

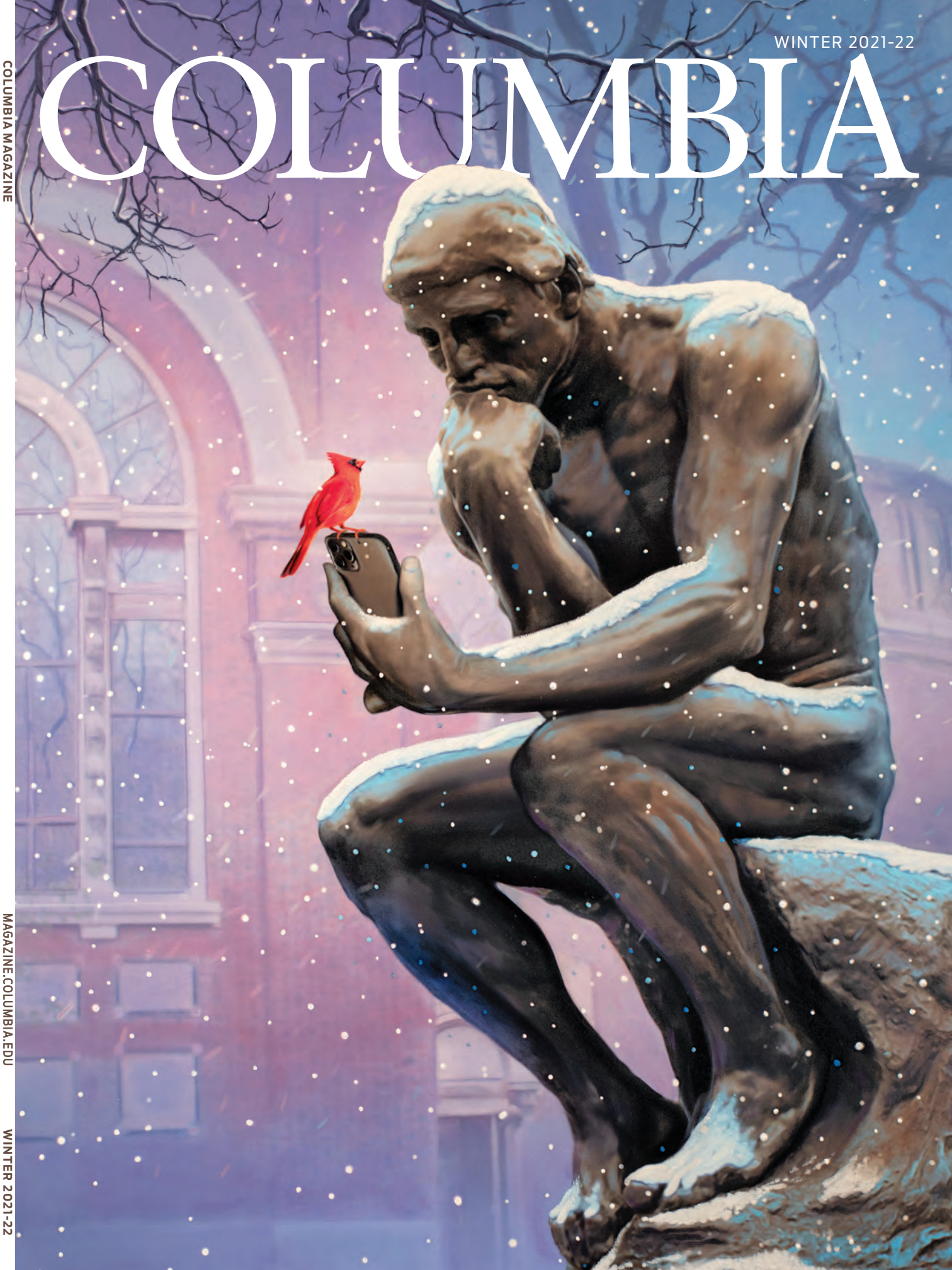
WINTER 2021-22

COLUMBIA

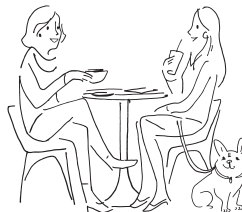
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JENNY KROIK

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“Jeff and Linda’s generosity has made it possible for me to dream big.”

QiYue Peng '20SEAS
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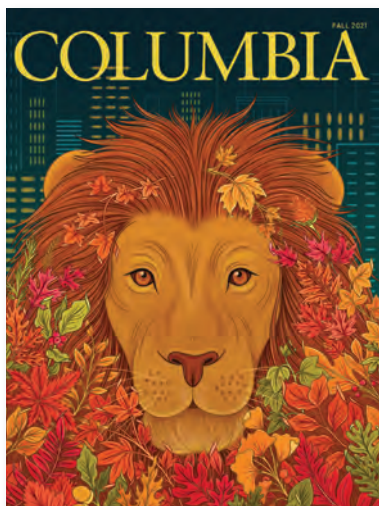
A shared Columbia connection brought Jeff and Linda Franklin together.

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Jeff Franklin '68SEAS received a full scholarship to Columbia Engineering. Thanks to another alum’s introduction, Jeff met Linda, and later they married. The couple knew they wanted to “pay forward” their good fortune. As they were planning their post-retirement life, Jeff and Linda found the perfect way.

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A LIFE IN ART

Thanks to Ashley Bryan for his inspirational life and work and to Paul Hond for the beautifully written and well-deserved article about him (“Oh God, Make Me Brave for Life,” Fall 2021). That Bryan was able to maintain “warmth and happiness” in his artistic output is a testament to his faith in humanity — especially children.

It is difficult enough for an artist to retain his creative energy in a materialistic society like ours, but for Bryan to keep it alive while courageously overcoming segregation and the horrors of war shows amazing belief in the efficacy of his craft.

Robert Chapla '68CC
Newbury, VT

In 1982, as head of children’s services at the Handley Library in Winchester, Virginia, I initiated a program to bring authors and illustrators of children’s books to the community. Nancy Larrick — the Winchester native and celebrated educator whose essay “The All-White World of Children’s Books” inspired Ashley

Bryan — suggested Bryan as the inaugural participant.

He turned out to be all that I hoped for and more. Gentle, kind, and patient, Bryan was fully at ease with the children, and they with him, as he explained his creative process and, just as important, encouraged his audience to nurture their own creativity. The resounding success of his visit led me to make this program a staple throughout my professional career.

It is good to know that Bryan is still vibrant, thriving, and productive almost forty years later.

Noreen Hinds Bernstein '68BC
Lanexa, VA

ACKNOWLEDGING SOCIAL WORKERS

Your article “The Mental Weight of COVID-19” (Fall 2021) fails to mention the work that the Columbia School of Social Work is doing to help support people of all ages managing the trauma of the pandemic. Students, alums, and professors are actively engaged in this work, and it is important to

highlight it along with that of Columbia psychologists and psychiatrists. Mental health is a collaborative field, and social workers, psychologists, mental-health counselors, and psychiatrists all recognize the need for support and services in this changing world.

Elizabeth Steinmeyer '13SW
Arlington, VA

Thank you for your very informative, well-researched, and timely article. The mental-health community is truly in crisis.

As a graduate of the Columbia School of Social Work in clinical practice for over forty years, in trauma-informed treatment and in private practice, I was disappointed that social workers weren’t mentioned, either for their work as practitioners or for the very important research they do.

Mark Gaynor '75SW
New Haven, CT

ANIMAL MINDS

I was so moved by Paul Hond’s article “What Are They Thinking?” (Fall 2021). Truly, Michelle Ashkin’s

FEEDBACK



The art on the cover is stunning! I’ve never seen a more beautiful rendering of our dear mascot.

Milan Adhikari '20SEAS
Jersey City, NJ

I am moved to write to compliment you on the cover illustration of the Fall 2021 issue. It is gorgeous, both in theme and execution. Oh, and the articles were really great also.

Nancy Spiegel '71GSAS
Delmar, NY

Gaby D’Alessandro’s cover is a knockout. Thanks, Gaby!

Halsey Munson '66GS
Decatur, IL



MISSING O'CONNOR

In a photo caption accompanying an article about Columbia's championship 1961 football team ("Lionhearted," Backstory, Fall 2021), we mistakenly identified player number 30 as Tom Haggerty '62CC rather than **Tom O'Connor '63CC**. O'Connor, who died in April 2020 at the age of seventy-eight, was the oldest of ten children, four of whom would go on to play Lions football. He grew up in Chicopee, Massachusetts, lettered for three years in Columbia football and captained in 1962, served in NROTC and later in the Navy as a nuclear-submarine officer, and worked for twenty-five years as the director of administration for the law firm McCarter and English, in Newark. His teammate Tom Vasell '62CC told *Columbia College Today* that O'Connor was "tough, strong, and reliable as the day is long."

passion and her efforts to bring the voice of the animal kingdom into our hearts is deeply touching. As humans we are blessed to be able to think and act like no other living species; with that ability comes a responsibility to be watchful that all animals have the freedom to live a life free from abuse and slaughter. The fact that some animals can "self-recognize" in a mirror makes one feel they have a form of self-consciousness. Hats off to Ashkin for creating a course to raise awareness among our own species.

To the team that brings us *Columbia Magazine* — a big thank-you. I read every article!

Rajiv Mehta '77SEAS
Troy, MI

MORE MAYORS

I enjoyed your article on Columbia alumni mayors ("Mayoral Musings," College Walk, Fall 2021). I am sure the article could not be comprehensive, but one mayor that is missing is me. I am the mayor of Beverly Hills and a graduate of Columbia Col-

lege, Class of 1975. It makes for an interesting coincidence that the mayors of the neighboring cities of Los Angeles and Beverly Hills are both Columbia alums.

Robert Wunderlich '75CC
Beverly Hills, CA

As the immediate past mayor of Scarsdale, New York, a community of eighteen thousand residents located about fifteen miles north of Columbia's campus, I would expect that there are many more Columbia alumni mayors scattered in smaller communities throughout the country.

I appreciated your article and your noting of the challenges of being a mayor — which were certainly heightened when the pandemic hit in March 2020. At that time, I relied on the broad-based, outside-the-box thinking and open-minded, team-based approach that I learned at Columbia to address this unprecedented pandemic in my small community. I offer that many communities of different sizes and shapes benefited from Columbia's outstanding education as much as our big-city brethren in New

York, Los Angeles, Durham, and Jersey City.

Marc Samwick '97BUS
Purchase, NY

TOP ENGINEERS

Congratulations to Provost Mary C. Boyce on her appointment and for being the first woman in that role ("Knowledge in Action," The Big Idea, Fall 2021).

It's not quite right, though, to say that she is the first engineer to be provost. Granted, she is the first engineer to be the *sole* provost. But during the brief time in the early 1980s when the role of provost was split into three positions, Peter Likins was provost of the Morningside professional schools for two years, from 1980 to 1982. And before that, he was dean of the engineering school, a noteworthy engineer, and my mechanics professor.

Alexander Michniewicz '82SEAS
Charlotte, NC

TALKING SHOP

"It's not just a cup of coffee and a pastry. There's a human relationship, and that's really a beautiful thing." That's what the pandemic helped Philip Biniotis, proprietor of

KEY TO ABBREVIATIONS

CODE	SCHOOL	CODE	SCHOOL
BC	Barnard College	NRS	School of Nursing
BUS	Graduate School of Business	OPT	School of Optometry
CC	Columbia College	PH	Mailman School of Public Health
DM	College of Dental Medicine	PHRM	School 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
LS	School of Library Service		

COLUMBIA ATHLETICS; OPPOSITE: PEARADA UNHA/ALFKHAKA 1165PS

the Hungarian Pastry Shop, realize more acutely than ever (“Strudel for the People,” College Walk, Fall 2021).

For this 1975–79 engineering student, Columbia was an inhospitable place. I was limited in the campus activities I could pursue, barred from Barnard classes and dorms, not welcome in Columbia College physical-education classes, and one of the very few coeds in squalid college dorms that were prone to fires.

Trekking to the Hungarian Pastry Shop was the highlight of every day. On weekdays at around 4:00 p.m., with a friend or alone, I would spend an hour or two sipping a café au lait, then lollygagging over free refills while



trying to study, decompress, or just zone out with the regulars sitting at the cramped tables around me.

The pastry shop and the School of Library Science’s library on the sixth floor of Butler were the top two happy places of my Columbia campus life. It looks like the pastry shop hasn’t changed much, but on the sixth floor of Butler, gone are the long, wide tables, the Windsor chairs, and the

man we nicknamed “Webster” reading the dictionaries bolted to the tables.

Yes, the human relationship is a beautiful thing, Mr. Binioris. Your dad, his partner, the staff, and the regulars made it more about that than just delicious coffee and scrumptious pastries.

**Lisa Levine ’79SEAS,
’85PH**
Columbia, SC

KEY LYME GUYS

It’s difficult to believe that an article in *Columbia Magazine* concerning Lyme disease (“New clinic will treat Lyme disease long-haulers,” Explorations, Fall 2021) could neglect to mention that Allen C. Steere ’65CC, ’69VPS, along with his Yale mentor

Stephen Malawista ’58VPS, are credited with discovering and naming Lyme disease.

Edward A. Merlins ’65CC
McLean, VA

PRINT’S CHARMING

I always love getting *Columbia Magazine*. I think it’s the only print publication I read anymore. Thank you for all of your work!

Laura Duane ’08CC
Santa Monica, CA

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COLLEGE WALK

NOTES
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STREET AND
BEYOND



Another Brick in the Walk

Reconstructing the University's "Main Street"

To honor Columbia's bicentennial in 1954, the City of New York gave the University an unusual gift: the one-block stretch of West 116th Street between Broadway and Amsterdam Avenue, which cut through the heart of the Morningside campus. Soon after, the street was closed to traffic and converted into a tree-lined public walkway. Two brick sidewalks, which dated to the opening of the campus in 1897, were preserved, while the roadway was repaved with hexagonal asphalt blocks, with wide strips of lawn added on either side. At the behest of alumni, the Board of Trustees named the 760-foot corridor College Walk.

The walkway became Columbia's grand promenade and the central gathering place for protest and performance, carnivals and club fairs, Convocation and Commencement. World leaders have trod upon it, filmmakers

have immortalized it, lovers have proposed marriage on it. And every year, the trees on College Walk — littleleaf lindens and Japanese flowering cherries — are ceremonially strung with twinkling white lights that dazzle through the winter.

Though the asphalt path is widest, it's the bricks that define the look of College Walk. Andrew Dolkart '77GSAPP, a professor of historic preservation at Columbia and the author of *Morningside Heights: A History of Its Architecture and Development*, notes that the original Catskill bricks, named after their place of origin, were chosen by campus architect Charles McKim 1904HON. McKim wanted the path to harmonize with the academic buildings, which were made of a type of dark-red brick known as Harvard brick. The sidewalk bricks, tidily arranged in a herringbone pattern, echo the motif on Low Plaza.

Over time, under the weight of the daily commerce of a major university, the central path began to sink. Dips and divots formed, and during rainstorms and snowmelts small puddles bloomed. In 2007 the University replaced the road's old "hex blocks." But the brick walkways were also sagging and collecting water, and while individual bricks were switched out through the years, the paths could become slick and sloshy in wet weather. Finally, this past summer, before the start of the academic year and the return of heavy foot traffic, Columbia Facilities embarked on a major renovation. Over the course of two months, the bricks of the southern span of College Walk were removed, and fresh bricks were set down.

The new pavers, made by the Pine Hall Brick Company in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, are sturdier than their predecessors. "They have more substance and traction and will eliminate slips and trips," says Donald Schlosser, assistant vice president of campus operations. "Pedestrian safety is our top priority." He estimates that more than 150,000 bricks were used. Beneath them lies a multilayered substrate of highly compacted concrete and asphalt — a far stronger foundation than what was there before — and a new drainage system to keep the route clear of puddles. "We built this like a roadway," says Schlosser. "The bricks should remain nice and even and drain properly for years to come."

The College Walk overhaul is the latest in a wave of similar projects that began in 2017 with Butler Plaza and the walkway leading from Butler to the Sundial. "We're being strategic about moving forward through the campus," Schlosser says. "The whole south end of the campus has been refurbished, and we want to keep going north."

For Schlosser, who has been guiding projects at Facilities since 2000, these brick-by-brick improvements are their own reward. "This campus is a jewel in the City of New York, and helping to make it more attractive is an honor," he says. "You step off Broadway and you walk in and it's just magnificent."

— Paul Hond



Head-to-Head Competition

Three Columbia undergrads roar through the *College Bowl*

Columbia is used to being an underdog in football, but *College Bowl* is a different sort of hard-hitting sport. An intercollegiate quiz show in which players tackle questions rather than each other, the program debuted on NBC radio in 1953 — the first match pitted the Columbia Lions against the Northwestern Wildcats — and aired on television from 1959 to 1970 as *General Electric College Bowl*. Last year, NBC revived the show (now sponsored by Capital One), and Columbia was one of twelve schools invited to participate in the 2021 tournament.

The producers auditioned potential contestants on Zoom, and four undergrads made the cut: Shomik Ghose (the team captain), Tamarah

Wallace, Jake Fisher, and alternate Addis Boyd. The students, who didn't know each other, flew to Los Angeles, where they did some team bonding before going to the studio to tape the show. Ghose, a football fan, was thrilled to meet the *College Bowl* emcees: former NFL quarterback Peyton Manning and his older brother, Cooper. The Manning brothers brought gridiron cred to a rah-rah competition whose stakes were dizzyingly high: the grand prize was \$125,000 in scholarships for each member of the winning team, while the runners-up would receive \$25,000 apiece. The Lions, wearing thinking caps rather than helmets, clawed their way past Morehouse and Tennessee to reach the semifinals against Auburn.

That's when things got hairy. Early in the Auburn match, the Lions fell behind by an eye-popping margin of 240–10. Their only chance for survival was the two-minute drill, the part of the game where most of the points are scored, and where the Lions had excelled in their previous matches. "The segment is like a verbal race," says Ghose. Peyton Manning reads as many questions as he can in 120 seconds, while the team captain, with counsel from his teammates, blurts out as many answers as possible.

The topic was history: "In 1809, Napoleon arranged for the nullification of his marriage to whom?" "Josephine!" "What January 1776 pamphlet by Thomas Paine" — "*Common Sense!*" "Robert E. Lee surrendered to the Union in what Virginia village?"

"Appomattox!" After Auburn took its turn and the dust cleared, the Lions were on top, 735–695. "The killer instinct really kicked in," says Ghose. It was an astonishing reversal, and Columbia, which hadn't won the tournament since 1966, advanced to the finals.

Waiting for them were the Trojans of USC. It was New York versus Los Angeles, or, as Cooper Manning put it, "pizza versus avocado toast." High-profile Columbians cheered on the Lions in video clips that punctuated the program: University provost Mary Boyce, Columbia College dean James Valentini, economics professor Sunil

COLLEGE WALK

Gulati '86GSAS, sports commentator Max Kellerman '98CC, and former secretary of state Madeleine Albright '76GSAS, '95HON, who called the three contestants "the future of Columbia."

The final match, which featured topics such as botany, women in fiction, world music, African-American authors, and conflict resolution, was a squeaker. Once again, it all came down to the two-minute drill. The Trojans went first, racking up points. The Lions, needing fifteen correct answers in two minutes in order to win, chose the category "liberal arts."



From left: Jake Fisher, Shomik Ghose, and Tamarah Wallace.

"We have the Core Curriculum at Columbia, we do our humanities," Ghose explained to the hosts. The clock started, and in the heat of battle, the Lions lost track

of the tally. With twenty-two seconds left, Peyton asked how many electoral votes the states of Vermont and Wyoming have. "Three!" Ghose yelled. There was a bell-like

sound, and Peyton hit the brakes. "And that is it," he said. "Columbia has won the *College Bowl* championship."

The Lions were in shock. On national television, with everything on the line, they had conquered the field. The Manning brothers brought over the *College Bowl* Cup along with symbolic checks for \$125,000.

Back on campus, Ghose, Wallace, and Fisher got a small taste of celebrity. "A lot of people stop me and ask, 'Are you the guy on TV?'" Ghose says. As usual, he has the correct answer.

— Paul Hond

SNIPS, STRIPS, AND QUIPS

What's 830 pages, thirty-six pounds, and read all over? Columbia's Rare Book and Manuscript Library has the answer: an oversized scrapbook that I. A. Persinger, a barber in Fredonia, Kansas, began compiling in 1928. This unusual relic, which the library recently acquired, started as an album of clippings of the adventure comic strip *Wash Tubbs*, by Roy Crane. But as the Depression took hold, Persinger expanded the book into a journal of drawings and inscriptions by himself and his customers. The library plans to scan the book, while fulfilling the humble barber's admonition, on one of the pages, to "Handle This Book Carefull."



TOP: GREG GAYNE / NBC; BOTTOM: ERIC OGLANDER



Two panels out of more than a dozen from *Our Kind of People*.

Art Lessons for Lawyers

Columbia Law School's inaugural artist-in-residence gives students a new perspective

In his photographic series *Our Kind of People*, the multimedia artist Bayeté Ross Smith presents a strip of six portraits, each of the same person dressed in a different outfit from that person's wardrobe. The implications — that appearances can be deceiving and that individuals are multifaceted — are clear enough. But it's when viewers start examining their own biases and perceptions that Ross Smith's work enacts its real power.

And so last year, when Columbia Law School announced the post of artist-in-residence as part of an initiative to reckon with structural inequality and structural racism, it was Ross Smith who rose to the top of a field of four hundred applicants.

"Bayeté's work forces a reexamination of how we perceive a situation or an event based on how we see people

— their race, their neighborhood, the way they're dressed," says law-school dean Gillian Lester, a prominent legal scholar and an authority on employment law. "Lawyers are always making judgments, and Bayeté is asking questions that are so relevant to thinking about the law and how we apply it. I believe we can make better, more ethical, more thoughtful and empathic lawyers if we can enable them to see the lens through which they view the world."

Ross Smith grew up on the Upper West Side in a family of jazz musicians. He took music lessons at the Harlem School of the Arts and swimming lessons at the Harlem YMCA. An aunt worked at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, which became Ross Smith's second home. But it wasn't until he entered Florida A&M University, the third-largest historically Black college or

university in the country, that he first thought deeply about identity.

He was a business major, and once a week the business students had to dress up in suits and attend a talk by an executive from a Fortune 500 company. "We were very thoughtful about acclimating ourselves to corporate culture — our conduct, our body language, and the way we spoke," he says. "But fifteen minutes before, we were hanging out and speaking in ways typical of twenty-year-old African-Americans. I thought, this is such an interesting switch: in one moment we're very much what would be expected, and in another we're almost the complete opposite." Ross Smith changed his major to journalism and started taking pictures.

Later, as a graduate art student in California, he was photographing a college

friend near the friend's house in Los Angeles when a group of people claiming to be the neighborhood watch approached them and asked what they were doing there. "After they left, four different police cars showed up because there was a report of suspicious behavior," Ross Smith recalls. "That got me thinking about the nuances of identity and how it impacts our daily interactions, not just on an interpersonal level but also on a macro level — one population to another."

In his piece *Taking AIM*, Ross Smith replaces the silhouetted cartoonish "bad guys" on the targets seen at firing ranges with photos of himself and other real people and asks: who is a victim and who is a threat? "Most violence is committed within a close geography, so if you're going to shoot someone, it's likely going to

COLLEGE WALK

be someone who looks like one of your neighbors,” he says. “What is evoked with real people on the target?”

