



A

The Atlantic

EST. 1857

What It Means to Be a Man

*Boys need a better
answer than the
one we're giving
them today.*

By Peggy Orenstein



SIR EDMUND HILLARY AND TENZING NORGAY 1953



TRIESTE EXPEDITION 1960



VOLCANOLOGIST ANDREW MCGONIGLE



DR. SYLVIA EARLE WITH ASPIRING OCEANOGRAPHER



NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC PERPETUAL PLANET MOUNTAIN INDEX





JAMES CAMERON
THE DEEPSEA CHALLENGE



GEOLOGIST FRANCESCO SAURO

PERPETUAL PLANET

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#Perpetual



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Mining companies are preparing to extract minerals from the bottom of the ocean that could wean the Earth from fossil fuels. Scientists are still discovering what habitats these companies might destroy in the process. The race between the two groups may determine the fate of the oceans—and the planet.

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Joe Biden's verbal miscues, non sequiturs, and tangents have voters worried about his mental fitness. Maybe they'd be more understanding if they knew he's still fighting a stutter.

Joe Biden, photographed at his home in November 2019

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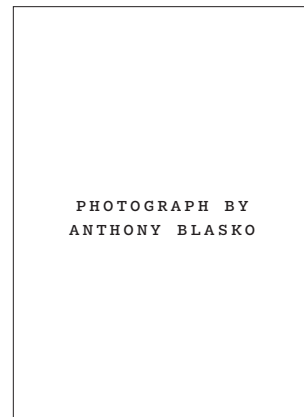
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Ode to Middle Age

By James Parker

On the Cover



PHOTOGRAPH BY ANTHONY BLASKO

Which **options strategy** could you use to generate income?

a. Covered Call

b. Credit Spread

c. Iron Condor

d. All of the Above

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Answer: d. All of the Above. Options trading is subject to significant risks and is not suitable for all investors. Multiple-leg strategies entail additional costs. Options trading privileges subject to TD Ameritrade review and approval. Before trading options, carefully read Characteristics and Risks of Standardized Options. Contact TD Ameritrade at 800-669-3900 for a copy. This is not an offer or solicitation in any jurisdiction where we are not authorized to do business. TD Ameritrade, Inc., member FINRA/SIPC. © 2019 TD Ameritrade.

Behind the Cover: Taking inspiration from mid-century documentary photographers such as Herbert List, we commissioned Anthony Blasko to create imagery for Peggy Orenstein's cover story. Blasko's work has a quiet drama; his sports photography captures drive and emotion.

Blasko documented six young men spending a day on the dusty fields of Palmdale, California—roughhousing, skateboarding, playing basketball, talking about their likes and dislikes. The resulting cover casts the physicality and vulnerability of boys in stark relief.
—Luise Stauss, *Director of Photography*

THE

General Chaos

In November, Mark Bowden reported on what top military officers really think about President Donald Trump.

Letters



There is a common misconception, which Mark Bowden repeats, that a military officer swears to obey all orders that descend to him or her from the president as commander in chief.

Military officers are not so sworn. The only completely binding oath of office taken by an officer of the U.S. military upon the occasion of her or his commissioning is the following:

I, [name], do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I take this obligation freely, without

any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office on which I am about to enter. So help me God.

Therefore, no military officer is under a legal obligation to obey any order from the commander in chief if he or she considers that order to be constitutionally null and void.

Of course, the officer in question may have to deal with the consequences of her or his resistance under the Uniform Code of Military Justice, but that does not mean a military commission annihilates individual responsibility. We know from the Constitution, as well as from the principles established in Nuremberg,

Germany, in the wake of World War II, that it does not.

Larry Hedrick
Washington, D.C.

Frightening. That is the only word to describe Mark Bowden's article. President Trump's inability or unwillingness to follow normal decision-making protocols has created chaos in our foreign policy and put our country at risk.

The article also helped me with respect to the 2020 election. I had been flummoxed. I will now have to consider voting for a Democrat: High unemployment, a stagnating economy, and massive debt for a few years are better than alienating the rest of our allies, getting into a nuclear war with Iran, or allowing 10,000 Islamist soldiers to be set free in Syria.

Trump is psychologically, morally, intellectually, and emotionally unfit for office. We can only hope Congress impeaches and removes him so we have a choice between two adults in 2020.

Dave Trott,
Former Republican Member of
the House of Representatives
Birmingham, Mich.

MARK BOWDEN REPLIES:

Regarding Larry Hedrick's quibble: All uniformed military officers are duty bound, under penalty of prosecution, to obey lawful orders from their superiors. Because the Constitution names the president commander in chief, obeying his orders, unless they are unlawful (not just



ill-considered), is required under both military law and the founding document.

Bovine Friends Forever

Cows have specific platonic companions that they prefer over others. Rebecca Giggis wrote about these relationships in the November issue.

Thank you for the article on cow friendships. I am lucky enough to work at a farmed-animal sanctuary, where we have seen incredible and complex relationships develop over the years. Cows show a capacity for affection and mutual emotional dependence that should require us to rethink the ethics of animal farming. Kayli and Maybelle are two cows that live at Woodstock Farm Sanctuary. Kayli ran from a slaughterhouse when she was very young, and Maybelle was abused for years as a dairy cow before being given to us. They are best friends—standing by each other, grooming each other, checking in when one of them is not feeling well. They have even become co-parents of two calves that we rescued from the dairy industry. If they were to lose each other, they'd be heartbroken.

Rachel McCrystal
High Falls, N.Y.

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

THE FACTS

What we learned fact-checking this issue

In this issue, John Hendrickson sat down with Joe Biden to discuss the former vice president's experiences with stuttering (page 50). In the article, Hendrickson dispels a common myth: that stuttering is caused by anxiety or fear.

This idea has not gone unexamined over the years. In a particularly radical experiment, the influential speech pathologist Wendell Johnson attempted to induce stuttering in a group of orphans by criticizing their speech. (The late University of Iowa professor, who stammered himself, believed that stuttering must be the result

of parents disparaging kids for small speech mistakes.)

The 1939 inquiry, dubbed the "Monster Study," didn't confirm Johnson's hypothesis, nor was it ever published, but it did result in a lawsuit. After a 2001 San Jose *Mercury News* investigation thrust the decades-old experiment into the spotlight, a few of the

study's subjects sued. In 2007, the state of Iowa settled for \$925,000.

Researchers still aren't sure what causes people to stutter. Despite Johnson's belief that the neurological disorder was not hereditary, it has since been found to have a strong genetic component.

— Will Gordon,
Assistant Editor

Q • & • A

In the November issue, Franklin Foer wrote about Jeff Bezos's master plan, and what it means for the rest of us. Here, Foer answers questions sent in by readers.

Q: What would failure look like for Bezos at this point? Or is he too big to fail?

A: The prospect of failure haunts Jeff Bezos and motivates his relentless pursuit of growth. In fact, the word that seems to best capture his anxieties is *stagnation*. At this stage, he fears standing still. He worries that if his mind stops moving or his company fails to find the next new thing, a competitor will overtake him. His ambitions keep swelling, because the alternative is too terrifying for him.

Q: Given Bezos's preoccupation with space, why hasn't he gone there already? And what are his personal plans?

A: Over the years, Bezos has gone from being a doughy engineer to a chiseled mogul. Why has he beasted out? According to one friend, he is preparing for the day when he'll journey into space. But space travel is hard. There are reasons that this is a pursuit left to governments. It takes the resources of the state—at least it has in the past. The engineering challenges are mind-bending. My guess is that it will happen eventually, but not as quickly as Bezos would like.

Q: Is Amazon *really* that powerful? Retail is, after all, a low-margin business. Sears, Roebuck looked like a tenacious powerhouse too, once upon a time.

A: Standard Oil was that powerful; so were U.S. Steel, IBM, and Microsoft. There's nothing new about Amazon's size and strength. But in the past, government loomed over these companies. The Department of Justice broke up these Goliaths, or at least threatened to smash them to pieces. It seems like we're in the early days of a resurgence of anti-monopoly sentiment. And that resurgence will pose a serious challenge to Amazon.

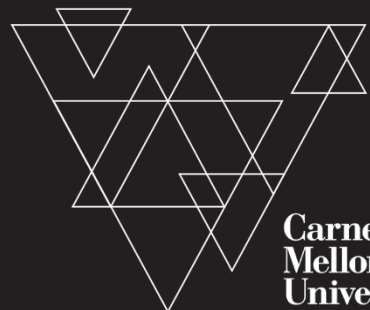


The world's greatest problems
are made of many small parts.

Through decades of working together,
we've learned how to assemble the
most diverse experts and solve them,
piece by piece.

*The most complex problems.
The most diverse experts.*

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DISPATCHES

OPENING ARGUMENT

WHERE'S MY FLYING CAR?

Silicon Valley continues to find profitable ways to sell ads. It's failed, often spectacularly, to remake the world of flesh and steel.

BY DEREK THOMPSON

How should we tell the story of the digital century, now two decades old? We could focus, as journalists tend to do, on the depredations of the connected life. As Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have devoured the online world, they have undermined traditional media, empowered propagandists, and widened America's political divides. The smartphone, for all its wonder and utility, has also proved to be a narcotizing agent.

But what if, instead of focusing on Big Tech's sins of commission, we paid

equal attention to its sins of omission—the failures, the busts, the promises unfulfilled? The past year has offered several lurid examples. WeWork, the office-sharing company that claimed it would reinvent the workplace, imploded on the brink of a public offering. Uber, once seen as an unstoppable force that would transform urban transit as radically as the subway had, has likewise seen its public valuation plummet. From January to October, the two firms together lost \$10 billion.

While these companies might seem like outliers, their struggles hold a message, not just for investors but for all of us. Big Tech continues to find new and profitable ways to sell ads and cloud space, but it has failed, often spectacularly, to remake the world of flesh and steel.

For decades, we've turned to Silicon Valley to show us the future of American endeavor. Optimism flowed from the Bay Area's evangelists but also from Washington. "In the new economy, human invention increasingly makes physical resources obsolete," President Ronald Reagan said in a 1988 speech that heralded the promise of the computer chip. In the '80s and '90s, Democrats such as Al Gore made up a new generation of liberals—named "Atari Democrats," after the early video-game company—who believed computer technology would provide opportunity on the scale of the New Deal. The internet age was hailed as a third industrial revolution—a spur for individual ingenuity and an engine of employment.

On these counts, it has not delivered. To the contrary, the digital age has coincided with a slump in America's economic

dynamism. The tech sector's innovations have made a handful of people quite rich, but it has failed to create enough middle-class jobs to offset the decline of the country's manufacturing base, or to help solve the country's most pressing problems: deteriorating infrastructure, climate change, low growth, rising economic inequality. Tech companies that

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operate in the physical world, such as Lyft and DoorDash, offer greater convenience, but they hardly represent the kind of transformation that Reagan and Gore had in mind. These failures—perhaps more than the toxicity of the web—underlie the meanness and radicalism of our era.

Decades from now, historians will likely look back on the beginning of the 21st century as a period when the smartest minds in the world's richest country sank their talent, time, and capital into a narrow band of human endeavor—digital technology. Their efforts have given us frictionless access to media, information, consumer goods, and chauffeurs. But software has hardly remade the physical world. We were

promised an industrial revolution. What we got was a revolution in consumer convenience.

THE ORIGINAL Industrial Revolution freed humanity from the centuries-long prison of slow economic growth. In the early 19th century, productivity and income were skyrocketing, first in England and soon throughout Europe. While the transition was brutal for many, the gains were broadly shared: Real wages for the working class doubled in the first half of the century, and life expectancy at birth rose dramatically in the second half.

In the computer age, the economy has trended in the opposite direction. If American productivity had continued to grow as it did from Harry Truman's election to Richard Nixon's resignation, the 2013 economy would have been about 60 percent larger. (Dividing those gains equally would have given the typical middle-class household a bonus of roughly \$30,000 a year.) Instead, income growth from 1973 to 2013 was 80 percent slower.

Technology's defenders claim that the traditional tools of macroeconomics can't possibly capture the magic of a smartphone—a single device that can function as a camera, a gaming console, a portal to the web, and, yes, a telephone. Look up from your textbooks, they tell economists: Everything is getting better except our ability to measure how much better everything is getting.

But no matter how aggressively you torture the numbers, the computer age has coincided with a decline in the rate of economic growth. When Chad Syverson, an economist at the University of Chicago's business school, looked at the question

of "missing" growth, he found that the productivity slowdown has reduced GDP by \$2.7 trillion since 2004. Americans may love their smartphones, but all those free apps aren't worth trillions of dollars.

And if you look up from your smartphone, progress becomes harder to see. The physical world of the city—the glow of electric-powered lights, the rumble of automobiles, the roar of airplanes overhead and subways below—is a product of late-19th-century and early-20th-century invention. The physical environment feels depressingly *finished*. The bulk of innovation has been shunted into the invisible realm of bytes and code.

All of that code, technology advocates argue, has increased human ingenuity by allowing individuals to tinker, talk, and trade with unprecedented ease. This certainly *feels* true. Who could dispute the fact that it's easier than ever to record music, market a video game, or publish an essay? But by most measures, individual innovation is in decline. In 2015, Americans were far less likely to start a company than they were in the 1980s. According to the economist Tyler Cowen, the spread of broadband technology has corresponded with a drop-off in entrepreneurial activity in almost every city and in almost every industry.

One explanation for the decrease in innovation leads right back to Silicon Valley. Tech's biggest winners have effectively built monopolies, whether in office software (Microsoft), social media (Facebook), or search advertising (Google). Rather than foster innovation, the tech giants have grown so large that they scare off entrepreneurs in

their path. Venture capitalists have a term for the menacing shadow cast by tech Goliaths: *the kill zone*. The outsize power of tech's biggest companies has worsened regional inequality, concentrating wealth in the handful of metro areas where they've set up shop. Eighty percent of venture-capital investment goes to just three states—California, New York, and Massachusetts. The internet's tools were supposed to shatter legacy empires, free untapped creativity, and spread wealth. Instead, the tech powers have become as cutthroat and anti-competitive as the companies they once aimed to replace.

For decades, the tech community has waved away its humdrum macroeconomic impact by touting some imminent leap forward. Take, for example, self-driving cars, which would replace flawed human drivers with huge fleets of vehicles steered by cameras and computers, saving lives and creating a new manufacturing industry. As recently as April, Elon Musk predicted that 1 million “robotaxis” would be on the road by 2020, and his optimism has been shared by automakers and technology companies alike. Yet progress on self-driving cars has been stubbornly slow. Encoding in computers visual and manual skills sharpened by millennia of human evolution is no easy task. But this is precisely the kind of near-miraculous accomplishment that Silicon Valley has long promised.

Ironically, the most visible consumer-tech innovation of the past decade hasn't been computers driving cars but rather contractors driving cars. We've seen an explosion of companies that allow consumers to summon products and services to their door, whether it's food

(DoorDash), a handyman (TaskRabbit), or a ride (Uber and Lyft). Goods in this so-called platform economy tend

to be shepherded around by workers whose part-time status allows the platforms to avoid providing full benefits,

including health insurance. These bargain-rate services make yuppie life convenient. But far from improving transit



or enriching workers, these companies exacerbate congestion, deplete resources for public transportation, and entrench urban inequality. Is this what passes for real-world progress in the digital age?

HERE'S A fair objection: What if everything I've told you about the slowdown in progress and human ingenuity is true—but it's not Silicon Valley's fault?

"I think we should be much more disappointed about the slowdown in progress than most people tend to be," says Patrick Collison, a co-founder and the CEO of the financial-technology company Stripe. "But the slowdown predates the internet, and I still consider the digital revolution, viewed in its totality, a very bright spot in the broader picture of the last 50 years. The status quo, and our broader societal ability to generate innovation, is almost certainly in need of significant change. But if we're not producing enough gold, it's important that we blame the geese, not the eggs."

Collison is right that Big Tech shouldn't be blamed for all negative economic indicators, many of which are the fault of bad governance, the difficulties of improving productivity in industries such as energy and home construction, and other factors. The digital revolution has in many ways ameliorated the broader slowdown. Yes, geographic mobility is in decline, but the internet has made remote work more feasible. Yes, air travel is no faster than it was 30 years ago (and, in some cases, even slower), but travel-comparison sites have made fares cheaper and in-flight Wi-Fi has made flights more productive.

But letting Silicon Valley off the hook would also be a mistake. The tech sector today bestrides the U.S. economy like a colossus. Data from the Computing Research Association show that from 2013 to 2017, the number of people majoring in computer science more than doubled. According to data from PitchBook, software has a powerful hold over U.S. venture capital, with more than 3,700 deals in 2018; pharmaceuticals and biotech came in a distant second, with just 720 deals. From an R&D standpoint, tech's supremacy is without precedent. In a paper reviewing the history of U.S. innovation through patent filings, the economists Mikko Packalen and Jay Bhattacharya found that previous inventive sprints generated an explosion in patent filings across several categories—chemistry, electronics, medicine, and mechanical engineering. By contrast, U.S. patents since 2000 have been dominated by computers and communication tech. America's innovative talents have devolved from versatility to specialization. If we're going to concentrate so many resources in one sector, that sector had better produce.

Perhaps it's time to reconsider the wisdom of placing such a big bet on Silicon Valley delivering the United States from its rusting present to a glimmering future. Too much American ingenuity is chasing problems that simply don't matter. The web was once celebrated as a democratizing force and a means of escaping institutional control. But Silicon Valley's most profitable business model has been to construct expansive systems for tracking and manipulating human behavior: Together, Facebook

and Google make almost 90 percent of their revenue by selling ads. As the big problems continue to go unsolved, tech's advertising duopoly amounts to roughly \$1.5 trillion in market capitalization.

"The internet age has been very underwhelming compared to what the expectations were," the economist and aerospace entrepreneur Eli Dourado told me. "I'm also worried

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that it's sapping talent from other industries that might benefit from more innovation. All these people building apps and software-as-a-service companies, if they applied themselves to challenges in the physical world—especially on energy, housing, health, and transportation—they could make a real difference."

Dourado doesn't think we've run out of ideas, but rather that our once-grand ambitions have narrowed to focus on a handful of reliably profitable endeavors, such as ad tech and cloud services—the low-hanging fruit. He advocates for a national project to reach for the higher-up fruit. Silicon Valley could deepen its investments in biotech (which could transform preventive care and disease detection) and construction automation (which could bring

down the price of new housing and transit). With help from the federal government, tech could also play a larger role in solving the greatest challenge in human history: climate change. Carbon-capture systems, which remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, could slow the rate of global warming while adding hundreds of thousands of jobs. In 2019, the Department of Energy announced more than \$150 million in federal funding for carbon-capture R&D. That's not nothing, but consider that, at its peak, the Apollo moon program siphoned off more than 2 percent of federal spending—the equivalent of nearly \$100 billion today.

The idea that Silicon Valley could swoop in and solve all of America's problems was always an illusion, conjured by technologists seeking to lure capital to California, and by politicians looking to shift responsibility away from Washington. Silicon Valley has a crucial role to play in meeting the challenges of the new century, but it can't act alone. Transformative advances will require participation from local, state, and federal government, and from the American people, who for too long have bought into the idea that prosperity can be delivered in lines of code.

For the past two decades, we've funneled treasure and talent into the ethereal world of software and digital optimization. Imagine what could be accomplished if American ingenuity came back down to Earth. *A*

Derek Thompson is a staff writer at The Atlantic.



Burnout isn't unique to Stanford Children's Health, but in many ways the hospital's solutions are.

Caring More

In order to improve patient care, Stanford Children's Health started with its caregivers.

Stanford Children's Health is improving the hospital experience for patients and caregivers.

Learn more about their efforts at: theatlantic.com/caringmore

EARLIER THIS YEAR, the World Health Organization classified "burnout syndrome" as an official medical condition. Burnout can affect anyone, but pediatric caregivers are especially vulnerable due to high levels of stress they can experience while working with patients and their families.

Today, two in five doctors report they have experienced burnout. And in a hospital, it's not just care providers who feel the effects. Overworked caregivers are more likely to make errors, which "also affect patients," says Dr. Dennis Lund, Chief Medical Officer of Packard Children's Hospital. "For us to take the best possible care of our patients, we need to take the best possible care of our people."

To that end, Lucile Packard Children's Hospital Stanford opened two new facilities this November: a new inpatient unit of the Bass Center for Childhood Cancer and Blood Diseases and a new outpatient clinic space for the Betty Irene Moore Children's Heart Center.

Among the care-first features at the new Bass Childhood Cancer Center are child and teenage playrooms, where caregivers have the opportunity to engage with patients away from their hospital beds—not as patients, but as kids. Meanwhile, the new Heart Center clinic was built next to a staff-only garden, where caregivers can step away from work and find moments of reprieve.

Staff gardens and patient playrooms might sound simple, but these amenities are part of a growing movement at Stanford Children's Health to help caregivers deliver better care to their patients—and to themselves. ●



THE PATRON SAINT OF COMPLICATED WOMEN

Bombshell is Charlize Theron's latest effort to subvert the typical Hollywood role.

BY ABBY AGUIRRE

C

Charlize Theron received the script for *Bombshell*, the new drama about the women who exposed sexual harassment at Fox News and brought down Roger Ailes, in the summer of 2017. Two months later, the first Harvey Weinstein story broke. In certain Hollywood circles, people had been aware that a Weinstein investigation might finally make it into print, but nobody could have foreseen the magnitude of the fallout or the movement it would ignite. “There was something in the air,” Theron recalled one morning in October, tucked into a corner table at a Hollywood restaurant. “I didn’t have an inkling of how big it was going to be or how long it was going to last.”

Among the things that ultimately drew Theron to the Ailes story—what led her to sign on to star in and produce *Bombshell*—were the women at the center of it: the formidable blond protagonists of Fox News. There was Gretchen Carlson (played by Nicole Kidman), the former Miss America and longtime anchor who filed the initial lawsuit against Ailes, accusing the Fox News chairman of making sexual advances and then retaliating against her after she rebuffed them. There was Megyn Kelly (Theron), the network’s biggest star, who came forward with allegations against Ailes

in the weeks that followed. And there was a young female producer (a composite character played by Margot Robbie) who seeks out Ailes in hopes of landing an on-air position, only to be cowed into showing him her underwear during a one-on-one meeting, among other indignities.

“Nothing is black-and-white in this,” Theron said of the film, which was directed by Jay Roach and written by Charles Randolph. She noted that Kelly had moved past her uncomfortable encounters with Ailes and managed to have a professional relationship with him for a decade. What’s more, Theron pointed out, Kelly seemed to have real respect for Ailes. At the same time, Kelly knew Carlson’s allegations were likely true, because Ailes had harassed her, too.

The gray area includes Ailes’s secretary, played by Holland Taylor, who ferries young women in and out of Ailes’s office and presumably notices his habit of locking the door behind him. Theron likened this gatekeeper to Ghislaine Maxwell, the longtime associate of Jeffrey Epstein who accusers say served as a kind of fixer, recruiting girls and women into Epstein’s alleged sex-trafficking web. “She knows exactly what’s happening,” Theron said of the secretary character. “I’ve never seen us brave enough to look at women fully, whether we’re complicit or we’re sitting in the room and having to placate.”

That may be true, but no other leading lady seems as intent as Theron is on jolting us into looking at women fully. Now 44, Theron was still in her 20s when she moved away from sweetheart roles to play the prostitute turned serial killer Aileen Wuornos in *Monster*.

(This after reportedly firing a manager for sending her too many scripts in the *Showgirls* vein.) She won an Academy Award for Best Actress in 2004 for the performance and has studiously avoided Hollywood typecasting ever since.

Theron’s characters are rarely “likable,” at least in the conventional sense. In *Young Adult*, written by Diablo Cody and directed by Jason Reitman, she plays a spoiled author of young-adult novels who returns to her Minnesota hometown in an effort to lure her high-school boyfriend out of his marriage. In *Tully*, another Cody-Reitman project, she portrays an exhausted mother of three with postpartum depression. Even Theron’s action heroines tend to be more than a little damaged—as is literally true of Furiosa, the one-armed warrior in *Mad Max: Fury Road*.

If there are no easy martyrs in the wasteland beyond Thunderdome, there are none at Fox News, either. Fans of *The Kelly File* will recall that the anchor once spent a segment arguing that Santa Claus and Jesus were white. (Her NBC show, *Megyn Kelly Today*, was canceled in 2018 after she defended blackface as a Halloween costume.) “They have all said things that I find highly offensive,” Theron told me. “But when we fight for things—if we believe in equal rights, that women should have safe work environments—we cannot cherry-pick who that belongs to.”

Nor does *Bombshell* lend itself to easy tropes of sisterly feminism. Carlson and Kelly were not close. Indeed, the film shows Carlson’s shock when Kelly came out against Ailes. “It’s pretty well known that they are not crazy about

each other,” Theron said. “That is good territory to cover. Not in the sense that women want to fuck each other over. It’s that we’re just as complex as men, and not all of us get along, and that’s okay. We can work in a space and be really good at our jobs and not have everybody be best friends and have slumber parties. Let’s *kill* that, okay? We’re all individuals.”

TO HEAR HER tell it, the salient thing to know about Theron’s childhood is that she grew up in apartheid-era South Africa, in a small town outside of Johannesburg called Benoni. Theron says it took her decades to come to terms with the implications of racial segregation. “It’s by pure luck that I was born in [South Africa]

with white skin,” she told me. “I was a minority. And I was benefiting from the suffering of other people. I know that I had an awareness, because my mom would talk about it. But I didn’t fully understand what that meant until I was living [in the United States] and I could see it with some distance.”

Journalists tend to highlight another detail. When Theron was 15, her father, a verbally abusive alcoholic, came home after a night of drinking and threatened Theron and her mother with a shotgun. As he fired shots, Theron’s mother reached for her own handgun

and shot back, killing Theron’s father and wounding his brother. (Officials eventually determined that Theron’s mother, Gerda Jacoba Aletta Maritz, had acted in self-defense.) Theron has never appeared eager to discuss the episode, so I was surprised when she mentioned it in passing. “People always tried to assume that they knew where my pain was coming from, and I was always very defensive about it, because I was like, *That was one night of my life*. Pain comes from things that you experience day after day after day.”

By the time her mother’s three-year legal ordeal had ended, South Africa was on the brink of civil war. Theron was in New York City, where she took classes at the Joffrey Ballet and pursued an unlikely modeling career. (Unlikely only to Theron, it seems, who spent most of her first decade without teeth—a consequence of antibiotics used to treat a case of jaundice.) Knee injuries were derailing her long-term prospects in ballet, so Theron had to figure out another career path or return to South Africa. Maritz suggested that she try acting and bought her a one-way ticket to Los Angeles.

Theron arrived in Hollywood in 1994, an 18-year-old still working on her English (her first language is Afrikaans). She lived hand to mouth, going out on auditions. On her first one, Theron recalled, a director put his hand on her knee, requiring that she make a quick escape. I asked her if she drew on that episode for *Bombshell*. “That experience is embedded in my body,” she told me. “It’s not an isolated experience. It’s an experience that I share with a lot of women.”

One reason Theron was able to chart an unorthodox course through Hollywood is that she eventually began developing her own projects. Here again, *Monster* marked a turning point. Though the movie was a box-office success, it was initially considered a risk. Theron had to sign on as a producer to make sure it got made, and to protect the integrity of the story. Through the production company she founded, Denver & Delilah, Theron went on to produce many of the films in which she has appeared, plus a host of other projects.

Theron's company is now located at Universal Studios. She lives "somewhere in Hollywood," in the first house she ever bought, 21 years ago. Although she was engaged, briefly, to Sean Penn, she has never married. She is raising two young adopted children with the help of Maritz, whom she refers to as her "co-parent." Both of Theron's children are African American. "I'm at that place now with my oldest where we talk about the civil-rights movement and stuff like that," Theron told me. The similarities between South Africa and the United States can be demoralizing, she added. "I'm telling her these stories. And then I get in bed and I turn the television on and I'm like, *What the fuck has changed?*"

WE TEND TO think of the seismic #MeToo reckoning as beginning in Hollywood, but *Bombshell* reminds audiences that Fox News had already undergone a similar upheaval. Though some may regard Hollywood and Fox News as political opposites, the film makes the case that women in these two settings have more in common than they think.

It is impossible to watch *Bombshell* without recognizing the similarities between Harvey Weinstein and Roger Ailes. "Both are incredibly charming," Theron said. "They can be paternal. They can be great advisers, people who fully invest. They want you to do great. But they want all of those things on their terms. They were both at the epicenter of incredible corporations where women wanted to work."

The dynamics that brought each man down are similar as well. After Carlson filed her lawsuit, the whisper network at Fox News reached a critical mass of voices, which *Bombshell* dramatizes with a cinematic montage of women naming names. "Very similar to the Weinstein situation," Theron said. "Once there were two or three voices, it was like ... a wildfire."

There's another parallel. If Donald Trump's rise was an indirect catalyst of the #MeToo movement, it was a far more direct one in the evolution of Megyn Kelly. The events may feel like a distant memory now, but in the year leading up to Carlson filing her lawsuit, Kelly's life was thrown into chaos after she challenged Trump during the first Republican presidential-primary debate in 2015. The next day, Trump remarked that Kelly had "blood coming out of her eyes, blood coming out of her wherever."

Trump continued to attack Kelly for eight months. According to Kelly's 2016 memoir, *Settle for More*, Ailes made private attempts to assuage Trump but did not hit back publicly. In early 2016, worn down by Trump's campaign against her and by heightened security issues, Kelly decided to put a stop to Trump's behavior with a televised face-to-face interview

in Trump Tower. "I think at that moment, that was crushing for her," Theron said. "Like a good little soldier, she went back. She groveled and had that horrible interview with him that's cringeworthy to watch, where she's just giggling. When you watch that entire interview, I can see a woman who is doing something that she doesn't want to do."

Bombshell ends with the Ailes story, but Kelly's saga isn't over. The journalist Ronan Farrow's book *Catch and Kill*, published in October, contains

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allegations that Farrow's former employer, NBC News, shut down his investigation of Harvey Weinstein after Weinstein made it known to the network that he was aware of harassment allegations against one of its biggest stars, Matt Lauer. (NBC has denied this.) Kelly had been critical of NBC's response to the Weinstein story—she had called, on air, for the network to have an external investigation conducted into its handling of Farrow's reporting, as Fox News had done with Ailes. The allegations in Farrow's book have fueled speculation that Kelly's firing may have had more to do with her Lauer coverage than her blackface comment.

The day after Farrow's book was released, Kelly went on Fox News's *Tucker Carlson Tonight* and demanded that NBC release any potential Lauer accusers from their non-disclosure agreements. About a week later, NBC *did* release past employees from any such confidentiality agreements. When I met with Theron, news had recently broken that former Fox News staffers, including Carlson, were demanding to be released from their own NDAs. "There is strength in numbers," Theron told me. "I saw a quote from [former Fox News host Juliet Huddy] yesterday who just went, *I've lost everything. What are you going to come after? Of course I'm going to break my NDA. I have nothing.* Most of the women who've been fired—they've never worked in the same industry again. They can't get a fucking job ... It takes [Huddy's] kind of reckless behavior for something to really change."

