, and cooked meats
tasted distressingly of animal. I felt glad

of my tidy apartment and my four gas rings.
I came to read a little less.

I wondered what I was, or even just what I looked like,
idling in that way.

Sandra Lim is the author, most recently, of the poetry collection The Curious Thing. She is a recipient of the 2023 Jackson Poetry Prize and a Guggenheim Fellowship.



Grand Canyon

Go West!—Fully guided 8-day tour—Book now for choice dates.

Grand Canyon, Bryce & Zion 8-Day Tour \$2195

Welcome to a great vacation at an affordable price. These quality tours feature complete sightseeing, professional Tour Directors, and great itineraries. **Your Grand Canyon tour is fully guided and includes all hotels, activities, and some meals.** Explore Grand Canyon, Bryce, Zion, Monument Valley, Sedona, Antelope Slot Canyon, Lake Powell, and more.



**Grand Canyon,
Bryce & Zion
8-Day Tour \$2195**

See the greatest national parks of America's Southwest! Enjoy 2 nights in national park lodges near the South Rim of the Grand Canyon, 2 nights at Lake Powell Resort, and 2 nights near Zion National Park. **The #1 in value. Fully guided tours since 1952.**

Book now for choice dates:
Caravan.com, 1-800-CARAVAN.

Latin America Tours	Days	Price
Costa Rica	8	1195
Panama	8	1395
Guatemala	8	1195
Belize with Tikal	10	1795
Dominican Republic	7	1195
Colombia	10	1595
Mexico Copper Canyon Train	8	1695
Mexico Ancient Civilizations	9	1495
Mexico Puebla & Oaxaca	8	1195
Mexico Colonial Cities	8	1195
Mexico Riviera Maya	8	1295

USA/Canada Tours

Grand Canyon, Bryce & Zion 8 2195

Mt Rushmore & Yellowstone	9	2395
New England & Fall Colors	8	1995
Nova Scotia & Maritimes	9	1995
Canadian Rockies & Glacier	9	TBA

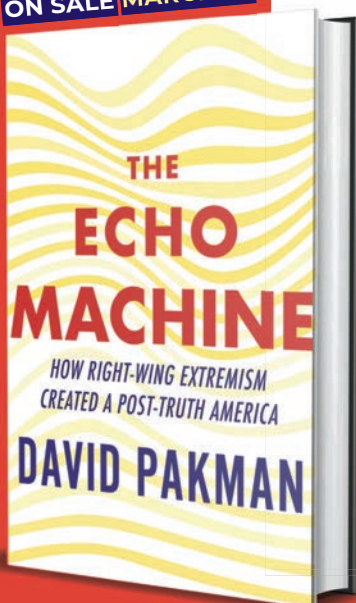
"Brilliant, Affordable Pricing"

Arthur Frommer, Travel Editor

Caravan®

Available Only at Caravan.com or 1-800-CARAVAN

ON SALE MARCH 25



IT'S TIME TO BREAK OUT OF OUR TOXIC POLITICAL ECHO CHAMBERS

For anyone who wants to stand up to disinformation and deepen their understanding of politics without getting lost in jargon,

this book is essential reading.

—Brian Tyler Cohen,
YouTuber and author of *Shameless*

A must-read for every American

looking to navigate the future of politics with clarity, purpose, and a commitment to preserving our democracy.

—Barbara McQuade,
author of *Attack from Within: How Disinformation Is Sabotaging America*

FROM THE HOST OF

THE
DAVID
PAKMAN
SHOW

ESSAY

On Track

*The time I spent
working on the
railroad changed the
course of my life.*

By
Graydon
Carter

Decades ago, and probably extending well before that, there was a custom among middle-class Canadian families to send their sons out West to work on the railroad for a spell. The parents' intention was not only to get the boys out of their hair for a while but also to toughen them up and introduce them to the ways of the world well beyond what would now be called their comfort zones. As it happened, one of my father's sisters,



Aunt Irene, was a vice president of the Canadian National Railways, a sprawling transportation network of trains, steamships, and grand hotels. It was as much a part of the Canadian national identity as the *Bonanza* star Lorne Greene and *Hockey Night in Canada*. Aunt Irene was a tall, thin, dignified woman. I don't think I ever saw her when she wasn't wearing a twinset and pearls. Family lore had it that during the final chapter of World War II, she had been the wire operator who sent word of Hitler's death to news organizations across Canada. Afterward, she went to work for the Canadian National Railways, also as a wire operator, and rose through the ranks.

