

IT'S LATER
THAN YOU
THINK



A

The Atlantic

EST. 1857

Anne Applebaum,
David Brooks,
Aziz Huq, and
George Packer on
Fighting Autocracy



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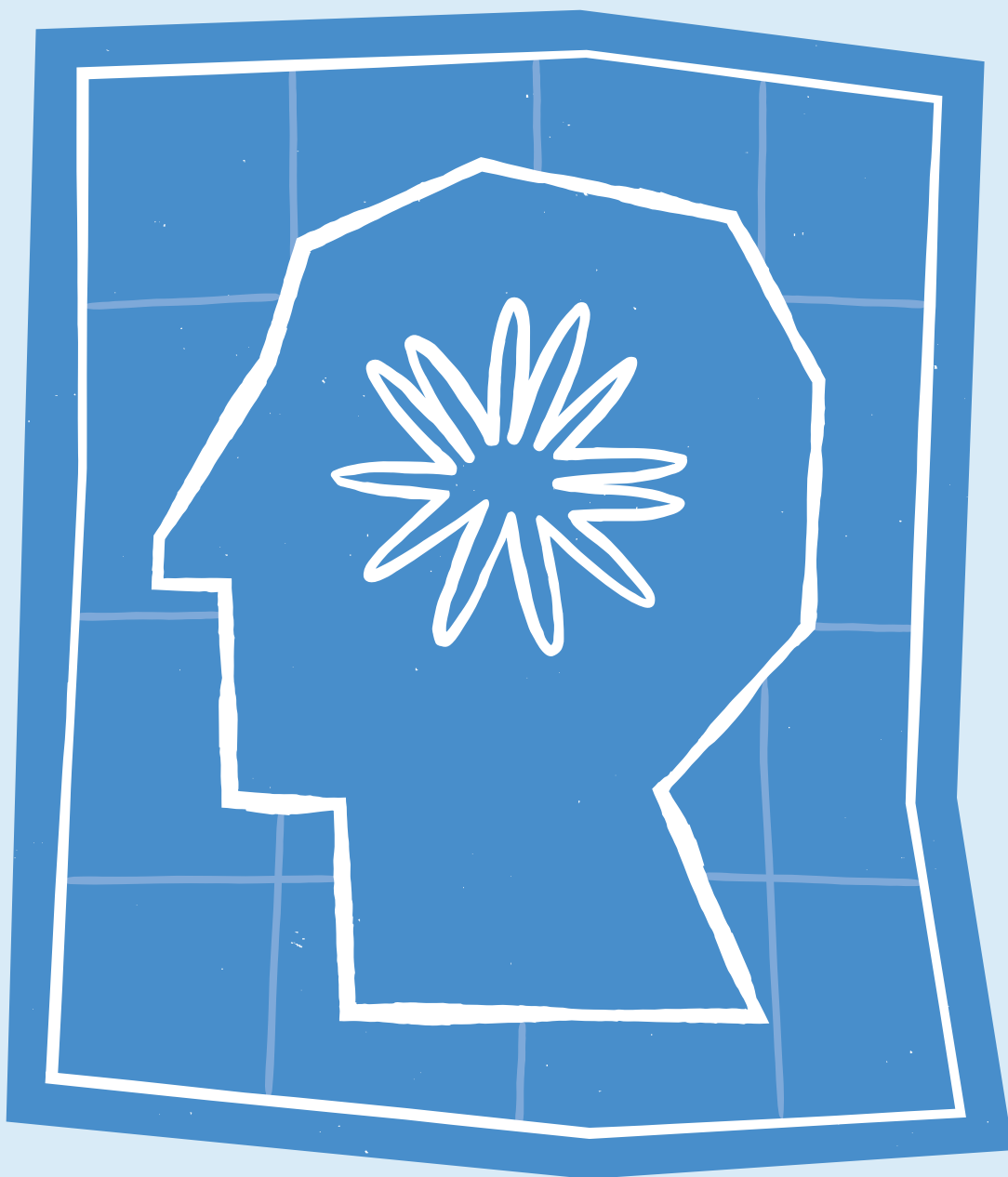
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THE DRIVE TO LEAD

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Leadership's terrain grows richer with each passing mile. Even now, in conversations with his father and industry peers such as Max Goldberg, Guidara proves that at any stage, there's opportunity to lead differently and invest more deeply. "No matter where you are in life," he says, "there's opportunity to lead. And if you are generous in your investments into relationships, and willing to learn, you can achieve remarkable things."

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THROUGH THE EYES OF THE GLOBAL HERO WHO CHANGED THE COURSE OF HISTORY

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Behind the Cover: This month, our cover spotlights four stories on threats to American democracy. George Packer (p. 13) examines President Donald Trump’s Orwellian tendencies. Anne Applebaum (p. 16) reports on the right’s dangerous embrace of Viktor Orbán’s Hungary. Aziz Huq (p. 18) recounts how the constitutional and

legal foundations of the Weimar Republic eroded. And David Brooks (p. 48) describes the nihilism at the core of the MAGA movement. For the cover image, the illustrator Ricardo Tomás created an imperiled American flag, its stars and stripes on the verge of collapse.

— Paul Spella, *Senior Art Director*

THE

Stuck In Place

In the March 2025 issue, Yoni Appelbaum considered why Americans stopped moving houses—and why that’s a very big problem.

Letters

Y

Yoni Appelbaum’s “Stuck In Place” accurately describes how restrictive land-use policies in America’s most economically vibrant cities have choked off opportunity for many Americans.

That said, I’m skeptical that homeowners would be as open to new development as Appelbaum thinks. One person’s exorbitant expense—money paid for rent or to purchase a home—is another person’s income. Increasing the housing supply to deliberately moderate or even lower prices threatens homeowners whose retirement plans include cashing in on the equity stake in their home.

Twenty-five years ago, William Fischel named this political economy the “homevoter hypothesis”: Voters lobby the local land-use authorities to protect their vested real-estate interests, thereby excluding newcomers from their communities.

Americans have grown accustomed to rapidly rising home values, and our federal, state, and local governments encourage this through zoning, mortgage, and tax policies. It’s no wonder people eagerly use the power of the state to privilege themselves, even if they couch it in lofty terms such as opposing “greedy

developers” and “protecting neighborhood character.”

Eric Fidler
Washington, D.C.

Yoni Appelbaum’s article on the ills caused by progressives’ neighborhood preservationism is thought-provoking, well researched, and convincing to a point. But it can’t serve as a blanket explanation for all of America’s current sociopolitical ills—nothing fits that bill.

Arguments like these can lead to scapegoating and a backlash that itself goes too far. Zoning laws should certainly be loosened—but do we want to open every last historical landmark to the wrecking ball and allow every last green space in America to be paved over just so someone can make a quick buck? Surely we can strike a new, better balance.

Martin J. Berman-Gorvine
Potomac, Md.

I read Yoni Appelbaum’s lament over decreasing American mobility with bemusement. Some people value establishing and maintaining deep bonds with family, friends, and community over chasing after money. Here in rural northeastern Kansas, I dwell among people who live on the same land that their forebears homesteaded in the mid-19th century. They possess a sense of rootedness and purpose as vital contributors to their local community that cannot be exchanged for cash. They also tend to be thrifty people who save, so other than them tipping off friends about

COMMONS



DISCUSSION
&
DEBATE

the latest sale at the fabric store, I've never heard them mention or complain about money.

Because of the quest for upward mobility, I know many couples whose grown children choose to pursue lives in California or Florida or New York and then cram into airports during the holidays. They would have saved themselves considerable time, money, and stress if they'd never left home in the first place. FaceTime and texting cannot babysit for you, mow your lawn, rescue you if your car breaks down, or run errands for you if you are sick. Mindlessly moving from one place to another in pursuit of the next promotion is not only extremely expensive—it has contributed to the loneliness epidemic. Neighbors no longer know one another; newcomers find themselves surrounded by strangers. And if they are transients who will jump at the next opportunity to relocate, I doubt that they will try to establish any meaningful connections.

The pursuit of more money through mobility is a dominant theme in our culture, but not everyone buys into it. I've discovered meaning and fulfillment by staying in one place.

Margaret Kramar
Lecompton, Kan.

Here's another reason fewer Americans are moving far from their hometowns: the increased

economic and social power of women. Women do a disproportionate amount of unpaid work in the form of child care and elder care. Women know how difficult it is to raise kids far away from the support of extended family. For the men who were the breadwinners and decision makers of previous generations, caring for children (to say nothing of aging parents) was not their concern. To modern couples who earn money and make decisions more equitably, the demands of child care and elder care are powerful incentives to stay close to home.

Emily Murbarger
Philadelphia, Pa.

Yoni Appelbaum's theory that progressives are to blame for America's housing crisis ignores a far more obvious culprit: greed. The reason no one is building affordable housing is that it simply isn't as profitable as luxury townhouses and condos. Downtown Milwaukee, for instance, teems with new apartment complexes marketed to those who can afford the \$2,000 rent. There needs to be an incentive to build housing for the people who clean and service these units, especially as wealthy Americans turn their backs on the public sphere. Otherwise, our cities risk becoming hives of affluence.

David Southward
Milwaukee, Wis.

I wholeheartedly agree with Yoni Appelbaum's three principles for restoring dynamism and mobility to our cities. We need more consistency and less discretion in our land-use rules. We need more tolerance for the messy process of change to the built environment. And we need to embrace growth and abundance.

But the correctness of Appelbaum's conclusions only deepened my frustration with the blame he placed on Jane Jacobs. Although she deserves criticism for inspiring a strain of progressive NIMBYism, Jacobs was no evangelist for freezing cities in amber. She famously attacked "separation of uses"—then a key facet of planning orthodoxy—in her book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. She advocated instead for mixed-use streets where people and businesses would age in and out over time in a constant process of urban self-regeneration. That's exactly the dynamism that Appelbaum wants.

True, Jacobs's prescription was not as accurate as her diagnosis. It seems strange that she thought historic-preservation laws could be "zoning for diversity" rather than zoning for gentrification. But in the '50s and '60s, the government

invested enormously in suburbanization, often by leveling neighborhoods to build highways. Americans should be a mobile people because we choose to be, not because Uncle Sam gives us an eviction notice. Jacobs's fight is more understandable in that context. The problem isn't what she did then; it's that some self-described progressives still insist on her approach 70 years later in radically changed circumstances. Fortunately, they are drowned out more and more by a new progressive movement that proclaims, "Yes in my backyard."

Michael Whelan
Ann Arbor, Mich.

There are times when moving house makes sense—say, a job change, or a significant change in the size of one's family. But there is also much to be said for simply being satisfied with what one has. I do realize that it is not a typically American attitude, but it is an attitude that can bring about a fair degree of happiness. Perpetual striving leads only to more striving.

Allen Murray
Mebane, N.C.

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

Correction: A caption in "O'Keeffe in the Frame" (February) misstated the location of Twilight Canyon. It is in Utah, not New Mexico.

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DISPATCHES

OPENING ARGUMENT

THE HOLLOW MEN

*It takes a special talent
to betray an entire
worldview without
missing a beat.*

BY GEORGE PACKER

In George Orwell's *1984*, at the climax of Hate Week, Oceania is suddenly no longer at war with Eurasia, but instead is at war with Eastasia, and always has been. The pivot comes with no explanation or even announcement. During a public harangue, a Party orator is handed a scrap of paper and redirects his vitriol "mid-sentence, not only without a pause, but without even breaking the syntax."

Republican politicians in Donald Trump's Inner Party faced a similar verbal challenge when the president changed sides in Russia's war against Ukraine. One morning in late February, Republicans in Washington greeted Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky as a hero for

continuing to resist Russian aggression. By afternoon, following Zelensky's meeting in the Oval Office with Trump and Vice President J. D. Vance, the Ukrainian leader was an ungrateful, troublesome, and badly dressed warmonger who, if he hadn't actually started the conflict with Russia, was the only obstacle to ending it.

After this new line was communicated to party leaders, a pro-Zelensky social-media post was taken down as swiftly as the banners denouncing Eurasia. Secretary of State Marco Rubio, Speaker of the House Mike Johnson, and Senator Lindsey Graham—all supporters of Ukraine—were sent out in front of the cameras like the Hate Week orator, not to explain a new policy but to pretend that nothing had changed while America switched sides. Using nearly identical language, Rubio, Johnson, and Graham declared that Zelensky must do Trump's bidding, which is also Vladimir Putin's bidding, and capitulate to Russia; otherwise, Johnson and Graham added, Zelensky should resign. America's enemy isn't Russia. America's enemy is Ukraine.

The philosopher Henri Bergson observed, "The attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine." The cause of laughter is the "deflection of life towards the mechanical." This insight explains why there is something comical about politicians when they substitute programmed language for speech that reflects actual thought. They are besuited contraptions, like another orthodoxy-spouting ideologue in 1984 whose spectacles catch the light and seem to render

him eyeless while his jaw keeps moving, as if "this was not a real human being but some kind of dummy." Having emptied themselves of the capacity or will for independent judgment, they become extremely fluent automatons, able to put together whole paragraphs of logical-sounding arguments, but with no connection between brain and mouth. Every politician is required to speak like a robot some of the time; it takes a special talent to betray an entire worldview without missing a beat.

Graham's mechanical style is to flit almost gleefully from one position to its opposite

RITUALIZED
HUMILIATION
IS ESSENTIAL
TO AN
AUTHORITARIAN
REGIME.

while remaining a party insider, which is his only consistent position and the justification for all his others. Johnson stares through his glasses and gropes for the appropriate words with the unease of a simple man trying not to screw up his lines: "I can tell you that we are—we are re-exerting peace through strength. President Trump has brought back strength to the White House. We knew that this moment would come, we worked hard for it to come, and now it's here." Rubio is a more complex case. He sat mute throughout the Oval Office blowup while his principles almost visibly escaped his body, causing it to sink deeper into

the yellow sofa. Having made his name in the Senate as a passionate defender of democracy and adversary of authoritarianism, he must have suffered more than others from the inner contortions demanded by the new party line—they were written on his unhappy face.

But Rubio had already begun the process of mechanizing himself weeks before, when he shut down foreign-aid programs that he had always supported. Reappearing in public after the meeting with Zelensky, he denounced the Ukrainian president with the overzealous exasperation of a successfully hollowed policy maker.

When a leader requires his underlings to say what they know isn't true—up is down, Oceania has always been at war with Eastasia, Ukraine is to blame—it's a test of loyalty and a show of dominance. Ritualized humiliation is essential to an authoritarian regime. Trump forces aides, advisers, and the friendly press that he allows into the room to utter absurdities on his behalf in order to bind them closer to him, and thereby frees himself from any restraint. They know from the example of more courageous or less careful colleagues that any quiver of independence will doom them politically, and perhaps even harm them physically. Almost immediately, it seems, they cease to be troubled by conscience or even motivated by fear. As they become more machinelike, they forget that they ever held a different idea, or any idea at all. You can see it in their relaxed features and smoother delivery.

Trump alone is allowed to say what he thinks. There's nothing laughably mechanical about his abandonment of Ukraine, Europe, and American

leadership of the free world; he doesn't embrace Russia like an eyeless dummy. He never sounded more natural, or truer to himself, than when he told Zelensky of his bond of sympathy with Putin and mocked the Ukrainian president for the agony that Russia has inflicted on his country. And if, a week or two later, American policy on the war flipped again, it wasn't because Trump's worldview changed—he still prefers dictators and wants to be one of them. It only meant that the leader can declare that Oceania is at war with Eastasia or Eurasia on any given day.

At least from the time he was 5 years old and, according to Maggie Haberman's biography, *Confidence Man*, threw rocks at a baby in a playpen, Trump has admired strength and despised weakness. Terms used by Ukraine's defenders, such as *sovereignty*, *democracy*, and *shared values*, obviously disgust him, because they're the language of the weak. For Trump, strength has nothing to do with the classical virtues of nobility and courage; it's the raw power to humiliate another, whether a person or a country. Zelensky's physical and moral courage, including his refusal to be belittled on camera in the Oval Office, enrages Trump, for he's accustomed to endless subservience and flattery.

Trump's decision in March to halt the flow of arms and intelligence to Ukraine doesn't follow a foreign policy of isolationism. When Vance, running for a U.S. Senate seat in Ohio in 2022, said, "I don't really care what happens to Ukraine one way or the other," he was expressing an isolationist sentiment. This indifference falls well short of Trump's contempt for Zelensky and

long-standing attraction to Putin. Trump wants Russia to win and Ukraine to lose.

Some analysts argue that Trump is turning American foreign policy toward “realism”: a cold calculation that Ukraine falls in Russia’s sphere of influence, not ours; that defending an embattled democracy against a much larger and more powerful dictatorship depletes American resources without serving its interests; that, in an ever more multipolar world, the United States is overcommitted; that the U.S. should stop trying to uphold global rules and democratic values, and start acting like a

traditional great power that uses its immense strength to secure specific interests.

These sound like rational claims, but they don’t describe Trump’s words and actions. There’s nothing realistic about aiding a dangerous adversary, undermining allies, breaking agreements, extorting concessions, threatening annexations, and destroying an order that has expanded American influence and made the past eight decades uniquely stable and prosperous in modern history. These are the policies of crude power worship, not realism. They are extensions of Trump’s character around the world,

and they will destroy all that Americans and others value about this country, turning the United States into a shiner image of Putin’s Russia. It doesn’t matter whether Trump is an actual Russian asset; he’s already doing the work of one.

A poll in early March by the civic organization More in Common shows that Americans haven’t abandoned all the values that Trump and his sycophants are trashing. Nearly two-thirds of respondents still sympathize with Ukraine and more want to continue arming it. Even among Republicans, a majority believe that Russia is to blame for the war

and consider Putin a dictator. Support for Russia is in the low single digits. The survey shows that years of propaganda and lies from Trump and the MAGA right have failed to poison the body politic with cynicism. Although the elites in power insist that might makes right and that Oceania has always been at war with Eastasia, most ordinary Americans haven’t yet thrown away a worldview of true and false, right and wrong. They might be America’s last best hope. *A*

George Packer is a staff writer at The Atlantic.



THE HUNGARIAN MODEL

*MAGA conservatives love Viktor Orbán.
But he's left his country corrupt, stagnant,
and impoverished.*

BY ANNE APPLEBAUM

Flashy hotels and upmarket restaurants now dominate the center of Budapest, a city once better known for its shabby facades. New monuments have sprung up in the center of town too. One of them, a pastiche of the Vietnam War memorial in Washington, D.C., mourns Hungary's lost 19th-century empire. Instead of war dead, the names of formerly "Hungarian" places—cities and villages that are now in Romania, Slovakia, Ukraine, Poland—are engraved in long granite walls, solemnly memorialized with an eternal flame.

But the nationalist kitsch and tourist traps hide a different reality. Once widely perceived to be the wealthiest country in Central Europe ("the happiest barrack in the socialist camp," as it was known during the Cold War), and later the Central European country that foreign investors liked most, Hungary is now one of the poorest countries, and possibly *the* poorest, in the European Union. Industrial production is falling year-over-year. Productivity is close to the lowest in the region. Unemployment is creeping upward. Despite the ruling party's loud talk about

traditional values, the population is shrinking. Perhaps that's because young people don't want to have children in a place where two-thirds of the citizens describe the national education system as "bad," and where hospital departments are closing because so many doctors have moved abroad. Maybe talented people don't want to stay in a country perceived as the most corrupt in the EU for three years in a row. Even the Index of Economic Freedom—which is published by the Heritage Foundation, the MAGA-affiliated think tank that produced Project 2025—puts Hungary at the bottom of the EU in its rankings of government integrity.

Tourists in central Budapest don't see this decline. But neither, apparently, does the American right. For although he has no critical mineral wealth to give away and not much of an army, Hungary's prime minister, Viktor Orbán, plays an outsize role in the American political debate. During the 2024 presidential campaign, Orbán held multiple meetings with Donald Trump. In May 2022, a pro-Orbán think tank hosted CPAC, the right-wing conference, in Budapest, and three months later, Orbán went to

Texas to speak at the CPAC Dallas conference. Last year, at the third edition of CPAC Hungary, a Republican congressman described the country as "one of the most successful models as a leader for conservative principles and governance." In a video message, Steve Bannon called Hungary "an inspiration to the world." Notwithstanding his own institution's analysis of Hungarian governance, Kevin Roberts of the Heritage Foundation has also described modern Hungary "not just as a model for modern statecraft, but *the* model."

What is this Hungarian model they so admire? Mostly, it has nothing to do with modern statecraft. Instead it's a very old, very familiar blueprint for autocratic takeover, one that has been deployed by right-wing and left-wing leaders alike, from Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to Hugo Chávez. After being elected to a second term in 2010, Orbán slowly replaced civil servants with loyalists; used economic pressure and regulation to destroy the free press; robbed universities of their independence, and shut one of them down; politicized the court system; and repeatedly changed the constitution to give himself electoral advantages. During the coronavirus pandemic he gave himself emergency powers, which he has kept ever since. He has aligned himself openly with Russia and China, serving as a mouthpiece for Russian foreign policy at EU meetings and allowing opaque Chinese investments in his country.

This autocratic takeover is precisely what Bannon, Roberts, and others admire, and are indeed seeking to carry out in the U.S. right now. The destruction of the civil service

is already under way, pressure on the press and universities has begun, and thoughts of changing the Constitution are in the air. But proponents of these ideas rarely talk about what happened to the Hungarian economy, and to ordinary Hungarians, after they were implemented there. Nor do they explore the contradictions between Orbán's rhetoric and the reality of his policies. Orbán talks a lot about blocking immigration, for example, but at one point his government issued visas to any non-EU citizen who bought 300,000 euros' worth of government bonds from mysterious and mostly offshore companies.

He rhapsodizes about family values, even though his government spends among the lowest amounts per capita on health care in the EU, controls access to IVF, and notoriously decided to pardon a man who covered up sexual abuse in children's homes.

Orbán also talks a lot about "the people" while using his near-absolute power not to build Hungarian prosperity but to enrich a small group of wealthy businessmen, some of whom are members of his family. In Budapest, these oligarchs are sometimes called NER, or NER-people, or NERistan—nicknames that come from Nemzeti Együttműködés Rendszere or System of National Cooperation, the Orwellian name that Orbán gave to his political system—and they benefit directly from their proximity to the leader. Direkt36, one of the few remaining investigative-journalism teams in Hungary, recently made a documentary, *The Dynasty*, showing, for example, how competitions for state- and EU-funded contracts, starting in

about 2010, were deliberately designed so that Elíos Innovatív, an energy company co-owned by Orbán's son-in-law István Tiborcz, would win them. The EU eventually looked into 35 contracts and found serious irregularities in many of them, as well as evidence of a conflict of interest. (In a 2018 statement, Elíos said that it had followed legal regulations, which is no doubt true; the whole point of this system is that it is legal.)

That story is just one of many that Hungarians recount to one another, just not in public. *The Dynasty* also describes the Kisfaludy Tourism Development Programme, which distributed 316 billion Hungarian forints (\$860 million) in grants. Two-thirds of those grants went to 0.5 percent of the applicants; almost one-fifth of them went to projects that were, or later became, connected to Tiborcz. Not that Tiborcz is the only recipient of government largesse. Lőrinc Mészáros, at one time the richest man in Hungary, a gas fitter turned entrepreneur who is an old friend of the prime minister's, once attributed his fortune to "God, luck, and Viktor Orbán." Other beneficiaries come and go, depending on Orbán's whim. One Hungarian businessman told me that "you can tell who is in, who is out by seeing whose companies begin growing. If you are in, then your company is growing. If you're out, your company goes from this big to this small. You see it in a year or two."

This kind of corruption is, again, mostly legal, because the laws, contracts, and procurement rules are written in such a way as to permit it. Even if this activity were illegal, party-controlled prosecutors would

not investigate it. But the scale of the corruption is large enough to distort the rest of the economy. The Hungarian businessman and a Hungarian economist I spoke with—both of whom insisted on anonymity, for fear of retaliation—had separately calculated that NERistan amounts to about 20 percent of the Hungarian economy. That means, as the economist explained to me, that 20 percent of Hungary's companies operate "not on market principles, not on

bright days in the future; success, unimaginable success."

"Please trust us," Orbán declared in his annual state-of-the-nation speech in early 2023. "You can bet on it: By the end of the year, we will have inflation in single digits." In fact, annual average inflation in 2023 was more than 17 percent. In 2024, the government predicted 4 percent growth; the reality was 0.6 percent. Anyone who contradicts this messaging is unlikely to be widely heard. Independent economists are



merit-based principles, but basically on loyalty." These companies don't have normal hiring practices or use real business models, because they are designed not for efficiency and profit but for kleptocracy—passing money from the state to their owners.

Not that the regime ever acknowledges the role that the oligarchy plays in the system, or even concedes that Hungary might face a structural crisis. Another Hungarian economist told me that Orbán always predicts "very

rarely invited to appear on public television, or in any media controlled by the ruling party. In February 2024, the regime created the Sovereignty Protection Office, a sinister body that harasses and smears independent Hungarian organizations. It has redoubled its efforts since the U.S. election and the assault on USAID. The office's targets include the Hungarian branch of Transparency International, the anti-corruption investigative group, as well as an investigative-news portal,

Atlatzo.hu—any entity that could tell the truth about how the country really works.

But the truth is not hard to perceive for anyone who cares to look, because the beneficiaries of this corrupt system are not shy about showing off their wealth. When I mentioned the shiny hotels in central Budapest to a Hungarian friend, he snorted. "Of course, that's where the NER-people live," he said. "They want it to look nice." Also, they own quite a few of them. *The Dynasty*, the documentary, includes footage of the Hungarian elite partying at clubs and in palaces, and garnered more than 3 million views within a month, a large number in a country of 9.6 million. Thousands of comments underneath the video on YouTube thank the Direkt36 reporters for showing "true reality" not available anywhere else.

In many ways, Hungary is about as different from the U.S. as it is possible to be: small, poor, homogeneous. But I watched the film with a sense of foreboding. As Elon Musk, a government contractor, sets fire to our civil service and makes decisions about the departments that regulate him; as the FBI and the Justice Department are captured by partisans who will never prosecute their colleagues for corruption; as inspectors general are fired and rules about conflicts of interest are ignored, America is spinning quickly in the direction of Hungarian populism, Hungarian politics, and Hungarian justice. But that means Hungarian stagnation, Hungarian corruption, and Hungarian poverty lie in our future too. *A*

Anne Applebaum is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

A WARNING OUT OF TIME

How autocrats create spheres of lawlessness

BY AZIZ HUQ

On September 20, 1938, a man who had witnessed the rise of fascism packed his suitcases and fled his home in Berlin. He arranged to have smuggled separately a manuscript that he had drafted in secret over the previous two years. This book was a remarkable one. It clarified what was unfolding in Berlin at the time, the catalyst for its author's flight.

The man fleeing that day was a Jewish labor lawyer named Ernst Fraenkel. He completed his manuscript two years later at the University of Chicago (where I teach), publishing it as *The Dual State*, with the modest subtitle *A Contribution to the Theory of Dictatorship*. The book explains how the Nazi regime managed to keep on track a capitalist economy governed by stable laws—and maintain a day-to-day normalcy for many of its citizens—while at the same time establishing a domain of lawlessness and state violence in order to realize its terrible vision of ethno-nationalism.

Fraenkel offered a simple, yet powerful, picture of how the constitutional and legal

foundations of the Weimar Republic eroded, and were replaced by strongman-style rule in which the commands of the Nazi Party and its leader became paramount. His perspective was not grounded in abstract political theory; it grew instead from his experience as a Jewish lawyer in Nazi Berlin representing dissidents and other disfavored clients. Academic in tone, *The Dual State* sketches a template of emerging tyranny distilled from bloody and horrifying experience.

As Fraenkel explained it, a lawless dictatorship does not arise simply by snuffing out the ordinary legal system of rules, procedures, and precedents. To the contrary, that system—which he called the “normative state”—remains in place while dictatorial power spreads across society. What happens, Fraenkel explained, is insidious. Rather than completely eliminating the normative state, the Nazi regime slowly created a parallel zone in which “unlimited arbitrariness and violence unchecked by any legal guarantees” reigned freely. In this domain, which Fraenkel called the “prerogative state,” ordinary law didn’t apply. (A prerogative

power is one that allows a person such as a monarch to act without regard to the laws on the books; theorists from John Locke onward have offered various formulations of the idea.) In this prerogative state,

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judges and other legal actors deferred to the racist hierarchies and ruthless expediences of the Nazi regime.

The key here is that this prerogative state does not immediately and completely overrun the normative state. Rather, Fraenkel argued, dictatorships create a lawless zone that runs alongside the normative state. The two states cohabit uneasily

and unstably. On any given day, people or cases could be jerked out of the normative state and into the prerogative one. In July 1936, for example, Fraenkel won a case for employees of an association taken over by the Nazis. A few days later, he learned that the Gestapo had seized the money owed to his clients and deposited it in the government’s coffers. Over time, the prerogative state would distort and slowly unravel the legal procedures of the normative state, leaving a smaller and smaller domain for ordinary law.

Yet, Fraenkel insisted, it was a mistake to think that even the Nazis would entirely dispense with normal laws. After all, they had a complex, broadly capitalist economy to maintain. “A nation of 80 million people,” he noted, needs stable rules. The trick was to find a way to keep the law going for Christian Germans who supported or at least tolerated the Nazis, while ruthlessly executing the führer’s directives against the state’s enemies, real and perceived. Capitalism could jog nicely alongside the brutal suppression of democracy, and even genocide.



FRAENKEL WAS BORN in Cologne in December 1898 in the comfortable home of Georg Fraenkel, a merchant, and Therese Epstein. After his parents died, Ernst and his sister were taken in by their uncle in Frankfurt, where Ernst became interested in trade-union activism. Despite his socialist leanings, he joined the German army and was sent to Poland in April 1917. He later wrote that he'd hoped "the war would mean the end of anti-semitism." Fraenkel survived the trenches of the Western Front. After his discharge in 1919, he earned a law degree, and eventually secured work in Berlin as a labor lawyer.

The war did not, of course, end anti-Semitism, but his military service did save his livelihood, at least for a time. On May 9, 1933—only a few months after the Reichstag burned—Fraenkel and other Jewish lawyers received an official notice prohibiting them from appearing in German courts. But Nazi law made an exception for Jewish lawyers who had served in World War I. And so, while many fled, Fraenkel remained in Berlin, representing litigants such as members of the German Freethinkers Alliance, a leader of the Young Socialist Workers, and a man arrested for insulting a National Socialist newspaper as "old cheese."

Often, he had to resort to unorthodox strategies. In the last of those three cases, Fraenkel persuaded his client to plead guilty, limiting his arguments to the sentence's severity. This gambit worked: The man was duly convicted, and received a light sentence, avoiding the fate of others acquitted under similar circumstances. In at least one

case, a Gestapo agent appeared as soon as the judge declared a not-guilty verdict, took the defendant into custody, and said, "*Kommt nach Dachau*" ("Come to Dachau"). Eventually, Fraenkel's name made it onto a Gestapo list. He and his wife fled first to London, then to Chicago.

TODAY, WE ARE witnessing the birth of a new dual state. The U.S. has long had a normative state. That system was always imperfect. Our criminal-justice system, for example, sweeps in far too many people, for far too little security in exchange. Even so, it is recognizably part of the normative state.

What the Trump administration and its allies are trying to build now, however, is not. The list of measures purpose-built to cleave off a domain in which the law does not apply grows by the day: the pardons that bless and invite insurrectionary violence; the purges of career lawyers at the Justice Department and in the Southern District of New York, inspectors general across the government, and senior FBI agents; the attorney general's command that lawyers obey the president over their own understanding of the Constitution; the appointment of people such as Kash Patel and Dan Bongino, who seem to view their loyalty to the president as more compelling than their constitutional oath; the president's declaration that he and the attorney general are the sole authoritative interpreters of federal law for the executive branch; the transformation of ordinary spending responsibilities into discretionary tools to punish partisan foes; the stripping of

security clearances from perceived enemies and opponents; the threat of criminal prosecutions for speech deemed unfavorable by the president; and the verbal attacks on judges for enforcing the law.

The singular aim of these tactics is to construct a prerogative state where cruel caprice, not law, rules. By no measure does the extent of federal law displaced in the first few months of the Trump administration compare with the huge tracts of the Weimar's legal system eviscerated by the Nazis. But it is striking how Donald

THE PERIL
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Trump's executive orders reject some basic tenets of American constitutionalism—such as Congress's power to impose binding rules on how spending and regulation unfold—without which the normative state cannot persist.

The CEOs who paid for and attended Trump's second inauguration can look forward to the courts being open for the ordinary business of capitalism. So, too, can many citizens who pay little attention to politics expect to be unscarred by the

prerogative state. The normal criminal-justice system, if only in nonpolitical cases, will crank on. Outside the American prerogative state, much will remain as it was. The normative state is too valuable to wholly dismantle.

For that reason, it shouldn't come as a surprise that Trump's lawyers—despite running roughshod over Congress, the states, the press, and the civil service—were somewhat slower to defy the federal courts, and have fast-tracked cases to the Supreme Court, seeking a judicial imprimatur for novel presidential powers. The courts, unlike the legislature, remain useful to an autocrat in a dual state.

