

SPRING/SUMMER 2024

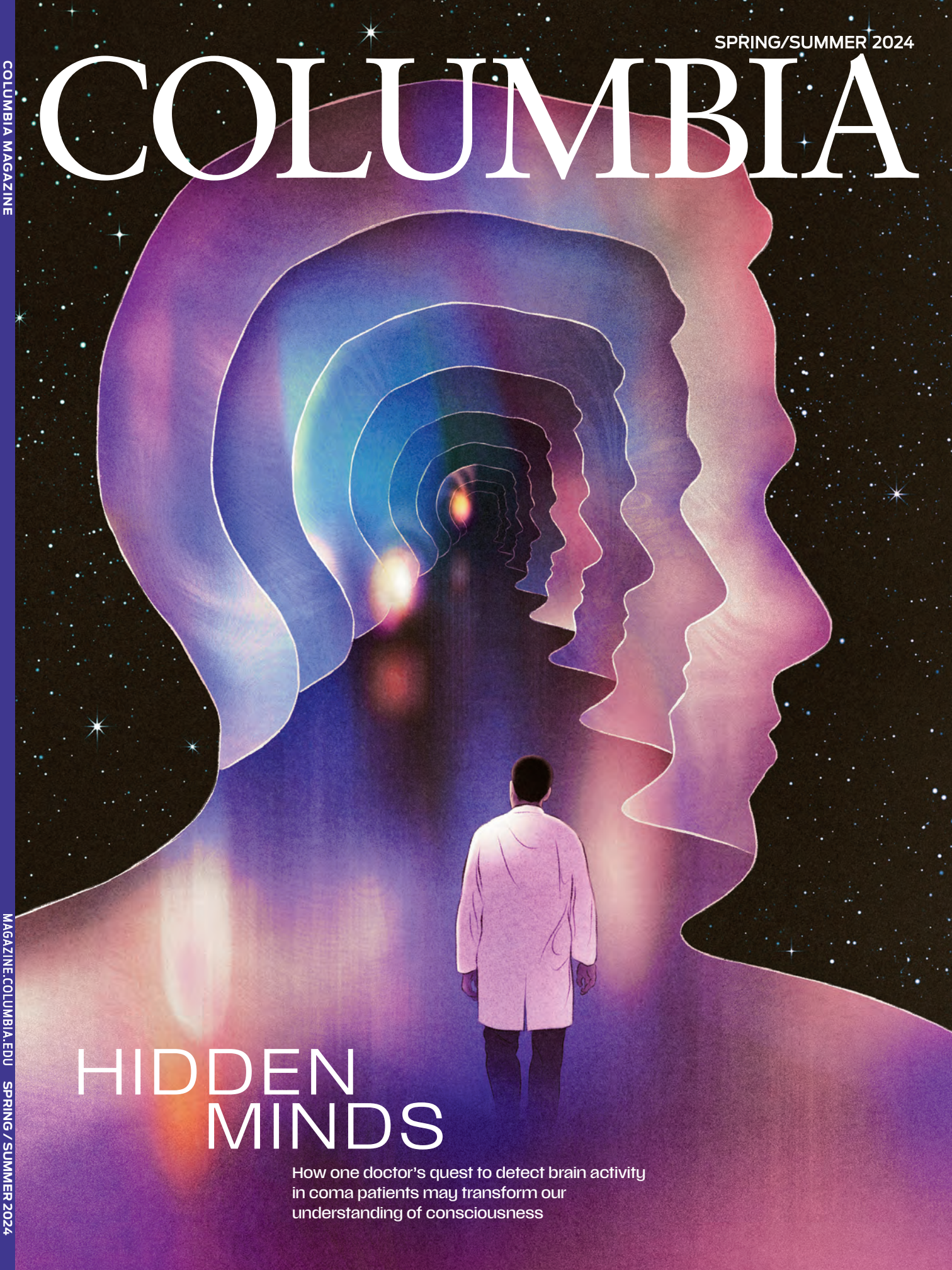
COLUMBIA

COLUMBIA MAGAZINE

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HIDDEN MINDS

How one doctor's quest to detect brain activity in coma patients may transform our understanding of consciousness



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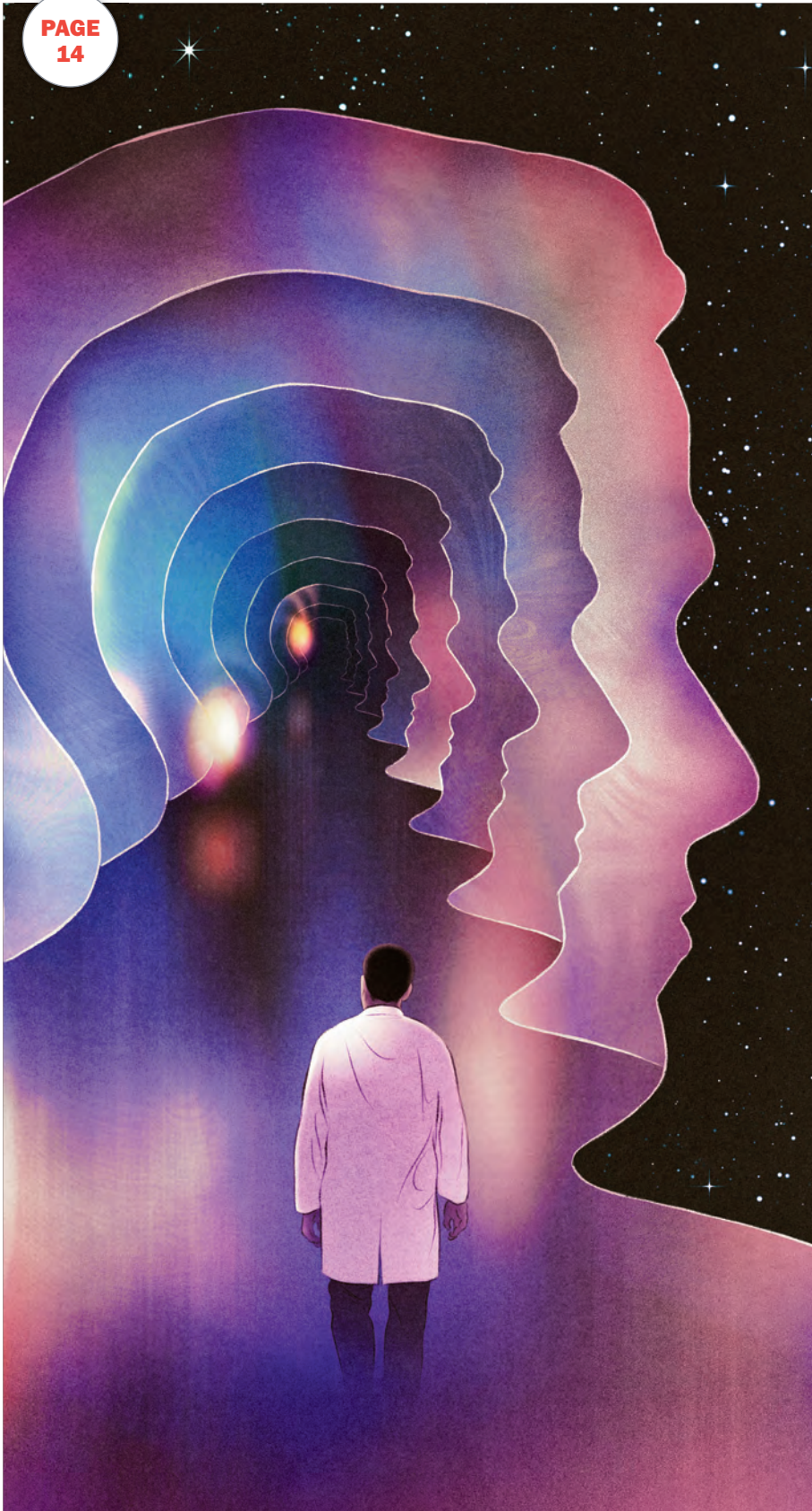
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ISABEL SELIGER

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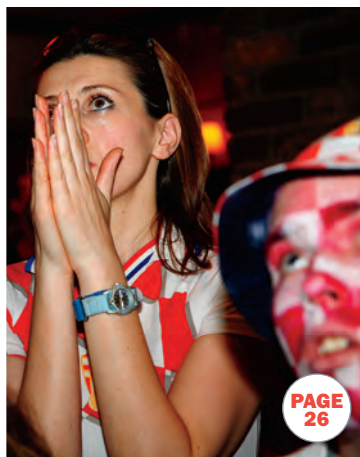
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NATO Called, Ike Answered

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A woman in a bright orange suit is posing with large, black, serif letters that spell out 'UPPER WEST END'. She is standing on the 'P' and 'D' of 'UPPER', with her right leg raised and resting on the 'V' of 'WEST'. The word 'THE' is written vertically in a smaller font between the 'P' and 'D'. Below this, the words 'WEST END' are written in a large, bold, sans-serif font.

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WORDS AND PICTURES

Thank you for a *Columbia Magazine* filled with an excellent choice of topics that reflect a keen concern for the important issues that affect people today.

Ayesha Mutope-Johnson
’83GS, ’85LAW
Houston, TX

The winter issue was better than most, but I’d like to see more campus photos. For those of us who don’t see the campus every day, haven’t been to New York City in years, and wouldn’t recognize the new buildings but have fond memories of the historical ones, a visual connection would be welcome!

Jerry DeMaagd
Kentwood, MI

BINARY OPINIONS

The statement by Walter Bockting, the founding director of Columbia’s Gender and Sexuality Program, that “we don’t have conclusive answers to these questions yet” pretty much says it all (“Beyond the Binary,” Winter 2023–24).

If an embryo with an X and a Y chromosome, which we know impacts the development of the brain in certain ways, is somehow really more like an embryo with two X chromosomes, please show me the science, data, and facts that support that conclusion before suggesting that significant restrictions around life-altering surgeries for children are a terrible thing.

Philip Gallo ’87LAW
New York, NY

Seventy years ago, if you had brought up gender dysphoria or being transgender or nonbinary, I would have immediately thought you were talking about some book by Bradbury, Heinlein, or Asimov. Gender identity is simple. Elementary biology states that humans are mammals, and all mammals are born either male or female, period. There is no “spectrum” there. If children “identify” as the sex (gender) opposite to the one they were born with, it is an immature, emotional problem to be handled

with love, compassion, and professional care, if needed. Certainly not with drugs, hormones, or surgery to try to alter the course of nature. Those attempts will not change the fundamentals and can cause irreparable damage, and young children are not capable of making this kind of decision.

Loren K. Seeley ’50BUS
Jacksonville, FL

FAULTY TOWER?

Most of the buildings profiled in “Foundational Wisdom” (Winter 2023–24) are imaginative and interesting. Sadly, I don’t think the same can be said for the Steinway Tower. If you asked Manhattanites, I believe most would describe it as an abomination that is completely out of step with the Manhattan skyline.

Margaret Monaco ’75BUS
Lakeville, CT

RESPECTING LIMITS

I was happy to see Hal Hinkle cite three seminal works of the mid-twentieth-century movements for

3 WEB STORIES YOU MIGHT HAVE MISSED



Could Beavers Help Save Us from Climate Disaster?



14 Classic Rom-Coms with Columbia Connections



How Norma Merrick Sklarek Paved the Way for Black Women Architects

Read at magazine.columbia.edu

FEEDBACK

a healthy diet and environment (“To Do Something Good for the Earth,” Winter 2023–24). Hinkle’s response to 1972’s *The Limits to Growth* — “That scared the bejesus out of me” — was and is appropriate. Thus, I was shocked

to read this in the next paragraph: “The report’s predictions were dire, and though they have proven to be wildly off base, they played a major role in launching the nascent environmental movement into the mainstream.”

This is an erroneous summary by the author. Hinkle himself, in a 2004 review of *Limits to Growth: The 30-Year Update*, wrote: “While necessarily high-level or imprecise in many projections, LTG still held a generation-long influence

over leading earth scientists and developmental economists.”

Hinkle notes in your article that “getting people to consider the longer-term impact of climate change is an incredible challenge.” This same point is made by the *Limits to Growth* authors, who conclude:

“Only a very few people have a global perspective that extends far into the future.”

I do not think it is appropriate to denigrate *The Limits to Growth* when it is critical for the long-term survival of our civilization that many more people understand that everything has limits.

Toby Thaler ’72CC
Seattle, WA

KEY TO ABBREVIATIONS

CODE	SCHOOL	CODE	SCHOOL
BC	Barnard College	LS	School of Library Service
BUS	Graduate School of Business	NRS	School of Nursing
CC	Columbia College	OPT	School of Optometry
CS	Climate School	PH	Mailman School of Public Health
DM	College of Dental Medicine	PHRM	College of Pharmaceutical Sciences
GS	School of General Studies	SEAS	Fu Foundation School of Engineering and Applied Science
GSAPP	Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation	SIPA	School of International and Public Affairs
GSAS	Graduate School of Arts and Sciences	SOA	School of the Arts
HON	(Honorary degree)	SPS	School of Professional Studies
JRN	Graduate School of Journalism	SW	School of Social Work
JTS	Jewish Theological Seminary	TC	Teachers College
KC	King’s College	UTS	Union Theological Seminary
LAW	School of Law	VPS	Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons

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THE WORLD IN THEIR HANDS

I was interested in Erica Komisar's comments about childhood anxiety in your "Ask an Alum" interview ("How to Raise Resilient Kids," Network, Winter 2023–24), especially her advice for parents to be self-aware and to spend as much time as possible with their children while they still live at home. One thing that jangled, however, was scapegoating technology as a big contributor to anxiety. While I don't dispute the statement, I also believe that technology can be a key to resiliency. Social media may be a morass of comparisons and insecurities, but the Internet is so much bigger than that. No matter what children are curious about or identifying with, they can find other people out there like them almost immediately. They have access to the entire world. Their context is bigger than just their school or their town or their family dynamic.

Laura Skerratt Shabazz '04GS
Bernardsville, NJ

HOUDINI REAPPEARS

I enjoyed reading your Backstory article "Houdini's Columbia Connections" (Winter 2023–24). Here's another, more recent Columbia connection: I met my husband Rob — the great-grandson of Walter B. Gibson, coauthor with Morris Young '35VPS of *Houdini's Fabulous Magic* — at Columbia Business School, and the lore of Walter (who created the pulp-magazine, radio, and comic-book character "the Shadow") has lived on in our family. (Our two school-age kids love playing with vintage Shadow figurines.) I knew Walter had written a book on Houdini, and it was fascinating to read your article alluding to it!

Rachel Vessey Gibson '09BUS
Phoenix, MD

My dad, George Boss, and my uncle Jack Boss grew up at 259 W. 112th Street. My grandfather owned a



Harry Houdini

small grocery on the corner. Their apartment house backed up against the backyard of Harry Houdini. The brothers would always be peering over the fence to watch Houdini exercise, practice, and entertain guests. Houdini even invited them in on occasion.

But most amazing of all was that my dad and uncle were the last known surviving employees of Harry Houdini. Houdini engaged the two young boys to gather fresh horse manure for his garden. He insisted on fresh Central Park manure. My dad and his very young brother would pull their little wagon the two blocks to Central Park and do a bit of shoveling. They would then pull the wagon back to Houdini's house on 113th Street, knock on the door and say, "Mr. Houdini, we have fresh manure for you." I do think they were mostly invited inside the house so that they could receive their wages (only after my grandmother cleaned them up).

Steven Boss '71CC,
'76SW, '78BUS
New York, NY

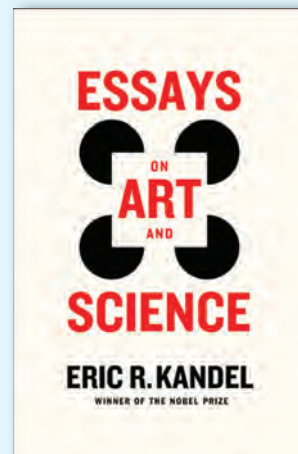
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COMMENTS?**

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Letters may be edited for brevity and clarity.

New from
Columbia University Press



"Anything Eric R. Kandel says about neuroscience or the relationship between art and neuroscience is noteworthy. He is not only brilliant at explaining difficult and complex scientific ideas and data in simple language but also well-informed about—and sympathetic to—twentieth-century art, and avails himself of an impressive range of art-historical literature."

—Nancy Princenthal,
author of *Unspeakable Acts*

ERIC R. KANDEL is University Professor Emeritus and professor emeritus of physiology and cellular biophysics, psychiatry, biochemistry, molecular biophysics, and neuroscience at Columbia University. He is founding codirector of Columbia University's Zuckerman Institute, founding director of Columbia's Kavli Institute for Brain Science, and Sagol Professor Emeritus of Brain Science at the Zuckerman Institute. He was also a senior investigator at the Howard Hughes Medical Institute from 1984 to 2022. In 2000, Kandel was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine for his studies of learning and memory. He has been awarded twenty-four honorary degrees. Kandel is the author of *In Search of Memory: The Emergence of a New Science of Mind* (2006), *The Age of Insight: The Quest to Understand the Unconscious in Art, Mind and Brain, from Vienna 1900 to the Present* (2012), *Reductionism in Art and Brain Science: Bridging the Two Cultures* (Columbia, 2016), *The Disordered Mind: What Unusual Brains Tell Us About Ourselves* (2018), and *There Is Life After the Nobel Prize* (Columbia, 2022). He is also a coauthor of *Principles of Neural Science* (2021), the standard textbook in the field of neuroscience.



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COLLEGE WALK

NOTES FROM
116TH STREET
AND BEYOND



Mollie Bayer-Yitayew and Michael Yitayew in front of St. Paul's Chapel.

Going to the Chapel

How to get married on campus: it's easier than you think

Mollie Bayer-Yitayew '19BC was in her first year of law school when she tried to organize her 150-person wedding to Michael Yitayew '19CC without a wedding planner. Put simply: "It was a stressful time." The couple had originally intended to hold their summer 2022 ceremony at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, with a reception on campus at Faculty House. But after some logistical challenges with the cathedral, they turned to another New York City landmark: St. Paul's Chapel at Columbia. "I had a lot of trust in Columbia, because we were students there; we weren't just paying for a venue that we weren't familiar with," Bayer-Yitayew says. "They made the process so simple and straightforward."

Dedicated in 1907 as an Anglican church, St. Paul's was the first new building on the Morningside campus not built by McKim, Mead, and White. Architect I. N. Phelps Stokes designed an exterior that echoed the red brick and limestone of other campus buildings. The Byzantine interior, with its soaring ninety-one-foot-high vault decorated with pink Guastavino

tiles and its 5,348-pipe Aeolian-Skinner organ, is considered a masterpiece. For Aaron Dai '96GSAPP, who married Thomas Ashe at St. Paul's in 2016, that interior, which he calls "both grand and intimate," was an important factor. Another: "My graduation ceremony was held in St. Paul's, so the chapel already held a special significance for me."

St. Paul's has hosted weddings since October 14, 1908, when Katrine Burdick, daughter of Columbia law professor F. M. Burdick, married Theodore Townsend in a short and simple ceremony in the newly built chapel. "Many floral pieces decorated the Chapel for this unusual occasion," recounted the next day's edition of the *Spectator*. "A large number of friends of the bride and groom was present, including some of the University professors and their wives."

The cost of renting St Paul's for a wedding has risen steadily over the years. In 1998 it cost \$600 for two hours. Today a wedding at the chapel runs \$4,900, which includes a security officer, a custodian, and a basic audio setup with microphones and a hookup

for your phone or laptop to play music over the sound system.

According to Emerald Currie '13SOA, the director of Columbia University Event Management, approximately 80 percent of the weddings held in the chapel involve Columbia alumni or affiliates. The other 20 percent tend to be people who are attracted to the nondenominational nature of the chapel, which, "listening to brides, can be hard to find in New York City." As the Reverend Dr. Ian Rottenberg, director of Columbia's Earl Hall Center for Religious Life, says, "The chapel is for people of all faiths or people of no faith." Rottenberg and his team can help couples find an officiant — or maybe several. "We recently had a request for a multi-faith, multi-officiant Hindu-Catholic wedding," he says.

Currie recommends that couples book a year in advance to secure their preferred date. But last-minute planners won't necessarily miss out: the chapel offers up to six wedding slots per weekend. "We had some alumni who were getting married in two weeks, and we actually had the space available," Currie says.

There are a few site-specific rules. For one: "You can't throw flower petals or rice inside because the inlaid-marble floor gets slippery," Currie explains. Photographers are generally the only people allowed in to the balcony section, as a safety measure.

But as wedding venues go, St. Paul's Chapel is relatively flexible. The only required vendor is a University-approved organist, such as Janet Yieh. "I usually talk with the couple and get a sense of what their ceremony will include and come ready with a list of wedding music," she says.

The ceremony is where "the music and architecture really meet," says Yieh. "There is such a warmth when you walk into the chapel. You see the organ pipes. You see the stained glass, the beautiful dome, and all the light streaming in."

While Bayer-Kityaw says most of her wedding ceremony was "a blur," she does remember the unadorned beauty of the chapel. "We didn't add flower arrangements to the space because we felt it would take away from the architecture," she says. "Even though I had been there as a student, it felt very different getting married there — almost regal."

— *Lauren Vespoli*

Children First

At 95, Columbia child psychiatrist Clarice Kestenbaum '68VPS looks back — and forward

At her ninety-fifth birthday party at her Upper West Side apartment earlier this year, Clarice Kestenbaum '68VPS, professor emerita of clinical psychiatry, was in fine form: energetic, smiling, and talkative. While guests mingled, her son played a ukulele and sang tunes from his mother's birth year of 1929 ("Just a Gigolo," "Am I Blue?"). That was also the year that British psychoanalyst John Bowlby, a key figure for Kestenbaum, first considered the effects of parental separation on children.



Ever since Kestenbaum arrived at Columbia's Division of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry in the 1960s, her career has revolved around kids: studying them, treating them, raising them (she has two sons), and training and mentoring child psychiatrists at Columbia. "I couldn't even count them all," she said of her trainees. "And each person who learns from me then teaches a hundred

other people." She continues to supervise child and adolescent psychiatry fellows at Columbia for twenty hours a week, conduct peer-supervision classes via Zoom, and consult with patients and families. In 1988, she and Ian Canino founded CARING (Children At Risk: Intervention for a New Generation) at Columbia, which promotes mental health for at-risk youth through arts and education. From 1999 to 2001, she was president of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, the leading child-psychiatry organization in the US.

"Clarice's effect on our field is immeasurable," says Jeremy Veenstra-VanderWeele, director of child and adolescent psychiatry at CUIMC. "Learning from Clarice means noticing things in a child or a family that you could never see before. That gift of truly seeing and understanding carries forward to every patient."

Oh, and she is also David Letterman's psychiatrist — a fact she revealed in 2017 when Letterman was being toasted at the Kennedy Center as the recipient of its twentieth Mark Twain Prize for American Humor. Somewhere in the program between Jimmy Kimmel and Bill Murray, Kestenbaum walked onto the stage, introduced herself, and joked about what it's like treating the famous late-night host ("If you ever need a solid forty-five-minute nap, drop in for a session").

COLLEGE WALK

Over the decades, in her papers and media interviews, Kestenbaum has explored many topics in child development, including only-child syndrome (“The only child carries the burden of trying to be all things to all people and fulfilling the wishes and hopes of everyone in the family”); sibling rivalry (“The feelings of the older child are still very diffuse at 12 or 15 months, and he won’t con-

sciously object to a new baby at that time; however, that child will miss a great deal of his mother’s attention and closeness at the time he most needs it”); and the power of narrative to cope with PTSD (“The life story can be changed from one of disturbing, negative recollections to one that highlights positive and affirming memories”).

At her party, she reflected on her profession. Being a good child psychiatrist,

she said, “isn’t just about following in the footsteps of mentors. It’s also about understanding a myriad of theories” — her list includes Piaget on cognitive development, the psychosexual stages of Freud, and Bowlby’s theory of attachment based in part on research in geese and monkeys — “and applying them uniquely to each child.”

Kestenbaum’s path to psychiatry was serendipitous.

