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Friday, October 19, 2001, at 6:39 PM ET

books

The Secret of *The Canterbury Tales*

The tellers get to mock their own tales.

By Adam Kirsch

Monday, December 29, 2008, at 6:38 AM ET

A confirmed sadist could find many things to enjoy in the pages of *The Canterbury Tales*. As Chaucer's pilgrims take turns telling stories to while away the hours on their long walk to the shrine of St. Thomas a Becket, they shy away from no variety of physical violation or psychological torture. In "The Miller's Tale," a man is rectally impaled with a red-hot poker. In "The Clerk's Tale," a husband tests his wife's obedience by pretending to murder their two children. In "The Reeve's Tale," a pair of students rapes a man's wife and daughter in order to humiliate him.

Why is it, then, that the actual experience of reading *The Canterbury Tales* is not at all painful? Why has it struck six centuries of readers as, in fact, the humane masterpiece of English literature—the book that seems to embrace more of the world, and affirm more of human nature, than any other? The answer lies in the disjunction between the men and women who populate Chaucer's poem and the stories that they tell. In their tales, the pilgrims reflect the assumptions of a medieval world that manages to appear, at the same time, inhumane in its love of comic brutality and sanctimonious in the way it elevates piety, humility, and (especially female) chastity into the highest virtues. Who would want to live as austerely as Chaucer's Pardoner demands from the pulpit?

> O gluttony, the height of wickedness!
> O primal cause of mankind's utter fall!
> O first and original sin that damned us all
> Till Christ redeemed us with his own dear
> blood! ...
> O stomach! O belly! O stinking bag of jelly,
> Filled with dung, and reeking with corruption!

Yet by the time the reader reaches these lines from "The Pardoner's Tale"—as rendered, here, by Burton Raffel, in his new translation of Chaucer from Middle to Modern English—she has already learned not to trust a word this character says. For in real life, the Pardoner—or, as Raffel derisively calls him, the "Pardon-Peddler"—is himself a first-class glutton, not to mention a lecher and a con artist. "I want good money, good clothes and cheese and wheat/… I like to water my throat with wine,/ And have a frisky wench in every town," the Pardoner brags in the prologue that precedes his tale. He is so brazen that the reader has to laugh, especially when he reveals the trick that always gets people to pay for the privilege of genuflecting

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before his faked relics. He announces to the congregation that "Anyone in sitting in church, cozy and warm,/ Guilty of several sins so awful he/ Dares not, for shame, confess and pray for mercy," is strictly forbidden to make an offering. After that, of course, no one wants to be seen holding back.

"In real life," I wrote, the Pardoner is not what he seems in his tale—yet of course there is no "in real life" when it comes to the pilgrims, who are all Chaucer's inventions. Indeed, the pilgrims are far more Chaucer's inventions than the stories they tell, which are usually recycled from other medieval tale collections. Yet it is precisely by building this second level, this metafiction, into his fiction that Chaucer renders it so powerfully realistic. Because we see the pilgrims telling stories, they gain the trust we place in storytellers, who, by definition, are more real than their tales.

And it is in the gap between the tellers and the tales that Chaucer's humanity is able to flourish. The Clerk might offer up Griselda, the wife who is unswervingly loyal despite her husband's cruelty, as a model of Christian patience: "A woman having been incredibly patient/ To a mortal man, how very much more we ought/ To take in good part whatever God has sent us,/ For rightfully he tests what he has wrought. …" Yet at the end of that tale, Chaucer adds a song or "envoy," gleefully acknowledging that "Griselda is dead, and so too is her patience," so that husbands should not try to find her like: "They'd only be wasting their time, and deserve their penance."

More important, Chaucer creates the Wife of Bath, that irresistible emblem of female independence and appetite, to display "in real life" a charisma that the "fictional" Griselda could never match. Griselda is the kind of woman that only exists in stories written by "clerks," that is, clergymen, as the Wife complains:

> There is no greater impossibility,
> In truth, than clerics praising wives would be,
> Unless the woman is a holy saint:
> No other women deserve a word of praise.
> Pictures of lion-killing show a living
> Man. But what if a lion had painted the
> picture?

The Wife of Bath's fifth husband, she recounts, had a book full of misogynistic stories from sacred and pagan literature; tired of hearing them, she "yanked three pages out of the book/ And threw them onto the floor, and also hit him/ Right on the cheek, hard, with my balled-up fist." The secret of *The Canterbury Tales* is that it allows its characters to tear out its own pages, so to speak—to mock and complain about the rules they are supposed to live by. Because of this, the book has a holiday air, a tolerance for human appetites and frailties, that few modern works can rival. Our officially secular and hedonistic society seldom allows us to feel as free and happy as Chaucer's pilgrims seem to be.

All the passages I have quoted come from Burton Raffel's new translation, and they show its one big virtue: It is immediately comprehensible, allowing the reader to grasp (most of) Chaucer's meaning without footnotes. For those readers who are absolutely unwilling to puzzle out Middle English spelling, or spend time getting acquainted with Chaucer's versification and syntax, Raffel's edition will be a useful substitute.

But even Raffel, a poet who has translated everyone from Cervantes to Stendhal, seems a little curious why anyone would bother reading *The Canterbury Tales* in translation. "Native speakers of English, as recently as the first half of the twentieth century, were not particularly uncomfortable with Chaucer's difficulties," he writes in his introduction. Since the English language has not changed much in the last 50 years, he clearly believes that the problem lies with its speakers—that we have gotten lazier and more provincial.

No one who embarks on reading *The Canterbury Tales*, however, can be all that lazy, and any reader who compares the original with Raffel's version will surely agree that the extra effort is worthwhile. For Raffel's translation loses the original's music without finding a music of its own; he is wordy where the original is pithy and bare where the original is lush. Chaucer is in many ways the progenitor of English fiction—he is closer to Dickens than to Keats—but he is also a great master of English poetry; and since poetry is what is lost in translation, why not take the trouble to read the original and avoid the loss? Besides, as the Pardoner says, "lewed peple loven tales olde;/ Swiche thynges kan they wel reporte and holde."

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bushisms

Bushism of the Day

By Jacob Weisberg

Wednesday, December 31, 2008, at 4:30 PM ET

"So I analyzed that and decided I didn't want to be the president during a depression greater than the Great Depression, or the beginning of a depression greater than the Great Depression."—Washington D.C., Dec. 18, 2008

Click here to see video of Bush's comments. The Bushism is at 19:09.

Got a Bushism? Send it to bushisms@slate.com. For more, see "The Complete Bushisms."

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bushisms

Bushism of the Day

By Jacob Weisberg

Monday, December 29, 2008, at 4:03 PM ET

"People say, well, do you ever hear any other voices other than, like, a few people? Of course I do."—Washington, D.C., Dec. 18, 2008

Click here to see video of Bush's comments. The Bushism is at 31:42.

Got a Bushism? Send it to bushisms@slate.com. For more, see "The Complete Bushisms."

chatterbox

Amazon.con

How the online retail giant hoodwinks the press.

By Timothy Noah

Saturday, December 27, 2008, at 3:00 PM ET

I am the most successful writer in the United States. Based on what, you ask? You'll just have to take my word for it. Not good enough, you say? Then why is it good enough when Amazon claims to be the most successful retailer in the United States?

The day after Christmas, Amazon put out a press release declaring the 2008 holiday season "its best ever, with over 6.3 million items ordered worldwide on the peak day, Dec. 15." The story was eagerly snapped up by the Associated Press, Reuters, the *Washington Post*, the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, and even the Web site for *Business Week*, which really ought to know better. Some, but not all, of these accounts went on to concede that Amazon would not provide revenue data for the entire shopping season, or even for its "peak day." Nor would Amazon confirm or deny that one or both of these revenue figures exceeded those for 2007. Without this information, we can't possibly know whether Amazon had a good year in comparison either to other retailers or to its own sales during the previous Christmas shopping season.

The same gullibility applies to coverage of the Kindle, Amazon's e-book reader. The *New York Times* reported on Dec. 23 that "the e-book has started to take hold." We "know" this "in part because of the popularity of Amazon.com's Kindle device," which is "out of stock and unavailable until February." The *Post* fronted essentially the same story in its business section on Dec. 27. But these newspapers were unable to report how many Kindles Amazon sold, much less how much revenue these sales generated, because Amazon won't release that information. We don't even know whether Amazon sold more Kindles this year than last. Amazon is famously stingy with financial numbers generally. This Christmas season, that's proving to be a winning strategy in dealing with a business press that, between layoffs and the usual holiday vacations, appears short-staffed to the point of utter witlessness.

culture gabfest

The Culture Gabfest, "*Valkyrie* Gave Me Pinkeye" Edition

Listen to ***Slate***'s show about the week in culture.

By Stephen Metcalf, Dana Stevens, and Julia Turner

Wednesday, December 31, 2008, at 11:55 AM ET

Listen to Culture Gabfest No. 24 with Stephen Metcalf, Dana Stevens, and June Thomas by clicking the arrow on the audio player below:

You can also download the program here, or you can subscribe to the weekly Culture Gabfest podcast feed in iTunes by clicking here.

In this week's Culture Gabfest, our critics discuss Tom Cruise's screen adventures as a one-eyed German soldier, Bruce Springsteen's decision to sell his new best-of collection exclusively at Wal-Mart, and the 2008 year in culture.

Here are links to some of the articles and other items mentioned in the show:

The *Valkyrie* Web site.
Stephen's ***Slate*** piece looking at Tom Cruise's career through the lens of his 1983 comedy *Risky Business*.
Box Office Mojo charts *Valkyrie*'s success in its opening weekend.
Billboard reports that the new greatest-hits collection from Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band will be available

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exclusively at Wal-Mart.
Jon Pareles' piece in the *New York Times* on coming to terms with musicians selling out.
Stephen's ***Slate*** piece on Springsteen and his guru Jon Landau.
Dana's list of the best films of 2008.
Slate's staff picks the best books of 2008.

The Culture Gabfest weekly endorsements:

Dana's pick: HBO's documentary *Jacques D'Amboise in China: The Other Side of the World*
June's pick: *The Archers*, a quintessentially British radio show from the BBC, now available as a daily podcast
Stephen's pick: an upstart podcast from a trio of culture-gabbers, and a happy 2009.

Posted on Dec. 31 by Jacob Ganz at 11:57 a.m.

Listen to Culture Gabfest No. 23 with Stephen Metcalf, Dana Stevens, and Julia Turner by clicking the arrow on the audio player below:

You can also download the program here, or you can subscribe to the Culture Gabfest podcast feed in iTunes by clicking here.

In this week's Culture Gabfest, our critics Stephen Metcalf, Dana Stevens, and Julia Turner discuss Jay Leno's announced move to prime time, the troubles facing the book-publishing industry, and the rebirth of Mickey Rourke in the new movie *The Wrestler*.

Here are links to some of the articles and other items mentioned in the show:

The *New York Times* article on how Jay Leno was convinced to stay at NBC and move into a prime time slot.
Jimmy Fallon's "vlog" practice for his *Late Night* gig.
Daniel Engber's ***Slate*** article on the "crying while eating" viral video that won him a spot on *The Tonight Show With Jay Leno*.
New York magazine's article on the sinking book-publishing industry.
The *New York Times*' piece on a particularly disastrous week for the publishing industry.
The Wrestler Web site.
Pat Jordan's profile of Mickey Rourke in the *New York Times Magazine*

The Culture Gabfest weekly endorsements:
Dana's pick: Deborah Eisenberg's article on the work of Susan Sontag in the *New York Review of Books*.
Julia's pick: Fred Armisen's underestimated Obama impersonation on *Saturday Night Live*.
Stephen's pick: "Warmer Corners," the 2005 album by the Australian indie pop trio the Lucksmiths.

Posted on Dec. 17 by Jacob Ganz at 12:27 p.m.

Dec. 3, 2008

Listen to Culture Gabfest No. 22 with Stephen Metcalf, Dana Stevens, and Julia Turner by clicking the arrow on the audio player below:

You can also download the program here, or you can subscribe to the Culture Gabfest podcast feed in iTunes by clicking here.

In this week's Culture Gabfest, our critics discuss *Milk*, Beyoncé, and Black Friday.

Here are links to some of the articles and other items mentioned in the show:

The official *Milk* Web site.
Dana Stevens' review of *Milk*.
Dennis Lim's analysis of whether *Milk* could have helped defeat California's Proposition 8 if it had been released earlier.
Beyoncé's new album, *I Am … Sasha Fierce*.
Beyoncé's video for the song "Single Ladies."
Beyoncé's video for the song "If I Were a Boy."
Jonah Weiner's piece on Beyoncé's odd new alter ego, Sasha Fierce.
David Carr's *New York Times* analysis of Black Friday.

The Culture Gabfest weekly endorsements:

Dana's pick: James Lipton's *Inside the Actor's Studio* interview with Paul Newman.
Julia's pick: Norman Rush's novel *Mating*.
Stephen's pick: Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man*.

You can reach the Culture Gabfest at culturefest@slate.com.

Posted on Dec. 3 by Amanda Aronczyk at 1:15 p.m.

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culturebox

Speed Reading

Once a Runner, the best novel ever about distance running.

By Marc Tracy
Wednesday, December 31, 2008, at 6:55 AM ET

On New Year's Day 2004, a runner named Quenton Cassidy

finished second among high-schoolers in the Resolution Run 5K in Atlanta. In 2005, he finished first among an all-ages set in a Massachusetts 5K and third in the Fifth Annual Cure Autism Now 5K in Maryland. A year later, he seems to have lost a step, finishing fifth in the 2006 Des Moines Midnight Madness 5K.

Quenton Cassidy is not actually a real person, some itinerant jogger bent on winning charity races nationwide. Rather, he's the hero of John L. Parker Jr.'s novel *Once a Runner*, a cult object among serious distance runners. To demonstrate their devotion to the book, runners not infrequently take its hero's name as a race-day nom de guerre. (I can't help but notice that the Quenton who ran in the Maryland race—second picture down—looks an awful lot like my old track teammate Ben.)

Since its publication in 1978, *Once a Runner* has purportedly sold more than 100,000 copies and spawned a sequel and a movie. Yet Parker sold the last of his original self-published editions in 2004. Demand has never subsided. The cheapest used paperback on Alibris was recently going for $77.98. And according to Bookfinder—the Google of dead books—the novel has been the most-searched-for out-of-print fiction or literature book each of the past two years.

There won't be a threepeat: This time next year, *Once a Runner* will no longer be eligible. The novel's place atop Bookfinder's list caught the eye of Brant Rumble, an editor at Scribner, which is printing new copies in April. A nonrunner, Rumble told me he nevertheless found himself "completely engrossed" in the detailed descriptions of Quenton's runs.

That puts Rumble in a small minority. The paradoxical nature of the novel's popularity—it was the most-wanted book that not enough people wanted anymore—suggests an intense but narrow appeal. There's a reason *Once a Runner* has never managed to find a mainstream audience. It aggrandizes the insular world of running in a way that, with due respect to its new publisher, no nonrunner could possibly relate to. It is written for runners—and to keep nonrunners out. But it also nails the running life like no other novel ever has.

Quenton is an undergraduate miler at the fictional Southeastern University in the Florida panhandle. He spends most of his time training with the cross country team and with Bruce Denton, an Olympic gold-medalist distance runner who lives nearby. The plot pits the liberal, free-spirited runners against a counter-countercultural football coach and a retrograde university president. For vague, dubious reasons that include Quenton's authoring of a petition protesting a dress code, he is suspended from intercollegiate competition, prompting him to leave school altogether and move, alone, to a cabin in the woods. There he trains for a race in the spring at the university against, among others, a world-champion miler from New Zealand. If he can only figure out how to sneak into the competition, from which he has been banned …

That's pretty much the extent of the plot. As for the prose, it frequently reads like the work of an eighth-grader going through his Beat phase. The novel's goofy literary pretensions—Quenton's name, for example, is surely a not-so-sly reference to Faulkner's equally time-obsessed hero, Quent*in*—only make matters worse.

Most cult objects essentially invent their own cults (think *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*), but *Once a Runner* had a readership waiting for it. The book doesn't just *have* a cult, in other words—its *subject* is a cult, and it depicts the cult's rituals in the minutest detail. Parker captures how it all feels: how during a tough workout a random word or phrase will materialize in your mind and be turned over and played with like "seals with a beach ball"; how as you wander around a track meet you feel as though your personal record is the dominant fact of your life ("This gentleman here, perhaps you'd like to meet him, is 27:42"); how after a race your spine feels as though it's "made of bamboo." Reading these dead-on descriptions, a runner feels a pleasurable sensation of recognition. The nonrunner, I assume, feels nothing.

Like many cults, distance running has its mysteries, and The Secret—how you become a real runner—is *Once a Runner*'s chief concern. ("As Denton's reputation grew," Parker writes, "a number of undergraduate runners decided they would train with him, thinking to pick up on The Secret.") But it turns out that The Secret is that there is no secret. The runner must pound the mileage, as we say. It's a grueling, tedious, insane lifestyle. So why do we keep doing it?

To understand the answer, you have to understand a bit about distance running. For one thing, it helps to know that only nonrunners talk about a "runner's high." It's not that it doesn't exist, that weird feeling of euphoria you sometimes get briefly after a tough day at the track or a superlong run. But no one could possibly be a runner just for the highs, whether brought on by natural chemicals or by winning a race. The running life is mostly just lots and lots and lots of miles. Only a few competitions punctuate the grind of thankless workouts on anonymous tracks, and you literally need a very loud gun to snap you out of the training existence and tell you it's time to save nothing for later. There simply isn't enough in the way of traditional rewards as compared with hard labor to make it worthwhile—that is, if you're only after the traditional rewards.

Once a Runner gets all this. It presents the distance running life as overwhelmingly mundane. It is appropriate that Quenton first shatters the all-important four-minute mile not in a race but during a random training session—"Just another goddamn workout." This being a sports novel, there is a Big Race at the end where Everything is on the line. But the book's true climax comes during one of Quenton's workouts in preparation for the race, an interval session requiring 60 quarter-miles (for those of you who've done quarters workouts, no, that's not a typo).

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Denton forces Quenton to run the final 20 alone: "I know you can do this thing because I once did it myself," Denton tells him. "When it was over I knew some very important things." And thus it is after the workout, and not the race, that Quenton achieves true self-knowledge, the end of any novel of growth. "I know," Quenton gasps afterward. "But it is a very hard thing to have to know."

The forthcoming edition is by far the handsomest copy of *Once a Runner* I've seen, but a part of me wishes the novel had stayed out-of-print. Not everyone is up for the running life, and not everyone should be able to get their hands on this book. It should take effort, whether that means borrowing (or stealing) it from someone or saving up $77.98. *Once a Runner*'s portrait of running may smack of elitism, but it is a democratic elitism: Not everyone can be a runner, but a runner can come from anywhere.

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culturebox

Oops! She Crashed It Again.

Why celebrities are such bad drivers.

By Tom Vanderbilt

Tuesday, December 30, 2008, at 8:01 AM ET

There was a poetic justice in the recent charging of *Melrose Place* star Heather Locklear on one misdemeanor count of driving under the influence of drugs (the legal sort, but the law is rightfully blind when it comes to operating a motor vehicle). The traffic stop, which happened nearly a year ago, was generated by a tip to the California Highway Patrol from a "former *US Weekly* reporter." It seems cringingly appropriate that someone from the magazine that brought us "Stars, They're Just Like Us!" should have brought a celebrity down to earthly mug-shot justice—and is it just me, or does the work of the Santa Barbara PD in-house photographer have a rather ethereal beauty?

Heather's misfortune brought to light, yet again, the curious cultural construct of the "celebrity driver." Granted, things have slowed a bit since the tumultuous Year of the Celebrity DUI—2006—when it seemed as if any starlet worth her salt was found operating under the influence and driving on a suspended license. And the world is still gasping at the moving violations of Britney Spears—whose most creative act of 2006 was to cruise around with her infant son on her lap. Yet the questions are still with us: Why has *celebrity driver* become such a meaningful pair of words? And what does our fascination with bad celebrity drivers reveal about ourselves?

Mere logistics explain a lot. Most celebrities live in Southern California, a region that has brought us everything from drive-in churches to drive-up voting, and they naturally spend an inordinate amount of time in their cars. Research has shown that the more miles one travels, the higher one's "exposure" to risk becomes. There are simply more chances to get into trouble. *Exposure* is an interesting word in the celebrity context, for in driving, celebrities not only expose themselves to risk but expose themselves to the general public and the paparazzi—who stake out driveways, the threshold to public life in Los Angeles. At the destination, the vulnerability comes in the parking lot, so it's no surprise that valet parkers supplement their income with tips … to photographers.

Traffic is a ruthlessly democratic environment; you can drive a $300,000 Maybach with high-luster leather seats and still sit in the same congestion, still get cut off by a 1983 Corolla with a "Visualize Whirled Peas" bumper sticker, still hit the same pothole, and still fall prey to the speed gun. Driving is one of the central areas of life in which celebrities, inescapably, are "like us," and, not surprisingly, the *vérité* photographs are often taken in traffic: waiting at a light on Melrose, pumping gas on Wilshire, pulled over for speeding on Sunset. (There was a curious denouement in this respect recently when David Beckham, flagged in his black Porsche for driving too fast, was let off with a warning by an LAPD officer, who seemingly wanted to prevent the assembling paparazzi —who themselves can provoke bad celebrity driving with their own bad driving—from causing any more traffic chaos themselves.)

One wonders, given the incomes involved, why more celebrities don't simply hire drivers for their mileage-intensive nights of parties and premieres. Perhaps it's the privacy issue. (There are rumors of limo services installing cameras.) Perhaps it's because Hollywood driving itself, with its similarly motorized press corps, becomes a platform for image-making. "They don't want to spend the money to pay for a car service because they want to be photographed in their fancy cars," one "image consultant" told the Associated Press. Even arrests can be photo ops. "Paris Hilton being arrested just makes her more famous," publicist Michael Levine said after her DUI. Her agent, meanwhile, told MSNBC: "She's been known to have a drink or two."

Conversely, driving offers celebrities some illusion of normalcy. My wife, writer Jancee Dunn, once interviewed the Olsen twins. The "contrived activity" for the interview was to go shopping at a vintage clothing store. "I drove with Ashley, who could barely see over the dash of her enormous Range Rover," she recounts in her book *But Enough About Me*. "Ashley kept phoning her sister in her corresponding Range Rover, because the two of them weren't sure of how to get to the store." All the while, their discreet bodyguards trailed in yet another vehicle. Rather than carpool in a limo, a virtual motorcade was required. It's as if being driven by a chauffer is some relic of old Hollywood—cue the images of haughty Gloria Swanson carted around by the faithful Max (played by Erich Von Stroheim, who actually couldn't drive).

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For a time, the staples of "just like us" photography were celebrities such as Nicole Richie or Lindsay Lohan, with handlers in tow, emerging from "traffic school"—that Californian institution where drivers are sent to do perfunctory penance. (Studies have suggested they do little to improve traffic safety.) "The 'Mean Girls' actress looked extra-girlie in a purple hoodie with pink shorts and black leggings," one Web site observed of Lohan as she emerged from traffic school before assuring us, "but later she got to kick back and enjoy her celebrity lifestyle at the grand re-opening of the flagship Fendi Boutique on Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills, California."

That sentence embodies the writhingly conflicted feelings we have toward celebrity. On the one hand, they are ultimately unknowable and out of reach to the average person, and so we seem to revel in the moments that, paradoxically, show them stripped of the mechanisms of fantasy that go into building this sense of exaltation. The U.K. reality show *Britain's Worst Celebrity Driver* plays on this feeling: dressing down celebrities who are still, at the end of the day, celebrities. (*Britain's Worst Everyday Punter Driver* doesn't quite have the same pizazz.) Perhaps contempt helps breed familiarity. Writing of the "Just Like Us" photographs, Virginia Heffernan aptly observed: "At first I thought, who cares? But then the magazines taught me to care, and mistake the new unkempt images for intimacy, if intimacy is something I might achieve by rooming with a celebrity at a mental hospital."

We also need to know, though, that celebrities can get away with things precisely because of their stardom; a counternarrative to the harsh blog judgment of celebrity drivers (type *speeding tickets* or *DUI* into TMZ.com) is the story of celebrities escaping a ticket with a smile and an autograph. In "celebrity driving," there is a poignancy in law-enforcement encounters because traffic is often the only place where most people actively experience the law in their lives. Who wouldn't want to have the moment, say, that Patrick Dempsey had, when pulled over for speeding: "The cop was really cool. He said, 'At least you're driving the Porsche properly.' He said 'Oh, I know you!' and I got out of it." Or how about William Shatner: "Most of them like to have a chat about when I was on *Star Trek*. Then they say, 'OK, Bill, not so fast next time.' " (Visions of "Warp speed, Scotty" jokes by troopers in mirror-tinted shades).

In this light, what is most revealing about the celebrity-driving episodes is what they show about our feelings toward those celebrities—and about driving. Writing in the *Weekly Standard*, Louis Wittig perceptively noted of celebrity DUIs, "the crime itself, which is more or less the equivalent of attempted criminally negligent homicide, takes a backseat to the hairdo. When Nicole Richie was popped—driving the wrong way down a six-lane highway, high on Vicodin, with her headlights off in the middle the night—the gossip blogs were, understandably, agog. But not for the reason you think. It was because the police report revealed that the scary-skinny Richie weighed just 85 pounds." When Mel Gibson was pulled over for DUI, it was his drunken slurs—not his driving—that attracted the most notice.

The lighthearted treatment of these episodes betrays the ways in which bad behavior in cars is still often viewed as a "folk crime"—something not entirely out of the bounds of normal behavior, something less than "real crime." Consider the case of DMX, one of a number of rappers known to be a menace on the road. (Note that traffic violations provide an easy way for gangsta rappers to burnish their non-law-abiding reputations without actually having to do hard jail time.) It is shocking that this repeat offender, arrested not only for DUI but for impersonating a federal agent while trying to avoid paying $9 worth of parking fees at JFK Airport, is still behind the wheel. His attorney hinted at our cultural laxity toward traffic laws when he declared, after his client was pulled over for going 104 in a 65-mph zone, "This is not a major concern and we are dealing with it appropriately. Basically, it's only a traffic violation."

Unless it crosses the thin line into a felony. That's the fate that befell the then-17-year-old Nick Bollea (a professional "drift" racer and the son of Hulk Hogan), who was jailed for "reckless driving involving serious bodily injury" (a third-degree felony) in a severe 2007 crash that left his passenger with permanent injuries. As the celebrity site TMZ noted, "[T]aking into account the last twelve months, anyone could have seen Nick Hogan's high speed car crash coming—from a mile away!" as Bollea's record was littered with at least four violations for excessive speed (and given a warning on at least one other occasion, according to one source, but not ticketed because of his half-celebrity status). There is a real question as to why he was still legally allowed to drive, given the violations and the risk profile for teen drivers, who die on the road at a rate higher than anyone. (In the United Kingdom, newly proposed legislation will see novice drivers lose their license after one speeding infraction.) But Bollea's case, viewed by some as just another celebrity driver behaving badly, reveals the big societal shrug we give to acting illegally behind the wheel. Celebrities drive just like us—they just get better publicity.

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culturebox

Good Germans and Uplifting Uprisings

Hollywood's take on the Holocaust.

By Ben Crair

Monday, December 29, 2008, at 1:28 PM ET

One way to measure the approach of the new year is to count the Holocaust films at your local multiplex. The holidays arrive just as studios begin wooing academy members with *serious* dramas, and there's nothing more *serious* than genocide. Over the

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decades, this award-baiting subject has enticed directors Otto Preminger, Sydney Lumet, and Steven Spielberg and stars such as Marlon Brando, Paul Newman, Judy Garland, and Meryl Streep. This winter there's a slew of new additions to the genre, including Bryan Singer's *Valkyrie*, Stephen Daldry's *The Reader*, Edward Zwick's *Defiance*, and several smaller features like *Good*, *Adam Resurrected*, and *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*.

Or maybe *new* isn't quite the right word. If you watch several Holocaust films back to back, as I did recently (during the most wonderful time of the year, no less), you start to notice patterns. In fact, by my count, there are really only five basic Holocaust plots. Forthwith, ***Slate***'s taxonomy of the genre:

Good Germans

Before the Marshall Plan had run its course, Hollywood combed through the rubble looking for tales of German goodness. One of the earliest results of this search was *The Desert Fox* (1951), which tells the story of Field Marshal Erwin Rommel. As commander of the Deutsches Afrikakorps, Rommel supposedly ignored orders to execute captured Jewish soldiers.

The Young Lions (1958) starring Marlon Brando fits into this category, too. Although protagonist Christian Diestl was not a virtuous type in Irwin Shaw's source novel, Brando insisted that his character be sympathetic. To accommodate the actor's ego, the screenwriters turned Christian into an honorable German who is shocked by his countrymen's atrocities.

Of course the most famous film about German decency is *Schindler's List* (1993). The real-life Oskar Schindler was, undoubtedly, good—he is the only person known to have gotten Jews out of Auschwitz. Lest that seem too slight, director Steven Spielberg threw in a rousing speech for Schindler, in which he declares "I could have done more." The latest good German is Tom Cruise's Claus von Stauffenberg in Bryan Singer's *Valkyrie*. Some might dispute the classification of *Valkyrie* as a Holocaust film, since it concerns the July '44 plot to assassinate Hitler and neither Jews nor concentration camps enter its frames. But the viewer is alerted to von Stauffenberg's goodness when the first thing he says he'll do "once we have control of the government" is "shut down all concentration camps."

Von Stauffenberg and his ilk were historical anomalies, but Hollywood seems not to have taken notice. In the mid-'60s, critic Judith Crist quipped, "[A] screenwriter, with a revolutionary glint in his eye was telling me the other day he's going all-the-way original; he's writing a World War II movie with bad Nazis."

Resistant Jews

Films about Jews during the war typically focus on resistance, which, unlike the camps, lends itself to moral uplift. Anne Frank never fired a rifle, but her survival for two years in an Amsterdam attic foiled the Nazis' ambitions—that is, at least until they found her. *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1959) is, in this sense, the first American film about Jewish resistance. It is not the darkest: Anne's despair is twice relieved by spontaneous group song.

Later resistance films lose the music as they move out of the attic and into the ghettos. Yet they retain the spirit of the line that Anne utters twice, shortly before she is deported: "I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are really good at heart." In the first American feature about the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, the television film *The Wall* (1982), a character similarly chimes, "[T]he only way to answer death is with more life." Another television film, Jon Avnet's *Uprising* (2001), also tells the story of the Warsaw Ghetto, and it ends with a triumphant speech by Yitzhak Zuckerman, one of the resistance's surviving leaders: "The dream of my life has come true."

Edward Zwick's new film, *Defiance*, concerns the plucky Bielski Partisans, who fought against the Nazis in present-day Belarus, and focuses on Tuvia Bielski (Daniel Craig), who prances around the Belarusian forest on a white horse. At the film's end, a dying man tells Tuvia, "I almost lost my faith, but you were sent by God to save us."

Postwar Judgment

Culpability is a notoriously thorny issue among Holocaust scholars, since the scale of the crime blurred the line between perpetrators and bystanders. But Hollywood started issuing verdicts directly after the war.

Orson Welles' *The Stranger* (1946) was the first American feature film to incorporate documentary footage of the camps, which, it claims, were "all the product of one mind"—the fictional Nazi genius Franz Kindler, who "conceived the theory of genocide." The consolidation of German guilt into a single villain makes retribution rather simple, since all the protagonist has to do is find and punish Kindler.

Justice is more elusive in Stanley Kramer's *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961), which stars Spencer Tracy as an American judge flown in to preside over the trial of four German judges. The main defendant is Ernst Janning, the German minister of justice, who takes the stand against his lawyer's wishes at the film's climax and confesses, "If there is to be any salvation for Germany, we who know our guilt must admit it—whatever the pain and humiliation." So much for Janning, but *Judgment* also explores how the Cold War undermined America's determination to try rank-and-file Nazis. "There are no Nazis in Germany," an

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embittered American prosecutor tells Tracy at one point. "Didn't you know that, judge?"

The Reader likewise takes place at Nuremberg, where young law student Michael Berg witnesses the trial of his former lover Hanna Schmitz (Kate Winslet). But the film is less concerned with Schmitz's crime than with her own personal tragedy. Embarrassed by the fact that she's illiterate, Hanna refuses to take a handwriting test to prove that she did not order the deaths of 300 Jews. Illiteracy, it would seem, is more shameful than the orchestration of mass murder and more dangerous, too: Hanna is sentenced to life, while her guilty-but-literate co-defendants get away with just a few years behind bars.

Survivors

There are two basic survivor narratives. Redemption stories, like *The Juggler* (1953) and *Exodus* (1960), frequently present Israel as the key to their heroes' deliverance and star good-looking men like Kirk Douglas and Paul Newman. By contrast, films like Sidney Lumet's *The Pawnbroker* (1964) suggest that the camp experience is inescapable and star homely actors like Rod Steiger.

Films that fall into the "no escape" group often unfold like mysteries, with the survivors' camp experiences functioning like clues to their present behavior. *Sophie's Choice* (1982) and Steven Soderbergh's *The Good German* (2006) fit the bill, as does this season's *Adam Resurrected*, which stars Jeff Goldblum as a mental patient who survived the Holocaust by playing the part of an S.S. commandant's dog.

The Fable

Roberto Benigni's *Life is Beautiful* (1997) is an Italian film, but Americans were happy to surmount the language barrier—the film grossed $57 million at the box office and Benigni won an Oscar for best actor. This story about a Jewish father who convinces his son that their internment is a game proved that you can depict concentration camps so long as you pretend they're something else. Two years later, *Jakob the Liar* (1999) tried a similar trick: Jakob (Robin Williams) spreads hope through a camp by making up stories about Allied victories. This season's entry is a British film, *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, which tells the story of the friendship between a Jewish boy and a German boy across a concentration-camp fence.

Though films across these five categories are rarely as outright cheery as, say, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, they almost all project the optimism that Lawrence Langer described in 1983: "[T]he American vision of the Holocaust … continues to insist that [the victims] have not [died in vain], trying to parlay hope, sacrifice, justice, and the future into a victory that will mitigate despair." As a Holocaust survivor puts it in the penultimate scene of *The Reader*: "Go to the theater if you want catharsis."

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dear prudence

His Future Is in the Bag

I have a degree but work as a grocery clerk. How do I explain my predicament?

Thursday, January 1, 2009, at 7:38 AM ET

Get "Dear Prudence" delivered to your inbox each week; click here to sign up. Please send your questions for publication to prudence@slate.com. (Questions may be edited.)

Dear Prudence,
I am a recent university graduate and am underemployed. After finding my field devastated by the economic collapse and jobs scarce, I started working as a clerk in a grocery store. The company is family-owned and offers excellent health benefits and a generous starting salary. I enjoy the work and have become friends with my co-workers, many of whom have made this their career. My problem is, when co-workers or customers find out about my diploma, I am inevitably asked what I am doing bagging groceries. This is a constant query as I frequently see former classmates and the occasional professor at my station. How do I explain that this job isn't for me without coming off as arrogant? I don't think I am better than my new friends at work, but I worked hard for my degree and am sometimes embarrassed not to be using it. How do I explain this without coming off as an elitist jerk?

—Underemployed

Dear Underemployed,
You're employed! For a recent college graduate, that's quite an accomplishment, especially if you were hoping to find a job in, say, the automotive industry, or finance, or journalism, or real estate, etc. The fact that you are grateful for the work and enjoy your colleagues must surely come through. And you say your co-workers know that this is just a temporary stop for you before you find something else, so they have probably been pleasantly surprised by you. So just answer people honestly, "Of course I'm still looking in my field, but until things turn around, I'm lucky that I found such a pleasant place to work so I can support myself." When you see classmates or professors, do remind them to let you know if they hear of any opportunities. And don't think of this time as wasted. (Here from the *Forbes* 400 list is someone who turned a job as a grocery clerk into a multibillion-dollar fortune.) You are learning many things that will be valuable to you when you move on in your career: being a reliable employee, getting along with your co-workers, and

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knowing what it feels like to stand on your feet all day so you can pay your bills.

—Prudie

Dear Prudie,
My mother was given up for adoption, and at 5 months old two wonderful people adopted her and gave her a very loving environment. She is now in her early 50s and has no desire to find her birth parents. I have two kids of my own and would like very much to find out our medical history for their sake. My adopted grandmother has the adoption papers, but when I have asked about them, she has never offered any information as to who the biological mother is. My mother knows the birth city and her original birth name, but that's all the information I have. I want my mom to find out who the biological mother is so I can find her and possibly learn about her family's medical history. I believe we would benefit from the findings, and if something were to ever happen to my mother (heaven forbid), I would not have the authority to open the file. How do I handle this?

—Looking for DNA

Dear Looking,
These wonderful people who adopted your mother are your grandparents, period. As you've mentioned, they are all the parents your mother has known or wants to know, and that should be good enough for you. For health purposes, your children have information about two biological generations—that's generally all doctors asks for in standard exams. If you're concerned about rare genetic diseases, like Huntington's, for example, only about 5 percent of people who actually know they have a probability of contracting it choose to be tested. As for the rest of the illnesses that stalk mankind—cancer, heart disease, diabetes—any doctor will tell you to feed your kids healthy food, make sure they get plenty of exercise, and get them regular checkups. It sounds as if you actually want this information not so much for medical purposes but to know your "real" family. You know your real family, so be grateful you have such a loving one.

—Prudie

Dear Prudence,
I've been dating my girlfriend for more than a year and half now and love her very much. We've recently moved in together and have been talking about getting married. This all seemed to come crashing down just a few days ago when I arrived home after work to find that she had gotten on my computer and sifted through my messages. She had become obsessed with a female friend of mine whom I used to date and am still fairly close to. The woman and I still talk maybe once a month and meet for coffee three or four times a year. My girlfriend found, in the course of her searching, that we had planned to meet for coffee a few weeks ago and that I had not told her about it. I see in hindsight I was wrong to keep this from her. However, I knew that she would obsess over the fact that I was seeing this former girlfriend. She went through e-mail, my Facebook account, and my cell phone to find out the last time we had talked. I feel very hurt that she doesn't seem to trust me at all and my privacy was violated so severely. I can't seem to get past it. What do I do?

—Bewildered and Scared

Dear Bewildered,
I think the best approach would be to offer to plant a listening device on yourself and hook your car and office up to a Girlfriend Cam, so she can stop snooping and just be free to monitor your every action. I know people are never supposed to snoop—but I have given passes to people whose trust has been violated in the past and now have grounds to feel it's happening again. However, there is no reason for your girlfriend to be suspicious about you. You should have the kind of open relationship in which you can say you're meeting your ex for coffee, but you understandably elided that information because you know your girlfriend is irrational about this. Now you've come home to find you've been more thoroughly monitored than Gov. Rod Blagojevich. And it doesn't even sound as if she's apologetic about this violation. She actually seems triumphant at getting "the goods" on what she already knew—that you stay in touch with your former girlfriend. You could try to work this out with her and establish guidelines about privacy and trust. But I'm afraid all this may be headed toward your realization that, unlike with your previous girlfriend, once you've broken up with this one, it won't even be possible to stay friends.

—Prudie

Dear Prudence:
I'm a musician who works periodically doing wedding ceremonies and receptions. The problem with this job is that friends love to line up events and try to get my services for free. One close friend, instead of asking me to be in the wedding, said that performing would "pay for my supper." I told her I couldn't make it. A few months ago, I agreed to play at a relative's ceremony and give her a "family discount"—which means my fee is a stipend. Now she wants me to also play for her cocktail party and asked if all my work could be a gift because wedding costs are getting high. This relative has a low tolerance for being offended, so it's difficult to find a succinct and nonoffensive way to turn her down. Any advice?

—Just Wants To Be a Guest

Dear Just,
Maybe your relative has such a low tolerance for being offended because she has such a high tolerance for giving offense. You know your mistake was agreeing to perform in the first place. In the future, tell friends and family that working during their social events means you can never enjoy the celebrations of those you

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care about most, and refer them to colleagues. Or if you're willing to do it, charge your full fee and don't budge. You're stuck having to play for this reception for a pittance, but she can't force you to entertain at the cocktail party or forgo your payment altogether. Tell her that you're sorry but you can't play at her cocktail party, and you're already giving her a steep discount but you need to be paid for your time because this is what you do for a living. Don't let her manipulate you into backing down, but do be prepared to be at the end of the line of her creditors.

—Prudie

Photograph of Prudie by Teresa Castracane.

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dear prudence

All the Answers

The most reviled and beloved advice of the year.

Tuesday, December 30, 2008, at 12:27 PM ET

This year, Dear Prudence letter-writers had questions about everything from diaper fetishes to food-spitters to self-mutilation. But the answers that got readers most riled up were those in which you felt I unfairly maligned three already outcast groups: supercilious boyfriends, smokers, and pit bulls.

My answer to In Love With a Supercomputer, who said she was dating a genius who had to win every argument, outraged many of you. I said he was a twit and a bully and suggested he read *Emotional Intelligence*. Many wrote I was the sexist bully because my estrogen-addled mind couldn't accept the fact that there are certain people—they're called "men"—who simply are always right. "This article is the senseless dribble people in your profession spout out about the differences between men and women. Never have any of you made the recommendation for a woman to find a partner who is more illogical, needlessly emotional, or with lower IQ," wrote one dissenter. According to another: "There's something you should have learned as a little girl: rationality and intellect drive the world we live in and contrary to popular belief your emotions are not good for the world. You strike me as an arrogant feminist who thinks you are better then men because you have a vagina." Oh, gentlemen, you sure know how to charm a gal!

Other readers offered armchair diagnoses for the boyfriend—from Asperger's syndrome to Narcissistic Personality Disorder to having the personality type INTJ. Whether any of these conclusions is correct, I was too harsh in the way I described this young man. But I won't back down from my belief that this boyfriend needs a new set of social tools because no matter his IQ, no one is always right.

Probably no letter got more angry mail than my reply to Nest-Featherer, who complained that her upstairs neighbors were tossing their cigarette butts into their shared yard, which she wanted to keep clean for her new puppy. I took the opportunity to trash smokers for their penchant for littering and their general defensive hostility about their habit. Smokers smoldered in response. Hundreds of you rebutted my remarks and said such gross stereotyping belongs in the ash heap. "The way you replied sounded like you believe all smokers are slobby pigs who also can't handle their emotions. You owe many decent, non-littering, considerate, and perfectly mentally normal folks a great big apology," fumed one. "The neighbors are rude people who happen to smoke—they are not rude people because they smoke," another argued.

The smokers were right—I unfairly tarred all of you. However, look at the sidewalks of any city, and you will notice that they are covered with cigarette butts. So, please, considerate smokers of America, intervene when you see your boorish brethren toss their trash in the street.

Everyone got mad at me for my answer to Uneasy. She was writing because her 20-year-old sister—a single mother with a toddler—just moved in with a roommate who had a nervous pit bull. I said both baby and dog must be intensely supervised when together and otherwise separated to avert a tragedy. Pit-bull lovers said my answer maligned their loyal, loving breed. Pit-bull haters said I exonerated these malevolent dogs and sent me articles from around the country on pit-bull maulings. Single mothers and others were outraged by what they felt was a gratuitous slap when I said that since the mother of the toddler had her while still a teenager, that indicated she lacked an ability to understand the consequences of her actions. "The fact that she is 20 and a new mother and single is why she's not able to clearly see the danger. But you lost me the minute you basically called her a slut," one reader bristled. "Two years ago, the woman had sex. God forbid! If you ever have pre-marital sex, you could end up with an unexpected pregnancy. So what?" asked another.

No, I did not call her a "slut," and, yes, I agree she is too young to be a mother. The "So what?" is that it's a tragedy that so many young women with no education, prospects, or partner are raising children alone.

I need to completely atone for my answer to Church Newbies about the young couple who were converting to Catholicism and found the elderly couple who were their church sponsors to be creepily huggy and free with their hands. I said the youngsters should tell off the oldsters, and, if that didn't work, instead of telling the priest, they should find a new parish. Wrong! As one reader, the Rev. Joshua Williams, wrote to me: "First, if this older couple might one day serve in some sort of an official capacity, their actions might leave the church open to lawsuits. Second, if I were in the priest's position, I would want to know

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so I could keep an eye out for the older couple and try to help them understand the detrimental effect their behavior is having on the church's attempts to reach out to new members."

I blew another theological question, according to many readers, in my answer to Oy Vey, a non-Jew employed at a small Jewish-owned firm whose bosses let other Jews leave early on Fridays in the winter for Sabbath but expect everyone else to work. Since she had complained to no avail, I agreed with her that the owners were behaving poorly. However, I advised she'd be best off to let it go. Many of you suggested she should take legal action. Instead, I agree with reader Dan Phillips, who suggested Oy Vey take the perfect Biblical passage, Deuteronomy 5:14, to her bosses and show them that this injunction means that on the Sabbath, *all* should enjoy a day of rest.

The dilemma of Terrible Twos, the father who got no pleasure out of interacting with his 2-year-old daughter, provoked a variety of reactions. I praised him for being able to acknowledge this unpleasant truth, suggested he might find his daughter more interesting when she became more independent, and urged that he look for ways to connect with her until then. One young woman in her 20s wrote that from girlhood her father was distant and uninterested, and when she became a teenager she made a difficult choice: "For the sake of both our sanity, I finally decided that the best way to have a relationship with my father was to have none. I hope Terrible Twos takes some of your suggestions. Otherwise, he's going to lose out on knowing his daughter and hurt her in ways he never consciously would intend."

One father acknowledged: "I could have written that letter myself three years ago. The important thing is that fathers who feel this way know that they are not alone. It's not an easy thing to admit to feeling. But now that our daughter is five, it's a different story. Your advice is right, time and growth change everything. I've gone from 'What did I do?' to 'I can't wait to get home to see her.' "

And one mother wrote in response: "I would love if my daughter would initiate play with either me or my husband. I would love if she turned to one of us and called us by name. You see, my daughter is autistic. That father should count his blessings that she has an interest in him and wants him to be a part of her world."

Thanks to this mother for the reminder that counting your blessings is good advice for us all. And one of my blessings is that I have such forthright, provocative, and insightful readers.

Photograph of Prudie by Teresa Castracane.

dispatches

How (Not) To Find a Pirate in the Strait of Malacca

The pirate's shopping list: machete, face mask, long bamboo pole, and hooked knife.

By Kelly McEvers

Friday, December 5, 2008, at 6:54 AM ET

From: Kelly McEvers
Subject: The Island of the Ex-Pirates
Posted Monday, December 1, 2008, at 11:00 AM ET

BATAM, Indonesia—It's not like there's a playbook on how to find a pirate. So what do you do? You start by heading to a region that's famous for piracy: the Strait of Malacca, a narrow channel tucked between Malaysia and Indonesia.

This probably would be a forgotten corner of the world if it weren't the sole waterway connecting the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea—and, eventually, the Pacific Ocean.

Every year some 70,000 ships pass through the Strait of Malacca. That's about two-thirds of the world's sea traffic, much of it crude-oil shipments heading from the Middle East to China and Japan.

Big foreign ships have been cruising through here for hundreds of years. So have pirates. That's because the strait is surrounded by hundreds of tiny islands populated by some of the poorest people in the world.

It's this contrast that has drawn me to the Strait of Malacca. I want to find a real pirate, not some Hollywood goofball wearing too much eye makeup. I want to know what it's like to be poor and to think the only way you can survive is to rob a ship. How hard could it be for me to find such a person?

My first contact is a local newspaper journalist named Iqbal. He has agreed to take me to a place he calls "the island of the ex-pirates." We're joined by another reporter, Arman, who will help translate.

We head to one of the main boat-taxi ports in the region. We walk down a long gangway that's propped up on stilts over murky, smelly water. We see row after row of *pancung*, the Malay word for long, thin wooden boats with outboard motors and brightly colored tarps to keep out the tropical rain.

This is what we'll take to the island of the ex-pirates.

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The ride takes 15 minutes and costs about $1 per person. There's quite a bit of chop, but the boat sits low and its pointed bow easily cuts through the waves. Still, Arman gets spooked.

Out on the water, dozens of islands appear on the horizon, tiny footnotes to some ancient volcano. One sticks out from the rest: Singapore, the booming city-state. With its skyscrapers and Ferris wheels and malls and jet planes, it looks like a floating party from the future.

The rest of the islands are stuck in the past. Hilly and verdant, they have the look of so many islands in so many places along the equator: slow and sleepy and completely unaware of their own beauty.

We reach the island of the ex-pirates and disembark onto a gangway even more rickety than before. We head up to the main open-air market, much of which is also on stilts. Our contact, the ex-pirate, sends a message that he's not yet ready to meet. We should wait for him at the market.

We pass rambutans and mangosteens and dozens of kinds of fish piled up on the ground for sale, and we squeeze into a crowded cafe that at one time was painted baby blue. We take a table near the water.

Arman orders tea and the local specialty, *prata*, a crispy egg-and-potato pancake served with rich curry sauce on the side. A generous piece of galangal wallows in the sauce.

Iqbal says he thinks we'll have no trouble meeting pirates. They'll be proud to talk to an American, he says, proud to show us their stuff.

If all goes well, he says, we could be done in a few days. The ex-pirates will introduce us to current pirates, then we will choose one we like, follow him around, and be on our way.

I take a deep breath and let the curried steam fill my lungs. I look out onto the water—out to all the lush little islands dotting the view. I love my life, I think. Especially when it comes this easily.

Our man, Anto, strides into the cafe. He's strong and sturdy and talking on the phone. His shirt is unbuttoned down to the navel. He orders us up to his house with a wave of an arm. The house is just down the block. Word has it Anto owns half the market.

Situated on a couch in his sparse front room, Anto says modern-day Indonesian piracy started back in the '60s—and it all started on this island. The real name of the island is Belakang Padang; the words indicate the precise location in Indonesia. But never mind all that. Let's call it B.P.

Back in the day, Anto says, people came to B.P. from all over Indonesia looking for work. It was the closest they could get to booming Singapore and still be in Indonesia. B.P. was the land of opportunity.

At the time, Anto and his friends were just a bunch of young thieves. They would sneak out of their parents' houses at night to pull small jobs on the island. They eventually graduated to stealing motorbikes from Singapore and ferrying them back to B.P. at night.

At one point, they realized there was booty to be had on the water. Just next to B.P. is a waterway called Philip Channel, which is a section of the Malacca Strait. The channel is narrow and rocky and perilous, which means big ships have to slow down here.

Seeing this pattern, Anto and his friends started outfitting their own *pancung* with machetes and long bamboo poles with a hook fixed to one end. They would wait for a night with no moon, drive up behind a big ship, hook the ship with the bamboo poles, and climb up the side.

Once on deck, they would wave their knives at the captain and order him to give them the cashbox.

"We never hurt anybody," Anto assures us. This, I later learn, is what all pirates say. "We just showed them our machetes with one hand, and told them to be quiet with the other. They always did what we told them."

Afterward, the group—roughly seven or eight guys—would split the spoils and head to "happy-happy," which basically means booze and girls. It didn't take long to spend the takings. So a night or two later, it was back to sea again.

Anto says these days security is tighter than when he was a pirate. International attention to piracy in these waters has brought authorities from Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore together to fight the problem.

But, Anto says, the underpaid local police aren't so diligent. They'd prefer to get a cut from the pirates' takings than to put pirates in jail and take home meager salaries.

I ask Anto whether we can meet some active pirates. He says he knows a few, but they're hard to contact. They come around only when there's an "operation" planned. Otherwise, they're hiding out on remote islands.

Anto promises he'll put the word out on my behalf, that he'll call a friend who knows a friend who knows a friend. And then he'll call us.

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I leave thinking he actually will call.

From: Kelly McEvers
Subject: Mr. Black
Posted Tuesday, December 2, 2008, at 12:01 PM ET

BATAM, Indonesia—I spend the next three days meeting people who have no idea how to find pirates. On the fourth day, I wake up and realize I have nothing scheduled for the day, no solid plan.

I send a text message to Iqbal, the newspaper reporter who has been helping me. "Anto has disappeared," he writes. Anto is the shady ex-pirate we met a few days before. Iqbal promises to find me another ex-pirate, but he says it will take some time.

It takes a whole day before Iqbal calls to say he's found another ex-pirate. I practically run down to the hotel parking lot and jump into his car.

The ex-pirate has agreed to meet us in the back room of a recording studio owned by one of Iqbal's friends. He wears a black leather jacket and gold chains. He smokes pack after pack of Indonesian clove cigarettes and drinks sweet black tea.

He asks me to call him Mr. Black. He says the nickname is a description of his face, which is dark from too much time in the sun out at sea. He doesn't want me to know his real name.

Mr. Black says local boys become pirates for one reason: Singapore. Seeing those skyscrapers—that prosperity—just a few miles away is too tempting for a young Indonesian living on a poor island.

"In other parts of the world, poor people don't know what they're missing," Mr. Black says through my interpreter, Arman. "Here, it's right across the water. And it's why they become pirates."

Mr. Black could spend all night telling pirate stories from back in the day. I listen, even though what I really want is a pirate from *right now*. Still, I learn a lot about the business from Mr. Black. Like the Italian sailor who cried like a baby when Mr. Black snuck onto his vessel. The night his partner fell from the bamboo ladder as he was inching up the side of a cargo ship and was lost at sea for an hour. The Korean captains who always put up a fight.

Mr. Black says his group of pirates worked only on nights with no moon. That way they could stay hidden from the navy. He says they could rob three or four ships in a night, sometimes making tens of thousands of dollars. Then they would blow their money on "happy-happy."

"We had so much money, we would wash our feet with beer!" Mr. Black says. "But," he adds, wagging a finger, "what we didn't understand is that pirates never get rich."

"Why?"

"We enjoy too much!"

Mr. Black says that after a really big haul, his group would go to Indonesia's capital, Jakarta, book rooms at five-star hotels, hire half a dozen girls for each guy. When all the money was gone, they'd come back to the islands and start all over again.

It all came to an end when Mr. Black was arrested and did three months in jail for robbing an Indonesian ship. After that, he decided to go legit. He changed his name and got a job hawking food at a popular tourist site. He eventually started his own printing business.

Listening to him, I can't help wishing he had a son or a nephew who's still a pirate.

I try to tread more slowly with Mr. Black than I did with Anto, our first ex-pirate. Instead of asking him outright if he knows any active pirates, I say, "When you meet young guys who are still working as pirates, what advice do you give them?"

"I tell them to stop," Mr. Black replies. "I tell them there are only two ways a pirate's life can end: jail or death."

I try to keep him talking about these "young guys." At one point, I hear Mr. Black say the word *nephew* in Indonesian.

"They just won't listen to me," he says. "They won't give it up, no matter how much I tell them to quit."

By now, I know he's talking about his nephew. We talk for another half-hour before I politely ask whether I can meet this nephew. At first Mr. Black says that would be impossible. But then he says he'll think it over.

I thank him and ask for his phone number. Iqbal and Arman squirm, worried that I've offended Mr. Black. But this guy is clearly a sucker for the ladies. He gives me his number and says he'll do what he can to help.

Back in the car, I can't help it. I give Arman a high-five.

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At the hotel I think about how bipolar this has been. One minute I'm dying of boredom; the next I'm totally high. Right now, I can just picture it all unfolding. The conflict between the pirate and his uncle. The scene at the seedy disco, planning the next attack while prostitutes serve us beer. The moonless night out at sea.

I wake up the next morning thinking I'm finally on a roll. I send a text message to Mr. Black, and he immediately messages back.

"Are you happy?" he writes.

"I am only happy if I meet you again," I write back. I'm still in bed, in my nightgown.

"I am free," he writes. "Try to call."

I do, but he says he's busy. He says he'll call me later. Maybe tonight. Maybe tomorrow.

The next day I get a "How are you?" from Mr. Black. I text him back, but I get no response. I call an hour later, and he says he might come to my hotel tonight and meet me for a drink.

As the day passes, I want to call him again, just to confirm that we will meet. But I figure I should probably wait. I reckon it's like dating. Except with a pirate.

A tropical storm blows in, and I open the window of my hotel room to the cool, damp air. It rains and rains, and I wait and wait and wait.

I've been here more than one week.

The next day, I go through what has become a routine to pass the time. Clean the room, make tea, go to aerobics, watch movies, try to read.

I wonder if I'm being lulled into complacency or if my patience with Mr. Black will eventually pay off. I have no way of knowing which instinct is right. One thing I do know: I've spent way too much time in this hotel.

I start checking moon cycles online. I learn that the moon is waning, and in a week it will be gone from the sky. This means the time for a pirate operation is approaching. I want to get excited about this. But I'm wary of the letdown if I fail to meet Mr. Black's nephew.

Mr. Black calls and promises—"100 percent!"—that we will meet tonight. I shouldn't believe him, but I do. It's the beginning of a bad relationship.

From: Kelly McEvers
Subject: Happy-Happy
Posted Wednesday, December 3, 2008, at 7:02 AM ET

BATAM, Indonesia—Mr. Black, the ex-pirate, doesn't exactly speak English. And I don't exactly speak Indonesian. The words we know in each other's languages are pretty basic. *Eat*, *sorry*, *please*, *like*, *call*, *night*, *walk*.

I try to call my interpreter, Arman, but his phone is off or out of battery power or out of credit. Here I've been waiting to meet Mr. Black for days, and when I finally do, I can't translate everything he says.

Mr. Black and I are strolling up to the second level of a shopping mall, heading toward the food court. He waves to a gaggle of guys sitting and drinking coffee and avocado shakes at a place called Godiva.

It takes me a minute to realize that one of these guys is Anto, the first ex-pirate I met—the guy who's been blowing me off for more than a week.

"I'm sorry, Kelly!" Anto says when he recognizes me. He speaks quite a bit of English. "I told you I was busy. I was busy with this!"

No problem, I say.

"But you should be happy now," he says. "You are sitting with all the pirates!"

Slowly it unfolds that the guys at the table are Yon, a notorious pirate just released from prison in Malaysia for hijacking a ship; Adi Bulldog, Anto's brother, who runs a crime syndicate; Jack, another pirate who recently did jail time in China; and some young guys who look like up-and-comers.

This could be exactly what I've worked toward all these days. Now where the hell is Arman?

Before I can ask too many questions, the guys invite me to go for "happy-happy." This is what pirates do with the money they make robbing cargo ships.

We pile into Anto's flashy SUV, and Mr. Black acts like I'm his date. Only *he* can open my door or offer me a french fry.

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We drive up to an enormous nightclub called Pacific that looks like a beached cruise ship. We're waved through security and park in the back.

Inside, the belly of the ship is an eerie, unfinished concrete shell. There are rooms and hallways that haven't seen humans in years. I imagine myself locked in one of these rooms without food. After all, pirates have been known to kidnap people for ransom. I try to call Arman, but still no answer.

We take the back elevator to the top, the VIP section. I steal away to call Iqbal, the local reporter who's been trying to help me meet pirates. I tell him where I am, just in case something happens, and I beg him to try to find Arman.

Inside the VIP room we position ourselves on vinyl couches in front of a huge flat-screen TV and four smaller screens that list song choices. The songs on the list are old and out of date. "Feelings" and "My Way" are big favorites.

Anto starts queuing up songs with English lyrics. I know what this means.

First up is "Hotel California." Anto hands me the microphone. On the big screen are bizarre images meant to illustrate the song: shots from an old schoolhouse in Utah, fuzzy photographs of Jesus.

This is not the last time I will sing "Hotel California" tonight.

The music switches to Indonesian love songs, but still no Arman. I convince myself that even though I can't conduct elaborate conversations with these guys, I have to stay on. This is an important element of a pirate's life. This is why they never get rich.

Mr. Black sits next to me, trying to convince me to drink wine or whiskey, but I say no. Everyone else is having water and Coke.

Then Anto stands up and looks my way.

"Breaking news, Kelly! I'm sorry, but now we would like to take drugs!"

OK, I say. No problem.

"We like ecstasy. Would you like to join?"

No thanks, I tell him. I know exactly what he means when he says "ecstasy." Big, chalky, blue-green things that are some weird mix of speed, heroin, and hallucinogens.

"You sure it's OK?" Anto asks.

Go right ahead.

The guys line up in front of Yon, who distributes the pills. They really want me to have one. One guy puts a pill on top of my notebook. Every time he catches my eye, he points to the pill.

He finally realizes I'm not going to take it. So he pops it into his mouth instead. The music changes from Bee Gees karaoke to anonymous techno, and the pirates dance and dance and dance.

After a while, the lights go down, and Anto and his "girlfriend" tastefully slow-dance. Everybody is polite, offering to buy me things. But they're wary when I try to ask about what they do for a living.

Mr. Black puts my phone, pen, and glasses on top of a Kleenex so they won't get dirty. I notice he's slightly different from the others. He hasn't been taking pills.