This may be the grimest parallel, of course. It's impossible to know just how many women have had their careers derailed by men like Ailes and Weinstein. Theron hopes *Bombshell* will remind audiences that sexual harassment and assault is "a non-partisan issue." I asked Theron whether she thought that anything had changed in Hollywood. Not quickly enough, she replied. "I think for the first time, though, my industry is embarrassed ... In that sense, I think, if we have to shame our way through this, then that's what we have to do." *A*

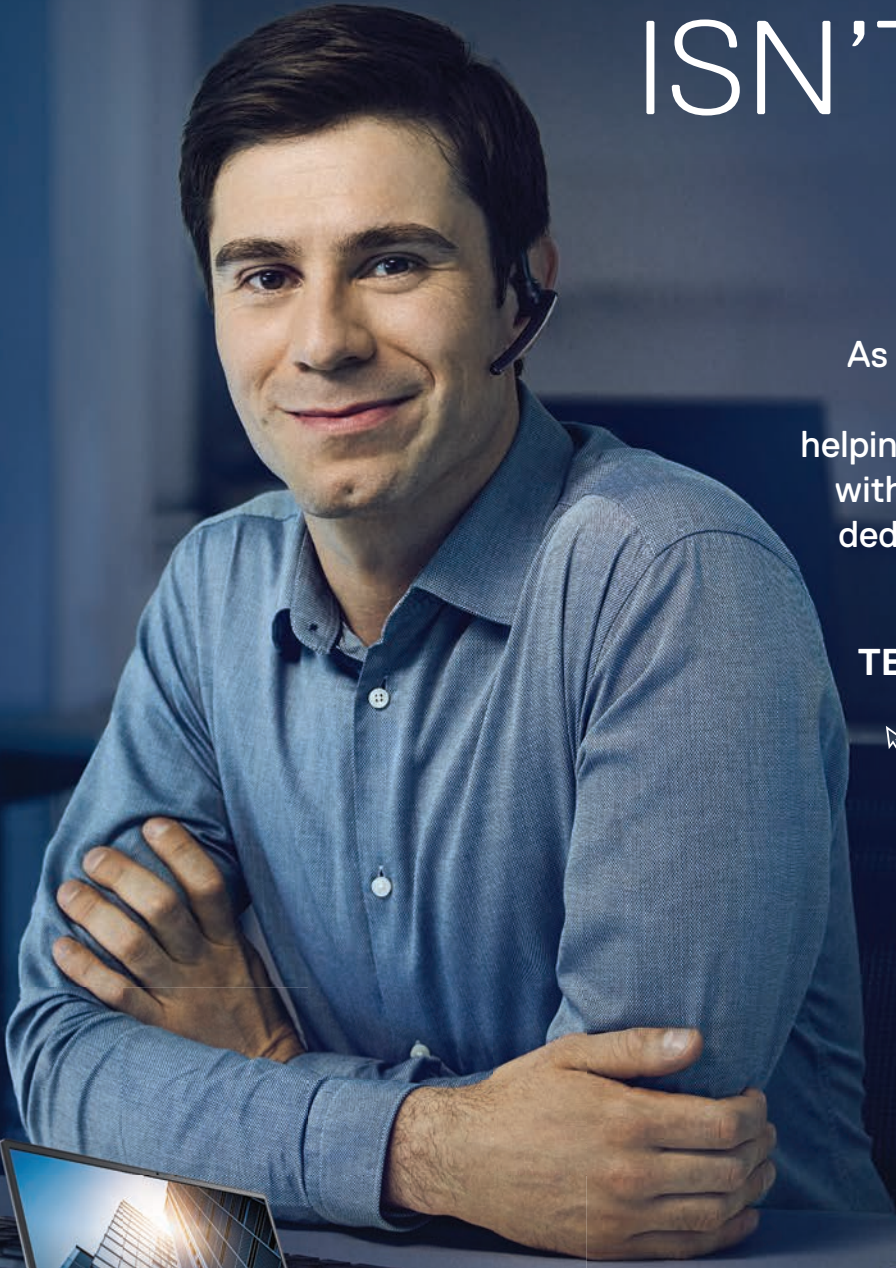
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THE MYTH OF FREE SHIPPING

How retailers hide the costs of delivery—and why we're such suckers for their ploys

BY AMANDA MULL

It was a pair of feather earrings that helped Ann Miceli get out from underneath strangers' cars. For years, Miceli had worked as an auto mechanic and picked up shifts in her spare time at Indianapolis restaurants. One day, she came across those earrings, and "it kind of sparked something." Miceli bought a pair, and then some supplies to make her own. She listed some of her creations in a shop on Etsy and named it PrettyVagrant.

That was in 2011. In the intervening years, Miceli has sold nearly 30,000 of her handmade earrings and feather hair extensions, all of which she assembles by hand at home. After a couple of years, Miceli quit her job as a mechanic. Etsy "has given me the opportunity to work from home and watch my grandkids," she told me. Everything was humming along nicely until last summer, when the site began implementing a new search algorithm that gives priority to sellers who guarantee free shipping. Those who charged even a few dollars, like Miceli, were removed from their spots on the first page of

search results. In August, Miceli's revenue was down 40 percent from the previous year—a huge dip that she blames on the free-shipping finagling.

Etsy said it had no choice: Buyers' expectations had changed, and it felt compelled to respond. The company told Miceli to raise her prices to compensate for and disguise shipping fees. But when Miceli looked around, her competitors seemed to be simply eating the cost, which she couldn't afford to do.

Etsy and Miceli share the same goal: to induce shoppers to buy from Etsy instead of ordering mass-produced goods from the uncountable conventional retailers that would also like to ship you a pair of feather earrings. Now she and the platform are in conflict because of how those other retailers—especially Amazon—have warped our idea of what it means to shop online. There's scarcely tastier bait for American shoppers than free shipping, and it's been transformed from an occasional incentive into something that closely resembles a consumer requirement. But shipping isn't free for the people who send packages, and

an insatiable demand for this perk might be the thing that breaks mom-and-pop retail for good.

ONLINE SHOPPING, when it works best, is sort of like a duck. The part above the water—the algorithmically selected products, the simple checkout process aided by personal information stored on phones, the package that appears on your porch two days later—glides placidly along, setting off only the gentlest of ripples in your attention. The apotheosis of e-commerce is when people spend money without feeling like anything has happened at all.

Below the surface, the little webbed feet of retail paddle furiously. Miceli alone takes a new bundle of packages to the post office nearly every day. This holiday season, the United States Postal Service will deliver a projected 800 million packages. Early in 2020, FedEx will start delivering on Sundays all year, a service previously reserved for the holidays. In New York, where daily deliveries have tripled in less than a decade, trucks snarl streets and rack up nearly a half million parking tickets annually.

In 2015, Amazon launched Amazon Flex, through which the company pays people to use their own cars to ferry boxes, assuming all responsibility for mileage and expenses. (Amazon did not respond to requests for comment.)

Large retailers make sure their own ducks stay upright. Orders come in boxes marked with the insignia of the seller, not the deliverer. Narvar, a popular logistics start-up that touts its ability to help brands "deliver premium post-purchase experiences," directs buyers to a clean, bright, retailer-marked landing page to track packages. If you don't look closely, you might think Warby Parker itself is bringing you your new glasses, not UPS.

Masking the nitty-gritty of shipping, namely the costs, is the most potent tool online stores have to persuade people to click "Place order" and come back for more. In a 2018 survey by *Internet Retailer*, shipping charges were cited as the most common reason shoppers abandon their carts, topping the pet-peeve list for nearly a third of respondents, ahead of things like not wanting to create an account and being unsure of the store's return



policy. Many resent paying for shipping so much that they'll buy more expensive items or throw in additional small stuff—a single-use skin-care mask, socks—just to clear a free-delivery purchase minimum, says Ron Berman, a marketing professor at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. At Etsy's suggestion, Miceli started using a similar gambit, absorbing the cost for orders over \$35 in the hope that people buying her least expensive products would buy more of them.

Free shipping is enticing, says Ravi Dhar, the director of Yale's Center for Customer Insights, because shoppers irrationally hate to pay for certain services—even those that they value immensely, such as speedy and reliable delivery. This demonstrates the economic principle known as “pain of paying,” a psychological discomfort that keeps people from completing purchases. Certain factors seem to sharpen the pain. Using cash rather than credit cards typically hurts more, because paper money must be physically relinquished. Higher charges for convenience, such as the jacked-up price for a soda in a hotel minibar or closer parking at a sporting event, usually rattle too. Printer ink and hotel Wi-Fi torment because they're a means to an end that consumers feel they've already paid to reach. You bought the printer—of course you need to print things. You booked the hotel—of course you need to check your email during your stay. (Hotels, with their inherently captive audiences, are veritable houses of pain.) Paying for shipping is a two-for-one pain deal: Not only are you confronted with the actual cost

of your convenience, but you're being asked to pay “extra” for a store to fork over items you're already laying out for.

“The reaction to free shipping goes beyond the normal way of looking at cost and benefit,” Dhar explains. “A 20 percent discount, which would add up to the same \$5 or \$8 that shipping costs—that's not as effective as giving

THE “PAIN OF PAYING” IS A PSYCHOLOGICAL DISCOMFORT THAT KEEPS PEOPLE FROM COMPLETING PURCHASES.

free shipping.” In general, Dhar says, shoppers are even willing to pay more overall for the same goods if there isn't a separate shipping charge. What bothers them most is the nicked-and-dimed feeling, not the total amount of the tab.

IT WASN'T ALWAYS like this in America, and it's not like this in most other countries—standard European shipping and return policies would probably seem downright hostile here. That's because U.S. shoppers are used to being coaxed into purchases by retailers who can and will bend over backwards to land a sale—another extreme of capitalism, American-style.

The main reason small businesses can't keep up with the behemoths is economies of scale. Thanks to their huge infrastructure, mega-retailers

simply pay less per package for shipping. Scale also helps when it comes to an ever more popular companion to free shipping: free returns. They're another salve for the pain of paying, but processing returns requires manpower and eats into profits. Big clothing retailers can recoup some of the costs by off-loading returns and stale inventory to discount stores such as Marshalls, but small businesses don't have that option.

Dhar and Berman point to the dot-com boom as the moment when retailers, fed by investor dollars and under no pressure to turn a profit, started offering free shipping to get people to take a chance on companies they'd never heard of. Webvan—an early and ill-fated grocery service—and Zappos, the online shoe store, helped normalize the incentive. Venture capital still drives much of the free-shipping expectation, for the same reason it did in the beginning: Getting people to try something new can be difficult, and taking a loss up front is often necessary to sweeten the deal enough to make it happen.

What got us to the present is Amazon Prime, the \$119 annual program with more than 100 million American members, which promises unlimited two-day shipping to almost anywhere in the United States. The trick Amazon pulled off was to divorce shipping costs almost entirely from individual buying behavior by charging an annual shipping fee, then further camouflaging matters by making video-streaming services and the like part of the package. And now that we think nothing we order online should take more than two days to arrive, the

company is in the process of shaving a day off that expectation. Buyers will receive their purchases the next day, as if delivered by the package fairy.

This is what Etsy's 2.6 million sellers—mostly women, mostly one-person operations, according to the company—are up against. On internal forums, they've been voicing concerns about lost sales, reduced margins, an inability to keep up with Jeff Bezos and the Waltons.

So far, the free-shipping push hasn't been a big win for Etsy, either. In an earnings call in October, the company's executives said that although the number of listings offering free shipping had more than doubled, to just over 60 percent, the conversion rate—the percentage of visitors to the site who actually buy something—had fallen. Popular sellers like Miceli had worked their way to the front page because buyers *liked* them, and now they were harder to find. But as more and more of its vendors get with the new regime, Etsy expects to see its performance rebound.

As for Miceli, her sales have started to tick back up from their mid-2019 crater, but she's still not where she was a year ago. In the meantime, she's picking up shifts at local restaurants and friends' bars, a Plan B that she's worked to keep viable in case the internet unexpectedly evaporates her income. “I'm always so nervous. There are so many highs and lows, and so much stress,” she said. “There are people winning—otherwise they wouldn't be doing it. I just don't know who those people are.” *A*

Amanda Mull is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

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BEFORE ZUCKERBERG, GUTENBERG

Anyone who thinks we've now grasped what the internet has in store for us should revisit what the printing press unleashed.

BY CULLEN MURPHY

Not long ago, I stopped by the Morgan Library, in Manhattan, to pay a visit to the Gutenberg Bible on display within a cube of glass in the Morgan's towering East Room. Gutenberg Bibles are among the rarest of printed books—about 50 copies are scattered around the world. At the time of their production, in Mainz in the 1450s, Gutenberg Bibles were of course the most common printed books—they were among the only ones. If a Gutenberg Bible were to come on the market today, it would sell for as much as \$35 million, according to some estimates. But who knows? Sheikhs and oligarchs might launch a bidding war. The Morgan has three Gutenbergs. The copy

on display was bought by J. P. Morgan in 1911 at Sotheby's, which was acting for the family of a Wiltshire banker, who had bought it from the British bookseller Bernard Quaritch, who had bought it from the family of a Middlesex brewer, who had bought it from a member of the aristocratic Sykes family, who in 1824 had sold off his brother's famed library in order to buy hunting dogs. The Sykes copy can be traced to a Scottish monk, antiquarian, and spy who lived in Germany in the late 18th century, and it is probably the copy that was lodged for centuries in the Augustinian monastery at Rebdorf.

I know all of this because of a remarkable (and hefty) recent study titled *Editio Princeps*—the book that prompted my

visit to the Morgan. The author, Eric White, the curator of rare books at Princeton, has composed meticulous biographies of each of the complete Gutenberg Bibles that have come down to us. Many have led picaresque lives. Harvard's copy was briefly stolen, in 1969, by a troubled young man who smashed its glass encasement, took the book, climbed out a window, and knocked himself unconscious when he fell to the ground; charges were dismissed on grounds of mental illness, and the thief went on to become an adult-film star. White tells the story of Johannes Gutenberg himself—how the goldsmith and maker of religious mementos for the pilgrimage trade combined the idea of metallic movable type (his true innovation, though

it had antecedents) with a wooden press (like the kind used for making wine) to produce a printed page. The practice of copying books by hand did not immediately disappear, but the new technology spread fast. Venice, with its dense cluster of print shops, played the role of Silicon Valley. The printing press would soon upend the social order in ways that no one had anticipated and that few today give much thought to.

THE COMPARISON of the printing industry in Venice to the tech industry in Silicon Valley is not Eric White's. It was made in 2005, by a historian of the printed word named Elizabeth Eisenstein, in the afterword to *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe*, an abridged edition of her monumental *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*. Eisenstein's original two-volume study was published in 1979, before personal computers and the internet began to work their will, but she was well aware of subsequent developments.

Eisenstein, who died in 2016 at the age of 92, was sharp, elegant, funny, and determined. She had picked up tennis late, at age 50; playing in the senior division, she won more than 30 national championships, the last when she was in her 90s. Breaking into academe as a woman in the 1950s had not been easy, but her work on the impact of the printing press, published in her sixth decade, proved to be another senior-division win. Many historians had written about Gutenberg and noted the role the printing press played in fostering the Reformation. But no one had mounted a vigorous investigation of the invention's broader

long-term consequences. Betty was 80 when I met her. Over several dinner conversations, she spoke at length about the printing press—the manifest good that it had done, in terms of spreading and “fixing” knowledge, but also the massive disruption it had caused. *Disruption* was the actual word she used. She didn’t mean it in a self-congratulatory, tech-mogul sort of way.

The printing press took most people by surprise—it wasn’t a technology that everyone had been dreaming about for centuries, like flying

machines—and its ramifications were dramatic. Printing gave rise to a “start-up” culture (again, Eisenstein’s term): Many printing shops failed, but many didn’t. Within a few decades, at least one printing press could be found in every sizable community—not just the Romes and the Londons, but also the Augsburgs and the Erfurts and the Modenas. The cost of entry was low. More books were printed in the five decades after Gutenberg’s invention than had been produced by scribes during the previous 1,000 years.

The printing press decentralized the role of gatekeeper. In a scribal culture, maintaining some measure of control over ideas and their dissemination was straightforward. In a printing-press culture, control was harder. Within their own jurisdictions, rulers tried anyway, and so did the Church. The word *imprimatur* is Latin for “Let it be printed”—it connoted official sanction. But more people had greater opportunities for public expression than ever before. Thwarted in Heidelberg, you could try Geneva or Utrecht.

The sheer number of books that printers produced made suppression problematic. Having your book land on someone’s watch list could even turn it into a best seller: *Banned in Bologna!* And words weren’t the only things that came off the press; mass-produced images, in the form of woodblock prints, shaped opinion even among the illiterate. Printing was referred to as a “divine art,” and the masters of this technology, in aprons rather than hoodies, could sometimes be a little full of themselves.



When people can publish whatever they want, they do. The printing press made individual books more uniform and more numerous, but it also put the idea of universal truth up for grabs. Martin Luther's challenge to Catholic orthodoxy was, of course, powered by the printing press. Previous challenges had burned themselves out, like pathogens in the jungle. The printing press changed all that. Luther posted his famous 95 theses in 1517; within three years, his printed works had sold some 300,000 copies. In Renaissance terms, this was the equivalent of cat videos. Unlike monastic scribes, animated by the one true way, printers were profit-seeking entrepreneurs. They published whatever would sell. Before long, you could find anything in a printed book—conspiracy theories, magic spells, recipes, satire, erotica. You could find support for any point of view. You could just make something up and set it in type, and people would say, *I read it in a book.*

Eisenstein described much of this in her writings. Her larger point is that the world was never the same again. As she explained to me, we no longer register the impact of the printing press because we have no easy way to retrieve the ambient sensation of “before,” just as we can't retrieve, and can barely imagine, what life was like when only scattered licks of flame could pierce the darkness of night. At first glance, printing seems like just a more efficient way of doing what people were doing anyway: making words and images available to others. But it was a revolution—many revolutions, really, most of them unforeseeable. Consider

what it meant to own books personally and read them silently, rather than having to hear words read aloud: No one knew what you were up to in the privacy of your home. Writers and publishers wanted some degree of ownership—hence the new concepts of copyright and intellectual property. More books and rising literacy created an eyeglass industry, which in turn brought advances in lens-making, which ultimately made possible the telescope and spelled the end of biblical

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cosmology. The printing press transformed religion, science, politics; it put information, misinformation, and power in the hands of more people than ever before; it created a celebrity culture as poets and polemicists vied for fame; and it loosened the restraints of authority and hierarchy, setting groups against one another. This shattered the status quo in ways that proved liberating but also lethal: If the printing press deserves some of the credit for democracy and the Enlightenment, it also deserves some of the blame for chaos and slaughter. As Edward Snowden observes in his new book, *Permanent*

Record: “Technology doesn't have a Hippocratic oath.”

DRAWING TECHNOLOGICAL parallels is a dicey enterprise. It requires ample use of *that said*, *to be sure*, and *as it were*. And Eisenstein wasn't harping on parallels. She wrote her books (and spoke with me) before Facebook and Twitter; before Russian hacking, Alex Jones, and Stuxnet. She had an eye on the internet but admitted that, when she first published her book on the printing press, the ascendant technology that drew her attention was the photocopier. She described a Xerox commercial from the late 1970s featuring a weary scribe named Brother Dominic, who is tasked with making 500 copies of an illuminated manuscript. He turns for salvation to a copying machine. “It's a miracle,” his superior says, casting his eyes heavenward, when Dominic returns shortly with perfect duplicates.

That said, drawing parallels is hard to resist. The Rand Corporation published an early paper about the printing press and the internet in 1998, when the public version of what was then called the “information superhighway” was only a few years old, and only about 20 million computers worldwide were linked to it. The study, by James Dewar, took note of several developments that “we are already seeing”—spam, trolls, viruses, and a variety of scams (like those get-rich schemes emanating from Nigeria)—and warned of a “dark side.” Dewar made a crucial distinction: between technologies, such as knives and microwave ovens, whose intended consequences far outweigh the unintended ones, and

technologies, such as cars and air-conditioning, whose unintended consequences dwarf the intended ones. The study's main message was that the internet, which originated as a form of military communication, was technology of the second kind. Its consequences would be “dominated” by the unforeseeable and the uncontrollable.

By a factor of about a zillion, more has been written about what the internet may have in store for us than about the wide-ranging effects of the printing press. We're all aware of the digital utopians and dystopians, the prophets and fantasists. Experts issue warnings. Regulators advance reforms. Right now we're in a doom phase: *The internet threatens everything from jobs to privacy to free will.* We should indeed be thinking about these things. A swelling legion of academic centers and private think tanks does nothing but. Novels such as Tim Maughan's *Infinite Detail* and Robert Harris's *The Second Sleep* stir the imagination. But as the example of Gutenberg's invention suggests, it's easy to forget how unforeseeable (and never-ending) the “unforeseeable” really is. When it comes to those who make predictions about the internet, the judgment of history is unlikely to be: They got it right.

Once, after listening to Betty Eisenstein lay out the wide array of unintended consequences of the printing press, whether mind-altering in a positive or catastrophic way, I made a remark along the lines of “And it took a mere 500 years for things to settle down.” She said, “Have they?” *A*

Cullen Murphy is The Atlantic's editor at large.

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Bypassed

*Photograph by
Joshua Dudley Greer*

ON A WARM, sunny December day in 2015, Joshua Dudley Greer drove into New Orleans and set up his large-format camera beneath Pontchartrain Expressway. The scene Greer encountered was both somber and festive, an assertion of personal space in the bowels of an industrial structure marked NO LOITERING. The tinsel, the carefully placed ornaments, the gold star atop a tree too tall to fit inside its owner's small tent—these items were hardly practical, let alone portable. They suggested, to Greer, “a public gesture,” an effort, perhaps, to stake out a sense of normalcy.

Greer was in New Orleans as part of a series of road trips he'd begun taking in 2011, during which he photographed people and places on and around the American network of superhighways. “Rather than moving quickly through these spaces,” Greer has written, he “made the decision to slowly and deliberately dwell within them, looking for unforeseen moments of humor, pathos and humanity.”

The New Orleans photo contains layers of humanity. While the viewer's eye is initially drawn to the individuality of the figure in the foreground, closer inspection reveals others in the distance—a reminder of the scale of homelessness, which is ultimately a systemic, nationwide problem.

— Amy Weiss-Meyer


*U.S. Highway 90, New Orleans,
Louisiana, 2015*





20,000 FEET UNDER THE SEA

BY WIL S. HYLTON

The background of the page is a dark, textured blue-to-black gradient, suggesting the depths of the ocean. In the center-left area, there is a small, faint, glowing white object with several thin, vertical lines extending downwards from it, resembling a jellyfish or a small bioluminescent organism.

The bottom of the ocean is as alien as Mars: a dark, mysterious place with purple octopuses, giant tube worms, and who knows what else. Mining companies are preparing to extract minerals that could wean the Earth from fossil fuels, but scientists have never explored many of the habitats they might destroy. The race between miners and scientists may determine the fate of the oceans, and the planet.

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Unless you are given to chronic anxiety or suffer from nihilistic despair, you probably haven't spent much time contemplating the bottom of the ocean. Many people imagine the seabed to be a vast expanse of sand, but it's a jagged and dynamic landscape with as much variation as any place onshore. Mountains surge from underwater plains, canyons slice miles deep, hot springs billow through fissures in rock, and streams of heavy brine ooze down hillsides, pooling into undersea lakes.

These peaks and valleys are laced with most of the same minerals found on land. Scientists have documented their deposits since at least 1868, when a dredging ship pulled a chunk of iron ore from the seabed north of Russia. Five years later, another ship found similar nuggets at the bottom of the Atlantic, and two years after that, it discovered a field of the same objects in the Pacific. For more than a century, oceanographers continued to identify new minerals on the seafloor—copper, nickel, silver, platinum, gold, and even gemstones—while mining companies searched for a practical way to dig them up.

Today, many of the largest mineral corporations in the world have launched underwater mining programs. On the west coast of Africa, the De Beers Group is using a fleet of specialized ships to drag machinery across the seabed in search of diamonds. In 2018, those ships extracted 1.4 million carats from the coastal waters of Namibia; in 2019, De Beers commissioned a new ship that will scrape the bottom twice as quickly as any other vessel. Another company, Nautilus Minerals, is working in the territorial waters of Papua New Guinea to shatter a field of underwater hot springs lined with precious metals, while Japan and South Korea have embarked on national projects to exploit their own offshore deposits. But the biggest prize for mining companies will be access to international waters, which cover more than half of the global seafloor and contain more valuable minerals than all the continents combined.

Regulations for ocean mining have never been formally established. The United Nations has given that task to an obscure organization known as the International Seabed Authority, which is housed in a pair of drab gray office buildings at the edge of Kingston Harbour, in Jamaica. Unlike most UN bodies, the ISA receives little oversight. It is classified as "autonomous" and falls under the direction of its own secretary general, who convenes his own general assembly once a year, at the ISA headquarters. For about a week, delegates from 168 member states pour into Kingston from around the world, gathering at a broad semicircle of desks in the auditorium of the Jamaica Conference Centre. Their assignment is not to prevent mining on the seafloor but to

mitigate its damage—selecting locations where extraction will be permitted, issuing licenses to mining companies, and drafting the technical and environmental standards of an underwater Mining Code.

Writing the code has been difficult. ISA members have struggled to agree on a regulatory framework. While they debate the minutiae of waste disposal and ecological preservation, the ISA has granted "exploratory" permits around the world. Some 30 mineral contractors already hold licenses to work in sweeping regions of the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans. One site, about 2,300 miles east of Florida, contains the largest system of underwater hot springs ever discovered, a ghostly landscape of towering white spires that scientists call the "Lost City." Another extends across 4,500 miles of the Pacific, or roughly a fifth of the circumference of the planet. The companies with permits to explore these regions have raised breathtaking sums of venture capital. They have designed and built experimental vehicles, lowered them to the bottom, and begun testing methods of dredging and extraction while they wait for the ISA to complete the Mining Code and open the floodgates to commercial extraction.

At full capacity, these companies expect to dredge thousands of square miles a year. Their collection vehicles will creep across the bottom in systematic rows, scraping through the top five inches of the ocean floor. Ships above will draw thousands of pounds of sediment through a hose to the surface, remove the metallic objects, known as polymetallic nodules, and then flush the rest back into the water. Some of that slurry will contain toxins such as mercury and lead, which could poison the surrounding ocean for hundreds of miles. The rest will drift in the current until it settles in nearby ecosystems. An early study by the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences predicted that each mining ship will release about 2 million cubic feet of discharge every day, enough to fill a freight train that is 16 miles long. The authors called this "a conservative estimate," since other projections had been three times as high. By any measure, they concluded, "a very large area will be blanketed by sediment to such an extent that many animals will not be able to cope with the impact and whole communities will be severely affected by the loss of individuals and species."

At the ISA meeting in 2019, delegates gathered to review a draft of the code. Officials hoped the document would be ratified for implementation in 2020. I flew down to observe the proceedings on a balmy morning and found the conference center teeming with delegates. A staff member ushered me through a maze of corridors to meet the secretary general, Michael Lodge, a lean British man in his 50s with cropped hair and a genial smile. He waved me toward a pair of armchairs beside a bank of windows overlooking the harbor, and we sat down to discuss the Mining Code, what it will permit and prohibit, and why the United Nations is preparing to mobilize the largest mining operation in the history of the world.

UNTIL RECENTLY, marine biologists paid little attention to the deep sea. They believed its craggy knolls and bluffs were essentially barren. The traditional model of life on Earth relies on photosynthesis: plants on land and in shallow water harness

sunlight to grow biomass, which is devoured by creatures small and large, up the food chain to Sunday dinner. By this account, every animal on the planet would depend on plants to capture solar energy. Since plants disappear a few hundred feet below sea level, and everything goes dark a little farther down, there was no reason to expect a thriving ecosystem in the deep. Maybe a light snow of organic debris would trickle from the surface, but it would be enough to sustain only a few wayward aquatic drifters.

That theory capsized in 1977, when a pair of oceanographers began poking around the Pacific in a submersible vehicle. While exploring a range of underwater mountains near the Galápagos Islands, they spotted a hydrothermal vent about 8,000 feet deep. No one had ever seen an underwater hot spring before, though geologists suspected they might exist. As the oceanographers drew close to the vent, they made an even more startling discovery: A large congregation of animals was camped around the vent opening. These were not the feeble scavengers that one expected so far down. They were giant clams, purple octopuses, white crabs, and 10-foot tube worms, whose food chain began not with plants but with organic chemicals floating in the warm vent water.

For biologists, this was more than curious. It shook the foundation of their field. If a complex ecosystem could emerge in a landscape devoid of plants, evolution must be more than a heliological affair. Life could appear in perfect darkness, in blistering heat and a broth of noxious compounds—an environment that would extinguish every known creature on Earth. “That was the discovery event,” an evolutionary biologist named Timothy Shank told me. “It changed our view about the boundaries of life. Now we know that the methane lakes on one of Jupiter’s moons are probably laden with species, and there is no doubt life on other planetary bodies.”

Shank was 12 years old that winter, a bookish kid in North Carolina. The early romance of the space age was already beginning to fade, but the discovery of life near hydrothermal vents would inspire a blossoming of oceanography that captured his imagination. As he completed a degree in marine biology, then a doctorate in ecology and evolution, he consumed reports from scientists around the world who found new vents brimming with unknown species. They appeared far below the surface—the deepest known vent is about three miles down—while another geologic feature,

known as a “cold seep,” gives rise to life in chemical pools even deeper on the seafloor. No one knew how far down the vents and seeps might be found, but Shank decided to focus his research on the deepest waters of the Earth.

Scientists divide the ocean into five layers of depth. Closest to the surface is the “sunlight zone,” where plants thrive; then comes the “twilight zone,” where darkness falls; next is the “midnight zone,” where some creatures generate their own light; and then there’s a frozen flatland known simply as “the abyss.” Oceanographers have visited these layers in submersible vehicles for half a century, but the final layer is difficult to reach. It is known as the “hadal zone,” in reference to Hades, the ancient Greek god of the underworld, and it includes any water that is at least

6,000 meters below the surface—or, in a more Vernian formulation, that is 20,000 feet under the sea. Because the hadal zone is so deep, it is usually associated with ocean trenches, but several deepwater plains have sections that cross into hadal depth.

Deepwater plains are also home to the polymetallic nodules that explorers first discovered a century and a half ago. Mineral companies believe that nodules will be easier to mine than other seabed deposits. To remove the metal from a hydrothermal vent or an underwater mountain, they will have to shatter rock in a manner similar to land-based extraction. Nodules are isolated chunks of rocks on the seabed that typically range from the size of a golf ball to that of a grapefruit, so they can be lifted from the sediment with relative ease. Nodules also contain a distinct combination of minerals. While vents and ridges are flecked with precious metal, such as silver and gold, the primary metals in nodules are copper, manganese, nickel, and cobalt—crucial materials in modern batteries. As iPhones

and laptops and electric vehicles spike demand for those metals, many people believe that nodules are the best way to migrate from fossil fuels to battery power.

The ISA has issued more mining licenses for nodules than for any other seabed deposit. Most of these licenses authorize contractors to exploit a single deepwater plain. Known as the Clarion-Clipperton Zone, or CCZ, it extends across 1.7 million square miles between Hawaii and Mexico—wider than the continental United States. When the Mining Code is approved, more than a dozen companies will accelerate their explorations in the CCZ

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to industrial-scale extraction. Their ships and robots will use vacuum hoses to suck nodules and sediment from the seafloor, extracting the metal and dumping the rest into the water. How many ecosystems will be covered by that sediment is impossible to predict. Ocean currents fluctuate regularly in speed and direction, so identical plumes of slurry will travel different distances, in different directions, on different days. The impact of a sediment plume also depends on how it is released. Slurry that is dumped near the surface will drift farther than slurry pumped back to the bottom. The circulating draft of the Mining Code does not specify a depth of discharge. The ISA has adopted an estimate that sediment dumped near the surface will travel no more than 62 miles from the point of release, but many experts believe the slurry could travel farther. A recent survey of academic research compiled by Greenpeace concluded that mining waste “could travel hundreds or even thousands of kilometers.”

Like many deepwater plains, the CCZ has sections that lie at hadal depth. Its eastern boundary is marked by a hadal trench. No one knows whether mining sediment will drift into the hadal zone. As the director of a hadal-research program at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, in Massachusetts, Timothy Shank has been studying the deep sea for almost 30 years. In 2014, he led an international mission to complete the first systematic study of the hadal ecosystem—but even Shank has no idea how mining could affect the hadal zone, because he still has no idea what it contains. If you want a sense of how little we know about the deep ocean, how difficult it is to study, and what’s at stake when industry leaps before science, Shank’s research is a good place to start.

I FIRST MET SHANK about seven years ago, when he was organizing the international mission to survey the hadal zone. He had put together a three-year plan to visit every ocean trench: sending a robotic vehicle to explore their features, record every contour of topography, and collect specimens from each. The idea was either dazzling or delusional; I wasn’t sure which. Scientists have enough trouble measuring the seabed in shallower waters. They have used ropes and chains and acoustic instruments to record depth for more than a century, yet 85 percent of the global seabed remains unmapped—and the hadal is far more difficult to map than other regions, since it’s nearly impossible to see.

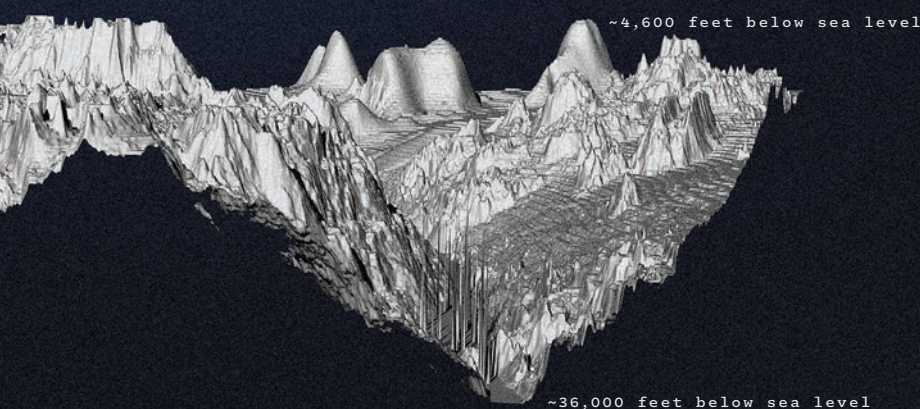


T H E M A R I A

If it strikes you as peculiar that modern vehicles cannot penetrate the deepest ocean, take a moment to imagine what it means to navigate six or seven miles below the surface. Every 33 feet of depth exerts as much pressure as the atmosphere of the Earth, so when you are just 66 feet down, you are under three times as much pressure as a person on land, and when you are 300 feet down, you’re subjected to 10 atmospheres of pressure. Tube worms living beside hydrothermal vents near the Galápagos are compressed by about 250 atmospheres, and mining vehicles in the CCZ have to endure twice as much—but they are still just half as far down as the deepest trenches.

Building a vehicle to function at 36,000 feet, under 2 million pounds of pressure per square foot, is a task of interstellar-type engineering. It’s a good deal more rigorous than, say, bolting together a rover to skitter across Mars. Picture the schematic of an iPhone case that can be smashed with a sledgehammer more or less constantly, from every angle at once, without a trace of damage, and you’re in the ballpark—or just consider the fact

N A T R E N C H



A 3-D model of the Mariana Trench, the deepest place on Earth. Most of what we know about its topography has been gathered by sonar. Only three crewed expeditions have reached the bottom.

that more people have walked on the moon than have reached the bottom of the Mariana Trench, the deepest place on Earth.

