THE UNDERGRADUATE
RYE-CATCHING, CHICK-LITTING,
TRANSNATIONAL-LAWMAKING WRITERS’ CLUB
by Andrew Flynn

SPRING BOOKS
Reviews of The Flaming Lips, Opal Mehta, Fellini, and more

THE CORPSE CURRICULUM The life of a New York City corpse

ALSO: THE GREENING OF COLUMBIA, HOLLYWOOD, WHAT THE FRICK?
Columns
4 Bluebook
6 Campus Characters
8 Letter to the Editor
24 Digitalia Columbiana
27 Measure for Measure
39 Campus Gossip

Spring Books
Andrew Flynn 14 Portrait of the Student as a Young Author
Skip University Writing, go straight to the big leagues.
Ciel Hunter 28 Flaming Lips
Review: At War with the Mystics, Staring at Sound.
Owain Evans 30 Unknown Unknowns
The ignorance of ignorance.
Iggy Cortez 33 A Sweet Life
Josh Mathew 34 Indian Reservations
Book Review: How Opal Mehta Got Kissed...

Features
Brendan Ballou 9 The Corpse Curriculum
Funeral directors and pathologists agree: we’re going to die.
Anna Phillips 19 Welcome to Hollywood
Can Harlem keep its flavor?
Lydia Depillis 20 The Greening of Columbia
WWSD: What Would Sachs Do?
Paul Barndt & Lydia Ross 22 Meet the Art Stars
Reverend Jen, Faceboy and their merry band.
Sara Vogel 26 Lecture Hopping: Don’t Mess with Ray Kelly
The NYPD Commissioner on the post-9/11 world.

Criticism
Julia Butareva 35 Steal this Exhibit!
Art Review: “Day For Night” at the Whitney.
Merrell Hambleton 36 What the Frick Happened?
Art Review: “Goya’s Last Works” at the Frick.

WWW.theblueandwhite.org  COVER: “Student Authors” by Jerone Hsu
very April, the mythic normal Columbian awakens from her winter-long slumber and sits on Low steps with a Victorian novel, imitating the generations of brochure covergirls that preceded her.

Often, she is from California. Or Florida. Or maybe even Texas. She sheds her light-gray hoodie for a tank top. Arms are exposed. Another mythic “normal” Columbian swoons, scratches his nose, and skips Foner section to passive-aggressively feign an attempt at flirtation.

Yet the awkward banter that characterized their mid-December Butler run-ins has disappeared into the cool breeze of Springtime. No longer must conversation be passed with false modesties or narcissistic hysterics. The “ums” and “ehs” and “what’s your majors” now give way to the exuberant clarity of a better topic: the Weather.

After another bizarro winter of tropical Januaries and freezing Februaries, it is pure glory to wake up knowing that the outside world will offer something other than meteorologically-enforced depression. South Lawn devolves into an orgy of sports and sunbathing as visiting high school students observe what appears to be a clean-cut university of stylishly shaggy Frisbee-chuckers.

But don’t bring your laptop outside; it’s Spring, not Christmas. You can’t get everything. The glare blinds monitors, and we must grope our way back to the world of paper. Technology cannot defeat the sun, but Ray-Bans can. So put on your shades, pull out a book, and make yourself prone to skin cancer. But, first, read THE BLUE AND WHITE’s “Spring Books” special issue—‘tis more noble to die both sunburnt and well-read.

Avi Zvi Zenilman
Editor-in-Chief
Columbia Students in “Unabashedly Virgin” Facebook Group.

Unabashed virgins in the Philolexian Society.

Free condoms available in Carman on a Sunday night.

Dollars found in the empty Carman condom receptacles.

Times per year the average 18 to 29-year-old has sex.

Questions submitted weekly to Go Ask Alice!

- Recent postings include: “What do I do about my man boobs?” “Smoking pot while pregnant” “My boyfriend likes to wear women’s underwear”

Back to the Future

MARCH
Robin Williams on campus. Filming August Rush or teaching a class on how to pull off prosthetic breasts?

University Professor Jeremy Waldron became the third CU law professor to move his talents downtown to NYU in the last year. He picked up an ironic haircut and a messenger bag on the way.

The Columbia College Class of 2010: the most exclusive in school history—only 9.6% of applicants were accepted. But that tool in your future English seminar still got in.

APRIL
New WB sex-ed drama Bedford Diaries, filmed on location at Barnard, self-censors scene of girls making out for fear of the FCC. Definitely not reality TV.

Pass/fail program will be changed so that students can see their grade and then decide to un-pass/fail the course. A tip: never pass/fail unless you plan on getting a D. Another: don’t take a class in which you’ll get a D, dumbass.

Columbia will begin to offer the first-ever clinical doctorate in nursing program (DrNP degree). A doctorate in nursing—isn’t that kind of like an MBA in bake sales?
Before meeting with Columbia basketball player Ben Nwachukwu, C ’08, I had to get interview approval from Columbia’s NCAA media representative. In a well-rehearsed reply, she explained that the basketball players were extremely busy, needed to spend time studying for midterms, and weren’t available for interviews until after spring break. Typical, I thought. A jock.

But Ben’s no stereotype. Shortly after my conversation with the media representative, she e-mailed back to say that in Ben’s case, the interview could take place as soon as possible. And so, the next day, I sat down with him, 45 minutes before his biology midterm.

At 6’9” and 235 pounds, Ben certainly looks the part of a Division I center. His academic record, however, comprising a major in psychology, a pre-med concentration, and a second concentration in Classics, would probably be more appropriate for one of those shorter, tired-looking over-achievers always holed up in Butler.

Ben was born in Nigeria and moved to London with his mother when he was seven. He began playing rugby and planned to pursue it into high school—until he shot up six inches at age 13; suddenly, he was the size of a basketball player. At 16, he came to the United States by himself to attend St. Augustine Prep in New Jersey, where he starred on the varsity team. He rejected the entreaties of other Ivies, and became one of Coach Joe Jones’ earliest recruits.

“I wanted to help bring the Ivy League Championship to Columbia, even though it hasn’t been done in 50 years, and I think we can definitely do that—our class and Coach Jones together,” Ben said. In February, he tipped in a rebound with one second left in the game and dealt Ivy heavyweight Penn its first Ivy loss of the season. In his sophomore season, Ben more than doubled his minutes played, points (averaging over ten a game), and rebounds per game statistics from his first year, while increasing his field goal and free throw percentages.

Not bad for a “Latin whiz,” as his classmates call him. When asked about the difficulties of being both an athlete and stellar student on a campus where athletics is often ignored, Ben shrugged his broad shoulders. “Some people will have a presupposition that if you’re an athlete you’re not a real student,” he said. “People often say to me, ‘Oh, you’re still doing bio?’ as if they’re surprised that I haven’t given it up.”

But Ben says he’s motivated by a need to prove the jock label wrong. Between daily practice, classes (including labs from eight to midnight, to make room for practice), the vice-presidency of the KDR fraternity, and his social life, he has his work cut out for him. “You have to prioritize, you have to make a lot of sacrifices,” he said. “You know you can’t always be out kicking it with the boys.”

—Jacob Victor
My first impression of Columbia theater legend Ted Malawer, C ’06, was formed by the girlish squeaks of upperclassmen delighting in his brilliance: “Oh my god—Ted’s your RA?—he’s sooo talented!”

Easily star-struck and swayed by upperclassman opinion, I couldn’t wait to meet a real-life diva, with talent spilling out of his flashy pants and metrosexual hairdo. Yet no such presence sashayed into our first floor meeting. While explaining the rules, Ted’s much-acclaimed theater voice stayed soft. Even during our icebreaker, full of talk of condoms and lube, he was charmingly normal—to my disappointment. He was even bashful when later revealing his joint enrollment in Julliard (he hushed that he preferred to keep it “on the DL”).

It was not until the New Student Orientation Program recap of last year's Varsity Show that I saw Ted shine. And sing. And sashay across the stage proclaiming his love in a solo to the ROLM Phone lady. I had discovered Ted’s brilliance, adding my own girlish shrieks to his adoring chorus. Other theater buffs had already discovered Ted from his two-year stint with the a cappella group the Clefhangers, his performance in and direction of The Rocky Horror Picture Show, which had a stint Off-Broadway after its run at Columbia, and last year’s Varsity Show (he played the nerd).

Yet in his senior year, Ted began to feel “a little saturated” with the Columbia theater scene. “I’m just done. It’s time to do something else,” he explained. Like start a new musical improv group called Tea Party because the troupe he wanted to join, Fruit Paunch, doesn’t accept seniors. Recently, Ted played Duffy the Sheep in Tea Party’s third show of the year: Brokeback Mountain: The Musical, where he donned a fake mustache and channeled Nathan Lane à la The Birdcage. The inebriated audience approved.

“Ted Malawer may not be the brains or talent of Tea Party, but he’s certainly the balls,” said Dan Kessler, his good friend the group’s co-founder.

Off the stage, a meeting in Café 212 revealed a more unassuming side of Ted—in a soft-spoken manner (but always with spectacular enunciation). Ted described his normal upbringing in Long Island (though he has no accent to show for it). Huddled in his grey raincoat, there was no air of celebrated flamboyance, except when he occasionally burst into laughter. His eccentricities echo in his laugh: loud and unabashed, reverberating perfectly thanks to all those voice lessons.

His musical theater experiences are weird and numerous enough to fill a book—which is sort of what he did. What started out as a fun way to pass the travel time while auditioning for master’s programs (he’ll be heading to one next fall) became 150 pages of a young adult novel he hopes to finish soon. Called Ski Season, it’s a modern mystery, drawing on the awkwardness of youth and the slapstick potential of theater personalities. Many characters are inspired by people he knows, including a drama teacher whose toupee is ripped off. “Part of it satirizes the genre for teens, but also embraces it,” Ted mused. “It’s nice to be creative in the private sphere.”

Kessler, who roomed with Ted their sophomore year, described Ted’s most defining characteristic as his “rude irreverence for everything and anything that other people hold decent.” I experienced this “rude irreverence” only during Ted’s attempt to sabotage himself for this profile. During my phone interview with his childhood best friend, Ted was in her room, egging her on as she mentioned his chubby childhood, monthly colon cleansing, and future crystal meth addiction, enjoying his self-maligning while muffling that distinct laugh in the background.

—Yelena Shuster
In response to the March B&W article, “Character Wars.” Read the article online at www.theblueandwhite.org.

To the Editor:

In writing “Character Wars,” Marc Tracy chose sensationalism over careful journalism, and in doing so unjustly attacked one of Columbia’s most praiseworthy departments. Interviewing “a dozen or so” students does not provide the depth of understanding necessary to write a piece that goes so far as to suggest that the quality of instruction in the department has deteriorated significantly, or that the majority of students feel that cross-strait issues have overwhelmed the program. Had he delved more deeply, he would have discovered how profoundly inaccurate his insinuations are.