I wonder whether he normally hangs out with these guys or if he's just doing it for my benefit. After all, he quit the pirate business and went legit.

Mr. Black watches me, too. He always checks to make sure I'm OK, even when he gets up to dance or take a phone call.

I start to understand that tonight might be his way of testing me, to see if he can trust me. I figure I should focus all my energy on Mr. Black so he'll introduce me to his nephew, the real pirate. I imagine the nephew as younger, more businesslike, and more forthcoming than these 50-year-olds.

I resolve to stay on as long as Mr. Black wants. I start dancing and finally accept his offer of a whiskey. Or two.

Hours later, Arman finally calls. By now the ex-pirates are too far gone for any kind of talk. I tell him to forget it for tonight. Mr. Black offers me a ride home.

Mr. Black drives an old white Indonesian-made truck with the steering wheel on the right side and rollbars out back. On the dashboard is sickly sweet air freshener set on some kind of time release.

Later, Mr. Black lights up a joint and offers me some. I tell him I don't smoke, but he won't let up. I finally take the joint and pretend to inhale.

"Maybe you give me some memory?" he asks in English.

"Sure," I say tentatively. "A photo?"

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"Photos are for schoolboys," he says. "But a kiss is for a real man."

I tell him this will not be possible. But then I wonder if I could use a kiss as leverage. Something like, "I'll let you kiss me if you let me meet your nephew." After all, I think, it would only be on the cheek.

I look over at Mr. Black's lips and am disgusted with myself for thinking I could let him kiss me.

What is my problem? I think. Will I do anything to meet a real pirate?

I tell Mr. Black to drive me home.

From: Kelly McEvers
Subject: The Real Pirate
Posted Thursday, December 4, 2008, at 7:22 AM ET

BATAM, Indonesia—My relationship with Mr. Black, the ex-pirate with a nephew who's a real pirate, ends in breakup. He's too cagey, I'm too pushy. By the end, we're not only furious with each other; we're no longer speaking.

At this point, I've been stuck here in the northwest islands of Indonesia for nearly three weeks, and I've made no real progress toward meeting a pirate. The morning this hits me, I start to pack my bags. I'm ready to go home.

I check my e-mail one last time and see a message from a French academic I'd written to many weeks before.

This guy has done extensive field research on pirates in the Strait of Malacca, and I'd been hoping to hear from him while I was here in the islands. Today, the day I believe is my last day, he decides to write. I open the message.

"I've been on holiday for two weeks," he writes. "Sorry for getting back to you so late. Do you still need pirate contacts?"

Sure, I say. He sends me the names and numbers of two ex-pirates with strong connections to the current pirate syndicate.

More ex-pirates? I groan. But I figure I might as well try.

Something tells me the French guy's ex-pirates are different than the old-timers I met. The new guys still work as boat-taxi drivers around the islands. This is a common job for real pirates.

The French guy also puts me in touch with a sailor named Edi who's done legitimate work at sea and speaks some English. He'll help translate.

I call Edi, and 15 minutes later, he meets me in the hotel lobby. We call the two ex-pirates and arrange a meeting for later that afternoon.

The two men don't want me to publish their names, so let's call them Andi and Joni. We meet them in a hotel just a few blocks from mine.

From the moment I see them, I'm certain these guys are different from the other ex-pirates. They're scruffy, very dark-skinned, and they chain smoke. There's no artifice in the way they speak, no guile. I nearly squeal with delight when one of them burps.

We order coffee and juice, and I tell them I'm looking for a real pirate. They say the only way to meet one is to pay for it. Apparently the French academic and a group of European journalists paid Andi and Joni to put on masks and pretend they were pirates for a film documentary.

I tell them that's not going to work for me. I want a real pirate.

"I'm sorry," Andi says. "This will be very difficult." I've heard this sentence many times before.

I tell him I can't pay someone for talking to me. What I *can* do is pay for meals and travel expenses. Andi and Joni laugh and click their tongues.

"It's not enough," Edi translates. "Everything here takes money. This is Indonesia."

I tell them it's all I have to offer. I say it's really important.

"Why?" Andi asks. "Being a pirate is normal here."

"Americans have the wrong view of pirates," I say. "They think you are Johnny Depp or that you are helping terrorists."

The latter is a common claim made by American and Japanese officials—especially when they want to send their own navy patrols here to the Strait of Malacca. The Indonesian government has fiercely resisted outside involvement. Instead, they prefer to work with the Singaporean and Malaysian navies.

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"I want to know the truth about pirates," I say. "About the way they live, about the reasons they turn to piracy to survive."

Edi translates. After a few hours of negotiating, Andi and Joni agree to go and look for a pirate. They say they have one in mind, but he's on a remote island. They say they need money for gas.

I give them about $50—with full knowledge that I may never see them again.

The next day, Edi and the boys are supposed to call by 10 a.m. By noon, I figure Andi and Joni have either run off with the money, failed to find a pirate, or, worse, found one but couldn't convince him to talk.

At 12:30, Edi calls from the lobby.

"We are here!"

"Who is here?" I ask.

"Me," he says. "With the guys."

"What guys?"

"Andi and Joni. And the one."

"He is here?" I say.

"Yes. He's here."

"And he's a real one?" I ask. "A real pirate?"

"Yes, Kelly, he is the real one."

It slowly dawns on me. After nearly a month of asking and waiting, he's here.

"What's his name?"

His name is Agus.

There is nothing romantic about Agus. He slouches a little when he walks up to shake my hand, crams his hands into his pockets as he steps into the hotel elevator. In my room, he sits politely near the window and refuses when I offer him a cold drink. His voice is soft and low.

He grew up in an Indonesian farming village more than 1,000 miles away from these islands. There, he made about $7 a day raising cocoa, but it wasn't enough to feed his wife, three kids, parents, and siblings.

"Then I met a man in my village who was successful," Agus tells me. "He owned a shop and his wife wore a lot of gold. I tried to stay close to him and ask him how he made so much money. After some time, he told me that he had been a pirate."

The shopkeeper told Agus to come to the islands and try his luck. He told Agus to start by working as a boat-taxi driver and slowly try to get introduced to pirates. Agus followed his advice. He joined a pirate group about four years ago.

He says he goes out on about six "operations" a year. The ideal night is one with no moon. Agus and his gang wear masks and black clothes. They fashion a long pole out of bamboo and fix a hook to the end of it.

They ride out in *pancung*, long wooden canoes with outboard motors, or in speedboats, depending how far they have to go.

Their destination is the Philip Channel, a small portion of the Strait of Malacca. It's a shallow and rocky waterway where international cargo ships have to slow down to pass.

Agus and the boys go out looking for prime targets. They call it "shopping."

"We do it in a team of seven," Agus says. They swing the bamboo pole up the side of the ship and hook it on.

"Then we climb up the pole to the ship. Two of us go to the bridge to catch the captain. The others stay and guard the crew. Sometimes the captain fights back. So we have to hit him and tie him up with rope. Then we tell him to give us all the money in the safe."

I ask Agus whether he's ever hurt anyone. One navy captain told me some pirates cut off captains' hands if they don't cooperate. Agus looks at me and shrugs.

"We only hit captains," he says. "That scares them enough to give us all their money."

If Agus and his partners manage to steal the money from the safe, each one can clear about $600 or $700.

"Sometimes we fail and come home with no money. But we still have to pay for the fuel. So we end up in debt."

I ask Agus to take me out in a boat and show me how it's done. I figure, like everyone else I've met here, he'll say no, it's "too difficult."

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But not Agus. He thinks about it for a minute. Then he says OK.

From: Kelly McEvers
Subject: Out at Sea
Posted Friday, December 5, 2008, at 6:54 AM ET

BATAM, Indonesia—Here in Indonesia, it's pretty normal to believe in magic. Especially if you're doing one of the most dangerous jobs in the world.

Agus, the pirate, always visits a magician before an "operation." He brings the magician sugar, milk, and coffee as payment.

The magician's house is built on rickety, wooden stilts, the sole structure on a tiny island that's hours from any major town. It takes two cars and three boats to reach it.

Inside, there's a lot of yelling. The magician is hard of hearing and, his wife says, he has been sick. So sick he thought he was going to die.

Now he sits on the floor wearing a traditional Malay sarong and a fezlike cap. He waves a knobby hand at us to sit down. Closer in, I can see that he is blind.

Agus tells the magician he's planning to rob a big international cargo ship. He needs help staying hidden from the Indonesian navy. Agus has already been questioned by the navy once before. Now he wants to be extra careful.

The old man takes a bottle of water, shakes it, and puts it in his armpit. He mumbles to himself, then whispers into the bottle.

The whispers get louder and louder. At the end, he blows a big gust of air into the bottle and quickly caps it before his words can escape. The magician tells Agus that if he pours this water around the edges of his boat, it will make the boat invisible.

"OK," Agus says in English. "OK."

The magician repeats the same procedure with the second bottle of water. This one, he says, is for Agus' face.

It will make Agus invisible.

After this, the old man seems tired. We say goodbye and hurry back to our boat taxi. It's covered in centipedes. We push out of the thick mud with bamboo poles until the water's deep enough to start the filthy engine.

Back in town, Agus says he'll show me how he robs ships. We head to a row of small shops to buy supplies: a $10 machete, a face mask, a long bamboo pole, and a hooked knife.

On the edge of town, we climb down into another narrow, wooden boat with an outboard motor. This one's bigger than the centipede taxi. It's dark now, and we can see what must be thousands of lights out on the water. Some of them are tiny islands. Most of them are boats.

We steal out toward the Strait of Malacca. It is one of the most heavily trafficked waterways in the world. Seventy thousand ships pass through here each year. No wonder there's piracy.

Agus says it's too dangerous to take me with him on a real pirate operation. But he promises to record a future one for me on his mobile phone.

We pull up to a light tower that's about 20 feet tall. That's less than half as high as a cargo ship would be. The plan is for Agus to climb the tower as if he were robbing it.

He lashes the knife to the end of the bamboo stick. Then he swings the stick up to the top of the tower, hooks it on, and climbs up.

"I want to stop this work," he says, panting, when he comes back down. "It's dangerous out at sea. People have accidents, people die. I have a dream that one day I will make so much money I can quit this work and stop everything. But until then, what else can I do?"

Back on land, we walk to Agus' neighborhood, a slum set back a few hundred yards from the town square. Agus rents two tiny rooms in the house of a family from Sulawesi, a far-away Indonesian province. People flock here from such provinces looking for work and wealth. They rarely find either.

Agus' rooms are on the second story of the house, up a wooden ladder. The first room is completely bare, except for a blue plastic gas can. The second room has a mattress on the floor; a pink, oscillating fan next to the mattress; a broken-down dresser; and a pile of dirty clothes.

Agus sends one of the village kids to buy some water. He asks me for the two bucks to pay for it. We sit on the floor and talk.

Like so many Indonesians, Agus came here to get rich. He had a friend back in his village who'd made money here as a pirate. He told Agus to try his luck.

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So Agus and his wife decided he would come here, make a nice chunk of money, then go home to buy some land or open a small shop.

That was eight years ago.

The problem, Agus explains, is that you just can't make enough money being a pirate. Sure, you might make thousands of dollars on one successful operation, but you might also lose money if you buy the fuel and supplies but then end up with nothing.

Needless to say, this has strained relations with the wife.

"Now my wife has managed to work for herself and make good money as a nurse," Agus tells me. "But I'm still doing this bad job and not making much money. For this reason, I feel ashamed. I cannot go back home with nothing. So I have to stay here."

Another reason Agus has a hard time saving money is "happy-happy." This roughly translates to booze and girls. But it's also an unwritten code among pirates: If you make money, you share the happy-happy with your buddies who might not have been as lucky as you.

The next night, Agus' friend is celebrating. He has just made a couple of hundred bucks stealing crude from an oil tanker and reselling it. He has invited us along.

Tonight, the happy-happy is a case of beer and a troupe of disco girls who travel from island to island and charge men to dance with them. The troupe assembles in the town square and blares techno music.

The girls wear jeans and white T-shirts and wait on folding chairs for partners. Agus points to the tallest one.

"See her? That's my girlfriend. Her name is Yuna."

Pretty soon Agus has spent his last $5 to be with Yuna. He doesn't touch her. He just closes his eyes, throws his head back, and dances and dances.

In the three days that I've known him, it's the first time I've seen Agus smile a real smile. I wave goodbye and take my final boat taxi away from the island.

Since that night Agus says he's been on two pirate operations. One was a success. He made nearly $1,000, a huge amount of money in Indonesia.

The other was not. There were too many navy boats out that night.

I called Agus a few times and asked about the recording he told me he'd make on his mobile phone. He kept promising to do it.

The last time I talked to him, though, he admitted he'd had to pawn the phone. Because, he said, he was broke. Again.

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dispatches

Pakistan Under Pressure

Militants are gaining territory—and strength—with astonishing speed.

By Vanessa M. Gezari

Friday, January 2, 2009, at 7:09 AM ET

PESHAWAR, Pakistan—The fields stretched to the horizon beneath a mild winter sun. A stream ran through them, and somewhere off in the distance, behind a stand of apricot trees, smoke curled from the chimney of a mud-walled house. A narrow lane connected the house and the village life it evoked to the loud, modern asphalt highway skirting Peshawar. We stood alongside this highway, in one of the transport-company parking lots that have become the de facto boundary between Pakistan's ungoverned tribal belt and the city.

This wasn't always the boundary. The tribal lands don't officially start for another few miles beyond the outer edge of the highway, and those lands haven't always been thick with insurgents. But a series of violent attacks in December on shipping containers bound for NATO troops in Afghanistan are just one sign that the boundary between militant-held land and government-controlled territory is creeping inward with astonishing speed. One night last month, hundreds of Taliban fighters armed with rocket launchers crouched behind the apricot trees, moved purposefully through the grass, and finally, crying, "God is great," they launched a barrage of heavy artillery at the concrete wall that separates the lot—where the NATO shipping containers were parked—from the countryside. The wall came down, fighters streamed through the opening, and more militants appeared on the highway.

"I was on duty, but when I saw such a large number of militants, I ran," said Mohammad Rehan, a 21-year-old night watchman. "If you fire at them, it just creates a problem for you."

Militants have launched six such attacks in Peshawar since the beginning of December, destroying some 300 Humvees and other military vehicles as well as supplies worth millions of dollars. While these raids have obvious consequences for international troops in Afghanistan, they also mark a new level of insecurity for Peshawar, a city of universities, kebab stands, and carpet dealers that has always had an edgy border-town vibe but that now seems increasingly vulnerable to a Taliban

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takeover. Mahmood Shah, a retired army brigadier who lives in Peshawar, estimated that, based on the scale of the attacks on NATO supplies, it would take the Taliban as little as 20 minutes to gain control of the city's key administrative offices and essentially conquer it.

"It's just a question of time," Shah said. "Either the government becomes serious, or if the Taliban do it, I'm sure they will be faced …with a civil war sort of condition, because the people are arming themselves quietly. So you will find that the people will start resisting, thinking that the government is doing nothing."

Suicide attacks in Peshawar killed nearly 100 in 2008 and injured more than 200. In November, a U.S. aid worker and his driver were shot dead, two journalists were wounded in another shooting, and an Iranian diplomat was kidnapped. A December car bombing near a Shiite shrine at a busy market killed at least 18 and wounded dozens. Before dawn on Dec. 22, masked men attacked three of the city's elite English-language schools, two for boys and one for girls, tossing petrol bombs into classrooms, burning buses, and wounding several staff.

Since late summer, the Pakistani military has been fighting insurgents in the Bajaur Tribal Agency northwest of Peshawar, which lies on a key militant transit route between the Afghan province of Kunar and the disputed territory of Kashmir. It is also battling militants in the nearby Swat Valley, once a tourist destination, where insurgents recently declared a ban on female education and where reports of beheadings and public executions are frequent. The fighting has forced at least 200,000 people from their homes in Bajaur and pushed militants into areas that have historically been more stable, including Peshawar.

Malik Naveed Khan, inspector general of police for the North West Frontier Province, has primary responsibility for protecting Peshawar, a city of about 3 million. From his office in a compound straight out of the British Raj—white columned buildings, clipped lawns edged with chrysanthemums, servants bearing tea—he commands a force of 48,000 whose territory is effectively at war.

"I don't see this as a problem of the province, of the frontier, of Pakistan," Khan said. "I see it as a very, very serious international problem."

A gray-haired grandfatherly man who chain-smokes Dunhills, Khan estimates the enemy force at 15,000 to 20,000 fighters. But the problem is not so much numbers as resources. A police officer is paid $100 a month at most, Khan said, while the militants get about $165. Of the 1,000 police in the city of Peshawar, fewer than 100 are trained in counterterrorism tactics, only 300 have bulletproof vests, and one-third lack automatic weapons. Because of a shortage of ammunition and training, many police have not fired a bullet for the last four or five years. (For the sake of comparison, the New York Police Department requires officers to requalify on their weapons twice a year.)

"I want the West to know what we are in and to sound a bell of warning, because I have been telling everyone that this is not going to stop here," Khan said. "It will grow into the rest of Pakistan if it's not stopped here."

In 2007, Khan lost 72 police officers. By mid-December 2008, the annual toll was 148. More than 500 others have been injured, many seriously, losing limbs or eyes. Khan tries to raise morale by appealing to his officers' tribal pride, reminding them that the force has a long and brave history. Nevertheless, hundreds of cops have deserted in recent months at the urging of their families. Khan has raised death benefits for the relatives of officers killed in the line of duty from $6,300 to nearly $19,000 per cop, including insurance payouts, he said. Families of the dead are given a plot of land, and the sons and brothers of slain officers are offered jobs in the force.

To fund this, Khan persuaded the provincial government to raid its development budget, an unprecedented move. Like many, he sees development as key to countering the insurgency. He speaks of creating a version of Roosevelt's Depression-era Civilian Conservation Corps in the tribal areas to educate people and put them to work.

"They'll have something to lose, and then they'll stand up to these Taliban," he said. "They have nothing to lose."

The attacks on NATO supply convoys have other consequences for Khan and his police. The containers aren't just being burned, Khan said; some are being raided by militants and thieves. In the markets of Peshawar, anyone can buy military uniforms, helmets, night-vision goggles, and high-tech weapon scopes, he said. He himself had bought 500 or 600 pairs of U.S. military boots, at $30 a pair, for use by his traffic police. (He had considered buying bulletproof vests, too, but they weren't the right grade for the weaponry his men faced.)

When I visited Karkhano market a few days later, I saw what he meant. The market stalls lead up to the arched gate that separates Peshawar from the tribal areas, lining the road to the Khyber Pass into Afghanistan. A cop stood in front of the archway waving traffic through, while another, strapped with ammunition, eyed passengers sharply as they approached. The shops offered toy guns, toasters, and flowered bedroom slippers as well as a camouflage patrol cap made by Southeastern Kentucky Rehabilitation Industries, a nonprofit that employs people in work release and welfare-to-work programs, as well as the physically and mentally challenged, and describes itself as the "manufacturer of a multi-layered cold weather system … developed for Special Operation Forces."

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We sat in the shop of a man named Mohammad Baz Afridi, whose shelves and display cases held DeWalt drill sets, various pieces of military gear, and, somewhat incongruously, a box of OB tampons. He showed me a Liberator II Soldier System Headset, covered in camouflage, with a mouthpiece and attached cord and plugs. The model is especially efficient because it can be used "with practically any portable radio model," according to the Web site of its manufacturer, Tactical Command Industries. (On the night of the attack at the transport lot I'd visited, the Taliban spoke constantly over wireless radios, and the night watchmen could hear commanders urging the militants on.)

Afridi served us tea in flowered china cups. He confirmed that some of his wares had probably been stolen from the NATO supply convoys.

"What will the transporters do if the Taliban come in their way and put guns on them and either kill the driver or the conductor?" he asked. "The transporter can't do anything, because the Taliban will kill him."

Among the more interesting items in Afridi's display case was a thick operator's manual for a laser aiming device that could be attached to a gun barrel, its cover marked "Department of the Army and Headquarters, Marine Corps." The manual described the product as "Class IIIb laser devices that emit a highly collimated beam of infrared light for precise aiming of the weapon." It continued: "The Aiming Lights are for use with Night Vision Devices and can be used as either handheld illuminator/pointers or can be weapon mounted with the included brackets and accessory mounts. In the weapon mounted mode, the Aiming Lights can be used to accurately direct fire as well as illuminate and designate targets." Afridi had sold the device, but whoever bought it had left the instruction manual behind.

Khan, the police chief, estimated that he would need about $300 million over the next three years to build a force that could stave off the militant threat to Peshawar. He said he would happily accept equipment in lieu of money, promising to return it when the fight was over. He had made his case to the government, members of parliament, think tanks, and the media.

"They come here, they listen to us and get very alarmed, but they do nothing," he said.

Indeed, the government in Islamabad seems numb to the threat. The day after the Dec. 22 school attacks in Peshawar, amid editorials calling them a milestone in insecurity for the city, the *News*, a Pakistani English-language paper, ran a story in which President Asif Ali Zardari declared that the situation in the North West Frontier Province was "improving." Last week, amid rising tensions with India in the aftermath of the Mumbai attacks, Pakistan moved troops from the tribal areas to its eastern border. Although officials said the troops weren't engaged in combat, the areas they reportedly left behind—including South Waziristan, a tribal agency on the Afghan border southwest of Peshawar—are rife with insurgents.

On Tuesday, Pakistan shut down the road between Peshawar and the Afghan border while paramilitary forces raided the hideouts of criminal gangs and Taliban militants who officials say have banded together to carry out kidnappings and attack NATO supplies. But when the operation ends, the police will be on their own again. Peshawar is home to a military garrison and is considered well-defended, though the military presence seems to have had little effect on the deteriorating security situation. If Khan doesn't get more resources and training for his men, he fears that he won't be able to hold the militants back. And if he doesn't get help soon, it may be too late.

"These requests we fast-track, otherwise we don't need them," he said. "We lose the game."

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dispatches

Iceland After the Fall

The writer, the witch, and the board head.

By Nathan Heller

Wednesday, December 31, 2008, at 6:59 AM ET

From: Nathan Heller
Subject: Down With the Man! Up With the Potato!
Posted Tuesday, December 30, 2008, at 11:52 AM ET

When people talk about Iceland, they talk about numbers, distance, and the awesome lack of human imprint on the landscape. The Vikings settled the harbor. It is 2,600 miles from New York. The island's footprint is 103,000 square kilometers, an area larger than South Carolina but smaller than Virginia, and 79 percent of the terrain is what the U.S. government calls "wasteland." Nine-tenths of the country's heat is geothermally produced. Renewable sources provide all electricity. The population has grown to 313,000—this is slightly less than the residency of Manhattan's Upper West Side, up to 155th Street—and the temperature of the Blue Lagoon, because I know you were wondering, averages 100 degrees, even in winter. What else? Iceland's culture today is a model of North European *savoir-vivre*. Almost two-thirds of its university students are women; the literacy rate has been estimated at 99.9 percent; and the annual publishing output is, per capita, the largest in the world.

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Data like these are trotted out whenever Iceland appears in the news—which, until this fall, was rarely—not because literacy rates are inherently telling but because they capture a vaguer sense of what the country signifies to outsiders. Iceland is, for many of us, the waist of the hourglass: the narrowest point in the flow of culture and commerce that buoys modern life, a place where the First World is winnowed and exposed. This is why we call its financial collapse a "crisis." It's the reason some of us with no clear stake are keen to learn what happened. And it's why, one afternoon not long ago, I stood in Austurvöllur Square in Reykjavík and watched a group of Icelanders rally against their government.

The protests have been a Saturday affair since mid-October, when the dust of the collapse first started to settle. Locals convene on a plot of grass downtown—just out of dumping range of a huge, ever-present flock of geese—and from a makeshift dais, speakers lay into the country's leadership. People go with homemade picket signs over their shoulders; collection buckets pass to fund the microphones and sound system. Everyone is in the loop. I hear about the protest from a waiter not an hour after I arrive in town. (And would I like more orange juice?) I get the details from a woman selling bus tours to a waterfall. "You will *feel* the anger and the disappointment," says a local writer just back from the countryside.

What I feel that afternoon, mainly, is cold. It's overcast and 23 degrees, and with powerful winds surfing off the bay not far away, it feels even rawer. Austurvöllur Square is nested between Iceland's squat, gray parliament house and an array of shops, posh eateries, and luxury hotels. Near the center, there's a statue of nationalist Jón Sigurðsson, immortalized with elbows out and hands drawn, roosterlike, toward his armpits. I do not speak Icelandic, so I spend the better part of the rally sidling up to people like a creep at a dive bar, asking them to translate what's being said over the loudspeakers.

"We have this huge problem, but all the people responsible still have their jobs," Tómas Holton, a local teacher, tells me, narrowing his eyes to paraphrase. He's tall and lanky and has a White Sox cap pulled down as far as it will go; through the rally, he's been hopping up and down athletically, like a boxer keying himself up, trying to keep warm. It's his fourth protest, he says proudly. He thinks the weather weeded out the rubberneckers. As the speaker prattles in an epic baritone, Holton talks about "transparency" and the desire for new blood in government, "people who don't have connections." I murmur that this all sounds familiar. Holton looks away to weigh a thought, and a slight grin plays across his cheeks. "Of course, it's difficult, in Iceland, to make something new," he says dryly. "There are so few *people*."

The protests are organized by a group called "Phalanx Against the Situation," which sounds like a James Bond movie, or a particularly boozy Dada cell, and the most prevalent picket sign reads "*Óstjórnina burt!*" which I am told translates to something like "Away with you, you corrupt government!" What, specifically, is being referred to here is open to interpretation. A woman in a turquoise hat passes petitions calling for the ouster of the finance leaders—one for the finance minister, another tailored to attack the bank heads. One grievance targets leaders' "lack of education," she explains; another blames them for trashing the "Icelandic image." A third is for (of course) "transparency." There are other signs: a piggy bank being roasted on a spit, a European Union flag X'ed out in red, and an austere black-on-white arrangement that says,

> EURO NO
> US DOLLAR YES
> KRONA R.I.P.

Iceland's finances imploded in the manner of a dying star. To beef up its tiny economy, financiers had set up seductive online-banking systems, vacuuming in cash and loans from the world's powerhouse economies and then lending against this capital. Everything ballooned. One hundred percent mortgages were commonplace, and because Icelandic mortgages are keyed to inflation (debt rises as inflation goes up), locals found themselves dealing with, and owing, larger sums. Many took loans in foreign currency, planning to shuttle advantageously between that currency and króna. This was the burning ball of gas. As market concern spread this year, foreigners realized Icelandic banks were sitting on more capital than its government could ever insure. The market panicked. The fuel dried up. And Iceland's economic star began collapsing on itself.

These days, all that is back story. Iceland's more recent trials come from European circumspection, bad luck, and internal reticence. In October, Britain used anti-terrorism laws to freeze the British assets in one bank and seized the U.K. outpost of another. Meanwhile, the prime minister refused a call for parliamentary elections, saying the turnover could subvert Iceland's interception of its $2.1 billion IMF loan. Icelanders are upset about these things. They are unsettled by the cryptic management, and by the terrorist accusation, and by the IMF loan—or the *idea* of the IMF loan—and even by the prospect of joining the euro, which, some say, would straitjacket their work force. Their raw-goods market is in trouble, too: The price of aluminum, Iceland's biggest industry as of this year, has more than halved over the past five months. Fishing profits are down, in part thanks to a parasite infecting $20 million worth of exportable herring. Local sales of horse meat are, reportedly, way up.

In other words, to visit Iceland now, especially if you've been before, feels something like joy riding in the Maserati of a hospitalized friend. In 2006, when I first came to Reykjavík, a hamburger to go (squished-bun kind) cost something like $15. Restaurant entrées could easily set you back $60 each. Bound by a research stipend, I spent nearly a month that autumn, often

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hungry, based at the Salvation Army hostel, where the shower flooded daily by 11 and each Sunday, people (who were they?) would gather in some back room, thrum guitars, and sing spiritual songs. Still, I was in love: the cool, gray hills descending to the harbor; the oddly blue sunlight; the fervor of the clubs that sent licentious, dancing people out into the streets and home across the wee hours of the night. Iceland seemed to me then—it seems to me now—a place where the world can't wholly catch up with you.

What catches up instead, these days, is a peculiar, spent-too-long-in-art-school brand of grass-roots action. Just as the Austurvöllur rally ends, a string of firecrackers shoots above the parliament house, bursting like small flares. People huddle to the scene, and as they do, a vandal in a cheap Santa suit and gremlin mask ('tis the season) runs up and dumps a sack of potatoes on the parliament-house steps. They bounce and roll. The Santa gremlin disappears. An army of photographers kneels, essaying the potato-on-the-ground art shot. Iceland has become a "potato country," a woman says by way of explanation, so poor its people can subsist solely on tubers. "And also the leaders are, like, stupid, like a potato."

"Ah, I see," I say. I don't.

From: Nathan Heller
Subject: The Writer, the Witch, and the Board Head
Posted Wednesday, December 31, 2008, at 6:59 AM ET

Early Sunday afternoon, I have coffee with Vigdís Grímsdóttir, a writer living in a quiet neighborhood just south of Reykjavík's main drag. Vigdís is the author of 11 novels, three collections of short stories, two volumes of poetry, a biography, and one children's book. The first thing she talks about after seizing my coat ("Take off your clothes. Not all of them") is how the couple downstairs lost their jobs and are moving out. As she speaks, her mind seems to commute between two moods—one distant and portentous, the other brisk, playful, and slightly frazzled. At one point, she stops midsentence to gape in horror at my coffee. "It must be cold!" she says in a half-whisper. "Is it *bad*?"

I've come to see her in the hope of finding out how one of Iceland's most prized assets—its national literature—is weathering the crash. Normally, early winter is the season of bounty, or what passes for bounty in Iceland, among local publishers. Almost every book is released in the two-month run-up to the holidays (called the *jólabókaflóðið*, or "Christmas book flood"), the idea being that hyperliterate, winter-bound Icelanders are, essentially, the world's most concentrated gift-book market. With production costs up and wallets slim this season, though, the plan risks falling flat. Roadblocks loom on the creative end as well: The government has paid tens of Icelandic authors' salaries every year, effectively helping to keep the country's literary output afloat. That sponsorship is almost certain to be scaled back, given changed regulations and the economic pinch.

At fiftysomething, Vigdís wears black the way some people wear red—a heavy shawl thrown dramatically around her shoulders, a whoosh of ebony hair—and she moves with the aloof intensity of an offstage actor. The literary world has come at the collapse with new fervor, she says, with previously standoffish authors stepping into the fray. "Now they're writing articles in the newspaper, much more than before," she tells me. "So many writers are coming from their shells." Vigdís has noticed a difference in public attention, too: Beginning last winter, when she was doing publicity for her latest book (a biography of an Icelandic everywoman), each reading she gave was packed. To her, this spelled impending crisis. "I could feel it in the air," she says. "There was something changing. People wanted to hear about—*themselves*, maybe." She thinks it showed readers' distrust of stories about highflying success and affluence.

So far, this year's *jólabókaflóðið* has not been hindered. Jóhann Páll Valdimarsson, publisher at the Icelandic house Forlagið, which is responsible for about two-thirds of the book market, says in an e-mail that sales this fall are strong and "probably up quite a bit from last year." He has deliberately kept book prices low, despite an increase in production costs, in anticipation of a larger-than-usual readership this winter—Icelanders, he thinks, seek solace on the page. Editorial cutbacks are inevitable, though. They will show up next year. "What we decided the day the first bank collapsed," he says, "was to postpone many titles we had in the pipeline for next year and 2010."

At a low table in Vigdís' kitchen, whose windows overlook the valley of southern Reykjavík, she talks about concern over next year's government stipends. Some writers have already started courting private donors, apparently; Vigdís has not. She says: "I always thought, 'Well, if someone wants to read me, he will find me.' " She also says: "I think we have to open our mind much more to the community of others, everybody, and stop rowing our boats alone, like the Vikings. … This beautiful little island—and it *is* beautiful—is just a picture of the world."

But what, exactly, is that picture? The next afternoon, en route to lunch, I stumble on a group of people gathered on the sidewalk outside the prime minister's office. They're dressed in black and carry black flags, one with the anarchist's symbol on it. The ringleader, a short, blond woman with a megaphone and a trash bag, shouts and pitches food at the building's facade. Mustard is squirted on the wall. So is something I've good reason to believe is rémoulade sauce. The woman with the garbage bag intones a

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spiteful-seeming speech, and then the crowd sets off across the street, over the grass of Arnahóll Hill.

Subsequent investigation of the crime scene reveals the thrown food to be raw meat, smoked lamb (deli-sliced), and two wedges of blue cheese. This, I learn, is "rat food," left for Geir Haarde, the prime minister. (It is also unsettlingly like my hotel breakfast.) The blonde is a witch who just cast an evil spell. By the time I follow them across the green, the witch has disappeared inside the jagged concrete bunker of the Central Bank, hoping to lure out (or perhaps to hex) Davíð Oddsson, the chairman of the bank's board of governors. The inner doors have locked behind her, so her posse waits in the foyer, where motion sensors nudge the outside doors open and shut.

The witch exits eventually, alone. Stopping to face the waiting crowd, she opens up her garbage bag and brandishes what looks like an oddly appointed sex doll. It has a pillow head, a hipster-tight white shirt with buttoned pockets, and a suit in the dimensions of Joe Pesci. A mop of yarn hair mimics Davíð's iconic thatch. The witch marches away from the bank, bearing the effigy on her forearms like an animal pelt, then she pulls its pants down and, with awkward flourish, whips the stuffed cloth buttocks with a clump of twigs. She throws cloth Davíð to the ground. She picks him up. She stuffs him back into the garbage bag and walks away.

Just a few years ago, this might have qualified as provocation, but today it's more like flogging a dead horse. For Iceland, Davíð Oddsson is an object lesson in diminishing political returns. He's spent most of his adulthood in government, first as Reykjavík's mayor and then, for an astounding 13 years, as prime minister. (He served briefly as foreign minister, too, before taking the reins of the Central Bank in 2005.) The Davíð doctrine is heavily inflected with the Reagan-Thatcher creed: At the peak of his power, he pushed for deregulation, privatization, and, eventually, tax cuts. He turned a budget deficit to surplus and set the groundwork for the growth of the past decade. From his last years as prime minister, though, he has been increasingly embroiled in controversy. Now he is the symbol of a leadership thought to have led its people off a cliff. The rush of criticism winds back to his actions well before the crash: Outside the bank, one protester lambastes him for enrolling Iceland in the coalition of the willing.

It is an accusation that sits uncomfortably, a reminder that this weird public Kabuki is, somehow, the glint off larger problems. The evening before, my girlfriend and I shared a geothermic pool with a National Guardsman en route home to the Midwest after a year abroad. "Afghanistan," he said softly. Steam spiraled from the water as he told us how he'd worked with Taliban defectors, trying to steer locals from the lure of short-term profit and from mullahs teaching a perverted, corrupt Islam. "They say, you know, 'hearts and minds,' but it's really more like carrots and sticks now." Across the pool, Icelandic twentysomethings on their stomachs in bikinis swirled their ankles in the air. A half-submerged couple nearby seemed for a moment to listen to the guardsman's stories; then they started talking softly in the tone that's used to plan the next day's errands.

Not long after my encounter with the witch, I come back to Arnahóll Hill. It is a holiday, the day Iceland got sovereignty from Denmark, and instead of a parade, there is a protest. Today's rally is just as inscrutable as the last one for me, so I talk with a group of people holding question-mark and exclamation-point signs against the wind. (The cumulative effect among the crowd is *??!?!!?!?*, like punctuation in a late-night e-mail.) When I ask Sára Riel, who designed the signs, what they're supposed to signify, she looks at me as if I'm a moron. "I think it's pretty obvious," she says. "We have *questions*, and we have *demands*." I ask what the questions are. "Lots of questions," she says.

The rally ends. As people file back into the downtown streets, I talk with a guy selling civil-disobedience literature on a foldout picnic table, a guy who identifies himself, when I ask, as "Siggi, a local anarchist and nurse." Siggi directs me toward the bank, where "leftists" have resumed the heckling of Davíð. The insurgents made it past the foyer this time and to a second doorway where police in body armor hold a blockade line. The demonstrators raise their hands above their heads to show they are unarmed. Behind the police and their transparent shields, a gaggle of businessmen are milling. For nearly an hour, nothing changes. People occupy themselves as they might spend a boring car trip: They chant ("Davíð, come out!"). They sing. They play Icelandic hip-hop on a big, tubular ghetto blaster. Smokers light up, and the foyer of the bank starts feeling like a basement disco.

Finally, one of the bank administrators shuffles out behind the line of armored officers. He makes a little speech. The people cheer. The demonstrators turn and leave, exuberant. What happened? A bearded young man tells me, "They said, 'If you leave, then we'll leave.' And they left. And so now, we're leaving." He grins and pumps a fist into the air, then looks into the courtyard, where music is playing. It's twilight. The sky outside has the effect of being low and broad and slightly canted, like the fabric of a tent collapsing toward the pole.

"It was like a small victory," he says.

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Icelandic last names are patronymics: If Jóhann has a son named Leif and a daughter named Helga, the children's full names will be Leif Jóhannsson and Helga Jóhannsdóttir. (And if Leif has a daughter Þórdís, her full name will be Þórdís Leifsdóttir.) But because these aren't actual surnames—and because Iceland's population is relatively small and localized—first, not last, names dominate public life: Icelandic telephone directories are ordered by first name, and public figures are generally identified by first name in the press. Davíð Oddsson, who heads Iceland's Central Bank, would never be referred to as "Oddsson" alone—if a concise form of his name were needed, he'd be called "Davíð."

There are exceptions, of course. Some Icelanders have actual family names, passed unchanged from parent to child. These often date from before 1925, when it was legal to claim a family name by preference. In other cases, Icelanders have inherited a surname from a non-Icelandic ancestor. (This is the case for the prime minister, Geir Haarde: *Haarde* is Norwegian.) And sometimes last names are bestowed by a matronymic system instead. One of Iceland's soccer stars is Heiðar Helguson, whose name comes from Helga, his mother.

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explainer

What Do Timekeepers Do?

Listen to radio waves; drink café au lait.

By Brian Palmer

Wednesday, December 31, 2008, at 2:12 PM ET

On New Year's Eve at 6:59:59 p.m. ET, an "international consortium of timekeepers" will add one second to the world's clock. How do you get to be an official timekeeper?

Earn a Ph.D. in astronomy and move to France. Tweaks to the official clock are announced by the Earth Orientation Center, a Paris-based subunit of the International Earth Rotation and Reference Systems Service. The IERS was established in 1987 by two professional associations comprising thousands of astronomers and geodesists (people who measure the Earth and its movements) around the world. It has no dedicated staff or payroll, and it exists merely as a group of government agencies, universities, and foundations that have agreed to share data on the position of celestial bodies and ensure that our clocks are consistent with the Earth's rotation. Duties are divided among the member institutions: As the parent institution of the EOC, the Paris Observatory is responsible for deciding when to adjust the world's clocks. The task of data collection is shared among other facilities around the world.

So if you wanted official control over adding a leap second, you would have to convince the Paris Observatory board of directors to make you the director of the EOC. Even then, you'd have little discretion in the matter—the decision to push the second hand is automatically triggered when the world's clocks fall behind the Earth's actual rotational speed by more than 0.9 seconds. (All the director does is send out the official memo.) If you're interested in the day-to-day work of monitoring the Earth's rotation, you'd do better to seek employment at the U.S. Naval Observatory or other IERS member institutions where the data is actually collected. If you had the right credentials—e.g., a degree in astronomy or geodesy, with a focus on the behavior and orientation of the Earth—you might get hired for the job.

Timekeepers calculate precise and universal clock values with an array of radio telescopes located in Hawaii, South Africa, Brazil, Australia, and other locations, and focused on distant galaxies, called objects. Every day, astronomers at each telescope fill a series of hard drives with exact data on the radio signal from those quasars and ship them via common carrier to the other IERS institutions. Each institution compares the signals recorded at all the telescope sites and uses the differences to compute the speed of the Earth's rotation. Their calculations normally agree to within a few microseconds.

The system requires the close cooperation of scientists around the globe. Astronomers formed the first transnational society to observe polar motion in 1895, called the International Latitude Service. In 1919, the International Time Bureau was established in Paris and became responsible for adjusting a universal clock. (Until then, those decisions were left up to individual countries.) The bureau retained this authority until it was replaced by the IERS in the 1980s.

Got a question about today's news? Ask the Explainer.

Explainer thanks Dennis McCarthy of the U.S. Naval Observatory. Thanks also to Laurie Gabik for asking the question.

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explainer

How Many Civilians Are Dead in Gaza?

Figuring out who's who among the casualties.

By Juliet Lapidos

Tuesday, December 30, 2008, at 5:37 PM ET

Israeli aircraft bombed Hamas targets in the Gaza Strip for the fourth day straight on Tuesday. Gaza officials said that, as of Monday, 364 Palestinians have been killed, and the United Nations noted that at least 62 were civilians. How did the U.N. determine which of the victims were combatants?

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Gender and age. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency came up with the figure by sending emissaries to visit hospitals and other medical facilities. Under the Geneva Conventions and subsequent international law treaties, civilians are those who do not belong to the armed forces, militias, or organized resistance movements. But in Gaza City, UNRWA counted only female victims and those under the age of 18. North of the city, the agency attempted to get a more complete count by including adult men who were not wearing dark-blue police uniforms and whom community members identified as noncombatants.

At a Monday press conference, an U.N. staffer clarified that the count was only meant to give a credible minimum figure rather than a hard total. Nor did the agency intend to suggest that all men killed in Gaza City were combatants. Making clear distinctions between civilians and militants is difficult since Hamas (which is listed as a terrorist organization by the United States, the European Union, Israel, and other countries) engages in civic activities (like running schools) as well as military operations. Likewise, it's possible that some of the female victims and older children were Hamas combatants.

As a rule, the U.N. does not tally civilian casualties, relying instead on local governments for information. The agency made an exception in Gaza due in part to persistent questions from journalists who wanted to gauge the impact of the Israeli offensive on ordinary Palestinians.

Got a question about today's news? Ask the Explainer.

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explainer

Stuck on Santa

What should you do if your costume fuses with your skin?

By Nina Shen Rastogi

Monday, December 29, 2008, at 7:12 PM ET

A disgruntled divorcee wearing a Santa Claus costume killed nine people last week when he arrived at his former in-laws' house and began shooting a semiautomatic handgun. The attacker set a fire before fleeing the scene but was burned badly in the blaze. The police found his body after he committed suicide and discovered that part of his costume had "literally melted to his body." What should you do if your Santa suit fuses to you in a fire?

Don't try to pull it off. It's possible for synthetic fabrics to fuse with burned human skin during a fire, especially when the blaze is intense enough to cause second- or third-degree burns. But the word *fuse* can be misleading: Your skin won't actually liquefy along with your clothing. (Flesh cooks under extreme heat; it doesn't melt.) Instead, a fabric can melt onto you like hot candle wax—when it cools off, it will be stuck to your skin. While you can safely peel off melted wax, it can be dangerous to rip off a fused piece of red-and-white polyester; if you're not careful, some healthy tissue will come off with the fabric and burned skin, and you'll leave the area vulnerable to infection or nerve damage. Instead, just run the burn under cool tap water to make sure it doesn't get any worse, and then head to the emergency room. There, doctors may be able to remove your burned epidermis and adhered clothing by sloughing it off with a clean towel.

A disposable Santa costume is one of the worst disguises you could wear if you're plotting an act of arson. Not only does baggy, ill-fitting clothing increase your risk of catching fire, but bargain costumes—like the economy option at MySantaSuit.com—are often made with polyester. Like many synthetic fibers, polyester takes longer to catch fire than cotton or linen, but when it does ignite, it melts. When the gluey substance reforms, it can stick to your epidermis. Melting fabric can be extremely dangerous, because it can cause scalding burns above and beyond direct fire damage. For that reason, the Marine Corps has banned some polyester- and nylon-based athletic wear in Iraq, where soldiers are in constant danger of fire exposure due to roadside bombs. (Pure cotton, on the other hand, quickly turns to ash, which crumbles and blows away from the body.)

Got a question about today's news? Ask the Explainer.

Explainer thanks Louis Riina of the Nassau University Medical Center.

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family

Reading Isn't Fundamental

How to help your child learn to read.

By Alan E. Kazdin and Carlo Rotella

Friday, January 2, 2009, at 7:11 AM ET

As a parent, you feel a special deep panic when you realize that your child—your beautiful, clever, funny child, who regularly surprises you with precocious bons mots, who built an ingenious bow out of tubing and rubber bands that can shoot a chopstick across the living room with remarkable accuracy—is having trouble learning to read. Meanwhile, all the other kids appear to be breezing along, polishing off Harry Potter books while your child stumbles over the difference between "how" and "now." You don't want to be one of those hysterical parents who gets all crazy about every little developmental bump in the road, but, hey, your kid can't really read yet, and the others can. In your

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darker moments you feel the desolate urge to ratchet down your ambitions for your child from valedictorian to graduating at all.

Such fears may be exaggerated, but they're not irrational. Reading ability does predict school achievement and success (which is, of course, related to income, health, and other factors), and reading gains ever greater importance beyond school, as more jobs are now based on information and technology. Failure to read places significant limits on how one fares in other parts of life. And a lot of people never do learn to read well: Approximately 40 percent of fourth-grade children in the United States lack basic reading skills; 20 percent of all graduating high-school seniors are classified as functionally illiterate (meaning that their reading and writing skills are insufficient for ordinary practical needs); and about 42 million adults in the United States cannot read. So you're not nuts to take a reading problem seriously.

Now for some perspective. First, let's take a moment to recognize that compared with the development of oral language, the acquisition of reading is unnatural. Speech and the ability to understand speech can be considered the result of a natural process in the sense that the requisite skills emerge without formal training. Several species of animal employ sounds such as clicking, whistles, song, or foot tapping in a fashion that constitutes focused and targeted communication (and dolphins actually seem to have names for one another). Before children can speak fluently, they move from sounds to words, words to phrases, and so on, acquiring their growing expertise from exposure to the speech around them. They then make efforts to speak, with little formal guidance. By contrast, children must be taught to read.

The good news for kids who have trouble reading is that while a deficiency in reading may look like an across-the-board failure, it is often a local problem in just one or two of the components that add up to the ability to read. Reading, like golfing or playing the guitar, is not one big global skill but a constellation of many smaller ones. When we read fluently, the little skills weave together so seamlessly that they look like a single expertise.

It's important to look at the components because a holdup in the development of any single one may be at fault in a child's poor performance in reading. If we can identify the component that's not doing its share, we can do a great deal to improve reading. The components that make up reading are interrelated and overlapping, but distinguishable:

> **Vocabulary:** knowing the meanings of words. A child's comprehension of what is read depends on this. Better vocabulary better prepares a child for reading.
>
> **Comprehension:** understanding and being able to interpret what is read, connecting the printed words and sentences with human experience.
>
> **Phonological awareness:** identifying and manipulating units of oral language, such as words, syllables, and onsets (beginnings of words) and rhymes. Children who have phonological awareness can recognize that sentences are made up of words, words can be broken down into sounds and syllables, sounds can be deleted from words to make new words, and different words can begin or end with the same sound or have the same middle sound(s).
>
> **Decoding:** breaking down words into their constituent sounds and building words from those sounds. This begins with blending sounds ("puh" plus "al" equals "pal") and extends into sounding out words the child has never seen before by recognizing the sounds of letters and syllables that form them.
>
> **Fluency:** reading smoothly with accuracy, speed, and expression that conveys the sense of what's being read.

As a parent with no particular professional expertise in teaching literacy, there's a lot you can do on the level of normal play and routine home life to promote reading—and without turning it into a chore or a high-pressure struggle.

Parents can begin working on the components of reading when their child is still an infant and extend the process throughout childhood. To begin with, the more the child knows about oral language, the better. When she begins to read she will draw upon a reserve of expertise that she first built up as a speaker and listener: vocabulary, comprehension, phonological awareness, connecting words to things.

With infants, talk to the child and encourage him to make a range of talklike sounds. Begin reading to the child, and keep books around, including some within the child's reach. Do what you can to make reading fun, enjoyable, peaceful, and engaging, setting the stage for what comes next at the toddler level. You are building command of sounds, love of reading, and an appreciation of the value and importance of books.

With toddlers and preschoolers, it helps to connect reading to some routine such as bed time, nap time, or a pre- or after-meal lull. Select topics she likes; let the child select books for you to read. Get in the habit of activities or games that rhyme and otherwise play with sounds: songs, jingles, made-up phrases (e.g., "Billy is silly" to catch the rhyming sounds, "Sally sounds

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silly" to catch the sound of the initial S). Nursery rhymes are especially rich in words, rhyming, and other fundamentals. Talk about a greater range of subjects, even very mundane ones—like pointing to the parts of a car or animal in an illustration and labeling them. As you read, stop and ask a gentle question: "What do you think Babar is thinking here?" or "What do you think will happen next?" These are great for comprehension. If the question is too difficult, offer a little more guidance by attaching a statement: "I'll bet Babar is a little lonely. What do you think would make him feel better?" Also, you can encourage your child to experiment with writing, which helps reading because she uses sounds to try to write the word. You might see the child write "sn" for "sun," a great start that shows awareness of sounds and the breakdown of words into sounds.

As your child continues in elementary school and begins to work hard during the school day on reading, it's a good idea to continue reading with and to him, mixing in casual writing practice (some kids will go for the idea of alternating entries in a journal with a parent) and talking over dinner and in other family settings about what the child has read. If there's a series of books that speaks to one of your child's enthusiasms, helping him get into that series will allow him to become familiar with continuing characters and engage with a larger story, which makes even new books seem familiar. Keep a dictionary around and easily accessible, and use it once in a while, inviting your child to do this with you. The dictionary not only reinforces vocabulary and comprehension, it helps your child decode words by showing that they are composed of syllables that can be sounded out. Make up word games to play while driving or in a store. "Think of words that sound like snow" is good for a first or second grader, but you can work up to more complicated games for older children. If you make the play competitive (if your family's into that), please resist the temptation to rattle off 50 words in a row and then do your special taunting wiggly victory dance. And, of course, continue to show by your actions and not just your pronouncements that reading is engaging, relevant, and a path to fresh experiences. Keep books around where your child can pick them up in the natural course of things. And don't forget to pick up a book yourself. Model the desired intimacy with books; don't just preach it.

You can't add becoming a full-time reading tutor to the already full-time demands of parenting, and children will vary in interest, ability, and attention, so you'll inevitably have to select just a few of the many possible activities to promote reading skills. In general, go for regularity—a little almost every day, as part of a routine that links reading to the more relaxed moments in the day—rather than a Shakespeare marathon one Saturday a month. And when setting priorities, bear in mind that two activities are clearly the most critical:

1. Read aloud to the child. It shows that reading is important, part of everyday life, and fun, and allows you to model the basic component skills. It's fine to read the same books over and over, as many children like to do. Research indicates that repeated readings help a child to integrate words better; comprehend meaning; and connect sounds, words, and meaning. Even on the 50th time through the same story, interact during the reading to bring the child into the activity. "What is Pooh doing? What do you think is in the jar?"
2. Help the child understand that letters are related to sounds and that words can break down into sounds. Ultimately, the child's reading will advance by being able to sound out words, not by memorizing individual words. There are alphabet books to help you work with your child to connect letters to sounds. In the middle of reading, stop and sound out a word. "Let's sound this out together: Errr ... un. Run! He's getting ready to run."

Reading may be important and complex and very scary when your child has trouble with it, but parents should take heart in remembering that mundane low-pressure practice during games and other activities with you can make an enormous difference. Even a slightly increased sensitivity to breaking down sounds or rhyming, even a slightly heightened familiarity with books and motivation to engage with them, can provide a significant boost at school. Reading preparation is at the top of the list of factors that make a difference in school achievement. Such preparation need not—and should not—feature threats, severity, and drudgery. Instead, help your child to read by doing what you do anyway—playing with him, talking with her—in a slightly more purposeful manner.

You may well have questions. Here are some common ones.

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How will I know if my child has a reading problem?

The news usually comes in one or more of three ways.

1. School feedback. If your child's teacher alerts you to a problem, resist falling into the blame game. If the teacher asks, "Do you ever read to him at home?" don't come back with, "Aren't you teaching him to read at school? Whatever you're doing isn't working."
2. Your child's statements. The child may well make general or specific comments: "I don't want to read," "I can't do this," "I don't get what's happening in this story." More likely, your child will just express frustration. Strong resistance against practicing reading,

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including blanket statements like "Reading is dumb" is an obvious sign.

3. Behaviors you can observe—reluctance to be read to, getting stuck on most words in a sentence, slow or no reaction when you ask a simple question like, "What is the sound of that letter?" Another warning sign would be if the child's reading is very slow. Accuracy in early reading is much more important than speed, but if you can wash and dry the dishes before the sentence is completed, fluency is a problem. Or you may notice that the child gets the beginning of the word but guesses at the rest of it—reading "smoke" as "smile," for instance—which suggests she is trying to memorize whole words instead of breaking them down to sound them out.

Can't I just wait until the child gets to school, where they have teachers trained to teach reading?

You could, but it would be better if you did not. Practicing the components of reading in the home doesn't mean you force reading before your child is ready to, but you can help develop important skills without rushing the process, and the child who does practice those skills will do better when he does get to school and is ready to read in earnest. Studies show that having more of the component skills in place at age 5 predicts better school achievement at ages 7 and 15.

What do I do if I think my child has a reading problem?

A reading evaluation can be very important. A trained specialist can identify weakness in any of the component skills and will know how to work on it. Bear in mind that the child's negative reaction to reading alone will not necessarily show you where the problem is. Your best bet is to ask your child's teacher, school psychologist, or principal to bring in a reading specialist. Or if you prefer to seek out help on your own, you can do your own search for a reading specialist online or in the phone book. A little respectful tact in dealing with your child's teacher may well be necessary, but you're not questioning the teacher's competence or going over her head by consulting a specialist. Reading is a well-developed area of educational specialization, with masters and doctoral-level professionals who can offer very focused assistance that goes beyond what can happen in the classroom. Plan to work with the teacher, as will any reading specialist your child ends up seeing.

There are more serious problems—auditory disorders, dyslexia, pervasive developmental disorder—that can lead to reading impairment. One reason to go to a specialist is that there are different strategies associated with addressing each of the many causes of a reading problem.

What if my child can read, but just won't? What if my child just has an attitude problem?

You can be certain of motivational problems only if all of the component skills are well established. As a parent, you probably cannot determine this on your own. But if you've taken your child for a reading evaluation and the problem really is just motivational, then you might try the following: Establish more reading routines; engage in more talking about reading at the dinner table; have the child select a book to read together at the book store; switch to engaging magazines or something else other than a book that has words to read; read stories connected to movies, and see the movies with the child.

If my child is pulled out of class for an intensive reading program or I enroll her in an outside program for a few weeks, will that bring her up to speed?

A few weeks in an intensive reading program, all by itself, probably will not be enough. A program that is sustained and supported in the home is more likely to have staying power. Research suggests that much can be done to help the child and build the skills needed, and that steady progress takes precedence over a quick fix. Most of the time, the mundane, gamelike activities I've discussed above will go far to improve reading and complement school activities. If you can start early, all the better. If you have the option, select day care, preschool, and kindergarten that emphasize sounding out, rhyming, and other pre-reading skills.

But do not leave the teaching of reading to the school. Without becoming a whip-cracking achievement monster, you can accomplish a great deal as part of a regular routine of play and home life.

For more information, try these sources:

National Institute for Literacy

National Right to Read Foundation

U.S. Department of Education

Reading Rockets

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family

The Perilous *Tale of Despereaux*

Why do G-rated movies have to be so scary?

By Emily Bazelon

Wednesday, December 31, 2008, at 10:03 AM ET

The Tale of Despereaux runs 87 minutes, and for at least one-

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third of them, my 5-year-old son, Simon, watched the movie with a pained expression and his hands over his ears. The story, about a book-loving mouse who rescues a princess by defeating a horde of rats who have trussed her up in a dungeon, is rated G for general audiences. It seems pitched to the 4-to-maybe-7-year-old set—we'd listened to the audiobook on a long drive last summer, and my 8-year-old dismissed the movie for seeming too babyish. Simon and his 6-year-old friend Charlotte, on the other hand, sat down in the theater with their cherry Slush Puppies and settled in for a good fairy tale.

Why, given this likely audience, did the moviemakers feel the need to include extended sequences with fear-pumping music; a giant menacing cat that charges after Despereaux in a gladiator ring; and Botticelli, the torture-obsessed leader of Rat World? And what's the point of a G rating if movies like *Despereaux* fall into that category? This movie confirms my feeling that it's past time to replace G with better age-tailored guidance. I remember sad G-rated kids' movies from childhood: Disney classics like *Pinocchio*, *Dumbo*, and *Bambi*. But my kids didn't find *Bambi* distressing. Instead, what's hard for them to handle are new movies, ostensibly created for their age group, from which they emerge metaphorically dripping in sweat, wrung out by an hour and a half of suspense and overexcitement.

The official description of G from the Motion Picture Association of America is "[n]o nudity, no sex, no drugs, minimal violence, and limited use of language that goes beyond polite conversation." But surely G doesn't reliably make good on the promise of "minimal violence"—or at least not with any definition of violence that actually reflects what kids find disturbing. *Despereaux* is the latest in a line of recent examples that have unwound my kids or the kids of friends. (Other villains: *Finding Nemo*, for the barracuda* that eats the mom and most of the eggs; *The Lion King*, for Mufasa's murder; *Cars*, for the wildly fast-paced action; *Swiss Family Robinson*, for the pirates; *Wall-E*, for the landing of the spaceship and attempted shooting; and *Monsters, Inc.*, for all the roaring at the outset.)

Perhaps the problem stems from the changing nature of animation. When Road Runner sends Coyote hurtling off a cliff, kids generally shrug off the calamity because they understand that the cartoon is all an utter fake, played for humor. *Despereaux*, by contrast, has the kind of *Shrek*-like animation that left Simon and Charlotte debating, in their after-movie analysis, whether the rats and mice were real. Simon thought maybe they were, because the eyes and claws looked lifelike. Charlotte thought not, but she wasn't completely sure, and, in any case, she found the head of Ratworld really creepy.

When the animals (and people) are animated with such technical skill that they look like they could come to life, some kids lose their tolerance for watching them hurt each other. This is one of the reasons that listening to *Despereaux*, the book, read aloud was charming while watching it unfold on the movie screen wasn't. At the movie's denouement (spoiler warning), the huge cat follows Botticelli into the mouth of a dark chest. The door shuts behind him; muffled whimpers and rattling can be heard within. At this point, Simon shut his eyes in addition to covering his ears, and from a few rows of ahead of us—at that exact torturous moment—we heard distressed cries of "No! No!" from another child in the audience. Botticelli was clearly the movie's bad guy, but that didn't mean kids wanted to watch torture inflicted on him barely off screen.

Complaints from parents about the MPAA's ratings are an old story. But most of the debate I've followed has been about how much sex and cursing should appear in a movie rated PG or R; hence the addition of the midway point, PG-13. When my kids are older, maybe I'll care about that, but at the moment, sex and profanity matter much less to me than suspense and violence in movies made for kids. And, historically speaking, the G rating has shifted meaning over time. From 1968, when the ratings system began, until the mid-1970s, as I learned from this helpful Wikipedia entry, G included "mildly adult mainstream films such as *Airport*, *Planet of the Apes*, and *2001: A Space Odyssey*." Then it became the rating for kids' films, which means that "G-rated movies from the 1960s and 1970s have often been re-rated PG in later years." At the same time, however, violence in G-rated movies increased through the year 1999. Kimberly Thompson, the Harvard public health researcher who made that finding in a 2000 medical journal article, noted a "great variation in the amount of violence in these films ranging from 6 seconds to 24 minutes, with an average of 9.5 minutes of violent scenes." That's a lot of heart-thumping.

In a follow-up review four years later, Thompson found that the level of violence in G movies declined slightly from 2001 to 2004. (Though that's not the case for PG and PG-13 movies, in which sex and violence increased.) And in the G movies, animation often meant license to kill. Looking at 79 G-rated films released since 1992, 50 of them animated and 29 not, Thompson found that the cartoons had "a significantly higher content-based score for violence." Connect that to the lifelike animation in films like *Despereaux*, and it's clear why G is useless for shielding a child from distress or nightmares. As Thompson concludes, "the current rating system may provide a false sense of security about violent content in animated films."