Egged on by my parents, I wrote to her, asking for a job. I was 19 at the time. As she described it in her letter back to me, there were two types of positions available. I could be a groundman, at \$2.20 an hour. Or I could be a lineman, at \$2.80 an hour. Like any sane person, I had a fear of heights and said that I'd like to get a groundman's job, which I was told entailed lugging equipment to the linemen, who climbed telegraph poles all day. Aunt Irene told me to report to the Symington Yard, in Winnipeg. With only a dim idea of what I was getting myself into, I boarded a train heading 1,300 miles west, to the capital of Manitoba.

I STAYED WITH my aunt the first night and reported to the railroad's headquarters at 7 o'clock the next morning with a duffel bag of my belongings: a few pairs of shorts, jeans, a jacket, a couple of shirts, a pair of Kodiak work boots, and some Richard Brautigan and Jack Kerouac books, acceptable reading matter for a pseudo-sophisticate of the time. The Symington Yard was one of the largest rail yards in the world. On some days, it held 7,000 boxcars. Half that many moved in and out on a single day. Like many other young men my age, I was slim, unmuscle, and soft. In the hall where they interviewed and inspected the candidates for line work, I blanched as I looked over a large poster that showed the outline of a male body and the prices the railroad paid if you lost a part of it. As I recall, legs brought you \$750 apiece. Arms were \$500. A foot brought a mere \$250. In Canadian dollars.

There were about 10 of us, and we were led to a room where a severe-looking nurse peered down our throats, checked our hearts, and then asked for urine samples. I filled the beaker to the very top by accident, and when the nurse attempted to pick it up off the table, she couldn't help but spill a bit down her hand. Two of the tougher-looking recruits behind me thought this was funny, and one patted me on the back.

By the afternoon, I was on a train to a small town out on the endless Saskatchewan prairie—my head leaning against the window, my stomach aching from hunger—trying to think of a way that I could get out of this in a few weeks and go home. This was my parents' idea of what I should be doing. Certainly not mine. A man with the big, meaty hands of someone who used them in taxing labor was sitting beside me. He had brought his own food, and out of a small pouch he pulled a roll that had been wrapped in waxed paper. His sandwich was like nothing I had ever seen before.

To me, a sandwich was something made of white Wonder Bread, with baloney or peanut butter and jam inside. But this was a round, soft roll, and the meat was thick and breaded. The man noticed me looking at the sandwich and quietly brought another one out of his pouch. He indicated that I should take it. I made a gesture to say, *No, no, I couldn't*. But he just smiled and put it in my hand. I wasn't sure if he spoke English. I unwrapped the waxed paper and bit in. It was breaded chicken with a glorious sauce. To this day, I don't think anything I have ever eaten was as welcome or delicious. I thanked him profusely over and over, and he just kept nodding and smiling.

We pulled up to a siding, where the conductor said I had to get off. I did as I was told and stood by the tracks as the train pulled away. When it was gone, I looked around. The land was as flat as a billiard table and stretched for miles in every direction. On the siding was a collection of boxcars. A man waved to me in a menacing manner, indicating that I should get over to him, chop-chop-ish. I looked behind me and then turned back to him and gave a *Who me?* gesture. He nodded, and I hurried over and introduced myself. He said nothing. He was in his mid-40s and built like a refrigerator. His blond hair was short

on the scalp. Enormous veins ran down his forehead and around his nose. He had terrifying bright-blue eyes and hands the size of a catcher's mitt. His incisors were pointed, and one of his upper teeth was enameled in gold. He looked through me, pointed to a boxcar with windows on the side, and left. I walked over to the boxcar, climbed the steps, and opened the door.

It was a Saturday, not only a day off but also the day of new arrivals. Men of various ages and sizes were stretched out on the wooden bunks or settling in. There were eight beds on one side of the door and eight on the other. Nobody said a word, but a fellow who was lying down pointed a nicotine-stained finger in the direction of a bottom bunk at the back of the car. I thanked him and sat on the bed and looked around. I was the youngest in the group. Everyone was smoking. Everyone had a mustache. And everyone looked a lot scrapper than the people I was used to. The bed was as hard as the floor. There was a single pillow and a worn gray blanket that lay folded at the foot. As I was to learn in the coming days, all but one of the men had some sort of record—breaking and entering being at the bottom rung of achievement and grand theft auto being at the top. Petty thievery and criminal mischief were almost entry-level accolades. Working on the railroad may have been a hardening regimen for doughy middle-class boys; for others, it was a sort of French Foreign Legion way station between prison gates and semicivilized society.