Building a dual state need not end in genocide: Vladimir Putin's Russia and Lee Kuan Yew's Singapore have followed the same model of the dual state that Fraenkel described, though neither has undertaken a mass-killing operation as the Nazis did. Their deepest similarity, rather, is that both are intolerant of political dissent and leave the overwhelming majority of citizens alone. The peril of the dual state lies precisely in this capacity for targeted suppression. Most people can ignore the construction of the prerogative state simply because it does not touch their lives. They can turn away while dissidents and scapegoats lose their political liberty. But once the prerogative state is built, as Fraenkel's writing and experience suggest, it can swallow anyone. *A*

Aziz Huq teaches law at the University of Chicago and is the author of The Rule of Law: A Very Short Introduction.

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A New Force of Indian Country

Photograph by Bruce Davidson

This is the living room of the 800-square-foot house in Denver that held our family of five in the mid-1960s. Every night, my father turned that tiny space into an office, sitting cross-legged in a wide armchair, hunched over the coffee table that held our most valuable possession, a new IBM Selectric typewriter. In the morning, my mom stacked paper and put things away, trying to make the living room livable again.

In 1968, the writer Stan Steiner published a book about a cohort of young Native American activists he called the “new Indians.” My dad, Vine Deloria Jr., was one of them. When he met Steiner, he was the executive director of the National Congress of American Indians, founded in 1944 to organize across tribal lines, coordinate political strategy, and lobby Washington. “Ten years ago, you could have tromped on the Indians and they would have said, ‘Okay, kick me again. I’m just an Indian,’” he told Steiner. Those days of acquiescence were over: My father demanded instead that Americans honor their treaties and recognize the political sovereignty of tribal governments.

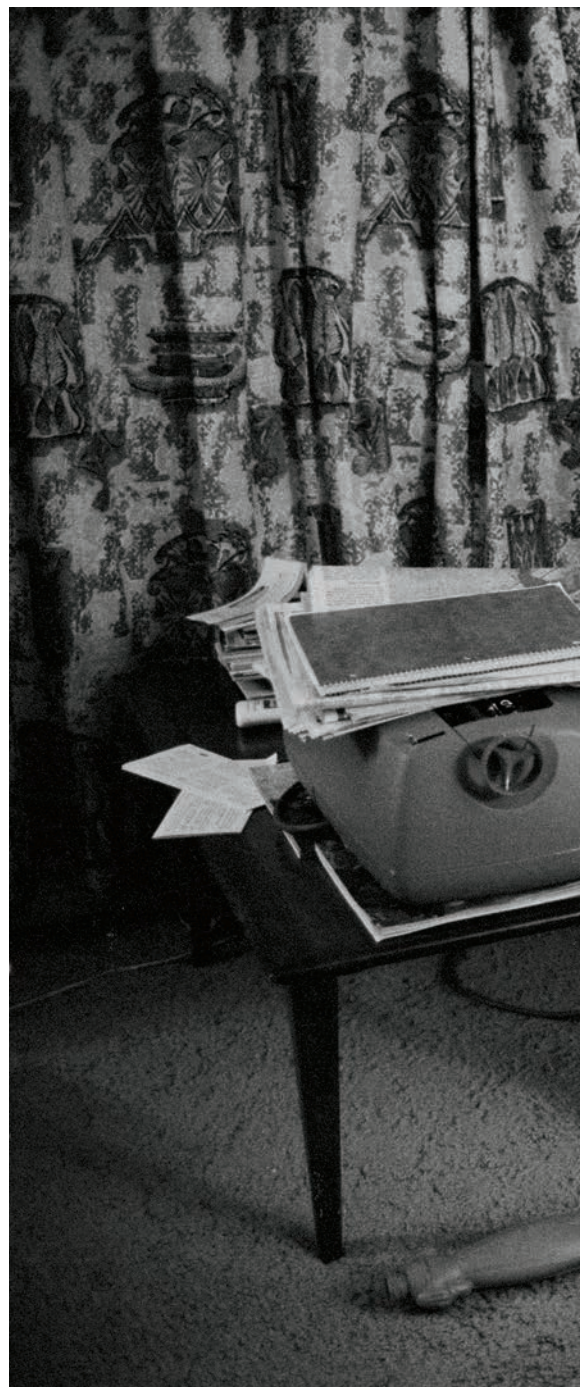
Steiner’s book sent New York publishers chasing after the new Indians he’d identified, hoping to find the voice of this activist generation. My father was one of the few able to get a manuscript between covers, the 1969 best seller *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*.

As he transformed our living room, my father transformed his life, bringing it into line with what he imagined a writer’s looked like. The transformation wasn’t entirely smooth. At one point, my father lost confidence in the project, and tried to return his advance to his publisher. His editor waved a marked-up page of manuscript at him—Norman Mailer’s, as he recalled—and my dad realized he wasn’t in it alone. He soldiered on.

This portrait, by the Magnum photographer Bruce Davidson, accompanied an excerpt from Steiner’s book published in *Vogue*. The image captures the writer’s infrastructure our home hosted each night: chair, table, typewriter, scattered books and newspapers, a ream of fresh paper. And, of course, the stimulants: a cup of cold coffee, a sugar bowl, and a cigarette to keep him going.

My father is wearing a new pair of Justin boots, stirrup-friendly, with the sharp toe pointing in your face. He was about a decade removed from the Marines, and a new regime of travel food and chair time is visibly filling out his frame. He’s holding forth, because my father spoke his book before he wrote it, practicing his words in meetings and interviews. My father is in the room’s corner, but not at all cornered; you can see in his face the new force of Indian Country that exploded in those years. My mom was there too, likely asking him to clean things up before the shutter clicked.

— Philip J. Deloria



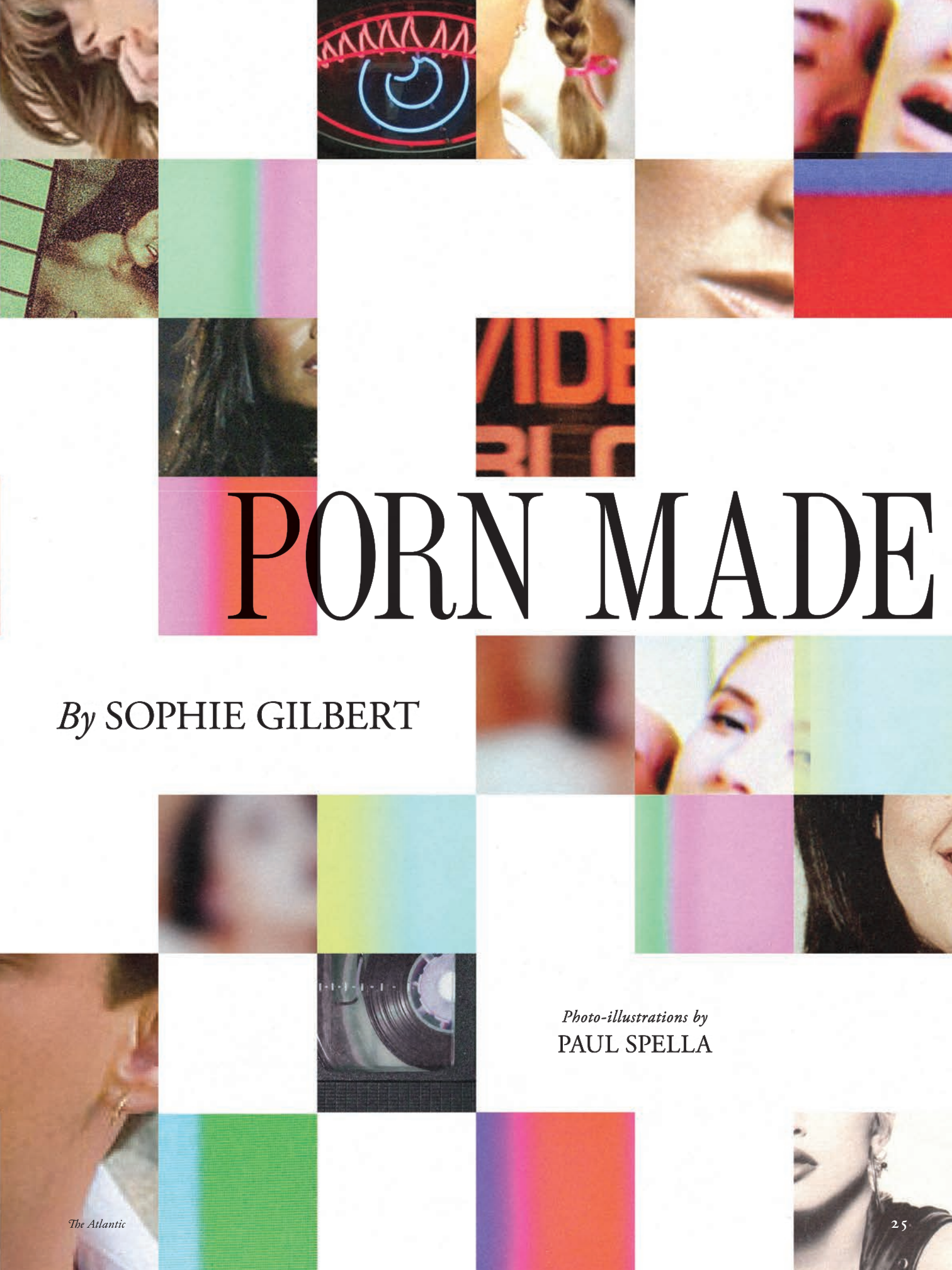


THE WORLD

MAY 2025

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PORN MADE

By SOPHIE GILBERT

Photo-illustrations by
PAUL SPELLA

I

In 1999, the year I turned 16, there were three cultural events that seemed to define what it meant to be a young woman—a girl—facing down the new millennium. In April, Britney Spears appeared on the cover of *Rolling Stone* lying on a pink bed wearing polka-dot panties and a black push-up bra, clutching a Teletubby doll with one hand and a phone with the other. In September, DreamWorks released *American Beauty*, a movie in which a middle-aged man has florid sexual fantasies about his teenage daughter's best friend; the film later won five Academy Awards, including Best Picture. In November, the teen-clothing brand Abercrombie & Fitch released its holiday catalog, titled "Naughty or Nice," which featured nude photo spreads, sly references to oral sex and threesomes, and an interview with the porn actor Jenna Jameson, in which she was repeatedly harangued by the interviewer to let him touch her breasts.

The tail end of the '90s was the era of Clinton sex scandals and Jerry Springer and the launch of a neat new drug called Viagra, a period when sex saturated mainstream culture. In the Spears profile, the interviewer, Steven Daly, alternates between lust—the logo on her Baby Phat T-shirt, he notes, is "distended by her ample chest"—and detached observation that the sexuality of teen idols is just a "carefully baited" trap to sell records to suckers. Being a teen myself, I found it hard to discern the irony. What was obvious to my friends and to me was that power, for women, was sexual in nature. There was no other kind, or none worth

having. I attended an all-girls school run by stern second-wave feminists, who told us that we could succeed in any field or industry we chose. But that messaging was obliterated by the entertainment we absorbed all day long, which had been thoroughly shaped by the one defining art form of the late 20th century: porn.

By this point in history, pornography, as Frank Rich argued in a *New York Times Magazine* story in 2001, was American culture, even if no one wanted to admit it. Porn was a multibillion-dollar industry in the United States—worth more money, Rich suggested, than consumers in the U.S. spent on movie tickets in a year, and purportedly "a bigger business than professional football, basketball and baseball put together." It was a cultural product few people bragged about consuming, but it was infiltrating our collective imagination nevertheless, in ways no one could fully assess at the time. And things were just getting started. Porn helped define the structure and mores of the internet. It dominated popular music, as the biggest hip-hop stars of the era released hard-core films and the teenage stars of my generation redefined themselves for adulthood with fetish-tweaking music videos. In 2003, Snoop Dogg arrived at the MTV Video Music Awards with two women wearing dog collars attached to leashes that he held in each hand, to minimal protest. In 2004, the esteemed fashion photographer Terry Richardson released a coffee-table book that predominantly featured pictures of his own erect penis, and the models he'd cajoled into posing with it.

This period of porno chic arrived with an asterisk that insisted it was all a game, a postmodern, sex-positive appropriation of porn's tropes and aesthetics. But for women, particularly those of us just entering adulthood, the rules of that game were clear: We were the ultimate Millennial commodity, our bodies cheerfully co-opted and replicated as media content within the public domain. If we complained, we were vilified as prudes or scolds. This kind of sexualization was "empowering," everyone kept insisting. But the form of power we were being allotted wasn't the sort you accrue over a lifetime, in the manner of education or money or professional experience. It was all about youth, attention, and a willingness to be in on the joke, even when we were the punch line.

What did growing up against this particular cultural backdrop do to me? What did it do to all of us? I didn't start trying to process this particular initiation into adulthood until two decades later. A few months into the coronavirus pandemic, I gave birth to twins, and becoming a parent in almost complete isolation triggered a kind of identity crisis. I was too exhausted to read; I could no more sit through an entire movie than I could sprout wings and fly. When I went back to work, the #MeToo movement had many women parsing their own historical experiences of assault and abuse. All of the subjects I wrote about seemed to be circling the same theme: an environment that had been set up against women from the beginning.

In 2022, when the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, progress no longer seemed inevitable. The recreational misogyny of the aughts was back, this time with new technology and a cult figurehead, Andrew Tate, who'd briefly appeared on the reality series *Big Brother* while under investigation for rape. (In the years since, Tate has been accused by multiple other women of sexual misconduct and is now under investigation for human trafficking. He has denied all allegations against him.) On TikTok, doll-like women murmured in affectless monologues about living the financially dependent dream of a "soft, feminine life." In 2024, when Kamala Harris ran for president, she was subjected to a targeted campaign of sexualized slander, some of it broadcast personally by

PREVIOUS PAGES: CHRIS ROUT / ALAMY; FRANK MICELLOTTA / GETTY; IAN D'AGALL LAPTOS COMPUTING / ALAMY; JEFFREY BLACKLER / ALAMY; ALBUM / ALAMY; TRACY KING / ALAMY; DREAMWORKS SKG / GETTY; THOMAS MCGOVERN / GETTY; SUNSET BOULEVARD / CORBIS; PATTI MCCONVILLE / ALAMY; SPENCER PLATT / GETTY; MARK PETERSON / CORBIS; GETTY; MARCUS BRANDT / PICTURE ALLIANCE / GETTY; RECORDS / ALAMY; DOD / AFP / GETTY; VNN PHOTOGRAPHY / ALAMY; MIMMO LOBEFARO / ALAMY; DBENITOSTOCK / GETTY

Donald Trump. And when Trump became president for the second time, his victory was jubilantly claimed by misogynists, who taunted women with a new catchphrase: “Your body, my choice.”

So much of this seemed familiar. It was all too reminiscent of the beginning of the 21st century, when feminism felt similarly nebulous and inert, squashed by a cultural explosion of jokey extremity and Technicolor objectification. This was the environment that Millennial women had been raised in. It informed how we felt about ourselves, how we saw one another, and what we understood women to be capable of. It colored our ambitions, our sense of self, our relationships, our bodies, our work, and our art. I came to believe that we couldn’t move forward without fully reckoning with how the culture of the aughts had defined us.

But as I revisited the entertainment of the ’90s and 2000s, what surprised me the most was how much the murk of the era came right from porn. It’s a more influential cultural genre than any other, and yet its impact outside of people’s homes and hotel rooms has hardly been analyzed. I should say here that I’m not opposed to porn on principle. Some of it is liberating; some of it is ethical; a tiny amount of it is even devoted to understanding female desire in a universe built on the male gaze and money shots. Still, in studying porn’s long cultural shadow, I’ve come to agree with the radical feminist Andrea Dworkin, who wrote in 1981 that “pornography incarnates male supremacy. It is the DNA of male dominance.” Porn has undeniably changed how people have sex, as researchers and anyone who has even fleeting experience with dating apps can attest. But it has also changed our culture and, in doing so, has filtered into our subconscious minds, beyond the reach of rationality and reason. We are all living in the world porn made.

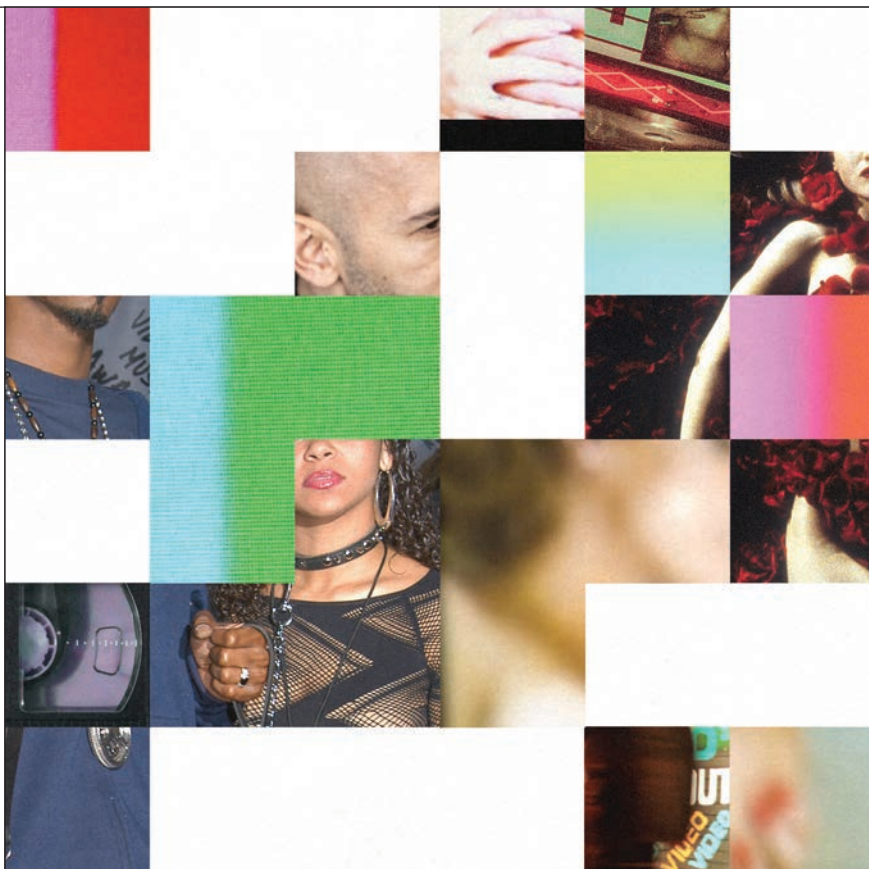
PORNOGRAPHY HAS tended to be at the forefront of emerging technologies, for the simple reason that titillation mixed with novelty is a powerful draw. The porn industry adopted VHS before many Americans had even heard of it. In 1977, when videocassette players

first went on the market, up to 75 percent of the tapes being sold were pornographic. Over the course of the 1980s, as AIDS became an unprecedented public-health crisis, both VHS adoption and porn consumption surged, fueled by convenience (movies you could watch alone, at home) and fear (casual sex was much safer as a solitary endeavor). Independent video stores, which pragmatically stocked the explicit tapes that chains such as Blockbuster refused to carry, also realized that porn could shore up their bottom line—in 1985, Americans rented 75 million adult videos. A decade later, that number had increased almost tenfold, according to the trade magazine *Adult Video News*.

America’s adoption of hard-core porn as a leisure pursuit happened so quickly that its effect on popular culture was hard to measure in the moment. But, as David Friend writes in his book *The Naughty Nineties*, the final decade of the 20th century was consumed with sex, a subject that dominated politics and art, but also public health. By the end of 1990, AIDS had claimed more than 120,000 lives in the United States; one-fifth of the victims had lived in New York City, the epicenter of

fashion, art, music, media, and advertising. The idea that sex could kill you had led to two wildly divergent schools of thought in American culture. One, nicknamed the New Traditionalism after a nostalgic *Good Housekeeping* ad campaign, called for a revival of old-fashioned family values, suggesting that women go home and stay there. (The 1987 movie *Fatal Attraction* made this fear of a corrupted American culture literal, in the form of Glenn Close’s sexually adventurous, bunny-boiling career woman, the fling who won’t be flung.) The other, the New Voyeurism, embraced sex—as a spectator sport. “At a time when doing it has become excessively dangerous, looking at it, reading about it, thinking about it have become a necessity,” a *Newsweek* feature on Madonna declared in 1992. “AIDS has pushed voyeurism from the sexual second tier into the front row.”

Already, the ’90s were a decade of unprecedented sexual openness. Explicit representations of sex were no longer taboo; they were, in fact, now considered vital for public education. This shift meant that artists could experiment with pornographic tropes in plain sight. Near the end of 1990, Madonna released a





video to accompany her new single, “Justify My Love,” that set the tone for the coming years: audacious, fiercely sexual, a bit trollish. Madonna, shot in black and white, is seen walking down a hotel hallway toward an assignation, limping slightly in heels and a black raincoat, clutching her head as if in pain. As she passes different doorways, we see fleeting glimpses of the rooms’ occupants, watching us watch them. After she enters a room, orgiastic flashes of different scenes appear: Madonna with her lover (played by her real-life boyfriend at the time, the amiable lunk Tony Ward); a man lacing a woman into a rubber corset; a dancer in a unitard contorting into shifting positions; Ward watching Madonna with another partner, then getting trussed up in a fetish harness. Finally, Madonna puts on her coat and leaves, laughing, renewed and jubilant, no longer tired.

The brazen sexuality of the video was the whole point. Madonna had lost many friends to AIDS, the artist Keith Haring among them. But she was adamant that sexual freedom, fantasy, and pleasure not be sacrificed amid the devastation. What some people call “sex positivity” today was, in the ’90s, understood by those promoting it as an expression of defiance and celebration. In 1990, HBO debuted *Real Sex*, an unfiltered peek into the lives of strippers, phone-sex operators, porn directors, and exhibitionist couples looking for an audience. The show, according to HBO’s then-head of documentary programming, Sheila Nevins, was a direct response to fears about sexuality that had been stoked by the AIDS crisis. Depicting sex, she said, had become “much more important because of all the terror that surrounds it.” Four years later, Janet Jackson released a video for “Any Time, Any

Place” that teased the same voyeuristic impulses at play in “Justify My Love”: An elderly neighbor looks on, disapprovingly, as Jackson pushes her lover’s head down while he’s on top of her—a then-radical assertion of sexual power and equality.

It was around this same time that then-presidential candidate Bill Clinton admitted on *60 Minutes*, with his wife at his side, to “causing pain” in his marriage, referencing an affair with the TV reporter Gennifer Flowers. “I have said things to you tonight,” he acknowledged, “and to the American people from the beginning, that no American politician ever has.” Clinton’s public acknowledgment of scandal, nonspecific though it might have been, *was* unprecedented, and it helped underscore how much his era would embrace confession and self-exposure. *The Jerry Springer Show* had debuted in 1991, offering Americans a space to air their wildest secrets to a nation of rubberneckers. By the end of the decade, we had been obliged to consider what stains on a blue dress signified; what, exactly, Hugh Grant was arrested for on Sunset Boulevard; whether John Wayne Bobbitt got what he deserved; and whether a person might sell themselves for \$1 million, as Demi Moore’s financially struggling Diana did in *Indecent Proposal*.

In the mid-’90s, DJ Yella, of the hip-hop group N.W.A, started directing adult movies, kicking off a collaborative relationship between hip-hop and porn. In 1996, Lil’ Kim’s debut album, *Hard Core*, opened with what sounded like a recording of a man going to an adult theater, purchasing a ticket to a porn movie, unzipping his pants, and audibly masturbating when Kim appeared as its star. In 1998, the tired porn trope of the sexy schoolgirl was defibrillated by the video for “Baby One More Time,” in which the 16-year-old Britney Spears thrust her hips with an intensity that, now, I find more unsettling than her much-discussed exposed midsection. The video works because Spears seems so earnest, so unaware of how people might be reading her. She looks so young. This is teen sexuality as postmodern spectacle: a mishmash of transgressive allusions transmuted into a product that can’t possibly be interpreted as serious.

In 2001, Snoop Dogg starred in the top-selling hard-core pornographic video in America, “Snoop Dogg’s Doggystyle.” (Snoop didn’t perform explicit acts on camera, but rather acted as a hype man and an emcee, introducing performers and providing the soundtrack.) For fans, this was less a shift toward transgression than a cultural crossover event. “We’ve been using sex to sell music for years,” Camille Evans, a magazine publisher, told *The New York Times*. “Now we’re just flipping it to have music sell sex.” At the beginning of the decade, the provocative, expressive experimentation of artists like Madonna and Jackson had foregrounded women’s desires. By the end, the cultural dominance of porn was pushing a much more regressive set of sexual standards. And the technological mechanisms that helped bolster this dominance would come to underscore—and exacerbate—a potent idea: that women existed only for men’s pleasure.

THE IMPULSE to look at eroticized pictures of other people, of course, is as old as art itself. What changed toward the end of the 20th century was the ease with which pornographic images and videos could be made, disseminated, and turned into profit. If you investigate the origins of today’s most prominent online platforms, a surprising number stem from the equivalent impulse of an eighth grader typing *boobies* into a search bar. Google Images was created after Jennifer Lopez wore a vivid-green jungle-print Versace dress to the 2000 Grammy Awards, cut so spectacularly low that it became the most popular search query Google had seen to date. Facebook was born in 2004, after Mark Zuckerberg first experimented with making a website dedicated to assessing the relative hotness of Harvard undergraduates. And when Jawed Karim, Chad Hurley, and Steve Chen founded YouTube in 2005, it was partly because Karim had been searching for videos of Janet Jackson’s “wardrobe malfunction” at the Super Bowl and couldn’t easily find one. “Sex is the one drive that can shape immediate consumer response,” Gerard Van der Leun wrote in January 1993, in the first-ever issue of *Wired*, considering

the extent to which the early internet was already being informed by sexual content.

In the mid-’90s, with porn now firmly propping up the rest of the web, and with shows such as *Real Sex* typifying the kinds of footage Americans wanted to watch, two women found themselves traversing fresh technological terrain. Both would end up determining the future of the internet. One was Pamela Anderson, who in 1997 became the first celebrity to have sexually explicit footage of herself disseminated on the internet without her consent. Despite the fact that the video in question was extremely private—made by herself and her husband, Tommy Lee, on their honeymoon, and stolen from a safe in their Malibu home—millions of people delighted at the opportunity to see something wholly new: a celebrity, an American icon, as exposed as anyone could possibly be.

When Anderson sued *Penthouse*, which was trying to profit from her tape, the company’s lawyer told her that because she’d previously posed nude for the magazine, she could not legitimately claim that she was being victimized and had “forfeited” her right to privacy. The following year, exhausted and seven months pregnant, Anderson agreed to let a distributor broadcast the tape online if he stopped selling physical copies on

VHS, not understanding that the internet was already a thriving marketplace for porn. The footage became the quintessential cultural product of the ’90s: One of the most famous women in the world lost the right to a private sex life, and countless more people learned how to get online, enticed by a novel form of public spectacle. That very same year, *Girls Gone Wild* made its infomercial debut, selling videos in which college girls (and, often, high schoolers) revealed their breasts, made out with one another, and performed stripteases on camera, all for the low, low compensation of branded trucker caps and dubious street cred.

Just as Anderson was making futile attempts to protect her own image, an unknown college student was becoming the first woman to allow the internet unfiltered, unmediated access to her life. In 1996, a 19-year-old student at Dickinson College named Jennifer Ringley bought a webcam that she connected to a computer in her dorm room. Ringley was, in her words, a “computer nerd,” and she wanted to see if she could write a programming script that would take pictures in real time and upload them to her website. The script worked, and Ringley began to post: regular, unposed, black-and-white images that published first every 15 minutes, and then every three. The banality



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of the pictures seemed to be, for her, the draw of the project: She sat at her computer, she ate, she talked on the phone, she slept. “I think the camera would be a lot less interesting if I paid that much attention to it,” Ringley told Ira Glass on a 1997 episode of *This American Life*, by which time her “JenniCam” was getting upwards of half a million hits a day. “It would be more of a staged show. And you can go see a staged show anywhere.”

There was nothing particularly erotic about these photos, but the majority of visitors to her site, she said, were men. Many people seemed interested in JenniCam less for its humdrum snapshots of everyday life and more for the long-odds hope that Ringley would do something salacious while they watched her. The first time she invited a date over who didn’t flee as soon as he saw the camera, so many viewers flocked to her site that they crashed the server and ended up seeing nothing. Ringley’s intentions weren’t to actively court what the film theorist Laura Mulvey termed “the male gaze,” and the camera didn’t deter her from doing anything that she felt like doing. She was opening up her life online to try something different, brokering a parasocial intimacy with the people watching her. But what most of them wanted to see—and what even well-meaning interpreters such as Glass and David Letterman wanted to talk about—was nudity and sex, the most fascinating contours of private life turned into public exhibition.

The internet, at this point, still felt redolent with possibility. Going online was an opportunity to experiment with identity, self-presentation, communication. For women, though, what was becoming clear was how much we were already the primary objects of the online age. As the ’90s went by, third-wave feminism was edged out by postfeminism, a cheerful, consumerist movement arguing that feminism had achieved what it needed to and now women were largely free to behave just like men, sexually liberated and socially empowered. The catch was that we were also subtly being conditioned to perform.

I’m fascinated by Ringley because in her effort to find a new way to connect online, she set a template for how women would learn to act. Her experiments with

radical honesty influenced the confessional online writing of the 2000s. And her willingness to become a living, breathing character on people’s computer screens, coupled with the expectations that porn had already set, shaped the future of both celebrity and sex work. Before Instagram and TikTok and OnlyFans, even before blogs and MySpace and reality television, the internet had reaffirmed that women were to be what Mulvey defined as “erotic objects” whose bodies were very much in the public domain. With no other direction to go in, 21st-century porn would exploit this idea to new extremes.

BY THE TIME I was in college, porn was everywhere in popular culture, providing a recognizable aesthetic that filtered through fashion magazines, advertising, independent film, and online media. In 2004, the Deitch Projects gallery, in New York City, debuted a splashy exhibition of new work by Terry Richardson, accompanied by the publication of his coffee-table book, both titled *Terryworld*. Richardson, by that point, was the torchbearer for a visual mode that was irresistible at the beginning of the 21st century: a tacky, sweaty genre of portraiture that gave Hollywood stars and random passersby the same high-flash, semisurprised, not-quite-human aura. Richardson’s book included images of Dennis Hopper, Kate Moss, and Pharrell Williams, as well as the photographer’s erect penis, which he captured in different settings: resting on a brown teddy bear, pointing down at the head of a seemingly passed-out model whom Richardson holds by the hair; choking another model whose eyes display what appears to be discomfort. (In 2017, Condé Nast finally ended its working relationship with Richardson after years of well-publicized allegations by models that Richardson relentlessly harassed, manipulated, and coerced them into sexual activity during shoots; Richardson has always denied the allegations.)

The tone of Richardson’s work—the way it flattens its subjects into two-dimensional beings seen through the photographer’s leering, cynical lens—might feel discomfiting now, but the substance of it, in that moment, wasn’t unusual. In

the early 2000s, popular culture was doing everything it could to emulate hard-core pornography, playing with its tropes and lack of boundaries. In 2003, the British photographers Rankin and David Bailey (both of whom had previously shot Queen Elizabeth II) collaborated on a series devoted to explicit images of female genitalia that was known officially as “Rankin + Bailey: Down Under” and unofficially as “the pussy show.” At the Cannes Film Festival, the British filmmaker Michael Winterbottom—who’d previously directed a Thomas Hardy adaptation starring Kate Winslet—debuted his movie *9 Songs*, the story of a young couple’s relationship that contained multiple scenes of unsimulated sex. In the summer of 2004, Jenna Jameson’s memoir, *How to Make Love Like a Porn Star*, spent six weeks on the *New York Times* best-seller list. In October, stars including Ben Stiller and Rachel Weisz attended the opening of Timothy Greenfield-Sanders’s *XXX*, a photographic series featuring porn actors that was accompanied by an HBO documentary—a project that captured the porno-chic style of the moment. “Fashion has tremendous influence on how the culture changes,” Greenfield-Sanders told a *Times* reporter. “And porn has had a tremendous influence on fashion.”