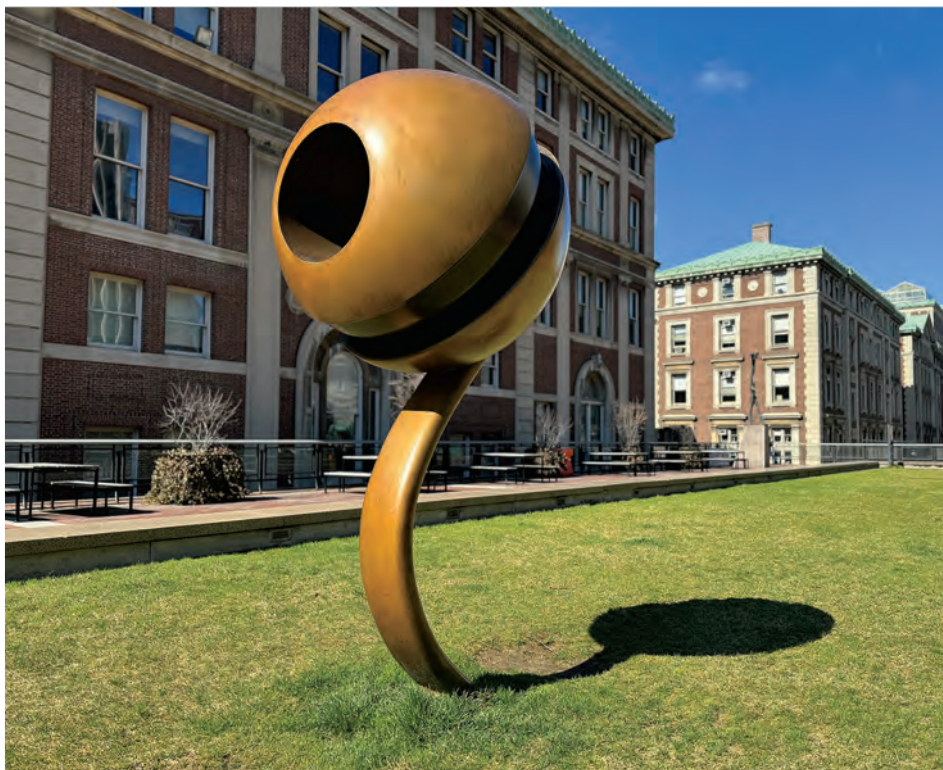
Growing up in Los Angeles in the 1930s and ’40s, she loved to act and play the piano, but the anxiety of being in front of an audience was so paralyzing that her father took her to a psychoanalyst. Under the analyst’s care, she realized that music and theater were not her true calling. When she decided she wanted to pursue medicine, her father was aghast at the thought of his daughter studying the male anatomy. His displeasure was matched later when she took a defiant leap into clinical psychiatry, a field he dismissed as “a fraud.” But her analyst convinced her father to allow it.

Today, Kestenbaum looks back on a field that has changed dramatically since she started: there are many more women practitioners, the use of medication has surged, and “evidence-based” treatments such as CBT (cognitive-behavioral therapy) have entered the mainstream. Anxiety and depression are rising, and the effects of the pandemic on young children are only just emerging.

But Kestenbaum has kept both her optimism and her sense of humor: you don’t get to her age without them.

“Look,” she said, as her son sang Cole Porter, “Did we have the Dark Ages? Yes, and then we had the Renaissance. So we’ll go through a dark age that’s pretty bad, and then we’ll have a renaissance. I think the world will change. I’m always very hopeful, and I wish I’ll be here in fifteen years. Maybe I will be.”

— Jonathan Slater ’85VPS



MAY THE FORCE BE WITH US

Campus flâneurs often stop to look into the conical “eye” of *Life Force*, the seven-foot-tall bronze sculpture by David Bakalar, installed on Revson Plaza. Bakalar, who turned one hundred this year, was late to the art scene. The child of Russian-Jewish immigrants, he studied physics and metallurgy before founding one of America’s earliest semiconductor companies. He took up sculpture in his sixties. “I’ve always been fascinated by the

codes and molecules that are the Life Force,” Bakalar once wrote. He says his Life Force series represents “the bonding forces — the birth force, the death force, the competitive force, and the nurturant force.” The Columbia sculpture, fabricated in 1988, was donated anonymously to the Law School in 1992 to honor Ruth Goldman Schapiro ’50LAW. Bakalar, whose own life force is an inspiration, still lives and works in Boston.



Alice Guy Blaché

Reel Equality

At the Women Film Pioneers Project, silents are golden

Mention women in silent film and most people will think of “America’s sweetheart” Mary Pickford or flapper flirt Clara Bow. But what many movie fans might not realize is that during the silent-film era in the United States, which spanned the late 1890s to the late 1920s, women weren’t just stars. They were also directors, writers, editors, and stop-motion animators. They operated cameras, owned theaters, and distributed films. They even ran their own production companies. From 1907 to around 1920, when the movie world was centered in New York and Fort Lee, New Jersey, women held influential positions in every part of the industry.

Jane Gaines, a professor of film history at Columbia and a pioneer of feminist film theory, wanted to give these women a voice. As a visiting scholar at Vassar College in the 1990s, she reflected on the paucity of research on women directors and

found that work on *early* women directors was even rarer. She and her students began amassing material from all over the globe on silent-era women and named this enormous effort the Women Film Pioneers Project (WFPP). By the time she came to Columbia in 2009, Gaines had enough pages to fill multiple volumes.

With that in mind, she met with Columbia’s Center for Digital Research and Scholarship, now the Digital Humanities Center, which is part of Columbia Libraries. Technology was allowing large printed documents to be reimaged online, where they could be revised and supplemented. “The libraries said, ‘Digital is the future of publishing,’” Gaines recalls. “And they agreed to publish the WFPP.” In 2013, the libraries launched the initial WFPP website, hosting what has become the premier database of women in silent film (wfpp.columbia.edu), with more than three hundred profiles written

by film scholars worldwide, along with related essays and links to resources.

Recently, the WFPP celebrated its ten-year anniversary with a program at the Museum of Modern Art co-curated by Kate Saccone ’13SOA, who is WFPP’s project manager. Saccone chose women-driven silent films from Japan, China, Tunisia, Argentina, France, Germany, Russia, the US, and more. As a film-history student, she hadn’t known the extent of women’s involvement in the nascent industry. “That’s because I had never been taught,” Saccone says. “Jane and the WFPP really changed my worldview.”

At the WFPP you can learn about such figures as Alice Guy Blaché (1873–1968), the trailblazing French director who made her first film in 1896 (and who lectured at Columbia in 1917); Lois Weber (1879–1939), the first woman to direct a feature-length film (an adaptation of Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, which she codirected with her husband in 1914) and a leading auteur of early Hollywood, best known for *The Blot* (1921); Pearl White, an action hero who did many of her own stunts and would dangle from the New Jersey Palisades in Fort Lee, where she staged her famous “cliffhangers”; and Frederica Sagor Maas (1900–2012), who studied journalism at Columbia in 1917, got a job as a story editor at Universal Pictures, and cowrote *The Plastic Age* (1925) for Clara Bow.

The WFPP has unearthed many Columbia connections to the subject, both pedagogical and geographical. Gaines notes that the Katharina Otto-Bernstein Screening Room at Columbia’s Lenfest Center in Manhattanville is just a block from the ferry that took New Yorkers to the studios of Fort Lee — Fox, Universal, Selznick, Goldwyn, and others — where women, who would not be allowed to vote in a federal election until 1920, set about creating a world in their own image.

— Paul Hond

Educational Excursions

Columbia+, the University's online learning platform, invites everyone on board

With apologies to whoever wrote that old bus-trip song about beer bottles: *Ninety-nine courses to take online now, ninety-nine courses to take. Enroll in one soon, when most opportune, ninety-eight courses to take online now ...* Yes, lifelong learners can take one of the ninety-nine (and counting) non-degree, non-credit courses on Columbia+, the University's online education hub, where experts from across the University take you to dozens of intellectual destinations.

"Students and alumni at leading higher-education institutions expect lifelong engagement with their universities for continued learning," says Soulaymane Kachani, Columbia's senior vice provost, whose office oversees the program. "Also, learning is increasingly taking place digitally."

Classes start at \$50 and are as specialized as they are varied. Whether it's Advanced Topics in Derivative Pricing (\$99), Animation and CGI Motion (\$199), or Epidemic Modeling (\$50), there is something for everyone. "There's also a discount of \$50 using code ALUM2024 for any course offered on the platform, which makes a number of courses free to alumni," Kachani says. The most popular courses at the moment are Artificial Intelligence in Real Estate, The Civil War and Reconstruction, and An Introduction to Central Banking and Foreign Exchange.

There are no grades or deadlines on this learning trip. Most of the courses are rolling: you can hop on anytime and travel at your own pace. And when you complete a course, you receive a digital certificate as proof of your journey. To paraphrase another bus-trip ditty: *The wheels in your mind go round and round ...*



Divine Crossings

High-wire artist Philippe Petit lifts spirits in the Heights

Earlier this year, when Philippe Petit placed a delicate slipped foot on a slender steel cable strung between two pillars in the nave of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, it wasn't just a performance. The great aerialist was also taking another step in his long love affair with the neighborhood.

More than forty years had passed since Petit first walked in the air at St. John's. Now, in 2024, he was aloft again, merging his performance, called *The Ribbon Walk*, with an art installation by Anne Patterson titled *Divine Pathways*. The work consisted of hundreds of long ribbons of blue and green, red and orange, white and gold, hanging like vines from the vault of the ceiling. Petit was poised to make his way through them.

Some in the audience of 1,400 wide-eyed souls could remember

the day in 1982 when Petit, to kick off a new phase of construction at the cathedral, rigged a wire 150 feet high over Amsterdam Avenue at 112th Street. The cable was less than an inch thick and stretched from a ledge above the cathedral's rose window to an apartment building across the street. Petit, then the new artist-in-residence at St. John's (a position he still holds), walked the length of it. As a performer whose stage is literally the world, Petit loves dramatic, beautiful backdrops, and the intricately carved limestone façade of one of the world's largest cathedrals was a natural setting for him. Eleven years before, he had walked between the towers of the Cathedral of Notre-Dame in his hometown of Paris; and in 1974 in New York, he and his cohorts covertly fastened a wire between the roofs of the Twin Towers.

Petit crossed and recrossed that plunging chasm in a piece of theater that witnesses described in the language of religious awe.

The Twin Towers exploit was portrayed in all its suspense and ecstasy in the 2008 Oscar-winning documentary *Man on Wire*, coproduced by Columbia film professor Maureen Ryan '92SOA, who calls the event "a miracle." Watching Petit on a tightrope, Ryan says, "You're looking up into the heavens — and he's up there and he seems untouchable. It just has this transcendence."

Writers through the ages have tried to capture the feeling of watching an artist perform on the very edge of life. That day in 1982, the novelist Paul Auster '69CC, '70GSAS stood on the cathedral steps among the neighbors, clergy, Columbia students, and VIPs who had come to behold the spectacle above Amsterdam Avenue. Auster had seen Petit perform on the streets of Paris and had decided that his vocation was of the highest order: "No art, it seems to me, so clearly emphasizes the deep aesthetic impulse inside us all," Auster wrote in a 1982 essay. Three years later he would translate Petit's book *On the High Wire*. Indeed, Auster could not walk past Notre-Dame without thinking of "an almost invisible wire stretched between the enormous towers of the cathedral, and there, right in the middle, as if suspended magically in space, the tiniest of human figures, a dot of life against the sky."

For *The Ribbon Walk*, Petit was closer to terra firma and fifty years removed from the Twin Towers. He was seventy-

four now, not twenty-four. And instead of being 1,350 feet above concrete in Lower Manhattan, he was twenty feet above a marble floor in Morningside Heights — still high enough to keep onlookers tense with the age-old question: *what if?*

Holding his balancing pole before him, Petit traversed the wire with slow, precise, fluid steps. There was no wind, but there were plenty of ribbons. Petit maneuvered the pole, which animated the ribbons, creating slow undulations that in one moment suggested a matador's cape and in the next the wings of a giant butterfly. Petit made multiple passes along the thirty-eight feet of cable. At several points, a fluttering ribbon wrapped around his leg, and he had to deftly disentangle himself — which sent more than a few hearts into throats.

But Petit, as ever, was firmly in control. When he finished his walk, a wave of applause (and relief) rose up and rolled over the cavernous room. One woman said, "I can breathe now." A man wondered aloud why he, or anyone, had chosen to watch such a thing.

Forty years earlier, Auster had provided an answer. "Each time we see a man walk on the wire, a part of us is up there with him," Auster wrote. "Unlike performances in the other arts, the experience of the high wire is direct, unmediated, simple, and it requires no explanation whatsoever. The art is the thing itself, a life in its most naked delineation. And if there is beauty in this, it is because of the beauty we feel inside ourselves."

— Paul Hond

THE SHORT LIST



REUNITE

If you graduated in a year ending in four or nine, **Reunion 2024** is for you!

Alumni of Columbia College, Columbia Engineering, the School of General Studies, and Barnard are invited to return to campus for a weekend of festivities, including a Friday-night party at Chelsea Piers. From May 30 to June 1. columbia.events.alumniq.com/go/reunion24

SEE The Wallach Art Gallery presents **Growing Sideways: Performing Childhood**, an exhibition of contemporary art centered on children. The show, curated by PhD student Piper Marshall, runs from June 21 to September 15. wallach.columbia.edu

JOIN Interested in connecting with other Columbians in your city? The Columbia Alumni Association supports numerous **clubs and shared-interest groups** across the United States and in over sixty-five international locations. alumni.columbia.edu/clubs



LOOK

The **Riverside Park Birding Club** invites new and seasoned birders to scope out avian hotspots along the Hudson River

while guided by conservancy experts. Expeditions take place on the last Saturday of each month at 8:00 a.m. and meet at 103rd Street and Riverside Drive. riversideparknyc.org/events

CELEBRATE Join in on the fun at **Manhattanville Community Day**, where your family can enjoy science and art activities, food from local vendors, and more. Open to the public on June 8 from noon to 4:00 p.m. neighbors.columbia.edu/events



HIDDEN MINDS

How one doctor's quest to detect brain activity in coma patients may transform our understanding of consciousness

By David J. Craig

Nick LaRock was going to pull through. Physically, at least. A thirty-three-year-old high-school history teacher, LaRock had been discovered by his girlfriend sprawled out on the floor of his Manhattan apartment late one Sunday evening, moaning incomprehensibly. Rushed by ambulance to Columbia University Irving Medical Center, Columbia's shared medical campus with NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital, he arrived unconscious and unresponsive, fighting for his life. Doctors in the neurocritical-care unit recognized that LaRock had suffered a massive brain hemorrhage and took extraordinary measures to save him, even bringing in surgeons to drill a hole in his skull to relieve pressure that threatened to irreparably damage his brain. Their efforts paid off. A few days later, LaRock was stable but in a coma, his motionless body surrounded by a humming nest of life-support machines that regulated his breathing and other vital functions.

Now, looking back on that time in January 2021, LaRock's parents recall the relief they felt at learning that Nick would survive, but also the troubling questions

that soon weighed on them. "I remember asking one of the doctors, 'Are we past the point where he's going to die?' and she said, 'Yes, I think so.' That was obviously a big moment for us," says Joseph LaRock, Nick's father. "Of course, you're next wondering, When is he going to wake up? And what is he going to be like when he does?" says Beth LaRock, Nick's mother. "I mean, is he still going to be our Nick? Is he still going to be my boy, or is he going to be a shell of himself?"

Nick's parents couldn't bring themselves to ask the doctors those questions. Afraid of the answers they might receive, they distracted themselves by searching for clues that their son might be mentally present. Every morning, having driven three hours from their home on Long Island, where Joe works as a restaurant manager and Beth runs a program for adults with developmental disabilities, they would slip quietly into their son's room, kiss him on the forehead, and perch themselves on chairs beside his bed. They would stroke his chilly hands, whisper reassurances, and wait for any glint of recognition — a tilt of the head, the flutter of an eyelid, the squeeze of a finger. When these signs didn't come,

they would talk to him nonetheless. “I would give him updates about his younger sister, my job at the restaurant, the New York Jets, the weather — anything I could think of,” says Joe. “I’d tell him that we knew he was in there. And that we needed him back.”

By any standard neurological assessment, their son’s prospects for recovery did not look good. Nick had experienced immense bleeding in his brain and now, nearly a week later, had still not opened his eyes. He appeared to be slipping into a long-term coma — a state that few patients with brain injuries ever awaken from with their personalities and mental faculties intact. “Nick’s injury was severe, and time was not on his side,” says Jan Claassen, a Columbia neurologist who directs CUIMC’s neurocritical-care unit and helped coordinate Nick’s treatment.

The longer a patient remains unresponsive, Claassen explains, the less likely they will achieve a good cognitive recovery, if they do awaken. Instead, they might emerge in a semiconscious, cognitively diminished state, requiring round-the-clock care. Many such patients spend the rest of their days hooked up to ventilators and feeding tubes, battling respiratory and urinary-tract infections. “If a person doesn’t regain consciousness within a week or two, we get very concerned,” Claassen says, noting that brain-injured patients who don’t awaken within that time frame are often taken off life support to prevent their prolonged suffering.

Yet Claassen, who is a leading authority on brain injuries, also believes that not all coma patients are as mentally incapacitated as they appear to be.

At the time of Nick’s injury, he was conducting an unusual clinical trial at CUIMC in which every brain-injured patient who seemed to be in a coma was, with their family’s permission, given a series of sophisticated tests designed to reassess their brain function.

Joe and Beth LaRock agreed to have Nick evaluated. They were told that the results of the test would not inform Nick’s care, since the technique was experimental, but that his participation could eventually help others. So once or twice a day, in the morning and afternoon, members of Claassen’s research team gently put earbuds into Nick’s ears and played a series of recorded messages that asked him to perform simple physical tasks, like squeezing and relaxing his right hand. A collection of electroencephalogram (EEG) sensors stuck to Nick’s scalp then recorded the electrical pops and crackles of his neurons, which were transmitted to a supercomputer located down the hall. There a team of Columbia data scientists and biostatisticians would analyze the millions of resulting data points using an artificial-intelligence program, looking for clues that Nick might have heard the commands, understood them, and attempted to respond. Gradually, a pattern emerged. The computer detected what no neurologist could have: *Nick was in there.*



Jan Claassen

The word “coma” is derived from the ancient Greek *koma*, meaning deep sleep, but the condition that it describes — a prolonged state of unconsciousness caused by injury or illness — has only become common in the modern era. Before the mid-twentieth century, most people who experienced severe brain injuries, whether from strokes, oxygen deprivation, or blows to the head, quickly died. That is because the brain, when traumatized, loses its ability to coordinate essential bodily functions. Most critically, it stops transmitting motor signals that control reflexive muscle movements, including those in the diaphragm that draw air into the

lungs; without them, a person asphyxiates. Only when mechanical ventilators became widely available in hospitals, in the 1950s and 1960s — a development inspired by the polio epidemic — did it become possible to sustain large numbers of brain-injured patients in comas. “Around then, modern emergency medical services also proliferated,” says Claassen, “which meant that people could be stabilized at the scene of injury and transported to hospitals quickly enough to be saved by the new equipment.”

Soon the study of brain injuries was among the most rapidly evolving and intellectually vibrant areas in medicine. By carefully observing patients who emerged from comas, physicians discovered previously unknown “disorders of consciousness,” including the vegetative state, a condition in which patients may open their eyes but are otherwise unresponsive and unaware; and the minimally conscious state, in which they may show intermittent awareness and attempts at communication. These disorders were initially thought to be chronic, but researchers eventually realized that some patients improved over time, which contributed to a new understanding of the brain’s capacity for reorganization, repair, and regeneration. There were other surprises too. In the 1960s, the American neurologists Fred Plum and Jerome Posner noticed that a tiny percentage of patients who appeared to be in a vegetative state were actually fully conscious and intellectually intact. Paralyzed except for their eyes, they could not respond to their examiners and so had been written off as mentally vacant. Plum and Posner called the condition “locked-in syndrome.” These patients could be taught to communicate by blinking and glancing from side to side — a method that the French journalist Jean-Dominique Bauby famously used to dictate his 1997 memoir about living with the syndrome, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*. Neurologists say that the discovery of locked-in syndrome had a profound impact on their field, impressing upon clinicians the need to be exceptionally vigilant when conduct-

ing exams, lest they miss the desperate human peering back into their penlights.

Claassen, who grew up outside Cologne, Germany, began his career at the University of Hamburg’s teaching hospital, caring for coma patients, in the late 1990s. At that time, he recalls, neurologists who treated people in the earliest stages of brain injury had to be masters of improvisation. Because only a few decades of clinical history had been amassed on the topic, doctors received little guidance from textbooks or senior colleagues on important matters such

“I was taught that someone who remained in a coma for more than just a couple of days after a brain injury was basically hopeless. But I saw for myself that wasn’t true.”

as how to improve a comatose patient’s chances for recovery or when to speak with family members about the possibility of withdrawing life support. Those clinical guideposts that did exist, Claassen says, often underestimated patients’ prospects. “As a young doctor, I was taught that someone who remained in a coma for more than just a couple of days after a brain injury was basically hopeless,” says Claassen, a tall and slender fifty-five-year-old with piercing blue eyes and a gentle demeanor. “But I saw for myself that wasn’t true.”

Despite the stressful, fast-paced, and sometimes chaotic nature of his work — the nonstop decisions about continuing or withdrawing life support, in particular, are said to contribute to high rates of burnout among doctors in neurocritical-care units — Claassen thrived, seeing endless opportunities to advance both clinical care and scientific knowledge. “I’ll never forget the first time I saw a patient who’d appeared to be lost forever wake up,” he says. “One day he was completely unresponsive, and the next time I saw him he was sitting at a table playing cards. There was something about that transformation that left me

awestruck. I knew I had to devote my life to helping these people. And I had to learn everything possible about what their experiences revealed about human consciousness — what it is, why it breaks down, and how it can arise again.”

In Hamburg, Claassen dove into clinical research, exploring new ways of diagnosing and assessing the severity of brain injuries. He came to CUIMC in 1999, lured in part by the medical center’s embrace of new electrophysiological and neuroimaging technologies that he believed were poised to revolutionize

his field. For example, physicians in Columbia’s neurocritical-care unit had just begun to use computational analysis of EEG signals to peer inside patients’ brains in real time and better diagnose and treat their injuries. They had also started to compile an unusually large database of patient outcomes, which they studied for insights into the effectiveness of their treatments. “I thought this was critically important, because although we’d gotten very, very good at saving the lives of people who’d suffered brain injuries, we still knew little about how to improve their chances of having a good recovery,” Claassen says. “To make progress, we had to observe the brain in new ways.”

Over the next few years, Claassen achieved a number of breakthroughs using EEG and other brain-monitoring techniques. In one series of influential studies, he and colleagues discovered that some comatose patients experience life-threatening brain seizures that are only detectable with EEG. They showed that administering anti-seizure drugs to these patients may save their lives. In a related line of research, Claassen’s team demonstrated that miniaturized EEG

sensors implanted in the heads of coma patients can help identify when they need interventions to adjust their blood pressure, oxygen levels, and other vitals. Many of the protocols that the Columbia team developed are now followed by physicians around the world.

In 2014, Claassen was named the head of CUIMC's neurocritical-care unit, an eighteen-bed facility that treats all types of brain injuries, from strokes to blunt traumas to side effects of heart attacks. He quickly set about expanding its research operations, hiring data scientists, investing in supercomputing technology, and encouraging its physicians to innovate whenever possible. "We also cultivated partnerships with faculty in other Columbia units, including the Department of Biomedical Informatics, the Department of Neurological Surgery, and the Data Science Institute," he says. "I thought that if we brought the full weight of the University's intellectual resources to bear on studying brain injuries, we could really move the needle on the quality of care that's available."

Perfecting the EEG test is critical, Claassen says, because its results are likely to inform the agonizing decisions that many families confront about whether to take their loved ones off life support.

Claassen soon saw an opportunity to make a big impact. Around the time he was appointed chief of the neurocritical-care unit, the field of neurology was abuzz with speculation about several anomalous case studies that had cropped up in the medical literature. The cases all involved patients who appeared to be unconscious but whose brain activity suggested they were alert. One British woman diagnosed as being in a vegetative state was slid into a functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) machine and asked to imagine that she was swinging a tennis racket. She exhibited patterns

of neuronal activity that indicated that she was enthusiastically playing along. Similar results were found in others who had suffered different types of brain injuries and since shown no outward signs of awareness. The neurologists behind the accounts had given the phenomenon a name — "covert consciousness" — but knew little about it.

