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## Passion for Serving Others

Patricia (Pat) Riley '76NRS began her nursing career devoted to the care of pregnant and postpartum women at Indian Health Service facilities on the Navajo Nation. She went on to spend 20 years, mainly in sub-Saharan Africa, working in global health with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention training nurses and other health professionals in HIV-AIDS treatment and health services and programmatic advances.

Continuing her life's work after retirement, Pat arranged to name the School of Nursing as a beneficiary of her federal retirement plan, which will be used to endow the Gloria Thomas Riley Scholarship Fund in honor of her mother—a gift that will preserve her values of serving others and ensuring access to healthcare and education for underserved communities.



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# FEEDBACK



## ALL THINGS COLUMBIA

Thank you for your Fall 2023 issue, which I read almost cover to cover in my first sitting. I am steeped in Columbia: My father taught there for forty years and was dean of the School of Architecture. I grew up in Columbia housing across from the law school. My mother worked on *The Columbia Encyclopedia*. I walked across the campus to school every day from seventh to tenth grade. My brother graduated from the College of Physicians and Surgeons. I enrolled as a Columbia undergraduate in 1967 and dealt with a campus in upheaval and a student body dealing with the Vietnam War, among many other issues. I did not finish at Columbia, leaving after that first year, but I came back to Columbia Law School (again leaving after one year). This edition of the magazine really held my attention. I especially liked the interview with the new president (“Meet President Shafik”), the article

on crash-test dummies (“Car Safety for Dummies,” Network), and the photographic work of Christopher Payne (“Factory Frames”).

**Keith Klovee-Smith**  
Olympia, WA

## NATURALLY GIFTED

I would like to pass along my admiration for the article by Paul Hond on Black Rock Forest (“A Lab in the Woods,” Fall 2023). I was a 1964–65 advanced science-writing fellow at the journalism school under John Foster Jr. Over the years, I have written for most nature-conservation magazines. I recognize superior writing on the subject when I see it. I especially liked the word picture he painted of the ecosystem at the start of the piece. My hat is off to Paul Hond.

**Ed Ricciuti '65JRN**  
Killingworth, CT

## PRODUCTION HELP

As an alumnus of Columbia College and the School of the Arts whose interest in Columbia was partly spurred by the knowledge

that Richard Rodgers, Oscar Hammerstein, and Lorenz Hart had all matriculated there, I read with interest your profile of three Columbia-associated producers in the Fall 2023 issue (“The Producers”).

I was struck by something that was apparent at the School of the Arts even in the late twentieth century: many are skilled, but those who have the backing of substantial family connections or fortune are usually the ones able to succeed. Taking nothing away from their passion for the theater, it’s important to note that Barbara Whitman would not have been producing a Broadway show in her second year of grad school were it not for her father, who a year earlier donated \$23 million to his alma mater, Syracuse University, to start the Martin J. Whitman School of Management. Similarly, Jill Furman’s barrier to entry was considerably lowered by her father’s having founded the investment boutique Furman Selz and then

## 3 WEB STORIES YOU MIGHT HAVE MISSED



Is Marijuana a Miracle Drug?



In Defense of Diet Drugs



Could AI Mend a Broken Heart?

Read at  
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# FEEDBACK

including her as an associate producer once he began to “dabble” in theater production. As it happens, the only self-made member of the highlighted trio, Hal Luftig, has a production company that is in bankruptcy court, which brings to mind the

adage that a Broadway producer can make a killing but not a living.

Having a safety net of upscale living expenses is an advantage that may not guarantee success, but it certainly makes failure less onerous, as Max Bialystock

and Leo Bloom would gladly attest.

**M. George Stevenson**  
’80CC, ’99SOA

Hastings-on-Hudson, NY

## WORDS MATTER

Your article “Major study shows multivitamins help

prevent memory loss” (Explorations, Fall 2023) was interesting in many ways, but in my opinion the headline was misleading. As the article said, the study found evidence that multivitamins can “slow the pace of age-related memory loss.” This is quite different from preventing memory loss altogether.

**Alan Jaffe ’62BUS**  
Bothell, WA

## SOCIAL SECURITY BENEFITS

In your “Ask an Alum” interview with author Michael Clinton (“How to Fight Self-Imposed Ageism and Energize Your Retirement,” Network, Fall 2023), Clinton says that the concept

### KEY TO ABBREVIATIONS

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

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of retirement “was created in the 1930s along with the Social Security Act to move older people out of the workforce.”

This is both incorrect and unfair to the framers of that program. The Social Security Act, passed in 1935, created a system to rescue working people who were unable to work, in many cases due to the effects of the Great Depression. Its creators were New Deal visionaries who sought to help citizens who were being “left behind.” It included not only insurance for the elderly but also unemployment insurance and aid to dependent children.

Although it is commonplace today to disparage Social Security because the monetary value of its payments has not kept up with inflation, for decades it was a lifesaver for millions of Americans.

**Edward Tabor ’73VPS**  
Bethesda, MD

## STATISTICAL ERROR

The claim that gender discrimination in the design of crash-test dummies “injures and kills thousands of women each year” is extraordinary and not supported by contemporary scientific evidence (“Car Safety for Dummies,” Network, Fall 2023). In crashes of similar severity, the fatality risk for female drivers and passengers was about 17 percent higher than for male drivers and passengers in pre-2000-model vehicles. But this excess female fatality risk has been virtually eliminated in new vehicles due to improved design and safety engineering. It is noteworthy that there is no statistically significant sex difference in the effectiveness of seatbelts in reducing crash-fatality risks. The Mailman School of Public Health is home to a CDC-funded injury-control research center, of which I am the founding director. Specialized training in injury epidemiology and prevention may help bolster Maria Weston Kuhn’s advocacy for car safety.

**Guohua Li**  
Montebello, NY

## THE OTHER BACKSTORY

In your Backstory feature “The Maps That Shook the World” (Fall 2023), you note that “earlier this year, Navy secretary Carlos Del Toro announced that the name of the survey ship *Maury* had been changed to *Marie Tharp*.” Secretary Del Toro’s action resulted from a congressional directive in the 2021 National Defense Authorization Act that military facilities no longer carry names honoring Confederate leaders. Matthew Fontaine Maury was a nineteenth-century US Navy officer and a pioneer of modern oceanography. But when the Civil War began, he resigned from the US Navy and became an officer in the Confederate Navy.



Marie Tharp

As a former lieutenant commander in the Navy Reserve Medical Corps, I feel that replacing Maury’s name with that of the world-renowned twentieth-century Columbia oceanographer Marie Tharp is a satisfying result of the congressional directive.

**Saran Jonas ’56VPS**  
New York, NY

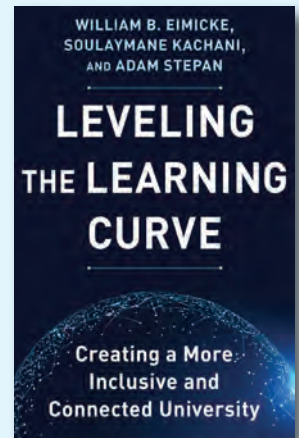
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COMMENTS?**

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Letters may be edited for brevity and clarity.

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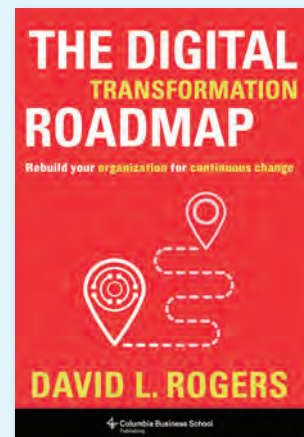
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William B. Eimicke is professor of practice and founding director of the Picker Center for Executive Education at Columbia University’s School of International and Public Affairs.

Soulaymane Kachani is the senior vice provost of Columbia University.

Adam Stepan is the director of Columbia’s Picker Center Digital Education Group.



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—Athina Kanioura, chief strategy and transformation officer, PepsiCo

David L. Rogers is an acclaimed expert on digital transformation and a member of the faculty at Columbia Business School.



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# COLLEGE WALK

NOTES FROM  
116TH STREET  
AND BEYOND



## Safety, Speech, and Community

The University responds to a post-October 7 world

This past fall, the Middle East exploded in a fresh cycle of violence that shocked the global community. In the US, public outrage over the Hamas terror attacks on Israel and the Israeli bombardment and blockade of the Gaza Strip reverberated on college campuses. Passions ran high, rhetoric was charged, and Jewish and Muslim students alike reported harassment and intimidation.

At Columbia, President Minouche Shafik reached out to students, faculty, and staff to express her heartbreak at the human toll of the conflict, assuring community members that their safety and security were paramount. In response to scattered incidents, including the assault of an Israeli student who was posting a flyer about Israeli hostages and the “doxing” of students who had participated in a pro-Palestinian rally (doxing is the malicious public exposure of someone’s identifying information), the administration announced the creation of an antisemitism task force and an anti-doxing resource group. In addition, an online resource hub was set up to support the well-being and safety of students, staff,

and faculty, and to underscore the University policies on behavior and conduct.

The crisis has opened up questions about the role of universities in managing intergroup strife caused by social and political upheavals. This is perhaps nowhere more the case than at Columbia, which has long had one of the most permissive speech policies in the country. This was evident even during President Shafik’s inauguration on Low Plaza on October 4, when several groups of protesters on College Walk chanted throughout the ceremony. Addressing President Shafik, one of the guest speakers, New York City first deputy mayor Sheena Wright ’90CC, ’94LAW remarked, “You will not have a Columbia welcome without protest — it would not be authentic. So get used to it.”

Days later, when the president was faced with one of the biggest challenges to campus comity in generations, she affirmed that the University’s liberal speech tradition was a critical value. “Debate, advocacy, and protest are essential ways for students to address and process political and social turmoil, and we are duty-bound to ensure they can gather and express

themselves,” she wrote to the Columbia community.

Students did express themselves. And amid the noise and the controversies — the protests and counterprotests, the student-group suspensions, the claims and counterclaims — many difficult, frank, and painful conversations were taking place. There was a sense that the University, even in its

turmoil — especially in its turmoil — was fulfilling its role as a living laboratory for the clash of ideas, interests, and perspectives.

Since she took office on July 1, President Shafik has upheld the idea of the University as an institution that is set up to teach students how to think, not what to think. Her priority, she says, is to provide a secure and respectful

environment that fosters teaching, learning, and understanding. Unlike a political organization or an advocacy group, Columbia aims to open minds to “different points of view” and to “create space for our scholars and students to fill with their own moral and intellectual conversations.”

This, President Shafik maintains, is an essential function of the academy.

## The Belafonte Legacy

A neuroscience student honors her late grandfather

In a sun-filled laboratory at the Zuckerman Institute in Manhattanville, amid shelves of beakers and bottles, Sarafina Belafonte, a Columbia College sophomore, takes a break from her work on *Sepia bandensis*, also known as the dwarf cuttlefish, to talk about her grandfather, Harry Belafonte '93HON, who died last year at ninety-six.

Harry Belafonte was born in Harlem and raised there and in Jamaica. He became a megastar in segregation-era America, a Black singer and actor who used his enormous success to advance civil and human rights. In 1956, the year his album *Calypso* became the first-ever LP to sell a million copies, he befriended the young pastor Martin Luther King Jr. and backed him financially. He helped organize the March on Washington and funded the Freedom Rides. On television, he promoted Black artists and viewpoints. For the rest of his life, he spoke out for “the cause.”

“My grandfather was a trailblazer,” says Sarafina,

noting his close ties to the singer, actor, and activist Paul Robeson 1923LAW. “It was from Paul that I learned that the purpose of art is not just to show life as it is but to show life as it should be,” Belafonte once said. Says Sarafina, “My grandpa idolized Robeson.”

Sarafina was born in 2003. She attended preschool at the Hollingworth Center at Teachers College, named after the educator Leta Stetter Hollingworth 1913TC. Hollingworth’s program for exceptional children at the Speyer School (part of Teachers College) in the 1930s inspired Sarafina’s mother, the Danish-born model and singer Malena Belafonte, to cofound the Speyer Legacy School, a K–8 school for gifted children, near Columbus Circle. Sarafina became its first student (“My number was 0001”).

She excelled in academics, especially math, and when she reached high school she enrolled in advanced classes in linear algebra. Then, in her junior year, her interests shifted. Her maternal



Sarafina Belafonte

grandmother, a classical recorder player and music professor, developed a brain tumor. “A botched surgery left my grandma with a six-centimeter hole in her forehead, where you can actually see her brain,” says Sarafina. Her grand-

mother began experiencing hallucinations, and Sarafina “became frustrated that I couldn’t understand what was happening in this physical thing I could see.” Wanting to learn about the brain, she took a neuroscience elective and was hooked.

## COLLEGE WALK

Of course, given her background, she was also immersed in the arts. She had studied dance since age three, and whenever she performed, Grandpa was in the audience, smiling. “He loved to watch us perform and to hear what we were doing. He was always like” — she channels Harry’s hushed rasp — “*What you up to now?*” Sarafina also sang for her grandfather, to his great delight. “We had such a pure, loving relationship. He was able to be there for me and my brother in a way that he couldn’t for his children, when he was being a superstar and social activist. I think he recognized that and was trying to be better for us.”



Harry Belafonte at the 1993 Commencement.

With her varied interests and perfect SAT score, Sarafina got in to Columbia, where she joined the lab of Nobel-winning neuroscientist Richard Axel '67CC. She loves the lab and is fascinated by the cuttlefish, a cephalopod related to the octopus and squid. “They camouflage within milliseconds of seeing the environment,” she explains. “They perceive the world around them and then use their motor neurons to reflect that perception on their skin.”

It’s no stretch to say that her grandfather, too, boldly reflected his perceptions — though in his case, it wasn’t to hide. Quite the opposite, says Sarafina. “He said what he wanted to say. And so his legacy is complicated: for a Black man with that caliber of success, there was no guidebook. He was writing that book, and so not everything was perfect. My grandpa wasn’t the best at knowing how to protect his legacy.”

In 2019, Sarafina’s parents — her father, David Belafonte, is an award-winning TV and music producer — launched, with Grandpa’s blessing, the Belafonte Family Foundation to safeguard that legacy. Its mission includes programs that address food insecurity,

award scholarships, and provide free legal advice to people in underserved communities. Sarafina cherishes her memories of her grandfather — going with him to the movies, sitting with him on the beach in Jamaica — but she is also keenly aware of his impact on the

wider world: the lessons he taught and the example he led.

“My grandpa opened up so many doors for Black artists, but he never separated his career from his activism,” Sarafina says. “He always asked: ‘How can I make sure that we are improving the state of this country and the world?’

“It’s all about the cause,” she adds. “Everybody has to be involved. Everybody has to see the problems, and everybody has to do something about them.” — *Paul Hond*



## 10 Years in Business

If entrepreneurship is about growing new ideas, then Columbia is fertile ground. In the past decade, thousands of students, alumni, and faculty have launched startups in areas from high tech to textiles, turning side hustles into successful businesses. Recently, Columbia Entrepreneurship, Innovation, and Design — a University-wide program that provides training and resources for students and alumni, including two Startup Labs — marked its ten-year anniversary. Its own numbers show an impressive rate of return.


  
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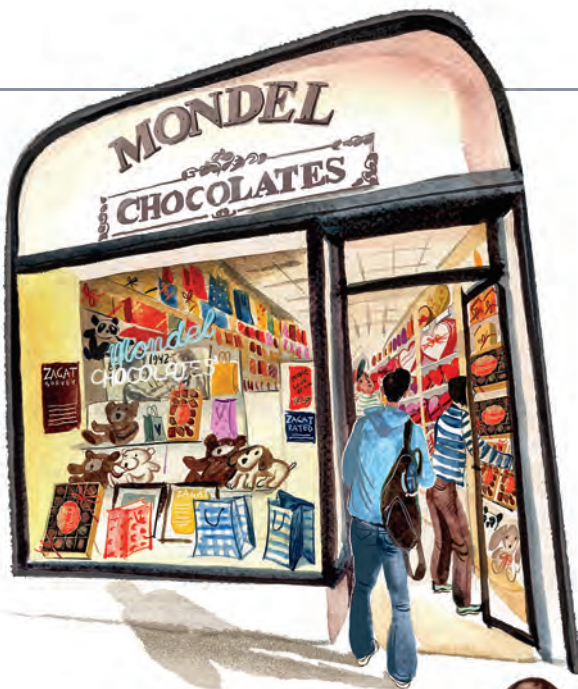
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**50+**  
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## Sweet Hearts

Love is in the air at Mondel Chocolates

Whenever Paula Blat gets out of the subway at West 116th Street on her way to work and sees large white tents set up on campus, she thinks, “Oh, we’re going to be busy.” Whether it’s Alumni Weekend, Homecoming, or Commencement, Paula knows that people will be lined up out the door of Mondel Chocolates, at Broadway and 114th. They will come into the small shop, look around at the stuffed shelves of confections and tchotchkes, the boxes of red, pink, blue, and gold, and the handwritten signs and say, “The place hasn’t changed at all!” They will order the chocolates they fell in love with as students: hazelnut truffles, mint squares, cordial cherries. Some will claim that they were there when Katharine Hepburn, who lived on East 49th Street, came in

to order her usual: pecan turtles, molasses chips, butter crunch, dark-chocolate orange peel, champagne truffles, and dark-chocolate almond bark — now sold as the Hepburn Mix.

Perhaps more than anything, alumni return to Mondel’s for a taste of simpler times. The computer age and the modern world in general have barely permeated the shop or its proprietors. “People love the old-fashioned feeling,” Paula says. This statement is punctuated, as if on cue, by the *ring-a-ling-a-ling* of an old telephone in the back office.

Mondel’s is a mom-and-pop shop in the literal sense, and one of the last of its kind in the neighborhood. It is also one of the oldest. The founder, Carl Mondel, who immigrated to America from Hungary, once stated that he opened the store in 1944, though others say

1943. In the 1970s, Carl’s daughter, Florence, took over the business, and around thirty years ago, Paula and her husband, Jack, looking for something new, answered an ad and came to work at the store. They fell in love with it and bought into the business, becoming partners with Florence. Now that Florence has retired, it’s just the Blats, their customers, and eighty years of history.

On a recent Thursday, while Paula weighed out caramels for a Barnard student,

Jack was in the back office carefully packing orders (someone at Columbia needed fifty boxed assortments for

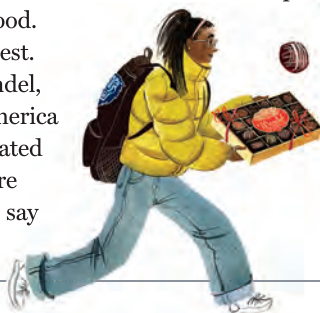
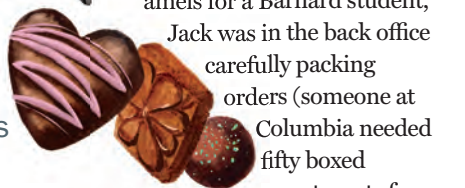
an event). The Blats, who were born in Eastern Europe and live in Brooklyn, are modest. They don’t seek publicity, and when it comes knocking, they peer through the peephole before opening the door. But, as with a raspberry truffle, once you get past their shells, they are all sweetness and delight.

“Chocolate makes people feel good,” says Paula, who has a ready laugh that jingles like shop bells. “It’s interesting: on a rainy day, you think, ‘Oh, it’s gloomy, no one is out,’ and then suddenly we’re so busy — people come in here to cheer themselves up.”

While Mondel’s offers such consolations five days a week, it is a holiday-based business: Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Hanukkah, Valentine’s Day (with the heart-shaped boxes perpetually on the shelves, every day is Valentine’s Day at Mondel’s), Easter, Mother’s Day, Father’s Day. Mondel’s also ships all over the country. This keeps the Blats tending shop most of the year. “The best thing about working here,” says Paula, “is meeting people. And the customers are so grateful. They want *us* to be happy. Many times they say, ‘Please don’t close.’ They really have a panic attack!” Paula laughs. “It’s very gratifying.”

Jack pops out from the back to help Paula at the counter, and the two of them muse on other celebrities who have dropped by. “Lauren Bacall came in here a couple of times when she went to visit Katharine Hepburn,” says Paula. Jack recalls meeting Kirk Douglas shortly before the actor’s death. “He was in a car,” Jack says, “and I brought him some chocolates.” “No, his agent came in,” Paula corrects him. Jack doesn’t argue. He says, “And Douglas wrote us a note that said, ‘Chocolates were great, thank you.’”

But for the Blats, it’s the neighbors — many of them Columbia faculty, staff, students, and graduates — who really sweeten their lives behind the counter. “Everybody comes here,” says Paula. “You really learn about the world, standing in this little store.” — *Paul Hond*



# Lesson in Liquidity

Actor Matt Damon and the fight for clean water

During the recent World Leaders Forum at Columbia, Matt Damon, star of *Good Will Hunting*, *Saving Private Ryan*, and the *Bourne* movie franchise, posed a hypothetical question to an audience in Low Rotunda. “Imagine if we cured cancer tomorrow and in a hundred years, four hundred thousand children were still dying of it.” That, Damon said, is the story with water: the technology to deliver safe drinking water to homes has existed for decades, yet nearly eight hundred million people worldwide lack access to potable water. This includes the more than one thousand small children who die every day from waterborne diseases such as typhoid, cholera, and dysentery —

what Damon called “unconscionable, senseless death.”

