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# THE NEW REPUBLIC

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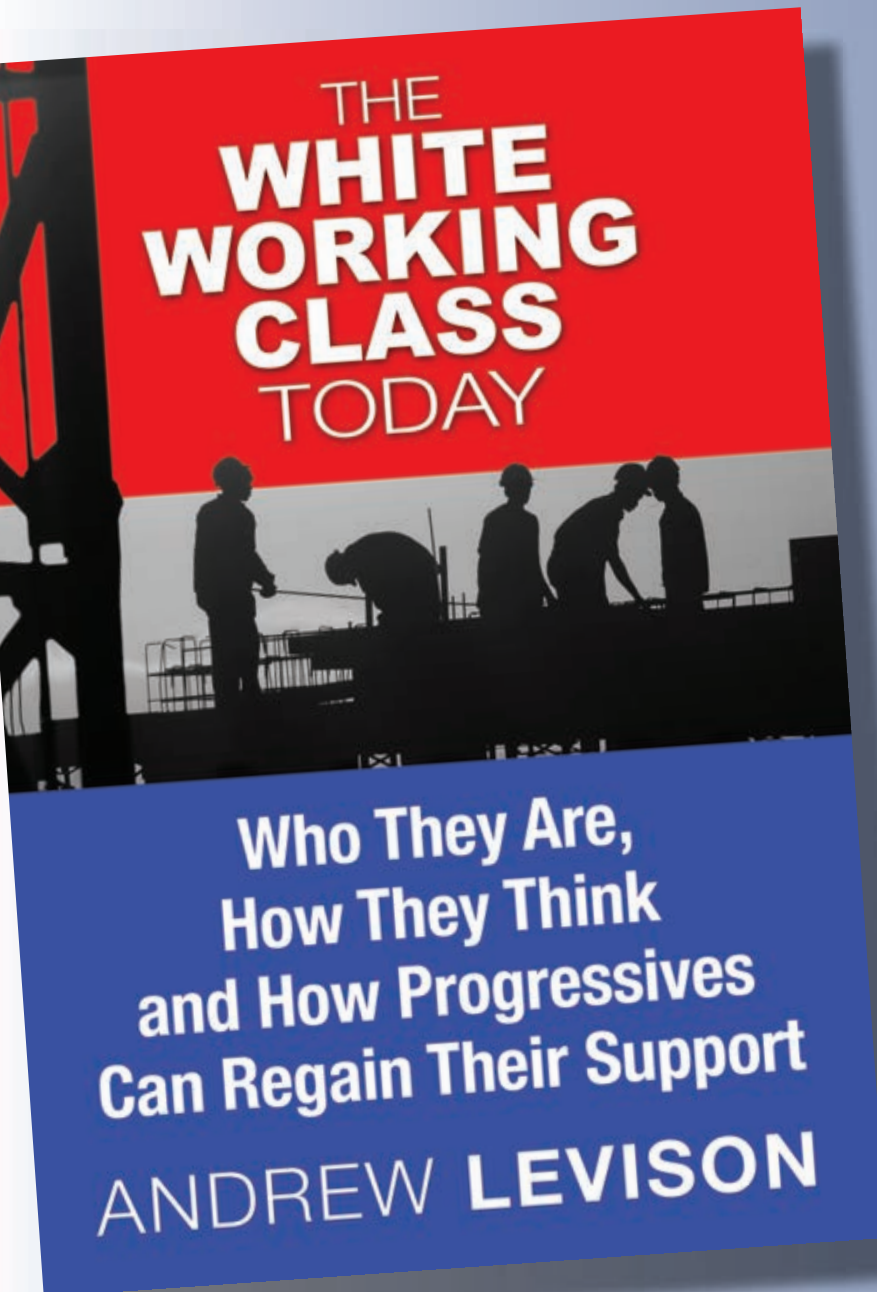
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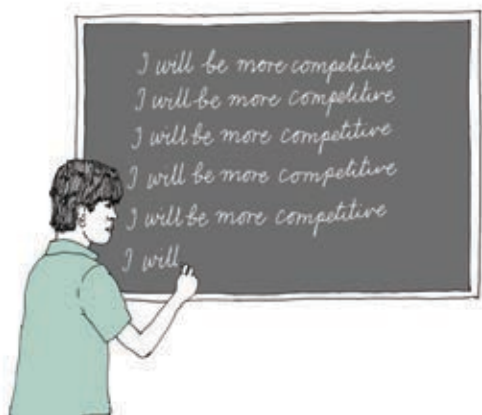
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FROM THE STACKS

# John Updike

“ON KNOCKING MISS NOVAK,” JULY 25, 1960

IN 1956, *THE NEW YORKER* published John Updike’s “Little Poems.” Like much of his light verse, the poem was inspired by text published elsewhere—in this case, a *Life* magazine photo caption describing the “bitter frustration” of Kim Novak. “They hounded / Me with flash bulbs, tripods, eyes / Of Polaroid,” Updike wrote in his sketch. When *THE NEW REPUBLIC*’s film critic, Stanley Kauffmann, wrote in a 1960 review of a now-forgotten adultery flick that Novak was “capable vocally of only an unvaried strangulated hush,” Updike penned an indignant letter to the editor defending her, reprinted below. Updike, Kauffmann then replied, saw “a film theater [as] a kind of steamy bath or opium den to which one goes for a faintly wicked and figuratively supine little debauch.” Kauffmann, now 97, remembers the scuffle, adding, “The few times that he and I met afterward, our difference about Kim Novak was not mentioned. We never fought a duel.”



I am sick and tired of Stanley Kauffmann knocking Kim Novak. She is a terrific-looking woman. Motion pictures are not, as Mr. Kauffmann seems to believe, transmogrified novels or adjusted plays; these two art-forms have as little to do with motion pictures as they have to do with each other. Motion pictures are giant projections of religious imagery. To criticize Miss Novak because her tone of voice is always the same is as absurd as criticizing a Byzantine ikon because it is static and badly drawn. If it were plastic and fluent, how could we give it our devotion? The actors and actresses which we moviegoers require are precisely those who,

whether disguised as a shiek, a cowboy, an empress, a kooch-dancer, or what have you, remain triumphantly *themselves*. . . . As actors and actresses—equipped with what Mr. Kauffmann calls “talent,” “versatility,” “emotional range,” etc.—progress toward *convincing* impersonation, our aesthetic pleasure dwindles to nothing. Mr. Kauffmann brings to a monolithic imagery whose rhythms and patterns are most analogous to music a set of aesthetic reactions apparently derived from a course in Great Books and a seminar on Method Acting. He is not a *bad* critic, he is an inverted one: the opposite of everything he says is true.

FOR THE FULL EXCHANGE — AND MORE FROM JOHN UPDIKE — HEAD TO [NEWREPUBLIC.COM](http://NEWREPUBLIC.COM) DAVID GAHR/GETTY IMAGES

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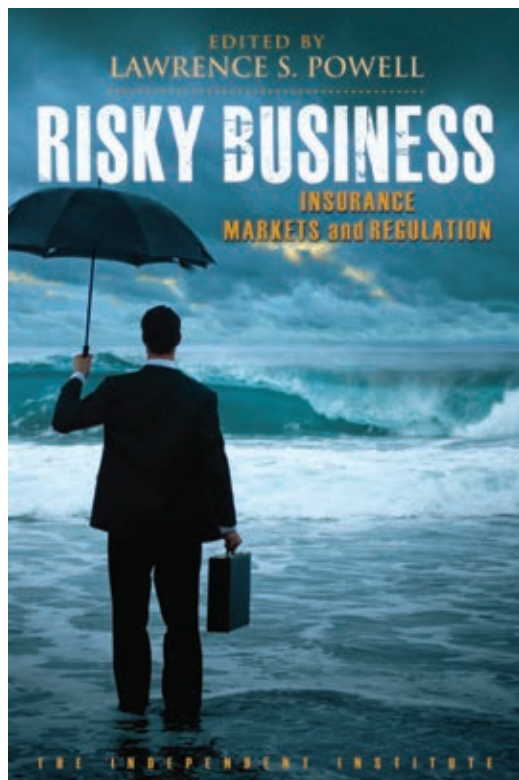
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NR-RB



# The Mail

LIFER

## REGRETS, MITCH McCONNELL HAS A FEW

BEING AN OBSTRUCTIONIST  
WASN'T WHY HE CAME TO  
WASHINGTON.

BY ISAAC CHOTINER

**I**N 1964, AN AMBITIOUS YOUNG student at the University of Louisville made an impassioned plea to his classmates, urging them to march in solidarity with Martin Luther King Jr. At the time, Kentucky was no haven for race reformers—it was dominated by some of the same elements of the Democratic Party that vehemently rejected the very notion of civil rights. Nevertheless, this 20-year-old activist called for strong statutes, state and federal, to protect the dignity of minorities. “Property rights have always been, and will continue to be, an integral part of our heritage,” he wrote in the campus newspaper, “but this does not absolve the property holder of his obligation to help ensure the basic rights of all citizens.” The student’s name was Mitch McConnell.

Then, as now, McConnell was a dedicated Republican, but in his younger days, he was also a very high-minded one. As an up-and-coming activist, he declined to work on Barry Goldwater’s reactionary



CALLIGRAPHY BY YOMAR AUGUSTO



presidential campaign. Instead, his biographer, John David Dyché, told me, he advocated for the civil rights supporter Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. His role model was Kentucky Republican Senator John Sherman Cooper, an outspoken opponent of the Vietnam war who helped defeat a filibuster of the Civil Rights Act. He admired Lyndon Johnson's legislative mastery, Dyché said, and believed politics could serve a larger purpose.

Nearly 50 years later, very few people in Washington would accuse McConnell of idealism. As one veteran Kentucky journalist explained, Democrats regard the Senate minority leader as "the ultimate Machiavelli," and with good cause. From the stimulus bill, to the 2011 debt-ceiling debacle (and its ultimate consequence, sequestration), to four years of stalled judicial nominations, McConnell's relentless obstructionism has mired the president in low approval ratings. There is no one the administration blames more for its troubles. And yet, when you consider McConnell's many small victories from another angle, they can start to look like defeats—not just for his own onetime dreams of statesmanship, but for the long-term future of the Republican Party.

McConnell is often described as driven—after overcoming polio at the age of five, he threw himself into competitive sports. Following six years in Jefferson County government, he ran for the Senate in 1984. His campaign unleashed ads depicting a pack of bloodhounds chasing his opponent, who was supposedly running from his record. By the end of one ad, the poor guy had sought refuge up a tree, dogs snarling savagely at his heels. It was a pretty good metaphor for the ruthlessness that would come to define McConnell's Senate career.

At first, McConnell had broad ambitions. His office was once home to the desk of Henry Clay, the Great Compromiser. (He even passed a resolution stating that the desk would always belong to a Kentucky senator.) An avowed internationalist, he resisted Jesse Helms's attempts to gut the foreign-aid budget. As chairman of the ethics committee, he undertook a dogged investigation of his fellow Republican, Bob Packwood, for charges of sexual harassment and assault.

But over the years, he became increasingly loyal to an increasingly right-wing party—and more and more obsessed with fund-raising. Kentucky's press and establishment remained

Democratic until 1994, and so, the veteran journalist said, money "was the only way to get his message out." A longtime McConnell observer remarked that, even compared with other senators, McConnell "puts his election and tenure before everything else." McConnell himself likes to say, "You have to be elected before you can be a statesman." As his power in the caucus grew, his worldview shrank.

By the time Barack Obama became president, all McConnell seemingly cared about was winning. "The single most important thing we want to achieve is for President Obama to be a one-term president," he famously told *National Journal*. His strategy was to keep Senate Republicans together to prevent the administration from accomplishing anything at all. Washington would look hopelessly inefficient, and he could convince independent voters that the stasis was Obama's fault. His strategy represented the complete triumph of short-term partisan thinking.

On the surface, at least, it worked: He maintained impressive control over his caucus. His former colleague Chuck Hagel has called him "the smartest political thinker we have in our conference." In 2010, independents turned against Obama and gave Republicans control of the House.

But there was a downside, even if it took some time to reveal itself. On the biggest issue of the last four years—health care—McConnell also went all out in opposition. He bet everything that reform would fail, instead of huddling with anxious conservative Democrats to craft a compromise. The result was Obamacare, a historic achievement. A similar dynamic occurred with financial reform. Because of McConnell's obstructionism, Obama didn't have to make concessions to Republicans—meaning that the bill was more substantial (and liberal) than it would have been otherwise. And while McConnell's procedural delays might have helped stall the president's agenda, they also helped make the Republican brand the toxic commodity it is today. Even McConnell's approval ratings in bright red Kentucky are dreadful.

Meanwhile, his own record has become almost tragically petty. The former internationalist is now the most fanatical Senate opponent of closing the military prison at Guantanamo Bay. Someone who has known McConnell for years told me he doesn't have a "racist bone in his body." But when McConnell was asked



## RACE TO THE BOTTOM

McConnell at a civil rights rally in March 1964 (second from right); in his element in the halls of the Capitol.

whether he thought Obama was a Christian, all he would say was: "I take him at his word." He admitted to *The Washington Post* with apparent pride that the country had indeed been held hostage by Republicans during the 2011 debt crisis. And when rumors surfaced that Ashley Judd was considering a 2014 challenge, he moved quickly to crush her, although her candidacy was hardly a threat. A leaked tape caught him observing, "This is the Whac-A-Mole period of the campaign, . . . when anybody sticks their head up, do them out." This was another good metaphor—for how limited McConnell's political ambitions have become.

McConnell once said admiringly of Henry Clay, "The compromises that he brought about probably pushed the Civil War off, first the one in 1820, then the one of 1850." This is the definition of short-term thinking. Today, we don't remember the Civil War being "pushed off"—we remember that, as Abraham Lincoln said, the war came. For his part, Obama will be remembered as a two-term president who won reelection in an ailing economy and who passed a law providing access to health care for all Americans. McConnell's claim to the historic legacy he once yearned for might lie, ironically, in having made Obama's possible. ●

Isaac Chotiner is a senior editor at THE NEW REPUBLIC.



# BETTER READ THAN RED

INFURIATING AND BRILLIANT, THE *NEW STATESMAN* TURNS 100.

BY GEOFFREY WHEATCROFT

**T**HE EARLY YEARS OF THE LAST century saw something of a golden age for the political press in England, with half a dozen serious daily papers published in London, another half dozen provincial morning papers as good if not better, as well as a clutch of evening papers with small circulations read intently by the West End equivalent of Beltway folk. But there were also the weeklies, with a mixture of politics and literature. Founded as long ago as 1828, *The Spectator* had become a voice of civilized Toryism, and there was *The Nation*, an influential radical-liberal organ whose chairman, a little later, was John Maynard Keynes.

One hundred years ago this spring, they were joined by the *New Statesman*, destined to become famous not just in England but throughout the English-speaking world as a byword for high-minded if sometimes obtuse progressivism. A magazine whose circulation never reached 100,000 may well in its day have wielded more

Revenue and came to believe that a socialist New Jerusalem could be ushered in by what the Labour politician Tony Crosland later mocked as “total abstinence and a good filing system.” In 1902, the first degrees were conferred by the London School of Economics, which Webb and his wife, Beatrice, were instrumental in founding. In 1906, the Labour Party was born and 30 Labour men were elected to Parliament in its name. And in 1913, the *New Statesman* (NS) was launched by the Webbs and like-minded Fabians, with a debut editorial that saluted “the world movement towards collectivism.”

For its first half-century, the NS had no more than three editors. Clifford Sharp edited the paper from 1913 to 1928; although, in later years, he was editor in name only since he was rarely sober enough to do any work. That was done by Charles Mostyn Lloyd, who briefly occupied the editor’s chair until a new editor took over at the beginning of 1931. Kingsley Martin remained in the job for almost 30 years and more than anyone gave the paper its flavor—ardently attached to socialism; also attached, but less ardently, to civil liberties; and in conflicted agonized anguish over the rise of totalitarianism on the left as well as right.

In the year he took over, the NS merged with Keynes’s *The Nation*, and for decades the masthead read *The New Statesman and Nation*, implying maybe a tension between Martin’s socialism and Keynes’s liberalism. But there were deeper problems. For the left everywhere, the October Revolution was a challenge, and ultimately a catastrophe, even at THE NEW REPUBLIC, which was launched a year after the NS.

In some ways, the magazines were transatlantic sisters. That included, alas, their painful intellectual gymnastics over Russia. By the late ’30s, THE NEW REPUBLIC and *The Nation*, the two American liberal magazines, had stubbed their toes

(in Dwight Macdonald’s phrase) on the Moscow Trials, which they halfheartedly endorsed. The NS was no better. In 1934, it ran a groveling interview with Stalin by H. G. Wells, old comrade-in-arms of the Webbs, who themselves toured Russia and then published *Soviet Communism: A New Civilisation?*, which has been called, despite severe competition, the most preposterous book about Russia ever written. That was in 1935; two years later, at the height of Stalin’s bloodbath, a second edition appeared without even the qualifying question mark.

For the NS, the lowest moment may have been in 1937. George Orwell appeared quite often in its pages, but Martin refused to run a piece by Orwell giving a historically important account of the events in Barcelona that spring, when the communists took advantage of the turmoil during the Civil War to extirpate their rivals on the left. Orwell later found himself lunching in the same restaurant as Martin and changed his seat so that he did not have to look at his “corrupt face.”

Whatever its political vagaries, people bought the NS just as much for the “back half,” outstanding books and arts pages that gave one of the best reflections of serious English culture for most of the last century. Evelyn Waugh was not the only one amused by what he called the notorious contrast “between the Jekyll of culture, wit and ingenious competition and the Hyde of querulous atheism and economics which prefaces it.”


The centennial issue just published includes a glorious anthology of pieces that once appeared in those pages, T. S. Eliot writing about new poetry in 1917, Orwell on hop-picking with the poor in 1931, Keynes in 1937 on whether to intervene in the Spanish Civil War (which has a curiously topical flavor today, what with Syria), and Graham Greene in 1938 on the London suburbs. I had no idea that the NS had first published Yeats’s “Easter, 1916,” still less Edward Thomas’s “Adlestrop.”

**This one paper’s career has been a subplot in an epic story: the rise and fall of socialism. But a particular kind of socialism.**

real influence than papers that sold millions. More than that, this one paper’s career has been a subplot in an epic story: the rise and fall of socialism.

But a particular kind of socialism. There was a succession of events that led to the magazine’s birth. In 1889, *Fabian Essays in Socialism* was published, edited by George Bernard Shaw and with an essay by Sidney Webb, the desiccated, little man who began life as a clerk in the Inland



A portrait of Chris Hayes, a man with short brown hair and glasses, wearing a dark suit jacket over a light-colored button-down shirt. He is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The background is dark and out of focus, with some bokeh light effects.

“WHETHER IT’S ROSA  
PARKS ON A BUS OR  
A STRIKING WORKER  
ON A PICKET LINE, THE  
MOMENTS THAT HAVE  
GIVEN BIRTH TO THE  
GREATEST PROGRESS  
ARE WHEN PEOPLE  
FOUND THE INNER  
COURAGE AND PEACE  
TO LOOK POWER IN  
THE EYE AND SAY ‘NO.’”

*Chris Hayes*

**LEAN FORWARD**

CHRIS HAYES msnbc host





After 1945, the *NS* became the house organ of Clement Attlee's government, which was powerfully affected by the *Statesman's* spirit of managerial socialism and the belief that, as one Labour politician of the day had famously said, "the gentleman in Whitehall really does know better what is good for people than the people know themselves." Martin was finally eased out in 1960 and replaced by John Freeman, a fascinating and curious figure, soldier, MP, journalist, British ambassador to Washington from 1969 to 1971, and now, at 98, a complete recluse. He was succeeded by Paul Johnson, under whom circulation reached 94,000, more than three times what it is now, sad to say. He too is still with us, at 84, having undergone a lurid voyage from left to right to become a darling of American conservatives.

For full disclosure, I should say here that the *NS* has been part of my life. Growing up in a good progressive home (as it was called in the days when we believed in progress), I read it every week when I was a boy, and we had family friends who worked for the magazine. By the 1970s, I came to know the *NS* gang older than myself. It was the first paper in which I was published, by Anthony Howard, who was then editor. The paper's political columnist was Alan Watkins (Howard's brother-in-law), who became one of my greatest friends, and I learned all too much about the baroque complexity of the marital and extramarital relations of the *NS* staff in those days, which would take a diagram to explain. With Claire Tomalin as Howard's literary editor, a new generation of writers came to the paper, "my lost

boys," Tony Howard later called them: Martin Amis, Julian Barnes, James Fenton, Christopher Hitchens.

Despite this flowering, Howard was pushed out, and it all went wrong. There had been one editor for almost 30 years from 1931; since Howard's departure in 1978, there have been ten. In his memoir, Amis implies that the problem was political, as the paper veered toward the hysterical left. To me, watching from *The Spectator* (to whose genial Tory pages I had defected), it seemed that this was the wrong analysis and that a collapse of serious cultural standards was what ailed the paper.

Sadly marking the end of an era, Alan Watkins and Tony Howard died in 2010, but today their old paper is looking in better shape than it has for some time, with Jason Cowley as editor





and Jonathan Derbyshire, who has just left after doing his best for some years to revive the Jekyll of culture and wit, and I wish the NS well: We still need good magazines—the grand old English weeklies that Macdonald saluted in his essay “Amateur Journalism,” written in 1956 while he worked in London. By that word, he didn’t mean amateurish in a derogatory sense but that these papers seemed to be written knowledgeably and stylishly, for love or fun. And one of their great strengths, he said, were the letters pages, a long conversation among people who mattered, or who cared.

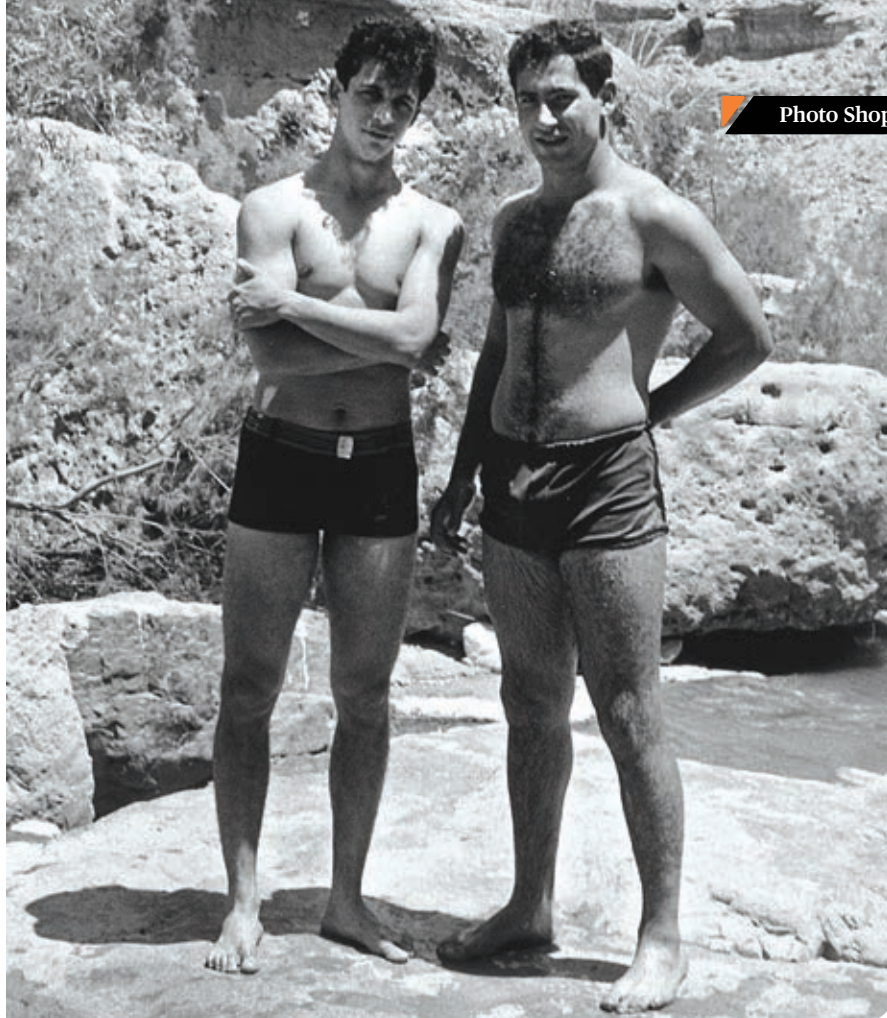
As I have said, the ’30s were not the *Statesman’s* finest hour, as Kingsley Martin gave strangled voice to the contradictory themes of Russophilia, anti-fascism, and pacifist derision of traditional military values, not quite grasping that fascism might have to be met with force. In August 1939, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact threw the left into turmoil. Some were disenchanted with Stalin but others, writing to the NS, took his side and shied away when Great Britain went to war on September 3.

This prompted what may be the single greatest letter-to-the-editor of the twentieth century, perhaps unknown to Niall Ferguson, with his belief that Keynes’s sodomitical proclivities inspired an indifference to the survival of humanity and humane values. It appeared in the *New Statesman* of October 14, and would have justified that paper’s existence if it had published nothing else for the past hundred years:

Sir, The intelligentsia of the Left were the loudest in demanding that the Nazi aggression should be resisted at all costs. When it comes to a showdown, scarce four weeks have passed before they remember that they are pacifists and write defeatist letters to your columns, leaving the defence of freedom and of civilisation to Colonel Blimp and the Old School Tie, for whom Three Cheers.