"Some compared it to locked-in syndrome, except that these patients couldn't even move their eyes, so they seemed to be really locked in," says Claassen. "Which is obviously terrifying."

But how conscious were these people, exactly? Were they fully aware of themselves and their surroundings or only faintly so? And how common was the phenomenon?

Many neurologists were skeptical that it would be possible to gain a proper understanding of covert consciousness because of practical constraints. The fMRI scanner, which produces highly detailed brain images and was therefore the first choice of many scientists studying the condition, was only suitable for observing small numbers of patients

with severe brain injuries. People hooked up to life-support machines and those with metal implants could not easily go into the scanner. Meanwhile, an EEG, although easier to administer, was seen as poorly suited to detecting signs of covert consciousness in bustling hospital settings, where its sensors tended to pick up stray electrical signals from other medical equipment.

"You can deal with that kind of electrical interference pretty easily when using EEG to observe broad patterns of neuronal activity, which is how the tool has traditionally been used, but if

you're attempting to observe a person's individual thoughts, as when looking for signs of covert consciousness, it would be more difficult," says Claassen. "Then you'd face a serious analytic challenge."

Yet as someone who had been working with EEG his entire career and knew its strengths and limitations, Claassen thought that he could adapt the technology for this purpose. He saw advantages in using the relatively cheap tool, which was widely available in hospitals around the world. "If we developed a test that worked, we wanted patients everywhere to have access to it," says Claassen, noting that he drew inspiration from earlier research by Cornell neurologist Nicholas Schiff, who had shown that EEG could be used to detect covert consciousness in quieter settings. So in the summer of 2014, Claassen and his colleagues launched the first major effort to identify people with the condition in a neurocritical-care unit.

On a recent Thursday morning, in a small, sparsely furnished office in CUIMC's neurology department, Qi Shen, a Columbia data scientist, is looking at two large computer screens. Her eyes dart back and forth between the brightly colored digital images of human brains. "Most of the time, it's like we're looking into mist," says Shen, who is a member of Claassen's research team. "And then if we're persistent, we may see a picture emerge — very faintly at first. We can then examine the data in many different ways to determine if we're truly detecting a signal amidst the noise."

The signal that Shen is hunting for? Consider it the shadow of a human thought. It will appear as a distinct and consistent difference in the levels of neuronal activity in various brain regions as a person hears commands played for them over headphones. For someone who is conscious but immobile, this could be an attempt at communication. A tiny salutation back from the void.

"We're looking specifically at regions that are responsible for higher cognitive functions, including language compre-

hension, to make sure we're detecting signals that represent active engagement with the stimuli," says Claassen, who is seated beside Shen.

This work is challenging in part because of the brain's sheer complexity. Even when it is injured and functioning at a reduced level, its hundred billion neurons are still firing constantly. The imprecision of EEG sensors adds to the challenge. "They'll detect electrical activity in brain regions other than the ones we're interested in and even in other parts of the body, including the heart," says Claassen. "We need to do a lot of creative analytics to weed out artifacts from our data."

Despite these challenges, Claassen's team has managed to produce the most detailed descriptions to date of covert consciousness in acutely brain-injured patients. This research, based on observations of hundreds of CUIMC patients and published in numerous papers, suggests that the phenomenon is real, surprisingly common, and a useful indicator of a patient's potential for recovery.

"We're still a couple of years away from incorporating this into practice, because our technology needs fine-tuning," Claassen says, "but we've certainly demonstrated that covert consciousness is a major clinical concern and that detecting it has great potential to guide patient care."

The Columbia researchers' first big discovery on the topic came in 2019, when they showed that about 15 percent of brain-injured patients in comas exhibit signs of covert consciousness, which is also known as cognitive-motor dissociation, or CMD. They also found that these patients are much more likely to awaken from a coma and achieve a robust recovery. Then last year they found evidence that covert consciousness is caused by a communication breakdown between the brain regions responsible for higher-order cognition and the brain regions that control muscle movement.

Still, major questions remain unanswered. Claassen's team has yet to determine, for example, the level of consciousness of the patients who respond

to their commands. The scientists can only say for certain that these patients are sufficiently aware to distinguish between prompts like "start opening and closing your right hand" and "stop opening and closing your right hand." The Columbia scientists have attempted to communicate with these patients in more meaningful ways, inviting them to open or close their hands to convey meaning in the style of Morse code, but the results so far are difficult to inter-

pret. "We're not sure if they're cognitively incapable of participating in a higher-level interaction or if something else might be getting in the way — like they're confused, distracted, or simply frustrated," says Ángela Velázquez, a Columbia physician involved in the project. "But we're continuing to improve our methods and remain optimistic that we may reach them."



Claassen with research-team members Qi Shen and Ángela Velázquez.

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Claassen says that he has spoken to patients who regained their mental faculties after testing positive for covert consciousness, and he's found that so far none can recall their time in the neurocritical-care unit. From Claassen's perspective, this is a mixed blessing. "Of course, it's fortunate that they don't seem to remember a possibly traumatic experience," he says. "On the other hand, it means that this phenomenon remains a mystery, a black box that we cannot peer into." He still operates on the assumption that some coma patients

abilities. "I think it's possible that some of these patients are fully aware, others barely awake, and still others somewhere in between," he says. "Clearly it's a moral imperative for us to try to reach them if possible."

Today, the Columbia researchers are pressing forward in their attempts to make contact with patients who are unresponsive. Their most ambitious plan is to develop a brain-computer interface similar to those that have been used to decode the thoughts of paralyzed people and to help them control keyboards and other communication devices. Claassen imagines that such a technology, by detecting distinct patterns of brain activity, could enable patients to answer yes-or-no questions and even summon hospital staff when they need help. "Are they in pain, uncomfortable, feeling hot or cold, or extremely anxious?" he says. "Being able to express themselves would dramati-

cally improve the care we provide and make them feel less isolated.”

The scientists are also fine-tuning their EEG test to make it more accurate. For now their methods are adequate for studying covert consciousness and estimating its prevalence but not for informing the care of individual patients. For example, people who are conscious but unable to comprehend language — a common result of brain injuries — will slip through the cracks, since their brains will be unable to process spoken requests and demands. (To

“This is a topic of such urgency that we need to break down institutional barriers and pool our knowledge and resources, so that we can get this technology out into the world as rapidly and safely as possible,” says Claassen. The team recently helped physicians at the University of Miami’s teaching hospital implement their testing methods, and it is in conversation with several other institutions that are interested in collaborating.

Perfecting the EEG test is critical, Claassen says, because its results are likely to inform the agonizing decisions

we can identify them early on.” These include people with catastrophic injuries to the midbrain and brainstem. “But in other patients, it’s extremely difficult to predict recovery,” he says. “It’s as much art as science.” For families, he says, the lack of clarity can be exasperating. “These are people who are facing one of the most difficult decisions they’ll ever have to make. What they would like to do is know the future.”

The picture is clouded by a lack of long-term epidemiological data. Since at some hospitals people are kept on life support for less than a week, it’s difficult to know how many of them might ultimately awaken and recover if they were sustained for longer. Claassen and his colleagues have conducted research aimed at addressing this question, too. In one study, published in the journal *Neurocritical Care* in 2022, he and several Columbia colleagues tracked the lives of people who had slipped into comas after suffering severe brain injuries in Japan, where, for a variety of cultural and legal reasons, comatose patients are rarely taken off life support. The Columbia team’s findings offered a measure of reassurance to Western neurologists, showing that Japanese physicians’ initial assessments of their patients’ long-term chances for recovery usually proved accurate. “In other words, patients who might have been removed from life support early on if they’d been in the US, based on the apparent severity of their conditions and other factors, did not, in fact, end up faring well on the whole,” says Claassen. Yet the Columbia researchers also discovered that a small minority of Japanese patients who were initially predicted to have no chance of meaningful recovery did eventually wake up, with some regaining a high level of cognitive function and even managing to live independently. It is the promise of identifying patients like these, whose inner life and potential is hidden from conventional diagnostics, that drives Claassen. Yet he insists that his test for covert consciousness must be made foolproof before it can be introduced



Nick LaRock and Jan Claassen reconnect recently at CUIMC.

identify such patients, Claassen’s team is now expanding the test to include a nonverbal component that looks for brain signals that indicate a person is aware of other types of stimuli.) False positives are also a concern. The key to improving the diagnostic, Claassen says, is to build a much larger database of patient results. To this end, the Columbia doctors continue to screen their own coma patients for covert consciousness, while also making their data-gathering methods and analytic algorithms freely available to the research community, to encourage others to join the effort. Claassen has also helped found an international nonprofit, the Curing Coma Campaign, in part to promote research on covert consciousness.

that many families confront about whether to take their loved ones off life support. In the US and Europe today, the majority of people who remain comatose for more than a couple of weeks following a brain injury are removed from life support. “It’s around that point that you need to perform surgical procedures, including a tracheotomy and the insertion of a feeding tube, to sustain patients,” Claassen says. Decisions about withdrawing life support in such circumstances are ultimately made by families in close consultation with physicians, who often struggle to provide guidance, since an individual’s chances for recovery are difficult to assess. “Clearly some patients will have no chance of waking up,” he says, “and

in the clinic. Imagine, he offers, if a patient were to be disconnected from life support simply for having been erroneously labeled as *not* having covert consciousness. Or if someone were to be kept alive for months or years in an unresponsive state, possibly suffering, on the faulty belief that she did.

“We have to get this absolutely right, so that we don’t mislead people in either direction,” Claassen says.

In some ways, the Columbia team’s research has already influenced the clinical care that they provide. With a deepened appreciation for how unpredictable brain injuries can be, Claassen says, he and his colleagues have rededicated themselves to helping family members navigate the difficult process of serving as surrogates for their loved ones’ care decisions. “We encourage a lot of open conversations about how comatose patients would likely regard the uncertainties surrounding their prognosis and the available care options, and how they would wish to proceed,” he says. And at the bedside, doctors and nurses in Claassen’s unit are careful to avoid speaking about patients as if they are not there. “We always operate on the assumption they can hear us speaking,” Claassen says. “And we encourage their loved ones to do the same.”

After one week in a coma, Nick LaRock began to move his fingers. Then he tilted his head slightly, toward a window. And his breathing changed: rather than inhaling in sync with his ventilator, he suddenly seemed to be battling it, insisting on his own rhythm.

“He sounded like he was gasping at first, and I hollered for the nurse,” remembers his mother, Beth. “But she told me it was a good sign — it meant that he was starting to breathe on his own.”

The next few days brought more surprises, for Nick’s parents and doctors alike. He opened his eyes. Said his name. Held up two fingers. Picked up a cup of water and drank from it. Spoke a full sentence. “Whenever he talked, he

sounded groggy, like he was still half asleep, and he was very confused,” says his father, Joe. “But it was Nick. We could tell. He was coming back to us.”

In the hallways of CUIMC’s neurocritical-care unit that week, Claassen says, doctors and nurses walked a little lighter, smiled a little wider. “When a very sick patient starts showing signs of recovery, it’s definitely something that we celebrate,” he says. “Everybody is excited. You might even hear whoops of joy.”

By the end of his second week at CUIMC, Nick was conversing with his caretakers, albeit in a laconic drawl that his family said was new, and he was cleared for transfer to another hospital closer to his home. Soon after, he entered a rehabilitation center on Long Island, where he began the hard work of starting his life over. Paralyzed on the right side of his body as a result of the brain hemorrhage, he spent the next several months relearning how to walk, navigate stairs, climb in and out of bed, shower, and dress himself. Suffering from mild cognitive impairment, he had to be taught to read, spell, and enunciate certain words.

“In movies, we’re used to seeing people come out of comas and pick up their lives right where they left off, but the reality is very different, especially for people who’ve suffered severe brain injuries,” says Claassen. “Recovery is a very long, slow, and painful process.”

Today Nick is living on his own, in an apartment in Upper Manhattan. A mild-mannered, composed, and agreeable young man, he speaks reflectively about the challenges he’s faced over the past three years. He is not currently working but dreams of returning to the classroom. He taught American history in New York City schools for ten years before his injury and says the job was the core of his identity. “I’ve actually tried to go back to teaching but found it too difficult,” he says. “I don’t know if that will change.” Reading is still arduous for him, and he says he is self-conscious now in a way that he wasn’t before the injury, when he could easily hold thirty-five boisterous teenagers in rapt attention.

“I struggle to find the right words and formulate my thoughts,” he says. “Other people might not notice, but I do, and it bothers me.” Even if he cannot teach, he says, he will be fine. He notes that he’s given up many other things as a result of his paralysis: playing saxophone and ukulele, golfing, bicycling, gaming, slicing vegetables, and wearing shirts with buttons. “And I’ve survived,” he says. “I’m just a different person now. I’m more likely to be found sitting in the park, simply enjoying being here. I feel very lucky.”

From a medical standpoint, Claassen says, Nick’s recovery has been extraordinary. “Considering the severity of his original injury and the length of his coma, it’s tremendous,” he says. “Quite unexpected.”

The supercomputer in Claassen’s office predicted it, though. Back in 2021, every time Columbia researchers asked Nick to imagine opening his hand and then closing it again, they observed two distinct patterns of neuronal activity in his brain’s motor-control center. These patterns closely resembled those seen in fully conscious, healthy subjects who had undergone the same exercise. Nick, like other former patients identified by the Columbia researchers as having covert consciousness, doesn’t remember this. But he doesn’t remember *anything* from three months before his brain hemorrhage until nearly four months after it. “From October 2020 until May 2021 is just kind of wiped from my mind,” he says.

Even if the Columbia team’s experimental new diagnostic had been in clinical use at the time, it would have had little bearing on Nick’s care. He woke up several days before his Columbia doctors would have talked to his parents about long-term life-support options.

So the real question is this: are there many more people lying unresponsive in hospital beds right now who might similarly spring to life, if only given additional time to heal? And if so, is it possible to identify them? “It’s difficult to know for sure — there are uncertainties at every turn here,” says Claassen. “But we need to look, and we are making great progress.” 🦋

A CUP OF COLUMBIA

ALUMNI COFFEE ENTREPRENEURS ARE
ENERGIZING COMMUNITIES THROUGH
COLD BREW, CAPPUCCINOS, CORTADOS,
AND MORE BY JULIA JOY





BEAN & BEAN

AS A HIGH-SCHOOL STUDENT growing up in Queens, Jiyoon Han '13CC would spend weekends working as a barista at Bean & Bean, the coffee shop owned by her parents in New York City's Financial District. "I learned to perfect the craft of making coffee," says Han, who was born in Seoul and moved to the United States at age nine.

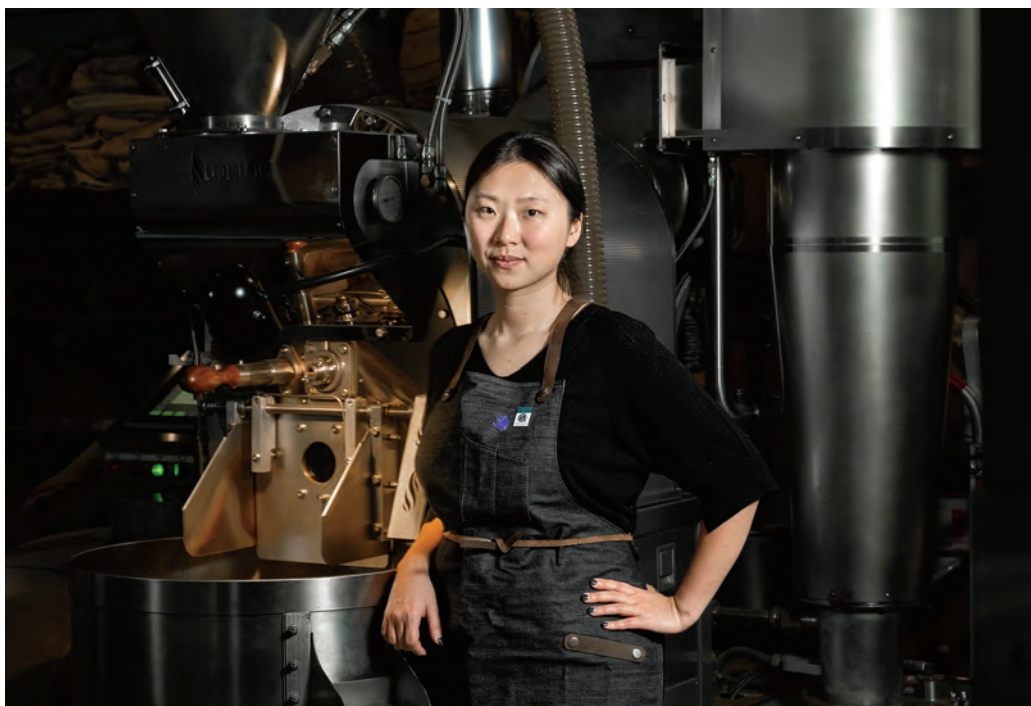
Sixteen years after the coffee shop's 2008 opening, Han, a former Columbia economics and philosophy major with an MBA from Harvard, is applying her business acumen as the co-owner of Bean & Bean. Working with her mother, Rachel, Han has helped oversee the company's four brick-and-mortar locations, an expansion of the Queens roastery, and the launch of an online business. She's also spearheaded the development of new business partnerships with schools such as Barnard and the Manhattan School of Music and corporations such as Meta and Goldman Sachs, which serve Bean & Bean's coffee in their cafés and pantries.

The company, which prioritizes ethical sourcing, makes a point to buy most of its beans from female farmers. "When my mom and I started going on coffee trips together, we realized that women make up more than half of the

labor force but a small minority of farm owners," explains Han. "The value distribution is not proportionate." The mother-daughter duo frequently visits Central and South America to meet coffee growers on their farms. "Over the years, I see how our purchasing directly leads to community improvement," says Han. "Mothers are able to buy computers for their children and build soccer fields for them to play on."

As an arabica Q grader ("like a coffee sommelier"), Han is acutely tuned in to flavor, aroma, acidity, and aftertaste. "A good coffee, when it cools down, tends to shine even more," she says. As an entrepreneur, she is driven by the ways the beverage's demand can fuel economic empowerment and environmental sustainability. Because coffee trees provide habitats for sloths, Bean & Bean uses the jungle creature on its packaging and donates 1 percent of online proceeds to the Sloth Institute, a conservation nonprofit in Costa Rica.

"I care about who the coffee producers are, if the beans are grown on rainforest-protected farms, and if the farm owners are giving back to their communities," says Han. "What I love most about coffee are the stories I'm able to tell through this beverage that millions of people drink every day."



ILLUSTRATIONS BY JO TURNER; OPPOSITE: DIANE SOOYEON KANG

Jiyoon Han



Left: Shanita Nicholas. Right: Sip & Sonder's flagship coffee shop in Inglewood, California.

SIP & SONDER

FOR A LEGAL CONSULTANT with degrees in law, business, and engineering, choosing to open a coffee shop might sound like a surprising career move. But Shanita Nicholas '09SEAS, '13LAW, '13BUS, a triple Columbia alumna with years of experience in the financial industry, chose to do just that when she cofounded Sip & Sonder, a specialty roaster and coffee brand in Los Angeles.

"I always thought, when I retire I'll open a little coffee shop," says Nicholas. The opportunity came sooner than expected once she befriended Amanda-Jane Thomas, a fellow attorney with a combined passion for coffee and community empowerment. In 2017, they opened Sip & Sonder in Inglewood, a city in the Los Angeles metro area. "Through coffee, I actually get to do a lot of the things I studied," says Nicholas, a certified arabica Q grader. "I use my engineering background when looking at thermodynamics in the roastery and my legal background when dealing with placements and partnerships."

With a motto of "come for the coffee, stay for the culture," Sip & Sonder

serves high-end brews and at its flagship location hosts an eclectic array of events, including tastings, jazz performances, open-mic nights, and voter-registration drives. Acknowledging coffee's origin and impact is an integral part of the brand. "Most coffee producers come from communities of color around the world," says Nicholas, who makes an effort to visit Sip & Sonder's growers, whether in East Africa, the

"I use my engineering background when looking at thermodynamics in the roastery."

Caribbean, or Central America. "We home in on telling the story of where coffee comes from and the hands involved in growing, harvesting, and getting it to clients."

Outside of Inglewood, Sip & Sonder operates an outpost in Downtown Los Angeles and will expand to Disneyland in late 2024. The company also

sells coffee through its website, with signature roasts like Native Daughter (Ethiopian, with notes of "black vanilla, strawberry jam, and dark chocolate") available as whole beans or tea-style "coffee bags" for steeping. "Since most people consume coffee at home, we want our products to be accessible," says Nicholas.

Beyond her coffee work, Nicholas still provides legal consulting for startups.

She also co-manages a nonprofit supporting Black entrepreneurs called Sonder Impact, which organizes many community-based education and wellness programs at Sip & Sonder.

Nicholas believes the coffee shop is the perfect venue to bring people together. "It's not your house, not your job, but you can go there and sit by yourself or meet people," she says. "Certainly we hope you buy a coffee when you come in, but there's no entrance fee or time requirement. A coffee shop is a unique place to experience the world around you."

SNAKE RIVER ROASTING

WHEN MEKKI JAIDI '10SEAS first visited Jackson Hole, Wyoming, in 2012, he didn't expect to want to pack up and move his whole life there. "I was instantly hooked," says the native New Yorker and Columbia Engineering graduate, who at the time was working as a financial trader. "I didn't realize these beautiful landscapes and vistas existed in the US. I kept finding ways to come back and make a living here."

Today, Jaidi not only lives in Jackson Hole full-time with his family but

businesses for cleaning, landscaping, and catering. He serves on the boards of several local nonprofits, and in 2021 he acquired Snake River Roasting, a local coffee company specializing in small-batch roasts.

"We are the only specialty coffee roastery here in Jackson Hole," says Jaidi, who, since buying the business, has revamped its downtown café and focused on expanding the e-commerce arm. (Beans in light, medium, dark, and espresso roasts can be purchased online

in single packages or through subscriptions.) "Coffee quality is rated on a scale from zero to one hundred, and anything above eighty is considered specialty," he explains. "We only purchase beans rated eighty or higher."

Jackson Hole's high altitude — 6,300 feet above sea level — also contributes to Snake River's rich flavor profiles, says Jaidi. "Because there's less air pressure up here and the climate is drier, we can roast at lower temperatures. You won't get an ashy or a burnt flavor but an enhancement of the natural fruitiness and chocolatiness of the beans themselves."

But it's the adventurous spirit of Jackson Hole that gives the roastery, which is named after the region's 1,078-mile-long Snake River, its distinct local charm.

"We're inspired by our surroundings," says Jaidi, an avid outdoorsman. "We

harness the energy that we take from skiing, mountain biking, or being out on the lake and channel it into the coffee. Our hope is that if you're drinking coffee at home or if you've visited Jackson Hole, you can kind of taste the memories created here and propel your next adventure." ☕



Mekki Jaidi

has established himself as one of the mountain town's most active entrepreneurs. As the founder of Outpost, a vacation-rental company tailored to the outdoor adventurers who visit the valley and nearby Grand Teton and Yellowstone National Parks, Jaidi owns more than 250 properties as well as

TAYLOR GLENN



MORE ALUMNI COFFEE COMPANIES YOU SHOULD KNOW



BLANK STREET

Originally started in 2020 as a single coffee cart in Brooklyn, this coffee chain cofounded by Issam

Freiha '17CC now has dozens of shops across New York City; Boston; Washington, DC; and the United Kingdom.

HIDDEN GROUNDS

Since opening its first location by the Rutgers campus in 2013, Hidden Grounds, cofounded by Anand Patel '16BUS, has launched five additional shops in New Jersey and one in Brooklyn.

LE CAFÉ

This brand of high-end coffee shops, started in 2013 by Raphael Sakr '12SPS, can be found all across Manhattan, with outposts at Penn Station, Bryant Park, the United Nations, and other city landmarks.

WANDERING BEAR

Founded in 2014 by Matt Bachmann '15BUS and Ben Gordon '15BUS, Wandering Bear specializes in boxed organic cold brew.



Of Gods and Games

DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKER GOTHAM CHOPRA '97CC GOES TO THE MOUNTAINTOP OF SPORTS — AND RETURNS WITH SOME TIMELESS LESSONS
BY PAUL HOND

The parallels between religion and sports are hard to miss: fans are the flock, coaches the priests, athletes the gods, stadiums the temples. There is chanting, praying, singing. There is ecstasy and transcendence, defeat and deliverance. There is ritual. There are rules. There is sacrifice. And when the impossible happens, it is recalled in sacred terms: the Hand of God, the Immaculate Reception, the Miracle on Ice.