The fact of the matter is that no student can claim to know the full story surrounding Chen laoshi’s departure or the nature of certain disputes within the faculty. Discussing it in such an uninformed way does nothing but baselessly insult the integrity and capability of teachers who work tirelessly for, as was mentioned, an otter trainer’s wages.

Cross-strait politics make Chinese language instruction a particularly tricky endeavor. Judging from a few quotes by Taiwanese-Americans in the article, some teachers clearly navigate the hurdles better than others. However, sweeping generalizations of “mainland” instructors as inferior or insensitive is a shortcut that is inexcusable when discussing such painfully sensitive political realities. Furthermore, to suggest that the only divide that exists within the department is a political one transforms these teachers into nationalist automatons—when it comes to the question of how best to conduct a class, teachers from the People’s Republic of China disagree with each other as much as they do with teachers from Taiwan.

I would ask that The Blue and White refrain from addressing topics that require a more thorough and more sensitive account—anecdotal evidence is simply not enough when attacking an extant department. Aping as investigative journalists is more harmful than it may first appear.

Sincerely,
Laura Conniff, C ’06
Anthony Tenga is short and round, with a calm and deliberate voice that seems to say: *I’m here to help.* He sits in his impeccably clean office, hands folded on his desk, revealing tasteful, discreet cufflinks. “I get paid well, but that wasn’t why I did it. You can’t do it for the money,” he says. “I love what I do.”

Tenga is the director of Greenwich Village Funeral Home, whose website montage declares: “Manhattan offers you the finest of everything—including the finest funeral home.” He offers complete funeral packages, which include memorial services, caskets and flowers, embalming and cremation, and, if necessary, international body shipping (apparently there’s a lot of red tape).

Tenga is totally comfortable talking about all of these subjects. “Funerals I like, memorials I enjoy,” he says. Later, while describing how to pump embalming fluid through the jugular vein, two small children, there for a viewing, run into his office as part of a game. “Hello kiddies!” he cries. The children smile, and move on.

The job of a funeral director is a surreal combination of salesman and grief counselor, and Tenga recognizes it isn’t for everyone. He must comfort the bereaved while extracting money from them. Yet,
he enjoys his work immensely. “I love doing this so
much that I never see myself retiring,” he tells me.
“I want to journey with people on a very personal
level.”

Indeed, death is a journey—but one that most of
us know nothing about. If I died tomorrow in New
York City, what would happen to me? Or, more spe-
cifically, what would happen to my body?

THE PURSUIT OF DEATH

In fact, the very definition of death has remained
unclear until recently. Ancient doctors believed
death was the simple cessation of the pulse. But
by the 18th century, doctors had realized the heart
could be restarted. This discovery was terrifying—if
shutdown of the heart meant death, and the heart
could be resuscitated, how could death be final?

People would take the precautionary step of hav-
ing their hearts ripped out after death to prevent an
unexpected revival. Composer Frederick Chopin
requested “...to make them cut me open, so that I
won’t be buried alive.” President George Washing-
ton asked Martha: “Have me decently buried, but
do not let my body be put into a vault in less than
two days after I am dead.”

18th-century inventors responded to these fears
by creating “safety coffins.” Strings tied to bells
above ground were piped down into the grave and
tied to the body’s limbs. Should a limb move, the
bell would ring, and supposedly the once-deceased
person underground could be saved. But bodies
bloat and decompose, naturally pulling the strings,
and the caskets were not equipped with air holes.
Should the deceased somehow recover, there would
be little time to re-enjoy the breath of life.

The emergence of the artificial respirator, the
pacemaker, and the heart transplant all proved that
death happens independent of the pulse. Doctors
now define death as the absence of brain function.
When the upper brain (which controls reasoning ca-
pacity) and the brain stem (which controls bodily
functions) both totally fail, the body is conclusively
dead.

Brain cells die after a few minutes without oxy-
gen. Muscle cells last longer, but calcium ions
stiffen the corpse into rigor mortis. Skin and bone
cells last the longest, but even they die after a few
days. Death turns the body into a heap of organic
matter—perfect for hungry bacteria, flies, maggots,
and beetles.

HUNGRY HUNGRY MAGGOTS

When bacteria previously feeding on the
contents of the intestines start to con-
sume the intestines themselves, the pro-
cess of decomposition begins. The bacteria break
down the cells, flooding the corpse with fluids and
gas. Over the course of several days these gases puff
the body up like a balloon, until it finally deflates
into an ooze of gassy liquid.

In warm weather, the body becomes a battle-
ground for flies, wasps, and beetles. House flies ar-
rive right away and start feeding on the body’s flesh.
They lay their eggs inside the body, which hatch
into maggots within a day. These maggots gnaw and
consume the body from the inside out, and quickly
become targets themselves. Sometimes, competing
As many as a third of all autopsies reveal that the cause of death was incorrectly identified. This statistic has remained constant for 50 years—even with the development of CAT scans and MRIs, we still have a hard time understanding why we die.

species of flies will swoop in and eat the maggots. Mites, traveling on the backs of beetles, burrow in and attack the maggots. Parasitic wasps lay their eggs inside the maggot pupae and eat them from the inside.

An unattended body essentially disappears after a few weeks. As the corpse hardens and dries, the flies and maggots find more appealing meals. Larger beetles then lay their eggs in the body and feed on the leftovers. Eventually the body dries completely, and only small moths remain to eat strands of hair—the last remaining edible part.

When it is cold outside, there are no insects available to speed up the decomposition. Fat in the corpse slowly turns into acid and soap. A disfiguring white film called “grave wax” coats the cheeks, chest, and buttocks.

Dead bodies are found all the time in New York, and the identity of the body is often unknown or the cause of death is unclear. A medical investigator is sent to the scene to make a determination. The investigator will look for certain clues. Is the body cool? Has rigor mortis set in? Did the deceased take any prescription drugs? Are there signs of illicit drug use?

Spring is the cruelest season for dead bodies. Ice and snow melt away, and previously hidden corpses reappear. Water temperatures rise and according to Dr. Jonathan Zenilman, a former New York City medical investigator, the “floaters come up in Springtime.”

If a body is found quickly—a luxury most floaters don’t have—police and medical investigators try to determine the time of death. If found within 24 hours, the body’s rapidly plummeting temperature can be used to calculate the time of death. For the decomposing and decaying, insect population within the body can be used as a rough time indicator.

If the cause of death is obvious, the investigator can certify the death on the scene. Fingerprints, DNA, or dental records are often used to identify the body. If the body is in one piece an X-ray can be taken to find histories of surgery and implants.

If the cause isn’t immediately clear, or if foul play is suspected, or if a family makes a request, the body is taken for a field trip to the New York City Medical Examiner’s office for an autopsy. The examiner’s spokesperson told me that the office performs about 5,000 such autopsies every year.

MAN IN A PAN

Autopsies frequently reveal new cold, hard truths. According to Dr. Eugene Marcantonio of Columbia Medical Center’s Department of Pathology Diagnostic Services, as many as a third of all autopsies reveal that the cause of death was incorrectly identified. This statistic has remained
constant for 50 years—even with the development of CAT scans and MRIs, it seems we still have a hard time understanding why we die.

Marcantonio walked me through the autopsy process. Like Tenga, talk of death didn’t faze him. Autopsies usually are not a problem, although “the hardest ones for me are always children or when you know the person.” Performing autopsies on celebrities is also unnerving, though he refused to say which ones had gone under his knife.

Movie star or not, the operation begins with a Y-shaped incision from the armpits to the groin. The top flap of skin is stretched over the head, and the chest plate cut open with giant rib cutters. Then “you gut the body like you might a fish” and place the organs in a dish referred to as the “man in the pan.”

Each organ is examined differently. The liver is cut into one centimeter slices to look for abnormal lesions. The kidneys are cut in half to peer into the middle. The ventricles of the heart are often cut apart, and the lungs are inflated with formaldehyde and sliced thinly.

If doctors suspect a stroke or a tumor, the brain may be removed and examined by making incisions behind the ears. The skin is folded forward and the skull is cut with a vibrating saw (the same one that cut open the cast of your broken arm), or, more rarely, a big hand saw. A special “skull chisel” finally gets the dome separated from the rest of the head. Then the brain is removed. But because “the brain has the consistency of toothpaste,” it must be soaked in formaldehyde before being sliced.

The dome is fitted back onto the empty skull, and the skin sewn back together with big surgeon’s needles. Gauze is packed into the empty cavity where the lungs, kidneys, liver, and heart once lived. The chest is sealed shut, and the body is sent to the mortician. What happens to all the organs removed in the operation? “I don’t actually know,” Mercantonio said.

STEALTH EMBALMERS

Matthew Scamardella, owner of Matthew Funeral and Cremation Services, explained that once the body reaches the mortician, the death process becomes less about the body itself and more about helping the survivors grieve. “The funeral is therapeutic … The purpose of an open casket is to move [mourners] through the grief process.”

And Scamardella and his fellow funeral directors usually succeed at their job. At almost every funeral, someone will say, “Oh, he looks so peaceful.” But that peaceful expression doesn’t just happen. The mouth of the deceased is sewn shut. The eyes are locked in place with special caps. Cosmetics are
applied to give the skin a lifelike tone. Body cavities are filled with a strong disinfectant. And if organs have been removed, or if the person lost weight in the final days, the body is stuffed with gauze. And, of course, before all of this, there is the embalming.

To start, the limbs must be massaged, to relieve rigor mortis. A small incision is then made in the jugular, and the mortician pulls out a vein and an artery. Embalming fluid is pumped into the artery via tubes, and the blood pumped out through the vein until the circulatory system is flushed of blood.

The circulatory system of a body on which an autopsy has been performed will be completely chopped up, in which case six injections are made; two in carotid arteries in the neck, two in the legs, and two in the arms. Embalming fluid is pumped in through each injection.

Blood doesn’t actually cause decay. Rather, the circulatory system is a convenient way to get the fluid into the body, where it seeps from the arteries through the capillaries and into the muscles and skin, preserving the corpse for public viewing. Once the body is polished, sewn, and dressed, all that’s left is the casket.

MOURNING WOOD

Tenga takes pride in the variety and selection of his caskets at the Greenwich Village Funeral Home. There are half a dozen full-sized caskets laid out in his sales room, with names like the “Senator,” the “Carbon Steel,” and the “Princeton.” Each casket can be personalized with an inscription on the top or embroidery on the head mattress. Small sculptures can be affixed to the side of the casket: eagles, lighthouses, fish, even golf clubs.

These selections were not possible a few decades ago, when casket personalization was rare. But the entire funeral process is changing. “Thirty years ago, everything was heightened emotions,” Tenga said. “Nowadays about 99.9 percent [of families] have had doctors; they’ve gone through the grieving process already.” Better health care has familiarized us with the dying process. “The unexpectedness of death is going away.”

