

# THE NEW ANARCHY

America faces a type of extremist violence it does not know how to stop

*By Adrienne LaFrance*



*The Atlantic*

EST. 1857

**Mark Leibovich**  
on Arnold  
Schwarzenegger

**Amy Weiss-Meyer**  
on Judy Blume

**Patricia Lockwood**  
on Virginia Woolf

**George Packer**  
on forbidden words

**Jennifer Senior**  
on the weirdness of aging

**Nicole Chung**  
on an adoption experiment

*Plus:* Fiction by Mona Simpson





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PLANET TUPUNGATO VOLCANO EXPEDITION TEAM



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CONSERVATION TECHNOLOGIST



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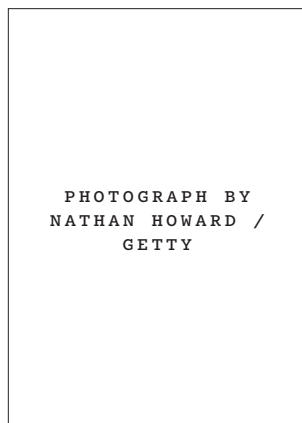
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By James Parker

*On the Cover*



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*Behind the Cover:* In this month's cover story, Adrienne LaFrance reports on political violence in the United States. We sought to convey the era's "new anarchy" with a photo of an anonymous figure emerging from a cloud of smoke at a 2020 protest in Portland, Oregon.

LaFrance argues that the Portland protests demonstrated how willing some radicals are to use violence—and that it may take a generation for their fervor to subside.

—Luise Stauss, *Director of Photography*;  
Genevieve Fussell, *Senior Photo Editor*

# THE

## The Eureka Theory of History Is Wrong

*Invention alone can't change the world, Derek Thompson wrote in the January/February issue. What matters most is what happens next.*

of divisiveness, we need to remind everyone that government policy and invention, like the internet, can benefit society as a whole.

Reginald I. Berry  
*Annamdale, Va.*

In light of Thompson's discussion of the importance of leadership and culture for an invention's implementation, I wanted to point out that one of the earliest supporters of smallpox inoculation in Europe was Catherine the Great, of Russia. Her bravery in receiving the inoculation in 1768, 28 years before Edward Jenner invented the first vaccine, narrowed the trust gap significantly in 18th-century Russia—no small feat, given the slow pace of communication. She used her status as empress to make the issue nonpartisan and nonclassist. She established inoculation clinics in several cities, and by 1800, 2 million Russians had been inoculated.

Robynn Jensen  
*Savage, Minn.*

As an engineer, I agreed with much of Thompson's article. But he errs in describing the pitfalls of nuclear power. I am an antinuclear activist, but I can assure you that the reason we don't have more nuclear-power plants isn't the success of the tiny antinuclear movement. It is because investors have been unwilling to finance an industry that for 50 years has overpromised and underdelivered. Every nuclear plant built in the past half century has

### Letters

D

Derek Thompson's conclusion that societal progress depends on trust is profound and should be shouted from the rooftops. I am a rabbi, and I may make it the topic of my High Holiday sermon this coming year.

Rabbi Ilana Goldhaber-Gordon  
*Palo Alto, Calif.*

Derek Thompson makes a number of insightful arguments about the decline in American progress. But in citing 1980 as the end of "building," he glosses over an important point: 1980 is not a random year in U.S. history—it is the dawn of the Reagan era. The shift that began then—declaring a quest for personal advantage to be a driving force of progress, or, to use Ayn Rand's phrasing, declaring selfishness to be a virtue—is central to the decline Thompson describes. Corporate strategies and business-school curricula rarely encourage thoughtful investments that yield reasonable returns for an extended period. Instead they emphasize strategic behavior that at times amounts to

gaming the system rather than doing something useful.

Restoring public trust will require recognizing that selfishness is not a virtue, and that responsible business leadership requires more than maximizing shareholder value.

Regan Whitworth  
*Missoula, Mont.*

Part of what stymies innovation in the U.S. is our culture's focus on individualism. The collective good of the country has not been important to industrial and corporate leaders. If the U.S. as a nation is to progress, there has to be concern for society in its entirety; there needs to be an understanding that government is for all of us. During this period



# COMMONS



DISCUSSION  
&  
DEBATE

suffered massive cost overruns and schedule delays. In 1985, *Forbes* famously called nuclear power “the largest managerial disaster in business history.” And nothing has changed since then, as the only two nuclear plants now under construction in the U.S., in Georgia, are projected to cost at least \$30 billion—more than double the original estimate—and are more than six years behind schedule. Two reactors that had been under construction in South Carolina were canceled, wasting billions of taxpayer dollars.

Jeff Alson  
*Ann Arbor, Mich.*

I saw merit in Thompson’s argument until I reached the final section. The great problem of today’s world is not economic but ecological, and Thompson’s idea of “build, build, build” won’t solve it. We live on a planet with limited resources. Our economic system is dependent on our ecological system, not the other way around. We think our technology will protect us and therefore feel we can continue expanding our impact ad infinitum.

Jack M. Pedigo  
*Lopez Island, Wash.*

Derek Thompson misunderstands the degrowth movement. Degrowth isn’t the reason for America’s housing shortage. First, the degrowth idea hasn’t

caught on widely—the number of advocates in this country would fill only a modest auditorium. Second, the degrowth movement is about policy interventions to reduce inequality. It centers ideas such as replacing GDP with a metric that measures actual progress and advocates for trust-busting and more public investment in the commons. The real cause of unaffordable housing is inequality.

Robert Montroy  
*Rockford, Mich.*

Though I enjoyed his article, I believe Thompson has overlooked the core paradox of human progress: that things generally get worse before they get better. Specifically, I feel Thompson misinterpreted our political discourse around climate change and the COVID-19 vaccine as evidence of our failures, when they could in fact augur periods of substantial progress on the horizon. The United States has at times been even more polarized than it is today, yet our country still made significant progress. At the peak of our rancor, we fought a civil war—and it brought about the end of the archaic atrocity of slavery.

Nathaniel Barrett  
*Manchester, N.H.*

What’s missing from Thompson’s otherwise compelling argument is consideration of whether any proposed material progress offers something sensationally desirable to citizens. If progress isn’t novel and pleasing to our senses, then arguments against implementation—however spurious, and from whichever band of the ideological spectrum—are far more likely to convince those on the fence.

My mother was born in 1929. She grew up in rural Pennsylvania without electricity. If electricity had brought only heat and light, it may have been easy to sway my poorly educated and conservative grandparents to oppose its broad implementation across rural America—after all, they already had fire and gas lamps. But electricity could also power radios, kitchen appliances, tools, and countless other useful and exciting gadgets. Life would change and improve at the sensory level with the flip of an actual switch.

Perhaps with the exception of high-speed rail, nothing in the current array of tech proposals has especially novel or aesthetic appeal. As Thompson notes, some technologies are repellent. Apartment buildings are old news. Solar panels can be eyesores that supplant natural landscapes. Nuclear reactors can

be ugly and still have a bad reputation, however unwarranted. Where’s the novelty, the beauty? How excited can we become about what amounts to new batteries in the same old gadgets? To build a broad coalition of support, progress needs to look, smell, sound, and feel exciting—little else has so powerfully united the American people.

Allen Farmelo  
*Hopewell Junction, N.Y.*

DEREK THOMPSON  
REPLIES:

*I’m pleased that readers seem to have concluded that culture is paramount to progress. Especially trust. It simply doesn’t matter what we invent in our laboratories if scientists, companies, and governments are met with widespread distrust by the public, making it impossible to implement what we discover. And I deeply appreciate Allen Farmelo’s point—progress ought to feel beautiful. I tend to think about new ideas through a utilitarian filter: Will this new thing help more people? I’ll do my best to add Farmelo’s Corollary to my arsenal: Will this new thing make the world more beautiful?*

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

**Correction:** “The Eureka Theory of History Is Wrong” (January/February 2023) stated that the United States advanced airplane technology during World War I. In fact, the U.S. advanced airplane technology after the war.

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# DISPATCHES

OPENING ARGUMENT

## THE MORAL CASE AGAINST EUPHEMISM

*Banning words won't make the  
world more just.*

BY GEORGE PACKER

The Sierra Club's Equity Language Guide discourages using the words *stand*, *Americans*, *blind*, and *crazy*. The first two fail at inclusion, because not everyone can stand and not everyone living in this country is a citizen. The third and fourth, even as figures of speech ("Legislators are blind to climate change"), are insulting to the disabled. The guide also rejects *the disabled* in favor of *people living with disabilities*, for the same reason that *enslaved person* has generally replaced *slave*: to affirm, by the tenets of what's called "people-first language," that "everyone is first and foremost a person, not their disability or other identity."

The guide's purpose is not just to make sure that the Sierra Club avoids

obviously derogatory terms, such as *welfare queen*. It seeks to cleanse language of any trace of privilege, hierarchy, bias, or exclusion. In its zeal, the Sierra Club has clear-cut a whole national park of words. *Urban, vibrant, hardworking*, and *brown bag* all crash to earth for subtle racism. *Y'all* supplants the patriarchal *you guys*, and *elevate voices* replaces *empower*, which used to be uplifting but is now condescending. *The poor* is classist; *battle* and *minefield* disrespect veterans; *depressing* appropriates a disability; *migrant*—no explanation, it just has to go.

Equity-language guides are proliferating among some of the country's leading institutions, particularly nonprofits. The American Cancer Society has one. So do the American Heart Association, the American Psychological Association, the American Medical Association, the National Recreation and Park Association, the Columbia University School of Professional Studies, and the University of Washington. The words these guides recommend or reject are sometimes exactly the same, justified in nearly identical language. This is because most of the guides draw on the same sources from activist organizations: *A Progressive's Style Guide*, the Racial Equity Tools glossary, and a couple of others. The guides also cite one another. The total number of people behind this project of linguistic purification is relatively small, but their power is potentially immense. The new language might not stick in broad swaths of American society, but it already influences highly educated precincts, spreading from the authorities that establish it and the

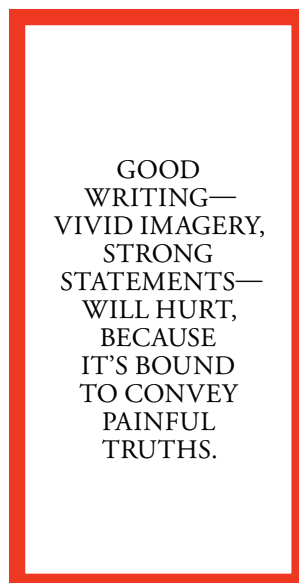
organizations that adopt it to mainstream publications, such as this one.

Although the guides refer to language “evolving,” these changes are a revolution from above. They haven't emerged organically from the shifting linguistic habits of large numbers of people. They are handed down in communiqués written by obscure “experts” who purport to speak for vaguely defined “communities,” remaining unanswerable to a public that's being morally coerced. A new term wins an argument without having to debate. When the San Francisco Board of Supervisors replaces *felon* with *justice-involved person*, it is making an ideological claim—that there is something illegitimate about laws, courts, and prisons. If you accept the change—as, in certain contexts, you'll surely feel you must—then you also acquiesce in the argument.

In a few cases, the gap between equity language and ordinary speech has produced a populist backlash. When *Latinx* began to be used in advanced milieus, a poll found that a large majority of Latinos and Hispanics continued to go by the familiar terms and hadn't heard of the newly coined, nearly unpronounceable one. *Latinx* wobbled and took a step back. The American Cancer Society advises that *Latinx*, along with the equally gender-neutral *Latine*, *Latin@*, and *Latinu*, “may or may not be fully embraced by older generations and may need additional explanation.” Public criticism led Stanford to abolish outright its Elimination of Harmful Language Initiative—not for being ridiculous, but,

the university announced, for being “broadly viewed as counter to inclusivity.”

In general, though, equity language invites no response, and condemned words are almost never redeemed. Once a new rule takes hold—once a day in history can no longer be *dark*, or a *waitress* has to be



a *server*, or *underserved* and *vulnerable* suddenly acquire red warning labels—there's no going back. Continuing to use a word that's been declared harmful is evidence of ignorance at best or, at worst, a determination to offend.

Like any prescribed usage, equity language has a willed, unnatural quality. The guides use scientific-sounding concepts to lend an impression of objectivity to subjective judgments: *structural racialization*, *diversity value proposition*, *arbitrary status hierarchies*. The concepts themselves create status hierarchies—they assert intellectual and moral authority by piling abstract nouns into unfamiliar shapes that immediately let you know you have work to do. Though the guides recommend the use

of words that are available to everyone (one suggests a sixth-to-eighth-grade reading level), their glossaries read like technical manuals, put together by highly specialized teams of insiders, whose purpose is to warn off the uninitiated. This language confers the power to establish orthodoxy.

Mastering equity language is a discipline that requires effort and reflection, like learning a sacred foreign tongue—ancient Hebrew or Sanskrit. The Sierra Club urges its staff “to take the space and time you need to implement these recommendations in your own work thoughtfully.” “Sometimes, you will get it wrong or forget and that's OK,” the National Recreation and Park Association guide tells readers. “Take a moment, acknowledge it, and commit to doing better next time.”

The liturgy changes without public discussion, and with a suddenness and frequency that keep the novitiate off-balance, forever trying to catch up, and feeling vaguely impious. A ban that seemed ludicrous yesterday will be unquestionable by tomorrow. The guides themselves can't always stay current. *People of color* becomes standard usage until the day it is demoted, by the American Heart Association and others, for being too general. The American Cancer Society prefers *marginalized* to the more “victimizing” *underresourced* or *underserved*—but in the National Recreation and Park Association's guide, *marginalized* now acquires “negative connotations when used in a broad way. However, it may be necessary and appropriate in context. If you do use it, avoid ‘the marginalized,’ and

don't use marginalized as an adjective." *Historically marginalized* is sometimes okay; *marginalized people* is not. The most devoted student of the National Recreation and Park Association guide can't possibly know when and when not to say *marginalized*; the instructions seem designed to make users so anxious that they can barely speak. But this confused guidance is inevitable, because with repeated use, the taint of negative meaning rubs off on even the most anodyne language, until it has to be scrubbed clean. The erasures will continue indefinitely, because the thing itself—injustice—will always exist.

In the spirit of Strunk and White, the guides call for using specific rather than general terms, plain speech instead of euphemisms, active not passive voice. Yet they continually violate their own guidance, and the crusade to eliminate harmful language could hardly do otherwise. A division of the University of Southern California's School of Social Work has abandoned *field*, as in *fieldwork* (which could be associated with slavery or immigrant labor) in favor of the obscure Latinism *practicum*. The Sierra Club offers *refuse to take action* instead of *paralyzed by fear*, replacing a concrete image with a phrase that evokes no mental picture. It suggests the mushy *protect our rights* over the more active *stand up for our rights*. Which is more euphemistic, *mentally ill* or *person living with a mental-health condition*? Which is more vague, *ballsy* or *risk-taker*? What are *diversity*, *equity*, and *inclusion* but abstractions with uncertain meanings whose repetition

creates an artificial consensus and muddies clear thought? When a university administrator refers to an individual student as "diverse," the word

easier to say *people with limited financial resources* than *the poor*. The first rolls off your tongue without interruption, leaves no aftertaste,

Katherine Boo's *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* is a non-fiction masterpiece that tells the story of Mumbai slum dwellers with the intimacy of a



has lost contact with anything tangible—which is the point.

The whole tendency of equity language is to blur the contours of hard, often unpleasant facts. This aversion to reality is its main appeal. Once you acquire the vocabulary, it's actually

arouses no emotion. The second is rudely blunt and bitter, and it might make someone angry or sad. Imprecise language is less likely to offend. Good writing—vivid imagery, strong statements—will hurt, because it's bound to convey painful truths.

novel. The book was published in 2012, before the new language emerged:

The One Leg's given name was Sita. She had fair skin, usually an asset, but the runt leg had smacked down her bride price. Her

Hindu parents had taken the single offer they got: poor, unattractive, hardworking, Muslim, old—“half-dead, but who else wanted her,” as her mother had once said with a frown.

Translated into equity language, this passage might read:

Sita was a person living with a disability. Because she lived in a system that centered whiteness while producing inequities among racial and ethnic groups, her physical appearance conferred an unearned set of privileges and benefits, but her disability lowered her status to potential partners. Her parents, who were Hindu persons, accepted a marriage proposal from a member of a community with limited financial resources, a person whose physical appearance was defined as being different from the traits of the dominant group and resulted in his being set apart for unequal treatment, a person who was considered in the dominant discourse to be “hardworking,” a Muslim person, an older person. In referring to him, Sita’s mother used language that is considered harmful by representatives of historically marginalized communities.

Equity language fails at what it claims to do. This translation doesn’t create more empathy for Sita and her struggles. Just the opposite—it alienates Sita from the reader, placing her at a great distance. A heavy fog of jargon rolls in and hides all that Boo’s short burst

of prose makes clear with true understanding, true empathy.

The battle against euphemism and cliché is long-standing and, mostly, a losing one. What’s new and perhaps more threatening about equity language is the special kind of pressure it brings to bear. The conformity it demands isn’t just bureaucratic; it’s moral. But assembling preapproved phrases from a handbook into sentences that sound like an algorithmic catechism has no moral value. Moral language comes from the struggle of an individual mind to absorb and convey the truth as faithfully as possible. Because the effort is hard and the result unsparing, it isn’t obvious that writing like Boo’s has a future. Her book is too real for us. The very project of a white American journalist spending three years in an Indian slum to tell the story of families who live there could be considered a gross act of cultural exploitation. By the new rules, shelf upon shelf of great writing might go the way of *blind* and *urban*. Open *Light in August* or *Invisible Man* to any page and see how little would survive.

The rationale for equity-language guides is hard to fault. They seek a world without oppression and injustice. Because achieving this goal is beyond anyone’s power, they turn to what can be controlled and try to purge language until it leaves no one out and can’t harm those who already suffer. Avoiding slurs, calling attention to inadvertent insults, and speaking to people with dignity are essential things in any decent society. It’s polite to address people as they request, and context always matters: A therapist is unlikely to use terms with a patient that she would with a colleague. But it

isn’t the job of writers to present people as they want to be presented; writers owe allegiance to their readers, and the truth.

The universal mission of equity language is a quest for salvation, not political reform

PRISON DOES NOT BECOME A LESS BRUTAL PLACE BY CALLING SOMEONE LOCKED UP IN ONE A PERSON EXPERIENCING THE CRIMINAL-JUSTICE SYSTEM.

or personal courtesy—a Protestant quest and, despite the guides’ aversion to any reference to U.S. citizenship, an American one, for we do nothing by half measures. The guides follow the grammar of Puritan preaching to the last clause. Once you have embarked on this expedition, you can’t stop at *Oriental* or *thug*, because that would leave far too much evil at large. So you take off in hot pursuit of *gentrification* and *legal resident*, *food stamps* and *gun control*, until the last sin is hunted down and made right—which can never happen in a fallen world.

This huge expense of energy to purify language reveals a weakened belief in more material forms of progress. If we don’t know how to end racism, we can at least call it *structural*. The guides want to make the ugliness of our society disappear by linguistic fiat. Even by their own lights, they do more ill

than good—not because of their absurd bans on ordinary words like *congresswoman* and *expat*, or the self-torture they require of conscientious users, but because they make it impossible to face squarely the wrongs they want to right, which is the starting point for any change. Prison does not become a less brutal place by calling someone locked up in one *a person experiencing the criminal-justice system*. Obesity isn’t any healthier for people with *high weight*. It’s hard to know who is likely to be harmed by a phrase like *native New Yorker* or *under fire*; I doubt that even the writers of the guides are truly offended. But the people in *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* know they’re poor; they can’t afford to wrap themselves in soft sheets of euphemism. Equity language doesn’t fool anyone who lives with real afflictions. It’s meant to spare only the feelings of those who use it.

The project of the guides is utopian, but they’re a symptom of deep pessimism. They belong to a fractured culture in which symbolic gestures are preferable to concrete actions, argument is no longer desirable, each viewpoint has its own impenetrable dialect, and only the most fluent insiders possess the power to say what is real. What I’ve described is not just a problem of the progressive left. The far right has a different vocabulary, but it, too, relies on authoritarian shibboleths to enforce orthodoxy. It will be a sign of political renewal if Americans can say maddening things to one another in a common language that doesn’t require any guide. *A*

*George Packer is a staff writer at The Atlantic.*

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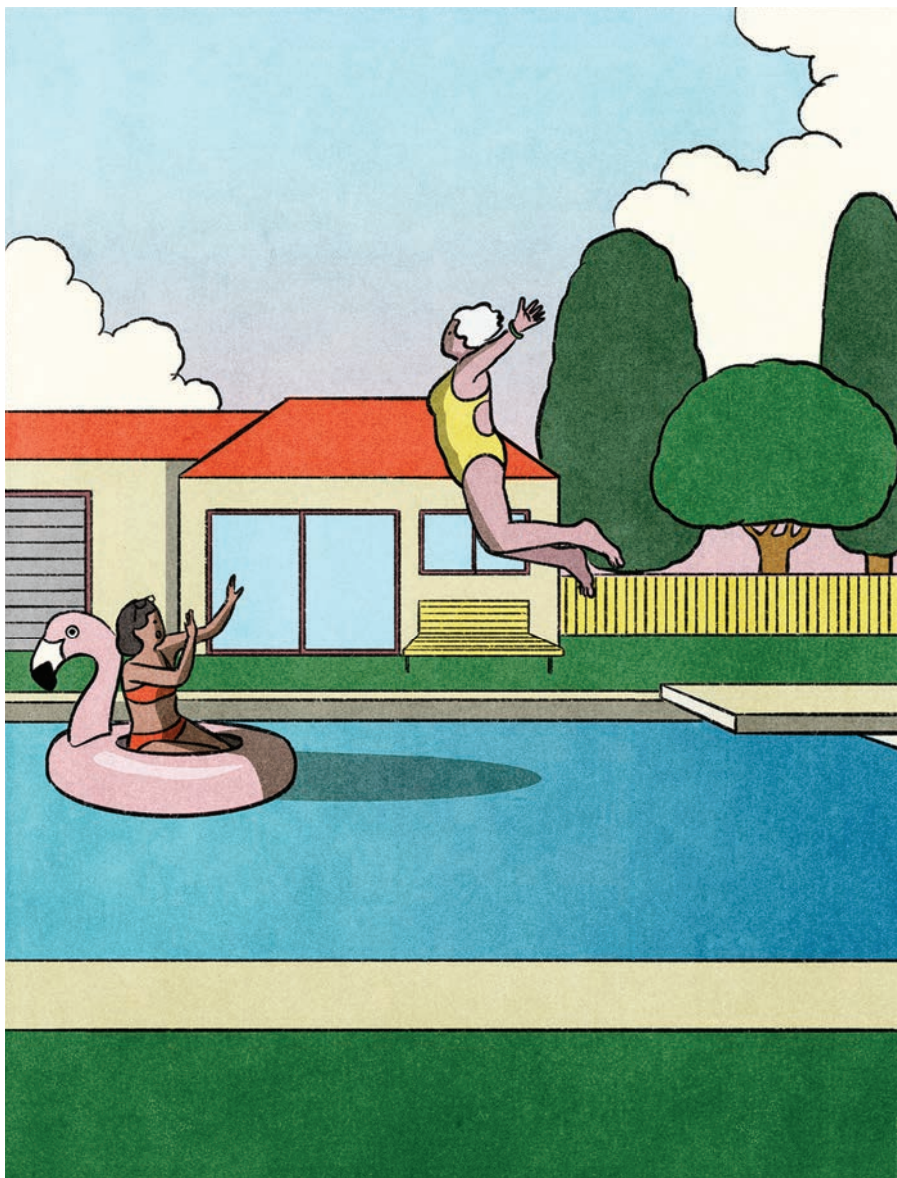
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## THE AGE IN YOUR HEAD

*I'm 53 years old. I feel 36.*

BY JENNIFER SENIOR

# T

This past Thanksgiving, I asked my mother how old she was in her head. She didn't pause, didn't look up, didn't even ask me to repeat the question, which would have been natural, given that it was both syntactically awkward and a little odd. We were in my brother's dining room, setting the table. My mother folded another napkin. "Forty-five," she said.

She is 76.

Why do so many people have an immediate, intuitive grasp of this highly abstract concept—"subjective age," it's called—when randomly presented with it? It's bizarre, if you think about it. Certainly most of us don't believe ourselves to be shorter or taller than we actually are. We don't think of ourselves as having smaller ears or longer noses or curlier hair. Most of us also know where our bodies are in space, what physiologists call "proprioception."

Yet we seem to have an awfully rough go of locating ourselves in time. A friend, nearing 60, recently told me that whenever he looks in the mirror, he's not so much unhappy with his appearance as startled by it—"as if there's been some sort of error" were his exact words. (High-school reunions can have this same confusing effect. You look around at your lined and thickened classmates, wondering how they could have so violently capitulated to age; then you see photographs of yourself from that same event and realize: *Oh.*) The gulf between how old we are and how old we believe ourselves to be can often



be measured in light-years—or at least a goodly number of old-fashioned Earth ones.

As one might suspect, there are studies that examine this phenomenon. (There's a study for everything.) As one might also suspect, most of them are pretty unimaginative. Many have their origins in the field of gerontology, designed primarily with an eye toward health outcomes, which means they ask participants how old they feel, which those participants generally take to mean how old do you feel *physically*, which then leads to the rather unsurprising conclusion that if you feel older, you probably are, in the sense that you're aging faster.

But “How old do you feel?” is an altogether different question from “How old are you in your head?” The most inspired paper I read about subjective age, from 2006, asked this of its 1,470 participants—in a Danish population (Denmark being the kind of place where studies like these would happen)—and what the two authors discovered is that adults over 40 perceive themselves to be, on average, about 20 percent younger than their actual age. “We ran this thing, and the data were gorgeous,” says David C. Rubin (76 in real life, 60 in his head), one of the paper's authors and a psychology and neuroscience professor at Duke University. “It was just all these beautiful, smooth curves.”

Why we're possessed of this urge to subtract is another matter. Rubin and his co-author, Dorte Berntsen, didn't make it the focus of this particular paper, and the researchers who do often propose a crude, predictable answer—namely, that lots of people consider aging a catastrophe, which, while true, seems to tell only a fraction

of the story. You could just as well make a different case: that viewing yourself as younger is a form of optimism, rather than denialism. It says that you envision many generative years ahead of you, that you will not be written off, that your future is not one long, dreary corridor of locked doors.

I think of my own numbers, for instance—which, though a slight departure from the Rubin-Berntsen rule, are still within a reasonable range (or so Rubin assures me). I'm 53 in real life but suspended at 36 in my head, and if I stop my brain from doing its usual Tilt-A-Whirl for long enough, I land on the same explanation: At 36, I knew the broad contours of my life, but hadn't yet filled them in. I was professionally established, but still brimmed with potential. I was paired off with my husband, but not yet lost in the marshes of a long marriage (and, okay, not yet a tiresome fishwife). I was soon to be pregnant, but not yet a mother fretting about eating habits, screen habits, study habits, the brutal folkways of adolescents, the porn merchants of the internet.

I was not yet on the gray turnpike of middle age, in other words.

“I'm 35,” wrote my friend Richard Primus, 53 in real life and a constitutional-law professor at the University of Michigan Law School. “I think it's because that's the age I was when my major life questions/statuses reached the resolutions/conditions in which they've since remained.” So: kind of like my answer, but more optimistically rendered. He continued: “Medieval Christian theologians asked the intriguing question ‘How old are people in heaven?’ The dominant

answer: 33. Partly bc age of Jesus at crucifixion. But I think partly bc it feels like a kind of peak for the combined vigor-maturity index.”

The combined vigor-maturity index: Yes!

Richard was replying to me on Twitter, where I'd tossed out my query to the crowd: “How old are you in your head?” (Turns out I'm not the only one with this impulse; Sari

ADULTS OVER  
40 PERCEIVE  
THEMSELVES  
TO BE, ON  
AVERAGE,  
ABOUT  
20 PERCENT  
YOUNGER  
THAN THEIR  
ACTUAL AGE.

Botton, the founder of *Oldster Magazine*, regularly publishes questionnaires she has issued to novelists, artists, and activists of a certain age, and this is the second question.) Ian Leslie, the author of *Conflicted* and two other social-science books (32 in his head, 51 in “boring old reality”), took a similar view to mine and Richard's, but added an astute and humbling observation: Internally viewing yourself as substantially younger than you are can make for some serious social weirdness.

“30 year olds should be aware that for better or for worse, the 50 year old they're talking to thinks they're roughly the same age!” he wrote. “Was at a party over the summer where average was about 28 and I had to make a conscious effort to remember I wasn't the

same—they can tell of course, so it's asymmetrical.”

Yes. They can tell. I've had this unsettling experience, seeing little difference between the 30-something before me and my 50-something self, when suddenly the 30-something will make a comment that betrays just how aware she is of the age gap between us, that this gap seems enormous, that in her eyes I may as well be Dame Judi Dench.

Although many hewed close to the Rubin-Berntsen rule, the replies I got on Twitter were not always about potential. Many carried with them a whiff of unexpected poignancy. Trauma sometimes played a role: One person was stuck at 32, unable to see themselves as any older than a sibling who'd died; another was stuck for a long time at age 12, the year her father joined a cult. (Rubin has written about this phenomenon too—the centrality of certain events to our memories, especially calamitous ones. Sometimes we freeze at the age of our traumas.)

My friend Alan, who is in his 50s, told me he thinks of himself as 38 because he still thinks of his 98-year-old father as 80. The writer Molly Jong-Fast replied that she's 19 because that's the age she got sober. One 36-year-old woman told me she thought the pandemic was a time thief—she simply hadn't accumulated enough new experiences to justify the addition of more chronological years—which made her younger in her head sometimes, as if she were willing back the clock.

When I mentioned to a colleague that I was writing this piece, he told me he was 12 in his head, not because he thinks of himself as a child,

but because his inner self has remained unchanged as he's aged; it's "the same consciousness as always since I became conscious." His words instantly brought to mind a line from the opening pages of Milan Kundera's *Immortality*: "There is a certain part of all of us that lives outside of time."

Of course, not everyone I spoke with viewed themselves as younger. There were a few old souls, something I would have once said about myself. I felt 40 at 10, when the gossip and cliquishness of other little girls seemed not just cruel but dull; I felt 40 at 22, when I barely went to bars; I felt 40 at 25, when I started accumulating noncollege friends and realized I was partial to older people's company. And when I turned 40, I was genuinely relieved, as if I'd finally achieved some kind of cosmic internal-external temporal alignment.

But over time, I rolled backwards. Other people do this too, just starting at a younger age—25—and Rubin has a theory about why this might be. Adolescence and emerging adulthood are times dense with firsts (first kiss, first time having sex, first love, first foray into the world without your parents' watchful gaze); they are also times when our brains, for a variety of neurodevelopmental reasons, are inclined to feel things more intensely, especially the devil's buzz of a good, fool-hardy risk. The uniqueness and density of these periods have manifested themselves in other areas of Rubin's research. Years ago, he and other researchers showed that adults have an outsize number of memories from the ages of about 15 to 25. They called this phenomenon "the reminiscence bump." (This is generally used to explain why

we're so responsive to the music of our adolescence—which in my case means my iPhone was loaded with a lot more Duran Duran songs than any dignified person should admit.)

Rubin and Berntsen made a second intriguing discovery in their work on subjective age: People younger than 25 mainly said they felt older than they are, not younger—which, again, makes sense if you've had even a passing acquaintance with a 10-year-old, a teenager, a 21-year-old. They're eager for more independence and to be taken more seriously; in their head, they're ready for both, though their prefrontal cortex is basically a bunch of unripe bananas.

In Rubin and Berntsen's 2006 study, socioeconomic status, gender, and education did not significantly affect their data. One wonders if this has something to do with the fact that they conducted their research in Denmark, a country with substantially less income inequality and racial heterogeneity than our own.

The picture changes when there's more variety: A 2021 meta-analysis of 294 papers examining subjective-age data from across the globe found that the discrepancy between chronological age and internal age was greatest in the United States, Western Europe, and Australia/Oceania. Asia had a smaller gap. Africa had the smallest, which could be read as an economic sign (poverty might play a role) but also a cultural one: Elders in collectivist societies are accorded more respect and have more extended-family support.

"Could it be that feeling younger is actually dysfunctional and no longer helping

you focus on what's going on? That's the more complicated question," says Hans-Werner Wahl (69 in real life, 55 in his head), a co-author of the meta-analysis. "A lower subjective age may be predictive of better health. But there are other populations around the globe

IF YOU MENTALLY  
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USEFUL.

for whom it is not necessary to feel younger. And they're not less healthy."

This seems to be the conclusion of Becca Levy, a professor of epidemiology and psychology at the Yale School of Public Health. As a young graduate student, she went to Japan and couldn't help noticing not just that people lived longer, but that their attitude toward aging was more positive—and her decades of research since have shown a very persuasive connection between the two. In the introduction to her book, *Breaking the Age Code*, she describes newsstands in Tokyo lined with manga books filled with story lines about older people falling in love. She reports wandering Tokyo on Keiro No Hi, or "Respect for the Aged Day," and seeing people in their 70s and 80s lifting weights in the park. She talks about music classes filled with 75-year-olds learning how to play electric slide guitar.

At first blush, Levy's scholarship may seem to quarrel with the literature of subjective age. But maybe it's a complement. What underpins them both is an enduring sense of agency: If you mentally view yourself as younger—if you believe you have a few pivots left—you still see yourself as useful; if you believe that aging itself is valuable, an added good, then you also see yourself as useful. In a better world, older people would feel more treasured, certainly. But even now, a good many of us seem capable of combining the two ideas, merging acceptance of our age with a sense of hope. When reading over the many *Oldster* questionnaires, I was struck by how many people said that their present age was their favorite one. A reassuring number of respondents didn't want to trade their hard-earned wisdom—or humility, or self-acceptance, whatever they had accrued along the way—for some earlier moment.

Recently, I wrote to Margaret Atwood, asking her how old she is in *her* head. In the few interactions I've had with her, she seems quite sanguine about aging. Her reply:

At 53 you worry about being old compared to younger people. At 83 you enjoy the moment, and time travel here and there in the past 8 decades. You don't fret about seeming old, because hey, you really are old! You and your friends make Old jokes. You have more fun than at 53, in some ways. Wait, you'll see! :) *A*

*Jennifer Senior is a staff writer at The Atlantic.*



*Five years ago, I would have never imagined my life would be like this."*

— UMA SINJALI MAGAR



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With just one goat and no income source, Uma Sinjali Magar struggled through life. But that all changed because of someone like you. Uma joined a cooperative that encouraged her to build her business, start saving money and confidently express herself. She grew her goat herd, and the bargaining power of her cooperative allows her to make more money. With an increased income, her whole family benefits. And it was all possible because someone decided to give her the chance to thrive ... opening the doors for a future she could have never imagined.