But for Gotham Chopra '97CC, a writer, filmmaker, and producer who cofounded, with NFL greats Tom Brady and Michael Strahan, the sports-media company Religion of Sports, the comparison misses the point. "Sports aren't *like* religion," Chopra says. "They *are* religion."

And Chopra, forty-nine, is a true believer. For more than a decade, he has written, directed, and narrated documentary films and docuseries that reveal the power and profundity of sports, whether on the scruffy soccer pitches of remote villages in developing nations or in thunderous multimillion-dollar arenas where elite athletes vie for immortality. Chopra is, above all, a storyteller, and it's his feel for the human pulse at the heart of the action

that makes his narratives so emotionally rich and revealing — and universal.

In his effort to convince even the most ardent skeptic that sports matters, Chopra has gone to the mat by invoking — and interviewing — the gods themselves: Brady, Serena Williams (tennis), Simone Biles (gymnastics), Lindsey Vonn (skiing), the late Kobe Bryant (basketball), Conor McGregor (mixed martial arts), and many more. There is something in Chopra's appreciation of his subjects, and in his thoughtful manner, that brings these world-class athletes out of their shells. They share their secrets, their strategies, their vulnerabilities, their intense competitiveness, and their passion for perfection, embodied in an obsessive focus on practice and detail. Chopra interweaves these unguarded confessions with thrilling footage of athletic high drama.

"Every athlete, from Kobe to Tom to Serena to Simone, addresses this question: how do I do what I do? And the answer is devotion to craft," Chopra says. "To perform at the highest level, to reach that elite status, requires discipline. And that is spiritual. We tend to think of spirituality as just this elevated state of awareness. But really it's about

repetition, process, and structure. That's what religion gives us. And I see that in these athletes.

"Take Serena: she has thirty-three Grand Slam finals across twenty-plus years, and she won twenty-three. She's the greatest ever. And I asked her, 'What's the one quality that enabled you to have all this success?' And she said, 'I guess it would be showing up and doing the work. I can't tell you how many times I woke up and didn't want to go to the court to practice. But I did — I showed up and I did the ritual even when I didn't want to.'"

But what really sets these performers apart, Chopra discovered — the thing that so often determines their fate — is how they respond to failure. "Tom always says, 'It's not about the seven Super Bowls I won. It's about the three Super Bowls I lost. How did I learn to pick myself up?' And that's what faith does. In our darker moments, it's what enables us to keep on going."

Brady is featured in two of Chopra's productions, both of them winners of Sports Emmys: *Tom vs. Time*, part of a "Versus" franchise for Facebook Watch that includes *Stephen vs. The Game* (with Steph Curry) and *Simone vs. Herself* (with Simone Biles); and *Man*

in the Arena: Tom Brady, a gripping ten-part epic for ESPN+ packed with wisdom, revelations, and parables. Whether he's portraying the brotherly rivalry between the backup quarterback Brady (a sixth-round draft pick) and the injured All-Pro starter Drew Bledsoe; or head coach Bill Belichick's blunt, Solomonic decree, after Bledsoe's recovery, to continue to start young Brady instead; or themes of loss and vengeance and redemption, of team over the individual and the individual over himself, Chopra shows us that hard work and a positive attitude are the name of the game, and that there are no shortcuts to greatness. "There's no easy climb," Brady tells us. "No one's dropping you at the top."

Chopra's climb up the mountain of sports media began in childhood. The son of Indian immigrants, Chopra grew up in Boston, where the home

integrative-medicine advocate, never took him to a ball game, but he always supported his son's interests. "Contrary to the stereotype of immigrant parents who say, 'You have to become a doctor or a lawyer or an engineer,' my father always said, 'Do what you're passionate about. Find your purpose,'" Chopra says. "My dad's my biggest cheerleader."

In 1975, the year of Chopra's birth, the Red Sox lost a heartbreaking World Series to the Cincinnati Reds — a blow widely attributed to The Curse, a championship drought that began in 1919 when the team sold Babe Ruth to the New York Yankees. Chopra suffered through the Sox's cruel 1986 World Series loss to the Mets and the soul-crushing 2003 defeat at the hands of the archvillain Yankees for the American League pennant. And so in the 2004 American League Championship Series, when his blighted ball club, down

Angeles Lakers. No house of worship was more magnificent to him than Boston Garden (the Celtics' home, demolished in 1998), no taste sweeter than victory over Magic and Kareem.

When it came time for college, Chopra wanted to leave Boston for New York. He applied to Columbia, eager to wrestle with the Core Curriculum, and got in. "My grandmother, my father's mother, would always tell us, 'Pursue Saraswati, the goddess of knowledge, and then Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity, will become jealous and she will chase you.'"

Chopra entered Columbia in the fall of 1993. That summer, his father, who was then relatively unknown, made his first appearance on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and exploded into the popular culture, bringing the idea of spiritual well-being to the fore. "My dad has had a profound influence in every aspect of my life, but particularly in Religion of Sports," says Chopra. "Again, my dad was not a sports fan. But these days it's interesting: athletes have figured out how to take care of themselves physically, and what they really want now is to talk about the mental and emotional side. When you have success and money and people coming at you, life can become really hard to navigate, and a lot of these athletes are searching for mental, emotional, and spiritual relief."

But that was all still far away in 1993. As an undergrad at Columbia, Chopra studied English, religion, and film — the three pillars of his future occupation. He also met his wife, Candice Chen '97CC, '02VPS, and a lifelong friend, Jay Adya '98CC, '05BUS, who would be instrumental in the creation of Religion of Sports. In Hamilton Hall, the literary ground in which he would later root his modern pop-culture sports stories. "When making a film," says Chopra, "I always ask myself: What's the bigger story here? What's the mythical story? What's the archetypal story?"

After graduation, Chopra looked for on-air TV work and got a freelance gig hosting a show about paranormal



Sports strikes all the human chords: joy, grief, hope, awe.

teams — the Celtics, the Red Sox, and the Patriots — formed his holy trinity. Here was a faith open to anyone, and membership required merely a rooting interest; in return it offered community, catharsis, and the spectacle of real-world myths and wonders.

Chopra was the only believer in the family. Neither his parents nor his sister shared his obsession. His father, Deepak Chopra, the physician and

three games to none against those same Yankees, proceeded to win four in a row — the first Major League team ever to complete such a comeback in the post-season — Chopra felt he had witnessed an honest-to-God miracle.

But his real salvation had always been basketball. He bled green for the great Celtics teams of the 1980s, enthralled by the wizardry of Larry Bird and the rivalry with the Los

TOP: LEFT: UPI / ALAMY; BOTTOM: LEFT: DANIEL DUNN / ICON SPORTSWIRE VIA GETTY IMAGES; RIGHT: PHILIP BIGG / ALAMY

phenomena called *Strange Universe*. That attracted the attention of an agent at United Talent Agency. “I was not yet conscious of the fact that a lot of people were getting to know me because of my dad,” Chopra says. The agency signed Chopra, then twenty-three, and got him a job with LA-based Channel One News, where Anderson Cooper and Lisa Ling had gotten their starts.

“One of the executives over there was a big fan of my dad’s,” Chopra recalls, “and he had this notion of, ‘We’ll spiritualize the news, and it’ll be softer and a little more progressive.’ I picked the job because it was a great job and an interesting opportunity. Then I got there and said, ‘I want to do what Anderson and Lisa are doing.’”

It was a bold play, and Chopra got his wish: for the next few years he did on-camera reporting from hot spots in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Chechnya, and the Middle East. “It was the antithesis of the expectation for the son of Deepak Chopra,” he says. “It was like, ‘I’ll go anyplace where there’s conflict.’”

In his often-grim travels, however, Chopra noticed something remarkable. “In all of these places, there was so much anger and conflict and resentment — until you started talking sports,” he says. “Back then, it was Michael Jordan, the ‘Bad Boy’ Detroit Pistons, or David Beckham and Manchester United. Sports was a way to cut through and connect. Everybody had an opinion. It’s like India and Pakistan in cricket: there’s this holy war, and the only time they ever stop firing rockets at each other is during cricket matches. Everybody wants to watch cricket. No matter where you go, no matter what side, people are sports fans.”

Chopra left Channel One in 2005, and the following year he cofounded a digital-comic venture called Virgin Comics (Sir Richard Branson was an investor), later Liquid Comics, which by 2011 grew into Graphic India, a digital-comic and animation company whose mission is to create inspiring stories and superheroes based in Indian myth and aimed at the country’s

550-million-strong youth market. Then, in 2012, Chopra’s life took a sudden turn: a friend invited him to a philanthropic event, and Chopra found himself seated next to LA Lakers star Kobe Bryant.

Chopra and Bryant were around the same age, and they chatted about the Celtics–Lakers battles of the 1980s. “Kobe said, ‘I want to show you something,’” Chopra recalls. “He invited me to his house in Newport, where he had these old VHS tapes of Celtics–Lakers games that his grandfather had sent him when he was growing up in Italy

“When making a film I always ask myself: What’s the bigger story here? What’s the mythical story?”

[Bryant’s father, Joe Bryant, had played basketball in the Italian league]. He said, ‘I want to show you why Larry Bird is the greatest pump faker: look at his eyes.’ And it turned into this hours-long master class. Kobe was an amazing storyteller and mythmaker, and he had this idea about inspiration. He was like, ‘I play basketball the way Michelangelo paints the Sistine Chapel,’ and ‘When I play ball, I hear Mozart,’ and he wanted to do a documentary on that. But I didn’t really know how to make sense of that as a film.”

By 2013, with the rise of ESPN’s sports-documentary series *30 for 30*, Chopra had taken the dive into the genre. ESPN hired him to do a *30 for 30* on Indian cricketer Sachin Tendulkar, and it was during a three-week shoot in India that Chopra saw on TV that Bryant, thirty-four, had ruptured his Achilles tendon — a potentially career-ending injury. “And I saw Kobe in the locker room saying, ‘I am going to come back from this.’ So I called him that night and said, ‘This is the idea for the documentary:

we follow your comeback.’ A week later, when I got back to the States, we started it. The project ended up taking two years, and we grew really close.

“Kobe was actually really difficult to work with, because he’s so opinionated and combative, just like on the basketball court, and he would push me and push our team. I traveled with him to China and all these places, and the way he impacts people beyond



Gotham Chopra

basketball — I used to always joke with him, like, ‘There’s the religion of sports, but there’s also the cult of Kobe.’ My experience with him was a catalyst for a docuseries idea that would become *Religion of Sports*. I realized that all the things that my dad had started to explore in his career and life around spiritual and wisdom traditions — all of it existed in sports, and that became the thesis for the show.”

Chopra sold the show to AT&T’s Audience Network. Meanwhile, he had become friendly with Strahan (who had recently become a host of ABC’s *Good Morning America*) and Brady (pushing forty and still playing football at the highest level), and in 2016 he invited them both to sign on as executive producers.

“I always understood the ‘religion of sports’ idea as a fan — joining a community that’s bigger than you, having faith in the irrational, surrendering control of your emotions,” Chopra says. “But these guys had it from the other point of view, like, ‘Man, I know what it’s like to be in the middle of the field and everybody’s invested in me, so how do I find that space in myself to be my best?’” Brady and Strahan loved the idea and became Chopra’s partners.

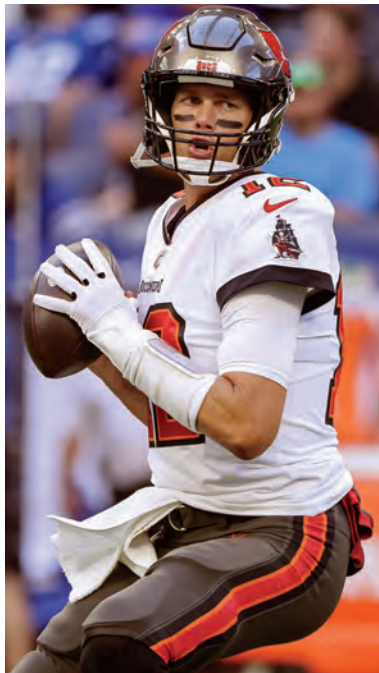
“Gotham had just set up the first season of the show *Religion of Sports* and started to conceptualize building this out as a company,” says Sankaran. “What could the company look like? How big would it be? Would we focus purely on unscripted material? Then we raised our first small round of capital and things became very real.”

Today, Religion of Sports has a team of fifty, offices in LA and London, its own postproduction facilities, and many

learn how to win, how to lose, and how to get back up after falling.”

As the religion’s biggest booster, Chopra has heard the doubters. Usually, he says, people will object to any conflation of sports and religion on the grounds that sports is tainted by scandal and corruption and violence and money. But Chopra sees no contradiction. “There’s a dark side of sports, just like there’s a dark side of religion,” he says. And he points out that when

“To perform at the highest level, to reach that elite status, requires discipline. And that is spiritual.”



From left: Serena Williams, Tom Brady, Stephen Curry.

Chopra was assembling a dream team, and he wasn’t done. His friend Jay Adya, now a sports-media investor, told Chopra he should think bigger than a series. Chopra agreed: there was *Religion of Sports* the show, but there could also be Religion of Sports the concept — a media brand that could produce all sorts of stories. Yes, Adya told him, but you’ll also need someone on the business end, someone who can raise capital. And Adya knew just the person: Ameeth Sankaran ’05BUS, a sports-loving entrepreneur from Texas. Adya made introductions, and Sankaran became Chopra’s business partner and the CEO of Religion of Sports.

broadcast and streaming partners. In April, the company took its first foray beyond sports — a four-part series on rock star Jon Bon Jovi called *Thank You, Goodnight: The Bon Jovi Story* — and this summer it will release the docu-series *In the Arena: Serena Williams*. Earlier this year, Chopra published a book, *Religion of Sports: Navigating the Trials of Life Through the Games We Love*. Chopra has always seen sports as one of life’s great teachers. “That’s why we put our kids in sports programs,” he says. “Not because we believe they’re going to become Steph Curry or Serena Williams. But because we learn from sports — we learn about teamwork, leadership, the value of practice. We

it comes to the double-edged sword of tribalism, sports gets it right: “We settle our differences on the field, and then we shake hands.”

One of the most poignant moments in Chopra’s filmography comes in a *Religion of Sports* episode titled “The Promised Land,” about two high-school football teams on opposite sides of the southern US border. Chopra takes us into the lives and communities of the two teams — one from Tornillo, Texas, the other from Juárez, in the Mexican state of Chihuahua — as they prepare to face each other in Tornillo. Going back and forth across the border fence, Chopra paints a portrait of such depth and sensitivity that the viewer’s sympa-

LEFT: ELISA / GETTY IMAGES; CENTER: MICHAEL HONEY / GETTY IMAGES; RIGHT: SAM HODDEE / GETTY IMAGES

thies are evenly divided. How do you root for both teams?

Then comes the game, under the Friday-night lights. It's never really close. Amid joy and despair, time expires on a lopsided score. Victory. Loss. We feel the tug of both. The two teams shake hands, and then, in the middle of the field, the players gather together to kneel and listen to the two coaches. The Juárez coach, humble in victory, delivers his speech in Spanish: "At the end of the day, we are football players and football brothers. Nothing will separate us. Not a wall, not a river. Nothing. Those who create borders are only men. And as long as we don't want to be separated by those borders, it will never happen."

The American coach, dignified in defeat, then moves into the middle of the scrum. The players on both sides stand and crowd around him, and they all raise their helmets in the air. "Thank you guys for coming," the coach says, "and good luck in the rest of the season. Everybody good?" Yes, everybody was good. "Football' on three. One. Two. Three —" "*Football!*"

There's nothing more to say. Chopra jumps to a long overhead shot of the field, which glows emerald green in the Texas night. Then he cuts to black.

It's a moment of storytelling grace, but Chopra — like Brady, like the kids from Juárez — would never claim the success as his alone. Every believer in the religion of sports knows that winning is a communal affair, that athletes need their teammates, coaches, and fans to lift them up, and that heroes aren't born but made.

"As a filmmaker I get a lot of credit, but I'm only as good as the people I surround myself with," Chopra says. "And I learned this from Tom, who will say, 'I'm the quarterback, I got all the credit. But it was the coaching staff. It was my offensive linemen. It was my receivers. It was the defense keeping games close enough so that what I did made a difference.'

"Tom always says, 'The team, the team, the team.' And I agree." 🍷



BLESSED ARE THE ATHLETES

SPORTS WAS ONCE EMBEDDED IN RELIGIOUS RITUAL

It was **1969**, and Allen Guttman '56GSAS was seated in a soccer stadium in Berlin amid sixty thousand screaming fans. Guttman found it interesting that Germans were crazy about soccer just as Americans were fanatical about other sports. He started to write about the phenomenon, and his research quickly went beyond a comparison of the two cultures. He discovered a much bigger divide. The resulting work, *From Ritual to Record* (Columbia University Press, 1978), examined the difference between modern sports and the sports of all previous eras.

"The most important difference is that in the past, in many societies, sports were a part of religious worship," says Guttman, who is professor emeritus of English and American studies at Amherst College. "The ancient Olympic Games were part of the worship of Zeus. The Apaches of the Southwest US had an annual foot race for adolescent boys that was meant as a religious ritual. Mayan religion included ball games in which the losers were sacrificed [some scholars believe that it was the winners who were sacrificed]. Sumo was part of the Japanese Shinto religion.

"But this is absolutely not the case in modern sports, unless you want to define them as a secular religion — which is actually what Pierre de Coubertin [founder of the modern Olympic Games, which date to 1896] did on many occasions."

According to Guttman, the connection between sports and religious rites began to fray in late antiquity. "Roman sports had been, to some degree, a part of religious ritual, but early Christians found this horrific. After the fourth-century Roman emperor Constantine converted to Christianity, the Olympics were banned and the site was destroyed."

Suspicion of sports continued through the Middle Ages, says Guttman, when the Catholic Church forbade them. In the early seventeenth century, English Puritans attempted the same. "King James I decreed that sports were fine on Sunday, if the pious went first to church. So it was clear that there was separation between sports and religion. Yet in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, fundamentalist Christians still denounced modern sports as pagan ritual."

But there was another force transforming the character of sports, Guttman says. The Romans began to count the number of times a charioteer won a race. In 1695, England's Samuel Watson invented the first stopwatch. Sports was soon captured by a kind of cult of quantification, in which numbers and records, not religious ritual itself, became sacred. By the modern era, statisticians had devised batting averages, field-goal percentages, passer ratings. Technology allowed race times to be measured to the thousandth of a second. Call it the religion of stats.

In contrast, neither times nor distances were measured at the ancient Olympic Games. "They didn't quantify anything," Guttman says. "The games were for Zeus, who didn't worry about how fast his worshippers ran or how far they threw a discus. He cared only that some athletes won and others lost."



SOMETHING WEIRD THIS WAY COMES



WITH FIVE COLLECTIONS OF GENRE-BENDING
SHORT STORIES AND NOW, FINALLY, A NOVEL,
2018 MACARTHUR FELLOW KELLY LINK '91CC
HAS HELPED MAKE FANTASTICALLY STRANGE
BOOKS THE NORM BY REBECCA SHAPIRO



When you enter Kelly Link's wild and wonderful world of fiction, it's best to check all expectations at the door. There's no road map for the twists and turns she takes, no warm-up for the workout she gives the imagination.

In Link's inventive landscapes, places that start out as commonplace quickly become unrecognizable. Characters are almost never who they seem to be. In her alternative realities, magical fairy-like creatures keep human servants, parents microchip their children, animals talk, overnight trains barrel toward hell. And the crazy lady sitting next to you at the bar might just be the moon herself.

Link's stories have been called fantasy, science fiction, literary fiction, magical realism, horror, modern-day fairy tales, modern-day ghost stories, and steampunk. With her love of the bizarre, she has been compared to writers like Shirley Jackson, Angela Carter, and Haruki Murakami. Her books are bold and original and buck categorization. But despite her unwillingness to bow to convention in either form or genre, Link has been enormously successful, both critically and commercially. She has been a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and the Kirkus Prize, has won the World Fantasy Award, and was a 2018 MacArthur Fellow.

This February, Link released her much-anticipated debut novel *The Book of Love*, marking a turning point in her already eventful literary career. Unsurprisingly, it too is an amalgam of many things. "It's my love letter to all the kinds of narratives that have given me immense pleasure over the years: romance novels, gothic novels, young-adult fantasy, CW shows like *The Vampire Diaries*, and other melodramas of all shapes and sizes," Link says. "I hope it gives my readers some joy too."

For Link, books have been a constant companion for as long as she can remember. She was born in Miami, but her family moved often during her childhood. Her father was a minister, though he eventually left the church to become a psychologist. The family bounced from Tennessee to the Philadelphia suburbs and then back to Miami before finally settling in North Carolina when Link was in high school. Link says that she was happy in most of the places that she lived, as long as she had access to nature.

"In Pennsylvania there was a gang of neighborhood kids that I ran around with, and we would play in the woods near our houses," she says. "In Miami, I loved being close to the ocean. And I loved the lizards and other creatures hanging around. If there was a frost in the winter, iguanas would start falling out of the trees. It was like something out of a fairy tale."

Fairy tales and ghost stories were the through line of Link's childhood. She grew up in a family that cherished books, with parents who read to Link and her two younger siblings every

night. Link's father favored J. R. R. Tolkien, and together they made it through his entire oeuvre. "I think *The Hobbit* is probably the book that influenced me the most as a writer," Link says. Her mother loved C. S. Lewis, and Link remembers following her around the house, begging her to read just one more chapter from the *Chronicles of Narnia*. Once Link learned to read, she says, it was a miracle that anyone saw her again.

"I have very strong and vivid memories of the libraries in each of the places where we lived," Link says. "At the Coral Gables library in Florida, there was no limit to how many books you could check out; to me that was heaven."

While Link explored all kinds of books as a kid, she loved anything a little spooky or scary. Anthologies of ghost stories piled up in the corners of her bedroom (Edith Wharton was a particular favorite), and as she got older, she started gravitating toward the science fiction and fantasy sections, especially things like the *Earthsea* series from Ursula K. Le Guin '52GSAS. "But really, I liked anything with a lurid cover."

Link played around with writing in high school — she worked on her school's literary magazine and experimented with poetry. "I had fabulous teachers who encouraged me," she says. "But I was much more of a reader than a writer. There were so many great books out there that I wanted to read, so that's how I wanted to spend my time."

When it came time to apply for college, Link was attracted to Columbia's Core Curriculum: "I liked the idea of starting life with this curated set of knowledge," she says. And as a lover of Broadway musicals and great bookstores, she was enticed by New York City. But it was her first visit to campus that convinced her to apply. "It felt like a little walled city of its own," Link says. "I couldn't imagine anything better than that."

At Columbia, Link started writing fiction in earnest. She took classes with the novelist Raymond Kennedy and began working on a novel about a woman whose son has inexplicably dug an enormous hole in the family's backyard. Kennedy showed the first few chapters to his agent and editor, and they encouraged Link to keep going. But she abandoned it for a more immediate pursuit: travel.

"I'm a writer who doesn't write if there are other things to do," Link says. "That remains true to this day."

Link spent her junior year abroad, at St. Andrews University in Scotland. At that time, travel arrangements were made through agencies, and the one she used was holding a sweepstakes for a big international trip. "The final question was, 'Why do you want to go around the world?'" Link says. "I answered, 'Because you can't go through it.'"

Link won the trip, and after graduating from Columbia she spent six months traveling to places like Malaysia, Thailand, and New Zealand. When she returned, she found she wasn't

tempted to finish the novel. Instead, she moved back to North Carolina and applied to graduate school.

Link earned her MFA from UNC Greensboro, but says she felt boxed in by the traditional approach to storytelling taught in the program. “We’d read a story by Raymond Carver, and that was the standard-bearer for what the short story should be,” she says. “I admire Raymond Carver, but I wanted to take elements of that kind of writing and go in my own direction.” After graduating, she enrolled in the Clarion Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers’ Workshop, then held at Michigan State University, thinking that was where she would find her people. But at Clarion, too, her writing didn’t adhere to the conventions of the form.