We ate in what was known as the reefer car, a refrigerated boxcar. It was broken up into three parts. One part was the cold box, where ice and frozen meat and other provisions were stored; one part housed the kitchen; and the last part held a long communal dining table. On my first day, I sat down at the end of the table and was joined by a tall, fair-skinned fellow with curly red hair and a decent mustache. His name was Craig Walls. He wanted to be a writer and was taking a year off to earn money for his tuition at the University of Winnipeg. Canadian kids in those days tended to pay their own way through school. Annual college costs were in the \$1,200 range, and therefore within striking distance if you worked in construction or on the railroad

during the summer. There was a certain pride in the deepness of the blue in the blue-collar job you took. Construction was good. The railroad was better. Working in the oil fields of northern Alberta was the deepest blue of all.

Two others at my and Walls's end of the bunk car became part of our circle, if you could call it that. One was a short, funny, wiry kid named Ernie, who had grand theft auto on his résumé. The other was Errol, a darkly handsome lady-killer. He had syphilis and said that it required him to have a small whisk device inserted into his penis at regular intervals to remove the thin scabs that formed there. I don't know if he was kidding or not, but when he told us this, Walls and Ernie and I could barely speak. But it did make Errol seem awfully cosmopolitan.

THE NEXT MORNING, the newbies were called out by the fellow who had waved to me from the siding. He never announced the fact, but he was the foreman, and his name was Herb Harzbeck. He was German, and there was some talk among the vets on the crew that he had been in the war—on which side was up for debate. The vets called him “Squarehead” behind his back.

On the ground were piles of equipment for the newcomers. We were told to grab a set each. There was a big leather belt about four inches wide with slots for tools. There were also spikes attached to braces, with leather straps to hold them to your legs. These were called pole gaffs. The braces went from the instep to just below the knee. They strapped around the top of the calf and at the ankle, and there was another leather strap that went under the boot. After a few false starts, we managed to get the pole gaffs on and hobbled around a bit, the way skiers do with a new pair of boots. There was a pile of leather gloves with long gauntlets that came up almost to the elbow. We sifted through the lot, trying to find pairs that matched and fit. When we were suited up, Herb brought us over to one of the telegraph poles to show us how to climb: hands on either side of the pole; lean back, but not too far. And then drive the first spike into the wood. When that was set, drive the next spike in a little higher. Then the next one, and so forth. He was

essentially walking up the pole, and he made it look easy.

It was not easy. I'd seen telephone repairmen back home climbing poles that had metal footholds all the way up, almost like ladders. But they wore safety belts that allowed them to lean back and fix whatever needed fixing. Here there were no foot grips. I asked Herb where the safety belts were, and he gave me a dismissive look. There were no safety belts. We took turns trying to climb the pole. There were a number of false starts and tumbles. I could get up maybe three steps before my arms gave out or one of my spikes didn't dig in deep enough and I fell to the ground. *This was all a terrible mistake*, I kept thinking. At the end

*I blanched as I
looked over a large
poster that showed
the outline of a
male body and the
prices the railroad
paid if you lost a
part of it.*

of the demonstration and my own feeble attempts, I worked my way over to Herb and said that there had been some sort of error—that I had signed on to be a groundman. “No groundmen,” he barked. “Just linemen.”

Over the next couple of days, my general fear of heights and my more specific fear of falling off a telegraph pole began to subside. I managed to climb a 20-foot pole. And then a 30-foot pole. I began to get cocky, and in an attempt to scramble up one of the taller poles, I slipped near the top and shot straight down. In my shock and embarrassment, I didn't notice it at first, but I had torn the front of my shirt and ripped big patches of skin off my chest. One of the

patches held the few chest hairs I had grown by this point in my life. Herb took me to the reefer car. He cleaned off the blood and put a block of ice on my chest, which eased the pain. Then he wrapped my chest in a bandage. The skin began to heal in a couple of weeks, and within months was back to normal. And lo, where there had been a few sprigs, something approaching actual chest hair began to appear.