Damon was headlining a discussion called “Social Innovation: Sourcing Capital for Global Challenges.” Next to him on the dais was Gary White, his cofounding partner in Water.org, a nonprofit that offers low-interest loans to people seeking to improve their access to water and sanitation. President Minouche Shafik moderated the talk, which centered on the nexus between water, poverty, and capital markets.

White, a civil engineer, began thinking about water in 1984 during a trip to Guatemala, where he saw mothers and children walk past open sewers on their way to fetch contaminated water. He

reasoned that if low-interest loans could be made to households wanting to lay water pipes, the benefits would multiply: borrowers would spend less time trying to get clean water, and they and their children would be healthier and have more time for work or for school.

In 2009, White teamed up with Damon, who had become passionate about water scarcity in 2006 on a visit to rural Zambia. They started a pilot program that used microloans to fund water projects. To date, Water.org has arranged, through its many local financial partners, twelve million loans for projects benefiting some fifty-eight million people, Damon said. Ninety percent of their clients are women, and 98 percent of the loans are paid back.

# Sardinia Cultural Heritage Project

Columbia University’s Italian Academy recently facilitated the loan of a 3000-year-old statue from Mont’e Prama to New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art. Learn about this exciting initiative, as well as other conferences, exhibitions, and a corresponding book published by Columbia University Press.

[italianacademy.columbia.edu](http://italianacademy.columbia.edu)

A digital exhibition on the gems and temples of Tharros



A digital exhibition on the colossal statues of Mont’e Prama



Images: Nicola Castangia; Valentino Sella

Damon contrasted this approach with the “traditional, paternalistic way” of going into an area, building a well, and “saying ‘you’re welcome’” — as opposed to listening to what residents actually want. “Nobody is going to take out a loan for something they don’t want,” he said. Damon discovered that Water.org could help people solve their own problems “by just nudging the market toward these women and getting out of the way.”

nized that we had to put skin in the game,” White said. That meant fundraising from philanthropies and using the money to reduce the risk for microfinance investors. In 2017, Damon and White founded WaterEquity, an asset manager that invests in financial institutions to help them expand their microlending capabilities.

Improving water access would seem to be the province of governments, not of markets, but White and Damon learned that it takes



Matt Damon and President Minouche Shafik

The microfinance industry usually provides funding for entrepreneurs — often those who are shut out from standard banking systems — with the expectation that they will use the capital to grow their small businesses. President Shafik, an economist who once worked in microfinance, noted that Water.org’s model was not business as usual. “Microfinance loans for water?” she said. “But there’s no cash flow. Microfinance is a completely cash-flow-based lending model. How did you persuade [investors] that this would work?”

White conceded that it wasn’t easy, and that when they finally found a willing investor, they were told they needed to front some money of their own. “We recog-

both. “There’s not enough funding among governments to build out the infrastructure in a way to solve the problem, and we do need the private capital markets to come in,” White said. “In most cases, people who live in water poverty aren’t necessarily a charity problem to be solved as much as they are a market to be served.”

For Damon, his water work has made for “an exciting journey,” he said. “I started this like, ‘I’m going to raise money to drill wells.’ Seventeen years later, I’m using donor dollars to de-risk a loan portfolio.” The audience laughed. “I had no idea it would steer me to finance and that that would be the answer.” Call it *Saving Private Equity*.

— Paul Hond

## THE SHORT LIST



**SEE** Hong Kong artist **Angela Su** is known for her cyborg-inspired drawings, films, installations, and human-hair embroidery. Her first solo

exhibition in the Western Hemisphere will be on view at the Wallach Art Gallery from February 2 to March 10. [wallach.columbia.edu](http://wallach.columbia.edu)

**LISTEN** Miller Theatre’s **Composer Portraits** series presents the experimental music of Carola Baukholt on February 8, followed by Amy Williams’s *Richter Textures* on February 22. Composer and percussionist Sarah Hennies closes the series with new works on April 4. [millertheatre.com](http://millertheatre.com)

**PLAN** Starting a new career? Glean expert tips about job searching, networking, and more through the **Columbia Career Coaches Network**, which holds virtual office hours on the second Wednesday of each month at noon. [careercoaches.alumni.columbia.edu](http://careercoaches.alumni.columbia.edu)



**READ** **Columbia Global Reports**, an imprint for timely nonfiction, has several new books planned for early 2024, including *Soul by Soul*, by journalist Adriana Carranca

'18JRN. The book tells the little-known story of Brazilian missionaries in Afghanistan. [globalreports.columbia.edu](http://globalreports.columbia.edu)

**EXPLORE** Adventurous Columbians can embark on unforgettable journeys through the **Alumni Travel Study Program**, which offers guided trips such as to Japan’s Seto Inland Sea from April 16 to April 27 and a circumnavigation of Iceland from June 25 to July 3. [alumni.columbia.edu/content/travel-study-trips](http://alumni.columbia.edu/content/travel-study-trips)

# TO DO SOMETHING GOOD





# FOR THE EARTH

ONE MAN'S QUEST TO TACKLE CLIMATE CHANGE WITH WINE, BAMBOO, AND NEUROBIOLOGY BY DANIEL OBERHAUS

**T**he year was 2004, and Hal Hinkle '76BUS, '13GSAS had decided to plant some trees. Millions of trees.

At fifty-one, Hinkle was winding down a successful career on Wall Street (twenty-two years at Goldman Sachs, then five running a global bond exchange), and he was trying to figure out how to spend his retirement. A lifelong environmentalist, he was captivated by the problem of climate change, an issue that seemed poised to become the defining challenge of the new millennium. Hinkle owned some property in Oregon, and launching an initiative to reforest the area seemed like a great way to give back to the local community while reducing America's carbon footprint.

Hinkle began recruiting volunteers and sponsors for his "million-tree" campaign. With his effervescent charm backed up by a deep concern about the climate crisis, he proved the perfect spokesperson for the project. He visited elementary schools, forged connections with nonprofits, and sought out donors. "People thought this was cool," he remembers. But then someone suggested he speak with a scientist at the Sierra Club, one of the world's largest environmental organizations. He was expecting kudos, but what he got was a dose of reality.

"The scientist basically told me it was the dumbest fucking idea he'd ever heard," Hinkle says with a laugh. The problem with trees, he soon learned, is that they grow too slowly to stop the planet's accelerating march toward "tipping points," thresholds that mark irreversible changes to the earth's environmental systems. "He said if you really care about climate change, this isn't what you should be doing," remembers Hinkle. "It stopped me dead in my tracks."

For Hinkle, the interaction with the Sierra Club taught him an important and humbling lesson. The battle against climate change is largely a race against time. If he wanted to make a difference, he'd have to direct his resources and energy toward more-immediate threats. It was a realization that would shape the next two decades of Hinkle's so-called retirement in ways that were often surprising even to him. Since his aborted attempt at planting millions of trees, Hinkle has launched a nonprofit dedicated to climate-change education and founded an eco-friendly organic vineyard, and he now runs a company creating carbon-negative construction materials. "I don't think I have a lot of chapters left in my life," Hinkle says. "I want to use that time to motivate people to make decisions that support the climate."

**H**inkle is the first to admit that his lifelong commitment to nature is somewhat surprising. The son of a bank teller and a grocery clerk, Hinkle grew up in a modest home in a neighborhood of Los Angeles that had far more concrete than trees. In

the 1960s, when Hinkle was still a kid, environmentalism was in its infancy, and to the extent that anyone spoke about the environment, it was in terms of "conservation." For Hinkle, it was a term ripe with meaning. At home, his parents discouraged any kind of waste. "We had so little," Hinkle remembers. "We were expected to take care of everything, and for me that included the earth."

A first-generation college student, Hinkle ended up following a friend to the University of California, Irvine, where he enrolled as a biochemistry and psychobiology major. During his time there, he read three books that profoundly shaped his perspective on the world. Frances Moore Lappé's *Diet for a Small Planet* led him to embrace a vegetarian diet, and Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* deepened his devotion to the environmentalist movement. But it was the Club of Rome's report *The Limits to Growth* that shook Hinkle to his core. "That scared the bejesus out of me," he says.

Published in 1972, *The Limits to Growth* was the product of a study led by MIT scientists that aimed to determine the consequences of unchecked population and economic expansion on a resource-limited planet. The report's predictions were dire, and though they have proven to be wildly off base, they played a major role in launching the nascent environmental movement into the mainstream.

After graduating from the University of California, Hinkle arrived at Columbia Business School with vague ideas about becoming a hospital administrator. But he hadn't fully decided on a career,

which is how he ended up on a recruiting trip to Goldman Sachs. He was an unlikely prospect for one of Wall Street's most prominent banks. During the visit, he cornered a partner and began questioning what he saw as Goldman's single-minded focus on profit. Didn't these finance guys ever think of anything besides making a buck?

"When I left Goldman after the interview, I thought that not only would I never be invited back, but Columbia might never be invited back either," Hinkle says. "I didn't fit their model. I was brash, I was attacking capitalism, and I didn't get the profit motive."

But rather than dismissing Hinkle, the Goldman partner decided to embrace him. Hinkle was clearly intelligent, if a little unorthodox. The Goldman partner told him the firm was exploring ways to apply the techniques they used for raising capital in the private sector to nonprofits, starting with a ballet company in New York City. After the meeting, Hinkle went to see the ballet, and his perspective shifted. He realized that with the right mindset it was possible to use the tools of capitalism to make positive changes in the world. Within days, Hinkle had a job offer at Goldman.

Hinkle would spend the next twenty-seven years on Wall Street, but his passion for the environment was always close to his heart. He continued to follow a dairy- and meat-free diet, was an early adopter of the Prius — he still drives one to this day — and even visited the Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory to learn more about its climate research. "I was so inspired by the serious research taking place at Columbia and concluded that there was nothing more important to focus on than climate change," he says. By then Hinkle was also beginning to understand the limits of capitalism when it comes to preserving public goods — resources such as clean air or wilderness that can be used by everyone and sold by no one. His years at Goldman had taught him that there's little incentive for profit-oriented individuals and orga-

nizations to bear the cost of preserving public goods, so they are often destroyed through overconsumption, pollution, and neglect. "It's one of capitalism's biggest shortcomings," says Hinkle. "Usually the solution is to get the government involved, because it can tax everyone to support that public good. But now we're in a climate situation that requires a multinational solution, and it's hard to bridge all the differences between countries. Now the question is: are we capable as a species of making a collective decision that saves the earth?"

With this question in mind, Hinkle sold the bond exchange in 2004 and turned his attention to finding ways to counteract the climate crisis that wouldn't entirely depend on flawed market mechanisms or slow government responses. First came the Million Tree Initiative, then after his "reeducation" on that issue, he launched a foundation dedicated to climate education and published a series of reports that he circulated among former Wall Street colleagues, whom he felt had the means to make personal and professional decisions that could contribute to sustainability.

But Hinkle knew that if he wanted to make a serious impact, he'd have to find ways to change the habits of entire populations. He decided to use his foundation to mitigate air pollution in New York City and partnered with two nonprofits: the Environmental Defense Fund and the Allergy and Asthma Network Mothers of Asthmatics. Together they convinced New York's then mayor, Michael Bloomberg, to introduce an anti-idling ordinance.

Despite the success of the anti-idling campaign, the work Hinkle did through his foundation also revealed just how difficult it is to change people's behavior, even when those changes benefit both individuals and society. "I thought of idling as a litmus test," he says. "It costs you nothing, and if you can't bring yourself in your daily life to not idle, then you're not going to fight for the climate. If we don't get people to make decisions that support the climate, then we're not going to solve climate change."

And so Hinkle, forever curious and not one for half measures, decided to study human decision-making. In 2006 he enrolled in the neurobiology and behavior PhD program at the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences. His dissertation focused on how intense exercise changes people's behavioral response to food, and insights from that study would ultimately inform Hinkle's approach to climate action. "In classical economic decision-making models, they assume that the individual makes a rational decision based on their current context," says Hinkle. "What I learned through my PhD is that we have this very complicated and messy decision-making process that might more properly be called a decision-*feeling* process."

Hinkle's new perspective on decision-making helped explain why he hadn't been able to make as much of a difference as he had hoped through education. "You can divide the brain into two main processing units. One makes its decisions incredibly fast, and the other is really slow. We make our decisions principally using the fast system that is focused on the here and now, which doesn't account for the externalities of our decisions in the future. Getting people to consider the longer-term impact of climate change is an incredible challenge."

In 2009, while in the middle of his PhD, Hinkle made the decision to relocate from New York back to California.

With his children fully grown, Hinkle envisioned living somewhere rural. But after more than a dozen trips to look at homes, Hinkle returned to New York City in early autumn feeling dejected. Then his realtor called to tell him about a new property that had just hit the market: a ranch in Sonoma County's Alexander Valley, complete with more than thirty acres of decades-old grapevines.

The vineyard had fallen into disrepair, but Hinkle saw an opportunity to apply his business acumen, his climate ideals, and his new understanding of human decision-making. He believed he could create a vineyard that would be both

profitable and sustainable, and the end result, good organic wine, would appeal to both a consumer's conscience and the pleasure principle.

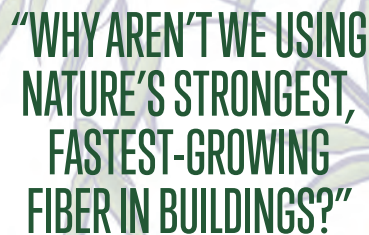
Over the next few years, Hinkle approached the project with scientific rigor. He mapped out the soil composition and water-holding capacity of every square meter of the vineyard, seeking to nourish his rootstock without overtaking the water supply. He changed the orientation of new grapevines to temper their sun exposure and minimize the need for canopy management. He restored the vineyard's creeks and added plants to attract beneficial native insects. Once his vineyard was certified as organic, sustainable, and bee-friendly, Hinkle worked with the California Land Stewardship Institute to create a new vineyard-specific climate-adaptation certification, which requires demonstrating a consistent reduction in greenhouse-gas emissions over time. His was the first vineyard certified as both organic and climate-adapted.

Hinkle's vineyard, Sei Querce, has already influenced the agricultural practices of Sonoma County by demonstrating to neighboring vintners that sustainability doesn't have to come at the expense of profit. Many of them have since changed their operations to be more climate-friendly. But Hinkle knew he could do more. "I wanted my wine to tell a story and get people to think about climate change," Hinkle says. "But that's tiny, it won't move the needle. You can only move the needle if you focus on the big things, like power generation — or buildings."

**A**n opportunity to focus on "the big things" would come sooner than he expected. After getting the vineyard up and running, Hinkle was planning to build a new house, and he asked his builder to recommend green construction materials. Among them was a bamboo-based engineered timber from a small California company called BamCore. Although Hinkle ended up selecting a more fire-resistant product — a prescient choice, since the home would

be hit by wildfires twice in the next three years — Hinkle was fascinated by the concept of using bamboo. "The idea just got stuck in my head," says Hinkle. "Why aren't we using nature's strongest, fastest-growing fiber in buildings?"

Hinkle set up a meeting with the BamCore founders, whom he says "at that point, were just the proverbial two guys in a garage," then spent the next year researching the company's product. He discovered that bamboo is widely used as a construction material throughout the world, except in places like the US and Europe where wood from trees is plentiful. He also learned that buildings account for 40 percent of greenhouse-gas emissions. Most of



**"WHY AREN'T WE USING NATURE'S STRONGEST, FASTEST-GROWING FIBER IN BUILDINGS?"**

these emissions come from operating the building's heating, lighting, and air conditioning, but a substantial portion comes from creating building materials and the process of construction. "All the focus on decarbonizing buildings has been on the impacts of the operations side," Hinkle says. "But what really matters today, because of the urgency of climate change, is the immediate upfront carbon emissions of construction."

Recognizing that using bamboo to frame houses and multistory buildings could dramatically reduce the climate effects of construction, Hinkle offered to make an investment in the business. Within a few years, he joined the company as CEO. Since then, BamCore has blossomed into a bona fide construction company, and its appeal is great. Bamboo's strength means that less material is required to build a home, and since each structure is cut to order, it only takes a handful of workers to assemble the frame. These features save on the costs

of construction, but for Hinkle the real value of bamboo is that the plants absorb carbon from the soil and atmosphere.

"The essential principle is trees are good, but bamboo is better," Hinkle says. "It's nature's fastest-growing and strongest structural fiber; it regrows where you cut it in just one year; the way we use it, it's more thermally efficient than wood; it's strong enough to handle earthquakes; and it's carbon-negative, because when you put it into a building, you're storing all the carbon it has sucked up."

In spring 2023, BamCore was awarded a \$2.2 million grant from the Department of Energy as part of a program to accelerate the development of buildings that store carbon. Since then, Hinkle and his team have started exploring ways to apply their technology to multistory commercial buildings.

With BamCore, Hinkle feels he has at last satisfied two of his new criteria for climate projects. His product creates an immediate and scalable environmental impact, and it offers tangible rewards to the homeowner. Hinkle understands that regulators and the broader construction industry still need to be convinced that engineered bamboo is the future. "The construction industry isn't very innovative and is famously hard to change," he says. What's more, the short-term consequences of a building's emissions footprint, the carbon cost of its construction, is too often ignored by policymakers and industry. "Nobody is required to care about this," he says.

But Hinkle cares, and for him that is motivation enough. His life's work has been a balancing act between profit and nonprofit, rationality and instinct, individual and community, the local and the global. Some people might find these tensions paralyzing, but for Hinkle this is the essence of a life well lived. "There's a saying in the climate community: 'Don't worry about the earth, it will be just fine,'" says Hinkle. "The earth will continue to evolve geologically and biologically, with or without us. But if we care about our human evolution and long-term survival, then we have to figure this out." ♣

# Foundational Wisdom

/// Remarkable buildings  
by alumni architects

Since the establishment of Columbia's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation in 1881, alumni have gone on to create dazzling structures from the National Archives Building to the Empire State Building to the Museum of Modern Art. Today, Columbia architects are building upon that legacy in conceiving a wide range of innovative public and private spaces around the world. "We are proud of the exceptional work that GSAPP graduates do every day across a broad spectrum, including government, academia, and advocacy," says Andrés Jaque, an award-winning architect and the school's dean since 2022. Here are just a few of the visually striking buildings brought to life by GSAPP alumni in recent years.



/// **Adams Street Library** The Adams Street Library — the first new Brooklyn Public Library branch since 1983 — opened in 2021 in a former industrial building in the DUMBO neighborhood. WORKac, cofounded and led by Columbia architecture professors Amale Andraos and Dan Wood '92GSAPP, designed the library's unique features, including the graphic wall treatments, exposed ceiling beams, and retrofuturist children's pavilion.

TOP: ROBIN HILL / COURTESY OF ARCHITECTONICA. BOTTOM: BRUCE DAMONITE



### **Miami Beach Convention Center**

Arquitectonica, a firm cofounded by Laurinda Spear '75GSAPP, has tapped into South Florida's roots in Art Deco and modern design to create a variety of structures in the Miami area. For the 2015–18 renovation of the Miami Beach Convention Center, the firm designed a wave-inspired façade that offers both shade and a beach aesthetic. Outside of Florida, Spear and her team have worked on major projects such as the Bronx Museum of the Arts in New York and Microsoft's Paris offices.



**Taipei Performing Arts Center** Chiaju Lin '01GSAPP, an architect at the international firm OMA, served as the project director for the Taipei Performing Arts Center and also worked on the design team. The building, which opened in 2022 in the Taiwanese capital's bustling Shilin district, contains three separate theaters, including a spherical playhouse seating eight hundred.



/// **The Chamber Church** BUZZ (Büro Ziyu Zhuang), a Chinese-German firm founded and co-led by Ziyu Zhuang '07GSAPP, designed the Chamber Church in Qingdao, China, in 2021 to serve as a religious center and community gathering space. For their ultramodern design, the architects drew upon classic church features — arches, nave, spire, rose window — to conceive a structure that feels both traditional and transgressive.



/// **Women's Opportunity Center** Sharon Davis Design, a firm led by architect Sharon Davis '06GSAPP, designed the Women's Opportunity Center in Kayonza, Rwanda, in collaboration with the nonprofit Women for Women International. The complex, completed in 2013, promotes economic stability by providing a space where local women can farm, sell goods, and develop profitable skills. In designing the center, whose seventeen pavilions are inspired by the region's traditional woven-reed homes, the architects chose perforated clay-brick walls to provide natural cooling and corrugated roof-tops to collect potable rainwater.

