CHARACTER WARS
A conflict made in China (or Taiwan) invades Columbia classrooms
by Marc Tracy

A GUTTER PIRATE’S LIFE FOR ME
Washed-up dope fiend philosophers in Tompkins Square
by Andrew Flynn

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ALSO: MTV’S MADE, EPCOT COLUMBIANA, DISILLUSIONED MAJORS
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This issue of THE BLUE AND WHITE is the last under Editor-in-Chief Zachary Bendiner.

www.theblueandwhite.org  COVER: “Character Attacks!” by Jerone Hsu

March 2006
You might not know the following figures—but you should. In Campus Characters, The Blue and White introduces you to a handful of Columbians who are up to interesting and extraordinary things, and whose stories beg to be shared. If you’d like to suggest a Campus Character, send us an e-mail at theblueandwhite@columbia.edu.

**Thomas Reardon**

Thomas Reardon, GS, confesses to me that he uses Mozilla Firefox. This wouldn’t be a big deal, except that he created Microsoft Internet Explorer.

We have just finished a class on Homer. He is a lanky, dark-haired man who doesn’t look his 35 years, and he stands out in class. He often arrives late, and while most of us stare with glazed eyes at difficult passages of Herodotus, Reardon—he always goes by his last name alone—prods the professor to explain minute points of grammar, his expressive face scrunched in puzzlement.

Nothing in Reardon’s background suggests he was destined for Columbia’s classics department by way of dot-com zillionairedom. He was born in a small New Hampshire town to working class, Irish Catholic parents, who adopted eight children after they had Thomas, their tenth and last biological child. His father was a bartender, his mother a waitress. His brothers and sisters have followed similar paths: today, they are truck drivers, plumbers, waitresses.

Reardon was different. He had a gift for math, and by the time he was 15, his Catholic high school had run out of classes for him. He started taking math and computer science classes at MIT. By high school graduation, he had completed the equivalent of half of a Master’s degree in math. That would be the end of his formal education for more than a decade.

Reardon moved to North Carolina to work in a Duke medical lab. There, he met Matt McCaughan, co-founder of Merge Records, member of the band Superchunk, and a Columbia grad. McCaughan introduced Reardon to Chapel Hill’s music scene, where he began DJing.

He also met Bill Gates’ girlfriend. She was then working for Symantec, where Reardon eventually landed a job. She introduced him, at age 21, to the Microsoft CEO. The hiring process was informal; Reardon doesn’t think they even knew how young he was when they offered him a senior position.

At Microsoft, he was a big-picture man. Less than a year before the launch of Windows 95, he looked at Netscape and saw the way the wind was blowing. Microsoft couldn’t wait another two or three years—the new version of Windows needed a built-in web browser. Bill Gates agreed.

So Reardon put together a “cowboy team” to write Internet Explorer in six months. “We sort of just rodeoed the motherfucker together,” he said. “And it was a piece of shit. It was horrible.” He added that it got much better, but acknowledges that, partly because of a culture of complacency at Microsoft, it hasn’t kept up.

In 1999, he left Microsoft and started his own company, Avogadro, which made cell phone messaging software. It was less lucrative than Microsoft, but more satisfying: “There’s always a question of whether you did well because you were one of the people who drove, or just because you were on the bus,” he says of working at Microsoft.

In 2003, he retired and moved to the West Vil-
lage. As he pondered his future, he remembered a meeting with renowned physicist Freeman Dyson in which the conversation had turned unexpectedly from physics to Herodotus. He remembers saying how he would like to brush up on his Latin. “Yes,” Dyson responded, “but, you know, Herodotus is in Greek.” And so Reardon resolved to get the classical education he’d never had. —Brendan Pierson

KATE BERTHOLD

With her elastic facial expressions and endless supply of voices, Kate Berthold, C ’06, is a natural—both on stage and in life—at slipping into character. Kate describes herself as an “actor/playwright/lesbian solo performance artist,” but she’s probably best known for the acting—whether it’s for sold-out crowds of 100 in the Lerner Black Box or 1,000 in Roone Arledge Auditorium. Soon, Kate will appear before an audience of millions.

Kate auditioned for a part on Rosie O’Donnell’s new nationally syndicated LGBT sketch program on a whim, entering an open casting call of thousands without an Actors’ Equity card or a formal headshot. (In place of the latter, she brought a photo taken by her mom.) Anyone familiar with Kate’s work on Columbia’s stages, though, shouldn’t be surprised Berthold got the gig. In three consecutive Varsity Show appearances, she displayed an impressive range, depicting a maniacal Spec edit or, a kindly Lifelong Learner, and a pompous king of the gods. It’s not every actress who can convincingly—and hilariously—play Zeus.

But Kate’s high-profile performances tend to overshadow her other talents. She plays the guitar, piano, and cello, has studied painting in Italy, and is currently working on a novel about a brother and sister who fall in love. Her passion for both comedy and writing explains why she counts Ellen DeGeneres (the female comedian) and Ellen McLaughlin (the Barnard playwriting teacher) as major influences.

Like any artistically minded Columbia student, Kate has strong opinions about what she does and doesn’t like. For example, she only enjoys music with “interesting chord progressions,” citing Ben Folds and, with a self-deprecating eye-roll, Ani DiFranco as favorites. Kate claims to listen purely for the sound, not the words, but as the resident lyricist for the music improv troupe Tea Party, she’s demonstrated a keen ability to turn a phrase. And when Cam’ron’s “Hey Ma” came onto Café 212’s stereo system during an interview, she began to rap along from memory to lines like, “You smoke, I smoke, I drink, me too, well good/ ‘Cause we gon’ get high tonight.”

With her love of rap and hatred of country music—she points to the Lynyrd Skynyrd lyric, “My hair’s turnin’ white, my neck’s always been red, my collar’s still blue” as exhibit A for the prosecution—Kate might not seem so different from your average Columbia student. Yet she has the kind of technical skills most college kids dream about: she cooks homemade pasta, tends bar, cuts her friends’ hair, and welds. Yes, welds. “It’s the gayest thing I’ve ever done,” she says.

Looking toward a future presumably not in welding, Kate can cross at least one specific postgraduate goal of hers off the list: last semester she starred in a one-woman show on campus. Kate’s semi-autobiographical solo piece, The Samantha Show, which addressed her sexuality and the death of her father, illustrated her main theory of comedy, that “everything needs an undercurrent of sadness.” In the performance, Kate uncannily inhabited a variety of gawky misfits, from a British janitor named Terry to the eponymous little girl with two dads and a love of unicorns. But the show also offered a rare glimpse of perhaps Kate’s most stunning character yet, one without any peculiar voice or facial tic: herself. —C. Mason Wells
To the Editor:

Promoting racial diversity is hard, as Spectator’s lackluster history of doing so demonstrates. Talking about race, however, can be just as difficult. Unfortunately, “The White Pages,” Josie Swindler’s well-researched, well-intentioned, yet flawed article about race at Spectator, demonstrates that as well.

The problem begins, appropriately enough, at the beginning of the article. Ms. Swindler details how last year, while serving as Spectator’s news training editor, she watched as “the newest members of the Spectator news staff trickled in,” taking care to note “the lone black girl sitting in the middle” of “a group of 30.” As anyone who has ever felt excluded from a group may know, having the person in charge of making everyone feel comfortable and accepted distinguish you from everyone else does not promote a welcoming atmosphere.

It makes sense that Ms. Swindler would note this student, though, because her theory of race dictates that this “lone black girl” should represent every other African-American student on campus. Solely because of the color of her skin, she could “bring a new perspective to the paper and open doors to historically underexposed areas of coverage.” Spectator, she writes, needs these “minority reporters” so that it can “cover minority issues well.”

Although the article doesn’t specify exactly what “minority issues” are, Ms. Swindler implies that they have something to do with covering the Morningside Heights community. That coverage of this community has increased dramatically in recent years under the leadership of editors who are not minorities seems to have escaped her notice. That compelling minority reporters to minority issues creates a type of segregated coverage that excludes them from covering other, presumably non-minority issues also is not mentioned.

The article unthinkingly accepts that minorities should cover minority issues because it also unthinkingly accepts that race makes people fundamentally different from each other. That is why it concludes that Spectator’s Managing Board has not “had a single black editor in the last four years” because Spectator promotes people like those who already work for it. As the article says, “When new editors take the reins, they are so similar to the ones they succeeded that they mightn’t have switched at all.” But even assuming that Spectator promotes only people who resemble a pre-existing personality type, why does skin color always and forever prevent someone from fitting that type?

This isn’t to say that a minority editor might not have, for instance, noticed the troubling implications of a line in a column Spectator recently published that compared Columbia athletes, who have a large minority population relative to the rest of the University, to chimpanzees. Heritage, racial and otherwise, can shape people in profound ways, ways that might change how they cover the news.

But by accepting the centrality of race so uncritically, the article promotes the mentality it claims to attack. Who, after all, would want to work for a publication so they can, as the article claims, “represent” hundreds of other people with a similar heritage on campus? It’s unfair, and, frankly, racist in the strictest sense of the term to expect a “lone black girl” to do so because of her skin color.

In her attempt to understand why Spectator has failed at achieving the type of diversity it should have, Ms. Swindler might have started by examining her own attitude toward race. Spectator has struggled in this area for so long in part because people like her, people so confident they are right that they cannot see the ways race corrupts their own thinking, have been in charge of it. As a consequence, even when these people have recognized the problem of diversity in Spectator, as she has rightly done, they haven’t been able to do anything to fix it.

By this time next year, Spectator will hopefully have the most diverse staff in its history. While that’s not saying much, making a bad situation less bad is one of our top priorities. But we don’t want to promote diversity because we believe only certain people can cover certain stories. We want to promote diversity because we want Spectator to be a comfortable place for people to work, and having a diverse staff helps indicate that we are succeeding. At this time next year, you are more than welcome to see if we succeeded. If we do, however, it will be in spite of this article and the mentality behind it, not because of it.

Steve Moncada
Spectator Editor-in-Chief

Tim Shenk
Spectator Managing Editor
A conflict made in China (or Taiwan) invades Columbia classrooms.

By Marc Tracy

The first word that Columbia students learn when studying Mandarin Chinese is tong zhi. It means “comrade.” This lesson is inevitably accompanied by a warning from the teacher. In China, a country ruled by the state Communist party, tong zhi means “comrade” and carries unmistakably positive connotations; in Taiwan, where the dominant language is also Mandarin, tong zhi is a derogatory term for a homosexual.