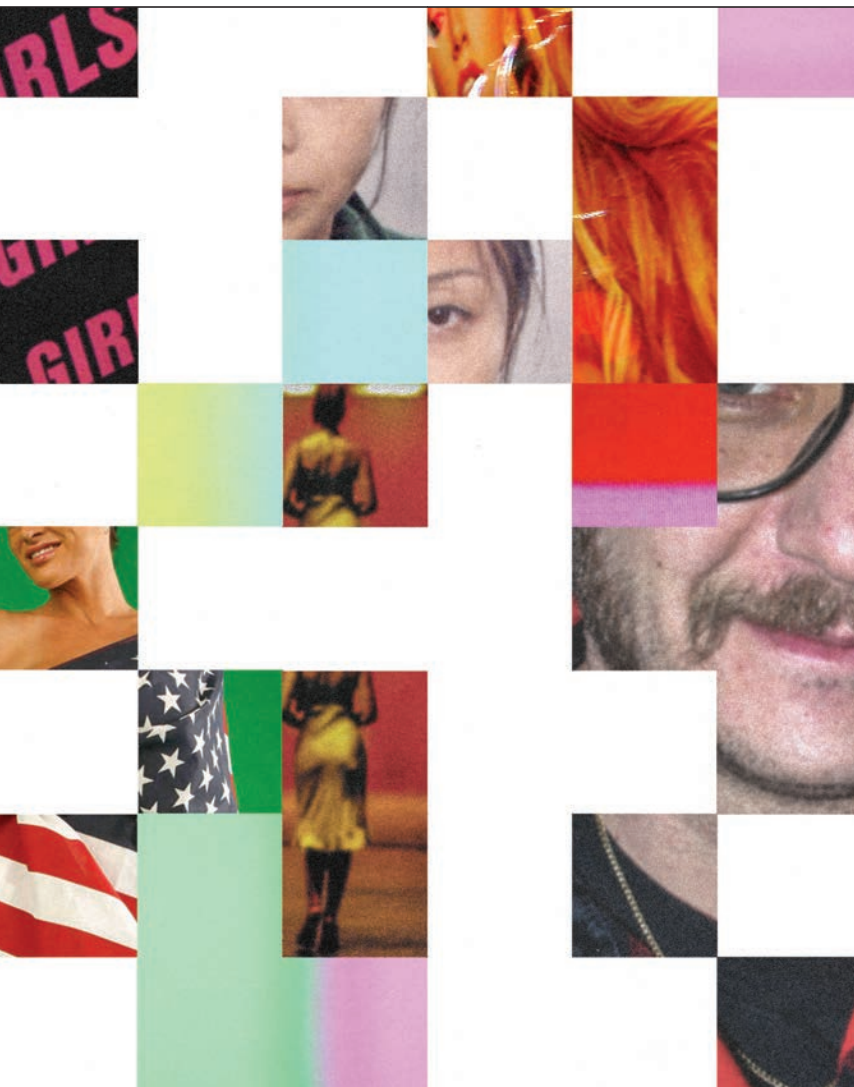
At the same time, porn was adapting to a world in which it was no longer on the margins. The more mainstream culture ripped off its imagery and its sexual excess, the more pornographers had to find new ways to stand out. The techno-optimistic vision of porn saw the medium as a sexually liberating force for everyone. But as the industry adapted to the jaded palate of the contemporary porn consumer, it pushed boundaries further. “The new element,” Martin Amis wrote in 2001, reporting for *The Guardian* on the business of porn, “is violence.” And it was overwhelmingly being inflicted on women, in content so degrading, it sometimes made even Larry Flynt, the *Hustler* publisher, uncomfortable.

Porn was getting crueler, and so was popular culture, as both met a growing taste for extremity. In 1999, a documentary was released about the porn actor Annabel Chong, who’d had sex 251 times in a single 10-hour period and then went

on *The Jerry Springer Show* to discuss her experience, while audience members gasped and cringed at the spectacle. Chong's feat of endurance and the 2002 Gaspar Noé film *Irréversible*—which included a nine-minute anal-rape scene featuring the actor Monica Bellucci—were arguably extensions of the same idea: testing the limits of what men could do to women for entertainment while the cameras rolled.

As the decade progressed, photographers lay on sidewalks trying to get upskirt, genital-exposing pictures of actresses who'd only just turned 18, and female celebrities psychologically disintegrated in full view of the cameras; what remained consistent was how people kept on watching. We had been conditioned to see people on our computer screens not as human beings but as characters in an ongoing, multiplatform story, whose degradation was all part of the grand spectacle. Male aggression and female submission had been coded into the ways women in public were treated. The photographers who haunted Princess Diana until her death, in 1997, had supposedly used violent language to describe their methods: They “blitzed her” as a group, “whacked her,” “hose[d] her down.” The overwhelmed princess once reportedly shouted at them to go “rape someone else.” In her 2023 memoir, *The Woman in Me*, Britney Spears describes how she flipped out after a photographer repeatedly harassed her during a moment of crisis, attacking him with an umbrella. “Later, that paparazzo would say in an interview for a documentary about me, ‘That was not a good night for her ... But it was a good night for us—’cause we got the money shot.’”

THE VIVISECTION OF women peaked in 2007, when, within the space of a few months, Spears shaved her head, Anna Nicole Smith fatally overdosed on combined prescription drugs, a sobbing Paris Hilton went to jail, and a pantsuit-clad Hillary Clinton announced that she was running for president. All of this was documented in what felt like real time, in a rolling barrage of blog posts, paparazzi photos, and cable-news clips. The cruelty and



disdain expressed toward women during the aughts were, I'd argue, more significant and enduring than they've been given credit for. We were being asked to see a woman as capable of occupying the most powerful position in the world, in a media landscape conditioned to view us as high-definition train wrecks. Early in 2008, when Clinton briefly welled up in a coffee shop after a bruising loss in the Iowa caucus, the moment was interpreted as being a melodramatic scandal fit for *TMZ* and a cynical ploy for attention that eventually won her New Hampshire.

The specter of a Hillary Clinton presidency was immediately presented by some pundits in objectified terms. How else were women in this era to be understood? “Will this country want to actually watch a woman get older before their eyes on a daily basis?” Rush Limbaugh asked on his radio show in 2007.

It's no longer at all surprising to me that a capable and experienced woman lost to a reality-TV character and virulent misogynist in 2016 (to say nothing of 2024). The overwhelming cultural message that Americans had absorbed during the decades leading up to Clinton's first presidential campaign enshrined the idea that women fundamentally lacked the qualities required to gain and exercise authority: intelligence, morality, dignity.

Clinton tends to loom large in any discussion of female political ambition in this century, but there's another woman whose rapid, turbulent ascent fittingly illustrates the cultural trends of this era. In August 2008, when Senator John McCain announced Sarah Palin as his presidential running mate, the 44-year-old Alaska governor was virtually unheard-of outside her state. She had minimal political experience: two terms as the mayor of Wasilla,

a town with fewer than 7,000 residents at the time, and less than two years as governor. But she was a woman—which the McCain campaign hoped would energize voters—a conservative Christian, and a mother. An early profile of Palin in the *Times* highlighted the latter identity, describing her as someone who had never had political ambitions of her own but rather was drawn to office reluctantly, out of a pragmatic desire to share her skills. Her successor as mayor described her to the newspaper as just “a P.T.A. mom who got involved.”

Palin also fit neatly into the decade’s understanding of what a woman should be. She’d won the title of Miss Wasilla and had placed as a runner-up in the 1984 Miss Alaska pageant. Mere days after she addressed the Republican National Convention as a candidate for vice president—the first woman ever to do so—Larry Flynt’s production company posted an ad on Craigslist requesting a “Sarah Palin look-alike for an adult film to be shot in the next 10 days.” Flynt had a history of trying to unite porn and politics: In 1975, one year after launching *Hustler*, he published photographs of former First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis sunbathing nude in Greece, and in 1983, he attempted to run for president himself as a Republican. *Who’s Nailin’ Paylin?*, which filmed over a weekend in October, starred the porn performer Lisa Ann as Serra Paylin, a politician who thinks the Earth is 10,000 years old, struggles to keep from saying “You betcha,” and participates in hard-core group scenes, including one with satirical versions of Hillary Clinton and Condoleezza Rice.

What did it mean, that American culture’s immediate response to a woman’s political ascent was to put her on her back? *Who’s Nailin’ Paylin?* was absurd, but it made undeniable all the ways in which porn had reset ideas about women. “Porn does not inform, or persuade, or debate,” Amia Srinivasan wrote in her 2021 book, *The Right to Sex*. “Porn trains.” For the past few decades, it has trained men to see women as objects—as things to silence, restrain, fetishize, or brutalize. But it has trained women, too. In 2013, the social psychologist Rachel M. Calogero found that the more women

were prone to self-objectification—the defining message of porn and aughts mass media—the less inclined they were toward gender-based activism and the pursuit of social justice. This, to me, goes a long way toward explaining what happened to women and power in the early 21st century. For decades, male supremacy was being coded into our culture, in ways that were both outlandish and so subtle, they were hard to question.

GIVEN WHAT Millennials had grown up with, it wasn’t surprising when they started examining their own conditioning through storytelling, taking stock of what the first decade of the new century had wrought. One of the most prominent was Lena Dunham, whose HBO series, *Girls*, debuted in 2012. The show reckoned with, among other subjects, the indignities of sleeping with 20-something men whose sexual scripts and practices now tended to be ripped right out of porn. (In the second episode, while Dunham’s Hannah is having sex with Adam Driver’s Adam, he calls her a “dirty little whore” and puts his hand around her neck before he ejaculates. “That was so good—I almost came,” she says meekly in response.) By the time Sam Levinson’s *Euphoria* debuted in 2019, explicit sexual imagery was omnipresent among teenagers, something Zendaya’s protagonist, Rue, notes in a voice-over: “I’m sorry. I know your generation relied on flowers and fathers’ permission, but it’s 2019, and unless you’re Amish, nudes are the currency of love, so stop shaming us. Shame the assholes who create password-protected online directories of naked, underage girls.”

Euphoria was provocative to a fault—one locker-room montage featuring more than a dozen full-frontal penises felt more like a challenge to find premium cable’s limits than a coherent piece of storytelling. But the series was intent, in a bleakly cynical kind of way, on exploring what porn culture had passed down to the next generation. In one scene, Rue, who battles addiction throughout the series, blithely offers a tutorial on the art of dick pics; in another, she tears apart her house looking for pills. Many of the show’s sex

scenes were unnerving: Kat (Barbie Ferreira) loses her virginity after being challenged by other high schoolers to prove she’s not a prude, but she’s secretly filmed and the footage is uploaded to Pornhub; she panics that she’ll become a social pariah. Jules (Hunter Schafer) meets a man online named “DominantDaddy” who turns out to be the father of one of her classmates, and when he meets her at a motel to have sex, her pain and forced submission are hard to watch.

Levinson has insisted that his show was simply trying to convey how rapidly the experience of adolescence was changing. By the time *Euphoria* debuted, porn’s practices and mores had thoroughly defined not just culture but sex itself. That year, a survey found that 38 percent of British women younger than 40 had experienced unwanted violent behavior—including slapping, gagging, spitting, or choking—during consensual sex. A culture of unfettered male dominance had simultaneously sprawled across the rest of the web, as misogynistic abuse and harassment manifested in different communities and targeted campaigns, and even culminated in episodes of real violence. “Incels,” as certain disaffected young men began calling themselves, hate women for not being more sexually agreeable, as though sex is a commodity that should be redistributed to the needy rather than a matter of personal desire. That particular term was relatively new, but the rest of their verbiage was familiar: One 2021 study conducted by researchers in Britain found that much of the language used in incel forums is identical to the language used in mainstream pornography, routinely employed to dehumanize and sexually humiliate women.

The impulse to subject women to sexual violence obviously predates porn. And not all porn is degrading or hateful toward women, even if much of it is. But, looking back across the past few decades, it’s hard not to see that the explosion of pornography as a cultural product during the 1990s and 2000s changed the terms of how women were to be viewed and understood. The ramifications have rippled throughout our on- and offline lives. In 2014, two years before Trump’s first presidential victory, approximately

70 percent of American men ages 18 to 39 reported using pornography within the past year. Trump's election confirmed how widespread and even tacitly accepted the degradation of women had become: Here was a winning candidate who'd been accused of sexual misconduct by dozens of women (which he has denied); the first "porn president," as my colleague Caitlin Flanagan wrote, for whom the reduction of women to sexual objects was as natural as breathing.

By 2024, the debasement of women in public life had become so instinctive that Kamala Harris was subjected to sexual slurs in the lead-up to her presidential campaign—even before she was officially a candidate. On Fox Business, a guest labeled Harris "the original Hawk Tuah girl," a reference to a viral video about blow jobs; Trump himself reposted memes inferring that Harris had used sex to further her career. In October, a week and a half before the election, a billboard appeared in Ohio that depicted Harris on her hands and knees, mouth agape, about to engage in oral sex with a frenzied look on her face. I spent much of the year with my head in my hands. For a moment, it seemed possible, again, that Trump's hateful rhetoric, his nonsensical diatribes, his coalition of creeps and podcast bros and internet-poisoned trolls might be enough to make a capable woman seem favorable by comparison.

But that wasn't the case. And as he returned to the presidency, I found myself thinking less about men than about women, particularly some of the women in Trump's orbit—the ones who trade power for visibility, a high-definition, glaringly enhanced veneer of public womanhood that insists being seen is the same thing as being significant. So much of this century's popular culture has presented women as spectacles: chaotic, melodramatic, hypersexualized recipients of attention.

Porn's logic of male supremacy has successfully saturated politics. The new administration is in thrall to the manosphere, and unabashed about its project of white masculine domination; in 2025, just 15 percent of Republican members of Congress are women. Young men and boys are growing up with misogynist influencers who assert that women are something less than fully human. "One must believe

SO MUCH OF THIS CENTURY'S POPULAR CULTURE HAS PRESENTED WOMEN AS SPECTACLES: CHAOTIC, MELODRAMATIC, HYPERSEXUALIZED RECIPIENTS OF ATTENTION.

in the existence of the person in order to recognize the authenticity of her suffering," Andrea Dworkin wrote in her 1983 book, *Right-Wing Women*, during another period of anti-feminist backlash. "Neither men nor women believe in the existence of women as significant beings."

The first part of her argument stands. That the second part is questionable—regarding how women see themselves, at least—is a positive development. And for all the ways in which popular culture helped enshrine porn as the defining form of modern entertainment, culture may be turning into the one place where we no longer want to be reminded of it. I keep coming back to HBO's 2023 miniseries *The Idol*, a work to which Sam Levinson brought all of *Euphoria*'s provocations and none of its emotional intelligence. The show starred Lily-Rose Depp as a disgraced pop star in the Britney tradition and Abel "The Weeknd" Tesfaye as the nightclub owner and cult leader who seduces her with rough sex and BDSM; its intentions seemed to be to marry premium-cable aesthetics with the hollow transgressions of extreme porn. In one scene, Tesfaye's character suffocates Depp's Jocelyn with a scarlet silk robe, then uses a knife to slash a hole so she can breathe, reducing the character to a bright-red slash, a pornographic crevice. Jocelyn's experiences, the show implied,

had empowered her, a suggestion so absurd and anachronistic that viewers could only cringe in response. *The Idol* was a critical failure that hardly anyone even talked about—a possible sign of progress.

For me, the process of adulthood has been less about lessons learned than unlearned—the steady dismantling of ideas I absorbed before I could really think critically about them. But I still believe that by understanding all of the ways in which women have been diminished and broken down in the recent past, we can identify and defuse those same attacks in the present. Our culture isn't just entertainment—it's the means by which we understand and relate to ourselves and one another. In moments when I'm galled by how cyclical backlash and progress are, it's consoling to remember that most women have newfound language and skepticism that I couldn't have imagined while watching *Girls Gone Wild* or listening to "P.I.M.P." Both of those developments feed the kind of unlearning, in other words, after which power is real, change is necessary, and wholly new stories can begin. *A*

Sophie Gilbert is a staff writer at The Atlantic. This article was adapted from her new book, Girl on Girl: How Pop Culture Turned a Generation of Women Against Themselves.

WHEN

I'M 84

**THE WORLD STILL
NEEDS RINGO STARR.**

BY MARK LEIBOVICH PHOTOGRAPHS BY DINA LITOVSKY





Let's start with something that I'm not proud of but feels important to disclose up front. Last spring, I was interviewing Ringo Starr at the Sunset Marquis hotel, in West Hollywood, when I committed an embarrassing breach of journalistic ethics: As we were wrapping up, I asked Starr if he would pose for a photo with me.

"Or is that grossly unprofessional?" I asked, trying to come off as sheepish and apologetic.

Starr smirked.

"No, no, everybody's unprofessional," he said. "Don't feel special."

He moved next to me and flashed a compulsory peace sign as his publicist snapped our photo. "Everybody does it," she said, and then handed me a white "peace and love" bracelet as a parting gift. Starr flashed another peace sign—a double this time.

Okay, end of disclosure. From here on, this will be a sober and detached treatment of a seminal figure in the history of popular music. (Also: The photo can be viewed on my Instagram.)

RINGO STARR IS 84 years old and has lived quite an extraordinary life. I realize I am late to this story.

He is among the most scrutinized, fetishized, analyzed, and catechized people in history. I admit to feeling out of my depth, if this was not already clear. Usually, I write about politics. I am not accustomed to interacting with Beatles. As opposed to, say, congressmen.

That first day I met him, Starr had a new record to promote—a solo record, it still feels necessary to say. I had been granted a brief

slot on his schedule around the release of *Crooked Boy*, a four-track collection that features the Strokes' guitarist Nick Valensi. Starr had a packed interview dance card, with a procession of podcasters, YouTubers, and other species that didn't exist when he and his Liverpool mates first started doing this, back when America's chief influencer was Ed Sullivan.

Starr greeted me with a light fist bump, in keeping with his hypervigilance about avoiding germs.

"You might be one of the most-interviewed people in the world," I felt the need to say.

"I am," he confirmed.

I wondered how I could make this interesting. "Well, just make it short," Starr suggested, as we headed out onto the patio adjacent to his suite.

"So, how short?" I asked. "Like, three minutes, two minutes?"

"You can have the whole three!" Starr said, and then punctuated his sentence, as he punctuates many of his sentences, with a dry and devilish giggle. Four quick "hah"s jackhammered in succession. He tends to speak in quips, toggling between his two dominant modes, seen-it-all sarcasm and glib nonchalance.

Born Richard Starkey, he became Sir Richard Starkey when he was knighted in 2018. I asked his excellency whether I should address him as "Ringo" or "Richard" (or "Richie," as intimates call him). "You'll call me Ringo, because I don't know you," he said. "A-hah-hah-hah-hah."

"My family don't call me that," he added.

After a few minutes, the publicist started gesturing in my direction. I feared this was the universal "wrap it up" sign, but no, false alarm (she was just trying to get a photographer's attention). "This is longer than three minutes, you know," Starr took the opportunity to observe, affecting a sneer. Or maybe he was not affecting it.

Starr looks remarkably well maintained for his age. This is a testament to the preservative power of his fitness regimen, strict sobriety, a vegetarian diet, and lots of hair dye. He is also one of those rare figures whose face has been such a fixture of our cultural lives for so long that his actual, three-dimensional presence in front of you elicits a double take. Is this the genuine cargo or some wiry wisp of a Ringo impersonator?

It feels perfectly suitable to describe him as "looking exactly like Ringo Starr" and expect to be understood. He has the shaped beard, the little red shades, and a peace-sign pendant on a necklace. He appears just as he has in countless pop-art pieces and wax museums, and that *Simpsons* episode in which Starr, playing himself, turns out to be Marge's artistic muse.

Everyone scurrying in and out of Ringo's suite looks famous, or almost famous. They include a swarm of well-wishers and maybe some actual friends whom Starr has gotten by with a little help from. I was struck by how Starr's presence arouses giddiness even in other rock stars. Valensi told me that when people hear that he worked with Starr, they tend to transform into elated teenagers. "Everybody who I tell that to is just so phenomenally either excited for me, or is baffled, and kind of questioning, *How did that happen?*" he said. "My wife and my mom, and my sisters, and even close friends who are musicians—everybody just kind of wants to know what the whole thing was like."

People who spotted Starr moving through the Sunset Marquis kept shouting out “Peace and love” at him. This of course has been Starr’s personal mantra, greeting, and aloha for most of his post-Beatles decades.

“Peace and love, peace and love,” Starr said back to a cluster of onlookers, sounding cheerfully bored. At one point, I watched Starr pause and puff out his cheeks into an ostentatious deep breath. I imagine that’s one of the hassles of immortality: It tends to go on forever.

I HAVE ALWAYS been a Ringo guy. This was true long before the Fab Four were reduced to an antique duo of Starr and Paul McCartney, now 82. Starr had seven straight top-10 singles after the Beatles broke up, and those early solo tracks were among the first pop songs I remember hearing on the radio when I was a kid. “It Don’t Come Easy” was released in 1971, when I was 6, and played in heavy rotation on the local pop station, WRKO-AM, Boston. It was one of my first favorite songs.

Starr always seemed like the friendliest and most life-size of the four Beatles. The others felt less accessible than the droopy-eyed drummer with the cartoon-cowboy name and childlike tunes. Ringo was yellow submarines and octopus gardens, the mascot little brother, despite being the eldest Beatle, and the best at fluttering above the feuds that afflicted the trio of geniuses around him.

Starr was the fastest to comic relief and most averse to pretension in any form. “There you go, hiding behind a smoke screen of bourgeois clichés,” he says in Richard Lester’s 1964 comedy, *A Hard Day’s Night*, after a stagehand has accused Starr of being “rather arbitrary” for not letting him touch his drum kit. I latched on to this line immediately. In high school, when certain highfalutin friends would try out their fancy SAT words, I would tell them, “There you go, hiding behind a smoke screen of bourgeois clichés.” (Admittedly, this itself was rather arbitrary on my part.)

“He’s the most sympathetic of all the Beatles,” T Bone Burnett, the legendary producer and guitarist, told me. When I spoke with him, Burnett had just produced a new Starr record, a country album called *Look Up*, which came out in January and has since become one of the biggest hits of his solo career. “Nobody has generated more goodwill than Ringo,” Burnett added. “Not a single person in the world.”

Clearly, this is hyperbole. Starr has had his moments of tribulation. As the Beatles were reaching their collective wits’ end in 1968, he up and left the band while the others kept on recording what would become *The White Album*. It was the first time a Beatle had quit, though as the journalist Rob Sheffield writes in *Dreaming the Beatles*, “It later became one of their favorite pastimes.” Ringo decamped to Sardinia, and somehow the press didn’t hear about it. McCartney took over on drums for “Dear Prudence,” a fact that would remain a secret for nearly two decades.

For the most part, though, Starr is depicted as an unfailingly positive force within the band. Starr, in Sheffield’s summation, is “the guy who holds it together because he can get along with the high-strung divas up front.”

This idea of Ringo as a source of solace, lowerer of temperatures, and defuser of tensions resonated with me. I spent much of 2024 covering the bleak spectacle of the U.S. presidential campaign. Nothing was making sense, and everywhere I went, people seemed stuck in rival camps of resentment. If “peace and love” had been on the ballot, it would have lost in a landslide.

But here was Ringo, still banging around. It felt like a small but significant win for humankind, and one to be celebrated as often as possible.

On July 7, I went to Starr’s birthday gala in Beverly Hills, where celebrities of varying wattages (Fred Armisen, the Eagles’ Joe Walsh) wished him well. Starr has turned his birthday into an international celebration of peace and love; at noon local time, Ringo fans in 34 nations

exclaimed “Peace and love,” as did NASA astronauts aboard the International Space Station. I attended events tied to the release of Starr’s two new records, and two concerts by his long-running “Ringo Starr and His All Starr Band.” Throughout, the Ringo habitat stayed blissfully sealed off from Donald Trump, Joe Biden, national reckonings, crises of democracy, and things of that nature.

On the rare occasions when politics did intrude, the context was fittingly fun-loving. “I agree!” Starr announced last fall, as he held up a RINGO FOR PRESIDENT 2024 placard that he had grabbed from a fan in the audience during a show in Washington, D.C.

If only. Instead, Starr would be my roving ambassador of joy and amity in an America that felt starved of such things.

“I can’t force you to be peaceful and loving; I can only say, ‘Peace and love,’” Starr told me. But how wonderful it would be,

STARR WAS THE FASTEST TO COMIC RELIEF AND MOST AVERSE TO PRETENSION IN ANY FORM.

I replied, if his “peace and love” birthday festivities kept growing and growing. The event might outlive him, and July 7 could be a certified international holiday. One day a *week* should be dedicated to peace and love, Starr countered: “I want Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Peace and Love, Thursday, Friday.” (Naturally, this would require eight days a week.)

STARR HAS a gift for coining offbeat phrases. His fellow Beatles referred to them as “Ringo-isms.” The phrases might sound askew at first, and don’t always track precisely. But something about them is just right. They fill a gap in the language you hadn’t realized was there.

Starr once described a particularly grueling Beatles session as being a *hard day’s night*. This presumably was meant to convey a hybrid sense of fatigue, relief, and satisfaction. Everyone who heard him seemed to know just what he meant. Soon enough, it would be a song, a movie title, and a universal refrain.

McCartney and John Lennon were mesmerized by these nonsensical yet lyrical coinages. Starr has said that Lennon would follow him around, pencil at the ready, “waiting to hear what I’d say next.” His quirky phraseology was unpredictable and did not keep normal hours. Suddenly, inspiration would strike. How to capture Father McKenzie’s abject isolation in “Eleanor Rigby”? Say he’s “darning his socks in the night when there’s nobody there.” That was all Ringo.

(*Eight days a week* has been credited as a Ringo-ism, but Starr told me the phrase came from an overworked cabdriver, who said it to McCartney. “At one time I did want to take credit for it,” he admitted. “I said all those other lines.”)

I first learned about Ringo-isms last spring while sitting in a Beverly Hills Starbucks cramming for my first meeting with Starr. A few months earlier, he had done an interview with *AARP the Magazine* on the occasion of yet another record, the EP *Rewind Forward*, which had come out in October 2023. The title track is a great and uplifting song. I especially loved the concept of “rewind forward,” a contemporary Ringo-ism that is also something of a mental strategy for him.

Starr explained that when he’s in despair, he tries to transport himself to a happier time in order to break his sadness. “If I’m

in a bad space, rewind to the good space you were in,” he said. “Like yesterday, an hour ago, or last year. And bring it forward.” Starr said he loved the term *rewind forward* as soon as it popped into his head and out of his mouth. “When I said it—like *hard day’s night*—it made no sense,” he told me. But soon enough, it made perfect sense. “Just, hey, bring it forward,” he said.

I instantly appreciated the notion of “rewind forward.” One of the most powerful examples of this in my own life, in fact, involves Ringo Starr.

It was the summer of 1991, and I was going through a brutally difficult time. My little brother, Phil, had just died after a terrible car crash and a six-year ordeal in a coma. I was 26; living in Cambridge, Massachusetts; depressed as hell; and not able to sleep, write, or do much of anything. Finally, a shrink prescribed me an antidepressant—something far less common and more stigmatized in those days, and I didn’t dare tell a soul. As the pharmacist at the crowded CVS in Harvard Square reviewed my

prescription, he said to me in a very loud voice, “You will be taking this to treat clinical depression, right?” I cannot emphasize how loud this was.

I stood there mortified, while everyone in the long line behind me cracked up. As did I, after a few seconds. It was my first moment of pure lightness in months. I will always remember that episode, as well as what was playing over the CVS speakers at just that moment: “It Don’t Come Easy,” that great Ringo tune about persevering through darkness.

Looking back on that period in my 20s, it now feels less a dreary memory than something to celebrate—a testament to the miracle of survival. Whenever I hear “It Don’t Come Easy,” it inspires an odd nostalgia for that moment in CVS when brightness peeked through. The song offers a chance to connect with an old, surmounted pain.

Starr began working on “It Don’t Come Easy” in the late 1960s, as tensions within the Beatles were reaching their full boil. He has spoken of the song in terms of his own self-doubt. The other three were much more accomplished songwriters; how would he fare on his own? “When I first started writing, I would play the songs to the boys, and they would all be on the floor laughing their asses off,” Starr told me. “Because I had just rewritten someone else’s song. I



Ringo Starr, drummer for Rory Storm and the Hurricanes, circa 1959



The Beatles, 1963. All four members endured gritty upbringings, but Starr overcame what one biographer called “a Dickensian chronicle of misfortune.”

just changed the words, but it had the same melody. And so I had to get out of that.”

Starr had always been set apart from the other three, and not just onstage, as drummers often are. Although all four Beatles had endured gritty Liverpool upbringings, Starr was a true vanquisher of long odds, overcoming a childhood steeped in poverty and chronic illness—“a Dickensian chronicle of misfortune,” as the Beatles biographer Bob Spitz has called it.

At age 6, little Richie Starkey contracted a ghastly case of peritonitis. “They went in for my appendix, but, too late, it had exploded; all the poison was in my body,” Starr told me. “And they did actually say to my mother—three times they said to her—‘He’ll be dead in the morning.’ And, hey, here I am.” He spent several months in the hospital before he recovered. He then contracted tuberculosis, endured another long hospitalization, and nearly died of boredom until one fateful day.

“The teacher came with percussive maracas and triangles,” he told me. “We weren’t doing school, so we learned to play a percussive band. And I got a drum, and that was the moment.

I hit that drum.” He was 13. “I only wanted to be a drummer from then on.”

This is another reason I’m a Ringo guy—he projects a kind of playful pathos. His hardships are never far from the surface, which makes him feel approachable, perhaps more so than he intends.

A few minutes after I’d met Starr for the first time, I heard myself telling him the story about depressed 20-something me hearing “It Don’t Come Easy” in CVS. This was, I realize, a bit of an overshare right out of the gate. “Every time I hear that song now, I feel joy,” I told him. Starr said nothing at first. “But enough about me,” I said to fill the silence. He did not respond for a second, which felt more like an hour. *Why is this man I just met baring his soul to me?* I imagined him thinking.

“No, but it’s a cool thing,” he finally said.

He gave me an empathetic look, the distinctly Ringo eyes.

Starr often conveys a sense of not wanting to linger or drag out an obligation. *Make it short.* T Bone Burnett told me about a listening party for *Look Up* that Starr hosted in L.A. “He said,

‘Well, it’s been wonderful having you all listen to the record. Over there is the food,’” Starr told his guests. “‘And over there is the door.’” But he also has a knack for snapping into a quiet mode of comforting contemplation.

“I think it goes back to that extraordinary scene in *A Hard Day’s Night*,” Burnett told me. The band members spend much of the movie being swarmed by fans and press, chased by girls, and cloistered in their hotel room (with Starr receiving by far the biggest stack of fan mail).

At one point, Starr grabs a camera and walks off on his own to experience the world. He attempts, with mixed success, to avoid detection. “He’s quiet; he’s thoughtful; he’s sensitive,” Burnett told me. “You could feel in the film there’s all this madness around him. But here’s this very thoughtful cat. And I think it goes back to that. And there’s something—and you can feel—there’s a hurt in him that he wears very gracefully.”

At various times, both Lennon and George Harrison spoke of being in the Beatles as a burden. Starr, by contrast, always seemed like the Beatle most fully grounded in gratitude. He was lucky to have survived his merciless Liverpool youth, the madness of

being in the Fab Four, years of addiction to drugs and alcohol after the band’s dissolution, even the apparently quite dangerous status of having been a Beatle at all. (Lennon was murdered by a deranged fan in 1980; Harrison was brutally stabbed by a paranoid schizophrenic who invaded his home in 1999.)

Starr has not always hidden his annoyance at the hassles of his hyper-fame. In 2008, he released an exasperated video begging fans to stop sending him stuff in the mail to sign. (“Nothing!” he railed. “Peace and love.”) For the most part, though, he has carried himself like someone who won a long-shot bet and has been playing with house money ever since. He seems eternally grateful to have been tapped for the World’s Greatest Band, or any band.

“I’M A BAND GUY,” Starr has said, often. “I need a group of guys,” he told me. “I need the bass player and the guitar players.” It’s not like the drummer can go out and perform by himself.

Last June, I went to see Starr and His All Starr Band play the Venetian in Las Vegas. Since 1989, Starr has been playing and touring with a revolving cast of old musical buddies. The current lineup comprises seven members, all in their 60s or older, including



Above: Fans watch Starr perform at the Grand Ole Opry, in Nashville, in February. Starr’s new country album has been one of the biggest hits of his long solo career. Opposite page: Starr in 1965.



**“WHATEVER
REDEMPTION HE
GOT THROUGH
HIS DRUMMING
AS A KID, IT’S
STILL THERE.”**

Steve Lukather of Toto, Colin Hay of Men at Work, and Hamish Stuart of Average White Band.

Starr’s people let me show up early for sound check. I watched from the front section of an empty theater of soaring ceilings, balconies, a massive chandelier, and pale-pink seats. Starr was wearing a black tracksuit and holding a mic at center stage. “Testing, one, two, three,” he said into the mic. “Hello, Mark.” I waved a peace sign back at him and did my best to keep my composure and not turn into a giddy groupie again. I failed. “Holy shit, he knows my name,” I said, pathetically, to Starr’s publicist, who probably had just reminded him of my name, and that I existed.

After rehearsing a few more songs, including “It Don’t Come Easy,” Starr wandered over. “Hello,” he said. Fist bump. How did he like Las Vegas? I asked. His 2024 spring tour included six dates at the Venetian, of which this was the last.

“I don’t care; I’ll play anywhere,” he said. “I’ll go where they send me.”

Given the crowds, the chaos, the ad campaigns condoning venial sin, I suggested that Vegas might be one of the least peaceful and loving cities in America. Starr pointed to the empty hall. “Tonight, this space will be all peace and love,” he vowed.

I wondered why Starr was still subjecting himself to this grind. If nothing else, it illustrated how being a “band guy” remains essential to his center of gravity. “He loves musicians,”

Lukather, of Toto, told me. “There’s something to be said with going through the good and the bad with people, as opposed to all by yourself. Because the highs are high and the lows are real low.”

Lukather has played guitar in the All Starr Band for 13 years. Every one of those years, he said, Starr has insisted would be the finale. “This is the last one, lads, the last one,” he says. No way, Lukather replies. Starr will get restless in a month and come running back. “Here’s the deal with the circus,” Lukather told me. “Once he joined the circus, he could never leave.”