J.M. Keynes  
King’s College, Cambridge

*Geoffrey Wheatcroft is the author of THE STRANGE DEATH OF TORY ENGLAND and YO, BLAIR!*



## BENJAMIN NETANYAHU

May 1968

A couple slackers at the beach? Actually, 18-year-old Benjamin Netanyahu (right) was already a member of *Sayeret Matkal*, the prestigious military intelligence and counterterrorism group nicknamed, simply, “the Unit.” Soon he would be called on to blow up planes in Beirut and rescue hostages in Tel Aviv. Here, Bibi (as all called him) and his friend are standing in the Judean Desert, most of which Israel had conquered less than a year before in the Six Day War. Nearly half a century later, Bibi is still holding his ground there.

## LGBT PC

BEING AGAINST GAY  
MARRIAGE DOESN'T MAKE  
YOU A MONSTER.  
BY MICHAEL KINSLEY

ONE REASON THE IDEA OF GAY marriage, or “marriage equality,” spread so fast is that it seems obvious once you think about it. It was a genuinely new idea when it first appeared in this publication in 1989. As was not the case with civil rights for African Americans, feminism, or for

that matter gay rights themselves, there was no long history of opposition to be overcome. The challenge was simply getting people to think about it a bit.

Not everyone was immediately persuaded. In March, Ben Carson appeared on Fox News’ “Hannity” show to talk about gay marriage. Carson is the latest Great Black Hope for the Republican Party, which is quickly running out of African American conservatives to make famous. But Carson’s appearance was not a success. He should have left bestiality out of it. And any reference to NAMBLA—the “North American Man/Boy Love Association”—is pretty good evidence

that we have left the realm of rational discussion and entered radio talk-show territory. This alleged organization exists—if indeed it exists at all—for the sole purpose of being attacked by Republicans and conservatives on talk radio and television.

Well, we all get our kicks in different ways, and if yours is watching someone being verbally flogged by Sean Hannity, I'm cool with that. Unwisely, though, Carson went on Andrea Mitchell's MSNBC show three days later. There, he tried to clarify his position. He said: "If you ask me for an apple, and I give you an orange, you would say, 'That's not

conflict with our core values of diversity, inclusion and respect." My analysis is that, at a crucial moment, the dean failed to defend a real core value of the university: tolerance.

The university's response was wrong for a variety of reasons. First, Carson isn't just another gasbag. He is director of pediatric neurosurgery at Hopkins. Pediatric neurosurgery! He fixes children's brains. How terrible can a person be who does that for a living? Yes, I know the flaw in this thinking: There is no necessary connection. As a character says in Mel Brooks's movie *The Producers*: "der Führer was a terrific dancer." But

Carson didn't murder millions of people. All he did was say on television that he opposes same-sex marriage—an idea that even its biggest current supporters had never even heard of a couple of decades ago. Does that automatically make you a homophobe and cast you into the outer darkness? It shouldn't. But in some American subcultures—Hollywood, academia, Democratic politics—it apparently does. You may favor raising taxes on the rich, increasing support for the poor, nurturing the planet, and repealing Section 14(b) of the Taft-Hartley Act, but if you don't support gay marriage, you're out of the club.

## Simply opposing gay marriage doesn't make you a homophobe, any more than opposing affirmative action makes you a racist.

an orange.' And then I say, 'That's a banana.' And that's not an apple, either. Or there's a peach, that's not an apple, either. But it doesn't mean that I'm equating the banana and the orange and the peach."

Carson may qualify as a homophobe by today's standards. But then they don't make homophobes like they used to. Carson denies hating gay people, while your classic homophobe revels in it. He has apologized publicly "if I offended anyone." He supports civil unions that would include all or almost all of the legal rights of marriage. In other words, he has views on gay rights somewhat more progressive than those of the average Democratic senator ten years ago. But as a devout Seventh Day Adventist, he just won't give up the word "marriage." And he has some kind of weird thing going on about fruit.

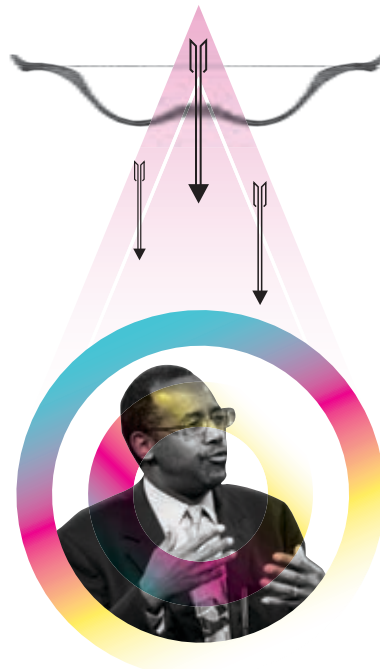
But none of this matters. All you need to know is that Carson opposes same-sex marriage. Case closed. Carson was supposed to be the graduation speaker at Johns Hopkins Medical School. There was a fuss, and Carson decided to withdraw as speaker. The obviously relieved dean nevertheless criticized Carson for being "hurtful." His analysis of the situation was that "the fundamental principle of freedom of expression has been placed in

Hopkins, as a private institution, may not have been constitutionally required to let Carson speak. But it was wrong for the university, once the invitation had been extended, to make Carson feel unwanted to the point of withdrawing. (In fact, it was wrong of Carson to let Hopkins off the hook in this way.) Behind the First Amendment is the notion that good ideas have a natural buoyancy that bad ideas do not. In fact, the very short (as these things go) debate about marriage equality demonstrates this. Denying Carson the right to speak was not just unprincipled. It was unnecessary. The proponents of marriage equality have not just won. They have routed the opposition. It's a moment to be gracious, not vindictive.

There are those who would have you think that gays and liberals are conducting some sort of jihad against organized Christianity and that gay marriage is one of the battlefields. That is a tremendous exaggeration. But it's not a complete fantasy. And for every mouth that opens, a dozen stay clamped shut. In the state of Washington, a florist refused to do the wedding of a long-time customer "because of my relationship with Jesus Christ." Note that "long-time customer." This woman had been happily selling flowers to the groom. She just didn't want to be associated with the wedding. Now she is being sued by the state attorney general. DC Comics dropped writer Orson Scott Card's planned Superman book when thousands signed a petition demanding it because of his many homophobic remarks.

Thought experiment: If you were up for tenure at a top university, or up for a starring role in a big movie, or running for office in large swaths of the country, would it hurt your chances more to announce that you are gay or to announce that you've become head of an anti-gay organization? The answer seems obvious. So the good guys have won. Why do they now want to become the bad guys?

The decision of gay leaders to concentrate on the right to marry was brilliant. This wasn't an inevitable choice. They might have chosen some other strategy, such as getting sexual preference under the protection of the civil rights laws, along with race, gender, and so on. Choosing marriage totally undercut the argument of opponents that gay men and women were demanding "special" rights. All they wanted, supporters could say truthfully, was a





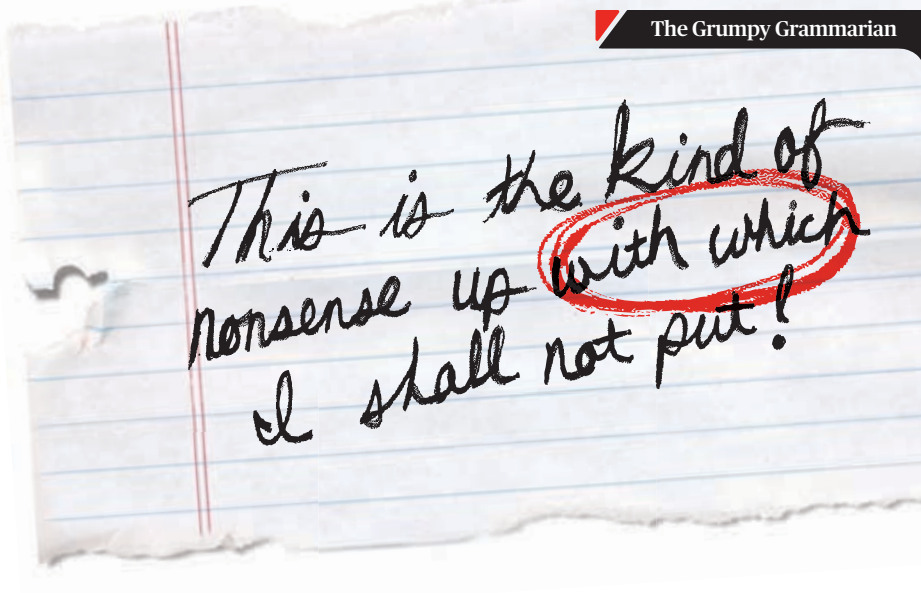
right (to marry someone you love) that every other American already enjoys. But the focus of gay rights on marriage is a historical accident, and to make support for marriage equality the test of right thinking on gay issues is absurd. In fact, the very idea of a “test of right thinking on gay issues” or any other kind of issues, is absurd. Gays, who know a thing or two about repression, ought to be the last people to want to destroy someone’s career because they disagree. In their moment of triumph, why can’t they laugh off nutty comments like Carson’s, rather than sending in the drones to take him out?

The first known mention of gay marriage is an article (“Here Comes the Groom” by Andrew Sullivan) commissioned by me and published in this magazine in 1989. And I would bet that there is no one born before 1989, gay or straight, who didn’t, when he or she first heard the idea, go, *whaaa*? Many on reflection got used to the idea, and a majority of Americans now support it. The day will come, probably next Tuesday at the rate things are going, when previous opposition to the idea of same-sex marriage will seem bizarre and require explaining, like membership in the Ku Klux Klan in the youths of some old Southerners—are there any left?—on Capitol Hill. But we’re not quite there yet. At the moment, simply opposing gay marriage doesn’t make you a homophobe, any more than opposing affirmative action makes you a racist or opposition to settlements on the West Bank makes you an anti-Semite.

The dean calls Carson’s remarks “hurtful.” They weren’t hurtful to him, unless he’s hopelessly oversensitive. The dean was just making a move in the great game of umbrage that has clogged American politics, where points are awarded for taking offense at something the other guy said. No one, when confronted with some opponent’s faux pas, or some stray remark that can be misrepresented as a faux pas, ever reacts anymore with: “Who cares?” Instead, it’s: “I am deeply, deeply offended by this person’s remarks. She should drop out of the race immediately, or quit her job, and move into a nunnery to contemplate her sins. And we certainly can’t let her speak at commencement because . . .”

Because what? ●

Michael Kinsley is editor-at-large at THE NEW REPUBLIC.



## FREEDOM FROM, FREEDOM TO

YES, YOU CAN END A SENTENCE WITH A PREPOSITION.

THE SENTENCE SCRAWLED ABOVE WAS Winston Churchill’s alleged response to the idea that one can’t end a sentence with a preposition, giving this fake grammar rule a particular distinction: Its legendary smack-down is as well known as the rule itself.

The whole notion about “dangling” prepositions traces back to a tossed-off remark by poet John Dryden in 1672, although what seems to have truly set the “rule” in stone is *A Short Introduction to English Grammar*, penned by Robert Lowth, an eighteenth-century bishop in London. Sober and pithy, this book happened to catch on and be used in classrooms into the early 1900s. Neither Dryden nor Lowth actually specified what was so wrong with prepositions coming last, but both were guided by an idea popular among writerly people of their era that good grammar was Latin-style, even in languages that aren’t Latin. Latin happens not to dangle its prepositions. However, Arabic doesn’t

either, and few would espouse beginning our sentences with verbs the way the language of the Koran does.

Besides, too often, there is no way to get that preposition off the edge. Should “she refused to come in” be recast as “in she refused to come”? Of course not. Lowth was referring only to language in its Sunday best when he wagged his finger about the sentence-ending preposition, and at one point in his book, he even wrote, “This is an idiom, which our language is strongly inclined to.” Whether Lowth was aware of the irony is something he took to his grave.

Nevertheless, many like to be told what to do, and messages get garbled over time. Countless grammar books simply put a taboo on ending sentences with prepositions. The result: a nonsensical “rule” tartly and accurately described by Kingsley Amis as “one of those fancied prohibitions dear to ignorant slob.” —JOHN MCWHORTER

## BOSTON STRONG MAN

THE UNDERWHELMING, INELOQUENT, TRIUMPHANT REIGN OF THOMAS MENINO.

BY JOE KEOHANE

**B**OSTON HAS HISTORICALLY BEEN a fractious place, down to its marrow: white against black, Irish against WASP, Italian against Irish, Dorchester against Brighton, us against

them, us against us if they weren’t around. A political culture rooted in an actual revolution and an actual tea party later produced characters like James Michael Curley, who, according to lore, threatened to use his authority as mayor to open the sewer mains under Brahmin banks if the bankers didn’t loan money to city projects. Firebrand busing opponent Louise Day Hicks campaigned for City Hall, and nearly won, under the barely coded slogan “Neighborhood schools for neighborhood kids.” (“A large part of my vote probably does come from bigoted people,” she said, with some

understatement.) In one typical episode, a state legislator stumping for his preferred mayoral candidate in enemy territory was assailed by “an unidentified vegetable that I suspect was a tomato.”

By contrast, the most striking thing about the Boston of Mayor Tom Menino, right until the bombs went off on Boylston Street, is how quiet it was. He has run the city for a record five terms, and if he hadn’t announced in March that he was finally ready to step down, voters would likely have waved him on to a sixth. But unlike his predecessors, his has been a reign without flamboyance, because for Menino that kind of power was not an option. He is physically awkward, with a froggy mien. His only flair is one for mangling English: “Alcatraz around my neck,” “Martha Luther King,” and the immortal “three or more people conjugating on the Public Garden over the next few weeks will be banned” stand among the local favorites. He was never going to rouse his city to action. Instead, he split the difference between blustering pugilists like Rudy Giuliani and clammy technocrats like Michael Bloomberg, forging a third way of urban boss-hood.

To understand how Menino ruled—and he ruled utterly—you have to appreciate how he rose. Much of it happened behind closed doors. A former insurance salesman with a high school diploma and a shrewd mind for organizing, Menino became a city councilor when the state senator he worked for had a seat created in Menino’s Hyde Park neighborhood and used his



At the time, the consensus was that this was a nice little caretaker job, Tommy getting to play dress up. But Menino saw it differently, shocking the political class by acting like, well, the mayor. As the election approached, he announced a slew of page-one anti-crime initiatives and millions of dollars in funding for teen and senior programs, even as he refused to openly engage in the campaign, citing “city business.” It wasn’t until August that Menino announced he was running; come November, he walked away with the race. It was like that for every cycle for the next two decades: Menino declining to engage challengers in sunlight, while working behind the scenes to mangle a parade of ham-and-eggars who either did not understand that the rules had changed or were essentially committing the political equivalent of suicide-by-cop. The best any of his four challengers did was get croaked by 15 points.

Between elections, Menino knuckled down (his jam-packed schedules are a thing of legend), avoided scandal and general farce (no small thing in the Hub), and largely abstained from picking the kind of high-profile fights that might

get voters thinking that they’d like to see the other side win. He managed to remain ethnic without being too ethnic, a townie who didn’t scare off the developers, a progressive who townies could live with. In a business of noisy, messy men who set passions aflame by their words only to be engulfed by them later, Menino made himself a model of competence and control.

If the approach reflected Menino’s awareness of his own limitations, it was also well timed. Boston transformed during his tenure, as the once provincial, somewhat gritty burgh sprouted biotech start-ups and million-dollar condos. The local economy grew by 58 percent and average incomes jumped 38 percent; the city’s high school dropout rate fell by more than 25 percent, and its decline in violent crimes outpaced the national average. In 2011, a think tank named Boston the sixth most economically powerful city on Earth, ahead of Hong Kong.

With all the money flowing in, the old hurly-burly lost favor, once-tight neighborhood and ethnic ties attenuated. The working class found itself pushed out by the higher home prices and rents, and the young advanced-degree-holders who replaced them figured that a government overseen by this mush-mouthed oddity wasn’t worthy of their concern. The new bloodlessness of the city’s civic life simplified Menino’s turnout efforts, at least. When he ran for a fifth term in 2009, he won with a little more than 63,000 votes in a city of more than 600,000—and that qualified as high turnout. His approval rating sat in the seventies, but for supporters, there wasn’t much point in actually voting for him. It would be like voting for winter in January.

By then already Boston’s longest-serving mayor, Menino promised big changes—an end to his low flame and careful incrementalism and a turn toward the boldness he’d always eschewed. But almost immediately, the decades of 16-hour days took their toll. He severed a tendon in his knee. He came down with a skin infection. He broke a toe. While hospitalized with a blood clot and a respiratory infection, he suffered a compression fracture to his spine and was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes, on top of the Crohn’s disease that had bedeviled him for years. A few weeks after he announced he wasn’t seeking reelection, he wound up in the hospital

**Few Menino supporters saw much point in actually voting for him. It would be like voting for winter in January.**

machine to install Menino in it. Once on the council, Menino, considered by his colleagues to be a good guy, hardworking but small-time, cozied up with Mayor Ray Flynn. Just as Flynn’s administration began to falter, Menino saw his opportunity and got Flynn to back him in a bid for city council president. Then, when Flynn stepped down in 1993 to become the ambassador to the Vatican under Bill Clinton, Menino became acting mayor.



# CONGRATS ON YOUR MEGA-DEAL!

NOW, HERE'S A HUNK OF LUCITE.  
BY ROB WALKER

Last spring, while the titans of Wall Street and Silicon Valley were sweating Facebook's initial public offering (IPO), five designers at the Corporate Presence—a “global market leader in Lucite commemoratives”—were sweating another part of the transaction. They had to devise the perfect deal toy for the occasion.

Deal toys are fairly common in the business world; they're signifiers of a job well done. And they can sometimes be pretty goofy, twisted into gimmicky, industry-specific forms like beer kegs or roulette wheels. But for the Facebook deal, Joe Reynolds, the CEO of the Corporate Presence, wanted to create something “sophisticated, business-looking, and almost stately.”

The resulting object looks like an abstract sculpture, presenting nothing more than surfaces that record the factual details traditional to these objects. In a sense, it all references the clean simplicity of a Facebook page.

A workaday deal might involve a production run in the dozens, but with so many players, the Facebook offering required “hundreds.” Reynolds

declined to reveal what his firm charged, but it's obviously a rounding error for a deal this size: Deal toys tend to cost less than \$100 each and, in many cases, far less.

Even though the deal-toy business was squeezed mightily during the financial crisis, it's unlikely to disappear altogether, because there's a pretty obvious function for those who collect them: “It's a visual résumé,” says Stephen Sokoler, CEO of deal-toy maker Altrum Honors. Like everything else in high finance, these symbolic objects aren't about the last deal—they're about the next one.



1

## AN ACTUAL FACEBOOK WALL

Familiar iconography from the site (thumbs-up included, of course) was subtly etched into the clear surface. The makers were aiming for a “sophisticated” look.



2

## C.R.E.A.M.

IPO deal toys almost always record the total sum raised. In this case: \$16,006,877,370.



3

## THE FEW, THE PROUD

Also immortalized on this capitalist trophy: the deal's three lead investment banks (Morgan Stanley, JP Morgan, and Goldman Sachs) and 30 “correspondent banks.”

again, this time with a broken leg.

And there he lay when the Tsarnaev brothers attacked the marathon. The modern crisis-response playbook was written by Giuliani and Chris Christie, politicians with naturally antic styles, and calls for barreling into the aftermath in a government-issued windbreaker, taking charge, embodying resilience. It's unkind, but not unfair, to wonder how well Menino's “urban mechanic” approach would have fit the moment had he been at full strength. As it was, he checked himself out of the hospital to work, but he was badly hobbled. The press briefings were handled mostly by Governor Deval Patrick

and Police Chief Ed Davis. And the people of Boston, now trained to trust that City Hall had a handle on things, galvanized just fine on their own.

Then, on April 18, Menino went to Boston's Holy Cross Cathedral to attend an interfaith service, entering the church in a wheelchair pushed by his son, Tom Jr., a cop. Reaching the podium, Menino rose, with agonizing effort, and spoke. “Even with the smell of smoke in the air ... and blood on the streets ... tears in our eyes ... we triumphed over that hateful act on Monday afternoon,” he said, with a clarity and power he had not before demonstrated during his two

decades in the job. “It's a glorious thing, the love and the strength that covers our city. It will push us forward, it will push thousands and thousands and thousands of people across the finish line next year. Because this is Boston, a city with the courage, compassion, and strength that knows no bounds.” Then Menino sat down and let his son wheel him away from the rostrum. He had made Boston a place that does not need big speeches. But diminished in a way he'd never experienced, he had for the first time needed to give one, and so he did. ●

*Joe Keohane is a writer and editor in Brooklyn.*

## Cyclorama

# BILL KRISTOL'S GALACTIC EMPIRE

The many, many board seats of DC's ultimate operator.

*Politico* recently christened all the conservative think tanks, nonprofits, and publications Bill Kristol is involved with "Kristol World." But "world" doesn't do it justice: Kristol's résumé occupies its own universe. His influence ranges from conservative media to foreign policy to academia to economics. To help untangle Kristol's myriad activities, both past and present, we mapped the influence of the neoconservative mastermind.

By Molly Redden

## NATIONAL AFFAIRS, INC.

MEMBER, PUBLISHING COMMITTEE CURRENT

The group once published *The Public Interest*, which Kristol's father, Irving, edited. Now, it publishes the conservative quarterly opinion journal *National Affairs*.

## LYNDE AND HARRY BRADLEY FOUNDATION

DIRECTOR OF BRADLEY PROJECT ON THE '90s 1993

Devoted primarily to school vouchers and union busting, it hired Kristol to write a survey on how to "liberate society from the therapeutic welfare state."

## PROJECT FOR THE REPUBLICAN FUTURE

FOUNDER AND CHAIRMAN 1993-1995

From his perch here, Kristol wrote a legendary memo urging House Republicans to block President Clinton's health care bill rather than pass popular reforms that could help Democrats in future elections.

## PROJECT FOR THE NEW AMERICAN CENTURY

CO-FOUNDER AND CHAIRMAN 1997-2006

One of Kristol's most infamous endeavors, the project advocated the invasion of Iraq and funneled many top thinkers—Donald Rumsfeld, Richard Armitage, and John Bolton—to the Bush administration.

## PREVIOUS PLANETS

## MEDIA

## THE WEEKLY STANDARD

FOUNDER AND EDITOR CURRENT

The "neocon bible," per *The Economist*. Kristol founded the magazine in 1995—just as the GOP took over Congress and found itself in need of policy solutions.

## CENTER FOR AMERICAN FREEDOM

BOARD MEMBER CURRENT

Modeled on the liberal Center for American Progress in more than just name, the center's projects include *The Washington Free Beacon*, a website run by Kristol son-in-law Matthew Continetti.

## FOREIGN POLICY

## EMERGENCY COMMITTEE FOR ISRAEL

BOARD MEMBER CURRENT

Dedicated to the protection of Israel against weak-kneed Democrats, the committee most recently made news for its unsuccessful campaign against Chuck Hagel's nomination for secretary of defense.

## KEEP AMERICA SAFE

BOARD MEMBER CURRENT

Its mission: to brand President Obama a foreign policy radical. Kristol co-founded the group with Liz Cheney in 2009.

## GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY

MEMBER, BOARD OF VISITORS 1997-2000

A public university in Northern Virginia that has become a hotbed of libertarian thought and study.



**FOUNDATION FOR COMMUNITY  
AND FAITH CENTERED ENTERPRISE**

MEMBER, BOARD OF TRUSTEES 2001-2004

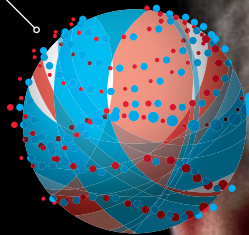
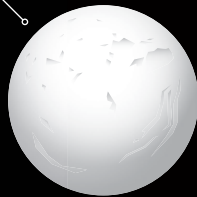
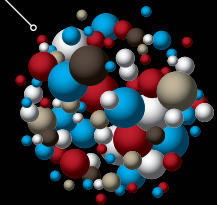
A relic of compassionate conservatism, the foundation advocated for faith-based initiatives before throwing in the towel after just three years.

**PREVIOUS PLANETS**

**COMMITTEE FOR THE  
LIBERATION OF IRAQ**

MEMBER, ADVISORY BOARD 2002-2003

Abandoned after Iraq was "liberated," the committee lobbied in favor of U.S. military action to oust Saddam Hussein.



**ECONOMICS**

• **THE MANHATTAN INSTITUTE**

BOARD MEMBER CURRENT

The premier economic think tank for free-market and Hayekian policy minds, it was established with the help of Richard Mellon Scaife and the Koch brothers.

• **FOREIGN POLICY INITIATIVE**

BOARD MEMBER CURRENT

A refuge for neocons after the Bush administration. Started in 2009, the initiative mainly defends military spending.

• **FOUNDATION FOR THE DEFENSE OF DEMOCRACIES**

MEMBER, LEADERSHIP COUNCIL CURRENT

hawkish foreign policy experts appeared routinely on Sunday talk shows to defend President George W. Bush during his tenure. Advocates hard-line positions on Iran and Israel.