When reading about the tangible science of death, we abstract the actual process of dying; by personalizing our deaths, we give ourselves a false measure of control. We fantasize that death is something that happens to other people.

But, for Tenga and his associates, death is a way of life. And it seems to make them happier, better-adjusted people. Towards the end of our interview, Tenga told me, “I’m a person of hope.”

So, however distant decomposition, autopsies, and embalming seem, remember and rejoice: they will all happen to you.

Decomposition 20-50 Days
Butyric Fermentation

This January, The Washington Post, reported that Biomedical Tissue Services Ltd. in connection with several Brooklyn funeral homes, had looted tissues from bodies never meant for donation. These tissues were taken without the knowledge of the families and implanted into hospital patients.

One of the bodies looted was Alistair Cooke, the former host of Masterpiece Theater, who died in 2004 at the age of 95.
Robyn Schneider, B’08, scared the crap out of me. Maybe it was because she told me she had already read four books that day. Maybe it was because they were all teen novels. More likely, it was because half the time I had no idea what she was talking about.

A Barnard English major who transferred from Hofstra after her freshman year, Robyn has three forthcoming books from Delacorte: Better Than Yesterday, a novel that her website (www.robynschneider.com) describes as “a compelling, honest take on the boarding school world, and on the challenges and friendships that shape a student’s life;” The Social Climbers Guide to High School, a stab at nonfiction whose content is still on the DL (though I bet you can venture a guess); and A Vision in Pearls, a “high concept” novel about psychic visions, secret societies, and Columbia, which Robyn is still working on.

Bouncing rapidly between impersonations and spewing reams of publishing jargon, she is as bubbly, effusive, and PR-savvy as you might expect from someone who cashed her first book advance “in a pleated plaid schoolgirl skirt and knee socks.”

Robyn started novel-writing before most were totally comfortable with novel-reading. In 6th grade, she tried to write a book called High School Diaries. “I was 11, and I really wanted to write about skater girls,” she said. “I threw that one out.” Two years and the emergence of Harry Potter gave her the confidence to find a niche. “It struck me—this was a woman writing about boys,” she remembered. “It was not just a girl book about hair and makeup.” Soon after discovering J.K. Rowling, Robyn wrote 85 pages of a “hack...
fantasy novel” while on a cruise with her family. “Since then, I’ve written, oh God,”—she looked away and strained to remember—“eight, or nine, or ten novels. They’re all somewhere saved on like a floppy disc in Clarisworks.”

Just exactly what sort of writer she aspires to be, though, is a little bit elusive.

“I used to call myself ‘Chickliterary,’” she admitted, “but my publicist didn’t like that. We want to reach a wider audience.” But, when asked if she considers her writing to be “chicklit,” she literally flipped out, shrieking, throwing her hands in the air, and rolling up into a fetal position.

I was quickly corrected when I pointed out that Better Than Yesterday had a pink cover. “A pink stripe! It has a thin pink stripe down the side!” Next to the pink stripe is a blurry photo of a neck buffered by layered pastel polo shirts. The characters are named Blake Dorsey and Skylar Banks. The sidebar on her website features the following excerpt: “Blake was gone. As in he’d run away from Hilliard. No one did that. It just wasn’t done. But Blake had, and he’d done it because of me.” I was still a little skeptical.

It’s probably more accurate to describe Robyn as existing in a milieu all her own. She keeps close tabs on the Young Adult fiction market, frequents teen writer events held at downtown bars, and has curated a number of public readings. She dropped a lot of names—John Greene, Ned Vazini, Marty Beckermen—none of which I remotely recognized; when asked which three writers she’d most like to have dinner with, she answered instinctively: “You mean who I haven’t had dinner with already?”

But she isn’t looking to write as a career. “I think I fully accomplished everything I ever wanted to accomplish this year,” she told me. “You know—become part of whatever literary scene there is, but still be a student even though it’s not typical.”

She once dreamed of joining a literary agency. “But I worked at one,” she said, “and I hated it. The stuff I was reading was awful, and then I realized if I did this as a career, I’d end up selling my own competition.” Instead she’s considering a career in PR or academia. “I’m thinking of getting a Ph.D in English,” she said, “I’m really into Victorian children’s literature. I think that’s the birthplace of the boarding-school genre.”

Despite the self-promoting glitz and near-obsession with her industry, Robyn’s success comes from a simpler source: hard work. “I don’t sleep much,” she said. “I don’t watch television, and I’m on AIM like maybe a half-hour a month. Weekends are the best—I’m so happy, I can just spend all day writing. I went out to one party last semester.” I was tempted to wonder how she gets it all done, but then I remembered I was talking to someone who’d read 80 pages of Great Expectations on the subway ride to campus.

When asked if she considers her writing to be “chicklit,” Robyn literally flipped out, shrieking, throwing her hands in the air, and rolling up into a fetal position.

“Y ou started with a novel?”

“Well… yeah.” Catalina Lee answered like she had been asked if she could tie her shoes. She wasn’t condescending, just unable to comprehend the scale of her precociousness. To be fair, it wasn’t just the fact that she had started with a novel that threw me off.

“How long was it?” I asked.

“The first one, it was reduced. It was supposed to be four or five volumes.”

Catalina began writing out of sheer boredom. “I was on vacation,” she told me, “and didn’t have anything to do. I started to write things up, and then it got bigger and bigger, and that’s how it got published.” She was 17, a rising senior at a San Diego high school, and so lonesome for her parents and brother in South Korea that she pounded out a whopping 700-plus pages of Korean prose. (Translated into English, her debut would probably surpass 800 pages.) The publisher cut it down, unwilling to risk so much on a new author in a country where people on average read fewer than one book per year. It didn’t matter, though; she had her foot in the door. Four years later, Catalina has published two more novels in Korea. A second semester GS student majoring in Neuroscience and Behavior, she is approaching a fourth 1,200-page novel.
WILL IT SELL?

The student authors I interviewed seemed driven by higher callings than commercial success. But I was curious: how would their books fare in the cut-throat world of American publishing? I asked literary agent Daniel Lazar for some insights.

ROBYN

“Young authors tend to get more attention for sheer novelty,” he said. “It’s unfair in the grand scheme of things, to have some young whippersnapper get the attention, but that’s often how the media works.” Still, this cannot be the only factor in success, at least in the long run. Most submissions he sees by young writers have greater ambitions than mass-market paperbacks, anyway. “There’s more of a chance it’s going to be serious,” he said. “They have sort of literary aspirations. Sometimes it’s laughably dramatic, but it’s dramatic. Most submissions from younger people, they are usually pretty serious.”

CATALINA

Lazar was skeptical about the value of Catalina’s success in Korea. “What’s a big hit?” he asked. “If she is, she probably has a publisher in Korea trying to sell rights themselves.” When I told him about her literary prize, he remained unmoved. “If the book was translated into English and won the Booker Prize in England,” he said, “then that would be something… Putting on the top of the book ‘National Korean Bestseller,’ I don’t know why that would be an attractive quality to an American reader.” But there is also a good chance that the length of Catalina’s novels would not be as problematic here as it was in Korea. “It’s not prohibitive if it’s good,” Lazar said. “There have been some very long books published recently. A lot of those books are epics, over the top. People who like to fall into those worlds don’t mind slogging through. Look at Harry Potter. I think a lot of books in that genre seem to grow larger as the series grows.”

RIDDHI

“I have no idea who will buy a 700-page tome about law not written by a lawyer,” he told me. “The chances it will get published by a trade publisher are zero to nothing… Just paying someone to publish your book so 200 copies can sit in a storage closet in Queens is not impressive to a publisher.” Then again, after meeting Riddhi, I don’t think his books would sit around in a closet, or that a publishing breakthrough was one of his top priorities anyway.
But none of this seems particularly remarkable to her. “Hi=) wow,” she began a tentative e-mail response after I acted on a tip and requested an interview. “I’m not sure if I’m the type of writer you’re looking for.” I couldn’t locate the books, or their titles. “Oh, and my books … geez … I left all of them at Korea where my parents are. I never thought that I would need them here for an interview….”

In person, she seemed even more embarrassed by my attention. “I never thought I was a writer,” she explained. When I asked about a writing prize she’d won, Catalina was quick to qualify the accolade. “Well it wasn’t like an official one,” she said. By this, Catalina means that one of the biggest information technology companies in South Korea chose her as the most promising writer of the next generation. “They like sorted out some writers from the next generation and they gave me first prize. And, I got to write for them and it got like posted on the front page.”

Even if her win was a fluke, Catalina is certainly a writer by now. “After high school,” she told me, “I did go to another school, but I kind of quit. And then, I was at home writing and writing and writing. That was all I did. I write for like 10, ummm … to like 14, 15 hours a day.” Her output—over six published volumes, not counting drastic cuts, in just a few years—would be impossible without this sort of dedication.

“Does school get in the way?” I asked, wondering if this was another silly question. “Of course!” Catalina laughed.

But Catalina has returned to college because of her writing, not in spite of it. “Since I started to write,” she said, “I wanted to come to school because I felt like I didn’t learn enough to get things into my writing. That’s why I just tried school again.” Why, then, is she majoring in neuroscience? “People think that I might want to take writing courses,” she said, “I dunno. Well what I really talk about in my novels is what’s really going on in the human—like how people act and the inner fears of themselves.”

Her influences, which range from Nancy Drew to Hunter S. Thompson, Japanese rock to visual art, have led to a hodgepodge of genre-breaking thrillers. The last novel she finished—the story of a crazy doctor who wants to separate the soul from the brain—signaled the start of her literary dive into the cognitive sciences. “My novels are really dark,” she said, “and I really wanted to study the behavior of humans.”

But last semester, Catalina was still forced to face the cruel reality of the Core and take University Writing. “I wasn’t that much into the course,” she told me, criticizing UW in words much less harsh than the average Columbia student, “because I really hate it when people tell me to do this and to do that. And one of the [reasons] that I think my novels got popular was that the style I wrote, like the way I wrote it, was kind of like talking to the audience,
not like trying to bring my work into specific rules. UW kinda choked me up because my teacher wanted specific ways for us to write.”

“Does everyone else in the class know that you wrote three novels?” I asked.

“Ummm …” she paused. “I think they know that I did publish some books but I don’t think they know about the three.”

Riddhi Dasgupta’s Changing Face of the Law: A Global Perspective is the only book I actually got to touch. I had asked to see it just before our interview, and he rummaged through a duffel bag and pulled out a doorstop wrapped in a glossy, three-color dust jacket with his name in red beneath a close-up photo of a pointedly un-blind statue of Justice. Judging by its cover, his work of comparative jurisprudence seemed more like the product of a tenured professor than a Columbia College junior.

I spent my time with him trying to figure out how he cobbled this together in only 18 months; he wrote 600 pages on an ostensibly technical subject without a J.D., while taking an average of 19 credits a semester and helping coach one of the law school’s moot court teams (among other things). “Time flies when you’re having fun,” he told me.

