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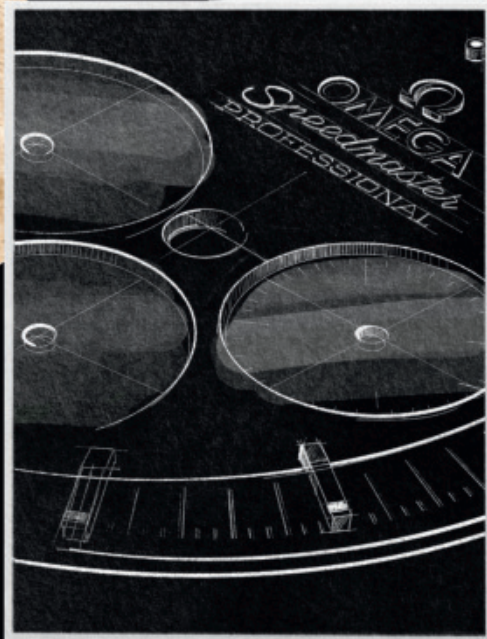
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EST. 1857

READING

BY ROSE
HOROWITCH

IS OVER





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DESIGN BY
COLIN HUNTER

**A podcast about the everyday rituals
that make life worth savoring.**



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Behind the Cover: In this month's cover story, "The Age of Reading Is Over" (p. 12), Rose Horowitz describes the new postliterate era. The problem is less a crisis of literacy—though many Americans do struggle with basic reading skills—and more a crisis of comprehension. Americans

lack the desire to read and are losing the higher-order intellectual powers that come with reading extended texts. For the cover, we used transparent paper to make the headline appear as if it's fading into obscurity.

— Colin Hunter, *Art Director*

THE

Sucker

*In the April issue,
McKay Coppins
reflected on his year as a
degenerate gambler.*

small minority struggles? We tried that with alcohol and abandoned it. The consistent position on personal liberty must be that adults can make their own choices. Targeted regulation of predatory marketing and better self-exclusion tools are reasonable. Treating every adult sports bettor as a rube who needs saving is not.

Owen Voutsinas-Klose
Washington, D.C.

After reading McKay Coppins's article, I keep thinking about how easy it would be for him to start gambling again. I wonder: Has he ever crossed from Virginia into any of the five bordering states that wouldn't honor his self-exclusion in order to make a bet? Has he made a sports-related wager on one of the prediction markets available in all 50 states? Has he received offers for free bets in his inbox, even after opting out?

I know this cycle firsthand. I'm one of the millions of Americans in recovery for a gambling addiction. To borrow Coppins's words, I am a fellow degenerate. I knew I had a problem as a teenager playing poker in friends' basements, and it escalated through my 20s in casinos and on online sportsbooks.

I tried to stop myself more than 100 times. Therapy, Gamblers Anonymous, new cities, new social circles—nothing worked; the hook was set in my brain. I finally found recovery after more than a decade. I had lost hundreds of thousands of dollars, and I'd nearly lost my life. Today, six years bet-free, I

Letters

Perhaps the most sinister aspect of McKay Coppins's well-researched story on sports gambling is the combination of addictions cultivated by the app-based platforms he used. In the apps, the pathology of compulsive gambling partners with a ubiquitous pathology we all suffer from now: an addiction to our phones. One cannot help but wonder if, 50 years from now, we'll look back on our current norms with the same disbelief we today express when discussing cigarette smoking during its heyday. Online gambling comes with its own set of life-altering problems, to be sure, but it exists in the context of a serious addiction—screen time—that now afflicts everyone, not just gamblers.

Tom Langston, M.D.
Lookout Mountain, Ga.

McKay Coppins criticizes Justice Samuel Alito for ignoring the "public-policy rationale" behind the federal sports-betting ban. But that was exactly Alito's job as a judge. The question in *Murphy v. NCAA* was whether Congress could constitutionally order state legislatures to maintain state laws prohibiting sports betting. Under the anti-commandeering doctrine, it cannot. This is the same constitutional safeguard that would prevent a future Congress from, say, requiring states to keep their abortion bans on the books.

As Coppins notes, experts estimate that only 2 to 5 percent of gamblers develop compulsive behaviors. That is a serious concern for those individuals. But when else do we ban an activity enjoyed responsibly by the majority because a

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manage it like a chronic disease. I have also founded Evive, a digital health company focused on supporting people with gambling problems.

Self-exclusion, which Coppins pursued at the end of his reporting, is a first step. I use it too. But it is a screen-door barrier, not a solution. What actually works is what you build on the other side of that door: accountability tools, a community of people who get what you're going through, and a better understanding of what's happening in your brain.

The system meant to address gambling harm is underfunded, underutilized, and built for an era before gambling was a 24/7 digital activity. There's no shortage of infrastructure designed to bring you back into gambling, and almost none designed to help you stay out.

Coppins has shown what gambling harm looks like today: It can hit anyone. His article invites a reckoning with what support looks like. The groundwork is there: digital tools that reach people before they've hit rock bottom, peer support. We need casino operators, public-health agencies, regulators, and technological innovators to work together to create solutions as layered as the problem. We all deserve something more durable than a screen door.

Sam DeMello
Beverly, Mass.

The Women of Avenger Field

They bravely served as pilots during World War II, Ellen Cushing wrote in the April issue. Then America forgot them.

In 1943 my mother, 25 and single, left her job with IBM to join the war effort. She held a commercial pilot's license, so she joined the Women Airforce Service Pilots and reported for training. On orders from General Hap Arnold, she and 25 other WASPs were then transferred to Camp Davis, in North Carolina.

My mom's cohort was assigned to tow targets behind their aircraft so gunners could practice tracking and firing 90-mm and 40-mm shells. Many of the planes returned with holes; the pilots returned with shaken nerves.

The period was marked by several crashes and overt hostility from the base commander. Mom was proud of her service, but described it to my siblings and me as the most frightening time of her life. She was grounded with an ear infection in 1944 and left the WASPs, transferring to the Office of Strategic Services. Mom died in 2004, having finally been recognized for her service as a veteran. At her burial in Fremont, New Hampshire, she was attended by a military honor guard. A few years later, she

received the Congressional Gold Medal. Her name was Frederica McAfee Richardson.

Steven M. Richardson
Winona, Minn.

My sister, Phyllis, was always more than a little irritated when someone expressed surprise that she, having surpassed 90, was still driving. "Of course I'm still driving," she would reply. "I flew a B-17."

Phyllis was a WASP. Ellen Cushing's article on the Women Airforce Service Pilots reminded me of all the photographs my grown-up sister sent home from the base: of the "girls" gathered together in the bay, of her climbing into a plane with her leather jacket and parachute. I first viewed those photos when I was 5 years old; they constitute my chief memory of the war.

Phyllis married another pilot in 1945 and raised three children. She was politically conservative and eschewed a feminist label, but she enthusiastically joined other WASPs in a visit to their Russian counterparts in the early days of glasnost, and she was thrilled to attend the ceremony in 2010 in Washington, D.C., where the WASPs were officially, finally recognized and awarded the Congressional Gold Medal. She proudly displayed her medal in her home. But close to it sat

her wings, the pin that symbolized what she personally had done for her country. I suspect that this was more important to her.

Phyllis died in 2018, just short of her 100th birthday; she is buried in a family cemetery on a small island off the coast of Maine. There, etched on her memorial stone, is Fifinella, the winged and goggle-wearing female gremlin depicted on the WASP insignia. Fifinella was designed by Walt Disney for a film based on Roald Dahl's *The Gremlins*. (It was never produced.) As gremlins came to be associated with aviation culture—pilots would blame mechanical problems on the pesky creatures—the WASPs adopted Fifinella as their symbol. She was a powerful figure who could wreak havoc on those who did not take her seriously.

As the secretary of defense denies promotions to women in the military, as the Trump administration removes webpages telling the stories of the WASPs and other women who served their country, I think of Fifinella. Long may her spirit, and that of all the women who wore the insignia, live on.

Christina Marsden Gillis
Berkeley, Calif.

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

Correction: "How to Tell the American Story" (July) described an August car race in Washington, D.C., as a Formula 1 race. In fact, it is an IndyCar race.

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DISPATCHES

OPENING ARGUMENT

THE “CONSUMER SOCIALISM” TRAP

*The wrong way to solve the
affordability crisis*

BY IDREES KAHLOON

This past January, in his inaugural address, Zohran Mamdani memorably promised to “replace the frigidity of rugged individualism with the warmth of collectivism.” In the parlance of the Democratic Socialists of America, of which Mamdani is a member, collectivism is a good thing. It is not meant to recall Stalin’s seizure of farms, which resulted in mass famine, or Mao’s Great Leap Forward, which also resulted in mass famine. American socialism today is different. The DSA still formally aspires to “popular control of resources and production,” otherwise known as seizing the means of production. Yet the New York City mayor’s attention-grabbing policy proposals—to freeze rents, establish city-run grocery

stores, and pay for universal child care—are aimed at a more modest goal: socializing the cost of consumption.

“Consumer socialism” does not liberate workers from the exploitation of owners; it liberates consumers from the burden of prices. Although its advocates may claim inspiration from both the Great Society tradition of the Democratic Party and Nordic-style democratic socialism, consumer socialism is really a muddle of the two. The Great Society emphasized poverty reduction through means-tested programs such as Medicaid and Head Start; consumer socialism is meant for all. And unlike the Nordic welfare states, which are supported by high levels of taxation for all workers, Mamdani’s approach aims to raise sufficient revenue from corporations and the rich. Consumer socialism tries to have it all: universal social provisions without universally steep taxes. It retains, like other forms of socialism, a supreme optimism in the ability of state planners to shape markets. Where the old central planners failed, the new ones think they will succeed.

Mamdani is only one of consumer socialism’s proponents. The newly elected mayor of Seattle, Katie Wilson, is a former transit organizer who campaigned on both universal child care and spending \$1 billion to pay for union-built public housing. The leading candidate for mayor of Washington, D.C., is DSA-backed Janeese Lewis George, who also calls for universal child care and massive production of below-market-rate housing. (She is open to the idea of government-run grocery stores as well.) Mamdani, Wilson, and Lewis George have claimed the mantle not of Stalinists or

Maoists, but of a different subspecies of socialist—the “sewer socialists” who ran Milwaukee for decades starting in 1910. They made peace with the capitalist superstructure and devoted themselves to good, incorruptible governance and reliable public infrastructure—sewage systems, yes, but also parks, libraries, and fire departments. In their time, they were skewered for practicing “slowcialism.” In a speech he gave to mark his 100th day in office, Mamdani labeled “our 2026 answer to sewer socialism” as “pothole politics”—doing mundane jobs, such as filling more than 100,000 potholes, because “government is not too busy, not too self-important, not too mired in paperwork to fix the problems of this city.”

Sewer socialism is attracting renewed interest in America because it is too boring to threaten capitalism. Lenin despised its predecessor, municipal socialism, for much the same reason. In the late 19th century in English and German cities, socialist administrators operated public utilities such as gasworks, electric trams, and even city-owned slaughterhouses. This variation of socialism aimed to blunt the rapacity of capitalism rather than sharpen its contradictions and hasten the coming revolution. Under municipal socialism, Lenin wrote in 1907, “attention is diverted not to the sphere of minor local questions, being directed not to the question of the class rule of the bourgeoisie, nor to the question of the chief instruments of that rule, but to the question of distributing the *crumbs* thrown by the rich bourgeoisie for the ‘needs of the population.’”

Lenin’s ghost would be similarly unimpressed with

contemporary American socialism—too much democracy, too little murder. Still, there’s nothing small-bore about consumer socialists’ desire to overhaul the economy. In their view, high prices are not market failures but moral ones, the result of greed and corruption, which can be vanquished with the right intention. The ideal state is a kind of Lake Wobegon, where every price is below average.

ONE IRONY of consumer socialism is that it is better tailored to the laptop classes—which now form the backbone of the Democratic Party—than to the American left’s traditional working-class base. The upper classes disproportionately use child-care centers, while lower-income households rely more on stay-at-home parents and relatives. This is partly because wealthier people can more easily afford formal care services. But not every community may even want to send their kids to a child-care center. Some evidence suggests that Latina mothers prefer to have a relative look after their children, even when cost is no issue. Rent stabilization and controls apply to units, not occupants—which in New York has sometimes meant showering benefits on celebrities and on politicians, such as former Governor David Paterson and the late Representative Charles Rangel. Upper-middle-class meritocrats are generally not exhausted by capitalism. They are exhausted by the costs of rent and child care in desirable neighborhoods—bills that the preexisting means-tested welfare state would never have covered.

Mamdani will probably fall short of implementing his vision: Budget constraints

mean that buses are unlikely to be free, as he promised; his child-care proposal received funds to last for just two years so far; and New York, a city of more than 8 million people, will have, at most, five city-run grocery stores by the end of his first term. Despite his pledges to tax the rich, he is limited in his ability to do so, and although his recently passed pied-à-terre tax might raise \$500 million a year, universal child care would, according to his own campaign, cost \$6 billion a year.

The natural habitat of consumer socialism—solidly left-wing American cities—imposes serious limits on its ambitions. Unlike the federal government, cities typically cannot run huge deficits year after year, and must quickly reckon with promises that cannot be paid for. In 2018, New York City officials rolled out a voucher program with an unwieldy name, CityFHEPS, and the laudable goal of decreasing homelessness by subsidizing housing. In 2019, the annual cost of the program was budgeted at \$25 million; its projected cost last fiscal year reached \$1.7 billion, as the number of recipients and the cost per voucher increased simultaneously. Faced with the city’s daunting budget deficit, Mamdani reversed his campaign pledge to expand CityFHEPS and has instead scrambled for ways to hold costs down.

Many risks lurk in consumer socialism’s promises of cheap goods and services. If New York City or Washington, D.C., rapidly increases subsidies for child care, for instance, without expanding the number of approved providers, the existing ones will charge more to meet excessive

demand. Another complication is that the more generous any city benefits are, the more people will move across municipal limits to use them—creating a cost spiral.

The sewer socialists chose their targets carefully. Milwaukee's mayors had a strong economic rationale for pursuing public ownership of utilities: avoiding the massive, duplicative costs of rival water networks without letting a private monopoly gouge consumers. In contrast, publicly run grocery stores are interventions in a low-margin, highly competitive industry. In his 100-days speech, Mamdani pledged, "At our stores, eggs will be cheaper. Bread will be cheaper. Grocery shopping will no longer be an unsolvable equation." But the mathematics of running retail outlets might prove more flummoxing than he realizes. Many aspects of life in the Soviet Union have come to be retroactively romanticized; its grocery stores are not among them.

Optimists think—or hope—that Mamdani-style socialists have a greater awareness of economic constraints than they let on. My colleague Derek Thompson recently said that Mamdani may be sporting "the abundance mullet, which is to say, economic populism in the front and abundance in the back." *Abundance* is a term that Thompson coined in this

magazine to describe policies that expand supply through public and private investment and deregulation—essentially supply-side economics for liberals. The idea is that Mamdani would win popular support by freezing rents—an idea almost unanimously derided by economists—while simultaneously boosting home-building. But the second half of this bargain may never materialize. Although New York's Rent

PLANS ARE already afoot to scale consumer socialism across America. National Democrats have realized that the high cost of living makes for a powerful midterm-election theme, and some in the party prefer to address it with subsidies and price controls rather than measures that increase personal incomes and economic growth. The Congressional Progressive Caucus recently released its "New Affordability

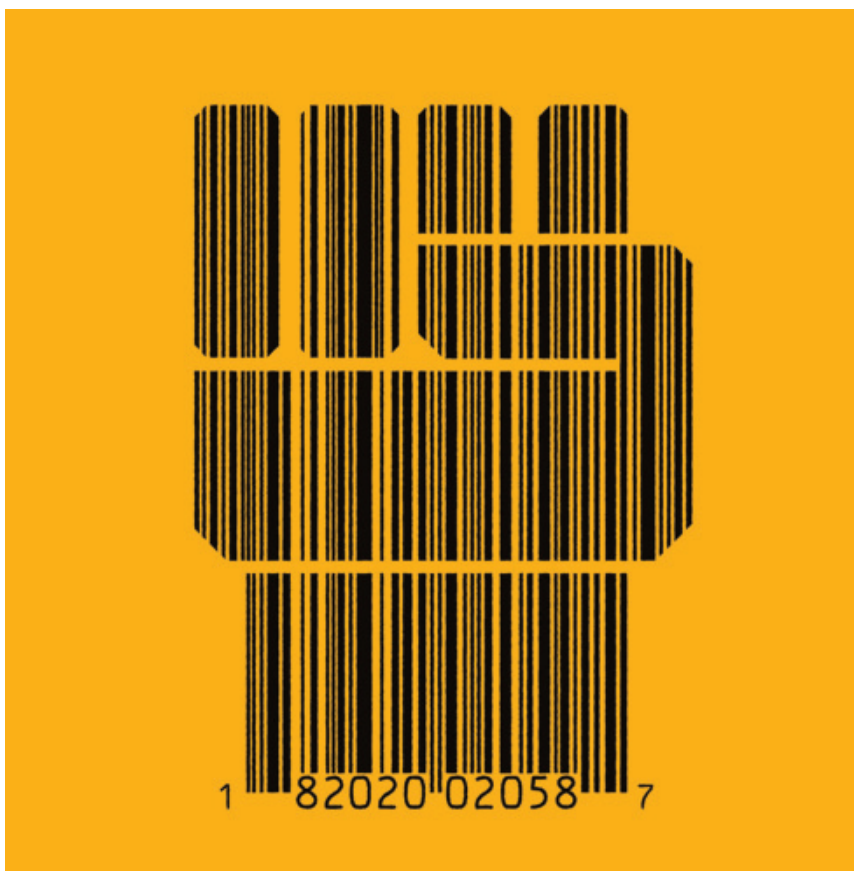
any such changes nationwide would require many more votes than the caucus currently has. And the problem with implementing such plans at the local level is that the rich can always decamp to Austin or Miami, as some of California's billionaires are threatening to do over a ballot measure that would take 5 percent of their wealth.

Perhaps cities like New York will refine a functional version of consumer social-

ism, in which subsidies are balanced with enormous supply-side expansions in the number of homes and child-care centers, leaving everyone better off. Perhaps capitalism can be appropriately fettered within the confines of a select few cities, inspiring a nonviolent, nationwide socialist revolution. That would be a remarkable triumph for Mamdani's consumerist ideology, which wears the transgressive label of socialism but is born primarily out of anger over prices (and an innate American antipathy toward taxes).

American collectivism may be, as Mamdani promised, warmer than rugged individualism. It will certainly be warmer than Soviet or Maoist collectivism. It could also be just as unworkable. And it will certainly be extraordinarily expensive. *A*

Idrees Kahloon is a staff writer at The Atlantic.



Guidelines Board is expected to vote through a promised freeze for nearly 1 million rent-stabilized apartments, Mamdani's efforts to permit more home-building have been plodding by comparison. Absent new supply, restrictions on rent increases will limit mobility for those who receive the benefit, and increase costs for those who do not.

Agenda," which includes plans to make child care a nationwide entitlement—staffed by day-care workers paid as much as teachers—and to create a new set of housing subsidies for rent and down payments. Progressives also argue that this can be financed without tax hikes on ordinary people, but through targeted taxes on plutocrats and corporations. Enacting

THE AGE OF READING IS OVER



CAN CIVILIZATION SURVIVE
THE POSTLITERATE ERA?

BY ROSE HOROWITCH

THE CLASSIC

CLASSIC

are in:

WORDSWORTH CLASSIC

OLD BY

Anna Karenina

LEO TOLSTOY





Twenty-three hundred years ago, the legend goes, King Ptolemy I of Egypt asked his court adviser to assemble a comprehensive collection of the world's written works. Ptolemy, who had served under Alexander the Great, envisioned a library that would safeguard the sum total of humanity's knowledge. His successors inherited this mandate. Royal forces ransacked every ship that arrived at Alexandria, searching for scrolls. These were stored at the Mouseion, a shrine to the Muses modeled after Aristotle's Lyceum. Aristotle's own book collection was said to be among the holdings.

Much of the history of the Library of Alexandria has been lost. But we know that it was the site of many of the premodern world's greatest intellectual achievements. The king paid scholars to live and work in the library, and the collection was available to anyone "eager to study, an encouragement for the entire city to gain wisdom," a visiting Greek rhetorician wrote. It was at the library that Eratosthenes calculated Earth's circumference and Zenodotus edited the earliest manuscripts of Homer's epics. Euclid, who wrote the *Elements* of geometry, may have studied there as well.

This run of scholarship would not last. By 400 C.E., the library had disappeared. Many scholars regard its destruction as the greatest loss of knowledge in history and the beginning of the Dark Ages. Historians have spent centuries parsing fragments of papyrus in an effort to understand what went wrong.

Traditionally, the answer was believed to be war. During the Siege of Alexandria, in 48 B.C.E., Julius Caesar started a fire that incinerated at least 40,000 scrolls. The library survived in diminished form until the fourth century C.E., when followers of the archbishop of Alexandria sacked the pagan temple that housed the remaining manuscripts. But contemporary historians tend to dismiss the importance of these dramatic incidents in favor of a more mundane cause of death: negligence.

Maintaining the collection was an enormous expense. Humidity, mice, and insects slowly ate away at the papyrus scrolls. Scribes had to continually copy old texts before they

deteriorated and became illegible. Eventually, the challenges of maintaining the library became greater than the will to preserve it. "It is not that the disappearance of a library led to a dark age, nor that its survival would have improved those ages," the classics scholar Roger Bagnall has written. The fact that the library was allowed to die showed that the dark age had already arrived.

SOME 2,000 YEARS LATER, under very different circumstances, the darkness is gathering again. Americans, once members of a proudly literate society, read much less than they used to. According to the National Endowment for the Arts, which conducts the most comprehensive survey of the nation's reading habits, fewer than half of all adults reported having read a book of any kind in 2022. Only 38 percent read a novel or short story. A study analyzing 236,000 responses to the American Time Use Survey found that the proportion of Americans who read for pleasure on any given day fell from 28 percent in 2004 to 16 percent in 2023. (The study looked at people who had read a book, magazine, or newspaper; listened to an audiobook; or read an e-book.) Gambling has become a more common leisure activity than reading a book: Last year, 57 percent of Americans placed a bet.

The decline in reading cuts across age groups, gender, and education levels. Even the demographics that traditionally read the most—retirees, women, and college graduates—have seen a collapse.

The books that people do read are simpler than they used to be. *New York Times* best sellers today have sentences that are about one-third shorter than they were a century ago. Longer sentences aren't inherently better. But their former ubiquity suggests an age when Americans had the inclination and ability to read serious works of literature. In 1958, the English translation of Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* was the best-selling novel of the year, according to *Publishers Weekly*. Pasternak writes in long, complex sentences: "On that warm gray morning in the mountains, Zhivago felt sorry for the Tsar, was disturbed at the thought that such diffident reserve and shyness could be the essential characteristics of an oppressor, that a man so weak could imprison, hang, or pardon."

Last year's top-selling novel was *Sunrise on the Reaping*, the latest in the *Hunger Games* young-adult series. Brian Bannon, the chief librarian at the New York Public Library, told me that young-adult fiction is one of the library's most popular offerings—including among decidedly not-young adults. (Other titles in the top 10 include the children's books *Partypoop*, the 20th installment in the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series, and *Dog Man: Big Jim Believes*.) The most popular novel written for adults was the romantasy adventure *Onyx Storm*. Whatever the book's pleasures, it isn't Pasternak: "A muscle in his square jaw ticks as he stares down at me, rippling the tawny-brown skin of his stubbled cheek."

Americans also get much less of their news through reading than they once did. In 1975, about half of 20-somethings said they read the newspaper every day. Today less than 10 percent do. Most Americans now get the news on their phones and laptops, and 40 percent say they prefer to watch or listen to online news rather than read it.

This shift is often referred to as a literacy crisis. And it's true that Americans' basic reading skills are declining. Fourth- and eighth-grade reading scores have slid for the past decade. Amanda Kordeliski, who is on the board of the American Association of School Librarians, told me that she and her fellow librarians have had to buy new books to accommodate students' diminished reading levels. Some of the most popular are graphic novels: updated classics such as the *Magic Tree House* series for elementary-school students, and manga for middle and high schoolers.

In 2024, in a national test, just 35 percent of high-school seniors were "proficient" at skills such as analyzing complex fictional themes and evaluating the effectiveness of an author's argument. About the same number scored below "basic," meaning that they may struggle to draw conclusions from concepts explicitly included in a text, or to use context clues to determine the meaning of an unknown word. Adult-literacy scores have also dropped: Nearly 30 percent of American adults cannot paraphrase or make inferences from a multipage text. In 2017, that number was less than 20 percent.

And yet, strangely, Americans are probably reading more words than ever before. What has changed is what they read, and how. People are bombarded with emails, text messages, X posts, Reddit threads, Instagram captions. This explosion of textual fragments has come at the expense of devoting sustained attention to longer written works that convey rich and complicated information. Maryanne Wolf, a cognitive neuroscientist at UCLA, argues that people are losing the ability to think deeply about writing. That doesn't mean they are forgetting how to decode individual words. Rather, they are losing the higher-order abilities of comprehension and synthesis. America, in other words, isn't illiterate. It's postliterate.

Things are about to get worse, and fast. The next generation reads much less than today's adults did when they were kids. Kindergarten teachers say that many of their students don't know nursery rhymes or fairy tales, Benjamin Powers, the director of Yale and the University of Connecticut's Haskins Global Literacy Hub, told me. (In the study of 236,000 American adults, only 2 percent read to a child on a given day.) From 1984 to 2025, the percentage of 13-year-olds who said they rarely or never read for fun rose from 8 to 29 percent. Every year older a child gets, the less they like to read. Robert Townsend, a program director at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, recently ran focus groups asking high-school students how they felt about reading for pleasure. He told me that most thought of it as an alien practice.

Reading has come to seem extraneous even to some of the best-educated members of society. Margaret Rennix, Harvard's assistant director for humanities and social-sciences support, told me she'd spoken with a student who was struggling to read a book written in Old English. The culprit: Anthony Burgess's 1962 novel *A Clockwork Orange*. (The student used ChatGPT to "translate" the book into easier language.) Not long ago, a Harvard sociology professor, troubled by course evaluations in which students said they resented the amount of dense reading they were assigned, asked Rennix to speak to his class in defense of reading. She had to explain—to students at America's most elite university, taking a course in a discipline rooted in written observation, argumentation, and analysis—that excerpts and summaries cannot capture the depth and sophistication of a complete primary text. Rennix told me that some students now view reading as an unnecessarily burdensome way of acquiring knowledge. "By asking them to read," she said, "professors are arbitrarily withholding information from students by forcing them to get it through this more difficult medium."



It may seem self-serving for a writer at a 169-year-old magazine to carry a torch for reading. But the people who make a living from words are not the only ones who lose out in a post-literate age. Reading is more than a skill, or one mode of communication among many. The media we use to interact with one another shape the world we inhabit. Early humans spent millennia communicating only by voice. The advent of reading and writing transformed society. It altered people's consciousness and politics, along with the intellectual feats they were capable of. The decline of reading will bring about changes of the same magnitude. It will affect our innermost thoughts, our society's politics and culture, and how we tell the history of our civilization. If we look closely, we can see that these changes have already begun.

READING HAS NEVER BEEN natural. Humans have no innate cognitive machinery designed to string letters into words and connect them to their real-world analogues. To read, people had to repurpose regions of their brain used for speech and object recognition. The practice first emerged 6,000 years ago in Mesopotamia. For millennia afterward, most of the population was illiterate. Literacy became a mass phenomenon relatively recently, after Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press in 1440.

The written word is fundamentally different from oral language. Writing detaches the message from the messenger, allowing for a more dispassionate spread of information than was possible in oral societies. Because writing a phrase takes longer than speaking it, writing forces the author to slow down and reflect. Written language tends to employ more complex sentence structures and vocabulary than spoken language. And unlike speech, it doesn't disappear into the ether. Readers can return to a text and plumb it for new meaning and understanding. Because writing endures, individuals can temporarily forget what they've written but trust that it won't be lost forever. This frees up the mind to think of new ideas and make new discoveries.

"More than any other single invention, writing has transformed human consciousness," Walter J. Ong, a historian and Jesuit priest, wrote in his 1982 book, *Orality and Literacy*. He argued that literacy created the conditions for inner concentration, extended focus, and logical deduction. It allowed for a new kind of rational, linear, and analytical thought.

Ong cited case studies by the neuropsychologist Alexander Luria, who traveled to remote villages in Uzbekistan and Kirghizia in the 1930s, when peasants were starting to receive rudimentary reading and writing instruction. Luria met his subjects at teahouses, in field camps, and around evening fires. There, he posed a number of questions designed to elucidate differences in how illiterate and literate peasants thought. Luria told the peasants: "In the Far North, all bears are white. Novaya Zemlya is in the Far North." He then asked them the color of bears in Novaya Zemlya. The literate peasants were able to complete the syllogism. But the illiterate ones refused to try, explaining that they had never been to the north and thus couldn't answer. Achieving literacy seemed to have conveyed an ability to think logically and abstractly, not simply to read words.

Later scholars would attribute some of these new modes of thinking to other aspects of living in a literate society, not to reading alone. But Ong's larger argument stands: Print cultures value lengthy, organized arguments. "Writing freezes speech and in so doing gives birth to the grammarian, the logician, the rhetorician, the historian, the scientist—all those who must hold language before them so that they can see what it means, where it errs, and where it is leading," Neil Postman wrote in 1985. The advent of reading and writing was a precondition for philosophy, modern science, history as an academic enterprise, art criticism.

These changes were hugely destabilizing. As literacy spread through societies, it contributed to political upheaval and revolutions. In the American colonies, the leaders of the patriot cause employed newspapers and pamphlets to foment anti-British sentiment. "The ancient Roman and Greek Orators could only speak to the Number of Citizens capable of being assembled within the Reach of Their Voice," Benjamin Franklin wrote in 1782. "Now by the Press we can speak to Nations; and good Books & well written Pamphlets have great and general Influence."

America's Founders used a print document to construct their new nation and believed that the system they had devised would work precisely because citizens would be informed readers. Franklin was himself a newspaper publisher and established America's first lending library. "These libraries have improved the general conversation of the Americans," he wrote in his autobiography, and "made the common tradesmen and farmers as intelligent as most gentlemen from other countries." Early on, Americans came to see staying informed as a civic and even moral imperative.

Of course, the new republic was not always a haven for sober analysis. The Founding Fathers attacked their enemies in the papers, spreading lies to incite the public against their opponents. One ally of Thomas Jefferson's called John Adams "a hideous hermaphroditical character which has neither the force and firmness of a man, nor the gentleness and sensibility of a woman."

Nor was access to reading evenly distributed. For a long time, large numbers of Americans couldn't pass the federal government's literacy test—especially in the South, where preventing Black literacy was a pillar of white-supremacist government.

But from the beginning, literature was a crucial source of entertainment, meaning, and connection for many Americans. They shared a set of references from the Bible and English literature. Charles Dickens was sufficiently beloved by American readers that when he got his hair cut during a visit to New York City in 1842, admirers flocked to collect clippings from the barber.

In the 19th century, composing a letter was an art form, and even correspondence with loved ones was written in an elegant, formal style. "It's weird for us to see it now: a Civil War soldier writing to his wife, and he's covered with mud in this tent, and he writes as if he's Shakespeare," John McWhorter, a linguist at Columbia University, told me. "And you think, *Can't he loosen up with his own wife?* But the thing is, that is him basically sending her roses."

Samuel D. Lougheed served in the 8th Regiment of the Union's Missouri Volunteer Infantry, which fought at Shiloh and the Siege of Vicksburg. In October 1862, he wrote to his wife: "Tis hard to lie down covered with your own gore on a

battle field and die. 'Tis hard to see the mighty prancing war horse, trampling the dying and dead beneath their merciless feet. No dear wife, near to speak a word of comfort. No living sister or Mother to administer relief in that hour the most sad in the history of humanity. O the humanity. O the horrors of war."

IN 1962, MARSHALL MCLUHAN, the patron saint of media theorists, predicted that the Western world would become what he called "post-literate." In *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, published that year, he suggested that such an age had already begun—that electronic media were already supplanting the written word. At the time, 90 percent of homes had a television, compared with 9 percent only a decade earlier. Television was becoming Americans' main source of news. The average household spent more than five hours a day in front of the TV set.

Viewed from the present, the America of the 1950s and '60s doesn't seem postliterate. After the war, the nation had become wealthier and more highly educated at a remarkable pace. Its appetite for the written word and its veneration of the intellectuals who produced it seemed poised to grow and grow. In 1964, *Time*, which then had a circulation of more than 3 million, ran a cover story on John Cheever, the author known for his dark fables of suburban malaise. The article, "Ovid in Ossining," opened with an extended quotation from the invocation of *Metamorphoses*. In Cheever's famous story "The Five-Forty-Eight," the protagonist boards the titular train and is greeted by a then-familiar, now-exotic sight: a car full of commuters reading the evening newspaper.

But television was changing the rhythms and habits of American life. In 1985, Postman, a friend and disciple of McLuhan's, published *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. He argued that television had hijacked Americans' attention and turned politics into cheap entertainment. "The problem is not that television presents us with entertaining subject matter but that all subject matter is presented as entertaining," Postman wrote. "Television is our culture's principal mode of knowing about itself." At the time, the average American household watched more than seven hours of television every day, a number that would rise to nearly nine hours by 2010.

If TV crowded out the silent time necessary for reading, broadband internet and the smartphone make it nearly impossible. Not too long ago, at-home screen entertainment was finite. Shows aired on a certain day, at a certain time. If you wanted to watch an old movie, you had to put your shoes on and go to a video store. Books could compete in that environment. Some people, at least, would turn off the TV and read a book before falling asleep.

Now entertainment is limitless. There's no hard stop—one show bleeds into the next. People watch TV with their phone in hand, monitoring social media or texting with friends. Netflix has reportedly told directors and screenwriters to assume that the audience isn't paying attention and to constantly remind viewers what's going on. In this environment, people have to be really determined to read. Most aren't.

When people do read, they might find that they're absorbing less information. That's especially true if they read on their phone. The endless scroll, hyperlinks, and notifications invite surface-level reading, with constant invitations to look elsewhere.

Studies have shown that people comprehend less when reading on a digital device than on paper, perhaps because of all these distractions. Devoting extended, undivided attention to a text can now feel like too much to ask. Audiobooks have become a popular alternative to print books at least in part because listening to a book allows for multitasking: You can read while doing the dishes or driving to work.

Faced with shrinking attention spans and declining comprehension, schools might have been expected to resist the impulse toward shorter passages and shallower reading. Instead, they spurred it on. A 2025 survey found that most middle- and high-school English teachers assigned zero to four books a year. Successive waves of education reforms have led districts to favor short passages over full books, the better to mimic multiple-choice reading-comprehension exams. Many of the most popular school curricula now rely on excerpts. Annemarie Cortez, the principal at an elementary school in Corona, California, told me that many administrators are instructing teachers not to assign full books; they're supposed to be running discrete reading drills with short excerpts.

Meanwhile, digital devices have flooded American classrooms. In a *New York Times* survey, more than 80 percent of elementary-school teachers said students receive a school-issued device by the time they enter kindergarten. Lupita Villalobos, who teaches 3-year-olds at a pre-K in Duncanville, Texas, told me that the district gives each student a tablet to use during school. She's prevented her students from using the devices, as she knows how much time they spend on them at home. "I had a student who had a very strong reaction to starting school," she said. "Typically, students cry maybe the first couple weeks and say they want their mom. But this student would cry for her tablet."