Which explains why alternate rating systems have appeared on the scene. Thompson's article directed me to two: Kids-in-Mind and Screen It. You have to pay to join the second one—the sample reviews on the part of the site that I could see for free looked potentially useful, but they weren't obviously attached to a numbers-based rating score. Kids-in-Mind is free, well-organized, lists a substantial number of G-rated movies, and offers a three-part ratings score for sex/nudity, violence/gore, and profanity. I wasn't sure, though, about the reviewers' conclusions. *Despereaux* was rated 1.3.1, giving it a score of three out of 10 for violence/gore—the same or a lower score as

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movies my kids have watched serenely, like *Babe*, *Curious George*, *The King and I*, and *Muppet Treasure Island*. Maybe this is about the difference between quickie punches, kicks, and shootings, which my kids don't usually mind, and extended suspense, which keeps them up at night.

I'll go back to Kids-in-Mind for suggestions of movies with scores of 1 or 2 for violence—the "minimal" kind that the G rating is supposed to ensure. And I'll also pay closer attention to the notes reviewers write about kids' movies, like this one in the *New York Times* from Manohla Dargis: " *'The Tale of Despereaux' is rated G (General audiences). Some children and city-raised adults might find all the hungry, scurrying rats a bit (or very) creepy*." That doesn't capture all my concerns about this mouse misadventure. But it's better than that bland and empty G.

***Correction*, Dec. 31:** *The article said a shark ate Nemo's mother and siblings. (Return to the corrected sentence.)*

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fighting words

Shame on You, Rick Warren

Still more reasons to boot the huckster of Saddleback from the inauguration.

By Christopher Hitchens

Monday, December 29, 2008, at 2:43 PM ET

It seems to have been agreed by every single media outlet that only one group has the right to challenge Obama's promotion of "Pastor" Rick Warren, and that group is the constituency of politically organized homosexuals. But why should that be? Last week, I pointed out that Warren maintains that heaven is closed to Jews and that his main theological mentor was a crackpot "end-of-days" ranter. Why is this not to count against him as well? Do we need our presidential invocation to be given by a bigmouth clerical businessman who is, furthermore, a religious sectarian? Let me add a little more to the mix. In November 2006, Warren made a trip to Syria and was granted an audience with the human toothbrush who has inherited control of that country and all its citizens. Bashar Assad, the dictator of Syria, is also a religious sectarian—his power base is confined to the Alawite sect—and in the intervals of murdering his critics in Lebanon, he does not expect to receive very many distinguished American or European guests. Of late, the most eminent I can think of have been David Duke, former grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, and George Galloway of Britain's so-called Respect Party, and I believe only Galloway—an old fan of Baathism in all its forms—got an audience with the Grand Toothbrush himself.

Whatever time Warren managed to get with the dear bristled leader was not wasted—you should check out the hilarious parody of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza that accidentally results from the official photograph—and whatever hospitality he received from the Syrian authorities did not go unreturned. "Syria," he told his viewers back home by video, is "a moderate country, and the official government rule and position is to not allow extremism of any kind." This is a highly original way to describe a regime that is joined at the hip with the Iranian theocracy, that is the patron of Hezbollah in Lebanon, and that is the official and unabashed host of the fugitive Hamas leadership whose military wing directs massacre operations from Damascus itself. (One might also add that the Syrian Baath Party's veteran defense minister,* Mustafa Tlas, published a book under his own name that accused Jews of using the blood of non-Jewish children for the making of those ever-menacing Passover matzos. I suppose it depends how you define *extremism*.)

According to an undenied report from the Syrian state news agency, SANA, Warren followed his Assad meeting with another get-together, this time with a mufti. The resulting press communiqué read like this:

> The Mufti called for conveying the real image of Syria, national unity and its call to spread peace, amity and justice to the American people which the US has distorted their image throughout the world. Pastor Warren expressed admiration of Syria and the coexistence he saw between Muslims and Christians, stressing that he will convey this image to his church and country.

(As one who has spent time in Syria, I can confirm that the official translations are indeed of that abysmal level. But Warren cannot wriggle out in this fashion, because most of the worst of what he said was recorded and transmitted in his own voice.) Our good pastor also found the time to tell his captive audience—if I may use such an unoriginal phrase in a literal way—that 80 percent of his countrymen opposed the administration's policy in Iraq. Assume yourself, dear reader, to be one of that possible 80 percent. Did you ever ask to be spoken for by Warren, who was a guest of a regime that sponsors al-Qaida infiltrators in Iraq, or to see him denounce the administration in front of an audience of Syrians that had no choice but to listen to whatever it was told? For shame.

And a shame, too, that on Inauguration Day we may also have to stand still—out of respect rather than fear, it is true—and listen to a man who is either a half-witted dupe, a hopeless naif, a cynical tourist who does favors for the powerful, a religious nut bag, a cowardly liar, or perhaps some unappetizing combination of all five. I personally think that the all-five answer is the correct one, because you cannot just *find* yourself in Syria, smirking into the face of the local despot and being treated like a

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treasured guest. The thing has to be arranged, and these things take time. So what was the motive? Listen again to Warren's driveling broadcast for the folks back home at the megachurch:

> In fact, you know Saul of Tarsus—Saul was a Syrian. St. Paul, on the road to Damascus, had his conversion experience, and so Christians have been here the longest, and they get along with the Muslims, and the Muslims get along with them. There's a lot less tension than in other places.

I can absolutely see what Warren hoped to get out of this sordid little trip, the evidence of which he vainly tried to conceal when it threatened to become embarrassing. He wanted to be on video for his open-mouthed followers as he posed "on the road to Damascus." And he didn't care what deals he had to make, with Baath and Toothbrush Central Command, in order to bring off such a fundraising coup. But now it's the sandals of Obama that are being exploited by the same tub-thumper, and one has not merely a right but a duty to object to having as an inaugural auxiliary a man who is a pushover for anti-Semitism, Islamic sectarianism, "rapture" theology, fascist dictatorship, 10th-rate media trade-offs, and last-minute panicky self-censorship *all at the same time.* Is there nobody in the Obama camp who can see that this is not just a gay issue? And is there no gay figure who can say that Warren is objectionable for reasons that have more to do with decency, democracy, and the Constitution? The televised, Bible-bashing entrepreneur is perhaps the single most unattractive and embarrassing phenomenon that modern American culture has ever produced. It would be nice if we could begin a new era in the absence of this racket and these racketeers, and if enough people can find their voices, we still may be able to do so.

***Correction*, Dec. 29, 2008:** *This article originally identified Mustafa Tlas as the Syrian Baath Party's veteran foreign minister. In fact, he was the defense minister. (Return to the corrected sentence.)*

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food

The State of the Cookie

Bubbie's *mandelbrot* and Aunt Pearl's bourbon balls.

By Sara Dickerman, Dorie Greenspan, and David Lebovitz

Friday, December 12, 2008, at 6:30 PM ET

From: Sara Dickerman
To: Dorie Greenspan and David Lebovitz
Subject: Just What Is a Cookie, Anyway?

Posted Thursday, December 11, 2008, at 7:03 AM ET

Dear Dorie and David,

Thank you both for joining me—I'm really looking forward to mulling over the state of the cookie with such inspiring bakers and writers. It is, of course, cookie season. Most of the food glossies have an elaborate cookie section in their December issues, and with this year's economic news, I suspect many people will make their holiday gifts rather than buying them. Also, Anita Chu's sweet little *Field Guide to Cookies* just came out. Organized by cookie taxonomy, it's a bit like a bird-identification book. Because the guide is so catholic, including such borderline species as *gougères* (cheese puffs), baklava, and Algerian almond tarts, it opens up a rather critical question (critical, at least, for those of us devoted to making life sweeter): Just what is a cookie, anyway?

It's actually quite hard to define a cookie when you get down to it. The adjective "sweet" usually comes to mind, but I was eating a Dutch windmill cookie the other day and was surprised at how savory it was—it could easily have been served with cheese. Chu has a great recipe for TV snacks, which are buttery little almond haystacks livened up with sea salt. Butter is a fairly universal cookie ingredient but not an essential one, either. *Macarons* and macaroons and meringues and the like are made with little or none of it. In the end, I suppose my definition of a cookie has something to do with portability and with guilty pleasure (although this diet doctor asserts that his high-protein cookies can help you get slim). Dorie and David—what makes a cookie a cookie for you?

A related question: What is it that makes a cookie American? You both spend a lot of time in Paris, so I'm hoping you'll share your expatriate perspective. When I think of an American cookie, I think chunky—in terms of heft and girth but also chunky with sedimentary matter like chocolate chips, raisins, M&M's, brickle bits, etc. Our penchant for chunk likely has something to do with the fact that we like to customize—we want our cookies to be ours in some fundamental way. Even people who aren't all that inventive in the kitchen feel as if they can hot-rod a basic cookie recipe with mix-ins like dried cherries and butterscotch chips. These tweaks often work quite well—my mother-in-law's chocolate-chip cookies, for example, have Rice Krispies mixed in for a clandestine crunch factor. But sometimes cookies have so many added ingredients that they get a little frenetic. As a rule, I'd say two textured add-ins—plus an optional flavor tweak like orange zest or almond extract—is about all a cookie-eating brain can process.

The size issue is a complicated one. I grew up when "monster cookies" were all the rage—those 9-inch cookies that you could decorate with frosting for someone's birthday. They were really bar cookies, because they ended up quite cakey. Today's bakery

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cookies tend to be 4 or 5 inches across, which is great, in some ways, because they allow a distinct chewy texture to develop at the center of the cookie while the edges stay crisp. On the other hand, many bakery cookies are too big for a single snack. (This problem has become more acute since I became a mother: I hear a lot of "just one cookie" entreaties.) Of course the size issue cuts across industries—here in the states we like big cars, big muscles, big lattes—you name it.

While we're defining things, I feel I should declare my cookie allegiances, just so you know where I stand. I do love a good chocolate chip cookie—one with a little too much chocolate and preferably no walnuts. I am also fiendish about very spicy hermits and chocolate-truffle cookies—the ones with a cocoa-rich dough and big chunks of dark chocolate inside. I am entirely indifferent to most shortbreads and to ordinary sugar cookies (the crisp kind). I prefer my cookies to have a certain chew to them, unless they are very, very thin. On that note, I am always drawn to recipes for thin nut cookies made with brown sugar, which are almost impossible to find at bakeries. Maida Heatter, one of the great cookie gurus and a Floridian, is an advocate, and so I associate them in my mind with a certain shade of coral lipstick and the click of mahjongg tiles. And, finally, I rarely make very fussy cookies. I frequently resolve to bake sandwiched French *macarons* or homemade fig newtons, but ultimately I'm too impatient for cookies that have multiple steps. David and Dorie, you've probably baked every cookie there is, but which ones do you keep returning to? Are there cookies from your childhood that stir your nostalgia like you-know-who's madeleines? (Sorry, sorry. I swore I could make it through a cookie discussion without mentioning Proust, but I couldn't.)

Yours,
Sara

From: David Lebovitz
To: Dorie Greenspan and Sara Dickerman
Subject: I Can't Resist Mallomars
Posted Thursday, December 11, 2008, at 12:12 PM ET

Dear Sara and Dorie,

Thanks, Sara, for getting us started. Well, here's my attempt to define the cookie: I'd say that it's handheld (although I've seen a few that tip the scales in the other direction); it's something meant to be consumed in a few bites; and it absolutely, positively has to be round. OK, I just made that last one up. Of course, you're right to point out that there are plenty of minisized treats and bars out there, like Anita Chu's Viennese almond crescents, which put my theory in question. Still, I would say that, for me, a good cookie should be big enough for at least three bites. Maybe Dorie can be the brain on that, and I'll be the brawn?

I agree with your explanation of why the American cookie is a chunky one. We Americans are "customizers." If you go to any restaurant in America, it's practically de rigueur to ask whether the chef can change everything on the menu. And we also take a "more is better" approach. Most folks feel a restaurant is a good value if there's a lot of food on the plate.

As for those thin, nutty cookies you mentioned, you probably won't find them at bakeries, since they're a lot of work to roll, cut, and bake. And they're fragile, meaning there's going to be a certain amount of breakage. (When I worked in a restaurant kitchen, I never had trouble getting rid of broken cookies, due to the steady swarm of hungry chefs milling around the pastry department at all hours.) Cookies take a lot of time, and anything fancy or small is going to be more costly and time-consuming to produce. That's probably the appeal of larger cookies in bakeries and with home cooks. On that note, I couldn't eat a 9-inch cookie, but if a cookie is good, I want more than one tiny bite of it. So a happy medium is appreciated.

Here in Paris, if I buy cookies, I prefer the kind that are difficult to make at home (especially if your kitchen is postage-stamp-sized, as is mine). I often go for *macarons*, which, like baguettes and croissants, are readily available and inexpensive. When I'm back in the States, if I'm in the supermarket, I can't resist Mallomars: big puffs of marshmallow sitting on a graham-cracker-like base, covered with the thinnest layer of dark chocolate. Those, and sugar wafers, remind me a lot of my childhood. But of all the store-bought cookies, HeyDays were the best—long wafers covered with caramel and dark chocolate, completely blanketed with toasted nuts. Perhaps they disappeared from the marketplace since they fell in that dubious area between cookie and candy bar: You're entitled to eat a bag of cookies, but few folks feel comfortable plowing through a bag of candy bars!

From: Dorie Greenspan
To: Sara Dickerman and David Lebovitz
Subject: Baker's Paradise
Posted Thursday, December 11, 2008, at 4:31 PM ET

Hi, Sara and David,

Thanks for giving me so much to think about. It's funny: I've never considered the definition of a cookie; I always figured I'd know one when I saw one. And since I love cookies immoderately, I say three cheers for Anita Chu for casting the

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net wide and including treats like profiteroles (little cream puffs filled with ice cream) and those Algerian almond tarts in her wonderful new *Field Guide to Cookies*. Of course, she couldn't get away with that in France, where a pastry chef's taxonomy of sweets is so precise: Profiteroles are classified as dessert, tarts are pastries, and bunches more of her sweets wouldn't qualify as cookies (which the French call *gateaux secs*), either.

Fun probably wouldn't be part of a scholarly definition of the cookie in any country, but I think one reason cookies are such a beloved part of the American culinary tradition is that you eat them with your fingers. They are, as both of you said, handheld or portable—when you've got to grab a fork to munch on a sweet, I think you've left cookiedom—and what's better than playing with your food?

David mentioned that you should be able to polish off a cookie in three bites. I'd add that cookies shouldn't be more than a bite larger. I really dislike what Sara calls "monster cookies." And don't get me started about those cookies that tip the scales at about 6 ounces and are almost raw in the center. In a perfect cookie world, cookies would be 3 inches around, crisp close to the edges, and just a little chewy in the center (just the way you like them, Sara). And they'd be fully baked. Again, not really a defining characteristic, but one I think makes a huge difference in the taste department—when you bake a cookie until it's truly golden, you get great caramel flavor from both the sugar and the butter. Cookies in this baker's paradise would not, however, have to be round! Sorry, David (even if you did only just make the point up). Limit cookies to roundness, and you miss out on bar cookies, like brownies—and my guess is that none of us would want to miss out on those!

Finally, I'm with you both on chunkiness and "sedimentary matter"—as Sara so adorably called mix-ins like chips and nuts—being a big part of what makes a cookie all-American. Maybe it's because, as you said, we Americans like to customize everything (David, I giggled when you wrote about how everyone wants to make changes in restaurant dishes), but I think it comes back to fun and, for me, surprise. When you've got lots of stuff in a cookie, it means that no two bites will be the same—some will have more chips, some more nuts, some a raisin, some a bit of brickle—and that you'll be surprised from first taste to last. I think it's part of what keeps us coming back for more.

Of course, coming back for more has never been an issue for me, and while my favorite cookies are crisp and crunchy and chockablock with mix-ins, I've got soft spots in my heart for lots of different kinds of cookies. I'd be happy to have Sara's spurned shortbreads and sugar crisps, which I love for their simplicity and luxurious butteriness. I could go through a box of Mallomars, one of David's favorites, any day and would eat them just the way I did as a child: First, I'd poke a hole in the chocolate covering the marshmallow, then I'd nibble away at the chocolate until the marshmallow sat naked on the graham cracker and I'd be able to pop the marshmallow into my mouth, whole, and chase it with the cracker. I'm always content when there are madeleines (really cookie-size cakes), Linzer cookies (spice cookies sandwiched with jam), rugelach (cream-cheese dough crescents rolled around jam, nuts, and currants), any kind of gingerbread or molasses cookie, and just about any kind of chocolate cookie in reach. And I'd never refuse a beautiful Parisian *macaron.* (Among my favorites are Pierre Herme's rose, raspberry, and litchi *macarons*, known as Ispahan.) But, pushed up against the cookie jar to name my desert-island fave, I'd reach for the chocolate-chippers and hope they'd be 3 inches in diameter, thin, crisp, well-browned, and overloaded with very dark chocolate.

From: Sara Dickerman
To: Dorie Greenspan and David Lebovitz
Subject: What Does the Cookie Jar of Tomorrow Hold?
Posted Friday, December 12, 2008, at 10:46 AM ET

Hi Dorie, hi David—

Yum! This discussion makes me realize what a huge role nostalgia plays in shaping our appetites. David, you've made me nostalgic for something I never actually tasted—those near-candy bar HeyDays. Isn't it upsetting when a childhood taste disappears from the markets? I was sad to see that a whole cookie line, Mother's, recently went under—their peanut butter Gauchos knocked the pants off Nutter Butters.

As Dorie points out, there's something "fun" about cookies. And nostalgia is a critical part of that fun—we allow ourselves to relate to cookies as if we were still children, including ritualistic ways of consuming these treats. Dorie, for example, mentioned she has a particular way of munching a Mallomar. Currently, I'm doing my best to pass my cookie ticks onto my 4-year-old son. I've taught him to disassemble Oreos (or, in our house, Newman O's) before eating them, to decapitate animal crackers, and to go at the *petit beurres* corners first. (OK—now there's a plain butter cookie I do like—give me a couple glasses of wine, and I will confess to delighting in crumbly sables as well.)

The actual baking process is an important aspect of cookie joy, too. It's rarely acknowledged that cookies take a while to prepare. (In general, individual treats like dropped or rolled cookies, cupcakes, and tartlets take longer to bake than cakes or pies.) Bar cookies are quicker, of course. And I'm always a fan of keeping frozen dough in the freezer, ready to slice and bake should the need for warm cookies strike with some urgency. But there's no reason baking should always be fast and easy. Indeed, there is much virtue in a certain kind of inconvenience. I love all

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the observation and anticipation that comes with baking: watching for the moment when the butter is creamed or the whites are whipped; tasting and analyzing the dough, and reanalyzing it again and again; the careful rotation of pans in the oven and waiting for that golden moment when you can finally pull them out of the heat.

On that note, Dorie, you are so right about underbaked cookies. There's something about a pallid cookie that just seems so wasteful—you can't stop thinking about how good it could have been with a few more minutes in the oven. Another key cookie sin, and a common one in this country full of chunky cookies, is untoasted nuts. There's nothing like the bitter bite of raw walnut skin to knock you out of your cookie reverie, while a golden-brown one adds divine toastiness.

But let's set aside these eternal baking issues. What's out there in groceries or bakeries or cookbooks that's exciting you today? Recently, my home cooking has taken on a more healthful bent, and I have been intrigued by cookie recipes that use whole grains and alternative sweeteners. Heidi Swanson has some especially neat ideas, though I still wonder if a healthy cookie is an untenable paradox. More specifically, I'm glad to find that some recipes are once again calling for instant espresso powder. I'd never use the stuff to make a cup of coffee, but I've found that it adds a bizarrely compelling coffee-salt tang to cookies. Dorie, you've written previously about how much salt we use in baked goods these days—a trend that's made sweets a whole lot more interesting, I think. On that note, I was just reading about saltine panna cotta at momofuku ssam bar, which got me thinking about how I might use crushed saltines in a cookie recipe, perhaps as a crumb crust or even as a sort of macaroon base. (I am totally American in my affection for tinkering.) What is it that sends you both scampering off to test a recipe? And what does the cookie jar of tomorrow hold? Certainly, there will always be room for chocolate chippers, but are there any overlooked cookie traditions due for a revival, any gizmo developments that could compete with the Silpat in cutting-edge cookie technology?

Yours,
Sara

From: David Lebovitz
To: Sara Dickerman and Dorie Greenspan
Subject: Mesquite Flour Is the Ingredient of the Future
Posted Friday, December 12, 2008, at 4:13 PM ET

Dear Sara and Dorie,

I feel like I'm becoming my parents whenever I say, "I remember when," but I can't help adopting the phrase since so many of the great, old-fashioned cookies seem to be disappearing. I remember when you could buy HeyDays at the supermarket! I remember Mother's white-frosted Circus Animal cookies! Thankfully, the trusty Girl Scouts still come 'round annually and remind us that some treats will always be in fashion. Although a couple of years ago in politically correct San Francisco, I saw the police rousting a gaggle of green-garbed girls from a shopping center. Their crime? Selling cookies without the necessary permits. I'm all for a crackdown on unlawful activity, but not having access to those chocolate-mint cookies is a crime in itself.

Sara, you hit the nail on the head with the idea that cookies need more care than other baked goods. Mixing and timing can be critical, and since someone (with more resolve than me!) might be eating only one cookie, it'd better be good. Keeping dough in the freezer is an excellent idea, and I usually have a few logs in there myself. In fact, over Thanksgiving weekend while everyone else was frantically cooking away, I calmly whipped a few bags of cookie dough out of the freezer—chocolate-coconut macaroons and chocolate chip cookies—and within 15 minutes, I was pulling freshly baked cookies out of the oven (and on my second glass of rosé). The only problem with being so well-prepared is that I had to guard the warm cookies with my life since no one wanted to wait until dessert to dive in.

Dorie and Sara, I do think underbaking can be advantageous, especially with treats like snickerdoodles or chocolate chip or oatmeal cookies, which should have a good chew. The hard truth is that you need to watch cookies like a hawk while they're baking. They can go from chewy, meltingly divine delights to sorry, crumbly discs in a matter of a minute.

I also beg to differ with the premise that a healthy cookie is "an untenable paradox." Who said that cookies are inherently unhealthy, anyway? I think folks should re-examine what "healthy" is. Is a low-fat cookie packed with sugar and hydrogenated fat better for you than a gingersnap made with butter and freshly ground spices? For that matter, I don't think a sweet treat made with real butter, eggs, and chocolate is all that bad for you. People should be selective about what they eat and go for quality over quantity, which is ultimately more satisfying.

I'm intrigued by any recipe that points out a new tip or technique. Alice Medrich wrote a wonderful book on cookies and brownies a few years back, which is sadly out of print, and each cookie I made from that book was the best of its species. (If I could only find my copy, I'd die a happy man.) Similarly with Dorie's recipes. I know everything that comes out of her kitchen is well-tested, and any cookie recipe that she publishes is a winner.

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As for the future, I think cookies are a bit resistant to trends. Sure, we've gone through biscotti and plate-sized cookies, and now French *macarons* have taken the world by storm, but they are still prepared in a classic, time-honored fashion, because it's hard to improve on the original. That said, Americans are willing to take twists and turns to reflect current trends. Dorie brilliantly added a flurry of *fleur de sel* to chocolate cookies, Heidi Swanson mixed mesquite flour with her chocolate chip cookies (which if you haven't tried, you must!), and I've been putting cocoa nibs in shortbreads, which give them the explosive taste of chocolate without adding sweetness.

Yours,
David

From: Dorie Greenspan
To: Sara Dickerman and David Lebovitz
Subject: This Conversation Is Making Me Hungry
Posted Friday, December 12, 2008, at 5:03 PM ET

Hi again, Sara and David,

On a sugar high from all our cookie talk, I went straight to the kitchen to bake—and to clear my head. Because cookies demand hawklike attention, as David said, and because, as Sara pointed out, every step in the cookie-making process is a pleasure, baking focuses me. There's something almost Zen-like in the repetition. Not that I understood the value of routine when I was fired from my first job after changing the restaurant's signature dessert … Actually, given what we've said about how Americans like to tinker with every recipe, maybe I wasn't done in by "creative insubordination"—that's what my boss called it—but rather by something nationalistic.

Speaking of things nationalistic, like David, I hope the Girl Scouts make their annual appearance. However, I'm not sure our neighborhood scout will be knocking on doors again. Last year, thinking the cookies had become too expensive, she sold them under duress and her opening line was, "You might not want to buy these." With this year's economy, who knows what she'll say.

But even if our supply of Thin Mints isn't guaranteed, the survival of some bedrock cookie customs, like disassembling Oreos and decapitating animal crackers, is assured. Sara, thank goodness you're teaching your son the proper way to eat cookies! Of course, I'm blithely assuming that Oreos and animal crackers have a future. But if the healthy cookie you both talked about becomes the norm, they, as well as my beloved Mallomars, could be (multigrain) toast, and that would be too sad. While I'm all for health, I'm not convinced we need a healthy cookie. I'm reminded of Julia Child, who ate all manner of things and counseled, "Everything in moderation." A cookie or three a day won't hurt if your diet is basically sound.

And I'm with you, David, on the need for cookies to be made with great ingredients. In fact, I think that's the future of the cookie. While the techno-chefs are deconstructing, gelifying, and atomizing desserts, I think we home bakers, and the people who buy cookies in supermarkets and bakeries, will be looking for a better cookie, one made with good butter, pure extracts and spices, organic milk and cream, premium-quality chocolate, and, if not whole grains, then organic flour. As you both mentioned, the ingredients might get more exotic—think flavored salts (David makes terrific seaweed-*fleur de sel* sables), savory herbs, and, yes, maybe even the saltines Sara talked about—but I'm not sure cookies are really going to change much. Sara, you asked if there might be a cutting-edge cookie technology, like Silpat, and I thought and thought, came up blank, and then decided it would be hard to bring cookies into the techno age—they're almost too basic.

And too basic is the way I hope they'll stay. Baking evangelist that I am, it's my dream that the cookie of the future will be homemade and that, even if it's baked in a space-age oven on silicone mats with the trendiest mix-in, it will be, like great cookies past and present, fun to eat, satisfying, and comforting.

Yours in chips, crunch, and crumbs,
Dorie

From: Sara Dickerman
To: Dorie Greenspan and David Lebovitz
Subject: Bubbie's *Mandelbrot* and Aunt Pearl's Bourbon Balls
Posted Friday, December 12, 2008, at 6:30 PM ET

It's hard to imagine a world without Thin Mints! Although everyone I know is cutting back in one way or another, I think this could still be a good year for cookies. Butter is dear this season, to be sure, but that makes the gift of something baked all the more considerate. And after all, homemade cookies are both more frugal and more fragrant than fine leather goods or cashmere mittens.

In terms of innovation, I think Dorie is right that even with tweaks like mesquite (!) flour, it's the basics that make a cookie great. Even working within Fran Gage's sweet quartet of basic baking ingredients (sugar, almonds, eggs, and butter), there are plenty of decisions we can make to improve the state of our cookies. I grew up in a household that allowed only Blue Bonnet

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margarine in the butter compartment of the fridge—at the time, it was considered a healthy choice—and I still marvel at the sea change that took place when I started cooking with butter. Talk about an innovation! Beyond that, over the past decade or so we've watched our chocolate get better, our access to organic eggs and higher-fat butter grow, and our sugar options diversify.

And on the subject of sugar and butter and health: Dorie and David, I agree that cookies can be part of a healthful diet, even as I stay wary of "healthy" cookies. For the most part, I've been doing my best to replace mediocre sweets with smaller bites of more intensely flavored goodies. One delicious square of brownie is better—and, I wager, better for you—than omega-3 fortified biscuits by the handful. The more one can consciously appreciate the workmanship in a cookie— the shattering brown-sugar crisp of a lace cookie, the candied nougat chew of the inside of a meringue, or the anise fragrance of a *biscochito*—the easier it is to be satisfied with just three or four bites of goodness.

That reminds me: Much has been made of artisanal foods over the past decades. We shouldn't forget (and I'm sure neither of you do) that as home bakers, we are all artisans. That's true whether one is passing on long-standing traditions like Bubbie's *mandelbrot* or Aunt Pearl's bourbon balls or seeing whether oatmeal cookies could be even better with candied ginger and goji berries. Thanks so much for your wit and your passion, Dorie and David—I can't wait to see what you each bake next.

Yours,
Sara

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food

Well Done, Rare, or Cryovacked

The story of the cow from four-legged co-worker to shrink-wrapped cutlet.

By Sara Dickerman

Friday, January 2, 2009, at 7:10 AM ET

In *War and Peace*, Tolstoy's Prince Andrei describes a woman who swoons at the sight of a calf being slaughtered: "She's so kind, she can't bear the sight of blood, but she eats the same calf in sauce with great appetite." This anecdote is really a metaphor for war, but it works just as neatly for, well, meat. Most of us carnivores are that lady, keeping the steer in the pasture mentally separated from the beef on our forks without too much consideration for how one becomes the other. In the past, this mental distance between the dinner table and the farm yard wasn't so easy to maintain; 19th-century Manhattanites, for example, might well have been confronted with the noises, smells, and sights of the unlicensed butcher in the tenement next to theirs slaughtering cows in his cellar. Over time, however, we've grown more and more alienated from how our meat gets to the table. In the grocery store, we choose from vast swaths of shrink-wrapped cutlets that seem to come from nowhere. How did this happen? Three recent beef-centric books help piece the story together.

Betty Fussell's *American Steak* takes a picaresque approach to the American beef industry, examining through character sketches the story of American beef both light (how to cook *carne asada*) and dark (what happens inside a beef processing facility). In *Beef: The Untold Story of How Milk, Meat, and Muscle Shaped the World*, Andrew Rimas and Evan DJ Fraser take a longer-term look at bovines—examining the history of cattle, their co-evolution with humans, and their deep significance in mythology and culture. And in the academic collection *Meat, Modernity, and the Rise of the Slaughterhouse*, edited by historian Paula Young Lee, several scholars examine the modern invention of the slaughterhouse as a dark countermelody to the history of urbanism.

As Rimas and Fraser point out, before the modern era, bovines were symbols of power, wealth, and fertility, and occasionally, as in Zeus' come-on to Europa, the embodiment of deities themselves. Cattle were valued for their farm labor, milk, and fertile dung perhaps more than as a source of meat. Ordinary farming families would probably kill a cow for food only once the animal was too old for labor.

The industrial and agricultural revolutions changed the cow's existence from four-legged co-worker to so much beef "on the hoof." Innovations like improved plows and, eventually, tractors made animal muscle less necessary for farm work. Meanwhile, the growth of huge cities vastly increased the demand for meat. With this appetite in mind, pioneering British agriculturalist Robert Bakewell developed new feeding and breeding methods at the end of the 18th century to raise tanklike "Dishley longhorns." These bovine behemoths, Rimas and Fraser explain, were not really suitable for milk production or field labor but amazing for sheer beef poundage. While Bakewell's ideas did not take hold immediately, his writings were highly influential for 19th-century British beef farmers as they ramped up production to feed a hungry empire (whose very symbol was the beef roast).

As our beef cattle grew bulkier, our approach to slaughtering these cattle became less intimate. Before the modern era, cattle were generally killed by the very butcher who would sell you your meat. Centralized slaughterhouses emerged first in post-revolutionary France. In 1807, Napoleon himself ordered four central slaughterhouses built to get the messy business out of Paris' streets. Not only was the act of slaughter consolidated in (or at the outskirts of) large cities, but it was also concealed in plain sight, with purposely forgettable architecture. It became easier and easier to avoid reflecting on how many animals need to be killed in order to feed a metropolis.

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Nowhere did the bovine business become more efficient than here in the United States. Thanks to the development of refrigerated railway cars at the turn of the 20th century, Chicago meat kings like Philip Armour and Gustavus Swift could process vast quantities of cattle in a single location and then ship processed meat, rather than live cows, across the country. To keep up with the volume of meat being butchered, they converted the packing house into a sort of factory disassembly line—a system still basically in effect today. (Though these days such factories are even more remote from major cities, in places like Amarillo, Texas, and Greeley, Colo.) The line was mechanized where possible, but since cows' bodies are stubbornly variable, Fussell writes, echoing historian Roger Horowitz, "workers themselves had to become machines"—each one performing a single or limited series of repetitive tasks to carcass after carcass.

We've also lost touch with our livestock at a retail level. As any viewer of the Brady Bunch surely remembers, the butcher used to be a stock character in American culture—kind of sweet and burly, and maybe not so bright, but his trade has been in serious decline since the 1960s. The butcher provided service as well as meat: selecting animal carcasses or at least big quadrants, then dry-aging, cutting, and trussing these and, most importantly, schmoozing with customers. As Rimas and Fraser put it, "they were a human link between people and the animals they ate, a shortening loop in a chain that's grown longer as we've distanced ourselves from our food." Now real butcher shops are a luxury—they've been replaced by grocery stores with grab-and-go meat. Beef is broken down into parts at the packing house and Cryovacked in plastic, which despite the euphemistic name "wet aging" doesn't help meat develop flavor.

As Fussell points out in one of her liveliest chapters, the butcher's craft has been reincarnated as meat science. She profiles Bucky Gwartney, a meat researcher whose job it is to mine the lesser-loved parts of the cow carcass for new, potentially marketable cuts of meat and thus increase the value of each animal. Through advanced computer modeling, Gwartney's Web site makes the beef corpse look like a systemic AutoCAD plan of a building. Not only have centralized slaughterhouses allowed us to be ignorant of how animals are killed for our food, but increasingly, retail packaging makes it possible to avoid touching uncooked meat. Companies like Hormel offer "refrigerated entrees"—bags of precooked meat that can be jazzed up by the weeknight cook with a dash of soy sauce or a dollop of tomato sauce. Cutting boards are not necessary.

The forces of culture, commerce, and, yes, consumer squeamishness have done much to make us forget that the little brown patty we eat at cookouts and fast-food restaurants was once a cow, who was probably not treated with a great deal of dignity. Recently of course, there are signs that these connections are being made. Best-selling writers like Eric Schlosser and Michael Pollan have managed to get us to ponder the fate of feedlot-bound animals. Last year, a Humane Society video of feedlot workers dragging sick cows to slaughter forced the largest beef recall ever. And, most incredibly, Californians passed a proposition in November that will regulate how farmers raise their chickens and pigs and veal calves. If we want our meat supply to become safer and our relationship with animals to become less heartless, we need to keep examining—like Fussell, Rimas, Fraser, and Young—the long, strange path between lowing cattle and low, low prices on ground chuck.

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foreigners

Can Israel Win the Gaza War?

It depends how you define success.

By Shmuel Rosner

Tuesday, December 30, 2008, at 4:02 PM ET

In a 2006 article about Israel and the doctrine of proportionality, Lionel Beehner of the Council on Foreign Relations explained that applying the test of "proportionality" to Israel's military operations can be a tricky exercise. According to the doctrine—originated in the 1907 Hague Conventions—"a state is legally allowed to unilaterally defend itself and right a wrong provided the response is proportional to the injury suffered. The response must also be immediate and necessary, refrain from targeting civilians, and require only enough force to reinstate the status quo ante."

When Beehner wrote this backgrounder, Israeli forces were bombarding Lebanon in retaliation for the kidnapping of two soldiers and the consequent shelling of Israeli towns with rockets. Now, three years later, the question of proportionality is once again being discussed, especially by those who oppose Israel's actions against the Hamas government in Gaza. "In its efforts to stop amateur rockets from nagging the residents of some of its southern cities," writes Palestinian professor Daoud Kuttab in the *Washington Post*, Israel reacted with "disproportionate and heavy-handed attacks." In other words, "nagging" isn't enough to justify airstrikes.

But for Israel, the daily shelling of civilians with rockets—homemade or not, events of recent days have proved that they are capable of killing—was much more than nagging. And Israeli leaders will claim that the response is far from disproportionate. "Our goal is not to reoccupy the Gaza Strip," said Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni. Asked if Israel was out to topple Gaza's Hamas rulers, she said, "Not now." If reinstating the status quo ante is the test of proportionality, then Israel passes with flying colors. All it wants to do—as Prime Minister Ehud Olmert explained—is "to improve the security reality of southern residents in a thorough manner." A modest goal for a

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prime minister who promised two years ago, during the war in Lebanon, to "operate in full force until we … take control and terminate … radical, terrorist, and violent elements."

Today, Olmert's Lebanon war is not seen as a great success. The more ambitious the leader, the greater the chance for failure. Olmert was far too ambitious in 2006, but he is rather sober today. So when Jackson Diehl of the *Washington Post* wrote that "Olmert badly miscalculated in launching the 2006 offensive against Hezbollah—and he's probably making the same mistake in Gaza," Diehl was the one making a questionable assumption. He assumed that Olmert's success will be measured by the ability of Hamas to retain its power: "Hamas … almost certainly will still control Gaza, and retain the capacity to strike Israel, when Olmert leaves office in a few months." But Olmert never promised Israelis that he would dismantle Hamas' rule in Gaza.

Of course, Olmert might be bluffing. Maybe his real goal is to uproot Hamas, a policy that some of his Cabinet members support. Even then, he would still be able to claim that a return to the status quo ante was all that Israel was trying to achieve. That is because *ante* also needs a clearer definition: Is it the ante just before the Lebanon war or the days before Hamas took over the Gaza strip (an action that was described as a "coup" not by Israel but by Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas)?

But there is no reason to think that Olmert isn't telling the truth. The fact that Hamas is likely to "still control Gaza" after the operation ends is irrelevant to its goals. If Olmert wants to leave office in March with some measure of success, he has to make sure Israelis—and the rest of the world—understand that. The problem is that clarifying the goals might undermine the chances for success: One of Israel's tools against Hamas is the subtle threat that it will topple the Hamas government if it does not acquiesce to some sort of settlement. Going into battle while promising the leaders of the other side that their position is safe might not be advisable.

Israel's failure in Lebanon was maddeningly visible, but the failure of the international community to provide better solutions is no less problematic. Security Council resolutions were implemented poorly, and the international forces sent to execute them have failed to achieve their goals. ("[T]here will be no weapons without the consent of the government of Lebanon and no authority other than that of the government of Lebanon.") Similar international community failures led to Israel's decision to go to war against Hamas in Gaza. The Egyptians and other mediators have failed to persuade Hamas to end the shelling of Israel. Those assisting the Palestinian Authority failed to prevent Hamas from taking over Gaza; they also failed to provide a strategy to tame Hamas after the group took control and to help the authority resume power in the territory. Complaining about Israel's failures is easy; providing alternatives is more difficult (except for those who think that Israel should just get used to living under rocket fire).

No reasonable, moderately compassionate human being can ignore the suffering of Gazans under Israeli attacks. But such is the tricky nature of modern warfare: How do we measure proportionality without reducing the concept to an impossibly pedantic tit-for-tat? (How would it work? For every rocket launched into an Israeli town, Israel would retaliate by launching a similar rocket? And even then, how could we achieve proportionality without making sure that Palestinians in Gaza have the same alarm systems and comparably effective shelters?) How do we measure "success" in a situation where no side is likely to bring real closure to a volatile situation?

The outcome of the military campaign, which is still in its early stages, will help observers decide whether the operation was a wise move on Israel's part. The outcome of negotiations leading to the conclusion of the campaign—the terms under which a renewed cease-fire will be achieved—will also determine whether the Gaza war was successful. But most of all, it is the expectations of all parties involved that will dictate how this round of violence will be perceived by Israelis, Palestinians, and the rest of the world. Anyone who expects this to be the last round is delusional. Anyone who hopes that the days of Hamas rule in Gaza are numbered is unrealistic. Only those who think Hamas will learn a lesson that might make it less likely to permit the shelling of Israeli citizens—while maintaining its power and its ability to cause trouble whenever it chooses—might be right. Time will tell.

This is the outcome Israel will call "victory." But so will the other side.

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foreigners

Speech and Debate

The magnificent rhetorical legacy of the Founding Fathers.

By Anne Applebaum

Monday, December 29, 2008, at 7:54 PM ET

On Christmas morning, my husband found a CD of *The Greatest Speeches of All Time* in his stocking. It was, if I may say so, an inspired gift. The title did prove somewhat misleading: Richard Nixon's "I am not a crook" speech really didn't belong, and I might not have chosen Winston Churchill's 1940 radio address as the sole example of his wartime rhetoric ("I have invincible confidence in the French army and its leaders"). There is also a fundamental problem with any such audio collection, which is by definition limited to the 20th century and can't include Lincoln, let alone Cicero. Anything called "the greatest speeches of all time," thus, has to be taken with a grain of salt.

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Still, in the wake of a presidential campaign marked by an unusually high standard of political rhetoric, it was weirdly revealing to listen to Martin Luther King Jr., Ronald Reagan, JFK and RFK, Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, and even Nixon, one after the other, out of chronological order. For one thing, their themes were surprisingly consistent over the years, across parties, at different events and occasions. To some degree, this is to be expected: It's clear, when you listen to them together, that the authors of Ronald Reagan's 1987 Berlin Wall speech ("We come to Berlin, we American presidents, because it's our duty to speak, in this place, of freedom") had carefully re-read JFK's 1963 "*Ich bin ein Berliner*" speech ("lift your eyes beyond the dangers of today, to the hopes of tomorrow, beyond the freedom merely of this city of Berlin … to the advance of freedom everywhere").

But some of the other cross-echoes were less obvious. Who remembers now that Ronald Reagan's 1983 speech, forever famous because he used it to call the Soviet Union "an evil empire," also contained the following statement:

> Our nation, too, has a legacy of evil with which it must deal. The glory of this land has been its capacity for transcending the moral evils of our past. For example, the long struggle of minority citizens for equal rights, once a source of disunity and civil war, is now a point of pride for all Americans. We must never go back.

In that one paragraph, there are echoes of JFK ("freedom has many difficulties and democracy is not perfect"), as well as, of course, of King, who so brilliantly appropriated the language of the American founding documents and made them into an irrefutable argument for civil rights:

> I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal."

Once he'd said that, there was indeed no going back. From then on, American democracy was established as an evolving phenomenon, not a set of ideas frozen in stone. The notion of an America "with a capacity for transcending … moral evils," an America that can and will evolve, became a rhetorical staple, appearing in many subsequent "greatest speeches of all time," including those of our president-elect.

These are not remotely original thoughts, I realize. But they strike me as worth repeating this week, and not only because of next month's inaugural. On Sunday, a Russian TV station announced the results of an opinion poll conducted to determine the "greatest Russian of all time." First place went to Alexander Nevsky, a medieval prince who defeated German and Swedish invaders and thus symbolizes Russian defiance of the West. Second place went to Piotr Stolypin, a czarist minister and economic reformer-with-an-iron-fist, famous not only for agricultural reform but also for repressing peasant rebellions. Third place, I'm afraid, went to Josef Stalin.

There are other political traditions in Russia, the country whose dissidents almost single-handedly invented the modern human rights movement in the 1960s and '70s. But in this particular popularity contest, Russia's repressive, anti-Western, dictatorial traditions prevailed, though perhaps not by accident. The TV station that conducted the poll is Kremlin-owned, after all, and there have been complaints about manipulation.

Still, it made me think: Aren't we lucky that our Founding Fathers were so eloquent, so quotable, that their language belonged to the 18th-century Enlightenment tradition, which valued clarity, and not the 19th-century Hegelian tradition, which did not. More to the point, aren't we lucky that the political rhetoric of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, as modified by Lincoln and King, has persisted into the present; that the language of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution—and not, say, the language of Jefferson Davis or the Ku Klux Klan—has remained mainstream; that it still sets the standard by which modern political speeches are judged.

Aren't we lucky. Happy 2009.

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gabfest

The Blagojevich Blowout Gabfest

Listen to ***Slate***'s review of the week in politics.

By Emily Bazelon, John Dickerson, and David Plotz,
Wednesday, December 31, 2008, at 12:13 PM ET

Listen to the Gabfest for Dec. 31 by clicking the arrow on the audio player below:

You can also download the program here, or you can subscribe to the weekly Gabfest podcast feed in iTunes by clicking here.

David Plotz, Terence Samuel, and Bill Smee talk politics. This week, Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich appoints a senator to replace Barack Obama, war rages in Gaza, and it's NFL playoff time.

Here are links to some of the articles and other items mentioned in the show:

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On Tuesday, embattled Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich appointed Roland Burris to fill the remaining Senate term of President-elect Barack Obama. A quick reaction came from the U.S. Senate, where some members are vowing not to let Burris take office. David points to a ***Slate*** piece that advocated a speedy appointment.

Terence points out that with Obama leaving the Senate, there are now no blacks serving in that body.

Bill says the ongoing attacks by Israel in Gaza might lead to an outpouring of sympathy for Hamas leaders, at least in some quarters. David says the attacks will force Obama to take a stronger stand on the Mideast conflict.

It's playoff time in pro football, but one team set a historic regular-season low, prompting the group to ask, "The car companies may be in financial trouble, but who will bail out the Detroit Lions?"

Terence chatters about the inauguration. He says this weekend everyone in Washington will be talking about who is invited to which inaugural balls and who is leaving town because of the expected crowds. He predicts the hot ticket will be the Illinois inaugural ball.

Bill recommends two newspaper stories on the nation's financial mess: The *New York Times*' profile of the rise and fall of Washington Mutual and a three-part series in the *Washington Post* outlining how Wall Street stayed ahead of Washington regulators.

David hates *Milk*.

The e-mail address for the Political Gabfest is gabfest@slate.com. (E-mail may be quoted by name unless the writer stipulates otherwise.)

Posted on Dec. 31 by Dale Willman at 11:15 a.m.

Dec. 26, 2008

Listen to the Gabfest for Dec. 26 by clicking the arrow on the audio player below:

You can also download the program here, or you can subscribe to the weekly Gabfest podcast feed in iTunes by clicking here.

Emily Bazelon, John Dickerson, and David Plotz talk politics. This week, a free-flowing wrap-up of some of the year's most memorable stories.

Here are links to some of the articles and other items mentioned in the show:

Emily talks about the heightened role of women on the national political stage this year, especially Sen. Hillary Clinton, D-N.Y., and Gov. Sarah Palin, R-Alaska. There was a knock-on effect for comedian Tina Fey, who grabbed attention with her portrayal of Palin during several *Saturday Night Live* sketches.

The group recalls the doubts many had that Barack Obama could win the general election in November.

They also ponder the political demise of former Sen. John Edwards, who began the political season as a strong contender for the Democratic nomination but flamed out amid revelations of an extramarital affair after his withdrawal from the race.

Which scandal was worse: that of John Edwards and his affair or the charges of corruption filed against Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich?

Emily says it will be interesting to see how former President Bill Clinton behaves if Hillary Clinton gets confirmed as Obama's secretary of state.

Emily honors Harriet McBryde Johnson, who died on June 5, 2008. Johnson's response to the Terry Schiavo controversy was among the first things Emily edited when she began working at ***Slate***.

David says his guilty pleasure of the year was listening to the musical group Vampire Weekend.

John chatters about the Canadian show *Slings and Arrows*, which he discovered this year.

The e-mail address for the Political Gabfest is gabfest@slate.com. (E-mail may be quoted by name unless the writer stipulates otherwise.)

Posted on Dec. 26 by Dale Willman at 10:47 a.m.

Dec. 19, 2008

Listen to the Gabfest for Dec. 19 by clicking the arrow on the audio player below:

You can also download the program here, or you can subscribe to the weekly Gabfest podcast feed in iTunes by clicking here.

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Emily Bazelon, John Dickerson, and David Plotz talk politics. This week: an inauguration controversy, a Kennedy mystery, and a torture debate.

Here are links to some of the articles and other items mentioned in the show:

Details of the live Gabfest in Washington, D.C., have been announced. The event will be held at 5 p.m. on Monday, Jan. 19, at the Sixth & I Synagogue. Those who have submitted ticket requests will soon be notified if they have won seats.

President-elect Obama has announced that the Rev. Rick Warren will present the invocation at his inauguration. Warren is the pastor of Saddleback Church, an evangelical megachurch in California. The announcement has drawn criticism from some gay rights leaders, as well as liberal organizations, because of Warren's positions on abortion rights, same-sex marriage, and stem-cell research.

The group discussed the latest news on the Obama Cabinet. John says he's pleased with the nomination of a Nobel physics laureate to the position of secretary of energy. Steven Chu is a strong proponent of combating climate change.

Tom Vilsack, former governor of Iowa, was nominated to head the Department of Agriculture. Vilsack is considered a friend of the biofuels industry.

Caroline Kennedy, the daughter of former President John F. Kennedy, announced this week that she wants to be considered as a possible replacement to fill New York Sen. Hillary Clinton's seat if Clinton is confirmed as the next secretary of state. Emily says she is apoplectic about the prospect. While Kennedy has raised money for New York City schools and has done other charitable work, she is not qualified to be a senator. Emily says appointing someone to such a powerful position on the basis of her last name does not serve feminism. Kennedy, meanwhile, is mirroring a tour of upstate New York that Clinton took when she decided to run for the Senate.

An investigation by the Senate armed services committee has found that top Pentagon officials were more involved in the development of torture techniques than had previously been thought. The group says this presents an interesting dilemma for Eric Holder, Obama's nominee for attorney general. It would be up to Holder to decide whether to investigate possible criminal misconduct in the use of torture.

Wall Street legend Bernard Madoff was arrested this week and accused of running a multibillion-dollar fraud scheme.

Emily chatters about Paul Tough's book *Whatever It Takes*.

David talks about an article in this month's *Outside* magazine about a discovery by MIT researcher Daniel Nocera and others. Nocera and his team have found a way to use solar power to derive hydrogen and oxygen from water.

John points out the good stuff at USA.Gov.

The e-mail address for the Political Gabfest is gabfest@slate.com . (E-mail may be quoted by name unless the writer stipulates otherwise.)

Posted on Dec. 19 by Dale Willman at 11:00 a.m.

Dec. 12, 2008

Listen to the Gabfest for Dec. 12 by clicking the arrow on the audio player below:

You can also download the program here, or you can subscribe to the weekly Gabfest podcast feed in iTunes by clicking here.

Emily Bazelon, John Dickerson, and David Plotz talk politics. This week, the Illinois governor faces charges, the incoming Obama administration names more Cabinet members, and journalism is in trouble.

Here are links to some of the articles and other items mentioned in the show:

A criminal complaint has been filed against Illinois Gov. Rod R. Blagojevich and his chief of staff, John Harris, alleging the two men conspired to use their positions for personal and professional gain.

Emily talks about Patti Blagojevich, the governor's wife, and her involvement in the complaint against her husband. Emily points out that, according to the complaint, Blagojevich told her husband to hold up that "Cubs shit," a reference to issues with the Chicago Cubs baseball team and its owner, Sam Zell. Zell also owns the *Chicago Tribune*, which had been critical of the governor in its editorial pages.

David is less troubled about Blagojevich and his behavior. He compares selling the right to be named Illinois senator to President Bill Clinton allowing major contributors to spend the night in the Lincoln Bedroom.

John talks about how Obama looked when the Blagojevich complaint became public. According to the complaint, Blagojevich was angry that Obama would not play along with his effort to benefit by appointing the next senator. But John

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says Obama's first public statements concerning Blagojevich left a good deal to be desired.

John also discusses recent public-opinion polls that indicate Americans have high hopes for the Obama administration. In one poll, 52 percent of respondents said they feel there will be great unity and compromise during the Obama presidency. David says that's wishful thinking.

The group talked about the apparent demise of journalism. As many as 30,000 jobs have been lost in the newspaper industry in 2008 as publishers struggle with reduced revenues. This week, National Public Radio (a ***Slate*** partner) announced 64 layoffs.

David chatters about Shin Dong-hyuk, a North Korean born in a political prison. A portion of one finger was cut off as punishment for dropping a sewing machine on the floor, and he was tortured with fire when he was 14 because he could not explain why his mother had tried to escape. Shin is the author of *Escape to the Outside World*.

Emily discusses a Supreme Court case argued this week that will decide whether Javaid Iqbal, a Pakistani citizen, can sue FBI Director Robert Mueller and former Attorney General John Ashcroft. Iqbal alleges that Muslim men arrested in New York City following the Sept. attacks were abused, and he wants to hold government officials responsible.

John talks about the video, "Dear Mr. Obama," a hit in conservative circles during the presidential campaign.

The e-mail address for the Political Gabfest is gabfest@slate.com. (E-mail may be quoted by name unless the writer stipulates otherwise.)

Posted on Dec. 12 by Dale Willman at 5 p.m.

Dec. 5, 2008

Listen to the Gabfest for Dec. 5 by clicking the arrow on the audio player below:

You can also download the program here, or you can subscribe to the weekly Gabfest podcast feed in iTunes by clicking here.

Emily Bazelon, David Plotz, and Hanna Rosin, sitting in for John Dickerson, talk politics. This week, Team Obama strengthens its identity, terrorism strikes India, and the Big Three automakers return to Capitol Hill.

Here are links to some of the articles and other items mentioned in the show:

President-elect Barack Obama officially announced his foreign-policy team, including Sen. Hillary Clinton as his nominee for secretary of state.

Arizona Gov. Janet Napolitano, Obama's pick to lead the Department of Homeland Security, was the subject of an offhand comment by Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell. He said Napolitano was perfect for the job because she had "no life." Napolitano is not married and does not have children.

Hanna also discussed the announcement of Obama's economic team. Several are noted for having strong personalities. Many are also considered Washington insiders, so Emily wondered just how different the Obama administration's policies would be.

The trio discussed the terrorist attacks in India. David said the response to the attacks by citizens in India was twofold: First, outrage at the government response, and second, anger at the involvement of Pakistanis.

Automakers returned to Capitol Hill this week in hopes of receiving as much as $38 billion in government loans. So far, their efforts have not been successful. However, union officials say they will consider making concessions.

Emily encourages everyone to see the movie *Slumdog Millionaire*.

Hanna predicts that people will be talking about the vote by conservative Episcopalians to create a new branch of the church.

David chatters about the controversy surrounding an article in *Women's Wear Daily* that discussed what Michelle Obama should wear when she moves into the White House. It was illustrated with a number of fashion designers' sketches showing very light-skinned women. The team wonders why it is so difficult for designers to draw a black woman in designer clothes.

The e-mail address for the Political Gabfest is gabfest@slate.com. (E-mail may be quoted by name unless the writer stipulates otherwise.)

Posted on Dec. 5 by Dale Willman at 11:30 a.m.

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gaming

The Gaming Club

And the Nintendo Wii shall lead them.

By N'Gai Croal , Seth Schiesel, Chris Suellentrop, and Stephen Totilo

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Friday, December 12, 2008, at 1:10 PM ET

From: Chris Suellentrop
To: N'Gai Croal, Seth Schiesel, and Stephen Totilo
Subject: Is 2008 Really the Best Year Ever for Video Games?
Posted Tuesday, December 9, 2008, at 7:22 AM ET

Dear N'Gai, Seth, and Stephen,

I'm honored to welcome you—three of the smartest video game writers in the country and in Blogistan—back for ***Slate***'s second Gaming Club, the magazine's now-annual look at the year in games. As someone who spent 2008 on hiatus from formal game criticism, I'm especially grateful to be invited back inside the sacristy. I hope to act as an engaged moderator of this year's discussion, but I'm probably too much of a blowhard to pull that off and will instead end up posing as the Anton Ego of the Xbox.

Let me start off by picking a fight. Over at MTV's Multiplayer, Stephen has already asserted that 2008 is the best year in gaming history, even better than 2007 (my pick for Best Year Evuh!!!) and 2001 (his other contender).

Really? I guess by the standard you establish—"a 12 month period that was more well-balanced with good games than any January to December stretch that had come before"—you might be right, but I think that's the wrong standard. Were there any games this year that rank with Bioshock and Portal, my two favorite games from 2007? Both of those instantly ascended to the canon, the list of games that all gamers must at least be familiar with, even if they haven't played them all—like Space Invaders and Zork and Super Mario Bros. and SimCity and Myst and Doom and Deus Ex and Halo and whatever else. Everyone knew this in December. There are no games like that this year. Something like Grand Theft Auto IV is an astonishing accomplishment, but I think it's in a lower, if still very esteemed, tier. (Though I'm ready to be persuaded otherwise. And I'm not saying, yet, that GTA IV was the best game of 2008. I still haven't rendered that judgment.) The greatest year in gaming history should have one or two revelatory titles, not an abundance (a welcome abundance, mind you) of Assassin's Creeds—games that are very good but also flawed and unlikely to be added to the medium's canon.

Put me down instead, then, with Sean Sands of Gamers With Jobs, who summed up the year a couple weeks ago as a disappointment: "I appreciate a fun game as much as the next guy, and this year has been positively choked with safe bets and easy playtime. I walk away from 2008 with some nice memories of time spent happily indulging my pastime, but few moments of gaming that challenged me on anything but a functional and mechanical level."

While I agree wholeheartedly with that, I should add the caveat that I'm rendering an incomplete judgment. I've only nibbled Fallout 3 ("Mad Max: Beyond Oblivion"). I'm still playing Fable 2. I probably gave up on No More Heroes too quickly. I pretty much sampled Spore. I've only played the demos of Mirror's Edge and Left 4 Dead. (Oh Valve, I promise to make that pilgrimage soon.) I haven't touched LittleBigPlanet or World of Goo. (I'll get there, I'll get there.) Et cetera.

But I think I've tasted enough of these and other games to feel comfortable in my verdict. There were four games this year that grabbed me by the thumbs and never let go: Grand Theft Auto IV, Gears of War 2, Star Wars: The Force Unleashed, and Far Cry 2 (still grabbing me, at least). One of them is a failed masterpiece. One is exactly what it aims to be. One would merely be a pretty good PlayStation 2 game, but it's also the fourth-best (maybe better!) *Star Wars* movie ever made. And one—and this is admittedly a midgame judgment—is an "open-world shooter" set in postcolonial Africa that has me crossing my fingers that it's as good as it seems to be so far.

This is not necessarily my list of the year's four best games, though it might be by the time this week is over. But all four of them created places that I enjoyed living in for long periods of time. As a gamer, I can take months to plow through a title that I would have completed in a week if I were reviewing it for publication. I need games that are more than a nice spot to spend a long weekend. I want to be able to move there.

Now, go ahead, berate me for liking The Force Unleashed. I can take it.

One thing I've been wondering: Is it a good sign or a bad sign for the medium that this year's crop of games has produced such a wide divergence of opinion? Michael "the Brainy Gamer" Abbott thinks Fable 2 is perhaps "the most seductive game world ever created." Chris Dahlen thinks Fallout 3 "balances—and sometimes betters—the approaches of other videogame masterpieces: the retro immersion of 'BioShock,' the paranoia of 'Portal,' the exploration of 'Oblivion' and the seamless storytelling of 'Half-Life 2.' " The pseudonymous "Iroquois Pliskin" says GTA IV is "a classic, and stands head and shoulders above its previous iterations and nearly every other game released this year."

Those are three more of the smartest people writing about games. They each think their Game of the Year is a new addition to the canon. Maybe they're right. Or, more likely, this was a year of just-misses, which is why there's an absence of consensus.

Some more questions:

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Is the PlayStation 3 now a system that a serious gamer really should own? Put economic considerations aside, as I mean this not as a financial question but as a gaming one. With Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots and LittleBigPlanet being released this year, am I missing crucial developments for the gaming connoisseur by abstaining from buying a third console?

Is the Wii a commercial success but a critical flop?

Should I have played Randy Balma: Municipal Abortionist?

And what did we think of Braid?

Chris

Click here to read the next entry.

From: Stephen Totilo
To: N'Gai Croal, Seth Schiesel, and Chris Suellentrop
Subject: My Gaming Year Peaked on Nov. 4, 2008
Posted Tuesday, December 9, 2008, at 10:52 AM ET

Dear N'Gai, Seth, and Chris,

Let's start with a correction.

I did not write that 2008 was the best year in gaming history. I wrote that it was the most well-balanced year in games.

You've got a fine balance when you get:

- A year that starts with the racing game Burnout Paradise—the video game that borrows from Facebook by making you aware of every little thing your fellow Paradise owners have achieved: who's now driven faster than you on any given road in the game's vast city since you last logged in, who has just launched the most jumps off a nearby ramp. Burnout links you to a network of other gamers more efficiently than any console game made before it, erasing classic gaming distinctions between single-player and multi-player experiences.
- A year that reaches the halfway mark with the release of Wii Fit and Metal Gear Solid 4, the former a triumph of design, marketing, and the philosophy that games can be good for you; the latter the story of an old soldier in a too-long war that unfolds with the constant, colorful surprise of a Haruki Murakami novel and serves as the best example yet that most game-makers take more creative risks with their sequels than filmmakers do.
- A year that ends with Prince of Persia—Ubisoft's adventure of a tower-climbing, cliff-jumping prince and his princess companion that posits that, yes, you actually can craft a romance in a game. The slowly developing flirtation of male and female lead don't get in the way of all the less-sentimental climbing and monster-killing the developers needed to put in the game to keep the player's thumbs and lizard-brain engaged.