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This page, clockwise from top left: *Wesaam Al-Badry's mother at home in Lincoln, Nebraska; high-school wrestlers in Dearborn, Michigan; the photographer's niece Amirah Al-Badry; a family birthday celebration for Al-Badry's daughter. Opposite page: Mya Al-Badry, a niece, in Lincoln.*



## “We Belong Here”

*Photographs by Wesaam Al-Badry*

Wesaam Al-Badry was born in Iraq, where he and his family might have stayed if not for the Gulf War, which began when he was 7. In 1991, the family landed at a refugee camp in Saudi Arabia. There, Al-Badry got his first camera, a Pentax K1000. “I didn’t understand the numbers on top, shutter speed, and aperture, but I understood, over time, composition,” Al-Badry told me. Even without regular access to film or any reliable way to develop what he shot, he saw in his hands a tool for telling his story as it unfolded.

Eventually, Al-Badry’s family was relocated to Lincoln, Nebraska. “When

you come in as a refugee, you think everything is beautiful. You think you made it to the promised land; everybody’s equal,” he said. “But then you realize there’s little hints.” As he grew up, Al-Badry became more aware of racism. Teenagers mocked his mother’s hijab; many Americans, he realized, had been conditioned to see Arabs and Muslims as intrinsically strange, angry, or violent.

The images in Al-Badry’s series “From Which I Came,” many of which feature his own family and friends, might easily be marshaled to represent a cultural

clash—but his work asks you to focus on the individual, the intimacy of daily life. The people in these photos are rarely smiling. Al-Badry’s aim is to present them as resilient and dignified, even if it makes the photos less immediately inviting to his audience. His allegiance is to the people he is photographing; he wants his subjects to see themselves in the absence of imposed stereotypes. “We belong here,” he said. “We bring this very rich culture with us. But we’re not archaic figures; we’re not stuck in the past.”

— *Aymann Ismail*





Left: *The photographer's mother (right) and a close friend.*  
*The two met in 1996, shortly after arriving in the United States.*  
Above: *The owner of a gym in Dearborn Heights, Michigan. Most*  
*of her clients are women of Middle Eastern origin.*

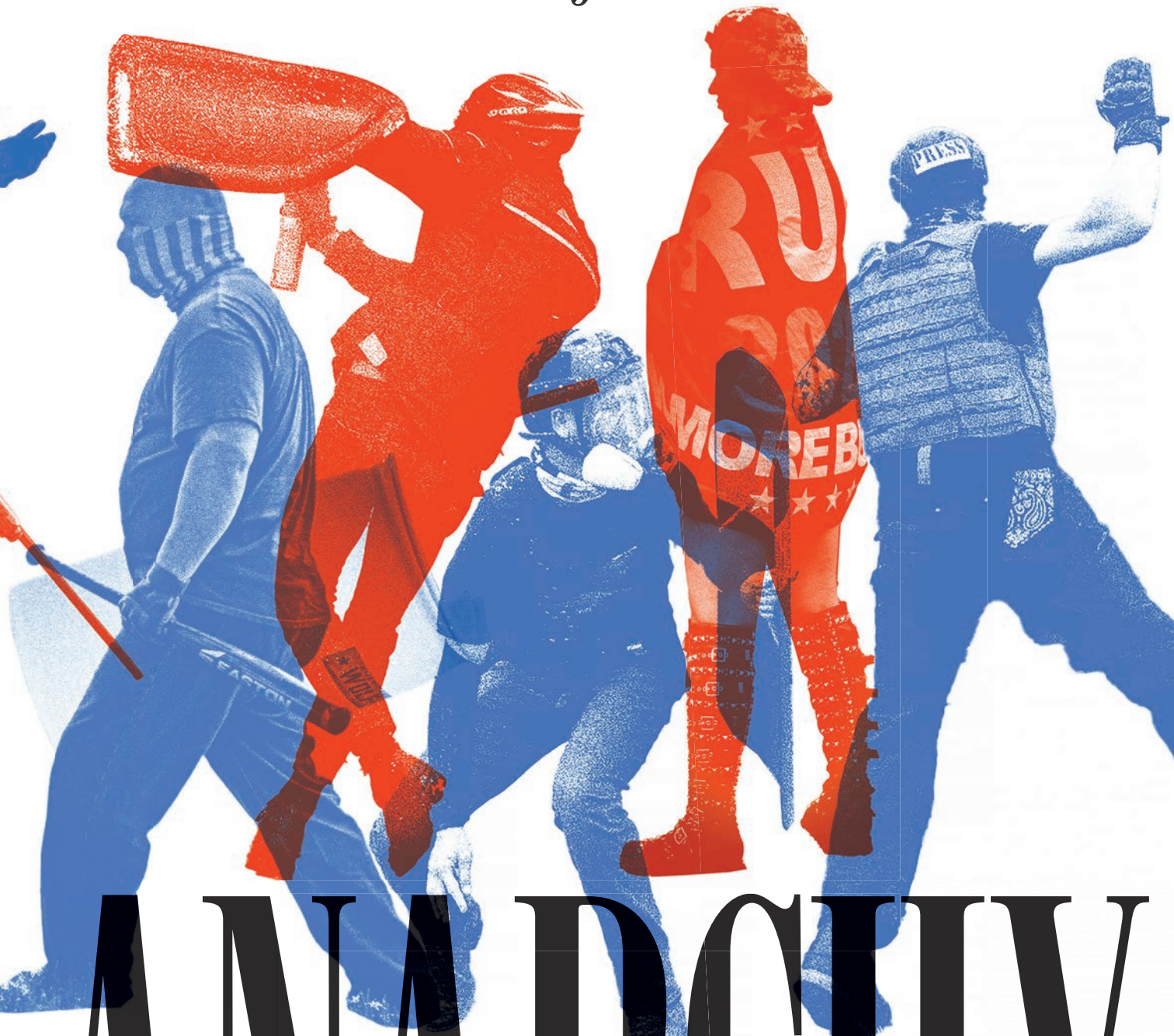
AMERICA FACES A TYPE OF  
EXTREMIST VIOLENCE  
IT DOES NOT KNOW  
HOW TO STOP.



# THE NEW



*By* ADRIENNE LAFRANCE



# ANARCHY

*“Blood grows hot, and blood is spilled. Thought is forced from old channels into confusion. Deception breeds and thrives. Confidence dies, and universal suspicion reigns. Each man feels an impulse to kill his neighbor, lest he be first killed by him. Revenge and retaliation follow. And all this ... may be among honest men only. But this is not all. Every foul bird comes abroad, and every dirty reptile rises up. These add crime to confusion.”*

— Abraham Lincoln, letter to the Missouri abolitionist Charles D. Drake, 1863

I.

## ON THE BRINK

In the weeks before Labor Day 2020, Ted Wheeler, the mayor of Portland, Oregon, began warning people that he believed someone would soon be killed by extremists in his city. Portland was preparing for the 100th consecutive day of conflict among anti-police protesters, right-wing counterprotesters, and the police themselves. Night after night, hundreds of people clashed in the streets. They attacked one another with baseball bats, Tasers, bear spray, fireworks. They filled balloons with urine and marbles and fired them at police officers with slingshots. The police lobbed flash-bang grenades. One man shot another in the eye with a paintball gun and pointed a loaded revolver at a screaming crowd. The FBI notified the public of a bomb threat against federal buildings in the city. Several homemade bombs were hurled into a group of people in a city park.

Extremists on the left and on the right, each side inhabiting its own reality, had come to own a portion of downtown Portland. These radicals acted without restraint or, in many cases, humanity.

In early July, when then-President Donald Trump deployed federal law-enforcement agents in tactical gear to Portland—against the wishes of the mayor and the governor—conditions deteriorated further. Agents threw protesters into unmarked vans. A federal officer shot a man in the forehead with a non-lethal munition, fracturing his skull. The authorities used chemical agents on crowds so frequently that even Mayor Wheeler found himself caught in clouds of tear gas. People set fires. They threw rocks and Molotov cocktails. They swung hammers into windows. Then, on the last Saturday of August, a

600-vehicle caravan of Trump supporters rode into Portland waving American flags and Trump flags with slogans like TAKE AMERICA BACK and MAKE LIBERALS CRY AGAIN. Within hours, a 39-year-old man would be dead—shot in the chest by a self-described anti-fascist. Five days later, federal agents killed the suspect—in self-defense, the government claimed—during a confrontation in Washington State.

What had seemed from the outside to be spontaneous protests centered on the murder of George Floyd were in fact the culmination of a long-standing ideological battle. Some four years earlier, Trump supporters had identified Portland, correctly, as an ideal place to provoke the left. The city is often mocked for its infatuation with leftist ideas and performative politics. That reputation, lampooned in the television series *Portlandia*, is not completely unwarranted. Right-wing extremists understood that Portland’s reaction to a trolling campaign would be swift, and would guarantee the celebrity that comes with virality. When Trump won the presidency, this dynamic intensified, and Portland became a place where radicals would go to brawl in the streets. By the middle of 2018, far-right groups such as the Proud Boys and Patriot Prayer had hosted more than a dozen rallies in the Pacific Northwest, many of them in Portland. Then, in 2020, extremists on the left hijacked largely peaceful anti-police protests with their own violent tactics, and right-wing radicals saw an opening for a major fight.

What happened in Portland, like what happened in Washington, D.C., on January 6, 2021, was a concentrated manifestation of the political violence that is all around us now. By political violence, I mean acts of violence intended to achieve political goals, whether driven by ideological vision or by delusions and hatred. More Americans are bringing weapons to political protests. Openly white-supremacist activity rose more than twelvefold from 2017 to 2021. Political aggression today is often expressed in the violent rhetoric of war. People build their political identities not around shared values but around a hatred for their foes, a phenomenon known as “negative partisanship.” A growing number of elected officials face harassment and death threats, causing many to leave politics. By nearly every measure, political violence is seen as more acceptable today than it was five years ago. A 2022 UC Davis poll found that one in five Americans believes political violence would be “at least sometimes” justified, and one in 10 believes it would be justified if it meant returning Trump to the presidency. Officials at the highest levels of the military and in the White House believe that the United States will see an increase in violent attacks as the 2024 presidential election draws near.

OPENING PAGES: FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: KATHRYN EISENER / AFP / GETTY; MICHAEL NIGRO / SIPA USA / ALAMY; MICHAEL NIGRO / SIPA USA / AP; MICHAEL NIGRO / SIPA USA / ALAMY; MICHAEL NIGRO / SIPA USA / AP; MATHIEU LEWIS-ROLLAND / AFP / GETTY; MARK DOWNEY / ZUMA / ALAMY; MATHIEU LEWIS-ROLLAND / AFP / GETTY

In recent years, Americans have contemplated a worst-case scenario, in which the country's extreme and widening divisions lead to a second Civil War. But what the country is experiencing now—and will likely continue to experience for a generation or more—is something different. The form of extremism we face is a new phase of domestic terror, one characterized by radicalized individuals with shape-shifting ideologies willing to kill their political enemies. Unchecked, it promises an era of slow-motion anarchy.

Consider recent events. In October 2020, authorities arrested more than a dozen men in Michigan, many of them with ties to a paramilitary group. They were in the final stages of a plan to kidnap the state's Democratic governor, Gretchen Whitmer, and possessed nearly 2,000 rounds of ammunition and hundreds of guns, as well as silencers, improvised explosive devices, and artillery shells. In January 2021, of course, thousands of Trump partisans stormed the U.S. Capitol, some of them armed, chanting "Where's Nancy?" and "Hang Mike Pence!" Since then, the headlines have gotten smaller—or perhaps numbness has set in—but the violence has continued. In June 2022, a man with a gun and a knife who allegedly said he intended to kill Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh was arrested outside Kavanaugh's Maryland home. In July, a man with a loaded pistol was arrested outside the home of Pramila Jayapal, the leader of the Congressional Progressive Caucus. She had heard someone outside shouting "Fuck you, cunt!" and "Commie bitch!" Days later, a man with a sharp object jumped onto a stage in upstate New York and allegedly tried to attack another member of Congress, the Republican candidate for governor. In August, just after the seizure of documents from Trump's Mar-a-Lago home, a man wearing body armor tried to breach the FBI's Cincinnati field office. He was killed in a shoot-out with police. In October, in San Francisco, a man broke into the home of Nancy Pelosi, then the speaker of the House, and attacked her 82-year-old husband with a hammer, fracturing his skull. In January 2023, a failed Republican candidate for state office in New Mexico who referred to himself as a "MAGA king" was arrested for the alleged attempted murder of local Democratic officials in four separate shootings. In one of the shootings, three bullets passed through the bedroom of a state senator's 10-year-old daughter as she slept.

Experts I interviewed told me they worry about political violence in broad regions of the country—the Great Lakes, the rural West, the Pacific Northwest, the South. These are places where extremist groups have already emerged, militias are popular, gun culture is thriving, and hard-core partisans collide during close elections in politically consequential states. Michigan, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Arizona, and Georgia all came up again and again.

For the past three years, I've been preoccupied with a question: How can America survive a period of mass delusion, deep division, and political violence without seeing the permanent dissolution of the ties that bind us? I went looking for moments in history, in the United States and elsewhere, when society has found itself on the brink—or already in the abyss. I learned how cultures have managed to endure sustained political violence, and how they ultimately emerged with democracy still intact.

Some lessons are unhappy ones. Societies tend to ignore the obvious warning signs of endemic political violence until the

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situation is beyond containment, and violence takes on a life of its own. Government can respond to political violence in brutal ways that undermine democratic values. Worst of all: National leaders, as we see today in an entire political party, can become complicit in political violence and seek to harness it for their own ends.

## II.

### SALAD-BAR EXTREMISM

If you're looking for a good place to hide an anarchist, you could do worse than Barre, Vermont. Barre (pronounced "berry") is a small city in the bowl of a steep valley in the northern reaches of a lightly populated, mountain state. You don't just stumble upon a place like this.

I went to Barre in October because I wanted to understand the anarchist who had fled there in the early 1900s, at the beginning of a new century already experiencing extraordinary violence and turbulence. The conditions that make a society vulnerable to political violence are complex but well established: highly visible wealth disparity, declining trust in democratic institutions, a perceived sense of victimhood, intense partisan estrangement based on identity, rapid demographic change, flourishing conspiracy theories, violent and dehumanizing rhetoric against the "other," a sharply divided electorate, and a belief among those who flirt with violence that they can get away with it. All of those conditions were present at the turn of the last century. All of them are present today. Back then, few Americans might have guessed that the violence of that era would rage for decades.

In 1901, an anarchist assassinated President William McKinley—shot him twice in the gut while shaking his hand at the Buffalo World's Fair. In 1908, an anarchist at a Catholic church in Denver fatally shot the priest who had just given him Communion. In 1910, a dynamite attack on the *Los Angeles Times* killed 21 people. In 1914, in what officials said was a plot against John D. Rockefeller, a group of anarchists prematurely exploded a bomb in a New York City tenement, killing four people. That same year, extremists set off bombs at two Catholic churches in Manhattan, one of them St. Patrick's Cathedral. In 1916, an anarchist chef dumped arsenic into the soup at a banquet for politicians,

businessmen, and clergy in Chicago; he reportedly used so much that people immediately vomited, which saved their lives. Months later, a shrapnel-filled suitcase bomb killed 10 people and wounded 40 more at a parade in San Francisco. America's entry into World War I temporarily quelled the violence—among other factors, some anarchists left the country to avoid the draft—but the respite was far from total. In 1917, a bomb exploded inside the Milwaukee Police Department headquarters, killing nine officers and two civilians. In the spring of 1919, dozens of mail bombs were sent to an array of business leaders and government officials, including Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes.

All of this was prologue. Starting late in the evening on June 2, 1919, in a series of coordinated attacks, anarchists simultaneously detonated massive bombs in eight American cities. In Washington, an explosion at the home of Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer blasted out the front windows and tore framed photos off the walls. Palmer, in his pajamas, had been reading by his second-story window. He happened to step away minutes before the bomb went off, a decision that authorities believed kept him alive. (His neighbors, the assistant secretary of the Navy and his wife, Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, had just gotten home from an evening out when the explosion also shattered their windows. Franklin ran over to Palmer's house to check on him.) The following year, a horse-drawn carriage drew up to the pink-marble entrance of the J. P. Morgan building on Wall Street and exploded, killing more than 30 people and injuring hundreds more.



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From these episodes, one name leaps out across time: Luigi Galleani. Galleani, who was implicated in most of the attacks, is barely remembered today. But he was, in his lifetime, one of the world's most influential terrorists, famous for advancing the argument for “propaganda of the deed”: the idea that violence is essential to the overthrow of the state and the ruling class. Born in Italy, Galleani immigrated to the United States and spread his views through his anarchist newspaper, *Cronaca Sovversiva*, or “Subversive Chronicle.” He told the poor to seize property from the rich and urged his followers to arm themselves—to find “a rifle, a dagger, a revolver.”

Galleani fled to Barre in 1903 under the name Luigi Pimpino after several encounters with law enforcement in New Jersey. He attracted disciples—“Galleanisti,” they were called—despite shunning all forms of organization and hierarchy. He was quick-witted, with an imposing intellect and a magnetic manner of speaking. Even the police reports described his charisma.

The population of Barre today is slightly smaller than it was in Galleani's day—roughly 10,000 then, 8,500 now—and it is the sort of place that is more confused by the presence of strangers than wary of them. The first thing you notice when you arrive is the granite. There is a mausoleum feel to any granite city, and on an overcast day the gray post-office building on North Main Street gives the

illusion that all of the color has suddenly vanished from the world. Across the street, at city hall, I wandered into an administrative office where an affable woman—*You came to Barre? On purpose?*—generously agreed to take me inside the adjacent opera house, which, recently refurbished, looks much as it did on the winter night in 1907 when Galleani appeared there before a packed house to give a speech alongside the anarchist Emma Goldman.

Galleani almost certainly could have disappeared into Barre with his wife and children and gotten away with it. He did not want that. In his own telling, Galleani's anger was driven by how poorly the working class was treated, particularly in factories. In Barre, granite cutters spent long hours mired in the sludge of a dark, unheated, and poorly ventilated workspace, breathing in silica dust, which made most of them gravely ill. Seeing the town, even a century after Galleani was there, I could understand why his time in Vermont had not altered his worldview. In the fore-

word to a 2017 biography, Galleani's grandson, Sean Sayers, put a hagiographic gloss on Galleani's legacy: “He was not a narrow and callous nihilist; he was a visionary thinker with a beautiful idea of how human society could be—an idea that still resonates today.” For Galleani and other self-identified “communist anarchists” like him, the beautiful idea was a world without government, without laws, without property. Other anarchists did not

*Opposite page: Mug shot of the anarchist leader Luigi Galleani, 1919. Below: The aftermath of the Wall Street bombing outside the J. P. Morgan building, 1920.*



share his idealism. The movement was torn by disagreements—they were anarchists, after all.

In Galleani's day, as in our own, the lines of conflict were not cleanly delineated. American radicalism can be a messy stew of ideas and motivations. Violence doesn't need a clear or consistent ideology and often borrows from several. Federal law-enforcement officials use the term *salad-bar extremism* to describe what worries them most today, and it applies just as aptly to the extremism of a century ago.

When Galleani had arrived in America, he'd encountered a nation in a terrible mood, one that would feel familiar to us today. Galleani's children were born into violent times. The nation was divided not least over the cause of its divisions. The gap between rich and poor was colossal—the top 1 percent of Americans possessed almost as much wealth as the rest of the country combined. The population was changing rapidly. Reconstruction had been defeated, and southern states in particular remained horrifically violent toward Black people, for whom the threat of lynching was constant. The Great Migration was just beginning. Immigration surged, inspiring intense waves of xenophobia. America was primed for violence—and to Galleani and his followers, destroying the state was the only conceivable path.

The spectacular violence of 1919 and 1920 proved a catalyst. A concerted nationwide hunt for anarchists began. This work, which culminated in what came to be known as the Palmer Raids, entailed direct violations of the Constitution. In late 1919 and early 1920, a series of raids—carried out in more than 30 American cities—led to the warrantless arrests of 10,000 suspected radicals, mostly Italian and Jewish immigrants. Attorney General Palmer's dragnet ensnared many innocent people and has become a symbol of the damage that overzealous law enforcement can cause. Hundreds of people were ultimately deported. Some had fallen afoul of a harsh new federal immigration law that broadly targeted anarchists. One of them was Luigi Galleani. "The law was kind of designed for him," Beverly Gage, a historian and the author of *The Day Wall Street Exploded*, told me.

The violence did not stop immediately after the Palmer Raids—in an irony that frustrated authorities, Galleani's deportation made it impossible for them to charge him in the Wall Street bombing, which they believed he planned, because it occurred after he'd left the country. Nevertheless, sweeping action by law enforcement helped put an end to a generation of anarchist attacks.

That is the most important lesson from the anarchist period: Holding perpetrators accountable is crucial. The Palmer Raids are remembered, rightly, as a ham-handed application of police-state tactics. Government actions can turn killers into martyrs. More important, aggressive policing and surveillance can undermine the very democracy they are meant to protect; state violence against citizens only validates a distrust of law enforcement.

But deterrence conducted within the law can work. Unlike anti-war protesters or labor organizers, violent extremists don't have an agenda that invites negotiation. "Today's threats of violence can be inspired by a wide range of ideologies that themselves morph and shift over time," Deputy Homeland Security Adviser Josh Geltzer told me. Now as in the early 20th century,

countering extremism through ordinary debate or persuasion, or through concession, is a fool's errand. Extremists may not even know what they believe, or hope for. "One of the things I increasingly keep wondering about is—what is the endgame?" Mary McCord, a former assistant U.S. attorney and national-security official, told me. "Do you want democratic government? Do you want authoritarianism? Nobody talks about that. *Take back our country*. Okay, so you get it back. Then what do you do?"



## CREEPING VIOLENCE

In another country, and in a time closer to our own, a sustained outbreak of domestic terrorism brought decades of attacks—and illustrates the role that ordinary citizens can sometimes play, along with deterrence, in restoring stability.

On Saturday, August 2, 1980, a bomb hidden inside a suitcase blew up at the Bologna Centrale railway station, killing 85 people and wounding hundreds more, many of them young families setting off on vacation. The explosion flattened an entire wing of the station, demolishing a crowded restaurant, wrecking a train platform, and freezing the station's clock at the time of the detonation: 10:25 a.m.

The Bologna massacre remains the deadliest attack in Italy since World War II. By the time it occurred, Italians were more than a decade into a period of intense political violence, one that came to be known as *Anni di Piombo*, or the "Years of Lead." From roughly 1969 to 1988, Italians experienced open warfare in the streets, bombings of trains, deadly shootings and arson attacks, at least 60 high-profile assassinations, and a narrowly averted neofascist coup attempt. It was a generation of death and bedlam. Although exact numbers are difficult to come by, during the Years of Lead, at least 400 people were killed and some 2,000 wounded in more than 14,000 separate attacks.

As I sat at the Bologna Centrale railway station in September, a place where so many people had died, I found myself thinking, somewhat counterintuitively, about how, in the great sweep of history, the political violence in Italy in the 1970s and '80s now seems but a blip. Things were so terrible for so long. And then they weren't. How does political violence come to an end?

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No one can say precisely what alchemy of experience, temperament, and circumstance leads a person to choose political violence. But being part of a group alters a person's moral calculations and sense of identity, not always for the good. Martin Luther King Jr., citing the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, wrote in his "Letter From Birmingham Jail" that "groups tend to be more immoral than individuals." People commit acts together that they'd never contemplate alone.

Vicky Franzinetti was a teenage member of the far-left militant group Lotta Continua during the Years of Lead. "There was a lot of what I would call John Wayneism, and a lot of people fell for that," she told me. "Whether it's the Black Panthers or the people who attacked on January 6 on Capitol Hill, violence has a mesmerizing appeal on a lot of people." A subtle but important shift also took place in Italian political culture during the '60s and '70s as people grasped for group identity. "If you move from what you *want* to who you *are*, there is very little scope for real dialogue, and for the possibility of exchanging ideas, which is the basis of politics," Franzinetti said. "The result is the death of politics, which is what has happened."

In talking with Italians who lived through the Years of Lead about what brought this period to an end, two common themes emerged. The first has to do with economics. For a while, violence was seen as permissible because for too many people, it felt like the only option left in a world that had turned against them. When the Years of Lead began, Italy was still fumbling for a postwar identity. Some Fascists remained in positions of power, and authoritarian regimes controlled several of the country's neighbors—Greece, Portugal, Spain, Turkey. Not unlike the labor movements that arose in Galleani's day, the Years of Lead were preceded by intensifying unrest among factory workers and students, who wanted better social and working conditions. The unrest eventually tipped into violence, which spiraled out of control. Leftists fought for the proletariat, and neofascists fought to wind back the clock to the days of Mussolini. When, after two decades, the economy improved in Italy, terrorism receded.

The second theme was that the public finally got fed up. People didn't want to live in terror. They said, in effect: *Enough*. Lotta Continua hadn't resorted to violence in the early years. When it did grow violent, it alienated its own members. "I didn't like it, and I fought it," Franzinetti told me. Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, a sociology professor at UC Santa Barbara who lived in Rome at the time, recalled: "It went too far. Really, it reached a point that was quite dramatic. It was hard to live through those times." But it took a surprisingly long while to reach that point. The violence crept in—one episode, then another, then another—and people absorbed and compartmentalized the individual events, as many Americans do now. They did not understand just how dangerous things were getting until violence was endemic. "It started out with the kneecappings," Joseph LaPalombara, a Yale political scientist who lived in Rome during the Years of Lead, told me, "and then got worse. And as it got worse, the streets emptied after dark."

A turning point in public sentiment, or at least the start of a turning point, came in the spring of 1978, when the leftist group



known as the Red Brigades kidnapped the former prime minister and leader of the Christian Democrats Aldo Moro, killing all five members of his police escort and turning him into an example of how *We don't negotiate with terrorists* can go terrifically wrong. Moro was held captive and tortured for 54 days, then executed, his body left in the back of a bright-red Renault on a busy Rome street. In a series of letters his captors allowed him to send, Moro had begged Italian officials to arrange for his freedom with a prisoner exchange. They refused. After his murder, the final letter he'd written to his wife, "my dearest Noretta," roughly 10 days before his death, was published in a local newspaper. "In my last hour I am left with a profound bitterness at heart," he wrote. "But it is not of this I want to talk but of you whom I love and will always love." Moro did not want a state funeral, but Italy held one anyway.

The conventional wisdom among terrorism experts had been that terrorists wanted publicity but didn't really want to kill people—or, as the Rand Corporation's Brian Jenkins put it in 1975, "Terrorists want a lot of people watching, not a lot of people dead." But conditions had become so bad by the time Moro was murdered that newspapers around the world were confused when days passed without a political killing or shooting in Italy. "Italians Puzzled by 10-Day Lull in Terrorist Activity," read one headline in *The New York Times* a few weeks after Moro's murder. "When he was killed, it got a lot more serious," Alexander Reid Ross, who hosts a history podcast about the era called *Years of Lead Pod*, told me. "People stopped laughing. It was no longer something where you could say, 'It's a sideshow.'"

The Moro assassination was followed by an intensification of violence, including the Bologna-station bombing. People who had

ignored the violence now paid attention; people who might have been tempted by revolution now stayed home. Meanwhile, the crackdown that followed—which involved curfews, traffic stops, a militarized police presence, and deals with terrorists who agreed to rat out their collaborators—caused violent groups to implode.

The example of Aldo Moro offers a warning. It shouldn't take an act like the assassination of a former prime minister to shake people into awareness. But it often does. William Bernstein, the author of *The Delusions of Crowds*, is not optimistic that anything else will work: "The answer is—and it's not going to be a pleasant answer—the answer is that the violence ends if it boils over into a containable cataclysm." What if, he went on—"I almost hesitate to say this"—but what if they actually had hanged Mike Pence or Nancy Pelosi on January 6? "I think that would have ended it. I don't think it ends without some sort of cathartic cataclysm. I think, absent that, it just boils along for a generation or two generations." Bernstein wasn't the only expert to suggest such a thing.

No wonder some American politicians are terrified. "We've had an exponential increase in threats against members of Congress," Senator Amy Klobuchar, a Democrat from Minnesota, told me in January. Klobuchar thought back to when she was standing at President Joe Biden's inauguration ceremony, two weeks after the attempted insurrection. At the time, as Democrats and most Republicans came together for a peaceful transfer of power, she felt as though a violent eruption in American history might be ending. But Klobuchar now believes she was "naive" to think that Republicans would break with Trump and restore the party's democratic values. "We have Donald Trump, his shadow, looming over everything," she said.





Left: A bodyguard slain by the Red Brigades during the kidnapping of former Italian Prime Minister Aldo Moro, 1978. Right: Graffiti in Milan supporting the Red Brigades, 1977.

This past February, Biden sought to dispel that shadow as he stood before Congress to deliver his State of the Union address. “There’s no place for political violence in America,” he said. “And we must give hate and extremism in any form no safe harbor.” Biden’s speech was punctuated by jeers and name-calling by Republicans.

## IV.

### A BROKEN SOCIAL CONTRACT

The taxonomy of what counts as political violence can be complicated. One way to picture it is as an iceberg: The part that protrudes from the water represents the horrific attacks on both hard targets and soft ones, in which the attacker has explicitly

indicated hatred for the targeted group—fatal attacks at supermarkets and synagogues, as well as assassination attempts such as the shooting at a congressional-Republican baseball practice in 2017. Less visible is the far more extensive mindset that underlies them. “There are a lot of people who are out for a protest, who are advocating for violence,” Erin Miller, the longtime program manager at the University of Maryland’s Global Terrorism Database, told me. “Then there’s a smaller number at the tip of the iceberg that are willing to carry out violent attacks.” You can’t get a grip on political violence just by counting the number of violent episodes. You have to look at the whole culture.

A society’s propensity for political violence—including cataclysmic violence—may be increasing even as ordinary life, for many people, probably most, continues to feel normal. A drum-beat of violent attacks, by different groups with different agendas, may register as different things. But collectively, as in Italy, they have the power to loosen society’s screws.

In December, I spoke again with Alexander Reid Ross, who in addition to hosting *Years of Lead Pod* is a lecturer at Portland State University. We met in Pioneer Courthouse Square, in downtown Portland. I had found the city in a wounded condition. This was tragic to me two times over—first, because I knew what had happened there, and second, because I had immediately absorbed Portland’s charm. You can’t encounter all those drawbridges, or the swooping crows, or the great Borgeian bookstore, or the giant elm trees and do anything but fall in love with the place. But downtown Portland was not at its best. The first day I was there I counted more birds than people, and many of the people I saw were quite obviously struggling badly.

On the gray afternoon when we met, Ross and I happened to be sitting at the site of the first far-right protest he remembers witnessing in his city, back in 2016; members of a group called Students for Trump, stoked by Alex Jones's disinformation outlet, Infowars, had gathered to assert their political preferences and provoke their neighbors. Ross is a geographer, a specialty he assumed would keep him focused on land-use debates and ecology, which is one of the reasons he moved to Oregon in the first place. After that 2016 rally, Ross paid closer attention to the political violence unfolding in Portland. We decided to take a walk so that Ross could point out various landmarks from the—well, we couldn't decide what to call the period of sustained violence that started in 2016 and was reignited in 2020. The siege? The occupation? The revolt? What happened in Portland has a way of being too slippery for precise language.

We walked southwest from the square before doubling back toward the Willamette River. Over here was the historical society that protesters broke into and vandalized one night. Over there was where the statues got toppled. ("Portland is a city of pedestals now," Ross said.) A federal building still had a protective fence surrounding it more than a year after the street violence had ended. At one point, the mayor had to order a drawbridge raised to keep combatants apart.

On the evening of June 30, 2018, Ross found himself in the middle of a violent brawl between hundreds of self-described antifa activists and members of the Proud Boys and Patriot Prayer, a local pro-Trump offshoot. Ross described to me a number of "ghoulish" encounters he'd had with Patriot Prayer, and I asked him which moment was the scariest. "It's on video," he told me. "You can see it: me getting punched." I later watched the video. In it, Ross rushes toward a group of men who are repeatedly kicking and bludgeoning a person dressed all in black, lying in the street. Ross had told me earlier that he'd intervened because he thought he was watching someone being beaten to death. After Ross gets clocked, he appears dazed, then dashes back toward the fight. "That's enough! That's enough!" he shouts.

By the time of this fight, Patriot Prayer had become a fixture in Portland. Its founder, Joey Gibson, has said in interviews that he was inspired to start Patriot Prayer to fight for free speech, but the group's core belief has always been in Donald Trump. Its first event, in Vancouver, Washington, in October 2016, was a pro-Trump rally. From there, Gibson deliberately picked ultraliberal cities such as Portland, Berkeley, Seattle, and San Francisco for his protests, and in doing so quickly attracted like-minded radicals—the Proud Boys, the Three Percenters, Identity Evropa, the Hell Shaking Street Preachers—who marched alongside Patriot Prayer. These were people who seemed to love Trump and shit-stirring in equal measure. White nationalists and self-described Western chauvinists showed up at Gibson's events. (Gibson's mother is Japanese, and he has insisted that he does not share their views.) By August 2018, Patriot Prayer had already held at least nine rallies in Portland, routinely drawing hundreds of supporters—grown men in Boba Fett helmets and other homemade costumes; at least one man with an SS neck tattoo. In 2019, Gibson himself was arrested on a riot charge. Patriot Prayer quickly became the darling of Infowars.

The morning after I met Ross, I drove across the river to Vancouver, a town of strip-mall churches and ponderosa pine trees, to meet with Lars Larson, who records *The Lars Larson Show*—tagline: "Honestly Provocative Talk Radio"—from his home studio. Larson greeted me with his two dogs and a big mug of coffee. His warmth, quick-mindedness, and tendency to filibuster make him irresistible for talk radio. And his allegiance to MAGA world helps him book guests like Donald Trump Jr., whom Larson introduced on a recent episode as "the son of the *real* president of the United States of America." Over the course of our conversation, he described January 6 as "some ruined furniture in the Capitol"; suggested that the city government of Charlottesville, Virginia, was secretly behind the violent clash at the 2017 "Unite the Right" rally; and made multiple references to George Soros, including suggesting that Soros may have paid for people to come to Portland to tear up the city. When I pressed Larson on various points, he would walk back whatever he had claimed, but only slightly. He does not seem to be a conspiracy theorist, but he plays one on the radio.