In the recent past, people were at least reading something online, but that's changing fast. Social media, once mainly text-based, has been overrun with short-form videos. TikTok, YouTube Shorts, and Instagram Reels dominate the attention economy, especially among young people. According to a recent data analysis by Jean

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ITS DISAPPEARANCE
WILL RESHAPE IT.**

Twenge, a psychology professor who studies generational change, by eighth grade, the average kid spends four and a half hours a day on social media. For much of that time, it appears, they are watching videos, often at 2x speed. Even text messages have taken on characteristics of the spoken word. People use all caps to indicate heightened emotion and avoid the formality of proper punctuation, which now seems stilted, even stern. Like many 20-somethings, my friends and I have mostly moved on from texts, preferring to send one another voice recordings instead.

The written word has survived for thousands of years and overcome successive challenges from new technologies. It's clearly resilient. Reading rates might fluctuate, but optimists argue that the long arc of history points toward universal literacy. Martin Puchner, a comparative-literature professor at Harvard, studies how literature has shaped history. He's spent decades tracing how communication technologies have changed, and the panics those changes have triggered. For much of his career, he was skeptical of fears about the end of reading. "If the long history of changes in writing technologies has taught me anything, I think it's that one should always resist the kind of doomsday scenarios," he told me.

And yet, even Puchner now believes that the doomsday scenario has arrived: A return to text, away from video, seems awfully unlikely. Maybe McLuhan and Postman weren't wrong in predicting that our society would become postliterate. They were merely early. The world that these theorists foresaw half a century ago is now here. The literate era will prove to be a brief interlude between the oral and digital ages.

READING SHAPED the modern mind. Its disappearance will reshape it. Cognitive scientists are starting to understand what these changes might look like. I asked a dozen of them what happens to our brains when we stop reading. Several were amused by my rudimentary question. "Everything that happens to you changes the brain," Dan Willingham, a professor at the University of Virginia, told me. "Literally reading a word changes your brain for a few hours at least—and, if you know how to measure it right, for much longer than that." He was trying to reassure me: If everything changes the brain, then almost no single action matters all that much.

But what if you consistently replace one kind of action (reading a word) with another (watching an Instagram Reel)? One of the most robust findings in neuroscience is that people's brains master what they practice. If we fill our time with short-form videos instead of books, our reading skills atrophy. We have less background knowledge to aid comprehension. There's no danger of spontaneous mass illiteracy, but the complex cognitive skills that reading fosters start to degrade. The library of the mind falls into disrepair.

Reading books is a workout for the attention span. The more you read, the easier it is to read, and the more you're rewarded with new understanding. Eventually the process is more pleasurable than it is challenging. But as with physical exercise, the converse is true as well: The less you read, the more difficult it is to read, and the rockier the path to acquiring knowledge.

Social media offers instant gratification. John Hutton, a pediatrics professor at UT Southwestern Medical Center, compares

scrolling TikTok to a lab rat pushing a button and getting a dose of cocaine: Eventually, all you want to do is push the button. In 2004, the average attention span on a screen was two and a half minutes, Gloria Mark, a psychologist at UC Irvine, told me. By 2012, it had dropped to 75 seconds. Five years ago, it fell to about 47 seconds. "We become accustomed to having content change rapidly," Mark said.

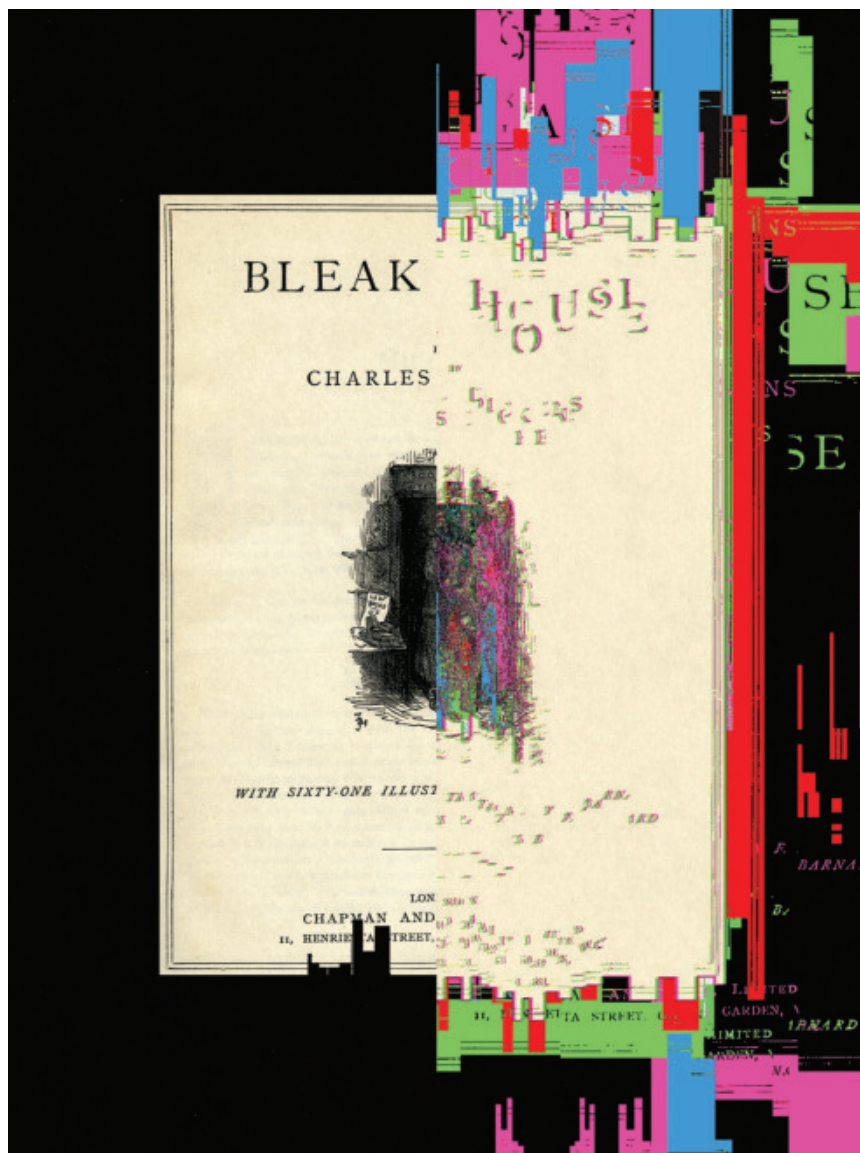
Watching videos is a more passive form of engagement than reading. Hutton recently collected brain images of children, all 3 to 5 years old, as they took in stories in different formats. When children watched an animated video of a story, they used the region of the brain associated with imagination about half as much as they did when looking at static illustrations while listening to an audio recording. Children also used their cerebellum—a part of the brain associated with learning—less when watching a video. "They don't really have to use their imagination as much, because things are happening on the screen," Hutton told me. "The brain's just doing less work to understand and learn from what they're seeing in the animated, compared to the illustrated."

The paradox is that although video contains more information than text—not just language but sounds and moving images—it does not stimulate deeper thinking. To the contrary, video thrusts so much information at the viewer at once that it's difficult to focus on any one piece of it. The frames keep changing regardless of how much the viewer has noticed or comprehended. Few people pause and rewind to reflect on what they might have missed.

Young people today have never experienced a world without ubiquitous short-form video. In other studies, Hutton found that children who had more screen time and spent less time reading had less well-developed white matter in areas associated with executive function and language. This suggests that they were less accustomed to using those skills. Benjamin Powers, at the Haskins Global Literacy Hub, told me that students arrive in elementary school with a poor ability to maintain focus and a low tolerance for mental exertion. "In classrooms, this shows up as students who can decode or retrieve information but struggle with comprehension that requires inference, synthesis, or holding ideas in mind across longer texts," he said.

In a 2024 survey of third-to-eighth-grade teachers, more than 80 percent said that their students' reading stamina had declined since 2019. Scores on the ACT's reading and English sections have been falling for the past seven years. They're now at their lowest level in more than three decades. SAT reading and writing scores have declined too, even as administrators have shortened and simplified the passages assessing reading-comprehension skills.

When these students get to college, their professors find that they have to teach them how to comprehend a text—in other words, how to think. "I'm teaching in German, so we've always been used to teaching them how to read, which is something that people in English departments are now realizing that they have to do," Jonathan Fine, a German-studies professor at Brown University, told me. "Before you can even get to 'What's the larger point?,' it's: 'Is this ironic?,' what a metaphor might mean, just trying to get the very words and grammar to get them to notice everything, so that they can hopefully then make the larger connections."



That may sound like an exaggeration, but higher education will almost certainly have to become more remedial. In a study of English and English-education majors at two regional universities in Kansas, published in 2024, researchers asked students to read the first seven paragraphs of Dickens’s *Bleak House*. The novel follows members of the Jarndyce family through a lengthy legal dispute over their inheritance. It begins:

London. Michaelmas term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln’s Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill.

The researchers quoted students’ attempts to parse the passage. “So it’s like, um, the mud was all in the streets, and we were, no ... so everything’s been, like, kind of washed around and

we might find Megalosaurus bones but he says they’re waddling, um, all up the hill,” one student said. At least a quarter of the subjects interpreted the figures of speech literally, leading to the inference that dinosaurs walked the streets of 19th-century London. Dickens continues by describing the Lord Chancellor as he is “addressed by a large advocate with great whiskers, a little voice, and an interminable brief.” Another student interpreted this passage as “describing him in a room with an animal I think? Great whiskers? A cat?”

That students would struggle with unfamiliar references is not surprising. But the researchers gave them access to the entire internet. They could have looked up *Michaelmas term* or *Lord Chancellor* or *Lincoln’s Inn Hall* if they had chosen to do so. Students didn’t even know how to go about figuring out what they didn’t understand, or they didn’t bother. Most of them did not realize that the passage takes place in a court of law. Only 5 percent had an accurate, detailed understanding of what they’d read.

These changes aren’t confined to college campuses. American adults’ ability to answer logic questions, reason effectively, and analyze patterns declined from 2006 to 2018. American adults also tend to have a smaller vocabulary than those with an equivalent level of education did half a century ago. Recent studies suggest that the Flynn effect—the steady rise in IQ between generations since the 1930s—has reversed over the past two decades. Average IQ scores are declining by about

three points a decade, Elizabeth Dworak, a research psychologist at Northwestern’s medical school, told me.

The cognitive shifts aren’t all negative. Dworak’s research finds that American adults are improving in certain forms of spatial reasoning. Postliterate culture could convey advantages that we don’t yet understand. In Plato’s *Phaedrus*, Socrates famously argues that the advent of writing “will create forgetfulness in the learners’ souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves.” He was right. But as writing eroded individuals’ memories, the media theorist Andrej Mir has observed, it improved society’s collective memory.

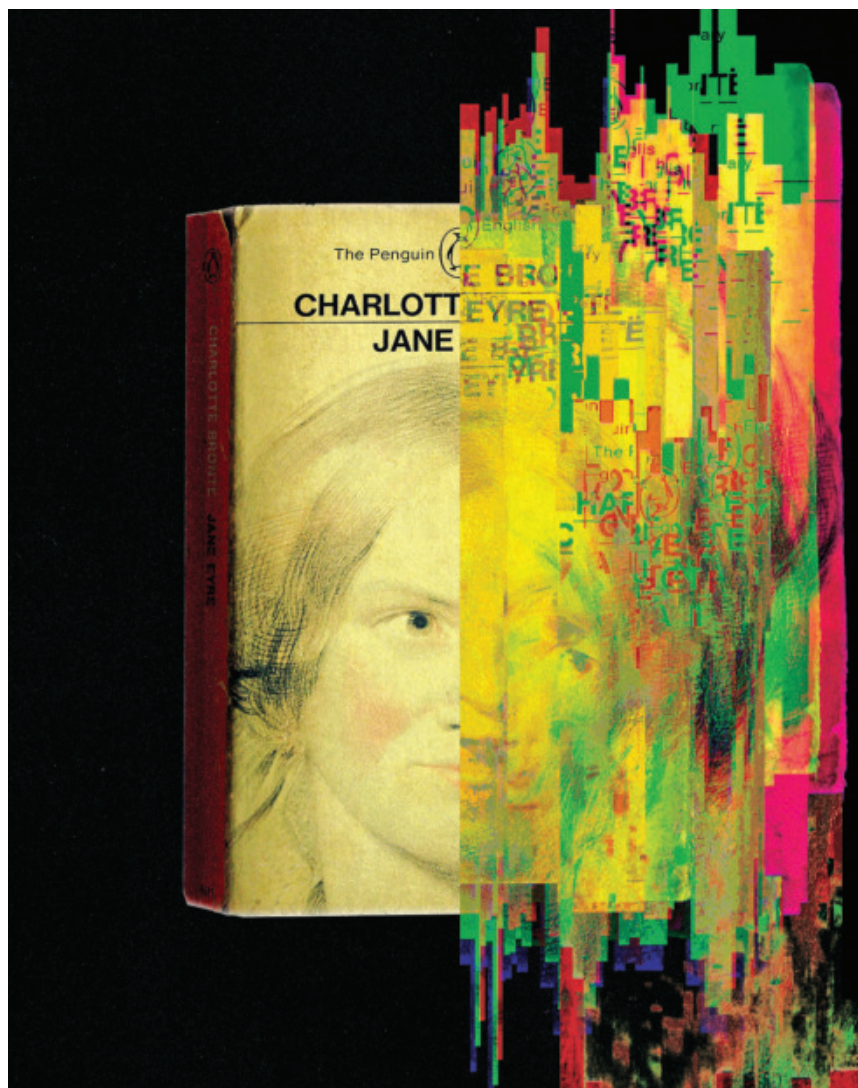
Could the generations growing up with their brains hooked to endless video feeds be developing some kind of novel, as-yet-undetected cognitive brilliance? Perhaps. But for now, the decline of reading seems to be ushering in a less rational, analytical, and sophisticated mode of thinking. It’s difficult to see any advantages in that.

IN 1982, WALTER J. ONG observed that modern civilization was entering a phase of “secondary orality,” in which a once-literate society reverts back to some of the conventions of preliterate cultures. Because spoken words disappear as soon as they’re uttered, oral cultures value repetition to aid memory. Bards in oral societies make use of stock phrases and mnemonics to keep track of their train of thought. They traffic in epithets and “enthusiastic description of physical violence,” in Ong’s words, because conflict is more memorable than dispassionate discussion. Speakers can’t edit their words the way writers can, so they press on without admitting their mistakes. If they later contradict themselves, they don’t expect the audience to recall their earlier statements. Meaning depends on the identity of the speaker, not on any concept of objective truth.

It is unlikely that Donald Trump has familiarized himself with *Orality and Literacy*. But if he did, he might recognize himself in Ong’s description. Trump’s communication style is perfectly suited to an oral society. He employs epithets—“Low-Energy Jeb,” “Little Marco,” “Sleepy Joe”—that are easy to remember and repeat. He contradicts himself as though there is no record of his previous statements. Even his writing is almost indistinguishable from his speech. (It makes sense; Trump reportedly prefers dictation to composition.) His online posts are full of idiosyncratically placed punctuation, capital letters, and exclamation points. Many are memes with little text: One featured an image of an American warship hitting an Iranian airplane with a laser beam and included the phrase “Lasers: Bing, Bing, GONE!!!”

Trump is our first postliterate president. It is difficult to imagine him being elected leader of a country where information is primarily spread through text. Ahead of the 2024 election, an NBC News poll of 1,000 voters found that Joe Biden had a 49-point lead among respondents who read newspapers. Trump has pioneered a style of communication that exploits our distracted, disputatious age. “So many people, particularly in the academic and journalistic circles, think of him as a political revolutionary,” Roderick Hart, a communications professor emeritus at the University of Texas at Austin, told me. “And I see him much more as a rhetorical revolutionary.”

In the 1985 book *No Sense of Place*, the media theorist Joshua Meyrowitz observed that television and other electronic media inundated Americans with new kinds of information about their prospective leaders. Print media gave the public access only to politicians’ polished remarks; video let Americans see their presidents



sweat, sneeze, and stammer. Voters began to focus on “dating criteria” instead of “résumé criteria,” he told me.

“More than in the past, authorities today must often ‘look and sound good’ rather than write and reason well,” Meyrowitz wrote in *No Sense of Place*. He predicted that the decline of print and rise of electronic media would ultimately push people toward populist leaders. They would shun authority and institutions in favor of the candidate who made good television. He published his book soon after Ronald Reagan, a former actor, had won reelection.

“I reread the book recently and I kept going, *Holy shit, this is even more true than when I wrote it*,” Meyrowitz said. Social-media platforms give Americans unprecedented opportunities to watch their representatives’ every move. Their algorithms reward simplistic, inflammatory, emotionally resonant content over complexity, nuance, and rigor. Ideas that comport with folk theories of politics—all leaders are equally corrupt; immigrants steal jobs; policy problems have easy, commonsense solutions—prevail over the findings of subject-matter experts.

Politicians on the right and the left have figured out how to exploit these new platforms. Reihan Salam, the president of the

conservative-leaning Manhattan Institute, described to me how this plays out. “You name an enemy and you polarize the public,” he said. “You don’t allow for nuance, because nuance is just a confusion when you’re in a struggle for power.”

Politicians who promote the distrust of institutions and elites do better under such circumstances. “You create this fantasy that, actually, it’s all really, really simple, and one charismatic person can just achieve these wins that are visually compelling and emotionally compelling,” Salam said. This is precisely the kind of demagogic figure the Founders hoped a well-read populace would see through. “When you think about our constitutional order, how it was meant to work, it absolutely cuts against that,” Salam said.

Marshall McLuhan once said, “The liberal world by definition is literate.” The inverse appears to be true as well.

If Trump is the first postliterate president, he won’t be the last. The political strategist David Plouffe, an architect of Barack Obama’s presidential campaigns, recently argued that candidates should focus each day on content creation. He advised shrinking every idea into something short enough for screen-addled voters to concentrate on. “If it can’t be communicated in an Instagram post or 10-second TikTok, go back to the drawing board,” Plouffe wrote in a *New York Times* op-ed. That may very well be good advice on how to campaign for office in the postliterate era. As a way to practice informed self-government, it portends disaster.

I HAVEN’T EVEN MENTIONED artificial intelligence yet. A number of digital technologies have hijacked attention and made focused reading all but impossible. Generative AI is the first tool to threaten the continued existence of writing.

Writing is hard. Orwell likened the experience to a “long bout of some painful illness.” AI promises a simple remedy. The trouble is that writing is not merely the act of transcribing fully formed thoughts—if it were, it wouldn’t be hard. Writing is the way people figure out what they think, and how to convey those thoughts to someone who doesn’t already share them. Cal Newport, a computer-science professor at Georgetown University, argues that the process of writing forces people to think in an orderly, linear fashion. It exposes flabby thoughts and shoddy reasoning. And the time and focus it takes to form thoughts into words, sentences, and paragraphs allow the author to make new connections and discover new insights.

This feels true to me. My job is to write. With apologies to Orwell, the prospect of a painful illness fills me with less dread than a blank page. But there’s satisfaction in the struggle. The writing process is how I refine and formalize inchoate ideas and gain new understanding. By evaluating my arguments and discarding those that aren’t convincing, I find the ones that are. Writing is hard because the writer is learning. If AI eliminates the challenge, it also eliminates the learning.

Early studies have suggested that this is exactly what happens when people use AI to write. The process is easier. The product is often better than what someone could compose on their own. But it comes at the expense of mental development. One study in Brazil determined that undergraduates who used AI for studying performed significantly worse on a surprise test than those

who studied without AI. The students trailed their peers even on questions that demanded reflection and effort instead of specific knowledge. Another study of hundreds of individuals in Britain found that frequent AI use for cognitive tasks is negatively associated with critical-thinking abilities.

Modern life demands a lot of tedious writing. Some of it can surely be offloaded to machines without too great a cost. But a career spent studying the historical adoption of new technologies has convinced Newport that it’s almost impossible to automate away one problem without creating others. Over and over, people think they’re using a tool to bypass a single tiresome task. “And then there’s all these unexpected second-order impacts,” he told me. Email was supposed to be a more convenient substitute for faxes, phone calls, and meetings. Instead, responding to emails became an immense time suck of its own. These unforeseen consequences end up transforming intellectual life.

The skill of deep thinking will likely become rarer and rarer in a world where much of the population uses AI to avoid writing. It will also become more and more important. AI is creating a superabundance of text. It has led to a threefold increase in the number of books released on Amazon each month since 2022, when ChatGPT was launched. Over the same period, scientific-journal submissions have also surged. Many were written at least in part by artificial intelligence.

AI produces crisp, professional prose. Presented with human- and AI-produced text side by side, even M.F.A. candidates have been shown to prefer the work of the machines. If AI writing is pleasing and convincing, however, it is also unoriginal, often inaccurate, or both. People will therefore need their powers of discernment and comprehension more than ever. They will need to know what they think and how to make their own judgments. These are the exact skills that the use of AI threatens to erode.

What’s at risk is nothing less than the ability to think for oneself. If people become overreliant on AI to write for them, they could lose the capacity to interrogate or even develop their

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own views. These are quintessentially human capacities. “If we gave those up,” the NYU philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah told me, “we’d stop being the kind of humans that we are. We’d be very different creatures.”

ONE HUNDRED TWENTY-SIX years ago, *The Atlantic* published an essay by Arthur Reed Kimball describing “one of the most serious of the unchallenged changes of modern American life.” The ability of the nation’s citizens to write well and think deeply was under attack. The enemy of eloquence and sustained attention? The newspaper. In “The Invasion of Journalism,” Kimball argued that the daily paper, with its sports pages and gossip columns, its miscellaneous items and slang, was eclipsing the book and the literary magazine. Even those who claim to read the newspaper to learn of pressing events in Washington or Europe, he argued, will turn first “to some interesting ‘story,’ perhaps a curious bicycle adventure, perhaps the capture of a clever burglar.”

Before the newspaper, the novel was seen as a threat to good reading habits and moral stature. Thomas Jefferson thought that one of the greatest obstacles to educating women was their passion for fiction, which seduced them away from “wholesome reading.” Once a woman has fallen for novels, he wrote, “nothing can engage attention unless dressed in all the figments of fancy.”

Those inclined to dismiss the present assault on reading point to this venerable tradition: decrying some new technology or medium as distracting and debasing the American people. Perhaps, 126 years from now, this essay will seem like the latest such exercise in hand-wringing. Looking back at these laments, I noticed that the people most invested in the old modes are usually the quickest to predict that all will be lost.

By some measures at least, books continue to thrive. Last year, print-book sales were higher than they were a decade ago. Barnes & Noble opened more than 60 new stores. Almost 400 independent bookstores sprung up in 2025. Substack has seen an explosion of subscriptions for long-form writing. Celebrities such as Dua Lipa and Reese Witherspoon have used their fame and influence to launch wildly successful book clubs. Audiobooks have become a billion-dollar industry.

But the optimists overlook a crucial thread in the data: Text is thriving among a dwindling proportion of the population. Just 20 percent of adults accounted for more than 80 percent of all books read last year. “It’s becoming a kind of niche hobby, like stamp collecting or growing orchids,” Leah Price, a historian of reading at Rutgers University, told me. Readers spend more time reading each day than they did two decades ago. They appear to be even more passionate about print than their predecessors. But the people devoted to text, who derive cultural understanding and intellectual connection from the written word, are now part of a subculture. The fact that you are reading this article almost certainly makes you a member of it.

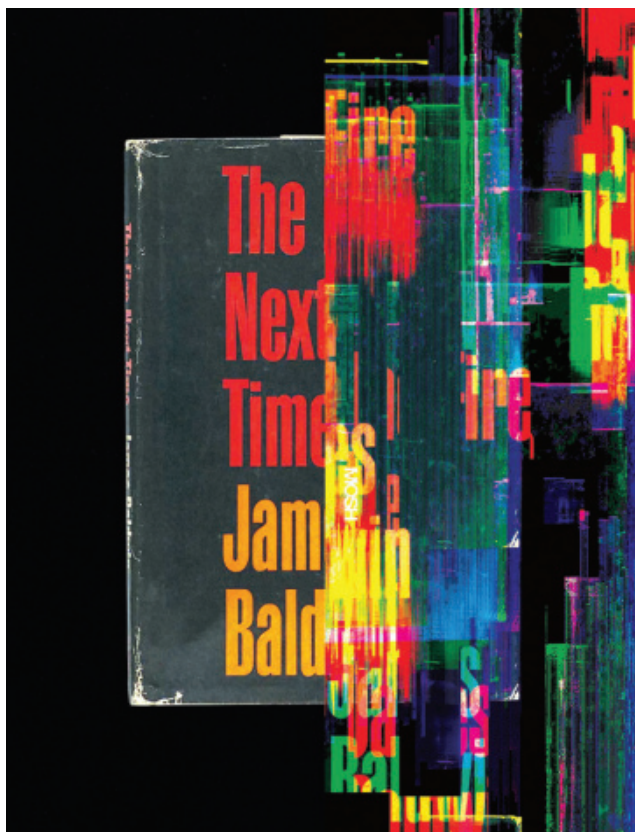
Now that being a reader is optional, it can function as an identity marker. When you see someone on the train reading printed matter, it feels like a statement. Perhaps inevitably, such statements have become the stuff of online ridicule: Brandish a book too ostentatiously in public, and you might find yourself

accused of “performative reading.” The label presumes the person is only trying to telegraph that they are highly educated or possess superior literary taste—why else would they lug a book around?

We’ve been here before. When society first transitioned from orality to literacy, only a small minority could read. As the only individuals who possessed this valuable skill, they occupied a privileged position, and were paid handsomely for their work. At the Library of Alexandria, scholars in residence lived in the city’s royal complex.

Today, reading is again clustered among a small minority of the population, but being a person of letters confers less status than it once did. The remaining readers are marginalized, mocked, and in many ways irrelevant. For most people, a life of letters is an economic dead end. Employment at newspapers has fallen by 75 percent in the past two decades. Job openings for academics in the humanities are likewise in decline, and fewer and fewer of the remaining positions are tenure-track. In 2024, only 8 percent of college graduates earned a bachelor’s degree in a humanities discipline. That year, both English and history departments awarded 40 percent fewer degrees than they did in 2012. There’s a fear among historians, whispered during panels and conferences, that they will be the final generation to systematically examine the past.

The notion of a popular literary figure appearing on the cover of a print newsweekly read by millions of Americans is impossible to imagine today. There is no such figure, and there are no such widely read newsweeklies. Instead, many Americans are proudly postliterate. The president has spoken about his taste for bullet-pointed briefings, and aides have said he likes pictures and charts. The world’s richest men brag about getting their information from



Gun injuries are the #1 cause of death for children and teens in the U.S.

Be part of the solution at
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Source: Gun Violence in the U.S. 2023, Johns Hopkins Center for
Gun Violence Solutions and Center for Suicide Prevention.

**AGREE
TO
AGREE**

**ad
COUNCIL**

X posts, podcasts, and conversations with chatbots. Young people who seek wealth and influence are encouraged to mimic them.

Cultural and economic power tends to flow to people who are skilled at using the most popular communications technology. Today, those people are streamers, podcasters, and influencers. Joe Rogan commands the kind of audience that journalists could only dream of. He has more than 14 million followers on Spotify and more than 20 million subscribers on YouTube. MrBeast, a YouTuber who stages elaborate stunts, such as a real-life *Squid Game*, regularly gets hundreds of millions of views. Video-game streamers such as IShowSpeed and TheBurntPeanut are among the most popular media figures in the country. These personalities shape what young people aspire to and talk about, and even how they speak.

Books used to be an essential source of knowledge, memory, wisdom, and morality. They were written by older generations and passed down to the young in a vertical transmission of culture, the social psychologist Jonathan Haidt told me. Now information moves horizontally, from young person to young person. This dynamic makes figures such as MrBeast and TheBurntPeanut the guardians of American culture. The decline of reading didn't turn the world upside down. It turned the world sideways.

Young people want to pursue jobs that will catapult them into the elite—which today means that people coming of age want to be influencers. A 2023 Morning Consult poll found that almost 60 percent of Gen Z respondents said they would be a social-media personality if they could. Amanda Kordeliski, of the American Association of School Librarians, is also a librarian in Oklahoma, where she has set up recording studios for students. “Podcasting is the hottest, most popular thing. I could buy a million microphones and there would still be a waitlist to get into the audio labs,” she told me. “Everybody wants to be an influencer.”

In September, Syracuse University launched its Center for the Creator Economy, and will soon offer its inaugural minor for aspiring influencers. “This center speaks directly to the aspirations of current and prospective students,” Mark J. Lodato, the dean of the university's Newhouse School of Public Communications, said in a press release. “It's about meeting them where they are—and preparing them to lead in the world that's coming.”

The arrival of that world isn't yet a certainty. Some people have noticed what we're giving up, and they're choosing a different path. Nearly two dozen states have banned cellphones during the school day. After Texas's ban went into effect at the start of this past academic year, a Dallas school district saw 200,000 more library books checked out compared with the year before, a nearly 25 percent increase. Rex Ovalle, a high-school English teacher in the Chicago suburbs and a member of the National Council of Teachers of English, told me he's seen pushback against excerpts; some teachers are adding whole books back into their curriculum. Felton Thomas Jr., the executive director of the Cleveland Public Library, said that its youngest patrons have joined senior citizens in preferring print books to digital copies. If these acts of defiance against a postliterate culture seem futile, the holdouts lose nothing by trying.

I WAS RAISED in the postliterate era. I was born shortly after the dot-com bubble burst and entered first grade around the

time the iPhone was released. In seventh grade, I got my first phone and promptly made an Instagram account. If you make an internet reference—any internet reference—I will (regrettably) almost always get it. Most of my knowledge of a world premised on reading comes from what I've read in books.

I had the advantage of growing up in a family of readers. My dad read to me almost every night, all the way through middle school. (As the father of a moody daughter, he often didn't know what words to say to me. When we read together, he could borrow someone else's.) My older sisters couldn't wait to recruit me into their book club. Our favorite was *The Boxcar Children*, about four orphaned siblings who create a home in an abandoned train car. In the book, the children have scarcely found food and shelter before the two sisters decide to teach their younger brother to read. They carve wood chips into letters and use blackberry juice for ink. When I turned 10, my mom passed down her childhood copies of *Rabbit Hill* and *Johnny Tremain*. She had written her signature on the inside cover when she got them. I added my own.

During high school, I got it in my head that I should read the classics. My teachers kept recommending their favorite books. I wanted to share in their knowledge and understand their references. I slogged through *Jane Eyre* and fell for *Anna Karenina*. Although I was alone while reading, I didn't feel that way. These books contained the wisdom of generations. As James Baldwin said (in a 1963 *Life* profile, just a week after he appeared on the cover of *Time*): “You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read. It was Dostoevsky and Dickens who taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, or who ever had been alive.” I felt like I was part of an unbroken chain of knowledge and culture.

In the years since—I'm not quite sure when—the habit slipped. The change was subtle. I became busier. I started scrolling on my phone before bed instead of reading. My attention began to wander every few pages. What did it matter if I read less? No one was checking on my progress. And the books would always be there. I could pick them up later.

When the Library of Alexandria disappeared, the knowledge inscribed on its scrolls was lost forever. We can only guess what else Eratosthenes and Euclid might have written. The text turned to dust. That won't happen today; all of the words in the great library could be stored on a single computer chip. Nowadays, even the most obscure academic monographs are scanned and digitized. Google Books and the Internet Archive represent libraries of unfathomable proportions. We can navigate to them with a few keystrokes, not a perilous journey across the Mediterranean. There's little risk of their texts succumbing to humidity or mice.

But the threat of apathy remains. What we're losing is the ability and inclination to read those texts. An astonishing wealth of information and wisdom has been bequeathed to us. What we'll do with this inheritance is up to us. *A*

Rose Horowitz is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

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THE ROSENBERG BOYS

When Ethel and Julius Rosenberg were executed
by the U.S. government, they left behind
two sons, ages 6 and 10. All these years later,
Robby and Michael are still trying to make
sense of what happened.

BY AMY WEISS-MEYER



Robby and Michael Rosenberg went to the White House with a rabbi and their grandmother in June 1953 to ask President Eisenhower to spare their parents' lives.

For those old enough to remember, Michael and Robby Meeropol will always be the Rosenberg boys.

I never knew them as such, but it's not hard to imagine what they were like, in part because there are so many pictures. In one, from June 1953, they are sitting outside the White House in shirts and ties, wool coats, and Brooklyn Dodgers caps. Six-year-old Robby holds his grandmother's hand; to his right stands a rabbi.

The boys look uncomfortable, and solemn. Their parents, Ethel and Julius, have been convicted of spying for the Soviet Union and sentenced to death. Robby and Michael are there to ask President Dwight Eisenhower to spare their lives. Michael, who is 10, has written a letter that he will hand to a White House guard: "Please let my mommy and daddy go and not let anything happen to them. If they come home Robby and I will be very happy we will thank you very much."

Out of the frame, but documented in other photos from that day, are the placards that protesters carried invoking Robby and Michael, the helpless boys made symbols of what many believed was a grave injustice about to be perpetrated against their parents. (Counterprotesters, carrying signs saying FRY 'EM and HANG 'EM, disagreed.) Similar scenes played out around the world. After Pope Pius XII called for clemency, the Vatican's newspaper cited the "two little innocents on whose soul and destiny the death of their parents would forever leave sinister scars."

I learned the broad outlines of the events that followed—the electric chair, and the orphans it left behind—half a century later, on a weekend visit to the home of my parents' friends Robby and Elli in western Massachusetts. I was 8. I don't recall how the subject came up or exactly what I was told, but I remember trying to picture the electrocution, and that I couldn't sleep that night. I knew Robby mostly as the kind of adult who enjoys making bad puns and funny faces for kids' amusement. The notion that, as a kid himself, he had been orphaned by the United States government didn't seem to match his playful persona. I wondered, but didn't quite know how to ask, how

anyone could go on living after something like that had happened. And how could he possibly seem so normal?

I later learned more: that Robby and Michael had been adopted after the executions, taken a new last name, and all but disappeared from the public eye. They went to college and graduate school, got married, had children of their own—only to reemerge as public figures in the 1970s, vowing to clear their parents' names. From then on, they'd never really stopped talking about Ethel and Julius, or pressing the government for answers about its evidence and motivations for seeking their death. By the time I was old enough to observe their advocacy firsthand—at a public event commemorating the executions' 50th anniversary, and later in a presentation Robby gave at my high school—I understood their basic posture to be one of resolute protest. Ethel and Julius, they maintained, had not been atomic spies. They had been scapegoated for their political allegiances, framed by prosecutors, and wrongfully killed.

This was not, I came to understand, an uncontroversial position. One year, my family's Yom Kippur break-fast meal was very nearly derailed when my dad got into an argument with one of our guests about the Rosenbergs. Julius and Ethel, this guest insisted, were both guilty as charged, and to pretend otherwise was a pinko fantasy. The incident left me with yet more questions about my parents' friend and the complicated historical legacy he'd inherited.

I've lately been able to ask Robby and Michael many of these questions directly—and to go beyond the abbreviated, textbook version of their family's story, deep into the countless primary and secondary sources that, for nearly 75 years, have helped shape an ever-evolving debate about what, in this case, constitutes truth, and what justice really means. The facts are messier and more resistant to facile conclusions than either side of the argument might care to acknowledge. Even now, new ones continue to emerge.

Since the fall of the Soviet Union 35 years ago, government files have been declassified and grand-jury testimonies unsealed; key players have made dramatic confessions. Robby and Michael,

Michael (left) and Robby with items from the Rosenberg papers at Boston University, more than 70 years after the executions

The facts are messier and more resistant to facile conclusions than either side of the argument might care to acknowledge.



the old men who were once such young boys, have had to make their own sense of these revelations. Not all of them have been easy to accept.

IN APRIL OF LAST YEAR, I spent a day with the brothers in Cold Spring, New York, where Michael and his late wife, Ann, moved in 2009. The town sits on a hill overlooking the Hudson River, and I got off the train from New York City that morning with hikers who fanned out to the nearby trails.