These are some of the political difficulties of Mandarin instruction, which only add to the challenge of teaching a tonal, character-based, non-Indo-European tongue. The best textbooks come from China and reflect a certain bias. “After a year, I couldn’t ask how to go to the bathroom, how to get a taxi,” said one male student who preferred to remain anonymous, “but I could say, ‘I will submit to the People’s Liberation Army.’”

The department is stuck in an unenviable position. “Around the current textbook we have built a large [apparatus] of exercises, tests,” said Professor Liu Lening, the Chinese Language Program Director. The department, to its credit, is currently working on a textbook of its own. And, most stu-
Students seem to take the ideological quirks in stride. “People make a lot of jokes about the first-year textbook,” said Lars Dabney, C ’07, but he says that’s the limit of its indoctrinating effect. There’s “no propaganda value these days.”

Trickier is navigating the waters between Chinese and Taiwanese faculty and students. For them, tong zhi is the least of it. The fervency of each side can be downright startling. “You’re going to run into an iron wall if you talk to the teachers” about the conflict, Dabney cautioned: it might “look bad for the department,” which would be “against all sense of Chinese propriety.”

Professor Liu, who is from Xian, the ancient former capital of the Middle Kingdom, did not disappoint. He denied that the Taiwan controversy affected instruction, and added, “I would discourage our instructors to discuss [the Taiwan issue] in a language class, particularly to impose their own views.” Another Mandarin instructor did not respond to e-mails. Professor Robert Hymes, the chair of Columbia’s East Asian Languages and Culture (EALAC) Department, where Mandarin study is housed, declined an interview request, writing in an e-mail, “I’m really not well qualified to talk about actual or potential China/Taiwan splits among teachers of Chinese language.” He added, “I have not perceived such splits in our own language program.”

However, extensive conversations with students and teachers convinced me that, even if ill feelings have been swept under the rug, there nonetheless remains a lump underneath it that students and faculty can still trip over.

I consistently faced a veneer of restraint that was punctured at various moments by a telling pedantry. For example, the name, or names, of the country, or countries, involved in the conflict were endlessly scrutinized.

One senior of Taiwanese descent insisted on calling the People’s Republic of China “China” because calling it “mainland China” could imply that Taiwan is actually a part of China. Dr. Wang Zhirong, the former Acting Director of the Chinese Language Program, a nice, impeccably poised woman who hails from China, referred to her homeland as “the mainland,” and her fellow countrymen as “mainlanders.” (This article will refer to the People’s Republic of China as “China” and the Republic of China as “Taiwan” strictly for clarity’s sake.)

Few outside of the EALAC bubble seem aware of the tensions at all. Even among those students in the know, direct evidence is hard to come by. The teachers are “hardly going to bitch about that to us,” Dabney explained; instead, they prefer to wage a sort of proxy war: “What the teachers bitch about to us is pedagogical.”

I spoke with a dozen or so students—both on and off the record—of varying ethnic and political backgrounds. They overwhelmingly perceived a rift between Chinese and Taiwanese faculty. “There is a gigantic rift, there are definitely two parties, and they dislike each other,” and it can be defined along China-Taiwan lines, Dabney said. The Chinese members appear currently to hold the upper hand, though this was not always the case. The schism has proved distracting and has cultivated an atmosphere not conducive to quality instruction. At its worst, according to student sources, it may have helped drive away a gifted teacher.

Feigning ignorance, I asked both Chinese and Taiwanese interviewees to tell me what precipitated the China-Taiwan split in 1949. Ev-
Everyone gave me more or less the same story. Professor Liu—who demurred, “I am not a historian”—and Dr. Wang were particularly scrupulous in giving an impartial account.

Briefly: in 1949, Mao Tse-Tung’s Communist Party defeated Chiang Kai-Shek’s Nationalist Party (the Kuomintang) in the Chinese Civil War, prompting the exodus of Nationalist sympathizers to Taiwan, an island off of China’s southeastern coast. From Taiwan, the Nationalists established the Republic of China and claimed sovereignty over both the island and the mainland. The Communist Party established the People’s Republic of China in China and declared itself the sole government of the Chinese people, including the people of Taiwan; it deemed the Republic of China an illegitimate entity and stated as its objective the reunification of all “Chinese people.” That remains the Chinese government’s official position, even as it has, at least in the economic realm, abandoned its Marxist-Maoist ideology. Taiwan, meanwhile, maintains control over a booming economy and democratic political system, but receives almost no official international recognition—it does not, for example, have a seat in the United Nations.

There is an ongoing debate in Taiwan about whether Taiwan should assert full, legal sovereignty. Support for total independence rarely garners more than 25 to 30 percent in polls, and the official goal of the current Taiwanese government is still eventual reunification. Recently, however, independence advocates have received more votes and popular backing than ever before.

According to Wayne Ting, C ’06, who studies Mandarin, Taiwanese-Americans tend to be disproportionately, and vigorously, pro-independence: “The people who are pro-Taiwanese independence are very vocal. I think being in America radicalized them.” That said, Ting’s family came to Taiwan with Chiang Kai-Shek in ’49, and are more likely to identify with the Chinese. Indeed, another senior of Taiwanese descent, whose family lived on the island before 1949, considers his vigorous Taiwanese self-identification and opposition to China anything but radical. Meanwhile, Chinese and Chinese-Americans tend to advocate the status quo, keeping an eye towards eventual reunification. But these political differences leave both sides with a lingering distrust of each other.

According to most of the students I interviewed, this distrust is consistently felt, even if it rarely makes itself conspicuous. “The sense I get,” said Lala Wu, B ’07, who studies Mandarin, “is that there’s tension and lots of the

"After a year, I couldn’t ask how to go to the bathroom, how to get a taxi, but I could say, ‘I will submit to the People’s Liberation Army.’"
article that had a dubious title, and the student said something like, ‘Must be a Taiwanese newspaper.’ Another time, someone made an insulting comment about Taiwan, and the other Taiwanese student in the class retorted with ‘We’re more advanced.’” The Taiwanese senior I spoke to felt less comfortable about retorting than the student Kao described, explaining, “If you start an argument, you’re totally outnumbered,” or labeled “an outsider.”

From tong zhi onward, the difference between the Chinese and Taiwanese dialects of Mandarin has served as a way for Chinese teachers to implicitly frame the class around their political backgrounds. Kao wrote of one Mandarin class, “there would be a comment about phrases that are commonly used in Taiwan that my instructor said were incorrect,” even though, she explained, “it’s really just a cultural difference. My mother is a Chinese teacher as well, and she said the Taiwanese phrases were correct as well.”

The department holds that any intradepartmental acrimony is minor and unrelated to faculty members’ birthplaces. Professor Liu said, “We are trying hard to create a harmonious working environment,” and believes they have been successful in doing so. Most of the students I talked to asserted that their experiences in Mandarin classes have been overall positive ones, despite the divide (and large class sizes). Dr. Wang also denied a departmental rift; no conflict, according to her, has risen above the level of “friendly disagreement.”

Both further assured me that birthplace plays no role in hiring and promotion decisions. “The only standard I consider,” Dr. Wang said “is ‘can she carry out the work she’s supposed to do?’” Professor Liu said, “When we have an opening, then we will ignore the background,” and, “seniority will be the key issue [in promotion decisions].”

But several students told me they believed that being from China is an advantage that has trumped qualification and seniority. “It strikes me that an experienced teacher would have to quit and they would hire a less qualified teacher,” the male student said. What’s clear is that an atmosphere has been cultivated in which students do not expect even basic fairness.

Students did point to one case of a Taiwanese instructor being passed over and made to feel not entirely welcome in part because she was Taiwanese.
Chen Pao-Yuen, or Chen Laoshi (all Chinese instructors are known by their surname and “Laoshi”), was an extremely popular Taiwanese lecturer who left over the summer. Several of her former students praised her in terms more worthy of fan club than CULPA. In fact, she has one: the Facebook group “Chen Laoshi’s Sea Otters,” an allusion to her self-deprecating references to the fact that she made less money than a trainer of sea otters. She ceased to be a Columbia Mandarin instructor before the beginning of this school year.

Ranya Saadawi, B ’08, described Chen Laoshi, who taught her introductory Mandarin, as “a really great teacher, [who] made everyone really love the subject.” Chad Diehl, a Ph.D. candidate in Modern Japanese History, also had Chen Laoshi for his first year of Chinese. He praised her ability to bring an outdated textbook to life. She frequently used games: for example, she would divide the class into two, write sentences with missing phrases on the blackboard, tape the missing phrases to students’ backs, and tell each team to grab the correct answers from the backs of their opponents. Pandemonium would ensue, complete with students hiding under desks and stuffing their bras. The students all felt engaged—she “made the class a lot more fun, but you really learned,” Saadawi said. Chen apparently could be, at times, outspoken in her support for Taiwan, although the students who mentioned this to me tended to laugh it off. The Facebook group’s description says it best: “We all have great love for Chen Laoshi. TAIWANESE love.”

The former students of Chen Laoshi whom I interviewed unanimously believed that she left at least in part because she felt certain pressures coming from within the department, and that her Taiwanese identity played a role.

The precise impact of the divide is impossible to measure, and there is little evidence of the rift elsewhere within the EALAC Department. The extent to which it caused Chen Laoshi’s departure is unclear.

But Chen Laoshi’s students wholly believe that her background helped lead to her departure. It is good to know that Professor Liu believes that “language teaching is linguistic work; it shouldn’t be a political science.” For the Chinese language department, it appears that this motto is honored as much in the breach as in the observance.

“Whatever it is that’s going on is taking its toll on the students,” the male student remarked. Turning to the matter of Chen Laoshi, he said: “One of my favorite teachers of all time left because she was mistreated, and now my teacher doesn’t know my name. [Chen] gave me my name.”
Professors’ Kids—They’re Just Like Us!

Like the ‘rents, free riding FacBrats have their own lessons to impart—mainly, professors aren’t gods.

BY JOSIE SWINDLER

It’s weird to be a professor’s kid, right? Like when Dad makes you read the entire Beckett anthology he just edited. Or when Mom’s dalliances on the lecture circuit leave you all alone in poorly carpeted hotel rooms. Professors aren’t real people. They do not have homes or first names. And because they are asexual, they don’t actually breed.

Or so you’d think—yet they do, somehow, have children. Which raises a new set of questions: how can academics, who work in a field in which the line between vocation and life is ground to a fine powder, also be parents? Jeffrey Sachs doesn’t read Sustainable Development Monthly on the john? Joseph Stiglitz doesn’t balance his checkbook with an eye toward the Chinese market? Do professors really find time to go to soccer games and ballet recitals with the short, genetically similar people that are their spawn?