I didn't hear much grumbling from gamers of any kind in 2008, except for hardcore Nintendo fans, who felt abandoned for about the past three months. (Yes, gamers are the kind of people who want satisfaction now!)

This was the year that Sony released interactive art for the PlayStation 3. Microsoft promoted a season of new small downloadable Xbox 360 games that were some of the best games of the year. And Nintendo put out a fantastic Scuba-diving simulator that let me virtually swim with sea turtles and whales.

So I cannot complain about gaming in 2008.

Chris, the four games you cited were all quite good. Star Wars: The Force Unleashed is a little bit of the weak link there, but it's quite a good-looking weak link. And don't feel bad about liking it. *Time*'s Lev Grossman thought it was better than Metal Gear Solid 4, Fable II, and Fallout 3, those three games you say other people have cited as their Game of the Year.

Grand Theft Auto IV as Game of the Year? Maybe. If you don't mind that Rockstar made my home state of New Jersey the setting for the game's bland final third. I thought the game lost its zip after its first 20 hours. It stopped developing the morally compromised immigrant protagonist Niko Bellic, turning him into just another avatar for virtual homicide and costing the game its potential as a "classic."

Fallout 3 as Game of the Year? Possibly. I've still played only four hours of this game, which puts me about 46 hours behind my MTV colleague Patrick Klepek, who likes it quite a lot.

Fable II as Game of the Year? Getting warmer. In the reverse order of what happens in GTA IV, this game begins with a poorly defined character in an uninteresting medieval European fantasy world but winds up with you controlling a man or woman who is literally the shape of the choices you've made in the game. All that celery he ate made my guy skinny; his ample scars came because he was a clumsy swordsman; his youthful visage remained, because I chose not to sacrifice his looks when given the alternate option to sacrifice a maiden to the gods

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instead. Ten years from now, the world will remember Nov. 4, 2008, as the day America elected its first black president. I'll also remember that day, I'm sure, as the day when I was first emotionally affected by a video game. Pausing my DVR just after California was called for Obama, I had to go back to Fable II to make the game's final moral decision, a triple-optioned Sophie's choice involving money, loved ones, and community that would affect characters I'd interacted with for weeks. I'm still haunted by the pick I made. Obama's victory speech later that night distracted me from the unease that my final actions had put in my heart, but as I went to bed, with cheers still echoing down the Brooklyn streets near my apartment, I was haunted by the wonderful emotional pain I finally felt from a video game.

Yeah, that's my frontrunner for Game of the Year.

Chris, to answer your questions:

1) A serious gamer should own every console. Costs notwithstanding, to miss the PS3 is to miss not just LittleBigPlanet and Metal Gear Solid 4 but the burst of creativity that's on the PlayStation Network, small- and medium-sized games that are more unusual than most of what you can buy at the average game shop.

2) The Wii is a critical flop only to the critics who don't like having fun with a group of people gathered around their TV. What's more fun at parties than the Wii or arguing whether the auto companies should be bailed out? Rock Band and Guitar Hero? But they're on Wii, too.

3) I haven't played Randy Balma: Municipal Abortionist, but I did play Braid. How can you not love a game that has a level in which time moves forward when you walk to the right, time moves backward when you walk to the left, and time stands still when you idle?

Hey, can we all agree about one thing that was a bit of a downer this year—what happened to handheld gaming? The burst of iPhone games notwithstanding, the creative excitement around the Nintendo DS and PlayStation Portable seemed to diminish significantly in 2008.

—Stephen

Click here to read the next entry.

From: N'Gai Croal
To: Seth Schiesel, Chris Suellentrop and Stephen Totilo
Subject: Resistance 2: A Staggering Work of Heartbreaking Mediocrity

Posted Tuesday, December 9, 2008, at 3:12 PM ET

Seth, Chris, and Stephen,

I'd say that it feels good to be back, but like last year, I'm feeling awkward and uncomfortable about having to sum up what this arbitrary unit of time means for video games. I'm in no rush to compile a top 10 list, to reduce the experiences I've had over the previous 12 months to A-is-better-than-B-but-not-as-good-as-C. Chris, you seem pretty comfortable in your assessment that 2007 was a better year for games than 2008. Stephen, you're insisting that 2008 was better balanced than 2007. But so much of this is by accident rather than by design.

Last year would have been more awesome and less balanced if the Brothers Four—Grand Theft Auto IV and Metal Gear Solid 4—hadn't missed their original holiday 2007 release dates. So? Did 2008 become less awesome but more balanced when those lazybones at Rockstar North failed to complete their planned expansion pack, The Lost and Damned, for this holiday? Maybe. But I don't know how meaningful those standards are beyond this brief moment in time, the week in December when we gather around our computers and fire off e-mails to one another about the year that just went by.

Last year, I said that one of my most important criteria for judging games was obsession. And on a game-by-game basis, 2008 scratched that itch just as much as 2007 did. Chris, I'd argue that the role-playing game Fallout 3 is easily as good as BioShock … but maybe that's because I'm an avowed RPG-hater who naturally skipped Bethesda Softworks' previously acclaimed hit, Oblivion. So even as I surprised myself by falling so hard for the bleak immersiveness of Fallout 3's stuck-in-the-'50s post-apocalyptic world, I had no way of telling whether it was just Oblivion in Mad Max fetish gear or something more. (Then again, I've never played BioShock's spiritual predecessors System Shock or System Shock 2; if I had, would BioShock have seemed quite as impressive?)

Even though I grew up playing Dungeons & Dragons and other pen-and-paper role-playing games, I don't like playing their computer and video-game counterparts. I hate the presentation of dialogue trees. I don't like assigning points to my character's attributes. I prefer action to behind-the-scenes d20 dice rolls. I dislike managing a party. Fallout 3 doesn't overcome all of my RPG pet peeves, though the focus on solo play (i.e., sans A.I. buddies) and the credible first-person-shooter mechanics helped tremendously. Still, I think it was the seamless unity of its presentation—character creation at the moment of childbirth; stat management first via a children's book, then a wrist-worn computer; combat using the green screen, data-terminal-like overlay of the Vault-Tec Assisted Targeting System—that subconsciously allowed me to settle into Fallout 3. All of this meant that I was finally able to appreciate the best virtues of the

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RPG: how narrative, character, and location can blend to create a series of interlocking stories, stacking choice upon choice until you feel that even though the world is bigger than you, you're still having a meaningful impact upon it.

Chris, I'll also see your Portal and raise you Braid. For a game whose mechanics could have been extremely confusing, Braid somehow taught me to play each of its time-twisting levels without instructions as explicit as Portal's own. One reviewer—I think it was Chris Dahlen—suggested that the best way to play Braid is like a crossword puzzle: Solve the parts you can, skip the parts you can't, then go back and slowly pick your way through the unsolved parts until you're done. That's what I did with Braid over four play sessions, and it worked like a charm. One hard-to-get puzzle piece required me to take advantage of my character's brief death animation, and I was floored when I finally figured it out. Most games teach us to either dismiss player death or be entertained by it. Braid let me ignore it for a long time, then, um, upbraided me for doing so. A nice touch in an exceedingly clever and, in its final act, unexpectedly moving game.

These aren't the only two games I'm considering for whatever top 10 list I assemble whenever I assemble it; others include Patapon, Grand Theft Auto IV, Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved 2, The Last Guy, PixelJunk Eden, Gears of War 2, LittleBigPlanet, Left 4 Dead, and Play Auditorium. But I'll end here by asking each of you to name and discuss the game you've had the hardest time expressing your opinion of. For me, it's Resistance 2, a staggering work of heartbreaking mediocrity from one of the industry's most accomplished studios. Staggering in its we-put-every-dollar-up-on-the-screen production values, in its scope, in its careful borrowing from all the right touchstones of the shooter genre. Heartbreaking in that its overblown scale may have helped do it in, in that it has created a fictional world that over two games has never truly connected with me, in enemy encounters that hit all the notes without ever quite playing the tune. It's not mediocre in the way that most games are mediocre. It's just off, and for the life of me I still can't figure out a succinct way to explain why.

Any games from 2008 make you feel that way?

Cheers,
N'Gai

Click here to read the next entry.

From: Chris Suellentrop
To: N'Gai Croal, Seth Schiesel, and Stephen Totilo
Subject: The Triple-F Dilemma: Fable II, Fallout 3, or Far Cry 2?

Posted Wednesday, December 10, 2008, at 6:50 AM ET

Hi guys,

N'Gai's question may provide a better frame for my year in gaming than my kickoff e-mail did. For me, 2008 was more about confusion than disappointment.

What to think of Grand Theft Auto IV, a game whose setting is a more complicated, fully realized, and living creature than its protagonist? Niko Bellic is supposed to resent the killing work that is increasingly forced onto him as the game progresses. But the game is wholly unconvincing on that level—the conflict between your actions as a player and Bellic's words and behavior in cut scenes is too jarring. I never finished the game, and I quit right around the time Stephen says the game loses its way, not too long after Niko reaches Liberty City's equivalent of New Jersey.

So Rockstar failed in its grandest ambition, to create a *Mean Streets* or *Dog Day Afternoon* for gaming. But it succeeded in creating one of the most compelling game environments ever made. Liberty City is a real place. Just ask anyone who's been there. Writing about it makes me want to overlook the game's flaws and start wandering its streets again.

Or, what to think of Gears of War 2? The game is even more shamelessly derivative than the first one. I picked up allusions to, off the top of my head, *Independence Day*, *Battlestar Galactica* (the Ron Moore re-imagining), *The Empire Strikes Back*, and the speeder-bike chase scene in *Return of the Jedi*. Mitch Krpata of the *Boston Phoenix* pointed out on his Insult Swordfighting blog that one of the game's levels is a tribute to, or a rip-off of, the final level of Contra.

The story in Gears, which Seth complained about vociferously in his *Times* review, is a combination of big explosions and sentimental revenge fantasy that will be deeply familiar to anyone who sat through the early works of the governor of California. And even the game's level design—while generally up to its predecessor's high standard—holds an occasional disappointment. There's a little too much running forward and not enough crouching in terror. A couple of times—which is a couple of times more than ever happened in the first Gears—I got a little lost and couldn't figure out where the game wanted me to go next.

I think Gears of War 2 was the most fun game I played all year, and the game that most achieved the goals it set for itself. If you want to see what an interactive Sylvester Stallone movie looks like, play Gears. It's everything a big summer blockbuster should be. But this is awards season, right?

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And in the fall, I've been confused for some time now by a triple-F dilemma—should I be playing Fable II, Fallout 3, or Far Cry 2? Stephen, N'Gai, and I seem to come down on different sides of this triangle, at least for now. I started with Fable II and was enchanted for a while, only to become bored, not long after finding the quest's first hero, with a game that encourages me to sit in the middle of a town square farting for applause. (And trust me, I'm not too good for fart jokes.) But Stephen has persuaded me to give it a second shot.

But how can I do that now, when N'Gai makes a fine case for Fallout 3? I adored the Vault, the setting for the opening scenes during the protagonist's childhood. When I left the Vault, I was so mesmerized that I sat and listened to the post-apocalyptic president's entire radio message. (I am prone to this—I did something similar at the beginning of Half-Life 2.) I explored Megaton, the game's first village. All of this is just the game's *amuse-bouche*, but I can tell it's a spectacular meal. Except, the first time I left Megaton to carry out a mission, I kept getting killed during an encounter with raiders on a stretch of broken bridge on my way out of town. After five or so deaths in a row, I decided to take Far Cry 2 for a spin instead.

A friend tells me there's a lot of boring leveling and grinding in Fallout 3 before the game really gets going, and I always planned to give it some serious attention. A little more handholding in the game wouldn't hurt. I had to pull out the manual—yes, the manual!— to figure out the combat system. GTA IV did a better job of mixing some linearity into its open world.

And for me, at least so far, Far Cry 2 is less frustrating and more obsession-inducing than the Fable and Fallout sequels. I like the mysteriousness surrounding the Jackal, the arms dealer supplying both sides of the civil war you find yourself embroiled in. I like how the game lets you make moral choices without beating you over the head with them. I love the game's setting so much that I enjoy just driving around in it. Last night, I saw a gorgeous storm and a zebra.

Finally, what to think of Braid? Loved the ending. Liked the puzzles. Loathed the writing. I second Steve Gaynor, who thinks that the game, for all its pleasures, has a reach that exceeds its grasp. But at the same time: more, please!

The short answer to your question, though, N'Gai, is that the game that most confuses me about how I should think of it is The Force Unleashed. But I've gone on so long that I'm going to have to save that for Round 3 of this exchange.

One question for the three of you, though. We all think—or so I presume—that too many games (see the aforementioned triple-F dilemma) come out in the fall and too few in the spring and summer. But are we demonstrating an end-of-the-year bias by not lavishing more praise on GTA IV? Wouldn't we think more of it if, like Fallout 3 or Fable II or Far Cry 2, it came out in late October?

Chris

Click here to read the next entry.

From: Stephen Totilo
To: N'Gai Croal, Seth Schiesel, and Chris Suellentrop
Subject: Playing Video Games Is a Lot Like Going to the Gym
Posted Wednesday, December 10, 2008, at 11:13 AM ET

Why the long faces gentlemen?

You seem let down by gaming in 2008. Did games let you down?

Or did you let down gaming in 2008?

Where were you, Chris, when Fallout 3 needed you to play more than one-tenth of it? N'Gai, did you really do your part to give Resistance 2 a try? Meaning, did you play its eight-man cooperative mode, soldiering through some randomized battles with a specially trained squad of fellow players? Or did you just play the single-player mode and declare the game's mediocrity then and there? And Chris, maybe I was wrong and GTA IV is a classic. You could have defended it if you'd played it through.

To nongamers, it may seem like I'm being unkind to Chris and N'Gai. But nongamers should recognize that Chris and N'Gai are typical gamers. I judge them no more harshly than I do the guy at Wal-Mart who just bought an Xbox for Gears of War 2 or the mom who finally tracked down Wii Fit.

Gamers abandon games—even games that they like—before finishing them. Gamers get angry at games—even games they like—for being repetitious or derivative or for falling short of being as good as it seems like they could be. That's what you get when you, the gamer, indulge in a creative form that was created to convey satisfying-but-repeatable, controllable bits of action for a quarter per minute. This is the creative form that has somehow evolved into a medium of 25-hour, $60 collections of satisfying-but-repeatable, controllable bits of action without inventing many successful strategies for telling stories, figuring out how to develop characters, or turning into a more interesting way to spend an hour than listening to Beethoven or watching *The Wire*.

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And you thought the people voting for the Grammys, the Oscars, and the Booker prize might have missed some of the glorious works in their fields?

Gaming people often lack the time, the money, and the patience to really get into a year's worth of games. Playing lots of games can be pretty unpleasant, not unlike going to the gym a lot. You like what you get out of it, but you've got to put in a lot of work, much of it tedious.

There was, however, plenty of good gaming in 2008, for those of us who have structured our lives in a way that allows games to dominate our entertainment-consumption food pyramid. You just had to dedicate lots of time to get to it. You needed to get more than five hours into Fable II. You needed to reach the zero-gravity space combat parts of Dead Space. You needed to play all of Metal Gear Solid 1, 2, and 3 to appreciate the farewell those games were given by 2008's Metal Gear Solid 4. You needed to reach the last hour of Star Wars: The Force Unleashed's dozen to play the level most worth talking about. You needed to dig deep enough into No More Heroes to find out how Goichi Suda, the self-styled leader of the Punk games movement, crafted the greatest fight scene in gaming this year—not the one in which you fight an old lady, but the one in which someone else does the fighting for you. To enjoy the first-person parkour game Mirror's Edge you needed not to mind that the game might last "only" six hours (a complaint among many critics) and actually play it. You needed to put in the work to enjoy this stuff. Fun, right?

I didn't find the year in gaming any more confusing or any more full of flawed gems than previous years, including 2007. Chris, might I remind you that 2007's BioShock suffered a mood-killing shift from intellectual art-deco shooter to action movie in its final playable scene? Or that MTV's own Rock Band had a few flaws that needed patches (and 2008's Rock Band 2) to fix? Or that Portal's … nah, Portal was just about perfect. Most other games in 2007, however, had their faults.

Taking up N'Gai's request to name a game I had trouble articulating my reaction to, I choose Too Human. It's a game I may have dismissed had I not known its back story. Yet is that a fair reason to care about it? Here's a game that mixes *The Matrix* and Norse mythology and was gestating at development studio Silicon Knights in various stages for about a decade. Its lead creator, Denis Dyack, is a passionate spokesman for games as the "eighth artform" (the seventh was film, in case you didn't know). Dyack's personal and intellectual response to my question about why he hadn't abandoned the game after all this time was among the most heartfelt, ambitious, and reasonable statements about improving the gaming medium that I heard all year.

But Too Human isn't a great game. It has some good design, fun controls, and a whole lot of the previously mentioned tedium special to video games. It struggles to flesh out its characters even though it ends its story well.

Does context forgive execution? Does ambition justify imperfection? Had I not known Dyack or read a bunch of his interviews, I may have forgotten his game shortly after playing it in August, as I do so many other games. That wasn't possible, though. That's not how I consume my entertainment anymore. In this age, I know the creative back story of many of the games I play. The more revealing the game's creators are—and Dyack is among the most revealing of his peers—the more I care about the games they make.

I just don't know if all of that makes Too Human a game I can recommend, or if I simply would recommend that gamers learn more about the people who make their games.

So, did none of you play handheld games this year or what? No one's talking about them.

Stephen

Click here to read the next entry.

From: Seth Schiesel
To: N'Gai Croal, Chris Suellentrop, and Stephen Totilo
Subject: How Roger Ebert Taught Me To Be a Video-Game Critic
Posted Wednesday, December 10, 2008, at 1:32 PM ET

Hi, everybody. Sorry for coming late to the party. I wish I could tell you that keeping late hours had nothing to do with my sniffle this week, but that wouldn't be entirely accurate.

I come to our conversation from a bit of a different place than I was in last year. And in order to understand how I feel about video games these days, you need to understand how my relationship with games and the game industry has changed.

It has been an exhilarating, daunting, rewarding, and at times frightening journey in 2008 as I have become what amounts to the *New York Times*'s first staff video-game critic. Since joining the culture department in 2005, I have always written some reviews and columns, but until this year I had mostly focused on news and features about games, gamers, and game makers.

Over the course of this year, starting in earnest with my review of Grand Theft Auto IV, I've been asked to shift toward building a critical voice through reviewing as many of the top games as I can get to. As a practical matter, that means spending a lot less

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time talking to and hanging out with people in the game industry and a lot more time sitting at home actually playing games (and writing about them).

The hardest part is that I have had to begin to distance myself from people in the game business. (I removed all my industry contacts from my Facebook!) As a reporter, you want to get close to people. You want them to like you and to want to give you information, especially in a scoop-crazed industry like video games. And a news reporter is able to maintain those relationships because he is not absolutely compelled to write for publication that his personal opinion was that a particular game had significant problems.

The critic does suffer that compulsion. And it can't matter whether or not the lead designer is a good guy or how bad you feel about how many millions of other people's dollars he has interminably wasted bringing his vision to the small screen. And it can't matter how much you have enjoyed socializing with the (often quite sociable) people whose job it is to get you to write nice things about their employers.

I had to confront this most squarely in my review of Fallout 3. I love the Fallout franchise. The first two installments are among my favorite role-playing games. And I really like the team at Bethesda Softworks. But I felt the game fell down in places and I had to say that.

One of the things I have really embraced about becoming a critic has been the process of learning to become a critic. Thankfully, at the *Times* I'm surrounded by some of the best in the world, whose work I now study much more closely than I used to. But as I struggled to come to terms with my ambivalence about Fallout 3, I finally discovered the touchstone of insight I needed from outside my paper, by way of both Roger Ebert and Robert Warshow. In a delightful item about his unorthodox review of *Tru Loved*, Ebert writes:

> As the critic Robert Warshow wrote, "A man goes to the movies. The critic must be honest enough to admit that he is that man." In other words, whatever you saw, whatever you felt, whatever you did, you must say so. For example, two things that cannot be convincingly faked are laughter and orgasms. If a movie made you laugh, as a critic you have to be honest and report that. Maybe not so much with orgasms.

For a variety of reasons that we will leave aside for the moment, there still aren't any decent pornographic video games, so game critics don't face all of Ebert's dilemmas. (And it is not a coincidence that the flap over Ebert's *Tru Loved* review revolved around the fact that he did not finish the movie: exactly the same issue Stephen is slagging Chris and N'Gai for here.)

Yet the point still stands. For those of us who have, as Stephen so baldly put it, "structured our lives in a way that allows games to dominate our entertainment-consumption food pyramid," we have to be honest about that to the public. For example, Blizzard was probably not entirely thrilled that my write-up about the new World of Warcraft expansion was in many ways an exploration of my concern about playing the game so much in the past. But I had to cop to it.

Over the course of this year, plowing through game after game, what surprised me most was simply how good most of them were. Though the crop of 2008 has demonstrated its talent in different ways, it seems clear that the overall level of production quality and creative talent is higher now in video games than it has ever been. This is the real golden age of gaming because only now is the audience large enough, variegated enough, and mature enough to support high levels of investment in such a broad portfolio of genres on such a wide range of devices and screens.

The major publishers have finally figured out that schlock is not a business strategy that can compete in the long term with producing a high-quality product. I have played through and reviewed most of the biggest games of the year, with a few formal reviews still to come, and the one word that keeps coming back to me is *professionalism*.

Of course, some people don't want their games to be professional—or polished, for that matter. They want their games to be art. They want to be inspired to grand heights of emotion and struck with epic depths of profundity. I understand that. I even succumb to it once in a while. (OK, a little more often than that.)

What made Portal and BioShock stand out last year was that they were different, in tone and narrative technique and, of course, in some basic play rules. And I agree that with the exception of Braid, we have not seen a ton of "wow, I never thought of that really working" new game concepts in 2008.

But what if I don't find time manipulation fun? Or what if I don't enjoy teleporting balls around in Portal or exploring a creepy underwater warren in BioShock? These are all very particular, perhaps even peculiar, games. And the strength of a creative form is not judged solely by its ability to deliver a few quirky new art projects every year. That strength is judged by the overall depth of output and in the ability to provide a suitably high-quality entertainment experience for everyone.

I don't think there is a single genre or demographic of gamer that hasn't benefited from a number of excellent games this year. As Stephen rightly said, only the hard-core Nintendo fan has had something to complain about. But across the board, if you are a gamer and you haven't been able to find anything you really like

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this year, maybe it is time for a new hobby, because the bounty of 2008 has been rich.

P.S. Hey, Stephen: For mobile, my DS is locked on Sid Meier's Civilization Revolution. I can beat Deity level maybe half the time these days.

Click here to read the next entry.

From: N'Gai Croal
To: Seth Schiesel, Chris Suellentrop, and Stephen Totilo
Subject: Why Won't Cliff Bleszinski Let Stephen Kill His Wife?
Posted Wednesday, December 10, 2008, at 2:09 PM ET

Stephen, it's just like old times. Our old dialogue feature, Vs. Mode, is on extended hiatus, but there you go again, taking shots at me for failing to play Resistance 2 all the way through. Pity you didn't select a better target, as there are oh so many games and game modes that I never touched, but the co-op mode in Resistance 2 was not one of them. I played it for quite some time when it was previewed in NYC; you were there, but the open bar was open, so I'll forgive you if you can't remember too much from that event. But you're a loyal subscriber to *Edge* magazine. Didn't you read the column in which I cited, among other things, Resistance 2's cooperative mode as one of the biggest breakthroughs of 2008? An excerpt:

> Insomniac built a separate co-op campaign for up to eight players, modeled after raids in massively multiplayer online games. ... [Its] approach is at once the most intriguing and the least fully fleshed out, mainly because it appears to have been designed with just a single strategy for success: soldiers out front, spec ops in the middle, and medics bringing up the rear. Whether the enemy AI or the encounter design is to blame I can't be sure, but if Insomniac can find a way to mix things up more it has the template for something both unique and special in the world of consoles.

So, yes, when I referred to Resistance 2 as a "staggering work of heartbreaking mediocrity" that I'm still struggling to explain, it wasn't based solely on the campaign. Still, you're my gaming sensei, so I won't take issue with your assertion that anyone who's disappointed with 2008 (hello, Mitch Krpata, author of the year's most essential blog series, "A New Taxonomy of Gamers") may not have played as many games as they should have nor as deeply as they should have. Your analogy to working out at the gym is nearly perfect; it's not just that games are work, it's that they also require you to learn. Every game, no matter how bad, is teaching you how to play it from beginning to end. And a lot of the time, I simply don't want to work at learning something new. (Is this the point where our more fanboyish readers say, *cry me a river and give me your job*?) Perhaps that's why a game's ability to quickly tap into my obsessive side is one of my key criteria for determining greatness: Without obsession, how many fewer games would I play, complete, or replay?

If it weren't for my trainer, I'd never go to the gym, and without you, sensei, I might not have finished the campaign modes in Halo 3 last year or Gears of War 2 this year. From this, I've learned that one of the best things about cooperative play is that it encourages me to finish what I start. I loved and was obsessed by Fallout 3, playing it night after night. But once I got into Gears 2 (particularly the Horde multiplayer mode) and Left 4 Dead, my obsession cooled, no doubt helped along by the fact that, at Level 8, I'd finally hit a stretch of the game where I'd have to grind in order to progress. Had Fallout 3 been co-op, with you and I walking through the bombed-out streets of our nation's capital, I'd probably have completed the game weeks ago. Thankfully, Gears 2 was co-op, and I could add it to The Handful of Games I Completed in 2008.

Seth, thanks for explaining to the readers and us why *you* actually have the best job in the world. Stephen and I still have to do reporting, while you play games all day and write about them. For the *New York Times*, no less! In an age when there's all but a dead pool for movie critics, not to mention those who write about books, theater, dance, and television, it's great that the Old Gray Lady has staked out this fertile critical terrain. I'm not sure any other outlets will follow, given our current Great Depression, but it's a good sign nonetheless.

Still, I'm somewhat surprised that either the *Times* required you to give up reporting and industry contacts or you chose to do so, simply because you became the paper's chief game critic. You cited Ebert as an inspiration; he writes profiles and features and Q&A's in addition to reviewing as many movies as he can. Do you really believe that you have to keep developers and executives at arm's length in order to be a good critic, or were you permitted to shed your reporting obligations because playing games takes a lot more time than watching a movie or reading a book?

Your point about professionalism also intrigues me. You're correct that, by and large, the level of craft in the video game industry continues to grow each year, and 2008 was no exception. I wonder if, however, by settling for the professionalism inherent in the acknowledgment that "we are those men, and we had fun with these games," we let games off too easily when they take the easy way out, interactively speaking.

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Here's where I get my Totilo on and start taking shots. In your review of Gears of War 2, you rightly criticized the story by writing, "With its unintentionally mawkish story line—there's no winking here—and sophomoric dialogue, Epic Games, developer of the series, is clearly trying to mix some emotional depth into the franchise's established recipe of explosions and hot lead. It doesn't work." And you rightly praised the gameplay, saying, "[W]hat makes Gears 2 such a consummately enjoyable popcorn game, is pitch-perfect pacing melded with some of the most carefully calibrated challenges and consistently enjoyable game design you will come across." Then you conclude by writing: "Just ignore what tries to pass here for story and character. And please, don't think too hard."

[SPOILER ALERT]

The thing is, there's a moment in this all-about-shooting game where the folks at Epic decide to do the shooting for you, and in doing so, rob the game of a potentially compelling intersection of gameplay and character. I'm referring to the moment when Dom, wingman to series protagonist Marcus Fenix, is finally reunited with his wife deep in enemy territory, only to discover that her mind has been completely destroyed by her Locust torturers. (This time, it seems, it's personal.) The ensuing cutscene and its dialogue were mawkish, as you observed, though I'd argue that one line ("Marcus, I … I don't know what to do") and its anguished delivery managed the requisite poignancy. But Dom's subsequent decision to kill his wife, no matter how much Epic tried to set it up in a previous cutscene, struck me as implausible.

Actually, I take that back. Dom didn't decide to kill his wife. Epic design director Cliff Bleszinski decided to kill his wife, and they wouldn't even let Stephen, who was playing as Dom, pull the trigger. Compare that with the sequence in the first God of War, in which our hero Kratos, trapped in Hell with the wife and child he inadvertently slaughtered, must now protect them by alternately holding them to him (using the game's grab mechanic to share his health bar with them) and fighting off an army of Kratos doppelgängers. It's gameplay, not a cutscene, and nearly four years after God of War's release, it still stands as one of the best examples of how narrative and interactivity can be synthesized to create, well, art.

Was Epic's handling of Maria's fate a failure of craft or art? I say it's worth thinking hard about, especially when writing for a mainstream audience like yours in the *Times* and mine at *Newsweek*. Because when we avoid such questions, we're gulling our readers into believing that story and gameplay are mutually exclusive—or that games are just like other media. Seth, that's something I accused you of before, here. And, in fairness, I fell prey to the same temptation here.

That's my last shot. Reloading!

Cheers,
N'Gai

Click here to read the next entry.

From: Stephen Totilo
To: N'Gai Croal, Seth Schiesel, and Chris Suellentrop
Subject: The Imminent Rise of the Self-Help Video Game
Posted Thursday, December 11, 2008, at 7:02 AM ET

Seth, good call on Civilization for the DS. That game hooked me for a time as well. And, N'Gai, good call on co-operative game-play having a heyday (heyyear?) in 2008.

I'd like to wrap up my contribution to our club by citing some other notable releases this year.

• You Have To Burn the Rope: Here we had a free game you could play from beginning to end in about three minutes. Not only that, but it had something to say about the challenges developers make us face in games. It may be the perfect accompaniment to my games-as-gym-equipment metaphor from my previous letter. And while I could say more, I think people should really just open a new window in their browser for a moment and play it. As an added bonus, its ending-credits theme is the best song released in a video game—and made about video games—in 2008. Play the game. Listen. And think about it.

• Wii Fit: To save us the embarrassment of not having deeply discussed 2008's biggest gaming newsmaker, I must add that this game served a number of interesting roles. It presented to average people the idea that playing a game could be good for you, it convinced some gaming executives that fitness gaming is the next trend that must be followed, and it expanded the currently unlabeled category of Self-Help Video Games that Nintendo's brain-workout Brain Age software opened up in 2006 (and which may someday force gaming-sales charters to give self-help games their own list, the way the *New York Times* had to in 1983).

• The Korean release of FIFA Online 2: I knew nothing of this game until last month, when it was the first thing on EA Sports chief Peter Moore's mind when I asked him what the biggest success of 2008 was for the Madden-making sports division. But I do know of games like it, and they excite American gaming executives quite a lot—they look like your standard American-released sports and racing games, but their economic model is predicated on a free-base product that you can buy items in. Some items improve the look of your character. Some improve his/her/its abilities. These micro-transaction games aren't new,

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but they've yet to make it big in the United States. Still, what we saw plenty of in 2008 was game publishers trying to find ways to sell small add-ons long after people purchased the original disc. It seems more likely than ever that the future of many people's gaming lives will involve not just paying for a game once but continuing to pay for it, or pay to add more to it, month after month. This change could prove similar to the way people went from not paying to watch TV programming in the middle of the 20th century to now paying for multiple services to see their favorite programs.

• Any iPhone/iPod Touch game: Apple, the company that typically projects an image that it knows what we want better than we do, never made an impressive step into the gaming world until 2008. And the company did it not by being a leader but by standing (somewhat) back and letting everyone from amateur developers to professional studios create hundreds of applications and games. The result? An Apple that once used to advertise how much cooler its machines were than Windows computers—even though Windows computers were the only computers worth playing video games on—now makes commercials showing off iPhone games. Now that Apple finally thinks video games are cool, cell-phone gaming has suddenly become a lot more interesting, and Nintendo has a reason to sweat for the first time in a couple of years.

Guys, it's been fun to talk about the year in games with all of you. May you all have more time to play in 2009.

—Stephen

Click here to read the next entry.

From: Chris Suellentrop
To: N'Gai Croal, Seth Schiesel, and Stephen Totilo
Subject: Pining for a Game That Doesn't Yet Exist
Posted Thursday, December 11, 2008, at 11:20 AM ET

Dear N'Gai, Seth, and Stephen,

Stephen wonders if we should be embarrassed for not discussing Wii Fit, and then he answers his own question by noting that it's a self-help game and therefore isn't really the kind of game that the four of us are talking about. Which reminds me: As games grow, and as they are played by more and more people, I think game critics will increasingly have to grapple with Stephen's mantra from last year's club: "Video games are not a genre; they're a medium."

I think this statement was more radical than Stephen intended it to be. I think I'm persuaded by it, but I have trouble wrapping my head around it sometimes. The boldness of the claim makes me want to resist it. Put the Internet aside for a moment—in time, we may see it as less a new medium and more a technology for the transmission of all media (including games!) under the sun—and you'll see that every other medium, at least that I can think of, qualifies under one of the big three rubrics: Print, Audio, Video. (Under this taxonomy, TV and movies, for example, aren't distinct media—they're just distinct ways of transmission for a particular medium, video.)

Stephen is saying that video games are a Fourth Medium, then, something truly new under the sun. (Maybe this is just a different way of saying that games are an Eighth Art Form, as Dennis Dyack says.) I often think that's right. But it also helps explain my long face, as Stephen puts it. Don't I have the right to expect something more from this marvelous new medium? Something more wondrous than beautifully and impeccably crafted worlds filled with enemies for me to kill?

What I want is a game with the elegant gameplay and level design of Gears of War 2 but with the story of The Force Unleashed. But I want it told in a manner like Braid—or even You Have To Burn the Rope—meaning, a telling of the tale that is consistent with the promise and the mechanics of this Fourth Medium (or Eighth Art Form).

I haven't played this game yet. Have any of you?

Stephen and Seth are right that if you put a space alien in front of this year's batch of games, the interstellar visitor—assuming his slippery, tentaclelike thumbs could handle the controller—would conclude that the games that are coming out right now are some of the finest examples of the promise of this new medium. But they are also captivating largely because they possess exactly that: promise. The best games are packed with the prospect of something more, something on the tip of everyone's tongue that no one has yet been able to put into words—or rather, games.

I don't feel guilty about dreaming of the day when a game designer puts it all together and I can finally, at long last, scratch the itch that all of us feel but none of us can find.

Until next year,
Chris

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From: Seth Schiesel

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To: N'Gai Croal, Chris Suellentrop, and Stephen Totilo
Subject: Everybody's Playing Something Different—and That's What Makes Video Games So Great
Posted Friday, December 12, 2008, at 7:13 AM ET

OK, a lot to get to here.

In terms of N'Gai's questions about how my job at the paper has evolved, a few clarifications. I have not given up any contacts, just held them at a bit of arm's length while in this period of heavy reviewing. I just didn't feel it was appropriate to be taking one-on-one meetings with game executives and PR people while I was reviewing the products they would be trying to spin me about. N'Gai, I think I saw you at one group dinner with a game company, and I made very clear to them that I was there only because it was a group event. It sounds obvious, but ultimately the products speak for themselves. The millions of people whom these companies want to buy their wares aren't getting special access to game-makers. In trying to come at the games from a perspective similar to that of a thoughtful consumer, I wanted to distance myself from the industry a bit. And as a practical matter, if I want to update my Facebook status with a transitory thought about a game I'm playing before I have published what I'm paid to publish, I don't think it is helpful if that's being seen by a few dozen game developers and publicists.

That all said, there is no doubt that even though big games like Super Smash Bros. Brawl, GTA IV, Metal Gear Solid 4, and Wii Fit were released in the first half of 2008 (which I applaud), gaming remains a very seasonal business. So in the early parts of next year, I'm sure I'll write some broader and more thematic features just because there won't be as many new games to review. What I will have to think hard about, though, is doing some big hype piece on a game in development that I know I will have to review later. We saw years of prerelease puffery on a game like Spore (none of it, thankfully, with my byline), a game that failed to maintain more than a few weeks of somewhat ambivalent buzz once we all actually got to play it.

Enough about journalism. N'Gai, I didn't think you were coming at me with what you said about Gears 2 and the wife scene. I think you raised a few of exactly the right questions. And this also plays into some of Chris' concerns about how stories are told in games. The goal of that scene is to move the player into the plot's next emotional arc—to attach meaning to gunning down the next wave of bad guys. I agree that the scene could have been a lot more interactive, but the real challenge would not have been in simply giving the player a choice but in allowing that choice to really matter in the overall plotline.

And that might have been a lot harder than it seems at first. Here is this soldier who has been searching for his long-lost wife, and he finally finds her in this horrible ghoulish state. If you give the player a choice there, his natural inclination most of the time is going to be to try to find a way to cure her. That's a whole different story, and Epic has the right to want her to die there to give the rest of the action a revenge vibe. So, what are you going to do, force the player to pull the trigger? Set up a fight where you try to save her but, no matter what you do, she dies anyway? Now that would piss people off, including me. Once you start giving people choices, the game has to allow those choices to matter. It is not always as easy as saying, "I should have had some choice there, and I didn't. Epic messed up." I obviously didn't think the story was the strongest element of Gears 2, anyway, but I didn't have a huge problem at that moment because I saw the rabbit hole the game could fall into otherwise.

More broadly, this line of thought plays into Chris' desire for more different kinds of storytelling in games. The thing is, in all of these mainline console games (even the Portals and such), the story is still being told to you, or even at you. In none of these games does the player really have any role in determining the overall story arc. In that sense, you are still acting out a role that has been written for you and have been given choices only within a fairly limited sphere of the fiction that has been spun around you. Meanwhile, your interaction with other actual human beings in most conventional console games is limited to shooting them, shooting with them, or competing with them for a spot on a high-score list.

That's why with every passing year I grow deeper in my conviction that the most interesting and meaningful games are massively multiplayer online games in which you have thousands of people in emergent, persistent communities with their own politics, their own tribes. In a massively multiplayer game, every day is different because people are always different. As I've played through dozens of games this year for my job, it has been so vital to maintain a gaming home base, a center of gravity with a group of people that I can just hang out and play with. I've found that most of this year in Eve Online, the hard-core science-fiction MMO that continues to grow. Eve is the kind of game in which the group of people you play with is the most important part of the experience. These are the people I'm on IRC with even when I'm playing something else, and it is that sense of community, of getting to know people from around the world just a little bit, that is the most valuable thing in gaming for me, and it is something that other media usually fail to provide. (Actually, music probably brings people together more than any other traditional media. I saw the Grateful Dead around 90 times, and I still know people I met out there on the road.)

As far as the year in MMOs, I have to give major respect to Electronic Arts and Mythic for making the first legitimate competitor to World of Warcraft with Warhammer Online. Warhammer isn't anywhere close to WOW's size and has only a fraction of WOW's depth, but Warhammer's focus on player-vs.-player combat as opposed to player-vs.-computer-controlled-monster combat gives it an important niche.

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WOW, of course, remains the juggernaut, and the recent expansion, Wrath of the Lich King, is pure Blizzard: It oozes polish and is totally accessible to casual players. Thing is, WOW is definitely now being built and designed almost entirely for casual players. The WOW of today is probably less than a third as difficult, overall, as it was even a couple of years ago. This is why the game has around 11 million players. But it is a bit of a joke when even the most hard-core players can blow through all of the new expansion's top-end content in a matter of days. I'm not sure what the people who used to enjoy spending weeks and months working through epic content are supposed be doing in WOW now for their $15 a month. The beautiful thing for Blizzard, though, is that if those people are going to go anywhere during the next couple years, they will probably stay on the Blizzard reservation by moving to coming games like StarCraft II, Diablo 3, and the as-yet-unrevealed new MMO it is working on.

Stephen: I must confess, I have not burned the rope.

And finally, of course games are a medium, not a genre. There are all sorts of games for all sorts of players now. The idea of a canon in games means nothing when there are Bejeweled addicts out there who wouldn't know Miyamoto if he showed up in their living room. For that matter, there are probably millions of Wii players who have no idea who Miyamoto is. There are people who play Guitar Hero who could not care less about World of Warcraft, and there are Pokémon gurus who have never touched Halo. That's all as it should be. Video games are the most vibrant and exciting new entertainment medium in the world right now because of their diversity. When so many millions of people are having fun in so many millions of different ways, something is going right.

Click here to read the next entry.

From: N'Gai Croal
To: Seth Schiesel, Chris Suellentrop, and Stephen Totilo
Subject: And the Nintendo Wii Shall Lead Them
Posted Friday, December 12, 2008, at 1:09 PM ET

Gentlemen, I hope you won't mind if I take a break from talking about the art of games to focus on the business. Last night, the NPD Group released sales figures for the month of November. So rather than directly engage the "other notable releases" that Stephen discussed in his e-mail, I'll instead use them to make a larger point about the current health of the video-game industry.

Stephen mentioned You Have To Burn the Rope, Wii Fit, FIFA Online 2, and games for the iPhone/iPod Touch. These games all have something in common: They don't require the most powerful hardware on the market in order to function. You Have To Burn the Rope runs in a Web browser. Wii Fit runs on the Wii, of course, which, as one developer said in a memorable rant, is just two Gamecubes duct-taped together. (Please don't try that at home.) FIFA Online 2, if my Google skills haven't failed me, will operate on a Windows 2000 PC with a Pentium III chip and 256 megabytes of RAM. As for the iPhone/iPod Touch, while it does sit at the top of the smartphone food chain, it is no threat to the two-year-old MacBook Pro I'm typing this e-mail on, let alone a top-of-the-line gaming rig.

Two companies with a shrewd approach to minimum system requirements are Blizzard and Valve. Now, I don't want to overload you with a flurry of numbers. But if you compare the minimum specs for Blizzard and Valve titles like World of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade, Half-Life 2: The Orange Box, and Left 4 Dead with games like Crysis: Warhead, Call of Duty: World at War, and Fallout 3, you'll see that the former have designed their games to run on older, less-powerful machines. By doing so, they've made their games accessible to a wider audience.

Taking this back to consoles for a moment: Microsoft's Xbox 360 had a year's head start on the competition, and as its executives love to remind us, the bulk of all console sales during the last generation took place at $199 or less—the current entry-level price for 360. Sony was all set to achieve global domination coming off consecutive wins with PlayStation and PlayStation 2. Yet in just 24 months, Nintendo has blown past its rivals and continues to do so even though the 360 is now $50 cheaper than the Wii's suggested retail price. To put this Nintendominance in perspective, for the month of November, Wii (2.04 million) outsold Xbox 360 (836,000), PlayStation Portable (421,000), Playstation 3 (378,000), and PlayStation 2 (206,000) combined.

Now if that's Game Over as far as the console wars are concerned, why are the major developers and publishers continuing to spend the bulk of their budgets on Xbox 360, PS3, and high-end PC games? Part of it is because Nintendo's own games have historically dominated sales on its own platforms, and that's been true for Wii as well. Part of it is because the creatives and the suits at third-party publishers don't know how to address the expanded audience on the Wii; they've tried a number of things—some bad, some good—but many of their efforts have underperformed. Yet as Electronic Arts' well-publicized struggles demonstrate, the winner-take-all software market on 360, PS3, and high-end PC games can pose just as much risk to a publisher's bottom line.

Yes, the data show that the video-game industry's revenues continue to rise. But how sustainable is that when development budgets are tilted toward 360, PS3, and high-end PCs and away from the market-leading Wii and low-end PCs. If a remake of

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Resident Evil 4 sold extremely well on the Wii, surely there was an opportunity for Dead Space. The liberating sense of movement in Mirror's Edge could have translated well to the Wiimote and nunchuk. But because EA built those games for the top-of-the-line machines, the Wii wasn't even a possibility. So with Nintendo as top dog, I think it's time for publishers to throw it a much bigger bone by leading development on Wii, then up-porting the games to the more powerful systems, which should result in a larger addressable audience. (Hard-core gamers' flames coming in 3 … 2 … 1.)

Now that I've rendered unto Caesar, let's get back to the art. Chris, I have to say that I was somewhat confused by the game that you're asking for. Would you ask for a movie with the action choreography of *Saving Private Ryan* and the story of *The Empire Strikes Back*, told in the manner of *Memento* or *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*? The creator of Everyday Shooter, an abstract twin-stick shooter game, gave a speech at this year's Game Developers Conference where he talked about the need for developers to become more creative with inputs and outputs; as an example, he said that he'd been bored by Call of Duty 3 but that he might have been more interested if it looked like Rez. Me too.

While I suppose it's possible that Marcus and Dom could shoot Locusts with quotes from famous revolutionaries or turn their enemies into Seurat paintings, it sounds like you're asking for something more like *Aliens*-meets-*The Thin Red Line*, where commerce meets art in a $60 game. So I'll just say two things. One, if Truffaut was right when he declared that it's impossible to make an anti-war movie, because film makes war look exciting, imagine how much more true that is of AAA games and the accompanying imperative that they be "fun." Two, you should play thatgamecompany's Flower when it comes to Playstation Network next year. Thrilling controls; gorgeous visuals; minimalist but allusive narrative; it's so good that I've already said that "Flower is everything that Mirror's Edge should have been" while Stephen, in his rush to canonize, has declared it "The First Must-Play Game of 2009." It just may be what you're looking for.

Lastly, Seth: You're absolutely right about Epic's goal with Maria's scene in Gears of War 2. It's just that I question the goal. No one playing the game needs any more reason to kill the Locust than they've already been given. Just as You *Have* To Burn the Rope, You *Have* To Kill the Locust; we gamers are very good at following orders, and Gears 2 players are no exception. If we should ever become confused about our motivation, the way that the aiming reticule helpfully turns red when we move it over the enemy makes it clear: Shoot till they're dead, no questions asked. No, Maria's scene is there to engender emotion in the player, to add something approaching depth to the game, to show that Cliff Bleszinski and his team at Epic can do more than just bro-speak. It fails, not because of a lack of meaningful choice, but because they didn't let that impulse influence their game design.

(SPOILER ALERT)

We're told that, in our role as Marcus and Dom, we're shooting the Locusts to save Sera. Maria is from Sera, but Dom—Bleszinski, really—shoots her rather than save her. Compare that with the sequence in "Dirty Little Secret," the first chapter of Act 3, where Marcus and Dom must both hold either end of a "heavy bomb" and carry it to a door that must be destroyed. Both men are vulnerable during this sequence: They can't roadie run, their turning speed is reduced, and they can only use their pistols. So if you don't think that it would have worked to make the player carry out the mercy killing of Dom's wife, the sequence above is proof that Epic had the means to build an alternative interactive sequence around her. They chose not to.

They could have carried her to an extraction point on a stretcher while coming under fire. They could have defended Maria from a Locust assault while waiting for a rescue team to come get her. There were any number of interactive options at Bleszinki's disposal, yet he opted for the cheap, easy sentiment of women in refrigerators, shuffling her off the stage so that Marcus and Dom's great bromance could continue. When all is said and done, he lavished more care and attention—interactively speaking—on a bomb than he did on Dom's wife. You say Bleszinski avoided the rabbit hole. I hope that with Gears of War 3, he'll jump in.

Thanks for the exchange, and I'll see you all back here in 2009.

Cheers,
N'Gai

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green room

eBay and Ivory

The auction site's ban on elephant products won't help the environment.

By Brendan Borrell

Tuesday, December 30, 2008, at 8:04 AM ET

If, like me, you have always wanted to get a carved, elephant-ivory snuff box for that special someone, this holiday season may well be your last opportunity. The online auction site eBay announced on Oct. 20 that it would ban nearly all ivory sales on its auction sites effective Jan. 1. Last month, the company was embarrassed by the International Fund for Animal Welfare, which estimated that it was hosting an elephant-ivory trade in the United States worth $3.2 million per year.

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This may seem like another example of corporate greenwashing—a way for the auction site to paper over its misdeeds and parade around as a concerned environmental steward. In fact, the new policy is directly at odds with mainstream conservationists. Just one week after eBay made its big announcement, the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species—with support from WWF—was going forward with a one-time auction of government ivory stockpiles from elephants that either died of natural causes or had been culled in population-control programs in four southern African countries. These sales netted $15 million, earmarked for elephant conservation and local community-development programs. Although international laws governing the ivory trade are complex, the truth is that most of the ivory being sold on eBay was totally legal. More to the point, buying ivory online may actually be a good thing for conservation: The more snuff boxes we demand, the better chance that elephants and their ecosystems have to withstand the pressures of modernization.

Wild elephants are never going to be tolerated in Africa so long as locals cannot profit from the animals' most valuable asset: those 120-pound teeth. As journalist John Frederick Walker argues in his provocative new book, *Ivory's Ghosts: The White Gold of History and the Fate of Elephants* (to be published in January), the high regard with which American zoo-goers hold these proboscideans is not shared by poverty-stricken farmers in Kenya, who must contend with 4-ton living bulldozers rampaging their cassava fields and threatening their lives. Flip through African newspapers, and you'll find lurid headlines describing trampled schoolchildren, panicked villagers, and nightly curfews. Americans would not put up with life under those conditions, yet we have imposed this imperial vision on a far-off continent that we imagine as our private zoo.

The elephant problem is equally vexing inside the national parks of Botswana, Namibia, Zimbabwe, and South Africa, whose burgeoning elephant populations must be managed to avoid their overwhelming the ecosystem. Elephants are the largest living land mammal, each consuming as much as 600 pounds of vegetation a day and drinking 50 gallons of water. In 1970, a hands-off policy to Kenya's elephants in Tsavo National Park provided a bitter lesson to those who opposed culling. After ravaging the park's fragile vegetation during a season of drought, elephants began dying by the thousands. Animals whose meat could have supported the region's desperate farmers and whose ivory could have provided $3 million for conservation were rotting in the blazing sun. In the years since, South African wildlife managers have refined culling procedures to minimize trauma to elephant family groups, and they catalog and store ivory under lock and key in anticipation of future auctions.

But pragmatic approaches to elephant conservation took a blow in 1989, when celebrities Brigitte Bardot and Jimmy Stewart joined animal rights campaigns to fight the "elephant holocaust" being conducted by poachers and, by implication, wildlife managers. According to Walker, the WWF and the African Wildlife Foundation "felt it prudent … to keep quiet about the value of sustainable use policies." Although no African or Western countries initially supported a ban on the ivory trade, by the end of the year they were on the losing end of the battle for public opinion. On Oct. 8, in Lausanne, Switzerland, CITES listed African elephants as Appendix I, effectively cutting off ivory sales, putting Asian importers and carving shops out of business, and turning "white gold" into a social no-no. "In the aftermath of the decision," Walker writes, "the ivory market collapsed as ivory prices plummeted."

The latest effort to humiliate eBay represents another example of an animal rights organization hijacking the African conservation agenda with an untenable vision that may do more harm than good. Advocates for a ban on ivory claim the CITES auction gives unscrupulous traders a chance to launder poached goods. But a wildlife trade monitoring program set up by WWF and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature has found that illegal-ivory seizures have declined in the five years following the last ivory auction approved by CITES in 1999. It appears that a flush of legal ivory from these auctions knocks out black-market dealers. While poaching remains a problem in Central and East Africa, the data suggest that those activities feed domestic African markets, not online auctioneers in the United States.

Most of the ivory that was being sold on eBay may not have been illegal at all. A good deal of ivory in the country simply predates the 1989 ban, and interstate sale of ivory is not tightly regulated or monitored. As for imports, residents can bring in licensed hunting trophies for personal use or antique ivory items more than 100 years old. The IFAW report on eBay simply identified certain auctions as "likely violations" or "possible violations" of the law, based on the wording used in listings. According to the study, just 15.5 percent of ivory goods on the site fell into the "likely violation" category. Turn those figures around, and it's clear that eBay also supported a vibrant, legal ivory market.

The only way to improve this market is through transparency, and eBay was ideally suited to play such a role. Because the site maintains a database of every auction, the final sale price, and the parties involved, it could provide a valuable tool for law-enforcement officers and conservation organizations. With those data, it would be possible to track the volume of the ivory trade and help identify questionable buyers and sellers based on their transaction patterns. Once the market moves offline—and to classifieds sites such as Craigslist—this sort of monitoring will be largely impossible.

If eBay wanted to take a stand for conservation, it should have partnered with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service—and notified its users that any purchase or sale of wildlife products will be recorded in a government database. Add to this the eventual

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possibility of spot checks using DNA testing, and we'd be well on our way to a sustainable, digital marketplace. Given such a framework, ivory would regain its respectability, and it might even be possible to open our borders to the importation of newly worked ivory from registered sellers abroad. After two decades under the ban, it's finally time to admit that saving elephants requires pulling a few teeth.

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green room

Tainted Government

How did the Food and Drug Administration let melamine into the U.S. food supply?

By James E. McWilliams

Monday, December 29, 2008, at 12:27 PM ET

It's been more than a year and a half since the Chinese melamine story first landed in the U.S. press, but the ripple effects continue to spread. Three months ago, the contaminant showed up in baby formula. (The earlier scare was limited to pet food.) In the last couple of weeks, we've learned that China is now investigating more than two dozen cases of animal feed contaminated with melamine, and its health officials have identified 17 other illegal food additives that demand scrutiny—including boric acid and Sudan Red dye. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has now resorted to random spot checks of hot dogs, chicken nuggets, frozen pizzas, and other foods processed with milk powder, and scientific organizations are discussing better ways to detect melamine in the global food supply. From the looks of it, this sprawling scandal will be with us for some time.

The deepening severity of the problem stands in sharp contrast to the continued insouciance of the Food and Drug Administration. When Canada voiced concern over milk-powder imports from the United States in late September, an FDA spokeswoman gave a dismissive response: "The public health crisis is in China." When, over the next several weeks, the administration finally discovered melamine in baby formula sold here in the United States, its first order of business was to set up a conference call to warn the companies that produce 90 percent of the world's milk powder—Abbott Labs, Mead Johnson, and Nestlé. But when it came to the general public, the FDA remained silent—at least until the Associated Press filed a Freedom of Information Act request for the test results and published the news in late November. The Department of Agriculture declared (PDF) that it will follow the lead of the FDA on the melamine issue, which is why it's only just now begun to take action.

Conscientious consumers who have followed the melamine story are appropriately outraged. Some have written off the FDA as hopelessly corrupt and proposed that we all protect ourselves by eating locally grown food. But self-imposed culinary isolationism isn't going to solve this problem. Once milk power enters the nation's commercial bloodstream, it's difficult to avoid. The powder appears in a dizzying array of products—caramelized candies, whey protein supplements, power bars, powdered drinks, nondairy creamers, and baking mixes, among others. We don't have to persuade every American to avoid every one of these products. Instead, let's fix some of the obvious flaws with the FDA so the agency can start doing what it's supposed to do.

Over the course of the scandal, the government made three major mistakes. All of these have become part of the FDA's standard operating procedure, and each could be remedied with proper legislative action. The first involves the arbitrary adjustment of allowable levels of a contaminant. On Nov. 26, the agency confessed on its Web site to being "currently unable to establish any level of melamine and melamine-related compounds in infant formula that does not raise public health concerns." A day later, just after the milk-powder news hit CNN, Dr. Stephen Sundlof, head of the FDA's Center for Food Safety, described the baby formula results as "in the trace range, and from a public health or infant health perspective, we consider those to be perfectly fine." (The administration made a similarly arbitrary decision a few weeks ago concerning mercury levels in seafood.) Melamine is an adulterant. How can it go from being unsafe one day to being "perfectly fine" the next? If the FDA cannot answer this question—that is, if it has no scientific evidence to justify the flip-flop—the change should not be legally permissible.

The second mistake is to use the risk of acute poisoning as a reference for setting contaminant standards. There is a long tradition of business-friendly regulatory agencies avoiding reference to studies of chronic exposure when setting legal trace limits. The Department of Agriculture, for example, ignored long-term effects when it set fruit-residue limits for arsenic-based insecticides in the 1930s. The situation with melamine has been no different. Legal limits in food other than infant formula sit at 2.5 parts per million, a rate that is by most accounts relatively safe with respect to acute toxicity. As a toxicologist at the Minnesota Department of Public Health recently told me, however, there's not a single study out there on the impact of long-term, low-dose exposure to melamine. Meanwhile, we have seen a mysterious but dramatic increase in kidney stones among children and young adults. Medical doctors are largely confused about the underlying cause and more often than not blame obesity. But melamine is known to cause kidney problems like these, and long-term exposure could be responsible for the larger trend. In that case, the FDA would be forced to reduce allowable trace amounts to zero—which is exactly where they should be until studies of chronic exposure suggest otherwise.

A third mistake has to do with the FDA's tendency to regulate finished products at the expense of raw materials. By choosing

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to monitor the safety of imported food items instead of the ingredients that go into them, the FDA not only ignores the intricate nature of global food production but opens the door for Chinese wheat gluten, rice gluten, and milk powder to enter the U.S. food supply without the benefit of stringent regulation. To make matters worse, our so-called "country of origin" labeling laws don't apply to individual ingredients in packaged food products. It might seem unwieldy to require a separate label for each foreign ingredient in a can of soup, but the inconvenience would force the FDA to protect our food supply at its most vulnerable points.

These are grave problems, but there's an achievable regulatory solution for each of them. If the FDA were required by law to provide scientific evidence when it changes adulterant standards and to rely on studies of both acute and chronic toxicity when it set those standards, it would be far more difficult for the bureaucrats to coddle corporate concerns. Add to that a requirement for country-of-origin labeling for all imported foodstuffs, and we're more likely to escape major health scares like this in the future. Short of becoming a nation of locavores in a globalized world, that may be the best we can do.

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hot document

Madoff 'n' Jeff

Bernie Madoff and his accountant made the oddest of couples.

By Bonnie Goldstein

Wednesday, December 17, 2008, at 5:34 PM ET

From: Bonnie Goldstein

Posted Wednesday, December 17, 2008, at 5:34 PM ET

Bernie Madoff, a much-respected Wall Street investment adviser and former NASDAQ chairman, was arrested last week after he confessed to the Federal Bureau of Investigation that he'd committed securities fraud. Madoff told the FBI that his 50-year-old company, Bernard L. Madoff Investment Securities LLC, had been running a "giant Ponzi scheme" for years and that there was "no innocent explanation." The company has been placed in receivership.

Investigators for the Securities and Exchange Commission, the FBI, and the Securities Investor Protection Corporation will surely have a few questions for the company's accountant, Friehling & Horowitz—a small tax-preparation firm located in a shopping center in tiny New City, N.Y.—about the $1.3 billion in assets that David Friehling signed off on in December 2006. At least one hedge-fund adviser, Aksia LLC, had last year warned clients that Friehling & Horowitz, which had only "three employees, of [whom] one was 78 years old and living in Florida [and] one was a secretary," seemed a peculiar choice given "the scope of Madoff's activities."

The two companies were, indeed, an odd match. On the Madoff Investment Securities Web site (Pages 2-4), which has now been removed and replaced with a trustee notice, the Wall Street powerhouse boasted of being "one of the first U.S. members of the London Stock exchange." Friehling led a more provincial life, delightedly relating last year in the "Trusted Professional," a newsletter for certified public accountants, that while touring Europe last year he and his wife foiled potential pickpockets by relying on a prepaid debit card rather than cash (below). "Although the seascape and the historical sites differ dramatically from those in the U.S.," Friehling wrote, "we are all operating in a 21st-century economy. When exiting ruins that are over 2,500 years old, there you find it: the bank ATM!"

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jurisprudence

How the Senate Can Stop Blagojevich

It easily has the power to block the governor's appointment of Roland Burris.

By Akhil Reed Amar and Josh Chafetz

Wednesday, December 31, 2008, at 6:23 PM ET

Does the Constitution allow the Senate to refuse to seat Roland Burris, Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich's surprise appointee? In a word, yes. Here's why.

Following English parliamentary tradition and early Colonial and state practice, the framers made the Senate its own gatekeeper and guardian. Each house of Congress is "the Judge of the Elections, Returns, and Qualifications of its own members," according to Article 1, Section 5 of the Constitution. At the founding, Senators were elected by state legislatures. If the Senate believed that legislators in a given state had been bribed into voting for a particular candidate, the Senate could refuse to seat him.

Because of the word "returns" in Section 5, what is true of elected Senators is equally true of appointed Senators. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a "Return" in the time of the framers involved a report of an appointment made by a sheriff or other official. If the Senate may refuse to seat a person picked in a corrupt election, it likewise may refuse to seat a person picked in a corrupt appointment process. (Alternatively, we might think of an appointment as an "election" by one voter.)

A simple majority of the Senate would suffice to exclude Burris. Majority rule is the general default principle established by the Constitution, except where text, structure, or tradition indicates otherwise. When the Senate tries to expel a member who has already been seated, the rule is two-thirds (as it is when the Senate sits as an impeachment court). But the framers clearly understood that majority rule would apply when the Senate was judging the accuracy and fairness of elections or appointments.