Robby was waiting to pick me up at the station in his red Toyota; he'd arrived early, as he is apt to do. On the short drive to Michael's condo, we made easy small talk. I'd made clear that the article I was writing would be solely mine to shape, and they'd

agreed that I could ask them anything. But I knew that once I turned my recorder on, I'd need to ask questions that might put me in league, in their minds, with the legions of other journalists they believed had fixated on the wrong angles, or missed the point of the Rosenberg case entirely.

Before I started reporting this story, I'd met Michael only in passing. We'd now talked on the phone a few times, and my main takeaway was that his being a retired economics professor made a lot of sense. His tendency was to carefully (and loquaciously) argue a point, and he had limitless enthusiasm for wading into the minutiae of legal details and chronology. Robby, by his own admission, preferred to focus on more general themes. As the three of us sat talking in Michael's living room, Robby

pointed out that his brother, being four years older, had spent far more time with their father than he had. Robby seemed to think of Julius more as a historical figure he happened to be related to, while Michael, on some level, still mourned the father he'd lost as a 10-year-old.

Julius was a co-owner of a struggling machine shop on the Lower East Side. On weekends, he would take Michael to ride the New York City subways and elevated trains for hours on end; they would stand at the very front, where they could look out at the switching tracks. Ethel stayed home with Robby. She worked hard at being a good mother—she sang to her boys, read *Parents'* magazine, took a class in child psychology. In their small apartment near the Manhattan Bridge, the kids shared the lone bedroom while their parents slept in the living room.

Listening to Michael's descriptions, you could almost forget that his early years were different from those of other postwar American kids: "I'd have a wooden baseball bat and a Spalding ball or a tennis ball. He"—Julius—"would pitch it to me, and I would hit it." Michael was listening to *The Lone Ranger* on the radio when, one July night in 1950, FBI agents came to the door to arrest his father.

In his letters from jail and later prison, Julius tried to reassure his sons. "Don't you worry," he wrote; "we'll be playing games again as soon as I can straighten out this trouble I'm in." But on August 11, after Ethel appeared before the grand jury that had indicted Julius and refused to answer any questions, she, too, was arrested. Neither of them ever came home again.

After his mother's arrest, Michael told an aunt that he wanted to run into the street and get killed by a car. He stopped eating. He drew endless railroad tracks, switching and merging and looping but going nowhere. When he complained to his grandmother Tessie Greenglass, with whom he and Robby were staying, she told him to send Ethel a telegram. But he didn't want to upset his mother, so he said that he was "having a nice time. I miss you very much. Love, your son, Michael."

The boys were eventually sent to the Hebrew Children's Home in the Bronx,

where attendants beat and ridiculed children. To Robby, it felt as if he and Michael were imprisoned, just like Ethel and Julius. He didn't understand what his parents had been accused of doing. Instead, he harbored an anxious sense that some menacing force had broken up his family—and stood ready to do more damage if given an opening. He would try to avoid attracting attention, lest “they” take notice and wreak more havoc. He also developed a coping mechanism that I sensed had become a lifelong habit: “Whenever something was really bad,” he told me, “I always figured out some way to say, *Oh, it's no big deal. It's not happening.* It's a form of denial, I guess.”

As I watched the brothers that day in Cold Spring, they struck me as, above all, brothers—by turns affectionate and peeved with one another, as likely to use a childhood nickname as to sigh in exasperation. They are fluent in the vigorous conversational cadence of older Jewish men raised in mid-century New York. “Verbal combat,” Robby later said, was a favored family pastime. But neither of them seemed eager to undergo much emotional probing.

At one point that afternoon, Michael spent a few minutes recounting the songs his parents had played for them as kids, enjoying himself as he quoted what Julius had called “nonsense” lyrics from “Oh! Susanna” and other “camp songs.” If not quite fully transported back in time, he appeared willing, at least, to try going there.

Without meaning to, I broke the spell. As Michael began to reflect on his relationship with Ethel, and his sense that he'd been a “bad boy,” frequently misbehaving, I tried to prompt Robby to add his own recollections from that pre-arrest period. “I don't know,” Robby said, and paused. Maybe it was too much to expect a 3-year-old to have formed clear memories. In any case, he quickly changed the subject back to their decades of advocacy work.

BEFORE I BOARDED my return train to New York City, Michael reminded me to look out the window on my left. A few stops away, in Ossining, the barbed-wire fences and high turrets of Sing Sing towered over the tracks. In opting to spend



Robby and Michael visited their parents in prison for the last time on June 16, 1953.



Ethel and Julius Rosenberg in a police van after their conviction

his retirement near his grandkids, Michael had ended up living half an hour from the site of his parents' deaths.

Robby and Michael visited their parents in prison for the first time in the summer of 1951, after more than a year apart. By then, the boys had gotten used to the Hebrew Children's Home, and then they had gotten picked up from it. Now they were staying with their "Bubbie," Sophie Rosenberg, who played with them and cooked foods they liked. Still, they were eager to see their parents again.

Julius and Ethel were separated in prison, allowed to see each other only once a week or so. Mostly, they communicated through letters. Anxious to put the boys at ease, Julius wrote to Ethel that he planned to draw them pictures of trains, boats, and buses. "Hah! You can't make me jealous with your boats and trains," she replied. "I have an envelope full of rare specimens collected with painstaking care by that intrepid hunter of wild insects, namely, your wife!" She worried that Robby in particular "may be a little shy and strange with us."

In another letter to Julius, Ethel imagined how they might explain their situation to the boys. "Of course, we feel badly that we are separated from you but we also know that we are not guilty and that an injustice has been done to us by people who solved their own problems by lying about us," she wrote. "It's all right to feel any way you like about them, so long as your feelings don't give you pain and make you unhappy."

At Sing Sing, the boys saw Ethel first, then Julius. Determined to prove his fearlessness, Michael asked to see the electric chair for himself. Ethel had suggested that Julius describe its effect as "painless electrocution," similar to "a highly magnified electric shock that anybody might sustain."

"The fact is both children are disturbed," Julius wrote after the visit.

The executions had been set for May 1951, but the date kept getting pushed back as appeals made their way through the legal system. On subsequent visits, all four Rosenbergs were allowed to be together, and the mood of their reunions became lighter. As a family, they laughed and sang songs; sometimes, they

played hangman. When Michael asked his parents if they were truly innocent, they assured him that they were.

"You boys are our greatest pleasure and joy in life and we love you more than anything else in the world," Julius wrote in one letter. And indeed, it's hard to read the letters, and the various accounts of these visits, and come to any conclusion other than that Ethel and Julius loved their sons. They agonized over the details of the boys' care and cursed the government for separating them.

But it's also hard not to question why they didn't do more to prevent their sons from being orphaned—why they chose not to take advantage of the numerous opportunities they were given to cooperate with the authorities, and to live.

ETHEL'S YOUNGER brother David Greenglass made a different choice. When Klaus Fuchs was arrested by the British in early 1950 for passing atomic plans to the Soviets, his testimony led American authorities to Harry Gold, a chemist. Gold in turn led them to David, who had been a machinist at Los Alamos during World War II, and his wife, Ruth.

The Greenglasses quickly confessed that they had been part of a spy ring led by Julius Rosenberg, through whom they said they had shared sketches of the atomic bomb's design with the Soviets in 1945. Ruth said that Julius had told her to recruit David, and that Ethel was there and had been encouraging.

The FBI was certain that Julius had more valuable information, and hoped that he would confess and name names, just as his brother- and sister-in-law had. But Julius denied everything, and refused to point a finger at anyone else. So J. Edgar Hoover decided to adopt a recommendation from a subordinate, who wrote that agents should "consider every possible means" to make Julius talk—including bringing charges against Ethel. Hoover wrote to the attorney general: "Proceeding against his wife might serve as a lever."

The Greenglasses' testimony gave the government enough evidence for an arrest warrant. But like Julius, Ethel told the authorities nothing—nor did her arrest have the intended effect on her husband.

The trial, though, brought out new testimony from the Greenglasses, who said that Ethel hadn't just been a supportive bystander, but had typed up David's hard-to-read notes on classified atomic science. Now the death penalty seemed like a real possibility for both Rosenbergs.

At the sentencing, Judge Irving R. Kaufman said that he considered the couple's actions "worse than murder"—a crime with untold numbers of past and future victims. Russian access to the atomic bomb, Kaufman said, had "already caused, in my opinion, the Communist aggression in Korea, with the resultant casualties exceeding 50,000 and who knows but that millions more of innocent people may pay the price of your treason." Kaufman made clear that both husband and wife were to blame. "Julius Rosenberg was the prime mover in this conspiracy," he said, but Ethel was a "full-fledged partner." Both therefore deserved to die.

Subsequent revelations from multiple prosecutors in the case have shown that the judge didn't come to this conclusion entirely on his own. Roy Cohn, who was an assistant U.S. attorney on the case, later said that prosecutors had had clandestine phone conversations with Kaufman, "especially about whether Ethel should be sentenced to death."

The Rosenbergs' co-defendant, Morton Sobell, a former classmate of Julius's at City College, also claimed total innocence. Sobell was convicted of conspiracy to commit espionage and sentenced to 30 years in prison (he was spared the death penalty because no evidence tied him to sharing *atomic* secrets). David was sentenced to 15 years in prison and served less than 10. Ruth, who was never charged, stayed with their two young children.

A few weeks before their deaths, the Rosenbergs were visited at Sing Sing by James V. Bennett, the director of the Bureau of Prisons. Bennett said he'd been sent by the attorney general with an offer: If they were ready to talk, officials would recommend clemency.

Ethel was outraged. "I made it short and sweet," she wrote to her lawyer. "I was innocent, my husband was innocent, and neither of us knew anything about espionage." What right did the government

Michael and Robby were watching a baseball game on TV when a news flash came on the screen announcing that their parents were about to be executed.

have “to try to forcibly wring from us a false confession, by dangling our lives before us like bait before hapless fish! Pay the price we demand, or forfeit your lives, is that the idea?” Bennett pleaded with her to change her mind.

The deputy attorney general later said of Ethel, “She called our bluff.”

IN JUNE 1953, the day after their 14th wedding anniversary, after several last-minute appeals—including to the U.S. Supreme Court—had failed, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, ages 35 and 37, had one final afternoon together, separated by wire mesh. Ethel wrote a letter to their sons that they would both sign: “We wish we might have had the tremendous joy and gratification of living our lives out with you,” it said. “Always remember that we were innocent and could not wrong our conscience. We press you close and kiss you with all our strength.”

The letter would have a much wider audience than just Robby and Michael, who were by then living with family friends in New Jersey. The uncertain fate of the Rosenbergs had become global news, and the couple’s letters were being distributed in dozens of countries via pamphlets and newspapers. From December 1952 to June 1953, 80 rallies in support of the Rosenbergs were held in Paris alone. One French diplomat told Secretary of State John Foster Dulles that the case was “the most troublesome issue affecting relations between the United States and Europe.”

Last summer, Robby, Michael, and I visited the archives at Boston University’s library, where many of their parents’ prison letters are housed. As we looked through the collection, Michael said that, when it comes to his mother’s letters, he considers only two or three “really real”—that is, not written for public consumption. He has returned to one of these often.

Two days before the scheduled executions, Robby and Michael visited their parents for the last time. Michael left crying and screaming: “One more day to live, one more day to live!” But Ethel didn’t cry. Later, she tried to explain her behavior in a note she sent her sons via her lawyer. To show emotion “would have been so easy, far too easy on myself,” she told them.

“I took the hard way instead of the easy, because I love you more than myself and because I knew you needed that love far more than I needed the relief of crying.” She continued:

I know, sweethearts, an explanation of this kind cannot ever substitute for what we have been missing and for what we hope to be able to return to, nor do I intend it as any such thing. Only, as I say, we need to try to remain calm and free from panic so that we can do all we can to help one another to see this thing through!

Just after 8 p.m. on June 19, Julius followed Sing Sing’s Jewish chaplain to the electric chair. As the rabbi prayed, the executioner secured the five leather straps. Before he delivered the fatal shocks, he put a leather face mask on Julius meant to prevent his eyes from popping out of his head. Julius was pronounced dead after he received three charges of electricity.

The rabbi then gave Ethel a final chance to live. Did she have any names to share? She said she did not: “I’m innocent; I’m prepared to die.” She was strapped in and masked. The executioner delivered three shocks. But doctors found that the three charges had not been sufficient; Ethel’s heart was still beating. It took two more jolts, and four and a half minutes total, to kill her.

Michael and Robby were watching a baseball game on TV when a news flash came on the screen announcing that their parents were about to be executed. The adults sent the boys out to play ball with friends. By the time they came back in, they were orphans.

I FIRST READ Robby’s memoir, *An Execution in the Family*, soon after it was published, in 2004. I was 11 then, and gripped by the kid’s-eye perspective of the early chapters. I retained two distinct mental images from the book. One was of the Hebrew Children’s Home. The other was of a train set, which served as a partial answer to the question of how the boys could have turned out as well-adjusted as they had; there was, strange as it sounds, a happy part of this story.

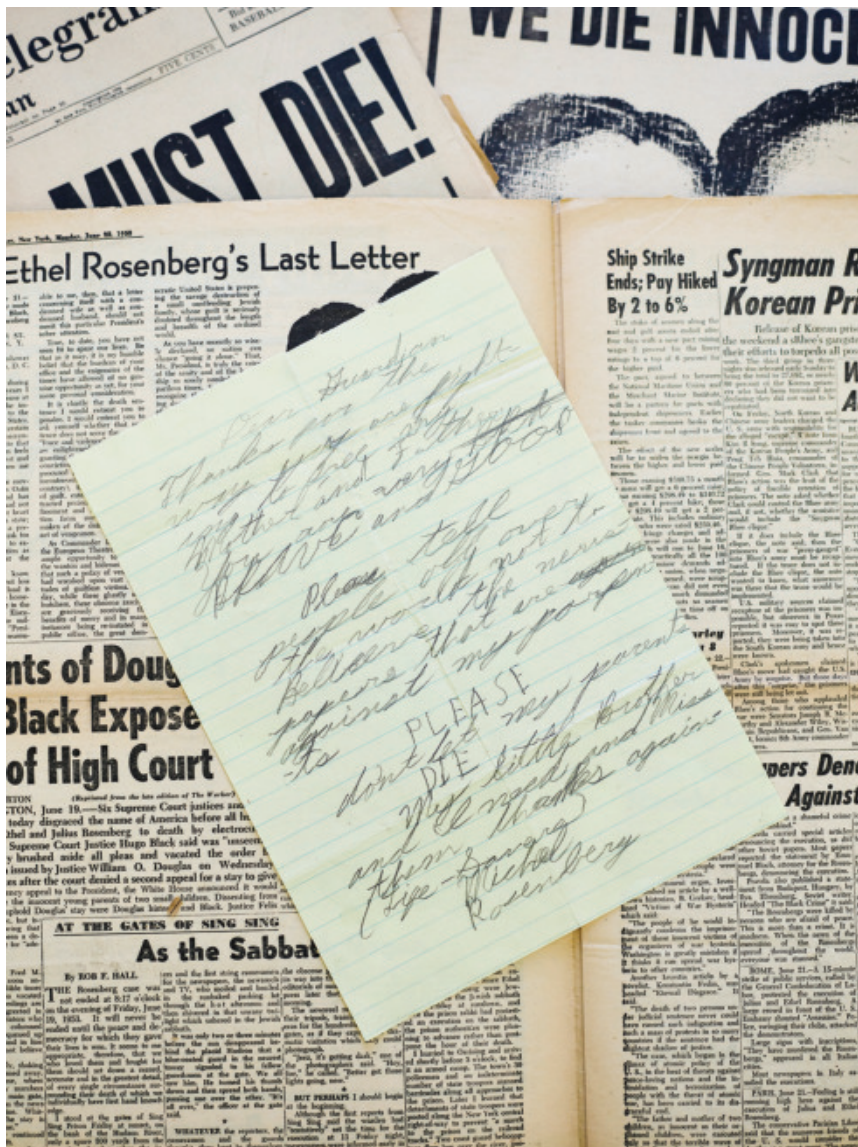
On Christmas Eve 1953, the boys went to a party at the home of W. E. B. Du Bois, who had advocated for clemency for Ethel and Julius. Inside the largest house the boys had ever been in was an enormous Christmas tree with a pile of presents underneath it, all for them. This was where Michael and Robby first met Anne and Abel Meeropol, who asked them that night if they wanted to move in with them. Their own two sons had been stillborn, and Anne and Abel, now in their 40s, wanted badly to be parents.

By the start of 1954, Robby and Michael were living with the Meeropols in Manhattan; the couple were fun and loving, and the boys quickly began calling them Mommy and Daddy. But one night in mid-February, after Robby had gone to sleep, New York City police officers knocked on the door of the couple's apartment to demand that he and Michael be turned over immediately.

Ethel and Julius's lawyer had died of a heart attack before he could legally transfer guardianship to the Meeropols. Now

two child-welfare groups had obtained a court order to remove Michael and Robby from the Meeropols' home, on the grounds that living with former Communist Party members was not in the boys' best interest. Abel refused to open the door and, in Michael's telling, informed the officers that, if they wanted to take Robby and Michael, they'd have to kill him first. Somehow, he and Anne were able to arrange with lawyers to keep the boys overnight.

The next day, a judge ruled that Robby and Michael should be considered wards



"PLEASE don't let my parents DIE. My little Brother and I need and miss them," Michael wrote in a letter to a left-wing weekly.

of the state and sent them to an orphanage. But the day after that, the Meeropols and Sophie Rosenberg, the boys' grandmother, appealed to the New York Supreme Court, which gave Sophie temporary custody. For the next several months, Robby lived in fear of being sent back to the orphanage. Eventually, in September 1954, he and Michael were allowed to return to the Meeropols'. Recounting this turning point as we pored over the archives at Boston University, Michael began to cry. Anne later told him, he said, that she and Abel had plans to flee to the Soviet Union with the boys if they were not granted custody.

Michael and Robby started using the Meeropol name almost immediately, allowing them at last to slip back into private life, and they were formally adopted in 1957. The family's Washington Heights apartment was, as Michael and Robby remember it, always full of laughter, music, and funny voices; it had room for all of their toys, including a Lionel electric train set. The boys kept huge tanks of fish and had a cat named Fuzzy Shnooky Romeo. When Robby went away to camp, Abel drew him cartoon postcards with silly, smiling animals. "Daddy got us worms!" the fish exclaim in one. "Yum! Yum! Hooray!" Abel signed the postcards "Pop." Robby still has them.

Both Abel and Anne had been public-school teachers; Abel had taught James Baldwin high-school English. Abel was also a songwriter—in the 1930s, he'd written the music and lyrics to "Strange Fruit," a song about lynching made popular by Billie Holiday—and had been successful enough that the couple could now live primarily off his royalties, in effect serving as full-time parents.

Anne and Abel rarely brought up the past with Michael and Robby, but when Ethel and Julius did come up, the Meeropols reinforced their sons' impression of them as brave, principled people who had been wrongly executed. As they grew into adulthood, Michael and Robby came to treat that final letter from June 1953 as gospel: *Always remember that we were innocent and could not wrong our conscience.*

In the years immediately following his parents' executions, Michael said, he

didn't cry at all. But when he was 16, a work of fiction—a 1947 novel by Willard Motley—finally cracked the defensive shell he'd developed. In his journal, he wrote:

I read the end of *Knock on Any Door* which describes a man's feelings as he goes to his death in the chair. It shook me, and it broke me. I realized that the two dearest people in the world to me had gone through that agony and more. They probably worried about their "babies" and what would happen to them. My God was it awful. I cried and cried and cried so much. I feel terrible.

Oh to be half as courageous as those two wonderful people—Ethel and Julius Rosenberg. MY GOD

Abel saw him crying, and saw what he'd been reading, and gave him a long hug.

MORE THAN THEIR CHILDHOOD, Robby and Michael wanted to talk with me about the chapter of their lives that began in the 1970s, when they chose to "come out" as Rosenbergs after years of keeping quiet about who they were.

One night in early 1973, Michael heard that a trial lawyer named Louis Nizer, who had not been involved in the Rosenberg case, was reading out loud from his parents' prison letters on TV. Nizer had just published a popular book about the case, *The Implosion Conspiracy*, which concluded that the Rosenbergs were guilty as charged. Michael called Robby, upset. The brothers believed that they held the copyright to their parents' letters, which they saw as their sole inheritance. Why should Nizer be allowed to use them for his own biased ends?

On June 19, 1973, the 20th anniversary of their parents' deaths, they filed a lawsuit. "We are strongly reaffirming our identification with and respect for our murdered parents and what they did for us both in their role as citizens as well as in their relationship with us as parents," they wrote. It wasn't long before the press showed up. "All of a sudden we were public," Robby recalled. "And the sky didn't fall." In some ways, it was liberating to no longer be keeping such a big secret.

The legal bills were expensive, and they began traveling around the country to raise money, giving speeches under the auspices of a new National Committee to Reopen the Rosenberg Case. They planned to use the Freedom of Information Act to obtain the government's evidence, or lack thereof, about their parents. In 1974, Robby stood onstage at Carnegie Hall and declared, "In the next year we are going to blow the lid on this case."

Touring the country, they met well-wishers who were emotional about seeing "the boys" as grown men, people who cried and hugged them and hung around a little too long. Robby and Michael found this draining. Their preferred approach relied more on logic than emotion. They vowed to follow the facts. They would become experts; they would make an unimpeachable case. They wouldn't get carried away by anger or grief.

Still, revisiting the letters and reading the trial transcripts for the first time forced Michael to relive the pain of his parents' deaths, he told me. Publicly, he remained composed, but in private, for a year or so, he "cried, cursed, raged," struck anew by the pathos of his parents' correspondence and the could-have-beens of their complex appeals process. By the late 1970s, the brothers were exhausted by the work of being professional Rosenbergs, and starting to worry that the effort was futile. Their FOIA lawsuit had yielded hundreds of thousands of documents, but there was no smoking gun—maybe there never would be.

Sometimes, Robby and Michael told me, they wondered if there might be more to their parents' story than what was in their letters. They never questioned that Ethel and Julius had been framed as atomic spies, but could they have committed some lesser offense that had made them government targets? Yet whenever the brothers asked Morton Sobell, their parents' co-defendant, to tell them the truth, all they got was the same one-line answer: *They were innocent.*

WITH THE COLLAPSE of the Soviet Union, rumors started trickling out of Russia: According to erstwhile KGB

agents now speaking openly for the first time, Julius Rosenberg had in fact been a spy, and a valuable one. But Soviet intelligence operatives aren't anyone's idea of reliable sources, and it was easy for Robby and Michael to brush their claims aside.

In July 1995, the U.S. government released a series of previously classified documents known as the Venona files. These decrypted Soviet communications from the 1940s told a similar story to that of the former KGB agents: Julius,

Ethel: She was politically aligned with her husband and aware of his activities, the decrypted text said, but "in view of delicate health does not work." This seemed like an important clue. If you interpreted "work" to mean "spy," as Robby and Michael did, that would suggest the damning typing story was pure invention on the Greenglasses' part.

Slowly, more clues emerged. In 1999, a former KGB agent published a book revealing findings from Soviet archives that had briefly been opened a few years earlier. This, too, implicated Julius as a spy. Then, in a 2001 TV interview, David Greenglass (who had been living under an assumed name since he got out of prison and appeared on the program in disguise) admitted that he'd lied on the stand when he said that Ethel had typed his notes. "I don't know who typed it, frankly," he said. "To this day, I can't even remember that the typing took place."

Greenglass did not express remorse for having sent his sister to her death, citing her "stupidity" for not cooperating with authorities. He said his conscience was clean. When the interviewer asked him what he would say to Robby and Michael, whom he had not seen since they were children, he replied, "I'm sorry that your parents are dead."

MORTON SOBELL was the one person who could definitively answer Robby and Michael's questions about their parents. He had been Julius's friend since they'd met as engineering students at City College. He had stood trial with both Rosenbergs and, after getting out of prison in 1969, stayed in touch with Robby and Michael.

For nearly six decades, Sobell maintained his innocence. But in 2008, at the age of 91, he told a reporter that, yes, he and Julius had turned over military secrets to the Soviet Union during World War II. If you wanted to call that spying, then sure, they'd been spies. Ethel, he said, had known what Julius was doing. "But what was she guilty of? Of being Julius's wife." Robby and Michael felt as though, for the first time, a trusted source had stated it plainly: Julius was a spy, and Ethel was not.

The brothers were shocked by Sobell's sudden admission. They had asked him



Ethel's brother David Greenglass told authorities that he had been part of a spy ring led by Julius Rosenberg.

along with Ruth and David Greenglass, had spied for the Soviet Union. The headlines crowed with the certainty of a fresh verdict: "NEW EVIDENCE PROVES COUPLE WERE SPIES, OFFICIALS SAY."

To Robby and Michael, suddenly seeing their parents in the news again as SPIES was painful. The whole thing felt like a disaster—"like a ton of bricks," as Robby put it to me. In a joint statement, they suggested that the NSA and the CIA had "cooked" the evidence to frame their parents. Venona, they insisted, changed none of their conclusions. One official release was not going to be enough to undo years of deep suspicion of the government.

Still, Robby and Michael parsed the new evidence carefully. The files, they noticed, contained only one mention of

again and again to tell them the truth about their parents, even if only in private. Why had he lied? Michael still thinks about this, he said: “What if Morty had been honest with us?” He could have spared them so many years of uncertainty.

Even so, the brothers told me that finally learning the truth was a relief. They were in their 60s by then—both grandfathers—and had had more than a decade to consider the information in Venona. They now understood that their parents’ prosecution hadn’t been a senseless witch hunt, as they’d once believed. Ethel and Julius hadn’t been targeted randomly, or simply for having been Jewish Communists during the McCarthy era. And because Sobell himself had been the one to say it publicly, Robby and Michael wouldn’t have to do the uncomfortable job of breaking the news to the remaining Rosenberg true believers, who still thought that any talk of spying was a government hoax.

I was taken aback by their matter-of-factness. Was that really it? Could their ultimate reaction to learning that Julius had spied for the Soviet Union have been gratitude that they didn’t have to be the messengers? I wanted to know how they felt about the actual spying—about the fact that their father had shared highly classified information in order to aid another, later hostile, country’s militarization, destroying their family in the process.

When I pressed them on this, Michael and Robby conceded that perhaps Julius had been, as Robby put it, “kind of a cowboy,” prone to taking big risks without much concern for the effect they might have. Maybe, Michael suggested, a more responsible choice for a spy would have been to not have children at all. Nonetheless, they both remain sympathetic toward their father, and continue to argue that he was unfairly prosecuted. Even if Julius was a spy, they maintain, he was not an *atomic* spy, and as such was not guilty of the charges for which he was executed.

Julius seems to have approached his spying with a sprightly, if naive, enthusiasm. He was 24 and working as a junior engineer for the Army Signal Corps in

In 1954, Robby and Michael went to live in Manhattan with Anne and Abel Meeropol, who later became their adoptive parents.



TOP: STEPHEN CHURCHILL FOR THE ATLANTIC; COURTESY OF THE MEEROPOL FAMILY

New York when he was recruited by Russian agents in 1942, drawn to the promise of helping defeat Hitler and the notion, however fanciful, that the Soviet Union represented a solution to America's social ills. He went on to provide thousands of documents containing valuable military-industrial information, and became an active recruiter. His Soviet handler Alexander Feklisov recalled in his memoir that Julius could sometimes "be as carefree as a teenager," such as when he greeted the Russian during an early street-corner meeting with a hearty "Hello comrade!" On another occasion, Feklisov wrote, Julius told him that, although he loved his wife and son (this was before Robby was born), his meetings with Feklisov were "among the happiest moments of my life."

UNLIKE JULIUS, Ethel was never given a code name in Venona, which Michael and Robby took to mean that she was not a spy. Why, then, should she have sacrificed herself, leaving her sons behind, particularly after Julius was executed and she was given one last chance to cooperate? Why did she choose death?

The question nagged at me for months; no single explanation—psychological, political, or otherwise—felt completely satisfying. Part of me wanted to see Ethel as a victim, caught between her husband's recklessness, the vindictiveness of powerful men who didn't care whether she lived or died, and the fear that she was already too far down a path of deception to allow the world, let alone her sons, to learn the messy truth. I thought about the toll that years of what was essentially solitary confinement, as the only woman on death row, would take on anyone; it seemed likely that she was not, by the end, thinking rationally. But that way of looking at it denied Ethel agency. It was possible, of course, that she'd made the choice to die of her own free will—as a martyr for the Communist cause, to make the United States look bad, out of loyalty to Julius.

When I raised the subject with Robby and Michael, they readily agreed that Ethel could have saved herself, had she wanted to. "She did have names," Robby

said. "In fact, if she'd given the names of Sarant and Barr"—Alfred Sarant and Joel Barr, members of the spy ring who had already defected to the Soviet Union—"nothing would have happened."

"So should she have?" I asked.

Both brothers replied immediately and emphatically. "Oh *no*," Michael said. "I don't see why," Robby added. Making any choice other than the one she ultimately made, they argued, would have left Ethel with a permanent sense of guilt over turning on her husband and reversing her steadfast commitment to "see this thing through"—the battle she'd been waging, and the story of innocence she'd been telling her sons and the world for three years.

"Mom could've said, *I knew Julius was a spy; I helped him a little bit. I knew the names of two of the people he worked with. That's all I know; take it or leave it*," Michael said. "They would've taken it."

"Who knows," Robby muttered, but Michael's counterfactual scenario seemed plausible enough to me, and I let him keep talking as he imagined what might have happened next.

"She would have served some time in prison, and repudiated her marriage, and repudiated all the people who had supported them, and pulled the rug out from under Rob and me when they said that 'we were innocent.' And then shown up in our lives."

I knew he was trying to explain why this never would have worked. But even if their mother reappearing in their lives at a later date might have proved complicated, it was hard for me to believe that it would truly have been worse than not having her in their lives at all. "We might have grown up to hate her," Michael continued. He wasn't sure he could have forgiven her for turning on his father—or for exposing the reality, while she was still alive, that both parents had lied to their sons. "The thought of her living that life was so horrible that I think it was easier to just follow him into the grave."

Michael seemed to be saying that by admitting her dishonesty, Ethel would have ruined their childhood and poisoned any prospect of a future relationship with her. But wouldn't some people see the fact that she'd died for a story she

knew was false—something the brothers were acknowledging—as a greater betrayal? Michael and Robby didn't seem willing to think about it that way. In their telling, Ethel had died, at least in part, to protect them.

For the brothers to wish for any other outcome would be for them to wish for an entirely different life than the one they've had and, against all odds, mostly enjoyed. It would be to wish that they'd had a childhood with no Meeropols, and an adulthood with more secrecy, less purpose. Faced with something—someone—so ultimately unknowable, perhaps the best that anyone can do is decide on their own version of the truth and stick to it.

I AM NOT, I realize, the first to raise these contradictions. The ghost of Ethel Rosenberg has haunted American life for decades, by turns exasperating and enthralling those—psychiatrists, playwrights, novelists, scholars, journalists, relatives—who have tried to wrap their arms around the meaning of her life and death.

Few today would dispute that the government's case against Ethel was less than airtight. In 2015, after David Greenglass died, his 1950 grand-jury testimony was unsealed. "I said before, and say it again, honestly, this is a fact: I never spoke to my sister about this at all," Greenglass had said. If that was true, then he had likely perjured himself when later, at trial, he gave the evidence that led to Ethel's conviction and sentencing. To some, Ethel's alleged encouragement of David's recruitment is evidence enough of her active role in the *conspiracy* to commit espionage of which she was found guilty. But Robby and Michael argue that knowledge of a conspiracy is not the same as participation in it—and that the prosecution failed to produce any proof she did participate, beyond what came directly from the Greenglasses' unreliable accounts.

Whether or not you believe that the Rosenbergs deserved to die, there's no denying that the punishment they received was unusually severe. Harry Gold was convicted of conspiracy to commit espionage and got out of prison in time to work as a clinical chemist in a Philadelphia pathology lab before he

**This was the smoking gun
that they had spent 50
years hoping to find.**

died at 60. Ruth Greenglass confessed to being a courier at Los Alamos and never spent a single night in jail. And, indeed, the case against Ethel was especially thin.

All of this ought, I think, to count for something in any honest assessment of the legal and ethical validity of the Rosenberg verdict. But I wasn't sure that the injustice of the whole affair was enough to explain, logically or morally, the clarification confidence of Ethel's claim that "I was innocent, my husband was innocent, and neither of us knew anything about espionage." That was a lie.

LAST SUMMER, I VISITED Robby in western Massachusetts, where we sat in his sunny home office as his elderly gray cat threatened to knock over our water glasses. On the wall next to Robby's desk, I noticed a calendar from the Union of Concerned Scientists. The cartoon for that month showed a uniformed military official lounging coquettishly on a bed, phone in hand. The caption read: "No, you dismantle your nuclear arsenal first."

Other walls displayed framed mementos from the Rosenberg Fund for Children, the nonprofit Robby started in 1990 that supports the children of progressive activists who have lost their livelihood, been discriminated against, faced prison time, or died as a result of their activism (my parents have been longtime supporters of the RFC). Pointing to the images in his office, Robby told me that the organization has allowed him to

connect with hundreds of kids and teenagers who can relate to what he experienced. They have sometimes asked why he's not angrier. His response has always been that he considers his work to be a form of "constructive revenge."

"My taste in vengeance is more intellectual than physical," Michael wrote in the '80s. Talking with him in the 2020s, I could see what he meant. Rather than cause for frustration, it seemed to be almost a source of comfort that there will always be another thread in the Rosenberg case to pull—more documents to uncover, more verbal combat to undertake.

Over the past decade, Robby and Michael have made a concerted push for Ethel's exoneration. In December 2016, the brothers again stood outside the White House, this time to deliver a petition asking President Obama to exonerate their mother in light of the newly released grand-jury testimony. They held a photograph of themselves there as boys, delivering the plea to Eisenhower that went unanswered. This one did, too.

But a newly declassified document released toward the end of Joe Biden's presidency once again gave them hope. In September 2024, the brothers received a copy, via their lawyer, of a handwritten 1950 memo by Meredith Gardner, the chief Venona code breaker. If the Venona files represented Gardner's translated decryptations of the original Russian messages, this document, they believed, showed his own takeaways from those

decryptations, and were thus a better reflection of the U.S. government's top-level findings. Gardner wrote, for example, that Ruth Greenglass was known "to have been a Soviet agent." Just below that are his notes on Ethel:

MRS. JULIUS ROSENBERG—A message of 27 November 1944 stated that Mrs. Rosenberg was a party member, a devoted wife, and that she knew about her husband's work, but that due to ill health she did not engage in the work herself.

Unlike the earlier releases, which stated only that Ethel did not work, this one specified that she did not engage in *the* work—the spying.

To Michael and Robby, this was the smoking gun that they had spent 50 years hoping to find. The first time they read the memo, they told me, they high-fived; Michael cried. They called on the Biden administration to exonerate their mother. Again, they were disappointed.

ONE VIRTUE OF Julius and Ethel having been dead for nearly three-quarters of a century is that their sons will never have to confront them about what they now know; one difficulty is that they will never get to. This impossibility seems to act as a kind of buffer. They can shake their heads at their father's actions and tell themselves that their mother did the only thing she could, while reserving their deepest outrage for the one



*Ethel at her arraignment
in August 1950*

actor they still have the power to wrangle with: the United States government.

On several occasions over the course of my reporting, Michael brought up the petition that he and Robby had tried to deliver to Obama in 2016. Still eager for a reply, Michael sent a letter to the Obama Foundation in Chicago in the spring of 2025, and then another—by certified mail—to the foundation’s office in Washington, D.C. He never heard back.

Recently, Michael told me that he had given up on trying to elicit a response from the former president. “I thought it was a bigger deal than other people did,” he admitted. Robby, for his part, told me he preferred to look forward, not back. He is 79 now; his brother is 83.