“There was a lot of work but none of it really seemed all that cumbersome,” he said, beaming. “I think that at the end of it I was sort of shell-shocked by the fact that there were about 837—” he flipped to the back of the book, “—840 footnotes.”

He has been studying the law since he was 12, thinking about it in terms of whatever he was reading at the time—literature, philosophy, history, or economics—and his research came from almost everywhere: Supreme Court decisions (especially those of Kennedy, Breyer, and Brandeis), Indian law (his grandfather knows “a Justice or two on the Indian Supreme Court”), the Pragmatism of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., economic models, Rousseau’s theory of the general will, and the advice of Law Professor Michael Dorf, the moot court team’s faculty sponsor. “There were times that I just woke up in the middle of the night,” Riddhi emphasized, “I just opened up my Gmail account, kept typing and saved it, and I woke up the next morning and I’m like, ‘Ah, this is not absolute bullshit, so let’s use some of it.’”

Riddhi didn’t originally intend the project to be so all-encompassing. “I planned to write like 150 pages at the max, and that just blew itself out of proportion, kind of to my embarrassment. I started writing and then there’s so much other material you find that just relates to it, you know? I think it was just my inability to discriminate between irrelevant and relevant,” he said. Riddhi’s initial idea was for a book on the Indian-American community here, which moved him towards a study of Indian law, and then to the rule of law in general, where his take is a little different than most.

He seemed a little surprised that the main points of his book—that the law should take into account the legal standards of other nations, and that law should have roots in real life and other disciplines—warranted so much text. “You’d think they’re pretty obvious,” he said, “and it wouldn’t take something like a big book by a precocious twenty-year-old to establish that point, but I was surprised.”

He also wasn’t fazed by his lack of a law school education. “Actually, it wasn’t daunting at all to write it without a J.D. because so much of it is just research and I don’t pretend to be a lawyer already, that’s very clear to others, and it was more like my perspective as a novice and as an undergraduate.”

Riddhi’s personal project doubles as a layman’s guide to what he sees as the important legal issues of the day. He addresses the worry that many lawyers spend the pinnacles of their careers mired in the minutiae of academic debate, losing sight of the bigger issues. His goal, then, is to show why law was deeply important to our everyday lives, as well as preserve a moment in time when he thought like this. “Maybe, if and when I become a lawyer the same will happen to me. I just wanted there to be something that would always enliven the aspirations with which I went into it.”

The first edition of Changing Face of the Law was self-published through the website IUniverse.com. Will things change the second time around? “If some publisher is kind enough then I probably would like to do a second edition, get rid of some stuff, put in some new things,” he said, “but right now I think it’s a little bit too premature.”
On 125th Street and Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard, the Times Square of Harlem, a youngish black woman in heels and a leather jacket coos into her cell phone, “Baby, do you want me to buy you a black power t-shirt?” “Baby” is indecisive, so the woman buys one anyway, choosing from a table with shirts flashing phrases like “Hollyhood” and “I love black people.”

Sometimes it’s hard to know what decade Harlem is living in.

The street vendors on 125th are selling CDs of Malcolm X and Marcus Garvey, while economists speak of a renaissance and community activists rail against the modern forces of gentrification. As East Harlem brownstones go for millions, there’s a fear among residents that as Harlem sells off it will sell out. But, because no one can agree what makes Harlem Harlem, it’s hard to know what, if anything, selling out really means.

At Community Board 9 meetings, every real estate developer with the chutzpah to stand before the crowd suffers a torrent of questions. Will Harlem become a haven for whites escaping the lunacy of East Village shoeboxes selling for fortunes? Or, maybe, a massive Striver’s Row for middle class blacks and Hispanics? Others are concerned about Harlem’s aesthetic; they would likely protest if plans for a new staircase didn’t look like one Ralph Ellison once climbed.

“The flavor of 125th Street is gone,” says an elderly woman in producer-director Shawn Batley’s documentary Changing Face of Harlem. But Batley, a Harlem native, thinks there’s still hope. “Businesses have to be there; they’re the lifeblood,” she said.

There are locally-owned shops that need community support to survive the arrival of chain stores. But a Starbucks on Lenox truly more egregious than one on 42nd—especially when you want a decent cup of coffee? Preserving Harlem’s flavor doesn’t mean everything must stay. Example: a dozen or so stores on 125th Street that seem to be selling the identical pair of 100 percent polyester pants.

Shoppers are arguably better served by the new H&M. “This is Harlem, even H&M is gangsta,” said an H&M security guard dozing on a clothes rack. Lo and behold, there I stood waiting in an aisle, 5’1” and pale as the pilgrims, singing “You gonna touch the sky babygirl!” with two massive black women. Kanye was a common denominator.

A white first-year from the Philadelphia suburbs probably isn’t the proper arbiter of which parts of Harlem are worth keeping. But the fact remains that no neighborhood is impervious to change or market forces. Freezing Harlem in time would be as artificial as lining its streets with chain stores.

“When gentrification happens in other places, it’s good. But when it happens in black neighborhoods people think it’s bad,” said Mahalia Stines, Harlem’s resident Ayn Rand. She’s not interested in fighting gentrification; she wants to make it work for her.

“Besides,” she added, “this place is vibrant.”

And it is. On a recent Wednesday morning, I sat in Mount Moriah Baptist Church, listening to the gospel choir. Women and men in red robes swayed and clapped, the music spilling out into the audience and possessing several listeners to stand and clap along. Does it matter if the choir goes out afterwards for fried chicken or foie gras? Gentrification will inevitably affect Harlem, just like the rest of Manhattan—the goal is to make sure Harlem can still be recognized.

“They say New York is a city that eats its young, but it’s not true,” Stines said. “It just bites them a little.” I hope she’s right.
The Greening of Columbia

The Earth Institute has Africa covered. Who’s taking care of Morningside Heights? By LYDIA DEPILLIS

The diminutive Jeff Sachs, friend of Bono and advisor to nations, may loom large in the world of international sustainability. But back home in Morningside Heights, his rock star shoes are filled by Housing and Dining director Scott Wright, whose office generates more energy-saving and waste-reducing reforms than any other at Columbia. Wright has developed a following of students relieved at his willingness to prioritize the planet over Columbia’s bottom line.

“This type of effort begins with a very personal commitment,” said Wright, fresh from a 15-year stint in green-friendly California. “Almost everything we’re talking about is something you do in a selfless fashion … this doesn’t provide the type of reward for good behavior that we’ve been taught our entire lives to expect.”

Savvier tree-huggers have learned to emphasize the long-term economic logic of sustainability, but not all measures look good on next year’s balance sheet. According to one student activist, the school has said that it will consider projects that break even within two or three years—if it takes more than five, chances are slim.

“It takes a long time to move a billion-dollar institution,” said Steven Cohen, Educational Programs Director of the Earth Institute, from a sunny office on the 14th floor of the International Affairs building. “They’re doing it in a very careful, professional way. They’re not doing it for superficial reasons, they’re doing it because it’s good business practice.”

Other billion-dollar institutions, however, don’t feel the same inhibition. A quick tour of other universities’ websites turns up pages dedicated to environmental operations, Offices of Sustainable Development, and public mission statements on environmental stewardship. (Columbia has been promising a comprehensive site since last semester.)

Renewable wind energy accounts for ten percent of the University of Pennsylvania’s energy needs, making it the biggest buyer of wind power in the country. Tufts effectively halted the growth of its emissions even as the number of campus buildings increased.

And the University of Michigan, President Bollinger’s former stomping grounds, even has a building constructed to LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) standards, the holy grail of green architecture awarded by the U.S. Green Building Council—not to mention food composting, extensive energy conservation initiatives, and the biggest alternative-fueled
vehicle fleet in the country. Students would like to use the achievements of other schools as leverage to goad the administration into action.

“Columbia is really behind the other Ivies, and that’s too bad,” said EarthCo President Kate Lundberg, E ’06, who noted that she hasn’t seen any progress during her time on campus. “They don’t want to get stuck in a project and have to follow up and end up costing a lot of money.”

A job posting for an environmental stewardship coordinator has sat on Columbia’s website since December. Small-scale projects are underway to reduce waste, conserve energy, and purchase greener products. Last May, Senior Executive Vice President Robert Kasdin convened an Environmental Stewardship Task Force, composed of volunteers from mid-level administration. Their accomplishments since then include, most prominently, organizing into committees and updating departmental websites. The lack of a cohesive vision, one that might bring Columbia into line with the high ideals of Jeff Sachs’ sound bites, is conspicuous.

Even Scott Wright, the activist’s friend, says that Columbia’s urban environment and landmarked status makes it impossible to draw parallels with Berkeley and Brown. But these obstacles haven’t stopped New York City, which just last year passed legislation requiring many municipal buildings to achieve “rigorous standards of sustainability” and is currently planning 15 projects that will be LEED-certified.

Columbia’s planners do not intend to use the LEED standard, even in Manhattanville, where the University intends to build five million new square feet over the next 25 years. The 177-page plan developed by community organizations, on the other hand, is a bit more ambitious: it proposes making the area into a “zero-waste zone,” which would mean recycling water and drastically reducing the generation of garbage. Already instituted in Seattle, California, and Australia, such a large-scale plan for the new campus would represent a dramatic, proactive step towards sustainability.

Some students are impatient with the administration’s modest goals. They envision something like an Office of Multicultural Affairs but for sustainability. Traditional activist tactics might not work: environmental campaigns just don’t lend themselves to massive protests the way issues of racism or sweatshop labor do. “I wish environmental groups could take on a more activist role,” said Students for Economic and Environmental Justice member Davida Schiff, E ’06, fresh off a successful two-year campaign for recycled paper. “It’s hard to get people really upset about environmental issues … you can’t storm Bollinger’s office related to paper.”

Kasdin, who students say places little trust in their initiatives, might not be listening anyway. “I don’t think this is being done in response to pressure,” said Kasdin, with a touch of impatience. “We are only responding to the idea that it’s the right thing to do.”

Saving trees doesn’t ring with the same urgency as building an endowment and a new 17-acre campus. Being green, however, need not be just about moral imperatives—it’s also good marketing, and being in step with the future. In funding the Earth Institute, the University has assumed the role of iconoclast in international sustainability. In Manhattanville, where 14 buildings will either be completely renovated or built from scratch, Columbia has a once-a-century chance to show that sustainability can take root in its own backyard.

It can’t happen if Low Library is afraid of the concept. “Sustainability comes with its own definitions and its own debate,” said Task Force chairman and professor Will McKoy. “Most of those definitions would be quite aggressive, quite comprehensive … We’re not taking on something as large as sustainability at any of our campuses.”