The first two people descended in 1960, using a contraption owned by the U.S. Navy. It seized and shuddered on the descent. Its window cracked as the pressure mounted, and it landed with so much force that it kicked up a cloud of silt that obscured the view for the entire 20 minutes the pair remained on the bottom. Half a century passed before the film director James Cameron repeated their journey, in 2012. Unlike the swaggering billionaire Richard Branson, who was planning to dive the Mariana in a cartoonish vehicle shaped like a fighter jet, Cameron is well versed in ocean science and engineering. He was closely involved in the design of his submarine, and sacrificed stylistic flourishes for genuine innovations, including a new type of foam that maintains buoyancy at

full ocean depth. Even so, his vessel lurched and bucked on the way down. He finally managed to land, and spent a couple of hours collecting sediment samples before he noticed that hydraulic fluid was leaking onto the window. The vehicle's mechanical arm began to fail, and all of the thrusters on its right side went out—so he returned to the surface early, canceled his plan for additional dives, and donated the broken sub to Woods Hole.

The most recent descent of the Mariana Trench was completed last spring by a private-equity investor named Victor Vescovo, who spent \$48 million on a submarine that was even more sophisticated than Cameron's. Vescovo was on a personal quest to reach the bottom of the five deepest trenches in the world, a project he called "Five Deeps." He was able to complete the project, making multiple dives of the Mariana—but if his achievement represents a leap forward in hadal exploration, it also serves as a reminder of how impenetrable the trenches remain: a region that can be visited only by the most committed multimillionaire, Hollywood celebrity, or special military program, and only in isolated dives to specific locations that reveal little about the rest of the hadal environment. That environment is composed of 33 trenches and 13 shallower formations called troughs. Its total geographic area is about two-thirds the size of Australia. It is the least examined ecosystem of its size on Earth.

Without a vehicle to explore the hadal zone, scientists have been forced to use primitive methods. The most common technique has scarcely changed in more than a century: Expedition ships chug

across hundreds of miles to reach a precise location, then lower a trap, wait a few hours, and reel it up to see what's inside. The limitations of this approach are self-evident, if not comic. It's like dangling a birdcage out the door of an airplane crossing Africa at 36,000 feet, and then trying to divine, from the mangled bodies of insects, what sort of animals roam the savanna.

All of which is to say that Shank's plan to explore every trench in the world was somewhere between audacious and absurd, but he had assembled a team of the world's leading experts, secured ship time for extensive missions, and spent 10 years supervising the design of the most advanced robotic vehicle ever developed for deepwater navigation. Called Nereus, after a mythological sea god, it could dive alone—charting a course amid rocky cliffs, measuring their contours with a doppler scanner, recording video

with high-definition cameras, and collecting samples—or it could be linked to the deck of a ship with fiber-optic cable, allowing Shank to monitor its movement on a computer in the ship's control room, boosting the thrusters to steer this way and that, piercing the darkness with its headlamps, and maneuvering a mechanical claw to gather samples in the deep.

I reached out to Shank in 2013, a few months before the expedition began. I wanted to write about the project, and he agreed to let me join him on a later leg. When his ship departed, in the spring of 2014, I followed online as it pursued a course to the Kermadec Trench, in the Pacific, and Shank began sending Nereus on a series of dives. On the first, it descended to 6,000 meters, a modest target on the boundary of the hadal zone. On the second, Shank pushed it to 7,000 meters; on the third to 8,000; and on the fourth to 9,000. He knew that diving to 10,000 meters would be a crucial threshold. It is the last full kilometer of depth on Earth: No trench is believed to be deeper than 11,000 meters. To commemorate this final increment and the successful beginning of his project, he attached a pair of silver bracelets to the frame of Nereus, planning to give them to his daughters when he returned home. Then he dropped the robot in the water and retreated to the control room to monitor its movements.

On-screen, blue water gave way to darkness as Nereus descended, its headlamps illuminating specks of debris suspended in the water. It was 10 meters shy of the 10,000-meter mark when suddenly the screen went dark. There was an audible gasp in the control room, but no one panicked. Losing the video feed on a dive was relatively common. Maybe the fiber-optic tether had snapped, or the software had hit a glitch. Whatever it was, Nereus had been programmed to respond with emergency measures. It could back out of a jam, shed expendable weight, guide itself to the surface, and send a homing beacon to help Shank's team retrieve it.

As the minutes ticked by, Shank waited for those measures to activate, but none did. "There's no sound, no implosion, no chime," he told me afterward. "Just ... black." He paced the deck through the night, staring across the Stygian void for signs of Nereus. The following day he finally saw debris surface, and as he watched it rise, he felt his project sinking. Ten years of planning, a \$14 million robot, and an international team of experts—it had all collapsed under the crushing pressure of hadal depths.

"I'm not over it yet," he told me two years later. We were standing on the deck of another ship, 100 miles off the coast of Massachusetts, where Shank was preparing to launch a new robot. The vehicle was no replacement for Nereus. It was a rectilinear hunk of metal and plastic, about five feet high, three feet wide, and nine feet long. Red on top, with a silvery bottom and three fans mounted at the rear, it could have been mistaken for a child's backyard spaceship. Shank had no illusion that it was capable of hadal exploration. Since the loss of Nereus, there was no vehicle on Earth that could navigate the deepest trenches—Cameron's was no longer in service, Branson's didn't work, and Vescovo's hadn't yet been built.

Shank's new robot did have a few impressive features. Its navigational system was even more advanced than the one in Nereus, and he hoped it would be able to maneuver in a trenchlike environment with even greater precision—but its body was not designed to withstand hadal pressure. In fact, it had never descended more than a few dozen feet below the surface, and Shank knew that it would take years to build something that could survive at the bottom of a trench. What had seemed, just two years earlier, like the beginning of a new era in hadal science was developing a quixotic aspect, and, at 50, Shank could not help wondering if it was madness to spend another decade of his life on a dream that seemed to be drifting further from his reach. But he was driven by a lifelong intuition that he still couldn't shake. Shank believes that access to the trenches will reveal one of the greatest discoveries in history: a secret ecosystem bursting with creatures that have been cloistered for eternity in the deep.

"I would be shocked if there aren't vents and seeps in the trenches," he told me as we bobbed on the water that day in 2016. "They'll be there, and they will be teeming with life. I think we'll be looking at hundreds or thousands of species we haven't seen before, and some of them are going to be huge." He pictured the hadal as an alien world that followed its own evolutionary course, the unimaginable pressure creating a menagerie of inconceivable beasts. "My time is running out to find them," he said. "Maybe my legacy will be to push things forward so that somebody else can. We have a third of our ocean that we still can't explore. It's embarrassing. It's pathetic."

WHILE SCIENTISTS STRUGGLE to reach the deep ocean, human impact has already gotten there. Most of us are familiar with the menu of damages to coastal water: overfishing, oil spills, and pollution, to name a few. What can be lost in the discussion of these issues is how they reverberate far beneath.

Take fishing. The relentless pursuit of cod in the early 20th century decimated its population from Newfoundland to New England, sending hungry shoppers in search of other options. As shallow-water fish such as haddock, grouper, and sturgeon joined the cod's decline, commercial fleets around the world pushed into deeper water. Until the 1970s, the slimehead fish lived in relative obscurity, patrolling the slopes of underwater mountains in water up to 6,000 feet deep. Then a consortium of fishermen pushed the Food and Drug Administration to change its name, and the craze for "orange roughy" began—only to fade again in the early 2000s, when the fish was on a path toward extinction itself.

Environmental damage from oil production is also migrating into deeper water. Disturbing photographs of oil-drenched beaches have captured public attention since at least 1989, when the Exxon Valdez tanker crashed into a reef and leaked 11 million gallons into an Alaskan sound. It would remain the largest spill in U.S. water until 2010, when the Deepwater Horizon explosion spewed 210 million gallons into the Gulf of Mexico. But a recent study revealed that the release of chemicals to disperse the spill was twice as toxic as the oil to animals living 3,000 feet below the surface.

Maybe the greatest alarm in recent years has followed the discovery of plastic floating in the ocean. Scientists estimate that 17 billion pounds of polymer are flushed into the ocean each year, and substantially more of it collects on the bottom than on the surface. Just as a bottle that falls from a picnic table will roll downhill to a gulch, trash on the seafloor gradually makes its way toward deepwater plains and hadal trenches. After his expedition to the trenches, Victor Vescovo returned with the news that garbage had beaten him there. He found a plastic bag at the bottom of one trench, a beverage can in another, and when he reached the deepest point in the Mariana, he watched an object with a large *S* on the side float past his window. Trash of all sorts is collecting in the hadal—Spam tins, Budweiser cans, rubber gloves, even a mannequin head.

Scientists are just beginning to understand the impact of trash on aquatic life. Fish and seabirds that mistake grocery bags for prey will glut their stomachs with debris that their digestive system can't expel. When a young whale drifted ashore and died in the Philippines in 2019, an autopsy revealed that its belly was packed with 88 pounds of plastic bags, nylon rope, and netting. Two weeks later, another whale beached in Sardinia, its stomach crammed with 48 pounds of plastic dishes and tubing. Certain types of coral like to eat plastic more than food. They will gorge themselves like a kid on Twinkies instead of eating what they need to survive. Microbes that flourish on plastic have ballooned in number, replacing other species as their population explodes in a polymer ocean.

If it seems trivial to worry about the population statistics of bacteria in the ocean, you may be interested to know that ocean microbes are essential to human and planetary health. About a third of the carbon dioxide generated on land is absorbed by underwater organisms, including one species that was just discovered in the CCZ in 2018. The researchers who found that bacterium have no idea how it removes carbon from the environment, but their findings show that it may account for up to 10 percent of the volume that is sequestered by oceans every year.

Many of the things we do know about ocean microbes, we know thanks to Craig Venter, the genetic scientist most famous for starting a small company in the 1990s to compete with the Human Genome Project. The two-year race between his company and the international collaboration generated endless headlines and culminated in a joint announcement at the White House to

declare a tie. But Venter's interest wasn't limited to human DNA. He wanted to learn the language of genetics in order to create synthetic microbes with practical features. After his work on the human genome, he spent two years sailing around the world, lowering bottles into the ocean to collect bacteria and viruses from the water. By the time he returned, he had discovered hundreds of thousands of new species, and his lab in Maryland proceeded to sequence their DNA—identifying more than 60 million unique genes, which is about 2,500 times the number in humans. Then he and his team began to scour those genes for properties they could use to make custom bugs.

Venter now lives in a hypermodern house on a bluff in Southern California. Chatting one evening on the sofa beside the door

to his walk-in humidor and wine cellar, he described how saltwater microbes could help solve the most urgent problems of modern life. One of the bacteria he pulled from the ocean consumes carbon and excretes methane. Venter would like to integrate its genes into organisms designed to live in smokestacks and recycle emissions. "They could scrub the plant's CO₂ and convert it to methane that can be burned as fuel in the same plant," he said.

Venter was also studying bacteria that could be useful in medicine. Microbes produce a variety of antibiotic compounds, which they deploy as weapons against their rivals. Many of those compounds can also be used to kill the pathogens that infect humans. Nearly all of the antibiotic drugs on the market were initially derived from microorganisms, but they are losing efficacy as pathogens evolve to resist them. "We have new drugs in development," Matt McCarthy, an infectious-disease specialist at

Weill Cornell Medical College, told me, "but most of them are slight variations on the ones we already had. The problem with that is, they're easy for bacteria to resist, because they're similar to something bacteria have developed resistance to in the past. What we need is an arsenal of new compounds."

Venter pointed out that ocean microbes produce radically different compounds from those on land. "There are more than a million microbes per milliliter of seawater," he said, "so the chance of finding new antibiotics in the marine environment is high." McCarthy agreed. "The next great drug may be hidden somewhere deep in the water," he said. "We need to get to the deep-sea organisms, because they're making compounds that we've never seen before. We may find drugs that could be used to treat gout, or rheumatoid arthritis, or all kinds of other conditions."

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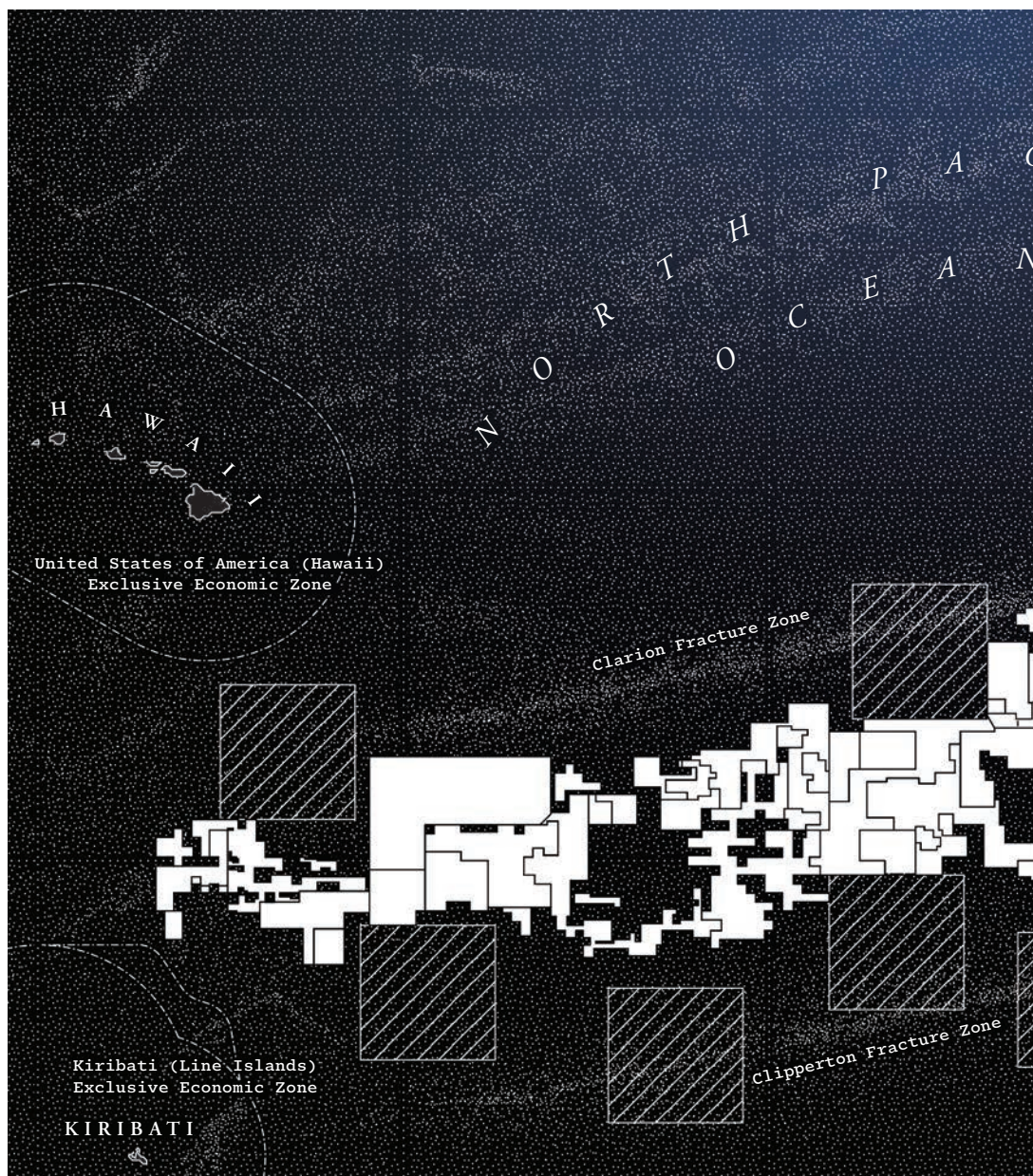
Marine biologists have never conducted a comprehensive survey of microbes in the hadal trenches. The conventional tools of water sampling cannot function at extreme depth, and engineers are just beginning to develop tools that can. Microbial studies of the deepwater plains are slightly further along—and scientists have recently discovered that the CCZ is unusually flush with life. “It’s one of the most biodiverse areas that we’ve ever sampled on the abyssal plains,” a University of Hawaii oceanographer named Jeff Drazen told me. Most of those microbes, he said, live on the very same nodules that miners are planning to extract. “When you lift them off the seafloor, you’re removing a habitat that took 10 million years to grow.” Whether or not those microbes can be found in other parts of the ocean is unknown. “A lot of the less mobile organisms,” Drazen said, “may not be anywhere else.”

Drazen is an academic ecologist; Venter is not. Venter has been accused of trying to privatize the human genome, and many of his critics believe his effort to create new organisms is akin to playing God. He clearly doesn’t have an aversion to profit-driven science, and he’s not afraid to mess with nature—yet when I asked him about the prospect of mining in deep water, he flared with alarm. “We should be very careful about mining in the ocean,” he said. “These companies should be doing rigorous microbial surveys before they do anything else. We only know a fraction of the microbes down there, and it’s a terrible idea to screw with them before we know what they are and what they do.”

MINING EXECUTIVES insist that their work in the ocean is misunderstood. Some adopt a swaggering bravado and portray the industry as a romantic frontier adventure. As the manager of exploration at Nautilus Minerals, John Parianos, told me recently, “This is about every man and his dog filled with the excitement of the moon landing. It’s like Scott going to the South Pole, or the British expeditions who got entombed by ice.”

Nautilus occupies a curious place in the mining industry. It is one of the oldest companies at work on the seafloor, but also the most precarious. Although it has a permit from the government of Papua New Guinea to extract metal from offshore vents, many people on the nearby island of New Ireland oppose the project, which will destroy part of their marine habitat. Local and international activists have whipped up negative publicity, driving investors away and sending the company into financial ruin. Nautilus stock once traded for \$4.45. It is now less than a penny per share.

Parianos acknowledged that Nautilus was in crisis, but he dismissed the criticism as naive. Seabed minerals are no different from any other natural resource, he said, and the use of natural resources is fundamental to human progress. “Look around you: Everything that’s not grown is mined,” he told me. “That’s why they called it the Stone Age—because it’s when they started



mining! And mining is what made our lives better than what they had before the Stone Age.” Parianos emphasized that the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, which created the International Seabed Authority, promised “to ensure effective protection for the marine environment” from the effects of mining. “It’s not like the Law of the Sea says: Go out and ravage the marine environment,” he said. “But it also doesn’t say that you can only explore the ocean for science, and not to make money.”

The CEO of a company called DeepGreen spoke in loftier terms. DeepGreen is both a product of Nautilus Minerals and a reaction to it. The company was founded in 2011 by David

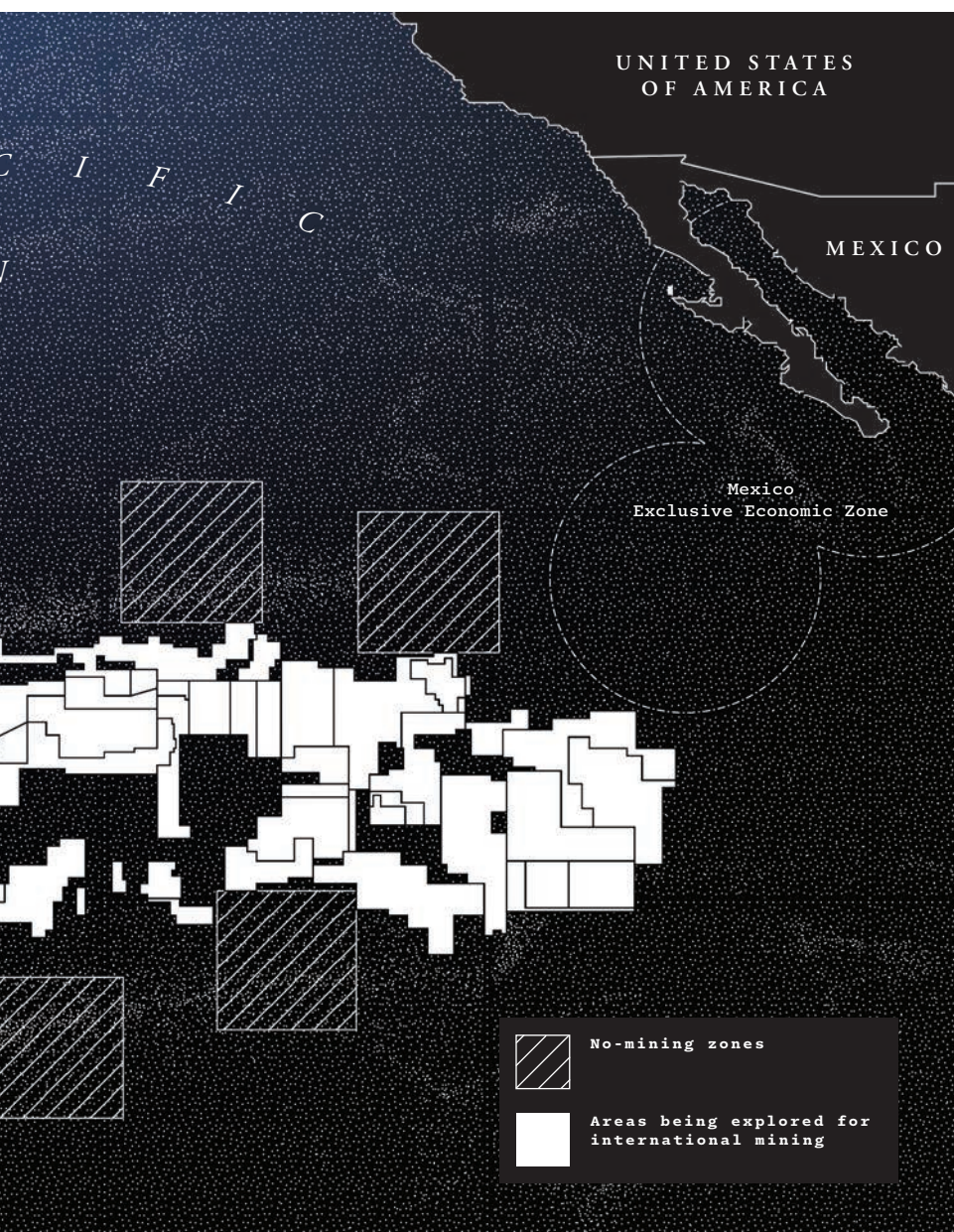
Heydon, who had founded Nautilus a decade earlier, and its leadership is full of former Nautilus executives and investors. As a group, they have sought to position DeepGreen as a company whose primary interest in mining the ocean is saving the planet. They have produced a series of lavish brochures to explain the need for a new source of battery metals, and Gerard Barron, the CEO, speaks with animated fervor about the virtues of nodule extraction.

His case for seabed mining is straightforward. Barron believes that the world will not survive if we continue burning fossil fuels, and the transition to other forms of power will require a

massive increase in battery production. He points to electric cars: the batteries for a single vehicle require 187 pounds of copper, 123 pounds of nickel, and 15 pounds each of manganese and cobalt. On a planet with 1 billion cars, the conversion to electric vehicles would require several times more metal than all existing land-based supplies—and harvesting that metal from existing sources already takes a human toll. Most of the world’s cobalt, for example, is mined in the southeastern provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo, where tens of thousands of young children work in labor camps, inhaling clouds of toxic dust during shifts up to 24 hours long. Terrestrial mines for nickel and copper have their own litany of environmental harms. Because the ISA is required to allocate some of the profits from seabed mining to developing countries, the industry will provide nations that rely on conventional mining with revenue that doesn’t inflict damage on their landscapes and people.

Whether DeepGreen represents a shift in the values of mining companies or merely a shift in marketing rhetoric is a valid question—but the company has done things that are difficult to dismiss. It has developed technology that returns sediment discharge to the seafloor with minimal disruption, and Barron is a regular presence at ISA meetings, where he advocates for regulations to mandate low-impact discharge. DeepGreen has also limited its operations to nodule mining, and Barron openly criticizes the effort by his friends at Nautilus to demolish a vent that is still partially active. “The guys at Nautilus, they’re doing their thing, but I don’t think it’s the right thing for the planet,” he told me. “We need to be doing things that have a low impact environmentally.”

The Clarion-Clipperton Zone is a deepwater plain wider than the continental United States. When the Mining Code is approved, more than a dozen contractors could begin commercial extraction there.



BY THE TIME I sat down with Michael Lodge, the secretary general of the ISA, I had spent a lot of time thinking about the argument that executives like Barron are making. It seemed to me that seabed mining presents an epistemological problem. The harms of burning fossil fuels and the impact of land-based mining are beyond dispute, but the cost of plundering the ocean is impossible to know. What creatures are yet to be found on the seafloor? How many indispensable cures? Is there any way to calculate the value of a landscape we know virtually nothing about? The world is full of uncertain choices, of course, but the contrast between options is rarely so stark: the crisis of climate change and immiserated labor on the one hand, immeasurable risk and potential on the other.

I thought of the hadal zone. It may never be harmed by mining. Sediment from dredging on the abyssal plains could settle long before it reaches the edge of a trench—but the total obscurity of the hadal should remind us of how little we know. It extends from 20,000 feet below sea level to roughly 36,000 feet, leaving nearly half of the ocean's depths beyond our reach. When I visited Timothy Shank at Woods Hole a few months ago, he showed me a prototype of his latest robot. He and his lead engineer, Casey Machado, had built it with foam donated by James Cameron and with support from NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, whose engineers are hoping to send a vehicle to explore the aqueous moon of Jupiter. It was a tiny machine, known as Orpheus, that could steer through trenches, recording topography and taking samples, but little else. He would have no way to direct its movements or monitor its progress via a video feed. It occurred to me that if Shank had given up the dream of true exploration in the trenches, decades could pass before we know what the hadal zone contains.

Mining companies may promise to extract seabed metal with minimal damage to the surrounding environment, but to believe this requires faith. It collides with the force of human history, the law of unintended consequences, and the inevitability of mistakes. I wanted to understand from Michael Lodge how a UN agency had made the choice to accept that risk.

"Why is it necessary to mine the ocean?" I asked him.

He paused for a moment, furrowing his brow. "I don't know why you use the word *necessary*," he said. "Why is it 'necessary' to mine anywhere? You mine where you find metal."

I reminded him that centuries of mining on land have exacted a devastating price: tropical islands denuded, mountaintops sheared off, groundwater contaminated, and species eradicated. Given the devastation of land-based mining, I asked, shouldn't we hesitate to mine the sea?

"I don't believe people should worry that much," he said with a shrug. "There's certainly an impact in the area that's mined, because you are creating an environmental disturbance, but we can find ways to manage that." I pointed out that the impact from sediment could travel far beyond the mining zone, and he responded, "Sure, that's the other major environmental concern. There is a sediment plume, and we need to manage it. We need to understand how the plume operates, and there are experiments being done right now that will help us." As he spoke, I realized that for Lodge, none of these questions warranted reflection—or anyway, he didn't see reflection as part of his job. He was there to facilitate mining, not to question the wisdom of doing so.

We chatted for another 20 minutes, then I thanked him for his time and wandered back to the assembly room, where

delegates were delivering canned speeches about marine conservation and the promise of battery technology. There was still some debate about certain details of the Mining Code—technical requirements, oversight procedures, the profit-sharing model—so the vote to ratify it would have to wait another year. I noticed a group of scientists watching from the back. They were members of the Deep-Ocean Stewardship Initiative, which formed in 2013 to confront threats to the deepwater environment. One was Jeff Drazen. He'd flown in from Hawaii and looked tired. I sent him a text, and we stepped outside.

A few tables and chairs were scattered in the courtyard, and we sat down to talk. I asked how he felt about the delay of the Mining

Code—delegates are planning to review it again this summer, and large-scale mining could begin after that.

Drazen rolled his eyes and sighed. "There's a Belgian team in the CCZ doing a component test right now," he said. "They're going to drive a vehicle around on the seafloor and spew a bunch of mud up. So these things are already happening. We're about to make one of the biggest transformations that humans have ever made to the surface of the planet. We're going to strip-mine a massive habitat, and once it's gone, it isn't coming back." *A*

Wil S. Hylton is a contributing writer at The New York Times Magazine. His most recent book is Vanished: The Sixty-Year Search for the Missing Men of World War II. Financial support for this article has been provided by the 11th Hour Project of the Schmidt Family Foundation.

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Retreat,

Feeling out of step with the mores of contemporary American life, members of a conservative-Catholic group have built a thriving community in rural Kansas, one centered on faith and family. Could their flight from mainstream society be a harbinger for the nation?

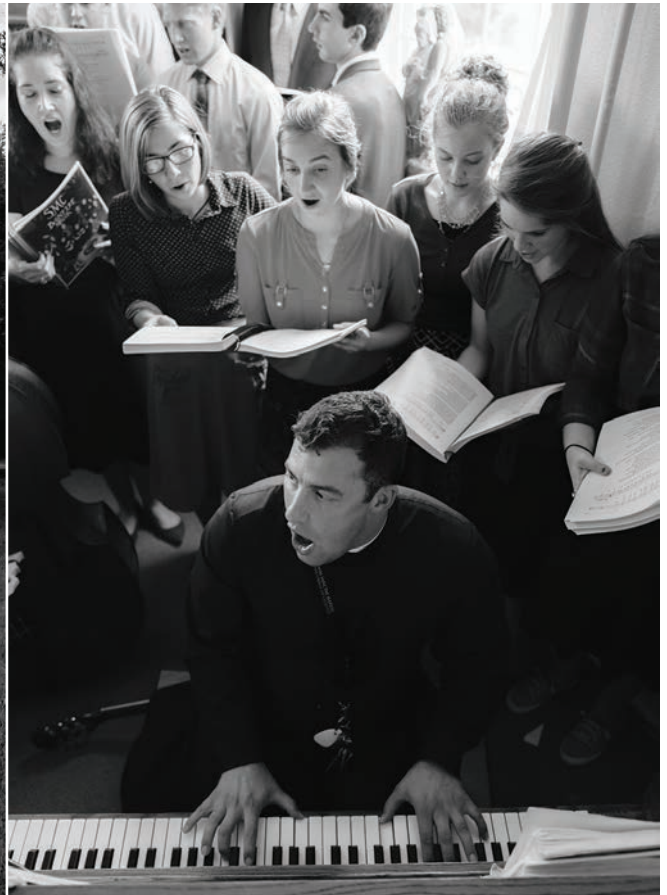
By Emma Green



Christian

Soldiers





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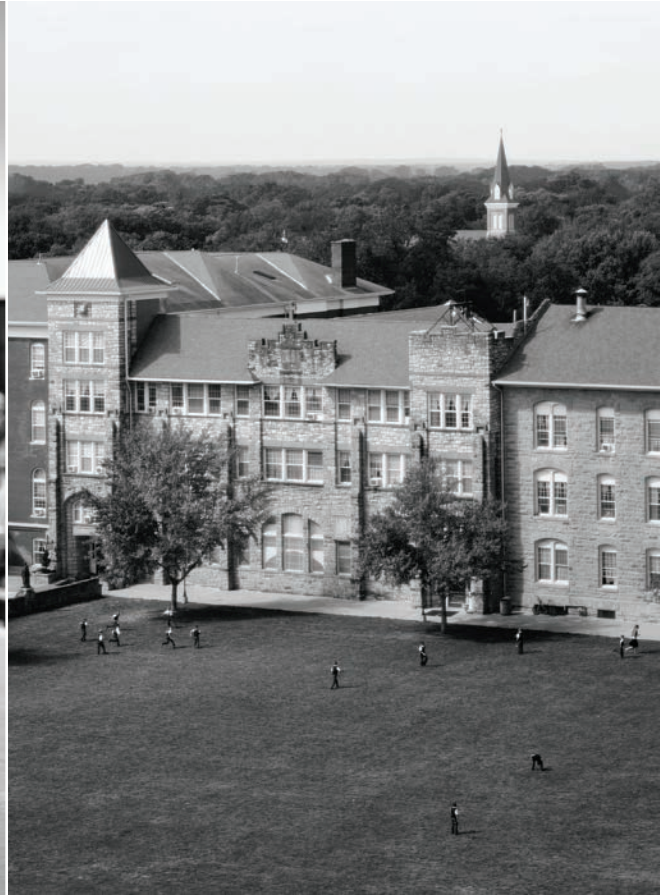
alf an hour down the highway from Topeka, Kansas, not far from the geographic center of the United States, sits the town of St. Marys. Like many towns in the region, it is small, quiet, and conservative. Unlike many towns in the region, it is growing. As waves of young people have abandoned the Great Plains in search of economic opportunity,

St. Marys has managed to attract families from across the nation. The newcomers have made the radical choice to uproot their lives in pursuit of an ideological sanctuary, a place where they can raise their children according to values no longer common in mainstream America.

St. Marys is home to a chapter of the Society of St. Pius X, or SSPX. Named for the early-20th-century pope who railed against the forces of modernism, the international order of priests was formed in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council, the

Catholic Church's attempt, in the 1960s, to meet the challenges of contemporary life. Though not fully recognized by the Vatican, the priests of SSPX see themselves as defenders of the true practices of Roman Catholicism, including the traditional Latin Mass, celebrated each day in St. Marys. Perfumed with incense and filled with majestic Latin hymns, the service has an air of formality and grandeur. To most American Catholics under the age of 50, it would be unrecognizable.