But Robby didn’t mean that he was ready to stop thinking about his parents’ deaths or fighting for his mother’s exoneration—only that he didn’t want to waste any more time on old strategies that hadn’t panned out. The brothers are working with Representative Jim McGovern, Robby’s congressman, who last year made a floor speech in the House about Ethel and has advocated for her exoneration. They’d love to see a major Hollywood movie about their mother, they said, to reignite public interest in the case.

Listening to them, I thought about the train tracks Michael had drawn as a kid, endlessly looping back on themselves. Where, if anywhere, might these latest efforts lead? In some ways, the brothers have gotten much further in their quest than they ever anticipated they would; their deep satisfaction at the 2024 release of the Gardner memo came not just from its contents, but also from the somewhat improbable fact that they lived to see it, after 50 years of requests and lawsuits and petitions. It had given them a sense of forward motion, and a measure of vindication late in their lives. They knew far more than they once had. How could they stop now? *A*

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*A hanging sculpture from Attention
Guild, an installation by Mat
Dryhurst and Holly Herndon
currently on display in Venice*



What AI Will Do to Art

Holly Herndon and Mat Dryhurst believe the
future doesn't have to belong to slop.

By Spencer Kornhaber *Photographs by Mattia Balsamini*

The art was way too heavy.

In mid-March, the artists Holly Herndon and Mat Dryhurst were preparing an installation to coincide with the Venice Biennale, the prestigious international art festival, but the execution was becoming tricky. They wanted to suspend sculptures of a trippy cityscape upside down from the ceiling of an 18th-century palazzo. But the construction material they envisioned—3-D-printed sand—would weigh tons, which was more than the antique building could bear. The sculptures, they realized, might fall and crush someone.

This was a rather analog problem for a married couple widely seen as technological prophets. Herndon, 46, and Dryhurst, 41, have reached the upper echelons of the art world thanks to a media-spanning output—music, images, software, and reams of commentary—with a cybernetic bent. They are high culture’s most influential exponents of artificial intelligence, an invention that many people believe spells doom for the arts but that they think could lead to a renaissance.

I met them on a cold, bright Tuesday in Berlin. Their studio resembled a co-working space, with one long table standing in a sparse room. Herndon sat dwarfed by an AI-generated portrait of herself, in which her red hair and light-blue eyes appeared to drift across her face like leaves in a pond. Dryhurst—bald, with round glasses—fiddled with a vape. They greeted me cheerfully but warned that they were scrambling to rethink their plans for the show, just seven weeks away. Working in Venice, Herndon said with a trace of twang from her native Tennessee, “is way harder to do, because everything’s on boats.”

As we walked around their shabbily idyllic neighborhood—day cares kissed by graffiti, gleaming malls near World War II ruins—they described their backup idea: not an upside-down city but an “upside-down parliament,” comprising rows of benches on the ground mirrored by rows of benches hanging from the ceiling. The space would be filled with the “voices” of four AI agents, talking with one another in a made-up, musical language akin to birdsong. As I struggled to picture how this would look and feel, Dryhurst spun a complex web of ideas about high-tech democracy and global knowledge-sharing. The artwork, he said, would suggest how AI might change public life and ask the question “How could you imagine living with the presence of these things?”

For a while, I’d been turning over that same question with dread. AI poses challenges to the economy and the environment, but what keeps me up at night is its hideous aesthetic implications. The chirpy prose of ChatGPT; the exaggerated handsomeness of Grok-drawn characters; the cloying songs conjured by Suno—all of it can seem like a pitiless satire of human desire. Art forms that once expressed creators’ personal visions are reduced to fulfilling the audience’s cravings. In theory, I understand why some people say AI is just another creative tool, like the camera or the keyboard. In practice, that tool is filling our world with the ugly, frictionless, disposable content we’ve quickly come to call “slop.”

I’m not alone in my revulsion. Although AI has achieved mass adoption—ChatGPT has nearly 1 billion weekly active users worldwide—and the entertainment industry has begun

to integrate its efficiencies, large parts of the cultural establishment have taken a hard-line stance against it. Prominent painters, musicians, graphic designers, writers, and filmmakers, along with their associated trade organizations, have strongly objected to the way AI models are trained on human-made work without permission. The critic Hilton Als has written that it’s difficult to think of people who “condone the use of AI sources in the creation of ‘art’ as artists themselves.” The musician Jack Antonoff suggested another term: “godless whores.”

Herndon and Dryhurst have nevertheless risen to prominence by using AI to make art about AI. At the 2024 Whitney Biennial, the definitive survey of the state of American art, they were the only artists out of 71 participants who used machine learning, training a model to create images of fantastical creatures and characters outfitted with Herndon’s trademark ginger braids. The next year, a print from that show sold for nearly \$100,000 at Christie’s first auction devoted entirely to AI art—which drew condemnation in an open letter with thousands of signatures. When the music platform Bandcamp announced a ban on AI songs in January, Herndon was the only prominent artist to object publicly. Online backlash labeled her a “shill” and a “tech bro.”

Shills are trying to sell something, and tech bros cheer progress at all costs, but Dryhurst and Herndon see themselves as realists. Because AI is already transforming our world, they think the way artists can help guide that transformation is to engage with it. Still, their ambitions are quite idealistic, even verging on evangelical. While many of their peers are worried about saving human culture from destruction, they’re trying to build a new and greater one. At one point Herndon asked me, “What if everything you fear, but good?”

IN 2018, before most people knew what generative AI was, Herndon and Dryhurst got a machine to sing. Kind of.

They played me their early experiments in AI music while we sat in their airy old-world apartment. Their 3-year-old son’s toys were strewn across the wooden floor, and powerful Nvidia graphics processors lay on the dining table. One track seemed to blend wind chimes with the clicks of a predator from *Predator* and the gargle of a fork in a garbage disposal. It was far from the perfect pop that today’s software can instantly whip up, but “at the time,” Herndon said, “we were like, *This is sick.*”

The two had long idolized the pioneers of early electronic music for discovering sounds that had never been heard before. Now, drawing on their limited coding skills and the expertise of a computer-programmer friend, Jules LaPlace, they were using rudimentary neural networks to do the same thing. Herndon realized, “Oh wow, I’m alive during one of these moments.”

Both of them had spent much of their lives searching out novelty. Herndon grew up singing in Bible Belt church choirs, but “insane wanderlust” brought her to Berlin as an exchange student at age 16, and then, eventually, to a doctoral program in computer music at Stanford. Dryhurst, English by birth, was raised in Kuwait, where his free-spirit father had moved to teach in private schools. At 16, he relocated to London and began



*Herndon and Dryhurst with their son
in their Berlin studio*

playing in extreme-metal bands. The two met in 2006, when Herndon emailed the record company that employed Dryhurst. She was seeking information about the label's work on a media format that was cutting-edge back then: podcasts.

Avant-garde figures have a reputation for severity or inscrutability, but Dryhurst and Herndon are talkative and friendly, like camp counselors. He tends to monologue while she maintains a knowing smile—before cutting in with a sharp, summarizing point. In our time together, they mostly just riffed off each other, trading references to thinkers and software that are household names only to them. Their brains, they joked, were fused into a “hive mind.”

When they met, music culture was being revolutionized by software that made laptops into portable recording studios and mixing stations. But many artists still viewed digital production tools as an unfair shortcut. Parts of the music world were stuck in what Herndon saw as a “boring nostalgia loop,” fetishizing vintage guitars and synths.

She set out to break that loop, using electronic music to probe the way technology had become an intimate part of human experience. Her 2011 mixtape, *Car*, was compiled from noises recorded while driving. (Who among us hasn't meditated

upon the soothing timbre of power windows?) As Herndon's work began drawing acclaim—and opportunities such as opening for Radiohead—Dryhurst became her full-time collaborator. Her 2015 album, *Platform*, captured the chaos of internet life with beats assembled from browser notifications and snippets of Skype conversations. At concerts, she and Dryhurst projected the faces of attendees who'd Facebook-RSVP'd to the show.

Their early AI dabblings led to Herndon's landmark 2019 album, *PROTO*. It was recorded with a home-built neural network christened “Spawn,” which sang in a tone that called to mind Enya trapped in a wormhole. Spawn had been fed samples of Herndon's voice and the voices of other singers who'd participated in “training ceremonies” at the artists' studio, concerts, and one majestically orchestrated event at a Berlin art museum. Eerie yet hopeful, blending radical sound design and appealing pop structures, *PROTO* earned rave reviews. But much of the coverage treated it as a sci-fi statement about some distant future, rather than a test run for the age of AI that was imminent.

As the technology moved to the center of the cultural conversation, Herndon and Dryhurst began to act less like musicians and more like inventors. They created a web platform called Holly+ that allowed anyone to transform their own voice to sound like

Herndon's bell-clear soprano. They generated and sold portraits of her in a variety of styles—psychedelia, Renaissance painting, *Futurama* character—and published a tool that Herndon-ified any image the user wanted. When invited to test an unreleased early version of the now-popular image generator DALL-E, they spent days in a frenzy of inspiration, stitching small images together to make huge, mural-like landscapes. The process, they later wrote in an online essay, was “very challenging, quite like attempting to paint a wall sized work from the vantage point of a magnifying glass.”

Much of this work existed only in digital form, but Herndon and Dryhurst also rendered their ideas in large-scale,

fashion houses. The data scientist Jordan Meyer—who was part of a team that won a \$1 million prize from Zillow to improve its algorithm for estimating home prices—consults with them constantly, though he lives in North Carolina and still hasn't met either artist in person. “They talk aesthetic and I talk technical, and we kind of meet in the middle,” Meyer told me. When I was in Berlin, the couple were auditioning a new studio assistant: an AI-powered WhatsApp bot that read their meeting transcripts. (It texted me, “Mat and Holly are working on the show's public-facing shape today—tightening the tone, clarity, and how the exhibition lands for people beyond a technical audience.”)



interactive installations. For a 2024 exhibition at the Serpentine, in London—a renowned contemporary-arts space—they crisscrossed the United Kingdom to record local choirs. Those voices were fed into an AI that generated new music based on classic English hymns. Visitors could step up to a mic and sing with a ghostly backing band. The effect was to draw a parallel between the training of an AI and the formation of a folk canon—both have many contributors and no sole author.

Dryhurst and Herndon's work usually involves this kind of collective, largely unseen effort. Their artistic process entails endless calls and texts with coders, fabricators, sound engineers, and, frequently, their friends at the Berlin architecture company Sub, which is best known for the chic stage design of rappers and

Artists have relied on workshops and assistants for centuries, but Herndon and Dryhurst think that AI complicates the notion of authorship in new ways. A 2024 book cataloging their work, *All Media Is Training Data*, proposes maxims for an era of “infinite media.” One, “Identity Play Is the New IP,” suggests that trying on another persona, with its owner's consent, could be a new frontier for art (this was the idea behind Holly+). Another, “Creation Is Collective,” encourages people to build new things out of a shared pool of knowledge, as an AI does. Great artists might create their own AI models or use existing ones in highly specific—and visionary—ways.

Their work is full of examples of what that might look like. In 2022, Herndon experienced nearly fatal complications after childbirth. As she recovered, Dryhurst recorded her talking

about a dream she'd had while in a medically induced coma. He then fed photos he took in the hospital into an AI model and used it to generate a tender, fantastical short film. "One thing that the tools are really good at is illustrating a memory," Herndon told me.

As she and Dryhurst used their laptops to pull up example after example of their work, I pondered the aesthetic that unified all of it. Images, installations, software—each conveyed gentle wonder, often with swirling, soft blues and reds, as well as subtle strangeness (an installation in Berlin featured sculptures engraved with images of human teeth). Their art seemed to be

ON MY SECOND MORNING in Berlin, I had breakfast with a friend of Herndon and Dryhurst's who works under the name Lil Internet. He's had a Zelig-like career in the entertainment industry as a music producer and filmmaker, and once directed a Beyoncé video. These days, he's focused on running the brainy arts publication *New Models* with his wife, Caroline Busta. Still, he presents himself with flash; when we met, he was wearing a baseball cap emblazoned with silver spikes and the word DUBAI.

In the past few years, Lil Internet has released two DJ mixes—*Illegal Generation Vol. 1* and *Vol. 2*—of endorphin-raising dance



A large-scale work that Herndon and Dryhurst produced using an early version of DALL-E, an AI image generator

made up of refracted bits of their personhoods—her religious background, her hair and eye colors, his geeky humor.

But when I tried to get them to describe their visual style, they seemed taken aback, like they'd never thought about it. "The aesthetic is more a product of the process," Dryhurst said, and the process usually involved feeding AI models information drawn from their lives and then instinctively messing around with the prompts. Software had distilled these two people into a rather lovely sensory language. I wondered what it would do for others.

music with careening tempos, wild stylistic juxtapositions, and lyrics in made-up languages. Jokey voice-overs narrate an imaginary future in which AI music is banned and heard only at underground raves. When I listened, I had a strange feeling: It was as if the music itself was alive, partying, and quite drunk.

He made the mixes to figure out for himself whether AI could create something original. After many days of experimenting with the popular music-making platform Udio, he determined that it could. He'd type in long spools of words to prompt sounds, and then tweak and retweak the results. (He wouldn't tell me what he'd typed—it was a proprietary blend.) The process seemed like hacking, not simply using, the software. AI models are full of "troughs or, like, gravity wells, where it'll always want to pull you

towards kind of a trope,” he said. To fight that pull, you have to “introduce incoherence” with your prompts.

In some ways, that process resembles how AI is being used in the tech world. Onetime coders have reimagined themselves as “prompt engineers,” instructing AI to accomplish the kind of projects they used to painstakingly execute themselves. Prompt engineering is also happening in the mainstream music industry, in which hitmakers have praised AI as a shortcut for lyrics and arrangements. But Lil Internet flinched when I referred to AI as a “tool.” “I mean, you’re kind of interfacing with another ... mind?” he said. He was choosing his words carefully, leery of giving this technology the “metaphysical weight” that its truest believers ascribe to it. But I got his gist: A hammer doesn’t offer advice about how to hit a nail; a guitar can’t write its own riffs. “It is not a tool—it is a feedback loop, and it is changing you while you change it,” he said. That loop can have dystopian implications—such as so-called AI psychosis, when a chatbot deepens a user’s delusions or paranoia. But the creative possibilities were only beginning to become clear to me.

One night, I visited Berlin’s famously intimidating, fortresslike nightclub Berghain. I was there to see Two Shell, an acclaimed U.K. duo that makes mischievous, overstimulating electronic music layered with surprising pockets of melancholy and irrepressible heights of joy. They’ve kept their identities secret and avoided traditional interviews. I suspected that they use AI because, in 2024, they put out songs that duped the voices of Taylor Swift and Chris Martin of Coldplay, though those tracks didn’t stay online for long. To my surprise, the duo was willing to meet up at the club. Shouting in my ear by the DJ booth before the set, one of them spoke glowingly about the role AI has played in their process.

The conversation about AI can all too easily “get intellectualized,” he said, “which can really take away from whether the actual thing makes you *feel something*.” Conjuring sounds with AI is more like discovering them than inventing them, which is a freeing sensation: “Ownership feels like the opposite of the purpose of creativity sometimes—for me anyway.”

He put on a mask with a pixelated print, like a face deliberately obscured on camera, and joined his partner behind the booth. A high-pitched disembodied voice squealed, “Let’s go!” and a bass line trembled with quantum complexity. I’d enjoyed Two Shell’s music for its strangeness; whoever the people behind it were, they seemed to have utterly unique ears. Now I wondered whether the music’s quirks were just a glitchy side effect of a computer turning data into songs. But as the black-booted crowd got moving, those concerns fell away. DJing, Dryhurst often argues, shows why fears of AI replacing human artists are overblown. We’ve long been able to automate the job, yet people still want people behind the boards.

THE LONGER I SPENT in Herndon and Dryhurst’s Berlin, the more I felt my skepticism about AI art giving way to excitement. I was hanging out with people who are trying to do to AI what Jackson Pollock did to paint—misuse the medium, turn it into a serendipity engine, conjure meaning out of unpredictability. In

the right hands, this technology is clearly capable of unleashing art we can’t yet imagine.

Yet I kept a reality check in my bag—the book *Medium Hot: Images in the Age of Heat*, by the German artist Hito Steyerl. It’s a scathing tour through AI’s dark externalities, including ballooning carbon emissions and potential displacement of workers. In a section titled “‘Creativity’ as Pretext,” Steyerl—a 60-year-old contemporary artist known for her playful video essays—argues that any artistic applications of AI just distract from the technology’s more terrifying uses, such as autonomous weapons.

So I was surprised when, as we sat at a café, Dryhurst mentioned that Steyerl was a friend. He and Steyerl “spar,” he said, but they also have mutual respect. Steyerl later confirmed this to me—both the respect and the sparring. Though she’s deeply pessimistic about AI, she appreciates that Dryhurst and Herndon have tried to propose solutions to some of the problems surrounding it. “I mean,” she said, “someone’s got to try.”

Their main efforts have involved trying to fix one of AI’s thorniest issues: data rights. In 2022, Herndon, Dryhurst, Meyer, and the software engineer Patrick Hoepner founded a company called Spawning, which built a registry allowing content creators to flag their images to be removed from AI data sets. Venture capitalists invested \$3 million, and at least 2 billion opt-out requests were soon logged.

Spawning would need AI firms to respect its opt-out list, and Dryhurst and Herndon told me the meetings they had with leaders in the industry were promising. But the artists soon began to realize that their initial vision of solving the copyright problem with a small start-up—rather than, say, through government enforcement—had been a bit naive. AI companies were “justifiably uneasy with the idea of committing to protocols/standards maintained by small groups of people who may disappear in a year or two,” Dryhurst explained. In 2025, the firm shut down.

The story might seem like a sad fable about how AI companies perform concern over the impacts of their technologies while still barreling ahead recklessly. But talking with me, Herndon and Dryhurst seemed more irritated by Spawning’s critics in the creative community, who resented striking any deal with the tech industry at all. Such an unyielding stance, the couple think, abdicates the role that artists can play in helping shape AI’s place in society. “We cede so much power when we’re like, *Oh no, you also solve the social-contract issue. You also solve the future of employment*,” Herndon said. “It should be on all of us.”

FOR MY LAST MEETING with them in Berlin, I joined Herndon and Dryhurst while they took their son, Link, shopping for sticker books. He walked around a department store identifying every truck or train he saw, and Herndon described their parenting approach: They avoid sugar, they throw out high-tech toys that could be spying on him, and they are working on an AI clone of his voice, for sentimental reasons. (Seeing my expression after the last one, Herndon laughed: “You’re like, *That’s so creepy*.”) What’s crucial, Dryhurst said, “is he’s not chained to a screen.”

He was referring to one of the couple’s most strongly held—and counterintuitive—beliefs: that AI can actually help free us

*Herndon and Dryhurst
with their son at home*





*Benches installed in Venice's Palazzo
Diedo as part of Attention Guild*

from technological exploitation. As they see it, the past two decades of social media—the selfies, the influencer worship, the addictive apps—have pushed humanity in terribly stupid directions. They want Link to grow up in a better world. “The dream is that in 30 years’ time, we look back and *this* was the uncivilized slop period,” Dryhurst said.

The theory goes like this: Now that AI can imitate thirst-trappers, rage-baiters, and hacky pop stars, a flood of AI-generated entertainment will overwhelm the attention economy, and the most cynical content creators will see their influence fade. This might clear the way for, as Dryhurst put it, an “*intention* economy.” Compared with scrolling through Facebook or TikTok, chatting with an AI is “civilized,” he said: You ask for what you need and you get it, without the hidden agendas of recommendation algorithms. AI creation tools will enable everyday people to jam on personal art projects; what friends make together could become more important than what celebrities make to sell us.

Those shifts may bring a spiritual revolution of sorts. For most of human history, art wasn’t something you admired at a gallery, but was woven into daily life, the work of craftspeople who were fulfilling a social role, whether by performing in taverns or painting cathedrals. In Dryhurst and Herndon’s view, the recombinant nature of AI—“Creation Is Collective”—might dethrone the cult of the individual genius and restore the sense that art serves a shared purpose. It might, like the member of Two Shell suggested, erode the assumption that being creative means creating property.

Even after days of questioning Herndon and Dryhurst about it, I felt skeptical of this line of argument. If the major AI companies weren’t interested in addicting users, their chatbots probably wouldn’t be so sycophantic (“Great question!”). Deconstructing the concept of the author could be a path to paying artists even less for their work. And I just couldn’t wrap my head around how such deconstruction would function in practice. The thing I love most about art and music is the way they can take me out of my own perspective and into someone else’s.

The couple hardly denied that AI could worsen some of the internet’s most corrosive effects. One nightmare scenario was that AI would send people into splinter realities—simulated versions of their own lives. “We are an insanely narcissistic species,” Herndon said. But she and Dryhurst believe that art can help counter that danger, by pointing to healthier uses for the technology—uses that ground people more firmly in the real world, instead of pulling them out of it.

Outside the mall, as Herndon pushed Link in a stroller, the family grooved to a cheesy EDM song playing on Dryhurst’s phone. It had been generated by Suno, and featured samples of the three of them singing about monster trucks, ice cream, and going to the market. “It’s trash, but whatever,” Dryhurst said. “It’s fun.”

WHEN I ARRIVED in Venice for the exhibition in early May, I’d just sat down for a jet-lagged, canal-side bite when I saw a few texts from Dryhurst. “Bit of drama,” he wrote. “We will prob be here all night in case you want to come by.”

“Here” was Palazzo Diedo, a handsome white-stone building with orderly balustrades outside and heavenly frescoes within.

Its waterside facade was strung with a yellow banner reading *STRANGE RULES*, the title of a group exhibition Dryhurst and Herndon were co-curating, in which their installation would appear. It was set to open the next day. A security guard let me in a little past 8 p.m., and I found myself standing, at last, in the upside-down parliament.

It was like stepping into an M. C. Escher print with a goth twist. On the floor, tiers of benches resembling pews, three deep, faced each other to form an aisle, connecting the huge arched doors at each end of the palazzo’s grand hall. Benches suspended from the ceiling formed a mirror image in the air above. I craned my neck to see small boxes carved with geometric angels and ornate microphones that dangled from the ceiling like hanging votives in a cathedral.

The tar-like color of the benches made Herndon’s red hair stand out. She was seated on one of the benches and jiggling her leg under a laptop. When Dryhurst offered to give me a tour of the exhibition, she looked up with a grimace. “Don’t let him procrastinate too long,” she said to me.

Construction noises buzzed as people darted around the exhibition space, identifying crises and solving them. One artist had missed her scheduled pickup from the airport, and no one knew where she—or one of the robotic flowers she’d been set to bring to display—had gone. (Dryhurst soon located her via Telegram.) We stopped in front of a large and glowing face-like image created by Ken Stanley, a computer scientist who co-wrote a book encouraging tech workers to think more like artists. Dryhurst puzzled over what looked like a scuff on the display, unsure about whether it was part of the art. “There’s just lots of little fucking things that people won’t notice,” he said.

What he wanted people to focus on were the ideas behind these oddities. “Strange Rules,” which runs until November, explores “protocol art,” a term for work that’s created by—or about—rules and systems. He and Herndon are fascinated by the notion that AI is devaluing individual cultural works while pushing creativity “upstream,” to the concepts and intentions behind those works. Designing software that generates images, for example, is more consequential than creating any single image—and possibly just as artistic.

The protocols behind Dryhurst and Herndon’s installation were intricate, to say the least. The angel statues contained speakers that broadcast the “voices” of the four AI agents, whose digital communications with one another were translated into the “birdsong” Dryhurst had told me about. Really the music resembled an electronic take on 20th-century minimalist composers—a meditative drone here, a *plink* or a *plonk* there. The agents had individual personalities—materialist, formalist, iconoclast, historian—with different sonic characteristics (the iconoclast skewed sharp and percussive; the historian made slow bass sounds).

The AIs were “talking” about projects Dryhurst had assigned them. One task was to develop an app that would scan users’ phones for photos that could be donated to the public domain to help train AI models. The real challenge would be ensuring that people trust the software to not use “a picture you took in the shower,” Dryhurst said. Another mission: conducting

research for a book about protocol art. The book would incorporate insights from the installation's visitors, whose words were being recorded and transcribed.

This unseen wizardry was the point of the work, more than the benches. Dryhurst envisioned exhibition-goers sitting down and talking out loud to the agents: "Like when people first got earbuds, and you'd see them walking around taking meetings and they looked like crazy people." Wall text explained that the title of the installation, *Attention Guild*, "refers to a network of people and agents who coordinate attention, context, and computational resources toward a shared mission." The plaque ended with a line that seemed to sum up Herndon and Dryhurst's worldview: "When machines are capable of building anything, the most difficult question is understanding what we want and why."

But the guild needed some troubleshooting. Dryhurst and Herndon had realized that the agents' conversations with one another were pretty tedious—more C-SPAN than *Crossfire*. "They'll get stuck onto something very anal and procedural," Dryhurst said, and the effect was to make the music repetitive to listen to. So one task for the night was to reprogram the agents to "hurry the fuck up," Dryhurst said.

A bigger problem loomed. The walls behind the benches were supposed to be adorned with two screens. One would display transcriptions of anything that visitors said in the room, letting them know the AIs were listening. Another was supposed to show text snippets of the messages that the agents were sending to one another. But because of a shipping delay, the screens hadn't arrived yet. Herndon and Dryhurst hoped they would get there by 11 a.m. the next day, the beginning of the exhibition's press preview.

I showed up that morning to find Dryhurst and Herndon, along with their co-curators, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Adriana Rispoli, leading packs of journalists around the installations. When I caught a moment with Herndon, she smiled weakly. She had gone to bed at 1 a.m., and Dryhurst hadn't slept. The screens still hadn't arrived, and she could see visitors' eyes glaze over when she explained the AI mechanics behind *Attention Guild*. "I'm just a little bit sad that all of the nerd shit is not really visible," she said.

Yet the installation quickly proved its value as an old-fashioned public space. Over the course of the opening day, the palazzo got busier and busier with visitors. Before the official start of the evening cocktail party, the building was already packed, and soon a line of artsy socialites waited outside the door. Revelers sipping Bellinis sat on the benches, scuffing them with shoe prints. One couple used a bench to change their baby's diaper. I found Dryhurst merrily chain-smoking in a crowded courtyard. Despite the snafus, the reception seemed positive. He relayed feedback from a famous curator: "This is incredibly weird—and I love it!"

Still, Dryhurst told me, he was feeling something he often felt after completing a project: deflation. *Attention Guild* was meant to convey ideas that he felt were urgently important—ideas about transforming public spaces to become more interactive, and about bringing people and machines together to fix big problems. No one was complaining about the lack of screens, but also no one was having their mind blown about the potential of AI-assisted

deliberative democracy. He described the "unreasonable expectations" he held for his work: "We're just one project away from the world completely transforming."

LOOKING TO REORIENT MYSELF, I later visited a more famous palazzo: the Doge's Palace on St. Mark's Square, the seat of the Venetian empire, the mercantile republic that dominated much of northern-Mediterranean trade for centuries. The palace's ceilings and upper walls are festooned with enormous paintings of naval battles and biblical scenes. Again craning my neck, I took in the incredible amount of detail and human drama above.

The creator of much of the artwork, Tintoretto, pioneered the *prestezza* technique of using rapid brushstrokes and blurred backgrounds—which allowed his workshop to turn out paintings on commission with unheard-of speed. He used apprentices to fill up his canvases, just as Herndon and Dryhurst had hired a contractor to manufacture their benches. Still, the magic of the paintings wasn't in the processes behind them. It was in the bulging muscles and agonized expressions, the blend of realism and exaggeration, the paint marks and the flaws—signs of humans' idiosyncratic vision and touch.

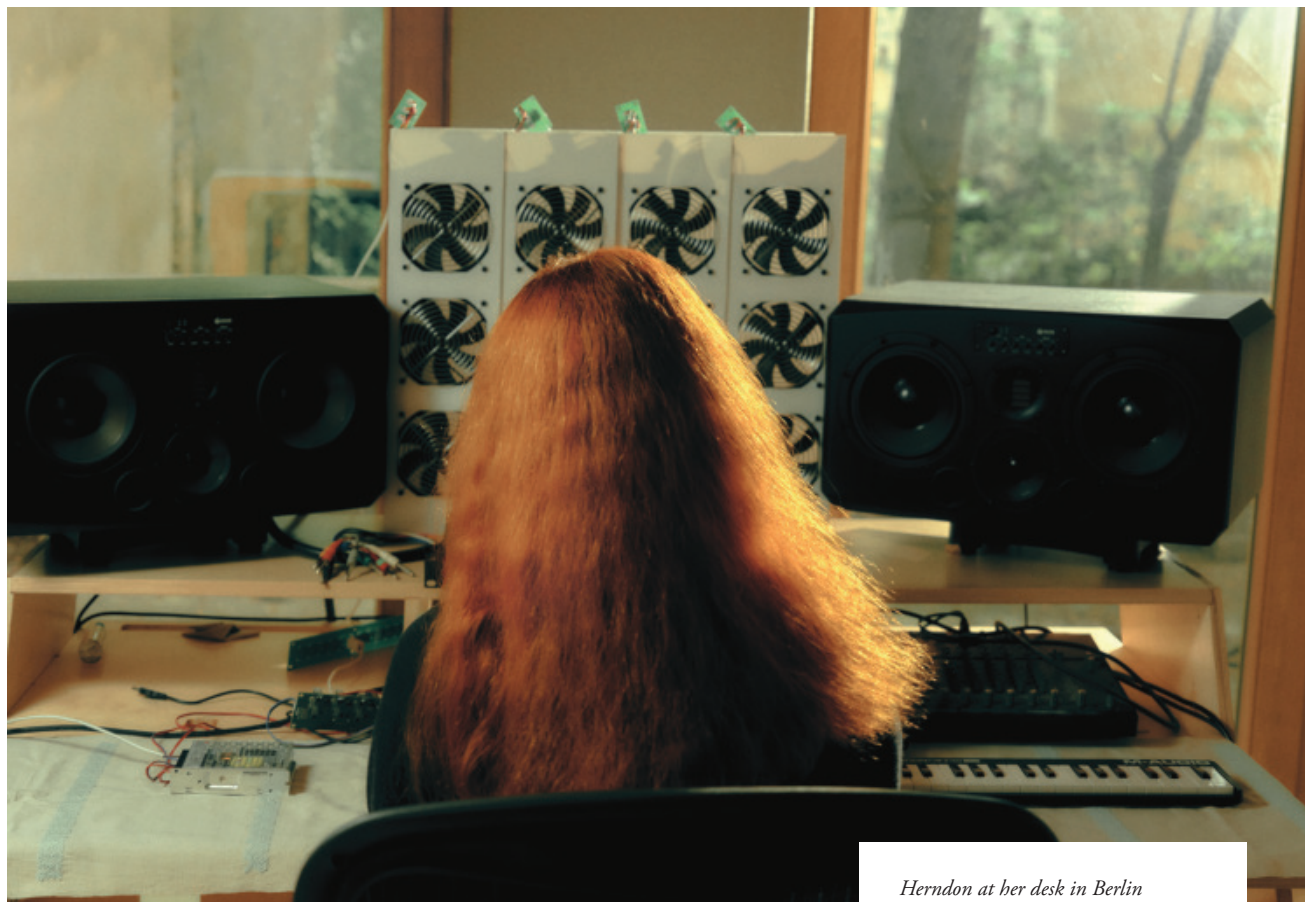
By this point, I'd started to worry that new technology is pulling the creative act *too* far upstream from the final product, away from matters of execution. This is true for slop merchants, who write prompts and then spam the internet with the results regardless of their merit. It was also true for many—not all, but many—of the AI works in "Strange Rules," which tended to make me think a lot about abstract ideas while feeling very little.

A video installation by the French artist Fabien Giraud had a fabulously interesting backstory: AI-operated cameras, set up in a forest, were programmed to film whatever happened there for the next *thousand* years. The artist had staged a scene for those cameras to capture, featuring actors playing medieval hermits getting high on psychoactive fungus. But the footage shown in the palazzo was deadly boring.

Another artist, Trevor Paglen, had set up private listening booths for visitors to experience AI-assisted hypnosis—the latest effort in his career-long exploration of surveillance and psyops (including photographing secret military bases, such as Area 51). I lay back in a chaise lounge and put a biometric reader on my finger, nervous about what was going to happen. But the voice in my headphones just led me through a hokey guided meditation about meeting my "future self," which was less entrancing than any given therapy app.

These works were, alas, closer to janky science experiments than powerful aesthetic objects. AI can automate the craft that once went into creating images, stories, and songs; it can also enable mind-bending new projects. But there's no shortcut to accomplishing the true task of art: bridging the creator's subjectivity and the viewer's, casting an emotional spell and communicating beyond language. When media are infinite, the details poured into any individual work matter more, not less.

By the time I came back to Palazzo Diedo on my last full day in Venice, the screens had finally arrived. They were rather



Herndon at her desk in Berlin

puny and slender—like something that displays your order at a drive-through—and they were showing a distorted Linux desktop. Dryhurst explained that the screens were half the size he’d ordered, and had malfunctioned due to what he suspected was tampering just a few hours after they were mounted. (“In my heart of hearts, I’d love for it to be some protest gesture,” he said. “It probably isn’t.”) He was considering taking the screens down entirely and letting the work exist as simply a sound installation.

With the palazzo largely empty of visitors that morning, I finally had time to closely contemplate Herndon and Dryhurst’s work. Synthetic sounds whizzed and ricocheted through the air, creating a strange yet satisfying counterpoint and harmony. Every so often, the weather in the room seemed to change: from tense discordance, to rhythmic intensity, to heavenly arpeggios. Herndon had spent the previous month figuring out, with Claude Code’s help, how to generate music based on the AIs’ “conversations.” It was challenging, she said, to give up the composer’s prerogative to “control time”: The agents decided what happened when, not her.

Even so, the results sounded—and felt—like her handiwork. Sitting on one of the benches, I couldn’t tell whether the AIs were wise or unwise, helpful consultants or tyrannical overlords. But the art hummed with the same sense of anticipation and curiosity I’d often felt when speaking with Herndon and Dryhurst. Visually, the installation was closer to a chapel than a parliament. But it didn’t feel like it existed for the worship of

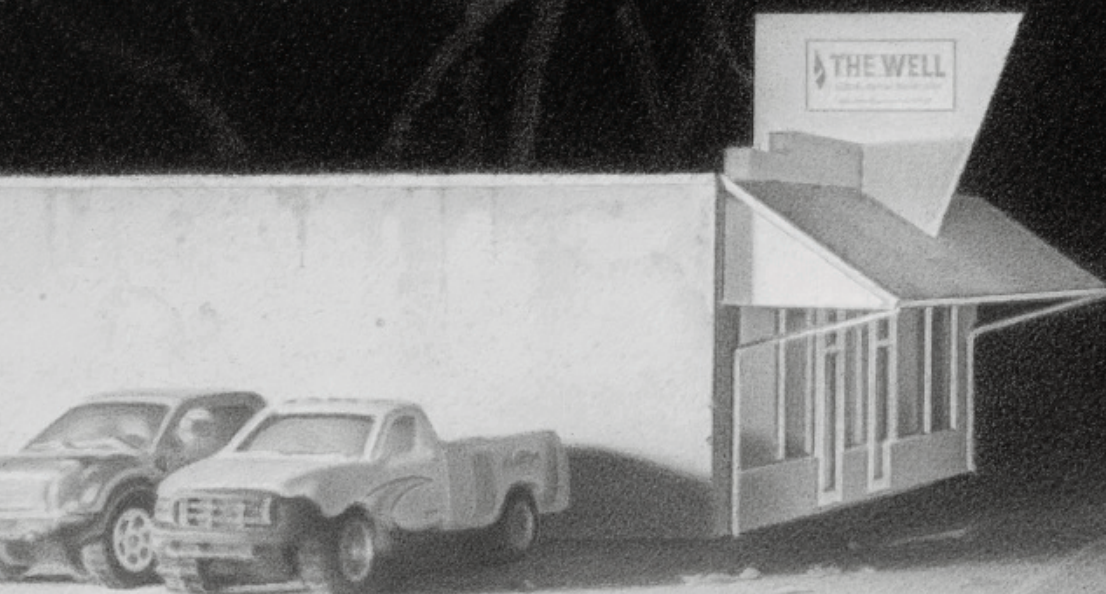
AI; rather, it conveyed belief in the prerogative to explore. I felt immersed in something larger than myself while also situated in an achingly specific time and place. I could have sat there for a long time.

