# Amend It!

by Jill Lepore

The Atlantic
EST. 1857

*The authors of the Constitution believed that it could, and should, change over time. The process of amendment is built into the document. Why have we abandoned — and all but forgotten — this essential democratic tool?*

*This is the story of how partisans of the legal philosophy known as originalism have undermined the process of constitutional evolution envisioned by the Founders. The Constitution is not a living document, originalists say. In the words of the late Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, it is "dead, dead, dead." And the only people who can be trusted to interpret its meaning, they argue, are the originalists themselves.*


12
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9
3
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6
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VOL. 336-NO. 4 OCTOBER 2025 CONTENTS



*Judd Apatow in his office in July*

*Features*

**58**

THE INVENTION OF JUDD APATOW

By Adrienne LaFrance

*How a kid from Long Island willed his way to the top of American comedy*

**20**

COVER STORY

**How Originalism Killed the Constitution**

*A radical legal philosophy has undermined the process of constitutional evolution.*

By Jill Lepore

**36**

**The Greatest Fight of All Time**

*Fifty years ago, Muhammad Ali met Joe Frazier in Manila.*

By Vann R. Newkirk II

**48**

**The Neighbor From Hell**

*Israel and the United States delivered a blow to Iran. But it could come back stronger.*

By Graeme Wood

PHOTOGRAPH BY MAGGIE SHANNON FOR *THE ATLANTIC*

*Front*

**6**
**The Commons**
*Discussion & Debate*

*Dispatches*

**9**
OPENING ARGUMENT
**You Deserved Better**
*A letter to America's discarded public servants*
By William J. Burns

**14**
VIEWFINDER
**Jazz Legends**
Photographs by Lisette Model

*Culture & Critics*

**72**
OMNIVORE
**This Was Spinal Tap**
*One more smell of the glove*
By James Parker

**76**
BOOKS
**Whither the Dictionary?**
*These are parlous times for lexicographers.*
By Stefan Fatsis

**80**
BOOKS
**John Cheever's Secrets**
*In a new memoir, Susan Cheever searches for the well-spring of her father's genius.*
By Adam Begley

**83**
**Summertime**
A poem by Rosanna Warren

**84**
BOOKS
**Songs of Herself**
*How did Taylor Swift convince the world that she's relatable?*
By Spencer Kornhaber

*Back*

**90**
ESSAY
**The Ghost of Lady Murasaki**
*A thousand years ago, she wrote* The Tale of Genji, *a story of sex and intrigue in Japan's imperial court. I went to Kyoto to find her.*
By Lauren Groff

**100**
**Caleb's Inferno**
A crossword by Caleb Madison

*On the Cover*

TYPOGRAPHY BY SEAN & EVE, THERE IS STUDIO

AI GIVES THE AMERICAN WORKER

# SUPER POWERS

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Palantir

*Behind the Cover:* In this month's cover story, "How Originalism Killed the Constitution" (p. 20), Jill Lepore considers why the process of constitutional amendment has all but vanished from American politics. The Framers designed the Constitution to be adaptable, Lepore argues, but a conservative legal philosophy has undermined attempts to change it. For our cover design, the calligraphers Sean Freeman and Eve Steben of There Is Studio wrote out the headline and subheadline using fountain pens and traditional brushes, their tapered strokes evoking the lettering of the Constitution's preamble.

— Liz Hart, *Art Director*

# THE

## Eighty Years on the Edge

*In the August issue,* Atlantic *contributors examined the past eight decades of life in the Atomic Age.*

### *Letters*

Thank you for your series of articles on nuclear warfare. I was especially moved by the essays on Japanese internment and Kurt Vonnegut, but all of them led me to wonder why we humans seem so incapable of learning from the past.

Noah Hawley was correct to note that our current age is rife with innovations that are technically sweet but have rarely been subjected to the question *Just because we can, should we?* I wonder what Vonnegut would say if he were alive today.

Ellen Vliet Cohen
*Arlington, Mass.*

One question is not answered in *The Atlantic*'s August issue: What can really be done to rid the world of nuclear weapons? Perhaps it is time that this topic reentered public discussion.

My proposal is that the 186 countries that don't have nuclear weapons assemble and draft an ultimatum to the countries that do, stating that unless the nuclear-armed states get rid of their weapons, they, the non-nuclear-armed states, will band together to conduct the research and development necessary for each of them to have their own weapons. That's it. Risky? Yes. But is it riskier than the present situation? Perhaps not. Ross Andersen, in "The New Arms Race," predicts that the nuclear club may double under existing conditions. Staying on the present course assures us of only one thing: that we will eventually, by intention, misjudgment, human or technological error, or just plain bad luck accomplish our mutual assured destruction. The ultimatum risks nothing more than that.

Red Slider
*Sacramento, Calif.*

How can I describe the feeling I had when I turned to "The Light of a Man-Made Star" and saw the photographs from Michael Light's *100 Suns*? First among them is a photograph of the Hood test, to which I, as a small child, was exposed. My father, a mineral exploration geologist interested in uranium, had brought my brother, mother, and me to Nevada that summer.

I was young, and my memories of that time are few: lifting my pillow off the floor in the bunkhouse to expose a rattlesnake, the ghostly rise and fall of a player piano's keys. Years later, many residents of the area contracted cancer from the fallout. Danger, secrecy, and the unnatural—these were the hallmarks of my own private nuclear age.

The following year, in 1958, my father went to work on a feasibility study for Project Chariot, to determine whether the government should use nuclear devices to bomb a harbor into the coast of northwestern Alaska. The project was classified, and he didn't speak of it until the year I turned 12, when I accidentally discovered a book-length document titled "The Effects of Nuclear Weapons" in our bookcase. The chapter that I most remember was titled "Effects on

# COMMONS

DISCUSSION & DEBATE

Personnel." It contained photographs of *hibakusha*—Japanese atomic-bomb survivors—with their bodies exposed to display the kimono patterns that had been burned into their backs. I've never shaken these images from my mind, or forgotten that those photographed were treated in the text not as victims but as subjects of an experiment.

My father continued to prospect in Alaska for radioactive minerals. The summer before the Cuban missile crisis, he found a large deposit of beryllium, an element crucial to the workings of nuclear weapons; it earned him a write-up in *Newsweek* and a citation from the Alaska legislature. I grew up to become an English professor, and I taught Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* in a course on nuclear issues that I developed in the early 2000s. Vonnegut's portrayal of Felix Hoenikker struck close to home.

Alison Sainsbury
*Bloomington, Ill.*

I read "Damn You All to Hell!," Tom Nichols's article discussing films about nuclear war, with interest. He left out an obscure contribution to the genre: In 1964, Rod Serling wrote a TV movie starring Peter Sellers, *Carol for Another Christmas*, which portrayed a nightmarish future of nuclear destruction. My father was active in groups that urged a nuclear-test-ban treaty. He was so impressed with the movie that he bought a copy, got a projector and a screen, and went around Chicago showing it to anybody who would watch. I was a teenager and it frightened me—it seemed that we were all doomed to die in nuclear war. The movie remains worth a watch today.

Judith Jacobson
*Baltimore, Md.*

I appreciated "Damn You All to Hell!" and could relate to Tom Nichols's anecdote about teaching today's students about nuclear war. After 23 years on active duty in the Army, I also went into academia, teaching courses in political science and intelligence studies. When I first taught a class on homeland security, I shared videos of "duck and cover" drills and received similarly incredulous reactions from my students, who after 9/11 were living with the threat of terrorism—not nuclear war. At one of the colleges where I taught, I had a colleague who owned a home with a fallout shelter constructed in the 1960s. I took students to see it so they could imagine what it would have been like to actually live there. It wasn't until I showed them the 1999 movie *Blast From the Past*, however, that they fully grasped what a fallout shelter would have to look like for a family to survive a nuclear war.

Richard Kilroy
*Charlottesville, Va.*

Eleven years ago, I visited Manzanar with my wife, never having known that such a place existed. We were told that the word *manzanar* means "apple orchard" in Spanish, because the land where the internment site stood had originally been an apple orchard. Now, we discovered, it was a national historic site. Trying to imagine life in the prison camp was impossible. We couldn't visualize how families had been ripped from their homes and crammed into barracks surrounded by guard towers and barbed wire. Our visit ended in Manzanar's cemetery, which people still visit to see the graves of their ancestors. What we did not hear or see were the firsthand stories of the people who lived there. Andrew Aoyama's "The Expatriate," about Joseph Kurihara, was an article we needed to read, even 11 years later.

Richard Grove
*Philadelphia, Pa.*

I appreciated Jeffrey Goldberg's article, "Nuclear Roulette," which quotes me in its last sentence: "Most of all, we forget the rule articulated by the mathematician and cryptologist Martin Hellman: that the only way to survive Russian roulette is to stop playing."

Society neglects the nuclear threat at its peril. If we would honestly face that threat—and others, such as climate change—they could transform into opportunities to finally build the more peaceful, cooperative world we have dreamed of for ages, but thought ourselves incapable of achieving. To quote a paper I wrote some years ago, "'Technology has given a new, global meaning to the Biblical injunction: 'I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life that you and your descendants may live.'"

Martin E. Hellman
*Stanford, Calif.*

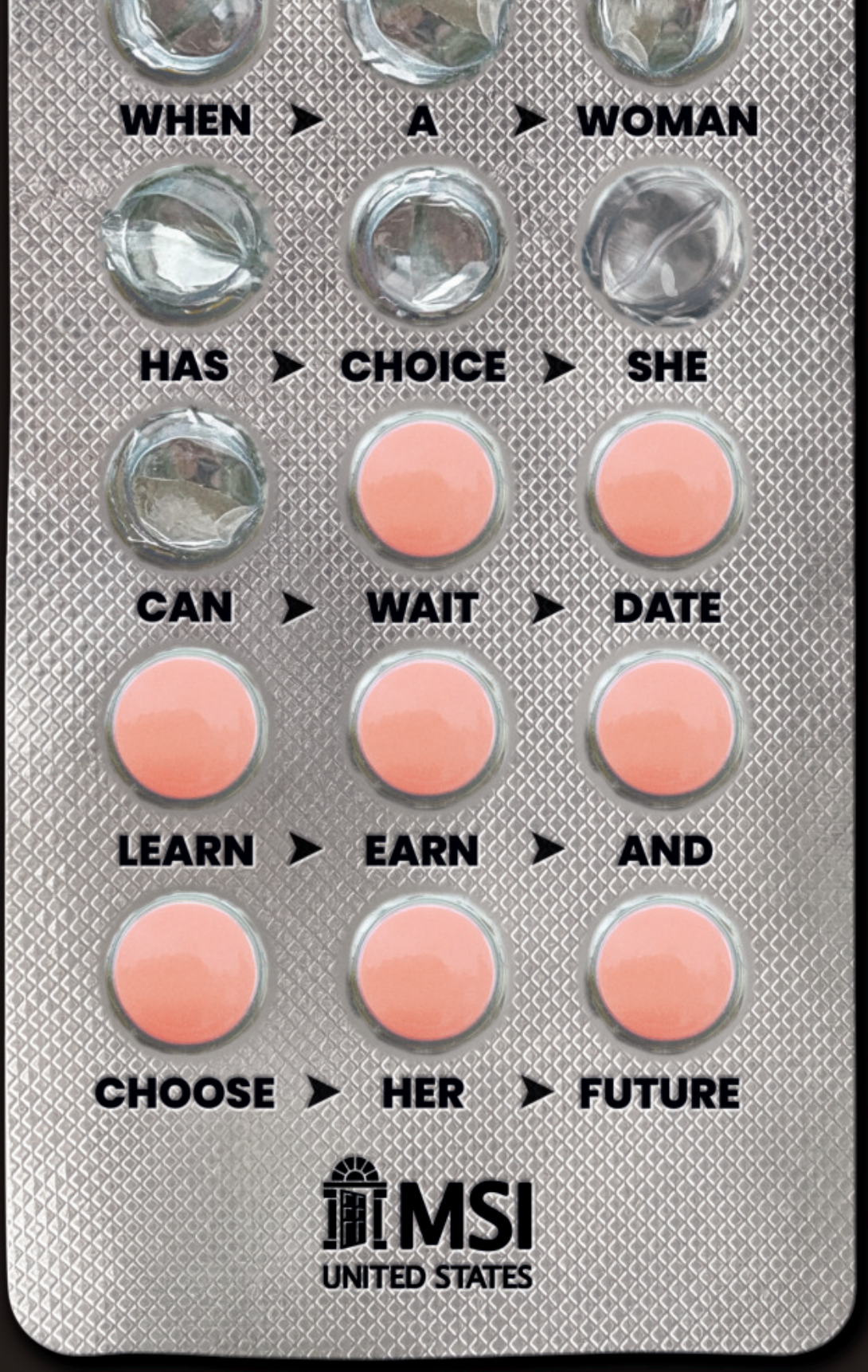
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*A Reminder From* The Atlantic*'s Editor in Chief*

Dear print subscribers: This is your semiannual reminder that the magazine label is now removable. The large white box bearing your address need not obscure our cover's brilliant design and compelling message. Not yet a print subscriber? Please join us! www.theatlantic.com/subscribe

*Corrections:* "The New Arms Race" (August) stated that Japan's centrifuge program reprocesses nuclear waste into plutonium. In fact, this process occurs in separate waste-reprocessing plants. "The Judgments of Muriel Spark" (September) stated that T. S. Eliot converted to Catholicism. In fact, he converted to Anglo-Catholicism.

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# DISPATCHES

OPENING ARGUMENT

## YOU DESERVED BETTER

*A letter to America's discarded public servants*

BY WILLIAM J. BURNS

Dear Colleagues,

For three and a half decades as a career diplomat, I walked across the lobby of the State Department countless times—inspired by the Stars and Stripes and humbled by the names of patriots etched into our memorial wall. It was heartbreaking to see so many of you crossing that same lobby in tears following the reduction in force in July, carrying cardboard boxes with family photos and the everyday remains of proud careers in public service.

After years of hard jobs in hard places—defusing crises, tending alliances, opening markets, and helping Americans in distress—you deserved better.

The same is true for so many other public servants who have been fired or pushed out in recent months: the remarkable intelligence officers I was proud to lead as CIA director, the senior military officers I worked with every day, the development specialists I served alongside overseas, and too many others with whom we've served at home and abroad.

The work you all did was unknown to many Americans, rarely well understood or well appreciated. And under the guise of reform, you all got caught in the crossfire of a retribution campaign—of a war on public service and expertise.

Those of us who have served in public institutions understand that serious reforms are overdue. Of course we should remove bureaucratic hurdles that prevent agencies like the State Department from operating efficiently. But there is a smart way and a dumb way to tackle reform, a humane way and an intentionally traumatizing way.

If today's process were truly about sensible reform, career officers—who typically rotate roles every few years—wouldn't have been fired simply because their positions have fallen out of political favor.

If this process were truly about sensible reform, crucial experts in technology or China policy in whom our country has invested so much wouldn't have been pushed out.

If this process were truly about reform, it would have addressed not only the manifestations of bloat and inefficiencies but also their causes—including congressionally mandated budget items.

And if this process were truly about sensible reform, you and your families wouldn't have been treated with gleeful indignity. One of your colleagues, a career diplomat, was given just six hours to clear out his office. "When I was expelled from Russia," he said, "at least Putin gave me six days to leave."

No, this is not about reform. It is about retribution. It is about breaking people and breaking institutions by sowing fear and mistrust throughout our government. It is about paralyzing public servants—making them apprehensive about what they say, how it might be interpreted, and who might report on them. It is about deterring anyone from daring to speak truth to power.

I SERVED SIX presidents: three Republicans and three Democrats. It was my duty to faithfully implement their decisions, even when I didn't agree with them. Career public servants have a profound obligation to execute the decisions of elected leaders, whether we voted for them or not; that discipline is essential to any democratic system.

Many of your fellow officers purged at the State Department were doing just that—faithfully executing decisions that ran contrary to their professional advice and preferences. They may not have supported the cancellation of Fulbright scholarships, the resettlement of Afrikaners, the expulsion of the Afghan partners who fought and bled with us for two decades, but they implemented those policies anyway. Still, those officers were fired.

Tensions between elected political leaders and career public servants are hardly new. Each of the presidents I served harbored periodic concerns about the reliability and sluggishness of government bureaucracy. Although individual officers could be remarkably resourceful, the State Department as an institution was rarely accused of being too agile or too full of initiative. There is a difference, however, between fixing bureaucratic malaise and hammering professional public servants into politicized robots.

THIS IS ABOUT RETRIBUTION. IT IS ABOUT BREAKING PEOPLE AND BREAKING INSTITUTIONS.

That's what autocrats do. They cow public servants into submission—and in doing so, they create a closed system that is free of opposing views and inconvenient concerns. Their policy making, their ability to realize their aims, suffers as a result.

Vladimir Putin's foolish decision to invade Ukraine in February 2022 offers a powerful example. Putin operated within a tight circle in the run-up to the war. He relied on a handful of long-serving advisers who either shared his flawed assumptions about Ukraine's ability to resist and the West's willingness to support it, or had learned a long time ago that it was not career-enhancing to question Putin's judgment. The results, especially in the first year of the war, were catastrophic for Russia.

For all its flaws and imperfections, our system still allows disciplined dissent—and it's better for it. Just as it is the duty of public servants to carry out orders we don't agree with, it is also our duty to be honest about our concerns within appropriate channels—or to resign if we can't in good conscience follow those orders. Sound decision making suffers if experts feel like they cannot offer their candid or contrary insights.

I could not have done my job as an ambassador, as a deputy secretary of state, or as the CIA director unless my colleagues were straightforward about their views. When I led secret talks with the Iranians more than a decade ago, I needed the unvarnished advice of diplomats and intelligence officers to help me navigate the complex world of nuclear programs and Iranian decision making. I needed colleagues to question my judgment sometimes, and offer creative, hard-nosed solutions.

There is a real danger in punishing dissent—not only to our profession, but to our country. Once you start, policy can become an extension of court politics, with little airing of alternative views or consideration of second- and third-order consequences.

LIKE SOME OF you, I'm old enough to have lived through other efforts at reform and streamlining. After the end of

the Cold War, budgets were cut significantly, and the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency and the U.S. Information Agency were absorbed into the State Department. Years later, when I was serving as the American ambassador in Moscow, we reduced staff by about 15 percent over three years. None of those was a perfect process, but they were conducted in a thoughtful way, respectful of public servants and their expertise.

Long before any of us served in government, amid the escalation of the Cold War, in the 1950s, McCarthyism provided a vivid example of an alternative approach, full of deliberate trauma and casual cruelty. A generation of China specialists was falsely accused of being Communist sympathizers and driven from the State Department, kneecapping American diplomacy toward Beijing for years. Today's "reform" process—at State and elsewhere across the federal government—bears much more resemblance to McCarthy's costly excesses than to any other era in which I've served. And it's much more damaging.

We live in a new era—one that is marked by major-power competition and a revolution in technology, and one that is more confusing, complicated, and combustible than any time before. I believe the United States still has a better

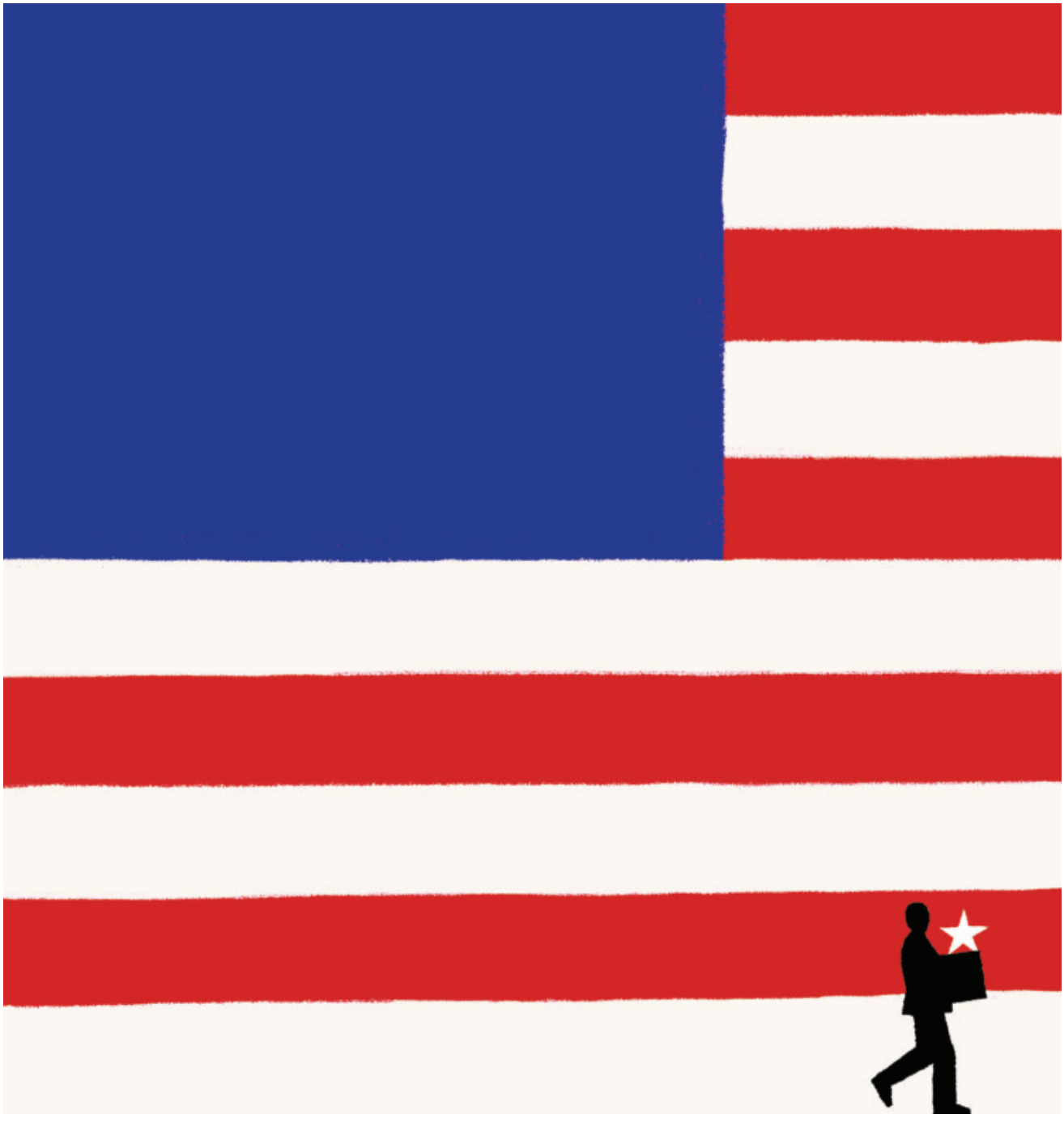


ILLUSTRATION BY BEN HICKEY

hand to play than any of our rivals, unless we squander the moment and throw away some of our best cards. That's exactly what the current administration is doing.

We cannot afford to further erode the sources of our power at home and abroad. The demolition of institutions—the dismantling of USAID and Voice of America, the planned 50 percent reduction in the State Department's budget—is part of a bigger strategic self-immolation. We've put at risk the network of alliances and partnerships that is the envy of our rivals. We've even gutted the research funding that powers our economy.

If intelligence analysts at the CIA saw our rivals engage in this kind of great-power suicide, we would break out the bourbon. Instead, the sound we hear is of champagne glasses clinking in the Kremlin and Zhongnanhai.

Of course we should put our own national interests first. But winning in an intensely competitive world means thinking beyond narrowly defined self-interest and building coalitions that counterbalance our adversaries; it requires working together on "problems without passports" such as climate change and global health challenges, which no single country can solve on its own.

At our best, over the years I served in government, we were guided by enlightened self-interest, a balance of hard power and soft power. That's what produced victory in the Cold War, the reunification of Germany, the coalition success in Operation Desert Storm, peace in the Balkans, nuclear-arms-control treaties, and the defense of Ukraine against Putin's aggression. The bipartisan PEPFAR program is a shining example of America at its best—saving tens of millions of people from the deadly threat of HIV/AIDS while also fostering some measure of stability in sub-Saharan Africa, establishing wider trust in American leadership, and keeping Americans safe.

> IF WE SAW OUR RIVALS ENGAGE IN THIS KIND OF GREAT-POWER SUICIDE, WE WOULD BREAK OUT THE BOURBON.

We weren't always at our best, or always especially enlightened, as we stumbled into protracted and draining conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, or when we didn't press allies hard enough to contribute their fair share. Criticism of the current administration should not obscure any of that, or suggest a misplaced nostalgia for an imperfect past.

The growing danger today, however, is that we're focused exclusively on the "self" part of enlightened self-interest—at the expense of the "enlightened" part. The threat we face is not from an imaginary "deep state" bent on undermining an elected president, but from a weak state of hollowed-out institutions and battered and belittled public servants, no longer able to uphold the guardrails of our democracy or help the United States compete in an unforgiving world. We won't beat hostile autocrats by imitating them.

MANY YEARS AGO, when I was finishing graduate school and trying to figure out what I wanted to do with my professional life, my father sent me a note. He was a career Army officer, a remarkably decent man, and the best model of public service I have ever known. "Nothing can make you prouder," my dad wrote, "than to serve your country with honor." I've spent the past 40 years learning the truth in his advice.

I am deeply proud to have served alongside so many of you. Your expertise and your often quietly heroic public service have made an immeasurable contribution to the best interests of our country. You swore an oath—not to a party or a president, but to the Constitution. To the people of the United States.

To protect us. To defend us. To keep us safe.

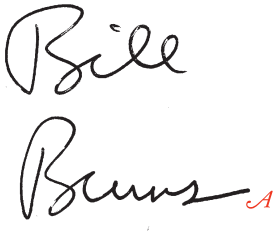
You've fulfilled your oath, just as those still serving in government are trying their best to fulfill theirs. So will the next generation of public servants.

All of us have a profound stake in shaping their inheritance. I worry about how much damage we will do in the meantime. There is still a chance that the next generation will serve in a world where we curb the worst of our current excesses—stop betraying the ideals of public service, stop firing experts just because their statistics are unwelcome, and stop blowing up institutions that matter to our future. There is still a chance that the next generation could be present at the creation of a new era for America in the world, in which we're mindful of our many strengths but more careful about overreach.

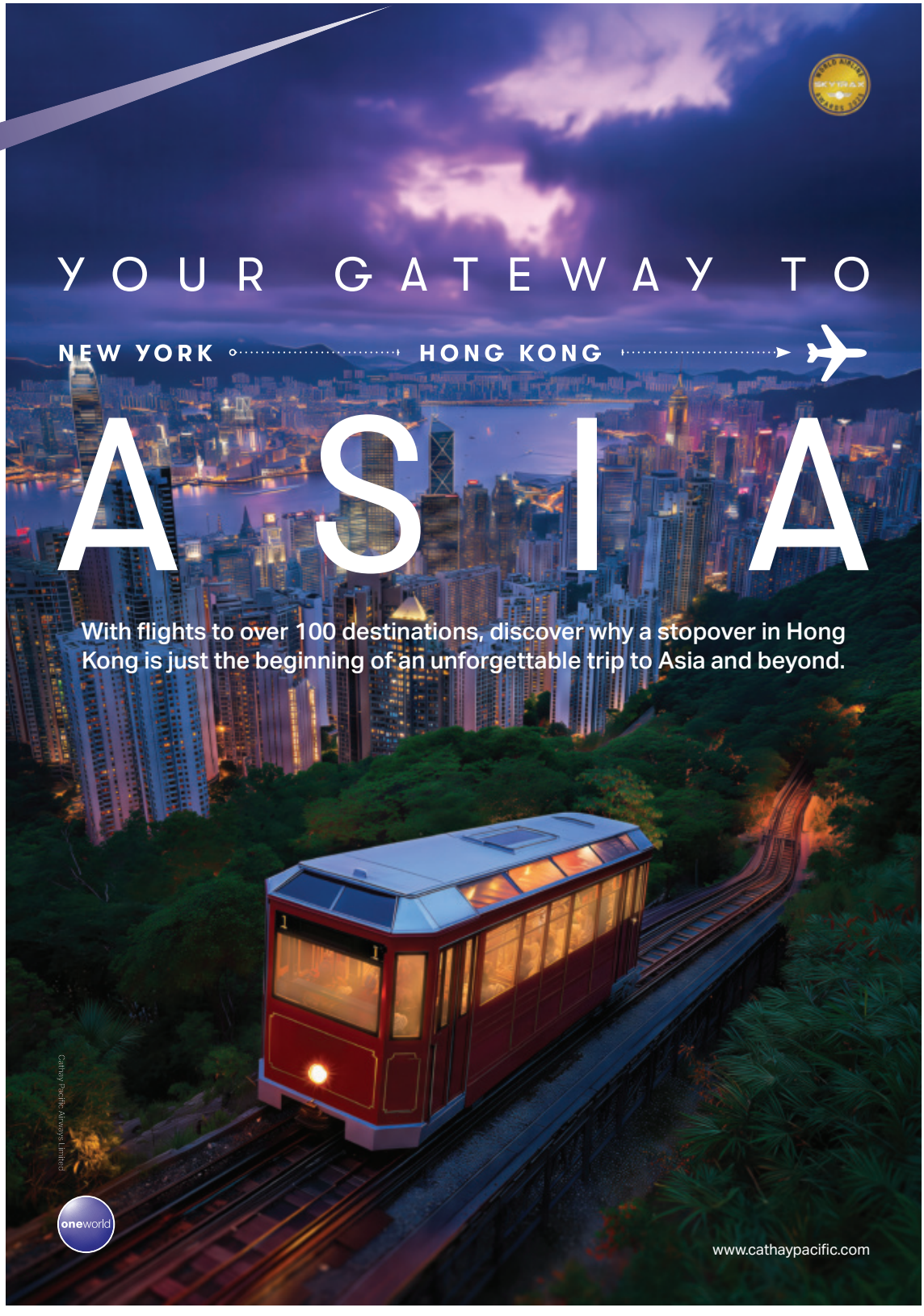
There is, sadly, room for doubt about those chances. At this pivotal moment, there's a growing possibility that we will inflict so much damage on ourselves and our place in the world that those future public servants will instead find themselves present at the destruction—a self-inflicted, generational setback to American leadership and national security.

But what I do not doubt is the abiding importance of public service, and the value of what you have done with yours. And I know that you will continue to serve in different ways, helping to stand watch over our great experiment, even as too many of our elected leaders seem to be turning their backs on it.

With appreciation to you and your families,



*William J. Burns is a former career diplomat who served as director of the CIA and deputy secretary of state. He is the author of* The Back Channel: A Memoir of American Diplomacy and the Case for Its Renewal.




CATHAY PACIFIC
MOVE BEYOND





# Jazz Legends

## *Photographs by Lisette Model*

"I was absolutely overwhelmed by jazz because I knew that was America," the photographer Lisette Model once said. America is many things—joy and pain, freedom and repression—and Model's photos of jazz musicians and their audiences captured the full range. Model, a Viennese Jewish émigré, is best known today for her street photography, but in the early 1950s, she set out to create a book of jazz pictures, with an accompanying essay to be written by Langston Hughes. But as the art historian Audrey Sands writes in an essay included in a new book of Model's photos, suspicion of her leftist politics led to the project's collapse; Model herself was investigated by the FBI and Senator Joseph McCarthy. When she died in 1983, Model left behind some 1,800 negatives from her jazz project, most of which were never printed.

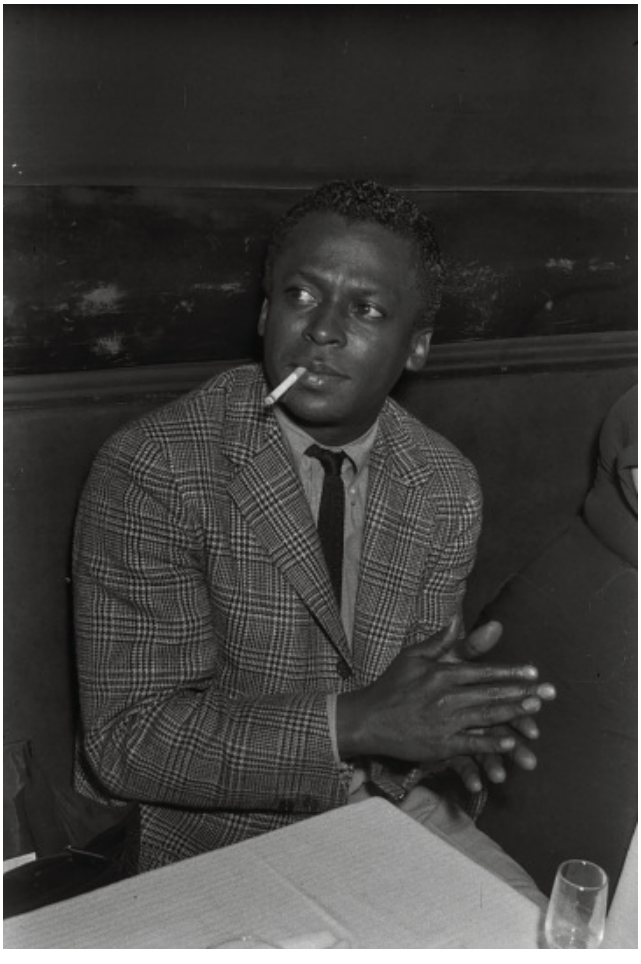
Model loved to document audiences in moments of rapture. What jumps out in her images of musicians, however, is the wariness in their eyes and gestures—even from the courtly Duke Ellington. "I know of no photographer who has photographed people as inwardly as Lisette Model," the photographer Berenice Abbott wrote. Perhaps shared experiences of persecution connected Model, who had fled the Nazis in Europe, with her subjects. Even as the U.S. government

used jazz to promote America's image abroad, the genre's luminaries suffered racism and violence at home. Miles Davis was brutally beaten by a police officer during a break in one of his own shows at a Manhattan nightclub, the worst of many incidents with law enforcement throughout his career. The drummer Art Taylor eventually relocated to France, where he and many other Black musicians sought better conditions. Billie Holiday, who for years had been harassed by the Federal Bureau of Narcotics, was arrested as she lay dying of liver and heart disease in the hospital. Model took a series of poignant postmortem photographs of Holiday, then never shot another jazz image again.

***— David A. Graham***

Previous pages: *Ray Nance (*left*) and Duke Ellington (*right*) at the Newport Jazz Festival, July 1956*

These pages (left to right): *Miles Davis at Café Bohemia in New York City, 1957; Art Taylor at Café Bohemia, 1957; Billie Holiday at the New York Jazz Festival, 1957*





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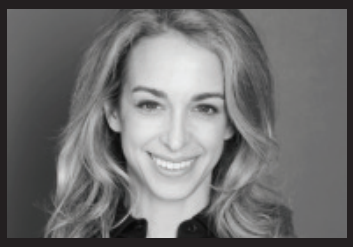
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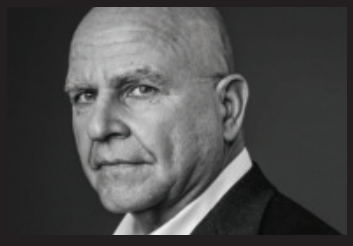
## Catherine Coleman Flowers

Founder, Center for Rural Enterprise and Environmental Justice



## Gayle King

Co-Host, *CBS Mornings*, and Editor at Large, *Oprah Daily*



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# How Originalism Killed the Constitution

A radical legal philosophy has undermined the process of constitutional evolution.

by Jill Lepore

Illustrations by Tyler Comrie;
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We the People



A BUSHY-BROWED, PIPE-SMOKING, piano-playing Antonin Scalia—Nino—the scourge of the left, knew how to work a crowd. He loved opera; he loved theater; he loved show tunes. In high school, he played the lead role in *Macbeth*: "I have no spur to prick the sides of my intent, but only vaulting ambition." As clever as he was combative, Scalia, short and stocky, was known, too, for his slightly terrifying energy and for his eviscerating sense of humor. He fished and hunted: turkeys and ducks, deer and boar, alligators. He loved nothing better than a dictionary. He argued to win. He was one of the Supreme Court's sharpest writers and among its severest critics. "It's hard to get it right," he'd tell his clerks, sending back their drafts; they had that engraved on a plaque. Few justices have done more to transform American jurisprudence, not only from the bench but also from the seminar table, the lecture hall, and the eerie velveteen intimacy of the television stage. He gave one speech so often that he kept its outline, scribbled on a scrap of paper, tucked in his suit pocket. The Constitution is not a living document, he'd say. "It's dead. Dead, dead, dead!"

Two hundred and fifty years after Americans declared independence from Britain and began writing the first state constitutions, it's not the Constitution that's dead. It's the idea of amending it. "The whole purpose of the Constitution," Scalia once said, "is to prevent a future society from doing what it wants to do." This is not true. One of the Constitution's founding purposes was to prevent change. But another was to allow for change without violence. Amendment is a constitution's mechanism for the prevention of insurrection—the only way to change the fundamentals of government without recourse to rebellion. Amendment is so essential to the American constitutional tradition—so methodical and so entirely a conception of endurance through adaptation—that it can best be described as a philosophy. It is, at this point, a philosophy all but forgotten.

The philosophy of amendment is foundational to modern constitutionalism. It has structured American constitutional and political development for more than two centuries. It has done so in a distinctive, halting pattern of progression and regression: Constitutional change by way of formal amendment has alternated with judicial interpretation, in the form of opinions issued by the U.S. Supreme Court, as a means of constitutional revision.

This pattern has many times provided political stability, with formal amendment and judicial interpretation as the warp and weft of a sturdily woven if by now fraying and faded constitutional fabric. But the pattern, which features, at regular intervals, the perception by half the country that the Supreme Court has usurped the power of amendment, has also led to the underdevelopment of the Constitution, weakened the idea of representative government, and increased the polarization of American politics—ultimately contributing, most lately, to the rise of a political style that can only be called insurrectionary.

The U.S. Constitution has one of the lowest amendment rates in the world. Some 12,000 amendments have been formally introduced on the floor of Congress; only 27 have ever been ratified, and there has been no significant amendment in more than 50 years. That is not because Americans are opposed to amending constitutions. Since 1789, Americans have submitted at least 10,000 petitions and countless letters, postcards, and phone and email messages to Congress regarding constitutional amendments, and they have introduced and agitated for thousands more amendments in the pages of newspapers and pamphlets, from pulpits, at political rallies, on websites, and all over social media. Every state has its own constitution, and all of them have been frequently revised and replaced. One delegate to a 19th-century constitutional convention in Missouri suggested that a state constitution ought to be rewritten every 14 years on the theory that every seven years, "every bone, muscle, tissue, fibre and nerve matter"—every cell in the human body—is replaced, and surely, in twice that time, every constitution ought to be amended too.