On a campus where the star professors have groupies with names like Bono and Angelina, some faculty members’ children just don’t get it. “The whole idea that professors are celebrities is stupid to me,” said Dahlia Goldfeld, C ’08, whose father Dorian has taught mathematics here for longer than she’s been alive. “They’re people you can call by their first name. It’s just a job in many ways.”

“Faculty Brats” like Goldfeld know the sad truth about their parents: “They’re just human.” (Apparently, students have spotted History professor Eric Foner shopping at…Morton Williams! They’re just like us!)

Judging by the number of e-mails I sent, and the number of non-answers I received, I’m assuming that many of these students don’t want to be identified. Those who did speak guessed that the silent ones don’t want to be outed either because they’re embarrassed by the attention or because others will think they were admitted to Columbia because of their DNA. Julian Arato, C ’07, son of political theory instructor Jean Cohen, thinks the admissions department assumes that children of faculty have developed certain, well, faculties: if their mom or pop teaches here, don’t we expect them to be pretty darn intelligent too?

Illustrated by Jerone Hsu
Victoria Johnston, C ‘06, whose father is David Johnston, the Joseph Straus Professor of Political Philosophy and the Core Curriculum, says she made her dad stay out of the admissions game. No one knew about her connections during freshman year, when he was away on sabbatical. But now she doesn’t care: he’s a political philosopher and she’s an astrophysics major—they work in different galaxies. Anyway, she claims to know several would-be FacBrats who were rejected by Columbia, office Christmases parties be damned.

Johnston didn’t even think about Columbia until the long drive back from a dismal Carnegie Mellon tour. And Pardis Dabashi, C ’08, and daughter of Hamid Dabashi, the Hagop Kevorkian Professor of Iranian Studies, once held an aversion to the city and therefore to Columbia.

Others felt compelled to go to Columbia, and with good reason: professors’ kids don’t have to pay for college. FacBrats studying at Columbia right now are enjoying a free ride because of their moms and dads—though they’re still charged for room and board. (It’s unclear how many FacBrats go here. According to the Student Services Department, there are no numbers readily available.)

The free ride, according to Goldfeld, lets her analyze her education without making cost-benefit judgments on each class. $40,000 puts a lot of pressure on a student to enjoy the place, she said. But she and Arato also said the free tuition put a lot of pressure of a different kind on them: it made it really hard to turn Columbia down. But the free ride may have its downside, especially if you want to go to a school without a core curriculum. “Honestly the only bad part is that he teaches at Columbia,” Goldfeld said.

The FacBrats I talked to seemed happy with the situation. They tend to avoid the ‘rents, except when they want a free lunch or an extra sweatshirt. It is weird to bump into Mom on College Walk, but at least you know why she’s there. Johnston, now a senior, thinks she’s only run into her dad once in four years. Still, according to Arato, it can get bizarre. “It’s a little weird taking classes with and reading books by people who I thought were just my parents’ buddies when I was younger,” he said.

But, because of his parents’ buddies, Arato gets expert advice—his mom tips him off to the best classes, “like a beefed-up CULPA.” And Johnston’s dad actually understands the jokes in the Varsity Show, which she works on.

Familiarity with the school also breeds comfort. Goldfeld said growing up around Columbia has made the whole place less mysterious, the professors less intimidating, and the administration less respectable. “It’s not scary to ever approach a professor,” she told me. For faculty kids, every hour is an office hour.

There’s also the fact that the FacBrats grew up in the same house as someone who is paid to be really, really smart. “He taught me almost all of middle and high school math and science...And he’s definitely the best math/science teacher I’ve ever had,” Brianna Hailey, C ’07, wrote in an e-mail about her dad, popular physics professor Charles Hailey. He even sweetened the deal—going beyond levers and pendulums to draw Brianna diagrams of the space-time continuum and explain the possibility of time-travel through black holes.

But be forewarned: like father, not necessarily like son. “The most frustrating thing about being my father’s daughter on campus is the assumption that I share all of his opinions,” said apolitical Pardis Dabashi about her outspoken father. It’s “disheartening,” she said, when other students judge her because they disagree with something her dad wrote.

During last year’s MEALAC debacle, when some students accused professors of ideological intimidation in the classroom, Pardis Dabashi saw men she had known for years criticized. Of the attacks on her father’s friends, such as Professors George Saliba and Joseph Massad, Dabashi said, “It was sad. I know these people and I know that they’re good people.” When she had to introduce herself in a discussion section for Intro to Islamic Civilization last year, she recalled feeling tension when she announced, “My name is Pardis Dabashi.” (“There’s always a look you get from other students,” Arato said.)

Few students seem interested in following in the footsteps of their faculty folks. No one I talked to was much interested in their parent’s field, though Arato thinks he will breach the ivory tower.

Other than some gossiping (“She wants all the dirt,” Arato said of his mom), the students and their parents largely remain blissfully, and mutually, ignorant. No one’s afraid one professor might tattle to another; and, as Johnston said, “He knows I don’t do all the reading.”
A Gutter Pirate’s Life For Me

When it comes to washed-up dope fiend philosophers on the Lower East Side, even the Times Metro Section is fallible.

BY ANDREW FLYNN

When Thom Corn erected an oil derrick in Tompkins Square Park last summer, he knew he was going to provoke a reaction; he just didn’t know that someone would try to burn it down. Corn had considered carving notches on the sides of the sculpture to mark the casualties of the Iraq war, or having it spew blood. In the end, he made his artwork a simple reminder of what he calls “the Bush administration’s never-ending quest for oil.” But L.E.S. Jewels didn’t get it. Jewels thought it was an homage to our president. Like most other New Yorkers, he really hates our president. Unlike most other New Yorkers, he pushed over the oil derrick and tried to set it on fire.

I am proud to say that my obsession with L.E.S. Jewels predates this watershed. A week earlier, on August 18, I saw the photo in the New York Times Metro Section and did a double-take. There was a man with a pentagram tattooed on his left cheek, contentedly lying on the cement next to an unidentified hand fisting a dollar bill.

He looked a little like Kid Rock. The caption: “He says that he has overdosed four times in the last week. Yesterday, he gave a friend a dollar to get beer.” The article that followed: “Six Deaths, but No Panic in the Park; It May Be Killer Dope, but Addicts Say They Can Handle It.”

The Times had dispatched a writer to the infamously drug-saturated Tompkins Square Park on the Lower East Side to investigate rumors of a deadly batch of heroin and gather wisdom from the resident sages. The result
was a crueler Tortilla Flat, a brief yet epic journey to a land ruled by a trippy oligarchy of junkies. Bane, Skywalker, Dante, and Jewels himself warned the reporter about the perils of heroin. (Thanks to Skywalker, I have adopted a practice of the “kings of old”—having my servants taste the heroin first.) A wise, sober 20-year-old man calling himself the “philosopher” reminded readers that there are no good batches of heroin. What the hell?

Google did not bring clarity. There was a follow-up article in the Villager, notable mainly for a black-and-white photo of Jewels embracing what looked to be the cast of some forgotten '80s sitcom. Under the headline “Hobo punks said to have wandered from their roots,” the myth of the “Crusties” unfolded. Jewels is the leader of an underground radical sect—“the punk subculture who [sic] squat in the park like gypsies, black clad and heavily tattooed.” They weren’t just an impromptu gang of junkie-philosophers.

Jewels bemoaned the lack of political idealism among the younger junkies, and announced the movement’s new name: the Gutter Pirates. He denied attempting to burn the oil derrick.

Tompkins Square Park has a long history of counterculture radicalism. It saw massive protests during the Vietnam War and, later, the beginnings of A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada’s Hare Krishna movement. In the 1980s a “tent city” emerged, crowded with the homeless and rife with hard drugs. Was the park still far out—a lawless ‘60s holdover, populated by loopy anarchists?

I needed to find out.

I ASK QUESTIONS

I sort of expected L.E.S. Jewels to be waiting at 9th Street and Avenue A to greet me with a big hug—it was all in the pictures! But he wasn’t…and neither was anyone else. There were no junkies. Or hobos. Or anarchist punks. There was a guy standing in the doorway to the bathroom eating a baloney sandwich, but that was about it. The park was, however, filled with droves of small children in costumes. Perhaps visiting Tompkins Square Park in the early afternoon on the Sunday before Halloween was not such a good idea. My next endeavor—planned for 5:00 p.m. on a weekday afternoon to maximize the squatter action—likewise yielded nothing. Actually, a full week of this turned out much the same, to my dismay.

Anarchism was nowhere to be seen. (See “Randomly Wandering Around” on p. 18 for the “isms” that still remain.) There were no obvious signs of the Park’s zany legacy, nor could I find the kings of new, the kings of old, or the Gutter Pirates. Observation would not suffice. I needed to talk to people.

“The ’88 riots.” Amy looked up at me from the picture of Jewels I’d printed from Gawker. I started my search at the park’s recreation office, and I was making rapid progress. “Riots?” I asked. “Yeah. Back in ’88 the police cleaned out the whole tent city. But, that’s before I started, and lots of guys around here look like this.”

The Times had painted the merry band of anarchists as if they ran the place; they couldn’t really be unknowns. “You’re sure you’ve never heard of a group of people who call themselves the ‘Crusties’?” I asked. “Nah,” Amy said, “that’s gotta be a long time ago.”

There were the two men I had previously seen during a sordid public restroom experience (see “Sexually Transmitted Disease-ism” in the sidebar). Both of them were 40-year residents of the area, and both of them knew nothing. “Is that supposed to be some Irish gang?” the thin, hyperac-
tive one with dreadlocks running down his back asked me.

Even if no one knew about the Crusties, everyone knew about their leader. “Oh that guy? Yeah I remember that guy who knocked down the oil rig,” the thin man said. Then he looked me straight in the face. “I don’t think they like him around here.” Paul was more frank: “He’s a big pain in the butt.”

Any mention of Jewels and the gang inexorably led back to the pivotal moment in the park’s collective consciousness—the ’88 riots. The thin man claimed he was in California at the time, but somehow he was able to happily recount the chaos. “The police came in”—he was gyrating, flapping his arms vigorously—“two busloads of cops, buses going sixty miles an hour down Avenue B. The cops all jumped out with shields, masks, riot gear, started beating the homeless, telling them, ‘We told you to get out!’”

“A lot of those guys in the tents,” the thin man’s fatter accomplice chimed in, his jowly face shaking with laughter, “a lot of those white guys were lawyers and they sued the city.” The thin one started hopping up and down, seconding the fat man’s story.

Then I told them I was 19 and had only lived in the city for two years. Ecstatic, they told me the one about the man who posed as a social worker and fed his chopped-up girlfriend as stew to the tent dwellers. (In July 2004, Daniel Rakowitz, also known as the “Butcher of Tompkins Square,” was found by a court to be mentally ill but no longer dangerous.)

