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What Would Happen if You Couldn't Stop Crying?

Mary Gaitskill's deeply strange new vision.

By Claire Dederer

Monday, March 30, 2009, at 11:55 AM ET

Back in the late 1980s and early 1990s, having Mary Gaitskill's story collection *Bad Behavior* (1988) on your bookshelf meant something. Gaitskill told stories about secretaries getting spanked, mopey young women caught in sadomasochistic affairs, disaffected prostitutes who were just trying to get enough money to go to art school. To display her book meant you were self-consciously transgressive. You might not live full-time on the dark side, but you'd paid a few visits there.

The book was, to misquote *Spinal Tap*, sexual but not sexy. The stories were too scary to be read as lite porn. The book was made especially unnerving by its lack of any identifiable stance. Gaitskill was writing about what was generally considered kinky sex, but she wasn't recognizably pro-sex, a fun-to-say term we had all learned only recently. In fact, she took special care to show the pain behind the spanking and hooking. Her people shifted in and out of insanity; they were desensitized; they were just plain sad. Gaitskill was so good at evoking this sadness that it came to seem inevitable; not just for her characters, but for her reader. No one got off the hook.

Bad Behavior was followed by two books which didn't stray widely: *Two Girls Fat and Thin* (1991), a novel with more S&M and also a spiky, funny satire of the followers of Ayn Rand, and then *Because They Wanted To* (1997), another story collection similarly themed.

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Transgression comes prepackaged with its own obsolescence; I found myself thinking of Gaitskill as somehow outdated. I was growing up and no longer interested in the titillating and upsetting subject matter of her books. I mistook the writer for her subject, and in my mind I reduced her to some kind of just-for-thrills caricature of herself: I pictured her pierced and glowering, clad in a bra and a black leather jacket, frightening the horses just as hard as she could.

Then, in 2006, Gaitskill published the novel *Veronica*, in which a former fashion model named Alison, now very sick with hepatitis C, looks back on her life and allegedly high times. Alison finds that she can't stop thinking about Veronica, an uncool co-worker from Alison's temping days who has died of AIDS. The book is a relentlessly serious exploration of early mortality; it is also beautifully written, filled with bizarre descants. This passage—describing a Paris runway show—demonstrates how Gaitskill marries her old raw sensibility with a fresh, overheated strangeness:

> Thumping music took you into the lower body,
> where the valves and pistons were working.
> You caught a dark whiff of shit, the sweetness
> of cherries, and the laughter of girls. Like
> lightning, the contrast cut down the center of
> the earth: We all eat and shit, screw and die.
> But here is Beauty in a white dress.

Veronica seems to have marked a new direction in Gaitskill's writing. Her latest collection, *Don't Cry*, continues to use operatically strange writing to probe elusive states of mind. Risking corniness, Gaitskill writes about big feelings, like fear and love and subjugation—feelings that bind us to others and that also expose our aloneness. But corniness is the last thing she has produced. Instead, she reframes these emotions in new ways.

In fact, she seems always to be asking us to think of a world that exists beyond our usual names for, and experiences of, emotion. In the story "Description," a writing teacher named Janice reads her class a passage from Chekhov about a young woman whose baby has just died.

> Janice asked them whether they could imagine
> such a scene written now. The suffering girl
> walking in the live darkness, the vast world of
> creatures all around. The girl and her suffering
> a small thing in this mysterious, still-soft, and
> beautiful world. Through this description of
> physical life, said Janice, mystery was bigger
> than human feeling, and yet physical life bore
> up human feeling as with a compassionate
> hand.

Here, Gaitskill has identified the three layers of experience she wants to explore: physical life, human feeling, mystery. For her these three layers constantly interact. This interaction ends her up in some pretty weird places in *Don't Cry*, none weirder than "Mirror Ball," a story about a girl who has a one-night stand with a musician and gets her feelings hurt. Hardly an extraordinary topic, but in Gaitskill's story, something extraordinary happens: "He took her soul—though, being a secular-minded person, he didn't think of it that way."

The girl senses that her soul has been stolen but can't quite put her finger on the problem. She tries framing her dilemma in the language more commonly used in fiction: "Because the girl was also a secular person, she didn't know he'd taken her soul any more than he did. … Rational and proud, she controlled her feelings by categorizing them in terms of obsession and projection."

In other words, the girl tries to be normal. She tries to define her experience through the accepted language of emotion. But Gaitskill is never interested in accepted language. She rejects the usual psychological readings of the self. What we call emotional reality, Gaitskill calls categories.

Gaitskill wants to show something more terrible and, to her mind, more real that is happening to the girl, that happens maybe to all girls who give their souls away to boys. She writes, "Where her soul had once held space, there was a ragged hole, dark and deep as the pit of the earth. At the bottom of it ran boiling rivers of Male and Female bearing every ingredient for every man and woman, every animal and plant."

This writing could be called humorless and pretentious; it could also be called brave and even majestic. Gaitskill refuses to diminish the girl's experience. She magnifies it until it achieves the same largeness of scale that Chekhov gave to the girl in the woods, mourning her dead baby. There's almost a defiance going on here: Gaitskill won't choose one kind of event as more important than another. In adult life, we put things safely in categories. Gaitskill doesn't, won't.

This is her project throughout the book: to remind us that people's experience ought not to be gainsaid. Experience ought to be explored and revealed, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. The women in this book lament their dead fathers; go crazy; have sex with 1,000 men, literally; work menial jobs; lose their spouses; have love affairs; wonder why their children have turned out not so great. Their stories are sometimes ordinary and sometimes disturbing. Sometimes the women have naughty sex, as in Gaitskill stories of yore. Sometimes they just walk through an airport. Gaitskill treats them as though there's no difference. Her pitiless seeing, her occasional grandiosity, is dispensed to them all.

In the title story, a small masterpiece, we again encounter the writing teacher, Janice, from the story "Description." Recently widowed, she's visiting Addis Ababa with a friend who is trying

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to adopt a child there. During her time in Ethiopia, Janice witnesses terrible poverty and civil war. She becomes horribly upset when a necklace, which is threaded with her wedding ring and her dead husband's wedding ring, is snatched from her neck. Eventually, the rings are returned to her. Years later, Janice tells the story of the purloined necklace at a party. A fellow partygoer who has spent a lot of time in Africa says to her, "Really, you make too big a fuss of yourself. You should not go to Africa and then make such a fuss."

Making a fuss: It would be a good title for this book, whose message is at ironic odds with its actual title. Do cry, these pages insist. The onetime mistress of transgression, the former high priestess of literary cool, has written a deeply compassionate book. Gaitskill's book says, Your pain matters. All pain matters. Don't be afraid to make a fuss.

It is a deeply disorienting invitation. And possibly a dangerous one. If you started crying and didn't stop, what would happen to you? What would you become? Maybe you would become a character in a Mary Gaitskill story. Your outsized pain would mark you as one of her people—people whose responses aren't appropriate to the given circumstance. There's a given, agreed-upon scale of human misery: The dead baby is more tragic than the sad aftermath of a one-night stand. And yet our responses don't always come tailored to size.

Gaitskill sees this, and goes further. She insists that it's during these moments of pain, appropriately sized or not, that we fall into a mysterious place, where we're all linked by our most elemental selves: In the "center of the earth," we exist merely as "Male and Female." In her writing, she imbues this place with a richness, and even a sense of possibility. We might learn empathy in this awful place, or we might flee it and try to avoid pain for the rest of our lives, or we might emerge so badly damaged that we're more alone than ever. But Gaitskill never doubts that the place exists. We all might visit it one day or another.

Slate V: Mary Gaitskill discusses the trashy novels that influenced her writing and explains why* Veronica *took so many years to complete:

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change-o-meter

The Big Embrace

Obama moves to give developing nations—and some developed ones—more influence in global decision-making.

By Emily Lowe

Tuesday, March 31, 2009, at 3:48 PM ET

The Change-o-Meter is now a widget. You can add it to your blog, Web site, or profile with just a few clicks. (Shortcut for Facebook here.) Each time we publish a new column, the widget will automatically update to reflect the latest score.

Following the Obama administration's big auto industry shake-up Monday, things are pretty quiet at home. But change is brewing abroad, where Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced an overhaul of the U.S. aid program in Afghanistan and President Obama is expected to give major shoutouts to some important developing nations at the G20 summit. All of that, plus a shiny new greenhouse-gas bill, brings the **Change-o-Meter to 45 for the day**.

In The Hague this week for a conference on Afghanistan, Clinton decried the billions of dollars wasted in dysfunctional aid programs in Afghanistan over the last seven years. Clinton promised a revamped aid plan that will scrub wasteful and redundant programs and bring other countries into a collaborative effort to support the war-stricken state. The 'Meter (and the American public) appreciates the secretary's continued habit of speaking frankly about touchy subjects, and her plan to plug the cash leak is good for 20 points.

On the other side of the North Sea, London is preparing for Thursday's G20 conference, where world leaders will discuss a proposal that would draw 10 developing countries into an economic council responsible for making global financial decisions. The unprecedented opportunity for developing nations comes on the heels of Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's allegation that the global economic crisis was engineered by "white, blue-eyed" people. Brown-eyed Obama is expected to support the proposal and further up the ante with a plan to give Russia, China, Brazil, Mexico, and India more influence on lending decisions by the International Monetary Fund. Bringing these growing nations into the global economic conversation is an overdue move that could lead to better relationships for Obama abroad. For propping open the door to the big boys' club, Obama wins another 20 points.

And at home, rumor has it that House Democrats are close to unveiling an ambitious greenhouse-gas bill. The 'Meter has noted before that a cap-and-trade program for greenhouse-gas emissions is an important priority for Obama, and since the House bill is starting out with a set of goals more aggressive than the president's, Obama may get what he wants. Five more points for a bit of agenda solidarity from the Democrats—particularly now that bipartisanship, born Jan. 20, 2009, is dead.

There's a lot to cover, so we want to hear your thoughts on what the Change-o-Meter should be taking into account. No detail is too small or wonky. E-mail may be quoted by name unless the writer stipulates otherwise.

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change-o-meter

Wagoner the Dog

Obama forces out GM's chief executive in a showy but justified move.

By Molly Redden

Monday, March 30, 2009, at 3:10 PM ET

The Change-o-Meter is now a widget. You can add it to your blog, Web site, or profile with just a few clicks. (Shortcut for Facebook here.) Each time we publish a new column, the widget will automatically update to reflect the latest score.

Obama sent the auto industry reeling today when he suddenly ousted General Motors' longtime chief executive G. Richard Wagoner Jr. and announced that GM and Chrysler will need to fulfill strict conditions to receive more of the federal aid that has been keeping them afloat. As Obama prepares to leave for a major overseas visit, he scores a **55 on the Change-o-Meter**.

Obama's tough-love policy for the automakers essentially asks all parties involved to suffer some substantial losses. The *Wall Street Journal* says the companies' bondholders and lenders will be the "clearest losers" in this deal, as the government will pressure GM debtors to convert the money owed to them into undesirable company stock and anticipates "extinguishing the vast majority of [Chrysler's] secured debt and all of its unsecured debt and equity." Members of the United Autoworkers Union will have to convert some of their retiree benefits into stock, too.

But they don't call it tough love for nothin'. A major shake-up of the companies' structures is about the only thing that can feasibly rescue these two failing auto giants, and they sure didn't appear to be making many lifesaving changes on their own. Given recent outrage over AIG bonuses from a public with a bad case of bailout fatigue, Obama couldn't have picked a better time to make a show of forcing the resignation of a stalwart executive. Not that Wagoner didn't deserve the sack. For pursuing a course that should hold automakers responsible for reform, Obama gets 40 points on the 'Meter.

Meanwhile, Obama is preparing for a whirlwind tour of Europe, which guarantees equal helpings of criticism for his economic policies and the "O come let us adore him"-style crowds that turned out for his July trip to Germany. The tour will also include encounters with leaders whose countries have been at odds with U.S. foreign policy in the past, like Turkey and Russia. For preparing to engage with—and not just pooh-pooh—the criticisms of foreign friends and sometimes-foes alike, Obama gets five on the 'Meter.

On Sunday, U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates pretty much confirmed that the United States will do nothing militarily to deter the missile test launch North Korea has planned for next month. The 'Meter thinks it's best to refrain from showing U.S. strength until Kim Jong-il has something other to say than "na-na-na-na-boo-boo." For this small but significant departure from pre-emptive plunges into international conflicts, the 'Meter awards 10 points.

There's a lot to cover, so we want to hear your thoughts on what the Change-o-Meter should be taking into account. No detail is too small or wonky. E-mail may be quoted by name unless the writer stipulates otherwise.

change-o-meter

TV Moment

Obama personally brokers a deal between France and China at the G20 summit.

By Chris Wilson

Thursday, April 2, 2009, at 5:10 PM ET

The Change-o-Meter is now a widget. You can add it to your blog, Web site, or profile with just a few clicks. (Shortcut for Facebook here.) Each time we publish a new column, the widget will automatically update to reflect the latest score.

As a candidate, President Obama often said that hype alone would not make him an effective president. Earlier today, that prophecy seemed fulfilled: Obama met stiff resistance during the G20 summit from French President Nicolas Sarkozy and German Chancellor Angela Merkel over financial regulations. Reports from the final hours of the meeting, however, suggest that Obama personally rescued delicate negotiations between France and China in a made-for-TV intervention. Obama scores a **55 on the Change-o-Meter**.

Earlier today, UPI declared, "Sarkozy, Merkel challenge Obama at G20" as the two European leaders demanded heavier regulations on hedge funds, banker compensation, and the listing of tax havens. Obama did not make much progress on that front, failing to persuade them to give up their regulation campaign. But he did succeed in changing the headline of the trip. Several hours later, on Marketwatch, that headline had morphed into "Sarkozy, Merkel praise Obama's G20 role."

McClatchy has the story of what happened in the meantime: As the summit was winding down, France and China were still at odds over a recommendation to endorse a list of tax havens by an international economic development organization to which China does not belong. Obama took Sarkozy into a corner to recommend merely "taking note" of the list and eventually got

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Chinese President Hu Jintao into their corner—literally—to make everyone agree.

Assuming the senior White House official who spoke to McClatchy wasn't pinching from a *West Wing* script, the 'Meter has to give Obama credit for putting his powers of persuasion to work. The president comes out of the meeting with a legitimate claim to success in contributing to an agreement that would keep stimulus funds flowing, expose tax havens, and appease those who wanted more regulation. Obama gets 40 points on the 'Meter for delivering on two years of promises that his election would signal a thaw in icy reception to American diplomacy.

Meanwhile, the United States will seek a seat on a U.N. human rights council that the Bush administration had ignored. Bush had legitimate reasons for feeling queasy about the group, whose leaders include states that have shielded human rights violations in other countries, but choosing to participate fits with Obama's engagement philosophy. Given that it seems to be working elsewhere, the 'Meter tosses in 10 points.

Back home, a version of Obama's fiscal year 2010 budget made progress in both houses of Congress as lawmakers prepared for Easter vacation. This is a small step on the long odyssey of a budget bill from conception to law. But the 'Meter awards 10 points for progress—and retracts five because the House version includes reconciliation procedures, which the 'Meter is on record as opposing.

There's a lot to cover, so we want to hear your thoughts on what the Change-o-Meter should be taking into account. No detail is too small or wonky. E-mail may be quoted by name unless the writer stipulates otherwise.

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chatterbox

Capitalists for Socialism

How to redefine political pragmatism in health care reform.

By Timothy Noah

Thursday, April 2, 2009, at 6:32 PM ET

One of the better arguments for health care reform is that the cost of providing health coverage to employees puts U.S. industry at a competitive disadvantage internationally. Testifying March 31 before the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, health and human services nominee Kathleen Sibelius made just that argument. Quoting a participant in an Obama transition town hall meeting, she said, "How can you go out on a limb and start a new business when health care is a noose around your neck?" General Motors, she pointed out, "spends more on health care than steel." Older industries, she said,

> are striving to maintain both coverage and competitiveness—locally and globally. New industries and businesses are struggling to offer coverage in the first place. Both workers and their employers are concerned about the future of employer-sponsored health insurance. Currently, there's no relief in sight.

Yet the Obama plan threatens to *increase* rather than *decrease* the economic burden imposed on U.S. industry by employer-based health insurance. That's because it will require large employers that contribute insufficient funds to employee health coverage to devote a certain percentage of their payroll for that purpose. Either they can establish or expand their own health insurance plans, or they can help pay for health coverage through the National Health Insurance Exchange, a new marketplace in which federally regulated health insurance plans—including one created and maintained by the feds themselves—would compete to serve individuals and small businesses. The so-called "public option" government plan is stirring lots of controversy, and it remains unclear how firmly Congress and the Obama administration will back it. But if Democrats want to compromise on some element of their plan, they'd do far better to make good on their "competitiveness" argument and free business from any requirement to pay for health insurance. According to the *New York Times*' Robert Pear, the Democratic chairmen of five congressional committees poised to shepherd health care reform through the House and Senate all agree that employers "should be required to help pay for it." Instead, they should pay for health care reform out of general revenues.

The policy reasons for doing this are obvious. You don't relieve health care's burden on American industry by imposing a new pay-or-play requirement. Even if health care reform manages to curb medical inflation, pay-or-play could easily weigh down the private sector with health-related costs even higher than those that weigh it down today. Eliminate pay-or-play and you virtually guarantee the private sector's health care costs will decrease, because many companies will see the establishment of the National Health Insurance Exchange as an opportunity to eliminate health coverage altogether. Nothing wrong with that, so long as the policies available through the exchange provide decent coverage at low prices, as promised.

The mainstream political mantra of health care reform is that Americans like employer-based health care and reform should build on it. But with employers already slashing away at health care coverage, that's a pretty wobbly foundation. I don't think voters would necessarily blame Obama should health care reform accelerate this trend. The president could be clear that he still expects responsible, civic-minded companies to provide

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their employees with health insurance while also stating that it has never been the government's job to force them to do so. The obvious political upside to not making business pay for health care reform is that it would drive a very useful wedge between the health insurance industry, which stands to benefit from pay-or-play, and every other industry, which stands to suffer from it. In exchange for this get-out-of-jail-free card, Democrats could require the business community to throw its support behind the public option. Apart from the hysterical fear that government health insurance constitutes socialism, American business has no real reason to oppose its expansion and has everything to gain from it. If industry fell behind the public option, the GOP would have to follow, or at least keep its mouth shut.

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chatterbox

The Bailout Record

It isn't nearly as bad as you've been told.

By Timothy Noah

Tuesday, March 31, 2009, at 7:24 PM ET

In polite society, it is necessary to declare at regular intervals that whenever the government assumes control of a private corporation, it invariably makes things worse. Writing in the March 31 *New York Times* about the White House's intervention in the ailing U.S. auto industry ("For U.S. and Carmakers, Many Potential Pitfalls"), David Sanger noted, "In the past, the United States government had briefly nationalized steel makers and tried to run the railroads, with little success." But Sanger's own piece made clear that we never got to find out how President Harry Truman's 1952 seizure of the steel mills might have played out (he was trying to block a strike that he thought would hurt the U.S. war effort in Korea) because the courts ruled it unconstitutional. At the very least, Truman's action delayed the strike by two months, a period longer than the strike itself, which ended after 53 days. Ten years later, President John F. Kennedy successfully flexed his executive muscle to block an inflationary price increase by U.S. Steel.

Sanger didn't elaborate his railroad example, but in the March/April issue of the *Washington Monthly*, Phillip Longman points out that in 1976, the Ford administration took over the bankrupt Penn Central and five other railroads and turned them into the Consolidated Rail Corp. (more popularly known as Conrail), whose profitability under government ownership became an embarrassment to market fundamentalists in the Reagan administration. Eventually, the Gipper sold the thing for a mortifyingly high $1.65 billion. According to Longman, President Woodrow Wilson's nationalization of the U.S. rail system during World War I took an industry that was a "financial and physical shambles" and restored it to health. The government's creation of Amtrak in 1970 is a less happy story, both financially and as a model for passenger-rail service. But if Amtrak were to go out of business, it seems doubtful, outside the northeast corridor, that the unsubsidized private sector would replace Amtrak's passenger service.

Do government bailouts typically succeed or fail? ProPublica, the nonprofit news agency, reviewed the history in September. Its findings suggest that, at least during the past three decades, the results have been fairly encouraging. (Note: Not all the numbers that appear below come from the ProPublica report. Where they don't, I've provided links to the source.)

1971: The Nixon administration guaranteed $250 million in loans to the **Lockheed Aircraft Corp**. The government ended up netting the equivalent in 2008 dollars of $112 million in loan fees.

1974: The Nixon, Ford, and Carter administrations spent the equivalent of $7.8 billion in 2008 dollars to bail out **Franklin National Bank**, the 20th-largest bank in the country, eventually selling off its assets for the equivalent of $5.1 billion in 2008 dollars.

1980: The Carter administration provided **Chrysler** with $1.5 billion in loan guarantees. Chrysler finished paying off the loans in 1983. The U.S government netted the equivalent in 2008 dollars of $660 million.

1984: The Reagan administration assumed an 80 percent share of **Continental Illinois National Bank and Trust Co**. This remains the "most significant bank failure resolution in the history of the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation," according to an official FDIC history. In 1991 the government sold off Continental Illinois at a loss to the FDIC of $1.1 billion. This was the bailout that bequeathed the catchphrase "too big too fail."

1989: The first Bush administration bailed out the **savings-and-loan industry** at a cost to the taxpayer equivalent to $220 billion in 2008 dollars.

2001: After 9/11, the second Bush administration lent the **airline industry** $10 billion and gave it $5 billion outright. A stock warrant provision in the deal netted Treasury somewhere between $140 million and $330 million.

There's no reason to believe *any* of these transactions took a bad situation and made it worse. The evidence suggests that the government tends to lose money when it bails out banks and to gain money when it bails out other sorts of companies. Conceivably, though, the *public* (as opposed to the *taxpayer*) loses more money when a big bank fails than when another sort of company fails because the person in question might have money deposited or invested directly in that bank or because the bank's collapse might bring down the entire economy. What this

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record doesn't indicate is that the government has *no clue* how to manage a troubled asset. Might the Obama administration still screw up in trying to save the auto industry? Sure. But don't assume history wills it so.

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culturebox

Oh, What a Chaos It Seems

Cheever bequeathed his biographer a journal as messy as his life.

By Blake Bailey

Friday, April 3, 2009, at 6:57 AM ET

"Fiction is art and art is the triumph over chaos (no less)," John Cheever wrote in his story "The Death of Justina." The art of biography, such as it is, grapples with the same dilemma, and yet the stuff of life tends to remain stubbornly chaotic. Still, the great challenge is to impose order, order, and then more order: to find the most salient themes (*flesh lusteth contrary to the spirit* was a big one in Cheever's life) and their concomitant narrative threads, and thus to reconcile the paradoxes of an exquisitely complicated nature. The more a biographer knows, the better—since, of course, to know all is to forgive all, and the goal (my goal, at any rate) is to strive to be compassionate.

Cheever's fiction was the refinement of an often *very* messy life, the raw materials of which are found in his journal—perhaps the most exhaustive record of a first-rate American writer's inner life, and a very messy artifact in itself. I waded into this mess and endeavored to clean it up the way Wall-E rolls around the devastated, polluted planet, the way Sisyphus pushes his rock—because, as a biographer, it's what one does. The sheer mechanical drudgery had a happy result, though: It melded my mind all the more with my conflicted subject and led to a surprising degree of empathy.

"I read last year's journal with the idea of giving it to a library," Cheever wrote in 1978, feeling the periodic tug of posterity. "I am shocked at the frequency with which I refer to my member." This is true. Perhaps as a kind of masochistic, paradoxical Puritan impulse (instilled by his proud Yankee parents in Quincy, Mass.), Cheever made a point of noting his more sordid sexual encounters (including solo performances), his daily struggle with alcoholism, and his generally scornful observations about friends, colleagues, and, especially, family. ("She [Cheever's wife] comes out very poorly [in the journal] and I am quite blameless which cannot be the truth," he mused toward the end of his life.) There is plenty of sublimity, too, and needless to say the whole thing is gorgeously written. At any rate, Cheever ultimately overcame his misgivings about preserving this crucial part of his oeuvre in a library and was even "almost gleeful," according to his son Ben, at the prospect of posthumous publication.

The original journal—more than 4,300 pages, 28 volumes in all, mostly typed, single-spaced—was sold in 1990 to Harvard's Houghton Library, whose staff has done a splendid job with the cosmetic side of things. They have removed the pages from their original three-ring binders (kept in a separate box) and placed them in protective folders. Nothing has been discarded. A billing receipt from Blue Cross Blue Shield, dated 1981 (when Cheever was dying of cancer), may be found in Vol. 17, otherwise concerned with the years 1967-68. One also finds train tickets, a postcard from "Alexandra" (who I later discovered was Cheever's translator-*cum*-bedmate during a 1979 trip to Bulgaria), a telegram from Lauren Bacall, newspaper clippings ("Water Detected Outside Earth's Galaxy"), and so on. Even the box of discarded binders is interesting. In the pocket of one, I found an unmailed letter to the pretty biographer of a great Romantic poet: "This is a proposal of marriage," Cheever wrote. "I will dedicate my new novel to you. I expect you to dedicate your book to me. We will appear together on the book jacket, photographed in the garden of our 18th century farmhouse on the grassy banks of the Limpopo River." The letter was written in the spring of 1967, a bleak time in the bleak, bleak history of Cheever's 41-year marriage.

Harvard's neat presentation, however, is like the well-manicured entrance to a labyrinth. The librarians haven't twigged that the pages of several volumes are almost chaotically jumbled, as if they'd been shuffled like decks of cards—an understandable oversight, since Cheever hardly ever dated his entries. This would explain certain peculiarities in *The Journals of John Cheever*, a selection of maybe 5 percent of the total edited by Robert Gottlieb and published in 1991. Gottlieb clearly struggled with chronology, and no wonder. The tangles are thickest in the early years, and he simply followed the library's jumbled page-order of Vol. 2 (dispensing with Vol. 1 altogether), which begins in 1952 and then, a few pages later, lurches back to 1948. Other volumes of the Harvard journal are similarly jumbled, hence the many errors of chronology in the published version, though most are too esoteric to notice—except, say, for a "1960" reference to Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast*, posthumously published in 1964. But then, how could Gottlieb have known (apart from that reference) that Vol. 8, from which the entry was taken, actually belongs between Vols. 12 and 13—or, rather, 12 and *14*, whose entries actually *precede* 13, which begins in March 1965 and then segues into an account of a Russian trip with Updike in October 1964 …

You see the problem—or, rather, *my* problem: Gottlieb could afford to be somewhat impressionistic, but a biographer (unless he's writing a kind of *Quest for Corvo*) needs to have a precise idea of what happened when. Therefore, almost two years of my research were largely devoted to reading and reordering the pages of Cheever's journal. Nobody knows how the pages got scrambled in the first place, though in the midst of my labor, I sometimes imagined the culprit was Cheever himself—the better

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to impose a further impish challenge on anyone who had the cheek to make sense of such a life.

The chaos was sometimes weirdly artistic, resulting in juxtapositions that shed light on Cheever's prismatic nature. A page or two might reflect some consoling spiritual lull, abruptly interrupted on the next page by a burst of self-hatred belonging to some earlier or later phase. Sometimes a historical reference would come in handy, as when Cheever noted Adlai Stevenson's defeat in the 1952 election ("in our national character there is a deep seated suspicion of perspicacity and wisdom"). But mostly I dated the pages with the help of a massive chronology I constructed of Cheever's life based on thousands of letters and other sources. Thus I deciphered the various personal allusions: his sister-in-law Buff's nervous breakdown at the family estate in New Hampshire? August 1946! Dawn Powell's almost fatal nosebleed at Yaddo? April 1960! And every May 27, again and again, Cheever's birthday was duly noted along with the invariable "drank too much."

I finished re-sorting the journal in the spring of 2005, whereupon I transcribed what I needed to my laptop and took the last (of many) research trips to the Boston area. My final stop was a one-day visit to the Brandeis library archive, where I pored over typescripts of Cheever's *New Yorker* stories, particularly intrigued by the marginal glosses of his editor at the magazine William Maxwell. ("What *is* a shapely day?" the literal-minded Maxwell jotted next to a description of a day "as fragrant and shapely as an apple" in "The Country Husband"; Cheever blithely disregarded the query.) With about 15 minutes to go before the library closed, I glanced at a 31-page portion of his journal that Cheever had donated in the mid-1960s—though obviously there was no need for me to do this, since I had my own (pristinely chronological) copy of the journal. But I couldn't resist.

Right away, I noticed something amiss: The Brandeis pages were too neatly typed, with a brand-new ribbon, no less. I found a passage on my laptop that I'd transcribed from the original—about Cheever's meeting with Sophia Loren in the summer of 1967—and compared it with the Brandeis version. Sure enough, they were different! "She seems sincere, magnanimous, lucky and matteroffact," Cheever had (sloppily) typed in the original, followed by a bit of dialogue between the two. "She seems sincere, magnanimous, lucky and intelligent," reads the (immaculate) Brandeis version, and the subsequent dialogue has been deleted. Was it possible that Cheever had not only retyped but substantially *rewritten* many journal pages for the sake of a little academic posterity? To think what pains he might have taken (and therefore spared his biographer) if he'd decided to donate—and tidy up—the whole thing during his lifetime! I was about to investigate further when the nice librarian stuck her head in the room and whispered it was time to go.

A month after that piquant visit to Brandeis, my family and I moved to New Orleans. My wife had been assigned to Tulane for her doctoral internship in clinical psychology, and though it was only a one-year program, we decided to buy rather than rent a lovely cottage in the neighborhood of Gentilly, about a mile from Lake Pontchartrain. As it happened, we lived there for about two months. When it came time to evacuate prior to Hurricane Katrina, I left my stately, repaginated version of Cheever's journal on the bottom shelf of my research cabinet, hardly thinking that a few days later the National Guard would be trolling around our house in motorboats.

When I finally returned, a month or so later, the journal over which I'd labored with such loving care (two years!) was four linear feet of solid mold.

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culturebox

Code Blue

Slate readers bid a fond, sad farewell to *ER*.

Wednesday, April 1, 2009, at 6:33 PM ET

Yesterday, we in the ***Slate*** culture department came clean: We wanted to say something intelligent about this week's *ER* finale, but none of us had seen an episode since the Clinton administration. So we invited ***Slate*** readers who have stuck with the show over its 15 seasons to tell us what's kept them hooked. What we got back was an outpouring of emotion worthy of the most heartrending *ER* episode—and it seems as if there were a good many of them.

Let's start by turning the analysis over to Stefan Schumacher of Wheeling, Ill., who submitted an eloquent defense of the long-running drama, and one that captures the mood of his peers:

> Despite its bumps in the road as it replaced the original cast, *ER* has pumped out more quality—fine acting, innovative and groundbreaking production techniques for television, memorable episodes and layered characters—than just about any other show.
>
> Not only has it retained strong viewership with basically zero national media attention, but it's done so by covering such topics as the genocide in Darfur (something else the national media hasn't bothered to cover), having an Indian woman (the absolutely splendid Parminder Nagra) as its female lead and scaling back to more realistic story lines while *Grey's Anatomy* is sticking time bombs in its patients' chests.

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> Through it all, though, the acting and characters stand out the most. Everyone who has ever played a major role on the show has lent his or her character an unflinching humanity. The doctors on *ER* save lives and they kill people by mistake. Then they learn to live with it. They drink too much and they sleep with the wrong people. They get hooked on pain killers and they get off pain killers, and they stop drinking, and they find a way to move on with their lives. They work tirelessly in a system that doesn't work. But they keep fighting, just like the show.

The majority of Stefan's fellow viewers agreed: The show exhausted the standard emergency-room plots in its first decade or so, but its three-dimensional characters kept viewers coming back. While a few readers felt the cast never quite matched the glory of the Clooney-Margulies-Wyle-La Salle-Edwards years (many seem to believe the show's golden era ended with the death of Edwards' Dr. Greene in Season 8), others offered passionate defenses of the actors who came to replace the originals. Several readers made a strong case for Goran Visnjic—"just as great looking as George Clooney," writes Connie Colvin of Queens, N.Y.—and Maura Tierney had a band of enthusiastic supporters as well. Even Uncle Jesse found an apologist: "Say what you want about John Stamos," writes Jamie Moulthrop of Newark, Del., "The guy is a good actor and, IMHO, has really burnished his credentials with this stint (yes, that is a completely serious statement)." ***Slate*** readers also tended to think that the infusion of fresh faces over the years was a strength, not a weakness, forcing the writers to imagine new character arcs and preventing the show from getting stale.

Occasionally, however, *ER*'s writers seemed to forget that their actors, and their commitment to medical realism, were the show's greatest strengths. Thursday's finale will be *ER*'s 332nd episode, but even if it had gone on for 332 more, it seems it never would have lived down Episode 209, in which the writers dispatched Dr. Robert Romano—who had already had a mishap with the business end of a helicopter blade—by dropping a chopper on him. *ER*'s supporters frequently open their cases for the show by stipulating that while they ardently endorse the series, they will not defend the copter episode. "Romano getting killed by the helicopter was one of the most disrespectful, ham-handed ways I've ever seen a show treat a character," writes otherwise loyal fan Maura Carney, of St. Paul, Minn.

Some readers who wrote in confessed that they've continued to watch *ER* despite a creeping ambivalence about the show. "There are very few things in life I'll ever follow through with until absolute completion," writes James Brown of Birmingham, Ala., with admirable self-knowledge. "*ER*, in sickness and in health, will be one of them. I wear this badge of honor to the horror and amusement of my friends, and to the drunken surprise of strangers at parties. I've never been so proud and yet, so sad." Readers like James noticed the show was getting repetitive, or soapier, but couldn't quite quit it; they'd known each other too long.

One way to describe this reason for watching is simply to call it inertia: You watch *ER* every Thursday night because you watch *ER* every Thursday night. "Holy crap," writes Jessica Rovanpera of El Sobrante, Calif. "I've been watching this show more than half my life. This is increasingly distressing. I guess it's just a force of habit." A more romantic way of describing it would be to say that *ER* became part of viewers' lives. "I mark milestones in my marriage by *ER*," writes Michelle Van Der Karr of Evanston, Ill. "It started when my oldest child was a baby. My youngest was born the day George Clooney left. After the doctor was finally finished with my delivery, I looked up in time to see the end credits rolling (don't despair; I caught that episode in reruns that summer)."