**ACADEMIA**

• **THE ASHBROOK CENTER FOR  
PUBLIC AFFAIRS AT ASHLAND UNIVERSITY**

BOARD MEMBER CURRENT

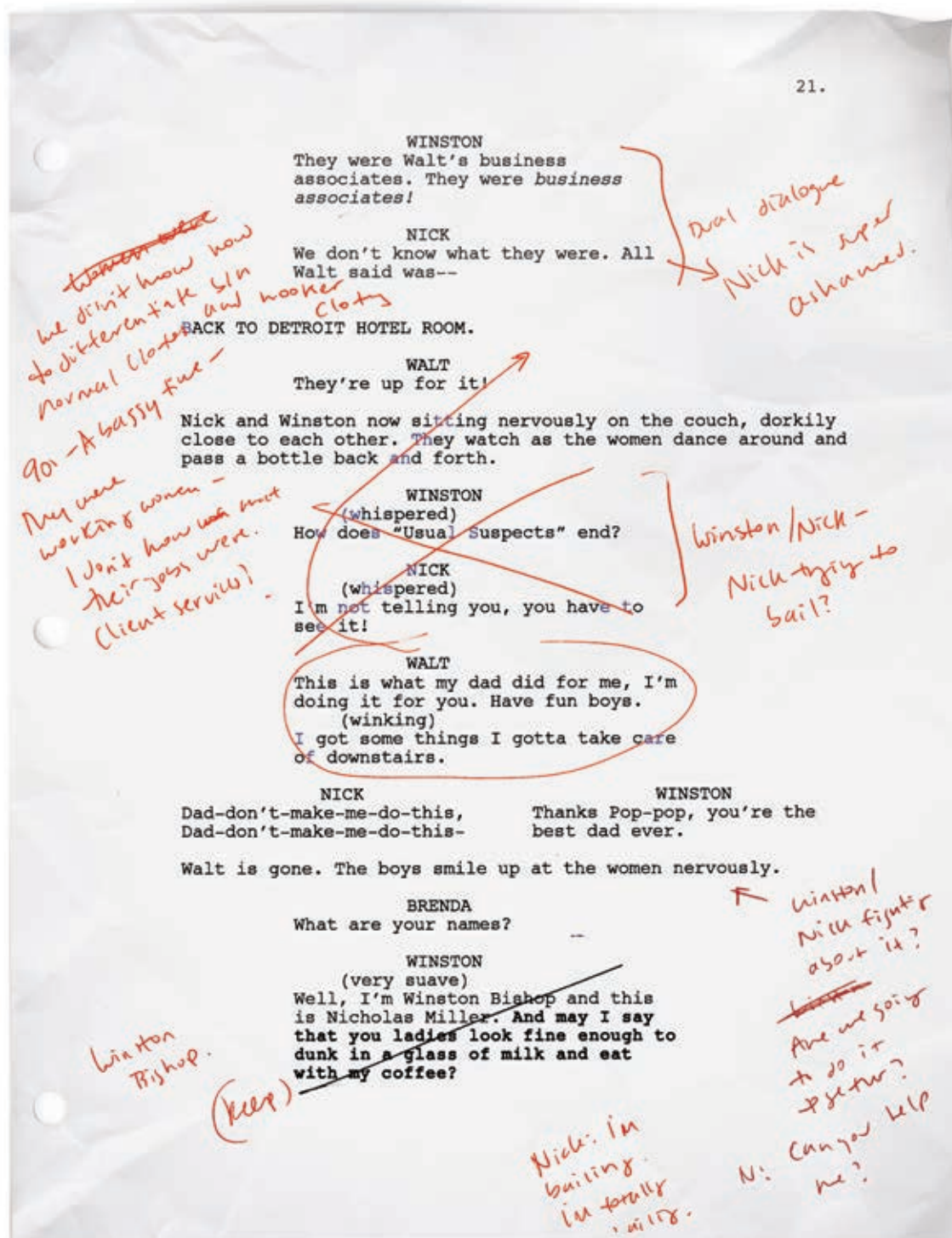
A conservative research and policy hub, the center promotes an originalist vision of the Constitution.

BILL KRISTOL: GETTY IMAGES

# NOT THAT KIND OF GIRL

WHILE EVERYONE WAS FAWNING OVER LENA DUNHAM, LIZ MERIWETHER MADE A SHOW THAT'S FUNNIER AND MORE TRUE TO LIFE.

BY NOREEN MALONE  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY  
TURE LILLEGRAVEN



RIGHT, Meriwether in the "New Girl" offices on the Fox lot. ABOVE, her edits to an early script of an episode called "Virgins." By the final cut, *The Usual Suspects* exchange became a more mainstream *Titanic* reference, while Winston's hammy thank you to "the best dad ever" was excised in favor of a sly shot showing him silently peacocking for the prostitutes Nick's father had hired for the teenagers.





# Liz Meriwether is trying to figure out the best way to make a funeral funny.

The 31-year-old showrunner of Fox's "New Girl" is in deep writing mode, clad in leggings and an actual, slender scrunchie, chewing on licorice that has replaced the "gross" tempeh salad she'd ordered in a failed bid to avoid the junk food that fills the writers' room. Meriwether didn't intend it in homage, but when the series began, her heroine, like that of "The Mary Tyler Moore Show," was a 30-year-old woman fresh out of a calamitous breakup. Except that, for Jess, played as sweetly kooky by Zooey Deschanel, the fresh start involves not a studio apartment and a new job, but three male roommates she meets on the Internet and who reside, naturally, in a dubiously capacious loft. Meriwether and her staff are at work on one of the more emotionally fraught episodes of the show's second season, which ends on May 14. One of the loft-mates, Nick, has just lost his father. A second, Schmidt, is having trouble processing his own feelings about the death.

Meriwether once dressed up as a slutty Woody Allen for Halloween—a gag worthy of Allen himself—and Schmidt can be read as another Allen type: He is a proud Jew as well as the self-identified douchebag of the bunch, whose cartoonish obsession with alpha-maleness barely disguises how neurotic he is about his libidinousness, his fastidiousness, his just about everythingness. Sitting with her legs tucked under her, Meriwether pulls at her cardigan and grabs her face while she ponders. Her voice can sound deceptively unconfident; she says "like" a lot and tends to introduce her good ideas with, "This is probably a bad pitch, but ... ." It all contributes to what one friend calls Meriwether's "dumb-blonde uppercut."

"We can't have this be an intellectual, philosophical crisis," she tells the room. They decide Schmidt will grapple with mortality by grappling with the dead body itself.

Meriwether starts the riff, imagining how the given-to-extremes character would react to an encounter with the corpse. "*Now I can't look away!*" she says. "*Now I want to be an undertaker!*"

"He bangs the body," suggests another writer. "Ohhhh. Didn't see that comin'!"

"Guys," says a third. "He just bangs a body?"

Meriwether ups the ante: "*I'm only gay with dead men!*"

"Next week on 'New Girl': *I can't stop dating a dead body*," parries yet another writer.

Meriwether expertly edits the teaser, putting on a chipper voice-over tone: "Schmidt's gay for dead guys!"

Ignore, for a moment, the poor harassed corpse. Those were not jokes about necrophilia or homosexuality—though Meriwether doesn't shy from topics that skirt the line of taste. They were jokes about the constraints of network television, which in 2013 is a highly embattled medium. At the 2012 Television Critics Association conference, Fox Entertainment Chairman Kevin Reilly summarized the state of affairs: "Our shows weren't rejected," he said of the network's most recent failures. "They weren't really sampled." It's not just that there are ever more ways to get free entertainment that don't involve flicking the remote. The collective attention

has also increasingly shifted to cable, where boundary-pushing comedies like "It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia" regard jokes about screwing dead people as amuse-bouche. The show "30 Rock," one of the few network sitcoms to get the kind of critical praise heaped upon cable in recent years, spun seven seasons of underwhelming ratings out of a meta joke about the limpness of network television.

Writing for a broadcast series, the producer Jenni Konner has said, is like making piss pie. You start out making something else, and the suits ask you to put a drop of piss in, then a drop more, then suddenly you're serving up something that smells like the bleachers bathroom at Yankee Stadium. As it happens, Konner is Lena Dunham's co-executive producer on the HBO hit "Girls." (She first learned about Dunham when Meriwether told her she had to see Dunham's movie *Tiny Furniture*.) No show better exemplifies cable's disproportionate influence. It has become virtually impossible, at least on vast swaths of the Internet, to talk about being a young woman, or American young adulthood in general, without referencing Dunham's almost sadistic vision of the difficulty of post-collegiate life. And yet the show's second-season finale drew just 632,000 viewers. (There were almost as many blog posts about it.) Saying that you like "Girls" shows that you're sophisticated, and maybe even believe that the only way to make worthwhile television these days is to be free from commercial concerns.

Meanwhile, "New Girl" averaged 6.4 million viewers this season, making it the third-most watched sitcom among 18- to 34-year-olds and number one among young women. It's not piss pie that's bringing in those ratings: The show has plenty of nuanced character development, cinematic tone, generational insight, and comic modernity to call its own. Meriwether could have gone the Dunham route. But instead, she is applying her talents to a very uncool task: restoring the virtue of the network sitcom.

**THERE ARE GIRLS WHO WEAR OVERALLS, OR THE EQUIVALENT,** to high school because they don't want to conform. There are girls who date cute athletes. It is an unfortunate fact of American teenage life that rarely do the two categories intersect. Growing up in Ann Arbor, the daughter of a newspaper publisher and an artist who taught in prisons, Meriwether managed that balancing act. She was a star actress—but played Gollum in *The Hobbit*.

It was at Yale that Meriwether developed her penchant for subversive shock humor, without ever quite leaving the AP-student trajectory. She worked as an assistant to superstar English Professor Harold Bloom, but attended the Harvard-Yale football game in a shirt that read "I BLOW FOR COKE." Her first stab at playwriting, sophomore year, featured now-star Zoe Kazan talking to a personification of cotton. It was called *The Touch, the Feel*.

After graduation, Meriwether moved to New York. She was still acting, but hid under tables after readings, so crippled was she by her fear of criticism. (These days, she avoids the Internet for the same reason.) Her breaking point was during a reading of Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, when she failed to cry on cue. The director, who happened to have a voice box that rendered his intonations especially oracular, told her she just wasn't committed enough. "I was like, well maybe I should be, like, losing weight or trying to be prettier. And I was immediately bored by it," she remembers. "I was just like, fuck it, I'm writing."

In 2004, her first year out of college, Meriwether showed a play she'd written called *Nicky Goes Goth*—the plot imagined the adventures of Nicky Hilton if unshackled from her celebuntante sister—at the Fringe Festival. R.J. Tolan, who co-runs Youngblood, a prestigious playwriting group to which Meriwether was admitted, says it "was



the kind of piece that would be easy to blow off until you actually read it and realize what sort of smart stuff is going on there.” He describes her style of writing as “hyperobservation.” Another word for the sensibility Meriwether was settling into would be “dirty.” “If there’s a rape joke, if there’s an incest joke, any type of taboo, she’s like, I’m going to get in there,” says her friend and fellow TV writer Dana Fox. Adds director Jake Kasdan, who works with her on “New Girl”: “She’s never met a dick joke she didn’t go running across the room to create.” *Nicky Goes Goth* got the attention of Alex Timbres, best known for directing *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson*. He asked Meriwether to write a play updating Ibsen’s *Hedda Gabler*, but with robots. *The New York Times* gave *Heddatron* a rave.

“Sluts,” the first TV pilot Meriwether wrote, sounds an awful lot like Dunham’s “Girls.” A raunchy, honest look at the messy dating lives of twentysomething women, it was based on Meriwether’s post-grad life in New York, where she lived in Manhattan with three roommates but “woke up a lot in Brooklyn.” But it was 2006, and she was pitching network television. “There was a lot of desire to put the characters in boxes,” says Meriwether. “This woman is slutty, this woman is smart, and those two things can’t be together.” Dana Walden, the chairman of Fox Television, has a slightly different take. “There was a carelessness in the way the characters in ‘Sluts’ lived their lives,” she says. While Fox deemed the pilot unmarketable, it established Meriwether as a distinctive commodity. Ivan Reitman, famous for megahits like *Ghostbusters*, gave her a rom-com idea to run with. The working title was *Fuckbuddies*.

The resulting script featured a career-oriented doctor (Natalie Portman) and her TV writer friend-with-benefits (Ashton Kutcher) who wants them to be more. “It was me,” says Meriwether of Portman’s character. “I’d kind of always been the guy in relationships,” she says, citing one six-year-long off-and-on situation as the main inspiration. “I’d always been the one who’s always sort of pulling away, which is not a good thing, and I’m not proud of it, but I just wanted to write about that experience.” Paramount bought the script, and the tinkering began. The studio, says Meriwether, had some questions about her protagonist. “Are women gonna relate to her? Is she gonna seem, like, cold, and, I don’t know, damaged?” The resulting, somewhat neutered movie—directed by Reitman—became 2011’s *No Strings Attached*. Instead of *Hedda Gabler* with robots, it was something like if Harry and Sally had booty-texted.

Dana Fox, who has also written romantic comedies and a Fox sitcom, makes the case that the massive expense that goes into a

studio movie has a way of bringing out executives’ paternal sides. “People need a captain of a ship. They want to feel like they have a daddy,” she says. “All these analogies are inherently masculine.” In television, the financial stakes are lower, at least to make a pilot and a first season or two. The result is that its decision-makers take more chances, often affording showrunners (of both genders) more creative freedom. Or, as Fox puts it: “I think it’s safe to say that it’s easier to be a powerful ambitious boss lady in television than features. In TV, you don’t have to be shy about ambition.”

During the three years it took for *No Strings Attached* to get made, Meriwether kept a toehold in the New York theater world. She wasn’t happy in L.A. at first, say old friends, despite being part of a close-knit “fempire” of female screenwriters detailed in a much-circulated *New York Times* Style section piece. She bounced from Craigslist subplot to Craigslist subplot. But professionally, it was New York that proved less welcoming than the West Coast. In 2010, her play *Oliver Parker!* was viciously panned by the *Times*. “Elizabeth Meriwether’s comedy combines the crass vulgarity that passes for wit in teen-aimed Hollywood movies with a well-worn stage cliché, the scabrously dark story of family dysfunction,” wrote Charles Isherwood. The headline called it “sitcomish.”

**MERIWETHER WROTE ANOTHER SITCOM. IN THE SCRIPT,** Schmidt was already Schmidt—he takes off his shirt twice to prove his manliness—and Jess was already Jess: Entirely missing the point of stripper names, she declares that her stripper name would be Rebecca Johnson. The three men are initially worried that having a pretty woman living with them will disturb their apartment’s equilibrium, establishing the premium that the series puts on friendship. “This one was more well-rounded. They all feel like real people,” said Walden. This time, the network bit, signaling its enthusiasm by pursuing Deschanel for the role. It also replaced Meriwether’s working title for the show, rechristening “Chicks and Dicks” as “New Girl.”

The year Meriwether got the green light for the series, 2011, happened to be the year of *Bridesmaids*, the Kristen Wigg-Judd Apatow production that spawned an acre of think pieces about the new generation of funny women. More important, the movie demonstrated the serious money that kind of entertainment could make. The film grossed nearly \$170 million domestically, making it the biggest financial hit of Apatow’s career.

In television, the audience for broadcast sitcoms is more than half female, but in the wake of *Bridesmaids*, the networks seemed determined to chase young women specifically—and with mixed results. At one end of the spectrum, Whitney Cummings’s “2 Broke Girls” and “Whitney,” on CBS and NBC, respectively, reached for stereotypes hard (and are still on the air, offering little for smart viewers to like). Nahnatchka Khan’s sparkingly funny and diamond-cruel “Don’t Trust the B\* in Apartment 23” was at the opposite end. It featured James Van Der Beek playing himself in a series of plots that revolved around “Dawson’s Creek” and reality TV show references (and was inevitably canceled). The influx of these shows did not go unnoticed elsewhere in the industry. “We are approaching peak vagina on television, the point of labia saturation,” Lee Aronson, executive producer of “Two and a Half Men,” told an interviewer last year. “Enough, ladies. I get it. You have periods.”

It is a rule of thumb in Hollywood that women will watch shows about men, but men won’t watch shows about women. From the beginning, “New Girl” did not do much to challenge that accepted wisdom. Meriwether bristles at interviewers who put too much focus on her gender or on whatever it is that Deschanel’s character means for modern womanhood. “You don’t want it to be a symbol

Meriwether during a network meet-and-greet with, from left, director and executive producer Jake Kasdan, co-showrunner Brett Baer, and cast members Zoëy Deschanel and Jake Johnson.





This season, Meriwether gave her writers T-shirts with their "spirit animals." Her own, as chosen by her assistant, is the kitten she's wearing here. (The bear, for its part, normally guards her office.)



of, like, women moving forward,” she told me. “I mean, that is the least funny thing you could think of. ... What’s funny is when women have problems. When anyone has problems, it’s funny.” Meriwether also, it is worth noting, wrote an entire second-season episode, “Menziez,” around a menstruation joke, one that winked at what it would be like if men got periods. Winston, one of the loft-mates, believes that he is experiencing a kind of sympathy PMS with Jess. Anything that makes people uncomfortable is worth doing, Meriwether told me. But, mostly: “Fluids are funny.”

**IN 2008, MERIWETHER VOLUNTEERED FOR THE OBAMA CAMPAIGN** in Ohio. During her self-deployment, she wrote a very funny, obscenity-laden e-mail urging her friends to help get out the vote. The missive was passed around until it found its way back to the campaign, which told her she could keep her post if she admitted the message wasn’t funny and shouldn’t have been sent. She refused.

Fox has not made Meriwether choose so starkly between her jokes and her job. “The first thing [Kevin Reilly, Fox’s top boss] said to me was, ‘I love this character, and your job is to protect her, and to make sure that she is unique, and to maintain your voice on this show,’” Meriwether has said. Still, Reilly had good reason to know she’d need to protect Jess. As the head of a national network, he runs a well-oiled muddling machine.

When Meriwether got the go-ahead from Fox, she more or less cold-e-mailed Kasdan, whose work she’d admired from the beloved short-lived Apatow sitcom “Freaks and Geeks,” to ask if he’d shoot the pilot. Known as an especially visually oriented director, he has directed many subsequent episodes and helped develop the feel of the show, which is lit more darkly and cinematically than the average sitcom. Meriwether also signed up Brett Baer and David Finkel, two TV veterans, as her co-showrunners. There are alumni of “The Simpsons” and “30 Rock” churning out jokes. It’s not an easy show to write for. There has been more-than-average turnover. But everyone agrees that the voice of “New Girl” has remained Meriwether’s own. “I can always tell reading the script how much she’s gotten her hands on it,” Kasdan says.

Part of what Meriwether set out to do was write characters who are not “TV together,” as she puts it, but who are shuffling into adulthood at what is, these days, a realistic pace. “As flawed as we could get away with on network” is how she describes her goal. “Their lives are moving forward, [but] they’re still trying to hang on to some kind of crazy youth.” At the same time, she says, “I don’t want them ever to seem pathetic.” Meriwether likes her characters, and they like each other. Such pleasant company is an oddly undervalued asset in the “Breaking Bad”/“Real Housewives” era. It’s also the key distinction between “New Girl” and “Girls,” which work with not dissimilar emotional grist. One first-season “New Girl” episode, for example, features Jess, post-breakup, trying to figure out what sex with someone new will be like. Worried she’ll be boring in bed, she winds up choking a character played by Justin Long while, at her behest, he does a seductive Jimmy Stewart voice—a scene that, in its own absurd way, says just as much about sexual anxiety as any of the ballyhooed bad sex written by Dunham.

A big turning point for “New Girl” came midway through this season, during which Jess and Nick share one of the more enjoyable-looking kisses I’ve seen on any kind of screen recently. By the next episode, the two had regressed back into awkwardness. “To me, [a kiss] is not the beginning of a relationship in any way in modern days,” says Meriwether. “That’s actually just something that happened that’s confusing.” Confusing, and highly relatable for viewers. But if maintaining that kind of emotional authenticity is harder amid the Victorianism of broadcast, where women have sex while

wearing bras, Meriwether—for all her bawdiness—is well-suited to the challenge. When asked to list her all-time favorite sex scenes, she names two that turn out to not to involve actual sex: Grace Kelly’s necklace-based tease of Cary Grant in *To Catch a Thief* and Henry Fonda putting a stocking on Barbara Stanwyck in *The Lady Eve*. During an episode this season full of sexual tension between Jess and Nick, things reach a tipping point when he tenderly removes an eyelash from her face. Because this is Meriwether, though, that moment is followed by a pun-filled trip to the hardware store for “hard caulk.”

“Hard caulk” had to make it through a lot before reaching the airwaves. On cable, showrunners are often treated like something closer to auteurs, and the “Louis C.K. deal”—wherein the comic extracted a promise from FX that they wouldn’t interfere with “Louie”—provides the dream every button-pushing writer aspires to. For episodes of “New Girl,” the creative process includes a pitch page, an outline, a final draft, and cuts of the episodes, each of which is approved not only by Meriwether and her co-showrunners but also by Chernin (the production company); then Fox, the studio; and Fox, the network. At each step, someone can pull rank. “Liz is in this tap dance of keeping hundreds of people happy, and being able to do that and stay popular and be weird is a real feat,” says one person who has worked at both HBO and Fox.

“You have to have a vision to have success in this business,” Walden says. “You can’t be open to the input of the huge number of people who get involved in our process.” Meriwether listens to feedback, but never too much. “Liz is strong,” she says.

**PART OF MERIWETHER’S PERSONAL APPEAL IS THAT SHE IS NOT,** precisely, “TV together” herself, despite being very much in charge of a TV show. She recently bought Selma Blair’s old house in West Hollywood, where, says Dana Fox, “she has fancy nice things, but next to a picture of a unicorn in front of a waterfall.” When Meriwether was pulled over for a speeding ticket not long ago, a friend says, the cop wrote her up for a number of additional violations, like expired license plates, that suggested a person not quite keeping up with the administrative details of her life. In Meriwether’s office at Fox, she keeps toiletries and a purple sleeping bag for frequent all-nighters. The space is guarded by a giant stuffed bear wearing striped underwear yanked slightly askew and surrounded by wadded-up tissues. She has gotten good at making compromises fun.

“Some of the beauty of writing for network is that there are so many things you can’t do, but that sort of pushes you to do things you didn’t even think you could do to get around that,” says Meriwether. “I do miss going there, I really do, and I hope—I want—in the future to write something that gets a little bit dirtier and goes there a little more. But it has been a really good exercise for me in learning not to rely on that, in learning, like: OK, so we can’t show boobs, we can’t say the word ‘dick,’ we can’t just say the most shocking thing. We have to come up with a way around it.”

One way around the obstacles was to anchor the show in a character who is a bit of a prude. Jess’s girlishness was something critics initially found off-putting about the show, but Meriwether wasn’t creating a symbol, after all. She was looking for things she found funny, then finding means for getting them across. And so there was a whole episode in the first season during which Jess is afraid to say “penis.” As Meriwether delights in recounting, in that context, standards and practices allowed five instances of the word. This year, she and her writers tried to get seven penises into an episode; that was too much. ●

Noreen Malone is a staff writer at THE NEW REPUBLIC.

THE

LETHALITY

OF

For the first time in history, we understand how isolation can ravage the body and brain.

Now, what should we do about it?

BY JUDITH SHULEVITZ

Photograph by Darren Braun Illustrations and Typography by Ariel Lee

LONELINESS





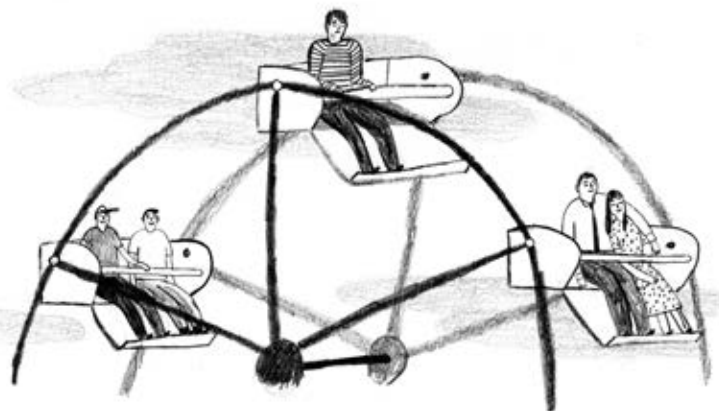
**S**ometime in the late '50s, Frieda Fromm-Reichmann sat down to write an essay about a subject that had been mostly overlooked by other psychoanalysts up to that point. Even Freud had only touched on it in passing. She was not sure, she wrote, “what inner forces” made her struggle with the problem of loneliness, though she had a notion. It might have been the young female catatonic patient who began to communicate only when Fromm-Reichmann asked her how lonely she was. “She raised her hand with her thumb lifted, the other four fingers bent toward her palm,” Fromm-Reichmann wrote. The thumb stood alone, “isolated from the four hidden fingers.” Fromm-Reichmann responded gently, “That lonely?” And at that, the woman’s “facial expression loosened up as though in great relief and gratitude, and her fingers opened.”

Fromm-Reichmann would later become world-famous as the dumpy little therapist mistaken for a housekeeper by a new patient, a severely disturbed schizophrenic girl named Joanne Greenberg. Fromm-Reichmann cured Greenberg, who had been deemed incurable. Greenberg left the hospital, went to college, became a writer, and immortalized her beloved analyst as “Dr. Fried” in the best-selling autobiographical novel *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* (later also a movie and a pop song). Among analysts, Fromm-Reichmann, who had come to the United States from Germany to escape Hitler, was known for insisting that no patient was too sick to be healed through trust and intimacy. She figured that loneliness lay at the heart of nearly all mental illness and that the lonely person was just about the most terrifying spectacle in the world. She once chastised her fellow therapists for withdrawing from emotionally unreachable patients rather than risk being contaminated by them. The uncanny specter of loneliness “touches on our own possibility of loneliness,” she said. “We evade it and feel guilty.”

Her 1959 essay, “On Loneliness,” is considered a founding document in a fast-growing area of scientific research you might call loneliness studies. Over the past half-century, academic psychologists have largely abandoned psychoanalysis and made themselves over as biologists. And as they delve deeper into the workings of cells and nerves, they are confirming that loneliness is as monstrous as Fromm-Reichmann said it was. It has now been linked with a wide array of bodily ailments as well as the old mental ones.