Back to reality. Paul balked at the lawyer story, looking almost offended when I asked if he could verify it. “No,” he said. “These two guys just graduated from law school, became lawyers, then they went up on the roof, and they threw bricks, like that, off the roof. They got busted and they had to do 30 days community service here. That’s the only lawyers I know that were here.”

He also gave me the law-abiding version of the ’88 riots. “I didn’t like it,” he confessed, “but, I mean, you know sometimes you gotta understand their problems, too. And then you also have your job that you gotta do, just like the police. It’s either you bring back your neighborhood, revive your neighborhood, or let it go to the dogs. So we chose to revive the neighborhood.”

Paul pointed to the basketball courts, which take up roughly a quarter of the park’s space, and to the dog-run. “It takes a lot of poop off the streets,” he said, “I can tell you that.” The employees are strict about alcohol and the park now closes at midnight. There are children on swings, not radicals on soapboxes. The wide central plaza, once home to a band shell and the tent city, is kept spic-and-span by community service workers. It is empty most of the time. “It’s good,” said Paul, “Let me tell you, it’s good.”

The bathroom guys quickly agreed. “You used to be able to walk from here to there,” the thin man said as he gestured to the walkway between Avenues A and B that we stood on, “and you could buy a thousand dollars worth of shit.” He supported the changes. “Needle City was not good for a public place,” he told me. “People are
always coming here with kids and their families, and drugs are no good with that.

I always felt safe in the new Tompkins Square Park, even at night. In scrubbing the sidewalks clean, however, it seemed like the do-gooders had also wiped away any sense of historical continuity. Despite anecdotes of urban cannibalism and otherwise, the master narrative was strikingly formulaic: the park was plagued by drugs and social unrest, then the police came, used a little gratuitous brutality and voila! A poster child for urban renewal!

If not for my obsessive quest for L.E.S. Jewels, I would have accepted this story. But the Crusties didn’t fit. Their persistent troublemaker-of-a-spokesman clearly pissed a lot of people off, but they were still somehow missing from a redemptive tale that climaxed in the park’s de-junkification. So far, no one could answer one simple question: where did all the junkies go?

**THINGS START MAKING SENSE**

*I’t’s gone indoors.* Van Asher knew exactly what I was looking for and solved my quandary with a frighteningly chilly nonchalance. He is muscular, slightly weathered, and exudes the aura of a professional wrestler. He loves his German shepherd. An employee of a needle exchange program, he informed me that the crack-down occurred at a moment that allowed drug-dealing in the park to become obsolete. “Since the ’80s it’s gotten harder to see the drugs,” he told me. “They’ve moved inside and they can be dealt out more discreetly with beepers and cell phones. Also, the scene has shifted as a whole. The cost and risk has gotten prohibitive in New York, so it’s moved to other places.”

He also knew the answer to why I couldn’t find the Crusties. “They’re travelers,” he said, “as well as punk rockers. When it gets cold, everyone who doesn’t have a dope addiction so bad that they have to stay, moves.” Van’s sidekick Patrick—I don’t know anything else about him—stood at our side throughout the conversation, occasionally sticking his head in: “Come in the summer and you’ll see hundreds of Crusties out here hanging around.”

Even though Van acknowledged the benefits of renewal, his view of the park was less black and white than Paul’s, and, as his job dictates, focused more on the lingering problems. He pointed at nearby buildings that are slated to become expensive private dorms and suggested that they would entail the end of good, low-income housing. When asked about the alleged spike in heroin deaths that sparked Jewels’ arrival into my life, he shook his head. “There was no spike in heroin deaths. There was a lot of publicity because two young white girls with big breasts died.”

Van is probably right on this front. A *Slate* col-

**Illustrated by Jerone Hsu**
When I first journeyed into the dark heart of Crusty-land, I discovered that anarchism was not as popular as I had been led to believe. I decided to compile a list of the more fashionable “-isms” that I observed.

EXISTENTIALISM. The Park resembles the ruins of the Roman Empire; the scattered remnants of one-time hobo kings look on as barbarian yuppies assert their dominance. Every time I visited, elderly men with glazed-over expressions and bags of recyclables on their shoulders stumbled out of the park en masse. One shouted, “See you tomorrow” with unrestrained glee to a friend, as if he were headed home from an office job.

FASCISM. Waiting outside on Avenue A. Rolling through every hour. Sitting near the dog-run. I never saw anything remotely dangerous happening, but the popo presence was heavy. Always.

ISOLATIONISM. The park can be easily broken down into self-contained factions. The visitors traverse the park after work, stroll through with baby carriages, or eat lunch on the benches. The barbarians, ranging from those wearing Uggs to those reading the New Yorker with their tortoiseshell glasses, confine themselves to the dog-run. Homeless people sit in isolated clumps, dispersed throughout the park but favoring the extremities. Young children and parents fill the playgrounds. Older kids use the basketball courts for skateboarding. And there are the craggy men who congregate around the nearby wooden tables, bundled as though they were manning an arctic tanker, drinking what may or may not be Vodka from disposable yellow cups, and speaking in some Eastern European tongue. I have been told they are Polish.

ALCOHOLISM. While in an Avenue A coffee shop one day, I heard a huge disturbance behind me. Three men with a teapot full of what appeared to be hard liquor had not so subtly taken a seat at one of the tables. I had seen one of the guys before; in fact, I had seen him a couple days earlier peeing on a trash can. The barista soon kicked them out.

BOBOISM. More than once I approached a bench where someone youngish in un-coordinated, shabby clothes was sitting, only to turn back at the sight of an iPod. Damn you prissy faux-bohemians! And damn you David Brooks for robbing me of the pleasure of making up a name for this!

SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED DISEASE-ISM. My only truly sketchy experience involved the classically dilapidated public restroom. A shady yet distinctly un-anarchistic character perennially loitered in the doorway, either reading or staring into space. Inside, the lively conversation I overheard ranged from tax evasion to marriage in attempts to avoid deportation. While I was washing my hands at the sink, a bald, olive-skinned man stuck his head out of the door-less corner stall and beckoned for me to come closer—a tempting offer I was unable to accept.
umn that ran the day before the infamous Times piece compellingly refutes the bad batch theory. Citing studies that found most heroin “overdoses” to be the result of interactions with other drugs, along with anecdotal evidence from New York papers that the two girls in question had been binge drinking, the column concludes: “If this amalgam of assertions turns out to be true, then the easiest explanation for the tragic deaths would be the mixing of drugs, not the consumption of tainted or super-pure heroin.”

According to Van, the media consistently overlooks the real story when it comes to Tompkins Square Park. “There was a guy who had his head blown off out here because somebody thought he stole some crack, which turned out not even to be true. But this got no news coverage. Why? Because he was black, homeless, and HIV-positive.” He told me that deaths in the park are fairly constant. “But,” he added, “oftentimes people don’t want to call the police if someone overdoses. If they’ve been using too, they’re afraid they’ll be caught.”

While the drug culture has moved to the peripheries, it has far from disappeared. “People have blinders on to this stuff,” Van concluded. “They act surprised and say, ‘There’s still drugs on the Lower East Side?’”

MY HOLY GRAIL IS MADE OF TIN FOIL

A fter talking to Van, I realized that there was a group in the park I had neglected to fit into my tidy mental map. A motley bunch that seemed to at least approach Crustiness, they hung around the chess tables where I had run into Van and didn’t listen to Paul’s rules. I watched them argue over a forty in a paper bag. A few covertly smoked a joint, while another, piss-drunk by lunch time, urinated on a trash can. Jewels was not far off.

I watched them argue over a forty in a paper bag. A few covertly smoked a joint, while another, piss-drunk by lunch time, urinated on one of the park’s trash cans. Jewels was not far off.

I did not recognize him when we finally met. He was huddled in a doorway near Avenue A’s Odessa Café, wrapped in a dark down jacket, his face obscured by a tightly drawn hood—not the picture of the rowdy anarchist punk I had been showing around for a few weeks, hoping for tips. Balancing his cane against the doorframe, he gruffly but softly asked me for a dollar. Had it not been for the chance “What’s up Jewels?” offered by Van as we passed him on the sidewalk, I might never have succeeded in my quest. As we began to talk, I felt the dull throb of anticlimax.

Jewels had nothing new to impart. He answered questions succinctly, and with a hint of contempt, gave me soundbites I could have attributed to anyone or made up at home. This was not the B-list media superstar I had expected. All my questions felt rhetorical.

How long had he lived there? 25 years.

What happened during the ’88 riots? “I was out of the game quickly,” he said. “They cracked my skull and threw me in a bar.”

What was his political vision? “Anti-Bush, anti-gentrification.”

Do you still hang out in the park? “It’s overpoliced. They don’t like me in there.”

How accurate, then, had all the publicity he’d gotten since August been? “They make me into whatever they want,” Jewels said.

He laughed at me through-out—not with humor, but with indifference.
Apparently, there are such things as stupid questions.

**I GET ANSWERS!**

Burdened with disappointment, I met Thom Corn for coffee. Even though his story was crucial to the epic of Jewels I had internalized, he was the only one able to step outside his own “-ism” and give a convincing, full-bodied account. A fast-talking, middle-aged man with a self-described “crazy hairdo” (dreadlocks), he began our conversation with an encyclopedic autobiographical rant: he was a muralist from California who came to the city well before the riots and bounced around from neighborhood art scene to neighborhood art scene. He spells his name with a “Th” because a numerologist told him it was good luck to have eight letters in his full name. (If you turn an “8” on its side, it becomes…infinity.)

What about this neighborhood? “As late as 1993,” he said, “there were no cars in the streets that weren’t burning or being stripped. There was smoke from the fires in between the houses, and people out in the streets roasting meat.”

He placed the birth of the Crusties squarely within the counter-culture of the ’50s and ’60s, before cataloging the area’s radical tradition (lefties, skinheads, punks, bikers, and transvestites) and the changing racial demographics of the Lower East Side. This lesson reached its pinnacle with an introduction to the different groups of Tompkins Square Park—which, to my chagrin, had already been cleverly mapped in the 1980s by the *Village Voice*.

I asked Thom how Jewels fit into this history of political radicalism, and he responded by shaking his head. “He’s a poster boy for what’s wrong with the education system out in the suburbs,” Thom said. “He’s a poster boy for some kind of deep ignorance that doesn’t include a liberal arts background of any sort or another. It was interesting how it affected my sculpture, how he had a psychotic reaction to it. He wants to do something else but he doesn’t know how because he’s locked in that vacuum of complete ignorance. You know, he could be good for some social movement to bring change, but he’d be a liability. Heaven forbid he should ever run into a real oil well without talking to the folks that own it.”