Throughout American history, religious groups have walled themselves off from the rhythms and mores of society. St. Marys isn't nearly as cut off from modern life as, say, the Amish communities that still abjure all modern technology, be it tractor or cellphone. Residents watch prestige television on Hulu and catch Sunday-afternoon football games; moms drive to Topeka to shop at Sam's Club. Yet hints of the town's utopian project are everywhere. On a recent afternoon, I visited the general store, where polite teens played bluegrass music beside rows of dried goods. Women in long, modest skirts loaded vans that had enough seats to accommodate eight or nine kids—unlike most American Catholics, SSPX members abide by the Vatican's prohibition on birth control. At housewarming parties and potluck dinners, children huddle around pianos for sing-alongs.



In their four decades in St. Marys, the followers of SSPX have more than doubled the town's size. Even with six Masses on Sundays, parishioners fill the Society's chapel to capacity; overflow services are held in the gym of the Society's academy, which inhabits an imposing campus built by the Jesuit missionaries who called St. Marys home in the 19th century. The school is constantly running out of classroom space. The parish rector, Father Patrick Rutledge, has to scramble each summer to accommodate rising enrollment. Real estate sells at price points closer to those of Kansas's big cities than of its other small towns.

Newcomers are attracted by the opportunity to live beside like-minded neighbors. But many are pushed here as much as they are pulled. When they lived in other places, many SSPX families felt isolated by their faith, keenly aware that their theological convictions were out of step with America's evolving cultural sensibilities and what they perceive as the growing liberalism of the Catholic Church, especially on issues such as gay marriage and abortion. They were wary of being labeled bigots by co-workers and even friends. They worried that their children would be exposed to sin: A friend's parents might let their kids watch violent television shows; teens might encounter pornography on a classmate's phone. "We can't keep things out that we'd like to

Previous spread: *Priests of the Society of St. Pius X. Father Patrick Rutledge, the parish rector, is on the left.*

This spread, left to right: *A sign welcomes visitors to St. Marys, Kansas. Students gather around Father Paul-Isaac Franks to sing. A young man takes part in an SSPX rite. The grounds of St. Mary's Academy.*

keep out completely," Rutledge told me. But the environment in St. Marys is "as conducive as possible for children to save their souls."

In 2017, the conservative writer Rod Dreher published *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation*, in which he describes growing hostility to Christian values in the secular world. Dreher, a convert to Eastern Orthodoxy, argues that sexual expression has become secular society's highest god. He laments that Christians have been pressured to accommodate and even celebrate LGBTQ identity. In the face of what Dreher calls the "barbarism" of contemporary American life, he believes

the devout have no option but to flee—to build communities, churches, and even colleges where they will be free to live their values and pass the gospel on to the next generation.

Among the conservative-Christian intelligentsia, Dreher's book was explosive. Charles Chaput, the outgoing archbishop of Philadelphia and an influential figure in the Catholic Church, described it as "a tough, frank, and true assessment of contemporary American culture." The *New York Times* columnist David Brooks called it "the most discussed and most important religious book of the decade." *The Benedict Option* prompted a flurry of essays in evangelical magazines, panel discussions at Christian colleges, and at least one spin-off book from a young Dreher acolyte. Dreher himself continues to write about so-called Ben-Op communities springing up around the country, from Alaska to Texas to the suburbs of Washington, D.C.

Dreher addressed his book to fellow conservative Christians, but in calling for a strategic retreat from society, he tapped into an impulse felt by a range of groups in America. In Philadelphia, Baltimore, and D.C., contemporary followers of Marcus Garvey, the 20th-century Pan-African activist and thinker, have built infrastructure designed to free black people from systemic oppression: community gardens to provide food in neighborhoods

devoid of grocery stores, and Afrocentric schools that teach black pride. Young leftist Jews skeptical of assimilation have founded a number of Yiddish-speaking farms in upstate New York, in an effort to preserve their ethnic heritage as well as Judaism's agrarian tradition. Environmentalists have established sustainable settlements in rural Virginia, which serve as both utopian experiments in low-impact living and shelters for the climate disasters ahead.

These groups ostensibly have little in common, but they share a sense that living according to their beliefs while continuing to participate in mainstream American life is not possible. They have elected to undertake what might be termed cultural secession. Katherine Dugan, an assistant professor of religion at Springfield College, in Massachusetts, who studies Catholicism in the U.S., describes the desire for protected, set-apart communities as "a natural American response to not liking what the cultural context is."

In some ways, these groups are merely practicing an extreme form of the insularity many Americans have already embraced.

When they lived elsewhere, many St. Marys residents felt isolated by their faith, keenly aware that their beliefs were out of step with America's evolving cultural sensibilities.

Deep-blue enclaves such as Berkeley and brownstone Brooklyn are similarly homogenous, sought out by people with a certain set of values and hopes for their children. But the rise of more radical self-sorting poses a challenge to America's experiment in multi-cultural democracy, enshrined in the motto *e pluribus unum*—"Out of many, one." The dream of a diverse society is replaced with one in which different groups coexist, but mostly try to stay out of one another's way. The ongoing experiment in St. Marys suggests what might be gained by such a realignment—and what might be lost.

Michelle and Francis Snyder moved to St. Marys seven years ago, just as Barack Obama was about to win his second term as president. The high-school sweethearts had grown up attending SSPX chapels, and wanted to raise their children with a strong Catholic faith, but in the early years of their marriage they struggled to make this vision a reality. Moving from job to job around Buffalo and Syracuse, New York, Francis found it difficult to earn enough money to support the large family the couple wanted. To make ends meet, he worked construction jobs seven days a week, skipping Mass for months at a time. Michelle had made sandwiches at Panera after high school, but quit after she gave birth to their first child.

It was only after the couple moved to St. Marys that Michelle realized how lonely her life in New York had been. In St. Marys, few married women work, especially once they have children. Mothers trade strollers and bassinets and coordinate a constant supply of casseroles when a new baby arrives. Michelle relies on her neighbors for carpooling and in emergencies, trusting them implicitly. "We're all Catholic," she told me. "We're all raising our children to get to heaven." Francis now works for a manufacturing business that, like many of the companies in town, is owned by a fellow SSPX parishioner. He gets time off to attend Mass and observe holy days of obligation.

Michelle and Francis, now in their mid-30s, have six children, three born since they arrived in St. Marys. They are raising their daughters—11-year-old Anna, 5-year-old Lucy, and an infant, Evelyn—to follow in Michelle's path. If they aren't going to become nuns, she said, the girls should be preparing to become wives and mothers. "I would not mind if they went for a career, but once they got married, I would encourage them to focus on their family," she said as she nursed Evelyn in the family's light-filled living room. "We're having children and raising them and educating them. And in the Catholic faith, that's priority."

That education takes place at St. Mary's Academy. (The town spells its name with no apostrophe; the academy uses the possessive form.) Students are strictly separated by gender. Little girls wear Mary Janes and jumpers to class on the upper part of campus. The boys, in crew cuts and ties, learn in the buildings of the lower campus. Female students can compete in intramural sports, such as volleyball and archery, but only against other girls. The boys compete against sports teams in the area, although the school attracted controversy in 2008 for forfeiting a basketball game when a woman showed up to referee. ("Teaching our boys to treat ladies with deference," SSPX said in a statement at the time, "we cannot place them in an aggressive athletic competition where they are forced to play inhibited by their concern about running into a female referee.")

In the classroom, students are instructed in the Catechism. Latin is the only foreign language offered, and teachers favor blackboards over computers. A classical education, the school believes, is the foundation of students' Catholic future. The day I visited, I watched ninth-grade girls discuss G. K. Chesterton and the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

Newcomers find St. Marys appealing precisely because it is built around uncompromising theological principles and shared social values. But for those who aren't affiliated with the Society, the town has become a less welcoming place since SSPX arrived.

As the SSPX community in St. Marys has grown, parishioners have come to dominate the town's civic life. Francis Averkamp is an SSPX parishioner who serves in local and state government and is a co-owner of the business where Francis Snyder works. He told me it makes sense that Society parishioners hold the mayoralty and every seat on the city commission, since members of SSPX make up the majority of the town's population. Most of the matters that commissioners deal with are crushingly mundane, he said: installing a new drainage ditch, or rezoning the golf course. "Government has a certain role in a community. And that role, in St. Marys, mainly revolves around infrastructure," he said. "Is there stuff that gets into religion? No."

Doyle Pearl tells the story differently. A longtime St. Marys resident, Pearl is the last "townie"—as non-SSPXers have taken to calling themselves—to have served as a commissioner. In the early days, he said, Society parishioners disapproved of the town swimming pool, the first concrete-bottomed pool in Kansas and

a source of pride for old-timers. Society members were worried about seeing girls in skimpy bathing suits; their kids would try to swim in jeans, which left behind fibers that taxed the pool's filtration system. Later, Society members on the city commission pulled funding from a chamber-of-commerce event, citing concerns about an allegedly ribald country-and-western band. While the local economy has grown, the chamber has shrunk.

SSPX's insularity, and the order's controversial history, have bred suspicion in town. Among the post-Vatican II changes the Society rejects is the Church's declaration regarding its relationship with non-Christian religions, including a passage repudiating the long-held belief that Jews are responsible for the death of Christ. In 1989, a Nazi collaborator convicted of committing war crimes in Vichy France was caught hiding out at an SSPX monastery in Nice. Two decades later, Richard Williamson, a former SSPX bishop, gave an interview denying that the Nazis had used gas chambers and claiming that no more than 200,000 to 300,000 Jews had died in the Holocaust. (During my visit to St. Mary's Academy, I noticed a photograph hanging in the school's main administrative building in which Williamson is a central figure.) For years, townies whispered about alleged weapons stashes in the steam tunnels beneath the academy. When I asked Rutledge about this, he laughed. To his knowledge, he said, no weapons are now or have ever been stored on campus.

Pearl and his wife, Laura, are pleased that their hometown has a growing population and a lively Main Street. Doyle told me he even feels "a little envious" of the Society's vibrant church life and constant baptisms. "Their children continue their religion," he



Michelle and Francis Snyder and their six children. In St. Marys, the Snyders are able to live according to their conservative-Catholic beliefs.

*A student at St. Mary's Academy,
where enrollment is rising rapidly*



An SSPX parishioner. Formed in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council, the Society sees itself as defending the true practices of Roman Catholicism.





Top: Students at the academy are strictly separated by gender. Female students can compete in intramural sports, such as volleyball and archery, but only against other girls. Below: A model of the new church the Society plans to build. It will seat 1,550 and stand 12 stories high.



said. “They seem to follow the values that their parents have.” But the town barely resembles the place where the Pearls grew up. Its bright future doesn’t necessarily feel like *their* future.

Townies look wistfully to Wamego, a small city just down Highway 24 that has established itself as Kansas’s hub for *Wizard of Oz* tourism. “They’ll have the Tulip Festival. They’ll have Octoberfest. They have a Fourth of July that, I think, is the biggest fireworks in Kansas now,” Doyle said. “People sometimes say, ‘Well, they’re doing it. Why aren’t we?’” Laura supplied the answer: “Because we don’t have a community.”

For the Snyders, and many other recent arrivals, moving to St. Marys has liberated them to practice devout beliefs without apology. But what feels like freedom to some can feel like a prison to others. While parents may choose SSPX for their children, those children don’t always want to live according to its moral strictures. And the Society spares little room for dissent.

Tiffany Joy-Egly moved from Tulsa to St. Marys with her parents and two sisters in 1979, when she was 6 years old. Tiffany grew up immersed in the SSPX world: learning about the dangers of rock music, skipping adolescent experiments with makeup, avoiding any behavior that might tempt men into sin. But Tiffany was possessed of a skeptical mind. “I would question in religion class,” she told me at a Starbucks in Topeka, where she works as an emergency-room nurse and lives with her husband and two daughters. “If God gave us a brain, how come we can’t use birth control? Because that makes more sense than having 12 kids that you can’t afford to feed.” This attitude was not welcome at the academy. “I was in detention a lot,” she said.

Her siblings, too, chafed at the constraints of life in St. Marys. One sister got engaged to a Catholic man who attended Mass at Immaculate Conception, the townie church. According to Tiffany, the SSPX priest announced from the pulpit that anyone who attended the wedding would be committing a sin.

Tiffany herself started using drugs and alcohol, but later resolved to return to the SSPX fold. She went to confession and delivered a litany of her sins, but the priest stopped her when she shared that a friend had recently had an abortion. This, the priest said, was unforgivable. While Tiffany herself had not terminated a pregnancy, she had failed to stop another woman from doing so. The priest declared that she would be excommunicated. (With proper penance, SSPX officials said, she could be reconciled with the Church.)

St. Marys “is a little, safe community,” Tiffany told me. People go there to escape “a world that is considered unsafe.” When she started building a life for herself outside St. Marys, however, she experienced less fear than relief. Small things like going to the mall and wearing shorts were revelatory; she finally felt she had choices about how to pray and when to get married. In St. Marys, that hadn’t been possible. “You give up everything to come into this community,” she said, “and do what you’re told.”

At a time when American politics is so fractured and dysfunctional, the idea of huddling among our own holds undeniable appeal. SSPX parishioners believe they know God’s way and try to follow it, largely unencumbered by those who do not share

their views. But there is peril in the premise that we would all be better off living among our own. Democracy depends on the friction that comes from encounters with difference. The movements for abolition, enfranchisement, labor dignity, and civil rights all stemmed from factions of Americans demanding rights and basic respect from their neighbors. If the country’s most fervent believers, whether Catholics, evangelical Christians, civil-rights advocates, or environmentalists, were to simply give up their visions for a better nation, the American project would stagnate.

On the eastern side of the St. Marys campus, the stone entrance is guarded by twin knights representing the school’s mascot, the Crusaders. The SSPX bookstore is filled with toy soldiers and warring knights from Catholic history—the perfect gift, a salesman told me, for a little boy’s First Communion.

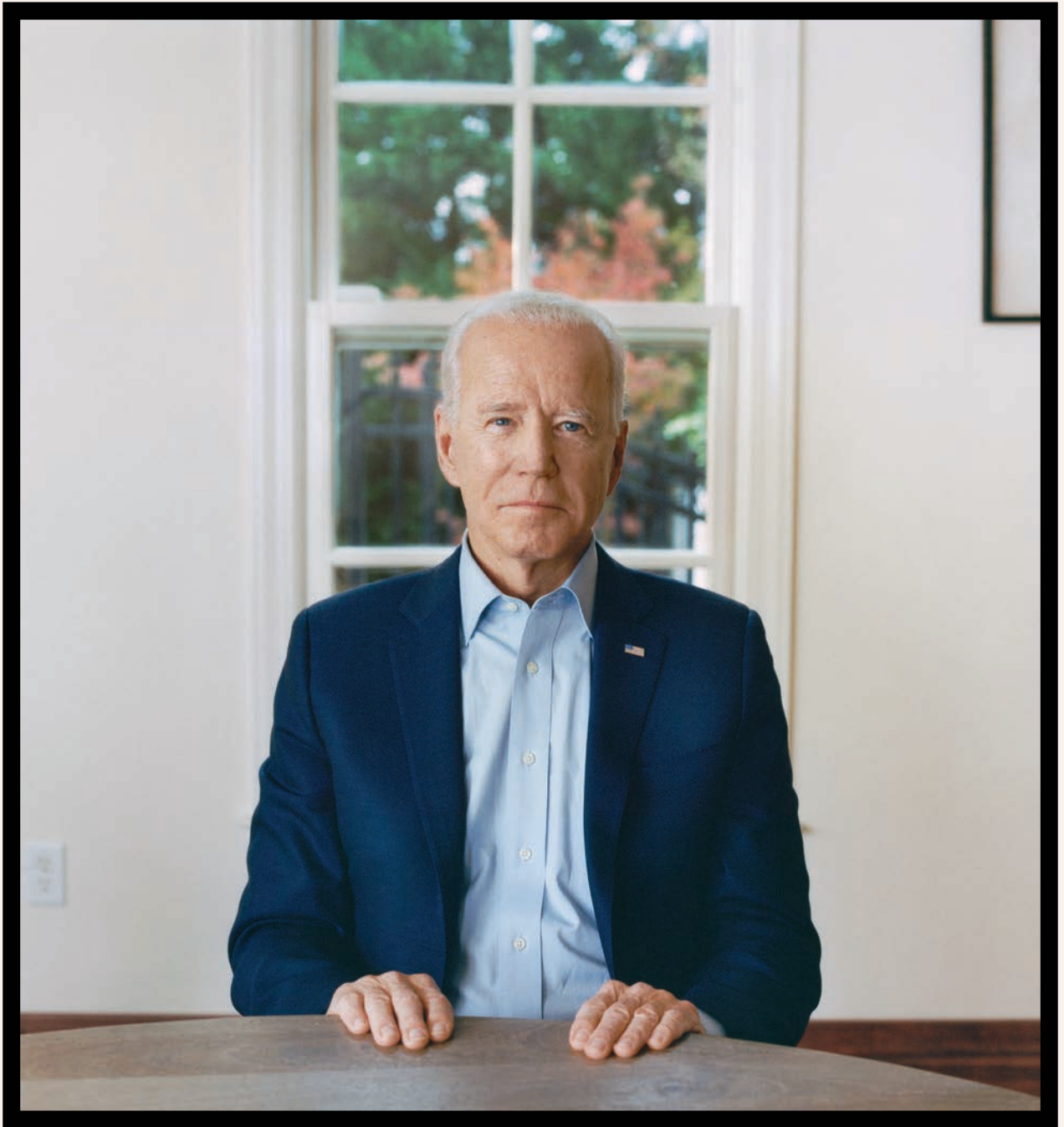
What the Society has built in St. Marys is more like a haven for those retreating from the culture wars than a training ground for battle.

But as much as SSPX may still think of itself as raising children to be warriors in the faith, the metaphor is no longer a good fit. What the Society has built in St. Marys is more like a haven for those retreating from the culture wars than a training ground for battle. Safe behind its walls, parishioners can seem uninterested in the moral failings of the outside world and untroubled by the country’s political turmoil. “There’s a lot to do,” Paul-Isaac Franks, a priest and a music teacher at the academy, told me. “I don’t have a daily ritual of reading the news.” Jim Vogel,

the editor of Angelus Press, which publishes SSPX literature, says that people in St. Marys are engaged in local politics, but “we can’t really do much about what’s happening in Washington.” Here, at least, parishioners can be confident that the tradition and truth they crave can be preserved.

In a field high above the academy’s campus, the Society is planning to construct a new church called the Immaculata, named for the old Jesuit church that burned down decades ago. For now, the space is marked only by metal rods sticking out of the overgrown grass, but once it’s built, the church will seat 1,550 and stand 12 stories high. Father Rutledge hopes the Immaculata will be visible from the road for miles around, a beacon on the Plains calling to those in search of refuge. *A*

Emma Green is a staff writer at The Atlantic.



PHOTOGRAPH BY MARK PECKMEZIAN

WHY WON'T HE JUST SAY

IT?

JOE BIDEN'S VERBAL MISCUES, NON SEQUITURS, AND TANGENTS HAVE VOTERS WORRIED ABOUT HIS MENTAL FITNESS. MAYBE THEY'D BE MORE UNDERSTANDING IF THEY KNEW HE'S STILL FIGHTING A STUTTER. ————— BY JOHN HENDRICKSON

H

His eyes fall to the floor when I ask him to describe it. We've been tiptoeing toward it for 45 minutes, and so far, every time he seems close, he backs away, or leads us in a new direction. There are competing theories in the press, but Joe Biden has kept mum on the subject. I want to hear him explain it. I ask him to walk me through the night he appeared to lose control of his words onstage.

"I—um—I don't remember," Biden says. His voice has that familiar shake, the creak and the croak. "I'd have to see it. I-I-I don't remember."

We're in Biden's mostly vacant Washington, D.C., campaign office on an overcast Tuesday at the end of the summer. Since entering the Democratic presidential-primary race in April, Biden has largely avoided in-depth interviews. When I first reached out, in late June, his press person was polite but noncommittal: Was an interview really necessary for the story?

Then came the second debate, at the end of July, in Detroit. The first one, a month earlier, had been a disaster for Biden. He was unprepared when Senator Kamala Harris criticized both his past resistance to federally mandated busing and a recent speech in which he'd waxed fondly about collaborating with segregationist senators. Some of his answers that night had been meandering and difficult to parse, feeding into the narrative that he wasn't just prone to verbal slipups—he's called himself a "gaffe machine"—but that his age was a problem, that he was confused and out of touch.

Detroit was Biden's chance to regain control of the narrative. And then something else happened. The candidates were talking about health care. At first, Biden sounded strong, confident, presidential: "My plan makes a limit of co-pay to be One. Thousand. Dollars. Because we—"

He stopped. He pinched his eyes closed. He lifted his hands and thrust them forward, as if trying to pull the missing sound from his mouth. "We f-f-f-f-further support—" He opened his eyes. "The uh-uh-uh-uh—" His chin dipped toward his chest. "The-uh, the ability to buy into the Obamacare plan." Biden also stumbled when trying to say *immune system*.

Fox News edited these moments into a mini montage. Stifling laughter, the host Steve Hilton narrated: "As the right words struggled to make that perilous journey from Joe Biden's brain to Joe Biden's mouth, half the time he just seemed to give up with this somewhat tragic and limp admission of defeat."

Several days later, Biden's team got back in touch with me. One of his aides gingerly asked whether I'd noticed the former vice president stutter during the debate. Of course I had—I stutter, far worse than Biden. The aide said he was ready to talk about it. In November, after Biden stumbled multiple times during a debate in Atlanta, the topic would become even more relevant.

"SO HOW ARE YOU, man?"

Biden is in his usual white button-down and navy suit, a flag pin on the left lapel. Up close, he looks like he's lost weight since leaving office in 2017. His height is commanding, but, as he approaches his 77th birthday, he doesn't fill out his suit jacket like he used to.

I stutter as I begin to ask my first question. "I've only ... told a few people I'm ... d-doing this piece. Every time I ... describe it, I get ... caught on the w-word-uh *stuh-tuh-tuh-tutter*."

"So did I," Biden replies. "It doesn't"—he interrupts himself—"can't define who you are."

Maybe you've heard Biden talk about his boyhood stutter. A non-stutterer might not notice when he appears to get caught on words as an adult, because he usually

maneuvers out of those moments quickly and expertly. But on other occasions, like that night in Detroit, Biden's lingering stutter is hard to miss. He stutters—if slightly—on several sounds as we sit across from each other in his office. Before addressing the debate specifically, I mention what I've just heard. "I want to ask you, as, you know, a ... stutterer to, uh, to a ... stutterer. When you were ... talking a couple minutes ago, it, it seemed to ... my ear, my eye ... did you have ... trouble on s? Or on ... m?"

Biden looks down. He pivots to the distant past, telling me that the letter *s* was hard when he was a kid. "But, you know, I haven't stuttered in so long that it's hhhhard for me to remember the specific—" He pauses. "What I do remember is the feeling."

I STARTED STUTTERING at age 4. I still struggle to say my own name. When I called the gas company recently, the automated voice apologized for not being able to understand me. This happens a lot, so I try to say "representative," but *r*'s are tough too. When I reach a human, I'm inevitably asked whether we have a poor connection. Busy bartenders will walk away and serve someone else when I take too long to say the name of a beer. Almost every deli guy chuckles as I fail to enunciate my order, despite the fact that I've cut it down to just six words: "Turkey club, white toast, easy mayo." I used to just point at items on the menu.

My head will shake on a really bad stutter. People have casually asked whether I have Parkinson's. I curl my toes inside my shoes or tap my foot as a distraction to help me get out of it, a behavior that I've repeated so often, it's become a tic. Sometimes I shuffle a pen between my hands. When I was little, I used to press my palm against my forehead in an effort to force the missing word out of my brain. Back then, my older brother would imitate this motion and the accompanying sound, a dull whine—something between a cow and a sheep. A kid at baseball camp, Michael, referred to me as "Stutter Boy." He'd snap his fingers and repeat it as if calling a dog. "Stutter Boy! Stutter Boy!" In college, I applied for a job at a coffee shop.

I stuttered horribly through the interview, and the owner told me he couldn't hire me, because he wanted his café to be "a place where customers feel comfortable."

Stuttering is a neurological disorder that affects roughly 70 million people, about 3 million of whom live in the United States. It has a strong genetic component: Two-thirds of stutterers have a family member who actively stutters or used to. Biden's uncle on his mother's side—"Uncle Boo-Boo," as he was called—stuttered his whole life.

In the most basic sense, a stutter is a repetition, prolongation, or block in producing a sound. It typically presents between the ages of 2 and 4, in up to twice as many boys as girls, who also have a higher recovery rate. During the developmental years, some children's stutter will disappear completely without intervention or with speech therapy. The longer someone stutters, however, the lower the chances of a full recovery—perhaps due to the decreasing plasticity of the brain. Research suggests that no more than a quarter of people who still stutter at 10 will completely rid themselves of the affliction as adults.

The cultural perception of stutterers is that they're fearful, anxious people, or simply dumb, and that stuttering is the result. But it doesn't work like that. Let's say you're in fourth grade and you have to stand up and recite state capitals. You know that Juneau is the capital of Alaska, but you also know that you almost always block on the *j* sound. You become intensely anxious not because you don't know the answer, but because you *do* know the answer, and you know you're going to stutter on it.

Stuttering can feel like a series of betrayals. Your body betrays you when it refuses to work in concert with your brain to produce smooth speech. Your brain betrays you when it fails to recall the solutions you practiced after school with a speech therapist, allegedly in private, later learning that your mom was on the other side of a mirror, watching in the dark like a detective. If you're a lucky stutterer, you have friends and family who build you back up, but sometimes your protectors betray you too.

A Catholic nun betrayed Biden when he was in seventh grade. "I think I was No. 5 in alphabetical order," Biden says.

He points over my right shoulder and stares into the middle distance as the movie rolls in his mind. "We'd sit along the radiators by the window."

The office we're in is awash in framed memories: Biden and his family, Biden and Barack Obama, Biden in a denim shirt posing for *InStyle*. The shelf behind the desk features, among other books, Jon Meacham's *The Soul of America*. It's a phrase Biden has adopted for his campaign this time around, his third attempt at the presidency. In almost every speech, Biden warns potential voters that 2020 is not merely an election, but a battle "for the soul of America." Sometimes he swaps in *nation*.

But now we're back in middle school. The students are taking turns reading a book, one by one, up and down the rows. "I could count down how many paragraphs, and I'd memorize it, because I found it easier to memorize than look at the page and read the word. I'd *pretend* to be reading," Biden says. "You learned early on who the hell the bullies were," he tells me later. "You could tell by the look, couldn't you?"

For most stutterers, reading out loud summons peak dread. A chunk of text that may take a fluent person roughly a minute to read could take a stutterer five or 10 times as long. *Four kids away, three kids away.* Your shoulders tighten. *Two away.* The back of your neck catches fire. *One away.* Then it happens, and the room fills with secondhand embarrassment. Someone breathes a heavy sigh. Someone else laughs. At least one kid mimics your stutter while you're actively stuttering. You never talk about it. At night, you stare at the ceiling above your bed, reliving it.

"The paragraph I had to read was: 'Sir Walter Raleigh was a gentleman. He laid his cloak upon the muddy road suh-suh-so the lady wouldn't soil her shoes when she entered the carriage,'" Biden tells me, slightly and unintentionally tripping up on the word *so*. "And I said, 'Sir Walter Raleigh was a gentle *man* who—' and then the nun said, 'Mr. Biden, what is that word?' And it was *gentleman* that she wanted me to say, not *gentle man*. And she said, 'Mr. Buh-Buh-Buh-Biden, what's that word?'"

Biden says he rose from his desk and left the classroom in protest, then walked home. The family story is that his mother,

Jean, drove him back to school and confronted the nun with the made-for-TV phrase "You do that again, I'll knock your bonnet off your head!" I ask Biden what went through his mind as the nun mocked him.

"Anger, rage, humiliation," he says. His speech becomes staccato. "A feeling of, uh—like I'm sure you've experienced—it just drops out of your chest, just, like, you feel . . . a void." He lifts his hands up to his face like he did on the debate stage in July, to guide the *v* sound out of his mouth: *void*.

By all accounts, Biden was both popular and a strong athlete in high school. He was class president at Archmere Academy, in Claymont, Delaware. His nickname was "Dash"—not a reference to his speed on the football field, but rather another way to mock his stutter. "It was like Morse

"MR.

**BUH-BUH-
BUH-BIDEN,**

**WHAT'S THAT
WORD?, " A NUN
ASKED
JOE BIDEN IN FRONT
OF HIS
SEVENTH-GRADE
CLASSMATES .**



Joe Biden (back) with his brother James and his sister, Valerie, at her First Communion

code—*dot dot dot, dash dash dash dash*,” Biden says. “Even though by that time I started to overcome it.”

I ask him to expand on the relationship between anger and humiliation, or shame.

“Shame is a big piece of it,” he says, then segues into a story about meeting a stutterer while campaigning.

I bring it back up a little later, this time more directly: “When have you felt shame?”

“Not for a long, long, long time. But especially when I was in grade school and high school. Because that’s the time when everything is, you know, it’s rough. They talk about ‘mean girls’? There’s mean boys, too.”

Bill Bowden had the locker next to Biden’s at Archmere. I called Bowden recently. “It was just kind of a funny thing, you know?” he told me. “Hopefully he

wasn’t hurt by it.” Bob Markel, another high-school buddy of Biden’s, went a little further when we spoke: “‘H-H-H-H-Hey, J-J-J-J-J-Joe B-B-B-B-Biden’—that’s how he’d be addressed.” Markel said the Archmere guys called him “Stutterhead,” or “Hey, *Stut!*” for short. He fears that he himself may have made fun of Biden once or twice. “I never remember him being offended. He probably was,” Markel said. “I think one of his coping mechanisms was to not show it.” Bowden and Markel have remained friends with Biden to this day.

Before collecting from customers on his paper route, Biden would preplay conversations in his mind, banking lines—a tactic he still sometimes uses on the campaign trail, he says. “I knew the one guy loved the Phillies. And he’d asked me about them all the time. And I knew another person would

ask me about my sister, so I would practice an answer.”

After trying and failing at speech therapy in kindergarten, Biden waged a personal war on his stutter in his bedroom as a young teen. He’d hold a flashlight to his face in front of his bedroom mirror and recite Yeats and Emerson with attention to rhythm, searching for that elusive control. He still knows the lines by heart: “Meek young men grow up in libraries, believing it their duty to accept the views, which Cicero, which Locke, which Bacon, have given, forgetful that Cicero, Locke, and Bacon were only young men in libraries, when they wrote these books.”

Biden performs the passage for me with total fluency, knowing where and when to pause, knowing how many words he can say before needing a breath. This is what stutterers learn to do: reclaim control of their airflow; think in full phrases, not individual words. I ask Biden what his moment of dread used to be in that essay.

“Well, looking back on it, ‘Meek young men grow up in li-li-libraries,’” he begins again. “‘Li’—the *l*.”

“That kind of sound, the *l* sound, is like the ... *r* sound,” I say.

“Yes.”

“Sometimes I’ve noticed, watching old clips, it looks like you do have a little trouble on the *r*. It’s your middle initial.”

“Yeah.”

“Like ‘ruh-ruh-ruh-remember,’” I say, intentionally stuttering on the *r*.

“Well, I may. I-I-I-I-I haven’t thought I have. But I-I-I-I-I don’t doubt there’s probably ways people could pick up that there’s something. But I don’t consciously think of it anymore.”

Biden says he hasn’t felt himself caught in a traditional stutter in several decades. “I mean, I can’t remember a time where I’ve ever worried before a crowd of 80,000 people or 800 people or 80 people—I haven’t had that feeling of dread since, I guess, speech class in college,” he says, referring to an undergraduate public-speaking course at the University of Delaware.

This is when I ask him what happened that night in Detroit.

After saying he doesn’t remember, Biden opines: “I’m everybody’s target; they have to take me down. And so, what I found is—not anymore—I’ve found that it’s difficult



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to deal with some of the criticism, based on the nature of the person directing the criticism. It's awful hard to be, to respond the same way in a national debate—especially when you're, you know, the guy who is characterized as the white-guy-of-privilege kind of thing—to turn and say to someone who says, 'I'm not saying you're a racist, but ...' and know you're being set up. So I have to admit to you, I found my mind going, *What the hell? How do I respond to that?* Because I know she's being completely unfair."

I eventually realize that he's describing the moment from the *first* debate, when Harris criticized his record on race.

"These aren't debates," he continues. "These are one-minute assertions. And I don't think there's anybody who hasn't been

**BIDEN SAYS HIS
FATHER TAUGHT
HIM ABOUT
"SHOULDERING
BURDENS WITH
GRACE."
SPECIFICALLY, HE
TOLD HIS SON,
"NEVER COMPLAIN.
NEVER
EXPLAIN."**

taking shots at me, which is okay. I'm a big boy, don't get me wrong."

Listening back to that part of the conversation after our interview made me feel dizzy. I can only speculate as to why Biden's campaign agreed to this interview, but I assume the reasoning went something like this: If Biden disclosed to me, a person who stutters, that he himself still actively stutters, perhaps voters would cut him some slack when it comes to verbal misfires, as well as errors that seem more related to memory and cognition. But whenever I asked Biden about what appeared to be his present-day stuttering, the notably verbose candidate became clipped, or said he didn't remember, or spun off to somewhere new.