Larson blamed Portland's troubles on a culture of lawlessness fostered by a district attorney who, he said, repeatedly declined to prosecute left-wing protesters. He sees this as an uneven application of justice that undermined people's faith in local government. It is more accurate to say that the district attorney chose not to prosecute lesser crimes, focusing instead on serious crimes against people and property; ironically, the complaint about uneven application comes from both the far left and the far right. When I asked Larson whether Patriot Prayer is Christian nationalist in ideology, the question seemed to make him uncomfortable, and he emphasized his belief in pluralism and religious freedom. He also compared Joey Gibson and Patriot Prayer marching on Portland to civil-rights activists marching on Selma in 1965. "What I heard people tell Patriot Prayer is 'If you get attacked every time you go to Portland, don't go to Portland,'" he told me. "Would you have given that same advice to Martin Luther King?"

Gibson's lawyer Angus Lee accused the government of "political persecution"; Gibson was ultimately acquitted of the riot charge. Patriot Prayer, Lee went on, is "not like these other organizations you referenced that have members and that sort of thing. Patriot Prayer is more of an idea." Gibson himself once put it in blunter terms. "I don't even know what Patriot Prayer is anymore," he said in a 2017 interview on a public-access news channel in Portland. "It's just these two words that people hear and it sparks emotions . . . All Patriot Prayer is is videos and social-media presence."

The more I talked with people about Patriot Prayer, the more it began to resemble a phenomenon like QAnon—a decentralized and amorphous movement designed to provoke reaction, tolerant of contradictions, borrowing heavily from internet culture, overlapping with other extremist movements like the Proud Boys, linked to high-profile episodes of violence, and ultimately focused on Trump. I couldn't help but think of Galleani, his "beautiful idea," and the diffuse ideology of his followers. One key difference: Galleani was fighting against the state, whereas movements like QAnon and groups like Patriot Prayer and the Proud Boys have been cheered on by a sitting president and his party.

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When I met with Portland's mayor, Ted Wheeler, at city hall, he recalled night after night of violence, and at times planning for the very worst, meaning mass casualties. Portlanders had taken to calling him "Tear Gas Ted" because of the police response in the city. One part of any mayor's job is to absorb the community's scorn. Few people have patience for unfilled potholes or the complexities of trash collection. Disdain for Wheeler may have been the one thing that just about every person I met in Portland shared, but his job has been difficult even by big-city standards. He confronted a breakdown of the social contract.

"Political violence, in my opinion, is the extreme manifestation of other trends that are prevalent in our society," Wheeler told me. "A healthy democracy is one where you can sit on one side of the table and express an opinion, and I can sit on the other side of the table and express a very different opinion, and then we have the contest of ideas ... We have it out verbally. Then we go drink a beer or whatever."

When extremists began taunting Portlanders online, it was very quickly "game on" for violence in the streets, Wheeler said. In this way, Portland stands as a warning to cities that now seem calm: It takes very little provocation to inflame latent tensions between warring factions. Once order collapses, it is extraordinarily difficult to restore. And it can be dangerous to attempt to do so through the use of force, especially when one violent faction is lashing out, in part, against state authority.

Aaron Mesh moved to Portland 16 years ago, to take a job as *Willamette Week's* film critic, and since then has worked his way up to managing editor. He is sharp-tongued and good-humored, and it is obvious that he loves his city in the way that any good newspaperman does, with a mix of fierce loyalty and heaping criticism. Like Wheeler, he trained attention on the dynamic of action and reaction—on how rising to the bait not only solves nothing but can make things worse. "There was this attitude of *We're going to theatrically subdue your city with these weekend excursions*," Mesh said, describing the confrontations that began in 2016 as a form of cosplay, with right-wing extremists wearing everything from feathered hats to Pepe the Frog costumes and left-wing extremists dressed up in what's known as black bloc: all-black clothing and facial coverings. "I do want to emphasize," he said, "that everyone involved in this was a massive fucking loser, on both sides."

It was as though all of the most unsavory characters on the internet had crawled out of the computer. The fights were enough of a spectacle that not everyone took them seriously at first. Mesh said it was impossible to overstate "the degree to which Portland became a lodestone in the imagination of a nascent Proud Boys movement," a place where paramilitary figures on the right went "to prove that they had testicles." He went on: "You walk into town wearing a helmet and carrying a big American flag" and then wait and see "who throws an egg at your car or who gives you the middle finger, and you beat the living hell out of them."

Both sides behaved despicably. But only the right-wingers had the endorsement of the president and the mainstream Republican Party. "Despite being run by utter morons," Mesh

said of Patriot Prayer, “they managed to outsmart most of their adversaries in this city, simply by provoking violent reactions from people who were appalled by their politics.” The argument for violence among people on the left is often, essentially, *If you encounter a Nazi, you should punch him*. But “what if the only thing the Nazi wants is for you to punch him?” Mesh asked. “What if the Nazis all have cameras and they’re immediately feeding all the videos of you punching them to Tucker Carlson? Which is what they did.”

The situation in Portland became so desperate, and the ideologies involved so tangled, that the violence began to operate like its own weather system—a phenomenon that the majority of Portlanders could see coming and avoid, but one that left behind tremendous destruction. Most people don’t want to fight. But it takes startlingly few violent individuals to exact generational damage.



V.

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## THE COMPLICIT STATE

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America was born in revolution, and violence has been an undercurrent in the nation’s politics ever since. People remember the brutal opposition to the civil-rights struggle, and recall the wave of terrorism spawned by the anti-war movement of the 1960s. But the most direct precursor to what we’re experiencing now is the anti-government Patriot movement, which can be traced to the 1980s and eventually led to deadly stand-offs between federal agents and armed citizens at Ruby Ridge, Idaho, in 1992, and in Waco, Texas, in 1993. Three people were killed at Ruby Ridge. As many as 80 died in Waco, 25 of them children. Those incidents stirred the present-day militia movement and directly inspired the Oklahoma City bombers, anti-government extremists who killed 168 people at the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in 1995. The surge in militia activity, white nationalism, and apocalypticism of the 1990s seemed to peter out in the early 2000s. This once struck me as a bright spot, an earlier success we might learn from today. But when I mentioned this notion to Carolyn Gallaher, a scholar who spent two years following a right-wing paramilitary group in Kentucky in the 1990s, she said, “The militia movement

waned very quickly in the 1990s not because of anything we did, but because of Oklahoma City. That bombing really put the movement on the back foot. Some groups went underground. Some groups dispersed. You also saw that happen with white-supremacist groups.”

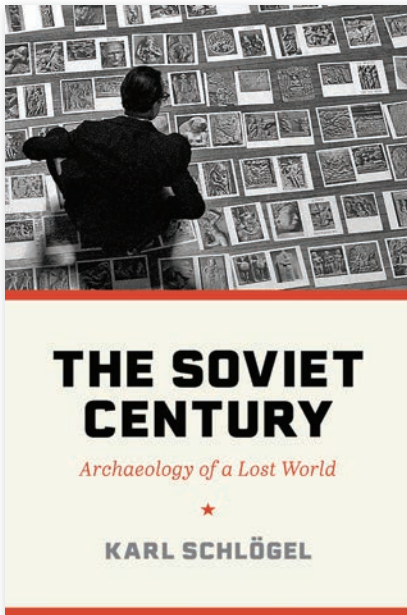
A generation later, political violence in America unfolds with little organized guidance and is fed by a mishmash of extremist right-wing views. It predates the emergence of Donald Trump, but Trump served as an accelerant. He also made tolerance of political violence a defining trait of his party, whereas in the past, both political parties condemned it. At the height of the Patriot movement, “there was this fire wall” between extremist groups and elected officials that protected democratic norms, according to Gallaher. Today, “the fire wall between these guys and formal politics has melted away.” Gallaher does not anticipate an outbreak of civil strife in America in a “classic sense”—with Blue and Red armies or militias fighting for territory. “Our extremist groups are nowhere near as organized as they are in other countries.”

Because it is chaotic, Americans tend to underestimate political violence, as Italians at first did during the Years of Lead. Some see it as merely sporadic, and shift attention to other things. Some say, in effect, *Wake me when there’s civil war*. Some take heart from moments of supposed reprieve, such as the poor showing by election deniers and other extremists in the 2022 midterm elections. But think of all the ongoing violence that at first glance isn’t labeled as being about politics per se, but is in fact political: the violence, including mass shootings, directed at LGBTQ communities, at Jews, and at immigrants, among others. In November, the Department of Homeland Security issued a bulletin warning that “the United States remains in a heightened threat environment” due to individuals and small groups with a range of “violent extremist ideologies.” It warned of potential attacks against a long list of places and people: “public gatherings, faith-based institutions, the LGBTQI+ community, schools, racial and religious minorities, government facilities and personnel, U.S. critical infrastructure, the media, and perceived ideological opponents.”

The broad scope of the warning should not be surprising—not after the massacres in Pittsburgh, El Paso, Buffalo, and elsewhere. One month into 2023, the pace of mass shootings in America—all either political or, inevitably, politicized—was at an all-time high. “There’s no place that’s immune right now,” Mary McCord, the former assistant U.S. attorney, observed. “It’s really everywhere.” She added, “Someday, God help us, we’ll come out of this. But it’s hard for me to imagine how.”

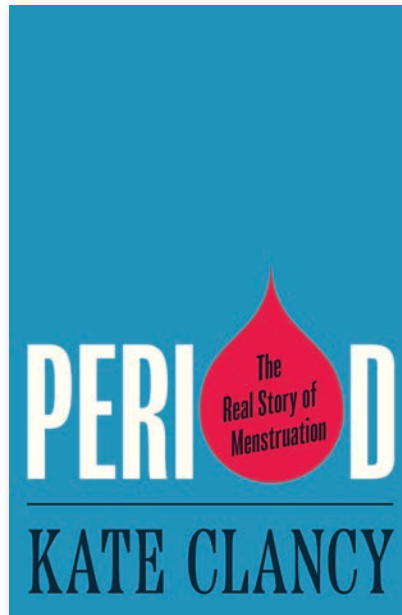
The sociologist Norbert Elias, who left Germany for France and then Britain as the Nazi regime took hold, famously described what he called the civilizing process as “a long sequence of spurts and counter-spurts,” warning that you cannot fix a violent society simply by eliminating the factors that made it deteriorate in the first place. Violence and the forces that underlie it have the potential to take us from the democratic backsliding we already know to a condition known as decivilization. In periods of decivilization, ordinary people fail to find common ground with one another and lose faith in

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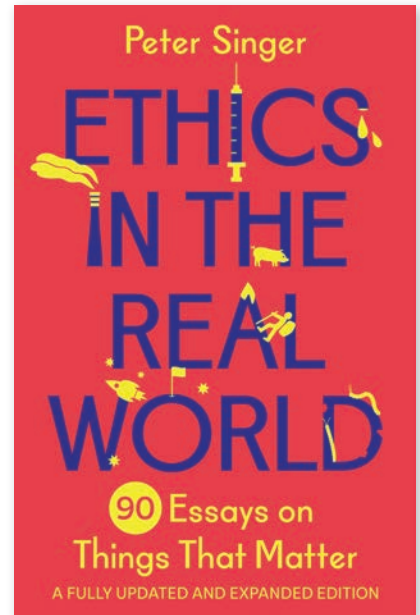
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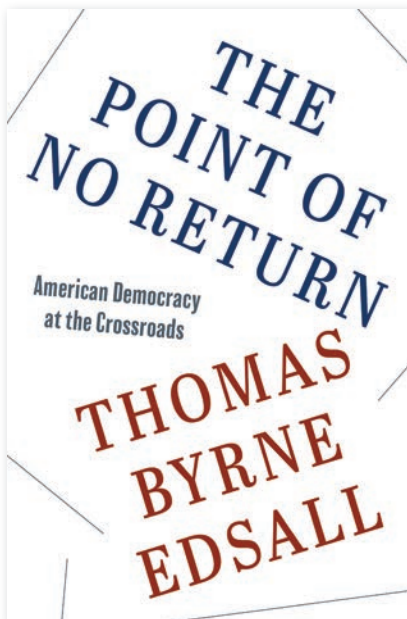
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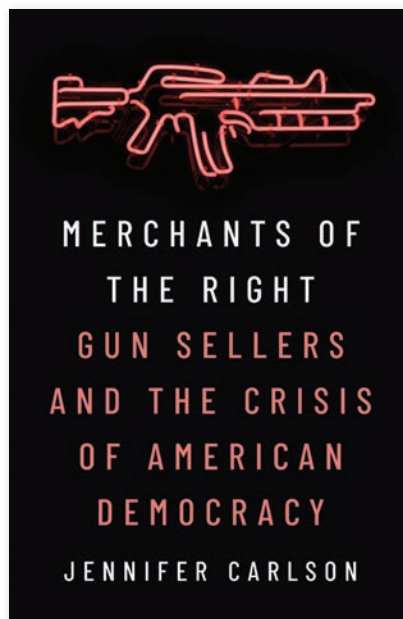
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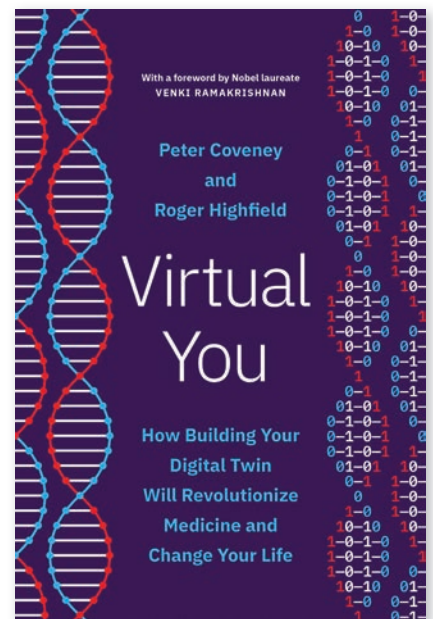
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“[A] wide-ranging investigation into efforts by scientists to create digitised ‘twins’ of human beings that promises a future of predictive medicine, but also ethical challenges.”

—*Financial Times*



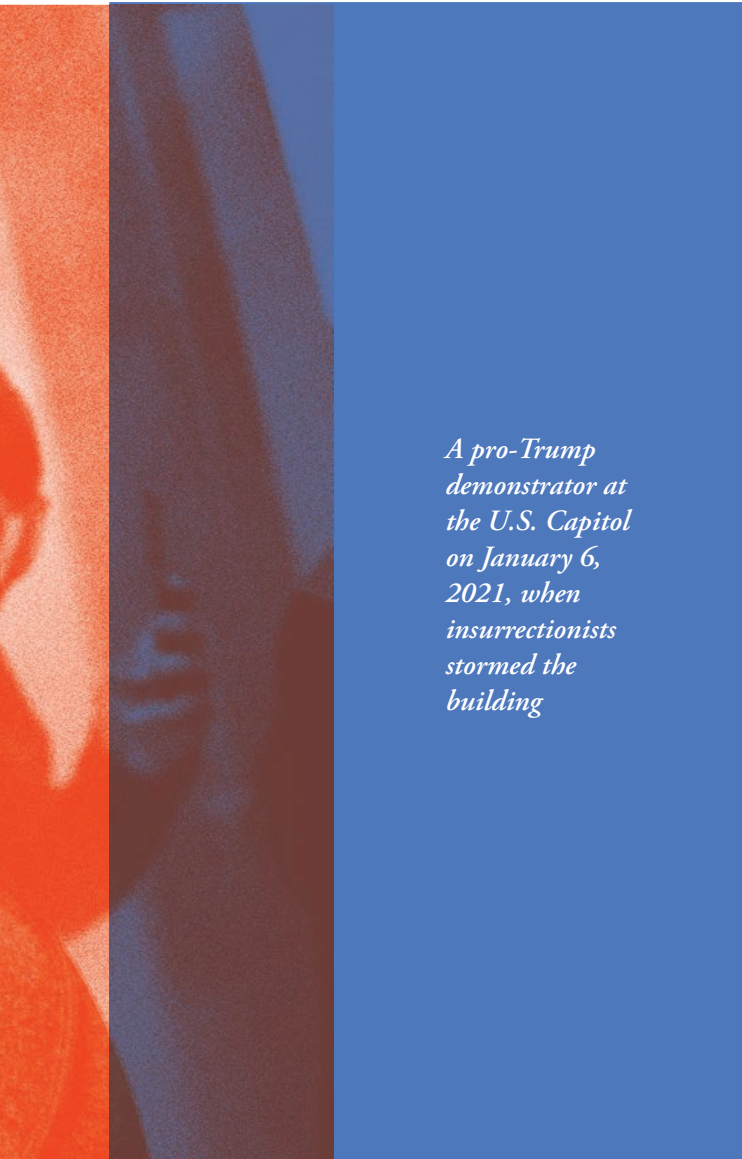
institutions and elected leaders. Shared knowledge erodes, and bonds fray across society. Some people inevitably decide to act with violence. As violence increases, so does distrust in institutions and leaders, and around and around it goes. The process is not inevitable—it can be held in check—but if a period of bloodshed is sustained for long enough, there is no shortcut back to normal. And signs of decivilization are visible now.

“The path out of bloodshed is measured not in years but in generations,” Rachel Kleinfeld writes in *A Savage Order*, her 2018 study of extreme violence and the ways it corrodes a society. “Once a democracy descends into extreme violence, it is always more vulnerable to backsliding.” Cultural patterns, once set, are durable—the relatively high rates of violence in the American South, in part a legacy of racism and slaveholding, persist to this day. In *The Delusions of Crowds*, William Bernstein looks further afield, to Germany. He told me, “You can actually predict

anti-Semitism and voting for the Nazi Party by going back to the anti-Semitism across those same regions in the 14th century. You can trace it city to city.”

Three realities mark the current era of political violence in America as different from what has come before, and make dealing with it much harder. The first—obvious—is the universal access to weaponry, including military-grade weapons.

Second, today’s information environment is simultaneously more sophisticated and more fragmented than ever before. In 2006, the analyst Bruce Hoffman argued that contemporary terrorism had become dangerously amorphous. He was referring to groups like al-Qaeda, but we now witness what he described among domestic American extremists. As Hoffman and others see it, the defining characteristic of post-9/11 terrorism is that it is decentralized. You don’t need to be part of an organization to become a terrorist. Hateful ideas and conspiracy theories are



*A pro-Trump demonstrator at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, when insurrectionists stormed the building*

not only easy to find online; they're actively amplified by social platforms, whose algorithms prioritize the anger and hate that drive engagement and profit. The barriers to radicalization are now almost nonexistent. Luigi Galleani would have loved Twitter, YouTube, and Telegram. He had to settle for publishing a weekly newspaper. Because of social media, conspiracy theories now spread instantly and globally, often promoted by hugely influential figures in the media, such as Tucker Carlson and of course Trump, whom Twitter and Facebook have just reinstated.

The third new reality goes to the core of American self-governance: people refusing to accept the outcome of elections, with national leaders fueling the skepticism and leveraging it for their own ends. In periods of decivilization, violence often becomes part of a governing strategy. This can happen when weak states acquiesce to violence simply to survive. Or it can happen when politicians align themselves with violent groups in order

to bolster authority—a characteristic of what Kleinfeld, in her 2018 book, calls a “complicit state.” This is a well-known tactic among authoritarian incumbents worldwide who wield power by mobilizing state and vigilante violence in tandem.

Complicity is insidious. It doesn't require a revolution. You can see complicity, for example, in Trump's order to the Proud Boys to “stand back and stand by” in the months ahead of January 6. You can see it in the Republican Party's defense of Trump even after he propelled insurrectionists toward the U.S. Capitol. And you can see it in the way that powerful politicians and television personalities continue to cheer on right-wing extremists as “patriots” and “political prisoners,” rather than condemning them as vigilantes and secessionists.

Americans sometimes wonder what might have happened if the Civil War had gone the other way—what the nation would be like now, or whether it would even exist, if the South had won. But that thought experiment overlooks the fact that we *do* know what it looks like for violent extremists to win in the United States. In the 1870s, white supremacists who objected to Reconstruction led a campaign of violence that they perversely referred to as Redemption. They murdered thousands of Black people in terror lynchings. They drove thousands more Black business owners, journalists, and elected officials out of their homes and hometowns, destroying their livelihoods. Sometimes violence ends not because it is overcome, but because it has achieved its goal.

Norbert Elias's warnings notwithstanding, dealing seriously with society's underlying pathologies is part of the answer to political violence in the long term. But so, too, is something we have not had and perhaps can barely imagine anymore: leaders from all parts of the political constellation, and at all levels of government, and from all segments of society, who name the problem of political violence for what it is, explain how it will overwhelm us, and point a finger at those who foment it, either directly or indirectly. Leaders who understand that nothing else will matter if we can't stop this one thing. The federal government is right to take a hard line against political violence—as it has done with its prosecutions of Governor Whitmer's would-be kidnappers and the January 6 insurrectionists (almost 1,000 of whom have been charged). But violence must also be confronted where it first takes root, in the minds of citizens.

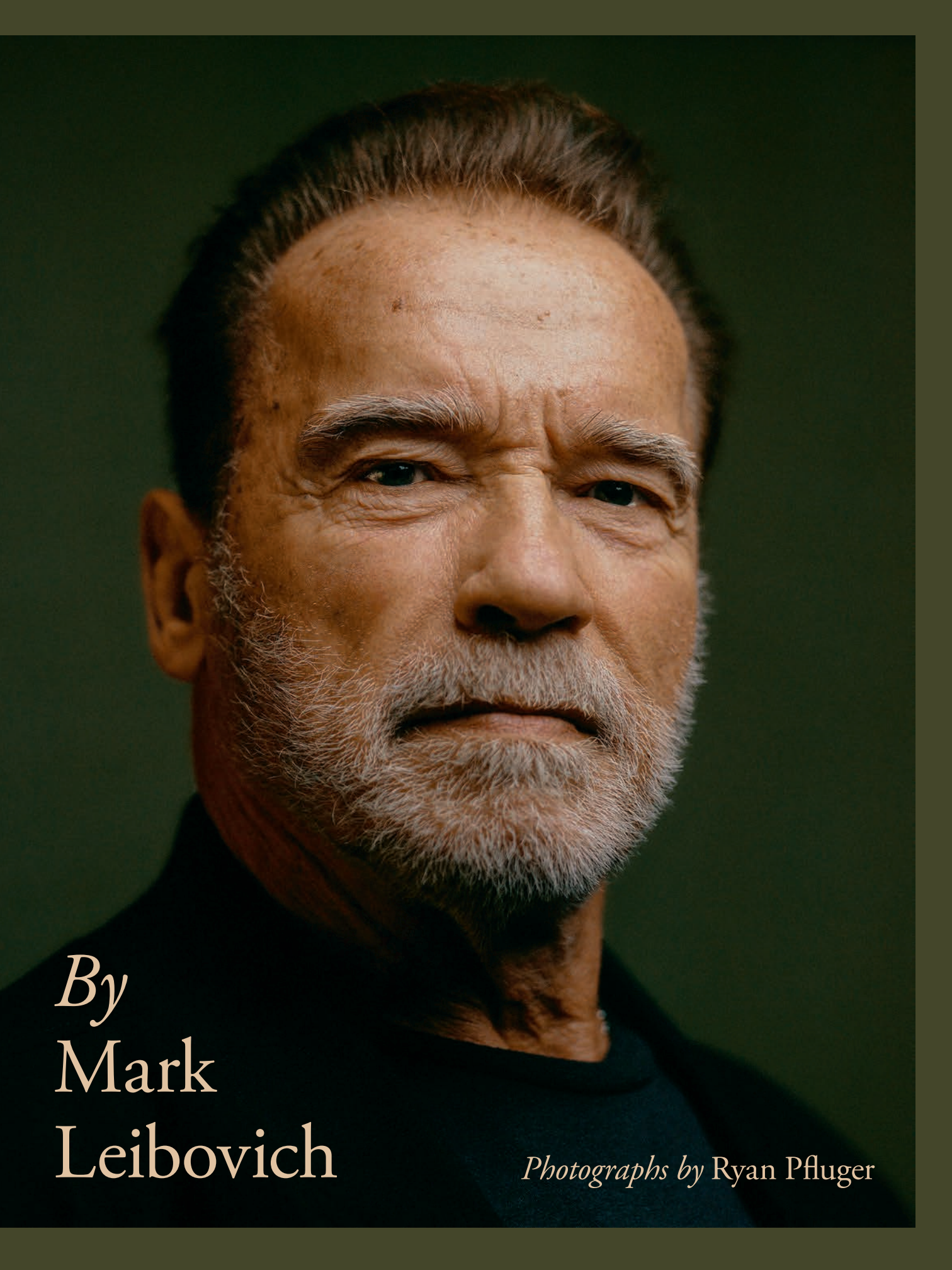
Ending political violence means facing down those who use the language of democracy to weaken democratic systems. It means rebuking the conspiracy theorist who uses the rhetoric of truth-seeking to obscure what's real; the billionaire who describes his privately owned social platform as a democratic town square; the secessionist who proclaims himself a patriot; the authoritarian who claims to love freedom. Someday, historians will look back at this moment and tell one of two stories: The first is a story of how democracy and reason prevailed. The second is a story of how minds grew fevered and blood was spilled in the twilight of a great experiment that did not have to end the way it did. *A*

*Adrienne LaFrance is the executive editor of The Atlantic.*

# Arnold's Last Act

*What happens  
when the Terminator  
turns 75*





*By*  
Mark  
Leibovich

*Photographs by Ryan Pfluger*

# Arnold Schwarzenegger nearly killed me.

I had joined him one morning as he rushed through his daily routine. Schwarzenegger gets up by six. He makes coffee, puts around, feeds Whiskey (his miniature horse) and Lulu (his miniature donkey), shovels their overnight manure into a barrel, drinks his coffee, checks his email, and maybe plays a quick game of chess online. At 7:40, he puts a bike on the back of a Suburban and heads from his Brentwood, California, mansion to the Fairmont Miramar Hotel in Santa Monica. From there he sets out on the three-mile bike ride to Gold's Gym, where he has been lifting on and off since the late '60s. The bike ride is his favorite part of the morning. It is also, I learned while following behind him on that foggy day in October, a terrifying expedition.

Schwarzenegger can be selective in his observance of traffic signals. He zipped through intersections with cars screeching behind him. I braked hard and, being neither an action hero nor a stunt double, barely stayed upright. Drivers honked and yelled at the speeding cyclist in the lead until they realized who he was. "Heyyyy, Mister Arnold!" the double-taking driver of a landscaping van shouted out his window.

Schwarzenegger does not wear a helmet and seems to enjoy being recognized, startling commuters with drive-by cameos. He describes his ride as a kind of vigorous nostalgia trip, a time when the former Mr. Universe, Terminator, Barbarian, Governor of California, etc.—one of the strangest and most potent alloys of

American celebrity ever forged—can reconnect with something in the neighborhood of a pedestrian existence. "It's like a Norman Rockwell," Schwarzenegger told me. "We talk to the bus driver. We do the garbage man, the construction worker. Everyone's got their beautiful, beautiful jobs and professions." These days, Schwarzenegger's own beautiful profession is to essentially be an emeritus version of himself.

We made it intact to Gold's Gym in Venice, the birthplace of bodybuilding in the '60s and '70s, and a cathedral to the sport ever since. Schwarzenegger will always be synonymous with the place, and with the spectacle of specimens at nearby Muscle Beach. The Venice Gold's is a tourist attraction but also a serious gym—loud with the usual clanking and grunting, and redolent with the pickled scent of sweat.

"Say hi to Heide," Schwarzenegger told me, pointing to 82-year-old Heide Sutter, who was working out in a skintight tracksuit. "She is a landmark," he said. "She's actually the girl who is sitting on my shoulder in the *Pumping Iron* book. She was topless in the shot." Perhaps I recognized her? Not immediately, no. I didn't even realize that *Pumping Iron* was a book. I knew it only as a movie, the 1977 documentary about the fanatical culture of bodybuilding. "Everybody wants to live forever," went the opening refrain of the title song. Schwarzenegger, then 28, was the star of the film and a testament to the idea that humans could mold themselves into gods—bulging comic-book gods, but gods nonetheless.

"The most satisfying feeling you can get in the gym is the pump," he says in the movie. "It's as satisfying to me as coming is, as in having sex with a woman and coming ... So can you believe how much I am in heaven?"

Now the aging leviathan jumped into a series of light repetitions. He likes to emphasize a different body part each day of the week. He was focused today (a Thursday) on his back and chest muscles. He did light bench presses, pectoral work on an incline chest machine, and some lat pull-downs. I did a few reps myself on an adjacent machine, to blend in.

For the most part, the muscled minions at Gold's left the king alone. "This is one of the few places where Arnold is treated normally," said Daniel Ketchell, Schwarzenegger's chief of staff, who hovered between us. A few tourists from Germany defied protocol and approached the bench, asking for selfies. "Don't worry about it," Schwarzenegger said, blowing them off. "We have a mutual friend," tried another intruder, and Schwarzenegger scowled, muttering indecipherably, possibly in German.

As someone who spent years perfecting his body, Schwarzenegger has always been attuned to the nuances of decline. Paul Wachter, a friend and business partner, first met him in 1981, when Wachter was about to turn 25. "Arnold said, 'Once you hit 26, it's all downhill with the body,'" Wachter recalled. "He said, 'You can still be in shape, but the peak is over at 26.'"

Schwarzenegger is now 75. He observed his birthday on July 30 by trying not to notice it. The only memorable thing about the milestone was that he tested positive for COVID that morning. He felt lousy for a few days and recovered.

I wanted to talk with Schwarzenegger because I was curious about what aging felt like for someone with a name, body,

and global platform so huge that they hardly seemed subject to time. What does it feel like to be perpetually compared with your long-ago peak? “They play *Pumping Iron* in a loop in some of the gyms,” Schwarzenegger told me, grinning at the idea of his souped-up old self still presiding over the pretenders. We all get soft and dilapidated, but it cuts much harder when you’ve been “celebrated for years for having the best-developed body,” as he put it. “You get chubby. You get overweight, you get older and older.” Just imagine, he added wistfully, “the change I saw.”

As I watched him complete his workout, Schwarzenegger was barely clearing 120 pounds on the bench press. After decades of abuse, the man’s shoulders are toast. His knees are shot, his back is sore, and he has undergone multiple heart procedures, including three separate valve-replacement surgeries, the last in 2020. Two of them devolved into 10-plus-hour ordeals that nearly killed him on the table. Still, let it be recorded that on a foggy October morning at Gold’s Gym in Venice, I was lifting heavier weights than Arnold Schwarzenegger was.

After our workout, Schwarzenegger stood a few feet away and looked me over, paying particular attention to my bare legs.

“You have very good calves,” he observed. “Very well defined.” And calves are important, he added: “They are one of the muscles that the old Greeks used to idolize.” Big deltoids are also coveted. In addition to abs and obliques. But he always takes note of a person’s calves. This was easily the highlight of my day, if not my five decades among Earth mortals.

A COUPLE OF years ago, Howard Stern asked Schwarzenegger on the air where he thought we all go after we die. “The truth is, we’re six feet under, and we’re going to rot there,” Schwarzenegger said. Some other authority gets to play the Terminator, and on a schedule of their choosing. Schwarzenegger wasn’t afraid of death, he added. “I’m just pissed off about it.”

Emotionally, Schwarzenegger has always been a padlocked gym. But he’s felt a change lately, a more reflective shift. People close to him have noted a degree of openness, a desire to confide, that wasn’t present back when he was young and invincible. Schwarzenegger told me that he recently attended the premiere

of the new *Avatar* film (directed by his old friend James Cameron) and found himself crying in the dark. Someone will tell a story and he’ll choke up out of nowhere. He asks himself: “Why did this have an impact on me today when it would have had none in the 1970s?”

The day before our helter-skelter bike ride, I had caught Schwarzenegger leaning against a doorway of the Chinese Theatre, on Hollywood Boulevard. He was waiting to give a brief speech in honor of Jamie Lee Curtis, who was about to get her hand- and footprints embedded in cement.

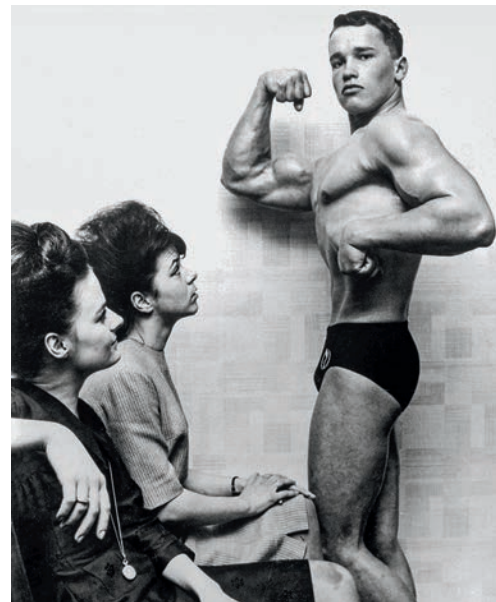
“I was trying to think of a big word,” Schwarzenegger told me. “You know, a forever thing, or something like that.” He kept landing on *verewigt*; German for “immortalized.” “It means ‘forever,’” he said. Ketchell encouraged the boss to not overthink it. “Just say ‘immortalized,’” Ketchell told him. This is Hollywood—speak in the native platitude.

Curtis walked into the theater and greeted Schwarzenegger. They performed ritual Hollywood shoulder rubs on each other. The two go way back: Schwarzenegger once did a Christmas special with her father, Tony Curtis. They have houses near each other in Sun Valley. In 1994, Schwarzenegger and Curtis co-starred in *True Lies*, the Cameron action comedy. That was the same year Schwarzenegger’s own massive hands and feet were set at the Chinese Theatre. He mentioned this more than once.

Schwarzenegger introduced me to Curtis, who told me how much she appreciated Arnold’s “showing up” for her. “Showing up” was a big part of the job these days. Then Curtis headed to the stage, while Schwarzenegger stayed behind in the doorway, squinting out into the glare. He looked fidgety, maybe bored. He asked me whether I had seen the spot where his hands and feet were imprinted.

Yes, I’d seen it. I’LL BE BACK, Schwarzenegger had signed in the concrete—his signature line, first uttered in *The Terminator*,

*Schwarzenegger  
isn't afraid of death.  
"I'm just pissed  
off about it."*



before his character circled back and murdered two dozen police officers. Schwarzenegger has been tossing out “I’ll be back”’s ever since. The phrase carries “intimations of the eternal return,” an overheated critic once wrote in *The Village Voice*. But it lands a little differently now that the aging gargantuan is inching closer to the point of no return.

The reminders are everywhere, the worst one being that Schwarzenegger’s friends keep dying. Jim Lorimer, a sidekick and business partner of more than 50 years, and an early promoter of bodybuilding in America, died in November (Schwarzenegger spoke at his funeral). George Shultz, the Reagan-era secretary of state who became a close mentor, died in early 2021. The hardest loss was the Italian champion Franco Columbu, another *Pumping Iron* icon, known as the “Sardinian Strongman,” who died of an apparent heart attack in 2019. “I love you Franco,” Schwarzenegger wrote in an Instagram tribute. “You were my best friend.” Schwarzenegger listed a roster of other deaths, each depleting him more. “It’s wild, because these are not just friends,” he told me. “If people have a tremendous impact on your life, that means that a chunk of you is being ripped away.”