Link decided to move to Boston to share an apartment with one of her former Columbia suitemates, and she got a job at a used bookstore, a Newbury Street fixture called Avenue Victor Hugo. There she met a kindred spirit, a bearded Scotsman named Gavin Grant. Grant had just launched a small, low-budget zine called *Lady Churchill’s Rosebud Wristlet*, full of “writing that reflected back some of the weirdness of the world.” Grant and Link started dating (they would eventually marry), and soon Link was coediting the magazine.

Out of that little zine (which recently published its forty-seventh issue) grew another, more ambitious project — a small publishing company called Small Beer Press. Grant, who had worked for the American Booksellers Association, knew the fundamentals of book marketing and publicity. And Link had experience editing for literary magazines. “We had a lot of conversations with people who ran small presses to try to learn from them, and eventually we got to the point where we knew we’d make mistakes, but we hoped we would at least make brand-new mistakes,” Link says.

At the time, Link remembers, there was a deep divide between genres. Major publishers slotted books into strict categories, and science fiction, fantasy, and romance — called “genre fiction” — were marketed completely differently from literary fiction. Short fiction was almost universally ignored. “We realized that there was a gap in the market: short stories that straddle the line between genre and literary fiction,” Link says. “That’s what we focused on.”

The realization was grounded in personal experience. Link had been shopping her own first collection of stories to the big publishing houses. And while many agents and editors expressed interest in her writing, they all asked her the same questions: What *was* this book? How would they market it? And, even more frequently, did she have a novel that they could look at instead?

So Grant and Link decided to publish her book themselves. In 2001 they released *Stranger Things Happen*, eleven stories with the funny, slightly ominous, and definitely off-kilter sensibility Link would come to be known for. A dead man sends letters to his ex-wife. A librarian develops a crush on a girl whose father collects artificial noses. New York is invaded by sexy, blond aliens — and so on.

“We could immediately think of other writers with work like mine that we wanted to put out,” Link says. Slowly they started to amass a list. Most of their writers were unknowns, but as Small Beer started to build a reputation, they were also able to publish what they call “sideways work” by established writers like *New York Times* bestseller Karen Joy Fowler and even Link’s literary hero, Ursula K. Le Guin. “We really just love what we do,” Link says. “It’s groovy to be able to put out the work that we like, without constraints.”

Novelist Karen Russell ’06SOA, a Pulitzer Prize finalist, was one of the then-novice writers who used Small Beer Press as a launching pad for her literary career. *Lady Churchill’s Rosebud Wristlet* put out her first-ever published work, a prose poem called “Help Wanted.” “To this day, it is one of my proudest accomplishments,” she says. “In addition to being a supernova herself, Kelly has supported so many writers and made a home for so much genre-straddling work. She and Gavin have taken exquisite care of an evolving literary family tree.”

Meanwhile, Link’s own work started to collect accolades, which caught the attention of some of the traditional houses that had once rebuffed her. Stories in *Stranger Things Happen* won the Nebula, Tiptree, and World Fantasy Awards, and the collection was named a best book of the year by both *Salon* and the *Village Voice*. Her next story collection, *Magic for Beginners*, published in 2005 by Small Beer, picked up even more critical acclaim. Three years later, Link for the first time sold a book to a bigger house — a young-adult collection called *Pretty Monsters*, which was published by Viking.

But if the buzz around Link and her work built slowly for years, it hit new heights by 2016. She signed a two-book deal with Random House, for another story collection and (finally) a novel. The collection she wrote, *Get in Trouble*, became a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. “It was sort of beyond comprehension,” Link says. “I thought just getting published by Random House was the pinnacle of literary success. The rest of it has all been a big surprise.”

After completing *Get in Trouble*, Link started working on the novel. It was the first time she had tackled a longer narrative project since college. “I realized that my stories were getting longer and longer, and one of my friends told me, ‘If you don’t write a novel on purpose soon, you’re going to write one by accident,’” Link says. “I think no matter how successful you are as a short-story writer, there’s always going to be some part of your audience who wants to know when you’re going to write a novel. I felt a little bit like I owed it to them.”

While Link was curious about what it would be like to immerse herself in a different form, she admits that “it felt much more like a slog.” Over the course of the eight years that it took her to write *The Book of Love*, which Random House published this February, she ended up writing and publishing a whole other collection of stories (*White Cat, Black Dog*, which came out in 2023).

At 628 pages, *The Book of Love* is a magnum opus. It tells the story of three teenagers in a coastal Massachusetts town

who find themselves back in their high-school music classroom after having disappeared for a year. But things are not as they seem. The teens didn't just disappear; they've been dead. And their dorky music teacher is actually a supernatural being from the underworld who, along with some nefarious-seeming colleagues, will decide whether to allow the teens to remain among the living or drag them back to eternal damnation. *Publishers Weekly* hailed the book as a "masterpiece," the *New York Times* called it "profoundly beautiful," and *Time* described it as "a heart-wrenching exploration of love and loss."

"I knew that I wanted to explore different kinds of love stories. Romantic love, familial love, community love," Link says. "A central question of the book became what anchors us to the world; what are the things that make us who we are. I used some of the fantasy elements to explore those universal questions."

That seamless blending of genres with a serious moral center remains Link's trademark. But thanks to her trailblazing, she is no longer alone. The once strict boundaries of literary fiction have blurred, allowing for more imaginative storytelling. Even MFA programs are seeing an uptick in applicants interested in writing speculative fiction, a genre that encompasses supernatural, futuristic and otherwise fantastical works.

Victor LaValle '98SOA, an award-winning novelist and professor at Columbia's School of the Arts who calls Link an "absolute genius of a writer," says that he's been seeing MFA students experiment more openly with genre fiction. "This kind of writing has always been with us — at its best, think Kafka, Murakami, or Toni Morrison. Using the unreal to offer new insight on the real is an exciting approach to storytelling," he says. "In the past, students may have felt the need to disguise, or apologize for, this method, but many now openly cite various genres as influences, proudly, and I'm thrilled when they do so."

In 2018, Link was awarded a MacArthur grant for "pushing the boundaries of literary fiction." Both as a writer and as the founder and publisher of Small Beer Press, the MacArthur committee wrote, Link serves as "a source of inspiration for many young writers dissatisfied with traditional distinctions between genres."

Russell says that Link's influence on other writers and artists — herself included — can't be overstated. "A good friend of mine is working on a theatrical adaptation of 'The Specialist's Hat,' and he sent me the sublime music her story inspired him to compose," she says. "It made me think about how many kinds of storytellers and artists adore Kelly Link, how many paintings and tattoos and songs and stories her work has inspired. She has this uniquely generous imagination that is so capacious, so welcoming. It's the kind of genius you invite to influence you and pray will."

These days Link does most of her writing from a cozy yellow farmhouse in Northampton, Massachusetts, which she shares

with Grant, a labradoodle named Koko, a slew of chickens named mostly for dragons, and their teenager. Link and Grant moved to the small, artsy city years ago, when they needed space to run the press out of their home.

Recently, Grant and Link have made the difficult decision to put Small Beer Press on indefinite hiatus, since Grant is suffering from long COVID. But Link has another community outlet that keeps her busy. After she won the MacArthur, the family used some of the grant money to open Book Moon Books in nearby Easthampton. Having spent much of her early career as a bookseller, Link says that she feels at home back in a store. And choosing books to make available to the public feels similar, in some ways, to publishing them.

"So much of our work has been getting books that we love into the hands of readers who also love those books," Link says.

For a writer who often avoids writing, Link says it's always been important for her to have other professional and creative outlets. "I'm most productive when I have a period of time working at the store, for example, and then a period of time teaching, and then a period writing."

She's also found over the last twenty years that she thrives in the company of other writers. Before the pandemic, she says, she met up most days with the novelists Holly Black and Cassandra Clare to work, talk, and bounce ideas off each other.

Now she mostly writes alone, carving out chunks of time in between her other obligations. But she still needs buzz in the background — whether it's music on her headphones, conversations with her family, or even checking social media in between sentences. "I find that I write better when the part of my brain that doesn't like writing is occupied," she says. "I like to be reminded that life is still happening all around me."

It is the alchemy that Link performs on her observations of that everyday life that makes her writing so special. Link says she's often drawn to fantasy as a way to understand the world around her. "In real life we are often confronted with things that are horrific next to things that are mundane," she says. "We still have to sit with those things. Fantasy can be a way to experience that strangeness."

But what is so singular about Link, according to Russell, is the way she's able to make her undeniably weird books also feel inviting. What should be disquieting is also, in a way, a comfort.

"When I read Kelly's stories, I feel that the surprises in them are bottomless, and at the same time I get a back-of-the-brain déjà vu, a kind of dream familiarity that is both inexplicable and somehow reassuring," she says. "Fairy tales go back a long way and connect us to the youngest and oldest parts of ourselves. Link's stories touch so many of us, I'd venture, because they do the same." 🍷

"A CENTRAL QUESTION OF THE BOOK BECAME WHAT ANCHORS US TO THE WORLD."



The Challenges of Reporting in an Election Year

Why disinformation and the dearth of local news may shape the way voters think about issues and pose a threat to democracy

Jelani Cobb, the dean of Columbia Journalism School, Peabody Award-winning filmmaker, and longtime staff writer at the *New Yorker*, discusses the complexities of journalism in 2024.



There's nothing like a presidential-election year to fire up the media. Does this mean people will be paying more attention to news? And does journalism still shape voters' thinking on issues?

I do think people will be paying attention to news; they're already paying attention. And yes, journalism does shape the way voters think about issues, but it no longer shapes it as it once did. Today's journalists are competing with information sources from all over the spectrum, many of which are not reliable, not vetted, not professional. So the perspectives people have on what happens in the election will realistically be some combination of information they receive from high-quality, vetted news sources and an array of misinformation and disinformation that has proliferated since the 2016 election.

One hypothesis about this glut of mis- and disinformation is that it arises from the siloing of news consumers around dubious sources that simply echo their own preconceptions.

Siloing and people's reliance on news that most closely conforms to their worldview is certainly one factor. That has been a problem going back a century or more, to the days of the "newspaper wars," when even smaller American cities had several daily newspapers, each aimed exclusively at a specific type of reader who disliked and distrusted the readers of all the competing newspapers. That pattern continues, and has intensified, in the digital age. But the other factor is the dearth of information, period. We are dealing with the siloing problem in the context of news deserts. Increasingly, in communities all over the country, citizens have no access to local news. That exacerbates the problem.

These news deserts presumably reflect the financial struggles of the news business across all media. Dwindling advertising revenue has triggered layoffs, cutbacks, and outright shutdowns at

hundreds of media outlets. Is there a positive side to this grim picture?

The challenges to journalism are significant, there's no doubt about that. And yes, the predominant concern is resources. But even as we're grappling with these difficulties, we're also seeing an unprecedented level of innovation. It's important to keep track of that. We have an emerging and vital nonprofit sector in journalism. News organizations such as Documented [a nonprofit digital-news site focused on immigration founded by Max Siegelbaum '16JRN and Mazin Sidahmed '16JRN] are experimenting with novel methods of dissemination, sending out targeted information to their readers by text message. We have not seen this much innovation on the technical side of news in easily a century.

We still need to figure out how to create sustainable news organizations outside the ecosystem of social media, but there are success stories. The *Texas Tribune* is the nonprofit news website that people point to most commonly, but there's also VTDigger in Vermont and *Sahan Journal* in Minnesota [founded by Mukhtar M. Ibrahim '17JRN], among



others. These are news organizations that have sprung up in the aftermath of a serious decline in institutional news in those locations. They have broken news, covered important stories, and figured out how to staff up and find a stable financial model through a combination of philanthropy, memberships, and public events.

One phenomenon that is constantly invoked in discussions of journalism today is the lack of trust consumers have in so-called “mainstream media.” Where does that come from?

The decline of trust is tied to a couple of dynamics, one of which is the decline of local news. While polls reveal decreasing trust in local news, the level of distrust is not nearly as high as it is with national news. That’s because local news is *local*. The person who reported a story might have a kid in the same class at school as your kid, or the editor is somebody you went to high school with. There’s that network of personal ties. Also, in these small markets, it’s imperative that the news organization keep all its readers or viewers in its fold, so polarization is much less likely to happen.

Thomas Jefferson had this idea of American democracy as fundamentally local. In many ways, Jefferson’s idea has held up over time. The crisis of trust in journalism is really a crisis of local news organizations. As I’ve said elsewhere, we saw a similar crisis of trust in medicine during the pandemic. Part of that is due to the fact that one hundred million people in the United States do not have access to a primary-care physician. In other words, those people lack any kind of *local* relationship with the medical establishment. It’s easy for people to become skeptical about large, anonymous institutions. That’s the real driver of the lack of trust in media. The great preponderance of this situation is driven by the dearth of those local, individual connections people make with the news they consume. When local news goes away, trust goes with it.

The other factor with trust is related to what everyone saw with the George Santos fiasco in Congress. The big question was, how could this happen? These gigantic lies he told about his résumé, his name, his background — all these fundamental things. How can anyone trust a press that missed all that?

Of course, the real problem, as most journalists will tell you, is rarely the big lies. The most pernicious lies are small, where someone shades a number on a spreadsheet or skews some data about how carcinogenic a particular chemical in a product may be. And to notice discrepancies of that sort requires a kind of meticulous, detail-oriented reporting that takes time and, again, resources.

You link local news to Jeffersonian ideas of democracy, and of course the nation’s founders believed a free, unfettered press was essential to democracy. Can you elaborate on this relationship?

I think Americans have largely adopted a seventh-grade social-studies idea of journalism’s connection to democracy: we believe in some general, vague way that an informed public is a good thing. But because we have tended to think of American democracy as unassailable, we have relegated to the background the real, hard ethical questions about how a pro-democracy press operates. And those questions are fundamental. Do we really benefit society by giving the

horse-race version of a political story? Do we further polarization by covering politics the way we cover sports? If there are Yankees fans who loathe Red Sox fans and vice versa, there's no fundamental societal concern there. It becomes a thornier issue when people of opposing political parties view each other with that same sort of unabashed contempt. We haven't given enough thought to those kinds of concerns — even when it comes to practical matters, such as how do we cover a disputed election? When do we call something a lie? That was a question we fumbled in the last election cycle, among the many others we had to think about.

Yes, that's part of the problem. The other part is that we should be drilling down on policy, not personality, looking not at whether a public figure won the week or messaged effectively but at the issues they're talking about and the implications of what they're saying about those issues. Margaret Sullivan, my colleague at the journalism school, has talked a great deal about this. When I became dean, I launched the slogan "Reporting begins here." This commitment has been a remarkably consistent mainstay of this institution for the 112 years it has existed. We teach reporting, and the fundamental skills of reporting have remained the same. We may have different structures, different

to preserve access, because if you say something critical about an elected official or point out an inconsistency, that person may not talk to you and your colleagues again.

Over the last two presidential election cycles, many news outlets benefited from what some called the "Trump bump." Out of love or hate, people were interested in Donald Trump, and readership, viewership, and subscriptions went up. So news outlets bombarded the public with Trump content, positive and negative. How does journalism hang on to its core values in such a situation?

There's no guarantee that will happen again in this election cycle. But people were more likely to read what the *New York Times* was saying or to tune in to a particular news station or podcast because there was a great deal of alarm and concern. Fear is often good for circulation. That's a conflict of interest that's been baked into most of our media systems from the outset. The profit incentive may not align with the ethical and democratic incentives. We are concerned these days about the ownership of news organizations, and certainly about the kind of hedge-fund takeovers that have resulted, in many instances, in the stripping down of newspapers for parts. Yet the wealthy have owned American news media for a long time. The Columbia Journalism School is housed in Pulitzer Hall, a building created and funded by an extremely wealthy and powerful newspaper magnate. This concern is not new.



Jelani Cobb

So how does one practice journalism in the true interests of democracy?

Journalism must be about the facts. It must have objectivity. And we've had a lot of debate and consternation about objectivity. Objectivity does not require that we treat people's arguments or statements as if they have an equality of merit. It requires that there be equality of scrutiny.

Are you referring to the so-called false equivalence that the press is often accused of adhering to — blindly treating two sides in a debate as equally legitimate?

technologies, different approaches, different ethics. But skeptical inquiry into facts that have been obscured from the public is what we do. That is the business we're in.

So why has journalism devolved into the horse race and the false equivalence?

I think that initially, especially with covering politics, taking a sports-like approach seemed a novel way to get people interested in civic concerns that they might not otherwise pay attention to — but with the result that we became a more divided society. And some of this false equivalence is done

So if conflicts of interest are built into almost every journalism model we have, what is the solution?

We need lots of different models. We need nonprofit papers. We need public media. We need large media. We need small, local, independent media. We need all kinds of different media structures. Here's a parallel I use involving election polls: You have ten polls, and all of them are flawed in some way, but

not in the same way. The best thing you can do in this case is to average those polls. By averaging them, you minimize the weight of any individual flaw. That's what we have to do with our news organizations. We have all these models; none of them is perfect. But if we have an assortment of many different competing models, the shortcomings of any one model are minimized.

Let's turn to content. The *New York Times* is currently enjoying great success by offering readers an expansive range of coverage that runs from hard news and opinion pieces to stories on beauty, fashion, celebrities, and health — not to mention an ever-expanding universe of daily word games. Many *Times* loyalists bemoan this “softening” of serious journalism. What's your take?

I'm keenly aware, as I mentioned, that our journalism school was founded by Joseph Pulitzer '52HON. The gem of Pulitzer's newspaper empire was the *New York World*, a paper known for its hard-hitting investigative journalism. Do you know what one of its greatest innovations was? Its cartoons. Readers *loved* the *World's* cartoons, and the *World* splurged on them, paying top fees to the best, funniest artists to create them, because management knew they attracted readers. Even in the best of times, the most respected newspapers published horoscopes and other quotidian, not at all lofty, elements. These innovations were immensely profitable. But the fact is, those daily, reliable features — the lifestyle, the sports coverage — build loyalty and help forge the kind of relationship with a reader that allows them to believe a newspaper when it reports that a city-council member is taking bribes.

Recently, people became alarmed and angry that, for instance, *USA Today* hired a Taylor Swift reporter. But readers have a variety of interests, and the ability to get their recipes, their dating advice, their celebrity news — all the information that pertains to the multiple areas of their lives — is part of the entire experience of what news organizations provide.

One focus of Columbia Journalism School is climate reporting, which you've said needs to be incorporated into every aspect of journalism today. Can you explain?

When we think about the big challenges on the horizon, climate is number one, globally. But one of the errors I think news organizations made when they first started covering this issue was to assign the topic to a dedicated climate

“We may have different structures, different technologies, different approaches, different ethics. But skeptical inquiry into facts that have been obscured from the public is what we do. That is the business we're in.”

reporter, as if climate only happened in one place. Now, there's nothing wrong with having a dedicated climate reporter — it's a great idea, actually. But this approach overlooked the extent to which stories being covered elsewhere in that news outlet were also climate stories. So many stories are climate-related! When you look at labor and the labor market — one of our Columbia Journalism Investigations teams did a series on this — a serious problem right now is the spiking number of outdoor workers who are dying of heat exhaustion. That's a labor story, but it's also a climate story. When you look at migration and immigration, you're often seeing refugees escaping the effects of climate change, so if you're covering immigration, you need to have an understanding of climate change in your toolkit. The economy, too. Think about all the ways that climate is affecting agriculture. Or global health worldwide. There is no story in which climate doesn't have its invisible hand somewhere.

The physical threats to journalists seem to be increasing, despite the fact that journalists covering conflict are supposedly protected by international law. Is this danger perception or reality?

It is real. The Committee to Protect Journalists has noted that, even before the hostilities broke out between Hamas and Israel, the number of journalists killed in 2023 was already

far above the previous year's number. Journalists have died in Mexico; they have died in Ukraine. We've also seen a generally more hostile attitude toward journalists in India. It's important to keep track of that. And not only are those deaths a tragedy, but they are also a barometer of the crackdowns on civil rights and civil liberties in those places where journalists are reporting.

We teach our journalism students about mechanisms for remaining safe in the midst of conflict. Those calculations constantly change, but what hasn't changed is the fact that journalism has always been a dangerous undertaking. The field is becoming more complicated and more trying for those who practice it, but fortunately there are still plenty of dedicated journalists all over the world who are willing to put themselves out there — often at the risk of physical harm — to get the story that will help readers, viewers, or listeners understand what's going on in the world around them.

— Lorraine Glennon

EXPLORATIONS

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How much plastic is in this water? You don't want to know

Scientists have long known that bottled water is tainted with microscopic bits of plastic, but now, for the first time, Columbia researchers have developed tools to count and identify these particles. What they found is sobering: their studies show that bottled water contains far more plastic than previously estimated. In fact, a typical one-liter bottle contains nearly a quarter million polymer particles that can enter the bloodstream and lodge in the heart, brain, and other organs.

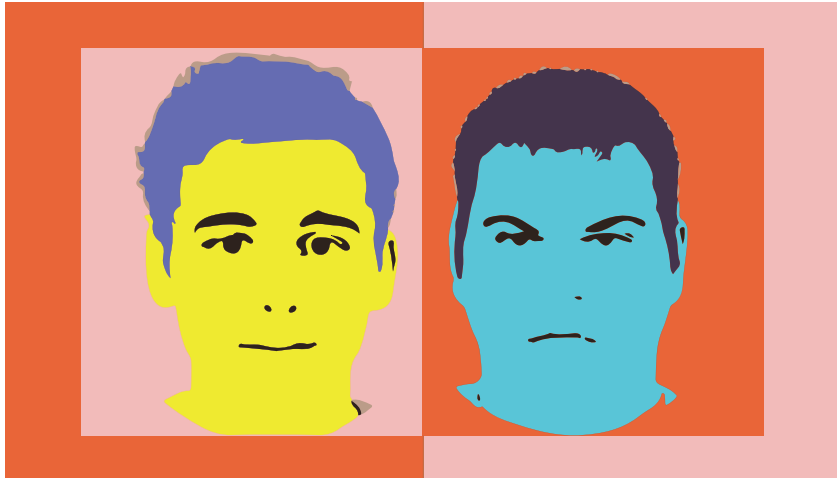
The discovery, from a team led by Columbia chemists Wei Min, Beizhan Yan, and Naixin Qian, was made using a novel microscopy technique that Min developed to detect plastic fragments at the nanoscale. Nanoplastics are plastic particles below one micrometer in length (for reference, a human hair is about seventy micrometers thick) and are measured in billionths of a meter. These particles, which are as small as viruses, can slip into human cells, potentially damaging DNA and disrupting our immune, reproductive, and nervous systems.



In addition to measuring the amount of contamination we're exposed to, the Columbia researchers identified the types of polymers present in bottled water, which yielded some surprises. For example, they found that while a serving of bottled water contains many minuscule pieces of polyethylene terephthalate, or PET, which is what the bottles are made of, they are outnumbered by bits of other plastics used in industrial processes to filter water and prepare it for packaging.

The researchers are next planning to look for nanoscale plastic particles in tap water, packaged food, wastewater from washing machines, and other sources. In addition, they are collaborating with environmental-health experts at Columbia's Mailman School of Public Health to find plastic fragments in a variety of human tissues and examine their developmental and neurological effects.

"Previously this was a dark area, uncharted," says Yan. "Toxicity studies were just guessing what plastics we were exposed to. This opens a window where we can look into a world that was not visible to us before."



What your facial features say about you

Do you have wide eyes, plump cheeks, and lips that turn upward even when you're not smiling? If so, strangers likely perceive you as kind, trustworthy, generous, and approachable. Or maybe you have angular features, a highly symmetrical face, and good skin. Then there's a good chance that others initially regard you as smart, successful, reliable, and outgoing.

Subconsciously, we all make snap judgments about people based on their facial features. And research has shown that these prejudices about someone's character and disposition often persist even after we learn more about the person. This bias can have serious social ramifications. For example, studies have found that people with certain conventionally pleasing features are more likely to get hired for leadership positions, succeed in politics, and even be acquitted of crimes.

So, what are the origins of "facial stereotypes"? And what, if anything, can be done to rid ourselves of them?

A team of psychologists led by Jonathan B. Freeman, the director of Columbia's Social Cognitive and Neural Sciences Lab, has been exploring these

questions for years, using a variety of human behavioral and neuroimaging experiments. Freeman's team recently achieved a series of important breakthroughs, revealing how our social attitudes influence these first impressions and developing a simple computer-based exercise that can help us perceive others more objectively.