Ross Smith hopes that his work at the law school will help students develop their “visual literacy,” which he defines as the ability to deconstruct the visual language of media, journalism, and art. “Imagery, stories, sequences, videos, film, monuments, statues — they’re all designed to disseminate certain messages,” he says. “And that’s fine, as long as they are transparent about what they’re saying, and as long as we all have a level of literacy so we can clearly understand what’s being said.”



Bayeté Ross Smith

Above all, he wants to instill in students a readiness to question their preexisting beliefs, especially on social issues. “We’ve got to apply the same level of scrutiny and intellectual rigor to questioning the things we agree with that we apply to the things we disagree with,” he says. “We’ve got to be willing to see the validity in an opposing perspective, even if we think the ultimate conclusion is faulty.”

With interactive art projects and classroom talks, the yearlong residency will allow Ross Smith to reach students poised to take their Columbia degrees into the world. “This is an exciting opportunity to engage with a new audience,” he says. “Often in the arts we’re siloed in galleries, and even when we do public art there’s usually no follow-up. But if we think that art and media are tools for social change — and I believe they are — then we need to work with people who are in a position to make change.” — *Paul Hond*



Health on the Horizon

At 100, the Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health prepares for the future

In late 1918, with influenza surging in New York City, Joseph De Lamar, a Dutch-born mining mogul who had lived on Madison Avenue, left \$3 million to Columbia’s College of Physicians and Surgeons to study the causes and prevention of human disease. The Spanish flu, which would kill some 675,000 Americans, was the latest public-health emergency in a city that had seen outbreaks of cholera, malaria, typhoid fever, yellow fever, polio, smallpox, and tuberculosis, as well as the effects of poor sanitation, crowded tenements, and hazardous workplaces.

De Lamar’s bequest helped realize an institutional vision that dated to 1908, when Norman Edward Ditman 1900GSAS, an instructor in pathology at the College of Physicians and Surgeons, called for a school of public health that would focus on preventive

medicine. In 1922, Columbia’s De Lamar Institute of Public Health, led by former New York City health commissioner Haven Emerson 1899VPS, opened on West 59th Street, in a single classroom with a single student. The institute, which was part of the College of Physicians and Surgeons, grew and became a separate school within the University in 1945, and was renamed in 1998 in recognition of a \$33 million gift from businessman and philanthropist Joseph L. Mailman. Over the years, the school emerged as a leader in the study of maternal, reproductive, and childhood health, occupational safety, HIV treatment, environmental exposures, obesity, healthy longevity, infectious-disease identification and care, and the use of biostatistics to better understand disease.

Today the school has 1,300 graduate students, 378 faculty,

more than 17,000 alumni, and \$250 million in sponsored research for projects in more than a hundred countries. This past September, New York City mayor Bill de Blasio '87SIPA announced that Columbia and the Mailman School would lead the city's new Pandemic Response Institute, to help the city prepare for future pandemics.

With public health in the spotlight like never before, Linda P. Fried, an epidemiologist and geriatrician who has been dean since 2008, is leading the school into a future of enormous challenges, including climate change, emerging viruses, food-system failures, and an aging population. "Some health problems can be solved one person at a time, but most of health involves what we have to do together," says Fried. "These problems are going to deeply jeopardize our health in coming years unless we find solutions and understand that when we protect each other's health we protect our own."

Fried notes that while 70 percent of any population's health status depends on factors like air and water quality, food safety, and prevalence of infectious diseases, the US spends 97 percent of its health dollars on individual medical care and less than 3 percent on public health. "The US has been disinvesting in public health since the 1960s, and in many ways we have been reaping the consequences," Fried says. "It's horrifying. What we saw during the COVID-19 pandemic was that the disarray and disavowal of public health left everyone at risk."

For Fried, one of the most compelling areas of public health is the tremendous potential to be unlocked when people are able to lead active lives well into their eighties and nineties. Average life expectancy in the US is near

eighty — a more than thirty-year increase from what it was in the early twentieth century. "As people live longer, they have time to develop chronic diseases like cancer, heart disease, stroke, and lung disease — 50 percent of which is preventable with clean air, access to healthy, affordable food, and programs that teach people how to live healthier," Fried says. "We are still living in a society designed for a life expectancy of forty-seven and have not created the systems to enable us to keep people healthy through their longer lives. So it's critical for public health to build on what we've learned: that prevention works at every age and stage."

The effects of a warming planet only complicate the picture. In 2009, Fried, on the basis of a Mailman-produced analysis indicating that climate would soon become the primary threat to human health, started the school's first program on how to decrease the health impacts of climate change. "At that point it sounded like science fiction," she says. "Now, with wildfires, floods, drought, extreme weather, and climate migration, people know this isn't science fiction." The climate program, which has thirty faculty members, will act as the health arm of the new Columbia Climate School, the University's first new school in twenty-five years.

Fried believes that public health "is the basis of a successful society," and as the school moves into its second century, she remains optimistic in the face of unprecedented obstacles. "I walk into the school every morning, where everyone is on the same beat, and it's inspiring," she says. "There's no choice but to stay focused and positive. There's simply no choice. The alternative is not acceptable."

— Paul Hond

THE SHORT LIST



LISTEN

Miller Theatre returns from a long pandemic intermission with a season of virtuosic live performance.

Program highlights include jazz from the **Miguel Zenón Quartet** (February 12) and the **Kenny Barron Trio** (April 2), Bach's tour de force the *Goldberg Variations* performed by pianist **Simone Dinnerstein** (March 31), and evenings dedicated to contemporary composers such as **Luca Francesconi** (February 3) and **Felipe Lara**, above (March 3). millertheatre.com/events



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READ

Columbia Global Reports, an imprint

dedicated to ambitious works of journalism on underreported subjects, is publishing several new books, including *Miseducation: How Climate Change Is Taught in America*, by former *Frontline* investigative reporter Katie Worth '15JRN, and *The Subplot: What China Is Reading and Why It Matters*, by arts journalist Megan Walsh. globalreports.columbia.edu

6 THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE NOW

With global warming no longer just a threat but a full-blown crisis, Columbia experts are on the frontlines, documenting the dangers and developing solutions

By David J. Craig



I. MORE SCIENTISTS ARE INVESTIGATING WAYS TO HELP PEOPLE ADAPT

OVER THE PAST HALF CENTURY, thousands of scientists around the world have dedicated their careers to documenting the link between climate change and human activity. A remarkable amount of this work has been done at Columbia's Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory, in Palisades, New York. Indeed, one of the founders of modern climate science, the late Columbia geochemist Wally Broecker '53CC, '58GSAS, popularized the term "global warming" and first alerted the broader scientific community to the emerging climate crisis in a landmark 1975 paper. He and other Columbia researchers then set about demonstrating that rising global temperatures could not be explained by the earth's natural long-term climate cycles. For evidence, they relied heavily on Columbia's world-class collections of tree-ring samples and deep-sea sediment cores, which together provide a unique window into the earth's climate history.

Today, experts say, the field of climate science is in transition. Having settled the question of whether humans are causing climate change — the evidence is "unequivocal," according to the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) — many scientists have been branching out into new areas, investigating the myriad ways that global warming is affecting our lives. Columbia scholars from fields as diverse as public health, agriculture, economics, law, political science, urban planning, finance, and engineering are now teaming up with climate scientists to learn how communities can adapt to the immense challenges they are likely to confront.

The University is taking bold steps to support such interdisciplinary thinking. Its new Columbia Climate School, established last year, is designed to serve as a hub for research and education on climate sustainability. Here a new generation of students will be trained to find creative solutions to the climate crisis. Its scholars are asking questions such as: How can communities best protect themselves from

rising sea levels and intensifying storm surges, droughts, and heat waves? When extreme weather occurs, what segments of society are most vulnerable? And what types of public policies and ethical principles are needed to ensure fair and equitable adaptation strategies? At the same time, Columbia engineers, physicists, chemists, data scientists, and others are working with entrepreneurs to develop the new technologies that are urgently needed to scale up renewable-energy systems and curb emissions.

"The challenges that we're facing with climate change are so huge, and so incredibly complex, that we need to bring people together from across the entire University to tackle them," says Alex Halliday, the founding dean of the Columbia Climate School and the director of the Earth Institute. "Success will mean bringing the resources, knowledge, and capacity of Columbia to the rest of the world and guiding society toward a more sustainable future."

For climate scientists who have been at the forefront of efforts to document the effects of fossil-fuel emissions on our planet, the shift toward helping people adapt to climate change presents new scientific challenges, as well as the opportunity to translate years of basic research into practical, real-world solutions.

"A lot of climate research has traditionally looked at how the earth's climate system operates at a global scale and predicted how a given amount of greenhouse-gas emissions will affect global temperatures," says Adam Sobel, a Columbia applied physicist, mathematician, and climate scientist. "The more urgent questions we face now involve how climate hazards vary across the planet, at local or regional scales, and how those variations translate into specific risks to human society. We also need to learn to communicate climate risks in ways that can facilitate actions to reduce them. This is where climate scientists need to focus more of our energy now, if we're to maximize the social value of our work."

A boat sits in a dried-out lakebed near Fresno, California.



A firefighter battles the Caldor Fire in Grizzly Flats, California, last summer.

2. BIG DATA WILL ENABLE US TO PREDICT EXTREME WEATHER

JUST A FEW YEARS AGO, scientists couldn't say with any confidence how climate change was affecting storms, floods, droughts, and other extreme weather around the world. But now, armed with unprecedented amounts of real-time and historical weather data, powerful new supercomputers, and a rapidly evolving understanding of how different parts of our climate system interact, researchers are routinely spotting the fingerprints of global warming on our weather.

"Of course, no individual weather event can be attributed solely to climate change, because weather systems are highly dynamic and subject to natural variability," says Sobel, who studies global warming's impact on extreme weather. "But data analysis clearly shows that global warming is tilting the scales of nature in a way that is increasing both the frequency and intensity of certain

types of events, including heat waves, droughts, and floods."

According to the World Meteorological Organization, the total number of major weather-related disasters to hit the world annually has increased five-fold since the 1970s. In 2021, the US alone endured eighteen weather-related disasters that caused at least \$1 billion in damages. Those included Hurricanes Ida and Nicholas; tropical storms Fred and Elsa; a series of thunderstorms that devastated broad swaths of the Midwest; floods that overwhelmed the coasts of Texas and Louisiana; and a patchwork of wildfires that destroyed parts of California, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, and Arizona. In 2020, twenty-two \$1 billion events struck this country — the most ever.

"The pace and magnitude of the weather disasters we've seen over the

past couple of years are just bonkers," says Sobel, who studies the atmospheric dynamics behind hurricanes. (He notes that while hurricanes are growing stronger as a result of climate change, scientists are not yet sure if they are becoming more common.) "Everybody I know who studies this stuff is absolutely stunned by it. When non-scientists ask me what I think about the weather these days, I say, 'If it makes you worried for the future, it should, because the long-term trend is terrifying.'"

The increasing ferocity of our weather, scientists say, is partly attributable to the fact that warmer air can hold more moisture. This means that more water is evaporating off oceans, lakes, and rivers and accumulating in the sky, resulting in heavier rainstorms. And since hot air also wicks moisture out of soil and vegetation, regions that tend to receive less rainfall, like the American West, North Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia, are increasingly prone to drought and all its attendant risks. "Climate change is generally making wet areas wetter and dry regions drier," Sobel says.

But global warming is also altering the earth's climate system in more profound ways. Columbia glaciologist Marco Tedesco, among others, has found evidence that rising temperatures in the Arctic are weakening the North Atlantic jet stream, a band of westerly winds that influence much of the Northern Hemisphere's weather. These winds are produced when cold air from the Arctic clashes with warm air coming up from the tropics. But because the Arctic is warming much faster than the rest of the world, the temperature differential between these air flows is diminishing and causing the jet stream to slow down and follow a more wobbly path. As a result, scientists have discovered, storm systems and pockets of hot or cold air that would ordinarily be pushed along quickly by the jet stream are now sometimes hovering over particular locations for days, amplifying their impact. Experts say that the jet stream's new snail-like pace may explain why a heavy rainstorm parked itself over Zhengzhou,

FRED GREAVES / REUTERS

"The pace and magnitude of the weather disasters we've seen over the past couple of years are just bonkers."

— Adam Sobel

China, for three days last July, dumping an entire year's worth of precipitation, and why a heat wave that same month brought 120-degree temperatures and killed an estimated 1,400 people in the northwestern US and western Canada.

Many Columbia scientists are pursuing research projects aimed at helping communities prepare for floods, droughts, heat waves, and other threats. Sobel and his colleagues, for example, have been using their knowledge of hurricane dynamics to develop an open-source computer-based risk-assessment model that could help policymakers in coastal cities from New Orleans to Mumbai assess their vulnerability to cyclones as sea levels rise and storms grow stronger. "The goal is to create analytic tools that will reveal how much wind and flood damage would likely occur under different future climate scenarios, as well as the human and economic toll," says Sobel, whose team has sought input from public-health researchers, urban planners, disaster-management specialists, and civil engineers and is currently collaborating with insurance companies as well as the World Bank, the International Red Cross, and the UN Capital Development Fund. "Few coastal cities have high-quality information of this type, which is necessary for making rational adaptation decisions."

Radley Horton '07GSAS, another Columbia climatologist who studies weather extremes; Christian Braneon, a Columbia civil engineer and climate scientist; and Kim Knowlton '05PH and Thomas Matte, Columbia public-health researchers, are members of the New York City Panel on Climate Change, a scientific advisory body that is helping local officials prepare for increased flooding, temperature spikes, and other

climate hazards. New York City has acted decisively to mitigate and adapt to climate change, in part by drawing on the expertise of scientists from Columbia and other local institutions, and its city council recently passed a law requiring municipal agencies to develop a comprehensive long-term plan to protect all neighborhoods against climate threats. The legislation encourages the use of natural measures, like wetland restoration and expansion, to defend against rising sea levels. "There's a growing emphasis on attending to issues of racial justice as the city develops its adaptation strategies," says Horton. "In part, that means identifying communities that are most vulnerable to climate impacts because

near large bodies of water have become susceptible to heat waves of surprising intensity, accompanied by dangerous humidity. His team has previously shown that in some notoriously hot parts of the world — like northern India, Bangladesh, and the Persian Gulf — the cumulative physiological impact of heat and humidity can approach the upper limits of human tolerance. "We're talking about conditions in which a perfectly healthy person could actually die of the heat, simply by being outside for several hours, even if they're resting and drinking plenty of water," says Horton, explaining that when it is extremely humid, the body loses its ability to sufficiently perspire, which is how it



Flooding killed at least three hundred people in China's Henan Province in July.

of where they're located or because they lack resources. We want to make sure that everybody is a part of the resilience conversation and has input about what their neighborhoods need."

Horton is also conducting basic research that he hopes will inform the development of more geographically targeted climate models. For example, in a series of recent papers on the atmospheric and geographic factors that influence heat waves, he and his team discovered that warm regions located

cools itself. Now his team suspects that similarly perilous conditions could in the foreseeable future affect people who live near the Mediterranean, the Black Sea, the Caspian Sea, or even the Great Lakes. "Conditions in these places probably won't be *quite* as dangerous as what we're seeing now in South Asia or the Middle East, but people who are old, sick, or working outside will certainly be at far greater risk than they are today," Horton says. "And communities will be unprepared, which increases the danger."

How much worse could the weather get? Over the long term, that will depend on us and how decisively we act to reduce our fossil-fuel emissions. But conditions are likely to continue to deteriorate over the next two to three decades no matter what we do, since the greenhouse gases that we have already added to the atmosphere will take years to dissipate. And the latest IPCC report states that every additional increment of

warming will have a larger, more destabilizing impact. Of particular concern, the report cautions, is that in the coming years we are bound to experience many more “compound events,” such as when heat waves and droughts combine to fuel forest fires, or when coastal communities get hit by tropical storms and flooding rivers simultaneously.

“A lot of the extreme weather events that we’ve been experiencing lately are so

different from anything we’ve seen that nobody saw them coming,” says Horton, who points out that climate models, which remain our best tool for projecting future climate risks, must constantly be updated with new data as real-world conditions change. “What’s happening now is that the conditions are evolving so rapidly that we’re having to work faster, with larger and more detailed data sets, to keep pace.”

3. THE WORLD'S FOOD SUPPLY IS UNDER THREAT

“A WARMER WORLD COULD ALSO BE a hungry one, even in the rich countries,” writes the Columbia environmental economist Geoffrey Heal in his latest book, *Endangered Economies: How the Neglect of Nature Threatens Our Prosperity*. “A small temperature rise and a small increase in CO₂ concentrations may be good for crops, but beyond a point that we will reach quickly, the productivity of our present crops will drop, possibly sharply.”

Indeed, a number of studies, including several by Columbia scientists, have found that staple crops like corn, rice, wheat, and soybeans are becoming more difficult to cultivate as the planet warms. Wolfram Schlenker, a Columbia economist who studies the impact of climate change on agriculture, has found that corn and soybean plants exposed to temperatures of 90°F or higher for just a few consecutive days will generate much less yield. Consequently, he has estimated that US output of corn and soybeans could decline by 30 to 80 percent this century, depending on how high average temperatures climb.

“This will reduce food availability and push up prices worldwide, since the US is the largest producer and exporter of these commodities,” Schlenker says.



Soybean yields in many parts of the world are expected to drop as temperatures rise.

There is also evidence that climate change is reducing the nutritional value of our food. Lewis Ziska, a Columbia professor of environmental health sciences and an expert on plant physiology, has found that as CO₂ levels rise, rice plants are producing grains that contain less protein and fewer vitamins and minerals. “Plant biology is all about balance, and when crops suddenly have access to more CO₂ but the same amount of soil nutrients, their chemical composition changes,” he says. “The plants look the same, and they may even grow a little bit faster, but they’re not as good for you. They’re carbon-rich and nutrient-poor.” Ziska says that the molecular changes in rice that he has observed are fairly subtle, but he expects that as CO₂ levels

continue to rise over the next two to three decades, the changes will become more pronounced and have a significant impact on human health. “Wheat, barley, potatoes, and carrots are also losing some of their nutritional value,” he says. “This is going to affect everybody — but especially people in developing countries who depend on grains like wheat and rice for most of their calories.”

Experts also worry that droughts, heat waves, and floods driven by climate change could destroy harvests across entire regions, causing widespread food shortages. A major UN report coauthored by Columbia climate scientist Cynthia Rosenzweig in 2019 described the growing threat of climate-induced hunger, identifying Africa, South America, and

ROBY DOYLE / BLOOMBERG VIA GETTY IMAGES

Asia as the areas of greatest susceptibility, in part because global warming is accelerating desertification there. Already, some eight hundred million people around the world are chronically undernourished, and that number could grow by 20 percent as a result of climate change in the coming decades, the report found.

In hopes of reversing this trend, Columbia scientists are now spearheading ambitious efforts to improve the food security of some of the world's most vulnerable populations. For example, at the International Research Institute for Climate and Society (IRI), which is part of the Earth Institute, multidisciplinary teams of climatologists and social scientists are

**"The plants look the same ... but they're not as good for you."
— Lewis Ziska**

working in Ethiopia, Senegal, Colombia, Guatemala, Bangladesh, and Vietnam to minimize the types of crop losses that often occur when climate change brings more sporadic rainfall. The IRI experts, whose work is supported by Columbia World Projects, are training local meteorologists, agricultural officials, and farm-

ers to use short-term climate-prediction systems to anticipate when an upcoming season's growing conditions necessitate using drought-resistant or flood-resistant seeds. They can also suggest more favorable planting schedules. To date, they have helped boost crop yields in dozens of small agricultural communities.

"This is a versatile approach that we're modeling in six nations, with the hope of rolling it out to many others," says IRI director John Furlow. "Agriculture still dominates the economies of most developing countries, and in order to succeed despite increasingly erratic weather, farmers need to be able to integrate science into their decision-making."

4. WE NEED TO PREPARE FOR MASSIVE WAVES OF HUMAN MIGRATION



South Sudanese refugees gather at a camp in Uganda.

FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS, the vast majority of the human population has lived in a surprisingly narrow environmental niche, on lands that are fairly close to the equator and offer warm temperatures, ample fresh water, and fertile soils.

But now, suddenly, the environment is changing. The sun's rays burn hotter, and rainfall is erratic. Some areas are threatened by rising sea levels, and in others the land is turning to dust, forests to kindling. What will people do in the coming years? Will they tough it out and try to adapt, or will they migrate in search of more hospitable territory?

Alex de Sherbinin, a Columbia geographer, is among the first scientists attempting to answer this question empirically. In a series of groundbreaking studies conducted with colleagues at the World Bank, the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, New York University, Baruch College, and other institutions, he has concluded that enormous waves of human migration will likely occur this century unless governments act quickly to shift their economies away from fossil fuels and thereby slow the pace of global warming. His

team's latest report, published this fall and based on a comprehensive analysis of climatic, demographic, agricultural, and water-use data, predicts that up to 215 million people from Asia, Eastern Europe, Africa, and Latin America — mostly members of agricultural communities, but also some city dwellers on shorelines — will permanently abandon their homes as a result of droughts, crop failures, and sea-level rise by 2050.

“And that’s a conservative estimate,” says de Sherbinin, a senior research scientist at Columbia’s Center for International Earth Science Information Network. “We’re only looking at migration that will occur as the result of the gradual environmental changes occurring where people live, not massive one-time relocations that might be prompted by natural disasters like typhoons or wildfires.”

De Sherbinin and his colleagues do not predict how many climate migrants will ultimately cross international borders in search of greener pastures. Their work to date has focused on anticipating population movements within resource-poor countries in order to help governments develop strategies for preventing exoduses of their own citizens, such as by providing struggling farmers with irrigation systems or crop insurance. They also

"The international community ... needs to help poorer countries prepare for these migrations."

— Alex de Sherbinin

identify cities that are likely to receive large numbers of new residents from the surrounding countryside, so that local governments can prepare to accommodate them. Among the regions that will see large-scale population movements, the researchers predict, is East Africa, where millions of smallholder farmers will abandon drought-stricken lands and flock to cities like Kampala, Nairobi, and Lilongwe. Similarly, agricultural communities across Latin America, devastated by plummeting corn, bean, and coffee yields, will leave their fields and depart for urban centers. And in Southeast Asia, rice farmers and fishing families in increasingly flood-prone coastal zones like Vietnam’s Mekong Delta, home to twenty-one million people, will retreat inland.

But these migrations, if they do occur, do not necessarily need to be tragic or chaotic affairs, according to de Sherbinin. In fact, he says that with proper planning, and with input from those who are considering moving, it is even possible that large-scale relocations could be organized in ways that ultimately benefit everybody involved, offering families of subsistence farmers who would otherwise face climate-induced food shortages a new start in more fertile locations or in municipalities that offer more education, job training, health care, and other public services.

“Of course, wealthy nations should be doing more to stop climate change and to help people in developing countries adapt to environmental changes, so they have a better chance of thriving where they are,” he says. “But the international community also needs to help poorer countries prepare for these migrations. If and when large numbers of people do find that their lands are no longer habitable, there should be systems in place to help them relocate in ways that work for them, so that they’re not spontaneously fleeing droughts or floods as refugees but are choosing to safely move somewhere they want to go, to a place that’s ready to receive them.”