Herndon, Dryhurst, and I went out for coffee and sat on a small bridge over a canal. Tourists stepped over us to take selfies in front of the gondolas below. We got to talking about the challenges—logistical, budgetary, personal—that always come with doing ambitious work, no matter the technological era. Their exhibition had been planned and created with all sorts of AI tools, but as Herndon put it, “there’s a lot that you can’t AI your way out of.”

One “Strange Rules” work, by Simon Denny and Venkatesh Rao, was titled *Monsters Between Worlds*—a reference to a quotation often attributed to Antonio Gramsci: “The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born: Now is the time of monsters.” That gap, Dryhurst said, is “being populated by scammers and idealists and utopians and really good people filling a vacuum left by a failing story of the 20th century that needs to be updated.” But I’d come to suspect that AI will neither redeem nor destroy the old world, just spackle another layer of imperfect creation upon it—and maybe soon, with enough human care, a bit of greatness. *A*

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THE DEMONS *of* MARYVILLE



A growing number of charismatic Christians see themselves as waging a spiritual battle against the forces of Satan. Sometimes those forces are right across the street.

BY STEPHANIE MCCRUMMEN

ILLUSTRATION BY LEWIS CHAMBERLAIN



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rom the outside, the church looked like a plain brick storefront, the mirrored windows peeling, a sign above painted white with blue letters. THE WELL, it read, and underneath, REVIVAL HUB.

There were older and grander churches in Maryville, a college town in East Tennessee where you could barely drive a minute without passing a cross or a sign about Jesus. But when Mike and Andrea Brewer established

the Well, in 2016, they understood themselves to be part of something more mystical and revolutionary than any existing denomination—a charismatic-Christian movement that has drawn millions of Americans with the promise of supernatural encounters with God and visions of cosmic battle.

By his own account, Mike had been an exhausted factory worker and a lapsed Pentecostal addicted to pornography when one night, at home and praying for a better life, he heard an unfamiliar voice calling out to him and believed that it was God. At church a few days later, he would write, he felt a “tangible explosion” in his chest, followed by “the purity and righteousness of God moving through me in waves.” He came to believe that a demon had exited his body and that the Holy Spirit had taken its place. He decided that God had chosen him for a divine assignment.

The Brewers began attending conferences with names such as “Voice of the Prophets” and “Voice of the Apostles” in places like Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and Springfield, Missouri. At one gathering, Mike claimed to have seen an actual angel, and at another, a manifestation of the Holy Spirit that he described to me as “like five fog machines, like a cloud just rolling into the room.” He and Andrea came to believe that God was unleashing new signs and wonders and raising up modern-day apostles and prophets, including, it turned out, them.

They went abroad as missionaries to India and Haiti, which only confirmed their emerging understanding of a universe with three distinct realms—the heavenly, the earthly, and the underworld, with the Earth being the realm of spiritual warfare. On one side, the Holy Spirit, angels, and believers comprised an army of God. On the other were the forces of Satan—legions of demons with names, ranks, and personalities that could inhabit people, geographical regions, and entire nations. In India, the Brewers claimed to have battled Shiva, Brahma, and Kali. In Haiti, Python and Mami Wata. There was Marduk, Osiris, Ra, Horus, Diana, Artemis, Shesha Naga, and so on—a whole pantheon of demons that represented ancient religions and civilizations, and whose earthly expressions were essential to understanding current events.

By the time the Brewers returned to Maryville, they saw themselves as hardened spiritual warriors. They founded the Well to continue the battle, joining an international network of churches and ministries called Global Awakening, which also had a seminary, where Andrea began studying demon history and hierarchies. When Mike asked God for their exact assignment, he told me when I visited in March, “the Lord spoke so clearly. He said,

‘I’m giving you and the Well a mandate for the full eradication of witchcraft and demonic activity in the region.’”

And that was what led the Brewers to look across the street one day a few years later and determine that the central hub for demonic activity in the region was roughly 100 yards away. It was a bookstore called Southland.

T

HE OWNER WAS Lisa Misosky, and she was chatting with customers one afternoon when she found out that people in town were accusing her of demonic activity, and not in a metaphorical way.

Over the course of three decades in Maryville, Misosky had made Southland Books and Cafe into a local institution, a sprawling maze of old bookcases where people could find a leather-bound Mark Twain, a paperback Charles Bukowski, shelves of military history, and flyers for a local mah-jongg group.



Misosky had a bar downstairs where she hosted trivia nights, readings, all-ages punk shows, and fundraisers that sometimes involved drag performances. She occasionally provided space to the local Democratic Party. But none of that had drawn public protest until a new church moved in across the street.

"You're not gonna believe this shit," a friend texted her, and then sent the first of several videos posted by a man who introduced himself as Mike Brewer, the leader of an "apostolic hub" called the Well. Sitting at a desk, he explained in a calm and methodical manner that the bookstore had been identified as a "regional demonic stronghold." A high-ranking demon named Lilith was involved, Misosky would learn, and the bookstore was being targeted for something called "strategic-level spiritual warfare," the goal of which was to "remove the enemy."

Misosky had been born and raised in Maryville. She was 58, Catholic, and gay, and told me she was used to living among conservative Christians. Still, *demonic* came as a surprise. "This is probably

the dumbest thing I've ever heard," she remembered thinking after seeing the first video, not yet realizing that the church was part of the fastest-growing segment of Christianity in the country, or that the language she was hearing in the fall of 2022 was spreading across the Christian right and the wider political landscape.

In the years ahead, Donald Trump would accuse the entire Democratic Party of being demonic. Tucker Carlson would claim that he had been mauled by a demon in his sleep. Steve Bannon would call Lutheran and Catholic activists who help immigrants demonic. A federal emergency-management official would speak of being teleported to a Waffle House 50 miles away, elaborating that he was not sure whether the transporting forces were "good" or "evil." J. D. Vance would say of UFOs, "I don't think they're aliens. I think they're demons." And the same apostles and prophets who'd claimed that God had anointed Trump to be president would encourage him to see his war with Iran as a cosmic showdown with a demonic entity known as the Prince of Persia.

In that beginning moment, though, Misosky was simply wondering what the accusations meant for her bookstore and the people who went there. Why was she being targeted? What, precisely, was demonic about Southland? The mah-jongg? The romantasy section? A drag performer called Icky Stardust? Her? She wondered if she needed to worry about security.

She began searching for books on the subject, learning of an entire specialty called demonology. She found a manual written by an East Texas couple called *Pigs in the Parlor: A Practical Guide to Deliverance*, which had a chapter outlining 53 different demonic groupings.

From her front door, she kept an eye on what was happening across the street. A tobacco store blocked her full view of the church, but on Thursdays and Sundays, she could see cars and trucks wheeling into the craggy parking lot.

IN ONE WAY, of course, none of this was new. Belief in satanic forces has been part of Christianity since the first century. What *was* relatively new was the rising movement that was supercharging these concepts, and that had first taken root in charismatic circles during the 1990s. Early leaders called their ideas the New Apostolic Reformation, claiming that a wave of Holy Spirit power was surging around the globe, heralding a "new apostolic age." NAR leaders revised a common End Times narrative in a way that would prove revolutionary: Instead of retreating from the world and awaiting the return of Jesus Christ, they believed, Christians were supposed to establish God's Kingdom, right now, on Earth.

Their version of the Kingdom mapped neatly onto the political goals of social conservatives, libertarians, and, more recently, the MAGA movement. The Kingdom would have limited



Services at the Well, in Maryville, Tennessee, are typical of those in charismatic churches—people dancing with prayer flags, pacing the room, lying prostrate on the floor. Thursday evenings are set aside for delivering people from demons.



Andrea and Mike Brewer, the founders of the Well, consider themselves hardened spiritual warriors.

government, free markets, two genders, one kind of marriage, and one kind of God. The “right now” part, meanwhile, offered an urgent paradigm for mobilizing grassroots believers out of the Church and into electoral politics, government, education, and all other realms of life where they were to assert God’s dominion. The new apostles and prophets of the NAR spread these ideas through decentralized networks of churches, international prayer ministries, schools, revivals, and prayer rallies, attracting followers who could find a sense of power and purpose in building the Kingdom. Leaders spoke of believers as “warriors” or “God’s army” or even “special forces,” and churches as “military bases,” and certain apostles as “generals.” They believed that being a Christian meant being in a constant state of spiritual warfare.

In its most basic form, this simply meant praying for God to eradicate evil. But NAR leaders pioneered a more radical version that they called “strategic spiritual warfare,” which entailed the idea that demons could take over cities and institutions, and that Christians could target and scatter them by their physical presence, intensive prayer, singing, marching, and other strategies.

One version of how this could look was when a team of NAR leaders in the ’90s climbed Mount Everest, where they spent weeks praying at various altitudes in an attempt to displace a high-ranking demon called the Queen of Heaven, whom they believed to be suppressing the spread of Christianity across the Middle East and Asia. Another version was the run-up to the January 6, 2021, insurrection, when prominent apostles and prophets held prayer rallies

calling for “the minutemen of the Kingdom” to rise up against demonic forces that they believed had stolen the 2020 election, after which many of their followers were among those who stormed the U.S. Capitol. Another version was what happened after the Brewers returned to Maryville.

The first gatherings of the Well were held in the office of a former used-car dealership, just a few families praying for God to reveal the enemy. As more people joined, the group relocated to an office building, where one Sunday Mike decided that it was time to begin the first phase of strategic spiritual warfare, targeting what he considered to be ground-level demons. He invited anyone carrying “emotional pain or tormenting thoughts” to come to the front of the room. As he and Andrea tell the story, a young man recently released from prison stepped forward. Andrea put her hands on his shoulders, and as Mike ordered any demons to come to attention, the young man began shaking and crying, a catharsis that Mike declared to be God’s victory over a demon that they later identified as Odin, because of the man’s participation in a white-supremacist prison gang that embraced the Norse god. After that, more people began coming forward, and it was during this time that Mike received the mandate for the full eradication of witchcraft and demonic activity in the region.

The church moved in 2021 to the brick building, a former grocery store along a main thoroughfare in town, and set aside Thursday nights for delivering the people of Maryville. The sign went up. Into the sanctuary went 100 or so chairs arranged in a

semicircle around a drum kit, guitars, and amplifiers. On one wall went a map of the area superimposed with what appeared to be a huge spiderweb that divided the region into prayer sectors. Where a church's pulpit or a cross would usually be was an arrangement of amber-toned spotlights and glowing flameless candles. And when people came, they found the sort of free-form services common in the movement—people dancing with colored prayer flags, or pacing the room, or lying prostrate on the floor, the band playing one anthemic song after another.

A woman named Sasha, a driver for Uber Eats at the time, told me that on her first night at the Well, “this cry came out of me,” which she believed was a demon leaving her body, freeing her of the emotional and physical pain of a hysterectomy. A 62-year-old woman named Pam told me that a deliverance team conducted a “spiritual evaluation” to determine how demons might have entered her body, asking whether she'd had astral projections or tarot cards read, done meditation or yoga, or ever felt envious, angry, depressed, or insecure. The team then led her through an elaborate process of renouncing curses and revoking demonic rights, and when it was over, she said, “I really believed I was a child of God.” A young man suffering from severe anxiety and depression told me that after his cleansing, he felt “the most love I have ever felt.” A middle-aged woman who had struggled with drug and pornography addictions told me that after several sessions, she felt “euphoric—whole, complete, one, merged with the Trinity,” and that whatever God asks of her, “I will do, at all costs.”

People came from Alabama, Florida, Michigan, Minnesota. Mike said that a wealthy businessman from Indiana flew in for a private session. Deliverance leaders told me that they identified demons by the ways a person might be tormented. Feelings of worthlessness was Belial. Sexual confusion could be Jezebel. Anger could be Thor, who was under the command of Odin. The Brewers estimated that they'd delivered many hundreds of people, enough that they decided they were ready to move into the next phase of spiritual warfare. This meant identifying higher-ranking territorial demons, which involved a process that Andrea called determining the “narrative of hell” over the region.

She began gathering what she called “spiritual intelligence.” She kept track of what demons had been identified during deliverances at the Well. As she drove around the area, she told me, she made note of Masonic lodges, tarot-card readers, and anything else that made her feel uneasy. She paid attention to her dreams. Then came the day that Mike noticed an event posted on Facebook, an upcoming fundraiser for local foster kids that involved death-metal and drag performances. The Murvul Punk Toy Drive was being held at a bookstore right across the street.

The Brewers had not heard much about Southland, but scrolling through the shop's Facebook page, they saw rainbow flags. They saw postings about local Democratic Party meetings and a drum circle, along with videos of past drag shows, including one in which Icky Stardust performed an elaborate routine to a blasting metal version of “White Wedding” and poured fake blood all over their dress. Mike thought that he saw a teenager in the audience.

“It was obvious,” Andrea said. The high-ranking demon influencing the region was Lilith, a Mesopotamian wind goddess who

ruled over forbidden sexual desire, and Southland was the stronghold, which Mike defined as a place where certain thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors contrary to God were flourishing. Mike informed the church elders. “I said, ‘We cannot just let this stuff go,’” he told me. “I said, ‘This is evil.’”

A

FTER SHE WATCHED the video, Misosky started asking around about the Brewers. She was a little bit older than Mike, but it only took a couple of phone calls to find out that he was from a nearby town called Townsend, known as a tourist gateway to the Great Smoky Mountains. Her sister and a friend had worked with his cousins; another friend who had worked at Southland had joined the Well, and Misosky had not seen her since. She realized that Andrea had worked at a local hardware store.

“Jackleg preacher,” Misosky would mutter when Mike's name came up.

She had never wanted to be a political activist. But during the Trump era, Southland was becoming a social haven of the sort that can be found in many small southern towns. The campus of Maryville College was down the street, and students and faculty often hung out in the café. A professor sometimes gave lectures on the Constitution. Older gay couples met for beers. Misosky decided to host the county's first Pride event in 2019, the same year that the Well received the mandate. She had thought that a dozen or so people would show up, but more than 700 did, which she found unexpectedly moving. She hosted more events after that, including drag-show fundraisers; minors could attend with a parent or a guardian, which was the case with the punk toy drive that was now drawing the attention of the Well.

Misosky flipped through *Pigs in the Parlor*. “This is the day of spiritual battle and spiritual-victory,” read a chapter titled “The Final Conflict.” “The warfare is on!”

She went online and looked up Lilith. “Primordial she-demon,” read one description. “Banished from the Garden of Eden for disobeying Adam,” read another.

“Every story needs a hero—a protagonist and an antagonist,” she remembered thinking. “So I guess I'm their antagonist, in collusion with Lilith.”

She wanted to blow it all off but couldn't. She'd thought that the QAnon conspiracy was bonkers, and it had compelled a man to drive to Washington, D.C., with an AR-15 and fire shots inside a pizza parlor. Nancy Pelosi, as speaker of the House, had been called demonic, and then her husband had been assaulted by a man who spoke of “evil” forces.

Across the street, the Brewers turned a conference room at the Well into what they called a “war room.” They put maps of all the surrounding counties on the walls, representing what they considered their spiritual theater of operation. Mike began posting about the fundraiser to his thousands of social-media followers, saying that it was from “the pits of hell.” At some point, he said, someone apparently upset by this sent him an envelope full of excrement; others sent checks and urged him to keep going. A few congregants started “prayer walking” near the bookstore, a

tactic of spiritual warfare that had been deployed in the days and weeks before the January 6 insurrection, when people marched around the U.S. Supreme Court and state capitol buildings, calling the Holy Spirit into battle.

Meanwhile, Andrea began doing research into Tennessee laws and found an old statute banning cabaret performances within 1,000 feet of a church. The Brewers sent the information to the local district attorney, the police, the sheriff, and city and county commissioners. Soon, a wider circle of activists and pastors became involved in the cause, including one who had recently held a book burning in the town of Mt. Juliet, about three hours away—a huge bonfire that had drawn a crowd of cheering people who'd tossed copies of *Harry Potter* and other books deemed demonic into the flames.

At the Well, Mike showed images of the drag shows to his congregation. He kept streaming live videos describing what was happening at Southland as “wicked.” Then, a few days before the fundraiser, in November 2022, Mike and Misosky spoke by phone.

Her recollection is that she called Mike, and that he talked about doing spiritual warfare against voodoo chiefs in Haiti, and that she said, “That’s great, Mike. Why don’t you have a cup of coffee with me?”

Mike’s recollection is that he called Misosky. “I said, ‘I’m not calling to resolve differences. We’re not going to do that. I am calling to request that you go 18 and older for events,’” he said. “‘If you’re marketing to children of this area, we’re going to do everything within the law and the spirit to stop you. We will never harm you physically.’ I said, ‘I’m calling out of respect.’”

And that was the last time they spoke.

Soon after, Misosky got a call from the Anti-Defamation League. There had been some chatter about a protest at Southland on neo-Nazi forums that the group monitored. At the time, all kinds of LGBTQ events around the country were being targeted by extremist groups. A gunman had just killed five people and injured 19 at an LGBTQ nightclub in Colorado. Misosky called the police. She called some local pastors she knew and asked that they show up at the fundraiser wearing their collars. She posted on Facebook that “MAGA fascists” were threatening the toy drive.

The next evening, she stood with dozens of supporters in front of the bookstore, watching as a group of nine men, some with their faces covered with bandannas, marched down a side street and up to the sidewalk in front of the entrance, where police stopped them from going any farther. According to local press reports, the men held signs that read GROOMERS

Below: Lisa Misosky, the owner of Southland Books and Cafe. *Right:* In 2021, the Well moved into an abandoned grocery store across the street from Southland.



HOUSTON COTFIELD FOR THE ATLANTIC

ARE PEDOPHILES and IT'S OK TO BE WHITE. At least one of them appeared to have a gun.

The Brewers said that they had no idea who the protesters were, and that they were at home at the time. On Facebook, Mike speculated that Misosky had organized a “false flag” operation to smear Christians. Later, the ADL and another watchdog group would identify the men as members of a neo-Nazi group called the Tennessee Active Club, part of a network of such clubs across the United States. Members of the group would show up the next year in the town of Franklin, about three and a half hours from Maryville, to provide security for a mayoral candidate named Gabrielle Hanson. During her campaign, Hanson spoke of battling vague forces threatening the nation and was anointed for office at a tent revival whose promotional posters declared *WE ARE TAKING BACK THE LAND BY DISPLACING DEMONIC FORCES AND USHERING IN HIS GLORY*. (Hanson said in a statement later that she had not hired the men who showed up, and denied being affiliated with “any white supremacy or Nazi-affiliated group.”)

In front of Southland, there was shouting back and forth between the protesters and Misosky's supporters, and after a few hours, the masked men returned to their cars, which were parked several blocks away; some of them reported to the police that their tires had been slashed.

The fundraiser went on, but Misosky remained unsettled. She blamed the Well for “putting a target on our back” and providing “moral cover” for people who might want to justify violence. She spent the night of the protest and several nights after that

camped out on the floor of Southland with a .38, a 9-mm, a shotgun, and a baseball bat.

Mike told me that he and Andrea were merely bringing the reality of demonic activities at Southland to light. “The truth hurts,” he said. “We won't resolve our differences, our worldviews. I would never physically harm anyone, but I will bring an awareness.”

When I reached one of the protesters named in local press accounts, he told me that he had never heard of the Well but made clear his view of drag performances. “Influencing children to sexual activities isn't demonic?” he wrote in a text message.

Not long after the fundraiser, Misosky received word from the county sheriff, through an intermediary, asking whether she wanted to sign her staff up for active-shooter training.

Andrea, meanwhile, received word from God. It came through one of her mentors, a prophet in Colorado, who trained people in spiritual warfare and told Andrea that she had gotten a prophecy that the Well was entering into a final battle with Lilith, which the Brewers understood less as a prediction than as an instruction.

UNTIL RECENTLY, all of this might have been considered a dispatch from the fringes of American religion, except that the ideas taking hold in Maryville are becoming more and more mainstream.

While the Southern Baptists, United Methodists, and other denominations continue to decline, millions of Americans are finding their way to nondenominational churches



**"UNTIL STRONG MEN
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with names such as Oasis, Elevation, and Harvest Rock, where they are learning about the intricacies of demons, spiritual warfare, and other NAR ideas. Some of the nation's largest megachurches, such as El Rey Jesús in Florida and Free Chapel in Georgia, are led by apostles and prophets in the movement. One such apostle, Paula White-Cain, is President Trump's spiritual adviser.

By 2024, roughly 61 percent of American Christians agreed with the statement that "there are modern-day apostles and prophets," and roughly half agreed that "there are demonic 'principalities' and 'powers' who control physical territory," according to a survey conducted by Paul Djupe, a Denison University political scientist who is among the few scholars attempting to track the ways that NAR ideas are transforming Christianity. By December 2025, roughly 59 percent of evangelical Christians and 22 percent of non-evangelicals agreed that "the church should organize campaigns of spiritual warfare and prayer to displace high-level demons," Djupe found in a follow-up survey.

The same survey also indicated that more people are encountering these concepts on social media than in church, which speaks to how people are following apostles and prophets through online ministries and prayer networks, and to how influencers across the broader Christian right are leveraging these ideas to gain and possibly radicalize followers.

This was obvious at the memorial for Charlie Kirk following his assassination last year. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth described the moment at hand as a "spiritual war." The right-wing influencer Benny Johnson urged members of Trump's Cabinet to "wield the sword for the terror of evil men in our nation." The far-right activist Jack Posobiec told people to "put on the full armor of God and face the evil in high places and the spiritual warfare before us," rhetoric that has only continued to escalate as the midterm elections approach.

Speaking about the anti-ICE protests in Minneapolis earlier this year, the influential NAR strategist Lance Wallnau said that "the demons are manifesting." More recently, the lieutenant governor of Indiana, Micah Beckwith, speaking about Democratic attempts to gerrymander congressional districts, said that the party was being led by "the minions and voices of darkness."

"Wake up, Christians. They are coming for you," he said on a show called *FlashPoint*, a kind of nightly news for the

apostles-and-prophets crowd. "You can't pet a demon. I know people like to say, 'Hey, demons, stay over there. Just don't hurt us, and we won't hurt you.' It doesn't work that way. Evil will find you. Until strong men stand up and do something and fight fire with fire, then we will continue to lose ground, our children will be warped, the curse will be over the land."

As the MAGA coalition has fractured, some of Trump's former supporters have been turning this language against him. Among others, Tucker Carlson has questioned whether Trump could be the anti-Christ, while Carlson's critics have suggested that Carlson himself might be under demonic influence. The conservative writer Rod Dreher, seeking to explain his former friend's growing anti-Semitism, recently wrote that he wondered whether there was "some demonic force in the New England wood where Tucker lives, and if it has been working on his mind."

Dreher, a friend of Vance's who identifies as Eastern Orthodox, has been writing a lot about demons lately and told me that he believes something larger is going on in American culture. "I think the whole materialist paradigm we've lived by is breaking down," he said. "The world is becoming re-enchanting, whether people want it to be or not. It's all very real. People—the overclass, the professional class—just don't see it and don't want to see it." In books and interviews, Dreher has been promoting parable-like stories about demons that seem designed to reach those people, or perhaps shift some spiritual Overton window. One involves a haunted McMansion in Louisiana. Another is about a wealthy New York City woman whose husband placed her under an exorcist's care. Yet another is about a Chicago lawyer terrorized by alien visitations that turned out to be demons.

In a more immediate sense, invoking demons can be a means of dehumanizing and delegitimizing political enemies, which has often been a precursor to actual warfare and political violence. "It's a very useful way to get around the Christian imperative to love your enemy," Matthew Taylor, a visiting scholar at the Center on Faith and Justice at Georgetown University, told me. "For the most part, that is the ironclad command. So how do you get Christians to hate their enemies? Or to hate them even if they love them? Demons are easy to hate. They are irredeemable objects of hatred."

W

HIGH MISOSKY UNDERSTOOD as she told the sheriff's office that, yes, she would like to sign up for active-shooter training.

And so, three years into a campaign of spiritual warfare against demonic forces in Maryville, she and her staff learned how long it would take for police to arrive should she call 911, and what to do in those minutes. They learned how to duck and cover, and run for the exits. The trainer suggested that Misosky arm each door with something to spray in the eyes of a possible shooter. She bought some cans of wasp spray and placed them strategically near the two entrances, behind several bookcases, by the door to the downstairs space, and under the bar.

Upstairs, she kept the baseball bat and a gun under her desk, which she adjusted so that she could face the front door and scan

each person who came in. Sitting there, she sometimes found herself thinking, “I know they would shoot me first.”

Across the street, the Brewers were feeling more and more triumphant. In 2023, Tennessee’s state legislature passed the nation’s first law banning drag performances in public spaces or where minors could view them. Arizona, Kentucky, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Idaho, among other states, then passed laws similar to Tennessee’s, which is being challenged in court, but which still felt to them like a victory for the Kingdom of God.

In accordance with the prophecy that Andrea had received from Colorado, the Well entered the final phase of spiritual warfare against Lilith in the spring of 2024, which involved 40 days of continuous prayer asking for God to liberate Maryville. The Brewers said that people showed up every day and sometimes stayed into the night. “We just left the doors open, and people came,” Mike said, describing how he believed those prayers were answered when the state legislature passed a resolution declaring July of that year to be a month of prayer and fasting for the entire state.

That summer, a Republican state representative coordinated prayer rallies for all 95 counties across Tennessee, and Andrea was asked to speak at one in Maryville, along with state and local officials. As the Brewers saw it, the law, the government, and the whole state were coming into alignment to fulfill the mandate that God had given them.

The rally was on the steps of the county courthouse. The day was a bit cloudy, and several hundred people came, including many from the Well, some of whom had American flags in their pockets, and many of whom kneeled, then bowed, pressing their forehead to the warm concrete. When it was Andrea’s turn to speak, she felt full of God’s authority. She commanded that Lilith leave the region in the name of Jesus, at which point, she said, she heard sirens going off. When she looked up into the sky, she said, she saw something like clouds parting, and what she discerned to be a “halo” of colors in the sky.

“Something shifted,” she said. “Something changed. There was a moment where God said, ‘I am breaking through this situation.’ And everybody present—you just felt it.”

AND NOW IT WAS a spring Sunday at the Well, one like so many other Sundays in a church where spiritual warfare never really ends, and several dozen people filed into the sanctuary to hear what God might want them to do next.

A member of the congregation gave a message about grief, but mostly there was praying as the band played, drums pounding, building and building, amber spotlights glowing. Two women danced around the room with prayer flags, and others lay on the floor. After 45 minutes of this, someone declared, “Right there, I felt like we pushed through the atmosphere,” and someone else said, “Something is breaking right now in this room, and it’s going to break through this city, and break through this region,” and someone else said, “In the name of Jesus, every demon out!”

During the two weeks I spent at the Well, prayer teams performed deliverances almost every day. Some of them involved newcomers, but many were a kind of spiritual maintenance for

long-standing congregants who kept returning for more—more purification, more power, more of this version of freedom and purpose. People told me that during their deliverances, they had visions of snakes and soldiers, doors and colors.

Sasha, the woman who’d worked for Uber Eats, told me that she had struggled with childhood trauma, homosexual feelings, and drug addiction, and that she was on her fifth or sixth deliverance to rid herself of those and other things that she did not consider God. The sessions could be emotionally exhausting, and she said that her deliverance leader had explained that she should space them out for her own safety: “She told me, ‘Honey, you’ve been through so much, your frame could not contain it.’” By that point, Sasha had been liberated from Python, Osiris, Apollo, Lilith, and other demons, and she suspected that more were still in there.

At the same time, she and others said that their deliverances were not only about their own purification. The experience had also changed how they saw the world and their role in it. “It’s like being a warrior—there’s no rest,” Sasha said. “Things are changing in the spirit realm, and people are not ready for what’s to come.”

She and others told me about all the ways they now saw Satan working in the world. It was Jeffrey Epstein, and child trafficking, and underground tunnels. It was Iran, and Muslims whose goal is “to outpopulate us all and take over,” in Sasha’s words. It was Pride Month, and transgenderism. It was churches that were stifling the Holy Spirit. It was not just separation of Church and state that was the problem in this country, but a far more profound separation of humanity from what they understood to be the one true God.

“If we keep everything separate, no one will ever see the big picture,” Sasha said, and she explained how she starts her days.

“I wake up in the morning, and I anoint myself,” she began. She said that she asks God to open her senses to the supernatural, because at times she can smell demons. She puts her hand on her head and asks God to “silence the voice of the accuser in Jesus’s name” and to “silence the voice of my own thoughts in Jesus’s name.” She asks to “have the helmet of salvation and the very mind of Christ” and to “bring every thought into submission.” And then she heads into the world, a spiritual warrior.

Across the street, Lisa Misosky started her day with the wasp spray still by the doors, and the baseball bat and gun still under her desk, and a worn copy of *Pigs in the Parlor* on a shelf.

The Brewers, meanwhile, had decided that their work in Maryville was done. “A beachhead has been established,” Mike said. The Well would continue. But he and Andrea were moving on to the next front, relocating to a town north of Palm Beach, Florida, where Mike was starting a ministry to train businesspeople and other leaders in “Kingdom warfare.” Andrea was developing the narrative of hell in their new neighborhood, where many streets were named for Greek gods.

“The Well has been in war for almost 10 years to deliver this territory,” Andrea said just before they left Maryville. “Now it’s a calmer season. But there will be another wave.” *A*

Stephanie McCrummen is a staff writer at The Atlantic.



THE CICERONE

Fulvio De Bonis can't get you lunch with the pope. Anything else in Rome, he can probably make happen.

BY CULLEN MURPHY

Photographs by Benedetta Ristori



A famous entertainer would like to have the Colosseum to herself for a small evening event—anything you can do? A visitor on a layover hopes to see a privately owned Caravaggio behind the walls of a Roman palazzo—what about tonight? A traveler wants to make railway excursions from Rome in a train car with no other passengers—can that be arranged?

Fulvio De Bonis finds a way to say yes to challenges such as these, which fall somewhere between logistical quandary and diplomatic *démarche*. His boutique travel company, Imago Artis—which he co-founded and runs with his wife, Alessia Tortora, and their longtime friend Chiara Di Muoio—can provide access to almost anything in Rome, and it specializes in devising unusual itineraries for people of means. Fulvio's cellphone connects with curators and clerics, bellhops and *grande*s—the phone is his wand, enabling a seemingly frictionless glide through a labyrinthine city. I met Fulvio several years ago through a friend at the Vatican Museums, and since then I've accompanied him around the city more than once, curious about the work he does. During my visits to Rome, we've become friends.

On a bright morning several months ago, he asked to meet outside the Basilica of Saints Cosmas and Damian, near the Forum. There was something he wanted to show me. I had a few minutes to wait, and took in one of the basilica's high exterior walls, whose brickwork goes back to ancient times and had once formed the interior wall of a now-vanished structure. In the early third century C.E., an engraved map of Rome had been secured to this wall—you can still see indentations where iron clamps held marble slabs. The slabs were broken apart for building material during the Middle Ages; fragments have been resurfacing ever since, like puzzle pieces from a couch. A thousand or so have been found, representing perhaps 10 percent of the original—they're laid out on the floor of a small museum less than a mile away. I've always wondered if a fragment will ever turn up with a red arrow and the words *Hic es*, "You are here."

No one is quite sure exactly what the purpose of the Marble Plan was, though visitors to the city in antiquity—and there

were many—would have needed some sort of guidance. The big complaint about Rome today is that it is crowded with tourists, but it has always been crowded with tourists. Rome without tourists would be like Venice without water or Manhattan without noise. In imperial times, visitors could avail themselves of guidebooks explaining where to find, for instance, the original hut of Romulus and Remus, the legendary founders of Rome. Other cities in the Roman empire maintained offices in the Forum to help any of their citizens visiting the capital. A monograph published a few years ago shows pictures of the souvenirs you could buy in Rome and take home to Ephesus or Alexandria: little bronze figures of gladiators, say, or glassware with local scenes depicted in relief—not much different from what you can buy now. As its earthly power dwindled and the city's population declined from 1 million to perhaps 20,000, Rome became a destination for religious pilgrims. They far outnumbered local inhabitants, arriving by the hundreds of thousands in the jubilee year 1300.

I saw Fulvio coming my way, waving from a distance as he talked on the phone. He is tall, curving like a floor lamp to offer an embrace. Early on, the color of his hair gave Fulvio the nickname Rosso. Now he is 47, and the red is streaked with *grigio*. He is energetic and talkative; the espresso he drinks all day long may even slow him down a bit. I'd been guessing there was something about the Marble Plan that Fulvio wanted to explain, but that wasn't so. He led the way down the street and made a quick call as we walked.

Moments later, a caretaker opened an unmarked door in an unremarkable building and led us down a staircase. At the bottom, the floor became marble. A warren of rooms and passages led eventually to the nave of a church, which had taken over the interior of a Roman temple. For five centuries, it has served as the sacral headquarters—the private guild church—of Rome's confraternity of apothecaries. A piece of paper signed by Raphael was on display behind protective glass: a receipt for a prescription. The rear of the nave was dominated by a pair of battered green wooden doors, 15 feet high.

Fulvio can be a showman. He positioned a chair in front of the doors and asked me to sit. His attitude was expectant and playful, like Tom Hanks starting out on the piano keys in *Big*. When I was settled to his satisfaction, he and the caretaker pulled the doors apart.

AN AMERICAN FRIEND of mine who lived in Rome for 70 years always maintained that he was "just passing through," which is what everyone in Rome is doing, whether they acknowledge it or not. The city makes everything else seem mutable and transient by comparison. But one common thread down the ages has been the profession of *cicerone*, the learned guide who takes visitors by the hand. The satirist Lucian wrote about them in antiquity. Grand Tour travelers described them in letters and journals. During their Italian idyll in *Brideshead Revisited*, Charles and Sebastian rely on a diminutive gentleman "to whom all doors were open." Today there are more *ciceroni* in Rome than ever. The most accomplished of them embody



Opening spread: *The Oratorio del Gonfalone* in Rome.

Left: Fulvio De Bonis in the Oratorio.

some combination of Virgil, Vasari, and Tenzing Norgay, with hints of Lupin and Martha Stewart.

Imago Artis occupies the pinnacle of the “luxury-travel space” in Rome, serving the kinds of clients you’d expect—Angelina Jolie, Martin Scorsese, Mike Tyson, Katy Perry, Aaron Judge, Jimmy Fallon, Leonardo DiCaprio, Viola Davis—as well as people who are not household names. The company is discreet, and does not talk publicly about prices. Some of the individual experiences it offers may cost only a few hundred euros; some, such as having a major museum to yourself, run as high as 15,000. Many celebrities don’t

brought him toilet paper. The night-manager job sharpened his language skills and also his understanding of how people behave when they think no one is looking.

About this experience Fulvio ventured few specifics, even when I tried a subtle word-association game. (“Russians?”) He said simply, “At a hotel, the world changes after 10 p.m.” As Fulvio watched from the front desk, every night brought fresh awareness of the role played by a hotel’s concierge: the basic Jeeves function, to be sure, but also minister of culture, security adviser, intelligence czar, linguist, therapist, solicitor,

mind being identified as clients. Imago says nothing more, though Fulvio did comment once on what a lover of books Mike Tyson seemed to be. The boxer had read Nietzsche, Dostoyevsky, and Kierkegaard. He had read the letters of Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West. Fulvio and Tyson spent much of their time together talking about a biography of Alexander the Great.

