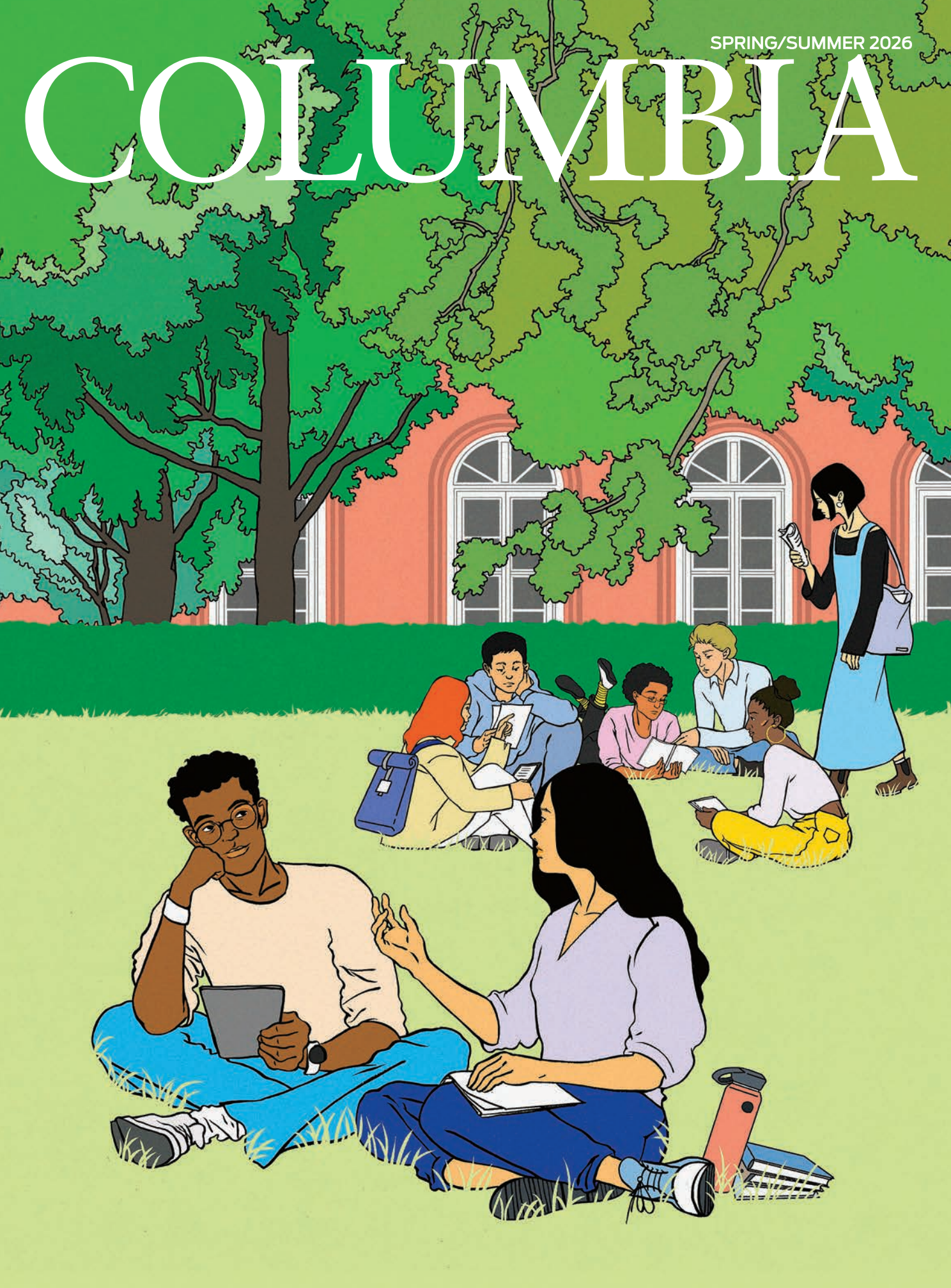


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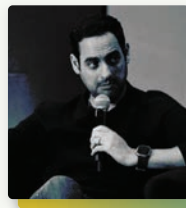
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His Signature Achievement

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FEEDBACK



COVER STORIES

Euphoria! The winter edition of the magazine prompted gushers of nostalgia here at the Buck household. The cover in all its elements — the image, the components, the perfectly blended detail — magically triggered a reflection on the emotional memories that I share with my wife, Carol, of our youth at Columbia. We were graduate students there in the late sixties, and madly in love during one of Columbia's most turbulent periods. We are still married after these fifty-seven-plus years, with three amazing kids. Thank you for the exquisite aide-mémoire.

Jan '70LAW and Carol Buck '69SIPA
Princeton, NJ

Your winter covers are amazing! Particularly great is the Winter 2025-26 cover, by Victoria Tentler-Krylov '98GSAPP. Thanks for the art that I'm proud to have in my house!

Reggie Henderson '84CC
Rochester, NY

I still love receiving *Columbia Magazine* in the mail. Over time I've

watched it grow lighter and thinner and noticed it's printed only three times a year now. I suspect it's just a matter of time before the publication migrates completely to the web and content will be uploaded on a regular basis.

When/if that happens, what I will miss most of all is the cover art. The latest winter issue cover, by Victoria Tentler-Krylov, was just beautiful, in both execution and feeling. It transported me back to those snowy nights when we would come out of class into a world covered in white and head for the subway station at 116th Street. I think it's safe to say there's no way a website can replicate cover art!

Michael D. Minichiello '85SOA
New York, NY

In a world saturated with digital noise, the print magazine carries a distinct and increasingly rare value. It is deliberate, focused, and permanent. It asks for attention rather than competing for it. That distinction matters, particularly for an institution defined by rigor, depth, and long-term thinking.

COLUMBIA MAGAZINE

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 **COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY**
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For me, the print edition is not a matter of nostalgia or convenience. It is a tangible continuation of my relationship with Columbia and of the significant personal and financial investment I made in my education. A physical magazine that lives on a desk or shelf signals care, seriousness, and belonging in a way digital content, however strong, cannot fully replicate.

The alumni magazine in print reinforces Columbia as an institution that values substance over immediacy, and meaning over volume. It is something I return to, not something that disappears into a feed.

Thank you for your time and for maintaining the quality and voice of the magazine.

Tom McKeogh '13GSAPP
Basel, Switzerland

To ensure that you continue receiving the magazine in print, visit magazine.columbia.edu/subscribe — Ed.

THE AGE OF EGGS

In “The Babymakers” (Winter 2025–26), the author states that fertility is compromised as parents age, and a woman’s age is the more important factor because “egg quality deteriorates much faster than sperm quality.”

Actually, that fact requires a stronger statement: A woman is born with all the eggs she will ever have, whereas a man’s supply of sperm can renew his entire lifetime. It’s true that overall, age has a bearing on quality for both, but the salient foundation for why women tend to experience infertility as they age is that their eggs are as old as they are. Fertility for a woman drastically plunges after age thirty-five.

Rita Mercedes '09SOA
Ridgefield, CT

SHADES OF CUBA

It is disgraceful that Columbia Law School included a Cuban artist pro-

fessing domestic repression in a panel discussing “authoritarianism” (“Speak Up, Speak Out,” College Walk, Winter 2025–26). She is quoted as saying that in Cuba today “the memory of freedom has been erased.”

No, it’s the memory of the United States’ oppression, domination, and exploitation of the Cuban people that has been erased by the Cuban revolution. The biggest obstacle to Cuban artists, to Cuban culture, to the Cuban people, is not its revolutionary government, but the US embargo, approved by both political parties, continuously strangling Cuba for more than sixty years. An embargo intensified by the current administration, as it ramps up its military forces in the Caribbean. Shame on Columbia for giving credence and cover to the US government’s lies!

Scott Breen '75GSAS
Seattle, WA

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EYES OF THE BEHOLDERS

The article “Seeing Danger That Isn’t There” (Explorations, Winter 2025–26) makes a bold and significant accusation: “It happens all too often: A police officer shoots a Black man, believing he is armed, only to discover that he was holding an ordinary object . . .” I would assume that this statement can be backed up by simple statistics. And if so, why not provide them? I’m surprised that *Columbia Magazine* would revert to sensationalism and unbacked statistics to make such an allegation.

Doron Friedman ’99BUS
Miami Beach, FL

SHOT AT TWICE, HIT ONCE

I would have more interest in reading a “deeply researched” book (*Five Bullets*, by Elliot Williams ’02JRN, ’02LAW, reviewed in Winter 2025–26)

if the review hadn’t referenced Darrell Cabey being shot twice by Bernhard Goetz, when he was shot only once! Sloppy work. For what it’s worth, I was a juror in Goetz’s trial.

Mark Lesly
West Orange, NJ

Author Elliot Williams accurately describes the shooting. We regret the error in our reviewer’s summary. — Ed.

VALUING RESEARCH

I was so heartened to read all the signs of hope presented in the Winter 2025–26 issue through the reports of various research that not only continues to survive the recent funding cuts, but also has amazing future impact on people’s lives.

Barbara E. Solt ’67SW
Cheverly, MD

As a retired scientist and academic, I applaud the editors for continuing to

cover the important role that Columbia, and many other institutions, are playing in continuing pertinent scientific research and making significant contributions to the world that benefit all of humanity. Doing so takes courage and objectivity at a time when science and education in general are under immense pressure by a rogue, undemocratic, and uncaring regime running our amazing country. Thank you, and keep trusting science.

John G. Scandalios
Raleigh, NC

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COLLEGE WALK



From left: Beverly Gage, Molly Jong-Fast, MaryLouise Patterson, and Michael Meeropol

The New Red Scare

What the McCarthy era tells us about today

Academic purges, investigations, harassment, arrests of journalists: If history, as Mark Twain is credited as saying, doesn't repeat itself but often rhymes, Mother Goose herself might blush at the consonance of today's "enemy of the state" rhetoric and the 1950s, when Senator Joe McCarthy demagogued Americans into an anti-communist fury.

In that light, a recent talk called "Confronting McCarthyism," cohosted by Columbia University Libraries, the Lehman Center for American History, and the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, brought together three descendants of American Communists: Molly Jong-Fast '97BC, granddaughter of novelist Howard Fast, imprisoned in 1950 for refusing to name donors to a home for orphans of the Spanish Civil War; MaryLouise Patterson, daughter of William and Louise Patterson, prominent Black labor organizers and civil-rights

activists; and Michael Meeropol, son of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, executed in 1953 for espionage. The trio shared family stories and condemned today's state-sponsored left-baiting — what Patterson called "a third Red Scare."

Historian Beverly Gage '04GSAS moderated the talk. Although the topic was McCarthyism, she noted that the speakers' kin also were investigated by the FBI and the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), of which McCarthy was not a part, and prosecuted by the courts. "If we de-center Joe McCarthy," Gage said, "we see a much longer and much more continuous story."

Meeropol, a retired professor of economics, explained that after World War II, the United States had a choice: to "continue on the path toward social democracy that began with the New Deal and the acceptance of the Soviet Union as a partner in the world," or to

reenact the Red Scare that followed the Russian Revolution of 1917. It chose the latter, he said, leading inexorably to the Cold War — and to a crusade to vilify those who opposed it.

"We knew not to talk to strangers," said Patterson, who, like Meeropol, grew up in the 1940s and '50s. "Not because they'd kidnap us, but because they might be FBI agents." Patterson portrayed World War II as a global struggle against "the attempted takeover of fascists," in which "African Americans valiantly fought" to defeat European fascism and, by extension, the American fascism of Jim Crow. But the US government "wasn't about to liberate the twenty million African Americans." Indeed, said Patterson, who is a retired pediatrician, anti-communism was "mostly a pretext" to stop labor movements and Black liberation.

Jong-Fast, a journalist and author, told of being confused as a child by

stories of the anti-communist witch hunts. Why had her grandfather, who never committed a crime, been jailed for three months? Her mother, the writer Erica Jong '63BC, '65GSAS, explained to her that “you might find yourself in a country that no longer recognizes its own rules.” Jong-Fast then read a passage from Howard Fast’s autobiography, regarding his FBI files: “The lousy bits and pieces of my life are nowhere in those pages, only the decent and positive acts: speaking at meetings for housing, for trade unionism, for better government, for liberalism, for a free press, for the right to assemble for higher minimum wage, for equal justice for Black and white, against lynching and against the creation of an underclass, against injustices, wherever injustice was found, and for peace.”

Patterson, who said she learned about Reconstruction from Fast’s 1944 novel *Freedom Road*, spoke of how her father and Paul Robeson 1923LAW each presented a peti-

tion to the United Nations in 1951, charging the US government, in its treatment of Black Americans, with violating the 1948 Genocide Convention. The US Department of State retaliated by illegally revoking Patterson’s passport, as it had done earlier to Robeson. “They were hauled into court and before the HUAC,” Patterson said. “And I believe in the end, it cost Paul Robeson” — who suffered repeated mental-health breakdowns in the following decade — “his life.”

The death of the Rosenbergs was more succinct. On June 19, 1953, Julius and Ethel (Julius went first) were strapped into the electric chair at Sing Sing. Meeropol doesn’t deny that his father, convicted of conspiracy to pass atomic secrets to the Soviets, was a spy, but he suggested that the execution had a political purpose: “One of the most significant impacts is it frightened the hell out of many leftists.” To justify the death penalty, Meeropol said, the government “had to promote my father to a master atomic spy, which we know

is not true. Then, to further pressure my father, they arrested my mother, when they knew she wasn’t a spy.”

Meeropol acknowledged that “terrible things” occurred under Stalin, and that US Communist leaders erred in backing the Soviets at every turn. And Patterson argued that the USSR, under pressure from the Cold War for much of its seventy years, hardly had opportunity to fulfill the principles on which it was founded — many of which, she observed, “are in sync with the values of this institution that we’re sitting in.”

Gage then asked if the pro-communist Americans under discussion thought of themselves as patriots.

“They loved this country,” Patterson answered, and cited Robeson’s 1956 HUAC testimony. When a congressman asked Robeson why he didn’t stay in Russia, which he had visited and found free of racism, Robeson replied, “My father was a slave, and my people died to build this country, and I am going to stay here and have a part of it, just like you.” — *Paul Hond*

The Editor Turns the Page

Good words flow at a retirement party for the director of Columbia University Press

Jennifer Crewe '79SOA, associate provost and director of Columbia University Press (CUP), was very clear: The speeches at her retirement celebration, held recently in the high-ceilinged, arch-windowed library of the Casa Italiana, would be short. Having steered hundreds of books to publication over her forty-year career at CUP, Crewe would naturally edit her own party as well.

The guests, a mix of authors, editors, faculty, CUP staff, University leaders, and friends and family of the honoree, chatted amid the library’s lofty oak bookcases. A few Crewe-edited books — among them, *The Incredible Need to Believe*, by the Bulgarian French philosopher Julia Kristeva, and *Said on Opera*, by Columbia literary critic Edward W. Said — were stacked on a table, free for the taking.

The speeches were indeed brief — but that didn’t limit the praise Crewe received. Haruo Shirane '74CC, '83GSAS, professor of Japanese literature and vice chair of the Department of East Asian Languages, recalled the day in the 1990s when Crewe asked him if he would put together an anthology



of traditional Japanese literature. Today, CUP is the “number one press in the world” for Asian literature in English, Shirane said. “In my view, Jennifer deserves the lifetime achievement award for best university press director.”

Victoria Rosner '90CC, '99GSAS, who is dean of NYU’s Gallatin School of Individualized Study, worked with Crewe

for more than twenty years on CUP's Gender and Culture Series, which Nancy K. Miller '61BC, '74GSAS and Carolyn Heilbrun '59GSAS, the first tenured woman professor in Columbia's English department, started in 1983. Rosner has been series coeditor since 2003. She lauded Crewe, who in 2014 became the first woman director of an Ivy League university press, as "a feminist pathbreaker, an influential intellectual, a champion of the humanities and its institutions, a titan of academic publishing, and a wonderful, wonderfully modest friend. As Virginia Woolf wrote about Clarissa Dalloway, 'For there she was.'"

Philip Leventhal, senior executive editor at CUP, hailed Crewe's "generosity and thoughtfulness, as well as care and respect for colleagues," and gave a shout-out to CUP's Black Lives in the Diaspora series, a collaboration with Howard University that was "born out of Jennifer's leadership vision and organizational acumen." Noting, too, Crewe's "groundbreaking role in making food studies an area of serious nonfiction publishing," Leventhal fondly recalled how, at CUP's twice-yearly sales conferences, Crewe would bring in food related to the book she was introducing. "The only possible misstep in this tradition," he said, "was with the publication of *The Insect Cookbook*."