5. RISING TEMPERATURES ARE ALREADY MAKING PEOPLE SICK

ONE OF THE DEADLIEST RESULTS of climate change, and also one of the most insidious and overlooked, experts say, is the public-health threat posed by rising temperatures and extreme heat.

“Hot weather can trigger changes in the body that have both acute and chronic health consequences,” says Cecilia Sorensen, a Columbia emergency-room physician and public-health researcher. “It actually alters your blood chemistry in ways that make it prone to clotting, which can lead to heart attacks or strokes, and it promotes inflamma-

tion, which can contribute to a host of other problems.”

Exposure to severe heat, Sorensen says, has been shown to exacerbate cardiovascular disease, asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, arthritis, migraines, depression, and anxiety, among other conditions. “So if you live in a hot climate and lack access to air conditioning, or work outdoors, you’re more likely to get sick.”

By destabilizing the natural environment and our relationship to it, climate change is endangering human health in

numerous ways. Researchers at Columbia’s Mailman School of Public Health, which launched its innovative Climate and Health Program in 2010, have shown that rising temperatures are making air pollution worse, in part because smog forms faster in warmer weather and because wildfires are spewing enormous amounts of particulate matter into the atmosphere. Global warming is also contributing to food and drinking-water shortages, especially in developing countries. And it is expected to fuel transmission of dengue fever, Lyme disease, West

Nile virus, and other diseases by expanding the ranges of mosquitoes and ticks. But experts say that exposure to extreme heat is one of the least understood and fastest growing threats.

“Health-care professionals often fail to notice when heat stress is behind a patient’s chief complaint,” says Sorensen, who directs the Mailman School’s Global Consortium on Climate and Health Education, an initiative launched in 2017 to encourage other schools of public health and medicine to train practitioners to recognize when environmental factors are driving patients’ health problems. “If I’m seeing someone in the ER with neurological symptoms in the middle of a heat wave, for example, I need to quickly figure out whether they’re having a cerebral stroke or a heat stroke, which itself can be fatal if you don’t cool the body down quickly. And then I need to check to see if they’re taking any medications that can cause dehydration or interfere with the body’s ability to cool itself. But these steps aren’t always taken.”

Sorensen says there is evidence to suggest that climate change, in addition to aggravating existing medical conditions, is causing new types of heat-related illnesses to emerge. She points out that tens of thousands of agricultural workers in Central America have died of an enigmatic new kidney ailment that has been dubbed Mesoamerican nephropathy or chronic kidney disease of unknown origin (CKDu), which appears to be the result of persistent heat-induced inflammation. Since CKDu was first observed among sugarcane workers in El Salvador in the 1990s, Sorensen says, it has become endemic in those parts of Central America where heat waves have grown the most ferocious.

“It’s also been spotted among rice farmers in Sri Lanka and laborers in India and Egypt,” says Sorensen, who is collaborating with physicians in Guatemala to develop an occupational-health surveillance system to spot workers who are at risk of developing CKDu. “In total, we think that at least fifty thousand people have died of this condition worldwide.”



Temperatures have become especially dangerous in inner cities as a result of the “urban heat island” effect.

Heat waves are now also killing hundreds of Americans each year. Particularly at risk, experts say, are people who live in dense urban neighborhoods that lack trees, open space, reflective rooftops, and other infrastructure that can help dissipate the heat absorbed by asphalt, concrete, and brick. Research has shown that temperatures in such areas can get up to 15°F hotter than in surrounding neighborhoods on summer days. The fact that these so-called “urban heat islands” are inhabited largely by Black and Latino people is now seen as a glaring racial inequity that should be redressed by investing in public-infrastructure projects that would make the neighborhoods cooler and safer.

“It isn’t a coincidence that racially segregated neighborhoods in US cities are much hotter, on average, than adjacent neighborhoods,” says Joan Casey, a Columbia epidemiologist who studies how our natural and built environments influence human health. In fact, in one recent study, Casey and several colleagues showed that urban neighborhoods that lack green space are by and large the same as those that in the 1930s and 1940s were subject to the racist practice known as redlining, in which banks and municipalities designated

minority neighborhoods as off-limits for private lending and public investment. “There’s a clear link between that history of institutionalized racism and the subpar public infrastructure we see in these neighborhoods today,” she says.

Extreme heat is hardly the only environmental health hazard faced by residents of historically segregated neighborhoods. Research by Columbia scientists and others has shown that people in these areas are often exposed to dirty air, partly as a result of the large numbers of trucks and buses routed through their streets, and to toxins emanating from industrial sites. But skyrocketing temperatures are exacerbating all of these other health risks, according to Sorensen.

“A big push now among climate scientists and public-health researchers is to gather more street-by-street climate data in major cities so that we know exactly where people are at the greatest risk of heat stress and can more effectively advocate for major infrastructure upgrades in those places,” she says. “In the meantime, there are relatively small things that cities can do now to save lives in the summer — like providing people free air conditioners, opening community cooling centers, and installing more water fountains.”



Workers install solar panels on the roof of a fish-processing plant in Zhoushan, China.

6. WE'RE CURBING EMISSIONS BUT NEED TO ACT FASTER

SINCE THE BEGINNING OF the industrial revolution, humans have caused the planet to warm 1.1°C (or about 2°F), mainly by burning coal, oil, and gas for energy. Current policies put the world on pace to increase global temperatures by about 2.6°C over pre-industrial levels by the end of the century. But to avoid the most catastrophic consequences of climate change, we must try to limit the warming to 1.5°C, scientists say. This will require that we retool our energy systems, dramatically expanding the use of renewable resources and eliminating nearly all greenhouse-gas emissions by mid-century.

“We’ll have to build the equivalent of the world’s largest solar park every day for the next thirty years to get to net zero by 2050,” says Jason Bordoff, co-dean of the Columbia Climate School. A leading energy-policy expert, Bordoff served on the National Security Council of President Barack Obama ’83CC. “We’ll also have to ramp up

global investments in clean energy R&D from about \$2 trillion to \$5 trillion per year,” he adds, citing research from the International Energy Agency. “The challenge is enormous.”

Over the past few years, momentum for a clean-energy transition has been accelerating. In the early 2000s, global emissions were increasing 3 percent each year. Now they are rising just 1 percent annually, on average, with some projections indicating that they will peak in the mid-2020s and then start to decline. This is the result of a variety of policies that countries have taken to wean themselves off fossil fuels. European nations, for example, have set strict limits on industrial emissions. South Africa, Chile, New Zealand, and Canada have taken significant steps to phase out coal-fired power plants. And the US and China have enacted fuel-efficiency standards and invested in the development of renewable solar, wind, and geothermal energy

— which, along with hydropower, account for nearly 30 percent of all electricity production in the world.

“It’s remarkable how efficient renewables have become over the past decade,” says Bordoff, noting that the costs of solar and wind power have dropped by roughly 90 percent and 70 percent, respectively, in that time. “They’re now competing quite favorably against fossil fuels in many places, even without government subsidies.”

But in the race to create a carbon-neutral global economy, Bordoff says, the biggest hurdles are ahead of us. He points out that we currently have no affordable ways to decarbonize industries like shipping, trucking, air travel, and cement and steel production, which require immense amounts of energy that renewables cannot yet provide. “About half of all the emission reductions that we’ll need to achieve between now and 2050 must come from technologies that aren’t yet available at commercial scale,” says Bordoff.

In order to fulfill the potential of solar and wind energy, we must also improve the capacity of electrical grids to store power. “We need new types of batteries

capable of storing energy for longer durations, so that it's available even on days when it isn't sunny or windy," he says.

Perhaps the biggest challenge, Bordoff says, will be scaling up renewable technologies quickly enough to meet the growing demand for electricity in developing nations, which may otherwise choose to build more coal- and gas-fueled power plants. "There are large numbers of people around the world today who have almost no access to electricity, and who in the coming years are going to want to enjoy some of the basic conveniences that we often take for granted, like refrigeration, Internet access, and air conditioning," he says. "Finding sustainable ways to meet their energy needs is a matter of equity and justice."

Bordoff, who is co-leading the new Climate School alongside geochemist Alex Halliday, environmental geographer Ruth DeFries, and marine geologist Maureen Raymo, is also the founding director of SIPA's Center on Global Energy Policy, which supports research aimed at identifying evidence-based, actionable solutions to the world's energy needs. With more than fifty affiliate scholars, the center has, since its creation in 2013, established itself as an intellectual powerhouse in the field of energy policy, publishing a steady stream of definitive reports on topics such as the future of coal; the potential for newer, safer forms of nuclear energy to help combat climate change; and the geopolitical ramifications of the shift away from fossil fuels. One of the center's more influential publications, *Energizing America*, from 2020, provides a detailed roadmap for how the US can assert itself as an international leader in clean-energy systems by injecting more federal money into the development of technologies that could help decarbonize industries like construction, transportation, agriculture, and manufacturing. President Joe Biden's \$1 trillion Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, signed into law in November, incorporates many of the report's recommendations, earmarking tens of billions of dollars for scientific research in these areas.

"We'll have to build the equivalent of the world's largest solar park every day for the next thirty years to get to net zero by 2050."

— Jason Bordoff

"When we sat down to work on that project, my colleagues and I asked ourselves: If an incoming administration wanted to go really big on climate, what would it do? How much money would you need, and where exactly would you put it?" Bordoff says. "I think that's one of our successes."

Which isn't to say that Bordoff considers the climate initiatives currently being pursued by the Biden administration to be sufficient to combat global warming. The vast majority of the climate-mitigation measures contained in the administration's first two major legislative packages — the infrastructure plan and the more ambitious Build Back Better social-spending bill, which was still being debated in Congress when this magazine went to press — are designed to reward businesses and consumers for making more sustainable choices, like switching to renewable energy sources and purchasing electric vehicles. A truly transformative climate initiative, Bordoff says, would also *discourage* excessive use of fossil fuels. "Ideally, you'd want to put a price on emissions, such as with a carbon tax or a gasoline tax, so that the biggest emitters are forced to internalize the social costs they're imposing on everyone else," he says.

Bordoff is a pragmatist, though, and ever mindful of the fact that public policy is only as durable as it is popular. "I think the American people are more divided on this than we sometimes appreciate," he says. "Support for climate action is growing in the US, but we have to be cognizant of how policy affects everyday

people. There would be concern, maybe even outrage, if electric or gas bills suddenly increased. And that would make it much, much harder to gain and keep support during this transition."

Today, researchers from across the entire University are working together to pursue a multitude of strategies that may help alleviate the climate crisis. Some are developing nanomaterials for use in ultra-efficient solar cells. Others are inventing methods to suck CO₂ out of the air and pump it underground, where it will eventually turn into chalk. Bordoff gets particularly excited when describing the work of engineers at the Columbia Electrochemical Energy Center who are designing powerful new batteries to store solar and wind power. "This is a team of more than a dozen people who are the top battery experts in the world," he says. "Not only are they developing technologies to create long-duration batteries, but they're looking for ways to produce them without having to rely on critical minerals like cobalt and lithium, which are in short supply."

In his own work, Bordoff has recently been exploring the geopolitical ramifications of the energy transition, with an eye toward helping policymakers navigate the shifting international power dynamics that are likely to occur as attention tilts away from fossil fuels in favor of other natural resources.

But he believes the best ideas will come from the next generation of young people, who, like the students in the Climate School's inaugural class this year, are demanding a better future. "When I see the growing sense of urgency around the world, especially among the younger demographics, it gives me hope," he says. "The pressure for change is building. Our climate policies don't go far enough yet, so something is eventually going to have to give — and I don't think it's going to be the will and determination of the young people. Sooner or later, they're going to help push through the more stringent policies that we need. The question is whether it will be in time." 🍷



L'art impossible?

난감한 예술

The Impossible Art?

Inside the mysterious and often overlooked world of literary translation

By Paul Hond *Illustrations by Melinda Beck*

In 1978, Gregory Rabassa '54GSAS, famed translator of Gabriel García Márquez '71HON, Julio Cortázar, and Mario Vargas Llosa, was asked about a review in the *Washington Post* of a novel by the Guatemalan writer and Nobel Prize winner Miguel Ángel Asturias. Rabassa had translated the book from Spanish into English, and though the reviewer praised the richness of Asturias's language, he never once mentioned Rabassa. It was as if the reader had absorbed the author's words directly, without any mediator. Rabassa, who taught Spanish and Portuguese at Columbia from 1948 to 1969, wryly wondered aloud whether the reviewer even knew the book had been translated. "This would seem to be an additional argument," Rabassa quipped, "for the placing of the translator's name on the dust jacket of the book."

At least since *The Epic of Gilgamesh* was translated from Sumerian into Akkadian four thousand years ago, translators have been unsung conduits of cultural, spiritual, and intellectual exchange. The verb "translate" is rooted in the Latin *translatius*, meaning "to bear across," and indeed translators, living on the edges of two languages, must ferry meaning across a churning sea of possibilities. In doing this they have faced skepticism and worse. An early martyr of translation, the English scholar William Tyndale, was strangled and burned at the stake in 1536 for violating a papal decree

against translating the Latin Bible into local languages, and in the sixteenth century, Italians angered by French translations of Dante, which they felt betrayed the poetry, hurled the phrase *traduttore, traditore*, or "translator, traitor" (a sentiment shared by many authors whose work has been shabbily translated — allusions disfigured, humor gone flat). Given the nuances and resonances of any two languages and the unachievable ideal of perfect lexical equivalence, writers from Voltaire to Virginia Woolf have decried the futility of translation, and the philosopher and linguist Wilhelm von Humboldt declared it "impossible." Science-fiction author Ursula K. Le Guin '52GSAS, herself an amateur translator, called the act "entirely mysterious."

Impossible, mysterious, traitorous, or plain misunderstood, literary translation remains a powerful vehicle for the transmission of stories and ideas around the globe. Today, in the US, recently translated books by Elena Ferrante (Italy), Roberto Bolaño (Chile), Stieg Larsson (Sweden), Liu Cixin (China), Haruki Murakami (Japan), Olga Tokarczuk (Poland), and Karl Ove Knausgård (Norway), among others, are as readily seen in coffee shops as those by English-language authors. Yet in most cases the translators are only discreetly acknowledged. And while a few practitioners like Rabassa, Constance Garnett (best known for her Tolstoy), C. K. Scott Moncrieff (Proust), and professor emeritus Richard Howard '51CC (Baudelaire, Robbe-Grillet, Stendhal) are well known, the vast majority of

translators toil in relative anonymity, quietly bearing an author's words across the waters.

“Translation is an art,” says writer and translator Mark Polizzotti '82GSAS, who has rendered the French of Rimbaud, Flaubert, and Nobel laureate Patrick Modiano. “When you read a translation it doesn't mean it's a secondary experience. It doesn't mean you're not reading the author. It means you are reading the product of *two* authors: the original author and the translator, who has to read the text, interpret it, and regenerate it in terms that make linguistic sense.”

“Translation is writing,” says Katrine Øgaard Jensen '17SOA, an award-winning translator of Danish poetry into English. “It's rewriting a literary work. You write the same book but in a different language, which means it's not the same book anymore. It's a sibling. It's not a twin.” Richard Howard, who received a National Book Award for his 1982 translation of Baudelaire's *Les fleurs du mal*, once put it this way: “Since it's almost impossible to translate *the line* in most poetry, one is not translating poetry at all, one is translating what the poetry says, which is a very different thing. One is translating the *myth* of the poem.”

Susan Bernofsky, a translator of German literature, is the director of Literary Translation at Columbia (LTAC), part of the graduate writing program in the School of the Arts. Created in 2012, LTAC

offers classes and workshops for all writing students — not as a training program for translation but as a tool to improve writing skills. “Translation affords opportunities to think about what English can do and what English can be asked to do,” Bernofsky says. “It forces you to solve aesthetic problems that you wouldn’t have to solve writing your own material.”

In its decade-long existence, LTAC has helped educate world-class translators, burnishing the reputation of a university whose signature undergraduate program, the Core Curriculum, is based on reading classical works in translation, and whose graduates include some of the most venerated names in the field. There are Rabassa and Howard, as well as professors Burton Watson ’50CC, ’56GSAS and Donald Keene ’42CC, ’50GSAS, ’97HON, whose English

novel *Don Quixote*, translated by Kimi Traube ’08CC, ’14SOA.

For Bernofsky, the biggest misconception about translation is the notion “that translators just look up each word in the dictionary — which couldn’t be further from what we do,” she says. “Every language has its own way of doing business. German, for example, is a highly inflected language that gives you more syntactical flexibility than English, which means you can arrange your sentences rhythmically in ways that aren’t available to English-language writers. And you can change word order around a lot in German without changing the meaning of the sentence — whereas in English, if you switch the nouns in the sentence *I gave the man a hat*, it’s a different meaning.”

Bernofsky is working on Thomas Mann’s 1924 novel *The Magic Mountain*

and there’s a sense of mourning and reverence, while on the other Mann is undercutting the solemnity by focusing on disruptive features of the scene: a fly landing on the corpse and the perceptible smell of decay despite all the flowers brought in to disguise the odor. This is a typical Mann situation (which people generally talk about in terms of irony), with conflicting moods expressed in a single passage or sentence.”

Jensen, who was born in Denmark and teaches in LTAC, explains that a literary translator “must have a feeling for the style of the work, the pace of the sentences, the rhythm, as well as the exciting word choices that make you want to keep reading. A word-for-word translation can work for a recipe, but it can’t work for literature.”

Jensen’s translation of *Third-Millennium Heart*, a poetry collection by the prominent Danish poet Ursula Andkjær Olsen, is a case in point. “This was a highly experimental work, and I was worried about how to convey it in English,” Jensen says. For one thing, Olsen used neologisms that have no English parallel, and Jensen wrestled with what to do. Should she go for a literal translation, even if it didn’t make sense? “In the end, I chose to invent my own words — ones that hit the same sort of tone and give the English reader a similar experience,” she says. “For instance, to make a reference to capitalism slightly clearer, I translated the neologism *væksthund* (direct translation: growth-dog) to ‘charging bulldog,’ replacing ‘growth’ with a reference to Wall Street’s *Charging Bull*, an American symbol of aggressive financial optimism.”

The book, which was Jensen’s MFA thesis, won the 2018 National Translation Award in Poetry. “You have to take some risks,” Jensen says, “if you want to create something interesting for the reader.”

Idra Novey ’00BC, ’07SOA, a novelist, poet, and translator, knows this well. In 2012, New Directions published Novey’s English version of *The Passion According to G. H.*, a 1964 novel by Clarice Lispector, the acclaimed Ukrainian-Brazilian writer whose interior, stream-of-consciousness style presented a daunting but seductive

“A word-for-word translation can work for a recipe, but it can’t work for literature.”

translations of classical Japanese and Chinese literature and modern Japanese literature introduced Westerners to the literary art of East Asia. Ambitious twenty-first-century biblical translations by Robert Alter ’57CC (Old Testament) and Willis Barnstone ’56GSAS (New Testament) have won high praise. And it was Moses Hadas ’30GSAS, a translator of Greek and Latin who taught at Columbia College from 1925 until his death in 1966, who advocated for teaching the classics not only in English translation (sacrilege to some) but in contemporary English, saying, “Let each age put down the classics in its own language, just so long as they keep the spirit of the original.”

Today, alumni translators are applying their powers to other canonical works: poet Mary Jo Bang ’98SOA is translating Dante’s narrative poem *The Divine Comedy* (*Purgatorio*, its second part, was published last summer to glowing reviews), and next year, W. W. Norton will publish a new English version of Miguel de Cervantes’s towering seventeenth-century

(to be published by Norton) and has translated Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* and the fiction of Swiss-German writer (and Kafka forerunner) Robert Walser. She notes that translation requires skills far beyond fluency. “When a literary translation falls down, it’s not because the person didn’t know the other language well enough,” she says. “It’s because the person isn’t a strong enough writer.” (Rabassa, asked if his Spanish was good enough to translate García Márquez, replied, “The question should be: Is my English good enough?”)

A good translator, then, not only possesses a flair for language but is also intuitive, resourceful, and sensitive to the essential qualities of the source text. “Nuances of tone are everything in literature, and figuring out the voice in another language is extremely difficult,” Bernofsky says. “For *The Magic Mountain* it took me a really long time.” In one scene, the protagonist, Hans Castorp, still a child, is confronted with the dead body of his beloved grandfather lying in state before burial. “The tone is very complicated, because on the one

task. “Translating Clarice was a master class in risky prose,” says Novey, who grew up in western Pennsylvania, taught in Chile after college, and later moved to Brazil to improve her Portuguese. “I tried not to explain or interpret her writing but to recreate the mystery. That’s the translator’s job: you’re there to make the magic happen again in another language.”

To achieve this subtle alchemy, translators must shrewdly address common textual problems. “Proper nouns, wordplay, jokes, dialects, idioms, slang, pop-cultural references specific to the country, the texture of a conversation, or even characters’ names — translating these things can create headaches,” says Jae Won Edward Chung ’08SOA, ’17GSAS, a professor of Korean literature at Rutgers who has translated excerpts from the novels *Whale*, by Cheon Myeong-kwan, and *A World History of Second Sons*, by Lee Kiho, as well as short fiction and poetry. “When you turn certain words and phrases into English, they can look or sound weird.”

Chung points to the name of the main character of *A World History of Second Sons*, which is 나복만, pronounced Nah Bok Mahn. “The name is meant to be ironic, because it literally means ‘Only Fortune for Me,’ but Na’s fate is anything but lucky,” Chung says. “He’s framed as a spy and destroyed by the government. Existing romanization standards suggest Na Pokman or Na Pongman or even Na Bogman. Though I like their whimsical feel, which is consistent with the tone of the novel, I don’t necessarily want the reader thinking of the character as a ‘bog man’ or a Pokémon. So though imperfect, I went for ‘Na Bogmahn,’ which better approximates the sound of the original. The playfulness of the original is gone, but so be it. You have to prioritize certain things over others if you want a readable translation.”