The power to judge elections and returns has been used on countless occasions in American history, at both the state and federal level, to exclude candidates whose elections and appointments were suspect.

True, in the 1969 case of *Powell v. McCormack*, the Supreme Court properly held that the Constitution imposes limits on the power of the Senate and the House to exclude members. Some legal commentators say this decision trumps the Senate's power to exclude Burris. But the letter and spirit of *Powell* actually cut against him. The case involved an elected congressman, Adam Clayton Powell, whom the voters had clearly chosen in a fair election and whom the House nevertheless excluded—wrongly, the court held. The key fact is that there was no doubt whatsoever that Powell was the people's choice, and in issuing its ruling, the Warren Court repeatedly stressed this. The justices insisted that their ruling was aimed at protecting the people's right to vote. None of that spirit applies here. And that's why the case doesn't stand in the Senate's way now.

Powell also said that each house could "judge" the qualifications laid out in the Constitution (such as age) but could not make up new qualifications. Thus, if the Senate were to plausibly decide in good faith that a candidate failed to meet the Constitution's age requirement, *Powell* nowhere suggests that this senatorial determination should be set aside by ordinary federal courts. For similar reasons, federal courts should not interfere when the Senate plausibly and in good faith decides an election or return to be improper or corrupt. The critical point here is that the Constitution itself sets up the Senate as the highest court of Senate elections. When the Senate speaks as this court, its adjudications are legal judgments that no other court may properly reopen. If the Senate convicts a federal judge in an impeachment court, no other federal court may properly interfere. So, too, for Senate elections and returns.

What are the counterarguments in favor of seating Burris? Both he and Blagojevich say that the Senate should not hold the governor's sins against his would-be senator. To be sure, there is no evidence Burris bribed the governor to get this seat. But imagine if Burris had won election only because other candidates were wrongly and corruptly kept off the ballot. Surely the Senate could properly deem this an invalid election. Similarly, it now seems apparent that there were candidates that Blagojevich refused to consider for improper reasons—because one refused to "pay to play" early on, or because another is at the center of the impending criminal case against the governor. With the appointments process so inherently and irremediably tainted, the Senate may properly decide that nothing good can come from a Blagojevich appointment.

(And let's not feel too sorry for Burris, who, after all, has shown dubious judgment in accepting the nomination, given the circumstances. Weeks ago, Senate leaders announced that no Blagojevich appointee would be allowed to sit. What is Burris thinking? Many other arguably better candidates doubtless refused to have any dealings with Blagojevich once his crimes came to light; Burris got his shot at the Senate at their expense.)

Nor does it matter, from the Senate's point of view, that Blagojevich hasn't yet been convicted. In this context, the Senate itself is a judge, in the words of the Constitution, and can decide facts for itself. It need not follow the rules of criminal courts. That means it need not find Blagojevich guilty beyond reasonable doubt, as a court would if his liberty were in jeopardy. It is enough for the Senate to reject Blagojevich's appointee if a majority of senators are firmly convinced that

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Blagojevich is corrupt and that any nomination he might make is inherently tainted by such corruption.

To make sure its ruling sticks, the Senate should follow its own procedures with due deliberation. Burris' case can be referred to a committee for careful review. He need not be seated while this committee does its work, and it will be very hard for Burris to persuade any federal judge to interfere in the meantime, especially if Senate Democrats and Republicans unite. With any luck, Blagojevich will be out of office soon enough and a new appointments process (or a special election) can begin that would supersede the attempted Burris appointment.

Finally, the Senate can bulletproof its vote to exclude Burris by adopting an anticipatory "sense of the Senate" resolution declaring that if Burris were ever to take the matter to a federal court and prevail, the Senate would immediately expel him. Expulsion would ultimately require a two-thirds vote. If two-thirds of the Senate is ready to vote against Burris now, an anticipatory resolution would discourage him from going to court in the first place. It would also discourage any activist judges who might be tempted by his case. Whether to seat Burris is the Senate's call: It easily has the brute power—and the constitutional right—to stop Blagojevich.

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The Senate has been called upon to judge the return of an appointed Senator at least twice.

In 1893 (before the 17th Amendment provided for the direct election of senators), the Montana legislature adjourned without electing a senator. After the adjournment, Gov. John E. Richards appointed Lee Mantle to fill the vacant seat. By a three-vote margin, the Senate determined that a vacancy the legislature knew about and did not fill was not the sort of vacancy that the governor had the power to fill himself. Accordingly, Mantle was denied the seat.

In 1913, just after the 17th Amendment was ratified, Sen. Joseph Johnston of Alabama died. The Alabama legislature was in recess, and the governor appointed Frank Glass to fill the vacancy. The last provision of the 17th Amendment reads, "This amendment shall not be so construed as to affect the election or term of any Senator chosen before it becomes valid as part of the Constitution." If this clause was read as attached to the Senate *seat*, then the 17th Amendment did not yet apply to it, and Glass was properly chosen under the pre-17th Amendment procedure. If, on the other hand, the amendment applied to the individual *senator*, then it was operative with regard to the Alabama seat. In that case, the appointment of Glass was unconstitutional, and the seat would have to be filled by special election. The Senate determined that the latter was the correct interpretation. Glass did not get the seat, which was filled instead by a special election.

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Houses of Congress have, in the past, found that certain elections were so tainted that the returned member should not be seated. For example, in 1854, it was alleged that the election for a territorial delegate from Kansas was disrupted "by an armed invading force" from Missouri—the beginning of the "Bleeding Kansas" episode in American history. A congressional committee determined that, under the circumstances, "a fair election could not be held," and the delegate was not seated. Although this election was for a nonvoting territorial delegate, rather than a full-fledged member, the House's procedure was no different than it otherwise would have been.

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medical examiner

The Tissue of Youth

Is human placenta a wonder drug, or is it just another Japanese health fad?

By Amanda Schaffer

Tuesday, December 30, 2008, at 8:00 AM ET

TOKYO—Call it the oxygen bar of the future, but with needles and nurses, vitamins, and a shot of human placenta.

Located in a tony complex—upstairs from L'Occitane and Armani, down the hall from Morgan Stanley—the clinic offers 10-minute intravenous drips to urbanites in need of a pick-me-up. (The place is called Tenteki 10, after the Japanese word for *intravenous*.) When I drop in, three women are on their way out, exuding relaxation, as if they've been to a spa. A technician tidies up the treatment room, where patients sit on elevated stools. IV bags release liquid into their veins as a flat-screen TV displays images of red leaves and water rushing over rocks. Many of the treatments include recognizable fare—vitamin C, biotin, and various amino acids—however questionable it may be to infuse unspecified doses of these "treatments" into healthy

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adults. But the kicker is the key ingredient in one of the cocktails: human placental extract.

Placental extract has been available in Japan since at least the late 1950s. The country's National Health Insurance covers placental treatments for liver disease and symptoms of menopause, though patients pay out of pocket for its other alleged benefits, like fighting fatigue, treating insomnia, and combating aging, according to several Japanese doctors. The academic literature on it remains thin, however. And the complex soup of placental compounds—including, potentially, hormones, growth factors, and immune molecules—might mean that fountain-of-youth seekers could face some risks, like unwanted immune reactions or viruses. Is placental extract a clinical treasure trove? Or do these infusions amount to freaky magical thinking?

The staff at Tenteki 10 is confident about its popular "placenta pack," which costs about $30. The bubbly receptionist tells me it's her favorite drip at the clinic—she personally receives it at least once every other week. The morning after, she says, she wakes up refreshed, her skin noticeably smoother and younger. The clinic's medical director, Ryuji Yasumura, a physician who telegraphs calm paternalism, is also a fan. "Some young doctors don't know about placenta because it's old," he says, gesturing to his own salt-and-pepper mop, though it's not clear exactly how far back it dates as a folk remedy. But he argues that placenta ought to be better recognized and covered by insurance for more uses, particularly for fatigue, which many people in Japan's workaholic culture suffer from.

It's hard to deny the poetry of placenta. Placenta plays a crucial role in sustaining pregnancy by supplying the fetus with oxygen and nutrients, allowing it to dispose of wastes, and helping it build blood vessels and protect itself from disease. The possibility that it could also serve as a fountain of youth or health for mom and dad has circle-of-life allure. In some cultures, people bury the placenta and plant a tree in the soil. Many mammals—including cats, bats, goats, and, possibly, Tom Cruise—eat the placenta after birth. One Japanese company sells a placental "health drink" that reportedly tastes like peaches.

So, poetry gives way to commerce. At least two Japanese companies produce human placental extract, and numerous sites advertise online sales. The extract is also exported from Japan to Korea, where it is approved for liver disease and menopausal symptoms and widely used for fatigue and "skin whitening" as well. A doctor in Yunoyama, Japan, who runs a "health and rejuvenation tour" that offers injections of placental extract, in part for menopausal women, tells me that the extract is effective for treating disease and "safer than aspirin, I'm sure, 100 percent." Still, he concedes, "pure scientists say, 'show me the evidence.' "

To date, at least, that evidence supporting placenta as a health treatment is scant. One small, randomized clinical trial from Korea published this spring suggests that injections of placental extract may help relieve symptoms of menopause and fatigue. The study followed roughly 80 women between ages 40 and 64. Those who received placental injections for eight weeks scored significantly lower on a scale of menopausal symptoms than those who received saline injections. They also seemed to experience decreased fatigue. The researchers speculate that immune molecules in placenta may act to reduce inflammation, which could have a positive effect on energy. The reduction in women's menopausal symptoms might be linked to estrogen, which is present in the extract. But estrogen may increase the risk of blood clots and strokes as well, as data from the landmark Women's Health Initiative suggested. Depending in part on the woman's age, it may also, together with progestins, increase the odds of a heart attack. The Korean group did not find an increase in cardiovascular risk factors. The researchers also note that their extract contained a relatively low dose of estrogen compared with hormone therapy. But they did not follow women for very long, and their sample was small, so it's hard to dismiss these worries out of hand.

As for liver and skin, some work suggests that placental extract may stimulate the regeneration of liver cells—in rats, at least. This may happen partly because placenta contains hepatocyte growth factor, which supports liver cell growth and tissue development. But without clinical trials, it's hard to know what the effects would be in people. The effects on skin are also fairly speculative. In theory, topical gels or creams containing placental extract might help chronic wounds to heal. That is plausible since placenta contains compounds that facilitate collagen formation and skin cell proliferation, says Michael Nelson of Washington University School of Medicine, who edits the scholarly journal *Placenta*. But this paper, at least, finds that the wound-healing effect is merely comparable to that associated with a common antiseptic. Nor did I turn up any clinical trials that demonstrate anti-aging effects on skin, at least in the peer-reviewed, medical literature. Perhaps the fountain-of-youth claims spring from a belief that substances connected with childbirth or infants must hold some power to turn the clock back. (The same leap seems to fuel hype about fighting wrinkles using cells from babies' foreskins—though foreskins themselves seem rather wrinkly!)

Placenta contains hormones, growth factors, immune molecules, lipids, and nucleic acids—hundreds of different compounds. Specific placental molecules isolated from the mix could turn out to have particular clinical applications. But the richness of placenta also makes casual infusion risky. To make an extract, according to one academic description, manufacturers simply gather human placentas from women who have just given birth and place the tissue on ice. Then, they cut it into pieces, test it for viruses, perform chemical separation and purification steps, and sterilize and seal the product. Some proteins may be

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rendered inactive by sterilization. And some manufacturers may remove specific groups of molecules. (Yasumura says Tenteki 10's infusion does not contain hormones.)

But it's hard to know what exactly is present and what the accumulated effects will be. For instance, some cytokines found in the placenta act to increase inflammation while others act to decrease it; some, like interleukin 6, can do either, depending on what other molecules are present, according to Ted Golos, an expert on placenta at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Rigorous clinical trials, using standardized extracts, would be crucial for sorting out what the actual effects might or might not be. And since extracts are made from human tissue, they could contain bacteria or viruses, some of which may not be tested for. As the staff at Tenteki 10 casually informs clients, those who receive placental infusions are no longer allowed to donate blood in Japan.

These dangers might seem important to wrestle with if placenta were shown to have genuine healing powers. But with little proven benefit, it seems questionable to turn to the extract, especially for conditions that have other available treatment options. For severe menopausal symptoms, for instance, it's hard to know whether placenta would prove better (or worse) than hormone therapy, unless more research, including head-to-head comparisons, were conducted. Meanwhile, claims that the extract aids both insomnia *and* fatigue are cause for some head-scratching.

Placental drips do not seem ready for prime time, even among the clinically adventurous. Nor are they likely to win approval in the United States anytime soon. Still, Tenteki 10 reports growing demand for all of its infusions, especially since the financial meltdown. When I drop by for a second visit, late in the afternoon, two businessmen are filling out intake forms in the reception area. Another is sprawled in the backroom VIP lounge, his eyes closed, his arm outstretched for the human cocktail. Regardless of the needle and drip, he seems, at least, to be getting a good nap.

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movies

Top 10 Movies of 2008

May I have the envelope please ...

By Dana Stevens

Monday, December 29, 2008, at 6:40 AM ET

I must have the opposite of Asperger's syndrome: I'm allergic to hierarchies, lists, and ranking. But like a hippie schoolteacher when report-card time rolls around, I have to haul out the red pen and mark the ledger this time of year—and if nothing else, it's an opportunity to kvell over the accomplishments of a few beloved pupils.

So, unranked and in alphabetical order, here are 10 of this year's best:

***A Christmas Tale*:** Arnaud Desplechin makes films about intellectuals that thrum with emotional (and cinematic) life. The story of a matriarch with a rare blood disease (Catherine Deneuve) seeking a transfusion from one of her three angry, resentful grown children (the craziest of whom is played by Mathieu Amalric), *A Christmas Tale* is a glorious feast of a movie, with the bitter served right next to the sweet.

***The Class*:** I said it all last week, but here's a recap: See this whip-smart vérité film about a Parisian teacher and his multiracial high-school class only if you happen to be interested in love, loyalty, race, class, language, or life.

***The Edge of Heaven*:** Director Fatih Akin, a German of Turkish descent, made this little-seen movie that's everything *Crash* and *Babel* should have been. Yes, it's an interlocking series of stories about globalization and its discontents, but this time, the characters are beautifully realized individuals, not symbolic pegs on an international game board. A little poky getting going, but give this movie an hour, and it will give you the world.

***Encounters at the End of the World*:** Though it lacks the conceptual purity of his masterpiece *Grizzly Man*, Werner Herzog's account of his visit to the McMurdo research station at the South Pole is an invaluable tour of one of the weirdest spots on earth, as seen through the eyes of our weirdest and wisest documentary filmmaker.

***Frozen River*:** The astonishingly mature debut film of director Courtney Hunt is as uncompromising as the work of those Belgian masters of social realism, the Dardenne brothers. Yet Hunt's subject matter—the straitened circumstances that compel two very dissimilar women to smuggle illegal immigrants across the Canadian border—is uniquely, and bleakly, American.

***Man on Wire*:** One morning in 1974, Philippe Petit, a French acrobat, walked a tightrope strung between the two towers of the World Trade Center. The stunt was simple and yet breathtaking—just like this documentary from British director James Marsh.

***Milk*:** Many of the films we think of as landmark depictions of gay life (*Philadelphia*, *Brokeback Mountain*) suffer from a deficiency of joy. Gus Van Sant takes care of that in the giddy first 10 minutes of his sexy, buoyant biopic of slain activist Harvey Milk—and then goes on to break our hearts.

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***Wall-E*:** In this postapocalyptic Pixar fable, a battered VHS copy of *Hello, Dolly!* is the only thing that sustains the titular robot through centuries of loneliness as the sole sentient being on Earth. If Al Gore's nightmares do come true and you find yourself alone on the planet, your best bet for keeping hope alive may be a battered DVD of *Wall-E*.

***Wendy and Lucy**:* The year's most haunting soundtrack may be the six-bar theme (composed by Will Oldham) that Michelle Williams hums throughout this quiet marvel of a film from director Kelly Reichardt. A transient young woman in the Pacific Northwest loses her dog: It sounds like a skimpy premise to hang a movie on, but then, you could say the same thing about *Bicycle Thieves*.

***The Wrestler**:* It seems to have become de rigueur, when talking about Darren Aronofsky's latest, to praise Mickey Rourke's performance while expressing grave doubts about the movie as a whole. I intend to do nothing of the kind: I loved it all, from Marisa Tomei's sad-eyed pole dances to the bit parts played by nonprofessional actors to the graceful handheld camerawork by Maryse Alberti. Go ahead and try to make me say something bad about *The Wrestler*. But be warned: I have a stapler, and I will use it.

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other magazines

Tax Gas, Not Income

The *Weekly Standard* on how to reduce demand for foreign oil for free.

By Marc Tracy

Tuesday, December 30, 2008, at 4:03 PM ET

***Weekly Standard*, Jan. 5, 2009**

Charles Krauthammer's cover story calls for a "net-zero" gasoline tax. A $1-per-gallon levy tempered by a $14-per-week reduction in payroll taxes would leave the average American no poorer (and his government no richer), but it would shrink gas demand. This would help keep the price of oil down, hurting the United States' hydrocarbon-exporting enemies and rivals. Krauthammer contends that currently cheap gas (about $1.65 per gallon) combined with the memory of extremely pricey gas (over $4 last July) has made the tax not only wise but also "politically palatable"—a "once in a generation opportunity"... "Obesity is the new smoking," argues one article, citing New York's "fat tax" on soda and a Binghamton, N.Y., ordinance barring discrimination against the overweight. The author ridicules progressives' use of epidemiological language to cast the obese as blameless victims of disease and wonders whether that soda tax might not run afoul of that anti-discrimination law.

***New York*, Jan. 5, 2009**

A spotlight on former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who taught a course on faith and globalization at Yale last semester, argues that he is "a better American politician than most American politicians." Like Winston Churchill and Margaret Thatcher, he has found a warmer reception stateside, where his strong personal faith is not anomalous, than he has back home. ... A column points to foreign policy to explain why George W. Bush and Barack Obama seem to have found themselves cast in a transition buddy comedy. The success of the troop surge aided Obama by minimizing the commander-in-chief question. Now Obama will control much of Bush's Iraq legacy. The author argues, "Obama's foreign-policy instincts bear a strong resemblance to those of George H.W. Bush, whose pragmatic realism looks more and more like the essence of an emerging new consensus in foreign policy"—especially given that Dubya, too, has recently adopted his father's global outlook.

***The New Yorker*, Jan. 5, 2009**

A lengthy dispatch examines the Darfur conflict from the perspective of the United Nations employees who run 12 camps in eastern Chad, which together have taken in about 250,000 Sudanese refugees. The author marvels at the nascent economies the refugees have established but finds himself giving money to a few desperate inhabitants. Meanwhile, portraits of aid workers, doctors, and bureaucrats do justice to the article's title: "Lives of the Saints."... A review of sex books past and present describes the "explosion" produced by *The Joy of Sex*'s 1972 release while criticizing its infamous hairy-man drawings, unfortunate heteronormative inclinations, and general Internet-age obsolescence. The author then applauds the P.C. revisions in a new edition of *Joy* ("crucially, rear-entry intercourse is no longer called sex "à la Négresse"), but critiques its odd prudishness: "What was revolutionary in 1972 seems obvious now, and to present the material otherwise feels silly and square."

***GQ*, January 2009**

Robert Draper describes his experiences interviewing George W. Bush for his book *Dead Certain*. "Bush's greatest talent is personal diplomacy," Draper relates. "Conversation with him feels like a physical experience. He listens acutely, relishes argument, and is just as quick to concede a point as he is to pummel a specious one." The article discloses Bush's post-White House plans—"I'll give some speeches, just to replenish the ol' coffers"—as well as some dish: Lynne Cheney, Draper says, "seemed affronted by my every question—except for the ones that gave her an opportunity to say what an asshole John Edwards was." … A dispatch from Foreclosure Alley, the expanse of southern California where the housing and credit crashes are yanking 500 homes from their owners per day, features a 21st-century ghost town and a McMansion with "walls

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... so thin a Chablis drinker could put a fist through them without dropping the Brie from his wafer."

***New York Review of Books*, Jan. 15, 2009**
In a review of three new books on the Bush administration's harsh interrogation techniques, David Cole expresses sorrow and anger at the U.S. military's official adoption of what amounts to torture. In one book, former Pentagon official Douglas Feith "practically gloats" about constructing legal doctrines that exempt alleged al-Qaida members from the Geneva Conventions; another tome "convincingly makes the case that [Donald] Rumsfeld committed war crimes." Cole argues, "The best insurance against cruelty and torture becoming U.S. policy again is a formal recognition that what we did after September 11 was wrong." But an official "reckoning" is as unlikely as it is crucial. ... An article on U.S. Middle East policy indicts Bush for a "lethal mix of arrogance and ignorance" while noting that President Bill Clinton also failed to produce positive results. So what ought the United States do under Obama? The authors counsel patience and humility concerning the limits of the United States' ability to bring peace.

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poem

"The Darkling Thrush"

Thomas Hardy's timely meditation on the turning of an era.

By Robert Pinsky

Tuesday, December 30, 2008, at 7:58 AM ET

This month's classic poem is Thomas Hardy's "The Darkling Thrush," which Hardy dated "31 December 1900": the last evening of the 19th century. More than a decade ago (June 1998), as the millennial year approached, I offered ***Slate*** readers "The Darkling Thrush" as a hard-to-equal model for responses to the turn of a millennium.

Now, at what many hope is the start of a new era, and in time for the new year, here again is Hardy's vividly described little bird with its blend of comedy and pathos. The "blast-beruffled" thrush in its wintry landscape may represent Hardy's bow of his head toward John Keats and Keats' great "Ode to a Nightingale" of May 1819—when their century was much younger.

Expressively tentative or qualifying phrases like the repeated "seems," "I could think," and "I was unaware" enact Hardy's somewhat skeptical holding back from any declaration that the natural surroundings reflect his mood or the human calendar. The poet is alone, and he ends the first half of the poem with the word *I*: That pronoun suggests, to me, that the "fervorless" or haunted or corpselike quality of the landscape—like the bird's putative "hope" later—is something that the subjective observer at least half creates.

I leant upon a coppice gate
    When Frost was spectre-gray,
And Winter's dregs made desolate
    The weakening eye of day.
The tangled bine-stems scored the sky
    Like strings of broken lyres,
And all mankind that haunted nigh
    Had sought their household fires.

The land's sharp features seemed to be
    The Century's corpse outleant,
His crypt the cloudy canopy,
    The wind his death-lament.
The ancient pulse of germ and birth
    Was shrunken hard and dry,
And every spirit upon earth
    Seemed fervorless as I.

At once a voice arose among
    The bleak twigs overhead
In a full-hearted evensong
    Of joy illimited;
An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small
    In blast-beruffled plume,
Had chosen thus to fling his soul
    Upon the growing gloom.

So little cause for carolings
    Of such ecstatic sound
Was written on terrestrial things
    Afar or nigh around,
That I could think there trembled through
    His happy good-night air
Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew
    And I was unaware.

31 December 1900

—Thomas Hardy

*Click the arrow on the audio player to hear Robert Pinsky read this poem. You can also download the recording or subscribe to **Slate**'s Poetry Podcast on iTunes.*

***Slate** Poetry Editor Robert Pinsky will be participating in the Poem Fray this week. Post your questions and comments on "The Darkling Thrush," and he'll respond and participate.*

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politics

Vote for Me, Not My Facebook Account

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Tips for budding politicians on how to avoid embarrassment on Facebook.
By Abby Callard
Friday, January 2, 2009, at 7:12 AM ET

People who work in politics have always had to worry about what they did before they worked in politics. But the sheer size and popularity of Facebook—140 million active users, at least 139.99 million of whom have been photographed drunk at a college party—present budding politicians (and budding political operatives) with a dilemma: How do they keep those pics from showing up on the front page?

Clearly, the safest way to protect yourself is not to have a Facebook account in the first place—or, alternatively, not to do stupid things. But neither of these pieces of advice is very practical. The whole point of being young, after all, is to do stupid things, and the whole point of Facebook is to record these acts for posterity. So here, as a public service, are some tips for those who feel they must be on Facebook and occasionally also feel the need to, say, feel up a cardboard cutout.

Use a Modified Name
Using a completely false name is against Facebook's terms of use, and accounts with questionable names are routinely deleted. However, using a modified version of your legal name, such as your first and middle name, is kosher. So something like J.S. McCain is OK, while Little Old Ladys Killer (an actual Facebook listing) might be suspect. This strategy isn't foolproof—Rudy Giuliani's daughter's profile was found despite her use of a modified name—but it can throw people off the trail for a while.

Remember That Friends Are Liabilities
In the case of Obama speechwriter Jon Favreau, a friend of his posted the now-notorious photo. While merely "untagging" photos—that is, removing your name from the description of who's in the photo—will make them harder to find, the photograph will still remain on the Web. So you may be reduced to asking your friends not to upload photos of you in compromising situations. Obviously, there's no guarantee that said friends will oblige. But it's worth a shot, right? Also keep in mind that everything you write on anyone's wall can be seen by all of his or her friends. Which leads to:

Be Careful What You Write on People's Walls
Although Facebook has made it easier to completely delete your profile, some information that you have posted to others' pages won't be deleted. So while professing your—totally platonic! really!—love for your friend might seem like a good idea on a drunken Saturday night, just imagine the headlines during primary season. Even though the link to your profile will become inactive, your comment will be floating around cyberspace until your friend decides to delete his or her profile, too.

Segregate Your Friends
Segregation might seem cruel. But you wouldn't invite your boss to a kegger, so why would you let him see pictures of the one you attended last weekend? Privacy settings let you make lists of friends and allow each group to see different parts of your profile. So while you may want the guys at the frat house to see photographic evidence of your totally awesome keg stand, you may want the DNC chairman to see only that you're currently reading *Crime and Punishment*.

Understand Guilt by Association
People like to belong. But on Facebook, associations can make trouble for you—or, as the case may be, a close family member—later on. Giuliani's daughter, for example, joined the "Barack Obama (One Million Strong for Barack)" group. And try to avoid groups, such as "I Paint My Nails Like a Blind Parkinson's Patient," that may raise questions about your sensitivity years from now.

Of course, it's possible that all this careful strategizing is entirely unnecessary. Maybe, by the time you want to run for office, no one will care about all the seedy information out there. Even in the past few years, there's been a shift in political thinking. Transparency has evolved from Bill Clinton's "didn't inhale" to Obama's "I inhaled frequently; that was the point."

In a March story in the *New York Times*, Susan Dominus theorized that in a few years, the whole game will have changed. "When everyone has already seen everything (and is thoroughly bored by most of it), the theory goes, politicians will have to find another way to self-destruct," she writes. A Facebook spokesperson agrees. "It may be that in the future, instead of fearing politicians' online pasts, we may actually come to accept, and even expect, them as a helpful measure of authenticity," he wrote in an e-mail. And Daniel Liss, a graduate of NYU's Interactive Telecommunications Program and self-described struggling idealist, thinks that the media will eventually tire of snooping through Facebook profiles for incriminating information. Right now, he says, they're still operating under the idea that anything they uncover is breaking news.

Then again, maybe the American public's hunger for celebrity gossip is insatiable. In which case, as you contemplate that run for Senate, think about how Fox News or MSNBC might use that photo from last Halloween of you dressed up as Sarah Palin.

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politics

Blago's Wily Move

The Illinois governor dares the Senate to reject his appointee, Roland Burris.
By Edward McClelland
Tuesday, December 30, 2008, at 5:09 PM ET

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You don't like Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich's pick for the U.S. Senate? What's the matter with you? Don't you want to see another black guy in the World's Most Exclusive Club?

That was the tone of Blagojevich's press conference Tuesday afternoon, when he introduced former Illinois Attorney General Roland Burris as his choice to fill the unexpired term of President-elect Barack Obama.

Blagojevich also reminded voters that if he hadn't acted, Illinois would be short-handed when the U.S. Senate convenes next week. A gubernatorial appointment is the only way to fill Obama's seat, since the General Assembly failed to schedule a special election.

"As governor, I am required to make this appointment," Blagojevich said. "If I don't, then the people of Illinois will be deprived of their voice and vote in the Senate."

Blagojevich likes to brag about his "testicular virility." This was a ballsy move by a governor who wants to show he's still running the state and wants to use racial politics to confound his enemies. Burris is an uninspiring but unobjectionable politician who served 16 years in statewide office as comptroller and attorney general. Burris made it through a decade and a half without a major scandal—a real achievement in Illinois. Even better, he wasn't one of the candidates Blagojevich discussed in phone conversations taped by the U.S. Attorney's Office. According to Burris, he and Blagojevich first discussed the appointment on Sunday night.

"Don't allow the allegations against me to taint this good and honest man," Blagojevich said.

That was Blagojevich using the term "good and honest," so reporters pointed out that Burris' law firm has contributed $14,000 to Blagojevich's campaigns. Burris' consulting firm also had a contract with the Illinois Department of Transportation to certify minority businesses.

Burris has been out of politics since 2002, when he ran against Blagojevich for governor. He didn't help himself in that campaign when called his opponents "unqualified white boys." But he did help Blagojevich, siphoning off black votes from the third candidate in that race, a popular Chicago school superintendent. Blagojevich squeaked through the primary with 38 percent and has credited Burris' presence in the race for his victory.

By 2002, Burris was starting to look like a shopworn politician. One of his favorite campaign lines was "I have never lost a race to a Republican." He's lost plenty to Democrats, though: He ran for governor three times and mayor of Chicago once. Paul Simon beat him in the 1984 Senate primary. Burris' tombstone in Oakwoods Cemetery, which lists all his achievements, has an empty space in the lower right-hand corner. He was hoping to fill it with "Governor of Illinois."

What are Burris' strengths? Besides his 16 years in office, he grew up downstate, in Centralia, Ill. He understands, more than most contenders for the seat, that there is an Illinois outside Chicago. And he's African-American. That helps Blagojevich at home. Blacks are the best friends he has left in Illinois, and they were expecting the governor to keep the Senate integrated. It also helps him in Washington. If Harry Reid stands on the Capitol steps next week and tries to bar Roland Burris, he won't just be rejecting Blagojevich's senator—he'll be rejecting black America's senator.

At the news conference, U.S. Rep. Bobby Rush dared the Senate to say no.

"This is not just a state of Illinois matter," said Rush, who hopes to rally the Congressional Black Caucus behind Burris. "Indeed, by this decision, it has tremendous national importance. We need to have an African-American in the U.S. Senate. I would ask you not to hang or lynch the appointee as you tried to do to the appointer."

Then he added, "I don't think that any U.S. senator wants to go on record to deny one black senator from being seated."

Burris called a potential challenge "a process we must look forward to."

But here's a piece of luck for Reid. Illinois Secretary of State Jesse White, who is also African-American, says he won't certify Burris' appointment. That may not invalidate the choice, but it will allow discomfited Senate Democrats to point out that a black politician was the first to reject Burris.

In a way, Burris has a claim on this seat. When he was elected comptroller in 1978, he was the first African-American to hold statewide office in Illinois, beating a path that Barack Obama later followed to the U.S. Senate.

If Blagojevich has any political life remaining, "United States Senator" will fill that last line on Burris' tombstone.

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slate v

The Best Viral Political Videos of 2008

A daily video from ***Slate V***.

Tuesday, December 30, 2008, at 11:43 AM ET

sports nut

0-16 to 16-0

OK, maybe more like 9-7. But the Detroit Lions can turn things around—they just need to emulate the Falcons and Dolphins.

By Robert Weintraub

Wednesday, December 31, 2008, at 4:05 PM ET

Hey, Lions fans! No need to fret. Sure, your team just completed the worst professional football season of all time, including the CFL, the World League, even the XFL. But this is the NFL, where waiting until next year actually works. Check out the playoff-bound Miami Dolphins and Atlanta Falcons. In 2007, both franchises suffered through near-Detroit levels of decrepitude. Miami was 1-15. Meanwhile, Atlanta's rookie head coach bailed on the team for the University of Arkansas, and the team's dog-killing star quarterback was escorted to Leavenworth.

One season later, the Dolphins and the Falcons are preparing for the postseason ball while the ballyhooed Dallas Cowboys, the even more-hooed Brett Favre, and the New England Patriots, who won 18 straight games not too long ago, will have to watch the postseason on their plasma screens. For the benefit of the poor, destitute Lions, let's run through how the Miami and Atlanta shipwrecks got salvaged. The bullet points: leadership, astute drafting, quarterback smarts, improved line play, good health, and a dose of well-deserved luck.

The NFL is a top-down league, and owners have more influence than in other sports. In Arthur Blank and Wayne Huizenga, the Falcons and Dolphins are run by a pair of men who inserted their egos into team operations, found out the hard way it was a mistake, and backed off this season to let a football man run the show. Bill Parcells, a master renovator who should have his own show on HGTV, was the first choice of both teams. Atlanta thought it had the Tuna signed, but Parcells wiggled free and headed for South Florida instead. Atlanta settled for a canny personnel man from the Parcells tree, Thomas Dimitroff, late of the Patriots' omniscient scouting department. Both men set about remaking their organizations to prize toughness, accountability, and smarts.

In a league where players have such short careers and are so prone to injury, shrewd drafting is essential. It's no coincidence that both teams' personnel men hit it big with their first picks in 2008. Jake Long, a massive offensive tackle, was taken No. 1 overall by Miami. While the Dolphins' use of the Wildcat formation has gotten the most attention, Long and his mates on the offensive line were the biggest reason why the Dolphins' running game has taken off. Matt Ryan was a risky selection for Atlanta at No. 3, with many pundits and fans feeling the Falcons were reaching for a replacement for Michael Vick. But Atlanta hit the jackpot—Ryan is Peyton Manning Jr., a sharp, strong-armed quarterback who can make all the throws but doesn't force the action.

The Dolphins, too, found themselves a quarterback. Chad Pennington fell into Miami's lap after the Jets' shotgun marriage with Favre, and the smart, savvy leader has spent the season showing New York that they chose poorly. Like Ryan, Pennington is extremely risk-averse. While Favre led the league in interceptions, the Jets' old quarterback threw a mere seven picks; as a result, Miami led the league in turnover margin, with 17 more takeaways than giveaways. Another—more underrated—talent that Ryan and Pennington share is ball-handling expertise. Both guys are exceptional at faking to backs, holding linebackers for that all-important second, and making defenses wonder just who has the ball. Pennington's mastery was well known; Ryan's slick hands have been revelatory.

Along with their new QBs, both Atlanta and Miami brought in new coaches. Mike Smith and Tony Sparano have a lot in common. Neither one was a particularly hot name (see Steve Spagnuolo this year) or a reheated old head coach. Smith and Sparano were well-respected line coaches—the guys in charge of the most anonymous, most important personnel groups in the NFL. It's probably not a coincidence that Miami's and Atlanta's offensive and defensive lines surged to the top of the league. While sack differential doesn't get the same publicity as turnover differential, it's just as good of an indicator of winning football games. Miami was +14 and Atlanta +17, both right near the top of the table (Tennessee was an astounding +32). The quarterbacks helped here, too. One of Ryan's best and most precocious attributes is his ability to throw away balls rather than take sacks. Pennington has been beaten up so badly in his career that he learned the lesson the hard way, but he learned.

On the defensive side, both teams revamped a key weapon—sack artists off the edge. Joey Porter, misused by the Fins coaching staff in 2007, was reborn, amassing 17.5 sacks. John Abraham, who struggled in 2007, rebounded with 16.5 for the Falcons, Both added numerous pressures that forced opposing quarterbacks to dump the ball early, helping their teammates in the secondary.

Generally speaking, teams that make quick turnarounds lack depth—if they had a lot of great players then they wouldn't have been bad in the first place. Without quality backups, maintaining good health is crucial, and the Falcons and Dolphins took their vitamins. In a season defined by injuries to superstars like Tom Brady, Shawne Merriman, and Osi Umenyiora, Atlanta and Miami were the league's healthiest teams. Who would've thought that Chad Pennington would make it through 16 games? The lack of names on the injury report is a combination of improved conditioning and training staffs, and a whole lot of good luck.

Speaking of good fortune, the random turns of the NFL schedule helped both squads. Of the 16 games each season, half are

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played on a rotating basis against other divisions. Atlanta drew the mediocre NFC North and the putrid AFC West, and the Falcons went 7-1 in those games. Miami was even luckier, playing the AFC West and the truly awful NFC West, likewise winning seven of eight. The Dolphins also won a "road" game against the Bills in December in a Toronto dome, rather than having to play in the snow and wind of Buffalo.

Giddy fans in Hotlanta and South Beach might not want to hear this, but luck tends to even out. In the last 26 years, only one team, the 1976 Baltimore Colts, has sprung from winning four or fewer games in a season to winning 10 or more the next and then improved again the following season. One need only to gaze toward the wreckage in Cleveland to see what happens when expectations are raised, injuries mount, and the schedule toughens.

A return to earth by either team would help clear a path for a current weakling. That a laughable 2008 squad will turn into a surprise power in 2009 is practically guaranteed. If they draft well (no more wide receivers!), get a QB (Sam Bradford? Matt Cassel?), strengthen their line play, and stay healthy, that team just might be Detroit. The Lions have already taken a huge first step, finally dumping remarkably putrid team president Matt Millen this year. Detroit doesn't need a bailout, just some smart decision-making and a few bounces to go their way for once.

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technology

Vista Revisited

The new version of Microsoft Windows is a lot like the old one. But better.

By Farhad Manjoo

Wednesday, December 31, 2008, at 5:39 PM ET

Last summer, Microsoft's marketing department pulled a strange stunt to prove that its latest operating system, Windows Vista, isn't as terrible as everyone on the Internet claims. The company invited 140 people who said they hated Vista to take part in a focus-group review of the new Microsoft OS, Windows Mojave. The malcontents were blown away by all of Mojave's amazing features, like how well it organized photos and music—why didn't the company put all this great stuff in Vista? That's when Microsoft's sales team dropped the bomb: Windows "Mojave" was actually Windows Vista! The company had rebranded its beleaguered OS to prove that much of what troubled the software was in people's heads, not in the program itself. As long as customers don't know they're using Vista, they love it.

Microsoft seems to have taken the results of that zany focus group to heart. Last week, copies of Windows 7, the first beta version of the new OS, leaked to file-sharing sites online. (The company plans an official release of the beta to developers and the public early in 2009.) I downloaded Windows 7 and installed it to my laptop, and after a couple days of using it, here's what I can report: "Windows 7" is actually Windows Vista—or at most a tidied-up retread.

Microsoft's next OS is not a whole-cloth reimagining of the sort you'd expect after a stinging failure. In building Windows 7, engineers didn't go back to the drawing board—they went back to the body shop. They tweaked many small details, fixing some of Vista's most persistent problems and adding several user-interface features that I found very handy. They also improved its speed and handling, rendering it snappier than Windows XP, the long-lived OS that many people—myself included—used in place of Vista.

The results are pretty great. Though still in beta, Windows 7 runs like a final version; it'll only improve as it nears its final release date (sometime in the summer or fall) and thus looks certain to strengthen Microsoft's hold over the PC desktop now and for years to come. That should come as no surprise: For all the bad press it received, Vista never posed any long-term danger to the Windows hegemony. True, sales of Macs have been up lately, but that's sort of like pointing out that soccer is gaining ground as an American spectator sport—perhaps technically true but somewhat beside the point. Nine out of every 10 PCs in the world run Windows. With this new version, the Windows world will now have a chance, after too long, to use an OS that doesn't feel like drudgery.

I installed Windows 7 on a new partition on a new hard drive—that is, uncluttered by a stack of old programs and any previous installation of the OS and thus probably not representative of what people will encounter when they install 7 over their current version of Windows (or on a new computer that's clogged with unnecessary apps installed by the manufacturer). That said, the results were impressive: With Windows 7, my machine booted up in less than 20 seconds and returned from sleep mode instantly. Under previous versions of Windows, rebooting the machine was an occasion for a long coffee break, and putting it to sleep went pretty much as that phrase suggests—sometimes, the sleep was permanent.

The speed improvements are of a piece with Windows 7's generally streamlined packaging. Ten years ago, Microsoft's practice of "bundling" extra applications into its OS blew up into a federal case. The company insisted that integrating programs like a Web browser benefited users while the government argued that Microsoft was aiming to leverage its OS monopoly into other areas of the software business. The feds won that argument in court; now Microsoft seems to have seen the business merits of what you might call unbundling. You'll still find Internet Explorer in Windows 7, but unlike previous versions, the new OS doesn't ship with an e-mail program, a calendar, a movie editor, and a photo manager. Instead, Windows 7 prompts users

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to get this software from Microsoft's Windows Live online service. This move surely follows its own business logic—Microsoft wants to encourage people to use its online apps in an effort to fight Google in the cloud software business, which many consider the future of the software industry. But in this case the business decision helps users, too: You no longer get an OS stuffed with apps you don't need and can instead stock your computer with free programs found online—whether from Microsoft, Google, Apple, or any other vendor.

Aesthetically, Windows 7 looks much more like Vista than XP or Mac OS X—its default color scheme is dark and businesslike, all slate grays and shiny blue-greens. Several attractive themes are built in, though—choose one, and you change the desktop image, window colors, and system sounds all at once. A few of these themes put your desktop's wallpaper on a slide show, switching the background image every few minutes; I picked one that showed stunning nature shots of various American landscapes.

The color scheme may be familiar, but the Windows taskbar—that menu at the bottom of your screen that shows what programs you're running—has received a major facelift. In fact, the redesign here is so fundamental that it could confuse a lot of Windows users and turn them off altogether on the whole OS.

To understand the significance of these changes, recall how the Windows taskbar differs from the corresponding element on the Mac, the dock. First introduced in Windows 95, the taskbar's main function has long been to show you what programs are currently running on your computer. Each on-screen window has a corresponding button in the taskbar, and in Windows the most obvious way to switch to another app—especially one that may be hidden somewhere on the screen—is to click its icon in the taskbar. The taskbar is, for many people, the heart and soul of the OS—the place you look most often to understand what's going on with your machine.

The Mac OS X dock is a more hydra-headed beast, combining many different functions into one interface: As in Windows, the dock puts up an icon for every program you've got open; you can switch among different running apps by clicking on their icons. But the Mac's dock is also a place to launch new applications—that is, some of the icons in the dock represent programs that you can choose to run if you'd like.

I prefer the Windows approach over the Mac's. It's not only simpler to grasp—*everything down here is something I've got open*—but it's also very useful, a quick way to see what's happening on your computer and to switch between different tasks. Over the years, though, Microsoft has made several changes to the taskbar that make it much more like the Mac's dock. Beginning in Windows XP, several similar taskbar items were grouped into one button; for instance, if you opened up a lot of Firefox windows, Windows would collapse them into a single icon on the taskbar. This makes the taskbar less useful as a window-switching tool—you've got to click on this one icon to see the different Firefox windows you're running. Microsoft also began to incorporate permanent shortcuts into the taskbar, turning it into a place to launch programs, not just switch between them. In Windows 7 the transformation is complete: The Windows taskbar now operates pretty much exactly like the Mac OS' dock.

An icon in the Windows 7 taskbar could represent one of several kinds of items: It could be a shortcut to a program that isn't currently running—if you click it, you'll launch that program. It could be a button representing an already open window—click that, and you'll switch to that window. Or it could represent *a group* of windows that are open—click on the Word icon, and you'll be able to choose which of several Word documents you'd like to switch to. Both the Mac and Windows use slight graphic clues to highlight these differences, but they're not as obvious as I'd like; it often takes some mousing around to figure out what exactly is being represented by an icon in the taskbar or dock. Still, Microsoft has implemented a few cool features that make this easier than on a Mac. For instance, if you simply move your mouse over a taskbar item, a large, transparent preview of that window appears on the screen. (To see this feature in action, watch this video.) Mac OS X engineers should swipe that feature.

Windows-watchers see the new taskbar as Windows 7's greatest weakness; Paul Thurrot, who writes the SuperSite for Windows, calls it "a whopper of a mistake, and one that will actively harm most Windows users." While I'm no great fan of the new taskbar, I think this is an exaggeration. If the worst that can be said of Windows 7 is that it copies one of the Mac's worst features, that's not so bad. The Mac OS, remember, is the one everyone loves. Borrowing liberally from Apple accounts for much of Windows' past success. If Microsoft is just a bit more diligent in its pilfering, glory will surely return.

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technology

Time for a Tablet

What the "netbook" craze tells us about the future of laptops.

By Farhad Manjoo

Monday, December 29, 2008, at 7:03 PM ET

There isn't much mystery to why a little-marketed computer known as the Eee PC has lately seized the top spot on Amazon's laptop best-seller list. The machine, a three-pound ugly duckling made by the Taiwanese company Asus, has a 10-inch screen, a nearly full-size keyboard, and offers what almost everyone wants in a portable computer: It's tiny and, at $390, very cheap. Of course, the Eee PC is missing some other things people tend

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to like in laptops—an attractive design, a DVD drive, a fully full-size keyboard, and enough processing power to run multiple demanding applications at the same time. But hey, these are tough times, and did I mention you can buy this machine for less than you're planning to blow on New Year's Eve?

Minimalism pervades Amazon's laptop list; over the last few weeks, the great majority of the 25 best-seller slots have been occupied by various permutations of the Eee PC and other souped-down, sub-$500 machines. In the computer industry, these miniature computers are known as "netbooks." The term is vaguely defined, but the best way to spot a netbook is to peek at the specs: Today's bigger laptops run on Intel's speedy Core 2 Duo processor, while netbooks use a smaller, less powerful, and cheaper Intel chip, the Atom. Netbooks also run older or more lightweight operating systems—generally Windows XP or some flavor of Linux.

PC companies are looking to these machines in much the same way John McCain once looked to the governor of Alaska—as an easy way to put a fresh face on an otherwise aging product line. Asus took an early lead in the category, but in 2008 nearly every major PC maker put out a netbook or two, including Dell, HP, and Lenovo. New netbooks will dominate CES, the consumer electronics trade show in Las Vegas next week, and completely unsubstantiated rumors have it that a netbook will also debut at MacWorld, the Apple-centric confab that starts Monday in San Francisco. It's still unclear whether this season's sales represent a trend or a fad—netbooks offer a user experience that's far from perfect, and buyers may well come to regret their chintzy purchases and vow to pay full-fare next time. Netbooks' rise could also end badly for the PC industry. As a Sony exec predicted this year, cheap machines may spark a pricing "race to the bottom," further shrinking PC makers' already squeezed profit margins.

But netbook sales suggest pent-up demand for the kind of machine that no company has yet perfected—a machine that I predict could make for the next PC boom. At the moment, the laptop market is dominated by two kinds of machines: a bunch of cheap netbooks that don't do much, and a bunch of expensive Apple notebooks that do a lot and do it very well. (Seven of the top 25 best-selling laptops on Amazon are MacBooks.) Consumers are fleeing the middle range, which seems to make sense—if you want a laptop to surf the Web, why spend $800 on a machine that runs Windows Vista when you can spend $400 on a machine than runs the more highly regarded Windows XP? On the other hand, if you want a laptop to use as your main computer, why spend $800 for a machine that runs Windows Vista when you can spend $1,000 for a virus-free, hassle-free system that runs the Mac OS (and can also run Windows)?

But I argue that there's gold buried in the gap between these extremes: The success of the netbooks speaks to a desire for second PCs, for machines that we can use on the couch or on the train, rather than at a desk. Their popularity seems of a piece with customers' growing appetite for simpler, less frilly gadgets. The netbook is like the Flip camcorder of laptops, a device whose myriad limitations seem to enhance, rather than detract from, its appeal. But we need a better such machine: Someone needs to build a good-looking, easy-to-use, and not-too-terribly expensive portable computer that aims to do one thing well—surf the Web.

At the moment, netbooks could stand a great deal of improvement. First, they're ugly—many are more than an inch thick, which isn't bad for a standard laptop but looks kind of goofy on a little guy. They've also got a few flaws that keep them from excelling at their main task of lightweight network computing. In particular, many lack access to cellular networks—if you want Internet connectivity away from a Wi-Fi hot spot, you've got to get it through an add-on card or by connecting the computer to your cell phone. (Some newer models—like the Acer Aspire One—do carry a 3G chip, and we can likely expect some more 3G-equipped models at CES.) More importantly, netbooks need better operating systems—in particular, a very fast, mobile operating system that can download and install trusted applications on the fly, over the air.

It may sound like I'm calling on Apple to build a netbook. I'm not. For years, people have exhorted Apple to build cheaper computers, a clamor that's only risen during the recession. But CEO Steve Jobs has consistently disavowed this approach for pretty much the same reason cited by that Sony exec—a race to the bottom that ends in "junk" machines. More importantly, proponents of an Apple netbook forget that the company already makes an underpowered, ultraportable computer: It's called the Macbook Air. If Apple were to release a cheapo, tiny laptop, won't customers wonder what to make of its high-ticket, tiny laptop?

Instead, I'm suggesting that the thing we think of as a netbook should really be something else—a flat-panel, touch-screen tablet that can do photos, music, movies, e-mail, games, and full-function Web browsing. The device would include a small amount of onboard storage but would depend on the Internet cloud for most of its resources. Why no keyboard? Because then the device would be conceived as an appliance. You'd use it mainly for passive computing—for reading e-mail and Web pages, for looking at photos, for sharing documents in a meeting. You'd keep it on your lap to scan Facebook as you watch TV or bring it to bed to read the news before you go to sleep. You'd catch up on your e-mail as you ride the bus to work; you could respond to that e-mail using the on-screen keyboard, and when you get to the office, you could connect a USB keyboard.

Apple could make this, of course. What I'm talking about is basically a souped-up iPhone or iPod Touch—say, one that's 7 inches across instead of 3.5 inches and has a slightly faster processor. These could sell for $400 or $500 (plus the purchase

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of a data contract). Apple's fans have long called on the company to build a tablet computer, but this isn't just a suggestion for Jobs. A host of other firms could make such a device, including Sony, Samsung, Nokia, and Motorola. Or, a startup: Over the summer, the TechCrunch blog launched its own crowd-sourced project to spec and build a cheap Web tablet; as of now, the community has built a rough prototype. Any company that builds one of these things doesn't even have to worry much about software; that's because the computer industry now has free access to Google's open-source Android platform, which has a stylish interface, an intuitive touch display, and a marketplace for third-party programs. Google, of course, would also benefit tremendously from the proliferation of a network-capable device that would keep you addicted to the Web throughout your house. Indeed, there are so many potential beneficiaries here—Apple, Google, Intel, the cell companies, and, of course, Web-addled you and me—that I'll be surprised if we don't see a great Web tablet in 2009. I can't wait.

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the book club

Outliers

Destined for the best-seller list, in spite of its flaws.

By John Horgan and Edward Tenner

Friday, November 14, 2008, at 2:16 PM ET

From: Edward Tenner
To: John Horgan
Subject: Outliers Have Outliers, Too
Posted Thursday, November 13, 2008, at 6:44 AM ET

Dear John,

When we co-reviewed Malcolm Gladwell's *The Tipping Point* for ***Slate*** in 2000, we agreed his book had much to say about networking and influence but not enough about the inherent quality that word-of-mouth hits usually need. His new book, *Outliers*, is a more sober look at success for a post-boom audience. But it rejects the Poor Richard self-help tradition. Gladwell is skeptical about innate genius and lonely struggle. He shows that we are the products of our social origins, the centuries-old values of our geographic roots, and even of the exact year and even month of our birth. That's what *Outliers* has in common with *The Tipping Point*: Both books apply sociology and social psychology to exceptional performance. The catalogers of the Library of Congress have assigned *Outliers* the subject headings "1. Successful People" and "2. Success," but they might have added one they used for the first book: "Context Effects (Psychology)."

Outliers offers hope. Exceptional ability is less important than the good old work ethic. Prodigies from Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart to computer programmer Bill Joy required the same 10,000 hours of practice for mastery as the rest of us; Mozart just began especially young. The Beatles considered their real break the intensive practice they received playing marathon sets in the Hamburg, Germany, red-light district. Many more of us could excel if we realized the time required and worked more patiently. Math students, for example, may simply be giving up too early in problem-solving.

In fact, *Outliers* is positively sunny about education and training. Do arbitrary cutoff dates for youth sports give kids born early in the year an unfair advantage? Change recruitment regulations. Does a legacy of social and linguistic hierarchy endanger airline safety by inhibiting timely warnings to captains? Hire outsiders to retrain your staff and shoot up in the safety rankings, as Korean Airlines did. Do American children, especially those in inner cities, lag behind Asian counterparts? Extend the school year.

But context also has an unfair, even fatalistic side. The suave, rich, and neurotic Robert Oppenheimer received only probation and psychotherapy after trying to poison his Cambridge physics tutor (Oppie as proto-Unabomber?), while the equally brilliant blue-collar American who may indeed have the world's highest IQ, Christopher Langan, with uncaring parents and teachers, dropped out of college and still is far from academic recognition. Memo to overscheduling, hovering, upper-middle-class mothers and fathers: Keep up the good work.

Time as well as class will tell. The founders of Microsoft and Sun Microsystems were all born between 1953 and 1956, coming of age just in time to work on a handful of early academic time-sharing computers when other scientists and engineers were still punching stacks of cards. Bill Gates' prep school had rare remote access to one such machine in 1968. The lesson, John, is that we should not only choose our parents wisely but also pick the year they have us.

Seriously, though, isn't Gladwell missing an opportunity to encourage his readers with a bigger picture? Gurus of information technology, recognizing and exploiting new tools, have appeared in every decade. Larry Ellison (born 1944), founder of Oracle, is the third-richest American. And don't forget Michael Dell (born 1965) and Google's founders, Larry Page and Sergei Brin (both born 1973). A dozen or more pioneers of computing, beginning with Grace Hopper (born 1906), who created plain-English programming language, never made fortunes but are revered in industry and academia. Are they unsuccessful?

Gladwell also shows how a generation of New York lawyers from Jewish garment-industry backgrounds struggled during the Depression, while the next such generation, favored by its small

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size and excellent education, flourished in merger-and-acquisition work originally disdained by snobbish old-line firms. Perfectly true. But many Jewish lawyers who came of age in the 1930s also found a way to succeed in the face of economic hardships and ethnic discrimination. Lawrence A. Wien invented real estate syndication and became a major philanthropist; Chicago's Pritzkers also built a fortune buying distressed properties that ultimately soared in value. Jewish lawyers helped implement the New Deal in Washington, while others (like Daniel J. Boorstin and Studs Terkel) entered academia and journalism. And Edith Spivack, who joined the New York City Law Department as an unpaid volunteer in 1934 and did not retire until 70 years later, became its unsung mastermind, helping avert financial collapse in the 1970s.

Yes, these men and women were atypical. They were outliers; isn't that the book's title, though? As with *The Tipping Point*, I loved Gladwell's combination of storytelling and academic social science even when I rejected his conclusions. But John, his soft demographic determinism makes me want to paraphrase Cassius in *Julius Caesar*: The fault is not in our birth cohorts but in ourselves, that we are underlings.

Best wishes,
Ed

From: John Horgan
To: Edward Tenner
Subject: A Squandered Opportunity?
Posted Thursday, November 13, 2008, at 1:48 PM ET

Dear Ed,

My reaction to *The Tipping Point* eight years ago was not quite as mild as you recall. That book, which sought to transform the truism that little causes can have big effects into an all-empowering revelation, irked me. I called Gladwell a "clever idea packager" whose "engaging case histories … cannot conceal the fatuousness of his core conclusions." In fact, my review was so nasty, even for me, that I was determined to give Gladwell's new book every benefit of the doubt.

As you note, Ed, *Outliers* features the same "combination of storytelling and academic social science" that animated *The Tipping Point* and Gladwell's second book, *Blink*, which is a tribute to snap judgment. Like you, I found *Outliers* entertaining and even fascinating at times. It also advances a much more consequential theme than Gladwell's previous books. Nurture, Gladwell argues, contributes at least as much as nature to our success or lack thereof. Delve into the history of "men and women who do things out of the ordinary," and you will find that their success stems from "hidden advantages and extraordinary opportunities and cultural legacies."

With this insistence on the importance of environmental factors as shapers of our lives, Gladwell is bucking a deplorable recent trend in science. Over the past few decades, fields such as evolutionary psychology and behavioral genetics have tipped the scales toward the nature side of the nature-nurture debate, implying that innate factors largely determine our personalities and talents, and hence our destiny. I call this line of reasoning "gene-whiz science."

One notorious example of gene-whiz science is the 1994 best-seller *The Bell Curve*, in which Harvard scholars Charles Murray and Richard Herrnstein asserted that blacks are innately less intelligent than whites. James Watson, the Nobel laureate and co-discoverer of the double helix, reiterated this persistent claim a year ago, as did ***Slate***'s own William Saletan.

Gladwell has a personal stake in this debate. He concludes his book by telling the tale of his mother, Joyce, a Jamaican descended from African slaves. While attending University College in London, Joyce fell in love with a young mathematician, Graham Gladwell. They soon moved to Canada, where Graham became a math professor and Joyce a writer and therapist. They had three children, including Malcolm.

While acknowledging the ambition and intelligence of his mother and other ancestors, Gladwell repeatedly emphasizes the role that serendipity played in their upward journey. The first lucky break took place in the late 1700s, when a white plantation owner in Jamaica, William Ford, took a fancy to a pretty female slave, "an Igbo tribeswoman from West Africa." Ford bought the woman and made her his mistress, saving her—and, more importantly, her offspring—from a life of brutal servitude. She gave birth to Ford's son, John, who was defined as "colored" rather than black and hence under Jamaican law was free.

John, who became a preacher, was the great-great–great-grandfather of Joyce, Gladwell's mother. She was lucky, too. She received a scholarship to a private school in Jamaica only after another girl who had received two scholarships relinquished one. Without the scholarship, Joyce would probably never have gained admittance to University College, where she met Gladwell's father.

Gladwell's family history engaged and even moved me. But the lessons that he gleans from this and other case histories in his book are oddly anticlimactic, even dispiriting. He concludes that success "is not exceptional or mysterious. It is grounded in a web of advantages and inheritances, some deserved, some not, some earned, some just plain lucky." To be fair, Gladwell offers more substantive analysis of the link between race and

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achievement elsewhere in his book when he analyzes the mathematical performance of Asian-American children and of inner-city New York kids enrolled in a special school called KIPP. Last December, he provided a sharp refutation of the *Bell Curve* reasoning in the pages of *The New Yorker*—why didn't he incorporate that material into the book, too?

Perhaps now that a man of African descent has been elected president, we have truly transcended race. But I still can't help but feel that *Outliers* represents a squandered opportunity for Gladwell—himself an outlier, an enormously talented and influential writer and the descendant of an African slave—to make a major contribution to our ongoing discourse about nature, nurture, and race.

Ed, maybe my problem with Gladwell is that I just expect too much of him.

From: Edward Tenner
To: John Horgan
Subject: Not Even Wrong
Posted Friday, November 14, 2008, at 7:12 AM ET

Dear John,

You're not expecting too much of Malcolm Gladwell. Where I come from—university press publishing—one philosopher explained pages of arguments accompanying a favorable recommendation: "Philosophers show respect by disagreeing with each other." Physicist Wolfgang Pauli put it more negatively about a junior researcher's paper: "Not even wrong." So, we should welcome Gladwell neither as a genius (a concept he dislikes, anyway) nor as a mere packager of others' ideas. Instead, let's treat him as a colleague who deserves careful attention.

Outliers isn't wrong, but neither is it necessarily right. Gladwell doesn't see, for example, that some outliers were just the first ones to seize a unique opportunity that others could not share—a "positional good," as economist Fred Hirsch called it in his book *Social Limits to Growth*. After ridiculing the idea of buying "a shiny new laptop" for every student, he asks rhetorically, "[I]f a million teenagers had been given unlimited access to a time-sharing terminal in 1968" like Bill Gates, "how many more Microsofts would we have today?"

Some academic reviewers have also dissented from much of the research Gladwell cites. One of his favorite sources is historian David Hackett Fischer's *Albion's Seed*, which he uses to argue the strong persistence of values in American regional cultures over four centuries. The work, rightly admired for its rich scholarship, has also been blasted for its selective use of evidence to support its thesis. Fischer's idea (repeated by Gladwell) that the cult of honor in the U.S. South originated in medieval British border disputes has also been questioned. According to Bertram Wyatt-Brown, author of the standard work *Southern Honor*, "colonial and backcountry historians in general stoutly reject" Fischer's book.