On the morning when we went to Gold’s, Schwarzenegger made a small detour afterward to show me the one-bedroom apartment he used to share with Columbu at 227 Strand Street, in Santa Monica. They lived there for about a year in the late ’60s, not long after each had landed in the States, while they were both making a living laying bricks. The dwelling, a blue-and-beige box with institutional windows, betrayed no trace of the behemoths who’d once resided there.

Schwarzenegger stared up at the soulless space. “He was the best,” he said of his friend.

**FOR MY NINTH BIRTHDAY**, my parents got me a subscription to *Sports Illustrated*. One of the first issues I received featured photos from the 1974 Mr. Olympia contest, in New

York. It was won, naturally, by the man *SI* called “enough of a legend for his first name to evoke a response wherever a barbell is picked up with purpose.”

Schwarzenegger won Mr. Olympia seven times, and Mr. Universe four. But he is dissatisfied by nature, and from a young age not easily contained. At 21, he set out for America. He felt alienated by the complacency of his boyhood friends: They aspired to a government job with a pension, maybe; church on Sunday; the usual. “I say to myself, *Are we really just clowns? And just do the same fucking things as the guy before? ... And I’m like, What the fuck? I better get out of here.*” Standing on a stage in South Africa after winning Mr. Olympia yet again, Schwarzenegger felt the same old restlessness. “I looked around and said to myself, *I’ve got to get out of this.*”

He charged into showbiz and became similarly huge, making \$35 million a film at his peak. “But then I outgrew that,” he said, mentioning *Terminator 3*, which brought in a burly \$433 million at the box office in 2003. “And somehow I feel like I was standing on that stage again in South Africa.”

Next? Politics! He’d always been intrigued by the business; he married a Kennedy, and George H. W. Bush appointed him chairman of the President’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sports (he claims to have presented 41 with a calf machine). And then, oh look, California was about to recall its pencil-necked governor, Gray Davis. Schwarzenegger jumped in and won his first attempt at elected office, also in 2003. He loved the job, telling me that of all the titles he has racked up, Governor is the one he cherishes the most.

Schwarzenegger was reelected by 17 points in 2006, though his popularity cratered by the time he left office, devoured by the usual bears of budgets, legislatures, and ornery voters. At that point he was not only term-limited by California law; he was also promotion-limited by Article II, Section 1 of the U.S. Constitution. He has often said he would definitely run for president if he could, except he was born in Austria.



Instead, upon leaving Sacramento, Schwarzenegger was greeted by scandal. He admitted to fathering a son in the 1990s with Mildred Patricia Baena, a family housekeeper for 20 years. Mildred and Schwarzenegger's wife, Maria Shriver, had been in the house pregnant with his children at the same time.

After the story came out, Schwarzenegger retrenched for a while, tried to repair relations with his five kids, including his no-longer-secret teenage son, Joseph Baena. He and Shriver tried marriage counseling. It did not suit him, and it did not save the marriage. "I think I went two or three times," Schwarzenegger told me. He dismissed the therapist as a "schmuck" who was "definitely on her side." He admitted that he'd "fucked up" but did not believe the situation required any deeper exploration. "The fucking weenie gets hard and I fucking lose this brain and this happened," he said. "It's one of the biggest mistakes that so many successful people make, you know, so what am I going to say?"

What to do next? Susan Kennedy (no relation to Maria), Schwarzenegger's chief of staff during the Sacramento years, told me that he missed his position as governor. "He had to learn a new role as a senior statesman"—one who was no longer in office. He took on a few film projects and did his various events and causes and summits. His friends saw that he was struggling. "To wake up without a purpose is a dangerous place to be," Jamie Lee Curtis told me.

Meanwhile, another celebrity tycoon, Donald Trump, jumped into politics and landed in the White House on his first try, leaving Schwarzenegger with the dregs of *The Celebrity Apprentice*. Arnold's *Apprentice* went about as well as Trump's presidency.

"Hey, Donald, I have a great idea. Why don't we switch jobs?" Schwarzenegger tweeted in response to the president's taunting of the show's ratings, before it was killed in 2017.

During the scary early months of the pandemic, Schwarzenegger began posting homemade PSA videos on social media as a lark. They showed him drowsing around his 14,000-square-foot mansion in Brentwood, smoking cigars and sitting in his hot tub.

From left to right:  
*Schwarzenegger at age 11 in art class in Thal, Austria, 1958; at the Mr. Steiermark competition in Graz, Austria, 1963 or '64; performing in "Articulate Muscle: The Male Body in Art" at the Whitney Museum in New York, 1976; and with Jamie Lee Curtis in True Lies, 1994*

He led exercise tutorials and taught proper hand-washing techniques. "I wash my hands a minimum of 50 times a day," he blustered into the camera from the kitchen sink. An ensemble of whimsical pets roamed in and out of the frame—Whiskey, Lulu, an assortment of tiny and massive (*Twins* style) Yorkies and malamutes.

Suddenly, Schwarzenegger was enjoying one of those random social-media moments—quarantined and yet everywhere at once. He was a goofball colossus called back into action. People loved the role: Arnold in winter. Conan the Septuagenarian. I watched the clips again and again. *Wear a mask! Don't party with your friends like a dumbass! Exercise!* The videos were an escape from my remote-work quicksand. The protagonist looked unsettled but also purposeful. Or maybe I was projecting. I very well could have been projecting.

Then Schwarzenegger watched the ransacking of the U.S. Capitol by Trump's supporters on January 6, 2021. He was horrified, and felt moved to make a different kind of video. Flanked by American and Californian flags, he talked about coming as "an immigrant to this country." He compared January 6

to Kristallnacht, the “Night of Broken Glass,” in 1938, which, he said, had been perpetrated by “the Nazi equivalent of the Proud Boys.” According to Schwarzenegger’s team, the video was viewed 80 million times. It was the biggest thing he’d done since he’d left office. “You never plan these things,” he told me.

As he ended the message, Schwarzenegger brandished his famous Conan sword. Because of course he did.

“The more you temper a sword, the stronger it becomes,” he said, suggesting that the same was true of American democracy. “I believe we will come out of this stronger, because we now understand what can be lost.” I remember thinking this was a hopeful take.

SCHWARZENEGGER was born two years after World War II ended and grew up, as he put it, “in the ruins of a country that suffered the loss of its democracy.” His father, Gustav Schwarzenegger, was a

police chief in Graz, Austria, and fought for the Nazis. Schwarzenegger has spoken more freely of late about his father’s activities and his own attempts to reconcile with them. History need not repeat—that has been his essential theme. Hatred and prejudice are not inevitable features of humanity. “You don’t have to be stuck in that,” he told me. Humans “have the capacity to change.”

When Schwarzenegger first made it big in Hollywood, he approached the Simon Wiesenthal Center, the Holocaust research and human-rights group, seeking to learn about his father’s complicity. Gustav’s record came back relatively clean. He “was definitely a member of the Nazi Party, but he worked in areas like the post office,” Rabbi Marvin Hier, the founder and CEO of the center, told me. Researchers there found “no evidence whatsoever about war crimes.” But it may be more complicated than that. According to Michael Berenbaum, a Holocaust scholar at American Jewish University, records suggest that Gustav was “in the thick of the battle during the most difficult times,” when some of the “most horrific military and nonmilitary killings” occurred.

Schwarzenegger rarely spoke publicly about his father’s past until Trump became president and emboldened a new generation of white nationalists. “Arnold always told us the goal after he left office was to stay out of politics and focus on policy,” Ketchell told me. “But when the president is calling neo-Nazis good people, it’s hard to just focus on gerrymandering.”

After the violent march on Charlottesville, Virginia, by torch-bearing white nationalists in 2017, Schwarzenegger went hard at the neo-Nazis in a video. “Let me be just as blunt as possible,” Schwarzenegger said. “Your heroes are losers. You’re supporting a

*Governor Schwarzenegger celebrating his victory on Election Night in Los Angeles, 2006*



DAVID McNEW / GETTY

lost cause. And believe me, I knew the original Nazis.” The video drew nearly 60 million views.

Schwarzenegger can be a bit of a brute and a pig and could easily have been canceled half a dozen times over the years. Just days before the special election for governor in 2003, several women came forward to say that Schwarzenegger had groped them, and a few other accusations of sexual misconduct followed. He denied some and didn’t directly address others, but he issued a blanket apology for his behavior. “I have done things that were not right which I thought then was playful,” he said at the time. “But I now recognize that I have offended people. And to those people that I have offended, I want to say to them, I am deeply sorry.”

The stay-at-home Arnold character from the pandemic videos changed how people viewed him, he believes. “The whole fitness thing was mostly guys, the movie thing was mostly guys, the Republican thing was mostly guys,” Schwarzenegger explained. “Then you had the fucking affair, and now of course the guys are on your side, and the girls are saying, ‘Fuck this, fuck this, I’m out of here, this guy was a creep all along ... I hope Maria leaves him,’ and all that.” But the videos—those turned things around. “Now, all of a sudden, I have all these broads coming up to me saying, ‘Oh, you won me over with this video.’”

After Russia invaded Ukraine, in early 2022, Schwarzenegger made a video urging Vladimir Putin to call off the war and the Russian people to resist their government. He said those who were demonstrating on the streets of Moscow were his “heroes.” And he once again invoked his father, likening Gustav’s experience fighting with the Nazis in Leningrad to that of the Russian troops fighting in Ukraine. His father “was all pumped up by the lies of his government” when he arrived in Leningrad, Schwarzenegger said. He departed a broken man, in body and mind.

**AFTER COVID RESTRICTIONS** were relaxed and the world reopened, Schwarzenegger receded again from the daily scenery. He had provided guidance and diversion during those rudderless months, and I had begun to miss him. I wanted to see how he was doing.

He was hard to get to, though. Beginning in May 2022, Schwarzenegger had cloistered himself in Toronto for several months filming a spy-adventure show for Netflix called *FUBAR*. While there, he was informed that he had won a prize for his work combatting prejudice. The first annual Award for Fighting Hatred was given by the Auschwitz Jewish Center Foundation (AJCF). Schwarzenegger is a sucker for such prizes and displays the biggies in his home and

office alongside his gallery of bodybuilding trophies, sculptures of himself, busts of Lincoln, nine-foot replicas of the Statue of Liberty, and whatnot. He couldn’t receive his AJCF award in person because he was tied up with *FUBAR*, but vowed to visit the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in Poland as soon as he could.

Filming wrapped in early September, and Schwarzenegger went home to Los Angeles for a few days before heading off to Munich to meet some people at Oktoberfest. From there, the plan was to make a quick day trip to southern Poland before returning to Germany to shoot an ad for BMW.

He would be at Auschwitz a few days after Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish new year. Schwarzenegger’s people encouraged me to be there.

I arrived at the town of Oświęcim, the site of the camp, with a group of donor and publicist types who were connected with AJCF. We were met at the entrance to the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum

by staff members, Arnold appendages, and a few strays, including a woman in a GOOD VIBES sweatshirt. No one seemed to know quite how to act. Distinct layers of surreal piled up before us.

Let’s stipulate that celebrity visits to concentration camps can be tricky. Schwarzenegger appeared mindful of this as he rolled up in a black Mercedes. He stepped gingerly into a thicket of greeters, and tried to strike a solemn pose. Originally, the thought was to do a standard arrival shot for photographers. But the keepers of the site are sensitive to gestures that might convey triumphal stagecraft or frivolity. “There are better places to learn how to

*When Schwarzenegger first made it big in Hollywood, he approached the Simon Wiesenthal Center, the Holocaust research group, seeking to learn about his father’s complicity.*

walk on a balance beam,” management was moved to tweet after visitors kept posting selfies on the railway tracks leading into the camp. Every visit here is something of a balance beam, but especially for the son of a Nazi.

“Not a photo op,” a staff member reminded everyone as Schwarzenegger began his tour. Photographers clacked away regardless. Schwarzenegger wore a blue blazer and green khaki pants, and appeared to have had his hair tinted a blacker shade of orange for the occasion. He flashed a thumbs-up—always the thumbs-up.

“No autographs please!” a random Voice of God from within the entourage called out. “Please be respectful.”

Schwarzenegger was accompanied by his girlfriend, Heather Milligan; his nephew, Patrick Knapp Schwarzenegger; and Knapp Schwarzenegger’s Texan wife, Bliss. They toured the grounds like students. “What happened here?” Schwarzenegger asked his guide, Paweł Sawicki, pointing up at a watchtower. Sawicki delivered a recital of unimaginables: 1.3 million people were exterminated at the 500-acre camp, about 1.1 million of them Jews. Victims were pulled from cattle cars and triaged by SS doctors deciding who among them was fit to work, who would be used as guinea pigs for Nazi scientists, and who would be murdered immediately.

Nearly all of those “spared” upon arrival would eventually die of starvation, exhaustion, hypothermia, or random beatings. They were gonged awake at 4:30 a.m., then fed rations of moldy bread, gray soup, and dirty water. “The word I will use a lot today is *dehumanization*,” Sawicki said.

Schwarzenegger viewed the gallows where the camp commandant, Rudolf Höss, had been hanged. He asked questions about the complicit enterprises—whether the firm that made the crematoria ovens had known what they would be used for (it had). His retinue was led into Block 4A, to a room that contained eyeglasses, dishes, and prosthetics that had belonged to the victims. Another exhibit featured piles of their hair.

The last thing Schwarzenegger did before he left was step toward a black desk where a guest book awaited his inscription. Visitor registers can present a special hazard for celebrities.

Some have committed egregious faux pas. Donald Trump at Yad Vashem, for instance: “It’s a great honor to be here with all my friends,” the then-president wrote breezily at the Israeli Holocaust memorial and museum in 2017. “So amazing and will never forget!” This was judged to lack gravity.

But it was not nearly as bad as Justin Bieber’s blunder at the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam. “Anne was a great girl,” the pop star wrote in 2013. “Hopefully she would have been a Belieber.” Hopefully Schwarzenegger would attempt nothing like this.

Schwarzenegger has worked hard to place himself on the right side of the genocide. Auschwitz officials were glad to have him visit, because he brought with him media attention and the gift of global awareness. “I have been fighting this cause ... for years and years and years,” he said in a brief statement to the Polish press at the end of his tour. “I’ve been working with the Jewish Center of Los Angeles ... I celebrated Simon Wiesenthal’s 80th birthday in Beverly Hills. We all have to come collectively together and say ‘Never again.’”

Photographers positioned themselves around the register as Schwarzenegger approached. Clearly, the safe play would be to simply sign his name. Please be respectful. Nothing cute, if only as a humanitarian pausing of The Brand. But no.

“I’ll be back,” Schwarzenegger scrawled.

AFTER LEAVING the complex, Schwarzenegger visited a small synagogue in Oświęcim, an otherwise charming village if not for, you know, the history. There, he met an 83-year-old Jewish woman, Lydia Maksimovicz, who as a toddler had spent 13 months at the camp as a “patient” of the notorious Nazi doctor Josef Mengele. She told him about how Mengele had performed experiments on her: drained her blood, and injected her with solutions in an effort to change the color of her irises. Mengele apparently had taken a liking to

*The last thing Schwarzenegger did before leaving Auschwitz was step toward a black desk where a guest book awaited his inscription.*



young Lydia and privileged her life above the other children's. Now, eight decades later, Arnold Schwarzenegger was engulfing her in a bear hug.

"People like Lydia show us how important it is to never stop telling these stories about what happened 80 years ago," Schwarzenegger said in brief remarks. "This is a story that has to stay alive." He vowed to "terminate" hate and prejudice once and for all. "I love being here!" he gushed. "I love fighting prejudice and hatred!" A woman connected with the AJCF tried to hand him a special box of cigars, but was intercepted by an aide. He reiterated that he would be back.

The Auschwitz visit left Schwarzenegger feeling depressed. He stopped off in Vienna afterward to receive a lifetime-achievement award from some Austrian sports outfit, and the friends who saw him there kept wondering if he was okay. He seemed dazed.

"We were sitting on the plane, and we both just shook our heads and were like, 'Wow, can you imagine?'" Knapp Schwarzenegger, his nephew, told me. "It was a somber mood for sure."

Knapp Schwarzenegger is an entertainment lawyer in Beverly Hills, and was the only child of Schwarzenegger's only sibling, his older brother, Meinhard, who died in a drunk-driving accident when Patrick was 3. Schwarzenegger brought Patrick to America as a teenager and effectively adopted him; they remain exceptionally close.

Knapp Schwarzenegger said their family history added a fraught dimension to the experience of visiting Auschwitz. They'd been particularly struck by the tour guide's stories of how the Nazis committed atrocities at the camp and then went home to their families. "That was the hard part," Knapp Schwarzenegger said, thinking of Gustav, "the loving grandfather," who died when Knapp Schwarzenegger was 4. "How can ordinary people like that do such a thing? ... It hits much closer to home when you've had personal experience with that."

Gustav was haunted by the war, his body racked with shrapnel and his conscience with God only knows what. He "would come home drunk once or twice a week, and he would scream and hit us and scare my mother," Schwarzenegger said in the January 6 video. Somehow, Schwarzenegger emerged intact. "My grandmother did the best she could," Knapp Schwarzenegger told me, "but that affects you as a child. For Arnold, it made him stronger and more determined. And for my dad, it crushed him."

Rabbi Hier, of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, speculated that Schwarzenegger's visit to Auschwitz could have been driven by shame, by a desire "to repent for the embarrassment of having such a father." But Schwarzenegger does not concede to this narrative—to feeling guilty or embarrassed. His recurring message is more upbeat, if a bit deflecting. "We don't have to go and follow," Schwarzenegger told me. "My father was an alcoholic. I am not an alcoholic. My father was beating the kids and his wife, and I'm not doing that. We can break away from that and we can change."

A FEW WEEKS after the trip to Auschwitz, I visited Schwarzenegger at his mansion in Brentwood, located in an extravagant hillside cul-de-sac of celebrity homes. Tom Brady and Gisele Bündchen used to have a place down the road (in better days),

as did Seal and Heidi Klum (also in better days). Maria used to live here too, in the mansion with Arnold (ditto).

I waited for Schwarzenegger on the patio where he smokes his cigars. He walked in and Whiskey and Lulu greeted him with a maniacal duet of braying. Two dogs wandered over to nuzzle him. An attendant brought him a cigar and a decaf espresso, and some treats for his dog-and-pony show. He took incoming FaceTime calls and kept raising his voice and shoving his face up into his iPad like my mother does.

Milligan, Schwarzenegger's girlfriend, called to see how his day had gone. They have a comfortable, domestic vibe. She had been Schwarzenegger's physical therapist, helping him through rehab for a torn rotator cuff about a decade ago. Ketchell, who had accompanied Schwarzenegger to the interview, wanted to make it clear that the pair had not become romantically involved until after Milligan stopped working with Schwarzenegger professionally.

Schwarzenegger and I hadn't had a chance to talk much in Poland, save for a brief kibitz outside one of the gas chambers. I wanted to debrief him. What had it been like to witness the death camp firsthand?

"We know people were killed there and exterminated and blah blah blah." (He has an unfortunate tic, when speaking about grave topics, of trailing off his sentences and adding filler words like *blah blah blah* and *all that stuff*.) It's one thing, he said, to be told about "all the gassing, the torture, all this misery, and all that kind of stuff. You can read about it, see documentaries about it, see movies—the *Schindler's List*, all this stuff." But actually seeing the eyeglasses, the hair—that added a dimension of reality. "I'm a visual person; it's one of my things," Schwarzenegger said. "When I was walking around, I was going back to that era."

Did he have any regrets about signing "I'll be back"? Some social-media congregants had criticized the message as "tacky" and "flippant," among other things. Schwarzenegger said that he had been made aware of the blowback and had meant no offense. "I wanted to write '*Hasta la vista*, baby,'" he said. Another signature line, this one from *Terminator 2*. (Yes, he was serious.) "I meant, you know, '*Hasta la vista* to hate and prejudice.'" But then he worried that *Hasta la vista* might come off as glib and dismissive—as in "Buh-bye, I will never come back here again." So he opted for the more forward-looking "I'll be back."

His hosts had felt the need to tweet a defense: "The inscription was meant to be a promise to return for another more in-depth visit." In other words, Schwarzenegger was speaking literally, and did in fact plan to return. "That is what he said, so we expect Mr. Schwarzenegger will come back," Paweł Sawicki, his tour guide, who doubles as Auschwitz's chief press officer, told me.

I wondered if this had always been the plan, or if he had I'll-be-backed himself into a corner and now had to schlep all the way to Poland again to prove his sincerity.

Definitely, it was the plan. In fact, he said, he was thinking about an annual road-trip-to-Auschwitz kind of thing. "I already told Danny DeVito and some of my acting friends that we're going to take a trip next year," he said. "Maybe Sly Stallone. I'm going to find a bunch of guys and we're going to fly over there, and I want to be a tour guide."

He contemplated the possibilities: “Imagine bringing business-people.” Maybe they could auction off some seats on the plane and give the proceeds to the museum. “We have to figure out something that is a little bit snappy and interesting,” he mused. Afterward, they could go to Munich for Oktoberfest, or something fun like that.

IN EARLY 2021, a few days after Schwarzenegger made his January 6 video, then-President-elect Joe Biden FaceTimed to thank him. They spoke for a few minutes, and at one point, Schwarzenegger offered his services to the incoming administration. “I told Biden that anytime he needs anything, he should let me know, absolutely,” he said. He’s heard nothing from the White House since. It’s complicated, he figures. Schwarzenegger, who is still a Republican, is not without baggage. The housekeeper-love-child-divorce episode remains a blotch. Celebrity politicians in general have seen better days: The likes of Trump and Dr. Oz have not exactly enhanced the franchise. In any event, Schwarzenegger gave no impression that he’s waiting by the phone.

But in the conversations I had with him, he betrayed a strong whiff of existential stir-craziness. “I felt like I was meant for something special,” Schwarzenegger told me that first morning after our workout, while we talked about his childhood in Austria. “I was a special human being, meant for something much bigger.”

At his bodybuilding peak, in *Pumping Iron*, Schwarzenegger spoke with a kind of youthful yearning—or megalomania—of enduring through time: “I was always dreaming about very powerful people. Dictators and things like that. I was just always impressed by people who could be remembered for hundreds of years, or even, like Jesus, be for thousands of years remembered.”

*If only he could have run for president.* That remains his recurring lament. Entering the Mr. Universe of political campaigns would have been the logical last rung of his life’s quest for something bigger. Schwarzenegger said he thinks he could

win. This is hard to imagine—a moderate Republican prevailing through the MAGA maelstrom of the GOP primaries? And he’s not about to become a Democrat, either. (“I don’t want to join a party that is destroying every single fucking city,” he told me. “They’re screwing up left and right.”) Still, if they tweaked the Constitution, he told me, he would love to run, even at 75, which he insists is “just a number” and not that old. It’s not like he’s 80 or something!

In the meantime, what if Biden asked him to be secretary of state? I admit, it was me who raised the possibility. But



Schwarzenegger warmed instantly to the idea, listing several reasons he would want the job and be perfect for it. George Shultz was one of his idols, and pretty much lived forever too (he died at 100). Schwarzenegger is a big believer in celebrity as a global force, in the power of being so widely, unstopably known. Who would be bigger than Arnold Schwarzenegger? Who could possibly compare?

“I mean, look at the guy we have now,” Schwarzenegger told me. Antony Blinken “is, like, a clearly smart guy, but, I mean, on the world stage, he’s a lightweight. He doesn’t carry any weight.”

(Blinken, who is leading U.S. efforts to contain Russia and China, could not be reached for comment.)

Schwarzenegger told me he really does want to live forever. Not everyone would, at his age. But not everyone has had his life, either. “If you have the kind of life that I’ve had—that I have—it is so spectacular. I could not ever articulate how spectacular it was.” He was trying to project gratitude, but something else came through—a plaintiveness in that gap between the tenses.

I HAD A FINAL VISIT with Schwarzenegger in late December, this time at his Santa Monica office suite. He wore a bright-red atrocity of a Christmas sweater and took a seat next to me at a conference table. Schwarzenegger has always been a creature of obsessive routine, dating to the strict training regimens of his bodybuilding days. But he emphasized to me that he is following no grand plan in this final stage. “The truth is that I am improvising,” he told me. He is trying to pass on what he knows, and just signed a deal to write a self-help book that will codify his advice for life. The working title: *Be Useful*.

The next morning, I was walking to a Starbucks near Santa Monica Pier, when who should dart by on his bike? “Hey, Arnold,” I called out.

He pulled over and accused me of being a “lazy sonofabitch” for not riding with him. He wore sunglasses emblazoned with I’LL BE BACK, and his white beard glowed in the dawn sun.

We chatted on the street, and Schwarzenegger suggested that I talk to a friend of his named Florian for this story. Florian, who sometimes stays in Austrian monasteries, apparently, has some elaborate theory of Arnold. “He would have an interesting perspective,” Schwarzenegger said. “He’s 6 foot 10, has big hair, and he FaceTimed me last night while he was shaving at 11 p.m. Who the fuck shaves at 11 p.m.?”

Florian does. His full name is Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, a German and Austrian filmmaker who won an Oscar for his 2006 thriller, *The Lives of Others*. Later, I emailed him. He declined to share any grand theories. “These thoughts are very personal,” he explained. “At some point soon, I’ll turn them into a book myself. Hopefully to coincide with the release of a movie I direct with Arnold in the lead.” He made sure to mention that Schwarzenegger was his hero.

In the meantime, the hero was idling on his bike, telling me that he has more things in the works—retrospective things (a Netflix documentary about his life) and new adventures (*Return to Auschwitz!*). He was also planning a trip to Ukraine; in late January, an invitation would arrive from the office of President Volodymyr Zelensky, praising Schwarzenegger’s “honest stance and clear vision of good and evil.”

I imagined Schwarzenegger dropping into Kyiv, unarmed except for the Conan sword. He would drive out the Russians, end the war, and detour to Moscow to take down Putin. At least that’s how the Hollywood action version would end.

“There will be more,” Schwarzenegger promised that morning. I kept expecting him to ride off, but he seemed to want to linger. *A*

*A bust of Schwarzenegger in his office in Santa Monica*

*Mark Leibovich is a staff writer at The Atlantic.*



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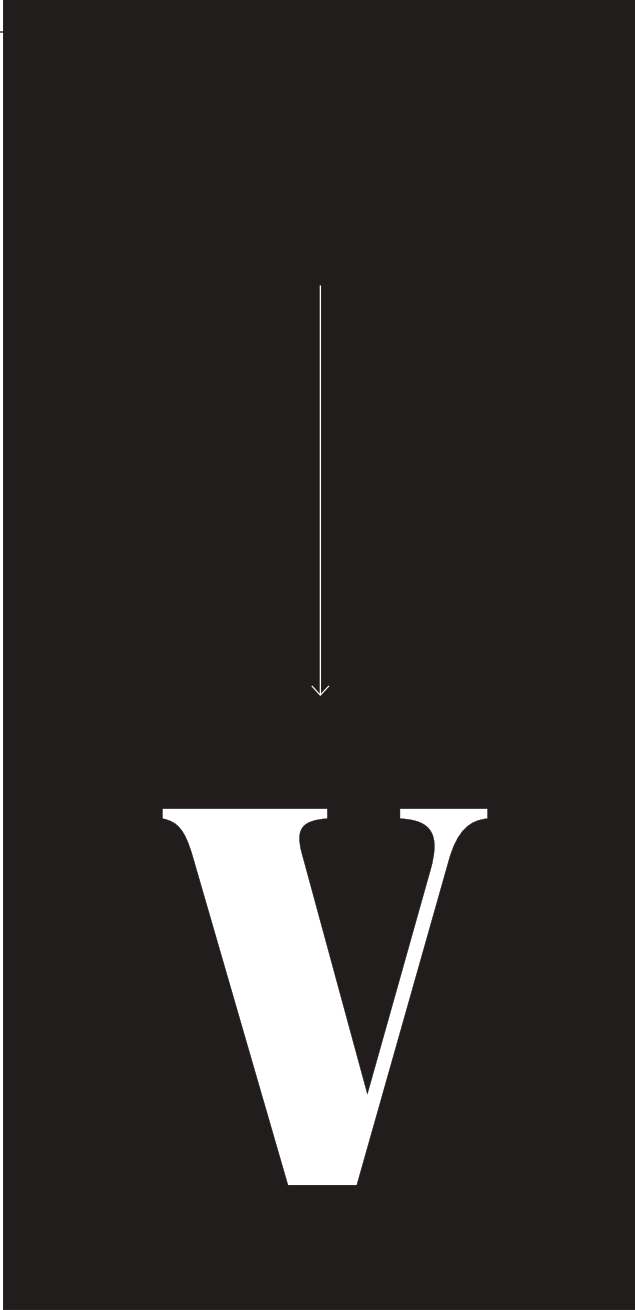
# AMERICA'S FUTURE IS AT SEA

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The nation  
is ceding the  
seas to its  
enemies.  
It's not  
too late  
to avoid  
catastrophe.

BY  
JERRY  
HENDRIX



around the world for their lifestyle, their livelihood, even their life. In 2021, the grounding of the container ship *Ever Given* blocked the Suez Canal, forcing vessels shuttling between Asia and Europe to divert around Africa, delaying their passage and driving up costs. A few months later, largely because of disruptions caused by the coronavirus pandemic, more than 100 container ships were stacked up outside the California Ports of Long Beach and Los Angeles, snarling supply chains throughout the country.

These events were temporary, if expensive. Imagine, though, a more permanent breakdown. A humiliated Russia could declare a large portion of the Arctic Ocean to be its own territorial waters, twisting the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea to support its claim. Russia would then allow its allies access to this route while denying it to those who dared to oppose its wishes. Neither the U.S. Navy, which has not built an Arctic-rated surface warship since the 1950s, nor any other NATO nation is currently equipped to resist such a gambit.

Or maybe the first to move would be Xi Jinping, shoring up his domestic standing by attempting to seize Taiwan and using China's anti-ship ballistic missiles and other weapons to keep Western navies at bay. An emboldened China might then seek to cement its claim over large portions of the East China Sea and the entirety of the South China Sea as territorial waters. It could impose large tariffs and transfer fees on the bulk carriers that transit the region. Local officials might demand bribes to speed their passage.

Once one nation decided to act in this manner, others would follow, claiming enlarged territorial waters of their own, and extracting what they could from the commerce that flows through them. The edges and interstices of this patchwork of competing claims would provide openings for piracy and lawlessness.

The great container ships and tankers of today would disappear, replaced by smaller, faster cargo vessels capable of moving rare and valuable goods past pirates and corrupt officials. The cruise-ship business, which drives many tourist economies, would falter in the face of potential hijackings. A single such incident might create a cascade of failure throughout the entire industry. Once-busy sea lanes would lose their traffic. For lack of activity and maintenance, passages such as the Panama and Suez Canals might silt up. Natural choke points such as the straits of Gibraltar, Hormuz, Malacca, and Sunda could return to their historic roles as havens for predators. The free seas that now surround us, as essential as the air we breathe, would be no more.

If oceanic trade declines, markets would turn inward, perhaps setting off a second Great Depression. Nations would be reduced to living off their own natural resources, or those they could buy—or take—from their immediate neighbors. The world's oceans, for 70 years assumed to be a global commons, would become a no-man's-land. This is the state of affairs that, without a moment's thought, we have invited.

**EVERYWHERE I LOOK**, I observe sea power manifesting itself—unacknowledged—in American life. When I drive past a Walmart, a BJ's Wholesale Club, a Lowe's, or a Home Depot, in my mind I see the container ships moving products from where

Very few Americans—or, for that matter, very few people on the planet—can remember a time when freedom of the seas was in question. But for most of human history, there was no such guarantee. Pirates, predatory states, and the fleets of great powers did as they pleased. The current reality, which dates only to the end of World War II, makes possible the commercial shipping that handles more than 80 percent of all global trade by volume—oil and natural gas, grain and raw ores, manufactured goods of every kind. Because freedom of the seas, in our lifetime, has seemed like a default condition, it is easy to think of it—if we think of it at all—as akin to Earth's rotation or the force of gravity: as just the way things are, rather than as a man-made construct that needs to be maintained and enforced.

But what if the safe transit of ships could no longer be assumed? What if the oceans were no longer free?

Every now and again, Americans are suddenly reminded of how much they depend on the uninterrupted movement of ships

they can be produced at a low price in bulk form to markets where they can be sold at a higher price to consumers. Our economy and security rely on the sea—a fact so fundamental that it should be at the center of our approach to the world.

It is time for the United States to think and act, once again, like a seapower state. As the naval historian Andrew Lambert has explained, a seapower state understands that its wealth and its might principally derive from seaborne trade, and it uses instruments of sea power to promote and protect its interests. To the degree possible, a seapower state seeks to avoid direct participation in land wars, large or small. There have been only a few true seapower nations in history—notably Great Britain, the Dutch Republic, Venice, and Carthage.

I grew up on a dairy farm in Indiana and spent 26 years on active duty in the Navy, deploying in support of combat operations in the Middle East and Yugoslavia, both at sea and in the air. I did postgraduate work at several universities and served as a strategist and an adviser to senior officials in the Pentagon. Yet I have always remained, in terms of interests and outlook, a son of the Midwest. In my writings I have sought to underscore sea power's importance and the reliance of our economy on the sea.

Despite my experience, I was never able to convince my mother. She spent the last years of her working life at the Walmart in my hometown, first at the checkout counter and then in accounting. My mother followed the news and was sharply curious about the world; we were close, and spoke often. She was glad that I was in the Navy, but not because she saw my work as essential to her own life. "If you like Walmart," I often told her, "then you ought to love the U.S. Navy. It's the Navy that makes Walmart possible." But to her, as a mother, my naval service mostly meant that, unlike friends and cousins who deployed with the Army or Marine Corps to Iraq or Afghanistan, I probably wasn't going to be shot at. Her perspective is consistent with a phenomenon that the strategist Seth Cropsey has called *seablindness*.

Today, it is difficult to appreciate the scale or speed of the transformation wrought after World War II. The war destroyed or left destitute all of the world powers opposed to the concept of a *mare liberum*—a "free sea"—first enunciated by the Dutch philosopher Hugo Grotius in 1609. The United States and Great Britain, the two traditional proponents of a free sea, had emerged not only triumphant but also in a position of overwhelming naval dominance. Their navies were together larger than all of the other navies of the world combined. A free sea was no longer an idea. It was now a reality.