This regard for the reader’s experience touches on an age-old debate among translators that Mark Polizzotti, in his 2018 manifesto on translation titled *Sympathy for the Traitor*, calls the “fidelity versus felicity” divide. “On one side are those who think there’s a single meaning to a word and you adhere

Translation Navigation

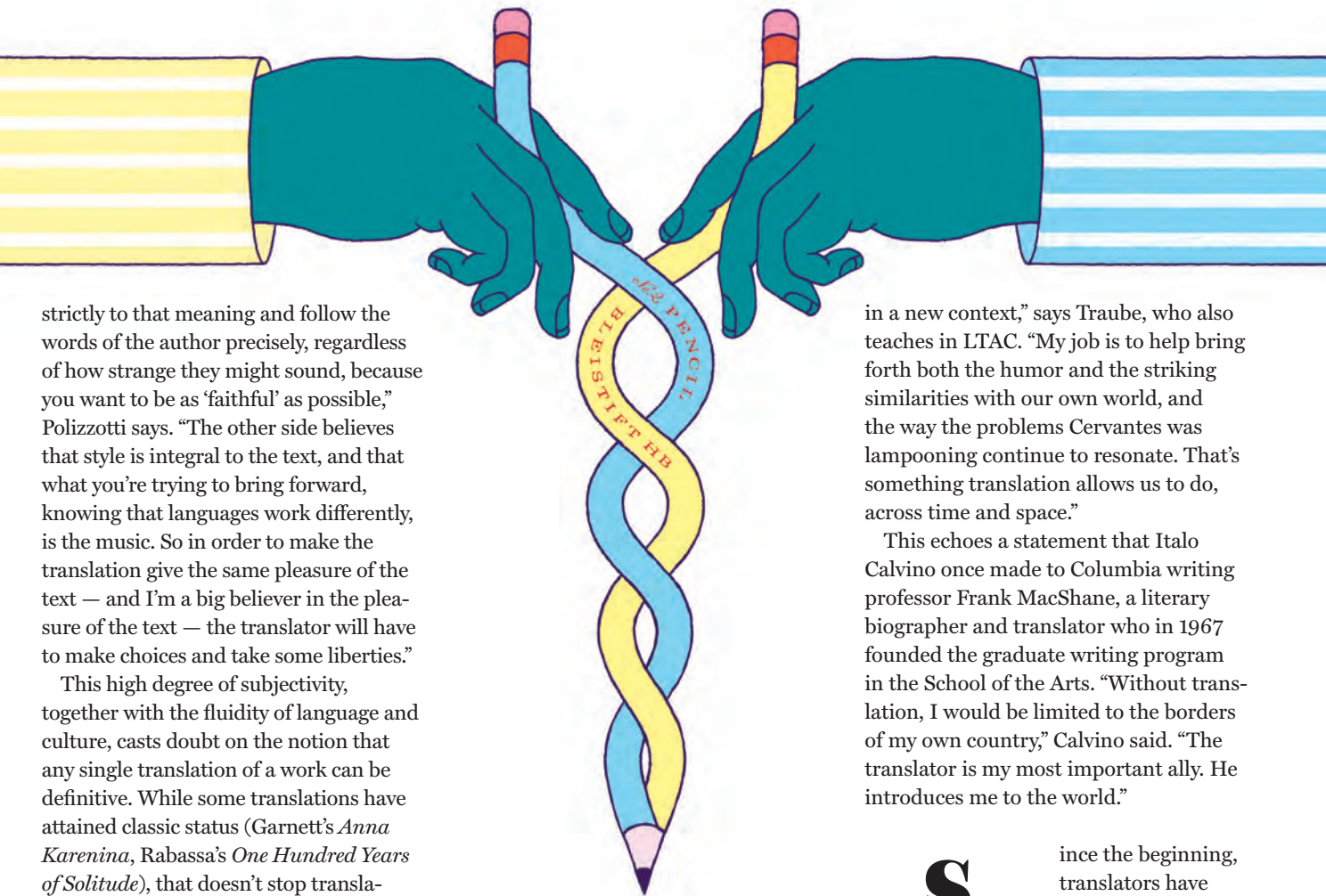


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regory Rabassa is best known for his 1970 translation of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the novel by Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez that embodies the genre known as magical realism. In his memoir *If This Be Treason*, Rabassa shares his thinking about the intricacies of word choice. The novel opens with the sentence “Muchos años después, frente al pelotón de fusilamiento, el coronel Aureliano Buendía había de recordar aquella tarde remota en que su padre lo llevó a conocer el hielo.” Rabassa famously translated this into: “Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice.”

“I chose *remember* over *recall*,” Rabassa writes, “because I feel that it conveys a deeper memory ... Also, I liked *distant* when used with time ... The real problem for choice was with *conocer*,” the Spanish verb for “to know,” which Rabassa translated as “to discover” — though he had plenty of options. “What is happening here is a first-time meeting, or learning,” he explains. “García Márquez has used the Spanish word here with all its connotations. But *to know ice* just won’t do in English. It implies, ‘How do you do, ice?’ It could be ‘to experience ice.’ The first is foolish, the second is silly. When you get to know something for the first time, you’ve discovered it.”

Rabassa’s thoughtful decisions paid off: his English version became a benchmark for literary translation, and García Márquez himself deemed it better than the original. ▲



strictly to that meaning and follow the words of the author precisely, regardless of how strange they might sound, because you want to be as 'faithful' as possible," Polizzotti says. "The other side believes that style is integral to the text, and that what you're trying to bring forward, knowing that languages work differently, is the music. So in order to make the translation give the same pleasure of the text — and I'm a big believer in the pleasure of the text — the translator will have to make choices and take some liberties."

This high degree of subjectivity, together with the fluidity of language and culture, casts doubt on the notion that any single translation of a work can be definitive. While some translations have attained classic status (Garnett's *Anna Karenina*, Rabassa's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*), that doesn't stop translators from attempting the task again and again. Rabassa once said, "I have always felt that while the original endures and remains eternally young, the translation ages and must be replaced."

Bernofsky isn't so sure. "I am not convinced that a good translation 'ages' as fast or as fully as some like to claim," she says. "I love the early-twentieth-century feel of Helen Tracy Lowe-Porter's 1927 translation of *The Magic Mountain*. When I think about 'updating' it, it's less because the language needs replacing than it is that I, in the twenty-first century, see different things in Mann's text. For example, I noticed the colonialist chain of association that is evoked by Mann's metaphorical invocation of an elephant when describing loading docks in Hamburg. To make the association clear, I used the word 'plantations' in my translation (Lowe-Porter uses the more literal 'colonial produce' where I have 'spices and fruit from colonial plantations,' since readers today might not be as aware of what 'colonial produce' in Germany might have

consisted of more than a hundred years ago). And I write that the elephants are 'pressed into service,' where Lowe-Porter has 'elephants at work' — whereas a literal translation of Mann's German ('serving elephants') is somewhere in between. The combination of 'pressed' and 'plantation' — both still reasonable interpretations of the German — help reveal the colonial power structures that underlie this picture of a Hamburg wharf."

Don Quixote, regarded by some critics as the greatest novel ever written, has been translated into English more than a dozen times, including a much-lauded version by LTAC faculty member Edith Grossman in 2003. The new translation by Kimi Traube will inevitably capture not just the art of Cervantes but also the cultural and historical moment in which the translation was produced.

"When we translate a text, whether it was written four years ago or four hundred, we are seeking to bring the beating heart of it — the particular piece of humanity it explores — to a new life

in a new context," says Traube, who also teaches in LTAC. "My job is to help bring forth both the humor and the striking similarities with our own world, and the way the problems Cervantes was lampooning continue to resonate. That's something translation allows us to do, across time and space."

This echoes a statement that Italo Calvino once made to Columbia writing professor Frank MacShane, a literary biographer and translator who in 1967 founded the graduate writing program in the School of the Arts. "Without translation, I would be limited to the borders of my own country," Calvino said. "The translator is my most important ally. He introduces me to the world."

S

ince the beginning, translators have grappled with how best to go about their work. Some believe that a translation should be chiefly concerned with imparting the *sense* of the text — the gist, the drift — even if it means straying from the author's words. The Roman statesman and philosopher Cicero, a translator of Greek to Latin, wrote, "I did not think I ought to count [the words] out to the reader like coins but to pay them by weight, as it were." St. Jerome, the fourth-century Christian scholar and patron saint of translators who translated the Bible from Greek into Latin, stated that "in translating from the Greek (except in the case of the holy scriptures, where even the order of the words is a mystery) I render sense for sense and not word for word."

Standing in opposition to this school are the partisans of the "servile path" theory, a term taken from a 1648 poem by Sir John Denham ("That servile path thou nobly dost decline / of tracing word

by word, and line by line”). This side holds that translators are servants to the author, and should not stray an inch from the work lest they be tempted to rewrite it in their own image.

In the fall of 1960, Michael Scammell ’85GSAS, an English-born graduate student of Russian at Columbia, received a dramatic lesson in this dispute. He had started translating, for his own edification, a novel by a Soviet author. He shared his work with his professor, the poet and Russian scholar Franklin Reeve ’58GSAS (father of actor Christopher Reeve). Reeve was impressed and got Scammell a job translating the whole book.

Meanwhile, Scammell had rented a room in a house near campus belonging to a woman named Anna Fagan, a Russian émigrée by way of Paris and Berlin. One day, Fagan asked him to Sunday tea. Scammell arrived to find that three other people had also been invited, including a tall, distinguished-looking gentleman who immediately caught Scammell’s attention. “I’d like to introduce you,” Fagan said, “to Mr. Vladimir Nabokov.”

The men shook hands, and the author of *Lolita* broke into a rather one-sided discussion of translation.

“Nabokov was very opinionated about the subject,” Scammell says. “He had translated some very difficult authors, so he knew what he was talking about.” Nabokov was looking for an English translator for his Russian novel *The Gift*. “I want the servile path,” he announced — and would Scammell be interested? “He gave me explicit instructions to follow the original sentences very closely,” Scammell recalls. “At the time I agreed with the servile path — not departing from the original by a comma — and I enjoyed that challenge.”

While Scammell labored, Nabokov was in Los Angeles working on the script for the film version of *Lolita*. When Scammell was done, he mailed the manuscript to the author. Nabokov was pleased. “That was my training,” says Scammell, who went on to translate Nabokov’s *The Defense*, Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, and Tolstoy’s *Childhood*, *Boyhood*, and *Youth*. He also abandoned the servile path.

“Other languages have different registers of style, and I believe that the English reader should feel completely comfortable reading a translation,” he says. “But there is another school of thought — I haven’t come across it in any other country but it’s very strong in America — which says that it’s a betrayal to make a translation sound like American English. ‘It’s a translation, therefore it should *sound* like a translation’ — it should have a sprinkling of words and phrases in the other language, and different word orders to match the syntax of the original, regardless of how it sounds in English. Which to me was always heresy.”

“The attitude toward translators has been a scandal from day one.”

This contrast — between “domesticating” and “foreignizing” translators, to use the terminology of translation theorist Lawrence Venuti ’80GSAS — is central to debates among literary translators today. According to Seth Schein ’63CC, ’67GSAS, a classicist who has translated Sophocles’s *Philoctetes*, the German philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher described a similar dichotomy in his 1813 lecture “On the Different Methods of Translating.” Schleiermacher, Schein says, favors the translator who “moves the reader toward the author” (the “foreignizing” translator) over the translator who “moves the author toward the reader” by using contemporary style and language (the “domesticating” translator). Schein, who translates with pedagogy in mind, finds a foreignizing translation more effective in the classroom. “I think it’s also a good way to translate for general readers,” he says. “Others believe that giving readers the easiest access to the text is what makes them want to go further. But I think it’s the foreignizing translation, with all its idiosyncrasies, that engages readers best.”

Despite these differences, most translators agree on one thing: they deserve more respect. “The attitude toward

translators has been a scandal from day one,” says Scammell. “As for leaving translators’ names off the covers, it’s disgraceful. With globalism being such a normal part of life, people have a better understanding of the importance of translating books from other countries. I’m shocked it’s even an issue.”

The situation has given rise to translation-centric publishers like Transit Books, founded in 2015 by writer Ashley Nelson Levy ’12SOA and translator Adam Levy ’12SOA, a married couple who met in Columbia’s MFA program and later relocated to the Bay Area. “We want visibility for translators,”

says Ashley. “We always put their names on the covers, and in the back of the books we try to add supplementary content on the art of translation.” Says Adam, “Our philosophy is that you can sell a book while bringing translation to the fore. It’s not just putting the translator’s name on the cover — it’s bringing the translator into the conversation.”

Asked to quantify the collaboration between author and translator, he says, “It’s not so much 50–50 as it is 100–100.”

In his manifesto, Polizzotti asks readers to embrace the idea that “translators are creative artists in their own right, on a par and in partnership with the author being translated.” He observes, too, that some of “the most beautifully realized translations have been successful precisely because the personality of the translator shone through and made itself felt.”

And that’s the heart of it for these literary artists: putting a translator’s name on the front cover isn’t a concession — it’s an accurate reflection of the collaborative nature of the work.

“A translation is a fusion, absolutely,” says Idra Novoy. “Without it, we wouldn’t have access to so much phenomenal literature. So why not delight in the fusion?” 🐞

STORIES

Daniel Alarcón '99CC likes to say that a good story has no borders, an apt sentiment from someone whose life and work transcends many of them.

Born in Peru and raised in the United States, Alarcón has spent his career documenting political and cultural life across Latin America, finding commonalities across the diverse set of nations. But the fluidity of his portfolio is more than geographic. Alarcón, an assistant professor at Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism, works in Spanish and English; writes lyrical fiction, carefully reported journalism, and introspective personal essays; and delivers them to audiences in books, in magazines, and on the radio.

"We tend to have these rigid definitions of particular genres, but they've never felt all that different to me," Alarcón says. "Creative work often takes rigorous research. And reporting in a compelling way takes creativity."

While many dabble in different media before specializing in one, Alarcón has been enormously successful across the board. He is the author of four works of critically acclaimed fiction — two novels and two story collections, the latest of which, *The King Is Always Above the People*, was a finalist for the National Book Award. He is an accomplished journalist, contributing regular articles and essays to the *New Yorker* and other magazines. He is a cofounder and host of *Radio Ambulante*, a massively popular Spanish-language podcast distributed

by NPR. And he is now a genius, at least according to the MacArthur Foundation, which recently named him to its 2021 class of fellows, crediting his "powerful narrative storytelling" with giving "voice to the diverse experiences of Latin Americans and of Spanish speakers."

"I still haven't really processed it," Alarcón says. "It feels absurd and shocking and great. It's the kind of call you really only get once in a lifetime."

Alarcón was born in Lima in 1977, but he moved to a suburb of Birmingham, Alabama, as a toddler when his parents, both physicians, joined the faculty of the University of Alabama's campus there. The Deep South was a complicated place for the immigrant family to land. There was hardly a thriving Peruvian community ("We used to joke that we knew every Spanish speaker within a two-hundred-mile radius"), and though Alarcón's parents did their best to change that, attracting a steady stream of Latinos to the university and the city, the local culture continued to be defined by the people who had lived in Alabama for generations.

"People there are really deeply attached to the place, to the land itself," he says. "There was always a sense that my family was just passing through."

As the youngest of three, Alarcón was the most American — his party trick growing up was to imitate a Southern accent for visitors — but he says his feelings about Birmingham are complicated.

WITHOUT BORDERS

*MacArthur fellow Daniel Alarcón '99CC chronicles
life in Spanish and English, through fiction and fact,
in print and on the air* **By Rebecca Shapiro**



“The history is so fraught,” he says. “I spent my childhood there, and it’s part of my identity. But there’s also a lot that I don’t want to claim, to carry around.”

When Alarcón was nine or ten, his parents started sending him to summer school in Peru, where he delighted in learning Spanish slang from his cousins and playing the kind of soccer that didn’t involve well-meaning suburban moms handing out orange slices at halftime. “Everything was different there,” Alarcón says. “It was liberating.”

Back in Birmingham, Alarcón was a devoted student and an avid reader (of Dostoevsky, Toni Morrison ’84HON, and Gabriel García Márquez ’71HON), as well as an enthusiast of jazz, hip-hop, and rock. When it came time to apply for college, Alarcón, eager to get out of Alabama and live in a big city, felt Columbia was a natural fit.

As an undergraduate, Alarcón majored in anthropology and creative writing. And though he says that “studied” was a generous word for what he did as an undergraduate, he had several formative academic experiences that shaped his early career. A freshman class with Iranian-American public intellectual Hamid Dabashi helped him rethink the origins of civilization. A semester abroad in Ghana — Alarcón’s first time traveling outside the Americas — was eye-opening and taught him much about colonialism (it was “a fascinating place, and I learned so much about history and about race and culture, and it made me reinterpret a lot of things about both the US and Peru,” he says). Alarcón also started writing fiction at Columbia and developed a friendship with poetry professor Alan Ziegler, who arranged for him to continue taking writing classes after he graduated, while he was teaching tenth-grade English at a New York City public high school.

In 2001, Alarcón won a Fulbright scholarship to study literature in Peru. “And I did that, sort of,” he says. “But mostly I immersed myself in Lima — in the city, in the culture.” He worked at an NGO and taught writing classes in San Juan de Lurigancho, a neighborhood in the hills of Lima, densely populated with

refugees who had fled rural Peru during the 1980s, the bloodiest period of the country’s long, devastating civil war.

For Alarcón, like many Peruvians, the war had personal resonance. His uncle, Javier Alarcón Guzmán, a university professor and labor-union organizer, disappeared in the jungle in 1989, presumably killed by Peruvian security forces. While Alarcón was living in Peru, he became interested in learning more about his uncle’s life and in piecing together the circumstances of his death and the cover-up that followed. He traveled around the country, interviewing people who knew Javier. He visited the notorious prisons that held people detained during the war, and he started listening to a radio show called *Buscapersonas*, or People Finder, that connected missing people with their loved ones.



While Alarcón’s quest could not bring back his uncle, it did inspire his fiction — haunting, imaginative books about war and displacement, poverty and injustice, nationhood and the loyalties that transcend it. He published his first story in the *New Yorker* when he was twenty-six, newly returned from Peru and working on his MFA at the University of Iowa, and came out with his first book, a collection of stories called *War by Candlelight*, shortly thereafter.

While still at Iowa, he started work on his debut novel, *Lost City Radio*, about a country in the aftermath of war and a radio program that was helping its people pick up the pieces and find their way back to each other.

Like much of Alarcón’s fiction, *Lost City Radio* is not specifically set in Peru but in a fictional country in the aftermath of an invented conflict, a choice he made so that the emotional heart of the story wouldn’t be lost in the details of Peru’s war. That nonspecificity, he says, helped many of his readers connect to the struggle in a more personal way.

“It’s interesting how people around the world reacted to it,” Alarcón says. “In Peru, of course, people recognized many things about the conflict. But in Spain it was about Franco. In Chile it was about Pinochet. The name of a place, where it is on a map — those are the least important things about it.”

While building a career crafting these inventive fictional worlds, Alarcón was also beginning to work as a journalist, writing long-form articles about political and cultural issues across Latin America. Initially, Alarcón started writing nonfiction for *Etiqueta Negra*, a quarterly literary magazine founded by two brothers who had grown up in a remote village in the Andes and who had little experience in publishing or journalism.

“After I published my first story in the *New Yorker*, they basically tracked me down and asked me to join them,” he says. “I couldn’t believe that something of that quality was coming out of Lima.”

Alarcón became their associate editor, but he continued to write for other magazines, including *Harper’s*, the *New York Times Magazine*, and the *New Yorker*. He has written extensively on soccer, a passionate pastime for many across the continent, including Alarcón. He has reported on devastating gang violence in El Salvador, followed political unrest in Chile, and chronicled the collapse of Puerto Rico’s famed Arecibo telescope. For a piece on Lima’s biggest prison, in San Juan de Lurigancho, Alarcón visited often, even spending the night in a cell.

Radio has always been central to Alarcón's life. He grew up listening to his father tell stories about calling soccer games for Peru's Radio Continental, a job he got when he was just fourteen years old. In Birmingham, the family's radio dial was usually tuned to NPR. Alarcón would fall asleep to *Jazz After Hours*, imagining a future outside his suburban bedroom as the host read listings of shows in faraway cities.

"I was raised believing in the power of voice," Alarcón says. "It was like a lifeline."

After Alarcón published *Lost City Radio*, in 2008, the BBC asked him to produce a radio documentary about Andean migration to Lima. Alarcón enjoyed the work but was frustrated that he didn't have more control over the end product. More importantly, he felt that the piece would be inaccessible to people in Latin America, where the story was most relevant.

"Many of the interviews that I did in Spanish, in Peru and about Peru, were left out of the program, and preference was given to interviews conducted in English. It was frustrating," Alarcón says. "So that was kind of the beginning of *Radio Ambulante*."

At the time, Alarcón was living in Oakland, California, with his girlfriend — now wife — Carolina Guerrero, a Colombia native who worked as a promoter and event planner for Latin American cultural organizations. The two started talking about making a radio show that combined personal stories and fiction with investigative journalism and reporting, like *This American Life*, except that the entire show would be in Spanish.

"Every Latino working in public radio had the same idea," Alarcón says. "But we were the ones who were crazy enough to do it."

Though neither Alarcón nor Guerrero had significant radio experience, they found a supportive community in the Bay Area's burgeoning podcasting community, where shows like Glynn Washington's *Snap Judgment* and Roman Mars's *99% Invisible* were thriving. They spent a year developing stories

and hiring a small team, and in 2012 they launched a Kickstarter campaign that attracted six hundred donors and raised over \$46,000, enough to produce the first season. By 2015, the show was averaging 1.5 million annual downloads; the following year, it was picked up by NPR and grew exponentially. Now in its eleventh season, *Radio Ambulante* has a staff of twenty-three and averages eight million annual downloads.



"I was raised believing in the power of voice. It was like a lifeline."

Radio Ambulante's mission is to tell "uniquely Latin American stories," which means many things. There are, of course, stories about immigration and the reasons for it. Recent episodes have featured a woman who lived in a North Carolina church for four years to avoid deportation, two sisters who spent their teenage years separated by the US-Mexico border, and a group of neighbors who formed a human chain to keep ICE from arresting one of their own. But those are only a small part of the repertoire. There are also stories about a village, high in the Andes, where people have inexplicably started going blind; a herd of hippopotamuses in a Colombian river, far from their native Africa; a group of indigenous women in Bolivia determined to climb a mountain; and a Puerto Rican man willing to

do just about anything to get his idol's autograph, to name just a few.

"There's a certain intimacy that's unique to the medium," Alarcón says. "The silences, the emotion when the voice cracks, the information that the accent might give you. You can tell so much from a person's voice. Where they're from, what kind of life they lead."

Though listening to the radio can be a very personal experience — "The way many of us listen now, with headphones, it's literally someone whispering in your ear" — Alarcón and his colleagues realized that they could also use the show to help bring people together. In 2019, before the world shut down, they launched a series of listening clubs in pilot cities, where members of the community could gather to discuss an episode. Alarcón also noticed that many non-native Spanish speakers were using the podcast to practice their language skills. To foster that, he created a companion app called Lupa, which gives English speakers educational exercises related to each episode.

In March 2020, *Radio Ambulante* branched out again, partnering with Vice Media to launch a weekly news podcast called *El hilo* (The thread), under Alarcón's editorial direction. *El hilo* uses narrative storytelling to address timely and news-based subjects, like the spread of COVID-vaccine misinformation across Latin America and whether President Biden has fulfilled his campaign promises to reform immigration policies.

With so many irons already in the fire, Alarcón says that the \$625,000 MacArthur grant will not change his day-to-day life, though he says it will give him the space and time to figure out projects he wants to pursue in the future. He'll be teaching a full load at Columbia in the spring, fulfilling his contract with the *New Yorker*, and working on the next season of *Radio Ambulante*. And, unsurprisingly, he's been exploring yet another medium: together with a cowriter, he is working on his first screenplay.

"My goal is to keep telling stories that mean something to me," Alarcón says. "I'm always open to new ways of doing that." ❧

Hidden Histories of Columbia

A whistle-stop tour of random curiosities and celebrity trivia



By Gary Shapiro '93LAW Illustrations by Jenny Kroik

Amelia Earhart climbed to the top of Low Library

Before becoming an acclaimed aviator and the most famous missing person in the world, Amelia Earhart scaled the heights of Morningside. Earhart attended Columbia from 1919 to 1920 through the Extension Teaching program, which later became the School of General Studies, and returned in the spring of 1925. She planned to matriculate into medical school, but a year later she moved to California to pursue her passion for flying.