All this came with the big news, delivered by vice provost and University Librarian Ann Thornton, that literary theorist and University Professor Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak,

one of several CUP authors in attendance, had just made the largest gift in the history of the press: \$3 million for an endowed fund in honor of her parents. The fund, said Thornton, will enable CUP to publish English translations of historical, literary, and philosophical works in Bengali, the language of Spivak's native Calcutta (now Kolkata), which is spoken by some 250 million people.

Such were the tidy encomiums that preceded Crewe, a behind-the-scenes figure now pushed into the spotlight before her admiring colleagues. She spoke — briefly, of course — of her start as an editorial assistant who "loved books and who believed in scholarship"; of her effort to further Columbia's educational mission by fully integrating CUP into the University, which she achieved in 2016, when the press was placed under the Office of the Provost; and of her confidence that her yet-to-be-named successor would be "a leader who cares as much about the place as I do."

She thanked everyone — authors, advisers, staff, publishing friends, and, not least, those who donated to a fundraising campaign in her honor. The campaign's goal is to endow the annual Columbia University Press Distinguished Book Award, which is given to the most important CUP book by a Columbia faculty member, as selected by CUP's faculty publication committee. Now in its twelfth year, the prize has been given a new name: It's called the Jennifer Crewe Distinguished Book Award. — *Paul Hond*

Shake, Battle, and Roll



Here's a campus clash we can get behind: Bacchanal's annual Battle of the Bands, a high-decibel contest fought with guitars, drumsticks, and vocal cords. Bacchanal, the student-run music-events club that produces Columbia's spring concert, also called Bacchanal, hosted the annual melodic melee, held in Wang Pavilion in Lerner Hall. Some 150 undergrads grooved to a mix of blues rock, R&B, indie, and folk rock from six student acts: Jennifer Surjadi, Benny and the Jets, Miss Demeanor, Federico Stock, Rosie Peppé, and Nudey. Battles don't get more wholesome: No amps were smashed, no humans moshed, and the hardest substance on hand was Red Bull. The winner, by crowd vote, was Columbia College senior Rosie Peppé, a soul-driven singer-songwriter from London. As her prize, Peppé would get to perform for thousands on Low Plaza at Bacchanal 2026, opening for the headliner, Fakemink, a London-based rapper and producer. No battle there — just a friendly British invasion.



The Dream of the Wood, by student Becky Moon, inspired by readings from English professor Patricia Dailey's seminar *Trees*.

Tree Huggers

Scholars and artists meditate on the arboreal

It would hardly be going out on a limb to say that the recent “Being Treely” talk, held at the Lenfest Center for the Arts, was the most tree-centric event involving Columbians since Joyce Kilmer 1908CC published his poem “Trees” in 1913 (“I think that I shall never see / a poem lovely as a tree”). At Lenfest, five Columbia thinkers gathered to look at trees through literature, art, science, history, and anthropology, and each made a case for the power of the flowering, bark-encased life forms that philosopher Michael Marder has called “vegetal beings.”

Patricia Dailey, associate professor of English and comparative literature, spoke first. Noting that trees are “silent witnesses to our histories,” she examined the Old English Christian poem “The Dream of the Rood,” told from the perspective of the former tree on which Christ was crucified — that is, the wooden cross, or rood.

Next, Rachel Grace Newman ’19GSAS, assistant professor of African American and African Diaspora Studies, reflected on the silk cotton

tree, or duppy tree, with its wide buttress roots and pods of fluff and seeds. She explained that the tree, which in Jamaican folklore is considered a portal to the spirit world, was sacred both to Indigenous Caribbean communities and to enslaved Africans in Jamaica, where it became a site of worship — and, for that reason, the site of whippings and hangings. Newman took solace in the thought that some of these long-lived trees predate the colonial world and its painful dislocations. “I do not want to think in evanescent human lifetimes of decades,” she said. “I want to think through the time of forests, in a web of interconnected presence.”

Then there is the inside of the tree. Nicole Davi, a researcher at the Tree Ring Lab at the Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory, described how the cells of tree rings reveal histories of weather, climate, fires, pestilence, earthquakes, volcanic events, and hurricanes. And visual artist Darylina Powderface, an MFA student from the Stoney Nakoda and Siksika Nations, in present-day Alberta and Montana,

compared tree rings to a diagram of four concentric circles describing the social structure of many Native communities: elders at the center, then children, then women, then men on the outermost ring, protecting the whole. Trees, too, she said, “hold lineage and kinship.”

The moderator, Miya Masaoka, director of the Sound Art Program at the School of the Arts, has composed “music” for trees in frequencies inaudible to humans. She called trees our “soulmates” from whom we’ve grown apart. “Closeness to them requires becoming more like them,” she said. “Trees and plants are like people but vastly slowed down.” Relating to trees, listening to them, leads us into “a transcendent space where what we thought we knew is now uncertain.”

Each speaker struck at the root of how to be treely, tapping the mysteries of our coexistence with these towering plants. In its ode to the arboreal sublime, the evening called to mind Kilmer’s closing stanza: “Poems are made by fools like me, / But only God can make a tree.” — *Paul Hond*

RENAIS



SANCE WOMEN



IN HER SWEEPING BIOGRAPHIES OF HER FOREMOTHERS, JOURNALIST AND AUTHOR **A'LELIA BUNDLES '76JRN** SHARES A DAZZLING AMERICAN INHERITANCE. HER OWN STORY BELONGS ON THE SAME HIGH SHELF. BY PAUL HOND

S

eated at her writing table in her house in Washington, DC, A'Lelia Bundles '76JRN is never far from her ancestors. The table, plumed with handwritten notes and pink and yellow Post-its, is surrounded by stacks of folders and boxes

stuffed with archival records related to her subjects. Behind her is a bulletin board covered with glamorous ragtime era and Jazz Age portraits of her family, whose remarkable American stories Bundles has brought to life in two elegant, deeply researched historical biographies: *On Her Own Ground: The Life and Times of Madam C.J. Walker* (2001) and, just published last year, *Joy Goddess: A'Lelia Walker and the Harlem Renaissance*.

As a girl, Bundles was beguiled by the family relics in her grandfather's apartment: the silk dresses, the Tiffany crystal vases, the mother-of-pearl opera glasses, the ostrich feather fan, the Ming dynasty figurines. The faintest perfume of a faded era still clung to the mysterious objects, and Bundles imagined that someday she would tell the world about the fascinating women behind them. Bundles's greatgreatgrandmother,

Madam C. J. Walker (1867–1919), was a hair-care entrepreneur and philanthropist who rose from the cotton fields of the Deep South to start her own business and become America’s first woman self-made millionaire. And Walker’s only child, A’Lelia Walker — Bundles’s great-grandmother — became the star socialite of 1920s Harlem.

“The line was always that Madam Walker made the money and A’Lelia Walker spent it, that A’Lelia threw big parties and wasn’t much of an arts patron,” Bundles says. “But what I found in writing the new book is that A’Lelia was really an original: someone who, like the children of all famous, self-made people, was struggling to find her identity.” It was A’Lelia who, in 1913, coaxed her mother to open a branch of her Indianapolis-based hair-and-beauty business in New York City, and it was A’Lelia whose generosity nourished the Harlem Renaissance, an artistic and cultural boom that lasted roughly from the end of World War I to the late 1930s. “She brought together this wonderful universe of people,” Bundles says. “Nobody else could have done it.”

After Madam Walker died in 1919, A’Lelia Walker inherited her mother’s property, including two adjacent townhouses on West 136th Street, which she converted into a single dwelling. In 1927, A’Lelia established a salon there, which she called the Dark Tower, and it quickly became a social hub of the Harlem Renaissance. Behind rose-colored curtains, Black and white artists and intellectuals intermingled in their own social bubble, rejecting the outside world of frank and legal racism and homophobia. Guests drank bootleg champagne or bathtub gin and caroused in an open, exuberant atmosphere that flowed from the hostess. On a given Dark Tower evening, you might brush past Zora Neale Hurston ’28BC, or spot W. E. B. DuBois, James Weldon Johnson, or singer Alberta Hunter,

or become an item for Black society columnist and former Columbia Journalism School student Bessye Bearden, mother of artist Romare Bearden. Poet Langston Hughes, who attended Columbia’s School of Mines (now Columbia Engineering), was a Dark Tower regular.

“Hughes was a generation younger than A’Lelia and really saw her as a muse,” Bundles says. “He wrote the poem that was read at her funeral, and in his memoir *The Big Sea*, he wrote about her parties. He called her the joy goddess of Harlem.”

“SHE BROUGHT TOGETHER THIS WONDERFUL UNIVERSE OF PEOPLE. NOBODY ELSE COULD HAVE DONE IT.”

For all Bundles’s skills as a biographer, it’s notable that she was not tuned in to the subject of history while growing up in Indianapolis in the 1950s and 1960s. “There was nothing about Black people in my textbooks,” says Bundles, who attended predominantly white public schools. “The only time I remember Black people being mentioned in my junior-year history text was as slaves. And there was a paragraph about Black people that said, ‘and the slaves were contented.’ I get prickles when I remember that.”

Fortunately, her grandfather Marion R. Perry — a lawyer and the husband of A’Lelia Walker’s adopted daughter, Fanny Mae Bryant — cared a lot about history. He was guardian of the ostrich feather fan and other Walker heirlooms, and he often spoke of *his* grandfather, who had been elected to public office in Arkansas during

Reconstruction. By the late 1960s, when Bundles was in high school, she became interested in other Walker artifacts, such as the items on her grandfather’s bookshelf: first editions of *Cane* (1923), by novelist Jean Toomer, and *Color* (1925), by poet Countee Cullen. Both books had come from A’Lelia Walker’s library. “That was my first awareness that there was a whole body of literature that wasn’t being taught in schools,” Bundles says.

After the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., in 1968, Black Power was ascendant, and hair became a political battleground. Bundles watched self-consciously as her peers turned away from the norms built by Madam Walker, whose beauty empire hinged on scalp conditioners and straightening combs. In this new and highly charged era of social and historical awareness, Bundles questioned whether she would ever write about the matriarch — after all, she herself had started wearing an Afro. It wasn’t until she graduated from Harvard and enrolled at Columbia that the past, in a sense, caught up with her.

“I never carried a sign that said, ‘I’m related to America’s first self-made woman millionaire,’” Bundles says with her ready laugh. But her first name was a clue, and of the few people on campus in 1975 who could have possibly made the connection, one of them, Phyllis Garland, an editor at *Jet* and *Ebony* and the only Black woman on the J-school faculty, was Bundles’s adviser.

When the two sat down to discuss thesis topics, Bundles pitched a few ideas, none of them memorable. At the end of the conversation, Garland said, “Your name is A’Lelia. Do you have any connection to Madam C. J. Walker and A’Lelia Walker?”

“Yes, that’s my family,” Bundles said. “That,” said Garland, “is what you’re going to write about.”

Bundles was thrilled. Her professor had validated Madam Walker as a worthy topic, even if the publishing world wasn’t clamoring for books by

or about people of color. So Bundles started her research, and turned up the first surprise: Madam Walker had been twice divorced. Bundles hesitated. What exactly was she getting into?

She decided to consult her mother, A'Leia Mae Perry Bundles, who was vice president of the Madam C. J. Walker Manufacturing Company. A'Leia Mae and her husband, who was president of a rival (and, by the 1960s, more successful) hair-care

came home for Christmas break. Bundles, twenty-three, could not grasp that her mother was about to die. At her bedside she sought her counsel.

"I said, 'Mommy, I'm finding in my research that Madam Walker was not perfect — what do I do?'" Bundles recalls. "And she said, 'Tell the truth, baby. It's all right to tell the truth.' That was such a gift."

It was one of their last conversations. "My mother died a few days before I was supposed to be back at

New York. She loved the city and wanted to stay: Her plan was to make a living in journalism while chiseling away, whenever she could, at the life of Madam Walker.

But in 1977, the network sent her to the Houston bureau. That year, the US Commission on Civil Rights released a study called *Window Dressing on the Set: Women and Minorities in Television*, which found that non-whites and women, and especially Black women, "continue to be under-



Madam C. J. Walker in a Model T (left); A'Leia Walker (right).

business, had raised their three children in a middle-class Black suburb of Indianapolis. Bundles recalls how her mother would leave the office every day at four to cook dinner, and wake up early in the morning to make breakfast. She was president of the PTA and active on the school board. "She was Supermom," Bundles says.

In the summer of 1975, while Bundles was wrestling with her great-great-grandmother's life, A'Leia Mae was diagnosed with lung cancer. She was in the hospital when her daughter

school," Bundles says. "I was in a fog, and I'm not sure I should have gone back, but I did. I wrote the paper that semester. It wasn't a great paper, but I wrote it. And that meant that I had started the journey."

In the late 1970s, when Bundles ventured from J-school into the world of television news, there were very few Black women on either side of the camera. Bundles was hired by NBC and placed in a management-training program in

represented in dramatic programs and on the news . . . and are almost totally excluded from decision-making positions." In this context, Houston did not sound promising. "But it turned out to be the best thing that could have happened," Bundles says. "It was a small bureau with wonderful people who embraced me and mentored me."

Her territory was Texas and Oklahoma, where she covered everything from prison rodeos to hurricanes to grain-elevator explosions. In the summer of 1978, the Ku Klux Klan held a

rally in Tupelo, Mississippi. That was the Atlanta bureau's zone, but it was shorthanded, and the network called Houston. "Our bureau chief, Arthur Lord, who was Jewish, said, 'Bundles, you're going,'" Bundles recalls. "Everyone else in the bureau was like, 'Really, Arthur?' But he said to me, 'You're a reporter. Go do this story.'"

Lord made sure that the cameraman was a local who would have her back. So Bundles flew to Memphis, rented the only car available, and headed to Mississippi. "There I was, driving into downtown Tupelo, with

successor was sent to Houston after screwing up at the Chicago bureau, where he'd been replaced by a Black woman. "This guy was definitely not feeling me," Bundles says. "It was an ugly, unpleasant situation, which I endured as long as I could." She lobbied for a transfer and got one — to Atlanta, where a horror was unfolding. From 1979 to 1981, the bodies of some twenty-nine young Black people, mostly boys, turned up in the woods, in the river, in empty buildings. For Bundles, covering the Atlanta child murders was "excruciating"

of Geraldine Ferraro, she was delving into all things Madam. She interviewed aging luminaries of Harlem, visited libraries, courthouses, and historical societies, and combed through the thousands of pages of documents that had been kept by Madam Walker's secretary. The project ended with Haley's death in 1992. That same year, Bundles's young-adult biography, *Madam C. J. Walker: Entrepreneur* (1991), won an American Book Award.

But Bundles's job was wearing on her. "In the bureaus we described ourselves as firemen: We wore beepers, and 'when news broke, we fixed it,'" she says. "I was always on call, always on the road, and it was just impossible to have a life." She got a transfer to Washington, DC, to work on a TV news magazine, then left for ABC's *World News Tonight* in New York, where she was producer for Carole Simpson, the first Black woman network anchor.

Bundles's beat with Simpson was social issues, and their stories included people of color. "We could put our spin on it," Bundles says. "We had our nice little niche, but there were other things going on that showed a clear lack of consciousness. For instance, whenever somebody did a story on welfare, the B-roll in the library was of young Black mothers, pregnant, with many children. Those images were shown over and over again." When Bundles questioned this, the response was simply 'that's the B-roll we have.' Her bosses in New York then asked her to help analyze the number of times people of color were on the air and what roles they were in. How many Black doctors, lawyers, and other professionals could be found on TV?

"We were putting together a database of people of color who were scientists and ambassadors, so that when we needed a Black person, we could talk to someone other than Jesse Jackson," Bundles says. "Then one of my colleagues, who must not have liked this project, leaked it to *The Wall Street Journal*, and I got a call from some-



my big Afro, in a red Camaro," she says. "It was unbelievable. There was a caravan of Klansmen on Main Street. Part of the producer's role was to find a pay phone so you can call in information, and I had to go into a pool hall. Not everyone in there was excited to see me. That night, the Klan held a cross burning."

The assignment was an important lesson for Bundles: an assertion of the right of the press to go anywhere. "The Klan at that time was more bluster than anything else," she says. "But now I think about how dangerous things can be for reporters."

In Bundles's third year, Lord was transferred to Los Angeles. His

During this distressing and frightening time, she continued her research into Madam Walker. In 1982 she met with Alex Haley, the author of *Roots* and coauthor of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, who wanted to do a Madam Walker miniseries and book. "Alex started talking about all the researchers he was going to hire for this project," says Bundles, laughing. "I said, 'Mr. Haley, I wrote my master's paper at Columbia about Madam Walker. I'd be happy to be one of those researchers.'"

So Bundles began working with Haley. When she wasn't busy at NBC covering Jesse Jackson's presidential campaign or the vice-presidential run

body there saying, “Why are you doing this? Isn’t this reverse discrimination?”