In a way, these discoveries are as consequential as the germ theory of disease. Just as we once knew that infectious diseases killed, but didn’t know that germs spread them, we’ve known intuitively that loneliness hastens death, but haven’t been able to explain how. Psychobiologists can now show that loneliness sends misleading hormonal signals, rejiggers the molecules on genes that govern behavior, and wrenches a slew of other systems out of whack. They have proved that long-lasting loneliness not only makes you sick; it can kill you. Emotional isolation is ranked as high a risk factor





for mortality as smoking. A partial list of the physical diseases thought to be caused or exacerbated by loneliness would include Alzheimer's, obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, neurodegenerative diseases, and even cancer—tumors can metastasize faster in lonely people.

The psychological definition of loneliness hasn't changed much since Fromm-Reichmann laid it out. "Real loneliness," as she called it, is not what the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard characterized as the "shut-upness" and solitariness of the civilized. Nor is "real loneliness" the happy solitude of the productive artist or the passing irritation of being cooped up with the flu while all your friends go off on some adventure. It's not being dissatisfied with your companion of the moment—your friend or lover or even spouse—unless you chronically find yourself in that situation, in which case you may in fact be a lonely person. Fromm-Reichmann even distinguished "real loneliness" from mourning, since the well-adjusted eventually get over that, and from depression, which may be a symptom of loneliness but is rarely the cause. Loneliness, she said—and this will surprise no one—is the want of intimacy.

Today's psychologists accept Fromm-Reichmann's inventory of all the things that loneliness isn't and add a wrinkle she would surely have approved of. They insist that loneliness must be seen as an interior, subjective experience, not an external, objective condition. Loneliness "is not synonymous with being alone, nor does being with others guarantee protection from feelings of loneliness," writes John Cacioppo, the leading psychologist on the subject. Cacioppo privileges the emotion over the social fact because—remarkably—he's sure that it's the *feeling* that wreaks havoc on the body and brain. Not everyone agrees with him, of course. Another school of thought insists that loneliness is a failure of social networks. The lonely get sicker than the non-lonely, because they don't have people to take care of them; they don't have social support.

To the degree that loneliness has been treated as a matter of public concern in the past, it has generally been seen as a social problem—the product of an excessively conformist culture or of a breakdown in social norms. Nowadays, though, loneliness is a public health crisis. The standard U.S. questionnaire, the UCLA Loneliness Scale, asks 20 questions that run variations on the theme of closeness—"How often do you feel close to people?" and so on. As many as 30 percent of Americans don't feel close to people at a given time.

Loneliness varies with age and poses a particular threat to the very old, quickening the rate at which their faculties decline and cutting their lives shorter. But even among the not-so-old, loneliness is pervasive. In a survey published by the AARP in 2010, slightly more than one out of three adults 45 and over reported being chronically lonely (meaning they've been lonely for a long time). A decade earlier, only one out of five said that. With baby-

boomers reaching retirement age at a rate of 10,000 a day, the number of lonely Americans will surely spike.

Obviously, the sicker lonely people get, the more care they'll need. This is true, and alarming, although as we learn more about loneliness, we'll also be better able to treat it. But to me, what's most momentous about the new biology of loneliness is that it offers concrete proof, obtained through the best empirical means, that the poets and bluesmen and movie directors who for centuries have deplored the ravages of lonesomeness on both body and soul were right all along. As W.H. Auden put it, "We must love one another or die."

WHO ARE THE LONELY? THEY'RE THE OUTSIDERS: NOT JUST the elderly, but also the poor, the bullied, the *different*. Surveys confirm that people who feel discriminated against are more likely to feel lonely than those who don't, even when they don't fall into the categories above. Women are lonelier than men (though unmarried men are lonelier than unmarried women). African Americans are lonelier than whites (though single African American women are less lonely than Hispanic and white women). The less educated are lonelier than the better educated. The unemployed and the retired are lonelier than the employed.

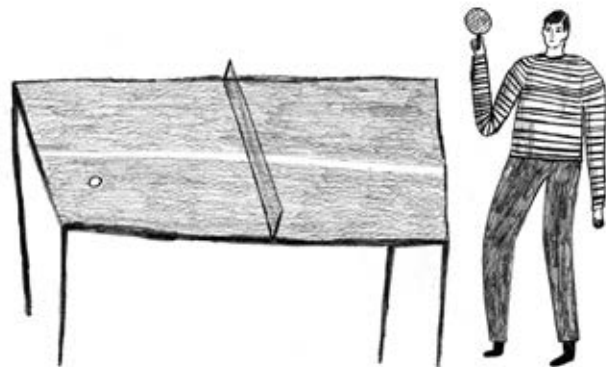
A key part of feeling lonely is feeling rejected, and that, it turns out, is the most damaging part. Psychologists discovered this by, among other things, studying the experience of gay men during the first decade of the AIDS epidemic, when the condition was knocking out their immune systems, and, as it seemed at first, *only* theirs. The nation ignored the crisis for a while, then panicked. Soon, people all over the country were calling for gay men to be quarantined.

To psychologists trying to puzzle out how social experiences affect health, AIDS amounted to something of a natural experiment, the chance to observe the effects of conditions so extreme that no ethical person would knowingly subject another person to them. The disease came from a virus—HIV—that was neutral-

izing all the usual defenses of a discrete group of people who could be compared with each other and also with a control group of the uninfected. That allowed researchers in a lab at UCLA to take on one of life's biggest questions, which had become even more urgent as the disease laid waste to thousands, then tens of thousands: Could social experiences explain why some people die faster than others?

In the mid- to late '80s, the UCLA lab obtained access to a long-term

**Since physical and emotional pain overlap, it turns out that Tylenol can reduce the pain of heartbreak.**



study of gay men who enrolled without knowing whether they were infected with HIV. About half of them tested positive for the virus, and about a third of those agreed to let researchers put their lives under a microscope, answering extensive questions about drug use, sexual behavior, attitudes toward their own homosexuality, levels of emotional support, and so on. By 1993, around one-third of that group had developed full-blown AIDS, and slightly more than a quarter had died.

Steven Cole was a young postdoctoral student in the lab itching to move beyond his field's mind-body split. At the time, he told me, psychology was only just beginning to grasp "how the physical world of our bodies gets remodeled by our psychic and conceptual worlds." When the UCLA researchers started trying to figure out which social factors sped up the progress of the disease, they tested obvious ones like socioeconomic status and levels of support. Curiously, though, being poor or lacking family and friends didn't much change the rate at which an infected man would die of AIDS (although being in mourning, as gay men often were those days, did seem to weaken an infected man's immune system).

It eventually occurred to Cole to try to imagine the world from a gay man's perspective. That wasn't easy for him: "I'm a straight kid from the suburbs. I had stereotypes, but I didn't really know the reality of these people's lives." Then he read a book, Erving Goffman's *Stigma: Notes on the Management of a Spoiled Identity*, that tallies in detail the difficulties of "passing" as someone else. He learned that the closeted man must police every piece of information known about him, live in constant terror of exposure or blackmail, and impose sharp limits on intimacy, or at least friendship. "It was like walking around with a time-bomb," says Cole.

Cole figured that a man who'd hide behind a false identity was probably more sensitive than others to the pain of rejection. His temperament would be more tightly wound, and his stress-response system would be the kind that "fires responses and fires 'em harder." His heart would beat faster, stress hormones would flood his body, his tissues would swell up, and white blood cells would swarm out to protect him against assault. If this state of inflamed arousal subsided quickly, it would be harmless. But if the man stayed on high alert for years at a time, then his blood pressure would rise, and the part of his immune system that fends off smaller, subtler threats, like viruses, would not do its job.

And he was right. The social experience that most reliably predicted whether an HIV-positive gay man would die quickly, Cole found, was whether or not he was in the closet. Closeted men infected with HIV died an average of two to three years earlier than out men. When Cole dosed AIDS-infected white blood cells with norepinephrine, a stress hormone, the virus replicated itself three to ten times faster than it did in non-dosed cells. Cole

mulled these results over for a long time, but couldn't understand why we would have been built in such a way that loneliness would interfere with our ability to fend off disease: "Did God want us to die when we got stressed?"

THE ANSWER IS NO.

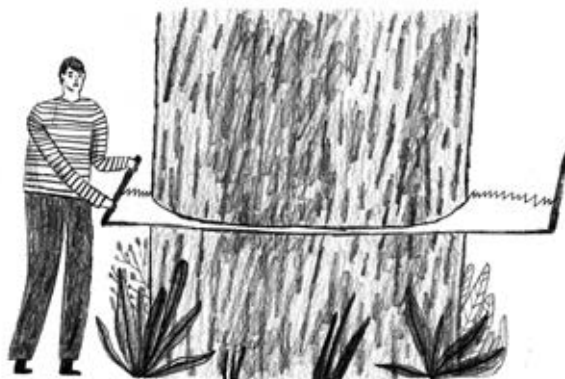
What He wanted is for us not to be alone. Or rather, natural selection favored people who needed people. Humans are vastly more social than most other mammals, even most primates, and to develop what neuroscientists call our social brain, we had to be good at cooperating. To raise our children, with their slow-maturing cerebral cortexes, we needed help from the tribe. To stoke the fires that cooked the meat that gave us the protein that sustained our calorically greedy gray matter, we had to organize night watches. But compared with our predators, we were small and weak. They came after us with swift strides. We ran in a comparative waddle.

**"The very fact that [loneliness] can affect the genes like that—it's huge," Suomi says. "It changes the way one thinks about development."**

So what would happen if one of us wandered off from her little band, or got kicked out of it because she'd slacked off or been caught stealing? She'd find herself alone on the savanna, a fine treat for a bunch of lions. She'd be exposed to attacks from marauders. If her nervous system went into overdrive at perceiving her isolation, well, that would have just sent her scurrying home. Cacioppo thinks we're hardwired to find life unpleasant outside the safety of trusted friends and family, just as we're pre-programmed to find certain foods disgusting. "Why do you think you are ten thousand times more sensitive to foods that are bitter than to foods that are sweet?" Cacioppo asked me. "Because bitter's dangerous!"

One of those alone-on-the-savanna moments in our modern lives occurs when we go off to college, because we have to make a whole new set of friends. Back in the mid-'90s, when Cacioppo was at Ohio State University (he is now at the University of Chicago), he and his colleagues sorted undergraduates into three groups—the non-lonely, the sort-of-sometimes lonely, and the lonely. The researchers then strapped blood-pressure cuffs, biosensors, and beepers onto the students. Nine times a day for seven days, they were beeped and had to fill out questionnaires. Cacioppo also kept them overnight in the university hospital with "nightcaps" on their heads, monitoring the length and quality of their rest. He took saliva samples to measure





levels of cortisol, a hormone produced under stress.

As expected, he found the students with bodily symptoms of distress (poor sleep, high cortisol) were not the ones with too few acquaintances, but the ones who were unhappy about not having made close friends. These students also had higher than normal vascular resistance, which is caused by the arteries narrowing as their tissue becomes inflamed. High vascular resistance contributes to high blood pressure; it makes the heart work harder to pump blood and wears out the blood vessels. If it goes on for a long time, it can morph into heart disease. While Cole discovered that loneliness could hasten death in sick people, Cacioppo showed that it could make well people sick—and through the same method: by putting the body in fight-or-flight mode.

A famous experiment helps explain why rejection makes us flinch. It was conducted more than a decade ago by Naomi Eisenberger, a social psychologist at UCLA, along with her colleagues. People were brought one-by-one into the lab to play a multiplayer online game called “Cyberball” that involved tossing a ball back and forth with two other “people,” who weren’t actually people at all, but a computer program. “They” played nicely with the real person for a while, then proceeded to ignore her, throwing the ball only to each other. Functional magnetic resonance imaging scans showed that the experience of being snubbed lit up a part of the subjects’ brains (the dorsal anterior cingulate cortex) that also lights up when the body feels physical pain.

I asked Eisenberger why, if the same part of our brain processes social insult and bodily injury, we don’t confuse the two. She explained that physical harm simultaneously lights up another neural region as well, one whose job is to locate the ache—on an arm or leg, inside the body, and so on. What the dorsal anterior cingulate cortex registers is the *emotional* fact that pain is distressing, be it social or physical. She calls this the “affective component” of pain. In operations performed to relieve chronic pain, doctors have lesioned, or disabled, the dorsal anterior cingulate cortex. After the surgery, the patients report that they can still sense where the trouble comes from, but, they add, it just doesn’t bother them anymore.

IT’S TEMPTING TO SAY THAT THE LONELY WERE BORN THAT way—it’d let the rest of us off the hook. And, as it turns out, we’d be about half right, because loneliness is about half heritable. A longitudinal study of more than 8,000 identical Dutch twins found that, if one twin reported feeling lonely and unloved, the other twin would report the same thing 48 percent of the time. This figure held so steady across the pairs of twins—young or old, male or female, notwithstanding different upbringings—that researchers concluded that it had to reflect genetic, not

environmental, influence. To understand what it means for a personality trait to have 48 percent heritability, consider that the influence of genes on a purely physical trait is 100 percent. Children get the color of their eyes from their parents, and that is that. But although genes may predispose children toward loneliness, they do not account for everything that makes them grow up lonely. Fifty-two percent of that comes from the world.

Evolutionary theory, which has a story for everything, has a story to illustrate how the human species might benefit from wide variations in temperament. A group that included different personality types would be more likely to survive a radical change in social conditions than a group in which everyone was exactly alike. Imagine that, after years in which a group had lived in peace, an army of strangers suddenly appeared on the horizon. The tribe in which some men stayed behind while the rest headed off on a month-long hunting expedition (the stay-at-homes may have been less adventurous, or they may just have been loners) had a better chance of repelling the invaders, or at least of saving the children, than the tribe whose men had all enthusiastically wandered off, confident that everything would be fine back home.

And yet loneliness is made as well as given, and at a very early age. Deprive us of the attention of a loving, reliable parent, and, if nothing happens to make up for that lack, we’ll tend toward loneliness for the rest of our lives. Not only that, but our loneliness will probably make us moody, self-doubting, angry, pessimistic, shy, and hypersensitive to criticism. Recently, it has become clear that some of these problems reflect how our brains are shaped from our first moments of life.

Proof that the early brain is molded by love comes, in part, from another notorious natural experiment: the abandonment of tens of thousands of Romanian orphans born during the regime of Communist dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu, who had banned birth control. A great deal has been written about the heartbreaking emotional and educational difficulties of these children, who grew up 20 to a nurse in Dickensian orphanages. In the age of the brain scan, we now know that those institutionalized children’s brains developed less “gray matter”—that is, fewer of the neurons that make up the bulk of the brain—and that, if those children never went on to be adopted, they’d sprout less “white matter,” too. White matter helps send signals from one part of the brain to another; think of it as the mind’s internal Internet. In the orphans’ case, the amygdala and the prefrontal cortex—which are involved in memory, emotions, decision-making, and social interaction—just weren’t connecting.

There’s a limit to how much we can poke around inside lonely humans, for obvious reasons. That’s why a great deal of research on the biological effects of a lonely childhood involves monkeys.



Last year, I visited a monkey lab in the rolling farmland of rural Maryland run by a burly and affable psychologist-turned-primatologist named Steve Suomi. Suomi conducts his experiments on rhesus macaques, adorable little creatures sometimes called a “weed species,” because they, like humans, thrive in most environments they’re thrown into.

Suomi is building on research begun by his teacher and mentor, Harry Harlow, a psychologist at the University of Wisconsin notorious for experiments in the ’50s and ’60s. Harlow subjected newborn rhesus macaques to appalling isolation—months spent in cages in the company only of “surrogate mothers” made of wire with cartoonish monkey heads and bottles attached. Luckier monkeys had that and cloth-covered versions of the same thing to cuddle. (It is remarkable what a soft cloth can do to calm an anxious baby monkey down.) In the most extreme cases, the babies languished alone at the bottom of a V-shaped steel container. Cruel as these experiments were, Harlow proved that the absence of mothering destroyed the monkeys’ ability to mingle with other monkeys, though the “cloth mother” could mitigate the worst effects of isolation. Years of monkey therapy were required to integrate them into the troop. Harlow’s insights were not well received. Behaviorists, who reigned in U.S. psychology departments, held a blank-slate view of animal and human behavior. They scoffed at the notion that baby monkeys could be hard-wired for love, or at least for a certain quality of touch.

Times have changed, and Harlow’s conviction that nature demands nurture is now the common view. (Changing laws also mean that Suomi would have a harder time getting away with such experiments, which he’s not inclined to do anyway.) What Suomi has that Harlow did not have is technology. By shipping off monkey tissue to laboratories, such as Steve Cole’s, that have machines capable of seeing which genes are turned on and which are turned off, Suomi can show that loneliness transforms the brain and body. He can match the behavior of the lonely monkeys as they grow—what they act like, where they rank in dominance hierarchies when they’re introduced into a troop, whether they ever manage to reproduce—with the activity of genes that affect their brains and immune systems.

Suomi raises his monkeys in three groups, one group confined entirely to the company of peers (a chaotic, *Lord of the Flies* kind of childhood); another group left alone with terry-cloth mother-surrogates, except when released for a couple of hours a day to scamper with fellow babies; and the third raised by their mothers. What he found is that, in monkeys separated from their mothers in the first four months of life, some important immunity-related genes show a different pattern of expression. Among these were genes that help make the protein that inflames tissue and genes that tell the body to ward off viruses and other microbes.

Suomi was also excited about results coming in from peer-raised monkeys’ brain tissue: Thousands of little changes in genetic activity had been detected in their prefrontal cortexes. This region is sometimes called the “CEO” of the brain; it restrains violent impulses and inappropriate behavior. (In humans, faulty wiring in the prefrontal cortex has been associated with schizophrenia and ADHD.) Some of the aberrations were on genes that direct growth of the brain; modifications of those were bound to result in altered neural architecture. These findings eerily echoed the Romanian orphans’ brain scans and suggested that the lonely monkeys were going to be weirder than the others.

“The very fact that something outside the organism can affect the genes like that—it’s huge,” Suomi says. “It changes the way one thinks about development.” I didn’t need genetics, though, to see how defective the peer-raised monkeys’ development had been. Suomi took me outside to watch them. They huddled in nervous groups at the back of the cage, holding tight to each another. Sometimes, he said, they invite aggression by cowering; at other times, they fail to recognize and kowtow to the alpha monkeys, so they get picked on even more. The most perturbed monkeys might rock, clutch at themselves, and pull out their own hair, looking for all the world like children with severe autism.

Suomi added that good foster care could greatly improve the troubled macaques’ lives. He pointed out some who had been given over to foster grandmothers. Not only did they act more monkey-like, but, he told me, about half of their genetic deviations had vanished, too.

## Emotional isolation is ranked as high a risk factor for mortality as smoking.

IF WE NOW KNOW THAT LONELINESS, A SOCIAL EMOTION, CAN reach into our bodies and rearrange our cells and genes, what should we do about it? We should change the way we think about health. James Heckman, a Nobel Prize-winning economist at the University of Chicago who tabulates the costs of early childhood deprivation, speaks bitterly of “silos” in health policy, meaning that we see crime and low educational achievement as distinct from medical problems like obesity or heart disease. As far as he’s concerned, these are, in too many cases, symptoms of the same social disorder: the failure to help families raise their children. Heckman believes that the life of a child at the lower end of the U.S. socioeconomic spectrum is starting to look more like the life of one of Suomi’s lonely macaques. As nearly half of all marriages continue to end in divorce, as marriage itself floats further out of reach for the undereducated and financially strapped, childhood has become a more solitary and chaotic experience. Single mothers don’t





have a lot of time to spend with their children, nor, in most cases, money for emotionally enriching social activities.

“As inequality has increased, childhood inequality has increased,” Heckman said, “So has inequality of parenting.” For the first time in 30 years, mental health disabilities such as ADHD outrank physical ones among American children. Heckman doesn’t think that’s only because parents seek out attention-deficit diagnoses when their children don’t come home with A’s. He thinks it’s also because emotional impoverishment embeds itself in the body. “Mothers matter,” he says, “and mothering is in short supply.”

Heckman has been analyzing data from two famous early-childhood intervention programs, the Abecedarian Project of the ’70s and the Perry Preschool project of the ’60s. Both have furnished ample evidence that, if you enroll very young children from poor families in programs that give both them *and* their parents an extra boost, then they grow up to be wealthier and healthier than their counterparts—less fat, less sick, better educated, and, for men, more likely to hold down a job. In the case of the Perry Preschool, Heckman estimated that each dollar invested yielded \$7 to \$12 in savings over the span of decades. One of the most effective economic and social policies, he told me, would be “supplementing the parenting environment of disadvantaged young children.”

If you can’t change society all at once, though, you can change it a few people at a time. Cacioppo and a colleague, Louise Hawkley, have been developing programs to teach lonely people to get along better with others. At one point, the psychologists thought of designing a mobile app, a sort of electronic nagging mother, to help people break bad social habits. (You’d check an item off the list, say, if you remembered to talk to anyone that day—a store clerk or a librarian.) But they didn’t get funding for the software, so now they’re focusing on a simpler and more low-tech fix. It’s a seminar with an instructor and a pointer and a screen in which students learn to read faces and interpret voices and also to stop making the assumption that lonely people seem prone to make, which is that every person they meet is judging or rebuffing them. What they’re learning, says Hawkley, is the art of “social cognition.” Her goal is to show people that they come at the world full of “assumptions about human nature, about social mores, that aren’t necessarily accurate.”

Cacioppo and Hawkley have been testing their social-cognition curriculum on Army bases, holding classes to hone soldiers’ social skills and teach platoon leaders to spot the lonely in their ranks and help them fit in better. The results aren’t in yet, U.S. Army psychologist Major Paul Lester told me, but he has been receiving reports that suggest that people who have gone through the training fall prey to post-traumatic stress disorder less often. Lester insisted that I add that the Army hadn’t agreed to spend \$50 million a year for this experiment *only* because

it’s worried about suicide and post-traumatic stress disorder—although if loneliness training brought down the number of suicidal and dysfunctional soldiers, so much the better. The Army sees the classes as essential training for coping with military life. The best fighting comes from soldiers who interact well with other soldiers, said Lester, and soldiers’ lives are full of social disruption—transfers from base to base and so on.

These are patch solutions, obviously, though it’s appealing to imagine a social-cognition program filtering down and replacing the vague platitudes usually taught to elementary- and middle-schoolers in their human growth and development classes. And it would completely transform a child’s world to have a teacher trained to identify the lonely kids in her classroom and to provide succor and support once she’d found them. Naomi Eisenberger pointed out to me that, while schools take physical pain very seriously, they usually trivialize social pain: “You cannot hit other students, but oftentimes, there are no rules about excluding another student,” she said.

Cole can imagine giving people medications to treat loneliness, particularly when it exacerbates chronic diseases such as diabetes and high blood pressure. These could be betablockers, which reduce the physical effects of stress; anti-inflammatory medicine; or even Tylenol—since physical and emotional pain overlap, it turns out that Tylenol can reduce the pain of heartbreak.

At a deeper level, though, loneliness research forces us to acknowledge our own extraordinary malleability in the face of social forces. This susceptibility is both terrifying and exhilarating. On the terrifying side is the unhappy fact that isolation, especially when it stems from the disenfranchisement of the underprivileged, creates a bodily limitation all too easily reproduced in each successive generation. Given that we have been scaling back the kinds of programs that could help people overcome such disadvantages and that many in Congress, mostly Republicans, have been trying to defund exactly the kind of behavioral science research that could yield even better programs, we have reason to be afraid. But there’s something awe-inspiring about our resilience, too. Put an orphan in foster care, and his brain will repair its missing connections. Teach a lonely person to respond to others without fear and paranoia, and over time, her body will make fewer stress hormones and get less sick from them. Care for a pet or start believing in a supernatural being and your score on the UCLA Loneliness Scale will go down. Even an act as simple as joining an athletic team or a church can lead to what Cole calls “molecular remodeling.” “One message I take away from this is, ‘Hey, it’s not just early life that counts,’” he says. “We have to choose our life well.” ●

*Judith Shulevitz is the science editor of THE NEW REPUBLIC.*

MY OBAMA

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# THE FIVE SCENARIO REFORM ADVOCAT

BY JONATHAN COHN

Conservatives are talking about the implementation of Obamacare in the same thoughtful way they talked about its enactment—that is, as an impending apocalypse. It won't be. Most Americans get insurance through employers, Medicare, and Medicaid, and that will still be the case on January 1, when Obamacare's big provisions take effect. But the minority who buy insurance on their own or have no insurance will see tremendous changes. And you don't have to be Rush Limbaugh to have real concerns about how those changes will play out.

The Affordable Care Act (ACA) is one of the most complex laws ever enacted—partly because its sponsors had to make so many convoluted compromises. Obamacare is not just a federal project. States will be in charge of many crucial functions, just as conservatives wanted. But not all their officials are up to the task. And even officials in places where implementation is going well (California, Oregon, Washington, Maryland, Connecticut, and Vermont get the best reviews) are bracing for a rough start.

The administration expects the inevitable glitches, but nothing like a meltdown. It's armed with a host of contingency plans. But the truth is, there's no way to know for sure how well Obamacare will work at first. I wanted to sort out the hysteria from the well-founded fears, the bad-faith arguments from the legitimate worries, so I talked to people on the front lines—federal officials, state officials, insurance industry representatives, advocates, and organizers.

HERE ARE THE THINGS THAT REALLY COULD GO WRONG:



# OBAMACARE

# IS IT

# WORKING THAT KEEP THIS SYSTEM UP AT NIGHT.

1

## NOT ENOUGH HEALTHY PEOPLE WILL SIGN UP

OBAMACARE'S SUCCESS DEPENDS heavily on the new health care exchanges, where anyone without employer-sponsored insurance can buy coverage, no matter what medical problems they have. But if the right kinds of people don't sign up, the exchanges won't function properly.

Health insurance needs lots of healthy people to sign up for coverage. Their premiums cover the big bills for the relatively small number of sick people. So if the exchanges don't enroll enough young, healthy people, insurers will have to raise everyone's premiums. In the worst case, this could create what actuaries call a "death spiral": Rising premiums prompt people to drop out, causing premiums to increase even more.