While at Columbia, Earhart honed her sense of adventure. In her 1932 memoir, *The Fun of It*, she recalled, “I was familiar with all the forbidden underground passageways which connected the different buildings of the University. I think I explored every nook and cranny possible” — particularly around Low Library. “I have sat in the lap of the gilded statue which decorates the library steps, and I was probably the most frequent visitor on the top of the library dome. I mean the top.” Several photos of Earhart, taken by her friend and classmate Louise de Schweinitz in 1920, show her perched on the dome’s roof.



Alfred Hitchcock spilled secrets over lunch

In June 1972, legendary filmmaker Alfred Hitchcock received an honorary degree from Columbia. During his visit, he spoke at the seventy-fourth annual Commencement Day Luncheon in Ferris Booth Hall, sponsored by the Columbia Alumni Federation.

At the luncheon, Hitchcock told guests that during the production of the famous Mount Rushmore scene in the 1959 thriller *North by Northwest*, he wanted Cary Grant to hide inside Abraham Lincoln’s nostril and have a sneezing fit there. “The parks commission of the Department of the Interior was rather upset at this thought,” the director recalled.

Willa Cather, novelist of the frontier, faced the patriarchy

Willa Cather, the American writer best known for her 1913 novel *O Pioneers!*, received an honorary degree from Columbia in 1928.

“The Commencement at Columbia was really quite thrilling and splendid,” she wrote to her mother after the ceremony. “I was the only woman among the seven recipients of honorary degrees, the rest were all old men, as you will see by their pictures.” She continued, “I was never so patted and embraced by so many old men at once.”

Cather took note of her popularity: “I really got a great deal more applause than anyone else.” Edith Labaree Lewis, Cather’s domestic partner, was in the audience to watch and cheer. She attested that the roar for Cather lasted twice as long as that for the other recipients.

Cather reported that meeting the Trustees, the professors, and their wives was all very exciting — and exhausting. “I was a tired creature when I came home in President Butler’s car.”



Martin Luther King Jr. headlined a fundraiser organized by a student newspaper

In 1961, *The Owl*, then the weekly newspaper of the School of General Studies, organized a series of performances by folk singers and comedians to benefit the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). The shows went so well that an SCLC leader in Harlem approached *Owl* editor Wally Wood and told him that if he could put together a large event, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the chairman of SCLC, would come to Columbia and give a speech.

Wood got to work. He contacted other New York City schools and organized an intercollegiate talk at Columbia's McMillin Theatre (now Miller Theatre). All the schools sold tickets to ensure a robust, citywide turnout.

On October 27, nearly four hundred people filled the auditorium at Broadway and 116th Street to hear King. "He brought the audience to its feet," Wood recalls. "The electricity in the room was extraordinary."



Édith Piaf showed off her pipes

Known as *la môme piaf*, or the little sparrow, Édith Piaf rose to fame in the 1940s with her international hit "La Vie en Rose." During her first trip to the United States, in 1947, the *petite chanteuse* visited the Maison Française at Columbia and took English lessons from Maison director Eugene Sheffer '26CC.

During her time at the Maison, Piaf gave a concert that the *Spectator* called "brilliant" and that "left applause ringing in her ears long after she had concluded." Piaf and Sheffer became lifelong friends.

Groucho Marx had a perfectly wonderful evening

During the 1930s, Columbia's Division of Film Study — one of the first academic cinema-studies departments in the US — hosted the Motion Picture Parade, a series of screenings and panel discussions at Columbia's McMillin Theatre. Celebrities including Groucho Marx and the director Fritz Lang appeared as speakers.

A pamphlet for the events noted, "The discussion will never be permitted to become hifallutin, arty, or highbrow. It will be kept lively, stimulating, and interesting."

W. Somerset Maugham played bridge with President Eisenhower

In 1950, W. Somerset Maugham, the author of *The Moon and Sixpence* and *Of Human Bondage*, delivered a lecture at Columbia at the invitation of a friend, the philosopher Irwin Edman 1917CC, 1920GSAS. According to the biography *Maugham*, by Ted Morgan '55JRN, the room had no microphone and was “unseasonably warm,” so windows were open and Maugham had to compete with noise from the street outside.

The next day, the novelist played bridge with Columbia president Dwight Eisenhower '47HON, where he reportedly lost twelve dollars and was a sore loser. But he would later say, “We had a very agreeable game.”

Bette Davis came for tea and attended an acting class

Two-time Oscar winner Bette Davis made at least two appearances at Columbia over the course of her life.

One occurred in 1929, less than a year before the actress moved to Hollywood to start a screen career. At the time, Davis was starring in *Broken Dishes*, a Broadway play about a henpecked husband. She and costar Donald Meek, who would later appear in numerous films, including *Stagecoach* in 1939, were invited to afternoon tea at the Columbia Women's Graduate Club. As reported in the *Spectator* at the time, “Miss Bette Davis entertained the group with her interesting reminiscences of her fellow actors.”

In a 1980s interview with biographer Charlotte Chandler, Davis recalled also visiting Columbia with director George Cukor, who had briefly employed her



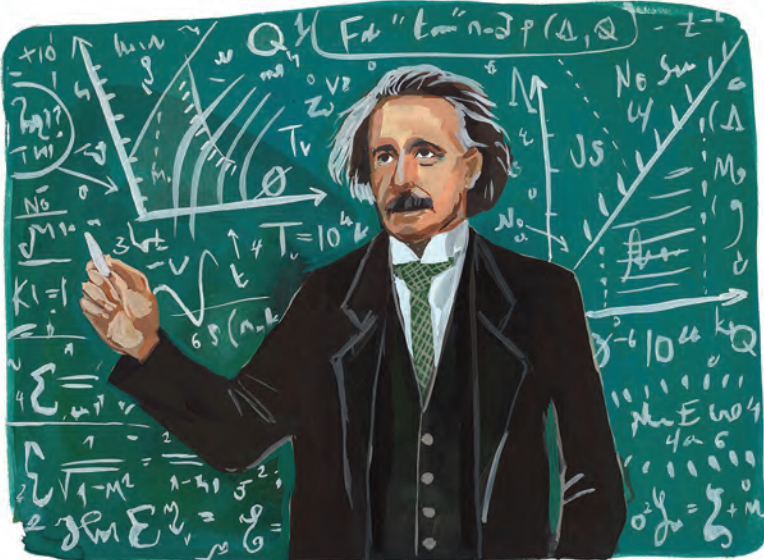
in his theater troupe in the 1920s: “It’s important not to have a character indulge in so much self-pity that she loses the sympathy of the audience,” George Cukor once told me. When I went with him to a Columbia University acting class where he was a guest speaker, he told the young actresses, who were proud of their ability to produce tears, “If you cry for yourself, the audience won’t cry for *you*.”

Albert Einstein gave a relatively simple presentation

In 1921, Albert Einstein gave his first public lecture in the United States on the theory of relativity. The speech, which he delivered in German, took place at the Horace Mann Auditorium at Columbia Teachers College.

The *Spectator* reported that the small number of attendees who understood Einstein’s native language laughed when the scientist related that parts of his theory were really “very simple.”

According to the *New York Times*, Einstein also “caused much amusement when he wished to erase diagrams he had drawn on the blackboard and made futile motions in the air with his hand until Professor [Michael] Pupin came to his rescue” with an eraser.



Federico García Lorca mingled at campus parties

Spanish poet Federico García Lorca spent ten months in New York City from 1929 to 1930. During his stay, he took English classes at Columbia, lived on campus in Furnald and John Jay Halls, and wrote his book *Poet in New York* on University stationery. He was struck by the city’s intense social environment. “There are more parties and gatherings here than anyplace else in the world,” he wrote to his family back home. “Americans cannot stand to be alone.”

Reflecting on the University, he wrote, “I have never seen more innocent creatures in my life than these Columbia students, or kinder, or more savage ones. This is a totally savage people, perhaps because there is no class system. These boys stretch and yawn with the innocence of animals, they sneeze without taking out their handkerchiefs and are always shouting, everywhere.”

He added, “And yet they are open and friendly, and they truly enjoy doing a favor for you.”

Roar-ee inspired **the MGM lion**

Before Howard Dietz became a prolific lyricist of Broadway musicals such as 1931's *The Band Wagon*, he worked as an adman in the late 1910s at the Philip Goodman Agency. One of his clients was movie mogul Samuel Goldwyn, whose new production studio, Goldwyn Pictures Corporation, needed a logo.

Having recently dropped out of Columbia Journalism School, the young Dietz was inspired by Columbia's mascot — specifically, the laughing lion seen in the campus humor magazine *The Jester* — and proposed that Goldwyn's company use a roaring lion for its own branding. Leo the Lion was born; Dietz was hired as Goldwyn's director of advertising and publicity; and the company, which became known as Metro Goldwyn Mayer after a 1924 merger, went on to become one of Hollywood's "big five" studios.

Winston Churchill paid a warm tribute to **Nicholas Murray Butler**

In March 1946, six months after the formal end of World War II, Winston Churchill took an extended trip across the pond. During his stay, he gave his famous Iron Curtain speech at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri, before accepting an honorary degree from Columbia.

Approximately eleven thousand people — including several hundred picketers protesting the threat of a new war with the USSR — crowded outside Low Library to greet the former British prime minister. While speaking in the library's rotunda, Churchill paid tribute to his longtime friend Nicholas Murray Butler 1882CC, 1884GSAS, who had just retired as president of Columbia and had recently gone blind. Churchill told the audience, "The light that burns within burns all the brighter."



King Kong's **codirector** learned moviemaking here

One of the most iconic film scenes of all time involves a giant ape perched atop the Empire State Building, swatting at airplanes attempting to shoot the creature down.

Ernest B. Schoedsack, codirector of the 1933 film *King Kong* and the sole director of its sequel *Son of Kong*, learned how to shoot action scenes at Columbia, but not in a traditional film-production program.

In January 1918, Columbia had opened the School of Military Cinematography to train World War I soldiers in combat photography and filmmaking. Organized by the US Army through an arrangement with University president Nicholas Murray Butler, the school hired such up-and-coming faculty as Victor Fleming, who would later direct the 1939 classics *The Wizard of Oz* and *Gone with the Wind*.

It was in the Columbia program that Schoedsack, who went on to document the Polish-Soviet and Greco-Turkish wars for the American Red Cross, studied the art of combat film. (Ape bombardment was not part of the curriculum.)



The Grateful Dead sneaked onto campus

On May 3, 1968, more than a week into the student protests that rocked Columbia, iconoclastic hippie band the Grateful Dead played a surprise show outside Ferris Booth Hall. Because police had barricaded campus, the group's six members and their instruments had to be smuggled through Columbia's iron gates in a bread delivery truck.

"Always up for an adventure, we of course went right along," recalled drummer Mickey Hart. "We were already jamming away before the security and police could stop us." Bass guitarist Phil Lesh remembers it as being "the fastest setup ever." In his memoir, *Searching for the Sound: My Life with the Grateful Dead*, he writes, "We play a short set, pack up, and split — the whole operation taking less than two hours."

Paul Robeson fell in love and switched careers

In 1920, before he became an international star of stage and screen and shortly after he distinguished himself as an All-American football player at Rutgers, Paul Robeson '23LAW was a law student at Columbia. To support himself he played professional football. One day Robeson got injured during a game and was taken to Columbia Presbyterian Hospital, where he stayed for weeks.

At least one hospital worker recognized him. Eslanda "Essie" Cardozo Goode 1920TC, a chemist in the pathology lab — the first Black person to be hired there — had met Robeson in Harlem. Now she had the chance to get to know him better. They fell in love, and Goode, who would become an anthropologist, journalist, and civil-rights activist, as well as Robeson's business manager, persuaded the then-unknown performer to accept the lead role in a play at the Harlem YMCA called *Simon*

the Cyrenian, about an Ethiopian man who helps Jesus carry his cross. Robeson's performances were electric, and word got out.

In 1921, Robeson and Goode eloped, and after graduating from Columbia, Robeson joined an all-white law firm, only to quit after a secretary refused to take his dictation. Disgusted, he turned his back on the profession — a foreshadowing of the public stance against racism that would define his legacy.

With Essie Goode Robeson's encouragement, Paul Robeson returned to the stage, playing the leads in Eugene O'Neill's *All God's Chillun Got Wings* and *The Emperor Jones*, and in 1936 he starred in the film version of *Show Boat*, in which he sang "Ol' Man River." The following decade he played the title role in *Othello*, which ran for 296 performances — still the longest-running Shakespeare play in Broadway history. 🍷

The Future of Your Money

Whether or not you understand cryptocurrencies, blockchain, and other new financial technologies, they have massive implications for us all

An interview with R.A. Farrokhnia, the founding executive director of Advanced Projects and Applied Research in Fintech, a Columbia Business School initiative that undertakes leading-edge research and practice at the intersection of finance and technology. Farrokhnia teaches at the schools of business, engineering, and journalism.

Q Your class on demystifying blockchain, cryptocurrencies, and digital tokens is extremely popular. Are you surprised?

Yes and no. Given the unprecedented pace of technological advancements in blockchain and beyond, it's important to untangle the interplay of disruptive forces shaping the financial-services industry and understand their strategic ramifications. Recognizing the esoteric nature of blockchain, I wanted to develop a comprehensive, interdisciplinary course with accessible content requiring no prior tech background. I also wanted this "crypto school" to not only cover the foundational principles but also constantly evolve to address the latest and most advanced topics. I

am delighted my course is highly rated and quite popular with students. Its success has inspired my next project, which is a series of modular courses for non-students, from alumni to business executives to journalists. I'm planning to launch those in mid-2022.

Even though Bitcoin and blockchain have been around for more than a decade, many people still don't fully understand the technology. Could you give our readers a quick primer?

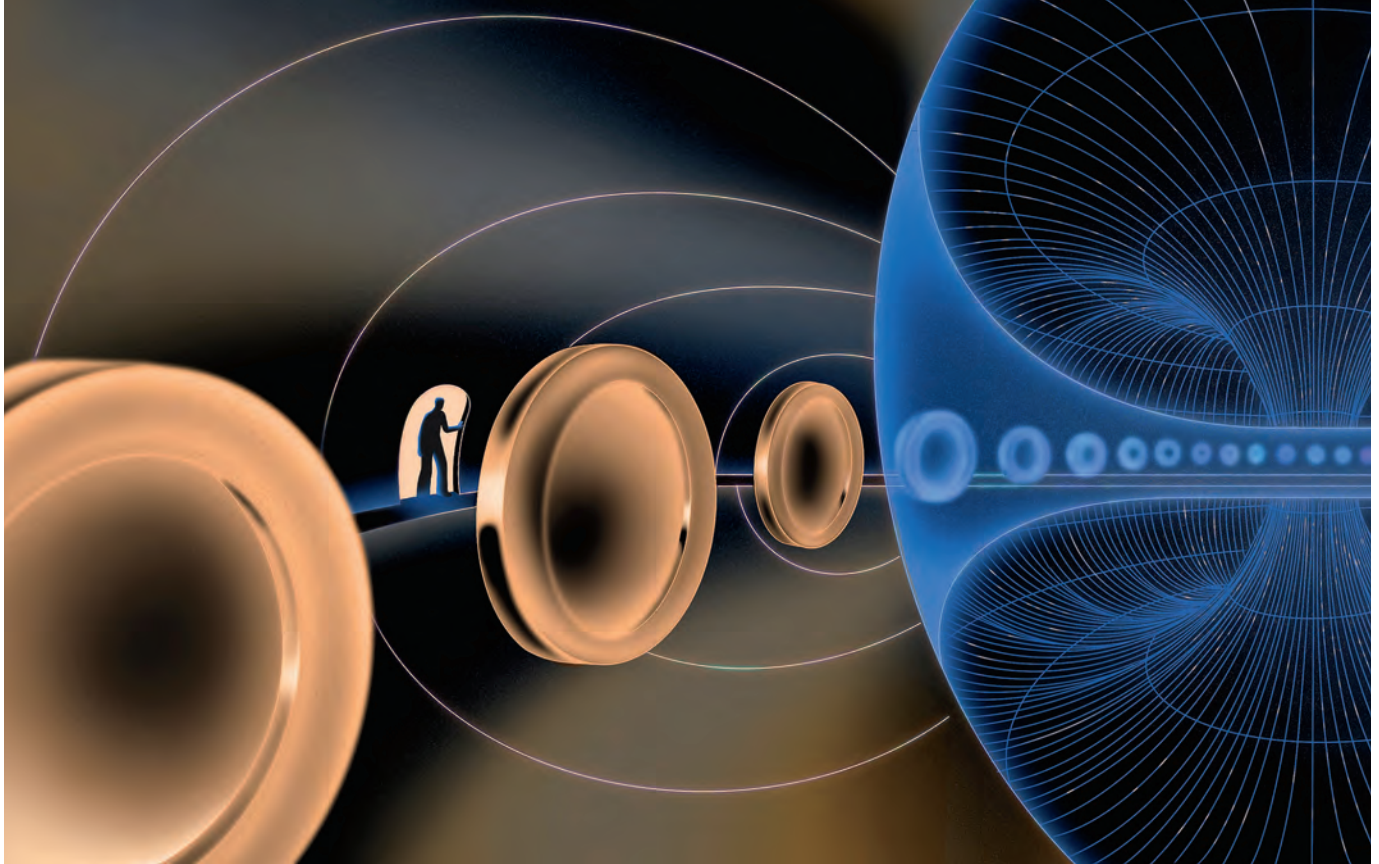
It's impossible to do it justice in a short paragraph, but let's try. Blockchain and Bitcoin are intertwined but not the same. Simply put, Bitcoin is a digital currency that is built on a technology called blockchain. Bitcoin and blockchain use math and computer science, particularly cryptography, to facilitate transactions of digital assets, and they do it through algorithms that establish indisputable trust. Because Bitcoin is maintained by a peer-to-peer network and does not rely on a central authority like a bank or a government, it is known as a decentralized currency.

In the Bitcoin network, transactions are processed in bundles called blocks,

which are validated about every ten minutes. These blocks, which have recorded every Bitcoin transaction and every new Bitcoin created since the currency's genesis, are chained together in an immutable, sequential, and irreversible fashion to collectively form a public ledger. Many thousands of computing devices, or nodes, work cohesively to verify and process those transactions and update the ledger. Embedded in this protocol is a math puzzle used to verify the integrity of transactions and blocks. Some node operators may decide to commit electricity and computational resources to try to solve this puzzle. If they are the first to succeed, then they will win rewards in the form of new Bitcoin. This is called "mining."

But how can you have a currency that is based on computer code? It seems so intangible.

I know! But learning such intricacies is not out of reach of non-techies. Note that the inner workings of central banking and fiat currency — think dollars and euros — are also complex and intangible, but we trust and use them without fully understanding them.



What do you say to the argument that cryptocurrencies help money launderers and tax dodgers?

A tool is just a tool. The way it is used, intentionally or unintentionally, is what gives it moral and ethical meaning. Cryptocurrencies can be used for nefarious purposes, but hundred-dollar bills are also misused by criminals and others with malicious intent. Overall, the hope is that we will eventually create a balanced and well-defined regulatory framework to reduce unscrupulous activities without stifling responsible innovation. We have yet to see whether blockchain will live up to its potential or if it will degenerate into a system where the benefits will disproportionately favor only certain groups.

Today, major financial-services companies like Goldman Sachs trade Bitcoin, and you may soon be able to use Bitcoin at Taco Bell. This seems to suggest that Bitcoin is gaining legitimacy. Should investors consider it?

Well, that depends on a person's appetite not only for tacos but also for volatility. Most of us would like our money to be stable. Bitcoin continues to experience big swings in value on a daily or weekly

basis, so that may deter its short-term adoption as a direct medium of payment. As for its value as an investment, that's a very difficult question to answer. Obviously, you have to understand the risk-reward profile of each qualified investor as well as other pertinent tax, financial, and personal considerations. There are certainly more institutional investors dabbling in Bitcoin, perhaps because they believe it will continue to appreciate in value or be a hedge against inflation.

But in discussing the legitimacy or value of Bitcoin, it's important not to see the world through our narrow lens. Some of us are privileged to live in a democracy with a highly developed economy and a stable legal system. There are millions of others who live in countries with weak or failed governments where the economy has suffered severe setbacks and high inflation. Ordinary citizens have seen their savings wiped out. Large swaths of the middle class have been dragged into poverty. If they had access to Bitcoin, it might have been an alternative way to exert a small amount of control over their savings and circumvent artificially restrictive capital controls that limit access to foreign currency.

A lot of articles have been published recently that suggest the Bitcoin network is a real drain on the environment and from that point of view is unsustainable.

Bitcoin mining and its verification systems are based on a mechanism that requires a lot of computational firepower and, thus, a lot of electricity. In fairness, its energy consumption as a network, while large and growing, is a fraction of that of other industries. Nonetheless, it is a real issue, and there is certainly more acknowledgement of this criticism in the crypto community. There are a number of ongoing developments designed to address it head-on, including using renewables and more energy-efficient consensus mechanisms for the newer-generation crypto ventures.

Some countries want to issue their own sovereign digital currencies. Didn't China just issue its own central-bank digital currency (CBDC) with the goal of replacing paper money?

China and a host of other nations, including the US, are indeed moving in the direction of CBDC. We don't know



R.A. Farrokhnia

if or when we will live in a truly cashless society, as cash has utility, but we are already living in a less-cash era. There will also be many other ramifications of moving toward CBDC, from privacy issues to the effects on international commerce to geopolitical shifts in power and influence. It's impossible to predict every outcome, given all the moving parts. The unintended consequences are particularly worrisome.

You have said that we are at a semi-nal moment in the financial-services industry — that it could evolve in a completely new direction.

We are indeed rethinking many of our first principles. The financial-services industry needs more innovation, as many of our systems are costly, inefficient, or unjust. Advances in fintech and blockchain, more sophisticated and ethical data analytics, and new developments in machine learning and AI could streamline financial processes, making them run more efficiently, intelligently, and inclusively. Our financial systems could be made more resilient when it comes to unpredictable events like the pandemic. In many ways, I hope COVID-19 ends up being a wake-up call.

In what way?

By showcasing our need to sensibly and purposefully tackle financial inclusion, access, and education. In studying the impact of the pandemic, in particular on low-income households, my lab team at the Fintech Initiative had a front-row seat. Along with several coauthors, we were among the first to publish a series of papers, starting in April 2020, on the consumer response to the pandemic and the CARES Act stimulus payments. We could see firsthand the challenges of getting stimulus payments to those who needed them most. If our financial system was built to better facilitate sharing of data among banks and various governmental agencies with proper privacy protections, we would have lessened the pain for the most vulnerable. A good number of my collaborative research efforts at the Fintech Initiative strive to develop solutions that would result in a more equitable and fairer financial industry. With holistic use of AI, data management, and cryptoeconomics, our money could work harder and smarter. We could even be moving toward autonomous, self-driving money, which could potentially be a net benefit to the society.

How might smart money affect the reader of this magazine?