Columbia has the brainpower to run a dorm on solar energy, build a green roof, make all grounds-keeping completely organic, establish a composting facility that would keep all food scraps out of the waste stream. What if Bollinger were to come out and say that Columbia would do everything in its power to cut its greenhouse gas emissions in half within ten years?
Meet the Art Stars

Reverend Jen, Faceboy, and their merry band try to redefine the New York avant garde.

BY PAUL BARNDT AND LYDIA ROSS

You are an art star, whether you know it or not. “It’s probably the least exclusive art movement of all time,” says Reverend Jen, a petite brunette in her early thirties often seen sporting a cape and elf ears. “All you need is your voice and the belief someone is listening.” Reverend Jen cites Andy Warhol’s Factory—the artist’s studio that hosted all sorts of sex, drugs, and avant-garde in the 60s—as the epitome of a lost downtown art world. Today, Reverend Jen says, “is an extremely lame era. There will never be another Warhol, another Factory.” But one gets the sense that this sort of bohemian, radical artistic community is exactly what Reverend Jen and her cohorts aim to recreate—except without the pretension, hierarchy, or segregation.

Twelve years ago, Jennifer Miller was ordained by the Universal Life Church: she sent a check in the mail. So she is now Reverend Jen, or, as her friends call her, Rev. Her full, self-proclaimed title, however, is the Reverend Jen, poet, preacher, performer, prophet, literary giant, upcoming celebrity personality, Patron Saint of the Uncool and Voice of the Downtrodden and Tired.

She is an art star. So are Francis Hall, aka Faceboy; Tom Tenney, the creator and producer of the now-defunct mid-night show “Grindhouse A-Go-Go!” Jonny McGovern, aka the Gay Pimp; Soce the Elemental Wizard, the “world’s first gay Jewish rapper;” and Nick Zedd, the director of Lord of the Cockrings; and several others.

Rev has earned her title. She has MCed a weekly open mic, published several books and a magazine, starred in a television show, written a monthly sex column, freelanced for publications as far afield as South Africa, performed around New York City, and updated a psychedelic website (www.revjen.com). She is the rare performance artist who is equally engaging and friendly on-stage and in conversation.

She is also the founder and curator of the World Famous Troll Museum (the CEO of Norfin, the Danish manufacturer of the original troll dolls, recently traveled to New York just to take a look). The idea came to her one drunken night when she turned to a friend and said, “I have too many trolls, I’m going to open a museum!” Rev received her first troll, Adrianna, at the age of twelve. It now resides in a beloved shrine with her many others, in one of the three rooms in Rev’s small, sixth-floor walk-up.
tion to Adrianna and friends, there is an extensive collection of troll merchandise: lunchboxes, coloring books, an immaculately preserved set of paper cutouts, and a terrifying set of live action videotapes.

Rev also makes time for her ministerial duties. In 1998, she presided over a series of gay weddings: “Yeah, we basically set up a tent and performed unlawful marriages all day long.” When asked if the Universal Life Church supported gay marriage, she replied, “I think they must. Their attitude is basically, ‘Whatever the fuck.’ John Waters is a member, and I’m pretty sure they’ve got some Satanists in there.”

But the true religious ritual of the art star movement is their open mic night. Reverend Jen and Faceboy—one of her closest friends and earliest partners in crime—host the Anti-Slam as well as the Faceboyz Open Mic Night, on Wednesday and Sunday nights, respectively.

The Anti-Slam was forged in opposition to the poetry slams at the exclusive Nuyoricans Poets Café, whose scoring Rev and her posse saw as creative rape. So one time she showed up wearing her “shit suit,” a brown outfit topped by a baseball cap with fake dog feces on the bill. She and her friend Kyle spent the allotted three minutes making “revolting fart noises.” For their second performance, they did it again. Out of a possible 60 points, they received a total score of 5. Rev used her clerical authority to declare a holy war on poetry slams everywhere.

“We’re not there to tell you how to become better or grow as an artist,” Rev says of the Anti-Slam. “We’re there to hear you express yourself.” Performers pay three dollars instead of five, and get six minutes instead of three. Besides the time constraints, and a ban on audience harassment, there are no limits. Scoring is on a scale of 1-10; everyone gets a 10. There is no fixed demographic: one night, performers ranged from a yuppie describing mouse murder to a 70-something man who insisted his wife videotape his words of wisdom.

Faceboyz Open Mic Night, although not as blatantly “anti-slam,” predates the Anti-Slam by several years and shares much of its ethos. Indeed, Rev describes Anti-Slam as something of a spin-off: “Joanie Loves Chachi to Faceboy’s Happy Days.” But for the art stars, it’s just as much Cheers: the welcoming joint where everybody knows their names.

Faceboy’s show has migrated throughout Lower Manhattan, spawning several offshoots. One, “Grindhouse-A-Go-Go!,” was started by performance artist and art star Tenney—he describes it as “dirty musicals, pop-culture satires, and really just excuses for a bunch of us to do the two things we enjoy most: drink and play.” Both Rev and “Face” were cast members, as well as The Gay Pimp, Reverend Hank, a couple of strippers, and many others.

Even art stars are not immune to internecine pettiness. “Like in any community,” Faceboy, a veteran of many civil wars, explains, “individuals are following their own agenda.”

Yet Faceboy, Rev, and Tenney are struck by how successful community members are at supporting each other. They go to each other’s shows, promote one another’s gigs, and take care of each other when they’re sick (Faceboy came every day to brush Jen’s hair after her appendix burst).

Rev once called her scene the only art scene in New York, and Tom Tenney agrees: “If one defines an art scene as one in which artists, all on their own, come together to form a true collaborative community, and out of that community comes work which is brilliant and inspiring, I know of no other scene like it in New York, or anywhere else.”

Illustrated by Julia Butareva
I love money. I love spreading it all over my hardwood floors and walking barefoot on them, the dollar bills sticking to my feet. It makes me feel like a woman. No. Like a goddess.

I love frolicking through the meadows as my money blows from the east. It’s like I am an Indian princess and I like curry. Wait no. Except not.

I love business. I love the crisp sensual texture of a hard-earned dollar bill. Just writing about it makes me shiver. Brrrrrr! Oh here come the butterflies!!!!!!! YAY!! BUTTERFLIES!!! OMG!!!! YEAH?!?! WHAT MOTHERFUCKER?!?! I’LL KICK YOU. God told me to.

The anguish of this situation is particularly enhanced by the architectural form of that prison, and as the poem leaves off here there is, alas, no respite for the poet.

I was fascinated to learn that windows on a ship (aka ‘portholes’) are round because the circular shape provides greater structural integrity. The corner’s of a traditional rectangular or square shaped window would be subject to the great strain and stress of a ship at sea. This is a most suitable metaphor for my love of Diane. Our love is round and therefore not as vulnerable as traditional heart-shaped love with its structurally unsound corner.

That’s a lot of angst. Romanticism, rather. Calling it angst conjures images of punk rocker suburban teen, oh-woe-is-me-I’m-white-young-and-middle-class. But call it Romanticism (capital R, natch), and it’s got legitimacy.

First I unloaded my backpack and just carried my pen and pad. This was a nice change, to unload all the weight of my books and be left with my imagination and creativity. Well, not really left with just my own. I had to copy someone else’s who’s inspiration was a designer or designers from over a thousand years ago.

Upon reviewing these three facets of my personality I came to the individual consensus that it would be most opportune if I focused myself into the entrepreneurial industry.

It is not a math equation where there is only one solution to the problem. It is not a derivative of a curve. We are not curves but PEOPLE.

God told me.

A giant boat.

The purpose of my research will be to investigate how stay-at-home mothers and dominatrices construct femininities and a sense of self through the practices of mothering and domming.

Allow my ambition to roam your campus and eat the grass of your dining halls.

However, we cannot help but be skeptical in that, many factories in the world do not produce a shirt one by one.

Citizen Kane has a very mysterious and scary opening.
Two thoughts came to my mind. First, “so he was crazy” but then I remembered when you are rich you are not crazy just eccentric so that is what I will say.

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. 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’s is well described.

I had no idea what type of sculpture I was looking for. I walked casually through the met and entered the European Art section. There was a big hall with lots of sculptures. In this respect, it is lacking, but it still peaked my interest.

Moreover, I felt a symmetry in having the eldest with the second youngest and the second oldest with the youngest. The oldest and the third child are on the right while the youngest and smallest sleeps under the second.

The jive bitch is a troublemaker. The deviance of the jive bitch is a deliberate, calculated strategy to cause conflict.

I’ll Have a Venti Water and a Shot of My-Pride-Back, Please.

Jamaal stood there naked, grinning. His hands were on his hips and his dick hung heavy between his legs like the bell of a church.

For example, evolution and the big bang theory are not falsifiable and, according to Popper, are about as scientific as, say, my personal theory that purple unicorns will descend from the sky when I die and bring me to heaven.

I thought about cloud formations, wild edibles, and how I could teach the girls to pitch tents and chop wood—all of which I thought would matter, none of which did.

In saying that nature is a temporary refuge Hund converts the girls into refugees whose summers were charity-based evacuations.

The purpose of my research will be to investigate how stay-at-home mothers and dominatrices construct femininities and a sense of self through the practices of mothering and domming.

Personne ne peut vraiment définir l’amour. Il y a beaucoup de variations.

Although the mission statement never said as much, as a counselor my job was to sell the wilderness and, in so doing, to sell white culture.

“By refusing to correct this flaw, you are betraying the universe, Phil.” Sam looked up. “The universe is pink.”

The “Welcome to New York, fuck you” attitude is as commercial as Woody Allen’s romanticism.

The mosquito must be on either the left or right hand side of me. Since it says that the hammock is placed precisely in the middle of the room (halfway to the ceiling and halfway from either side, I determined that the mosquito would be moving on one of the sides. This is what I concluded because it seemed much more difficult to catch a mosquito that is underneath the hammock. This mattered because, although it is my friend and not I who is catching the mosquito, I felt that myself and the hammock (the nucleus) would be less of an obstacle if the mosquito were moving to one side. Wenn die Spiegeleier fast fertig sind, legen Sie an die Brotscheiben.
When New York City Police Commissioner Ray Kelly stepped to the podium, his eyes darted around the room, checking for terrorists behind the water fountains and under the stairs. It was March 23, 2006, and Osama bin Laden was nowhere to be found in Lerner Party Space.

With the grimace of a seasoned veteran, Kelly asked the central question of the evening, preaching to the choir of mostly white male admirers: “What have we done to protect New York?”

It involves a joint terrorism task force, lots of money, and military jargon. He wields an annual counter-terrorism budget of nearly $200 million with impunity, and has agents stationed in Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island, Madrid, Amman, Tel Aviv, and other boroughs.

Using words like “apprehend” and “reconnaissance,” and dropping phrases like “rectify the situation,” Kelly described how moments after the London bombing, the NYPD secured information from liaisons at the scene and promptly deployed bomb-sniffing dogs and cops into the New York City subways, all before the morning rush.