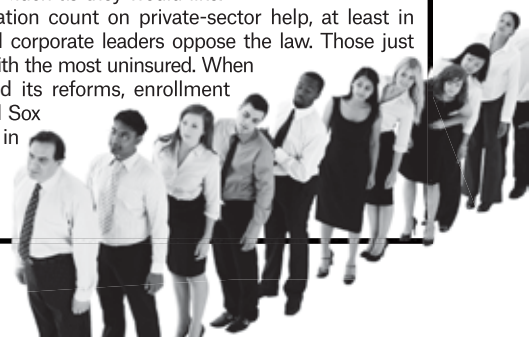
To encourage participation, Obamacare offers generous income-based subsidies. If you don't purchase insurance, you'll be hit with a small financial penalty. Still, convincing healthy people to pay for insurance isn't easy, even when it's cheap. In the first year of the Children's Health Insurance Program, in 1997, less than a million children signed up—a fraction of the eligible population. Since then, that number has increased to around eight million. But Obamacare is under far more pressure to prove itself early.

Administration officials say they've developed a sophisticated strategy

for persuading young consumers, partly by applying the data-analysis techniques developed during the presidential campaign. "If there's one thing we know how to do," says a senior administration official, "it's reach young people." They're also conducting person-to-person outreach through social media, churches, unions, and other groups.

But they're doing this on a tight budget. The Bush administration spent \$1.5 billion on outreach for the Medicare drug benefit. The Obama administration gets substantially lower funding to promote a more ambitious law to a less receptive population: Young people aren't nearly as desperate for health insurance as seniors were for assistance with prescriptions. So far, congressional Republicans have refused requests for more funding. Nonprofit organizations are trying to fill the gap, but they may not be able to do as much as they would like.

Nor can the administration count on private-sector help, at least in states where political and corporate leaders oppose the law. Those just happen to be the states with the most uninsured. When Massachusetts introduced its reforms, enrollment became a civic cause; Red Sox players touted its benefits in TV ads. Nobody expects the Dallas Cowboys to do the same.



## 2

## THE COMPUTERS WON'T WORK

OBAMACARE SUPPORTERS LIKE to say that buying insurance online from the exchanges will be as simple as arranging travel on Expedia or Travelocity. This is

highly optimistic. The health care law requires a vast electronic infrastructure to be created from scratch, so that every state has its own website. Some states are building their own; others are letting the federal government do it. The sites are supposed to go online on October 1, and it'll be no small accomplishment if they work at all.

Consider what the new system has to do. First, it determines whether you're eligible for Medicaid or for subsidized private insurance. If it's the latter, it will figure out what subsidies, if any, you qualify for. To do that, it must verify your identity, residency, and income, which means communicating with the Social Security Administration, Homeland Security Department, and Internal Revenue Service. You'll be presented with insurance choices, based on a separate set of communications with the carriers. Finally, the system will calculate your premium, taking the subsidies into account.

Ensuring all the different entities communicate seamlessly is a headache-inducing task—especially when some of the systems are old

and idiosyncratic. Federal officials are particularly nervous about states that have asked Washington to run their exchanges but insist on determining Medicaid eligibility themselves. Many states already make Medicaid enrollment arduous. Under Obamacare, they could make it cumbersome to connect to Medicaid websites or force applicants to wait many weeks before hearing whether they qualify. On top of all this, the whole online operation has to run with ironclad security, given the sensitive nature of the data involved.

Officials have reportedly been testing the systems extensively, both internally and with outside troubleshooters. Despite stories of missed deadlines, the administration is confident the federal IT will function as planned. But among implementers, there's plenty of angst. "Everybody will breathe a sigh of relief when it's up and running," one Democratic state official told me. It's possible the websites will be a work in progress: The early versions could be rudimentary and, in the worst cases, officials would have to work around bugs until they can be fixed. Jon Kingsdale, who ran Massachusetts's exchange and has been advising the states, told me most exchange directors "expect a rocky start." But, he said: "Over time, they will learn, improve. October first is not the end, but just the start."

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# "IT'S NOT QUITE 'READY' IT'S CLOSE, ESPECIALLY AS COMPLEX AS THIS."

## 4

## RICK PERRY WILL SEEK REVENGE

EVEN IN PLACES where officials want to make Obamacare work, a smooth start isn't guaranteed. But a bigger worry is the states where leaders aren't interested in seeing

Obamacare succeed—or are actively trying to make it fail.

More than half the states still haven't agreed to expand their Medicaid programs, potentially leaving millions without insurance. And there are other ways hostile officials can mire the law in chaos and confusion. They can use their power over Medicaid to halt enrollment or decline to help resolve problems with insurers. (Good luck getting any help in Texas, where Governor Rick Perry has called Obamacare a violation of "our Constitution and our founding principles.")

When it comes to Medicaid, all but the most hardened state-level adversaries should come around eventually. The federal government covers nearly the entire cost of the expansion, money most states won't refuse. But at the federal level, opposition may prove implacable.

Complex legislation always has problems—drafting errors or issues the architects didn't anticipate. The ACA is based on the Senate version of the

bill, written with less technical precision because the effort to pass it was so difficult. In such situations, Congress usually addresses snags with narrow, uncontroversial measures. "In the real world, when we implement a law, we learn and we adapt," says Drew Altman, president of the Kaiser Family Foundation. "It's not quite 'ready, fire, aim,' but it's close, especially for something as complex as this."

So far, however, congressional Republicans are resisting even simple fixes. When a question arose over when employers will be responsible for providing coverage for employees, the criteria for calculating employee income was unclear. Congress could have easily settled the matter—but didn't. The administration was forced to reduce employer responsibility for coverage—a decision that will potentially leave a few hundred thousand people uninsured.

The law doesn't state explicitly that the federal government can offer tax credits when it's running a state's exchange—although it's obvious that's what the authors intended. Again, Congress could fix this with a few lines attached to any bill. But it won't—enabling conservatives to file a federal lawsuit that could block the government from subsidizing coverage in states that aren't setting up their own exchanges.



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## INSURANCE COMPANIES WILL ACT LIKE INSURANCE COMPANIES

IT'S NOT EXACTLY comforting that Obamacare may need the good faith of insurers—the one group of health companies that resisted the law all along. The biggest

fear is that insurers will jack up premiums, scaring consumers away.

Right now, insurers selling to individuals can make coverage very cheap, if they only offer such policies to relatively healthy people and don't offer very generous benefits to anybody. Obamacare outlaws both practices. Insurance companies, worried that they'll need to pay out more to hospitals and doctors, are going to raise premiums.

Most people buying on the exchanges won't notice this. If your income is at or below four times the poverty line (about \$94,000 for a family of four), the subsidies limit what you'll pay for a standard plan, no matter how high the premiums. But increased premiums would affect people who don't qualify for subsidies, as well as small businesses that buy group plans. (Subsidies for businesses are lower than for individuals.) They would also drive up the overall cost of the law to the government, since higher subsidies would be needed to cover the rising premiums.

A lot of this depends on how insurers behave. Many people working on implementation worry that they will simply seize the opportunity to

raise premiums, regardless of whether it's necessary. Maryland's insurance commissioner has hinted that she will reject a rate hike averaging 25 percent proposed by CareFirst. But officials in many states lack that power. Then there's the danger that insurers will simply refuse to participate in the exchanges: Aetna corporate officers have told investors that the company might limit offerings or pull out of exchanges if they can't get sufficiently high premium increases.

Administration officials say they expect strong competition. And it's worth noting that the Massachusetts exchange, which most closely resembles the one the federal government is setting up, has generally only offered a handful of plans, and yet premiums have remained low. (The limited choice has also arguably been easier for consumers to navigate.) But Massachusetts gives officials power to aggressively negotiate bids, in order to drive down prices and encourage competition. In many states, exchanges will lack that authority. Jay Angoff, a former insurance commissioner from Missouri who worked on Obamacare, says it's possible that what develops is "a government-compelled, taxpayer-subsidized market, but most of the inefficiencies of the [current] system are still there." For insurers, that'd be the best of all worlds.

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# Y, FIRE, AIM,' BUT Y FOR SOMETHING "



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## OBAMA WILL GET SMACKED NO MATTER WHAT

HERE ARE A FEW predictions of things that will happen during the first year of Obamacare: Many people will experience long waits before being able to see a doctor.

Insurance companies will refuse to cover important treatments that doctors say are necessary. Employers will balk at the rising cost of providing care to their employees. These predictions are certain to come true—because they come true every year. And while Obamacare was designed to address some of these problems, they won't all vanish overnight.

Perhaps my biggest fear about Obamacare is that the inevitable, predictable troubles become full-blown political firestorms, undermining the entire system. The national Republican leadership doesn't share the goal of universal health care coverage and neither do Rush Limbaugh or the pundits on Fox. They've made it clear they want to get rid of the entire ACA and replace it with nothing at all. You can expect these forces to exploit even the slightest sign of trouble—even problems in the general realm of health that don't actually have anything to do with Obamacare. "[The administration] own[s] the health care system," says Mark McClellan, the former administrator of Medicare and Medicaid, who oversaw implementation of Bush's prescription drug benefit. "And ... they only get the things that go wrong."

This could have a snowball effect. Insurers could get skittish about participating in the exchanges and stop offering plans. Wavering state officials might come to the conclusion that it's too politically risky to help federal officials to fix the system and instead let the problems pile up. Individual consumers might decide that it's too expensive to purchase insurance on the exchanges and opt to simply pay the penalty instead. That's the true nightmare scenario—that the predictions of doom become self-fulfilling.

That's why expectations are so important. Starting in January, millions of people will get the kind of affordable, comprehensive, and stable insurance they never could before. This may be quicker to happen in some states than others—and the experience may not always be easy. But it will certainly be an improvement on the current state of affairs. And even those who anticipate difficulties also expect that things will get better over time. "I have described my expectations for 2014 as 'bumpy,'" says economist Gail Wilensky, who was in charge of Medicare and Medicaid under President George H.W. Bush, "but something I assume the country will muddle through." ●

*Jonathan Cohn is a senior editor at THE NEW REPUBLIC.*

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# The Blowtorch

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How Michelle Rhee misled education reform.

By Nicholas Lemann

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THE OTHER DAY I PICKED UP A COPY OF *The Adventures of Augie March*. I hadn't remembered that Saul Bellow, writing in the early 1950s, when he was not yet forty, about Chicago in the 1920s, had been in full sympathy with the urban poor, as he definitely was not later in his career. There is a hilarious bit in the early pages in which Grandma Lausch, the March family's boarder and a master at avoiding bills, including the rent she owes the Marches, expertly intimidates Lubin, the neighborhood welfare caseworker who comes for regular home visits wearing an ill-fitting suit: "He had a harassed patience with her of 'deliver me from such clients,' though he tried to appear master of the situation."

Today's education-reform movement has something of the venerable dynamic of American social improvement about it. We no longer have caseworkers who inspect poor people's apartments in person, but we definitely have members of the same ethnic group as the very poor, doing better but not all that much better than their clients, charged with the often exasperating job of performing the functions of betterment: the mainly black teachers at all-black, all-poor public schools, for example. Another category of character in the drama, often just offstage, comprises the well-meaning patricians who designed the system—social work and settlement houses a century ago, charter schools and accountability regimes today—who feel some mixture of moral outrage about "conditions," swelling pride in the selflessness of their intentions, and frustration over being so often unappreciated by the objects of their largesse.

Like all significant causes, education reform bears the mark of its time. These days

we trust markets and mistrust institutions, especially of the state, so education reform proposes to take apart the main structures of schooling in America—a network of districted public schools and a unionized teaching corps. It proposes, as an urgently necessary national project, to replace them with a school system governed by metrics, choice, incentive compensation, and personnel reductions. It is roughly the same prescription that activist investors would apply to an industrial corporation of the same vintage as the education system. And this is no coincidence: many of the leaders of education reform *are* activist investors. The proselytizing and structure-building proclivities of the social reformers of a century ago are nowhere to be seen in education reform.

In the late aughts, Michelle Rhee, during her brief run as chancellor of the Washington, D.C. school system, became the face of the education-reform movement: a young, tough, impassioned, camera-ready crusader who encapsulated the appeal of the movement for those who find it appealing, and its horrors for those who don't. As in the case of Lubin and Grandma Lausch, the people she was in business to help did not appreciate her as much as they were supposed to. As Rhee freely acknowledges in her memoir and manifesto, the activities that she thought of as being on behalf of poor black people in Washington caused her boss, Mayor Adrian Fenty, to be unseated by Washington's black voters, barely three years into her term. That meant she lost her job, too. Rhee regrouped and founded a national organization called StudentsFirst, which lobbies for school reform in state legislatures. Her book is meant more to advertise the new phase of her career than to revisit the old one.

Rhee was born in 1969 and grew up mainly in Toledo, the child of Korean immigrants; by her account, she got her social concern from her father and her run-you-over personality from her mother. She describes a year she spent back in Korea as a child, in

a large classroom in which every student was numerically ranked against the others every day, as a season in paradise, because it taught her "that it was not only okay but essential to compete." (Later on she grouses that her daughters have too many soccer medals and trophies even though "they suck at soccer," which is an example of the way in which "we've gone soft as a nation.") After college she joined Teach for America, which placed her in an inner-city elementary school in Baltimore, and then she enrolled in the Kennedy School at Harvard. Rhee makes a big impression on people. One of them was Wendy Kopp, the founder of Teach for America, who asked her to start a new organization that would supply school districts with new teachers in numbers beyond what Teach for America itself (whose magic in the elite universities where it recruits comes from its being highly selective) could generate. Rhee called that organization the New Teacher Project.

In her account of her years in Teach for America, the lesson Rhee wants to impart is that success in the classroom takes time to achieve and depends mainly on discipline and toughness. In her first year she failed miserably: she was a nervous wreck who couldn't control her classroom. But on the first day of her second year, she writes, she took a new approach: "I wore my game face. No smiles, no joy; I was all thin lips and flinty glares." She describes making her students line up and walk into the classroom four times, until they had achieved a state of perfect order. "My mistake the first year was trying to be warm and friendly with the students, thinking that my kids needed love and compassion. What I knew going into my second year was that what my children needed and craved was rigid structure, certainty, and stability." Once we get past the glorification of the drill-sergeant approach to life, which with Rhee always takes a while, we learn that it also helped that she was guided by other teachers into using different and more effective (more



hard-ass and less progressive, naturally) reading and math curricula, and mastering the best ways to use them.

BUT AS SOON AS SHE BECOMES HEAD OF an organization, and a voice in public debates, and (perhaps most importantly) a regular fund-raiser among the very rich and their foundations, Rhee's story begins to change into one in which everything wrong with public education is attributable to the malign influence of the teachers' unions. Rhee is a major self-dramatizer. As naturally appealing to her as is the idea that more order, structure, discipline, and competition is the answer to all problems, even more appealing is the picture of herself as a righteously angry and fearless crusader who has the guts to stand up to entrenched power. She is always the little guy, and whoever she is fighting is always rich, powerful, and elite—and if, as her life progresses, her posse becomes Oprah Winfrey, Theodore Forstmann, and the Gates Foundation lined up against beleaguered school superintendents and presidents of union chapters, the irony of that situation has no tonal effect on her narrative. Again and again she gives us scenes of herself being warned that she cannot do what is plainly the right thing, because it is too risky, too difficult, too threatening to the unions, too likely to bring on horrific and unfair personal attacks—but the way she's made, there's nothing she can do but ignore the warnings and plow valiantly ahead.

Rhee's confrontations, especially with Randi Weingarten, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, brought her to the attention of new patrons, chief among them Joel Klein, then the New York schools chancellor. When Fenty was elected mayor of Washington, he decided that he needed his own Joel Klein, and Klein, among others, steered him to Rhee. As Rhee observes, Washington in the 1950s became the first black-majority American city, but on Fenty's watch it was on its way to becoming white-majority again, as middle-class blacks decamped to the suburbs and middle-class whites moved back into the city. This meant that white public schools were overcrowded and many black public schools were half-empty. But the black schools were often just about all their neighborhoods had left, as institutions and as employers, so they engendered fierce loyalty.

Rhee is not one for exquisite sensitivity. She closed schools, fired teachers, and

(though she assures us that "I had never sought the limelight") became famous. She was on the covers of *Time* (holding a broom) and *Newsweek*, and was one of the stars of *Waiting for Superman*. It is usually a fundamental rule of politics that a department head isn't supposed to do anything to make her boss unpopular or to upstage him. Rhee did not follow this rule. She has a special scorn for "politics" and often praises Fenty for not considering it when making decisions, but this is both un-self-aware (Rhee's policies were very good politics in white Washington) and impractical. We live in a democracy, so officials have to contend with public opinion and with groups organized to promote their own interests. Many American politicians over the last generation, including all of the last five presidents, have been able to push education policies in the same realm as Rhee's in a way that kept their coalitions together. *That* is what Rhee and Fenty were unusually bad at doing, and Rhee's insistence that "politics" is a terrible thing that only her opponents practice was surely a big part of the reason why.

STUDENTSFIRST, RHEE'S POST-WASHINGTON organization, lobbies state legislatures around the country to pass education-reform measures. Although it began in a series of meetings in Washington among the influential friends Rhee had made as chancellor—the names she drops in telling of its founding include Rahm Emanuel, Eli Broad, the Aspen Institute, the Hoover Institution, and McKinsey, and her initial requests for philanthropic funding are at the \$100 million level—she insists that it is a grassroots organization, "a movement of everyday people." What this really means is that StudentsFirst has used the latest top-of-the-line Internet-marketing technology to generate a notional membership of more than a million. They do not pay dues and they are not organized into local chapters that hold regular meetings, but when there is an important vote in a state capitol, StudentsFirst can generate turnout to demonstrate that it is engaged in a grand battle between powerless parents and rich unions.

StudentsFirst represents the next step in the journey Rhee has been taking all along. All policy and no operations, it frames education reform exclusively in anti-union terms, and ramps up the rhetoric even higher than it was during Rhee's chancellorship in Washington. ("No more mediocrity. It's

killing us.") Rhee actually does know what life is like in a public school, but she either openly or implicitly removes from the discussion of improving schools any issue that cannot be addressed by twisting the dial of educational labor-management relations in the direction of management. She gives us little or no discussion of pedagogical technique, a hot research topic these days, or of curriculum, another hot topic owing to the advent of the Common Core standards, or of funding levels, or class size, or teacher training, or surrounding schools with social services (which is the secret sauce of Geoffrey Canada's Harlem Children's Zone), or of the burden placed on the system by the expensive growth of special-education programs.

Rhee simply isn't interested in reasoning forward from evidence to conclusions: conclusions are where she starts, which means that her book cannot be trusted as an analysis of what is wrong with public schools, when and why it went wrong, and what might improve the situation. The only topics worth discussing for Rhee are abolishing teacher tenure, establishing charter schools, and imposing pay-for-performance regimes based on student test scores. We are asked to understand these measures as the only possible means of addressing a crisis of decline that is existentially threatening the United States as a nation and denying civil rights to poor black people.

Some of the specific causes of Rhee's early career, such as giving principals the right to accept or reject teachers being transferred into their schools, or not requiring that layoffs be made solely on the basis of seniority, are perfectly reasonable. The mystery of the education-reform movement is why it insists on such a narrow and melodramatic frame for the discussion. You'd never know from most education-reform discourse that anybody before the current movement came along ever cared about the quality of public education. (Remember that the reason both Bill Clinton and George W. Bush became president was that, as governors, they successfully established teacher-accountability regimes that were accomplished in ways that got them reelected and established them as plausible national figures. Rhee treats Clinton as someone who doesn't have the guts to embrace the cause, and doesn't even mention Bush.) You'd never know that unionization and school quality are consistent in most of the country (including Washington's



affluent Ward 3) and the world. You'd never know that the research results on charter schools are decidedly mixed. You'd never know that empowered and generally anti-union parents' and employers' organizations have been around for decades. (Bush's education secretary, Margaret Spellings, was once an official of the Texas Association of School Boards.)

Surely one reason that the education-reform movement comports itself in this strident and limited manner is that it depends so heavily on the largesse of people who are used to getting their way and to whom the movement's core arguments have a powerful face validity. Only a tiny percentage of American children attend the kind of expensive, non-sectarian private schools where many of the elite send their children. It is worth noting that these schools generally avoid giving their students the standardized achievement tests that state education departments require, making the results public, and paying teachers on the basis of the scores, and that they almost never claim to be creating hyper-competitive, commercial-skills-purveying

environments for their students. Sidwell Friends, of presidential-daughter fame, says it offers "a rich and rigorous interdisciplinary curriculum designed to stimulate creative inquiry, intellectual achievement and independent thinking in a world increasingly without borders." That doesn't sound like it would cut much ice with Michelle Rhee.

But if the world of the more than fifty million Americans who attend or work in public schools is terra incognita to you, then the narrative of a system caught in a death spiral unless something is done right now will be appealing, and the reform movement's blowtorch language of moral urgency will feel like an unavoidable and principled choice, given the circumstances. It is a measure of the larger social and economic chasm that has opened in the United States over the last generation that the movement has so little ability to establish a civil interaction with public-school teachers, a group made up of millions of people mainly from blue-collar backgrounds, some of whose leadership (such as Albert Shanker, Randi Weingarten's mentor) was working aggressively and decades ago on the issues that concern education reformers now. The quasi-essentialist idea that teachers are either "great" or should be fired, which pervades

Rhee's book and the movement generally, may be emotionally satisfying, but it utterly fails to capture what would really help in an enormous system. Making most good teachers better, in the manner of Rhee when she was teaching, would be far more useful than focusing exclusively on the tails of the bell curve.

Rhee recounts a crucial moment in her rise, during the early days of the New Teachers Project (TNTP), when, to inspire her staff, she told them the story of a brave group of Korean fighters against the Japanese occupation: "In order to prove their loyalty, they each bit off the top of their pinkie and wrote their name in blood on a banner. When TNTP was entering into a new three-year strategic plan I told the senior management team they all had to bite off their pinkies and sign up for three years." One flaw Rhee does not have is inauthenticity: she really is the character she plays on television and in the movies. The troubling question is why she has become what the education-reform movement is looking for in a standard bearer. ●

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# The Ear Hearing What the Eye Sees

The future of opera and its past.

By G. W. Bowersock



Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London

# W

WESTERN CULTURE HAS PRODUCED nothing quite like opera among its privileged art forms. It uniquely combines theater, narrative, music, and the human

voice in extravagant and paradoxical ways. Its plots are often absurd, and its texts often unintelligible when sung. Producing an opera can be cripplingly expensive. But for its devotees, opera provides an aesthetic and emotional experience unlike any other. It emerged from Baroque musical theater in the seventeenth century and grew in popularity in the eighteenth, when human capons, castrated as boys to preserve

their angelic voices, became the pop stars of their time. Opera plots range across classical mythology and the historical past, both near and remote, as well as non-European cultures seen with European eyes. Stage machinery has been a major attraction from the beginning, with special effects that included erupting volcanoes (in Auber's *La Muette de Portici*) and scenery that moved almost cinematically (during



the transformation music of Bayreuth's first *Parsifal*). This old tradition of thrilling invention continues today with the help of complex machines, computers, and digitalization. The controversial *Ring* cycle by Robert Lepage at the Metropolitan Opera is only the latest manifestation of this. The extravagance of opera is, at least for those who love it, magical, and the magic is arguably even more musical than scenic.

Yet the composers who have created this musical magic accomplish what they do by virtue of technical skills that they have acquired over a long period of apprenticeship. Even if an operatic text (the libretto) can survive on its literary merits, however absurd or banal the plot, there would be no opera without music, and music has to be learned, either quickly in the case of geniuses such as Mozart or Mendelssohn, or over time through study, experience, and experiment. Berlioz, whose instrument was the guitar, brilliantly re-invented himself as he became more sophisticated.

WRITING MUSIC THAT COMPLEMENTS AND illuminates a previously prepared text takes its inspiration from the plot, however dreary or inept, and the conjunction of plot, text, and music must inevitably lie at the core of any history of opera. Roger Parker and Carolyn Abbate, who are by no means the first to have undertaken such a history, come to the task with formidable credentials. Parker is a recognized authority on the operas of Verdi and has contributed a magisterial article on his work to *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*. He is currently involved in new editions of the operas of Donizetti, in addition to a non-operatic project on music in nineteenth-century London. Carolyn Abbate is the author of *Unsung Voices*, one of the truly seminal books on opera in recent decades. Beginning with Edward Cone's concept of the composer's voice, this work attempted to distinguish the voices of singers from other voices of a more literary kind that emanate within an opera from the composer or the plot, much as we might speak of a poet's voice. Abbate taught us to separate an operatic character into the character in the plot and the character who actually sings. She devised such terminology as the "plot-Brünnhilde" and the "voice-Brünnhilde," and the recurrence of such terminology in this new history of opera is obviously indebted to Abbate but endorsed by Parker, whom she already thanked for his help in her book.

Parker and Abbate have written, as one would have expected of them, a highly idiosyncratic and personal history of opera. They claim to have collaborated so closely with one another as to construct a seamless whole for which both take responsibility. Although I imagine I can hear their separate "voices" from time to time, their book overall has a brio, insouciance, and even irreverence that are very much their own and distinguish it from all previous histories of the genre. The book is always lively and readable, full of opinionated but (except at the end) benevolent judgments, and equipped with three delightful gatherings of plates that display, along with a few movie stills and caricatures, some of the more memorable productions and artists of the past.