Assuming most alumni belong to a certain socioeconomic stratum, it could take a lot of the stress out of their personal finances. For instance, with smart money, or “self-driving” money, our retirement accounts would be automatically and intelligently rebalanced based on parameters and market conditions with minimal input by us. Our credit cards would look out for our needs and not be geared toward maximizing fees and profits for their issuers. Our banking relationships could become decentralized, working more cohesively across various accounts and products to optimize outcomes aligned with our personal goals. Of course, there is a cost, financial and otherwise, to letting data and algorithms take an ever-larger role in our daily lives. We would need to have privacy and civil-liberty protections in place, and when it comes to AI we would need to address issues such as data bias. Finding the right balance between convenience and privacy, among many other considerations, would require computer scientists to work hand in hand with their colleagues in the humanities and social sciences. I am grateful that I'm doing my research at a “full-stack” university like Columbia where one is surrounded by smart faculty, students, and industry participants across all disciplines and where collaboration comes naturally. I should add that as fintech and crypto evolve, what I am really excited about is their potential to democratize access for unbanked, underbanked, and underserved communities.

How would it do that?

Generally speaking, it is expensive to be poor. For lower-income households, access to a good number of banking services is limited or not cost-efficient. This perpetuates a whole series of downstream effects such as the inability to save for retirement, secure a mortgage, or even cash a check without hefty fees. Technologies like blockchain could help address some of these issues, at the most basic level by removing some of the mid-

JONATHAN SURY

dle players who are collecting economic rent. Consider how remittance fees have been a big burden on low-income immigrants, especially for small transfers. A blockchain-based solution could theoretically provide cheaper alternatives by allowing direct transfers.

You have described blockchain as a very elegant technology. You seem to be more excited about its broader uses than about Bitcoin.

In some ways, yes. Bitcoin has historically dominated the conversation when it comes to blockchain-based applications. I believe blockchain is a true paradigm shift, and the use cases are vast. Blockchain could be a force for good, helping us to design alternative models that could redress some of the shortcomings and structural challenges of our finance or banking industries. It enables digitization and monetization of many types of assets that, when coupled with decentralized finance (DeFi), could unleash a new

“Our money could work harder and smarter. We could even be moving toward autonomous, self-driving money ...”

class of distributed consumer finance. We are already seeing an ever-growing collection of inventive ideas and solutions coming online. Blockchain is being used to support fair-trade cooperatives and microfinance initiatives. It could completely transform the real-estate industry by streamlining costs and creating new, more liquid ownership models. The use cases and industry applications are endless. I’m excited to see crypto and blockchain domains beginning to overlap with innovations in machine learning and AI. But we need to make sure that our foundational infrastructure contin-

ues to evolve and scale in user-friendly ways that benefit everyone. Certainly, achieving these “global maxima” would be quite complex, and there is still a chasm between theory and praxis when it comes to blockchain’s promise. Still, I am hopeful that the entire ecosystem and its major players, from academics to innovators to technologists to investors to policymakers to regulators, will continue to view constructive collaboration as foundational. It is on that promising intersection that I have banked — pun intended — my academic and professional careers. — *Sally Lee*



PREMIER SENIOR LIVING ARRIVES IN MANHATTAN

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EXPLORATIONS

FRONTIERS OF
RESEARCH AND
DISCOVERY



The white-necked Jacobin.

Why female hummingbirds masquerade as male

As any birdwatcher will tell you, male and female birds typically look distinct from each other, with males sporting bolder, more eye-catching plumage. Consider the white-necked Jacobin, a tropical hummingbird that spends its days flitting from flower to flower in the woodlands of South and Central America. Male Jacobins are instantly recognizable by their dazzling, iridescent feathers. Females' feathers, in comparison, look washed-out and drab.

Except when they don't. A recent study by Columbia ecologist Dustin R. Rubenstein, Jay J. Falk of the University of Washington, and Michael S. Webster of Cornell has revealed that approximately one in every six birds that appear to be adult male Jacobins is actually a female in disguise. The research team, which has been closely monitoring Jacobins in Panama since 2015, also discovered why these females evolved to resemble males.

"We've observed that the females with male-like plumage enjoy better access to food, because other birds, knowing that males are generally aggressive, will cede more space to them," says Rubenstein, a professor of ecology, evolution, and environmental biology and the director of the Center for Integrative Animal Behavior. "Females with drab feathers, on the other hand, often get harassed and chased away from food sources."

Rubenstein's study, which appears in the journal *Current Biology*, adds to a growing body of research showing that female birds and animals can advertise their physical fitness or social status with conspicuous characteristics known as "biological ornaments." Biological ornaments such as brightly colored feathers, bushy tails, and big horns are more commonly associated with male animals, which use them to attract mates. But Rubenstein says that females of

many species of birds, fish, and insects have in recent years been found to use ornamentation to intimidate rivals when competing for nesting sites, food, and other resources needed to raise their young.

“This is still a relatively new area of research, because for a long time, scientists who were interested in ornamentation focused on male–male competition

over access to females and how that process of ‘sexual selection’ influenced the evolution of male bodies,” Rubenstein says. “But females are obviously engaged in a lot of competitive activities that drive *their* evolution too.”

He hopes that further research on white-necked Jacobins will reveal the genetic basis for the masquerading females’ plumage and whether their

flashy feathers are an indication of other male-like attributes the birds might possess.

“We’d like to know if these birds are actually stronger or more aggressive than ordinary-looking females,” Rubenstein says. “So far, our observations don’t bear that out. It seems that they’re just tricking other birds into thinking they’re tougher.”

What do memories look like?

One of the greatest mysteries in neuroscience is how groups of brain cells work together to form and maintain memories.

Now a team of Columbia neuroscientists led by Attila Losonczy of the Zuckerman Institute has achieved a breakthrough in this area, capturing how brain cells in mice perform computations as the animals navigate the world. The researchers accomplished this using novel brain-imaging and analytic methods they developed in collaboration with biologists in the laboratory of fellow Zuckerman Institute neuroscientist Franck Polleux, as well as with scientists at Imperial College London, the Sainsbury Wellcome Centre at University College London, and the Institute of Experimental Medicine in Budapest. Their techniques enabled them to observe interactions between brain cells in the hippocampus, which is where long-term memories are created, as mice explored new environments and formed memories about the places they visited.

Among the researchers’ discoveries is that the process of memory formation is a more boisterous activity than previously known. They found that when neurons called place cells, which are involved in encoding information about our physical surroundings, are first stimulated, many other neurons in their vicinity begin to vigorously converse, creating a “massive reconfiguration” of nearby circuitry. The researchers speculate that such group chats serve to amplify new mental images and store them away for safekeeping.

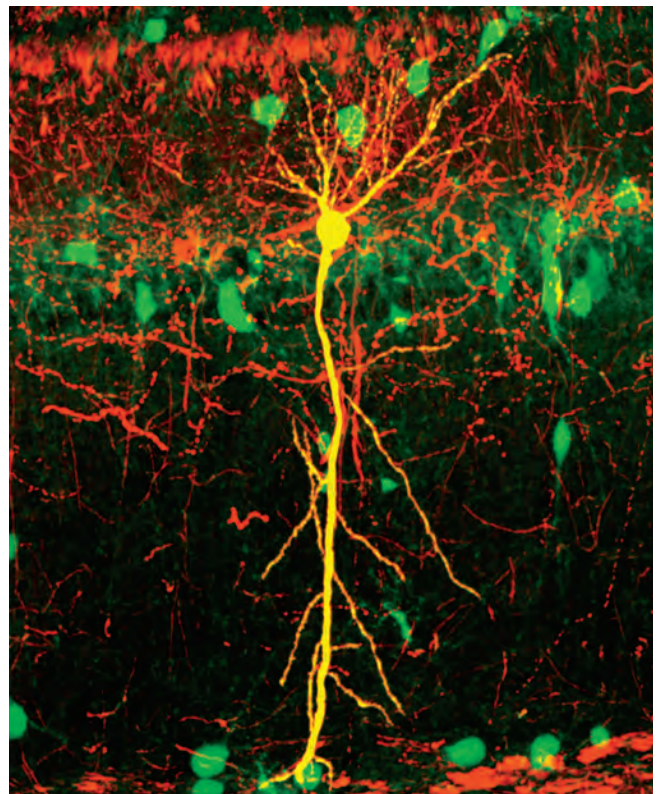
“Scientists have known for decades that individual place cells respond to specific locations, helping the brain create maps of the environment,” says Tristan Geiller, a postdoctoral researcher in Losonczy’s lab and the first author of the study, which appears in *Nature*. “But little has been known about how the cells talk to other cells to perform the mental computations that encode these memories.”

In another recent study, members of Losonczy’s lab discovered that new memo-

ries are consolidated in the hippocampus gradually, over a period of twenty-four hours or more, and that periods of physical rest are essential for the brain to complete the job.

Losonczy says that his group’s research could eventually have clinical implications. “A better understanding of how the

brain creates its mental maps of the world could help inform research into how memory is disrupted in disorders such as schizophrenia and Alzheimer’s disease,” he says. “This can in turn help guide experiments testing potential therapies for memory-related symptoms of these ailments.”



Neurons in the hippocampus, the brain’s memory center.

In old NYC lumber, researchers find clues to region's climate history

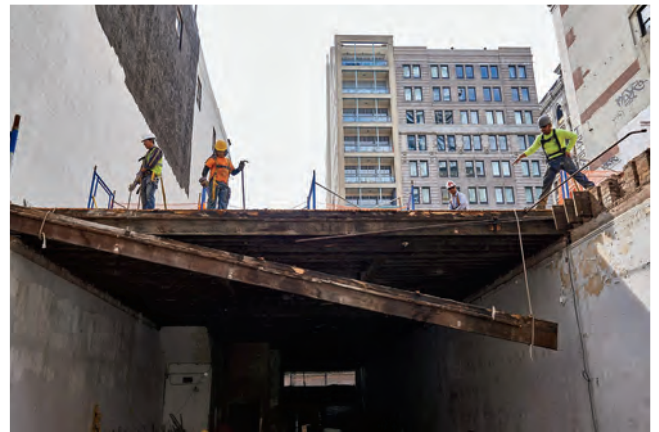
Dendrochronologists, or tree-ring scientists, spend a lot of their time hiking through forests, boring holes into trees, and removing long, cylindrical cores to reveal the specimen's growth rings. Since trees grow vigorously in response to rainfall, the relative widths of their rings from one year to the next provide scientists a unique window into past rainfall levels and a region's climate history.

But wood recovered from old buildings, boats, or bridges can also be valuable to dendrochronologists. As long as the wood can be dated by comparing its rings with those of younger trees in the scientists' databases, it can provide even older climate data.

And where do you find lots of old wood? Try New York City, where many nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century warehouses, factories, and row houses contain massive wooden beams and joists.

"New York City is a huge repository of old timbers, probably the biggest in the country," says Mukund Palat Rao '20GSAS, a postdoctoral researcher at Columbia's Tree-Ring Lab, which is part of the Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory. Yet because historic preservation has never been one of New York City's strengths, about one thousand wood-frame buildings are demolished or gut-renovated every year, the materials mostly going to landfills.

A team of Columbia tree-ring scientists is now harnessing this destruction and mining those torn-out timbers for information. "It's an amazing resource for science," says Rao. With the help of the Brooklyn-based company Sawkill Lumber, which salvages and resells vintage wood, the researchers are collecting and analyzing samples of old beams in hopes of increasing their knowledge of North America's climate over the past millennium. To date,



Workers drop a ceiling joist from the remains of an 1880s commercial building.

the Columbia scientists have amassed wood from eighteen local structures, including the recently renovated 1891 Terminal Warehouse in Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood; a circa 1831 commercial building demolished in the Financial District; and the demolished nineteenth-century parish house of St. Mary's Episcopal Church in Brooklyn. They have discovered that some of the recovered lumber dates as far back as the early sixteenth century, having been harvested from 250-year-old white pines that were chopped down in New York's Adirondack Mountains in 1789.

"There is a lot of history locked up in those timbers," says Caroline Leland '19GSAS, also a postdoctoral researcher at the Tree-Ring Lab. "It's really difficult to find living old-growth trees in the eastern United States now. If we can get enough samples, it may allow us to develop a bet-

ter understanding of the long-term climate in the regions these trees come from."

Says Rao: "These forests don't exist anymore — they're inside the buildings."

Rao, Leland, and several other Columbia dendrochronologists, including Tree-Ring Lab director Edward Cook and Milagros Rodriguez-Caton, have now joined with Sawkill Lumber co-owner Alan Solomon to launch a nonprofit aimed at promoting the preservation of old lumber in New York. They are also talking with a small group of local engineers and architects who want to lobby the city for an ordinance that would identify historic timbers uncovered in demolitions and require companies to contact salvagers.

"I'd like to see information from a big network of buildings," says Leland. "We could develop a sort of history of the urban forest."

— *Kevin Krajick '76GS, '77JRN*



Edward Cook extracts a core from a beam in Manhattan's Terminal Warehouse.



Fighting racial bias, collaboratively

Despite ambitious recent efforts to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in American workplaces, surveys show that people of color still feel that their ideas and accomplishments are routinely ignored by colleagues.

Columbia sociologists David Stark and Sheen S. Levine believe they have discovered an underlying source of the problem — and the seeds of a potential solution.

In a series of experiments designed to assess white Americans' attitudes toward their Black peers, the sociologists asked white, well-educated men and women to try to solve an online puzzle in a virtual environment. Participants were introduced to fictional characters whom they were told possessed secret information that was essential to completing the puzzles, and they were invited to copy these peers' strategies. They knew nothing about their fictional peers apart from their names: some had typically white names, and others had typically Black names. The researchers found that the participants were 25 percent less likely to imitate the puzzle-solving methods of their Black-named peers, compared to their white-named ones. The participants also rated their Black-named peers as less competent afterward, even though they performed equally well.

The researchers tried two remedies. In one case, at the start of the experiment, they provided participants with their imaginary peers' excellent scores on a cognitive test. This led the participants to describe their Black peers as more skilled, but it did not make them any more likely to imitate their methods. In another case, the researchers let the participants observe their Black peers' intelligence and skills more directly, by watching them repeatedly solve the puzzle successfully. This had a profound impact: the white participants' biases melted away, and they began to trust and emulate their Black peers.

The Columbia researchers say that their study, which is one of the largest of its kind ever conducted, involving nearly 1,500 white participants, holds practical lessons for organizations that are committed to supporting communities of color within their ranks. It is not enough, the researchers say, for companies to simply facilitate conversations among their employees about unconscious racial biases. Rather, companies need to ensure that white workers have regular and sustained interaction with Black colleagues.

"The takeaway is that there is no quick and easy fix," says Levine. "And this can explain why diversity and sensitivity training programs often do not accomplish much on their own."

STUDY HALL RESEARCH BRIEFS

Cholesterol's cumulative toll

Researchers at Columbia University Irving Medical Center have demonstrated

that LDL, or "bad" cholesterol, has a cumulative effect over a lifetime, with a person's risk for having a heart attack or stroke growing the longer their LDL levels are elevated.

The shadow pandemic Data scientists at the Mailman School of Public Health estimate that one-third of the American population, or 103 million people, had had COVID-19 by the end of 2020 — more than four times the number indicated by official government records. They say that about half of all residents in major cities were likely infected.

In a financial hole, digging deeper

People struggling financially often feel a deep sense of shame that leads

them to engage in avoidance behaviors, like ignoring bills, which worsens their troubles, according to research by Adam Galinsky, a social psychologist at Columbia Business School. His team found that engaging in self-affirmation exercises — like writing a list of one's best qualities — can give people the confidence to confront and begin to resolve their money problems.

Now we're cooking Columbia mechanical engineers led by Hod Lipson have achieved a breakthrough in their ongoing effort to develop a system for cooking 3D-printed food with lasers — a technique that could one day be useful to astronauts. In a new paper, they report having transformed liquefied raw chicken into a laser-cooked dish that looks and tastes similar to stove-cooked meat but is moister and more uniform in texture.

Tudor timber terrors Simon Billinge, a materials scientist at Columbia Engineering, recently used a powerful X-ray technique that he developed to inspect the remnants of King Henry VIII's favorite warship. He discovered that the wooden hull of the *Mary Rose*, which was built in 1511 and is now displayed in a museum in Portsmouth, UK, is slowly being eaten away by microscopic acid deposits — essentially "bacteria poop," he says — that must be painstakingly removed to protect the one-of-a-kind artifact from further degradation.

NETWORK

YOUR ALUMNI
CONNECTION



American Ninja
The absurdly delightful career of
doctor, and TV host Matt Iseman

Entertainer
comedian,
'98VPS

For TV personality Matt Iseman '98VPS, a chipper outlook and flexible attitude are more than winning character traits — they're key ingredients to success.

Over the years, the entertainer has appeared on numerous shows from *Today* to *The New Celebrity Apprentice* to *RuPaul's Secret Celebrity Drag Race*, where he once lip-synched to Céline Dion in a sparkly evening gown. "I've said yes to just about every opportunity that's come my way," he says.

Iseman is perhaps best known as the cohost of *American Ninja Warrior*, a popular reality series where amateur athletes tackle extreme obstacle courses with the hope of winning a cash prize. On the show, Iseman blends the macho energy of a sports announcer with nice-guy charisma and goofy enthusiasm for the competitors. "I love celebrating people who do exceptional things," says Iseman, who has served as a commentator since 2010. He takes pride in knowing that, thanks to the series, "ninja" training is now a popular activity. "Some kids play baseball or basketball; others are ninja warriors," he says. "They go to gyms, they compete in local competitions. It's been cool to be a voice of the sport."

Iseman has overcome many of his own obstacles on his path to primetime TV. Orig-

inally from Denver, he attended Princeton as an undergrad, then enrolled in Columbia for medical school to follow in his father's footsteps as a doctor. But while completing his medical residency, he experienced a sort of existential crisis. "I realized I would soon have to start making life-or-death decisions," he says. "It hit me that my heart was not in it enough. Medicine isn't a job, it's a calling."

In an effort to reset, Iseman says, he moved to Los Angeles to try his hand at comedy. "I'd always enjoyed entertaining people, and I wanted to do something completely removed from medicine. I figured I would clear my head and come back with a renewed sense of purpose. Instead, I ended up falling in love with performing." He says his medical training gave him valuable perspective and softened the harsh realities of Hollywood. "Not getting a role or completely bombing in front of a hundred strangers while doing standup was nothing compared to the pressure of being in the ICU or ER."

Since landing a breakthrough TV role in 2006 as a regular cast member on the home-makeover series *Clean House*, which won him a Daytime Emmy, Iseman has acted in episodes of *The League* and *Hot in Cleveland*, served as a medical expert on the

talk show *Home & Family*, and hosted the documentary series *Live Rescue*, which follows first responders on rescue missions. Last summer he covered the Tokyo Olympics for NBC's streaming service Peacock, and on Thanksgiving he cohosted the National Dog Show junior program for kids.

A particularly exciting break came when Iseman went on *The New Celebrity Apprentice*, hosted by Arnold Schwarzenegger. He ended up winning the 2017 season against runner-up Boy George. (Other contestants included *Jersey Shore*'s Snooki and Mötley Crüe lead singer Vince Neil.) As a double Ivy League graduate, Iseman was well-equipped



Iseman on *American Ninja Warrior* and *RuPaul's Secret Celebrity Drag Race*.

for the show's business challenges. "You couldn't see this on TV, but with every team task, we'd get a dossier full of instructions and resources," he explains. "I would study the rules and keep everyone organized. It was like doing the grunt work in medical school."

Iseman, who is still a licensed physician, often



makes health and medicine the center of his work and philanthropy. When he won *The New Celebrity Apprentice*, he donated almost a million dollars to the Arthritis Foundation, a charity that hits close to home: Iseman suffers from rheumatoid arthritis, a painful inflammation of the joints. He has also battled renal

cell carcinoma, and in 2007 he had a cancerous tumor removed from his left kidney. "Ending up on the other side of the stethoscope has given me even more appreciation for doctors," he says.

Through all his health struggles, Iseman, who still lives in Hollywood, has found room for humor. "I truly agree that laughter is the best medicine," he says. Plus, no matter what hurdles stand in his way, Iseman can usually count on his busy schedule to lift his spirits. "My job is absurd," he says. "I'm telling jokes and traveling the world trying to entertain people. I have such an appreciation for the amount of joy I get to have. It's incredible." — *Julia Joy*

ARTIST'S STATEMENT



ACCLAIMED FILMMAKER JIM JARMUSCH '75CC has amassed a cult following for his quirky, contemplative independent movies, including *Stranger Than Paradise*, *Broken Flowers*, and *The Dead Don't Die*. But he is also a prolific visual artist and recently unveiled a collection of collages with the apt, deadpan title *Some Collages*. Relying heavily on clippings from old newspapers —



a striking contrast to our constant digital newsfeed — Jarmusch superimposes famous faces and crosses time periods in eerie, often very funny ways. Patty Hearst's mug shots get Edwardian bodies, Stanley Kubrick becomes a golfer, and one of Andy Warhol's iconic Brillo boxes replaces a man's head. Like a sign on a passing taxi, the images are familiar, but only fleetingly.

NETWORK



Top: Ashton, Duthiers, Herridge, Kellerman, Madowo, McFadden, Smith, van Zeller. Bottom: Abrams, Diaz, Harlow, Jones, Kurtz, Malveaux, Radford, Stephanopoulos.

Spreading the News

Stay up-to-date with these sixteen alumni TV correspondents

Dan Abrams

As the chief legal-affairs correspondent for ABC News, Dan Abrams '92LAW is a key voice in the network's news coverage.

Jennifer Ashton

Ob-gyn, nutritionist, and author Jennifer Ashton '91CC, '00VPS discusses everything from diet to pandemic precautions on ABC News, *Good Morning America*, and her streaming program *On Call with Dr. Jen*.

Adriana Diaz

Based in Chicago, national correspondent Adriana Diaz '09SIPA anchors the Saturday edition of the *CBS Weekend News*.

Vladimir Duthiers

Correspondent Vladimir Duthiers '11JRN covers a wide range of domestic and foreign affairs for CBS News. The 2010 and 2021 Haiti earthquakes and the deforestation of the Amazon jungle are just a few of the topics on his reporting résumé.

Poppy Harlow

A former political-science major at Columbia, Poppy Harlow '05CC is a journalist for CNN's *Newsroom*. She is currently on leave to study law at Yale.

Catherine Herridge

Reporting from Washington, Catherine Herridge '90JRN is a senior investigative correspondent for CBS News, where she covers national security and intelligence.

Athena Jones

After spending several years covering the Trump White House for CNN, Athena Jones '99JRN now reports from the network's New York offices as a national correspondent.

Max Kellerman

Max Kellerman '98CC started his career as a boxing commentator after graduating from Columbia with a history degree. In September 2021, he began hosting *This Just In*, a sports talk show on ESPN.

Howard Kurtz

Since 2013, journalist Howard Kurtz '75JRN has hosted the Fox News program *Media Buzz*, which analyzes the coverage of recent news stories.

Larry Madowo

Nairobi-based journalist Larry Madowo '20JRN reports on African news as an international correspondent for CNN.

Suzanne Malveaux

Since 2002, CNN's Suzanne Malveaux '91CC has reported on numerous pivotal events, including Hurricane Katrina, the 2008 presidential election, the Arab Spring, and the war in Afghanistan.

Cynthia McFadden

Cynthia McFadden '84LAW brings her legal expertise to NBC as the news division's senior legal and investigative correspondent.

Morgan Radford

As a correspondent for NBC News, *Today*, and MSNBC, Morgan Radford '12JRN has reported from the frontlines

of major national events.

Since August 2021, she has also served as a co-anchor on the streaming channel NBC News Now.

Ryan Smith

Sports anchor and attorney Ryan Smith '97LAW is a familiar face on ESPN, where he regularly cohosts the network's *Outside the Lines*, *E60*, and *SportsCenter*. Smith also contributes as a legal analyst across ABC News programs.