Since 1776, the states have held some 250 constitutional conventions and adopted 144 constitutions, or about three per state. Every state constitution currently in place has an amendment provision. For most of American history, the states have

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been exceptionally busy holding constitutional conventions, but as with amending the U.S. Constitution, the practice has stagnated. (No state has held a full-dress convention since Rhode Island did in 1986.) Nevertheless, the practice of amendment by popular vote thrives in the states, where constitutional revision is exponentially easier to achieve. Since 1789, some 7,000 amendments formally proposed in the states have been ratified, more than two-thirds of those introduced.

Article V, the amendment provision of the U.S. Constitution, is a sleeping giant. It sleeps until it wakes. War is, very often, what wakes it up. And then it roars. In 1789, in the aftermath of the Revolutionary War, Congress passed 12 amendments, 10 of which, later known as the Bill of Rights, were ratified by the states by 1791. A federal amendment requires a double supermajority to become law: It must pass by a two-thirds vote in both houses of Congress (or be proposed by two-thirds of the states), and then it must be ratified by three-quarters of the states (either in legislatures or at conventions). No amendments were ratified in the 61 years from 1804 to 1865, and then, at the end of the Civil War, three were ratified in five years. What became the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865, abolishing slavery, had first been proposed decades earlier. No amendments were ratified in the 43 years from 1870 to 1913, and then, around the time of the First World War, four were ratified in seven years. The Nineteenth Amendment, granting women the right to vote and first called for in 1848, was ratified in 1920, after a 72-year moral crusade.

Again, the giant slept. In the 1930s, President Franklin D. Roosevelt largely abandoned constitutional amendment in favor of applying pressure on the Supreme Court, and the civil-rights movement adopted a legal strategy that involved seeking constitutional change through the Court too. The Second World War did not awaken Article V, because mid-century liberals abandoned amendment in favor of the exercise of executive and judicial power. From 1961 to 1971, as the United States became engulfed in the Vietnam War, Americans ratified four amendments and seemed very likely to ratify two more. Those that succeeded included the Twenty-Fourth Amendment, which in 1964 abolished poll taxes (generally deployed to suppress the votes of the poor and especially of Black people), and the Twenty-Sixth Amendment (which in 1971 lowered the voting age to 18). Both relied on a broad liberal consensus. Other efforts, such as an amendment abolishing the Electoral College, which passed the House in 1969, failed in the Senate. The Equal Rights Amendment, prohibiting the denial or abridgment of rights on the basis of sex, was introduced in Congress in 1923 and sent to the states in 1972. It fell short of the 38 states needed for ratification before the deadlines set by Congress. Liberals soon stopped proposing amendments, and amendments proposed by conservatives—providing for school prayer, banning flag burning, defining marriage, protecting fetal life, and requiring a balanced budget—all failed, leading conservatives, like earlier liberals, to instead seek constitutional change through the federal judiciary. The amending stopped. The Twenty-Seventh Amendment, which concerns congressional salaries and was ratified in 1992, was one of the 12 amendments sent by Congress to the states in 1789, and then was more or less forgotten; it can hardly be said to have introduced a new idea into the Constitution. The giant has not awoken since, despite half-hearted attempts to rouse it, mainly in the form of presidential political theater. Ronald Reagan supported a balanced-budget amendment. Bill Clinton supported a victims'-rights amendment (granting rights to victims of crime, a law-and-order answer to the defendants'-rights movement of the 1960s), and George W. Bush called for a defense-of-marriage amendment (identifying marriage as between a man and a woman). Neither made any headway. Joe Biden, after stepping down from his reelection campaign in 2024, proposed a constitutional amendment to reverse the Supreme Court's decision that year granting the president considerable immunity from criminal prosecution. The giant did not wake.

ONE OF THE CONSTITUTION'S FOUNDING PURPOSES WAS TO PREVENT CHANGE. BUT ANOTHER WAS TO ALLOW FOR CHANGE WITHOUT VIOLENCE.

Between 1980 and 2020, members of Congress proposed more than 2,100 constitutional amendments. Congress, more divided with each passing year, approved none of them. In roughly that same stretch of time, state legislatures introduced almost 5,000 amendments and ratified nearly 4,000. Instead of arguing for amendments at the national level, legislators, lobbyists, and other advocates pursued different means of either securing or thwarting constitutional change: by influencing the nomination and confirmation of Supreme Court justices and by altering the method that those justices use to interpret the Constitution.

The Constitution has not been meaningfully amended since 1971, right when the political parties began to polarize. Polarization would ultimately make the double-supermajority requirements for amending the Constitution impossible to meet. Tellingly, 1971 marked another turning point in the history of American

constitutionalism. That year, a method of constitutional interpretation that became known as originalism was put forward by a distinguished legal scholar, the Yale law professor Robert Bork. The word *originalism* didn't enter the English language until 1980, and it had virtually no currency before 1987, when Reagan nominated Bork to a seat on the U.S. Supreme Court. The nomination was rejected. Bork maintained that the only way to read the Constitution is to determine the original intentions of its Framers and that every other method of interpretation amounts to amendment by the judiciary. Rather than Bork, it would be Scalia who brought originalism to the Court, trapping the Constitution in a wildly distorted account of the American past at a time when ordinary Americans found their ability to amend and repair a constitution to which they had supposedly given their consent entirely thwarted.



ANTONIN SCALIA, like Felix Frankfurter, came to the Court after a career primarily as a law professor. He'd been a judge for only four years; most of his published writing consisted of law-review articles and speeches, not opinions from the bench. He grew up in Queens, an only child. His father was an Italian immigrant who'd become a professor of Romance languages; his mother, the daughter of Italian immigrants, taught elementary school. He inherited his first gun from his grandfather, who grew up hunting in Sicily and used to take Nino to Long Island to shoot rabbits. Scalia attended a Jesuit military school, where he was on the rifle team; he used to ride the subway from Queens to Manhattan carrying his .22 carbine target rifle. "When I was growing up in New York City, people were not afraid of people with firearms," he'd say. He went to Georgetown University and then to Harvard Law School. He was a Goldwater conservative—a supporter of Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona, the Republican presidential nominee, in 1964. He served in the Nixon and Ford administrations and taught law at the University of Virginia and the University of Chicago before Reagan appointed him to the D.C. Court of Appeals in 1982. Four years later, Reagan nominated him to the Supreme Court.

On the first day of Scalia's confirmation hearings, in 1986, he was welcomed by the 83-year-old committee chair, Strom Thurmond, a one-man timeline of the political and constitutional history of the 20th century: a Democratic governor of South Carolina, the 1948 presidential candidate of the southern splinter Dixiecrat party, a drafter of the segregationist Southern Manifesto, and, in 1964, a backer of Goldwater. No one in the U.S. Senate had more fiercely fought for segregation and against civil rights.

"You have got a lot of children there," the senator from South Carolina said affably. "I believe you have eight of them here?"

"All nine are here," Scalia, 50, told Thurmond, beaming. "I think we have a full committee."

Thurmond asked Scalia about the difference between serving on a circuit court and on the Supreme Court.

"There's no one to correct your mistakes when you're up there," Scalia answered, "except the constitutional-amendment process."

That process was by then no more than a chimera. The more difficult it became to amend the Constitution, the more politicized nominations to the Supreme Court became. Scalia's confirmation, though, was a breeze, partly because liberals had decided to focus their efforts on questioning the elevation of William Rehnquist to the chief justiceship, following the resignation of Warren Burger, which is what had opened up a seat for Scalia. Also: Scalia was charming. And he'd been exceptionally well briefed. Aides had peppered him with questions in practice sessions and provided memos with titles such as "Likely Areas of Interest Arising Out of Your Writings," warning him, among other things, about *Roe v. Wade*, the 1973 decision that had legalized abortion: "You have probably said a little more on this topic than you think." (In 1978, Scalia had said that, in his view, the courts, in cases such as *Roe*, had "found rights where society never believed they existed.") In a typed list in Scalia's briefing packet titled "Talking Points," the No. 1 topic was abortion. Scrawled below in black ink were two tips: "1. Professional, not adversarial" and "2. Don't get sucked in."

Thurmond, after a friendly chat with the nominee, yielded the floor to Senator Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts, who, without so much as a hello, jumped in:

> KENNEDY: Judge Scalia, if you are confirmed, do you expect to overrule the *Roe v. Wade* [decision]?
>
> SCALIA: Excuse me?

For a long time, the overruling of *Roe* had appeared most likely to come in the form of a constitutional amendment. Even before the Court issued its 1973 decision, the right-to-life movement had worked, unsuccessfully, to defeat abortion by amending the Constitution to guarantee a "right to life" beginning at conception. But by the time Kennedy confronted Scalia, right-to-lifers had decided there was one other way to overturn *Roe*. In 1980, the GOP had vowed in its party platform to appoint "judges at all levels of the judiciary who respect traditional family values and the sanctity of innocent human life."

During the confirmation hearings for John Paul Stevens in 1975—the first justice named to the Court after *Roe*, and by a Republican president, replacing the most liberal justice, William O. Douglas—no one asked him even a single question about the abortion decision. That changed under Reagan, who, in his two terms in office, appointed more than 400 federal judges, amounting to half the federal judiciary. All were screened for their views on abortion. (Reagan's influence on the judiciary has had a long afterlife: Supreme

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We the People
Article I

Court Justices John Roberts, Clarence Thomas, and Samuel Alito all worked in his administration.)

Screening judges in this way was, at the time, both novel and controversial. Members of Reagan's Justice Department defended the practice by insisting that they were screening, instead, for originalism. As an assistant attorney general put it in a memo to the attorney general, "The idea of 'original intent' must not be marketed as simply another theory of jurisprudence; rather it is an essential part of the constitutional framework of checks and balances." He emphasized that, "contrary to allegations, we are not choosing judges who will impose a 'right-wing social agenda' upon the Nation, but rather those who recognize that they, too, are bound by the Constitution."

In 1981, Reagan nominated Bork to the D.C. Court of Appeals. "*Roe v. Wade* is an unconstitutional decision, a serious and wholly unjustifiable judicial usurpation of state legislative authority," Bork had written in a statement. To opponents of abortion, Sandra Day O'Connor's Supreme Court hearings a few months later were far less reassuring. O'Connor, at 51, said she was personally opposed to abortion but then added, "I am not going to be pregnant anymore, so it is perhaps easy for me to speak." This response alarmed pro-lifers and greatly contributed to the movement's decision to abandon constitutional amendment in favor of influencing the judicial-nomination process. "The intensity of right-to-lifers on the issue of judicial power should not be underestimated," a Reagan adviser had reported.

Republican strategists had been hoping to make the GOP the party of the pro-life movement as a way to expand its base, bringing in Catholics and white evangelicals. This realignment happened very slowly. Not until 1979 were Republican members of Congress more likely to vote against abortion than Democrats. That year, Jerry Falwell helped found the Moral Majority, and a new evangelical-Christian right joined the crusade against abortion. Only after Republicans in Congress began aligning with the pro-life movement did the rest of the party follow, but again, they did so gradually: Republicans were more pro-choice than Democrats until around 1990. And only during Reagan's presidency did this effort begin to involve attacking the legitimacy of the Court's decision in *Roe*.

Reagan's alliance with the New Right proved crucial to his landslide reelection in 1984, after which he appointed Edwin Meese as his attorney general. Meese's Justice Department would soon fill up with young lawyers who were members of a new organization known as the Federalist Society, formed by law students at Yale (studying with Professor Bork) and the University of Chicago (studying with Professor Scalia). Keen to avoid the word *conservative*, they chose instead to emphasize the original intent of the Framers, and, in naming the organization, they honored both the original Federalists and a Reagan doctrine known as New Federalism, which sought to transfer power from the federal government to the states. The first meeting of the Federalist Society, at Yale in April 1982, featured 20 invited scholars and jurists, including Bork and Scalia. Some Yale law students perceived the meeting to be hostile to both reproductive rights and civil rights. A poster objecting to the symposium warned NEW FEDERALISM MEANS OLD BIGOTRY—SUPPORT CIVIL RIGHTS. The legal scholar Mary Dudziak, then a second-year law student, was among those who picketed. She carried a handwritten sign with the feminist slogan IF MEN COULD GET PREGNANT, ABORTION WOULD BE A SACRAMENT.

Soon after Meese took office, in 1985, he announced that the official policy of the Reagan Justice Department would be to pursue a "jurisprudence of original intention" as the only legitimate and properly democratic method of constitutional interpretation. Meese hired some of the founders of the Federalist Society and trained them up as a "farm team" (as one Meese aide later put it). He aimed to sell originalism not only to the legal community but also to the public as a form of modest and humble deference to the wisdom of the Framers, in contrast to the unrestrained imperiousness, the judicial oligarchy, of the Supreme Court.

This strategy raised liberals' hackles, and it raised historians' hackles, too. Justice William Brennan, in a speech at Georgetown, called the doctrine of original intent "arrogance cloaked as humility" and speculated that proposals endorsing the idea "must inevitably come from persons who have no familiarity with the historical record." Nothing in history is as clear as originalists pretended, and not even the most skilled historian—which justices were not—could reach such certain conclusions from such fragmented evidence. What really rankled was Meese's claim that original intent was democratic, because it was quite clear that, having failed in their efforts to amend the Constitution, conservatives had changed course, instead using judicial selection to pursue objectives they could not achieve by democratic means. "The aim is now to accomplish in the courts what the Administration failed to persuade Congress to do—namely, adopt its positions on abortion, apportionment, affirmative action, school prayer and the like," a political scientist wrote in the *Los Angeles Times*. Nor did Meese's jurisprudence escape censure as realpolitik. "Mr. Meese's version of original intent is a patent fraud on the public," the historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. argued in *The Wall Street Journal*. "The attorney general uses original intent not as a neutral principle at all but only as a means of getting certain results for the Reagan administration. He is shamelessly selective." He was also undeniably effective.

Before Reagan moved into the White House, as the legal scholar Mary Ziegler has demonstrated, the pro-life movement had not been especially interested in originalism, on the theory that there is no "right to life" in the Constitution, at least not any more than there's a "right to privacy," the right cited by the Court in *Roe*. But after Reagan pledged to use opposition to *Roe* as a litmus test in appointing federal judges, litigation seemed a far better approach than amendment. In 1984, Americans United for Life held a conference under the rubric "Reversing *Roe v. Wade* Through the Courts." Two years later, the National Abortion Rights Action League observed in a report on the Scalia and Rehnquist nominations that the pro-life movement, having failed to amend the Constitution, had turned to a legislation-and-litigation strategy.

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In 1985, for its brief in *Thornburgh v. American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists*—concerning a Pennsylvania law that placed restrictions on abortion—the Meese Justice Department directed the acting solicitor general, Charles Fried, to ask the Court to overturn *Roe* and to base the government's argument on original intent; Fried obliged. (A young Samuel Alito, in the Office of Legal Counsel, who had stated his opposition to abortion in his application for the position, worked on the brief.) "There is no explicit textual warrant in the Constitution for a right to an abortion," Fried's brief read. The brief elicited considerable protest, including from five former solicitors general. Only narrowly did the Supreme Court decide against overturning *Roe*. On June 11, 1986, the Court issued its 5–4 decision in *Thornburgh*, declaring Pennsylvania's law unconstitutional. Warren Burger, who had joined the majority in *Roe*, now dissented. Six days later, Burger announced that he was resigning to devote himself to the celebration of the Constitution's 1987 bicentennial.

And so it came to pass that in August 1986, Antonin Scalia sat before the Senate Judiciary Committee and stumbled over Senator Kennedy's question.

"Excuse me?"

Kennedy repeated: "Do you expect to overrule the *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision?"

Scalia declined to answer.

Kennedy had been questioning Scalia while waiting for the committee's ranking Democrat, Joseph R. Biden, the junior senator from Delaware, to arrive from another meeting. Biden sought a national stage, but when he got one, he often talked for too long and without making a great deal of sense. "Obviously, I don't know what the hell I'm talking about," he once said in the middle of remarks at a Judiciary Committee hearing about revising the criminal code. Biden was a devout Catholic, but he was opposed to a constitutional ban on abortion. In 1983, he had considered making a play for the 1984 Democratic presidential nomination. (He would make his first bid in 1988.) As Scalia's briefing materials warned, Biden had "gradually lived down his early reputation as an *enfant terrible*." Biden was affable—goofy, even—and willing to compromise, and Thurmond liked working with him so much that he called him "my Henry Clay."

Biden and Scalia had much in common: middle-aged Catholic men from industrial eastern cities, with young families and thinning hair and big dreams and funny jokes, though Scalia's humor was more studied. (He once famously began an opinion with this sentence: "This case, involving legal requirements for the content and labeling of meat products such as frankfurters, affords a rare opportunity to explore simultaneously both parts of Bismarck's aphorism that 'No man should see how laws or sausages are made.'") Biden gave the judge his wide smile, told him he'd read all of his speeches that he could find, and said he was pretty darn interested in this "newfound, newly enunciated doctrine of original intent." He began by asking Scalia about a speech he'd given two months earlier, at a conference hosted by Meese.

Scalia had known when he delivered that speech, on June 14, that he was being considered for a position on the Court. Burger had visited the White House on May 27 to tell Reagan he intended to retire and to give him a list of possible replacements for the chief justiceship, including Scalia and Bork. By June 12, Reagan had decided to nominate Rehnquist for the chief justiceship and leaned toward replacing Rehnquist with Scalia, in part because he was nearly a decade younger than Bork, though there was some concern about the quickness of his temper. Scalia was scheduled to meet with the president on June 16.

Riffing on the flap between Meese and Brennan, Scalia in his June speech had cataloged the weaknesses of the doctrine of original intent, including by pointing out that the early Supreme Court could not possibly have followed it, because James Madison's notes on the Constitutional Convention, generally cited by originalists as definitive, were not available until 1840. What people who talked about original intent must mean, then, Scalia argued—essentially offering Meese a way out of the box he'd locked himself in—was not the original intent of the *Framers* but of the *Constitution*: "It is not that 'the Constitution must mean this because Alexander Hamilton thought it meant this, and he wrote it'; but rather that 'the Constitution must mean this because Alexander Hamilton, who for Pete's sake must have understood the thing, thought it meant this.'" The doctrine of original intent, Scalia concluded, just needed a better name; he proposed "the doctrine of original meaning." (Originalism, perhaps surprisingly, is quite changeable, and originalists have for decades come up with new varieties, so many niceties.)

When Biden seemed baffled, Scalia said he'd be happy to explain the distinction but it wouldn't be worth it, because, he admitted, "it's not a big difference." As for that June speech, in which Scalia had professed his allegiance to originalism, Biden told Scalia wearily, "I just hope you don't mean it." But he very much did.

Originalism in the 1970s and '80s was an outsider's game. Originalists accused the Supreme Court of amending the law by creating new rights, such as the right to an abortion, and insisted both that Article V amendment was the only legitimate method of constitutional change and that originalism was the only legitimate method of constitutional interpretation. Practically, though, originalism took hold from the failure of conservatives to change the Constitution by democratic means—by means of amendment.

Since the days of the New Deal, social and especially fiscal conservatives had now and again called for constitutional amendments and even for a constitutional convention. Among their more notable efforts was a campaign starting in 1939 to call a convention to repeal the Sixteenth Amendment, which provides for a federal income tax. For the entirety of the Warren and Burger Courts, there had also been calls for a constitutional convention: in the 1950s, to overturn *Brown v. Board of Education*, which found racial segregation in public schools to be unconstitutional, and in the 1960s, to repeal the Court's one-man, one-vote decisions. A balanced-budget amendment, first seriously proposed in the '50s, gained support during the economic malaise and rising federal debt of Jimmy Carter's presidency. By March 1979, 28 states had called for a convention to adopt a balanced-budget amendment. Richard

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Rovere, the celebrated Washington correspondent for *The New Yorker*, believed that the call for a constitutional convention was a bluff and that Congress would pass a stand-alone balanced-budget amendment in order to avoid the terrifying prospect of a convention—which, he warned, might "throw out much or all of the Bill of Rights" and could lead "possibly even to civil war."

Sixty-five percent of Americans favored a constitutional convention. Scalia, asked at a forum that May whether the prospect was really all that dangerous, joked that it was always possible a constitutional convention might "pass a bill of attainder to hang Richard Rovere," but said he'd support "a convention on abortion."

One person who was decidedly unwilling to run that risk was the conservative insurgency's most prominent political strategist, Phyllis Schlafly. A convention called for the purpose of a balanced-budget amendment might get out of hand and turn its mind to other business—becoming a so-called runaway convention—and very likely undo all her work to defeat the Equal Rights Amendment. She went to war, and she won. Aside from defeating the ERA and "making the Republican Party pro-life," Schlafly considered defeating a convention in the 1980s her signal achievement.

Herein lie the origins of originalism's rise to power: in the failures of the right-to-life amendment and the balanced-budget amendment. It was at this very moment that the Federalist Society was founded.



THE SUBSEQUENT HISTORY of originalism has everything to do with abortion, and everything else to do with guns. One in three Americans owns a gun; one in four American women will have an abortion. In the 1970s, as partisanship strengthened and polarization worsened, guns and abortion became the defining constitutional issues in the life-and-death, winner-take-all fury of modern American politics. On the left, abortion came to mean freedom and guns murder; on the right, guns came to mean freedom and abortion murder. That none of these equivalencies can withstand scrutiny has not seemed to matter.

In 1975, the District of Columbia introduced a law that all but banned the possession or sale of any handgun. That year, there were two assassination attempts on President Gerald Ford. The National Council to Control Handguns proposed a national ban. In 1976, the California legislature debated a similar bill; opponents proposed a state constitutional amendment guaranteeing a right to keep and bear handguns, rifles, and shotguns. There was no reason to believe that any of these gun-control measures violated the Second Amendment, which the Court had hardly ever paid attention to and in any case had long read as concerning only the keeping and bearing of arms for military purposes—not as a right pertaining to citizens as individuals—and as limiting only the federal government, not the states.

The National Rifle Association, whose motto since 1957 had been "Firearms safety education, marksmanship training, shooting for recreation," had endorsed the 1968 Gun Control Act. But in the mid-1970s, the NRA began organizing in opposition to handgun-control laws. Ronald Reagan, who had just left the California governor's office, joined this campaign, too. In an article published in *Guns & Ammo* in 1975, Reagan advocated for the altogether novel and unsupported individual-rights interpretation of the Second Amendment, maintaining that "it appears to leave little, if any, leeway for the gun control advocate." In 1977, the NRA abandoned a planned move to Colorado to remain in Washington, where it became essentially a lobbying organization, with a new motto displayed at the entrance of its building: "The right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed."

In 1981, Strom Thurmond appointed Senator Orrin Hatch of Utah as chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee's subcommittee on the Constitution. Hatch had already proposed a right-to-life amendment, and an amendment outlawing affirmative action. Reagan would later consider naming him to the Supreme Court. Amending the Constitution having failed, Hatch was now interested not in a new amendment but in an old one. Upon assuming the chairmanship, he called immediately for a report on the original meaning of the Second Amendment.

While Hatch's subcommittee was at work, Reagan was shot; his press secretary, James Brady, was also shot. Reagan continued his opposition to gun-control legislation; Brady became an advocate for it. In February 1982, Hatch's subcommittee published a report called "The Right to Keep and Bear Arms." The subcommittee maintained that it had found "clear—and long-lost—proof that the second amendment to our Constitution was intended as an individual right of the American citizen to keep and carry arms in a peaceful manner, for protection of himself, his family, and his freedoms." That November, after the NRA waged a well-funded campaign against California's handgun-control bill, voters resoundingly defeated it in a statewide referendum.

As the Reagan administration prepared for the Constitution's bicentennial, a private committee was set up to consider possible constitutional reforms. Its members included present and former elected officials, scholars, and business and labor leaders, and its focus was largely on addressing the growing problems of congressional gridlock and budgetary brinkmanship. In a compilation of working papers published in 1985, it urged Americans not to treat the Constitution as "immutable, like the Ark of the Covenant," but to be open to changes, such as amendments. It recommended six, including longer congressional terms and bonus seats in the House and the Senate for the party that wins the presidency. None of these ideas made any headway. It wasn't voters who were opposed to amendments. The hurdle was Congress—and, more and more, conservatives. In 1984, James McClellan, who had left his position as a staff member on the Senate Judiciary Committee to become

the president of a newly formed Center for Judicial Studies, urged conservatives to "kick the habit" of Article V. "There is something fundamentally wrong with our system if we are driven to amend the Constitution so as to restore its original meaning," McClellan wrote. "We should resist efforts to add amendments to our fundamental law to correct misinterpretations rendered by the Supreme Court." Better to effect constitutional change under the guise of *restoring* the Constitution's original meaning. But that would require taking over the Court.

When Meese became attorney general in 1985, he announced that originalism would govern judicial selection. John Paul Stevens would later recall that between 1969, when Burger became chief justice, and 1986, when Scalia joined, "no judge or justice expressed any doubt about the limited coverage of the [second] amendment." But in 1986, Congress passed the Firearms Owners' Protection Act, which repealed parts of the 1968 Gun Control Act by invoking "the rights of citizens to keep and bear arms under the second amendment." This was by no means an article of faith among conservatives. To the contrary. Bork, for instance, did not endorse this theory. "I'm not an expert on the Second Amendment," he said in 1989, "but its intent was to guarantee the right of states to form militia, not for individuals to bear arms." From retirement in 1991, Warren Burger, appearing on PBS and holding a pocket Constitution in his hands, said that if he were writing the Bill of Rights, he wouldn't include the Second Amendment, adding that the NRA's individual-rights interpretation was "one of the greatest pieces of fraud, I repeat the word *fraud*, on the American public by special-interest groups that I have ever seen in my lifetime." The test of originalism would be whether this interpretation—an amendment by fiat—would be accepted by the Supreme Court.

As the Constitution's bicentennial year began, Meese's Office of Legal Policy issued a 200-page sourcebook on "original meaning jurisprudence," containing excerpts from the work of Bork, Scalia, and Meese himself, with Brennan as a counterpoint. It alleged that until the 1960s, original-meaning jurisprudence had been "the dominant form of constitutional interpretation during most of our nation's history." Meanwhile, plans were drawn up for grocery-store cashiers to give away free copies of the Constitution; the government was to print enough for every American household. A facsimile of the Constitution went on the road, along with an original of the Magna Carta, in a temperature-controlled, 40-foot trailer that traveled to more than 100 cities. ABC ran a series of "Bicentennial Constitutional Minutes" during Saturday-morning cartoons, featuring characters from *Looney Tunes*. Professor Bugs Bunny, dressed in cap and gown at the front of a lecture hall, sings, "Our Constitution's really splendid, but sometimes we do amend it." Daffy Duck, dressed as a vaudevillian in waistcoat and spats, soft-shoes across the stage, while Bugs belts out, "It was intended! To be amended!"

SCALIA BROUGHT ORIGINALISM TO THE SUPREME COURT, TRAPPING THE CONSTITUTION IN A WILDLY DISTORTED ACCOUNT OF THE AMERICAN PAST.

And it *was* intended to be amended. But it was no longer amendable. Instead of producing constitutional amendments, liberals achieved landmark legislative gains and rights-protecting Court decisions whose importance was matched only by their reversibility. Conservatives of course were abandoning amendment too, instead seeking constitutional change by judicial appointments and judicial interpretation. Reagan transformed the judiciary; not since FDR had a single president replaced so high a percentage of the federal bench. He nominated Bork to the Supreme Court in July 1987, but the prospects for confirmation were mixed at best: The president was a visibly aging lame duck and reeling, too, from the Iran-Contra scandal; Republicans had lost the Senate in the 1986 midterms, with the result that Biden, not Thurmond, was now chair of a Democratic-run Senate Judiciary Committee. Scalia had replaced Rehnquist, which meant that his appointment didn't change the balance on the Court. But Bork would be replacing Lewis Powell, often a swing vote. On the day Reagan announced the nomination, Ted Kennedy described "Robert Bork's America" as

> a land in which women would be forced into back-alley abortions, blacks would sit at segregated lunch counters, rogue police could break down citizens' doors in midnight raids, and schoolchildren could not be taught about evolution. Writers and artists would be censured at the whim of government, and the doors of the federal courts would be shut on the fingers of millions of citizens for whom the judiciary is, and is often, the only protector of the individual rights that are the heart of our democracy.

Bork afterward insisted that "there was not a line in that speech that was accurate," but it had raised the stakes for the hearings.

Warren Burger wanted Congress to declare Constitution Day, September 17, 1987 (which happened to fall on his own 80th birthday), a onetime national holiday. But, in a speech in Hawaii, Justice

Thurgood Marshall declared his refusal to participate in any such celebration. "I do not believe that the meaning of the Constitution was forever 'fixed' at the Philadelphia Convention," Marshall said. "Nor do I find the wisdom, foresight, and sense of justice exhibited by the Framers particularly profound."

When Constitution Day came, Reagan delivered a bicentennial address at Independence Hall, in Philadelphia, calling the Constitution a "covenant with the supreme being," and CBS televised Philadelphia's Constitution Day parade. But on C-SPAN that day, you could watch a very different discussion of the Constitution: Robert Bork explaining his understanding of the nation's founding document.

Biden's staff had advised him not to center his attack on abortion but instead to call attention to Bork's "judicial philosophy," while Bork's opponents waged a remorseless and relentless campaign against his confirmation. In an unprecedented attack on a Supreme Court nominee, People for the American Way aired a television ad narrated by Gregory Peck. "If Robert Bork wins a seat on the Supreme Court, it will be for life," Peck warned. "His life and yours." A Block Bork Coalition argued that Bork would "turn back the clock" on civil rights, women's rights, and workers' rights. Making the case that Bork would not hesitate to overturn *Roe*, no matter what he told the committee, Kennedy played an audio recording from 1985 in which Bork had said, "I don't think that in the field of constitutional law, precedent is all that important." In a cover story published on September 21, four days after the Constitution Day parade, *Time* magazine hinted that if Bork were confirmed, *Roe* might go.

*Roe* did not go, at least not then. Bork went instead, defeated 42–58. Having endured a brutal series of attacks, many of them unwarranted, he sought vindication in a tell-all book recounting his experience of the confirmation process—he noted, for instance, how news stories on CBS ran eight to one against him. Intended to tamp down the politicization of Supreme Court appointments, Bork's book only inflamed it.

If Bork's nomination had been a referendum on originalism, originalism had lost. But originalism also won, because it had been brought so entirely into the public eye. Biden gave originalism 115 days of free television at the height of the nation's celebration of the Constitution's bicentennial.

Scalia, meanwhile, bided his time.



IN 1989, abortion again came before the Court. *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services* involved an abortion-restricting Missouri law. Rehnquist wrote a draft opinion that both upheld the law and, almost as an afterthought, essentially overturned *Roe* by arguing that the key elements of *Roe* "are not found in the text of the Constitution or in any place else one would expect to find a constitutional principle." Stevens, who had been wavering, declined to join the majority, circulating a memo in which he said that he'd rather not overturn *Roe*, but if it had to be done, he'd rather give it "a decent burial instead of tossing it out the window of a fast-moving caboose." O'Connor agreed, which everyone assumed would elicit a strong reaction from Scalia. "The expected 'Ninogram' will arrive this morning," Justice Harry Blackmun's clerk wrote, anticipating Scalia's fury that the majority opinion would fall short of overturning *Roe*. Scalia was indeed furious, scolding the Court in his concurrence: "We can now look forward to at least another Term with carts full of mail from the public, and streets full of demonstrators urging us—their unelected and life-tenured judges who have been awarded those extraordinary, undemocratic characteristics precisely in order that we might follow the law despite the popular will—to follow the popular will."

The Court again upheld *Roe* in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, in 1992. Scalia said, "The only reason you need a Constitution is because some things you don't want the majority to be able to change." Those things are fundamental rights, and Scalia did not believe that a woman's right to decide whether to end a pregnancy, even if her life was in danger, was one of them. Unlike an individual right to bear arms.

Because neither side in the abortion debate had succeeded in amending the Constitution, the right to an abortion asserted from *Roe* to *Casey* remained vulnerable. By the end of the 1980s, the parties had sorted themselves over this issue. Few were the commentators who, like the feminist legal scholar Joan C. Williams, acknowledged that views on abortion were nuanced, complicated, deeply felt, and likely irreconcilable. "I, for example, am convinced, absolutely convinced without hesitation, that the Constitution protects a woman's right to choose abortion as a basic, undeniable political right, a right without which many other political rights are worthless," Williams wrote. "And yet I can see how the conclusion that seems so obvious to me can seem foreign, even repulsive" to others—a celibate priest, say, or a mother of five—and "I must acknowledge that consensus on this issue is not in the cards."

The abandonment of amendment has meant that constitutional history since the 1970s has turned on presidential nominations to the Supreme Court, placing pressure on that institution that it has proved nearly unable to bear. Presidential elections no longer involved campaigns to amend the Constitution. They involved campaigns to appoint justices. Nomination hearings have become spectacles. Trust in the Court has plummeted. And it's no longer clear that the president of the United States will honor its decisions.

In 1991, when George H. W. Bush nominated D.C. Court of Appeals Judge Clarence Thomas to replace Thurgood Marshall in what some called the "Black seat" on the Court, opponents of the nominee again braced for battle. This time the hearings took a nasty turn when Anita Hill, a Black law professor and former colleague of Thomas's, testified before an all-male, all-white Senate Judiciary Committee that Thomas had sexually harassed

her. Other women had made similar allegations, but only Hill had been called to appear before the committee, where Biden, as chair, altogether failed to restrain Republican Senators Orrin Hatch, Arlen Specter, and Alan Simpson from essentially placing Hill on trial. Thomas, citing his own right to privacy, refused to answer questions about "what goes on in the most intimate parts of my private life or the sanctity of my bedroom." Questions about Thomas's qualifications to serve as a justice were set aside, overwhelmed by the attention given to the allegations of sexual harassment.

Feminists had defeated Bork by claiming that he would turn back the clock on women's rights and undo *Roe*. By the time Bush nominated Thomas, sexual harassment was the unforgivable sin of the day. The Thomas hearings also set a precedent, prefiguring the airing of sexual-assault charges levied at Donald Trump's nominee Brett Kavanaugh in 2018, and the reckless, remorseless, and wildly partisan news coverage in which liberal news organizations appeared less interested in reporting on the nomination than in defeating it, while conservative organizations sought only to secure the confirmation. The Senate confirmed Thomas, 52 to 48.

In 1993, Bill Clinton desperately needed to appoint a woman to the high court. Ruth Bader Ginsburg was rightly celebrated as the Thurgood Marshall of women's rights. She'd first appeared before the Supreme Court in 1973, and as the head of the women's-rights program at the ACLU, she had methodically chipped away at discrimination on the basis of sex, each case, as she once put it, another "small, guarded step." Yet she refused to take on cases that would have required her to defend *Roe*, which she believed had been badly decided (among other things, she wished the case had rested on an argument for equality, not privacy). Jimmy Carter had named her to the D.C. Circuit in 1980, where she served alongside Scalia and Bork. "*Roe v. Wade* sparked public opposition and academic criticism, in part, I believe, because the Court ventured too far in the change it ordered and presented an incomplete justification for its action," she said in 1984. In 1993, at NYU, she had cited *Roe* as an example of a bad judicial decision. When Clinton nominated her to the Court, leading women's groups refused to endorse her. Fourteen members of the faculty of NYU Law School signed a letter stating that they were "distressed that her remarks at NYU have been misconstrued as anti-choice and anti-women." The Senate confirmed her 96–3. The fact that she had grave doubts about *Roe* would be forgotten and, by the left, forgiven.

There were rumors, in the spring of 2000, that if Al Gore were to win the presidency, Scalia would resign, at age 64. "A Gore presidency would eliminate his chance of becoming Chief Justice and ensure that his jurisprudence will never be anything more than a footnote," one reporter wrote at the time. During the campaign, Gore pledged that, if elected, he "would look for justices of the Supreme Court who understand that our Constitution is a living and breathing document, that it was intended by our Founders to be interpreted in the light of the constantly evolving experience of the American people."

After *Bush v. Gore*, which resolved the disputed 2000 election results in Florida in favor of Bush, giving him the presidency, Scalia, who had generally failed to build a conservative coalition on the Court, became more isolated. In *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003), the Court found laws banning homosexual conduct to be unconstitutional. Scalia, dissenting from the bench, said that while he did not endorse the Texas law at issue—he once said he wished all judges were given a stamp that said "Stupid but Constitutional"—the Court had no right to overturn it and was, instead, taking sides in a culture war. (Where did the Court find the right to homosexual behavior in the Constitution? he would later ask. "On the basis of, I don't know, the sexual-preference clause of the Bill of Rights?")

Amendments defining marriage as between one man and one woman were first introduced in Congress in 2002. Two years later, the GOP platform endorsed such an amendment for the first time. But public opinion increasingly favored allowing same-sex marriage. Fifty percent of Americans favored a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage in 2003; that fell to 37 percent in 2008. In 2015, in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the Court held that same-sex marriage is protected under the Fourteenth Amendment.



IF SCALIA HAD WAVED ASIDE Biden's question, in 1986, about the difference between original intent and original meaning, he eventually settled the matter in his own mind. "The theory of originalism treats a constitution like a statute, and gives it the meaning that its words were understood to bear at the time they were promulgated," he explained. He brought his case to the public in a series of interviews and speeches that pundits came to call the Dead Constitution Tour. "When I find it—the original meaning of the Constitution—I am handcuffed," he'd say, pressing his hands together, as if bound. "The Constitution is not a living organism, for Pete's sake," he'd say, and then recite the familiar refrain: "It's dead, dead!"

The case Scalia had been waiting for finally came before the Court in 2007, in *District of Columbia v. Heller*, a challenge to D.C.'s handgun ban. The work of discovering the original meaning of the Constitution, Scalia had once said, was "a task sometimes better suited to the historian than the lawyer." But in case after case, he set aside briefs submitted by distinguished historians in favor of his own reading of a carefully selected set of historical documents. No application of this method was more consequential than his reinterpretation of the Second Amendment in *Heller*, an opinion that Scalia considered to be, as he told NPR's Nina

Totenberg, "the most complete originalist opinion that I've ever written."