I wondered if I reminded Biden of his old self, a ghost from his youth, the stutterer he used to be. He and I are about the same height. We happened to be wearing the exact same outfit that day: navy suit, white shirt, no tie. We both went to all-male prep schools, the sort of place where displaying any weakness is a liability.

As I listened to the recording of our interview, I remembered how I used to respond when people asked me about my stutter. I'd shut down. I'd try to change the subject. I'd almost always look away.

IN EARLY SEPTEMBER, I got in touch with my high-school speech pathologist, Joseph Donaher, who practices at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. I hadn't heard Donaher's voice for almost 15 years. Immediately, I was transported back to the little windowless room in the hospital where we used to meet. Donaher was the first therapist—really the first person—who ever leveled with me. I can still see his face, the neutrality in his eyes on the day he looked at me square and said the sentence my friends and parents had avoided saying my entire life: *You have a severe stutter.*

Donaher and his colleagues try to help their patients open up about the shame and low self-worth that accompany stuttering. Instead of focusing solely on mechanics, or on the ability to communicate, they first build up the *desire* to communicate at all. They then share techniques such as elongating vowels and lightly approaching hard-consonant clusters, meaning just touching on the first sound in a word like

stutter—the *st*—to keep the mouth and throat from tensing up and interfering with speech. The goal isn't to be totally fluent but, simply put, to stutter better.

This evolution in treatment has been accompanied by a new movement to destigmatize the disorder, similar to the drive to view autism through a lens of "neurodiversity" rather than as a pathology. The idea is to accept, even embrace, one's stutter. There are practical reasons for this: Research shows, according to Donaher, that the simple disclosure "I stutter" benefits both the stutterer and the listener—the former gets to explain what's happening and ease the awkward tension so the latter isn't stuck wondering what's "wrong" with this person. Saying those two words is harder than it seems. "I'm working with people who spend their whole lives and are never able to disclose it," Donaher told me.

Eric S. Jackson, an assistant professor of communicative sciences and disorders at NYU, told me he believes that Biden's eye movements—the blinks, the downward glances—are part of his ongoing efforts to manage his stutter. "As kids we figure out: *Oh, if I move parts of my body not associated with the speech system, sometimes it helps me get through these blocks faster,*" Jackson, a stutterer himself, explained. Jackson credits an intensive program at the American Institute for Stuttering, in Manhattan, with bringing him back from a "rock bottom" period in his mid-20s, when he says his stutter kept him from meeting women or speaking up enough to reach his professional goals. Afterward, Jackson went all in on disclosure: Every day for six months, he stood up during the subway ride to and from work and announced that he was a person who stutters. "I had this new relationship with my stuttering—I was like Hercules," he told me. At 41, Jackson still stutters, but in conversation he confidently maintains eye contact and appears relaxed. He wishes Biden would be more transparent about his intermittent disfluency. "Running for president is essentially the biggest stage in the world. For him to come out and say 'I still stutter and it's fine' would be an amazing, empowering message."

Occasionally, Biden has used present-tense verbs when discussing his stutter. "I find myself, when I'm tired,



Jill and Joe Biden, shortly after they first met, with his two sons, Beau and Hunter

guh-guh-catching myself, like that,” he said during a 2016 American Institute for Stuttering speech. Biden has used the phrase *we stutterers* at times, but in most public appearances and interviews, Biden talks about how he *overcame* his speech problem, and how he believes others can too. You can watch videos posted by his campaign in which Biden meets young stutterers and encourages them to follow his lead. They’re sweet clips, even if the underlying message—beat it or bust—is out of sync with the normalization movement.

Emma Alpern is a 32-year-old copy editor who co-leads the Brooklyn chapter of the National Stuttering Association and co-founded NYC Stutters, which puts on a day-long conference for stuttering destigmatization. Alpern told me that she’s on a group text with other stutterers who regularly discuss Biden, and that it’s been “frustrating” to watch the media portray Biden’s speech impediment as a sign of mental decline or dishonesty. “Biden allows that to happen by not naming it for what it is,” she said, though she’s not sure that his

presidential candidacy would benefit if he were more forthcoming. “I think he’s dug himself into a hole of not saying that he still stutters for so long that it would strike people as a little weird.”

Biden has presented the same life story for decades. He’s that familiar face—Uncle Joe. He was born 11 months after Pearl Harbor and grew up in the last era of definitive “good guys” and “bad guys.” He’s the dependable guy, the tenacious guy, the aviators-and-crossed-arms guy. That guy doesn’t stutter; that guy *used to* stutter.

“My dad taught me the value of constancy, effort, and work, and he taught me about shouldering burdens with grace,” Biden writes in the first chapter of his 2007 memoir, *Promises to Keep*. “He used to quote Benjamin Disraeli: ‘Never complain. Never explain.’”

STEPHEN COLBERT launches across the Ed Sullivan Theater stage, as if from a pinball spring. It’s early September, and his *Late Show* taping is about to begin. To

warm up, he takes a few questions from the studio audience. Someone asks what he’d want in a potential new president. “Empathy?” Colbert deadpans. “A soul?”

Colbert tapes in Midtown Manhattan on the same stage where the Beatles made their American television debut 55 years ago, when Joe Biden was a mere 22. Biden struts out to a standing ovation and throws up his hands in amazement: *For me?* A brief “Joe! Joe! Joe!” chant erupts.

At first, Colbert lobs softballs, and Biden touches on the key parts of his 2020 stump speech: Why voters must stand up to the existential threat of Trumpism and how the Charlottesville, Virginia, white-supremacist rally crystallized his decision to run. Then Colbert goes for it.

“In the last few weeks, you’ve confused New Hampshire for Vermont; said Bobby Kennedy and MLK were assassinated in the late ’70s; assured us, ‘I am not going nuts.’ Follow-up question: Are you going nuts?”

“Look, the reason I came on the Jimmy Kimmel show was because—”

The audience howls. Biden flashes a flirty smile. Colbert adjusts his glasses, sticks his pen in his mouth, and nods in approval. The joke was probably canned, but Biden landed it.

Colbert continues to press him about accuracy issues in his storytelling. The studio audience is silent; I'm watching from the balcony and can hear the theater's air-conditioning humming overhead.

"I-I-I-I don't get wrong things like, uh, ya know, there is a, we, we should lock kids up in cages at the border. I mean, I don't—" People applaud before Biden can finish.

When the interview is over, Biden receives a second standing ovation. He peers up toward the rafters, using his hand as a visor against the bright lights. A white spotlight follows him offstage. Several minutes later, he glides through the stage door and out onto West 53rd Street. People call to him from the sidewalk. "Joe! Joe Biden!" He climbs into the back of an idling black SUV, and the doors clunk close.

I follow Biden for a couple of days while he campaigns in New Hampshire. His town halls have a distinctly Norman Rockwell vibe. One takes place in the middle of the day on the third floor of a former textile mill, another on a stretch of grass as the wind whips off the Piscataqua River. His crowds are predominantly older, filled with people who stand for the Pledge of Allegiance and wait patiently to ask questions. After he speaks, Biden typically walks offstage to Bruce Springsteen's "We Take Care of Our Own," then saunters down the rope line for handshakes and hugs and selfies. One voter after another tells me they're unaware of Biden's stutter. "Knowing that he has had something like that to deal with and overcame it, as well as other really sad things that have happened—it just makes me like him more," says 70-year-old Grace Payne.

Back in New York, I start to wonder if I'm forcing Biden into a box where he doesn't belong. *My* box. Could I be jealous that his present stutter is less obvious than mine? That he can go sentences at a time without a single block or repetition? Even the way I'm writing this piece—keeping Biden's stammers, his *ums* and pauses, on

the page—seems hypocritical. Here I am highlighting the glitches in his speech, when the journalistic courtesy, convention even, is to edit them out.

I spend weeks watching Biden more than listening to him, trying to "catch him in the act" of stuttering on camera. *There's one. There's one. That was a bad one.* Also, I start stuttering more.

In September, before the third Democratic debate, in Houston, I called Michael Sheehan, a Washington, D.C.–area communications coach whose company website boasts clients ranging from Nike to the Treasury Department. Sheehan worked with President Bill Clinton while he was in office and began consulting on and off for Biden in 2002, when he was in the Senate. On the day we spoke, he was in

**AT AN AUGUST TOWN
HALL, BIDEN BRIEFLY
BLOCKED ON
OBAMA, BEFORE
SUBBING IN MY BOSS.
THE HEADLINES
AFTERWARD?
"BIDEN FORGETS
OBAMA'S NAME."**

Wilmington, Delaware, doing debate prep with Biden.

Sheehan and I traded stories of daily indignities—he stutters too. "I remember exactly where the deli was; it was on 71st and First Avenue," he said with an ache in his voice. He lamented the interventionists, the people who volunteer, "You know, why don't you speak more slowly?" I always want to say "Holy shit! Why didn't I think of that? Thank you!"

Sheehan's own stutter improved, but didn't fully go away, when he took up speech and debate in high school. This eventually led him to the theater, which is a common, if surprising, place where some stutterers find that they're able to speak with relative ease. Taking on a character, another voice, the theory goes, relies on a different neural pathway from the one used in conversation. Many successful actors have battled stutters—Samuel L. Jackson, Bruce Willis, Emily Blunt, James Earl Jones. In 2014, Jones, whose muscular baritone is the bedrock of one of the most quoted lines in film history, told NPR that he doesn't use the word *cured* to describe his apparent fluency. "I just work with it," he said.

Sheehan was extremely careful with the language he used to describe Biden's speech patterns—"I can't say it's a stutter"—though he noted his friend's habit of abruptly changing directions mid-sentence. "I do hear those little pauses, but I really don't hear the stuff that you would hear from me or I would hear from you," he said. A few minutes into our conversation, he choked up while discussing Biden's tenderness toward young stutterers. "Sometimes I feel when he goes a little long on a speech, he's just making up for lost time, you know?"

Sheehan told me about a night when he came home with his wife and saw the answering-machine light blinking: "Hey, Michael, it's Joe Biden. I just was watching *The King's Speech* with my granddaughter, and I just thought I'd give you a call, because it made me think of you. Goodbye!" He says the message felt like a secret fraternity handshake: "You and I have both been there, and only people in that society know what that is about."

In Biden's office, the first time I bring up his current stuttering, he asks me whether I've seen *The King's Speech*. He speaks almost mystically about the award-winning 2010 film. "When King George VI, when he stood up in 1939,

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everyone knew he stuttered, and they knew what courage it took for him to stand up at that stadium and try to speak—and it gave them courage ... I could feel that. It was that sinking feeling, like—oh my God, I remember how you felt. You feel like, I don't know ... almost like you're being sucked into a black hole."

Presidential candidates usually don't speak about their bleakest moments, certainly not this viscerally. It resembles the way Biden writes in his memoir about the aftermath of the 1972 car accident that killed his first wife and young daughter and critically injured his two sons, Beau and Hunter: "I could not speak, only felt this hollow core grow in my chest, like I was going to be sucked inside a black hole."

A few weeks later, I ask Jill Biden what she remembers about sitting next to her husband during the movie. "It was one of those moments in a marriage where you just sort of understand without words being spoken," she says.

As he watched *The King's Speech*, Biden accurately guessed that the screenwriter, David Seidler, was a stutterer. "He showed me a copy of a speech they found in an attic that the king had actually used, where he marks his—it's exactly what I do!" Biden tells me, his voice lifting. "My staff, when I have them put something on a prompter—I wish I had something to show you."

He pulls out a legal pad and begins drawing diagonal lines a few inches apart, as if diagramming invisible sentences: x words, breath, y words, breath. "Because it's just the way I have—the, the best way for me to read a, um, a speech. I mean, when I saw *The King's Speech*, and the speech—I didn't know anybody who did that!"

BIDEN IS RUNNING for president on a simple message: *America is not Trump. I'm not Trump. I'll lead us out of this.* With every new debate, with every new "gaffe," the media continue to ask whether Biden has the stamina for the job. And with every passing month, his competitors—namely Senator Elizabeth Warren and South Bend, Indiana, Mayor Pete Buttigieg—have gained on him in the polls.

A stutter does not get worse as a person ages, but trying to keep it at bay can take immense physical and mental energy. Biden

talks all day to audiences both small and large. In addition to periodically stuttering or blocking on certain sounds, he appears to intentionally *not stutter* by switching to an alternative word—a technique called "circumlocution"—which can yield mangled syntax. I've been following practically everything he's said for months now, and sometimes what is quickly characterized as a memory lapse is indeed a stutter. As Eric Jackson, the speech pathologist, pointed out to me, during a town hall in August Biden briefly blocked on *Obama*, before quickly subbing in *my boss*. The headlines after the event? "Biden Forgets Obama's Name." Other times when Biden fudges a detail or loses his train of thought, it seems unrelated to stuttering, like he's just making a mistake. The kind of mistake other candidates make too, though less frequently than he does.

During his 2016 address at the American Institute for Stuttering, Biden told the room that he'd turned down an invitation to speak at a dinner organized by the group years earlier. "I was afraid if people knew I stuttered," he said, "they would have thought something was wrong with me."

Yet even when sharing these old, hard stories, Biden regularly characterizes stuttering as "the best thing that ever happened" to him. "Stuttering gave me an insight I don't think I ever would have had into other people's pain," he says. I admire his empathy, even if I disagree with his strict adherence to a tidy redemption narrative.

IN BIDEN'S OFFICE, as my time is about to run out, I bring up the fact that Trump crudely mocked a disabled *New York Times* reporter during the 2016 campaign. "So far, he's called you 'Sleepy Joe.' Is 'St-St-St-Stuttering Joe' next?"

"I don't think so," Biden says, "because if you ask the polls 'Does Biden stutter? Has he ever stuttered?,' you'd have 80 to 95 percent of people say no." If Trump goes there, Biden adds, "it'll just expose him for what he is."

I ask Biden something else we've been circling: whether he worries that people would pity him if they thought he still stuttered.

He scratches his chin, his fingers trembling slightly. "Well, I guess, um, it's kind

of hard to pity a vice president. It's kind of hard to pity a senator who's gotten six zillion awards. It's kind of hard to pity someone who has had, you know, a decent family. I-I-I-I don't think if, now, if someone sits and says, 'Well, you know, the kid, when he was a stutterer, he must have been really basically stupid,' I-I-I don't think it's hard to—I've never thought of that. I mean, there's nobody in the last, I don't know, 55 years, has ever said anything like that to me."

He slips back into politician mode, safe mode, Uncle Joe mode: "I hope what they see is: Be mindful of people who are in situations where their difficulties do not define their character, their intellect. Because that's what I tell stutterers. You can't let it define you." He leans across the desk. "And you haven't." He's in my face now. "You can't let it define you. You're a really bright guy."

He's telling me, in essence, that my stutter doesn't matter, which is what I want to tell him right back. But here's the thing: Most of the time, Biden speaks smoothly, and perhaps he sincerely does not believe that he still stutters at all. Or maybe Biden is simply telling me the story he's told himself for several decades, the one he's memorized, the one he can comfortably express. I don't want to hear Biden say "I still stutter" to prove some grand point; I want to hear him say it because doing so as a presidential candidate would mean that stuttering truly doesn't matter—for him, for me, or for our 10-year-old selves.

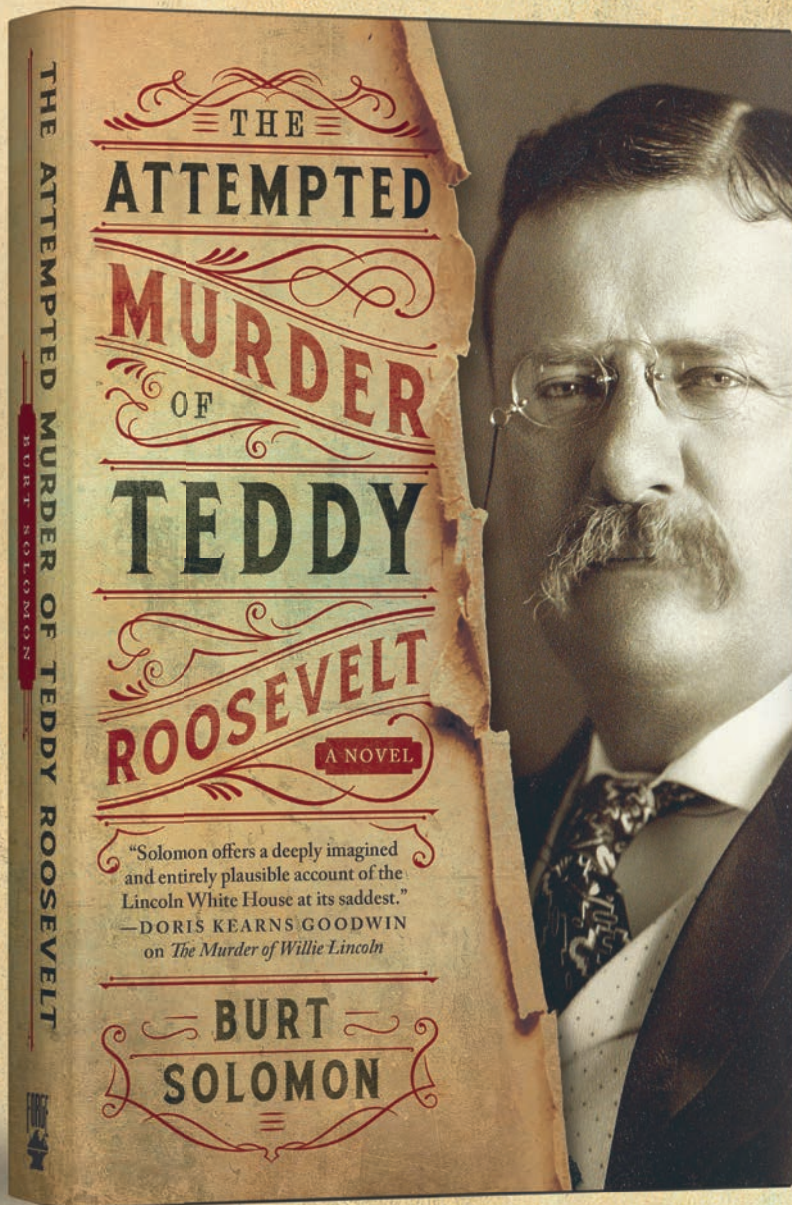
Now his aide is knocking, trying to get him out of the room. I push out one more question, asking what he saw reflected in that bedroom mirror as a kid.

He goes off into a different boyhood story about standing against a stone wall and talking with pebbles in his mouth, some oddball way to MacGyver fluency. I do the thing stutterers hate most: I cut him off. "What did that person look like?"

Biden stops. "He looked happy," he says. "You know, I just think it looked like he's in control." *A*

John Hendrickson is a senior editor at The Atlantic.

WAS IT AN ACCIDENT... OR AN ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT?

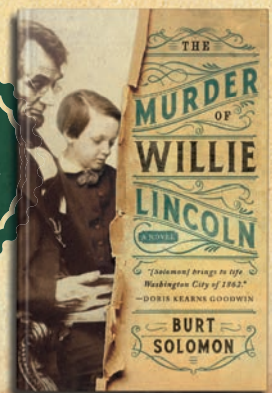


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MISEDUCATION

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AMERICAN

BOY

WHY BOYS CRACK UP AT RAPE “JOKES,” THINK
HAVING A GIRLFRIEND IS “GAY,” AND STILL CAN’T
CRY—AND WHY WE NEED TO GIVE THEM NEW AND
BETTER MODELS OF MASCULINITY

by

PEGGY ORENSTEIN



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANTHONY BLASKO

I knew nothing about Cole before
meeting him; he was just a name on
a list of boys at a private school
outside Boston who had volunteered to
talk with me (or perhaps had had their
arm twisted a bit by a counselor).

The afternoon of our first interview, I was running late. As I rushed down a hallway at the school, I noticed a boy sitting outside the library, waiting—it had to be him. He was staring impassively ahead, both feet planted on the floor, hands resting loosely on his thighs.

My first reaction was *Oh no*.

It was totally unfair, a scarlet letter of personal bias. Cole would later describe himself to me as a “typical tall white athlete” guy, and that is exactly what I saw. At 18, he stood more than 6 feet tall, with broad shoulders and short-clipped hair. His neck was so thick that it seemed to merge into his jawline, and he was planning to enter a military academy for college the following fall. His friends were “the jock group,” he’d tell me. “They’re what you’d expect, I guess. Let’s leave it at that.” If I had closed my eyes and described the boy I imagined would never open up to me, it would have been him.

But Cole surprised me. He pulled up a picture on his phone of his girlfriend, whom he’d been dating for the past 18 months, describing her proudly as “way smarter than I am,” a feminist, and a bedrock of emotional support. He also confided how he’d worried four years earlier, during his first weeks as a freshman on a scholarship at a new school, that he wouldn’t know how to act with other guys, wouldn’t be able to make friends. “I could talk to *girls* platonically,” he said. “That was easy. But

being around guys was different. I needed to be a ‘bro,’ and I didn’t know how to do that.”

Whenever Cole uttered the word *bro*, he shifted his weight to take up more space, rocking back in his chair, and spoke from low in his throat, like he’d inhaled a lungful of weed. He grinned when I pointed that out. “Yeah,” he said, “that’s part of it: seeming relaxed and never intrusive, yet somehow bringing out that aggression on the sports field. Because a ‘bro’—he rocked back again—“is always, always an athlete.”

Cole eventually found his people on the crew team, but it wasn’t a smooth fit at first. He recalled an incident two years prior when a senior was bragging in the locker room about how he’d convinced one of Cole’s female classmates—a *young* sophomore, Cole emphasized—that they were an item, then started hooking up with other girls behind her back. And the guy wasn’t shy about sharing the details. Cole and a friend of his, another sophomore, told him to knock it off. “I started to explain why it wasn’t appropriate,” Cole said, “but he just laughed.”

The next day, a second senior started talking about “getting back at” a “bitch” who’d dumped him. Cole’s friend spoke up again, but this time Cole stayed silent. “And as I continued to step back” and the other sophomore “continued to step up, you could tell that the guys on the team stopped liking him as much. They stopped listening to him, too. It’s almost as if he spent all his

social currency” trying to get them to stop making sexist jokes. “Meanwhile, I was sitting there”—Cole thumped his chest—“too afraid to spend any of mine, and I just had buckets left.

“I don’t know what to do,” he continued earnestly. “Once I’m in the military, and I’m a part of that culture, I don’t want to have to choose between my own dignity and my relationship with others I’m serving with. But . . .” He looked me in the eye. “How do I make it so I don’t have to choose?”

I’VE SPENT TWO YEARS talking with boys across America—more than 100 of them between the ages of 16 and 21—about masculinity, sex, and love: about the forces, seen and unseen, that shape them as men. Though I spoke with boys of all races and ethnicities, I stuck to those who were in college or college-bound, because like it or not, they’re the ones most likely to set cultural norms. Nearly every guy I interviewed held relatively egalitarian views about girls, at least their role in the public sphere. They considered their female classmates to be smart and competent, entitled to their place on the athletic field and in school leadership, deserving of their admission to college and of professional opportunities. They all had female friends; most had gay male friends as well. That was a huge shift from what you might have seen 50, 40, maybe even 20 years ago. They could also easily reel off the excesses of masculinity. They’d seen the headlines about mass shootings, domestic violence, sexual harassment, campus rape, presidential Twitter tantrums, and Supreme Court confirmation hearings. A Big Ten football player I interviewed bandied about the term *toxic masculinity*. “Everyone knows what that is,” he said, when I seemed surprised.

Yet when asked to describe the attributes of “the ideal guy,” those same boys appeared to be harking back to 1955. Dominance. Aggression. Rugged good looks (with an emphasis on height). Sexual prowess. Stoicism. Athleticism. Wealth (at least some day). It’s not that all of these qualities, properly channeled, are bad. But while a 2018 national survey of more than 1,000 10-to-19-year-olds conducted by the polling firm PerryUndem found that young women believed there were many ways to be a girl—they could shine in math, sports, music, leadership (the big caveat being that they still felt valued *primarily* for their appearance)—young men described just one narrow route to successful masculinity. One-third said they felt compelled to suppress their feelings, to “suck it up” or “be a man” when they were sad or scared, and more than 40 percent said that when they were angry, society expected them to be combative. In another survey, which compared young men from the U.S., the U.K., and Mexico, Americans reported more social pressure to be ever-ready for sex and to get with as many women as possible; they also acknowledged more stigma against homosexuality, and they received more messages that they should control their female partners, as in: Men “deserve to know” the whereabouts of their girlfriends or wives at all times.

Feminism may have provided girls with a powerful alternative to conventional femininity, and a language with which to express the myriad problems-that-have-no-name, but there have been no credible equivalents for boys. Quite the contrary: The definition of *masculinity* seems to be in some respects contracting. When

asked what traits society values most in boys, only 2 percent of male respondents in the PerryUndem survey said honesty and morality, and only 8 percent said leadership skills—traits that are, of course, admirable in anyone but have traditionally been considered masculine. When I asked my subjects, as I always did, what they liked about being a boy, most of them drew a blank. “Huh,” mused Josh, a college sophomore at Washington State. (All the teenagers I spoke with are identified by pseudonyms.) “That’s interesting. I never really thought about that. You hear a lot more about what is *wrong* with guys.”

While following the conventional script may still bring social and professional rewards to boys and men, research shows that those who rigidly adhere to certain masculine norms are not only more likely to harass and bully others but to *themselves* be victims of verbal or physical violence. They’re more prone to binge-drinking, risky sexual behavior, and getting in car accidents. They are also less happy than other guys, with higher depression rates and fewer friends in whom they can confide.

It wasn’t always thus. According to Andrew Smiler, a psychologist who has studied the history of Western masculinity, the ideal late-19th-century man was compassionate, a caretaker, but such qualities lost favor as paid labor moved from homes to factories during industrialization. In fact, the Boy Scouts, whose creed urges its members to be loyal, friendly, courteous, and kind, was founded in 1910 in part to counter that dehumanizing trend. Smiler attributes further distortions in masculinity to a century-long backlash against women’s rights. During World War I, women proved that they could keep the economy humming on their own, and soon afterward they secured the vote. Instead of embracing gender equality, he says, the country’s leaders “doubled down” on the inalienable male right to power, emphasizing men’s supposedly more logical and less emotional nature as a prerequisite for leadership.

Then, during the second half of the 20th century, traditional paths to manhood—early marriage, breadwinning—began to close, along with the positive traits associated with them. Today many parents are unsure of how to raise a boy, what sort of masculinity to encourage in their sons. But as I learned from talking with boys themselves, the culture of adolescence, which fuses hyper-rationality with domination, sexual conquest, and a glorification of male violence, fills the void.

For Cole, as for many boys, this stunted masculinity is a yardstick against which all choices, even those seemingly irrelevant to male identity, are measured. When he had a choice, he would team up with girls on school projects, to avoid the possibility of appearing subordinate to another guy. “With a girl, it feels safer to talk and ask questions, to work together or to admit that I did something wrong and want help,” Cole said. During his junior year, he briefly suggested to his crew teammates that they go vegan for a while, just to show that athletes could. “And everybody was like, ‘Cole, that is the dumbest idea ever. We’d be the slowest in any race.’ That’s somewhat true—we do need protein. We do need fats and salts and carbs that we get from meat. But another reason they all thought it was stupid is because being vegans would make us *pussies*.”

LEARNING TO “MAN UP”

There is no difference between the sexes' need for connection in infancy, nor between their capacity for empathy—there's actually some evidence that male infants are more expressive than females. Yet, from the get-go, boys are relegated to an impoverished emotional landscape. In a classic study, adults shown a video of an infant startled by a jack-in-the-box were more likely to presume the baby was “angry” if they were first told the child was male. Mothers of young children have repeatedly been found to talk more to their girls and to employ a broader, richer emotional vocabulary with them; with their sons, again, they tend to linger on anger. As for fathers, they speak with less emotional nuance than mothers regardless of their child's sex. Despite that, according to Judy Y. Chu, a human-biology lecturer at Stanford who conducted a study of boys from pre-K through first grade, little boys have a keen understanding of emotions and a desire for close relationships. But by age 5 or 6, they've learned to knock that stuff off, at least in public: to disconnect from feelings of weakness, reject friendships with girls (or take them underground, outside of school), and become more hierarchical in their behavior.

By adolescence, says the Harvard psychologist William Pollock, boys become “shame-phobic,” convinced that peers will lose respect for them if they discuss their personal problems. My conversations bore this out. Boys routinely confided that they felt denied—by male peers, girlfriends, the media, teachers, coaches, and especially their fathers—the full spectrum of human expression. Cole, for instance, spent most of his childhood with his mother, grandmother, and sister—his parents split up when he was 10 and his dad, who was in the military, was often away. Cole spoke of his mom with unbridled love and respect. His father was another matter. “He's a nice guy,” Cole said—caring and involved, even after the divorce—“but I can't be myself around him. I feel like I need to keep everything that's in here”—Cole tapped his chest again—“behind a wall, where he can't see it. It's a taboo—like, not as bad as incest, but ...”

Rob, an 18-year-old from New Jersey in his freshman year at a North Carolina college, said his father would tell him to “man up” when he was struggling in school or with baseball. “That's why I never talk to anybody about my problems.” He'd always think, *If you can't handle this on your own, then you aren't a man; you aren't trying hard enough.* Other boys also pointed to their fathers as the chief of the gender police, though in a less obvious way. “It's not like my dad is some alcoholic, emotionally unavailable asshole with a pulse,” said a college sophomore in Southern California. “He's a normal, loving, charismatic guy who's not at all intimidating.” But “there's a block there. There's a hesitation, even though I don't like to admit that. A hesitation

to talk about ... anything, really. We learn to confide in *nobody*. You sort of train yourself not to feel.”

I met Rob about four months after he'd broken up with his high-school girlfriend. The two had dated for more than three years—“I really did love her,” he said—and although their colleges were far apart, they'd decided to try to stay together. Then, a few weeks into freshman year, Rob heard from a friend that she was cheating on him. “So I cut her off,” he said, snapping his fingers. “I stopped talking to her and forgot about her completely.” Only ... not really. Although he didn't use the word, Rob became depressed. The excitement he'd felt about leaving home, starting college, and rushing a fraternity all drained away, and, as the semester wore on, it didn't come back.

When I asked whom he talked to during that time, he shrugged. If he had told his friends he was “hung up” on a girl, “they'd be like, ‘Stop being a bitch.’” Rob looked glum. The only person with whom he had been able to drop his guard was his girlfriend, but that was no longer an option.

Girlfriends, mothers, and in some cases sisters were the most common confidants of the boys I met. While it's wonderful to know they have *someone* to talk to—and I'm sure mothers, in particular, savor the role—teaching boys that women are responsible for emotional labor, for processing men's emotional lives in ways that would be emasculating for them to do themselves, comes at a price for both sexes. Among other things, that dependence can leave men unable to identify or express their own emotions, and ill-equipped to form caring, lasting adult relationships.

By Thanksgiving break, Rob was so distraught that he had what he called a “mental breakdown” one night while chatting in the kitchen with his mom. “I was so stressed out,” he said. “Classes. The thing with my girlfriend.” He couldn't describe what that “breakdown” felt like (though he did say it “scared the crap” out of his mom, who immediately demanded, “Tell me everything”). All he could say definitively was that he didn't cry. “Never,” he insisted. “I don't cry, *ever*.”

The definition of masculinity seems to be contracting. When asked what traits society values most in boys, only 2 percent of male survey respondents said honesty and morality.



I paid close attention when boys mentioned crying—doing it, not doing it, wanting to do it, not being able to do it. For most, it was a rare and humiliating event—a dangerous crack in a carefully constructed edifice. A college sophomore in Chicago told me that he hadn't been able to cry when his parents divorced. "I really *wanted* to," he said. "I *needed* to cry." His solution: He streamed three movies about the Holocaust over the weekend. That worked.

As someone who, by virtue of my sex, has always had permission to weep, I didn't initially understand this. Only after multiple interviews did I realize that when boys confided in me about crying—or, even more so, when they teared up right in front of me—they were taking a risk, trusting me with something private and precious: evidence of vulnerability, or a desire for it. Or, as with Rob, an inability to acknowledge any human frailty that was so poignant, it made me want to, well, cry.

BRO CULTURE

While my interview subjects struggled when I asked what they liked about being a boy, the most frequent response was sports. They recalled their early days on the playing field with almost romantic warmth. But I was struck by how many had dropped athletics they'd enjoyed because they couldn't stand the *Lord of the Flies* mentality of teammates or coaches. Perhaps the most extreme example was Ethan, a kid from the Bay Area who had been recruited by a small liberal-arts college in New England to play lacrosse. He said he'd expected to encounter the East Coast "lax bro" culture, but he'd underestimated its intensity. "It was all about sex" and bragging about hooking up, and even the coaches endorsed victim-blaming, Ethan told me. "They weren't like that in class or around other people; it was a super-liberal school. But once you got them in the locker room ..." He shook his head. "It was one of the most jarring experiences of my life."

As a freshman, Ethan didn't feel he could challenge his older teammates, especially without support from the coaches. So he quit the team; not only that, he transferred. "If I'd stayed, there would've been a lot of pressure on me to play, a lot of resentment, and I would've run into those guys all the time. This way I didn't really have to explain anything." At his new school, Ethan didn't play lacrosse, or anything else.