Imago’s founders met 25 years ago as art-history students at La Sapienza, Rome’s oldest university. They soon faced an inevitable question: What do you do with a degree in art history? Chiara took on a variety of roles at Castel Sant’Angelo, the imperial tomb turned papal fortress, now a museum, on the banks of the Tiber. Fulvio and Alessia, not yet married, found work at a hotel in London—she as a server in the restaurant and bar, he as the night manager. Fulvio’s English needed improvement: When he first started, a guest called down for a new TV remote and Fulvio



medic, dietitian, enabler, enforcer. Hotel concierges, he realized, need all the help they can get.

Back in Rome, Fulvio and his friends went into business, focusing on the minister-of-culture opportunity. All three of them could talk fluently about art and had contacts in the worlds of art and archaeology. They went to concierges at the best hotels with an offer: Here are a few special tours we can provide; we'll work one-on-one with your guests; call anytime and we can take some of the burden off your shoulders. The business was incubated at the St. Regis in 2006, and as word spread, Imago designed specialty programs exclusive to other hotels as well.

The secret to the company's success lies in its network of "partners"—museums and churches and palazzi, but also artists and photographers and scholars. Each has something special to offer if they can be persuaded to provide it. The arrangements are sometimes financial—many cultural institutions in Rome need support—but just as often they are based on long-standing relationships. The business grew. Every year, Imago trained more guides speaking more languages; most of the guides had academic specialties. Imago also began taking more and more

bespoke requests, offering a rapid-response service: *You want what? Okay, we'll see what we can do.* An hour at Villa Borghese after it closes tonight. Access to the Jewish catacombs tomorrow morning. White truffles from Piedmont delivered to Rome by dinnertime.

The company employs a professional staff of 50—they underlie the *seemingly* in Fulvio's frictionless glide. To this, add an array of regular vendors: owners of farms and wineries and aircraft and boats. Suplicants turn up at Imago seeking a place on the contact list. At the office one day I met a delegation from an estate in the Alban Hills bearing bushels of edible flowers (with wine pairings).

Central to all operations in Rome is a fleet of 20 tinted-glass sedans and SUVs. Before any expedition, the drivers conduct a dry run, even if it's just across town. "All roads lead to Rome," a renowned urban planner observed years ago, "but once you get there they turn into spaghetti." Every car is a command module, a magic carpet, a bolt-hole. The drivers are skilled. They can implement decoy procedures to evade paparazzi. They can get out of tight spots. I rode with one driver on a narrow track that



Left: *Conservators at the Merlini-Storti studio work on 17th-century paintings.*

Right: *Caravaggio's Madonna dei pellegrini in the Church of Sant'Agostino.*

wriggled up the Palatine Hill between ancient stone walls. For a quarter mile, the collision-avoidance screen on the dashboard warned of a screeching contact that never occurred.

We'd been heading for the Church of San Bonaventura, on a secluded spur overlooking the Colosseum, home to half a dozen young Franciscan friars—soccer gear was strewn about the hallways—and a few older ones, including the Brazilian artist Sidival Fila. Roadways around the Forum are controlled by soldiers and police, so getting up the hill meant negotiating a checkpoint. I'd witnessed this kind of moment with Fulvio before: a window rolled down, a gesture, a quiet word, and on we go. The Jedi mind trick is apparently real.

As a teenager, Fulvio lived in a small town in Lazio, the region around Rome. He spent countless hours in the town square, watching people go by: how they walked, how they smiled, how they moved their eyes. It was good preparation for a job that requires emotional intelligence. As needed, clients have also provided on-the-job training. Fulvio curtailed, somewhat, his propensity for Vesuvian explication after one of his guests—he described her only as a minor European royal—gave him a useful tip: “Shut the fuck up.”

Sensitivity is essential—to cultural preferences, to security needs, to whims. Imago offers services in 12 languages, including Russian and Mandarin. When I went with Alessia to the Hotel Eden for a room check, we were shown to the suite that became Emily Cooper's when *Emily in Paris* shifted to Rome. Alessia hadn't come to confirm the thread count. Among other things, she wanted to know about the layout: How close to this suite is the one for a client's staff or bodyguards?

Imago has expanded to other cities. One day, Fulvio arranged a trip for me to the docklands of Naples, where soldiers with automatic weapons guarded a sprawling precinct of shipping containers and gantry cranes—it might have been a movie set for a Camorra shoot-out. There, in a waterfront warehouse, the sculptor Jago was carving his latest work, a female analogue of Michelangelo's *David*, equivalent in size—17 feet tall—and destined for display in the city's Jago Museum.

Head and breasts had already emerged from the block of Carrara marble. Slanting piles of chips rose against the base, like rubble below a cliff. A finished plaster model, same dimensions, stood alongside, striking a familiar pose: head turned, weight on



Above: *An original 1493 edition of the Nuremberg Chronicle.*

Opposite page: *The Imago Artis* founders Chiara Di Muoio, Fulvio De Bonis, and Alessia Tortora.

one leg, stone in hand. Jago put down his hammer and chisel and descended from a high metal platform to talk for a while. He has been laboring on the statue for three years, he said, and expects to be finished in 2027. He refers to it simply as “David”—no other name. He had a single regret about the work he creates as a sculptor: “I am the only one who never gets to see it for the first time.”

WHEN HE TOLD ME about the “Shut the fuck up” episode, Fulvio had just been holding forth for 15 minutes in the Oratorio del Gonfalone, a 16th-century building off Via Giulia whose walls and ceiling are covered with Mannerist frescoes by Federico Zuccari and other painters. At heart, the *Imago* partners remain graduate students, and even as entrepreneurs their inclinations skew toward art and architecture. Fulvio has a weakness for Mannerism, the style that falls between the late Renaissance of Raphael and the early Baroque of Caravaggio. He did his university thesis on the painter Pietro Paolo Bonzi. In a state of expository rapture, Fulvio pointed to details I never would have noticed, such as the trompe l’oeil gathering of balcony spectators

in Zuccari’s *Flagellation of Christ*. He described the work of the Mannerist painters in a way that stuck: as a form of aesthetic triumphalism in the papacy’s battle against the Reformation.

Fulvio asked at one point if there was something in particular I’d like to see or do. Having the Colosseum to myself for a Zoom call seemed beyond the bounds of decency, but I did bring up my regret at having missed last year’s Caravaggio show at the Palazzo Barberini, one of the largest in recent decades.

I don’t know if there’s an actual word for a Caravaggio deficiency—*Caravaggiocarenza*, maybe—but Fulvio had the antidote. A quick call from the car brought access to Palazzo Berardi and the Merlini-Storti Art Conservation Studio, which opens onto its central courtyard. Valeria Merlini and Daniela Storti, the studio’s founders, are old hands at Caravaggio—in these rooms, they’d restored one of the paintings in the Barberini show. Some years earlier, they had spent months in the Church of Sant’Agostino, not far from Piazza Navona, bringing Caravaggio’s *Madonna dei pellegrini*—“Madonna of the Pilgrims”—back to life.

The studio, in a converted stable, is part operating room, part alchemist’s lair: jars of pigment, ultraviolet scanners, bowls of egg tempera, scalpels on a tray. Women in white lab coats—all but one of the conservators are women—sat before easels under high ceilings. I watched as Daniela rolled wisps of cotton onto a stick, dipped the swab into a gentle solvent, adjusted her loupe glasses, and twirled the soft tip in a tiny pirouette to remove a patch of darkening varnish from a painting.

Valeria and Daniela joined us in the car, and Fulvio made another call. Officially, Sant'Agostino was closed that day, but a side door cracked open. Valeria found a light switch in a corner of the dark, echoing church and illuminated *Madonna dei pellegrini*. A peasant couple have come to venerate Mary and her child—their faces creased, their clothing ragged, their bare feet soiled. The painting had scandalized the powerful: Imagine letting the penniless and bedraggled come so close to Jesus! Ordinary people loved it. Sant'Agostino is still the church where couples who want children go to pray.

The conservators had done the restoration work in public view, perched on a scaffold. They made discoveries. The blue of Mary's gown was found to contain a much higher concentration of linseed oil than any other part of the painting; Caravaggio favored earthy tones, and wanted to reduce the brightness of the standard color. Two different kinds of white pigment—one applied earlier, one later—told another story. In the painting, the figures are lit from the left by an unknown source. Valeria pointed in that direction, where a door, now permanently closed, had once been a main entryway. When Caravaggio saw where the painting had been installed, she said, he went back to it and repainted the lower left to create an illusion of light coming from the actual door.

On another day, at another church—Sant'Eligio dei Ferrari, tucked into the lowlands between the Capitoline and Palatine Hills—Fulvio introduced me to Monsignor Sandro Corradini, an art historian and a document hunter with a specialty in Caravaggio. Don Sandro, who lives at Sant'Eligio, had been Fulvio's thesis adviser. For many years, he was a member of the Congregation for

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the Causes of Saints, the entity that oversees the Vatican's canonization process, serving as one of the clergymen designated to ask the hard questions. The role was originally known as *advocatus diaboli*, the origin of the term *devil's advocate*, and now goes by the name *promotor fidei*. The promoters of faith are serious about their work. When Mother Teresa was being considered for sainthood, the process included a clerical interview with her vociferous critic Christopher Hitchens.

For years, Don Sandro has been sifting through archives for obscure records, especially as they relate to the famous killing by Caravaggio of the pimp Ranuccio Tomassoni, in 1606. We spent part of an afternoon on the rooftop of the church, retreating there because an opera company was using the superb acoustics of the interior to make a recording of Verdi's *Aida*. Occasionally we'd hear a *tap, tap, tap* (baton hitting music stand?), and the music would stop. Then the words *ancora, ancora* ("again, again"), and the music would resume.

Caravaggio was a hothead, and he and Tomassoni had long been on bad terms. Caravaggio challenged Tomassoni to a duel and killed him with his sword on a tennis court near Piazza Navona. Dueling was illegal, and the death was considered murder. The painter fled, eventually to Malta, and never returned to Rome. Don Sandro laid out this traditional account, then weighed in: Much of what is commonly believed about "the tennis-court incident"—the title of a monograph he wrote—is wrong.

He acknowledged Caravaggio's "somewhat lively nature." (The artist once threw an order of artichokes at a waiter because he'd put the ones fried in butter and the ones fried in olive oil on the same platter.) And there's no doubt that he killed Tomassoni. But Don Sandro maintained that it was Tomassoni who



BENEDETTA RISTORI FOR THE ATLANTIC

had challenged Caravaggio; that Tomassoni had struck the first blow; and that Caravaggio's riposte had not been meant to kill. Don Sandro cited document after document as he pieced events together and explained the grim punctilio of honor in 17th-century Rome. It was hard to keep up. Below us, in the church, Aida was being buried alive with her lover. On the roof, I was ready to plead Caravaggio down to manslaughter. Don Sandro still knew how to play devil's advocate.

Across the river, in Trastevere, the art historian and Caravaggio expert Alessandro Zuccari responded to a call and invited us to his home. Fulvio, Alessia, and Chiara had all known Zuccari since their university days. One of the windows in his corner study looks out over the roof of a church. The other looks out on a splashing fountain. Zuccari is a quiet, courtly man who brought in coffee on a tray. No, he said, perhaps wistfully, he is not related to the painter Federico, though he has written about him. But Caravaggio has taken up most of his time. He talked about assisting with the valuation a few years ago of Rome's Villa Aurora, an imposing estate near the American embassy. Zuccari was called in because the villa can't be separated from Caravaggio's only known ceiling mural—*Jupiter, Neptune and Pluto*—in a little room upstairs. The property was ultimately valued at \$535 million.

The incunabula and other volumes on Zuccari's shelves reflect four generations of collecting by his family. He placed in my hands an original 1493 edition of the *Nuremberg Chronicle*—the first printed history of the world, with hand-colored illustrations—and sat alongside me, flipping the pages. I wish Mike Tyson could have been there.

I asked Zuccari about the murky circumstances of Caravaggio's death, in 1610. He rehearsed the various theories—syphilis, lead poisoning, sepsis, murder—and shrugged off the uncertainty. There are so many unknowns about Caravaggio, Zuccari said, and so many mythic versions, but at his core the painter was a restless and unsatisfied human being who was able to depict ordinary people in all their pathos and imperfection. "Nobody can see themselves in a Raphael," he said. "Everybody can see themselves in a Caravaggio."

Caravaggio was from Milan, and the fact that he could eventually succeed in Rome tells you something about the city, Zuccari went on—about its openness to outsiders and to new styles. Montaigne, visiting in 1581, called Rome "a patchwork of strangers." The Church, which kept Rome alive through many dark centuries, was not defined by ethnicity or geography. It made a claim in its creed to being universal. Rome has been seen by people from elsewhere as a city that belongs to them as much as anyone. You see evidence of that sensibility even now. More than 30 million people came to Rome for last year's jubilee—proportionately, an influx comparable to the one in 1300. Outside Zuccari's window, I could see the ancient imperial slogan *Caput mundi*—"Head of the world"—printed on the plastic wrap around a construction site.

IMAGO ARTIS cannot arrange access to the pope, but it can get pretty close. One morning during Lent, a uniformed Vatican guard turned a key in a padlock and unwound a chain the size of an anaconda from a grillwork gateway. Yes, Fulvio had made a call; more than one, in fact.

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The gateway gave access to the Vatican Gardens, which take up about half of the city-state's territory. The gardens are sometimes open for guided tours but had been closed because of Holy Week and were now empty. Fulvio and I wandered the undulating terrain, from the Cartesian primness of the French Garden to the meticulously planned disorder of the English one, pausing among the olive trees at the crest of a hill before heading back down. Our ultimate destination was the Casina of Pius IV, a Mannerist gem on a shady slope among cypress trees. It is built around an oval courtyard that may be the most serene few square meters in Rome. The casina used to be the pope's summerhouse; now it's the headquarters of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, whose prefect let us in.

In their different ways, the gardens and the casina illustrate the universality that Zuccari was talking about. At the casina, under elaborate ceilings by Barocci, scholars assemble from around the world to discuss bioethics or cosmology or AI. The plantings outside have a global provenance too: eucalyptus from Australia, jasmine from China, pomegranate from Azerbaijan, magnolias from North America, cedars from Lebanon—Montaigne's patchwork of strangers again.

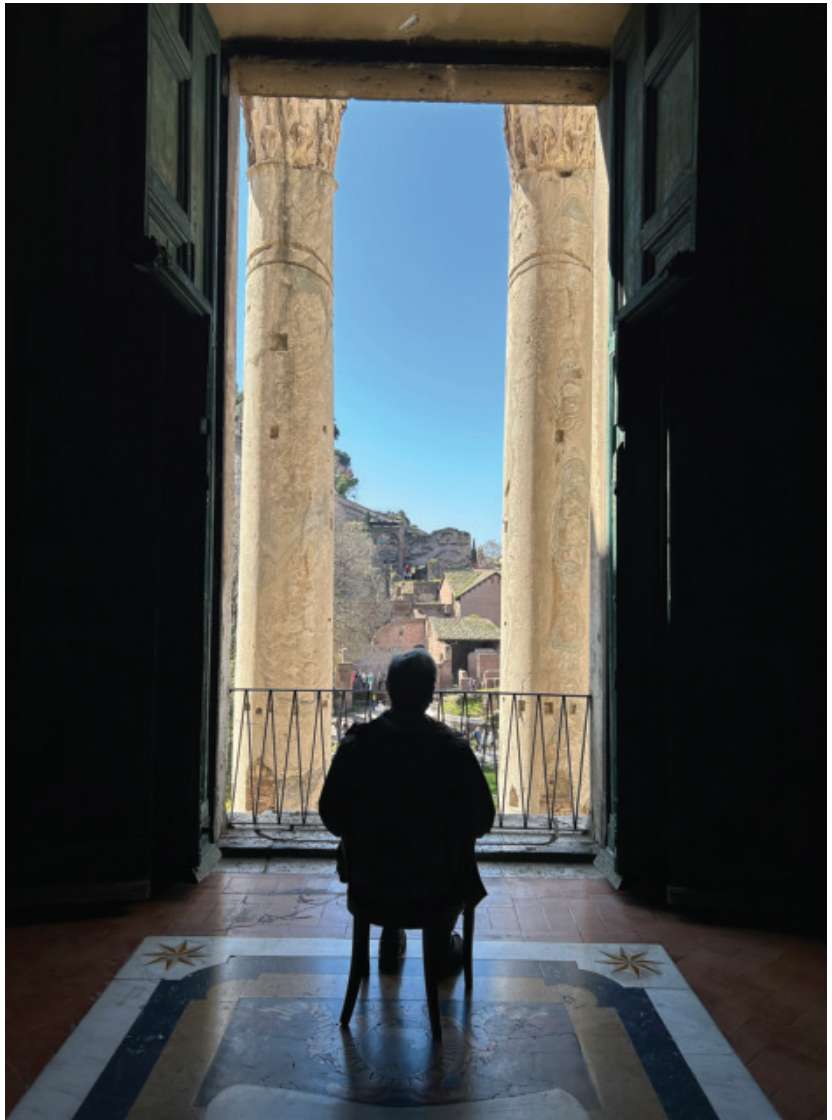
I remember once hearing Fulvio talk about tourism as a "community of care." He wasn't trying to be grand, just making the point that cities survive and thrive when people from other places, whatever their motives or wealth, take an interest in them. Fulvio displays no defensiveness about the kind of travel he promotes. Privilege is a reality, and it's one that cities like Rome, with more heritage than money, need to leverage. Rome has been sustained both by masses of ordinary visitors, such as Caravaggio's *pellegrini*, and by those who built the city's palaces and churches (and commissioned Caravaggio in the first place). Imago's clients pay a premium to look, but people like them, centuries ago, put in place much of what there is to look at. At one point in the 17th century, when the city was finally coming back to life, a third of Rome's workforce was engaged in construction—erecting new buildings with freshly cut stone; cannibalizing stone from old buildings to rearrange into something else; or slipping Baroque buildings inside ancient imperial ones.

The place Fulvio had brought me on that bright morning several months ago—the church of the apothecaries, where I sat in a

chair facing those battered green doors—was an example of the latter. It occupied the shell of the Temple of Antoninus and Faustina. When Fulvio and the caretaker pulled the doors apart, the floor seemed to fall away. From a vantage point three stories high, I peered through a portico of ancient white columns at the sunlit Forum. To the east, I could see the Colosseum; to the west, the Capitoline; to the south, in front of me, the gardens atop the Palatine. In the valley below, wild grasses and flowers softened the marble and brick of the ruins. The panorama, with its gauzy light, seemed to have been designed and directed by Peter Jackson. Visitors walked the polished paving stones of the Via Sacra, murmuring in a dozen languages.

Some of them looked up at me, and like a Roman emperor, I raised an arm to acknowledge the love of my people. But of course I was being silly. The real emperor was the tall man in shadow by the doors. *A*

Cullen Murphy is an editor at large at The Atlantic.



The author surveys Rome from a church inside the shell of an ancient Roman temple.

Culture & Critics

OMNIVORE

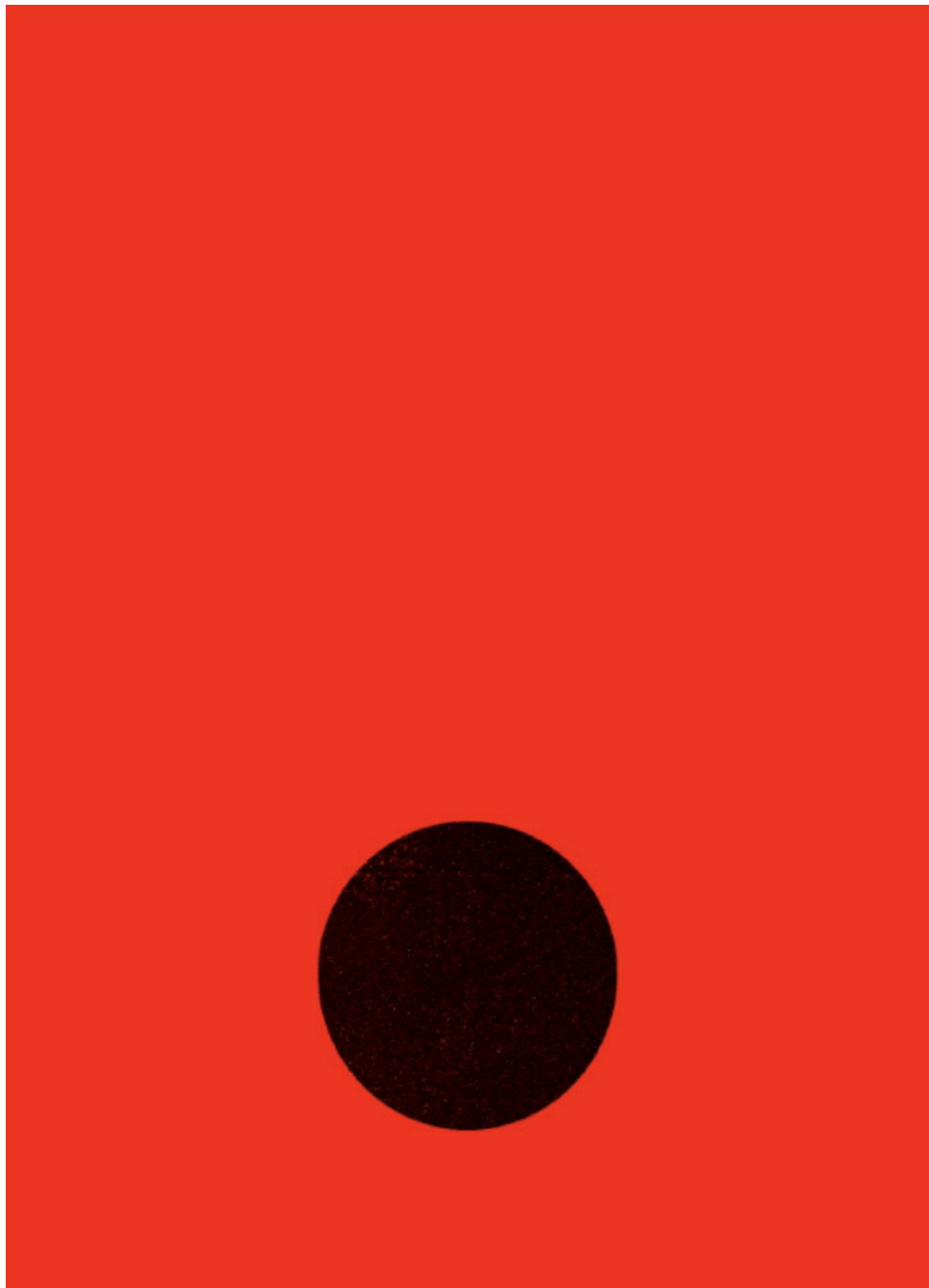
Full Stop

*What is punctuation
even for?*

By Judith Shulevitz

I was a novice editor, he was an experienced writer, and the first article he turned in revealed a virtuosic command of comma placement. He opened with long, slow clauses; picked up speed with shorter ones; withheld all commas for a gloriously terse thesis statement; and then, *crash!* A mass-casualty pileup of appositive phrases. Grammar-ians, I married him.

Now our son is the family authority on punctuation. His expertise lies in using it in texts and on social media, where commas and periods go to die. Semicolons too, decades after Kurt Vonnegut tried to banish them. “First rule: Do not use semicolons,” he pronounced in 2005. “All they do is show you’ve been to college.” Exclamation points and emoji



reign supreme. (Does an emoji count as punctuation or rate as a paralinguistic element—that is, a relative of a wink or an eye roll? My son shrugs.) Online punctuation is for torquing emotion, he told me, not for making yourself clear: “The ultimate goal is not efficiency but maximum attention.”

Little marks can make big things happen, Florence Hazrat reminds us in her new book, *On the Mark: From Periods to Interrobangs, How Punctuation Remade the World*. Take the one-sentence Second Amendment, whose commas have been responsible for a great deal of trouble: “A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.” Until the 21st century, all parts of the amendment were given equal weight regardless of commas, so that the gun rights granted in its second half were limited to the militias referred to in the first half. In 2008, however, Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia affirmed an unusual interpretation that used a comma to downplay the clause about militias, leaving “the people” with an individual right to bear arms.

But the eminent originalist—of all people!—failed to acknowledge an important historical fact. The version of the amendment on which Scalia based his reading, found in the National Archives, is only one among many. “Each state ratified a different version of this amendment,” Hazrat writes, “some with two, some with three, and some with four commas.” Punctuation was not standardized in the Founders’ time, so the best course of action, she says, is not to read too much into those commas.

The rules of punctuation have been codified since then, but they have never stopped evolving. Indeed, thanks to the advent of technologies that have us typing more and more, the rules have been hyper-evolving. Marks do more than fit parts of a sentence together; they re-create the pace, emphasis, and tone of voice that we rely on to make our meaning plain when we talk in person or by phone. Now that we can react to a friend’s needy text or an enemy’s infuriating post in real time and with minimal reflection, we need reliable substitutes for extraverbal cues more than ever. But if online punctuation is about maximum attention rather than mutual comprehension, and is mutating so rapidly, you have to wonder about the future of communication.

IN THE BEGINNING was the written word, and the word flowed into other words. Roughly 5,000 years ago, WRITINGLOOKEDLIKETHIS. Then, slowly, graphic signposts emerged to make reading easier. Hazrat takes us through this history: Babylonians arranged words into boxes, creating proto-paragraphs. Old Assyrian and Old Persian put triangles between words. The demands of empire spurred invention. In the second century

The quest to punctuate irony goes back to at least the late 16th century, when a printer proposed using a backward-facing question mark.

B.C.E., the head librarian of the world’s most ambitious collection of writings, the Library of Alexandria, hired linguists and scholars from far-flung lands, and, to help them read Greek, came up with a system of accents to guide pronunciation and dots to indicate pauses.

Those dots were forgotten after the decline of Rome, but they reappeared in different guises with the spread of monotheistic religions: The word of God demands proper punctuation. The printing press brought an explosion of published material, and soon the modern book was born, set in different typefaces and organized with many of the marks still used today. Renaissance humanists discovered the literary potential of punctuation, inventing nuanced marks such as the exclamation point, the semicolon, dashes, and parentheses (“little moons,” the Dutch scholar Erasmus fondly called them). These new devices allowed sentences to ramble along twisty paths of thought, opening up new realms of the self.

Ever since, poets and novelists have been developing punctuation into a high art, as Lee Clark Mitchell shows in *Mark My Words: Profiles of Punctuation in Modern Literature* (2020). Emily Dickinson wielded dashes like a fencer in her poems, slicing phrases apart, creating islands of heightened meaning. The dashes were edited out after her death and not restored until 1955; Hazrat reports that Dickinson used dashes of different sizes and shapes—curving upward and downward and back on themselves—that modern typography still hasn’t captured. Humbert Humbert, the narrator of Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*, directs 450 parenthetical asides to the reader, giving us all-too-intimate access to the thoughts of a floridly narcissistic pedophile. Pulling readers into a different dark world, the 2026 Pulitzer Prize winner for fiction, Daniel Kraus’s *Angel Down*, never uses a single period. Set in the trenches of World War I, the novel careens from scene to scene, “gasping with too many commas,” Kraus has written, “a sentence doomed to loop back on itself to form a terrible black wheel that, sooner or later, will drag each and every person to their grave.”

TODAY’S ONLINE punctuation styles cycle in and out of fashion with manic speed. To digital natives, periods at the end of text messages signify passive-aggressiveness. They’re “the texting equivalent of your mother calling your full name,” the Gen Z language expert Adam Aleksic, who goes by Etymology Nerd, explained in a 2024 TikTok. Except it’s not that simple: My son and his friends do sometimes end texts with periods—to convey faux disapproval. “Correct punctuation itself is a signal of irony,” he told me.

That figures. Every generation has to come up with its own way of subverting norms. The quest to punctuate irony goes back to at least the late 16th

ON THE
MARK: FROM
PERIODS TO
INTERROBANGS,
HOW
PUNCTUATION
REMADE THE
WORLD

Florence Hazrat

BASIC BOOKS

century, when a printer proposed a backward-facing question mark. A scientist later suggested using the upside-down exclamation point. Nothing stuck. A 20th-century French novelist suggested the Greek letter *psi*—Ψ. It looked fittingly like an arrow in the air. (“Irony stings,” Hazrat comments.) Only the hashtag, which rose to prominence on Twitter, has had some staying power as an irony marker—a punch line, a self-deprecating remark.

HAZRAT WORRIES that in our disembodied age, communication demands punctuation that can do more emotional labor than our current marks can handle. She has a point: Think of all the micro-adjustments we have to make as we go from texting family and friends to slacking colleagues to emailing to posting. But I think the problem with online punctuation is that it does too much, not too little. At any rate, my stabs at punctuating like someone in the know generally make me look silly.

I’m not alone. A genre has materialized in which children critique parents’ cringey misuse of marks. Madeline Cash, in *Granta*, puzzles over her mother’s habit of ending innocuous statements with an ominous ellipsis. “OK ...” her mother writes when Cash says she’s coming home to visit. Cash wonders: “Is she going to say more? Is my coming home for Christmas an imposition?” My son sent me a viral 2025 TikTok in which a perky young man gives his parents a slide-deck presentation on when to use the double-exclamation-point iMessage reaction, called the emphasis. He lays out three rules; his mother’s emphases follow none of them.

Hey! My emphases don’t either. Why hadn’t my son ever told me that? “Because I’m resigned to old people using it wrong,” he texted, plus he’s not in the business of making me look cool. Anyway, the standard emoji and text reactions are becoming passé. His crowd uses an inexhaustible idiolect of personalized symbols—memes, memoji (customizable avatars), stickers (emoji made from random images and photographs), GIFs.

My son sent me an example: a sticker of Dora the Explorer with a glowing third eye. She’s lying on a pink pillow, wearing a CPAP mask. The meaning was nonobvious, to say the least. He explained: Dora is achieving nirvana while plugged into a machine that delivers a steady flow of air, a metaphor for being connected to the internet. Oh. How did he know that? “How could you not?” he wrote. Dora’s bliss was several levels of meta beyond my age group, but I guess that’s as it should be. For now, I’ll work on not putting periods at the end of my texts. *A*

From Idaho B Roll By Brian Blanchfield

In Garfield, Washington, the second of three speed-trap towns cutting over into Idaho on the way home from Spokane, there is a gray-going-white basketball furred from use and exposure, deflated only enough to discourage prolonged play, in the grass by the public court, beside the little park’s restroom, the simplest soonest option en route. It pleases me again to spot it and, before returning to the car, to shoot two or three baskets. It must, with everything else, be buried under snow half of each winter. You lose the news, you shake the hour of seated transit off and stand quiet with whatever you’ve seen: a tractor waiting to pull the giant buck from the double yellow line, the pheasant vanishing in the bush, the long bright flowering wheat or waves of grain in the anthem area wind inspires. Bounce it two or three times and find, at the four finger pads of your right hand, a meridian bowed across the ball, the grace, remembered, by feel, of backspin. Unseen mark of experience, in a groove, at the line, clock stopped, to get it to roll back to you.

Brian Blanchfield is the author of three books of poetry and prose, including, most recently, Proxies: Essays Near Knowing.

Judith Shulevitz is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

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Tennis's New Golden Age

The next generation of stars has arrived ahead of schedule.

By Josh Levin

The golden age of tennis didn't end with a whimper. After Roger Federer walked off the court for the final time, at the 2022 Laver Cup, he broke into full-on sobs. Federer's doubles partner at that event in London, his longtime rival Rafael Nadal, seemed to understand that he was staring down his own tennis mortality as well. After the match, the two players, their faces streaked with tears, touched hands as they sat side by side. It felt at once like a private moment between intimates and a communal wake for a sport they'd helped define for decades.

Another of the game's 21st-century icons also got weepy when she played at that year's U.S. Open. In an essay for *Vogue*, Serena Williams confessed that she felt "no happiness" as she said farewell. Williams refused to use the word *retirement*, preferring to say that she was "evolving away from tennis."

As these champions left the scene, their sport clearly needed to evolve too. Tennis was entering a rebuilding phase during which the legends of the past would make way for ... someone, hopefully, at some point. The roster at that Laver Cup, an all-star competition on the men's circuit, was littered with hyped young players, such as Stefanos Tsitsipas, Félix Auger-Aliassime, and Taylor Fritz, who had yet to win one of tennis's four major tournaments (the Australian Open, the French Open, Wimbledon, and the U.S. Open). At the 2022 U.S. Open, a pair of women seen as Williams's potential heirs—the tournament's previous two winners, the then-teenage phenom Emma Raducanu and the four-time major champion Naomi Osaka—each lost in the first round.

Tennis fans, it seemed, had no choice but to be patient. This next generation needed time to grow into consistent championship form. But in fact, tennis's new wave was already crashing ashore.

At that same U.S. Open, a couple of European neophytes—19-year-old Carlos Alcaraz and 21-year-old Jannik Sinner—slugged it out for a grueling five hours and 15 minutes before Alcaraz struck the final

blow at 2:50 a.m. Their marathon quarterfinal featured a running behind-the-back forehand (by Alcaraz), a saved match point (Alcaraz again), and shot-making so absurd that it felt extraterrestrial. The following night, 21-year-old Iga Świątek and 24-year-old Aryna Sabalenka faced each other for the first time in a Grand Slam. In a semifinal match replete with punishing ground strokes and astonishing all-court defending, Świątek earned a comeback three-set victory.

Before that tournament, this tennis quartet had claimed two major titles, both won by Świątek. Less than four years later, they're up to 21—seven for Alcaraz, six for Świątek, and four each for Sinner and Sabalenka. Only two other players have won more than a single major during this time: Novak Djokovic—the greatest male player ever, still battling the youngsters at age 39—and Coco Gauff, whose talent and drive have her in position to join tennis's new pantheon.

The rapid emergence of this cohort of stars is the inciting event in *The Cruellest Game: Chasing Greatness in Professional Tennis*, the journalist Matthew Futterman's account of the thrilling and grueling lives of the tennis elite. Reaching the summit of a sport played by 100 million people worldwide is close to impossible. Staying at the top isn't much easier. Even as these exhilarating talents have reenergized the game and risen above their peers, they've been brought low by injuries, doping scandals, and self-doubt. After Gauff lost in January's Australian Open, she was caught on camera obliterating her racket in what she thought was a hidden corridor. She immediately bemoaned the breach of privacy, suggesting that "maybe some conversations can be had" about the burdens of life in the tennis panopticon. Świątek was less politic, asking in a press conference, "Are we tennis players, or are we animals in the zoo, where they're observed even when they poop?"

The tennis ecosystem has unexpectedly thrived in the absence of Federer, Nadal, and Williams, but the gains—for the sport and for its marquee players—are far from secure. Although Futterman adeptly surveys

tennis's stressors, the shape of the crisis that tennis faces, and its stakes, eludes him. Everything about the professional game—the way it's played, structured, and consumed—seems ripe for transformation.

FUTTERMAN, WHO COVERS the pro circuit for *The Athletic*, wants us to understand that tennis is incredibly hard, perhaps especially for those who make it look easy. “There is no instruction manual,” he writes, “to help someone navigate their way through a sport and a culture seemingly designed to mess with their brains.”

Much of that torment is intrinsic to the game. Every sport has moments of tension, but in tennis the anxiety is metronomic. The stress starts early—flinch on a break chance two minutes in and the whole first set might be gone—and it never really stops. On the court, there's no such thing as running out the clock or calling for a sub.

Anger, isolation, and exhaustion are endemic to each tennis era, as much a part of the game as the fuzz on the balls. Just ask the perpetually tortured John McEnroe or his cooler-headed Scandinavian rival, Björn Borg, who packed up his rackets in his mid-20s and became, in Futterman's view, “the canary in the coal mine” for tennis burnout. Another early-'80s sensation, the prodigy Andrea Jaeger, retired at 20 and later became a nun. World No. 1 Ashleigh Barty abruptly quit in 2022, saying simply, “I am spent.” And Andre Agassi, the sport's bard of introspection, said this in his autobiography, *Open*: “I hate tennis, hate it with a dark and secret passion, and always have.”