*Heller* is an excellent illustration of the distance between originalism and historical scholarship. "Historians are often asked what the Founders would think about various aspects of contemporary life," read an amicus brief submitted by 15 eminent university professors of early American history. "Such questions can be tricky to answer. But as historians of the Revolutionary era we are confident at least of this: that the authors of the Second Amendment would be flabbergasted to learn that in endorsing the republican principle of a well-regulated militia, they were also precluding restrictions on such potentially dangerous property as firearms, which governments had always regulated when there was 'real danger of public injury from individuals.'"

In June 2008, in a 5–4 opinion, Scalia held most of the provisions of the handgun law unconstitutional. "The Court had before it all the materials needed to determine the meaning of the Second Amendment at the time it was written," he explained. "With these in hand, what method would be easier or more reliable than the originalist approach taken by the Court?" He then set aside the brief written by distinguished scholars of American history who disagreed with his interpretation of the Second Amendment. Relying on his own reading of history, Scalia insisted that the Second Amendment protects the right of citizens to bear arms not only to defend the state in a militia but also to defend themselves as individuals. The day after the Court issued its opinion, *The Wall Street Journal* ran an op-ed by Randy Barnett, a Georgetown law professor and the author of *Restoring the Lost Constitution*, under the headline "News Flash: The Constitution Means What It Says." Barnett argued that "in the future, we should be vetting Supreme Court nominees to see if they understand how Justice Scalia reasoned in *Heller* and if they are committed to doing the same." This proved prophetic.

"I used to be able to say with a good deal of truth that one could fire a cannon loaded with grapeshot in the faculty lounge of any law school in the country and not strike an originalist," Scalia, delighted with his triumph in *Heller*, said at a Federalist Society meeting. "That's no longer true." But the criticism of *Heller* had been pointed, too, beginning with sharply worded dissents written by Justices Stevens and Stephen Breyer. In *McDonald v. City of Chicago* (2010), Stevens described Scalia's account of the Second Amendment as part of a "rudderless, panoramic tour of American legal history" that was "not only bad history, but also bad constitutional law." Stevens would later propose amending the Second Amendment to avoid Scalia's "misinterpretation."

Criticism of *Heller* had also come from conservative quarters. J. Harvie Wilkinson III, a retired conservative Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals judge, argued that Scalia had done exactly what he accused liberals of doing: He had found in the Constitution a new right, a "right of self-defense," a "right that the Court had never acknowledged in the more than two hundred years since the amendment's enactment."

By now, the Second Amendment, like *Roe*, had come to feature in judicial confirmation hearings. Elena Kagan, nominated to the Court by Barack Obama in 2010, was asked so many questions about whether she had ever hunted or even held a gun (she hadn't) that, in a private session with a member of the Senate, she promised that, if confirmed, she would go hunting with Scalia. (And when she was confirmed, she did.) Originalism appeared to gain strength, even as it lost all historical coherence in Thomas's bewildering opinion in *New York State Rifle & Pistol Association, Inc. v. Bruen* in 2022, a decision announced in the same term that, with *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, the Court overturned *Roe*.

In *Bruen*, which came six years after Scalia's death, Thomas applied a "text, history, and tradition" test, requiring lawyers to demonstrate the existence of an 18th-century (or in some cases 19th-century) "historical analogue" to any law that in any way restricted or regulated the ownership of firearms. If no analogue could be found, the law violated the Second Amendment. ("Tradition is a living thing," Justice John Marshall Harlan II once wrote; the Roberts Court disagreed.) American history is full of gun laws at the municipal, county, and state level—rules and restrictions of nearly every kind and variety—which meant that lawyers and organizations all over the country were left to dedicate countless hours to arcane historical research to meet the requirements of *Bruen*. An entirely new field of the history of firearms law emerged, documenting that if anything could fairly be said of American text, history, and tradition, it was that Americans had always been interested both in owning guns and in imposing rules on their manufacture, sale, use, and ownership.

Two years after *Bruen*, in *United States v. Rahimi*, the Court would attempt to walk back *Bruen* by clarifying that its intent in its recent Second Amendment cases was not "to suggest a law trapped in amber." (Thomas dissented.) But originalism, like the text, history, and tradition test, had become so confused that seven justices found it necessary to offer separate opinions in *Rahimi*, each attempting to explain what originalism is or isn't, or ever was or wasn't. Without Scalia, originalism—its conceptual integrity as constitutional theory—disintegrated. Its political power, however, remains intact.



ANTONIN SCALIA considered *Heller* to be his most important legacy. But he also wanted to leave behind an originalist instruction manual. That book, *Reading Law*, appeared in 2012, jointly authored with the legal scholar and lexicographer Bryan Garner. In a chapter called "Thirteen Falsities Exposed," Scalia and Garner discuss *Heller* under the heading "The false notion that lawyers and judges, not

being historians, are unqualified to do the historical research that originalism requires." Historical research is not a difficult endeavor, they alleged. Nor are historical sources difficult to discover or to read. Nor is such a reading likely to be inconclusive. The historical record is, instead, legible, unitary, and dispositive. Learning how to "read law" requires three years of law school and the study of many books, like the more-than-500-page textbook *Reading Law*, but anyone can write history and anyone who says otherwise has exaggerated the nature of the work.

This, unsurprisingly, did not quiet Scalia's detractors. *Heller* is the most criticized of all of Scalia's opinions. The Seventh Circuit judge (and Reagan nominee) Richard Posner wrote in a review: "*Reading Law* is Scalia's response to the criticism. It is unconvincing." Scalia and Garner had suggested that one tool that made reading history so simple was the availability of so many amicus briefs written by actual historians. But as Posner observed, "The book's defense of the *Heller* decision fails to mention that most professional historians reject the historical analysis in Scalia's opinion." Scalia must have known that the historical record is scarcely ever unambiguous. In *Heller*, Justice Stevens had stacked his historical evidence up against Scalia's. What made Scalia's history into law was that he got five votes, and Stevens got only four. That didn't make Scalia's history right.

Yet Scalia may have wielded his greatest influence not on the Court but outside it. At a certain point, he seems to have become more interested in speaking to his admirers off the Court than in winning votes on it. He had an insatiable appetite for intellectual battle, but as political rhetoric heated up after the election of Barack Obama, in 2008, Scalia found himself the subject of ceaseless personal attack. Understandably, he grew weary and alienated. Like many Americans, he found the polarization of the press troubling and the insurrectionary style of American politics unbearable. The crazier the far-right press of Fox News got, the crazier became MSNBC, CNN, and even the nation's newspapers of record. At the beginning of Obama's second term, Scalia told a reporter that he didn't read *The New York Times* and had given up on reading *The Washington Post*, saying that it "went too far for me. I couldn't handle it anymore." By then, he said, he was getting most of his news from talk radio.

*Heller*, he began to fear, had been originalism's high point. But after that case, originalism soared on the Supreme Court, as Trump added three originalist justices to the bench: Neil Gorsuch, Brett Kavanaugh, and Amy Coney Barrett. In 2022, this originalism-powered Court overturned *Roe*. Progressives, who expect originalism to prevail on the Court for decades to come, have attempted to devise something called "progressive originalism," seemingly favored by the Biden-appointed justice Ketanji Brown Jackson. As one law professor explained in 2022, "If conservative judges are making selective use of history to make originalist arguments for conservative results, then the only way to show this is to make better originalist arguments to the contrary."

Would judging law be reduced to the act of choosing among competing accounts of the past written by different groups of historians, based on some as-yet-undefined method of determining which account is the correct one? It hasn't worked out that way. In a series of crucial cases, the Trump-era Court cited history if the history supported a preferred outcome; if history did not support that outcome, the Court simply ignored the past. As the liberal justice Sonia Sotomayor observed in a scorching dissent in the presidential-immunity case *Trump v. United States*, "It seems history matters to this Court only when it is convenient."

*The Constitution is dead!* Scalia liked to say. To many Americans in the early decades of the 21st century, it has begun to seem that way, although half of the country blames Republicans and the other half blames Democrats. In 2021, one in three Americans said they might consider either abolishing the Supreme Court or limiting its power. Senator Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts, a former Harvard law professor, co-sponsored a new Judiciary Act to restructure the Court. Warren charged the conservative six-justice supermajority with pursuing a "deeply unpopular and partisan agenda at odds with the Constitution and the settled rights of our citizens."

In 2022, Trump, citing "Massive Fraud" in the 2020 election and seeking reelection, called for "the termination of all rules, regulations, and articles, even those found in the Constitution." Democrats called for two justices, Thomas and Alito, to recuse themselves in cases relating to the 2020 election and the January 6 insurrection, arguing that their wives had been publicly associated with the "Stop the Steal" effort; when they refused, Democrats in Congress called for their impeachment. After *Dobbs* and *Bruen*, public estimation of the legitimacy of the Court fell to record lows, although opinion divided along strictly partisan lines. This year, after Trump returned to the White House, he was asked whether he has a duty to uphold the Constitution. He said he didn't know.

Scalia did not live to witness this crisis in constitutionalism. In an exceptionally candid interview near the end of his life, he speculated that he might be despised for his legacy, adding, "And I don't care." Long before, playing Macbeth onstage back in high school, he'd uttered some of Shakespeare's most aching lines:

> Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
> And then is heard no more.

Did he ever wonder if that might be true of the Constitution, if he had been wrong, and if it were, all along, a living thing, though now stunted, thwarted, ailing? In 2016, during a quail-hunting trip in Texas, he died in his sleep, at age 79. The Constitution limps along, a walking shadow. *A*

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EVERLAST



# THE GREATEST FIGHT OF ALL TIME

BY VANN R. NEWKIRK II

It was oven-hot inside the arena, and that was before the fight began. The building's air-conditioning had already lost the undercard against the tropical sun, and the air was thick with humidity. Still, almost 30,000 people waited with sweat soaking their shirts, standing on tiptoe to get a glimpse of the men walking toward the center of the arena. From one side, draped in a dark-blue robe and flanked by an entourage in matching work shirts, Joe Frazier walked slowly through the crowd, stern and granite-jawed. A ripple of applause passed through the arena.

From the other side of the arena, dressed in a white satin robe with his name embroidered on the back, walked Muhammad Ali. Even at age 33, approaching the twilight of his career, Ali was electromagnetic, drawing the crowd to its feet and polarizing its constituents all at once. The noise was raucous. When match officials placed a more-than-three-foot-tall trophy in the middle of the ring, Ali grabbed it and feigned running away with it. In the ring, after his name was announced, he pantomimed heartbreak as boos overcame the adulation. Frazier, whose ring demeanor generally toggled between glowering and frowning, glowered.

This was the third bout between Frazier and Ali. Held on October 1, 1975, in the Philippine Coliseum, the fight is remembered by many who attended as the best heavyweight contest in history, and possibly the pinnacle of the sport. The match was the first ever broadcast live overseas by satellite, and hundreds of millions of people watched from abroad.

It was not the most dazzling display of pugilism as an art. There were no knockdowns, no calls from commentators that now live on as sound bites. The significance of the fight was more narrative than technical, and its appeal was elemental: a bitter test of wills and an exploration of the outer limits of human endurance. The final contest between Ali and Frazier was the culmination of a relationship that had begun in friendship but curdled into deep enmity, the decisive battle in a war that had become larger than the two men in the ring. The match was filled with contradictions. It had been pitched as an announcement of the arrival of the postcolonial Third World—but staged in part to help cover up the abuses of an autocratic regime supported by the U.S. government. It would be a showcase for all of the beauty and ugliness of boxing, a sport that made the world smaller by making tall tales of men. Looking back now, 50 years later, the event reveals—perhaps more than any other since—the ways that sport can be a mirror to society and the soul.

Ali and Frazier faced each other as the bell rang. And so began the Thrilla in Manila.

THE TWO FIGHTERS ADVANCED, Ali jogging enthusiastically and Frazier plodding, cautious. They put up their guards and began to maneuver and dance, keeping their feet moving as they surveyed each other. Ali kept his hands high while Frazier reached out, almost gently, with a shot to the abdomen. Ali hit back with light left jabs as Frazier probed further, gauging Ali's reaction time as he shifted his guard.

Their measurements taken, the fighters increased their intensity. Ali aimed to knock Frazier out early, at times holding the shorter man off by extending his left fist straight out, like a football stiff-arm, while he waited for openings to strike with his coiled right. Frazier, though, was relentless, seeking a way inside Ali's reach, driving blows into Ali's ribs but moving too fast to get caught by the night-ender Ali had planned.

Ali had spent much of the previous month telling any reporter who would listen how slow and tired the 31-year-old Frazier was, but it was immediately clear that the two were evenly matched. The crowd roared when they exchanged combinations, when Ali jawed at Frazier, and when Frazier yelled back. When the bell rang at the end of the first round, Frazier tapped Ali on the butt, almost playfully, as if to let him know: *I'm here*.

JERRY IZENBERG USED his walker to prop open the door of his ranch-style house and beckoned me inside. "I used to be a lot faster," he said. We were in Henderson, Nevada, a suburb of Las Vegas in the foothills of the McCullough Range. His house bears all the hallmarks of a Vegas retirement refuge—a rock garden, a brilliant-green turf lawn, a view of the Strip across the Mojave Desert. But Izenberg is not retired. In his mid-90s, he still writes columns for the Newark *Star-Ledger* in New Jersey, making him likely the oldest working sports journalist in America. (Dave Goren, the executive director of the National Sports Media Association, told *The Atlantic* that "if there's an active sports journalist older than Jerry, I have no idea who it might be.") His book about the heyday of heavyweight boxers, *Once There Were Giants*, was released in 2017.

As he talked about his 74 years of sportswriting, the ease with which Izenberg recalled the fights he covered decades ago, and even the scorecards of specific rounds, astonished me. But he reached a different level of clarity when we talked about Ali and Frazier's final fight. Izenberg leaned closer, recounting the entire match, blow by blow, and quoting the two fighters as they spoke to each other in the ring. It was the greatest match he'd ever seen in person.

In late September 1975, Izenberg landed in Manila. The flight from San Francisco had been packed with sports reporters, and

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they were all transported to the Bayview Plaza, where the promoter Don King had arranged accommodations for journalists. The hotel, famed for its views of the sunset over Manila Bay, had been well stocked for the incoming brigade of thirsty men. They flocked to the bar for Joe's Knuckle Punch, a drink made with *lambanog*, a local palm liquor that supposedly wouldn't come with a hangover. The reporters drank for lunch and for dinner, and some stayed up late, talking politics over cocktails.

By the time Izenberg arrived, Ali and Frazier had been in Manila for days in order to acclimate to the heat and prepare for the fight. Frazier had gotten there first, landing at the airport at dawn. He was greeted on the tarmac by security guards and taken to his hotel.

Ali's arrival was more of a spectacle. His team had delayed the plane's departure from Honolulu so that instead of getting to Manila before dawn, Ali would arrive just after 6 a.m., which provided enough light for television cameras—and also coincided with the news hour back in the States. Hundreds of people crowded the runway to greet Ali, pushing against a cordon of soldiers armed with truncheons. As Ali stopped to address the crowd and the cameras, a disturbance broke out between the jostling spectators and the soldiers. "I don't want any fighting here," Ali said. He praised Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos, the president and first lady of the country, and bantered with the crowd, then launched into a poem he'd workshopped back home: "It will be a killa', chilla', thrilla' / when I get that gorilla in Manila." The rapturous arrival struck a chord with President Marcos, who aspired to build his own cult of personality in the Philippines. "I'd have to kill him," he allegedly later said about Ali, "if he was a Filipino." It was a joke, but only halfway.

Staged in a former U.S. colony just five months after the fall of Saigon, the fight was billed as a showcase for a new postcolonial era. With no evident sense of irony, Ali had likened his role as an international figure to that of a "Black Kissinger," a statesman for the Third World. Ali had recently taken huge purses, negotiated by King, for the "Rumble in the Jungle" in Kinshasa, Zaire, and a title defense in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. But in Zaire, he had been the guest of the kleptocratic dictator Mobutu Sese Seko, who'd paid handsomely for the good press. Marcos hoped to receive similarly favorable publicity.

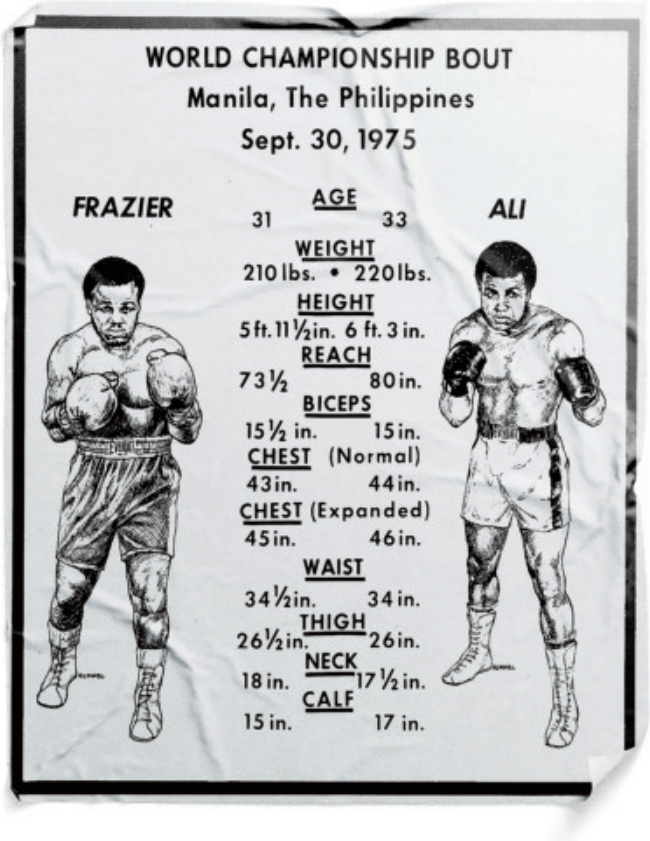
Under Marcos's rule—which was propped up publicly by U.S. military aid and secretly by CIA assistance—the Philippines had been transformed into a police state. In 1972, in the name of fighting communism and terrorism, Marcos had declared martial law, granting himself supreme power. Three years into his regime, it had become commonplace for Filipinos to have family members who'd been disappeared, or to encounter the mutilated bodies of the president's political opponents, left on the streets as warnings.

One way that the Marcoses managed their reputation at home and abroad was through glitzy events that projected the Philippines as a booming, modernized state. The fight—for which they paid millions in purse money, promotion, and setup—was among the boldest examples. Nobody who knew the country was ever really fooled, and even Kissinger—the white one—warned President Richard Nixon that he thought Ferdinand Marcos was a self-serving tyrant. But boy, could he put on a *show*.

It was always unclear whether Ali's wide-eyed embrace of authoritarian regimes was a product of naivete or something more calculated. As with all things Ali, the boundaries between theater and reality were purposefully vague. But he readily availed himself of the Marcoses' hospitality, taking members of his entourage to parties and events. When Ali's mistress appeared at a state reception in Manila, Ali's wife, Khalilah, flew to the Philippines in a fury. Asked by the press about the fight, she responded tersely, "I'm going to root for the best man to win tonight—whomever that turns out to be."

In many ways, the extracurriculars—the women, the parties, the junkets—were all standard Ali fare by this point. A week before the match, Izenberg wrote that when it came to time, "he never has as much as he would like because there are so many things he wants to say and do before the bell rings. Some of them even concern the fight."

But Ali's antics in Manila had a more vicious edge. He leaned into his portrayal of the darker-skinned Frazier as more animal than human, even going so far as to wear a shirt imprinted with the image of a gorilla to the weigh-in. He had brought a toy gorilla to a press conference announcing the fight and pretended his sparring partners were gorillas. During one of Frazier's training




Joe Frazier was two years younger than Muhammad Ali, but Ali had a significant edge in height and reach.

ASSOCIATED PRESS

sessions in Manila, Ali taunted him from the rafters. One night, Frazier heard shouting from outside his hotel window. He looked down from his balcony and saw Ali pointing a pistol at him. Ali and his team would later say that the pistol was a toy, but the truth has never been determined.

Frazier's time in Manila was less remarkable. During press conferences, he always called Ali by his last name at birth—a growled, clipped "Clay," as if even that one word was too much acknowledgment. He spent downtime at a villa in the mountainous outskirts of Manila, passing hours in monk-like silence. Cutting an image that contrasted with Ali's more libertine act, Frazier traveled with his family, including his teenage son, Marvis, an aspiring boxer himself. Marvis had greeted Ali at the airport when he arrived in Manila, and was on hand to witness his delivery of the "gorilla" rhyme in front of the crowd.

When reporters asked Frazier about Ali's abuse, he would point to his children and ask how he could be an animal with such beautiful kids. He brushed off most of the taunts. But inside, as he later wrote in his autobiography, Frazier seethed. He wanted to kill Ali, or die trying.

**FRAZIER WAS MAKING** his point early. Ali had assumed he was slow, creaky, and dangerous only with his left hand. But Frazier was a new man in Manila. Ali was scoring plenty with jabs and flurries, but his attempts to land big punches mostly fell flat.

By the third round, the temperature in the arena may have reached 120 degrees. Ali gave up trying for a quick knockout blow and instead allowed Frazier to push him back into a corner, hoping to employ the "rope a dope" strategy he'd used so effectively against George Foreman in Kinshasa. Ali covered his face and tried to absorb Frazier's metronomic body blows, aiming to tire him. Twice, Ali taunted Frazier, beckoning him to hit him. Frazier obliged, surprising Ali with a cross and an uppercut from his supposedly weak right arm.

Ali began trying to clinch Frazier, putting his gloves behind the shorter man's head and seeking to weigh him down. The two-man dance became a triad as the referee, Carlos "Sonny" Padilla Jr., repeatedly pulled the men apart and scolded Ali.

Ali had often ridiculed Frazier for turning fights into slogs. Now he was in the mud himself. Despite it all, he managed his usual jabs to the chin and eyes, but Frazier seemed unfazed. Realizing the shift in rhythm, during the fifth round, Ali snarled at Frazier: "You ain't got no right hand! What are you doing?"

**IZENBERG FIRST MET** Cassius Clay in Rome, while covering the 1960 Olympics. Clay was an 18-year-old amateur then, the Louisville golden boy who'd already captured eight regional Golden Gloves and two nationals. He was a dyslexic kid who'd chafed at the indignities of growing up Black in a visibly segregated city, and for whom the lynching of Emmett Till in 1955 was deeply traumatic. Precocious, loud, and ambitious, he was discovered early by local trainers and promoters, and proved to be a boxing prodigy. He knew early that the sport would be his way out.

At the Olympics, he was skinnier than you probably remember him, and the warrior-poet braggadocio that later defined him was still embryonic. His surprising gold medal in the light-heavyweight division, over a Polish champion seven years his senior, made Clay something of a household name in the States.

Izenberg didn't actually watch Clay fight in the Olympics, but remembers him cracking jokes in the Olympic Village. "Athletes are walking by," Izenberg told me. Many didn't speak English, but something about Clay captivated them, especially the women. They "walked past him, turned around, walked back a few feet to take a look at him," Izenberg said. Later, Izenberg got in touch with the young champion, who begged him to come watch a fight. The two struck up a friendship that lasted for the rest of Ali's life.

Joe Frazier, two years younger than Ali, arrived at stardom on a Greyhound bus. He was born to a Gullah sharecropping family in South Carolina's Sea Islands. The shack where he and 12 siblings lived had been built by his father out of scrap lumber; luxuries such as plumbing belonged to another world. Like most sharecropping children, Frazier started working on the farm early. In his flickers of leisure time, at 8 years old, he made his own heavy bag, stuffed with moss, and tried to train himself to be the next Joe Louis. But a hard life made its mark. One day, he fell and seriously injured his left arm while trying to wrangle the family's 300-pound hog. The family had no money for doctors, and the arm healed crooked, forever limiting his reach and range of motion. But, as Frazier liked to say, the arm's awkward angle kept it "permanently cocked" for a left hook, which would become his signature punch.

At 15, Frazier joined the Great Migration, taking a bus north to New York and then settling in Philadelphia, where he landed work at a slaughterhouse. He was 18 before he finally received his first formal boxing training, at a Police Athletic League gym in Philly. He worked out obsessively, carrying his own record player to the gym late at night and training solo to the soundtrack of Otis Redding and Sam Cooke. The hard-nosed, straightforward style that he developed suited his adopted city, and would later provide a contrast to Ali's finesse. He made the 1964 Tokyo Olympics as an alternate after another American boxer was injured, keeping to himself in the Olympic Village and focusing on training. Improbably, he kept winning his bouts. In the heavyweight semifinal, he broke his thumb, but he won that fight too, then hid the injury in order to compete in the final. He won the gold over the older, more experienced German fighter Hans Huber, only to be fired from his job in the slaughterhouse because his hand was in a cast.

It seems only natural in retrospect that Ali's and Frazier's lives would become intertwined: the dyslexic boy who found purpose—and a refuge from racism—in boxing, and the young sharecropper dropout who escaped his own inner-city blues in the ring; the would-be heirs of the Brown Bomber, Joe Louis. And for a time, they were friends. Ali would turn pro shortly after his Olympic coming-out party, and within four years, at the age of 22, he claimed a heavyweight title by beating Sonny Liston. The same year, he joined the Nation of Islam and changed his name. He cultivated both fame and infamy with his outspoken Black radicalism, and with his denunciations of the war in Vietnam. When he refused the draft in 1967, citing his faith, he was convicted for draft evasion and sentenced to five years in prison, and then stripped of his boxing licenses,

passport, and heavyweight title. Before public opinion turned against the war, Ali was likely the most despised man in America. In the boxing world, Frazier was among the few people who didn't cut ties.

Frazier had come up in Ali's shadow. With Ali no longer eclipsing him, his career took off. In 1968, he fought Buster Mathis for the New York State Athletic Commission's heavyweight title, one component of the unified world heavyweight title. After the fight, a reporter asked, slyly, if Frazier considered himself a champion. According to the New York *Daily News*, Frazier glowered.

The promoter Butch Lewis later said that when the two met, Frazier continued to call Ali "champ," even after taking part of his title. Ali moved to Philadelphia while waiting for his appeal to work its way through federal courts, and the two often crossed paths. In an interview he gave later in his life, Frazier would say that Ali popped into Frazier's gym to talk about their inevitable fight, and asked Frazier for help with getting his license back. Frazier said he obliged. In 2011, many obituaries of Frazier mentioned that he said he'd lobbied President Nixon for Ali's reinstatement.

During his time away from boxing, which would end up lasting some three years, Ali supported himself with speaking engagements and appearance fees. According to Frazier, Ali liked to characterize the duo as generals in two different theaters. "Just keep whuppin' those guys in the ring and I'll keep fighting Uncle Sam. And one day we'll make a lot of money together," he told Frazier. Ali decided to write an autobiography, *The Greatest*. In it, he said he admired Frazier. "Of all the people in my profession I would like to have had as a friend," Ali wrote, "he was the one."

On a summer day in 1970, according to that book, when the two men both had appointments in New York City, Frazier, flush from his earnings as the newly crowned heavyweight champion, picked Ali up in Philadelphia in his gold Cadillac and drove him to New York. Frazier told Ali about his aspirations as a soul singer, and Ali sang a ditty he'd composed, "Mighty Whitey." They talked about race in America, and Frazier told Ali about having to fight his way through the Jim Crow Deep South.

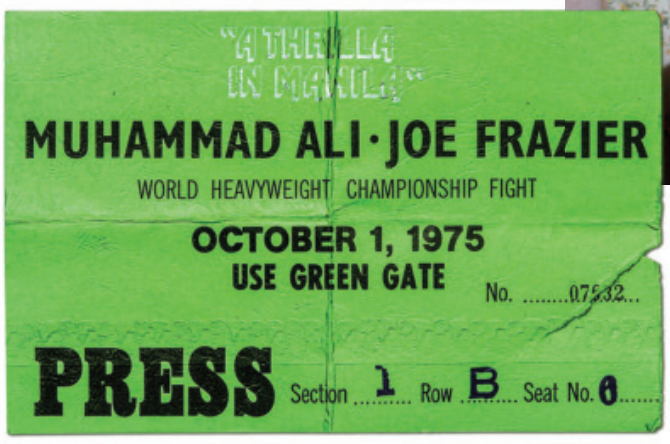
Sitting side by side, the two often returned to rhapsodizing about how their future fight might play out. There was no shortage of playful insults, but Ali told Frazier in earnest that with his fighting income dried up, he needed a job. He wanted to be Frazier's sparring partner, and asked for money. Near the end of their trip, Frazier loaned Ali a hundred bucks. He let the top down on the gold Cadillac and they cruised. But when it came time for Frazier to drop off Ali, the men agreed that they shouldn't be seen as friendly in public. Nobody pays to see two friends fighting.

SHORTLY AFTER the sixth round began in Manila, the dynamite in Frazier's left hand finally exploded. He connected with a thunderous hook, stretching his arm and body as far as he could reach to snap Ali's head back. A few seconds later, Frazier hit him again with the same punch. Ali stumbled, throwing a feeble, off-balance uppercut to the space where Frazier had just stood. The crowd, which had favored Frazier—for his Christian faith, it was said, and out of a national affinity for underdogs—erupted in cheers. Now it was Frazier who jogged and Ali who lumbered. Three more times in the round, Frazier's left found Ali's face cleanly. For the first time in the match, Frazier was the clear winner of a round.

But after his exile from boxing, Ali had discovered something useful, and something terrible. Stripped of the preternatural speed of his prime, he realized, quite simply, that he could sustain more damage than most fighters could deliver. In the seventh round, Ali shook off the punishment and for a time found some of his younger self, beginning to dance in the middle of the ring again. Frazier kept pounding Ali's body. But now, as Frazier advanced, Ali peppered his face with starch-stiff jabs and two-punch counters. His fist kept finding Frazier's right eye.



Ali and Frazier meet with Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos in September 1975, shortly before fighting for the world heavyweight championship.




MICHAEL BRENNAN / GETTY; TAKEO TANUMA / *SPORTS ILLUSTRATED* / GETTY

THE GENESIS OF the Frazier-Ali feud all depends on who's telling the story. Long after Frazier's retirement from boxing, after his hatred of Ali had solidified into a defining part of his life, he denied in his autobiography that they'd ever really been friends. And *The Greatest*, Ali's autobiography written with Richard Durham, a renowned Black journalist and former editor of a newspaper for the Nation of Islam, may not be entirely reliable in its characterization of Ali's sentiments. It was published in 1975, just two months after the Manila fight, with a mandate from Ali's handlers to scrub unsavory elements of his life. It's possible that the book's praise for Frazier was a real-time revision of the ugliness Ali had recently unleashed in the Philippines.

But the balance of the evidence suggests that the two men did share a bond. Frazier had looked up to Ali, and is said to have asked for his autograph when they'd first met, hoping they would one day fight. The question of when that might happen was postponed for a long time as Ali appealed his case. A match planned in Florida fell through, and rumors of bouts in Mississippi, Canada, and Australia never materialized.

Ali had always made a habit of taunting his opponents, many of whom took it as funny and gave back as good as they got. That's boxing. But over the course of his exile, Ali's barbs and stunts against Frazier grew into something more venomous.

During his sojourn in Philadelphia, Ali constantly challenged Frazier to unsanctioned fights. On a September day in 1969, he showed up at the Police Athletic League gym, demanding a fight with Frazier right there. According to a local report, more than 1,000 people who'd gotten wind of the challenge also arrived, and police soon broke up the crowd. Outside, Ali stood on top of a car and stoked the nascent mob, promising them a fight at a rec center a few miles away. He led a mass of people across the city to the supposed fight location, where as many as 10,000 people eventually gathered. Ali urged them to form a ring, and led them in chants calling out Frazier, who never showed.

These spectacles might have all been excused as Ali doing what he did best: promoting. But ultimately, there was never room enough, in town or in boxing, for both men. It was not a given that Ali would ever fight again; that he could avoid jail time and be vindicated; that he'd reclaim the title. And all the while, Ali felt that Frazier was a counterfeit champ who wasn't his equal in the ring, the face of all that had been taken from him. In the other corner, Frazier constantly had to prove himself as a deserving victor, even though his style and persona never quite captured audiences the way Ali's did. And years of continual needling is apt to get under anyone's skin.

The growing fissure became a permanent rift when one day Frazier heard Ali doing a radio interview. Ali boasted about how easily he would beat Frazier, calling him a coward, as he'd often done. But this time, Ali added something new: He called Frazier an Uncle Tom.

After repeated provocations, Frazier grew so incensed that he drove to Ali's residence, where Ali began a frustrating game he would play with Frazier for the rest of their lives. He insisted that he hadn't meant anything by the insults, that he was just trying to gin up attention for their eventual fight. Frazier was being too sensitive, he said; he needed to loosen up. But Frazier wasn't having it. He'd told Ali about how he'd had to scrap with racists who meant him physical harm just to make it out of the South. Being called an Uncle Tom was a betrayal.

They finally fought in 1971, at Madison Square Garden, a few months before the Supreme Court ruled that Ali had been improperly denied status as a conscientious objector and overturned his conviction for draft dodging. The "Fight of the Century," as it was dubbed, was marked as much by personal animosity as by the unique excitement of having—by virtue of Ali's forced hiatus—two undefeated champions face off in a title fight. In the months before the $5 million match, Ali turned up the invective, calling Frazier dumb, mocking his dark skin, and painting him as a lackey for his white handlers.

**ALI SAID THAT ROOTING FOR FRAZIER MADE A BLACK PERSON A TRAITOR, AND THAT FRAZIER FOUGHT FOR NIXON. AS A RESULT, FRAZIER RECEIVED ANONYMOUS DEATH THREATS, AND HIS CHILDREN FEARED FOR HIS LIFE.**

Frazier didn't hide his anger, raging in prefight interviews about how badly he would hurt Ali. He'd never called Ali by his chosen name, but now Frazier's insistence on calling him Clay was tied to a larger rejection of the Nation of Islam, and his contention that the group was using Ali.

Ali countered, saying that Frazier was himself being used by his management group, a collection of white businessmen in Philadelphia. He said that rooting for Frazier made a Black person a traitor, and that Frazier fought for Nixon. (According to a member of Frazier's entourage, Dave Wolf, Ali also said that Frazier fought for Klansmen.) As a result, Frazier received anonymous death threats, and his children feared for his life. Winning the fight would not be enough

for Ali; he evidently needed to erase the *idea* of Frazier as an equal, both in and out of the ring.

The "Fight of the Century" lived up to the billing. Ali came out aggressively, with rapid-fire punches in the first few rounds. But he was slower than he'd been before his hiatus, and as he got tired, Frazier's constant, precise body work took hold. Frazier was more John Henry than Joe Louis, driving steel over and over again into the core of his opponent. The fight went the distance, a full 15 rounds, but the outcome was clear. In the 11th, Frazier uncorked a left hook that made Ali wobble. In the 15th, he delivered another that knocked Ali down.

The scorecards were unanimous, although Ali and his team disputed the decision and demanded another fight. After the match, Frazier said that he'd reached back home to "the country" for some of the blows he'd landed. In a match that was, in a sense, a referendum on Frazier's Blackness, the arm that had been permanently marked by Jim Crow had forced a judgment.

BY THE TENTH round in Manila, Ali and Frazier both knew that this fight would take something from them, something they hadn't had to give before. Sweat poured off them, and between rounds they sank onto their stools and gasped. This was a test of endurance, against each other and against the hellish conditions in the ring.

A beleaguered Ali had gained momentum in the eighth, launching a barrage of punches that momentarily hurt Frazier, and began to swell his face. But Frazier was inexorable. He kept Ali on his back foot, driving him into the corners and delivering vicious shots to the head, blows that—had they been delivered by a slightly younger Frazier—might have knocked men out cold. Ali shook it all off. He was a blanket, still trying to clinch Frazier and hold him down. The two boxers teetered against each other, exhausted, until Padilla stepped in again, pulling Ali's gloves off the back of Frazier's neck. They raised their arms, almost unwillingly, and resumed slugging.

WHEN CARLOS PADILLA JR. had woken up on the morning of the Ali-Frazier match, he was not the chosen referee. Amid all the acrimony between the Ali and Frazier camps, they hadn't agreed on who would stand in the ring between the two men. Their second fight, in which Ali had thoroughly avenged his defeat in the "Fight of the Century," had been marred by controversy over the officiating. That bout, also held in Madison Square Garden, was less a boxing match than a hugging match. According to Frazier's trainer, Eddie Futch, Ali had clinched more than 100 times, often pulling Frazier's neck down in order to tire him. Both corners had criticized the referee, Tony Perez—Frazier's side for not stopping the clinching, and Ali's for a key moment in which Perez had accidentally ended a round too soon, after Ali had stunned Frazier with a right hand and might have been able to go for a knockout. Even on the eve of the fight, Ali's and Frazier's teams and the boxing authorities could not agree on which of the candidates who'd been brought to Manila would be in the ring.

There was a uniquely Marcosian way of breaking the deadlock. According to Izenberg, when the parties met that night to finally settle the issue, one of the omnipresent Filipino military men placed a .45-caliber pistol on the bargaining table between the two sides and suggested that the referee be Filipino. The leading candidate was Padilla. At dawn on the day of the fight, the commission called Padilla's home to let him know he'd be the referee. But he had already left for the Coliseum to report for the undercard fights. After he arrived, he told me recently, an official said to get a move on; reporters were waiting for him. Confused, Padilla asked why. "Don't you know you're going to referee the Ali-Frazier fight?" was the answer.

He had never refereed a fight above the 135-pound weight class, and most of his experience had come in amateur gyms and converted cockfighting rings, which were small compared with a regulation heavyweight ring. "I said, 'Goddamn, it's big!'" Padilla recalled. He'd never had to give instructions to fighters in English, and his English wasn't so great. Trying to separate two 200-plus-pound men would be difficult for anybody, and at 5 foot 8, Padilla was diminutive next to Ali and Frazier.

I met Padilla at his home in Las Vegas, not far from Izenberg's. He's 91, still spry, and still wearing the same thick mustache that made him stand out in the ring. Padilla is fiery and prone to a "goddamn," a favorite expression. He was eager to show me a Facebook video, taken the year before, of him working a speed bag, sending it flying with a steady rhythm until it became a blur.

We talked in his living room, which was crowded with photographs and Catholic figurines. On the wall and in frames propped up behind me were pictures of Padilla's refereeing career, and of boxers who'd been in his orbit. In the middle were the highlights: photographs of Ali and Frazier squaring up in Manila, with Padilla looking on.



The referee Carlos Padilla Jr. during the Thrilla in Manila. He had never officiated a fight above the 135-pound weight class before.