Several younger ***Slate*** readers said their affection for the show stems from having grown up watching it. "I began watching *ER* as a kid interested in science and thinking of becoming a doctor," writes Eleanor Vernon of Houston. "I continued following it as a college student who was still interested in science but knew her sister, not she, would go into medicine. I still tune in as an attorney whose sister is an ER pediatrician, like Doug Ross. When I speak of her, that's how I describe her: 'This is my sister. She has the coolest job of anyone I know. She's an ER pediatrician, like George Clooney on *ER*.' "

Eleanor is onto something. Despite all the turnover in the cast, there has been one constant on *ER*: the ER. Nearly all the ***Slate*** readers who wrote in noted the electric energy of the emergency room, the natural drama of the stories that unfold there, and the heroic, but also just human, acts that occur there every day. The show brought viewers inside that world, titillating them with (for the time) groundbreaking gore but also offering them catharsis and the occasional gut-check. Many ***Slate*** readers noted that the show was expert at reminding the viewer who is in fine fettle just how lucky she is and how quickly a drunk driver or infectious disease could change her fortunes.

The most poignant account of how the show managed to capture the life-or-death stakes of the ER came from Kathryn Morse, of Weybridge, Vt., who gets the final word:

> I still watch *E.R.* because it reminds me, week after week, in a visceral way, that every day, somewhere, other human beings face the sudden, unexpected, tragic loss of a beloved person—often in a chaotic Emergency Room. *E.R.* often (still) leaves me speechless and grateful that today, at least, it was not me in an E.R. somewhere, unbelieving and bereft. In August 1993 my 21-year old sister committed

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suicide in a Boston hospital. She overdosed on antidepressants, coded, and the doctors could not revive her. My parents, alone in a hospital corridor, had to make the decision to end life support. Thirteen months later I first watched *E.R.*—the pilot episode in which Carol Hathaway attempted suicide. I've done a fair amount of grieving in front of the T.V. since then. When the show doesn't trigger and release my own grief, it elicits compassion for others beginning the long journey through loss.

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Actually there are *two* constants: Not counting a few hiatuses here and there, Abraham Benrubi really has been on the show for nearly its entire run.

culturebox

Nü Testaments

Two memoirs about turning to God, from two members of Korn.

By James Parker

Wednesday, April 1, 2009, at 7:13 AM ET

Into the great river of American evangelical Christianity, ever-pouring, ever-replenishing, a fresh tributary flows. Nameless as yet—Freak on a Leash Ministries would be my suggestion—the new church at present has only two members. But they both make a lot of noise. With the publication last month of his memoir, *Got the Life*, Reginald "Fieldy" Arvizu becomes the second dude from Korn to offer himself loudly and in book form to Jesus. The first was guitarist Brian "Head" Welch, whose God-drenched tell-all, *Save Me From Myself*, came out in 2007. Somewhere Oscar Wilde is smirking: "To drive *one* nü-metaller into the arms of Christ, Mr. Worthing, may be regarded as a misfortune; to drive *two* looks like carelessness!" Seriously, though—what's going on with Korn?

Perhaps you're surprised that they're still around. It's been 15 years, after all, since they first broke out of Bakersfield, Calif., and longevity was hardly to be expected. *Korn*, the album that finished grunge more surely than the suicide of Kurt Cobain, was a dead-end masquerading as a debut—a lumpy, disturbed, belligerent take on Red Hot Chili Peppers/Faith No More funk rock, produced at unstable tempos, with a hip-hop grimace. Fieldy, on bass, seemed to be playing an instrument with two necks: one that clicked and popped with nasty zealous high-end definition and another that rumbled almost subsonically, at an abysmal depth. Amp settings were part of the trick—"I don't use any mid-range," he explained to one interviewer, "it's all highs and lows, I take the mid-range and turn that shit off"—and the rest was his glowering, either-or personality. Head, meanwhile, was a guitar anti-hero, alternating between shapeless, melted-down riffs and twinges of lead that were ghostly as samples. The total sound was something you'd heard before, only now there was *more* of it. Fieldy had a fifth string on his bass and Head a seventh on his guitar.

Korn finished grunge because it completed it: The album's implosive heaviness was the terminus of punk's long dalliance with metal, and in the bipolar dramatics of singer Jonathan Davis, gnashing and mewling through piteous verses before inflating to a terrible chorus-wrecking roar, we saw the last enthronement of Cobain's maddened inner child. Every good album is a concept album to some degree, and *Korn*'s concept—from the slasher-flick cover shot (nameless adult shadow looms over little girl on swing), through the growled nursery rhymes of "Shoots and Ladders," to the 10-minute abreaction called "Daddy"—was the destruction of innocence. "You *raped* (I feel dirty)/ It *hurt* (I'm not a liar)/ My *God* (I saw you watchin')/ Tell me *why* (your own child) ..." By the conclusion of "Daddy," Davis is wrung out, in pieces, whimpering softly to himself while the band with rather superb indifference commences a strange Goth-metallic jam. At which point the listener may well reach a conclusion of his or her own: Well, that's the end of *that*.

But it wasn't, of course. Korn's eccentric, last-gasp noise galvanized the masses, proving to be not only commercially viable but very easy to rip off. Nü metal, they called it, and suddenly everyone was doing it—Limp Bizkit, Staind, Deftones, Godsmack. Korn hopped onto the hamster wheel of tour/album/tour; their third album, 1998's *Follow the Leader*, debuted at the top of the *Billboard* charts. Now they sounded less like Killing Joke doing the Beastie Boys' "Brass Monkey" and more like the disco at the end of the world. Stadiums quaked. Mega-success was theirs, an apocalypse of rock 'n' roll cliché whipped up punctually on the after-show tour bus—drugs, women, the works. Fieldy maintained a groggy oscillatory buzz with booze and pills, while Head slipped into speed and then crystal meth. Et cetera, et cetera.

Nü metal, as a genre, was far from irreligious. P.O.D. played powerhouse Christian rock. Godsmack liked to talk about Wicca. The darker bands were possessed, as if by a nightmare, by the idea of spiritual extinction: "Must not surrender my God to anyone," vowed Fear Factory's Burton Bell on *Digimortal*, "or this body will become CARRI-ON!!!" Korn's lyrics, while less poetic, were no less eloquent: "Sometimes I cannot take this

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place/ Sometimes it's my life I can't taste/ Sometimes I cannot feel my face/ You'll never see me fall from grace" ("Freak on a Leash"). Abjection, numbness ... how much of this stuff can you do before something gives? Head was the first to crack. Besieged by guilt about his young daughter (whom he was raising alone), exhausted by his addiction, he began to zigzag toward God: "Immediately after church, after raising my hand to accept Christ in my life for real this time, I went home, put on a movie for Jennea, and went into my master closet, opened the safe, and grabbed the best bag of meth I had in there. I snorted a line, then sat there on the floor, a rolled-up bill in my right hand, and prayed. ... Then I snorted another line." After a few nights of this the meth was all gone, but Jesus was still there.

Got the Life and *Save Me From Myself* are both ruggedly confessional in the best nü-metal manner; read them in tandem, and you get to know Korn quite well. The experiences they describe, though, are somewhat different. Head's conversion, between meth benders and saturations of divine love, was a precipitous inner event which he was then obliged to manifest outwardly: He became a new man. He left Korn, got himself baptized in the river Jordan, and—no joke—founded an orphanage in India. Fieldy's pilgrimage, begun in the wake of his father's death, seems to be more a matter of gradual and humble atonement for years of raging asshole-ism. *Got the Life* includes contrite, AA-style letters to each of his band mates. ("I know now that a physical beating would have healed better than the things I said to you.") He certainly gave them a hard time; early in the book, he and fellow Korn member James "Munky" Shaffer are pulled over in their pickup truck in L.A., and Shaffer is placed under arrest for an outstanding jaywalking ticket. "For whatever reason," Fieldy writes, "Munky was wearing a pair of my shoes that day. ... 'Take my shoes off,' I told him. 'I'm serious. I don't want you wearing my shoes to jail.' " The discalced Munky is duly handcuffed and hauled away, leaving Fieldy to be rebuked by the New Testament clarity of the episode's imagery—shoes, bare feet, prison.

Korn is still operational, and Fieldy is still making that sticky, indelible sound with his bass. Head has released an album of post-Korn salvation rock; October of last year found him discussing it with Pat Robertson on the Christian Broadcasting Network's *The 700 Club*. Head: "I went to church and I just felt something. And the guy was saying that Jesus was real, the pastor was just saying if you talk to him he'll start to take things out of your life that are hurting you. ... So I did drugs and I talked to Jesus." Robertson (chuckling, curious): "What did he *say*?"

culturebox

Paging *ER* Fans, Stat

Slate wants to know why you still watch.

Tuesday, March 31, 2009, at 11:13 AM ET

Slate owes you an apology. Over the last three months, we in the magazine's culture department have been trying to prepare the perfect eulogy for *ER*, the medical drama whose finale airs Thursday. We have approached both staff writers and a series of reliable correspondents, inviting them to weigh in on the final episode and the legacy of the drama's 15-year run. No one wanted the assignment. It's tough to find a surprising angle on this story. And it's even tougher, it turns out, to find anyone who has watched the show since George Clooney was just that promising young actor from *The Facts of Life*.

But if ***Slate*** contributors aren't watching, somebody is. Even in this its final season, *ER* has reliably delivered 9 million viewers for NBC on Thursday nights. By contrast, *Friday Night Lights*, the network's high-school football drama, draws a mere 4.5 million (and yet was just renewed for two seasons). ***Slate*** has lavished attention on the critical darling *Friday Night Lights* while all but ignoring *ER*. A search of the ***Slate*** archive yields more uses of the interjection *er* than mentions of the medical drama.

We'd like to make it up to you, *ER* fans. We propose to turn our *ER* finale coverage over to you. Why do you still watch this show? What is it that has kept you coming back to County General season after season? Was it really still good after Clooney, Julianna Margulies, and Noah Wyle left? What does *ER* do that no other series does? How has it changed television? And is Abraham Benrubi *really* still on the show? Send your thoughts to slateculture@gmail.com by noon Wednesday, and we'll collect the best responses and publish them. Please include your name and where you're writing from (city and state) in your messages.

Sincerely,
Slate's Culture Dept.

culturebox

Great Shots of Tough Times

Ten new photographs of the economic crisis from ***Slate*** readers.

Monday, March 30, 2009, at 6:49 AM ET

Click here to view a slide show of recession photographs taken by Slate readers. Click here to submit your own.

A few weeks ago, ***Slate*** launched "Shoot the Recession," a project in which we asked our readers to help us document the

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economic crisis in photographs. We invited you to submit images to the group page we set up on the photo-sharing site Flickr. You responded by sending in poignant, surprising, and sometimes even humorous photos from across the country and around the globe. Earlier in March, we published a slide show of the best photos we'd received so far. Today, we're publishing a second. We'd love to publish a third. So keep the photos coming.

Liquidation sales, foreclosures, and recession specials have continued to be well-represented in the Flickr pool, but the latest batch of photos also captures more abstract symbols of the recession. When the economy goes south, it seems, folks start seeing the crunch everywhere they look. Did this Hummer get stuck with a boot because its owner could no longer afford to fill it with gas? Or simply because he forgot Tuesday is street-cleaning? Tough to say, but also tough to deny the photo's wry symbolism. Are these puppies on sale because Americans are struggling to put food on the table, never mind in the doggie dish? Or just to make room for a new shipment of Portuguese water dogs? Again, hard to know for sure, but hard not to see it as a sign of the times.

Click here to see other new submissions to ***Slate***'s Flickr pool, including a "For Rent" sign in the window of an empty real estate office, a Gucci sign missing its G, and a Dairy Queen sign far from home. Click here to launch the latest slide show of great photos of the recession—some symbolic, most not so—taken by ***Slate*** readers.

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dear prudence

Sexagenarian Sex Symbol

My crush on a famous actor is coming between me and my husband.

Thursday, April 2, 2009, at 6:45 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.)

Got a burning question for Prudie? She'll be online at Washingtonpost.com to chat with readers each Monday at 1 p.m. Submit your questions and comments here before or during the live discussion.

Dear Prudence,
I am a college student in my early 20s and have been married for three years to my wonderful husband. My problem is that I've got a huge crush on Michael Douglas, who is in his 60s. I watch his movies every day! At first my hubby just laughed it off and said he had crushes on celebrities, too, but now he's irritated because I insist on him watching these movies with me and discussing Michael Douglas' personal life all the time. I am not a stalker or anything. I am not writing him fan letters—though I've considered it. I have had mad celebrity crushes before, but this is the first since I've been with my husband. It feels like I am cheating and pushing my hubby away to watch movies that are older than I am. Please help!

—Cheating With the Movies

Dear Cheating,
I just saw the preview for *Ghosts of Girlfriends Past*, a Matthew McConaughey movie in which Michael Douglas appears as Uncle Wayne, a dead playboy. If the movie is as awful as the trailer—and since it stars Matthew McConaughey, I have every confidence it will be—sitting through multiple screenings just might be the kind of shock therapy you need. Also helpful would be to Google "Michael Douglas facelift" and see your dreamboat with his incisions oozing. If that doesn't do it, get the HBO series *Flight of the Conchords*, about a failed rock duo, and pay particular attention to the character Mel. She is the pair's crazed fan who forces her husband to accompany her as she stalks them. She's what you don't want to become. For that matter, you don't want to end up one bunny shy of the Glenn Close character in *Fatal Attraction*. Having fantasies about a celebrity has got to be a nearly universal experience. (When I was walking through a lobby in Los Angeles and literally bumped into my first big crush, Sean Connery, my knees buckled.) But once you get past the stage of taping pictures of the Jonas Brothers on your wall, you're supposed to be able to understand this is a limited, private indulgence that you don't subject your patient husband to on a nightly basis. If you were bingeing on potato chips, you'd keep them out of your pantry. So get rid of the Michael Douglas *oeuvre*, and start doing things with your husband (besides going to the movies) that make you appreciate the young man you have for real.

—Prudie

Dear Prudence Video: Bridezilla's Friend

Dear Prudence,
I was at a birthday party for a preschooler a few weeks ago, and I was shocked to hear two of the dads talking about how fat their little girls are and calling them fat to their faces. The little girls in question are perfectly normal toddlers, round in the way that 2-year-olds are, but certainly not fat. I told the fathers that what they were saying was terrible and they're going to give their daughters complexes. My husband thinks I should have kept my mouth shut, but as a woman and mother, I think that little girls have enough challenges to deal with in terms of body image without their own fathers calling them fat when they are not, and that for grown men to be assessing and judging the bodies of preschoolers is totally inappropriate. Was I wrong?

—Horrified Mom

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Dear Horrified,
Maybe for a 3rd birthday, one of the fathers could host a liposuction party. There could be a contest in which the preschooler who gets the most fat sucked out is the winner. The fathers could also run a "Pin the Tail on the Pudgeball" game. At the end of the party, the birthday girl could blow out the candles on her rice cake. It's a good idea to keep out of other people's childrearing practices, but when the child's health or safety is an issue, you have to speak up. Sure, the girls are not at immediate risk, but perhaps these fathers have never thought through the psychological damage they are going to do to their daughters with their revolting comments. You were right to admonish them. It may have been better to compose yourself and say something like, "I couldn't help but overhear you telling the girls they are fat. I know you don't mean anything by it, but this is the kind of thing that can be really insidious and lead to body image problems and eating disorders down the road. And your girls are adorable and not overweight." But I'll give you a pass for giving a piece of your mind to these fat-mouths.

—Prudie

Dear Prudie,
My husband and I are best friends with another couple we have known for many years. We all get along great, our children are playmates, and we see them a few times a week. For as long as I can remember, my friend has had issues with her mother, whom she calls "crazy." I can't tell you how many times I have heard my friend say that she wishes her father would leave her mother because of the verbal abuse she puts him through. But my friend treats her husband—who is a good husband and father—the same way that her mother treats her father. In front of anyone within earshot, she degrades him for everything that she thinks he does wrong, often throwing in comments such as, "How f---ing stupid can you be?" The comments are something I have just ignored because the husband seemed to have thick skin. I can see, however, that he is growing weary of the abuse. Should I bring this up to her? I honestly don't think she realizes that she is increasingly behaving more like her mother. Our friendship with this couple is irreplaceable, and I don't want to stick my nose where it doesn't belong.

—Hard To Be a Bystander

Dear Bystander,
By one account, Socrates married his harpy of a wife, Xanthippe, because he felt if he could tolerate her hectoring, he would be able to get along with anyone. Somehow I doubt this was the Socratic method that led to the marriage of your friends. Discussing the wife's behavior is fraught with risk to your friendship, but unless this shrew tames herself, her outbursts are going to jeopardize the continuing closeness of the two families. You don't want your children to think it's acceptable for people to talk that way to one another. And you and your husband must cringe every time she lets loose with one of her verbal fusillades. Have a talk with her in which you say you don't want to poke your nose in her marriage, but that you and your husband are becoming uncomfortable listening to her put-downs. Tell her you understand that husbands can be frustrating but that she's married to a good guy, and she's probably not even aware how constant and disproportionate her criticisms of him are. Don't mention her mother at this point—that would just send her to the self-defense barricades. If she is not irretrievably stuck recapitulating her parents' marriage, perhaps your talk will prompt her to recognize that she is turning into her least favorite person. If she doesn't stop, the next time she goes off, say quietly to her, "Jen, I really don't want to listen to this." And if it still continues, tell her that if she could hear herself, she'd hate how much she sounds like her mother

—Prudie

Dear Prudie,
I am in my mid-30s, and my never-married boyfriend is in his late 40s. We've been best friends for five years and a couple for 18 months. Several months ago he said, "I think it's time our parents meet." His mother visits once a year over the holidays, and my parents live two hours away. The meeting went very well, and a lovely time was had by all. Here's the rub: He had *no idea* that having our parents meet could indicate a marriage proposal was on the horizon. On New Year's Eve, he toasted 2009 as "our year," and now he's been talking about how romantic our summer vacation—which will be our two-year "anniversary"—is going to be. I asked, "So those things don't add up to anything?" and he said, "I'm sorry, no, they don't." My question is: Did I read too much into him wanting our parents to meet, or is he really that clueless?

—Misread the Tea Leaves

Dear Misread,
You don't get to be a heterosexual man in your late 40s who's never been married unless you have some really good strategies for fending off commitment conversations. It is perfectly reasonable that after knowing each other very well for almost seven years, you want to know if marriage is on the horizon. You don't mention whether you want to have children, but if you do, you can't stick to your boyfriend's schedule, which will probably mean that menopause is on the horizon before he decides that all your time together "adds up to anything." If you're in a serious, committed relationship, you two need to be able to talk openly about what you both want out of life and this relationship. He might confess that he never intends to get married, he could say he's studying his mathematical marital models and waiting for them to indicate the proper pain/gain ratio, possibly he'll make noises about not imposing deadlines on something that's going so well. Whatever he says, you need to respond by letting him know how that makes you feel. If the man you love can't engage in this type of conversation, then maybe you don't want to be engaged to him at all.

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—Prudie

dispatches

Lagos, Africa's Mega-City

Did you ever wonder what happened to your clunky old television? It may have ended up at Alaba.

By Will Connors

Friday, April 3, 2009, at 6:59 AM ET

From: Will Connors
Subject: Growth Continues, With or Without a Plan
Posted Monday, March 30, 2009, at 11:35 AM ET

LAGOS, Nigeria—Bar Beach wakes up later than the rest of Lagos. The prostitutes, touts, and religious devotees who live here on the breakwaters of the Atlantic Ocean emerge from their small shacks or from underneath tarps after the rest of the city has already begun its daily hustle. They had a late night.

Jutting up against the shoreline is a long concrete sea wall, similar in color, shape, and seeming disdain for aesthetics to Chicago's south side Promontory Point revetment, with hundreds of tractor-tire-sized X-blocks meant to protect the nearby high-priced real estate. On a recent morning, I walked down the sea wall as men, women, and children appeared from behind the X-blocks, taking pulls from small brown bottles, smoking joints, or picking at their teeth with bits of plastic.

A few city employees were bent over, sweeping the causeway of dirt. Beside them was a sign that read, "*Eko o ni baje!*" Yoruba for "Don't spoil Lagos." The signs are posted all over the city. Few heed them, from the state minister driving by in his Bentley to the tattered guy next to me drinking his breakfast.

A few hundred yards down the road stands the Eko, Lagos' most expensive and ostentatious hotel, where wealthy businessmen, foreign oil workers, and government officials drink expensive Champagne and chat up high-end working girls. The food at the Eko is overpriced and bland. The prostitutes have business cards.

Lagos, where I have lived for the last year, is filled with many such juxtapositions. Endlessly frenzied but somehow functional. Massively rich but poor beyond belief. Bursting with 15 million people but resolutely familial.

Lagos is the commercial hub of Africa's most populous nation and its second-biggest economy, trailing only South Africa. Depending on how you see the world or what kind of mood you're in on a particular day, you can look out of your window and see the unstructured chaos of a Third World city on speed or the vibrancy and sense of hope that continues to attract thousands of newcomers every day.

City officials love to tout Lagos' status as a mega-city, and according to the United Nations' definition, based on population size and density, it is (somewhere between 12 million and 18 million people, an estimated 20,000 people per square kilometer).

Dozens of proposed mega-city projects have been unveiled by officials and developers eager for cash in the years since military power gave way to a flawed but earnest democracy in 1999. Their titles, and price tags, are ambitious. The Lagos Energy City Project ($1.5 billion). The Lekki Free Trade Zone ($1.5 billion). The Lagos Beautification Project. The Lagos Drainage and Sanitation Master Plan. The proposed projects, despite good intentions, could each be characterized in similar ways. Foolhardy. Corrupt. Wasteful.

Bar Beach is the site of the city's most ambitious project, Eko Atlantic City. The goal? To build an entirely new high-end residential mini-city on land reclaimed from what is currently the Atlantic Ocean. Original estimates put the cost of the project at $3.5 billion, but analysts think the cost could eventually be much higher.

Previous efforts to improve Lagos' infrastructure do not bode well for Eko Atlantic City.

A local newspaper account of recent efforts to ease traffic, for example, began with this simple, poignant couplet: "Traffic congestion seemed to be the order of the day in and around Lagos metropolis. Several efforts in the past to holistically address the trend had little or no effect."

The traffic is still some of the worst in the world. Roads are terribly potholed. Drainage ditches flood even during light rainfalls, spreading waste everywhere. Electricity is a luxury; most of the city runs on diesel-powered generators. Pure water is hard to find, so small boys walk the streets of Lagos selling jerrycans filled with water pumped from boreholes miles away.

The governor of Lagos state, Babatunde Raji Fashola, is considered by most Lagosians to be an honest striver who aims to improve the city. (The city and the state of Lagos are basically one and the same, such is the expansiveness of the urban sprawl.) I have heard Fashola speak on several occasions; each time, I came away impressed but just as convinced that his lofty and admirable goals would not succeed.

"Most places do planning before development," said Moses Ogun of the Nigerian Institute of Town Planners. "Here they do

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development and building before they've done the planning. I call it disjointed incrementalism."

The architects of the 1998 city master plan promised to develop 28 new districts in Lagos and ease congestion, but they didn't follow through, according to Ogun. Only 15 percent of the 1985 master plan was implemented.

"There is no one guiding the growth," Ogun said. "The governor needs to wake up."

I don't think wakefulness is the governor's problem. Disentangling himself from rich patrons and the corruption long endemic to Nigeria may be.

There are huge amounts of money to be made in Lagos, particularly in the housing industry. Demand is high, and so are rents. A two-bedroom apartment in Ikoyi, Lekki, or Victoria Island (where Eko Atlantic City will be constructed), the wealthier areas of Lagos, can cost $6,000 a month.

Developers have been quick to pounce on this housing bubble, and they are very keen to build additional properties on the islands. The city's plan to reclaim land from the ocean is music to their ears.

The poorer neighborhoods of Lagos invariably get neglected.

Mabel Samuel lives in a shanty village enclosed on all sides by multistory homes and businesses catering to wealthy Lagos residents. The people here work as servants, cleaners, and drivers for the more affluent folks who surround them. They pack themselves and their entire families into tiny rented rooms because they cannot afford the cost of commuting daily from other, more affordable neighborhoods. Mabel, her husband, and their three children live in a room that is about 6 feet by 8 feet.

The only utility provided for this slum is water, and that is only because a large industrial company, whose smokestacks are visible a few hundred yards away, built a borehole as a PR move. If the borehole weren't there, Mabel said, "we'd have to trek about 2 kilometers to buy it and start standing in the queue at about 5 a.m."

When night falls, the neighborhood goes dark except for the flicker of kerosene lamps. Residents huddle outside their doors, chatting with neighbors and waiting for the next day of work.

Bar Beach residents have been waiting for the night to come. Touts swarm everywhere, offering anything and everything to revelers. Hundreds of white plastic tables are planted into the thick sand. Young men smoke and drink from large brown bottles of potent beer. Working girls sashay between tables looking for johns. Music blasts from dozens of competing loudspeakers as bars court patrons. A Fela Kuti impersonator dances for an audience of no one.

Farther down, away from the bar lights, the beach takes on a seedier vibe. Men stumble in and out of small huts. Idle women stand by, chatting with each other. Young boys with joints the size of their arms try to look tough. They usually succeed.

As part of its plan to build the Eko Atlantic City Complex, the Lagos government will raze all the bars and drive out the squatters who call Bar Beach home. As smart as Lagosians are, they are equally tough. I wouldn't want that job.

From: Will Connors
Subject: Soap-Seers, Snake-Fat Juice, and Lemon-Grass Gin
Posted Tuesday, March 31, 2009, at 9:17 AM ET

LAGOS, Nigeria—Taye paddles us between the stilt-borne homes. Women glide by in canoes on their way to the market, men on their way to sea. Small children paddle themselves to school. They look at me warily, and I try to return their gaze, but my eyes still sting. The smoke from the cars grinding their way across the 7-mile-long bridge toward the city center has crept across the lagoon and gotten into my clothes, nose, and eyes.

It is morning in Makoko, a slum neighborhood in Lagos, Nigeria, built above lagoon water fetid with pollution and industrial and human waste. Men and women fish from dugout canoes as they have done for centuries. They also have two or three cell phones, each from a different service provider, which they use according to which mobile network is functioning best that day.

Every day, several million people cross over three bridges onto the two island hubs of Lagos where most of the banking and commerce in Nigeria takes place. Underneath the longest of these bridges is Makoko, a cluster of shacks sticking up jaunty-legged from the jet-black water.

No one knows the exact population of the neighborhood. There is no official government representative on the water, no police, no hospitals. But there is plenty else. Churches, schools, market centers, traditional clinics, bars, and barber shops all share space on the water.

On a recent afternoon, I met up with an aspiring actor named Joseph and his friends Taye and Simeon, who would be my guides and interpreters while in Makoko. After a short and

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terrifying tightrope walk over jagged planks, we reached our canoe and headed out onto the water.

Almost immediately, I felt we had slid into a different time and place. The tension in my shoulders and arms, necessary when navigating the turmoil of Lagos' streets, slipped away. The poverty endemic to Nigeria was still visible, but on the water it seemed less dire, less immediate.

After a few minutes of paddling, we saw a man leaning out of his window, keeping tabs on his children as they mended a fishing net. We pulled alongside the house and greeted him. His name was Prosper Bako, he was 42, and like many of Makoko's residents, he was a fisherman and an immigrant, from neighboring Benin.

The sense that anything can be done in Lagos with sweat and ingenuity brings tens of thousands of migrants from poor, rural regions of Nigeria here, but they also come from neighboring West African countries.

"I came here five years ago," Bako said. "There was no work in Benin. My wife had a baby, and I had no money to support them. We live here because there's no space on the land. We have no choice."

There are fish to be caught in Benin, he said, but the market is too small to support a good living. A half-dozen small children played or worked at Bako's feet, so I asked him how many children he had. He hesitated. Four, he said. Maybe five. His wife, hidden behind a plank until then, stuck her head out and laughed. Five!

A few minutes later, we approached a house where a dozen men sat chatting and drinking from a bottle filled with green herbs. It was *sodabi*, a popular home-brew in Benin. This particular batch was mixed with lemon grass, roots, and a few secret ingredients that I was not permitted to know. We were invited up and offered a shot. I drank one back and felt the familiar burn of homemade gin but with a strong, grassy aftertaste that reminded me of summer. The men laughed and clapped me on the back, telling me it would help any stomach problems I might have.

They were all fishermen, some from Benin or Togo, others natives of Nigeria. They were waiting for the wind to pick up. Their small boats bobbed nearby, the sails made from old stitched-together rice sacks wrapped tightly around short masts. I thanked them for the drink and wished them luck.

After an hour or two, I noticed that we had passed several canoes laden with large brown boxes. I asked Taye what they contained. Frozen fish, he said, imported from Europe. Foreign frozen fish in a fishing community?

It was a sign of the degradation and pollution of the local fishing waters—and of the constant expansion of the city of Lagos into traditional fishing grounds. It was also a simple matter of supply and demand. There are so many people in Nigeria—many of whom love to eat fish—that local fishermen can't keep up.

That night, as we made our way in the dark toward the house where we would sleep, we passed a small shack, and Joseph stopped our canoe. Inside, a man sat hunched over a single kerosene lamp.

"Do you want to have your future told?" Joseph asked.

Sure, I said, why not?

The oracle, an unkempt middle-aged man, greeted us, and we sat down on a narrow bench in the one-room house. The walls were unadorned, better to focus attention on the objects on the floor. Stones, feathers, clumps of multicolored powder, a necklace of small shells held together by ratty string. I was instructed to take out a bill. I handed the oracle 500 naira, about $4, and he quickly wrapped it around a bean. He said a few words to the money. Then I was told to put some sweat on the bill and whisper a secret question. I did as instructed. My guides, happy young men who had been laughing and arguing about Premier League soccer just minutes before, were silent.

The oracle made a few movements with the crumpled bill and his shells and powders, then issued his decree.

"You are not making as much money as you should," he said.

This is true, I thought.

"There is a job you want but haven't gotten yet."

Also true.

"This is because someone jealous of you is blocking you with bad magic."

Suddenly I didn't want to hear any more. Just in case.

Toward midnight, we eased into the mooring area of the house we'd sleep in. As we clambered up the steps, a dog leapt out at us, and I jumped back, almost falling into the water. I hadn't expected a dog to live out here.

We took turns showering outside over a hole in the wooden floorboards; then the four of us were given one thin mat to sleep on and a mosquito net to sleep beneath. Our host, Joseph told me as we fell asleep, was also a seer, a prophetess. She would tell me my fortune in the morning. There were balls of pink soap

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involved, and a crucifix, and snake-fat juice. The prophetess would ease my mind, he said. The snake-fat juice would make me strong.

From: Will Connors
Subject: Too Busy To Burn
Posted Wednesday, April 1, 2009, at 7:10 AM ET

LAGOS, Nigeria—Leo Igwe is a lonely man. In this overwhelmingly religious country, he is a rare creature. Leo is a proud, "out," practicing atheist.

This is no small feat in a country where people answer the question, "How are you?" with, "I thank God." Leo's outspokenness has made him well-known but largely disliked in his home town on the northern outskirts of Lagos. It has also put his life in danger.

"I get death threats all the time," Leo told me when I first met him several months ago. "What can I do? I believe what I believe."

Death threats over religious matters are taken seriously in Nigeria, a country with a long and troubled history of religious violence. Particularly in the country's "middle belt," between its predominantly Muslim north and mostly Christian south, religious violence is easily triggered and dangerously volatile.

In 2002, several hundred people were killed after a perceived insult to Islam during a Miss World beauty pageant being held in Nigeria. In 2006, an additional 200 people were killed in several Nigerian cities after anger erupted in the wake of the publication of Danish cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed.

Late last year, the number of dead from religious fighting climbed by around 300 after local government elections sparked mob violence, shootings, and the burning of churches and mosques in the central city of Jos, a city populated by roughly similar numbers of Christians and Muslims.

I traveled to Jos to report on the conflict. Nearly everyone I spoke with held deep-seated animosity toward followers of the other religion. Archbishops, imams, and—most disturbing—children spoke with disdain, distrust, and outright dislike for their Muslim or Christian counterparts.

Lagos had no such incidents during any of the controversies mentioned above. This city never does.

There is crime in Lagos. Bank robberies, muggings, and con schemes are common. Religious violence is relatively unknown here, however. People of every conceivable religion and ethnicity, from every corner of West Africa, come to work in Lagos. So why don't they bring their ethnic and religious baggage with them?

One possibility is that Christians and Muslims often intermarry in Lagos, a rare event in most other regions of the country.

Rotimi Farawe is a court official and a devout Muslim. I met him at the central mosque, where he prays daily.

"I'm an Alhaji," he said, referring to his pilgrimage to Mecca. "I married a Catholic woman who goes to church every Sunday, and she's still in my house. She goes to church; I go to mosque. It works out."

Their five children have attended a Methodist school and a Quranic school.

Another reason may be government intervention and a strong inter-religious council. Lagos state forbids two religious buildings from being built side-by-side. When a conflict arose recently over a church's desire to expand on a plot next to a mosque, the issue was quickly taken to the council and settled amicably.

But the real reason may also be the simplest: Lagosians are too busy.

In the search for work, money, and advancement, there seems to be no time for religious violence in Lagos. Churches and mosques espouse a healthy desire for wealth in most of the country, but Lagos is the physical embodiment of that desire, and people have far too much to do.

I asked one of the religious leaders at Lagos' central mosque why Lagos remained peaceful.

"We're too busy," he said.

I asked a banker friend why Lagos didn't experience the same troubles as other cities.

"We're too busy trying to make money," he said.

Churches in Lagos are particularly good at urging their followers to strike it rich.

I recently visited the Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministry, perhaps the most aggressive church in a city filled with them. Sermons are loud, sweaty affairs in which worshipers spend

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most of the four-hour service on their feet, eyes closed, yelling and swaying with the band. Church memorabilia is sold in small kiosks for blocks in all directions. Books, tapes, T-shirts, perfume, foodstuffs, household goods, DVDs. A movie poster reads: *Tears of the Barren*. A bumper sticker: "Don't Test Me—My Lord Is a Vengeful Fire." A newspaper headline: "Obama in Phone Talks With Pastor: Please Pray for Me."

Three of us lingered in the vestibule, waiting to see the general overseer: a large woman fidgeting with her purse, a sad middle-aged man staring out the window, and me. When the secretary came out to usher the fidgety woman into the office, she paused and looked at me.

"Are you a pastor?" she asked.

No. Not a pastor.

"Because you look like a pastor."

I assured the woman I was not a pastor. (I decided not to tell her that I had played a priest in a Nigerian movie once.) Whether it was my beard or the color of my skin that gave her this impression, it certainly was not my shabby clothes. In Lagos, most Christian leaders dress like Wall Street CEOs. And their churches are everywhere. Big and small, well-known or obscure, you can't walk for long in any Lagos neighborhood without seeing church signboards or posters offering redemption, successful marriages, and sexual potency. Most often, they promise wealth.

The quest for money is by no means limited to the Mountain of Fire.

A TV ad for the Holy Ghost Congress promises, "Abundance, exceeding greatness, and success," all thinly veiled euphemisms for making money.