Cultures change more rapidly and thoroughly than Fischer and Gladwell acknowledge. Think of the cosmopolitan, lively Spain that followed the grim Franco years or the hypercapitalist and individualist China that came after Mao. What about postwar Germany, which now rates much lower on indexes of authoritarianism than France, at least according to one of Gladwell's notes? Or, for that matter, consider the changing values represented by Barack Obama's election victory that you mention, John, which overthrew structuralist dogmas of "blue" and "red" states and fears of concealed racism.

Obama's story has another dimension strangely neglected in *Outliers*: his abandonment by his father, the death of his mother, and his struggle for a new identity. The successes cited by Gladwell, including his own mother, go from strength to strength; cultural forces and good luck come together. Yet for all Obama's elite education, his years as a community organizer in Chicago while others of his age were launching lucrative careers only conforms to the "accumulative advantage" model endorsed by Gladwell in hindsight.

There isn't much suffering, for the sake of art or anything else, in *Outliers*. People fortunate enough to be born in the right time, place, cultural group, and profession are borne along by the current. Yet among previous presidents, even upper-class outliers had a lot to overcome. Think of Theodore Roosevelt's lifelong respiratory problems, Franklin Roosevelt's polio, John F. Kennedy's childhood scarlet fever and his war injuries. (When Kennedy said that life is unfair, he was referring to health and sickness.) John McCain's captivity was his own turning point, as PT-109 was Kennedy's. Americans aren't the only politicians to be proud of fighting adversity. Nicolas Sarkozy, with a multiethnic family tree and an absent father like Obama's, once declared, "What made me who I am now is the sum of all the humiliations suffered during childhood."

Gladwell credits some of J. Robert Oppenheimer's success to the aristocratic social skills he absorbed from his family. But there was another side of Oppenheimer, revealed when he contracted tuberculosis as a young professor and retreated with his younger brother Frank to the hills of New Mexico; his fascination with Los Alamos began during that interlude. When Oppenheimer took his Army physical before receiving his commission in 1943, he was nearly disqualified as 11 pounds underweight with a chronic cough. But according to Gladwell's main source on

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Oppenheimer, Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin's *American Prometheus*, the physicist was able to withstand the stress of preparing for the hearings on his security clearance; as his secretary later recalled, he "had that fantastic stamina that people often have who have recovered from tuberculosis. Although he was incredibly skinny, he was incredibly tough."

Misfortunes are not like cultivated homes and great schools; their effects are unpredictable, energizing some and crushing others regardless of social class and education. In rejecting the myth of self-made men and women—and very properly revealing all the help most of them had—Gladwell also ignores important, if often mysterious, realities of endurance.

John, if our economic emergency is as serious as it appears, "accumulative advantage" will matter less and dealing creatively with crises will count more. And if this sounds like the old-style success books that *Outliers* is trying to replace, I can only recall an aside made by historian of science Charles C. Gillispie in my college History 101 course: "There is nothing more embarrassing to the educated mind than a true cliché."

Best wishes,
Ed

From: John Horgan
To: Edward Tenner
Subject: Nothing Succeeds Like Success
Posted Friday, November 14, 2008, at 2:16 PM ET

Dear Ed,

Yes, as John McCain often reminded us during the campaign, suffering can be a terrific character builder. Your examples of men who triumphed in spite or because of their disabilities reminded me of Marianne Moore's poem "Nevertheless," which begins: "you've seen a strawberry/ that's had a struggle; yet/ was, where the fragments met, a hedgehog or a star-fish for the multitude of seeds."

It's true that prison, torture, disability, disease, and other misfortunes leave most of us embittered and broken. So we may be inclined to believe that some lucky souls simply have the temperament to overcome trauma and even be inspired by it. Gladwell is quite right to resist this fatalistic conclusion and to look for other, more useful correlates of success than innate traits. But as you remarked in your first post, Ed, some of the lessons that emerge from his case studies end up being just as restrictive as those he's trying to refute.

We learn that in 1968, a "Mothers' Club" at an elite private school in Seattle raised funds for a computer center better than those found in most universities; a student named Bill Gates, whose parents had placed him in the school so he would have these opportunities thus became a master programmer while still in eighth grade. Similarly, high-IQ children tracked for decades by psychologist Lewis Terman were much more likely to succeed if they had affluent, well-educated parents. At the opposite end of the spectrum is poor Christopher Langan. Although blessed with an IQ of 195, he never made much of himself because he grew up in a desperately poor home "dominated by an angry, drunken step-father."

So some people are just born to the right parents in the right place at the right time. Hard work helps, too, Gladwell emphasizes. He notes that achievers as diverse as Gates, lawyer Joe Flom, Mozart, and the Beatles spent at least 10,000 hours honing their skills at an early age. So, um, practice makes perfect? Tell us something we don't know, Malcolm!

Gladwell tries to do just that when he investigates why 70 percent of the Canadians in the National Hockey League were born in the first half of the calendar year. The reason is that youth hockey programs initially accept all boys born in a given year and then select the best players for the best teams. Boys born just after the Jan. 1 cutoff date are older, and hence bigger and stronger, on average, than boys born later in the year. That makes them more likely to be selected for the elite teams, where they get the best coaching and play the most games, compounding their early advantage.

Gladwell calls this phenomenon the "Matthew Effect" after this Biblical passage: "For unto everyone that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance. But from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath." The effect occurs in many other sports around the world—and in schools. Beginning in kindergarten, the oldest children in each grade are more likely to be placed in accelerated-learning programs, again giving them an "accumulative advantage." International studies of fourth graders have shown that the oldest children score as up to 12 percentage points higher than the youngest.

So the smart get smarter, the strong get stronger, and so on. That's life. But we don't have to accept this state of affairs. Gladwell proposes that athletic and academic programs sort children according to time periods shorter than a year. While cumbersome, this system would be much fairer and more efficient at recognizing talent. Schools and sports programs could also delay sorting according to talent until children are older, when age-related effects have decreased.

The "Matthew Effect" identifies a nontrivial and—most important—solvable problem. So does the chapter on the cultural causes for airline accidents. But what Gladwell calls the "Ethnic Theory of Plane Crashes" has little to do with the

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"Matthew Effect," beyond sharing some vague connection to "success." The case studies in the book seem to have been chosen for their intrinsic interest rather than any coherent, mutually reinforcing perspective.

Outliers is nonetheless destined to become a best-seller in spite of its flaws—and certainly in spite of anything that we or other reviewers say, Ed. Gladwell's track record ensures that the book will be widely publicized by the media, prominently displayed in bookstores, and eagerly embraced by readers. Nothing succeeds like success.

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the chat room

Who's Gonna Stop Him?

Edward McClelland takes your questions about Gov. Blagojevich's Senate appointment.

Wednesday, December 31, 2008, at 1:35 PM ET

***Slate** contributor Edward McClelland was online at Washingtonpost.com to chat with readers about Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich's appointment of Roland Burris to fill Barack Obama's Senate seat. An unedited transcript of the chat follows.*

Edward McClelland: Good morning, everyone. I've been writing about Rod Blagojevich and the Illinois senate seat crisis from Chicago. I'm ready to answer your questions on that issue, and other aspects of Chicago politics.

Washington, D.C.: The most important question is, can the Senate block the appointment? I seem to recall a case where the House refused to "seat" a corrupt member from Harlem in the 70s. What procedural options do they have?

Edward McClelland: The case you're referring to is *Powell v. McCormack*. In 1967, the House refused to seat Rep. Adam Clayton Powell of New York. Powell took his case to the Supreme Court, which ruled that Congress could only be the judge of a member's constitutional qualifications—in the case of a senator, whether he's 30 years old, nine years a citizen, and a resident of his state.

The Senate could refuse to seat Burris and invite a court challenge, hoping the current Supreme Court would give it more latitude in determining its' members qualifications.

Tying up the appointment in court could keep the seat empty until Blagojevich is removed from office. Then current Lt. Gov. Patrick Quinn could make a competing appointment, which the Senate would seat. That, of course, might also be challenged in court by Burris.

Oakland, Calif.: Please comment on the precedent set by Blagojevich's actions. Can the governor be removed, and if so what are the guidelines? And is his appointment of a replacement for Senator Obama legal?

Edward McClelland: I think Blagojevich's action is legal. He's the sitting governor of Illinois, which gives him the authority to appoint a senator. Until he resigns or is removed from office, he can exercise all his powers.

It's interesting that nobody has challenged Blagojevich's authority to sign bills or pardon criminals, which he has done since his arrest. But there's a political element to this Senate appointment. Illinois Democrats don't want be stuck running on the same ticket as "Blagojevich's senator" in 2010. That'll be a tremendous issue for the Republicans. And Senate Democrats want to help them avoid that.

The Illinois General Assembly is already taking steps to remove Blagojevich. A committee has been appointed to decide whether to recommend impeachment to the full House. If Blagojevich is impeached, he would be tried by the state Senate. A two-thirds majority is required to convict. Same as the procedure for a president.

Falls Church, Va.: Did Blago have to act before Jan. 1 for any particular reason? Or was he just looking to make this boring holiday week a little more interesting?

Edward McClelland: Blagojevich had to act before Jan. 6. Otherwise, Illinois would begin the 111th Congress short a senator. I think he wanted to do this before the holiday because we have a long weekend coming up, and Burris needed a week to prepare.

Bethesda, Md.: How will the fact that Mr. Burris has accepted Blagojevich's appointment, and thus gotten himself involved in this affair, affect Mr. Burris' reputation and political career?

Edward McClelland: Burris no longer had a political career in Illinois. He was an uninspiring but honest state office holder in the '80s and '90s, but since then, he had lost three races for governor and a race for mayor. Burris has long been looking for that last big office. He already has a tombstone which lists all of his accomplishments. He left a blank spot in the lower right hand

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corner, hoping to fill it with "governor." I think he'll be just as happy to put "senator" there.

The view of some is that Burris' ego has allowed Blagojevich to use him as a dupe here. Burris does like to refer to himself in the third person. He named his children Roland II and Rolando. I think he'll try to run for a full term in 2010. He's a politician, and it's more exciting than reviewing minority contracts for the tollway authority.

Arlington, Va.: What's the mood like in Chicago these days regarding this mess? It must be troubling to be buoyed by Obama and then deflated by Blago all at once.

Edward McClelland: For five weeks, Chicago was the beacon of the world, the city that gave America Barack Obama. Now we're back to our reputation for political sleaze.

Those are the bright and dark sides of Illinois politics. On the one hand, we lead the nation in racial progress. We produced Abraham Lincoln, Barack Obama and more black statewide officials than anyone else. On the other hand, we have this freewheeling, pay to play political culture that produced Rod Blagojevich. So we have both the best and the worst politicians in the country, and yeah, we're a little proud of our colorful politics.

Washington, D.C.: What is the latest on the Obama-Blagojevich connection? The only thing I heard reported by the media during these past weeks were repetitions of the statements made by Obama and his advisers that there were no "inappropriate" conversations between Obama's advisers and Blagojevich. However, that implies that there were conversations between the two. I appreciate that Obama and his advisers believe that the conversations were not inappropriate, but that is their opinion. Shouldn't we see transcripts or more details about the conversations that took place so we can judge for ourselves?

Edward McClelland: I think we'd all like to see transcripts of those conversations, but so far, U.S. Attorney Patrick Fitzgerald is holding them back. That's even complicating the work of the General Assembly, which wants to use the tapes in impeachment proceedings.

Obama and Blagojevich were never close. Blagojevich was seen as shady even before this episode, and Obama didn't invite him to the convention, or to Grant Park. Obama definitely took an interest in who would fill his old Senate seat, and used Rahm Emanuel to communicate Valerie Jarrett's name to Blagojevich. Actually, what I find inappopriate about that situation is that we had the soon-to-be leader of the executive branch trying to influence an appointment to the legislative branch. I also think it was inappropriate for Obama to back the Senate in refusing to seat Burris. He's the president-elect now. He has to respect the separation of powers and let the Senate police itself.

Alexandria, Va.: What can you tell us about Burris? Is he Senate material? (Whatever that is these days...)

Edward McClelland: Burris has followed the same path as plenty of other senators. He spent 16 years in statewide office, first as comptroller, then as attorney general. Some people think this makes him a political hack or a party regular. He won't be the only one. While he's not as gifted an orator or as deep a thinker as Obama, he's got more political experience, and a broader knowledge of Illinois. He grew up in Downstate Centralia.

Bethesda, Md.: What is Blagojevich thinking? Really. It seems like maybe the guy is delusional. Why hasn't he stepped down yet?

Edward McClelland: Blagojevich has a very expensive defense attorney who had no doubt advised him that stepping down will look like an admission of guilt. Also, he can't afford to step. Unlike Eliot Spitzer, Blagojevich is not independently wealthy. He has to pay his mortgage.

And yes, he is delusional. He's always wanted to president. On the tapes, he talked about appointing himself to the Senate to set up a 2016 run. Even before this scandal, he had a 13 percent approval rating. His response? He was going to get the people of Illinois to "love me again." As much as he loves himself, perhaps?

Rockville, Md.: Is there any indication that Burris may have been one of the potential candidates referred to in the federal charges against Blagojevich for having offered to pay for the seat?

Edward McClelland: No. Burris is not one of the seven Senate candidates on the tape, which I'm sure was a qualification for the appointment.

Burris did lobby the governor for the job—he even held a press conference to promote himself—but Blagojevich never seriously considered him. Burris was seen as a political has-been, having lost four straight elections since 1994. So while he may not be

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tainted by involvement in Blagojevich's attempt to sell the Senate seat, he's may not be as high a caliber a senator as we would have gotten if the governor was free to choose anyone he wanted.

Vienna, Va.: It's crazy to me that there aren't more African American Senators. Is there any chance that one of the other open seats might go to an African American? Or is Burris the only hope?

Edward McClelland: I don't know about the other open Senate seats. But if Lt. Gov. Patrick Quinn ascends to the governorship and makes a competing appointment, I'm sure it will be an African-American—maybe Rep. Danny Davis, who was Blagojevich's first choice. The fact is, Illinois has elected two of the three black senators since Reconstruction. That is a matter of great pride here, and some people think it's our role to provide a black senator.

Charlottesville, Va.: You noted in your story that the Illinois Secretary of State may not certify Burris for the seat—what exactly does that mean and by what grounds would the Secy make that call?

Edward McClelland: I'm not sure that he can legally refuse. The Illinois Constitution says it's his job to endorse the governor's appointments. On the other hand, he's joined the game of legal chicken between Blagojevich and the Senate. Blagojevich is saying, "I dare you to reject my appointee." The Senate is saying, "Oh yeah, go ahead and sue."

Crofton, Va.: What does this all mean for Jesse Jackson, Jr.? Are his chances at a future Senate run over?

Edward McClelland: I think Jesse Jackson Jr. would have been a hard sell as a Senate candidate to begin with. There was some concern, when open seat was first discussed, that he wouldn't be able to hold it in 2010. Now that he appears to have been bargaining for the seat with Blagojevich, his Senate prospects look even dimmer.

D.C.: Why do you think Blagojevich picked Burris as opposed to someone else? Is Burris so far beyond reproach that Blago imagines that it helps his case and makes him look more honest? Or is it just that Burris is the only one that would have accepted, for the reasons you discussed above?

Edward McClelland: I think it's a little bit of both. Burris made through 16 years in Springfield without getting into a scandal, which is a huge accomplishment in Illinois. Even Republicans are calling him honest. Also, Burris was hungry to get back into politics, and, unlike other potentials, had nothing to lose. His political career was dead before this.

And of course, he's African-American. That allows Blagojevich to confound the Senate with racial politics, and appeal to blacks in Chicago, who are about the only friends he has left here.

Insanity: What is taking the Illinois government so long to get Blagojevich out of power? This whole debacle is amazing to me in its inefficiency. You noted earlier that no one has questioned Blago's ability to pardon criminals or sign legislation since he's been charged. I next expect to see him issue an edict that would pardon himself from any future conviction of wrongdoing—and get away with it!

Edward McClelland: As a lawmaking body, the General Assembly has to follow the law. Blagojevich is entitled to due process in impeachment proceedings. If he doesn't get it, he could conceivably sue to prevent his removal. Lt. Gov. Quinn hopes the Senate will convict Blagojevich before Lincoln's 200th birthday, which is Feb. 12. (No one wants to see him on the dais at the Lincoln Library!) That may be soon. Blagojevich's lawyer, Ed Genson, is a master of delay. He kept R. Kelly out of court for six years.

Washington, D.C.: Any word on what Patrick Fitzgerald thinks about all of this? He's an interesting figure in this investigation—he seems determined not to let Blagojevich get away with his crimes. Has Fitzgerald ever investigated Burris for any reason?

Edward McClelland: Patrick Fitzgerald has never investigated Burris because Burris was out of office long before Fitzgerald arrived.

When Fitzgerald announced the complaint against Blagojevich, I wondered how much the timing had to do with the fact that a Democrat was about to take over the White House, and potentially choose a new U.S. Attorney. Obama had voiced admiration for Fitz before, but after this, he committed to keeping him on. It would have looked shady for a Chicago Democrat to throw out a Republican U.S. Attorney while he was investigating another Chicago Democrat.

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Fitzgerald has refused to comment on the Senate appointment.

So...: ...if the Senate rejects Burris, then what? A special election? An appointment by Harry Reid or Obama himself once he takes office? This all seems so over the top!

Edward McClelland: I would expect Burris to sue for this Senate seat.

Harry Reid or Obama can't make an appointment. It can only come from Illinois.

Bobby Rush is trying to rally the Congressional Black Caucus behind the appointment. It is over the top. On the Early Show, he was comparing Harry Reid to Orval Faubus and Bull Connor.

Detroit, Mich.: What's the latest on Mrs. Blagojevich? Is she still out in the world bleeping at people? Or has she been trying to keep a lower profile?

Edward McClelland: I haven't heard anything from Patti since her husband was arrested. I wasn't surprised to hear her use that language, though. After all, he father is an alderman.

Washington, D.C.: Everyone agrees that Burris has violated no laws by accepting the appointment but some are attempting to assert that he has violated some vague ethical standard.

In truth, the issue is pure politics. Some of the people complaining either wanted to be appointed by the Lt. Governor or wanted to be elected in a special election. Of course, the Lt. Governor conducted a diatribe against the appointment that was so bitter it seemed Blagojevich had disrupted delicate negotiations of some sort.

What standard of conduct that existed prior to Fitzgerald's media event is Burris accused of violating?

Edward McClelland: Burris hasn't been accused of violating any standard of ethical conduct. It's guilt by association with Blagojevich. If Blagojevich is smart, he'll disappear and let this become about Roland Burris, a 71-year-old with an honest record as a public servant, the son of a railroad worker who grew up in a small town in central Illinois, and got started in politics by integrating the public pool. It's tough to be against a senator like that.

The big question: Are Blago's aides sticking by him? And are they keeping good track of "the football" (his Paul Mitchell hairbrush)?

Edward McClelland: Blagojevich's aides aren't sticking by him. His chief of staff resigned the week of the arrest, and his legal counsel resigned this week. The "football" is entrusted to his state police detail, so as long as he's governor, he'll be able to maintain his high standard of personal grooming.

Washington, D.C.: Isn't it sort of odd to criticize Burris for failing to advance through a corrupt system? He has been elected statewide four times, which, barring a special election, is the most democratic credential anyone can bring to a controversial situation.

Edward McClelland: Burris does have excellent credentials for the Senate. However, reaching the top of Illinois politics doesn't necessarily mean you're corrupt. Adlai Stevenson, Paul Simon and Barack Obama both got there.

Oakland, Calif.: Could Blagojevich have been ordered not to perform his duties? If so, who would determine that and how? (Good point that no one's contested his approval of bills and pardons.)

The choice of Burris was audacious and well-considered for benefit to Blagojevich rather than Illinois. Thank you for the clarification of issues.

Edward McClelland: The only way Blagojevich can be ordered not to perform his duties is through impeachment. We're going through that process now, but until it's completed, he's governor.

Wilmington, N.C.: Mr. McClelland, that was great re: Burris' tombstone; what a hoot, in a good way. With the situation with the economy and soon-to-be-approached stimulus plan, shouldn't our great leaders be busying themselves with more important issues? Or is it only one separate committee that would be involved the possible impeachment proceedings?

Edward McClelland: Right now, it's one separate committee of the Illinois General Assembly. But impeachment could soon consume all of Springfield, and the fight over seating Burris could consume the Senate. I agree that we have more important

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issues. The Senate should seat Burris and let the voters of Illinois work this out in 2010.

Edward McClelland: Thanks for all your great questions, everyone. Hope I was able to illuminate you about this situation. Keep an eye on Chicago politics. There's always something interesting happening here. Great day!

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the good word

Who Checks the Spell-Checkers?

Microsoft Word's dictionary is old and outdated. Here's how to fix it.

By Chris Wilson

Wednesday, December 31, 2008, at 6:55 AM ET

On April 30, 2007, with all the usual fanfare that accompanies a software update, Microsoft added *Barack* and *Obama* to Office's dictionary. It was a fairly quick canonization for the Illinois senator. His surname had been on Microsoft's candidate list for new words since Jan. 5 of that year, and his first name followed three days later, in the same recruiting class as *Zune*, *Klum*, and *Friendster*. Three months later, it was official—no longer would Microsoft suggest *Boatman* as a replacement for the future president's last name.

Of course, by April 2007 Obama was already a figure of some renown. He'd announced his bid for the Democratic nomination in mid-January and had been an object of intense fascination since his July 2004 speech at the Democratic Convention. But escaping the shackles of Microsoft Word's red corrugated line is no small feat, and the list of those who've made the cut can seem arbitrary: Why does it recognize the surnames of Matthew Broderick and Susan Sarandon but trip over DiCaprio and Blanchett? They've heard of Friendster, but not Facebook? Does Microsoft really want to start something with Mark Wahlberg? (Or, speaking of *Entourage*, with Jeremy Piven?)

There's no reason why spell-check dictionaries need to be so behind the times. All the technology to build a relevant, timely spelling database already exists in search engines like Google and Microsoft's own Live Search, which have a vast vocabulary of words and names and update their dictionaries in near real time. Microsoft Word may not have heard of Marky Mark, but a Live Search or a Google query for *Mark Walberg* includes results for the actor, who has an "h" in his last name.

For another example, take a reasonably new tech neologism like *pharming*. Neither Microsoft Word nor the Google Docs spell-checker, the latter of which is based on an open-source tool called GNU Aspell, have heard of the word. Live and Google recognize the term just fine, however, and can retrieve it as a correction for a basic misspelling like *pharmung*.

What's behind this disparity? Word processors and search engines have different goals. The latter has to field queries as broad and varied as the Internet itself, so it needs a very large vocabulary in order to differentiate spelling mistakes from legitimate search terms. Word processors are much more conservative, limiting their lexicon to words that are definitely legitimate. This way, a program like Word can catch virtually every typo, even if it means misidentifying some proper names and newer words. In other words, search engines put breadth first and spelling accuracy second while word processors are the other way around. If you type in *Monkees*, Google will assume you're searching for the band; Word will give you a red squiggly line, thinking you've screwed up the word *monkeys*.

Not surprisingly, search engines and word processors build their dictionaries differently. A search engine's lexicon is typically put together using words gathered from Web pages or old search queries—a huge corpus of real-world data that constitutes a list of valid words and their frequency in the language. Word-processing lexicons are more heavily chaperoned, and the pace at which new terms enter the dictionary is much slower.

Microsoft is beginning to incorporate more natural-language detection into its Office products, though. Ten years ago, they kept candidate words on a single Excel sheet for review by a higher-up. Mike Calcagno, a member of Microsoft's Natural Language Group, says the company now scans through trillions of words, including anonymized text from Hotmail messages, in the hunt for dictionary candidates. On top of this, they monitor words that people manually instruct Word to recognize. "It's becoming rarer and rarer that anything that comes to us ad hoc isn't already on our list" from Hotmail or user data, Calcagno says. According to a July 14, 2006, bug report, for example, the Natural Language Group harvested the following words that had appeared more than 10 times in Hotmail user dictionaries: *Netflix*, *Radiohead*, *Lipitor*, *glucosamine*, *waitressing*, *taekwondo*, and *all-nighter*.

Incorporating user data is a huge step in the right direction for Word, but the process is still sluggish compared with search engines. Google and Live Search generate dictionaries that approach real-time models of language. In a fascinating paper (PDF), two Microsoft researchers explain that a stream of previous search queries can be used to maintain an up-to-date lexicon capable of correcting a high percentage of mistakes, even when 10 or 15 percent of your searches have errors. This purely statistical approach is much timelier than any involving human editors and has far fewer biases. When it comes to fixing errors, the researchers write, "the actual language in which the

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web queries are expressed becomes less important than the query-log data."

Google's system relies heavily on word data gathered from the Web itself. As tech staff member Pandu Nayak explained to me recently, Google tries to determine proper spelling algorithmically. While Nayak was unable to look up exactly when *Barack Obama* entered the lexicon, he predicted that the president-elect was in there well prior to his 2004 convention speech, when even local attention would have produced a substantial online footprint. As soon as a word starts showing up on the Web with any appreciable frequency, it becomes a candidate for a spelling suggestion. Take a very obscure academic term like *theothanatology*—the study of the death of God—which returns all of 829 results as of this writing. Not only does Google recognize the word, it gets you there from a close misspelling like *theotanatalegy*. (Live Search is a little behind here. It returns 103 results but can't correct a misspelling that's even one letter off.)

Google's process is wholly automated, which generates a natural set of challenges. The correct spelling of a word is usually more frequent than its incorrect permutations, but there are exceptions. *Dalmation*, for example, is such a common misspelling of *Dalmatian* that it can trip up the algorithms. The best search-engine spelling models look at the other words in the query for clues. A search for Sasha Baron Cohen automatically corrects to *Sacha*, since that spelling of the first name is heavily associated with the latter two. The best algorithms can identify a mistake even when each individual word is spelled correctly—a Google search for *golf war* returns some results for Gulf war as well.

What would happen if Google's search technology was ported into a word processor? First, the spell-checker would recognize the bulk of any document's proper nouns (no more squiggly red line under DiCaprio) as well as any new terms the kids are using these days (Urban Dictionary tells me, for example, that *overchicked* is an adjective used to describe a man who is significantly less attractive than his female companion. A word processor powered by search-engine spelling could handle *overchicked* just fine.)

I also suspect the search-engine model would do a better job at suggesting the right word when you really did make an error. Most word processors make suggestions using the concept of "edit distance"—basically the number of letters you have to change, add, delete, or switch to transform one word into another. *Duck* has an edit distance of one from *luck*, and *trial* and *trail* are also just one edit away. (For the nitty-gritty on this, see Google research director Peter Norvig's paper on how to write a spell-check program.) While edit distance usually works pretty well for word processors, it can produce some funny suggestions, like *Boatman* for *Obama*. (The edit distance there is three; just switch the *b* and *o*, add a *t*, add an *n*.) Most search engines, by comparison, complement the edit-distance method with a huge amount of data on common mistakes. Given the complexity of the English language, this real-world information is a tremendous spell-checking boon.

The search-engine method does have drawbacks. People have faith that Microsoft Word won't mislead them spellingwise. Perhaps because those red squigglies are so quietly reprimanding, we do anything we can to avoid them. In that last sentence, I originally wrote *reprimatory*, which is not a real word. Microsoft suggested *respiratory*. I appealed that verdict to Google, which returned this blog post in which someone uses the word in a comment, plus a bunch of Italian pages with *reprimatori*. So even though *reprimatory* isn't a bona fide word, Google found it often enough that it didn't return an error. Relying on Web users for your dictionary does have its perils.

Because it is guided by humans, the Word dictionary is full of words that Microsoft thinks you should be using—it's "prescriptive" instead of "descriptive," to use the lexicographer's parlance. Microsoft will tolerate a few FCC violations in your copy, but damned if it will ever suggest one. Just watch what it does with "siht."

While *New Yorker* critic Louis Menand has written movingly about Word's hijacking of the writing process, there is something to be said for steering people toward basic literacy. If Microsoft Office's core dictionary becomes a creation of the Web, we'll be handing the keys to a bunch of people who often wield the language clumsily. This clumsiness may be the parent of linguistic evolution, but it's going to make for some rocky spelling suggestions.

Some of these problems could be solved algorithmically, such that a minor word like *reprimatory* returns an error if it fails to meet a certain frequency in the index. At the very least, Microsoft could give Word a supplemental online dictionary, to ensure that its words are always up-to-date. (Google Docs, too, should take a few hints from the Google search engine.) Eventually, a spell-check based on Web data will be the way to go. Sure, we would see a few more naughty words and *Dalmations* in our Word documents, but the end product will be something that resembles the way people use language in the present day. Tally it up as one more victory for the pragmatists in the language wars.

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the good word

Czar Wars

How did a term for Russian royalty work its way into American government?

By Ben Zimmer

Monday, December 29, 2008, at 11:24 AM ET

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When Benjamin Franklin wanted to describe our national indifference to royal pomp and circumstance, he would compare Americans to a London porter whose heavy load once jostled Czar Peter the Great. When told he had just bumped into the czar, the porter responded: "Poh! We are all czars here!"

Franklin's porter could have been describing the incoming Obama administration. Already Tom Daschle has been tapped for "health czar" and Carol Browner for "climate czar." Adolfo Carrión is expected to be the "urban affairs czar." There's also been talk of a "technology czar" and a "copyright czar." Plans for a "car czar" recently fell apart on Capitol Hill, but Obama and the incoming Congress will try, try again in the new year.

This efflorescence of czars—those interagency point people charged with cutting through red tape to coordinate policy—has people wondering: Why do we use a term from imperial Russia to describe bureaucratic troubleshooters?

Czar first entered English back in the mid-16th century, soon after Baron Sigismund von Herberstein used the word in a Latin book published in 1549. The more correct romanization, *tsar*, became the standard spelling in the late 19th century, but by that time *czar* had caught on in popular usage, emerging as a handy label for anyone with tyrannical tendencies.

On the American scene, *czar* was first bestowed on one of Andrew Jackson's foes: Nicholas Biddle, president of the Bank of the United States. Jackson vehemently opposed the centralized power of the bank, which he called a "hydra of corruption," and his clash with Biddle exploded into the "Bank War" of 1832-36. One of Jackson's staunchest allies in this fight, *Washington Globe* Publisher Frank Blair, dubbed Biddle "Czar Nicholas"—a potent image at a time when Russia's Nicholas I was at the height of his repressive nationalist regime. (Jackson's opponents fought fire with fire, calling him King Andrew I.)

After the Civil War, journalist David Ross Locke (writing under the moniker "Petroleum V. Nasby") lampooned Andrew Johnson's mishandling of Reconstruction, anointing him "the Czar uv all the Amerikas." But it wasn't until 1890 that the "czar" label became an American political staple. Republican House Speaker Thomas Reed incensed Democrats by disallowing a favored stalling tactic of the minority party: not responding to a quorum call. When Reed pushed through a rule that allowed the speaker to count members as present for the quorum even if they didn't respond, Democratic congressmen erupted with cries of "Czar! Despot! Tyrant!"

The "Czar Reed" image stuck; the speaker would be known as "czar" for the rest of his career, after which time an even more potent House speaker, Joe Cannon, would inherit the title. As Reed's biographer William A. Robinson observed, the nickname "had no pleasant connotations" at the time. "In 1890, it brought to the mind the Russian autocrat himself," along with images of "the Cossacks, Siberia, and the knout" (a whip used for flogging).

That would all change after the Russian Revolution deposed the last real-life czar in 1917; painful images of imperial repression quickly faded to the background and Communist leaders became the new dictatorial icons. Accordingly, kinder, gentler "czars" made their way into American public life. When Kenesaw Mountain Landis became the first commissioner of baseball in 1920, "czar of baseball" worked just fine for the headline writers. New York had its "boxing czar" (Athletic Commission Chairman William Muldoon) and its "beer czar" (Alcoholic Beverage Control Board Chairman Edward Mulrooney). And when Nicholas Longworth served as House speaker in the late '20s, he distinguished himself from his predecessors Reed and Cannon as the "genial czar."

The newly benign term evolved again during World War II, when Roosevelt expanded the government rapidly and appointed a host of brand-new federal overseers. The *Washington Post* reported in 1942 on the sudden rush of "executive orders creating new czars to control various aspects of our wartime economy," and a cartoon from that year shows "czar of prices" Leon Henderson, "czar of production" Donald Nelson, and "czar of ships" Emory S. Land all cramming onto one throne.

In the postwar era, the rise of the "czar" has accompanied the expanding role of the executive office in promoting policy initiatives; the term tends to be used when presidents create special new posts for the individuals charged with pushing those initiatives through. Nixon succumbed to czarmania, appointing the first "drug czar," Jerome Jaffe, in 1971 (long before William Bennett took the mantle in 1988). But it was the title of "energy czar" that got the most attention during those days of OPEC embargoes and gas rationing. Though John A. Love first held the title in 1973, his more powerful successor William E. Simon really got the "czar" ball rolling. *Doonesbury* cartoonist Garry Trudeau found the "czar" title fitting, depicting Simon imperiously asking for his "signet ring and hot wax." Simon, for his part, enjoyed the sendup and took pleasure in colleagues calling him "your czarship."

When Nixon offered him the job, Simon would later recall, the president himself used the term *energy czar* and discomfitingly likened the role to that of Hitler's minister of armaments, Albert Speer. Subsequent presidents, however, have shied away from the C-word and its domineering, anti-democratic connotations. Most recently, President Bush has been careful not to call Lt. Gen. Douglas Lute his "war czar," even though he's universally labeled that in the press. It's sure a lot easier than saying his official title: assistant to the president and deputy national security adviser for Iraq and Afghanistan.

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Now we hear that the Obama team doesn't like *czar* either. No wonder: Even now, the word evokes either old-fashioned despotism or latter-day caricatures of tin-pot tyrants. But it's safe to say it's not going anywhere, as long as that compact word keeps doing its job, glibly condensing bureaucratic mouthfuls.

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the green lantern

Should My Baby Wear Huggies?

Going diaper shopping for the Little Green Penlight.

By Brendan I. Koerner

Wednesday, December 31, 2008, at 6:59 AM ET

I'm about to have my first child, and my husband and I are vigorously debating our diaper options. Old-fashioned cloth nappies seem like a greener choice than plasticky disposables, but I've heard this isn't necessarily the case—washing machines don't run on pixie dust, after all. Can we put Huggies on the tyke without feeling too guilty, or is cloth the clear environmental winner?

This is a timely question for the Lantern, who joined the fatherhood ranks last month. In the weeks leading up to the Little Green Penlight's joyous birth, the cloth-or-disposable conundrum vexed his parents to the edge of madness. After copious number crunching, we decided that cloth is, indeed, the greener option. Yet for the time being, at least, the 6-week-old Penlight is doing his business in disposables. Should you follow our wicked lead? That all depends on your specific circumstances as well as your ability to weather the disapproval of your high-minded friends.

It's pretty clear that disposable diapers require more resources to manufacture than cloth diapers, even when you take into account the vast amounts of water and energy involved in cotton farming. A 1992 study from Franklin Associates estimated that producing a year's supply of disposables, which are composed largely of plastic, consumes roughly 6,900 megajoules of energy, vs. around 1,400 megajoules for a year's supply of cloth diapers. Yet the study concluded that cloth ended up being 39 percent more energy-intensive overall, given the electricity needed to wash load after load of dirty diapers.

That conclusion is now woefully outdated, however, given the major advances that have occurred in washing-machine efficiency (PDF). For a washing machine made in 1985, an 11-pound load of cottons washed in warm water used up 1.68 kilowatt hours of electricity and 34 gallons of water; for a machine made two decades later, the relevant figures are just 0.95 kilowatt hours and 12 gallons.

A 2005 study (PDF) by Britain's Environment Agency took into account some of these technological advances. In making their calculations regarding cloth diapers, the study's authors used average energy-consumption figures for machines made in 1997. They concluded that there was "no significant difference" between the environmental impact of cloth and disposable diapers. Keeping a child clad in home-laundered cloth diapers for 2.5 years emitted 1,232 pounds of carbon dioxide equivalent, vs. 1,380 pounds for disposable diapers.

Critics of the study—and there were many—pointed out that cloth diapers would have enjoyed a more notable triumph had the authors taken into account the latest washing machines' technical specs. The critics also contended that the study underestimated the resilience of cloth diapers and didn't properly stress the waste-management consequences of disposables. Indeed, there's no question that single-use disposables require more landfill space than multiple-use cloth diapers. (In the United States, disposable diapers make up about 2 percent of all garbage.)

The bottom line is that cloth diapers are greener than run-of-the-mill Pampers and Huggies, as long as you're committed to an energy-efficient laundry regimen. But that commitment takes more than just an EnergyStar washing machine and a clothing line for air drying. It also takes time, a commodity which will be in startlingly short supply once your offspring drops. And thus we must delve into the ceaseless conflict between idealism and reality.

Trust the Lantern when he says those first few weeks of Junior's life will be a sleep-deprived jumble, and that you may be grateful for the small respite provided by disposable diapers. Your washing machine will already be running several hours a day, chock-full of milk-encrusted onesies; there's a chance you may not have the fortitude to double that laundry burden by doing cloth diapers, too, especially if you plan on getting back to work pronto. (Also note that cloth diapers generally soak through more quickly than disposables, and so have to be changed more frequently.)

The Lantern and his wife both work full-time, albeit partly from home. Taking care of the Penlight is an exhausting, 24/7 assignment, so we opted for disposable diapers in order to make these first months a smidgen easier. We did, however, select chlorine-free diapers, since the chlorine used to bleach regular disposables is associated with dioxin emissions. We plan to use disposables until the Penlight is roughly three months old, at which point we'll give cloth diapers a try—not only for environmental reasons but because of some purported health and financial benefits. If we can't deal with the ensuing laundry deluge, we may try an alternative such as flushable gDiapers.

Ultimately, you'll have to make a deeply personal judgment call as to whether you're willing to forgo a modern convenience in

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the name of being a little kinder to the planet. Whichever way you go, just make sure you'll feel comfortable explaining your choice to your child in, say, 2024.

Regardless of your decision, it's worth noting that the diaper debate too often overshadows other wasteful aspects of baby care. It's curious how people feel so guilty about using Huggies but not about all the fossil fuels that went into making and transporting their brand-new bouncers, swings, and diaper pails. Really, would it be so awful if your young 'un inherited a secondhand Diaper Genie or crib mattress from a friend? But for the moment, alas, giving used baby-shower gifts seems to be a serious faux pas.

Is there an environmental quandary that's been keeping you up at night? Send it to ask.the.lantern@gmail.com and check this space every Tuesday.

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the green lantern

Thermostats, Tissues, Light Bulbs, and Power Strips

The Green Lantern presents a superefficient, four-in-one economy answer pack!

By Jacob Leibenluft

Tuesday, December 30, 2008, at 8:05 AM ET

In an effort to do a little New Year's cleaning, here are some quick answers to a few popular (though not so consequential) questions that keep showing up in the Lantern's inbox:

I've heard that my appliances waste energy even when I'm not using them, so long as they're still plugged in. Can I save that "vampire power" by plugging everything into a power strip? Or will the surge protector suck its own vampire power?

It's not hard to see why this brainteaser is so popular among the Lantern's readers. This column thrives on tricky lifestyle questions with unexpected answers. It may be interesting to ask whether polystyrene coffee cups are really worse than a dish-washed mug or whether a CSA is still environmentally friendly if its members waste a lot of food. But there's a risk to trying to be *too* clever about these things. Yes, according to data from the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, some types of power strips do waste a tiny bit of electricity even when switched off. But that doesn't mean you shouldn't use them whenever possible to cut down on vampire power waste.

Part of the challenge in reducing your environmental impact is to decide which questions are worth your time and money. Even if a surge protector leaks a little juice, it's probably not worth the effort to worry about it. The Lantern will confess to dwelling on these minutiae from time to time—your choice of pens or pencils is not all that Earth-shattering—but in the end, the keys to reducing your environmental impact can be summed up in a few words: Buy less stuff, use less gasoline and electricity, and make sure you have energy-efficient machines at home and at work.

The problem with incandescent light bulbs, everyone keeps telling me, is that they waste lots of energy producing heat instead of light. So if I switched to a fluorescent bulb, wouldn't my heater need to work a little harder to keep me warm?

The quick answer is yes—but the folks who calculate the energy savings from compact fluorescent lamps have already taken your question into account. It's true that switching to fluorescent bulbs may increase your heating bill ever so slightly in the winter. But it's still worth your time and money to make the switch. First, an obvious point: You're likely to use your light bulbs every day, but unless you live at polar latitude, you probably aren't running your heater year-round. In the summertime, your air conditioner may need more energy to offset the heat from the incandescents. Second, most people don't heat their homes with electricity—they use other fuel sources like natural gas that produce less carbon per unit of energy. Surprisingly enough, it's more efficient to warm your house with a heater than a light bulb. (The same arguments apply to any modern appliance that saves energy by operating at lower temperatures.)

I have one of those thermostats on which you can program the temperature to go down at night. It seems as if my heater has to work very hard to get the temperature back up in the morning—so wouldn't I be better off keeping the thermostat set at 68 all the time?

You'd have a point if the air conditioner kicked in every time you lowered your thermostat. But that isn't the case. Turning down the temperature cools off your house by reducing the amount of energy used to heat it. (The cold weather outside does the rest of the work.) In fact, the amount of energy it takes to heat your home back up in the morning is just about the same as the amount you save while your house cools down in the evening. In between, when your house is at 60 degrees, you'll be saving a good deal of energy.

It does make sense, in certain cases, to keep an energy-guzzling machine running rather than to turn it off for five minutes. But even for computers and compact fluorescent lamps, the break-even time is so low that you may as well turn them off when you leave the room for anything longer than a bathroom break.

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Every winter, I spend a few weeks suffering from a nasty runny nose. As I go through boxes and boxes of tissues, I wonder where to dispose of the dirty trash. Should I put used tissues in the toilet when I go to the bathroom or into the garbage?

A first step is to save trees by cutting down on the number of tissues you use in the first place. (Hanky, anyone?) But back to the question: In theory, throwing your tissues down the toilet—in the course of your regularly scheduled flushes—might have slight benefits: Some paper would dissolve, eventually ending up as part of a sludge that might be recycled into fertilizer or converted into electricity. But given that tissues aren't designed to disintegrate in water, much of the paper may end up getting filtered out during the sewage treatment process. From there, it goes right to the dump, just as it would if you threw it in the trash. (Of course, you may be wasting energy by forcing the sewage treatment plant to handle extra material.) Many municipal sewer systems ask residents not to dump tissues down the toilet to prevent the risk of clogged drains—although the Lantern's understanding is that this rule is designed to keep people from using their pipes as an all-purpose wastebasket.

Ultimately, your choice of where to dispose your snotty tissues is basically a wash. When it comes to the environment, there are weightier things to worry about than tissues.

Is there an environmental quandary that's been keeping you up at night? Send it to ask.the.lantern@gmail.com, and check this space every Tuesday.

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the music club

The Music Club

Do you ever fantasize about being a movie critic?

By Robert Christgau, Ann Powers, and Jody Rosen

Tuesday, December 23, 2008, at 3:55 PM ET

From: Jody Rosen
To: Robert Christgau and Ann Powers
Subject: My Top 10 Albums and Top 25 Singles

Posted Wednesday, December 17, 2008, at 11:45 AM ET

Dear Ann and Bob,

I ended our conversation last year by wondering aloud about the contents of Barack Obama's iPod. We now know that our first black president is also our first rock critic president, with a canonical playlist—*Innervisions*, *Blood on the Tracks*, "Dirt off Your Shoulder"—that places him squarely in the mainstream of the Pazz & Jop poll votership. Obama himself inspired unnumbered songs this year from across the musical spectrum: bluegrass bands, *conjuntos*, reggaeton MCs, Irish pub rockers, reggae singers, and Ludacris, whose "Politics (Obama Is Here)" included a pre-emptive request for a presidential pardon in case of future incarceration. (Obama also unwittingly wrote a song.) Some of my warmest and fuzziest musical moments of 2008 came from this YouTube and MP3 outpouring, and not just because I've got a crush on Obama. Twenty-first-century technology may have doomed the record business, but it is reviving an old-fashioned kind of musical populism—teleporting us back to the 19th century, when amateur and professional balladeers greeted the news of the day with quick-and-dirty tailor-written songs.

If the Obama ditties left me feeling all gushy about the Folk, my best-of list as usual leans hard toward pop-industrial complex product, with strong showings by the Nashville hit factory, pop divas, overpaid hip-hop producers, and Lil Wayne, who almost single-handedly propped up what was left of the biz in 2008. Here are my favorites:

Albums

1. Girl Talk, *Feed the Animals*
2. Lil Wayne, *Tha Carter III*
3. Jamey Johnson, *That Lonesome Song*
4. Calle 13, *Los De Atrás Vienen Conmigo*
5. Portishead, *Third*
6. Sugarland, *Love on the Inside*
7. Benji Hughes, *A Love Extreme*
8. TV on the Radio, *Dear Science*
9. The Cool Kids, *The Bake Sale*
10. Ashton Shepherd, *Sounds So Good*

Singles

1. Brad Paisley, "Waitin' on a Woman"
2. Lil Wayne, "Lollipop"
3. The Raveonettes, "Aly, Walk With Me"
4. Lee Ann Womack, "Last Call"
5. Usher, "Moving Mountains"
6. Tricky, "Council Estate"
7. T-Pain featuring Lil Wayne, "Can't Believe It"
8. Beyoncé, "If I Were a Boy"
9. The Ting Tings, "That's Not My Name"
10. Busy Signal, "Tic Toc"
11. Ciara featuring Ludacris, "High Price"
12. Beyoncé, "Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)"
13. Lil Wayne, "A Milli"
14. Estelle featuring Kanye West, "American Boy"
15. Keak Da Sneak featuring Prodigy & Alchemist, "That Go" (Remix)
16. Lykke Li, "Little Bit"

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17. Maino featuring T.I., Swizz Beatz, Plies, Jadakiss, and Fabolous, "Hi Hater" (Remix)
18. Gnarls Barkley, "Run"
19. Alan Jackson, "Small-Town Southern Man"
20. Little Big Town, "Fine Line"
21. Kylie Minogue, "2 Hearts"
22. Jonas Brothers, "Lovebug"
23. Jay-Z, "Jockin' Jay-Z"
24. James Otto, "Just Got Started Lovin' You"
25. Fall Out Boy featuring Elvis Costello, Brendon Urie, Travis McCoy, Alex DeLeon, and William Beckett, "What a Catch, Donnie"

I found it harder than usual to compile these lists, probably because, for me, 2008 was a so-so musical year. Just look at my No. 1's. Brad Paisley's magnificent ballad "Waitin' on a Woman" is actually three years old—it first appeared on *Time Well Wasted* (2005) but was finally released as a single this year, in a rerecorded version, with added spoken-word hokum by Andy Griffith. Meanwhile, my top album pick, Girl Talk's mashup opus *Feed the Animals*, features snatches of hundreds of songs, few of which were released in 2008.

I decided in the end to choose the records that I enjoyed the most, period—pleasure principle over agonizingly weighted critical judgment. Which is how I arrived at Girl Talk, aka Pittsburgh DJ Gregg Gillis, and his exuberant collages of classic rock, raunchy hip-hop, power ballads, and '80s bubblegum. (Typical segue: Unk into Twisted Sister into Huey Lewis and the News.) Some would have you believe that Gillis' songs say something serious about musical genre or the carnal and the spiritual. And they do say something—just not something serious. Girl Talk is a comedian, really. Beat-matching and pitch-shifting software has taken the technical wizardry out of mashup art, and what's left to Gillis are in-jokes, funny contrasts, a cheeky higher form of fanboyism. In "Let Me See You," he sets up a battle of the sexes showdown between 2 Live Crew's "I Wanna Rock" and MIA's "Boyz": The Miami rappers command "Pop that pussy!"; M.I.A. answers with a schoolyard taunt: "Na na na na na na na na!"

Gillis' signature trick is juxtaposing melodramatic rock instrumentals with filthy hip-hop to underscore the pathos and the silliness and the plain fun that lurks in both gangsta rap and bombastic rock—an equal-opportunity celebration of pop's depths and pop's shallows. The irony is that while Girl Talk's mashups epitomize musical ADD in the iPod era, *Feed the Animals* is an expertly paced and sequenced song suite. Many tracks begin with snippets of the song that ended the previous one, and the whole megillah is framed by the UGK/Outkast song "International Player's Anthem," with the album coming full circle, *Finnegans Wake* style, to end where it began. In other words, *Feed the Animals* hangs together like a traditional album better than most anything else I heard this year. Which may be Gillis' best joke of all.

In my next entry I want to dig deeper into my lists—to talk about TV on the Radio; and the terrific albums by Bristol stalwarts Portishead and Tricky; and my country picks (including Sugarland, whose delicious '70s AOR stylings would sound right at home on a Girl Talk mashup). But for now, a quick word about the Artist of the Year—technically speaking not an artist or even an animate human being, but a computer plug-in.

Historians will look back on 2008 as the year that Antares Auto-Tune pitch correction software achieved pop-music ubiquity. (This fact was underscored recently by the release of Bon Iver's "Woods," which brings cyborg vocal effects into the heretofore T-Painless realm of beardy-indie folk.) The signal auto-tune record of 2008 was Kanye West's *808s and Heartbreak*, a fascinating failure, half-redeemed by some lovely beats but doomed by West's bad singing and banal lyrics. Let's give credit where credit is due, though. It was T-Pain, the perpetually lovelorn strip-club habitué, who led the way, showing that auto-tune could be deployed not merely as a sonic novelty but to enhance vocal expressiveness and increase pathos.

Of course, the biggest robo-pop hit of 2008 was Lil Wayne's "Lollipop," a piece of pop doggerel right up there with "Tutti Frutti" and a brilliant conceptual art stunt, in which Weezy proved he could suppress all the qualities that make him the best rapper alive, ladle auto-tune over a half-hearted blow job conceit, and skyrocket to the top of the charts. *Tha Carter III* is a great record for all the reasons that Lil Wayne's mixtapes have been great: the constant surprise, the outsize wit, the aversion to cliché. But it is Wayne's flow, the virtuoso shadings and variations in mood and tone and timbre, that carried the day for me. He is, hands down, the best vocal stylist in pop: a rapping Sinatra. And while I worry that *T-Wayne*, the Lil Wayne-T-Pain album slated for 2009, may push things a bit too far, for now I get immense pleasure hearing the guy spout gibberish slathered in auto-tune. My favorite Wayne moment of '08 is his verse in T-Pain's "Can't Believe It," 16 bars of unintelligible auto-tuned mumble-rap. I don't know what the hell he's saying, and I don't care.

But enough of my imperfect pitch. Ann, Bob—your turn. What music turned you on, bummed you out, and made you audaciously hopeful in 2008?

Jody

Click here to read the next entry.

From: Ann Powers
To: Robert Christgau and Jody Rosen
Subject: Twilight of the Pop Gods

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Posted Thursday, December 18, 2008, at 11:50 AM ET

Hey, fellas—happy to be back with you during these uncertain times.

Thanks, Jody, for starting with that poptimistic recap of the amateur agitprop that made YouTube a tonic during election season. These days, as Shepard Fairey's Obama portrait iconically expressed, hope keeps us sane. The guy with the giant Doberman who lives down my street thought so, too—he stuck a doctored Fairey sticker to his car, with Sarah Palin's mug replacing Barack's. Sort of a Girl Talk-style mashup.

As a new universe dawns for the Folk, though, what we once knew as Pop continues to devolve into a dwarf star. Fairey's image was the most powerful icon of the campaign season, along with Tina Fey's televised impersonations of Palin. No particular song had much impact, unless you count "I Got a Crush … on Obama," and let's be real, that was all about the Obama Girl's, um, image. I can't even remember what Obama's official campaign song was.

The transference of cultural power from the few to the many is a triumph of sorts, but for pop music it also signals a loss. Yes, I'm talking about the monoculture again. As a daily-newspaper critic focused pretty squarely on the mainstream, I'm always looking for what unites—what artists, trends, and sounds form communities in hometowns or across the globe; what potent "product" breaks down social boundaries and cultural prejudices; or more viscerally, what simply makes a listener feel like throwing her arm around another person's shoulder and laughing or crying. You know, like Sugarland!

I guess that makes me old-fashioned. As culture continues to atomize within the archipelago of virtual realities, I'm finding it hard to maintain my dream of pop as an agent of change. Not to be a grumpy Gus, but I need to bring up this year's other historical shift: the economic downturn that's got everyone I know turning in toward themselves in fear.

The sense of retraction that had long overtaken the music biz is now universal. What's that going to mean for music? Maybe a new era of activism, with the Flobots in the lead (the kids sure love them!), or a further transformation of the do-it-yourself punk ethic through affordable technologies—a thousand Bon Ivers blooming. Maybe a 21st-century Woody Guthrie will emerge, countered by an art-for-art's-sake movement based around bedroom studios run by hippies raising their own chickens. Maybe rappers will finally stop proselytizing about overspending on bling, and rockers will find a way to be relevant again. (Sorry, Axl, you really picked a bad year to debut a rock epic.) I'm so curious to see what's going to happen, I almost wish this were the end of 2009.

But back to now, as the goddesses of Labelle said on a comeback album that made my Top 15 list, despite an extraneous Wyclef-produced attempt at a hit. (The Lenny Kravitz material is gorgeous.) I actually found it fairly easy to compile my lists, not because my favorites were so indelible, but because they were so easy to check up on—and to augment. With a Rhapsody subscription and Rex Sorgatz's indispensable "list of lists" (plus that crumpled piece of paper I stole from Bob's desk on a Thanskgiving visit—thanks for turning me on to K'Naan, pal!), I could peruse the picks of myriad tastemakers and consider how they compared with mine.

In the meantime, should we finally all agree to admit that critical consensus is just for the birds? I know journalists are embarrassingly prone to navel-gazing, but the enterprise of thinking and writing hard about music is truly undergoing a revolution. I'm not talking about blogging or even about paring down our thoughts to the size of a Facebook status report. I'm talking about the need to recalibrate our ears and minds to suit a new era, when the combination of easy technical access and reduced means could altogether eradicate pop's role as a unifier.

In November, a major label, Atlantic, announced that its digital sales have surpassed those of physical CDs. That same season, gaming continued to triumph over old-school music consumption via new editions of Rock Band and Guitar Hero. The commercial success of big thinkers Coldplay, Taylor Swift, and Lil Wayne may have been impressive compared with their competition this year, but they're modest in light of a history that includes Garth Brooks, Michael Jackson, and what Axl calls "old Guns." We're living through the twilight of the pop gods.

The space this void creates is, to me, what makes Lil Wayne the logical culture hero for the moment. His relevance goes beyond his wicked flow or his gut-busting rhymes. In any other era, I'd venture to say, he would have been received as a fascinating weirdo—perhaps a 14th member of the Wu-Tang Clan. But Weezy is like the living embodiment of a computer virus. He's infiltrated nearly every corner of the Top 40 (including country, via a couple of surprise appearances with rapper-turned-corndog Kid Rock), and wherever he hits, things go topsy-turvy. His outsider style challenges rap's "hard" masculinity; his free-associative, sometimes devilishly profane lyricism makes shocking seem, if not cuddly, at least kind of cute.

However, I do need to call him out on his caveman attitudes about women and sex. That line about licking the rapper in "Lollipop" gets a giggle, but the carnal encounter the song describes is soulless and starving. Yes, he raps a lot about oral gratification on both sides of the 69, which I guess is progress. But his slobbering exhibits no tenderness; it's just another way of expressing old anxieties about femininity as a snake in the grass (or the bush. Sorry.). Add in T-Pain's somewhat endearingly hapless need to persuade strippers to love him, and you have

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exactly zero progress when it comes to creating a space within mainstream hip-hop to express healthy sexual love.

Well, that's always been the job of the ladies and the crooning love men—Eric Benet's *Love and Life* is definitely one of my overlooked albums of the year. And then there's Kyp Malone, he of the Lincoln beard and the Coke-bottle glasses, one of the most unlikely sex symbols that indie rock (never really a gold mine for sex symbols) has produced. But Malone closes out TV on the Radio's *Dear Science* with "Lover's Day," a volcanic ode to body rocking that's really pretty embarrassing in its intensity. It's one reason I adore "Dear Science"—that, and so much more.

But more on that later. Gotta go see Metallica rock the Forum, in utter disregard of the waning power of their chosen art.

xakp

Click here to read the next entry.

From: Robert Christgau
To: Ann Powers and Jody Rosen
Subject: My Lists
Posted Thursday, December 18, 2008, at 1:15 PM ET

Just to get them out of the way—with no presumption, for the moment, that they reflect anything but personal musical pleasures I experienced in 2008—my lists. Although I'll eventually go to 25 singles on my Web site—constructing weekly playlists for Rhapsody has me focusing in on more songs as songs than at any time since I stopped dancing at clubs—I'll reverse Jody's procedure and limit those to 10. And because I remain an album-rating machine, I'll expand that list to 20 (out of 70 so far). Ann, who saw an earlier version, may notice that both Girl Talk and K'naan (now down around 22) have dipped. As I keep listening, other things will change—including, I hope, more 2008 albums that vault over some of these. There are always so many.

Albums

1. Franco: *Francophonic*
2. Lil Wayne: *Tha Carter III (Deluxe Edition)*
3. Drive-By Truckers: *Brighter Than Creation's Dark*
4. TV on the Radio: *Dear Science*
5. Coner Oberst: *Coner Oberst*
6. Randy Newman: *Harps and Angels*
7. Les Amazones de Guinee: *Wamato*
8. Hayes Carll: *Trouble in Mind*
9. The Roots: *Rising Down*
10. The Magnetic Fields: *Distortion*
11. Orchestra Baobab: *Made in Dakar*
12. Girl Talk: *Feed the Animals*
13. Raphael Saadiq: *The Way I See It*
14. Los Campesinos!: *Hold On Now, Youngster …*
15. Steinski: *What Does It All Mean: 1983-2006 Retrospective*
16. Robert Forster: *The Evangelist*
17. T.I.: *Paper Trail*
18. Menya: *The Ol' Reach-Around*
19. Jaguar Love: *Jaguar Love*
20. *The Rough Guide to Colombian Street Party*

Singles

1. M.I.A.: "Paper Planes"
2. Lee Dorsey: "Yes We Can Can"
3. Conor Oberst: "I Don't Want To Die (In the Hospital)"
4. Los Campesinos!: "Death to Los Campesinos!"
5. Rihanna: "Disturbia"
6. Mike Doughty: "More Bacon Than the Pan Can Handle"
7. Dan le Sac vs. Scroobius Pip: "Thou Shalt Always Kill"
8. Randy Newman: "Potholes"
9. Drive-By Truckers: "The Righteous Path"
10. Nas: "Black President"

To answer one of Ann's questions, kinda, the Obama song of the year was Allen Toussaint's "Yes We Can Can"—originally a 1970 hit for Lee Dorsey, a much bigger hit for the Pointer Sisters in 1973, smuggled into the Free Sampling Republic by the Treacherous Three in 1982, and in 2008 reprised most prominently by will.i.am on one of those YouTube moments. Old guy that I am, I don't watch music on my computer or anywhere else, but seeing will.i.am's version just once reminded me how much I loved Dorsey's (and the Treacherous Three's, though I'll bet Michelle O. loves the Pointers'), and, therefore, I stuck it atop my singles list out of sheer orneriness. At No. 2, though, because—musically, folks, musically—not even Barack Obama could surpass M.I.A.'s belatedly ubiquitous "Paper Planes." Beyond Lil Wayne, the commercial recognition of her *Kala*, the greatest album of 2007 and probably of the decade, was the story of the year, and M.I.A. did it the postmodern way: placements in two good, if overrated, movies, *Pineapple Express* and *Slumdog Millionaire*, for a song with a cash-register beat underpinning a joyful description of Third World kids stealing tourists' money. Not that many fans of the movies know that, but that's how pop "subversion" works, innit? I was lucky enough to see her "last" concert in Brooklyn in June, an unprecedented spectacle that climaxed with maybe 100 girls and women storming the stage at M.I.A.'s instigation. Pregnant and engaged

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to some Bronfman, M.I.A. just scored a *Spin* cover story that didn't exactly drip with pearls of wisdom. But that's how …

What does this story say about continuing possibilities of musical communion as the world monetary system heaves and spews? A little—because "Paper Planes" addresses such issues musically and lyrically; because M.I.A.'s (now provisionally abandoned) live manifestation did deliberately incite symbolic shows of panracial and quasi-feminist pleasure and solidarity; because she made a deep, daring record and put it over, utilizing new and not yet utterly hegemonic business models. But great as she and the song and the show all may be, it doesn't tell us all that much. Those stage-storming women getting a memorable taste of empowerment were part of a relatively small socio-cultural subset—at McCarren Pool (which no longer presents music), larger than it would have been at a club in Williamsburg (though they've gotten bigger) but very sub nevertheless. And if Sugarland were to go all Dixie Chicks on Tim Geithner, I doubt the answer would be much different. I've been around too long to believe that pop music can change all that many people's lives at once. Maybe the economic crisis will in turn change that—people are, indeed, hungry for change. But as Ann's lament for the monoculture makes clear, that's not what the current structural models suggest. Plenty of music will be recorded—the hardware is everywhere. But nothing in the YouTube distribution model Jody finds so inspirational encourages the kind of communality and solidarity Ann craves. Other kinds, yes—including some good ones. But not the kind with laughing and crying and, especially, shoulders.