In the end, these steps toward inclusion did not have the effect Bundles had hoped. “The truth is that most people were not interested in changing. And they didn’t have to.”

Frustrated, Bundles began plotting her next move. One day in 1996, Robin Sproul, who was then just a few years into her long tenure as ABC’s Washington bureau chief, invited Bundles to lunch. Sproul knew of Bundles’s struggles with her bosses in New York, and told Bundles that she needed a deputy bureau chief in Washington. It was an offer, and Bundles accepted.

For the next four years, Bundles co-led the Washington bureau, and in 2000 she was named director of talent development for the news division at ABC. After twenty-four years in the business, she became an executive.

She also became a sophomore author, publishing *On Her Own Ground* in 2000, which was reissued in 2020 under the title *Self Made*. It tells the rags-to-riches story of Sarah Breedlove, born in Louisiana just after the Civil War to formerly enslaved parents. Orphaned at five, married at fourteen, a mother at eighteen, and a widow at twenty, Breedlove was working as a washerwoman in St. Louis when she developed a scalp condition and began losing her hair. Seeking out remedies, she met Annie Malone, a Black entrepreneur who sold a sulfur-based scalp formula, and became Malone’s sales agent. In 1906 she married a newspaperman, Charles Joseph Walker, and began making and selling her own hair products under the name Madam C. J. Walker.

“She put her image on the products, opened a factory in Indianapolis, made a fortune, hired many women, moved to New York, and gave her money away,” says Bundles. A supporter of the arts, Madam Walker also donated liberally to the newly formed NAACP and the Black YMCA in Indianapolis. And, Bundles was surprised

to find, Madam Walker was an activist: After the East St. Louis Massacre, in the summer of 1917, when a white mob burned houses and murdered dozens of Black residents, Walker and a group of Harlem leaders traveled to Washington with a petition for President Woodrow Wilson, urging him to support legislation to make lynching a federal crime.

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“Wilson was supposed to meet with them, but at the last minute he was ‘unavailable,’” Bundles says. In fact, the government dispatched a Black spy to follow Walker and her friend Ida B. Wells, the prominent journalist and suffragist. The spy wrote them up in a classified document as “Negro subversives.”

“That’s what made her interesting to me,” Bundles says. “She was so multidimensional — an entrepreneur and pioneer of the modern hair-care industry who employed thousands of Black women as salespeople, empowering them and helping them become economically independent, and also a philanthropist and political activist. Madam Walker was part of that first and second generation out of slavery, when African Americans were creating businesses as well as social and cultural institutions, and had the hope that they were going to stake their claim to America.”

In 2020, Netflix aired *Self Made*, a miniseries based on the book. Bun-

dles was unhappy with some of the filmmakers’ choices, especially the fictionalized conflict between Walker and the light-skinned character based on Annie Malone. Shortly after the show’s release, Bundles posted a candid essay sharing her qualms about the script. “I had been anticipating *Hidden Figures*,” she wrote, referring to the 2016 film about three Black women mathematicians at NASA who helped put John Glenn into orbit. “Instead, *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* was staring back at me from the page.”

She had learned the hard lesson of Hollywoodization. And she vows that if *Joy Goddess* gets optioned — it’s not hard to imagine a screen version of A’Lelia Walker, the “Black Cinderella” with, in Bundles’s words, “diva-worthy flamboyance,” welcoming the culturati into the smoky, bubbly opulence of the Dark Tower — she will make sure to have a seat in the writers room.

Bundles tries to write every day, but it’s never easy, as she has inherited the family habit of board service. (“I’ve gone *overboard*,” she jokes.) She served nearly fifteen years as a Columbia Trustee — including eight years as vice chair — and in 2020, Columbia’s Community Scholars program, which began in 2013 as part of the University’s outreach for its Manhattanville expansion, was renamed for her. She currently sits on the boards of the Schlesinger Library for the history of American women, at the Harvard Radcliffe Institute, and the Friends of Woodlawn Cemetery, in the Bronx, where the Walker women are buried.

For Bundles, the story of every American family tells the story of America, and she is humbled to be the chronicler of her own. Such stories, she feels, need to be heard now more than ever.

“There are so many great stories that haven’t been told,” she says — stories that, like the uncorked joy of A’Lelia Walker’s soirees, broaden our sense of what America is, and what it could be. 🍷

SCHOOLS UNDER SIEGE

In our desperation to protect children from mass shootings, we're turning our schools into fortresses. Are we actually making kids safer — and if so, at what cost? **BY DAVID J. CRAIG**

On a mild, sunny Wednesday morning last August, nearly two hundred children — kindergarteners through eighth graders — sat shoulder to shoulder in the pews of their Catholic school's church in Minneapolis, listening to a recitation of Psalm 139: *Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my thoughts . . .* Outside, a silver van pulled onto the campus. The driver, a twenty-three-year-old transgender woman and former student of the school, stepped out carrying an AR-15-style assault rifle, a shotgun, and a pistol. She walked briskly up to the church and, finding its doors locked, aimed her rifle at a stained-glass window. She pulled the trigger once, blowing the glass out in a burst of color. She then squeezed harder and didn't stop, spraying bullets into the cathedral for nearly two minutes straight. When she was almost out of ammunition, she walked around the back of the building and shot herself, ending her own life. Inside, two children — an eight-year-old boy and a ten-year-old girl — were dead. Twenty-four other children, along with three adults, lay bleeding but still alive.

That evening, Minneapolis mayor Jacob Frey, a Democrat, delivered an

impassioned speech in a nearby park, begging lawmakers to offer more than “thoughts and prayers” in response. “We are a city united in grief,” he said, his eyes welling with tears. “Let us take the next step, to be a city united in action . . . We need to have true gun reform, right now.”

A few days later, Minnesota governor Tim Walz jumped into the fray, announcing plans to convene a special legislative session on gun violence. He and other Democrats insisted that the negotiations would have to include a vote on banning assault weapons and high-capacity magazines — a condition that state Republican leaders rejected. With the two parties unable to agree even on an agenda, the talks collapsed before they began. In Washington, meanwhile, top Democrats and Republicans blamed each other for the nation's gun-violence epidemic and offered no new solutions.

If state and national lawmakers couldn't muster a response to the Minneapolis shooting, though, millions of parents, educators, and local officials across the country could. And in the ensuing weeks, they responded as Americans have in the wake of dozens of other high-profile school shootings this century: by fortifying their schools

ILLUSTRATIONS BY CHRIS W. KIM





against would-be attackers. In rural districts and inner-city schools alike, in red states and blue, they drew up plans to install new automated gates, key-card access systems, surveillance cameras, motion sensors, magnetic door locks, metal detectors, bullet-proof windows, and concrete bollards. They arranged for police officers to patrol their kids' classrooms and hallways, conducted active-shooter drills with children as young as four and five, and in some cases encouraged teachers to carry firearms. A few

trauma and neglect. But their concerns are often overridden by parents' demands for physical safeguards.

"Anytime a school shooting makes national headlines, the public conversation now centers on these types of hardening strategies," says Sonali Rajan '10TC, a professor of health promotion and education at Columbia's Teachers College and an expert on gun-violence prevention. "Parents, understandably, want schools to do everything possible to protect their kids. And it's natural that when we see

Rajan, along with Columbia epidemiology chair Charles Branas, has for the past several years been leading a pair of nationwide studies aimed at answering these questions. Supported by grants from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), their studies together represent the largest, most scientifically rigorous investigation of school-hardening tactics ever conducted. By analyzing the security strategies of all 324 K-12 public schools that experienced a shooting in the US between 2015 and 2023, then comparing their policies at the time of the shootings to those of similar schools that had no gunfire, the researchers are evaluating the impact of dozens of common security measures on gun violence. They are also surveying children about their grades and mental health to see if aggressive security policies are having any unintended negative consequences. "Smaller studies have looked at the effects of individual tactics like arming teachers and the use of surveillance cameras," says Branas, "but they haven't assessed the collective impact of hardening measures or compared their effects in schools with and without shootings."

Because no high-quality studies have ever examined the full range of school security practices, Branas says, parents and educators are working in the dark. "In the absence of good data, they're pursuing strategies based on what feels right," he says.

The scarcity of information about school security performance isn't for a lack of interest among scholars. Until a few years ago, grants for studying gun violence in the US were almost impossible to come by, thanks to a little-known congressional provision that since 1996 discouraged federal agencies like the CDC and the NIH from funding any research whose results might be used to advocate for gun-control laws. "The rule was motivated by politics," Branas says, "and disastrous in its consequences."



Minneapolis residents after the Annunciation Catholic School shooting last August.

states, including Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Virginia, approved millions of dollars in new funding for what education officials call "hardening" measures. (The military term, short for "target hardening," has crept into parents' and teachers' everyday speech over the past decade.) Most others, including Minnesota, left it up to local communities to pay for security upgrades. This has forced districts to make difficult decisions about whether to invest in hardening measures or in counseling, mental-health services, and sports and music programs. Many teachers warn that shortchanging such programs will only make schools less safe in the long run, since the US is already experiencing a youth mental-health crisis and many shooters are known to have histories of

a horrible shooting on the news, we crave a response that feels as aggressive as the act itself"

Meeting this demand for quick and tangible solutions, and fueling it, is a sprawling school-safety industry. Today, dozens of US companies that originally catered to law-enforcement agencies and the armed forces now also woo superintendents with everything from bulletproof chalkboards to pepper-ball-spraying drones. According to market-research company IMARC Group, the industry is worth \$3 billion and set to triple in size by 2033.

But are these tactics actually making schools safer? Or, as some critics assert, are they just causing kids unnecessary stress, disrupting their learning, and even exacerbating the risks they're meant to address?

For decades, he says, little research on gun violence was conducted in the US. “As a result, we still have huge gaps in what we know.”

The federal blockade on gun research finally lifted in 2020. Over the next couple of years, the CDC and the NIH awarded more than thirty grants for academic studies aimed at understanding why gun violence happens and how to prevent it. Branas and Rajan, who had helped lead a nationwide push urging Congress to reverse the funding ban, were among the recipients. Of all the newly funded projects, their assessment of school security tactics may have the most pressing policy implications, touching the daily lives of some fifty-five million American youngsters.

“Everyone who works in schools knows that in order to create a safe environment, you need to invest both in physical security and in students’ mental well-being, since violent attacks can come from outside or within,” says Janet Robinson, who was the superintendent of schools in Newtown, Connecticut, at the time of the 2012 Sandy Hook shooting and is now a consultant on Branas and Rajan’s project. “But how do you find the right balance, when operating on a tight budget?” Currently, she says, school administrators don’t have the information necessary to make good decisions. “Meanwhile, you’ve got parents demanding that you take decisive actions and security firms selling you on technologies that would at least *appear* to make your schools safer.”

Later this year, the Columbia researchers will publish the first of several papers reporting their findings. The results, they say, may prompt a reassessment of how American schools try to protect kids.

“The takeaway is that these hardening strategies, when looked at cumulatively, seem to do little, if anything, to prevent shootings,” says Branas. “Which doesn’t mean that none of them have any value. But it does suggest that we ought to be looking at other options.”

Mass shootings of the type that now routinely make US headlines — in which a person kills a large number of strangers for no apparent reason — are a modern phenomenon, and a distinctly American one. Gun-wielding, grievance-fueled mass murderers first started mowing down crowds in schools, workplaces, restaurants, shops, and parks on a regular basis in this country in the late 1980s, initially striking a couple of times per year, on average. Such rampages have grown steadily more frequent since, with the United States experiencing twenty mass shootings last year alone, bringing the nation’s total over the past half century to more than five hundred,

firearms, according to Columbia terrorism and gun-violence expert Louis Klarevas. “The two types of events that have tended to push the needle on gun policy are mass shootings and high-profile assassinations,” says Klarevas, a research professor at Teachers College and the author of *Rampage Nation: Securing America from Mass Shootings*. “Mass shootings, in particular, burrow into our collective psyche because it’s easy for us to identify with the victims. We say to ourselves, ‘That could have been *me* in that supermarket, or in that park. That could have been *my* child in that school.’”

In *Rampage Nation*, Klarevas documents how in other nations, public outrage over mass shootings has pushed their lawmakers to enact

“It’s natural that when we see a horrible shooting on the news, we crave a response that feels as aggressive as the act itself.”

according to the Rockefeller Institute of Government. No other advanced democracy has experienced more than a handful of such incidents in that time. Mass shootings in the US have also grown deadlier over the years, as military-style weapons and large-capacity magazines have become more widely available. Studies show that these weapons enable shooters to harm more people by firing off dozens of rounds in rapid succession without stopping to reload.

Of the approximately forty-five thousand gun-related deaths that occur in the US each year — a body count that far exceeds those in peer nations — public mass shootings account for less than 2 percent of the total. (Suicides account for 60 percent of all US gun deaths, and homicides committed in the course of another crime, like a robbery, or between people in an argument, 35 percent.) Yet mass shootings have long played an outsized role in public discourse about

gun regulations that have all but eliminated these events. Shortly after a forty-three-year-old man went on a shooting spree that killed sixteen children in the Scottish town of Dunblane in 1996, for example, the British government expanded an earlier ban on semiautomatic rifles to include most handguns, and the country has experienced only one shooting that’s killed more than five people since. Similarly, Australia imposed a ban on all semiautomatic weapons following a wave of mass shootings there in the 1990s; the nation didn’t endure another high-fatality rampage until this past winter, when two Islamic terrorists used a combination of rifles, shotguns, and homemade bombs to kill fifteen people at a Hanukkah event in Sydney. Within weeks, Australia intensified its already rigorous system of background checks and limited imports of firearms. Canada, Norway, Germany, and New Zealand have all enacted similar laws in recent

years — and this, says Klarevas, has saved countless lives. Often, nations have responded to mass shootings by restricting access not just to assault weapons, but to broad categories of guns. “This ends up preventing suicides and homicides, as well as rampages,” he says.

There was a time when US lawmakers also took decisive steps to combat gun violence. In 1994, following a series of high-profile mass shootings — including one that saw five schoolchildren killed and thirty-one wounded in Stockton, California, and another in which twenty-five passengers on a Long Island commuter train were gunned down, ending in six deaths — Congress passed a federal assault-weapons ban. Eight years previously, the US had effectively outlawed civilian ownership of machine guns; the new legislation banned the sale of the closest substitute: semiautomatic assault weapons and large-capacity magazines. The measure was politically fragile from the start, though, with many Democrats in Southern and Western states joining Republicans in opposing it. To get the law passed, Democratic party leaders had to agree to a sunset provision that would see the ban expire in 2004, unless Congress renewed it. That renewal would never come.

In the 1994 midterm elections, Republicans campaigned heavily on gun rights and crushed the Democrats, taking control of both the House and the Senate for the first time in forty years. The Republicans then set their sights on academic researchers whose work they saw as laying the groundwork for additional gun regulations. These included emergency-room physicians who had begun chronicling the devastating injuries caused by semiautomatic weapons, as well as public-health researchers documenting links between gun ownership and risks of death and injury across populations. Some of these pioneering scientists, such as Emory University physician Arthur Kellermann and

University of Washington pediatrician Fred Rivara, were publicly castigated by members of Congress, who accused them of political bias and called for their grants to be canceled.

“It was pretty shocking,” Rivara said in a 2013 interview. “Ten senators wrote a letter to the Secretary of Health and Human Services saying using federal dollars to lobby for gun control was unacceptable. We never did any lobbying. What they were really saying is that they didn’t want to see this type of research being conducted.”

The clash culminated in 1996 with the passage of the Dickey Amendment, a rider to a federal spending bill that stated that no CDC funds could be used to “advocate or promote gun control.” Named for Arkansas congressman and NRA ally Jay Dickey, the provision didn’t explicitly ban the government from sponsoring any research on gun violence, but administrators at the CDC and other agencies interpreted it that way, and federal funding for such research dried up. Young scholars were discouraged from entering the field, and many established researchers moved on to other topics. Consequently, by the early 2000s, the scientific community in the US was collecting much less information about gun violence than other public-health threats.

Gun enthusiasts, meanwhile, embarked on a historic buying spree. After the federal assault-weapons ban expired in 2004, sales of semiautomatic rifles and high-capacity magazines surged. Tens of millions of AR-15-style rifles flowed into civilian hands, even as annual sales of handguns, shotguns, and traditional rifles set new records.

As a result, scholars say, Americans now find themselves in a curious predicament: surrounded by some 400 million firearms — nearly half of the civilian-owned guns in the world — yet knowing startlingly little about who possesses them, how they’re being used, or how best to protect themselves and their families.