This is no solemn march through the centuries with dates, composers, librettists, premières, singers, and conductors put on show. The renunciation of conventional scholarly apparatus—and prose—in search of a broad audience has led the authors also to renounce musical examples. The complete absence of any musical illustrations is most unusual in a book that purports to be a history of a musical genre. The authors claim, perhaps a little defensively, that this was their idea, not the publisher's. But a history of opera without musical examples is rather like a history of art without images. Even Kobbé's guide to opera, on which generations of opera-lovers have depended, includes musical examples in the form of piano reductions, which could easily be picked out on a piano at home.

Although not every opera enthusiast can read music, many can do so, at least in a rudimentary way, and it is patronizing to assume that a few staves here and there would put readers off. But Parker and Abbate prefer, as they explain at the beginning, to concentrate on performances of opera, not so much over historical time but as they have themselves experienced and remembered them. "Scores," they maintain, "encourage the idea of opera as a text rather than as an event. Memory, on the other hand, goes back to an event—something heard out loud, possibly also seen on stage. Hence the musical descriptions in this book were written almost entirely on the basis of memory, whether in response to a recording, or—far more often—from the repositories of our personal operatic experiences." Yet, as they soon acknowledge, the operas of Meyerbeer deservedly loom prominently

in this history, even though his most influential works "are now very rarely heard." This is, of course, characteristic of the authors' openness and flexibility, but it calls into question their anti-musicological bias. They condemn previous work on opera for introducing harmonic and melodic detail, but without a technical mastery of harmony and counterpoint none of the composers who interest them could have written any notes worth hearing.

It is perhaps not surprising that Parker and Abbate proclaim their indebtedness to Joseph Kerman's classic work of over half a century ago, *Opera as Drama*. That book is best known today for its description of *Tosca* as a "shabby little shocker." So bracing an assessment of a beloved repertory staple set a new standard in critical candor, but anyone who knows the brilliant and wide-ranging musicological studies of Kerman will recognize that this throwaway phrase did not betoken any embarrassment in the face of scores. If Kerman was outspokenly adding a critical dimension that comes with viewing opera as drama, he certainly did not shy away from its music. Nor did Abbate in her *Unsung Voices*, with a rich store of musical examples that serve to render the book's audacious argument convincing. Similarly Roger Parker is an accomplished editor of Donizetti. One almost has the impression that these two scholars, whose profound knowledge of music is beyond question, fear that they will lose their readership if they flaunt what they actually know. Yet once in a while, they cannot contain themselves, and their observations on the notorious *Tristan* chord, with some sharp comments on the ambiguity of A natural and A flat, are well worth reading.

EVEN WITHOUT MUSICAL ILLUSTRATIONS Abbate and Parker repeatedly conjure up the musical and theatrical experience of opera listeners, and they manage to do this not merely by metaphorical descriptions of orchestral or vocal sounds ("thumping," "rumbling") but by reference to what is happening on the stage and to the libretto that is being sung. One of the great strengths of this history of opera is its constant attention to staging and text, both of which seem at times to serve as substitutes for musical examples. Rossini's final operatic masterpiece, *Guillaume Tell*, is given its due in the creation of French grand opera by stressing what the



Aida, Chorégies d'Orange, 2011

authors call a “frozen moment,” when the action and sound all but stop. In *Tell*, this is the episode of shooting the apple, introduced by the words addressed to Tell’s son, “*Sois immobile* [Be still],” followed by something close to immobility in the score during the high drama on the stage: “There is almost no music when Tell lifts his bow for the shot, only a single pitch from the tremolo strings.” This astonishing invention on the part of Rossini led to his famous quip in old age, “So I made music of the future without knowing it.”

The correlation of plot, staging, and sound in that frozen moment soon leads Abbate and Parker to an equally perceptive interpretation of the end of the opera, where again everything depends upon the ear hearing what the eye sees. As they rightly observe, the finale that brings *Guillaume Tell* to its close contains its greatest moment of pure visual splendor, the clearing of the skies to reveal a superb Alpine landscape. This revelation “is accompanied by music that aspires to translate the sublime scenic effect into sound, its grand musical gestures seeming to slow down the

very passing of time as man contemplates nature.” This is beautifully expressed, but here, if anywhere, we need a musical example to show the ever growing swirl of orchestral sound as the opera reaches its immensely satisfying resolution, both on the stage and in the music.

We are told that many opera historians complain when a production becomes “easy on the eye.” Abbate and Parker will have none of this. They tell their readers that “whenever opera becomes more visually oriented, ... the chance to feed the eye is also a chance for the ear to relax. This can be tremendously important, and composers (both French and others) have rarely been blind to its advantages.” The authors are thinking particularly of Meyerbeer, but what they say might equally be said of Wagner and Verdi. Yet the ears of most opera lovers probably do not relax when the fire blazes up around Brünnhilde at the end of *Die Walküre* or during the Triumphant Scene in *Aida*. Visual effects do indeed matter, but to augment, not to relieve, what the music contributes. The creation of these effects through technology

has always been part of opera production, from Baroque marvels on stage down to the creaky machine in the Met’s *Ring* cycle, which, for all its problems, can sometimes deliver a spine-tingling impact.

No one knows this better than John Adams, an opera composer whose sure musical instincts have combined with creative innovation in a series of outstanding works (*Nixon in China*, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, *Doctor Atomic*). In *The New York Times Book Review*, he recently addressed this issue. “There is nothing shockingly modern,” he wrote, “about the dynamic between artistic creation and technological innovation, be it an intellectual discovery like perspective or a new piece of hardware like the movie camera or the electric guitar. Art and technology have always moved hand in hand.” What matters is not the technology itself, but what it can express beyond entertainment and spectacle. That, for Adams, reaching back into ancient aesthetic language, is “the sublime.” An aperçu of such simplicity and clarity, coming from an accomplished practitioner of the art of opera, makes

one recognize that Abbate and Parker were closer to the mark in their account of the finale of *Guillaume Tell*, where they actually use the word “sublime,” than in their suggestion that the ear relaxes when the eye is nourished.

ABBATE AND PARKER RETURN explicitly to the connection between libretto and music when they reach the early twentieth century. They make a persuasive case that both Debussy and Richard Strauss altered their musical styles because of a deliberate choice to make operas out of highly adventurous, not to say controversial, texts. Debussy, who was struggling to liberate himself from the intoxicating and almost irresistible influence of Wagner at a time when French *wagnérisme* was at its height, encountered the dream-like drama of a Belgian symbolist, Maurice Maeterlinck, and he chose this text—not simply its plot—to inspire an opera in a new style. He deliberately did not hire a librettist to re-work the plot for a musical setting, as had been done traditionally in the past. Instead he lifted Maeterlinck’s words more or less as they stood. The result, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, was something utterly new. Even if Debussy failed to free himself completely from Wagner’s magical spell, about which he had written eloquently in an essay on *Parsifal*, *Pelléas* was a radical break with the operatic past, not only in France but everywhere else.

Pairing this innovation with Richard Strauss’s *Salome* was a brilliant idea. Abbate and Parker are able to demonstrate that Strauss, who had been far more in thrall to the Wagnerian legacy than Debussy, succeeded in breaking out into a wholly new kind of music drama by taking over the text of Oscar Wilde’s hothouse play, which, though originally written, with Wildean preciousness, in French, had reached Strauss in a German translation. (In its English version, the play was kept off the British stage for decades.) To suggest that Wilde did for Strauss what Maeterlinck had done for Debussy makes perfect sense. Of course the liberation of both composers led to very different musical idioms, neither of which fully shook off the Wagnerian influence. In a way, Strauss’s opera, with its gritty harmonies and orchestration, mirrored Wilde’s decadent eroticism just as successfully as Debussy’s slippery notes and dreamy levels of sound mirrored Maeterlinck’s evanescent prose.

IT IS ODD THAT SUCH A LARGE AND ebullient history of opera should end with a whimper, but so it does. Gloom spreads across the operatic landscape from the 1930s, when the authors see widespread enthusiasm for revivals of traditional repertoire gradually embalming classic works and imposing unattainable goals on composers of new works. The size of opera houses, together with audience expectations that what might appear on the stage will be at least as exciting as the tried and true, allegedly demonstrates that opera has settled into a mortuary, “a wonderful mortuary full of spectacular performances, but a mortuary for all that.” The reader, whose traversal of this history of opera is rather like an exhilarating roller-coaster ride, may be excused at the end for crying out, “Enough already!” The claims of tradition and a familiar repertoire have tugged at operatic innovation from the beginning, and the traditional interpolation of a high note for a bravura singer, as famously in *Trovatore*, has had a long history without suggesting that death was at hand.

Abbate and Parker nostalgically evoke Britten’s *Peter Grimes* as the last of the great operas before the mortuary filled up. It is characterized as a “breakthrough” and “an important moment in the tortured later-twentieth-century history of the genre.” Its international success is acclaimed and cited as the reason that Britten went on to write other operas. He is admirably compared with such modern slouches as Messiaen and Ligeti, and, more recently, John Adams and Thomas Adès. Philip Glass’s *Einstein on the Beach* shows up as an influence on Adams’s first opera, and this leads to an astute observation about the resemblance between such music and film music, in which Glass has conspicuously excelled. But the penultimate section of the last chapter is called, unflatteringly and indefensibly, “Revenants.” It seems almost as if Abbate and Parker had themselves succumbed to the indiscriminate obsession with the past that they castigate in modern audiences and impresarios.

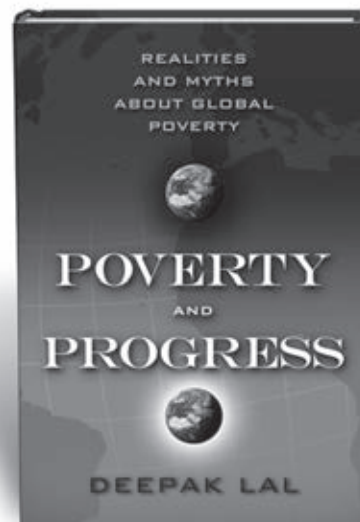
Although only a few lines are devoted to Adès, he has enjoyed an international success with his opera *The Tempest*, which might have elicited more thought and analysis than it receives. Adès himself is not only a superb performer but also a perceptive and outspoken commentator on music, as any reader of his recently published conversations with Tom Service, under the title

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*Full of Noises*, will discover. He doesn't think much of *Peter Grimes*, and he has some basis for an opinion since he directed the Aldeburgh Festival for ten years. Britten had not wanted the piece performed there, and Adès thinks he knows why: "It's so mean about the people of Aldeburgh. They're all madams or paedophiles or small-minded maniacs, and meanwhile the real people of Aldeburgh were all sitting there around me, and they didn't look like that at all.... I just can't believe in all these people dressed up as fishermen and that woman singing about her knitting. I mean, who cares?"

Adès goes on to identify the principal problem with Britten, which is, in his view, singing in English. The sung text is clearly a topic of interest to Abbate and Parker, and they might reasonably have weighed in on this subject in the case of Britten. Adès's opinion that there is something unnatural in the relationship between the music of his operas and the English words that are sung is by no means foolish, and it should be remembered that Britten was not writing the title role to be sung in English by just anyone, but precisely by Peter Pears. When Jon Vickers took over the role in later years, *Peter Grimes* was an altogether different opera. Britten and Pears were in a box together for Vickers's first performance as Grimes, and I have often wondered what they thought.

It is always instructive to hear composers talk about their craft. They do not do it all that often, and opera composers have rarely shared their views, with a few signal exceptions (Berlioz, Debussy, and Virgil Thomson in the forefront). Wagner's logorrhea was highly unusual, and he would have done posterity a great favor by curbing it. But what the writings of opera composers invariably show is that they were carefully watching the work of their contemporaries, as Wagner's handwritten dedication of his newly published *Tristan* score, five years before the first performance, poignantly shows. He inscribed the score to Berlioz in homage to the composer of *Roméo et Juliette*, and Berlioz read it carefully and annotated it. In the mid-nineteenth century, there were plenty of revenants in opera houses, but this did not discourage innovation. A few decades later, Wagner himself became a revenant, as Debussy was acutely aware, and so in opera we had then, and arguably still have today, a truly Heraclitean flux, not a mortuary.

IT IS REGRETTABLE THAT THIS warm-hearted and sprawling new history of opera should end with such dyspepsia. One could easily imagine that the sheer exertion of trawling through some four centuries of operatic creativity without offering a single musical example simply exhausted the two authors. After all, they are musicologists, not cultural historians, and writing about music while, in effect, having one hand tied behind the back, compels them to work at a considerable disadvantage. This may enliven their prose, but it certainly diminishes their authority. The history of music, insofar as it involves audiences and taste, both popular and elite, is an integral part of cultural history, and the biographies of composers, from the greatest to the least of them, all contribute to our understanding of historical epochs. But to understand their music, we cannot avoid looking at their music.

And so this exciting and wide-ranging book abruptly comes to an undeservedly conservative, grumpy, and eccentric conclusion. Yet even in the decades that lead up to the alleged mortuary, there were extraordinary operas, many of which were suppressed in the Nazi period but have been gradually unearthed and revived among other works of Nazi *entartete Kunst*, or "degenerate art." If Alban Berg receives proper attention for *Wozzeck* and *Lulu*, Franz Schreker does not, despite the rediscovery and modern performances of *Der ferne Klang* ("The Distant Sound") and *Die Gezeichneten* ("The Branded"), to say nothing of equally exotic contemporary operas such as *Eine florentinische Tragödie* ("A Florentine Tragedy") by Alexander von Zemlinsky. Hans Pfitzner's monumental opera *Palestrina* bridges many centuries in linking modern idioms with the Renaissance. Greater by far was Paul Hindemith's *Mathis der Maler*, inspired by the Isenheim Altarpiece with its paintings by Matthias Grünewald. All these pieces, which have been staged and performed in recent years, go unnoticed in this history of opera.

Walter Braunfels wrote a brilliant opera on Aristophanes's *The Birds* at the end of World War I, and a very young Leonard Bernstein set the same text to music at Harvard in the late 1930s.

## Onlookers Gathered at the Traveling Chair's Arrival

—Mississippi, 1940

By Natasha Trethewey

So many of them  
faceless beneath the brims  
of their hats: so many

men and women, and always  
it seems, children too,  
drawn to the spectacle—

some finding the camera,  
lifting their faces to history.  
Here: two men stunned

into record, a boy squinting,  
one man smiling as if  
to leave his mark on the day.

From the bird's-eye view  
you can see the delicate part  
in a girl's hair, the dapple

of shadow on concrete—  
leaves of the tree from which  
the photographer must be

shooting. I can't stop finding  
the small wounds limned  
into focus: a tiny dog

in a boy's arms, one leg  
dangled—a hook angling  
toward the machine;

another boy cradling  
a stack of books, his head  
cropped by the frame;

a woman resting her hand  
on the chair's arm; and how  
even the sun, bright

as the flash that whitens  
their faces, polishes  
the darker ones like stone.

Why was that? Probably for the same reason that Aristophanes created his escapist fable in the first place during the dreadful days of the Peloponnesian War. Yet their musical styles could not have been more different. As Adès observed in talking about his setting of *The Tempest*, "I know what happens to the characters on stage in the story, but I don't know how that functions in the music until it's composed." But once the music has been composed,



*Elektra*, Salzburg Festival, 2010

it is the job of a serious critic to see precisely *how* what happens to the characters actually functions in the music. This responsibility is no less important and fruitful in considering Messiaen, Ligeti, Adams, or Adès than it is in considering Berg or Strauss—or Schreker.

Abbate and Parker have shortchanged the twentieth century and offered an unjustifiably pessimistic prognostication for the twenty-first. In addition to condemning “our desire to cling to the operatic past,” they go after commissions of new operas by major opera houses both here and abroad. This provokes them to an embarrassing effusion of ridicule. After observing that La Scala in Milan had commissioned Bellini’s *Norma*, they note that the same theater commissioned Luciano Berio’s *La vera storia* in 1982. “What continuity!” they cry, “What noble lineage!” Have they forgotten that the premiere of *Norma* in 1831 was a disaster? Both then and now, commissioned operas undergo extensive tinkering and revision before they disappear or are metamorphosed into the pieces that we know and admire today. It is hard to accept that modern commissions “cannot carry the same weight as they did a century and a half ago.”

Fortunately, opera itself is charging forward. Christopher Keene, the farsighted leader of the New York City Opera, brought to his New York stage Hindemith’s *Mathis der Maler*, Zimmermann’s *Die Soldaten*, and, long before the Met, Schönberg’s *Moses und Aron*. Shortly before his death, he told me that he read, on average, a dozen new opera scores each month in search of new material. Anyone who is equally enlightened today would probably be reading considerably more scores than that. Composers find opera an increasingly attractive genre, and works such as Paul Moravec’s *The Letter* and Kevin Puts’s *Silent Night* have been produced to considerable acclaim in the last few years. We will soon have at the Met Nico Muhly’s *Two Boys*, which gives the Internet a major role in the plot. We are likely to witness a growth in the experimental use of electronic sound and, above all, images that are inspired by Bill Viola’s video art. Many have admired his work with Peter Sellars on *Tristan und Isolde*.

Rufus Wainwright has already shown that pop stars see opera as a new frontier for their art, and Stephen Sondheim has long since demonstrated that great musical theater is almost indistinguishable from great

opera. The Met’s HD transmission of selected performances to theaters around the world has been a triumph that has been imitated by other houses. Opera is vigorous in ways it never was before. Its future will certainly be unlike its past, but no less resplendent. That has been the nature of opera throughout its long history. The Sellars-Viola *Tristan* is proof that the old repertory will not be lost, only transformed. The new repertory will involve both audio and visual technology in ways not yet imagined. A few cobwebs may have to be swept away, but the greatest contributions of the past will survive. William Christie has demonstrated, through his revivals of forgotten baroque masterpieces, that music and plots that are hundreds of years old can be exciting to audiences who not only appreciate Bellini and Wagner but Sondheim and Viola. After all, opera is music drama, and on the stage, this means musical theater. ●

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# Adventures in Nosology

Finding a name for our darkest disturbances.

By Sherwin B. Nuland





# E

“EXHAUSTING DRIVES, THIRTY OR FORTY patients each day and double visits, over-night stays, and obstetric calls.... And of course, endless sickness; and despite his best efforts, deaths of patients, some of whom were friends or relatives ... deaths sometimes merciful, other times brutal. [He] took no vacations and scarcely missed a day of rounds.... It could not go on. By 1868, in addition to his headaches and, of course, fatigue, he displayed worsening insomnia and periods of agitation.... In the Spring of 1869, shortly after the death of his mother, [his] constitution gave out.” Dr. Owen Wister, an overworked family physician practicing in Germantown, Pennsylvania soon found that he was no longer capable of the effort of so much as writing a prescription. In the words of a non-medical friend describing his condition at the time, “He has neuralgia and nervous weakness from overwork, cannot exert his brain at all, not even to read, and has given up his practice entirely for the present.”

The foregoing paragraph is extracted from the clinical description of Wister's condition that was presented by the medical historian and internist Steven J. Peitzman in a lecture at the American Association for the History of Medicine in 2007.

A condition such as Wister's—in later generations to be known, as Peitzman points out, by the sobriquet “nervous breakdown”—epitomized what would soon be dubbed “neurasthenia.” This latter term first appeared in an article published in *The Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* (the forerunner of *The New England Journal of Medicine*) by the eminent nerve specialist Dr. George M. Beard, and was defined as an “exhaustion of the nervous system” and “impoverishment of nerve force, a problem significantly more often encountered in women than in men.” The treatment, providing the patient could afford it, consisted of rest and diversion far from the site of travail, preferably by taking the baths at one of the many spas of America and Europe, or of leisurely travel for an extended period of time. Wister's slow peregrinations took him first to Saratoga Springs, then to Newport, and thereafter on a grand tour of Europe. When he re-established his practice after three years of this kind of deliberately slow recovery, he chose to do it in a somewhat less demanding location, where he was able to circumscribe his activities and avoid the demands of his former patients. He never again suffered from neurasthenia.

But in 1875, the neurologist S. Weir Mitchell of Philadelphia (who had himself suffered a nervous breakdown nine years earlier) introduced a more directed therapy for the condition, and touted it in fact as a cure. Edward Shorter, arguably North America's leading historian of psychiatry, describes the new treatment as follows in his important—if sometimes exasperating—new book: the patient was put to bed in a private room supervised by the authoritarian doctor and a tough-minded nurse, started on a milk diet, and given intermittent doses of massage and peripheral electricity, often over a period of months. Since the increasingly popular treatment could best be provided in a hospital-type environment, a host of dedicated private clinics soon sprang up all over America and Europe, usually directed by physicians but some owned by entrepreneurial laymen. It is important to note that such physicians were not psychiatrists. The latter treated what was called “mental disease,” namely psychosis, severe depression, and dementia; the former, general physicians, were concerned only with neurasthenia, considered a disease of exhausted nerves.

As described by Shorter, five kinds of symptoms encompassed the range of problems that were identified in nervous exhaustion, neurasthenia (a term that has been little used since the early 1940s), or, as he now proposes to call the loosely defined problem, “nerves.” These were: pathological fatigue going beyond ordinary tiredness; mild depression; mild anxiety; bodily symptoms such as insomnia, chronic pain, and disordered bowels; and some variety of obsessive thinking even though the patient realizes that the ruminations are irrational. He refers to this group of symptoms as constituting a syndrome. This syndrome, he argues, is quite different from major depression, which he prefers to call “melancholia.”

Thus, early in his book, Shorter introduces his readers to two distinct forms (and by implication, two different causes) of what is today collectively known as “depression,” respectively to be called “nerves” and “melancholia.” He proposes that all patients now carrying a diagnosis of depression should be re-categorized into those suffering from one or the other. So different are they, he asserts, that he considers melancholia to be “a predominantly biological illness,” so biologically determined and specific that an adrenal-dependent blood test, the dexamethasone-suppression test (regrettably, he says, now rarely used), will most often be found to be positive in its presence but negative in other psychiatric illnesses. Unlike nerves, a condition symptomatic of the existential tensions with which so many of us live our daily lives, melancholia is “one of the most terrible afflictions in medicine.” It is “fearsome in a far different way than nervousness, for it may lead to despair, hopelessness, a complete lack of pleasure in one's life, and suicide.” It is as different from nerves, Shorter declares, as tuberculosis is from mumps.

Shorter's credentials to make such a differentiation are remarkably strong. During the course of devoting his long career to studying the history of psychiatry, he has exhaustively studied that complexly labyrinthine discipline itself, almost as though he were preparing for a career as a clinician or laboratory researcher. A dazzling expertise is apparent in his new book, about drug mechanisms and psychiatric disease in general, not to mention the politics of academic jousting. Shorter may very well be as qualified to make judgments and



define categories as is the committee of the American Psychiatric Association that every few years issues yet another iteration of the *DSM*, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, though that may be faint praise.

NOSOLOGY (FROM THE GREEK NOSOS, meaning “disease,” and *logos*, referring to “study”) is not a sport for the timid, and certainly not for those so scrupulous about rules and order that they demand consistency in all things. As used in medicine, the word refers to the classification of diseases, for which reason one might suppose that it has some sort of principles of predictability that would make sense to a reasonably well-educated person. Not so. Every hope of successive generations of scholars that order might be constructed from the chaotic mess of medical nomenclature has been frustrated. Even diseases recognized in the same historical period have been given names based on characteristics that have no relation to one another, and thus no common criteria. For one example, the Greeks of the Hippocratic era invented the term “carcinoma” for a tumor with the appearance of a crab (*karkinos*, “crab,” and *oma*, “tumor”), and then went on to leave us with another familiar illness described as “consumption,” because it seemed gradually to consume its victims. Beginning around that time, there never have been standardized criteria for the ways in which diseases are named.

In the mid-nineteenth century, attempting to instill some permanent conformity into nosology, Rudolf Virchow, others having discovered that a tubercle-like structure characterized the appearance of consumption, insisted on its being called “tuberculosis.” He is the same sensible German who gave us “thrombosis” (the Greek *thrombos* means “clot”) for a blood clot lying within an artery or vein. Likewise “leukemia” (from the Greek for “white” and “blood”), because the centrifuged blood of its victims demonstrated an abnormally thick layer of white blood cells above the red. Virchow was determined that all nosology should be based on universal criteria, and for this purpose, he uniformly used the microscopic or visible abnormality that characterized the disease: tubercle, clot, white blood. In this, he was attempting to overcome centuries of practices so inconsistent and even capricious that

a sexually transmitted syndrome making its first appearance in 1493 in Italy had been dubbed “syphilis” for the somewhat whimsical reason that an Italian physician named Girolamo Fracastoro wrote an epic poem in 1530, in which a shepherd boy named Syphilus insults one of the gods and is punished by developing a horrible disease.

Of course, Virchow’s efforts were ultimately in vain, as demonstrated by the inconsistency of terminology applied to naming such twentieth-century illnesses as the tick-borne Lyme Disease, named for Lyme, Connecticut, from where the first patients hailed; and Legionnaire’s Disease, originally identified in a group of veterans attending a convention in Philadelphia; and Sjögren’s Syndrome, permanently connected to its discoverer. Obviously no rhyme or reason was applied in pinning a label on any of them. As so often in the past, caprice led the way.

Even if their ways of being named are inconsistent, physicians generally comfort themselves that entities considered to be distinct diseases bear a set of equally distinct and associated physical and laboratory findings. By and large, this is true in internal medicine, but the closer one comes to pathologies of the nervous system the further away is certainty, especially if the

psychotics and seeming psychotics, was limited to the very sick.

Even in the next century, it was family physicians who cared for those whose problems were of a nervous sort, as psychiatrists limited themselves to working with the four groups of Pinel. Nowadays, of course, the care of all patients with mental illness is the province of the specialty of psychiatry. Of the many consequences of this development, there has been a strong tendency to lump truly serious disease into the same bundle as conditions of a far less consequential nature. These latter are conditions, Shorter seems to be claiming, that have no biological substrate, or have a connection to physiological phenomena that is rather the result of the problem and not its cause.