In this secure environment, trade flourished. The globalizing economy, which allowed easier and cheaper access to food, energy, labor, and commodities of every kind, grew from nearly \$8 trillion in 1940 to more than \$100 trillion 75 years later, adjusted for inflation. With prosperity, other improvements followed. During roughly this same period, from the war to the present, the share of the world's population in extreme poverty, getting by on less than \$1.90 a day, dropped from more than 60 percent to about 10 percent. Global literacy doubled, to more than 85 percent. Global life expectancy in 1950 was 46 years. By 2019, it had risen to 73 years.

All of this has depended on freedom of the seas, which in turn has depended on sea power wielded by nations—led by the United States—that believe in such freedom.

But the very success of this project now threatens its future. Seablindness has become endemic.

THE UNITED STATES is no longer investing in the instruments of sea power as it once did. America's commercial shipbuilding industry began losing its share of the global market in the 1960s to countries with lower labor costs, and to those that had rebuilt their industrial capacity after the war. The drop in American shipbuilding accelerated after President Ronald Reagan



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THAT MAKES  
WALMART  
POSSIBLE.”**

took office, in 1981. The administration, in a nod to free-market principles, began to shrink government subsidies that had supported the industry. That was a choice; it might have gone the other way. Aircraft manufacturers in the United States, citing national-security concerns, successfully lobbied for continued, and even increased, subsidies for their industry in the decades that followed—and got them.

It is never to a nation's advantage to depend on others for crucial links in its supply chain. But that is where we are. In 1977, American shipbuilders produced more than 1 million gross tons of merchant ships. By 2005, that number had fallen to 300,000. Today, most commercial ships built in the United States are constructed for government customers such as the Maritime Administration or for private entities that are required to ship their goods between U.S. ports in U.S.-flagged vessels, under the provisions of the 1920 Jones Act.

The U.S. Navy, too, has been shrinking. After the Second World War, the Navy scrapped many of its ships and sent many more into a ready-reserve “mothball” fleet. For the next two decades, the active naval fleet hovered at about 1,000 ships. But beginning in 1969, the total began to fall. By 1971, the fleet had been reduced to 750 ships. Ten years later, it was down to 521. Reagan, who had campaigned in 1980 on a promise to rebuild the

Navy to 600 ships, nearly did so under the able leadership of his secretary of the Navy, John Lehman. During Reagan's eight years in office, the size of the Navy's fleet climbed to just over 590 ships.

Then the Cold War ended. The administrations of Presidents George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton slashed troops, ships, aircraft, and shore-based infrastructure. During the Obama administration, the Navy's battle force bottomed out at 271 ships. Meanwhile, both China and Russia, in different ways, began to develop systems that would challenge the U.S.-led regime of global free trade on the high seas.

Russia began to invest in highly sophisticated nuclear-powered submarines with the intention of being able to disrupt the oceanic link between NATO nations in Europe and North America. China, which for a time enjoyed double-digit GDP growth, expanded both its commercial and naval shipbuilding capacities. It tripled the size of the People's Liberation Army-Navy and invested in long-range sensors and missiles that could allow it to interdict commercial and military ships more than 1,000 miles from its shores. Both Russia and China also sought to extend territorial claims into international waters, the aim being to control the free passage of shipping near their shores and in their perceived spheres of influence. In short: Autocratic powers are trying to close the global commons.



Alfred Thayer Mahan



Today the United States is financially constrained by debt, and psychologically burdened by recent military conflicts—for the most part, land-based actions in Iraq and Afghanistan fought primarily by a large standing army operating far from home—that turned into costly quagmires. We can no longer afford to be both a continentalist power and an oceanic power. But we can still exert influence, and at the same time avoid getting caught up in the affairs of other nations. Our strategic future lies at sea.

**AMERICANS USED TO** know this. The United States began its life purposefully as a seapower: The Constitution explicitly directed Congress “to provide and maintain a Navy.” In contrast, the same article of the Constitution instructed the legislature “to raise and support Armies,” but stipulated that no appropriation for the army “shall be for a longer Term than two Years.” The Founders had an aversion to large standing armies.

George Washington pushed through the Naval Act of 1794, funding the Navy’s original six frigates. (One of these was the famous USS Constitution, “Old Ironsides,” which remains in active commission to this day.) In his final address to the American people, Washington advocated for a navalist foreign policy, warning against “attachments and entanglements” with foreign powers that might draw the young nation into continental European wars. The strategy he advised instead was to protect American trade on the high seas, and advance America’s interests through temporary agreements, not permanent alliances. This seapower approach to the world became the *sine qua non* of early American foreign policy.

In time, conditions changed. The U.S. was preoccupied by sectional conflict and by conquest of the continent. It turned inward, becoming a continental power. But by the end of the 19th century, that era had come to a close.

In 1890, a U.S. Navy captain named Alfred Thayer Mahan published an article in *The Atlantic* titled “The United States Looking Outward.” Mahan argued that, with the closing of the frontier, the United States had in essence become an island nation looking eastward and westward across oceans. The nation’s energies should therefore be focused externally: on the seas, on maritime trade, and on a larger role in the world.

Mahan sought to end the long-standing policy of protectionism for American industries, because they had become strong enough to compete in the global market. By extension, Mahan also sought a larger merchant fleet to carry goods from American factories to foreign lands, and for a larger Navy to protect that merchant fleet. In a few thousand words, Mahan made a coherent strategic argument that the United States should once again become a true seapower.

Mahan’s vision was profoundly influential. Politicians such as Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Cabot Lodge advocated for larger merchant and naval fleets (and for a canal through Central America). Mahan, Roosevelt, and Lodge believed that sea power was the catalyst for national power, and they wanted the United States to become the preeminent nation of the 20th century. The swift expansion of the Navy, particularly in battleships and cruisers, paralleled the growing fleets of other global



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powers. Leaders in Britain, Germany, France, and Italy had also read Mahan, and they wanted to protect commercial access to their overseas empires. The resulting arms race at sea helped destabilize the balance of power in the years leading up to the First World War.

This is not the place to relate every development in the evolution of America’s naval capability, much less that of other nations. Suffice to say that, by the 1930s, new technologies were transforming the seas. Aircraft, aircraft carriers, amphibious assault craft, and submarines had all been developed into more effective weapons. During the Second World War, the oceans once again became battlefields. The fighting proceeded in a way Mahan himself had never envisioned, as fleets faced off against ships they could not even see, launching waves of aircraft against each other. In the end, the war was won not by bullets or torpedoes but by

the American maritime industrial base. The United States began the war with 790 ships in its battle force; when the war ended, it had more than 6,700.

No nation could come close to challenging the American fleet, commercial or naval, on the high seas after the war. So great was its advantage that, for decades, no one even tried to match it. In concert with allies, the United States created an international system based on free and unhindered trade. It was the culmination of the Mahanist Age.

For the first time in history, open access to the seas was assumed—and so people naturally gave little thought to its importance and challenges.

**A NEW SEAPOWERS** strategy involves more than adding ships to the Navy. A new strategy must start with the economy.

For 40 years, we have watched domestic industries and blue-collar jobs leave the country. Now we find ourselves locked in a

new great-power competition, primarily with a rising China but also with a diminishing and unstable Russia. We will need heavy industry in order to prevail. The United States cannot simply rely on the manufacturing base of other countries, even friendly ones, for its national-security needs.

In 1993, Deputy Secretary of Defense William Perry invited the executives of leading defense contractors to a dinner in Washington—a meal that would enter national-security lore as the “Last Supper.” Perry spelled out projected cuts in defense spending. His message was clear: If the American defense industrial base was going to survive, then mergers would be required. Soon after, the Northrop Corporation acquired the Grumman Corporation to form Northrop Grumman. The Lockheed Corporation and Martin Marietta became Lockheed Martin. A few years later, Boeing combined with McDonnell Douglas, itself the product of a previous merger. Among the shipbuilders, General Dynamics, which manufactures submarines through its Electric Boat subsidiary, bought Bath Iron Works, a naval shipyard, and the National Steel and Shipbuilding Company.

These mergers preserved the defense industries, but at a price: a dramatic reduction in our overall industrial capacity. During World War II, the United States could claim more than 50 graving docks—heavy-industrial locations where ships are assembled—that were greater than 150 meters in length, each one able to build merchant craft and naval warships. Today, the U.S. has 23 graving docks, only a dozen of which are certified to work on Navy ships.

The United States will need to implement a seapower industrial policy that meets its national-security needs: building steel plants and microchip foundries, developing hypersonic glide bodies and autonomous unmanned undersea vehicles. We will need to foster new start-ups using targeted tax laws, the Defense Production Act, and perhaps even a “Ships Act” akin to the recent CHIPS Act, which seeks to bring back the crucial semiconductor industry.

We also need to tell the companies we once encouraged to merge that it’s time for them to spin off key industrial subsidiaries in order to encourage competition and resilience—and we need to reward them for following through. In 2011, for example, the aerospace giant Northrop Grumman spun off its shipbuilding holdings to form Huntington Ingalls, in Newport News, Virginia, and Pascagoula, Mississippi. Adding more such spin-offs would not only increase the nation’s industrial depth but also encourage the growth of parts suppliers for heavy industries, companies that have endured three decades of consolidation or extinction.

Shipbuilding, in particular, is a jobs multiplier. For every job created in a shipyard, five jobs, on average, are created at downstream suppliers—well-paid blue-collar jobs in the mining, manufacturing, and energy sectors.

Most of the civilian merchant ships, container ships, ore carriers, and supertankers that dock in American ports are built overseas and fly foreign flags. We have ignored the linkage between the ability to build commercial ships and the ability to build Navy ships—one reason the latter cost twice as much as they did in 1989. The lack of civilian ships under our own flag makes us vulnerable. Today we remember the recent backlog of container



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ships in the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, but tomorrow we could face the shock of no container ships arriving at all should China prohibit its large fleet from visiting U.S. ports. Today we're proud to ship liquefied natural gas to our allies in Europe, but tomorrow we might not be able to export that energy to our friends, because we don't own the ships that would carry it. We need to bring back civilian shipbuilding as a matter of national security.

To revive our merchant-shipbuilding base, we will need to offer government subsidies on a par with those provided to European and Asian shipbuilders. Subsidies have flowed to commercial aviation since the establishment of commercial airlines in the 1920s; Elon Musk's SpaceX would not be enjoying its present success were it not for strong initial support from the U.S. government. Shipbuilding is no less vital.

Reindustrialization, in particular the restoration of merchant-shipbuilding capacity and export-oriented industries, will support the emergence of a new, more technologically advanced Navy. The cost of building Navy ships could be coaxed downward by increasing competition, expanding the number of downstream suppliers, and recruiting new shipyard workers to the industry.

Wherever American trade goes, the flag traditionally follows—usually in the form of the Navy. But the new Navy must not look like the old Navy. If it does, we will have made a strategic mistake. As rival powers develop ships and missiles that target our aircraft carriers and other large surface vessels, we should make greater investments in advanced submarines equipped with the latest in long-range maneuvering hypersonic missiles. We should pursue a future in which our submarines cannot be found and our hypersonic missiles cannot be defeated.

The Navy, however, is not just a wartime force. It has a peacetime mission unique among the military services: showing the flag and defending American interests by means of a consistent and credible forward presence. Commanders have identified 18 maritime regions of the world that require the near-continuous deployment of American ships to demonstrate our resolve. During the Cold War, the Navy maintained approximately 150 ships at sea on any given day. As the size of the fleet has fallen—to its present 293—the Navy has struggled to keep even 100 ships at sea at all times. The service's admirals recently suggested a goal of having 75 ships "mission capable" at any given moment. Right now the fleet has about 20 ships going through training workups and only about 40 actively deployed under regional combatant commanders. This has created vacuums in vital areas such as the Arctic Ocean and the Black Sea, which our enemies have been eager to fill.

The chief of naval operations recently called for a fleet of some 500 ships. He quickly pointed out that this would include about 50 new guided-missile frigates—small surface vessels able to operate closely with allies and partners—as well as 150 unmanned surface and subsurface platforms that would revolutionize the way wartime naval operations are conducted. The frigates are being assembled on the shores of Lake Michigan. The construction of the unmanned ships, owing to their nontraditional designs and

smaller sizes, could be dispersed to smaller shipyards, including yards on the Gulf Coast, along the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers, and on the Great Lakes, where ships and submarines were built for the Navy during World War II. These types of ships, combined with advanced submarines, will allow us to exert influence and project power with equal vigor.

**ACROSS THE 50 YEARS** of my life, I have watched the importance of the oceans and the idea of freedom of the seas largely fade from national awareness. The next great military challenge we face will likely come from a confrontation on the sea. Great powers, especially nuclear-equipped great powers, dare not attack one another directly. Instead, they will confront one another in the commons: cyberspace, outer space, and, most crucially, at sea. The oceans would be battlefields again, and we, and the world, are simply not ready for that.

Some voices, of course, will argue that America's interests, diffuse and global, might best be served by expanding our commitments of land forces to places like Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and South Korea as demonstrations of American resolve, and that air and naval forces should be diminished to pay for such commitments. Others—those in the "divest to invest" school—believe in the promise of future technology, arguing that more traditional warfare platforms and missions should be phased out to fund their newer and more efficient missiles or cybersystems. The first approach continues a path of unnecessary entanglements. The second proceeds along a path of promise without proof.

A seapower-focused national-security strategy would give new advantages to the United States. It would not too subtly encourage allies and partners in Eurasia to increase investment in land forces and to work more closely together. If they build more tanks and fully staff their armies, the United States could guarantee transoceanic supply lines from the Western Hemisphere. The 70-year practice of stationing our land forces in allied countries, using Americans as trip wires and offering allies a convenient excuse not to spend on their own defense, should come to an end.

A seapower strategy, pursued deliberately, would put America back on course for global leadership. We must shun entanglements in other nations' land wars—resisting the urge to solve every problem—and seek instead to project influence from the sea. We must re-create an industrialized, middle-class America that builds and exports manufactured goods that can be carried on U.S.-built ships to the global market.

We knew all this in the age of Alfred Thayer Mahan. The Chinese are showing us that they know it now. The United States needs to relearn the lessons of strategy, geography, and history. We must look outward across the oceans, and find our place upon them, again. *A*

*Jerry Hendrix, a retired Navy captain, is a senior fellow with the Sagamore Institute, in Indianapolis, and the author of To Provide and Maintain a Navy (2020).*



# *Judy Blume Goes All the Way*

*A new generation discovers  
the poet laureate of puberty.*

*By Amy Weiss-Meyer*



**L**ike tens of thousands of young women before me, I wrote to Judy Blume because something strange was happening to my body.

I had just returned from visiting the author in Key West when I noticed a line of small, bright-red bites running up my right leg. I was certain it was bedbugs—and terrified that I'd given them to Blume, whose couch I had been sitting on a few days earlier.

I figured that if the creatures had hitched a ride from my hotel room, as I suspected, the courteous—if mortifying—thing to do would be to warn Blume that some might have

stowed away in her upholstery, too.

In Key West and in Brooklyn, beds were stripped, expensive inspections performed: nothing. After a few days, I had no new bites. I was relieved, if further embarrassed. I apologized to Blume for the false alarm, and she responded with a “Whew!” I hoped we had put the matter behind us.

The next morning, another email appeared in my inbox:

Amy—When I am bitten by No-See-Ums (so small you can't even see them and you were eating on your balcony in the evening)—I get a reaction, very itchy and the bites get very red and big. They often bite in a line.

It was “just a thought,” she wrote. “xx J.”

Here was Judy Blume, the author who gave us some of American literature's most memorable first periods, wet dreams, and desperate preteen bargains with God, calmly and empathetically letting me know that an unwelcome bodily development was nothing to be ashamed of or frightened by—that it was, in fact, something that had happened to her body too. Maybe, on some level, I'd been seeking such reassurance when I emailed her in the first place. Who better to go through a bedbug scare with?

For more than 50 years, Blume has been a beloved and trusted guide to children who are baffled or terrified or elated by what is happening to them, and are trying to make sense of it, whether *it* has to do with friendship, love, sex, envy, sibling rivalry, breast size (too small, too large), religion, race, class, death, or dermatology. Blume's 29 books have sold more than 90 million copies. The New York *Daily News* once referred to her as “Miss Lonelyhearts, Mister Rogers and Dr. Ruth rolled into one.” In the 1980s, she received 2,000 letters every month from devoted readers. “I'm not trying to get pity,” a typical 11-year-old wrote. “What I want is someone to tell me, ‘You'll live through this.’ I thought you could be that person.”

Blume, now 85, says that she is probably done writing, that the novel she published in 2015 was her last big book. She doesn't get many handwritten letters anymore, though she still interacts with readers in the nonprofit bookstore that she and her husband, George Cooper, founded in Key West in 2016. Some fans, women who grew up reading Blume, cry when they meet her. “Judy, hi!” one middle-aged visitor exclaimed when I was there, as if she were greeting an old friend. She was from Scotch Plains, New Jersey,

where Blume raised her two children in the '60s and '70s, though she admitted that the author would have no reason to know her personally. “Well hello, and welcome!” Blume said.

Blume loves meeting kids in the store too. Usually, though, she avoids making recommendations in the young-adult section—not because of the kids so much as their hovering parents. “The parents are so *judgmental*” about their kids' book choices, she told me. “They're always, you know, ‘What is this? Let me see this.’ You want to say, ‘Leave them alone.’” (Key West is a tourist town, and not everyone knows they're walking into *Judy Blume's* bookstore.)

Such parental anxiety is all too familiar to Blume. In the '80s, her frank descriptions of puberty and teenage sexuality made her a favorite target of would-be censors. Her books no longer land on the American Library Association's Top 10 Most Challenged Books list, which is now crowded with novels featuring queer and trans protagonists. Yet Blume's titles are still the subjects of attempted bans. Last year, the Brevard County chapter of Moms for Liberty, a right-wing group based in Florida, sought to have *Forever . . .* taken off public-school shelves there (the novel tells the story of two high-school seniors who fall in love, have sex, and—spoiler—do not stay together forever). Also in 2022, a Christian group in Fredericksburg, Texas, called Make Schools Safe Again targeted *Then Again, Maybe I Won't* (it mentions masturbation).

These campaigns are a backhanded compliment of sorts, an acknowledgment of Blume's continued relevance. Her books remain popular, in part because a generation that grew up reading Blume is now old enough to introduce her to their own children. Some are pressing dog-eared paperbacks into their kids' hands; others are calling her agent. In April, the director Kelly Fremon Craig's film adaptation of Blume's 1970 novel *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* will open in theaters. Jenna Bush Hager is bringing Blume's novel *Summer Sisters* to TV. (Hager and her twin, Barbara Pierce Bush, have said that *Summer Sisters* is the book that taught them about sex.) An animated *Superfudge* movie is coming to Disney+, and Netflix is developing a series based on *Forever . . .*. This winter, the documentary *Judy Blume Forever* premiered at Sundance Film Festival (it will be streaming on Amazon Prime Video this spring).

Today's 12-year-olds have the entire internet at their disposal; they hardly need novels to learn about puberty and sex. But kids are still kids, trying to figure out who they are and what they believe in. They're getting bullied, breaking up, making best friends. They are looking around, as kids always have, for adults who get it.

They—we—still need Judy Blume.

**I GOT MY** first email from Blume two weeks before my trip. “Hi Amy—It's Judy in Key West,” she wrote. “Just want to make sure your trip goes well.” I hadn't planned to consult the subject of my story on the boring logistics of the visit, but those details were exactly what Blume wanted to discuss: what time my flight landed, where I was staying, why I should stay somewhere else instead. Did I need a ride from the airport?

The advice continued once I arrived: where to eat, the importance of staying hydrated, why she prefers bottled water to the Key West tap. (Blume also gently coached me on what to do when,

at dinner my first night, my water went down the wrong pipe and I began to choke. “I know what that’s like,” she volunteered. “Bend your chin toward your chest.” I’d forgotten to bring a hat, so Blume loaned me one for rides in her teal Mini convertible and a walk along the beach. When I hesitated to put it on for the walk, eager to absorb as much vitamin D as possible before a long New York winter, she said, “*It’s up to you*” in that Jewish-mother way that means *Don’t blame me when you get a sunburn and skin cancer*. I put on the hat.

Blume and Cooper came here on a whim in the 1990s, during another New York winter, when Blume was trying to finish *Summer Sisters*. “I would say to George, ‘I wonder how many summers I have left,’” Blume recalled. “He said, ‘You know, you could have twice as many if you lived someplace warm.’” (Cooper, a former Columbia Law professor, was once an avid sailor.) Eventually they started spending most of the year here.

Blume enjoys a good renovation project, and she and Cooper have lived in various places around the island over the years. They now own a pair of conjoined condos right on the beach, in a 1980s building whose pink shutters and stucco arches didn’t prepare me for the sleek, airy space they’ve created inside, filled with art and books and comfortable places to read while watching the ocean. In the kitchen, a turquoise-and-pink tea towel with a picture of an empty sundae dish says *I GO ALL THE WAY*.

At one end of the apartment is a large office where Blume and one of her assistants work when she’s not at the bookstore. Her desk faces the water and is littered with handwritten notes and doodles she makes while she’s on the phone. She plays Wordle every day using the same first and second words: *TOILE* and *SAUCY*.

Usually, Blume told me, she sleeps with the balcony door open so she can hear the waves, though she’s terrified of thunderstorms, so much so that she used to retreat into a closet when they arrived. This condo has thick hurricane glass that lessens the noise, and now, with a good eye mask, Blume can bear to wait out a storm.

Blume spoke about her anxieties, and her bodily travails, without a hint of embarrassment. When I visited, she was still recovering from a bout of pneumonitis, a side effect of a drug she’d been prescribed to treat persistent urinary-tract infections. It had been months since she’d felt up to riding her bike—a cruiser with bright polka dots painted by a local artist—or been able to walk at quite the pace she once did (though our morning walk was, in my estimation, pretty brisk). Lately, she had been snacking on matzo with butter to try to regain some of the weight she’d lost over the summer.

Blume’s fictional characters are memorably preoccupied with comparing height and bra size and kissing techniques, as Blume herself was in her preteen and teenage years. Nowadays, when she has lunch with her childhood friends Mary and Joanne, with whom she’s stayed close, the three talk about things like hearing aids, which Mary had recently argued should be avoided because they make one seem old. But Joanne said that nothing makes someone seem older than having to ask “What?” all the time, and Blume, a few weeks into using her first pair, was glad she’d listened to Joanne.

Her body is changing, still. “I’m supposed to be five four. I’ve *always* been five four,” Blume said during breakfast on her balcony. “And recently the new doctor in New York measured me,

and I said, ‘It better be five four.’” It was 5 foot 3 and a quarter. “I said, ‘No!’ And yet, I have to tell you, all this year I’ve been saying to George, ‘I feel smaller.’ It’s such an odd sensation.”

She knows it happens to everyone, eventually, but she thought she’d had a competitive advantage: tap dancing, which she swears is good for keeping your posture intact and your spine strong. Her favorite teacher no longer works in Key West. But some nights, Cooper will put on Chet Baker’s fast-paced rendition of “Tea for Two,” and she has no choice. “I have to stop and tap dance.”

**BEFORE SHE WAS** Judy Blume, tap-dancing author, she was Judy Sussman, who danced ballet—“That’s what Jewish girls did”—and made up stories that she kept to herself. She grew up in Elizabeth, New Jersey, where her father, Rudolph Sussman, was a dentist, and the kind of person everyone confided in; his patients would come to his office just to talk. Her mother, Esther, didn’t work. Her brother, David, four years her senior, was a loner who was “supposed to be a genius” but struggled in school. Blume distinguished herself by trying hard to please her parents. “I knew that my job was making the family happy, because that wasn’t his job,” she told me.

She felt that her mother, in particular, expected perfection. “I didn’t doubt my parents’ love for me, but I didn’t think they understood me, or had any idea of what I was really like,” she has

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about her  
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written. “I just assumed that parents don’t understand their kids, ever. That there is a lot of pretending in family life.”

As a child, Blume read the *Oz* books and Nancy Drew. The first novels she felt she could identify with were Maud Hart Lovelace’s *Betsy-Tacy* books. When she was 11, the book she wanted to read most was John O’Hara’s *A Rage to Live*, but she wasn’t allowed (it has a lot of sex, as well as an awkward mother-daughter conversation about periods). She did read other titles she found on her parents’ shelves: *The Catcher in the Rye*, *The Fountainhead*, *The Adventures of Augie March*.

In the late 1940s, David developed a kidney condition, and to help him recuperate, the Sussmans decided that Esther and her mother would take the children to Miami Beach for the school year (Rudolph stayed behind in New Jersey so he could keep working). Blume's 1977 novel, *Starring Sally J. Freedman as Herself*, is based on this time in her life. Its protagonist, 10-year-old Sally, is smart, curious, and observant, occasionally in ways that get her into trouble. She asks her mother why the Black family she befriends on the train has to switch cars when they arrive in the South, and is angry when her mother, who admits that it may not be fair, tells her that segregation is simply "the way it is." She has vivid, sometimes gruesome fantasy sequences about personally confronting Hitler.

When Sally finds out that her aunt back home is pregnant, she writes her a celebratory letter full of euphemisms she only half-understands; her earnest desire to discuss the matter in adult terms even as she professes her ongoing fuzziness on some key details makes for a delicious bit of Blume-ian humor: "Congratulations! I'm very glad to hear that Uncle Jack got the seed planted at last." What Sally really wants to know is "how you got the baby made."

Blume, who hit puberty late, had similar questions at that age. She faked menstrual cramps when a friend got her period in sixth grade, and even wore a pad to school for her friend to feel through her clothes, as evidence. When she was 14 and still hadn't gotten her period, Esther picked her up from school one day and brought her to a gynecologist's office. Blume later recalled that the doctor barely spoke to her at all. "He put my feet in stirrups, and without warning, he examined me." She cried all the way home. "Why didn't you tell me he would do that?" she asked her mother. "I didn't want to frighten you," her mother replied. Blume was furious.

Her father, the dentist, was slightly more helpful. When she caught impetigo at school as a teenager, she developed sores on

her face and scalp—and "down there," as she put it. "I asked my father how I was going to tell the doctor that I had it in such a private place," Blume has written. "My father told me the correct way to say it. The next day I went to the doctor and I told him that I also had it in my pubic hair." Blume "turned purple" saying the words, but the doctor was unfazed. She learned that there was power in language, in knowing how to speak about one's body in straightforward, accurate terms.

She went to NYU, where she majored in early-childhood education. She married her first husband, a lawyer named John Blume, while she was still in college. For their honeymoon, Blume packed a copy of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* that her brother had brought home from Europe. It was still banned in the United States. "That book made for a *great* honeymoon," she has said.

Blume graduated from college in 1961; that same year, her daughter, Randy, was born, and in 1963 she had a son, Larry. She'd always loved babies, and loved raising her own. But being a Scotch Plains housewife gave her stomach pains—a physical manifestation, she later said, of her discontent.

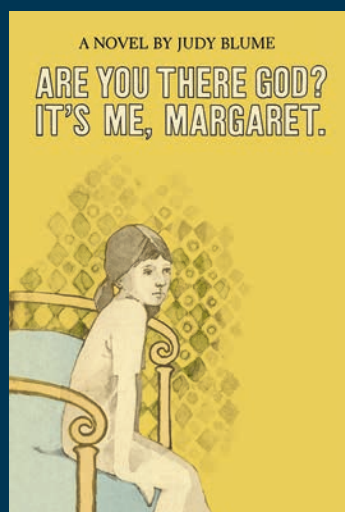
"I desperately needed creative work," Blume told me. "That was not something that we were raised to think about in the '50s, the '40s. What happens to a creative kid who grows up? Where do you find that outlet?"

Blume spent "God knows how long" making elaborate decorations for dinner parties—for a pink-and-green-themed "evening in Paris," she created a sparkling scene on the playroom wall complete with the River Seine and a woman selling crepe-paper flowers from a cart. She was never—still isn't—a confident cook. "I used to have an anxiety dream before dinner parties that I would take something out of the fridge that was made the day before and I'd drop it," she told me.

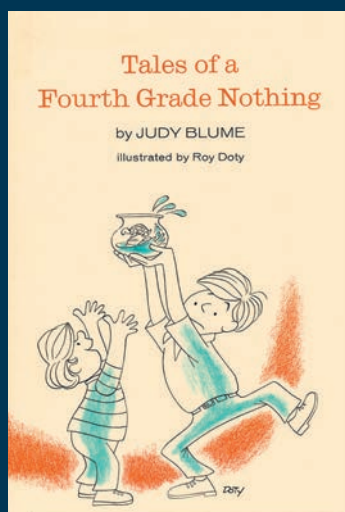
"I didn't fit in with the women on that cul-de-sac," she said. "I just never did. I gave up trying." She stopped pretending to care about the golf games and the tennis lessons. She started writing.

COURTESY OF JUDY BLUME; SIMON & SCHUSTER

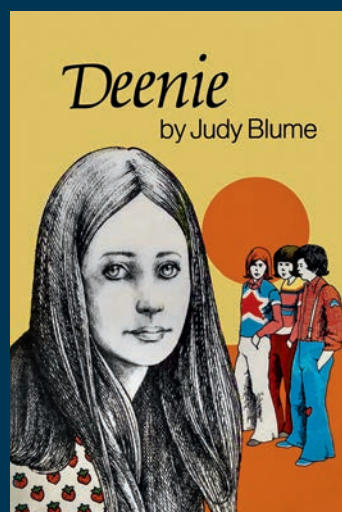
Selected Blume novels, in order of publication. At far right, a 2014 reissue of *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*, repackaged for the digital age.



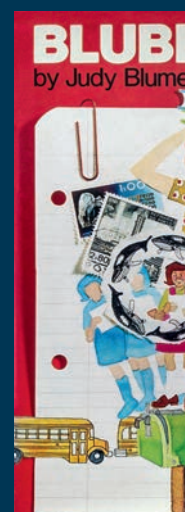
1970



1972



1973



1974



**THE FIRST TWO** short stories Blume sold, for \$20 each, were “The Ooh Ooh Aah Aah Bird” and “The Flying Munchkins.” Mostly, she got rejections.

In 1969, she published her first book, an illustrated story that chronicled the middle-child woes of one Freddy Dissel, who finally finds a way to stand out by taking a role as the kangaroo in the school play. She dedicated it to her children—the books she read to them, along with her memories of her own childhood, were what had made her want to write for kids.

Around the same time, Blume read about a new publishing company, Bradbury Press, that was seeking manuscripts for realistic children’s books. Bradbury’s founders, Dick Jackson and Robert Verrone, were young fathers interested, as Jackson later put it, in “doing a little mischief” in the world of children’s publishing. Blume sent in a draft of *Iggie’s House*, a chapter book about what happens when a Black family, the Garbers, moves into 11-year-old Winnie’s all-white neighborhood. Bradbury Press published the book, which is told from Winnie’s perspective, in 1970.

Today, Blume cringes when she talks about *Iggie’s House*—she has written that in the late 1960s, she was “almost as naive” as Winnie, “wanting to make the world a better place, but not knowing how.” In many ways, though, the novel holds up; intentionally or not, it captures the righteous indignation, the defensiveness, and ultimately the ignorance of the white “do-gooder.” (“I don’t think you understand,” Glenn, one of the Garber children, tells Winnie. “Understand?” Winnie asks herself. “What *did* he think anyway? Hadn’t she been understanding right from the start. Wasn’t she the one who wanted to be a good neighbor!”)

The major themes of Blume’s work are all present in *Iggie’s House*: parents who believe they can protect their kids from everything bad in the world by not talking to them about it, and kids who know better; families attempting to reconcile their personal value systems with shifting cultural norms. Years later, Blume

asked Jackson what he’d seen in the book. “I saw the next book, and the book after that,” he said.

After *Iggie’s House*, Blume published the novel that would, more than any other, define her career (and earn Bradbury its first profits): *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret*.

Margaret Simon is 11 going on 12, newly of suburban New Jersey by way of the Upper West Side. She’s worried about finding friends and fitting in, titillated and terrified by the prospect of growing up (the last thing she wants is “to feel like some kind of underdeveloped little kid,” but “if you ask me, being a teenager is pretty rotten”). When *Margaret* came out, the principal of Blume’s kids’ school didn’t want it in the library; he thought elementary-school girls were too young to read about periods.

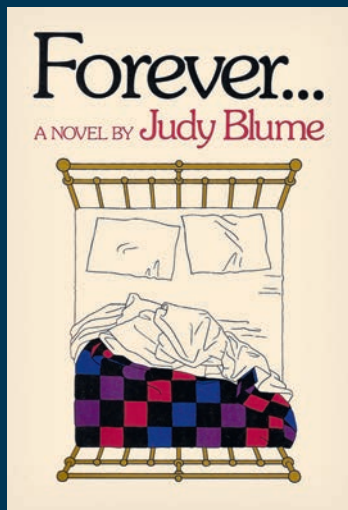
I remembered *Margaret* as a book about puberty, and Margaret’s chats with God as being primarily on this subject. Some of them, of course, are. (“Please help me grow God. You know where. I want to be like everyone else.”) But reading the book again, I was reminded that it is also a thoughtful, at times profound meditation on what it means to define your own relationship to religious faith.

Margaret’s Christian mother and Jewish father are both proudly secular. She fears that if they found out about her private prayers, “they’d think I was some kind of religious fanatic or something.” Much to their chagrin, she attends synagogue with her grandmother and church with her friends. She’s trying to understand what her parents are so opposed to, and what, if anything, these institutions and rituals might have to offer.

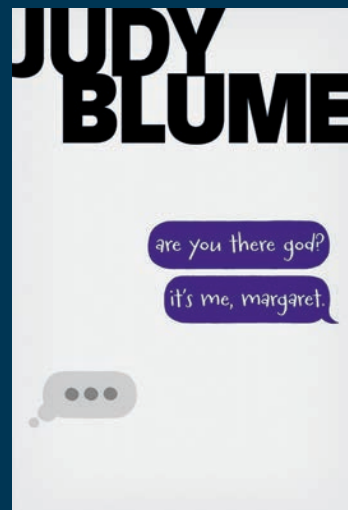
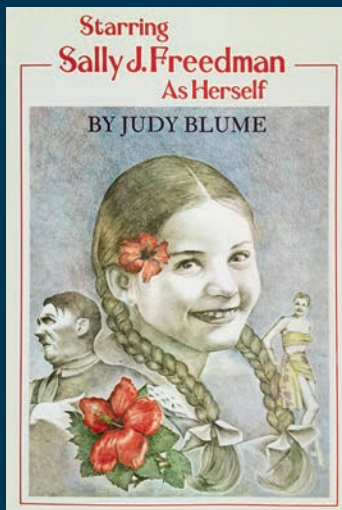
Several Blume fans I talked with remembered this aspect of the novel far better than I did. The novelist Tayari Jones, whose career Blume has championed, told me that the way *Margaret* is torn between “her parents’ decisions and her grandparents’ culture” was the main reason she loved the book. “I’m Black, and I grew up in the South. Being raised without religion made me feel like *such* an oddball,” Jones told me. “That really spoke to



1975



1977



2014

me even more than the whole flat-chested thing, although there was no chest flatter than my own.”