Starr confirmed that he is a failed retiree, many times over. “I’ve had enough; I’ve done enough,” he will say. “And I get a phone call: ‘Well, we’ve got 10 gigs if you’re interested.’ ‘Okay.’ And we’re on the road again.” It’s much easier doing only 10 or 11 gigs a month, he said, compared with the 30 or so they used to do. “It still gives me time to get my rocks off and play the drums,” Starr told me. “With a band.”

Ringo’s All Starr Band shows last about two hours and feature several of his best-known solo tracks, such as “Photograph” and “Back Off Boogaloo.” The set also includes Beatles songs that Starr did vocals on (“Octopus’s Garden” and “With a Little Help From My Friends”). Interspersed throughout are songs from each of the All Starrs’ primary bands: Lukather will lead renditions of Toto’s “Africa,” and Hay will do Men at Work’s “Down Under.”

Starr wore a bright-red jacket over a black peace-sign T-shirt, and split his stage time between front-man duties and drums. He clearly preferred one role to the other. Holding a mic, Starr looks stiff. On the drums, he looks 20 years younger. Valensi, of the Strokes, has also observed how much looser he looks behind the kit. “Whatever redemption he got through his drumming as a kid, it’s still there,” he told me.

If the Beatles at Shea Stadium in ’65 was packed with shrieking teenage fans, the All Starrs at the Venetian incubated quite a different ambience about six decades later. About a third of the sold-out audience looked old enough to have been at Shea. “When I first started doing this, there were a lot of high voices: ‘We love you, Ringo,’” Starr said from the stage, imitating a screaming girl’s voice. “Now: ‘We love you, Ringo,’” he said, affecting the labored voice of an old-timer.

Forty minutes or so in, after “Yellow Submarine,” Starr leaves for a break while the others keep performing their songs. “I’m going to have a cup of tea,” he tells the audience as he heads off. On one hand, this is a bit odd, the headliner just up and leaving mid-show; what is he doing while he’s offstage? On the other hand, does this octogenarian really need to hear another rendition

of Average White Band’s “Cut the Cake”? I say Ringo has paid his dues and earned his rest.

After a few minutes, Starr jogs back onstage in a fresh T-shirt and the same blazer. The first chords of “Octopus’s Garden” twang out, and the crowd goes an aging version of nuts. Everyone sings along. I sense some earnest effort in the theater to make this gathering count for more than just nostalgia.

“Peace and love! Peace and love!” a group of women screamed from behind me. They pretty much kept this up for two solid hours. It was slightly annoying, but their conviction was undeniable.

PAUL MCCARTNEY was on the phone. It was late January, and I was in Greenland, reporting on Donald Trump’s inauguration from one of the foreign territories he was proposing to annex. McCartney sounded intrigued by my whereabouts, or perhaps merely amused that I was marooned there waiting out a predictably bad run of snowy weather. I asked whether he’d ever been to Greenland. “The only way would be if the plane had to stop there,” McCartney allowed. “For refueling and stuff.” He had just completed a global tour that featured 59 shows and lasted two and a half years—but no date in Nuuk. I felt a swell of pride at having found a spot on the globe that a Beatle had never been to.

Starr had joined McCartney onstage a few weeks earlier at a concert at London’s O2 arena—the last stop on McCartney’s tour. McCartney introduced him that night as “the mighty, the one and only Mr. Ringo Starr.” They played a few Beatles tracks (“Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band (Reprise),” “Helter Skelter”) and shared an embrace, and the stadium rocked accordingly.

Starr told me he and McCartney keep in close contact. Starr lives in Beverly Hills, where he’s owned a home since the 1990s, and McCartney resides mainly in the U.K. But they FaceTime regularly, and pop in on each other when proximity allows. “I had dinner with him on Wednesday,” Starr mentioned during our first meeting.

The Beatles have often spoken of one another as brothers. “I was an only child, and then suddenly I had three brothers,” Starr told me. He said he felt sorry for Elvis Presley, who had to go through megastardom by himself. Harrison drew this contrast as well. “There was only one Elvis,” he once said. “Nobody else knew what he felt like.” He seemed to speak with a note of pity.

Many theories have taken hold about the Beatles—about their genius, their rivalries, their time at the summit of the world. Few bands have inspired such complicated or closely studied mythology. But the truth will always reside in the exquisite space that John, Paul, George, and Ringo inhabited together.

Only the four of them can understand. And now there’s just two. Ringo and Paul, Paul and Ringo. “He’s the only one who knows,” Starr said to me of McCartney.

I asked McCartney about Starr’s remark. What, exactly, does only he know?

“Well, there’s nothing to mean by it; it’s just true,” McCartney said. “It’s just simple truth. There were four of us. The Beatles. And we worked together, we lived together, we were a Beatles sandwich.” No other soul could ever fully comprehend that sandwich.

**“THERE WERE
JUST FOUR
OF US THAT
KNEW HOW
IT FELT,”
MCCARTNEY
TOLD ME.**



Starr at the Grand Ole Opry. His life has always been steeped in country music; Hank Williams and Lightnin' Hopkins were early idols.

“Nobody else,” McCartney continued. “People might have been in the room, but they weren’t really in the room. There were just four of us that knew how it felt.”

Ringo and Paul were roommates when the band went on the road. “I never really roomed with anyone,” McCartney told me. “I didn’t go to college. I had one brother—I have one brother—but after a certain age, we got our own rooms.” Bunking with Starr at that age strengthened their bond, McCartney said. “And we were in a million vans, trains, planes, cars.”

Starr’s friends tend to speak about him in a particular key of fascination. I also detect a note of protectiveness, especially against the critics who have described Starr as the band’s weakest link. The rap is that any drummer would have made it work with the Beatles. McCartney mentioned Buddy Rich, the late jazz drummer, who apparently once dismissed Starr as “adequate, no more than that.” From a technical standpoint, McCartney said, Rich might have been correct. “None of us would have passed a music exam,” he said. “None of us ever could read or write music.”

Starr’s admirers say his genius lies in something far more intuitive than the likes of Buddy Rich could appreciate. Starr says “I play to the song”; his drumming relies on feel more so than technique or training.

McCartney recalls the first time that he, Lennon, and Harrison played with Starr in front of an audience, in the early 1960s. “I remember just glancing at the other two guys, and we all had a look in our eyes,” he said. “It was one of those magical moments, you know; it was like, *Shit, something just happened.*”

Then there is the matter of Starr’s extramusical contributions to the group. He was an essential figure of cohesion.

“He’s glue, you know; he’s the glue kind of thing,” McCartney told me. “We were all what you’d call ‘grammar-school kids,’” he continued, referring to Lennon, Harrison, and himself. “Ringo was just University of Life.” Starr barely went to school. He had his medical torments, and grew up in the “Dingle,” one of the roughest, poorest sections of Liverpool. “You can’t be trained to be like Ringo,” McCartney told me.

Starr was also older, the last to join the Beatles, and the only one who’d already played in another professional band, Rory Storm and the Hurricanes. McCartney said that all of the Beatles looked up to one another. They never dared to admit it, but it was a driving dynamic. “I think we all kind of had that,” McCartney said. “Quietly.”

Their reverence for Starr was perhaps the hardest to distill. “You’d meet Ringo, and it would cut across everything you’d ever

learned,” McCartney told me. “You’d think, *God, I’ve got to try to be a little more like this. This guy’s cool.*” Starr would sit and assess and stay silent for long stretches. Then, periodically, he would blurt out something “that comes out of left field”—a Ringo-ism.

“He’s actually making mistakes,” McCartney said. “But he says it with such conviction that it works.” Starr would coin something like *hard day’s night*, and grammar-school kids would hear it and immediately want to correct the grammar. “I’ve never heard it said like that,” McCartney told me. “And then it’s basically, ‘Well, I’m not sure *why* no one’s said that before. Because that’s the perfect phrase.’”

Once, McCartney told me, the Beatles were sitting in a restaurant, preparing to order. “And Ringo said, ‘I’ll have slight bread.’” Slight bread?

“Slight bread, yeah,” McCartney said.

What exactly is “slight bread”?

“Well, who knows?” McCartney said. “There’s no answer to these questions. It’s just right.”

WHAT DOES “NORMAL” life look like for an 84-year-old former Beatle? I was able to ascertain some details about Starr’s day-to-day. Does he drive? (Yes.) Does he have a trainer? (Yes:

three days a week, weights, yoga, pilates, treadmill.) Streaming? (“Yeah, I love TV,” he told me.) What shows?

“Well, I’m not going to plug anybody,” he said, and I withdrew the question.

Naturally, Starr is a fan of Liverpool FC of the Premier League, but also the Dallas Cowboys of the NFL. He saw me wince when he mentioned the Cowboys and asked why. “Just like everyone loves the Beatles, everyone hates the Cowboys,” I explained. Starr objected—mostly to my choice of words.

“Why would you hate them?” he wondered. “That’s a strong word, to *hate*. *Dislike* is a better word.”

Confronted with more inner-directed questions about what it’s like to be Ringo Starr, the man can be stubbornly understated. “My name is Ringo, and I play drums,” he said when he entered the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame as a solo artist in 2015. On the topic of how he came to join the Beatles, Starr is similarly laconic. “They wanted me to join the Beatles,” he told me. “I got this phone call, and that’s how it all happened.”

In 2022, Starr was given an honorary doctorate from the Berklee College of Music, in Boston. “I don’t have a lot to say, just ‘Thank you,’” he said.

“You know, I just hit them. That’s all I do. I just hit the

buggers,” he added, “the buggers” being the drums. “In a way, it’s like some strange fairy tale.”

Perhaps the strangest quality of this fairy tale is that it’s still unfolding. Starr’s country collaboration with T Bone Burnett, *Look Up*, is one of Starr’s most successful albums in years, hitting No. 1 on the U.K.’s Official Country Artists Albums Chart and selling briskly in the U.S. as well.

Coverage of *Look Up* has noted that Starr is one of several pop acts who have recently made country albums, as if Starr has latched on to some new crossover fashion, chasing the likes of Beyoncé and Post Malone. But Starr sounds genuinely oblivious to the bandwagon he’s supposedly hopping on. “I know Beyoncé made a record and it was No 1,” Starr said in an interview with *The Times* of London. “But no, I haven’t heard it.”

In fact, Starr’s life and career have always been steeped in country music. As a boy, he loved Westerns and worshipped Gene Autry, the Singing Cowboy. His early music idols were Hank Williams and Hank Snow; later, he admired Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings.



The Beatles in May 1967, at a party celebrating their new album, Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band



Starr circa 1990, around the time he convened the All Starr Band and resumed touring

He dreamed of escaping the Dingle for Texas. He even wrote to the Houston Chamber of Commerce after resolving to live close to the country-blues icon Lightnin' Hopkins. As a general rule, this was not something poor Liverpool boys aspired to do.

Burnett says he always considered Starr to be the Beatles' resident country ambassador. He thought of him as "rockabilly." Burnett pointed to "What Goes On," from *Rubber Soul*, and "Don't Pass Me By," from *The White Album*. "Even 'Octopus's Garden' is country," Burnett told me. "It sounds like Chet Atkins playing guitar."

Country also played an essential part in helping Starr adapt to his post-Beatles life. The withdrawal was difficult at times: eight years of manic, identity-warping hysteria and creative intensity. Then, suddenly, nothing. Starr wallowed. He drank, a lot. The plaintive strains of country music made for a fitting companion. "The wife's left, the dog's dead, or I need some money for the juke-box" is how Starr sums up the standard trajectory of country tunes.

"I sat in my garden, wondering what to do with myself," Starr told me. "And get over, really, missing and playing with the other three boys. And I thought one day, *I've got to get up*."

He talked with Pete Drake, an American producer who worked with Harrison on his album *All Things Must Pass*, about making

a country album. *Beaucoups of Blues* would be Starr's second solo release. Hearing it now, it's striking how well suited Starr's voice is to country singing. He sounds playfully mournful—or mournfully playful—like someone perfectly at home in the genre.

Starr has long been a casual acquaintance of Burnett's, who has won about a million Grammys (13). In November 2022, the pair encountered each other at a reception for Olivia Harrison's book of poems about her late husband. Starr mentioned that he was making an EP and asked Burnett if he wanted to contribute a track. Sure, Burnett said. He came back with a song, and then Starr asked for more. He sent nine, all of them country songs, figuring Starr could pick one or two. Starr said he liked them all.

Look Up is a vibrant and gentle compilation with recurring themes of despair, resilience, and, especially, gratitude. "Thankful" (with Alison Krauss), the record's second release, is an homage to hard-won lessons and, in some ways, a countrified rendering of Starr's post-Beatles trajectory.

His descent into alcoholism and long path to sobriety is a clear subtext. "'Thankful' is the most personal song he's ever written," Burnett told me. "It starts off, 'I had it all and I started to fall,'" Burnett said. "It's about being in the Beatles, and being on top



DINA LITOVSKY FOR THE ATLANTIC

**“ARE YOU
WORRIED
AT ALL?”
JIMMY KIMMEL
ASKED HIM.
“WHY WOULD I
BE WORRIED?”
STARR REPLIED.**

of the world, being the most famous person in the world. And then being an addict.” A central figure of Starr’s recovery—and the main object of his gratitude—is his wife of more than 40 years, Barbara Bach. Together, they embraced sobriety in the late 1980s, which was around the time Starr convened the All Starr Band and resumed his touring career.

“Thankful” resonates with familiar Ringo refrains (“hoping for more peace and love”) and contains echoes of some of his signature songs (“I needed a friend to help me along”). After I listened a few times, I came to hear the song as an updated version of “It Don’t Come Easy,” conveyed by a blessed old soul, who had lived, thankfully, to sing the tale.

IN THE MIDDLE of January, I dropped into Nashville to watch Starr play the Ryman Auditorium, a converted downtown basilica known as the “Mother Church of Country Music.” He was joined by a lineup of country royalty: Emmylou Harris, Brenda Lee, Molly Tuttle, Billy Strings, plus a few hybrids such as Sheryl Crow and Jack White. Both the younger crowd and the grandes dames betrayed an endearingly starstruck appreciation for the Liverpool cowboy. “Oh man, this is extremely cool,” said Tuttle, the Grammy-winning bluegrass player. “I cannot think of a better way to spend my 32nd birthday than to sing one of my favorite songs,” she said, and swung into a fiddle-heavy rendition of “Octopus’s Garden.”

“Such a thrill to be playing with really one of the most amazing people that ever was, but also right now,” Crow said when she took the ancient stage. “Don’t we need this love?” she asked. Trump’s inauguration was about a week away, and for a moment, it seemed that politics might cast a shadow over the evening. Instead, Crow and Tuttle launched into a vivacious duet of “I Don’t Want to Spoil the Party.”

In my final conversation with Starr, I asked him about the title track of *Look Up*. He’s complained that people are always looking down—he sees them walking, eyes fixed on the pavement. “You look up, your attitude changes,” he told me. “You’re looking around.” Otherwise, “you’re just trapped in your head.” He’s been asked if there’s some religious message in the phrase: Several people have said, ““Oh, you’re looking at God.”” But they have it wrong, Starr said. “I’m looking up at the world.”

And what does he see? As Starr has made the media rounds for *Look Up*, I’ve watched him get hit a couple of times with the requisite questions about our parlous political moment. “Are you worried at all?” Jimmy Kimmel asked him. “Why would I be worried?” Starr replied. He has no interest in playing the role of pundit, or sounding a note of protest.

“You can only do what you do,” Starr told me, when I took my own shot at asking him about the state of the world. “I can only do what I do.” Starr flashed me another double peace sign, which is him doing what he does. Maybe it will start something. Maybe others will follow. Who can say? As a wise man once put it, tomorrow never knows. *A*

Mark Leibovich is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

Edmund Burke 1790



EVERYTHING WE

ONCE BELIEVED IN

Trumpism has replaced conservatism's core values with just one: the raw pursuit of power.
By DAVID BROOKS | Illustrations by Ricardo Tomás





Charles de Gaulle began his war memoirs with this sentence: “All my life I have had a certain idea about France.” Well, all my life I have had a certain idea about America. I have thought of America as a deeply flawed nation that is nonetheless a force for tremendous good in the world.

From Abraham Lincoln to Franklin D. Roosevelt to Ronald Reagan and beyond, Americans fought for freedom and human dignity and against tyranny; we promoted democracy, funded the Marshall Plan, and saved millions of people across Africa from HIV and AIDS. When we caused harm—Vietnam, Iraq—it was because of our overconfidence and naivete, not evil intentions.

Until January 20, 2025, I didn’t realize how much of my very identity was built on this faith in my country’s goodness—on the idea that we Americans are partners in a grand and heroic enterprise, that our daily lives are ennobled by service to that cause. Since January 20, as I have watched America behave vilely—toward our friends in Canada and Mexico, toward our friends in Europe, toward the heroes in Ukraine and President Volodymyr Zelensky in the Oval Office—I’ve had trouble describing the anguish I’ve experienced. Grief? Shock? Like I’m living through some sort of hallucination? Maybe the best description for what I’m feeling is moral shame: To watch the loss of your nation’s honor is embarrassing and painful.

George Orwell is a useful guide to what we’re witnessing. He understood that it is possible for people to seek power without having any vision of the good. “The Party seeks power entirely for its own sake,” an apparatchik says in *1984*. “We are not interested in the good of others; we are interested solely in power. Not wealth or luxury or long life or happiness: only power, pure power.” How is power demonstrated? By making others suffer. Orwell’s character continues: “Obedience is not enough. Unless he is suffering, how can you be sure that he is obeying your will and not his own? Power is in inflicting pain and humiliation.”

Russell Vought, Donald Trump’s budget director, sounds like he walked straight out of *1984*. “When they wake up in the morning, we want them to not want to go to work, because they are increasingly viewed as the villains,” he said of federal workers, speaking at an event in 2023. “We want to put them in trauma.”

Since coming back to the White House, Trump has caused suffering among Ukrainians, suffering among immigrants who have lived here for decades, suffering among some of the best people I know. Many of my friends in Washington are evangelical Christians who found their vocation in public service—fighting sex trafficking, serving the world’s poor, protecting America from foreign threats, doing biomedical research to cure disease. They are trying to live lives consistent with the gospel of mercy and love. Trump has devastated their work. He isn’t just declaring war on “wokeness”; he’s declaring war on Christian service—on any kind of service, really.

If there is an underlying philosophy driving Trump, it is this: Morality is for suckers. The strong do what they want and the weak suffer what they must. This is the logic of bullies everywhere. And if there is a consistent strategy, it is this: Day after day, the administration works to create a world where ruthless people can thrive. That means destroying any institution or arrangement that might check the strongman’s power. The rule of law, domestic or international, restrains power, so it must be eviscerated. Inspectors general, judge advocate general officers, oversight mechanisms, and watchdog agencies are a potential restraint on power, so they must be fired or neutered. The truth itself is a restraint on power, so it must be abandoned. Lying becomes the language of the state.

Trump’s first term was a precondition for his second. His first term gradually eroded norms and acclimatized America to a new sort of regime. This laid the groundwork for his second term, in which he’s making the globe a playground for gangsters.

We used to live in a world where ideologies clashed, but ideologies don’t seem to matter anymore. The strongman understanding of power is on the march. Power is like money: the more the better. Trump, Russian President Vladimir Putin, and the rest of the world’s authoritarians are forming an axis of ruthlessness before our eyes. Trumpism has become a form of nihilism that is devouring everything in its path.

THE PATHETIC THING is that I didn’t see this coming even though I’ve been living around these people my whole adult life. I joined the conservative movement in the 1980s, when I worked in turn at *National Review*, *The Washington Times*, and *The Wall Street Journal* editorial page. There were two kinds of people in our movement back then, the conservatives and the reactionaries. We conservatives earnestly read Milton Friedman, James Burnham, Whittaker Chambers, and Edmund Burke. The reactionaries just wanted to shock the left. We conservatives oriented our lives around writing for intellectual magazines; the reactionaries were attracted to TV and radio. We were on the political right but had many liberal friends; they had contempt for anyone not on the anti-establishment right. They were not pro-conservative—they were anti-left. I have come to appreciate that this is an important difference.

I should have understood this much sooner, because the reactionaries had revealed their true character as far back as January 1986. A group of progressive students at Dartmouth had erected a shantytown on campus to protest apartheid. One night, a group of 12 students, most of them associated with the right-wing *Dartmouth Review*, descended on the shanties with sledgehammers and smashed them down.

Even then I was appalled. Apartheid was evil, and worth opposing. A nighttime raid with sledgehammers seemed more Gestapo than Burkean. But conservative intellectuals didn’t take this seriously enough. In large part, I think this was because we looked down on the *Dartmouth Review* mafia, whose members had included Laura Ingraham and Dinesh D’Souza. Their intellectual standards were so obviously third-rate. I don’t know how to put this politely, but they just seemed creepy—nakedly ambitious in a way that I thought would destroy them in the end.

PREVIOUS PAGES: RICARDO TOMÁS; SMITH COLLECTION / GADO / GETTY; BACHRACH PHOTOGRAPHERS / GETTY

Instead, history has smiled on them. A prominent publisher of right-wing authors once told me that the way to sell conservative books is not to write a good book—it's to write a book that will offend the left, thereby causing the reactionaries to rally to your side and buy it. That led to books with titles such as *The Big Lie: Exposing the Nazi Roots of the American Left*, and to Ann Coulter's entire career. Owning the libs became a lucrative strategy.

Of course, the left made it easy for them. The left really did purge conservatives from universities and other cultural power centers. The left really did valorize a “meritocratic” caste system that privileged the children of the affluent and screwed the working class. The left really did pontificate to their unenlightened moral inferiors on everything from gender to the environment. The left really did create a stifling orthodoxy that stamped out dissent. If you tell half the country that their voices don't matter, then the voiceless are going to flip over the table.

But although Trump may have campaigned as a MAGA populist, leveraging this working-class resentment to gain power, he governs as a Palm Beach elitist. Trump and Elon Musk are billionaires who went to the University of Pennsylvania. J. D. Vance went to Yale Law School. Pete Hegseth went to Princeton and Harvard. Vivek Ramaswamy went to Yale and Harvard. Stephen Miller went to Duke. Ted Cruz went to Princeton and Harvard. Many of Musk's DOGE workers, according to *The New York Times*, come from elite institutions—Harvard, Princeton, Morgan Stanley, McKinsey, Wharton. These are the Vineyard Vines nihilists, the spiritual descendants of the elite bad boys at the *Dartmouth Review*. This political moment isn't populists versus elitists; it is, as I've written before, like a civil war in a prep school where the sleazy rich kids are taking on the pretentious rich kids.

The MAGA elite rode to power on working-class votes, but—trust me, I know some of them—they don't care about the working class. Trump and his crew could have taken office with actual plans to make life better for working-class Americans. An administration that cared about the working class would seek to address its problems, such as the fact that the poorest Americans die an average of 10 to 15 years younger than their higher-income counterparts, or that by sixth grade, many of the children in the poorest school districts have fallen four grade levels behind those in the richest. An administration that cared about these people would have offered a bipartisan industrial policy to create working-class jobs.

These faux populists have no interest in that. Instead of helping workers, they focus on civil war with their left-wing fellow elites. During Trump's first months in office, one of their highest priorities has been to destroy the places where they think liberal elites work—the scientific community, the foreign-aid community, the Kennedy Center, the Department of Education, universities.

IT TURNS OUT that when you mix narcissism and nihilism, you create an acid that corrodes every belief system it touches.

This Trumpian cocktail has eaten away at Christianity, a faith oriented around the marginalized. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the poor in spirit. The poor are closer to God than the rich. Again and again, Jesus explicitly renounced worldly power.

But if Trumpism has a central tenet, it is untrammelled lust for worldly power. In Trumpian circles, many people ostentatiously identify as Christians but don't talk about Jesus very much; they have crosses on their chest but Nietzsche in their heart—or, to be more precise, a high-school sophomore's version of Nietzsche.

To Nietzsche, all of those Christian pieties about justice, peace, love, and civility are constraints that the weak erect to emasculate the strong. In this view, Nietzscheanism is a morality for winners. It worships the pagan virtues: power, courage, glory, will, self-assertion. The Nietzschean *Übermensch*—which Trump and Musk clearly believe themselves to be—offer the promise of domination over those sick sentimentalists who practice compassion.

Two decades ago, Michael Gerson, a graduate of Wheaton College, a prominent evangelical institution, helped George W. Bush start the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, which has saved 25 million lives in Africa and elsewhere. I traveled with Gerson to Namibia, Mozambique, and South Africa, where dying people had recovered and returned to their families, and were leading active lives. It was a proud moment to be an American. Vought—Trump's budget director, who also graduated from Wheaton—championed the evisceration of PEPFAR, which has now been set in motion by executive order, effectively sentencing thousands to death. Project 2025, of which Vought was a principal architect, helped lay the groundwork for the dismantling of USAID; its gutting appears to have ended a program to supply malaria protection to 53 million people and cut emergency food packages for starving children. Twenty years is a short time in which to have traveled the long moral distance from Gerson to Vought.

Trumpian nihilism has eviscerated conservatism. The people in this administration are not conservatives. They are the opposite of conservatives. Conservatives once believed in steady but incremental reform; Elon Musk believes in rash and instantaneous disruption. Conservatives once believed that moral norms restrain

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and civilize us, habituating us to virtue; Trumpism trashes moral norms in every direction, riding forward on a tide of adultery, abuse, cruelty, immaturity, grift, and corruption. Conservatives once believed in constitutional government and the Madisonian separation of powers; Trump bulldozes checks and balances, declaiming on social media, “He who saves his Country does not violate any Law.” Reagan promoted democracy abroad because he thought it the political system most consistent with human dignity; the Trump administration couldn’t care less about promoting democracy—or about human dignity.

HOW DOES THIS END? Will anyone on the right finally stand up to the Trumpian onslaught? Will our institutions withstand the nihilist assault? Is America on the verge of ruin?

In February, about a month into Trump’s second term, I spoke at a gathering of conservatives in London called the Alliance for Responsible Citizenship. Some of the speakers were pure populist (Vivek Ramaswamy, Mike Johnson, and Nigel Farage). But others were center-right or not neatly ideological (Niall Ferguson, Bishop Robert Barron, and my *Atlantic* colleague Arthur C. Brooks).

In some ways, it was like the conservative conferences I’ve been attending for decades. I listened to a woman from Senegal talking about trying to make her country’s culture more entrepreneurial. I met the head of a charter school in the Bronx that focuses on character formation. But in other ways, this conference was startlingly different.

In my own talk, I sympathized with the populist critique of what has gone wrong in Western societies. But I shared with the audience my dark view of President Trump. Unsurprisingly, a large segment of the audience booed vigorously. One man screamed that I was a traitor and stormed out. But many other people cheered. Even in conservative precincts infected by reactionary MAGA-ism, some people are evidently tired of Trumpian brutality.

As the conference went on, I noticed a contest of metaphors. The true conservatives used metaphors of growth or spiritual recovery. Society is an organism that needs healing, or it is a social fabric that needs to be rewoven. A poet named Joshua Luke Smith said we needed to be the seeds of regrowth, to plant the trees for future generations. His incantation was beatitudinal: “Remember the poor. Remember the poor.”

But others relied on military metaphors. We are in the midst of civilizational war. “They”—the wokesters, the radical Muslims, the left—are destroying our culture. There were allusions to the final epochal battles in *The Lord of the Rings*. The implication was that Sauron is leading his Orc hordes to destroy us. We are the heroic remnant. We must crush or be crushed.

The warriors tend to think people like me are soft and naive. I tend to think they are catastrophizing narcissists. When I look at Trump acolytes, I see a swarm of Neville Chamberlains who think they’re Winston Churchill.

I understand the seductive power of a demagogue who tells you that the people who look down on you are evil. I understand the seductive power of being told that your civilization is on the verge of total collapse, and that everything around you is degeneracy and ruin. This message gives you a kind of

terrifying thrill: The stakes are apocalyptic. Your life has meaning and urgency. Everything is broken; let’s burn it all down.

I understand why people who feel alienated would want to follow the leader who speaks about domination and combat, not the one who speaks about healing and cooperation. It doesn’t matter how many times you’ve read Edmund Burke or the Gospel of Matthew—it’s still tempting to throw away all of your beliefs to support the leader who promises to be “your retribution.”

America may well enter a period of democratic decay and international isolation. It takes decades to develop strong alliances, and to build the structures and customs of democracy—and only weeks to decimate them, as we’ve now seen. And yet I find myself confident that America will survive this crisis. Many nations, including our own, have gone through worse and bloodier crises and recovered. In *Upheaval: Turning Points for Nations in Crisis*, the historian and scientist Jared Diamond provides case studies—Japan in the late 19th century, Finland and Germany after World War II, Indonesia after the 1960s, Chile and Australia during and after the ’70s—of countries that came back stronger after crisis, collapse, or defeat. To these examples, I’d add Britain in the 1830s and ’40s, and the 1980s, and South Korea in the 1980s. Some of these countries (such as Japan) endured war; others (Chile) endured mass torture and “disappearances”; still others (Britain and Australia) endured social decay and national decline. All of them eventually healed and came back.

America itself has already been through numerous periods of rupture and repair. Some people think we’re living through a period of unprecedented tumult, but the Civil War and the Great Depression were much worse. So were the late 1960s—assassinations, riots, a failed war, surging crime rates, a society coming apart. From January 1969 until April 1970, there were 4,330 bombings in the U.S., or about nine a day. But by the 1980s and ’90s—after getting through Watergate, stagflation, and the Carter-era “malaise” of the ’70s—we had recovered. As brutal and disruptive as the tumult of the late 1960s was, it helped the country shake off some of its persistent racism and sexism, and made possible a freer and more individualistic ethos.

But the most salient historical parallel might be the America of the 1830s. Andrew Jackson is the American president who most resembles Trump—power-hungry, rash, narcissistic, driven by animosity. He was known by his opponents as “King Andrew” for his expansions of executive power. “The man we have made our President has made himself our despot, and the Constitution now lies a heap of ruins at his feet,” Senator Asher Robbins of Rhode Island said. “When the way to his object lies through the Constitution, the Constitution has not the strength of a cobweb to restrain him from breaking through it.” Jackson brazenly defied the Supreme Court on a ruling about Cherokee Nation territory (a defiance, it should be noted, that Vice President Vance has explicitly endorsed). “Though we live under the form of a republic,” Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story wrote, “we are in fact under the absolute rule of a single man.”

But Jackson made the classic mistake of the populist: He overreached. Fueled by personal hostility toward elites, he destroyed the Second Bank of the United States, an early

precursor to the Federal Reserve System, and helped spark an economic depression that ruined the administration of his chosen successor, Martin Van Buren.

In response to Jackson, the Whig Party arose in the 1830s to create a new political and social order. Devoutly anti-authoritarian, the Whigs were a cultural, civic, and political force all at once. They emphasized both traditional morality and progressive improvements. They agitated for prison reform and for keeping the Sabbath, for more women's participation in politics and for a strong military, for government-funded public schools and for pro-business government policies. They were opposed to Jackson's monstrous Indian Removal Act, and to the Democratic Party's reactionary, white-supremacist social vision. Whereas Jacksonian Democrats emphasized negative liberty—*get your hands off me*—the Whigs, who would turn into the early Republican Party of Abraham Lincoln, emphasized positive liberty, empowering Americans to live bigger, better lives with things such as expanded economic credit, free public education, and stronger legal protections including due process and property rights.

Though we've come to call the early-to-mid-19th century the Age of Jackson, the historian Daniel Walker Howe notes that it was not Jackson but the Whigs who created the America we know today. "As economic modernizers, as supporters of strong national government, and as humanitarians more receptive than

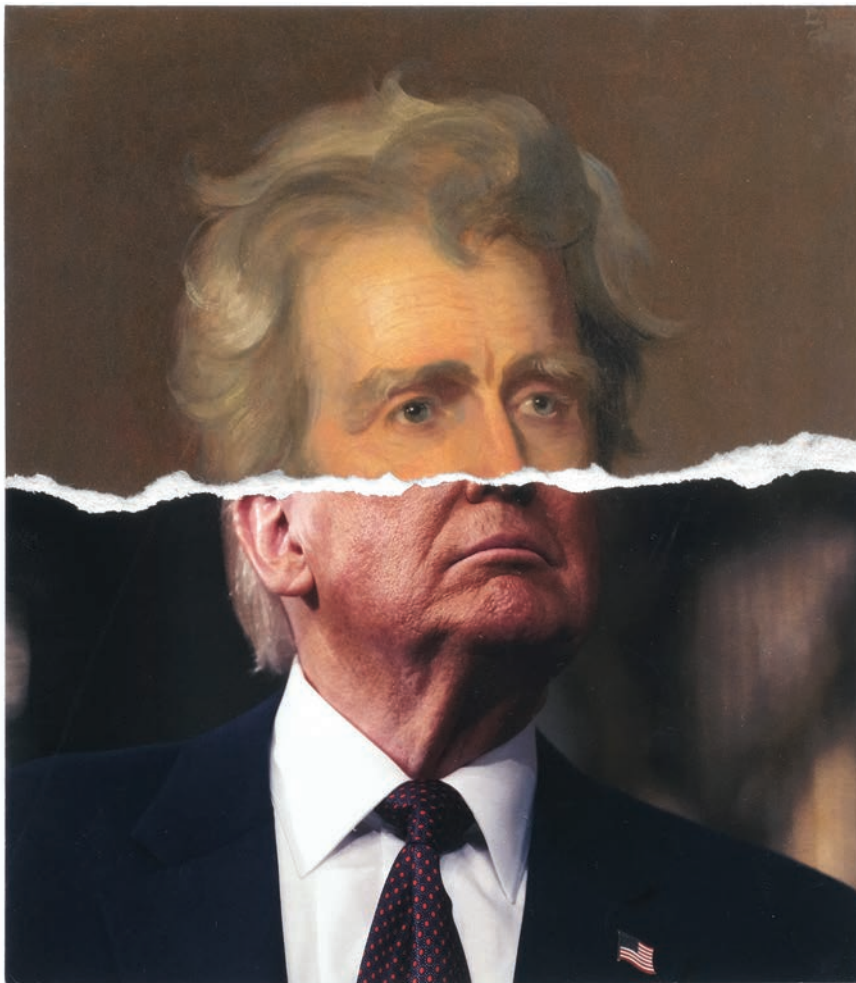
their rivals to talent regardless of race and gender," Howe writes, the Whigs "facilitated the transformation of the United States from a collection of parochial agricultural communities into a cosmopolitan nation integrated by commerce, industry, information, and voluntary associations as well as by political ties." Looking back, Howe concludes, we can see that even though they were not the dominant party of their time, the Whigs "were the party of America's future." To begin its recovery from Trumpism, America needs its next Whig moment.