ED KOLENOVSKY / AP

Long before that fight, boxing had been a prominent part of life in the Philippines. After America seized control of the archipelago from Spain in 1898, then brutally suppressed Indigenous rebellions, it exported American culture in the name of "civilization"—part of the "white man's burden," as Rudyard Kipling put it in 1899. As was true of colonialism's other exports, the intended subjects quickly made the art of boxing their own, subverting the original intentions. The legendary Pancho Villa won the world flyweight championship in 1923. In the 1960s, Gabriel "Flash" Elorde held the world super-featherweight title

for seven years. Also trained in eskrima, the national martial art of the Philippines, Elorde embraced a boxing style—of "dancing" and maintaining distance while landing quick strikes—that influenced a young Muhammad Ali. When Ali floated like a butterfly and stung like a bee, he was likely channeling Elorde.

Padilla happily recounts his role in all of this history to anyone who'll listen. The morning of the match, he was nervous: He had never officiated anything with anywhere close to this level of attention. Then again, nobody had. The fight was held at 10 a.m. local time, in order to accommodate an expected global audience of hundreds of millions; it was likely one of the most-watched television events in history at that point. Many people who watched the match live paid to do so in movie theaters or arenas equipped with closed-circuit projectors. But nearly half a million viewers in the United States watched it live via satellite on a new network, HBO.

If Padilla got anything wrong, the error would be indelible. Just about every person in the Philippines would be watching. Hundreds had traveled to Manila just to be close to the action, even if they couldn't get into the arena. "They slept around the outside of the Coliseum," Padilla told me. "For boxing, Filipinos pause everything in life," Jay Gonzalez, a Manila-born boxing coach and academic, told me. He was 11 years old in 1975, and watched the fight in class on a television his teacher rolled in. He and his classmates were excited to watch two Black champions, feeling an affinity as people of color. It didn't hurt that the referee was Filipino.

Padilla endeavored to make his mark early. With the Marcoses looking on—seated in high-backed thrones that Padilla believes were bulletproofed to foil assassination attempts—he barked at both fighters, trying to project authority. It was almost unheard-of for a referee to disqualify a fighter in a heavyweight championship, and Filipino officials warned Padilla not to make history. But he was never demure. He told Ali that he would penalize him for illegal holds, and gave a warning to Frazier early on for a low blow. Padilla kept the fight brisk, a welcome change from the wrestling match that had transpired during the previous Ali-Frazier fight.

**ALI COULDN'T HAVE KNOWN** that Frazier was fighting one-eyed—that he had been fighting one-eyed for years, having lost most of his sight on his left side because of a cataract. He had made it past physicals by memorizing eye-test charts and tricking fight doctors, just as he'd shrugged off other injuries and ailments that would have sidelined other men. But now his right eye—the good one—was failing him.

After taking Frazier's punishment to his body and skull for the better part of 10 rounds, Ali started landing power punches more frequently around Frazier's face and right eye. Inflammation on each side of the socket met in the middle and began to shut it.

In the 13th round, with the eye swelling and bleeding, and with blood pouring from his mouth, an exhausted Frazier willed himself out of his corner, throwing blows that even a gassed Ali could avoid or ignore. Frazier could not see clearly, and his entire head seemed swollen, and Ali kept landing punches. He knocked Frazier's mouthpiece into the crowd, but somehow, miraculously, Frazier still stood.

**ON A SWELTERING** April night, I hailed a GrabCar and sped from the Manila airport to my hotel in Quezon City, one of the cities that make up the megalopolis of greater Manila and the site of the Ali-Frazier fight. Everywhere I looked, armed security guards crowded street corners and building entrances. The country's midterm elections were approaching, and violence around elections was not uncommon. Still, as guards and a bomb-sniffing dog checked the trunk for explosives outside my hotel, I sensed a bit of theater in all the security. The legitimacy of the government, now led by Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr., the son of the two famed kleptocrats, still seems to rely on the appearance of safety more than anything else.

The next morning, I ducked into the cool refuge of the Araneta Coliseum, which had been temporarily renamed the Philippine Coliseum in 1975 before it hosted Ali-Frazier III. The white-domed arena, now gray with age and grime, didn't resemble its namesake so much as a spaceship, a Starship Enterprise plopped amid high-rises. Inside, the place that had been so hot as to be nearly unbearable on that morning 50 years ago was mostly empty, and the air-conditioning was cranked high enough to give me goose bumps. If I was looking for traces of Ali and Frazier, they might have been covered from my view: The venue was being prepared for a live show by performers from *RuPaul's Drag Race* the following night.

I left the Coliseum and walked around the corner to Ali Mall—built in honor of its namesake in 1976—and then to Gateway Tower, where I met Jorge Araneta, the leader of the empire that had built the Coliseum and the business district around it. He was 89 years old, still svelte and sharp in a patterned blue resort shirt, and still wearing the easy, confident air of authority. We sat at a round wooden table in his office and he picked up a stack of photo albums, all filled with snapshots taken during Ali's time in the Philippines. Araneta found a picture of two smiling men attending the dedication ceremony of the mall I had just visited. One was quite obviously Muhammad Ali. It took me a moment to place the young face of Araneta himself.

The Araneta clan had grown prosperous as sugar planters during Spanish rule, he told me. After their home was destroyed during World War II, his father took a trip to Rome and, upon seeing the Colosseum, had a spark of inspiration. "He said: 'I'm going to build the same,'" Araneta told me.

At the time of its completion, in 1960, the Araneta Coliseum was the largest building of its kind in the world. Its inaugural event was the super-featherweight title fight between Flash Elorde and Harold Gomes, when Elorde became the first Filipino in decades to capture a title.

When Marcos declared martial law in 1972, the elder Araneta, a prominent backer of the opposing Liberal Party, fled to New York. Jorge stayed behind and ran the business. When Marcos's regime needed a venue for what would be the biggest sporting event in the history of the Philippines, there was just one real choice. The regime's sole imposition was the temporary renaming of the building. In his office, Araneta laughed. "At least they gave it back," he said. "Some people would have kept it."

The Coliseum today has hosted everything from Boyz II Men concerts to the Miss World Philippines pageant, but it still carries a special association with combat sports: boxing, kickboxing, mixed martial arts. The Filipino boxing legend Manny Pacquiao, who recently returned to the ring after a four-year retirement, is planning an event commemorating Ali-Frazier at the Coliseum, fueling speculation that he might himself fight there. The arena is also home to an annual tournament billed as "the biggest cockfighting event in the world." Blood still regularly stains the floors of the Coliseum's rings.

Most agree that Ali won the beginning of the fight in Manila and dominated the end, but that Frazier owned the middle.

This is a fulfillment of the elder Araneta's vision. Inside the first Colosseum, the masses of Rome watched slaves and animals butcher one another. Brutality, coercion, and terror were always elemental parts of the entertainment. But there were also moments of transcendence mixed in with the gore—the beauty and creativity of martial arts, the thrill of the contest, the inquiry into human limits and potential. And there was always the chance that some fighter might one day, through repeated victories, win freedom from the fight.

Perhaps the importance of the Ali-Frazier match derives from the extremity of those blood-sport contradictions. Ali—or Richard Durham channeling Ali—would write just months after the fight that some part of him had always rebelled against the primal allure of his sport. "Like in the old slave days on the plantations," he wrote, "with two of us big black slaves fighting, almost on the verge of annihilating each other while the masters are smoking big cigars, screaming and urging us on, looking for the blood." But he, the race man's race man, had needed so badly to prove something in that ring that he'd tried to turn the entire Black community against someone he might otherwise call brother.

Frazier had needed to prove something too. In this, his last big bout, he had the opportunity to fight for a kind of freedom—freedom from torment and from constant comparison to his nemesis. But part of the reason the crowd was so rapt was the silent speculation—dreadful and giddy, and building in the final rounds—that he might face a gladiator's end.

FRAZIER CAME OUT of his corner in the 14th all but blind, rocking on unsteady legs. A knot on his forehead was growing by the second, and his mouth and both eyes were badly swollen. Ali went forward stiffly, his trunk and hips deeply bruised from Frazier's body blows. He seemed to struggle to lift his arms. Whatever well from which he'd drawn energy had gone dry.

Frazier couldn't defend himself, but he kept throwing wild, delirious punches. A few left hooks landed, but they didn't have much power anymore. Frazier kept tapping his own face, either to will himself on or simply to try to clear his limited vision. He almost entirely abandoned his guard. Ali threw wide, slow blows that arrived on Frazier's skull by telegraph. It was like he was punching underwater. But the punches kept finding home.







LAWRENCE SCHILLER / POLARIS COMMUNICATIONS / GETTY




When they went back to their corners, Futch, Frazier's trainer, asked Frazier why he couldn't avoid Ali's winding punches. Frazier told Futch that he could no longer see Ali's right hand. Frazier was determined to finish the fight. But Futch had seen boxers die in the ring. Against Frazier's murderous protestations, he told Padilla to stop the fight.

After Padilla raised Ali's arm and declared him the victor, the champion collapsed in a heap. The crowd roared, launching into chants of "Ali! Ali! Ali!" His team helped him push himself up to sit slumped on his stool, his arms dragging toward the floor as if his fists were too heavy to carry, his head bowed between his knees. When it came time to talk to reporters, Ali wobbled, barely able to steady himself or hoist the trophy. He told Izenberg that this was the closest to death he'd ever been. In his recap of the fight, Ali mostly eschewed his usual bravado: "I was surprised Joe had so much stamina," he told a reporter. "He is the greatest fighter of all times, next to me."

"Except for you," the reporter replied.

"Except for me."

AS THE REFEREE, Padilla was one of the three people who submitted an official scorecard for the fight. All three had Ali up by a healthy amount going into the 15th round. Padilla said that even if Futch hadn't told him to do so, he probably would have called the fight. "Because Frazier was no more."

The unofficial scorecards from journalists were more favorable to Frazier. The Associated Press scored the fight even going into the final round. *The New York Times* gave Frazier eight of the first 11 rounds. "Going into the 15th round, I had Ali ahead by one point," Izenberg told me.

The general consensus is that Ali won the beginning of the fight and dominated the end, and that Frazier owned the middle. Frazier always maintained that Ali was too exhausted to fight the 15th, and that he could've won by a knockout if he'd just been allowed to fight.

After it was over, the Marcoses invited Ali to one of their many homes for the evening. They'd been pleased by the fight. In the Philippines, citizens rejoiced in it, and particularly in Padilla's presence. "President Marcos wanted a showcase to the world," Araneta told me. "What better show can you present than Muhammad Ali?" But the source of the regime's good fortune sat in silence at dinner in the palace, seemingly unable to eat.

Araneta hosted Ali at his home for lunch shortly after the fight. "He was very somber" and could "hardly walk," Araneta told me. "I wanted to uplift his spirits, and I said, 'Muhammad,

NEIL LEIFER / *SPORTS ILLUSTRATED* / GETTY



After 14 rounds, Frazier's trainer tells Padilla to stop the fight, and Ali retains his title as the heavyweight champion of the world.

I'm going to name a building after you.' " That woke Ali up, he said. The next year, Ali would come back for the opening of Ali Mall.

The mall was one small testament to what Ali meant in Manila and in other corners of the subaltern world. He wasn't all pageantry and promotion; people were genuinely inspired by his presence, his idealism, and his earned status as a symbol of resistance against empire. Even in the Philippines, where he dined with a butcher and entered the ring disfavored against Frazier, he is now revered—all part of the contradictions of the man. As President Barack Obama would say on the occasion of his death, Ali was "a name as familiar to the downtrodden in the slums of Southeast Asia and the villages of Africa as it was to cheering crowds in Madison Square Garden."

Frazier didn't attend the Marcoses' after-party. He was too hurt to go, and probably too prideful. He sat in his dressing room, his face battered into a new shape. His son hugged him, and Frazier grumbled with his team about what might have been. "I was there, wasn't I?" he said.

ASK ANYONE WHAT makes a human human, and they'll likely mention something to do with our brains. Maybe they'll say we stand alone in our capacity for language, or reason, or self-awareness, not knowing that science has chipped away at each of these presumptions. We suspect now that whales can talk; that crows can reason; that octopuses may be self-aware. But one thing that seems to be truly unique to *Homo sapiens* is this: We are the only animal with fists.

Perhaps the fist evolved as an anatomical accident, a by-product of the lengthened fingers and opposable thumbs that gave humans their unparalleled tool-grabbing dexterity. That's one theory. But compelling evidence suggests that the exact shape of the human fist evolved at least in part for punching. The theory would place the duality of human nature quite literally in our hands. On the one side, we have our instruments for the written word and our tools for daily diplomacy—for shaking hands or putting our palms up in peace. On the other side, we carry our most primal weapons.

In Jerry Izenberg's home, there is a shrine to the human arsenal: a case holding a single, cherry-red boxing glove. On the thumb of the glove, Muhammad Ali's famous, compact signature, scribbled in black marker. On the body of the glove, Frazier's larger, swooping signature. The souvenir, which Izenberg thinks was signed after Frazier's and Ali's retirements, might suggest a thawing of relations between the men. But there's some deception at play. According to Izenberg, the autograph seeker who'd first owned the glove had Ali sign first and then took it to Frazier, holding it so as to obscure Ali's mark while Frazier signed.

In the waning years of Ali's and Frazier's lives, friends and media figures tried to patch things up between the rivals. But they never really reconciled, and both men's lives were too abbreviated to let time do its healing. Like many of their peers in the pantheon of Black heavyweight boxing, they died relatively early, facing serious health and financial trouble.

Shuffling and diabetic, Frazier died broke in 2011, at the age of 67. As he had in Manila, Ali outlasted him, but again in Pyrrhic fashion. Parkinson's disease hollowed him out in front of the world's eyes, and he died at 74, in 2016, his own fortune having been diminished by friends and hangers-on.

There had been promising statements and portents—charity matches and television appearances—that made it seem like Ali and Frazier might finally rekindle their friendship, but all were false starts. Invariably, Ali would renege on his apologies.

In 2000, when Izenberg was working on a 25th-anniversary retrospective for the *Star-Ledger*, he interviewed his friend Ali by phone. "And he said, 'I don't know why he doesn't like me,'" Izenberg told me. "I said, 'Yes, you do.'" He reminded Ali about Frazier's children, who would come home from school crying when other kids teased them about their father being a gorilla or an Uncle Tom. "If Laila came home crying—'Daddy, they think you're a gorilla; you're an animal'—how would you feel about that?" he asked Ali, referring to Ali's daughter. Ali responded that he hadn't meant to hurt Frazier's family—again pleading that he hadn't quite understood the impact of his own words.

Izenberg later called Frazier to relay Ali's regrets. "Well, first of all, let him come and say that to me," Frazier told him. It was something of a cruel jab toward Ali, who by that point struggled to get around on his own, and to speak. Frazier, despite his own infirmities, took pride in the idea that his blows in Manila had contributed to Ali's Parkinson's—or even caused it—going so far as to gloat about the possibility on the outgoing voicemail message for his cellphone. "But secondly," he continued on the phone with Izenberg, "I ain't accepting no apology. You hurt my boy, and that's all there is to it."

There's a lifetime of what-ifs between the two signatures on the glove, of parallel realities where the two men did find common ground, and with it, a measure of peace. I envisioned how the glove might look if I squeezed it together, so that Ali's and Frazier's names finally found themselves side by side. But I realized that to do so would be to reconfigure the imaginary hand bearing the glove. It would disfigure the fist, our one uniquely human trait, and diminish that which makes us us. *A*

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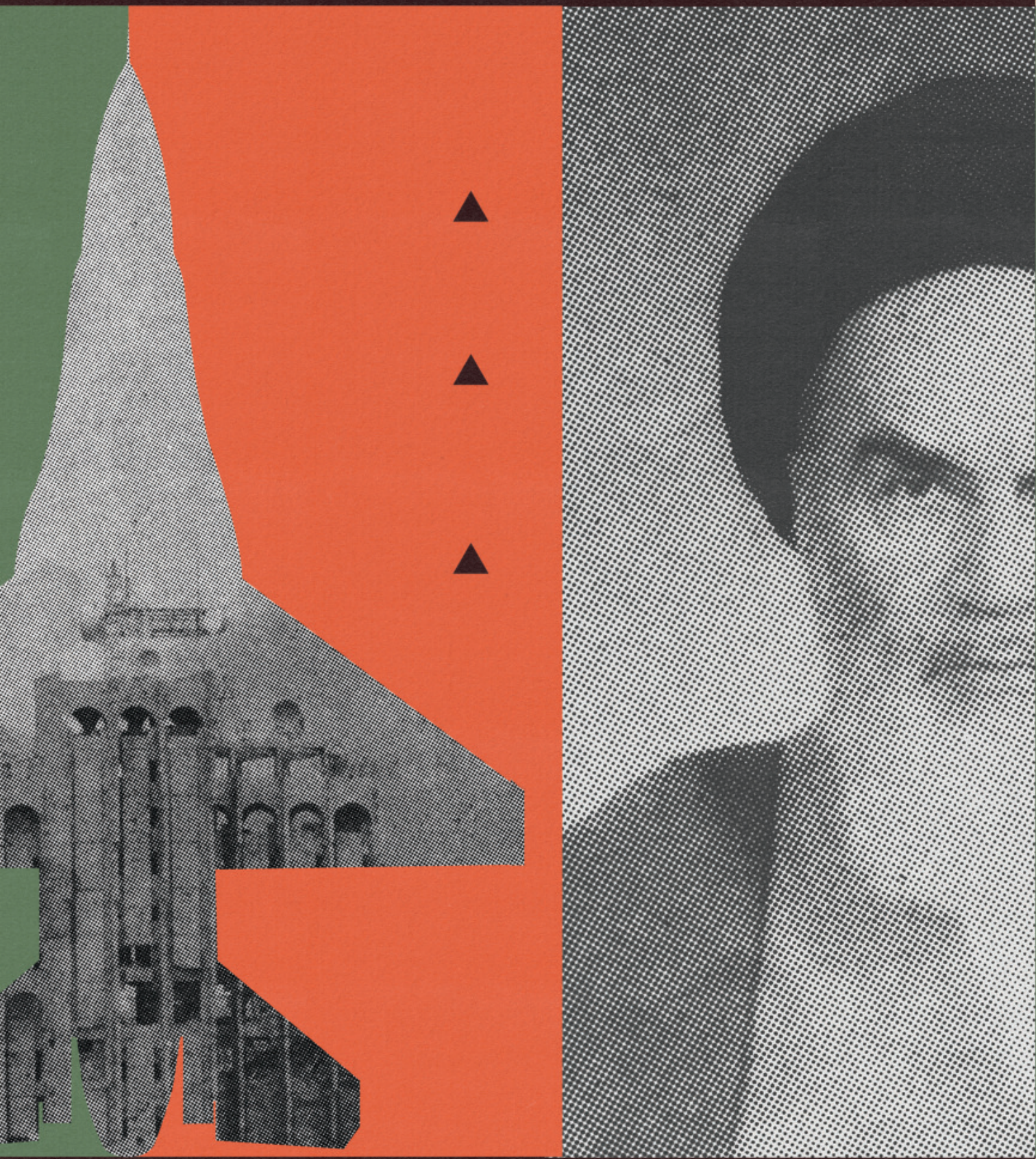



PHOTO-ILLUSTRATIONS BY ALEX MERTO

# THE NEIGHBOR FROM HELL

Israel and the United States delivered a blow to Iran. But it could come back stronger.

BY GRAEME WOOD





Shortly after the end of the Iran-Iraq War, the United States Institute of Peace held an event in Washington, D.C., to discuss the Middle East's delicate prospects. Panelists suggested ever more intricate ways to give regional peace a chance, until the neoconservative Michael Ledeen spoke out heretically. "You have heard the case for peace," he said. "I rise to speak on behalf of war." He said that the conflict, which lasted from 1980 to 1988 and killed perhaps a million people, had been "a good war." And he said that any "peace" between the United States and a government as malevolent as Iran's would be a sham, and a prelude to more war. Peace is what happens "when one side imposes conditions on another," Ledeen told me in 2013. He said it is not enough for both sides to stop fighting. One of them must lose. Ledeen died in May, well into his fifth decade of arguing against peace, or at least a sham peace, with Iran.

War had its chance just weeks later. On June 13, Israel assassinated high-ranking Iranian officials and neutralized Iranian air defenses. During the next 12 days, Israel and Iran traded missile strikes. About 1,000 Iranians and dozens of Israelis died. Iran's "Axis of Resistance," its federation of militias and other allies, did not show up to fight. On June 22, the U.S. bombed three Iranian nuclear sites and declared the conflict over. The Trump administration said that the country's nuclear program had been "obliterated," but no public evidence has confirmed that claim. Ledeen, if he were alive, would no doubt note that at the end of the war, Iran did not accept any cease-fire conditions. In fact, Iran's official position is that it never accepted a cease-fire at all.

Now that talk of what happens after war is back, I rise to make the case for déjà vu. The region risks reverting to its default setting, which is peace that has characteristics of war, with Iran planning to attack its enemies but not actively doing so, and vice versa. "This is a regime on its last legs, but it could last like that for another 20 years," Michael Doran, a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, told me. "They took a blow, but I see no signs that it's ready to fall." In the past, Iran has recovered from its tribulations by revising its strategy and finding novel ways to subvert the United States, Israel, and their interests. It should be expected to recover once more.

Even before the Axis of Resistance turned out to be an Axis of No-Shows, the Islamic Republic had suffered humiliating defeats: bombings and assassinations inside Iran itself; the decimation of Hezbollah, its most sophisticated proxy; the slow and bloody dismantling of another proxy, Hamas; the collapse of its main state ally, Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria. In December, Iran's 86-year-old supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, said that his country's predicament reminded him of the absolute nadir of the Islamic Republic, which was the Iran-Iraq War. He noted for his audience members that few of them were alive—but he was—when Iraqi warplanes bombed Tehran.

"I was giving a speech at a factory near Tehran's airport," Khamenei reminisced, in an especially portentous installment of Imam Story Hour. "I saw an Iraqi plane descending, dropping its bombs on the airport and then flying away. We have witnessed these things." He said the belief that these difficult moments were setbacks was mistaken. He spoke optimistically of Iran's allies. "The Resistance Front is not a piece of hardware that can be broken, dismantled, or destroyed," he said. "It doesn't weaken under pressure; it also becomes stronger."

Some of this was bluster. Khamenei could hardly have delivered a speech acknowledging that the double act of Great and Little Satan had won. But his rendition of the history of the Axis of Resistance—from its birth out of necessity, to its success, to its present adversities—is largely accurate. In the past year, I visited several countries where Iran has made inventive use of its limited resources. The trip was a survey of destruction and dismay. The Axis, which bought Iran 20 years of survival and "peace," wrecked the places where it operated. This wreckage was intentional. Iran prefers weak allies over strong ones, and corrupt and corruptible governments over ones that respond to their citizens' needs.

The purpose of Iran is Shiite theocracy, for its own sake and as a counterweight to democratic, secular, and Sunni governments allied with the United States in the region. Khamenei has made the argument to his own people that the Islamic Republic is an anti-fragile empire. It gets closer to its purpose and stronger when attacked and should therefore be patient and steadfast, focusing on surviving to learn from its failures. To Iran's enemies, he has inadvertently made the opposite argument: that defeating Iran means vigorously prosecuting the war now, giving no chance for Iran to survive, and finally imposing a peace that will last.

THE AXIS OF RESISTANCE is a simple concept: a network of armed friends of Iran, spread across the region and on call to fight against Iran's enemies. As of mid-2024, this network was a cordon around the country itself, a line of what Iran called "forward defense" that kept its enemies busy hundreds of miles away from Iran's own border. Its main members were Hezbollah in Lebanon, Shiite militias in Iraq, the Houthi de facto government in Yemen, the Alawite government of Syria, and Hamas in Gaza. Iran, by far the world's largest Shiite-majority country, encouraged these groups—mostly Shiite minorities—by scouting them, nurturing the most promising, and building trust and fellow feeling. Iran's leaders and allies spoke of a "unity of the arenas." Any attack against one could draw retribution by another, somewhere far away.

For years, members of the Axis armed themselves and conducted regular harassment operations—for example, rocket attacks against Israel and American bases in Iraq. Before Israel began a counterattack against Hezbollah in September 2024, this strategy

PREVIOUS PAGES: ALI AL-SAADI / AFP / GETTY; SHUTTERSTOCK; POP_JOP / GETTY; KAVEH KAZEMI / GETTY.

was reckoned brilliant by Iran's supporters and adversaries alike. A U.S. diplomat had told me the month before that "the Iranian strategy works to this day." He said time was on Iran's side. "I suspect we'll be out of the region before they're out of business." One Lebanese Shiite politician told me that the United States and Israel should stop being such sore losers. "Don't blame Iran," he said. His voice was pitying and patient, like a peewee-soccer coach imparting a lesson of sportsmanship. "If we play, you lose the ball, and I shoot, I score, it's your mistake," he said. "Move on."

Within a matter of months, the Axis line of defense had been broken. Only the Houthis remain more or less intact, and indeed resilient against Israeli and American retaliation.

Although the Axis is in shambles now, it was no failure. It dictated the terms of Middle East geopolitics for 20 years and allowed a poor, isolated nation, run by partisans of a small religious sect, to keep stronger and richer countries scrambling, spending billions of dollars just to maintain a status quo in which those countries were periodically peppered with rockets and drone attacks.

The strategy was thrust upon the Islamic Republic after others failed. Directly after its 1979 revolution, Iran busied itself with internal enemies. It labored mightily to suppress and, when convenient, murder those reluctant to support the revolution's leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. In 1980, when Iraq's president, Saddam Hussein, seized oil fields on the Iranian border, under the assumption that Iran was too distracted to object, Iran saw an opportunity to pivot to fighting external enemies. Far from letting Iraq take its land, Iran fought back and recovered its territory within two years. Saddam sued for peace, but Iran rejected him and opted to turn the war into a death match. It lasted for the next six years. The United States and other Western powers were delighted to watch both countries suffer. Sunni monarchies propped up Iraq when it looked ready to collapse. The war prompted the most reptilian of Henry Kissinger's quips: "It's a pity," he reportedly said, "they can't both lose."

But they did both lose, and badly. One would have to look back to Passchendaele, the Somme, or Stalingrad to find a similarly pointless churn of death at this scale. Iraq used chemical weapons and other outré methods of killing, such as putting electrified cables into bogs and zapping Iranian infantrymen as they waded through. ("We are frying them like eggplants," an Iraqi officer told the *Los Angeles Times* in 1984.) Iran deployed human-wave attacks and recruited child soldiers as human minesweepers. In his book about the war, the scholar Efraim Karsh quotes an Iraqi officer who faced an Iranian human wave:

> They chant "Allahu Akbar" and they keep coming, and we keep shooting, sweeping our 50 millimetre machine guns around like sickles. My men are eighteen, nineteen, just a few years older than these kids. I've seen them crying, and at times the officers have had to kick them back to their guns. Once we had Iranian kids on bikes cycling towards us, and my men all started laughing, and then these kids started lobbing their hand grenades and we stopped laughing and started shooting.

The war ended in 1988 without strategic gain for either side. Both were exhausted. Khomeini died in 1989. A 49-year-old minor cleric named Ali Khamenei succeeded him as leader of an Islamic Republic that was a mutilated shadow of its revolutionary self.

Virtually all of Iran's recent military leaders, including the architect of the Axis of Resistance, General Qassem Soleimani, fought in the Iran-Iraq War and learned its main lesson: not to do *that* again. Big wars are catastrophic. After this miserable experience, Iran spent the 1990s and early 2000s like a sailor in port: wandering, getting in trouble, never quite mustering long-term planning or vision. Because it had an international reputation as mad, bad, and dangerous, it had little choice but to innovate. "The Iranians took a good, hard look at themselves," a former U.S. intelligence official told me. "They said: *We've got no technology. We have no friends. We don't have money.* They said, *We need an unconventional approach*."

That approach originated in Lebanon. In 1982, several years into the Lebanese civil war, Israel invaded Lebanon to dismantle the Palestine Liberation Organization, then headquartered in Beirut. Iran trained and supported Hezbollah to counter Israel, the United States, and the Sunni and Christian Lebanese militias. No party in the war was blameless, but Hezbollah distinguished itself by outright rejecting norms of war and diplomacy. It took hostages and tortured them. It attacked embassies and civilians, inside and outside the country. It pioneered the use of suicide bombs. In 1983, a Hezbollah operative blew up 241 American soldiers and Marines in their barracks next to Beirut International Airport. The bomber is said to have been grinning as he sped past the checkpoint and crashed into the building.

Hezbollah was built to fight. In 1989, when all other Lebanese groups agreed to give up arms and become political entities, Hezbollah remained armed so that it could continue fighting Israel. Hezbollah persisted until Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000—a moment of celebration and vindication for Hezbollah, and for Iran, a sign that the Hezbollah model held promise elsewhere. Hezbollah took advantage of its win to dig tunnels and stockpile missiles for the sole purpose of attacking Israel. Iran now had a seasoned fighting force, assembled at minimal cost out of Arab Shiite volunteers, with nary an Iranian among them to be shot or electrocuted on the battlefield. When Hezbollah killed Americans and Israelis, it received little in the way of punishment or retribution. It drove out enemy invaders, and it held its own against Israel in a monthlong war in 2006. Later, when Syria looked ready to fall to Sunni jihadists, Hezbollah answered the call and crossed the border to terrorize the population and keep the Assad regime in power.

The Hezbollah model followed a three-step recipe: create a proxy; arm it to fight by any means necessary; wait for it to outlast the enemy. An alternative to creating a proxy is finding one. Because the Middle East is rife with hostility toward America as well as domestic governments, Iran found these friends easily. An Axis member could flourish as long as there was a vacuum of responsibility, where no competent government was present to discipline it. Acute chaos helped, allowing Iran to provide guns and training. Most but not all of the proxies were Shiite. Hamas, for example, is Sunni, and the Houthis of Yemen and Alawites of Syria practice

forms of Shiism distinct from Iran's. The phrase *Axis of Resistance* was coined by a Libyan journalist in 2002, as an alternative to the "Axis of Evil" tag applied by President George W. Bush to Iran, Iraq, and North Korea that same year. Soon, Iranians were using it themselves.

Just as Iran needed Israel's occupation of Lebanon to cultivate Hezbollah, it needed the U.S. occupation of Iraq to fertilize and grow Axis partners there. Iran did not initially welcome the 2003 invasion. Its first response was to put its entire nuclear program on ice, almost certainly out of fear that it would be invaded next. The early months of the U.S. occupation of Iraq went well compared with the years that followed, in part because the senior Shiite cleric in Iraq, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, was then—and continues to be, at the age of 95—a sort of anti-Khomeini, at least in his attitude toward the role of religious scholars in politics. He prefers to influence politics from a distance rather than seize the state and rule directly. U.S. officials figured out how lucky they were that al-Sistani differed from Khomeini in this regard, and eventually they went to great lengths to seek his favor and refer to him by honorifics ("his Eminence," "Sayyid") they would not bother applying to other clerics.

Al-Sistani's patience during the early months of the occupation kept Iraqi Shia from zealously fighting the Americans. Iraqi Sunnis were resisting but without great effect. The Americans' success was frustrating to Iran's high echelons. Finally, in 2004, they did something about it, by intervening the only way that seemed to work: by Lebanonizing the fight. Find a proxy; arm it; let it fight so you don't have to. Iraq became proof that the model would work across the region, with Hezbollah serially midwifing the proxies that Iran sired.

By February 2004, two non-Iraqi figures were quietly turning Iraq's Shia against the occupation and preparing them, militarily, to inflict pain on the Americans. The first was Soleimani, the commander of Iran's Quds Force. The second was the most wanted Shiite jihadist in the world: Imad Mughniyeh, the military chief of Hezbollah. Both men would eventually die violently at the hands of the United States and Israel. But until then, they managed to undermine those enemies' interests, at minimal cost.

Because Iraq's al-Sistani would not militarize his followers, Iran went mullah shopping and found another more inclined to do so. That ornery cleric was Moqtada al-Sadr, the son of Mohammad Sadiq al-Sadr, a grand ayatollah assassinated almost certainly by Saddam's order in 1999. The position of ayatollah is not hereditary: Clerics tend to be graybeards who have distinguished themselves through scholarship. Al-Sadr, who was 29 at the time of the invasion, instead distinguished himself through resistance.

He visited Iran for the first time in 2003 and met with Supreme Leader Khamenei. In the months after his return, he mobilized his followers into a militia, the Mahdi Army. By early 2004, the Mahdi Army was in an all-out war with the Americans in the streets of Najaf. The United States was better armed and trained. But the very fact that the battle was taking place was ominous for the U.S. and its allies, and al-Sadr cut a worrisome contrast to the American commanders. He was young and tubby. The American failure to neutralize this preachy butterball suggested serious limits to the occupying force's control of the situation. At a press conference, the commander of U.S. ground forces in Iraq, Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez, announced that his objective in Najaf was "to kill or capture Moqtada al-Sadr." One could not help but notice, though, that al-Sadr delivered sermons before crowds, whereas Sanchez, during his press conference, appeared to be hiding in a bunker somewhere.

For the next few years, the Mahdi Army and the Iranians shared a goal: to bleed the American occupiers. Iraq had plenty of small arms and ammunition, which could kill Americans but would often plink harmlessly off their armored vehicles. As the occupation wore on, the Iraqis became proficient at building roadside bombs in basements, garages, and other insurgent test kitchens spread across Baghdad and Anbar. The Iranian contribution was leveraging the R&D from elsewhere in Iran's area of operations—chiefly Lebanon—and multiplying the Iraqis' lethality. The key Iranian ingredient was explosively formed penetrators (EFPs). Instead of blasting in all directions, like a primitive roadside bomb, an EFP directs and concentrates the force of its explosion. It forms a molten metal blob and fires it like a cannon. The United States estimates that at least 603 of the approximately 3,500 American soldiers killed in combat in Iraq were victims of Shiite militias. Many more were maimed, and almost all the carnage was the direct and intended result of Iran's nascent Axis.

Success in Iraq gave Iran confidence to try the same model elsewhere. In Syria, it had a state partner, led by Assad, and when Assad's grip began slipping in 2011, at the onset of the Syrian civil war, Iran at first sent its own soldiers—Iranians, in uniform—to help put down the Sunni and American-backed uprisings. But the real force deployed to keep Assad in place was Lebanese. Hezbollah, its hands relatively idle since 2000, showed up and crushed rebels. Iraqi Shiite militias, idle after the end of the American occupation there, appeared too, and, in tandem with Russian mercenaries, kept Syria in a grim stalemate. By 2018, Assad had control of Damascus and Aleppo, and the rebels were confined to a jihadist ministate in Idlib.

Emboldened, Iran began reviving or confecting proxy forces in yet more locations. In Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, it found fellow Shia eager to overthrow Sunni monarchies. In Yemen, it found a remarkable, and remarkably weird, partner in the Houthis. The Houthis are led by a family of clerical megalomaniacs who have been prophesying apocalyptic war since the early 2000s. With Iran's and Hezbollah's assistance, they managed to kick out Yemen's Saudi-backed government and get into a long-distance shooting war with the United States and Israel. The Houthis' success is due in part to the rock-bottom price they place on human life (including their own), and in part to the sophisticated weaponry they have received from Iran. In late 2023, they fired anti-ship ballistic missiles at commercial and military vessels in the Red Sea. They were the first such missiles fired in anger in the history of the world.

By the mid-2010s, these proxies were connecting, networking, sharing plans and technical knowledge, and operating in sync. Iran had made its own army redundant, and assembled a more agile and creative alternative in its place. "Suddenly, they have this whole keyboard to play a tune, instead of just one or two notes," the former U.S. intelligence official told me. The polyphony of proxy groups could now harmonize and syncopate so that the United States and its allies would always be offbeat.

THE SENTINELS of conventional wisdom settled on the view that the Iraq invasion was one of the great own goals of American foreign policy, and that its beneficiary was Iran. "The Bush administration has done more to empower Iran than its most ambitious ayatollah could have dared to imagine," the *New York Times* editorial board declared in 2006.

Those fortunes were made and squandered rapidly—Iran went from bereft during the Iran-Iraq War, to unbeatable two decades later, to resoundingly beaten a little less than two decades after that. But the Axis was guaranteed to fail, and the signs of that failure were visible long before the Axis started wobbling. No country in the region has wobbled more vertiginously than Lebanon, and no country has had a longer history of Iran's sustained attention. Those distinctions are not coincidental. In the summer of 2024, I met the historian Makram Rabah in his office at the American University of Beirut. He likened Hezbollah to "Iran's strategic consultants—the proxies' brain, the force that gets them running," a jihadist McKinsey that multiplies the Iranian proxies' power. He said Hezbollah's brilliance in this endeavor came at the expense of its competence at any task that might make Lebanon a functional democratic state.

"Hezbollah is a parasite that kills its host," Rabah told me. A group that exists only to fight, and prepare to fight, develops weaknesses and limitations, because it never learns to do anything else. That leaves it friendless, brittle, and uncreative—and, paradoxically, that leaves it vulnerable when fighting, too. Hezbollah, Rabah said, never sought conversion into a strong, durable political force, because it was never meant to be that. Since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, he said, the group had treated Lebanon as a base and traveled the region on a series of bloody adventures, while growing less interested in its home country. "Domestic politics became a nuisance for Hezbollah," Rabah said. He compared Hezbollah unfavorably to its Shiite Lebanese cousin, Amal, which disarmed after the civil war and set to work learning the dark arts of politics: backroom dealing, parliamentary maneuvering, and plundering a system rife with old-fashioned corruption within an acceptable range. The Hezbollah members "who try to be politicians are all actually intelligence people or military people," Rabah said. "They're all Sparta, no Athens."

"Other political parties have taken up arms in Lebanon because they wanted a better seat at the table," he said. "But Hezbollah never cared about having a state of their own. Lebanon became a shell for them, something to protect them while they fought abroad." Fighting abroad overextended Hezbollah. And because its soldiers used phones and posted images online, the Israelis were able to map out the whole group. Ultimately, they became a regional problem instead of a local one. "They grew into a beast that couldn't be brought back into the barn," Rabah said.