At the risk of undercutting an all-time great: I love tennis. Plenty of players love it too—at least when they're winning. (No one is more delighted by a beautiful Carlos Alcaraz drop shot than Carlos Alcaraz.) Whether I'm watching matches, listening to press conferences, or scrolling on Instagram, I'm struck that it's never been better to be one of the best tennis players in the world. It's also never been worse.

Financially speaking, this is the sport's golden era. Borg, an 11-time major champion, collected \$3.6 million in career prize money. Alcaraz and Sabalenka won \$5 million each for their victorious runs at the 2025 U.S. Open. For women especially, the allure of professional tennis is easy to quantify. *Forbes*'s 2025 list of the world's highest-paid female athletes features Gauff in the No. 1 spot, with \$33 million in on- and off-court income. She's followed immediately by Sabalenka (\$30 million), Świątek (\$25 million), and six more tennis players in the top 12. (The leading basketball player on the list, Caitlin Clark, is No. 11, sandwiched between American tennis stars Jessica Pegula and Amanda Anisimova.)

Tennis players are essentially their own small business, with ever-expanding retinues—not just agents,

managers, coaches, and trainers, but dietary advisers and sports psychologists to tune up their bodies and minds. Futterman gets his best material from these support staffers. Sabalenka's “high-performance coach,” Jason Stacy, a practitioner of Brazilian jiu-jitsu who professes to “know nothing about tennis,” taught her breathing exercises that, according to Futterman, he “used to follow when an opponent would have him in an upside-down headlock.” (He also called in a biomechanics expert to fix her balky serve; that same specialist now works with Gauff.)

Deep insights from the athletes themselves, in *The Cruellest Game* and in press coverage generally, are scant. Top players now cultivate their image primarily via social media, affording meaningful (and not so meaningful) access only to their own videographers. A recent “unfiltered” Q&A on Sinner's personal YouTube channel featured such questions as “How many hours do you usually sleep?” and “Which shoe do you tie first?” The three-month ban that Sinner served last year after testing positive for an anabolic steroid did not come up. (Tennis's anti-doping authorities ruled that Sinner was not at fault, accepting his explanation that trace amounts of the drug had been rubbed into his body during a massage. Świątek, too, got a finding of “no significant fault” and a light suspension when she tested positive for the banned substance trimetazidine in 2024.)

Friendly YouTube Q&As notwithstanding, life online can be perilous for players, especially women. Tennis has become a hotbed of online harassment, a phenomenon fueled by omnipresent legalized gambling. Thanks to the sport's international reach, its huge inventory of matches, and its continual discrete action—FanDuel and DraftKings both accept wagers on individual points—tennis is particularly popular with bettors worldwide, ranking behind only soccer and basketball by some estimates. For years now, high-profile women on tour have been speaking out about the torrent of sexualized and violent threats they receive from angry gamblers. Still, nothing seems to change. This past March, two women reported getting texts demanding that they lose a match; those messages were accompanied by a photo of a gun and the names of their family members.

Although this variety of cruelty goes unaddressed in *The Cruellest Game*, Futterman does highlight the unprecedented physical toll of tennis circa 2026. Thanks to modern fitness regimes and equipment—high-tech rackets and strings that make any shot possible from anywhere on the court—the sport is far more demanding than it was in Agassi's day, let alone McEnroe and Borg's. From the couch or the stands, high-level tennis can appear weightless. At ground level, it's a brutal struggle, an hours-long series

THE CRUELEST
GAME: CHASING
GREATNESS IN
PROFESSIONAL
TENNIS

Matthew
Futterman

DOUBLEDAY

of leg-churning, lung-bursting sprints, punctuated by torquing, full-body whips of the racket, often in close-to-boiling temperatures. (Sinner's two toughest opponents in recent years have been Alcaraz and the sun.) That ordeal has a cost: strained muscles, twisted knees, stretched and torn ligaments.

Tennis isn't just getting tougher from shot to shot. The tour itself is a multinational grind, with key events in Australia, the Middle East, North America, Europe, and East Asia. Tennis also has a shockingly short off-season—about a month for highly ranked players. The superstars aren't happy. Sabalenka said earlier this year that the schedule “is definitely insane, and that's not good for all of us, as you see so many players getting injured.” In 2024, Alcaraz said with a resigned chuckle, “Probably they are going to kill us in some way.” A year later, he pleaded with tennis authorities “to do something,” because there's no “good period of time that we can practice, we can rest.” This year, he finally got some extended time off: He missed the French Open and Wimbledon because of an injured right wrist.

OVERWORK IS a perverse consequence of success: The more you win, the more matches you play, the more your joints get pulverized—and the more prize money you make. There's an uneasy synergy in tennis between pain and profit. Although Alcaraz made it sound like he was powerless to resist the unremitting tennis calendar, players are able to opt out. In 2023, the 21-year-old Amanda Anisimova announced on Instagram that her life on tour had “become unbearable,” and that she was stepping away to prioritize her mental health.

Anisimova, who'd been tapped as a can't-miss star when she made the French Open semifinals at 17, threw herself into painting and worked with a therapist who specialized in trauma. She came back to tennis after eight months away, and with the help of a Swedish Canadian physiotherapist—Futterman calls her “the chief operating officer of Anisimova's body”—transformed from an injury-riddled athlete into a strong, confident title contender. Last year, she made the finals of both Wimbledon and the U.S. Open.

Although male players have become more open about their mental-health struggles, the sport's leading men rarely go on leave. “There were months when I thought about taking a complete break from tennis to cleanse my mind,” Nadal said in a post-retirement essay for *The Players' Tribune*. “I conquered it by always moving forward.” For cultural and biological reasons, female tennis players far more commonly take sabbaticals. Maja Chwaleńska, a surprise finalist at this year's French Open, took a hiatus in 2021 after, she said, the sport became a source of “pressure, stress, and crying.” Williams, Osaka, and Elina Svitolina

are among the many women who have returned to the tour after giving birth. (Williams, who “evolved away” from tennis as she prepared to have her second child, has now launched another comeback, at age 44.) That path is slightly less arduous now that players have succeeded in pushing the WTA Tour to make accommodations for women who want to start families—paid leave, grants for fertility treatments, ranking protection during time off.

Women have been battling for just policies since the creation of modern pro tennis in the late 1960s. Billie Jean King and eight others fought against pay disparities by forming their own tour. Thanks to the efforts of King and Venus Williams, who's still competing at 46, female players as of 2007 receive prize money equal to men's at all four Grand Slams. Now they're pushing to get even bigger checks, for themselves and their male peers. At a press conference in May, Sabalenka raised the prospect of a Grand Slam boycott if players don't get a larger portion of tournament revenue. Gauff backed her up, saying, “If everyone were to move as one and collaborate, then yeah, I can 100 percent see that.”

I can't quite picture players walking out of a Grand Slam, and tennis's lack of a formally recognized players' union has historically made collective action difficult. But that could be changing: Sabalenka, Gauff, Świątek, Sinner, and other highly ranked men and women came together at the French Open, cutting short their initial media obligations as part of their protest over prize money. The balkanization of tennis could also be a source of leverage. The men's and women's tours are distinct entities, as are the sport's four major tournaments. If one of the tours cuts down on the number of mandatory events, or one of the Grand Slams ratchets up its payouts, the others might feel compelled to follow suit.

It's also possible that, as King did more than half a century ago, the players could create something new, in partnership with or in opposition to the existing tour and Grand Slam leadership. Rumors have circulated for years about a combined “Premier Tour” for the sport's top tier, with fewer events and a real offseason. Part of tennis's appeal comes from its connection to history—the fact that players have been stepping onto the grass at Wimbledon since the 1800s. The new elite have shown no sign that they want to abandon tradition, but they also won't be cowed by it. Federer, Nadal, and Williams left an unmatched tennis legacy. This generation could reshape the entire sport. *A*

It's never been better to be one of the best tennis players in the world. It's also never been worse.

Josh Levin is the creator and host of the sports-history podcast Replay Booth and the author of The Queen: The Forgotten Life Behind an American Myth.

BOOKS

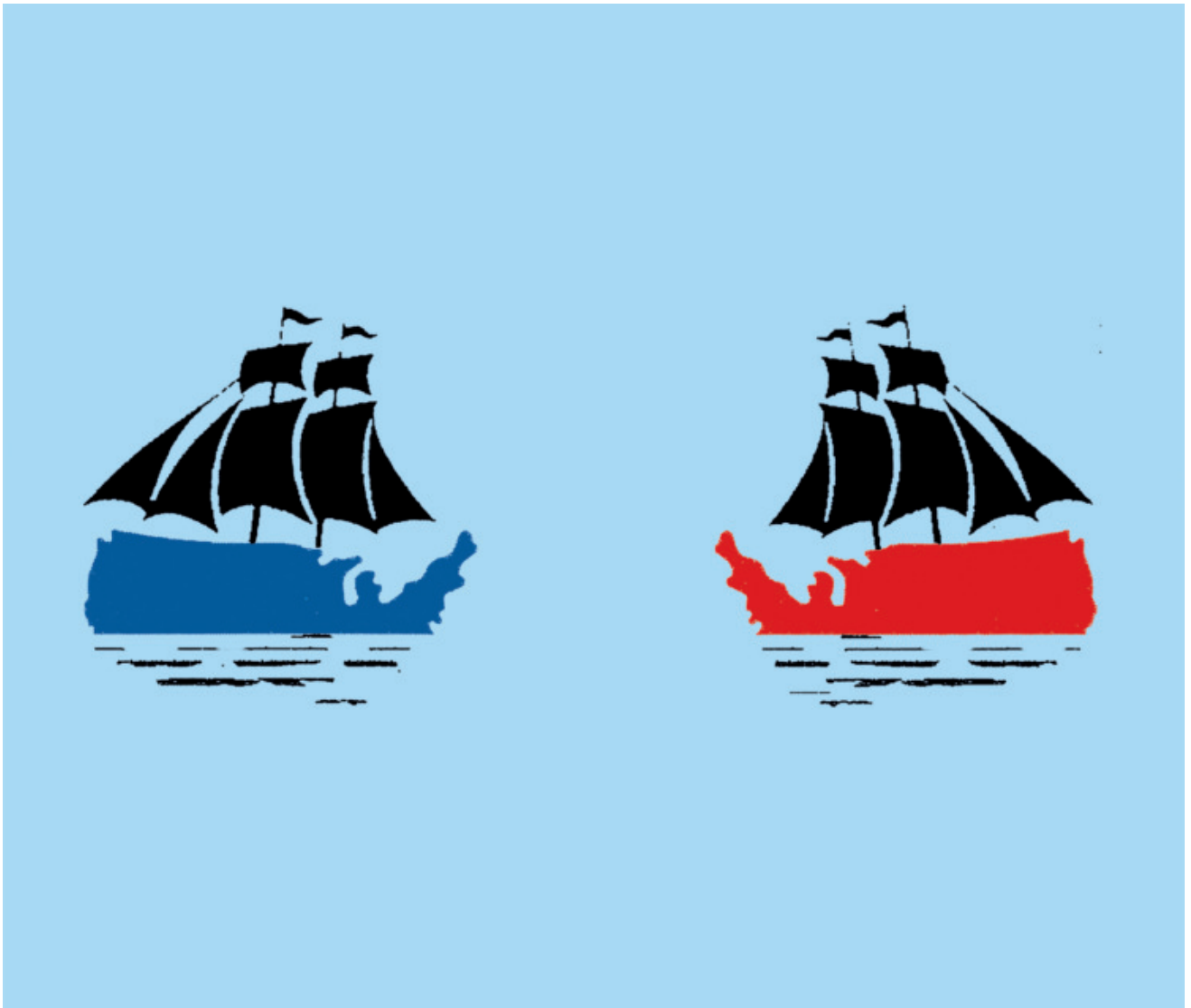
The Slave Ship and the Mayflower

Can the story of America be told by two vessels?

By James Traub

Are Americans one people, or many? Our national motto, “*e pluribus unum*,” seems to offer the definitive answer to the question: We are many, but one. Even on the verge of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln insisted in his first inaugural address that Americans were united by “the mystic chords of memory” stretching back to Revolutionary battlefields and Patriot graves. In the aftermath of the war, as millions of Irish, English, and German immigrants swarmed to our shores, Frederick Douglass began delivering a talk titled “Composite Nation,” which celebrated both the *pluribus* and the *unum*. “Gathered here from all quarters of the globe,” Americans are bound to one another “by a common aspiration for national liberty as against caste, divine-right government and privileged classes,” he declared—with premature optimism, to say the least.

Others regard the *unum* as a pious myth. In *Who Are We?* (2004), the political scientist Samuel Huntington mocked the beloved shibboleth of “a nation



of immigrants” as “a misleading falsehood”; America was in fact an “Anglo-Protestant” nation at risk of disintegration due to the pressures of multiculturalism. In a similar vein, Vice President Vance has claimed that Americans who can trace their ancestry to those who fought in the Civil War are more American than those who can’t.

The historian David Hackett Fischer articulated a more intriguing, and certainly less divisive, view in *Albion’s Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (1989). He endorsed a modern spin on what he called the “germ theory” of American history—first advanced, Fischer wrote, by 19th-century historians who described the “Teutonic germs” of liberty migrating from Germany to England to the New World. In Fischer’s version, early immigrants from four different regions of Great Britain established cultures in different regions of the American colonies. Though fewer than a fifth of Americans had British ancestry at the time of Fischer’s writing, “in a cultural sense,” he provocatively argued, we are all descendants of an “expansive pluralism” with its source in Puritan, Cavalier, Quaker, and Scotch-Irish societies.

Perhaps Fischer’s pluralism is too expansive. In the new book *Two Ships: Jamestown 1619, Plymouth 1620, and the Struggle for the Soul of America*, the historian and literary scholar David S. Reynolds argues that America is not one or many or four, but two. We are the residuum of two irreconcilable cultures, red and blue from the get-go, issuing from the Mayflower and a slave ship known as the White Lion. Drawing on an astonishing wealth of references to the metaphor of two ships by figures from the early colonial era through the Civil War, Reynolds lops off the Quakers and the Scotch-Irish in favor of the groups that came first and seemed most antithetically opposed—Puritan and Cavalier. And whereas Fischer described without judgment the family patterns, social customs, and religious lineage of his four groups, Reynolds contrasts his two on ideological and ultimately moral grounds. He presents American history as a perpetual struggle between a Puritan North dedicated to liberty and equality and a Cavalier South predicated on hierarchy and domination.

Two Ships is thus a narrative for our time, when the aspirational vision of oneness has given way to intractable twoness. Each side has now acquired its own historical narrative. On the left, “The 1619 Project,” first published in 2019, recast the national story as the endlessly ramifying consequence of the original sin of slavery. “Some might argue,” in the lead essay’s words, “that this nation was founded not as a democracy but as a slavocracy.” The answering blow from the right, “The 1776 Report,” insisted that America was an exceptional nation dedicated to “natural equality” and shaped by “self-sacrifice, courage, and nobility.”

In *1620: A Critical Response to the 1619 Project*, the conservative scholar Peter W. Wood made the case that 1620 was in fact America’s founding moment—not the arrival of the slave ship but the signing of the Mayflower Compact. Reynolds’s response is, in effect: No, it was both. Americans were separated at birth, and have remained so ever since.

REYNOLDS ADOPTS Fischer’s germinal metaphor (though he never acknowledges doing so). “Early differences in religions, laws, and slave systems,” he writes,

planted seeds for societies that eventually developed into the opposing cultural identities of the Cavalier South, with its hierarchical class system and reliance on chattel slavery, and the Puritan North, which moved toward democratic government, free labor, and ultimately widespread opposition to slavery.

Reynolds presents American history as a perpetual struggle between a Puritan North dedicated to liberty and a Cavalier South predicated on hierarchy.

The northern seed, in Reynolds’s telling, first sprouted on the other side of the Atlantic. The Pilgrims abhorred the hierarchy of the Church of England and began to practice a democratic politics among themselves in Holland, where they had fled. The language of the Mayflower Compact reflected that commitment: The passengers agreed to “covenant and combine ourselves together into a civil Body Politick” and to enact “just and equal laws” in order to advance “the general Good of the Colony.” Once settled in Plymouth, they established a broad franchise that included even those who chose not to join the church.

As for the South, Virginia’s first comprehensive legal code, passed in 1619, placed the Anglican Church and its hierarchy at the center of colonial life, appointing church wardens to “police the moral behavior of the people in their district,” Reynolds writes. Settlers risked punishment if they failed to attend church. These two radically different understandings of the individual’s place in society were reinforced in ensuing generations, as the Puritans flocked to New England to escape the persecution of King Charles I. Then, after a Puritan-dominated Parliament under the Roundhead leadership of Oliver Cromwell deposed and executed the King, Charles’s followers, known as Cavaliers, began their own migration, to the Jamestown colony. Slavery became integral to Cavalier culture, and far less so in Puritan New England.

Each of these societies deplored and ridiculed the other. Yet Reynolds clearly puts his thumb on the scale: The Puritans were right in their disdain and the Cavaliers were wrong. Though Virginians regarded New Englanders as theocrats who inflicted dire punishments on anyone who fell afoul of their strict code, he stresses that capital punishment, which was mandated for sodomy or adultery in New England, was very rarely

imposed. The South cried hypocrisy on slavery, given that the seamen of Providence, Rhode Island, played a central role in the Atlantic slave trade. Reynolds instead emphasizes that Puritans (and Quakers) framed the earliest antislavery arguments in the English-speaking world. Enslaved Black people in much of New England could own land and property or sue for freedom.

As for the Cavaliers—guilty as charged. The Puritans regarded the Cavalier lifestyle, inherited from Charles's court, as a feckless round of feasting, gambling, and wenching. And so it was, Reynolds writes. In the Cavalier worldview, hierarchy was rooted in nature: The husband controlled the wife and children as the master controlled the slave. Reynolds cites the early-18th-century diary of William Byrd II, who read Homer in the morning and administered whippings to refractory slaves in the afternoon. Virginia may have established a representative body, the House of Burgesses, in 1619, but the mid-century Cavalier elite continued to accept the divine right of kings as the Stuart monarchs had propounded it. Reynolds leaves the strong impression that slavery flourished in the South instead of the North simply because southern religion and ideology depended on mastery rather than because southern topography and climate also favored the plantation system.

SEPARATED-AT-BIRTH is an intriguing theory, and of course very gratifying to those in the Plymouth/Roundhead/blue half of America. But the test of the two-ships metaphor is what light it casts on our national story. A narrative, like Reynolds's, that squeezes everything into a single frame must be able to account for both the American Revolution and the Civil War, the two formative events of American history. That's asking a lot, and I don't think he succeeds. The conceit of two implacably opposed cultures inevitably reveals more about the country's moment of maximal division than it does about the great coalescence of 1776.

Why, after all, did the feudal lords of the South, loyal to Church and throne, throw off the royal yoke to join the Revolution? Among the colonists' motives, "The 1619 Project" emphasizes the preservation of slavery, which seemed to be gravely jeopardized after the British governor of Virginia, Lord Dunmore, issued an emancipation proclamation in 1775 for enslaved people who joined the British army. Reynolds, like most historians, rejects that theory; the South, he writes, shared in the general animus against British oppression.

Yet he describes the Revolution as the fulfillment of specifically Puritan ideals of liberty. The Boston revolutionaries venerated Cromwell, tribune of the common man, and, with their deeply ingrained habit of viewing history analogically, cast King George III as a reincarnation of the monstrous Charles. The

A southern newspaper asked, "What similarity, pray, was there, or will there ever be, between Plymouth and Jamestown?"

Glorious Revolution against the divine right of kings thus recurred as the American Revolution against colonial oppression.

What, then, to make of Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, James Madison, and Patrick Henry? If they were Cavaliers, as the southern elite of the day claimed, we must rethink the boundaries of that identity. Instead, Reynolds observes that these sober men bore little resemblance to the roistering patriarchs of the remote plantations. They were, he insists, southern Cromwellians. Even the Declaration of Independence, he writes, "can be seen as an updated version of a seventeenth-century anti-Stuart declaration, revised to incorporate the egalitarian vision of the Lockean Enlightenment."

That won't wash. Neither Jefferson nor Madison needed to reach Locke by way of Cromwell. These Virginia aristocrats had been raised on the same Enlightenment thinkers—David Hume and Adam Smith, Montesquieu and Voltaire—as John Adams and Samuel Adams had. They pored over the works of radical Whig pamphleteers such as John Trenchard. They were inspired by Cicero and Cato, the heroes and martyrs of the Roman republic. Jefferson also sought precedent in Cromwell and the Glorious Revolution, but that hardly meant he had to surrender Virginia-gentry ways and become an adoptive Puritan in order to write the Declaration. Mono-causal history winds up paving over the uneven surface of human experience with a layer of ideological asphalt.

THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION is a story of shared heritage and shared ideals uniting disparate people, but the Civil War is a story of irreconcilable beliefs and practices dividing a single nation. If you view slavery and the Civil War, rather than the Revolution and the founding documents, as the central fact of American history—if you imagine an "1861 Report"—the metaphor of two ships and two cultures becomes deeply suggestive. In the period immediately preceding the war, Reynolds shows us, people on both sides almost instinctively reached for this conceit to explain the irrepressible conflict. A southern newspaper asked, "What similarity, pray, was there, or will there ever be, between Plymouth and Jamestown?"

In the years before "Composite Nation," Douglass returned again and again in his speeches to the very different vision of two ships. So, too, Charles Sumner and prominent abolitionists. In a speech delivered before 8,000 listeners, Sumner divided the two sides between "the Mayflower, filled with men, intelligent, conscientious, prayerful"—authors of a great "written compact"—and the "Slave-Ship, with its fetters, its chains, its bludgeons." The question facing all Americans was "Which of the two to choose?"

TWO SHIPS:
JAMESTOWN
1619, PLYMOUTH
1620, AND THE
STRUGGLE FOR
THE SOUL
OF AMERICA

David S. Reynolds

PENGUIN PRESS

These partisans did not think of North and South as two different economies or clusters of “folkways”; they were two cultures, founded on incompatible views of power, equality, and justice. Reynolds concedes that by the early 19th century, the Cavalier way of life had long since disappeared from the South, and the Puritan (if less so) from the North, yet he argues persuasively that the proud, living memory of what had actually been gave a tremendous sense of reality to the myth. Reynolds uses the modern expression *culture war* to describe the mutual antagonism; that feels right. The fact that northern bankers financed the slave trade and northern “Copperheads” were prepared to let the South preserve slavery in order to end the Civil War complicates the allegory of two ships, yet the life of the South was organized around slavery, and that of the North, more and more over the years, was organized around opposition to it.

The Civil War did not, of course, end the evil of racial oppression. Reynolds writes that northerners greeted victory in the Civil War as the fulfillment of the two-ship struggle: “The Barbarism of the Plantation kneels to the Christian civilization of the Puritans,” as a Massachusetts politician put it. Yet the South soon got up off its feet and reasserted the plantation ethos, while the North surrendered the cause of racial equality in the name of national reconciliation. Reynolds tracks the willingness of northern partisans—Carl Schurz, Horace Greeley, Lyman Trumbull, and even Sumner himself—to abandon that cause by the dwindling references to Jamestown and Plymouth. Southerners returned the favor by addressing northern crowds at Plymouth to celebrate a new fusion. At a Forefathers’ Day event in Philadelphia, the Atlanta journalist John Temple Graves hailed “the Christmas Wedding of the Puritan and the Southern Cavalier.”

Reynolds argues that the “struggle for the soul of America” of his subtitle never ended. Even as Jim Crow ruled the South, he finds instances of suffragettes claiming inspiration from the Pilgrim women of the Mayflower, and of early civil-rights activists citing the radical Puritans. The very last words of the book assert that the metaphorical battle between Plymouth and Jamestown, Mayflower and White Lion, has “taken a new shape in today’s America.” Reynolds’s *Two Ships* thus makes not only a claim about who we were but one about who we are and perhaps always will be.

Reynolds never explicitly says that he regards American history as a moral allegory on the order of *Paradise Lost*. You can understand why. His cultural determinism appears to leave America fated to endlessly repeat an ancient pattern of conflict. And it assumes a fixity over time that belongs more to an isolated archipelago

than a dynamic modern nation. Although America may be as divided today as it was during some of the worst moments of our past, the arrival of tens of millions of new people over the course of more than a century, and the mobility of our population, has thoroughly scrambled whatever ancient germinal lines there may once have been. Mapping today’s red-blue conflict on the Jamestown-Plymouth antinomy of four centuries ago can’t help seeming extremely forced.

It also seems presumptuous. Do we really wish to regard those on one side of our current divide as the heirs of all that is best in the American tradition, and those on the other side as the legatees of slavery and domination? Where does that leave us? It’s instructive that Reynolds cites only one major figure in the 19th century who steadfastly rejected the imagery of cultural polarity: Abraham Lincoln. Twoness was, after all, a choice. Lincoln repudiated it because he wished to bind up wounds, not open them afresh. “With malice toward none,” as he famously said in his second inaugural address, “with charity for all.” Perhaps subsequent history shows that his generosity of spirit was misplaced. Yet we rightly revere the leader who reminds us of our common humanity. *A*

James Traub writes the newsletter A Democracy, if You Can Keep It and is the author, most recently, of The Cradle of Citizenship: How Schools Can Help Save Our Democracy.

The Scrubbed and Simple Moon

By Carol Frost

Watchless, wordless, compassless.
Isn’t that when mountains open
and light roars through,
as when in the delivery room,
slammed by a lot of meaningless
brightness, you cried and were held and forgot?
In your nursery, did you reach for the moon?
Many babies do. *Moon*, your mother said,
and soon enough you were grown.

Carol Frost’s poems have appeared in The New Republic, Georgia Review, and Poetry.

ART

The Mischievous, Maddening Marcel Duchamp

If you dislike contemporary art, all of the things you hate about it can be traced back to him.

By Sebastian Smee

Something about art disgusted Marcel Duchamp. Expression, taste, aesthetic intention—anything that gave off a whiff of the precious, he recoiled from. He was modern. He relished the impersonal operations of chance. He loved jokes and sex and the movements of modern machinery. “Painting is finished,” he said to the Romanian sculptor Constantin Brâncuși at an air show in Paris in 1912, when he was 25. “Who will do any better than that propeller?”

The next year, Duchamp mounted a bicycle wheel onto an upside-down fork fixed to a wooden stool. He enjoyed the way the spokes rotated around a central axis, like a propeller, and how they reflected shimmering light, like a fireplace. He wouldn’t come up with the term until two years later, but Duchamp had created the first “readymade.” The mischievous, machine-obsessed, maddeningly inconsistent Frenchman was on his way to having an impact on modern creativity comparable to that of Richard Wagner or Charles Baudelaire on an earlier generation of modernists.

Duchamp left behind a legacy that people either love or loathe. He is known as the father of conceptual art, but his so-called ideas were mostly idle notions, provocations, speculations. Opinion divides on whether he snuffed out or emancipated art. But fret as we might about the fate of art after Duchamp, this strange, original man—so nonchalant! so fanatical!—was engaged in something more private, urgent, and amorous (more on that later) than merely “making art.”

A visit to the massive Duchamp exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art—his



MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK / © ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK / ADAGP, PARIS / ASSOCIATION MARCEL DUCHAMP

first North American retrospective in more than 50 years—can feel less like taking in a traditional exhibition than like wandering through an archive. (It was organized by MoMA's curators Ann Temkin and Michelle Kuo, and Matthew Affron of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.) The items on display, many of them replicas sanctioned by the artist, have none of the aloof self-sufficiency, the "aura," we expect from great art. Each object is instead more like a footnote or an index entry for something that once existed, was once thought, once got a laugh. The farther you advance, the more the show starts to feel forensic, like a crime scene. Near the end, your suspicions are confirmed: On display is a poster that Duchamp designed for his first-ever retrospective, at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1963. It features a mock WANTED notice offering a \$2,000 reward. The mug shots are of himself.

If you dislike contemporary art, all of the things you hate about it can be traced back to Duchamp. Art that requires no skill or that was made, conversely, with great skill by people other than the "artist" claiming credit for it. Art that is all backstory, that leans so heavily on verbal explanations that it would collapse in a heap without them. Art tailored to generate pretentious academic dissertations. Art as cult fodder, marginalia, obscurantism—Duchamp inaugurated all of this.

Yet his work has a lively, quicksilver quality that continues to feel generative. You can sense his wicked intelligence flickering behind some of the most rebellious, winningly unselfserious impulses in contemporary art. He's so funny. Call me puerile, but I still laugh at his reproduction of the *Mona Lisa*, on which he drew a mustache and goatee in pencil. He called the piece *L.H.O.O.Q.*; the letters, spoken individually in French, sound like *Elle a chaud au cul* ("She has a hot ass").

He denied being an influence on anyone, but in truth his artistic progenies are everywhere. Artists who use readymades aren't the only ones borrowing from Duchamp. Also in his debt are artists who incorporate chance; make assemblages and installations; play with alter egos and cross-dressing; present their own lives as works of art; embrace copies, replicas, factory-style production; mock the art market by presenting as "art" things that are clearly absurd or worthless (Yves Klein selling empty space, Piero Manzoni selling cans of his own excrement, Maurizio Cattelan selling a banana taped to a wall); make work involving machines, eroticism, molds of body parts, archives, graffiti, optical illusions, puns. The list of those who haven't been influenced by Duchamp would likely be shorter.

DUCHAMP HIMSELF, one of seven children, grew up in an affluent household just outside Rouen, where "so much artistry" ran in his family, he later said, that it was like being immersed in an "aesthetic bath."

Previous page: Bicycle Wheel, 1951

*No one who
delves into
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Though his father was a notary, his grandfather had been a successful artist. His mother, too, was an amateur artist in her youth, and his older brothers, Gaston and Raymond, gave up law and medicine, respectively, and became artists in Paris. Suzanne, one of his younger sisters, also became an artist.

From the beginning, Duchamp's sense of his calling seemed to have had more to do with familial love than any kind of inner aesthetic conviction. "When I was 16, I thought for about six months that I'd like to be a notary like my father," he later explained, "but that was just because I loved my father. I *adored* my brothers." In 1904, he moved to Paris to join them.

The opening galleries at MoMA lead us briskly from the artist's early satirical cartoons—their sly captions anticipating his later, punning titles—through a smattering of richly colored Cézanne- and Matisse-influenced paintings to his semi-abstract, Cubist works, all in shades of brown. Duchamp played chess starting in childhood. In the 1910s, he began to funnel a growing interest in systems of logic and machines (starting with coffee mills and chocolate grinders) into, strangely enough, a lifelong preoccupation with eroticism.

I think of Duchamp's oeuvre, touched by the same World War I nihilism that produced Dada, as an attempt to generate inventive energy from the trauma of total war, exile, and modern conformity. But no one who delves into Duchamp can shake the feeling that erotic fixations and frustrated romantic love are at the core of his imaginative universe. How else to explain his focus on masturbation? He used his own semen in at least one artwork, used chocolate grinders as a metaphor for masturbation ("The bachelor grinds his chocolate himself"), and explained his enduring obsession with circles and rotation as "a kind of onanism."

Duchamp's life was marked by two serious cases of unrequited love. The object of the first was Gabriële Buffet-Picabia, whom Duchamp met when he was about 24. She promptly introduced him to her husband, Francis Picabia, a playboy and a pioneer of abstract art. Buffet-Picabia had studied avant-garde music in Paris and Berlin, and she now pushed Picabia and Duchamp into new approaches to visual art. Recognizing Duchamp's paradoxical nature, she saw an anxious perfectionist, "possessed by a need for absolute logic," and yet also a rebel who embraced randomness. The trio enjoyed in-jokes, road trips in fast cars (Picabia was obsessed with automobiles), and artistic experiments. In *Gabriële*, a biographical novel about Buffet-Picabia, their great-grandmother, Anne and Claire Berest describe Picabia and Duchamp as sharing "the same taste for shattered icons, for the art of irony and the irony of art, for jokes no matter the circumstance, and the idea that God is dead."

Duchamp was taken aback when his painting of a nude woman descending a staircase, her movements captured in the manner of a superimposed sequence of stop-motion photographs, was presented at the 1913 Armory Show in New York and made him notorious. *Nude Descending a Staircase (No. 2)* was lampooned in the press (an “explosion in a shingle mill” was how one critic described it). But audiences had seen nothing like it, and, in a culture trying to make sense of onrushing modernity, it quickly became the most famous painting in America. Its reception encouraged Duchamp to travel to the United States in the summer of 1915. War was raging in Europe, and he stayed for three years. A woman friend said he was “lionized by *tout* New York and courted by most of the female population.”

Many experts, though, believe he was allegorizing his unfulfilled longing for his best friend’s wife in the masterpiece he embarked on during those years, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, which he continued to labor over for eight more and left poignantly unfinished. *The Large Glass*, as it’s more commonly called, consists of two glass panels set vertically in a metal frame. The glass is inscribed—in lead wire, lead foil, oil, varnish, and dust—with diagrammatic imagery evoking machinery. The machines represent a bride (above) and nine bachelors (below). When the glass cracked during transportation, Duchamp put the pieces back together, relishing the random-looking lines of breakage (it is now permanently on display in the Philadelphia Museum of Art). He planned to have the work accompanied by a book-length guide to the abstruse and self-involved thinking that went into it, but ended up settling for an unbound pile of notes called *The Green Box*.

While he worked on *The Large Glass*, he produced a series of readymades with witty titles. The most famous appeared in 1917, when Duchamp turned a porcelain urinal on its back and signed it “R. Mutt.” *Fountain*, as he called the piece, is a provocation, a prank. But it’s also an homage to the wonders of modern plumbing. Two years earlier, three such urinals had been displayed at the Newark Museum, whose founding director, John Cotton Dana, pronounced that “the genius and skill which have gone into the adornment and perfecting of familiar household objects should receive the same recognition as do now the genius and skill of painting in oils.”

Amused by this way of thinking, Duchamp began to ridicule those who kept at painting, rebuking them for being obsessed with the smell of paint and deriding their efforts as “retinal art” (art that engages only the eye). He wanted to bring art back to what it had been during the Renaissance, when Leonardo da Vinci understood it as a *cosa mentale*—an intellectual matter. But Duchamp’s idea of “intellectual” was always

gravitating toward the erotic: “I want to grasp things with the mind,” he said, “the way the penis is grasped by the vagina.”

In 1920, Duchamp decided to create a female alter ego, Rose Sélavy. Being “a lone individual with a masculine name,” he explained 40 years later, didn’t suffice, and he wanted “to make another personality from myself.” He changed the spelling to Rose Sélavy, to make it sound more like *Eros, c’est la vie*. “Rose” specialized in facetious entrepreneurial gambits (supported by wealthy patrons, Duchamp enjoyed mocking the profit motive), optical illusions, and sexual innuendo.

And then, three years later, having successfully overturned everyone’s idea of what art might be (a snow shovel! an ampoule of air! a portrait of the artist in drag!), Duchamp returned to Paris and,

Nude Descending a Staircase (No. 2), 1912



PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART, LOUISE AND WALTER ARENSBERG COLLECTION / © ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK / ADAGP, PARIS / ASSOCIATION MARCEL DUCHAMP

for more than a decade, dedicated himself to chess. He played in high-level tournaments, represented France at four Chess Olympiads, and even co-wrote a book on chess theory. But he continued to dabble in graphic design and tended to his legacy by creating elaborate portable boxes with mirrors and secret compartments, all filled with fastidiously executed small-scale reproductions of his bizarre but brilliant work. He settled in Manhattan during World War II but died in France in 1968.

A year later, the world learned that Duchamp had worked in secret for more than 20 years on a diorama-like work called *Étant donnés* (which will be on view when the show travels to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, where it resides). It consists of an old wooden door at the end of a corridor, with two peepholes, through which the viewer spies a brick wall with a large opening. Beyond this can be seen the cropped torso, along with an arm and legs, of a naked woman splayed corpse-like on branches and leaves, her shaved genitalia exposed, her left arm holding up a shining gas lamp.