YES, WE HAVE REACHED a point of traumatic rupture. A demagogue has come to power and is ripping everything down. But what's likely to happen is that the demagogue will start making mistakes, because incompetence is built into the nihilistic project. Nihilists can only destroy, not build. Authoritarian nihilism is inherently stupid. I don't mean that Trumpists have low IQs. I mean they do things that run directly against their own interests. They are pathologically self-destructive. When you create an administration in which one man has all the power and everybody else has to flatter his voracious ego, stupidity results. Authoritarians are also morally stupid. Humility, prudence, and honesty are not just nice virtues to have—they are practical tools that produce good outcomes. When you replace them with greed, lust, hypocrisy, and dishonesty, terrible things happen.

The DOGE children are doubtless brilliant in certain ways, but they know as much about government as I know about rocketry. They announced an \$8 billion cut to an Immigration and Customs Enforcement contract—though if they had read their own documents correctly, they would have realized that the cut was less than \$8 *million*. They eliminated workers from the National Nuclear Security Administration, apparently without realizing that this agency controls nuclear security, and had to undo some of those cuts shortly thereafter. Trump seems to be trying to give a bunch of Sam Bankman-Frieds access to America's nuclear arsenal and IRS records. What could go wrong?

When Trump creates an unnecessary crisis, it's unlikely to be a small one. The proverbial "adults in the room" who contained crises in Trump's first term are gone. Whatever the second-term crisis—runaway inflation? a global trade war? a cratered economy and plummeting stock market? an out-of-control conflict in China? botched pandemic management? a true hijacking of the Constitution precipitated by defiance of the courts?—it is likely to crater his support and shift historical momentum.

But although Trumpism's collapse is a necessary condition for national recovery, it is not a sufficient one. Its demise must be



followed by the hard work necessary to achieve true civic and political renewal.

Progress is not always a smooth or merry ride. For a few decades, nations live according to one paradigm. Then it stops working and gets destroyed. When the time comes to build a new paradigm, progressives talk about economic redistribution; conservatives talk about cultural and civic repair. History shows that you need both: Recovery from national crisis demands comprehensive reinvention at all levels of society. If you look back across the centuries, you find that this process requires several interconnected efforts.

First, a national shift in values. In the late 19th century, for example, as the country went through the wrenching process of industrialization, America was traumatized by severe recessions and mass urban poverty. In response, social Darwinism gave way to the social-gospel movement. Social Darwinism, associated with thinkers such as Herbert Spencer, valorized survival of the fittest and claimed that the poor are poor because of inferior abilities. The social-gospel movement, associated with theologians such as Walter Rauschenbusch, emphasized the systemic causes of poverty, including the Gilded Age's concentration of corporate power. By the early 20th century, most mainline Protestant denominations had signed on to the Social Creed of the Churches, which called for, among other things, the abolition of child labor and the creation of disability insurance.

Second, nations that hang together through crisis have a strong national identity—they return to their roots. They have a leader who replaces the amorality of the nihilists, or, say, the immorality of slavery, with a strong redefinition of the nation's moral mission, the way Lincoln redefined America at Gettysburg.

Third, a civic renaissance. After the social gospel took root, Americans in the 1890s and early 1900s launched and participated in a series of social movements and civic organizations: United Way, the NAACP, the Sierra Club, the settlement-house movement, the American Legion.

Fourth, a national reassessment. As Jared Diamond notes, nations that turn around don't catastrophize. Rather, they develop a clear-eyed view of what's working and not working, and they pursue careful, selective change. According to Diamond's research, the leaders of successful reform movements also take responsibility for their part in the crisis. For instance, Germany's leaders accepted responsibility for the country's Nazi past; Finland's leaders took responsibility for an unrealistic foreign policy before World War II, when they had to deal with a looming Soviet Union on their border; and Australia's leaders took responsibility in the 1970s for a political culture and foreign policy that had become overly dependent on Britain.

Fifth, a surge of political reform. In 1830s and '40s Britain—racked by social chaos, bank failures, a severe depression, riots, and crushing wealth inequality—Prime Minister Robert Peel, a leader of great moral rectitude, built the modern police force, reduced tariffs, pushed railway legislation that literally laid the tracks for British industrialization, and helped pass the Factory Act of 1844, which regulated workplaces. In early-20th-century America, Progressives produced a comparable flurry of effective reforms that pulled the country out of its industrialization crisis.

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Part of political reform is an expansion of the circle of power. What that would require in America today is, among other things, a broad effort to include working-class and conservative voices in what have traditionally been cultural bastions of elite progressivism—universities, the nonprofit sector, the civil service, the mainstream media.

Finally, economic expansion. Economic growth can salve many wounds. Pursuing a so-called abundance agenda—a set of policies aimed at reducing government regulation and increasing investment in innovation, and expanding the supply of housing, energy, and health care—is the most promising way to achieve that expansion.

IN THE LONG TERM, Trumpism is doomed. Power without prudence and humility invariably fails. Nations, like people, change not when times are good but in response to pain. At a moment when Trumpism seems to be devouring everything, the temptation is to believe that this time is different.

But history doesn't stop moving. Even now, as I travel around the country, I see the forces of repair gathering in neighborhoods and communities. If you're part of an organization that builds trust across class, you're fighting Trumpism. If you're a Democrat jettisoning insular faculty-lounge progressivism in favor of a Whig-like working-class abundance agenda, you're fighting Trumpism. If you are standing up for a moral code of tolerance and pluralism that can hold America together, you're fighting Trumpism.

Over time, changes in values lead to changes in relationships, which lead to changes in civic life, which eventually lead to changes in policy and then in the general trajectory of the nation. It starts slow, but as the Book of Job says, the sparks will fly upward. *A*

David Brooks is a contributing writer at The Atlantic. His most recent book is How to Know a Person: The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen.

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The Making of Dwyane Wade

Basketball, and what comes after

By D. Watkins

Photographs by
Arielle Bobb-Willis



On a Sunday in October, a group of spectators gathered outside the Kaseya Center, the home of the Miami Heat.

They sat in rows of chairs, arranged in a half circle. The crowd was there for the unveiling of a statue of Dwyane Wade, the superstar who had led the team to three NBA championships.

I wasn't enough of a VIP to get a seat, so I found a spot on a gate during the unveiling, behind Wade and his family. I knew he had been anxiously awaiting the day. I'd watched, eight months earlier, as he'd paced around an early clay model in the sculptors' studio, asking detailed questions—about the definition of his arms and legs, the way his jersey would be rendered. I knew how much this statue meant to him. And I knew he thought it captured him, as a player, perfectly.

The statue was made by Rotblatt Amrany Studio, a firm that has designed monuments to some of the most well-known athletes in America: Ernie Banks, Barry Sanders, Michael Jordan, Kobe Bryant. When I'd visited the studio, in the Chicago suburbs, the sculpture of Wade ended at the wrists. I'd asked a member of the studio's team where the hands were; he'd explained that the sculptors still needed more reference photos. "Wade has really, really big hands," he'd said. "The biggest hands on a human that I ever saw."

At the unveiling, flames shot up into the air and two black panels that had been concealing the statue slid apart. When the smoke cleared, there it was: a bronze behemoth, muscles rippling, Heat jersey clinging to the torso, hands appropriately disproportionate. The sculpture was based on a moment in a 2009 game against the Chicago Bulls. In the second overtime, Wade stole the ball and made a running, game-winning three-pointer as time expired. He then leaped onto the scorers' table and yelled, "This is my house!" The face of the sculpture was a rictus of fury, with furrowed eyebrows and bared teeth. It also looked nothing like Dwyane Wade.

Wade took the podium and shook his head in awe. "Who is that guy?" he said. The comment was intended as a statement of humility—I *can't believe that's me*—but laughter rippled through the crowd. "I don't know who that guy is either," someone near me whispered. On social media, the statue was immediately mocked. "Why they make Dwyane Wade look like Laurence Fishburne?" one sports reporter posted on X. Others compared the likeness to Thanos, or to the villain from *The Mask*.

To Wade, if the sculpture looked strange or monstrous, it befitted that moment in his career: an outburst of raw competitive energy, a pure expression of the rage that had driven him on the court. "It's not a beauty shot of me," he later told me.

Wade took the response to the statue in stride. "I saw some funny shit along the way about it," he said. "That's just the world we live in, man." But perhaps behind the jokes was a recognition of a different kind of dissonance. Wade's public image today is far removed from that 2009 moment, so much so that the two can be hard to reconcile. Maybe it wasn't just the statue that was strange. Maybe people didn't quite recognize the person the statue was meant to immortalize.



Dwyane Wade speaks during his statue unveiling outside the Kaseya Center, in Miami. The statue's likeness was immediately mocked online.

A year earlier, as I prepared to meet Wade for the first time, my usual barber took his wife on a cruise. I needed a cut, so I had to do the unthinkable: trust a stranger with my thinning hairline. I wandered into an unfamiliar barbershop in my hometown of Baltimore. The vibe of the spot was revolutionary; the walls were lined with faded posters of Malcolm X, Huey P. Newton, Chuck D, Nas. The barbers all wore dashikis or T-shirts that celebrated the motherland.

The man who stepped up to cut my hair told me his name was Power. Just Power. We made small talk, other guys chiming in. Eventually, as barbershop conversations do, the talk drifted to the NBA, and how the NBA of today is nowhere near as hard as it used to be. We talked about the days when Michael Jordan would get assaulted by the “Bad Boy” Pistons and still drop 50, about how you can barely touch another player nowadays without being ejected.

“Them kids softer than baby shit!” a UPS driver with a tight gray afro said. “I can play in the league now!” We all laughed.

I couldn’t help myself. I mentioned that I had an interview scheduled with Dwyane Wade. On the court, Wade had been one of the last avatars of the old-school way of hooping we’d just been reminiscing about, a warrior who played hurt and held grudges. But at the mention of Wade, the mood in the room immediately shifted; all around me, eyebrows raised. “Be careful around those Hollywood Negroes, brother,” Power warned me in a low tone. “Wade used to be a good brother. He hit Hollywood and he changed.”

Wade has the kind of NBA origin story that would ordinarily make him a hero in a room like that one. He grew up on the South Side of Chicago, at the corner of 59th Street and South Prairie Avenue. His mother, Jolinda, struggled with drug addiction. The police raided their apartment so often that it became a familiar routine: Wade and his older sister Tragic Wade would escape through a back door and scale an outdoor stairway to their grandmother’s back porch, on the top floor of the same building, where they could hide. Other times, Jolinda wouldn’t come home. Wade could never sleep well when she was in the street, so even as a kid, he would sit outside late at night, waiting for her.

He was too young to understand why chaos reigned in his home and community, but Wade found early on that basketball was the perfect way to disappear, to get lost in something that demanded all of his body and mind. At first, he was too little to play on the South Side courts for real, so he would go with his dad to the playground and use anything he could as a hoop. He scored on baby swings, between the rungs of monkey bars, on milk crates.

That’s how it started. Now Wade has seen the highest reaches of American athletic success: All-Star, All-Star MVP, scoring champion, NBA champion, Finals MVP, Olympic gold medalist. Yet as intense as he may have been on the basketball court, in the six years since his retirement, he has presented a different face to the world—one that doesn’t fit with a certain narrow way of thinking about how a Black man should carry himself.

Wade and his wife, the actor Gabrielle Union, talk about their marriage as an equal partnership. For a long time, they insisted on splitting their finances 50–50. (Once, during an argument,



Wade hugs his mother, Jolinda Wade, after the Miami Heat’s victory in Game 4 of the Eastern Conference Semifinals against the Toronto Raptors, in 2016.

Wade reminded Union that they were in “my house that I paid for.” She looked at her husband and replied, “You will never say that to me again.”) In 2020, Wade’s daughter Zaya came out as transgender, and he has very publicly supported her; last year, he won a Daytime Emmy as an executive producer on a short documentary about the fathers of trans kids. And those massive hands, which once authored ferocious dunks, are now immaculately manicured, the nails often painted. When Power said Wade had changed, this is what he meant.

ONE NIGHT LAST YEAR, I sat in a plush room at Fiserv Forum, in Milwaukee, and watched a woman empty the largest Chick-fil-A bag I’d ever seen onto a countertop: sandwiches, boxes of nuggets, packs of waffle fries. A nearby fridge was stocked with juices, sparkling water, and white wine. Fiserv is Marquette University’s home court. A group of school employees, sitting in leather chairs around the room, fidgeted while they waited for Dwyane Wade to arrive.

In 2003, Wade led Marquette to the Final Four, its first trip since the team had won its sole championship, in 1977. Wade’s team lost in the semifinals to the Kansas Jayhawks, but he left Marquette as a legend. In 2007, the school retired his jersey. Now, nearly two decades later, he was being honored for a \$3 million donation, which would support a reading program, scholarships, and an expansion of the men’s-basketball facilities.

Wade arrived with a small entourage (the Chick-fil-A was for them), and the room buzzed. He greeted me and leaned in for a shake; his hand eclipsed mine, almost reaching my wrist. He was dressed in black from neck to toe—black shirt, flared black pants, black socks, and black sneakers. On his head sat a cream cap with a black D in the center. Chin up, with perfect posture, he walked down a long hall toward the donor dining hall, where some of Marquette’s wealthiest alumni awaited him.

Wade, towering over everyone, was greeted by applause. He started his brief remarks with a joke about how he had finally

given enough money to enter this room. Wade spoke passionately about his love for Marquette and how the school had changed his life. He didn't, however, say much about what that life had been like before he got to college.

I imagined how strange it must be for Wade: all these white faces celebrating you as one of their own. No one else in that room had once been a skinny Black kid who lived where Wade lived and saw what he saw. He gave them a story they could comprehend—the truth, but not the *truth*.

I had struggled, at first, to get past such carefully constructed surfaces with Wade. In many respects, my own background is similar to his. He's from the hood. I'm from the hood. We came of age around the same time, in places that many white people talk about like they're alien worlds. It might sound strange, but I've found that Black people from poverty are often *more* cagey, *more* on guard, when talking with a Black writer from poverty. Maybe it's because I know what's beneath the success stories that get packaged for white audiences. Or I could be there with an ulterior motive, trying to prove that Wade has sold out—that he is “Hollywood” now. I've come to think of this kind of reluctance as the “Black Wall.”

Slowly, though, the wall started to come down, and I got a very different account of Wade's life from the one he'd shared with the Marquette donors. When Wade was about 8 years old, he went to live with his father in Robbins, a small town on the outskirts of Chicago. Despite everything he'd gone through on the South Side, Wade didn't want to leave; he was protective of his mother. His sister Tragil, then 12, had to trick him into leaving. She told her younger brother that he was just going to Robbins for a visit. He went for a ride, and that was that.

In Robbins, Wade lived with his father, stepmother, and four stepsiblings. Robbins was mostly Black, a place built by Black people who were tired of racial conflict in Chicago. One of Wade's best friends in town, though, was white. “I'd never had a white friend before,” he told me. “It was different going over to his house after school some days and shit, you know what I mean? It was way different than my house. After school, there was food waiting for him, and the house was clean.” Wade commuted to a racially diverse school in Chicago, where he was quiet and shy. “My confidence was low because my shoes got holes in them,” he told me. When he wore white socks with his black shoes, he'd use a black marker to darken the sock where it showed through the holes.

Wade's father was a standout baseball player in high school, and he'd dabbled in just about every sport except basketball. But after a stint in the Army, he came back to a Jordan-era, basketball-crazed Chicago and decided to be good at hoops. He dominated pickup ball around the city and its suburbs, and the boys in his house took after him. They played on a hoop their father had built in the driveway beside their house in Robbins. Dwyane Wade Sr. was a relentless coach. “He 6 foot 3, muscles, had a mean streak,” Wade told me. “Damn right, I'm listening to my dad. I had no choice. I was scared of my dad.”

“He brought that military background to everything we did,” Wade said. If Wade Sr. got it in his head that his son had to make

a certain number of shots, he wouldn't let it go. “We could be out there all night,” Wade said. “And I would cry through it; he didn't care.” He often resented the pressure. “I'm talking about my shoulder hurting, my hand hurting, I'm hungry, I'm thirsty, whatever; he didn't give a fuck. And so that was tough as a kid, because at that time, you want to do it, but you don't want to do it that long. You don't want to act like you're training and really working at the game. You just want to play it.”

Tragil often visited the house in Robbins. She saw how hard her father pushed her brother. Wade Sr. made his son play against kids who were older and bigger than he was. In one game, playing as a fifth grader against eighth graders, Wade missed an easy shot. “Dwyane missed that left-hand layup; he couldn't go left,” Tragil told me. “So Daddy made him stay out on the court until he got it right. He was crying and everything, but he learned to use that left hand.”

Growing up, Wade saw competing versions of what a man was supposed to be. He saw men putting their hands on women, men fighting each other, men drawing guns. He also saw his own father get up at five in the morning every day to take the train to make deliveries for a printing company. Wade Sr. demanded that the kids use *ma'am* and *sir* in the house. He made them clean the bathrooms and wash the dishes. Wade Sr. took pride in providing for his family. But Wade never recalls hearing him say the words *I love you*. “It was a lot of tough love as a Black man in America,” Wade told me. “At that time, wasn't a lot of hugs going around for a lot of young boys in the community that I had.”

Even as Wade grew into his powers as a high-school player, his father continued to push him. “My dad was so intense that by the time Dwyane got in high school, he wasn't allowed to come inside the gym,” Tragil said. “He was always trying to coach from the sidelines, so they ended up banning him from home games.”

Although Wade dreamed of playing college ball at Michigan, the school didn't recruit him, because his ACT scores were too low. But Tom Crean—Marquette's head coach, who was in his second year of transforming the program into a contender—had heard stories about the all-state shooting guard from Chicago, and decided to reach out. On June 25, 2000, just as the window to call high-school players officially opened, Crean contacted Wade at the home of his high-school sweetheart, Siohvaughn Funches. Funches's mother told Wade to pick up the phone, and Crean sold him on becoming the cornerstone of the team he was building.

Wade wasn't academically eligible to play as a freshman, and had to spend the year getting his grades and test scores up. That same year, his mother was incarcerated on drug charges related to crack. He wrote to her in secret, never telling anyone what was going on.

At first, Wade said, he used all the adversity as motivation. On the court and, for the first time, in the classroom, he tried to channel his anger and hurt: “*He's not this; he's not that. He will never be this; he will never be that.*” Wade drilled and studied. He spent hours overhauling his shot. He wasn't allowed to travel with the team, but Crean sat him on the bench during home games and made him take notes. Wade was allowed to practice





During his junior season at Marquette, Wade led the team to its first Final Four in more than three decades.

with the team, and it was clear that, even as a freshman, he was the best player out there.

"I was doing stuff that they couldn't do," Wade told me, "and I was like, *Oh, wait, I'm different*, you know what I mean?" His mother got clean in prison and was released just in time to see him play his first game, his sophomore year. Jolinda started her first ministry in prison, and years later Wade would buy her a church on the South Side.

Wade was 20 years old, a sophomore at Marquette, when he became a father himself. Funches gave birth to their son, Zaire, in 2002, and Wade and Funches married a few months later. Fatherhood overwhelmed Wade at first. Every bit of his financial aid went to diapers and baby food. "I was broke as hell in college, bro," he told me. "I'm talking about *broke broke*."

But Wade knew money was coming. The Miami Heat drafted him after his junior year. In that crowded class of prospects, each star had his own identity. LeBron James was the chosen one; Carmelo Anthony was the tough Baltimore kid who could get a bucket anywhere. Wade was the ruthless, hard-driving warrior.

"I don't give a fuck. I'm a savage," he told me. "Especially if I felt like you crossed me or you said something to me I don't like. I'm out here to win. I get dirty if we gotta get dirty."

Before drafting Wade, the Heat had suffered two consecutive losing seasons, prompting the head coach, Pat Riley—who'd never had a single losing season before—to resign. But in Wade's rookie season, the team advanced to the second round of the playoffs, where it faced the Indiana Pacers. Wade announced his arrival as a star by slashing through the lane, leaping over the Pacers' center Jermaine O'Neal, and slamming the ball like he wanted to tear the rim off the backboard.

Though James is the most decorated player of his era, Wade was the first of his contemporaries to achieve team success in the NBA. In his second year, he made the NBA All-Star and All-NBA teams, and he and his new teammate Shaquille O'Neal led the Heat to the Eastern Conference Finals. The next season, in June 2006, with Riley back on the sidelines, Wade carried the Heat to the NBA Finals.

For me, the moment Wade became Wade was in that series, when the Heat played Dirk Nowitzki and the Dallas Mavericks. Miami went down by two games early, and nobody thought they would win the series. From the third game on, though, Wade seemed possessed. He hit mid-range jumpers; he got to the basket; he dunked on defenders' heads; he made his free throws. Wade scored 157 points over the last four games, all Heat wins, and turned in a damn-near-perfect performance in the elimination game, playing with relentless energy on both sides of the ball. He brought Miami its first championship trophy and became one of the youngest NBA Finals MVPs ever. In just a few years, Wade had gone from an underrecruited high schooler to one of the highest-profile stars in the NBA.

When Wade had entered the league, baggy, untucked dress shirts and oversize suits were the style on draft night; on game days, players draped 5XL sweat suits and Mitchell & Ness throw-back jerseys over their lanky frames. At the beginning of the 2005 season, then-NBA Commissioner David Stern implemented a dress code. It was unpopular and even deemed racist by many—a white commissioner forcing a league of predominantly Black millionaires to wear business casual. Wade, however, embraced the new restrictions. The next year, his tailored suits and taste for designer fashion landed him on *Esquire's* best-dressed list.

Today, the NBA's "tunnel walks" are like runways, with avant-garde couture, designer bags, and, yes, painted nails. But Wade recalls how the media jumped on him when he started to experiment with his fashion. "I remember in the early stages, if I wore a color, if I wore pink pants, they were talking about it like it was the worst thing ever," he told me.

Wade wanted to be presentable, whether he was wearing sneakers and sweats or expensive sandals. But, like dancers, professional basketball



Wade in the eighth grade

players tend to have twisted and mangled feet, often crowned with discolored and bruised toenails. Wade had a solution for getting his feet together—he started to get pedicures, and had his toenails painted.

In 2007, Wade and Funches had another child, Zaya, but then separated that same year. Their divorce was a bitter tabloid saga, and their custody proceedings were among the longest in the history of Cook County. In 2011, Judge Renee G. Goldfarb granted Wade sole custody of both children, and they moved in with him. Zaire struggled with the change; he had been, he told me, “a momma’s boy,” and he worried that he was abandoning his mother. Basketball often kept Wade away from home, a fact that Goldfarb had considered. “But, to posit that he does not have the time to be a primary parent is incorrect,” she wrote. “He has the time if he makes the time.”

Dwyane, Zaire, and Zaya were all young, all still learning how to talk to one another. “I just was like, *All right, I don’t know what the hell I’m doing*,” Wade told me. He thought of his father’s emotional distance. He wanted to do things differently. “Me, I’m kissing you on the forehead,” Wade said. “I’m coming in there, I’m tucking you in at night. I’m coming off the road at three in the morning. I’m coming in to show you love.” He bought Zaire, then about 11, a blank notebook and told him to write down his feelings. Zaire told me, “I would leave it under his door, and then, whenever he would get back from a road trip, he would see it, open it, write his own thing, leave it back under my door.” Zaire, now 23, thinks the diary was crucial in helping him through his preteen years. “It was good,” he said, “‘cause I never really knew how to express by talking.”

When Wade was in his mid-20s, his NBA career at its peak, he met Gabrielle Union, who’d starred in *Bring It On*, *Bad Boys II*, *Daddy’s Little Girls*, and *Deliver Us From Eva*, at a Super Bowl party. “She was different,” Wade said. Union was already an established presence in Hollywood, and he liked her confidence and independence. “She had her own bread, you know what I’m saying? She had her own swag.” During a break with Union, Wade had another son, Xavier, with a different woman. Eventually he and Union reconciled, and they were married in 2014; Union became a bonus parent to Zaire and Zaya. (Xavier is primarily raised by his mother.) That year, Wade was awarded full custody of his nephew Dahveon Morris. Four years later, Wade and Union welcomed a daughter, Kaavia James.

When Zaya first came out to Wade and Union as transgender, Wade was confounded. Nothing in his upbringing had prepared him for the experience of having a trans daughter. After Zaya was born, he had started planning for another generation of Wade basketball dominance. “When I had two boys, I was like, *I got two chances at the NBA*,” he said. Unlike Zaire, who dreamed of playing basketball, Zaya had never been interested in it. Sometimes, she’d come home, take off her school clothes, and put on a wig, heels, a dress. Back then, Wade admitted, he didn’t really know what being transgender meant.

Zaya, who turns 18 this year, told me she was afraid of what her father would think. “I was so scared,” she told me. “Everyone’s scared about coming out to their parents, and yeah, my parents

are from Chicago. Chicago’s not the most, you know, I mean, you know ... Like, in that moment, he had to make a choice: *Do I stay in my beliefs from my childhood, or do I grow and expand and evolve in order to be a better dad for my kid?*”

It took Wade time to fully understand Zaya’s identity, and how to be her dad. He thought about how impossible her life would have been under the circumstances of his childhood. “I thank God all the time that I was able to be in a position in life that I was able to be in, but also that I was put in a position to be Zaya’s dad,” Wade told me. “If she grew up in my situation, forget about it. You’re either going to kill yourself, hurt yourself, or you’re going to keep that shit tucked in when you’re growing up like that; you’re not telling everybody.”



Dwyane and Zaire Wade catch Game 5 of the 2010 NBA Finals, between the Los Angeles Lakers and the Boston Celtics.

Wade and Union called their friends Magic and Cookie Johnson for advice. Their son, EJ, had come out to his family as gay when he was 17, and Wade remembered watching Magic talking about EJ in an interview with Ellen DeGeneres. “Well, I think it’s all about you not trying to decide what your daughter or son should be, or what you want them to become,” Magic had told DeGeneres. “It’s all about loving them, no matter who they are, what they decide to do.” He continued: “If *you* don’t support them, who’s going to support them and love them?”

Wade recalled thinking that Magic had navigated these interviews gracefully. “It was about EJ; it wasn’t about Magic,” he told me.

The Johnsons encouraged Wade and Union to relocate from Florida to California, where Zaya would have more community and a friendlier environment. The Wades decided to make the move, and the Johnsons helped them find a school that would be comfortable for their daughter.

After Zaya came out to the public, in 2020, Wade also went on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* to express his support for her. Later, he talked about what it had felt like for him to see the fear in her face when she told him she was trans. “I had to go look myself in the mirror and ask myself: *Why was my child scared, scared to tell me something about herself?*”

But, elsewhere within the family, the news did create turmoil. Shortly after Zaya came out publicly, her mother attempted to block her legal name and gender change until she turned 18. In court documents, Funches claimed that Wade was “positioned to profit from the minor child’s name and gender change with various companies through contacts and marketing opportunities.” She expressed her concern that Wade might have pressured Zaya into coming out, and said media attention would exacerbate that pressure. (Funches and her lawyers did not return requests for comment.)

It is true that as Wade’s daughter, Zaya might be one of the most visible young trans people in the world (she walked the runway during Paris Fashion Week in 2023, and landed the March 2025 cover of *Seventeen* magazine), but that prominence has also often made her a target. When she came out, the rapper Boosie BadAzz was incensed. “Like, don’t address him as a woman, dog,”



Wade says his father, Dwyane Wade Sr., gave him the tools he needed to succeed in the NBA.

he said in an Instagram video. “He 12 years old. He don’t, he’s not—he’s not up there yet.” The rapper Young Thug also weighed in on Twitter: “All I wanna say to dwade son is ‘GOD DONT MAKE MISTAKES’ but hey live your true self.”

Wade does his best to tune out the bullshit, but he can’t stop his kids from seeing every slight or attack. Yet Zaya says that he’s made their home a sanctuary for her, and in doing so has given her the comfort to succeed. “If a father wants some advice,” she told me, “it’s all about making sure your kids feel loved and they feel accepted and they’re protected and they’re safe.” For Zaya, this is a basic tenet of fatherhood, no matter who your children are, or what happens in their life.

The challenges of protecting a world-famous trans daughter aside, Wade is trying to navigate the basic father-teen dynamics. One day, he decided to surprise Zaya by picking her up at school. “I was coming from a meeting and I was dressed rather nice and I was in my Maybach,” he said. Zaya was outside with all of her

friends; Wade was blasting music with his windows down and got out of the car. “I was just hanging on the car, like, ‘Hey, Zaya.’” She and her friends saw him and laughed. When she got in the car, Wade said, “I was like, ‘Did I look cool?’ She’s like, ‘Yeah, Dad, you looked cool.’”

ONCE, LONG AFTER Wade had left 59th and South Prairie, his mother told him a story. Back in those early years, when she was dealing with drug addiction, Wade’s father would drive to her neighborhood after work, looking for her. When he found her out on the streets, he’d sit with her for a bit and ask her if she needed anything before he went home. As bad as their relationship was, she was his kids’ mother, and he wanted to make sure she was okay.

It took Wade a while to fully appreciate his father, to understand why he’d been the kind of parent he was. Wade Sr. drilled into his son the competitive drive necessary to become an elite athlete, and his ex-Army toughness taught Wade about respect. “When I got coaches—when I got high-school coaches, eventually college coaches, NBA coaches—I already had that respect built in, and it was built in from my dad being my first coach.”

In 2023, when Wade was inducted into the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame, he gave a speech thanking his teammates, his coaches, Marquette, his family. Finally, he asked his father to stand up. “The hard work I put in is because I didn’t want to let you down,” he said. “Those countless hours in the backyard where we would compete against each other like strangers—it built me to last.” In the audience, Wade Sr. nodded slowly, his hands clasped. “I admired you as a kid,” Wade said. “I admire you now.” Then he invited his dad to join him onstage. “This one is for my father,” he said. “I love you, and I’m thankful for you.” They pulled each other into a hug. “I love you too, man,” Wade Sr. said.

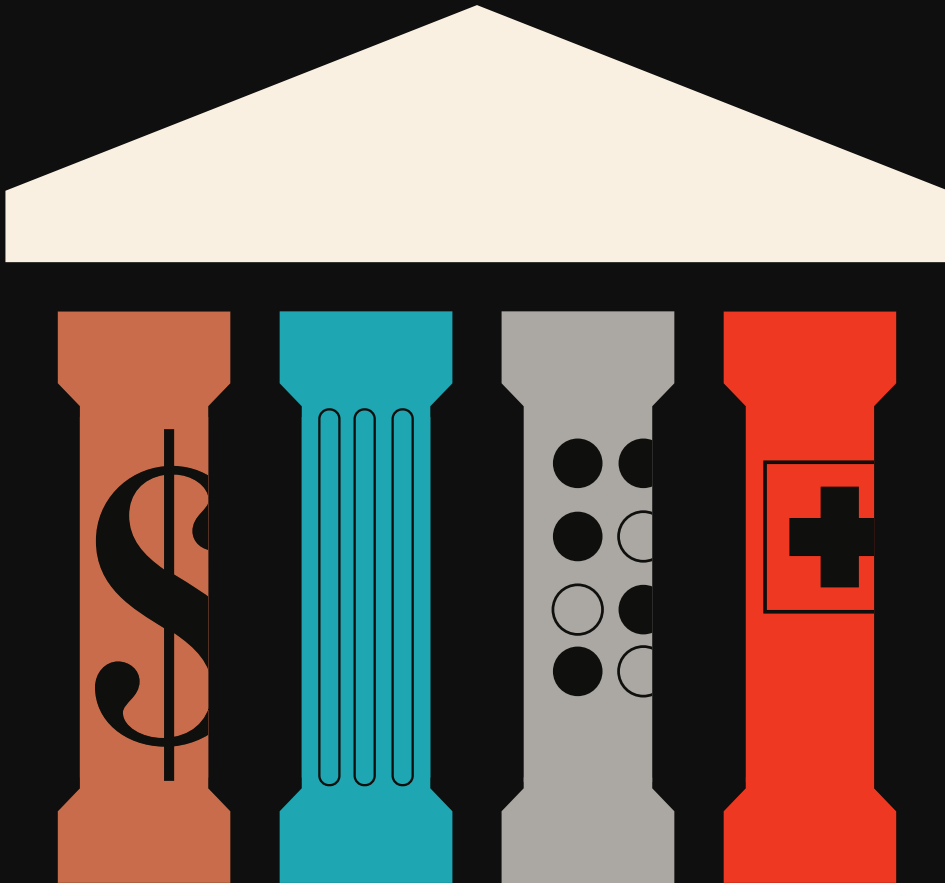
A few months after the Hall of Fame ceremony, I spoke with Wade Sr. over Zoom. He still seemed to be reeling from that speech. “I wasn’t prepared for it,” he said. “That was an incredible, surreal moment.” We talked about how, when his son was growing up, priorities seemed clear-cut: “Staying away from the gangs, which is, you know, on the next block, and then, you know, the next block, and the next block.” For Wade Sr., the primary goal was staying alive. He tried to teach discipline above all. “I’ve always wanted to be a strong father,” he told me.