He stopped. “Nah, I don’t want to talk about that guy. He’s an idiot, you know?” I had weathered enough to nod vigorously.

It was Thom’s account of the neighborhood’s current state, however, that really struck me. It was so obvious that I had never considered it. “There it is right there,” he pointed to the playground, “where you see the kids right there. That’s what it’s about. You know a lot of people grew up here, got married, had kids and now they’re in another mode. You don’t have that quite yet in Williamsburg, but you’ll have that in Williamsburg in the next ten years, as those people grow up and the party zone winds down. And then if you’re a guy you knock some chick up, or if you’re a chick you get knocked up and all of the sudden you’re serious about something. And life goes on like that.”

Finally, the answer to my initial, nagging question: why were the Crusties still sticking around? “This place has always been welcoming,” Thom said. “Somebody told me one time that this was Peter Stuyvesant’s farm. And, going back to that time, as you went over all the way over there with swamps and what have you, this was a pirate area. People would hang out over here and be river pirates and then go down there and raid New York City. Sounds like the ghost of those pirates is still hanging around, so the spirit of that kind of other-than-standard behavior still exists here. I said, ‘That explains it for me. I like that.’”

Me too. ✤

Illustrated by Ben Grohsgal
“If they’re good enough for THE BLUE AND WHITE, they’re good enough for you.”

1.800.336.2522
Yo! MTV Sucks

BY IAN SOLSKY

How reality television MADE me into a douche.

Roughly a year ago, MTV aired my episode of MADE, a documentary-style show where average teens embark on missions to “live their dreams and find out who they really are.” In the span of one hour, viewers around the country watched my transformation from band geek to sleek, sexy salsa dancer, a ploy to win the heart of my longtime crush. In the final confrontation, she rejected me. My normal reaction would have been to lock myself in a closet, cry uncontrollably, and write angry poetry. But this was not normal: as a D-list celebrity, it is my duty to inform everyone of the scripted nature of MTV’s MADE.

It started as soon as my friend Laura and I, who jokingly had applied together as a wannabe salsa-dancing pair, were selected. About one week before filming, I received a call from a producer who told me that she really liked our personalities, but that a show only about salsa dancing would be boring. She asked if I would be willing to learn the dance moves to impress Laura and win her over as a girlfriend. I was not completely comfortable with this idea because I actually was attracted to Laura, and daily film shoots did not seem like the best way to get closer to her. But MTV convinced me and I signed my life away for two months, a path that would later lead a friend to dub me “Salsa Bitch.”

The cameras started rolling and I met my MADE
coach, the man who would teach me both dancing and lady skills. At this moment, any faith I had left in reality television vanished. The cameraman brought Laura and me to our school auditorium, where we were led to the front stage and placed on an X made with tape in front of the closed curtain. After two takes, the cameraman yelled, “You can come out now.” My coach-to-be, a flamboyant man in tight black clothing, popped out from behind the curtain, showing off a few moves. Like many of the show’s “characters,” he was more stereotype than human. Once he introduced himself, our coach gave us a brief lesson and a plan for our eventual performance. After this first “practice,” Laura was told to leave while I stayed behind.

With Laura gone, I received my first love lesson, the first of a series of tasks designed, ostensibly, to light the way to Laura’s heart. I was assigned to read several issues of *Glamour, Seventeen, Cosmo*, and the like, in order to take the quizzes about “how to win a boyfriend.” I have never been a ladies’ man, but even I realized how dumb this was. Eventually, the MTV masterminds scrapped this scene.

With the dancing and romancing plot arc established, the show now had to reveal my personality. A cameraman began to follow me around school. I was, it seemed, not enough of a loser band geek, and was encouraged to act goofier. The camera recorded only my nerdiest moments: wearing my marching band uniform with pride or carrying a huge backpack filled with books. The production staff was especially displeased to find that I had friends. Indeed, many of them approached me and apologized for making fun of me at lunch because the cameraman had approached them, asking them to “talk some shit about Ian.” Of course, they weren’t sorry enough to skip the chance to slander me for a 30-second cameo. Yet I was content, knowing that both my friends and Laura saw it all as a joke.

At this point, with the foundation laid, the filming picked up to a few hours almost every day. Only a small portion of countless hours of filming was actually devoted to dancing. Through the magic of editing, the hour shows me practicing very hard to learn the salsa moves, even though I had no more than two practices a week, for about an hour each. In truth, I never learned salsa, only a routine, filmed as if it were a great feat. I got a metrosexual makeover, complete with frosted tips in my hair and

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**STALKERS**

I am always shocked and usually frightened by the number of people who still try to contact me to share their sympathies. Through the self-selecting publicity of Facebook, my fan base has grown exponentially. Most of my acolytes only send trite messages along the lines of “haha this is so creepy but i don’t give a shit i was watching mtv and i saw you and haha i just wanted to say laura is a dumb bitch you are REALLY cute hahaha neways way to creep you out have a nice day :), (Christi T., Syracuse).” Or, “You ARE the kid from MTV. this is so crazy. i saw that you like forensics too. that is what i am going into! well i just wanted to say hi (Laura E., N. Illinois).” I will occasionally, however, receive one that is more inspired:

“I saw you on MADE, Salsa is quite delicious I, too, miss the fro.

I know this is weird but my roommate can google that’s how we found you.

These are some haikus I hope this was fun for you spicy salsa love (Esther C., Fordham)”

Weird, pathetic…but harmless. Others, though, blur the line between fan and stalker. Last year, Becky K. from Binghamton, would instant message me late at night, repeatedly asking if I “wanted to see her pictures” and randomly bringing up her ex-boyfriend. Ironically she had filed a restraining order against him.

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a Boost Mobile phone that I modeled for a corporate sponsor. But the majority of each shoot was devoted to the love story.

If I’d been left to myself to woo Laura, I might
have succeeded. But MTV’s assigned tasks were so contrived that I didn’t stand a chance. We started to get sick of each other. The time we spent together was miserable. MTV was tearing our relationship apart. In an effort to save it I broke the most important rule of all: I told her the truth.

When the producers found out, they decided to tweak the story. Instead of revealing my love for Laura in the end, I would do it inappropriately at a party. That weekend, the cameraman followed me to a friend’s house and captured my forced confrontation with Laura. The scene was awful television, but it could have made the final cut—if the mom of my friend who lent out his house hadn’t found out about the party, and if MTV had not filmed underage drinking. Under threats of a lawsuit, MTV got rid of the footage. I was pissed about how sour Laura and my relationship had become.

The filming uncomfortably continued until the end, where the show concludes that I was “made” into a dancer and that Laura and I would stay friends as we valued our friendship so much. In reality, that once-great friendship was destroyed, and we had a long way to go to get it back to where it once was.

When the episode first aired in February 2005, Laura and I threw a viewing party for our friends. I made supplemental comments, telling them how editors liked to reshoot scenes. If I’m wearing a hat in the episode, it’s because I’d already had my makeover but the editor wanted a do-over of a moment from the days before my frosted tips—the days of my Jewfro. And if I’m on the phone, I’m a walking advertisement; there’s no one on the other end. My friends understood that it was fake, but America, it seemed, did not. My mom would return from work telling me how all of her co-workers watched the show, thinking that Laura was a “complete bitch” and that I was “such a sweet guy.”

Soon after, I would have my first fan contact and spotting. My first fan letter came from two girls in Oshkosh, Wisconsin who likewise sang my praises and called Laura vulgar names. Despite their kindness, I turned down their offers to be my girlfriends. In a Boston ice cream parlor, I was spotted by an entire figure skating team. Even today, a year after the show aired, I sometimes get recognized in the street, in a restaurant, or at the train station; but the worst are the Facebook stalkers (see sidebar). I hope that knowing the truth will convince them that they’re wasting their time.

My first fan letter came from two girls in Oshkosh, Wisconsin who sang my praises and called Laura vulgar names. Despite their kindness, I turned down their offers to be my girlfriends.
THEOLOGICALLY TRANSMITTED DISEASES

Religion as a Natural Phenomenon: Daniel C. Dennett in conversation with Robert Thurman

With his luxuriant white beard and paternal mien—and without the polka-dot tie—philosopher Daniel C. Dennett vaguely resembles Moses as he gestures to his Power Point slides in Miller Theater for his talk on February 13. An ironic association, perhaps, for one who denies the existence of God.

That’s not the main point of his talk, of course. Instead, as the Director of Tufts University’s Center for Cognitive Studies, Dennett focuses on something even more unsettling for religious people: the idea of religion as a biological phenomenon, like sex, or hunger, or schizophrenia.

Hallelujah! I shout to myself. Finally, someone who views spirituality as a mere quirk, stripped of its self-justifying righteousness! Although not explicitly anti-religion, Dennett rejects the idea that people need faith to be moral, and calls the practice of exploiting the human desire for goodness to find converts “the greatest con job that religions have accomplished.”

Enter Columbia Professor of Religious Studies Robert Thurman. He’s been lying in wait in his large puffy armchair, taking notes, politely considering Dennett’s presentation. I expected a fawning interviewer lobbing softballs to keep the conversation moving. But Thurman, the first American ever to be ordained as a Tibetan monk (and yes, Uma’s dad), thinks Dennett is the delusional one. This is a duel, not a dialogue.

Thurman begins benignly enough, telling Dennett about Columbia’s proposed (but as yet unfunded) Center for the Critical Study of Religion. It’s intended, he says, to foster moderates and liberals within religious traditions. Translation: see how enlightened I am, not like those anti-intellectual zealots.

The two pace mental circles around each other, feinting and jabbing. They squabble over the implications of explaining religion through biological processes, and what happens to us after we die. When Thurman accuses Dennett of propagating the “dogma of materialism,” his argument reveals itself: belief in science’s explanatory power is itself a religion. He moves in for the kill, asking the increasingly exasperated Dennett if he would give credence to a supernatural being should it present itself.

“Oh of course,” Dennett says, not taking the bait.

The debate ranges into the relativity of consciousness and the physicality of mind, the audience drawn in less by their words and more by the clash of secularism and spirituality unfolding onstage. At the end of one of Thurman’s especially metaphysical monologues, Dennett pauses for one half second.

“I confess that I simply can’t fathom most of what you just said.” Applause. Thurman must prove that God exists, because the alternative is frightening: no basis for objective morality. Dennett’s “religion of scientism,” Thurman says indignantly, has “made Western culture irresponsible.” You almost feel sorry for the man—he needs it to be true.