Despite the barriers erected by Congress, a small number of prominent researchers continued to study gun violence in the US, often relying on private donations or doing the work on their own time. Among this rarefied group — insiders say that in the leanest years of the Dickey Amendment, there were fewer than two dozen of them — is Charles Branas. A pioneer of “place-based” public-health interventions, which aim to enhance safety and well-being by improving the built environment, Branas is recognized for helping chart a path forward for gun researchers that circumvents the political blockade over gun control. His solutions — such as renovating vacant lots and abandoned buildings where young people might otherwise stash weapons — can seem modest, but studies have shown that they’re surprisingly effective, in part because people from across the political spectrum embrace them.

“My viewpoint is that all of us, regardless of our politics, can agree that we’ve got an urgent problem with gun violence in this country,” says Branas, an athletic fifty-eight-year-old with an intense but friendly demeanor. “We might have different ideas about what the ideal solutions are, but we can’t let that stop us from working together in the meantime. We can’t throw our hands up. We’ve got to get creative, find strategies that we all support, and get to work on them.”

Like many gun-violence researchers, Branas isn’t focused specifically on mass shootings. Those tragedies, he says, are the tip of the iceberg. “The deeper crisis is the hundreds of murders, suicides, and unintentional shootings that take place every day, out of public view,” he says. Branas notes that gunshots are now the leading cause of death for American children and teenagers, claiming thousands of kids’ lives each year — many of them in schoolyard and neighborhood shootings that never make national headlines. According

to Branäs, all forms of gun violence share underlying risk factors, such as poverty, social disenfranchisement, and unchecked access to firearms, so “interventions that address these root causes will have the biggest effect.”

Branäs says that his worldview was shaped growing up outside Philadelphia in the 1980s, at a time when the city was reeling from deindustrialization, with cheap handguns and crack cocaine flowing into the city as fast as middle-class residents were moving out. “Shootings were a part of daily life, and I saw firsthand how they devastated families and entire neighborhoods,” he says. “It was a constant stream of suffering.” Determined to help, Branäs took a job as an EMT after graduating from nearby Franklin & Marshall College in 1990. The work was relentless. “The ambulance I worked on would bring one gunshot victim to the hospital, and we’d race back out to get the next one,” he says. “There was never a break.” Emergency calls would come in from some blocks again and again. “I wanted to understand why that was,” he says. “I wanted to figure out how to stop these shootings in the first place.” He soon enrolled in an epidemiology course for paramedics and realized he’d found his calling.

The idea for one of Branäs’s biggest breakthroughs would emerge years later from conversations with residents of Philadelphia. “My colleagues and I asked them what they thought could be done to stem gun violence, and they told us about the fear that surrounded a lot of abandoned properties, how teenagers would hide weapons in them and fights would break out,” he says. Some local nonprofits had begun to clean up such properties, but they weren’t sure what effect it was having. “So I said, ‘Let’s do something on a large scale, across the whole city, and test it scientifically.’” In a series of randomized trials, Branäs and his team partnered with the nonprofits and the city to turn hundreds of vacant lots into parks.

Private donors and federal agencies kicked in money to renovate dilapidated buildings, some of which were converted into affordable housing. The results astonished everyone: Gun-crime rates in the spruced-up areas dropped nearly 40 percent and stayed low for years. The strategy has since spread to New Orleans, Chicago, and other cities.

For all his emphasis on grassroots interventions, Branäs is unequivocal that Americans’ easy access to

Branäs found himself the target of an organized pressure campaign urging administrators at the University of Pennsylvania, where he was a professor at the time, to fire him. “That experience made me very thankful for tenure,” he says, noting that scientific reviews have since judged his study to be among the most rigorous ever on what scholars call defensive gun use.

In 2017, Branäs was recruited to Columbia’s Mailman School of Public Health to lead its epidemiology



Sonali Rajan and Charles Branäs

guns is the main reason the nation experiences so much lethal violence. “Arguments that might otherwise have ended with a fist fight, result in people dying,” he says. “That’s a fundamental difference between the US and other countries.” Branäs has not shied away from studying firearms directly. In a widely cited 2009 paper, his team found that people who are assaulted are more likely to be shot and killed if they are carrying a gun themselves — a discovery that challenged gun advocates’ long-standing claim that being armed is protective. The National Rifle Association pounced, publishing a critique in its flagship magazine, *American Rifleman*, that declared the study “junk science” and accused Branäs of being in cahoots with activists trying to overturn “stand-your-ground” and “right-to-carry” laws.

department. Upon arriving, he met new allies in unexpected places across campus. Among them was Klarevas, who had used his own money to assemble one of the most comprehensive databases of mass shootings in the world and was mining it for clues about how to prevent them. There was Rajan, a child-health specialist who had begun documenting the psychological toll borne by children who witness gun violence or know someone who is shot, as well as the psychiatrist Paul Appelbaum ’72CC, the emergency physician Ashley Blanchard ’20PH, and the pediatrician Danielle Laraque-Arena. Soon a kind of salon took shape, with the professors meeting, exchanging ideas, and imagining ambitious new studies that blended epidemiology, education, psychiatry, and security

studies. Out of those conversations grew the Columbia Scientific Union for the Reduction of Gun Violence, or SURGE, an interdisciplinary coalition that since 2020 has provided mentorship and networking opportunities for young scholars with novel ideas for tackling the nation's gun-violence crisis but who are uncertain how to navigate the field's precarious funding landscape.

"Because the field of gun-violence research was dormant for so long, young scientists had few senior colleagues to turn to for guidance," says Branas. "We wanted to build up that infrastructure."

Around the same time, fissures were starting to show in congressional support for the Dickey Amendment, with members of both parties expressing concerns about the lack of available information on shooting trends and prevention efforts. (Jay Dickey himself had publicly disavowed the provision before he died in 2017.) Branas and his Columbia colleagues joined forces with scientists across the US in pushing for a reinstatement of research funding, meeting with congressional staffers, briefing them on data gaps, and encouraging concerned parents and educators across the country to speak out. In an effort to demonstrate that the academic infrastructure existed to make good use of federal grants, they also worked with fellow gun researchers at the University of Michigan and RAND to lay the groundwork for what would become the first professional society in their field. (The Research Society for the Prevention of Firearm-Related Harms would launch two years later, with Rajan as its founding president.) "And it actually worked," Branas says. "Reason prevailed and lawmakers agreed that we had to do more about this problem."

Branas and Rajan then began developing plans for what would be one of the biggest projects of their careers: a long-overdue audit of the security revolution reshaping American schools.

Each morning, millions of American children — from big-city schools in New York and Los Angeles to rural districts in West Virginia and Texas — begin their day by queuing up like they're at an airport. They walk through metal detectors and past surveillance cameras, swipe their ID badges, and allow police officers to inspect their backpacks. In some schools, the officers may later enter classrooms to apprehend kids for infractions that once were handled with trips to the principal's office. And every few weeks, these children will rehearse for the nightmare scenario: The lights will go out, and everyone will crouch behind desks or hide in bathrooms while adults carrying toy guns roam the halls, yelling and banging on doors, pretending to hunt for them.

"There's a tremendous amount of variation between schools, in terms of which security measures get implemented, in part because there's been little national guidance on the issue," says Rajan, who early in her career ran youth-empowerment programs in New York City schools. "But there's been an increase in hardening across the country, especially over the past decade."

America's experiment in school hardening began in the aftermath of the 1999 Columbine shooting, when two twelfth graders carrying semiautomatic handguns strolled into their high school without so much as a glance from a hall monitor and slaughtered thirteen of their fellow students and a teacher. Back then, few US schools, outside of some in high-crime urban districts, bothered even to lock doors or install surveillance cameras. "Now virtually all schools do these things and much more," Rajan says. She points out that among the schools her team is studying, 90 percent regularly hold lockdown drills, most have law enforcement officers on campus, and about 2 percent arm teachers.

Advocates of school hardening say the more fortified a building looks, the less attractive it will be for someone intent on committing acts of violence.

But that's not what the Columbia researchers have found. "Hardening a school may seem like it would prevent shootings, but it's not at all clear yet that it's accomplishing that," says Branas.

In conducting their study, the Columbia researchers catalogued all the major security tactics employed by 648 schools — half of which had experienced shootings and half of which hadn't — and matched the two groups of schools by demographics, size, and region in order to reliably isolate the effects of the security measures. In total, they examined twenty-seven common security measures to determine if any were associated with a school's chances of experiencing a gun attack. They found that only a handful of the measures, notably the use of metal detectors, were linked to a reduction in risk.

"The benefits are so subtle that we'll need to conduct follow-up studies to understand the impacts they're having, and how schools might leverage them more effectively," says Rajan. "Like, are metal detectors particularly useful in certain kinds of schools? Or only in combination with other measures?"

Surprisingly, the researchers found that the presence of police officers in schools is associated with an *increase* in the likelihood of a shooting. They say that follow-up studies will be needed to understand this finding, which shouldn't necessarily be interpreted as evidence that police cause problems. One possible explanation, they say, is that school districts in regions with a strong gun culture might be more likely both to put officers in their schools and to have students with access to firearms at home, which is a known risk factor for youth gun violence. The researchers hope to soon gather more detailed information about how police officers are being deployed. "We wonder, for example, if the officers might be more valuable when they develop positive relationships with kids, acting as mentors, and only serve as disciplinarians when it's absolutely necessary," says Branas.

That beefed-up security doesn't eliminate the risk of school shootings is unlikely to surprise many scholars who have studied patterns of gun violence. "It's pretty clear that attackers don't often choose targets based on how vulnerable they appear," says Klarevas, who explores this question extensively in *Rampage Nation* and contributed to the new research. Instead, he says, mass shooters are typically motivated by grievances tied to particular places or groups of people, and will go after them regardless of a site's defenses. Most other school shootings, he notes, stem from conflicts between students that erupt outside school buildings, where metal detectors and other security technologies offer little protection.

The Columbia study leaves some tricky questions unanswered. For example, gun-rights advocates have long argued that hardening tactics not only prevent shootings but limit casualties when they do occur. The researchers don't evaluate the latter claim. "But other researchers could certainly do that," says Branäs, noting that his team's database will eventually become publicly available. "Our research is meant to spark those kinds of inquiries."

Currently, the Columbia team is analyzing their data to see if hardening tactics have any unintended consequences for students. For example, they're examining whether the presence of police officers, metal detectors, and other security tactics are associated with higher rates of expulsions or student arrests. "Past research has suggested that overly aggressive security policies can lead to the criminalization of routine misbehaviors, especially for Black and brown students," says Rajan. "We're looking to see if our data bear that out." The team is also investigating how hardening tactics may affect students' mental health and academic performance. "A fundamental ques-

tion is whether kids feel safer when schools are hardened, or whether being continuously reminded of the threat of gun violence stresses them out," she says. The answer may have significant implications. One of Rajan's most cited papers, from 2014, shows that teenagers who feel unsafe are more likely to begin carrying a firearm. "We don't want to inadvertently fuel feelings of insecurity that could perpetuate cycles of violence," she says.

None of this is to suggest, the researchers say, that schools ought not take common-sense measures to secure buildings, like controlling entry points,



requiring visitors to sign in, and teaching kids what to do in emergencies. But what their new findings do indicate, they say, is that communities should think carefully about how much money they spend on hardening measures — especially if the goal is to prevent shootings. In fact, the researchers say there is a growing body of evidence that shows that investing in students themselves — through programs that support their social development, conflict-resolution skills, and mental health — may ultimately save more lives. "You really want to intervene and help young people before they ever pick up a gun in the first place," says Rajan, who notes that the vast majority of school shooters are teenage boys. Yet, in the wake of school shootings, Rajan says, "people don't want to hear about investing in

after-school programs, opening more public libraries, renovating parks in surrounding neighborhoods, or hiring more school psychologists and social workers. There's an almost forensic examination of the violent act itself, and an obsession with figuring out how we could have physically stopped it. But to prevent these killings, we really need to step back from that moment and pay more attention to the smaller, private tragedies that led up to it."

The Columbia researchers say that their investigation is already giving them ideas for new types of anti-gun-violence initiatives. "We're thinking up new ways of reaching out to students at the very end of the school day, because a lot of shootings occur right when classes are dismissed," says Rajan. The team would eventually like to conduct a large, comprehensive assessment of how youth programs and social-support services influence rates of gun violence. "This would compare the impact of different types of programs offered by schools and local communities, similar to how

we're now analyzing the effects of hardening measures," she says.

For now, the researchers are doing much of this work at night and on weekends. After last year's federal spending cuts, which hit public-health initiatives especially hard, the vast majority of gun-violence-prevention projects funded by the CDC and the NIH were denied renewal. One of Branäs and Rajan's grants was among those shelved. So now the professors are pressing on with a smaller team, racing to complete the analyses they'd planned, and cautiously optimistic that the funding, and the attention the issue deserves, will one day return.

"We're persevering and focusing on the work, as we've always done," Branäs says. "Our nation needs to understand this problem. It's too big to ignore." 📖

THE ART OF CURATION

Through visionary exhibitions and programming, Columbia alumni are shaping the direction of some of New York City's most prestigious art museums *By Julia Joy*



AIMEE NG

The Frick Collection

Walking into *Gainsborough: The Fashion of Portraiture*, an exhibition at the Frick Collection, you are greeted by a stylish cast of characters (and a few Pomeranians) in various textures of lace, silk, satin, and chiffon, posed against pastoral backdrops or in elegant Georgian rooms. The twenty-five portraits on display are by Thomas Gainsborough, an eighteenth-century British painter known for his lush blend of photographic precision and loose, feathery brushwork.

The show, which opened in February and runs until May 25, is curated by Aimee Ng '12GSAS, who was promoted in November 2025 to the role of Peter Jay Sharp Chief Curator at the Frick. "Gainsborough was one of the more important artists to Henry Clay Frick when he was building his collection," explains Ng, who has been with the Upper East Side museum — the former mansion of the Gilded Age steel tycoon — since 2015. "Yet the Frick itself has never had a focused Gainsborough exhibition."

For Ng, Gainsborough's art is both timeless and timely. "For one thing, he was a pretty damn good painter, and I think that's sometimes forgotten," she says. The artist's life and career also overlapped with the founding of the United States, which turns 250 this year. "The stories Gainsborough told through portraits of figures from King George III all the way down to servants are all wrapped up in the birth of this country."

As the Frick's chief curator, Ng oversees the museum's entire curatorial department, including around three dozen staff members and a collection of approximately 2,500 paintings, sculptures, decorative objects, and medals, mostly from Europe in the thirteenth through nineteenth centuries. For the museum's first major overhaul since 1935, a significant renovation and

expansion that wrapped up last year, Ng helped conceive of the placement of artwork in the upstairs rooms, which previously held offices. The addition of 30 percent more gallery space now allows the Frick to mount loan exhibitions without de-installing works from the permanent collection.

Bringing *Gainsborough: The Fashion of Portraiture* to life required years of planning and a labyrinthine borrowing process. "A curator has to have many informal conversations with



Mary, Countess Howe, a 1763–64 painting by Thomas Gainsborough on loan to the Frick.

institutions about whether or not, for instance, the Duke of Norfolk is willing to lend his portrait of Bernard Howard," says Ng. "At the end of the day, even if you've got a great idea, if you don't have lenders who are on board, you don't have an exhibition."

Ng's connection to the Frick goes back to her time as a Columbia graduate student in art history, when she took a course on French painting under Louis XV, taught by Colin B. Bailey, the Frick's chief curator at the time (he's now director of the Morgan Library & Museum). Bailey would take students on field trips to the Frick to study its rococo treasures up close. "That was

important exposure for me to the wider application of art-history training in a museum setting," says Ng, who wrote her PhD dissertation on sixteenth-century Italian Renaissance painting. "Having that bridge through a faculty member was really eye-opening."

Since joining the Frick, Ng has sought out ways to attract new audiences and keep existing fans engaged. During the pandemic, she cohosted the Cocktails with a Curator video series, which explored highlights from the museum's collection — each talk accompanied by a drink recipe. This year, the museum has leaned in to New York City's status as a fashion epicenter to promote the Gainsborough exhibition and an affiliated showcase of French engravings from the time of Marie Antoinette. "I think fashion is an appealing topic for people who may not otherwise feel that welcome in the fine-art world," says Ng.

Though beautiful art tends to speak for itself, it's the stories behind the people and places depicted in historic works — whether the scandalous courtesan Grace Dalrymple Elliott (mistress to the future King George IV, then to the Duke of Orléans), the subject of two known Gainsborough portraits, or Lady Skipwith, a baronet's wife and equestrian captured in a pensive gaze by Joshua Reynolds in 1787 — that give Ng the most fodder for connecting today's audiences with the past. At the Gainsborough exhibition, wall placards and an audio guide narrated by Ng offer intriguing backstories for the long-gone aristocrats and commoners hanging in the galleries.

"The general audience is not as interested in the nitty-gritty scholarly details as they are in the types of human stories and dramas that fuel literature and movies," says Ng. "Storytelling humanizes what some might see as old, dusty things and reminds us of the lives that each one of these objects represents."