Without elucidating my life theory of why popular music is the greatest of the arts, however, let me insist that, as usual, nearly all my favorite albums burst with *artistic images* of human solidarity. Without naming every one, let me offer a few examples. Flowing up from the past with pre-1980 music that, for the most part, has never been heard this side of the Atlantic, the supreme Congolese guitarist-singer-bandleader Franco Luambo is unmistakable proof of such progressive clichés as unlettered genius, African mother lode, and universal language—none of which are why he tops my list, which is the same reason James Brown's *Star Time* topped my list in 1991. Also on Sterns Africa are the all-woman, all-militia Les Amazones de Guinee, many of whom have been in this 11-piece for 46 years. They sound a lot livelier than dat grump Randy Newman, whose evisceration of the Bush-Cheney regime is no sharper than his eviscerations of his own privilege and who's never better than on a rambling meditation about synapse loss and what a dick his father was. Coner Oberst has never been so lyrical; Stephin Merritt has never been so noisy. Phildelphia's Roots make hip-hop politics beautiful; Atlanta's T.I. makes radio readiness exultant. Los Campesinos! are six wiseass kids from Wales just losing their giddy grip on their band scam; TV on the Radio are five grown-ass men from Brooklyn who lost their purism and found their souls. Scattered through all these records are political meanings implicit and explicit that, in this environment, seem as natural as electric guitars. Even the painstakingly retro Raphael Saadiq, whose miracle isn't replicating the Motown Sound but writing consistently charming and catchy songs in that style, has one about Katrina. But the meanings are built as well into the way each artist's music mines traditions, forges connections, and licks the collective ear hole.

I have plenty to say about Girl Talk, Auto-Tune, Lil Wayne, all that. Please give me the chance to take up those discussions. But I promised myself that in my first post I'd put in a good word for the most underrated album of the year. I've been playing the Drive-By Truckers' *Brighter Than Creation's Dark* for more than a year—it was one of my last reviews before *Rolling Stone* offed me. It never quits. Anyone who knows the band knows what songwriters Patterson Hood and Mike Cooley can be. Here they're never anything else—they have three songs in the top 25, Lil Wayne only one. Hood's best work is about what Obama calls the middle class—small-time entrepreneurs, the local gay guy, a couple of GIs. Cooley's focus is more countercultural—the rocker's life. The compassion in these songs is never-ending, and the melodies range from better-than-average to unforgettable. Stylistically, however, they're kind of retro boogie, Skynyrd sans soloists, and Hood's rough voice wouldn't pull you in if the words didn't. Maybe that's why they've been shut out in the year-end lists of *Blender*, *Spin*, or *Stone*. It's an outrage nevertheless.

I also really like T-Pain. Jody, where's your sense of humor? Over with porn fan Greg Gillis? (Whom I also like, but with more misgivings.)

Xgau

Click here to read the next entry.

From: Jody Rosen
To: Robert Christgau and Ann Powers
Subject: Pop Stars Are Not M.I.A.
Posted Friday, December 19, 2008, at 11:23 AM ET

Friends,

So much to chew on in your posts. But first I must defend my honor, since Bob has accused me of being humorless and—worse—not liking T-Pain. I gave *Thr33 Ringz* an enthusiastic review in one of those magazines that ignored Drive-By Truckers; had I expanded my albums list to 25, it would have made the cut. "Can't Believe It" is one of the year's great singles (No. 7 on my list), in part because of its swank sound (Pain is a fine producer), but mostly because he rhymes *mansion* with *Wiscansin*. My point was simply that T-Pain doesn't use auto-

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tune *just* as a novelty fillip (not that there's anything wrong with novelty fillips). He also uses it thematically: His is the voice of a man so stupefied by longing—for pole dancers, it goes without saying—that he has become something less than human. T-Pain was doing this Love Machine 2.0 routine years before self-proclaimed "pop artist" Kanye West, and a lot less pretentiously.

Plus, he rhymes *mansion* with *Wiscansin*.

Since we're on the subject of funny music, I want to give props to the best comical-topical song I heard in 2008, Blake Shelton's "Green," in which a redneck one-ups blue-state locavores. Then there's my pick for underrated album of the year, Benji Hughes' double-CD debut *A Love Extreme*. Hughes is a big guy with an Allman Brothers beard, a way with words, and an ear for melody and the absurd. He's been compared to Beck—he lives in L.A., sings in a drowsy slacker's drawl, and likes lo-fi keyboard sounds. But Hughes isn't a jive-Dadaist like Beck; in addition to hooks and eccentric arrangements, his songs have discernable dramatic situations and emotions. He's at his best when his knack for the droll and the hopelessly romantic overlap, as in "All You've Got To Do Is Fall in Love," a song so tuneful and witty that you half suspect Hughes found it hidden under a trash can in Tin Pan Alley or on a lost Stephin Merritt record:

> Wouldn't it be sweet
> If you could be in love with me
> The way that I'm in love with you?
> It's so easy to do
> All you've got to do is fall in love with me

Of course, Hughes is a niche artist. As is M.I.A., despite her new top-of-the-pops success. As is the indomitable TV on the Radio. But I can't join Ann in lamenting the passing of the pop gods, or the monoculture, because I think the pop gods are doing just fine, and I'm not convinced the monoculture ever existed, except maybe for 10 minutes in 1964.

It's true that Michael Jackson and Garth Brooks sold many more records than today's stars. But does anyone believe that there are fewer pop fans—that fewer people are listening to the music of Lil Wayne and Taylor Swift and Coldplay (and Beyoncé and the Jonas Brothers and Nickelback and Kenny Chesney and …)? Have you had a gander at the song-play stats on their MySpace pages? I just did. Total number of songs streamed on MySpace for the seven artists listed above: 767,612,724. If I'm not mistaken, that's three-quarters of a billion—not quite Henry Paulson bailout numbers, but not too shabby. Throw in the zillion other Internet outlets for streaming audio; and MP3 downloads, legal and not-so; and YouTube; and *Gossip Girl*; and radio; and the seven extant record stores; and the songs that are piped into restaurants and cafes, like the one where I am currently sitting in Brooklyn (shocker: They're playing Bon Iver)—I'd wager that more people are listening to popular music now than ever before. Record companies are doomed, for sure.

But let's not confuse the twilight of Tommy Mottola with the twilight of Mariah Carey.

Today's stars have to be nimbler than in the past, relying not just on records and live performances and videos, but ring tones and sketch-comedy cameos and carefully managed "Stars—They're Just like Us!" appearances and, yes, Guitar Hero and Rock Band. (Video games aren't competition for musicians—they're new promotional venues and revenue streams.) These multiple platforms make the average pop idol's fame bigger than in the past—stardom is writ larger, and spread wider.

As for monoculture: The freaky new modes of music production and consumption merely highlight the balkanization and regionalism that have always existed in the pop audience. And yet: Even though today's teenagers are armed to the teeth with iMachines and space-phones, most of them are having the same old-fashioned Top 40-centric young adulthood we did back in the 20th century. Go ask a bar mitzvah DJ if he isn't sick of playing T-Pain records.

Meanwhile, have you seen this week's *Billboard* Hot 100? Four performers—Beyoncé, Britney, T.I., and Kanye—have two songs each in the Top 10. Monoculture, anyone? The No. 1 song in the country, Beyoncé's "Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)" is a genuine phenomenon. Hate to get all Web-utopian on you again, but enter "Single Ladies" into the YouTube search field and check out the thousands of dance routines, mashups, and bedroom cover versions that pop up. (My favorite, by far, is this one. Get 'em started young!) And these videos offer just a hint of the arms-around-shoulders (and arms-around-other-places) delirium that is touched off every night of the week in dance clubs around the world, when the DJ fires up that preposterously peppy "Single Ladies" beat.

Speaking of dancing: Like Bob, I was touched when M.I.A. invited the women to storm the stage at her show. Powerful tableau. But also, a shtick. She did it at the McCarren Pool show that Bob saw; she did it at the Terminal 5 show that I saw in October of the previous year; she does it at every show. In fact, this is becoming an indie-concert staple. At Girl Talk's New York City show last month, dancing girls swarmed onstage during the first song and stayed there the whole concert, right up through the final strains of Journey's "Faithfully" (video here). I guess this trend makes sense. As Ann put it: the transference of cultural power from the few to the many. And all that. My favorite variation is Arcade Fire's: They end their concerts by descending from the stage *into* the audience, to play a final encore in the middle of the scrum. Smash that fourth wall.

Anyway, I've gone on too long. I'll get into my country faves and the music of the Great Recession in the next round.

Over and out,
J.

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From: Ann Powers
To: Robert Christgau and Jody Rosen
Subject: In Defense of Axl Rose
Updated Friday, December 19, 2008, at 6:22 PM ET

Hey, guys,

I feel like an idiot. I'm sorry. The mournful tone of my first missive was inappropriate, and motivated by personal issues—namely, the dissolution of my own internal monoculture during the frenzy of year-end musical cramming—and I totally accept both Jody's admonition that unifying forces in pop still dominate as much as they ever have and Bob's reminder that when we don't have anyone close to hug, we can look to the music itself to help us imagine our way toward one another. And if you hopeful scolders weren't enough, I had the whole fist-pumping, moshing, bellowing crowd at Metallica's Forum show last night to prove that unity in homage to rhythm and noise is far from dead.

Inspired by Bob's reminder that the songs and sounds we love can shore up our dreams even when life chips away at them, I'm taking another look at my lists (the first of which is here; there'll be more at the same spot soon) and thinking about what succor I found in my favorite offerings. There's plenty. Let's start with New York DJ Andy Butler's project Hercules and Love Affair, because disco always makes me feel mighty and real.

I first heard "Blind" while playing the real-life video game of driving around Los Angeles. A tense experience, always, but this music took me somewhere else. Guest angel Antony Hegarty's ethereal croon drew me in, of course, but what really caught me was the track's eclecticism. The beat recalls early house, while swirling strings take us back to Eurodisco and some punchy horns hint at acid jazz. Then there's the song inside the swirl, a romantic tale of spiritual loss straight out of Goethe.

And "Blind" wasn't a fluke—the entire album, which retells the story of the ancient strongman's love for and loss of a young soldier, unfolds in swells of giddiness and sorrow, rage and resolution. I often find today's indie-rock-associated dance music to be somewhat callous and superficial, but here is an album that goes deep into history and into the heart.

I expect Antony and the Johnsons' next album, *The Crying Light*, to be my first major obsession of 2009. (The band gave one of my favorite performances of 2008, accompanied by strings at Disney Hall.) The one that claimed me in 2008 was the work of a beast, not a bird like Antony. A sexy beast, though, and elegant, too. And damn hilarious, down to that handlebar moustache. Nick Cave remains in his prime at 50, and *Dig!! Lazarus!! Dig!!* is the best Bad Seeds album since 1986's *Tender Prey*. In 20 years, Cave has thoroughly pondered his place in history, and here he addresses it head-on, paying tribute to Dylan and the Velvets, Leonard Cohen and John Berryman without showing any need to top them. The songs are as dirty and overblown as ever, pondering violent sex, mystical love, the meaning of manliness, and the weight of the Judeo-Christian mythos.

But the humor that runs through them—and the pleasure, and in many cases, wrenching beauty—makes them richer than the rants of Cave's younger days. And the utter on-pointness of the Bad Seeds, a band as seasoned as Metallica but far less showy about it, gives Cave the sturdiest of bully pulpits from which to declaim. Plus, in the literary manifesto "We Call Upon the Author," he has what may be my favorite advice to writers ever: "Prolix!" he bellows. "Nothing a pair of scissors can't fix!" That's as good as rhyming *mansion* with *Wiscansin*.

Cave's album was my favorite "rock" album of the year, I guess, though TV on the Radio and Santogold are both "rock" by any other name, and in certain lights I'd even put Kanye, whom I love on Auto-tune, in that box. I don't want to get into a tedious argument about semantics, and I now know I really need to spend more time with that latest Truckers disc. But I will say that "rock," in its heroic aspect, really seems to be on the skids, despite the fact that monster bands keep releasing albums and some fans keep vitriolically defending them.

Metallica may still be mighty live, but *Death Magnetic* was, to my ears, a somewhat airless exercise, more technically impressive than emotionally galvanizing. AC/DC ruled commercially by producing the musical equivalent of a decent diner meal: *Black Ice* is satisfying on a gut level, but resolutely uninventive. Coldplay, the year's other big rock seller, has turned banality into an art. And then there was *Chinese Democracy*.

I'm one of those nutty critics who actually gives credence to Axl's project (he's a person of ongoing interest around our house—the hubby even wrote a book on the *Use Your Illusion* albums), and I've spent enough time with *Chinese Democracy* to tell you there's some pretty cool stuff in there. But could its release have produced any reaction but a giant sucking sound?

Axl was never that concerned with unifying his audience—he seems to have enjoyed adulation and the power it gave him over certain people, but his complexes have nothing to do with messiahs. He did, however, believe that rock's forcefulness and grandeur could make his voice undeniable. If the commercial disappointment of his long-awaited epic signals anything beyond some bad marketing decisions, it's that classic rock's sometimes inspiring, often exclusionary notion that an ordinary (white,

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male) striver can serve as prophet and sacrificial god has little traction in a time of a million avatars.

But lest you think I'm growing grim again, let me tell you about one voice that makes no such presumptions and that I love beyond all reason. Martha Wainwright has always been the little sister in a family of daunting extroverts, coming through now and then with an amazing song of her own but often simply simmering in the background. Her second album, the charmingly titled *I Know You're Married but I've Got Feelings Too*, is all about inappropriate emotions and ambitions and what happens to a woman when she refuses to stay in "her place," even in these liberated times.

Too musically polished to catch the fancy of hipsters and too overflowing to attract Norah Jones fans, *I Know You're Married* hasn't found its audience. I wish I could give it to every woman who got caught up in the drama of Hillary C. and Sarah P., or who worries that Britney really will go over the edge, or who wonders if her daughter should be so obsessed with *Twilight*. If anxiety is to become the great theme of the new Depression, women like Wainwright can show us how to approach it. They've been coming to terms with it, and making it into something beautiful, for years.

Ann

Click here to read the next entry.

From: Robert Christgau
To: Ann Powers and Jody Rosen
Subject: TV on the Radio Unites Us
Updated Monday, December 22, 2008, at 12:19 PM ET

Dear Allies/Colleagues,

Looking over your lists—including Ann's list, embargoed from ***Slate*** just in case Sam Zell needs to put it up as collateral—has me thinking more about music and fellow feeling. Ann is one of my best friends, Jody by now a warm acquaintance; together with Sasha Frere-Jones (Kelefa Sanneh having spit the bit), they're my favorite critics working. Yet I examine the 30 choices on our album top 10s and find 26 different titles; unanimity only for TV on the Radio, which I promise to close with. In addition, Ann and Jody share Nashville neotraditionalist Ashton Shepherd, Christgau and Jody Lil Wayne's inexhaustible *Tha Carter III*. Moreover, the three faves to which Ann devotes her second entry—Hercules and Love Affair, Nick Cave, and Martha Wainwright—are all records I've had to struggle to like just a little, a struggle that may never succeed in Wainwright's case. My initial attraction to Shepherd and another Jody fave, the Cool Kids, failed to deepen after too many exposures; Jody fave Sugarland (also cited by Ann last time) I'll buy for a coupla singles (including the glorious womanist "Take Me as I Am"); and his beloved Jamey Johnson, which he Absolutely Guaranteed when he hipped me to it months ago, will be a Dud in the next Consumer Guide. Johnson's drug-advisory "High Cost of Living" resembles Blake Shelton's environmentalism-tweaking "Green" (That's *funny*? I'll take my hundredth replay of Elmo and Patsy's "Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer" any day) in begrudgingly acknowledging a pointy-headed urban modernity it doesn't understand as well as it presumes. I sympathize with the messages of both. But I got minimal pleasure and learned not a thing from either—not even about country music. Hayes Carll's "She Left Me for Jesus" on Ann's singles list? That one goes somewhere. But he's really an alt-"Americana" guy.

The reasons for these disconnects are worth explaining briefly. Like more female than male critics, Ann has always favored the kind of unabashed emotionality I've been panning as melodrama for 40 years; like many contemporary "poppists," only with deeper schooling in pre-rock history, Jody strives to find meaning in the calculations of the hit-making dynamic. In both cases, I'm down—rock criticism has always been way too male, and in its first dispensation, I was an outspoken "poppist" myself, though back then the opposition was folkies, not "rockists." Also, I'm a devout pluralist, an early adherent of the Orthodox Church of Universal Heterodoxy. But I lived through the monoculture—from approximately 1964 through 1968, Jody, well over half of what we heard on a pop radio that counted to 40 rather than 15 were songs whose artistic value is undisputed by nobody but turf-scrounging contrarians. And then I lived through a period of consolidation when albums achieved a degree of critical and cultural consensus that's been slipping statistically for decades as pop's demographic has widened and its subgenres proliferated. I'm not nostalgic about these glories because nostalgia still nauseates me. Nevertheless, something has been lost, and even if it turns out that what's replaced it is just as good or better, which is unlikely, for someone my age to completely adjust his tastes accordingly would be an unseemly self-abnegation. I'm just glad I really like hip-hop. And I'll keep looking for music that lives in the present but speaks to values formed by the past I've outlined—and arguing for it.

So now let's talk a little Auto-Tune, shall we? I'm delighted I misunderstood Jody on T-Pain—his take on the new album is much like mine, though I wouldn't be quite so psychoanalytic about it. But I like Kanye's album, too—the man's such an adept that I find its sound subsumes its self-indulgence (as the almost unlistenable but meta-meaningful live track at the end illustrates—consciously, I suspect). But if Auto-Tune is the pop story of the year, as some claim (Jody's more judicious), it's an ominously minor one—especially as regards the meaningful distortion Jody cites. Those meanings don't promise much in the way of expansion, and though this may be partly generational, I

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find that the distortion limits the music's listenability—physically accelerates sonic fatigue. Most important, Auto-Tune's primary industrial function is supposedly inaudible—it's supposed to fix singers' bum notes electronically. I don't worry about the "inauthenticity" of that process—authenticity is usually a red herring. But I do believe tiny increments of error help make music interesting, subconsciously. And as with the limiting technologies that have so drastically encroached on pop's dynamic range, my guess is that the secret ubiquity of Auto-Tune is literally making music slightly more "boring," a concept almost as dubious as authenticity.

So, question. How much Auto-Tune did TV on the Radio slather onto the redolently titled *Dear Science*? My unresearched hunch is a lot more than Drive-By Truckers did on *Brighter Than Creation's Dark* (where I suspect, perhaps unjustly, that Shonna Tucker needed at least a little help). And really, so what? I am not a big or natural TVOTR fan—took me months to break through to 2006's acclaimed *Return to Cookie Mountain*. The big reason, redolently enough, is that lead vox Tunde Adebimpe favors a variant on the melodramatic emotionality I can do without in Martha Wainwright and Antony Hegarty (whose own arresting and idiosyncratic vocal affect, come to think of it, has a hint of organic Auto-Tune to it). Although Adebimpe's referents are less European and more gospel-doo-wop, hence more to my highly personal liking (especially the doo-wop part), I always wondered just how bad things could be to have him moaning like that. But in the end—and these 180-degree reversals happen, that's why pluralism is such a boon—the very intensity of his moan became one of the things I savored about *Cookie Mountain*. This time I came in softened up, and although I resisted the bad poetry of a few early songs, the engaging music soon swept me away. No other album this year came near to providing such rockist consensus. It's significant and probably essential that, despite Dave Sitek's crucial musical role, this consolidation was achieved by a band comprising Sitek and four guys of African descent, all of whom, in the manner of our president-elect, assumed they had every right to this particular piece of American pie. Fusing Africa and Europe into music that is definitely "rock" but just as definitely dance-, pop-, and hip-hop-friendly, TVOTR elected to curtail the public suffering and—especially in the defiant "Red Dress"—joyously confront the contradictions of their undertaking. That's why all three of us, different as we are, can't resist it. Which is great, right?

Yet formally and presentationally, *Dear Science* is still a little conservative—especially compared with *Tha Carter III* and *Feed the Animals*, the two other major Album of the Year contenders. I hope I have room for them before I sign off next time.

Xgau

Click here to read the next entry.

From: Jody Rosen
To: Robert Christgau and Ann Powers
Subject: The Best Recording of 2008 Was the Oldest
Posted Monday, December 22, 2008, at 12:19 PM ET

Ann, Bob,

Thanks for such stimulating thoughts. Special thanks, Bob, for your too-kind words about my work—softened the blow a bit when you went and dissed my favorite recovering addict/troubadour.

I won't bother mounting a defense of Jamey Johnson. I said my piece a few months back in ***Slate***, and I stand by his strong, grim songs about drugs, divorce, and sprinkling his ex's potpourri "on a burn pile in the back." Johnson aside, country music in 2008 was dependable: my go-to for stories well-told and sung. I love Alan Jackson's understated swing—he's one of the subtlest vocalists out there—and on his first of all self-penned originals, he proved he could write honky-tonk almost as well as he sings it. Greatest living ballad singer Willie Nelson had his usual prolific year, hovering between genres while collaborating with Wynton Marsalis, Kenny Chesney, Snoop Dogg, and Steven Colbert. There was also a very good, little-heard CD by Nashville also-ran Ray Scott, which I urge you to track down. And let's not forget Hootie. I found Darius Rucker's country debut, *Learn To Live*, a bit workmanlike, but "Don't Think I Don't Think About It" was the first country No. 1 hit by an African-American in a quarter-century—a milestone worth noting in this year of "post-racial" breakthroughs.

It was the country women who really shone, though. Sugarland's Jennifer Nettles brings charisma and swagger to everything she sings, and I love the variety of flavors on *Love on the Inside*: the country bubblegum, the funny song about Steve Earle, even the cover of "Life in a Northern Town." Ashton Shepherd has an even bigger, harder voice than Nettles, and she sounds like she's packed a lot of living into her brief life; at 22, she is the anti-Taylor Swift, singing wised-up songs about beer guzzling and bad marriages. She's already an assured country classicist, and I expect she'll only get better when she swaps some of the easy genre moves for something more peculiar and personal.

Running out of time and space, so, speed-round-style, I want to: a) register my love for reggaeton powerhouse Calle 13, one of the sharpest hip-hop acts in any language, with a rapper, Residente, whose wit and style are audible even if you don't know any Spanish; b) praise Ne-Yo's songcraft (and wardrobe!) while noting that he still hasn't come within a mile of equaling his debut single and while wondering whether he's not more valuable behind the scenes; and c) tip a cap to Dave Sitek, not

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just for his buffing and streamlining of TV on the Radio's sound but also for his production work on Scarlett Johansson's *Anywhere I Lay My Head*—the most beautiful bad record of 2008. And now … back to the Auto-Tune Question.

My "popism" notwithstanding, I am as old-fartish as anyone when it comes to the issues Bob raises of ear weariness and the homogenizing of music through Auto-Tune abuse. I'm fuzzy on the technical details, but I know that ear fatigue is a product of digital recording generally—of the capturing of signal information at rates that tax the normal human hearing range. And I know this fatigue is exacerbated by the rampant use of compression in the mastering process, with audio engineers jacking up the overall volume level of songs to make them leap from car speakers, thereby draining music of its natural dynamic range. We are all civilian casualties in the record industry's "loudness war"—the Top 40 is bludgeoning the pop audience. T-Pain, indeed.

In fact, I sometimes find myself recoiling from music that I really like. For instance, I'm a Young Jeezy fan and am quite fond of *The Recession*, a more compelling political rap album, in its way, than Nas' ballyhooed *Untitled*. But the roar of Jeezy's synth-swathed beats is physically excruciating to listen to—my ears hurt as I strain to hear the rapper through the digital din. And I can only imagine how I'm damaging my ears by doing 95 percent of my listening on my laptop and iPod while a fancy 20th century hi-fi gathers dust in my home office.

As for Bob's theory that Auto-Tune is eliminating "the tiny increments of error that help make music interesting, subconsciously": There's nothing subconscious about it for yours truly. One of the keenest pleasures in pop music is listening to vocalists—the ol' grain of the voice, you know? Many of my all-time favorite singers are the eccentric ones: Louis Armstrong, Billie Holiday, Willie Nelson, Bob Dylan, and my latest flame, the way-underrated torch singer Lee Morse. (I suspect Dean Christgau doesn't care for Jamey Johnson's mush-mouth style, but it's one of the reasons I love the dude.) The logical extension of over-Auto-Tuning is dystopian: the erasure of eccentricity, of human frailty, from pop singing. Which, it occurs to me, is what makes T-Pain's Auto-Tune Roger Troutman shtick kinda conceptually deep. He's created an idiosyncratic vocal personality by co-opting a technology designed to purge voices of their idiosyncrasies.

And yet the high-tech present continues to offer new wonders, including unprecedented access to the lower-tech musical past. I spent many happy hours this year listening to the History of Hip-Hop megamixes by the DJ crew the Rub—a downloadable encyclopedia of practically every great song from the genre's first two decades. And even before current events made the 1930s suddenly relevant, I went on a '30s music bender this year, thanks to sites like the stupendous Jazz-On-Line, where you will find dozens of digitized Fats Waller 78s, not to mention the greatest recordings of the aforementioned Lee Morse, among thousands of other goodies. Based on this research, I have a provisional answer to Ann's question about what the present economic crisis will bring us musically: Everything. For every Dust Bowl folkie, a dopey hillbilly novelty tune. For every "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime," a decadent escapist anthem, such as Fred Astaire boasting "I'm fancy free, and free for anything fancy" while gliding around a penthouse with a cocktail shaker. Bling—it's so Great Depression!

This talk of yesteryear reminds me that the most moving record I heard in 2008 was also the oldest. Literally: *the* oldest. I've had an interest in phonograph history for a number of years and in my travels have gotten to know a remarkable group of historians and enthusiasts dedicated to recovering the world's earliest recordings, the First Sounds group. In March, I had the privilege of breaking the story of First Sounds' biggest triumph: the discovery of a recording that predated Thomas Edison's "Mary Had a Little Lamb" tinfoil by nearly two decades. The record was actually was a visual representation of an anonymous female singer's rendition of the folk song "Au Clair de la Lune," made by the French inventor Édouard-Léon Scott de Martinville on a contraption called the phonautograph, in 1860—well before the idea of audio playback was even conceived. Scott's sound-wave images were converted to playable sound by scientists at the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory—the ultimate analog record, brought to life with a dash of digital fairy dust.

I was one of the first people in the world to hear Scott's "phonautogram." For 48 hours prior to the publication of the story, I sat at home listening again and again to that woman's muffled voice, calling out from a fog bank, warbling across the centuries. As music, it ain't much. But "Au Clair de la Lune" reminded me that all records are time machines, preserving for posterity fleeting moments, moods, indrawn breaths—and that music's unequaled emotional impact derives in no small part from this miracle that we take for granted. It's corny, I know, but it was nice to be snapped back from worrying about Katy Perry's *Girls Gone Wild* routine or how the hell I was going to persuade the Atlantic publicity department to send me a Flo Rida advance. It made my year.

Ann, Bob—it's been a pleasure, and an education. Thanks so much for doing this.

Cheers,
Jody

From: Ann Powers
To: Robert Christgau and Jody Rosen
Subject: Is the Internet Making Us Love Insular Music?

Posted Tuesday, December 23, 2008, at 1:41 PM ET

Dear like-minded strivers,

I awakened this morning to Jody's poetical musings on recorded sound as a vault of indrawn breaths—beautiful image. That gives me an in to comment quickly on Auto-Tune: As I elaborated in my review of *808s and Heartbreak*, I think Auto-Tune fascinates both artists and listeners now, not only because it's novel and easy to use, but because its robotic qualities make it ideal for negotiating our brave new world of avatars, Botoxed beauties, Facebook love affairs, and other elements of quasi-real humanity. (Props to Sasha F-J over at *The New Yorker* for writing the most lucid piece explaining the phenomenon, by the way.)

808s was strongly inspired by the loss of West's mother to the pursuit of plastic feminine ideals—she died after going under a liposucker's knife. Kanye himself is in constant fruitful crisis over what's "real," caught like the continuum-bending Hiro in *Heroes* between hip-hop and indie pop, high fashion and the street, machismo and dandyism, a comic-book persona and an authentic voice.

What's real? Now, that's an old wad to chew on when it comes to pop. Bob, you note that "authenticity is usually a red herring"; and, Jody, you remind us that every recording is just a slice of time, and as the Buddha might say, life is change, so therefore frozen time must be fake. All recorded music, all amplified music, distorts and deceives. Let's enjoy that!

Still, we seek, in music, something tangible—that is, "discernible by touch." Music has always been made on machines or, if you'd rather, tools—ever since an animal skin was stretched across a wooden hoop to form a drum. Even singing involves the manipulation of the strings and woodwindlike passages within one's throat. It's a poignant testament to the egocentricity of our species that we listeners (especially critics, who are often not musicians) put so much more value on the trace of human sweat on a guitar string than on the properties of the string itself. During an era of foregrounded machine tinkering, we've simply become more interested in the sweat on the laptop keyboard or the synthesizer knob.

In-your-face Auto-Tune doesn't erase human frailty—it attributes that very quality to a computer program. I think it's irresistible now, because we're logging too many hours on the computer, only to break and take a walk on a treadmill set to a carefully calibrated "alpine trek" program before popping our organic frozen lunch into the microwave and checking our Twitter tweets. We're desperate to add human value to the mechanical, the synthesized, and the virtual. That's one reason voices such as Santogold's, so bratty and vulnerable, sound great in settings dominated by samples and blips.

Of course, the kids are both leading this movement and rebelling against it. One of the impressive things about Jody's favorite, Girl Talk, is just how slapdash Gillis' mashups can feel—he's a pro, but he's excellent at portraying amateurishness (never so much as when he's dancing in his underwear during a show, surrounded by starlets). On the other hand, the post-collegiate hippie thing really peaked this year. Since we last exchanged missives, the indie-über-influential Pitchfork chose *Fleet Foxes* as its No. 1 album of the year. Others prefer Wisconsin cabin boy Bon Iver to Robin Pecknold and his fellow suburban Seattle flannel-wearers. The attraction is the same in both cases—a return to pastoralism and self-reliance and a sound so free of shiny urban gimmicks that you can almost hear the chickens clucking in the background.

I use the word *urban* deliberately. As my hippie-hating hubby was quick to point out the first time he heard Bon Iver's *For Emma, Forever Ago*, these neo-pastoralists are about as white as musicians get in an art-pop world increasingly ruled by proud mongrels like M.I.A. and multiracial coalitions like TV on the Radio. Bon Iver's album was even recorded in the snow! On that level, Iver and Fleet Foxes really bum me out, especially because their immediate elders in freak folk—with Devendra Banhart and Joanna Newsom leading the way—are bent on exploring multiracial influences and affects, however awkwardly they do so.

On the other hand, I understand how the internal clamoring for some kind of pure space beyond the din of hyperaccelerated information can lead a listener to reach out to music that's stubbornly insular.

After repeated listenings, I'm still not really getting Bon Iver's mournful gurgling. But Fleet Foxes intrigued me from the first listen; as I walked around the Rose Bowl back in June with the band's monklike harmonies echoing in my headphones, I wondered: Is this absolutely the worst album I've heard this year—or one of the best?

A few weeks later, seeing the band silence the drunk and giddy crowd at the Sub Pop Records anniversary party in Seattle's Marymoor Park, I was—not converted, exactly, but persuaded that people still need those pockets of stillness in which to step back and remember themselves; and for a certain niche audience, these skilled artisans are now best at carving them out. David Crosby and Graham Nash can still top their harmonies, though.

Overvaluing your niche is part-and-parcel of loving pop to distraction. This study, out today, suggests any fretting we've done about the monoculture is just silly—it states that 85 percent of the 1.23 million albums available digitally last year didn't move even one copy.

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That's a lot of unheard music! I'm not sure whether I should feel validated by this study, and continue to enjoy my perch as a reader of the tea leaves spilled by mainstream pop artists, or whether it should motivate me, in my increasingly rare position as a pop critic at a major daily newspaper, to work much harder in 2009 to bring attention to more obscure artists. My immediate reaction was to wonder whether there's some relation between this vast, dark sea of unheard sounds and the sense (my own personal sense, admittedly) that even those bubbling up a bit just aren't having as much impact—or are having a different, harder to quantify impact—than they did in years past.

I want to conclude on this point without edging into despair or even hinting that "things were better then," whatever my or your "then" might be. Instead, I hope that in 2009 those of us still privileged to have a forum in which to write about pop music could consider how our practice might adapt to music's changing place in everyday life.

If the monoculture still rules but it's harder to feel its impact on the polis … if subcultures (aka "niches") still arise but trade in passionate self-assertion for self-preserving retreat … if the sacrifices frugal consumers make include concert tickets and, consequently, the experience of sharing transformative sounds with strangers … if pop's own history continues to surface constantly in new "product" without being properly considered … if cultural journalists and music-industry tastemakers, justifiably concerned about their own livelihoods as the media world transforms, lose their grip on what's positive about those transformations … how do we speak truth in the midst of these shifts?

I don't have the answers. Right now, I'm finding myself drawn to music that hits me powerfully and directly, though I wouldn't call it simple. This time next year, I don't know whether anyone will be talking about the strong shot of bourbon that is the new Heartless Bastards album *The Mountain*, out in February on Fat Possum Records, or the magical sunshower created by Malawian emigrant DJ Esau Mwamawaya and Radioclit, available now, for free, on his MySpace page. I hope so. But, then, we have a whole long turn of the Earth to find out what will hit us next.

Love you guys. Thanks for talking,
xakp

From: Robert Christgau
To: Ann Powers and Jody Rosen
Subject: Do You Ever Fantasize About Being a Movie Critic?
Posted Tuesday, December 23, 2008, at 3:52 PM ET

Hey, guys,

So—I'm supposed to wrap this shit up, right? No way, Jo-day.

I mean, (gender inclusive) guys, do you ever fantasize about being a movie critic? How many releases a year do they suffer through? Five hundred, something like that? Plus some righteous moaning about how the evil mothers at Miramax are holding up the new Kiarostami? Boohoo. When I was doing Pazz & Jop, more than 1,500 albums a year made some crappy critic's top 10 or other. I dip into something like 2,500 albums a year, and the 300-plus I write about pass through my earholes in their entirety three, five, 10 times—good or recalcitrant ones even more. Yet as Ann's London *Times* link indicates, those 2,500 would barely fill out a Manx's tail. And as all our musical musings have made clear, albums are only the most readily rationalizable part of our job. Do Girl Talk's dancing girls equal M.I.A.'s dancing girls? Is the proper study of indie changing the world a little or building its own little world? Is music meant to capture time or enrich human interconnection? Does Auto-Tune feel T-Pain's pain? Who listens how much on YouTube to what, and so what?

The good news is that we know the answer to all these questions and many others like them. The bad news is that in each case, the answer is some syntactically appropriate version of yes and no. It could be said that any closely examined art throws up similar conundrums. But not these conundrums. Although my life theory of why popular music is the greatest of the arts has its formal and thematic propositions, note that except for the music-and-time thing, which has assumed countless oft-incomprehensible guises over the years, these conundrums are not formal or thematic. They're social. No art has ever had as many social ramifications, especially post-recording. We can cite them. But it's just about impossible to get our minds around them in concise, journalistically plausible words. Albums are at least rationalizable. And should the critic so choose, they offer up critical images of the artistic images of social interconnection the music suggests. As an example, here's the Duds page from the November Consumer Guide, which excoriates the Bon Iver record Ann politely dissents from and merely lists the Pitchfork fave she gives the benefit of the doubt. (I should explain to those who read it that the Robert Creeley mention references a posthumous album featuring the poet and Ralph Carney that got an A-minus in that month's column.) So, I'm wondering, would it be possible to discuss the Girl Talk and Lil Wayne albums I counterposed to TV on the Radio and then left hanging last time in ways that address their social ramifications?

With Gregg Gillis d/b/a Girl Talk it's easy. Again I notice Ann being polite and wonder whether she shares my reservations about *Feed the Animals*, which my wife and daughter and I played with pleasure all during an August vacation that stopped at Ann's house—such pleasure that only these nagging reservations (and the aural displeasure they sometimes occasioned) kept it out of my top 10. I love Gillis' highhanded

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adoration of sacrosanct hooks, the way Procol Harum's claim to fame underpins the Youngbloodz' "If you don't give a damn, we don't give a fuck." But I see what Jody calls Gillis' "signature trick [of] juxtaposing melodramatic rock instrumentals with filthy hip-hop" as more than a gimmick. I see it as a pre-emptive normalization of filthy hip-hop. Gillis makes a strong case. But despite his pointed inclusion of female rappers mouthing priapic truisms, I'm not convinced that, statistically speaking, hip-hop's male-dominant carnality is normal—and if I'm wrong, I want to combat the normalization. Maybe this means I don't understand modern female pleasure. But it's just as likely UGK doesn't. In any case, I then extrapolate to the dancing girls at Girl Talk's shows and think spring break show-us-your-tits. M.I.A.'s stage-dancer shtick is almost as sexual—her own dancers are *more* sexual. But it feels more conscious and autonomous.

If Gillis is a comedian, as Jody quite reasonably says, he's a crass comedian—Don Rickles rather than Andrew Dice Clay, one hopes, but not Jerry Seinfeld or Richard Pryor. Musically he's crass, too—call it gusto if you like it, crudity if you don't. No TV on the Radio rock synthesis or DJ Shadow crate reconstitution here—just whomp-there-it-is, right down to a defiance of copyright law that makes this longtime sampling advocate wonder about economic morality. I don't think Procol Harum should be able to censor Gillis' blasphemous connections, his insistence that they're the Youngbloodz' secret sharer. But it's hard to argue that they shouldn't get paid—not as much as they think, but more than the other artists bricolaged into that track. Ah, economic justice. Wouldn't it be nice.

Economics are where Lil Wayne ramifies socially. Unlike Ann, I'm more bothered by Girl Talk's equal-time sexism than by Wayne's casual feel-'em fuck-'em—he's been using gangsta as a means to outrageous wordplay and untrammeled rhyme for so long that I don't take his sexual rhymes any more literally than I do his thug rhymes, and I doubt many of his fans do either. One of his achievements has been to turn hip-hop's pro forma it's-only-a-story defense into an emergent reality by shifting both those fields of hip-hop discourse toward fantasy and metaphor, so maybe that's social, too. But what he's done with mixtapes—which jack-beats as shamelessly as Gregg Gillis within the context of a back-scratching cooperative subculture—is even wilder, as big a challenge to biz capitalism as Gillis', though who else is talented enough to make it work is as yet unknown. The hang-looseness of his mixtapes at their best—especially *Da Drought 3*, which Jody jawboned me into exploring in this very venue just a year ago—is so seductive that for a week or two I was slightly put off by the pop moves and finished production of *Tha Carter III*. And, of course, Wayne—and his bootleggers, who as Wayne acknowledges in a recent mixtape, he'd be imitating himself if he were them—made plenty of money off these supposedly free items even as he primed the pump for 2008's best and best-selling new music.

Right, music. I'm enjoying that music right now, for many more than the 10th time. Social, schmocial—it sounds great. I'm a lucky man to own so many albums. I tell myself that even if music production sinks to nothing the way it did in the depths of the Great Depression (only a theoretical, I've already explained why that won't happen), even if no one will pay me to write about the new stuff anymore (much less a theoretical), there are all these wonderful records in my shelves just waiting for me. Some will lose their charm as social contexts shift in ways frightening to imagine. But just as sound, most of them will endure. Merry Christmas.

Xgau

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the undercover economist

Why Not Start Your Weekend on Wednesday?

There's no need to preach the gospel of leisure. Most of us work less than our parents did.

By Tim Harford

Saturday, December 27, 2008, at 7:37 AM ET

Were an alien to pick up our news channels, it would conclude that human civilization depended on the production and purchase of cheap plastic rubbish. First came the concern that we might talk ourselves into not spending enough, then the fear that the banks wouldn't lend us the money to spend even if we wanted to. In November, our governments borrowed money and gave it to us in the hope that we'd catch on. Are we really so dependent on consumption?

In the short run, yes. Economists worry about a sharp fall in consumer spending, because when demand for goods falls, so does demand for labor. Our desire to spend less is quickly revealed as a desire to spend less hiring each other (and our friends in China) to make things. Result: economic collapse, unemployment, misery.

In the long run, the picture is completely different. We earn—this is a very rough average—twice what our parents did when they were our age. When today's teenagers are in their 40s, there is no reason why they shouldn't decide to enjoy their increased prosperity by working less instead of earning more. Rather than being twice as rich as their parents, they could be no richer but start their weekends on Wednesday afternoon.

If this were a gradual process, mass unemployment would not result. People would simply earn less, spend less, wear a few more secondhand clothes, and spend more time reading or going for walks.

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This would be perfectly possible. We are rich enough already. Even the Chinese might cope: They already devote much of their economy to making things for each other.

Here's the big question of the season, then: Why don't we do as countless moralists urge every year and focus less on money and more on leisure (or spiritual concerns, if you must)? Why haven't we all decided to work less, spend less, and consume less?

There is an anti-consumer movement with a ready answer: We're helpless, enthralled by advertisers and hooked on shopping. I've always had a slightly more optimistic view of human autonomy.

A more convincing answer is that we work hard because income is linked to our desire for status, which is collectively insatiable, because status is largely relative. A famous survey by economists Sara Solnick and David Hemenway found that many Harvard students (although few Harvard staff members) would rather have an income of $50,000 in a world where most people were poorer than an income of $100,000 in a world where most people were richer. The survey has arguably been overinterpreted in the 10 years since it was published, but it does seem to point to an important truth: It matters to us how much money other people have.

When it comes to leisure, positional concerns seem to matter less. Perhaps that is because leisure is not closely linked to status—anyone can enjoy leisure by walking out of his job. It is hard to imagine many people preferring four weeks of annual vacation in a world where most people have less to eight weeks of vacation in a world where most people have more.

This may be part of the story. The other part is that we *do* have more leisure. According to economists Mark Aguiar and Erik Hurst, leisure time for women has increased by at least four hours a week since 1965. Men have done even better. That may well understate the leisure gains. A hundred years ago, many people would start working at the age of 10 or 12 and work until they died. Now it is common to spend fewer than half our years working; the rest of the time we spend studying, traveling, and in retirement.

The "work less, spend less" movement is winning. It's a shame it hasn't noticed.

today's business press

Russia Cuts Off the Gas

By James Ledbetter
Friday, January 2, 2009, at 6:22 AM ET

today's papers

Israel Kills Senior Hamas Leader

By Daniel Politi
Friday, January 2, 2009, at 6:14 AM ET

The *Washington Post* leads with the continuing Israeli airstrikes on the Gaza Strip, which killed a senior Hamas leader yesterday. It marked the first time in the nearly weeklong bombing campaign that a Hamas leader was targeted and came at a time when Israel continues to amass troops and tanks along the Gaza border in preparation for a possible ground invasion. Israel also stepped up its diplomatic efforts in the face of mounting international pressure to bring an end to the punishing aerial campaign. The *Wall Street Journal* also leads its world-wide newsbox with Gaza and gets word that Israel is currently in discussions with Washington officials about the possibility of using international monitors to make sure Hamas stops its rocket attacks on Israel and that it's not able to rearm if there's a cease-fire.

The *New York Times* leads with a look at how the steel industry "is emerging as a leading indicator of what lies ahead" for the economy. After achieving record profits in the first nine months of the year, the industry is now in collapse, and executives are hoping that the massive stimulus plan that is in the works will provide a much-needed jolt to American steel. *USA Today* leads with the formal handover of control of the Green Zone to the Iraqi government, which marked the beginning of a year when the United States is set to decrease its presence in Iraq. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki said he would push to make Jan. 1 a national holiday to mark the return of sovereignty. For now the move is mostly symbolic, but by the end of the year, U.S. presence in the Green Zone could be cut by 50 percent. The *Los Angeles Times* leads with the grim outlook for Hollywood in 2009. More layoffs are seen as pretty much inevitable, and if a strike by the Screen Actors Guild materializes, it could prove devastating to the industry.

The *LAT* says that yesterday's airstrike that killed Nizar Rayyan suggests that "the Jewish state could be reviving its practice of assassinating Hamas leaders." Rayyan is the most senior Hamas official to be killed since the group's co-founders died in airstrikes in 2004. The airstrike also killed Rayyan's four wives and nine of his 12 children. The *LAT* does the best job of explaining how Rayyan's death is a severe blow for Hamas since he was "uniquely popular" and was "a force in both the political and military wings of Hamas." He was such a strong advocate for suicide bombings that his own son died in such an attack. While most of Hamas' leadership went into hiding when the Israeli airstrikes began, Rayyan refused to leave his home.

The *WSJ* emphasizes that nothing has been decided yet in the talks between the United States and Israel, and the negotiations

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could easily fall apart. Regardless, the fact that the talks are even taking place seems to suggest "a significant softening in Israel's position." But it might prove difficult to reach an agreement with Israel at a time when politicians are keeping busy by supporting a wide variety of negotiating tactics in an attempt to gain favor with the public in advance of next month's general election.

Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni was in France yesterday and said that a temporary cease-fire would be harmful to Israel. "There is no humanitarian crisis," she said, "and therefore there is no need for a humanitarian truce." The *WSJ* notes that the Israeli government has tried to brief President-elect Barack Obama and his top aides on the situation, but his team has refused.

The *WP* notes that Israeli military officials say a ground invasion could come at any moment. And while some see the threats as a negotiating tactic, the paper notes that the Israeli government is feeling pressured to continue the campaign, and perhaps topple Hamas. A ground operation would almost certainly be required in order to fulfill such an ambitious goal, and that would surely increase the death toll on both sides.

The Big Three automakers were once seen as a bellwether of the U.S. economy, but now "steel has replaced autos as the industry to watch for an early sign that severe recession is beginning to lift," says the *NYT*. Since September, steel output has decreased by 50 percent, and production has reached its lowest point since the 1980s. Industry executives are now one of the main proponents of a massive public investment program that could lead to a surge of demand in steel to construct everything from highways to schools. "What we are asking," said the head of a giant steel maker, "is that our government deal with the worst economic slowdown in our lifetime through a recovery program that has in every provision a 'buy America' clause."

Some think that the ongoing recession could "force Hollywood to fundamentally change the way it does business," reports the *LAT*. Studios and production companies are already cutting back on their lavish ways in an attempt to save as much money as possible. It's not just that TV-ad revenue is down or that DVD sales have been on a downward spiral, but the credit crunch has also made it more difficult to obtain financing for expensive projects. As consumers continue to cut back on their spending as a result of the bad economy, some think studios will be forced to step up efforts to distribute their content via the Internet and other new outlets such as cell phones. "The recession will accelerate the transformation of the entertainment industry from traditional media to tomorrow's reality of new media," an economist said.

The *NYT* fronts a look at how corruption has seemingly seeped into every corner of Afgahnistan's government. "From the lowliest traffic policeman to the family of President Hamid Karzai himself, the state … often seems to exist for little more than the enrichment of those who run it," writes Dexter Filkins. Almost every public transaction seems to carry some request for a bribe or gift, and that is contributing to a decline in public confidence in the government and the rise of the Taliban. This poses a unique challenge to the incoming Obama administration, which "may be required to save the Afghan government not only from the Taliban insurgency … but also from itself."

After spending several years ignoring the question of whether combat in Iraq could have contributed to violent behavior that has been seen among some returning service members, the military is finally taking a look at the issue, reports the *NYT*. In Ft. Carson, Colo., the base commander is investigating the nine current or former members of Ft. Carsons' 4th Brigade Combat Team that have killed someone or were charged with killings within three years after returning from Iraq to find out if there's something the military could have done to prevent the violence. The secretary of the Army is now thinking about conducting a review of all soldiers who were involved in crimes since returning from service in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The *WSJ* hears word that the United Kingdom is the latest European country to be seriously considering receiving additional Guantanamo Bay inmates. Australia also said it is considering helping resolve what might be Obama's biggest obstacle in his goal of closing down the detention facility. Portugal has been pressing European governments to assist in the effort, but Germany is the only other country to have publicly acknowledged it is willing to consider the issue.

The *WP*'s Charles Krauthammer writes that the Israel-Gaza war "possesses a moral clarity not only rare but excruciating." Israel works hard to prevent civilian casualties, while for Hamas "the only thing more prized than dead Jews are dead Palestinians," and it does everything to maximize the number of civilian deaths in order to get world opinion on its side. "The question is whether Israel still retains the nerve—and the moral self-assurance—to win."

In the *WSJ*, Alan Dershowitz also writes about how Hamas often deliberately puts civilians in the line of fire and says that it's "absurd" to claim Israel has violated the principle of proportionality. There is simply "no legal equivalence" between deliberately targeting combatants and deliberately killing civilians. In addition, proportionality should be measured by the deliberate risk posed to civilians rather than the raw number that are killed. "Until the world recognizes that Hamas is committing three war crimes—targeting Israeli civilians, using Palestinian civilians as human shields, and seeking the destruction of a member state of the United Nations—and that Israel is acting in self-defense and out of military necessity, the conflict will continue."

While Hollywood is preparing for a tough year, those who actually want to give their hard-earned money to the film industry are finding that it's not always an easy proposition.

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"Seeing all the films that may receive Oscar nods this season requires a single-mindedness bordering on mania," writes the *NYT*'s David Carr. Even after choosing a movie, "the dogfight has only begun." If you manage to snag a precious ticket, you have to resign yourself to getting to the theater early to grab a good seat and pray that the people sitting next to you aren't more interested in their cell phones than the movie. If Hollywood expects people to leave their comfortable home entertainment systems, "it might want to think about the notion that sitting down and actually seeing the movie should not require investing huge chunks of time, sharp elbows or an even sharper tongue."

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today's papers

2008: Good Riddance

By Lydia DePillis

Thursday, January 1, 2009, at 5:15 AM ET

The *New York Times* leads with news from Gaza, where nearly 400 people have been killed by the Israeli offensive since Saturday. Under mounting international pressure, Israel offered humanitarian aid to Gazans but did not agree to a 48-hour cease-fire, holding out for a promise from Hamas for a cessation of rocket fire into civilian areas and full control over border crossings.

The *Washington Post* leads with how bad 2008 actually wound up—$6.9 trillion in assets lost, the worst for the markets since the Great Depression, etc. (The *LAT* and *NYT* also indulge in front-page rehashes of the economic year that was, reminding readers about the Dow's 34 percent drop and staggering losses on everything from industrials to derivatives.) Happy New Year!

The *Los Angeles Times* leads with relatively encouraging news: Bucking typical patterns of crime during recessions, violent crime decreased in the city for the sixth year in a row in 2008. Academics warn that the expected bump could still be coming down the pike, but the LAPD claims the numbers as support for its strategy of "putting cops on the dots," or increasing police presence in computer-identified hot spots.

(The *Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today* do not publish on New Years Day.)

The *NYT* also hones in on the human cost of bombing in Gaza, complete with overwhelmed hospitals and torpedoed ambulances. The United Nations estimates that a quarter of those killed were civilians—although since Hamas also serves as the official government, the line between civilian and military targets is sometimes blurry. The *Post* buries the main story on A10 but fronts a look at how the incursion has created even more Palestinian disunity, with Fatah blaming Hamas for the breakdown in a six-month truce with Israel and Hamas accusing Fatah of collaboration with the enemy. The dissention even prompted Saudi Arabia to break its typical Arab solidarity by rebuking both Palestinian factions for failing to reconcile their differences, the *NYT* notes.

Also in potentially big news, early morning wires are reporting that Russia has cut off all gas supplies to Ukraine after the two countries failed to agree on a financing arrangement for 2009, indicating a deepening rift between Moscow and Kiev.

New details of the hubbub surrounding Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich's appointment of Roland Burris have come to light, including the revelation that another black politician, Democratic Rep. Danny Davis, had been offered the seat nearly a week previously. Senate Democrats aren't sure whether they actually have the authority to prevent Burris from claiming his seat, but they're trying as hard as they can, attempting to stall the nomination with paperwork—like the form that would make his appointment official, which Illinois' secretary of state has refused to sign—until Blagojevich can be properly impeached. African-American public figures warn that their constituents won't look kindly upon opposition to Burris' appointment. But according to the *Post*, most aren't willing to stick their necks out for Blagojevich's otherwise inoffensive pick.

The New Year actually means something in Baghdad, the *Post* reports, where the U.S. military has officially turned over the Green Zone to Iraqi control under the "status of forces" agreement signed last month. In practice, that means moving out of Saddam Hussein's old palace into a new, $736 million embassy compound, and granting only "limited and temporary support" at the Iraqi government's request. Iraq celebrated by announcing a new round of bids for oil fields, with the goal of over doubling production within four or five years. The *LAT* fronts a peek at the challenges ahead for Iraq, including ongoing Sunni-Shiite tension and elections at the end of 2009.

Dec. 31 was also a deadline for Bernard Madoff to turn over a detailed account of all his assets to the Securities and Exchange Commission. Journalists will still have to wait to salivate over what it contains.

The post-mortems of financial giants continue with the second in a three-part series from the *LAT* on AIG—long, somewhat technical, but worth a read if you're interested in the details. And although it seems like it would go without saying that Citigroup executives wouldn't be paying themselves bonuses, the *WSJ* makes it official.

In the ongoing midnight pardons drama, real estate swindler Isaac Toussie wasn't the only one to bypass the normal review process for clemency petitions, according to the *NYT*. Several others lucky enough to have lawyers with White House connections have made the same play, and with upward of 2,000

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trying to make it through the normal pipeline, it's hard to blame them.

Chief Justice John Roberts issued his annual State of the Courts, and guess what: Judges need a raise. The *Post* emphasizes that this year's request was more modest than years previous though: just cost-of-living increases this time around.

Is it the promised "commemorative credential"? With more and more people out of work, 60,000 have applied to volunteer for President-elect Barack Obama's inauguration. The committee organizing the event says it needs between 15,000 and 18,000—still three times the number recruited for the last two inaugurations—and has been screening applicants for availability and capability.

So cheers, it's a holiday. Sit back, read a year-end list that's actually funny, and remind yourself that all those resolutions are likely going down the tubes anyway.

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today's papers

Blago: I'm Still the Decider

By Daniel Politi

Wednesday, December 31, 2008, at 6:26 AM ET

The *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* lead with Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich's surprise announcement that he has selected former state Attorney General Roland W. Burris to take the Senate seat of President-elect Barack Obama, which he has been accused of trying to sell. Blagojevich defied Senate leaders, who have said they would refuse to admit anyone who is appointed by the governor, and said he had no choice in the matter because the state's lawmakers had refused to approve a special election.

The *Washington Post* leads with Israel saying that it was willing to consider a 48-hour cease-fire of its air assault on the Gaza Strip. It marked the first time that Israeli leaders have publicly said they were considering pausing their offensive and came at a time when Israel is facing growing international pressure to halt the attacks. Early morning wire reports reveal that Israeli leaders decided to continue the aerial assault for a fifth day but emphasized that they are still discussing cease-fire proposals. The *Wall Street Journal* leads its world-wide newsbox with word that Pakistan's investigation into the Mumbai attacks has found "substantive links" to Lashkar-e-Taiba, a militant group that its spy agency supported for many years. As the year comes to an end, *USA Today* leads with a look at how 2008 had the lowest combined total of U.S. troop deaths in Afghanistan and Iraq of any year since the Iraq war began in 2003.

In announcing his selection to the Senate seat, Blagojevich pretty much challenged Senate Democrats to refuse to seat Burris, the first African-American elected to statewide office in Illinois. Just in case he was too subtle, Rep. Bobby Rush joined the news conference and pointed out that there are no African-Americans in the Senate and emphasized that he doesn't think any senator "wants to go on record to deny one African-American from being seated." Rush asked lawmakers not to "lynch" Burris, who does not have "one iota of taint on his record" and "is worthy" of the seat.

"The governor is going back on offense," a political science professor tells the *WSJ*. "He loves political surprises and to kind of stick his finger in your eye. It is so removed from reality, it's almost surreal, and yet it's typical Blagojevich."

Democrats immediately emphasized that they have nothing against Burris but made it clear that anyone appointed by the embattled governor couldn't be an effective representative and would not be seated. Obama followed the same tune, praising Burris as a "good man and a fine public servant" but also saying he agrees that Senate Democrats "cannot accept an appointment made by a governor who is accused of selling this very Senate seat."

Can they do that? No one knows, but some legal scholars have their doubts. As the *LAT* and *WSJ* detail, the Supreme Court has ruled that neither the House nor the Senate can refuse to seat new members who meet all the qualifications for office. But the court was referring to someone who is elected to office, and it's not clear whether the standard would be different for someone who is appointed. The *WP* says the Senate could choose to refer the appointment to the rules committee for an investigation before Burris can be seated. That could prevent the courts from taking up the issue and could give Illinois lawmakers enough time to finish impeachment proceedings. "The Senate, basically as a practical matter, is going to do what it wants to do," the former chief counsel of the Senate ethics committee said.

As Israeli leaders discussed the cease-fire proposal, troops continued to converge along the Gaza border in preparation for a possible ground offensive. "The leading option right now is still a ground invasion, but the target of this operation is an improved cease-fire, and if that can come without the invasion, fine," a close aide to Israel's defense minister told the *NYT*. "But, of course, Hamas has to agree, and there has to be a mechanism to make it work." *Haaretz* reports that the Israeli government declared that the French cease-fire proposal was unrealistic because it "contained no guarantees of any kind that Hamas will stop the rockets and smuggling," as the spokesman for the foreign ministry said.

The *LAT* says the death toll among Palestinians increased to 384, including nearly 70 civilians. But, as ***Slate***'s Juliet Lapidos explains, the civilian death toll can hardly be considered a

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reliable figure since it's based on a U.N. count that only added up the number of women and children who had been killed. The *NYT* says that the number of targets that could be hit from the air is decreasing, which makes it more likely that Israel will decide to launch a ground invasion. The *LAT* talks to one expert who says Israel is now at a fork in the road and must decide whether to carry out a ground invasion or agree to a cease-fire. Of course, there's also the possibility that Israel would agree to a cease-fire and continue to prepare for a ground invasion in case no resolution can be reached.

The *LAT* says that while the Bush administration has been adamant in supporting Israel, it is "increasingly nervous" about the Gaza offensive and is urging Israeli leaders to come up with a timetable and exit strategy. There's growing concern that the Israelis won't be able to destroy Hamas and will actually end up making it stronger. But don't expect Obama to jump into the debate. Although Obama likes to say that "there is one president at a time," the *WP* points out that not all issues are created equal. While Obama has kept quiet on foreign policy, he hasn't been shy about outlining his plans for the economy.

In a separate front-page piece, the *WP* takes a look at how the Israeli offensive is being led "by a triumvirate of politicians" who are "known to mistrust one another deeply" but "have staked their futures on a highly risky military operation." Defense Minister Ehud Barak and Foreign Minister Tzipi Livini are vying to take over for Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and have seen their public approval increase since the attacks began. Olmert isn't running, and the Gaza operation "could be his last chance to rehabilitate a legacy badly tarnished by Israel's failure to achieve a clear-cut victory against the Lebanese Hezbollah movement in 2006." Outside the triumvirate is former Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, who has been leading in the polls and has long advocated for Israel to take a tougher stand against Hamas.

A top commander of Lashkar-e-Taiba who was captured earlier this month has confessed that, just as the United States and India have affirmed, the militant group was involved in the Mumbai attacks. The question now is what Pakistan will do with this information. When the 2001 attack on India's parliament was tied to Lashkar, the militant group was banned but continued operating openly. The top leaders who were arrested were released a few months later. "They've got the guys. They have the confessions. What do they do now?" a Western diplomat tells the *WSJ*. "We need to see that this is more than a show. We want to see the entire infrastructure of terror dismantled. There needs to be real prosecutions this time."

The *NYT* reports that the United States and NATO are working on expanding supply lines through Central Asia to deliver goods to forces in Afghanistan. While these arrangements would allow supply convoys to circumvent the dangerous tribal areas of Pakistan, it also means that the United States would become more reliant on cooperation from authoritarian countries like Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Officials are also in negotiations with Russia, which illustrates "the continued importance of American and NATO cooperation with the Kremlin, despite lingering tension over the war between Russia and Georgia in August," notes the *NYT*.