That Lebanon is a catastrophe is beyond dispute. Parts of Beirut seem to have been written off, after a series of disasters even a minimally competent government could have averted. In 2020, the Port of Beirut exploded when a 2,750-ton pile of ammonium nitrate caught fire in a warehouse. It normally takes a nuclear blast for a city to be so suddenly and awesomely ripped apart by a percussion wave. In downtown Beirut, one can still see windows blown out and buildings uninhabited. In 2019, Lebanese depositors discovered that their banking system had, in effect, just been kidding about those savings accounts. The money was gone. The Lebanese pound lost nearly all its value, and nowadays if you fly into Beirut, once a center of banking, it's wise to strap foreign currency to your body, like a drug mule. The biggest advertising billboard I saw in downtown Beirut was for a service that will help you get a second passport.

**HEZBOLLAH FUNCTIONED AS A JIHADIST McKINSEY, MULTIPLYING THE IRANIAN PROXIES' POWER.**

What the *New York Times* columnist Thomas L. Friedman once called the "Pottery Barn rule"—you break it, you own it—has an analogue in civil conflict: If you have the guns, you have the responsibility. And Hezbollah, as the most heavily armed and violent element of Lebanon's menagerie of factions and sects, wanted the guns without the responsibility. With adventures to be had in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, and patrons to please in Tehran, Hezbollah had little time left over (let alone inclination) to build up the country it purported to defend.

I spoke with Fouad Siniora, a former prime minister of Lebanon, who said that Iran's backing of Hezbollah had unbalanced the country's system, which was set up to make sure that all the largest sects—Christians, Sunnis,

Shia, Druze—have power. But when one faction is supercharged by support from overseas, the balance is lost, and, with it, the ability to govern. "In a democracy, you have a majority that rules and an unmarginalized opposition that actually wants to get rid of the majority" by winning elections, he told me. What could never work, he said, is a system where the government coexists forever with a shadow entity lacking democratic intentions. He quoted the Quran, which says that only one God exists, because if there were multiple gods, all would be ruined. There can be only one government, one leader. That is true of a state, of a family, of a company, Siniora said. Or as his father used to say, two captains "will sink the ship."

**AS A TOOL** for threatening Israel, however, Hezbollah for almost a quarter century had no real rivals. It was Iran's key instrument for deterrence and punishment: *If you touch us, we will use Hezbollah to touch you*. The end of that era came slowly, through the pathetic collapse of Syria and Lebanon as functioning states, and then quickly, when Israel began touching Hezbollah in unexpected places.

In September 2024, Israel blew up the group's pagers, causing gruesome injuries as the devices detonated in Hezbollah operatives' pockets. The Quran says that God is closer to a man than his jugular vein. The pager operation showed that Israel was only a few inches away from Hezbollah's femoral artery. Devastating pinpoint strikes showed that Israel had near-complete knowledge of the group's structure, whereabouts, and leadership. Israel then invaded and occupied southern Lebanon again. Its incursion ended with an agreement between Israel and the Lebanese government that was humiliating for Hezbollah and Lebanon. The Lebanese government affirmed that it would keep southern Lebanon free of military buildup by Hezbollah, and Israel reserved its right to defend itself. Because Israel had never conceived of its attacks on Hezbollah as a war of aggression in the first place, the assertion of this right amounted to a threat to return to Lebanon for further rounds of demolition. The deal was an embarrassment to Iran as well. Iran was supposed to defend its proxies, to reciprocate for their many years of fighting for Iran. Now Iran would not, or could not, protect them.

In parallel, Israel had begun dismantling Hamas. As of this writing, Israel has not finished doing so—and Hamas's mere survival, after nearly two years of bombing and siege, is for the group's stalwarts a victory in itself. But the ability to harass Israel and lob rockets at it in perpetuity has never been Iran's main use of the group. Hamas's real value to Iran is as a threat to the Palestinian Authority, the West Bank–based secular Arab autocracy seated in Ramallah, and by extension the secular Arab governments that are Iran's other targets in the region.

If Hamas took over the West Bank (ejecting the Palestinian Authority, as it did in Gaza in 2007), it would establish a jihadist state on the border of Jordan, one of the closest regional allies of Israel and the United States. More than half the population of Jordan is of Palestinian descent, and the presence of Palestinian refugees is a persistent source of instability. A Hamas-controlled West Bank would threaten Jordan's secular Sunni monarchy. The war in Gaza has not destroyed Hamas, but it has mortally wounded the version of Hamas that could have served this purpose for Iran. Hamas lives, but Hamas as a strategic asset for Iran is dead.

The last of the proxy defeats was preordained. Syria's regime could not survive without Hezbollah. Syria was like a dialysis patient: guaranteed to die if left to its own resources, but kept alive through costly intervention. At the beginning of the Syrian civil war, Iranian soldiers arrived to save Assad. Hezbollah and Iraqi militias reinforced the government further, and Russian soldiers joined them in 2015. But when Israel began escalating its own strikes against targets in Syria, even the Iranians left. Last year, when an army of erstwhile Sunni jihadists marched on Damascus, each of these saviors had more important chores to take care of: Hezbollah was depleted from fighting Israel; Russia was fighting Ukraine; Iraq's Shiite militias mostly preferred to stay home; and Iran itself was gun-shy after its recent losses there. Syria's military lacked the will to defend its cities, and Damascus fell just 10 days after the offensive began.




**THESE DEFEATS** happened faster than anyone predicted. But Iran's model decayed even in places where Israel and the

PHOTO-ILLUSTRATION BY ALEX MERTO; KARIM SAHIB / AFP / GETTY; MAXAR / GETTY; POP_JOP / GETTY; HOSSEIN BERIS / AFP / GETTY

United States had not attacked for some time. The most ironic is Iraq, given that Iraq was, after Lebanon, the site of Iran's greatest success. Iran had the chance to install a government that would mimic its own theocracy. Shiite parties dominate Iraq's politics, and Iraqi politicians who spent years during Saddam's rule living in Iran have led Iraqi Shiite parties and served as prime minister. By 2008, Americans were withdrawing, and combat deaths were subsiding to their lowest level since the start of the occupation. Iran seemed to have won, and whether the next game was electoral or military, most observers assumed that Qassem Soleimani and the Iranian government would decide who would end up in charge and what they would do.

To the surprise of many Shiite factions who thought they had Soleimani's support, they were both right and wrong: Iran had raised them all, and now rather than seeing any one of them dominate, it preferred for them all to fight. The internecine squabbling was immediate. The Mahdi Army controlled large parts of Basra. In 2008, it came under attack—not only by the Americans but also by Iraq's Shiite-led government. The Iraqi prime minister at the time, Nuri al-Maliki, was a Shiite sectarian with close ties to Iran, and many of his fellow Shia thought he could be relied on to listen to Iran's wishes and find a way to avoid clashing with an Iranian proxy militia. But Iran did little to stop the fratricide. By custom, every subsequent Iraqi government has been Shiite-led. Many, including the present one, are beholden to Shiite militias with strong ties to Iran. The militias are powerful and, because of their control of smuggling and other criminal activity, profitable. They are also engaged in constant bickering over the spoils of illicit trade and corruption.

Not long ago, these militias' tendency to bicker was mitigated by the deft orchestration of Soleimani. He had helped create and coordinate many of them, and sometimes played them off one another. After the United States killed him in a missile strike in 2020, the whole unruly gang of militias started pursuing their own interests. Many of the militias were incorporated into the Iraqi government in 2016, as the Popular Mobilization Forces. But rather than strengthen the Iraqi state, they have undermined it from within, by using their government privileges to streamline their corruption. "They use the PMF units to do things outside the government chain of command," Hamdi Malik, an associate fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, told me. In practice, PMF vehicles are exempt from investigation by any other Iraqi security services, as if they have diplomatic immunity from their own country's police and customs agents. "They have total freedom of movement, and that's why they can smuggle," Malik added.

Baghdad, it must be said, is flourishing now. When I visited in August 2024, I was moved to see that city, which I had known only as a site of murder and oppression, beset by the comparatively venial sin of gentrification. I found freshly built shopping malls and cafés with the interchangeably chic aesthetic of Dubai or Miami, filled with men and women bearing all the signs of new wealth: makeup, tanklike SUVs, beach bodies. At a bakery, I bought a pastry that tasted awful, because it was gluten-free. Downtown, I ate a burger from a food truck and lingered over cold drinks, without wondering whether I should scram before someone decided to kidnap me and videotape my beheading.

On previous trips to Baghdad, I had wanted to visit Mutanabbi Street, a narrow lane of booksellers that terminates at one of the Arab world's great remaining literary cafés. To stop there before would have been a risk—and indeed, in 2007, someone blew the whole place to bits, killing dozens. This time I browsed every bookstall, at leisure. The goods were odd. In English, I found copies of Assyrian histories, printed in England in the middle of the last century. In stock in Arabic were books by Margaret Atwood and Steve Harvey and Hitler. As a souvenir, I bought a recent translation of the Unabomber's manifesto, and read it in the reopened literary café, over a hot tea.

Iraqis warned me that this new peace conceals rot. "It's totally peaceful, and you can go anywhere," Ali Mamouri, who advised Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi on strategic communications from 2020 to 2022, told me. But he said there is a "deep dark side." The country's large businesses, such as power companies, refineries, and financial institutions, still operate under the influence of the militias, he said. "You have to pay protection money to this or that militia." I said that the protection seemed to be working, because the streets felt safe, and no one seemed afraid. "They get security," he said. "But they mostly do not get the security from police, or from the government." He said that the arrangement was going to be fatal for Iraq eventually, because the Mafias demanding protection money were a temporary measure, and they were at risk of descending into conflict in the streets. Iraq's lasting prosperity demanded the building of a state.

I saw signs of that state-building. At an intersection in central Baghdad one morning, I noticed about 30 men dressed identically for what appeared to be a casting call for a Mesopotamian remake of *Reservoir Dogs*: cheap black suits, thin black ties, white shirts. They were, in fact, cadets—officers in training at the Ministry of Interior, a main organ of Iraqi state security.

But never far from the sites of state-building were signs of others undermining that same state. I thought of the ominous line from the poet Shelley: "I arise and unbuild it again." In this case, the undermining agent occupied prime real estate just across from the Interior Ministry: an administrative headquarters for the PMF. It sprawled over a large block in central Baghdad. On the right, a state-building site; on the left, a site for unbuilding it, through the efforts of militias widely suspected of answering to another country's government.

Within the PMF headquarters, the group's leaders barely disguise the fact that their allegiances are split between Iraq and Iran. Photos of Khamenei and Soleimani are everywhere. The militias that make up the PMF have units that operate independently from the Iraqi state and are even more proudly sectarian and loyal to Iran. Some are listed by the Americans as terror groups. I spent an hour in a political office of one of the more extreme of these groups, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba. "Nujaba is quite simply the closest militia to Iran," Malik said. "It is Iran's military wing in Iraq. They get their commands directly from Tehran." The friendly spokesperson, Hussein al-Musawi,

compared his group's fondness for Iran to the natural alliance, based on shared interests and values, between the United States and Israel. Look in the mirror, he said. "America and Israel have their alliance, and we have ours." It was odd, though, that Iran had so *many* friends, and that even with such dominance, they could not come together to form a coherent government.

The reason for this incoherence, other Iraqis told me, is that incoherence has always been in Iran's interest. If you were Khamenei, or Soleimani, and had spent your early life listening to Iraqi-bomber raids on Tehran, or reading reports of your countrymen being fried like eggplants by Iraqis, wouldn't you be cautious about conjuring an Iraqi government as powerful as your own? Any tool that a Shiite government could build might become an American, Sunni, or Kurdish one, if power shifted. The safest course would be to force out the Americans, persecute the Sunnis, and then let the Shiite factions bicker forever. The most dangerous of all scenarios, for the Iranians, would be the rise of an Iraq with its own interests and means to pursue them at Iran's expense. Iran built an Axis to serve Iran, but built it in such a shoddy and corrupt way that, in Iraq, it often prefers to serve only itself.

Just two years ago, it appeared that Iran had three guns pointed at Israel's head. One was Hezbollah, with its much-vaunted rockets; another was Iraq, with battle-hardened militias ready to send drones and rockets, and possibly even fighters, through Syria; and the last was Yemen. When Israel decided to strike Iran, two of the guns didn't fire. Hezbollah was caught by surprise and decimated in the first attack. Iraq's militias were understandably concerned about facing the same quick denouement as Hezbollah. Only Yemen's Houthis took their shot—multiple drones and missiles, aimed straight at Israeli population centers—but without partners, they were not enough to substantiate the threat that the Axis represented.

By 2025, the Axis was in disarray. Iran's leaders still had their old distaste for direct confrontation. No direct confrontation and no indirect confrontation means no deterrence. Israel's dominance in those other corners of the arena gave it the confidence to start June's 12-day war, in which the last remaining Iranian strategic tool was its ballistic missiles. The war ended with a lopsided Israeli victory, and with Iran scrambling to find more ways to punish and deter Israel if hostilities resumed.

HOW LONG will Iran take to find an alternative to the Axis? When Iran was bereft before, finding another way forward took 15 years. Maybe it will never recover, and the Axis will turn out to be Iran's last good strategic idea. Maybe the next idea will be much better than the Axis—a nuclear weapon produced with unprecedented stealth, say, or something more clever than my own small mind can contemplate. Michael Doran, of the Hudson Institute, suggested that one possible fate was that of Castro's Cuba: Iran would swap its first generation of charismatic leaders for a military junta. "By some lights, the reign of the mullahs ended a long time ago, and it's already an IRGC regime," he told me, referring to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. The ideology of the regime is evolving from revolutionary Shiism to Persian nationalism, he said. But that shift would not mean that enmity with the United States and Israel would evaporate. A diminished Iran, sapped of its charisma, would continue seeking ways to harass Israel and the United States. This behavior is a singular and consistent feature of the Islamic Republic. Even when the regime has looked more amenable to peace with the U.S., through deals and compromise, it has labored mightily for the opposite.

"The resistance is an inextricable part of the Islamic Republic's identity," Karim Sadjadpour, a scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, told me. Khamenei has made feints and tactical adjustments. But the attempt to lead a revolutionary international movement against the United States and Israel, Sadjadpour said, is nonnegotiable. "Death to America, death to Israel, and hijab," he told me, seem to be points of stubborn insistence, not subject to reassessment.

In 2015, the Obama administration's nuclear deal with Iran established unprecedented access to its nuclear sites, and strict but temporary limits on enrichment. It did nothing, though, to dull Iran's enthusiasm for attacking the United States and Israel. In anticipation of a deal, and during the years the deal was in effect, Iran accelerated its support for the Axis. It used extra resources and latitude to become more aggressive. It intensified its support for Assad (having already prolonged a civil war); it strengthened its ties to the Houthis; it gave money and rockets to Hezbollah; it reportedly plotted and carried out terrorist attacks overseas. After the United States exited the nuclear deal, Iran allegedly tried to kill former National Security Adviser John Bolton, former Secretary of State Michael Pompeo, and the Iranian dissident Masih Alinejad.

Peace is not overrated. Many Iranians who hate their government nonetheless cheered the end of the war, and decried the senseless death of their countrymen at the hands of a faraway government whose concern for Iranian life was open to doubt. But not all peace is equal, and this strange, eventful history offers many reasons to suspect that the present peace with Iran will be a brief parenthesis in the long story of mutual enmity.

When Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini agreed to end the Iran-Iraq War, he likened the peace to drinking from a poisoned chalice. He did not—he could not—perform the elementary self-criticism that would have been involved in admitting that his decision to prolong the war and multiply its miseries was catastrophic. The peace at the end of the recent war with Israel is similarly marked by a lack of Iranian introspection or remorse.

Many Iranians wonder why their government spends so much money and effort on picking fights with Israel, the United States, and their allies, rather than on fixing its own corruption. I see no sign that the government itself wishes to reassess those priorities. Instead, it will do what it always does, which is look for bold new ways to pursue those priorities, with renewed vigor. The suffering of Iranians would be bad enough. But Iran's determination to spread that suffering around to its friends and enemies alike makes it a uniquely awful neighbor, in peace as well as in war. *A*

*Graeme Wood is a staff writer at* The Atlantic.

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PEARL J

# The Invention of Judd Apatow

How a kid from Long Island willed his way to the top of American comedy

By Adrienne LaFrance

Photographs by Maggie Shannon

In the fall of 1983, Judd Apatow made his way down to a musty room in the basement of Syosset High School and stumbled upon his secret weapon—he just didn't know it yet.

Apatow was 15 years old, deep into an infatuation with comedy, but had nowhere to channel it. Boyhood on Long Island was something like a John Hughes movie: idyllic on the outside and tormented on the inside. "A lot of what formed some aspects of my personality was that there was an enormous amount of sports happening and I wasn't good—I would always choke and panic," Apatow told me recently.

This happened, he emphasized, all the time: in gym class, at pickup games during lunch, after school. "Imagine not being very good," he said, "and having to be picked close to last multiple times a day," and then being given a position "so far out in right field that I was almost in the middle of Jericho Turnpike."

The jocks may have been the kings of high school, but Apatow came to understand that theirs was a fleeting achievement. "I remember as a kid thinking, *It doesn't matter if you're good at this*," he said. "You become suspicious of how everything works—power structures; whatever the caste systems are—and then you're drawn to comedians who are always calling out the different parts in life that are bullshit."

He worshipped Lenny Bruce, Steve Martin, Albert Brooks, Gilda Radner, George Carlin, Martin Short. He wanted a friend to talk about *Saturday Night Live* with every week, but couldn't find one. Comedy wasn't cool—at least not among the teenagers he knew. "People weren't interested in it," he said.

Apatow was describing all of this to me in his office in West L.A. On this particular morning, he had asked me to come by at 7:30 a.m. (Apatow is a morning person, a quality that vexes his fellow comedians.) When I arrived at 7:23, he was already outside waiting, carrying a half-eaten banana and blaring classic rock from his smartphone. Inside, we settled into a couple of chairs around the long table in his writers' room—a writers' room that actually has windows, he proudly pointed out—and talked about loneliness.

While his classmates were out playing baseball, he holed up in the public library, poring over microfiche of old newspapers so he could learn about Lenny Bruce's obscenity trials. He didn't apply the same rigor to academics. He sweet-talked his way into advanced physics, only to find himself out of his depth—he started cheating, got caught, and dropped the class. ("The teacher's name was Richard Lesse," Apatow told me. "So people called him Dickless.")

But things were different at the high-school radio station. In that basement studio, he got his hands on a clunky green tape recorder that would allow him to waltz into the world of show business. WKWZ 88.5 FM was, to Apatow, a "nerd's paradise," though he likes to joke that the signal barely extended beyond the school parking lot. The teacher who oversaw the station, Jack DeMasi, is now nearly 80. He lovingly described WKWZ to me as a smelly "rat hole" for "misfit kids." He remembers Apatow as an affable teen despite troubles at home. The teachers knew that his parents had gone through a hellish divorce, and that money troubles had followed.

"Judd said the scariest thing that any adviser faculty member at an FM-broadcast high-school radio station could ever hear," DeMasi recalled. "He says, 'I want to do a comedy show.'" DeMasi feared that Apatow would do a show so off-color that it would get the station shut down. "One of the things about adolescent boys is that they frequently think they're funny, and they're just stupid," DeMasi said. But Apatow had something different in mind.

DeMasi had long encouraged his students to go out and talk to real people. One kid interviewed Mario Cuomo, then the governor of New York; another, R.E.M. To Apatow, this was a revelation: The tape recorder in his hand could provide a direct line to the comedians he idolized. If he could just talk to them, he could ask them how they did what they did, what it took to be funny, what their lives were like—so that maybe, one day, if he worked hard enough (though he dared not admit this to anyone), he could do it, too.

When Apatow requested interviews, he identified himself—accurately, though misleadingly—as calling from WKWZ 88.5 FM in New York. People like Garry Shandling, Jay Leno, Harry Anderson, and Steve Allen agreed to speak with him not knowing he was a teenager, only to be (mostly) charmed when they eventually found out. Apatow tells the story of walking into Jerry Seinfeld's apartment circa 1983 and seeing the bemusement on Seinfeld's face. "His apartment had nothing on the walls, no books in the bookshelves—he was just there to write his jokes,"



COURTESY OF JUDD APATOW

Apatow recalled in his 2022 book, *Sicker in the Head*. "And he looked at me when I walked in like, *I can't believe I have to do this with this child*."

Apatow's descriptions of these early interviews are laced with self-deprecation and hero worship. (Lena Dunham told me she loves them in part because his Long Island accent, which he retains, was even stronger when he was young—*audience* and *autograph* are *aww-dience* and *aww-tograph*, and he always drops the *h* in *humor*.) But when you listen closely, what you also hear is poise—and a kid trying to chart a course for his own future. In a 1984 conversation, he asks Martin Short, "How does Second City work?" and "Did you ever do stand-up comedy, like in a club?" and "Did you go to college?" In his interview with John Candy, Apatow asks how many takes it took to get the shot where Candy gets nailed in the back of the head with a racquetball in *Splash*. ("Three takes," Candy responded. "I was lucky.") Apatow then asks Candy about a rumored three-picture deal with Touchstone Films. Candy hadn't even signed the contract yet.

Apatow told me he can't remember how he knew to ask about that. He would hoover up information about the world of comedy anywhere he could find it. He'd hold his tape recorder to the television so he could record, play back, and transcribe *SNL* sketches in an attempt to figure out what made them funny. Apatow was so obsessed, so focused on doing whatever it took to enter that world, that it wasn't until much later that he thought to ask himself, *Why comedy?*



COURTESY OF JUDD APATOW

**Previous page:** ***From a young age, Apatow knew he wanted to perform.*** **Above:** ***Apatow in his early stand-up days.***

IF YOU'VE NEVER BOMBED—and I mean really bombed, bombed so badly that the crickets hear crickets—you can't possibly know what it feels like to have a room turn on you. There are two kinds of dying onstage, both painful: The first is the quiet kind, where nobody laughs. Then there's the loud kind, where the audience openly ridicules you. Apatow has experienced both.

While he was doing his interviews for WKWZ, Apatow was also spending as much time in comedy clubs as he possibly could. He took a job as a dishwasher at the East Side Comedy Club a couple of towns over, only to realize that he couldn't hear the comedians onstage when he was stuck in the kitchen. (He switched to busboy.) Once in a while, Eddie Murphy, still in his early 20s, would drop by to try out new material. Apatow tells the story of a time Murphy showed up, got heckled, and quickly shot back, "I don't care what you say, because I'm 21, I'm Black, and I have a bigger dick than you."

This exchange might have been on Apatow's mind the first time he ever did stand-up, when he was 17, at Chuckles, a comedy club also on Long Island. "I had thought about getting onstage for a really long time, and was really scared," Apatow told me. "I didn't have a cocky attitude about it. I was shitting a brick." He had been offered a five-minute slot late at night, typical for a rookie, and brought his best friends, Ronnie and Kevin, along for moral support. Somewhere in those five minutes, Apatow floated an idea to the audience: *I'm just starting out and I don't know how to handle hecklers, so help me out by heckling me.*

This was deranged. The local scene at the time was marked by an affection for a particularly brutal form of insult comedy—Don Rickles, only meaner. Comedians mercilessly mocked their audiences, and audiences liked to punch back. Apatow was not prepared for what he had unleashed. People were shouting "You suck!" and "Get the fuck off the stage!" It got so bad that Ronnie and Kevin turned around and started threatening the hecklers. Apatow can still remember hearing their voices: *You better shut up or I'll kick your ass*. "They were trying to calm the room down for me," Apatow said. "Unsuccessfully."

Apatow is not proud of his early stand-up. Some of the material is still funny 40 years later—a joke about his back hair getting so long that he can see it in his shadow—but much of it was a product of its time. "I don't even know what I was thinking, to tell the truth. I'm embarrassed that I was even out there, and I hope no one remembers any of it," he told me. One



*For comedy nerds, this photo will evoke the famous Steve Martin character "The Great Flydini," a vaudeville magician who pulls tricks out of his pants, including, in the coup de grâce, an opera-singing hand puppet. (Apatow bought the original puppet at auction for $3,520.)*

recurring bit involved jamming the palm of his hand into his eye socket, something he referred to as "the eye fart."

There would be other bad sets, but none as disastrous as that first night at Chuckles. From then on, Apatow kept a line in his back pocket for when a set started to sour: "The great Jerry Lewis said you learn nothing by being funny. You only learn by not being funny. And I have gotten a college education here tonight. Thank you." That actually worked. The line would always bring the audience back around "no matter how bad I bombed," he said.

AFTER APATOW GRADUATED from Syosset, he went to the University of Southern California to study filmmaking. When he got there, he was startled to learn that his classmates "had been watching Truffaut and Godard at home, and I'm watching Abbott and Costello." One classmate, Matt Reeves, went on to direct movies such as *Cloverfield* and the forthcoming *Batman II*. "His films were so good, and I showed mine and I just felt like such a fool," Apatow said.

Sophomore year he landed a spot on *The Dating Game*, a quiz show that involved competing against two other young men for the affections of a bachelorette who had to choose a winner without laying eyes on the contestants. As Bachelor No. 1, Apatow—all dressed up in a blazer and tie—looked like a lost uncle from *Full House* going for a job interview. But he was in his element, making fart noises (with his hands this time, not his eye) and generally hamming it up in a charming way. When he won the competition, and the trip to Acapulco that came with it, he took it as a sign. He was already behind on tuition payments, and was so focused on doing stand-up that he wasn't finishing his assignments. It was either final exams or Mexico. He decided to drop out.

"I was young and so stupid," Apatow said. "All those decisions didn't make any sense, and I had no one to discuss them with. I don't think I debated these moves with my parents or any friend. I had no mentor. I just was an idiot who was like, *I don't want to miss this Acapulco vacation*." He also felt that his *Dating Game* victory was validation that he could make it in Hollywood. It amuses him now to think of how naive that was, but at the time he really thought, "This is show business." If he could make it on *The Dating Game*, maybe he could make it big.

The trip to Acapulco was "terrible": He got sunburned on the first day, forcing him to spend the whole next day in the hotel room. And it was immediately clear that there would be no actual love connection with the bubbly, blond bachelorette. ("I've seen her Instagram lately, and it seems like she's had a very happy life," he told me.) Looking back, Apatow thinks his parents were as relieved as he was to lose the tuition pressure. Nobody even feigned an attempt to persuade him to stay in school.

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His grandmother lived in Los Angeles, and after he dropped out, Apatow slept on her couch for two years, toiling away at open mics and emcee gigs, where he met a couple of unknowns named Adam Sandler and Jim Carrey. (Apatow became roommates with Sandler and introduced Carrey to his manager.)

It was around this time that he hunted down the complete scripts for 42 episodes of *Taxi*, the classic James L. Brooks sitcom. "I would sit and outline them and study them, and I figured out that there were common structures in them," he said. "I could see how these shows were made." He was also spending a lot of time at the Ranch, a nickname given to the group house where a bunch of aspiring actors and comedians lived, way out in the Valley, where rent was far cheaper than it was in Hollywood. At the Ranch, he was exposed to a different breed of comedian—not the exuberant, sharp-elbowed Jews of his Long Island comedy-club upbringing, but midwesterners who were, in his telling, just as funny in a softer way.

Apatow also started writing jokes for other comedians, something he had learned was possible from the director and actor Harold Ramis, whom Apatow had interviewed back in high school. (Ramis, whom Apatow adored for *Caddyshack* and *Stripes*, had told him he'd written jokes for Rodney Dangerfield.)

Apatow was emceeing comedy shows at the Comedy & Magic Club, in Hermosa Beach. "That's how I met a lot of my heroes," he recalled. One of those heroes was Garry Shandling. When Shandling was doing a set one night, Apatow's manager floated the idea to Shandling that Apatow should write some jokes for him. Shandling didn't seem remotely interested; they had "no connection whatsoever" that night, Apatow said. But a few months later, out of the blue, he called to see if Apatow wanted to help him write a few jokes for his upcoming gig hosting the 1990 Grammys. The answer was *Yes, God yes, of course yes*.

Apatow stayed up all night and gave Shandling, to his surprise, a list of 100 jokes to choose from. Shandling rewrote every punch line—which, to those who knew Shandling, says more about him than it does about Apatow. The way Apatow tells it today is that they made a good team: Apatow knew way more about music, and Shandling was simply funnier. This was the beginning of one of the most important relationships in Apatow's life.

One of Shandling's friends, the actor-writer-director Albert Brooks, told me he remembers hanging out at Shandling's house in the early '90s when Apatow started coming around. "He was like Garry's shadow," Brooks said. "What I've always loved about Judd is that more than anyone, he's a comedy savant. I would describe him as a human Friars Club. And I love that about him. Because he didn't just love it; he knew everything. And he was funny! It was like, *Who is this kid?*"

The more time Apatow spent around comedians and writers in L.A., the more he began to think he wanted to be in comedy—but not as a stand-up. "I was such a fan that I was very aware of how good people were," Apatow told me. "I knew how funny Andy Dick was and Ben Stiller was and Jim Carrey was." Walking away from stand-up, "there was probably a little part of me that died," Apatow said, but it made space for something new, too.

In 1990, he and Stiller created *The Ben Stiller Show*, which appeared on MTV (and later Fox), and starred up-and-comers

"What I've always loved about Judd is that more than anyone, he's a comedy savant. I would describe him as a human Friars Club."

such as Andy Dick, Janeane Garofalo, and Bob Odenkirk. It produced sketches beloved by comedy nerds—see: "Legends of Springsteen"—but was barely given a chance to take off. (The show won an Emmy for outstanding writing just after it was canceled.) Furious, Apatow took a trip to Hawai'i to wallow in the tropics, and by some cosmic turn of fate ran into Shandling near the hotel where Apatow was staying.

Shandling coached him on how to cope with the cancellation, and offered him a job writing for a series he was developing for HBO called *The Larry Sanders Show*. "Garry said writing is a way to figure out who you are," Apatow told me. "It's all about self-exploration. I didn't think that. I just thought I was writing a funny wife joke for Rodney Dangerfield. I didn't think spiritually about any of it. It was like, comedy is about knowing yourself? What? I thought it was just punching the horse in *Blazing Saddles*." It wasn't until then that he felt "some sort of calling" to write.

**FOR THE NEXT SEVERAL YEARS,** Apatow worked obsessively, toggling between writing gigs for the animated series *The Critic* and *The Larry Sanders Show*. Set behind the scenes at a Johnny Carson–style late-night show and featuring a parade of A-list comedian guest stars, *The Larry Sanders Show* was beloved by critics and industry insiders. It launched the careers of numerous comedians, and pioneered a documentary-style format that influenced shows such as *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *The Office*, *30 Rock*, and *Parks and Recreation*. Apatow parlayed that success into writing the 1995 film *Heavyweights* and producing *The Cable Guy*, starring Jim Carrey, in 1996. Both flopped but have since achieved cult status. This dynamic would become excruciatingly familiar to Apatow: splashy failures on projects that only grew more beloved over time.

During casting for *The Cable Guy*, a young actor named Leslie Mann came in to audition for the female lead, and Apatow read Carrey's part with her. He remembers leaning over to Stiller and saying something to the effect of *I can't believe the future Mrs. Apatow just walked into the room.* (The encounter was not as indelible for Mann. She doesn't remember it at all, she told *Vanity Fair* years later. "Is that bad?") By the summer of 1997, they were married. Later that year, they had their first child together—a girl named Maude. Another girl, Iris, followed.

When Maude was still a toddler, one of Apatow's friends from the Ranch, the actor and director Paul Feig, proposed making something together. "He literally handed me a manila envelope with *Freaks and Geeks* in it," Apatow said. He was astonished by what he read. He ended up developing and executive-producing the show. Around this time, the teen drama *Dawson's Creek* was an enormous hit. Apatow and Feig wanted to make something that was nothing like it.

*Freaks and Geeks* was unusual in a number of ways. Feig and Apatow cast actors who looked like real kids, rather than finding Hollywood-ready teens grown in a lab to appear on the cover of *Tiger Beat*, and the characters those actors played were complex, not mere vessels for sexual objectification or moral lessons that could be neatly resolved in 22 minutes. *Freaks and Geeks* also collapsed the distance between pain and humor in a way that made it feel true: Going through puberty isn't just terrible and awkward; it's hilariously terrible and awkward.

Apatow and Feig infused the show with their own adolescent agony. The gut punch of Apatow's life was when his parents got divorced while he was in middle school. The split was beyond ugly; it scattered the family. His brother moved in with his grandparents in California. His sister lived with his mom. Apatow lived with his dad.

One by one, all of Apatow's friends' parents got divorced too. They talked about divorce constantly with one another, but barely with their own parents. (Apatow's father once left a book out on the coffee table called *Growing Up Divorced* but never said a word about it.) Apatow remembers he and his friends thinking, "We can't listen to these people. They don't know what the hell they're doing."

That feeling gave rise to the conviction that he had to learn to take care of himself—through comedy. "I built this obsession that I thought would free me at some point," Apatow told me. "I had a very clear thought my whole childhood, which was: *This will pay off. One day, people will be interested in this.* It's almost maniacal."

In one of our conversations, Apatow brought up the episode in which one of the geeks of *Freaks and Geeks*, Neal Schweiber (played by Samm Levine), confronts his philandering father by telling hostile jokes about him through a ventriloquist puppet. "I really related to that," Apatow said. "There was a moment where I thought, *I need to learn how to juggle fire and perform at birthday parties*—that desire to get a skill because you're so traumatized by what's happening in the house."

One of Apatow's closest friends, the comedian Pete Holmes, told me that he always saw Apatow as another of the geeks, Bill Haverchuck (Martin Starr). In one of the series' unforgettable scenes, Haverchuck comes home from school to an empty house, makes himself a grilled-cheese sandwich and pours a tall glass of milk, pulls out the TV table, and dissolves into laughter watching Shandling do stand-up while the Who's "I'm One" plays over the scene. That "raised-by-television latchkey thing," Holmes told me, "that's Judd. That's all you need to know about Judd." He went on: "It's an isolated fan who used his love of comedy to make himself not isolated."

Today, *Freaks and Geeks* routinely shows up on critics' lists of the best shows ever made. But NBC canceled it after just 12 episodes, citing low ratings. Apatow was devastated, again.

It was around this time that he began having serious panic attacks. The worst of them happened during a meeting with Lorne Michaels at the Beverly Hills Hotel's Polo Lounge. "We were seated in a round booth I couldn't easily escape from," he told me. Apatow sat in silence, screaming on the inside and wondering if he would have to fabricate a story about food poisoning to get out of the room. ("I made it through. No once seemed to notice.")

Even when Apatow's not panicking, his mind tends to race. He remembers sitting and watching *The Merv Griffin Show* as a child, tapping his toes constantly, counting the syllables of the words being said on TV. He is not prone to catastrophizing so much as compulsively planning ahead. Over the years he's developed tactics for staying calm, first by white-knuckling it through episodes of panic and later with obscene amounts of therapy and mountains of self-help books.

After *Freaks and Geeks* was canceled, Apatow focused on finishing the series, even though he knew it wouldn't be renewed. He wanted to do right by the cast of young actors, which included Seth Rogen, Busy Philipps, Linda Cardellini, Jason Segel, and James Franco, all of whom eventually became stars. Working with all of that nascent talent on one show was "like discovering a music scene," Apatow told me. "It was like discovering Seattle or Manchester." He told himself that if he could finish the show and know that, just once, he had gotten something exactly right, it would be enough. In the end, NBC never even aired the complete series—three of the show's 18 episodes reached audiences only when Fox Family reran the series later that year.

In a clever act of desperation, Apatow used the show's website to ask fans for help demanding that *Freaks and Geeks* be released on DVD, something that never happened for a canceled show, and which ultimately helped *Freaks and Geeks* find its audience.

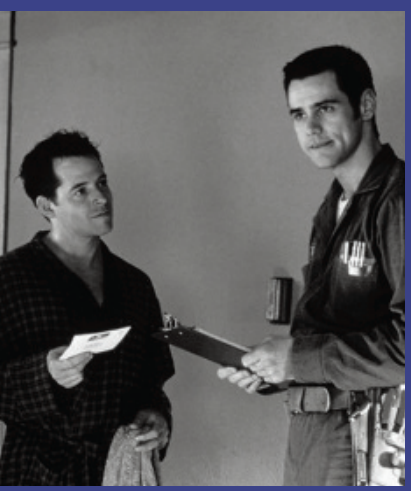
**From top left:** ***Apatow with the* Trainwreck *stars Amy Schumer, LeBron James, and Bill Hader; Jason Segel and John Francis Daley in* Freaks and Geeks*; Seth Rogen, Jay Baruchel, and Apatow on the set of* Knocked Up*; the cast and crew of* The 40-Year-Old Virgin*; Apatow with Lena Dunham and the cast of* Girls*; Apatow with Rogen and Katherine Heigl on the set of* Knocked Up*; Matthew Broderick and Jim Carrey in* The Cable Guy*; Iris and Maude Apatow, Paul Rudd, and Leslie Mann on the set of* This Is 40*; more* This Is 40*; on the set of the Netflix series* Love*; Apatow with Norman Lear, Mel Brooks, and Dick Van Dyke; Jonah Hill, Michael Cera, and Christopher Mintz-Plasse in* Superbad.

UNIVERSAL STUDIOS LICENSING; GABE SACHS; MOVIESTORE COLLECTION / ALAMY; DIMITRIOS KAMBOURIS / GETTY; AJ PICS / ALAMY; SUZANNE HANOVER; COURTESY OF JUDD APATOW; CINEMATIC COLLECTION / ALAMY
















**Above:** *Apatow and his onetime roommate Adam Sandler.*
**Opposite page:** *Apatow, Mann, and their daughters in 2018.*

But when the same experience happened—"almost beat for beat"—with the cancellation of his 2001 television show, *Undeclared*, Apatow was livid. That same year, he filmed a pilot for *North Hollywood*, starring Segel with the up-and-comers Amy Poehler, January Jones, and Kevin Hart, which got scrapped before it even aired. "That became the fuel," he told me. He just kept thinking, "You're wrong. I think all these people are great. All these writers and directors are so strong. Let's just try to prove everybody wrong."

When *Undeclared* was canceled, *Time* magazine had just named it one of the 10 best television shows that year. Apatow sent a framed copy of the article to the chair of the Fox Television Entertainment Group, who also happened to be the man who had canceled *The Ben Stiller Show*. The note said: "I don't know if you just fucked me in the ass again or you just never took it out in 1992. Merry Christmas, Judd."

**THE PEOPLE WHO KNOW** Apatow best will tell you that his willingness to burn bridges is legendary in comic circles. "Just really tough with studio executives—like, *You need to let us make this show what it is*," the comedian Mike Birbiglia told me. He went on: "When you're in show business long enough, you start to see that there are people who are rooting for themselves, and then there are people who are rooting for the art form at large. He's the quintessential example of 'He's rooting for the art form at large.'"