But there is plenty about Wade’s life that his father can’t quite grasp. Wade Sr. knows that his son goes to therapy, which he still can’t wrap his mind around. “I’m not going to talk to nobody about Dwyane; that’s who I am,” he said, referring to himself. “If I can’t understand me, how I’mma expect somebody else to understand me? So I try to keep it in-house.” But some men are just built differently, Wade Sr. tells himself. With his son, he said, “I’ve always tried to instill: *Be better than me*. I really think that, in a way, he took his own path.”

There’s still no shortage of old-school discipline and hardness about Wade. In January, he publicly revealed that he’d had surgery to remove a cancerous tumor from his kidney in December 2023. “I think it was the first time that my family,

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my dad, my kids, they saw me weak,” Wade said on his podcast. “That moment was probably the weakest point I’ve ever felt in my life.” He had carried that weakness privately, never mentioning it to me over the course of our many conversations, or to anyone outside his family.

I thought back to the barbershop, where so many people had opinions on how Wade went about his career and his life. Everyone in the shop knew how they would handle marriage, fatherhood, and a post-NBA career if they were in Wade’s shoes. They would be better Dwyane Wades than Dwyane Wade.

Just a couple of weeks after Wade had that secret surgery, we loaded into a black SUV and drove to the South Side. We were going to Wade’s childhood home, where he’d lived with his mother. The higher the street number, the more abandoned the blocks seemed to be. And I don’t mean abandoned by the people—they were out, even though it was freezing. I mean abandoned by the city. Well-manicured businesses and beautiful homes on clean, trash-free streets slowly turned into fast-food chains, and then run-down local storefronts, and then not much of anything—a different Chicago.

I was riding in the back seat with Dwyane and Tragil. Both were in a reflective mood. Tragil recalled how Dwyane, at age 4, had figured out how to cross a busy street and walk to a corner store called Miss Pearl’s so he could buy Little Debbie’s.

“Look to the left,” Tragil said. “You see that garage?”

“Yooooo, the garage,” Dwyane said.

“That was Miss Pearl’s,” they said, nearly in unison, laughing.

The darker memories came, too. Dwyane talked about the fights he got into with different boys in the neighborhood; the police raids where cops busted into their home, arresting every adult inside. As they passed another building, Dwyane motioned out the window. “This is where I used to watch my mom—and, like, she ain’t know I used to see her; she used to be shooting up.”

Dwyane rested his chin on his hand.

“We coulda stayed here, and we coulda struggled,” Tragil said.

Dwyane nodded. “This coulda just been our life.”

We arrived at 5901 South Prairie Avenue, a big three-story building that sat on a corner. Its black gate was wide open.

“They didn’t have this gate when we lived here,” Tragil said. “Remember how the cops always tripped on that top step because it was never fixed?”

“Remember the time we were running from the cops, and you fell?” Dwyane said. “I looked back and you was gone.”

We jumped out of the SUV. Tragil pointed to a spot where there’d once been a bush in which dealers used to hide drugs. Dwyane walked around the outside of the building, taking photos. Brother and sister kept sharing flashbacks, finishing each other’s stories as their eyes welled. They paused, wiped their tears, and continued to bask in nostalgia. We walked through the gate up onto the porch. Even though the step had been fixed, somehow I still tripped on it, just as the cops had.

Wade showed me a scar on his head, and gestured toward a railing he’d once fallen from. “I didn’t go to the hospital,” he



Dwyane and Zaya Wade in 2024

laughed. “I was told to put some water on it, maybe a little alcohol, even though I had a concussion.”

I tried the building’s front door, and to our surprise, it was open, so we went in. Like excited kids, we ran up and down the central staircase, trying doors on each landing, but they were all locked. On the middle floor, where Wade’s cousins used to live, a Ring camera had been installed. Wade looked directly into it and said hello multiple times, pressing the button, but no one answered. After trying every other door in the building, we went back outside.

Tragil looked up the rent for one of the building’s apartments: \$1,400 a month. “They tryin’ to gentrify,” Wade said.

We got back in the car. In those South Side days, Wade said, “I just felt out of control of my life.” He reminisced about how he used to sit on the building’s porch, watching the rain. “I saw the same things I just seen. Like, it doesn’t look that different,” he said. “But my thoughts were different. I was, you know, thinking of a better life.” He wouldn’t relive those years for anything. But he believes they taught him patience, how to work hard and wait. Now he’s trying to teach his kids the same thing. It’s not easy: “They don’t have it,” he said. “Like, my son wanted to be in the NBA at 18. And he expected that. He has no patience.”

Years ago, he’d taken Zaire to see 5901 South Prairie, though they hadn’t gone inside; they’d taken a photo on the front steps. Dwyane wondered aloud how his younger children—whose lives couldn’t be further away from this place—might react to seeing it now. “I would love for them to walk through it.”

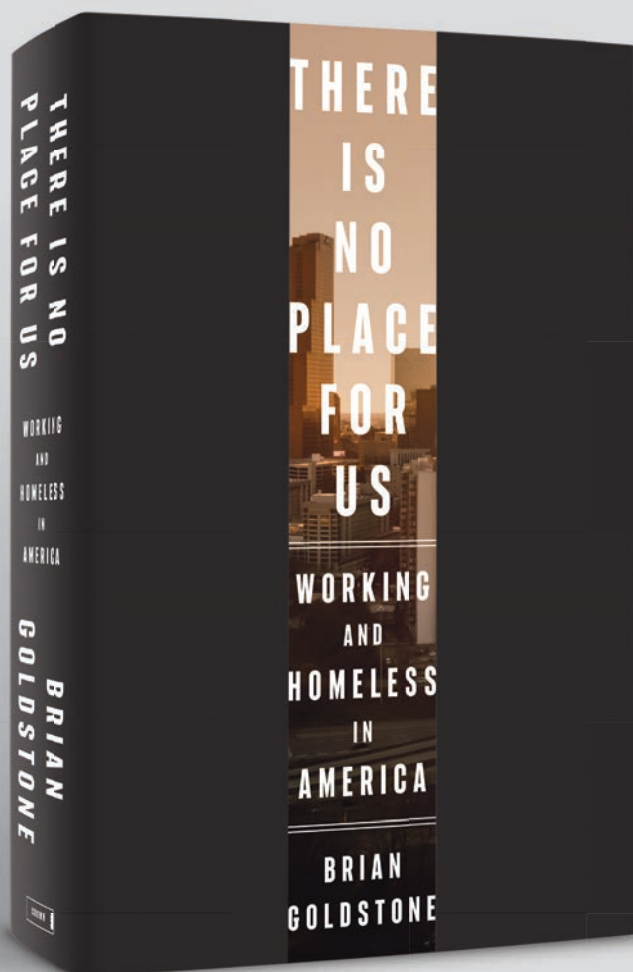
Wade gazed out the window at the South Side as we rode back to the other side of town, past the empty lots and the run-down buildings. “That’s what the American dream is, though,” I said. “You bust your ass. And then your kids get to have a different experience.”

Wade smiled wide and nodded. “Yeah,” he said. *A*

D. Watkins is an editor at large at Salon, and an assistant professor at the University of Baltimore. He is the author of Black Boy Smile and was a screenwriter for the HBO limited series We Own This City.

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The Anti-Rockwell

R. Crumb's comics dredged the depths of his own subconscious—and tapped into something collectively screwy in America.

By Gal Beckerman

Certain great artists are synonymous with their kinks. Egon Schiele had his thing for gaunt girls and their undergarments. Robert Mapplethorpe was partial to bulging muscles wrapped in leather. And then there is the legendary cartoonist R. Crumb—lover of solid legs, worshipper of meaty thighs, champion of the ample backside. To truly know his art is to know what turns him on.

For the man who effectively invented underground comics in the 1960s, rubbing his readers' faces in his sexual proclivities was always the point. If Crumb, now 81, was helpless against his own desires—and there he was on the page, quivering and sweating behind his thick glasses as he beheld one of his zaf-tig goddesses—he suspected that, somehow, everyone else was also helpless against theirs. His comix, as he renamed them, epitomized the hippie turn of the decade because he dove to the depths not just of his own subconscious, but of something collectively screwy, bringing up all the American muck.

He was the anti-Norman Rockwell the culture was craving. But this was also the gamble of his art. Diving down like that, he risked derision—being called a sicko, a misogynist, a racist (all labels he indeed could not escape).

In a loving biography, *Crumb: A Cartoonist's Life*, Dan Nadel begins with a childhood memory that Crumb preserved in a 2002 comic, “Don’t Tempt Fate.” A slouchy young Crumb is standing in a junkyard next to a boy who is hurling pieces of cement over a cinder-block wall. Crumb is appalled by the “total obliviousness” of the boy, who doesn’t care that he might really hurt someone. To demonstrate the danger, Crumb then does “the crazy thing” and walks to the other side of the wall, where a chunk immediately hits him in the mouth, knocking out a front tooth with a perfect comic-book “BAM!” The crux of Crumb, Nadel writes, can be found in this anecdote, where “the compulsions of masochism, sadism, and martyrdom are conjoined.”

He made art out of the kinds of insecurities and brutal fantasies that today might live on a subreddit for incels.

Crumb’s gawky, eccentric persona was first revealed to the wider public in a 1994 documentary made by his friend Terry Zwigoff, which portrays the cartoonist with all of his incongruities. On the one hand, he’s a man who seems of another era: dressing in a fedora and suit jacket, obsessively collecting blues and country records from the 1920s and ’30s, and using a crow-quill pen to draw in a meticulous crosshatch style reminiscent of Thomas Nast’s 19th-century political cartoons. On the other hand, he’s flagrantly free of inhibition; unabashed in his sex-craziness; creating preposterous characters, such as an urbane, horny cat named Fritz and a pleasure-loving pseudo-guru with a long beard, Mr. Natural. Crumb is both a recluse in need of frequent monk-like retreats from the world and a man with a fetish for requesting piggyback rides from women he has just met.

If the documentary presented him as a sort of accidental artist, with little other than his id propelling him from drawing to drawing, a more intentional drive emerges in the biography. Crumb found his audience in the late ’60s after he arrived in San Francisco, escaping the violence and mental illness of his dysfunctional Philadelphia family and the dead-end job drawing greeting cards in Cleveland that followed.

With LSD fueling his visions, he began drawing bizarre, big-footed figures in absurd comics, many of them disjointed, grotesque, as if Samuel Beckett were expressing himself with a Sharpie on the wall of a bathroom stall. Here’s Nadel on one of Crumb’s first breakout strips, “Har Har Page,” from 1966:

It begins with a rotund male wiping snot on a nude woman, then chasing her with a bus, which multiplies to infinite buses. He attempts to assault the woman, who in turn throws a toilet at him; he finally manages to capture her, only to be swept away by a janitor. Reappearing, the man drags the woman and eats her foot.

Crumb desecrated sleek American surfaces in a way that felt disturbing and profound, especially to the many young people also dropping acid. The title of another strip from this era neatly captured his critique of a society that he felt still needed to shake off its ’50s conformity: “Life Among the Constipated.” By 1969, he had drawn the cover for the album *Cheap Thrills*, at the request of the band’s lead singer, Janis Joplin; started one of the first underground comic books, *Zap Comix*; and signed a deal with a major publisher for a collection of his strips.

Though Crumb and his many fans have always called his creations sharp social satire, he made art out of the kinds of insecurities and brutal fantasies

that today might claim a niche porn category or live on a subreddit for incels. In his 1969 strip “Joe Blow,” a standard-issue 1950s nuclear family joyfully descends into depraved acts of incest, father and daughter, mother and son. In an early-’90s strip, “A Bitchin’ Bod,” Crumb presents a woman, “Devil Girl,” whose body has all of his favorite features, but no head—available for sex and incapable of speech or thought. Is Crumb here revealing the culture’s violent misogyny, or his own? It’s honestly hard to tell.

In a 1994 issue of his comic book *Weirdo*, Crumb drew a pair of visions that were meant to illustrate the fears that he imagined lived within white Americans: “When the Niggers Take Over America!” which featured Black men killing white men and raping white women, and “When the Goddamn Jews Take Over America!” in which shady cabals use psychoanalysis to subvert the Christian population. Even Art Spiegelman, the most famous of Crumb’s subversive-cartoonist progeny, admitted that it didn’t really work as satire, and a white-power newsletter soon reprinted a bootlegged copy of both in its pages, very much proving Spiegelman’s point.

Crumb became aware early in his career of a dynamic that any online shitposter today is all too familiar with: The darker he got, as he noted in a long entry in one of his 1975 sketchbooks, the more positive reinforcement he received. The moment was right for an artist so willing to reveal his “own subconscious yearnings,” as he put it. But a spiral followed: “Then when they love you for it, make a hero out of you and interview you to death, you (me) over-react and start drawing socially irresponsible and hostile work which you (I) then feel guilty about.”

Crumb mellowed his approach over the decades, perhaps having stretched nearly to its breaking point the kinetic power of comics to illustrate transgressive thought, emotion, and fantasy. His work grew more introspective and psychological. In a less constipated America, he was free to explore his own neuroses. And he took on subjects for the sheer technical challenge. Who would have predicted 40 years earlier that his last great work, published in 2009, would be a faithful illustration of the entire Book of Genesis, the decadent Mr. Natural replaced by the moral force of the Old Testament God?

Aline Kominsky-Crumb, his partner of half a century and a comics artist in her own right who died in 2022, was also clearly a stabilizing force. Robert and Aline often drew together and had the rare open marriage that seemed to have been relatively serene—they knew that they needed each other, and that being a couple was never going to be enough. They also knew that they needed escape, much as they both appreciated provocation. They ended up in



R. Crumb, posing here for a portrait in the early 1980s, took a mellower approach over the decades. His comics grew less socially and sexually transgressive and more introspective and psychological.

CRUMB: A
CARTOONIST'S
LIFE

Dan Nadel

SCRIBNER

Sauve, a village in the south of France, where Crumb still lives, surrounded by his daughter, Sophie, and three grandchildren.

Despite his stature now as a founding father of the graphic novel, there is a strong case for placing Crumb’s signature work in the groaning file labeled “problematic.” We live in a moment awash in just the sort of winking sarcasm that could be read as genuine hate or a joke or both—the Pepe the Frog meme that’s maybe racist, the wave that’s maybe a Hitler salute. But what saves Crumb is the shakiness of his hand—in being creepy or dark or dangerous, he was also making himself terribly vulnerable, and he knew it. *A*

Gal Beckerman is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

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MUSIC

What Is Classical Music?

The term is applied to radically different compositions across more than 1,000 years of history. We need a better definition.

By Matthew Aucoin

If most music lovers were asked to identify the defining characteristics of their favorite genre—jazz, folk, rock, hip-hop—I would guess that they might simply say, “Well, it *sounds* a certain way.” It’s music, they might go on, that tends to have a particular rhythmic feel, or that usually features, say, the saxophone, or the electric guitar, or the sitar. Presented with exceptions to these patterns—what about a cappella jazz ensembles? what about “unplugged” rock albums?—most listeners would likely offer some variant of *I know it when I hear it!*

But, counterintuitive though it might seem, I don’t think sound is always a helpful way to understand genre. I’m a composer and conductor in the field that’s broadly known as Western classical music, a term that’s routinely applied to radically different idioms across more than 1,000 years of musical history. Within this huge array, you’ll find the engulfing sonorities of William Byrd’s choral music; the intimate revelations, too private for words, in chamber works by Franz Schubert and Anton Webern; the majestic topography of Jean Sibelius’s orchestral landscapes; and, more recently, a multitude of works by composers as different from one another as Chaya Czernowin, Tyshawn Sorey, and Thomas Adès.

The unruly and elusive entity known as classical music does not sound like any one thing, and the sheer abundance of the tradition might invite the conclusion that trying to define it at all is a hopeless exercise. But that would be a mistake, especially at this moment. Like every other sector of cultural life, classical music has been roiled over the past decade by intense debates about the field’s ongoing lack of diversity, among performing artists, composers, and leaders of musical organizations. The stakes of these discussions—which have involved charges of Eurocentrism, head-in-the-sand elitism, even white supremacy—have at times felt existential, given many institutions’ financial straits. Maintaining a 90-piece orchestra is generally a money-losing proposition in America today, and as a result,

classical-music organizations lean heavily on private donations. Why, many onlookers have asked, should an orchestra or opera company gobble up millions of dollars from wealthy sponsors to subsidize the salaries of musicians who mainly perform music by white men from centuries past, music for which (judging by ticket sales) demand is limited? What is classical music, whom is it for, and what about it is worth defending?

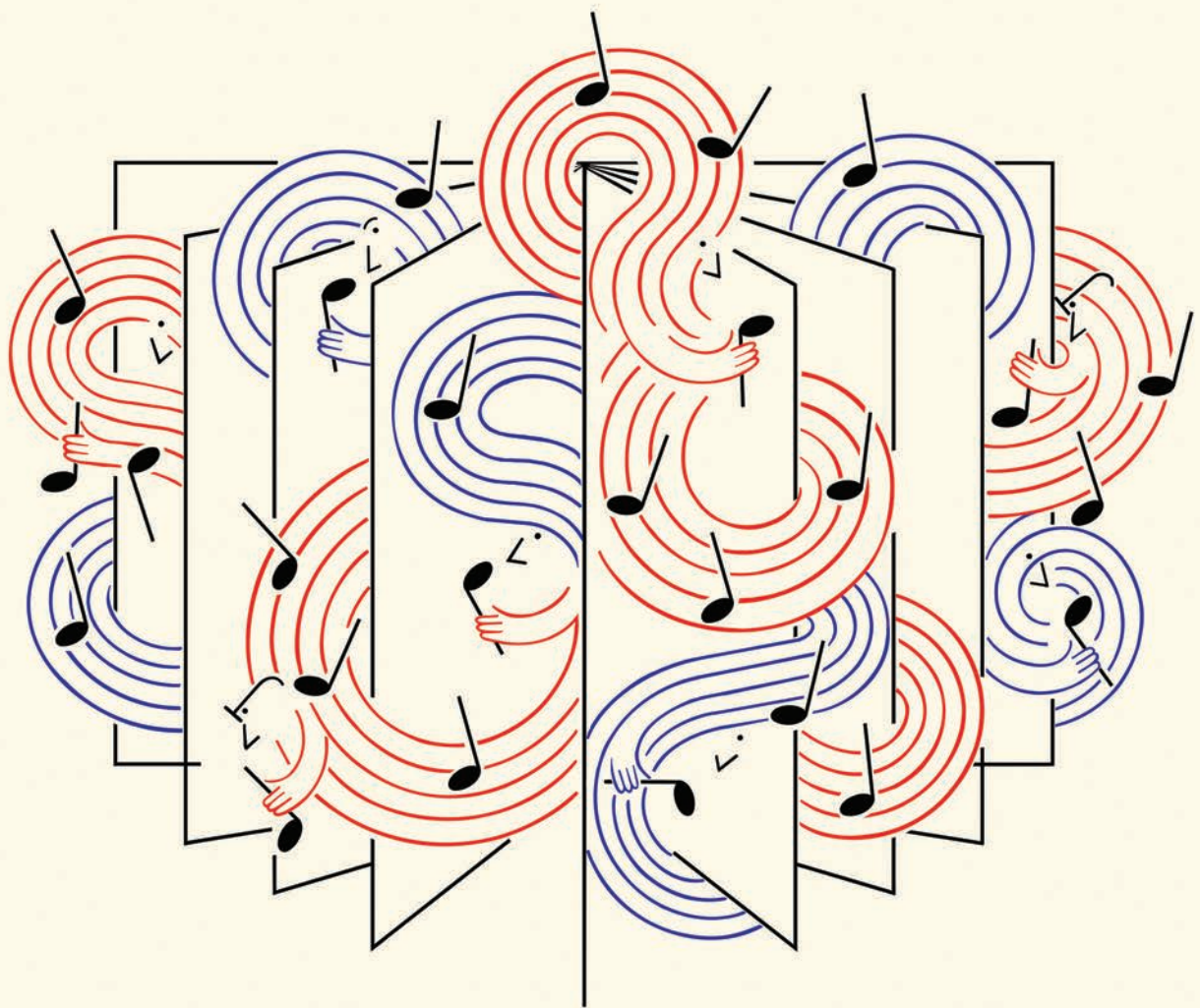
Our answers to these questions will depend on what exactly we love about this music, and what we care about preserving, enriching, and expanding. Claiming that classical music deserves a prominent place in American culture merely because we want to safeguard a particular sound, style, or cultural or ethnic lineage—“music that sounds like Brahms,” or “music from one of three Central European countries”—would be a losing cause.

But a better answer is out there. Rather than defend the “classical” in classical music, I want to champion a particular creative process. What links Hildegard von Bingen and Kaija Saariaho, Johann Sebastian Bach and George Benjamin, is not a specific sound or aesthetic but a shared technology of transmission. At its core, classical music isn’t “classical.” It is written music.

BY “WRITTEN MUSIC,” I mean music that comes into being through the act of composition. Music from practically any tradition can, of course, be written down. If you’re a Beatles fan, you can buy a collection of Beatles sheet music, and if you want to plunk out your favorite jazz standard, you can order a copy of *The Real Book*, which contains the essential harmonic and melodic information for hundreds of well-traversed tunes. (Both a *Real Book* and a 1,136-page tome called *The Beatles: Complete Scores* are sitting on my piano as I write this.)

Though all music can be documented and experienced in multiple ways—scores, recordings, live performances—one approach to distinguishing musical traditions is to ask which form a given tradition treats as authoritative. It would be odd, for instance, to claim that a collection of printed scores constitutes a definitive document of the Beatles canon, because the unquestioned reference point is the band’s studio albums. My Beatles compendium proudly declares its own contingency: Printed on the front cover is an all-caps proclamation that its pages contain FULL TRANSCRIPTIONS FROM THE ORIGINAL RECORDINGS.

In other words: albums first, scores later. Taylor Swift’s 2019 decision to rerecord her earlier albums was a potent gesture, even a radical one, precisely because in pop music, the studio album typically



possesses an authority upon which all subsequent iterations—whether live performances or written transcriptions—are based. Only by returning to the studio could Swift achieve control over her master recordings and literally set the record(s) straight.

Jazz musicians and aficionados tend to have a different perspective. Even though certain albums (*Kind of Blue*, *A Love Supreme*) have attained the status of holy relics in the minds of many listeners, I think most jazz lovers would agree that the genre is not defined by the worship of specific studio recordings. Fans are more likely to value the evanescent moment of live performance, with its potential for spontaneous expression, for the very reason that a familiar tune can sound different every time it's performed. A major artist such as Miles Davis might have performed and recorded a certain song—"My Funny Valentine," for example—many times throughout his career, and there's no reason to automatically treat a particular performance as the authoritative version. In spite of *The Real Book*'s name, jazz musicians rarely consider the printed score to be "the real thing" either. No self-respecting jazz musician would play a *Real Book* score exactly as written.

Western classical music is an unusual case. The reference point for a given piece of music is the score, rather than a studio recording or a live performance. Beethoven's symphonies have been recorded hundreds—if not thousands—of times, and they've been performed many more times than that, but every one of those performances and recordings refers to the same score. For a composer, the score is the foundational site of creativity, and the act of score-making links together artists who could hardly sound more different from one another—say, an Italian composer of the late Renaissance and early Baroque period like Claudio Monteverdi and a 20th-century American avant-gardist like John Cage. Even an extreme case, such as Cage's famous 4'33"—a work in which performers refrain from playing their instrument for four minutes and 33 seconds—depends on its score, a simple and playful set of written instructions. (In fact, to a greater degree than most notated music, 4'33" is inconceivable as a work of art without those directions.)

If we let ourselves be guided by this basic question—which musical artists regard the score as a creative starting point?—we arrive at the broadest and most welcoming definition of "classical" music. All kinds of unexpected affiliations and affinities emerge beyond music that's typically thought of as belonging to the tradition. Many of the big-band masterpieces of Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn, for instance, strike me as indistinguishable, in their creative genesis, from orchestral works by Igor Stravinsky and Aaron Copland that were being

written around the same time: They are notated in exquisite detail, usually for large ensembles, and Strayhorn's gorgeously balanced wind and brass voicings remind me in particular of Stravinsky's. To my ear, Strayhorn is a symphonist at heart. His work—in its fundamental writtenness—has more to do with that of many so-called classical composers than it does with, for example, that of an artist like Ornette Coleman, a free-jazz master who ostensibly hails from a tradition that is continuous with Strayhorn's, but whose method could hardly be more different.

WRITTEN MUSIC MATTERS for the same reason written language does: To write is to free oneself from the constraints of memory. It's possible, in a novel or an essay or a nonfiction narrative or a book of poems, to devise an aesthetic structure full of details, depths, and digressions that would be far harder to construct in a purely oral storytelling tradition, one in which verbal transmission works through either memorization or improvisation. When you write, you don't simply set down your thoughts; in the process of writing, your thoughts are transformed, and allowed to assume a newly complex shape—the miraculous scaffolding that emerges from the accumulation of thoughts on the page.

Our world is awash in written language, but not written music. The musical genres that dominate mainstream American culture are all more or less oral traditions. Most pop songs can be taught through verbal communication (*Play this chord, then that chord*) and demonstration (*Here, listen; the melody goes like this*). In the 19th century, by contrast, the best way to widely disseminate a piece of music was to write it down; many music lovers in the emerging middle class had at least basic proficiency as singers or instrumentalists. If you were such a music lover, you might buy scores of the latest songs or chamber music so that you and your friends could read through them around the piano at a party.

Audio recording, which emerged in the second half of the 19th century and became ever more inescapable in the first few decades of the 20th, changed the landscape. The technology is its own kind of writing, a direct transcription of sound itself. And by cutting out the intermediate step of translating one's musical ideas onto the page, it forged new pathways of transmission—radio broadcasts, records, CDs—and exponentially sped up the process through which music could be shared. To be clear, I think audio recording is a miracle; a world without recorded music is unimaginable to me. But, because a musician no longer had to be literate to gain worldwide acclaim, the technology had the collateral effect of sidelining musical literacy.

Counterintuitive though it may seem, I don't think sound is always a helpful way to understand a musical genre.

The influence on the music itself was transformative. Mainstream music was soon pervaded by miniature forms that could be memorized—the four-minute song, not the 40-minute symphony. Reading and writing music once again became an activity for specialists, a modern-day equivalent of medieval monks laboriously copying out illuminated manuscripts. Sure, any kid who takes piano lessons or plays in their school's concert band will still learn the fundamentals of musical notation. But our culture doesn't offer many incentives to stick with notation as a primary means of creative expression. Why expend the crushing effort to write music down in detail when you can capture sound with uncanny clarity and ease using your iPhone?

Whether the turn away from musical literacy was inevitable is open to debate; recording technology enabled not only music but also spoken language to be broadcast worldwide, yet verbal literacy was spared a similar fate. Doomsayers warned for decades that radio and TV would eclipse books, print media, literacy itself—but the written word is as prevalent today as it ever was.

We should be wary of the seemingly unassailable cultural preeminence of oral musical traditions because, in music as in language, the medium shapes the message. Mainstream musical culture privileges brevity and harmonic simplicity; I'm surely not the only composer who has had the songwriter Harlan Howard's peerless definition of a country song, "three chords and the truth," quoted at them as a kind of challenge. (*Bob Dylan and Bob Marley didn't need more than a few chords to make musical history; why do you?*) The very act of writing down a piece of music can be viewed with suspicion. In a 2018 interview with *The Guardian*, the multidisciplinary artist Christian Marclay offered a dispiritedly reductive version of this perspective. "I don't write notes. I can't read or write music in the traditional way," he declared. "I'm not one of those fascist composers who says, 'Play this!'"

This is a curious claim. I've never seen authors called "fascist" simply because they insist that we read their words one after the other, in the order they wrote them. And yet Marclay's misplaced scorn for notated music reflects implicit assumptions that a lot of us carry around: Because relatively few people can fluently decipher the gnomish hieroglyphs of musical notation, the thinking goes, the music that's transmitted that way must itself be forbidding, abstruse, redolent of ancient hierarchies.

But what I love about the act of writing music down is precisely the freedom it affords. Though a piece of music is a temporal structure, composing it takes place not in real time, but outside time. The

process is one of unearthing sound by delving into silence. A composer can make certain musical discoveries only after weeks or months spent inhabiting an imagined sonic world, just as a writer might experience certain epiphanies only years into work on a book. In music, as in language, you can learn a lot about yourself by wrestling with a blank page.

All of this is made possible through the elegant, limitlessly expressive writing system that is musical notation, which is as miraculous as the alphabet itself, and can be used for purposes every bit as varied. Notation doesn't just open the way to the creation of unbounded musical universes; it also enables astonishing forms of human communication. An orchestra, a chorus, a jazz big band, a marching band—these are complex macroorganisms whose inner workings require formidable feats of interactive precision, all of which depend on information encoded in a written score. I can't think of another comparably intricate form of social coordination outside the military.

Musical literacy is a highly specialized skill; to become a fluent reader of music, a student needs to be given the kind of focused instruction that not all public schools have the funding to provide. Exposure to music education, beyond the rudiments, all too often becomes a question of whose family can afford expensive private lessons. We can react to this fact by feeling guilty about it, and letting notated music be tainted by its association with elitism, or we can push for an expansion of musical education. We all understand that to teach a child to read and write is to endow them with potent means of expression and self-discovery. Why should musical literacy be any different? Even a basic grounding in musical notation can transform a child's sense of what can be communicated to another human being, especially—and this is crucial—if notation is treated as a tool of creativity rather than simply an unpleasant test of the ability to play all the right notes *or else*.

If we understand that writing, in music as in language, has the potential to be a force for liberation, and that it can transcend localized questions of style and aesthetic, we might come to a fuller sense of what music can be in our lives—the many forms it can take, the many truths it can tell. And if I could prescribe one thing for our world at this moment, it would be to deepen and expand our understanding of what it is to listen. *A*

Matthew Aucoin is a composer and conductor. His vocal symphony, Music for New Bodies, based on the poetry of Jorie Graham, will be featured at the Tanglewood music festival this summer.



BOOKS

Who Needs Intimacy?

Influential novelists are imagining what women's lives might look like without the demands of partners and children.

By Jordan Kisner

Over the past decade or so, an influential set of female novelists has been circling a shared question: Given how often women are forced to understand themselves as fundamentally *in relation* to others (most commonly a child and/or a partner, but also parents, extended family, friends), is it possible for a woman to have an authentic, independent self? If a female narrator is extracted from her core relational ties, what kind of consciousness is left?

I am thinking here of Rachel Cusk's *Outline* trilogy, whose narrator, divorced and currently apart from her children, travels and observes the world with a sense of self so hollowed out as to render her more a conduit for the musings of her interlocutors than a full-fledged character. I also have in mind Jenny Offill's alienated wife in *Dept. of Speculation*, as well as Ottessa Moshfegh's parodically disaffected protagonist in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*. Katie Kitamura's last two novels, *A Separation* and *Intimacies*, are exemplars of this form. Her female protagonists lack the normal trappings of selfhood: They have no names, ages, or detailed backgrounds. They are loners, dispassionate and disassociated, floating through foreign places in dreamlike Woolfian internal monologue. They recall Emerson's turn of phrase "I become a transparent eyeball." Who are they? They're rarely sure.

"I don't really know what 'authentic' means," Kitamura said in a recent interview about her new novel, *Audition*. "When you take away all of the role-playing, all of the performance, what is left? I don't know if that's your authentic self, or if it's a profoundly raw, destabilized, possibly non-functioning self." *Audition*, which Kitamura describes as the final entry in a loose trilogy, lingers over this curiosity about the instability of the "self," and her bafflement at how authenticity could have anything to do with something so clearly assembled and performed.