JOSH SIEGEL

The Museum of Modern Art

The Museum of Modern Art might be best known for Van Gogh's *Starry Night*, wall-sized Monet water lilies, and a world-class collection of Picassos. But the Midtown Manhattan behemoth is also home to an influential film program that, since the museum's early days, has brought together a spirited community of local cinephiles.

Josh Siegel '92CC has been a face of that program since 1993, when he joined MoMA as a curatorial assistant. "I'm a senior veteran at this point," he says. As a curator of film, Siegel serves on festival selection committees and organizes screenings at the museum's in-house cinemas — MoMA shows upward of four films a day, in addition to the moving images projected inside galleries — while appealing to an eclectic array of tastes among the museum's roughly 130,000 members. "Programming ranges from the first-ever comprehensive retrospectives of filmmakers like Spike Jonze, Dziga Vertov, Frederick Wiseman, and Sarah Maldoror to premieres of new films by Gus Van Sant, Lucrecia Martel, or Apichatpong Weerasethakul," he says.

Siegel is also involved with the museum's robust film restoration and archiving program, an initiative that goes back to the 1930s. "We've collected a diverse range of films from the start — works by everyone from Sergei Eisenstein to Walt Disney, at a time when Disney didn't even understand that he was making art," says Siegel, who in 2002 founded To Save and Project: The MoMA International Festival of Film Preservation, dedicated to showcasing newly restored works.

Once thought of as purely commercial entities, movies weren't widely regarded as museum-worthy until the second half of the twentieth century. "The sad reality is that around eighty percent of all the films made before 1955 are gone forever, whether

through loss or deterioration or neglect," says Siegel. "So it's essential to save what remains and make it available to the world."

This restoration work is no less critical in the digital age. "With streaming platforms like Netflix or even the Criterion Channel, people assume that movies are infinitely reproducible, but they're not," explains Siegel. "If you save sixteen- or thirty-two-millimeter film prints properly, they'll last for



roughly five hundred years. A digital file will last maybe five or ten years before the format becomes obsolete — think about floppy disks and DVDs. Digital material is expensive to store and needs to be migrated from one format to another on a continuous basis."

While Siegel takes pride in introducing audiences to obscure foreign art-house films or rediscovered gems of the silent era, when it comes to

archiving and curating, he makes no distinction between "highbrow" and "lowbrow" media. "One of my proudest moments was getting *Jackass* into the permanent collection of MoMA," he says. "It belongs to a long tradition of physical comedy, of slapstick, of cruel humor. It goes all the way back to the origins of cinema."

Growing up in the city, Siegel started his cultural education early. "My life in New York was one long

internship, everywhere from the Met to the Bronx Zoo," he recalls. He fondly remembers climbing atop the Picasso goat in MoMA's sculpture garden — "at a time when you were allowed to do that." After attending Columbia Prep and completing Core Curriculum work in high school, Siegel studied at Columbia College, majoring in English and history. He wrote an undergraduate thesis on depictions of childhood in films from the Great Depression, with English and comparative literature professor Robert O'Meally as his adviser.

"The liberal-arts education that I received helped make me the voraciously curious person that I am today," says Siegel, who stays connected with the University by providing studio critiques to School of the Arts MFA students. "Columbia has an imperative to preserve its Core Curriculum and core values. Without the humanities, we'll be diminished as citizens and have lost a piece of our souls."



DENISE MURRELL

The Metropolitan Museum of Art

When Denise Murrell '14GSAS set out to write her Columbia PhD dissertation on the use of Black models in modern and contemporary art, she couldn't have predicted how far the project would take her. The idea first came to Murrell while studying Édouard Manet's 1863 painting *Olympia*, which shows a naked white courtesan sprawled out on a divan beside a Black maid holding flowers. Murrell realized that most scholarship focused only on the courtesan.

"I wanted to point out that there were two women in that painting" recalls Murrell, "and that while the woman who posed for the Black figure, whom Manet refers to as Laure in his notes, was in some ways an example of exoticized tropes of servitude, her modern attire indicates that she was part of the free Black community in Paris that interacted

with nineteenth-century artistic circles. That community had been all but ignored by art historians."

In 2018 at the Columbia Wallach Art Gallery, Murrell curated a show based on her dissertation, *Posing Modernity: The Black Model from Manet and Matisse to Today* — the first major international loan exhibition to be held at the gallery's new space, on the

Manhattanville campus. In 2019, the show traveled all the way to the Musée d'Orsay in Paris — where *Olympia* permanently resides — under the title *Le Modèle noir, de Géricault à Matisse*.

Since that breakthrough exhibit, Murrell's profile in the art world has continued to rise. In 2020, she joined the Metropolitan Museum of Art as an associate curator, and in 2022 was given the inaugural title of Merryl H. and James S. Tisch Curator at Large, reporting to the Office of the Director. "In this role, I develop exhibitions, make acquisitions, and collaborate across departments," says Murrell, who divides her time primarily between the Modern and Contemporary Art and European Paintings Departments while also contributing as a guest lecturer, essayist, and advisory committee member for other institutions.

While at the Met, Murrell has established herself as one of the art world's go-to voices on the Harlem Renaissance. Her debut show, *Harlem Renaissance and Transatlantic Modernism*, in 2024, marked the first significant exhibition in New York City focused on the period in nearly forty

years. "We were trying to re-center the Harlem Renaissance within the narratives of American art, but also foreground the fact that this was an international movement," explains Murrell. "Most of the Harlem artists spent extended periods of time in Europe, especially France, and shared stylistic similarities with modernists like Matisse, Picasso, and Munch."

A large part of Murrell's work involves expanding the Met's permanent collection to feature historically underrepresented groups. "I've focused a great deal on artists of color — African American and the broader African diaspora — but also on representations of Black subjects by other artists," she says.

Her acquisitions include Charles Alston's 1934 painting *Girl in a Red Dress*, works by Harlem Renaissance portraitist Laura Wheeler Waring,



Laura Wheeler Waring, *Girl with Pomegranates*, 1938.

the Met's first painting by contemporary artist Titus Kaphar, and an 1873 terra-cotta bust of the playwright Alexandre Dumas *fils*, who was mixed race, by Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux. Other than the Carpeaux, which is in the European sculpture galleries, Murrell's acquisitions will be showcased in the Met's forthcoming Tang

Wing for Modern and Contemporary Art, which is scheduled to open in 2030. “The new wing will have fifty percent more space than the current wing, so therefore a much broader capacity to showcase more voices and narratives,” says Murrell. Until then, Met visitors can find some of the acquired works on temporary display in the museum’s Robert Lehman Wing.

Murrell’s entry into the art world was far from conventional. After graduating from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill as a first-generation college student, she earned an MBA from Harvard and spent over twenty years working in finance and consulting. Living in New York City and traveling internationally exposed her to the world of museums and galleries. “Museums became a part of my life in a way they had not been before,” says Murrell, who joined museum supporter groups and began taking evening classes in art history at Hunter College. What had started out as a curiosity escalated into a passion, and Murrell ended up enrolling in graduate school at Columbia while working a full-time finance job. “I would take half a day of vacation time per week to attend afternoon classes,” she says.

Now an accomplished curator at America’s largest and most-visited art museum, Murrell hopes to spark that same enthusiasm in others — especially people who might be discovering art late in life or in unconventional ways. “I try to develop exhibitions and create publications that speak to audiences who are not necessarily initiated,” she says. “I think that is a key component of what all museums need to do in order to broaden the groups of people who come on a regular basis.”

Back when she was a Columbia graduate student focused on art of the mid-twentieth century, Connie H. Choi ’19GSAS lived in Harlem and paid regular visits to the Studio Museum, one of the nation’s top institutions dedicated to artists of African descent. “It was my neighborhood museum, and I would walk by it whenever I went to campus,” says Choi, who wrote her PhD dissertation on the relationships between education, photography, and the civil rights movement.

“My deep connection really came out of being a Columbia student.”

Today, Choi plays an important role in stewarding the museum’s collection and direction. After joining the Studio Museum as an associate curator in 2017, Choi was promoted to curator in 2022 — a job that covers everything from

ing every few weeks. Featured artists have included historic heavy hitters like Jean-Michel Basquiat and Romare Bearden, as well as active artists such as Derrick Adams ’03SOA and Allison Janae Hamilton ’10GSAS, ’17SOA. “Every time people visit, hopefully they will see new works,” says Choi.

While the Studio Museum’s previous space, a former bank, had low ceilings and limited exhibition capacity, the 82,000-square-foot new building on



CONNIE H. CHOI

Studio Museum in Harlem

researching the permanent collection to overseeing new acquisitions. “Since we have limited storage, we also need to think strategically about space, to ensure that we can properly care for all the works that we are bringing in,” she says.

Choi also organizes temporary exhibitions — her show on the sculptor and activist Tom Lloyd just closed in March — at the museum’s new building on 125th Street. Since the reopening in fall 2025, Choi has helped oversee an exhibition called *From Now: A Collection in Context*, which showcases selections from the permanent collection, rotat-

the same site allows for more — and larger — artworks to be showcased. “Our third-floor gallery has a twenty-eight-foot-high, barrel-vaulted ceiling, which makes the possibilities of what can be installed nearly endless,” says Choi.

The upgraded design also encourages deeper engagement with the surrounding community — an effort bolstered by the Studio Museum’s pay-what-you-can fee structure and free admission on Sundays. “Beautiful floor-to-ceiling windows on the north and south facades allow the building to feel as porous as possible, erasing the boundary between the museum and the street and bringing Harlem inside,” says Choi. “This is in an incredibly vibrant neighborhood, home to cultural organizations like the Apollo Theater. We want to celebrate the spirit of what it actually means to live in Harlem.”

DREW SAWYER

Whitney Museum of
American Art

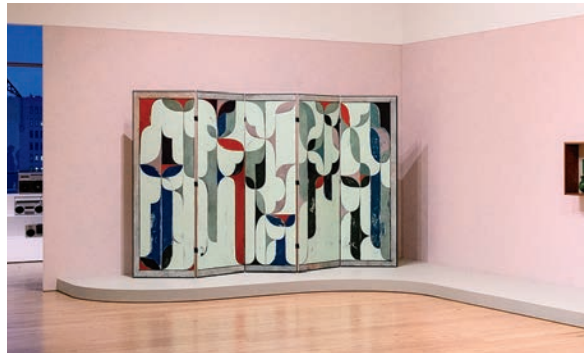


Drew Sawyer '16GSAS spent a long stretch of 2024 and 2025 trying to answer a specific question: How do you capture the look, sound, and mood of American art at this moment? It's a pursuit that has challenged generations of curators since 1932, when the Whitney Museum of American Art hosted its first invitational painting exhibition. The tradition, which later became a biennial showcasing all artistic media, helped raise the profiles of artists like Jackson Pollock, Robert Rauschenberg, and Cindy Sherman. This year marks the event's eighty-second edition.

Planning the Whitney Biennial, which opened in March and lasts until August 23 at the museum's Meatpacking District building, sent Sawyer on a deep dive into the contemporary art scene alongside fellow curator Marcela Guerrero. "We did a little more than three hundred studio visits over the course of twelve months," says Sawyer, the museum's Sondra Gilman Curator of Photography. Sawyer and Guerrero, the selected co-curators for the 2026 biennial, didn't initially approach the project with a specific theme in mind, but after connecting with multiple artists, they landed on the concept of relationality.

"We wanted to think more broadly about what it means to be in relation to one another, to our environment, to other species, to other countries," Sawyer says.

The curators also broadened the scope of American art in their search. "We traveled to a lot of places and met with a lot of artists from countries



Works by Kamrooz Aram are on display in the 2026 Whitney Biennial.

or regions where there has been US military intervention," says Sawyer. The exhibition features work by Japanese photographer Mao Ishikawa, who was born in Okinawa during the US occupation after World War II, and Berlin-based Afghan artist Aziz Hazara, who makes art using objects left by the US military after its 2021 Afghanistan withdrawal.

The biennial features a total of fifty-six individual artists, duos, and collectives — including Columbia alumni Kamrooz Aram '03SOA, an Iranian American artist whose work recalls Middle Eastern decorative art; Ten Izu '14CC, a member of the multimedia collective CFGNY; and Michelle Lopez '92BC, who is known for her provocative installations made of industrial material — and spans genres from sculpture to immersive soundscape. "We were particularly drawn to artists who have atmospheric installations," says Sawyer.

Originally from Iowa, Sawyer came to Columbia in 2006 for graduate school, eventually completing his PhD in art history with a focus on American art. "Columbia's proximity to major institutions and the gallery scene allowed me to participate in the art world in ways that I wouldn't have been able to outside of New York City," he says. Since coming to the Whitney from the Brooklyn Museum in 2023, Sawyer has planned exhibitions and public programs, overseen photography acquisitions, served on the museum's replication committee,

and kept an eye out for emerging artists.

Though planning the biennial required digging into a range of artistic media, Sawyer's primary mandate at the Whitney is photography in its many forms, whether aesthetic, conceptual, or commercial. "Photography circulates in so many different con-

texts, from journalism and fashion in magazines to more institutional uses like science and historical surveys," he says. "It's also a contested medium, especially today with issues around AI and the generation of fake images. There's a long history of debate around photography and its relationship to reality. I've always been drawn to those questions." 📷

Defending the Fifth Branch A Response to Authoritarian Attacks on Universities



In his latest book, *University: A Reckoning*, former Columbia president Lee C. Bollinger '71LAW, '02HON upholds the central role of higher education in America.

What was the impetus for this book?

I've been thinking about these ideas, these institutions, for most of my life: universities, the First Amendment, democracy, authoritarianism. And then, of course, the unprecedented assault by the Trump administration on universities really made me want to write a defense of universities, which I felt were not being adequately defended or explained, as well as argue for their vital role in the society. I wanted to assert that our university system is the best in the world, and to explain that this success is rooted in a

unique and somewhat odd structure that has evolved over the last century.

Your book pegs that evolution to a turning point in the interpretation of the First Amendment. When did this happen, and how?

In the very first cases in the Supreme Court of 1919, the court upheld the convictions of various people who dissented from America's involvement in World War I, including presidential candidate Eugene Debs. Then, very quickly, Oliver Wendell Holmes changed course and articulated this magnificent, foundational ideal of freedom of speech and press in America, calling for protection of "freedom for the thought that we hate" and conveying the notion of "the marketplace of ideas." At the same time, universities were growing from small colleges to

powerful research institutions that were organizing around what I call the scholarly temperament, and they developed the idea of academic freedom.

With the First Amendment, the courts were trying to determine what the protections against government censorship should be. That took many years and many cases, and liberals and conservatives alike on the courts adopted an extremely strong protection for speech in America — greater than any protection of any society today or in history.

But in a system of freedom of expression, of protection of extreme speech, we are grappling with how to achieve this value of the search for truth or knowledge, and overcome our natural intolerance for speech we don't like. And that's the tension that's so beautiful in the First Amendment. It's like the First Amendment is setting an example for the society about what our values are, and we need to think about how to bring the jurisprudence of the First Amendment into a conception of the university, which deserves the sort of protection and autonomy that we have given to the press.

You've been president of both a state school, the University of Michigan, and a private one, Columbia.

How does the First Amendment apply in each?

The First Amendment applies to what is called state action. So if the government says you cannot say a certain thing, you have a First Amendment case to go to court and say, "The government can't tell me I can't say those things." If a private organization says, "Anybody who is part of this organization cannot say these things," that's

not subject to the First Amendment. It's not state action — it's private action. So that's the principle, and it's quite meaningful as it plays out with universities.

Public universities are public state actors, and therefore they must abide by the First Amendment. You cannot, at a public university, establish a rule that students and faculty will not be able to criticize the university administration, or that students and faculty cannot take positions on certain controversial issues in public debate on the campus. Private institutions, even though they receive federal funds, are not subject to the First Amendment. And in theory, they could set rules preventing students from discussing certain subjects. But every major private university in the United States has said, "We are going to voluntarily live by the First Amendment."

Now, when you follow that framework, you become subject to noxious speech, offensive speech, speech that is harmful and hurtful to others, but that can be protected — we know this from cases like *Brandenburg v. Ohio*, where the Klan held a rally and made racist and antisemitic statements. People may, in the abstract, say, "Well, that's fine." But what actually happens — as I know from countless experiences — is that people don't understand why that speech should be protected. Of course, nothing is set in stone, and you can debate whether that framework is right or wrong. But it's the framework we have now, and leaders must make sure people understand it.

With democracy and free speech under attack, what can universities do to strengthen their public standing?