George Stephanopoulos

The former communications director for President Bill Clinton, George Stephanopoulos '82CC transitioned from public relations to broadcast journalism in the mid-1990s. He currently anchors ABC's *This Week* and co-anchors *Good Morning America*.

Mariana van Zeller

Portuguese journalist Mariana van Zeller '02JRN is the host of *Trafficked*, a National Geographic channel investigative series that exposes notorious black-market networks.

Bear Necessities

Wildlife ecologist Rae Wynn-Grant '16GSAS is looking for ways to keep bear (and human) populations happy and healthy

Rae Wynn-Grant '16GSAS goes where few others have gone before — inside the dens of hibernating black bears in Southern California. As an ecologist who studies the behavior of large carnivores, she crawls into the lairs of sleeping females and their cubs; tranquilizes the mothers; counts the cubs; takes hair, blood, and DNA samples from both; and tags them all so they can be tracked throughout their lives.

For Wynn-Grant, a faculty member at UC Santa Barbara's Bren School of Environmental Science and Management, it's all in a day's work. The monitoring is necessary, she says, because bears are an indicator species — their health signals the well-being of the entire ecosystem.

In studying the movement and behavior of black bears, as well as mountain lions, at the Jack and Laura Dangermond Preserve, a thirty-eight-square-mile protected area on the Santa Barbara coast, Wynn-Grant hopes to learn how frequently the bears and mountain lions walk on the beach, whether they go there to eat, and whether such spaces are safe for them. She is also looking for ways to mediate interactions between the animals and the humans who live nearby.

"I'm interested in how humans negatively impact animal behavior and ecology — anything from face-to-face

interactions when people walk their dogs to more subtle things like the effects of light and sound pollution," she says. She ultimately wants to devise conservation strategies, because even though California has a healthy black-bear population today, "there's value in being proactive."



Wynn-Grant's special focus is female bears, who need a safe and stable environment to raise their young. Her "den dives," though potentially dangerous, have their perks. "I get to cuddle baby animals in the name of science," says Wynn-Grant. "I don't want to detract from the rigor of the science, but sometimes you just want to give them a hug."

Once or twice a week, Wynn-Grant hikes into the forest and sets up cameras

to observe the bears. Soon she will begin attaching GPS collars to the animals to help her understand their movements and network of habitats. Though she doesn't bring a firearm, she carries a tranquilizer gun. "I always pack bear spray, and I've had to use it," she says. The best way to avoid conflict with a

her "geek out" and fall in love with animals. "Some people were into *Star Wars*," she says. "For me, it was nature shows." Her master's research at Yale took her to Africa, and she thought she might spend her career studying lions. But after learning more about their vulnerable status, which would make the type of long-term research she wanted to do difficult, her PhD thesis advisers at Columbia helped redirect her interests toward bears, whose populations are more stable.

In addition to her research contributions, Wynn-Grant is one of the first African-American women (and one of the few women generally) in her field and serves as a role model for underrepresented groups in STEM. She also works with youth organizations and makes media appearances as a science communicator. She recently started hosting a weekly podcast for PBS's *Nature*, called *Going Wild*, which combines stories of her adventures with commentary on personal growth and identity politics.

"People of color have been excluded from the natural and environmental sciences for years," says Wynn-Grant. "I want to let people know that this is a career they can have. You can start late. You can be different. You can look like me and still make major change and help move this field forward." — *George Spencer*

Power Brokers

How three alumni entrepreneurs are helping to light up Africa

Growing up in South Africa, Nthabiseng Mosia '16SIPA says she spent many nights studying by flashlight, thanks to frequent power outages. But she knew she was lucky to have electricity at all. Even today, less than half of sub-Saharan Africans have access to the grid; in poorer countries, and particularly in rural communities, that number plummets further.

“The statistics are staggering,” Mosia says. “On much of the continent, life stops when the sun goes down.”

Leone and Liberia, where over 75 percent of the population is living without power. To ensure that its products are affordable, Easy Solar uses a rent-to-own system, allowing customers to buy “on trust” and make weekly or monthly payments. Their payment histories are recorded and used to create a credit score, which gives customers access to more products and better payment plans.

“The vast majority of our customers don’t have bank accounts or any other form of credit,” Tourre says. “Paying

system also helps West Africans buy higher-quality products that ultimately save them money. Mosia says that people in Liberia and Sierra Leone have long relied on cheap, battery-operated flashlights and chargers, because the upfront cost of anything more durable is prohibitively high. But those devices are short-lived, so customers have to keep buying new ones. She says that by using an Easy Solar lantern, which generally lasts at least five years, households can save around \$150 over that period — an incredible amount, given that the vast majority of customers live below the international poverty line.

“Solar devices are obviously a more sustainable choice. With our products, we’ve been able to prevent nearly nineteen million batteries from ending up in landfills,” Mosia says. “And with more permanent sources of power, our customers have saved nearly \$15 million in total.”

Mosia, Silverman, and Tourre began talking about the idea for Easy Solar as part of a collaborative group project over SIPA’s winter break in 2015. Over the next year and a half, they honed their business plan, conducted extensive surveys, and began to fundraise. Boosted by a win at the 2016 SIPA Dean’s Public Policy Challenge, which came with a \$40,000 grant, the trio moved to Sierra Leone’s capital, Freetown, after graduation. There they began their first pilot program with two hundred customers.

Five years later, Easy Solar has provided over 660,000 people across Sierra Leone and Liberia affordable access to clean power. And the social impact does not stop with its customers; Easy Solar has also become a major employer in the two West African countries, creating over nine hundred clean-energy jobs.

“We started out literally fumbling through the dark,” Mosia says. “And we’ve created a network that’s helping thousands of people keep the lights on.”

— Rebecca Shapiro



An Easy Solar staff member demonstrates the company’s first product, the rechargeable Eco Lamp.

Mosia decided to dedicate her career to alleviating the power crisis in Africa. After working in energy consulting for several years across the continent, she enrolled at Columbia’s School of International and Public Affairs. There she met Eric Silverman '16SIPA, a Peace Corps volunteer who had recently returned from Sierra Leone, and Alexandre Tourre '16SIPA, who wanted to use his background in finance and technology to tackle problems in the developing world.

Mosia, Silverman, and Tourre teamed up to create Easy Solar, a company that supplies affordable clean-energy products to off-the-grid households in Sierra

in installments gives them a record of accountability that they can use not only with us but in other areas of their lives.”

Currently, Easy Solar sells a range of solar products for home use. The most basic is a lantern, which charges a mobile phone. Home packages can also include fans, televisions, fuel-efficient stoves, solar water pumps, and rechargeable smartphones. These products make up the bulk of Easy Solar’s business, but in 2019 the company also launched a line of large-scale solar-generators, used to power schools, hospitals, and companies.

In addition to helping customers build a line of credit, Easy Solar’s payment



ASK AN ALUM: TALK THERAPY

Natalie H. Rogers '79SW, a public-speaking coach and psychotherapist with a background in theater, has helped more than 13,000 people overcome stage fright.

What inspired you to teach public speaking?

Public speaking is said to be the number-one phobia in America. When people are overly self-conscious about the way they look and sound, the consequences can be catastrophic. People drop out of law school, they turn down fabulous jobs and promotions, and they constantly make excuses to avoid talking.

I took a speaking course in college and was horrified by the way it was taught. Most of the students were incredibly uncomfortable, but the teacher would just sit at the back of the room and say “relax” or “make eye contact.” It wasn’t effective at all.

I realized there was no systematic method for teaching public speaking. The academic approach involved a hodgepodge of fragmented theories, lectures, and suggestions. So I created my own science-backed, step-by-step method that got students to distract themselves from negative thoughts and build better performance skills.

What makes a good speaker?

Your ability to insert pauses, think systematically, and, most importantly, stay focused and relaxed while people are looking at you. It’s helpful to use a

story to illustrate your point and relate the rest of your speech to that narrative. Relying too much on statistics and numbers tends to bore an audience.

The very worst thing is when people talk too fast. They do this because they lose control. They’re nervous and trying to cram as many words as possible into a short amount of time, trying to get the speech over with.

Can you share some speaking tips?

My book, *Talk Power: The Mind-Body Way to Speak Without Fear*, includes a variety of exercises that I developed to train the speaker to concentrate. One involves lifting your hands slightly off your lap while you practice speaking, which shifts your attention and helps you stay calm. Another has you walk in slow motion, holding weighted objects. Focusing on your hands or another body part activates your right brain, the nonverbal side. This shuts off the negative thoughts coming from the left brain.

When preparing for a speech, always plan out a clear structure in advance. Never “take a deep breath” to ease panic. When you breathe deeply using your chest, you’re producing adrenaline and stimulating the fight-or-flight response. Instead, breathe from your diaphragm, also known as belly breathing. Take a breath in through your nose as you push your belly out. Pull your belly in and blow out slowly through pursed lips as if you were whistling. Doing this while waiting for your turn to speak will help you stay calm.

If you struggle to insert pauses during your speech, try squeezing your toes a couple of times between each sentence. The advice about making eye contact with the audience? It’s all baloney. You just have to skim the faces of people. The less eye contact the better, because it distracts you from what you’re saying. And of course, practice makes perfect. Public speaking is a learned skill that requires training, just like swimming, riding a bicycle, or playing an instrument. — *Julia Joy*

NEWSMAKERS

● **Mary T. Bassett '79VPS** was recently appointed New York State health commissioner by Governor Kathy Hochul. Bassett, who oversaw the New York City Department of Health from 2014 to 2018, is known for her shrewd handling of the Ebola and Zika scares and for promoting social equity in public health.

● At the 2021 Primetime Emmy Awards, **Lucia Aniello '04CC** won two awards for writing and directing *Hacks*, a comedy series about a washed-up Las Vegas comedian. **Joanna Rothkopf '14JRN** won an award for outstanding variety series writing for *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*.

● **David Stanton '77CC** cycled to victory at the USA Cycling Masters Track National Championships. Competing in the event for men ages sixty-five to sixty-nine, Stanton took home a gold medal.

● Actor **Maggie Gyllenhaal '99CC** (below) made her directorial debut with *The Lost Daughter*, an adaptation of the 2006 Elena Ferrante novel *La figlia oscura*. Released in December, the film stars Olivia Colman as a woman who confronts her dark past while vacationing in Greece.



BULLETIN

UNIVERSITY
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VIEWS



DENNIS MITCHELL NAMED EVP FOR UNIVERSITY LIFE

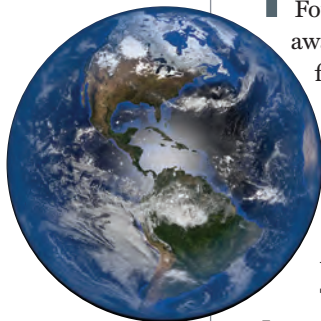
Dennis Mitchell '97PH, a Columbia professor of dental medicine with decades of experience spearheading campus diversity initiatives, has been appointed executive vice president for university life. In his new position, he will oversee a wide range of programs that will help the University engage with students on issues such as community citizenship, mental health and well-being, inclusion and belonging, sexual respect, and anti-racism.

A clinician and scholar whose academic work has focused on the oral-health needs of underserved populations, Mitchell joined Columbia's College of Dental Medicine in 1991. He became the school's dean for diversity and multicultural affairs in 2004 and has been responsible for a nearly sevenfold

increase in the percentage of Columbia dental students from underrepresented backgrounds. Since 2014, Mitchell has worked in the Office of the Provost, helping to oversee the University's \$185 million faculty diversity initiative. Under his stewardship, the numbers of women and Black, Latino, and indigenous faculty members at Columbia have steadily increased.

"I know how central the student experience is to everything we do at this university," says Mitchell, who is continuing to serve as senior vice provost for faculty advancement while EVP. "We wouldn't be who we are without our students, and I'm committed to making their time at Columbia as rewarding as it can possibly be."

COLUMBIA LAUNCHES CLIMATE MODELING CENTER



The National Science Foundation has awarded Columbia a five-year, \$25 million grant to lead a new research center where scientists will develop the next generation of long-term climate models. The center, called

Learning the Earth with Artificial Intelligence and Physics (LEAP), is being over-

seen by Columbia in collaboration with the National Center for Atmospheric Research, NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies, New York University, and the Universities of California at Irvine; Minnesota; and Montreal.

One of LEAP's main goals, says center director Pierre Gentine, a professor of earth and environmental engineering, is to harness the power of artificial intelligence to

develop climate models that offer useful predictions about the types of climate conditions that particular cities or regions are likely to confront decades from now. He says that this will be crucial for guiding decisions about investing in expensive adaptation measures like building seawalls, retreating inland, or upgrading transit systems and other critical infrastructure.

TOP: MICHAEL DIVITO; BOTTOM: HILVARIJA IMAGES / SHUTTERSTOCK

KATRINA ARMSTRONG TO LEAD CUIMC

Katrina Armstrong, a prominent physician and medical researcher, has been named the next chief executive officer of Columbia University Irving Medical Center, executive vice president for health and biomedical sciences, and dean of the faculties of health sciences and medicine. Her tenure will begin on March 1.

Armstrong is currently a professor of clinical medicine at Harvard Medical School and a professor of epidemiology at the Harvard T. H. Chan School of Public Health. She is also chair of the department of medicine and physician-in-chief of Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, overseeing the management of two thousand faculty, residents,

and fellows in ten clinical divisions and more than a dozen research centers.

A native of Alabama, Armstrong attended Yale before earning her medical degree from Johns Hopkins and a master's degree in clinical epidemiology from the University of Pennsylvania. Before joining the Harvard faculty in 2013, she practiced medicine and taught at the University of Pennsylvania's Perelman School of Medicine for many years.

An expert on the genetics of cancer and personalized medicine, Armstrong has done groundbreaking research on cancer risk and prevention in Black and Latino patients; racial inequities in genetic testing and neonatal care; and

the impact of segregation, discrimination, and patient distrust on the health of marginalized populations.

"Nothing is more important to the University and the nation — indeed the world — than the evolution of ever-deepening knowledge

related to human health, the education of the next generation of professionals who will serve humanity in this realm, and the creation of a just and effective system of health care," said President Lee C. Bollinger. "Dr. Armstrong is the best leader for this era."



JEANNETTE WING APPOINTED EVP FOR RESEARCH



Jeannette Wing, a professor of computer science and previously the director of Columbia's Data Science Institute, was recently named the University's executive vice president for research.

In her new position, Wing is responsible for managing Columbia's research activities across its New York campuses and abroad. She is the first woman, Asian-American, and computer-science professor to take on the senior administrative role at Columbia.

"Jeannette will advance the office's mandate to grow our research efforts in ways that align with the challenges and opportunities ahead," said President Lee C. Bollinger in announcing her appointment. "Importantly, Jeannette is committed to promoting fundamental research with real-world applications in the realms of artificial

intelligence, quantum science, semiconductors, robotics, biotechnology, energy technology, cybersecurity, and material science, thereby furthering what I call the Fourth Purpose of the University. She will also expand our partnerships with organizations in the business, nonprofit, higher-education, and government sectors."

Wing, an MIT-educated computer scientist and an expert on the reliability and security of computing systems, was recruited to Columbia to lead its Data Science Institute in 2017, having previously held executive positions at Microsoft Research, the National Science Foundation, and Carnegie Mellon University. As the head of the institute, she oversaw academic programs that advance the integration of data science across all disciplines at the University, in teaching and in research.

VAGELOS COLLEGE RECEIVES \$61.7M GRANT TO SPEED DEVELOPMENT OF NEW MEDICAL TREATMENTS

Columbia University's Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons has received a \$61.7 million grant from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to help medical researchers accelerate the development and application of scientific discoveries so that new treatments can be delivered to patients faster.

The grant, one of the largest ever to Columbia's medical school, will support the Irving Institute for Clinical and Translational Research, which works in partnership with researchers and physicians from across Columbia University Irving Medical Center (CUIMC), NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital, and the New York State Psychiatric Institute on all phases of clinical and translational science.

The infusion of federal funding addresses a critical need in medical research. In laboratories at Columbia

and at other universities across the nation, important scientific breakthroughs are made almost every day, but it often takes a decade or more for such discoveries to result in new drugs, medical devices, or diagnostic tools.

"The pace and breadth of discovery in biomedical research has the potential to transform medicine," says President Lee C. Bollinger. "To deliver on that promise, we must expand our capacity to translate new knowledge into new tools and treatments."

The Irving Institute, which has been awarded more than \$200 million from the NIH since 2006, provides Columbia medical researchers with seed funding for ambitious new translational projects, access to specialized equipment they might not have in their own labs, and assistance in launching clinical trials to test experimental therapies.



The latest NIH grant will enable the institute to develop a host of new programs, including a "data concierge service" to link researchers with experts in biostatistics, biomedical informatics, and data science. The institute will also use community leaders as ambassadors to promote public-health research.

DUCHESNE DREW AND KEITH GOGGIN ELECTED TO BOARD OF TRUSTEES

Duchesne Drew '89CC, the president of Minnesota Public Radio, and Keith Goggin '91JRN, a private investor and proprietary trader, were recently elected to Columbia University's Board of Trustees.

Drew, who was the *Columbia Daily Spectator's* news editor and mentored high-school students at the Double Discovery Center while studying history at Columbia College, spent most of his career at the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, where he began as an intern and rose to the upper echelons of the newsroom, serving as managing editor of operations. He then worked for several years in



Duchesne Drew and Keith Goggin

philanthropy, as vice president of the Bush Foundation, a Saint Paul-based nonprofit that supports social-service organizations. He has been president of Minnesota Public Radio since 2020, overseeing the programming, strategy, and daily operations of a network of forty-six stations. An active College alumnus, he has served on the *Spectator's* Board of Trustees.

Goggin earned a master's degree from Columbia's



School of Journalism after studying economics at Colgate University. He started out as a financial reporter and then became a finance professional, working as a research manager in the derivative-securities division of the American Stock Exchange and eventually as a market maker and specialist there and on the New York Stock Exchange. Goggin serves on the journalism school's Board of Visitors

and on the Columbia Alumni Association's board, of which he is a past chair. He also serves on the board of governors and executive committee of the Columbia University Club of New York, the board of Columbia Global Reports, the Columbia Climate Board of Advisors, the president's council for Columbia World Projects, and the campaign executive committee for the Columbia Commitment. Goggin received Columbia's Alumni Medal in 2013 and the journalism school's Founder's Award in 2016.

Goggin is also the lead donor among a group of alumni who recently established the CAA Scholarship Fund, which will provide financial assistance and alumni mentorship to students at every school.



Physician David Louis Bell treats a patient at CUIMC.

COLUMBIA AND PFIZER LAUNCH RESEARCH DIVERSITY INITIATIVE

Improving diversity among drug-trial participants is a critical step toward reducing racial and ethnic disparities in health, experts say. In the US, 12 percent of the population is Black and 18 percent is Hispanic or Latino, but among the thirty-two thousand patients who participated in clinical trials that led to FDA-approved new drugs in 2020, only 8 percent were Black and 11 percent Hispanic.

Now Columbia University Irving Medical Center (CUIMC) and its Herbert Irving Comprehensive Cancer Center have teamed up with the pharmaceutical company Pfizer to reduce those health disparities by establishing the new Columbia-Pfizer Clinical

Trials Diversity Initiative. Pfizer will provide a three-year, \$10 million grant to Columbia to support the initiative, which seeks to increase both the participation of underrepresented minorities in medical trials and diversity among clinical researchers.

“A diverse research staff not only helps to improve trust in clinical trials among participants from underserved groups but improves the entire clinical-trial enterprise by bringing different questions, experience, and perspective to the table,” says Anil K. Rustgi, the director of the cancer center and the interim executive vice president and dean of the faculties of health sciences and medicine at CUIMC.

TROY EGGERS NAMED DEAN OF SCHOOL OF PROFESSIONAL STUDIES

Troy Eggers '05BUS, an academic administrator who has served in a number of senior leadership positions at Columbia, was recently named dean of the School of Professional Studies.

Eggers had been serving as interim dean of the school since 2020, when Jason Wingard, a scholar of leadership strategy, stepped down from the post. In the summer of 2021, Wingard left Columbia to become president of Temple University.

Eggers was previously the University's executive vice provost, where his portfolio included critical areas of academic management, such as financial planning, faculty housing, human resources, travel, emergency protocols, and space planning. He also oversaw the International Students and Scholars Office, Columbia University Press, the University Seminars, and the Alliance Program, a joint venture between Columbia and École Polytechnique, Sciences Po, and Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne University. Before that, Eggers

held senior positions at Columbia Business School and the School of International and Public Affairs.

The School of Professional Studies, founded twenty years ago as the School of Continuing Education and renamed in 2015 to reflect its broadened academic mission, offers a range of professional degrees,



lifelong learning opportunities, and market-specific training in areas such as applied analytics, bioethics, enterprise risk management, human rights, and strategic communication.

President Lee C. Bollinger, in announcing Eggers's new appointment, praised his “outstanding performance” as interim dean, which included launching several new academic programs and enhancing the school's online offerings.

“As dean, Troy will build upon the school's unique and impressive history, while refining and broadening its approach to non-traditional higher education,” Bollinger said.

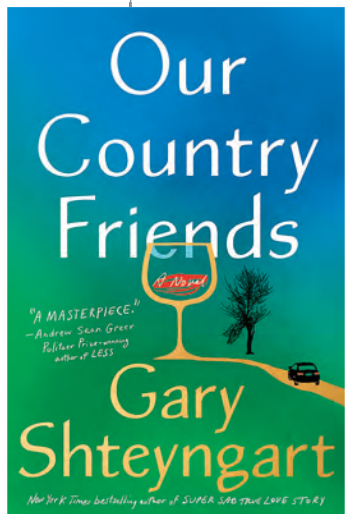
GIVING DAY RAISES \$28 MILLION

Columbia's tenth annual Giving Day on October 20 shattered previous records, raising nearly \$28 million through 21,359 donations from alumni, parents, faculty, students, staff, and friends around the world. The twenty-four-hour online fundraising drive, in which schools and programs compete for matching gifts, raised \$4 million more than last year's event. The donations will support financial aid, research, athletics, patient care, and global initiatives that address the pressing challenges of our time. To learn more, visit givingday.columbia.edu.

Our Country Friends

By Gary Shteyngart (Random House)

Did we really need this — Gary Shteyngart’s take on how the virus broke the world? We’re still emerging from the pandemic nightmare. Is a jab of the celebrated satirist’s high-dose pen really what the doctor ordered?



Turns out, it is. The gently named *Our Country Friends*, a super sad funny new novel set in an epically unfunny time, is not just wisecracking but wise, and as tender as it is trenchant.

Shteyngart, who teaches in Columbia’s graduate writing program, brings us back to March 2020, when a pod is forming at a Hudson Valley bungalow colony owned

by the Russian-born, Queens-raised novelist Alexander (Sasha) Senderovsky. Sasha; his wife Masha, a psychiatrist; and Nat, their precocious, anxious, K-pop-fixated daughter, are joined by an odd lot: Vinod and Karen, Sasha’s old chums, who bring their own immigrant journeys and traumas; Ed Kim, the glammy scion of a successful Korean family; Dee, Sasha’s provocative former writing student; and the exploding supernova in their quirky constellation, a movie star we know only as the Actor. They come for the weekend. They stay for the summer.