What the longtime sportswriter Robert Lipsyte calls "jock culture" (or what the boys I talked with more often referred to as "bro culture") is the dark underbelly of male-dominated enclaves, whether or not they formally involve athletics: all-boys' schools, fraternity houses, Wall Street, Silicon Valley, Hollywood, the military. Even as such groups promote bonding, even as they

preach honor, pride, and integrity, they tend to condition young men to treat anyone who is not "on the team" as the enemy (the only women who ordinarily make the cut are blood relatives—*bro*s before *hos*!), justifying any hostility toward them. Loyalty is paramount, and masculinity is habitually established through misogynist language and homophobia.

As a senior in high school, Cole was made captain of the crew team. He relished being part of a unit, a band of brothers. When he raced, he imagined pulling each stroke for the guy in front of him, for the guy behind him—never for himself alone. But not everyone could muster such higher purpose. "Crew demands you push yourself to a threshold of pain and keep yourself there," Cole said. "And it's hard to find something to motivate you to do that other than anger and aggression."

I asked him about how his teammates talked in the locker room. That question always made these young men squirm. They'd rather talk about looking at porn, erectile dysfunction, premature ejaculation—*anything* else. Cole cut his eyes to the side, shifted in his seat, and sighed deeply. "Okay," he finally said, "so here's my best shot: We definitely say *fuck* a lot; *fuckin'* can go anywhere in a sentence. And we call each other pussies, bitches. We never say the N-word, though. That's going too far."

"What about *fag*?" I asked.

"No," he said, shaking his head firmly.

"So why can't you say *fag* or the N-word but you can say *pussy* and *bitch*? Aren't those just as offensive?"

"One of my friends said we probably shouldn't say those words anymore either, but what would we replace them with? We couldn't think of anything that bites as much."

"*Bites*?"

"Yeah. It's like ... for some reason *pussy* just works. When someone calls me a pussy—'Don't be a pussy! Come on! Fuckin' go! Pull! Pull! Pull!'—it just flows. If someone said, 'Come on, Cole, don't be weak! Be tough! Pull! Pull! Pull!,' it just wouldn't get inside my head the same way. I don't know why that is." He paused. "Well," he said, "maybe I do. Maybe I just try not to dig too deeply."

ALTHOUGH LOSING GROUND in more progressive circles, like the one Cole runs in, *fag* remained pervasive in the language of the boys I interviewed—including those who insisted that they would never use the word in reference to an actual homosexual. *Fag* has become less a comment on a boy's sexuality, says the University of Oregon sociology professor C. J. Pascoe, than a referendum on his manhood. It can be used to mock anything, she told me, even something as random as a guy "dropping the meat out of his sandwich." (Perhaps oddest to me, Pascoe found that one of the more common reasons boys get tagged with *fag* is for acting romantically with a girl. That's seen as heterosexual in the "wrong" way, which explains why one high-school junior told me that having a girlfriend was "gay.") That fluidity, the elusiveness of the word's definition, only intensifies its power, much like *slut* for girls.

Recently, Pascoe turned her attention to *no homo*, a phrase that gained traction in the 1990s. She sifted through more than

A college sophomore told me that he hadn't been able to cry when his parents divorced. "I really wanted to," he said. "I needed to." His solution: He streamed three movies about the Holocaust over the weekend.

1,000 tweets, primarily by young men, that included the phrase. Most were expressing a positive emotion, sometimes as innocuous as "I love chocolate ice cream, #nohomo" or "I loved the movie *The Day After Tomorrow*, #nohomo." "A lot of times they were saying things like 'I miss you' to a friend or 'We should hang out soon,'" she said. "Just normal expressions of joy or connection." *No homo* is a form of inoculation against insults from other guys, Pascoe concluded, a "shield that allows boys to be fully human."

Just because some young men now draw the line at referring to someone who is openly gay as a fag doesn't mean, by the way, that gay men (or men with traits that read as gay) are suddenly safe. If anything, the gay guys I met were more conscious of the rules of manhood than their straight peers were. They had to be—and because of that, they were like spies in the house of hypermasculinity.

Mateo, 17, attended the same Boston-area high school as Cole, also on a scholarship, but the two could not have presented more differently. Mateo, whose father is Salvadoran, was slim and tan, with an animated expression and a tendency to wave his arms as he spoke. Where Cole sat straight and still, Mateo crossed his legs at the knee and swung his foot, propping his chin on one hand.

This was Mateo's second private high school. The oldest of six children, he had been identified as academically gifted and encouraged by an eighth-grade teacher to apply to an all-boys prep school for his freshman year. When he arrived, he discovered that his classmates were nearly all white, athletic, affluent, and, as far as he could tell, straight. Mateo—Latino and gay, the son of a janitor—was none of those things. He felt immediately conscious of how he held himself, of how he sat, and especially of the pitch of his voice. He tried lowering it, but that felt unnatural, so he withdrew from conversation altogether. He changed the way he walked as well, to avoid being targeted as "girly." "One of my

only friends there was gay too," he said, "and he was a lot more outward about it. He just got *destroyed*."

Guys who identify as straight but aren't athletic, or are involved in the arts, or have a lot of female friends, all risk having their masculinity impugned. What has changed for this generation, though, is that some young men, particularly if they grew up around LGBTQ people, don't rise to the bait. "I don't mind when people mistake me for being gay," said Luke, a high-school senior from New York City. "It's more of an annoyance than anything, because I want people to believe me when I say I'm straight." The way he described himself did, indeed, tick every stereotypical box. "I'm a very thin person," he said. "I like clothing. I care about my appearance in maybe a more delicate way. I'm very in touch with my sensitive side. So when people think I'm gay?" He shrugged. "It can feel like more of a compliment. Like, 'Oh, you like the way I dress? *Thank you!*'"

One of Luke's friends, who was labeled "the faggot frosh" in ninth grade, is not so philosophical. "He treats everything as a test of his masculinity," Luke told me. "Like, once when I was wearing red pants, I heard him say to other people, 'He looks like such a faggot.' I didn't care, and maybe in that situation no one was really harmed, but when you apply that attitude to whole populations, you end up with Donald Trump as president."

W ' S AND L ' S

Sexual conquest—or perhaps more specifically, bragging about your experiences to other boys—is, arguably, the most crucial aspect of toxic masculinity. Nate, who attended a public high school in the Bay Area, knew this well. At a party held near the beginning of his junior year of high school, he sank deep into the couch, trying to look chill. Kids were doing shots and smoking weed. Some were Juuling. Nate didn't drink much himself and never got high. He wasn't morally opposed to it; he just didn't like the feeling of being out of control.

At 16, reputation meant everything to Nate, and certain things could cement your status. "The whole goal of going to a party is to hook up with girls and then tell your guys about it," he said. And there's this "race for experience," because if you get behind, by the time you do hook up with a girl "she'll have hit it with, like, five guys already. Then she's going to know how to do things" you don't—and that's a problem, if she tells people "you've got floppy lips" or "don't know how to get her bra off."

A lanky boy with dark, liquid eyes and curly hair that resisted all attempts at taming, Nate put himself in the middle of his school's social hierarchy: friends with both the "popular" and "lower" kids. Still, he'd hooked up with only three girls since ninth grade—kissing, getting under their shirts—but none had wanted a repeat. That left him worried about his skills. He is afraid of intimacy, he told me sincerely. "It's a huge self-esteem suck."

It would probably be more accurate to say that Nate was afraid of having drunken sexual interactions with a girl he did not know or trust. But it was all about credentialing. “Guys need to prove themselves to their guys,” Nate said. To do that, “they’re going to be dominating.” They’re going to “push.” Because the girl is just there “as a means for him to get off and to brag.”

Before the start of this school year, Nate’s “dry spell” had seemed to be ending. He’d been in a relationship with a girl that lasted a full two weeks, until other guys told him she was “slutty”—their word, he hastened to add, not his. Although any hookup is marginally better than none, Nate said, you only truly earn points for getting sexual with the right kind of girl. “If you hook up with a girl below your status, it’s an ‘L,’” he explained. “A loss. Like, a bad move.” So he stopped talking to the girl, which was too bad. He’d really liked her.

After a short trip to the kitchen to watch his friend Kyle stand on a table and drunkenly try to pour Sprite from a can into a shot

glass, Nate returned to the couch, starting to relax as people swirled around him. Suddenly Nicole, the party’s host and a senior, plopped onto his lap, handing him a shot of vodka. Nate was impressed, if a little confused. Usually, if a girl wanted to hook up with you, there were texts and Snapchats, and if you said yes, it was on; everyone would be anticipating it, and expecting a postmortem.

Nate thought Nicole was “pretty hot”—she had a great body, he said—though he’d never been especially interested in her before this moment. Still, he knew that hooking up with her would be a “W.” A big one. He glanced around the room subtly, wanting to make sure, without appearing to care, that everyone who mattered—everyone “relevant”—saw what was going down. A couple of guys gave him little nods. One winked. Another slapped him on the shoulder. Nate feigned nonchalance. Meanwhile, he told me, “I was just trying not to pop a boner.”

Nicole took Nate’s hand and led him to an empty bedroom. He got through the inevitable, cringey moments when you actually have to *talk* to your partner, then, finally, they started kissing. In his anxiety, Nate bit Nicole’s lip. Hard. “I was thinking, *Oh God! What do I do now?*” But he kept going. He took off her top and undid her bra. He took off his own shirt. Then she took off her pants. “And that,” he said, “was the first time I ever saw a vagina. I did not know what to do with it.” He recalled that his friends had said girls go crazy if you stick your fingers up there and make the “come here” motion, so he tried it, but Nicole just lay there. He didn’t ask what might feel better to her, because that would have been admitting ignorance.

After a few more agonizing minutes, Nicole announced that she wanted to see what was going on upstairs, and left, Nate trailing behind. A friend handed him a bottle of Jack Daniel’s. Another high-fived him. A third said, “Dude, you hit that!” Maybe the hookup hadn’t been a disaster after all: He still had bragging rights.

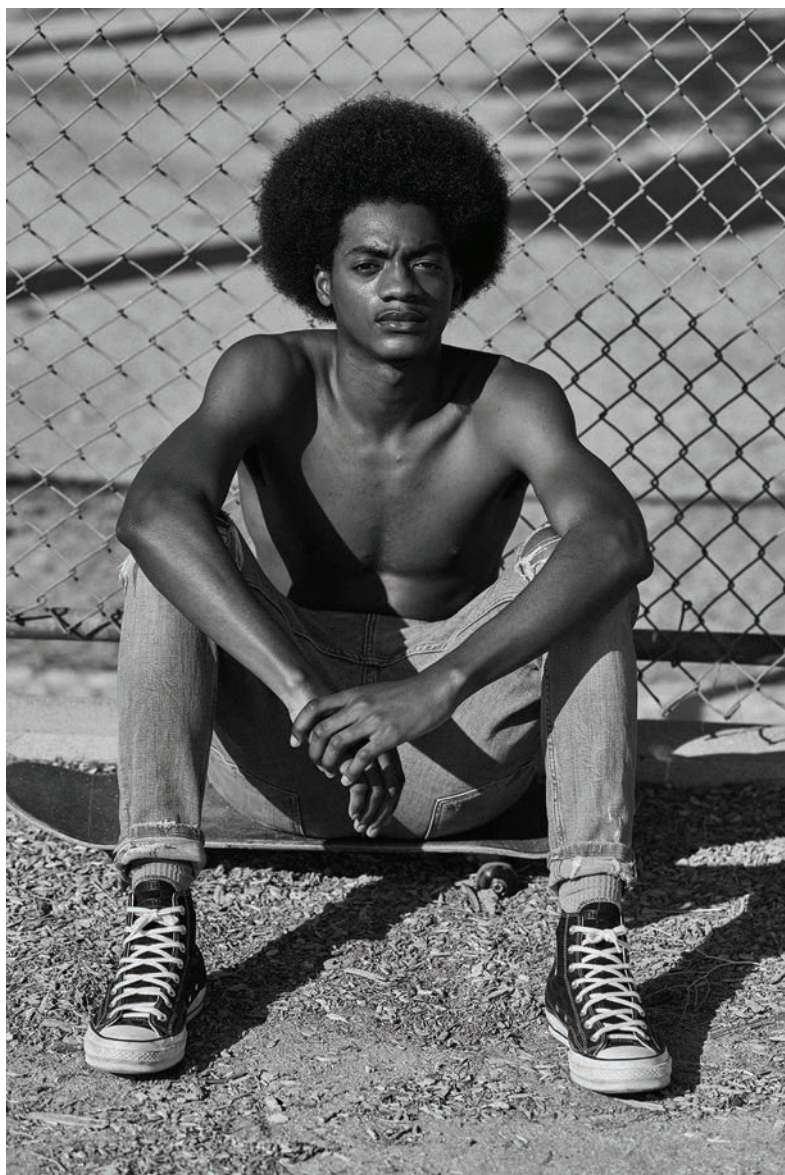
Then he heard a senior, a guy Nate considered kind of a friend, loudly ask Nicole, “Why would you hook up with *Nate?*”

She giggled. “Oh, I was drunk!” she said. “I was *so* drunk!”

They were calling him an “L.”

By Monday morning, Nicole had spread the word that Nate was bad at hooking up: that he’d bit her lip, that he didn’t know how to finger a girl. That his nails were *ragged*. “The stereotype is that guys go into gory detail,” Nate said, but “it’s the other way around.” Guys will brag, but they’re not specific. Girls will go into “what his penis looked like,” every single thing he did.

Nate said he felt “completely emasculated,” so mortified that he told his mom he was sick and stayed home from school the next day. “I was basically *crying*,” he said. “I was like, *Shit! I fucked up.*”



No question, gossip about poor “performance” can destroy a guy’s reputation almost as surely as being called a “slut” or a “prude” can destroy a girl’s. As a result, the boys I talked with *were* concerned with female satisfaction during a hookup; they just didn’t typically define it as the girl having an orgasm. They believed it to be a function of their own endurance and, to a lesser extent, penis size. A college freshman in Los Angeles recalled a high-school classmate who’d had sex with a girl who told everyone he’d ejaculated really quickly: “He got the nickname Second Sam. That basically scared the crap out of all the other guys.” A college senior in Boston recounted how he would glance at the clock when he started penetration. “I’d think, *I have to last five minutes, minimum,*” he said. “And once I could do that, I’d think, *I need to get to double digits.* I don’t know if it’s necessarily about your partner’s enjoyment. It’s more about getting beyond the point where you’d be embarrassed, maintaining your pride. It turns sex into a task—one I enjoy to a certain degree, but one where you’re monitoring your performance rather than living in the moment.”

Eventually, Nate decided that he had to take a stand, if only to make returning to school bearable. He texted Nicole and said, “I’m sorry that you didn’t enjoy it, [but] I would never roast you. Why are you doing this?” She felt “really bad,” he said. “She stopped telling people, but it took me until the next semester to recover.”

HOW MISOGYNY BECOMES “HILARIOUS”

No matter how often I heard it, the brutal language that even a conscientious young man like Nate used to describe sexual contact—*you hit that!*—always unnerved me. In mixed-sex groups, teenagers may talk about hooking up (already impersonal), but when guys are on their own, they nail, they pound, they bang, they smash, they hammer. They tap that ass, they tear her up. It can be hard to tell whether they have engaged in an intimate act or just returned from a construction site.

It’s not like I imagined boys would gush about making sweet, sweet love to the ladies, but why

was their language so *weaponized*? The answer, I came to believe, was that locker-room talk isn’t about sex at all, which is why guys were ashamed to discuss it openly with me. The (often clearly exaggerated) stories boys tell are really about power: using aggression toward women to connect and to validate one another as heterosexual, or to claim top spots in the adolescent sexual hierarchy. Dismissing that as “banter” denies the ways that language can desensitize—abrade boys’ ability to see girls as people deserving of respect and dignity in sexual encounters.

For evidence, look no further than the scandals that keep popping up at the country’s top colleges: Harvard, Amherst, Columbia, Yale (the scene of an especially notorious 2010 fraternity chant, “No means yes; yes means anal”). Most recently, in the spring of 2019, at the politically progressive Swarthmore College, in Pennsylvania, two fraternities disbanded after student-run publications released more than 100 pages of “minutes” from house meetings a few years earlier that included, among other



things, jokes about a “rape attic” and the acquiring of roofies, “finger blasting” a member’s 10-year-old sister, and vomiting on women during sex.

When called out, boys typically claim that they thought they were just being “funny.” And in a way that makes sense—when left unexamined, such “humor” may seem like an extension of the gross-out comedy of childhood. Little boys are famous for their fart jokes, booger jokes, poop jokes. It’s how they test boundaries, understand the human body, gain a little cred among their peers. But, as can happen with sports, their glee in that can both enable and camouflage sexism. The boy who, at age 10, asks his friends the difference between a dead baby and a bowling ball may or may not find it equally uproarious, at 16, to share what a woman and a bowling ball have in common (you can Google it). He may or may not post ever-escalating “jokes” about women, or African Americans, or homosexuals, or disabled people on a group Snapchat. He may or may not send “funny” texts to friends about “girls who need to be raped,” or think it’s hysterical to surprise a buddy with a meme in which a woman is being gagged by a penis, her mascara mixed with her tears. He may or may not, at 18, scrawl the names of his hookups on a wall in his all-male dorm, as part of a year-long competition to see who can “pull” the most. Perfectly nice, bright, polite boys I interviewed had done one or another of these things.

How does that happen? I talked with a 15-year-old from New York who had been among a group of boys suspended from school for posting more than 100 racist and sexist “jokes” about classmates on a group Finsta (a secondary, or “fake,” Instagram account that is in many cases more genuine than a “Rinsta,” or “real” account). “The Finsta became very competitive,” he said. “You wanted to make your friends laugh, but when you’re not face-to-face,” you can’t tell whether you’ll get a reaction, “so you go one step beyond.” It was “that combination of competitiveness and that ... *disconnect* that triggered it to get worse and worse.”

At the most disturbing end of the continuum, “funny” and “hilarious” become a defense against charges of sexual harassment or assault. To cite just one example, a boy from Steubenville, Ohio, was captured on video joking about the repeated violation of an unconscious girl at a party by a couple of high-school football players. “She is so raped,” he said, laughing. “They raped her quicker than Mike Tyson.” When someone off camera suggested that rape wasn’t funny, he retorted, “It isn’t funny—it’s *hilarious!*”

“Hilarious” is another way, under the pretext of horseplay or group bonding, that boys learn to disregard others’ feelings as well as their own. “Hilarious” is a haven, offering distance when something is inappropriate, confusing, depressing, unnerving, or horrifying; when something defies boys’ ethics. It allows them to subvert a more compassionate response that could be read as unmasculine—and makes sexism and misogyny feel transgressive rather than supportive of an age-old status quo. Boys may know when something is wrong; they may even know that true manhood—or maybe just common decency—compels them to speak up. Yet, too often, they fear that if they do, they’ll be marginalized or, worse, themselves become the target of derision from other boys. Masculinity, then, becomes not only about what





boys do say, but about what they don't—or won't, or *can't*—say, even when they wish they could. The psychologists Dan Kindlon and Michael Thompson, the authors of *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys*, have pointed out that silence in the face of cruelty or sexism is how too many boys become men. Charis Denison, a sex educator in the Bay Area, puts it another way: “At one time or another, every young man will get a letter of admission to ‘dick school.’ The question is, will he drop out, graduate, or go for an advanced degree?”

MIDWAY THROUGH COLE'S freshman year in military college, I FaceTimed him to see how he'd resolved the conflict between his personal values and those of the culture in which he found himself. As he'd expected, most of his classmates were male, and he said there was a lot of what passed for friendly ribbing: giving one another “love taps” on the back of the head; blocking one another's paths, then pretending to pick a fight; grabbing one another's asses; pretending to lean in for a kiss. Giving someone a hard time, Cole said, was always “easy humor,” but it could spiral into something more troubling pretty quickly. When one of his dorm mates joked to another, “I'm going to piss on you in your sleep,” for instance, the other boy shot back, “If you do, I'll fucking rape you.” For better or worse, Cole said, that sort of comment no longer rattled him.

Although he had been adamantly against the epithet *fag* when we met, Cole found himself using it, reasoning, as other boys did, that it was “more like ‘You suck’ or ‘You're lame.’” However, at least one of his friends had revealed himself to be legitimately homophobic, declaring that being gay was un-American (“I didn't know that about him until *after* we became friends,” Cole insisted). And Cole had not met a single openly LGBTQ student at the school. He certainly wouldn't want to be out in this environment if he were gay. Nor, he said, would he want to be Asian—the two Asian American boys in his dorm were ostracized and treated like foreigners; both seemed miserable.

“I do feel kind of like a cop-out for letting all the little things slide,” Cole said. “It's a cop-out to not fight the good fight. But, you know, there was that thing I tried sophomore year ... It just didn't work. I could be a social-justice warrior here, but I don't think anyone would listen to me. *And* I'd have no friends.”

The #MeToo movement has created an opportunity, a mandate not only to discuss sexual violence but to engage young men in authentic, long-overdue conversations about gender and intimacy. I don't want to suggest that this is easy. Back in the early 1990s, when I began writing about how girls' confidence drops during adolescence, parents would privately tell me that they were afraid to raise outspoken daughters, girls who stood up for themselves and their rights, because they might be excluded by peers and called “bossy” (or worse). Although there is still much work to be done, things are different for young women today. Now it's time to rethink assumptions about how we raise boys. That will require models of manhood that are neither ashamed nor regressive, and that emphasize emotional flexibility—a hallmark of mental health. Stoicism is valuable sometimes, as is free expression; toughness and tenderness can coexist in one human. In the right context, physical

aggression is fun, satisfying, even thrilling. If your response to all of this is *Obviously*, I'd say: Sure, but it's a mistake to underestimate the strength and durability of the cultural machinery at work on adolescent boys. Real change will require a sustained, collective effort on the part of fathers, mothers, teachers, coaches. (A study of 2,000 male high-school athletes found significantly reduced rates of dating violence and a greater likelihood of intervening to stop other boys' abusive conduct among those who participated in weekly coach-led discussions about consent, personal responsibility, and respectful behavior.)

We have to purposefully and repeatedly broaden the masculine repertoire for dealing with disappointment, anger, desire. We have to say not just what we don't want from boys but what we do want from them. Instructing them to “respect women” and to “not get anyone pregnant” isn't enough. As one college sophomore told me, “That's kind of like telling someone who's learning to drive not to run over any little old ladies and then handing him the car keys. Well, of course you think you're not going to run over an old lady. But you still don't know how to drive.” By staying quiet, we leave many boys in a state of confusion—or worse, push them into a defensive crouch, primed to display their manhood in the one way that is definitely on offer: by being a dick.

During our first conversation, Cole had told me that he'd decided to join the military after learning in high-school history class about the My Lai massacre—the infamous 1968 slaughter by U.S. troops of hundreds of unarmed Vietnamese civilians along with the mass rape of girls as young as 10. “I want to be able to be in the same position as someone like that commanding officer and *not* order people to do something like that,” he'd said. I'd been impressed. Given that noble goal, was a single failure to call out sexism a reason to stop trying? I understood that the personal cost might be greater than the impact. I also understood that, developmentally, adolescents want and need to feel a strong sense of belonging. But if Cole didn't practice standing up, if he didn't figure out a way to assert his values and find others who shared them, who was he?

“I knew you were going to ask me something like that,” he said. “I don't know. In this hyper-masculine culture where you call guys ‘pussies’ and ‘bitches’ and ‘maggots’—”

“Did you say ‘maggots,’ or ‘faggots?’” I interrupted.

“Maggots. Like worms. So you're equating maggots to women and to women's body parts to convince young men like me that we're strong. To go up against that, to convince people that we don't need to put others down to lift ourselves up ... I don't know. I would need to be some sort of superman.” Cole fell silent.

“Maybe the best I can do is to just be a decent guy,” he continued. “The best I can do is lead by example.” He paused again, furrowed his brow, then added, “I really hope that will make a difference.” *A*

Peggy Orenstein is the author of Boys & Sex, to be published in January by Harper, an imprint of HarperCollins. This article is adapted from that book.



KEEPING A NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTION IS HARD. **WE'VE MADE IT EASY.**

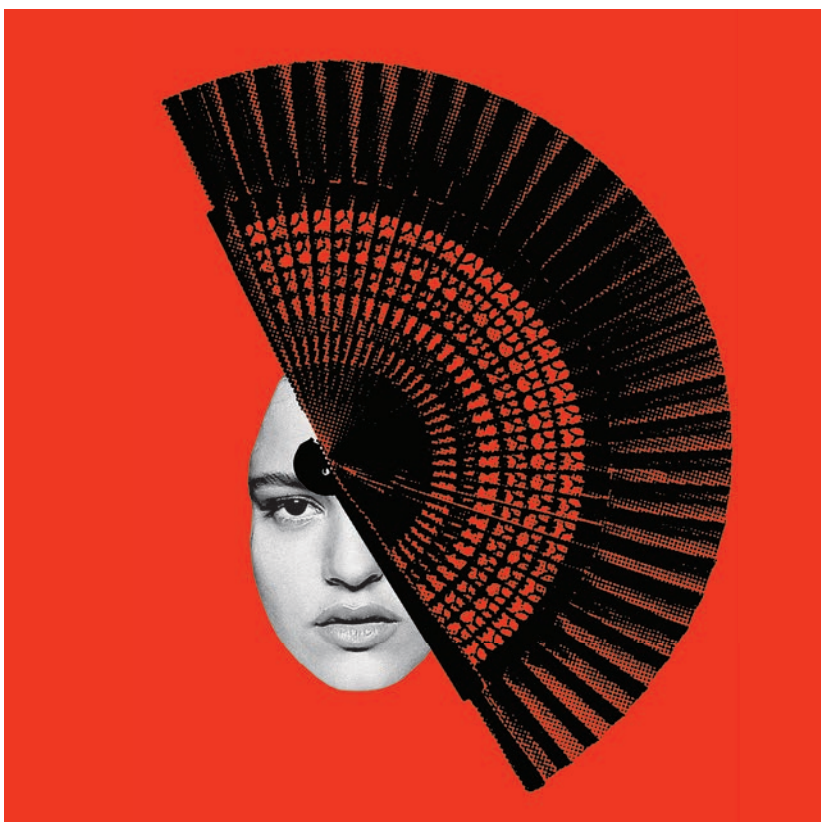
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Culture & Critics



OMNIVORE

How Flamenco Went Pop

The Spanish star Rosalía has made the harrowing music of Andalusia into a global phenomenon.

By James Parker

God must have made Camarón de la Isla weak for a purer display of glory. Camarón was small and pale—his name means “shrimp” in Spanish—and he sat on a wooden chair and sang. His pained and primitive voice roared through him, with no concern for his person; his fragility increased its power. Camarón was Romany and his art was flamenco, the elaborate and harrowing music chiefly associated with the Andalusian Romanies of southern Spain. In his lifetime he was flamenco’s first superstar, and a divinity to his people. Rock-and-roll habits depleted him; lung cancer finished him off at the age of 41. His body was taken back to his hometown of San Fernando, in Cádiz, where his coffin bobbed and tilted delicately on the surgings of a massive, stricken crowd.

Why am I telling you, now, about Camarón de la Isla, a heroin-snorting flamenco singer who died 28 years ago? Because of Rosalía: the Hispanic Beyoncé, the Iberian Björk, the Catalan Sinead O’Connor. A 26-year-old Spanish avant-pop artist with global reach, Rosalía is topping charts, winning awards, and finding a vast audience for her unique sound. And she loves Camarón. She was 13, and he was her first exposure to flamenco, his voice emanating hoarsely and shatteringly from a nearby car stereo. “*Me explotó la cabeza*,” as she told *El Mundo*: My mind was blown.

Possessed of a daringly syncretic musical intelligence, Rosalía has inhaled flamenco. She has absorbed the moods and structures of this untraceably old Romany blues into her gleaming 21st-century pop. Polyrhythmic handclaps; wild, melismatic vocals; Phrygian scales—they’re all in there, right alongside the trap beats and the sonic future-flutters. Released in 2018, *El Mal Querer*—you could translate it as “Bad Loving” or even (hail Gaga) “Bad Romance”—is a concept album based on the anonymous 13th-century narrative poem

DAVID M. BENNETT / GETTY

Flamenca: jealous husband, ardent young knight, wife crammed in a cloister. Listen to “Que No Salga la Luna,” and you can hear Rosalía’s pop system metabolizing flamenco in real time: a classic *bulería* opening of shouts, fierce strummings, and spattering handclaps travels down an electronic tunnel, gets swallowed, and becomes a muffled pulse, like something heard underground or through the wall of a club.

There’s nothing haphazard or bolted-on about this. Rosalía’s encounter with Camarón launched an obsessive technical-emotional study of flamenco, years of apprenticeship and vocal coaching, a scholarly initiation from which she emerged with skills verging—in true flamenco style—on the uncanny. Nonetheless, her innovations have jolted the flamenco universe. “*Rupturista*” is how a reviewer for *El País* saluted Rosalía on the occasion of her new album. “*Imagino ya*,” he wrote, “*a los puristas rasgándose las vestiduras*”: I can see them now, the purists rending their garments.

Camarón, in his day, had a similarly surplice-shredding effect. In 1979, at the height of his success, he outraged flamenco hard-liners and (temporarily) lost fans in droves by using snazzy rock instrumentation on his album *La Leyenda del Tiempo*. Of course, Camarón, unlike Rosalía, was working from inside the tradition, looking out. Also, *La Leyenda del Tiempo* was not a hit. “Those who have listened to it and don’t really like it,” he suggested at the time, with modest conviction, “I think that they should listen to it again, because it’s very well-conceived.”

It’s in his barer moments, in his stripped-down, classic style, that Camarón now sounds truly radical. Take the 1981 recording of “Como el Agua,” which he made with his most constant collaborator, the great guitarist Paco de Lucía. The song is a tango, one of the lighter and more celebratory flamenco forms. De Lucía’s guitar comes sidling in almost absently, humming a theme, rhythmically tucked-under, and then, with an abrupt fingernailed flurry, stops. A ringing silence. “*Limpia va el agua del río*,” calls out Camarón in his young-old voice, with crystalline authority, “*como la estrella de la mañana*.” The timbre and the elemental phrasing are one. It comes as if from a muezzin’s tower: *Clear runs the water of the river, like the morning star*.

Two recent documentaries now streaming on Netflix—*Camarón: The Film* and the six-part series *Camarón Revolution*—are superbly educational. For all his slightness, Camarón is an intense physical presence. His hands, with their many rings, are broad and eloquent, delicately clasping and unclasping in synopated claps. He softly raps a table with his knuckles, keeping time, or—in one clip—lays a hand on the knee of his guitarist Paco Cepero. In traditional flamenco there is an exquisite rapport between singer

and guitarist. The voice leads, and the guitar follows; on the nerves of the guitar, as it were, the voice measures its first effects. Tomatito is another of Camarón’s prime accompanists; he gazes at his partner with a telepathically stoned and sensual grin. Off goes Camarón, eyes shut, hair quivering, on one of his dizzying and wildly dramatic vocal runs. Netflix, via its subtitles, gives bathos to the lyrics: *How joyful everyone is and what a harsh life I have*; and *My cigarette went out, I lost my way, I lost my way, mother*. But the pain is real. “He’s cut me so deep, so many times,” testifies the bullfighter Curro Romero, one of Camarón’s greatest allies. “He really makes my body tremble.”

“A real flamenco artist pains the ears of the layperson” declares the old *cantaor* Melu in *Camarón Revolution*. One sees his point. Flamenco is street opera; an ecstatic mode of complaint; lamentation, some say, straight from the cavelike forges of the Romany blacksmiths. It is a profound combination of formal intricacy, ethnic memory, and soul-scooping urgency. And the singing, all that virtuosic wailing and sobbing, can be hard to take. But the thing, the spell, when it happens, is unmistakable. *Duende* is the Spanish word for it: the prickle on the skin, the ax-edge of experience, sublimity freeze-framed—even a shining closeness to death.

Camarón was dripping with *duende*: He only had to open his mouth, and the spirit was summoned. And Rosalía can do it too. With her hands on the live wire of tradition, she can produce the shock that is *duende*. In live performances of “De Plata,” she is seated next to her accompanist, Raúl Refree. Two chairs: old school. But Refree is hipsterishly hunched over his instrument, head down, hacking out a minimal, grungy figure, a brief spiral of drone. Rosalía, knees wide and hands on her thighs, is braced and waiting; a sound, a frequency, is building inside her. The guitar figure repeats, repeats. Is this flamenco? It is when she starts singing. “*Cuando yo me muera*,” when I die—the angle at which her voice comes in will make your hair stand on end.

Rosalía—not Romany, and from the north of Spain rather than the south—has been predictably accused of cultural appropriation. The more interesting question is whether you can commodify *duende*—whether you can make the centuries-old neural voltage of flamenco part of your pop project. So far, for Rosalía, it’s working. Meanwhile, from smoke-filled flamenco heaven, the spirit of Camarón looks on—wondering whether this tough young woman, with her deep schooling and her shortwave commercial instincts, is his truest earthly inheritor. *A*

James Parker is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

Rosalía’s innovations have jolted the flamenco universe. “I can see them now,” wrote one reviewer, “the purists rending their garments.”