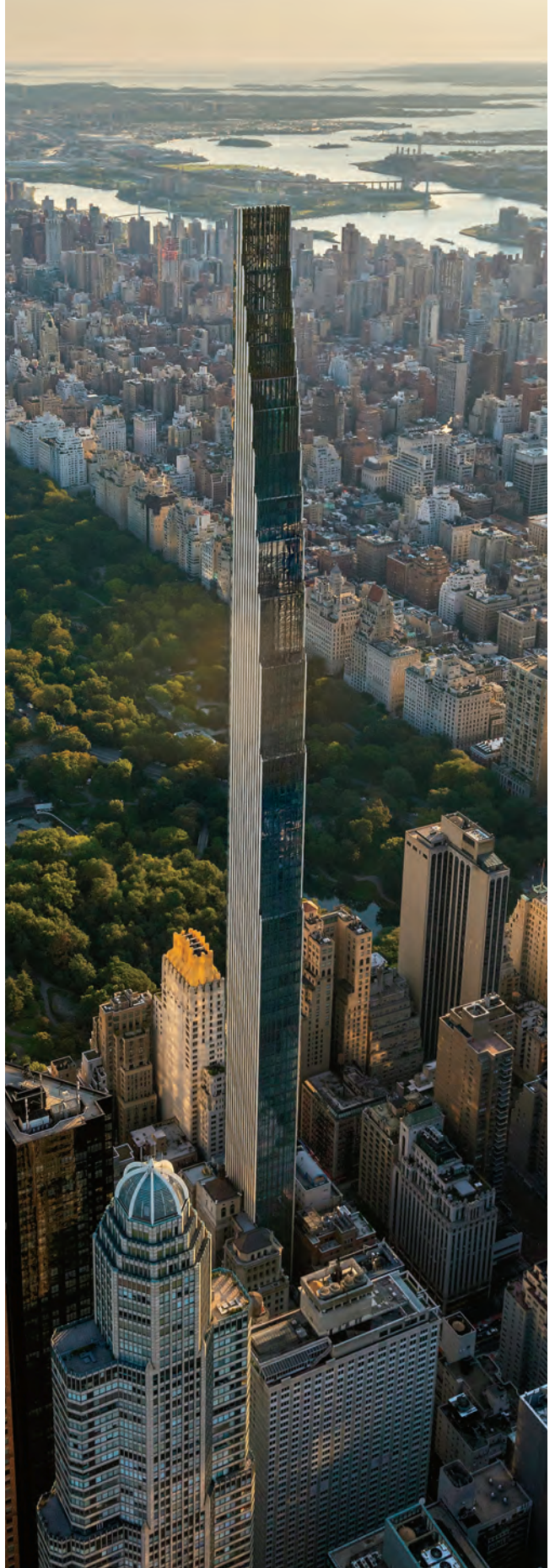




/// **Space K Seoul Museum** Minsuk Cho '92GSAPP, founder of the firm Mass Studies, is known for his cutting-edge commercial and public buildings in South Korea. For the Space K Seoul museum, completed in 2020, Cho integrated the low-lying gallery building into a surrounding park and incorporated a pedestrian bridge that leads to a plant-covered rooftop.



**The Steinway Tower** With a width-to-height ratio of 1:24, it's no wonder that the Steinway Tower at 111 West 57th Street is the world's skinniest skyscraper. The luxury condo building, completed in 2021, was designed by SHoP Architects, a firm founded by Gregg Pasquarelli '94GSAPP, Kim Holden '94GSAPP, William Sharples '94GSAPP, Coren Sharples '94GSAPP, and Christopher Sharples '90GSAPP. (The Beaux Arts firm Warren and Wetmore, cofounded by former Columbia student Whitney Warren, designed the original Steinway Hall at the tower's base.) SHoP's other high-profile projects include the Brooklyn Tower, the tallest building in Brooklyn as of 2022.



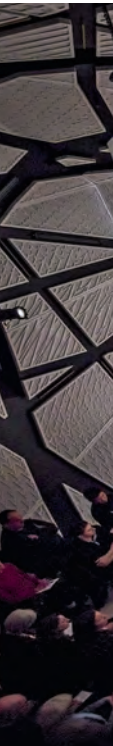


### **Hyundai Card Music Library**

Korean architect Moongyu Choi '91GSAPP designed the striking Hyundai Card Music Library in Seoul, which holds thousands of records — most of them vinyl, some of them rare — and a vast collection of books and magazines. At the library, which opened in 2015, holders of Hyundai credit cards (issued by a subsidiary of the car company) and their guests can listen to music, practice and record their own tracks in soundproof studios, and attend live performances in an underground concert hall.



**US Embassy in Mozambique** Several years ago, the US Department of State selected Allied Works, an architecture firm based in Portland, Oregon, founded and led by Brad Cloepfil '85GSAPP, to design a new campus for its embassy in Maputo, Mozambique. The 180,000-square-foot project, which was completed in 2021 and received a LEED Gold certification for sustainable design, features an exterior “veil” to shield the building from solar heat and to keep energy consumption low.





OPPOSITE TOP: NAMGOONG SUN; OPPOSITE BOTTOM: ALLIED WORKS / YGH ARCHITECTURE / PHOTO BY JEREMY BITTERMANN;  
TOP: IWAN BAAH; BOTTOM: CHRIS LEE



/// **Blue Dream** This seaside house on the rolling dunes of East Hampton, New York, is the creation of Diller Scofidio + Renfro, a firm led by Elizabeth Diller, Ricardo Scofidio '60GSAPP, Charles Renfro '94GSAPP, and Benjamin Gilmer. The otherworldly summer home, which was commissioned by philanthropists Julia and Robert Taubman and completed in 2017, gets its name, Blue Dream, from a strain of marijuana favored by Julia's friend Elmore Leonard. Renfro, whose firm also designed Columbia Business School's Kravis and David Geffen Halls, has stated that the building is the result of a conscious effort to bring mid-century beach modernism into the twenty-first century.



/// **National Sawdust** Bureau V, a firm founded by Peter Zuspan '01CC, '05GSAPP, Stella Lee '00CC, '05GSAPP, and Laura Trevino '07GSAPP, played a key role in transforming the century-old National Sawdust Co. factory in Brooklyn's Williamsburg neighborhood into a music venue. The architects' additions include a performance space, a neon-lit lobby, and murals adorning the industrial exterior. Since opening in 2015, the venue has showcased a wide range of notable artists including Yo-Yo Ma, Philip Glass, and Nico Muhly '03CC. 🎵



# THE HUMAN ACROSS THE TABLE

At the School of International and Public Affairs, students learn that diplomacy isn't just about standing up for your values and interests. It's also about sitting down to listen.

By Paul Hond

Illustration by Ellen Weinstein



On a Wednesday afternoon this past September, more than 350 students, having passed their required Secret Service background checks and charged their smartphones for picture-taking, filed into Altschul Auditorium in the International Affairs Building with something more than the usual excitement that accompanies the first day of class. Chosen from eight hundred applicants from the School of International and Public Affairs, Columbia College, Barnard College, and the School of General Studies, these future diplomats, policymakers, intelligence analysts, foreign-service officers, and civic leaders had come to attend the most talked-about course of the year. As the auditorium filled up, the students opened their laptops but kept their eyes expectantly on the stage, which held twin lecterns and a couple of stylish white chairs.

The course, called Inside the Situation Room, would be taught by two Columbia professors: Keren Yarhi-Milo '03GS, the dean of SIPA and an expert in political psychology and international security, and Hillary Rodham Clinton '22HON, a former first lady, US senator, and US secretary of state, who joined SIPA last year as a professor of practice. Yarhi-Milo and Clinton had worked closely over the summer, planning lessons that would take students inside the black box of crisis decision-making at the highest levels of government, from the pursuit of Osama bin Laden to nuclear negotiations with Iran. And given that day's charged headlines — Russia's war on Ukraine, China's military exercises off Taiwan, North Korea's missile tests, a speakerless House, and more — the class couldn't help but be timely.

Shortly after 2:00 p.m., Yarhi-Milo and Clinton walked onto the stage and the room erupted in applause ("It's not normal for the students to applaud when the professors enter the classroom," Yarhi-Milo said later, "and I'm under no illusion that they're clapping for me"). But just beneath the heady atmosphere of celebrity was a sense of gravity about the geopolitical perils of the moment, unfolding in an age of climate disaster, rising autocracy, intense partisanship, and nuclear threat. "Every year, I teach a version of this

class,” Yarhi-Milo said in her opening remarks, “and it always feels like, ‘This is the best year to teach a class on foreign policy.’” That drew knowing chuckles. There are plenty of foreign-policy crises out there, she said, and they often serve as useful examples of the theories discussed in the class.

Yarhi-Milo, who came to SIPA in 2019 after a decade at Princeton, studies how leaders make decisions. Her work draws on insights from behavioral economics, psychology, game theory, and history. But that afternoon she confessed to her own limitations as a scholar: “I get to this point where I say, ‘Well, that’s as much as I can tell you, because I was not in the room’ ... So we are extremely fortunate to have somebody who *was* in the room, making those decisions, to be with us and talk through the tradeoffs, the process, the different considerations that came into each and every decision.”

As secretary of state under President Barack Obama ’83CC, Clinton had sat down in rooms from Beijing to Baghdad, Kinshasa to Kabul, Moscow to Manila,

public pressure, complicate the effort to assess the intentions of your counterpart across the table.

Clinton gave a salient example: the Russian military buildup on the Ukrainian border that preceded the invasion of February 2022. Some decision-makers had fallen into what Clinton called the “rationality trap,” in which they considered this to be mere saber-rattling, since it would be irrational for Putin to launch an unprovoked attack. “There was so much disbelief: it’s 2022, why on earth would Russia invade Ukraine? It made no rational sense.” It was only the Biden administration’s “unprecedented decision” to declassify intelligence about Russian troop movements and show it to allies, said Clinton, that proved to the Ukrainians and to NATO that “the irrational may well happen.”

Both Clinton and Yarhi-Milo are avid students of modern US diplomacy, and their combined expertise — Yarhi-Milo discusses the various theories of international relations, and Clinton illustrates them with historical examples, some of

interpret threats and behavior (and which led to a Nobel Prize); and Robert Jervis, a longtime Columbia professor and towering political scientist who put the personal perceptions of individual leaders at the heart of foreign relations, influencing a generation of scholars, including Yarhi-Milo.

Clinton, meanwhile, having headed the State Department from 2009 to 2013, could speak intimately about high-pressure situations in which life-and-death decisions had to be made, and fast. As the syllabus notes, the Situation Room “metaphorically travels with policymakers as they encounter different kinds of crises,” whether military, political, diplomatic, or humanitarian. The literal Situation Room, located in the West Wing, was created in 1961 to funnel intelligence directly to the White House. That’s where Clinton was on May 1, 2011, during the US Navy SEAL raid to kill Osama bin Laden.

“I was part of the small group that was analyzing the intelligence and then had the responsibility of making a recommendation to President Obama,” Clinton told the class. “We had information. Did we have the *right* information? Did we have *enough* information?” To find out, they tasked two teams in the intelligence community with assessing the data and were told that there was a 40 to 60 percent chance that a man they had spotted in bin Laden’s compound was bin Laden. “Is 40 percent enough to do something?” Clinton asked, giving a real taste of the stakes. “Is 60 percent enough to do something?”

These were the kinds of problems that she wanted students to think hard about. Ultimately, Obama made the decision to go ahead: the raid took forty minutes, bin Laden was shot and killed in a firefight, and there were no US casualties. But today, Clinton warned, deepfake artificial intelligence has added more layers of potential deception to the hunt for accurate data, taking disinformation campaigns, she said, “to an astronomical new level of difficulty.”

And then there is the problem of subjectivity — the idiosyncratic psychologies of human beings that inform crisis deci-

**“You are going to think really hard about how leaders make decisions,” Clinton told the class. “What were the alternatives? What information was he or she given?”**

São Paulo to Seoul. But one room she hadn’t been in for about fifty years was the classroom. Yet it was immediately evident from her ease and command at the lectern that her decades in politics had prepared her well for the professoriate (Yarhi-Milo calls her “a natural”).

“You are going to think really hard about how leaders make decisions,” Clinton told the class. “What were the alternatives? What information was he or she given? How were other factors outside the so-called Situation Room at work in influencing not only the leader but the people *around* the leader, who may have had their own agendas?” Those other factors, such as individual psychology, personal biases, political calculations, bureaucratic limitations, and

them firsthand — gives students a rare portal into world events. In the first class alone, they touched on the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Suez Crisis, the Six-Day War, the Yom Kippur War, the Iran nuclear agreement, the Paris climate agreement, and the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. They introduced students to such thinkers as Thomas Schelling, a leading exponent of coercion theory, which examines military threats as ways to deter or compel another state’s actions; the psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, whose 1979 paper “Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision Under Risk” posited that people feel the pain of losses more intensely than the pleasure of equal gains, an insight that reshaped how foreign-policy analysts

sion-making. Students are encouraged to wrestle with complexity and deploy empathy and imagination in order to transport themselves, as Yarhi-Milo said, “into the shoes of the leaders — looking at the situation from their perspective, with the information they had.” The focus here is on process, not outcome: “This is not,” she emphasized, “a class about who got it right or wrong.”

Yarhi-Milo grew up in Holon, Israel, just south of Tel Aviv, in a region where issues of security and diplomacy are part of daily life. In 1993, the year she turned fifteen, three things happened that would shape her future. First, in January, the new US president, Bill Clinton, appointed Madeleine Albright ’76GSAS, ’95HON to be ambassador to the UN. Second, that same month, a secret back-channel meeting between two Israeli professors and three officials of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) took place in Oslo, Norway — negotiations that would culminate that September at the White House, where President Clinton, Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin, and PLO chairman Yasser Arafat would sign the Oslo Accords, which granted self-government to Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. “That was the period that I became very interested in diplomacy and thinking about international relations in a different way, beyond what was happening in Israel or in the Middle East,” Yarhi-Milo says. “I read a lot about US foreign policy.” Third, she visited New York with her mother, who took her to see the Columbia campus. Knowing that Ambassador Albright had a Columbia degree, Yarhi-Milo grabbed a course catalog and vowed to return there someday as a student. “That was the dream,” she says.

By the time Albright was confirmed as secretary of state in 1997, becoming, at that point, the highest-ranking woman ever in US government, Yarhi-Milo was fulfilling her mandatory service in the Israel Defense Forces, where she worked in intelligence with a focus on the peace

process. After her service, she went to New York for an internship with the Israeli mission to the United Nations. There she met her future husband, Ariel Milo ’03GS, who was then a student at Columbia’s School of General Studies. Yarhi-Milo was thrilled to learn that Columbia had an undergraduate college for nontraditional students who had spent their post-high-school years in the military. She met with then GS dean Peter Awn — a Harvard PhD in Islamic religion and the son of Lebanese Christian immigrants — and they hit

published the acclaimed books *Knowing the Adversary: Leaders, Intelligence, and Assessment of Intentions in International Relations* and *Who Fights for Reputation: The Psychology of Leaders in International Conflict*. As a tenured woman professor in international relations at Princeton, she was lavished with offers. But everyone knew what she was waiting for.

“When Columbia called, I said, ‘Absolutely,’” Yarhi-Milo says. “This is my home. There’s no other place.” She joined the political-science department and



Professor Hillary Clinton and SIPA dean Keren Yarhi-Milo take questions during their class.

it off, talking in depth about religion and politics. Yarhi-Milo had found her intellectual home.

At GS, she took a class with Robert Jervis, whose groundbreaking 1976 book *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* looked at how decision-makers draw inferences from information — especially information that contradicts their views. “Political science is largely about finding patterns, identifying key variables that produce those patterns, and applying a theory that can explain the patterns and maybe even predict them,” Yarhi-Milo says. “But it’s also about the human factor — the psychology of leaders. That’s the part that I find most fascinating.”

After getting her PhD from the University of Pennsylvania, Yarhi-Milo became a professor at Princeton and

SIPA in 2019, briefly reuniting, this time as colleagues, with her mentor Jervis, who died in 2021. The following year, Columbia President Lee C. Bollinger ’71LAW, ’02HON, nearing the end of his twenty-one-year presidency, appointed Yarhi-Milo dean of SIPA.

Bollinger was also instrumental in bringing the former secretary of state, whom he’d known for years, to Columbia. One day in late 2022, he hosted an event for Clinton at the President’s House and introduced her to a number of deans. The last dean she met was Yarhi-Milo. The two women clicked. For one thing, Clinton had read Yarhi-Milo’s work and found that it rang true to her own experience in the field. “We started this back-and-forth,” says Yarhi-Milo, “and everybody in the room was just looking at us, wondering, ‘What’s going on there?’”

“When we met,” says Clinton, “we immediately connected. We saw these massive challenges in the world and talked about the ways we could design an institute to address them.” The conversation excited Clinton, and she says Yarhi-Milo played a big role in drawing her to Columbia. Another major factor was location. “New York is home to the United Nations and close to many world-class academic centers,” Clinton says. “This was a chance to give fellows and students direct involvement in global policymaking. That connectivity really appealed to me.”

Now, with half a century of domestic and global political experience to her name, Clinton, in partnership with Yarhi-Milo, jumped straight into the dream project they had talked about that day at the President’s House. Working closely and intensely, they fused their talents to create the nonpartisan Institute of Global Politics (IGP), a hub where scholars and practitioners would produce work to address real-world problems in domestic and foreign relations — work that they could get into the hands of policymakers. During her years in government, Clinton found that leaders had

tured panel discussions with scholars, diplomats, politicians, journalists, and organizational leaders, including Nobel Prize-winning Columbia economist Joseph Stiglitz, President Minouche Shafik, former secretary of the treasury and current SIPA professor Jack Lew (now US ambassador to Israel), Columbia law professor Timothy Wu, New York governor Kathy Hochul (a Democrat), former Maryland governor Larry Hogan (a Republican), US ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield, Nobel Peace Prize-winning journalist and IGP fellow Maria Ressa, and former US ambassador to Ukraine and IGP fellow Marie Yovanovitch, as well as a one-on-one conversation between Clinton and former New Zealand prime minister Jacinda Ardern. The panels addressed the global economy, artificial intelligence, the modeling of respectful, across-the-aisle discourse, and, not least, the ways women shape diplomacy.

“Women are disproportionately affected by so many of our global challenges, from the effects of climate change to gendered violence in conflict zones,” Clinton says. “They are also underrepresented in the rooms where people purport to try and solve these challenges, whether it be the halls of government or academia. Yet many of the most visionary responses to climate change are being implemented by women. Women are contributing to peace processes and national security. So, quite simply, to achieve our mission to effect change, we must include women every step of the way.”

At the summit, women diplomats enumerated their attributes. “Women have superpowers: one is listening, and one is compassion,” said Yovanovitch, who as ambassador to Ukraine testified before Congress during President Donald Trump’s first impeachment over his attempted extortion of Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky. She also pointed to the “really superb work ethic” that women bring to the Foreign Service. “We have to work twice as hard in order to get to where we need to go,” she said,



An IGP panel features (from left) journalist Erin Haines, Debora Cahn (creator of *The Diplomat*), Henrietta Fore (former executive director of UNICEF), and diplomats A. Elizabeth Jones, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, and Marie Yovanovitch.

In January 2023, Bollinger announced that Clinton would join the faculty of SIPA.

The academy has long been a common starting and landing place for State Department heads. Condoleezza Rice, secretary of state under George W. Bush, teaches at Stanford. George Shultz ’01HON (Ronald Reagan) taught economics at MIT. Henry Kissinger (Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford) taught at Harvard. Dean Rusk ’63HON (John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson) was the dean of faculty at Mills College, in Oakland, before he became secretary of state and afterward joined the law faculty at the University of Georgia. Madeleine Albright taught at Georgetown before her service and at Columbia after. And Clinton herself had taught at the University of Arkansas School of Law in the mid-1970s.

little access to the latest research and ideas from academia. There was no real policy pipeline between the classroom and the Situation Room. She wanted to change that.

Yarhi-Milo calls the IGP “the living embodiment of SIPA’s mission.” She and Clinton assembled, in cooperation with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, a cohort of fourteen Carnegie Distinguished Fellows (among them: Stacey Abrams, voting-rights activist and former Georgia House minority leader; Henrietta Fore, former executive director of UNICEF; Frank Mugisha, Ugandan LGBTQ+ advocate; and John Sullivan ’85LAW, former deputy secretary of state) to meet with SIPA students and develop policy proposals with faculty across the University.

The IGP held its inaugural summit on October 3, 2023. The program fea-

“and we don’t get the same benefit of the doubt, even today.”

Another panelist, the prominent diplomat A. Elizabeth Jones, said that women “make the Foreign Service a better place. We have to listen, ask a lot of questions, have to figure out what’s going on with the people we’re talking to in order to understand where they’re coming from, so we can formulate our advocacy needs in ways that meet their needs and wants. We can’t go in and harangue and shake our finger — that’s not going to change behavior.”

Yarhi-Milo expanded on that. “When polarization infects our political discourse and corrodes our ability to enact meaningful policy, when future leaders have been allowed to cluster in silos instead of being exposed to new ideas, when the space to talk about policy, including foreign policy, is becoming narrower and narrower, leading to dangerous group-think, we need an entirely new approach,” she said. “For our students to become effective leaders, we have to teach them not how to articulate their own beliefs but how to listen to others.”

**F**our days after the IGP summit, on October 7, Hamas militants entered Israel, killed some 1,200 Israelis, and kidnapped more than two hundred people. This triggered devastating Israeli attacks on Gaza, which touched off a humanitarian disaster and angry demonstrations around the world. Here was a decades-long struggle whose resolution had eluded every diplomatic overture ever made.

The following Wednesday, the chatter in the Altschul Auditorium was noticeably louder. The violence had exposed profound divisions on campus, and some of that tension had seeped into a lecture hall filled with the world’s future policymakers and peacemakers. Yarhi-Milo had foretold that world events might merge with the course material, though no one could have anticipated anything like this.

The dean came out and faced the class. Though deeply shaken by events, she remained composed and

measured, acknowledging the attack and the retaliatory strikes and the suffering on all sides. She urged students to exercise empathy and compassion in their interactions with each other and reaffirmed SIPA’s role as a policy school whose job in a crisis of this magnitude was to produce real-time analysis and foster conversations “that are civil and respectful and professional.”