In an interview with the *WSJ*, former Attorney General Alberto Gonzales opens up a bit and says he's writing a book about his time in the Bush administration. Gonzales has kept a low profile since resigning 16 months ago and still very much sees himself as the victim of unwarranted criticism. "[F]or some reason, I am portrayed as the one who is evil in formulating policies that people disagree with," Gonzales said. "I consider myself a casualty, one of the many casualties of the war on terror." Although he has given a few paid speeches, Gonzales has had trouble landing a job and said that law firms have been "skittish" about hiring him.

The *WP* notes that while the ball drop in Times Square is certainly the most famous celebration to mark the New Year, it's hardly the most exciting. At least as far as what is being dropped is concerned. In Maryland, the city of Annapolis decided to drop a sailboat this year. In Georgia it will be giant peaches and chicken nuggets, and in Maine, a sardine. In Key West, Fla., a drag queen named Sushi will be lowered to mark the beginning of 2009. "Honestly, we just started it because we were tired of watching New York's ball drop every year," a resident of Easton, Md., said as she prepared the huge crab that will be lowered tonight and reminisced about how parties always used to end around a TV screen. "This year, I mean, it's a big, huge crab on a hydraulic lift. No one's going to want to miss something like that."

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today's papers

"All-Out War Against Hamas"

By Daniel Politi
Tuesday, December 30, 2008, at 6:30 AM ET

As bombs continued to pummel the Gaza Strip for the third straight day, Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak declared "an all-out war against Hamas." The Palestinian death toll rose to more than 360 yesterday, many of them civilians. But so far Israel appears not to have been able to cripple Hamas' ability to fire rockets into Israel. Hamas fired about 60 rockets into southern Israel yesterday and killed four people. The *New York Times* points out that Israel "has not made clear if it means to topple the leadership of Hamas" and has emphasized that it merely aims to strike at Hamas' ability to fire rockets into Israel. But *USA Today* quotes Israel's ambassador to the United Nations saying that the goal of the military operations is to "destroy

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completely" what she referred to as a "terrorist gang." Indeed, the *Washington Post* notes that the airstrikes that began Saturday "have had broader aims than any before," which suggests that "Israel intends to weaken all the various facets of Hamas rather than just its armed wing."

The *Wall Street Journal* says that the fact that Hamas can still fire so many rockets into Israel after three days of air attacks "pose[s] concerns in the West that Israel could face a repeat of its 2006 war with Hezbollah in Lebanon," which only made Hezbollah stronger. Whatever happens in the long term, the residents of Gaza are suffering now. The *Los Angeles Times* goes inside with the straight-news story about the conflict and leads with a look at the civilian casualties in Gaza and what it refers to as "a battle of unequal forces" since "Israel is far better equipped than Gaza to absorb the conflict." While Israel can quickly respond to a rocket attack and send the wounded to the hospital, residents of Gaza often have to fend for themselves, and the hospitals are so overwhelmed that they have to turn people away.

There are hints that Israel is preparing for a ground offensive into Gaza, although the *NYT* gets word that nothing has been decided yet. The *WSJ* points out that if the rocket attacks continue, the military may face more pressure to carry out the ground offensive. But a *NYT* analysis piece says that that may be exactly what Hamas wants. An analysis in *Haaretz* says that Hamas hopes a ground offensive would "let it inflict such heavy losses on Israeli tanks and infantry that Israel would flee with its tail between its legs." If there's one thing that's clear, it is that what is already one of the largest attacks on Gaza in decades shows no sign of stopping. Hamas has called on Palestinians to retaliate with suicide attacks, and Barak has made it clear that the "operation will be widened, deepened as we see fit."

The *WSJ* says that while the six-month cease-fire may have calmed military tensions, it seems clear that both Hamas and Israel spent the time preparing for battle. Israel has been aggressively training ground forces on urban warfare to avoid a repeat of what happened when it confronted Hezbollah in 2006. For its part, Hamas has dug lots of new tunnels that could allow the organization to move tools and personnel without being detected by Israeli authorities. While Palestinians are obviously quick to blame Israel, the *NYT* notes that the key question for Hamas now is whether Gaza residents will get tired of the current situation and vote for someone else in the next elections. Meanwhile, Israel is thinking about its own election in February, notes *USAT* in a piece inside. The outcome of the vote is going to be strongly tied to this operation, which more than 80 percent of Israelis support.

The *WP* devotes a separate front-page piece to, and the *LAT* mentions, the tragic story of a family that lost five sisters ages 4 to 17 in an Israeli airstrike. For its part, the *NYT* devotes some sentences to describing the scene in a Gaza hospital, where armed Hamas militants walked the halls and shot six people who were accused of collaborating with Israel.

Many continued to take to the streets across the Middle East to express their anger toward Israel, but the *WSJ* points out that the protesters are also taking aim at Arab rulers who are not doing anything to stop the airstrikes. Some are worried that this lack of action by Arab leaders could create a backlash and might motivate more to join Islamist groups. "These groups are increasingly seen as the only organized movements willing to stand up to Israel," notes the *WSJ*.

In the *WP*'s op-ed page, Daoud Kuttab writes that the "disproportionate and heavy-handed Israeli attacks on Gaza have been a bonanza for Hamas." Hamas had been steadily losing support both inside Gaza and abroad since it came to power in 2006. But now "the Islamic Hamas movement has been brought back from near political defeat while moderate Arab leaders have been forced to back away from their support for any reconciliation with Israel."

The *WSJ* fronts, and everyone covers, news that the Treasury Department announced it would commit $6 billion to prop up GMAC, the auto financing giant. GMAC provides most of the financing to GM dealers and buyers, so its survival is crucial to General Motors. The Treasury injected $5 billion into GMAC, which is 49 percent owned by GM, and then extended a $1 billion loan to GM so the automaker could purchase additional equity in the financing company. In what the *WSJ* says could be a sign that the government's role "could become open-ended," the Treasury has set up a separate program within the Troubled Asset Relief Program to inject money into the auto industry

The *NYT* fronts a look at how the downturn in the real estate market has made divorce more complicated. "We used to fight about who gets to keep the house," one lawyer said. "Now we fight about who gets stuck with the dead cow." Some couples can't decide and end up staying together even after divorce because they can't sell their home. "We're finding the husband on one floor, the wife on the other," a certified divorce financial analyst said. "Now one is coming home with a new boyfriend or girlfriend, and it's creating a layer to relationships that we haven't seen before. Unfortunately, we're seeing *The War of the Roses* for real, not just in a Hollywood movie."

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today's papers

Israel Strikes Back

By Jesse Stanchak

Sunday, December 28, 2008, at 6:39 AM ET

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Everyone leads with Israeli airstrikes against Hamas facilities in the Gaza Strip. The attacks killed at least 225 Palestinians and injured at least 400 more, making it one of the deadliest days in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The *New York Times* says the bombings had a "shocking quality," starting in broad daylight and not shying away from civilian-populated areas. The *Washington Post* writes that the attacks are the first stage of an Israeli attempt to clamp down on Hamas launching rockets into Israel. The *Los Angeles Times* writes that the bombings were not aimed at ousting Hamas but at forcing them to accept a new cease-fire that includes a pledge to stop smuggling weapons.

The *WP* reports that Israel saw a marked increase in rocket attacks following the collapse of the old cease-fire on Dec. 19. Israel is calling these airstrikes the first stage of an open-ended campaign to stop the rocket barrage. Defense Minister Ehud Barak said, "There is a time for calm and a time for fighting, and now the time has come to fight." The *NYT* reports the campaign may include the use of ground troops. The *LAT* speculates that the attack could have an impact on the upcoming election to replace Prime Minister Ehud Olmert.

The *WP* says that senior Hamas official Ismail Jumaah was among the dead. Following the Israeli attacks, Hamas launched 110 additional rockets into Israel, killing one person and injuring at least four others. Hamas has also called for the resumption of suicide attacks on Israel, a practice the group had all but abandoned.

President Bush has issued a statement condemning Hamas' actions, while the U.N. and the European Union, Russia, Egypt and other nations have admonished both sides. Inside, the *WP* writes that these attacks could snuff out any hope the incoming Obama administration might have had of finding a peaceful resolution to the conflict, since it seems likely that these attacks will only breed more violence in the future.

The *NYT* publishes its reactions to a lengthy interview with Caroline Kennedy regarding her push to be appointed the next senator from New York. To put it mildly, they aren't impressed. The paper calls her, "less like a candidate than an idea of one" because of her lack of strong issue positions. Kennedy declined to specify how she'd improve on Hillary Clinton's tenure as senator and demurred as to how she'd differ from the Democratic Party's platform or from other prominent New York politicians. There are moments in the piece in which the writers sound a little irked by some brusque comments made by Kennedy, which may have contributed to the pessimistic tone of the piece. The quotes in the article appear a little scant at first, but a full transcript of the interview appears online, and it shows the reporters didn't miss much of substance.

The *WP* goes under the fold with a feature following up on Saturday's coverage of the disintegration of the Chesapeake Bay's distinctive culture. Efforts to restore the bay's biodiversity have repeatedly failed and so the bay's oyster and crab populations continue to dwindle. Without the bounty the bay used to provide, residents have a hard time maintaining the seafood-centric traditions that made the area unique. Online, the paper includes a variety of multimedia elements, including photos, video, and graphics, to enhance the story.

White farmers in Zimbabwe won their case against President Robert Mugabe, reports the *NYT*, but the victory is largely symbolic. Since 2000, Mugabe has been seizing land owned by white farmers and then using it as a reward for supporters. In an effort to get an impartial ruling, the farmers took their case to a tribunal of judges representing a regional trade federation. The tribunal ruled in the farmers' favor, but the paper makes it very clear that no one expects Mugabe's government to abide by the decision.

The *LAT* explores the web of connections between politics and drug kingpins in the state of Sinaloa, Mexico. The piece examines the ways drug traffickers have infiltrated law enforcement, the statehouse, and the federal government. The story is divided into several vignettes about people trying to stand up to the cartels, and it's not until the final third of the article that the stakes become clear. The paper warns that as the cartels gain increasing control over local affairs and hire their own paramilitary forces, Mexico runs the risk of becoming a fragmented coalition of warring states each run by their own drug lords, akin to Afghanistan.

As part of their "The Reckoning" series on the financial crisis, the *NYT* publishes a look at the incredibly lax lending practices at Washington Mutual, where employees were all but required to approve every loan application. Employees were discouraged from verifying facts on loan applications, no matter how ridiculous the claims sounded.

The *WP* covers the ongoing fight over the fate of the crash site of United Airlines Flight 93. A group representing the families of the 40 passengers who perished in the crash on Sept. 11, 2001, want President Bush to use eminent domain to seize the land surrounding the crash site so that they can build a permanent memorial to the crash victims.

The prospect of finally tapping the vast reserves of oil shale located in and around the Rocky Mountains has many energy companies excited and water providers concerned, the *LAT* says. While America is believed to possess 800 billion barrels of oil trapped in underground shale, the technology to extract the oil has yet to be perfected. What scientists do know is that any method for extracting the oil from the shale will require a great deal of another natural resource that's in short supply out West:

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water. Some scientists think it may take as much as 10 barrels of water to produce one barrel of oil from shale.

The declining number of American Catholics entering the priesthood has forced some diocese to look abroad to fill vacancies. The *NYT* follows a priest from a rural diocese in Kentucky as he searches for priests from Africa, Latin America, and India. The solution is far from perfect. Foreign-born priests sometimes have trouble overcoming the culture shock and often come from countries where the priest shortage is even more severe. Some critics say that importing priests might ease the burden on American parishes, but it does little to address why the church has a priest shortage in the first place.

Inside, the *WP* runs an interesting look back at how the role of technology in political discourse changed in 2008. The story makes the case that a shift from community-based political organizing to viral political movements means that politics is no longer about catering to local concerns; it's about engaging individuals.

Dogfighting is making a comeback in Afghanistan, according to the *NYT*. The fights, which were once banned by the Taliban, have steadily grown in popularity since 2001. Victory can now bring in thousands of dollars in prize money. Unlike American dogfights, in Afghanistan the dogs rarely fight to the death, since few can afford the expense of losing a dog in the ring. Instead, the dogs fight until one dog shows clear signs of submission or dominance.

The *LAT* counts Broadway among the many marketplaces that are suffering in the current downturn. In the current climate only the most bankable shows (or those with the most bankable stars) are able to find financial backing.

The *WP* wraps up 2008 by reveling in the absurd with Dave Barry's take on the year that was.

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today's papers

A Helping Hand for Ohio?

By Kara Hadge

Saturday, December 27, 2008, at 6:33 AM ET

The *Wall Street Journal* leads its worldwide newsbox with word that Pakistan is redeploying troops who had been fighting Islamic militants in the northwest. The troops may be headed for Pakistan's eastern border with India, as tensions escalate between the two countries following the November terrorist attacks in Mumbai, India. The *Washington Post* leads with a look at Ohio's dire need for an infusion of federal funds. After accruing a $7.3 billion budget deficit over the last two years, the governor says that the state's only way out of its economic morass is through federal funding from a planned stimulus package from President-elect Barack Obama.

The *Los Angeles Times* leads (and the others go inside) with new developments in the Christmas Eve massacre of nine people in California by Bruce Jeffrey Pardo, whose original plan to flee to Canada after the shooting was thwarted after he received third-degree burns from the firebomb he set off. News has also surfaced of the precipitating event for Pardo's recent divorce: Years before his marriage, he abandoned a son from a previous relationship who was paralyzed after a swimming pool accident that occurred while Pardo was baby-sitting him. The *New York Times* leads locally with the news that nearly $5 billion worth of development projects in the city have been put on hold or canceled due to the recession. Development projects have been a driving force in New York City's economy, and their loss signifies unemployment for many of the city's thousands of unionized workers.

In addition to moving troops, Pakistan has also limited leave for all troops. Pakistani officials will not disclose how many troops have been shifted but say that the redeployment will not affect the country's fight against terrorism. Conflicting sources in the *WP* put the number of troops at either 5,000 or 20,000. The *NYT* also fronts the story but notes that as of Friday, there was little evidence to indicate the shift was a significant redeployment; sources in the *LAT* frame Pakistan's move "as a warning to India rather than an actively aggressive posture." India has not ramped up its military presence in response, but it is advising citizens not to travel to Pakistan following an unconfirmed bomb in Lahore last week. Pakistani media sources reported that an Indian national set off the bomb.

Ohio has cut 100,000 jobs this year and $640 million from the budget year ending in June, but the state is still facing a further loss of 25 percent of discretionary funds in its next budget period. The governor is hoping for federal support for Medicaid, infrastructure projects, and education. Seeking funding for education is largely a preventative measure, as the state's schools have not suffered budget cuts yet, but governors from several other states are teaming up with Ohio in this request.

The *WSJ* fronts a profile of the middlemen who found investors for Bernard Madoff. None of them are alleged to have known about Madoff's investment scheme, but they may not always have been up front with clients about who was investing their money, either. In addition to Rene-Thierry Magon de la Villehuchet, the middleman in New York who apparently committed suicide earlier this week, others who attracted funds for Madoff's investments have also taken a fall with personal financial losses and now lawsuits brought against them by clients.

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A front-page story in the *WP* delves into the role a private intelligence firm played in capturing an Afghan drug trafficker and Taliban supporter and selling other intelligence to the government, banks, and securities firms. In the hope of securing future government contracts, Rosetta Research and Consulting led one of its top informants, Haji Bashir Noorzai, into the hands of Drug Enforcement Administration officials after luring him to the United States to provide intelligence to the FBI. Rosetta was never rewarded for its role in turning over the drug trafficker. Instead, the company fell thereafter when investors who wanted to support the fight against terrorism, not drug trafficking, pulled out.

The *LAT* fronts a story about Guantanamo Bay prisoners arrested as minors. Captured in Afghanistan as a 15-year-old on charges of throwing a grenade at an American soldier, Canadian Omar Khadr has been subjected to harsh interrogations during his six years in prison, which have involved "snarling dogs, 'stress positions' and being upended by guards and used as a human mop to clean the floor." Now legal scholars and human rights advocates are questioning the detention of Khadr and other juveniles with the argument that child soldiers should not be held responsible for crimes perpetrated by adults.

The *WSJ* tests another of Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich's alleged corruption schemes for possible Obama involvement. An article finds that Obama may have "unwittingly" aided Blagojevich's alleged attempts to use a planning board for hospital expansion projects to solicit money for political favors. As a state senator, Obama supported legislation five years ago that reformed the planning board but ultimately enabled Blagojevich to curry favor with a majority of the board members.

After "one of the worst holiday shopping seasons in decades," the *NYT* fronts a story on retailers' attempts to recoup some of their losses with massive post-Christmas sales. Estimates suggest that consumers purchased 10 percent to 40 percent fewer gift cards than last year, so package deals offer incentives to try to drive consumers into stores after the holidays to clear out merchandise before the spring.

As the recession carries on in the United States, the enormous crash of tiny Iceland's economy earlier this fall continues to cast ripples in foreign markets. A front-page story in the *WSJ* reconstructs the last days of the collapse of Iceland's economy, which sent the country plummeting from its previously high quality of life and has left investors abroad with little to no assurance that their deposits in Icelandic banks will ever be recovered. Banking assets vastly outnumbered Iceland's national gross domestic product after the country's banks were privatized and expanded in the early 1990s, but even at its height, Iceland's wealth was only "a mirage" perpetuated by high interest rates.

In the *LAT*, British columnist Chris Ayres tells Americans to buck up at the prospect of losing our status as the top world superpower. It would actually be a godsend, he says, because no one blames the little guy.

In Portland, Ore., there's more to being a barista than just pouring coffee. A five-page job application for Ladybug Organic Coffee Company wants to know what prospective employees think might improve their city and what they routinely do "to make the world a better place," says the *NYT*. Although 150 people have answered the 10 essay questions on the application since the cafe opened in 2007, only 25 have been hired.

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today's papers

Lebanese Do-Over

By Ryan Grim
Monday, December 29, 2008, at 6:25 AM ET

Israeli warplanes continued their attack on Gaza, dominating global news coverage. Israel called up thousands of reservists, sparking fears that those new soldiers would be used as part of a ground invasion. The death toll hovered around 300 as night fell and protests broke out in Western European capitals.

The *New York Times* leads with the conflict and gives most of its above-the-fold space to a photo of a man screaming, trapped under the rubble of a bombed security compound and prison. The *Wall Street Journal* tops its world-wide news box with the crisis and fronts a photo of the same bleeding man. An *NYT* analysis, also above the fold, is headlined "With Strikes, Israel Reminds Foes It Has Teeth" and argues that the bombing is a way for Israel to expunge memories of the failed war against Hezbollah in Lebanon in 2006. The *Los Angeles Times* also makes the Lebanese connection.

USA Today fronts a photo of Gaza horror but leads with news that the capture of immigrants trying to sneak into the United States is at the lowest level since the mid-'70s. The *L.A. Times* leads with the Gaza battle, fronting analysis and news stories. The *Post* also leads with a photo of Gazan carnage buttressed by a spread of analysis (medical supplies running short) and news (death toll nears 300; Hamas calls for suicide strikes).

"This is something we never even dreamed of," a Gazan told the *L.A. Times*. "We expected an Israeli retaliation but not like this."

Israel says that Hamas was warned. "We contacted Hamas and spoke to them bluntly," Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas said during a visit to Cairo. "We pleaded, 'Please do not end the cease-fire.' " A cease-fire expired Dec. 19. The Israeli strikes are said to be in response to a consistent and low-volume barrage of mortar fire that has been coming from Gaza.

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President-elect Barack Obama was largely pushed off the front pages by the attacks, which he is currently leaving to President Bush to handle, but the *L.A. Times* reports that he is still planning for a middle-class tax cut and a giant stimulus package to be ready for his signature after his inauguration.

"It is a good time to be me," a lawyer who worked with S&L bailout regulators in the '90s tells the *NYT* in a front-page look at the cottage industry of bailout consultants, which is looking forward to a boom time. "It is a great time to be a banking lawyer," says another.

The *Post* fronts the first of a three-part series (with a Bob Woodward tag line) on the oh-so-clever guys who, back in 1986, thought they could model and quantify their way out of financial risk and who ultimately persuaded American Insurance Group to back their scheme. The next installment in the series is titled "A Dangerous Fork in the Road." TP is guessing that the guys will make a wrong turn there.

The *Wall Street Journal*, too, gets in on the year-end, look-back action with a front-page feature called "The Weekend That Wall Street Died"—a recap of the death of Lehman Bros., complete with an interactive graphic (though TP couldn't figure out how to interact with it). "It was a weekend unlike anything Wall Street had ever seen: In past crises, its bosses had banded together to save their way of life. This time, the financial hole they had dug for themselves was too deep. It was every man for himself, and Mr. Fuld"—Lehman's CEO—"who declined to comment for this article, was the odd man out."

The *LAT* fronts an investigation into high arsenic levels in the water at a California prison.

The *Post* fronts a three-pager (online) that marshals anecdotes and data to make the case that the Bush administration's Occupational Safety and Health Administration was effectively run by the industries it was meant to regulate. Under Bush, OSHA officials issued 86 percent fewer rules deemed economically significant than over a similar period during the Clinton years—a disparity Bush officials insist is due to their embrace of regulatory "quality, not quantity."

Thailand's political structure continues to disintegrate.

The *Journal* tops its business and finance box with news that wealthy Latin American investors may have been the biggest victims of Bernie Madoff's Ponzi scheme.

The item shares front-page space with the ravings of a Russian analyst who has long been predicting the disintegration of the United States by 2010. Although the *Journal* doesn't say as much to its readers, professor Igor Panarin's analysis is based on near-total ignorance of the United States. A story that made the rounds in November, after being linked on the Drudge Report, more clearly illuminates his reasoning: "He predicted that the U.S. will break up into six parts—the Pacific coast, with its growing Chinese population; the South, with its Hispanics; Texas, where independence movements are on the rise; the Atlantic coast, with its distinct and separate mentality; five of the poorer central states with their large Native American populations; and the northern states, where the influence from Canada is strong."

Right. Will the part about "the South, with its Hispanics" be on the midterm, professor?

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well-traveled

The Pervert's Grand Tour

Little death in Venice: The covert Casanova tour.

By Tony Perrottet

Friday, December 19, 2008, at 11:01 AM ET

From: Tony Perrottet
Subject: In Search of the Secretum
Posted Monday, December 15, 2008, at 6:37 AM ET

Sex has always been the unspoken inspiration for travel.

In Homer's *Odyssey*, the first travel book in history, Ulysses, the hero, spends more time in the arms of comely nymphs and enchantresses than actually under sail. Medieval pilgrims were notorious for spicing up their religious devotions with riotous fornication. By the 19th century, the erotic obsession had spilled from the bordellos and bars to suffuse the whole sightseeing agenda, creating a secret itinerary across Europe. For dirty-minded tourists, no visit to Paris was complete without a visit to the *Enfer*, or Hell, section of the National Library, where banned pornographic books from the Renaissance onward were conveniently hidden. The highlight of southern Italy was the ancient Roman brothels of Pompeii and their frescoes demonstrating sexual positions. Nobody had "done" Venice without visiting Casanova's prison cell or Provence without admiring the dungeon of the Marquis de Sade. In fact, the discerning traveler was spoiled for choice: Europe's major museums all had their off-limits rooms containing saucy relics, and every noble family boasted its private cabinet of naughty artifacts.

While researching my book on salacious history, *Napoleon's Privates: 2,500 Years of History Unzipped*, I realized that this deviant itinerary could still be traced through the underbelly of

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Europe—in short, a Pervert's Grand Tour. I'd always avoided the most popular attractions of Britain, France, and Italy, but this was an inspiring prospect: I would pick three "official" destinations and seek out some tasteful historical filth.

And I knew just the place to start.

Oh, Behave! The Wicked British Museum

Sexual imagery is so ubiquitous these days that only the most lurid display can raise an eyebrow, but there is still something deliciously furtive about tracking down a Victorian cache of "obscene objects"—the British Museum's once-forbidden Secretum.

The prospect had me as wide-eyed as a schoolboy as I made a beeline through the drizzling rain to that hallowed institution in the heart of old London. Once inside, wandering the stolid Georgian corridors of the King's Library, I fantasized that pulling a book from one of the mahogany shelves would open a secret passageway to a cave of sinful treats—the private collection, perhaps, of Sir Richard Burton, first translator of the Kama Sutra; or Henry Spencer Ashbee, author of the Victorian porn classic *My Secret Life*; or even Sir William Hardman, "genial connoisseur of smut."

The reality was slightly less Merchant Ivory, but in my feverish state, nothing could disappoint. After muttering my name into to an intercom, I was ushered into a waiting room by a little old lady, then pointed down some gloomy stairs into the storage areas. The public face of the British Museum immediately dissolved: Marble splendor was replaced by institutional gray. The corridors were shabby, the paint chipped, and windows grimy in that *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* sort of way. Things were getting interesting.

Waiting for me was a young curator—Liz Gatti, a fashionable urbanite with an understated nose piercing, looking like a Marc Jacobs emissary now lost in *Bleak House*.

"We get a lot of inquiries about the Secretum," she began, as I signed the visitors' book. "But I'm afraid you'll be disappointed. There's hardly anything left!"

"Oh, that's not important," I said with what I hoped was sober aplomb.

We followed a corridor lined with antique wooden cabinets, each marked with a bronze number plaque, until we stopped in front of 55. This was it. The dreaded Cupboard 55 was the last known resting place of the Secretum.

"No whiff of brimstone," I joked. Ms. Gatti looked at me askance, then pulled out a fistful of keys.

The Museum Secretum was officially created in 1865, at the height of Victorian sexual hysteria, to protect the more impressionable public—women, children, and the working class—from the moral perils of erotica. At the time, boatloads full of archaeological finds were arriving from abroad, and these revealed the exuberant carnal habits of classical cultures. Excavations in the ancient Roman cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum, for example, included eye-popping images of uninhibited pagan copulation in every gender combination, the same images that had once graced every bedroom, street, tavern, and brothel of antiquity. Such guilt-free sex, it was decided in London, should be locked safely behind closed doors. (Naples, the city closest to the Pompeii dig, already had a Secretum in its Bourbon Museum; known as the *Gabineto Segreto*, or Secret Cabinet, it was created in 1819.) According to former curator Dr. David Gaimster, London's Secretum soon housed 1,100 objects. Only gentleman scholars deemed qualified to interpret such dangerous imagery could gain access.

As one would expect, the Secretum soon took on an underground cachet, luring a steady stream of randy tourists, dilettantes, and voyeurs, who would seek permission from the official "keeper of the Secretum" for a private session with the relics. The 434 phallic objects donated by an oddball collector named George Witt, a former medical doctor who had made a fortune in Australia as a banker, were a particular draw. Witt was convinced that all ancient religions had begun with phallus worship, and he amassed a huge array of examples to prove his thesis. Also in the dark and dingy storage room were a series of graphic Italian engravings from the 1500s called "The Positions," illustrating pornographic verse by Pietro Aretino; ancient Greek drinking cups adorned with explicit sex scenes; a replica chastity belt; antique condoms; a statue of the god Pan fornicating with a she-goat; and exotic erotica from the colonies, especially India and the Far East.

Wicked items were still being added as late as 1953, but finally, in the more permissive atmosphere of the 1960s, the Secretum collection was gradually redistributed to other parts of the museum. From the 1980s, its remaining relics were kept in Cupboard 55, which today is under the management of the Department of Prehistory and Europe. I naturally assumed that anything still confined to the cupboard at such a late date must be pretty darned offensive. And since the British Museum's entire storage collection is open to the public by appointment on weekday afternoons, I applied to have a peek.

I actually held my breath as Ms. Gatti creaked open the doors like a vampire's casket. Blinking in the half-light, I made out rows of peculiar items that looked a bit like dreidels. I peered closer. "Egad," I said, mystified. They *were* dreidels.

"Everything has been moved about," Liz explained. "Today we use this cupboard to mostly house Judaica." This was deflating and disturbing news: It turns out that most of the last items had

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been redistributed in 2005. "There was no logic to the Secretum," she added. "Modern curators believe it's important to keep items within their cultural context. Keeping 'immoral' objects together in one place was a false premise."

But is there nothing here from the former collection? I pleaded.

"Well …" she said hesitantly, fingering the keys. "A few bits and bobs."

That was when she cracked open the doors to Cupboard 54. And there, embedded in neat rows of clinically white, acid-free foam, was a selection of pastel-colored wax penises. These miniature ornaments were used in the late 1700s as votive offerings in a village in southern Italy, hung by the peasantry on the walls of Catholic churches as fertility symbols. They had been collected by Sir William Hamilton, who had been posted as the British envoy extraordinary to the court of Naples during the Napoleonic wars (and whose wife, Lady Hamilton, famously ran off with Lord Nelson).

Another foam sheet held ancient Roman rings and charms decorated with erect male members, laid out in neat rows like bright insects caught by a collector.

"Most of the supposedly 'obscene' items in the Secretum were not originally created to be titillating," Liz explained. "These were everyday objects for the ancient Romans. The phallic imagery was actually used for good luck and safety. Even the Roman kids wore little rings with phalluses engraved upon them."

My eye was drawn to the last display—four soft strips that turned out to be condoms from the 18th century. These pioneer contraceptives were handcrafted from animal intestines, but the result was very attractive. In a nice design touch, they were tied at the open end by little pink silk ribbons.

"They're like works of art," I marveled.

Finally, taking a deep breath, I stepped back onto the polished parquet of the real world. As a parting gift, Liz gave me a printout of items that had once been in the Secretum and were now on permanent public display. I searched throughout the galleries and identified many of the items that were once too immoral to be seen—a classical roll call of satyrs, sodomites, hermaphrodites, and maenads, women driven to a sexual frenzy. In one cabinet, a woman was passionately copulating with a horse; in the next, a young girl was "tending *phalloi*," pouring seed over a series of erections like gnomes in a garden.

All very impressive—but somehow, under the bright lights of the regular museum, it wasn't quite the same.

From: Tony Perrottet
Subject: The Devil's Playground
Posted Tuesday, December 16, 2008, at 7:32 AM ET

You should never visit the Marquis de Sade's castle on a pretty summer's day. No, to appreciate the site, you need an atmosphere of infernal darkness, with torrential rain and howling wind. At least, that's what I told myself as I tried to find the place while blinded by a brutal thunderstorm. I'd been soaked to the bone just walking to the car-rental agency. Now, with lightning darting about my cobalt-blue Picasso (yes, a Picasso—some sort of Citroën), I had to pull over for the 20th time to make sense of the road map. Sade's castle is in a little village called Lacoste, only 25 miles east of Avignon in Provence, which is supposed to be southern France's most seductive idyll of lavender fields, vineyards, and quaint B&Bs. But paradise certainly wasn't behaving as advertised today. I might as well have wandered into the opening sequence of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, en route to the Annual Transylvanian Convention.

At last, a sign to Lacoste protruded from the murk. I parked by a medieval fortress wall; ahead lay a stone arch engraved with the words *Le Portail des Chèvres*, the Goats' Gate, the entrance to the upper part of the village. The marquis's old stomping ground was as welcoming as Salem on a witch-trial day. The houses were shuttered, so I walked cautiously up a steep alley, trying not to slip on the uneven cobblestones as the rain gushed in a channel between my feet, then I climbed a trail littered with weeds and loose chunks of masonry. And there, crouching like a wolf in the mist, was the Château Sade. It still appeared to be half ruin, with a veil of crumbling outer walls, yet the core has been renovated to a habitable state—the ideal haunted refuge, you could imagine, for a deranged monk or bestial aristocrat from one of Sade's pornographic classics like *120 Days of Sodom*. At the very least, a Dungeons & Dragons computer game designer.

Au contraire. I climbed the wet stone steps and banged on the wooden door, but I was answered by grim silence. No lights shone in the windows.

I would have to come back to meet the new lord of the lair, Pierre Cardin.

France has always been a hot destination for literary tourists: The land is lousy with shrines like Victor Hugo's apartment in central Paris or Balzac's cottage in Passy, where even the author's old teapot is revered like a piece of the true cross. But only a certain type of traveler is lured to this corner of Provence,

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where the château of Donatien Alphonse François, Marquis de Sade, still looms in decaying grandeur. This 42-room redoubt was Sade's most beloved residence. He visited it often as a child, and after his father gave it to him as a wedding present in 1763, he lived here for long stretches of his 20s and 30s—his feral prime. The château soon became the core of his fertile imaginative life. As biographer Francine du Plessix Gray points out in her classic *At Home With the Marquis de Sade*, its position hovering above the village fed Sade's outdated fantasies of feudal inviolability, where he could act out his rabid carnal desires with no fear of reprisal. Even while he was in prison, the château remained a font of inspiration for Sade's grisly literary works—a Walden Pond for the polymorphously perverse.

Essentially, the château was the mise-en-scène for some of his more outrageous real-life escapades. To take one example, it became the setting of a light-hearted romp dubbed by biographers "The Little-Girls Episode." At the end of 1774, the charismatic, 34-year-old marquis came to winter at Lacoste with his family and a string of fresh-faced household servants he'd hired in Lyon, including five unsuspecting virgins. These were intended to supplement his more knowing staff, such as the lovely housekeeper Gothon, whom Sade had hired because she sported "the sweetest ass ever to leave Switzerland," and the studly male valet Latour, by whom Sade liked to be sodomized while prostitutes watched and cavorted. For the next six weeks, Sade dedicated himself to corrupting the captive minors. As far as historians can discern, he held them hostage in the château's dungeon, forcing them to act out scenes from pornographic literature as well as Sade's own intricately stage-managed sexual rituals. (A control freak, Sade like to choreograph every detail: As a character complains in one of his comic fictions, "Let's please put some order into these orgies!") Modern French wives are legendarily indulgent of their husbands' peccadilloes, but Sade's wife, Pélagie, took spousal freedom to new levels by overseeing this marathon debauch, keeping the five girls compliant, and then hushing up the ensuing scandal. When the police came knocking, she helped bribe the outraged parents and spirit the girls, decidedly damaged goods, away to convents.

Pondering this edifying tale, I puddle-jumped through the castle's former moat and climbed in the pelting rain up to the wild plateau of Sade's old estate. This was once a splendid garden and orchard, where the dashing young marquis and his three children would frolic on summer days. (He was, by all accounts, a devoted father, with a fondness for playacting and games like hide-and-seek and musical chairs.) Now, there were loopy artworks installed on the grounds, including some fairly gross sexual cartoons painted on panels by a Russian artist and a few surreal sculptures—a giant fly, a human finger the size of a tree trunk, and an enormous skull, its eye socket filled with pinkish rainwater.

But the most striking piece, perched on a strategic precipice, was a shiny, new bronze sculpture of the Divine Marquis himself. Erected in the summer of 2008, it displays Sade's bewigged 18th-century head surrounded by a cage—Sade the perpetual prisoner. After being seized by police during a night raid in 1777, he spent most of his life in prisons and nuthouses, including 13 years in the Bastille and 11 in Charenton Asylum, the setting for the film *Quills*. Both proved futile efforts to censor his literary outpourings.

Some 40 years after Sade's death, poet Baudelaire wrote that if a statue of Sade were ever erected, thousands would come to lay flowers at its feet. Well, the crowds might have been thin on this rainy day in October, but there's no question that the marquis can bring in the fans. His presence in Lacoste 250 years ago has given the village a notoriety it might otherwise lack. And what began as a trickle of a few lecherous pilgrims has escalated exponentially since the Château Sade was snapped up by—of all people—Pierre Cardin, the elderly haute couturier based in Paris.

The billionaire fashion icon was evidently tickled by the Sade connection when he purchased the decrepit castle seven years ago for a nominal 1 million francs, including 70 acres of the estate and an oil painting of the marquis. In the village, rumors flew: Some said Cardin was related to Sade; others whispered that Cardin is bisexual and thus wanted to vindicate the broad-minded writer's memory; still others alleged he was looking for some mythical Sade family treasure. Since then, Cardin has renovated the château as his holiday residence and has started an annual summer arts festival on the grounds, luring crowds from Paris and the Riviera. (Cardin's Web site presents it as an homage to Sade, who loved the theater and used to stage plays on the estate. And Cardin has certainly caused more tumult in Lacoste than anyone since Sade himself: In recent years, the fashion designer has been buying many of the village's historic structures in a real-estate grab along the lines of Ted Turner in Montana. The reaction among some villagers has been violent. Lacoste is being torn apart by a miniature civil war with a viciousness that only the French can manage.

You could almost imagine the ghost of the marquis pirouetting in glee.

I wanted to stay in Lacoste for several days to see how Sade's mischievous legacy was playing out, so I'd booked a room above the Café de France, the only lodging available off-season. When I pushed open the door, four farmers were hunched over a wooden table, ripping into roast chickens like gourmandizing Orcs, the one missing a leg pausing to shoot me a scowl. The barman also eyed me suspiciously, then led me up a dark, creaking stairway that smelled of last month's cooking oil.

As I sat sodden and hungry in my freezing garret, staring out at the ghoulish fog, I had to wonder if this was really Provence, and if so, what century.

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It seemed to be less Brueghel and more Hieronymus Bosch.

From: Tony Perrottet
Subject: The Marquis de Sade Is Dead! Long Live Pierre Cardin!
Posted Wednesday, December 17, 2008, at 7:01 AM ET

"Oh, he loved Lacoste did the Marquis de Sade. He adored it! Every time he was on the run, he came back here. And Cardin, he loves the place, too."

Finn Mac Eoin, wild-haired gardener and local poet, was showing me around the renovation work under way in the Marquis de Sade's old village, which is being funded by Parisian fashion king Pierre Cardin. Suddenly, carried away with the grand ambition of it all, he stopped and decided to orate a celebratory poem. "I call this one 'Resurrection,' " he said, striking a mock-heroic pose like a Shakespearean actor on the tiles. "It's dedicated to Cardin." Raising one hand, a knee up on a medieval wall, Mac Eoin swept back his curly hair and pronounced in a rolling Irish brogue:

> Up from ancient ruins in Phoenix flight,
> Domain de Sade Pierre'd before my very
> eyes—
> Stone by stone this titan feat rose and rose
> beyond a dream
> Where lark and passing cloud can meet …

Mac Eoin pointed with a flourish to another picturesque hilltop village, Bonnieux, in the distance, for centuries Lacoste's bitter Catholic enemy.

> Now, a beacon on this once Lacoste'd hill has
> Far-off Bonnieux put to shame. And soon the
> moon it will.

"Cardin's got that poem up on his wall in the château," Mac Eoin exulted. "Right next to the Marquis de Sade's portrait."

A villager stuck his head out of the window to see what all the noise was about, then, seeing it was Mac Eoin, pulled his head back with a snort of disgust.

"Ah, they hate me here," Mac Eoin chortled. "They fuckin' hate me! I don't care. Friends make you weak. Enemies make you strong! I'll make 'em hate me more."

That next morning in Lacoste, things had livened up in every sense. When I creaked open the shutters of my garret in the Café de France, the fog from the day before was rapidly burning off to reveal the sorts of views that would make an Impressionist drool. Lacoste, I now discovered, floats above the region called the Lubéron like a hot-air balloon, with sweeping vistas across verdant fields and succulent orchards. In the distance was Mount Ventoux, whose peak looks snowcapped but is actually bare white limestone.

So, this was the mythic Provence of Peter Mayle memoirs, beloved by British retirees and anyone with a passion for produce markets and renovating farmhouses.

Fine for some. But I prefer a bit of drama in my paradise, and Lacoste was delivering the goods. By 9 a.m., the village—which had been deserted the day before in the Gothic deluge—was ringing with activity. Construction workers were everywhere, scurrying like ants along the Rue Basse, Lower Street, where in the last year Cardin has purchased a dozen buildings, bringing his total to more than 25. On all the work permits, I noticed Pierre Cardin's name had been crossed out by hand, and little slogans scribbled in—"*Sauvez Votre Village*," Save Your Village.

Lacoste has always had a contrarian streak. It was a Protestant village in a sea of Catholics, and more recently, it was run by a Communist mayor for 50 years. Now many of the villagers are revolting again—against Cardin's renovations. In an inevitable conflation, the billionaire in the marquis's manor is being denounced as a haughty "neo-feudal" overlord trying to turn back the clock to prerevolutionary days. It's a theme that has delighted newspapers like *Le Figaro* and French TV. But not everyone in Lacoste is ready to light torches and storm the château. A minority view sees Cardin as saving the village from provincial stagnation. When the designer first arrived, several villagers actually donated houses for Cardin to renovate, saying they had been in the family for generations, but they could no longer maintain them. Others have approached him on the sly, aware that they could get up to three times market rate for ramshackle properties.

By chance, I was getting this positive view first, from Finn Mac Eoin, a one-man PR team for Cardin.

"I'm pro-Cardin, and I'm pro the Marquis de Sade," Mac Eoin declared, swearing that he had read every word Sade had ever written. (This is quite something; even some leading biographers admit they have never been able to slog through the deadening litany of carnal horrors.) "People don't know shit about the Marquis de Sade," he said. "They come here and they tell me, 'Oh, do you know he killed his wife and cut out her heart?' Such crap! So much misinformation. He loved his wife! She was like Florence fucking Nightingale to him. Everyone wants to see blood. Everyone wants to add to the rumors."

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Certainly, there are subtleties to the marquis's life that get lost in the sensation. As biographer du Plessix Gray points out, he should perhaps be termed "a nonviolent sadist." He never drew blood in his rituals, preferring to use psychological torture. He denounced the death penalty, was never in a duel or even went hunting. The very word *sadism* was not coined until the 1880s, more than 60 years after his death, and anyway, Sade was probably more of a masochist: He liked to be whipped, often demanding hundreds of lashes to provoke his erections. A lot of French aristocrats were at least as deranged.

"So what if de Sade was a rapist and a murderer?" Mac Eoin railed. "You can't judge him by our modern standards."

Mac Eoin's wife was patiently making breakfast throughout this tirade. I asked her if she shared his passion for the Marquis de Sade. "I think it's good in a marriage to have different interests," she said sweetly.

Mac Eoin took me out into the warm autumn sunshine to visit charming old houses that Cardin had renovated into gallery spaces, and two mansions destined for hotels: one five-star, the other budget. The marquis would surely have approved of Lacoste's artsy new life as host to Cardin's summer theater festival; he was passionate about the stage, and his dearest wish was to be recognized not as a pornographer but as a playwright. Come to think of it, he would have approved of Cardin's profession, too, since he was obsessive about fashion. His prison letters are filled with demands for trendy new stockings, shoes, and suits. ("Send me a little prune-colored riding coat," Sade ordered his wife in 1781, "with a suede vest and trousers, something fresh and light but specifically *not* made of linen." In the same letter, he requests a suit that is "Paris Mud in hue—a fashionable color this year—with a few silver trimmings, but definitely not silver braid.")

Everything in the new Lacoste is cashing in on the Sadist theme. We peered into the Cardin-owned Café de Sade, where a fortune was being spent to raise the antique ceilings. And we looked in at the new grocery, the Boulangerie du Marquis, which Cardin had taken over from its former owner and expanded. "This used to be such a shitty grocer," Mac Eoin scoffed. "The owner didn't even bake her own bread!"

When I learned that Cardin had even opened a boutique gift store named after the Divine Marquis, my imagination ran riot. Would it be a high-end sex shop for the dominatrix and fetishist? Would it stock Sade's favorite accessories, like the hand-carved dildos he particularly liked for his auto-erotic rites, or his beloved enema syringes, which bore tasteful engravings of men kneeling in worship before plump buttocks? At least it could offer some books from the marquis' secret library, I thought, classics like *The Fornications of Priests and Nuns*, or antique illustrated editions of his own phantasmagoric works, which were once passed secretly among the cognoscenti.

No such luck. Instead, when I entered the cool stone cavern that is the Boutique le Moulin de Sade, I was confronted with an array of gourmet food: foie gras, jams, pâtés, and honeys. When I quizzed the elderly shopkeeper about Sadist souvenirs, she gave me a bookmark bearing his profile.

The truth is, Sade would probably have been delighted. He was a fervent gourmand who loved Provençal delicacies like quail stuffed with grape leaves, cream of chard soups, and luscious jams. He once demanded that his wife send him a chocolate cake black "as the devil's ass is blackened by smoke." Fine food appears in all his writings about orgies, inspiring the participants to fits of lust. As one character notes, "Our cocks are never so stiff as when we've just completed a sumptuous feast."

Which, I guess, is a more direct way of saying that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach.

From: Tony Perrottet
Subject: The Curse of the Château Sade
Posted Thursday, December 18, 2008, at 3:15 PM ET

Every afternoon, I climbed up the castle steps and banged on the wooden door, hoping that Pierre Cardin might show me around the Marquis de Sade's dungeon, but the only answer was a dismal silence. The chatelain was still in Paris—he liked to visit only in summer, it seemed—so I tried to hang out with the rebellious villagers.

This was something of a challenge. After four days, I had become a familiar face in Lacoste, where the off-season population is only around 60 souls. Even the crustiest of the locals, *les Costains*, huddled outside the Café de France like illiterate goatherds, didn't shoot me quite as many scowls. And yet their world seemed remote and impenetrable. I was desperate to know what these former Communists thought of their two celebrity château owners, the Marquis de Sade and Cardin. But how would I get past their Gallic suspicion of outsiders—me, an interloper from that citadel of capitalism, Manhattan?

Then, in the Cardin-owned store, I noticed a flimsy little book on the history of Lacoste, filled with murky photographs and obscure old censuses. As I flicked through the pages, I froze in shock: There in the tax list of 1608 was my own name, *Antoyne Perrottet*. My family moniker had been, until now, fairly obscure, so this seemed quite a coincidence. From the Middle Ages, it turned out, a whole bunch of Perrottets were clustered together in this tiny village—about 10 extended families.

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Wackiest of all, in 1806, one André Perrottet was the mayor of Lacoste at the height of Napoleon's glory.

Now, I've never been one for roots tours, but the idea that my forebears made up a good percentage of the local citizenry at the time of the Marquis de Sade put a whole new spin on things. All of a sudden, the village's history was personal. I had a blood connection. *Zut alors*, I was a *Costain* myself, give or take two centuries.

Now that I had my Gallic credentials—*one of the Perrottets*, mon ami, *used to be mayor under Napoleon!*—I considered I had an instant entree to stop people in the street and ask their opinions. (Luckily, Finn Mac Eoin had already pointed out many of the more vocal anti-Cardin figures around town: "See that feller? He's an antichrist. Him? Fucking antichrist.") Suddenly, everyone was happy to talk. I ran into two weather-beaten farmers unloading firewood from a truck and quickly introduced myself. "Ugh, Cardin!" spat one, Jacques Trophemus. "He's a megalomaniac! What does he want with all these houses? One home, yes. But 26? There's more to life than money!" He said the village life was being gutted by Cardin, who offers people far above market rate for their homes. Old people can't turn down the offer. Young people can't afford to live here. "These streets used to be filled with children playing! Where are they now?" He waved a hand theatrically. "The village is dead!" True *Costains*, he said, were even boycotting Cardin's new *boulangerie*, buying their bread from faraway villages.

This was obviously a feud in deadly earnest—but I soon found that interviewing the anti-Cardin forces was not entirely unpleasant. Usually, it involved sitting on a sunny terrace and quaffing wine while railing against the modern world. When I sought out Yves Ronchí, founder of an anti-Cardin group called the Association for the Harmonious Development of Lacoste, he turned out to be a vigneron in an old farmhouse. He came up from the cellar in wet rubber boots and purple hands, as if he'd just been stomping grapes. "This country is supposed to stand for liberty, equality, fraternity," he complained. "That is why we fought the revolution! But the rich today have taken on a new sense of privilege. They ignore laws and trample our democratic rights."

Ronchí took my business card and rubbed his straggly beard. He soon dug out a topographical map from his desk. "Did you know there is a village called Perrottet near here?" Instantly, we were old friends. He took me downstairs to see his great chrome vats of the latest harvest, and I tried the fresh red—an excellent drop, I thought. "Look, I don't mind Pierre Cardin personally," Ronchí confided. "It's what he represents, the sort of society. It's all about money, empty words, appearances. He is pouring a fortune into renovating these buildings, but the result is *bricolage*—a rushed job, makeshift, not serious. When you look inside, there is no character. Just empty space."

I had to admire the town's stubborn resistance to change, even though some feel they've become *fanatiques*. It reminded me of the Groucho Marx song "Whatever It Is, I'm Against It!" Perhaps the phrase should be on Lacoste's coat of arms. Still, sometimes it did seem a little extreme. Cécile Lendfors, a 30-ish artist who grew up in the village, told me that she was just waiting for the day the couturier keels over and croaks.

"I've bought a nice bottle of champagne to open when I get the news," she declared. "Cardin's 86. He'll die before I do. I'm waiting for the day!"

When French TV journalists asked Pierre Cardin earlier in 2008 why he was buying up Lacoste, he adopted a provocative tone: "For my pleasure," he said coolly. Still, he has often seemed a little baffled by the villagers' reaction.

Things have clearly gone downhill for a feudal overlord.

Back in the 18th century, the Marquis de Sade could do no wrong in Lacoste. When he'd arrived in 1765, at the age of 23, the pink-cheeked *Costain* yokels danced and sang for the lovely woman on his arm: "Oh, the happy news. … Our marquis has married a young beauty. There she is! There she is!" The beauty turned out to be one of the most noted prostitutes in Paris, but the *Costains* took no offense. In fact, none of his regular scandals seemed to faze the villagers; it was really no less than was expected of a red-blooded French aristocrat. Sade took care to procure his victims from faraway cities, a considerate gesture to the locals. So, the villagers continued to warn him about police raids and assist his many white-knuckle escapes. On one occasion, he hid in the château roof; several times, he disappeared into the wild countryside of Provence.

Of course, the arrangement came to an end on the night of Aug. 26, 1777, when 10 policemen managed a 4 a.m. raid on the château and carried Sade away in shackles. He would never return: During the Revolution, a mob sacked the castle. It was not led by loyal *Costains*, of course, but radicals from the nearby town of Apt. Sade was devastated when he learned. "No more Lacoste for me!" he wrote. "What a loss! It is beyond words. … I'm in despair!" Broke, he was soon forced to sell the castle.

He was less upset at never seeing his faithful villagers again. "I've come to the conclusion that all *Costains* are beggars fit for the wheel," he wrote in a 1776 letter, "and one day I'll surely prove my contempt for them. … I assure you that if they were to be roasted one after another, I'd furnish the kindling without batting an eyelash." The outburst came after the father of one of his victims had burst into his château and tried to murder him by firing a pistol inches from his chest. The shot misfired, but the culprit had wandered the village for days, drunk on local wine, until the marquis had to bribe him to leave. Rather than form a lynch mob, the villagers had reacted with a Gallic shrug.

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In fact, it's tempting to think that the ghost of the marquis has come back to plague the peasantry. After all, he has effectively skewed the village's fate through his notoriety alone. Without Sade, there'd be no Cardin dragging them into the modern world.

Now how would the Divine Marquis punish me, a direct descendent after all?

On my last night, I managed to get myself invited to a bacchanal in a remote farmhouse, where hundreds of Provençal hipsters converged to listen to live music around open fires, guzzle *vin rouge*, and gorge on fresh cheese. No hardship there. But the next morning, after only three hours' sleep, I had to drive back to Avignon. Under my windshield was an envelope: Finn Mac Eoin had left me a farewell poem.

It was called, appropriately, "Wine":

> Then what of morn, should all of night be chaste?
> The wine has gone and but the hourglass filled.

Sade was poised to take his revenge. I somehow managed to navigate my overpriced rental car back to a gas station and had just filled up the tank when I noticed a little sticker: "*DIESEL SEULEMENT*." Oh, *merde*, I realized. Wrong fuel. The station attendant patiently advised me that if I now tried to drive the car on regular gasoline, the engine would implode. Three excruciating hours later, my car was on a trailer, and I was sitting beside a crusty mechanic who told me all about how he was going to come to New York and run the marathon, and maybe he could visit me and even stay?

When I checked my credit card statement back home, I'd been charged an extra $400 for that little Provençal screw-up. I guess Sade got me where it really hurts.

From: Tony Perrottet
Subject: The Casanova Tour of Venice
Posted Friday, December 19, 2008, at 11:01 AM ET

With her bouffant red hair, thick-rimmed spectacles, and puffy overcoat, my guide, Luciana, hardly seemed Casanova's type as she clomped up the sumptuous Golden Staircase of the Doge's Palace in Venice. But then she paused, slipped open her coat, and dipped a hand coquettishly down her plunging neckline to produce a small key on a silver chain. This she inserted with a flourish into the wall, opening a hidden panel.

"*Signori* and *signore*," she whispered huskily. "Welcome to the Secret Tour of the Doge's Palace. There will be no bags permitted. No photographs. No video."

The half-dozen of us on the tour nodded obediently. Luciana, now coat-free, was instantly transformed into Sophia Loren in one of her later films—say, *The Priest's Wife*—and she beckoned us to enter. A crowd of milling tourists could only stare in slack-jawed envy as we, the chosen ones, stepped into the netherworld. As we passed, Luciana touched us each lightly on the hair, counting our numbers, then stepped inside to lock the door behind us, slipping the key with a smile back into her magnificent *décolletage*.

The Venetians certainly know how to stage a secret tour. At the Doge's Palace, the sumptuous nerve center of the old Republic of Venice, a special behind-the-scenes visit includes Casanova's prison cells. But it's difficult to learn about the trip, it's almost impossible to book, and then it's highly likely to be canceled on a whim. As a result, the mounting tension leaves travelers half-crazed and panting for more.

An illicit atmosphere goes with the territory in Venice, which flourished for over 10 centuries as the erotic capital of Europe. Fabulously wealthy, sexually permissive, the whole city qualified as a beautiful red-light district by the late 1700s. Travelers flocked here from around Europe to cruise the canals with alluring local courtesans and beefy gondoliers. They flirted at masked balls, gamboled in the bordellos, and flocked to the nunneries where aristocratic convent girls would entertain foreign gents with musical concerts and sparkling conversation, then offer intimate favors for a modest fee.

Nobody sums up the lascivious pleasures of this era more than Giacomo Girolamo Casanova, the prototype playboy who cut a virtual swath through the willing female population of Venice. He has been so mythologized in literature and film (most recently in a hokey 2005 Heath Ledger vehicle, *Casanova*) that many people now assume him to be fictional character. In fact, he lived from 1725 to 1798, and most of his operatic love affairs—his passions for milkmaids and princesses, his *ménage à trios* with noble sisters under the nose of their father, his liaison with a female singer who was masquerading as a castrato, his seduction of his own illegitimate daughter—have been documented by historians. (Incidentally, Casanova was born 15 years before the Marquis de Sade; the pair never met, although they had a mutual friend in Rome, a cardinal who seduced high-society ladies in the catacombs of the Vatican.) Casanova's many other achievements put Hugh Hefner to shame. He was the ultimate self-made man: the handsome son of two poor actors, he used his wit, charm, and *joie de vivre* to insinuate himself into the highest courts of Europe. Today, few realize that Casanova was also a translator of *The Iliad*, a successful theater director, a violin virtuoso, a spy, and creator of the French lottery. He debated with Voltaire and Benjamin Franklin and worked on one

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of Mozart's librettos. He penned a history of Poland as well as arcane mathematical treatises, a science-fiction novel, and a proto-feminist pamphlet.

Strangely, Venice prefers not to celebrate its most famous son, as if it is still rather ashamed of his reckless, wastrel ways. The only memorial is a plaque in the alley where he was born (nobody knows in which house). Which is why his prison cell in the Doge's Palace—where he was thrown in 1755, then escaped in spectacular fashion—has unusual status. It's the only place undeniably connected to the adventurer's fantastical life.

I felt like I was clambering about inside a galleon. Luciana led us up dark stairs and into corridors made of raw wooden planks, which began to shudder and sway as if we were at sea. The route to Casanova's cell ran through the original offices of the republic's most powerful bureaucrats. One door led to the chancellor's little no-frills cubicle; it was made with special hinges to create an airtight fit in order to prevent eavesdropping. Next came the State Inquisitor's Room. Then the Torture Room, where prisoners had their arms tied behind their backs and were dropped from ropes.

It was through these dismal corridors that the 31-year-old Casanova was led after being arrested in his rooms on a hot July night in 1755. He had been denounced to the Inquisition for "irreligious behavior," but the real motive for the arrest was evidently to tame his overactive libido. Over the years, he had made many enemies by seducing the wives of powerful men; he had recently been courting a young lady fancied by a grand inquisitor. Now Casanova, who was never told of the trumped-up charges against him or the length of his sentence, was thrown into a cell in *I Piombi*, "the Leads"—so named because they were located beneath the prison's lead roof, which broiled in summer and froze in winter.

Climbing up into this attic, our little group became as hushed as if we were entering a cathedral. We stooped through a tiny doorway into a tight box; the floor, walls, and ceilings were dark planks encrusted with metal studs around an opaque window. Fixed near the door was a garroting machine, handy for quick executions.

"*Alora*," Luciana breathed sadly as we crouched inside. "This was Casanova's *first* cell. You can imagine what it was like for a man like him to be trapped here! He couldn't even stand up straight. He was attacked by fleas constantly and tormented by boredom. In the heat, he could do nothing but sit stark naked, sweating. So he decided to escape, even though nobody had ever succeeded from the Doge's Palace before."

We all crouched as Luciana enthusiastically related the Great Venetian Breakout. Plan A, begun in this very cell, was an embarrassing flop. Casanova got hold of an iron bolt left by some workmen, and he began to dig through the floorboards. But after months of painful labor, the guards decided to do their amiable prisoner a favor and transfer him to a nicer cell. The tunnel was discovered. "But it was just as well," Luciana said. "Directly below us is the grand inquisitor's chamber. Casanova was about to break through the ceiling! He would have destroyed a Tintoretto fresco."

We filed into Casanova's second cell, which had slightly better ventilation and light, to hear about Plan B. Aware that he was being closely watched, Casanova slipped the iron pike, which he had somehow kept, to the prisoner in the next cell—a disgraced monk named Marin Balbi—and put him to work on the ceiling. At midnight on Oct. 31, 1756—Casanova had by now spent 15 months and five days in prison—the odd couple were ready to make their break. The monk scrambled up through the ceiling, broke into Casanova's cell, and pulled him up. They then dislodged some lead tiles to get onto the palace roof itself, 200 feet above the darkened San Marco Square. After nearly plunging to their deaths, the pair managed to get back inside another window using ropes made from torn sheets. But when they slunk down the Golden Staircase, they discovered, to their horror, that the main palace gate was locked from the outside.

This was when Casanova's fashion sense came to the rescue. In a bag around his neck, he was carrying the flamboyant party clothes he had worn on the night he was arrested—a lace-trimmed silk coat, ruffled shirt, tricorn hat with long feather—and now he put them back on. Glimpsing this chic man-about-town in the grille, a guard assumed it was a rich visitor accidentally caught inside after visiting hours, and he opened the door. Casanova elbowed past and scampered for the first gondola. "The escape made Casanova famous, but he would not return to our beloved city for 18 years," Luciana sighed, as if mourning on behalf of Venetian womanhood. "When he returned, it was to a hero's welcome. Even the inquisitors wanted to know how he did it!"

"*Signore and signori*," Luciana said in conclusion back at the Golden Staircase. "You, too, have escaped from the Doge's Palace! And perhaps you have learned that Giacomo Casanova was more than just a famous lover. He was a man of action, too."

When I emerged back out in San Marco Square, it took a while for my eyes to adjust to the sunshine and crowds. What now, to honor the memory of this Venetian demigod? I considered going to the Cantina do Spade, a restaurant housed in a former bordello, where the patriotic owner tells any diner who will listen that "Casanova was the greatest fucker in history," or to the convent of Murano Island, where he once lured the ravishing young nun "M.M." away for a tryst in a gondola. But my own short stay in prison gave me the answer. I decided to sit in the sun and read his autobiography, *The Story of My Life*. In his 50s, flat broke, Casanova took a position as a librarian in a castle near Prague, where he knocked out some 3,500 manuscript pages. His carnal adventures—122 affairs—take up only about one-third of

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the final 12-volume memoir, but they are the most energetically written pages and have always drawn the most eager attention. "I have devoted my life to the pursuit of pleasure," he declares without the slightest regret, and then he recounts why in hilarious, captivating detail. These tales would be published in uncensored form only in 1966, in time for the sexual revolution.

Well, I thought, maybe our view of Casanova as history's ultimate playboy is a little one-dimensional, since it ignores his other achievements. But it's hard to feel sorry for the guy.

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