Calloused with experience—before taking control of the NYPD after 9/11, Kelly was the first person to hold all of the ranks in the NYPD, fought in the Vietnam war, was a colonel in the Marine Corps reserves, and served as Commissioner of the U.S. Customs Service under President Clinton—he speaks with gruff, confident authority.

Yet as the end of his speech approached, what was a brusque, insider-y debriefing morphed into PR-speak. He stiffly detailed NYPD efforts to reach out to religious communities, placing special emphasis on all the imams New York’s Finest will welcome to their “positive” meetings about “community affairs.” “We can all help maintain the climate of tolerance. Maybe it is the best defense against extremism.” Tolerance? What happened to the bomb-sniffing dogs and critical response vehicles?

Kelly’s closed his talk with an awkward, forced “O.K.,” and audience members lined up at the mic, presumably to deliver long-winded requests for Kelly to “please comment” on excessive use of force by cops during arrests, aggressive treatment of Republican Convention protesters, and the constitutionality of bag searches in the subways.

While Kelly was forced to work his grimace into a smile to laugh off an appeal for his opinion on the war in Iraq, most of the questions posed were friendly. When a student asked how he funds his task force and initiatives, Kelly hinted at his disdain for the federal government’s homeland security appropriations for places like Wyoming and Idaho. “[Politicians] can rationalize anything, [even] protecting the tobacco crop from terrorist poisoning.”

Kelly saved most of his fury for commenting on stingy arbitration that lowered the salary of rookie cops to $25,100. Responding to the concerns of an EMT who works with cops in the South Bronx, he called the wage decrease an “outrage,” a “disgrace,” “fundamentally wrong,” and “a validation of corruption.”

“If I sound not too happy about it, I’m not too happy about it,” he said with immaculate old-school New York intonation.

Whisked from the room by a suited entourage after the question and answer session, Kelly received loud applause. And why not? Crime is down, there are well-trained agents keeping the terrorists out of Red Hook, and they’re bringing imams down to the precinct for tea.

—Sara Vogel

Illustrated by Jerone Hsu
MEASURE FOR MEASURE

FRIEND DETAILS

- You are in Rickie’s extended family.
- You hooked up in 2005 and it was so hot.
- You dated. It’s complicated.
- You lived in Hartley together... well Anna lived in the room directly above Rickie’s. In the summer this meant that to communicate they just had to stick their heads out the window. Rickie would sit and read while the sound of Anna’s cello floated in, along with the smell of pot from downstairs and the wooshing of the cars on Amsterdam Avenue. Then winter came and they were forced to shut their windows, as neither of them had the resistance to cold they so admired in Natasha, Rickie’s Russian betrothed. When they didn’t see each-other for a few days because of unsurmountable schoolwork and insupportable men, they missed each-other sorely like rain drops miss their clouds and fought just to have a reason to be passionate and emotional. Secretly Rickie hoped that Anna would stop dating men and be with her. Then Anna and Rickie realized that there is a clock ticking in every person’s soul that feels like a kick in the stomach when it clangs out the random changes in their lives. They could never be perfectly synchronized. And so Rickie consoled herself with a series of second-rate stand-ins. Anna consoled herself by reading books about people more lonely than herself and by watching birds fly by her room at eye level. But some nights, some thing ticked, and they remembered that despite glass skeletons, impounded hearts, traffic-jammed minds, people together are like a spiderweb of individual Christmas lights. Anna often thinks about how when she was little, she walked in the woods and stopped to duck under spider webs that crossed her path. This aversion to breaking delicate connections expanded and seeped into her life. But she remembers the feeling of electricity, a lighting up, that comes from Rickie to her, so even when it’s absent, she burns.
- You took econ! (oh shit have you done the problem set yet?)
- You went to college with Rickie.

—Anna Corke and Rickie Siegel
Coachella 2004 was a legendary mixture of high temperatures, huge crowds, and superstar bands. But there’s only one band whose set from that glorious blur of a weekend remains imprinted in my mind: The Flaming Lips. Or, more accurately: Lips lead-singer Wayne Coyne rolling over the crowd in a plastic bubble, while expansive versions of his songs burst forth from a stage full of people in animal costumes. They were still touring for 2002’s *Yoshimi Battles the Pink Robots*, and this was a physical incarnation of that album’s sense of fantasy, emotive power, and strange, almost disarming beauty. With all its excess and its impact, that spectacle represented everything The Flaming Lips stand for.

In his new book about The Flaming Lips, *Chicago Sun-Times* writer Jim DeRogatis mentions the Coachella set, but the description is sandwiched between a story about a fight with Beck and an explanation of the sound problems that kept the show to only four songs. In this case and throughout his book, DeRogatis entirely misses the point. *Staring at Sound* is well-written and filled with quirky stories, but it is too grounded in the mundane details. Yes, it’s cool to know that Coyne is secure enough to have such obvious idols as the Beatles and The Who, and that Michael Ivins was a New-Wave-obsessed valedictorian who barely knew how to play the bass when he met Wayne. And there’s also some voyeuristic joy in hearing personal anecdotes from the cast of family and friends DeRogatis has assembled.

But, in painting such a precise picture of the
people behind the band, DeRogatis overshadows the essence of the band itself. What's worse, this book comes at the same time as the band's latest album, At War With the Mystics, which relies on spectacle more than ever before. So fans are left with a deadly combination: as the book exposes the layers of reality underneath the image of the Lips, the album becomes so dependent on that image that it lacks actual substance. The result is a band, and a legend, that is starting to crack.

With Mystics, The Flaming Lips have taken their love of production so far they almost forgot to include solid music. The lead single, “W.A.N.D.,” lacks a convincing melody, relying only on a catchy rhythm and stereotypically Lips-ian soundscapes. What's missing are the extremes: there are no obvious, heart-stopping Lips masterpieces like “Waitin’ for a Superman” or “Do You Realize?,” nor are there those quieter, bizarre tracks like “The Spiderbite Song” and “When You Smile.”

The illusion of the Lips is an uncomplicated one: they take the most basic of melodies, melodies that are almost unfairly beautiful, and cover them in swirling production. That sonic backdrop is then coupled with Coyne’s slightly unpleasant voice, and lyrics that are at once universal, poignant, and utterly bizarre. In their live show, they go one step further: utilizing confetti, costumes, and the like to produce an onslaught of stimulation. It’s an equation very few bands can master; a lesser group might rely on distortion to hide inherently boring compositions (see: anything on alt-rock radio). The Flaming Lips, however, are more than just boys with expensive studio toys; they’re boys who know how to use those toys to morph the simple melodies of “Race for the Prize” or “Fight Test” into something transcendent.

As with any band that traffics in illusions, maintaining a sense of enigma is essential to making an impact. And that's why I almost wish I hadn't read DeRogatis's book: it gives too much away. The Flaming Lips sing about the grandest of themes: love, death, existence; and they do so in the most dramatic of fashions. I don’t want to know that underneath they’re just a group of men who seem pathetically trapped in childhood.

Learning more details about drugs, sex, and rock ’n roll than you wanted to know is an obvious danger of any band biography, but in this particular exposé, DeRogatis really manages to tear the Lips apart. He’s keen to highlight the deficiencies in how the band operates, describing how they bicker like adolescent girls. He comments on the lopsided distribution of talent—drummer Stephen Drozd, the most accomplished musician, would write and record most parts, to the point where bassist Ivins barely had a role. It’s a destruction of the band’s image on the most basic level.

It’s not the method I take issue with; I applaud DeRogatis for being willing to expose the lesser sides of a band he obviously loves. His journalistic objectivity provides all of the book’s strongest points, including an examination of the toll Drozd’s heroin addiction took on the Lips’ creative process. DeRogatis narrates how the Lips managed to have a long tenure with Warner without ever producing a true hit with skill and insight.

Perhaps best of all, DeRogatis uses this storyline as an opportunity to examine the conflict between passion and commerce that lies at the heart of the industry. By delving into the bands, festivals, and music business insiders associated with The Flaming Lips throughout their career, he is able to tell the story of the past 20 years of indie rock: from Nirvana’s leap to commercial success through Wilco’s expulsion from Warner Brothers before Yankee Hotel Foxtrot to the current indie-in-the-mainstream climate.

Had that been the subject of his book, I would be gushing. But in pushing that story to a secondary level, he lets the same details that destroy the image of the Lips turn a potentially interesting, wide-ranging book into something plodding and, ultimately, pointless.

—Ciel Hunter
A few years ago I knew almost nothing about Dostoevsky. If he came up in conversation, I would have just said, “I don’t know,” and waited for the topic to pass. I was fully aware of my ignorance. Now I have read Dostoevsky, and I have lots to say about him. I did well in Lit Hum, and I said plenty of things about Dostoevsky in class that the grad student seemed to agree with. When asked, I can detail his literary lineage, his prose style, his philosophical significance—and that’s before I get into Nabokov’s view of him.

Yet for all this bravado, if someone were to really press me on my knowledge of Dostoevsky, I’d become less certain. After all, I only read the first half of Crime and Punishment. I also skipped some early sections that seemed unimportant. I took no notes, and I never reread any difficult passages—I was reading at 3 a.m. so I had to cut corners. I haven’t read The Brothers Karamazov or The Idiot. But my success in Lit Hum warped my modesty: it gave me an apparently good reason to talk about things I’d barely read.

Is my frequently overblown confidence in my knowledge unusual? I doubt it. Poli Sci majors love to explain how voting systems work. Classics majors etymologize. Historians sprinkle facts and dates into pretty much any conversation. And each student tour-guide seems to have exotic new things to say about Butler Library.

But maybe all this confidence is justified. Columbia students have mostly good GPAs. They end up at Harvard or Columbia Law, a top grad school, or Wall Street. Are they wrong to be confident in their knowledge?

It is easy to test whether a person’s knowledge is as accurate as he thinks it is. You do three things: ask him a set of questions to which you know the answers, ask him how many he thinks he answered correctly, and then check to see how his expectations matched his performance.

If he expected to get many more questions correct than he did, then he thinks he knows more...
than he actually does. This method has been utilized by social scientists for decades. In a recent study at the University of Chicago, students were given general knowledge questions (e.g. How old is Bill Clinton?). They were then asked to give numerical intervals that they were 90% confident contained the precise answers (e.g. Clinton is between 55 and 65). If students were perfectly aware of the accuracy of their knowledge, 90% of the answers would fall within the intervals they gave. But they were perfectly unaware, and only 43% of the intervals they chose contained the correct answer.

What happened? Students were confident with their guesses, and selected small intervals containing those guesses, most of which turned out to be way off. Had they been less confident, they could have increased the margin of error and done better simply by choosing wider intervals. The students weren’t just ignorant of the right answers—they were ignorant of their ignorance.

Does it matter that college students think they know more than they do? Aren’t there experts who actually need to know certain things, and can be completely confident in their knowledge? Well, no.