Near the end of the talk, Dennett explains the new terminology for atheists and agnostics: “brights,” modeled on the homosexual appropriation of the neutral word “gay.” Atheists, America’s last persecuted minority?

“What are we?” Thurman protests, on behalf of people of faith. “Glum?”

No, actually—they’re “supers,” as in “supernatural.” “Two happy words,” Dennett says of the new nomenclature.

Thurman doesn’t quite know what to say to that. The two stand up and shake hands. I’m far back in the orchestra, but I can take it on faith that Dennett left with the faintest of smiles.

—Lydia Depillis
I’ve never had the urge to punch a seventy year old man, and I didn’t then, but I couldn’t believe what I was listening too.

What is not debatable is those women are indeed different than men. Women have different body types and physical characteristics. Perhaps the largest difference is that women are equipped to give birth to children. While none of these differences to those of the males make the women inferior but what it does do is make woman unique, which is commonly referred to as feminism.

To lick and to electrify, or a lick and electricity, should never happen concurrently. They’re potentially dangerous enough to be a life-threatening combination. We all know that. ...Maybe it’s not what you’d intended, but they definitely stick out to me on the page in a good, shocking way where you’ve paired them.

Therefore, the recent addition of a course titled “Frontiers of Science” not only represents a flaw in the Core Curriculum education but in American national identity, as well.

It’s true the University of Virginia wasn’t meant to be a fitness club, but it shouldn’t be a labor camp of learning either.

Mortal women are the last of the suspects.

I find it hard to sympathize with Aeneas in the family aspect. I see him as an irresponsible and immature baby.

When my students see me, they think of me a “cool”, and not “white-washed” and I use that to show them that you do not have to give up yourself and your ways to have an education and to have a good paying job.

quantum there is nothing deterministic in the way you navigate your space—you flurry of pureeing the kumquats in the kitchen, sprawling thrashing in the bedroom, hurling words into the phone—

Jenny also received physical therapy by means of a Hungarian method called conductive education.

They reek, fascinatingly enough, of economic depression, pestilence, and a ravishing drug epidemic.

“Brush your hair! Take off your brother’s clothes! Stop Rolling around in the dirt”, these are just a few phrases my mother shouted to me as a child. My mother was a beauty queen and she wanted a princess for a daughter but what she got was royal knightmere. As a child I did not understand why I should embody the characteristics of Barbie when in my opinion Ken was having more fun. In society a construction of gender is created.

And so just like Troy was destroyed and replaced, I agree with Rem Koolhaas.

“He demonstrates this through the symbol of the maggots and the worms that feed off of them. The worms benefit from their pain with apathy.”
It had to be the money and fame because it sure couldn’t be my charm, good looks, or hot body. I didn’t have any of that. I wondered when they would begin to notice that.

“By having the prince hold kitchen utensils instead of swords, and trying to balance a large chicken pie on his head, in addition to fighting with a pig’s head, two cooked birds, and a pair of sausages as ammunition, the craziness of the meat lover is well described.”

From my bed I scan the audience of stuffed animals that watches me from their diverse world on my windowsill, where penguins and polar bears live alongside bears and monkeys, with cartoon characters and aliens sprinkled among them. Trying to escape the fixed gaze of each creature, I contemplate the smallness of the space they are forced to share with creatures entirely different from themselves. In this respect, I suppose, they are very much human.

They were tan boys with short haircuts, both younger than me. They were shooting paintballs at a stringy white dog wearing a homemade helmet.

I walked in and Marianne was under the bed. I couldn’t see her, but I knew that she was under the bed because she wasn’t in the bed or on the toilet.

Between the rubbery cheese in the middle of the table and the area around Phil’s head, I had no place else to look beside the can of beer to my left.

Hay mucha gente que no les gustan las minorías. Había muchas veces cuando me sentía discriminada. No sé porque la gente se comporta así. Cuando yo estaba en la escuela secundaria, mis compañeros siempre tenían algo mal de decir de mí.

“It allows one to accept people not only from different cultures, but also those who are different in social, economic, and moral wayssss. Boooooo change this.”

It was like when the postal service introduced the Sacagawea dollar and no one told me, so I threw it out.

Overdone literary criticism cloaks each nude, each text, in a burka—in theory. The new pornography, the literary pornography, has found it more effective to suffocate expression and language beneath a shroud of criticism, whereas pornography is too obviously porn.

All we need do is un-tart the whore.

It’s much like the refrigerator magnets that allow you to dress a nude in several outfits

He has been reduced to a shell of his former self; lobotomized and traquilized, like the whole decade itself.

This is illustrated in his quantified study of the dominant social structure of chickens.
The Disillusioned Majors Guide

It is the duty of a true liberal arts major not only to grow intellectually, but to effing hate his chosen field. Below, six of the doomed explain why first-years and sophomores should resist the lures of their respective departments.

CLASSICS

For a certain kind of person—you know who you are—Classics seems the ideal major. You actually enjoy Herodotus and Thucydides. You laugh out loud at Plato’s Dialogues, swoon at the Odes of Horace. The titillatingly precise organization of the Roman phalanx sends chills down your spine. Antiquity calls to you, a world of dazzling beauty and ideas and heroism. And men on men.

Here’s the problem: the ancients wrote in other languages. These are hard. Maybe you took Latin in high school. Great: you can jump right into the literature and spend hours debating what kind of relative clause that is and why the verb is subjunctive. The rest of you will spend your first two years on a grueling—nay, Sisyphean—task of memorization. This will offer you all the intellectual stimulation of Sisyphus’ actual task, but be worse for your skin tone and eyesight. It’s easy to get discouraged. However, upon graduation, you may be able to read entire sentences of Tacitus without recourse to a dictionary. But probably not.

What you’ll notice, as you’re doing this, is that your fellow-students are occupied with the discussion of “ideas.” As you parse your declensions, you may hear your friends talking about post-colonial cinema or gender in the Bildungsroman. So if you don’t speak Latin, and if figuring out word roots doesn’t excite you—don’t bother.

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

A close “reading” of Raimi’s Spider-Man reveals that Peter Parker (who colo-
the world but don’t really know how to do that and figure that Econ might help…or at least provide job security.

As you can imagine, economics majors engage in some really stirring class discussions.

Don’t get me wrong. There are few topics more consequential than the wealth and poverty of nations. I even learned stuff from about 50 percent of my professors. But the Econ major has its downsides. Too many required classes (eight), too much focus on theory at the expense of reality (80 percent), too few good looking students (eight).

ENGLISH
Do you love a good book? Revel in rich prose? Delight in dense verse? Abhor annoying alliteration (and assonance)? Do you look back fondly on those childhood nights spent reading under the covers, hours past bedtime and with a flashlight in hand?

Then don’t become an English major.

Some English professors have merrily embraced recent trends in the field like cultural studies and literary anthropology. Others cling wistfully and obstinately to the cigar-smoking, gin-swilling, belletristic days of yore, when “postcolonial literature” referred to the dribble written in America circa 1781. All think this divide matters way more than it does.

But even if the department could reach some sort of pedagogical détente, every Columbia English major would still face an even bigger aggravation: dealing with other Columbia English majors. These fall into two categories: first, the infamous “literary snobs,” who read Derrida and Deleuze in their free time; the second are the venerable “literary morons” (a close relative of the “idiot Lit Hum classmates”), who’ll barely skim the SparkNotes but still receive cushy inflated grades.

If you’re in the latter group, you’ll make comments like, “Yeah, cause like, what Mrs. Dalloway goes through is sort of like my own life. And like, kinda relates to the war in Iraq.” Leading to the former group’s crowning disappointment: You want to deal with paratexts, but really, you’ll deal with future paralegals.

HISTORY
If any of the below apply to you, you should be a history major. To clarify, you don’t want these things to apply to you:

–you think studying history is like squeezing toothpaste: it’s best done from the bottom up.
–you do everything, from the swim test to cooking to masturbation, as a form of resistance.
–you’ve given up on being as prolific as that guy Ibid.
–you listed “agency” as one of your interests on The Facebook.
–you have started suspecting your boy/girlfriend of hegemony.
–you can smell the fear of a History TA leading a discussion on economics.
–you consider plagiarism the sincerest form of flattery.
–you never cried so hard as during Episode Eight (“War is All Hell”) of Ken Burns’ The Civil War.
–you know Poli Sci is just History without the soul.

POLITICAL SCIENCE
The worst feature of the Political Science major is the majorors. If they’re not cripplingly insecure over the uselessness of their course of study, they regard themselves with humorless seriousness and condescend accordingly. Moreover, most don’t have the decency to fall into the former category; not even the English department boasts such a seething horde of officious name-droppers clawing pathetically for the top.

Which begs the question, the top of what? Classes dispense little actual knowledge, instead assigning hundreds of pages of abstruse justifications for the existence of the subject itself. They are concocted, with varying degrees of literacy, by people who make their livelihood by selectively squishing facts into models with no predictive value and no aspiration to anything beyond stating the opposite of the other fellow’s model. These models sporadically include ham-handed, often incoherent statistical analyses as a grudging nod to empiricism.

Your B.A. in Political Science—it’s not a B.S. because as any engineer knows, real sciences don’t have the word “science” in the name—will have imparted two certainties, after four years and $100,000. The first is that people and nations, acting in self-interest, occasionally hurt the feelings of other people or nations, and this may or may not be intentional, and may or may not cause conflict. The second is that you would have learned more staying home and reading the newspaper.
How will we prove
the pressing of the yellow sky?
And how the rising swells of yelling?
We must take: concrete corners, rusted trainrails,
dirty snow, and modern ruins
that languish under the Colossus
and perish under the illusion of rebirth.
Proven, we continue.

In the chain-link lot, the emptiness,
we will bend to the dusty weeds,
tear them for the fire.
The pool that reflects faces in the clouds
will provide our human sweetness.

—Katie Reedy
B&W: Can you tell us about how you got started writing children’s horror?

RLS: I got started writing when I was nine. It’s all I’ve ever done. I found this typewriter and I started typing joke magazines and my mother would say, “Go outside and play.” And I said, “It’s boring out there.” But I never learned to type. I only type with one finger. Not even two. You see I’m left-handed.

B&W: (Gasp as Stine holds up his misshapen index finger, irreversibly disfigured from years of typing.)

RLS: Three hundred books with one finger. It’s wrecked. It’s totally useless. This is what I gave up for my art.

B&W: We’ll know you’ve lost the finger when you stop writing.