"Psychologists have long thought that our responses to human faces are so deeply rooted in our evolutionary biology as to be unalterable, but we've shown that isn't true," says Freeman. "As it turns out, the cognitive associations that we draw between facial features and personality traits can be tweaked and dismantled, so that we don't rely on them in situations where they can be harmful."

When meeting new people, Freeman says, we project positive traits onto those whose facial features resemble expressions of joy or contentment (upturned lips and arched eyebrows, say), while regarding more apprehensively those whose features mimic expressions of anger (like narrowed eyes and thin lips). Freeman says that this is likely an evolutionary artifact from a time when our prehistoric ancestors had to be hyper-attuned

to visual clues about others' temperaments and intentions in order to survive. "Presumably, early humans found themselves in lots of situations where they had to instantly decide: Is this a friend or foe? Should I approach them or flee?" he says. "The ability to quickly determine a stranger's emotional state would have been critical — so much so, it seems, that we've evolved strong reactions to anyone whose facial features even *resemble* happy or angry expressions."

Psychologists have a term to describe our proclivity to read too much meaning into others' faces: they call it "face overgeneralization," and they say that the phenomenon is also on display in our tendency to respond positively to baby-faced adults (who trigger our impulse to protect and nurture) and to feel attracted to people whose features are symmetrical (a drive that once might have ensured that humans choose mates without serious genetic abnormalities).

Traditionally, scientists have viewed facial stereotypes as genetically hardwired, universal, and fixed, but Freeman and his colleagues have been chipping away at this idea. They have discovered that people in different cultures perceive faces in distinct ways (for example, Americans assume that people with sad-looking faces are aggressive, while many Argentinians regard them as caring), and that even within cultures people's responses to facial features vary depending on their attitudes toward race, gender, and other social factors. In addition, the researchers have found that brain regions responsible for higher cognitive functions, such as maintaining social beliefs, communicate with the brain's visual-processing centers in real time whenever we look at human faces, influencing what we think we see.

"Any racial or gender stereotypes that you've internalized have the potential to shape your visual perceptions," Freeman says. "So, for example, you may perceive a man's face as more

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angry-looking than it really is or a woman's face as more joyful."

Inspired by the malleability of human facial perception, Freeman and his colleagues recently set out to see if facial stereotypes might be mitigated in settings where they have pernicious consequences, including courtrooms. Previous research had suggested that convicted murderers are more likely to be sentenced to death if they have downturned lips, heavy brows, and other disfavored facial features, and the Columbia researchers confirmed this by conducting a large-scale analysis of photographs of US death-row inmates and holding mock trials in which study participants played the roles of jurors. "We found that jurors are more likely to recommend the death sentence for defendants who are judged to be untrustworthy-looking, based simply on their photos," says Freeman.

But the psychologists then repeated the experiment with a twist: before hearing a case, jurors had to complete a computer task that Freeman's team had developed. The task consisted of viewing images of stereotypically untrustworthy faces accompanied by

brief descriptions of noble behaviors like "volunteers at a homeless shelter," or "returned \$20 to someone who dropped it." Conversely, images of trustworthy faces were paired with reports of contemptible actions like "got a promotion by lying about coworkers."

"Remarkably, this eliminated the jurors' biases," Freeman says. "It managed to unpair the mental associations that they'd drawn between certain facial features and personality traits, allowing them to see each defendant more clearly as an individual."

The computer task that the Columbia team created is the first anti-bias intervention ever to successfully combat facial stereotypes. The key to its effectiveness, Freeman believes, is that it influences people subconsciously, as users are not told the purpose of the exercise beforehand.

"Other researchers had previously tried to tackle facial-stereotype biases by explicitly nudging people to recognize and overcome their own biases, but that didn't work," Freeman says. "It might be that in order to combat implicit visually based biases that are operating subconsciously, you need an intervention that similarly flies

beneath the radar and modifies a person's underlying visual associations without them realizing it."

Further research will be needed before the Columbia team's intervention is ready for implementation in the real world. Currently, its benefits likely last for only a few hours. And the researchers have, to date, only assessed its impact on people's perceptions of white men's faces. Freeman says that his team is now using big-data techniques to develop more-sophisticated versions of the training module that account for the race and gender of both the face and the viewer.

"We could see this intervention eventually being used in the criminal-justice system and in any other settings where people are routinely being discriminated against because of their physical appearance," he says, noting that large companies could easily incorporate such training into their hiring and promotion initiatives. "Many companies have gotten increasingly serious about eliminating insidious forms of bias in the workplace. Why should facial stereotyping still be acceptable?"



Scientists go bananas over baby galaxies

Astronomers recently got their first close-up look at the early universe and saw something they were not expecting: fledgling galaxies formed not in the spiral shape that they would eventually grow into, like our own Milky Way, but rather curved, elongated disks that vaguely resemble giant bananas.

An international group of astronomers led by Columbia's Viraj Pandya made the discovery by analyzing images from NASA's James Webb Space Telescope, looking specifically for galaxies born when the universe was between six hundred million and six billion years old. Their findings, which appear in a forthcoming paper whimsically titled "Galaxies Going Bananas," could dramatically improve our

understanding of how galaxies evolve, as well as shed light on the nature of dark matter, a mysterious substance thought to help stabilize large cosmic bodies. The shapes of the young galaxies that Pandya and his colleagues observed could be evidence of their having gestated inside of tube-like clusters of dark matter, which are hypothesized to have been commonplace soon after the Big Bang.

The Columbia-led discovery should also help astronomers spot nascent galaxies in the sky, since they now know what shapes to look for. "Identifying additional categories for early galaxies is exciting," says Columbia astronomer Kartheik Iyer, a coauthor of the paper. "There's a lot more to analyze now."

Can you slow the pace of aging?



Time is not a friend to the human body. And the true ravages of age, beneath the wrinkles and gray hair, occur at the molecular level, inside our cells, which become progressively less adept at absorbing and processing nutrients, clearing out waste materials, replicating themselves, and preserving the integrity of their DNA as the years march on. Many scientists believe that slowing down the pace of our cellular deterioration is a key to preventing nearly all chronic diseases, from cancer to heart disease to dementia.

But biology is messy and complex, and there are countless factors that may influence our cellular health. Which are the most important? Daniel Belsky, a Columbia epidemiologist at the Mailman School of Public Health, may have some answers. Belsky is at the forefront of a new type of aging research called

“geroscience,” and he has created an analytical tool that allows researchers to quickly determine the pace at which a person is aging with just a single blood test.

Recent breakthroughs in molecular biology have revealed that our cells contain chemical signatures that indicate how much wear and tear they have endured. Belsky’s tool interprets these signatures, which are made of millions of tiny particles that accumulate on our cells’ DNA over time, and generates an easy-to-read, highly accurate assessment of how quickly a person is aging. This has enabled Belsky and other scientists to evaluate how various behavioral and environmental risk factors influence our health at the most fundamental level. “Traditionally, public-health researchers have sought to link risk factors to specific disease outcomes, but it’s also important for us to

identify factors that affect the basic biology of aging, and hence people’s overall susceptibility to disease,” says Belsky. “That’s always been the holy grail of aging research, but until recently we didn’t have the scientific knowledge or technological capabilities to do it.”

Belsky’s tool, which he developed with colleagues at Duke University and the University of Otago, is based on analysis of physiological data collected from more than one thousand people who have participated for decades in a landmark longitudinal study in Dunedin, New Zealand. It’s called DunedinPACE, for “pace of aging calculated from the epigenome.”

Since rolling out the tool in 2022, Belsky and his colleagues have used it to make a number of important discoveries. Their studies have validated past research — confirming that smoking and obesity accel-

erate aging, for example — while also venturing into new territory. Scientists at other institutions have also adopted DunedinPACE, broadening its impact. Here are some highlights of what they’ve learned so far.

LOW-CAL DIETS PAY OFF

If you’re a healthy middle-aged adult and reduce your caloric intake by a whopping 25 percent — with the cuts coming mainly from unhealthy fats, sugars, and processed foods — you can slow the pace at which your body ages by 2 to 3 percent. That translates into a 10 to 15 percent reduction in your risk of dying early, a benefit similar to that of giving up smoking. Belsky, fellow Mailman School researcher Calen Ryan, and other colleagues made the discovery by conducting a randomized controlled trial in which they analyzed blood samples from 220 healthy men and women who had followed a strict diet for two years. The authors acknowledge that the spartan diet isn’t for everyone; they say future studies might investigate whether similar benefits are achievable through intermittent fasting or time-restricted eating.

SCHOOLING CORRELATES WITH LIFESPAN

In another first-of-its-kind study, published earlier this year, Belsky’s team found that people who stay in school longer tend to age

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more slowly and live longer. Every additional two years of education, the researchers found, corresponds to a roughly 10 percent lower risk of early death. They suspect that people who stay in school longer may gain access to higher-quality health-care services as a result of professional success. They may also be better educated about healthy lifestyle habits. “Our findings support the hypothesis that interventions to promote educational attainment will slow the pace of biological aging and promote longevity,” says Columbia PhD candidate Gloria Huei-Jong Graf, the study’s lead author.

METAL EXPOSURE ACCELERATES AGING

Numerous research groups at Columbia and beyond have used DunedinPACE to examine how environmental hazards harm disadvantaged groups. One of the latest efforts, led by Mailman School professors Allison Kupsco and Ana Navas-Acien, investigated how American Indian populations are affected by exposure to heavy metals like arsenic, cadmium, and selenium, which have previously been shown to contaminate drinking-water supplies on many tribal reservations in the southwestern US. The Columbia scientists found that ingesting these metals has significantly increased tribal members’ pace of aging and that it is a main driver of their elevated risk of heart failure.

KIDS’ BODIES WEAR DOWN TOO

Children and adolescents who experience racism and other hardships age faster than their peers, according to studies that have used DunedinPACE. One investigation by researchers at the University of Texas found that Black children who attend highly segregated and impoverished primary schools display more age-related cellular changes than either Black children in more integrated schools or white children. Another study by researchers at Northwestern University showed that adults who had experienced severe abuse as children aged faster than they would have otherwise. The researchers controlled for many other variables, such as the participants’ socioeconomic status, lifestyle, and health choices, to confidently link the abuse to their accelerated aging.

HEALTHY FOOD’S HIDDEN BENEFITS

A team of Columbia neurologists led by Yian Gu recently teamed up with Belsky to evaluate how the Mediterranean diet affects people’s cellular integrity. They confirmed previous studies that have suggested that the popular eating regimen, which limits red meats, dairy, and highly processed foods, makes people age more slowly. Furthermore, the scientists concluded that this reduced pace of aging helps to explain why people who adhere to the vegetable-heavy, whole-foods-based diet are less likely to develop Alzheimer’s disease.

In soccer, heading can cause brain damage

A team of Columbia medical researchers has found evidence that adult soccer players who frequently head the ball show long-term changes in brain structure and function.

The scientists, led by Michael Lipton, a professor of radiology at Columbia University Irving Medical Center, tracked hundreds of recreational soccer players for two years in the New York City region, periodically giving them cognitive tests and observing them with neuroimaging techniques. They found that the most prolific headers in their cohort — those who used the move 1,500 or more times per year — showed signs of mild neurological damage.



“Their mental function was still within the normal range,” Lipton says. But the results suggested that “these folks might be a little bit sharper, with better working- and verbal-memory performance, if it weren’t for heading the ball.”

Lipton is quick to point out that many questions about the impact of heading remain unanswered, such as the cumulative damage that it may cause over an athlete’s career and whether playing soccer may have cognitive benefits that outweigh the risks for some people. Past research by Lipton’s group has found that recreational soccer players who head the ball fewer than one thousand times per year have cognitive abilities on par with those of serious runners, swimmers, and other endurance athletes whose exceptional fitness has been shown to significantly boost brain health. Lipton suspects that soccer players who exceed that amount of heading may gradually deplete the neurological benefits of aerobic exercise.

“The participants in our study who headed the ball the most frequently had cognitive abilities comparable to healthy non-athletes but lower than athletes who do not experience repeated head impacts,” he says.



Is every fingerprint unique? AI tells us otherwise

In a discovery that could be a boon for law enforcement, a team of Columbia engineers has found that the fingerprints from each of your ten digits are not entirely distinct from each other, as forensics experts have long thought, but contain similarities in their loops, whorls, and arches that are detectable by powerful computers.

The researchers say the insight could allow investigators to determine if a perpetrator was present at multiple crime scenes after leaving prints from different fingers at different locations, as often occurs. “This would primarily be useful in cases when police are trying to figure out if various crime scenes are connected,” says Gabe Guo, a Columbia engineering undergraduate who led the research.

Guo and several colleagues made the discovery by uploading some sixty thousand fingerprints from a public US government database into an artificial-intelligence system that they created. The researchers, working under the guidance of Columbia engineering professor Hod Lipson and University at Buffalo computer scientist Wenyao Xu, fed

the fingerprints into their computer in pairs, initially indicating to the AI system if they came from the same person or not. Over time, the system learned to predict whether unlabeled pairs of prints were from the same person with 77 percent accuracy — a success rate researchers say could be improved if the computer were provided larger databases to train on.

Lipson says that the study, which appears in *Science Advances*, points to a fundamentally new strategy for analyzing fingerprints: his team’s AI system determined that the most distinctive aspects of a print are not, as human analysts have long assumed, the contours of the branches and the endpoints at its outer edge but rather the swirls and loops near its center.

“Even more exciting is the fact that an undergraduate student, with no background in forensics whatsoever, can use AI to successfully challenge the widely held belief of an entire field,” Lipson says. “We are about to experience an explosion of AI-led scientific discovery by non-experts, and the expert community, including academia, needs to get ready.”

STUDY HALL RESEARCH BRIEFS

A new way to spot AI
Columbia computer scientists Junfeng Yang, Carl Vondrick, and Chengzhi Mao '23SEAS have developed

an algorithm that reliably detects AI-generated text, based on its lack of grammatical and stylistic idiosyncrasies. They say their tool could be useful in authenticating human-produced news articles, social-media posts, and other content.

Roots of anti-immigrant sentiment

Americans who live through economic recessions when they are young adults are more likely to harbor anti-immigrant attitudes, according to new research by Columbia Business School professor Stephan Meier.

These fish are team players

A group of Columbia neuroscientists led by Nathaniel Sawtell has found evidence that elephantnose fish, which emit electrical pulses to sense their surroundings, work collectively, perceiving how one another’s pulses bounce off objects. This trait has never before been seen in nature.

Laying odds on the volcanic apocalypse

So-called “supervolcanoes” that spewed enormous amounts of particulate matter into the earth’s atmosphere tens of thousands of years ago, blocking out sunlight, did not cool the planet nearly as much as past studies have suggested, according to a new analysis by Columbia geoscientists.

The authors conclude that volcanoes pose less of a threat to human existence than previously feared.



Methadone to go Flexible new drug policies that allow people to receive take-home methadone doses are safe and effective, causing few people with opioid-use disorder to relapse, according to a study by Columbia psychiatrists Arthur Robin Williams and Edward Nunes.

Play it again, hypothalamus

Columbia engineers Elizabeth Hillman and David Thibodeaux '23SEAS have developed a new analytic tool that turns statistical data about brain activity into notes played on musical instruments. They say that because humans are extraordinarily adept at detecting patterns in sound, the tool could enable scientists to spot relationships in neural data that computers miss.

NETWORK

YOUR ALUMNI CONNECTION



Vampire Weekend Is Back

The indie giant drops a new album

It's hard to believe that sixteen years have passed since Vampire Weekend released its first album, a debut that would shape the sound of modern indie music and take the Columbia band-mates from student gigs to *Saturday Night Live*.

Formed by Ezra Koenig '06CC, Chris Tomson '06CC, Chris Baio '07CC, and Rostam Batmanglij '06CC (no longer a member), the Grammy-winning group, which played its first show at the Battle of the Bands in Lerner Hall, is known for writing literate, urbane lyrics and for making unabashed references to its members' college days. The cover of Vampire Weekend's 2008 self-titled debut album featured a photo taken at a Morningside Heights party, and songs like "Mansard Roof," "Campus," "Hudson," "Young Lion," and "Harmony Hall" are not-so-subtle allusions to the musicians' time at Columbia.

Its new release, *Only God Was Above Us*, the band's first studio album in five years, reveals that Vampire Weekend continues to be inspired by the city of New York and by nostalgia for jam sessions in college dorms.

"I personally found an immense peace and pleasure in creating with the guys like we had in the Ruggles [Hall] days," drummer Tomson has said about the making of the album. "The vibe was strong"

While superfans may parse the new album's lyrics for erudite references, some sources of inspiration are more obvious. The title comes from a *Daily News* headline featured on the album cover. The

image was shot more than thirty years ago by Steven Siegel, a street photographer who captured the gritty energy of New York.

The music video for the single "Capricorn" also incorporates retro footage of the city in the '70s and '80s, including a shot of the Cathedral Parkway-110th

Street train station near Columbia. The video ends with the band performing in an ornate academic-style library to a very serious audience. As Tomson might note, the Butler vibe is strong.

The *Only God Was Above Us* concert tour is scheduled to include thirty-nine shows across the United States and Canada through the fall, with performances at Madison Square Garden on October 5 and 6.



Only God Was Above Us, released 2024.



The Columbian's Guide to NYC

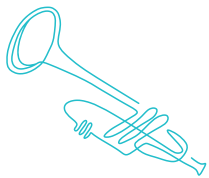
If you're looking for an urban adventure, consult an alumni expert



FOR WITTY WALKING TOURS

"Cicerone" is a term for a learned guide who explains matters of historic or artistic interest,

but Cicerone Travel, founded and directed by Jon Goldstein '03CC, also boasts expertise in the "funniest, quirkiest, most absurd anecdotes throughout history." The Brooklyn-based company offers local tours such as "Jewish Lower East Side" and "Colonial and Revolutionary America."



FOR A JAMMING GOOD TIME

As a guide with Big Apple Jazz Tours, self-proclaimed jazz diva Amanda Humes '99GS leads immersive tours of Harlem's legendary music scene.

The company's signature Harlem Juke Joint Tour takes small groups to legendary venues like Minton's Playhouse (known as the birthplace of bebop), as well as former speakeasies and vibrant new haunts. Guests are encouraged to meet the artists and can, if musically inclined, join in on a jam.



FOR GETTING OFF THE BEATEN PATH

Michelle Young '12GSAPP, who teaches urban studies at Columbia, began Untapped New York

as an online guide to the city's hidden gems and historical curiosities, from abandoned subway stations to famous filming locations to under-the-radar restaurants. The company also offers guided walking tours to sites like Fifth Avenue's Gilded Age mansions and the remnants of "gritty old Times Square."

To Save a Scavenger

Corinne Kendall '08GSAS, one of America's top vulture experts, is working to preserve an unfairly maligned bird

Ever since Corinne Kendall '08GSAS uttered her first word — "dog" — animals have been a constant fixation.

Growing up, the budding ecologist kept a watchful eye on skunks, porcupines, deer, and turkeys on family trips to the Poconos and would track down salamanders on hikes with her dad, a fellow nature enthusiast. In the concrete cityscape of New York, where Kendall was raised, she gravitated toward the natural

"Once you've watched vultures up close, you realize how systematic, intelligent, and socially complex these animals are," says Kendall. "My job is to study how they interact with the environment, how they interact with human activities, and the challenges that we pose for them."

Ten months of the year, Kendall is in Asheboro, North Carolina, where she manages the zoo's small research team. The other two months find her overseas at the zoo's partner



world, making frequent visits to the American Museum of Natural History and the Bronx Zoo. "More or less by the age of six, I decided I wanted to be a field biologist," she says.

Today, as a conservation biologist and curator of conservation research at the North Carolina Zoo, Kendall is focused on an underappreciated and increasingly vulnerable bird of prey: the vulture.

sites in Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia, keeping tabs on endangered vulture species in the wild.

Vultures, known (and notorious) for their penchant for rotting flesh, have experienced major population decline over the last few decades, due in large part to poisoning, explains Kendall. Hunters often put pesticides on carcasses to kill the scavengers,

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making it harder for law enforcement to detect illegal poaching (“circling vultures can indicate the presence of a large carcass and therefore help rangers find dead elephants”). Additionally, farmers sometimes use poison to retaliate against predators that kill their livestock. “When the vultures feed on the bodies, they die within a few hours,” says Kendall, adding that vultures are also sometimes killed by superstitious locals who see them as bad omens.

It’s Kendall’s job to track these poisonings in order to prevent them. Working with trained field staff and local rangers, she captures the vultures and attaches solar-powered tracking devices that sit between their wings like little backpacks. These devices allow Kendall and her team to follow the birds’ movements and detect the locations of

poisonings. “The initiative helps us chart population declines but also target conservation interventions,” she says.

Kendall, who has received several grants from National Geographic as a member of the organization’s Explorers program, fell in love with vultures serendipitously more than a decade ago. While completing her master’s degree in conservation biology at Columbia’s Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, she studied hippos at Ruaha National Park in Tanzania. But after coming to terms with the obstacles to studying wild-hippo behavior (aquatic habitats, nocturnal behavior, and

aggressive dispositions make the animals difficult to tag), Kendall knew she needed to focus on a more accessible endangered species.

Then she attended a Wildlife Conservation Society event featuring a discussion of the Asian vulture crisis, and her passion was officially piqued. There she learned that 99 percent of some vulture populations died between the late 1990s and early 2000s and that it wasn’t until years later that scientists discovered that the birds were inadvertently poisoned after consuming an anti-inflammatory drug called Diclofenac in the bodies of

dead cattle. “No one was really studying the vultures, so population declines didn’t get noticed quickly,” says Kendall. “No one knew much about them.”

That’s starting to change, she says, as more people are waking up to vultures’ ecological importance. They may get a bad rap, but from where Kendall sits — often just fifty meters away from their feeding sites — they are fascinating creatures that offer a slew of environmental benefits. Specifically, vultures clean up carrion, or decaying animal flesh, which might otherwise attract mammalian scavengers like feral dogs that are likelier to transmit diseases.

“If people can start to think of vultures as critical members of a complex ecosystem, it becomes clearer why they’re so important.”

— Mary Cunningham



LUKAS GOLDA

Olympic Fever

With several Columbians headed to the 2024 Olympics in Paris this summer, here’s an overview of alumni athletes who in recent decades have medaled at the Olympic and Paralympic Games

Trent Dimas '02GS

GYMNASTICS
1 Gold (1992)



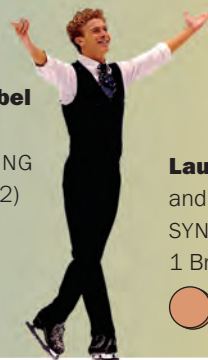
Cristina Teuscher '00CC

SWIMMING
1 Gold, 1 Bronze (1996, 2000)



Timothy Goebel '10GS

FIGURE SKATING
1 Bronze (2002)



Caryn Davies '13LAW

ROWING
2 Gold, 1 Silver (2004, 2008, 2012)



Lauren McFall Gardner '08GS and Kendra Zanotto '08GS

SYNCHRONIZED SWIMMING
1 Bronze (2004)



Jenny Thompson '06VPS

SWIMMING
8 Gold, 3 Silver, 1 Bronze (1992, 1996, 2000, 2004)





Lightsaber Moment

Lanny Smoot '77SEAS, '78SEAS joins inventors' hall of fame

With over a hundred patents and counting, Lanny Smoot '77SEAS, '78SEAS is among the Walt Disney Company's most prolific inventors. His most recognizable innovations include a real-life extendable *Star Wars* lightsaber, the technology that makes the ghost of Madame Leota roam the Magic Kingdom's Haunted Mansion, and the *Moana*-inspired

interactive "water harps" seen at EPCOT's Journey of Water attraction.

In May, the engineer added another achievement to his résumé: induction into the National Inventors Hall of Fame. Smoot is only the second Disney employee to earn this honor; Walt himself was the first.

Smoot first learned the art of tinkering from his father, whom he calls

an "itinerant inventor." As a promising science student at Brooklyn Technical High School, Smoot received a scholarship to Columbia from Bell Labs, as well as a summer job with the company. He earned a master's in electrical engineering in 1978, just a year after finishing his undergraduate degree.

"I learned my engineering at Columbia University, and that stood with me all my life," says Smoot, who, while working at Bell Labs for over two decades, invented critical technologies for fiber-optic transmission and early videoconferencing.

Today, after twenty-five years as a Disney "imagineer," Smoot isn't slowing down. In fact, he's more excited than ever about his latest project, the Holo-Tile floor. "It's the world's first omnidirectional treadmill floor," he explains. When used with a virtual-reality headset, Smoot's invention could allow someone to move through an imaginary world without having to worry about the physical space around them.