Pointing out the delusional overconfidence of experts is Nassim Taleb’s specialty. A mathematically-trained financial trader, Taleb wrote a book called *Fooled by Randomness* after founding his own financial company. Clearly written and non-technical, it is a litany of examples of overconfidence.

The examples from the financial world are most striking. When people get rich from their investments, they attribute it to their subtle knowledge of the market. But Taleb offers an alternative explanation: dumb luck.

Suppose the market is unpredictable in the long run. If 1,000 people invest, then—by chance alone—you’d expect half of them to win (i.e. make money) by the end of the year and half of them to lose it. Of the 500 winners, you’d expect half to win again the next year and half again the year after that. If this continued for eight years, then you’d be left with four of the initial 1,000 investors who won on the market *every year for the last eight years*. They might say that they were successful because of their smart investments, but they would be confusing luck with knowledge, just like the lottery winner who claims he had seen the winning numbers in a dream the night before.

Therefore, the so-called financial experts, who get paid six or seven-figure salaries and pontificate on CNBC, are, in Taleb’s words, “lucky fools,” and most have less work skill than the cooking staff in their office cafeterias.

Most of us are interested less in the advice of financial gurus than in the views of experts in politics, science, and global economics. We want to know how long the war in Iraq will last, whether the War on Terror will succeed, whether China will emerge as the world’s dominant nation-state, and whether the polar ice caps will melt and drown New York City. When specialists in these sorts of issues speak, they influence things like support for a war or the choice of a career.

We want the pundits to know a lot, but we also want them to have an accurate gauge of the quality of their knowledge. If they make a prediction about the war in Iraq, they should be clear on whether it’s a mere speculation, a near certainty, or something in between. But, like students, political experts are also ignorant of their ignorance.

In Berkeley psychologist Philip Tetlock’s recent book *Expert Political Judgment*, he exhaustively documented this collective blind spot. The premise is simple: ask lots of political experts to make predictions about political developments and then wait to see if they turn out to be true. Tetlock surveyed 284 experts—including academics, govern-

---

**FURTHER READING**

*Fooled by Randomness: The Hidden Role of Chance in Life and in the Markets*
Nassim Nicholas Taleb
Random House
368 pages, $14.95

*Expert Political Judgment: How Good Is It? How Can We Know?*
Philip E. Tetlock
Princeton University Press
280 pages, $35.00
ment advisors, and journalists—over twenty years, assembling extensive data on predictions about everything from the Gulf War to China’s economy in the 1990s. He then compared the expert predictions to the forecasts of inexpert Berkeley undergraduates and various computer algorithms.

The results look bad for college students. Berkeley undergrads were worse at predicting than the ‘chimp’ computer algorithm, which picks random outcomes from a list. And once again, the undergrads were much too confident in their predictions. The experts did better, trouncing the students, but they in turn suffered a damning defeat to crude extrapolation algorithms. The more sophisticated computer models defeated everyone by a huge margin.

It might seem like a good thing that we have developed computer algorithms that predict so much better than humans. But it is experts, not equations, that advise governments and influence public opinion. Computers, therefore, cannot be the whole solution. Nor can this problem be solved just by making people know more—many experts already have an encyclopedic knowledge of their fields. Instead a solution will have to change how people evaluate their own knowledge, not how much knowledge people have.

Taleb suggests a starting point in confronting overconfident political experts, Wall Street hotshots, and college students. He says we should tease people about the quality of their knowledge. We should point out to people that on the basis of many studies they are probably wrong. We should ask them if their information is from a reliable source. We should check things to see if what people say is true, and tell them if it isn’t.

As children, most of us were used to saying “I don’t know” very frequently. But you needn’t be a child to be ignorant of lots of things. I am ignorant of Dostoevsky. And until I rid myself of this ignorance, I will say, when asked about him, that I don’t know.

—Owain Evans
A Sweet Life

Fedderico Fellini: His Life and Work
Tullio Kezich
Faber & Faber
464 pages, $35.00

The literalists who had a field day with James Frey probably wouldn’t think much of Tullio Kezich, either. His biography of Federico Fellini, *Fellini: His Life and Work*, first published in 1988, was released in an updated version this month. Kezich, a close friend of Fellini and a sacred monster of film criticism in his own right, constructs his biography through the prism of Fellini’s films rather than through a linear narrative of biographical events. There are no details of the director’s notorious philandering, no references to domestic drama, and no insight into what he had for breakfast. The resulting work is a remarkable account of the only Fellini who should interest us: Fellini the director (in my opinion, the greatest filmmaker in the history of cinema).

Fellini’s breakthrough film came in 1954 with *La Strada*—an outstanding hybrid of fairy-tale fantasy and the social concerns characteristic of the highly influential Italian neorealism. Soon after, with such films as *La Dolce Vita* and *8 1/2*, Fellini broke away from neorealism to pursue his personal style, influenced by psychoanalysis, surrealism, and his own exuberance.

Kezich’s story is rich with anecdotes about what Fellini’s films could have been, if his producers had gotten their way. Imagine *La Dolce Vita* with Paul Newman playing Marcello, the jaded celebrity journalist. Or *Juliet of the Spirits* starring Katherine Hepburn, rather than Fellini’s cherubic wife, Giulietta Masina. In true Fellini style, Kezich takes these anecdotes as a starting point for imagining these films that never were, informing his fantasy with his knowledge of the actual, final masterpieces.

The book is richest when Kezich becomes a critic. His translation of Fellini’s enormous, complex accomplishment into words is poetic, intelligent, and exacting. Defending *La Dolce Vita*, largely misunderstood as moralistic, Kezich writes, “There’s no need for explicit accusations or banner waving in order for a director to prove he’s on the right side because the right side, for an artist (beyond the problems he faces in real life), is fantasy, sincerity and inspiration.”

And in writing about *Roma*, Fellini’s postmodern ode to his nation’s capital, Kezich succinctly captures the spirit of Fellini’s body of work: it teaches “spectators to be uninhibited and bold when looking at reality, to be fantastical and flamboyant, and to proudly indulge freedom.”

The close friendship between Kezich and Fellini may undermine the conception of the biography as a ruthless search for accuracy. In a recent interview in the Italian press, Kezich said that the director, who died in 1993, gave copies of Kezich’s biography to his hospital staff. But Kezich, insisting that he would not “[push] every boundary of privacy,” finds a more illuminating approach.

Admirers of Fellini’s work will appreciate how Kezich’s project remains true to the director’s spirit. Keenly aware that the director was a talented fabricator, Kezich calls attention to Fellini’s myth-making and understands its values without eroding them in the name of something as banal as truthfulness.

—Iggy Cortez

Illustrated by Lydia Depillis
Indian Reservations

How Opal Mehta Got Kissed, Got Wild, and Got a Life: A Novel
Kaavya Viswanathan
Little, Brown
320 pages, $21.95

How much does it pay to rip a title from How Stella Got Her Groove Back, a plot from Mean Girls, and shallow dialogue from Laguna Beach? $500,000, apparently. That’s how much Harvard sophomore Kaavya Viswanathan received as an advance for her first novel How Opal Mehta Got Kissed, Got Wild, and Got a Life and a yet to be written second novel (the average for a debut is $20,000).

The Boston Globe praised this “clever novel by a promising author,” Entertainment Weekly included Viswanathan in its list of the most talented rising writers, and, according to Variety, Dreamworks has optioned the book and expects to release a movie adaptation in 2008. Yet Opal Mehta fails to live up to its hype.

The implausible hook actually has some potential. Driven by overzealous parents, Opal’s life has revolved around gaining admission to Harvard. But when the university’s Dean of Admissions recognizes that, in her quest for the perfect resume, she has failed to develop socially, he gives Opal an ultimatum: get a life or find another alma mater.

But to call what follows trite would almost be too trite an observation. Her parents become obsessed with making their daughter mainstream. After an extreme makeover, Opal infiltrates the popular crowd at her high school; she becomes disillusioned and falls in love with the non-conformist “grunge” boy; she gets into Harvard; grunge boy goes to UConn.

Here is where Viswanathan’s use of Indian identity as a marketing tool comes into play. Frequent references to Indian foods and clothing—complete with awkwardly placed definitions—gives Indian Americans a story about themselves while imbuing the work with a false exoticism for everyone else. So, when Opal visits Edison—New Jersey’s “Brown-town”—she has lunch at “Dimple Bombay Chaat House.” But I’m from Jersey, and no one calls it Dimple Bombay Chaat House. It’s Dimple.

Often, this forced identity humor proves irritating. Take Opal’s parents. To assist their daughter in her pursuit of conformity, the Mehtas’ speech becomes saturated with tacky references to American pop culture (Black Eyed Peas, The O.C., the WB’s collection of crap). Their vocabulary becomes rife with clichéd lingo: mad bling, ice, dope, crunk, jiggy wit’ it. Any ambiguity about whether the reader is supposed to find this funny because they’re parents or because they’re Indian is cleared up by Dr. Mehta’s reaction to the mess left by Opal’s house party: when he finds a broken statue of Lord Krishna and Opal begins to apologize desperately, he responds, “Your party was the shizznit!”

While Viswanathan’s use of ethnicity is mostly gimmicky and sometimes genuinely obscene, there are nonetheless several meaningful observations about Indian-American culture: set pieces concerning consumerism, obsession with medical education, and bigotry towards blacks and Hispanics are somewhat insightful. But these digressions last for only a few lines before the novel returns to the stale and the ridiculous.

Early in the book, Opal expresses contempt for the Americanized “NRIs” (“Not-Required Indian”), but she arrogantly distinguishes herself from the local “FOBs” (“Fresh Off the Boat”), whom she slanders as greasy, fashionably inept, and lecherous. These comments serve only to add a hint of exoticism, as Viswanathan doesn’t offer any insight into the question of Indian-American identity. While Viswanathan should be applauded for rejecting the usual ethnocentric “return to roots” theme, her exploitative approach and hackneyed plot leave me wondering How Opal Mehta Got Published.

—Josh Mathew
Whitney Biennial 2006: Day for Night
Whitney Museum of American Art
945 Madison Avenue (at 75th Street)
Through May 28, 2006

Even before you enter the museum, the “Peace Tower,” a collaborative project that looks like a series of clotheslines stretched across a narrow street, sets the tone for the Whitney Biennial, entitled “Day for Night, or La Nuit Americaine,” after the Truffaut film.

The tower is an authentic relic from the 1960s; in fact, its story might be that of the Biennial itself. First erected in a park in Los Angeles in 1966 as the “Artists’ Tower Against the War in Vietnam,”—among the participants then were Roy Lichtenstein, Judy Chicago, and Mark Rothko—the tower became a gathering place for protesters and counter-protesters alike. There were violent clashes, brutalized artists, and sensationalist headlines. The work had to be guarded from vandals day and night.