Apatow can also be impressively petty. Some of the same friends who expressed to me their undying loyalty to Apatow described him as sometimes "defensive" and "biting," the kind of person you have to work to win over. He once got into a prolonged email argument with the television producer Mark Brazill that was so over-the-top, *Harper's* ended up publishing the entire thing. Brazill signed off one email to Apatow with "Get cancer," and another with "Die in a fiery accident and taste your own blood." Apatow, ever the comedy savant, accused Brazill of stealing the "taste your own blood" line from Sam Kinison's 1986 album, *Louder Than Hell*: "That's a Sam Kinison line you stupid fuck!!!! Hypocrite!!!! J'accuse!!!!"

Yet Apatow described himself to me as someone who wants to be liked and who tries to avoid conflict. He worries about upsetting people. "Comedians are sensitive," he said. "Comedians are aware of all the dynamics that are happening, and they're feelers." The only time in all of our many hours of conversations that he ever balked was when I asked him whom he considers his closest friends. "You want me to list them?" He was horrified by the idea of making anyone feel bad.

Apatow has, over time, mellowed out. One of the people who has seen this up close is Seth Rogen, who was an unknown 16-year-old when Apatow cast him in *Freaks and Geeks*. "He was the first boss I ever had," Rogen told me. He was terrified of Apatow at the time, and desperate to impress him. After *Freaks*, Apatow asked Rogen to be a writer on *Undeclared*.

The first movie they made together was *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, Apatow's 2005 directorial debut and a blockbuster. Rogen remembers the moment Apatow came up with one of the scenes that drew the biggest laughs in the film, in which Steve Carell's character awkwardly tries to relieve himself while aroused. It is "forever tattooed in my mind," he told me. They'd been working on the script and Apatow left to pace around, get coffee. When he returned, "he was laughing so hard," Rogen said, and he went on to describe the whole scene, with Carell's character having to "tilt down" to pee. Rogen lost it too. "We were laughing so hard," he said. He kept thinking, "They would have never let us do that on television." (Apatow told me that coming up with a joke that perfect feels like you've "finally connected to God.")

Apatow made the jump to directing films at precisely the right moment. Studio executives had realized that audiences actually loved big comedic films starring actors who weren't traditional leading-man material. Will Ferrell, who in 2003 successfully leaped from *SNL* to the big screen with the Todd Phillips hit *Old School*, was a catalyst for the golden decade of big comedies that followed.

Apatow's success, when it came, hit like a tsunami. It is difficult to overstate his influence on American comedy. Critics started using the ungainly term *Apatowian* to describe his imitators.

*Knocked Up* was an even bigger hit than *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, grossing nearly $220 million on a $30 million budget. The film told the story of an underachieving stoner (Rogen) and an ambitious TV reporter (Katherine Heigl) who, after their one-night stand results in pregnancy, must navigate the complexities of becoming parents while getting to know each other. It was raunchy, tender, absurd, and hilarious.

COURTESY OF JUDD APATOW

**Apatow is interested in flawed characters and what they have to do to become good people.**

Apatow had worried that *Knocked Up* wouldn't come together at all because he couldn't figure out the casting. Eighty women had read for the lead part, and none of them clicked until Heigl showed up. When you find the right person for a role, "you almost feel relief," he told me. "Because when people read it and they're not right for the part, the scene doesn't work. So you're watching your scene not work over and over again."

Heigl may have been perfect for the part in Apatow's eyes, but she criticized the movie after it came out, touching off a larger debate about Apatow's work at the time. She called *Knocked Up* "a little sexist," and described the women characters he had written—including her own—as "shrews" who were "humorless and uptight." (Apatow, clearly bruised, reacted by calling her choice of the word *shrew* something out of the 1600s.) To him, the argument was unfair. He is interested in flawed characters and what they have to do to become good people, a theme that runs through his work going back to *Freaks and Geeks*.

Amy Schumer told me she never understood people who dismiss Apatow's work as sexist. The men in *Knocked Up* don't seem to understand what the women in their lives are going through. Seen one way, that's evidence of sexism; seen another, it's an honest portrayal of how some men behave in their relationships. The subject seemed to exasperate Schumer: "His house is all girls, his cats are girls, he made the show *Girls*, he made my movie." I will confess that I find the debate somewhat tiresome myself. Sometimes the flawed characters Apatow focuses on are men; sometimes they're women. As Schumer noted, he guided her and Dunham toward realizing their own creative visions for *Trainwreck* and *Girls*, respectively.

Apatow has filmed almost all of his movies in Los Angeles because he didn't want to be away from his family, especially when the girls were little, and he famously casts Mann and his daughters in his movies (*Knocked Up*, *Funny People*, *This Is 40*). This has provoked inevitable eye-rolling about nepotism, but Mann is a comedic star in her own right. She is the first person who reads his scripts. "She has come up with some of the great moments and scenes in all of the movies we've collaborated on," he told me.

The Apatow girls—both now in their 20s, both actors—first appeared on-screen when they still had their baby teeth. Apatow likes to point out, swelling with pride, that then-8-year-old Maude completely improvised her character's hilarious explanation of where babies come from in *Knocked Up*. "I think a stork, he drops it down, and then a hole goes in your body, and there's blood everywhere, coming out of your head, and then you push your belly button, and then your butt falls off, and then you hold your butt, and you have to dig, and you find a little baby." Mann's character deadpans in response: "That's exactly right."

AFTER A LONG PAUSE, Apatow started doing stand-up again about a decade ago, and has been doing it ever since. One of his regular venues is Largo, a gem of a comedy club in West Hollywood with the prettiest twinkle lights and the least comfortable chairs you can imagine.

The greenroom at Largo is a small shrine to great talent. Images of David Bowie and Gilda Radner are tacked up on one wall. On a recent visit I found Apatow there with Stephen Merchant, a co-creator of the original *The Office*. Merchant and Apatow were discussing the best place in the world to see Bruce Springsteen (Milan, they concluded), while the musician Pete Yorn stood in the hallway tuning his guitar. A few minutes later, Sarah Silverman wandered in. Ali Wong showed up after that.

Apatow had assembled this group of comedic super-talent for Judd Apatow and Friends, a semi-regular benefit he hosts that combines stand-up and live music. For each show, he picks



JON KOPALOFF / GETTY




MAGGIE SHANNON FOR *THE ATLANTIC*

a different lineup, and a different cause—on this night, proceeds were going to the ACLU. Apatow had with him a chaotic pile of notes—scrawled by hand, photocopied, clearly out of order, some upside down. If he was nervous, it did not show.

Apatow's set had a relaxed, funniest-dad-at-the-barbecue feel. He got huge laughs, from both old material (the hairy-back-shadow joke) and new, much of which involved confronting the indignities of aging. ("Don't you hate diverticulitis? Isn't it the worst when your high-school girlfriends start dying of natural causes?") He also recounted a story about a quasi-religious experience he'd had while tripping on ayahuasca. (He'd told me the story before. "That really did happen," he said.)

Apatow's style is predicated on a confessional sort of self-deprecation, while Wong's, for example, is more brash and confrontational—she told a story about a one-night stand that was so vulgar, a man sitting near me was actually honking with laughter, which prompted the people around him to start laughing even harder.

Apatow's approach was clearly influenced by Shandling. Like his mentor, Apatow pushes a joke to get funnier until there is nowhere left to go. When he's directing, he's known to shout out one punch line after the next for actors to try, and then chooses which one to use in editing. (He still stews about bits of his films he wishes he could change.)

If Shandling taught Apatow to be exacting in his writing, he also helped him find ways to calm his galloping mind. It was Shandling who introduced Apatow to Ram Dass, the author of the best-selling 1971 book *Be Here Now*, which popularized Eastern spirituality in the West. When I first started reading Ram Dass, at Apatow's urging, my immediate reaction was that it seemed very Los Angeles—we're all just cosmic vibrations made to love one another, that kind of thing. It wasn't until I listened to one of Ram Dass's lectures that I had a revelation: Ram Dass's belief system may have been Buddhism-flavored, but his delivery is basically a form of stand-up. He talks about going to India and meditating until he achieved transcendence. "I mean, light was pouring out of my head and I was some combination of the pure mind of the Buddha and the heart of the Christ"—here he pauses for just a beat before delivering the punch line—"which, for a Jewish boy, is not bad, you know?" The audience roars.

One of the best pieces of advice Apatow gives to other writers—which Schumer, Rogen, Birbiglia, and others all repeated back to me—is to write comedy like you're writing a drama. The story has to work on a human level before it can be funny. "I think what he's trying to get at almost always in all of his films and television is the vulnerability of the characters, and the comedy is secondary," Birbiglia told me. "And because he's so funny and he's so comedy-obsessed, the comedy ends up being the thing he's known for. But actually it's the other thing that he's extraordinary at."

*Apatow at his office. His approach is to push a joke to get funnier until there is nowhere left to go.*

Apatow put it to me this way: "The jokes can't work if the story doesn't work. The whole thing will crumble. So the most important part is that you have a great dramatic story that you care about that tracks, and then you can figure out how to ornament humor where it's needed. I think movies are usually bad when they haven't figured that out."

The director and *Simpsons* co-creator James L. Brooks told me about taking his 15-year-old son to see *Superbad*, a raunchy but sweet caper about a couple of teenagers trying to hook up with their crushes before they go off to college. Brooks's son left the theater feeling like someone had "looked into his heart," Brooks told me. Rogen, who co-wrote *Superbad* with his childhood best friend, told me he'd learned how to tell that story by watching Apatow (who produced the film). When you think about all of the talented actors, writers, and directors who do what they do because of Apatow, "I mean, the group of actors is big," Brooks said. "He raised puppies."

IN THE 1970S, when Steve Martin hit it big, Apatow went crazy for him. "I bought every album he put out—and couldn't stop doing an impression of him for the next five years," he recalled in one of his books. To a kid who worshipped the gods of comedy, Martin was the biggest of them all. So when Apatow was 13 years old, on a visit to California to see his grandmother, he persuaded her to drive him out past Martin's Beverly Hills home. When they arrived, Apatow couldn't believe his eyes: There was Martin, taking out the trash. He seized the moment, hopped out of the car, and asked for an autograph. Martin politely declined, saying he had to draw the line at signing autographs at his home. Apatow, ever quick-witted, suggested that they simply step into the street. But Martin insisted he could not.

When Apatow got back home, he wrote Martin an obscenity-laden, joking-but-not-joking letter, asking Martin why he treated his fans like garbage and threatening to share his home address with a Hollywood celebrity bus tour unless Martin responded with an autograph. When the reply came, it included a copy of Martin's book *Cruel Shoes*. "Dear Judd," the inscription reads, "I'm sorry. I didn't realize I was speaking to *the* Judd Apatow."

Years later, after Apatow had broken out, he and Martin were in a meeting together and someone asked Apatow to tell the story. "I told it," Apatow recalled in *Sicker in the Head*. "And at the end, they asked Steve if that was how he remembered it. And he said, 'In my memory, I knocked on Judd's door.'"

Apatow is no longer the young apprentice—he has long since become a master himself. Now comedians constantly come to him for advice. Rogen runs every big creative project by Apatow, he told me. "I, to a fault, to an inappropriate degree, run everything by him," Schumer said. "He honestly only gives good advice," Dunham told me. The best advice he ever gave her is that a good note of feedback can come from anywhere. She took that to mean that real artists are confident enough to release a bit of control. ("Though he did once take me to a Who concert after a long workday, and I fell asleep and he took photos.")

And yet Apatow has lost none of his enthusiasm for studying comedy. He has a scrapbook of a memoir coming out in October, *Comedy Nerd*, which tells the story of his life and is filled with the

many photos, studio notes, and other documents he has hoarded over the years. He has continued to interview comedians, and published two books filled with those conversations. This is how I first got to know him. I had long wanted to find a way to get Mel Brooks into the pages of *The Atlantic*. I knew that Apatow shared my adoration of Brooks, and figured he was more likely to pick up a call from Apatow than from me. So I got in touch with Apatow to ask if he would do the interview. He said yes right away—and Brooks said yes to Apatow.

Apatow is now making a documentary about Brooks, while also developing films about Norm Macdonald and Maria Bamford. These projects follow his documentaries *The Zen Diaries of Garry Shandling*; *George Carlin's American Dream*; and *Bob and Don: A Love Story*, about the friendship between Bob Newhart and Don Rickles. The same thread runs through all of these films: a deep curiosity about how people, despite their flaws and fears, find a way to keep going.

Apatow is drawn to comedians who deal directly with suffering. He executive-produced Gary Gulman's stand-up special *The Great Depresh*, as well as Ricky Velez's special, *Here's Everything*, both of which are steeped in pain. When I caught up with Gulman recently, he described Apatow to me as a hybrid of Springsteen and Hal Ashby. Springsteen because of his relentlessness; Ashby because "there's always that gut punch in Judd's movies," Gulman told me. "Even the ones that are almost absurd in the amount or the concentration of comedy." Maybe especially those ones.

Not long ago, I had a conversation with Kelly Carlin, daughter of George, about what makes someone become a comedian in the first place. She had gotten to know Apatow when he made the documentary about her father, and had known Shandling as well. It is clear to her why Shandling had taken Apatow under his wing. "I really do think he saw that Judd was a very soulful, human guy," she said, and that his reverence for comedy was real. For people like her father and Shandling, when you make something that you hope will make people laugh, and it works, "it's like all's right in the universe."

"It's a form of church," Carlin went on. "There's something about that shared space. My dad used to say that when you're laughing, your heart and your mind are open."

Shandling, who died from a blood clot in 2016, did not come easily to the wisdom that Apatow so admired him for. He spent his life working through the childhood death of his older brother from cystic fibrosis, and struggled to maintain relationships.

Apatow has experienced his own losses. During one of our conversations, he told me what it was like to be with his mother in the hospital as she was dying. She had ovarian cancer, and had developed sepsis. It was a terrible night and everything seemed to be falling apart. Right before she died, she looked up at her son and said: "Can you believe this shit?"

"That's what comedy is," Apatow told me. "We just have to laugh at how hard it is, and also really enjoy when we get a good moment." The story made me think of a page in one of Shandling's old diaries that Apatow is obsessed with. On it, Shandling had scrawled, in all caps: "GIVE MORE, GIVE WHAT YOU DIDN'T GET, LOVE MORE."

"My dad used to say that when you're laughing, your heart and your mind are open."

I once asked Apatow if he tends to juggle multiple projects at once because, on some level, he thinks about Shandling, who died at age 66, and hears a clock ticking. Apatow said that wasn't it. ("My dad is a young 83 so I feel I am going to live long, like the Russians in the old yogurt commercials," he said.) He works so hard because he understands that most things never get made in the first place, and that plenty more get canceled when they shouldn't.

For all of his success, Apatow still dreads failure. It's much harder for anyone to make big comedic films than it used to be, even for Apatow, though Universal is fast-tracking his latest—a still-untitled film he is directing about a country-music star who has hit rock bottom. He told me that, long ago, he decided he would be content as the Elvis Costello of comedy: not the person who sells out Madison Square Garden but the person who makes great art for its own sake, for an audience who appreciates it, even if that audience is smaller. But several of his friends told me that he quietly worries about staying relevant.

Recently, I told Apatow that I'd come to believe he is the most well-adjusted anxious person I've ever known—few people can worry as much as he does and still come off as easygoing. "That's just a solid facade," he told me. "That's why I probably just am drowning in pop-psychology books and religious books—because I don't get me at all. I just don't."

What Apatow has learned, what he knows for sure, is that the good and the bad will come. No matter what you do, no matter how hard you work or how talented you are, life entails suffering. But you get to choose what you do with pain. If you surround yourself with people you love and respect and believe in, if you refuse to take yourself too seriously, then you begin to see that the darkness contains more light than might seem possible. *A*

*Adrienne LaFrance is the executive editor of* The Atlantic. *She wrote about Albert Brooks for the June 2024 issue.*

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# Culture & Critics




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# This Was Spinal Tap

*One more smell of the glove*

By James Parker

*Does the world need another Spinal Tap movie?*

On July 5, a couple of days after I saw *Spinal Tap II: The End Continues*, Black Sabbath played its final show, at Villa Park, in Birmingham, England. Not only are these two phenomena related; they seem to have been impishly synchronized: Just when the troupe behind Rob Reiner's *This Is Spinal Tap*, the mockumentary that satirically exploded the genre of heavy metal, reunited after four decades for a sequel, the band that invented heavy metal called it quits.

And then, two weeks later, Ozzy died: Ozzy Osbourne, Sabbath's front man, who at Villa Park had sung sitting down, enthroned on what looked like a satanic office chair, heroically managing a host of ailments (including Parkinson's disease). No one was more metal than Ozzy. At the same time, no one in metal was funnier, more in touch with his own bathos, more post–*Spinal Tap*, in a sense, than Ozzy, especially in his shambling-paterfamilias incarnation on MTV's reality show *The Osbournes*. At Villa Park, his frailty was epic, defiant, even as his bandmates labored drastically to summon the power of 50 years earlier. Still, Sabbath sounded amazing, the band's distinctive vibe of limitless cosmic encumbrance, of Man squirming under the thumb of Fate, God, madness—the essential heavy-metal vision—somehow magnified by the venerable wobbliness of its playing.

*Spinal Tap II* (which arrived in theaters on September 12) also concerns itself with last things. As the movie (again directed by Reiner) begins, Spinal Tap the band—ultra-English, ultra-deluded as to its own quality and status, basically a slavish amalgam of every trend in hard rock since 1966—is no more, its members long dispersed and out of touch with one another. Lead guitarist Nigel Tufnel is the proprietor of a guitar-and-cheese shop; guitarist-vocalist David St. Hubbins makes on-hold Muzak and soundtracks for true-crime podcasts; bassist Derek Smalls runs the New Museum of Glue. But upon the death of Ian Faith, Tap's posh-sounding, cricket-bat-wielding manager, his daughter, Hope (Kerry Godliman), inherits from him a contract for one last Spinal Tap show. Initially underwhelmed by this concept, Hope happens to catch a clip of Garth Brooks sound-checking with a Spinal Tap song. The clip has gone viral; people love it; Tap has accidentally re-impinged on pop consciousness. There's money to be made. She must get the band together again for a final outing, for a grand farewell fling. She books the Lakefront Arena, in New Orleans.

*This Is Spinal Tap* was an almost-clinical study in anticlimax, in rock-and-roll humiliation. Again and again, the band falls (petulantly, peevishly, with English accents and English swear words) into the gap between its bombastic self-image and the facts on the ground, the dwindling ticket sales and tiny sandwiches and spontaneously combusting drummers. The world is against the members of Spinal Tap: Everything undercuts them; everything ironizes them. Their way to rock-and-roll sublimity, to headbanging apotheosis, is comprehensively barred.

And as dead-on comedies will sometimes do, the movie claimed a piece of reality. After *This Is Spinal Tap*, any band, in any genre, could have a Spinal Tap moment: taking a wrong turn on the way to the stage, being caught out by malfunctioning gear, suffering through an in-store appearance. For musicians, and metal musicians in particular, it was a new and liberating form of self-awareness.

Does the world need another Spinal Tap movie? Obviously not, no more than—inside the movie—the world needs another Spinal Tap concert. But the redundancy, the extraneousness, is exactly the point here. Prior to their reanimation by Hope and her magic contract, the Tappers are in a state of almost-hysterical obsolescence. The cheese, the Muzak, the glue museum—they're all doing, with complete conviction, completely useless things. They are post-rock, post-culture, post-history in a sense. An inferno of triviality. A cameo by Elton John, along with glancing appearances from Metallica's Lars Ulrich and the Red Hot Chili Peppers' Chad Smith, contributes to the sense of the movie as an End Times in-joke. And we're all in on it.

I don't want to argue that rock and roll is over, its teleology exhausted, its glorious arc attenuated and made vague by Spotify and nostalgia and stylistic recyclings and concert tickets that cost $400 and blah blah blah—I'd die if I really believed that. But it certainly *feels* over. (For the definitive account of this feeling, and the reasons for it, read Simon Reynolds's *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past*.)

Next question: Is *Spinal Tap II* funny? I'll give you a qualified yes. The sensation of a new comic universe popping into being is absent, because you can do that only once, but the original elements are still vital: the luminous deadpan stupidity of Nigel Tufnel (Christopher Guest), the wheedling vanity of David



*In* Spinal Tap II, *guitarist-vocalist David St. Hubbins (Michael McKean), bassist Derek Smalls (Harry Shearer), and guitarist Nigel Tufnel (Christopher Guest) reunite for an absurd final show.*

St. Hubbins (Michael McKean), the spacey sentimentality of Derek Smalls (Harry Shearer). These are great comedians, working up their scenes, as before, from hours of improv. There's some lovely in-studio bickering as Tufnel and St. Hubbins lock horns over a complex new musical arrangement. (St. Hubbins: "Why is it so hard for you to grasp?" Tufnel: "I'm grasping it! And my fingers are saying … *don't*.") Also, as before, the occasional shamelessly scripted gag. St. Hubbins, in his solo career, is working on the soundtrack for "a horror movie that takes place in a retirement community. It's called *Night of the Assisted-Living Dead*." We learn of a new addition to the dark lineage of deceased Spinal Tap drummers—Skippy Scuffleton; cause of death: sneezing fit—and we watch the band rustically keening its way through a folk song: "I loved me a lass whose hair was long / And brown as the finest stew."

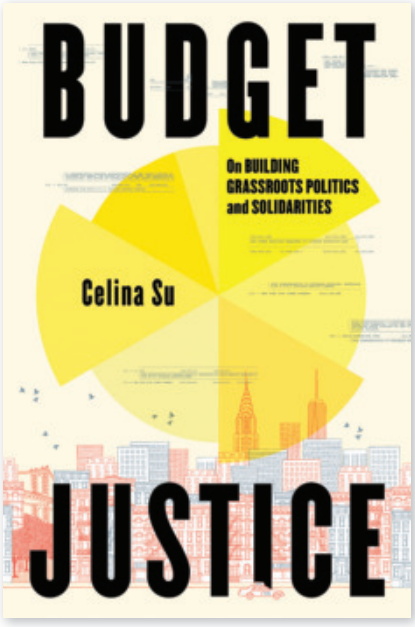
Speaking of drummers, Valerie Franco—hired in the movie for that final gig at the Lakefront Arena—is almost too good. Driven by her smooth and emphatic playing, Spinal Tap comes close to losing its special lumpy Tap groove, its farcical Deep Purple mega-thump, and begins to sound disconcertingly like a proper band. But it's okay, because here comes the cameo of cameos: Paul McCartney! He wanders into the rehearsal studio with his long Liverpudlian face and ironic *O*-mouth, takes Tufnel's side in the aforementioned musical dispute, and then sits down with the band for—yes!—a full-length version of "Cups and Cakes": "Cups and cakes, cups and cakes / Oh what good things Mother makes." It's a number from Tap's psychedelic infancy, and—in its pastiche-y, chamber-musicky way—wonderfully McCartney-appropriate: It's like "Martha My Dear" written by … Spinal Tap.

Last question: Will *Spinal Tap II* put a dent in actuality, refine the consciousness of musicians, in the same way as its predecessor? Time will tell. With my own eyes, I have seen the uncanny afterlife of *This Is Spinal Tap*. I have witnessed the movie creating, as it were, new scenes for itself, new great lines. In 2006, for example, I saw Iron Maiden, perhaps the most potently theatrical (and ultra-English) heavy-metal act ever, at an arena in Boston. At one point in the set, during a characteristically epic, multi-part number, the music turned moody and the stage blacked out. From up in the rafters, a single spotlight coldly blazed. Its unfortunate operator, however, couldn't seem to find his target. His beam wavered on a patch of blankness, or the corner of an amp, and then began to roam the stage in desperation, scanning here and scanning there—until, from the darkness, the voice of Bruce Dickinson, Iron Maiden's singer, was heard. "I'm over here," he said dryly. "On top of the speaker. Twat." *A*

*James Parker is a staff writer at* The Atlantic.

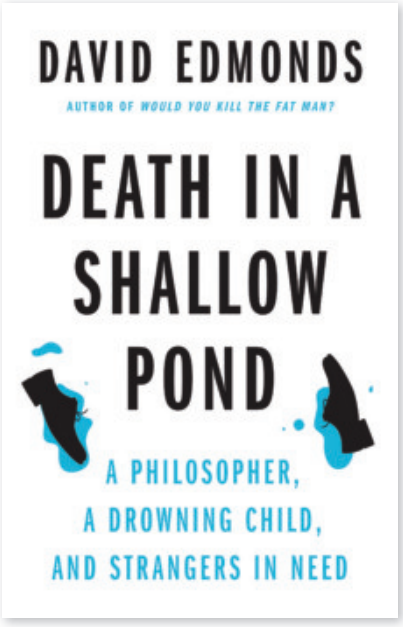
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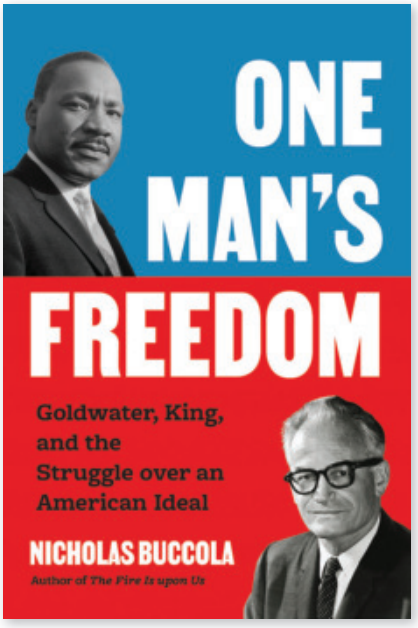

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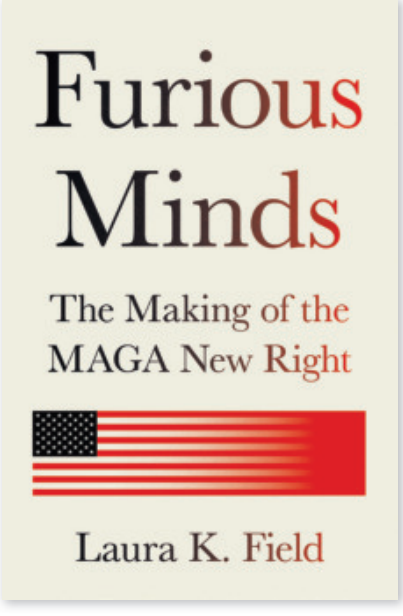

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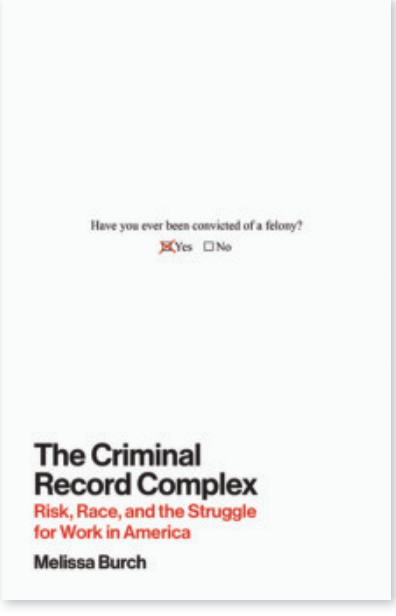

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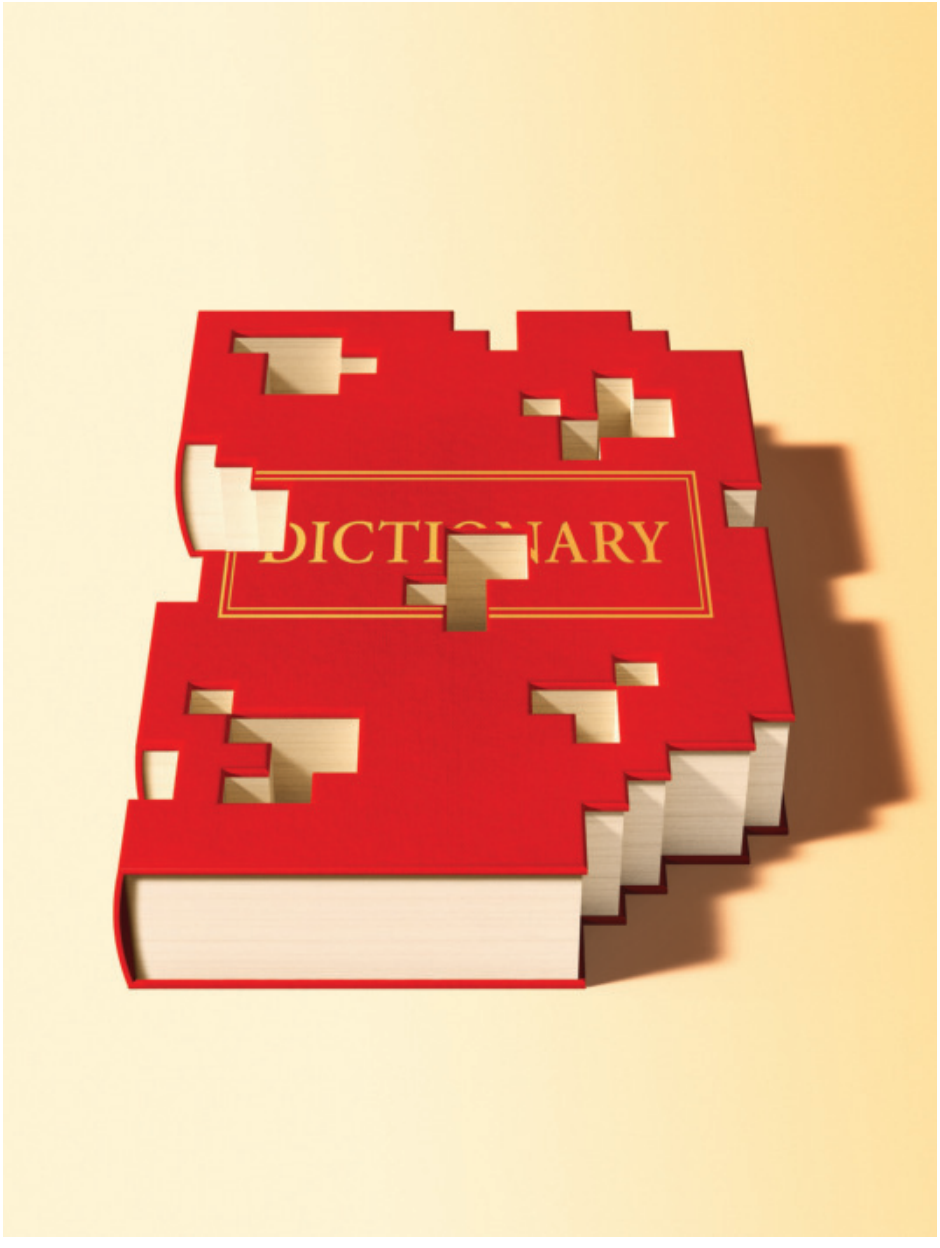

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BOOKS

# Whither the Dictionary?

*These are parlous times for lexicographers.*

By Stefan Fatsis

In 2015, I settled in at the Springfield, Massachusetts, headquarters of Merriam-Webster, America's most storied dictionary company. My project was to document the ambitious reinvention of a classic, and I hoped to get some definitions of my own into the lexicon along the way. (A favorite early drafting effort, which I couldn't believe wasn't already included, was *dogpile*: "a celebration in which participants dive on top of each other immediately after a victory.") Merriam-Webster's overhaul of its signature work, *Webster's Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged*—a 465,000-word, 2,700-page, 13.5-pound doorstop published in 1961 and never before updated—was already in full swing. The revision, which would be not a hardback book but an online-only edition, requiring a subscription, was expected to take decades.

Not long after my arrival, though, everything changed. Page views were declining for Merriam-Webster.com, the company's free, ad-driven revenue engine: Tweaks to Google's algorithms had punished Merriam's search results. The company had always been lean and profitable, but the financial hit was real. Merriam's parent, Encyclopedia Britannica, was facing challenges of its own—who needed an encyclopedia in a Wikipedia world?—and ordered cuts. Merriam laid off more than a dozen staffers. Its longtime publisher, John Morse, was forced into early retirement. The revision of Merriam's unabridged masterpiece was abandoned.

Call it the paradox of the modern dictionary. We're in a golden age for the study and appreciation of words—a time of "meta awareness" of language, as one lexicographer put it to me. Dictionaries are more accessible than ever, available on your laptop or phone. More people use them than ever, and dictionary publishers now possess



ILLUSTRATION BY MATT CHASE

the digital wherewithal to closely track that use. Podcasts, newsletters, and Words of the Year have popularized neologisms, etymologies, and usage trends. Meanwhile, analytical software has revolutionized linguistic inquiry, enabling greater understanding of the ways language works—when, how, and why words break out; the specific contexts for expressions and idioms. And all of that was true long before the rise of AI.

But these advances are also strangling the business of the dictionary. Definitions, professional and amateur, are a click away, and most people don't care or can't tell whether what pops up in a search is expert research, crowdsourced jottings, scraped data, or zombie websites. Before he left Merriam, Morse told me that legacy dictionaries face the same growing popular distrust of traditional authorities that media and government have encountered.

Other big names in American lexicography were already receding. In 2001, a decade after releasing an edition dubbed the "politically correct dictionary" for its inclusion of *womyn*, *herstory*, *waitron*, and more, Random House abandoned dictionary making altogether. *Webster's New World Dictionary* cycled through corporate owners until its last edition, in 2014. *The American Heritage Dictionary*, published in 1969 to challenge Merriam's *Third*, is an infrequently updated shell of its legendary self.

By the start of this decade, the once-competitive American dictionary business was essentially down to two players: Merriam-Webster, with its 200 years of tradition and brand recognition, and Dictionary.com, whose founders, 30 years ago, beat Merriam to the URL by a few weeks. After it was acquired in 2008 by the media and internet giant IAC, Dictionary.com's small editorial staff had innovated. When I visited its offices in 2016, the company's verticals for slang, emoji, memes, and terms related to gender and sexuality were robust, and its periodic dictionary updates were trendy and substantial—a batch of entries included *superfood* and *clicktivism*. The company reportedly had more than 5 billion annual searches in the mid-2010s, and in 2018 was among the internet's 500 most-visited websites.

In 2018, Dictionary.com was purchased by the mortgage-industry titan (and Cleveland Cavaliers owner) Dan Gilbert's company Rock Holdings—apparently just because Gilbert was a fan of dictionaries. He took a personal interest in the project, and for a few years, it seemed like the digital future of the lexicon was at hand. The line inside the company was that Gilbert wanted "to own the English language." And he did seem genuinely interested in the work of the dictionary. "Every so often he would ask a question that a reader might ask," John Kelly, a longtime Dictionary.com editor, told me. For instance, Gilbert was into extreme weather, Kelly said, and had subordinates brief him on terms such as *bombogenesis*. When Rock Holdings' mortgage and financial companies went public in 2020, Dictionary.com remained privately held, shielding the site from shareholder pressures.

*Dictionary.com couldn't match Merriam's history. Instead, the company was trying to "capture language at the pace of change."*

In 2023, Dictionary.com hired three full-time veteran lexicographers—including Grant Barrett, a cohost of the public-radio show *A Way With Words*, and Kory Stamper, a former longtime Merriam-Webster editor and the author of the memoir *Word by Word*—to bolster a team of about a dozen freelancers. The goal was to modernize the dictionary, which was a gigantic undertaking. Dictionary.com was based primarily on *The Random House Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language* (published in 1966, updated in 1987), which was based on *The New Century Dictionary* (published in 1927), which was based on *The Century Dictionary* (published in 1889), which was based on *The Imperial Dictionary of the English Language* (published in 1847). Some of the entries were more than 100 years old.

The lexicography team revised frequently viewed terms such as *theory* and *hypothesis*, which generate lots of traffic at the start of the school year. It enhanced entries with new pronunciations, etymologies, and alternative senses, such as a new adjectival use of *mid* ("mediocre, unimpressive, or disappointing"). It removed sexist and archaic language and diversified names in example sentences. ("'John went to school,'" Barrett told me. "Why not Juan or Juanita or Giannis? This is a multicultural society.")

Barrett designed a reading program to help flag emerging lexical items and turbocharge additions, tripling the volume of new words added in the site's periodic updates over the course of a year. A February 2024 rollout included *Barbiecore*, *bed rotting*, *slow fashion*, *range anxiety*, and *enshittification*, which the American Dialect Society had chosen a month earlier as its 2023 Word of the Year. (Of those words, only *enshittification* has since been added by Merriam, and only to a new slang portal, not the official dictionary.) The lexicography team was revising a database to more quickly update entries and post them on social media, and developing a synonym-based game. It was training new lexicographers.

Dictionary.com couldn't match Merriam's history or reputation. Instead, the company was trying to position itself to "capture language at the pace of change," to be "hipper and more experimental, but also rigorous AF," Kelly said. (Dictionary.com added the slang initialism for *as fuck*; Merriam still has not.)

The piecemeal efforts improved the dictionary's quality and cool quotient. Barrett also loved the work: He was surrounded by colleagues who cared about language and how it was presented, verbally and visually. For a time, Barrett could plug his fingers in his ears and tune out the sobering reality: Although he and his

colleagues were getting paid well, "the dictionary business was crumbling," he said. "So ride it 'til the wheels fall off. And the wheels fell off."

NOT LONG AFTER Rock Holdings took over, the industry grew more challenging. Google's "knowledge boxes" were hogging the top of search pages with definitions licensed from the British dictionary publisher Oxford, including synonyms, antonyms, and, eventually and predictably, AI-generated summaries of words' meanings. The proprietary clutter pushed down traditional-dictionary links, and Dictionary.com's traffic fell by about 40 percent. At the same time, the pandemic drained advertising revenue. The site tried to stanch the decline with more ads, only to create a worse user experience.

Dictionary.com rolled out a K–12 online tutoring service, AI writing software, and other education products. None of it aligned with a dictionary's mission, and none of it worked, staffers said. Then, as interest rates rose, revenue at Gilbert's core mortgage business plunged, resulting in nearly $400 million in losses. Even for a billionaire who was in the comparatively low-budget dictionary business less for profit than for fun, the bottom line mattered, and the pressure to make money and cut costs was inescapable.