Nigerians don't do anything halfway, and their religious fervor is no exception. The nation has provided several slumping Christian denominations with their fastest-growing population bases.

The Anglican Church of Nigeria is the second-largest Anglican branch in the world, behind only the Church of England. Roman Catholic Cardinal Francis Arinze, a Nigerian, was on the shortlist to succeed Pope John Paul II in 2005. The Catholic Church is growing faster in Africa than anywhere else, and some of its biggest parishes are in Nigeria. The same is true for the Baptists and the Pentecostal movement. A recent all-night Christian-music event attracted more than 300,000 people to downtown Lagos.

At a recent event at the biggest Catholic church in Lagos, this same spirit of cupidity was on full display. The church required its parish members to bring in animals to be slaughtered for a feast or to contribute an equal amount in cash. One of the wealthier parishioners brought in a prized cow worth several thousand dollars. The congregation oohed and aahed. Another parishioner, also quite rich, wouldn't be outdone, so he pledged to bring in a cow worth even more. More sounds of approval, none as loud as those from church leaders. The parishioners who did not donate, or who donated small amounts, were shunned.

I still find the overt materialism surrounding the religious world of Lagos off-putting, especially when pastors drive Mercedes-Benzes past parishioners on their way home to shanty towns. But after walking through countless burned-down homes and stepping around charred bodies in the smoldering aftermath of the religious fighting in Jos last December, the striving for money doesn't seem so bad after all.

From: Will Connors
Subject: Dapper, Dandy, and Pissed Off
Posted Thursday, April 2, 2009, at 6:46 AM ET

LAGOS, Nigeria—Lunch hour in downtown Lagos. Bankers and secretaries stream out of their offices toward fast-food joints with names like Mr. Biggs, Tastee Fried Chicken, and Tantalizers. Others hustle toward food stands overseen by women with powerful forearms.

I sit on a rickety wooden bench at one of the stalls, waiting for a waitress to bring me a soda water and spicy *jollof* rice.

A few men chat nearby. They've kept their suit jackets on despite the midday sun, and they aren't sweating. Their shirts and pants are crisp and clean. They are sporting cufflinks, and pocket squares, and tie bars. They laugh and nudge each other when a group of young women enters the food stall to order pounded yams. The women look them up and down and give slight, approving grins: The men are well-put-together; they deserve smiles.

I look away from them and down at myself. Shoes scuffed and nearly worn through. Pants ripped and caked in dirt. Shirt wrinkled and yellowed. My handkerchief damp from the frequent passes it has made over my forehead.

I've never felt as unkempt as I do in Lagos. Staying composed and well-groomed in a hot, humid city built on swampland is tough enough. Most days I give up and let the heat take over.

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But there's also the traffic and garbage to deal with. Fifteen million people living in a city originally meant for 100,000 means that it's not easy to stay clean in Lagos. Especially if you don't have your own vehicle. Public transport comes in two forms: impossibly crowded *danfos* (mini-buses) and fast but dangerous *okadas* (motorcycle taxis). Neither allows for space to keep shirts unruffled or shoes unscuffed.

Lagosians, though, manage to keep their brilliantly colored clothes (traditional and Western) clean through it all. People look neat and presentable every day here, because in Lagos, you have to. Appearances matter everywhere, but Nigerians—and Lagosians in particular—are the most status- and style-conscious people I've ever been around.

I once headed out the door unshaven, wearing a T-shirt with a small hole in it. My Nigerian friends refused to be seen in public with me, and they weren't joking. A few days later, a friend saw my outdated, beat-up cell phone and offered his BlackBerry so that the people we were going to meet wouldn't shun us. Grunge will never be in style here.

"People judge you by what you're wearing," said Gbenga Badejo, a British-Nigerian recently returned from London. "It's always been that way, but now it's gone astronomical. It's also an indication of the severe level of poverty here: You stand out if you dress well. Others will think you're better than them. What can you do?"

Gbenga and his wife, Atinuke, hope to take advantage of their countrymen's natural sense of style and use it to ease their notoriously short tempers and bravado. They recently founded the Lagos Finishing School and the Lagos Etiquette Bank. They mostly cater to businesses, holding seminars on how to speak and act professionally, but they also hope to take their teachings to the streets soon.

There they will be met by taxi drivers with little regard for human life, traffic police with liberal ideas on the use of batons and whips, shop customers with a complete disregard for queues, people who transform from normal-seeming commuters into screaming tyrants at the slightest provocation, and motorcycles honking tricked-out horns that make them sound like 18-wheelers.

The Badejos have their work cut out for them.

When I brought up their venture at a recent dinner party, both Nigerians and expatriates laughed heartily.

"My God, it will never work," one guest said.

"It could be a brilliant business model, actually," another replied. "But as a real means for change in Lagos? Hah, never!"

One thing the couple will not have to worry about is whether Nigerians dress well.

"We live to look good, because looking good is good business," said Tolu Olusoga, the manager of a branch of T.M. Lewin, the classic British clothier, in Lagos. "If I look good, it will be a big plus for me at a job interview."

But they don't just want to look good. They want to stop traffic.

"We like it loud, and we're very particular about brand names," Olusoga said. "We're funky."

While eating lunch at a French-themed restaurant recently, I noticed a dapper young man sitting by himself nearby, tapping his fingers steadily on the table. Eventually another man approached him and sat down with a fat book of cloth samples.

"You know, you should give me 10 percent off because you were late!" the first man said, poking his finger at the second.

After a few more exhortations—and a few expletives—the first man began leafing through the pages and finally settled on a suitable style. When the tailor left, I asked the client why Nigerian men, and Lagosian men in particular, are so style-conscious.

"I don't want to look bogus," the man said, looking at me as if I had asked him why humans breathe. His name was Stanley Ajirioghene, and he was in advertising. Before I could ask another question, Stanley started off on one of the brilliant, stream-of-consciousness rants that Lagosians are famous for.

"I want to look immaculate, sharp!" he said. "Appearance does matter. If you walk into a meeting dressed well, your chances of doing business go up. If you make a good first impression, you're 70 percent there. It's worth it, every penny of it. It's an innate thing. It starts in high school, trying to get girls. Then at Christmas and Easter, you get new clothes, and you compete with your friends to see who got the best stuff. Then as a young adult, the competition becomes stiff as you enter the business world. You know you have to invest a lot in wardrobe. Now it's about business first, then girls."

The custom-made suit Stanley had just ordered would eventually cost well over 125,000 naira, or nearly $1,000. Typical, perhaps, in developed countries, but an absolute fortune in a country where the average person earns about $2 a day.

Worries about style and appearance are not limited to wealthy Nigerians, however. Those without high-paying jobs also make sure to dress well, such as my friend Aziz.

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Aziz drives a small motorcycle vending cart around the streets of Lagos selling Indomie, a popular brand of instant ramen noodles, to food stands and kiosks. He owns one simple shirt—a solid-colored button-down—and one pair of khakis.

After each day spent fighting through grinding traffic and trying to convince shop owners to buy more Indomie noodles, he returns to the room he shares with several other young men and washes his shirt by hand in a small plastic bucket. He hangs the shirt up to dry overnight and spends the rest of the night in a stretched singlet or bare-chested. He rises at dawn, takes the shirt down from the clothesline, and carefully irons it on the floor before heading out for another long day.

From: Will Connors
Subject: Tinkerer's Paradise
Posted Friday, April 3, 2009, at 6:59 AM ET

LAGOS, Nigeria—Did you ever wonder what happened to that clunky 12-inch television you used to watch *Seinfeld* on? Or to that old CD player you wore out in the '90s listening to Pearl Jam and P.M. Dawn? There's a decent chance it ended up here, on the western outskirts of Lagos, in West Africa's biggest electronics market, Alaba International.

Franklin Azubuike wants you to know that your old appliances are doing fine. And, by the way, thank you.

According to Azubuike, public affairs officer for the Alaba secretariat, the market's 3,000 shops sell "anything electronic within the imagination of any man" to more than 300,000 people every single day. During the holiday season, the numbers are much, much higher.

Azubuike was coy about the amount of money that passes through Alaba in a typical day, but stall owners said they usually earned at least several hundred thousand naira a month and can make as much as several million naira per month. That's only five figures in dollars, but in a country where the average person makes around $2 a day, it's a fantastic living.

Marketers estimate that at least 500 40-foot containers arrive in Lagos each month, and that's just the computer and TV monitors. A 2004 report estimated that as much as 75 percent of the goods that enter the city—most of them bound for Alaba—is junk, neither marketable nor repairable. Environmentalists call this e-waste or techno-trash and have tried to stop Western countries from exporting their used computers and televisions to developing countries.

Despite potentially hazardous environmental issues, Alaba is still a success story in a country with far too few. The same entrepreneurial spirit that led to Nigeria's industrious, tireless e-mail scammers also created dynamic markets like Alaba.

Until recently, the market was chaotic, riddled with pirated goods and beset by crime, with few controls and little order. Armed robbers entered the market almost every night to make off with as much merchandise as they could carry. Bootleg movies, knockoff televisions, and stereos were standard fare. My friend Raymond, a lifelong Lagosian, warned me that if I went to Alaba, I would probably be accosted; he told me not to take any valuables.

His advice turned out to be unnecessary. The market is still a crazy place, but it buzzed not with menace but with a vibrant energy. I didn't feel threatened in Alaba, but if you're not a businessman or a prospective buyer, you're wasting their time.

Alaba is not exempt from the problems plaguing the rest of Lagos. Due to years of corruption and mismanagement, many neighborhoods go weeks without electricity. Most of the country runs on diesel-powered generators. So does Alaba. Even the section of the market that sells generators runs on generators.

Azubuike and I walked down hundreds of narrow paths filled with equipment and salesmen and repairmen. We had to leap out of the way as boys carrying massive televisions on their heads hustled by. One man saw me taking pictures and grabbed my arm.

"What kind of business are you going to get for me, taking these pictures?" he asked, sticking his smiling face close to mine. "I have stuff from Italy, England, just in today. Where are you from? America, England, Germany? I love America! We have anything you could want here, and good prices!"

Actually, I'm just a writer; I don't think I can get you any business. But a story about Alaba might be good publicity for you and your—

"Forget it." His smile immediately faded, and he dropped the pose. "You can do nothing for me. This stuff is all second-hand. Nobody from America is gonna buy this junk."

Azubuike is vying for my attention. He wants to make sure I've understood that the piracy and counterfeit goods problem, once rampant, is now under control. His hands chop the air while he's talking, making him seem better suited to being behind a pulpit or a podium. In fact, he ran for public office in recent local elections. He lost, but not for lack of charisma.

"Piracy is a cankerworm!" he said, eyes twinkling. "It is a sin against not only humanity but God. It is a wind that blows no

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good. It kills the man with creativity to do new work. It touches every strata of the economy."

At the end of my day in Alaba, I stopped to buy some classic Nigerian afro-funk and high-life CDs. While bargaining with the vendor, I noticed that the young man next to me had bought hundreds of hip-hop mixes and pirated Hollywood DVDs. His name was Aliyu. I asked him what he would do with them.

"I'll take them up to Kano," he said.

Kano is a city in Nigeria's majority-Muslim north, where a fairly docile version of Sharia law is practiced. Since there are no nightclubs or movie houses in Kano, most people listen to CDs and watch DVDs in their homes.

"I buy them here for 100 naira and sell them for 150 naira in Kano," Aliyu said. "Mostly hip-hop CDs and every kind of movie. Hollywood stuff, Chinese action pics, Indian movies."

Alaba not only supplies almost all of Lagos with televisions, refrigerators, and generators; it also supplies huge chunks of the rest of Nigeria and West Africa with goods that would otherwise be difficult to gather.

Azubuike suggests I leave the market by 3 p.m. to beat traffic. After a quick negotiation over how much I should pay him for showing me around (Azubuike: "You can spare something. You're a big man." Me: "How about my appreciation and thanks?"), I walk toward the public buses, known as *danfos*. I had taken a *danfo* out to Alaba in the morning, squashed with 18 passengers on a mini-bus meant for 12, but going back in one would mean several hours stuck in gridlock.

Instead, I find an *okada*, or motorcycle taxi, willing to take me all the way to my house. It's not the safest way to ride (hospital emergency rooms in Lagos are often called *okada* wards), but because it can weave in and out of traffic, it's faster than waiting for a *danfo*. David, the driver, urges me to buy a pair of cheap sunglasses from a nearby street vendor so the dirt and rock shards won't get in my eyes on the way home. The only ones that fit my face are large, oval-shaped, and purple.

I tell David I have to live. I'm going home soon.

"I have to live, too," he says. "I have a 4-month-old baby."

Thirty minutes later, my knees and back sore, my face grimy with soot, I hold tight as the traffic begins to thicken and downtown Lagos comes into view.

There are the familiar billboards. The tall bank buildings and fancy hotels where consultants and oil workers gather. The policemen are shaking down passers-by for small bribes.

At one such checkpoint, we wait while three Mercedes-Benz jeeps maneuver into narrow parking spaces. Taut-armed boys dripping with sweat walk between the cars and *okadas*, selling bottles of water and the evening papers. One boy is selling plantain chips, my favorite.

I buy a bag and lean back on the beat-up motorbike. The plantains are crisp and spicy, just the way I like them.

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dispatches

Venezuela's Expat Revolutionaries

Meet the young foreigners who love Hugo Chávez so much they moved to his "Bolivarian paradise."

By Alexander Cuadros

Tuesday, March 31, 2009, at 7:49 AM ET

If you watched Venezuelan state-run television in early 2009, you probably saw a sweetly smiling young Italian woman wearing a neon-green chef's hat and brandishing a pizza while extolling the virtues of indefinite re-election. Venezuela was gearing up for a referendum to eliminate term limits for government posts, and a savvy producer had decided to enlist the country's resident foreigners to support President Hugo Chávez's bid to stay in power past 2012, when his current term expires. The ad also featured an Englishwoman daintily sipping tea, a German dressed something like a yodeler, and a beret-clad Frenchman holding a baguette across his chest. "In France, we didn't have term limits, but the parliament made a change without consulting the people. What luck you have to be able to choose!" the Frenchman declared.

I had come to Venezuela to cover the Feb. 15 referendum, but I became obsessed by these people. *Who were they?* Caracas is a dirty, run-down, violent city where tourism is almost nonexistent—Buenos Aires' evil twin—and yet a vital cadre of expats has sprung up there. Most are dedicated to building Chávez's Bolivarian revolution, as he calls it. Yet unlike the millions of poor Venezuelans who make up *chavismo*'s base, they tend to come from middle-class backgrounds; they're well-educated and well-traveled. And unlike the well-connected "Bolivarian bourgeoisie," they generally aren't sucking on the teat of government largess—no plasma TVs, no Hummers, no scotch. In fact, they tend to live humbly, many of them in illegally built, ramshackle apartments called *ranchitos*, where, judging from the holes in the ceiling, every heavy rainfall puts their laptops and video cameras in mortal danger. Plenty have suffered muggings.

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A French friend who makes pro-Chávez documentaries—a veritable cottage industry in Venezuela—put me in touch with the Italian from the referendum ad, Barbara Meo Evoli. Now 27, she first came to Caracas in 2006 after getting her degree in international law. She had wanted to get away from Europe, and as a "lifelong leftist" she was curious about Chávez and his "socialism of the 21st century." Speaking with people, getting involved in community projects, she quickly became fascinated. "At first I wasn't really clear on what I wanted to do in my life," she told me. "But after a few months, I realized I wanted to be a journalist. ... Being far from your country, I think, sometimes helps you understand yourself, no?" Though she now has a full-time job at a newspaper for Venezuela's Italian community, she regards her freelance work for publications back home—such as *Il Manifesto*, a Communist daily—as her most valuable contribution to "the process." Her goal, she said, is to provide a counterbalance for what she sees as willful distortion in mainstream European media.

I thought of Evoli's cameo in the ad, in which she cheerily told Venezuelans: "In Italy, we can pick the politicians we like many times, without that right being limited by a law." These days, Italy's prime minister is Silvio Berlusconi—a fact the ad doesn't mention. It is probably not a comparison Chávez would cherish. Referring to Europe, Evoli told me: "Honest information on Venezuela simply doesn't arrive there."

A Spanish friend of Evoli's, Fernando Casado, met me the following day in a spare conference room in a building belonging to the ministry of higher education, which he advises. A professor at the Bolivarian University, he had gelled-back hair and a precise, didactic manner. He came to Caracas in 2005 explicitly intending to participate in the revolution. I asked him if, after so much time there, he saw flaws in the process. "Perhaps," he said, choosing his words carefully. "The ideal is so ambitious ... that its practical realization runs into problems, realities that every human being possesses." I asked if he was speaking of corruption or crime—both endemic in Venezuela. He switched to heavily accented English to tell me, coldly, "That's a leading question."

During the conversation, we kept a Chávez-like pace of espresso consumption: two in a half-hour. "I work for the revolution," Casado told me. "I've never believed in borders—I believe borders are superfluous divisions of political maps. I came here because there's a marvelous revolutionary process that I believe in, that I identify with." He went on, "It could be anywhere in the world. That doesn't matter—it's the revolution." He planned to stay in Venezuela, working for what he saw as a crucial paradigm shift in the way states are organized, as long as the revolution remained "true" to its ideals.

On referendum day, I met a 6-foot-4 platinum-headed German named Tilo Schmidt as we waited for Chávez to show up to vote at a high school in a poor neighborhood. Schmidt, 33, was filming a pro-Chávez documentary and staying at Casa Azul, a sprawling apartment in downtown Caracas that is a kind of cross between a hostel and a commune. I visited him there a couple of days later. The rooms are small and simple. There are Che Guevara posters on the walls and laundry hanging in the open-air patio. American intervention in Latin America is the usual dinner conversation. Another Casa Azul tenant was the "German" yodeler of the referendum ad (she turned out to be Austrian). It's a sketchy area, Schmidt told me: "I get this kind of paranoid feeling on the streets—I don't go out at night." Still, he felt swept up in what he saw going on around him.

Jojo Farrell, who now lives in New York but used to coordinate Venezuelan "reality tours" through a nonprofit called Global Exchange, had seen a lot of "starry-eyed" types come through the house. "It's exciting to be marching in the streets, the aura of change," he said. "Elections are like a party here." But he acknowledged that these expat *chavistas* would never have as much at stake as the Venezuelans involved in the process, because if things turned sour, they could always leave. "You've always got the ticket out," he said; Schmidt, for one, was staying just another week.

After leaving Caracas, I managed to get hold of Eva Golinger, a thirtysomething American lawyer who is, in her own words, "an emblematic figure of the process." I interviewed her shortly after she returned from a literary festival in Cuba. In 2005, she published a book called *The Chávez Code*, which digested thousands of official documents related to U.S. meddling in Venezuelan affairs. She's on television all the time these days, sometimes even appearing with Chávez, who once called her "the bride of Venezuela." She was able to get citizenship because her mother is Venezuelan, but she doesn't fully identify herself with either nationality: "Every revolution has its internationalists, people who've come from abroad and become intimately involved with the struggle," she said. "It's fundamental."

Because of her outspoken criticisms of the Venezuelan opposition and the U.S. government, Golinger has received death threats. Her apartment has been broken into and trashed. She acknowledges that Caracas is not an easy city to live in—unlike "people-friendly" New York, her home base until 2005. But perhaps her biggest sacrifice came when her involvement in the revolution began to cause friction with her Venezuelan husband and his family. They eventually divorced. "He gave me an ultimatum," she said: "Him and life in New York or the revolution. I chose the revolution. It's my life, it's my principles and values and ideals, my dreams.

"It's too bad. He felt threatened by it. I'm not sorry—it's sad, but those things happen. They make you stronger. They reinforce your choice, because it's the path that's right for you."

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explainer

World Wad

What would a new global reserve currency look like?

By Christopher Beam

Friday, April 3, 2009, at 3:22 PM ET

At Wednesday's G20 summit, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev suggested creating "a new reserve currency" to replace the dollar. In a paper published March 23, Chinese central bank governor Zhou Xiaochuan also proposed a new reserve currency, one "disconnected from individual nations." Even Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner has said he's "open" to the idea. What would a new currency look like?

Lots of other currencies combined. Medvedev, the Chinese economic minister, and other would-be reformers want to create an accounting unit based on a "basket" of other currencies—a sort of hybrid. Instead of countries holding billions of U.S. dollars in their reserves—which makes them vulnerable if the dollar drops suddenly—they would hold a new unit, composed of, say, the dollar, the pound, and the Euro. The value of each component currency might fluctuate, but if one drops, the others can serve as "hedges."

The most prominent example of such a basket is the Special Drawing Rights—or SDR—overseen by the International Monetary Fund. The value of the SDR is composed of 44 percent U.S. dollar, 34 percent euro, 11 percent yen, and 11 percent British pound. So if the U.S. dollar loses half its value, the SDR declines by 22 percent. Today, one SDR is worth 1.49 U.S. dollars. (Track the daily exchange rate here.) You can't withdraw SDRs at the ATM, but you can use them for accounting transactions. Some countries, such as Syria, peg their currencies to the SDR. (This role earned the SDR the nickname "paper gold.") Zhou proposes making the SDR the new reserve unit but suggests expanding it to include all other major currencies as well.

So who would oversee this new currency? Probably the IMF or another independent entity with representatives from each country. The IMF wouldn't "produce" the new unit—let's call them SDR2s. But you could trade, say, X U.S. dollars for Y SDR2s, which would then show up in your bank account. You could use those SDR2s to buy oil or pay down debt, or you could simply stash them in your reserve.

Instead of convincing all the G20 nations to oust the dollar, couldn't China just start buying up other currencies? Sure. Countries aren't required to keep their reserves in dollars—they do it because they want to. (The dollar's "primary reserve currency" status is more de facto than official.) But if China dumped its reserve of dollars it would jeopardize its relationship with the United States, and other countries wouldn't necessarily do the same. Any systematic overhaul would have to be done cooperatively and a switch to the SDR requires approval from the IMF, which is controlled by the United States.

The first currency to be held in foreign reserves was the British pound, during the 18th and 19th centuries. That changed after World War II, when the major economic powers met at Bretton Woods and established the exchange-rate system and the International Monetary Fund to oversee it. Under that system, the U.S. dollar became the go-to reserve currency, partly because the United States was an economic powerhouse and partly because the dollar was backed by gold. (In other words, any country could trade its dollars back to the United States in exchange for gold.) As a result, the U.S. dollar was considered extremely stable. The dollar plummeted when President Nixon unhitched it from the price of gold in 1971 but remained strong compared with other currencies. The dollar still makes up 64 percent of global reserves, trailed by the euro, which constitutes about 26 percent.

Bonus Explainer: What's the point of a reserve currency, anyway? It serves as a standard unit for international payments, and it protects your own currency against shock. If demand for yen drops, for example, Japan can use their extra U.S. dollars to buy up the unwanted yen, thereby propping up its value. At the same time, though, the country whose currency is held in reserve—in this case, the United States—is *more* vulnerable to shock, since so much of its currency is in foreign accounts and therefore inaccessible to the United States. Transitioning to a hybrid reserve currency would therefore protect both weaker economies, which are usually vulnerable to another single country's ups and downs, and stronger ones, which would have more ability to control and stabilize their own currencies.

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

Explainer thanks David Beim of Columbia University and John Coleman of Duke University.

explainer

The Executive Gift Exchange

Have U.S. presidents always traded tchotchkes with foreign leaders?

By Brian Palmer

Thursday, April 2, 2009, at 6:39 PM ET

Queen Elizabeth II presented President Obama with a framed photograph of herself during his visit to Buckingham Palace on

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Wednesday. He in turn provided her with an iPod loaded with show tunes. Have U.S. presidents always exchanged gifts with foreign leaders?

Yes, but the early presidents weren't the most gracious recipients. The Framers viewed the ancient custom of diplomatic gift exchange as a temptation to corruption and forbade the practice completely in the Articles of Confederation. They soon realized the prohibition would offend important allies, though, so they included Article I, Section 9, Clause 8 in the Constitution—permitting officials to accept gifts from foreign leaders or foreign states only with congressional approval.

Heads of state have been exchanging gifts since the beginning of recorded time. The pharaohs of ancient Egypt presented stone vessels emblazoned with the royal cartouche, a kind of monogram, to the neighboring Hittites in the second millennium BC. Gift exchange had become a ritualized part of diplomatic contact by the Middle Ages: During the Third Crusade, an emissary of Richard the Lionheart presented a flock of birds to the representative of Saladin by formally noting, "It is the custom of princes when they camp close to one another to exchange gifts." (In modern times, live animals are inappropriate diplomatic gifts, as President George W. Bush learned the hard way.) A 14th-century Muslim scholar also noted, "Very often, sovereigns linked by proximity exchange gifts involving that which is rarest in their respective lands." (He likely would have joined the chorus critiquing President Obama's choice of the ubiquitous iPod as a gift for the queen.)

Americans have never been particularly comfortable with this tradition. When Louis XVI gave Benjamin Franklin a snuffbox adorned with hundreds of diamonds in 1785, Franklin accepted the gift to avoid an ugly scene. The same year, John Jay accepted a horse from King Charles III of Spain in the process of negotiating a treaty. Congress recognized that returning the two gifts might cause a diplomatic row at a sensitive moment and so approved them retroactively.

Based on this experience, the Framers at the Constitutional Convention decided that full disclosure, rather than outright prohibition, was the appropriate course. President Washington appears to have taken this provision quite literally. When an emissary of the French Republic presented its new flag to Washington, he replied, "The transaction will be announced to Congress, and the colors will be deposited with [the] Archives." Thomas Jefferson refused to keep any gifts other than books, even if Congress approved. He auctioned several items and deposited the proceeds in the treasury.

Congress initially approved most gifts on an individual basis. Until the mid-20th century, approved gifts could become the recipient's personal property, unless they were expressly donated to the state. In 1966, Congress overhauled the system so that legislators did not have to approve individual gifts. Today, the president (and other officials) may accept most gifts worth $335 or less without congressional oversight and must turn over more valuable gifts to the government.

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

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explainer

The Undemocratic People's Republic of Korea

Why do the most totalitarian countries always have the most democratic-sounding names?

By Juliet Lapidos

Wednesday, April 1, 2009, at 6:47 PM ET

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (i.e., North Korea) accused the United States Wednesday of intruding on its airspace with surveillance planes—the latest tension between the two countries. Though nominally Socialist, the DPRK is a totalitarian regime, rather like other states that include the words *Democratic* or *People's Republic* as part of their official names. Like the People's Republic of China, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, and don't forget former East Germany—the German Democratic Republic. Why is it that the least democratic countries always brandish democratic-sounding names?

Soviet influence. After the 1917 October Revolution, the newly established Soviet regime couldn't very well keep the moniker "Russian Empire," which connoted czarist rule. But "Russia" plain and simple wouldn't get at the seismic shift envisioned by the Bolsheviks. So, like the French in 1792—who tagged on the word *Republic* to mark the end of monarchic rule—the Bolsheviks called their new nation the "Russian Socialist Federated Soviet Republic." It was a fairly accurate title at the time: *Soviet* means council—like the councils of workers and soldiers who'd been organizing their communities as the government fell apart; *socialist* highlighted the difference between the new Russia and the bourgeois nations of Europe. A few years later, the RSFSR unified with other SSRs—including the Ukrainian SSR and the Belarusian SSR—to form the USSR, which became less "soviet" as time went on.

After World War II, countries influenced by the Soviets or forcibly occupied by the Red Army started adopting the "People's Republic" tag line instead of the SSR ending—like the People's Republic of Macedonia, the Hungarian People's Republic, and the Romanian People's Republic. This change partly reflects a shift away from the concept of grass-roots governance toward a unitary state structure and reinforces the idea that the state and its people are synonymous. (The phrase

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People's Republic actually dates back to the founding of the Ukrainian People's Republic in 1917 and the Tuvinian People's Republic in 1921, but it didn't become widespread until after the war.)

Just as Soviet political models would filter into the Far East, so would Soviet naming practices. To signal solidarity with pro-Soviet states, the Supreme People's Assembly in Pyongyang established the new Democratic People's Republic of Korea in 1948. The word *Democratic*, in this case, was used to distinguish North Korea from the (very short-lived) "People's Republic of Korea" to the south. In 1949, Mao officially declared the founding of the People's Republic of China. Similar to the North Korean case, the word *People* was used to distinguish the name from Chiang Kai-shek's "Republic of China."

Although the North Koreans used the modifier *democratic* to claim a unique local identity, other countries—like Laos (1975) and East Germany (1949) —had a more specific intention. These weren't bourgeois republics, like those found in Western Europe, but countries organized to serve the demos or common people. So "democratic" was really just another way of saying "socialist republic." Like many other socialist states, they went the way of totalitarianism. Thus we get the seemingly inverse relationship between the use of the word *democratic* and the actual democratic structure of the country in question.

In the African context, the use of populist words in state names is a way to emphasize freedom from colonial rule. (Since many anti-colonial uprisings had a Communist tinge, the state names also reflect a leftist inclination.) Thus, post-independence from Belgium, the Belgian Congo became the Republic of the Congo and later the Democratic Republic of the Congo. And after liberation from France, Algeria became, officially, the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria.

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

Explainer thanks Charles K. Armstrong of Columbia University, David Bell of Johns Hopkins University, Yanni Kotsonis of New York University, and Jonathan Spence of Yale University.

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explainer

Could My iPhone Really Crash My Airplane?

What about an onboard Wi-Fi network?

By Christopher Beam

Tuesday, March 31, 2009, at 7:10 PM ET

American Airlines announced Tuesday that it will expand in-flight Wi-Fi Internet service to its entire fleet. The airline, along with Delta and Virgin America, started offering Wi-Fi on select planes in late 2008. In-flight calls, however, are still prohibited. If I can surf the Web, why can't I use my cell?

It operates on a totally different frequency. Cell phones transmit signals at roughly the same frequencies as aircraft communications—pilot radios and radar range from below 100 to 2,000 MHz, and many phones operate at 850 MHz or 1,900 MHz. Your cell could therefore—at least theoretically—interfere with navigation. Wi-Fi, on the other hand, signals at a higher frequency—anywhere from 2,500 to 5,000 MHz—and thus won't get mixed up with the plane's transmissions.

In-flight Wi-Fi works like a moving Starbucks hot spot. The plane is rigged with three antennae—two on its belly and one on top—that receive signals from towers across the country. The frequency of those transmissions, 849 MHz, *is* within the range of airline communications. But they don't interfere with the plane's navigation, since 849 MHz is a dedicated frequency that was auctioned off and bought in 2006 by Aircell, which services American, Delta, and Virgin. (It's the same frequency once used by Airfone.)

But are cell phones on planes really that dangerous, anyway? Studies analyzing the dangers of in-flight cell-phone use suggest the risks are small but real. In 2003, a study by *IEEE Spectrum* concluded that "continued use of portable RF-emitting devices such as cell phones will, in all likelihood, someday cause an accident by interfering with critical cockpit instruments such as GPS receivers." A study produced by the Radio Technical Commission for Aeronautics in 2006 found that portable electronic devices *can* interfere with airplane communications and laid out testing guidelines for airlines to figure out which devices should be permitted.

The rationale for switching off other portable electronic devices is slightly different. Even if a device doesn't transmit a signal—think iPods, Game Boys, "anything with an on-off switch"—it still emits energy at a frequency that could, possibly, interfere with the plane's electronics. The Federal Aviation Administration requires all such devices to be off during takeoff and landings, but you're allowed to turn them on once you reach a cruising altitude—presumably because any interference would be minimal and temporary. There are exceptions, though, for necessary devices like hearing aids and pacemakers.

Some international airlines do allow cell-phone use. Emirates Airline permits in-flight calls as long as you use an onboard picocell network, which isolates the cellular communications from the pilot's. In the United States, the resistance to in-flight calls is strong, but often for social rather than safety reasons. Members of Congress have even introduced legislation to keep cell phones off planes, titled the Halting Airplane Noise To Give Us Peace Act, or HANG UP Act.

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explainer

Why Does Obama Want To Combine Chrysler and Fiat?

Because their products and markets are complementary.

By Brian Palmer

Monday, March 30, 2009, at 7:11 PM ET

Chrysler has 30 days to complete a merger with Italian automaker Fiat, or the U.S. company will be cut off from further government loans, according to a report released Sunday by the president's auto-industry task force. How did the White House pick Fiat, of all the car companies in the world?

Because Fiat makes fuel-efficient cars and sells them everywhere but the United States. The administration believes that Chrysler can be viable only if it starts to offer more fuel-efficient cars. Right now, no Chrysler vehicle gets more than 30 mpg, and even the company's most efficient models compete poorly against their U.S. and Japanese counterparts. (General Motors has eight cars rated above 30 mpg and is nearly ready to take its electric vehicle and 45-mpg compact model to showrooms.) Fiat, on the other hand, focuses almost entirely on fuel-efficiency, with almost all models getting more than 30 mpg and some getting more than 60. If the two companies merged, Chrysler could sell Fiat's fuel-efficient models to U.S. consumers without spending money it doesn't have on research and development.

In addition to small-car technology, Fiat could teach Chrysler to be more flexible in its manufacturing. American car manufacturers have historically produced very few models per plant, leaving them exposed to sudden changes in the market. Japanese and European automakers, on the other hand, have more versatile assembly-line equipment that allows them to meet demand for whatever vehicle happens to be selling best. For example, foreign producers often have multifaceted stamping presses and painting robots that can be used to build several different kinds of car.

Meanwhile, Fiat has been seeking a partner for several years. According to its own CEO, the Italian company is too small to survive in the long term. Because cars are expensive to develop, automakers need to sell a certain number just to break even. As research costs go up, Fiat will struggle to recoup those expenses without penetration into the U.S. market. Through the merger, the automakers can offer vehicles like the Fiat 500, which gets a combined 46.1 mpg, to thrifty American consumers. Moreover, the company could sell Chrysler-made Jeeps, rather than its own underperforming larger vehicles, at dealerships in Europe, South America, and Asia.

This is not to say that Fiat was the only potential partner. Chrysler had merger talks with General Motors at the end of last year. Chrysler also announced a partnership with Nissan last spring, but that fell through when both companies decided they were too cash-poor to undertake the venture. A small company like Tata in India might have been a good choice, since, like Fiat, it produces a wide range of fuel-efficient vehicles. However, Fiat offers a much broader dealership network than Tata.

Nevertheless, many analysts question the administration's decision to condition additional funding on the completion of the merger, which the two companies have been publicly discussing since January. They argue that a Chrysler-Fiat alliance might steal market share from GM, which could render both companies unable to compete with their Japanese rivals. Moreover, the adaptation of European cars to fulfill U.S. emissions and safety requirements can be very expensive, which might cut deeply into the merger's value to Chrysler.