This time around, the curators placed the piece outside to reflect the democratic spirit of its original incarnation. The words on the panels, one of which is by Yoko Ono, proclaim things like “VietIraqNam” and “Kill Not,” channeling that 1960s aura. But placed out on Madison Avenue, overrun with ladies who lunch, the work feels like little more than forced nostalgia.

It also makes clear that this year’s Biennial is an overtly political show. There’s nothing wrong with that—it’s admirable when artists take political stands in their work. But in this case, many of them have only attempted to capture a lost, idealized feeling of protest that fails to resonate in a contemporary context. These recycled themes may be attractive, but such bold-letter clarity may have been a myth even in the 60s, and is certainly out of place now. Accordingly, the memorable works from this show are those that address its political theme in a smart, nuanced way, and that engage with current issues instead of gazing longingly at a past cultural moment.

Inside, there’s Richard Serra’s huge protest painting, “Stop Bush,” with its title scrawled across the top in big letters. It’s more sober than clever, dominated by what looks like the silhouette of a hooded Abu Ghraib torture victim standing, Christ-like, with arms akimbo. It’s as if Serra grew tired of being badgered to make something deep, and instead gave the crowd something obvious and affected—a quick fix for an artist under pressure to make a statement.

Next to “Stop Bush” is a basket with photocopies of the painting—cheap ones, like protest flyers. I took one. But next to Monica Majoli’s eerily beautiful “Hanging Rubberman” watercolors, with their oblique allusions to torture, it just looks crude.

The true model of ideological subtlety and humility is Angela Strassheim’s series of clinical photographs of her born-again Illinois family, called “Left Behind.” Trained as a forensic photographer, Strassheim creates images—especially those of the family’s two young daughters—that pull you in with slightly off colors and subtle symbolism, then leave you disturbed by their vague eroticism and strange emotional detachment.

Politics are hardly absent from these works—Strassheim named her series after Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins’ Christian fundamentalist novels about Armageddon, and could easily have created works that accused this family of hypocrisy and closed-mindedness. Instead, she opted to take ambiguous and beautiful photographs of complex and vulnerable people. She invites the viewer to understand them only to demonstrate the futility of trying to.

—Julia Butareva

Steal This Exhibit!
Illustrated by Sasha De Vogel
What the Frick Happened?

Goya’s Last Works
The Frick Collection
1 East 70th Street (between Fifth and Madison)
Through May 14, 2006

One hour in the Met leaves me feeling horribly unaccomplished and in need of a nap. One hour in the Frick is leisurely and relaxing. It is unin-timidating, predictable, manageable, and the crowd only enhances the feeling that I’m at a dinner party straight out of Edith Wharton. It can get a little boring, but I don’t go to the Frick for exciting art. I go because the four Whistler portraits are always exactly where I left them, engaged in some silent exchange across the back gallery with the bad lighting. It is the visual equivalent of Koronets—it’s comfort art.

Recently, however, it seems that the Frick isn’t as happy with its stasis as I am. According to museum director Anne L. Poulet, the board has been looking for ways to “shake things up” and “move forward” (albeit “at a moderate pace”—this is still the Frick).

This initiative has started, quite literally, from the bottom up. Rarely do I wind my way down the narrow staircase to the “Special Exhibitions” gallery. In early 2000, the Frick was still using that underground space for such captivating shows as, “Two Exceptional Candelabra: An Intimate Glimpse,” and “Two Tapestries Reinstalled.” I prefer the Ingres portrait I had seen 11 times. But the curators have finally realized the hidden treasure that is the museum basement, or more formally, the Special Exhibition Galleries and Cabinet. Last October, the museum staged a Hans Memling exhibit there that the Times called “some kind of ideal experience.” The curators found a way to make the small space work to their advantage: the show was “perfect in scale: two compact rooms of compact pictures, each picture a main event.” This review goaded me downstairs, where I discovered, to my complete surprise, the most lively and sublime collection of works I’d seen in two years of living in New York.

The newest installment in the Special Exhibition Galleries, “Goya’s Last Works,” isn’t the masterpiece that the Memling show was. To begin with, the execution isn’t as graceful: the display is set off-balance by the stark divide between drawings and paintings in the two downstairs rooms; furthermore, the works spill awkwardly into a third gallery upstairs. But if you crop the exhibit down to just the right-hand gallery, where Goya’s drawings are hung, you are left with a tiny, potent collection of works that do much to reveal this magnificent artist.

“Goya” makes an impression by capturing the artist’s seminal sense of fantasy, whimsy, and especially humor. “Flying Dog” depicts a familiar canine with the inexplicable addition of duck feet and wings. In “Not even with these; what Tyranny,” Goya illustrates a woman whose private areas are locked away by heavy iron. A dejected older man looks on, a set of keys hanging impotently in his outstretched hand. And this work looks tame when paired with “To Eat a Lot,” which shows a man squatting on the toilet and a sly figure in the corner seeming to take some perverse pleasure in watching the messy act (perhaps like the viewer of the painting?).

Toilet humor was never something I expected to find at the Frick. Yet the Special Exhibition Gallery is ideally suited to “shaking things up.” Like an in-house Salon des Refusées, the basement of the museum allows for challenging and inspired new shows, while leaving the upstairs intact for all us connoisseurs of comfort art.

—Merrell Hambleton

Illustrated by Sumayya Ahmed
La Negrita
999 Columbus Avenue (109st)
Open 7am-4am Monday-Friday
9am-4am Saturday-Sunday
Free Wireless
lanegrita@verizon.net
www.lanegritanyc.com

Chill Lounge
*Happy Hour
3pm-8pm
*Book your Private Party.
*Live Music.

Morton Williams Supermarkets
Your Portal to the Arts
On and Off Campus

Dinosaur Bar-B-Que
646 W. 131st Street
NY, NY 10027
(cornet of 131st & 12th Ave.)
Office (212) 694-1777
Fax (212) 694-9072
www.dinosaurbarbque.com

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

RED STATE, BLUE STATE

If there was ever any doubt as to whether Senator John McCain was thinking about 2008 in terms of swing states and long debates, his Spring plans give it away:

May 13: Commencement address at the Rev. Jerry Falwell’s Liberty University in Lynchburg, VA.
May 17: Class Day address at Columbia University, home to nine of America’s 101 most dangerous academics.

A B&W staffer drinking at the West End the night of the infamous riots was shocked that, at midnight, the bar started charging a ten-dollar cover. Could all of the Hennessy bottle-throwing be over the fact that the dirtiest bar in Morningside Heights thinks it’s worth almost a meal in John Jay?

A little girl’s reaction to an undergrad reading Allen Ginsberg through a loudspeaker on the Sundial: “Why won’t he shut up?”

Maybe if Ginsberg had to pay ten dollars every time he went to the West End to write, he would have been a bit more concise.

WHO ASKED?

Overheard in the Hungarian Pastry Shop:

“High School Facebook is a bigger political issue than Manhattanville expansion, if you ask me.”

A BLUE AND WHITE staffer abroad in England recently sat behind Courtney Love at a Saturday night performance of The Night of the Iguana at London’s Lyric Theatre. How many times did her cell phone go off? Three. She finally solved the problem by leaning across two empty seats and whispering urgently, “I don’t know how to turn it off!” Two bemused Spanish men managed to silence it for her.

She then fell asleep, breathing heavily and occasionally waking when the crowd laughed. She disappeared after the intermission, only to re-enter in the middle of the second act. Ms. Love was wearing a beige satin skirt, elbow length gloves, and a large pair of black sunglasses—all the better to fight the glare of a prop moon.

PIMP MY … MOM?

Professor Andrew Sarris on both our tendency to overestimate the prudishness of Academy voters and Terrence Howard’s Oscar chances for his portrayal of a pimp in Hustle & Flow:

“Thinking about the Academy watching those kinds of movies is like imagining your mother watching hardcore porn.”

Professor Alfred MacAdam has a bad habit of repeating jokes from year to year in his Latin American Literature in Translation class. We can only hope the original inspiration for this comment lies far, far in his past: “All of this is like trying to learn sex from a manual and using a blow-up doll. There are some things you just can’t learn from books.”
CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS?
Noha Radwan’s Contemporary Islamic Civilization lecture was recently interrupted by a pizza delivery. The following dialogue ensued:

Radwan: Nobody here ordered a pizza.
Pizza Guy: 501 Schermerhorn?
Radwan: It’s not ours.
Pizza Guy: It says here it’s for Contemporary Islamic Civilizations.
Radwan: No.
Pizza Guy: R—l T—r? Is there a R—l T—r here? I have your pizza.
[No one responds, except with laughter.]  
Radwan: Sorry.
Pizza Guy: Well what am I supposed to do now? I can’t just take it back.
Radwan: I don’t know.
Pizza Guy: Does anyone want a pizza? Anyone can have it for $11. Anybody hungry?

At this point, a macho TA charged towards the pizza guy, and issued a warning: “I think you need to go.” He left, and class went on.

GUUUUUUUUUULATI

Econ Professor Sunil Gulati has always seemed to have a bit of an inferiority complex when it comes to his Nobel Prize-winning/poverty eradicating/just plain publishing colleagues. At least now he can cheer himself up knowing he’s the only one in the department elected president of the U.S. Soccer Federation. ¡Olé!

STOP HATING ON DEAN QUIGLEY

Overheard outside Avery:

Girl: I’m not staying with a married guy!
Guy: It’s your perfect opportunity—a two week fling that nobody has to know about.
Girl: He’s probably some 65-year-old British guy...
Guy: Yeah...
Girl: …And you know they all have uncircumcised dicks, which I hate.

This year’s Varsity Show is goin’ to be Garfunk-a-dunk! Art Garfunkel, C ’65, of Simon and Garfunkel infamy, will return to Alma to receive the V Show’s I.A.L. Diamond Award, which goes to a Columbia alumnus who has rocked the arts world. Hard.

While at Columbia, where he also received an MA in Mathematics, Garfunkel sang with the Kingsmen, and no doubt picked up some nasty habits (he’s been arrested twice for marijuana possession in the last several years). He never actually performed in the Varsity Show, but, according to his website, he’s read 948 books since June 1968. Wicked smart!

TOO LATE TO TURN THAT P/F INTO A LETTER GRADE?

Last month—that’s March 2006—an observant work-study student in the Philosophy Department witnessed the submission of a paper due in Spring 2001.

WE ARE WATCHING YOU

A Blue and White staffer recently received this weekly tip on campus safety from Saferegistry.com:

“Avoid using university computer labs. Various bits of your personal information can easily be left on those university computers. University computers are prime targets for crooks who are interested in stealing your identity.” [Editor’s note: please see pp. 24-25]

SPANGLISH 101

A mother was spotted paying for her groceries at the 103rd Street Gristedes as her four-year-old stared at two men speaking Spanish.

Men: Hola.
Four-year-old: HO-la.
Mother: Sweetie, if you’re going to speak another language, try not to decimate it.

The West End … it’s a riot!