"We finally have the thing that was always missing from virtual reality," he says. "I think it's going to change the world." — *Grant Currin*

©DISNEY



Sasha Cohen '16GS
FIGURE SKATING
1 Silver (2006)



Keeth Smart '10BUS and James Leighman Williams '07CC, '09GSAS, '17BUS
TEAM SABRE FENCING
1 Silver (2008)



Erinn Smart '02BC
FENCING
1 Silver (2008)



Katie Meili '13CC
SWIMMING
1 Gold, 1 Bronze (2016)



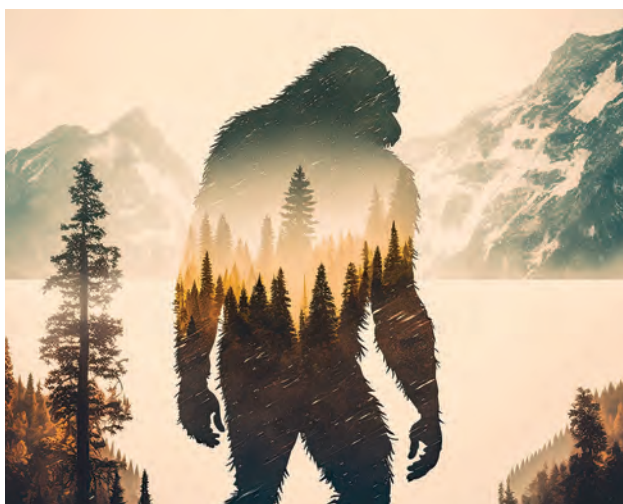
John Tanguay '20CC
PARALYMPIC ROWING
1 Silver (2020)



Maya Lawrence '05TC
FENCING
1 Bronze (2012)



DIMAS: SCOTT HALLERAN / GETTY IMAGES; THOMPSON: PCN PHOTOGRAPHY / ALAMY; GOEBEL: PA IMAGES / ALAMY; COHEN: PCN PHOTOGRAPHY / ALAMY; MEILI: COLUMBIA ATHLETICS; TANGUAY: PETER SPURRIER / ALAMY



ASK AN ALUM: **WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL ABOUT BIGFOOT?**

In *The Secret History of Bigfoot*, journalist **John O'Connor '03SOA** explores the mystery and legacy of the North American sasquatch.

What exactly is Bigfoot?

It depends on who you ask. There are two realms of thinking. Folks who call themselves “flesh-and-blooders” believe that Bigfoot is an undiscovered giant hominid that has somehow escaped detection in the American wilds. Those often described as “woo-ers” believe that Bigfoot is magical or paranormal and can disappear through wormholes. There’s a lot of gray area and overlap between those two beliefs.

Where did the myth originate?

Bigfoot is a strangely cross-cultural and trans-historical figure. Some of the oldest American Indigenous legends deal with Bigfoot-like creatures. There are similar mythical

monsters found throughout most of the world, including Australia, South America, and Japan. There were “wild men” in medieval European folklore. The most recent American iteration of Bigfoot comes from Northern California in the late 1950s, after a logging crew claimed to find large hominid tracks in an area called Bluff Creek. The famously disputed 1967 Patterson-Gimlin film, which shows a grainy Bigfoot striding across a riverbed in harsh sunlight, was shot there. I would argue that the iconic image of Bigfoot you see on beer cans and bumper stickers comes from this film.

How did you conduct field research on the creature?

The project started years ago as an admittedly bad screenplay I wrote with a friend who, like me, was an underemployed stay-at-home dad. We shelved the script, but I later came back

to the topic. As part of my research, I attended Bigfoot conventions and went on four “expeditions,” two of them organized by the Bigfoot Field Researchers Organization, where you camp out in the woods looking and listening for evidence of Bigfoot. I also did my own self-guided expedition in the North Cascades in Washington. I didn’t find Bigfoot.

Numerous alleged Bigfoot sightings are reported each year. What explains this phenomenon?

I think the sightings boil down to misperception, what psychologists call the predictive brain and our desire to see what we want to see. Our minds are very good at convincing us that what we want to be there is there. Bigfooters certainly aren’t alone in harboring irrational beliefs.

The prevalence has a lot to do with what’s on TV and the Internet. When the Animal Planet reality series *Finding Bigfoot* aired, from 2011 to 2018, there was a huge uptick in Bigfoot sightings. Similarly, the most popular years of *The X-Files* saw a 200 percent increase in UFO sightings. Hoaxes also play a role: there are people who go out in the woods and take staged photos or videos and post them online.

Do you see an overlap between Bigfoot believers and other types of conspiracy theorists?

In most cases, Bigfooting is a benign weekend activity for people who are maybe

yearning for something they can’t quite articulate. The majority tend to be white, male, conservative, and working- or middle-class. But lots of research has shown strong connections between supernatural beliefs and conspiracy thinking, and at the margins of Bigfoot culture are folks like right-wing Second Amendment fanatics and what I would call January 6 types.

Is there any convincing evidence for Bigfoot?

In terms of physical evidence, there isn’t much — no credible photographs or videos, certainly no fossil evidence, and no DNA analysis of hair or scat. Footprints thought to be from Bigfoot tend to have clear alternative explanations; often they’re bear tracks. Bigfoot believers like to argue that no remains have been found because large mammal bones decompose very quickly in the wild. I’ve talked to wildlife experts from Maine to Montana, and they’ve all told me that’s utter bullshit, that old bear and moose bones are found in remote locations all the time.

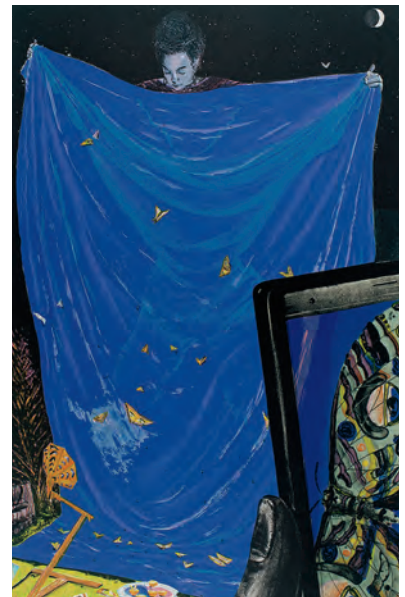
I think that, especially now, we need to be governed by reason and fact-based reality, and Bigfoot simply defies logic. We’re not talking about a tiny salamander. The idea that a seven-hundred-pound mammal could survive in the United States without being noticed or monitored is just inconceivable.

— Julia Joy



Great Installations

Paula Wilson '05SOA, a New Mexico–based multimedia artist, is known for her richly textured paintings, prints, and eclectic installations. Her works include *Full Circle Swing*, which invites visitors to sit and become a part of a sculpture, and monumental paintings and collages that joyfully explore Wilson’s identity as a Black biracial woman. “I’m completely invested in accessibility, interaction, and breaking down the barriers between art and life,” says the artist. “My work is often biographical, with self-portraits taking the form of multimedia amalgamations.” A solo exhibition of Wilson’s art, titled *Toward the Sky’s Back Door*, is on view at the California African American Museum in Los Angeles from May 22 to August 18.



Clockwise from top: Paula Wilson stands in front of a new work; *Catching the Night*, 2021; *Full Circle Swing*, 2023 (with Mike Lagg); *Light It Up*, 2019.

Praise for *Past Lives*

As a debut feature film with a budget of only \$12 million, *Past Lives* is the kind of breakthrough most aspiring filmmakers can only dream of. Written and directed by Celine Song '14SOA, who studied playwriting at Columbia, the semiautobiographical indie flick stars Greta Lee as a Korean-American writer who rekindles a connection with her childhood crush, who lives thousands of miles away. Since premiering

last year, *Past Lives* has captured the attention of critics and received numerous accolades, including 2024 Oscar nominations for best picture and best original screenplay, Independent Spirit Awards for best film and best director, and a Directors Guild of America Award for outstanding direction of a first-time feature. Song’s next project, a romantic comedy called *The Materialists*, is reportedly in preproduction.



Celine Song

11 Alumni Make the Forbes “30 Under 30” Lists

ART AND STYLE

Justice Faith Betty '18GS, cofounder of Révolutionnaire

Oscar yi Hou '21CC, visual artist

CONSUMER TECHNOLOGY

Nico Laqua '22CC, cofounder of Basket Entertainment

ENERGY

Marissa Beatty '22SEAS, founder of Turnover Labs

Claudia Herbert Colfer '19GSAS, head of programming at United Nations Global Compact

FINANCE

Zoia Kozakov '20SPS, product leader at JPMorgan Chase

FOOD AND DRINK

Raghav Poddar '19SEAS and Vamsi Gadiraju '19SEAS, cofounders of Superorder

HEALTH CARE

Christophe Rimann '18SEAS, cofounder of Juniper Behavioral Health

MEDIA

Lauren Aliza Green '17CC, writer

VENTURE CAPITAL

Sam Peurifoy '20GSAS, founding partner at Hivemind



Tech Support for Boomers

Quincy, cofounded by Ryan Greene '21BUS, helps older adults navigate our ever-changing digital world

If you're a digital native with older relatives, you've probably had to play the often unwanted role of family IT specialist. But for Ryan Greene '21BUS, one such moment with his grandfather was a source of inspiration, not frustration. "I was visiting him in Florida after not seeing him for a couple of months," Greene recalls, "and he comes out of his bedroom with a yellow legal pad full of computer tasks he needs help with."

It was near the height of the pandemic, when everyone, especially seniors, was being forced to use technology in new ways, from family Zoom calls to telehealth appointments. After coaching his grandfather through the list and returning to his final semester at Columbia Business School, Greene began thinking about creating a structured way

to help older adults use technology. He wanted to offer troubleshooting services but also show his clients ways to enjoy tech, like "learning about streaming services or how to read the *Wall Street Journal* on their iPad." Over the course of that spring, with the help of a Columbia class called Launch Your Startup, Greene developed what would become Quincy, a tech-support service for adults fifty-five and over.

The company is named for his grandfather's former dog, alluding to the idea of being a "faithful companion," Greene says. With just one phone call or a visit to gogoquincy.com, customers are connected to a human who will clearly and patiently guide them through their problem, often by remotely accessing their screen. "We want them to take a deep breath, have a snack, and watch us get to work," Greene says.

Quincy offers two paid tiers of service, including a \$4.99 per month pay-as-you-go plan, which caps the cost of a support session at \$11, and a \$19.99 per month all-inclusive plan. The company reaches other seniors through employee-benefits providers, health plans, and continuing-care retirement communities. Most customers, says Greene, are in their seventies or eighties, and the average problem takes Quincy technicians just fifteen minutes to solve.

That efficiency is made possible by the company's empathy training, which teaches technicians how to patiently and clearly guide customers through a problem. "When we describe something, we don't say 'x out.' We say, 'Look in the top-left corner. You should see a little red button to the left of a green button. Click that.' And that's assuming the

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NEWSMAKERS

individual knows what clicking is,” Greene says. “Human involvement is what makes the magic possible.”

While Quincy has helped older adults in thirty-eight states with everything from calling an Uber to getting back into a locked Facebook account, Greene says that printer trouble is one of the most common issues. Scam prevention is also a major focus, as elder fraud becomes increasingly sophisticated. “AI has made it scarily easy. They can scrape information readily available on Facebook, which is easy to put into a tailored e-mail, which could be asking for gift cards,” Greene explains. Quincy automatically notifies users if they’ve clicked a malicious link or visited a fake website designed to steal personal information. Seniors can also have a Quincy technician review suspicious texts, e-mails, and more. “We’re on the phone with our users, helping them determine whether that e-mail is authentic and then helping them find the right organization to call” to report a fraudulent one, he says.

Through features like these, Greene hopes to position Quincy as a service one can enlist proactively to give older adults and their loved ones peace of mind. “My goal is to help people age more comfortably, whether that’s through accessing entertainment or being able to check their insurance portal,” he says. “I want Quincy to be America’s digital grandchild.”

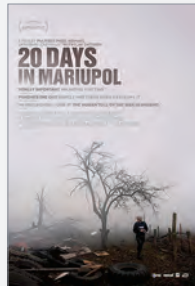
— Lauren Vespoli

● *Time’s Echo*, a meditation on the connections between classical music and the Holocaust by **Jeremy Eichler ’15GSAS**, won the book of the year award at the 2024 National Jewish Book Awards.

James McBride ’80JRN was also honored there for his novel *The Heaven and Earth Grocery Store*, as was **Carlie Hoffman ’16SOA** for her poetry collection *When There Was Light*.

● **Binaifer Nowrojee ’88SIPA, ’89LAW** was named president of the Open Society Foundations, which support democracy, human rights, free expression, and climate justice worldwide.

● *20 Days in Mariupol*, produced by **Raney Aronson-Rath ’95JRN**, won the Academy Award for best documentary feature. Da’Vine Joy Randolph won best supporting actress for her performance in *The Holdovers*, which was written by **David Hemingson ’90LAW** and also received nominations for best picture and best original screenplay.



● The Whitney Biennial, a prominent survey of contemporary American art at the Whitney Museum, features work by **ektor garcia ’16SOA, Julia Phillips ’15SOA, Ser Serpas ’17CC, Tourmaline ’06CC**, and **Kiyan Williams ’19SOA**. The show runs through August 11.

● **Alex Mierjeski ’17JRN** and his colleagues at ProPublica received the George Polk Award for national reporting for a series of articles on alleged ethical transgressions by US Supreme Court justices Clarence Thomas and Samuel Alito.

● Former Lions soccer star **Ally Clark ’23CC** signed her first professional contract, with the Danish team Odense Boldklub Q.

● The US Postal Service honored **Constance Baker Motley ’46LAW, ’03HON**, the judge, civil-rights lawyer, and second Black woman to graduate from Columbia Law School, with a commemorative postage stamp.



● **Carolyn Woods Eisenberg ’71GSAS** won a prestigious Bancroft Prize from Columbia, an honor for scholars of American history, for her book *Fire and Rain: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Wars in Southeast Asia*.

● New York City Council member **Shaun Abreu ’14CC**, whose district includes Morningside Heights and Manhattanville, was named chair of the council’s committee on sanitation and solid-waste management.

● *The Stag*, written, directed, and produced by **An Chu ’22SOA**, won the short-film jury award for international fiction at the 2024 Sundance Film Festival. *Daughters*, produced by **Sam Bisbee ’90CC**, won the audience award for best US documentary and the Festival Favorite Award.

● **William W. Chin ’68CC**, a Harvard Medical School professor and pharmaceutical-industry executive, received Singapore’s Honorary Citizen Award for his contributions to science and technology.

● Multiple alumni received 2024 MacDowell Fellowships, which support residencies at top arts organizations: architects **Nina Cooke John ’98GSAPP** and **Janette Kim ’97CC**; composer **Dalit Warshaw ’96CC**; theater artists **Sam Chane ’12SOA** and **Shayok Misha Chowdhury ’16SOA**; visual artist **Farah Mohammad ’21SOA**; and writers **Alexandra Kleeman ’12SOA**, **Christopher Kondrich ’08SOA**, and **James Yeh ’09SOA**.

BULLETIN

UNIVERSITY NEWS
AND VIEWS



ANGELA OLINTO APPOINTED UNIVERSITY PROVOST

Angela Olinto, a prominent astrophysicist and experienced academic administrator, was recently named provost of Columbia University.

Olinto comes to Columbia from the University of Chicago, where she most recently served as dean of the Physical Sciences Division, overseeing seven academic departments and a number of research centers and institutes.

A pioneer of astroparticle physics, Olinto has conducted seminal research on the inflationary origins of the universe, the cosmological effects of magnetic fields, and the structure of neutron stars. The implications of her work touch on everything from the workings of the universe to the evolution of life. She is the principal investigator of two NASA programs studying high-energy cosmic particles: the Probe of Extreme Multi-Messenger Astrophysics (POEMMA) space and balloon missions and the Extreme Universe Space Observatory (EUSO) super-pressure balloon missions.

Born in Boston, Olinto spent her formative years in her family's native Brazil, graduating from Pontificia Universidade Católica of Rio de Janeiro. She went on to receive her PhD in physics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology before beginning her career at the Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory. She joined the University of Chicago in 1990 and twice chaired its department of astronomy and astrophysics before being named divisional dean in 2018.

Olinto says she was drawn to Columbia by President Minouche Shafik's vision for the University's leadership "in academic excellence in research and teaching, in global and local engagement, and in tackling the hardest problems of today and the future, including climate change, artificial intelligence, and mental health. I'm eager to contribute my small part to developing and preserving the greatness of American universities, and to growing this extraordinary institution."

ELEEN BARROSO

NEW CENTER FOR PEDIATRIC HEART RESEARCH LAUNCHED WITH \$15M GIFT

Columbia's Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons has launched a new center to develop innovative treatments for pediatric congenital heart disease (CHD), which afflicts some forty thousand babies born in the US each year.

Supported by a \$15 million gift from Lawrence Neubauer and named in honor of his young son, who passed away from CHD in 2001, the Garrett Isaac Neubauer Center for Cardiovascular Innovation aims to improve outcomes for patients through groundbreaking research and to help find a cure for the condition.

The center is led by Jordan S. Orange, chair of Columbia's Department of Pediatrics and physician in chief of NewYork-Presbyterian Morgan Stanley Children's Hospital; Christopher Petit, chief of the pediatric department's Division of Pediatric Cardiology; and Emile Bacha, chief of the department's Division of Cardiac, Thoracic, and Vascular Surgery. Among the center's goals is to discover why CHD develops in some infants and to identify the best treatments.

"After we lost Garrett, we wanted to help other families avoid our situation," says Neubauer, who chairs the children's health board for Columbia University Irving Medical Center. "We know that our work with Columbia will support new research and care that will aid so many other families and patients facing congenital heart disease. His memory is our inspiration."



CAS HOLLOWAY NAMED CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER

Cas Holloway, a former deputy mayor of New York City, business leader, and entrepreneur, was recently named Columbia's chief operating officer. In this role, he will provide strategic oversight in key administrative areas, such as facilities and operations, human resources, information technology, health services, and technology transfer.

A graduate of Harvard College and the University of Chicago Law School, Holloway joined the administration of New York mayor Michael Bloomberg '04HON in 2006 and served in a number of high-ranking positions, eventually becoming deputy mayor for operations in 2011. In that position, he led efforts to overhaul the city's emergency-response system, restructure its technology projects, and expand its recycling programs, among other initiatives. He also managed the city's response to Hurricane Sandy, overseeing the rebuilding of homes and neighborhoods and the development of a long-term citywide resilience strategy.

From 2014 to 2019, Holloway worked at Bloomberg LP, the financial information, software, and media firm, serving as deputy chief operating officer and global head of technical operations. He subsequently had leadership roles at New York-based startups Unqork and Shiftsmart and advised other organizations on a variety of local, state, and federal issues.

DOUBLE DISCOVERY CENTER TO EXTEND SERVICES TO COLLEGE STUDENTS

Columbia's Double Discovery Center (DDC), which provides academic mentoring and counseling to college-bound high-school students in Upper Manhattan, recently announced that it will extend its services to support young people as they proceed through their first and second years of college.

This new initiative, called Project Start Right, is funded by nearly \$400,000 in federal appropriations and will support local students who are enrolled in colleges across the country.

The goal of Project Start Right is to reduce college attrition rates among first-generation students from underserved communities in West Harlem, Washington Heights, and Inwood. To this end, it will provide mentoring in financial literacy and social-emotional wellness, as well as academic support.

Since its founding in 1965, DDC has served more than twenty-five thousand New York City students. To learn more, visit ddc.college.columbia.edu.





TASK FORCE ON ANTISEMITISM RELEASES RECOMMENDATIONS

Columbia’s Task Force on Antisemitism, formed in late 2023 to address rising prejudice against Jewish and Israeli members of the University community, issued its first set of recommendations in March, covering rules on demonstrations.

The report emphasizes three goals: safeguarding the rights of all Columbia students, faculty, and staff to protest; ensuring that protests do not interfere with the rights of other Columbia affiliates to speak, teach, research, and learn; and combating discrimination and harassment.

To implement these foundational principles, the task force endorses a “speaker’s corner” approach that permits protests in designated areas, but not in academic buildings. (This approach mirrors the one detailed in the new Interim University Policy for Safe Demonstrations announced earlier in the year.)

The task-force report also highlights the need for more-effective enforcement, recommending nonconfrontational ways of stopping unauthorized protests as they occur, a simpler process for filing complaints, and other measures.

Later this year, the task force is expected to issue additional reports that document and analyze the discrimination and bias reported by many Jewish students, faculty, and others. The reports will recommend a range of responses to sensitize and educate the community and to promote a more inclusive atmosphere. To learn more, visit news.columbia.edu/recommendations.

EIGHT FACULTY HONORED FOR OUTSTANDING TEACHING

Eight faculty members in Arts and Sciences recently won Lenfest Distinguished Faculty Awards, which recognize exemplary teaching, mentoring, and research. The awards were created in 2005 through a gift from the late Gerry Lenfest ’58LAW, ’09HON. This year’s recipients are computer scientist David Blei, theater director Anne Bogart, political scientist Donald Green, Middle Eastern studies scholar Gil Hochberg, historian Karl Jacoby, astronomer Kathryn Johnston, Yiddish-language expert Agnieszka Legutko ’12GSAS, and psychologist Nim Tottenham ’96BC.

EILEEN BARROSO

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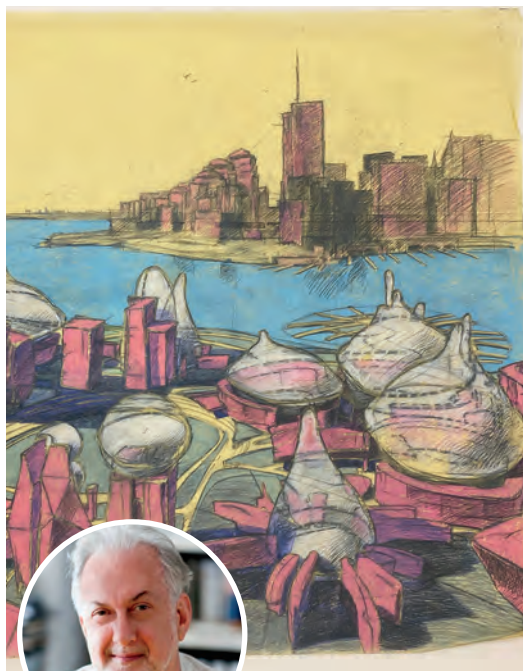
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EVERY LIBRARY ACQUIRES PAPERS OF ARCHITECTURAL CRITIC MICHAEL SORKIN



Michael Sorkin and his studio's concept for New York City's Governors Island.

Columbia's Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library has acquired the personal archive of the late Michael Sorkin '71GSAS, the prominent architecture critic, designer, and scholar of urbanism.

Sorkin, who earned a master's degree in English at Columbia, established his reputation as a writer at the *Village Voice* in the 1980s, penning witty critiques of what he regarded as the elitism and aesthetic excesses of contemporary architecture. He eventually opened his own design studio, creating plans for buildings and public spaces that would be more broadly accessible and welcoming. Few of his structures

were built, but his ideas, which he advanced in numerous books, were broadly influential.

Sorkin's personal archive includes drafts of his writings; documents pertaining to exhibitions, lectures, and film projects; and over two thousand drawings.

"Among the cities he loved, it was New York that captured his heart and imagination," says Sorkin's wife, the philosopher Joan Copjec, who donated the collection. "I never considered any archive other than the Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library for Michael's drawings and writings, knowing that he would consider it the proper place for his work."

GARUD IYENGAR TO LEAD DATA SCIENCE INSTITUTE

Garud Iyengar, a longtime professor of industrial engineering and operations research, has been chosen to lead Columbia's Data Science Institute (DSI), effective July 1.

As the next Avanesians Director of DSI, Iyengar will oversee a multidisciplinary research institute that brings together academics from across the entire University to apply big-data solutions to real-world challenges in areas like climate, health, finance, politics, and urban planning.

Iyengar, whose own research focuses on improving the efficiency of supply chains, sensor networks, and other complex systems, has been involved in DSI since its creation in 2012, helping to launch its PhD concentration, seed-fund program, and postdoctoral program.