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

Explainer thanks Susan Helper of Case Western Reserve University, Glenn Mercer of the International Motor Vehicle Program, Jesse Toprak of Edmunds.com, and Josh Whitford of Columbia University.

faith-based

A Behind-the-Scenes Look at Holy Week

The olive-oil-buying, candlestick-polishing, and soul-shepherding that make the seven days from Palm Sunday to Easter run smoothly at a D.C. cathedral.

By Michael Sean Winters

Friday, April 3, 2009, at 6:56 AM ET

For some people, Easter is vacation time. For Christians, it is the liturgical high point of the entire year. Holy Week starts on Palm Sunday and runs through Easter Sunday. Each day commemorates a different key moment in the final days of Jesus' life, from his entry into Jerusalem, through the Last Supper and crucifixion, culminating with the celebration of the resurrection. The liturgies have evolved through the centuries, but they have always been the central focus of the church's liturgical year. But for the clergy and staff at St. Matthew's Cathedral in Washington, D.C, Holy Week means a lot of work.

The first sign that Holy Week is coming is when the big jars of olive oil arrive. Usually, Maria, the cook, buys olive oil with the other groceries as she plans dinner for the four priests who live at the rectory. But on the Monday of Holy Week, Donald Wuerl, the archbishop of Washington, will celebrate the Chrism Mass, when he will bless the holy oils to be used by all the priests in

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Washington for the entire year. So, the parish secretary must call Costco to order 21 5-quart, 9-ounce jugs of Filippo Berio olive oil. The oil will be poured into six large urns, blessed, and distributed to the priests at the end of the Chrism Mass.

The cathedral itself needs to be looked after, too, as Holy Week requires it to undergo some transformations. The sacristan, Max, must polish the brass candlesticks and altar rail as well as the 17th-century silver crucifix that will be used in Holy Week processions. At the end of Mass on Holy Thursday, rubrics, which are the instructions about what must be done at each of the liturgies, require that the altar be stripped: All the candlesticks, plants, and cloth coverings are removed in preparation for Good Friday. Two days later, on Holy Saturday, the cathedral will close for six hours so a team of volunteers can decorate the empty sanctuary.

From Palm Sunday through Easter Sunday, the daily liturgies contain wildly different emotional focal points. Good Friday is the saddest day of the year for a Catholic; Easter is the happiest. Holy Thursday has emotionally powerful rites recalling the Last Supper, including the moment when Archbishop Donald Wuerl will wash the feet of 12 men and women, commemorating Jesus' washing of the feet of the disciples. Tenebrae, a medieval service of readings and music held on the Wednesday of Holy Week, is somber and plaintive. Picking the right music for each of these services requires a lifetime of listening and experimentation.

"For me, the demands and the opportunities of the Cathedral are unique," Thomas Stehle, who is spending his first Holy Week as choirmaster at St. Matthew's, tells me. "Thursday, Friday, and Saturday are really one liturgy, and to keep that felt musically is a very difficult thing." He has chosen an 18th-century "Ave Verum" by William Byrd and a brand-new piece by Leo Nestor for Good Friday. The Easter Vigil will close with the "Hallelujah Chorus." Since the Second Vatican Council of the early 1960s, the Catholic Church has put increasing emphasis on congregational participation in the music. At most parishes, that means Catholics now sing hymns and some parts of the Mass. At a cathedral, the possibilities are richer. "You can actively participate by being drawn into something beautiful like medieval polyphony," Stehle says, closing his eyes as if he can already hear the strains of the "Adoremus Te" by Clemens non Papa that the choir will sing at Tenebrae.

The Rev. Mark Knestout, who will be one of the masters of ceremonies all week, has less ethereal worries. He has to make sure that enough pews are roped off for the 170 priests he expects at the Chrism Mass. In addition to blessing the oils, this Mass will see the priests of the archdiocese renew their vows. Knestout also has to prepare the sanctuary for the archbishop of Washington, two cardinals, Vatican Ambassador Archbishop Pietro Sambi, four auxiliary bishops, and dozens of monsignors. It is the greatest annual concentration of prelates in D.C.

Knestout is joined by two other MCs, one a priest at the cathedral, the other the archbishop's secretary. Seminarians help light all the candles, move the benches for those who will get their feet washed, carry the logs for the fire that starts the Easter Vigil, distribute communion, and dress the newly baptized in their white garments.

At all of Holy Week's standing-room-only services, seats on the left of the very front are reserved for those who will be baptized or received into the church at the Easter Vigil. In the early centuries of the church, the vigil was the only time that those seeking to become Christians were baptized. By the Middle Ages, virtually everyone was Christian, so there was no need to baptize adults, and the liturgy lost its focus and got shifted to Saturday morning. Only in 1951 did Pope Pius XII restore the nighttime vigil with its focus on adult baptism and the renewal of baptismal vows for those already baptized. In America, would-be converts join a yearlong process called the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. They, along with God, are the stars of Holy Week.

This year, 22 people will be fully initiated into the Catholic Church at St. Matthew's, according to Jeannine Marino, the director of the RCIA. Marino has been meeting with the group twice a week for a year, on Sundays to discuss the readings at Mass and on Wednesday nights, when she instructs them in the history and teachings of Catholicism. Some of the converts have been discerning their conversion for more than a year. Karla has been going to Catholic churches since she met her husband eight years ago, but she was reluctant to "swim the Tiber." She worried that becoming Catholic meant "turn[ing] my back on my Protestant upbringing," but now she sees her decision to become a Catholic as growing out of that upbringing. In fact, she has embraced that most distinctive of Catholic practices, confession. "I never saw confession to a priest as being necessary," says Karla. "I had a relationship with God and could confess to Him any time. But after my first confession … I truly felt unburdened of those sins after confessing them."

The entire staff at St. Matthew's can be forgiven for pleading exhaustion by the end of the week, but they will not need to go to confession. They will simply need to find the time to absorb the profound spiritual significance of all the concrete minutiae to which they have attended. After Marino shepherds her converts at the Holy Week services, leading them up to the altar, telling them when to sit and when to kneel, she plans to sleep in on Sunday morning. She will go to a noon Mass with her boyfriend and his family at their church. "No one knows me there. I will have no responsibilities. Finally, I will be able to just pray."

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family

May the Force Be With Them

Why does *Star Wars* still take over the minds of small boys?

By Emily Bazelon

Thursday, April 2, 2009, at 11:37 AM ET

A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away—circa 2006, at our old house in D.C.—my husband and I let our little boys watch *Star Wars*. Eli was almost 6 and had just broken his leg. We were housebound, antsy, and despairing. In a moment of weakness, we turned on *Star Wars*. We figured, like most indulgences, that the movie would thrill and then pass.

Wrong. Our younger son, Simon, who was not quite 3, couldn't sleep that night or for many nights over the months that followed. He was obsessed. He talked about the movie to any relative, friend, or baby sitter who would listen and plenty of shopkeepers who wouldn't. He relived the trash-compactor scene. He worried over Obi-Wan Kenobi's Jedi sternness and Darth Vader's glittering malevolence. He sniffed out plot twists in the rest of the endless six-movie saga (who knows how) and tried desperately to work out why Darth Vader could be Anakin Skywalker and Luke's father—and could also cut off Luke's hand. Here's a little girl sweetly summarizing the *Star Wars* plot. Simon wasn't sweet. He was feverish. He was short-circuiting. Thanks to our two hours of stupid indulgence, Paul and I concluded, his neurons were melting.

In the annals of the mommy confessional, the ante is ever being upped for what counts as a real lapse in parenting. Perhaps an almost-3-year-old's single viewing of a 1977 fantasy film barely qualifies. But it's become our family's classic tale of second-child sin—committed, regretted, and, we hope, recovered from. In the first of three episodes (unlike George Lucas, I know to stop with one trilogy), our younger son falls from grace, exposed to something he shouldn't have seen, because of his older sibling. In the second, the brain poison takes hold. And in the third, the child grows up enough to conquer the experience, or at least make sense of it.

During Episode 1, in the throes of Simon's initial fixation, I happened to be interviewing child psychologist Edward Zigler. In the middle of a conversation on an entirely unrelated topic, I veered off into my family's *Star Wars* woes. I was confessing to Dr. Zigler, but in that rueful way that's really a bid for absolution. Instead, on the other end of the line, I heard only silence. And then he said quietly that indeed I had erred and that Simon probably shouldn't watch any more movies with violence or even suspense, for, well, years. Here's a 2007 study from Seattle Children's Hospital that links violent screen images to aggressive behavior in boys (not girls) ages 2 through 5.

My husband, Paul, had already settled on Zigler's medicine. We banished Luke and Obi-Wan for Dora and Bob the Builder. But we couldn't wring the *Star Wars* characters out of our children's lives. Long after the actual memory of the film faded, Eli and Simon talked and played in George Lucas' world. When we refused to buy them toy light sabers, their baby sitter rolled up newspapers into sturdy cones. The kids crayoned them green, purple, and yellow and bashed each other over the head, not quite Jedi-like. With their friends, they dissected the business of Jabba the Hutt and the furriness of Ewoks, never mind that they appear in later movies that my kids have never seen. Driving a carpool a couple of months ago, I listened while someone else's 6-year-old held forth about the intricacies of the plot in the prequel films in more detail than he could have described his home. My kids fell silent out of awe. Then our current baby sitter took pity on them and gave them a *Star Wars* *Fandex*. Eli read the whole thing, card by card, and Simon somehow absorbed by osmosis facts such as Emperor Palpatine's other name (Darth Sidious).

How does the Lucas-world accomplish this mind control? My kids have other loyalties. They swear by various superheroes, will listen over and over again to Greek myths, can tell you the story of David and Goliath, and love *The Hobbit*. But nothing, nothing, exerts the irresistible pull of the *Star Wars* galaxy. Maybe it's the combination of simplicity and multilayered detail, good vs. evil in a world of interdependent yet rival creatures. Maybe it all comes down to Darth Vader, with his fearsome helmet and the voice of James Earl Jones. Or maybe the magic element is the open void of outer space as a backdrop.

My own theory has two more mundane components: overwhelming length and co-branding. However dragged out and tedious it may seem to me, the adult, the recent prequels add to the epic's allure by building up more layers of plot permutation. I'm not sure the internal logic of Lucas' universe holds up, but it sure does have a lot of moving parts. And many of them, like Anakin going rogue and turning into Vader, are cunningly designed to lodge in the heads of small boys. Simon's teacher recently banned *Star Wars* talk, except at recess, because debates over plot points had gotten too vociferous. Outside of school, kids are surrounded by the films' relentless marketing: birthday party plates, cups, candles, Lego ships, a recent cartoon series. Our kids covet the paraphernalia partly because their friends are flaunting it.

Which brings me to Episode 3 of our family saga: The Second Viewing. After three years of lobbying, Paul and I decided that Simon could handle watching the first *Star Wars* movie again. (My kids speak Lucas and call the 1977 original the fourth in the series.) Simon is twice the age he was during that ill-fated first encounter, and as he and Eli have pointed out many times, they're now practically the only kids they know who haven't seen at least the earlier-made trilogy. We promised we'd get it from Netflix after Simon's 6th birthday. Last week, the magic disc

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arrived. Paul and I decided on a Saturday-morning showing. That way, Simon would have the whole day to decompress.

The boys swallowed their breakfast in hunks and wrapped themselves in an orange blanket on the living room sofa. Paul popped in the movie. I went out for a run. When I got back, Eli's friend Dylan came over. We entered just before the trash-compactor scene. Eli nodded hi to Dylan. Simon sat, rapt, eyes fixed to the screen. I checked to make sure he was blinking. While Luke dove into the trash, a small periscopelike creature popped up and looked around.

"Hey, it's got an eye," Paul said appreciatively.
"That's a dianoga," Dylan said.
"A what?"
"A dianoga. It turns whatever color it eats."

Eli, Dylan, and Simon, to be fair, also cared about the movie's more profound themes. Bear with me for some plot review here: At the movie's climax, Obi-Wan duels with Darth Vader, buying time for Luke, Leia, and Han Solo to make it to their getaway ship. Obi-Wan says to Vader, in that dear Alec Guinness British accent, "If you strike me down, I shall come back more powerful than you can possibly imagine." He sees Luke, Leia, and Han appear and then holds his light saber before his forehead, *namaste*-like. Vader strikes. Obi-Wan disappears, leaving behind his ratty old cloak. Luke calls out in horror as he and his pals make it to the deck of their ship—which actually is pretty close to the fight.

Simon, in the heat of the moment: "Why did Obi-Wan die?"
Eli: "He could have kept on fighting. He could have gotten away."
Dylan: "He couldn't have gotten off the Death Star."
Simon: "But he could have killed Darth Vader!"
Dylan: "Then Palpatine would have killed him. Palpatine and Vader together are more powerful."

The boys had to explain to me who Palpatine is (a Vader ally). In the days since, we've returned often to this question of Obi-Wan's self-sacrifice. Paul offered a meta interpretation: In myths, old wise men have to make way for their young protégés. Gandalf leaves Bilbo for a while, I pointed out. Dumbledore leaves Harry. (Poor Simon: He knows the whole *Harry Potter* plot before he has turned a single page or seen any of the movies. But that's a problem for another day.)

Simon didn't entirely accept this explanation. He wanted Obi-Wan to have died because he didn't have a choice. But he definitely got the idea that Luke is an apprentice training to be a Jedi knight—he taught me the term for Luke's in-between awkward status: *padawan*. "Like a squire," Simon put it. I think maybe he's now a padawan, too. He's talking about *Star Wars* more than ever this week, but he's not losing sleep over it. So what do you think, should we brave *The Empire Strikes Back*?

fighting words

Let Them In

When governments refuse to let politicians and academics into their countries, it's nothing but old-fashioned censorship.

By Christopher Hitchens
Monday, March 30, 2009, at 11:26 AM ET

Recent weeks have seen a sort of unofficial race among various governments to see who can most righteously ban whom from whose territory and on what complacent grounds. Last week, the Canadian authorities announced that British Member of Parliament George Galloway would not be permitted to keep his appointment for a speaking tour he had arranged in Toronto and Ottawa. Canada's immigration minister, Jason Kenney, said that the ban had more to do with actions than with words. Galloway had indeed, on a recent trip to Gaza, called for the Egyptian armed forces to overthrow the government of President Hosni Mubarak. But it was the announced purpose of Galloway's trip to the Gaza Strip—the delivery of a convoy of material aid to the Hamas leadership—that prompted Kenney to deny him permission to land, on the grounds that he had delivered "aid and resources to … a banned illegal terrorist organization."

Galloway has in the past issued his own calls for foreign politicians to be banned from British soil, as in the case of Jean-Marie Le Pen, the leader of France's extreme-right National Front. And he was not conspicuous in protesting in February, when the British government deported Geert Wilders, a Dutch politician whose party holds nine seats in parliament, after the latter's arrival at Heathrow Airport. Wilders has made a short film called *Fitna*, freely available on the Internet, which shows scenes of violence and cruelty intercut with some of the more lurid injunctions of the Quran. He has referred to the Muslim holy book as comparable to *Mein Kampf* and has, in keeping with the new intolerant spirit of the times, called for it to be banned. When invited to debate his film on a small Dutch Muslim station, he declined. Nonetheless, he was invited by a member to come and screen *Fitna* at the House of Lords and, given that he has no record of violence or its incitement, it's hard to see how his presence in London was in any sense a police matter.

The hasty ban on Wilders, which was obviously adopted by Gordon Brown's government as a gesture of appeasement to the very active Muslim fundamentalist wing in British politics, thereupon made it almost inevitable that the same government's decision to invite some representatives of Hezbollah to London would itself have to be reversed. The plan had been to get some civilian spokesman of the party's Lebanese wing to meet with officials and academics to discuss possible areas of common interest—this was in line with the British government's recent

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decision to resume contacts with Hezbollah in Beirut, on the assumption that a distinction can be made between its elected parliamentary wing and its military one. Even if you think that this is based on a naive assumption, the British are at least entitled to try it. But now they find that one ban leads to another, for the sake of appearances and "even-handedness," so that having refused hospitality to one Dutchman, they are compelled to deny themselves the pleasure of sitting down with one or two Lebanese.

Geert Wilders has already visited the United States, where he addressed the Conservative Political Action Conference. Hezbollah and Hamas officials will not be visiting Washington at any early date, though George Galloway has been allowed to come and go as he pleases. (This might change, given the number of questions raised by two authoritative reports on his participation in the abuse of the United Nations' "oil for food" program.) There is currently an argument about whether we can risk giving a job or a visa to Tariq Ramadan, a Muslim author whose supposed "moderation" is seen by some (including me) as a cover for some quite extreme apologies for such things as suicide-murder and the stoning of women. There are two separate questions in Ramadan's case: The first concerns whether he should be given tenure on an American campus and the second whether he should be allowed to visit the United States at all. The second call seems a fairly easy one.

What is at stake in all these cases is not just the right of the people concerned to travel and to take their opinions with them. It is also the right of potential audiences to make their own determination about whom they wish to hear. As a journalist, I can go and visit Hezbollah spokesmen and report back on what it's like and what they say, but why should a reader have to take my word for it? The British House of Commons has room for a man as appalling as George Galloway; why should Canadians not have the chance to make up their own mind about him? If Geert Wilders is persuasive enough to get himself elected to parliament in The Hague, is there any reason to believe that the British people are so lacking in robustness that they need to be protected from what he has to say?

The underlying premise of the First Amendment is that free expression, when protected for anyone, is thereby protected for everyone. This must apply most especially in tough cases that might raise eyebrows, such as the ACLU's celebrated defense of the right of American Nazis to demonstrate in heavily Jewish Skokie, Ill., in the late 1970s. One of the effects of the "war on terror," and of one of its concomitants, namely the attrition between the Muslim world and the West, has been an increasing tendency to make exceptions to First Amendment principles, either on the pretext of security or of avoiding the giving of offense. We should have learned by now that, however new the guise, these are the same old stale excuses for censorship. We might also notice that if one excuse is allowed, then all the others are made "legitimate" also. The risk of allowing all opinions by all speakers may seem great, but it is nothing compared with the risk of giving the power of censorship to any official.

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grieving

The Long Goodbye

Can nature help assuage your grief?

By Meghan O'Rourke

Wednesday, March 25, 2009, at 12:36 PM ET

From: Meghan O'Rourke
Subject: The Long Goodbye
Posted Monday, February 16, 2009, at 6:02 PM ET

The other morning I looked at my BlackBerry and saw an e-mail from my mother. At last! I thought. I've missed her so much. Then I caught myself. The e-mail couldn't be from my mother. My mother died a month ago.

The e-mail was from a publicist with the same first name: Barbara. The name was all that had showed up on the screen.

My mother died of metastatic colorectal cancer sometime before 3 p.m. on Christmas Day. I can't say the exact time, because none of us thought to look at a clock for some time after she stopped breathing. She was in a hospital bed in the living room of my parents' house (now my father's house) in Connecticut with my father, my two younger brothers, and me. She had been unconscious for five days. She opened her eyes only when we moved her, which caused her extreme pain, and so we began to move her less and less, despite cautions from the hospice nurses about bedsores.

For several weeks before her death, my mother had been experiencing some confusion due to ammonia building up in her brain as her liver began to fail. And yet, irrationally, I am confident my mother knew what day it was when she died. I believe she knew we were around her. And I believe she chose to die when she did. Christmas was her favorite day of the year; she loved the morning ritual of walking the dogs, making coffee as we all waited impatiently for her to be ready, then slowly opening presents, drawing the gift-giving out for hours. This year, she couldn't walk the dogs or make coffee, but her bed was in the room where our tree was, and as we opened presents that morning, she made a madrigal of quiet sounds, as if to indicate that she was with us.

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Since my mother's death, I have been in grief. I walk down the street; I answer my phone; I brush my hair; I manage, at times, to look like a normal person, but I don't feel normal. I am not surprised to find that it is a lonely life: After all, the person who brought me into the world is gone. But it is more than that. I feel not just that I am but that the world around me is deeply unprepared to deal with grief. Nearly every day I get e-mails from people who write: "I hope you're doing well." It's a kind sentiment, and yet sometimes it angers me. I am not OK. Nor do I find much relief in the well-meant refrain that at least my mother is "no longer suffering." Mainly, I feel one thing: My mother is dead, and I want her back. I really want her back—sometimes so intensely that I don't even want to heal. At least, not yet.

Nothing about the past losses I have experienced prepared me for the loss of my mother. Even knowing that she would die did not prepare me in the least. A mother, after all, is your entry into the world. She is the shell in which you divide and become a life. Waking up in a world without her is like waking up in a world without sky: unimaginable. What makes it worse is that my mother was young: 55. The loss I feel stems partly from feeling robbed of 20 more years with her I'd always imagined having.

I say this knowing it sounds melodramatic. This is part of the complexity of grief: A piece of you recognizes it is an extreme state, an altered state, yet a large part of you is entirely subject to its demands. I am aware that I am one of the lucky ones. I am an adult. My mother had a good life. We had insurance that allowed us to treat her cancer and to keep her as comfortable as possible before she died. And in the past year, I got to know my mother as never before. I went with her to the hospital and bought her lunch while she had chemotherapy, searching for juices that wouldn't sting the sores in her mouth. We went to a spiritual doctor who made her sing and passed crystals over her body. We shopped for new clothes together, standing frankly in our underwear in the changing room after years of being shyly polite with our bodies. I crawled into bed with her and stroked her hair when she cried in frustration that she couldn't go to work. I grew to love my mother in ways I never had. Some of the new intimacy came from finding myself in a caretaking role where, before, I had been the one taken care of. But much of it came from being forced into openness by our sense that time was passing. Every time we had a cup of coffee together (when she was well enough to drink coffee), I thought, against my will: This could be the last time I have coffee with my mother.

Grief is common, as Hamlet's mother Gertrude brusquely reminds him. We know it exists in our midst. But I am suddenly aware of how difficult it is for us to confront it. And to the degree that we do want to confront it, we do so in the form of self-help: We want to heal our grief. We want to achieve an emotional recovery. We want our grief to be teleological, and we've assigned it five tidy stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Yet as we've come to frame grief as a psychological process, we've also made it more private. Many Americans don't mourn in public anymore—we don't wear black, we don't beat our chests and wail. We may—I have done it—weep and rail privately, in the middle of the night. But we don't have the rituals of public mourning around which the individual experience of grief were once constellated.

And in the weeks since my mother died, I have felt acutely the lack of these rituals. I was not prepared for how hard I would find it to re-enter the slipstream of contemporary life, our world of constant connectivity and immediacy, so ill-suited to reflection. I envy my Jewish friends the ritual of saying kaddish—a ritual that seems perfectly conceived, with its built-in support group and its ceremonious designation of time each day devoted to remembering the lost person. So I began wondering: What does it mean to grieve in a culture that—for many of us, at least—has few ceremonies for observing it? What is it actually like to grieve? In a series of pieces over the next few weeks, I'll delve into these questions and also look at the literature of grieving, from memoirs to medical texts. I'll be doing so from an intellectual perspective, but also from a personal one: I want to write about grief from the inside out. I will be writing about *my* grief, of course, and I don't pretend that it is universal. But I hope these pieces will reflect something about the paradox of loss, with its monumental sublimity and microscopic intimacy.

If you have a story or thought about grieving you'd like to share, please e-mail me at morourkexx@gmail.com.

From: Meghan O'Rourke
Subject: Finding a Metaphor for Your Loss
Posted Tuesday, February 24, 2009, at 7:11 AM ET

I am the indoctrinated child of two lapsed Irish Catholics. Which is to say: I am not religious. And until my mother grew ill, I might not have described myself as deeply spiritual. I used to find it infuriating when people offered up the—to me—empty consolation that whatever happened, she "will always be there with you."

But when my mother died, I found that I did not believe that she was gone. She took one slow, rattling breath; then, 30 seconds later, another; then she opened her eyes and looked at us, and took a last. As she exhaled, her face settled into repose. Her body grew utterly still, and yet she seemed present. I felt she had simply been transferred into another substance; what substance, where it might be located, I wasn't quite sure.

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I went outside onto my parents' porch without putting my coat on. The limp winter sun sparkled off the frozen snow on the lawn. "Please take good care of my mother," I said to the air. I addressed the fir tree she loved and the wind moving in it. "Please keep her safe for me."

This is what a friend of mine—let's call her Rose—calls "finding a metaphor." I was visiting her a few weeks ago in California; we stayed up late, drinking lemon-ginger tea and talking about the difficulty of grieving, its odd jags of ecstasy and pain. Her father died several years ago, and it was easy to speak with her: She was in what more than one acquaintance who's lost a parent has now referred to as "the club." It's not a club any of us wished to join, but I, for one, am glad it exists. It makes mourning less lonely. I told Rose how I envied my Jewish friends the reassuring ritual of saying kaddish. She talked about the hodge-podge of traditions she had embraced in the midst of her grief. And then she asked me, "Have you found a metaphor?"

"A metaphor?"

"Have you found your metaphor for where your mother is?"

I knew immediately what Rose meant. I had. It was the sky—the wind. (The cynic in me cringes on rereading this. But, in fact, it's how I feel.) When I got home to Brooklyn, I asked one of my mother's friends whether she had a metaphor for where my mother was. She unhesitatingly answered: "The water. The ocean."

The idea that my mother might be *somewhere* rather than nowhere is one that's hard for the skeptical empiricist in me to swallow. When my grandfather died last September, he seemed to me merely—gone. On a safari in South Africa a few weeks later, I saw two female lions kill a zebra. The zebra struggled for three or four long minutes; as soon as he stopped, his body seemed to be only flesh. (When I got home the next week, I found out that my mother had learned that same day that her cancer had returned. It spooked me.)

But I never felt my mother leave the world.

At times I simply feel she's just on a long trip—and am jolted to realize it's one she's not coming back from. I'm reminded of an untitled poem I love by Franz Wright, a contemporary American poet, which has new meaning. It reads, in full:

> I basked in you;
> I loved you, helplessly, with a boundless
> tongue-tied love.
> And death doesn't prevent me from loving you.
> Besides,
> in my opinion you aren't dead.
> (I know dead people, and you are not dead.)

Sometimes I recite this to myself as I walk around.

At lunch yesterday, as velvety snow coated the narrow Brooklyn street, I attempted to talk about this haunted feeling with a friend whose son died a few years ago. She told me that she, too, feels that her son is with her. They have conversations. She's an intellectually exacting person, and she told me that she had sometimes wondered about how to conceptualize her—well, let's call it a persistent intuition. A psychiatrist reframed it for her: He reminded her that the sensation isn't merely an empty notion. The people we most love do become a physical part of us, ingrained in our synapses, in the pathways where memories are created.

That's a kind of comfort. But I confess I felt a sudden resistance of the therapist's view. The truth is, I need to experience my mother's presence in the world *around* me and not just in my head. Every now and then, I see a tree shift in the wind and its bend has, to my eye, a distinctly maternal cast. For me, my metaphor is—as all good metaphors ought to be—a persuasive transformation. In these moments, I do not say to myself that my mother is *like* the wind; I think she *is* the wind. I feel her: there, and there. One sad day, I actually sat up in shock when I felt my mother come shake me out of a pervasive fearfulness that was making it hard for me to read or get on subways. Whether it was the ghostly flicker of my synapses, or an actual ghostly flicker of her spirit, I don't know. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't hoping it was the latter.

From: Meghan O'Rourke
Subject: "Normal" vs. "Complicated" Grief
Posted Thursday, March 5, 2009, at 11:24 AM ET

A death from a long illness is very different from a sudden death. It gives you time to say goodbye and time to adjust to the idea that the beloved will not be with you anymore. Some researchers have found that it is "easier" to experience a death if you know for at least six months that your loved one is terminally ill. But this fact is like orders of infinity: there in theory, hard to detect in practice. On my birthday, a month after my mother passed away, a friend mused out loud that my mom's death was surely easier to bear because I knew it was coming. I almost bit her head off: *Easier to bear compared to what—the time she died of a heart attack?* Instead, I bit my tongue.

What studies actually say is that I'll begin to "accept" my mother's death more quickly than I would have in the case of a sudden loss—possibly because I experienced what researchers call "anticipatory grief" while she was still alive. In the

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meantime, it sucks as much as any other death. You still feel like you're pacing in the chilly dark outside a house with lit-up windows, wishing you could go inside. You feel clueless about the rules of shelter and solace in this new environment you've been exiled to.

And that is why one afternoon, about three weeks after my mother died, I Googled "grief."

I was having a bad day. It was 2 p.m., and I was supposed to be doing *something.* Instead, I was sitting on my bed (which I had actually made, in compensation for everything else undone) wondering: Was it normal to feel everything was pointless? Would I always feel this way? I wanted to know more. I wanted to get a picture of this strange experience from the outside, instead of the melted inside. So I Googled—feeling a little like Lindsay in *Freaks and Geeks*, in the episode where she smokes a joint, gets way too high, and digs out an encyclopedia to learn more about "marijuana." Only information can prevent her from feeling that she's floating away.

The clinical literature on grief is extensive. Much of it reinforces what even the newish mourner has already begun to realize: Grief isn't rational; it isn't linear; it is experienced in waves. Joan Didion talks about this in *The Year of Magical Thinking*, her remarkable memoir about losing her husband while her daughter was ill: "[V]irtually everyone who has ever experienced grief mentions this phenomenon of waves," she writes. She quotes a 1944 description by Michael Lindemann, then chief of psychiatry at Massachusetts General Hospital. He defines grief as:

> sensations of somatic distress occurring in waves lasting from twenty minutes to an hour at a time, a feeling of tightness in the throat, choking with shortness of breath, need for sighing, and an empty feeling in the abdomen, lack of muscular power, and an intensive subjective distress described as tension or mental pain.

Intensive subjective distress. Yes, exactly: That was the objective description I was looking for. The experience is, as Lindemann notes, brutally physiological: It literally takes your breath away. This is also what makes grief so hard to communicate to anyone who hasn't experienced it.

One thing I learned is that researchers believe there are two kinds of grief: "normal grief" and "complicated grief" (which is also called "prolonged grief"). Normal grief is a term for the feeling most bereaved people experience, which peaks within the first six months and then begins to dissipate. ("Complicated grief" does not—and evidence suggests that many parents who lose children are experiencing something more like complicated grief.) Calling grief "normal" makes it sound mundane, but, as one researcher underscored to me, its symptoms are extreme. They include insomnia or other sleep disorders, difficulty breathing, auditory or visual hallucinations, appetite problems, and dryness of mouth.

I have had all of these symptoms, including one (quite banal) hallucination at dinner with a friend. (I saw a waitress bring him ice cream. I could even see the flecks in the ice cream. *Vanilla bean*, I thought. But there was no ice cream.) In addition to these symptoms, I have one more: I can't spell. Like my mother before me, I have always been a good speller. Now I have to rely on dictionaries to ascertain whether *tranquility* has one *L* or two. My Googling helped explain this new trouble with orthography: Some studies have suggested that mourning takes a toll on cognitive function. And I am still in a stage of fairly profound grief. I can say this with confidence because I have affirmation from a tool called "The Texas Revised Inventory of Grief"—one of the tests psychiatrists use to measure psychological distress among the bereaved. Designed for use after time has gone by, this test suggested that, yes, I was very, very sad. (To its list of statements like "I still get upset when I think about the person who died," I answered, "Completely True"—the most extreme answer on a scale of one to five, with five being "Completely False.")

Mainly, I realized, I wanted to know if there was any empirical evidence supporting the infamous "five stages of grief." Mention that you had a death in the family, and a stranger will perk up his ears and start chattering about the five stages. But I was *not* feeling the stages. Not the way I was supposed to. The notion was popularized by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in her famous 1969 study *On Death and Dying*. At the time, Kübler-Ross felt—accurately—that there was a problem with how the medical establishment dealt with death. During the 1960s, American doctors often concealed from patients the fact that they were terminally ill, and many died without knowing how sick they were. Kübler-Ross asked several theology students to help her interview patients in hospitals and then reported on what she discovered.

By writing openly about how the dying felt, Kübler-Ross helped demystify the experience of death and made the case that the dying deserved to know—in fact, often *wanted* to know—that they were terminal. She also exposed the anger and avoidance that patients, family members, and doctors often felt in the face of death. And she posited that, according to what she had seen, for both the dying and their families, grieving took the form of five emotional stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

Of course, like so many other ideas popularized in the 1970s, the five stages turned out to be more complex than initially thought. There is little empirical evidence suggesting that we actually experience capital-letter Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance in simple sequence. In *On Grief and Grieving*,

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published years later, Kübler-Ross insists she never meant to suggest the stages were sequential. But if you read *On Death and Dying*—as I just did—you'll find that this is slightly disingenuous. In it, she does imply, for example, that anger must be experienced before bargaining. (I tried, then, to tackle *On Grief and Grieving* but threw it across the room in a fit of frustration at its feel-good emphasis on "healing.") Researchers at Yale recently conducted an extensive study of bereavement and found that Kübler-Ross' stages were more like states. While people did experience those emotions, the dominant feeling they experienced after a death was yearning or pining.

Yearning is definitely what I feel. I keep thinking of a night, 13 years ago, when I took a late flight to Dublin, where I was going to live for six months. This would be the longest time I had ever been away from home. I woke up disoriented in my seat at 1 a.m. to see a spectacular display of the aurora borealis. I had never seen anything like it. The twisting lights in the sky seemed to evoke a presence, a living force. I felt a sudden, acute desire to turn around and go back—not just to my worried parents back in Brooklyn, but deep into my childhood, into my mother's arms holding me on those late nights when we would drive home from dinner at a neighbor's house in Maine, and she would sing a lullaby and tell me to put my head on her soft, warm shoulder. And I would sleep.

From: Meghan O'Rourke
Subject: Hamlet's Not Depressed. He's Grieving.
Posted Thursday, March 12, 2009, at 11:29 AM ET

I had a hard time sleeping right after my mother died. The nights were long and had their share of what C.S. Lewis, in his memoir *A Grief Observed*, calls "mad, midnight … entreaties spoken into the empty air." One of the things I did was read. I read lots of books about death and loss. But one said more to me about grieving than any other: *Hamlet.* I'm not alone in this. A colleague recently told me that after his mother died he listened over and over to a tape recording he'd made of the Kenneth Branagh film version.

I had always thought of Hamlet's melancholy as existential. I saw his sense that "the world is out of joint" as vague and philosophical. He's a depressive, self-obsessed young man who can't stop chewing at big metaphysical questions. But reading the play after my mother's death, I felt differently. Hamlet's moodiness and irascibility suddenly seemed deeply connected to the fact that his father has just died, and he doesn't know how to handle it. He is radically dislocated, stumbling through the world, trying to figure out where the walls are while the rest of the world acts as if nothing important has changed. I can relate.

When Hamlet comes onstage he is greeted by his uncle with the worst question you can ask a grieving person: "How is it that the clouds still hang on you?" It reminded me of the friend who said, 14 days after my mother died, "Hope you're doing well." No wonder Hamlet is angry and cagey.