Universities, like any other institution, have flaws and issues to be addressed. But the public has accepted too easily the negative characterizations of universities promoted by certain political segments, which are meant

to diminish the university's identity in society. I think it's useful to look at the traditional role of the press in America, which has, over the past half century, with the help of the Supreme Court and the Constitution, forged this very important identity as the fourth branch of the society, responsible for informing the public, according to professional standards of journalism. And that has served it well. And I think universities need to craft and assert our particular identity too, as the fifth branch.

we're competing for students and faculty against other schools. So we've set up a system in which institutions have individual identities and compete with one another, and this makes us more vulnerable to authoritarian efforts to undermine us.

So what can universities do?

First, we need to acknowledge that we would be stronger if we had more collective resistance and more collective action. One idea would be something like the equivalent of a NATO charter,

“We need to think about how to bring the jurisprudence of the First Amendment into a conception of the university.”

Why do you think the government has been attacking universities?

In authoritarianism, the government tries to politicize the civil service and institutions within government that are intended to provide independent, objective information, such as the Bureau of Labor Statistics or the Federal Reserve Board. And it attacks its critics — law firms, the press, universities, business.

Until recently, universities have been relatively secure from that kind of assault. You would have to go back to the McCarthy period in the 1950s to see something comparable to what's happening today. For many decades we lived free from government efforts to seize control of universities and suppress criticism and independent thought. And in this time, we forged individualistic identities. We want our students and our faculty to think of themselves as loyal to our particular institution, and at the same time,

with an Article 5 for universities in the US: If any institution among us is attacked, all of us will come to its defense. That would not be hard to implement.

And not only do we need the capacity for more collective resistance by universities, but we also need to be prepared to join with other sectors of society that are under attack: the press, law firms, and so on. So there has to be collective action across the board. If you look at any of the scholarship on authoritarian risks in a society, the point will be made that only the cross-sector resistance by civil society will be effective in defeating those authoritarian moves.

That said, the government has enormous power, and if a government is intent on destroying democracy and destroying great institutions that have taken a century or more to create, I'm afraid it has it within its powers to do so. — *Paul Hond*

EXPLORATIONS



A scene in Sylhet, Bangladesh.

Hope beneath the surface

What a decades-long study about arsenic exposure has taught us about human health

More than twenty-five years ago, an interdisciplinary team of Columbia public-health experts, doctors, and earth scientists set off to Bangladesh to help solve what the World Health Organization called “the largest mass poisoning in history.” Decades earlier, international aid workers had encouraged Bangladeshis to dig wells rather than rely on polluted rivers and streams for drinking water. Only when people started developing painful skin lesions — a hallmark of advanced arsenic poisoning — did scientists realize that Bangladesh sits atop some of the world’s most arsenic-contaminated aquifers. By then, tens of millions of people were affected.

So, what was to be done? To help the country respond, the Columbia

researchers had to answer a multitude of questions that had never been investigated before. Chief among them: What are the health effects of arsenic exposure at various levels of concentration, and what is the most reliable way for people to get clean water?

The Columbia team got to work testing wells in the semirural region of Araihaaz, population seventy-five thousand, where they also set up a health clinic. The people whose wells tested as contaminated were then directed to other nearby wells that were arsenic-free, with the aim of sharing the clean water. The scientists eventually succeeded in helping about two-thirds of the local residents get access to clean groundwater. However, some people with unsafe wells did not stop using them, even when offered subsidies to dig new ones. “There were sometimes

cultural or personal reasons, like they just preferred the way their water tasted or were averse to change,” says Joseph Graziano, a Columbia pharmacologist and environmental-health scientist who oversaw the project for many years. Although these outcomes were often tragic, the team’s work would ultimately reveal the health consequences of chronic exposure.

The Columbia project has evolved over time. After the development of well-testing, drilling, and public-education programs that have directly benefited tens of thousands of people, many of the team’s core initiatives have been transferred to locals. But several faculty members continue to work in Bangladesh, advising the government on how their interventions can be scaled up to help others who still lack clean water, and the original

team continues to publish findings from a long-term health study. Here's a snapshot of what they've learned.

Our bodies are exceptionally sensitive to chemical elements

When the Columbia team first arrived in Bangladesh in 2000, scientific knowledge of chronic arsenic exposure was limited. "The dogma was that it caused skin lesions and contributed to certain types of cancer, but that was about it," says Graziano.

He and his colleagues would eventually stun the medical community with what they found. Beginning in the mid-2000s, the Columbia team would show in dozens of papers that arsenic causes not only cancers of the skin, liver, bladder, and lung, but also heart disease, diabetes, fatty-liver disease, and a range of neurocognitive problems.

These discoveries have since prompted the scientific community to look more closely at the health risks posed by exposure to chemical elements in general. For example, scientists have in recent years found that even trace amounts of lead and cadmium, which are ubiquitous contaminants in the industrialized world, significantly increase one's risk of heart disease, much as arsenic does. And research led by Allison Kupsco and Ana Navas-Acien, both Columbia professors of environmental-health science, has shown that members of American Indian communities are aging more rapidly, in part as a result of exposure to arsenic, cadmium, selenium, and other elements in their water supplies and other sources.

Children are at greatest risk

Some of the cruellest consequences of arsenic exposure are inflicted on children. In a series of groundbreaking papers, the Columbia researchers found that kids who drink water containing arsenic are likelier to have cognitive deficits, developmental delays, and metabolic disorders such as type 1

diabetes. And while these effects are especially pronounced in Bangladesh, where groundwater arsenic levels can be fifty times higher than the WHO's recommended safety standards, research has shown that even drinking water with arsenic concentrations that do not exceed legally established limits can affect a child's neurocognitive development. One study led by Columbia psychiatrist Gail Wasserman found that schoolchildren in Maine showed significant declines in intelligence after exposure to levels of arsenic that are commonly found in many parts of the US. Sustained exposure to arsenic, the authors found, shaved five to six points off children's IQ scores.

What happens when the exposure stops

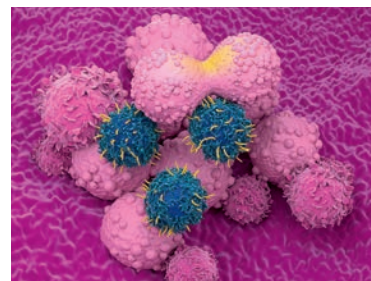
While the neurocognitive effects of arsenic poisoning in early childhood are thought to be permanent, a recent study published in the journal *JAMA* by Yu Chen '05PH and several other members of the Columbia team provides hope for people experiencing other harms. It shows that adults in Bangladesh who drank arsenic-contaminated water for decades saw their physical health largely recover when they finally stopped, with their once sky-high risk of dying from cancer, heart disease, and other chronic ailments returning to normal. "I was extremely surprised by the magnitude of the finding," says Graziano. "It actually brought tears to my eyes."

Lex van Geen, a Columbia earth scientist who still works in Bangladesh studying the geological forces that cause arsenic to seep into aquifers, hopes that the new findings will motivate people in the country to use a new smartphone app that he and several colleagues have developed. "It estimates how deep you'll need to dig a well to reach clean water in a given location, based on geo-referenced data about well depths and water safety that the government has collected over the years," he says. "Most Bangladeshis now have smartphones, so we hope this will change a lot of people's lives."

Immunotherapy pioneer's new breakthrough

A team of Columbia scientists led by Michel Sadelain, who pioneered a type of immunotherapy that has revolutionized the treatment of many blood cancers over the past decade, has achieved a new breakthrough that may extend the approach to solid tumors.

In a recent issue of *Science*, the scientists report that a new form of immunotherapy they've developed can defeat human kidney, pancreatic, and ovarian tumors grafted onto mice. The treatment is similar



Artist rendering of genetically modified immune cells (blue) attacking cancer

to Sadelain's most significant innovation, CAR T-cell therapy, which genetically engineers a patient's own immune cells to attack cancerous ones. But whereas CAR T therapy works primarily against leukemias and lymphomas, the new approach appears to be effective against a much broader range of malignancies. It involves removing immune cells from a patient's body, engineering them into what the scientists call HITs (short for HLA-independent T-cell receptors, which can recognize antigens on the surface of cancer cells), and then infusing the HITs into the body to seek out and destroy tumors.

The scientists hope to soon begin testing the therapy in people.



The launch of the Columbia-led General AntiParticle Spectrometer (GAPS) mission on December 15.

Balloon ride to the edge

After twenty years in development, a high-tech particle detector whose design and construction was overseen by Columbia scientists was deployed in Antarctica this past winter, carried aloft by a gigantic helium balloon. The van-sized instrument rose twenty-two miles above the ice and then drifted for nearly a month on stratospheric winds that circle the continent. As it floated, its thick silicon sensors recorded the impact of hundreds of millions of protons, electrons, and other particles raining down from space. Within the data the sensors collected, the scientists hope to also find the footprints of an antideuteron — an exotic particle that has not yet been observed outside of experimental conditions and could provide a telltale signal of dark matter.

“Dark matter is the invisible material that’s holding the universe together, meaning that it’s creating gravitational interactions,” says Kerstin Perez ’05CC, a Columbia physics professor who is leading the project alongside fellow physics professor and principal investigator Chuck Hailey ’83GSAS. “And it’s eighty percent of the mass in the entire universe . . . So the positive detection of dark matter would be a fundamentally transformative discovery for twenty-first-century physics.”

The Columbia team, which is collaborating on the project with scientists from several other institutions in the US, Japan, Italy, and China, will be analyzing its data for several months and expects to release its findings next year.

What the canyon forgot



Our planet’s geological history, as written in layers of rock, is missing a big chapter: nearly one billion years preceding the so-called Cambrian explosion (when most animals appeared) 500 million years ago. In many places, including the Grand Canyon, that rock is simply gone. A new paper coauthored by Columbia geologist Nicholas Christie-Blick claims to have solved the mystery. Evidence suggests that the now-vanished rock was pushed up to the surface during

the massive tectonic upheavals that led to the formation of the first supercontinent, Columbia, then was worn away by the elements. Scientists say the findings have profound implications for understanding the Earth’s evolution — and our own.

Water fluoridation safe for babies: study

A large study led by Columbia public-health researchers indicates that fluoridated drinking water is safe for pregnant mothers and their babies. The team analyzed the staggered rollout of community water fluoridation across the US between 1968 and 1988, alongside birth outcome data for 11 million babies. It found that the introduction of fluoridated water is not associated with changes in birth weight — a widely accepted indicator of infant health and long-term outcomes. Whereas previous studies had raised questions about possible unintended consequences of water fluoridation, the authors of the new study, led by Columbia’s Matthew Neidell, say their own analysis used more-rigorous methods.



Brain waves go wireless

Columbia researchers have developed a flexible, paper-thin silicon chip that can be safely implanted on the surface of the brain to record and stimulate neural activity. Measuring about three square millimeters in size, the chip is smaller and less invasive than existing brain implants, yet capable of sending and receiving large amounts of data wirelessly. The device is intended for studying neurological conditions such as epilepsy, paralysis, ALS, and stroke — and for informing treatment strategies in real time. Columbia engineer Ken Shepard developed the tool, called the Biological Interface System to Cortex (BISC), with Columbia neurosurgeon Brett Youngerman ’12VPS, ’19PH and collaborators at Stanford and Penn.



“I enjoyed weekly Café Conversation at Maison Française along with French movie nights with friends. And dancing at the Brooklyn Bridge as choreographer of the Swing Dance Club is at the top of my list of memorable experiences.”

—Leonard Robinson '13SEAS
1754 Society Member

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NETWORK



Hongxiang Huang with a pangolin.

Wildlife Warrior

Conservationist Hongxiang Huang '13SIPA is risking it all for the world's most trafficked mammal

Rhino horn. Bear bile. Elephant ivory. Vendors in the bustling markets of the Laotian capital of Vientiane peddle many notoriously illegal wildlife products. They're all unsettling to Hongxiang Huang '13SIPA, but lately he's been most focused on one critically endangered victim of the trade: the pangolin.

The scale-covered nocturnal mammals slurp up ants and termites with their long tongues. There are four species in Africa and four in Asia, with the Sunda and Chinese pangolins — both roughly the size of a house cat (excluding tail) — found in Laos. When afraid, a pangolin rolls into a ball. And, as the most trafficked wild mammal in the world, it has a lot to be afraid of. All pangolins are protected under national and international laws, but that hasn't

stopped poachers in places like Laos, where demand for its meat, as well as the powder ground from its scales, is still rampant.

The trade volume in Laos is “crazy,” says Huang, the founder and CEO of Agent C Wildlife Initiative, a nonprofit organization that sends Chinese people under cover to expose illegal wildlife trafficking. “I would estimate that about ten thousand pangolins are being sold and killed every year.” Watchdog organization TRAFFIC reports that between 2010 and 2015, 5,678 pangolins were confiscated in forty-three operations in Laos, with more animals seized in each subsequent operation in the same period. Nothing indicates that the crisis has gotten any better since.

In January, Huang spent ten days in Laos investigating the illegal pangolin trade with Agent C. On prior trips, the

team had been in Laos chiefly to share intelligence with other interested organizations. This time, the members were taking action.

Going after the middlemen instead of the poachers, the group of volunteers staged sting operations to catch marketplace vendors trafficking pangolins and report them to authorities. The team also engaged in guerrilla tactics to shame consumers, mostly tourists from China. In one operation, the team papered Vientiane's Chinatown with signs in Mandarin saying that people who eat pangolin must be impotent, referencing the widespread belief that consuming the animal boosts virility. “Most of the consumers for pangolin right now are male,” Huang says. The powder is also believed to cure an array of ailments, even though pangolin scales are simply

keratin — the same substance that makes up human hair and nails.

Agent C broke new ground during that January expedition. Getting authorities in Laos to arrest anyone involved in the trade has been next to impossible, because law enforcement in the country is generally “quite bad,” Huang says. But he and his peers were pleasantly surprised when forestry officials confiscated four live pangolins after the group reported the vendors. The animals were delivered to a local rescue center and later released back into the wild. And under Laotian law, the vendors could, at least in theory, face hefty fines and up to five years in prison.

In China, media coverage of the operation — alongside the group’s informative, albeit graphic, social-media videos (one shows a pangolin being clubbed to death) — raised more awareness in his home country than Huang imagined was possible. “We’ve been getting millions of views,” he says, particularly on the Chinese messaging app WeChat. “You will see a lot of the comments from people who don’t realize that buying these kinds of wildlife products is illegal.”

Growing up in the southern Chinese province of Guangdong, Huang witnessed the ubiquitous roadside wildlife trade firsthand. “I had a dream of going to Africa to protect animals, because I read a lot about Dr. Jane Goodall,” he recalls. He ended up pursuing journalism, with the hope of investigating wildlife crimes. After he obtained an undergraduate degree from Shanghai’s Fudan University, Huang

enrolled at Columbia’s School of International and Public Affairs for his master’s degree, looking to connect with professionals in the development world.

Following his graduation from Columbia in 2013, Huang got the opportunity to investigate southern Africa’s trade in ivory and rhino horns through a fellowship with Wits University, in Johannesburg. When visiting an illicit ivory market, Huang quickly realized that his physical appearance was key to rooting out traffickers: Vendors, he noticed, would hide their goods when white or Black people walked by, but upon seeing Huang, a more likely customer, they’d yell out Chinese words for “ivory” and “rhino horn.” The fellowship led Huang to found China House, a nonprofit focused on conservation and humanitarian work, followed by Agent C, and to team up with NGOs as an on-the-ground investigator. In 2016, his undercover work was featured in the Netflix documentary *The Ivory Game*.

Huang and his colleagues are planning another trip to Laos, where they’ve made valuable connections with local Chinese people who are eager to help blow the whistle on the pangolin black market. But given that tourism operators, sprawling souvenir shops, restaurants, and criminals with portfolios of illegal businesses all have a financial interest in the industry, the challenges are massive. Huang has even received death threats — and he knows that a hit in Laos costs just \$8,000.

Is it all worth it? Huang thinks so, for a very simple reason: “I love animals.” — *Felipe Ossa*



Late-nineteenth-century dresses from the French couturiers Maison Lévilion (left) and House of Worth.

The Age of Opulence

The Gilded Age: a period known for industrial innovation, the novels of Edith Wharton, and decadent fashion (as seen, most recently, on the HBO show of the same name). As a scholar of art history, Elizabeth L. Block ’04GSAS has always been fascinated by America in the late 1800s. The senior editor in the Publications and Editorial Department at the Metropolitan Museum of Art recently published *Gilded Age Fashion*, a book showcasing over fifty garments of the era. “Women of the Gilded Age were very aware of quality,” Block says. “They knew that the French couturiers had relationships with the finest silk purveyors in Lyon. They knew the fabrics, they knew the best designers, and they had money to buy whatever they wanted.”



ASK AN ALUM: HOW TO FIND A JOB IN THE AI ERA

Andrew Seaman '11JRN, the editor-at-large for jobs and career development at LinkedIn News, host of the *Get Hired* podcast, and chair of the Columbia Journalism School alumni board, specializes in actionable guidance for today's job seekers.