In April 2024, Rock Holdings announced that it had sold Dictionary.com to IXL Learning, the owner of Rosetta Stone, Vocabulary.com, and other online ed-tech brands. Within a month, IXL laid off all of the dictionary's full-time lexicographers and dumped most of its freelancers. Including non-lexicography staff, Dictionary.com had started 2024 with about 80 employees. After the sale, only a handful remained. (A representative for IXL said that the company retained some of the freelancers, brought in its own lexicographers, and now has a staff larger than it was at the time of the acquisition.)

When he lost his job, Barrett wasn't bitter, or surprised. Dictionary.com hadn't aspired to have a full staff in the tradition of the books on which it was based, he said. It didn't have Merriam's advertiser base, print backlist, or historical mission to preserve, protect, and define American English. Barrett understood its more circumscribed project. "Dictionary content is expensive," Barrett said. "Just the cost of lexicographers—people are expensive, and the output is low. It is very difficult to justify that just for the sake of completism. You will never have enough staff to keep up. People are too productive in the creation of language."

IT'S HARD TO KNOW what future business model might save the industry. Getting swallowed by a tech giant expecting hockey-stick growth has proved untenable. A billionaire willing to let the dictionary just be the dictionary—a self-sustaining company with a modest staff performing an outsize cultural job that might not always be profitable—looks less likely after Dan Gilbert's foray. A grand national dictionary project—some collaboration among government, private, nonprofit, and academic institutions—feels like the Platonic ideal. But with universities and intellectual inquiry under assault in 2025, I'm not holding my breath.

*Even before Google's AI Overview began taking clicks from definitions written by lexicographers, the trajectory of the industry was clear.*

At Merriam-Webster, the standard capitalist model is working, at least for now, as is its hybrid print-digital approach. The publisher has rebounded from its mid-2010s struggles. It was a social-media darling during the first Trump administration, racking up likes and retweets for its smart-alecky and politically subversive social-media persona. (When Donald Trump tweeted "unpresidented" instead of "unprecedented," the Merriam account responded: "Good morning! The #WordOfTheDay is … not 'unpresidented'. We don't enter that word. That's a new one.") Britannica invested in software, hardware, and humans to enable Merriam to better navigate Google's algorithms. Merriam added a phalanx of games, including Wordle knockoffs and a dictionary-based crossword, to attract and retain visitors.

Merriam has outlasted a long line of American dictionaries. But plenty of household media names have been humbled by the shifting habits of digital consumers. Even before Google's AI Overview began taking clicks from definitions written by flesh-and-bone lexicographers, the trajectory of the industry was clear.

After Merriam shut down its online unabridged revision, I stuck around the company's 85-year-old brick headquarters, reporting and defining. I eventually drafted about 90 definitions. Most of them didn't make the cut. But a handful are enshrined online, including politically charged terms such as *microaggression* and *alt-right*, and whimsical ones such as *sheeple* and, yes, *dogpile*.

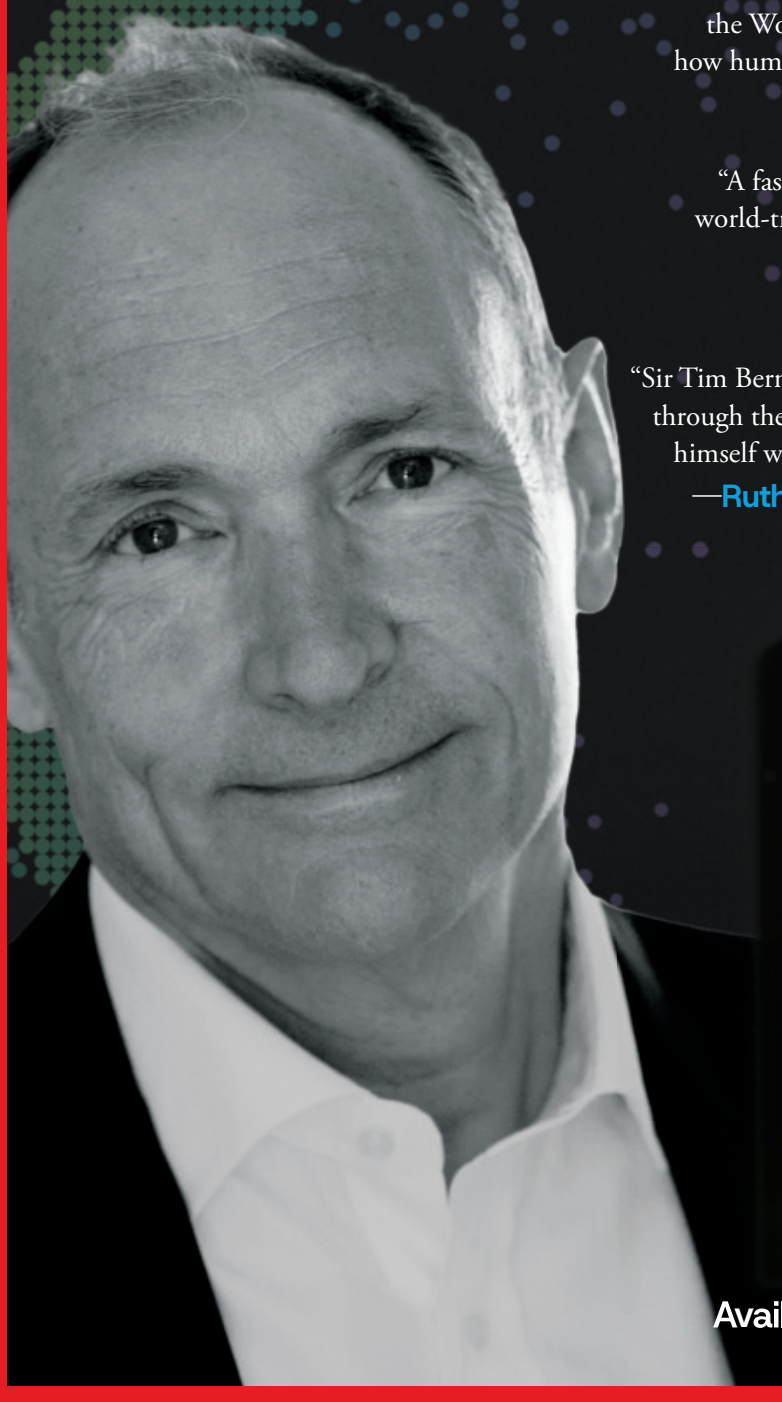
While I'm proud of these small contributions to lexicography, my wanderings through dictionary culture convinced me of something far more important: the urgent need to save this slowly fading business. Twenty years ago, an estimated 200 full-time commercial lexicographers were working in the United States; today the number is probably less than a quarter of that. At a time when contentious words dominate our conversations—think *insurrection* and *fascism* and *fake news* and *woke*—the need for dictionaries to chronicle and explain language, and serve as its watchdog, has never been greater. *A*

*Stefan Fatsis is the author of* Unabridged: The Thrill of (And Threat to) the Modern Dictionary*, from which this article was adapted.*

# This Is for Everyone

## A gripping, in-the-room account of the rise of the digital world, from the inventor of the World Wide Web

# Tim Berners-Lee



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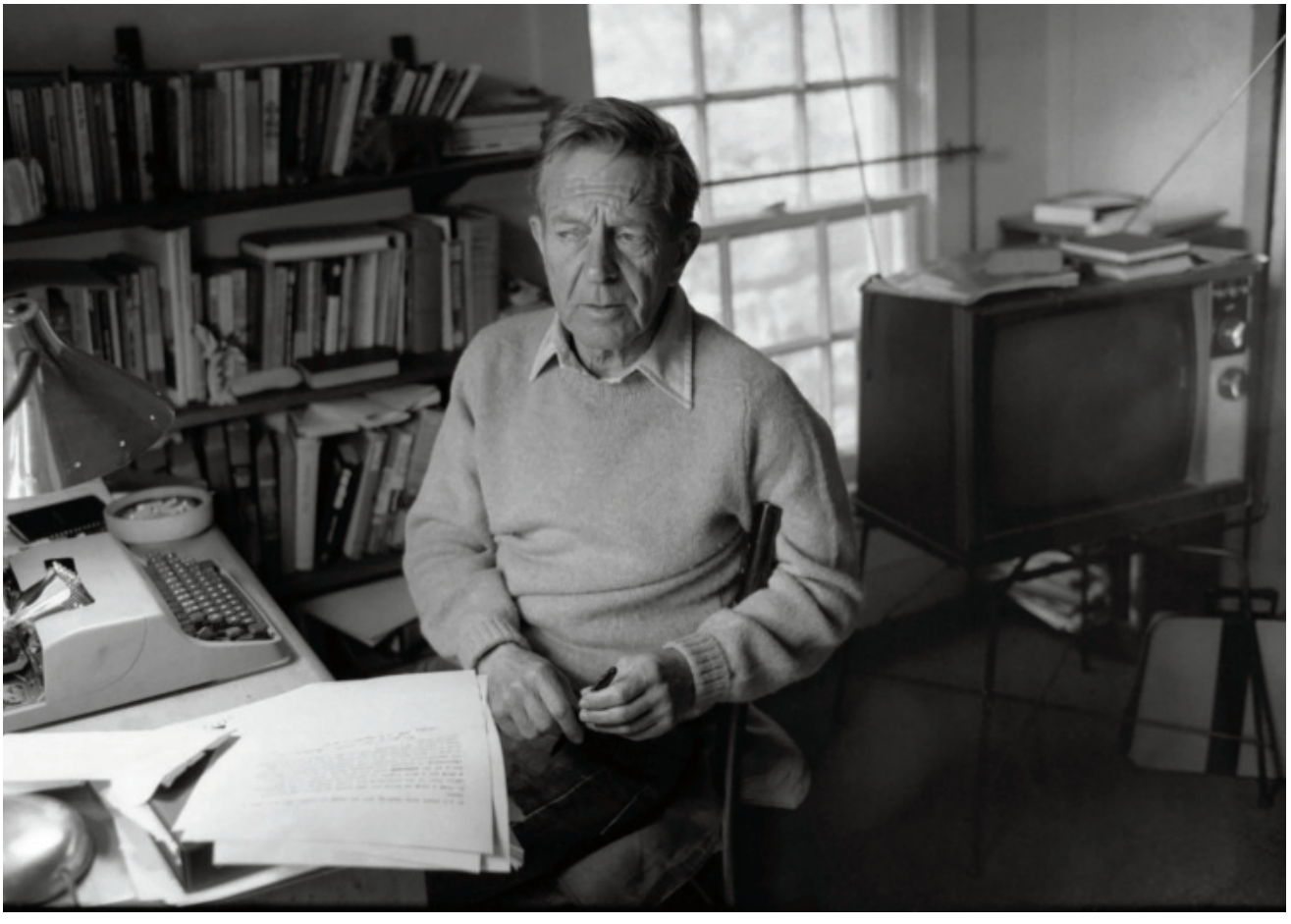
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BOOKS

# John Cheever's Secrets

*In a new memoir, Susan Cheever searches for the wellspring of her father's genius.*

By Adam Begley

About 20 miles south of Boston, under a big maple near a white clapboard church, John Cheever is buried next to his parents and brother. He's also buried under an accretion of myth and myth-busting. A restaurant on the edge of the cemetery, just yards from the family plot, calls itself the Cheever Tavern. Advertising a "tasteful setting," it invokes the great writer's mid-1960s public persona as the bard of suburbsville. The author of a dazzling flow of *New Yorker* stories, he was hailed on the cover of *Time* as "Ovid in Ossining" and presented in the accompanying article as a monogamously married father of three living in a grand house with the obligatory Labrador retrievers. "I had no idea that my father was anything but the country squire he pretended to be," Susan Cheever writes in her new book, *When All the Men Wore Hats*. He himself linked his best stories to "a long-lost world when the city of New York was still filled with a river light," as he wrote in the preface to *The Stories of John Cheever* (1978)—a time, he went on, "when almost everybody wore a hat."

Forget the hats. Fedoras and bird dogs are not the key to Cheever. But neither is the sordid flip side, the anti-myth that ought to gut any misguided hankering after a mid-century golden age. In *Home Before Dark*, a "biographical memoir" published in 1984, two years after her father's death, Susan Cheever outed him as doubly tortured: a closeted homosexual promiscuously unfaithful to his wife with both men and women, and a self-destructive alcoholic who dried out after nearly dying of drink and only then accepted his gay identity. She discovered his "sexual imposture" (his phrase) after he died, when she began writing about him. Her memoir was eventually followed by reams of corroborating evidence, including his private writings, *The Journals of John Cheever* (1991), and Blake Bailey's long, excellent, and desperately dismal *Cheever: A Life* (2009). That biography supplied the final indignity: the surprising news that, less than 30 years after his death, even his best books were no longer selling. In 2012—Cheever's centennial—the novelist Allan Gurganus regretted that his friend was "now unfairly known as the gloomy, sodden satyr of suburbia."

For those who love the stories, the shrinking readership is what's most regrettable. By turns lyrical and satirical, funny and heartrending, they show us a paradise of sorts, a dream America—and then reveal terrible depths of discontent. His own estimation of his fiction, as recorded in the *Journals*, is itself a hyper-condensed Cheever story: "flighty, eccentric, and sometimes bitter work, with its social disenchantments, somersaults, and sudden rains."

His most famous story, "The Swimmer," fits the bill. Sitting by a friend's pool, one hand dabbling in the water, the other curled around a glass of gin, Neddy Merrill decides to swim the eight miles to his home, traversing the county pool by pool. "The day was beautiful, and it seemed to him that a long swim might enlarge and celebrate its beauty." But during this quixotic journey, the seasons change—there's a sudden rain. Lovers grow hostile and old friends make cryptic, damning remarks about his "misfortunes." He weakens, "stupefied with exhaustion," and arrives at his house only to find it locked, empty, abandoned—no sign of his wife and four daughters. The meaning of this disturbing tale is suggested when he's not even halfway home. "He could not go back," Cheever writes. "He had covered a distance that made his return impossible." Neddy's life is a mess; we don't know exactly what happened to him and his family, but the moral is clear: We cannot recapture remembered bliss or recover bygone happiness.

*By turns funny and heartrending, Cheever's stories show us a dream America—and then reveal terrible depths of discontent.*

AT THE END OF HIS LIFE, in a speech at Carnegie Hall accepting the National Medal for Literature, Cheever insisted that "a page of good prose remains invincible." His daughter uses that hopeful sentence as an epigraph in *When All the Men Wore Hats*; it's a fair summary of her theme, as is another epigraph, taken from the *Journals*: "Literature is the salvation of the damned." Her first book about her father fused memoir and biography; this one fuses memoir and literary appreciation. She aims to help us read Cheever's best stories, and if in this "sequel of sorts" she seems to be squeezing one last drop, she provides welcome context, clues to her father's very particular genius.

As a writer and a daughter of a writer, she's also exploring the wellsprings of creativity, which she does with openhearted elegance. When young Susie, already an avid reader, discovered that little girls very much like her appeared in her father's stories, she was indignant; he laughed at her concerns. "Fiction is not crypto-autobiography," he pronounced. And yet Susan Cheever now also knows that "good writing does not require pure intentions." In the Cheever household, the boundaries between art and life were blurry at best. "Our truths often appeared as fiction; the fiction of my father's heterosexual nature appeared as truth."

Perhaps the eeriest example, noted in Bailey's biography but more powerful in Susan's first-person account, is her interview with her father when she was a 33-year-old working at *Newsweek*; the cover story was a profile of him just after he'd published *Falconer* (1977), which features a love affair between the protagonist, incarcerated for fratricide, and a fellow inmate. The journalist daughter asked, "Did you ever fall in love with another man?" The novelist father artfully replied that it could indeed happen, "but I would think twice about giving up the robustness and merriment I have known in the heterosexual world." Robustness! Merriment! She then asked point-blank if he'd ever had a "homosexual experience." Instead of answering in the negative as she expected, he said, "I have had many, Susie, all tremendously gratifying." A dreadful pause before he continued, laughing, "and all between the ages of 9 and 11."

She took that as a no and soldiered on with the interview; the curious exchange was printed in the magazine. And she continued to think of her father as straight until she started reading his journals a couple of months after cancer killed him, at age 70. She decided that she should be the one to reveal his sexuality, and resolved to find "a loving way to do it." Tender, sad, and respectful, *Home Before Dark* is a proud daughter's elegy for an unhappy parent.

But there's no loving way to present the torment he endures in the journals, whose posthumous publication he approved. Gurganus called the several million words—mostly typed, stashed away in 29 loose-leaf notebooks—"a ten-thousand-page suicide note." Only about one-20th of it has been published, the winnowing

expertly done by Robert Gottlieb, Cheever's editor at Knopf, who described the work as the most difficult editorial project he ever attempted—because "it was disturbing to be so immersed in the hell of Cheever's inner life." The landmark features of that hellscape are resentment of his wife, a losing battle with alcohol, and his "galling otherness."

Cheever desperately wants to honor the vows made to his wife and children, he writes, "but my itchy member is unconcerned with all of this, and I am afraid that I may succumb to its itchiness." Here's what happens when he does (hardly for the first time): "We sped into the nearest bedroom, unbuckled each other's trousers, groped for our cocks in each other's underwear, and drank each other's spit." His postcoital detachment is clinical, merciless:

> I remember the acute lack of interest with which I regarded his nakedness in the morning when he returned to bed after having taken a piss. He was merely a man with a small cock, a pair of balls, and a small ass suitable for cushioning a chair or a toilet seat and for nothing else.

And yet he believes he's in love. "Lunching with friends who talked about their tedious careers in lechery, I thought: I am gay, I am gay, I am at last free of all this. This did not last for long."

The writer and critic Geoff Dyer believes that in the "shapeless privacy" of the published *Journals*, Cheever most fully plumbs "the complex depths of his being." Psychologically acute and full of glorious lyricism ("incessant inventories of light and landscape"), they are his greatest work, according to Dyer, "his principal claim to literary survival."

WHEN ALL THE MEN WORE HATS: SUSAN CHEEVER ON THE STORIES OF JOHN CHEEVER

*Susan Cheever*

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

**SUSAN CHEEVER** puts her money on the short story as the form in which her father's vision found its most exact and astonishing expression; in an appendix she reprints six of them, all among those Gottlieb selected for the massive *Stories of John Cheever*, a runaway best seller and the winner of the 1979 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction as well as a National Book Critics Circle Award. She calls attention to sexual ambivalence as an essential creative catalyst and theme (noting Gottlieb's alertness to it), and indeed it's hard to argue against the idea that Cheever's sexual charade generated tension in his life that helped produce some brilliant fiction. But there were other tensions squeezing him.

In "The Housebreaker of Shady Hill" (it's in her appendix and surely the inspiration for the new television series *Your Friends & Neighbors*), money is the root of Johnny Hake's troubles. A businessman with an archetypal suburban lifestyle, he loses his job and, to avoid bouncing checks, starts sneaking into wealthy friends' houses in the middle of the night to steal cash. (It turns out that an 11-year-old Susie, though she never stole a thing, also enjoyed slipping into neighboring houses: She "liked watching rich people sleep"—"an inherited taste," she writes, bending the laws of genetics to establish a link between her father's fiction and a childhood eccentricity.)

Johnny Hake steals because financial disgrace would undoubtedly end his life in Shady Hill and exile him from his wife and four children. In a bravura sentence, Cheever gives us the measure of Johnny's enchantment:

> We have a nice house with a garden and a place outside for cooking meat, and on summer nights, sitting there with the kids and looking into the front of Christina's dress as she bends over to salt the steaks, or just gazing at the lights in heaven, I am as thrilled as I am thrilled by more hardy and dangerous pursuits, and I guess this is what is meant by the pain and sweetness of life.

After his fall, dismayed by his thievery, he exclaims: "Oh, I never knew that a man could be so miserable and that the mind could open up so many chambers and fill them with self-reproach!"

In 1956, Cheever sold the movie rights to "The Housebreaker of Shady Hill" for $25,000—a rare windfall. Still, he was chronically plagued by financial anxiety, in part because *The New Yorker* consistently underpaid him. He could plausibly exclaim, *Johnny Hake, c'est moi!* But his daughter is inclined to see the story as springing from a different kind of anxiety. She quotes Blake Bailey: "Beneath it all, of course, was an escalating terror of homosexuality, and living among the dauntingly normal citizens of Scarborough didn't help." In this reading, Cheever's "galling otherness" is more worrisome than money troubles, though the son of a traveling shoe salesman who lost his job in the 1920s and his investments in the Crash will always be sensitive to financial stress. It was a crucial ingredient in his cocktail of anguish and inspiration.

"The Country Husband" is a coruscating story about love and death, or, anyway, about infatuation with the babysitter and a near-fatal airplane crash. It features an indelible description of "public chastisement" for sexual misconduct. The protagonist, Francis Weed, sees a waitress passing drinks at a Shady Hill party and realizes that he recognizes her from the war. He'd seen her once before, at a crossroads in a village in Normandy. She'd been condemned for sleeping with a German officer, and he'd watched with the crowd as her head was shaved. Then she was forced to strip naked. "One woman spat on her, but some inviolable grandeur in her nakedness lasted through the ordeal." Her sexual crimes, and the

grim punishment, resonate powerfully, though Francis recognizes that "the atmosphere of Shady Hill made the memory unseemly and impolite."

Can Cheever's fear of being outed, of public chastisement for his "sexual imposture," have been the sole impetus for this story, which Vladimir Nabokov singled out for praise as "a miniature novel beautifully traced"? I would argue that economic anxiety was at work here too—and Susan Cheever supplies evidence to back me up. "The Country Husband," she tells us, was written to pay for her orthodontics. "I am proud," she writes, "to have had the crooked teeth that inspired it." Her "expensive overbite" gave us a story in which a pilot sings, "I've got sixpence, jolly, jolly sixpence. I've got sixpence to last me all my life" as the plane he's flying drops out of the sky and the panicked passengers see "the spreading wings of the Angel of Death."

Angst is angst, whatever the cause. Circumstance may constrain, ambivalence paralyze, but great artists—miraculously, mysteriously—transform ambient pressure into exquisite cultural artifacts. In her two books about her father, Susan weighs every ounce of the burden of stress he carried; she takes note of his literary alchemy and also of the emotional bruises inflicted on his wife and children.

"The lens through which he saw the outside world for the purposes of his work was as sharp as the light on a cold winter day," she writes; "the lens through which he saw his family was hot, blurry, and sometimes self-serving." She herself is both clear-eyed and compassionate. She gives an astute reading of a story she loves, "Reunion," about a divorced father who meets an estranged teenage son for lunch and gets drunker and drunker and never orders food. She recognizes her father's voice: *He* is the dreadful drunken boor. "I am outraged at this portrait of him, until I remember he wrote it."

"My deepest feeling about Cheever," the critic Alfred Kazin wrote, "is that his marvelous brightness is an effort to cheer himself up." That may sound dismissive—Susan Cheever finds it "mean"—but I think it points to the secret engine of his best work (yes, it's the stories; his daughter is right). His anguish and his piercing joy are inseparable. When we strip away all the extratextual padding, the myth and the countermyth, we discover, reading slowly and lovingly, a writer whose tremendous talent for emotional oscillation allowed him to traverse, in a sentence or even in a clause, the gamut of human hope and despair—as in "The Housebreaker of Shady Hill," which ends, "and off I went, whistling merrily in the dark." *A*

*Adam Begley is the author of several biographies, including* Updike. *He's working on a book about Harvard College.*

## *Summertime*

By Rosanna Warren

Ash-brown tatters lofted on pheromones,
gypsy moths flutter among boughs and across the meadow
like confetti. Beyond hunger. Only sex
drives the males. The females wait
folded within crevices in bark. They've lost their mouths.
Admirable to be so single-minded.
Just days ago, as creepy adolescents
they chewed the branches bare, littered the path
with skeleton leaf-stalks, tore new craters
out of the canopy so the sky fell through:
we, too, could strip a forest, strip
a continent, but not so lacily.
The lanyard on our neighbor's flagpole clanks
in the wind, the fraying stars and stripes
fluster and droop. The lime-green
katydid impersonates a folded leaf
pressed to the maple trunk, chiding, rasping,
preparing to mate and chew. Along the road
wild Sweet William and purple chicory
festoon derelict beer cans and vodka bottles in the ditch.
We have everything we need, but we want more,
and faster. The crushed garter snake
is scrawled on the tarmac in an ampersand.

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*Rosanna Warren's new book of poems,* Hindsight, *was published in September 2025.*

BOOKS

# Songs of Herself

*How did Taylor Swift convince the world that she's relatable?*

By Spencer Kornhaber




A great way to ruin a party is to put on a Taylor Swift playlist. The Swift fans in the crowd will stop what they're doing to sing along, but pretty soon the non-Swifties will start to complain—about the breathy and effortful singing, or some fussily worded lyrics, or the general vibe of lovelorn sentimentality cut with dorky humor ("This. Sick. Beat!"). You'll soon find yourself hosting another round in the endless debate about whether Taylor Swift is a visionary artist or merely a slick product of marketing. Both camps will be reacting to the defining feature of Swift's music: There's just so much of her in it.

Pop isn't supposed to work this way. The most consequential American singer of the past 20 years, Swift can claim commercial achievements that equal or surpass those of the Beatles, Madonna, and Michael Jackson. But Swift still has the feel of an acquired taste, albeit one that millions have acquired. Her success owes less to smash singles—though she has them—than to the obsessive listening she elicits from fans. She is the perfect entertainer for our socially fractured era, in which internet-forged tribes—led by charismatic, love-'em-or-hate-'em idols—have upended politics and popular culture.

Why her? What is the essence of Swiftness? *Taylor's Version: The Poetic and Musical Genius of Taylor Swift*, by Stephanie Burt, is a thorough and thoughtful elaboration of the conventional answer. An influential poet and a Harvard professor, she made headlines for teaching an English course called "Taylor Swift and Her World" last year. Burt writes in a sober, ruminative fashion that departs from the overheated tone of so much Swift-related commentary. Rather than limit her comparisons to contemporary pop stars, she puts Swift in conversation with writers



PHOTO-ILLUSTRATION BY ELIZABETH RENSTROM

such as Alexander Pope and Willa Cather. Still, the book ultimately reinforces the consensus among critics, fans, and even haters that Swift's extraordinary success stems from how ordinary she seems—a consensus that both underplays her achievement and insulates her from critique.

Burt knows that the subtitle of her book contains a major claim, and she addresses it early and directly. The *genius* label is "more often applied to artistic revolutionaries, to rule-breakers who stand above and apart from the crowd, and (not by coincidence) to men," she writes. They tend to follow Ezra Pound's famous dictate to "make it new," leaving an entire discipline transformed. But Swift, as Burt sees her, isn't that kind of genius. She is "a versatile creator who understands her audiences; who brings us along with her; who figures out all the rules, then uses those rules." Burt goes through Swift's catalog album by album, showing how every phase hews to what she sees as the three pillars of Swift's brilliance: her songwriting acumen, her work ethic, and her relatability.

That last term, *relatability*, is the watchword of almost all Swiftology—understandably enough. The tidiest explanation for Swift's success is that she befriended an audience the music industry had underestimated: girls and young women. Swift's 2006 self-titled debut (released when she was 16) and subsequent two albums of country-pop embodied the point of view of a teen navigating first crushes and schoolyard rivalries. "Fifteen" mentioned Swift's friend losing her virginity; "The Best Day" was inspired by being shunned by the popular girls. These topics were the concerns of neither the *Billboard* Hot 100 nor mainstream country at the time. In a 2009 interview, Swift explained, "All the songs I heard on the radio were about marriage and kids and settling down. I just couldn't relate to that." The inner lives of girls are so often treated as trivial—but Swift's hopeful voice and assertive melodies conveyed confidence that her, and her audience's, experiences were as important as anyone else's.

As Swift matured from teenage newcomer to name-brand celebrity, she managed to sing about her personal dramas—her trysts with actors, her feud with Kim Kardashian—in ways that sounded recognizable to ordinary young women. "Dear John," from 2010, was clearly a kiss-off to her ex John Mayer, the rocker who met Swift when she was 19 and he was 31. But Swift's narrator was simply "the girl in the dress" who "cried the whole way home"—an archetype that many listeners could see themselves in. Swift's dismay about a powerful ex became a fable for any girl courted by an older guy. "When Swift sings about men, especially bad men," Burt writes, "she's often singing to, and for, other women, and she's usually giving advice."

*Swift's songs portray her as a specific sympathetic type: the good, hardworking girl straining to exceed personal and social expectations.*

Swift's sisterly relationship with her audience is only part of her role-model appeal. Her songs portray her as a specific sympathetic type: the good, hardworking girl straining to exceed personal and social expectations, all while caddish guys and jealous rivals do her wrong. Pop culture loves to valorize underdogs, and Swift's trick has been making the figure of the "careful daughter" (to quote "Mine") into one. She's a "people-pleaser, driven both by her wish to follow the rules and by her own persistent artistic ambition," Burt writes. "But that ambition also leaves her vulnerable. What if she fails? What if people think she's fake?" To anyone with a hint of a pleaser in them, those questions will remain poignant no matter how little Swift's life resembles their own—as concert crowds who dress up in Swift's image readily attest.

But relatability can also be a reductive, even belittling lens through which to view any artist's work. It downplays the exceptional qualities of an entertainer—magnetism, talent, unpredictability—as well as the curiosity and flat-out awe that draw audiences to them. Swift skeptics tout the relatability thesis when they say that she's done nothing original other than identify an eager audience to exploit. And the logic of *She's just like us* renders even the claim of Burt's subtitle as faint praise. Swift, in Burt's view, has merely tinkered with a formula. She's used her songwriting acumen and work ethic to model a feminine sort of genius, in which fastidious care—not disruptive innovation—creates a body of nourishing art. In this interpretation, her achievements should be attainable for anyone who puts their mind to it. Really, though, Swift has done precisely what Pound commanded. She's made pop music into something new.

THESE DAYS, every influencer and brand consultant seems to want to call themselves a storyteller. It's a 21st-century buzzword, perhaps because narrative—the open-ended, mythic kind sustained across Marvel movies and the MAGA movement—has turned out to be one of the few ways to capture and hold attention in a distractible, content-flooded culture. And yet many familiar narrative forms—stand-alone books, movies, concept albums—can hardly compete anymore. Swift's greatest legacy is already clear: overhauling pop into a vital, contemporary storytelling medium.

Music has always had narrative aspects: Lyrics can tell stories, and the pleasure of a chord progression is in the movement from beginning to middle to end. But music is also an art form of pure sensation whose power surpasses words. For pop music in particular,

narrative can be fundamentally in tension with other imperatives. The more plot, specificity, and complication in a song, historically, the less likely it is to work as a sing-along for everyone.

Great artists have transcended this contradiction. Joni Mitchell's and Bruce Springsteen's hits, for example, are simultaneously tuneful and rich with story. The work of both artists is among the many precedents for what Swift has accomplished. But their catalogs are also filled with music that skews away from pop palatability in order to tell woollier tales. They have songs of sharp political observation, something Swift's only clumsily stab at, and songs describing abstract ideas in abstract ways, which Swift's concrete style and first-person vantage tend to preclude. (Mitchell's song "Blue" is a riddle of ambiguous images and phrases; Swift's "Red" opens, "Loving him is like driving a new Maserati down a dead-end street.") And neither Mitchell nor Springsteen enjoyed a sustained duration of chart success on the scale that Swift has. Her commercial echelon, again, is more akin to pure pop artists like Madonna, whose lyrical narratives—while memorable—aren't usually packed with diaristic detail.

Swift's breakthrough has been finding ways to saturate sugary tunes with information. Whether banger or ballad, her tracks make room for characters, settings, twists, a tidy ending, a cliff-hanger. The tracks interlock with other tracks—and with extramusical artifacts, headlines, and rumors—to build a larger story that makes each individual work more enjoyable. (For example, the 2022 song "Question … ?," describing a mysterious kiss at a crowded party, is deepened by piecing together how this kiss ripples over years of Swift's life—and through the rest of her catalog.) Listening to a Swift song is like eating a candy bar that transmits a personal essay into your memory. If you eat enough candy bars, it becomes a novel, and then a series of novels, and then (this is when you become a Swiftie) a virtual-reality, open-world video game you play with friends and strangers. If that all sounds nonsensical, it's because Swift has pulled off something that's never quite been done before. The closest comparison might be to show tunes—but for a one-woman play that's gone 19 years without a curtain call.

How does she do it? Burt is helpful here. "Every sound and word in almost every Taylor song not only solicits attention but rewards it," she writes. "Time that we spend on her work won't feel wasted or pointless." Swift's moment-by-moment choices play on both the listener's ear and intellect. She works to turn the audience's brain on rather than—as pop often seeks to do—off. But the truth is (and this is an actual sign of genius), there's no single, simple answer to the *how* of Swift. With every song, her skills meet her assignment in a new way.

TAYLOR'S VERSION: THE POETIC AND MUSICAL GENIUS OF TAYLOR SWIFT

*Stephanie Burt*

BASIC BOOKS

Take "All Too Well," Swift's best track by wide acclamation. The original 2012 version is a five-minute strummed reminiscence that was never released as a single; the now-canonical version, released in 2021, is 10 minutes long. No song of this length had ever, as this one did, hit No. 1 on the Hot 100. And perhaps no song of this length has ever been so compulsively listenable. Within that form of distended pop song—verse, chorus, verse, chorus, bridge, instrumental passage, outro—she does riveting work with music and lyrics. Burt digs into the poetics:

> The song amounts to a masterpiece not just in how images move within the restricted space of a pop song, but also in rhyme and off-rhyme and consonance. "Gaze," "upstate," "place," and "days" shift as if each word sought, but couldn't quite settle into, its perfect rhyme. "Asked for too much" chimes with "tore it all up"; "break me like a promise" matches "name of being honest" (notice the *t*'s in the first pair, the *b*'s in the second).

She observes that "these devices might come off as not much more than basic competence in hip-hop, where rapid off-rhymes across lines are what we expect. In Taylor's kind of pop song, though, where everything has to fit a melody, and verse-chorus patterns aren't optional, it's bravura technique."

Burt's allusion to hip-hop hints at another way in which Swift breaks ground: As her career has progressed, Swift's adventuresome approach to genre has helped her write ever richer chapters. Country music, that classic stronghold for story-songs, was a smart place for her to begin her career. (Intentionally so—at age 13, she moved from the Pennsylvania suburbs to Nashville, where she adopted a twang.) When she began to turn away from country, with 2012's *Red*, she embraced electronic-dance-music elements—not simply as trendy tropes, but as punctuation marks in the musical stories she was telling about her giddy, exploratory 20s. The results were jolting and sui generis. One struggles to think of any precedent on the charts for a song like "I Knew You Were Trouble," in which chipper surf-rock verses careen into headbangable choruses of synth-fortified wailing—signifying the moment when she realizes how ill-advised her crush is.

Swift kept experimenting to make her music more pungent, more extreme, even more her. Burt identifies how her swerves into synth pop (for 2014's *1989*) and hip-hop and R&B (for 2017's *Reputation*) broadened both how Swift wrote and what she wrote about. She tried on different attitudes, different subplots, and different notions about how words and rhythm and

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notes interact. A soft dancehall groove on "Delicate" matched her tale of secretive, tiptoeing courtship; the disco spiral of "Style" framed a romance that "has no particular destination," Burt writes. Her 2020 duo of albums, *Folklore* and *Evermore*, channeled the sound and sensibility of indie rock, refracting her perennial personal themes through a dark, blurry lens of fantasy and allegory. She was moving into a newly rewarding phase: making emotionally ambivalent, sonically omnivorous music about the anxieties of her 30s—aging, work, commitment. Her 2022 album, *Midnights*, first scanned as a return to the safety of beats-driven pop, but the lyrics were bracingly candid, the confessions of a onetime child star wondering if she would ever truly grow up.

SWIFT'S ZIGS AND ZAGS were well timed for cultural and technological shifts that were dissolving the very meaning of pop. Thanks to streaming—which started to take off after the release of *Red*—success in music no longer always entails landing a hit single that drives album sales. Luring as many people as possible to listen to your music as compulsively as possible is now the goal. Even as Swift balked at Spotify's pay rates (she pulled her catalog off the platform from 2014 to 2017), she took the opportunity afforded by its influence to deepen and densify the classic format of the pop song. This thrilled her base—and annoyed many casual listeners.

Much of pop now follows her example. A cohort of young female singer-songwriters—including Sabrina Carpenter, Olivia Rodrigo, and Gracie Abrams—has arisen over the past five years, delivering storytelling-driven, personally revealing bubblegum. These artists no doubt saw themselves in the plucky perspective that Swift's lyrics conveyed. But more important, they've clearly studied her methods in order to express their experiences in a way that—like any well-delivered yarn—can resonate broadly.

As for Swift, she's been straining the pop format nearly to its breaking point. Her 2024 album, *The Tortured Poets Department*, is—even among fans—her most divisive work. Its full form (the "Anthology" edition, which was released the same night as the normal edition) contains 31 songs. Grokking it fully requires knowing the convoluted backstory about an early midlife crisis of sorts. It's an album about restlessness, impulsivity, consequences, and a very specific-to-Swift brew of personal hurt and public judgment. More than anything, it's an album in which narrative trumps all. The songs ramble and double back and change shape; she and her producers (Jack Antonoff and Aaron Dessner) use perplexing time signatures and unsettling, bittersweet chord patterns. *Tortured Poets* is almost her crowning artistic achievement, containing the most complex and unguarded—and gorgeous—songs of her career.

*Whether banger or ballad, her tracks make room for characters, settings, twists, a tidy ending, a cliff-hanger.*

Almost. The problem with *Tortured Poets* highlights a problem with Swift that's been there all along. If she is a genius—and here's my faint praise—she's a genius at making diamonds out of doggerel. Her best songs daisy-chain clichés into novel shapes ("The Archer" on 2019's *Lover*: "Easy they come, easy they go / I jump from the train, I ride off alone / I never grew up, it's getting so old"). Her worst songs lumber along with clanging metaphors and leaden coinages ("Willow" on *Evermore*: "Every bait and switch was a work of art"). Fans mostly don't mind this, and as a listener, I often don't either; the overall effect of her music is what counts. But the stark, brooding palette of *Tortured Poets* casts an unforgiving light on some of the least consistent writing of her career. I adore the melty, country-trip-hop sound of "Guilty as Sin?," except for the part where the arrangement slows down and she says this: "You've haunted me so stunningly," precisely enunciating the last word, as if it made much sense.