Hamlet is the best description of grief I've read because it dramatizes grief rather than merely describing it. Grief, Shakespeare understands, is a social experience. It's not just that Hamlet is sad; it's that everyone around him is unnerved by his grief. And Shakespeare doesn't flinch from that truth. He captures the way that people act as if sadness is bizarre when it is all too explainable. Hamlet's mother, Gertrude, tries to get him to see that his loss is "common." His uncle Claudius chides him to put aside his "unmanly grief." It's not just guilty people who act this way. Some are eager to get past the obvious rawness in your eyes or voice; why should they step into the flat shadows of your "sterile promontory"? Even if they wanted to, how could they? And this tension between your private sadness and the busy old world is a huge part of what I feel as I grieve—and felt most intensely in the first weeks of loss. Even if, as a friend helpfully pointed out, my mother wasn't murdered.

I am also moved by how much in *Hamlet* is about slippage—the difference between being and seeming, the uncertainty about how the inner translates into the outer. To mourn is to wonder at the strangeness that grief is not written all over your face in bruised hieroglyphics. And it's also to feel, quite powerfully, that you're not allowed to descend into the deepest fathom of your grief—that to do so would be taboo somehow. *Hamlet* is a play about a man whose grief is deemed unseemly.

Strangely, *Hamlet* somehow made me feel it was OK that I, too, had "lost all my mirth." My colleague put it better: "*Hamlet* is the grief-slacker's Bible, a knowing book that understands what you're going through and doesn't ask for much in return," he wrote to me. Maybe that's because the entire play is as drenched in grief as it is in blood. There is Ophelia's grief at Hamlet's angry withdrawal from her. There is Laertes' grief that Polonius and Ophelia die. There is Gertrude and Claudius' grief, which is as fake as the flowers in a funeral home. Everyone is sad and messed up. *If only the court had just let Hamlet feel bad about his dad*, you start to feel, *things in Denmark might not have disintegrated so quickly!*

Hamlet also captures one of the aspects of grief I find it most difficult to speak about—the profound sense of ennui, the moments of angrily feeling it is not worth continuing to live. After my mother died, I felt that abruptly, amid the chaos that is daily life, I had arrived at a terrible, insistent truth about the impermanence of the everyday. Everything seemed exhausting. Nothing seemed important. C.S. Lewis has a great passage about the laziness of grief, how it made him not want to shave or answer letters. At one point during that first month, I did not

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wash my hair for 10 days. Hamlet's soliloquy captures that numb exhaustion, and now I read it as a true expression of grief:

> O that this too too sullied flesh would melt,
> Thaw and resolve itself into a dew,
> Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
> His canon 'gainst self-slaughter. O God! God!
> How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
> Seem to me all the uses of this world!

Those adjectives felt apt. And so, even, does the pained wish—in my case, thankfully fleeting—that one might melt away. Researchers have found that the bereaved are at a higher risk for suicideality (or suicidal thinking and behaviors) than the depressed. For many, that risk is quite acute. For others of us, this passage captures how passive a form those thoughts can take. Hamlet is less searching for death actively than he is wishing powerfully for the pain just to go away. And it is, to be honest, strangely comforting to see my own worst thoughts mirrored back at me—perhaps because I do not feel likely to go as far into them as Hamlet does. (So far, I have not accidentally killed anyone with a dagger, for example.)

The way Hamlet speaks conveys his grief as much as what he says. He talks in run-on sentences to Ophelia. He slips between like things without distinguishing fully between them—"to die, to sleep" and "to sleep, perchance to dream." He resorts to puns because puns free him from the terrible logic of normalcy, which has nothing to do with grief and cannot fully admit its darkness.

And Hamlet's madness, too, makes new sense. He goes mad because madness is the only method that makes sense in a world tyrannized by false logic. If no one can tell whether he is mad, it is because he cannot tell either. Grief is a bad moon, a sleeper wave. It's like having an inner combatant, a saboteur who, at the slightest change in the sunlight, or at the first notes of a jingle for a dog food commercial, will flick the memory switch, bringing tears to your eyes. No wonder Hamlet said, "… for there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so." Grief can also make you feel, like Hamlet, strangely flat. Nor is it ennobling, as *Hamlet* drives home. It makes you at once vulnerable and self-absorbed, needy and standoffish, knotted up inside, even punitive.

Like Hamlet, I, too, find it difficult to remember that my own "change in disposition" is connected to a distinct event. Most of the time, I just feel that I see the world more accurately than I used to. ("There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,/ Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.") Pessimists, after all, are said to have a more realistic view of themselves in the world than optimists.

The other piece of writing I have been drawn to is a poem by George Herbert called "The Flower." It opens:

> How Fresh, O Lord, how sweet and clean
> Are thy returns! ev'n as the flowers in spring;
> To which, besides their own demean,
> The late-past frosts tributes of pleasure bring.
> Grief melts away
> Like snow in May,
> As if there were no such cold thing.
>
> Who would have thought my shrivel'd heart
> Could have recover'd greennesse? It was gone
> Quite under ground; as flowers depart
> To see their mother-root, when they have
> blown;
> Where they together
> All the hard weather,
> Dead to the world, keep house unknown.

Quite underground, I keep house unknown: It does seem the right image of wintry grief. I look forward to the moment when I can say the first sentence of the second stanza and feel its wonder as my own.

From: Meghan O'Rourke
Subject: Dreaming of the Dead
Posted Tuesday, March 17, 2009, at 11:36 AM ET

After my mother died, one of my brothers told me he had been dreaming about her. He was comforted by this. I was envious. I was not dreaming about her, and my main fear, in those first days, was that I would forget what her face looked like. I told an old friend this. He just looked at me and said, "That's not going to happen." I didn't know how he could know this, but I was comforted by his certainty.

Then, about a month later, I began to dream about her. The dreams are not frequent, but they are powerful. Unlike dreams I had about my mother when she was alive, these dreams seem to capture her as she truly was. They seem, in some sense, beyond my own invention, as if, in the nether-realm of sleep, we truly are visiting each other. These visits, though, are always full of boundaries—boundaries, that, judging from other mourners' accounts, seem almost universal.

The first dream was set in both the past and the present. And it captured an identity confusion that is, apparently, not uncommon right after a loved one dies. In the dream, it was summertime, and my mother and I were standing outside a house like one we used to go to on Cape Cod. There was a sandy driveway and a

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long dirt road. We were going to get ice cream, and we were saying goodbye to my youngest brother, who is 12 years younger than I am; in the dream, he was just a little boy. When I looked at him, I felt an oceanic sadness, but I didn't know why. He smiled and waved from the porch as my mother and I pulled out; I was driving, which struck me as odd in the dream. (My mother loved to drive, and I learned to drive only last year; she taught me.)

As we headed down the long road, my mother talked about my brother, telling me I didn't need to be anxious about him. It became clear she was going somewhere, though I couldn't figure out where. The conversation replicated one we had while she was in the hospital, when I reassured her that my brother (now in college) would be OK, and that I'd help look after him. Only in the dream, she was playing me and I was playing her. The dream had a quality so intense I can still feel it: I am as sad as I have ever been, as if ice is being poured down my windpipe, and I keep trying to turn so I can see my mother, but I have to keep my eyes on the road.

In the next dream, I am at my parents' house in Connecticut with my father and one of my brothers, when, to our surprise, my mother walks into the kitchen. Somehow, we all know she will die in six days. She seems healthy, although her fate hangs around her and separates her from us. Even so, her eyes are bright and dark, darker than I remember them being. We ask her what she is doing that day. She tells us, with a sly smile, that she is going to something called Suicide Park. I become upset. She reassures me. "I'm not going to there to commit suicide, Meg," she says. "It's a place where people who know they're dying go to do risky things they might not do otherwise—like jump out of a plane." She's excited, like a bride on the precipice of a life-changing ritual. I am happy to see her face, and I never want her to leave.

(Two days later, I tell her friend Eleanor about my dream, and she goes silent on the phone. Then she asks, "Did you know that your mother told me she wanted to jump out of a plane?" No, I say. "One Friday this fall, when she had to stay home from school, I was at the house with her, and she said: 'I really want to jump out a plane before I die.' I said, 'B, you can't—you'll hurt your knee.' But she got upset. So we tried to figure out how she might really jump out a plane. She also wanted to learn Italian. This was when we thought she had more time.")

The third dream had the quality of a visitation. Again, I am at my parents' house in Connecticut, feeling anxious about work. In the den, I tell my father, who is watching football, that I need to go back to New York, and he gets up to look at the train schedule. As he rises, I become aware in my peripheral vision that there are holiday ornaments on the kitchen table, and that people are sitting there. "Stay another night," I hear my mother's voice say, and I look up to see that *she* is the person at the table. She looks at me, but her hands are busy—either knitting or kneading dough for apple pie. "Stay another night," she says again, with longing in her voice. "Of course," I say, happy I can grant this wish, so simple yet so fundamental. When I woke that morning, I felt calm and peaceful. The voice was my mother's voice, and for the first time, her face was my mother's face. I felt that she had been saying something important to me; I wasn't quite sure what it was, but it had to do with how she loved me; I was still her daughter.

My middle brother has told me about some of his dreams, too. And I am struck by the continuities among all of them. Our dreams almost seem to follow certain rules of genre. In all, I know my mother is gone and that she will never be back as before. But I am given a moment to be with her, to say something, or to share a look or a feeling. In most, the important conversation comes when we are alone together, although another family member may be present on the outskirts. I am never fully able to grasp her; in the first, the car was a barrier between us; in a recent dream, I held her hand over the barrier of a hospital bed. My brother's dreams are similar. (His, I find, are even more beautiful and evocative than mine.) We both experience a quality of being visited, of being comforted, though we also feel a sense of a distance that cannot be traversed. Many readers who have written to me have reported a similar sense of feeling visited from a great distance.

Every time I wake from these dreams, I am reminded of passages from epics like *The Aeneid* in which the heroes go to the Underworld to see their fathers and cannot embrace them, though they can see them. Or of the beautiful sonnet by Milton about his wife, who died in childbirth. Recounting a dream about her, he writes, "Me thought I saw my late espoused saint," and then invokes her disappearance at precisely the moment they try to touch : "But oh! As to embrace me she inclin'd,/ I wak'd, she fled, and day brought back my night." What surprises me is how comforted I feel when I wake. I am sad that the dream has ended, but it's not the depleted sadness I've felt in the past when I've woken up from a wishful dream. I feel, instead, replete, reassured, like a child who has kicked the covers off her in her sleep on a chilly night and dimly senses as her mother steals into the dark room, pulls them up over her, strokes her hair, and gives her a kiss before leaving.

From: Meghan O'Rourke
Subject: Can Nature Help Assuage Your Grief?
Posted Wednesday, March 25, 2009, at 12:36 PM ET

The other night, I was talking to my father on the phone, remembering my mother, when he happened to mention a "loss of confidence" that "we" (that is, our family) had all

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experienced. I asked him what he meant. I had been noticing that I feel shy and insecure ever since my mother died, but I had assumed my insecurity was particular to *me*; I've always been a nervous person, especially compared with my sociable brothers. But here was my father talking about something he saw all of us suffering from. He explained. "Your mother is not there," he said. "And we are dealing with her absence. It makes us feel, I think, a loss of confidence—a general loss, an uncertainty about what we can rely on."

Perhaps that's why I've gone to the desert twice since my mother died. Not only does the physical desert reflect back at me my spiritual desert, it doesn't have a lot of people in it—allowing me to enjoy solitude without feeling cut off, as I would if I were hunkered down in my Brooklyn apartment. In January, three weeks after my mom's death, I flew to L.A. and then drove to the Mojave Desert, where I spent a few days wandering around Joshua Tree National Park. Being alone under the warm blue sky made me feel closer to my mother, as it often has. I felt I could detect her in the haze at the horizons. I offered a little prayer up to her, and, for the first time since she died, I talked out loud to her. I was walking along past the cacti, when I looked out into the rocky distance. "Hello mother," I whispered. "I miss you so much." Then I started crying, and, ridiculously, apologized. "I'm sorry. I don't want you to feel bad. I know you had to leave." Even now, whenever I talk to my mother—I do it every few weeks, and always when I'm outdoors—I cry and then apologize because I don't want her to feel guilt or sorrow that she can't be here with me as she used to be. A part of me believes this concern is foolish. But it is intrinsic to the magical thinking at the heart of the ritual. I am powerless over it.

Just last week, I went to Marfa, Texas, a town in the Chinati Desert in far west Texas, near Mexico. One afternoon, I drove south through the desert to Terlingua, an old ghost town, where I sat in the fresh spring sun. Perhaps because it is almost spring in New York, the warmth of the air registered as the augur of a new stage of mourning. It was as if I had been coaxed out of a dark room after a long illness. I watched a band play songs to a haphazard group of people who, for one reason or another, had been drawn down to this borderland and its arid emptiness. A group of girls lazily Hula-hooped in the sun while a drunk older man from New Jersey, with the bluest, clearest eyes I have ever seen, razzed the musicians: "Yer not stopping yet, are ya, ye worthless sons of bitches? It's just gettin' goin'." Later he pulled up a chair next to me. He told me he was about to turn 74. This lent his desire for things not to end a new poignancy. Dogs wandered among the tables, and tourists paused to watch before walking to the general store, where they could buy souvenirs and spring water. Listening to the band sing about loss and love, I felt sad and wrung out, but this, too, was good, like the sun on my skin. A vital nutrient that had seeped away during the winter was being replenished.

Loss is so paradoxical: It is at once enormous and tiny. And this, too, I think, is why I am drawn to landscapes that juxtapose the minute and the splendor; the very contrast is expressive of what I felt. After the concert, I drove down along the Rio Grande, noting all the green that had sprouted up along the dry riverbed. Then I turned and went into Big Bend National Park—a majestic preserve. Here, as in Joshua Tree, you drive along roads and can see rolling, rocky desert for many, many miles. The sky is as open as can be. On the horizon, mountains loom like old gods. On a clear day, you can see so far you can actually detect the curvature of the earth, according to the National Park's literature. I wasn't sure I saw any curves, but it hardly mattered. Having my sense of smallness reflected back at me—having the geography mimic the puzzlement I carry within—made me feel more at home in a majesty outside of my comprehension. It also led me to wonder: How could my loss matter in the midst of all this? Yet it does matter, to me, and in this setting that felt *natural*, the way the needle on the cactus in the huge desert is natural. The sheer sublimity of the landscape created room for the magnitude of my grief, while at the same time it helped me feel like a part—a small part—of a much larger creation. It was inclusive.

Being in the vast spaces while mourning made me think about religion. On New Year's Eve, I'd had dinner with a friend who had been through his share of ups and downs. I was telling him that I hadn't felt my mother leave the world, and he asked me if I believed in God. I told him that I did not know. "I can say existence is a mystery I don't understand or presume to pretend I do," I said. And I mentioned that over the past year, I had prayed in several moments of need, and had always felt better—as if something were coming back at me. He was quiet and then said, "I don't know if I believe in God. But I do believe in prayer." If you are a secular agnostic in America today, chances are you subscribe to a psychological framework for seeing the world. This framework places stress on individuality, on the unique psyche and its formation. I believe in the importance of individuality, but in the midst of grief I also find myself wanting connection—wanting to be reminded that the sadness I feel is not just *mine* but *ours.*

I also want to find a way not to resent my suffering (though I do). It is hard to know what that way is, outside of the ethical framework of religion. Last fall, I copied out a passage from an interview with author Marilynne Robinson in an issue of the *Paris Review*. She is one of my favorite novelists; she is also Christian. The interviewer recalled Robinson once observing that Americans tend to avoid contemplating "larger issues." (Many mourners would agree.) Here is what Robinson said in response:

> The ancients are right: the dear old human experience is a singular, difficult, shadowed, brilliant experience that does not resolve into being comfortable in the world. The valley of the shadow is part of that, and you are

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> depriving yourself if you do not experience what humankind has experienced, including doubt and sorrow. We experience pain and difficulty as failure instead of saying, I will pass through this, everyone I have ever admired has passed through this, music has come out of it, literature has come out of it. We should think of our humanity as a privilege.

To that, I can say: Amen. And it underscores why I have been drawn to the remote outdoors, to places largely untouched by telephone wires and TGI Fridays. I want to be reminded of how the numinous impinges on ordinary life. It's a feeling I have even in New York, but traffic lights and honking cars and businessmen leaping over puddles can make it hard to let that eerie, weird knowledge in.

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human nature

Shades of Gay

The heterogeneity of homosexuality.

By William Saletan

Wednesday, April 1, 2009, at 7:51 AM ET

Guy walks into a shrink's office. Says he's gay and wants to be straight. Shrink says, "OK, I'll help."

Don't wait for the punch line. There isn't one, because this isn't a joke. It's a true story. And it's a common one, according to a British study just published in *BMC Psychiatry*. Researchers contacted more than 1,800 mental health professionals to find out whether they would ever try to change a client's sexual orientation. Of the 1,328 practitioners who responded, one in six admitted to having helped at least one patient attempt to alter homosexual feelings. The total number of such cases reported by the respondents was 413. That's nearly one case for every three therapists.

The study's authors find this disturbing. Treatment to change homosexuality has proved ineffective and often unsafe, they argue. Therefore, therapists shouldn't try it.

If only life were that simple.

In the big picture, the authors are right. Homosexuality isn't a sin or mental illness. It needs no cure. In most cases, it's deeply ingrained and probably inborn. If you try to change your sexual orientation, you're more likely to end up at war with yourself than at peace. For these reasons, any systematic program to turn gay people straight, such as "reparative therapy," is futile and dangerous.

But therapy isn't about the big picture. It's about lots of little pictures: the worlds unique to each of us. You and I may have the same sexual orientation, but our lives are very different. You know nothing of my family, my religion, or my community. You don't even know how straight or gay I am. If I tell my therapist that I'd rather try to modify my feelings than give up my faith or my marriage, who are you to second-guess her or me?

In the British study, the therapists who admitted to collaborating in such cases weren't anti-gay. "A very small number of those advocating intervention in this area had discernibly negative views about the same sex relationships," the authors report. But for most intervention advocates, "The qualitative data suggest that they made therapeutic decisions based on privileging client/patient choice where there was a wish to avoid the impact of negative social attitudes to same sex relationships."

The therapists also distinguished between clear-cut and borderline homosexuality. "I am sure there are cases of bisexuality or sexual ambivalence where counseling could be offered to motivated individuals," one respondent wrote. Another argued that "some clients/patients are unsure of whether they are really homosexual—particularly young adults under 25." A third ventured, "Some bisexual individuals may wish to choose an orientation that is comfortable for them and their lifestyle choices for example. This is a therapeutic issue to explore and support if that is their wish."

The idea of heterosexuality as a valid "lifestyle choice" turns the argument for sexual acceptance on its head. If a patient prefers to adjust his orientation to family or cultural circumstances, rather than the other way around, should the therapist challenge him?

In some cases, the answer may be yes. "In many societies/cultures expression of sexuality out [of line] with cultural norms can cause huge distress," one therapist wrote in response to the British survey. "Given the balance between biological and developmental determinants of sexuality it is valid for an individual to value his cultural norms and to try and reduce the distress caused by transgressing these." Maybe the therapist should question those norms. Maybe the client should be told that his distress is a symptom of cultural ignorance and injustice—and that changing his orientation would be even harder than changing society.

But what do you do when the distress is rooted in the client's deeply held values? One therapist, answering the survey, said it might be OK to help a patient try to modify her feelings if she wanted to stay married. Another argued that the "client ultimately knows best and may have deep religious beliefs that influence them enormously." A third wrote that if the patient "had a strong faith, then working to help the person accept their feelings but manage them appropriately may be the best approach if [the] person felt they would lose God and therefore their life was not worth living."

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Would you tell such a patient that her understanding of God is wrong? Are you sure her attraction to women is more fundamental than her religious beliefs? Is peace with the lesbian part of her sexuality worth the destruction of her family or her faith? And most important: Do you think you can answer these questions without knowing more about her?

Michael King, the professor who led the British study, tries to do just that. When gay people seek therapeutic escape, he argues, "Mental health practitioners and society at large must help them to confront prejudice in themselves and in others."

Help them confront prejudice in themselves? Isn't that just the substitution of one inner war, one purification quest, for another?

Sometimes, the substitution makes sense. When the patient is clearly gay, and when his discomfort with homosexuality isn't fundamental to his personality, it's logical to target the discomfort. But not every case is that simple. A friend once told me she was "primarily wired toward women." She was my girlfriend for the next year and a half. Another friend told me he couldn't countenance homosexuality because he was "obliged to believe it's a mortal sin." He came out of the closet a year later, but he never left Christianity or conservatism. Another friend lived as a gay man for years, then carried on a multiyear, monogamous relationship with a woman, then went back to the gay life.

"The evidence shows that you cannot change sexual orientation," says King. But on the margins, I've seen it happen.

That's the thing about therapy: It's about real people, and they don't necessarily fit your grand theory or mine. Conservative evangelists are arrogant and wrong to assume that therapy can alter a patient's sexuality. Don't repeat their mistake by insisting that it can't.

*(**Now playing at the Human Nature blog:** 1. Should organ donors get financial rewards? 2. Do ADHD drugs permanently stunt growth? 3. Race, genes, and criminal justice.)*

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jurisprudence

And Then They Came for Koh ...

If mainstream America can't stand up for Harold Koh, we will get precisely the government lawyers we deserve.

By Dahlia Lithwick

Friday, April 3, 2009, at 6:54 AM ET

It's 11:45 a.m. on April 1, and if you run a Google News search on Harold Koh, dean of Yale Law School and President Obama's pick for legal adviser to the State Department, here's what you'll find: 13 pieces on far-right Web sites characterizing Koh as dangerous and anti-American; several Fox News stories, updated several times daily, one of which describes the anti-Koh screeds as "burning up the Internet"; and a measly two blog posts defending Koh from these attacks. By the time you read this, I suspect that Fox News will have a scrolling red banner that reads, "Obama's Koh pick imperils us all" (and … wait for it … BINGO!), the anti-Koh pieces will number 18, and the pro-Koh blog posts will number three.

And yet by my most recent tally, every one of the anti-Koh rants dutifully repeats a canard that first appeared in a hatchet piece in the *New York Post* by former Bush administration speechwriter Meghan Clyne. She asserts that Koh believes "Sharia law could apply to disputes in US courts." The evidence for her claim? "A New York lawyer, Steven Stein, says that, in addressing the Yale Club of Greenwich in 2007, Koh claimed that 'in an appropriate case, he didn't see any reason why Sharia law would not be applied to govern a case in the United States.' "

Needless to say, if the future lawyer for the State Department wanted to apply *sharia* law willy-nilly in American courtrooms, it would be a terrifying prospect. And so Daniel Pipes can title his post "Obama's Harold Koh, Promoter of Shari'a?" … OMG, people! Dean Koh wants to see women executed in the middle of the town square for wearing the wrong color burkha.

But, of course, Koh believes nothing of the sort. And the only real revelation here is that truth can't be measured in Google hit counts or partisan hysteria.

The *New York Post* today published a letter from Robin Reeves Zorthian, who actually organized the Yale Club dinner to which Stein refers. In that letter, Zorthian writes that "the account given by Steve Stein of Dean Koh's comments is totally fictitious and inaccurate" and that she, her husband, "and several fellow alumni ... are all adamant that Koh never said or suggested that sharia law could be used to govern cases in US courts." Why should we believe her and her colleagues over Stein? Well, for one thing, Koh in all his academic articles and many public statements has never said anything to suggest some dogged fealty to *sharia*. But the right-wing blogs have yet to take note of Zorthian's version of events; the *sharia* fable is chuffing along on its own steam now; and Fox can continue to pass along Stein's account of the story in a breathless game of sky-is-falling telephone.

Chris Borgen, at *Opinio Juris*, has done a great job of debunking some of the worst of Clyne's distortions of Koh's legal and constitutional views, and Above the Law treats her absurd *sharia* claims with all the unseriousness they warrant. The underlying legal charge from the right is that Koh is a "transnationalist" who seeks to subjugate all of America to elite international courts. We've heard these claims from conservative critics before. They

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amount to just this: The mere acknowledgment that a body of law exists outside the United States is tantamount to claiming that America is enslaved to that law. The recognition that international law even *exists* somehow transforms the U.S. Supreme Court into a sort of intermediate court of appeals that must answer to the Dreaded Court of Elitist European Preferences.

Harold Koh is not a radical legal figure. He has served with distinction in both Democratic and Republican administrations (under Presidents Clinton and Reagan), and in that capacity he sued both Democratic and Republican administrations. He was confirmed *unanimously* 11 years ago, and yet this time around, he is a threat to American sovereignty.

Clyne's gross distortions of Koh's views have gone completely unanswered in the mainstream press. You can certainly argue that ignoring the whole story signals that it's beneath notice. But it also means that, once again, the only players on the field work for Fox News. So last night, while you were reheating Monday's lasagna, Glenn Beck was jubilantly warning his viewers that Koh went to Europe and "protested against Mother's Day." And thus one of the country's leading academics—a man who has authored 175 law review articles and/or legal editorials and eight books—has been reduced to an ad hoc answer to a gotcha question that nobody but the questioner himself seems to understand.

Why am I bothered by this? This kind of vicious slash-and-burn character attack, the kind in which the nominee is attacked as a vicious hater of America, is hardly new. The little trick of upending Dean Koh's legal arguments and recharacterizing them as the nefarious plotting of Dr. Evil is a surprise to nobody at this point. But we can be bothered even if we're not surprised. When moderate Americans and the mainstream media allow a handful of right-wing zealots to occupy the field in the public discussions of an Obama nominee, they become complicit in a character assassination. Dawn Johnsen, a law professor at Indiana University and one of the most qualified candidates ever tapped to head the Office of Legal Counsel in the Justice Department, now faces the prospect of a Senate filibuster because it took weeks for the mainstream media to evince outrage at how she was being treated.*

As Neil Lewis observes today in the *New York Times*, the attack on Johnsen (who is an acquaintance and used to write for ***Slate***) also started out with an attack from a handful of conservative blogs. The posts asserted that a 20-year-old footnote in a brief Johnsen had authored "equated pregnancy with slavery." And this bizarre claim rapidly became a holy truth to Senate Republicans at her confirmation hearing, even when they couldn't quite recall where they had read it or why.

There is no rest stop on the misinformation superhighway. Some senators apparently cannot be bothered to fact-check the claims they have read in the blogosphere. And that makes the rest of us responsible for fact-checking them as needed and for getting angry when good people are smeared for views they do not hold. One needn't read all of the thousands of pages Koh has written over his career to find an opinion or argument with which you disagree. But the fact that his critics must fabricate Koh's opinions in order to take issue with them suggests that they haven't read any of them.

I'm doubly bothered by the radio silence in the mainstream media because Johnsen and Koh represent two of President Obama's bravest choices. Both have been outspoken critics of Bush administration excesses, and they have done so openly and unequivocally. They were willing to use strong words like *torture* and *illegal* long before most of us could bring ourselves to do so. President Obama could have named a pair of mild-mannered tax attorneys to these high government positions. Instead, he opted to pick precisely the sorts of people we most need there: fierce advocates who care deeply about these agencies and the law as it applies to them.

If we cannot bring ourselves to loudly support nominees like Koh and Johnsen, we deserve whoever it is that actually can be confirmed in this climate. (I was about to suggest that possibly Dora the Explorer might squeak through a confirmation hearing, until it occurred to me that she's a foreigner, a transnationalist, *and* a woman.) We may have bigger things on our minds than Obama's top lawyers just now, but they deserve better from us. The one thing about which Meghan Clyne is brutally candid in her assessment of Koh is her own motivation for trashing him: "[T]he State job might be a launching pad for a Supreme Court nomination. (He's on many liberals' short lists for the high court.) Since this job requires Senate confirmation, it's certainly a useful trial run." If what Koh and Johnsen have been facing is a practice-sliming from the far right, we should be very, very afraid for whoever it is that someday merits their scrutiny at the high court.

***Correction, April 2, 2009**: This article mistakenly referred to the University of Indiana. (Return to the corrected sentence.)*

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jurisprudence

No Vacancy

Reading the tea leaves of the Supreme Court's retirement prospects.

By Dahlia Lithwick

Saturday, March 28, 2009, at 7:48 AM ET

Court watchers can't take their eyes off the Supreme Court right now, obsessively scrutinizing every judicial cough or comment for hidden evidence of illness or depression or looming

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retirement plans—in the manner of wild-eyed New Yorkers on the hunt for a rent-controlled apartment. Attention largely centers on Justice John Paul Stevens, who turns 89 in three weeks, and Ruth Bader Ginsburg, just turned 76, who recently underwent surgery for pancreatic cancer. Only two weeks ago, Ginsburg made headlines again when she told a Boston audience the justices haven't posed for a court photo featuring a new justice in a while, "but surely we will soon." Even more speculation is focused on Justice David Souter, 69, who famously pines for a return to his New Hampshire home. Souter claims to have the world's best job in the world's worst city, and in a very rare public appearance last month, he described the beginning of each court's term as the start of a "sort of annual intellectual lobotomy."

It's hard to understand the inner workings of the Supreme Court unless you recognize that it operates along about the same principles as an Oscar Wilde play—all polished surfaces and good manners on the outside, roiling drama stuffed forcibly under the surface. If the court were any kind of normal public institution, retirements would be discussed openly at press conferences and also privately among the justices. But the justices seem to cling to the tradition of retirement as political jack-in-the-box—usually announced on the last day of the term and sometimes even surprising the brethren as much as the masses. The court loves its own stylized kinds of high drama. And just as the justices refuse to let us know in advance which case they will be handing down until the moment it's read from the bench, the institutional preference for privacy and drama means we rarely learn of big news until it's already happening.

Outsiders are often surprised to learn how little the justices actually communicate with one another in person. Through memos, yes. But casual face-to-face chats about intimate matters can be rare at the court, and even when they do happen, they can tend toward the impersonal. In her 2007 book, *Supreme Conflict*, Jan Crawford Greenburg described how Sandra Day O'Connor was essentially forced off the court in 2005, because then-Chief Justice William Rehnquist did not want to step down, despite terminal thyroid cancer. O'Connor had hoped to serve one more term and then retire in 2006 to be with her husband, whose Alzheimer's disease was advancing. The chief kiboshed her plans, telling her that he, too, planned to stay on at the court and warning, "we don't need two vacancies." Faced with the choice between retiring that spring and potentially serving two more years, O'Connor felt pressed to step down. Indirection, triangulation, and Rehnquist's sudden death meant that within a few short months, the court had two vacancies after all.

One might well imagine a similar round of "After you, Alphonse-ing" playing out between Souter, Stevens, and Ginsburg this spring as they attempt to sort out their own preferences, while communicating with one another exclusively in polite, speculative code. Indeed it's very possible that all this judicial hush-hushery is what makes court watchers most anxious—which is why we over-read even the most benign comments as judicial hand signals.

I can't help but wonder whether all the mysteriousness and obfuscation, followed by a surprise announcement in late June, doesn't contribute to the widespread Confirmation Derangement Syndrome that explodes the instant a vacancy is announced. Americans might be less apt to overreact at news of court vacancies if there were warning signals that they were imminent. And perhaps at least some of the growing support for term limits for the justices and proposed mechanisms to remove them if they become infirm have come about because the public feels so completely cut out of this decision-making process and very much at the mercy of the justices' secret plans.

Except, of course, this time around the justices have actually been very forthcoming about their plans. Justice Ginsburg has offered nearly unprecedented medical detail regarding her cancer treatment and prognosis. Both she and Stevens have been as open as possible about their hopes to stick around. Stevens insists he is not going anywhere. He still plays tennis and golf almost religiously. He is said to be gunning to shatter a few court records, and some court watchers predict he'll stay on until 2011, beating out William O. Douglas, who served 36 years and seven months, as well as surpassing Oliver Wendell Holmes as the oldest sitting justice. Ginsburg—who insists that her comment about a new court photo was misinterpreted as insider prognostication—is gunning for her own inside-baseball record. She hopes to stay on the bench longer than Justice Louis Brandeis, who served until he was 82. Which may well put the job of appointing Justice Ginsburg's successor squarely into the hands of President Meghan McCain in 2015.

Neither Ginsburg nor Stevens are showing any indication of slowing down on the bench, either. Anyone who watched oral argument in last week's campaign finance reform case saw the two of them at the very top of their game—elbowing their way into the action and roller skating through their complicated hypotheticals at perilously high speeds. I think we may want to take them at their word when they tell us they're not planning to go anyplace unless the celestial Court of Highest Appeals issues a differing opinion.

This leaves Washington insiders to speculate and whisper about Souter, and he's not saying much of anything. He may not be enjoying his time in Washington, but, like his colleagues, he still shows signs of enjoying himself on the bench, lobotomy notwithstanding. As attractive as the prospect of a lifetime spent reading by a winter's fire might be, Souter still looks awfully engaged in the life of the law.

It's worth remembering that each of these likely suspects for retirement comes from the court's liberal wing. Which means President Obama will replace any of them with a like-minded liberal centrist, and the net effect on the court as a whole will

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probably be minimal. That might incline any of them to leave sooner rather than later, but not necessarily this June.

In light of the current economic crisis and the outcome of the last election, the composition of the federal judiciary is still seen as a winning issue on the right; perhaps the last winning issue that's left. If recent confirmation hearings are any indication, the makeup of the federal courts are a concern on which conservatives are, if anything, more determined and more focused than ever. That makes any chances of a quiet retirement and a quiet replacement at the Supreme Court negligible, even if the ultimate effect will actually be quite small. Whoever it is that sneaks away from the high court in the next year or two will initiate at least one summer of national political insanity. Which may also explain why the justices are holding on to their secrets more tightly than ever.

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medical examiner

Treating Autism as if Vaccines Caused It

The theory may be dead, but the treatments live on.

By Arthur Allen

Wednesday, April 1, 2009, at 12:25 PM ET

A federal court may have changed the public discourse about the safety of vaccines in February, when it dismissed the theory that they cause autism. But vaccine damage is still the reigning paradigm for a rump caucus of thousands of parents who turn to physicians with a remarkable set of beliefs and practices in hope of finding recourse for their children's ills.

To sift through the 15,000-page record of the Autism Omnibus hearings and the decisions by the three special masters who considered the evidence is to peek into a medical universe where autism is considered a disease of environmental toxicity, rather than an inherited disorder, and where doctors expose children to hundreds of tests simply to justify the decision to "detoxify" them. In some cases, the judges found, doctors simply ignored data that didn't fit the diagnosis.

The court came down hard on the alternative medical practitioners who tailor their treatments to fit theories of vaccine damage. Among the doctors criticized was Jeff Bradstreet, a former Christian preacher in Melbourne, Fla., who has treated 4,000 children with neurological disorders. Among the children was Colten Snyder, whose case was one of those considered by the court.