A member of Columbia's faculty since 1998, Iyengar is also the engineering school's senior vice dean for research and academic programs.

"As the Data Science Institute builds on its decade-plus record of remarkable success in advancing the frontiers of the field, developing collaborations across Columbia's many schools, and training the next generation of data-science leaders, it is in exceptionally capable hands," said President Minouche Shafik in announcing Iyengar's appointment. "Garud brings a wealth of experience in academic leadership and a long record of success in convening faculty from disparate fields to tackle pressing interdisciplinary challenges."



COLUMBIA JOINS AI CONSORTIUM

Columbia University has announced that it will join six other research institutions as part of a plan advanced by New York governor Kathy Hochul to make the state a leader in artificial-intelligence research.

At the center of this effort, called "Empire AI," will be the development of a large computational facility in upstate New York to support research on socially responsible artificial-intelligence technology.

Empire AI is to be governed by Columbia, Cornell, New York University, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, the State University of New York, the City University of New York, and the Flatiron Institute. The consortium aims to attract more data scientists to New York, expand educational opportunities, strengthen the state's economy, and bolster US national security.

The Stone Home

By Crystal Hana Kim '09CC, '14SOA (William Morrow)

During a period of military rule in the 1970s and 1980s, South Korean police and local officials sent thousands of people to “welfare facilities” under the pretense that they were “vagrants” who needed to be rehabilitated. In reality, the majority were kidnapped children and disabled adults, and those in charge of these internment camps subjected them to forced labor and abuse. These government-sponsored violations of human rights were in part tied to the country’s preparations to host the 1988 Summer Olympics, which would put South Korea on the world stage.

Novelist Crystal Hana Kim '09CC, '14SOA first learned of these atrocities from a 2016 Associated Press investigation

of Brothers Home, the most notorious facility. At the time, Kim was working on her debut novel, *If You Leave Me*, which is set during the Korean War. But she was haunted by Brothers Home, writing in an author’s note to her new novel, “Questions plagued me: What does it mean that state-sanctioned violence happens

time and again? How do we confront our capacity for evil?”

That new book, *The Stone Home*, takes up these questions, bringing to life a horrific chapter of the past. The novel is informed by research, including an extensive interview with Han Jong-sun, a Brothers Home survivor and activist. But rather than attempt to faithfully tell the stories of Han and other victims, Kim uses fiction to explore the emotional terrain of what happened to detainees and how they were marked by their experiences.

The Stone Home opens in 2011, when forty-six-year-old Eunju Oh opens the door of her Daegu apartment to an unexpected visitor. Narae has come from New York to speak with Eunju at the suggestion of her father, Sangchul, who has just died. From 1980 to 1981, Eunju and Sangchul crossed paths at the Stone Home, a rehabilitation center that Kim models on Brothers Home. Eunju reluctantly takes on the task of exposing Narae to the long-buried truth of what happened at the Stone Home.

With this frame, Kim launches a dual-timeline, intergenerational story. For much of the novel, Eunju is plunged into the past, painfully reliving the year she and her mother spent interned at the Stone Home. Chapters alternate between Eunju’s first-person narration of her own experiences there and her third-person omniscient recounting of Sangchul’s story. Kim uses short interludes set in 2011 to give us a break from the harrowing intensity of both characters’ traumas and weave in historical context. As Eunju explains in one such section, the people sent away “were the vestiges of a country trying to reshape itself. It was easier not to see, to let us disappear.”

The brutality of the Stone Home is indeed difficult to confront. At the top of its hierarchy are Warden, a smarmy middle-aged man whose Christianity serves as a cover for his cruelty, and Teacher, a henchman who does no actual teaching. The facility is largely filled with “wayward boys,” but, as Warden explains, “we have space for the most vagrant women.” The boys — mostly teens like Sangchul and his older brother — are assigned to workshops where they produce goods for domestic and international sale. Meanwhile, Eunju and her mother join a small group of women and girls who spend most of their time locked in a kitchen, cooking meals that are insufficient to sate anyone’s hunger.

If the boys don’t meet each day’s production quota, Warden lashes them. But physical abuse is also doled out randomly.

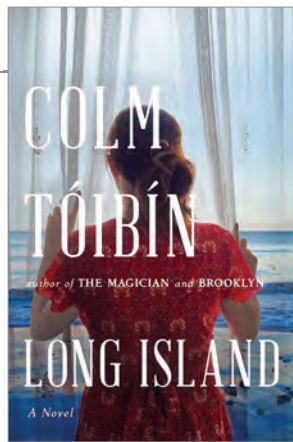


Teacher frequently erupts and attacks anyone in his path, and appointed “Keepers” — slightly older teens who were once “wayward” themselves — are all too ready to beat and rape their peers, “sucking satisfaction from these small acts of power.” Kim’s descriptions of violence are at times hard to read, but they never feel gratuitous. Each assault is tied to the novel’s exploration of the intoxicating effects of power, how easily it is abused, and how quickly we accept its crooked logic.

Over the course of the novel, Eunju and Sangchul must each determine how to make it out alive without accepting their disempowerment. The two recognize the worst of themselves in one another: a quick temper, selfishness, a tendency to compete rather than collaborate. While Eunju never loses sight of her mission — plotting an escape for herself and her mother — Sangchul gradually becomes more concerned with eking out an existence within the nightmare that Warden has constructed, with or without his brother.

Ultimately, they both must learn to trust their fellow inmates — and one another — in order to survive. Kim thus tempers the tale’s bleakness with a reminder that the human spirit can find ways to survive under the worst of circumstances. Solidarity brings not only greater strength but also justice, reconciliation, and hope for the future.

— *Kristen Martin ’16SOA*



Long Island

By **Colm Tóibín** (Scribner)

Fifteen years ago, Colm Tóibín won readers’ hearts with his best-selling novel *Brooklyn*. Now, with the sequel, *Long Island*, he just might break them.

At its core, *Brooklyn* is a love story, or several — between both people and places. The main character, Eilis Lacey, is a plucky small-town Irish girl who immigrates to New York City just after World War II. Eilis is desperately homesick when she meets the Italian-American Tony Fiorello, and he pursues her, sweetly and persistently. But just as she is beginning to build a life in New York, tragedy calls her back to Ireland. There it’s easy for Eilis to forget her life abroad, especially as she starts to fall for Jim Farrell. At the end of *Brooklyn*, she must choose between Tony and Jim, America and Ireland. She picks Tony.

It’s a perfect Hollywood ending — and indeed, the book was adapted into an Oscar-nominated movie, with Eilis played charmingly by Saoirse Ronan. Moviegoers are left with the image of our heroine sailing back across the Atlantic and into Tony’s arms. Of course, in real life there is no guaranteed happily-ever-after, and what happens after the credits roll is the focus of the second novel in what Tóibín is calling the Eilis Lacey series.

Tóibín picks up the action twenty years later, on the titular island, where Eilis and Tony and their two teenaged children live on a cul-de-sac next to the rest of the Fiorello clan. “At times, Eilis found it stifling living beside Tony’s parents and his two

brothers and their families,” Tóibín writes. “They often blamed her interest in privacy and staying apart as something Irish.”

That privacy is shattered when a man rings Eilis’s doorbell and tells her that Tony has had an affair with his wife, resulting in a pregnancy. When the baby is born, the man says, he will bring it directly to Eilis and Tony’s home and leave it for them to raise. Tony doesn’t deny the affair; his only weak attempt at appeasing Eilis is telling her that she will not have to raise the baby. Instead, his mother will do it, in the house next door, which is cold comfort to Eilis.

Angry and humiliated, Eilis decides to return to Ireland, alone, for the first time in two decades. As she settles back into her life there, she must reckon with some of the relationships she left behind: with her stern mother, who appears not to have kept any of the letters that Eilis sent from America; with her childhood best friend, Nancy Sheridan, widowed far too early; and most significantly with Jim Farrell, who never married and who has long wondered if Eilis made the right decision.

Eilis, too, thinks about the crossroads she once faced and how her choice shaped the marriage that she and Tony built. “Tony’s relief that she had come back from Ireland that time was so great that he never asked her why she had not replied to his letters. He had never inquired if she had met someone else in Ireland. Her being away that summer was simply never mentioned again. And that had made life easy between them.” Easy, perhaps, but also lonely. Now Eilis faces another crossroads at an unexpected time in her life.

Tóibín, Columbia’s Irene and Sidney B. Silverman Professor of the Humanities, writes beautifully about the struggle between the comfort of the familiar and the hope for something better. Like *Brooklyn*, this book is as much about place as it is people — about what makes a home and how to find your way in a life split between two worlds. Eilis has lived for twenty years on the cul-de-sac, sitting quietly at loud Sunday lunches with her in-laws and feeling like she doesn’t belong. And yet as she thinks back on Long Island from Ireland,

she realizes, “The rooms in the house in Lindenhurst belonged to her as much as to Tony ... and the leafy streets around, the salt air coming in from the ocean, the light shivering with expectancy on the days when the weather on

Long Island was about to change, all this had become her life.”

Long Island isn’t all quiet contemplation — there’s enough romantic entanglement that a cinematic sequel wouldn’t be off the table. But the book

shines when it gives us such artfully crafted depictions of its characters’ inner lives, particularly Eilis’s. It’s a pleasure to be back in the company of this strong, complicated heroine.

— Rebecca Shapiro

The Demon of Unrest

By Erik Larson '78JRN (Crown)

Exactly how did the American Civil War begin? This was the question Erik Larson was pondering when he began working on a new book in the first weeks of the COVID pandemic. After writing three histories of wartime Europe, most recently *The Splendid and the Vile*, which detailed the first year Winston Churchill '46HON served as Britain’s prime minister, Larson set out to research a subject closer to home. Of course, everybody knows how this bloody chapter in American history ends, but Larson’s account of the political crisis that led to the first shots being fired in Charleston Harbor reads like a thriller and positively drips with tension.

The Demon of Unrest gives us a front-row seat to the five months of drama that unfolded between Lincoln’s election and the attack on Fort Sumter. Larson is known for his exhaustive research, and here he draws on hundreds of historical documents, including letters, telegrams, military reports, personal diaries, and plantation ledgers. From these he

painstakingly reconstructs the unfortunate series of events that led “Americans on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line to the point where they could actually imagine the wholesale killing of one another.”

What his research reveals is sobering. Yes, the issues of slavery and states’ rights were certainly the chief sources of political tension, but the march toward war was propelled not just by principles but also by a string of misunderstandings, hurt feelings, misplaced codes of honor, and naked narcissism. Indeed, the “unsatisfiable craving on the part of certain key actors for personal attention and affirmation” was a key driver of civil unrest.

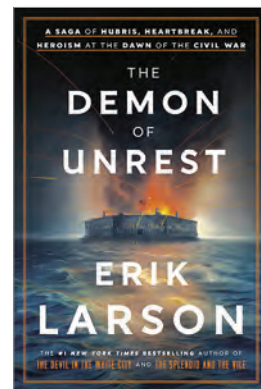
We learn about the role of Edmund Ruffin, a puffed-up Virginia planter who was afforded the dubious honor of firing the first shot in the attack on Fort Sumter. Ruffin, a vocal instigator of secession, was vain but terribly insecure. He desperately chased the spotlight, embraced his role as a rabble-rouser, and sought praise and flattery constantly.

Pride was also a distinguishing characteristic

of the three envoys of the Confederate States who, in the days leading up to the war, traveled to Washington in the hopes of meeting with President Lincoln. “Proficient in the art of taking offense, they needed the unalloyed respect of all around them,” writes Larson. When the trio were summarily rebuffed, they angrily threatened “blood and mourning” and said they would “accept the gage of battle thus thrown down to them.”

While male ego played an outsized role in this tragedy, heroism also drove the action. Fort Sumter was manned by the courageous Major Robert Anderson, who despite dwindling supplies and insufficient arms, bravely defended his position even as the fort was surrounded by the enemy. Cleaving to the most revered principles of military etiquette (yes, another sort of pride), he kept the American flag flying under the greatest duress.

In the book’s introduction, Larson says that during his research, he couldn’t help but have “the eerie feeling that present and past had merged.” Then as now, the nation was deeply divided,



with one member of the cabinet declaring, “The people in the South are mad; the people in the North are asleep.” In February 1861, the certification of the Electoral College vote was under threat, as crowds of irate Southerners gathered in Washington and converged on the Capitol, clamoring to get inside. Polarization was fueled by men with deep passions, massive insecurities, huge egos, and conflicting economic interests. Thus, with flag-waving, cheers, and an overdeveloped sense of indignation, the nation blundered into a civil war that would result in the loss of some 750,000 American lives. This terrifying conclusion, one might argue, makes Larson’s latest tome not just a saga of hubris, heartbreak, and heroism, as the subtitle suggests, but a sobering and timely cautionary tale.

— Sally Lee

READING LIST

New and noteworthy releases

BURN BOOK

By Kara Swisher '85JRN
Journalist and podcaster Kara Swisher has covered American tech since the dot-com boom in the early 1990s and has become known for holding industry leaders accountable in her no-holds-barred interviews. With thirty years of unparalleled access to a who's who of Silicon Valley — from Jeff Bezos to Steve Jobs to Mark Zuckerberg — she has plenty of tea to spill in her much-hyped new book. But there's more than just gossip here: it's a thoughtful history of a period that has irrevocably changed our world and a surprisingly hopeful vision of the potential role of tech in our future.

LAST HOUSE

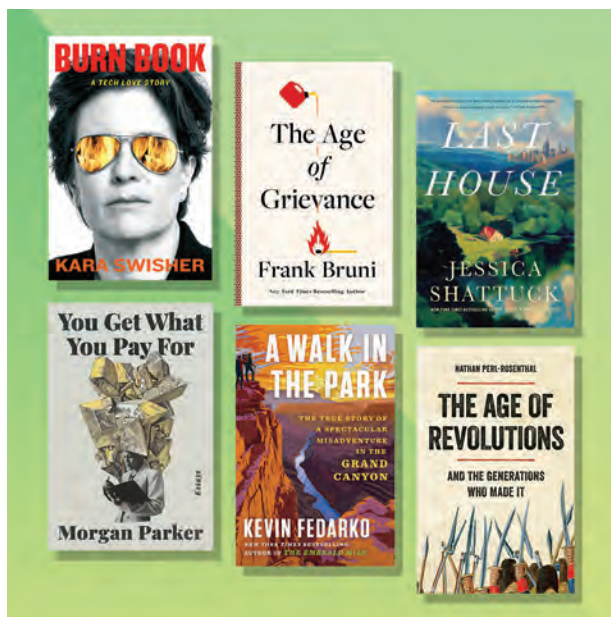
By Jessica Shattuck '01SOA
In her latest novel, Jessica Shattuck, the best-selling writer of *The Women in the Castle*, captures two generations, each caught up in the politics of their time. The book opens in 1953, when World War II vet Nick Taylor, a lawyer for a major American oil company, gets drawn into the Iranian coup d'état. Meanwhile, his wife, Bet, once an Army code-breaker, bides her time in the suburbs, raising their children, Katherine and Harry. Fifteen years later, those children are grown and protesting all that their parents stood for, Katherine at a liberal newspaper in Morningside Heights and Harry near the family's country home in Vermont.

THE AGE OF GRIEVANCE

By Frank Bruni '88JRN
American politics has changed drastically over the last several decades. In his compelling new book, Frank Bruni argues that much of that change can be attributed to a cultural shift in attitude: we've become a nation of whiners. Bruni writes that Americans on both sides of the aisle feel victimized and aggrieved (though he is clear that he thinks the Right has weaponized this tactic in more dangerous ways), and politicians have responded in kind. Bruni contends that while grievance is not a new concept, and has historically often been good, this new era is different. Legitimate complaints are lost among exaggerated ones. And in a nation with broad gun ownership, the results can be devastating.

YOU GET WHAT YOU PAY FOR

By Morgan Parker '10CC
The author of three award-winning poetry collections and a young-adult novel, Morgan Parker has a bold, provocative, often hilarious voice, and her insights about Black womanhood in contemporary America have resonated with a wide audience. But in her personal life, Parker often feels isolated and alone: "I'm a poet who has never experienced true romantic love; I believe this is an American tragedy." Her latest book, an essay collection, explores this and other intimate



themes, with plenty of reflection on the greater societal contexts.

A WALK IN THE PARK

By Kevin Fedarko '88CC
Veteran journalist Kevin Fedarko is no stranger to the Grand Canyon: his first book, *The Emerald Mile*, told the story of a thrill seeker who rode a wooden boat the entire length of the Colorado River. But now, Fedarko himself is the adventurer. Accompanied by *National Geographic* photographer Pete McBride, Fedarko embarked on a 750-mile, end-to-end trek through the awe-inspiring gorge. With no marked trail, punishing temperatures, and death-defying cliffs, it's considered one of the hardest hikes in the world — and indeed, the year-long trip nearly killed them both. Fedarko's prose is often funny, but he also pays appropriate respect to both the land and the native peo-

ple that have called it home for thousands of years.

THE AGE OF REVOLUTIONS

By Nathan Perl-Rosenthal '11GSAS
In an ambitious survey of what Thomas Paine called "the age of revolutions," historian Nathan Perl-Rosenthal traces revolutionary movements of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in North America, Spanish America, Europe, and Haiti. Producing the first narrative history of the era, Perl-Rosenthal assembles a cast of famous (John Adams, Napoleon, Toussaint Louverture) and lesser-known figures (Peruvian nun Maria De La Concepción Rivadeneyra) to show how two generations forged massive transformations and how political progress often came at the expense of racial and social equality. To read an interview with Perl-Rosenthal, visit magazine.columbia.edu.

Body Politics

In *Dead Weight*, Emmeline Clein '16CC, '22SOA draws on her own story, as well as interviews, academic studies, history, and pop culture, to reveal the societal causes of eating disorders



Columbia Magazine: What was the genesis of this book?

Emmeline Clein: When I was in the writing MFA program at Columbia, I started working on what I thought was going to be a book about female hysteria. And I realized that whether I was looking at Victorian medical literature or contemporary pop culture, a lot of feminized mental-health symptoms centered around eating disorders. I started looking for a book that would contextualize eating disorders, to help me understand them as political and social and cultural and economic phenomena, the same way things like addiction and depression are often treated in nonfiction books. I really wasn't finding that book.

CM: You write that, by 2012, nearly three-quarters of women reported struggling with symptoms of eating disorders. Do you think the pervasiveness ironically makes people take this subject less seriously?

EC: I think that there's a lot of truth to that. When I tell women about my work, I often hear, in a joking tone, "Oh, right, what girl hasn't had an eating disorder?" But eating disorders are actually the second-most-fatal mental illness, after opioid addiction. And

even if eating disorders don't reach the clinical level, they are still harmful. For example, studies have found that yo-yo dieting does more cardiovascular damage than steadily remaining at a higher weight. Shouldn't we be asking a lot more questions about why so many women have had this type of relationship with food, something that should be sacred and basic and nourishing?

CM: And why do you think it is so pervasive?

EC: We as a society are devoted to the idea that a very thin body is possible for the majority of people. It's foisted upon us everywhere from pop culture to the multibillion-dollar diet industry. But weight is mostly determined by genetics. There is naturally a wide range of body types. So you have a lot of women resorting to self-harm to try to attain a size their body isn't meant to be.

CM: Can you talk about how social media and the Internet affect eating disorders? How have things changed since you were a teenager in the aughts?

EC: I think it's very important to make a distinction between the two time periods. There was a lot of panic about the pro-anorexia online community in the aughts, but for the most part, it was a very insular community. Those forums were not being accessed by people who didn't already have an eating disorder. Now we have very powerful algorithms. Diet content is being dished out on TikTok to people who are not seeking it. There was a study done recently where bots were coded as thirteen-year-old girls to see what kind of content was being pushed to the tops of their feeds, and the results were eye-opening.

CM: How do you think Ozempic will affect eating disorders?

EC: I have a lot of concerns about Ozempic. In many ways, it replicates the conditions of an eating disorder. It masks hunger, which allows you to eat at the level of restriction that occurs with anorexia. And it can make you throw up if you eat too much, because the food doesn't move through your intestines fast enough. And of course, we're seeing all these celebrities emerge having lost weight very quickly, so there are a lot of people saying, Why not me too? We've been blaming people for the size of their bodies for so long, and now we're saying that it's not their fault. But still we're incapable of accepting and celebrating those larger bodies, and instead we've found a quick-fix solution, even if it comes with likely negative health effects.

CM: Your book lays out some of the ways that both insurance companies and for-profit clinics make it difficult to treat eating disorders. Given that, how do you recommend that people who have eating disorders get better?

EC: There are a lot of amazing support groups, and I do think it's beneficial to share and to listen to other people's stories. But for me, the only path to recovery was a combination of educating myself on the kinds of systems that were profiting off me having this disease and realizing that these structures are the apotheosis of decades of racist and misogynist messaging. It's a powerful machine that's been running for a long time, but when any of us start trying to be the screw that doesn't work, we can break it pretty fast.

— *Rebecca Shapiro*



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NATO Called, Ike Answered

Columbia's president helped shape the now 75-year-old military alliance

On April 4, 1949, the newly formed North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), represented by delegates from the US, Canada, and ten European countries, signed a collective security pact. Four years after the end of a war that killed thirty-nine million Europeans, the twelve nations negotiated an all-for-one, one-for-all agreement with the declared intention to check Soviet expansion, bolster Europe's defenses, and prevent German remilitarization.

At Columbia, President Dwight D. Eisenhower '47HON, the five-star general who led the Allied invasion of Europe during World War II, was closely following events. Eisenhower had become president of Columbia less than a year earlier, succeeding Nicholas Murray Butler, who resigned in 1945 after forty-four years. Provost Frank Fackenthal 1906CC, 1929HON had been serving as acting president, and the University was desperate for leadership. Influential trustees, led by IBM boss Thomas Watson 1929HON, hoped that General Eisenhower would bring fresh glory to Columbia — and invigorate donors.

But not everyone liked Ike. Many professors and students were skeptical of this military man who was neither an academic nor an intellectual. They questioned his political ambitions (he denied having them), and even his admirers wondered how he would square the responsibility of leading Columbia with the demands of his immense fame and his soldier's duty. "The position of president of a major university, such as ours, is no part-time job," wrote one wary Ike supporter in the *Spectator*. Eisenhower did not run for the US presidency in 1948, which quieted some of the talk. "He clearly could have had either party's nomination," says historian Travis Jacobs '71GSAS, author of *Eisenhower at Columbia*. "In that respect, I think Eisenhower was a boon to the University."

Jacobs's father, Columbia law professor Alfred Jacobs, was the new provost at the time, and his responsibilities quickly grew as Eisenhower began to spend more time away from Low Library. In February 1949, at the request of President Truman, Eisenhower went to Washington to temporarily

head the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Then, after suffering an attack of gastroenteritis, he spent two months resting at Truman's winter home in Key West. "My dad was doing Eisenhower's office work on top of his own," Jacobs recalls.

In May, a month after NATO formed, Eisenhower returned to campus. By then, Alfred Jacobs had resigned as provost, replaced by political-science professor Grayson Kirk '53HON. A year later, in June 1950, the Korean War broke out — the first hot clash of the Cold War — and that fall, duty again called: the disparate NATO armies needed a cohesive command structure, and they wanted Eisenhower to build it.

And so on December 19, 1950, Columbia granted its president indefinite leave to serve as supreme allied commander Europe. Eisenhower moved to NATO headquarters in France and held the post until May 31, 1952, while Provost Kirk led Columbia. In July, at the Republican National Convention, Eisenhower accepted the GOP nomination for president.

Victorious in the general election, he resigned from Columbia effective January 19, 1953. The following day, in Washington, he took the oath of office.

As America's thirty-fourth president, Eisenhower used his NATO experience to form his defense policies: he worked to strengthen the alliance and shifted strategic emphasis from naval and ground forces to air power and tactical nuclear weapons. By the time Eisenhower died in 1969, NATO had expanded to fifteen countries.

Today, NATO has thirty-two members. And while scholars and politicians may disagree about the aims and efficacy of the alliance, the current geopolitical climate has imbued NATO with, in the words of political scientist Kimberly Marten of Columbia's Harriman Institute, "a new sense of purpose and a renewed degree of unity."

As supreme allied commander, Eisenhower had always insisted that NATO's mission was to preserve the peace and avert war. "No lesser purpose, no warped nationalism, and above all, no aggressive or predatory design," he said, "should be allowed to turn us away from this noble enterprise." — *Paul Hond*



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