The writer Gary Shteyngart first encountered *Margaret* as a student at a Conservative Jewish day school. He found the questions it raised about faith “mind-blowing.” “I think in some ways it really created my stance of being apart from organized religion,” he told me. (The book stuck with him long after grade school; Shteyngart recalled repeating its famous chant—“I must, I must, I

*The letters started right after Margaret. The kids wanted to scream. They wanted to die. They knew Judy would understand.*

must increase my bust!”—with a group of female friends at a rave in New York in the ’90s. “I think we were on some drug, obviously.”)

*Margaret* was not a young-adult book, because there was no such thing in 1970. But even today, Blume rejects the category, which is generally defined as being for 12-to-18-year-olds. “I was not writing YA,” she told me. “I was not writing for teenagers.” She was writing, as she saw it, for “kids on the cusp.”

**THE LETTERS STARTED** right after *Margaret*. The kids wrote in their best handwriting, in blue ink or pencil, on stationery adorned with cartoon characters or paper torn out of a notebook. They sent their letters care of Blume’s publisher. “Dear Judy,” most began. Girls of a certain age would share whether they’d gotten their period yet. Some kids praised her work while others dove right in, sharing their problems and asking for advice: divorce, drugs, sexuality, bullying, incest, abuse, cancer. They wanted to scream. They wanted to die. They knew Judy would understand.

Blume responded to as many letters as she could, but she was also busy writing more books—she published another 10, after *Margaret*, in the ’70s alone. *It’s Not the End of the World* (1972) took on the subject of divorce from a child’s perspective with what was then unusual candor. “There are some things that are very hard for children to understand,” an aunt tells 12-year-old Karen. “That’s

what people say when they can’t explain something to you,” Karen thinks. “I can understand anything they can understand.”

Blume’s mother, Esther, was her typist up until Blume wrote *Forever ...*, her 1975 novel of teen romance—and sex. The book is dedicated to Randy, then 14, who had asked her mother to write a story “about two nice kids who have sex without either of them having to die.” *Forever ...* got passed around at sleepovers and gained a cult following; it is a book that women in their 50s can still recite the raciest page numbers from (85 comes up a lot). It’s also practical and straightforward: how to know if you’re ready, how to do it safely. The protagonist’s grandmother, a lawyer in Manhattan, bears more than a passing resemblance to her creator, mailing her granddaughter pamphlets from Planned Parenthood and offering to talk whenever she wants. “I don’t judge, I just advise,” she says.

The same year *Forever ...* came out, Blume got divorced after 16 years of marriage, and commenced what she has referred to as a belated “adolescent rebellion.” She cried a lot; she ate pizza and cheesecake (neither of which she’d had much interest in before, despite living in New Jersey). Within a year, she had remarried. She and her children and her new physicist husband—Blume calls him her “interim husband”—landed in Los Alamos, New Mexico, where he had a job. Blume knew from the start that the marriage was a mistake, though she didn’t want to admit it. “He was very much a know-it-all,” she told me. “It just got to be too much.” She was unhappy in Los Alamos, which felt like Stepford, but she kept writing. By 1979, she was divorced again.

In the midst of this second adolescence, Blume published her first novel for adults. *Wifey*, about the sexual fantasies and exploits of an unhappy New Jersey housewife, came out in 1978. She never intended to stop writing for children, though some assumed that *Wifey*’s explicitness would close that door. After the novel was published, Blume’s mother ran into an acquaintance from high school on the street. Bess Roth, whose son was Philip Roth, had some advice for her. “When they ask how she knows those things,” she told Esther, “you say, ‘I don’t know, but not from me!’”

In December 1979, George Cooper, who was then teaching at Columbia, asked his ex-wife if she knew any women he might want to have dinner with while he was visiting New Mexico, where she lived with their 12-year-old daughter. Cooper showed his daughter the four names on the list. His daughter, being 12, told him he had to have dinner with Judy Blume.

Dinner was Sunday night; Monday, Blume and Cooper saw *Apocalypse Now*. He called and sang “Love Is the Drug” over the phone (Blume thought he was singing “Love is a bug”). Tuesday night, Blume had a date with someone else. Cooper came over afterward, and he never left. They got married in 1987, to celebrate their 50th birthdays.

“The enjoyment of sexuality should go for your whole life—if you want it to,” Blume told the writer Jami Attenberg, in a 2022 conversation at the Key West Literary Seminar. “If you don’t, fine.” *I don’t judge, I just advise*. She had a product endorsement to share with the audience: George had given her a sex toy, the Womanizer, and it was fabulous. “Isn’t that wonderful? Isn’t that great? He got it for me and then I sang its praises to all of my girlfriends.”

**BLUME'S STEADFAST NONJUDGMENTALISM**, a feature of all her fiction, is part of what has so irritated her critics. It's not just sex that Blume's young characters get away with—they use bad words, they ostracize weirdos, they disrespect their teachers. In *Deenie* and *Blubber*, two middle-grade novels from the '70s, Blume depicts the cruelty that kids can show one another, particularly when it comes to bodily differences (physical disability, fatness). "I'd rather get it out in the open than pretend it isn't there," Blume said at the time. She didn't think adults could change kids' behavior; her goal was merely to make kids aware of the effect that behavior could have on others.

In 1980, parents pushed to have *Blubber* removed from the shelves of elementary-school libraries in Montgomery County, Maryland. "What's really shocking," one Bethesda mother told *The Washington Post*, "is that there is no moral tone to the book. There's no adult or another child who says, 'This is wrong.'" (Her 7-year-old daughter told the paper that *Blubber* was "the best book I ever read.")

As Blume's books began to be challenged around the country, she started speaking and writing against censorship. In November 1984, the Peoria, Illinois, school board banned *Blubber*, *Deenie*, and *Then Again, Maybe I Won't*, and Blume appeared on an episode of CNN's *Crossfire*, sitting between its hosts. "On the left, Tom Braden," the announcer said. "On the right, Pat Buchanan." Braden tried, sort of, to defend Blume's work, but Blume was more or less on her own as Buchanan yelled at her: "Can you not understand how parents who have 9-year-olds ... would say, 'Why aren't the kids learning about history? Why aren't they learning about the Civil War? What are they focusing in on this nonsense for?'" Blume explained that it wasn't either/or—that her books were elective, that kids read them "for feelings. And they write me over 2,000 letters a month and they say, 'You know how I feel.'"

"I touched my special place every night," Buchanan replied, reading from a passage in *Deenie* about masturbation. (After the bans received national publicity, the Peoria board reversed its decision but said younger students would need parental permission to read the books.)

Despite, or perhaps because of, the censorship, Blume was, in the early '80s, at the peak of her commercial success. In 1981, she sold more than 1 million copies of *Superfudge*, the latest book in a series about the charming troublemaker Farley Drexel Hatcher—a.k.a. Fudge—and

his long-suffering older brother, Peter. Starting that year, devoted readers could purchase the Judy Blume Diary—"the place to put your own feelings"—though Blume reportedly declined offers to do Judy Blume bras, jeans, and T-shirts. Mary Burns, a professor of children's literature at Framingham State College, in Massachusetts, thought Judy Blume was a passing fad, "a cult," like *General Hospital* for kids. "You can't equate popularity with quality," Burns told *The Christian Science Monitor*. "The question that needs to be asked is: will Judy Blume's books be as popular 20 years from now?" Burns, obviously, thought not.

But 20 years later is about when I encountered the books, when my first-grade teacher pressed a vintage copy of *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing* into my hands in the school library one day. I continued reading Blume over the coming years—as a city kid, I was especially intrigued by the exotic life (yet familiar feelings) of the suburban trio of friends in *Just as Long as We're Together* (1987) and *Here's to You, Rachel Robinson* (1993). In fourth grade, I tried to take *Margaret* out of my school library and was told I was too young.

I recently went back to that school to speak with the librarian, who is still there. The young-adult category has exploded in the years since I was a student, and these days, she told me, tweens and young teens seeking realistic fiction are more likely to ask for John Green (*The Fault in Our Stars*), Angie Thomas (*The Hate U Give*), or Jason Reynolds (*Long Way Down*) than Judy Blume. She implied that the subjects these authors take on—childhood cancer, police violence, gun violence—make the adolescent angst of Blume's books feel somewhat less urgent by comparison.

Yet Blume's books remain popular. According to data from NPD BookScan, *Margaret* tends to sell 25,000 to 50,000 copies a

Blume visits with sixth graders in 1977.





Abby Ryder Fortson as Margaret and Rachel McAdams as her mother, Barbara, in the movie adaptation of *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*

year; the *Fudge* series sells well over 100,000. (*The Fault in Our Stars*, which was published in 2012 and became a movie in 2014, sold 3.5 million copies that year, but has not exceeded 100,000 in a single year since 2015.) A portion of these sales surely comes from parents who buy the books in the hope that their kids will love them as much as they did. But nostalgia alone seems insufficient to account for Blume's wide readership; parents can only influence their kids' taste so much. "John Updike once said that the relationship of a good children's-book author to his or her audience is conspiratorial in nature," Leonard S. Marcus, who has written a comprehensive history of American children's literature, told me. "There's a sense of a shared secret between the author and the child." Clearly, something about these stories still feels authentic to the TikTok generation.

Now that Blume's books seem relatively quaint, I asked my former librarian, can anyone who wants to check them out? Absolutely not, she said. Her philosophy is that "the protagonist, especially with realistic fiction, should be around your age range." It's not censorship, she insisted, just "asking you to wait."

Back in 2002 or 2003, not wanting to wait, I'd bought my own copy of *Margaret*. I loved that book, all the more so because I knew it was one adults didn't want me to read.

For her part, Blume believes that kids are their own best censors. In Key West, she told me the story of a mother who had reluctantly let her 10-year-old read *Forever ...* on the condition that she come to her with any questions afterward. Her daughter had just one: *What is fondue?*

"IS GROWING UP a dirty subject?" Blume asked Pat Buchanan on *Crossfire*. What were adults so afraid of? What made it so hard

for them to acknowledge that children were people too? In her fiction, Blume had always taken the kids' side. But as her own kids got older and she began to reflect on her experience raising them, Blume gained more empathy for parents. In 1986, she published *Letters to Judy: What Your Kids Wish They Could Tell You*, "a book for every family to share," featuring excerpts and composites of real letters that children (and a few parents) had sent her over the years, plus autobiographical anecdotes by Blume herself. "If you're wondering why your child would write to me instead of coming to you," she wrote, "let me assure you that you're not alone. There

were times when my daughter, Randy, and son, Larry, didn't come to me either. And that hurt. Like every parent, I've made a million mistakes raising my kids."

When she would describe the project to friends and colleagues, they'd nod and say, "Oh, letters from deeply troubled kids." Blume corrected them. "I would try to explain," she wrote, "that yes, some of the letters are from troubled kids, but most are from kids who love their parents and get along in school, although they still sometimes feel alone, afraid and misunderstood." She admitted in the book's introduction that "sometimes I become more emotionally involved in their lives than I should." Blume replied directly to 100 or so kids every month, and the rest got a form letter—some with handwritten notes at the top or bottom. After *Letters to Judy* came out, more and more kids wrote.

Today, the letters are in the archives of the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library at Yale. Reading through them is by turns heartwarming, hilarious, and devastating. Some letter-writers ask for dating advice; others detail the means by which they are planning to kill themselves. Blume remembers one girl who said she had the razor blades ready to go.

Blume's involvement, in some cases, was more than just emotional: She called a student's guidance counselor and took notes on a yellow Post-it about how to follow up. One teenage girl came to New York, where Blume and Cooper had moved from New Mexico, for a weekend visit (they took her to see *A Chorus Line*; she wasn't impressed). Blume thought seriously about inviting one of her correspondents to come live with her. "It took over my life at one point," Blume said of the letters, and the responsibility she felt to try to help their writers.

“Hang in there!” Blume would write, a phrase that might have seemed glib coming from any other adult, though the kids didn’t seem to take it that way when she said it: They’d write back to thank her for her encouragement and send her updates.

Her correspondence with some kids lasted years. “I want to protect you from anything bad or painful,” Blume wrote to one. “I know I can’t but that’s how I feel. Please write soon and let me know how it’s going.”

After spending a day in the Beinecke’s reading room, I began to see Blume as a latter-day catcher in the rye, attempting to rescue one kid after the next before it was too late. “I keep picturing all these little kids playing some game in this big field of rye and all,” Holden Caulfield tells his younger sister in J. D. Salinger’s novel:

Thousands of little kids, and nobody’s around—nobody big, I mean—except me. And I’m standing on the edge of some crazy cliff. What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff—I mean if they’re running and they don’t look where they’re going I have to come out from somewhere and *catch* them.

Perhaps, through these letters, Blume had managed to live out Caulfield’s impossible fantasy.

**WHEN YOUR BOOKS** sell millions of copies, Hollywood inevitably comes calling. Blume, long a skeptic of film or TV collaboration, was always clear with her agent that *Margaret* was off the table. “I didn’t want to ruin it,” she told me. Some books, she thought, just aren’t meant to be movies. “It would have been wrong somehow.”

Then she heard from Kelly Fremon Craig, who had directed the 2016 coming-of-age movie *The Edge of Seventeen*. Blume had admired the film, which could have drawn its premise from a lost Judy Blume novel. Its protagonist, Nadine, is an angsty teen who has recently lost her father and feels like her mom doesn’t get her. Fremon Craig and her mentor and producing partner, James L. Brooks, flew to Key West and went to Blume’s condo for lunch. (Blume had it catered—no reason to have anxiety dreams about serving food on a day like that.) They convinced Blume that *Margaret* could work on the screen.

Blume served as a producer on the film, gave Fremon Craig notes on the script, and spent time on set, heading off at least one catastrophic mistake when she observed the young actors performing the famous “I must increase my bust” exercise by pressing their hands together in a prayer position. (The correct method, which Blume has demonstrated—with the caveat that it does not work—is to make your hands into fists, bend your arms at your sides, and vigorously thrust your elbows back.)

The result of their close collaboration is an adaptation that’s generally faithful to the text. Abby Ryder Fortson, who plays Margaret, manages to make her conversations with God feel like a natural extension of her inner life.

If anything, the movie is more conspicuously set in 1970 than the book itself, full of wood paneling, Cat Stevens, and vintage sanitary pads. Blume told me that *Margaret* is really about her own experience growing up in the ’50s; she just happened to publish it in

1970. The movie, unfolding at what we now know was the dawn of the women’s-liberation movement, adds another autobiographical layer by fleshing out the character of Margaret’s mother, Barbara (Rachel McAdams), who now recalls Blume in her New Jersey–mom era. In the book, Barbara is an artist, and we occasionally hear about her paintings; on-screen, she gives up her career to be a full-time PTA mom. She’s miserable.

Preteens aren’t the only ones in this movie figuring out who they are, and what kind of person they want to become. By the end of the film, Barbara has quit the PTA. She’s happily back at her easel.

**I SHOULDN’T HAVE** been surprised by how easy it was to confide in Blume. Still, I hadn’t expected to reveal quite so much—I was there to interview *her*. Yet over the course of our conversations, I found myself telling her things about my life and my family that I’ve rarely discussed with even my closest friends. At one point, when I mentioned offhand that I’d been an anxious child, Blume asked matter-of-factly, “What were you anxious about when you were a kid?” She wanted specifics. She listened as I ran down the list, asking questions and making reassuring comments. “That’s all very real and understandable,” she said, and the 9-year-old in me melted.

It was easy to see why so many kids kept sending letters all those years. Even those of us who didn’t correspond with Blume could sense her compassion. To read one of her books is to have her tell you, in so many words, *That’s all very real and understandable*.

This kind of validation can be hard to come by. Tiffany Justice, a founder of Moms for Liberty, has said that the group is focused on “safeguarding children and childhood innocence,” an extreme response to a common assumption: that children are fragile and in need of protection, that they are easily influenced and incapable of forming their own judgments. Certain topics, therefore, are best avoided. Even adults who support kids’ learning about these topics in theory sometimes find them too awkward to discuss in practice.

Blume believes, by contrast, that grown-ups who underestimate children’s intelligence and ability to comprehend do so at their own risk—that “childhood innocence” is little more than a pleasing story adults tell themselves, and that loss of innocence doesn’t have to be tragic. In the real world, kids and teenagers throw up and jerk off and fall in love; they have fantasies and fights, and they don’t always buy what their parents have taught them about God.

Sitting across from her in the shade of her balcony, I realized that the impression I’d formed of Blume at the Beinecke Library had been wrong. Much as she had wanted to help the thousands of kids who wrote to her, kids who badly needed her wisdom and her care, Blume was not Holden Caulfield. Instead of a cliff for kids to fall off, she saw a field that stretched continuously from childhood to adulthood, and a worrying yet wonderful lifetime of stumbling through it, no matter one’s age. Young people don’t need a catcher; they need a compassionate coach to cheer them on. “Of course I remember you,” she told the kids in her letters. “I’ll keep thinking of you.” “Do be careful.” *A*

*Amy Weiss-Meyer is a senior editor at The Atlantic.*

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# Culture & Critics



OMNIVORE

## In Their Feelings

*The indelible, indomitable voices of Miley Cyrus and Lana Del Rey*

By James Parker

If you're looking to the stars—and why wouldn't you be?—you'll know that Saturn has entered the sign of Pisces. It happened in early March: Shaggy old Saturn, god of constriction and mortality, lowered his iron haunches into the Piscean waters. He'll be there until May 2025, an intractable lump in that wishy-washy element. Displacing it. Blocking it. Imposing his limits. Enough with the changeability, he says to dippy, fin-flashing Pisces. Enough with the half-assedness. Endless mutation is not possible. Now you're going to face—and be stuck with—yourself.

This will be a challenge, one senses, for artists in general. And for pop stars in particular. Who sheds selves, and invents selves, faster than a pop star? Who defies time and gravity with more desperation? Something else was augured for March: the release of new albums by two of our most continually expanding and dramatically evolving celestial bodies. I'm talking about Miley Cyrus and Lana Del Rey. Two emanations of the holy city of Los Angeles; two distinct transits across the firmament.

Cyrus, daughter of the country singer Billy Ray Cyrus, was a Disney kid, the star of *Hannah Montana*, a highly processed pop prodigy who moved from Tennessee to L.A. (see: "Party in the U.S.A."), broke out, and became a bong-brandishing hip-hop appropriator, twerk transgressor, sometime Flaming Lips collaborator, and pop/country/glam-rock anarchic aberration obsessed with freedom and nudity and Molly and "getting some," chafing and rattling in her corporate cage, her magnificent voice growing steadily/unsteadily deeper and rougher and omnivorous, from a gurgling mezzo-soprano to an anthemic libertine roar to something like Metallica's James Hetfield belching flames of pure estrogen, all the while achieving higher and higher levels of pop visibility until finally, in January, she smashed Spotify's all-time weekly-song-streaming

record (and took the top spot on the *Billboard* charts) with her post-breakup empowerment frolic “Flowers.” “I can buy myself flow-uuuuuhs ...” Is it her best song? Not even close. But her personality has achieved some kind of critical mass in the culture. Cyrus has lived several lifetimes, burned through several careers, made some beautiful music (“Adore You,” “High,” “Malibu”) and some not-so-beautiful music, and still—at age 30—gives the impression of not being able to manage, not quite, her freakish powers, like the pupils at Professor Xavier’s School for Gifted Youngsters in *X-Men*, knocking down walls with their elbows and accidentally putting people in comas.

Del Rey, born Elizabeth Grant in New York, weathered a now-incomprehensible controversy about “authenticity” (a word that, to paraphrase Nabokov, should only ever be in quotes) upon the 2011 release of her swooning, doomy single “Video Games.” “It’s you, it’s you, it’s all for you / Everything I do ...” Romanticism that smelled like nihilism, utterly convincing. Who could have doubted her? Who could have doubted Lana Del Rey? But they did. They arraigned her as the fabrication of (male) music-biz wizards: a fake, a thing of vapors. Only to watch her billow unstoppably outward, enveloping her helpless audience in a woozy fantasia of poetry, scandal, profanity, emotional purgation, street talk, and yellow-toothed pianos in decaying Hollywood mansions. Dark-blue Americana. A Doorsian West Coast trip. Tambourine-like flickerings of electricity on the horizon.

Her sonic environment is submarine, slow-blossoming, lavish with dream imagery and orchestral overkill. When she sang, with a kind of shimmering solemnity, “My pussy tastes like Pepsi Cola” on 2012’s *Paradise*, it felt like a Frederick Seidel-esque provocation but also like Patti Smith singing “Jesus died for somebody’s sins but not mine.” Or like Sylvia Plath writing “Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through.” In other words, it felt like a breakout, one of those lines that instantaneously, heretically, clears the ground in front of it and blasts the artist into free space. After a line like that, you can do what you want.

Is she a persona? A sequence of personas? It’s never clear. “All these bitches want something from me / Got me fucked up on LA money.” Cyrus, singing these lines in a demo version of “LA Money,” sounds genuinely disgruntled; if Del Rey sang them (as she might), hushing the consonants and dilating the vowels, they would be smoking with her special metallic irony. Then again, she can be utterly naked: “God damn, man child / You fucked me so good that I almost said ‘I love you.’” (Then again again, maybe that’s ironic too ... See what I mean?)

People who make their living singing songs tend to have good voices. Cyrus and Del Rey have great voices. Extraordinary voices. Cyrus has made her voice a drama of experience: the ravagings of good times and bad times, the scraping-out of new depths, the attainment of raucous new heights. “Man has places in his heart which do not yet exist,” wrote the Catholic mystic Léon Bloy, “and into them enters suffering in order that they may have existence.” Cyrus’s performance of her there-goes-my-marriage song, “Slide Away,” at the 2019 MTV Video Music Awards had me reaching for the oxymorons: a rueful shout, a soaring growl, a rumble on wings of sorrow. Her voice can sound sore, split, like she’s an older, even more time-damaged pop star doing a guest spot on her own song. Or it can sound straight-up bacchanalian.

Out there in YouTube limbo, unreleased as of this writing, is a thundering Cyrus ballad called “Fucked Up Forever.” What a vocal performance this is: Cyrus’s age and youth, her tenderized understanding and her hooligan snarl, in perfect, momentary balance. “We’re holdin’ on the hands of Time / So baby put yours in mine / I’ll leave this place whenever / And run away together ... Can’t stay fucked up forever!” And the oldest wolf in Yellowstone bursts into tears, and wild young couples across the nation drive straight into the flames of a better day.

Del Rey’s voice is more pastoral, woodwind to Cyrus’s pedal-stomping power chord: It floats, wafts, whispers, swells, flutters, dissociates, as if she’s always teetering, just teetering, at some grand balustrade of feeling. She can climb to rapture, as in the storming falsetto finale of “In My Feelings,” or add an exquisite detail: “We could get lost in the purple rain,” she sings in “Let Me Love You Like a Woman,” and the little accent of transport she puts on *rain* turns it from a shopworn Prince reference to a ... to a micro-ecstasy. She says things that a female rapper might say—“Who’s doper than this bitch?”—but slowly, through a mesh of glimmering reserve. Swagger, inverted. It’s really a unique psychic zone, her voice: One breath and we’re in it.

Their stars are crossing, these two, daughters equally in their art of heavy-metal Saturn and of dreamy, fleeting Pisces. They’ll ride the transition. The id of California—the id of America—is strong in both of them. Cyrus, in my imagination, will keep slinging TVs out the windows of Chateau Marmont while howling at the hills. Del Rey will drift angelically down Sunset Boulevard, singing drug lullabies and tapping dirty skateboarders with her wand. What a rare conjunction, and what a gift. They’re refining themselves, they’re exposing themselves, and they’re doing it all for us. *A*

*James Parker is a staff writer at The Atlantic.*

*The id of California—the id of America—is strong in both of them.*





## We're All Invited to the Lighthouse

*On the Isle of Skye with Virginia Woolf and my mom*

By Patricia Lockwood

*To the Lighthouse*, from the first word of its title, is a novel that moves. Here it comes striding across the lawn, with its hair in long, curving crimps and a deer-stalker hat on its head, with a bag in one hand and a child trailing from the other. It is coming to find you, its face lights up, there is something in this world for you to do.

I had met Virginia Woolf before I ever opened her books. I knew what she looked like and what had happened to her; I knew that her books took place inside the human mind and that I had my whole life to enter them. My premonitory sense of what her novels were about—*Mrs. Dalloway* is about some lady, *The Waves* is about ... waves, *To the Lighthouse* is about going to a lighthouse—turned out to be basically accurate. Yet I put off *To the Lighthouse* for a long time, in order to live in delicious anticipation of it. There is a pleasure to be had in putting off the classics; as soon as you open *Bleak House*, you foreclose all other possibilities of what it could be, and there sits Mr. Krook in his unchanging grease spot, always to look the same, never to raise a hand differently. As long as it remains unread, the story can be anything—free, immortal, drowning between white sheets. Yet if you are a reader, this pleasure can be drawn out for only so long.

I have beliefs about *Mrs. Dalloway*—that Clarissa Dalloway should have been the one to kill herself,

for example. I have sometimes, picturing all the characters in black leotards, found myself laughing at the first 10 pages of *The Waves*. But I never have the sense, opening *To the Lighthouse*, that it could have been anything else. It begins with the weather, just like a real day. It rises to some occasion, wakes with the lark to meet the weekend—moves “with an indescribable air of expectation” because it is going to meet someone around the corner, and, with the shock of encounter you sometimes feel in reading, you find that it is you.

“This is going to be fairly short,” Woolf wrote in 1925, “to have father’s character done complete in it; & mothers; & St Ives; & childhood; & all the usual things I try to put in—life, death &c.” A maniac’s claim, “life, death &c.,” but she actually did it. Virginia Woolf, being one of those who can turn the Earth with one finger, picked up her own childhood summers in Cornwall and set them down intact in the Hebrides, on the Isle of Skye.

When I first read this book, I had not seen this place; now I have been over every inch of it, eating its butter and eggs in the morning, blinking like a light at its lakes at night, getting backed up the road by the dense yellow sponge of its sheep in the afternoon. We spent a few days on the island in the spring of 2019, my mother, my husband, and I. At dawn we drove around the whole perimeter of the novel, over the heather that keeps a footprint, down by the rock pools where something might be lost. I felt I could have been riding in the car that the royalties of *To the Lighthouse* bought Virginia and her husband, Leonard, as she drove me past all points, on the wrong side of the road and under threat of rain, so that the real scenes blurred with the ones she had transposed on them. Virginia saw the Godrevy Lighthouse in St. Ives Bay when she closed her eyes, though Skye, too, has a famous one. She saw her father, Sir Leslie Stephen, scholar, writer, and mountain climber, and her mother, Julia Stephen, the tallest thing on the island, painted here in the black-and-white stripes of someone called just Mrs. Ramsay.

It is Mrs. Ramsay herself we are going to meet; it is she who could not have been different. She is the human holiday, the dinner table laid with everything in season, and she herself rotating in the center of it—her own face in season, a fruit. She has little time for books, not even books like this (and there is only one of those). She has no foreknowledge, but she has intuitions: an impulse of terror when her family ceases to wash her with the sound of their talk, or when the line “stormed at with shot and shell” is carried for a moment into her ear by her husband, the thunderer. Her 6-year-old, James, wants to go to the Lighthouse tomorrow, but it seems there will be weather.

“Yes, of course, if it’s fine to-morrow,” said Mrs. Ramsay ... ‘But,’ said his father, stopping in front of the drawing-room window, ‘it won’t be fine.’”

“But it may be fine—I expect it will be fine,” said Mrs. Ramsay, making some little twist of the reddish-brown stocking she was knitting, impatiently.” Along with James, from the first page of the book, you may wish to kill Mr. Ramsay. And along with James, looking into the possibility and plenitude of his mother’s face, you may feel that paradise is a refrigerator.

**IS IT RIDICULOUS** that what I remember most about Skye is wandering the grocery store with my own mother, through the cold breath of the dairy aisle? My mother is no Mrs. Ramsay—she looks at you not with tenderness, but as if a volcano is exploding behind you—but she has the gift of putting newspaper headlines on the day, of setting Tomorrow before you as if it were something to eat. We walked up and down and we chose, as if we were choosing each other.

Ringed by water, things on an island have the halos that objects wear in still-life paintings. Everything familiar was a bit different there: fruit, flowers, ourselves. Randomly we bought a huge melon; maybe this was the place where we would finally be the people who would crack open a melon for breakfast. Rain began to spatter as we emerged into the parking lot, which should have worried us but didn’t—driving on the wrong side of the road through rough weather was an opportunity my mother had waited for her whole life. We pulled squealing out of the lot, and we talked of what we would do, as the melon rolled thunderously from one side of the car to the other. It was raining steadily now. The forecast said it would continue, but my mother drove us between drops, as if nothing that came from the sky could matter to us. Maybe she has some Mrs. Ramsay in her after all.

“I remember it a little less beautifully,” my husband said tactfully, as those who were not Virginia Woolf may have remembered those St. Ives summers. “We walked into the grocery store 15 minutes before it closed. We had never been so hungry in our lives, so time was of the essence, but your mother started to malfunction, trying to find midwestern treats and bags of ice so that she could formulate the liquid that kept her alive and that no one in this part of the world would acknowledge: iced tea. You were walking through the cold breath of the dairy aisle so that your mother could yell at the unpasteurized milk, which she considered dangerous. Both of you became deranged in the produce section and started grabbing fruits at random”—“That melon had meaning to me,”

I interrupted, but he went on. “Everyone knew she was your mother, and everyone knew you were American.” Well. I have often called him my Leonard, but I feel he is a little harder on me.

You could write about Mrs. Ramsay for a long time; anyone could. That is how the world gets a Virginia Woolf, maybe. Woolf lays her out not like a figure but like a spectrum. Sitting knitting by the window in the shabby drawing room, Mrs. Ramsay feels waves, winds, pulses of suspicion about her own nature:

She looked out to meet that stroke of the Lighthouse, the long steady stroke, the last of the three, which was her stroke, for watching them in this mood always at this hour one could not help attaching oneself to one thing especially of the things one saw; and this thing, the long steady stroke, was her stroke. Often she found herself sitting and looking, sitting and looking, with her work in her hands until she became the thing she looked at—that light for example.

Her work was the shape of a stocking, and hospitals, and ensuring that the milk came to your doorstep still white and clean. And saying tomorrow may be fine; we may yet go to the Lighthouse.

You could write about Mr. Ramsay, too, the scholar and professor. The most generous woman of the age, as Woolf saw it, might be married to the most bottomless hole, who must regularly be assured “that he too lived in the heart of life; was needed; not here only, but all over the world.” Mr. Ramsay’s light strokes over something, but it is not the pageant of people that surrounds him; it is the alphabet of his own mind, which he fears goes up only to Q, while someone else’s might reach all the way to Z. Indeed, he might have made it to Z had he not married, he thinks. Well, a fool might count fruits in paradise.

“He is absorbed in himself, he is tyrannical, he is unjust,” thinks Lily Briscoe, a friend of the family, with her eyes down, because only when her eyes are down can she see the Ramsays clearly. “Directly one looked up and saw them, what she called ‘being in love’ flooded them. They became part of that unreal but penetrating and exciting universe which is the world seen through the eyes of love. The sky stuck to them; the birds sang through them.” Paradise, and a fool pacing through it with the sky stuck to him and the birds singing through him, thinking he would have written better books if he had not married.

The Ramsays come to Skye every summer with their eight children: Prue, Nancy, Rose, Cam, Andrew, Jasper, Roger, and that engine of desire, young James. They are surrounded as much by visitors as they are by the landscape, because Mrs. Ramsay requires attendants of varying colors and dispositions; she is a

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have been  
anything else.*

master in the flower-arranging of people, which likes a stem or two of something wild. And so we have the handful gathered here almost by chance—Lily, who wants to paint and never marry; the widowed botanist William Bankes; Charles Tansley, a student; the young couple Paul Rayley and Minta Doyle; Augustus Carmichael, the poet and almost afterthought. They could have been anyone. Even we, in the right time and place, could have been there.

We are perhaps somewhat like Lily, striving and unformed, a tamer flower than she wants to be, who tomorrow may be able to make the paint move, who feels the agony of having her painting looked at. She is trying to capture the house, with Mrs. Ramsay and James in the window. She is required, through the long upright afternoon of the novel's first section, to stand in one place in front of her easel so that she can register the passing of the horizontal through the vertical, the kitchen table through the pear tree, the march of time through Mrs. Ramsay. Tomorrow, Lily tells herself, thinking of her canvas, she must move the tree more toward the middle.

We are perhaps more like the “little atheist” and groveling admirer of Mr. Ramsay, Charles Tansley, who quite swiftly finds himself shunned by the children and in uncomfortable thrall to Mrs. Ramsay, under whose influence “he was coming to see himself, and everything he had ever known gone crooked a little. It was awfully strange.” He grew up without enough love or money and so, as a man, does not know how to cry out “Let us all go to the circus!” with any spontaneity, which causes Mrs. Ramsay considerable wonder. It is not difficult at all to go to the circus! It is not difficult to go to the Lighthouse. If other people would only stop saying it were not possible, she would carry them there.

Mrs. Ramsay's work is to make people magnificent—to make them believe in themselves, make them think they can do anything, which is also how you get a Virginia Woolf. Mrs. Ramsay's work is to make people fall in love with her, so that they can marry other people. “William must marry Lily,” she thinks, and such is the force of green sap in the thought that it almost comes to flower. (Not really, but there is a moment when we think, *Maybe?*)

**WOOLF'S MOTHER**, Julia Stephen, was an extraordinary woman, with eyes like cups and a mouth that turned down and a chin you have seen in a dozen paintings. She was a model for the artists Edward Burne-Jones and George Frederic Watts, and her aunt Julia Cameron, a photographer, made more than 50 portraits of her. In her pictures she presides, as if you are looking at her from the child end of a very long table. Her hair streams and a light glow sometimes

comes from the top of her head. In the 1981 introduction to the book, Eudora Welty writes that “the novel's conception has the strength of a Blake angel,” and it is hard to envision this angel without Julia Stephen's face. If you have seen her, staring with compassion and without mercy in black-and-white, perhaps you imagine Mrs. Ramsay this way. Perhaps you picture your own mother.

It is the eyes from which Virginia proceeds, and the nose like an arrow. People really do come from other people, strange as it might seem. To her children, Mrs. Ramsay said, “You shall go through with it. To eight people she had said relentlessly that.” Julia and Leslie had four children. The Woolfs had none, yet to her countless readers Virginia said the same thing, and relentlessly that: You shall go through with it all.