Chelation therapy—the administration of chemical agents that tightly bind heavy metals and can be used to flush them out of the body—became a craze in the 1980s as a treatment for atherosclerosis in adults; proponents claimed patients were being harmed by mercury from their fillings. Dentists used it as an excuse to pull teeth and even remove jaw bones from their patients. Boyd Haley, a University of Kentucky chemist, was the high priest of the amalgam wars. When the thimerosal theory emerged on the scene, Haley and other chelationists shifted their focus to autistic children.

From 2000-06, Bradstreet prescribed seven rounds of chelation for Colten, each consisting of 90 doses over a four-month period, mostly in pill form. Bradstreet theorized that thimerosal, a mercury-containing preservative previously used in three infant vaccines, caused Colten's symptoms. Remove the mercury, cure the autism, went his theory.

Colten, now 12 years old, hated chelation, which can be painful and, on rare occasions, fatal. On Aug. 20, 2000, a nurse reported that he "went berserk" after receiving the chelating agent. On other occasions he screamed all night, vomited, and suffered constipation, back pain, headaches, night sweats, and "meltdowns."

Of course, children generally don't like medicine, especially when it's administered intravenously, as was the case with Colten's final rounds of chelation. But Special Master Denise Vowell found Colten's suffering particularly egregious, because the boy had never shown any evidence of mercury toxicity.

"The medical records ... reflected that Colten did poorly after every round of chelation therapy," Vowell wrote in her opinion. "The more disturbing question is why chelation was performed at all, in view of the normal levels of mercury found in the hair, blood and urine, its apparent lack of efficacy in treating Colten's symptoms, and the adverse side effects it apparently caused."

The answer can be traced, in part, to a Chicago laboratory that performs most of the chemical testing for alternative doctors like Bradstreet who treat autistics. Doctor's Data Inc., which tests about 100,000 urine samples for toxic metals each year, presents the results in such a way that it almost guarantees a finding of "toxicity" for each child.

According to a recent federal report on complementary medicine, about 72,000 children were chelated in 2007. Most of them were probably seen by doctors loosely allied to an organization called Defeat Autism Now! The doctors, naturopaths, and other practitioners in DAN! frequently order up exhausting regimens of testing for each child in the belief that people with autism are out of whack with nature. They test the children for viruses, bacteria, yeast, immune system elements, and brain antibodies, drawing copious amounts of blood, as well as spinal fluids and biopsy material, before prescribing immune globulins, vitamins, enzymes, and other pills and infusions. The tests and therapies run into the tens of thousands of dollars per child.

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One of the more popular tests, in recent years, has been for traces of toxic metals. The testing methodology is explained here. In a nutshell, Doctor's Data classifies the level of mercury in the urine of a recently chelated child by comparing it with base-line levels in normal, unchelated children. Naturally, the chelated levels are higher. That's what chelators do: They leach metals out of tissue. Plus, everyone has a little bit of mercury in them, because trace amounts are in our air, water, and food. What's remarkable is that so many people have relied on the data from these tests.

In July 2000, in preparation for heavy-metals testing, Colten was administered 100 milligrams of the chelating agent DMSA. When Doctor's Data tested his urine, it found 2.2 micrograms of mercury per liter. Even though 2.2 micrograms is about what you'd find in the urine of a normal, *nonchelated* person, Doctor's Data reported the result as "very elevated." And although conventionally trained pediatricians are instructed not to use chelation even for acute lead poisoning—unless the level is above 70 micrograms per liter of urine—Bradstreet, who is not trained in pediatrics or neurology, decided to chelate Colten, as he does with about one-third of his patients.

Among the parents and physicians of Defeat Autism Now!, it is an article of faith that these children are genetically vulnerable to damage from "toxins" like thimerosal. There's little scientific evidence to support that belief. Indeed, Vowell found "no reliable evidence" of hypersusceptibility to mercury in children with autism diagnoses.

But many parents remain convinced that chelation helped. "I think we're in a strange world when judges are opining on treatments for autism," said J.B. Handley, co-founder of Generation Rescue, a group that attributes many cases of autism to vaccines. "We hear more reports from parents than ever that chelation is working." In an e-mail message, Handley hypothesized that even if thimerosal were not solely to blame for autism, chelation still had beneficial effects. "We don't have answers for everything, and more kids are recovering."

To me, the Doctor's Data tests look like an artifact of science being put to unscientific use. A parent in search of answers on how to improve the health and communication skills of a profoundly disabled child isn't likely to focus on the finer points of matched controls. "Someone waves this sheet in front of you and says, 'You're three times the background rate!' " says Dr. Robert Baratz, a cell biologist and internist in Braintree, Mass., who has testified on chelation before medical boards. "Their agenda is to make money off of somebody else's misfortune. When you look at their charts, they never cure any patients. It's merely a matter of how close you can get to the bottom of their wallet."

Then comes the bully pulpit, the advocacy groups, doctors, and supplement salesmen who claim that chelation cures children. They overlook the fact that most kids' behavior will change as they grow older, whether or not they are autistic. To attribute these changes to an implausible treatment, without a controlled study, is wishful thinking.

Science hasn't figured out how to deal with autism, because the neural changes that probably cause it occur in the womb and it's a condition defined by behavior, not biological markers. In the absence of satisfactory answers, good money chases bad.

Doctor's Data did not respond to a request for an interview. An individual close to the company said there was no way to establish a base line for post-chelation samples, which might have been provoked by any number of different chelating agents, at varying doses. "The tests are ordered by physicians, so they can interpret the results," this person said. "They do what they want with this information." But copies of the reports, which chart the child's mercury levels into deceptively shaded "elevated" and "very elevated" areas, are typically provided to both physicians and patients.

Bradstreet eventually realized that chelation wasn't working for Colten. After conducting a painful spinal tap and a gut biopsy, he concluded that Colten was suffering not so much from thimerosal as from the effects of the measles-mumps-rubella shot, which contains no mercury. He began administering regular intravenous immune globulin, conventionally given to immunocompromised patients. The family said Colten improved on this therapy—at $3,000 a pop, though, they often couldn't afford it.

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medical examiner

The Hawthorne Effect

Why parents swear by ineffective treatments for autism.

By Sydney Spiesel

Wednesday, April 1, 2009, at 7:11 AM ET

Autism can present in many ways—hence "autism spectrum disorders"—but that range is nothing compared with the diverse techniques that parents use in their attempts to cure, ameliorate, or disrupt the progress of the disease. In the 60-plus years since autism was first described, many methods to treat it have been proposed—one research paper identified 111 recognized treatments or strategies. Studies have found that parents try an average of between 4.3 and seven interventions simultaneously; one family reported using 47 different treatments at one time.

Alas, almost none of these treatments are evidence-based, and some have been clearly demonstrated to be worthless. In dealing with other medical problems, like the common cold, I've always

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annoyed medication-seeking parents by pointing out the obvious: If there is any illness for which 100 treatments are available, you can be sure that none of them works. But with autism, the stakes are much higher.

It is especially difficult to know where to look for treatments when a condition is poorly defined and characterized. There are no laboratory tests or gross anatomical findings that establish the diagnosis, but experienced clinicians often "know it when they see it" almost instantly, especially when patients are severely affected. I once made the diagnosis from a dog-eared snapshot. Since most of the ways we diagnose autism are based on behavior, we can't rely on biological, structural, or chemical findings to determine if a treatment is working. We primarily measure success based on a patient's change, or lack thereof, in behavior.

Medications, new styles of teaching, classical psychological conditioning, physical manipulation, vitamins, diets, special eyeglasses—many kinds of treatments have been proposed and tried, but few have been tested in a rigorous way. Fewer still—some behavioral conditioning methods, a few anti-psychotic medications—have demonstrated some degree of efficacy. Some autistic patients exhibit very difficult patterns of behavior, ranging from simple stubbornness to compulsiveness to screaming to destructiveness to explosive violence. The behavioral changes produced by the few effective treatments make life in social settings (including the home) possible, but we have no idea whether they have any effect on the underlying cause (or causes) of autism or whether they even make severely affected patients feel better. The people who work with autistic clients often come to depend on their own sensitivity and empathy to judge whether a treatment has had a positive or negative impact.

Other treatments are iffier in their ability to cause behavioral change; some are utterly worthless. For instance, patients with autism frequently have huge difficulties in communication, so there has always been the hope that addressing that problem would have great benefit, both in improving quality of life and perhaps even in fixing the underlying problem. One method intended to help, "facilitated communication," is based on the idea that a sensitive facilitator will hold the hand of a patient over a kind of Ouija board. She will then help the patient respond to questions by sensing his intention and helping guide his hand to spell out answers. Rigorous studies have shown that the spelled-out answers come from the unconscious (or, worse, the conscious) mind of the facilitator. Nonetheless, the practice is still in use, and I know parents who are utterly convinced that it is valid and useful. Frankly, something important *did* happen when facilitated communication was introduced to my patients: They improved, they brightened, they became more social and more interactive, and they seemed, somehow, happier, even though facilitated communication didn't actually translate their thoughts into words. I'll come back to "why" in a minute.

Sensory integration treatment is another method in very wide use for autistic patients. The technique, developed by occupational therapist/clinical psychologist Dr. A. Jean Ayres, is based on the observation that some children, particularly in autistic, learning disabled, or developmentally delayed populations, show an excessive sensitivity to a variety of external stimuli—touch, position in space, sound. She posited that this was the result of a poor ability to process sensory messages received by the brain—for example, skin contact or signals from the balance organ in the inner ear. Ayres and her followers suggested that occupational therapists could help repair and reintegrate improperly processed sensory inputs. In doing so, they hoped to address and improve the underlying conditions that led to (or perhaps were caused by) dysfunctions in sensory integration. The techniques of sensory integrative treatment include rubbing or brushing skin (using graded and tactile stimulation), balance exercises, exposure to soft music, and the use of weighted clothes, among other things. Does it work? Most of the research has been of very poor quality, but, in virtually all of the recent studies, sensory integration doesn't seem to be any more beneficial than any other treatment.

The problem is this: When it comes to human behavior, almost any (positive) attention or intervention is likely to be somewhat beneficial. Between 1924 and 1932, some industrial psychologists and efficiency experts studied the Western Electric manufacturing plant in Hawthorne, Ill., to determine what interventions might lead to an increase in productivity. Increase the lighting, even a little bit? Definite improvement for a while. Shorten the workday? Definite improvement for a while. Lengthen it? Definite improvement for a while. Dim the lighting? Definite improvement for a while. It looks as if environmental alteration, especially if coupled with increased attention and perhaps expectation, often leads to change in human behavior. It's called the "Hawthorne effect."

People respond—mostly favorably—to positive attention and interaction. The question we need to ask about all the treatments available for autism is whether they actively shape and change brain development and thus treat the underlying condition, as many proponents believe, or whether the benefits (if they are present at all) are simply another example of the Hawthorne effect.

Perhaps my patients who became more alive and more interactive after facilitated communication was introduced changed because their families and caretakers were taking them more seriously as people who might have an inner life—people worthy of attention and interaction.

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mixing desk

Rascal Flatts

The kings of Midwestern prom rock.

By Jody Rosen

Wednesday, April 1, 2009, at 2:13 PM ET

The new album by the country superstars Rascal Flatts, out next week, is called *Unstoppable*. The title is well-chosen: The band has parlayed an aesthetic of relentlessness—huge, wind-whipped ballads about undying love, broken hearts, broken roads, tears that fall like rain, rain that falls "on the roof of this empty house," walking through the rain, trying to catch the rain—into one of the decade's commercial juggernauts. The group, from Columbus, Ohio, has released five studio albums since 2000, all of which have been certified multiplatinum. (*Feels Like Today*, from 2004, sold 5 million copies.) It's had nine No. 1 country singles, but the fiddles and mandolins are mostly ornamental—barely audible amid the electric guitars and string orchestra swells that supercharge the money shot choruses. Rascal Flatts' real genre is Midwestern prom rock. In hits like "What Hurts the Most" (2006), "Take Me There" (2007), and "Bless the Broken Road" (2004), the mournful catch in singer Gary LeVox's voice recalls no one so much as Kevin Cronin, the leader of an earlier era's Big Ten ballad powerhouse, REO Speedwagon of Champaign, Ill.

On the first single from *Unstoppable*, "Here Comes Goodbye," Rascal Flatts hit its marks with the usual efficiency. There is a stately piano intro, electric guitar and strings that surge to the forefront in the second chorus, and a lyric about sleepless nights and tumbling tears. The song (co-written by *American Idol* also-ran Chris Sligh) makes plaintive use of the E-minor chord, and LeVox has a nice falsetto flourish in the chorus.

The video, though, takes this perfectly tidy heartbreak ballad into a whole realm of bizzaro gothic sentimentality, with a puzzling little ghost story starring a grandfather, a grandson, and a couple of pretty blond women weeping on the front porch of a snowbound farmhouse. "Sometimes life just seems like chapters of goodbyes," Grandpa intones while the little boy plays with some suspiciously old-looking Matchbox trucks. The goodbye in question, it turns out, is not the one lovelorn LeVox is singing about—"One day I thought I'd see her with her daddy by her side/ And violins would play 'Here Comes the Bride' "—but the big goodbye: death. Grandad's dead. The creepy boy-child is dead. The women are talking to gravestones in the snow. And Rascal Flatts is crashing into a final chorus—their coiffure intact despite a swirling blizzard, their great big melody, like their faith in schmaltz, veritably unstoppable.

Previously: Read about Prince's new album.

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mixing desk

Prince's New Album

A new protégé and a lot of love for Salma Hayek.

By Jody Rosen

Tuesday, March 31, 2009, at 7:47 AM ET

Attention, Target shoppers. The new release by Prince, a three-CD package titled *Lotusflow3r*, is now on sale exclusively at the discount retailer for just $11.98. It's a bargain, especially when you consider the alternative: Those wishing to download the records—*Lotusflow3r* and *MPLSound*, a pair of Prince solo discs, and *Elixer*, the debut by Prince's new protégé Bria Valente—can do so at lotusflow3r.com for the not-so-low price of $77.

I'm not sure what to make of this pricing scheme. At age 50, Prince has reached the curmudgeonly stage of his career; on the new album, he declares himself "old-fashioned" and spends several songs proving it, inveighing against DJs who don't play his records, "the freax in the magazines who never paid no dues," and other whippersnappers who are sending the world to hell. One wonders: Is Prince rewarding fans who, after the 20th-century fashion, troop to the store to buy physical product while punishing downloaders by charging them $2.38 per song? I wouldn't put any capriciousness past him, but it's probably best not to search for logic in *Lotusflow3r*. It is a messy and bewildering (and, frequently, thrilling) mix of sensuality and theology, stitched together with some staggeringly virtuoso musicianship. In other words, it's a Prince project par excellence.

Elixer serves mainly as a reminder of Prince's spotty record as a Svengali. Valente is Appollonia redux: a beautiful woman with little personality, musical or otherwise. Her plush, precise slow jams will doubtless sound better when Prince covers them himself in concert. More bracing are *Lotusflow3r*, which foregrounds Prince's Hendrix-esque guitar heroics, and *MPLSound*, a tribute to the synthesizer-propelled funk that Prince established as Minneapolis sound in the 1980s. The orientation is retro, but Prince's innate weirdness steers the music far from nostalgia and genre clichés. The songs take curious twists: The funk workout "Chocolate Box," on *MPLSound*, disassembles into a symphony of guitar screeches, keyboard beeps, and heavy breathing; on "$" (*Lotusflow3r*) and "Ol' Skool Company" (*MPLSound*) Prince revives his helium-voiced alter ego Camille, a precursor to the autotune vocal distortions that dominate today's Top 40.

Prince's influence can also be detected in the weird, funny boudoir pop of R&B stars like R. Kelly and The-Dream. But where, for instance, Kelly's "Trapped in the Closet" is a bit of a sweat act, kinkiness comes naturally to Prince; he remains a sui generis libertine. In the middle of *MPLSound* is "Valentina," a deliciously perverse Princely come-on. The song is a lustful ode

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to Salma Hayek—addressed to the actress' 18-month-old daughter. Prince sings: "Hey Valentina tell your mama/ She should give me a call/ When she get tired of runnin'/ After you down the hall/ And she's all worn out/ From those late-night feedings." On the off chance that the song fails to produce the desired effect, Prince includes an insurance pickup line, figuring that the infant Valentina has access to all of Hollywood's A-list Latinas. "If Penélope wants to Cruz," he sings, "there ain't no way that we ain't gon' dance."

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moneybox

Paper Money

Newspapers aren't assets to be flipped, leveraged, and stripped.

By Daniel Gross

Wednesday, April 1, 2009, at 4:19 PM ET

Each time a newspaper company closes or files for bankruptcy—as Sun-Times Media, the owner of the *Chicago Sun-Times* and 58 other newspapers, did this week—analysts are quick to hammer another nail in the coffin of the printed word. Roughly coinciding as they do with the advent of the Kindle 2, the failures give ammunition to voices who say newspapers are obsolete. Now that both of the Second City's major newspapers are operating under the umbrella of Chapter 11, and with papers in Denver and Seattle shutting down, it's tough to argue with those who say the industry has useless management, a fundamentally unviable business model, and not much of a future.

While newspapers have serious problems, the recent failures of several newspaper companies (here's a list of list of four others that have gone BK in recent months) shouldn't necessarily lead to visions of the apocalypse. Virtually every newspaper in the country has experienced a sharp drop in advertising and is suffering losses. But not every newspaper company in the country has gone bankrupt as a result. And the failures may say more about a style of capitalism than an industry. Each company was undone in large measure by really stupid (and in one case criminal) activities by managers.

Let's review. Sun-Times Media is the name given to the company formerly run by convicted felon Conrad Black. Black and his colleague, Publisher David Radler, who confessed to his crimes, improperly took tens of millions of dollars in fees from the company and caused it endless legal heartache. Jeremy L. Halbreich, the interim CEO of the company, blamed the bankruptcy filing on "this deteriorating economic climate, coupled with a significant, pending IRS tax liability dating back to previous management."

The actions of the top executives in other bankrupt newspaper companies were criminal only if you consider gross financial stupidity and recklessness to be jailing offenses. Who loads up newspapers—cyclical companies whose revenues are in secular decline thanks to the disappearance of classified advertisements and the rise of the Internet—with tons of debt at precisely the wrong time? Financial geniuses, that's who.

In 2007, legendary real estate investor Sam Zell decided that a talent for good timing in flipping office buildings made him an expert on the ailing newspaper industry. In December 2007, he closed on the $8.2 billion purchase of the Tribune Co., which owned the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and the Chicago Cubs. Zell put down just 4 percent of the purchase price—$315 million—and borrowed much of the rest, leaving the company with a $13 billion debt burden. This deal was the purest expression of the "dumb money" mentality. The only hope Zell had of making a dent in the debt load and keeping current on the $800-million-plus annual interest tab was to sell off trophy properties like the Cubs, office buildings, and big-city newspapers—assets that themselves don't throw off lots of income but whose purchase requires tons of cheap credit. Tribune Co. filed for bankruptcy Dec. 8, 2008.

Two of the other large newspaper companies that went bust in recent months have similar back stories. A bunch of private-equity types bought the company that owns the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and *Philadelphia Daily News* in June 2006, borrowing about $450 million of the $562 million purchase price. The company filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in late February but not before paying top executives $650,000 in bonuses in December. Among those getting a bonus: Brian Tierney, the former public relations executive who was one of the architects of the deal. The *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, which filed for Chapter 11 in January, was another private-equity train wreck. About two years ago, Avista Capital Partners bought the paper for $530 million, loading well over $400 million of debt onto the company.

In other words, the newspaper companies that have failed wholesale were essentially set up to fail by inexperienced managers who believed piling huge amounts of debt on businesses whose revenues were shrinking *even when the economy was growing* was a shrewd means of value creation. A similar dynamic is playing out in other industries. Several mattress companies have filed for bankruptcy or are near it. It's not simply because sales are down due to the economy or because mattresses, which rely on an inferior technology, are being displaced by futuristic futons. Rather, as the *Wall Street Journal* reported (subscription required), the companies are going bust because private-equity types loaded them up with absurd levels of debt at the wrong time.

It's true that plenty of smaller newspapers without huge debt loads are in trouble. But lots of newspapers are muddling

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through, in part because, like our sister publication the *Washington Post*, they're owned by a parent company that has other lines of profitable businesses; or, like the *New York Times*, their parent companies have the financial flexibility to take dramatic action to raise capital; or, like Gannett papers, the parent company manages expenses aggressively. All newspapers—all print media—have been hit hard in this recession. All face an existential crisis and may ultimately face the prospect of bankruptcy. Those whose owners saw papers as assets to be flipped, leveraged, and stripped are already bankrupt.

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moneybox

Paid Cadillac Prices, Got a Chevrolet

Obama's auto bailout punishes Wall Streeters as much his toxic-assets program helped them.

By Daniel Gross

Monday, March 30, 2009, at 6:15 PM ET

The Obama administration's new program to encourage the purchase of troubled mortgage assets last week offered what seemed to be a nice wet kiss to the private-equity/hedge-fund complex. But on Monday, with his announcement about the future of the U.S. auto industry, President Obama delivered a slap to the same folks.

In addition to pushing out General Motors CEO Rick Wagoner, Obama also sent unwelcome tidings to other stakeholders of both GM and Chrysler. Given that Obama is being advised on these efforts by Steve Rattner, a veteran private-equity manager and investment banker, it's not too hard to divine the unpleasant message he was delivering to Wall Street hotshots.

At GM, the action is all about the company's debt, not its equity. GM's market capitalization was about $2.23 billion before trading opened today and is less than $2 billion as I write. By contrast, the company has loads of debt. (Here's a list of outstanding bonds.) The most recent quarterly results indicate long-term debt of more than $29 billion. And since the firm's credit ratings have been pushed deep into junk territory, that means most of the holders of this debt are hedge funds, private-equity firms, and other investment vehicles. (Many mutual funds and institutional investors like pensions or insurance companies eschew junk debt.) GM's debt is trading at what is euphemistically called "distressed levels." As indicated here, bonds due in less than two years are trading at 20 cents on the dollar. Many of those who bought GM's bonds did so because they hoped to 1) convert the debt into ownership in the case of bankruptcy filing or 2) see the bonds rise in value should the government step in and formally guarantee GM's corporate debt. Obama made clear today what they suspected: No such guarantee would be forthcoming. While GM had tried to restructure, Obama noted, it hasn't yet done enough. "I'm absolutely confident that GM can rise again, providing that it undergoes a fundamental restructuring. Have they cleaned up their balance sheets, or are they still saddled with so much debt that they can't make future investments?" (If you answered this double question with a *no* and a *yes*, you're right!) The upshot: Holders of GM's debt, like other entities to whom GM has made financial commitments—dealers, the auto unions—are going to have to cut a deal, sooner rather than later, and accept less than they think they're entitled to. None of that AIG-creditor treatment for you.

Obama's message to Chrysler was harsher. The company's equity—its stock—is owned not by public shareholders but by the private-equity firm Cerberus, which paid $7.4 billion to buy an 80 percent stake in the company. Cerberus sold off big chunks of its equity to other professional investors, which reduces the amount of capital it has at risk. But last year it agreed to lend $2 billion to the struggling firm. According to the viability plan Chrysler submitted to Washington, the company has about $24 billion in debt outstanding. Effectively, Obama told Chrysler that the government wouldn't be providing much, if any, new cash and that he didn't foresee much of a future for the company as an independent firm. He heavily recommended it pursue a deal in the works with Fiat, in which the Italian company would get a 35 percent stake in Fiat in exchange for contributing know-how. The equity that Cerberus and other investors have put in was already severely impaired. After today, it's worth even less. Obama gave Cerberus 30 days to cut a deal with Fiat. (How do you say *negotiating leverage* in Italian?) Should Fiat and Chrysler cut a deal—which would dilute Cerberus' impaired equity even further—"we will consider lending up to $6 billion to help their plan succeed," Obama says. If not, "and in the absence of any other viable partnership, we will not be able to justify investing additional tax dollars to keep Chrysler in business." In other words, big haircuts all around—for owners, bondholders, and creditors—even if Chrysler survives.

Obama also used the B-word, *bankruptcy*, which would be particularly disastrous for Cerberus. Under any circumstances, it seems, many of the Wall Streeters who celebrated Obama's toxic-assets plan won't profit from his auto bailout.

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moneybox

Bubblespeak

The Orwellian language of Wall Street finds its way to the Treasury Department.

By Daniel Gross

Saturday, March 28, 2009, at 7:44 AM ET

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In his timeless 1946 essay "Politics and the English Language," George Orwell condemned political rhetoric as a tool used "to make lies sound truthful" and "to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind." Were he alive today, Orwell might well be moved to pen a companion piece on the use of financial lingo. Remember those toxic assets? The poorly performing mortgages and collateralized debt obligations festering on the books of banks that made truly execrable lending decisions? In the latest federal bank rescue plan, they've been transformed into "legacy loans" and "legacy securities"—safe for professional investors to purchase, provided, of course, they get lots of cheap government credit.

It's as if some thoughtful person had amassed, through decades of careful husbandry, a valuable collection that's now being left as a blessing for posterity. Using the word *legacy* to describe phenomena that are causing financial carnage is "crazy," according to George Lakoff, a Berkeley professor of cognitive science and linguistics, because "*legacy* typically suggests something positive." More insidiously, the word is frequently deployed to deflect blame. Legacy financial issues are, by definition, holdovers from prior regimes. Word sleuths advise me that *legacy* derives from an ancient Indo-Aryan root meaning, "It wasn't my fault, and I should still get a bonus this year even though we lost billions of dollars."

The (not so) Big Three auto companies routinely refer to the now-unaffordable pension and health care commitments entered into by prior management as "legacy costs." (And why not? They've convinced us to regard used cars as "pre-owned.") Citi CEO Vikram Pandit last month told employees that "we are profitable through the first two months of 2009 and are having our best quarter-to-date performance since the third quarter of 2007." Huh? Citi, currently connected to a taxpayer-funded multibillion-dollar feeding tube, is "profitable" only if you ignore the losses it continues to incur on lending decisions made in the previous years—legacy loans made by legacy bankers.

In this new paradigm, a legacy, usually a gift, is a burden. A potential loss is spun as a potential gain. War is peace. See what I mean by Orwellian?

The legacy gambit is necessary, in part, because the prior nomenclature used to describe the stuff in question was so corrosive. "*Toxic* is one of those words that is so negative that it's just hyperbole," said Jesse Sheidlower, editor-at-large of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The phrase *toxic assets*, used widely in 2008, was either a sign of admirable reality or an attempt to scare people into action. A middle ground of sorts was reached last fall when then-Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson rolled out the Troubled Asset Relief Program. Of course, calling some of those mortgage assets "troubled" was a little like calling Charles Manson a troubled person.

In trying to rebrand dodgy financial instruments, treasury secretaries like Paulson and Timothy Geithner are continuing a recent tradition. So much of the finance sector's innovation in the past 30 years, it turns out, wasn't developing new stuff, but rather developing new ways of talking about pre-existing stuff. In the 1980s, labeling risky debt offerings as junk bonds was an intentionally ironic feint (pros knew that the instruments possessed real value). But as junk bonds went mainstream in the 1990s, they evolved into "high-yield debt"—their liability became an asset. Frank Partnoy, a reformed derivatives trader who teaches law at the University of San Diego, recalls that at Morgan Stanley in the 1990s, "we were constantly coming up with new acronyms" to describe similar financial instruments. The goal: to present products, some of which had been discredited, in a more favorable light.

At the height of the housing frenzy, I visited a large subprime lender in Irvine, Calif. These folks would have made a $425,000, no-money-down, negative-amortization loan to a 12-year-old presenting nothing more than Pokémon cards as collateral. Were they engaged in subprime lending? Absolutely not. This outfit, they informed me proudly, made "nonprime" loans.

The late Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan lamented declining societal standards in an essay titled "Defining Deviancy Down." The language employed in the late credit bubble—let's rebrand it the Dumb Money Era—helped define solvency down. And words, even if they're thrown mostly by sophisticated professionals at other sophisticated professionals, can be just as damaging as sticks and stones.

The people on Wall Street believed so fervently in their own rhetoric that they bet their financial houses on it. They chugged the Kool-Aid through funnels. "If you call a mortgage-backed security AAA for long enough, you forget that its value could get cut in half," says Frank Partnoy.

The problem isn't that words intended to change the conversation aren't accurate. Rather, the accepted terms turned out not to mean what people think they mean. Instead of helping to reduce risk, securitization—chopping up debt and distributing it—spread risk. Nonprime mortgages frequently turned out to be subprime. A lot of high-yield debt turned out to be junk. This confusion over the meaning of financial terms, and the skepticism it engenders, may be the real legacy of the Dumb Money Era.

A version of this article appears in this week's Newsweek.

movies

Back in the Summer of '87

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Greg Mottola's wonderful *Adventureland*.
By Dana Stevens
Friday, April 3, 2009, at 11:37 AM ET

Adventureland (Miramax Films), Greg Mottola's tale of coming of age in Pittsburgh in 1987, has the note-perfect melancholy of a classic young adult novel. Like many books of that genre, the film takes place over one very special, and often very shitty, summer. James Brennan (Jesse Eisenberg), a brainy and high-strung kid fresh out of college, has been counting on touring Europe before starting grad school in the fall. But when his secretly alcoholic father (Jack Gilpin, wonderful in a nearly wordless part) gets demoted at work, James has to contribute to the family income by taking a job at Adventureland, a seriously downscale amusement park.

To his humiliation, James is soon handing out lame prizes (a stuffed banana with googly eyes?) and mopping up children's barf at a game booth. His fellow reluctant carnies include Joel (Martin Starr), a pipe-smoking, Gogol-reading misfit, and Em (Kristen Stewart), the slinkster-cool tough girl of every indie boy's dreams. Em offers James rides home from work, Lou Reed and Big Star blasting from the car stereo, and confides in him about her miserable family. But she's secretly involved with Mike Connell (Ryan Reynolds), Adventureland's mechanic and chief Lothario, who's both much older and a married man. Frustrated by Em's reluctance to go beyond friendship, James takes up with the park slut, Lisa P. (Margarita Levieva), only to discover that beneath her hoop-earringed, gum-snapping exterior lurks a Catholic prude.

All this sounds like a retread of raunchy, deliberately outrageous teen sex comedies—*American Pie*, say, or Mottola's last film, *Superbad*. Instead, *Adventureland* harks back to the introspective teen rom-coms of the 1980s, with Jesse Eisenberg in the John Cusack role. The gangly Eisenberg, with his soulful gaze and unruly mop of curls, is adorable enough to spread on toast, as anyone who saw him in *The Squid and the Whale* can attest. And the amount of screen time devoted to James' emotional, as opposed to hormonal, fluctuations makes *Adventureland* as likely to appeal to girls as boys. Kristen Stewart, who gets more ethereally lovely with each screen appearance, plays a darker and richer variant of the disaffected schoolgirl she played in *Twilight*. And Ryan Reynolds, an actor I've never really gotten the point of before, invests his potentially unappealing character—a would-be musician with a weakness for jailbait—with unexpected layers of pathos and humor.

The film doesn't go to archival extremes in its period correctness (it's not, like last year's *The Wackness*, a nostalgic museum piece), but the details feel just right: The cool girl wears army fatigues and drives a dented hatchback. As the meek wife of Adventureland's cheapskate manager (Bill Hader), Kristen Wiig wears sublimely awful blue jeans, high-waisted and acid-washed. The tacky disco the kids frequent is called Razzmatazz, and the nice restaurant reserved for special dates is called (this one kills me) The Velvet Touch. The soundtrack captures the way pop music can function as the backdrop of a love affair: It includes a few classic '80s touchstones (the Cure's "Just Like Heaven," the Replacements' "Unsatisfied") but also unearths worthy smaller hits like Crowded House's "Don't Dream It's Over."

Perhaps the outsized affection I feel for this modest little movie is partly generational: I'm only two years younger than Greg Mottola, and in the summer of 1988, one year after the film takes place, I was a college grad with a degree even more useless than James' and a crap job at a bakery. But surely you don't have to have lived through the summer of Iran-Contra and *Robocop* in order to remember (or look forward to) how the worst summer job ever can turn into the ride of your life.

Slate V: The critics on* Adventureland *and other new movies

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movies

Bright Lights, Big Curveball

The remarkable *Sugar* tells the story of Dominican baseball prodigies in the United States.
By Dana Stevens
Thursday, April 2, 2009, at 11:44 AM ET

More than half of ***Sugar*** (Sony Pictures Classics) takes place on the baseball field, but to call it a sports movie would be like labeling *The Bicycle Thief* a film about cycling. For the film's hero, Miguel "Sugar" Santos (Algenís Perez Soto), baseball is a means of survival, a ticket out of desperate circumstances. *Sugar* is a finely observed study of a subcategory of the American immigrant experience: the lives of Dominican baseball prodigies who are spotted by American talent scouts, groomed in the Dominican Republic, and brought to the United States to play on farm teams in the minor leagues.

Sugar is also the second feature from the filmmaking couple Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck, whose first movie was *Half Nelson* (2007), a quietly harrowing portrait of the friendship between a drug-addicted public school teacher and his troubled student. When *Half Nelson* was recognized with multiple festival awards and an Oscar nomination for its star, Ryan Gosling, Boden and Fleck were in a position to make whatever movie they wanted. It's an encouraging sign for the next generation of filmmakers (Boden is 29 years old, Fleck 32) that they chose a project as unusual, and potentially uncommercial, as *Sugar*.

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How uncommercial are we talking? Most of the dialogue in *Sugar* is in Spanish, and there are long stretches with no dialogue at all, in which the expression on a character's face or the thwack of a ball on a glove tells us all we need to know. And without giving away too much of the ending, I can say that the movie steers miles clear of the conventional win-one-for-the-Gipper sentimentality of the sports movie. It's about immigration and acculturation, capitalism and exploitation, hospitality and loneliness.

As the movie opens, 19-year-old "Sugar" Santos—who likes to claim his nickname derives from his skill with the ladies, rather than (as his teammates insist) his predilection for dessert—spends his weeks boarding at an American-run baseball academy in the Dominican Republic, returning to his dirt-poor hometown only on weekends. After mastering a near-unhittable knuckle curve, he's invited to the States, where, after a stint at a training facility in Arizona, he's sent to Bridgetown, Iowa, to play for the single-A team there. He boards with an elderly Christian couple, the Higginses, who live on an isolated farm and speak just enough Spanish to forbid *chicas* and *cerveza*. After some exquisitely awkward attempts to join the church youth group of the Higginses' pretty granddaughter Anne (Ellary Porterfield), Sugar resigns himself to socializing only with his Dominican teammates, especially Jorge (Rayniel Rufino), an older player who's recovering from a knee injury. But when Jorge is cut from the team and moves to New York, Sugar's sense of alienation becomes almost unbearable and begins to take its toll on his game and his fragile sense of confidence.