You've been covering jobs since 2018. Is the hiring world currently as bleak as the media portrays it?

It's definitely tough out there. LinkedIn's hiring rate is down about 4 percent from last year. But there are still bright spots that job seekers can use to their advantage. Not only is there demand in the AI space, but AI is creating jobs in different sectors downstream from technology. Because of the need for data centers, there's a demand for people in construction and people who can handle large projects, and manufacturing is also up. Location matters as well: The market is slow in some places, but cities like Miami and Detroit have seen spikes in hiring. So you have to look at the data and plan accordingly.

How concerned should job seekers be about the rise of AI-powered application screeners and bot interviews?

Honestly, the best way to approach screening technology is to not worry about it. People think of the tech as new, but applicant-tracking systems have been around for decades. The difference now is that AI is being incorporated.

For the most part, these systems are trying to unearth the best candidates. They look at the totality of your résumé and past experiences. People who focus too much on keywords tend to over-engineer their résumés, which makes them look less appealing to employers. There are a lot of applicant-tracking systems out there, and they all work a little bit differently, so there's no way to even know what technology an employer is using.

At the end of the day, AI isn't hiring people — people are hiring people. AI might be doing some sorting and analysis, but there are still a lot of recruiters out there

who are reading every résumé. People I respect in the talent-acquisition field all say that qualified candidates do stand out regardless of the application technology.

What else should applicants not do when applying to jobs online these days?

Don't use services where you can pay to have your résumé sent to hundreds of employers a day. Take the time to figure out what you want, customize your applications, and talk to the right people instead of spraying your résumé everywhere and hoping it lands. That approach can sometimes work for getting *a* job, but probably not the *right* job.

What's your stance on optional cover letters?

It depends on your situation or industry. If you're changing careers, a cover letter can help connect the dots. If you're in a more creative field, I'm very pro-cover letter because you get to make a case for yourself and, if you're a writer, showcase your chops. But when it comes to jobs in technology, engineering, or other hard skills, your cover letter probably won't be read, so don't bother including one.

What's the best way to go about networking?

Networking gets a bad rap because a lot of people think of it as going to a hotel ballroom and putting on a "Hi, my name is" tag. I see it more as keeping up with people and letting genuine curiosity lead discussions. Don't approach it as trans-

actional — you're probably not going to have a conversation and immediately get a referral.

I recommend writing to someone whose work you admire and asking if they're willing to have a fifteen-minute phone call. You'll be surprised at how many people will say yes. Be specific with your questions during the call. You can also network through professional organizations and events: Columbia and other schools have get-togethers and lectures where you can connect with alumni across different fields. Most importantly, keep a networking mindset at all times. The friends, family, and acquaintances in your life can all be stepping stones.

Also, don't be afraid to ask for help. I see a lot of discussion around fear of looking desperate online. LinkedIn has an "open to work" banner that you can put on your profile, and this has been a net positive for everyone. Once you put it out into the world that you're looking for a job, people will start paying attention.

Any advice for recent grads entering the job market?

Being nimble and not necessarily wedded to your degree will serve you well. Many companies recruit and hire based on applicants' specific skills more than on their past job titles or college majors. Reflect on the skills you can offer in an entry-level job — whether that's coding, social media, or creating spreadsheets — and strategize from there. — *Julia Joy*

Sound Effects

If you've ever watched the BBC nature show *Planet Earth III* or the 2025 Netflix crime series *The Beast in Me*, or played the virtual-reality game *Alien: Rogue Incursion*, then you've heard the music of Sara Barone '17CC.

As an Emmy-nominated composer who works on a wide range of media projects out of her Los Angeles studio, Barone is attuned to the art of creating mood through music, conveying everything from the awe of entering the world's largest cave in *Planet Earth III* to

and having access to a lot of up-and-coming filmmakers and short films being created took me deep into that rabbit hole," she says. As one of the few composition students in her cohort who was seriously interested in scoring, Barone found mentors in professors Zosha Di Castri '14GSAS and David Adamcyk. "They really gave me the encouragement and confidence to pursue this crazy career," she says.

This year, Barone has been busy adding to her eclectic portfolio, working on an indie feature film



the high tension of a fight scene in the German action thriller *Exterritorial*. "What bridges all of these genres is that you're trying to tell a story," Barone says.

When writing for film or TV, Barone typically receives a rough cut and comes up with corresponding music, brainstorming themes and melodies at her piano. Games are less linear. "You watch videos, play the game yourself, and work with an audio lead to create a breakdown of the types of music needed to enhance player immersion," she says.

Barone, who grew up playing classical piano, started to pursue media composition while she was a Columbia undergrad majoring in music. "Being in New York

and another sci-fi video game. *R.J. Decker*, a detective series that she scored, with frequent collaborator Sean Callery, premiered on ABC and Hulu in March. "With the show being set in Florida, the score has influences in Latin music and blues," she says. "It's fun and quirky but also has dramatic turns that we had to convey sonically."

Having worked in Hollywood for nine years now, Barone has witnessed the industry's unsettling shifts, from the reduction in projects being green-lit to the looming impacts of AI. It's harder today for young composers to break onto the scene, she says. "I'm really lucky that these past couple of years have been busy." — *Julia Joy*



● Politician **Julie Menin '89CC** was appointed speaker of the New York City Council in January. Menin, who since 2022 has represented Manhattan's Fifth District, covering the Upper East Side and Roosevelt Island, previously held posts as commissioner for the Mayor's Office of Media and Entertainment and for the Department of Consumer Affairs.

● *Paradiso 17*, a novel by **Hannah Assadi '08CC, '13SOA**, made the longlist for the Women's Prize in Fiction, an annual award for English-language books by female authors.

● **Matthew Bogdanos '84GSAS, '84LAW**, a Manhattan assistant district attorney and retired Marine colonel, won the 2026



Marica Vilcek Prize in Art History for his work on antiquities repatriation.

● Warner Bros. development executive **Diamond McNeil '11SOA** worked on the 2025 blockbuster film *Sinners*, which won multiple awards this year, including Oscars for best original screenplay and best actor.

● **Parul Kapur '89SOA** received the \$25,000 Pattis Family Foundation Creative Arts Book Award at Interlochen for her debut novel, *Inside the Mirror*.

● Screenwriter and producer **Jeremy Robbins '13SOA** made his feature-film debut, as the writer of *Apex*, a survival action thriller starring Charlize Theron and Taron Egerton. The film premiered on Netflix in April.

BULLETIN



JENNIFER L. MNOOKIN NAMED UNIVERSITY PRESIDENT

Jennifer L. Mnookin, a nationally recognized legal scholar who has served as the chancellor of the University of Wisconsin-Madison since 2022, will become Columbia University's next president on July 1.

"I am honored and thrilled to join Columbia University at this important moment," wrote Mnookin in a January 25 announcement. "Columbia is defined by rigorous scholarship, a deep commitment to open inquiry, world-class patient care, and an inseparable and enduring connection to New York City, the greatest city in the world. I look forward to working closely with faculty, students, and staff, and with both our local and global community of alumni and friends, to advance the University's critically important mission and to ensure that its teaching and research continue to contribute meaningfully to society."

At Wisconsin, Mnookin has led a flagship public research campus

that serves more than fifty thousand students across thirteen schools and colleges with more than twenty-five thousand faculty and staff, including a medical school and an affiliated health system. Her tenure included significant investments in faculty hiring and research infrastructure, the launch of major cross-campus initiatives on artificial intelligence and interdisciplinary research, and sustained leadership through an uncertain federal funding environment. She has also advanced initiatives to expand access and increase affordability for students.

"Jennifer will be an exceptional leader for Columbia's future," wrote David J. Greenwald '83LAW and Jeh C. Johnson '82LAW, co-chairs of the Columbia University Board of Trustees, in the announcement. "She understands the essential role that higher education and research play in advancing knowledge, serving the public good, and addressing our most

pressing challenges. She is also a keen listener who builds consensus and does not shy away from making difficult decisions when necessary. As president, she will lead Columbia forward with strength and a firm commitment to the University's cherished values."

Mnookin's appointment came after an extensive national search led by a committee of Trustees and faculty members, who sought input from students, staff, alumni, fellow faculty, and other members of the Columbia community.

"From the outset of this process, we sought a leader with both intellectual depth and demonstrated leadership," said Andrew Barth '83CC, '85BUS and Jonathan Lavine '88CC, '23HON, co-chairs of the Presidential Search Committee. "Jennifer's record as a scholar and university leader reflects a deep understanding of how research universities function — how they must continuously evolve in an ever-changing world to enable the pursuit of new

knowledge while remaining true to their academic mission and institutional values.”

Prior to her time at Wisconsin, Mnookin served for seven years as dean of UCLA School of Law, following nearly two decades on the UCLA and University of Virginia law faculties, holding multiple senior academic leadership roles.

One of the nation’s most prominent legal scholars, Mnookin received her bachelor’s degree from Harvard University, her JD from Yale Law School, and a PhD in the history and social study of science and technology from MIT. Her academic work sits at the intersection of science and the law, examining how expert evidence is evaluated and used within the legal system.

Mnookin was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2020. She and her husband, political scientist Joshua Foa Dienstag, have two children.

“To be entrusted with Columbia’s leadership is both humbling and incredibly exciting,” wrote Mnookin in a message to the University community on January 26. “The last several years have been challenging ones for higher education, certainly including Columbia. Having had the privilege for the past few years of leading a public flagship university in a complex time, I well understand the significant uncertainties and heightened scrutiny many universities are now facing. Moments like this demand, in my view, an urgent assertion of the role universities must play in civic life, a clear articulation of both our value and our values, and, simultaneously, a genuine openness to taking seriously the views of those who see the world differently, both inside our campus and in the broader world. Columbia has the depth of talent, the tradition of excellence, and the capacity for innovation to meet this moment with clarity and purpose.”

JONATHAN MERMIN APPOINTED DEAN OF PUBLIC HEALTH

Jonathan Mermin, a physician, epidemiologist, and researcher who has overseen national public-health initiatives, became dean of Columbia’s Mailman School of Public Health on March 2.

Mermin most recently served as director of the National Center for HIV, Viral Hepatitis, STD, and Tuberculosis Prevention (NCHHSTP) at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

and development, as the center supported health departments and community-based prevention programs serving millions of people in the US and around the world.

A retired two-star rear admiral in the US Public Health Service, Mermin earned his BA from Harvard University, his MD from the Stanford University School of Medicine, and his MPH from the Rollins School of



(CDC), where he oversaw an annual budget of \$1.5 billion and 1,800 staff. His center led national efforts to prevent infectious diseases, reduce health disparities, and translate evidence into effective public-health action.

“Dr. Mermin is a nationally and globally recognized public-health leader whose career has been defined by a deep commitment to scientific rigor, health equity, and public service,” wrote Columbia interim president Claire Shipman ’86CC, ’94SIPA and medical campus head Katrina Armstrong in announcing his hire. “We are delighted that he will bring his experience and vision to lead Columbia Mailman in its next chapter.”

As director of the NCHHSTP, Mermin oversaw a broad portfolio of surveillance, research, policy,

Public Health at Emory University. He has authored or coauthored over 250 peer-reviewed publications and advised many national and international public-health organizations.

“Throughout his career, Dr. Mermin has been deeply committed to strengthening public-health systems and mentoring the next generation of leaders, whether in the US or over the decade he was director of CDC-Uganda and CDC-Kenya,” Shipman and Armstrong wrote. “He has played a central role in shaping federal and global public-health strategy, fostering cross-sector partnerships, and guiding responses to complex public-health challenges. His leadership has consistently emphasized data-driven decision-making and collaboration with communities most affected by health issues.”



OBAMA PRESIDENCY ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVE IS NOW AVAILABLE

After recording more than 450 interviews over several years, a team of Columbia historians and social scientists has released the full Obama Presidency Oral History archive to the public.

The digital archive was produced by Columbia's Incite Institute, which fuses social science, oral history, and public engagement. It contains more than 1,100 hours of audio and video conversations with people reflecting on the presidency of Barack Obama '83CC. Included are White House advisers David Axelrod and Valerie Jarrett, cabinet secretaries Timothy Geithner and Hillary Clinton '22HON, former members of Congress, heads of universities and philanthropies, cultural figures like Oprah Winfrey and author Marilynne Robinson, and activists and labor union leaders who fought to shape the Obama administration's agenda.

Whereas presidential oral histories have typically recorded the memories only of top administration officials, the Columbia scholars say they included the voices of ordinary people whose lives were touched by administration policies, such as those who wrote letters to President Obama about their economic precarity, their struggles to secure health insurance, or the effects of gun violence on their lives.

"This archive reminds us how the government can work to enrich the varied communities that make up our enormously complex world," says Columbia sociologist and Incite director Peter Bearman, who oversaw the project.

LAVINES DONATE \$10 MILLION TO BASKETBALL TEAMS



Jonathan Lavine '88CC, '23HON, his wife and partner Jeannie Lavine '23HON, and their family, daughters Allison Lavine '16CC and Emily Lavine Rosin '18CC and son-in-law Nathan Rosin '18CC, recently donated \$10 million to the men's and women's basketball programs.

The gift, one of the largest in the history of the Columbia Athletics department, provides support for both teams and endows the women's head coaching position, now known as the Lavine Family Head Coach of Women's Basketball. Megan Griffith '07CC, who has led the women's squad since 2016, now assumes that title.

Jonathan Lavine, a former varsity Lions golfer and the chair of Bain Capital, is emeritus chair of the University Trustees and a recipient of the College's Alexander Hamilton Award and the John Jay Award. Jeannie Lavine is the cofounder and trustee of the Crimson Lion/Lavine Family Foundation, which she and Jonathan established to support a wide variety of philanthropic causes.



ENGINEERING SCHOOL OFFERING INTERDISCIPLINARY AI MASTER'S DEGREE

Columbia Engineering will launch an interdisciplinary master's-degree program this fall in partnership with several other Columbia schools.

The Master of Science in Artificial Intelligence (MSAI) program will combine computer science and engineering courses with instruction in another domain of a student's choice — medicine, public health, the arts, statistics, or architecture.

Students can choose either an in-person or an online version of the thirty-credit program, both of which have the same rigorous requirements, including proficiency in programming; data structures and algorithms; linear algebra; and calculus and probability.

"While we expect many students will have a computer science, computer engineering, or software background, the program is designed to accommodate students from other disciplines and professionals with different backgrounds," said Garud Iyengar, a Columbia data scientist who is codirecting the new program alongside computer scientist Vishal Misra. "For example, someone with a health-care background and basic programming skills can learn AI to become a specialist in AI for health care, whereas someone with a computer science background may want to deepen their foundation in a domain like finance or policy. The mix of backgrounds will enrich all aspects of the program."



 COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
School of Professional Studies

DEAN'S FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM

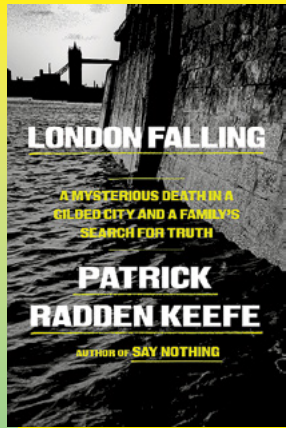
New master's students
are eligible for up to
\$30,000 in support

Full-time and part-time study,
online or on-campus

sps.columbia.edu/CM26



BOOKS



London Falling

By Patrick Radden Keefe '99CC (Doubleday)

London *Falling*, the latest feat of impeccable reportage from Patrick Radden Keefe '99CC (author of opioid exposé *Empire of Pain* and *Say Nothing*, about the Troubles in Northern Ireland), should come with a trigger warning to parents of adolescents. This book, which centers on the mostly thwarted efforts of a London couple, Rachele and Matthew Brettler, to get to the bottom of how and why the body of their beloved nineteen-year-old son, Zac, washed up on a Thames riverbank on a chilly November morning in 2019, will activate every fear modern parents harbor about the minefields that await in a culture saturated with rampant consumerism, drugs, alcohol, weapons, and online toxicity of every imaginable stripe.

As its title indicates, this book focuses on twenty-first century London, a milieu that, in Keefe's rendering, makes present-day America look downright quaint. American readers who haven't crossed the pond

in the past couple of decades may be stunned to discover how radically the staid, stately city they remember has been transformed into a sleek, status-driven megalopolis where the skyline is dotted with newly built, mostly empty high-rises owned by impenetrable holding companies registered in other countries. The factors feeding this real estate frenzy, which Keefe charts in a fascinating mini-history, include the decline of traditional British industries such as shipping and manufacturing, favorable residency policies for foreign nationals (particularly post-Soviet oligarchs fleeing Putin's Russia) with millions of pounds to park in real estate and other easily disguised assets, and the UK's notoriously lax enforcement of financial regulations.