BOOKS

Cool It, Krugman

*The self-sabotaging rage of
the New York Times columnist*

By Sebastian Mallaby



Strangely, and unexpectedly, the big reveal in Paul Krugman's new anthology comes right at the end. All through the book, the reader wonders how so talented and fortunate an author came to develop such a furious and bitter voice. What drives a dazzling academic—the winner of the 2008 Nobel Prize in economics, no less—to turn his *New York Times* column into an indiscriminating guillotine for conservative foes? Krugman is substantively correct on just about every topic he addresses. He writes amusingly and fluently. His combination of analytic brilliance and linguistic facility recalls Milton Friedman or John Maynard Keynes. But Krugman can also sound like a cross between a bloodthirsty Robespierre and a rebarbative GIF. Week after week, he shakes his fist righteously at Republicans and anyone who defends them: *You're shilling for the fat cats. You're shilling for the fat cats.* Over and over. Again and again.

We will get to the essence of that big reveal presently, but first we should consider Krugman's own explanation for his tone. As he acknowledges, it does invite questions. For most of his career, Krugman was not a partisan. Emerging from graduate school in 1977, he assumed that if he ever got mixed up in policy debates, he would occupy the role of a technocrat—"someone dispassionately providing policymakers with information about what worked." For a brief stint in the 1980s, he served this function in Ronald Reagan's White House, and in the mid-'90s a *Newsweek* profile pronounced him "ideologically colorblind." During these decades, Krugman was as likely to whack Democrats for their suspicion of markets as he was to denounce Republicans for their magical unrealism about the growth effects of tax cuts. But then, in 1999, Krugman became a *Times* columnist. Almost immediately—and long before Donald Trump became president—technocratic dispassion gave way to polemics.

In the introduction to this collection of mostly journalistic writings, Krugman contends that he didn't change. Rather, politics did. Republicans lost respect for facts and data, turning politically neutral technocrats into involuntary foes. "In 21st-century America," Krugman writes, "accepting what the evidence says about an economic question will be seen as a partisan act." He began to feel this viscerally before the period covered in this volume: George W. Bush anticipated the revolt against experts when he sold his tax-cut proposal dishonestly during the 2000 election campaign. But since then Krugman's frustration has only grown deeper.

In the Obama years, technocrats determined that the Federal Reserve's bond-buying in a depressed economy wouldn't generate dangerous inflation, but "the official Republican view," Krugman tells us, was

that the Fed was being irresponsible. In the Trump presidency, technocrats have pointed out the lack of support for the claim that tax cuts for high earners will generate prosperity, but Republicans have preached this gospel regardless. Commentators in this post-evidence, post-truth environment find themselves “arguing with zombies,” to cite Krugman’s book title. They confront “ideas that should have been killed by contrary evidence, but instead keep shambling along, eating people’s brains.”

Faced with these alarming undead adversaries, Krugman has concluded that politically neutral truth telling is not merely impossible. It is morally inadequate. He duly sets out four rules for engaged public intellectuals. First, they should “stay with the easy stuff,” meaning subjects on which experts have achieved consensus: This is where an authoritative commentator can improve public understanding by delivering a clear message. Second, they should communicate in plain English—no controversy there. Third, and a bit more edgily, Krugman insists that commentators should “be honest about dishonesty.” If politicians deny clear evidence, they should be called out for arguing in bad faith. Finally, Krugman proclaims a rule that flies in the face of traditional journalistic tradecraft: “Don’t be afraid to talk about motives.”

To see what Krugman means in practice, let’s apply his rules to the topic that best suits his approach. As he rightly maintains, Republican leaders have repeatedly ignored the solid expert consensus on climate change. Given that this consensus has been clear for more than a decade, it is fair to conclude that Republican leaders are consciously making false statements—in other words, that they are liars. Guessing at their motives seems risky but not totally unreasonable. Conceivably, they might be lying because they don’t want to irk voters with the news that hamburgers and pickup trucks are cooking the planet. But Krugman is basically right that “almost all prominent climate deniers are on the fossil-fuel take.” To state the matter plainly, conservatives lie about this issue because they are paid to lie. Or, in Krugman’s broad and snarling formulation: “Republicans don’t just have bad ideas; at this point, they are, necessarily, bad people.”

Krugman’s blunt approach has powerful attractions. For one thing, it delights his liberal readers, and may inspire some of them to advocate for better policy. For another, his willingness to ascribe motive may reveal the real drivers of political struggles. In one of this book’s punchy and persuasive sections, he goes after the media’s cowardly tendency to give both sides of a debate equal treatment, even when one side is clearly lying. At his best, he is the lucid antidote to this sort of false equivalence. But the Krugmanite approach also has drawbacks. By branding Republicans as “bad

people,” he reduces the chances of swaying them. By sweeping all Republicans into the same basket—often without specifying whether he means party leaders or the rank and file—Krugman may obscure more of reality than he manages to expose.

His answer to these objections is characteristically forthright. The way he sees things, sweeping “Republicans,” the “right,” or sometimes “conservatives” into one basket isn’t a mistake, because he believes that nearly all Republicans belong in there. Insulting large categories of opponents has no cost; all are more or less dishonest, in hock to special interests, and therefore impossible to influence by means of reasoned argument. “If you’re having a real, good-faith debate, impugning the other side’s motives is a bad thing,” Krugman explains at one point. “If you’re debating bad-faith opponents, acknowledging their motives is just a matter of being honest about what’s going on.” By ignoring evidence and lying, Republicans are signaling that they cannot be reasoned with. In Krugman’s summation, “the mendacity is the message.”

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WHEN YOU STOP AND THINK about this line of argument, you begin to get a handle on why Krugman sounds so furious. For the past two decades, he has poured his prolific talents into a torrent of *Times* commentary, yet he doubts whether his writings can bring people around. If a large chunk of the 21st-century Republican Party is guilty of disparaging the truth, the flip side is that Krugman himself has lost confidence in the efficacy of the truth, at least in forging policy consensus. This is a dispiriting conclusion, especially for a truth-seeking professor. The more important question is whether it is justified. Are Republicans really so undifferentiated? Will none of them ever listen to a Krugman-type message, perhaps cleansed of its bile?

Go back to the example of climate change—a topic chosen, remember, because it fits relatively easily into Krugman’s Manichean worldview. Contrary to Krugman’s assumption, not all Republicans have the same outlook. President Trump has mocked climate science, but Republican senators such as Lamar Alexander and Lisa Murkowski are at least willing to acknowledge global warming and to call for extra research into renewable energy sources. Senator Lindsey Graham, usually an abject Trump defender, recently urged the president “to look at the science, admit that climate change is real, and come up with solutions.” In April, Representative Matt Gaetz of Florida, another Trumpy Republican, tweeted, “I didn’t come to Congress to argue with a thermometer, and I think that more of my colleagues need to realize that the science of global warming is irrefutable.”

Talk is cheap, of course, and Krugman might note that small pinpricks of reason don’t change the big picture. The most striking fact about the congressional

Republicans is not that they disagree with the president occasionally, but rather that they abase themselves grotesquely by defending his conduct. Yet what's revealing about Graham's and Gaetz's statements is that the men's consciences are still flickering. Writing the lawmakers off as "bad people" is too simple. Some part of them does respect science. And even if Krugman concludes that congressional Republicans are evil anyway, does he really want to imply the same about the broad mass of Republican voters? At one point Krugman writes that the Republican Party is "completely dominated by climate deniers." But the Pew Research Center reports that 19 percent of conservative Republicans, and fully 43 percent of moderate and liberal Republicans, regard climate change as a major threat. They are not all the demons that Krugman imagines.

On other issues, Krugman's caricature of Republicans is even further off the mark. He accuses the party, with reason, of catering to racial animosity—only to then go too far. It isn't just some Republicans who take this position, in his telling. Rather, the vast majority do. He dismisses the idea that many Republicans might favor small government while rejecting racial intolerance, writing that this combination "is logically coherent, but doesn't seem to have any supporters beyond a few dozen guys in bow ties." Yet Pew tells a more mixed story: 53 percent of white Republicans say that America's efforts to extend equal rights to black people have been about sufficient, and an additional 15 percent say that these efforts have not gone far enough. On taxes, Pew reports that 42 percent of Republicans say that some corporations don't pay their fair share. And despite Krugman's assertion that "Republicans almost universally advocate low taxes on the wealthy," 37 percent of Republicans believe that some of the wealthy should pay more.

In short, Krugman is suffering from an especially public case of what's come to be known as Trump Derangement Syndrome. Appalled by the Republican Party's most bigoted leaders, whose rise he traces at least as far back as the George W. Bush administration, he has allowed himself to believe that nearly all Republicans are corrupt and evil, and therefore that reasoned argument is futile. "The modern G.O.P. doesn't do policy analysis," he pronounces. Yet the reality is subtler. Republicans are more open to reason than Krugman allows.

ALL OF WHICH brings us to that big reveal at the end of Krugman's book. If the author's own justification for his angry tone is not quite satisfying, we must seek an alternative explanation, and it comes in an essay titled "How I Work," first published in 1993. In it, Krugman reflects on his approach to academic research

and emphasizes his facility with simple mathematical models that necessarily incorporated "obviously unrealistic assumptions." For example, his work on trade theory, which helped win him the Nobel Prize, assumed countries of precisely equal economic size. "Why, people will ask, should they be interested in a model with such silly assumptions?" Krugman writes. The answer, as he tells us, is that minimalism yielded insight. His contribution to economics, in his own estimation, was "ridiculous simplicity."

That same contribution distinguishes his journalism, and might well also win him a Pulitzer Prize, given that Krugman has pushed the boundaries of what it means to be a *Times* commentator—arrogantly or bravely, or both. Many passages of his book underscore how thunderingly right he's been on the big questions of the past 15 years or so: on the overriding postcrisis need for maximum economic stimulus; on the political (as opposed to technological) causes of wealth concentration; on the commonsensical proposition that all Americans should have access to affordable health care. But Krugman should surely be the first to admit that his journalism, like his research, is founded on radical simplification. Like those economic models that assume people are perfectly rational, he presumes that his adversaries are perfectly corruptible. This is elegantly clarifying. But, to borrow one of Krugman's own phrases, it may mistake beauty for truth.

In the end, one's judgment about Krugman the columnist depends on the test that he applies to economic models: Their assumptions are allowed to be reductive, but they must yield a persuasive story. If you accept that almost all conservatives are imperious to reason, you will celebrate Krugman's writings for laying bare reality. But the evidence from the Pew surveys counsels more charity and caution. Most people cannot be pigeonholed as purely good or purely evil. Their motives are mixed, confused, and mutable. Sometimes conservatives will be venal, but other times they will respond to evidence; like Representative Gaetz, they do not want to argue with thermometers. Krugman's "ridiculous simplicity" produces writing that is fluent, compelling, and yet profoundly wrong in its understanding of human nature. And the mistake is consequential. For the sake of our democracy, a supremely gifted commentator should at least try to unite citizens around common understandings. Merely demonizing adversaries is the sort of thing that Trump does. *A*

ARGUING WITH
ZOMBIES:
ECONOMICS,
POLITICS, AND
THE FIGHT
FOR A BETTER
FUTURE

Paul Krugman

W. W. NORTON

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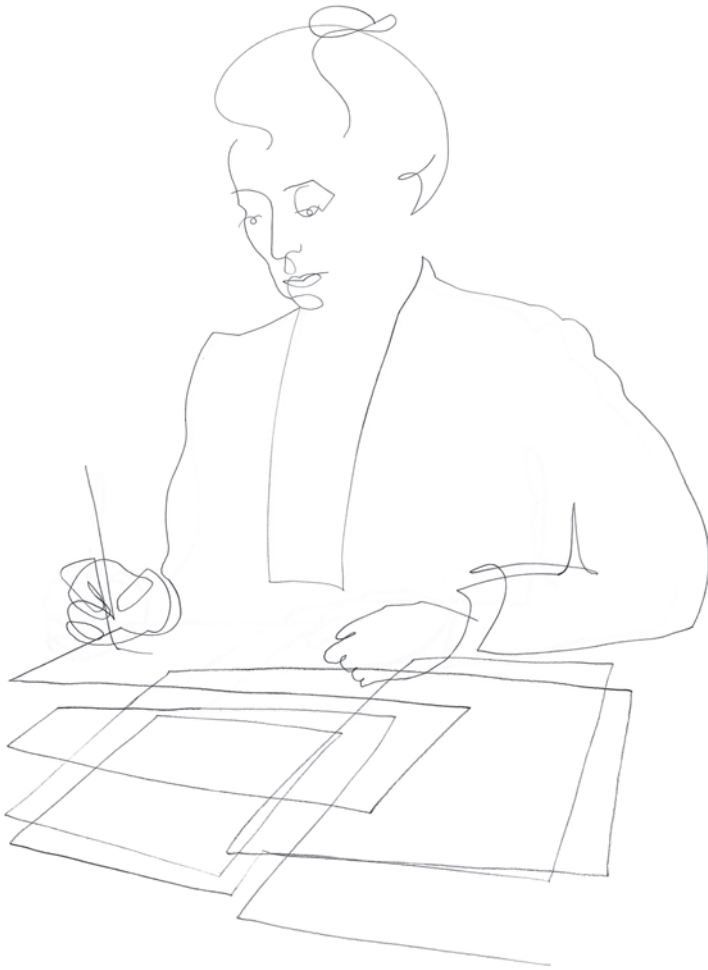
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BOOKS

The Woman Who Made Modern Journalism

Ida Tarbell helped pioneer reportorial methods and investigative ambitions that are as potent today as ever.

By Liza Mundy

Once upon a time, during a period of great technological innovation but also great economic inequality, journalism was striving to define its role in a fractious democracy. Divisions between conservatives and progressives were stark—and angry—and social anxiety about racial injustice and the rise of women was acute. The behemoth size of some corporations stirred alarm. So did the plight of workers with few protections. At the helm of the government was a president with a bully pulpit, ready to upend things. It was one of those rare moments, in the words of the historian Doris Kearns Goodwin, of “transformation so remarkable that a molt seems to take place, and an altered country begins to emerge.”

If that sounds familiar and ominous, take heart. I’m describing the turn of the 20th century, a time when those striving journalists were defining the bedrock reporting principles we now take for granted—developing their field on the fly, and triumphantly. In the process, they confirmed what a potent force their vocation could be. To revisit investigative journalism being born and magazines thriving more than 100 years ago is to be reminded that dizzying change in technology and the media—the refrain of our digital era—is by no means unique to our moment. Nor is it the whole story. The standards, methods, and collaborative ambitions that fueled the 20th-century journalistic upsurge don’t look quaint at all: They remain as crucial as ever in the effort to hold power accountable.

Back when modern journalism was defining itself—before *objectivity* was a reportorial byword, before *off the record* and *on background* were terms of the trade, and before *narrative nonfiction* was common parlance—one of the leading practitioners of the bold new form of inquiry was Ida Tarbell. A tall woman in a long dress, her brown hair piled high, she might be seen regularly entering the doors of the Standard Oil offices in New York City as the century began. Tarbell was meeting with what we would call a “source.” Her interlocutor was a forceful man with a nickname—Henry “Hell Hound” Rogers—right out of central casting. Tarbell was writing a series on Standard Oil and the rapacious practices of its founder, John D. Rockefeller. Rogers’s job was to guide her reporting—as we might say, to “spin” her.

But Tarbell was not to be spun. When he gave her a glass of milk, she insisted on paying. When he pressed to know who had told her something, she refused to say. When she ran some near-finished copy by him—what would today qualify as fact-checking—she refused to let him make changes beyond offering corrections. All of these were guidelines she developed alongside her editor, S. S. McClure, and her colleagues at his eponymous magazine, *McClure’s*. The upshot was one of the seminal early examples of what is now

known as long-form investigative reporting. Tarbell might have won a Pulitzer, except that journalism prizes also were not yet a thing. “Woman Does Marvelous Work!” was one of many rapturous headlines.

Tarbell’s 19-part Standard Oil series began in *McClure’s* in November 1902, and the celebrated January 1903 issue—which featured the third installment of the series, a piece on labor unrest among coal miners by Ray Stannard Baker, and an exposé by Lincoln Steffens on municipal corruption—sold out on newsstands in days. (The magazine also had about 400,000 subscribers.) Tarbell became so famous that she was recognized everywhere. McClure, a manic genius, had assembled what an editor of *The Atlantic*, Ellery Sedgwick, later called “the most brilliant staff ever gathered by a New York periodical” at precisely the time when magazines enjoyed top status as the mass medium of the moment; newspapers tended to be sensational and partisan, and radio had not quite arrived. Among the first-ever magazine staff writers, McClure’s team grasped that when laying a complicated topic before readers, narrative pacing and a strong writerly voice are invaluable. So are facts, facts, and more facts; vivid characters; and a central conflict.

THE SWAY exerted by these “muckrakers” has been the subject of books including Goodwin’s *The Bully Pulpit: Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, and the Golden Age of Journalism*, which highlights the influence of their muscular exposés of political corruption, monopoly power, and labor conditions. Their work enabled Roosevelt to push his Progressive agenda, securing better enforcement of antitrust legislation and persuading Congress to regulate the food and drug industries. In *Citizen Reporters: S. S. McClure, Ida Tarbell, and the Magazine That Rewrote America*, Stephanie Gorton, a magazine journalist herself, focuses on how a “hothouse” collaboration happens. She explores the clash and interplay of talents that created an entity greater than the sum of its parts, absorbed in an endeavor as important now as it was then: molding coherent narratives that help readers—surrounded by a cacophony of daily stories—grasp the changes they are living through.

From 1860 to 1895, the number of magazines in the United States rose from 575 to 5,000. McClure, born in Ireland, set out to form his own in 1893. Small-framed and vital, he was like a modern-day start-up founder, endlessly pitching the ideas his febrile brain produced. He shocked the competition by dropping the price of a quality monthly from 35 cents to 15. He understood that ads could bring in the bulk of the income, especially at a time when new corporate brands such as Cream of Wheat and Coca-Cola were endeavoring to create a consumer market.

Competitors scoffed—“McClure’s got a girl trying to write a life of Lincoln”—and tried to thwart Tarbell.

McClure also understood that if he could provide an array of versatile talents with job security, time, and a workspace—transforming what up to then had been a gig-based enterprise that had writers scrambling—their voices together would shape the magazine and define its character and mission. He knew how to pick writers, and how to listen to them. In Tarbell, Steffens, Baker, and William Allen White, he had the Big Four, relentless reporters who injected magazine journalism with a new seriousness of purpose as they came to appreciate that their work was having an impact on democracy itself.

The key to the undertaking was McClure’s discovery of Tarbell. The two had much in common, including their outsider status (one an immigrant, the other female), their curiosity, and a college education at a time when few had one. Tarbell had grown up in northwestern Pennsylvania, where she watched as her father and their neighbors—ordinary people making a living as independent oil producers—were forced to sell off or go under when Rockefeller struck a crooked deal with the railroads: Trains would carry his petroleum cheaply, while gouging his competitors. “There was born in me a hatred of privilege,” she wrote.

As a girl, Tarbell read anything she could get her hands on: Charles Dickens, William Thackeray, and also the lurid *Police Gazette*, which she found lying around the bunkhouse where her parents’ workers lived, and which she enjoyed for the “wanton gaiety about the women” and the “violent rakishness about the men,” as she wrote later. After graduating from Allegheny College, she tried teaching but found it tedious. She then began working on the editorial staff of *The Chautauquan*, the progressive but predictable periodical that served the Chautauqua talkfests. Restless as she moved into her 30s, she set out for Paris to freelance. A half century before *The New Yorker’s* Joseph Mitchell went to the waterfront to write about clammers and fishermen, before John McPhee started hanging out with greengrocers, Tarbell was visiting out-of-the-way sectors and practicing immersive journalism. When McClure read her submission, “The Paving of the Streets of Paris by Monsieur Alphand,” he declared, “This girl can write!” On a trip to Europe, he showed up at her door. What Gorton calls a “transformative relationship for both” had begun.

He assigned Tarbell to interview Émile Zola and Louis Pasteur, then coaxed her back to the States, where she wrote a serialized life of Napoleon—the general was in vogue, and archives in D.C. held new material—that jolted the circulation of *McClure’s*. Her next series, a 20-parter on Abraham Lincoln that she worked on for four years, did the same. Competitors scoffed—“McClure’s got a girl trying to write a life of Lincoln,” one editor sneered—and tried to thwart her. Tarbell was one of those souls (today we speak

of “grit” and “resilience”) who find obstacles to be energizing. Rather than hanging out with the power crowd in the capital, she traveled to Lincoln’s place of origin, Kentucky, and worked through the chronology of his life. She chatted up archivists and librarians. She found people who had never been interviewed. She befriended Lincoln’s only surviving son, who shared “what he believed to be the earliest portrait made of his father,” as she put it, an unpublished daguerreotype that literally changed how people saw Lincoln.

When her beloved father heard she was taking on Standard Oil, he begged her, “Don’t do it, Ida”—not because he didn’t support her career, but because he did, and feared Rockefeller would destroy her and *McClure’s*. Tarbell soldiered on. She learned yet more about how to gain her own access. When Rockefeller wouldn’t grant her an interview, she attended a Sunday-school lecture and observed him. She dug up court filings by people who had sued the oil magnate: a “great mass of sworn testimony,” as she wrote. Courtroom testimony had the detail she needed; being sworn, it also had the advantage of being reliable. Today, Robert Caro is lionized for his exhaustive gumshoe method, but Tarbell was there before him, reading pamphlets and the opinion columns of local papers. “There is nothing about which everything has been done and said” became her core insight.

McClure read multiple drafts, and Tarbell, who welcomed criticism, revised and revised. She “often doubted her own originality and brilliance,” Gorton writes, but he bucked her up with ardent admiration. Tarbell bucked him up in return. Their intellectual frisson was unusually intense, but mutually motivating in a recognizable way: In workplace settings, a kind of professional passion is more fruitful—and common—than we might find comfortable to admit. Tarbell was able to pluck his good ideas from a torrent of bad ones. She gave him praise and encouragement; she stimulated but also settled him. (Her colleagues often described her, Gorton points out, as a “maternal or sisterly figure,” expert at handling a boss given to extreme mood swings.) McClure’s feelings become clear in his letters: He loved her, if chastely. Her feelings are more obscure, in part because Gorton doesn’t quote Tarbell at length.

TARBELL’S PRIVATE REFLECTIONS, about gender among other things, do emerge from time to time. Early on, she recognized the predicament of women. At 14, Ida knelt and prayed to God that she would be spared marriage. “I must be free; and to be free I must be a spinster.” She was right: Though higher education was becoming more available to women, to have a career, a woman had to forgo having a family. Aside from teaching and missionary work—the two

“respectable” careers for educated women—journalism, in its chaotic infancy, offered an opening an intrepid female could slip through. The *McClure’s* fiction editor was a woman, Viola Roseboro, and Willa Cather joined the staff in 1906. Elsewhere, Nelly Bly and Ida B. Wells had also performed feats of investigation. Obstacles came with the territory of being female in a mostly male industry, but Tarbell’s gender also helped safeguard her integrity: While Steffens, who was granted audiences with Roosevelt, got a little too cozy with power, she was never invited into a political inner sanctum.

As McClure, who evidently suffered from manic depression, grew more grandiose and erratic—and had affairs with two women writers—he became more of a liability than a galvanizing force. The core staff, fearing *McClure’s* would founder on charges of moral hypocrisy, walked out in 1906. They bought their own publication, *The American Magazine*, where Tarbell continued to do groundbreaking work—in another parallel to the modern day, she wrote compellingly about tariffs and how they hurt consumers by raising prices. But others in the field were not as woman-friendly as McClure had been. Despite her star status, she was the only staff member not invited to the first annual publishers’ dinner, a men-only event. “It is the first time since I came into the office that the fact of petticoats has stood in my way,” she wrote, “and I am half-inclined to resent it.”

Her exclusion was a harbinger of journalism’s passage into maturity. The National Press Club was founded as all-male in 1908, part of a dreary pattern of barring women that was replayed in other fields as they attained prestige, and as the porousness of their formative days vanished. But McClure never stopped believing in Tarbell, or craving her presence. “I wish you had not turned away,” he wrote in one poignant letter, telling her he was learning to speak and act more slowly, and had dreamed that “you drew me down & kissed me to show your approval.”

Tarbell missed him as well, and “the excited discussions” at his magazine were never quite replicated. Her “radical reforming” friends pressured her to “join their movements,” she wrote, but she resisted. The tension she felt between advocacy and objectivity—like the journalistic techniques she helped establish—is no less central today than it was then. Nor is the tenuousness of the community—profitable, important, and, as she put it, “so warmly and often ridiculously human”—that she had been welcomed into. She knew that it, like most great collaborations, couldn’t last forever. But its example could live on, and has. *A*

Liza Mundy, a senior fellow at New America, is the author, most recently, of Code Girls: The Untold Story of the American Women Code Breakers of World War II.

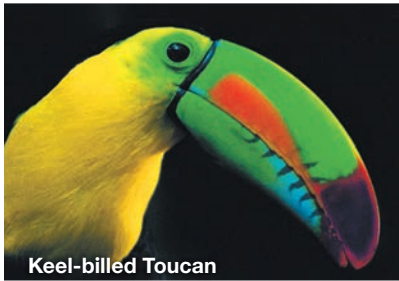
CITIZEN
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S. S. MCCLURE,
IDA TARBELL,
AND THE
MAGAZINE
THAT REWROTE
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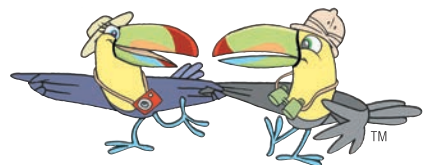
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The View From Inside the Bubble

*Drawn into the tech world,
a 20-something watches herself get
seduced by a myopic mission.*

By Ismail Muhammad

Perhaps the most repeated phrase in *Uncanny Valley*, Anna Wiener's memoir of life as a tech-industry worker, is "I did not know." When the book opens, Wiener's world feels like one with limited horizons. It's 2013, and she's a 20-something college graduate who has been working in the sclerotic New York publishing industry, stringing together a meager income as a freelance editor and an assistant at a boutique literary agency. "There was no room to grow, and after three years the voyeuristic thrill of answering someone else's phone had worn thin," she remembers in typically sardonic fashion. She's not exactly poor, only "privileged and downwardly mobile."

A new, more dynamic economy was taking shape on the other side of the country—"not that I was paying any attention," Wiener writes. An unnamed "online superstore" known for its ruthless efficiency had elbowed its way into publishing and well beyond. "The social network everyone hated" was changing what it meant to be social. Venture capitalists were supporting these companies by shoveling billions of dollars at very young men who promised that their particular app would be the one to usher in a kinder, more connected world—while making its investors millionaires.

Though tech had insinuated itself into many facets of Wiener's life—her waking hours were spent tethered to her computer, working, using the social network everyone hated, writing blog posts, and scrolling her way through images—she hadn't stopped to think about the people, structures, and forces that had enabled that entwining. Then she got a tech job in San Francisco and discovered that the screens she had

been staring at weren't as transparent as they seemed. Yet she remained, by her own account, remarkably clueless about the larger implications of the industry she'd wandered into.

We're not at a loss for in-depth accounts of the tech industry these days. Reporters, cultural critics, academic historians, and tech figures themselves have been busy trying to explain a social and economic paradigm shift that's affected everything from our dating lives to the security of municipal infrastructure. Books like Alexandra Wolfe's 2017 *Valley of the Gods* have fetishized Silicon Valley, offering portraits of tech as a culture apart, rising up to replace the moribund institutions that have failed society—academia, public transit, local news media, government. Other books, such as *Zucked: Waking Up to the Facebook Catastrophe*, by Roger McNamee, a venture capitalist and an early mentor of Mark Zuckerberg's, have taken a far darker view. Where these accounts converge is in portraying tech as nothing less than the catalyst of a radically new social order.

Uncanny Valley is a different sort of Silicon Valley narrative, a literary-minded outsider's insider account of an insulated world that isn't as insular or distinctive as it and we assume. Wiener is our guide to a realm whose denizens have been as in thrall to a dizzying sense of momentum as consumers have been. Not unlike the rest of us, she learned, they have been distracted and self-deluded in embracing an ethos of efficiency, hyperproductivity, and seamless connectivity at any cost. Arrogant software developers, giddy investors, and exorbitantly paid employees—all have been chasing dreams of growth, profits, and personal wealth, without pausing to second-guess the feeling of being "on the glimmering edge of a brand-new world," as Wiener puts it in the middle of her book.

Now, from the vantage of 2020, the unintended consequences of the chase are glaringly obvious. But why was the recognition so slow in coming? Wiener downsizes that question to human scale: How, even half a decade ago—a lifetime in the Valley—could everyone still have been so blinkered, from those at the top down to her and others at the bottom? Complicity is Wiener's theme, and her method: She's an acute observer of tech's shortcomings, but she's especially good at conveying the mind of a subject whose chief desire is to not know too much. Through her story, we begin to perceive how much tech owes its power, and the problems that come with it, to contented ignorance.

Wiener's participant-observer journey calls to mind a predecessor. "I set out to write this book," Michael Lewis explained 30 years ago in his now classic coming-of-age memoir cum exposé, *Liar's Poker: Rising Through the Wreckage on Wall Street*, "because I thought it would be better to tell the story than to go

on living the story.” Like Lewis, Wiener found “a way out of unhappiness” by writing her own gimlet-eyed generational portrait that doubles as a cautionary tale of systemic dysfunction. But if her chronicle acquires anything like the must-read status that Lewis’s antic tale of a Princeton art-history major’s stint at Salomon Brothers did, it will be for a different reason. For all her caustic insight and droll portraiture, Wiener is on an earnest quest likely to resonate with a public that has been sleepwalking through tech’s gradual reshaping of society. She’s interested in how an industry so invested in promoting a sense of community and “noble mission,” so brimming with assurance, left her feeling so dissociated from herself, so impotently eager to please, so uncurious about the world around her. Lewis gleefully made short shrift of the flagrant excess and dog-eat-dog allure of the finance sector of the 1980s, figuring that the youthful stampede into Wall Street had seen its heyday. Wending her way through the “promised land for millennial knowledge work,” as Wiener sums up the aura of Silicon Valley in the 2010s, is more disorienting.

WIENER’S SWERVE into tech took place in post-recession America, where even graduates from prestigious universities found the old economy’s wreckage jamming the path to wealth and power. “My desires were generic,” she offers by way of explaining her jump from publishing to tech. “I wanted to find my place in the world, and be independent, useful, and good. I wanted to make money, because I wanted to feel affirmed, confident, and valued.” Tech held out the opportunity to “feel like I was going somewhere,” to stop questioning her worth. In publishing, she writes, “nobody my age was excited about what might come next. Tech, by comparison, promised what so few industries or institutions could, at the time: a future.”

An article about an ebook start-up in New York attracted her interest. She interviewed for a job, and was hired in early 2013. It wasn’t a good fit—“She’s too interested in learning, not doing,” the CEO accidentally typed in the company-wide chat room—and she was soon fired. But Wiener had caught the bug. She landed a job as a customer-service associate at a thriving start-up in San Francisco that made a data-analysis tool. It was the hottest of products in an era when ever more finely articulated data about consumers had emerged as the most valuable commodity of all. After nearly two years of being “Down for the Cause”—as the young CEO demanded—she began to wonder about the psychological and social effects of tech, yet continued to drift through the Valley. Another support-team job, this one at an open-source start-up, meant a pay cut, but she was drawn by the

promise of better work-life balance and the “idealism and old-school techno-utopianism.”

To watch Wiener watching herself become absorbed by her Valley existence, and then ever so gradually alienated, is to recognize along with her that the social life of the tech industry holds the key to understanding its hypnotic sway—and the corrosive effects of its cultlike culture. Paradoxically, the Valley’s vaunted commitment to transparency and social change gets in the way of perceiving its actual social effects. On Lewis’s everyman-for-himself Wall Street, brutal hierarchy, cutthroat drive, and greedy opportunism were out in the open. In the Valley, money still counts, of course: Billions of dollars slosh across the Bay Area. But Wiener was “seduced by the confidence of young men” who had recalibrated the style, and the scale, of ambition. These geniuses see themselves in direct competition with the “middle-aged leaders of industry.” Their own professed faith in principles that promise meaning and purpose, along with an “optimized” lifestyle, marks a crucial and contagious difference. Wiener bought into the narrative, trusting innovators who she thought would be enlightened versions of Wall Street titans. “I wanted to believe that as generations turned over, those coming into economic and political power would build a different, better, more expansive world,” she writes, “and not just for people like themselves.”

No wonder she let these men supply goals that felt suitably rewarding. Wiener is wittily merciless in portraying how susceptible she was to “the sense of ownership and belonging, the easy identity, the all-consuming feeling of affiliation” that start-up culture promotes. The quirky office camaraderie, the I AM DATA DRIVEN T-shirts, the scavenger hunts, the CEO given to pronouncements like “We are making products . . . that can push the fold of mankind”—Wiener lets the details accrue. At this point, though, the self-parodic tech ambience is low-hanging fruit. Her real feat is exposing her own persistent failure to register the big picture. She had a ringside seat to just about every issue that has tarnished tech’s aura since 2016—privacy invasion, sexism, lack of diversity, internet harassment, conspiracy campaigns—yet she wasn’t especially attuned to trouble. She was too intent on making sure her bosses thought she was “smart and in control.”