The most remarkable thing *Sugar* does is give American viewers a sense of how our country must seem to a newly arrived immigrant, without caricaturing or condescending to either guest or host. Sugar and his teammates marvel at conveniences such as the hotel minibar and on-demand porn. But straitened by their meager paychecks and nearly nonexistent English, they subsist for weeks on French toast, the only meal on the diner menu whose name they recognize. Seen through the camera of Andrij Parekh (who also shot *Half Nelson*), the cornfields of Iowa and sterile locker-room interiors of the ball club look as lonesome as moonscapes, an expression of Sugar's barren interior state. And though the stodgy, baseball-obsessed Higginses couldn't be more hopeless at reaching out to their miserable boarder, they're not shown as villains, just decent people with a limited and limiting view of the world.

Algenís Perez Soto, a Dominican native and longtime nonprofessional athlete, has his work cut out for him in this, his first acting role. He not only appears—often by himself—in virtually every scene of the movie, but he's required to shift gears from cock-of-the-walk bravado to sulky rage to despair to cautious hope. Perez Soto's infinitely expressive face—not to mention his gorgeous, lanky physique and that mean throwing arm—should open up opportunities that will take him farther than Sugar Santos could have imagined.

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my goodness

A Private Matter

Am I hurting my local public schools—and hurting America—by sending my kids to expensive private schools?

By Patty Stonesifer and Sandy Stonesifer

Wednesday, April 1, 2009, at 7:08 AM ET

Do you have a real-life do-gooding dilemma? Please send it to ask.my.goodness@gmail.com and Patty and Sandy will try to answer it.

Dear Patty and Sandy,

My family lives on the west side of Los Angeles. I face the same choice as many urban families: Will the kids attend public or private schools? Should one minimize opportunities for one's own child in service to the greater good?

In our desire to protect our children physically and academically, we send them to very expensive schools that are inherently segregated ethnically and economically. We, being white, educated, and comparatively affluent, are the agenda-setters in society. The agenda does not include fierce protection of the public school system we value in general terms but abandon in our own specific cases.

And so we've let down our future fellow citizens by turning our backs on them. And we've certainly let the government off the hook yet again, by individually shouldering the burden of quality education for our own children and letting the public schools crumble. Advice?

Eloise

Patty:

Eloise, the public education failure in this country is huge, and fixing it needs to be a national priority. Thirty percent of American eighth-graders never make it to graduation; 1.2 million students will drop out of high school this year. We rank 21st in science education and 25th in math education among the top 30 industrialized nations. As you know, our country's future requires deep and broad reform of our public school system. I encourage you to follow, learn, and act on key education decisions that affect all students in California, and you can do that through the Education Trust's West Coast affiliate. On a national basis, you can learn about what is going on across the country and how you can take action related to the three pillars that are part of the Strong American Schools effort (raising American education standards, putting effective teachers in every classroom, and increasing time for learning). There is

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some limited good news: The stimulus plan included $140 billion for schools, and while most of that will go to prop up state investments in education in times of decreased revenue, about $15 billion of it is discretionary for the new secretary of education, Arne Duncan, who plans to use it reward and accelerate education reform efforts.

Now my own disclosure: My two kids went to public schools for elementary school, and then we switched them to a local private school. Even with my concern about the overall system, I am unapologetic about this decision. My role as a concerned citizen—supporting the importance of public schools in my community and across the country—did not trump my responsibility as a parent to make the best decisions I could for my family and my children given the information I had at hand about their needs and the services available.

While my advice is to choose the best school you can for your child and your family situation, you also have a continued obligation, in my view, to advocate for near-term and dramatic improvements in the public system that serves the majority of our children.

Sandy:

Since I don't have kids of my own yet, I haven't given much thought to the public vs. private dilemma. I asked some twentysomething friends what their plans are and ended up with a variety of "it depends" coupled with looks of intense distress at the thought of having to make such a weighty decision. I feel the same way, so I offered the following challenge to a friend who is also an education expert: What advice would she give to parents struggling with Eloise's dilemma?

She made the excellent point that accepting the public education system *as it is* would be a far better example of "letting the government off the hook" than sending your kids to private school. While making the right personal decision about your children's well-being is important, so is the public responsibility that you have to advocate for all kids in the same way you advocate for your own. And she underscored what research shows (and every parent knows) to be the most important determinant of success at any school: quality teachers. *How* we ensure the best teachers are attracted and retained in the system, however, is hotly contested. Performance pay, changes in teacher training, better data systems to track student progress, or any of the other numerous teacher incentive programs will require that we begin to make real efforts at reform and track the evidence of what works. The New Teacher Project, started by Michelle Rhee, the current chancellor of Washington, D.C., public schools, works to help ensure all kids have access to the highest-quality, effective teachers possible.

In President Obama's first town hall meeting, his answer to the question "How do we know what makes an effective teacher?" was, by some reports, the most animated exchange. Our education guru says that the most well-meaning parents who flee public schools (and probably even well-meaning parents who have their kids in public schools) often end up unconsciously supporting bad policy decisions when they think they are doing what's best for kids. One of the best examples of this can be found in your home state of California, Eloise. California pushed through a huge statewide class-size-reduction effort in the primary grades. While it cost the state billions of dollars, the effort actually ended up diminishing teacher quality without showing any clear educational benefits. Though "conventional wisdom" still says that smaller class sizes are the most important factor in a child's educational success, the only thing the research shows to be anything close to a "silver bullet" is ensuring that children end up with a high-quality teacher for an extended time.

Finally, returning to the dilemma of the parent making the decision one child at a time:It's important to remember that there are great private schools *and* great public schools. So rather than worry about one type of school over the other, you should focus on identifying your child's and family's needs and do your best to find a school that meets them. The Department of Education's Guide to Choosing a School for Your Child and the Great Schools site both provide good tools and resources for deciding what factors are important to you and finding schools that meet those needs.

Do you have a real-life do-gooding dilemma? Please send it to ask.my.goodness@gmail.com and Patty and Sandy will try to answer it.

In our ongoing effort to do better ourselves, we're donating 25 percent of the proceeds from this column to ONE.org—an organization committed to raising public awareness about the issues of global poverty, hunger, and disease and the efforts to fight such problems in the world's poorest countries.

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other magazines

Waltz With Bashar

Seymour Hersh recommends talks with Syria.

By Sonia Smith

Tuesday, March 31, 2009, at 6:47 PM ET

***New Yorker*, April 6**

Seymour Hersh corresponds with Syrian President Bashar Assad and finds him willing to enter peace talks with Israel if the Obama administration mediates. Hersh warns Obama not to pass up such a chance, which could lead to a strategic realignment in the Middle East. "[A] deal on the Golan Heights could be a way to isolate Iran, one of Syria's closest allies, and to moderate

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Syria's support for Hamas and for Hezbollah," Hersh writes. Assad may have another goal as well: to serve as an intermediary between the United States and Iran. **…** Bearded billionaire heir David de Rothschild plans to sail across the Pacific this summer on *Plastiki*, a custom-built boat made entirely from recycled materials, an article finds. While de Rothschild has skied to both poles and is no stranger to adventure, this voyage is particularly treacherous. "Storms, sharks, isolation, injury, and illness are standard hazards attempting a Pacific crossing by sailboat, but de Rothschild is proposing to do it in an experimental craft made from materials that have never been tested against ocean waves."

***Newsweek*, April 6**
Nobel Prize in tow, Paul Krugman has emerged as Obama's most visible liberal detractor, the cover story reports. At his perch at the *New York Times*, Krugman has been vocal in his distaste for Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner and the administration's attempts largely to preserve the status quo in the banking sector. Krugman has never met Obama and expressed annoyance that the president mispronounced his name at a press conference. "Krugman is not likely to show up in an administration job in part because he has a noble—but not government-career-enhancing—history of speaking truth to power." **…** One-quarter of all newspaper jobs could disappear this year, according to an article on the death of the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*. Seattle was a two-newspaper town, leaving the *Seattle Times* to chronicle awkwardly the final gasps of its long-time rival. "The intense rivalry made it a tricky assignment. Imagine Barack Obama writing John McCain's life story, or Goldman Sachs presiding at Lehman Brothers' funeral."

***New Republic*, April 15**
Looking to previous Democratic administrations, Jonathan Chait predicts in the cover story that Obama will fail because the Democratic Party "remains mired in fecklessness, parochialism, and privilege." Democrats like Nebraska Sen. Ben Nelson confuse business interests with the national interest and bring rot to the party, Chait writes. "It seems impossible to believe that this party, with the challenges before the country so great and the opportunity to address them so rare, would again follow the path to self-immolation. Yet, somehow, the Democrats can't help themselves." **…** Jason Zengerle wonders why New York City stopped churning out basketball stars. A city that once stocked NBA all-star teams has turned to producing professional basketball's "malcontents and underachievers." One scout thinks that the city's young talent is surrounded by a corrupting amount of hype. New York today would spoil even a young Michael Jordan. "[H]e would have had to have been Michael Jackson in addition to Michael Jordan. He would have become a performance artist, and he would have cared a lot less," the scout says.

***Weekly Standard*, April 6**
A reporter travels to the West Bank in search of a Palestinian leader who practices peaceful resistance in the vein of Gandhi or Martin Luther King. Suicide bombings and other forms of terror have failed to achieve Palestinian goals. "So why not adopt the strategy of nonviolent civil disobedience, the methods of Gandhi?" the author asks. "Sainthood can work," he argues. "Britain abandoned India; Montgomery's buses were desegregated." While some argue that Islam is inherently violent, others say Hamas has politicized Islam to suit its needs. Religion "is a box where you can find all sorts of tools to legitimize your strategy," says one scholar. **…** An article carps about Obama's budget and says the administration is underestimating the long-term effect it will have on the national debt. The administration is overestimating how many jobs will be created and is not taking into account that some of the stimulus spending will become permanent.

***New York*, April 6**
Michael Osinski narrates how he helped bring about the financial crisis as the behind-the-scenes person who penned the widely used software that sliced mortgages into bonds. This practice, he said, is the equivalent of grinding up chicken and dubbing it steak. Osinski remains proud of his work but is still grappling with the results. "To know that a dozen years of diligent work somehow soured, and instead of benefitting society unhinged it, is humbling," he writes. Osinski, something of a Renaissance man, worked as a shrimper and ditch digger before turning to programming. Since his retirement in 2001, he has been farming oysters off Long Island. **…** The Obamas will be using their own funds and Steven Spielberg's decorator to spruce up the White House, an item notes.

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poem

"Poem for Hannah"

By Matthew Zapruder
Tuesday, March 31, 2009, at 7:45 AM ET

Click the arrow on the audio player to hear Matthew Zapruder read this poem. You can also download the recording or subscribe to ***Slate****'s Poetry Podcast on iTunes.*

The tiny bee on its mission
died before it felt a thing. Its
body rested for a moment
on the railing of my sunny

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porch in California. Then
wind took it away. You
are an older sister now so
it's true the world owes you
massive reparations. Also
you have special alarm
pheromones implanted
in your nose that explode
with *phacelia distans*
i.e. wild heliotrope each time
what they say will happen
turns out to be a compendium
of what can never exactly
be. Today the electric bus
full of humans listening
through tiny flesh-colored
earbuds to the music news
or literature perfectly calibrated
to their needs kneels before
the young man in his gleaming
black wheelchair. Inside
green laboratories experiments
in the realm of tiny particles
are being for our vast benefit
completed. Already I can see
the same little wrinkle I have
appearing on your brow.
You were born to feel a way
you don't have a word for.

politics

Economies of Scale

The Obama administration is finally putting together a roster of spokesmen to defend its economic policies.

By John Dickerson

Thursday, April 2, 2009, at 6:15 PM ET

Good news for President Obama: Americans aren't tired of him yet. The latest Pew poll shows that Obama fatigue is very low, despite his regular presence on the front page, the op-ed page, prime-time TV, Sunday-morning TV, drive-time radio, talk radio, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and any other forum that will have him. Only about one-third of respondents said they felt they were hearing too much from the president.

White House aides were right. Over the last few weeks, they've argued the president was in no immediate danger of overexposure because Americans like him and want to hear what he has to say. What concerned Obama's advisers was that if Americans did eventually tire of the president, the administration would be without a spokesman on economic policy, since he was the only person who could clearly articulate and defend his plans. The man who was supposed to play a key supporting role, Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner, was so damaged the president was spending time insisting he wasn't going to let him go.

That was last week. Now it looks as if the administration has a competent economic B-team. Not only has Geithner's standing improved, but several other economic advisers have found their voices. It couldn't have happened at a better time, as the administration prepares to battle over budget priorities with Democrats and Republicans.

The way an administration communicates can seem beside the point. What about the policies? But as Warren Buffett put it recently, even smart policies need to be communicated properly in order to have an impact. One of the president's key jobs—perhaps *the* key job—is to persuade both the public and Congress. But he can't do it alone. And the more speeches and appearances and announcements he makes, the more mundane those events become. A good chorus allows the president to be reserved for crucial moments.

Last weekend, the president had his first Sunday show appearance on *Face the Nation*. But White House aides weren't worried about Obama. They were worried about Geithner, who was appearing on the other two network shows. Earlier in the week, his second bank bailout announcement had been well-received. The Dow had gone up, and analysts didn't pounce as they had after his first bank announcement. If he could make it through the Sunday shows, advisers thought, maybe they could declare a bottom to the falling shares of Geithner.

The treasury secretary made it through, and while he's not out of the woods yet—a new Fox poll shows Geithner with just a 39 percent approval rating—the White House is feeling a whole lot better about his ability to convey the administration's economic policies with confidence. Two weeks ago he was practically in the Cabinet secretary's version of the witness protection program. This week he was ubiquitous in Europe selling the administration's plans.

Meanwhile, back in the States, this week Budget Director Peter Orszag, who has become a sort of cult favorite, appeared on *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart. Economists Austan Goolsbee and Jared Bernstein are now regulars on the daily cable news networks, mixing actual expertise with sound bites.

The Obama team has its work cut out for itself. While the president's approval ratings hover around 60 percent and he gets similar marks for his handling of the economy, his economic policies are less popular. Only 51 percent support his stimulus plan, according to the Pew poll, down 7 percent. Only 49 percent

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approve of his handling of the deficit, according to the Gallup poll, a weakness Republicans are trying mightily to exploit. Congressional Democrats are acting nervously and occasionally defying the president over his tax and spending priorities.

Fortunately for the White House, while its team is coming together, the Republicans are becoming more cacophonous. There's a gaggle of spokesmen, and some members have different views than the others. Each day they continue their internecine battling is one more day for Obama's surrogates to polish their message and practice their sound bites.

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politics

"No" Worries

Republicans let Obama goad them into releasing a budget. Maybe they shouldn't have.

By Christopher Beam

Wednesday, April 1, 2009, at 7:06 PM ET

Watching congressional Republicans elaborately introduce their second alternative budget—this time with numbers—it was hard not to see them as victims of a cruel prank.

Opposition parties typically present an alternative—sometimes more than one—to the administration's budget. But it's by no means required. And for good reason: If the party doesn't control Congress, the budget stands little chance, anyway, making it more important as a rhetorical device than as a fiscal blueprint. And when the process is rhetorical, the minority generally does better when forcing the majority to defend its position rather than explaining its own. (Besides, the president's own party can often be counted on to create headaches for the administration.) All this explains why, especially when it comes to a budget, the opposition usually takes a pointillist approach, targeting one provision at a time.

This seemed to be the preference of most Republicans this year. "Traditionally, the party in the minority has offered a series of amendments to try to improve the majority's budget, and that's the tack we have taken this year," said Republican Sen. Judd Gregg of New Hampshire on Tuesday. Sen. John Kyl of Arizona agreed: "They won the election, so they get to draft the budget."

Yet somehow Obama managed to goad the opposition into producing its own full-blown alternative. First it was the DNC, labeling the GOP the "party of 'no.' " Obama joined in at his press conference last Tuesday: "[T]here's an interesting reason why some of these critics haven't put out their own budget. … And the reason is because they know that, in fact, the biggest driver of long-term deficits are the huge health care costs that we've got out here that we're going to have to tackle."

The Republicans took the bait, and the results have not been pretty. The first draft—more a statement of principles than a budget—was widely mocked. (GOP leaders now say it was more of a "marketing document" or a "blueprint" than an actual budget.) It also allowed White House press secretary Robert Gibbs to twist the knife on prime time: "The party of 'no' has become the party of no ideas."

The second draft, released Wednesday, is substantive but does little more than reiterate familiar GOP policies. It cuts entitlement spending, extends the Bush tax cuts of 2001 and 2003, simplifies the tax system so people pay either 10 percent or 25 percent on income, and imposes a five-year spending freeze. Republican budget committee member Rep. Paul Ryan framed it in terms of long-term debt, pointing to a series of graphs comparing projected deficits under Obama's budget with the more prudent Republican alternative. The diverging lines said it all. "We want to tackle these fiscal challenges before they tackle us," Ryan said. Twice.

That takes care of the "ideas" charge. But it doesn't mean the ideas are new, or popular, or that they make sense. (The budget makes projections all the way to 2080, prompting one liberal blogger to ask why it fails to account for the invention of warp drive.) Ryan said voters voted for Obama's personality, not his policies. But if Obama's policies are guaranteed health care, funding for education, and reaching out to unfriendly countries, then polls suggest that Americans do support him.

Why Republicans lost in 2006 and 2008—were they too conservative or not conservative enough?—is up for debate. But electoral defeats usually chasten the losing party somewhat. "The Democrats after Reagan's victory were a bit intimidated by his election and were looking to accommodate, rather than offer what their enduring values and beliefs were," says Thomas Mann of the Brookings Institution. The GOP's alternative budget shows that they are taking the opposite tack, doubling down on conservative favorites like coastal drilling and dropping the capital-gains tax.

Meanwhile, the roll-out process has been one long tale of internal backbiting and forced displays of unity. After last week's draft emerged, some Republican leaders said there would be a follow-up while others denied it. Some defended the numberless document while many complained. To counter this perception, Republicans staged an elaborate pep rally Wednesday, complete with a bicameral procession past photographers into the chamber, a closed-door budget discussion, and a press conference on the east steps of the Capitol, where Minority Leader John Boehner referred reporters to a later press conference if they wanted information on the

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budget. Now alternative alternatives are emerging, reinforcing the impression that the party is fractured.

Which raises the question: Would the GOP have been better off with no alternative at all? Outright rejection vs. constructive engagement is a perennial dilemma of opposition parties. In the last eight years, Democrats argued constantly whether "Not Bush" was enough of a platform to win an election. "You can play this either way," says longtime budget guru Stan Collender. "On the one hand, they rose to the challenge and can now say they're more than just the party of 'no.' On the other hand, every time you put out a detailed budget, you give people the opportunity to attack it." (Democrats don't mind if they do.)

Fair enough: The failure to produce an alternative may have been more damaging than producing one. But Republicans were against having a budget before they were for it. They can now be criticized for both the budget they failed to produce *and* the one they did produce. They also risk looking fractured just when unity is key. Meanwhile, hackneyed attempts at projecting unity just make it look worse. Maybe they should have remained the party of "no."

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politics

Courting Bankruptcy

Why Obama's GM-Chrysler plan is making conservatives so happy.

By Christopher Beam

Monday, March 30, 2009, at 7:15 PM ET

President Obama's plan to restructure General Motors and Chrysler is not designed to make conservatives happy. But cheers from the right may be an unexpected byproduct.

In his speech Monday introducing the plan, Obama finally used the B-word—and it wasn't *bailout*. "While Chrysler and GM are very different companies with very different paths forward, both need a fresh start to implement the restructuring plans they develop," he said. "That may mean using our bankruptcy code as a mechanism to help them restructure quickly and emerge stronger."

Bankruptcy does not necessarily mean dissolving the company and selling off its parts, Obama explained. That would be Chapter 7 bankruptcy, which nobody is proposing. What Obama was suggesting is Chapter 11 bankruptcy, which just means restructuring debts and contracts. The bankrupt company still exists—it's just a slimmer version of its former self.

Which is exactly what conservatives have been suggesting all along. In December, many House Republicans urged President Bush to simply let the Big Three enter bankruptcy rather than spend taxpayer money on companies that would probably fail anyway. In November, Mitt Romney wrote a column in the *New York Times* titled "Let Detroit Go Bankrupt." At the very least, he argued, to make U.S. companies competitive with foreign carmakers, a government-sponsored plan should include firing management, cutting workers' pay, and reducing salaries and perks for executives.

The bailout bill passed, of course, with support from both parties. But now, $17 billion later and with the bailed-out companies still foundering, Obama appears to be reconsidering the bankruptcy option. The plan drew jeers from some Republicans, including Sens. Bob Corker, Mitch McConnell, and John McCain. Sen. Harry Reid, meanwhile, commended Obama's "firm resolve" in dealing with automakers, and Michigan Rep. John Dingell praised the plan.*

More noteworthy were the words of praise from conservative politicians and policy wonks. Republican Rep. Darrell Issa, a ranking member of the House oversight committee, said it "struck the right chord in seeking balance between supporting the American auto industry and calling for a much-needed restructuring of GM and Chrysler." Bankruptcy "went from being off the table to the lead option," said James Gattuso of the Heritage Foundation. "So far it's just talk, but it's encouraging talk." Daniel Ikenson of the libertarian Cato Institute said: "The hardball that Obama appears to be playing now is exactly what a bankruptcy judge would do."

But if that's true, who needs Chapter 11? Why not just settle everything out of court, like adults? After all, while Obama can push for concessions, he can't force them (nor would he particularly *want* to abrogate union contracts). A bankruptcy judge, meanwhile, can impose limits on worker wages or executive compensation. Another advantage of bankruptcy court is that the negotiations are apolitical. If the company can be saved, the court will try to save it. If not, it won't. At the same time, workers and executives get paid according to court-determined formulas. Campaign donations don't figure into it. And bankruptcy may still be inevitable. According to an analysis by the administration's auto task force, GM and Chrysler failed to make the necessary adjustments over the past three months. Why would the next two be any different?

All the same, it's clear that the Obama administration would rather avoid bankruptcy. For one thing, some economists think letting GM and Chrysler fail would hurt the rest of the auto industry, from parts suppliers to dealerships. Moreover, the administration would rather not be seen as having abandoned two massive car companies. After Obama's announcement Monday, GM's stock tumbled 30 percent. The stock market itself took a dive, too. Bankruptcy would make those plunges look tame.

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Instead, Obama seems to be keeping his options open. If the companies do go into Chapter 11, he can say he did everything he could to save them. At the same time, the "tough love" message signals to critics that he's not writing the auto companies a blank check. And the threat of bankruptcy is now hanging over the heads of unions and company officials, just to show them he's serious.

Republicans no doubt relish the thought of Obama carrying out their original plan. But based on Monday's reaction, it could also win the president some conservative fans.

Correction, April 2, 2009: *This article originally identified Rep. John Dingell as a senator. (Return to the corrected sentence.)*

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politics

From Détente to Taunts

Obama's promise of post-partisanship is almost completely gone.

By John Dickerson

Monday, March 30, 2009, at 7:01 PM ET

Once upon a time, the Obama administration tried hard to show it listened to Republican ideas. Two months ago, when Congress was debating the stimulus bill, presidential aides pointed to tax cuts in the legislation that Republicans had requested (even though lots of Democrats asked for the same tax cuts). They said Minority Whip Eric Cantor had given them the idea of tracking stimulus spending online (even though they were already planning to do that).

That was then. Now the administration has all but given up even the pretense of bipartisanship. At a recent lunch with reporters, Budget Director Peter Orszag was asked if he could name a useful idea submitted by Republicans. He couldn't—and didn't even pretend he'd considered many. When House Republicans put out a budget last week, press secretary Robert Gibbs said, "The party of no has become the party of no ideas."

Gibbs probably wouldn't have said that 40 days ago, when the White House was treating the issue of bipartisanship more carefully. But after party-line votes in the House and Senate and minimum flexibility from GOP leaders, Obama aides say that Republicans are not "acting in good faith." Which leads them to two conclusions: One, their acts of conciliation buy them nothing in negotiations with the GOP; two, and more important, they've decided they'll pay no political price for acting in a more partisan fashion.

With no penalty to be paid for dropping the pretense, Obama aides hope to push their luck by painting Republicans as either irrelevant or ridiculous. The equation is simple: The more clownish the opposition seems, the more the White House can get away with.

The White House is getting lots of help as the GOP sorts through its leadership problems.

After an internal debate, House GOP leaders put out a 19-page budget last week that was more press release than governing document. Whatever substantive arguments might have been found in the document, they weren't strong enough to overcome the fact that it lacked numbers—a seemingly crucial first step for anything called a budget (which is why previous opposition budgets included numbers). Senior White House aides reacted with glee at the idea of using the document to bury Republicans.

This weekend the confusion mounted. John McCain said Republican senators were working on an alternative budget with numbers. But his party leaders said they would be offering no such thing. The DNC reacted with predictable derision.

The president and his aides can't be completely dismissive, because voters have told pollsters they want Obama to make good on his promises to reach across the aisle. Plus, Obama and his team want to leave the door open enough to allow Republicans to come back once they realize, out of political necessity, that they need to vote with the White House.

But so far the president doesn't look like he's in danger. He often frames Republicans unfairly or defines them by their most extreme elements, but he is not openly derisive (in part, say aides, because he still hopes to diminish partisanship). In the cut and thrust so far, it's congressional Republicans who have taken the political hit. They are unpopular in the polls—only 29 percent of Americans view them favorably, according to a recent CBS News poll, compared with 50 percent who approve of congressional Democrats. And voters think the president is trying a good deal harder than Republicans to find bipartisan solutions.

The best measure of how far we've not traveled may be Republican Sen. Judd Gregg of New Hampshire. Back in January, there was talk of the stimulus bill getting 80 votes in the Senate, including a slew of Republicans. Now the White House and some Democrats are considering using the process of "budget reconciliation" to pass important initiatives on health care and energy—a process that allows them to pass these bills without Republican votes. "You're talking about running over the minority, putting them in the cement, and throwing them in the Chicago River," says Gregg. (He was less troubled by this process when it was used by Republicans.) This is the man who, until about six weeks ago, was Obama's choice for commerce secretary. A lot has changed since then.

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press box

The Water-War Myth

Spike those stories about water disputes leading to armed combat.

By Jack Shafer

Thursday, April 2, 2009, at 3:24 PM ET

Attention foreign-desk editors and those in charge of the environmental beat: Before assigning any pieces about impending wars between countries battling over this essential, scarce resource, read Wendy Barnaby's essay in *Nature*, "Do Nations Go to War Over Water?" (paid). She writes:

> Countries do not go to war over water, they solve their water shortages through trade and international agreements.

Barnaby discovered this enduring truth after being approached by a publisher to write a book about waters wars. It seemed logical enough. If countries were prepared to fight over oil, which makes modern life possible, why not water, without which there would be no life? And it's not a fringe idea, she notes. NGO leaders, academics, and journalists have all predicted that water struggles will inevitably turn into shooting wars when countries can no longer cover the demands of agriculture, industry, and citizens for the resource.

In this scenario, Canada is the Saudi Arabia of the water world, drawing immense power from its surplus—and in the process becoming the target of a military strike by less-liquid nations.

Barnaby, the editor of the British Science Association magazine *People & Science*, started lining up sources for the book, but her thinking shifted after being introduced to the concept of "embedded" or "virtual" water. It takes an average of about 1,000 cubic meters of water to grow enough food to feed one person for one year. Arid nations that can't muster that amount for each person can navigate around water scarcity by importing food, which contains "virtual" water from the land where it was grown. Barnaby writes:

> Ten million people now live between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. If they were to be self-sufficient in food, they would need ten billion cubic metres of water per year. As it is, they have only about one-third of that: enough to grow 15-20% of their food. They import the rest in the form of food.

Water scarcity in the region results in "conflict and tension," Barnaby adds, but the Israeli and the Palestinian officials have successfully used a committee (controlled by the Israelis) to peacefully resolve problems. In other places where competition for water should theoretically escalate into violence, Barnaby finds similar resolution. Egypt has become more fluid in its relations with its water neighbors because it wants to improve the climate for trade. Similarly, India and Pakistan, which war with each other with the same frequency that other nations exchange sister cities, have so far used a World Bank-arbitrated treaty to make water peace.

Barnaby wanted to revise the thesis for her water book, but her publishers pointed out that "predicting an absence of war over water would not sell" many copies. So she bagged the idea.

Despite Barnaby's findings, other writers sense water wars in the making. The March 31 issue of *The Nation* includes a feature titled "Blue Gold: Have the Next Resource Wars Begun?" that cites a report (PDF) by the British nonprofit International Alert that names 46 countries "where water and climate stress could ignite violent conflict by 2025" and quotes U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon as saying, "The consequences for humanity are grave. Water scarcity threatens economic and social gains and is a potent fuel for wars and conflict." Last month, a new U.N. water study about water scarcity warning of "a global water crisis … leading to political insecurity at various levels" prompted ominous coverage around the world (the *Independent*, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the *Bangkok Post*, *Bloomberg News*, AFP, and elsewhere).

None of my skepticism should imply that I think everybody everywhere has all the clean, cheap water they need. Water, like all resources, *is* scarce, and I accept that scarcity can cause conflict. But before anyone starts frightening themselves about impending water wars, they might want to consider Barnaby's observation that in the last five decades there have been no "formal declarations of war over water."

Although Israel has fought wars with Egypt and Jordan, Barnaby notes, it has never fought one over water, and "more 'virtual' water flows into the Middle East each year embedded in grain than flows down the Nile to Egyptian farmers."

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press box

Are *Times* Publishers Born Stupid?

Let's check the historical record.

By Jack Shafer

Tuesday, March 31, 2009, at 6:58 PM ET

The simplest way to write a journalistic profile is to present its subject as either a giant or a dwarf. *New York Times* Publisher Arthur Ochs Sulzberger Jr. gets the dwarf-standing-in-a-ditch treatment in Mark Bowden's feature in the May *Vanity Fair*, as named and unnamed sources freely slag Arthur Jr. in the piece.

Gawker collected a variety of insults and trash talk that project a not-so-bright, plodding fellow. An unnamed former associate of Arthur Jr.'s tells Bowden that the business side of the company viewed him with contempt. "They saw him as insubstantial, as flighty, as glib, and as not caring about them as much as he cared about journalists," the unnamed source says. Diane Baker, a former chief financial officer of the New York Times Co., says Arthur Jr. has the personality of "a twenty-four-year-old-geek." Bowden writes that even the "mid-level talent around Arthur [Jr.] does not regard him as a peer, much less a suitable leader." Uncollected by Gawker: "To a degree some of his top staff consider unwise, he tends to promote people based not on a cold-eyed assessment of their talent but on how comfortable he feels around them—on how much *fun* they are."

It's not that Bowden thinks Arthur Jr. is actively stupid. In fact, he writes that Arthur Jr. is "clearly smart." But it's the way that Bowden finishes the sentence—"Arthur is not especially intellectual"—that completes his thought. Bowden continues, "For what it's worth, he is a *Star Trek* fan. His mind wanders, particularly when pressed to concentrate on complicated business matters." In other words, smart enough to don a unitard and command the *Starship Enterprise* from an imaginary bridge but not smart enough to publish the *Times*.

If Arthur Jr. is a simpleton, he upholds a family tradition that can be traced to his clan's founding patriarch, Adolph S. Ochs. Ochs purchased a controlling interest in the *New York Times* in 1896 and his relatives and descendants have operated the paper ever since. (Consult *New York* magazine's "Children of the *Times*" [PDF] genealogy to keep all the players straight in your head.)

How stupid was Adolph S. Ochs? Garet Garrett, who worked for Ochs on the *Times* editorial page, regarded his boss a bit of a lamebrain. "Intellectually he is the inferior of any man at the [editorial] council table," Garrett scribbled in the diary he kept in 1915 and 1916. "None of us values his mental processes highly." Garrett also faulted Ochs' ungrammatical constructions, criticized his vocabulary, and clucked about how the *Times* owner was "always impressed by large figures of wealth or income." Dumb. Unlettered. Shallow. Sound familiar?

If Ochs carried a dumb gene, it did not taint his only child, daughter Iphigene. In a more enlightened era, she, instead of her husband, the equally bright and personable Arthur Hays Sulzberger, might have inherited the company reins from her father. Sulzberger became publisher in 1936, when the old man died.

But back to the bloodline. Iphigene presented Ochs with his first grandson in 1926, but upon visiting the hospital, Ochs "took one look at the wrinkled infant and pronounced him unacceptable," write Susan E. Tifft and Alex S. Jones' book *The Trust: The Private and Powerful Family Behind the* New York Times.

The infant, Arthur Ochs Sulzberger, was nicknamed "Punch," and Punch was always regarded as a dullard. "Arthur Ochs Sulzberger, the only son of Arthur Hays Sulzberger, was a man-child never taken seriously even by his own family, much less executives and editors of the *Times*," Joseph C. Goulden writes in 1988's *Fit To Print: A.M. Rosenthal and His Times*. Later in the book, Goulden reprises the Punch-as-knucklehead theme, writing, "One man who worked for the *Times* in 1955 said the consensus opinion among 'real reporters' was that 'the old man ought to put Punch in a sack with a heavy rock and drop him in the river.' "

Edwin Diamond echoes Goulden in his 1993 book, *Behind the* Times*: Inside the New* New York Times. Punch turned in an "indifferent academic performance as a child" and "was not judged very bright by his own parents. In later years, he would joke to interviewers about the schools he had quit 'right before they were going to throw me out.' "

Punch's poor reputation followed him to the *Times*, Diamond reports:

From the day [Sulzberger] walked into the building, he had to contend with the impression that he was an intellectual lightweight, and undeserving of his position at the paper. This early judgment, based as much on hearsay as any firsthand evidence, was never wholly erased.

It should be noted that during Punch's tenure as publisher (1963-92), the *Times* became a bigger, more important journalistic institution. Or maybe that should be "in spite of Punch, the *Times* became a bigger, more important journalistic institution." Perhaps he had the Forrest Gump thing working!

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If Punch was stupid, he was stupid enough to treat Arthur Jr. stupidly. In 1976, after getting Arthur Jr. a reporting job at the Associated Press' London bureau to season him for future employment at the *Times*, Punch arranged a job for his son's wife, Gail, at the United Press International's London bureau. From Tifft and Jones' book:

> The first draft of his letter recommending Gail to the head of UPI betrayed doubts about his son's maturity and intelligence. "We think she is smarter than he is," Punch had dictated, but when his secretary, Nancy Finn, sat down to type the letter, she blanched. "You can't write that!" she told him. Chastened, Punch excised the offending sentence. To Finn, the incident was reminiscent of what Punch had suffered at the hands of his own father.

As best as I can determine, nobody—inside or outside the family—has insulted the intelligence of Arthur Jr.'s son, A.G. Sulzberger, who now reports for the *Times* and is considered an heir to the throne.