RLS: Getting into children’s books, everything was accidental. This is hard to explain to children. They all think there’s this direct path. I bounced around. I grew up in Ohio and I thought you had to live in New York to be a writer. So I moved to Greenwich Village and started getting magazine jobs. I worked on fan magazines and got work making up interviews with the stars. Then I worked at a humor magazine called Bananas. It was my life’s dream. Then I got a call from an editor who said I would be great at funny children’s books. I wrote my

B&W: Who was the most famous person you pretended to interview?

RLS: The Beatles. Diana Ross. Jane Fonda. I’d come in the morning and the editor would say, “Do an interview with Diana Ross.” And I’d sit down. It was very creative work. I also learned to write really fast because I had to do four or five interviews a day. …[I then worked at] a humor magazine called Bananas. It was my life’s dream. Then I got a call from an editor who said I would be great at funny children’s books. I wrote my

Illustrated by Julia Batarova
very first book, *How to be Funny*. Parents hated it.

**B&W**: *Was this under the alias “Jovial Bob?”*

**RLS**: Yes. I was funny for years. I did all these “101 Jokes” books. It was a great living.

**B&W**: *Did you write the jokes?*

**RLS**: Here’s how you write a joke book. You go through a whole bunch of joke books and you put the jokes from those books into your book. One year I wrote a dog book and a monster book and the jokes were the same in both. You just change the monsters to dogs.

**B&W**: *Can you tell us one of your jokes?*

**RLS**: Here’s my best: What do you get when you cross a dog with a frog?

**B&W**: What?

**RLS**: You get a dog that can lick himself from across the room.

**B&W**: …

**RLS**: That’s why I’m not doing joke books anymore.

**B&W**: *How did you make the leap from being funny to being scary?*

**RLS**: This is embarrassing. It wasn’t my idea. I had left Scholastic and I was doing freelance. I did anything people would call me to do. I did coloring books. I did a line of bubblegum cards. Then one day I was having lunch with a friend who had just had a fight with an author who did horror. She said, “I’m never working with him again. Anyone can write scary books. I bet you could! Go home and write a book called *Blind Date.*” She gave me the title! I didn’t really know what she was talking about, but it was an immediate bestseller. A year later I did another and it was a bestseller. Kids like this stuff.

**B&W**: *In order to write a scary book for a younger audience do you think you have to have a happy ending?*

**RLS**: Once I wrote a book where the good girl loses and the bad girl wins, and I got a lot of letters from kids saying, “Dear R.L. Stine. You moron.”

**B&W**: *When you write these books do you tend to stick to certain formulas?*

**RLS**: I wish there was a formula. It would make things a lot easier. There’s no formula, but I only have one brain. Things are bound to repeat. Normally it’s the best friend that’s the evil one.

**B&W**: *Is there a great American novel hidden somewhere inside you, bursting to come out?*

**RLS**: No. This is what I do. I love this. You can’t imagine how much fun it is. This is the best audience. Some people don’t want to sit at the grown-up table. I get these kids before they have to be cool. This is the last point in their lives when they’ll be enthusiastic.

**B&W**: *And the last point when they’ll read three hundred books by the same author.*

**RLS**: There was a period when I was doing two a week. How nuts do you have to be? I did not get out much. *Goosebumps* was so successful. It was exhilarating. I had written for twenty years and no one had noticed, and then all of a sudden we were selling four million books a month.

**B&W**: *We’ve read a few conspiracy theorists who claim that because of the sheer volume of your work, you use ghost writers—no pun intended. We even came across a website that gave a name.*

**RLS**: Really? Who was it?

**B&W**: *Eric Weiner. Do you know him?*

**RLS**: Oh, yeah. I discovered him. I did a TV show for four years—a kid’s show called *Eureka’s Castle*. I was the head writer. We had a big writing staff, and Eric was one of the guys that I hired for the show.

**B&W**: *Did he ever write any of your books?*

**RLS**: No one ever wrote any of my books. But when
I was doing two books a month, which really is not for humans, I would do outlines on some of the Fear Street books, and then somebody like Eric would do a first draft. Then, I would take the first draft and re-write it and put it in my style. It was like a head start. It was like having an assistant, that kind of thing. No one ever wrote an entire book word for word for me. It was always my story, my outline, and then I would always do the final draft.

B&W: Did you feel a little bad about doing that?

RLS: No, because otherwise, I’d have no life at all. As long as I did the final draft, and made sure that it was in my style and that it was the best book I could send down, then I didn’t feel bad. If I would have turned it over to someone else and let some schlocky thing go down, then I would have felt bad that I was letting the kids down. But I never did that.

B&W: Have you faced any other similar accusations?

RLS: There was some woman during the height of Goosebumps who made a living by attacking me and by saying that my books actually were pornography because they gave kids the same tingle that you would get from pornography.

B&W: Do you ever try and put any subliminal messages in your books?

RLS: Kids are very smart. You can’t fool them. People are always trying to protect kids and people, you know, say “Well, this stuff is too scary for them,” it’s too violent,” but they know what’s too scary for them.

B&W: Do you have an irrational fear or anything that really scares you?

RLS: My phobia is that I cannot jump into water. I can’t jump into a swimming pool. It’s not a rational thing at all.

B&W: You know, you’d never graduate from Columbia because we require a swim test.

RLS: Well, I went to Ohio State, which requires a swim test. When I was a freshman you had to report to the gym for your swim test, and there was a woman at the table, and I was really worried about it, and she said “Can you swim?” and I said, “Yeah.” Passed.

B&W: O.K. Last question. Do you have a favorite scary movie?

RLS: I think “The Shining” is really scary.

B&W: What about it makes it a really good scary movie?

RLS: Well, the idea of being alone in this giant hotel, and then the husband just goes nuts. Discovering that you’re living with a maniac and didn’t know it, you know? It’s just…the quiet of that film. That big empty hotel. But horror movies always make me laugh. I never get scared. And I think there’s a real close connection between humor and horror. Which is lucky for me, since, you know, I do both. But I honestly think it’s like the same thing. When you play peek-a-boo with a baby, you scare the kid but he also laughs. And when you’re in an amusement park and you go up close to the roller coaster, you hear people screaming and laughing at the same time. So I think they’re very closely connected.

B&W: Any theories about why?

RLS: No. That’s too deep for me. I’m a children’s author.

—James Williams and Oriana Magnera

Illustrated by Julia Butareva
On Monkey

Utterly Monkey: A Novel
Nick Laird
Harper Perennial
368 pages, $13.95

Utterly Monkey, the first novel by Irish poet Nick Laird, was initially published stateside as a paperback, rather than as the traditional $25 hardcover. Foregoing the hardcover route usually signals a publisher’s pessimism regarding money-making, and indeed if Laird were not hipster literary royalty, most readers and reviewers would likely pass over his novel’s bold letters and red cover. Lucky for Laird, then, that he is Mr. Zadie Smith, the husband of the British novelist who wowed readers with White Teeth, disappointed them with The Autograph Man, and regained their respect last year with On Beauty.

A Smith fan (or critic, for that matter) may recognize some of Laird’s themes and devices. His plot focuses on Danny Williams, a disenchanted Irish lawyer working in London who falls in love with his coworker Ellen, a young black woman. Their love story falls into a path already well tread by Nick Hornby, with Danny’s insecurities manifesting as romantic incompetence, Ellen’s intelligence as long-standing despair. But Laird goes through these motions with just enough energy to keep them from lapsing into cliché.

He does so partly with welcome wit and humor. Utterly Monkey’s best moments are the scenes set in the law firm, with Danny angrily and impotently seething at the idiocies of corporate law. Recalling late nights at the firm, Danny remembers the time when a Nigerian worker “prodded him awake as he lay slumped over the desk, his forehead being embossed by the lid of a pen, because a small pool of saliva was growing on top of a file.”

Laird lends the love story momentum by paralleling Danny and Ellen with Danny’s friend Geordie and Geordie’s girlfriend Janice. Geordie, an old mate from Northern Ireland, arrives at Danny’s apartment on the run from Janice’s brother and his fellow gang members. Prodded by mild class guilt and a shared childhood secret, Danny takes Geordie in, and their interactions quickly combust into moments of exasperation and occasional violence. (Danny’s black eye from a fistfight in a flowerbed becomes one of Utterly Monkey’s best running jokes.) Geordie’s flight from Northern Ireland quickly precipitates the novel’s bombastic finale, in which Danny and Geordie race through London to stop a terrorist plot.

Laird’s awareness of the ridiculousness of this situation makes the climax work better than it deserves to, especially since the lead terrorist is not a very compelling character. Indeed, Utterly Monkey, like Danny, succeeds in spite of itself. There’s an economy of characters—Danny’s enemy at the firm just happens to have a past with Ellen, the Irishman whom Geordie meets on the boat to Scotland just happens to be involved in the terror conspiracy. The plot takes too many easy, unsubtle, and predictable turns. Yet Laird’s sly irony—or maybe earnest faith?—is fully embedded in the fabric of Utterly Monkey, and it makes the entire ride seem new and engaging, rather than unrealistic or overdone.

It’s worth noting that Danny is a parallel of Laird himself—after marrying Smith, the Irish Laird quit his job at a London law firm to focus on his writing—although, in an interview with The Guardian, Laird claimed that the story is wholly fictional. He added that Ellen couldn’t be Zadie because Zadie would never work in an office.

Is Laird here being disingenuous, ironic, or perfectly honest? Hard to say. And the same question could be asked of the novel’s too-neat turns and serendipities, and the same answer given. But what’s the need for realism in a book that has nothing at all to do with any part of Laird’s life? As Laird might point out, the convenient plot twists, the irony, and the parallels are just little coincidences.

—Gautam Hans
Roger Ebert likes to wax nostalgic about the old days. In a favorite story of his, he stood with a crowd of eager moviegoers outside Chicago’s Three Penny Cinema for hours in the pouring rain, anxiously awaiting the next sold-out screening of Jean-Luc Godard’s post-apocalyptic Marxist treatise *Weekend*. There is a certain false nostalgia here. But Ebert and company does get something right: at that point in world history, going to see a movie in a theater meant something. Film screenings were an event.

It’s strange to complain about a time when a Columbia student can acquire elusive and difficult movies by Theo Angelopoulos or Hou Hsiao-Hsien by walking to Kim’s basement or to the Lerner mailroom and watch them on his laptop. Steven Soderbergh has let his *Bubble* burst, and its much-discussed distribution strategy—simultaneous release in theaters, on video, and on cable—points to a general trend in the culture: accessibility.

But before the advent of home-video technology, theaters weren’t just the best way to see a movie, they were the only way. And so, in the last three decades, film screenings have lost the unique power of concerts or museum exhibitions, one-time-only events that can never be replicated.