After the lecture, which dealt with the concepts of reputation and credibility among leaders and countries, Yarhi-Milo

**“To achieve our mission to effect change, we must include women every step of the way.”**

allotted extra time for students to ask questions, and here some of the day’s emotions inevitably surfaced. Students from various backgrounds complained of double standards and bias in the way the conflict was being judged. In the end, it was Clinton who got the last word. “The empathy that Keren talked about is needed now more than ever,” she told the class. “It doesn’t mean you agree with someone, but it does mean that at least you hear them out and do the best you can to try to find some common point of humanity.

“That’s what we are hoping will be part of the response of people here at SIPA, which is the largest policy school in the US, the most diverse, the most international. If *we* can’t figure out how to have respectful conversations that include disagreement, but also to practice empathy, what hope do we have for the rest of the world?”

As the worldwide protests over the war in Gaza continued through the semester, Inside the Situation Room proceeded on track and on schedule, covering such urgent geopolitical issues as intervention (what factors influence the choice of whether to intervene in a crisis?), red lines and credibility (what happens when a leader fails to back up a promise or a threat?), the risk factors of clandestine missions, the role and

impact of women on peacemaking and national security, intelligence failures (featuring a guest lecture from SIPA adjunct professor Peter Clement, a former CIA senior official), and humanitarian crises, including the one unfolding in real time in Gaza.

In addition, the IGP held webinars, conversations, and interviews that addressed not just the Middle East but also international human rights, cybersecurity, and — a recurring theme at IGP — the search for common ground

in politics, which begins with the recognition of a shared humanity. In a time of “radical uncertainty,” says Yarhi-Milo, the central task for world leaders must be “to build resilience and optimism.”

And while optimism may be in short supply for many of us, it is, as Yarhi-Milo and Clinton make clear, the precondition for conducting diplomacy — and for teaching it.

“I often borrow a phrase from my late friend Madeleine Albright and say that I’m an optimist who worries a lot,” Clinton says. “I come to teach at Columbia every week, and I talk to students who are trying to make a better world, who are energetic and smart and compassionate. And I think we owe it to them not to give in to hopelessness.

“So I remain optimistic, because to do otherwise would be to give up on the chance, every day, to help even one woman access health care, to send even one girl to school in a place where only boys have access to education, or to lay one brick in a foundation of diplomacy that ends a conflict. We keep moving forward because that’s what we owe those who did it before us and who will after us.” 📖

*The course Inside the Situation Room will be available for purchase online in spring 2024, with all proceeds going toward SIPA financial aid. Visit [plus.columbia.edu](https://plus.columbia.edu).*

# The Bestseller

How did a law student become a mega-successful writer, television host, presidential confidant, and philanthropist? Brad Meltzer '96LAW says he owes it all to the power of stories. *By Rebecca Shapiro*

There's a small square logo in the upper left-hand corner of each of Brad Meltzer's popular children's books with a big message: "Ordinary People Change the World." The adage befits the series, a group of charmingly illustrated biographies of inspirational figures, from Amelia Earhart to Jackie Robinson to Mister Rogers. But Meltzer '96LAW argues that the motto is a through line in his entire body of work. It could just as easily be applied to his thrillers, which regularly top the *New York Times* bestseller list and often feature ordinary folks who manage to uncover some of the government's darkest secrets and save America from total collapse. Or to his nonfiction, a series that focuses on little-known conspiracies that might have changed the course of history, had it not been for the heroic interventions of people we've likely never heard of. It might even apply to Meltzer himself, once a scrappy

kid from Brooklyn, today someone who has not only met every president since George H. W. Bush but was even recruited by the Department of Homeland Security to help combat terrorism.

Meltzer, an enormously successful author across a variety of genres, is one of the only writers to hit the bestseller lists in fiction, nonfiction, children's literature, advice, and comic books. He has hosted two television shows and created another, and his TED talks on storytelling have garnered over three hundred thousand views. With audiences both vast and influential, Meltzer has tried to use that power for good — supporting dozens of charities, making a lifelong commitment to child literacy, and even going to extraordinary lengths to do noble deeds, like recovering a long-lost artifact from Ground Zero a decade after 9/11. If ordinary people change the world, Brad Meltzer tries hard every day to be one of them.





Meltzer grew up in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn — “the part that hasn’t been gentrified yet” — in a house with no books. “The only thing in our house with words was the *National Enquirer*,” he says. His father was in the “schmatte” business — Yiddish for ladies’ house-dresses. To make a little extra money, he also worked in a greeting-card store under Penn Station. Sometimes he would come home from the store with comic books, which is what Meltzer remembers reading.

“But my grandmother had this magical thing called a library card,” Meltzer says, “and the librarian took me to the children’s section and told me that it was my section. All these beautiful shelves of books, and they were all for me. That was the day my world got bigger.”

Meltzer remembers falling in love with Judy Blume — he read *Superfudge* first and then *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret*, an unlikely pick for a preteen boy. “At first, I just wanted to know how girls worked,” he says. “But that book ended up teaching me one of the greatest lessons in life — that you have to love yourself for who you are.” Then the librarian gave him Agatha Christie’s *The Murder at the Vicarage*, which ended up sparking a lifelong love of mysteries and thrillers.

“I didn’t know what a vicarage was. In fact, I still don’t. All I cared about was that there was a dead body on those pages. I wanted to know everything about it. How did it get there? Why? And most importantly ... whodunit?” Meltzer says. “I’ve been asking that question ever since. Agatha Christie taught me that stories aren’t about what *did* happen. They’re about what *could* happen.”

When Meltzer’s father was thirty-nine years old, he lost his job, which was catastrophic for a family already skating on thin ice. Unable to keep their house, the family relocated from Brooklyn to Florida, where Meltzer’s grandmother had previously moved. The whole family squeezed into her one-bedroom apartment. “He billed it as this big adventure, this big game,” Meltzer says. “It wasn’t a

game. We genuinely lost everything. We were one step away from homelessness.”

Meltzer was about to start high school, and his grandmother used a fake address to get him into a school in a better neighborhood. There a teacher ended up changing the trajectory of his life. “There was an English teacher named Sheila Spicer who told me for



Meltzer at his Columbia Law School graduation.

the first time that I could write. She honestly was the first person that ever told me that I was good at something,” Meltzer says. “A decade later, when my first novel was published, I came back and handed her a copy of the book and told her that it was because of her.”

Not only did Spicer believe in Meltzer, boosting his confidence when no one else had, but she also paved the way for him academically, setting him on the honors track that would prepare him to go on to a rigorous university. “I honestly thought that after you graduated high school, you just got a job. That’s what life was,” Meltzer says. “College wasn’t even a dream before her.”

Meltzer’s family only had enough money for him to submit one college application, and he says he picked the University of Michigan on a whim. “I think it was literally that I liked the color of their T-shirts,” he says. “But then I was committed. It felt like something I was doing not just for me but for my whole family. If I hadn’t gotten in, I would have just tried again the next year.” But Meltzer did get in,

and he says that studying history as an undergraduate helped him blossom intellectually and gave him a foundation for the thorough research that he’s still known for today.

Meltzer graduated in 1992 and moved to Boston, where a mentor had promised him a corporate job, which would help him put a dent in his student loans. But the week he arrived, he learned that the mentor had left the company and the job had fallen through. With time to kill and what he thought was a good idea bouncing around his head, Meltzer figured he’d use the year to write a novel. “I thought, everyone has one good story in them,” he says. “Maybe this was mine.”

While he worked on the novel, he decided to apply to Columbia Law School, where his high-school girlfriend, now wife, Cori Flam Meltzer ’95LAW, had just started her first year. He was called in for an interview with James Milligan ’83TC, then dean of admissions. “All I talked about was books and movies. I thought I blew it,” Meltzer says. “But I quickly learned that Columbia isn’t just a factory feeding into law firms. They want people who think a little differently. And I got in.”

The next fall, as Meltzer began law school, he was putting the finishing touches on his first novel, *Fraternity*. “So of course as soon as I got to campus, I started looking for free legal advice,” he says. Meltzer asked faculty member Jane Ginsburg for help copyrighting his manuscript, which “I like to say is a little like asking the head of the Treasury Department for help doing your taxes,” he says. She became a trusted mentor, offering him useful advice as well as introducing him to contacts who eventually helped him get his first literary agent.

He says that his professors were universally supportive of his literary career, even on the most practical level. When Meltzer was ready to start sending out his five-hundred-page manuscript to agents, he didn’t have the money to make the photocopies. So dean of students Marcia Sells ’81BC, ’84LAW made the copies for him.

Despite all Meltzer's efforts, his first novel never found a publisher — he ended up getting twenty-four rejection letters. "Which is actually pretty impressive, because there were only twenty publishers," Meltzer says. "So that meant some publishers actually rejected it twice." But the week that the twenty-fourth rejection letter arrived in the mail, Meltzer was sitting in David Leebron's torts class and found that his mind was wandering. "I wrote down the words 'Supreme Court' and 'clerk' and 'book idea,'" he says.

Intrigued by the idea of Supreme Court clerks — young people who suddenly

Spicer had given him in high school: encouragement. That he got from Kellis Parker — Columbia's first Black law professor — who taught a class called Jazz and the Law. Meltzer picked him to be his adviser for the independent study, thinking someone arts-minded might be sympathetic to a student writing a novel. After reading the manuscript, Parker wrote one comment back to Meltzer: "Keep going, baby."

"It just takes one person saying yes," Meltzer says. "I'll forever be thankful to Kellis Parker."

That yes turned into more affirmations — this time from agents and editors. By

still had a contract with the first house but worried that his book would get buried there. He took a big risk and left his contract to follow his original editor. The decision paid off in spades. *The Tenth Justice*, Meltzer's first published book, became a bestseller. "And that's when the silliness began," he says.

Meltzer never did end up practicing law. Instead he went on to write twelve more thrillers, all of which hit the *New York Times* bestseller list, most making it to number one. His fast-paced, conspiracy-packed, intricately plotted page-turners blend together several of Meltzer's intellectual interests: history,



"If I could tell ten-year-old Brad that this is what I get to do for a living, I think he'd die of happiness."

From left: Meltzer on *Late Night with Seth Meyers*; at the Library of Congress; with members of Ghost Machine.

have a tremendous amount of power, he started writing a second novel, *The Tenth Justice*, about a Supreme Court clerk fresh out of Yale who is tricked into leaking the outcome of a not-yet-released decision. Meltzer says he learned everything he needed to know to write that book in the first year of law school. "It's sort of a crash course in all the fundamentals — contracts, torts, civil procedure, property, constitutional law, criminal law, research, and writing."

He still needed time to actually write the book, and for that he took a one-credit independent study. "I worked harder for that one credit than I did for any other class in law school," Meltzer says. But he also needed something else — the same thing that Sheila

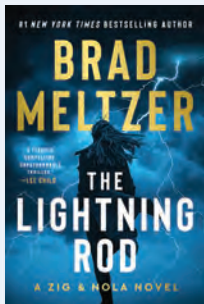
the time Meltzer entered his second year, he had a two-book deal. When he graduated from Columbia in 1996, the *New York Times* ran a story on him on the front of the Metro section with the headline "Presumed Best Seller." "Honestly, it must have been a slow news day," he says.

Meltzer accepted a job offer with a big law firm and took the bar exam. "If my father taught me one thing," he says, "it's that life can implode at any moment." But he never actually started work. The firm gave him a year off to write the second novel of his two-book deal, and in the meantime, his publishing career took an unexpected turn. His editor, a rising star with some hit clients on his roster, left the publishing house for a new job with a rival publisher. Meltzer

the law, and good storytelling. "I think what makes a great story is the details," Meltzer says. To get those details right, he does obsessive research, particularly around the workings of the government. "Before 9/11, I literally had the blueprints of the bunkers under the White House. Now things are a little more tight-lipped."

In fact, shortly after September 11, 2001, Meltzer got a call that seemed to come straight out of one of his books. The Department of Homeland Security was forming a working group with the CIA, the FBI, psychologists, and even fiction writers to brainstorm new ways that enemies might attack the United States. "They were looking for out-of-the-box thinkers," Meltzer says. "I

## The Latest from Brad Meltzer



### FICTION

*The Lightning Rod* (2022)

US Army artist-in-residence Nola Brown and mortician Zig Zigarowski have uncovered one of the government's

best-kept secrets — and it could bring down the country.

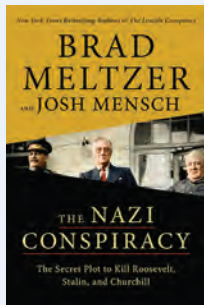


### CHILDREN'S

*I Am Ruth Bader Ginsburg* (2024)

How a determined girl from Brooklyn grew up to be a groundbreaking

US Supreme Court justice.



### NONFICTION

*The Nazi Conspiracy* (2023)

The true story of a Nazi scheme to assassinate Franklin D.

Roosevelt '08HON, Joseph Stalin,

and Winston Churchill '46HON at the height of World War II — and how the world-changing event was averted.



### COMICS

*Justice League of America: The Deluxe Edition* (2020)

Batman, Superman, and Wonder Woman lead a band of heroes against dark

forces in this full collection of Meltzer's *Justice League of America* comics.

figured if they were bringing me in, they must be getting pretty desperate.”

Meltzer later got research help from some unlikely sources: former presidents George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton, both of whom had previously reached out to express admiration for his work. His relationship with the Bush family blossomed. Meltzer worked with Barbara Bush on a number of literacy events, and when Meltzer was gathering background information for his 2011 novel *The Inner Circle*, Bush gave him a copy of the letter that he had left for his successor, Bill Clinton. Bush would eventually become a close friend, so close that he asked Meltzer to read to him when he was ill at the end of his life.

When Meltzer was doing research for his Culper Ring series, whose premise is that a secret spy ring founded by George Washington still operates today, a footnote about the first president caught his eye. “I’m still a Columbia Law nerd at heart — trained to read all the footnotes,” he says. The note alluded to a thwarted conspiracy to kill Washington. Meltzer decided to dig a little deeper and learned that, during the Revolutionary War, Washington was surrounded by an elite group of soldiers who served as his bodyguards — but some of those guards had ulterior motives.

Meltzer considered using the idea for one of his novels. But he wondered if, in this case, the truth might be more compelling. He tabled the idea for many years, but he eventually teamed up with a longtime research partner, Josh Mensch '06JRN, and wrote *The First Conspiracy*, his first nonfiction book. The book, published in 2019, was a critical and commercial hit, and Meltzer and Mensch followed it with two more history books: *The Lincoln Conspiracy*, about a failed plot to kill Lincoln to prevent him from taking office, and *The Nazi Conspiracy*, about a plan to kill the leaders of the Allied nations. “To me, a good story is a good story,” Meltzer says. “I’ve spent a lot of my career focused on fiction, but in the end I don’t think the genre matters that much, as long as you have a compelling narrative arc.”

Meltzer has branched out into many other genres over his career. A lifelong lover of comic books, he has worked with DC Comics to write several of their series, including the best-selling *Justice League of America*, for which he won an Eisner Award. “If I could tell ten-year-old Brad that this is what I get to do for a living, I think he’d die of happiness,” he says.

Now Meltzer is using his deep knowledge of the comics world to chart new territory in the industry. In October 2023, he announced the launch of Ghost Machine, a comic-book media company he founded together with eight other writers and artists, in which authors will maintain ownership of their characters.

The concept is innovative in an industry that has long been frustrating to the creative talent, who, because they don’t own the copyright to their own characters, often don’t financially benefit from the ultimate success of their ideas. The company’s first series, *Geiger: Ground Zero*, came out in November, followed by *Ghost Machine*, whose sixty-four-page first issue is scheduled to be published this month. Both are supernatural stories with overlapping universes, set partially in one of Meltzer’s favorite places: the White House.

Meltzer has also been successful in television: he created a drama series on the WB called *Jack & Bobby* about two teen brothers, one of whom would grow up to be president; and he hosted two shows on the History Channel. In one, *Decoded*, Meltzer investigated historical mysteries, such as the curious death of Lincoln’s assassin, John Wilkes Booth, and the cryptic symbol at the base of the Statue of Liberty. In the other, *Brad Meltzer’s Lost History*, he partnered with archivists from the Library of Congress to find lost and stolen historical artifacts.

On the very first episode of *Lost History*, Meltzer’s team sought to find a flag that was raised over Ground Zero in the aftermath of 9/11 — made iconic by a prominent photograph — but that went missing twenty-four hours later. During the episode, Meltzer talked with obvious emotion about a friend he had lost on that harrowing day. He offered a reward

of \$10,000 for the flag. “I said, I want this back for my friend Michelle,” Meltzer says. “Four days after the episode aired, a man walked into a fire station in Washington State and said he had the flag.”

It took nearly a year to authenticate it. The man who had returned it was a collector who said he hadn’t realized what he had. But, he claimed, it was Meltzer’s impassioned appeal that made him stop to consider his collection. On the fifteenth anniversary of 9/11, Meltzer unveiled the flag at the National September 11 Memorial & Museum, where it is now on display.

“The two History Channel shows were very much in my wheelhouse,” Meltzer says. “But it was an exciting challenge to work in a different medium, to be able to reach people in a new way.”

Meltzer is perhaps proudest of his children’s book series, which just celebrated its ten-year anniversary. Meltzer has three kids, and when they were younger he found himself thinking about their future role models. “I wanted to teach them that being famous is different than being a hero,” he says. He couldn’t find examples of books geared toward kids in preschool up to early elementary school that introduced real inspirational figures through compelling stories and warm, inviting illustrations. So he decided to write the books himself. He thought that his middle child, Lila, would really fall for aviator Amelia Earhart, so he started with her. From there it was a matter of finding the right illustrator. “Any cartoonist can do cute,” Meltzer says. “What we needed was heart.”

Meltzer approached Christopher Eliopoulos, an illustrator he knew from working in comics, and together they began the Ordinary People Change the World series. Meltzer says that when he chooses his subjects, he looks for people who would interest his three kids. “One of my sons loves animals, so I did Jane Goodall for him,” Meltzer says. “My other son is a sports fan, so I did Jackie Robinson.” During the 2016 presidential campaign,

he noticed that two books were selling out over and over again: Martin Luther King Jr. and George Washington. “We were seeing what was happening in the world and trying to find an antidote for it,” Meltzer says.

This January, Meltzer will publish his thirty-second children’s book, which is also one of the most personal for him: *I Am Ruth Bader Ginsburg*. The book tells the life story of the pioneering Supreme Court justice, who was also a fellow Columbia Law alum and mother of Meltzer’s cherished mentor Jane Ginsburg.

“Getting a chance to revisit Justice Ginsburg’s story, and particularly her

the rest of world, which feels apt for a mystery writer obsessed with secrets and conspiracies. But a figure of Charlie Brown, a set of Lego comic-book heroes, and framed Superman prints quickly betray his playful side.

There are stacks of fan mail on his cluttered desk, though Meltzer says he only keeps the letters from children, as a reminder of who he’s working for. And he says he always has copies of his first two published books close by, as a reminder of how far he’s come. Those touchstones are important, because when Meltzer isn’t writing, he’s working on causes that put books in children’s

hands. He volunteers his time with numerous organizations, particularly in his home state of Florida, that help foster child literacy, a cause he’s long been passionate about.

“I think that reading is a superpower,” Meltzer says. “It’s the best gift that we can give our kids.”

That gift has gotten complicated lately, because of politically motivated book bans in libraries and school systems. Two of Meltzer’s books — *I Am Billie Jean King* and *I Am Martin Luther King, Jr.* — were banned by a Florida school board last year, a decision

he was able to successfully appeal. “It honestly felt like a miracle,” he says. “Both Fox News and MSNBC agreed with us, which may be the first time that’s ever happened.”

Meltzer is now working with PEN America on some larger efforts to combat the banning of books across America. “If you’re on the side of book banning, you’re on the wrong side of history,” says Meltzer.

Meltzer says that he owes his success to all the people who fostered his love of reading — his father, who brought home his first comics; the librarian who showed him the stacks of children’s books; his high-school English teacher who encouraged him to write. He hopes he can have the same kind of influence.

“I believe in the power of stories,” he says. “They can take you anywhere.”



Meltzer dressed as Mister Rogers on his book tour.

time at Columbia, was emotional for me,” Meltzer says. “Just as Columbia Law School helped shape her, it shaped me.”

In recent years, Meltzer and his wife have decided to pass that gift along to future generations. They endowed a scholarship at Columbia Law School in the name of James Milligan, the late dean of admissions who took a chance on an applicant who was a little bit different. “Without him, I never would have had the opportunity that I did,” Meltzer says. “We hope that we’re able to open the same kind of doors for someone else.”

**M**eltzer does most of his writing from the attic of his home in Hollywood, Florida, where he’s lived with his family since graduating from law school. A steep spiral staircase separates him from

# Beyond the Binary

## A Columbia mental-health program serves young people and adults who want to express their gender identity in more expansive ways

**Walter Bockting, a clinical psychologist and the founding director of the Gender and Sexuality Program at Columbia University Irving Medical Center (CUIMC), explains why more people are identifying as transgender and describes their paths to self-acceptance.**



**Tell us about the Gender and Sexuality Program. What is its mission? Who does it serve?**

We launched our program in 2018 to serve people identifying as transgender or nonbinary. It now offers comprehensive mental-health services to those who are questioning their gender or sexuality or struggling to navigate life with an identity that does not conform to traditional expectations. The majority of our patients are adolescents and teenagers, some of whom are considering medical treatments to align their bodies with their gender identity. We also see adults who are considering making such changes. And sometimes parents will come in with young children who appear to identify with another gender. They want to understand what their children are going through and how best to support them.