At the analytics start-up, for example, Wiener came to understand that “transparency for the masses wasn’t ideal: better that the masses not see what companies in the data space had on them.” In fact, she experienced the allure of unfettered access to data herself. In order to solve her customers’ problems, she was permitted to use a setting known as “God Mode,” which let her see customers’ data on *their* customers, as if invading privacy were a video game. “Data sets were mesmerizing,” she confesses. And when a government whistle-blower

In publishing, Wiener writes, “nobody my age was excited about what might come next. Tech, by comparison, promised . . . a future.”

UNCANNY
VALLEY:
A MEMOIR

Anna Wiener

MCD

revealed that just this sort of information could be accessed by intelligence services, her supervisor was quick to rally employees to the Cause. “Don’t forget, we’re on the right side of things,” he told them. “We’re the good guys.”

“For all the industry’s talk about scale, and changing the world, I was not thinking about the broader implications,” Wiener writes. “I was hardly thinking about the world at all.” She’d exchanged cluelessness about what was behind the internet for willful ignorance about the tech industry’s impact on the world. But Millennial that she is—a beneficiary, she wryly notes, of “two decades of educational affirmation, parental encouragement, socioeconomic privilege, and generational mythology”—she finally began to see the toll the industry was taking on her.

Tech’s ethos of optimization, far from giving her genuine purpose, had sent her—in her job and in her life—careening “across the internet like a drunk.” Meanwhile, beyond the Valley, America was roiling, its polarization intensified by social media, and digital surveillance was spreading—not that Wiener really noticed. “I had felt unassailable behind the walls of power. Society was shifting, and I felt safer . . . inside the machine.” The 2016 election jolted her. In succumbing to the “overwhelming myopia” that had served to entrench tech and leave inequities untouched, she realized she had company. “An entire culture . . . had been seduced” by faith in efficiency and easy connectivity, by an empty promise of momentum and mission.

Looking back at *Liar’s Poker* in 2011, Lewis remarked that he had “thought it was about a period that was coming to an end. I thought a system that paid a 24-year-old like me to give financial advice must be crazy, but I never thought it would last.” Wiener found herself in a similar position after the election. “I thought, for a while, that everything would change. I thought that the party was over.” She anticipated a newly chastened Valley, forced into an awareness of its deficiencies and shorn of its excesses. But like Tom Wolfe’s *Masters of the Universe*, the young men of Silicon Valley weren’t interested in humility. “They had inexorable faith in their own ideas and their own potential,” she says. The election only marked a new cycle in tech’s life span, a new chance for its titans to prove their exceptionality. At an industry event, a fellow tech employee confided to Wiener: “We’re the government now.” In the Valley, the new *Masters of the Universe* are still dreaming, and Wiener has no illusions that they will wake up. *A*

Ismail Muhammad is the reviews editor at The Believer. His work has appeared in The New York Times and The Nation, among other places.

Little Narrows By David Barber

No lie, look here—so
Little, so narrow, it’s got
No middle, a matchstick inlet,
A little shuttle to get
Across it, so long, hello.

Make that so little, so
Narrow, bet your shadow
Beats us to it, better not
Fidget or you’ll miss it, no
Kidding, kiddo.

Narrows, not shallows: no
Little bridge over it, no
Long way around it, so
Here’s the two-bit ferryboat
About to spirit us straight

Into the narrow channel no
Bigger than a moat or wallow
With its piddling cargo of fellow
Small-fry carfuls, the far shore so
Nearby you could spit on it.

So long, land ho, don’t forget
To write—so little, so
Narrow, no wonder it’s cut
Out for us, the closest we’ll get
To a perfect fit.

David Barber is the poetry editor at The Atlantic. His new collection of poems is Secret History.

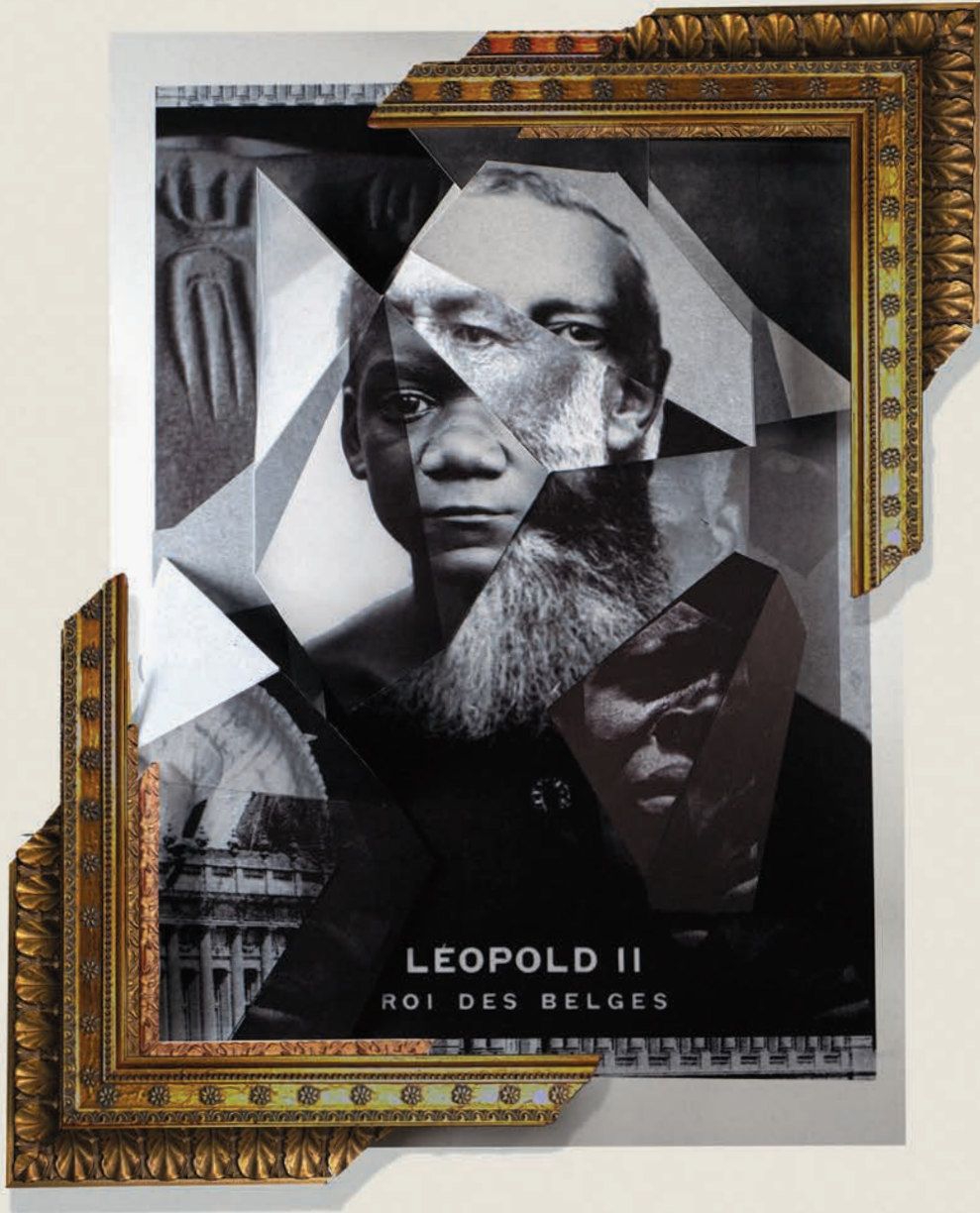
ESSAY

When Museums Have Ugly Pasts

Textbooks can be revised, but historic sites, monuments, and collections that memorialize dark times aren't so easily changed. Lessons from the struggle to update the Royal Museum for Central Africa, outside Brussels.

By Adam
Hochschild

One of Europe's loveliest urban journeys begins as you step aboard a trolley at the Montgomery Metro station in Brussels. Its tracks quickly emerge from underground to travel along a grand, tree-shaded boulevard lined with elegant mansions a century old or more, many of them now embassies. Then the route leaves the street traffic behind to run through a leafy forest of beech and oak, a former hunting ground for the





The Royal Museum for Central Africa, one of the largest museums in the world devoted exclusively to Africa

dukes of Brabant that becomes a symphony of fluttering green light on a spring day. Finally the tracks end near a palatial stone edifice whose very existence embodies some of the unresolved tensions of our globalized world.

Welcome to the Royal Museum for Central Africa. Although one of the largest museums anywhere devoted exclusively to Africa, it is thousands of miles from the continent itself. The tall windows, pillared facade, rooftop balustrade, and 90-foot-high rotunda of the main building give it the look of a chateau. That impression is only enhanced by an inner courtyard and a surrounding park: formal French gardens, a reflecting pool and fountain, ponds with ducks and geese, wide lawns laced with hedges, and carefully groomed paths that sweep away to majestic trees in the distance.

A visitor here is a long way from Africa, but not from the fruits of the continent's colonization. For 23 years starting in

1885, Belgium's King Leopold II was the "proprietor," as he called himself, of the misnamed Congo Free State, the territory that today is the Democratic Republic of Congo. Exasperated by the declining power of European monarchs, Leopold wanted a place where he could reign supreme, unencumbered by voters or a parliament, and in the Congo he got it. He made a fortune from his privately owned colony—well over \$1.1 billion in today's dollars—chiefly by enslaving much of its male population as laborers to tap wild rubber vines. The king's soldiers would march into village after village and hold the women hostage, in order to force the men to go deep into the rain forest for weeks at a time to gather wild rubber. Hunting, fishing, and the cultivation of crops were all disrupted, and the army seized much of what food was left. The birth rate plummeted and, weakened by hunger, people succumbed to diseases they

might otherwise have survived. Demographers estimate that the Congo's population may have been slashed by as much as half, or some 10 million people.

Using testimony and photographs from missionaries and whistle-blowers, the British journalist Edmund Dene Morel turned Leopold's slave-labor system into an international scandal. Luminaries from Booker T. Washington to Mark Twain to the archbishop of Canterbury took part in mass protest meetings. Rising outrage finally pressured the king to reluctantly sell the Congo to Belgium in 1908, a year before his death.

Until that point, Leopold, a master of public relations, had worked hard to portray himself as a philanthropist, motivated only by the desire to bring Christianity and civilization to the "Dark Continent." In 1904, he had hired his favorite architect, the Frenchman Charles Girault, who designed the Petit Palais in Paris, to

build this museum on the site of a royal PR coup seven years earlier. In 1897, when a world's fair took place in Brussels, the king had orchestrated a special exhibit on the Congo here, just outside the city. Its centerpiece was human beings: 267 Congolese men, women, and children who for several months were on display in three specially constructed villages with thatched roofs. In the "river village" and the "forest village" they used drums, tools, and cooking pots brought from home, and paddled dugout canoes around a pond. In the "civilized village," men dressed in the uniform of Leopold's private Congo army played in a military band. More than 1 million visitors came to see them.

In 1910, soon after the king died and his personal colony became the Belgian Congo, the museum finally opened its doors. Part of it houses archives and sponsors natural-science research, but throughout the 20th century, its public exhibition halls continued to express a highly colonial view of the world. The human zoo was gone, but silence about the plunder remained. When I first visited the museum, in 1995, the exhibits of Congo flora included a cross section of rubber vine—but not a word about the millions of Congolese who died as a result of the slave-labor system established to harvest that rubber. It was as if a museum of Jewish life in Berlin made no reference to the Holocaust.

After I mentioned my visit in *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa*, published a few years later, a dissident staff member began emailing me about internal conflicts. The museum remained filled with relics of colonial soldiers and explorers and larger-than-life statues of heroic, idealized figures with inscriptions like "Belgium Brings Civilization to the Congo." Belgians who cared about human rights were demanding changes; the country's powerful "old colonial" lobby—people who had lived and worked in the Congo before it became independent, in 1960, and their descendants—was resisting them.

The institution was paralyzed. Finally, in 2005, with much fanfare, a temporary exhibit purported to tell the truth about colonialism at last. It contained a few small photographs that showed the

violence of colonial rule—but not a single display case explained the slave-labor system. The exhibit was so evasive that an activist group in Brussels published an online guide in the country's two main languages, French and Dutch, that visitors could print out and take to the museum. It provided text and photographs—of women hostages in chains, for example, and enslaved laborers carrying baskets of wild rubber—to fill in the history that was not on display, room by room.

A sign that year promised A NEW MUSEUM IN 2010. But when 2010 came,

The museum was filled with relics of colonial soldiers and idealized figures with inscriptions like "Belgium Brings Civilization to the Congo."

only a small portion of display space had changed, given over to marking the 50th anniversary of Congolese independence. The exhibit did a considerably more honest job than the one five years earlier, but it, too, was temporary, gone after a few months. Finally, in 2013, the museum announced that it was closing down for a complete revamping, and would reopen in 2017.

Behind the scenes, occasionally leaking into the press, tensions remained. That

was hardly surprising, given that Europeans were spending a huge sum—the renovation bill would eventually total \$83 million—to portray Africa to the world. Half a dozen scholars from Belgium's African-diaspora community were recruited as an advisory committee, but they had to sign nondisclosure agreements, were given no authority, and came to feel that their advice was being ignored. Eventually the committee stopped meeting. One imaginative historian-anthropologist who worked at the museum for a time suggested that Africans should be invited to build a museum-within-the-museum portraying how they saw Belgium, but this idea was considered too radical. The year 2017 passed, and the museum remained closed.

UNUSUAL AS the Royal Museum for Central Africa might be, the conflict over its contents mirrors similar arguments over museums, historic sites, and monuments everywhere from Scotland to Cape Town to Charlottesville, Virginia, where a protest and counterprotest over the removal of a statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee turned deadly. Elsewhere in the United States, the Museum of Man, in San Diego, recently hired a Navajo educator as its "director of decolonization" and announced that it would no longer display human remains without tribal consent. In Monticello, Virginia, Thomas Jefferson's home now has exhibit space devoted to Sally Hemings, the enslaved mother of some of his children. When the Fraternal Order of Retired Border Patrol Officers started the National Border Patrol Museum, in El Paso, Texas, several decades ago, little did they imagine that in 2019 the museum would close for several days after protesters pasted over its exhibits with photographs of children who had died in Border Patrol custody.

Museum professionals can now turn to a sudden plethora of books, symposia, workshops, and advice blogs about "creating conversation, not controversy," "future-proofing" a museum, and handling protesters. The main problem, of course, is that so many monuments and museums were built a century or more ago by people who took colonialism, racial hierarchy, and slavery (or at least a benign

Gone With the Wind view of the American South) for granted. You “can easily rewrite a textbook,” Lonnie Bunch, the founding director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture (and now the secretary of the Smithsonian Institution), has said, “but you can’t rewrite a museum.”

Sometimes, though, you have to try. Of course, new museums can be built from scratch, and the African American museum, which opened in 2016, is the country’s most impressive in decades. With nearly 2 million visitors a year, it is arguably more influential than any textbook. But what if your existing museum already has even more visitors, sits on hundreds of millions of dollars’ worth of real estate, and owns more than 100 years’ worth of collections? Should you tear the place down? And what should you do with the stuff in it, especially when some of that stuff was booty gathered from conquered peoples at gunpoint?

More than 90 percent of sub-Saharan African items housed in museums, for

example, are held outside that continent. This is the Elgin Marbles controversy writ large. Should art or cultural objects taken from somewhere else be returned to the territories they came from? Even if that makes moral sense, it doesn’t always work out. The Royal Museum for Central Africa, in fact, gave a small portion of its magnificent African art collection to a museum in the Democratic Republic of Congo some 40 years ago. But the country’s long-term dictator at that time, Mobutu Sese Seko, was famously kleptocratic, and within a few years many of those same objects began appearing for sale in Europe, some in the shops of Brussels antique dealers.

Nowhere in the United States is a museum controversy so heated as at New York City’s venerable American Museum of Natural History. Its 5 million annual visitors have included, for four years now, hundreds of demonstrators who have trooped through the museum on an Anti-Columbus Day Tour. They chant, drum, dance, and unfurl banners: **RENAME THE DAY. RESPECT THE ANCESTORS.**

DECOLONIZE! RECLAIM! IMAGINE! They deliver speeches demanding changes, a few of which the museum is slowly making.

Their prime target is the way exhibits still inherently reflect the assumptions of the museum’s 19th-century founders: that Native Americans, Africans, Eskimos, and stuffed rhinos and tigers are all, in some manner, equally exotic and museum-worthy—while that which comes from Europe or white America, being civilized rather than “natural,” does not merit being displayed. In one TV-news report, Marz Saffore, a young black woman from Decolonize This Place, the group that organizes the Columbus Day protests, stands in front of the sign for the museum’s Hall of African Peoples and points out, “There is no Hall of European Peoples. There’s no Hall of European Mammals. Because that’s called history; that’s called science.”

Why, asks a leaflet from the group, “do Indigenous, Asian, Latin American, and African cultural artifacts reside in the AMNH, while their Greek and Roman

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counterparts are housed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art across the park?” Why are the rings on the cross section of an ancient California sequoia labeled with dates from “Eurocentric” history (Columbus “discovers” the Orinoco River, Yale is founded, Napoleon takes power) and not from the history of the peoples who lived in its shadow?

The protesters are also demanding the removal of the statue of Theodore Roosevelt on horseback (flanked by subservient African and Native American figures on foot) that stands in front of the museum. Yes, Roosevelt gave us many national parks, they say, but much of the land for those parks was cleansed of Native American inhabitants. And let’s not forget his enthusiasm for eugenics and his drumbeating for the Spanish-American and Philippine Wars and other imperial conquests. Two years ago, the base of the statue was splashed with red paint. Online, a group called the Monument Removal Brigade claimed credit: “Now the statue is bleeding. We did not make it bleed. It is bloody at its very foundation.” The museum acknowledged the protesters in July by including some of their voices in an exhibit and website called “Addressing the Statue.” But the statue still stands.

A red-paint bath has also been the fate of several of the dozen-plus statues of King Leopold II scattered across Belgium. A bust of the king was recently stolen from a Brussels park and replaced with one of Nelson Mandela. The battle over monuments, like that over museums, is global—and far from resolved.

IN DECEMBER 2018, more than a decade after plans for changes were first announced, the Royal Museum for Central Africa finally reopened, and a few months later I again rode the trolley to see it.

The museum now includes a new glass-and-steel building next to the original chateau, plus more space underground. One of the first things a visitor sees refers to the controversy over whether the place should have been changed at all. A well-known piece of sculpture from the old museum, *Leopard Man*, was acquired in 1913: a large, menacing figure of an African dressed in leopard skin, with clawlike

knives in his hands, about to pounce on a sleeping victim. Now a painting by a Congolese artist, Chéri Samba, titled *Reorganization*, shows the statue on its pedestal, teetering on the outside steps of the museum. A group of black men and women are pulling on ropes to try to haul it away; several white people strain at another set of ropes, trying to prevent its removal. The museum director, in suit and tie, looks on impassively, arms crossed.

Many of the multilingual signs on exhibits are now apologetic. Colonialism “remains a very controversial period,” one says gingerly. “The collections of the

Many of the signs on exhibits are now apologetic. Colonialism “remains a very controversial period,” one says gingerly.

Royal Museum for Central Africa have been composed by Europeans; it remains a challenge, therefore, to tell the colonial history from an African perspective.” Another points out, “Collections often say more about who has collected them than about the society in which the objects were made and used. From the outset, Africans opposed colonization in different ways, but this is hardly apparent from the collections of this museum.”

Such apologies are just the sort of thing that enrage the “old colonial” lobby. A former official of a group of colonial-era veterans has denounced the museum for featuring “the worst slanders.” An open letter from another critic accused the director of being “*politiquement correct*.” An online screed condemned him for “Belgium bashing.”

The apologies, however, continue throughout the building. Some of them are vague and bland (their wording no doubt the outcome of testy arguments and compromises), but at their best they implicitly acknowledge that almost anything on public exhibit anywhere is a political statement—something few museums do. For example, the institution has a huge collection of photographs, but signs now explain: “They were almost exclusively made by white people and mainly show their perspective.” “They were carefully staged.” “Political leaders and dignitaries from rural areas were presented as ‘noble savages,’ while laughing city dwellers conveyed the image of a model colony.”

This is followed up with a remarkable early photo showing just such a portrait of a “noble savage” being staged. Two sun-helmeted Belgians are preparing to photograph an unsmiling, half-naked Congolese man in profile. One of the white men has his head under a black cloth behind an ancient tripod-mounted camera; the other has his hands sternly on his hips, a few feet away from the black man, as if he has just ordered him into position. It is hard to imagine a more vivid portrayal of the colonial view of Africa, captured in the making.

A notorious part of the old museum was its giant rotunda, filled with huge statues of such figures as *The Worker* (a black man with loincloth and shovel), *The Warrior* (a black man with spear), *Justice* (a gilded, robed white woman, scales in one hand, sword in the other), and *Belgium Brings Well-Being to the Congo* (a gilded, robed, saintly white woman comforting two black children). Now a sign describes the “colonial vision” behind the statues: “Belgians are presented as benefactors and civilizers, as if they had committed no atrocities in the Congo, and as if there had been no civilization there beforehand.”



The museum invited a Congolese artist, Aimé Mpane, to create “an explicit response” to statues that represent a “colonial vision.” The result, Nouveau souffle ou le Congo bourgeonnant, is on display in the rotunda.

The sign goes on to explain that the statues have landmark status and cannot be removed. So the museum invited a Congolese artist, Aimé Mpane, to create a work as “an explicit response.” This is an enormous chiseled-wood representation of an African man’s head, sitting on a base the shape of Africa. As a piece of art, it did not move me, but I liked the idea of one sculpture as an answer to another. It reminded

me of a recent article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, in which the sociologist Troy Duster, a grandson of the anti-lynching crusader Ida B. Wells, suggested something similar for the United States: Why not leave Robert E. Lee in place, but put up a statue of William Lloyd Garrison or Frederick Douglass next to him?

Although the museum’s “Colonial History and Independence” gallery takes

up a disappointingly small portion of the building’s total space, it does not stint on displaying colonialism’s dark side. Video monitors show historians—almost all of them Congolese—talking about the vast death toll of the slave-labor system, and about Belgian complicity in the 1961 assassination of the independent Congo’s first democratically chosen prime minister, Patrice Lumumba, who gets a corner of the room all to himself. Several of the atrocity photographs that helped rouse world outrage about the slave-labor system are on display. So are examples of the ubiquitous *chicotte*, a whip made of twisted sun-dried hippopotamus hide with sharp edges, used to beat enslaved laborers, sometimes to death. A photograph and a painting show it in use. Also on exhibit are some of the pamphlets and books written to expose the system, both by Belgians and by foreigners. Visitors can see cartoons mocking Leopold, and transcripts of statements made by black witnesses before a 1904–05 investigative commission—testimony suppressed for more than half a century, first by Leopold and then by the Belgian government.

Though this exhibit has drawn the most ire from the “old colonial” lobby, it also clearly reflects some unresolved differences among the museum staff. Whoever chose the *chicottes* and other objects on display had a far different sense of history than whoever compiled the interactive historical timeline on computers in this gallery and several others. It omits several major anti-colonial rebellions and never mentions the large mutinies among black conscripts in King Leopold’s private army. Slave labor gets mentioned only in passing, and the scale of the international protest movement is barely hinted at. The timeline notes, however, the appointments of various governors-general and ministers of colonies, and the creation of the Congo’s first Boy Scout troop.

A greater shortcoming is that nothing here really links the exploitation of the Congo’s riches—ivory and rubber in the early days; copper, diamonds, uranium, and much more later on—with Belgium’s own prosperity. Congolese profits helped fund, for instance, the giant archway of the Arcades du Cinquantenaire, a Brussels

landmark. And how many of the mansions that visitors pass on their trolley ride to the museum were built with such wealth? A 2007 survey showed that the fortunes of nine of the 23 richest families in Belgium had roots in the colonial Congo. A good museum should make you start looking at the world beyond its walls with new eyes.

But few museums do so. Where in the United States can you find a first-rate exhibit showing the connections between American corporate profits and our long string of military interventions in the Caribbean and Central America? You can now see slave quarters at restored southern plantations, but only recently, for example, have Providence and Boston announced plans to create museums linking their city's prosperity to the slave trade. New York's enormously wealthy Brown family (of Brown Brothers Harriman) even owned southern slave plantations outright—and, incidentally, were early patrons of the American Museum of Natural History.

A major problem that museum suffers from is echoed at the Royal Museum in Belgium. Exhibits about the lives and history and art of African peoples continue to share a building with stuffed animals—an elephant, a giraffe, multiple crocodiles, snakes, butterflies, insects—and rocks. The same space remains a container for everything African, whether human, animal, or mineral. One of the African-diaspora scholars consulted by the Royal Museum urged that at least the animals be given to Belgium's large Museum of Natural Sciences, but her advice was not taken. As an astute critic put it in the Belgian magazine *Ensemble*, the institution remains *un musée des Autres*, a museum of Others.

Despite the limitations of the revamped Royal Museum, it now has one feature that is quietly stunning. One wall has long held an immense marble panel on which are written the names of 1,508 Belgians who died in the earliest years of colonization, before Leopold's personal rule over the Congo ended in 1908. The

panel also bears a quotation from the king's successor, his nephew, Albert I: "Death reaped mercilessly among the ranks of the first pioneers. We can never pay sufficient homage to their memory."

To any African, this is outrageous. Most of these "first pioneers" were anything but heroes. They were ambitious young adventurers, hoping to get rich quick on rubber

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and ivory; Joseph Conrad portrayed them excoriatingly in *Heart of Darkness*. They died, for the most part, from diseases like malaria, sleeping sickness, and dysentery, for which there was as yet no cure; their ends were sometimes hastened by drink. A startlingly high number, estimated at nearly one in 200, committed suicide. And the crafty Leopold (who never set foot in his prized colony himself) kept secret the

fact that roughly one in three Europeans who went there during the first decade of his rule perished; that statistic would have discouraged others from going.

But the greatest injustice of all is that during the Leopold years and their immediate aftermath, at least several million Congolese died—worked to death gathering rubber; shot down in rebellions; starved in the rain forest, where they fled to escape the slave-labor system; or felled by the famines that took place when men were turned into slave laborers and their wives and daughters into hostages. The names of nearly all of these victims are unknown.

But we do know the names of a handful of Congolese who died in Europe during Leopold's reign. A few were children, sent as an experiment to a church school in Belgium; others were among those exhibited at world's fairs like the one on the very site of the museum in 1897. The Congolese who died at the 1897 fair were refused tombs in the consecrated part of the nearby parish cemetery, and were buried instead in a common grave in the ground reserved for suicides, paupers, prostitutes, and adulterers. In tribute to seven of these Africans whose lives ended so far from home, a Congolese artist, Freddy Tsimba, has engraved their names, and the dates and places of their deaths, high on a row of floor-to-ceiling windows that face the marble panel. When the afternoon sun comes through the windows, these names are projected in large letters of shadow on top of the Belgian names on the panel. It is a haunting, ghostly overlay that reminds you of just how many ignored and forgotten lives throng unseen behind the history we are accustomed to celebrating. *A*

Adam Hochschild is the author of the forthcoming Rebel Cinderella: From Rags to Riches to Radical, the Epic Journey of Rose Pastor Stokes.

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From the outside it looks steady.

It looks *resolved*. Sitting heavily in a chair, with settled opinions and stodgy shoes—there’s something unbudgeable about the middle-aged person. The young are dewy and volatile; the old are toppling into fragility. But the middle-aged hold their ground. There’s a kind of magnetism to this solidity, this dowdy poise, this impressively median state.

But on the *inside* ... You’re in deep flux. A second puberty, almost. Inflammations, precarious accelerations. Dismorphic shock in the bathroom mirror: *Jesus, who is that?* Strange new acts of grooming are suddenly necessary. Maybe you’ve survived a bout of something serious; you probably have a couple of fussy little private afflictions. You need ointment. It feels like a character flaw. Maybe it *is* a character flaw.

For all this, though, you are weirdly and unwontedly calm, like someone riding a bicycle without using his hands. You’re not an apprentice adult anymore. You’re through the disorientation period, the Talking Heads moment—“And you may find yourself in a beautiful house / With a beautiful wife / And you may ask yourself / Well, how did I get here?” You’re through the angst and the panic attacks. You don’t yet have the wild license of old age, when you can write gnarly, scandalous poems like Frederick Seidel, or tell an interviewer—as The Who’s Pete Townshend recently did—that “it’s too late to give a fuck.” But

you’re more free. The stuff that used to obsess you, those grinding circular thoughts—they’ve worn themselves out. You know yourself, quite well by now. Life has introduced you to your shadow; you’ve met your dark double, and with a bit of luck the two of you have made your accommodations. You know your friends. You love your friends, and you tell them.

I’m generalizing from my own case, of course, because what else can I do? Besides, a sense at last of having some things in common with the other humans, the other wobbling bipeds—this, too, is one of the gifts of middle age. Good experience, bad experience, doesn’t matter. Experience is what you share, the raw weight of it. The lines around the eyes. The bruising of the soul. The banging up against your own boundaries, your own limits.

Limits, limits, thank God for limits. Thank God for the things you cannot do, and that you *know* you cannot do. Thank God for the final limit: Death, who now gazes at you levelly from the foot of your bed, and with an ironical twinkle, because you still don’t completely believe in him.

At any rate, if you’re reading this, you’re not dead. So: Should you leap gladly, grinningly, into these contradictory middle years, when everything is speeding up and slowing down, and becoming more serious and less serious? The middle-aged person is not an idiot. Middle age is when you can throw your back out watching Netflix. The middle-aged person is being consumed by life, and knows it. Feed the flame—that’s the invitation. Go up brightly. *A*

James Parker is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

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— to —

MIDDLE AGE

By James Parker



Is it possible to outsmart fate?

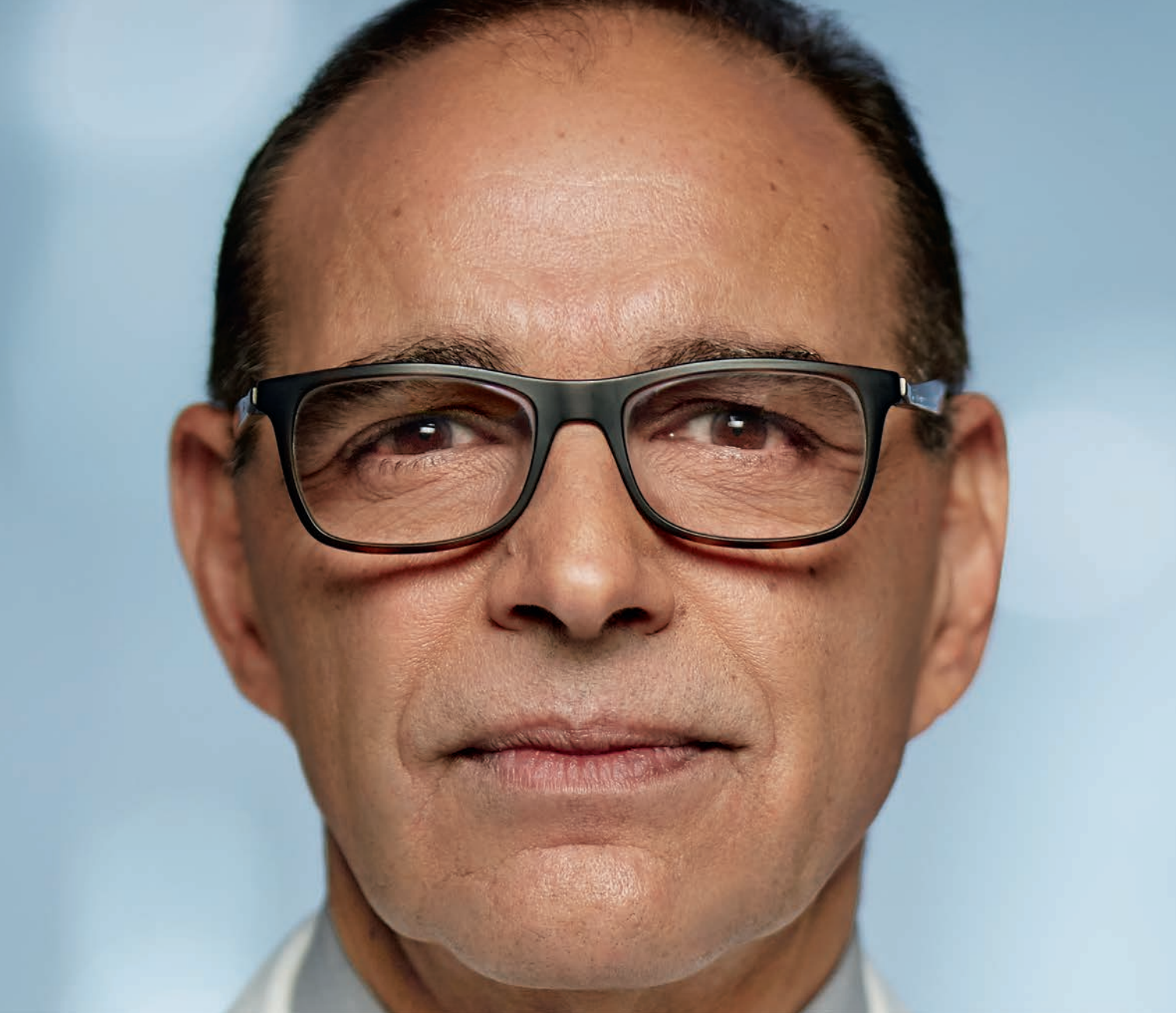


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