That summer, I had been trying to grow my hair long. I wanted to be a hippie—or at least look like one. But one day, Herb motioned to me and Walls and made us sit down in front of him. He pulled an electric shaver out of his vest and shaved us to the scalp. Aside from the lack of a criminal record, which in this group was like working in a hospital without a medical degree, I wanted to stand out. There is nothing more parochial or bland than being a soft, white Anglican kid from Ottawa. I feigned being something of a Jewish intellectual. In this crowd, the mere fact that I had brought books singled me out as a great thinker. A few of the tougher hands took to calling me “Professor.”

THOSE TELEGRAPH POLES you see alongside train tracks served two purposes back then. One was for sending telegrams. The other was to enable dispatchers to know where the trains were at any given moment. The telegraph wires would eventually wear out, and our job as linemen was to haul fresh wire up the pole on our shoulders, remove the old wire, let it drop to the ground, and then connect the new wire to the glass insulators on the horizontal wooden spars. Once we had mastered the fine art of climbing, we were ready to be put to use. We were awake at 5 a.m., and after breakfast we suited up and stood around anxiously. Even in late spring, it was cold on a Canadian-prairie morning, a few degrees above freezing. We would wear two or three layers on top to stay warm. A group of us would climb onto a motor car—not one of those contraptions from silent movies, with hand-operated seesaw locomotion, but a motorized cart with benches big enough for five or six men on either side. We would be dropped off half a mile apart, on the assumption that we could each cover half a mile of track before lunch.

On that first morning, I jumped off the motor car. There was already a climber half a mile behind me. And in minutes, one would be deposited half a mile in front of me. Other than that, it was just me and nothing but flat prairie. The new telegraph line had been laid out alongside the track. The poles up ahead looked to be no taller than 20 feet. It took me two or three attempts to reach the top of the first one. Like all the others, it was covered in creosote, a black, sticky, coal-tar coating that preserved the wood but stuck to gloves, jeans, and skin. I survived the first pole. I survived the second pole. In four hours, I made it to the spot, half a mile beyond, where the climber after me had been dropped off earlier in the day. The temperature had risen 30 degrees between sunrise and noon, and I had gradually started to remove layers of clothing.

The motor car appeared in the distance and came my way. It stopped to pick up other climbers, and then every few hundred yards or so, we'd stop and grab the clothes we had all discarded as the temperature rose. This was in the days before bottled water, and by the time we were picked up, we were parched. There was a big cooler on the motor car, and a ladle. I opened the top and saw that it indeed contained water, but not just water. The surface was awash with dead flies and bits of grass. I dipped the ladle into the cooler and gingerly managed to get it out without picking up any extras. The water was warm and fetid. But it was wet, and I learned to appreciate it. We returned to the railcars for lunch, then went back out for another four hours.

One morning, Herb threw a bunch of canvas hats on the ground. "Take them," he said. We each grabbed one. The hats came with a fine mesh that fell from the brim onto our shoulders. They were mosquito hats. We were heading into a patch where the black flies were horrendous. Black flies

are not like houseflies. Canadian black flies are the size of a thumb tip, and they bite. For three days, we lived in those hats. We never took them off. We lifted the netting when we were eating to make way for food. We slept with them on too. At night, the sound of black flies smacking against the mesh screens was unnerving.

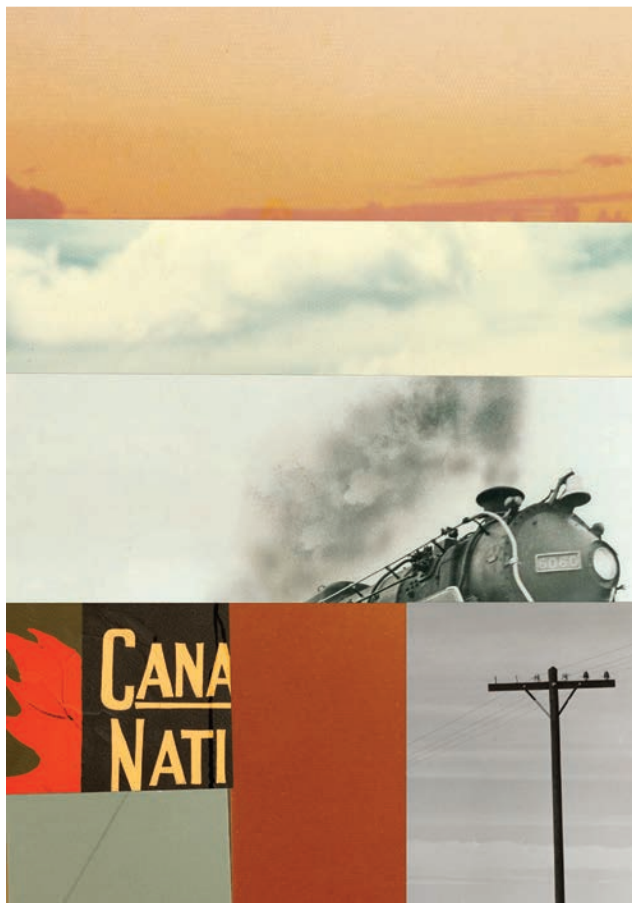
EVENINGS WERE SPENT smoking, drinking, playing cards, and reading. Then the whole ordeal started again the next