**What exactly do the terms “transgender” and “nonbinary” mean?**

Transgender is an umbrella term used to describe anyone with a gender identity that differs significantly from the sex they were assigned on their birth certificate, based on their outward anatomy. This can include people whose gender is the opposite of the sex they were assigned at birth — that is, a person assigned male at birth who identifies as a girl or woman or a person assigned female at birth who identifies as a boy or man. Transgender people may undergo medical interventions to align their appearance with their gender identity, or they may choose not to do so. Nonbinary individuals, who identify as neither boy nor girl, man nor woman, are generally considered part of the transgender community too. Their identities may combine aspects of masculinity or femininity or transcend these binary categories. Research conducted by my group and others has shown that gender identity and expression exist on a spectrum. For many people they are composed of different characteristics not easily reducible to being either male or female, masculine or feminine.

**Is the transgender population growing?**

There’s been a significant increase in people who openly identify as transgender or nonbinary over the past decade, especially among young people. Surveys indicate that 2 to 3 percent of adolescents and teenagers and about 5 percent of young adults in the United States now identify as transgender, with half or more of these individuals considering themselves nonbinary. Among older adults, that number is less than 1 percent, which is in line with historical trends dating back to the mid-twentieth century, when the concept of gender identity as distinct from biological sex first emerged.

**What explains the rise?**

Of course, there are cultural forces at work. As more and more people have embraced diverse gender identities, less stigma is associated with being trans. Which isn’t to say that it’s particularly easy to come out as transgender, because gender-nonconforming people are still among the most stigmatized in society. But transgender people feel freer to be themselves now, compared to previous decades. This is especially true for young



people who've grown up seeing transgender individuals depicted positively in the media and meeting other transgender folks in school, on the job, or through friends and family. I think that older adults who grew up when it was less socially acceptable to be transgender are more likely to have suppressed or concealed any gender-identity issues they had, which is why you see a generational divide in these statistics.

#### **How many Americans now undergo gender-affirming surgeries?**

It's difficult to say for sure, because the US has no centralized system for collecting data on such procedures, but it's probably on the order of ten thousand people a year, the vast majority of whom are adults. Only a few hundred adolescents undergo gender-affirming surgeries annually, although thousands of young people do receive puberty suppressants or hormones to feminize or masculinize their bodies.

Before they perform gender-affirming surgery, physicians typically require a referral from a mental-health professional who can attest that a patient has thought the decision through, and in the

past obtaining such a referral was more challenging than it is today. For example, until the mid-1990s, people who sought genital surgery were often turned down if they exhibited symptoms of severe anxiety or depression, which were seen as signs of mental instability. Now we know that feeling an incongruence between one's gender identity and sex assigned at birth can contribute to mood disorders and that it is often appropriate to provide a person gender-affirming care at the same time that you're treating them for other mental-health conditions.

People who opt for gender-affirming surgeries typically carry a diagnosis of gender dysphoria, a condition characterized by a discomfort with one's sex assigned at birth that is so intense that it becomes debilitating, making daily life difficult if not impossible. Many, but not all, teenagers and young adults who now identify as transgender experience gender dysphoria. And having gender dysphoria does not necessarily lead a person to seek puberty suppression, hormone therapy, surgery, or any other gender-affirming medical interventions. Gender dysphoria plays out differently for each person.

#### **Do your patients at the Gender and Sexuality Program tend to have dysphoria?**

Most of them do, yes. We see people who are in a lot of emotional pain. In addition to experiencing incongruence between their gender identity and physical sex characteristics, which is incredibly frustrating, many are also socially isolated. Before coming to us, some have never spoken to anybody at length about what they're going through. They might also have experienced bullying, harassment, violence, and discrimination. And it's not uncommon for them to have internalized other people's negative attitudes about transgender people and to feel ashamed of who they are. The cumulative stress can contribute to a wide range of mental-health issues, including substance abuse, suicidal thoughts, self-harm, anxiety, and mood disorders. When we help them come up with a plan to alleviate their gender dysphoria, we often need to address these issues, too.

#### **What does treatment typically look like?**

It starts with talk therapy to facilitate self-acceptance and identity exploration. We ask patients to describe how they'd ideally like to express their gender and

what, if anything, is holding them back. If they haven't lived openly as a transgender person yet, we might suggest that they first learn about the possibilities online and then try expressing their gender identity in a safe, private setting, like in the company of supportive friends or family members. After exploring their identity and expression in this way, some people may decide that they don't need to change their gender identity in a formal sense. They might conclude that they're simply uncomfortable with traditional gender norms and can be happy continuing to identify as a man or woman if they bend the rules to their liking a bit. But more often than not, among the patients we see, such experiences are affirming, encouraging people to move forward and continue transitioning. Then we might help them develop a plan for coming out at school or work, which can include preparing to address changes in pronoun use, how they dress, and bathroom access. We'll work with their families to ensure that individuals get the emotional and social support they need. And if a patient is determined to change their body, we'll help them think through the available options. We'll also support them after they've made any physical changes, because the challenges of being transgender don't end at that point.

**You've been counseling transgender people and studying their lives for more than three decades. In particular, you've researched how their identities evolve over time. What have you learned?**

One insight is that most transgender people, as they get older, become less interested in trying to pass as cisgender men and women and more comfortable identifying primarily as *trans* men, *trans* women, or *nonbinary* individuals. It can take them years to get to this point, because many transgender people, especially when they're young, have internalized our society's binary conception of gender and feel compelled to adopt the stereotypical gender expressions of men or women. They may initially think, "Well, I know I'm not a

girl, so I must be a boy. Now I need to look and behave exactly like one!" This isn't surprising. It's human nature to seek a sense of belonging by carving out rather neatly defined identities for ourselves. And realizing that your gender identity is different or ambiguous can be nerve-racking. When my colleagues and I counsel transgender people, we encourage them to unearth and face some of this anxiety. We've found that by accepting the complexity and uniqueness of their gender identities, and by embracing the fact that, as transgender people, their experiences will always be unique and a bit different from cisgender people's, they're able to feel better about themselves and ultimately find more meaning in their lives.



Walter Bocking

**Shortly before coming to Columbia in 2012, you served as president of the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH). In that role, you oversaw the creation of treatment guidelines that have made it easier for nonbinary people in many countries to access appropriate gender-affirming medical care.**

Yes, these guidelines, which are now followed by most medical professionals and endorsed by their associations, stipulate that people who identify as nonbinary should have access to the same high-quality care as other transgender people. This is important because, as recently as the early 2000s, people who needed to change their bodies but didn't

necessarily want to look like cisgender men or women were often turned away. Maybe they just wanted to alter their chest, tone of voice, or hair-growth patterns while forgoing other procedures. If a physician asked if they identified as a man or woman and they responded, "Neither," they might have been told, "Well, come back when you figure it out." Now they're treated equally and can access gender-affirming medical interventions appropriate to their identities and needs.

**You're also credited with improving access to care for transgender people who identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual.**

Yes, when I entered this field, another common requirement for getting gender-affirming surgery was to identify as heterosexual after transitioning. Can you believe that? In other words, you couldn't be sexually attracted to members of your own gender identity but rather only to members of the sex you were originally assigned at birth. This was rooted in a twentieth-century theory called the "inversion hypothesis," which held that the desire to transition one's gender was the manifestation of intense same-sex attraction — basically, an extreme form of homosexuality. So, for example, a person who was assigned male at birth and sexually attracted to other men — and who had an unusually "de-masculinized and feminized" mind — might eventually want to become a woman. Transgender people who were brave enough to disclose their same-gender attractions faced significant barriers to accessing gender-affirming medical care. And transgender men who were attracted to men weren't even thought to exist. But in the late 1980s and early 1990s, I published a series of papers documenting that transgender men who are attracted to men do exist and are quite happy and well-adjusted. This research, together with other scholars' observations that transgender women often identify as lesbian, helped usher in a paradigm shift, where gender identity and sexual orientation were finally understood as separate components of one's overall identity.



**Today there is fierce debate about whether it has become too easy for adolescents to access gender-affirming medical care. In the past couple of years, more than twenty states have passed laws banning anyone under the age of eighteen from receiving puberty suppressants, hormone therapies, and surgeries. What do you make of this?**

I'm shocked at how thoroughly the public discussion on this issue has become politicized and inundated by misinformation. Opponents of transgender rights, who've now organized themselves into a powerful movement, would have Americans believe that their kids are being brainwashed into thinking they're transgender and greenlighted for medical procedures that they don't need and will later regret. Of course, this isn't true. Even among youth with gender dysphoria, only those with the most pronounced symptoms access medical interventions, usually after extensive counseling and therapy. What's really happening is that young people in nearly half the United States are being denied access to health care that they desperately need, care that nearly every major medical organization in the country has deemed safe and essential. It's a disgrace. Honestly, it makes me so upset that it's difficult for me to talk about it.

When you meet a young person with gender dysphoria and hear them describe what they're going through, you don't forget it. It's heartbreaking. I'm talking about kids who are overwhelmed by despair related to their sex characteristics. Who take showers in the dark to avoid seeing their bodies. Who can't focus in school because they're so upset about going through puberty. To these kids and their families, having access to gender-affirming care can feel like a matter of life or death.

**Puberty blockers are now given to transgender kids as young as ten or eleven, which critics point out is a pretty tender age to be making medical decisions whose effects could last a lifetime.**

Helping kids to change their bodies raises serious questions and concerns, there's no doubt about it. I think that everyone

working in the field of transgender health right now is asking themselves: Will any of these kids come to regret this decision? Will the puberty blockers cause any unintended effects later in life? Exactly how much therapy should these kids be getting before they transition? We don't have conclusive answers to these questions yet. The best data available comes from a clinic in Amsterdam where gender-affirming medical care was first provided to adolescents in the 1990s. I grew up

**“I'm shocked at how thoroughly the public discussion on this issue has become politicized and inundated by misinformation.”**

and trained in the Netherlands, and I've conducted research with some of the people who developed that program, which has shaped my thinking. In any case, the results from patients of that clinic are so far positive, which is why health-care providers throughout Europe and the US have since started offering puberty suppression and hormone therapies to adolescents. Hundreds of Dutch people who received gender-affirming care as youngsters decades ago are still being followed by researchers. Very few say they regret transitioning or show signs of serious unintended effects. And as a group, they have lower rates of anxiety and depression than other transgender people who attain access to gender-affirming care later in life or not at all.

**What are you studying now?**

For the past eight years, I've been leading a longitudinal study following the lives of more than three hundred transgender people, who now range in age from about twenty to ninety, in New York City, San Francisco, and Atlanta. My colleagues and I are hoping to follow these participants for years to come. We want to learn what aspects of their lives are most challenging, what brings them happiness and contentment, and how

they develop resilience in the face of stigma, discrimination, and the associated stress. Among our discoveries so far is that transgender people who maintain close friendships with other transgender people are happier and healthier overall, as are those who are in regular contact with their parents, siblings, or other close family members and friends.

The importance of family, I think, is particularly interesting. Other studies have shown that transgender people

are often rejected by their families or subjected to such awful abuse at home that they have to cut ties. Some of our participants have experienced this too. But many others told us things like, “You know, my folks weren't very nice to me at first and actually said some terrible things. But I was patient and left the door open, and eventually they came around and accepted me. And I'm glad I gave them a chance, for my own sake and theirs.”

**That's inspiring. Do you share those types of stories with your patients?**

I do. I'm always telling my patients about the dignity, strength, and courage of other transgender people. I'll recommend movies, TV shows, and books, and I'll tell them anecdotes about some of the amazing patients and research participants I've known over the years. When they're ready, I'll help them connect meaningfully with other transgender people in group therapy and support meetings. And I'll tell them, “I know that being transgender isn't easy — but it's also exciting, beautiful, and, yes, fabulous. And you are now among these fabulous people who, just by being themselves and holding their heads up high, are changing the world.” — *David J. Craig*

# EXPLORATIONS

FRONTIERS OF  
RESEARCH AND  
DISCOVERY



## Fishing for an aggression gene

**B**eloved by aquarium owners for their gorgeous colors and flowing fins, betta fish are also aggressive and territorial — put two males together in a tank and they will attack each other mercilessly. But bettas, also known as Siamese fighting fish, weren't always so beautiful and ill-tempered. The bettas sold in pet stores today have been shaped by hundreds of years of selective breeding, first by seventeenth-century Thai gamblers, who pitted the fish against one another in contests akin to cockfights, and later by European hobbyists, who bred the same seasoned brawlers to exhibit eye-catching ornamentation.

Because of their unusual evolutionary history, betta fish are ideal research subjects for Columbia neurobiologist Andrés Bendesky, who studies how genes influence animals' physiology and social behavior. Bendesky is particularly interested in the genetic basis of violent aggression and has for years been analyzing and comparing the genomes of various lineages of bettas. These include much less combative wild bettas that he and his students plucked out of ponds in rural Thailand as well as exceptionally vicious bettas that the Columbia scientists acquired from breeders who still raise the fish to fight.

"We're looking for genes that are unique to the most hostile fish so that we can understand what drives their behavior," says Bendesky, who is an assistant professor in Columbia's Department of Ecology, Evolution, and Environmental Biology and also a principal investigator at the Zuckerman Institute.

Bendesky and colleagues recently achieved a breakthrough, identifying several genes that may be associated with aggressiveness in bettas, causing the fish to puff up their gills at passersby and bite rivals. To confirm their findings, which they have presented at scientific conferences but have not yet published, the researchers will use the gene-editing technology CRISPR to remove these genes and see how the bettas' behavior changes.

"We'll put these genetically modified fish into a tank with a robotic betta fish that we've built using a 3D printer to see how they react," Bendesky says. "Will they still try to intimidate the robot and bite it? Or will they ignore it and swim away?"

He anticipates that his team's work will ultimately yield insights into the social behavior of animals beyond the aquatic kingdom, possibly including humans. "Our goal is to learn something fundamental about the nature of violent impulses," he says.

# Lessons in partnership

How Columbia's ICAP has revolutionized the fight for global health

**T**wenty years ago, at the height of the AIDS epidemic in Africa, a team of Columbia public-health researchers led by Wafaa El-Sadr '91PH set out to do something that many thought impossible: save the lives of large numbers of people with HIV in some of the continent's hardest-hit countries.

"Critics said we would fail," remembers El-Sadr. "They said that even if we managed to distribute medicines, there were too few doctors to provide

who, if provided with the training, mentorship, and equipment, could meet their countries' needs for testing and diagnostics. And she saw tightly knit communities and large extended families whose members could be enlisted to support sick relatives, friends, and neighbors. In essence, she saw people who, if provided the necessary training, tools, and support, could help to pioneer creative new strategies for combating one of the most severe health crises in history.

importantly, local partnerships and international cooperation.

Two decades after its founding, ICAP is a leader in global health, known for tackling the world's toughest health challenges. The largest grant-funded center at Columbia, it has more than 2,500 staffers who support training, technical assistance, and clinical services in forty nations on five continents.

ICAP has facilitated the screening of more than fifty-one million people for HIV and brought life-saving treatment



Left: Health workers in Zambia conduct surveys to track progress against HIV. Right: An ICAP-supported program in Cameroon.

comprehensive HIV care. They told us that the countries' health-care systems were in bad shape and that patients would struggle to keep up with complex antiretroviral-drug regimens. They believed that trying to save people who were already sick and dying would not be a good use of resources."

But El-Sadr, an Egyptian-born physician and epidemiologist, had a different vision. She looked at the situation in Africa and saw thousands of talented nurses, physicians, public-health workers, and counselors who could administer HIV care and screening. She saw scores of laboratory workers

With a commitment to partnership as a key priority, El-Sadr and her colleagues founded ICAP (initially called the International Center for AIDS Care and Treatment Programs), a global health initiative based at the Mailman School of Public Health. Recruiting Columbia faculty, students, and affiliated health experts, ICAP launched multipronged HIV screening, treatment, and prevention programs on a massive scale in sub-Saharan Africa and other underserved regions, transforming the health of millions through scientific innovation, research, and, most

to nearly two and a half million with HIV in Asia, Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Africa. Over the past two decades, these efforts have contributed to a 50 percent or more decline in the annual number of new HIV infections and AIDS-related deaths in sub-Saharan Africa. "Today, millions of people living with HIV are enjoying long and healthy lives," says El-Sadr.

El-Sadr, who in addition to leading ICAP is a University Professor and executive vice president for Columbia Global, credits much of ICAP's success to the deeply collaborative relationships it builds with ministries of health

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and other partners in government, academia, and civil society in the countries where it works. She says that ICAP staffers design programs hand in hand with these partners to ensure that they are responsive to cultural, social, and economic contexts. This is especially important, she says, when serving vulnerable people who may require extra support in following HIV prevention and treatment plans. “You need to know what the daily lives of your patients are like, and what obstacles they’re facing, in order to serve them effectively,” says El-Sadr. “Our staff and partners on the ground are the ones with the knowledge to meet those challenges.”

Over the years, ICAP has expanded its work in low- and middle-income countries to address tuberculosis, malaria, reproductive health, and maternal and children’s health, as well as noncommunicable diseases such as hypertension and cancer. It has also pivoted to address emerging infections, including Ebola and COVID-19, and supported the strengthening of the health

system in war-torn Ukraine. Recently it launched the New York City Pandemic Response Institute to ensure that the city is well prepared to confront future



Wafaa El-Sadr

health crises. In all of this, ICAP has focused on improving the core health capacities of the countries where it works. It has supported the training of over four hundred thousand nurses, midwives, doctors, laboratory workers, and data managers around the world; it has also upgraded thousands of health clinics, laboratories, and data systems. “ICAP’s programs, in addition to saving millions of lives, are supporting the ability to deliver innovative, high-quality health care and population health, and training the next generation of global health leaders on the ground,” says Linda Fried, the dean of the Mailman School of Public Health.

Building health systems that are resilient, sensitive to local needs, and nimble enough to handle new threats is now more important than ever, according to El-Sadr. “COVID-19 revealed in dramatic fashion that health risks are constantly evolving and that undoubtedly we’ll be facing more surprises in the future,” she says.



## Do we underestimate the speed and scale of global warming?

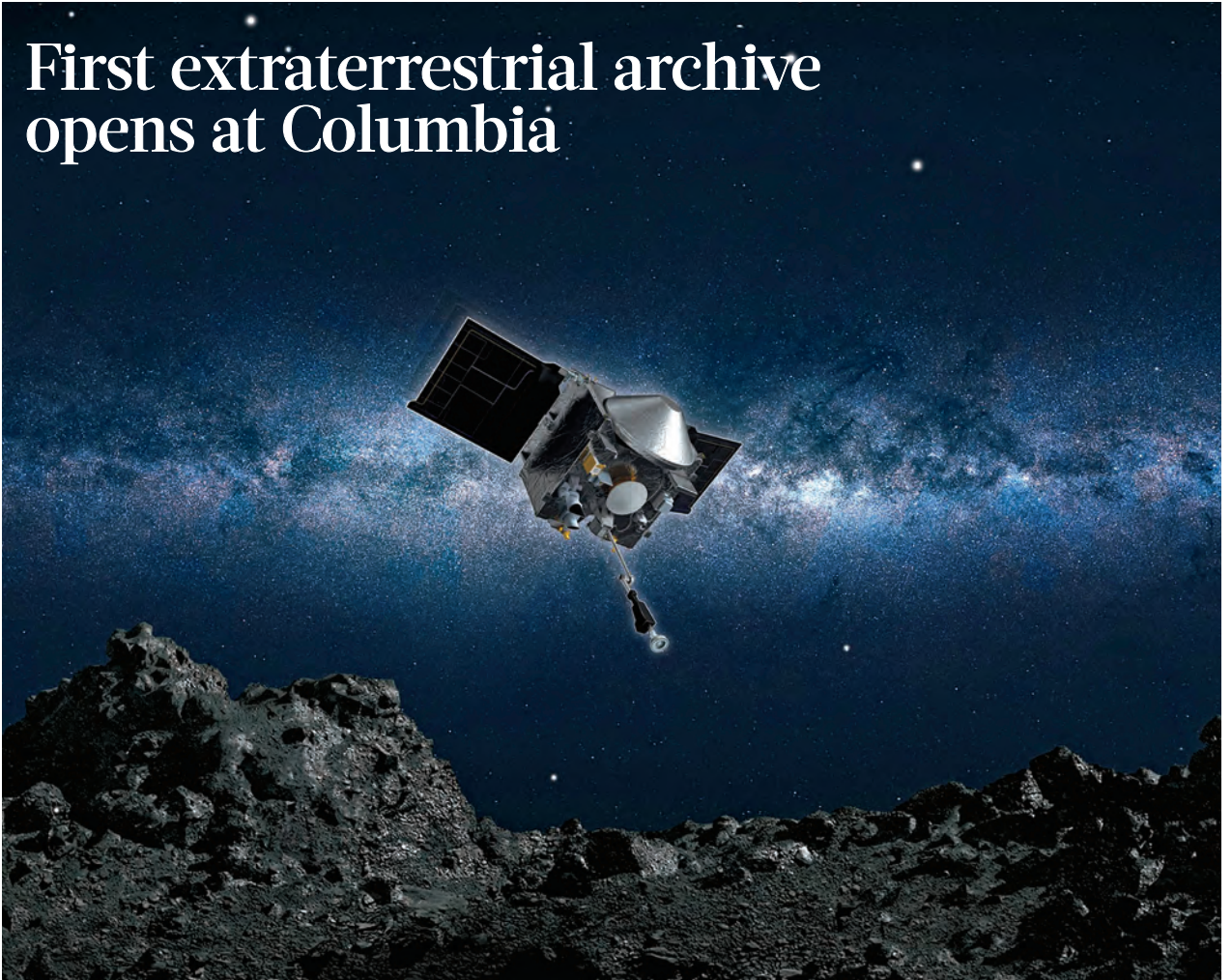
A group of climate scientists led by James E. Hansen, the preeminent climatologist who famously sounded the alarm about global warming in the 1980s and who now directs the Columbia Climate School’s Climate Science, Awareness, and Solutions center, has released a new study asserting that temperatures could begin to rise much faster than previously expected over the next decade.