Keefe's portrait of London as a city drunk on foreign lucre serves as the backdrop for and, in the estimation of Rachele and Matthew Brettler, a driving force behind their younger son's shocking evolution from a lively, quick-witted boy to a reck-

less, wealth-obsessed impostor who plunges to his death from a riverside skyscraper. A turning point is Zac's decision to transfer from the secondary school he attends as a day student to a posh, if not quite top-tier, boarding school favored by the children of Russian and Eastern European oligarchs. These scions' casual extravagance and hyper-confident sense of entitlement

housemates who take Ubers to class on cold days rather than walk eight minutes, or who eschew the school uniform in favor of pricey designer suits—have a profound impact on Zac, whose parents are well-off but understated and unflashy in a traditional upper-class English way that he finds uninspiring. Long enamored of films featuring brashly ambitious young men, Zac becomes determined to act on his all-consuming desire to amass a fortune of his own.

Not long after graduation, as his parents discover only later, Zac begins introducing himself to new acquaintances as Zac Ismailov, the son of a Russian oligarch entrusted with finding investments for his family's vast wealth. He soon falls in with a pair of unsavory denizens of London's thriving underworld: a gangster named Verinder Sharma (aka Indian Dave) and a shady entrepreneur named Akbar Shamji, who take Zac under their wing and are instrumental in sealing his fate. They're just two among Keefe's large cast of vividly drawn crooks and con men.

Keefe unfolds the bulk of this story in classic true-crime fashion, much as Rachele, a lifestyle journalist, and Matthew, a partner in a small banking concern, experience it: a bumpy road rife with blind alleys, dismaying revelations, and baffling contradictions. The Brettlers believe that their son's death is the result of a crime. But they are confronted with a Metro

politan Police force that, hard hit by budget cuts, is indifferent to their quest for answers and incompetent in its feeble attempts to investigate. The two (with Keefe's assist, after he learns about their case) are forced to become detectives themselves, tracking leads, questioning witnesses, creating spreadsheets of evidence, and poring over videos captured by hidden cameras. The official incompetence is so dumbfounding, particularly during key fact-finding opportunities, that Keefe speculates that the underlying cause is police corruption.

Keefe, as usual, excels at weaving many tangled elements — historical and sociological analysis, family dynamics, underworld shenanigans, and hidden lives, including that of Rachelle's late father, a famous British rabbi and public intellectual — into a spellbinding whole. Yet Keefe never loses sight of the beating heart and moral center that fuel this narrative: the quietly heroic, heartbreaking struggle of two grieving parents to make sense of the unthinkable.

— Lorraine Glennon

Under Water

Tara Menon '11CC (Riverhead)

It's October 2012, the eve of Hurricane Sandy. But as her fellow New Yorkers are hunkering down to prepare for the "storm of the century," Marissa, an editorial assistant at a luxury travel magazine, is wandering the city streets, thinking about the Skeleton Coast of Namibia — a place that is "exceptionally remote and dramatically beautiful," but also littered with shipwrecks and whale bones, potent reminders of the dangers that can lurk even amid great beauty.

It's something that Marissa knows all too well. The daughter of researchers studying manta ray reproduction, Marissa was raised after her mother's death on a "tiny, uninhabited island in the Andaman Sea," just across from the tourist playground of Phuket. On her first day of school, Marissa meets Arielle, and the two become inseparable — a friendship unlike any she has had before or since. During the week, the girls have their run of Arielle's parents' luxury Phuket hotel. But on the weekends,

they return to Marissa's island to roam freely, becoming "creatures of the sea."

The book oscillates between this paradise and the jittery days before Sandy hits New York City. For Marissa, the impending hurricane isn't just unsettling — it's harrowing and unmooring, triggering in the truest sense of the word. In the smooth white

slash across her stomach and the ghost she sees on every corner, Marissa bears the scars, both literal and emotional, of another storm: the 2004 tsunami, a disaster that in just minutes ravaged her world and took an unthinkable toll.

Menon '11CC is a professor of English at Harvard, where she specializes in the novel, and her familiarity with the form is evident in this expertly constructed debut.

In the book, when Marissa is asked if she lost any family in the tsunami, she doesn't know how to answer. "I realized after a few years that there are people it is acceptable to mourn," she says. "There is no place in our language for grief about friends, or love for them." But with this book, a tender meditation on loss, Menon has created exactly that. — Rebecca Shapiro



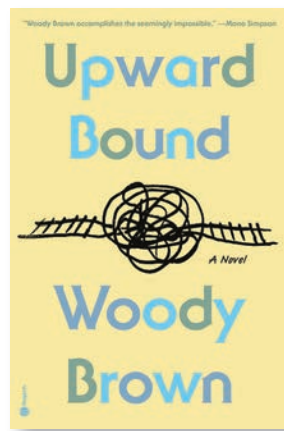
Upward Bound

By Woody Brown '24SOA (Hogarth)

Time moves differently at Upward Bound, a Los Angeles day-care center for disabled adults. Walter — a self-described "inmate" there (the staff calls them "clients") — rotates through a schedule of group activities meant for toddlers: crafts, snacks, visits to the playground. The goal, it seems, is just to fill those spaces, "as if time means nothing to people who have nothing but

time." Walter says the opposite is actually true: "Our time is wasted so profligately that we cherish it for what it might be, not for its emptiness."

But Walter *can't* say that — at least not out loud — which is why he's at Upward Bound. He's severely autistic and non-verbal. Because he can't talk, the world assumes that he can't think. In fact, Walter is searingly intelligent. With communica-



tion assistance (his mother and a spelling board), he graduated with honors from high school and went on to community college, with the eventual goal of a bachelor's degree. But when his father died, and his mother was forced to go back to work, that dream died too.

Debut novelist Woody Brown '24SOA knows his material well. Like Walter, he is autistic, and he has spent time in places like Upward Bound, before earning his BA at UCLA (the first nonspeaking student ever to do so) and his MFA at Columbia. His ability to articulate the inner lives, the enormous frustrations, and the very real dreams of characters who are constantly underestimated by society is stunning and eye-opening.

In addition to Walter, there's also Tom, whose movie-star looks are overshadowed by debilitating cerebral palsy, and Jorge, a gentle giant with the inconvenient habit of running away. Thanks to Brown, we get to know them in meaningful ways.

But Brown is far more than a megaphone for the disabled community. He writes with enormous empathy from the perspectives of not just the Upward Bound inmates, but the staff members too. Being a human — any human — is complex and challenging and joyful and tragic in countless ways. And everyone, as Brown's novel seems to scream, deserves a voice. — *Rebecca Shapiro*

READING LIST

New and noteworthy releases

EMERGENCE

David Sussillo '03SEAS, '09GSAS

Born to mentally ill, drug-addicted parents, David Sussillo spent most of his trauma-filled childhood in group homes and foster care. Now, he's what his Stanford students call "science famous," a pioneering researcher who has helped shape cutting-edge AI technology at companies like Google and Meta. In this moving memoir, he infuses his remarkable life story with neurological insight, using his scientific expertise to try to understand the forces that shaped him.

MEN LIKE OURS

Bindu Bansinath '18CC, '23SOA

When Matthew Pillai is found dead in his car on a New Jersey highway, surrounded by pills, the gossip turns to where his GPS had pointed: Willow Road, and the women who live there. At the center is the Sharma family, recently widowed Anita and her teenage daughter, Leila, with whom Matthew had been suspiciously close. As the investigation heats up and secrets are uncovered, the core of this tight-knit South Asian enclave is rocked. Bindu Bansinath's debut novel is unique and sharply funny, a warmhearted portrait of a community.



THE OPTIMISTS

Brian Platzer '04CC

The first time John Keating, an eighth-grade English teacher at a Manhattan private school, meets pupil Clara Hightower, he understands immediately "there'd never be another one." Years later, Clara is a tech titan turned activist, and Keating, immobilized by a stroke, reflects on his remarkable student and the role he played in her origin story. It's a fascinating take on the student-educator relationship, from someone who knows it well — by day, Platzer teaches at a school much like the one in his novel.

STUCK

Maya L. Kornberg '16SIPA

There's no doubt that the state of the US Congress is concerning. Plagued by extreme partisanship, with threats of violence on the rise, it is ineffective as a legislative body and often toxic. In her timely new

book, Maya L. Kornberg, a fellow at NYU School of Law, focuses on three pivotal congressional freshman classes — the "Watergate babies" of 1974, the Contract with America conservatives of 1994, and the anti-Trumpers of 2018 — to understand how we got where we are, and what steps could move us forward.

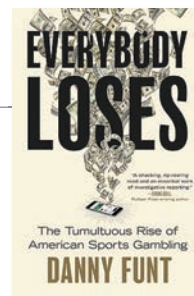
IT WILL COME BACK TO YOU

Sigrid Nunez '72BC, '75SOA

The beloved author of nine novels — including the 2018 National Book Award winner, *The Friend* — Sigrid Nunez has not until now published a book of short fiction. Her new book culls thirteen stories from her decades-long career, showcasing the evolution of her voice. As with her novels, the stories are at once funny and profound, using everyday scenes to ask big questions about memory, grief, art, and love.

High Stakes

In his first book, *Everybody Loses*, journalist Danny Funt '15JRN explores the astronomical rise and alarming consequences of legal sports gambling



Columbia Magazine: How did you become interested in sports gambling?

Danny Funt: The first piece I ever wrote about sports betting was for *Columbia Journalism Review*. I was interested in how gambling fit into the relationship between sports and the media. For example, reporters now have access to locker rooms and coaches, giving them insider information that would be incredibly useful to gamblers. That piece made me interested in the complex issue of sports betting as a whole.

CM: What shocked you the most?

DF: I think the whole VIP side of the business. The major sports betting sites like FanDuel and DraftKings have these robust perks programs to keep their “VIPs” betting at truly phenomenal rates. As a sports fan, I didn’t think it was possible for money to buy the kind of perks that these companies are using, things like throwing out the first pitch at a Major League Baseball game. The programs are designed to make these customers feel special and important. But in reality, it’s because they’re the losers — they’re being rewarded for betting consistently without winning significant amounts. There’s so much that’s delusional about gambling, and this is maybe at the top of the list.

CM: And at the same time these companies are incentivizing losing

streaks, they make it impossible to have a winning streak, by continually adjusting the amounts customers can wager after they win.

DF: Right. Sports books are able to profile customers very quickly, and cut off anyone who has an edge. In the book I tell the story of an attorney named Beau Wagner, who had a hunch about Knicks role player Evan Fournier, who tended to perform well against his former team, the Boston Celtics. Wagner placed a \$50,000 wager that Fournier would end up the high scorer in a game against the Celtics, and he was right. This is the kind of story that DraftKings likes to promote, because it makes people think they can win big. The company tweeted out Wagner’s winning ticket with the caption “Beau Knows Betting.” But the next day, Wagner realized that DraftKings had limited his account. He could no longer bet more than \$100 on an NBA game, and not more than \$3.63 on a player’s single-game shooting. You can make a reasonable argument that these companies need to restrict certain people’s wagering, or they’d go out of business. But the way that they’re doing it is galling.

CM: Is it possible to be successful at sports betting?

DF: Some people do make a living as professional sports gamblers, but it’s a grind. It’s very hard to win at the sports that people like to bet on, like football or basketball — you have to pick more obscure wagers. And even if you do manage to win, most of your time is spent on deceptive methods to keep sports books from identifying you and limiting your ability to place bets. Most successful gamblers use “beard accounts,” where they partner

with other people who actually place the bet, for a cut of the winnings.

CM: Sports leagues were once staunchly opposed to gambling, but they’re now an integral part. How did that evolve?

DF: Until very recently — basically until 2014, when NBA commissioner Adam Silver published an op-ed in *The New York Times* in support of legalizing gambling — it was seen as an evil that could destroy sports. But of course it all comes down to money. The gambling industry commissioned more than \$1 million worth of studies from Nielsen, the company that measures TV audiences. It found that gamblers watch far more sports than regular fans and that they watch until the end of the game. Nielsen found that every year, the NFL would make almost \$2.5 billion more if sports betting was made legal. So, despite decades of opposition, the money was just too good to pass up.

CM: You start the book with a harrowing story about a college basketball player who has the game of a lifetime, only to be the subject of online abuse because his winning basket impacted the points spread. How do you think gambling affects the actual players?

DF: It’s escalated beyond the point of harassment. Some players are regularly getting death threats, and I think it’s only a matter of time before something truly catastrophic happens. The recent scandal involving college basketball players participating in a points-shaving scheme also highlights the pressure that some of these athletes are under. For the most part, I think athletes don’t want to be involved in gambling, but the temptation is clear.

— Rebecca Shapiro

His Signature Achievement

How Robert Livingston 1765KC changed America

On June 11, 1776, with the American Revolution raging, the Second Continental Congress convened in Philadelphia and appointed five men to draft a statement declaring a break from Great Britain. This group, known as the Committee of Five, comprised lawyer and lead author Thomas Jefferson, of Virginia; lawyer John Adams, of Massachusetts; Postmaster General Benjamin Franklin, of Pennsylvania; judge Roger Sherman, of Connecticut; and lawyer Robert Livingston 1765KC, of New York.

Though only twenty-nine, four years younger than even the rising star Jefferson, Livingston was chosen for his legal acumen. His insights informed the document's litany of abuses charged to King George III and its conclusion that "a Prince, whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people." The colonies adopted the text, soon to be known as the Declaration of Independence, on July 4, and fifty-six delegates signed it. But Livingston, recalled to New York to draft the state constitution with his law partner, John Jay 1764KC, and his friend Gouverneur Morris 1768KC, missed the signing ceremony, and his name does not appear on the parchment.

Back home, he shuttled between New York City and his family estate, Clermont, in the Hudson Valley, where he lived with his wife and daughter, as well as a number of enslaved servants: Like most liberty-espousing founders, Livingston was a slave owner, and as late as 1790, he held fifteen people at Clermont.

During the revolution he also kept tabs on the battlefields, using the new US Postal Service to send intelligence to General Washington ("The troops raised on Long Island, & which we have subjected to your Excellency's command . . . may amount to about 800 men," he wrote in August 1776). In 1777 the New York Convention of Representatives named Livingston chancellor, the highest judicial post in the province.

As chancellor, Livingston presided over the court of chancery, which handled cases involving restitution and sought to apply standards of fairness and conscience. And it was Livingston who, as New York's legal authority, stood before George Washington on April 30, 1789, at Federal Hall in Manhattan and, Bible in hand, administered to him the oath of office of the first President of the United States.

In 1801, President Thomas Jefferson asked Livingston to be minister to France. Livingston resigned as chancellor and turned to the task of acquiring the port of New Orleans. As talks stalled, Jefferson sent Livingston and envoy James Monroe to Paris to bargain with Napoleon's treasury minister. Negotiations ended unexpectedly in April 1803, when France offered not just New Orleans but the entire Louisiana Territory, 828,000 square miles from the Mississippi to the Rocky Mountains. The Americans agreed to pay \$15 million, and voilà: The size of the US nearly doubled. "This is the noblest work of our lives," Livingston wrote to Jefferson. "Today, the United States take their place among the powers of first rank."

His service done, Livingston retired from public life in 1804 and set out in business. After having met inventor Robert Fulton in Paris in 1802, he bankrolled Fulton's steamboat while gaining exclusive rights from the state legislature to run steamboats on the Hudson. In 1807 he and

Fulton launched the *North River*, the world's first steam-propelled commercial vessel, which took two days to go from New York to Albany. Livingston also pursued livestock breeding, starting with two pairs of merino sheep he had brought back from Europe. In 1809 he published *Essay on Sheep*, a manifesto of the "merino craze" (1809–1811) that gripped the Northeast when embargoes on

British goods sparked demand for homegrown wool, a boom that added even more layers to Livingston's wealth.

Livingston died at Clermont in 1813 at age sixty-six. Compared with others on the Committee of Five, his recognition is modest: New York and Kentucky each have a Livingston County; the Livingston Masonic Library, on West 23rd Street in Manhattan, is also named for him. Statues of Livingston stand in the US Capitol and in the New York Court of Appeals in Albany. At Columbia, generations of undergrads resided at Livingston Hall, which was changed to Wallach Hall in 1969. And, of course, his signature is on the Louisiana Purchase Treaty, housed at the National Archives.

The Declaration of Independence, which bears Livingston's lawyerly stamp if not his name, stands as his most important contribution to the country. For while the Louisiana Purchase and the steamship greatly changed America, the Declaration, with its claims of natural rights, and its contempt for tyranny, defined it. — *Paul Hond*



Independence authors Adams, Sherman, Livingston, Jefferson, and Franklin.



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Photo by Brandon Vallejo



COLUMBIA GIVING DAY IS WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 28



Save the date to come together and make a difference.
Scan the QR code to add to your calendar.