The only movies that retain this special quality of spectacle seem to be the most extreme ones. Case in point: Béla Tarr’s *Sátántangó*, a Hungarian film about swindlers, collective farming, and peasants. A leisurely paced, non-linear masterwork shot primarily in long takes, it has a running time of seven-and-a-half—yes, 7.5—hours. Given that it’s subtitled, black-and-white, and four times the length of most other films, with few cuts and a confusing structure, Tarr’s epic frustrates every commercial expectation. Indeed, it does so with deliberate defiance: it opens with a shot of a herd of cows slowly walking across a farm. For ten minutes.

But it’s these qualities that ensure a reputation as big as the film itself and guarantee *Sátántangó*’s status as a curio and a classic. Screenings are exceedingly rare, so when the film played an unprecedented six-day run at the Museum of Modern Art in January, New York’s most discerning critics, from the Voice’s J. Hoberman to the Times’ Manohla Dargis, touted the event as a must-see. On a rainy Saturday afternoon—the kind invented for gray and dour films—MoMA managed to pack its theater full of viewers eager to take this legendary test of cinematic stamina. Hitchcock’s dictum that the length of a movie should be correlated to the endurance of man’s bladder went out the window. During the two fifteen-minute breaks, everyone rushed to the bathroom or outside to eat bag dinners, and camaraderie developed between the filmgoers. Everybody knew this was not just a movie, but a shared experience.

Apparently, a DVD release of *Sátántangó* is in the works—a sad thought for any fan of the film. Yes, cinéastes across the world will finally have the chance to see and debate the merits of this stunning work of art. The formalist magic of Tarr’s film, however, will not easily transfer to a television or computer. It develops its spellbinding potency precisely from exhaustive duration and repetition, from the viewer being forced to sit in a single space in real time.

(This is why the films of Gus Van Sant, whose *Elephant* is a loose remake of *Sátántangó*, fail to attain the heft they so obviously aspire to: they usually run under two hours.)

But perhaps more importantly, a DVD release will end the film’s force as a cultural event, as an unusual way to bring movie buffs together for a moment—or seven hours—of celebration.

—C. Mason Wells
Epcot Columbiana

BY HECTOR CHAVEZ

The ultimate pan-Columbian experience.

Café Nana! – The Kraft Center for Jewish Life

On one wall of this new Israel-themed café, an enormous photograph has the patron overlooking a valley in what must be the Middle East. In front of that wall, an enormous television has the patron watching “Unsolved History: Ninjas!” The sheer majesty of the unabashedly barren desert vista can only be matched by the majesty of the unabashedly deadly ninja.

“I think the ninja would be regarded with terror. These are people you’d be very, very careful dealing with,” warns the Discovery Channel’s ninja-expert. Israelis, on the other hand, should be regarded as a people very, very concerned with your dining comfort. In fact, three concerns govern the Israeli people: making mind-blowing lemonade (“LemoNana”), distributing literature on the principles of eating establishments, and providing mountains of cushions and ottoman-like items in well-textiled “Morrocan tents.” Now all Moroccan-Israeli students can easily slip away to what Café Nana knowingly calls “A taste of home.”

Deutsches Haus – 420 W. 116th St.

Tucked away across the street from Wien, Deutsches Haus fails to bring the magic of Teutondom to Morningside. Inside, a sign on the wall alludes to the weekly Kaffeestunde. The staff, having left work at precisely 3:00 p.m., was not available for comment, but the Deutsches Haus website apologizes openly that “decades of neglect have produced drafty windows, dreary restrooms, substandard lighting, noisy heating and air-conditioning, as well as crumbling floors, walls and ceilings.” One disgruntled student of German began to offer a sociological explanation: “You see, the German people are a sparse and utilitarian people—oh no, you’re not going to quote me. Oh no.” Entschuldigung.

Maison Française – Buell Hall

This Francophonie outpost provides a reasonably accurate simulation of visiting France: wine-sipping intellectuals debate inconsequential topics and ignore you. On my visit: “Amputation mémorielle et (dé)construction nationale en France et au Cameroun.” I depart the region mystified by its mindset and deeply ashamed of my French.

Sushi Island – Lerner Hall

If you land a job at Ferris Booth, they might give you a light blue shirt and a cap. But not if you work on Sushi Island. Our sushi chefs’ clothes declare “Tora! Tora! Tora!” on humdrum get-up, wearing jazzy pseudo-kimono shirts. The green plastic bamboo shoots underneath the sushi boxes transport students to the Land of the Rising Yum. Japanese characters dance all over the golfshirt/kimonos.

Zane Torretta, a Ph.D student in Japanese Studies, deciphered the characters, which translate to “Unagi Eel” (a popular sushi ingredient), and “Koi Carp” (a fish not used in sushi). Wait, what? “Koi is associated with good luck. You don’t kill it. I don’t think anybody would serve it,” explains Torretta. Outside the box: that’s how we roll.

Casa Hispánica – 612 W. 116th St.

Casa Hispánica presents a rollicking cultural experience, induced by the building’s guiding principle of interior decoration: find something related to Spanish culture, frame it, and hang it. A nameless bull fighter, a South American map, Maimonides, a coat of arms; I’m sold.

Casa Italiana – 1161 Amsterdam Ave.

Columbia leases this building from the Italian government. So, it’s actually like going to Italy. From the woodworked ceiling in the plush 200-person auditorium to the sumptuous leather seats in the cork-floored library, this place screams “Italian ebullience!” A large engraving above the stage reads “MORIBVS ANTIQVIS RES STAT ROMANA VIRISQVE.” By the old customs and by nobility the Roman state stood—and stands today on our campus, our little Epcot. It is a small world after all.
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Anne-Sophie Mutter

Sunday, March 26 at 3:00
Kurt Masur, music director and conductor
Garrick Ohlsson, piano
SCHUMANN: Piano Concerto in A minor
MAHLER: Symphony No.1 in D major
Avery Fisher Hall · Tickets: $35-69

DINOSAUR BAR-B-QUE
646 W. 131st Street
NY, NY 10027
(corner of 131st & 12th Ave.)

694-1777
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www.dinosaurbarbque.com

Monday: Closed
Tuesday - Thursday: 11:30am - 11pm
Friday - Saturday: 11:30am - Midnight
Sunday: Noon - 10pm
CAMPUS GOSSIP

David Horowitz, C ’59, has just published academia’s equivalent to The 50 Most Beautiful People: *The Professors: The 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America*. Danger is sexy! And guess what? Columbia is the sexiest! Nine of the Dr. Dangers teach at Columbia. Eric Foner, Todd Gitlin, and Rashid Khalidi are among the elite bunch. Sorry ladies, they’re already taken.

Eight years after Katie Holmes decided to permanently defer enrollment at Columbia, Daddy Holmes has requested his $500 non-refundable deposit back. Are Scientology weddings really that expensive?

GRADE INFLATION SAVES LIVES

Heard outside Mathematics, a young woman explaining to a friend how a professor just didn’t get it: “No, I was like, ‘You don’t understand the difference between a B- and a C+. If you give me a B-, my life is NOT over.”

During the blizzard in mid-February, older grad student types were spotted in Kent Hall’s library dancing on tables. Seriously.

Columbia College Student: I don’t like how you guys don’t have public elections.

Anonymous Engineering Student Council Member: Yeah, whatever, we’re fascists. And proud of it.

SEAS fascists to world: F U.

BATTLE OF THE PRESIDENTIAL STARS

Astrology.com’s horoscopes for February 21, the day of Harvard President Larry Summers’s resignation (Bollinger was runner-up for the Harvard job in 2001):

Larry Summers (Born: November 30, 1954; Sagittarius):
If any sign is famous for always being game to try something new, it’s you. But right about now, the universe is just about insisting that you try something, believe it or not, when it comes to finances. If you’ve begun thinking about making a bit of cash on the side, be sure it’s by doing something you consider fun. With so many diligent, hard-working astrological energies on duty now, you’re set. Just tell the powers that be that you’re ready.

Lee C. Bollinger (Born: April 30, 1946; Taurus):
Now is the time to let go of all the ‘what ifs’ you’ve been allowing to hold you back from doing exactly what you really want to do. You’re just about guaranteed to be smart enough to only take well calculated risks, so whether it strikes you that this would be the perfect time to try sky diving, bungee jumping, telling that long-distance lover that you want them to come home now, or something equally precarious, if it feels right, do it. You can’t win if you don’t play.

THERE CAN ONLY BE ONE

A rumor swept across campus recently that Tom Selleck, star of *Magnum P.I.*, and champion of mustachioed men everywhere, was at The West End, enjoying a burger and fries. After much investigation, the *B&W* regrets to inform you that it was only a Tom Selleck look-alike, Sigh.
Word has it that it costs the university 15 cents in used energy every time you press the handicapped button to open the doors into John Jay or Butler.

Tuition for a full year is about $40,000, which equals 266,666 door openings.

The B&W has calculated that it takes the door five seconds to open and close. Therefore, it would take you 370.37 hours to use up all of that money, or about 46 days of pressing the button constantly from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

This wouldn’t get your money back, though. You can only do that by:
1. Stealing toilet paper.
2. Telling the clerk at Ferris it’s regular cream cheese when it’s really the expensive kind.

And we have pillow fights, too!

A Barnard tour guide reassuring a parent: “Well, actually, many students get accepted by Columbia and rejected from Barnard.”

THE PASSION OF THE HISTORY DEPARTMENT

Undergraduate history theses were originally due April 15, until the department realized that day was Good Friday.

The due date is now April 13 ... which is the first day of Passover. Good job, goys.

America’s Next Top Model runner-up Kahlen (Season 4) is now a bartender at Nacho’s.

Etched into a John Jay dining tray:

Iraq war protestors are traytors

In the Midwest they call it pop

Overheard in Wallach:

Boy #1: Was it you who tried to snort pop rocks?

Boy #2: Yeah. My nose started bleeding and I had a headache for hours.

Recent Columbia Homepage headlines:

Music is a major key to reviving the musical city

Learning to think strategically is harder than it looks

This just in: Falling brings you closer to ground.

Scotch v. Water

The B&W is proud to bring you gossip from abroad—because everything is funnier when it’s not American.

Overheard in an Edinburgh University library cafe:

Girl 1: So yeah, I’m impervious to water.

Girl 2: You’re what?

Girl 1: Impervious. To. Water.

Girl 2: So you can’t get wet...?

Girl 1: Oh no, I can get wet, it just doesn’t destroy me.

Girl 2: ...You’re a fucking idiot.

Winter... it’s ambivalent!

The Blue and White, live 24/7 on its spankin’ blog.

Free food listings!

More Gossip!

Digitalia Tuesdays!