The study, which appears in the journal *Oxford Open Climate Change*, is coauthored by climate scientists at a dozen institutions, including NASA, the University of California, the University of Arizona, the University of Kansas, Peking University, and the Chinese Academy of Sciences. In it, Hansen and his colleagues argue that many experts in their field have underestimated how sensitive the earth’s climate is to rising levels of atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>, in part because of flawed interpretations of our planet’s climate history. In addition, they say

that other types of air pollution have been blocking a significant amount of solar radiation from reaching the earth’s surface and hence hiding the full warming potential of our greenhouse-gas emissions. As air pollution decreases in response to stricter environmental regulations, they write, more solar radiation will soon reach the earth’s surface and the rate of annual warming could jump 50 percent.

The new paper has generated controversy, since it challenges the scientific consensus. For example, many scientists dispute the conclusion — central to Hansen and his colleagues’ thesis — that recently discovered evidence indicates that global temperatures are much more sensitive to CO<sub>2</sub> levels than previously assumed. But others say the paper should be taken seriously. “I think Hansen’s pessimism is warranted,” Stanford environmental scientist Rob Jackson recently told the *Guardian*. “He stood up thirty-five years ago and sounded the alarm — and the world mostly ignored him, and all of us.”

# First extraterrestrial archive opens at Columbia



An artist's conception of NASA's OSIRIS-REx spacecraft collecting samples from the asteroid Bennu, a mission whose findings will be archived at Columbia.

In dozens of space missions dating back to the 1960s, NASA astronauts and spacecraft have collected samples of moon rocks, meteorites, cosmic dust, and other celestial materials.

Now, in an effort to improve scientists' access to information about these strange substances, NASA has teamed up with Columbia University to create a first-of-its-kind online library of geochemical data derived from the unearthy quarry. The Astromaterials Data System, based at Columbia's Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory in Palisades, New York, is tasked with tracking down, cataloging, digitizing, and making easily accessible the results of all laboratory tests that

have ever been conducted on NASA's extraterrestrial samples. The archive, launched this year at [astromat.org](http://astromat.org), currently contains the results of nearly 1.3 million chemical analyses of materials gathered by US space missions, including the 1969–70 Apollo trips to the moon, a 2004 Stardust expedition that collected particles of solar wind, and a 2006 Genesis mission that captured castoffs from an asteroid's tail. Also preserved is information about tiny space particles that hitched a ride on Earth-orbiting satellites and thousands of meteorites collected in Antarctica.

Columbia mineralogist Kerstin Lehnert, who directs the Astromaterials Data System, says that the project

is enabling new scientific discoveries by bringing together huge amounts of unpublished data that had previously been stored at research institutions where the original analyses were performed, along with published data that had only been available behind the paywalls of subscription journals. Earlier this year, for example, a team of astronomers and data scientists who searched the archive were able to determine the origins of some previously uncategorizable meteorites.

"This is partly about democratizing science," says Lehnert. "Before this, only a small, insular community had access to a lot of this data. Now anyone with a computer and the Internet can study it."



Left: Farmland contaminated by land mines in the Zhytomyr region of Ukraine. Right: A mine-seeking drone.



## Drones and AI are new recruits in battle against land mines

**M**ore than one hundred million land mines, booby traps, and other unexploded ordnance lurk in present and former war zones, killing or maiming thousands of civilians a year, many of them children. And while humanitarian agencies are constantly working to clear such threats, their efforts are insufficient to the task, in part because they rely on manual methods that are time-consuming, expensive, and treacherous. Bomb technicians must sweep the ground with metal detectors and poke around in the dirt, a process that inevitably churns up more nails, spent bullet casings, and bits of shrapnel than live munitions. And tragically, for every five thousand mines recovered, three workers are injured or killed, according to the United Nations.

Enter Jasper Baur, a Columbia PhD candidate who is studying volcanology. He believes that the same tools that he and other earth scientists use

to monitor volcanoes and lava flows — drone-mounted imaging systems and artificial intelligence — can be adapted to locate land mines faster and more safely. For years, he has spent his free time developing specialized remote-sensing technologies that, when mounted to drones and flown over minefields, can quickly detect buried or partially concealed explosives. In one recent paper, he and colleagues from Binghamton University showed that an airborne system that they designed to spot one of the world's most widespread and feared antipersonnel mines — the Russian-made PFM-1 — performs faster than human teams and with 90 percent accuracy. It works by sensing temperature differences between the land mine and the surrounding soil and vegetation.

“The idea is to map out an area and determine where the hazards are before anyone steps into the minefield,” says Baur. “This could enable demining teams to cover more ground faster, while preventing injuries.”

Baur's drones have attracted the attention of organizations that oversee demining operations, including the United Nations, although they have not yet been deployed in the field. But this past summer, Baur and his design partner, the computer scientist Gabriel Steinberg, traveled to Ukraine to answer a UN call for demonstrations of new mine-detection technologies. In a five-hour trial held at a military training ground northeast of the capital, their drones successfully identified a wide range of antitank mines, grenades, and projectiles that were scattered across a sixty-acre bushy expanse.

Today Baur and Steinberg, along with colleagues at Binghamton, the University of Maryland, and Oklahoma State, are fine-tuning their techniques in the hopes of soon helping humanitarian demining crews around the world. Baur and Steinberg, who met as undergraduates at Binghamton, have also founded a nonprofit organization — the Demining Research Community — that supports other scientists interested in developing mine-clearing tools.

Baur says that his team's recent trip to Ukraine gave the researchers a renewed sense of urgency, since approximately one-third of that country is now littered with land mines and unexploded armaments. “There are farmers pulling missiles out of their fields with tractors and trying to clear land mines themselves,” he says. “They need our help.”

— *Kevin Krajick '76GS, '77JRN*

# The true price of motherhood

It's no secret that motherhood is costly because women, whether by choice or necessity, often drop out of the workforce to raise their children. In fact, the financial hit that mothers take in these years is the main reason for the overall US gender pay gap.

But new Columbia research reveals that the so-called "motherhood penalty" is more severe than experts had previously recognized. The study, by Columbia economist Douglas Almond and graduate student Yi Cheng '20GSAS, along with Cecilia Machado '10GSAS of Fundação Getulio Vargas's Brazilian School of Economics and Finance, is the most statistically powerful of its kind, drawing on two decades' worth of earnings and employment data for hundreds of thousands of families. The researchers show that working women see their incomes cut in half, on average, after having children, and that their earnings remain depressed for years thereafter.

"We tracked parents' pay for six years following the birth of a first child and found that a mother's income, after initially plummeting, typically does not recover during that period," says Almond, who is a professor at the School of International and Public Affairs.

Past research has shown that mothers lose earnings largely because they work

less, either dropping out of the labor force or reducing their hours, but the Columbia researchers reveal some additional insights. They show that even women who, before giving birth, were the primary breadwinners in their families tend to pause their careers and endure huge income losses afterward.



According to Almond, this undercuts a theory that many economists have used to try to explain the motherhood penalty in the past, which posits that couples strategically decide to have the lower-earning partner — historically the mother — shoulder the burden of child-rearing. "The data suggest that many dads who ought to be stepping up and

taking charge of the childcare, for the economic well-being of their families, aren't doing so," he says.

Jane Waldfogel, a Columbia professor of social work and public affairs who conducted seminal research on the financial ramifications of motherhood in the 1990s, says that the new paper underscores the need for stronger policies to support mothers who wish to remain in the labor force as well as cultural changes so that heterosexual parenting is seen as a joint venture between men and women. "The US is an outlier among wealthy nations in not legally mandating paid parental leave, which is certainly needed," says Waldfogel. Her own research has shown that many women, if given the opportunity to stay at home with their baby for six to twelve months and then return to their jobs, choose to take it, thus maintaining their careers and avoiding significant wage loss. And men who get paternity leave tend to become more actively involved in parenting, which benefits kids and makes it easier for women to work. Another priority, Waldfogel says, should be to provide universal access to high-quality, publicly subsidized childcare. "Then you'd have a situation where both women and men are able to contribute their full talents to society and the economy."

## Study reveals 8 ways to slow aging

Columbia researchers have found that eight common health recommendations, previously shown to protect against cardiovascular disease, can also significantly reduce the pace at which your body ages.

The study, led by epidemiologist Nour Makarem, revealed that adults who control their weight, blood pressure, cholesterol, and blood sugar while maintaining healthy sleep and eating habits, exercising regularly, and not smoking can effectively reduce their "biological age" by five years or more.

Based on data from 6,500 middle-aged Americans, the Columbia study assessed the overall health benefits

of adhering to lifestyle and wellness guidelines recommended by the American Heart Association. Makarem and her colleagues found that people who abide by the organization's "Life's Essential 8" checklist not only enjoy better cardiovascular health but exhibit fewer signs of aging throughout the body — as evidenced by their metabolic activity, organ function, inflammation levels, and other indicators.

"People who diligently pursue good cardiovascular health appear to be about five years younger than their actual chronological age, while those who don't heed the guidelines appear to be about four years older than it," says Makarem.



## Can zombie office towers help solve the housing crisis ?

**W**ith more and more US companies embracing remote work and reducing their office footprint to save money, the commercial real-estate industry has been left reeling, with landlords saddled with millions of square feet of vacant space and drastically devalued properties. This has led many observers to wonder if the empty office towers that now dot US cities might be converted into rental apartments and condos, thus helping to address the country's worsening housing shortage.

Columbia economist Stijn Van Nieuwerburgh, graduate student Candy Martinez, and NYU economist Arpit Gupta '16BUS recently conducted an in-depth analysis of the challenges and potential benefits of office-to-residential conversions, ultimately concluding that policymakers ought to consider encouraging such projects on a large scale in at least six metropolitan areas: New York City; San Francisco; Washington, DC; Denver; Boston; and San Jose. In these areas alone, the researchers found, there are more than 1,200 office buildings that are good candi-

dates for conversion, based on their vacancy rates, architectural designs, and other factors. Together the properties could produce some 120,000 new apartments.

The authors, whose paper was published by the Brookings Institution, say that there are hundreds of other underutilized office buildings scattered throughout the US that are physically suited to conversion. Generally speaking, the best candidates are properties built before 1990, since they tend to have windows that open and smaller floor plans that enable natural light to reach all parts of the interior. But only in the six cited cities are many office-to-apartment conversions likely to be financially feasible without significant government subsidies, the researchers say, since housing prices in these areas are extraordinarily high, thus compensating for the costs of conversion.

"New York City has by far the most potential, with about six hundred buildings ripe for conversion," says Van Nieuwerburgh, a professor of real estate and finance at Columbia Business School. "Lawmakers just need to loosen zoning regulations and building codes to allow for more residential

developments in parts of Midtown and downtown Manhattan."

Van Nieuwerburgh made headlines last year with a related paper that described the severe economic threat posed by the collapsing office market. He and colleagues predicted that if more companies chose not to renew long-term leases, the tax revenues that New York and other large cities derive from office towers could shrink to record lows, forcing them to slash essential services. Rates of crime, homelessness, and other social problems could increase, prompting even more businesses to flee and setting in motion a vicious cycle that Van Nieuwerburgh and his coauthors termed an "urban doom loop." But by converting empty offices into apartments, cities can avoid this scenario.

Reusing old buildings is also more environmentally friendly than constructing new housing developments from scratch, creating less waste and carbon emissions, say the researchers. "During the conversion process, old buildings with outdated heating and electricity systems could also be made more energy-efficient, significantly reducing their future emissions," says Van Nieuwerburgh.



# Babies' secret weapon against germs

Every parent knows that young children are germ magnets, picking up one virus after another. Yet studies have shown that youngsters are also better than adults at fighting off novel pathogens. This became evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when few young children became gravely ill.

How is it that kids are in some ways exceptionally vulnerable to germs and in other ways notably resilient to them?

Two new studies by Columbia immunologist Donna Farber shed light on the matter. In one paper, published in the journal *Immunity*, Farber and her colleagues show that the adaptive immune system — which remembers disease-causing microbes that it has previously encountered and mounts immediate attacks against them — is not fully functional until children are four to six years old. In a related study in *Nature Immunology*, the team reveals that the developing immune system compensates for this vulnerability by producing elevated levels of versatile antibodies that will attack any foreign microbes that invade a

child's organs. "Young children may frequently get sick, but their bodies are very adept fighters, even against novel pathogens like the SARS-CoV-2 virus that causes COVID-19," says Farber. She notes that most babies and toddlers who were exposed to the virus didn't even show symptoms. "The adult immune system, on the other hand, is geared toward fighting familiar foes, not strange new ones."

Farber says that her team's research could have implications for understanding disorders of the immune system, including food allergies and chronic asthma. The antibodies that the Columbia scientists found to be elevated in healthy young children typically decrease in number by the age of three, Farber says, but her team is now investigating whether levels of these antibodies may remain stubbornly high in some older children. "We think it's possible that immune tissues that produce these antibodies may sometimes continue to do so well into childhood, when they're no longer an asset but instead a liability, triggering an overreaction to certain antigens."



LEFT: SIRTRAVELALOT / SHUTTERSTOCK; RIGHT: HAKIMHAN / SHUTTERSTOCK

## STUDY HALL RESEARCH BRIEFS

**The power of a good secret** Got good news about a new job, budding romance, or other personal achievement? Don't share it with others just yet. Keeping it to yourself temporarily can make you feel more energized and alive, finds Columbia social psychologist Michael Slepian.

### Poor sleep linked to diabetes risk

Women who routinely sleep less than seven hours a night undergo metabolic changes that may raise their risk of diabetes, according to new research led by Marie-Pierre St-Onge, a Columbia associate professor of nutritional medicine. Her team found that postmenopausal women are most prone to this effect.



**Miracle glass?** Columbia engineers led by Oleg Gang have developed a form of glass whose purity at the atomic scale makes it nearly unbreakable. They say the technology could improve products from cars to body armor.

**Big tech's big debt** Google and Facebook should be required to pay US news publishers at least \$10 billion and \$2 billion a year, respectively, for the value they derive from posting snippets of news articles on their platforms, according to a report coauthored by Anya Schiffrin, the director of SIPA's Technology, Media, and Communications program.

**"Chemobrain" explained** Columbia medical researchers led by Andrew Marks have discovered both the cause of and a potential treatment for "chemobrain," a type of cognitive impairment that many cancer patients experience while receiving chemotherapy. The researchers report that chemotherapy causes dangerous levels of calcium to build up inside brain cells and that a new drug they have developed prevents this side effect in mice.

**Political bias in economic research** Using big-data techniques to analyze the campaign donations of thousands of economists and all their published articles, Columbia researchers have found that the words that appear most frequently in economists' writings accurately predict their political affiliations and that their affiliations strongly influence their research conclusions.

# NETWORK

YOUR ALUMNI  
CONNECTION



## Voice of Reason

Talk-show host Brian Lehrer '96PH on the power of public health

For many New Yorkers, *The Brian Lehrer Show*, which airs weekdays from 10:00 a.m. to noon on the New York public-radio station WNYC, is as essential to the morning as fresh-brewed coffee. The program's host, Brian Lehrer '96PH, serves up a nourishing spread of interviews and discussions on politics, culture, health, science, and current events, delivered in a relaxed, intelligent voice so familiar and so empathic that audiences easily identify with him — and vice versa. "I see my role as being the listeners' advocate," Lehrer says.

At seventy-one, Lehrer is a New York institution and one of those rare celebrities recognized not by his face but by his voice. (Once, at a gas station, he said "Fill 'er up," to which the attendant replied, "Brian Lehrer!") His show debuted in 1989, and Lehrer quickly established himself as a sensitive, versatile interviewer, a sort of erudite everyman. "I'm a generalist, so I'm not an expert in every topic," he says. "That's the role of the guests. But I still want to come as prepared as possible." Each show requires hours of research,

and Lehrer considers different points of view as he formulates his questions, with an eye, always, to the public interest.

"In my ideal vision of myself, I'm a community builder, and my main vehicle for that is to invite a lot of different people in," Lehrer says. Whether talking to a City Council member or a cook, a medic or the mayor; whether discoursing on college admissions, air quality, or the minimum wage, Lehrer creates a warm and open kitchen-table environment filled with honest, direct questions and thoughtful dialogue. And if his varied interests help account for his democratic cross section of listeners, he is also pointedly inclusive. "You don't get a diverse caller base by saying, 'Everybody's welcome,'" he says. "You get it by explicitly inviting individual groups for different segments."

Those groups may be bound by race, religion, gender, geography, occupation, medical condition, political bent, or life experience. Lehrer may ask to hear from immigrants or workers affected by a strike. He may ask to hear from people who have their houseguests remove their shoes. Once,

while covering a port labor dispute, he invited longshoremen to phone in — and they did. On the Friday after Thanksgiving 2001, with fires still smoldering at Ground Zero and anti-Islam feeling in the air, he invited Muslim listeners to call in and talk about the dishes they'd made for their Ramadan post-fast Thanksgiving feasts, as the holidays coincided that year. In such times of trauma, the show can be a veritable lifeline.

Lehrer was raised in Queens by parents who were very health-conscious. "They instilled that in me early on," he says. He grew up loving baseball, studying classical flute, and listening, late at night, to local radio: the talk 'n' roll schmooze of Alex Bennett (WPLJ), the grumpy artistry of Steve Post (WBAI), and the funny, poignant storytelling of Jean Shepherd (WOR). After majoring in music at SUNY Albany ("I minored

in the radio station"), he got a master's in journalism at Ohio State. He also developed a strong interest in conservation law and ecology. Wanting to deepen his knowledge, he enrolled in Columbia's Mailman School of Public Health, where he focused on health and the environment.

"What I learned at Mailman has informed my approach to almost every major issue," he says. "The school taught me policy-analysis skills, which I see as a framework for a holistic understanding of so much that we debate in politics." With his public-health education, Lehrer was well-prepared to talk through 9/11 as well as the pandemic, to say nothing of gun violence, health inequality, pollution, and the climate.

Lehrer lives in Inwood, at the northern tip of Manhattan, and has two grown sons. He loves listening to

jazz and classical music, and on most days he runs a few miles ("a great joy of mine"), often on the "wonderful" track at Columbia's Baker Athletics Complex. He is a New Yorker to the bone, though over the course of his thirty-four years on the air, his New York has changed a lot.

"One thing I like is the development of many more bike lanes in the city, including the fabulous path that goes up the Hudson River, the length of Manhattan," he says. "One thing I don't like is the proliferation of chain stores, which never used to be a New York City thing. Today, a visitor could walk around and think the name of the city was Dunkin' Donuts."

Bike lanes versus doughnut chains — that's a pretty good snapshot of Lehrer's abiding concerns. As he says: "Public health touches everything."

— Paul Hond

## ARTIST SPOTLIGHT



Tim Gardner '99SOA, an American-Canadian artist known for his hyperrealistic watercolors and explorations of modern masculinity, is the subject of a major retrospective at the Winnipeg Art Gallery–Qaumajuq in Manitoba, Canada. Titled *Tim Gardner: The Full Story*, the exhibition, on view through April 7, showcases more than 130 artworks, including the 2018 painting *College Walk* (above), which captures the quiet serenity of the Columbia campus in summer.



**ASK AN ALUM: HOW TO RAISE RESILIENT KIDS**

**Erica Komisar '90SW** is a clinical social worker, psychoanalyst, and parenting expert. Her two books, *Being There* and *Chicken Little, the Sky Isn't Falling*, offer tips for helping children overcome anxiety.

**When did you first notice that we — and our children — were living in what you call a “new age of anxiety”?**

Two decades ago, I realized that the referrals I was getting were increasingly for younger and younger children. I was a consultant for preschools and primary schools in Manhattan, and I noticed a growing number of children being diagnosed and medicated at an early age for anxiety and depression. I started to look at every bit of research I could get my hands on.

**Obviously, no one wants their kids to be anxious or depressed, but how do parents inadvertently contribute to these issues?**

The vast majority of parents want the best for their children. But sometimes they don't know what the best is. Some pressure their kids to get perfect grades. I can't tell you how many parents bring their children into my office because of a B grade. They're certain something is wrong.

People have always had expectations of children, but the world has become a more complicated and competitive place. Parents have become more anxious themselves, and they worry that their children won't be successful. So they push and push and push. Children grow up in an environment where their schools and friends are all pushing. We're pushing these kids to the brink.