The narrators of *A Separation* and *Intimacies* are translators, one who specializes in contemporary fiction and the other who works as a simultaneous interpreter. Her latest is yet another woman whose job is to become a vessel for other people's words: She is a stage actor. This is a kind of stakes-raising for Kitamura. Translators are intended to be, at least in theory, impersonal transmitters of language, but an actor is someone for whom the performance of emotional authenticity is paramount, someone who is supposed to make the words convincingly *their own*. The actor's career is itself a string of alter-selves.

Kitamura's narrator is again nameless, and we learn almost nothing of her childhood, family of origin, or race, though we're given clues that she is not white and that she is middle-aged. Her vocation requires the skill of transformation and self-abnegation, as well as a receptiveness to language and emotion not her own. Accordingly, she feels attuned to the ways in which selfhood can be permeable and subject to manipulation by persuasive narrative. The actor finds that an all-consuming story is a thrill, but "also a danger for a person of my disposition, for whom the managing of these borders was not always easy."

This instability is a signature of Kitamura's women. They tend to be encased in rigid professional or class structures that they observe and enter through language—a medium that Kitamura portrays as forceful but morally ambiguous. The narrator of *Intimacies*, who serves as an interpreter in trials of war crimes—her job, she reflects, is "to repeat the unspeakable"—comes to think that she's neutralizing the crimes, or causing them "to recede further and further into some state of unreality."

AUDITION'S PLOT revolves around a rupture in the border between reality and unreality for the narrator: A young man, Xavier, shows up when she's rehearsing a new play, introduces himself, and confesses that he's been looking for her. An article he'd read about her described her "giving up a child" many years ago, and he thinks he was that child. The actor stares at him. "He was evidently in the grip of some serious

delusion," she thinks, "or else he was a grifter of some kind, it was one or the other."

As he talks, she acknowledges to herself that his story, if misguided, is also "a little bit comprehensible." Back when she was single, she'd had an abortion, which had been obfuscated in the article. And she'd had another brush with maternity: Much later, after marrying her husband, Tomas, she became pregnant again. Tomas had grown emotionally attached to their future as parents and was quietly devastated when she miscarried. She was comparatively cool about the end of the pregnancy, a difference in responses that silently drove a wedge between them.

The encounter with Xavier highlights these facts of her life—she never gave birth, never became a mother—while also stirring a sense of doubt. She had noticed the way that Xavier sits back in his chair and gives a little sigh. "I realized with a growing sense of horror that I myself had made that exact gesture, had utilized it, to be more precise, many times in my work." It is the kind of twinning of small gestures that occurs between parents and children, those epigenetic tics that subconsciously signal that two people are family. Not that she has concrete reason to question her own life history, but the assuredness with which she has just declared Xavier to be delusional or manipulative begins to waver.

This tiny reflex draws attention to how little we know of this actor's body (except that it has seemingly never carried a child to term)—a distancing of corporeal experience shared across the recent fictional array of silvery, cerebral female consciousnesses. Writing in *The Atlantic* about Cusk's 2024 novel, *Parade*, the critic Nicholas Dames described this variety of fiction as a slow process of almost ascetic, transcendent self-erasure: "No more identities, no more social roles, even no more imperatives of the body—a clearing of the ground that has, as Cusk insists, particular urgency for writing by women, who have always had to confront the limits to their autonomy in their quests to think and create." Kitamura's actor has been constrained by both her gender and her race. As a woman of color, she has been forced repeatedly to play "only parts that were commensurate with erasure," characters who "were quite literally silent, a moving image, and nothing else."

The trend of alienated and disembodied female narrators can be read as a collective rejection of the social "imperatives" of the body, allowing, as the novelist Heidi Julavits suggested in her review of Cusk's *Outline*, "a more complex portrait of a person—a self instead of a set of gender stereotypes." This is a Pyrrhic victory, one that seems to preclude the possibility that a woman could create and think *in concert with* her body.

What's more, these narrators commonly achieve their spectral detachment only in the ambivalent or ruinous aftermath of procreation. Offill's narrator in

What are the repercussions of allowing yourself to be a vessel—for language, for art, for a child, for a beloved's needs and desires?

Dept. of Speculation decided in her youth to skip marriage and motherhood in favor of being “an art monster,” and the novel tracks her struggle, after reversing her earlier decision, to reconcile herself to the life of a mother-wife-writer. In *Outline*, the narrator reveals that she has recently moved from the countryside to London, bidding farewell to “our family home,” after having “stayed to watch it become the grave of something I could no longer definitively call either a reality or an illusion.” Kitamura’s actor, too, has achieved a kind of creative and professional zenith only after renouncing the prospect of such a home, and Xavier’s claim suddenly confronts her with the alternative reality of being a very different kind of character: a mother.

His declaration/question is destabilizing precisely because it is in some way seductive. Kitamura has talked about her abiding interest in the “psychological and ethical repercussions of allowing yourself to be a vessel for language,” and one can detect in her work a broader query: What are the repercussions of allowing yourself to be a vessel at all—whether for language, for art, for a child, for a beloved’s needs and desires?

This becomes the through line of *Audition*, which plays again and again with the idea that the shared reality of intimate relationships is merely the result of the performances that unfold between people and the flawed interpretations they invite. For the actor, what transpires is not an escape from the motherhood plot, but a vertiginous, possibly delusional slide into it. Unsure of who she and Xavier are to each other, she also begins to lose her grip on what Tomas actually knows and feels about her, and she about him.

As the novel progresses, this sense of unreality sharpens. On arriving at her apartment,

I felt as if I were entering a space long uninhabited, for a brief moment it was as if I had come into an apartment that looked exactly like my home in every last particular, down to the vase on the table in the hall and the coats hanging from the rack, and yet was not my home at all.

When she later runs into Xavier on her way to rehearsal, he seems to have completely forgotten about his claim on her and behaves warmly but professionally, explaining that the play’s director has taken him on as an assistant. “I found myself wondering if I had misunderstood or misinterpreted or even misremembered the entire unlikely thing,” she confesses. A pattern emerges: She is sure of her interactions, and sure of herself, until she is not.

AUDITION IS broken into two parts. At the end of the first, the actor and Tomas are approaching a moment

of confrontation. Part two opens with a feeling of déjà vu: The actor and Xavier are sitting across from each other in a restaurant, as they were earlier in the book. Months have passed, rehearsals are over, and the show has become a smash hit. Now Tomas is at the table and Xavier is her son—is *their* son. He’s asking to come live at home with her and Tomas. Tomas is making a toast. “As he lifted his glass I gazed at Tomas and then at Xavier, their faces soft and smiling in the light, united in the same expression, each an echo of the other.” When she hugs Xavier later, she remembers “what it was like to embrace him as a child, the animal scent of the skin at his neck.”

This disjuncture—a total reassembly of the terms of the story—goes unremarked upon and unexplained. The actor carries on in the same stream-of-consciousness style as before, acknowledging no memory of the terms of part one. Are we in a parallel universe? Are we in the same universe, and the narrator has somehow become psychologically destabilized? Is this a game?

As interactions among the actor, Tomas, and Xavier spiral into an ever more baroque and unsettling drama, another option suggests itself: Perhaps the three of them have embarked upon a shared performance, constructing a family where there was none, and doing it so faithfully that they never, not even in their own thoughts, break character. In a moment of strain, the actor realizes that all along, they

had been playing parts, and for a period—for as long as we understood our roles, for as long as we participated in the careful collusion that is a story, that is a family, told by one person to another person—the mechanism had held.

But the glamour between the actor and Xavier has dissipated, “as if it had suddenly occurred to both of us that his lines were insufficient, my characterization lacking, the entire plotline faulty and implausible.”

This is the revelatory moment that these novels of female alienation inevitably confront: the dissolving of any illusion that intimacy is possible, the failure of the narratives that unify a family, the crumbling of the relational identities (mother, wife) that have pinned her in place. Instead of floating uneasily through the world of the book, the narrator rises skyward, like a balloon, totally untethered.

The formal moves by which Kitamura delivers the actor to this place are unusual and interesting, yet the trajectory toward giddy estrangement is familiar—such a staple of all these plots that it arguably now defines a subgenre of the contemporary literary novel. Why has this become a “type” of fiction, and this narrator a kind of woman with whom the literary world is preoccupied?

AUDITION

Katie Kitamura

RIVERHEAD

The untethered narrator enacts, to a degree, a welcome fantasy: that the alienation generated inside long marriages and complex parent-child relationships—or intrinsic to living in a fraying social and political world—can both provide inspiration for profound art and also be left behind entirely. In the same way, this arc imagines that the body's burdens, demands, and constraints can be readily abandoned for an escape into pure consciousness. "I wondered also if that wasn't the point of a performance," the actor reflects:

that it preserved our innocence, that it allowed us to live with the hypocrisies of our desire ... We don't want to see actual pain or suffering or death, but its representation. Our awareness of the performance is what allows us to enjoy the emotion, to creep close to it and breathe in its atmosphere, performance allows this dangerous proximity.

But one can't—*women* especially can't—elude embodiment and entanglement in the end. Not in this country, not anywhere—not even in novels, however attenuated their characters become. We are ensnared in the real, as much as we might wish it were otherwise. The book's end finds the actor reassembling her marriage, hoping to make peace with Xavier, and attempting to create art from inside the confusing mess of a self that she could not escape. No matter how lost in her mind or subsumed in a fiction she becomes, she must return, over and over, to her own life, home, and marriage. The tethers don't actually vanish simply because she feels untethered.

She is once again up on a stage, speaking into a theater's waiting dark, following "a chain of words, sturdy as a cable, a voice that has been given to me." She is playing a character patterned after her, "a woman who can no longer distinguish between what is real and what is not real." But this space of performance—of generating something and someone new out of the material of herself—is where she feels the most real: "Here, it is possible to be two things at once," she recognizes. "Not a splitting of personality or psyche, but the natural superimposition of one mind on top of another mind." I won't give away who has written the monologue. And Kitamura pulls back, too, declining to forecast a next chapter of the actor's marriage or what new creation she might forge with her layered selves. But the question that could carry us beyond this spate of novels about the untethered woman beckons: What will this woman make once she's back in her body and back on the ground? *A*

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For the Duration

By Katie Ford

For Jay Hopler

The philosophers I love believed in things they didn't want to convert to; the isolation of the thought, of the shattering idea, lonelied them into a truth that would tremble too much were it carried from desk to window, its outermost manifestations too loosened, too far specified to seem much other than frailty now. And what I think they feared, or what I fear when tempted to tell you of something I saw, how it moved in me this way or that, what relief, what chiding need for a little sturdy peace this sight allowed, or that touch, and of what, or with whom, is that such confiding could draw down the paradox that although it has no mass, light does strike. What we don't say is bright as metal bells. And were my friend still alive, I'd want to make a meal for him, something not all that skilled, but not all that terrible, lit with forefire and the lateness of the hour. The giant peony erupting its skull from the center of the table would gather in us an enormity of conviction so thorough, we'd want to carry it elsewhere, the risk of its complete disheveling, its dropping open, requiring us to resist the second thought that wants so badly to follow the first, that conviction itself pulls behind it a mender's cart—, mustn't it?

Better just to look at what the ludicrous spring had done, not saying much of it, speaking instead of anything else, certainly least of all trying to outlive it by saying there will be more—not now, but come next spring.

Katie Ford is the author of four collections of poetry, including, most recently, If You Have to Go. She teaches at UC Riverside.

BOOKS

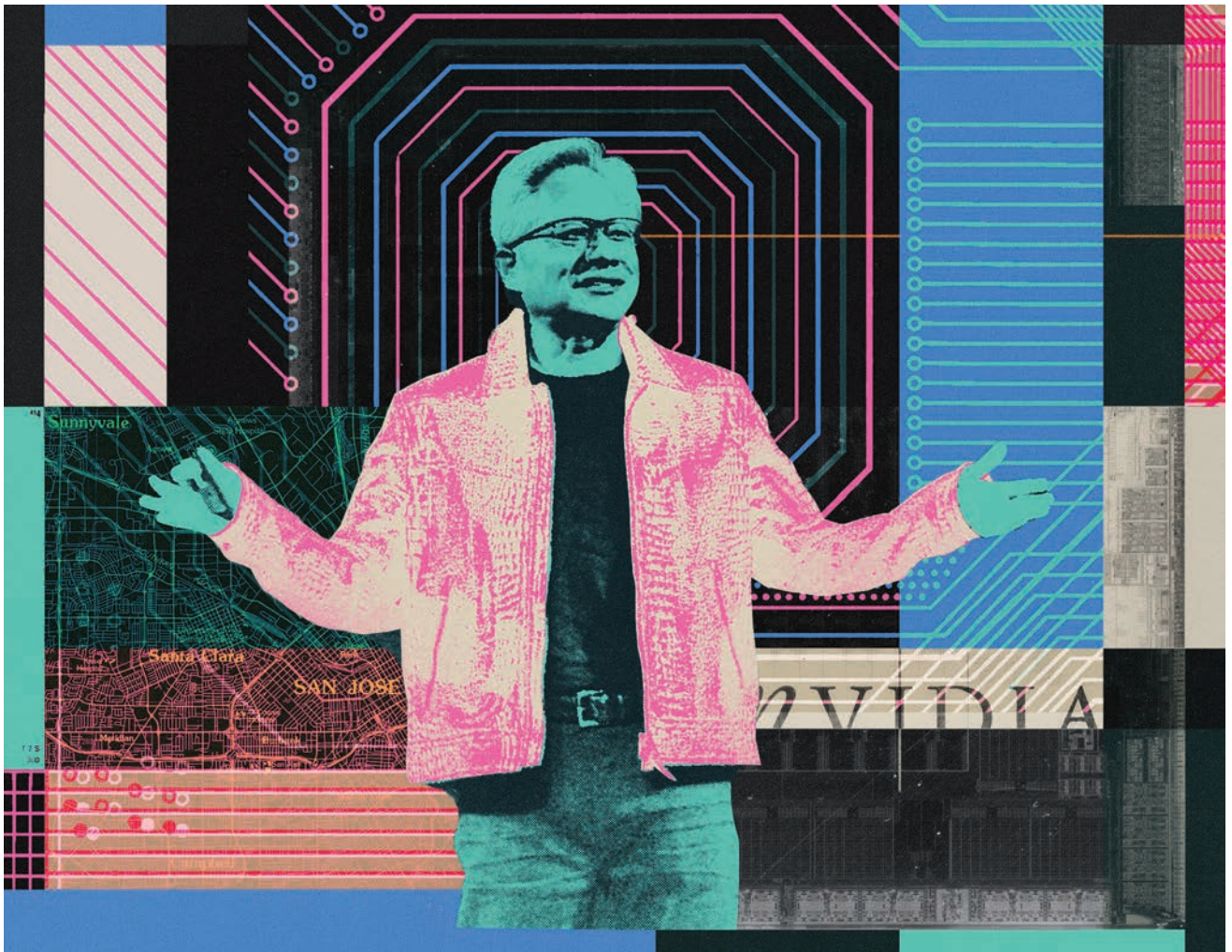
The New King of Tech

How Jensen Huang built Nvidia into a nearly \$3 trillion business

By James Surowiecki

Another day, another new AI large language model that's supposedly better than all previous ones. When I began writing this story, Elon Musk's xAI had just released Grok 3, which the company says performs better than its competitors against a wide range of benchmarks. As I was revising the article, Anthropic released Claude 3.7 Sonnet, which it says outperforms Grok 3. And by the time you read this, who knows? Maybe an entirely new LLM will have appeared. In January, after all, the AI world was temporarily rocked by the release of a low-cost, high-performance LLM from China called DeepSeek-R1. A month later, people were already wondering when DeepSeek-R2 would come out.

The competition among LLMs may be hard to keep track of, but for Nvidia, the company that designs the computer chips—or graphics-processing units (GPUs)—that many of these large language models have been trained on, it's also enormously lucrative. Nvidia, which, as of this writing, is the third-most-valuable company in the world (after Apple and Microsoft), was



PATRICK T. FALLON / AFP / GETTY; USGS PUBLICATIONS WAREHOUSE; RAWPIXEL

started three decades ago by engineers who wanted to make graphics cards for gamers. How it evolved into the company that is providing almost all the picks and shovels for the AI gold rush is the story at the core of Stephen Witt's *The Thinking Machine*. Framed as a biography of Jensen Huang, the only CEO Nvidia has ever had, the book is also something more interesting and revealing: a window onto the intellectual, cultural, and economic ecosystem that has led to the emergence of superpowerful AI.

That ecosystem's center, of course, is Silicon Valley, where Huang has spent most of his adult life. He was born in Taiwan, the son of a chemical engineer and a teacher. The family moved to Thailand when he was 5, and a few years later, his parents sent him and his older brother to the United States to escape political unrest. Eventually, his parents relocated to the U.S. as well, and Huang grew up in the suburbs of Portland, Oregon. In the early 1980s, after majoring in electrical engineering at Oregon State (which at the time didn't offer a computer-science major), he got a job at Advanced Micro Devices. The company—then the poor cousin of the chip giant Intel—was headquartered in Sunnyvale, California, near US 101, the highway that runs from San Jose to Stanford. Since then, Huang's career has unfolded within a five-mile radius of that office.

Huang soon left AMD for a firm called LSI Logic Corporation, which built software-design tools for chip architects, and then left LSI in 1993 to start Nvidia with the chip designers Curtis Priem and Chris Malachowsky: He was right on target “to run something by the age of thirty,” as he'd told them he aimed to do. The company was entering a crowded marketplace for developing graphics cards, the computer hardware that's used to render images and videos. Nvidia didn't have a real business plan, but Huang's boss at LSI recommended him to Sequoia Capital. One of the Valley's most important venture-capital firms, Sequoia helped the company get off the ground.

The graphics-card business was built on a perpetual upgrade cycle that forced developers into a never-ending game of performance improvement: A company was only as good as its last card. At various points in those early years, Nvidia was one misstep away from bankruptcy, and its unofficial motto became “Our company is thirty days from going out of business.”

One gets the impression that Huang liked it that way. He says his heart rate goes down under pressure, and to call him a relentless worker is to understate matters. “I should make sure that I'm sufficiently exhausted from working that no one can keep me up at night,” he once said. His reading diet features business books (which he devours). He has no obvious politics (or at least never discusses them). He's not a gaudy philanthropist. Though devoted to his family, he's also honest:

Nvidia's employees see Huang as “a prophet who made predictions about things. And then those things came true.”

“Lori,” he says of his wife, “did ninety percent of the parenting” of their two children. For the past 30 years, his life has clearly revolved around Nvidia.

HUANG'S RELUCTANCE to talk about himself makes him a challenging subject for Witt to bring to life. But Nvidia's employees, who almost all refer to Huang by his first name, are effusive. They “worship him—I believe they would follow him out of the window of a skyscraper if he saw a market opportunity there,” Witt writes. He later adds that they see Huang “not just as a leader but as a prophet. Jensen was a prophet who made predictions about things. And then those things came true.” He has a ferocious temper—referred to in the company as “the Wrath of Huang”—and is notorious for publicly reprimanding, at length, workers who have made mistakes or failed to deliver. But he rarely fires people and, in fact, inspires intense devotion. One of his key subordinates says, “I've been afraid of Jensen sometimes. But I also know that he loves me.”

Huang's greatest strength as a CEO has been his willingness to make big, risky bets when opportunities present themselves. The first of those came when he changed the architecture of Nvidia's chips from serial processing to parallel processing. Witt calls this move “a radical gamble,” because up to that point, no company had been able to make selling parallel-processing chips a viable business.

Serial computing is the way your computer's central processing unit works: It executes one instruction at a time, very, very fast. Witt likens it to telling one delivery van to drop off packages in sequence. By contrast, “Nvidia's parallel GPU acts more like a fleet of motorcycles spreading out across a city,” with the drivers delivering each package at roughly the same time. The coding required to make parallel processing work was much more complex, but if you could do it, you had access to enormous amounts of computing power.

Initially, all that power was used mainly to make computer games look and perform better. But then Huang took another big risk, remaking Nvidia's GPUs so that they could also process massive data sets, of the kind scientists might use. As one Nvidia executive puts it, “You have a video game card on one side, but it has a switch on it. So you flick that switch, and turn the card over, and suddenly the card becomes a supercomputer.”

The fascinating thing about this decision was that Huang didn't know who might want to buy a supercomputer in the guise of a graphics card, or how many such people were out there. He was just betting that if you make powerful tools available to people, they will find a use for them, and at a scale to justify the billions in investment.

That use—and it was big—turned out to be artificial intelligence, in particular neural-network technology.

As Witt notes, just as parallel processing was revolutionizing computing, a similar revolution was happening in AI research—though no one at Nvidia was paying attention to it. AI had gone through a series of boom-and-bust cycles as researchers tried different techniques, all of which ultimately failed. One of those methods was neural networks, which tried to mimic the human brain and allow the AI to evolve new rules of learning on its own. When you train these networks on massive databases of images and text, they can, over time, identify patterns and become smarter. Neural networks had long been peripheral, partly because they're black boxes (you can't explain how the AI is learning, or why it's doing what it's doing), and partly because the computing power required to make a high-performance neural network operate was out of reach.

Parallel-processing GPUs changed all that. Suddenly, AI researchers, if they could write software well enough to get the most out of the chips, had access to sufficient computing power to allow neural networks to evolve at an extraordinary pace. In 2009, Geoff Hinton, one of the godfathers of AI research, told a conference of machine-learning experts to go buy Nvidia cards. And in 2012, one of Hinton's students, Alex Krizhevsky, strung together two Nvidia GPUs and built and trained SuperVision (which he later renamed AlexNet). It was an AI model that could, for the first time, identify images with startling accuracy, largely because, in Witt's words, "the GPU produced in half a minute what would have taken an Intel machine an hour and what would have taken biology a hundred thousand years."

Huang did not immediately recognize the importance of what had happened. When he spoke at Nvidia's annual GPU Technology Conference in 2013, he never mentioned neural networks, talking instead about weather modeling and computer graphics. But a few months later, after an Nvidia researcher named Bryan Catanzaro made a direct pitch to him about the importance of AI, Huang had what Witt calls a "Damascene epiphany": He placed another big bet, essentially transforming Nvidia from a graphics company into an AI company over the course of a weekend. This bet was less risky than his earlier ones, because even though Nvidia had competitors who also built GPUs, none of them had really designed theirs to be used as supercomputers. Still, going all in was prescient—developments such as large language models had yet to take off—and is what has turned Nvidia into a nearly \$3 trillion company.

That weekend feels as if it were the compressed culmination of Nvidia's story, which isn't empirically true. The 12 years that followed have been incredibly eventful, and incredibly profitable, as the company has kept improving its chips, servicing the insatiable appetite for computing power created by the

emergence of LLMs, and fending off competitors (many of whom are Nvidia's customers, now building their own chips). But the foundations for that pivot, and all that ensued, were already in place when Huang decided to act on his AI insight.

THOSE FOUNDATIONS, *The Thinking Machine* makes clear, were not laid by Nvidia alone. Indeed, among Witt's key contributions is to show that Nvidia's success can't be understood apart from the culture and economy of Silicon Valley (and of tech more generally). Take the simple fact of free labor markets. One catalyst of the Valley's success, as the scholar AnnaLee Saxenian has famously argued, was a freewheeling, risk-taking culture that encouraged workers to leave companies for competitors or to start their own firms. And that depended, in part, on the fact that noncompete clauses were unenforceable in California. Nvidia's history exemplifies this: not just Huang's mobility, but that of his early hires as well. Later, one of the company's favorite tactics was to poach its competitors' best engineers and coders—bad form, perhaps, but a good business tactic.

Nvidia also benefited from the research investments made by the government and universities. One of the crucial breakthroughs in unlocking the power of parallel computing, for instance, was an open-source programming language called Brook, which a gamer and Stanford graduate student named Ian Buck developed with a group of researchers in 2003, relying on a Defense Department grant. Alex Krizhevsky and his partner Ilya Sutskever (who later helped start OpenAI) were grad students at the University of Toronto when Krizhevsky devised AlexNet. The contest in which the model demonstrated its accuracy, the ImageNet challenge, was designed by a Stanford computer scientist named Fei-Fei Li. And as that lineup demonstrates (Krizhevsky and Sutskever were born in the Soviet Union, Li in China), immigration has been central to the history of not just Nvidia but AI generally.

Practical economic features of the ecosystem mattered as well. The most important was the rise of independent chip foundries: factories that serve many different companies and make chips on order. Nvidia's partnership with Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company, the best-known of these factories, allowed it to become a dominant player by focusing on designing and writing software for its chips; Nvidia didn't have to invest in actual production, which would have required prohibitive amounts of capital.

Finally, Nvidia benefited from patience, and its board's willingness to put long-term thinking ahead of short-term profits. Because of the gaming market, Nvidia was almost always a profitable company, but its stock price dropped nearly 90 percent two

THE THINKING
MACHINE:
JENSEN HUANG,
NVIDIA, AND
THE WORLD'S
MOST COVETED
MICROCHIP

Stephen Witt

VIKING

different times; it didn't appreciate for a full 10 years after the dot-com bubble burst, while the company was spending billions turning its graphics cards into supercomputers. One familiar indictment of American capitalism is that it's too short-term-focused. In the tech industry, at least, the trajectory of Nvidia (and many other companies) suggests that's a bum rap.

To be sure, Huang himself was central to Nvidia's success: He has run the company essentially on his own (as Witt puts it, he has had "no right-hand man or woman, no majordomo, no second-in-command"), and he's made the bold moves. What's more, he seems to have done so without a trace of doubt. Lots of people in the AI industry—including the people training LLMs—have raised concerns about AI's dangers, but Huang is not one of them. For him, Witt writes, "AI is a pure force for progress." Huang does not fret that it may eat all of our jobs, or replace artists, or go rogue and decide to wipe out humanity.

In fact, when Witt, stricken with existential anxiety about how AI will change the world, asks Huang whether some of these concerns might be worth pondering, he is subjected to one of his legendary tirades:

"Is it going to destroy jobs?" Huang asked, his voice crescendoing with anger. "Are calculators going to destroy math? That conversation is so old, and I'm so, so tired of it," he said. "I don't want to talk about it anymore ... We make the marginal cost of things zero, generation after generation after generation, and this exact conversation happens every single time!"

You could write this off as an example of Upton Sinclair's adage "It is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends upon his not understanding it!" But the fact that Huang talks about AI in terms of its impact on "marginal costs" shouldn't be reduced to mere opportunism: It fits right in with the single-minded focus on performance that has driven him from Nvidia's beginning. Witt at one point calls Huang a "visionary inventor." The vision Huang has been in thrall to, though, seems to be less about grand future goals, and more about tools—about making the fastest, most powerful chips as efficiently as possible. "Existential risk" has no place in that vision. Huang's unapologetic stance on AI is bracing in its way, especially in contrast with the public hand-wringing of many AI chieftains, fretting about the dangers of their LLMs while continuing to develop them. But he is in effect making the biggest, riskiest bet ever—not just for Nvidia, but for all of us. Let's hope he's right. *A*

James Surowiecki is a contributing writer at The Atlantic and the author of The Wisdom of Crowds.

Chickadee

By Stanley Plumly

Margaret remembering in summer how they'd fly into her hand, black-capped, black-masked, bobbing one birdseed at a time—I remember in cold Amherst how they'd fill the lonely feeder just outside the kitchen window, especially when the ice mixed in with snow would slap the double glass, shake it a little, and start to sing. One wearies of the sublime, the great deep thing, the red-tailed kiting hawk sliding down the sky to make the kill, the sky itself changing on its own, depth of feeling depth of field. Margaret sitting still, pieces of the sun falling in the shadows all around her, while my bright chickadees are braced against the wind, feathers fluffed, each of them so small I could wrap one in my fist to keep it warm, alive, then suddenly gone. All winter in the snow depths just outside you live in separations made of glass—I'd never have the patience to hold out my hand and wait out a bird, regardless of how beautiful the weather.

Stanley Plumly (1939–2019) was the author of numerous books of poetry and prose. His posthumous collection Collected Poems will be published in August.



BOOKS

What to Make of Miracles

In a new book, Elaine Pagels searches for the narrative origins of Jesus's most wondrous acts.

By Judith Shulevitz

How should we understand miracles? Many people in the near and distant past have believed in them; many still do. I believe in miracles too, in my way, reconciling rationalism and inklings of a preternatural reality by means of “radical amazement.” That’s a core concept of the great modern Jewish philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel. Miracles, insofar as Heschel would agree with my calling them that—it’s not one of his words—do not defy the natural order. God dwells in earthly things. Me, I find God in what passes for the mundane: my family, Schubert sonatas, the mystery of innate temperament. A corollary miracle is that we have been blessed with a capacity for awe, which allows us “to perceive in the world intimations of the divine, to sense in small things the beginning of infinite significance,” Heschel writes.

Every so often, though, I wonder whether radical amazement demands enough of us. Heschel would never have gone as far as Thomas Jefferson, who simply took a penknife to his New Testament and sliced out all the miracles, because they offended his Enlightenment-era conviction that faith should not contradict reason. His Jesus was a man of moral principles stripped of higher powers. But a faith poor in miracles is an untested faith. At the core of Judaism and Christianity lie divine interventions that rip a hole in the known universe and change the course of history. Jesus would not have become Christ the Savior had he not risen from his tomb. Nor would Jews be Jews had Moses not brought down God’s Torah from Mount Sinai.

Those who wish to engage with religious scriptures are not relieved of the obligation to wrestle with how miracles should be understood. Do we take them literally or symbolically? Are they straightforward reports of events that occurred in the world, perhaps ones that are no longer possible, because God no longer acts in it? Or are they encoded accounts of things that happened on some other, less palpable level, but were no less real for that?

In her book *Miracles and Wonder: The Historical Mystery of Jesus*, Elaine Pagels asks different questions about New Testament miracles. She is less interested in whether Jesus performed them than in what accounts for their power. Her larger quest is to understand the enduring appeal of Jesus to so many people “as a living presence, even as someone they know intimately.” Pagels, now 82, is a historian of early Christianity who also writes about her own efforts to find an experience of Christianity, a sense of intermittent grace, consonant with her experience of extreme loss: Her first son died at 6 of a rare disease; her husband died in a hiking accident shortly thereafter. She has spent a lifetime thinking about the multiple dimensions of the gospel truth.

What problems did the miracle stories solve; what new vistas did solving them open; what religious function did they serve?

Pagels’s *The Gnostic Gospels* (1979) is a liberal theologian’s cult classic—it has gone through more than 30 printings. Though not her first work of scholarship, it marked the beginning of a long career as a gifted explainer of abstruse ideas. Her overarching ambition has been to restore a lost heritage of theological diversity to the wider world. *The Gnostic Gospels* reintroduced forgotten writings of repudiated Jesus sects, produced over the course of the first and second centuries, before a welter of competing perceptions of Jesus’s story were reduced to a single dogma, codified in the apostolic creed, and before the New Testament was a fixed canon. Sounding faintly Buddhist to the modern ear, those writings interpreted miracles as symbolic descriptions of real spiritual revelations and transformations, available only to those with access to secret knowledge (gnosis). “Do not suppose that resurrection is an apparition,” one gnostic teacher wrote in his *Treatise on Resurrection*. “It is something real. Instead, one ought to maintain that the world is an apparition.”

The subtitle of *Miracles and Wonder* is slightly misleading: *The Historical Mystery of Jesus* seems to imply that Pagels will revisit the old debate over whether Jesus existed. That he did is settled doctrine, at least among historians. Rather, she takes us back to what biblical scholars call the *Sitz im Leben*, the “scene of composition,” in an effort to reconstruct where miracle narratives came from and how they evolved. Using the tools of the historian as well as the literary critic, she tries to unearth the writers’ concerns and influences, and she considers miracles from a bluntly instrumentalist perspective: What problems did they solve; what new vistas did solving them open; what religious function did they serve?

AMONG THEIR other uses, miracles helped the evangelists overcome challenges to the authority of the Christ story. For all his enigmatic teachings and at times mystifying behavior, Jesus the man is not that hard to explain: He was one among many Jewish preachers and healers prophesying apocalypse in a land ravaged by Roman conquest and failed uprisings. But Jesus the man-god was more difficult for outsiders—Roman leaders, Greco-Roman philosophers, other Jews—to accept. They asked a lot of hostile questions. Why worship a Messiah whose mission had apparently failed? Didn’t his ignominious end—crucifixion was Rome’s punishment for renegades and slaves—contradict his claim to be divine? The Romans were incredulous that anyone would glorify a Jew. To the Jewish elite, he was a rube from the countryside.

Mark, the first known writer of a Christian gospel, could have produced a traditional hagiography. Instead, wishing to publicize Jesus’s singular power—to

spread the “good news”—he appears to have invented the gospel genre, the Greek biographical novella as a work of evangelical witness; the subsequent chroniclers followed his lead. Writing around the time of the destruction of the Second Temple, in 70 C.E., he gave Jesus’s story cosmic dimensions. Now it was the tale of “God’s spirit contending against Satan, in a world filled with demons,” in Pagels’s words. Mark may have been recording oral stories developed by Jesus’s followers to convey perceptions of real experiences, but Mark, and they, would also have wanted to defend their certainties against the skeptics.