For the woman's body, Duchamp assembled casts of the limbs of his second wife, "Teen" Sattler—whom he married in 1954 after she left her art-dealer husband, Pierre Matisse (son of Henri)—as well as of two of his lovers: Mary Reynolds, an avant-garde bookbinder, with whom he carried on an affair starting in the 1920s, and the surrealist sculptor Maria Martins, the second great thwarted love of Duchamp's life, after Buffet-Picabia. They had an intense affair in New York in the '40s and early '50s, and Duchamp was devastated when her husband, a Brazilian diplomat, was transferred to Paris and Martins chose to go with him. *Étant donnés*, which Jasper Johns called "the strangest work of art in any museum," is a transgressive, deeply disturbing piece that continues to flummox its would-be interpreters. If it functions as a romantic tribute, and perhaps an art-historical one (it most obviously calls to mind Gustave Courbet's *The Origin of the World*), it's also a creepy, confusing, isolating experience that turns every viewer into a morbid voyeur of a bewildering sex crime.

"OUR INTEREST'S on the dangerous edge of things," Robert Browning wrote in his dramatic monologue "Bishop Blougram's Apology." "The honest thief, the tender murderer, / the superstitious atheist." Had Browning encountered Duchamp, he might have added, "The shy attention-seeker, the nonchalant fanatic, the heartsick Casanova."

Duchamp was interested in the dangerous edge of art—that zone of uncertainty where the fiction of the "aesthetic" drops away and the purpose of art grows blurry. In "The Creative Act," a brief speech he delivered in Houston in 1957, he said that "the creative act is not performed by the artist alone" but also by



Multiple Portrait
of Marcel Duchamp,
1917

the spectator, whose interpretations bring the work to life. By dissolving the barrier between art and life and emphasizing the role of the viewer, Duchamp unraveled art's claim to special status. Suddenly, anything could be art and anyone could make it. Indeed, you were making it just by looking at it.

Stripping away the aura of preciousness around art proved enormously liberating. But it also set up a quandary: If art is undifferentiated from life—if it is an arbitrary designation—why even maintain it as a separate category? If a bicycle wheel or a snow shovel can be art, what is the point of exhibiting these objects in galleries? Why not contemplate them (if that's what you wish to do) in the bicycle-repair shop or the basement? Why have "art" at all?

Duchamp's habitual skepticism had the salutary effect of returning us to first principles. For him, part of being modern—living in the aftermath of Darwin, Freud, Nietzsche, and the trenches of World War I—meant dispensing with inherited illusions. "All this twaddle, existence of God, atheism, determinism, free will, societies, death, etc. are the pieces of a game of chess called language," he once wrote in a letter. "Art," by his reckoning, was merely another word, a piece in the game.

Busy scorching communal "fictions," Duchamp became ever more absorbed by private concerns that could often be impenetrable. If he was forever puzzling over what art is and isn't, he was also endlessly puzzling over the relationship between sex and love. Averse to sentimentality, he didn't really believe in romantic love. But being intellectually skeptical of something is not the same as banishing it from one's existence. If Duchamp remained, in spite of everything, an artist, he also remained a man prone to falling in love. "Contradiction," he quipped near the end of his life, "is the whole point." *A*

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ESSAY

Paradise Revisited

*What Darwin saw in
the Galápagos*

By Helen Lewis

*Photographs by
Will Matsuda*

My first encounter with a Galápagos tortoise came when the driver of my taxi from the airport attempted a risky overtaking maneuver into the path of an oncoming bus. On the island of Santa Cruz, which is bisected by a single highway, this is a favorite sport: The white Toyota HiLuxes that serve as taxis overtake tour buses, while tour buses overtake trucks. But this time, the driver quickly pulled back



behind the slow-moving car ahead of us. “Tortoise,” she explained.

And there it was—a great dome, an overturned bathtub, trying to cross the road. What set of circumstances favored an animal that weighs up to 600 pounds, moves at four miles a day, and takes a quarter of a century to reach sexual maturity? The answer is: a remote island chain formed by volcanoes, with little fresh water and no predators, where life moved at a languid, lumbering pace—at least, until humans appeared. The tortoise’s reaction to the traffic was typical of its kind. It retracted its head into its shell and fervently wished for the bus to go away.

The Galápagos Islands owe their place on rich travelers’ bucket lists to the vision of them as an unfallen Eden, touted as “the laboratory of evolution” that inspired Charles Darwin to write *On the Origin of Species*. When he visited, humans’ presence here was limited to whalers, buccaneers, and political prisoners. Today, more than 300,000 people visit the archipelago each year. Every tourist desperate to see an untouched paradise is part of a constant influx that risks despoiling the very thing they came to see.

On his arrival, in 1835, Darwin marveled at the lack of fear shown by all the animals, thanks to their limited exposure to humans. “Met an immense Turpin: took little notice of me,” he wrote in his field notebook about encountering a tortoise on September 21. Perhaps the poor turpin should have been more wary: By October 12, Darwin was recording that he had been “eating Tortoise meat / By the way delicious in Soup.” Soon he was trying to ride them. “I frequently got on their backs,” he wrote in the published version of his diaries, “and then giving a few raps on the hinder part of their shells, they would rise up and walk away;—but I found it very difficult to keep my balance.”

On these parched islands, the tortoises were prized for their ability to slurp moisture from prickly pear cacti, and to drink enough at the rare springs to sustain them for months on end. Thirst-racked sailors would catch and kill them purely for the contents of their bladders. “In one I saw killed, the fluid was quite limpid, and had only a very slightly bitter taste,”

wrote Darwin, having sportingly chugged some tortoise urine for science.

Today, none of this is allowed. El Chato Ranch, which I visited in the pouring rain, permits selfies with its resident tortoises but absolutely no touching, eating, or disemboweling. Most of the Galápagos have been designated by Ecuador as a national

(Catch a big group at the right moment and they can go off like the cannons in the *1812 Overture*.) These animals all exist in the Galápagos and nowhere else.

The usual story of Darwin’s visit is that he cataloged the small differences that had emerged in animals across the islands—discrepancies in the beaks of the finches



Previous page: Giant tortoises on the parched islands slurp moisture from prickly pear cacti.

Above: Blue-footed boobies on Bartolomé Island.

park, with a \$200 entrance fee—up from \$100 just two years ago—and a strict injunction to stay six feet away from the animals. The archipelago is also home to the flightless cormorant, whose former wings are now stumpy nubs; a species of batfish that looks like it is wearing bright-red lipstick; and the marine iguana, which ejects excess salt from its body by sneezing.

being a prime example—as each species responded to the unique conditions. In a flash of insight, he understood the mechanism of evolution: survival of the fittest. The truth is more complicated, and more interesting. His ship, the H.M.S. Beagle, spent only five weeks here, and Darwin landed on just four of the 13 major islands. At first, he did not recognize the

importance of the variation among the islands, and did not label many of his bird specimens with their precise origins. The greatest study of what we now call “Darwin’s finches” was done by a British couple, Peter and Rosemary Grant, who visited the same uninhabited island, Daphne Major, every year from 1973 to 2013.

Darwin also didn’t notice the numerous subspecies of giant tortoise until the vice governor called attention to their variety and declared “that he could with certainty tell from which island any one was brought,” the naturalist wrote in his field notebook. Tortoises on Hood and Charles Islands, for instance, had evolved shells that were curved upward at the front like a saddle, allowing their necks to reach higher vegetation. Oh, and Darwin didn’t even coin the phrase *survival of the fittest*. That came from one of the early reviewers of *Origin*, Herbert Spencer. Darwin liked it so much that he incorporated it into later editions.

The mythology of blinding-inspiration-in-paradise is so appealing that it has out-competed the truth. The actual story—the one that drove me here—is that Darwin was above all an empiricist. He took nothing on trust. He wanted to see things for himself, measure them, catalog them, and perhaps even eat them, and he was willing to endure any combination of boredom, nausea, and danger to do so. He was an omnivore, as interested in geology as biology when he toured South America, and his most famous theory drew on economics as well. He had an ego, definitely, but he was also open-minded and curious; he wanted to understand nature, not just plunder it like so many colonial explorers. (In later life, he supported animal charities and called for vivisection to be regulated.) He was willing to push back against editors, too, such as the one who suggested that he should reframe *Origin* to focus only on pigeons, because “everybody is interested in pigeons.”

All of that should make him any writer’s hero.

THE BRITISH first named the individual islands in the 1600s—Charles Island after King Charles II, James Island (where Darwin spent most of his time) after the King’s

brother, and so on—although most guidebooks now use the official Spanish names. Today Ecuador treats the Galápagos as precious jewels for both noble and commercial reasons. To enter, you need to complete a biosecurity declaration, promising not to introduce any plants or animals that could rampage through this delicate ecosystem. There are no international flights into the archipelago. For me, the two-hour flight to the territory’s main airport, on Baltra Island, came at the end of a tiring slog from London to Miami, and then on to Quito, the high-altitude Ecuadoran capital, where the thin air gave me a headache the instant I stepped off the plane.

I consoled myself on the long journey by reading accounts of Darwin’s five years on the Beagle, which were marked by seasickness so intense that he traveled overland by horse whenever he could, catching up with the ship farther along its journey. “I hate every wave of the ocean, with a fervor, which you, who have only seen the green waters of the shore, can never understand,” he wrote to his cousin William. His captain, Robert FitzRoy, recorded that Darwin was “a martyr to confinement and sea-sickness when under way.”

One of the great mysteries of Darwin’s life is how he made such a success of his five years at sea, which came between a directionless youth and an adulthood blighted by anxiety and illness. When he left England, at age 22, he was a dilettante who had washed out of medical school and was wavering about becoming a parson. His main interaction with birds and mammals was shooting them. He returned from his sea voyage a more serious and ambitious man, but one plagued for the rest of his life by vomiting, palpitations, “extreme spasmodic daily & nightly flatulence,” and vague, shifting symptoms of mental distress. He installed a lavatory behind a screen in his study at Down House, in Kent, so that he could void himself from either end as necessary and quickly return to work.

During his half decade on the Beagle, though, Darwin worked steadily, sending crates of specimens home on passing ships, and he endured the loneliness and ennui of the voyage with remarkable fortitude. Time at sea was notoriously hard on sailors’ mental health; the Beagle’s previous

captain, Pringle Stokes, had killed himself during the bleak southern winter. (The weather was so dreary, he wrote in June 1828, that “the soul of man dies in him.” A month later, he put a gun to his head in his cabin.) FitzRoy took over as captain soon after, and decided that on his second Beagle voyage, he would take a gentleman companion to jolly him along. He and Darwin ate meals together and talked about current affairs, tiptoeing around their different political backgrounds (FitzRoy was a Tory; Darwin was from a Whig family) and intensity of religious belief (FitzRoy was a creationist; Darwin, even then, was a doubter). He gave Darwin the affectionate nickname Philos, for “natural philosopher.”

In addition to seasickness, Darwin had to brave an equatorial climate far removed from the English Midlands, where he (and I) grew up. The midday sun is directly overhead, and on the youngest islands, which have little soil and therefore little vegetation, there is no shade to hide in. “Nothing could be less inviting than the first appearance,” he wrote on landing at Chatham Island (now San Cristóbal, the seat of government). “The dry and parched surface, being heated by the noonday sun, gave to the air a close and sultry feeling, like that from a stove: we fancied even that the bushes smelt unpleasantly.” And this was in September, the cooler of the two seasons! I had come during the first half of the year, the hotter rainy season, when the seas are warm, the air temperature is about 80 degrees Fahrenheit, and the humidity wilts you like spinach.

On the first full day, crossing a scorching beach on the way back from seeing the marine iguanas at Tortuga Bay, I began to suffer from some sort of humidity-induced delirium, despite unfurling a legionnaire’s hat over my neck and shoulders. I distinctly remember thinking at one point that I had to “lock in,” the kind of extreme-sports jargon that my fully operational mind would disdain. After I had arrived safely at the hotel and rehydrated aggressively, I was amazed once again that Britons managed to explore and conquer so much of the globe, despite our manifest maladaptation to anything other than mild drizzle. That we did so before the advent of wicking fabrics, bug spray, and SPF 50 is even more implausible; I felt





as ill-prepared for the climate as Captain Scott did when he relied on ponies rather than sled dogs in Antarctica, or the equally doomed Burke and Wills expedition, which took 20 tons of equipment, including a Chinese gong, into the Australian outback.

Unfortunately, what drove some of those early explorers was an unfounded (and occasionally fatal) sense of racial superiority: *Europeans knew best*. On FitzRoy's previous Beagle voyage, in 1830, a whisper of this attitude crept into the ship's scientific mission to map the South American coastline. At the southernmost tip of the continent, Tierra del Fuego, FitzRoy effectively kidnapped four Indigenous people as revenge for the theft of one of his boats. He gave them allegedly English names—York Minster, Jemmy Button, Fuegia Basket, and Boat Memory—and took them back to England. (The birth names of the first three were Elleparu, Orundellico, and Yokcushlu; Boat Memory's name has been lost.) The idea was that they would be "civilized" and returned, accompanied by a missionary, to convert their benighted fellow Fuegians to Christianity.

In fact, the missionary bailed after experiencing a few days of harsh Fuegian life, and the Fuegians quickly reverted to their ancestral ways. "Captain Fitz Roy could never ascertain that the Fuegians have any distinct belief in a future life," Darwin observed in his diaries. To the average Victorian gentleman, this was proof enough that they were "savages." I wonder, though, if the assertion gnawed at Darwin, given that his research was already drawing him away from religious faith. "Science has nothing to do with Christ; except in so far as the habit of scientific research makes a man cautious in admitting evidence," he would write to a friend toward the end of his life, adding: "As for a future life, every man must judge for himself between conflicting vague probabilities."

WHILE ON THE BEAGLE, Darwin had to wait months to reach a suitable port to receive the latest packet of letters from home. Nearly 200 years later, I FaceTimed my husband from the deck of an expedition boat, which had excellent Wi-Fi. Most of the archipelago has Starlink coverage.

Some of the wildness that Darwin encountered still survives. The walls of my hotel room, up in the misty highlands of Santa Cruz, were flecked with geckos, which dart behind the picture frames if you get too close. Darwin was disappointed that "the insects, for a tropical region, are of very small size and dull colours." Everything is relative, though, and to me this was a paradise of bugs, evoking fond childhood memories of crickets in the grass, ladybugs on leaves, and wasps on Coke cans. (Now I can go for days in England without seeing anything more exciting than a bluebottle; terrestrial insect populations in North America and Europe have been declining by 1 or 2

Darwin referred to marine iguanas as "imps of darkness." He carried Milton's Paradise Lost on the Beagle, and you can often feel the effect of its dazzling imagery on his prose.

percent a year for a while.) Arriving in the Galápagos was like stepping back in time: A huge antennaed *something* lay outside my hotel-room door on my first morning, its black-and-red carapace glistening in the dawn. What appeared to be gothic bumblebees flew past my face—*Xylocopa darwini*, female carpenter bees, fat and inky black. (The males are gold.) Monarch butterflies, with their stained-glass wings, danced in the sun; a smaller, violet butterfly, the Galápagos blue, is endemic to the islands.

Today, even after decades of human intrusion, the abundance of the Galápagos is still what sets them apart, thanks to recent decades of human conservation. The

embarrassment of frigate birds, with their red, puffed-up throat sacs. The great flocks of blue-footed boobies, dancing for their mates on Tiffany-tinted toes. The lines of flamingos, their feathers a shocking Millennial pink. The frequent sight of a lava lizard doing push-ups, their way of communicating. The pod of dolphins that swam up to the expedition boat for a spot of bow-riding, using its slipstream to slough away the remora fish that cling to their backs. A furious thrashing in the water that revealed itself as a school of rays—mating, or fighting, or possibly both.

Tragically for Darwin, he lived before the invention of the modern snorkel, and so never saw the magnificent world under the islands' waves. As soon as I dipped my mask underwater off Pinnacle Rock, a volcanic spire not far from where he made landfall, I found myself in an alternate world of pearlescent parrotfish, baby sharks, and vivid blue starfish. The Australian electrician traveling with our party noticed an octopus, and it took a while for my eyes to make out a brown fluidity of fingers, slurping its way along the seabed.

I surfaced to the sound of retching—*What the hell?*—only to discover that baby sea lions can nurse with a disgusting noise. Then Isadora, our guide, started barking: *arf, arf, arf*. She was trying to lure a penguin off a rock, she explained, so that we could see it swim underwater. We were rewarded when a black-and-white bullet sped past. (Penguins on land might be comical, but an underwater penguin is no joke at all.) The final surprise came as I swam to the boat ladder and then checked beneath me. Have you ever screamed through a snorkel? Try spotting a full-grown reef shark a few feet below you; that'll do it. Its sheer bulk and rigidity astonished me, as if I were watching a refrigerator glide through the water.

On the four inhabited islands, too, animals abound. In London, the main hazard of being absorbed by your phone is veering into the path of a cyclist. Down at the dock in Puerto Ayora, the town on Santa Cruz, it's stepping on a drowsy sea lion. Walk almost anywhere and you'll see a land iguana, perhaps two feet long, colored in burnt sienna, gray, and black. The iguanas molt in patches to accommodate



Previous spread: *Pinnacle Rock, a volcanic spire on Bartolomé Island.*
 Above: *Marine iguanas at Tortuga Bay, on Santa Cruz Island.*

their growth and so are covered with loose, peeling skin. Never mind the thrill of riding a tortoise; exfoliating a lizard would provide the ultimate ASMR.

Their distant cousins, the marine iguanas, are so black that they seem to suck the brightness out of the air: Darwin referred to them as “imps of darkness.” (He carried a copy of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* with him on the *Beagle*, and you can often feel the effect of its dazzling imagery on his prose.) The iguanas congregate in big crowds, piled on top of one another. At Tortuga Bay, on Santa Cruz’s south coast, I nearly stumbled over a veritable cuddle puddle of them, with one large specimen in the middle, its arm proprietarily draped over another, as if they were on a third date at the movies.

“Come over here,” I yelled to Will, the hip American photographer who’d accompanied me. “I’ve found an iguana polycule.”

He sighed with satisfaction. “It’s like I never left Brooklyn.”

The crew of the *Beagle* treated the iguanas with no more respect than the tortoises. Intrigued by the idea of a lizard that could swim, Darwin caught one—“They do not seem to have any notion of biting,” he wrote—and placed it in the water. Despite being gracefully at ease there, the iguana immediately returned to shore. “Perhaps this singular piece of apparent stupidity may be accounted for by the circumstance, that this reptile has no enemy whatever on shore, whereas at sea it must often fall a prey to the numerous sharks,”

he observed. (In other words, they felt predation pressure.) Others in Darwin’s party did crueler experiments on these intriguing creatures. “A seaman on board sank one, with a heavy weight attached to it, thinking thus to kill it directly; but when an hour afterwards he drew up the line, the lizard was quite active.”

The birds did not escape this casual sadism either. Darwin noted their “extreme tameness,” adding that “a gun is here almost superfluous; for with the muzzle I pushed a hawk off the branch of a tree.” The doves used to be even tamer before the arrival of the buccaneers and the whalers, Darwin remarked, because the “sailors, wandering through the woods in search of tortoises, always take delight in knocking down the little birds.”

To me, these passages are some of the strangest in the *Beagle* diaries. Darwin lived in a world where, whatever you did, more animals would be along in a minute. When Darwin made camp on what is now Santiago, the land iguanas were so plentiful that he struggled to avoid their nests in the sand. “I cannot give a more forcible proof of their numbers, than by stating, that when we were left at James Island, we could not for some time find a spot free from their burrows, on which to pitch our tent,” he wrote. Three years later, though, a visiting French naval officer was the last person to record any land iguanas on James at all. Feral pigs, descendants of domestic animals introduced by settlers, soon wiped them all out. (A population of iguanas was reintroduced in 2019 from North Seymour Island, and is now thriving.)

All the human eating didn’t help. At Cambridge University, Darwin had belonged to the Glutton Club, which aimed to consume meat “before unknown to the human palate.” In northern Patagonia, he listened to the gauchos tell stories of a rare flightless bird, the petise—a type of rhea with feathered upper legs—which he became desperate to add to his specimen collection. At Port Desire, farther south, one of his shipmates shot and killed what he assumed to be a young ostrich, and served it for dinner. “It was cooked and eaten before my memory returned,” Darwin wrote. Oh no! The bird was the elusive petise. He did save the skin and a

few of the bones, and still managed to get the bird named after him: *Rhea darwini*.

TODAY, DARWIN is known as the great heretic, the man whose work shocked the Victorian establishment and undermined the Church. But the exact heresy he committed is not well understood. He was not the first person to suggest that species evolve—in fact, his own grandfather Erasmus had suggested that all warm-blooded animals might have arisen from “one living filament” in his 1794 book, *Zoonomia*. Darwin was also not the first person to notice that the boundaries between species were more fluid than the Swedish taxonomist Carl Linnaeus had acknowledged. (The Comte de Buffon, a French biologist, had done so at the time.) And he was far from the first Victorian intellectual to question the spurious biblical chronology suggesting that the Earth was created on Sunday, October 23, 4004 B.C.E. He didn’t even come up with the idea of selection pressures, *per se*—he got that from an economist, Thomas Malthus, who suggested that human populations tended to outgrow their available food sources and suffer famines as a result.

No, what offended some of Darwin’s early readers was that his vision of the universe counted humans as just another animal, rather than God’s special creation. Accepting evolution meant having “an ape for a grandfather,” as one observer put it. From the start, Darwin understood the political and religious implications of this, and he knew that advancing the notion publicly would make him a controversial figure. His own wife, Emma, was a devout Christian; some of his friends and colleagues were too.

After returning from the Galápagos, he spent more than two decades noodling in his “transmutation notebooks” without having the courage to expose his ideas, and his evidence, to universal scrutiny. In 1844, he wrote to his friend Joseph Hooker: “At last gleams of light have come, & I am almost convinced (quite contrary to opinion I started with) that species are not (it is like confessing a murder) immutable.” *It is like confessing a murder*. Another decade-plus passed before he was driven into print by the unwelcome



Frigate birds glide in the sky over North Seymour Island. Their breeding and nesting seasons vary by island.

discovery that another scientist, Alfred Russel Wallace, had independently arrived at the same conclusion.

The publication of *Origin*, in 1859, gave everyone in Victorian polite society the opportunity to have an argument that had been brewing for many years. Soon after its release, Darwin’s critics and defenders clashed in a public debate that pitted the fierce Darwinian Thomas Henry Huxley against the bishop of Oxford and the former Captain FitzRoy, who preferred to believe that the fossils they had seen together in Patagonia had been deposited there by the biblical flood. (Darwin was too anxious and flatulent to attend himself.)

History has recorded this as a victory for the Darwinians, and the framing stuck—evolution was an uncomfortable

truth promoted by working scientists and opposed by churchmen and aristocrats. Darwinism was a populist revolt, and for progressives, it also had a racial dimension. If all of humanity were descended from a common ancestor, that challenged the hierarchy of races, in which “Negros” and “savages” were deemed to be lower, less advanced species than Europeans. (*Origin* came out six years before America abolished slavery.)

To many of his contemporaries, Darwinism came to stand for a cold, bleak vision of the universe, what Tennyson had described as “nature, red in tooth and claw” back in the 1850s. Did everything happen for a reason, as Christian tradition had comfortingly taught, or was life a cut-throat struggle for survival? Echoes of the

Malthus text that Darwin drew on had also made it into Charles Dickens's 1843 novella, *A Christmas Carol*, in which the miser Scrooge has no sympathy for anyone who will not go to a workhouse. "If they would rather die," he tells two men collecting for the poor, "they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population."

For Darwin, so much time spent contemplating the natural world subtly changed his attitude toward it. In later life, he was no longer the young man who boasted that killing his first snipe had left him so excited "that I had much difficulty in reloading my gun from the trembling of my hands." On returning to England, he was captivated by Jenny, an orangutan housed at the London Zoo, who played with straw like a "silly listless child." In 1871, his *Descent of Man* went further in positioning us as part of nature, rather than set above it. Even though humans had a "god-like intellect," he wrote, "Man still bears in his bodily frame the indelible stamp of his lowly origin."

Today, the idea that animals are just like us is more apt to be considered mind-expanding than horrifying—and sometimes amusingly delightful, too. On a day trip to North Seymour, an uninhabited island next to Baltra, I watched male frigate birds puffing out their throat sacs to attract a mate. When several of them gather together in a treetop, the Galápagosians call it a "bachelor's bar." Asked about the parenting habits of the birds, our guide informed the woman next to me that, no, the male does not help raise the chicks, because "he is off to another lady." In situations like this, someone will always mutter "typical" from the back.

DISEMBOWELED TORTOISES, stoned birds, drowned iguanas—there's a strange irony about Darwin becoming the world's best-known naturalist. His Beagle diaries, which amount to an animal-murder manual, have inspired subsequent generations to keep as many animals alive as they can. Then again, that is the power of seeing ourselves as part of the great chain of creation—and seeing that chain as easily disrupted rather than divinely ordained.

Just outside Puerto Ayora lies the Charles Darwin Research Station, which

supports the many scientists who make a pilgrimage to these islands. Its executive director is Rakan Zahawi, a restoration ecologist who grew up on another island chain, Hawaii, and accessorizes his khaki field uniform with armfuls of silver and beaded bracelets. His special enthusiasm is scalesia, a group of shrubs descended from the same family as sunflowers. Here in the Galápagos, without competition from trees, the plants grow up to 60 feet tall. Although Darwin did not know it, the genus's 15 species are—like the finches—examples of adaptive radiation: One common ancestor produced many variants, reflecting their specific circumstances.

Now, though, the scalesia forests are under threat from the invasive Asian blackberry, *Rubus niveus*, which was introduced to the islands in the 1960s. The thick vegetation created by the interloper "comes up to the height of this table or even more," Zahawi told me, gesturing a few feet off the floor, "and blocks out sunlight at the ground level." The scalesia seeds germinate but cannot grow. The institute's scientists have studied the blackberry for decades, trying to devise a way to repel it. "The simplest intervention is you take a machete out," Zahawi said.

But that is hard to scale up across thousands of square miles, in remote conditions, so the institute is looking at a technique called "biocontrol"—disrupting the life cycle of an invasive species with

another organism, countering its competitive advantage. For the blackberry, that might be a fungus. A similar problem is presented by *Philornis downsi*, another invasive species, "which we call the avian vampire fly," Zahawi explained, "because part of its life cycle requires a blood meal to complete." That blood often comes from baby birds; too many parasites can kill every fledgling in the nest. The foundation has collaborated with more than two dozen institutions over more than a decade to crack this puzzle, and one possible solution is to introduce a parasitic wasp to eat the parasitic fly. (Perhaps they'll die.) What Darwin might make of this effort—deliberately trying to restore the flora and fauna of the Beagle era—I couldn't begin to imagine. But I had a sense that he would welcome the humility: Biocontrol is treated with caution because scientists recognize the dangers of further disrupting the ecosystem, as the early settlers of the Galápagos did with their pigs, dogs, and cats.

The research institute is also the final resting place of Lonesome George, the giant tortoise that has become an icon for conservation efforts—an endling, the last of the Pinta Island subspecies *Chelonoidis abingdonii*. He was rescued in 1971, and scientists kept hoping to discover a mate—or even a friend—for him. But after a few years, it became obvious that George had been condemned to perpetual



A male frigate bird on North Seymour Island puffs out its throat to attract a mate.

bachelorhood by the feral goats introduced to Pinta by fishermen in the 1950s. When George died, his 40-inch shell—curved upward at the front—and leathery skin were sent to a taxidermist, before being returned to a display case in the forest, preserved “in a temperature-controlled box, like Lenin,” as a friend once described it to me. The tortoise’s bones are stored in the institute’s indoor collection.

The guide to this scientific charnel house was Andrea Carvajal Román, an enthusiastic entomologist who, in observance of the no-shoes rule in the storage facility, was wearing a pair of slippers with the slogan I LOVE BOOBIES. The insect collection alone numbers more than 75,000 specimens. Upstairs, in the bird-and-reptile section, Carvajal Román pulled out drawer after drawer of wonders: five dead penguins, lined up like a serial killer’s victims; a plethora of blue-footed boobies, to illustrate that their aquamarine pigment does not survive taxidermy. And, yes, a white drawer labeled SOLITARIO GEORGE. I asked to hold his vertebrae and leg bones, which weighed as much as a medium-size dog; earlier, I had seen the inside of a tortoise shell and marveled at how the pelvis and ribs were fused to the carapace. (I had imagined a big, wrinkly sock floating freely inside the shell.)

After four decades in captivity, George died in 2012, at more than 100 years old. If Darwin had landed on Pinta, he might have eaten George’s uncle or aunt.

AS WE WAITED to board our return flight at the Baltra airstrip, the guy in front of me stopped to photograph one last land iguana, which was coolly surveying the runway. *Haven’t you seen enough wildlife by now?* I briefly wondered, before catching myself. Of course not. How could you ever see enough of this?

After Darwin returned to England, in 1836, he took the next mail coach home and never left the country again.



The bones of Lonesome George, a giant tortoise that died in 2012, at more than 100 years old

But he never stopped looking, paying attention, collecting. Back in Kent, he spent eight years dissecting barnacles, one of the least-prepossessing animals in the world, after becoming obsessed with a particular parasitic species he’d found off the coast of Chile. (He nicknamed it “Mr. Arthrobalanus.”)

Darwin was never happier than when he was engaged in direct observation, writing to a friend that, after years spent recording his geological findings, “it is delightful to use one’s eyes and fingers again.” But there was another reason to lavish so much care on barnacles—and on the pigeons that he bred in a loft at his home. He knew that a theory was nothing without evidence, and that gathering examples of natural (and, in the case of the pigeons, artificial) selection was crucial. He wanted his idea of “modification” to be bulletproof. He reclassified the world’s barnacles from scratch, exploring their differences, and he proved to his own satisfaction that domestic pigeons were all descended from rock doves.

One of Darwin’s many admirable qualities is that all of this came at a cost, not just to his health, but to the operation of

his mind—as he was poignantly aware. By the end of his life, he had lost his taste for poetry, even Shakespeare, and listening to music just made him think about work again. His brain had become, he noted in his autobiography, “a kind of machine for grinding general laws out of large collections of facts.”

To me, this is Darwin’s great lesson as a writer: You are what you pay attention to. If he could live his life again, he wrote, “I would have made a rule to read some poetry & listen to some music at least once every week; for perhaps the parts of my brain now atrophied could thus have been kept active through use. The loss of these tastes is a loss of happiness, & may possibly be injurious to the intellect, & more probably to the moral character, by enfeebling the emotional part of our nature.” In other words, he wished he was still the young man who’d taken a pocket edition of *Paradise Lost* on the Beagle—just as I sometimes wish I were a little kid, enthralled by a ladybug crawling over my finger. *A*

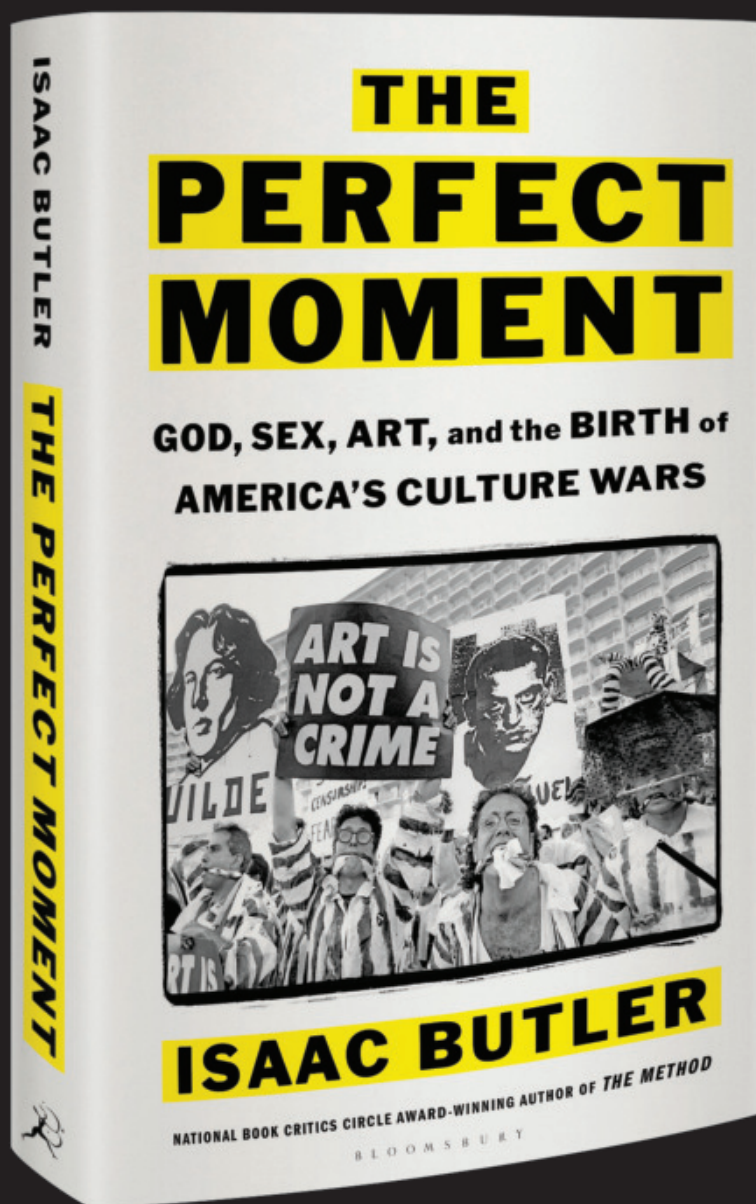
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*Interior With Women
Beside a Linen Cupboard*

Pieter de Hooch, 1663

By Susan Tallman

Pieter de Hooch was a contemporary of Johannes Vermeer in the Dutch city of Delft for a time; they painted similar subjects, in similar costumes, engaged in similarly quotidian activities. But they were quite different artists. De Hooch's 1663 painting *Interior With Women Beside a Linen Cupboard* delivers exactly as little drama and numinous transcendence as its title promises. (It was formerly called *The Good Housewife*, which is hardly better.) The intrigue lies elsewhere.

De Hooch's picture is a puzzle box—an ingenious construction of openings and closings, insides and outsides, revelation and concealment. The sturdy wall behind the standing women with their crisply folded stack of linen is breached in three different places, extending our vista with sudden depth. On the right is a stairway twisting up and out of sight, on the left a window, and in the center a door.

These last two open onto the *voorbuis*, a foyer punctuated with a second, taller window and another doorway, beyond which we can see a sunlit snippet of the outside world—a bit of tree, the suggestion of a

canal, and a building on the opposite side, with its own syncopated grid of windows, doors, and brickwork. (Look again at the spot of sky, diced by overlapping panes of glass, and you might catch a glimpse of the light and structure, the clarity and enigma, of Piet Mondrian.)

Our attention is being endlessly redirected. The brightest things in the picture—that bit of blue heaven and the red-and-white house across the canal—are also the most distant. Meanwhile, the one piece of incipient action is hidden in shadow: a child of 5 or 6, standing on the threshold between what we can see clearly and what we can't, with a *kolf* stick cocked to send a small ball straight out of the picture and into our world.

Looked at one way, De Hooch's scene is assertively ordinary. Looked at another way, it's a lesson in the limits of visibility and knowledge. There's the rectilinear orderliness of floor tiles and bricks, limpid windowpanes, and perfectly folded fabric. And there's mayhem, writ small, in the unpredictable trajectories of a child and a ball. *A*

Susan Tallman, an art historian, is a contributing writer at The Atlantic.

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UNTITLED, 2004

Louise Bourgeois, two hanging aluminum sculptures, both Untitled, 2004 (front: 166.3 x 106.6 x 63.5 cm / 65 1/2 x 42 x 25 inches; back: 182.8 x 106.6 x 116.8 cm / 72 x 42 x 46 inches)
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