block. You put the ice in a pail and then onto a stove to melt it. Then you took the pail and poured the water into a contraption that looked like a watering can and hooked it to the ceiling over the shower area. You pulled the nozzle down a bit, wetted yourself, soaped, and prayed there'd be enough water left to rinse off.

There were no sleepers available on that trip to Winnipeg, so they put us in the mail car, near the end of the train. We slept on sacks with the Royal Mail Canada logo on them. Old locomotives in those days had bunks right in the engine, and on a subsequent trip, Walls and I were allowed to sleep there. Meals were taken in the dining car. We were a pretty scruffy lot, so they usually sat us in the back, near the kitchen, where big, muscular men cooked up meals on long grills heated by gas jets.

By most Fridays, though, we were too worn out to travel. Saturdays were for writing home, reading, and the occasional water fight. The siding was equipped with dozens of fire extinguishers. They were big red canisters that you filled with water and then strapped to your back. There was a pump that you compressed with one hand, and a hose for the other hand. We'd load them up and divide into teams. Often it would escalate. During one fight, we climbed to the roofs of the boxcars and scampered across the tops the way gunfighters did in old Westerns.

During one such water battle, we noticed an enormous machine off in the distance. As it approached along the track, we realized that it was a vehicle maybe two stories high and two or three times as long as a boxcar. It crept ahead slowly, deliberately, replacing old track with new track. Half of its large crew loosened the rails in front of the machine. And the other half tightened the new rails down in its wake. As the machine got closer, it became apparent that this was a much rougher-looking crew than ours. We put away our



morning. Weekends were different. At sundown on Friday, we were given passes on the Canadian National trains and could travel as far as we wanted, as long as we were back at work and ready to climb at 5 o'clock sharp on Monday. On one of our first weekends off, Walls and I decided we'd try to make it to Winnipeg, about 600 miles to the east. I resolved to take a shower before leaving. The routine for this was highly labor-intensive. It involved going to the reefer car and chipping off a chunk of ice about half the size of a cinder

water cannons and just watched as the machine made its way slowly by us.

The water cannons were always filled for emergency use. Often this involved putting out brush fires that started in the midday sun when what were called “hot boxes” went by. These were overheated axle bearings that could accidentally ignite the brush. We’d be sent out on motor cars to extinguish the flames. On my first fire call, the wind picked up, and the flames licked skyward and singed my eyebrows down to almost nothing. They grew back, but never as thickly as they had been before the fire.

We were advised to stand well clear of the ditches that border the rails when the Super Continental, the railroad’s gleaming passenger train, whisked by every day. One rookie hadn’t heard this bit of useful information, and on his first day, as the train sped through, he got too close. He was soaked and a bit more: Someone had flushed a toilet. Back then, there were no holding tanks on trains; when you flushed, the waste just emptied onto the tracks. The Super Continental came by at the same time every day. Often we’d make a pact to pull our pants down and moon the passengers.

Our cook got sick at one point and was sent home to Saskatoon. Herb announced that we’d each take turns cooking a meal. We had complained about the food when the cook was there. But with him gone, it deteriorated rapidly. I had never cooked a thing in my life. When my time came, I went to the reefer car to scout the provisions. There was a large leg of something, so I brought it to the kitchen. A coating of green covered parts of it, and I cut those sections off with a knife. And then I put the meat in the oven. I had no idea what temperature to set the oven at or how long to leave the meat there. I didn’t want to burn it, so I set the oven at medium heat and left it for three hours. I told Walls about this, and he told me I was out of my mind. We raced to the kitchen and opened the oven door. The meat had barely cooked at all.