If you have not read the book yet, stop here and come back later, because I am going to talk about the dinner party. No summary shall ever stand in place of the experience. Rereading the book, I had to pause a whole day before that scene, when the book's first day and all the people in it come together. I was in an agony of anticipation, as if it were an actual party. I had to choose my jewels! Would I be able to converse? Would the boeuf en daube be overdone, or properly timed? Would the right words come to my lips? Then tomorrow came and the worst happened: I was reading it badly, in scraps and fragments, nothing coming together. I was failing—along with the little atheist, I wanted to get back to my work. But I had forgotten that this was how it was written, to make you feel this way. It was written so that when the candles were lit, “some change at once went through them all.” Suddenly,

they were all conscious of making a party together in a hollow, on an island; had their common cause against that fluidity out there. Mrs. Ramsay, who had been uneasy, waiting for Paul and Minta to come in, and unable, she felt, to settle to things, now felt her uneasiness change to expectation.

The dish of fruit, of people, is intact, the party all of a kind for a moment, until a hand reaches out to take a pear. And I was sad; I had not said what I'd wanted to say.

You cannot ever replicate your first reading of this scene. But once you have read it, you have it, and it goes on forever in a room inside of you: the low lights, the faces sparkling in their sugar, the carrying of the boeuf en daube to the table. It is where the movement of the title finally sweeps you up and makes you a part of it. You, too, were invited, despite your imperfections and your pretentious dress; your bad ideas about

TO THE  
LIGHTHOUSE

Virginia Woolf

PENGUIN CLASSICS

art and your inability to paint the world as you see it; your choice of husband or wife; the fact that you will never marry, that you will die in the war, that your mind cannot make it all the way through to Z. You were asked to come and you are there.

Woolf notes, after finishing *To the Lighthouse*, that hardly a word goes wrong in this scene, and it is true. The things of the Earth float in orbit around Woolf; they proceed one from the other in a montage of transformation. “It could not last,” Mrs. Ramsay knew, “but at the moment her eyes were so clear that they seemed to go round the table unveiling each of these people, and their thoughts and their feelings, without effort like a light stealing under water so that its ripples and the reeds in it and the minnows balancing themselves, and the sudden silent trout are all lit up hanging, trembling.”

Virginia Woolf is not like her mother, not like Mrs. Ramsay. But she has the center that holds, and you feel with full force what she declared in 1925, not long after she first saw *To the Lighthouse* in her mind, circling like a fin far out at sea, that she was “the only woman in England free to write what I like.” The churn of paint that will take over *The Waves* entirely begins here. *To the Lighthouse* asserts the abstract painting as figural: Here are the mother and child, a triangle on Lily Briscoe’s canvas, among curves and arabesques. What Lily wishes for is what Woolf must have wished for, what every artist must wish for before they begin: “that very jar on the nerves, the thing itself before it has been made anything.”

It is characteristic of Woolf that you could use nearly any elemental metaphor to describe her effects. Shall I speak of paint and canvas, or the tick of minutes in an empty room, or the wind in a hollow shell? Anything is possible. You have only to choose, as she chose from among her people. Shall I look now through the painter, the student, the child? It is she who likes a stem of something wild, she who has invited one of every kind to come to the table, in case she needs their eyes, their ears, the clear water running through their mind.

“I have an idea that I will invent a new name for my books to supplant ‘novel,’” Woolf wrote in her diary while working on *To the Lighthouse*. “A new — by Virginia Woolf. But what? Elegy?”

In the novel’s short interlude—“Time Passes”—before the family returns to the island 10 years later, Mrs. Ramsay dies in brackets, Mr. Ramsay’s arms reaching out for her. Prue is given in marriage and dies in brackets. Andrew is blown sky-high in them; the brackets are the arms where we are not. The house is left empty, and molders. The skull of an old pig still hangs on the wall, and the shawl that Mrs. Ramsay wrapped around it to keep it from

frightening Cam swings to and fro like Time. The war has happened, and Mr. Carmichael has written his poem. Lives—the Ramsays’, and our own—have eroded; a few more grains of us are gone, after we have finished reading.

BY THE TIME my mother and I had unloaded our armfuls of insane groceries at the Wee Croft House—we were actually staying at a place called the Wee Croft House, on a picturesque finger of land known as Sleat—it was too late to cook, so we found ourselves driving back into town, back again toward the sea. When we got to the restaurant, the rain had stopped and light and shadow moved in great mammalish shapes outside. The melon was still intact, as it would remain for the rest of the trip, never touched or tasted; we do not live the lives that we mean to live, in those elevated moments in the produce section when we reach out a hand to choose. It ended up in a Dumpster, in a chapter I like to call “Time Passes.”

When we sat down near the window that gathered up the view, a murmur rose all around us, so that the room was united in its theme and purpose. Fried fish and hamburgers in their halos were set down in front of people almost unnoticed. We looked around uneasily, not yet a part of things. It was the day when Notre Dame was burning, and at every table a child was showing the videos to his parents on his phone.

The fathers were impatient; either they were firefighters in their own minds, or else to them, Notre Dame had burned down a long time ago. The mothers took the phones and cradled them, lighting candles with their eyes. Perhaps they were not really hearing the news; perhaps the voices came to them as they came to Mrs. Ramsay that night when everything surrounded her, flowers and fruit and family: “very strangely, as if they were voices at a service in a cathedral.” I knew that if I showed my mother a video of a burning church, she would scream out loud—we don’t all have a Mrs. Ramsay—so at our table we sat listening to the wholeness of the scene, its color and its pattern and its music, while a single rhythm swept our faces from far out at sea. We talked of whether tomorrow would be fine, when we would rise, what we would do that day. Outside the window, at the end of a long spit, stood the Lighthouse. *A*

*Patricia Lockwood is the author, most recently, of the novel No One Is Talking About This. This essay was adapted from the foreword to a new edition of To the Lighthouse.*

*Mrs. Ramsay's work is to make people magnificent—to make them believe in themselves, make them think they can do anything.*

# AGENCY

[ey-juhn-see] *noun*

*Your ability to make decisions about your own life.*

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## BOOKS

## The Scandalous, Clueless, Irresistible Oscars

*How the Academy holds on to its prestige despite a history of embarrassment*

By Dana Stevens

As a film critic, I have complicated feelings about Oscar season, a baggy calendrical concept that now includes every month of the year, from the indie-film discoveries of the Sundance Film Festival in January to the awards voting by critics' groups in December. The complaints about the Academy Awards are as well rehearsed as the acceptance speech of a surefire victor: The most deserving nominees seldom win, and the most inventive movies of the year typically get no nominations at all. The voting process is so opaque and so subject to external influence—barraged by ever more expensively managed PR campaigns and buffeted by political and social forces far outside the Academy's garden walls—that to say the prize has little to do with the

recognition of artistic merit is to join a weary chorus. And yet the whole cinematic world dances to the rhythm of the Oscars' baton, and I refer not merely to the film industry itself, but to a sprawling satellite economy of run-up awards, Oscar-branded media coverage, fashion marketing, and social-media conversation.

To scoff at or criticize or even ignore the annual ritual that is the Academy Awards is not to escape its hold on our culture. Indeed, the doubters and haters make up a crucial part of the system. Resistance to the Oscars' outsize influence is what sparked the creation of alternative prizes such as the Independent Spirit Awards and the Gotham Awards, now glamorous institutions in their own right. Some award-giving bodies, such as the dubious Hollywood Foreign Press Association, which votes for the Golden Globes, have become foils that make the Academy look like a model of uprightness by comparison. Decades of recurring scandals—including voter-swaying payola campaigns and an accusation of sexual assault—have destroyed whatever legitimacy the Globes ever had. (I should disclose that I'm a member of the New York Film Critics Circle, whose annual ceremony—started just six years after the first Oscars were handed out—has long been a station of the cross on the awards circuit. So even in critiquing the Oscars, I'm one more cog in an awards machine that offers no real place for an observer to stand outside it: Critics' awards, reviews, lists, and rankings are routinely deployed in Oscar campaigns.)

The Academy has managed, somehow, to maintain its legitimacy, at least insofar as its trophies have retained their potent symbolic value. But the history of the Oscars is a history of the struggle to sustain that legitimacy, as scandal, embarrassment, and a remarkable ability to be one step behind the zeitgeist continually seem to threaten the entire enterprise. In 2015, one such fracas became a spur for reform: In response to an all-white slate of acting nominees, the hashtag #OscarsSoWhite, started by a Black activist, quickly went viral. When the acting slate was all white *again* in 2016, a fresh surge of outrage finally shamed the Academy into recruiting a younger, more diverse membership. Some dared to anticipate that a watershed was at hand. Notably, the years since have delivered Best Picture wins to such atypical Oscar fare as *Moonlight*, *Parasite*, and *Nomadland*, artful, downbeat films made outside the Hollywood system by nonwhite and, in one case, nonmale filmmakers. Results like these, and the reforms that abetted them, are welcome and overdue. They are also clearly insufficient.

Yet once again, like the indestructible star of an action franchise, the Oscars have reemerged, ready for another sequel. We keep watching, or refusing to watch, even as we can't resist debating what the lists and the ceremony—“this farcical charade of vulgar

egotism and pomposity,” as its own frequent host Bob Hope once described it—may have to tell us about Hollywood and ourselves. Not that we believe in oracles, or that the Oscars have ever been one. But the ceremony and its extended prelude offer us a shared spectacle that prompts discussion of very American questions. Who's up and who's down? Which dreams and fears are selling this year? In what direction might this mass, and so often messy, medium be headed?

IN *OSCAR WARS: A History of Hollywood in Gold, Sweat, and Tears*, the *New Yorker* writer Michael Schulman provides just what we need as the same old love-hate drama plays out yet again for Oscar fans and shunners alike: a rich array of unflattering but spellbinding stories about the feuds and failures of judgment that the Academy has thus far managed to weather. Schulman explores nine decades of Oscar-related turf battles, examining the institution's constant missteps and often bumbling self-reinvention as it strives to sustain its influence. “If there's a common thread running through the decades of Oscar wars,” he writes, “it's power: who has it, who's straining to keep it, who's invading the golden citadel to snatch it.” As everyone in the movie business knows, that particular story line appeals to brows high and low.

A sparkling compendium of show-business anecdotes as well-researched as they are dishy, *Oscar Wars* reminds us that a power struggle inspired the very creation of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. It was formed in 1927, when the silent era was coming to an abrupt close and the studio system's grip on the industry was tightening. As the craft guilds formed in the 1920s began to threaten strikes, the MGM mogul Louis B. Mayer banded together with a group of influential industry players, including producers, directors, writers, and actors, to establish a bulwark against growing labor unrest. The following year, the Academy introduced the concept of an annual awards ceremony: What better strategy for pacifying and thereby controlling the talent? “If I got them cups and awards,” Mayer crowed in an interview decades later, “they'd kill themselves to produce what I wanted.”

For the next few decades, Mayer's plan worked, at least on the surface. MGM retained its clout in the yearly Oscar race, right up until the studio system finally disintegrated in the 1960s, after nearly two decades of slow decline. Yet well before that, the Academy had acquired its own aura of prestige, independent of (and soon much more sought-after than) the approbation of any individual member of its voting group. By the mid-'30s, the statuette of a nude bronze man sketched in 1928 by the legendary MGM designer Cedric Gibbons had become the world's most desirable piece of mantel candy.

*The Oscar ceremony's own frequent host Bob Hope once described it as “this farcical charade of vulgar egotism and pomposity.”*

Of course, just because the awards have long been sought-after doesn't mean they've always gone to the most deserving recipient. Whether the Oscar merits respect as an arbiter of artistic quality is a debate as old as the Academy itself. Nor was it always the case that the bestowing of "cups and awards" worked to facilitate the top-down control of talent that Mayer envisioned. Schulman devotes an early chapter called "Rebels" in part to the recurring standoffs between a fierce, artistically driven young Bette Davis and an Academy already headed, *Variety* declared, for "the ash-can of oblivion." (A resurgence of the Hollywood labor movement in the Great Depression had left the power of the Academy looking less secure.) Having lost the 1935 Best Actress race despite her widely admired performance in *Of Human Bondage*—and having then won in 1936 for a role in what she considered the "maudlin and mawkish" *Dangerous*—Davis hardly revered the Academy's standards. But she wasn't about to opt out of the game. Leveraging the power of the Oscar she disdained, she staged a "one-woman strike," breaking the terms of her Warner Brothers contract and signing on to make two films with a European production company. She was sued by Warner Brothers and lost, but her defiance opened the way for a history-making win by Olivia de Havilland in a lawsuit against the same studio a few years later: Henceforth, studios could enforce exclusive contracts for at most seven calendar years, enabling actors to work as free agents.

By 1939, Davis the rebel was poised to become an Academy insider. She had another Best Actress win under her belt (this time for a film, *Jezebel*, that she felt deserved the honor), and her influence had grown to the point that she had earned the nickname "the fourth Warner Brother." She was elected the Academy's first female president in November 1941, a leader with her own ideas about the institution's elite-but-democratic balancing act. Less than two months later, she resigned after daring to disagree with the board's view that the ceremony should be canceled in light of the attack on Pearl Harbor. Davis argued that a toned-down event, staged, in *Variety*'s words, "sans orchidaceous glitter," could be a boon to American morale. The board, feeling that no event would be preferable to an event so modest as to "rob the Academy of all dignity," was appalled—but ended up adopting Davis's approach for the 1942 awards.

That same year provides one of the most salient examples of the by-now-general rule that the Best Picture Oscar seldom goes to the movie that, in retrospect, has the greatest long-term impact on the motion-picture medium. As Schulman recounts, Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane*, a box-office flop lauded by critics but tepidly received by audiences,

was presumed to be in contention for the award with Howard Hawks's widely beloved World War I drama *Sergeant York*, the top-grossing film of 1941—until both lost to John Ford's nostalgic Welsh-mining-family drama, *How Green Was My Valley*. Given that the United States had entered World War II just a few months before the prizes were awarded, the Academy's choice to bypass a dark social satire like *Kane* is understandable. The patriotic *Sergeant York*'s eclipse was a surprise, but a welcome one for the Academy, which was all too happy to skirt controversy: Isolationists were threatening a Senate investigation of "war hysteria" issuing from "non-Nordic" Hollywood. The Senate probe fell apart after Pearl Harbor, and by the end of 1943, the war had become, Schulman writes, "the driving force in American movies."

*Citizen Kane*'s fate, in Schulman's telling, was also ensured by the fierce campaign waged against it by the film's thinly disguised subject, William Randolph Hearst. And Welles's insistence on complete creative freedom, paired with his developing reputation for being behind schedule and over budget, scarcely endeared him to his higher-ups at RKO Studios. If *Kane* had won the industry's most valued prize despite its failure to recoup the studio's investment in an untried 24-year-old theater director, film history from 1941 on might have looked different. But even without the Oscars' help—or rather, wearing its lone trophy for Best Original Screenplay as a badge of anti-establishment pride—*Citizen Kane* now regularly appears on, if not atop, lists of the best and most influential films of all time. And Welles did get his Oscar payback 30 years later, receiving an honorary award in the New Hollywood era, when a generation of young directors was on the rise. He didn't show up to accept it, though. His cover story was that he was "filming abroad." In fact, Schulman writes, he was watching from a house in Laurel Canyon. Perhaps Welles was tired from years of battling Hollywood insiders, and just couldn't face a fickle awards process that was busy buttressing its own reputation by delivering a belated apology.

Soon enough, the Academy was lagging behind once again. In 1976, Miloš Forman's bleak anti-establishment parable *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* swept all five of the top awards, the first film to do so since Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night* in 1935. To call the bonanza belated is an understatement. Here was the Academy catching America's new wave of auteur-driven filmmaking as the wave was receding: By then, *Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Graduate*, and *2001: A Space Odyssey*, three New Hollywood masterworks that were also box-office hits, had all failed to secure the Academy's top prize. Meanwhile, Steven Spielberg, whose *Jaws* had been the box-office

OSCAR WARS:  
A HISTORY OF  
HOLLYWOOD IN  
GOLD, SWEAT,  
AND TEARS

Michael  
Schulman

HARPER





*Hattie McDaniel arose from a segregated table in 1940 to collect her Best Supporting Actress award for her role in *Gone With the Wind*.*

juggernaut of 1975, wasn't nominated for Best Director, and his film won only for Best Original Score, Best Sound Mixing, and Best Film Editing. Yet the mid-1970s would be remembered as the moment when summer blockbusters and big action franchises started to pump renewed energy and large profits into the corporate studio system.

FOR ANYONE eager to think that the #OscarsSoWhite turmoil just might have marked a decisive swerve in the Academy's approach to diversity in Hollywood, Schulman's late chapter "Tokens"—a harsh but accurate title—is sobering. His foray into the history of the Academy's recognition of nonwhite performers requires a temporal montage, a departure from his technique of focusing on episodic tales decade by decade. Drawing connections among the careers of Hattie McDaniel, Sidney Poitier, and Halle Berry—the first Black actors to win, respectively, Best Supporting Actress, Best Actor, and Best Actress—Schulman emphasizes the dispiritingly long stretches of time between each of these milestone wins: McDaniel for *Gone With the Wind* in 1940, Poitier for *Lilies of the Field* in 1964, then Berry for *Monster's Ball* in 2002. (During the nearly four decades that elapsed between the last two victories, four other Black actors won Oscars for supporting roles.)

Schulman avoids making the parallels among their very different cases too explicit, but shows how all three went on to have trouble escaping the stereotyped roles that had brought them their biggest success. He writes that McDaniel, who had made her name as a bawdy vaudeville singer, searched in vain for films that would let her break out of the "servile, sexless 'mammy' archetype." Poitier spent most of his career boxed into the role of upstanding, "exceptional" Black man in stodgy if well-meaning liberal race dramas. Nearly 40 years later, the biracial Berry, a former pageant queen, struggled to find her place in the early-21st-century film industry: Just three years after winning her Best Actress Oscar, she was awarded the Golden Raspberry (or "Razzie") Award for the disastrous *Catwoman*.

Schulman wisely resists any tidy summary of the Academy's long history of internal strife, and instead closes by giving his readers a surreal behind-the-scenes glimpse of gleeful celebration after an Oscar night from hell. Before leaving the *Vanity Fair* party following last year's ceremony, he observes Will Smith's triumphant turn on the dance floor, holding his newly acquired Best Actor statuette for his role in *King Richard*, after his much-discussed on-air slap of the presenter Chris Rock. "In a matter of hours," Schulman marvels, "he had assaulted someone on live television, ripped his soul open while winning an Oscar, and written himself a bizarre new chapter in Academy Awards history. Had we witnessed a psychic breakdown? A husband defending his wife? A jerk? A victim? A monster?"

Schulman's response to the most recent Oscars dustup feels entirely of a piece with the foregoing 500 pages of skirmishes, upsets, subterfuges, rivalries, reputational machinations, and unforeseen personal and historical dramas. The trajectory of the Academy, it seems, has always featured just such lurches, usually with unintended consequences. First comes what looks like a bold breakthrough or egregious oversight or violated taboo, followed by controversy and complaint and, naturally, intense competition. Last of all comes the self-celebratory spin on the dance floor, a dizzying commemoration of the Academy's ever-changing sense of its own meaning, purpose, and future—however out of sync that sense may be with what the film industry, and the society it aspires to entertain, has in store. On the morning after Oscar night, ritual preparations for the next year's dance begin again. *A*

*Dana Stevens, Slate's movie critic, is the author of Camera Man: Buster Keaton, the Dawn of Cinema, and the Invention of the Twentieth Century.*



BOOKS

## Love Annihilated

*The Irish writer Sebastian Barry's great subject*

By Adam Begley

Five years ago, when Sebastian Barry was appointed laureate for Irish fiction, he delivered a lecture that began with what he confessed was a truism: “All things pass away, our time on Earth is brief, and yet we may feel assailed at great length in this brief time, and yet we may reach moments of great happiness.” The whip-lash repetition of “and yet” is typical Barry, and so is the stoic resolve behind the truism, a long, bleak perspective that accedes to the inevitable, with misery and joy cozying up to each other. Reading his novels is like braving Irish weather: You’re chilled and drenched and dazzled and baked in buffeting succession.

His new novel, *Old God’s Time*, his ninth, is a beautiful, tragic book about an “old policeman with a buckled heart” who’s assailed at great length and yet enjoys streaks of jubilation, even after repeated assaults. I find the book powerful enough to want to bang the drum and say as loudly and clearly as I can that Barry ought to be widely read and revered—he ought to be a laureate for fiction everywhere.

Let’s start with the writing, an unclouded lens that, yes, occasionally goes all purple. No surprise to hear an Irish lilt and discover an unabashed delight in metaphor—paragraphs without a simile or three are a rarity. Barry is a poet and playwright as well as a novelist, and lyricism and drama jostle in nearly all his sentences, many of which are stuffed to bursting. *Prose* seems the wrong word for what he does; paragraphs unspool like spells, dreamy incantations, words repeated, cadence summoned. A sample plucked more or less at random from his most resolutely rural novel, *Annie Dunne* (2002): “Oh, what a mix of things the world is, what a flood of cream, turning and turning in the butter churn of things, but that never comes to butter.” A skeptic might dismiss this as a nostalgic ditty with a clunky ending, but as the eponymous Annie knows, “there is a grace in butter, how can I explain it—it is the color we all worship, a simple, yellow gold.” Barry churns and churns, and gold comes out. And so does pitch black. This, from the new novel: “Tar melting in tar barrels, roadmenders. The lovely acrid stink of it.”

Each of his novels stands on its own, but many of the characters belong to two interconnected Irish families, the Dunes and the McNultys, based on the two branches of his own clan. Ordinary, inconsequential folk in sometimes extraordinary, history-defining

circumstances—soldiers, spinsters, policemen, rogues, fugitives, many of them willing or unwilling participants in the Irish diaspora—emerge from what Barry calls “the fog of family.” (More Irish weather!) They themselves are substantial, flesh and blood, but drifts of fog cling to them, the secrets and lies, the hopelessly mixed motives and divided loyalties of kinfolk everywhere. The family connections add a satisfying resonance. Knowing that Annie Dunne is the sister of Willie Dunne, whose hellish sojourn in First World War trenches is the subject of *A Long Long Way* (2005), seems to give both books greater heft. Annie cherishes the sentimental notion that Willie fought to protect the world of her childhood, “so that everything could continue as before,” a faith painfully stripped from Willie in the mud and gore of Flanders.

Family is rooted in history and place. The epicenter of Barry’s world, his home turf and time, is the early and mid-20th century in Dublin and County Wicklow, hilly countryside about 40 miles south of the capital yet somehow excitingly remote. Many of his characters roam the globe; some turn up in war zones. The painful birth of an independent Ireland and its ugly and confused sectarian struggles always loom in the background of whatever else happens. An exception, the magnificent *Days Without End* (2017), is set in mid-19th-century America and, weirdly, miraculously, resembles nothing so much as a mash-up of Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* and Annie Proulx’s “Brokeback Mountain.”

Its sequel, *A Thousand Moons* (2020), is set in Tennessee in the aftermath of the Civil War and narrated by Winona, an orphaned Lakota woman who was adopted and raised by the narrator of *Days Without End*, Thomas McNulty, and his “beau,” John Cole. New World horrors have proved as fertile to Barry as Old World horrors. He describes Indian War massacres and the Easter Rising of 1916 with equally clinical specificity, and yet there’s something beyond history, beyond war and politics, beyond America’s manifest destiny and Irish independence that animates his novels.

To pinpoint that something is to risk sounding mawkish. Annie Dunne, a “humpbacked woman” whose only brush with romance consists of a foolish fantasy, finds other uses for her load of thwarted passion. A summer spent looking after her young, city-bred grandniece and grandnephew on the tiny subsistence farm in Wicklow where she lives teaches her to see “eternal pleasure and peace in the facts of human love.” The deepest of the “moiling mysteries of the human heart,” human love is Barry’s great subject—love enjoyed, love tested, love betrayed, love annihilated by human depravity and the suffering it inflicts.

*Prose seems the wrong word for what Barry does; paragraphs unspool like spells, dreamy incantations, words repeated, cadences summoned.*

**OLD GOD’S TIME**, set in the 1990s in Dalkey, a seaside suburb south of Dublin, cranks into motion with a comically hackneyed premise: a retired detective visited by former colleagues who drag him into a cold case he dreads revisiting. Tom Kettle has had nine months of mostly sitting in his favorite wicker chair, gazing out his window across Dalkey Sound to “stolid” Dalkey Island. The sudden intrusion has “unmoored” him—an “act of terror,” he calls it. A storm is rising outside his modest flat; it all seems a bit overwrought, the air of menace and mystery and guilt thickly laid on. One of the younger detectives brandishes a “rumped sheaf” of police reports, and Tom seems to know without looking that it concerns historic allegations of child abuse leveled at the clergy. His visceral response: “Ah no, Jesus, no, lads, not the fecking priests, no.”

We learn in due course that Tom, who never knew his parents, was raised in an orphanage run by the Christian Brothers in Connemara. (The institution is unnamed, but we can assume it’s the infamous St. Joseph’s Industrial School, in Letterfrack, where abuse was rampant and extreme.) And we learn that Tom’s late wife, June, was also an orphan, raised by nuns, and repeatedly raped, from the age of 6, by a priest. So, yes, the fecking priests.

We learn that Tom, too, was beaten and “used” by one of the Christian Brothers, information gleaned from hints and asides (“He was the guardian of his own silences, had been all his life”). We hear of June’s trauma from June herself. “Tom, will you forsake me if I tell you?” she asks on their honeymoon. “I’d better say it now.” The words come out in “her smallest voice.” The passage is hard to read, not because it’s graphic, which it is, but because Tom feels her words so keenly. “Now, Tom, now Tom—you love me now, if you can,” she says, and he does.

She also says, “It’s a wonder we’re alive at all, us two.” They raise a couple of children, Winnie and Joe. The family, but most especially his love for June and hers for him, is the source of “immeasurable happiness.” And then, when the children have barely reached adulthood, it’s all taken away, item by item. This is as close as Tom comes to self-pity:

Things happened to people, and some people were required to lift great weights that crushed you if you faltered just for a moment. It was his job not to falter. But every day he faltered. Every day he was crushed, and rose again the following morn like a cartoon figure.

Tom has the Road Runner in mind, and Bugs Bunny, but the epigraph for *Old God’s Time* is from the Book of Job: “Will the unicorn be willing to serve thee?” God, speaking from the whirlwind, contrasting his omnipotence with Job’s impotence.

**THE NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE** (though Barry is expert enough to make it seem not a technique but an organic element of the story) is close third person: Tom isn't the narrator, but we're nonetheless in his head, often an uncomfortable place to be. Preternaturally observant—he's a detective, after all—he has moments of startling lucidity, accompanied by a heightened awareness of the tragic arc of his existence. Here he's remembering the rhythm of his day when he was still young, his family still intact,

the two babies in their beds and June in their own ... Tom would be thinking of the early rise in the morning to get out to the bus, and the long trek into town, head nodding from the broken sleep, and the passing from his character as father and husband into his character as policeman and colleague, a curious transition that in the evening would be reversed, in the eternal see-saw of his life, of everyone's life. The only thing being missed by him in those moments being the absolute luck of his life, the unrepeatable nature of it, and the terminus to that happiness that was being hidden from him in the unconsidered future.

At times this hyperclarity is almost too much to bear, as when he describes the devastation caused on one Dublin street by the car bombings of May 1974, a particularly vicious episode in the long, sad history of the Troubles. ("Political bombs with personal outcomes" is Tom's bitter understatement.) A sentence that in its entirety runs to 256 words takes us from the scene as Tom imagines it in the seconds before the explosion to what he actually witnesses as he arrives, galloping in his heavy boots from the nearby police headquarters:

And then the blast, bursting everything known and usual to smithereens, every window in the street blown in in a great cascade, and the bomb debris and the looser items of the street, and the window glass, all turned into weaponry now, against the soft bodies of the citizens, and rending them, and tearing them, and undoing them, till Tom saw more clearly what he had thought were the cuts of meat, black smoke everywhere and the cuts of meat, some of them neatly squared, smoking, blackened, but it was sections of those just recently living souls, oh some still living, a head and a torso with the mouth moving, the eyes open in bloodied faces, and some still whole, in their blast-torn coats, here and there kneeling to the imploring faces, saying words that Tom could not hear, prayers maybe, or whispering.

This is shocking but not gratuitous. The gruesome details foreshadow June's equally shocking and violent death—not witnessed and, mercifully, not imagined

on the page—and remind us that no one, not even poor Tom, has a monopoly on suffering: "There were worse things and worst things." June, who "survived everything except survival," dies a death that lies on the absolute grievous end of that spectrum.

A widower for 20 years, retired from police work for nine months, and now suddenly asked to consult on a case that dredges up an obliterating load of grief and guilt, Tom veers into fantasy, a dreamworld so lifelike that the reader will only with difficulty separate Tom's imaginings from what transpires in reality. The first time this happens, he's having a drink with his landlord, Mr. Tomelty, and his wife—or so he thinks. He notices that in the corner of the room "stood a unicorn, with a silver horn, or possibly white gold, raising its delicate right hoof, and innocently staring out through quiet eyes. Mr. Tomelty and his missis made no reference to it. It was just there, verifiably." But we later discover that Mr. Tomelty's wife died years ago. Subsequent appearances of the mythical beast signal the recurrence of fantasy or a dream sequence: "Mrs. Tomelty's unicorn was standing on the little beach. Pay it no heed."

Tom is a victim, a modern-day Job, but he's also the perpetrator of a crime committed two decades earlier. His fellow detectives might just let him off the hook, but Barry won't. He once wrote, in an essay about his family, "I am honour-bound to judge them in the round," and he seems to feel the same about his characters. The doomy first chapters of *Old God's Time* are crammed with clues pointing to Tom's stricken conscience. Looking in the mirror, he sees a criminal: "He had no cheekbones, it was suddenly clear, and his face just seemed like a flat, failed loaf with dirty knife-holes in it. It looked to him like he had had his head shaved in a sort of unconscious gesture of atonement." The novel's ending is a dramatic exploration of the possibility of atonement. One cannot say for sure whether his putative redemption is "verifiably" real or fantastical, but there can be no doubt about how Tom feels. The final pages are ravishing.

In *A Long Long Way*, Willie Dunne listens to a battlefield sermon and has a minor epiphany: "He wondered suddenly and definitely for the first time in his life what words might be. Sounds and sense certainly, but something else also, a kind of natural music that explained a man's heart or heartlessness, words as tempered as steel, as soft as air." The ending of *Old God's Time* explains Tom Kettle's heart as truly and well as can be. *A*

*Adam Begley is the author of three biographies, Updike, The Great Nadar: The Man Behind the Camera, and Houdini: The Elusive American.*

OLD GOD'S TIME

Sebastian Barry

VIKING

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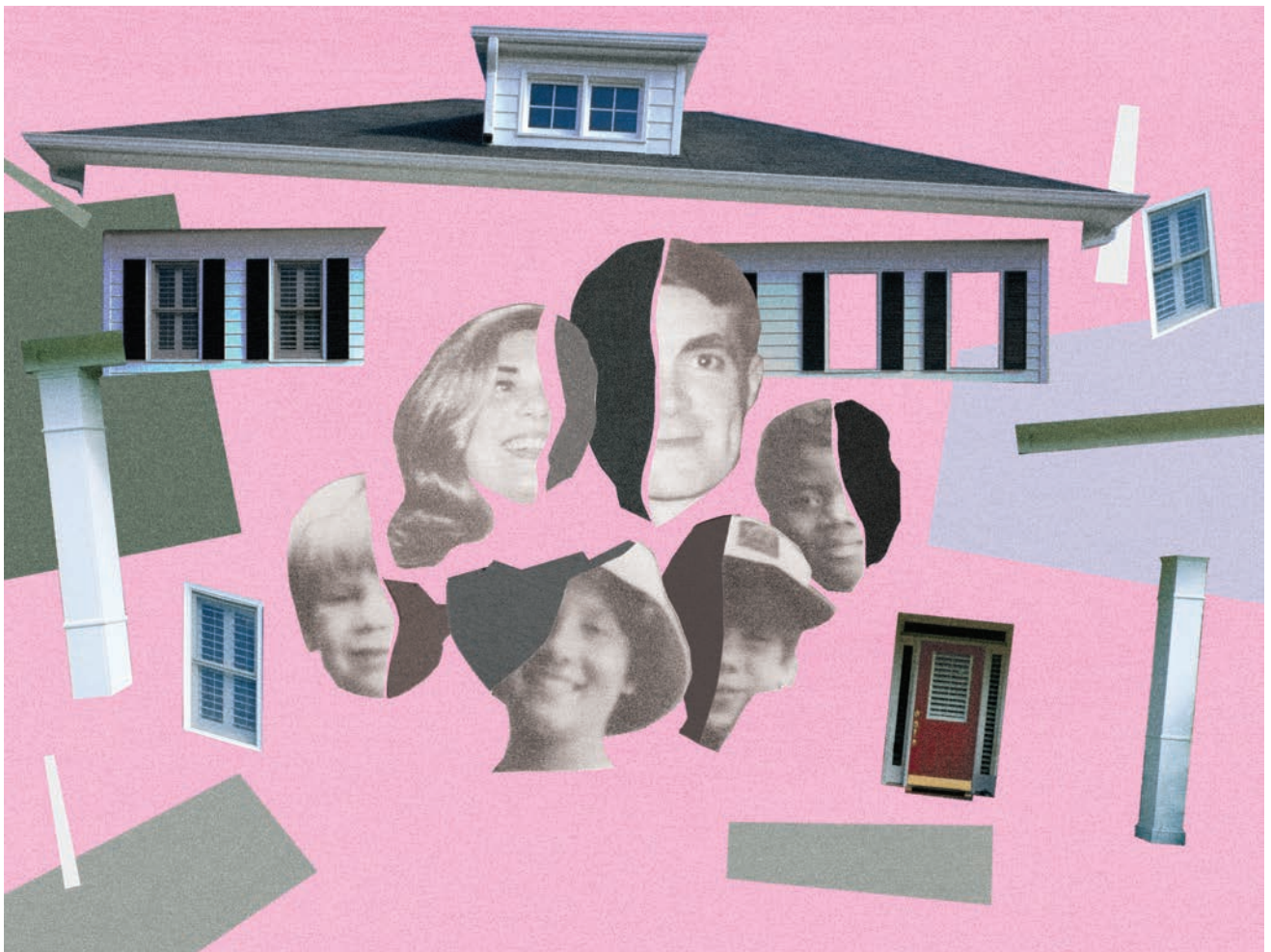
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## BOOKS

## “Two of Every Race”

*A family's impossible quest to erase prejudice through transracial adoption*

By Nicole Chung

Growing up as the adopted Korean daughter of white parents in a predominantly white community, I discovered early on that my presence was often a surprise, a question to which others expected answers. I soon learned how to respond to the curiosity of teachers at school, strangers at Sears, friends who had finally worked up the nerve to ask *Who are your real parents? Why did they give you up? Are you going to try to find them someday?* I told them the same story my adoptive parents had told me: My birth parents were unable to take care of a fragile, premature baby. They believed that another family would provide me with a better life. And so I was adopted and became my parents' beloved only child—a “miracle,” they called it, evidence of God's goodness. When your family is formed by divine will, who are you to question it? To wonder about the family you never knew?