It should not be thought that by choosing to use such a seemingly non-medical word as “melancholia” Shorter is invoking a term more comfortably issuing from the mouth of a layman than that of a highly trained psychiatrist. Melancholia, as a word and as a disease, has in fact enjoyed a long history in medicine, having been introduced during the Classical period and named on the basis of the Greek theory of diseases that most are caused by imbalances of the four humors: blood, phlegm,

Shorter introduces his readers to two distinct forms of depression, respectively to be called “nerves” and “melancholia.”

illness is one of those we call mental. The first serious attempt to put some order into the confusion was made in 1798 by Philippe Pinel, the chief physician at the Salpêtrière, a Parisian public facility for the insane. In his masterwork, *Nosographie philosophique ou méthode de l'analyse appliquée à la médecine*, Pinel divided the institutionalized insane into four types, designated as maniacs, melancholics, dementeds, and idiots. There would have been no reason for the hospitalization of those people later to be known as neurasthenics, so Pinel’s experience, coming only from his contact with

yellow bile, and black bile, each of which was thought to impart certain personality characteristics. Black (*melas*) bile (*kholē*) was believed to instill a dark, depressive cast into one’s outlook, so much so that excessive amounts of it caused the severe depression called “melancholia.” Melancholia was so serious a disease that medieval textbooks of medicine often pictured a typical victim lying in a bed from which he was unable to rise, and being cared for by a woman sitting patiently at his side.

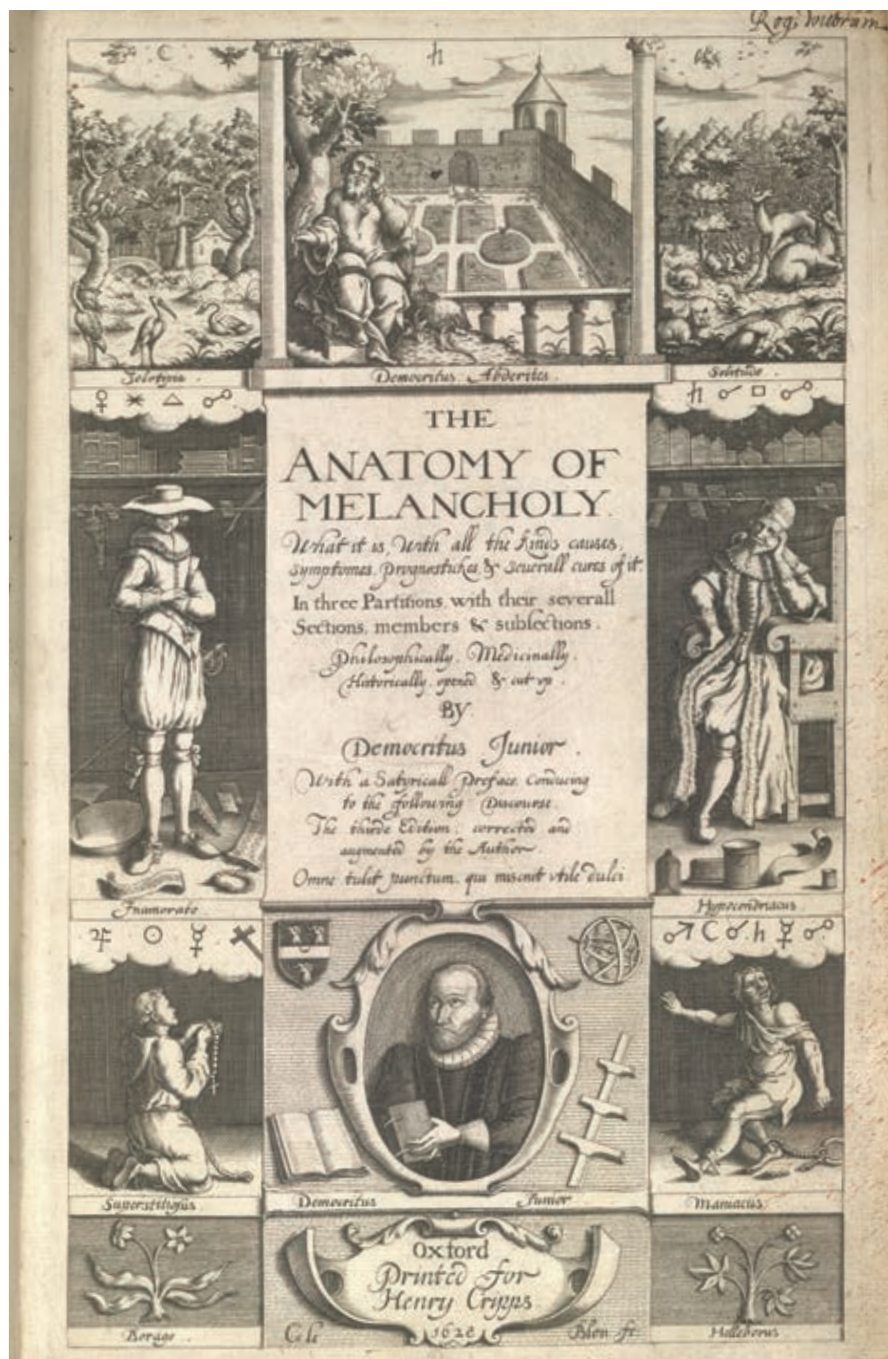
But even during the long period of almost two millennia in which the theory of



humors dominated medical thought, the name of this disastrous disease was already being used to refer to much less consequential conditions that later generations would call “nervous weakness” or “neurasthenia.” Well before those two terms came into being, society and the profession of medicine had created a disorder called “Spleen.” It derived its name from the purplish organ where black bile was thought to be both made and destroyed, and whose physiological purpose has puzzled (and continues to puzzle) biologists since the first time human eyes set sight on it. Though we now know a great deal more about the spleen’s usefulness to the body than we did in the historical past, some of those puzzles remain unsolved. Since it was traditionally thought to be the source of *melas kholē*, all symptoms related to depressed mood and emotional malaise were attributed to it, particularly in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Britain and somewhat less in contemporary France; many literary works, of which Baudelaire’s unfinished collection of prose poems, *Le Spleen de Paris*, is perhaps the most famous, attest to its prevalence there.

The symptoms attributed to Spleen varied along a continuum, from the extremes described by Robert Burton in 1621 in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* to a set of discomforts so common that the condition became rather fashionable among the upper classes, in time being referred to as the English Malady. *The English Malady*, in fact, is the title of a medical volume on nervous diseases in general, and those related to Spleen in particular, that was published in 1733 by the leading British physician George Cheyne, who wrote of its distempers, vapours, and lowness of spirits, referring to “these nervous disorders being computed to make almost one third of the Complaints of the People of Condition in England.” Since only “People of Condition” were likely to be seen in Cheyne’s extensive private practice, he seemed not aware of the number of his charity patients who suffered from similar symptoms but would never think to discuss such relatively minor problems with the eminent physician who saw them for major medical conditions such as tuberculosis, cancer, or paralysis.

At the other end of this Splenic continuum was the anguish characteristic of a syndrome that is recognizable as the melancholy that Edward Shorter would have us distinguish from its far lesser associations. These are associations, as we



Title page, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, 1628

have seen, that existed—Shorter to the contrary—centuries before the often deliberate befuddlement and intermixing caused nowadays by the best and worst intentions of physicians, psychiatrists, the drug industry, and advertising agencies. Here follows Burton’s description, as expressed in the final six lines of a poem of forty-eight couplets that preceded the text of his 740-page book. Every man or woman who has been sufficiently depressed to require hospitalization—as I have—will recognize the anguish expressed by these words:

My pain’s past cure, another hell,  
I may not in this torment dwell!  
Now desperate, I hate my life,  
Lend me a halter [hangman’s noose]  
or a knife;  
All my griefs to this are folly,  
Naught so damn’d as melancholy.

And so Shorter seems to be right and he seems to be wrong: persistent moderate instabilities of mood, energy, visceral function, malaise, and similar “nervous exhaustions”—in a word, what he would have us





*The New Treatment of Ataxia by Suspension at the Salpêtrière, 1883*

recognize as “nerves”—had for centuries before the present era been lumped together with the much more dangerous diagnosis that we are urged to call “melancholia.” But for those patients suffering from the most debilitating symptomatology, it cannot be doubted that the latter term was more likely to be invoked than the former.

The historic importance of the great German psychiatric theorist and clinician Emil Kraepelin (1856-1926) lies most significantly in his attempts to invoke order amid the chaos that was the classification of mental diseases around the turn of the twentieth century. In 1896, in the fifth edition of his classic work, translated into English as *Psychiatry: A Textbook for Students and Physicians*, he essentially “killed off melancholia and prompted its replacement with depression,” in Shorter’s account. Though seventeen years later Kraepelin “suggested that particularly malignant outcomes might be referred to as melancholic.... the term melancholia disappeared as an independent disease entity.” Thus with one sweep of the *Geheimrat*’s nosological authority, an entity that had been recognized since antiquity was driven from the diagnostic arena, an event that occurred at the very beginning of the several-decade period during which leadership in psychiatry was gradually passing from the German-speaking countries to those communicating in English.

This might have been the time for the profession to recognize that its future hopes for a rational nomenclature lay not in the treacherous quicksand of diagnostic categories but rather in the more realistic fields of symptom description and the individualization of therapy. But diagnosis and therapeutics were changing rapidly at the time, as the precision of medical science increasingly became paramount, so that the doctors of the mind no doubt began to feel that their validation lay in classification, order, and predictable nosology, in order to follow the lead of their brethren in internal medicine. They were mistaken then and they are very likely mistaken now. Only the emerging specialty of psychoanalysis seemed to understand that mental maladies are not fully analogous to physical disease. They resist classification, and might better be known by their symptoms and the individualized sufferings of patients than by assigned names.

Once the notion of depression had begun to dominate the diagnostic armamentarium,

## Steeple

By Carl Phillips

it became but a matter of time before patients with relatively mild disorders of mood or anxiety would be entered into it. Shorter is particularly good in his meticulous documentation of the ways in which the term came to be used to include—once again as in past centuries, though he does not acknowledge it—the entire range of disturbances, from those that were catastrophic and truly life-threatening to those that he would like us to call nerves. It is in this documentation that his book finds its greatest strength and its greatest weakness: Shorter’s meticulous roll call of pharmacological (in both the scientific and commercial sense) advances will be invaluable to historians and to those seeking to understand how psychiatry and the *DSM* found themselves in their present diagnostic quagmire, but it will prove maddening to the general reader trying to keep track of all the webwork of influences, well-intentioned and baleful, that have brought us to our present bewilderments.

As the years passed, and as more and more pharmacological treatment methods reached the marketplace—particularly in the relatively recent case of the selective serotonin re-uptake inhibitors (SSRIs), such as Prozac and its cousins—more and more people were given the diagnosis of depression, increasingly as if there were no difference between the melancholic and the nervous varieties. The leading villains in this ever-widening scenario, as might be expected, were the drug companies and their advertising campaigns, presenting to physicians and the public an ever-greater array of what are called anti-depressants, anxiolytics, tranquilizers, mood stabilizers, and more. But the specialty of psychiatry (and its frustrated attempts at specific nosology, as in the *DSM*) must bear part of the blame, as also must the practitioners of internal medicine, who diagnose and pharmacologically treat what they diagnose as depression at the drop of a symptom. This tendency is so widespread that it has entered our cultural perception, and even our television screens, and the demand by patients for drug treatment expands with time. There may even be an element of trendiness in it, and a social association with Cheyenne’s “People of Condition.”

“How did everyone become depressed,” asks Shorter, about two-thirds of the way through his book, although he has by that time largely answered his own question. Incorporated into the diagnosis has been

Maybe love really does mean the submission of power—  
I don’t know. Like pears on a branch, a shaking branch,  
in sunlight, 4 o’clock sunlight, all the ways we do harm,  
or refrain from it, when nothing says we have to.... Shining,  
everyone shining like that, as if reality itself depended  
on a nakedness as naked as naked gets; on a faith in each  
other as mistaken as mistaken tends to be, though I have  
loved the mistake of it—still do; even now—as I love  
the sluggishness with which, like ceremony or, not much  
different, any man who, having seen himself at last,  
turns at first away—has to—the folded black and copper  
wings of history begin their deep unfolding, the bird itself,  
shuddering, lifts up into the half-wind that comes after—  
higher—soon desire will resemble most that smaller thing,  
late affection, then the memory of it; and then nothing at all.

every symptom-complex that was in an earlier day lumped into Spleen, from the serious illness recognized since antiquity to the ennui of bored housewives and the chronic neurotic dissatisfaction of those millions who descend into the subway each morning to earn their daily bread. Shorter attributes the contemporary prevalence of diagnoses of depression to the blameworthy commercial actors noted above, but he barely gives reference to the precedent and long life of the notion of Spleen. I would argue with this historical inaccuracy, and propose that a societal tendency toward finding neurotic manifestations in daily life has been an underlying and frequent tendency—at least during certain historical periods—of human nature, to the point where individuals need the reassurance of believing they have a disease with a specific name, when they are only the victims of existential malaise. That modern psychiatry and the pharmaceutical industry have found an intellectual and commercial bounty in this tendency is contributory but hardly the underlying etiology: *If my troubles have a name—whether it be depression, Spleen, or whatever—I am sick, and not just neurotic. I need treatment.*

Along comes Edward Shorter with a remedy: let us go back to the simplicity of the two very different orders of this particular form of human misery, by calling them respectively “melancholia” and “nerves.” In this day of increasingly complex nosologies and increasingly controversial *DSMs*, his proposal comes like a cooling blast of fresh air. Though I disagree with Shorter about many things—the degree of culpability of the assigned culprits;

the totality of influence of modern trends in pharmacology, the pharmaceutical industry, and the psychiatric profession; the statement that “the current crop of drugs referred to as antidepressants are ineffective in real depressive illness, which is to say melancholia, and somehow land wide of the mark in treating nervous illness”; the usefulness in major melancholia of the dexamethasone-suppression test in severe cases; his failure to acknowledge the role of a probable biological element in the condition that he calls “nerves”; and certain denigrations of the validity of psychoanalytic theory—I applaud his contribution, and earnestly believe it should be taken seriously by both the profession and the public, even though the latter must face the implications, social and otherwise, of the reality that one can experience a set of symptoms that amount only to “nerves.”

In certain ways, this is a landmark book. But its overly meticulous and unnecessary inclusion of so many minor details of society’s trudging toward inclusion under the umbrella now indiscriminately called “depression” makes it more difficult to read than it should be. Shorter’s raging torrent of documentation—so helpful to the historian but a hindrance to the general reader and even to most psychiatrists—will necessarily detract from his book’s usefulness as a well-reasoned argument for a straightforward and meaningful differentiation of symptoms that have since ancient times defied easy classification. ●

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# Line Sublime

The artist who raised printmaking to its heights.

By Jed Perl

# R

RARELY HAVE LIFE'S SWEETNESS AND bitterness been embraced with more even-handed genius than in the work of Jacques

Callot. The seventeenth-century French printmaker finds an ethics of vision—a way of grappling with whatever the world has to offer—in the indomitable force and lucidity of his line. Revered from his own day down to ours by those who see possibilities for transcendence in the printmaker's technical know-how, Callot has nevertheless been a fairly minor figure in the art history

books, no matter that some of his impressions of the horrors of war are as indelible as Goya's and that his reflections on the pleasures of the theater and the fairground rival those of Rubens and Watteau. Within the frequently Lilliputian dimensions of his prints—some of the most famous ones are little more than two inches high—Callot represented beggars, gypsies, soldiers, actors,





and the ladies and gentlemen of the court. He etched Biblical stories, royal festivals, hunts, battles, gardens, landscapes, and seascapes. "Princes & Paupers: The Art of Jacques Callot," mounted at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, is a brave attempt to raise Callot's profile. It has been many years since this country saw a major show with a catalogue devoted to an artist I would rank among the peerless image makers and storytellers of European art. Allow yourself to succumb to Callot's work and you will experience a concentrated high.

We all know that major work can be done in minor genres, but there nevertheless lingers some almost primitive feeling that the most important visions require a commensurate size or scale. How many people really believe that an ode by Keats can be as important as a play by

Shakespeare? Or that a song cycle by Schubert can range as widely as a symphony by Beethoven? Callot, who was born in Nancy in 1592, apprenticed with a goldsmith and had most of his successes under the patronage of a courtly world, so one can assume that he was attuned to the taste for small, precious objects (saltcellars, knives, clocks, and the like) by master craftsmen, of whom Cellini has the most enduring reputation. The seriousness with which Callot pursued expansive compositions of frequently minuscule sizes—many of his prints with dozens of figures are little more than three inches in any direction—reflected a sophisticated courtly idea that grand visions can be encompassed in tiny dimensions.

Of course the courtly world was never immune to the power of brute size, and

the Baroque taste for grandiosity was in full swing well before Callot died in 1635. Compared with the titanic square footage of the Maria de' Medici cycle by Rubens, who died five years later, it is all too easy to regard as a special albeit honorable case the spectacles that Callot fit into extraordinarily small spaces—for example, *The Punishments*, a harrowing representation of modes of torture and execution that packs the victims together with hundreds of onlookers on a piece of paper just over eight inches wide. But Callot's genius for the tiniest etched line is no more a matter of mere virtuosity than Rubens's genius for the painterly brushstroke. For these artists, virtuosity is a virtue, the elegance tempered by deep knowledge and scrupulous decision-making.

Callot was one of the great innovators in the still relatively young art of etching. An





etching is produced by covering a copper plate with an acid-resistant surface. Lines are drawn into this surface; the plate is etched in acid; the acid-resistant surface is removed. Ink is then forced into the lines etched in the copper; the surface of the plate is wiped clean; and when the plate is run through a press, the etched and inked lines produce an image on a sheet of paper. Callot's great innovation was to develop a new kind of acid-resistant surface, a hard ground made of oil and mastic, which was less likely to break down in the acid than the earlier soft-wax ground. The result was a line of increasing delicacy and specificity, which Callot further refined with an etcher's needle with an oval-shaped tip, known as an *échoppe*, which enabled him to vary the width of the line, allowing it to swell or to taper. These technical innovations liberated Callot to produce a new kind of poetic exactitude; some might see an analogy in the filigreed yet steely movements of a great ballerina's hands.

There is something uncanny in the experience of Callot's etchings, because the proliferation of tiny elements generates an image that feels extraordinarily expansive. At moments, peering into these mind-boggling compositions, we may imagine that we are witnessing a sort of parlor trick—or being asked how many angels can fit on the head of a pin. This reflects the side of Callot's personality that is always playing a courtly game. But the accuracy and aplomb of Callot's line, even in the smallest intervals, is too heartfelt to be dismissed as an elegant trick. Callot etches faces less than a quarter of an inch high that register complex human emotions. And when he etches a figure less than half an inch high, we see a person with a particular physique and demeanor. The prints beguile us with their almost superhuman suavity, and then pull us up short with a humanity that is by turns frank, boisterous, sardonic, somber, even down and dirty.

THE IMPORTANT EXHIBITION AT THE Museum of Fine Arts (MFA) in Houston was organized by Dena M. Woodall, a curator at the museum, and Diane Wolfthal, an art historian at Rice University, using as its core the works owned by Albert A. Feldmann, a collector who has made a specialty of Callot. Within the relatively small compass of the exhibition at the MFA, Woodall and Wolfthal succeed in suggesting the extraordinary

range of Callot's work: he produced some 1,400 prints. Although he began and ended his life in Nancy, the capital of the duchy of Lorraine—Duke Charles III had ennobled his grandfather and employed his father as court herald—Callot spent the years between 1610 or thereabouts and 1621 in Italy. He was in Rome and then for most of the decade in Florence, working for the Medici court. His great success in Florence lasted until 1621, when his patron, Cosimo II, died and economies were initiated at court. Back in Nancy, he made an excellent marriage, received commissions from Louis XIII and the Spanish Infanta, and maintained a valuable relationship with a publisher of prints in Paris. But with Lorraine torn apart by the Thirty Years' War and politically unstable, Callot could not but look back on his time in Florence as the halcyon years, or so some believe.

One frustration of the Houston show is that no drawings are included. Although virtually unknown in the United States, they are an essential key to Callot's powers as a printmaker. He tended to prepare his compositions fully in drawings before committing his ideas to copper. There are some 1,400 of these drawings—as many as there are prints—done in a variety of media, from chalk to ink, and preserved in European collections. The disciplined freedom of the drawings suggests an athlete in training for the main event that will take place when the etching needle is in his hand. In the drawings, you can see Callot's immediate rapport with the world: his graphic attack is bold and experimental, a way of getting down the facts. Although some of his figures are probably drawn from imagination, others are surely made from direct observation, and all of them suggest how questions of realization and stylization are resolved not through calculated decision-making but through seismographic responses to social and psychic states. In his drawings, Callot makes judgments about what matters and what doesn't, and not only in relation to the human figure. Some of his landscapes, in a broad ink-and-brush technique reminiscent of the dazzling graphic effects of Claude and Poussin, evince their own kind of emotional weather, an extraordinary sensitivity to the particular mood of a time and a place. It may be easiest to see how the drawings prepare Callot for the pyrotechnics of the etchings in the small prints devoted to one or two figures that have

been among Callot's most admired works over the years. A. Hyatt Mayor, a curator of prints at the Metropolitan Museum of Art half a century ago, spoke of Callot's studies of the actors of the *commedia dell'arte* as “pixilated vignettes.” One might characterize these crackerjack images as unnatural or anti-naturalistic, considering the fantastical wit with which Callot turns the arms and legs of pulliciniello and sundry comic personalities into configurations suggesting extravagantly twisted, tangled, stuffed, and stretched silken puppets. Then again, perhaps Callot is only being true to the actors' wild energies, his exaggerations a transcription of their own inebriated exertions. Among Callot's work, the *commedia dell'arte* figures find their closest cousins, surprisingly enough, in representations of elegant ladies and gentlemen whose outrageous finery, including impossibly overscaled and befeathered hats, bespeaks another kind of performance, albeit courtly rather than comic. What links courtier and clown is the re-imagining of the self in terms of the elongated extravagances of the Mannerist style, which although born early in the sixteenth century was still setting off exotic shoots and tendrils in courtly circles nearly a hundred years later. Callot may be one of the last artists to give new life to the old Mannerist exaggerations, suggesting not exhaustion but ebullience, a theatrical extravagance that would reignite hundreds of years later in Seurat's impressions of the circus and the music hall.

WITH CALLOT, WHETHER THE SUBJECT is prince, pulliciniello, or pauper, surface always reflects substance. Confronted with the extravagant imaginations of courtier and clown, his line becomes appropriately exultant. And it goes without saying that Callot's gentle and unsparing studies of beggars and pilgrims necessitate a different kind of graphic attack, so as to demonstrate how the beggar clings to clothes that are like a tent or a shroud—a protection, poor as it may be, against the world's onslaught. *The Blind Man with Dog*, *The Old Woman with Cats*, *The Obese Beggar*, and *The Beggar with Bare Head and Feet* are sunk in their ragged existence, their solitude only emphasized by the whiteness of the paper on which their disquieting images have been stamped. Here Callot offers no scrap of landscape or distant figures in action that might mitigate the beggar's isolation.





While some might dismiss these as studies of types, they are in fact far more searching, with each face suggesting a complete personality. We sense a whole other side of Callot, a realism that many would say is northern in its essential character, and draws him in these studies especially close to the steady-eyed sympathy that makes Louis Le Nain's paintings of peasant life among the highest achievements of seventeenth-century France. The boy who looks out from beneath an oversized hat in *The Mother with Three Children* is close cousin, if not brother, to the children in Le Nain's paintings, whose straight-ahead gazes, quizzical and relentless, raise questions to which there are evidently never going to be satisfying answers.

NOBODY SHOULD IMAGINE THAT CALLOT, the master of the miniature, feared the grand statement. In *The Fair of Impruneta*, a print over two feet wide, he produced a work of mythopoetic richness. Based on

an autumn fair in the Tuscan town of Impruneta, not far from Florence, the print contains more than a thousand figures, arranged in great eddies and waves, the individual linked to the group by some magnetic force, the whole an exploration of the possibilities of flux and flow in human relations. The church at Impruneta was home to a miracle-working Madonna believed to have been painted by Saint Luke, and so it was a great pilgrimage site around the saint's feast day in October. Did such a large number of people ever really congregate at Impruneta? Perhaps. It is also true that the Baroque artists, even when embracing naturalistic possibilities, had a taste for hyperbole, and Callot might have been inclined to italicize the possibilities of this gathering of humanity. *The Fair of Impruneta* is a glorious hymn to human energy, appetite, curiosity, and conviviality. The good and the bad, the innocent and the malevolent, are wonderfully mixed. All the way to the left, two men help an accomplice drop down a

rope from the top of a building, probably in an attempt to steal eggs. Far below, people gather around the tables of a merchant selling dishware. There are tents where fairgoers examine a seemingly endless assortment of merchandise. And there are families, rich and poor, walking along together, conversing with one another, meeting friends. Callot's line is quick and deft, the individuals, each perfectly realized, united in overarching, curving, surging movements.

One of the riveting episodes in *The Fair of Impruneta* takes place in the right foreground, beneath an immense, overarching tree. Two snake charmers, one with a huge snake coiled around his arm, stand on a platform, seen in stark profile. In front of the platform some forty men, women, and children gather to watch the goings-on on stage. It is not easy to see how all of the members of the audience are responding, as many are in deep shadow; but set against those figures who are mere ciphers are some in full light, and the looks of rapt pleasure on their



faces create a thrilling dramatic effect. The only drama in printmaking that strikes me as comparable is Rembrandt's use of chiaroscuro to highlight the emotional states of figures in his prints; and Rembrandt knew some of Callot's work, though not necessarily *The Fair of Impruneta*. Like Rembrandt and Rubens, Callot had a solid grounding in the principles of large-scale figure composition that had been developing since the High Renaissance, and like them, he found ways to give an organic order to what had perhaps theretofore seemed to many the inherently chaotic lives of the lower regions of society. *The Fair of Impruneta* is a riveting realization of the dynamics of the crowd, with the variegated members of society cast together in inherently unpredictable ways, a reminder of that unpredictability being the child who cuts open the purse of a bystander who is watching a lady have her fortune read by a gypsy.