And given that it was about a foot thick, he told me that we would need another four or five hours at high heat. Dinner was late that night, and as we picked through the stringy, undercooked meat, I kept my head low to avoid the looks coming my way from my fellow diners.

Our pal Errol had a habit of heading into town to pick up local girls. One night he returned a bit drunk and fell into his bunk. The lights were out and he drifted off to sleep. Sometime in the middle of the night, the door to the bunk car was kicked open, and all of us inside were jolted awake. Three men stormed in with flashlights, going from bunk to bunk. When the light shone into my eyes, I covered them with my hand. The men continued to move down the car until they got to Errol’s bunk. Two of them grabbed him and hauled him outside. We couldn’t see much in the dark, but clearly they were working Errol over pretty badly. Then they left, screaming obscenities, and made their way, flashlights in hand, across the open field. Walls and I ran outside to see if Errol was okay. He was. But just. He had a broken rib and a black eye and was bleeding from the head. We woke Herb and he came and bandaged him up.

In the morning, we heard the backstory. It seemed that Errol had tried to pick up one of the men’s girlfriend, and she was up for his affections. He left the crew a few days later, and we never heard from him again.

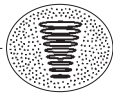
I HAD SIGNED on for six months, and as my tour of duty was coming to an end, I was still unsure about what I was going to do with my life. I’d had jobs before, but none like this. My parents weren’t alone in making sure their kids were busy during the summer, working at something, anything. An “allowance” was a thing we read about in American books and magazines. As a result, I was always digging around for pocket money. During winters, I had worked as a ski instructor at a local club and sorted mail at the post office over Christmas

break. In the summers, I worked as a camp counselor and canoe instructor. I worked as an unarmed bank guard one hot summer, and I pumped gas.

Nothing I had done before, or pretty much anything I did after, could match the sense of accomplishment and sheer exhilaration of that half year on the railroad. I liked being around the crew, most of whom had endured hardscrabble childhoods and had just naturally gotten into a bit of trouble in their teens and 20s. When my stint was done, I packed my gear into my duffel bag and said my goodbyes to the other fellows. Walls and I kept in touch for a while, but in the days before the internet, this wasn’t easy. One day, a letter I had sent him came back with a stamp saying he had moved. A decade or so ago, I heard from a friend of his that Walls had died, which saddened me terribly.

Out on the line on one of my last days, just before dusk, I was preparing to get picked up for the trip back to the bunk car when I saw the Super Continental in the distance. I clambered up to a field beside the tracks to watch it go by. It was traveling slowly, and in the pink late-afternoon light, I could see into the dining car. There was a young couple seated inside. They were nicely dressed and looked to be having a good time in the amber glow of the table lamp by the window. Lonely, tired, and dirty, I felt a million miles away from the attractive couple. It was then that I resolved that, whatever I did, I was done with show-
ering at the end of the week rather than the beginning of the day. It was time to get on with the life I envisioned for myself. I wasn’t completely sure what that was going to be. But I knew one thing: I wanted to be on the other side of that window. *A*

Graydon Carter, the founder of Air Mail, was for 25 years the editor of Vanity Fair. He was also a co-creator of Spy magazine. This article was adapted from his new memoir, When the Going Was Good.



CALEB'S INFERNO

By Caleb
Madison

Warning: This crossword puzzle starts easy, but gets devilishly hard as you descend into its depths. See which circle you can reach before you abandon all hope.