Like Matthew Pratt Guterl, I know what it is to be raised in the belief that

COURTESY OF MATTHEW PRATT GUTERL; PHILLIP SPEARS / GETTY

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your family represents something far greater than itself. Whereas my parents saw our adoptive family as proof of God's handiwork, Bob and Sheryl Guterl saw theirs as a new kind of "ark for the age of the nuclear bomb, of race riots, of war," one that could change the world by example: They would raise a family of white biological children and adopted children of color—"two of every race"—and all would live in harmony behind a white-picket fence. In *Skinfolk*, Guterl, a professor of Africana studies and American studies at Brown University, assigns himself the task of reckoning with the experiment his white parents confidently embarked on.

He describes them as serious Catholics, loving and "big hearted," convinced of their own good intentions: Bob, a respected New Jersey judge, was "the wild-eyed dreamer"; Sheryl, a teacher turned homemaker, was "the practical one." Reading the brief autobiographies his parents submitted to Welcome House, the first international and interracial adoption agency in the United States, Guterl notes that they shared a desire for a large family, concerns about population growth, and the belief that "recycling and adoption are methods of global repair."

As their firstborn son, he grew up alongside his brother Bug (Guterl refers to some of his siblings by name, others by childhood nickname), who came from South Korea as a baby in 1972, two years after Matthew's birth; Mark, his only biological sibling, born in 1973; Bear, the son of a Vietnamese mother and a Black American-GI father, adopted as a 5-year-old in 1975; Anna, a biracial Korean girl, who arrived from Seoul in 1977 at the age of 13; and Eddie, a Black child adopted from the South Bronx in 1983, at the age of 6. Guterl details the ways in which the siblings were known, observed, and sometimes fetishized within and beyond their rural New Jersey town. "The whole enterprise, in accordance with Bob's wishes, is meant to be seen," he writes:

We are seen, and we see things ... I begin to note a troubling public surveillance of our whole ensemble, our various skin tones on display. I watch as cars drive by, and see how quickly the heads turn to see the wide world of rainbow at play in our picket-fenced front yard. A game of catch. A throw of the football. Choosing up teams for Wiffle ball. With Blackness added, our performed comity means something more.

Reading this passage made me think of my own upbringing in white spaces, constantly watched and watchful. My parents believed my race was irrelevant, insisting that people cared only about who I was "on the inside"; I didn't tell them about the slurs and barbs I heard throughout my childhood. For the Guterls, however, calling attention to the racial

makeup of their family was partly the point—how else could they lead by example? Bob's sermonizing at the dining-room table introduced the children to their parents' mission and helped indoctrinate them early on: "We understand that our multiracial composition is a critique of the present, our color-blind consanguinity an omen of the future." The children were expected to acknowledge and celebrate one another's differences, and also, somehow, to transcend them.

**THE REALITY**, of course, is that transracial adoption has no intrinsic power to heal racial prejudice, and Guterl and his siblings were never going to neutralize or escape its effects, much less undo the harms of white supremacy. Young Matthew discovers firsthand that the world won't be changed by families like theirs: He is cornered and terrorized by a group of white kids because he has a Black brother; he later notices that their parents apologize to him, not to Bear. In middle school, he is so distressed at being called "N—— Lips" (again, he is targeted because he has Black siblings) that he takes the shocking step of getting cosmetic surgery on his lips. By the time he is in college, he knows that he can rebel, play pranks, even get caught speeding, and not worry that the hammer will fall on him the way it might on Bear or Eddie—not that his parents give the boys "the talk," precisely: "Racial disparities in policing ... are regular subjects of conversation at the breakfast and dinner table. Bob feels, though, that there should be no formal, separate syllabus" for his Black sons.

Throughout the book, the sibling we learn the most about, and the one Guterl seems closest to, is Bear: near enough in age to be his "twin." Bear comes to the Guterls with a small bag of belongings and a photograph of the family he was separated from after leaving Vietnam—his older half brother's arm on his shoulder, his mother and half sister to their left—an image that leads Guterl to reflect on "the great sorrow that he has been ripped from that set of relations with such tremendous and severing force." By high school, Bear is a popular football player and solid student—unlike Guterl, who is aware that he lacks his brother's star power yet also has an unearned advantage in his whiteness. Bear may be loved and widely admired in their small town, but neither his own successes nor his adoptive family can exempt him from the racism of their fellow residents. Bear "is a Black," one of Guterl's white friends says to him during senior year—and then comes Eddie's turn: "But your younger brother is a n——." Guterl freezes at

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Opposite page clockwise from top left: *Sheryl Guterl, Bob Guterl, Bear, Matthew, Anna, and Mark*

this “detour into American racism,” unexpected but not unfamiliar to him.

The family meets crises that further highlight their disparities and test their bonds. An adolescent Eddie begins to “act out” in escalating ways, and Bug nurses growing anger toward Bob and Sheryl. One night, violence erupts between Eddie and Bug, and is “handled” by Bob alone—he calls Eddie’s therapist, who arranges for his admission to a nearby psychiatric institution. There, Eddie is observed, tested, medicated: “He fights it, of course, but the plot has grabbed hold of him,” Guterl writes. “And never, ever lets him go.” Eddie is in the pipeline, and moves through one disciplinary institution after another—“reform schools give way to jails and then prisons”—while Bug’s alienation from the family intensifies.

Many years later, Bear is the one who assumes primary support of Eddie, even while himself recovering from a violent assault by two white racists. By then, Bob is dead, having spent years consumed by “the need for repair and reconnection,” confused and crushed by Bug’s resistance to being reincorporated into the family. Guterl writes that his father regretted how his choices affected Eddie, and never stopped questioning what might have been had he never called the therapist and enlisted “the world—as uneven, as broken, as treacherous as it is—in the disciplining of his son.” Yet though racked by “considerable, late-in-life anguish,” Bob remained indefatigable in another sense, a firm believer in the power of their family until the end. Guterl describes his farewell letter to them all as a “paean to the foundational, even generic ideas of family, togetherness, and solidarity, in which he encourages forgiveness and begs us to stay together.”

I WAS INTERESTED in reading *Skinfolk* in part because I believe that the stories of those who have lost or gained siblings through adoption have much to tell us about families—their inner workings as well as the social expectations and tensions that shape them. As a child, Guterl had no more ability than his adopted siblings to determine the structure of their family; his life, too, was remade and ruled by Bob and Sheryl’s experiment. When I began reading his memoir, I did not think that I would find in him, the white son of white parents he has always known, a fellow seeker. But his urgent need to probe choices that he had grown up being told to believe were uncomplicated felt unexpectedly familiar.

Questioning the family mythology, that bedrock you share with those you are closest to, is no easy task. For years I had denied my wish to know more about my birth parents and my own past, and when I finally admitted it, the depth of my need and curiosity staggered me. So did the fear: How could

SKINFOLK

Matthew Pratt  
Guterl

LIVERIGHT

I tell my adoptive parents that the story they had steadfastly believed, the story they had given me, was likely untrue and no longer enough? Who was I if not their contented, loyal daughter, their gift from God? I might never have searched had I not gotten pregnant with my first child, someone who I imagined would one day have her own questions about our missing history: If I could not look for answers only for myself, perhaps I could search for the two of us. Once I had begun, I found still more company in a long-lost biological sister who had believed me dead, and craved the truth even more than I did.

Guterl’s search, perhaps undertaken on behalf of his siblings, does not shy away from challenging their parents’ mission. That entails examining not just the failure of their experiment, but also the limits of their father’s ability to grasp why and how the “endeavor begins to unravel.” When Bob blames Bug’s estrangement from the family on the adoption agency, the Korean orphanage, everything and everyone beyond the white-picket fence—“Not us. Not this place. Not what has happened at our home”—Guterl suggests that this picture is incomplete: For Bug, being part of the Guterl clan, and especially accepting Bob’s overpowering vision of what the family represented, seemed to require a painful and, in the end, impossible denial of self. The historian of the family, Guterl wants to convey his perspective on the tangled truth of what has happened to him and the people he loves, aware from the start that his search—and what he uncovers—may cause him and others pain.

Though at times I felt held at a bit of a distance—Guterl is a careful writer and has clearly tried to respect his relatives’ wishes regarding their privacy—he rarely tries to protect or exonerate himself. In a late chapter, he, his brothers Bear and Mark, and their sister, Anna, reunite in 2002, a year after their father’s death. They spend the day together, and return to the house filled with a sense of camaraderie; as Guterl notes, “some of the old magic is back.” But by now, we understand that this family was never magic.

Later that night, the usual racial banter has returned, one of the comfortable grooves from our past. Anna says something in her sometimes-imperfect English—a habit when she is speaking fast, or emotional, and the sort of thing we all made sport of before. I jokingly correct her, the kind of move I made—we all made—for years without a thought. And that night, when we are all so saturated with feeling and drink, the familiar joke lands all wrong. Anna leans forward, finger pointing—at me and also at what I signify, at the vast edifice behind me.

“That is racist, and I can’t take it anymore.”



The Guterl parents' view of adoption as an "engine of reform," strong enough to override racism, set up an assignment their children couldn't possibly fulfill. For all that Guterl has learned by the time his sister confronts him, and for all that he has come to question about how they were raised, he, too, still needs to be disabused of some assumptions. His thoughtless jibe and her pent-up hurt testify to the complexities and contradictions of the endeavor their parents enlisted them in. And he finds the encounter especially distressing because of that tension: His deep love for his sister—for each of his siblings—is what sometimes prevents him from seeing the chasm between their experiences. "As children in a family meant to undo racism, we were asked to learn—and to unlearn—race," he writes. "To see one another as siblings—to see beyond our skin—but also, dissonantly, to see one another as color-coded . . . Those parallel lessons are, in the end, impossible to suture together."

The scene made me think of my own family, and one night in particular, when my father and I were watching the 2015 Women's World Cup. My mother joined us and asked if the athletes on-screen were Korean or Japanese, and my father replied: "Does it matter? Who can tell the difference?" I had been their child for 30-odd years. I was accustomed to biting my tongue for the sake of family cohesion. I don't know why I couldn't do it that day, but I still remember the trembling anger and anxiety I felt as I called someone I loved, who loved me, to account. My father, shocked, eventually apologized, but not before he told me, "It's just hard for me to see you as Asian."

Transracial adoption will never empower adoptees of color or our white family members to sidestep the realities of privilege, bias, and racism; as *Skinfolk* shows, we will meet and experience these things in the most intimate of ways, within the microcosm of our own family. Reading Anna's challenge to her brother, one that may have been decades in the making, I knew where all my natural sympathy as an adoptee lay. My response to Guterl's description of his agonizing confusion and self-doubt, which kept him awake for hours that night, took me by surprise. It made me catch my breath and wish that I could see or speak to my adoptive parents, both of whom are now gone, and simply feel close to them again. I know what it is to confront a painful and unwanted distance between you and those you love; to want to believe, if only for a moment, that your will alone can bridge it. *A*

*Nicole Chung is a contributing writer at The Atlantic and the author of the new book A Living Remedy and All You Can Ever Know (2018).*

## *Nomenclature*

By Clint Smith

After Safia Elhillo

Your mother's mother came from Igboland  
though she did not teach your mother her language.  
We gave you your name in a language we don't understand  
because gravity is still there  
even when we cannot see it in our hands.

I ask your mother's mother to teach me  
some of the words in hopes of tracing  
the shadow of someone else's tongue.

The same word in Igbo, she tells me, may have four different meanings depending on how your mouth bends around each syllable. In writing, you cannot observe the difference.

The Igbo word *n'anya* means "sight"  
The Igbo word *n'anya* means "love"

Your grandmother said,  
*I cannot remember the sight of my village*  
or

Your grandmother said,  
*I cannot remember the love of my village*

Your grandmother's heart is      forgetting  
or  
Your grandmother's heart is      broken

Your grandmother said,  
*We escaped the war and hid from every person in sight*  
or

Your grandmother said,  
*We escaped the war and hid from every person in love*

Your grandmother was running from danger  
or  
Your grandmother was running from vulnerability

Your grandmother said,  
*My greatest joy is the sight of my grandchild*  
or

Your grandmother said,  
*My greatest joy is the love of my grandchild*

Your grandmother wants you      present  
or  
Your grandmother wants you      home

*Clint Smith is a staff writer at The Atlantic and the author of the new poetry collection Above Ground.*

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## FICTION



Second Life

By Mona  
Simpson

During Donnie's first week in the mixed unit (drugs and crazy), a girl threw a TV set out the window because she thought it was criticizing her. Donnie walked to the window to look. "Probably was," he mumbled. He'd grown up with a mother who came alive when insulted. The guy sleeping across the room, who'd dealt heroin with his own now-jailed dad, was woken up by the noise and asked, "Are we dead yet?"



“No. You’re just sleeping,” Donnie told him, and the boy’s eyes closed again; his thin arm, with a tattoo of a serpent, hung over the side of the bed. In the southwest corner of the unit, a girl had turned into a horse. She moved on all fours, neighing. Rearing. You had to walk around her.

Donnie had been terrified when his sister and brother had left him at the hospital, off in a remote wing of the place where their mom had been for years now. The whole first month, the staff wouldn’t let him visit her. He didn’t want her seeing him like this anyway. He wondered if she knew he was here, or if she still pictured him in the town on the hill, finishing up his sophomore year of college. Instead, they were together in this run-down, not-built-right hospital compound in Norwalk, California, in 1981—the bottom of the world.

All day, he was herded into groups with the other drug people, where they told their stories of how they’d become bad. They allowed Sylvie, his dog, to accompany him. Others talked; Donnie kept quiet. It made sense that he’d ended up here. He’d been aiming at something for a long time—he just hadn’t understood that this place was the target. He liked being on the same grounds as his mom. Even if she didn’t know he was here. Some moments, remembering that she was less than a mile away, he felt safe.

The police had found him on the beach, south of LAX, with a cluster of homeless people and Sylvie. Months earlier, he’d followed some kids to the beach. They taught him to surf. It felt like being clobbered in a fight, and then he washed up onshore, somehow still whole. The rest of the day, his body felt looser. They made fires at night and, around those circles, a joint traveled hand to hand. Donnie passed it along. Until he didn’t. From one toke to being high all the time took only a heartbeat.

That was one of the ways to know that he was an addict, they told him in the unit. Most people came from families of addicts, but his had insanity, not addiction. His mother had sipped crème de menthe from a tiny glass once in a blue moon. But he was marked. Lina and Walter, his sister and brother, had always

wondered if he was their full brother. Maybe somewhere in the world he had a junkie dad. Would’ve explained a lot.

Everyone in high school had found out what happened to his mother. He’d never told, but they knew. Girls wanted to *talk about it*, their voices pitying, hands eager. For the first time, he had the impulse to punch a person. He never touched those girls who wanted to soothe him. He turned remote because he would have liked to hurt them.

The unit had incredibly glossy floors. Public schools used these same tiles, but they gave no shine. Donnie asked one of the hospital janitors how he kept it up. A block of wood covered with a towel at the end of a pole was all. They let Donnie keep one in his room to polish his hall. He liked the back-and-forth motion. He did the homework here, in a way he hadn’t in college.

Caseworkers shuffled the group into a van bound for a gym, off grounds. After the third Thursday, he asked the trainer—a pert, tiny, muscular mother of three—if she could write down a program for him to do by himself.

“Do you ever run? That’s how I get my cardio. You’re outside; you see things.”

He’d hated going around the track in school, hated the gym clothes. But now he built the habit every morning and, by the fourth week, felt the return loop of reward. Sylvie began to trot along. Running was the first habit he learned in rehab that he knew he could maintain.

By then he had seen his mom and told her that he lived here now too, within the same chain-link fence. He called it the Humble Place. He told her only what he knew she could take. He told her how Sylvie had saved him. His mother patted the dog. Animals had always gone to her instinctively.

**HE AND THE REST** of the group prepared for family week. Donnie had never been part of the drama department in high school, but remembering how his classmates had cycled through adrenaline to exhaustion, he thought this must be like what went into the annual Shakespeare play, only real, the long rehearsals culminating not in a performance but in

face-to-face revelations and apologies, not conversations exactly, because they were so practiced. You were talking with the people who meant the most to you, who’d now seen into the box of your failures. Your betrayals, your lies, your greed, your cheating—they could pick them out one by one to examine.

Julie, his mom’s friend from nursing school, owed him nothing, but she still came for the week. When their mother had gone into the hospital, Walter was already at Berkeley, and Julie took in Donnie and Lina. Julie had laughed with Donnie, told him her daily news, learned to cook what he liked. They’d watched movies together, eating Jiffy Pop and almond brittle, most nights of the week. But then he’d stopped and left her alone to worry while he was out destroying himself. Not that it had felt that way at the time.

He’d prepared a long letter to read to Julie, but she didn’t let him get through it. She wanted to take the blame from him, to make it all her fault.

His brother was a cipher, as always. Walter went for a walk with Donnie on the grounds, and when they sat down, he said, “You know how when we were growing up, I was considered, like, at least in the family, smart?” Walter said. “When I got to college, I found other people way better at school than me. Even Lina. She likes all that. I’m good at finding things that have fallen apart and making something out of the pieces. I fix up old buildings so they can be used again. Maybe when you’re done with all this, you can come work with me.”

Later, when Donnie talked to Lina, she kept trying to jump down into the well of the past with him. She saw them as twins. And she was this goody-goody! He’d never been like that.

**AT HIS NEXT MEETING** with Trish, his caseworker, she wanted to help figure out what jobs he should look for; she had a list of shops that hired kids from the unit. But Donnie hoped to work here, on the hospital grounds.

“Because you want to see your mom?”

“Yes. Other things too. I want to be near her kind of people.”

Trish seemed to take this as an acceptable answer. A calm seeped into him.

After putting in some calls, Trish found only one opening, in geriatrics. The head nurse there would take him but not the dog. “We’ve got more than enough incontinence,” she said.

“Sylvie’s house-trained,” Donnie argued, but the nurse wouldn’t budge.

Donnie decided to hike over to the adult wards to talk to Shirley, the nurse his mom liked best. Sylvie folded herself into a perfect triangle at his feet as he spoke. “She’s my luck,” he said. Shirley convinced geriatrics to give them a try.

When he started, the head nurse put him on diaper detail. “New person always takes it.” Her profile was like the cut side of a key.

Donnie had once told a girl who’d asked about his mom that it wasn’t all poetry. The girl had looked at him with pity and romance. But he knew he could handle this, with Sylvie looking up at him. He taught Sylvie to sit near the person’s head. Often a hand would reach down to touch her.

HE WROTE a letter to the only professor he’d actually talked to in college. He said that he hoped to return in a semester, or maybe a year. He was moving to sober living. It had taken Trish a while to locate a place that would allow Sylvie. The house she’d found was in the direction of the college. Donnie would have more freedom, but with that came responsibility. He was strong enough to manage, she said. And he could always pop in to see her.

“You’re going to be dazzled by choices. You’ll need your supports. Tell me your dailies.”

“I run.”

“What else? You’ll find a meeting there. Do you meditate or anything? You know I pray.”

“I read. I’ve been reading more.”

“You’ll need strong dailies to structure your recovery. Oh, and your house will have its own rules, but one thing we recommend is, and this comes from a lot of experience: For the first year, try to stay away from any romantic involvement.”

Donnie laughed. “No problem there.”

His last day in the unit, he saw

Horsegirl balanced on two feet, looking the way dogs do when they’re made to stand. Chagrined. To go from being a beautiful horse to a mental patient pulled up by your parents: talk about a flat world.

He didn’t mind the new place. He called this one Humble House, and he abided by the rules. He ran with Sylvie, five, sometimes six miles a day. He drove his mother’s old car to the hospital for work, where he was assigned not just to diapers but to help care for a very

*They made fires  
at night and,  
around those  
circles, a joint  
traveled hand to  
hand. Donnie  
passed it along.  
Until he didn’t.*

old woman, Ida. He drove out again on Sundays, to visit his mom. She was used to Sundays.

OVER THE SUMMER, Donnie and his mom worked next to each other in the hospital garden for an hour after his geri shift. He weeded and turned the hard soil with a hoe. He bought fertilizer from a nursery, and they scattered the pellets as if they were feeding ducks. They had done that together when he was small. They talked little. One afternoon, his mother

said, “See?” and lifted his arm to point out a bird. Until then, Donnie hadn’t noticed birds, but he now grew attentive to their differences. Eventually he found a book in the hospital library. He pointed out birds to her too. At dusk, he identified owls calling from a stand of redwoods.

When Donnie or his mom offered a comment, the other would nod or make a noise. Their conversations didn’t catch, the way Lina needed hers to lock and turn together. The hour felt like more than an hour. Clouds stretched thinner. They washed their hands together in the shed when they finished. He took his mother’s hands under the faucet of cold mineral water and scrubbed her fingernails with a brush. He always made her a mug of tea before he left. He set her up with it on a table next to her, in front of the TV.

When summer’s end neared, Trish decided it was time for Donnie to move again, closer to the college. “Sober houses are expensive,” she explained. “You’ll be starting school in a semester or two.” She rested her hands on the mound of her now-pregnant belly.

Walter came to help him find a room. The 11th place they saw was in a garage, overlooking a garden. Donnie liked the woman renting it out, an assistant professor named Caroline. She was young, and her tanned legs sparkled with blond flecks of hair. Her house was orderly and pretty.

Later, Donnie left his boxes on the swept floor of the new place and went out for a long run. Sylvie stopped after a few blocks in the August heat, and she showed no sign of wishing to resume. So after he showered, he took her for a walk. Contentment fell over him in the soft air, his body loose, tugged by the gentle, roving tension of the leash.

The geri unit celebrated Ida’s 91st birthday with a cake—but her daughter, whom Donnie had never seen, once again didn’t show. He took pictures, the staff helped Ida blow out candles, and then he walked her to the library, where she could talk to her daughter on the telephone. The key-faced nurse had given him the code to dial long-distance.

Donnie wandered over to the metal shelves of periodicals to give Ida privacy, but he could still hear. Ida was keeping

the conversation going. She asked questions. The answers seemed short. Finally, he heard “I love you. I hope so,” and then the phone being put down.

He asked her if she wanted to walk before going back. She said no, she was tired. “She does her best; she tries,” Ida said. “You see, I wasn’t a good mother.”

FOR A LONG TIME, Donnie hadn’t talked about his mother at meetings. She was a box with a lid. But now he began to. The way he wanted to remember her, she was keen-eyed, fun. A very particular person. She didn’t like yellow flowers. “How can you dislike a flower?” someone asked. But he understood; not much of her time had ever been her own. Her likes and dislikes defined her. She could turn a small room beautiful.

One night—it felt like ages ago—in a dirty sleeping bag by the thundering surf, Donnie had been alone in the dark, high on LSD. The stars sparkled closer. He wasn’t afraid to be alone. Then he saw a shape that was really there, not a person, just denser air. The height of his mother. She had tried to kill herself; that was why she was in the hospital. The figure stood there, the edge of its density waving a bit in the wind, like the edge of a cloth. Nobody told him, but the waves and the pressing stars and the figure had given him to understand. She’d wanted to die.

Telling these people he barely knew about his mother changed him. His life had broken—he’d broken it—and was nearly healed. Now he could feel himself trying to grow. Donnie got stuck on the Steps. He made inventories without much trouble, but when he tried to offer amends, nobody wanted them.

Like Julie, his family refused to forgive him; they blamed themselves instead. Lina said they were fine when he told her he needed to apologize. The only person who accepted an apology was his mother. She listened and murmured, “Mm-hmm.”

As spring arrived, Donnie felt that he would remember this time as the period when his character was formed. It could have happened anywhere, but it happened here. He was 20 years old, sober, and employed. He saw his mother every week

through it all. It could have been anywhere, but it was here that his second life began.

WHEN HE TALKED to Caroline about recovery, she asked if he missed drugs. He didn’t think so. “I miss the places they brought me. I don’t have as many revelations.” She also asked about his return to school. He had no idea what to major in. He thought about it while running and afterward in the shower, the hot water voluptuous on his back. In the mixed unit, he’d learned to enjoy restoring order. The rote work of it. He’d spent hours going back and forth polishing that floor. He

*In the hospital unit, he’d learned to enjoy restoring order. The rote work of it. He’d spent hours going back and forth polishing that floor.*

knew that there was such a thing as beautifully clean. Sylvie was always by him. Donnie made dinner for Caroline and her kids, Lily and Jasper—soba noodles every Monday, with a fried egg for each person (over-easy for Jasper) and snipped herbs from the garden. He didn’t want the summer to end.

His mother was rocking in a chair when he asked, “You going to be okay with me going back to college? I wouldn’t be able to see you every day.” She stared

at her hands, not answering. “I don’t have to,” he said.

“I want you to,” she said slowly. “I wish I had gone for a higher degree.”

“You have a degree. You’re a nurse, Mom. You may not have become what you wanted, but what you are gave me my life.”

When fall classes started, he saw his mother less often. He was able to drive to the hospital only on Tuesdays and Sundays to wash her hair. He told her about his courses. Sometimes he brought his books along and did homework, reading little bits aloud. Often he’d come across something and say, “I have no idea what that means,” and they’d laugh. They could spend an afternoon together without saying much. When he left, he felt nourished, as if he’d eaten a light but healthy meal.

Donnie started to pick her up after his classes on Wednesdays to bring her to his place. He was planning a winter garden bed for them to work in together in Caroline’s backyard. He sat his mother in a lawn chair while he dug.

The second Wednesday she came, he and his mother picked up Caroline’s kids from school. Lily and Jasper were sweet with her, taking her hand as she got into the car. In the yard, they brought things over to her in her chair. Tea. A blanket. A peeled orange. For a while, she slept as the three of them moved around her. Donnie prepared a good dinner, but she didn’t eat much. Driving her back to the hospital, he asked whether she’d ever considered moving in with Julie.

“No,” she said.

Donnie was surprised.

“Never.” She shook her head.

She could still be adamant. That was a good sign.

Caroline suggested that Donnie bring his mother to the house for the week that Shirley, his mother’s favorite nurse, would be on vacation. The kids would be away on a school wilderness trip then, and they could clear out Lily’s room. If it went well, maybe they could reconfigure so she could be there more.

Donnie spent days preparing. He carried out six bags of trash, took down curtains and rods, and unscrewed hooks from Lily’s closet. He remembered the phrase



*danger to oneself or others*, the way he'd stopped the first time he'd heard it. His mother had never wanted to hurt them. She'd only been after herself. She probably didn't need these precautions anymore. Still, he thought he would close her into Lily's room at night, with a chair shoved under the knob. Just so she couldn't roam outside in the dark and trip.

Two weeks before Donnie's mother was due to arrive, the next-door neighbor pounded a FOR SALE BY OWNER sign into his front lawn. It wasn't a beautiful house. It was right next door, though; a garden could span both yards.

But he was getting ahead of himself. She was just coming to visit. The morning he was to pick her up, Donnie rose early. He diced vegetables for soup and tried to remember the last time he and his mother had lived together. He had been 13 when she'd stopped going to work. The sound of running water and the clatter of pots in the kitchen that had awakened him most days of his life no longer did. When he got home from school, she would still be in bed. He would knock on her door and ask if she'd like some toast. He made cinnamon toast, cut in fours, the way she had before.

At the hospital, the paperwork involved in signing her out overnight was time-consuming, and he found her sitting on the edge of her bed. Shirley had packed her suitcase. Finally, when they arrived at Caroline's house, she seemed disoriented. She asked where the little girl was, though she knew Lily's name. She didn't want her soup. She didn't touch the avocado either, once her favorite food. That night, she had trouble sleeping. She stayed up fretting her hands as Donnie sat with her. Shirley had given him her medicine for each day in a Ziploc bag, and she'd carefully written out the schedule. Caroline had sleeping pills, but they didn't think they could give one to her without asking a doctor.

Julie was supposed to visit the next day. Then, Donnie thought, he could rest. He'd been awake for more than 28

hours. His mother didn't seem happy to see Julie, but Donnie excused himself for a nap with Sylvie in his room above the garage. That night, while they sat at dinner—Donnie had made risotto with squash from the garden—his mother got up from the table and put her hand on the wall. She said she had to go to bed. It was 5 o'clock. She slept until 10. Then she was up all night again, wanting to

*Telling these people he barely knew about his mother changed him. His life had broken—he'd broken it—and was nearly healed.*

walk outside. Donnie took her out on their quiet street. She kept turning to go the other way.

He wound up driving her back to the hospital after her fourth night. She seemed relieved to watch her clothes being put back in her cubby. She patted the top of her bed. They went to the community room, and she fell asleep in a chair.

Donnie told Shirley about the visit when she returned from her vacation. "We

all get used to our routines," she said. "And then we end up loving them."

"I'm so glad you're here," Donnie said to Shirley.

DONNIE SAT with his mother in Ward 301, as he had so many afternoons. "You were a wonderful mother," he said. "Thank you."

"I did come," she murmured.

"I love you."

"That's all we have to worry about now. That's all that's important."

Those were the last things she said. Then she was gone.

Something he hadn't thought about for years came back to him. His mother had once parked at the end of a dusty road lined with olive trees. This was somewhere in the Central Valley, long ago. A friend of hers was there, with a scarf triangled on her head, tied under her chin. Could that have been Julie? They'd parked behind a flat, one-story building that turned out to be a sanatorium, and his mom was walking toward the entrance. Her friend, who was Julie, he was now sure, acted as if this were a joke, a stunt his mother had cooked up for a laugh. A nun behind the desk gave his mom a clipboard, and she started to fill it out. They had her in the wheelchair already, another nun stationed behind, ready to push her by those two horns down a long, empty hall.

Julie said to her, "Come on, let's go find a place to get ice cream." And then, at the very last minute, his mother stood up from the chair and walked outside with them, a person rising from a grave. Exhilarating. They drove around looking for ice cream and finally found a stand with strange flavors. Avocado. Date.

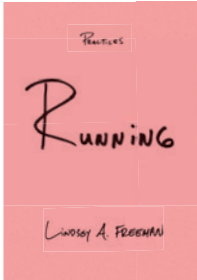
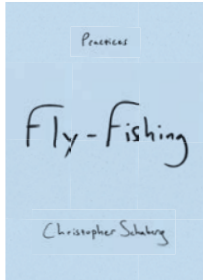
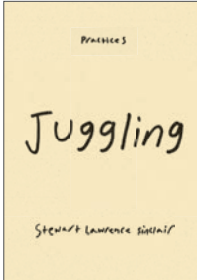
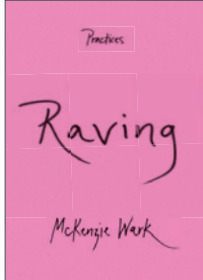
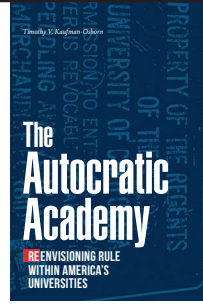
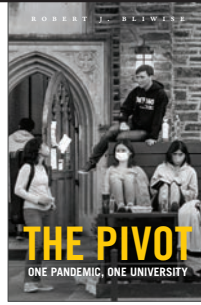
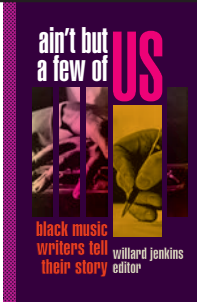
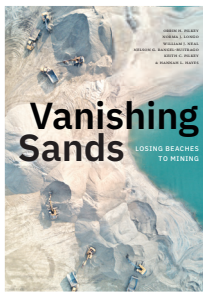
Donnie understood that she'd come back to life for him. *A*

*Mona Simpson is the author of seven novels. This story is adapted from her most recent, Commitment, out in March.*

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*Here's what I  
think about  
Spare, by  
Prince Harry.*

I think it's a very interesting book, a feat of psychosensory downloading by the master ghostwriter J. R. Moehringer. But it should have been called *Spike*. "The Spare"—as in, not the heir—is what members of the Royal Family have allegedly dubbed the brooding prince. "Spike," however, is his nickname, or his most resonant one. It's the one used by his more roistering and familiar chums. Spike is who Harry really is. Spike is his punk-rock Etonian ginger essence. Spike, as T. S. Eliot put it in "The Naming of Cats," is his "ineffable effable / Effanineffable / Deep and inscrutable singular name."

Your parents named you, of course. But bless them, they had no clue who you were. They plucked your name out of the air, for their own reasons, their own sentimentalities, like they were getting a tattoo. And a newborn baby has no relationship with its name. Next to the exploding, barbaric baby-self, its name—so thoughtfully chosen, so fondly given—is a nothing.

Your friends, however—and your enemies—*they* know who you are. They'll give you your real name. Behind your back, sometimes, which almost

guarantees its accuracy: They're reporting on angles and aspects of you that you can't even see. No one comes up with their own nickname. A boxer or a wrestler might name himself, glorify himself with some sobriquet, but that's different. That's branding. Marvelous Marvin Hagler is not a nickname.

There are no bad nicknames or wrong nicknames, for the simple reason that if they're bad or wrong, they don't stick. If it sticks, like it or not, it's your nickname. At school I was Gobbet—because I was small, or goblinlike? Or in some way like a discrete chunk of matter? Whatever, it stuck. My son was 10 when he first called me Mr. Personal Pants, for my habit of taking everything personally. (Reeling with self-recognition, I protested in vain that writers *have* to take everything personally. It's our job.)

There are ironic nicknames, counter-nicknames—the Viking-size rugby player known to his teammates as Tinker Bell. But maybe there is something darting and sprightly about him. Insane-seeming nicknames, deriving perhaps from some now-forgotten incident: Another kid at school was called Bleh Bleh. Not Blah Blah. *Bleh Bleh*. Having trouble remembering someone's name? Give them a nickname. Sci-Fi Mike. Second-Wave Dave. Eugene the Unitarian. As long as some fiber of their primary nature adheres to it, you won't forget it.

Meanwhile, other people will be doing this to you—fixing you, capturing you. Naming you. So don't waste a lifetime wondering who you are. Listen for your nickname. *A*

*James Parker is a staff writer at The Atlantic.*

# ODE

— to —

## NICKNAMES

*By James Parker*



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