Pagels isn’t trying to shock the faithful. Reading sacred texts as the products of history, rather than the word of God, has been standard practice in biblical scholarship for more than a century. Her book demonstrates that the *Wissenschaftliche*, or “scientific approach” (the pioneering Bible scholars were German), doesn’t have to be reductive; indeed, critical scrutiny may make new sense of difficult texts and yield new revelations. As Pagels portrays them, the evangelists were men of creative genius, using their defense of Jesus as an occasion to draft the outlines of a new world religion. “What I find most astonishing about the gospel stories,” she writes, “is that Jesus’s followers managed to take what their critics saw as the most damning evidence against their Messiah—his crucifixion—and transform it into evidence of his divine mission.”

In some cases, recontextualizing the old stories gives them an unexpected poignancy. A good example is her analysis of the virgin birth. It yields a less sanctified Mary, but by highlighting darker currents in the text perhaps obscured by tradition, Pagels imbues the young mother with a haunting sadness. We think of the virgin birth as a basic element of Christian faith, yet only two of the four canonical Gospels refer to it: Matthew and Luke. Mark doesn’t mention Jesus’s birth and says little about his family background. When we first encounter Jesus, he’s a full-grown Messiah being baptized in the wilderness. John’s Gospel has a bit more on Jesus’s family, but no birth scene. When we first see Jesus in the Gospel of John, he is already both the Son of God and a man—that is to say, not an infant.

Matthew and Luke, by contrast, not only depict Jesus’s birth, but herald it at length. They supply genealogies that stretch back to King David, the founder of Israel’s dynasty, giving Jesus a lineage commensurate with his stature. Matthew stresses royalty, prefacing the birth with heavenly portents; afterward, Magi bear royal gifts to a future king. Luke’s version is more rustic but heightens the dramatic tension between Jesus’s humble background and his divinity. Joseph and Mary are turned away from an inn. Mary gives birth in a barn, and shepherds worship him. Both feature an Annunciation, in which an angel appears

and announces that Mary, a virgin who is engaged to Joseph, is to have a son by God. In Matthew, the angel comes to Joseph, who has already discovered that Mary is with child, and advises him to marry her—he was planning to send her away before she disgraced them both. Luke’s angel goes directly to Mary.

Why did Matthew and Luke add all this material? Among the many possible answers, Pagels focuses on the likelihood that after Jesus’s death, talk began to circulate that he was the illegitimate son of an unwed mother. The second-century Greek philosopher Celsus used the charge to discredit the Gospels. In an anti-Christian polemic citing Jewish sources, he writes, “Is it not true . . . that you fabricated the story of your birth from a virgin to quiet rumors about the true and unsavory circumstances of your origins?”

That Mark himself seems to have called Jesus’s paternity into question complicates matters. When his Jesus comes home to Nazareth to preach at the local synagogue, his former neighbors mock him for his wild ideas. “Where did this man get all this?” they sneer. “What miracles has he been doing? Isn’t this the carpenter, *the son of Mary*, the brother of James, Joses, Judas, and Simon?” (The italics are Pagels’s.) Mark’s readers, who knew how Jewish patronymics worked, would have understood what the villagers were throwing in Jesus’s face. They would not have said “son of Mary” if they’d known the name of Jesus’s father—even if his father was dead.

Matthew and Luke excise that “son of Mary” and make Jesus not just legitimate but doubly legitimate. His mother acquires both a husband, Joseph, and a father, God, for her child. Her marriage and Jesus’s divine paternity purge the implied stain of wantonness. And yet disturbing hints of sexuality still run beneath the surface of the evangelists’ Gospels. In Luke’s Annunciation, after the angel Gabriel delivers his message, Mary asks, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” Gabriel replies, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the Power of the Most High will overshadow you.”

Pagels doesn’t cite this exchange or address the disconcerting aggressiveness of “come upon you” and “overshadow you,” but she does look closely at Mary’s response: “I am the Lord’s slave; so be it.” This is Pagels’s translation; the word she gives as slave, *doule*, is in this context more often translated as “servant” or “handmaid.” Soon after, Luke has Mary, thrilled about the pregnancy, burst into song. But her first response, Pagels says, sounds more resigned than joyous: “An enslaved woman was required to obey a master’s will, even when that meant bearing his child, as it often did.” At a minimum, “a girl with no sexual experience might be startled and dismayed to hear that she is about to become pregnant, given the potential embarrassment and shame she might suffer.”

MIRACLES AND
WONDER:
THE HISTORICAL
MYSTERY OF
JESUS

Elaine Pagels

DOUBLEDAY

Pagels goes so far as to conjecture how Mary got pregnant, a thesis very much based on circumstantial evidence. Around the time of Jesus's birth, tens of thousands of Roman soldiers marched into Judea to suppress an insurrection, a brutal campaign recorded by the Jewish historian Josephus. As they fanned out through the countryside to hunt down rebels, they kidnapped and raped any women they could find. Pagels asks, "Was Mary, as a young girl from a humble rural family," one of those women? "We have no way of knowing," she adds, though she is struck by one coincidence. Unfriendly rabbinic sources from the first few centuries after Jesus's death cited slanderous gossip claiming that Mary was promiscuous and had a lover who was a soldier named Panthera, and that he was Jesus's father. Modern scholars have found the gravestone of a soldier with that name, said to have served in Judea until 9 C.E.; Pagels wonders whether he could have been one of those rapists. Thinking of Mary as a victim of sexual assault is horrifying; it feels sacrilegious. But that she gave birth to her son in an age of cataclysmic violence does make his ultimate triumph seem even more miraculous.

An appreciation of context also yields a new reading of the Passion of the Christ. This account of Christ's trial and torture in the days leading up to the crucifixion, which shows the Jews baying for his death, has been thought by some to have contributed to centuries of anti-Semitism. In Pagels's version, the evangelists are motivated less by sheer hatred of Jews than by the need to solve some difficult theological and political problems. What leads them to demonize the Jewish priests and elders, even as they turn Pontius Pilate, Judea's Roman governor, into an honorable man who perceives Jesus's innocence and is loath to sentence him?

That the leader of a notoriously cruel occupying power would have shown such compassion for a militant rebel strains credulity and defies the historical record. Pilate was infamous for his "greed, violence, robbery, assault, frequent executions without trial, and endless savage ferocity," according to the first-century Jewish philosopher Philo, among many others. "I find no simple answer" to the conundrum of the revisionist Pilate, Pagels writes. But she has her theories. For one thing, by acknowledging Jesus's innocence, the Pilate of the Gospels safeguards Jesus from the charge that he died a criminal.

A good Pilate is implausible though not impossible—that is to say, not miraculous—but he plays a crucial role in the larger miracle of the crucifixion, the transfiguration of a degrading death into the salvation of all mankind. Another reason for the evangelists to absolve Pilate of blame, according to Pagels, would have been to protect themselves. The Roman authorities persecuted Christians harshly, subjecting them to torture

and deaths even more gruesome than crucifixion. To vilify a high Roman official was to invite retribution. As the Christians grew more Gentile, the Gospel writers made Pilate more sympathetic and the Jews less so. The writers could not have foreseen that their scapegoating of the Jews would have such lethal consequences and for so long.

I should stress that the Christian miracle narratives have multiple sources. Most important, they interpret other texts. Sure that Jesus was the Messiah, his followers scoured the Jewish Bible for prophecies that foretold his coming. The virgin birth elaborates on a verse from Isaiah that could be construed as predicting it: A virgin "shall conceive, and bear a son." ("Virgin" is a famous mistranslation. The Hebrew word is *almah*, or "young woman." But Matthew would probably have been reading the Hebrew Bible in Greek, where the word appears as *parthenos*, "virgin.") Drawing on existing holy writ was in no way scandalous. Even as Christians moved away from Judaism, the evangelists continued to work within a Jewish scriptural tradition that expected later writers to build on earlier ones. The presence of the old texts in the new ones served as validation. In Matthew and Luke's view—and in the view of Christians throughout the ages—Isaiah proved them right.

What do biblical miracles do for believers today? In Pagels's final chapter, she visits Christian communities around the world, many of them poor and subject to political oppression, to explore some of the ways in which the story of Jesus continues to offer comfort and inspiration. In the Philippines, for example, she finds the Bicolanos, Catholics living in remote villages, who worship a syncretistic Jesus inflected with Filipino tradition; they are particularly focused on Easter week, because to them, Jesus represents the promise of a glorious afterlife.

Miracle stories also have applications outside a strictly religious context. They are indispensable fictions, tales to live by. They re-enchant the world. Or so I feel. I read the Bible, Christian as well as Jewish, not for spiritual nourishment—or not for what is generally considered spiritual nourishment—but to be reminded that the universe once held more surprises than it does now and that hoping when all seems hopeless is not unreasonable, at least from the vantage point of eternity. Miracles are useful insofar as we take their poetry seriously. We are talking about encounters with the Almighty. Human language falters in the face of the indescribable, which reaches us only through the figures of speech we are able to understand. *A*

We think of the virgin birth as a basic element of Christian faith, yet only two of the four canonical Gospels refer to it.

Judith Shulevitz is a contributing writer at The Atlantic and the author of The Sabbath World: Glimpses of a Different Order of Time.

ESSAY

The American

*How Leonard Bernstein
won over Europe*

By David Denby

Leonard Bernstein's way with orchestras that wouldn't give him what he wanted was usually imploring, even beseeching. He was *disappointed*—the musicians were not so much failing him, the conductor, as failing the composer, failing the music. But on one occasion, his disappointment turned to anger. In 1972, he was working with the Vienna Philharmonic on Gustav Mahler's Fifth Symphony. Mahler had



been the head of the Vienna Court Opera and had conducted the Philharmonic from 1897 to 1907.

This was their own music—and they were holding back. Bernstein was rehearsing the stormy first movement of the Fifth Symphony. In his own score of the work, now lodged at the New York Philharmonic Archives, he had written, before the opening movement, “Rage—hostility—sublimation by Mahler *and* heaven.” And then, “Angry bitter sorrow mixed with sad comforting lullabies—rocking a corpse.” But he was getting neither rage nor consolation from the Vienna Philharmonic.

Sighing and shrugging, irritably flipping pages of the score back and forth, he finally burst out (in German): “You can play the notes, I know that. It’s Mahler that’s missing!” The orchestra had arrived at the anguished climax toward the end of the movement, and the strings—by habit sweet and lustrous—were not playing with the harsh intensity that he wanted. “I’m aware that it’s only a rehearsal. But what are we rehearsing?” It was an implied threat to walk out.

Bernstein later reported hearing grumbling from the ranks. “*Scheisse Musik*.” Shit music. *Scheisse Musik* was Jewish music. Mahler was a Bohemian Jew. “They thought it was long and blustery and needlessly complicated and heart-on-sleeve and overemotional,” Bernstein said later in a documentary interview about his relations with the orchestra. The Philharmonic, after banning Mahler during the Nazi period, had played his great, tangled, tormented later symphonies only a few times. The orchestra didn’t know the music; the musicians didn’t love it.

The moment is startling because this was hardly Bernstein’s initial encounter with the esteemed Vienna Philharmonic. He had first conducted the orchestra in 1966, and with enormous success (bouquets were flung; champagne was poured), so his wrath carried a hint of betrayal, as if to say, “We are squandering a lot of hard work.” Turning Mahler into a universal classic—not just a long-winded composer of emotionally extreme symphonies—was part of Bernstein’s mission, part of his understanding of the 20th century, and essential to his identity as an American Jew. In their prejudice

against Mahler, which was both racial and musical, the Germans and Austrians at the core of classical tradition had torn out of themselves a vital source of self-knowledge as well as musical glory. Destroying Mahler made it easier for them to become Nazis. Bernstein was determined to restore what they had rejected.

He was proud of America’s musical achievements—proud of the work of the composers Charles Ives and Aaron Copland, and perhaps even prouder of the enduring native talent for popular Broadway entertainment, which, in 1972, was largely a Jewish creation. He had ennobled that tradition himself with the galvanizing *West Side Story* and the brilliant potpourri

Bernstein needed the Vienna Philharmonic, and it needed him too. In fact, after the war, the orchestra needed him desperately.

that is *Candide*, an homage to Voltaire’s satire and to European operatic styles, shaped into the greatest American operetta. Ever eager to break down the barriers between classical and popular music, he put elements of jazz into his work. In the ’20s, Europeans had certainly become conscious of American jazz, and Bernstein wanted to enlarge that recognition; he wanted to join America to world culture, even world history.

It turned out that he needed the Vienna Philharmonic, and it needed him too. In fact, after the war, the orchestra needed him desperately. That angry rehearsal was a cultural watershed. Bernstein demanded that Vienna, and Europe in general, acknowledge what both America and Mahler meant to the 20th century—the century that the Europeans had played such a dreadful part in and that the Americans had helped liberate from infamy. An American Jew had become the

necessary instrument in the New World’s reforming embrace of the disgraced Old.

THE CHILD of Ukrainian immigrants, Bernstein grew up in suburban Boston, an irrepressibly musical little boy who loved listening to the radio and beat out rhythms on the windowsills at home. He didn’t have a piano until he was 10. His father, Sam, notoriously refused to pay for piano lessons, but when he finally relented, Lenny accelerated to full speed, working with the best piano teachers in the Boston area, including the well-known German pianist Heinrich Gebhard. In the summers, he stayed at the family cottage in Sharon, Massachusetts. As a teenager there, Lenny mounted a production of *Carmen* in which he played the temptress, wearing a red wig and a black mantilla, and a tumultuous *Mikado* in which he sang the part of Nanki-poo.

Let me make a comparison with a renowned European musician. In 1908, Herbert von Karajan was born in Salzburg, Mozart’s birthplace. There were at least two pianos at home, and Karajan played through Haydn and Beethoven symphonies with his family. On special evenings, string and woodwind players among the family’s Salzburg friends would assemble at the house for chamber music. When he was 6, Karajan took classes at the Mozarteum, the school that preserved the Austro-German musical legacy. He spent his summers with his family on a stunning mountain lake, the Grondlsee, 60 kilometers east of Salzburg.

The contrast makes an American happy: on the one side, tradition, serious public performance, luxury; on the other, émigré teachers, amateur musicales and family shenanigans, casual summers in the modest countryside. Yet what Boston and its environs had to offer in the 1930s, however scrappy, was enough to bring out Lenny’s talent. Karajan was a prodigy; Bernstein was a genius.

On November 14, 1943, the 25-year-old American conducted the New York Philharmonic without rehearsal; the concert was nationally broadcast on CBS Radio, and Bernstein was famous by the next day. In the following years, he conducted all over the country while working

Page 89: Leonard Bernstein practices with the Vienna Philharmonic at the Viennese Musikverein in 1967.

Right: Bernstein at 25, rehearsing his *Jeremiah* symphony with the New York Philharmonic in 1944.



on his own classical compositions, including his Symphony No. 1 (*Jeremiah*), based on biblical texts. By the time he was 40, in 1958, he had created the Broadway successes *On the Town* and *Wonderful Town*, in addition to *Candide* and *West Side Story*, as well as some of his enduring classical scores. In that same year, he took over as music director of the New York Philharmonic.

Initially, there was a lot of excitement in the press—the first American at the helm of one of the great orchestras! But the tone soon became hostile, even acrimonious. Audiences loved Bernstein, but his full-bodied manner on the podium—arms, head, hips, shoulders, eyebrows, groin in motion—caused embarrassment and even anger. The critic and composer Virgil Thomson, writing in the *New York Herald Tribune*, complained of “corybantic choreography” and “the miming of facial expression of uncontrolled emotional states.” In the arts, embarrassment may be the super-ego of emotion: This liberated Jewish body dismayed not only Thomson but the fastidious descendants of German Jews in New York, especially Harold C. Schonberg, the chief music critic of *The New York Times* starting in 1960, who gave Bernstein terrible reviews for years. In the eyes of Schonberg and others, Bernstein was hammy, exaggeratedly expressive, undignified: He

was Broadway; he was show business; he lacked seriousness. The ecstasies of classical music are supposed to be, well, clean. But here was this lusciously handsome young man, a little overripe, leading orchestras in Haydn and Beethoven.

I WENT to a lot of Philharmonic concerts in Bernstein’s early days as music director, and I heard some things that were under-rehearsed and overdriven, a bit coarse, without the discipline and mastery that were so extraordinary in his later years. But the playing was always vital, the programs exciting. And one concert, given on April 2, 1961, changed my life. It was a performance of Mahler’s Symphony No. 3, a monster with six movements, 95 minutes of outrageously stentorian swagger and odd, folkish nostalgia, capped by a lengthy adagio marked *Langsam. Rubevoll. Empfunden* (“Slowly. Tranquil. Deeply Felt”). Bernstein took the adagio at a very slow tempo indeed, considerably slower than did many subsequent conductors, who, I daresay, would have had trouble holding it together at that speed. But the tempo wasn’t remarkable in itself. What was remarkable was the sustained tension and momentum of the movement and the sense of improvisation within it—the slight hesitations; the phrases explored, caressed; and also the singing tone of the

entire orchestra at those impossibly slow speeds, all of it leading to the staggering climax at the end.

The audience erupted into applause, and I remember thinking (I was 17), *Anyone who doesn’t know that this man is a great musician can’t hear a thing*—or something like that. (The Mahler Third was recorded within the next few days at the Manhattan Center, on West 34th Street. What I heard then, you can hear now on a Sony CD and a variety of streaming services.) After the concert, I went home shaken. That last movement opened gates of sensation and feeling that I had never experienced before, at least not outside of dreams. I was a very repressed and frightened teenager, and the music granted permission, a kind of encouragement to come out of myself and meet the world. The word *awakening* sounds banal, but I don’t know how else to describe what happened. Bernstein had that effect on many people. But it took his first engagement with the Vienna Philharmonic to awaken New York’s critics, which became one of the great ironies of American musical taste.

DURING THAT first stint in Vienna, in 1966, Bernstein conducted Verdi’s *Falstaff* (at the Staatsoper, the orchestra’s sister organization, formerly known as the Vienna

Court Opera). With the Philharmonic, he also did some Mozart, along with Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde*, the orchestral work for two voices that was in fact part of its repertoire. (It was the convoluted and violent later symphonies—masterpieces, all—that the orchestra resisted.) The ovations in 1966 went on forever, in a startling kind of release that even Bernstein, who certainly enjoyed acclaim, thought was a bit curious. "I'm a sort of Jewish hero who has replaced Karajan," he wrote to his wife, Felicia. And a couple of weeks later, making a report to his parents:

You never know if the public that is screaming *bravo* for you might contain someone who 25 years ago might have shot me dead. But it's better to forgive, and if possible, forget ... What they call the "Bernstein wave" that has swept Vienna has produced some strange results; all of a sudden it's fashionable to be Jewish.

The reference to Karajan was far from casual. The prodigious child of Salzburg had become a dominant figure in European classical music. In 1954, when he and Bernstein were both working at La Scala, they talked late into the night. Lenny wrote to Felicia: "I became real good friends with von Karajan, whom you would (and will) adore. My first Nazi." (Karajan had joined the party in 1935 and remained in it until the end of the war.)

Bernstein's way of appropriating ex-Nazis has elements of both seduction and triumph. When he went to Vienna in 1966, he had to deal with the repulsive truth that a man named Helmut Wobisch, a former trumpet player in the Philharmonic, was now the manager of the Philharmonic. Wobisch had worked for the SS during the war, and was likely involved in expelling Jewish members from the orchestra. Bernstein referred to him in public as "my dearest Nazi," and there are photos of Wobisch happily greeting the maestro at the Vienna airport.

Bernstein made grim jokes, but he wanted to woo these men away from their past, their guilt; he would win them over, asserting not only Jewish talent but Jewish forgiveness. He and Karajan developed a



Gustav Mahler during his directorship of the Vienna Court Opera

friendly rivalry. On different occasions, when they were working in Vienna and Salzburg at the same time, they took turns upstaging each other in public. One was a perfectionist who gave performances of stunning power that sometimes became smoothed out and even bland through repetition; the other was full of surprises—always discovering things, a sensibility always in the making. For years, they represented two versions of musical culture: the authoritarian essence of the Old World and the democratic essence of the Jewish-immigrant New World.

That an American conductor of any kind was enjoying acclaim in Europe was itself cause for wonder. From Bernstein's point of view, the odds had always been stacked against him. Some years after that 1966 triumph, he wrote the distinguished Austrian conductor Karl Böhm:

You were born in the lap of Mozart, Wagner and Strauss, with full title to their domain; whereas I was born in the lap of Gershwin and Copland, and my title in the kingdom of European music was, so to speak, that of an adopted son.

But by 1972, the positions of son and elders were reversed, and Bernstein's tone as he fought the Vienna Philharmonic in that rehearsal of the Mahler Fifth was anything but abashed. Bernstein did not, of course, walk out of the turbulent session. He stayed, and he drove the Vienna

Philharmonic hard. An American Jew would make them play this music.

In a 1984 video lecture called "The Little Drummer Boy," Bernstein insisted that Mahler's genius depended on combining two laughably incompatible musical strains—the strengths of the Austro-German symphonic line and the awkward and homely sounds of shtetl life recalled from the composer's youth in Bohemia. The exultant and tragic horn calls in the symphonies and in *Das Lied von der Erde*—were these not the potent echoes of the shofar summoning the congregation on High Holidays? The banal village tunes that Mahler altered into sinister mock vulgarities—did these not recall the raffish klezmer bands, the wandering musicians who played at shtetl weddings?

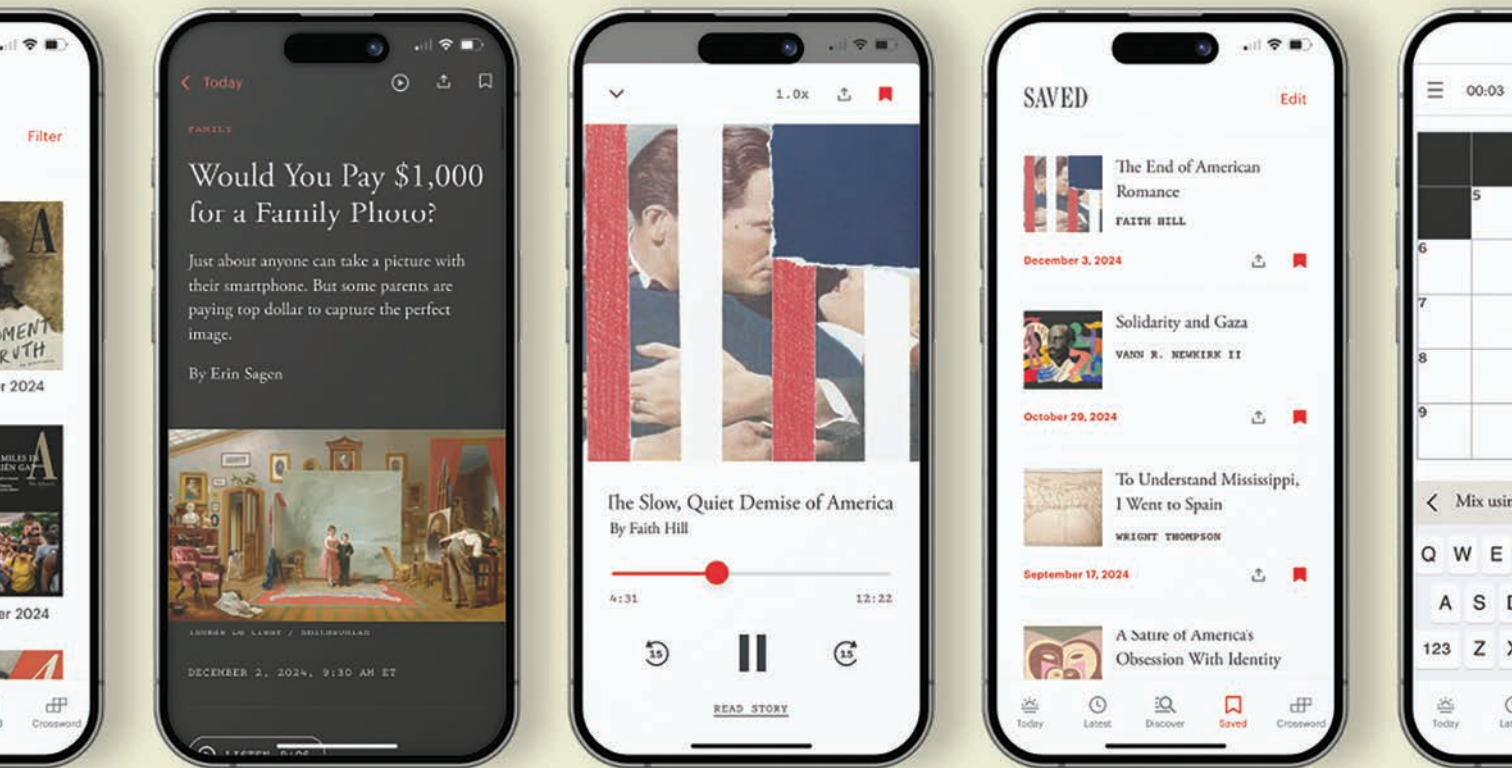
The ambiguity, the exaltation and sarcastic self-parody, the gloom alternating with a yearning for simplicity and even for redemption—all of that reflected the split consciousness of Jews who could never belong and turned revenge upon themselves. In a remark that Bernstein often quoted, Mahler said, "I am thrice homeless. As a native of Bohemia in Austria, as an Austrian among Germans, and as a Jew throughout all the world. Everywhere an intruder, never welcomed."

Mahler was demanding and short-tempered, and shame—the shame of being a Jew—may have been an element in his volatile disposition; Bernstein felt that it was. Leading orchestras in London, Tel Aviv, and Berlin, as well as in Vienna and New York, he performed the symphonies and song cycles with a violence and tenderness that ended any further talk of shame. By advocating for Mahler as powerfully as Bernstein did, he helped bring the Jewish contribution to Austro-German culture back into the lives of Europeans—and perhaps also a range of emotions, including access to the bitter ironies of self-knowledge that had been eliminated from consciousness during the Nazi period. Mahler died in 1911, but Bernstein believed that Mahler *knew*; he understood in advance what the 20th century would bring of violence and harrowing guilt. "Marches like a heart attack," Bernstein wrote in his score of Mahler's apocalyptic Sixth Symphony. The tangled assertion and self-annihilation, the

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vaunted hopes and apocalyptic grief—that was our modern truth. It was all there in the music.

In 2018, the Jewish Museum Vienna mounted an exhibit called “Leonard Bernstein: A New Yorker in Vienna.” The accompanying catalog featured the words “Bernstein in Vienna became the medium through which a prosperous democratic German-speaking cultural community could display its newly found post-war liberal tastes.” Yes, exactly. The ovations for Bernstein went on forever in part because Vienna was celebrating its release from infamy. Perhaps only an American Jew—open, friendly, but a representative of a conquering power—could have produced the effect that Bernstein did.

After his initial Vienna triumph in 1966, Bernstein returned to New York, and the embarrassment and condescending reviews petered out. Vienna had taught New York how to listen. The Europeans were enchanted by the expressive fluency that the New York critics had considered vulgar. Everyone but the prigs realized that Bernstein’s gestural bounty was both utterly sincere and very successful at getting what he wanted. He wasn’t out of control; he was asserting control. Karajan, by contrast, worked through the details in rehearsal and then, in performance, stood there with his eyes closed, beating time, thrusting out his aggressive chin and mastering the orchestra with his stick and his left hand. He was fascinating but almost frightening to watch.

Karajan radiated power when he conducted; Bernstein radiated love. Smiling, imploring, flirting, and commanding, he cued every section and almost every solo, and often subdivided the beat for greater articulation. If you were watching him, either in the hall or on television, he pulled you into the structural and dramatic logic of a piece. He was not only narrative in flight; he was an emotional guide to the perplexed. For all his egotism, there was something selfless in his work.

In 1988, when Bernstein and Karajan were both close to death, they had a final talk in Vienna. Karajan, after neglecting Mahler’s music for decades, had taken up the composer in his 60s and eventually produced two glorious recorded performances of the Ninth Symphony. The Austrian could no longer afford to ignore Mahler; he had become too central to concert life, to 20th-century consciousness, and Bernstein had helped produce that shift. They spoke of touring together with the Vienna Philharmonic. I am moved by the thought of the two old men, rivalries and differences forgotten, murmuring to each other in a hotel room and conspiring to make music. Mahler had brought them together.

A FEW DAYS after struggling with the Vienna Philharmonic over Mahler’s Fifth in 1972, Bernstein performed and filmed the work with the orchestra in Vienna. The musicians are no longer holding back; it’s a very exciting performance (viewable on YouTube and streaming services). Fifteen years later, in 1987, Bernstein and the Vienna Philharmonic returned to the Fifth, taking it on tour. The performance in Frankfurt on September 8, 1987, was recorded live by Deutsche Grammophon and released the following year, and is also available to stream. It is widely considered the greatest recording of the symphony.

But it is not the greatest recording of the symphony. Two days later, on September 10, at the mammoth Royal Albert Hall in London, Bernstein and the orchestra played the work yet again. The BBC recorded the performance for radio broadcast, and though the recording (audio only) has never been commercially released, it has been posted on YouTube.

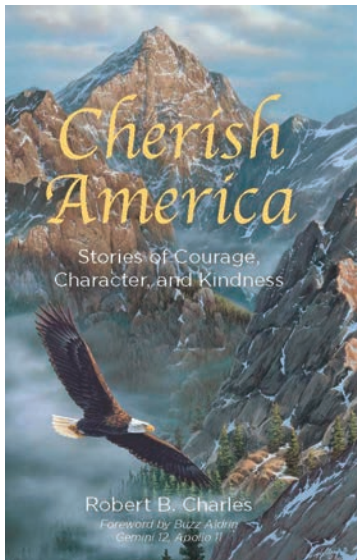
The symphony, in any performance, is a compound of despair, tenderness, and triumph. But in many performances, much of its detail can seem puzzling or pointless—vigorous or languorous notes spinning between the overwhelming climaxes. Bernstein clarifies and highlights everything,

sometimes by slowing the music down so that one can hear and emotionally register such things as the utter forlornness of the funeral march in the first movement, the countermelodies in the strings that are close to heartbreak, the long silences and near silences in which the music struggles into being—struggles against the temptation of nothingness, which for Mahler was very real.

The symphony now makes complete sense as an argument about the unstable nature of life. Toward the end of it, after a passage slowing the music almost to a halt, Mahler marks an abrupt tempo change: *accelerando*. In Bernstein’s personal score, he writes at this point, “GO.” Just . . . go. In London, the concluding pages—with the entire orchestra hurtling in a frenzy to the close—release an ovation in the hall that has the same intensity of joy as the music itself.

Mahler’s music is the dramatized projection of a Middle European, Jewish-outsider sensibility into the world. Bernstein carried the thrice-homeless Mahler home, yes, home to the world, where he now lives forever. The conductor may have been frustrated in some of his ambitions (he was never the classical composer he wanted to be), but he blended in his soul what he knew of Jewish sacred texts, Jewish family life and family feeling—blended all of that with the ready forms of the Broadway musical, the classical symphonic tradition, Christian choral music. He took advantage of new ways of reaching audiences—particularly television—without cheapening anything he had to say. He died too young at 72, dissatisfied, full of ideas and projects, a man still being formed; yet throughout his half-century career, he brought the richness of American Jewish sensibility into the minds and emotions of millions of people. *A*

David Denby is a staff writer at The New Yorker. This article was adapted from his new book, Eminent Jews: Bernstein, Brooks, Friedan, Mailer.



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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.

- 1 ____ and cheese (common
barbecue side)
- 4 "I told you!"
- 7 Every last one
- 8 Uneven?
- 9 Morsel in a pod
- 10 Use a shovel, maybe
- 11 Idaho or Iowa
- 13 Shindig
- 15 Come into view
- 18 Feature at some wedding
receptions
- 20 Where an album or a
painting might be created
- 21 Requirement
- 22 Cairn components, maybe
- 25 To ____ (precisely)
- 26 Lee's *Way of the Dragon*
co-star
- 29 *Pushing Hands* director Lee
- 30 Hershey Bears org.
- 32 Extraction from some buds,
for short
- 33 Big name in the Hundred
Flowers Campaign
- 34 System used by chess.com
- 35 Landmark that crosses the
Hudson at Ft. Lee
- 36 High lights?
- 38 Pains
- 39 Not a typical beach read
- 40 Babylonian "Queen
of Heaven"



42 Patxaran base
43 Fancy pen?
47 Arrival announcement, maybe
48 “New New Orleans” pioneer
49 Like questions that can’t
be answered
50 Juices up?

1 Navigation aid
2 The *A* of *IPA*
3 Critter that might be beloved
by kindergartners
4 Mr. Pibb or Dr Pepper
5 Change from passive to active
voice, maybe
6 Rim
12 With 37-Down, 666
13 Steamed dim sum option
14 Array on an iPhone home screen
16 Former co-worker of Jackson
and Cowell
17 Hike
19 Goes bad, as produce
22 Magic bullet
23 Shade named for a famous
boarding school
24 Famous name in the
Ladies' Mile
27 Catchphrase understood by
Star-Lord, Gamora, and Drax
28 Levantine dish similar to *doner*
31 Food that might be served
with crackers on the side
37 See 12-Down
40 *Grace of My Heart* star Douglas
41 Emission with significant
amounts of hydrogen sulfide
42 No Lothario
44 Big name in college guides
45 Facilitates
46 Shot one's shot, maybe





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