One thing parents can do is take their foot off the gas. Be self-aware and reflective. Take a good long look at yourself and what you value. How do you define success in your child's life? Shouldn't it involve their being happy and mentally balanced?

I also see a connection between teen mental-health issues and parents who are distracted and less present. A misperception about adolescents is that they don't need us. It's true they don't need parents in the same way as a zero-to-three-year-old, but they do need help with processing feelings and regulating emotions.

**How does technology contribute to the rise in mental-health problems?**

The invention of the smartphone really was a downfall, for adults and for kids. There's an addictive quality to being attached to information and people at all times. It's like having threat signals

sent constantly to your brain — you have to be constantly vigilant.

For adolescent girls especially, social media can amplify what is already the threat-sensing part of their brains; their amygdala is in hyperdrive. It creates anxiety and makes them self-conscious. And it feels like they can never get away from it.

**How can parents distinguish normal worry — about a grade, a breakup, a sick relative — from clinical anxiety?**

It's natural for everyone to have a few bad days. But if the signs and symptoms of depression and anxiety last more than two weeks and seem intense, you do want to get help for your child. If you take them to a psychiatrist, they will most likely be medicated. That doesn't get to the root cause of the issue. You're medicating symptoms away but not helping that child long-term. Instead, find a feelings-oriented talk therapist who will get to the bottom of things and understand the psychosocial factors in family and school that are having an impact.

One caveat: if your child is suicidal, take them to a psychiatrist right away. Parents should never be afraid of asking a child if they ever consider hurting themselves. Some people think that if you mention it, you'll put the thought in your child's head and make it worse. It's just the opposite. If you mention it, it's manageable.

**What's the most important advice you can give to parents navigating this new age of anxiety?**

Spend as much time as you can with your kids while they're still living with you, while you still have the opportunity to help them grow up. Be nonjudgmental; have open communication. Being present for your children isn't about doing things for them excessively or helicopter parenting. It's about helping them learn to deal with experiences that are overwhelming for them. And there's a lot that's overwhelming.

— *Beth Weinhouse '80JRN*

# Global by Design

Hanako Maeda '10CC bridges Japanese and American style

**G**rowing up in Tokyo and New York, Hanako Maeda '10CC was captivated by the vibrant fashion scenes of her two home cities. As a Columbia College student majoring in art history and anthropology, she interned at *Vogue* and completed a summer design intensive in Paris. “I learned that fashion is more than just pretty clothes,” she says. “Every brand has a unique story, and it’s the stories that inspire people.”

Today, Maeda is the founder and creative director of Adeam (her last name spelled backward), a luxury brand with an East-meets-West aesthetic. Adeam’s unique silhouettes and edgy functional wear have been seen on celebrities from tennis player Naomi Osaka to first lady Jill Biden to comedian Jenny Slate '04CC. Maeda’s tastes are eclectic, surprising, and inclusive. The runway looks for her spring/summer 2024 collection draw inspiration from ballet, but for fall/winter 2023 she was inspired by pop-punk and the manga series *Nama*.

Adeam, which has focused primarily on women’s fashion since launching in 2012, introduced a gender-neutral line in 2021 called Ichi, the Japanese word for “one.” “Japanese youths have more freedom when it comes to dressing and styling themselves,” explains Maeda. “If you go to Harajuku [Tokyo’s fashion district], you see people mixing women’s wear, menswear, and everything in between. I wanted to capture that spirit.”



Clockwise from top left: Hanako Maeda and looks from Adeam’s spring/summer 2024, Ichi, and fall/winter 2023 collections.

MAEDA: COURTESY OF ADEAM; RUNWAY PHOTOS: NOWFASHION; BOTTOM LEFT: COLUMBIA ATHLETICS; BOTTOM RIGHT: OLIMPIA MILANO



Lô playing for the Columbia Lions (above) and Olimpia Milano (right).



## Slam Dunk

Maodo Lô '16CC, a former Columbia Lions basketball player, helped Team Germany win its first-ever gold medal at the FIBA Basketball World Cup, held this past summer in Manila. Lô, who was born and raised in Berlin, has won several national championships with German professional teams since graduating from Columbia and represented his home country at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. He is currently a guard for the Italian team Olimpia Milano.



## Data Feed

Gro Intelligence, founded by Sara Menker '12BUS, uses AI to bring hunger and climate risks into focus

**B**ack in 2008, a young Morgan Stanley employee noticed she was reacting to the global financial crisis differently from those around her.

“One of my colleagues was buying guns and gold as a way to protect himself from the world collapsing,” recalls Sara Menker '12BUS. “And I was like, Listen, if the world’s collapsing, I just want to eat.” She started researching the price of farmland in her home country of Ethiopia. “It was a personal interest that grew into a complete obsession,” she says.

Menker didn’t end up buying a farm, but she did find a productive outlet for her preoccupation with food security. Thirteen years later, she was included on *Time*’s list of the hundred “most influential people” for her work as founder and CEO of Gro Intelligence. The technology company, launched in 2014, uses AI to analyze and forecast agricultural activity around the world — yielding

insights on everything from the effect of El Niño on the Ivory Coast’s cocoa harvest to the global price disparity between palm and soybean oil. Its goal is to tackle the challenge of world hunger in the age of climate change, helping decision-makers build more resilient food and economic systems.

Gro’s mission is deeply personal to Menker, who says that as a child growing up in Addis Ababa, she experienced the far-reaching effects of famine and political unrest. “Fuel was rationed, sugar was rationed,” she says. “It didn’t matter if you were rich or poor.” After moving to the US and graduating from Mount Holyoke College, she pursued work in commodities risk management and natural-gas options trading.

When Menker started investigating Ethiopian agriculture, she discovered a broken system — “Africa is filled with so much arable land, but it’s not yielding as much as it needs to yield” — and her search for explanations

was thwarted by a lack of accurate data. She decided to help fill that informational void and went on to launch Gro with COO Sewit Ahderom '05BUS. The company’s senior vice presidents include classmates of hers from Columbia’s executive MBA program, Jim Heneghan '09BUS and Michael Simonetti '09BUS, as well as Philip Tuinenburg '15BUS.

Gro’s platform — which encompasses the world’s largest agriculture- and climate-related database — draws on more than 170,000 data sets from hundreds of public and private sources. “There’s tons of missing data even after you organize all that,” Menker says, explaining that machine learning can fill in the gaps. Gro has generated some 2.9 million new data series on such topics as the yields of and consumer demand for specific crops, as well as climate risks like fires and floods. Its platform includes user-friendly applications, such as a drought index and an agricultural price-inflation tool, and predictive models. Gro is now working to merge its data with that of other industries beyond agriculture, such as real estate and mining, to establish a more comprehensive picture of climate risk across sectors.

The for-profit company strikes an uncommon balance between selling its services and providing open-source information for social good. In Menker’s philosophy, when you have access to powerful data and analytics, “it’s your obligation to say something if you see something that impacts humanity.” Commercial clients like insurers, hedge funds, and food-and-beverage companies pay for annual subscriptions. For academics and NGOs working on food security and climate change, access is free. Gro also creates tools for the general public, such as the Food Security Tracker for Africa, a deep dive into the status of staple crops in forty-nine countries.

Menker travels frequently between the company’s offices in New York,

## NEWSMAKERS

Singapore, and Nairobi, working not only with corporations and financial institutions but also with governments, which use the platform for managing reserves, evaluating trade policies, and devising other strategies to feed their populations. In May 2022, Menker delivered a speech to the United Nations Security Council, describing the confluence of factors — including



Cocoa farmers in the Ivory Coast.

fertilizer shortages and logistical bottlenecks exacerbated by the war in Ukraine — that had recently plunged four hundred million people worldwide into food insecurity. “In a world that is increasingly isolationist, we need to come together,” she told the UN leaders. “Food is personal. But our agricultural systems are global.”

While the details of Gro’s success stories are often confidential (“food security is national security”), that doesn’t diminish Menker’s pride in her company’s lifesaving work. “I still get excited every time I leave a meeting, knowing Gro has helped to inform a decision that could make a real difference in the lives of hungry people,” she says. “Those moments give me fuel to keep working.”

— Nicole Estvanik Taylor

- **Courtney Bryan '14GSAS**, a New Orleans-based composer and pianist known for fusing jazz, classical, and religious music, received a 2023 MacArthur “genius” fellowship, an \$800,000 grant for artists, researchers, and others.

- **Jon Hilsenrath '96JRN, '97BUS**, an editor and writer at the *Wall Street Journal*, received a 2023 Christopher J. Welles Memorial Prize from Columbia Journalism School for his biography of US treasury secretary Janet Yellen. **John Tozzi '17JRN**, a health reporter at Bloomberg News, also received a 2023 Welles Prize, for uncovering insurance overpayments in New Jersey.

- Lithuanian president Gitanas Nausėda presented Philadelphia resident **Krista Butvydas Bard '77GSAPP**, an honorary consul general for Lithuania, with a Knight’s Cross Order of Merit medal for her efforts to strengthen international ties.



- Actor and singer **Brandon Victor Dixon '07CC** (above) starred in the Off Broadway musical *Hell’s Kitchen*, which premiered at the Public Theater and will move to Broadway in the spring. The show is inspired by the life of R&B icon and former Columbia student Alicia Keys, who wrote the music and lyrics.



- **Christopher Zalla '04SOA** (above) wrote and directed *Radical*, a 2023 film about a struggling school in a Mexican border town. The movie, which was produced by **Benjamin Odell '04SOA**, hit theaters last fall after winning the Festival Favorite Award at the 2023 Sundance Film Festival.

- *Inheritance*, an exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art exploring the theme of legacy, includes work by **Kambui Olujimi '13SOA**, a multimedia visual artist, and **Chitra Ganesh '02SOA**, who creates prints inspired by South Asian iconography. The show, curated by **Rujeko Hockley '05CC**, runs through February.

- The American Heart Association selected **Tifphani White-King '98CC**, a tax-services executive at Mazars, to spearhead New York City’s 2023–24 Go Red for Women initiative, which promotes cardiac-health awareness.

- **Rosemary Salomone '76GSAS, '84LAW**, a linguist and law professor at St. John’s University, received a 2023 Premio Pavese — an Italian literary prize — for her book *The Rise of English: Global Politics and the Power of Language*. She is the second American to receive the award.

- Sculptor **Bat-Ami Rivlin '19SOA** received a 2023 Socrates Annual Fellowship, which grants funding and studio space to artists creating large-scale public installations. Rivlin’s sculpture, a wheel made from recycled bathtubs, will be on view at the Socrates Sculpture Park in Queens until March 24.



## IN INAUGURAL ADDRESS, PRESIDENT SHAFIK PROPOSES A “NEW SOCIAL CONTRACT” FOR COLUMBIA

**O**n October 4, Minouche Shafik was officially inaugurated as the twentieth president of Columbia University.

In her inaugural address, delivered to a large crowd in front of Low Library, Shafik reaffirmed Columbia’s commitment to academic excellence, public service, and diversity, while also inviting faculty, students, and alumni to join her in imagining how the University might evolve to serve humanity in new ways.

“Columbians have always been pioneers; we’ve always been ahead of the curve,” she said, citing the large numbers of influential scientists, artists, entrepreneurs, public officials, and activists who have attended or taught here. “Now we have the opportunity to be pioneers yet again. We can be pioneers in redefining, for a new era, what the role of a great university should be.”

Shafik then proposed that Columbia University pursue a “new social contract” with the world beyond its gates. She outlined three pillars of this new social contract: educating citizens and leaders; solving real-world problems; and strengthening local and global communities.

“The first job of universities is to educate citizens and leaders who are comfortable with rigorous debate,” Shafik said. “At a time of great divisions, the experience of reading and debating texts together

creates the foundation for informed and enlightened citizens and leaders. Through their teaching, our faculty get to touch the future and shape the people who will determine it.”

The second part of the social contract between a great university and society, she asserted, is to “create the knowledge that will take humanity forward — whether it is finding solutions to global warming or cancer, exploring how new technologies affect us, or finding ways to preserve our social and cultural history. University research has probably done more to advance human progress than anything else.”

The third and last pillar of a great university’s social contract, she said, is its commitment to community. “To be an engaged citizen at Columbia is to be engaged globally and locally,” said Shafik. “We need to do more of this, and I am eager to find a way to make such local and global engagement core to who we are as a University.”

She concluded: “My vision of Columbia is of an institution that is a friend to our neighbors, an asset to this nation, and a beacon in this world. So let us forge a new social contract with society and with each other that will make us an exemplar of a great university in the twenty-first century.”

*Read the full speech at [president.columbia.edu](https://www.columbia.edu/president).*



## PROFESSOR LOUIS BRUS WINS NOBEL PRIZE IN CHEMISTRY

Louis Brus '69GSAS, a longtime Columbia faculty member, was recently awarded the Nobel Prize in Chemistry. He was recognized along with two other scientists — Mounqi G. Bawendi of MIT and Alexei I. Ekimov of Nanocrystals Technology Inc. — for developing quantum dots, infinitesimal man-made crystals with special optical properties.

“These smallest components of nanotechnology now spread their light from televisions and LED lamps, and can also guide surgeons when they remove tumour tissue,” according to an announcement from the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, which awards the nearly \$1 million prize.

Brus, an Ohio native who attended Rice University on a Navy scholarship and then earned his PhD at Columbia, began his career at AT&T's Bell Labs, in New Jersey, in the 1970s. It was there that he made a remarkable discovery, finding that nanoscale salt



crystals emit different colors of light, depending on their size. Just a couple of years earlier, Ekimov had observed a similar effect in copper chloride crystals; taken together, the scientists' work revealed that nanoparticles' physical dimensions, rather than their elementary makeup, determine the wavelength of light they release. Bawendi, who worked as a postdoctoral researcher in Brus's lab in the 1980s, went on to develop a chemical

method to produce quantum dots of extremely high quality, enabling their commercial use.

In addition to revolutionizing consumer electronics and biomedical technologies, quantum dots are widely expected to lead to advances in solar cells and quantum computing.

Brus, who was recruited to Columbia in 1996, is the Samuel Latham Mitchill Professor Emeritus and a special research scientist at the University. He is one of eighty-seven Columbians — alumni, faculty, researchers, and administrators — to win a Nobel Prize.

Upon receiving news of his award, Brus emphasized that many people had contributed to the development of quantum dots over the years. “This is a collaborative effort — partly physics, partly chemistry, partly materials science,” he said. “I'm just lucky, I guess, that the Nobel Prize has chosen to honor this particular area of research at this time.”

## COLUMBIA RECEIVES \$6.5M GIFT TO EXPAND CEREBRAL-PALSY CENTER

Columbia University's Weinberg Family Cerebral Palsy Center, which since 2013 has provided multidisciplinary care for people with cerebral palsy and related movement disorders, has received a \$6.5 million gift from its original benefactors, Debby and Peter Weinberg. The gift will enable the center to expand its clinical offerings, grow its research programs, and create fellowships for aspiring physicians and scientists interested in studying and treating cerebral palsy.

Affecting about one million people in the US,

cerebral palsy is a group of disorders, caused by damage to the developing brain, that result in impaired movement. The Weinberg Family Center is dedicated to providing lifetime care for individuals with cerebral palsy, with services attending to both their physical and emotional well-being. Researchers at the center, under the direction of Columbia neurologist and neuroscientist Jason Carmel '03VPS, are also developing new treatments that seek to repair the nervous system. For example, pilot studies



Columbia clinicians Lisa Yoon and Jason Carmel work with a young patient at the Weinberg Family Cerebral Palsy Center.

at the center and elsewhere suggest that electrical stimulation of the spinal cord could partially restore movement, including walking and manual dexterity.

“We are at an inflection point in the field of electrical

stimulation where protocols developed in laboratory models have proven safe and effective,” says Carmel. “I'm really optimistic about the future of treating the nervous system directly in cerebral palsy.”

## BULLETIN

### JON POPPE NAMED HEAD FOOTBALL COACH

The athletics department recently announced that Jon Poppe has been named the Patricia and Shepard Alexander Head Coach of Football.

Poppe comes to Columbia University from Union College in Schenectady, where he was head coach for one season, leading the Garnet Chargers to a 10–2 record and the second round of the NCAA Division III tournament. From 2015 to 2017, he was the Lions’ defensive secondary coach and recruiting coordinator, helping to bring in nationally ranked recruiting classes. In those roles, Poppe worked closely with legendary Columbia head coach Al Bagnoli, who retired last summer after leading the Lions for eight seasons.

In addition to his time at Columbia University, Poppe had two stints with



Jon Poppe appears at a Columbia press conference announcing his appointment in December.

Harvard between 2011 and 2022, where he coached the secondary and special-team units, which under him were consistently among the best in the country at the Division I level. Poppe has also coached at Holy Cross and Springfield College.

“We are so excited to welcome Jon and his family back to Columbia,” says athletics director Peter Pilling. “Jon did a remarkable job at Union College this past season, has a winning pedigree, and will be a great leader for our student-athletes.”

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY ATHLETICS / STOCKTON PHOTO



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## COLUMBIA LIBRARY ACQUIRES PAPERS OF JOSEFINA BÁEZ

Columbia's Rare Book and Manuscript Library recently acquired the archives of Dominican-born author, dramatist, and performance artist Josefina Báez. An influential figure in the New York City art scene for decades, Báez is the founder and director of the Ay Ombe Theatre, whose productions often explore issues related to race, the immigrant experience, and identity.



Her archives include drafts and galleys of some of her best-known works, including *Dominicanish* (2000) and *Comrade, Bliss Ain't Playing* (2008); video footage of rehearsals and performances; and flyers, posters, ticket stubs, and other ephemera.

"It is impossible to tell the story of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Latinos in New York, global Black thought, and performance history without Báez, an innovator in method, form, and language," says Frances Negrón-Muntaner, a Columbia professor of English and comparative literature and the founding curator of the Rare Book and Manuscript Library's Latino Arts and Activisms collection.



First-year guard Riley Weiss competes against the Memphis Tigers on December 6.

## DEFENDING THE CROWN

The women's basketball team, which won its first Ivy League championship last year, started off the 2023–24 season strong, sweeping a homestand against Northeastern, Providence, Villanova, Memphis, and Wagner in December. Tickets are still available for the regular season, which extends into March. Visit [gocolumbialions.com](http://gocolumbialions.com).

## ANDREA CALIFANO TO LEAD CHAN ZUCKERBERG BIOHUB NEW YORK

Andrea Califano, a Columbia systems biologist, was recently tapped to lead a new multi-institutional research center, the Chan Zuckerberg Biohub New York, whose mission is to find novel ways of harnessing the immune system to help fight cancer, Alzheimer's disease, and many other conditions.

The center, supported by Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg and his wife Priscilla Chan's philanthropic organization, the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, will bring together teams of scientists from Columbia, Rockefeller University, and Yale. According to Califano, participating scientists will conduct basic research that could one day enable colleagues to bioengineer immune cells that monitor real-time changes in the body and diagnose and treat diseases in their earliest stages.

The New York-based biohub is one of several research institutes created in



recent years by the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, with other locations in San Francisco, Chicago, and Redwood City, California. "Joining the Chan Zuckerberg Biohub Network presents a unique opportunity to assemble a remarkable dream team of scientists and technologists to pursue their most ambitious goals aimed at creating a healthier future for all of us," says Califano.

## The Vulnerables

By Sigrid Nunez '72BC, '75SOA (Riverhead)

With *The Vulnerables*, a seemingly random, often discursive, thoroughly wonderful new book, Sigrid Nunez '72BC, '75SOA has written not so much a novel as another of her virtuoso mash-ups of fiction, memoir, and intellectual rumination (see also *The Friend* and *What Are You Going Through*). This signature form clearly owes a deep debt to Virginia Woolf, one of Nunez's abiding literary heroes. Woolf aspired to write an "essay-novel" that, in Nunez's words, "included, well, everything." Woolf envisioned this exciting new hybrid as "a terrific affair" that would embrace "history, politics, feminism, art, literature — in short a summing up of all I know."

Nunez has created just such a marvelous amalgam here. But fear not: *The*

*Vulnerables* is not merely a series of literary allusions or digressive meditations on culture and politics, delightful as those essay-like elements are. Happily, Nunez's empathy, wit, and acute social observations also give rise to great storytelling.

The book's action kicks in days before the COVID-19 lockdown with an

unplanned reunion of the narrator (a sixty-something writer who lives alone in New York City) and four of her former college dorm mates, all of whom bear the names of flowers. Violet, Rose, Jasmine, Camellia, and the unnamed narrator have just attended the funeral of a sixth member of their group, Lily — "The first one of us to get married. The first to have a baby. The first to die."

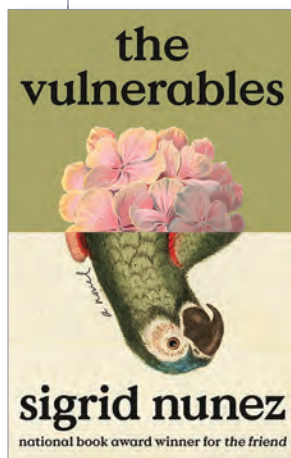
The women's lively conversations, which take place over post-funeral drinks and

at breakfast the next day, range from recollections of the deceased's penchant for extramarital affairs to an analysis of the wholesale demotion of white men in society to Jasmine's wrenching story about her daughter's stepson, a high-achieving college student who has been charged with sexual assault. In detailing the last, Nunez manages to shed more light in a few paragraphs on the infinitely thorny sexual politics of today's college campuses than entire books on the topic have done.