I'd hoped that Burt, herself a wordsmith, might have some gentle feedback to give about such clunkiness. Instead, she praises the album's multisyllabic excess for executing a conceptual bit: Swift making herself into a tortured poet trying to outdo a pretentious, typewriter-wielding ex. This effort, in Burt's telling, reflects the broader female experience of falling for a dashing, manipulative "art monster." Swift is kind of doing this—the delightful title track goes, "You're not Dylan Thomas, I'm not Patti Smith / This ain't the Chelsea Hotel, we're modern idiots"—but that shouldn't necessitate ruining otherwise great songs. The search for a mote of relatability has led Burt to excuse-making. Any claim for Swift's genius should reckon with her lapses into imprecision and pompousness. She has the chops to do better than she often does.

That criticism doesn't hold Swift—who just announced her 12th album, *The Life of a Showgirl*—to an unfair standard. It recognizes the level she's long aspired to and has often hit. Swift's trajectory and the hype around it embody a utopian dream: the perfect marriage between pop music and art music. The two were never separate, really, but pop is an art of compromise—and these days, Swift seems less bound by limits. Can she get deeper, realer, less relatable without sacrificing the pleasure of a tale well told or a song well sung? Might she branch out from the *I*? Or might she rewrite her narrative again in a way only someone as singular as her could? The suspense is part of the story. *A*

*Spencer Kornhaber is a staff writer at* The Atlantic.




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# The Ghost of Lady Murasaki

*A thousand years ago, she wrote* The Tale of Genji, *a story of sex and intrigue in Japan's imperial court. I went to Kyoto to find her.*

By Lauren Groff
*Photographs by Takako Kido*



*Kyoto at night*

In mid-April, I flew to Japan because I'd become obsessed with an 11th-century Japanese novel called *The Tale of Genji*. I also had a frantic longing to escape my country. At its best, literature is a way to loft readers so far above the burning present that we can see a vast landscape of





*A view of the Genji garden from the veranda of the Rozan-ji Temple*

TAKAKO KIDO FOR *THE ATLANTIC*

time below us. From the clouds, we watch the cyclical turn of seasons and history, and can take a sort of bitter comfort in the fact that humans have always been a species that simply can't help setting our world on fire.

I was bewildered that *The Tale of Genji* had such a hold on me at this particular moment: It is a wild, confounding work that many consider to be the first novel ever written, by a mysterious woman whose true name we'll never know, but whom we call Murasaki Shikibu, or Lady Murasaki. The novel is more than 1,000 pages long, more than 1,000 years old, and larded with enigmatic poetry. It's about people whose lives differ so much—in custom, religion, education, wealth, privilege, politics, hierarchy, aesthetics—from the lives of 21st-century Americans that most of their concerns have become nearly illegible to us through the scrim of time and language.

Even so, this novel, which I first encountered almost three decades ago, returned insistently. Once again, I was caught up in its radically unfamiliar world and literary form. Unlike most Western books, Lady Murasaki's tale isn't guided by an Aristotelian arc of action that steadily rises to a climax, followed by a denouement. Instead, the novel is episodic and patterned with recurring images and ideas: swiftly fading cherry blossoms, clouds moving through the sky, autumn leaves, the aching transience of life on this planet. The spirits of jealous lovers possess and sicken primary characters; scandals in one generation echo, transformed, in the next. Nine centuries before Gabriel García Márquez was born, Lady Murasaki infused her story with magical realism. Classics resonate through time for a reason, but what *The Tale of Genji* was saying to me so urgently was far too faint to hear. I wanted to track down the ghost of its author in her own city, now Kyoto, which was then the capital of imperial Japan. I wanted to get her to speak to me a little louder.

Medieval women have long fascinated me, particularly artistic medieval women whose work seems to push against the limits of their era and, as a result, show the places they write about in a strange new light. In my 2021 novel, *Matrix*, I imagined a life of the 12th-century writer Marie de France, the first known female poet in the French language, whose *Lais*, a series of courtly poems, brims with weird vitality, and about whom only two facts are known: that her name was Marie, and that she came from France but lived in England. I have lived in both of those countries, but the Heian era (794–1185) in Japan is thrillingly distant to my imagination.

What we know of the contours of Heian imperial-court culture makes *The Tale of Genji*'s very existence miraculous. The lives of high-born women within the court were both isolated and political: They were pawns in a clan system by which men acquired social status and power through marriage. Polygamy prevailed in the aristocracy, and a husband's various wives were ranked in importance. Once married, women in the ruling class lived almost entirely in seclusion, and were forced to hide their faces behind screens and fans. Almost no court women

were taught to read or write Chinese, the language of the imperial bureaucracy.

In response, women in the court developed a written form of Japanese, which was still relatively new when Lady Murasaki, likely born in 973, was growing up. Along with monogatari, fictional tales drawn from the oral tradition, the first fully Japanese prose texts were women's autobiographical writings. The other famous work from the era that remains famous today was a racy diary about the Heian court, *The Pillow Book*, by a contemporary of Lady Murasaki named Sei Shōnagon. Men in the imperial aristocracy also avidly read texts in Japanese, but nobody, male or female, bothered to retain for the historical record the actual name of *The Tale of Genji*'s author, even though she was recognized during her lifetime as a supremely skilled writer. She was given her pen name, which means "purple," in homage to one of the central female characters in her tale: the child-wife—and dearest beloved—of the eponymous Genji, who is a prince of both imperial and common blood. *Shikibu*, which means "ministry of ceremonials," has nothing to do with the writer, either: It refers to the position of her father at court.

ON THE NIGHT I arrived in Kyoto with my husband, I was delighted to bump my suitcase down Teramachi Street, where Lady Murasaki is rumored to have lived with her father at some point in her youth. In the dark, Kyoto is at its most magical. It emanates a deep softness and hush, despite the hordes of tourists eager to touch the layers of history that the city so conscientiously maintains. The buildings are traditionally wood, and so most of Kyoto has been repeatedly subject to fires, razed and rebuilt many times over the past millennium. Still, the streets of the city's old sections, though immaculate and nearly odorless, seem to retain some of their medieval flavor, with small buildings pressed closely together, and tiny storefronts on the bottom floors gently illuminated by round lanterns.

Teramachi Street, much of which is now a covered arcade, surely looks nothing like it did in Lady Murasaki's time, yet its refined-but-accessible vibe tracks with the known outlines of the writer's life. She was born into a family waning in power, a minor offshoot of the most prominent clan at the time, the Fujiwaras. Her pedigree was literary: Her father, grandfather, great-grandfather, and brother were all celebrated poets. Her diary offers intimate glimpses of her private thoughts. It tells how, as a young girl, she eavesdropped on her father as he taught her brother Chinese, and proved herself the far better student. "What a pity she was not born a man!" she describes her father saying. To be a woman fluent in Chinese was so freakish that she "pretended to be incapable of reading even the inscriptions on the screens" that divided rooms and shielded women's bodies from view. She "worried what people would think if they heard such rumors" of her abilities.

In the year 996, still unmarried at a time when marriage in very young womanhood was expected for the aristocracy, she accompanied her father north to Echizen; he'd been appointed a regional governor, which was considered something of a dishonor, as power diminished with distance from the capital. She returned to Kyoto in her mid-20s to marry a much older relative, Fujiwara no Nobutaka, who is vividly described in *The Pillow Book* as a flamboyant character with many other wives. He died two years later in an epidemic, leaving her with a young daughter who would eventually become a poet known as Daini no Sanmi. During her widowhood, in the early 1000s, out of grief or boredom, Lady Murasaki began writing *The Tale of Genji* in Japanese.

Because *The Tale of Genji* described scandalous love affairs, reading it became a craze, something like watching a prestige television series today. Around the same time that its circulating chapters won admirers, Lady Murasaki was summoned to the aesthetically refined court of Emperor Ichijō. There she entered the service of Shōshi, the second empress and the daughter of the most powerful man of the day, Fujiwara no Michinaga, the controlling figure behind the emperor's throne. Shōshi surrounded herself with ladies talented in music, drawing, and poetry, and when she discovered that Lady Murasaki could read and write Chinese, she asked for secret lessons.

Lady Murasaki's diary suggests a sort of singing-bird entrapment—a sense of being under immense pressure to add new chapters to her tale; Michinaga would even go into her private space to steal her work in progress. She was lonely at court and reserved among the competitive women. One moment in her diary has always stood out to me, when the careful screen of convention slips and a piece of the too-bright self flares through. She is talking about the ladies of the court and how they see her: "No one liked her," she writes, ventriloquizing their views of her. "They all said she was pretentious, awkward, difficult to approach, prickly, too fond of her tales, haughty, prone to versifying, disdainful, cantankerous, and scornful." Sometime after 1013, the year she may have turned 40 and the date of the last mention of her in court records, she died.

I DISCOVERED an onsen, or a hot collective bath segregated by gender, in the basement of our ryokan, a small traditional inn, in an old part of Kyoto. My husband and I descended from our room in slippers and traditional cotton robes (yukatas), which we'd been instructed to fold left over right before fastening them with the embroidered obi, because right over left is how the Japanese dress their dead. Then we scrubbed ourselves pink with bucketfuls of water before climbing into the pool. It was very late, and the heat drew out the travel weariness from my bones. I floated and dreamed, and I had an inkling that, though my love of Lady Murasaki could be explained only through beautiful abstraction—by meeting her mind in her work—I might begin to understand something tangible about her through the wordless animal body.

*The Tale of Genji*'s early chapters are rooted in fairy-tale monogatari, but the book soon metamorphoses into its own strange thing, a courtly romance that follows Prince Genji over his half century of life, and then, after Genji's death, takes up the lives of the next generation. Genji, called "The Radiant Prince," is the son of an emperor and his most beloved wife, who has no powerful family to protect her

child. Like Lady Murasaki herself, Genji is both an insider and an outsider. As a young boy, he enters the court with the rank of a commoner, but he becomes by far the most beautiful and talented of men, easily outshining his half brother, the future emperor. He is also wildly, and audaciously, sexy: As a teenager, he seduces and has a son with one of the wives of his father, the current emperor. Though Genji goes on to marry several times, he continues to make a game of seducing as many of the most beautiful women at court as he can, a game as much of spiritual and poetic yearning as it is of bodily lust. When he's about 26 years old, his scandalous behavior leads him to years of exile in Suma, by the seaside. There he begins another relationship, one that produces a child who becomes an empress. When he returns to court, restored from disgrace, he never stops chasing women.

My husband and I rise early; even in Japan, we were up with the birds. Nothing opened for hours, so we descended to the onsen again, then went out on a quest for coffee—not easy to find in Japan before 8 a.m., we learned, unless you like cold coffee in cans from the vending machines on every street. This is how we discovered the wonders of the Japanese 7/11, full of tasty fresh foods such as onigiri, seaweed-covered rice pyramids, and the internationally and justly famous egg-salad sandwiches, with their incredibly soft white bread and tangy, smooth egg filling, which became our favorite anytime snack. I had a surreal moment while we sat on the clean-swept Kyoto curb, drinking hot coffee and eating egg-salad sandwiches, when the barely dawn-touched streets were entirely empty of people. I suddenly felt myself living outside time for a brief spell, not within the 21st century or any of the other centuries visible in Kyoto's smooth palimpsest, but within the hovering dual-time that is the experience of reading a great novel.

I do think *The Tale of Genji* is a great novel, and some of its greatness comes from its self-contradictions. Prince Genji is held up as a courtly ideal, yet he's also a renegade; he's an amorous adventurer, yet also deeply attached to one of his beloved wives, Murasaki. The narrative sporadically darts into his consciousness, reflecting a conflicted conscience and a degree of interiority that make the book revolutionary. I believe interiority is necessary to define a novel as a novel, and its absence disqualifies the other books that scholars have proposed as alternative "first novels" in the history of literature, such as Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*.

Interiority is especially fraught in the evocation of Genji and his young wife Murasaki's relationship. He discovers her as an enchanting child of about 10, kidnaps her, secludes her in a lonely house, molds her into the perfectly accomplished wife he wants, and marries her when she is a teenager, which the narrative presents as something of a romantic coup. But the prose simultaneously makes clear what is happening from Murasaki's point of view: This man, who first presented himself to her as her adoptive father, comes to her bed when she is still a child and violates her painfully, against her will and to her immense distress. None of the people who care for her lifts a finger to help her.

Genji pursues many other affairs, then suddenly the narrative reveals that he has died at the age of 52. At this point, *The Tale of Genji* does a spin in the air: There are 13 more chapters, set primarily in Uji, a city south of Kyoto, which feature two men of the next generation vying for the love of the young princess Ukifune. She is driven to despair by their caddish treatment, and her suffering becomes the focus of the narration. This final section closes the book cryptically and counter-romantically—Ukifune renounces the world and becomes a nun—and delivered a jolt when I first read it, because it goes against any epiphanic or revelatory ending that I've been taught by Western narratives to expect.

When I returned to the book with the idea of visiting Kyoto, I began to read the final chapters as the novel's firm renunciation of itself. The tale turns its back savagely on its previous concerns, saying that the things it had taught us all along to think of as so important—the heartache, the rise and fall of fortunes, the attention to aesthetics—in the end actually mean nothing; it is as if the author has lost patience with male callousness, upheld for so many pages as the signature of courtly elegance.

The reader of any text provides half of its meaning. To me, an American woman in the early 21st century, prickly and free-spirited Lady Murasaki now appears to have been chafing under conformist pressures in the Heian court. I read her radical evocations of characters' internal states as though they are eruptions of the author's own rebellious soul. Perhaps this subversive interpretation is wish fulfillment on my part. But Kyoto itself seemed to agree with it. The city is a place for people who love history and appreciate ambiguity. Shinto shrines are everywhere, meticulously maintained and restored, robust memento mori of the many generations of humans who have lived and died adoring them. The April cherry trees, with their brief pink opulence, seem infused with the spirit of *mono no aware*—the Japanese idea of the transience of things, the gentle sadness yet also the beauty of impermanence. This is a place where Lady Murasaki's work has never disappeared, yet also has never ceased to take on new shapes and transform to fit the current moment.

**BY DAWN,** we were driving along the Kamo River next to runners confettied by the last of the cherry blossoms. We were joined by Takako Kido, our spark plug of a photographer, and her friend (and fellow hip-hop dancer) from college, Masaaki Kaga, who had once been a historical tour guide for schoolchildren, and had been roped into being our driver that day. When I asked them about *The Tale of Genji*, Takako shrugged. "Everyone knows *Genji*," she said. "It's in our bones." But neither she nor Masa had read the book in decades.

As a millennium-old, omnipresent reference in Japan, like Shakespeare's work in the Anglophone world, the book "no longer has to be actually read in order to have been 'read,'" Dennis Washburn, a professor at Dartmouth College, writes in an introduction to his 2015 translation (in my opinion the best one, with its clear and accessible prose). Soon after *The Tale of Genji* appeared, it inspired fan fiction and painted illustrations, and artists in every century since have used the tale as a prism to refract the aesthetic, political, and spiritual concerns of their times. Its legacy is everywhere you turn—in Noh drama, erotic parodies, Buddhist rituals, advertisements, manga books, games, anime films. At the Tale of Genji Museum, in Uji, we

watched one film that featured a teenage girl who turns into a cat and ends up in the arms of Genji with a bizarre expression of ahegao, or "sexual ecstasy," on its face. The homage to the novel is eclectic and ever-evolving, both irreverent and faithful. One can find echoes of the work, too, in places frequented long ago by Lady Murasaki and her characters that can be visited today.

It was still dawn when Masa brought us to one of the oldest Shinto shrines in Japan, the Shimogamo, the original version of which was built in 678 and would have already been antique by the time Lady Murasaki venerated its deities there. Shintoism is an Indigenous animist belief system that predates Buddhism's arrival in Japan, and Shinto sites of worship now exist comfortably alongside Buddhist temples. The forest that surrounds the shrine itself is a kami, or "powerful spirit," and when we watched people, out giving their Shiba Inus an early-morning walk, bowing to individual trees that wore rope belts from which dangled paper lightning bolts, we discovered that the trees were also kamis. Genji visits these woods before his exile to Suma and composes a poem wishing that the forest might one day see the injustice against him reversed. As the sun rose, the vermilion paint that decorates most Shinto shrines to ward off evil and misfortune began to shine dazzlingly. At the main shrine, Masa taught us how to pray: throw a small coin into a slatted wooden trough, bow twice, clap twice, pray, then bow again. We prayed, feeling a great spiritual potency in the place, and because it never hurts to send sparks of gratitude into the world.

Kamis can have negative power, too, and shrines are not always portals to peace. In *Genji*, the Kamigamo shrine—loud and crowded and too bright in the hot mid-afternoon sun when we arrived there—appears often, sometimes as a place of conflict. In a memorable scene, one of Genji's lovers, the intensely jealous Lady Rokujō, and his first wife, Aoi, have both come in ox-drawn carts to Kamigamo to see Genji ride by during the Aoi Matsuri, or wild-ginger festival, and are soon jostling for the best viewing spot. Rokujō's jealous spirit eventually enters and sickens Aoi's body until she dies. Later, young Murasaki is also possessed by that bad spirit.







Top: *At the entrance of the Nonomiya shrine, the twisted rope serves as a boundary between sacred and ordinary spaces.* Middle: *During a tea ceremony at the Shunkō-in Temple, the head priest, Reverend Takafumi Zenryu Kawakami, fills participants' cups.* Bottom: *The Imperial Palace was rebuilt in the Heian style in 1855.*

TAKAKO KIDO FOR *THE ATLANTIC*



*The garden at the Ginkaku-ji Temple*

We were too early for the wild-ginger festival, which takes place in mid-May, when celebrants in Heian-era costumes process to the shrine from Kyoto's Imperial Palace. I was happy to be spared the crowds jostling for views. The palace itself, which burned down many times over the centuries and in 1855 was rebuilt in the Heian style, is breathtaking in scale, with astonishing roofs curving up at the corners, constructed of layers of cypress bark lashed into place with bamboo strips. Its surrounding lawns of raked gravel and its park of pruned trees made it appear even bigger.

Takako had never visited before—"this is an entirely new Japan for me," she murmured. A moment later, a loud alarm went off: She had leaped across the moat surrounding the wall to take a photo, and leaped nimbly back, laughing, after she was scolded by the guards. Inside the palace, the rooms were dark and very large; in the days of the Heian court, they would have been partitioned off by screens and curtains. I thought of Murasaki Shikibu trying to write in this place, separated from the noises and voices and smells of others by thin silk, trying to lose herself and her worries in the composition of her text. I saw that the book she was writing would have been another screen between herself and the world, even as the fame the book brought would have, paradoxically, served to bind her even tighter to that world.

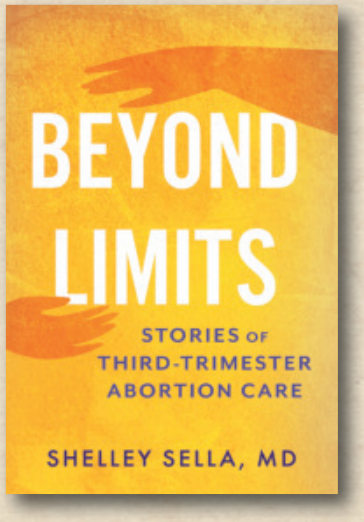
ALTHOUGH LADY MURASAKI wrote in her diary of her loneliness and alienation at court, one of her childhood homes was only a couple of miles away. Rozan-ji is a dark-wood Tendai Buddhist temple on the grounds where her family house is said to have been. Fire destroyed the original residence centuries ago, but in rooms off the temple's quiet courtyard is a small exhibition of scrolls and gilded clamshells decorated with scenes from the novel. A sign at the front gate lays claim to Lady Murasaki, proudly calling her a GREAT WOMAN OF THE WORLD.

Masa brought us to another quiet courtyard just off a busy road, where we found the grave site of Lady Murasaki. Inside were two neatly maintained mounds, with two markers. Her ancient bones are thought to lie beneath the big mound; under the smaller one are those of Ono no Takamura, a poet who lived two centuries before she did, and who was considered to be a protector of souls sent to languish in hell. No one knows how they were paired up, but legend has it that Lady Murasaki's admirers, fearful that her scandalous book had consigned her to punishment in the afterlife,

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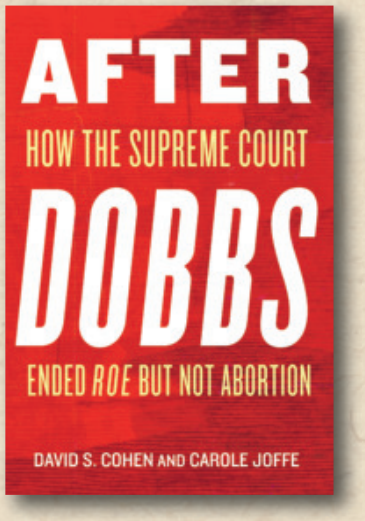
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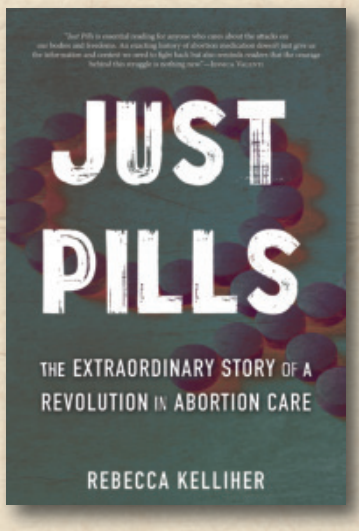

"Reminds us that when we leave third-trimester abortions on the floor of political compromise, we abandon some of the most vulnerable among us."

*-KHIARA M. BRIDGES,* author of *Critical Race Theory*



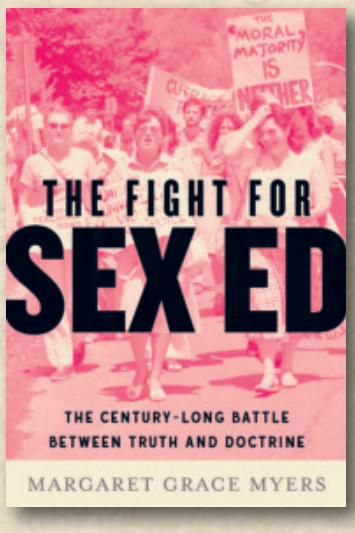

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*-EMMA STRAUB*

put them side by side so that he could help her travel out of the underworld. I said a quiet thank-you to her remains for the book I love so much. I was answered by birdsong and traffic on the street beyond the walls. The solemnity was broken by a garbage truck puttering by, singing out in a recorded loop a warning in the voice of a small Japanese child.

Perhaps the most important location for the book is an eighth-century temple called Ishiyama-dera, east of Kyoto on a hillside overlooking Lake Biwa, the largest body of fresh water in Japan. The myth is that Lady Murasaki, during a visit there after her husband died, was struck with the inspiration to write her chef d'oeuvre while gazing up at an August moon. Although Ishiyama-dera is the most stunning of the shrines we saw, with hiking paths and high views of the lake, we encountered very few other tourists, perhaps because the trip from Kyoto requires two train transfers. The grounds were dotted with statues of Lady Murasaki, all of which depict a woman with a large forehead and loose hair, her writing brush in hand. As soon as we entered the gates, I felt a strange, holy energy.

I believe that places, like people, hold memory, and when place memory announces itself, it does so through the body. A tiny museum on the grounds displayed ancient scrolls on which Heian hands had written, sculptures of ancient Buddhas to which Lady Murasaki might have prayed. The temple of Ishiyama-dera rising up from huge, jagged slabs of wollastonite; the pagodas perched like little hats atop the hill; the dangling purple wisteria; the lake glittering below; the way the cool wind and the April sunshine filtered through the leaves and pressed upon our skin—an ambiguous understanding that I'd been searching for arrived. There, my body recognized something of the long-gone body of Lady Murasaki, who had also once stood, an animal like me, seeing the stones, smelling the woods and the lake, feeling the breeze and the warmth on her flesh. I was gripped by the truth of something I'd known only intellectually: how much courage Lady Murasaki, as a woman in her era, had to summon, how much loneliness and insecurity she must have felt, when she dedicated her life to literature in Heian Japan.

We climbed the steps to the great temple, where we found a statue of Kannon, the Buddhist deity of compassion and mercy. We tossed the money, rang the bells, clapped, and prayed to Kannon for the sake of our wounded world.

BY THE END of our trip to Japan, I knew less than ever about the real Murasaki Shikibu. She did not visit me as a ghost in the night. Although I sensed in Kyoto a more rebellious artist than I'd imagined her to be from her work, I didn't hear a clear message from her to blow up the poisonous narratives that have created the tragedies of the current age. I didn't understand much more of the heartache of her life, the person beyond the words.

Yet my body understood *The Tale of Genji* and its marvelous writer far better. First through the sense of taste: At a ryokan near Lake Biwa, famous for its geothermal onsen, we ate a kaiseki dinner, which is a seasonally inspired sequence of courses, their flavors and textures and aromas carefully choreographed. There was no Aristotelian arc in this meal, no central main dish. Every course was equally important, to be savored in its own way. Soup gave way to sashimi so fresh that I could swear it twitched, and this gave way to simmered salted fish, which gave way to a grilled course, and on and on, for three exquisite hours. The meal was episodic, patterned, refusing the very concept of climax in its devotion to the moment.

The sense of sight taught me other things when, at the Zen Buddhist Tenryuji Temple, we walked through the most stunning garden I've ever encountered. Japanese gardens aren't subservient to symmetry in the way that many European gardens are. They aren't built around any central focus point. Instead, they are created with keen attention to texture and color and season. The one at Tenryuji is said to remain as it was when it was built in the 14th century, when the designer and head priest, Musō Soseki, integrated the surrounding hills into the garden's pattern, in a tradition called shakkei, or "borrowed scenery." As a result, any place in the garden has its own perfect view; every spot holds something new to contemplate. The neat lines of raked gravel around the buildings bring awareness to the present moment and to the impermanence of all things. As I walked its paths, I became hyperconscious of pattern, repetition, texture, transience, the shifting of viewpoint: koi, pond, stone, azalea, camellia, pine, weeping cherry, hill beyond in its gradients of green. I felt I had been given a three-dimensional map of *The Tale of Genji*.

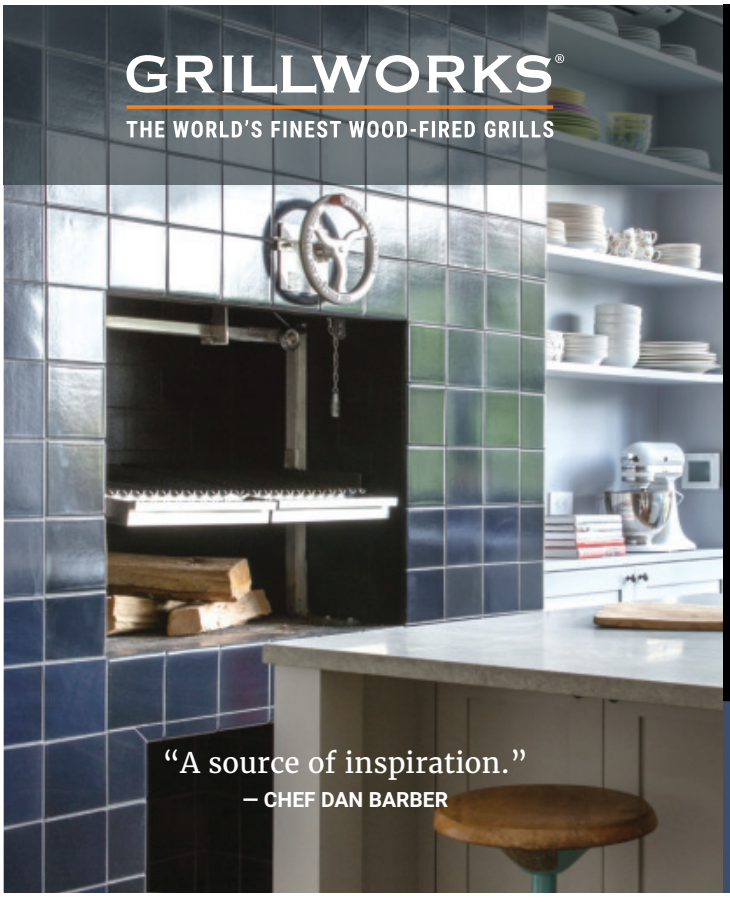
And then, at a tea-and-meditation ceremony at the Shunkō-in Temple, the Reverend Takafumi Zenryu Kawakami, in his splendid purple robes, gave voice to the things that my body had been telling me in its wise, oblique way. We sat on cushions in a room that opened out onto a cool garden, and were led through a long meditation, after which the reverend spoke, telling us that of course there is no single definition of enlightenment. The self is a shifting, inconstant phenomenon, brain and body ever transforming in time and space, with no clear delineation between what is self and what is other. Westerners want certainty but we should embrace ambiguity, he told us; ambiguity is part of nature. He said that to taste tea that has been steeped in cold water, first we should taste with the tip of the tongue, then with the back of the tongue. First you taste umami, then you taste the floral. First you taste the bitter, then you taste the sweet. *A*

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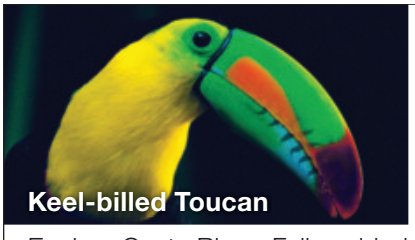
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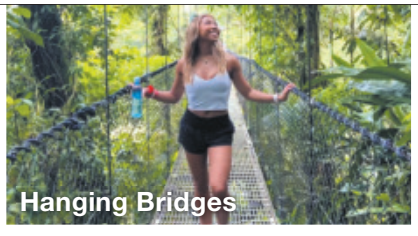
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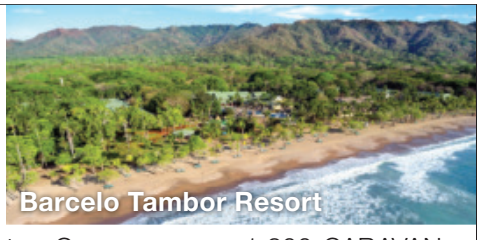
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Shown: Grillworks Architectural 36 installed in a New York residence by Elizabeth Roberts Architects.

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# CALEB'S INFERNO

*By* Caleb Madison

*Warning: This crossword puzzle starts easy, but gets devilishly hard as you descend into its depths. See which circle you can reach before you abandon all hope.*

## ACROSS

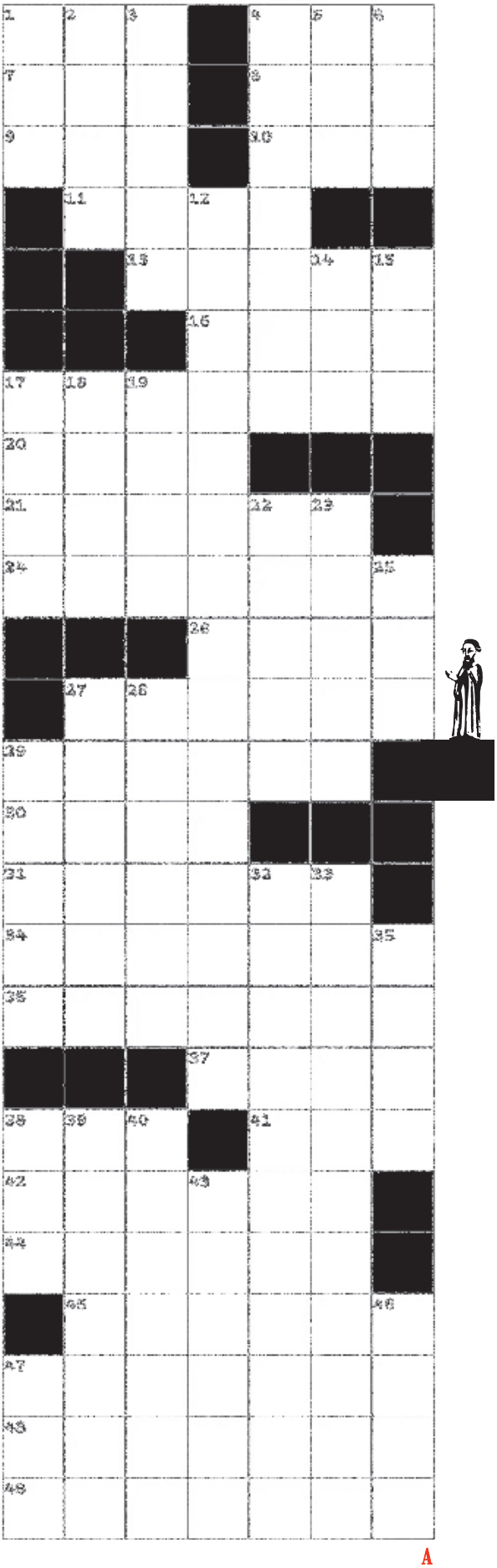
1 One in a pod
4 Cry from a film director
7 Smartphone download
8 Yoko ___
9 Prefix for Kim or Nas X
10 It might be kept in a janitor's closet
11 Verge
13 Appear, as in a video game
16 Reverb in a cave … ave … ave … ave …
17 Title for Sanders or Cotton
20 "it was nbd!"
21 It might be bottomless at brunch
24 Introduction to literature?
26 "___ company; three's a crowd"
27 Cannon projectile that's generally harmless
29 Make like mad
30 During
31 Gucci and Prada
34 Relationship between people with a shared legal interest
36 Regular
37 It may get buried
38 Common attachment style, for short?
41 Like a professor emerita: abbr.
42 Component of a crankcase
44 Gone bad, to a Brit
45 Inflation indicators?
47 ___ *Be My Neighbor?* (documentary about Fred Rogers)
48 Underground legend?
49 Poly ___ (X-Ray Spex front woman)

## DOWN

1 Buddy
2 Story like *The Odyssey* or *Lawrence of Arabia*
3 Best-possible letter grade
4 Makeup case named for its size
5 "One" in Spanish
6 Spinning toy
12 "We were just talking about you!"
14 One of the five *W*'s
15 "I can neither confirm ___ deny"
17 Hopeless devotee, familiarly
18 "Commander" in Arabic
19 City at the end of the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race
22 2005 horror sequel that features Billy the Puppet
23 Resource that might be squirreled away
25 Suffix for a superlative
27 *The Savages* filmmaker Jenkins
28 Strapping apparel on the slopes?
29 *Juneteenth* novelist Ellison
32 "OMG, couldn't relate more!"
33 Advanced-learning offer?
35 *Eat It or ___ It!* (YouTube food series)
38 > zero, for short
39 Says "Deuces," maybe
40 Passed quickly, as a span of time
43 Dutch Golden Age painter Claesz
46 Apartment-complex VIP
47 Talent, tank, and tod: abbr.

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# PREDIABETES CAPTURES 1-IN-3 ADULTS. BUT YOU CAN ESCAPE.

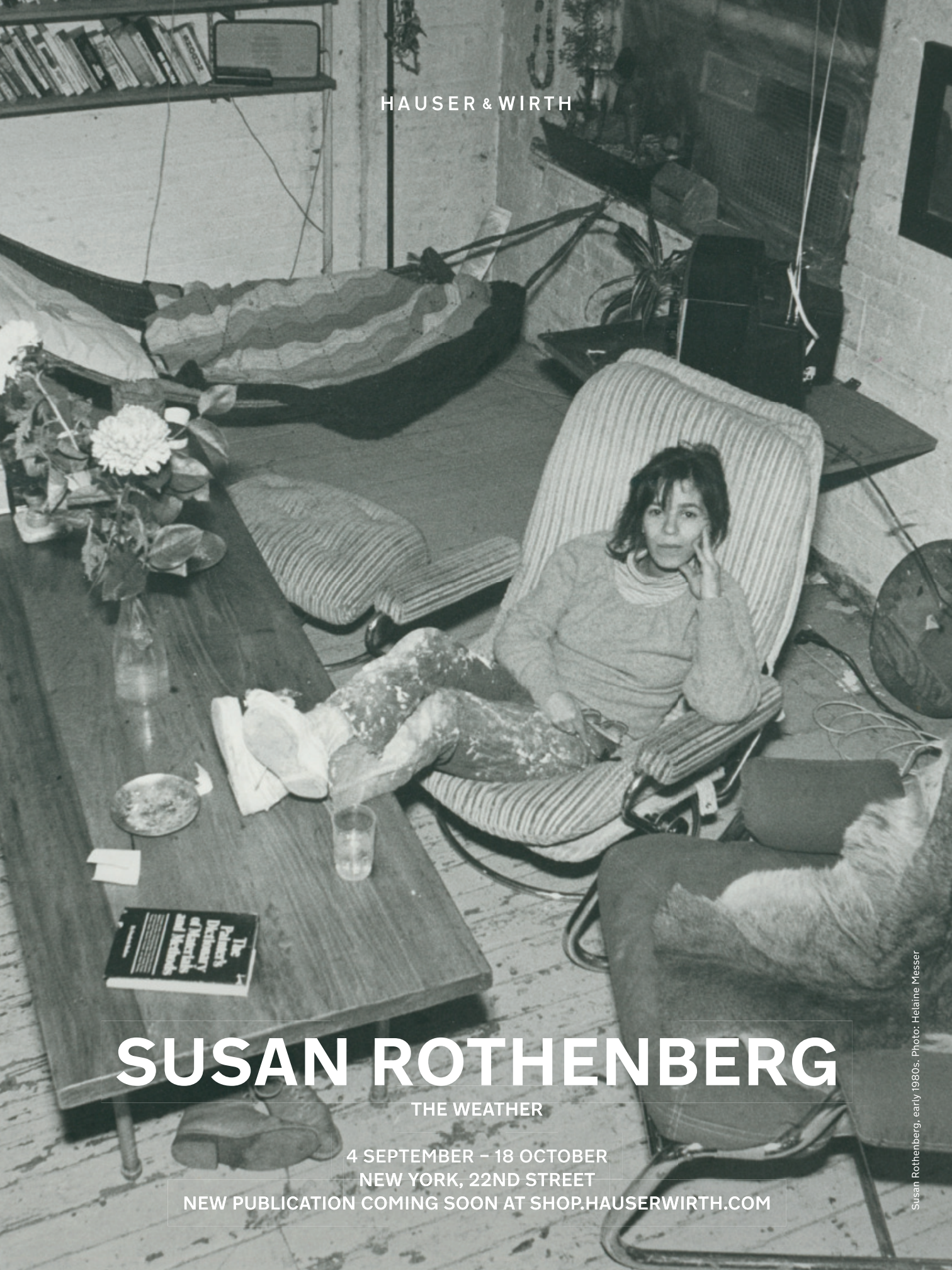


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