The novel is set in the pandemic’s early months, when we all sheltered in place and peered out at a world gone toxic. The characters may be at safe remove from the cities — “moated ... into their biosphere”

— but they are also “watching a double disaster through glasses pressed to binoculars pressed in turn to a telescope.” It all intrudes: the ventilator shortages and curbside morgues, the brutal murder of George Floyd, the paroxysms of protest, the dizziness of life untethered, the dead trees portending climate change.

If that all sounds kind of grim, not to worry: there are delights in store. When we first meet Senderovsky, he is stocking up at local shops, overspending on sausages and whiskey. Shteyngart is just as punctilious: he’s packed our pandemic picnic basket with surprises (Nat singing K-pop to the neighbor’s sheep, a hypnotizing dating app, a groundhog named Steve), and his sharp prose and social observations are nothing short of delectable.

The pandemic has been kind to puzzle fiends, and the solvers among us may spend some happy hours decoding allusions to authors from Homer to Nabokov. Most obvious is Chekhov, with the novel’s division into four acts, the insertion of a dramatis personae up top, and nods throughout to *Uncle Vanya*. Former Russian majors will

catch winking references to classics, whether *Anna Karenina* (“The House on the Hill was in a tizzy”) or *Lolita* (Vinod tells Sasha: “I broke your liquor, you broke my life”).

Still, every unhappy era is unhappy in its own way. Even apart from the pandemic, ours is a doozy —

from the here unnamed forty-fifth president to climate change to the vaporousness of online life, where the self merges with the selfie and social media can make or break you overnight. Shteyngart also takes on the complex, sometimes brutal dynamics of immigrant families in America, as when



Sasha reflects in a particularly acrid passage on the role he has unwittingly played:

You came, they laughed at your accent on an urban playground, and then you were given your degrees and guided into battle. By which point, you were just a scab sent in to reinforce the established order ... All of us have come to feast on this land of bondage. And all of us are useful and expendable in turn.

Along with such hot-button topics, Shteyngart also reminds us that even when the world is a preoccupying mess,

our personal crises remain paramount. In the end it is the fates of the characters, their longing for family and connection, their betrayals and loyalties that stay with us. That and the sparkle of the storytelling.

As Shteyngart writes in his memoir *Little Failure*, he learned as a child that “the world is harsh and inconsiderate, and you can rely only on your family.” Reading *Our Country Friends*, you’ll decide for yourself how true that is. But in any case, join Sasha and company upstate. They, and the master who conjured them, are great company as we ride out the storm.

— Jerry Kisslinger '79CC, '82GSAS

The Other Dark Matter

By Lina Zeldovich '12JRN (University of Chicago Press)

If someone told you that the most optimistic book they’d read in a while was about human waste, you might think they were full of it. But to author Lina Zeldovich '12JRN, “waste” is a misnomer. “That ugly, foul-smelling, disease-spreading substance is full of nutrients, particularly nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium — the important building blocks for plants and all living things,” she writes. Yet by flushing this “treasure” away through miles of pipes, we’ve created huge problems: “The potent fertilizer we produce regularly ... goes to fertilize all the wrong places: not the farm fields, but our rivers and lakes,” resulting in “depleted, barren soils in some places and overfertilized, stinky, dying creeks and marshes in others.”

Traveling as far as Chile, Madagascar, and Israel, Zeldovich goes in search of innovative ways to harness the power of poop. She

meets scientists, inventors, and entrepreneurs and investigates an array of waterless toilets and biodigesters that convert feces into renewable energy (methane and carbon dioxide). Back in the US, she explores the life-saving potential of fecal transplants, told through the emotional story of a desperate and courageous Indiana couple.

Zeldovich, who grew up on a farm in Russia, laments the social and economic forces that have demonized dung and destroyed what was once a wholesome and natural recycling process. She recalls how her grandfather would empty the family septic tank with buckets and spread the “riches” over his strawberry patches — which resulted, over time, in black, fertile soil that yielded delicious fruit. It’s from this vantage that she traces the history of waste management, from the dung pits of early settlements to

the communal latrines of the Romans (men used their togas to shroud themselves) to the eighteenth-century Japanese “night soil” merchants who collected household sludge to sell to farmers.

But two later developments — the discovery of microbes and the advent of synthetic fertilizer — changed everything, Zeldovich writes. “We destroyed the organic goodness we produced, and we forged synthetic fertilizers to grow our crops ... At the same time, the developing countries kept struggling with disease outbreaks and other sanitation issues stemming from fecal contamination of drinking water. It seemed that neither world could get its shit right.”

For those who like the thematic unity between their lives and books — reading *Death in Venice* while in Venice, for instance — *The Other Dark Matter* should make perfect bathroom



reading. (Certainly it should not be consumed over lunch.) And while some of the technical passages about the biological processes of bacteria and the engineering complexities of tomorrow’s toilets can be hard to digest, Zeldovich softens things with humor and humanity. In writing a primer on poop and its possibilities, the author performs a much larger function: destigmatizing a vital biological product that has long gotten a bum rap.

— Paul Hond

The Magician

By Colm Tóibín (Scribner)

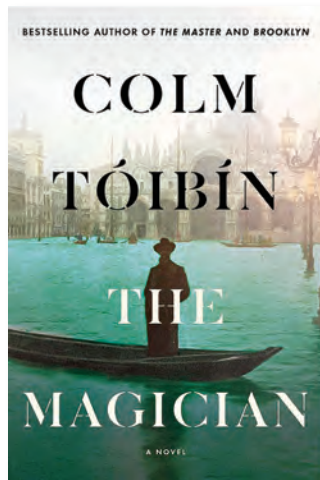
By today's standards, Thomas Mann hardly qualifies as a confessional writer. The great German novelist, who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1929, never wrote a soul-baring memoir or made himself the main character in a book the way many writers do today. If anything, Mann strikes twenty-first-century readers as practically Olympian, with his dignified public image and formal prose.

But the further you delve into his work and biography, the clearer it becomes that Mann was a daringly personal novelist. As his original readers recognized, his stories are often rooted directly in his own life. *Buddenbrooks*, the debut novel that made him famous in his twenties, reflects the history of the Mann family so closely that it caused a scandal in his hometown of Lübeck. In *Death in Venice* he wrote intimately about the homosexual desires concealed behind his public image as a married father of six children. In other books he wrote about his fierce rivalry with his older brother Heinrich, who was also a novelist.

The complicated relationship between Mann's life and art has made him a favorite subject for biographers and critics. Now Colm Tóibín, Columbia's Irene and Sidney B. Silverman Professor of the Humanities, brings a novelist's eye to the subject in *The Magician*, a fictionalized retelling of Mann's story. Tóibín's 2004 novel *The Master* gave Henry James similar treatment, and the books have been aptly described by one critic as "bionovs," the literary equivalent of "biopics"—accessible narratives that dramatize key episodes and major themes in the subject's life. Tóibín's aim is to decode the experiences so elaborately encoded in Mann's fiction.

"The Magician" was Mann's family nickname, bestowed by his children

after he dressed up as a wizard for a costume party. Not only did it echo the title of his most famous novel, *The Magic Mountain*, it also captured the sense that there was something uncanny about his powers — that his imagination masked secrets, possibly dark ones. Tóibín highlights this idea from the first chapter, when we meet young Thomas, the teenage scion of a prominent family



The real Thomas Mann was a poet and a dreamer, fascinated by sickness, obsession, and decline.

of merchants. To all appearances, he was their natural successor. But “when he heard them say that he was the one who would shine in the world of business,” Tóibín writes, “he almost shuddered at the thought that if these people knew who he really was, they would take a different view of him.”

Tóibín traces Mann's development from failing high-school student to apprentice writer to celebrated man of letters in Munich, where he lived in high style after marrying Katia Pringsheim, the daughter of a wealthy Jewish family that had converted to

Protestantism. During World War I, Mann emerged as an influential voice in politics: initially a superpatriot, after Germany's defeat he evolved into a steadfast defender of democracy and opponent of Nazism. When the Nazis took power in 1933, he went into exile in the US, where he became a living symbol of German culture and freedom.

All along, however, Tóibín suggests that the real Mann was a poet and a dreamer, fascinated by sickness, obsession, and decline. The closest thing to a self-portrait in his fiction is the character of Gustav von Aschenbach in *Death in Venice*, a disciplined and celebrated writer who literally throws his life away to remain near the teenage boy he has fallen in love with. One of Tóibín's main purposes in *The Magician* is to imagine what Mann's actual erotic life was like, based on hints from his works and diaries. Constrained by his own fame, he was usually content with exchanging meaningful looks with young men he encountered at hotels: “Anyone who follows your eyes can see where they land,” a friend teases him in the novel.

Mann's secret life threatened disaster when he had to flee Germany, leaving behind diaries in which he had confided his homoerotic feelings and experiences. “The diaries would make clear who he was and what he dreamed about,” Tóibín writes, and the Nazis wouldn't have hesitated to use them to destroy his reputation. After some close calls, Mann managed to have the diaries spirited out of the country, and they weren't published until long after his death in 1955. He would be surprised to learn that, in 2021, “who he was and what he dreamed about” are among his chief claims on the attention of posterity, including the new readers who will surely come to his work thanks to Colm Tóibín's homage.

— Adam Kirsch

READING LIST

New and noteworthy releases

THE SWIMMERS

By Julie Otsuka '99SOA

At a community swimming pool, one of the unofficial rules is to be nice to Alice, who swims to escape the reality of her advancing dementia. But when a crack in the concrete forces the pool to close, Alice deteriorates and is plunged into a confusing web of memories, centering around her childhood in a Japanese internment camp. The sparse, elegant novel — the third from National Book Award finalist Julie Otsuka — is collectively narrated by a Greek chorus of the pool's regulars, people who are strangers in “real life,” but who become important to each other as they gather every day for the same simple purpose.

THE URGE

By Carl Erik Fisher '09VPS

When Carl Erik Fisher was starting his medical residency in psychiatry, he found himself at Bellevue — not as a doctor but as a patient, suffering from a manic episode brought on by alcohol. After completing a rehab program for doctors, Fisher decided to devote his career to the study of addiction. Now a practicing addiction physician, bioethicist, and professor of clinical psychiatry at Columbia, Fisher is an adept and empathetic guide to the history of this confounding human condition.

MISEDUCATION

By Katie Worth '15JRN

In her alarming new book, investigative journalist Katie Worth writes that more than a third of young people think that climate change is not man-made — a staggering statistic, and one with dire implications for the future. Worth set out to understand how climate change is taught in different communities across America and found stark differences between red- and blue-state curricula, due in large part to extensive lobbying campaigns funded by the fossil-fuel industry. Worth's book is useful in understanding not only the climate crisis but also the dangerous spread of misinformation in general.

READ UNTIL YOU UNDERSTAND

By Farah Jasmine Griffin

When Farah Jasmine Griffin — a professor of comparative literature and the chair of Columbia's African-American studies department — was a child, her beloved father, Emerson, gave her great works of Black literature and told her to read until she understood. Tragically, her father died when Griffin was nine years old, and in his absence, she writes, “African American literature served as a constant spiritual and intellectual companion.” Her elegant new book is part memoir and part ode to these works, particularly the novels of Toni Morrison '84HON, which helped shape the way she thinks about the world.



THE LUCKIEST GUY IN THE WORLD

By Robert Abrams '60CC, '66GSAS

Robert Abrams spent nearly fifteen years — from 1979 to 1993 — as New York State's top prosecutor. Known for his progressive values, he was unafraid to battle major corporations as he fought for fair housing, access to abortion, environmental justice, and LGBTQ rights. During the Reagan administration, Abrams organized a coalition of state attorneys general to take collective action against the president's laissez-faire anti-regulatory policies, an unprecedented move that arguably changed the role of the office forever. His compelling memoir chronicles an extraordinary career, from his childhood in the Bronx to his time at Columbia and NYU law school to his term

as Bronx borough president to his history-making run as New York's attorney general.

BURNING BOY

By Paul Auster '69CC, '70GSAS

The late-nineteenth-century writer Stephen Crane lived a life almost too extraordinary to be real. As a young journalist for the *New-York Tribune*, he wrote an article that some say altered the course of a presidential election; he survived a shipwreck and reported from the battlefields of the Spanish-American War; after penning *The Red Badge of Courage*, which became an international sensation, he died tragically young, succumbing to tuberculosis at twenty-eight. It's excellent fodder for Paul Auster, who turns his attention from fiction to biography to tell Crane's engrossing life story.

Turning the Tide of Terrorism

In *Home, Land, Security*, National Book Award finalist Carla Power '95JRN grapples with one of the world's thorniest questions: can a terrorist ever be rehabilitated?



Columbia Magazine: The concept of “deradicalizing” an extremist is highly politicized. Why is that?

Carla Power: “Extremist” and “radical” are blanket terms applied to people whose views are outside the mainstream but who may not engage in violent activity. Yet the use of these terms is always subjective. Back in the 1980s, for instance, Osama bin Laden was among the mujahideen fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan. They were praised as “freedom fighters” by Ronald Reagan and supported by American tax dollars. Meanwhile, Nelson Mandela was deemed a terrorist by authorities in South Africa. More recently, China has sent its Uyghur population into camps for “deradicalization,” and the Saudi government has prosecuted the women’s-rights activist Loujain al-Hathloul under its counterterrorism laws. Martin Luther King acknowledged these inconsistencies in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” writing that if he was the “extremist” that white moderates in the civil-rights movement accused him of being, then so were Paul and Jesus.

CM: One of your chapters is titled “The World’s Best Deradicalization Program.”

What is that program, and why is it so effective?

CP: It’s called Sabaoon, and it’s a boarding school for once-desperate Pakistani boys who were recruited into the Taliban. The boys, who are provided with food, clothing, shelter, and education, are monitored and supported long after they graduate, and receive funds to pursue higher education. The program has been highly successful in settling them back into their communities, where many now thrive as lawyers and doctors, motorcycle mechanics and grocers.

CM: A chapter in *Home, Land, Security* tells the story of two women who bond over their tragic experiences with terrorism. Can you describe their unlikely alliance?

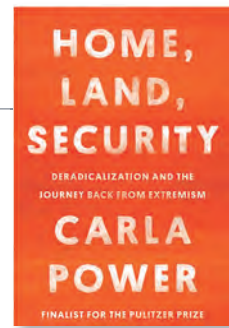
CP: The friendship between Nicola Benyahia and Figen Murray rejects the dominant us-versus-them narrative around terrorism. Nicola’s eighteen-year-old son, Rasheed, ran away from his home in Birmingham, England, to join the Islamic State and was killed by a drone strike in Raqqa in 2015. Figen’s son, Martyn, was one of twenty-two people killed by a suicide bomber at an Ariana Grande concert in Manchester, England, in 2017. Figen angered many Britons when she went on the BBC after Martyn’s death and forgave her son’s killer. The women became friends after meeting at a conference on counterterrorism. Both were grieving mothers, both children of alcoholics, both counselors by profession. Perhaps more importantly, both were willing to pose hard questions about collective responsibility for the creation of hatred, to puncture the image of the terrorist as a mad or irredeemably evil “other.” When the pair appeared together on a morning talk show, Figen said they’d “lost [their] sons to the same monster.”

CM: Your book identifies American foreign policy as a key force in global recruitment. How would you characterize its role?

CP: It’s huge. When the US supports strongmen who strangle free speech and disregard human rights in the name of “security” or oil, as we have in Saudi Arabia and the shah’s Iran, or when, in the interests of “stability,” we turn a blind eye to official corruption in places like Afghanistan, or when we preach about democracy and then disregard democratically elected Islamist governments, as we have in Egypt — these policies help set the conditions for militant groups to flourish.

CM: You quote a commonly held view that terrorist recruitment will stop when the US and its allies stop invading other countries. Is there any reason to hope that the withdrawal of the American military from Afghanistan will help quell the spread of extremism?

CP: No. From the perspective of Kabul and the big cities, the American departure has been a disaster for women, minorities, LGBTQ people, and anyone working with or for Western institutions. In those places, the Taliban seem just as extreme as they were in the 1990s. But we do have to ask ourselves: what other kinds of “extremism” and brutality did we overlook while we were busy hunting Talibs? What conditions produced their easy victory? In some cases, the US government propped up warlords and known pedophiles, tolerating their crimes because they agreed to help fight the Taliban. In others, US drone strikes killed civilians. Is it really a surprise that Afghan villagers would then turn to the Taliban to dispense justice and keep them safe? — *Lorraine Glennon*



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The Battle for Grant's Tomb

How a Columbia undergrad saved the grave of the 18th president

Frank Scaturro '94CC set down his suitcase in his freshman dorm and then walked up Riverside Drive to the General Grant National Memorial.

It was the fall of 1990, and Scaturro, a presidential-history buff from New Hyde Park, Long Island, was eager to visit Grant's towering neoclassical mausoleum — the largest in the Western Hemisphere — to offer his services as a volunteer.

Scaturro had been fascinated with Ulysses S. Grant from childhood and knew that the monument, designed by John Duncan and managed since 1959 by the National Park Service, had fallen on hard times. Yet when he arrived at 122nd Street, he was shocked by what he saw. The memorial's outdoor plaza was marred by graffiti, littered with drug needles, and fouled by the stench of urine. Inside, the marble floors surrounding the sarcophagi of Grant and his wife, Julia Dent Grant, were cracked, and the captions for the photo exhibit contained several errors.

It was a bitter disappointment for Scaturro and an ugly end for the triumphant Union general and two-term president (1869 to 1877) who worked to secure civil rights for formerly enslaved people under the program of Reconstruction. When Grant died in 1885, his

funeral procession in New York drew 1.5 million people, at the time the biggest gathering ever in North America. And in the first two decades after his privately funded monument was dedicated in 1897, Grant's Tomb, as it was known, attracted more visitors than the Statue of Liberty.

Scaturro became a student volunteer and gave tours of the tomb on Grant's birthday, April 27. A double major in history and political science, he wrote a paper reassessing Grant's presidency, which he later expanded into a book called *President Grant Reconsidered*. "The condition of the tomb tracks with Grant's seesawing reputation," says Scaturro, who ascribes the decline to two forces: the narrative of the Lost Cause of the Confederacy, which whitewashed slavery and cast the South as the victim of Northern aggression; and the Dunning School, a white-supremacist reading of history articulated by Columbia professor William A. Dunning 1881CC, 1885GSAS, 1904HON, which discredited Reconstruction and gave cover to Jim Crow. In 1988, Scaturro's faculty adviser, Eric Foner '63CC, '69GSAS, published the Bancroft Prize-winning *Reconstruction: America's*

Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877, which provided a corrective to Dunning and a basis for Scaturro's work on Grant.

"As president, Grant wanted to protect the gains of the Civil War," Scaturro says. "He ensured the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment [which made it illegal to deny the right to vote based on race], established the Department of Justice, and signed the Civil Rights Act of 1875. Tragically, much of this didn't stick. The legal architecture of civil rights was dismantled during Jim Crow. But after the civil-rights movement, which in many ways recovered the principles of Reconstruction, Grant's contributions were newly appreciated."

While a student, Scaturro urged the Park Service to address the shabbiness of the national monument dedicated to the

eighteenth president. He sent memos to his supervisors but got nowhere. Finally, he wrote a blistering report and sent it to everyone from President Bill Clinton and Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt on down. In November 1993, after the local news reported on Scaturro's campaign, the Park Service relieved him of his volunteer duties.

Scaturro fought on. He revived the Grant Monument Association, the group that built the edifice, and invited

Grant's descendants onto the board. Then, on January 2, 1994, the day Scaturro's father died, the *New York Times* published an editorial titled "Dishonor for a Hero President," which hailed Scaturro's efforts. That same year, the association prepared a lawsuit to compel the US to restore the site, and a New York congressional delegation led by Representative Jerrold Nadler '69CC, whose district included the monument, pushed for appropriations.

All of this spurred Congress to find the money. Security at the monument was beefed up, the structure was cleaned, and the plaza was replaced, all in time for the tomb's centennial in 1997.

This spring marks 125 years since the tomb was unveiled, an anniversary that coincides with the bicentennial of Grant's birth. Scaturro, now a lawyer, is working with the US Military Academy at West Point to organize events at the tomb for April 27, including a color guard, speeches, and a wreath-laying ceremony.

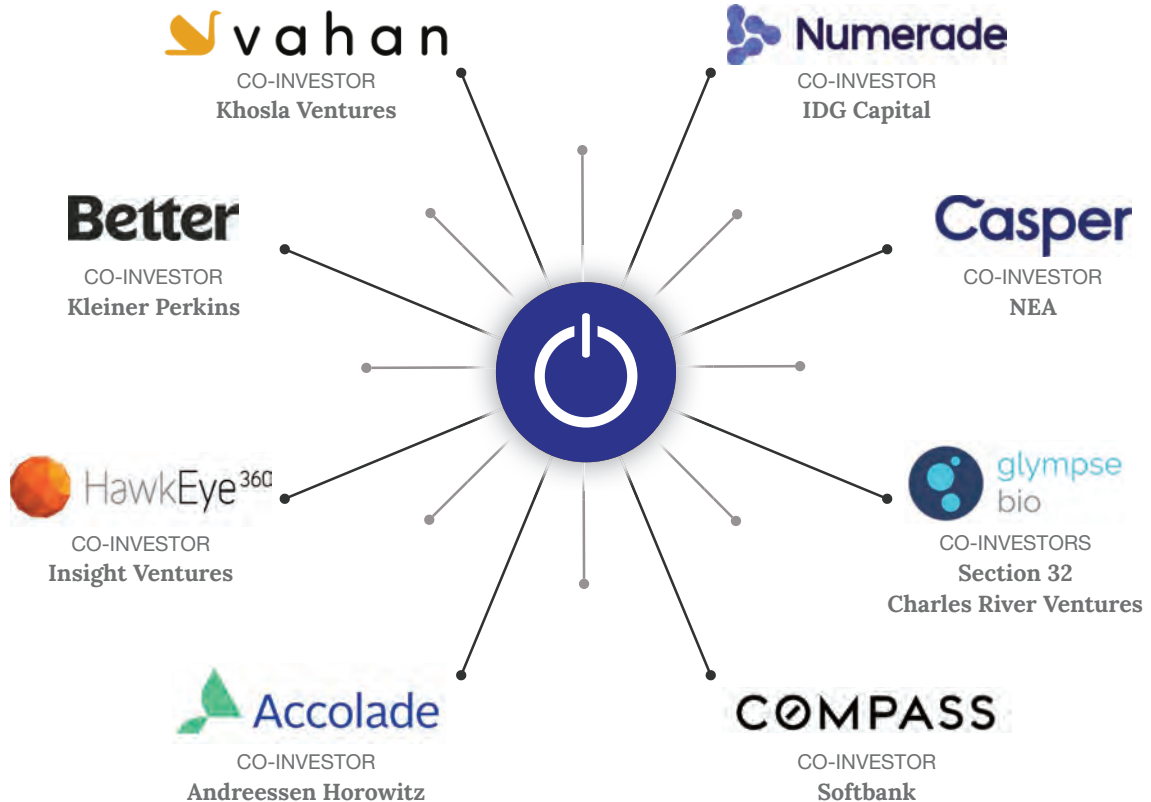
"There are only a few presidents you can call great," Scaturro says, "and I think Grant is one of them." 🍷



Frank Scaturro at the General Grant National Memorial.

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- Colin M. '22CC