The heart of the story, however, is the narrator's relationship with a parrot she begins to care for after the pandemic sets in. Here Nunez reaffirms her status, established with the National Book Award-winning *The Friend* (which explores the close bond between the protagonist and the Great Dane she inherits), as the reigning poet laureate of animal-human relationships. The parrot, a gorgeous macaw named Eureka, belongs to a wealthy New York City couple who are marooned in California when the lockdown begins. The narrator moves in to the couple's lavish apartment after she relinquishes her own place to a pulmonologist who has come to New York to help with the COVID crisis.

The narrator's interactions with Eureka, a compelling character in his own right, inspire a wealth of touching and often profound ruminations about animals' links with humans. "I believe that an affinity with other living things, a desire to be near and connect with them, and a love of natural beauty, are in our DNA," she muses. "How to square this, though, with what anyone living in our day can see: the human drive to make the world increasingly ugly, and, in the end, to trash it."

Even the narrator can't elude this paradox. Feeling creatively blocked and increasingly isolated, venturing outside only to take long walks and to buy food (her age makes her one of the core "vulnerables" of the book's title), she is nonetheless furious when her solitude is



disrupted by the return of Eureka's earlier caretaker, a troubled NYU dropout whom she dubs "Vetch." Because neither has anywhere else to go, the pair divvy up the cavernous apartment, sticking to separate zones and meeting only rarely in the kitchen.

Vetch, a good-looking vegan who lacks purpose (but not strongly expressed opinions), loves Eureka as much as the narrator does. As her resentment wanes, the two begin to share space, meals, long chats, cannabis, micro-doses of psilocybin, and caramel oat-milk ice cream while "idling another lockdown day away." Eventually, of course, this sense of stopped time must yield to reality, and Vetch

moves out, taking (with the owners' blessing) Eureka with him. The narrator reclaims her apartment and resumes a semblance of her former life — a life that necessarily means trying to make sense of the experience she has just had.

Woolf never pulled off her dream of an essay-novel: she ended up separating the attempt into two books, a polemic called *Three Guineas* and the novel *The Years*. Nunez, however, has the alchemy down pat: *The Vulnerables* succeeds on every level and includes, well, everything. By Woolf's or anyone else's metric, it is a terrific affair.

— Lorraine Glennon

## Mapping the Darkness

By Kenneth Miller '83JRN (Hachette)

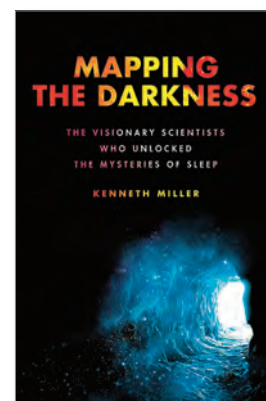
"The quest to understand sleep — and to apply that understanding to our daily lives — has become a global obsession," writes journalist Kenneth Miller '83JRN in his first book, *Mapping the Darkness*, a compelling history of sleep science. There are major institutes devoted to sleep research, thousands of sleep-disorder clinics worldwide, and a multibillion-dollar industry offering medications, supplements, and devices. Today anyone interested in their sleep health need only strap on a smartwatch before bed, and in the morning they'll have an analysis of their REM cycles.

But it hasn't always been this way. In fact, writes Miller, just a century ago, almost nothing was known about our subconscious state — a staggering fact, considering that we spend about a third of our lives in the land of Nod. In his book, Miller chronicles the work of the four maverick scientists — Nathaniel Kleitman 1920GSAS, Eugene Aserinsky, William Dement, and Mary Carskadon — who pioneered sleep research, taking it from the fringe to the mainstream.

Kleitman, the "patriarch" of sleep science, was a Jewish immigrant who escaped a Russian pogrom and a Lebanese POW camp before

finally landing in America, where he studied physiology at City College and Columbia and then entered a PhD program at the University of Chicago. Rampant antisemitism kept him from the good research grants, so he took the only topic that no one else would touch: sleep. Kleitman's initial experiments were literally primitive — together with an assistant, he camped out in a cave for a month to assess the body's natural sleep cycles when deprived of all outside stimuli.

In the early 1950s, Kleitman's assistant, Aserinsky, used early brain-mapping technology to discover the REM state — "revealing that the slumbering brain is as active as its waking counterpart" (amazingly, even this was not considered sufficient research for him to earn a PhD). Dement, another of Kleitman's protégés, founded the first Stanford University sleep clinic, where he linked dreams to REM cycles and helped us understand neural activity during sleep. Carskadon, a cousin of Dement's wife, was initially pushed out of neuroscience because it was a "man's field." Thanks to the family connection, she ended up at Stanford doing clerical work for Dement, who saw her potential and encouraged her to earn a doctoral degree. Her research focuses on the sleep needs of



adolescents, and it inspired much-needed policy changes in school systems in the 1980s.

Sleep science, as Miller emphasizes, is much more than a wellness trend. Many catastrophes, from the space shuttle *Challenger* explosion to the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill, have been found in hindsight to be due to human error, caused in part by a lack of sleep. And modern technology increasingly undermines our need to rest. "Growing attachment to digital devices makes it harder to disconnect from waking consciousness," Miller writes, "and the blue light from screens throws our circadian clocks into confusion."

There is still much to be learned about sleep. But this engrossing tale of four scientists plunging into the unknown gives us a better understanding of the deeply important role of sleep in our lives and is an inspiring story of scientific discovery against all odds.

— Rebecca Shapiro

# The Liberators

By E. J. Koh '13SOA (Tin House)



**T**he *Liberators*, the poetic first novel from E. J. Koh '13SOA, opens with a widower, Yohan, longing to access his late wife's wisdom. It is 1980 in Daejeon, South Korea, and after a coup d'état, the country is under the thumb of a US-backed military dictator. News of North Korean tunnels has South Korea feeling "contaminated with spies."

The army opens fire on students protesting martial law in Gwangju, killing hundreds. Amid the horror, Yohan thinks of his wife: "She would tell us what had been set into motion — like a single thread unraveling a silk tapestry — when we'd turned against ourselves and called each other the enemy ... I wanted to ask Namjo whether a country split in half was still a country."

It's a question that reverberates across *The Liberators* as Koh follows four generations of two families from Korea to California, tracing how decades of occupation, war, and division echo in the lives of individuals. Koh begins the story in 1980 but dips back to the years preceding the 1945 division of the Korean peninsula after thirty-five years of Japanese colonial rule. The border, "an arbitrary line," cleaved "a society which shared a culture and a language," Koh writes. Reunification remains illusory; the Korean War is ongoing, paused by armistice. Narrated in short chapters from the shifting and split perspectives of a dozen characters, *The Liberators* grapples with what Korea's rending has wrought in the lives of these families and those they touch.

At the center of this spiderweb of interconnected lives and histories is Yohan and Namjo's daughter Insuk. A twenty-three-year-old idealist who wants to join the protests for democracy, Insuk is engaged to fellow university student Sungho, "a nihilist about country." Not long after the engagement, Yohan is imprisoned under suspicion of harboring communist sentiments. Insuk and Sungho — already unhappy — wed in Sungho's impoverished and overbearing mother's basement apartment. Sungho soon leaves his wife,

now pregnant, with his mother as he immigrates to San Jose, California, in hopes that his family will join him and establish a freer life there. By the time they arrive in 1983, Insuk has already given birth to their son, Henry. He grows up watching his grieving mother struggle to adjust to life in America; meanwhile he develops a tendency to stray far from home. The family has left Korea, but they have erected their own borders between one another.

While *The Liberators* is Koh's first novel, her work spans genres, languages, and continents and is united by a lyrical tone and an unflinching approach to Korean history. Koh studied poetry and translation at Columbia and in 2017 published her first book, *A Lesser Love*, a collection of love poems and elegies grounded in the Korean concept of *jeong*, the deep bond between people, places, and things. She explored her own familial bonds and history in the

2020 memoir *The Magical Language of Others*, translating and reflecting on letters her mother sent

her in the early 2000s from South Korea, where Koh's parents had returned for a job, leaving a teenage Koh and her older brother behind in Northern California. In reading these letters as an adult and researching how her family's past in Korea was marked by violence and destruction, Koh gained new empathy for her mother.

Koh's turn to fiction has enabled her to revisit her family's history through a more expansive — though no less intimate — lens. By splitting the narration between several voices, Koh juxtaposes competing views and memories, mining the tensions between personal and state narratives, love and war, paranoia and trust, borders and connections, captivity and liberation. And while the novel deals with historical episodes, from the 1948–49 Jeju Island massacre to the 1988 Seoul Olympics to the 2000 Inter-Korean Summit, the focus throughout is on how these events affect the characters. Most of the historical exposition comes from snippets of personal and political debates in San Jose's Korean restaurants and pool halls.

Even as it maps dreams crushed by borders, *The Liberators* is ultimately about survival and love and reasons to hope for peace. As Insuk reminds her granddaughter toward the end of the novel, "The sun still shone upon the wreckage and the water, and upon everyone and everywhere in the world."

— Kristen Martin '16SOA



## READING LIST

New and noteworthy releases

### **NOBILITY IN SMALL THINGS**

*By Craig R. Smith '97JRN*  
As chairman of the Department of Surgery at New York-Presbyterian Hospital, Craig R. Smith has enjoyed a remarkable career. In fact, in 2004 he led the team that performed the quadruple bypass that saved President Bill Clinton's life. And for most of his working years, there was a certain rhythm to his days — until COVID-19 upended the world in March 2020. With all his surgeries canceled, Smith started to write much-needed dispatches from the frontlines, first as e-mails to his staff and then as public posts on Twitter. With his first book, Smith looks back on that harrowing time and reflects on his long career in medicine, the moral convictions that ground him, and his hopes for the future.

### **TO FREE THE CAPTIVES**

*By Tracy K. Smith '97SOSA*  
“I descend from a history of daily miracles,” writes Tracy K. Smith in her new book, a remarkable hybrid of family lore and American history, “by which the soul of a people whom institution upon institution has sought to annihilate yet lives on.” Despite seemingly insurmountable intergenerational oppression, Smith graduated from Harvard and Columbia and became the poet laureate of the United States. In this book, she seeks to understand and celebrate the “titanic” strength

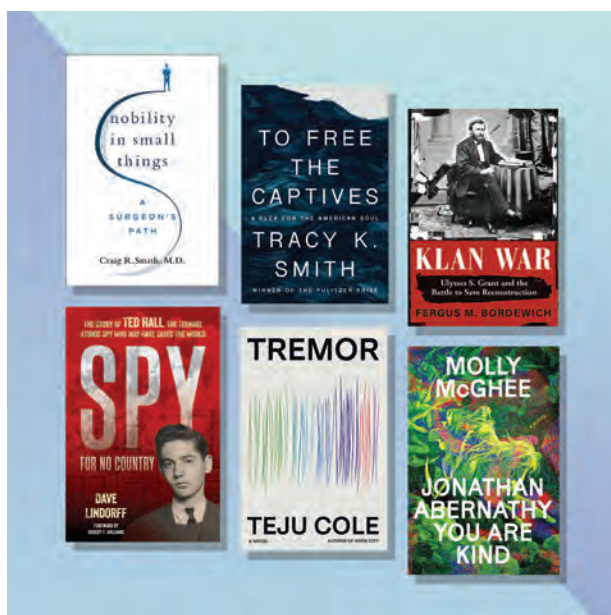
it took for her family to succeed in a world intent on seeing them fail — and she asks what the nation might learn from this resilience.

### **KLAN WAR**

*By Fergus M. Bordewich '77JRN*  
We tend to think of the KKK as a fringe group, made up of rogues and outcasts. But if we trace its roots, as journalist and historian Fergus M. Bordewich does in his riveting new book, it's clear that that is far from true. Rather, when the Ku Klux Klan — which Bordewich calls “the first organized terrorist movement in American history” — rose to prominence after the Civil War, it was full of well-heeled members of society intent on destroying Reconstruction. Bordewich paints a vivid picture of a turbulent time, documenting the rise of the KKK and President Ulysses S. Grant's struggle to contain it and reunite the country after a bitter war.

### **TREMOR**

*By Teju Cole '03GSAS*  
In the opening of *Tremor* — photographer, critic, and fiction writer Teju Cole's first novel in more than twelve years — a Nigerian Harvard professor (much like Cole himself) named Tunde considers buying a West African headdress at a Maine antique shop. What, muses Tunde, makes something authentic? What is the value of “provenance”? Questions like these, of art and its role in society and of race and colonialism,



permeate this gorgeous work of autofiction, which follows Tunde from New England back to Nigeria, which he sees with fresh eyes after years away.

### **JONATHAN ABERNATHY YOU ARE KIND**

*By Molly McGhee '20SOSA*  
Jonathan Abernathy is down on his luck — out of money, friends, prospects, and just about everything else — when a new government program lands him a gig as a “dream auditor.” All Abernathy has to do is enter the subconscious minds of his fellow workers and erase any unpleasant memories that might make them less productive. If Abernathy succeeds, he's told, all his debts will be forgiven. But the title gives it away: Abernathy has too much heart for his task. Still, going along on the ride with him is great fun. Molly McGhee is herself a veteran of the dreaded cubicle — she

started her career on the editorial side of publishing — and her debut novel is a biting satire of office life.

### **SPY FOR NO COUNTRY**

*By Dave Lindorff '75JRN*  
In 1944, a brilliant Harvard junior named Theodore Hall traveled to Los Alamos to work on a top-secret assignment for the US government. But Hall wasn't just the youngest scientist recruited for the Manhattan Project. He was also the youngest Soviet spy, feeding integral information about the plutonium bomb to the Kremlin. Hall was no Soviet sympathizer, though, argues Dave Lindorff in this impeccably researched biography. Rather, he claims, Hall worried that if Americans monopolized nuclear science, the results could be catastrophic. Sharing our atomic secrets evened the playing field, and, Lindorff claims, may have saved the world as we know it.

# Working Girls

In *Women Money Power*, Josie Cox '22BUS gives a comprehensive history of women in the workplace over the past eighty years and the social and political barriers they've faced along the way



**Columbia Magazine:** Your book starts with World War II, when Rosie the Riveters all over America went to work for the war effort — only to watch most of their jobs disappear when the men returned. Why begin there?

**Josie Cox:** World War II was a unique moment not just in the history of the world but also in the history of the labor market: for the first time, women entered the paid workforce in a significant way. While most of these groundbreaking women have passed away, a few were still alive and able to tell me their stories. I wanted to give them that platform.

**CM:** The next really significant moment for women looking to work arguably came in 1960, when the FDA approved the birth-control pill. Why was this so central to women's economic advancement?

**JC:** I cannot emphasize enough this direct correlation between access to birth control and access to the paid labor market. The FDA approval of the first contraceptive pill was a rare and incredible moment of economic opportunity for women because the newfound ability to plan the expe-

rience of motherhood allowed them to navigate their careers in unprecedented ways. The appetite for this product was profound. The 1960s and the increasing availability of reliable birth control signaled a shift in social norms that culminated in the 1970s with not just *Roe v. Wade* in 1973 but a host of other court decisions and legislative efforts that affirmed women's equality, including access to credit and the right not to be fired because of pregnancy.

**CM:** We're all familiar with the "glass ceiling" that women bump up against as they pursue career advancement, but you also invoke a phenomenon known as the "glass cliff." What is that?

**JC:** The term was coined in 2005 by two economists at the University of Exeter, Alexander Haslam and Michelle Ryan, who analyzed the macroeconomic contexts of the appointment of women to positions of power. They found an overwhelming tendency for women to be offered top positions when the likelihood of failure was particularly high. What we can extrapolate from this trend is that women often ascend to positions of power — get appointed as CEO, for example — at times when a company is poised to perform poorly, when a CEO risks being removed because of wider economic forces. Following this reasoning, we can conclude that women in these situations are viewed as more disposable than men.

**CM:** A significant gender pay gap persists in this country. But your book brings up something still more pernicious: the gender *equity* gap. What is the distinction between the

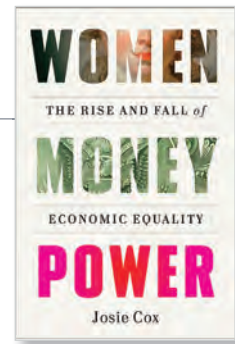
two gaps, and why is the equity gap so important?

**JC:** Equity is stock in a company; the gender equity gap refers to the ownership stake in companies held by women relative to men. Women founders struggle more than their male counterparts to raise money from investors and even when they succeed are often forced to give up more equity in their own companies. Many factors are at play, but the one I highlight is bias. Women's authority is questioned more; their investors tend to trust women less than men. This element of the gender wealth gap is poorly understood, but it's critical to the broader landscape of socioeconomic inequity in this country.

**CM:** Even as the gender pay gap has not budged much in recent years, a parallel narrative has arisen that American men are being eclipsed by women, who are living longer, attending college at higher rates, and pursuing professional degrees in greater numbers. How do you interpret these dueling narratives?

**JC:** I cite Richard V. Reeves's 2022 book *Of Boys and Men*, which argues that most men had no comparable experience to the strides women made during this period of seismic social and economic change from the 1950s through the 1980s. The result, Reeves posits, has been a male malaise not unlike an identity crisis. And we do see some men feeling threatened by competition from women for positions that once would have been off-limits to them. We can't afford to ignore this conflict. I believe the only way to address gender equity is to look at the issues from every perspective.

— Lorraine Glennon





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# Houdini's Columbia Connections

The great magician can't escape his academic ties

When the illusionist and escape artist Harry Houdini died on Halloween 1926, Morris Young '35VPS was crushed. Young, a seventeen-year-old magic enthusiast, had once seen Houdini perform and afterward had seized the opportunity to show the master his best trick, in which he appeared to suspend himself horizontally in the air. "Houdini was impressed," says Young's daughter, Cheryl Young Deknatel '72BUS, "and he offered to get my father into the Society of American Magicians."

Intrigued since childhood by sleight of hand and the illusions of magic, Young became an ophthalmologist and raised his two children — Deknatel and her brother, Charles — in a magic-filled home on West 99th and Riverside. "My dad wasn't a performing magician, but he did a few tricks that would terrify my mother," Deknatel recalls. "He'd make a lit cigarette disappear by holding it in his mouth. You've got to practice, and you can hurt yourself."

In 1961, Young published, with coauthor Walter B. Gibson, *Houdini's Fabulous Magic*, which inspired a generation of magicians. Now in its fourth edition (it was reissued last year by Vine Leaves Press), the book explains many of Houdini's famous stunts, including the handcuff act (Houdini's daring variations on this classic trick required hundreds of keys and a special belt) and the straitjacket escape. "To escape a straitjacket, Houdini would dislocate his shoulder," says Deknatel. "Your body has to be able to do that, and even if it can, it's painful. But he trained himself"

Houdini, born Erich Weisz in Hungary (he moved to the US at age four), was one of the early twentieth century's biggest celebrities, and he had many ties to Columbia. In 1904, toward the end of a triumphant tour of Europe, he bought a brownstone at 278 West 113th Street, just blocks from campus. His lawyer was Bernard Ernst 1905CC, whom he trained in magic. The magician and author John Mulholland, who taught at Columbia, helped Houdini write lectures unmasking spiritualists who conned the public by claiming to communicate with the dead. Houdini had once promised his wife that after his passing he would, if at all possible, contact her from "the other side."



Nearly two years after the fact, Columbia English professor R. F. Dibble, in the *Nation*, wrote that Houdini's "complete silence since his death, despite the many attempts made to communicate with him, furnishes perhaps the strongest argument against the spiritualists."

Young wasn't the only Columbian to put out a book on Houdini. In 1996, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author and magician Kenneth Silverman '56CC, '64GSAS published *Houdini!!! The Career of Ehrich Weiss*, generally considered the definitive Houdini biography. Alex Stone '11GSAS, in his 2012 book *Fooling Houdini: Magicians, Mentalists, Math Geeks, and the Hidden Powers of the Mind*, focused

on the science involved in deceiving the eye and mind. "I think there's much to be gained from reverse engineering a magic trick from the standpoint of cognitive science and psychology," says Stone, who studied physics at Columbia. "We often don't realize how ingenious a trick is. Once you learn the method, the illusions may no longer be a mystery, but you can find them even more interesting and beautiful."

As a collector, Young amassed a trove of magic-themed texts and artifacts. But one was especially dear to him: a pair of Houdini's handcuffs. He acquired them in the late 1940s, following the death of Houdini's brother Theodore Hardeen, who had taken possession of Harry's magic paraphernalia. One day, Hardeen's widow called Young: she was selling the house and invited him to take what was left. Young went into the cellar, and that's where he found the handcuffs.

He kept the cuffs on display in his library. As children, Deknatel and her brother were mesmerized by them. In 2024, to mark the 150th anniversary of Houdini's birth, they will publish *Houdini's Last Handcuffs*, a fantasy based on their childhood in 1950s New York.

Young died in 2002 at ninety-three, a much-honored figure in the magic world. His obituary notes that he used a mnemonic system to interpret the numbers of Houdini's Harlem address, 278 West 113th Street. He came up with "Uncuff We Tie Them" — another reminder that, as with life, there is more to magic than meets the eye. — Paul Hond

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