THE FAIR OF IMPRUNETA CERTAINLY HAS its variegated sonorities. The church itself forms a backdrop to the jam-packed scene, a large, solid, and even stolid presence, its nearly blank façade suggesting religion's imperturbability. Anything but imperturbable is a scene in the middle distance, where a group has gathered to watch a prisoner submit to strappado, the torture of being suspended in the air from ropes attached to the wrists, causing enormous pain and the dislocation of the shoulders. Perhaps such events could not fail to fascinate an artist entranced by all the victories and vicissitudes of the human body. Over the years Callot returned to the question of human cruelty, climactically in a cycle of eighteen etchings, called *The Miseries and Misfortunes of War*. Responding to the experience of the Thirty Years' War, Callot offered the darkest imaginable view of the soldier's life and personality, with scenes of soldiers committing atrocities, the violence of peasant reprisals, and the poverty and dislocation that can accompany the soldier's life.

The most shattering print in the cycle is *The Hanging*, dominated by a tree with the kind of wide-spreading branches that Callot loved to represent, except now the tree's branches are full not of leaves but of the bodies of soldiers who have been hanged for the atrocities that they committed. In the foreground, a tall soldier being sent to his death confronts a priest who is giving him the last rites, and the face of

the priest, full of pity, sorrow, and unyielding principle, is as unsentimental a representation as I know of religious experience confronting the vagaries of humanity. This extraordinary little vignette is something that a viewer may discover only over time, for what rivets us is the tree itself, hung with human bodies, the strangest fruits imaginable—*fruits malheureux*, as the caption would have it. Although there is an elegant serenity about even Callot's most violent images, certainly with *The Hanging* he goes as deep as Goya ever did into the monstrous enigmas that war reveals. That Callot adds a group of men who are casually gambling beneath the spreading branches only adds to the supreme strangeness of the spectacle.

IN RECENT YEARS A GOOD DEAL OF scholarly attention has been paid to the development of printmaking in the Renaissance and the Baroque. Much of this work has been spurred by historians attuned to questions about the death of the author and the original, the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, and the increasing ubiquity in museum galleries (heretofore dedicated to painting) of photography and multiple and serial images of many varieties. Interesting questions have been raised about the deep origins of what some see as an ongoing crisis in the nature of originality in the arts.

Nobody can doubt that printmaking places the artist in a different kind of relationship with the audience. And Callot's prints, which sold in considerable quantities and were rapidly distributed over a good deal of Europe, are very much a part of this story. But I do not believe that they support a view of printmaking as precipitating the depersonalization of the artist or the artist's alienation from the work of art. Quite the contrary. Callot's extraordinary body of work suggests that, in the early seventeenth century, printmaking was infusing new forms of intimacy and immediacy into the visual arts. The less expensive and more readily available nature of prints, as opposed to paintings and tapestries, offered a way to expand the reach of an artistic vision. And the vigor and immediacy of Callot's line could make people feel that they were establishing a personal relationship with the artist's sensibility.

It seems to me that Callot sometimes aimed to give a more intimate intonation

to subjects theretofore defined through the grandest works of the Renaissance and Baroque periods. His *Great Hunt* is a horizontal image a little over eighteen inches wide that encompasses all the boisterous pageantry we know from the spectacular hunt tapestries produced in the sixteenth century. Among the series called *Various Italian Landscapes* is a scene of male bathers cavorting near a shoreline ornamented with romantic architecture, which has an impish elegance that brings Annibale Caracci's playful pastoral paintings to mind. Callot's *Two Large Views of Paris* (large means thirteen inches), done toward the end of his life, are fairly early landmarks in the visualization of a city that artists would be







Jacques Callot, *The Fair of Impruneta*, 1620s

exploring down to our own time.

Those who devote all their energies to printmaking will probably always be regarded as second-class citizens in the visual arts. And when the rare printmaker breaks through with a vision as deep and forthright as Callot's, he may still appear a shadowy figure in comparison with the many great printmakers in the European tradition who were also, and often primarily, painters, among them Dürer, Rembrandt, Goya, and Picasso. That Callot, in his finest works, is right up there with such giants hardly seems to make much of a difference. But *The Fair of Impruneta* is every bit as great a work as Picasso's *Minotauromachy*, and I would not be unwilling to argue that it is

equal to Rembrandt's *Hundred Guilder Print* or *Three Crosses*.

It is a fine irony that, in our day, when there is so much interest in the artist as outsider or outlier, the deeply cultivated work of an artist who embraced with all his gifts what is commonly regarded as a secondary art should not be the subject of intense interest. There have always been those who admire Callot, and they include those who saw to it that he had his day in Houston, but printmaking seems condemned to linger on the fringes of art history, except when it is brought in to declare the end of originality or the death of the aura—which is to say, the end of art history as we know it. In Callot's etchings the sense of an aura

is thrillingly, almost uncannily present. As he draws us in, closer and closer, he forges the kind of immediate relationship that all formidable artists seek with their audience. He proves that the widening reach of art is not irreconcilable with art's intimacy and seigneurial sophistication. If all printmakers are populists, Callot is a populist who is capable of the purest artistic expression. Perhaps that is what makes him an artist that our determinedly dumb-it-down art world doesn't really want to know. ●

*Jed Perl is the art critic for THE NEW REPUBLIC and the author, most recently, of MAGICIANS AND CHARLATANS: ESSAYS ON ART AND CULTURE (Eakins).*





# The Pitching Life

The art of the movie deal, circa 2013.

By David Thomson



# O

ONCE UPON A TIME, ORSON WELLES IS supposed to have lamented that he spent 95 percent of his life running around trying to raise money for movies and 5 percent making them. “It’s no way to live,” he concluded, but that imbalance lasted Welles until he was seventy, when he died, alone, in a cottage in the Hollywood hills. This shriveled life seems seductive to many people, and the glory and the madness of the contract have no better display than at the Cannes Film Festival, which is about to open again for business, publicity, sex, and a just a little art.

As usual, a Palme d’Or will be awarded, and the official competition includes the Coen Brothers’ *Inside Llewyn Davis*; *The Past* by Asghar Farhadi (his last film was *A Separation*); *Nebraska* by Alexander Payne; Steven Soderbergh’s *Behind the Candelabra*, which has Michael Douglas as Liberace; and *Only God Forgives*, in which director Nicolas Winding-Refn is reunited with Ryan Gosling, his star from *Drive*. There are other events, outside competition: Baz Luhrmann’s *The Great Gatsby* will be the

## Seduced and Abandoned

Stanley Kauffmann’s film reviews may be found on [newrepublic.com/authors/stanley-kauffmann](http://newrepublic.com/authors/stanley-kauffmann).



opening film; a very strange venture, *All is Lost*, will be screened—it has just one character and no talk, but the star is Robert Redford, and the writer-director is J.C. Chandor, who made the brilliant *Margin Call*. The special events also include Stephen Frears's *Muhammad Ali's Greatest Fight*, which explores Ali's battle in the courts to avoid going to Vietnam (and has Frank Langella as Chief Justice Burger). And then there is *Seduced and Abandoned*, which is the perfect Cannes event.

What is *Seduced and Abandoned*? Last year, two friends elected to go to the Cannes Festival with a film crew. They were Alec Baldwin and James Toback, the director of *Fingers*, *Two Girls and a Guy*, and *Tyson*, and the screenwriter on *Bugsy*. They had three investors and their plan was to make a movie about Baldwin and Toback running around Cannes attempting to raise money for a project. In truth, this is a more candid portrait of Cannes than the distinguished films that will play at the Palais. For Cannes is basically a marketplace, attended by many money people who never bother to see a picture but take meetings everywhere from the terrace of the Carlton Hotel to

the beach at night, seeking to put together projects that are hard to describe or to credit without mirth or madness.

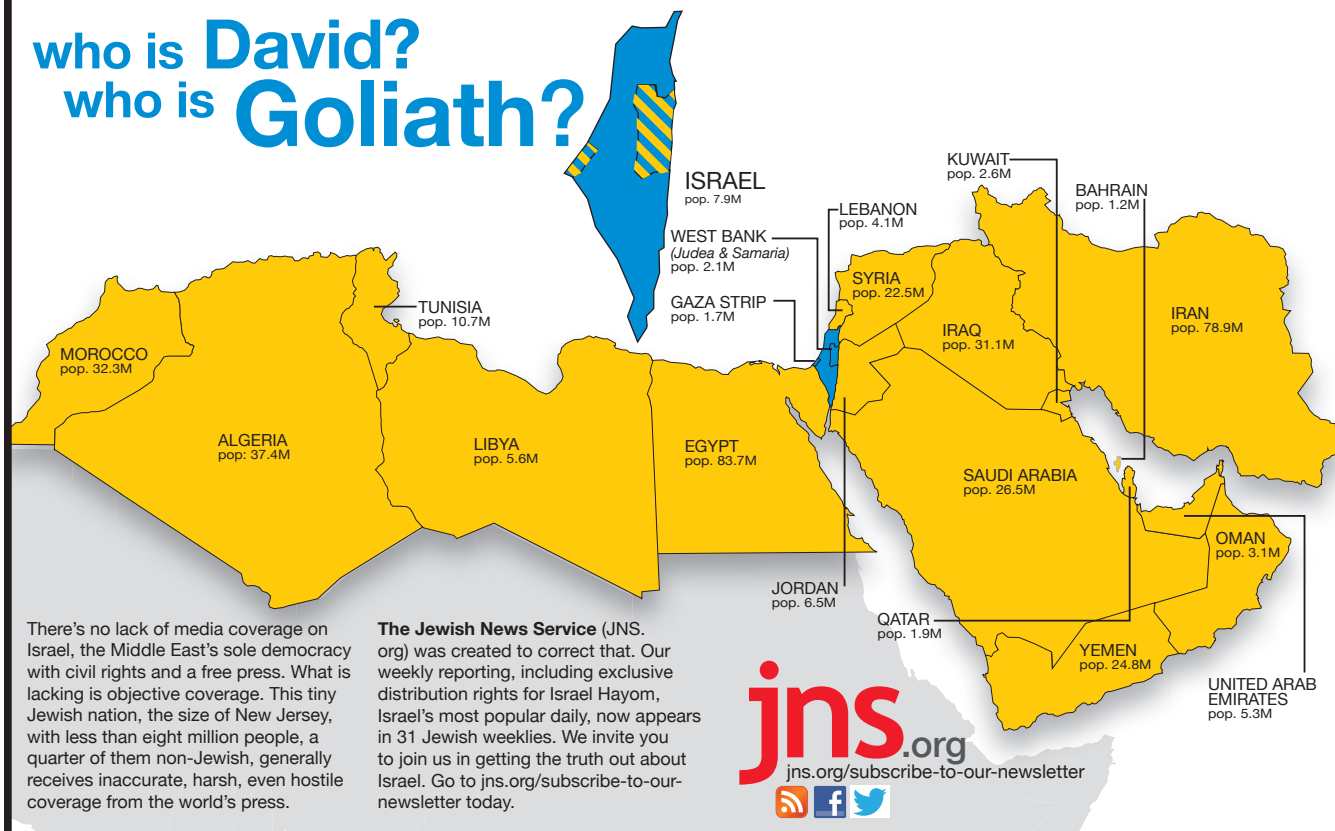
Baldwin and Toback have a pitch: a film to be set in Iraq, with an American who is disillusioned after the war. So there will be political intrigue, action, and a little espionage. Or anything else a money man cares to name. Comedy? asks one. Sure, comedy, agree our guys. Scenes in Russia and China? Why not? The original plan (there is no evidence that it exists on paper) also involves a frank, exploratory sexual relationship—it might be called *Last Tango in Tikrit*, suggests Toback. Of course, Baldwin will play the man, and for the woman they're pitching Neve Campbell, who was in *When Will I Be Loved?* for Toback. (That had a domestic gross of nearly \$160,000.)

What follows is brutal but as funny as the John Goodman-Alan Arkin scenes in *Argo*. Baldwin and Toback are dreaming of a budget around \$25 million, but one financier listens to the pitch and tells them that Neve Campbell is very nice, he likes Neve Campbell, but she means so little at the box office. Worse, he suggests, Baldwin is more a TV actor these days than a movie star. So he reckons that the project

is worth \$5 million tops. "I'm too old for that," responds Toback, and by now he is carrying Wellesian weight that suggests he needs to direct from a chair. One financier wonders if the girl could be Natalie Portman. Then someone else, voicing the same doubts, suggests Jessica Chastain. Well, says Toback, that might work. He doesn't want to throw Neve Campbell under the bus, but maybe they could write in another part: the girl could be Jessica, while Neve could play Alec's disenchanted wife or his ex-wife.

The next thing you know, Jim and Alec are talking to Jessica Chastain herself, who has learned the trick of being elusively vague about everything. Then they talk to Diane Kruger, who rather flinches at the idea of uninhibited sex; she claims that she is interested, but they haven't got her yet. What we realize is that this film project is made of rubber. It can stretch and change form to accommodate any source of money. When the American producer Mike Medavoy says it might raise \$25 million, our heroes are ready to sign on the spot. The script? Well, no glimpse of it yet. Toback tells a story (he is an exuberant storyteller) about the time when Fellini wanted to persuade Marcello Mastroianni to do *La*

## who is David? who is Goliath?





*Dolce Vita*. I'd like to see a script, said the actor, and Fellini gave him a block of 120 pages, all blank except for the title page, which had a drawing of Mastroianni in the sea with his immense penis attracting mermaids. "That's an interesting part," said Mastroianni, and made the film.

Now, the Cannes Film Festival and its top prize, the Palme d'Or, can turn very dignified, as when the austere Michael Haneke took the prize twice in recent years with *The White Ribbon* and *Amour*, and Terrence Malick won for *The Tree of Life*. I don't doubt that if this project in Tikrit ever gets made (and they are open to filming in Tunisia, and why not Malibu?), Toback and Baldwin will speak with splendid sincerity about artistic integrity (and hope that Neve Campbell keeps quiet). This very year at Cannes, they will introduce their *Seduced and Abandoned*, a hugely entertaining film, as neither documentary nor feature, but as an entirely new genre, and it may be one of the hits of the festival. Your chance to see it will come soon, I think, because HBO regards it as a very special event.

HBO is right. This film has a great deal going for it: interviews with Scorsese and Coppola, Bertolucci and Polanski; considered testimony from Ryan Gosling; anecdotes from Todd McCarthy, the film critic for *The Hollywood Reporter*; a judicious overview from Thierry Fremaux, the man who now runs Cannes; the poker smiles of all the money men; the ravenous press people; and best of all, the ongoing double act of Baldwin and Toback. Toback will be sixty-nine this November, while Baldwin is fifty-five. They have never worked together until now, but they make a bouncy, boyish team. They have the same scathing humor, and a matching instinct that there is no real talk now: everything is like lines from a film made long ago, or still to be completed. They are both very smart and totally absorbed in the melodrama of being themselves.

And here is the point: they are typical of the kind of people who flourish at Cannes and in the film business as a whole, because they can hold opposed ideas in their heads at the same time. For example: how can we make a great movie and who's going to pay for this round of drinks? It's a board game where you have to pay for the drinks, the hotel room, the limos, and the tuxedos because the next deal may depend on that assurance. It

## A Late September Afternoon in the Office of the Birches

By Alan Michael Parker

Sometimes, a squirrel like a thought  
agitates through the leaves.  
Scrabbling up the papery bark  
of a birch tree, almost free.

When I close my eyes,  
the cool moss on the rock  
against my cheek feels like a memory  
I can't recall—ice cream? peaches?

Sometimes, the wind delivers.  
But there are no messages.  
A gash of blue quartz  
veins a boulder in the clearing,  
pulses, fixed.

One characteristic of light: it reaches.  
Sometimes, the wind sloughs into readiness,  
silent upon the strings of the birches,  
and like the deer I raise my head.

was the Hungarian mogul Alexander Korda who said, long ago, that the way to handle Hollywood was to arrive in town, stay at the best hotel, be seen with the most beautiful women at the most expensive restaurants, charge everything but tip lavishly. And wait for offers. It still works.

*Seduced and Abandoned* is a title that hints at self-pity in the guys: the system will seduce them into making a picture and then toss them on the scrap heap. But the system has exactly the same feelings. Everyone knows that everyone else is a rascal—but *your* friend and *your* rascal. There may be some lofty, if not pretentious, works coming to Cannes this year, loaded down with integrity and art—a version of Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* by James Franco could be one, and *The Great Gatsby* may be another. But then there might be a masterpiece or two, like *A Separation* and *Amour*, or a sensational entertainment that simply captures every imagination and makes a ton of money—like *Pulp Fiction*, *Blow-Up*, *The Wages of Fear*, and *The Third Man*, all of which won the Palme d'Or in their time.

Meanwhile the serious cinephiles at Cannes will ignore so many things—the sun, the sea, the food, the countryside, even the sexual invitations—in the effort to cram five or six films into every day. For the French, Cannes is a way of saying, look, here is the south of France, a reminder to tourism. It is so expensive an event that you know for certain that few people there are paying their own way. They are on some kind of expense account, like children who want Daddy to keep them funded. *Seduced and Abandoned* is exhilarating because it suggests that these sophisticated infants, these self-pitying pirates, these people who know a bus is always coming if someone needs to be disposed of, might also be geniuses for a moment. Orson Welles said it wasn't worth the exchange, 5 percent of movies for 95 of exhaustion and disappointment. But he, Toback, Baldwin, and three-quarters of the men and women in Cannes trust no other way to die. ●

David Thomson is a film critic for THE NEW REPUBLIC.

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**A REPORTER WHO VISITED THE WHITE HOUSE LAST WEEK** brought back the news that the criticism of President Obama's immobility about the Syrian disaster has "begun to sting." Good.

Something got through. The president's sophistries about his "red line" helped, of course: he spoke his way into a predicament that he cannot speak his way out of, thereby damaging the article of faith about the magical powers of his speech. The press is full of reports that our policy may be changing, that we may finally supply weapons to rebels we can ideologically support, that we have identified such rebels under the leadership of General Salim Idris, and so on. "We are on an upward trajectory," a White House official told another reporter about these second thoughts, which only a short while ago it would have considered a downward trajectory. Obama, somewhat embarrassed by the implication that for two years he may have been in error about one of the most consequential crises of his presidency, is having the White House rehearse its old admonition about caution (its chin-stroking Kissingerian term for a doctrinaire timidity), but still something may be stirring. The Syrian use of sarin and the Israeli airstrikes (which were miraculously unimpeded by the mythical power of Assad's air defenses) seem to have concentrated the West Wing mind. Is Obama being stung into action? I do not really believe it—his anti-interventionism runs deep, philosophically and temperamentally; but in any event it is not too early to record a few lessons that can be extracted from this fiasco.

*The bitterness of belatedness.* There is nothing we know about Assad now that we did not know a year ago and longer. Not even his use of chemical weapons changes our understanding of him. His strategy in this crisis has always been to transform a democratic rebellion into a sectarian war, and his method for doing so has been to commit crimes against humanity. In the two years of American quiescence the Syrian situation has become only more dire, so that those who now plead that there are no perfect options are right. But there are imperfect options, which is often all that the Hobbesian life of nations anyway allows: we can still create pro-Western elements in the struggle for Syria after Assad, and deny Al Qaeda a government in Damascus, and stem the tide of the refugees that is shaking the entire region. Yet the road to a democratic Syria is now much longer

and more twisted than it had to be. I say this not only in recrimination, but also because Obama's failure to act swiftly in the Syrian crisis reiterates one of the regular mistakes of American presidents after the cold war, which is to refuse to treat an emergency like an emergency. In many problems of statecraft, patience is a virtue and judiciousness the beginning of wisdom; but not in all. There are gross outrages against justice, such as the butchery of civilians, that must be acted against without delay or they have not been properly understood. Confronted by this degree of urgency, the difference between success and failure is time. Why do we have to keep rediscovering this? Must the learning curve of presidents always cost so many corpses? Has anyone at the White House read Samantha Power's book?

*The cult of the exit strategy.* A "senior American official who is involved in Syria policy" plaintively said this to Dexter Filkins of *The New Yorker*: "People on the Hill ask me, 'Why can't we do a no-fly zone? Why can't we do military strikes?' Of course we can do these things. The issue is, where will it stop?" The answer is, we don't know. But is the gift of prophecy really a requirement for historical action? Must we know the ending at the beginning? If so, then nobody would start a business, or a book, or a medical treatment, or a love affair, let alone an invasion of Omaha Beach. We can have certainty about our objectives but not about our circumstances. The most

serious action is often improvisatory, though its purposes should always be clear. The prestige of "the exit strategy" in our culture is another American attempt to deny the contingency of experience and assert mastery over what cannot be mastered—in this instance, it is American control-freakishness applied to the use of American force. But we often engage with what we cannot master. No outcomes are assured, except perhaps when we do nothing. We do not need to control the realm in which we need to take action; we need only to have strong and defensible reasons and strong and defensible means, and to keep our wits, our analytical abilities, about us. After all, there are many ways, good and bad, to end a military commitment, as Obama himself has shown. All this talk of exiting is designed only to inhibit us from entering. Like its cousin "the slippery slope," "the exit strategy" is demagoguery masquerading as prudence.

*The eclipse of humanitarianism.* Seventy thousand people have died in the Syrian war, most of them at the hands of their ruler. Since this number has appeared in the papers for many months, the actual number must be much higher. The slaughter is unceasing. But the debate about American intervention is increasingly conducted in "realist" terms: the threat to American interests posed by jihadism in Syria, the intrigues of Iran and Hezbollah, the rattling of Israel, the ruination of Jordan and Lebanon and Iraq. Those are all good reasons for the president of the United States to act like the president of the United States. But wouldn't the prevention of ethnic cleansing and genocidal war be reason enough? Is the death of scores and even hundreds of thousands, and the displacement of millions, less significant for American policy, and less quickening? The moral dimension must be restored to our deliberations, the moral sting, or else Obama, for all his talk about conscience, will have presided over a terrible mutilation of American discourse: the severance of conscience from action. ●



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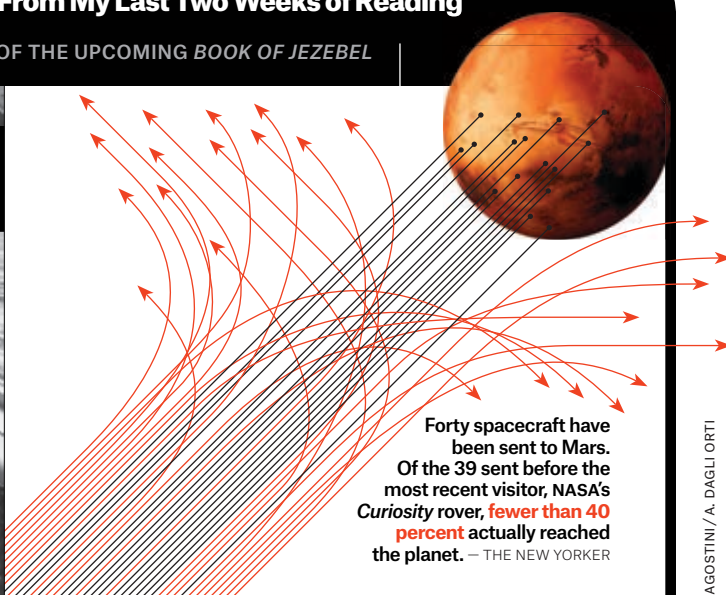
# The Most Compelling Details From My Last Two Weeks of Reading

BY

*Anne Holmes*

EDITOR OF THE UPCOMING BOOK OF JEZEBEL

Stray dogs board the London Tube every morning to travel from the suburbs to the city in search of food. **The dogs prefer quieter cars** at the front and back of trains and can assess the amount of time to be on the train so as not to miss their stops. — THE SUN



An apple tree can live **more than 200 years** and still bear fruit. — MOTHER JONES

Nearly **70 percent** of *Politico's* top female editors and staff writers as of January 20, 2011, have since departed. The figure for men is **34 percent**. — THE WASHINGTON POST

**POLITICO** 70% 34%

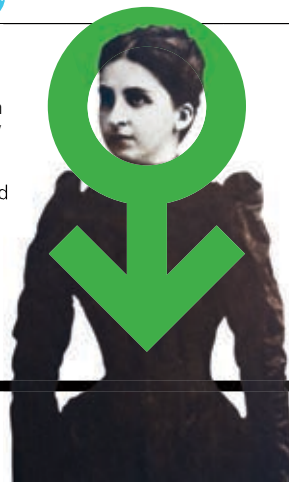
**Former basketball star Allen Iverson earned and burned more than \$150 million during his 14-year NBA career. During divorce proceedings last year, he complained that he didn't "even have money for a cheeseburger." (His ex-wife promptly gave him \$61.)** — THE WASHINGTON POST



The Federal Helium Program was established in the 1920s, when zeppelins were thought to be viable means of conducting war and leaders **feared a "blimp gap."** Today it administers a reserve underneath Texas that contains enough of the lighter-than-air gas to fill **33 billion party balloons**. — THE WASHINGTON POST



The five women behind the Miss G Project for Equity in Education—which successfully agitated for the inclusion of gender studies in **Ontario, Canada, high schools**—named their campaign after "Miss G," a university graduate from the 1800s whose untimely death was blamed on **"too much energy in brain, not enough in womb."** — TORONTO STAR



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