ACROSS

- 1 "Not today, ____!"
6 Soft pad on a seat, maybe
8 ____ International
(human-rights group)
9 Spaghetti or ramen, e.g.
10 Degree for some UCLA grads
11 Serbs, Slovenes, or Slovaks
14 It might be accessed through
a hotspot
15 Mixture
19 Cover at a bar?
20 "Hurt Somebody"
singer Kahan
21 "If you ask me ..."
24 People responsible for making
it snappy?
27 Sideswept, spiky bangs,
typically
28 Zip
29 ____ Gonne (Irish
revolutionary activist
and Yeats's muse)
30 "That's a must"
34 Orgiastic acts of activism?
35 Elaborate start to a passage
36 Novels and such: abbr.
37 Run in the rain?
39 Natural spring?
40 Continues

FOR HINTS AND
SOLUTIONS, VISIT:

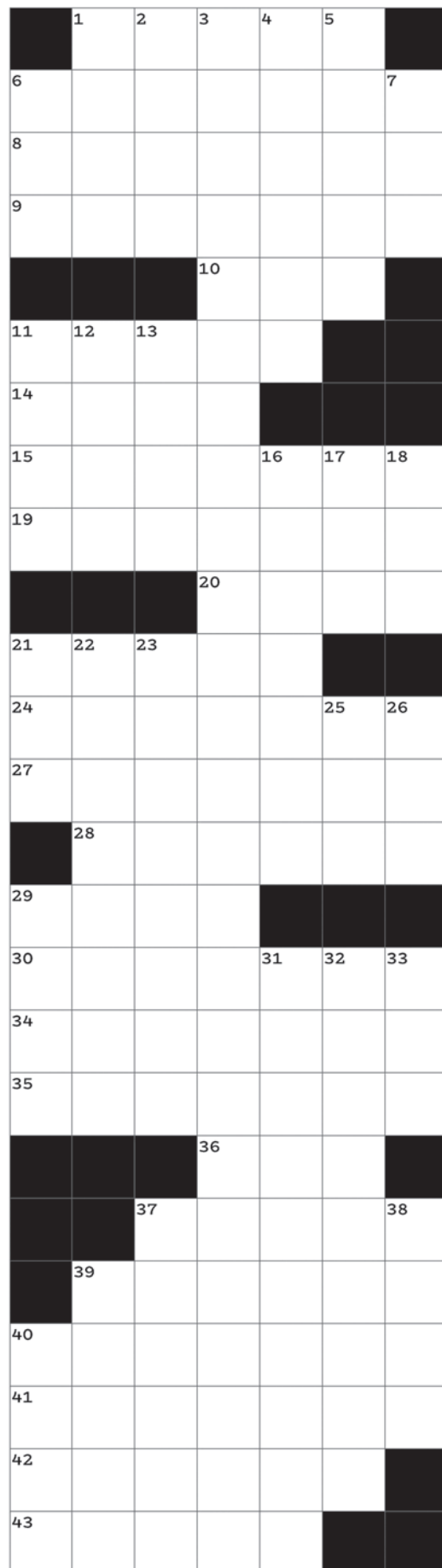


TheAtlantic.com/inferno

- 41 Opening or closing,
as a camera aperture
42 *The Lion and the Cobra* singer
43 Atlantic, e.g.

DOWN

- 1 Japanese wrestling style
2 "This comes ____ surprise ..."
3 Where the answer to this
clue lies between, literally
4 Supermarket sections
5 Components of a musical score
6 Six-pack alternative to a bottle
7 Gov. Kathy Hochul's domain
11 Smoochy sign-off for a
love letter
12 Peru's capital
13 In the distance
16 "Impressed you heard that!"
17 Letters before an alias
18 What a shrugging emoji
might mean
21 You might want it for a drink
22 Air
23 *Ocasión para beber champán*
25 Special setup for gaming
26 "my b"
29 Not exactly trying for
the palate
31 Twisty, as a story?
32 Shortly
33 Abbreviation in many recipes
37 Bullish?
38 Moo ____ (viral zoo animal
of 2024)
39 Acid used in eyewash
40 *Aspergillus oryzae* product



Gun injuries are the #1 cause of death for children and teens in America.

Be part of the solution at
AgreeToAgree.org

Source: Gun Violence in the U.S. 2022, Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions.

**AGREE
TO
AGREE**

**ad
COUNCIL**

A photograph of an artist's studio. In the center, a person with bright orange hair, wearing a blue and grey patterned sweater and dark pants, is walking towards the camera. The studio is filled with large, abstract paintings leaning against the walls. The painting on the left is a dense, dark, and textured composition. The painting in the center is a large, colorful abstract work with figures. The painting on the right is another large abstract piece with warm tones. The studio has a concrete floor and white walls, with industrial lighting fixtures visible on the ceiling.

HAUSER & WIRTH

IN THE STUDIO
GEORGE ROUY

ON VIEW IN DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES FROM 18 FEBRUARY – 1 JUNE