But it's early yet.

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Bowden unfairly dumps blame for the disastrous purchase of the *Boston Globe* on Arthur Jr. That deal went down in October 1993, and Punch didn't retire as chairman and chief executive until 1997. Send e-mail to slate.pressbox@gmail.com. Also, the stupid and the intelligent are invited to follow my Twitter. (E-mail may be quoted by name in "The Fray," ***Slate***'s readers' forum; in a future article; or elsewhere unless the writer stipulates otherwise. Permanent disclosure: ***Slate*** is owned by the Washington Post Co.)

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press box

Bring Back Yellow Journalism

At its best, it was terrific. At its worst, it wasn't that bad.

By Jack Shafer

Monday, March 30, 2009, at 7:32 PM ET

How many times while plowing through a *New York Times* or *Washington Post* news story have you muttered to yourself, "I haven't had this much fun since the last time I read a GAO report."

That's not to deny the importance of GAO reports or of significant but dull newspaper stories. But every now and again, I wish the newspapers landing on my doorstep contained a little more blood, took a position without being partisan, yelled a tad more, and brushed some yellow from the palette while painting their stories.

There. I've said it. I wish our better newspapers availed themselves of some of the techniques of yellow journalism and a little less of the solemnity we associate with the Committee of Concerned Journalists. Yes, the yellow journalism of William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal* and Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* from the 1890s.

Now before you storm the U.S. Congress' Periodical Press Galleries, demanding that they deny my latest application for a press card, hear me out. Being rambunctious to the extreme, yellow journalism is misunderstood. At its best, yellow journalism was terrific, and at its worst, it really wasn't all that bad. That's was my takeaway a couple of years ago after I read W. Joseph Campbell's 2006 book, *The Year That Defined American Journalism: 1897 and the Clash of Paradigms*. Now that I've consumed Campbell's earlier book *Yellow Journalism: Puncturing the Myths, Defining the Legacies* (2001), that takeaway has become my conviction.

It's not that Campbell, an associate professor at American University's School of Communications, doesn't appreciate the, um, downside of yellow journalism. In *The Year That Defined American Journalism*, Campbell acknowledges Hearst's tendency to exaggerate some coverage (e.g., during the Spanish-American War), to use the paper's pages to advance his own political ambitions, to manipulate public opinion, and to indulge in "oddball" stories such as "Can Man Breed Men From Monkeys?" (But those mostly appeared in the Sunday supplements, Campbell notes.)

Hearst also wasn't big on conceding error, Campbell writes, so if the wheel turned and Hearst were reborn, we'd have to kill him. That said, he inspired some great newspaper stories. As a contemporary critic of the *Journal* wrote in 1898, Hearst "would have one of the best papers in the English language" if only he would "cut his newspaper in two, publish the real, vital news in one part, and the sensations, rot, and nonsense in the other."

Campbell cites as favorable the views of media historian Frank Luther Mott, who said yellow journalism "must not be considered as synonymous with sensationalism." In Mott's mind, the essence of yellow journalism—or the essences, if you prefer—were its subjects: crime, scandal, gossip, divorce, sex, disasters, and sports.

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Presentation played a role, too. Headlines that "screamed excitement, often about comparatively unimportant news," heavy use of pictures, a Sunday supplement and color comics, sympathy with the "underdog" and "campaigns against abuses suffered by the common people"—they all cut to the heart that was yellow journalism. The one completely irredeemable part of the yellow journalism package was its dependence on faked interviews and stories.

Campbell cites a range of authorities to dispel the yellow-journalism caricatures. Far from being a flavor consumed by only the poor and immigrants, yellow newspapers enjoyed wide readership across class, sex, and age lines. Media historian John D. Stevens found that the yellow papers "published a fair amount of sober financial, political, and diplomatic information." They crusaded against the privileged and the powerful; they exposed corruption in government and corporations and "probably encouraged the rise of magazine muckraking in the early twentieth century." The yellow papers also paid reporters well, which is a big plus in their favor.

H.L. Mencken was a fan of sorts. Assessing William Randolph Hearst in the May 1927 issue of the *American Mercury*, he praised the aging press mogul for his accomplishments. Hearst's yellow journalism "shook up old bones, and gave the blush of life to pale cheeks," Mencken wrote. "The government we suffer under is still corrupt, but, especially in the cities, it is surely not as corrupt as it used to be. Yellow journalism had more to do with that change than is commonly put to its credit." As long as we're collecting nice things to say about this lapsed form, remember that Mary Baker Eddy founded the *Christian Science Monitor* to *combat* yellow journalism.

It will come as no surprise that Campbell argues in both books that 1) yellow journalism doesn't deserve its bad rap and 2) that modern journalism has absorbed much from yellow journalism's look and techniques. One of the biggest enemies of yellow journalism in the 1890s was Adolph Ochs, who purchased a controlling interest in the *New York Times* in 1896. He prided himself in publishing the journalism of restraint and impartiality (aka anti-yellow journalism). Upon acquiring the *Philadelphia Times* in 1901, Ochs had a list of newspaper "don'ts" drawn up, which aims squarely at the yellow papers. The list was published in a newspaper trade journal and reprinted (paid) in the June 29, 1901, *New York Times*. It states:

In reply to the inquiries of his editors and managers, the new proprietor gave directions, which may be codified as follows:

No red ink.
No pictures.
No double column heads.
No freak typography.
No free advertisements.
No free circulation.
No free notices to advertisers.
No reading matter advertisements with-out marks.
No medical advertisements.
No advertisements on first page.
No free passes from railroads.
No free theatre tickets.
No collectors of advertising bills.
No Bryanism.
No coupon schemes.
No guessing contests.
No prizefighting details.
No advertisements that a self-respecting man would not read to his family.
No concessions from the advertising rate card.
No personal journalism.
No pessimism.
No friends to favor.
No enemies to punish.
No drinking by employes.
No speculation by employes .
No private scandal.
No word contests.
No prize puzzles.
No advertisements
    Of immoral books,
    Of fortune tellers,
    Of secret diseases,
    Of guaranteed cures,
    Of clairvoyants,
    Of palmists,
    Of massage.
No advertisements
    Of offers of large salaries,
    Of large guaranteed dividends,
    Of offers of something for nothing.

Prizefighting details? Personal journalism? Word contests? Ads on the front page? I shudder! Pictures? Double-column heads? Red ink? Freak typography? Medical ads and ads for immoral books? How the mighty *Times* has fallen afoul of the Ochs code! Surely when the *Times*' Nicholas D. Kristof bought sex slaves out of bondage, the ghost of Ochs must have wept. By 1890s standards, today's *Times* is as yellow as a lemon.

Campbell's revisionist view doesn't downplay the activist nature of the yellow journals, which would set up soup kitchens, send relief to victims of hurricanes, file lawsuits to get government contracts overturned, and, in the *Journal*'s case, once organized a Havana jailbreak. To Campbell's 21st-century eyes, such partisan efforts—which Hearst called "the journalism of action"—got a second wind in the "civic" and "public" journalism experiments of the 1990s, in which newspaper editors met with citizens and attempted to solve or address communities' "problems." The difference, Campbell notes, is that the yellow journalists

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imposed solutions from above while the civic journalists strove to percolate agendas from the ground up.

The purest forms of civic journalism and Hearst-ian journalism of action have always given me palpations of distrust because I'm never sure how far either camp has skewed coverage to fit a predetermined agenda. And yet, paging through Campbell's two books, I found myself yearning for the sort of vital newspapers that were common in the Hearst-Pulitzer heyday.

"The yellow press possessed an effervescence, a visceral and essential appeal that newspapers 100 years later seem desperate to recapture," Campbell writes in *Yellow Journalism*. Have the hell-bent professionalization of journalism and the erection of a complex ethical code for its practitioners sapped from newspapers their life force? Can yellow journalism be reinvented—tamed and respiced, perhaps—in a way that preserves its best elements, subtracts the worst, and still glows? Is there a place in the newspaper world for saffron journalism?

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Yellow Journalism demolishes the myth that Hearst sent Fredric Remington a cable stating, "You furnish the pictures, and I'll furnish the war." That said, you furnish the e-mails to slate.pressbox@gmail.com, and I'll furnish the Twitters. (E-mail may be quoted by name in "The Fray," ***Slate***'s readers' forum; in a future article; or elsewhere unless the writer stipulates otherwise. Permanent disclosure: ***Slate*** is owned by the Washington Post Co.)

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Madonna and Child, Africa Edition, Part 2

How do you adopt a child in the developing world?

By Daniel Engber

Wednesday, April 1, 2009, at 1:47 PM ET

Madonna and her brood are in Malawi this week, awaiting a judge's ruling on her planned adoption of 4-year-old Chifundo "Mercy" James. James would be her second child from Malawi; she and then-husband Guy Ritchie adopted a boy in 2006. On the heels of that event, Daniel Engber explained how to go about adopting a child in Africa.

A village chief in Malawi confirmed on Wednesday that Madonna has adopted a local baby from an orphanage. A few days ago, gossip pages in the United Kingdom reported that husband Guy Ritchie's family was "very concerned Madonna wants an African baby as a celebrity status symbol, like Angelina Jolie." (Jolie has adopted children from Cambodia and Ethiopia.) How do you adopt a child in Africa?

Work it out with the local government. Some African countries make this easier than others. Ethiopia, where Jolie adopted Zahara Marley, has a fairly straightforward system that doesn't even require travel to the continent. To adopt in Ethiopia, you usually have to be married and heterosexual. If you're single, you must be at least 25 years old. American applicants must work with one of seven licensed agencies and have to submit an extensive dossier that includes letters of reference and a written statement translated into Amharic.

Ethiopia was the seventh most popular source for overseas adoptions in 2005, according to a list compiled by the State Department. (China, Russia, Guatemala, and South Korea have topped the charts for the last decade, supplying about three-quarters of the 23,000 babies brought into the United States.) By comparison, adoptions from Malawi are very, very rare—only seven visas have been issued to adopted Malawian babies since 2001.

Those low numbers reflect the fact that only residents of Malawi can adopt a child there, and each adoption must be preceded by a two-year period of foster care. The Malawian government bent the rules for Madonna due to her celebrity status and because she's pledged several million dollars in aid for the country's orphans. The Malawian authorities presented Madonna with 12 orphan boys and let her pick the one she wanted. Though she's being allowed to take the child home without first residing in the country, the government will still require the foster care "trial period" before they make the adoption official.

Once you've worked out an adoption with a local government, you have to clear it back in your home country. In the United States, you can apply for a visa only if your adopted child is under 16 years old and an orphan. (Under certain circumstances the age limit goes up to 18.) A child's parents don't have to be dead or missing to be declared an "orphan"; a single parent can designate his child an orphan in writing if he or she doesn't have enough money to care for her.

The United States requires its own dossier, which includes a "home study" of the adoptive parents. For the home study, a social worker interviews the applicants and surveys their living conditions. All adoptive parents must also undergo fingerprinting and background checks. Meanwhile, the orphan must receive medical clearance from a U.S.-approved physician. Several conditions could affect her chances of getting a visa, like syphilis, active tuberculosis, insanity, or "sexual deviation."

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Bonus Explainer: What about adopting babies from continents other than Africa? The Explainer checked the requirements at a few off-the-beaten-path destinations. Iran allows adoption only by Iranian citizens, and Muslim and Christian babies must be placed with parents of the same religion. Other Muslim countries, like Syria, forbid adoption of Muslim children altogether. (You can try to adopt a Christian kid from Syria, but it's not easy.) Don't try Venezuela, either—they won't accept American parents until the United States finishes implementing the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption.

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

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The April Fools' Day Defense Kit

This year, don't be taken for a sucker by the media.

By Jack Shafer

Wednesday, April 1, 2009, at 11:51 AM ET

Google unveiled CADIE today, the first program to emerge from an ongoing artificial-intelligence project. Unexpectedly, CADIE broke free from its original directives and now threatens to rule the Web. Terrified? Well, don't be. CADIE is just the latest of Google's annual April Fools' jokes. In 2007, Jack Shafer offered advice on how to avoid becoming the victim of similar media shenanigans.

You don't look gullible, but you are. Year after year, the media take advantage of your naiveté and humiliates you with an April Fools' Day prank.

You're probably still kicking yourself for being fooled by the April 2000 *Esquire* feature about "Freewheelz," an Illinois startup that promised "self-financing, free cars" to consumers. Every time you spot *Discover* magazine on the newsstand, you growl because you fell for its April 1995 article about the discovery of the ice-melting, penguin-eating hotheaded naked ice borer. Your father probably still gripes about *Sports Illustrated*'s April 1, 1985, article about Sidd Finch, the New York Mets prospect who could throw a baseball 168 mph.

The Museum of Hoaxes Web site catalogs these greatest hits to complete its Top 100 list of the greatest April Fool's hoaxes of all time. There's the BBC's legendary segment on the Swiss spaghetti harvest (1957), *Phoenix New Times*' story about the formation of the "Arm the Homeless Coalition" (1999), and *PC Computing*'s report on legislative efforts to ban the use of the Internet while drunk (1994), just to name a few classics.

April Fools' hoaxes succeed because the victims, conditioned by a stream of implausible but true stories in the press, aren't expecting the sucker punch. If you don't want to be anybody's fool this year, assume a guarded crouch, especially as the countdown to April 1 progresses. Some April Fools' Day pranks arrive in your mailbox a couple of days before the holiday in the form of a monthly magazine. Remember, to be forewarned is to be forearmed.

Beware strange animals. If a story whiffs even remotely of the hotheaded naked ice borer, it's likely to be a hoax. *Technology Review* hoaxed its readers with an April Fools' story in 1985 titled "Retrobreeding the Woolly Mammoth." In 1984, the *Orlando Sentinel* did the same with a piece about the cockroach-devouring Tasmanian mock walrus. In 1994, London's *Daily Star* sports pages reported that invading superworms might destroy the Wimbledon green.

Turn off your radio. Deejays love to pull practical jokes on April Fools' Day. In 1989, KSLX-FM in Scottsdale, Ariz., broadcast the claim that the station had been taken hostage by Pima Indians, prompting calls to the police. WCCC-AM/FM in Hartford, Conn., told listeners on April 1, 1990, that a volcano had erupted not far away. San Diego's KGB-FM alerted listeners on April 1, 1993, that the space shuttle Discovery had been rerouted from Edwards Air Force Base to a local airport. Thousands showed up to view the landing despite the fact that the spacecraft was earthbound that day. It's not just shock jocks pulling the pranks—you can't trust NPR, either. Its "humorists" have aired pieces on portable zip codes you can take with you when you move (2004), federal health care for pets (2002), and advertisements projected onto the moon (2000).

Shun the British press. The British tabloids make stories up all the time, but on April Fool's Day, everybody on Fleet Street fabricates. The *Times* used the day to run a spoof ad announcing an auction of "surplus intellectual property"—various patents, trademarks, and copyrights. The *Daily Mail* announced the postponement of Andrew and Fergie's wedding because of a clash with Prince Charles' calendar. He was going to be butterfly-hunting in the Himalayas. The *Daily Mail* told readers that nuclear submarines were now patrolling the Thames. The *Independent* published a scoop about skirts for men at a fashionable shop. The *Guardian* declared it would replace the women's page with the men's page. In 2000, the *Times* complained that the surreal quality of the news—Labor turning right wing, for example—had taken the ease out of cracking a good April Fools' joke.

If they pranked before, they'll prank again. In addition to the British press and NPR, the weekly chain formerly known as New Times Inc. (now Village Voice Media) loves to hoax its readers. Google has established a reputation for silly hoaxes with pages hyping its Google MentalPlex and PigeonRank technologies. It once posted openings for its Googlelunaplex

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office on the moon and introduced a smart-drink called GoogleGulp!

Too good to be true. News organizations sometimes fall for the April Fools' Day pranks perpetrated by outside hoaxsters, so don't expect every clue to be obvious. If an April 1 article declares that something valuable is now "free" or purports to break news about "hidden treasure," you're being had. Does an organization's acronym or abbreviation spell April Fool? Also, scan copy for anagrams of "April Fools'" or some similar play on words. *Discover*'s story on the hotheaded naked ice borer cited as its authority wildlife biologist "Aprile Pazzo," which is Italian for April Fool.

Alex Boese, curator of the Museum of Hoaxes and expert on all things April Fools', advises that you finish reading articles before rushing into the next cubicle to spread the incredible news. Many hoax articles end with an obvious clue or an explanation that it's all a joke. Double-check all radio warnings of disasters—volcanic eruptions, floods, killer bee invasions—and question any story uncovering a new, onerous tax (say, on Linux).

New-product announcements that arrive on or near April 1, such as the left-handed Whopper, should be approached with skepticism, Boese says, but he cautions against reflexive hoax-spotting. On March 31, 2004, Google released the beta version of Gmail, which featured 1 GB of free storage, cavernous compared to other e-mail provider offerings. That was the same day the company unveiled its Googlelunaplex plans. The moon joke and the generosity of Gmail's 1 GB storage caused some nerds to sense a con and insist—wrongly—that Gmail was a giant April Fools' Day hoax.

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For a GoogleGulp of hoaxes, check out Alex Boese's book *Hippo Eats Dwarf: A Field Guide to Hoaxes and Other B.S.* What hilarious media-generated April Fool's Day hoax have I missed? Send your nominations to slate.pressbox@gmail.com. (E-mail may be quoted by name unless the writer stipulates otherwise. Permanent disclosure: ***Slate*** is owned by the Washington Post Co.)

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The 25-Cent Flood Protection Device

Why are we still using sandbags to keep rivers from overflowing?

By Jacob Leibenluft

Monday, March 30, 2009, at 11:48 AM ET

Workers constructed makeshift levees from millions of sandbags in Fargo, N.D., through the weekend to prevent possible flooding as the Red River crested to record heights. In this "Explainer" column from June 2008, Jacob Leibenluft explained why we still use sandbags to stop floods.

The Mississippi River breached more than a dozen levees in the St. Louis, Mo., area Thursday as flooding continued to spread across the Midwest. To mitigate the damage, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers alone has distributed nearly 13 million sandbags, most of which have been filled and laid down by local residents. Why do we still use sandbags?

Because they're cheap, easy to use, and usually effective. The familiar image of the burlap sack stuffed with sand goes back at least as far as the Revolutionary War—when they were used to build makeshift forts—and they have long been deployed as a defense against deluges like the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927. These days, the bags used to hold back rising floodwaters are more likely to be made of polypropylene plastic, often taken from the scraps of textile manufacturers. They cost about a quarter apiece, and they are packed for delivery by the thousands to flood-stricken areas.

Then locals have to find sand to put in the bags. In Iowa, it has come from local quarries that normally serve as suppliers for construction. Sand has the benefits of being inexpensive, plentiful, and easy for untrained volunteers to handle and clean up. (Clay might be more effective at holding back a flood, but it's more difficult to bag and stack quickly—and to remove when the danger is past.) If for some reason sand weren't available, the Army Corps of Engineers says you could use silt or gravel in an absolute emergency.

Sandbags remain so popular because they are low-tech—all you need are some bags and shovels, manpower, and a whole lot of sand. They're also effective in most cases, having proven reliable for dikes from 4 to 6 feet tall. The best sandbag protection usually comes from packing them about halfway full (which keeps the bags from getting too heavy) and leaving them untied with the top folded over (which makes them easier to stack). The most stable arrangement is to stack them in a pyramid. (Using Army Corps of Engineers specifications, a 4-foot-high pyramid would be about 10 feet wide; for every foot along the river, the pyramid would require about 78 bags.) But experts say that proper construction makes a big difference: Researchers at the University of Manitoba conducted an experiment (PDF) in which they asked two groups—one made up of professional engineers, the other of volunteers given standard instructions—to construct a dike using standard sandbags. The professionals were able to create a sandbag dike 12 feet tall that proved quite effective. But the 6-foot-tall dike prepared by the unsupervised volunteers failed when the water reached its peak level.

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Sandbags pose another problem when it's time to get rid of them. If the plastic bags have been out in the sun for a few weeks, they may start to fall apart from exposure to ultraviolet radiation. As a result, the bags themselves can't be easily reused. If the sand is wet, there's the added risk that it has become contaminated by unsafe materials in the floodwater. In Johnson County, Iowa—the site of some of the state's worst flooding—local agencies are trying to figure out what to do with as many as 6 million leftover sandbags. State authorities do not recommend (PDF) dumping the bags into your kid's sandbox or on beaches, but they do say the material can be stored to sand streets in the winter or used as fill material under roads or buildings.

There are some viable alternatives. One example is the HESCO Bastion barrier, which has supplemented sandbags in Iowa City. Consisting of a mesh wire frame wrapped in polypropylene, the barrier—a version of which is used to fortify troops abroad—can be filled with gravel or other material using a front-loader. As long as heavy machinery and trained installers can get to the site of the flooding, the barriers can be set up in far less time and with far less labor than sandbags—and then later reused. Along with the HESCO barriers, the Army Corps of Engineers has also tested barrier devices like the Portadam and the Rapid Deployment Flood Wall; when properly constructed, all three showed lower seepage rates than sandbags under lab conditions.

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

Explainer thanks James Blatz of the University of Manitoba, Ron Fournier and Fred Pinkard of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Jennifer Jordan of the Iowa City Landfill and Recycling Center, Mike Sullivan of the Johnson County Emergency Management Agency, and Stephanie Victory of HESCO Bastion USA.

Science

The Problem With 3-D

It hurts your eyes. Always has, always will.

By Daniel Engber

Thursday, April 2, 2009, at 6:13 PM ET

One week into its theatrical run, *Monsters vs. Aliens* has already become a certified, three-dimensional mega-blockbuster. In its opening weekend, the film crushed previous records by pulling in $33 million in revenue from RealD and IMAX screens and $59 million total; with little competition at the box office, there's every reason to think it will become the highest-grossing 3-D movie of all time. The timing couldn't be better for the evangelizing studio executives who plan to release 40 more films in the format over the next few years. At an industry trade show this week in Las Vegas, Fox studio Co-Chairman Jim Gianopulos called 3-D "the most exciting new exhibition technology since they put sprocket holes in celluloid." Jeffrey Katzenberg, whose DreamWorks Animation studio produced *Monsters vs. Aliens*, predicts that soon enough all movies will be made in 3-D and audience-members will bring their own pairs of polarized spectacles to the theater.

What about the failed 3-D experiments of the 1950s and 1980s? Those movies, say Katzenberg and the others, were beset by technical problems that gave viewers eyestrain, headaches, and nausea. (A Katzenbergian mantra: "Making your customers sick is not a recipe for success.") The problem has been solved, they claim: The latest batch of stereo flicks relies on a crisp and clean digital technology that's easier to watch and enjoy. "Comparing the 3-D of the past to this is like comparing a Razor scooter to a Ferrari," Katzenberg tells reporters. So far, reporters have seen no reason to doubt him—over the past few years, countless trend pieces have parroted the industry line on how "3-D's most egregious side effects" have been eliminated. The credulous messaging has become even more intense in recent weeks: Take Josh Quittner, whose March feature in *Time* toed the party line in the clearest terms imaginable: "As just about everyone knows," he dutifully explained, "old-school 3-D was less than awesome. Colors looked washed out. Some viewers got headaches. A few vomited." Now, with digital 3-D, Hollywood has found "a technology that's finally bringing a true third dimension to movies. Without giving you a headache."

Let me go on record with this now, while the 3-D bubble is still inflating: Katzenberg, Quittner, and all the rest of them are wrong about three-dimensional film—wrong, wrong, wrong. I've seen just about every narrative movie in the current 3-D crop, and every single one has caused me some degree of discomfort—ranging from minor eye soreness (*Coraline*) to intense nausea (*My Bloody Valentine*). The egregious side effects of stereo viewing may well have been diminished over the past few decades (wait, does anyone really remember how bad they were in 1983?) but they have not been eliminated. As much as it pains me to say this—I love 3-D, I really do—these films are unpleasant to watch.

That's because the much-touted digital technology is not fundamentally different from anything that's been used in the past. Today's films, like those of yore, are made by recording and projecting a separate pair of image-tracks for each eye. These are slightly offset from each other, giving what's called a binocular disparity cue, which in turn produces an illusion of depth. (It's the same idea as an old View-Master, or an even older stereoscope.) For at least the past 50 years, and across several theatrical revivals, 3-D filmmakers have used the same technique for separating the two tracks: They project the footage for each eye through lenses of different polarizations for an audience wearing polarized glasses with matching filters. (Despite frequent claims to the contrary, the 3-D films of

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yesteryear were rarely shown in anaglyph with those schlocky red-cyan glasses.) Whatever breakthroughs we've seen in 3-D technology have been relative refinements of the same technology. The essential mechanics of the medium—and its essential side effects—haven't changed at all.

Vision researchers have spent many years studying the discomfort associated with watching stereoscopic movies. Similar problems plague flight simulators, head-mounted virtual-reality displays, and many other applications of 3-D technology. There's even a standard means of assessing 3-D fatigue in the lab: The "simulator sickness questionnaire" rates subjects on their experience of 16 common symptoms—including fatigue, headache, eyestrain, nausea, blurred vision, sweating, and increased salivation. (Japanese scientists use a native term, *shoboshobo*, to describe the "bleary eyes" that sometimes afflict 3-D viewers.) Despite all this work, no one yet knows exactly what causes this visual fatigue, or "asthenopia"; in any case, there's little reason to think it can ever be overcome.

One potential explanation for the discomfort lies with the unnatural eye movements stereoscopy elicits from viewers. Outside of the 3-D movie theater, our eyes move in two distinct ways when we see something move toward us: First, our eyeballs rotate inward towards the nose (the closer the target comes, the more cross-eyed we get); second, we squeeze the lenses in our eyes to change their shape and keep the target in focus (as you would with a camera). Those two eye movements—called "vergence" and "accommodation"—are automatic in everyday life, and they go hand-in-hand.

Something different happens when you're viewing three-dimensional motion projected onto a flat surface. When a helicopter flies off the screen in *Monsters vs. Aliens*, our eyeballs rotate inward to follow it, as they would in the real world. Reflexively, our eyes want to make a corresponding change in shape, to shift their plane of focus. If that happened, though, we'd be focusing our eyes somewhere in front of the screen, and the movie itself (which is, after all, projected on the screen) would go a little blurry. So we end up making one eye movement but not the other; the illusion forces our eyes to *converge without accommodating*. (In fact, our eye movements seem to oscillate between their natural inclination and the artificial state demanded by the film.) This inevitable decoupling, spread over 90 minutes in the theater, may well be the cause of 3-D eyestrain. There's nothing new about the idea—an article published in the *Atlantic* in 1953 refers to the breakdown of the accommodation-convergence ratio as a "difficulty [that] is inherent to the medium." And there's no reason to expect that newfangled RealD technology will solve this basic problem of biomechanics.

(There's also little reason to believe new technology will overcome another fundamental problem with the 3-D business model: Five percent to 8 percent of the population is stereoblind and can't convert binocular disparity into depth information. That means they can't appreciate any of the 3-D effects in a RealD or Imax movie. An additional 20 to 30 percent of the population suffers from a lesser form of the deficit, which could diminish the experience of 3-D effects or make them especially uncomfortable to watch.)

The eye-movement issue may even carry other, more serious risks. A long session of 3-D viewing tends to cause an adaptive response in the oculomotor system, temporarily changing the relationship between accommodation and convergence. That is to say, audience-members may experience very mild, short-term vision impairment after a movie ends. I won't pretend there's any hard evidence that these transient effects could develop into permanent problems. But if 3-D becomes as widespread as some in the industry claim—every movie in three dimensions, for example, and television programs, too—we'll no doubt have plenty of data: Small children, their vision systems still in development, could one day be digesting five or six hours of stereo entertainment per day. There's already been one published case study, from the late-1980s, of a 5-year-old child in Japan who became permanently cross-eyed after viewing an anaglyph 3-D movie at a theater.

There are plenty of other problems with 3-D movies that might contribute to the sore eyes, headaches, and nausea. As a general rule, the greater the disparity between the two image tracks—that is to say, the farther apart the two cameras are placed during shooting—the greater the illusion of depth in the finished product. That's a plus for the filmmakers, who tend to favor extreme special effects, pickaxes flying off the screen and all that. On the other hand, the more pronounced the disparity, the more difficult it is for the viewer to fuse the two perspectives into a coherent scene. That could lead to double-vision, uncomfortable flickering, and—yes—eyestrain.

So if the new 3-D movies are still giving us headaches, why has no one bothered to mention them? It may be that the visual fatigue, however pervasive, is small enough to hide in the novelty of the experience—we're so jazzed up that we barely notice our eyes hurt. If we did become aware of some discomfort, we might not recognize where it came from: Were my eyes tired from watching *Monsters vs. Aliens* last night or from having sat in front of my computer all through that morning and afternoon? Did the RealD projection give me a headache or was it the movie's lamebrained script? Indeed, several of the critics who reviewed the film seem to be suffering from a form of source amnesia: A.O. Scott calls *Monsters vs. Aliens* "strenuous, noisy, 3-D fun;" Anthony Lane describes growing "fuzzy with exhaustion;" even *Time*'s Josh Quittner must confess, "After watching all that 3-D, I was a bit wiped out."

So here's one theory for why 3-D movies have failed to catch on in the past. It's not because the glasses were "cheesy" or because

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the projection systems were crude. It's not because the movies were poorly made. (Some truly amazing stereo films have been produced, like Hitchcock's *Dial M for Murder*.) No, the bubbles always pop because 3-D movies hurt our eyes. We may not notice the discomfort at first, when the gimmicks are still fresh and distracting. But eventually, inevitably, perhaps unconsciously, they creep off the screen and into our minds. It's happened before and it will happen again: At some point soon, 3-D cinema will regain its well-earned status as a sublime and ridiculous headache.

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shopping

Battle of the Banks

Which checking account is best?

By Noreen Malone

Tuesday, March 31, 2009, at 11:43 AM ET

When I moved from Cleveland to New York just over a year ago, I closed out my checking account with Huntington Bank, a regional institution, and opened a new one with Chase. I'm not exactly a high roller, so it never occurred to me that I could play the field, pitting banks against one another to get a better deal. I just went for a basic checking account at a national institution. My financial situation hasn't changed much over the past year, but the world's sure has. Next to Wall Street's huge red blots of government debt, my slender margin in the black suddenly looks pretty good.

So I set out to investigate whether a solvent potential client such as myself could finagle a sweet offer from once-mighty, now-fallen, financial institutions. Will customer service reps compete for my attention? Is Chase willing to do whatever it takes to keep me from leaving?

My banking needs are bare bones: No mortgage and none on the horizon, I use my debit/credit card for nearly every purchase, and I usually write just one check per month (for rent). I have a separate online savings account with HSBC that suits me just fine. What I'm on the hunt for, then, is the elemental checking account experience: The simple black dress or chocolate chip cookie of the financial industry. If a bank can do this well, perhaps it's an indication of overall competency. (Before you shake your head at my naiveté, remember that fancy financial instruments haven't served the industry well.)

I have three requirements. First, of course, I'm after convenience. Lower ATM fees are key, and so are branch and ATM density. Second, as a shortsighted young person, I'm heavily influenced by the toaster factor. Last year, Chase gave me a free iPod Nano; it was entirely superfluous to my needs and I gave it away immediately, but I like shiny things and it sealed the deal. I understand times aren't quite as flush, but, come on, lavish a little something on me. Third, just to make you shake your head at my callow superficiality, I'll admit that the optics of the banking experience are important to me. I like a well-appointed Web site, an attractively designed debit card, and brick-and-mortar banks that evoke just the right level of corporate soullessness.

Bank of America

I started my search with Bank of America, one of Chase's biggest rivals (and one of the biggest TARP beneficiaries). An efficient greeter with a clipboard welcomed me as soon as I walked through the door, then passed me along to a gentleman I'll refer to as F. (for decorum's sake), a personal-banking specialist with a flag pin, slicked-back hair, and a professionally flirtatious gaze. I briefly explained my reasons for stopping by that afternoon, and F. bored his eyes even deeper into mine. "What do you *really* want from a bank?" he asked, a simple question for which I suddenly had no answer. "I just want to see what's out there," I said, then started rambling about how I hate carrying cash—a rotten but unshakable habit—and constantly find myself paying $4 non-Chase ATM fees to get $1.50 coffees at cash-only bodegas.

F. took this all in, nodding slowly as I talked with increasing speed and decreasing substance. Then, with a sidelong glance, he casually popped the question: "How much money do you normally keep in your bank account?" I felt so … exposed, but once I croaked my answer, the awkwardness subsided. F., that gracious soul, showed no signs of judgment and proffered a wealth of pamphlets. (He *did* quickly dismiss some of the higher-end options with "Oh, you don't need to worry about these!")

Bank of America's regular checking account is virtually identical to Chase's: free online banking, free check card, and a low minimum balance that's waived if you sign up for direct deposit. If you use another bank's ATM, you get slapped with a $2 penalty, plus the machine fee. There are more than 18,000 Bank of America ATMs nationally (14,000 for Chase), so both are more than adequate for my mobility and convenience requirements. The main difference between the two banks is that overdraft charges are assessed on a per-diem basis at Chase, and in a single lump sum at Bank of America. But since I've never overdrafted, that's hardly a reason to jump ship.

Deals abound for the consumer interested in squirreling his money away in various CDs and money-market accounts, but there's virtually nothing for me, the relentless spender who represents the salvation of our national economy. The "Keep the Change" program is enticing: It rounds up any check-card purchases to the nearest dollar and deposits that difference to

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your savings account. But in the long run, Bank of America's low interest rate (0.3 percent) won't match up to HSBC's.

On the aesthetic front, Bank of America and Chase are, again, quite similar. These fierce competitors are united in their appreciation for the anodyne—unmemorable standard checks and inoffensively bland physical branches. I do prefer Chase's calming blue color scheme to Bank of America's bullfighting red, which, to the pop color theorist might indicate risk aversion.

F. gamely tried to sell me on the bells and whistles: low-balance alerts texted to my cell phone, new ATM check-scanning technology being installed all over New York, themed debit cards with everything from camo to Anne Geddes! (Clearly he'd misread my taste.) The best F. could offer on the toaster front was a $25 cash gift if you maintain a certain balance for your first month as a customer, not exactly dazzling even in this new era of restraint. Finally, F. pulled out his ace: In his profligate youth, he was a Chase customer. And although the two institutions seemed comparable, online banking was "more intuitive" with Bank of America. He was right to peg me as an intuitive decision-maker, but in this case my gut wasn't feeling it. I left with his card and an empty promise to call him soon.

Apple Bank

My next stop was Apple Bank, a hyper-local New York institution. Perhaps it was nostalgia for my Cleveland bank or a reaction to scary headlines about the big conglomerates, but locavore banking suddenly seemed like an appealing option. (I'm not alone in this sentiment; both credit unions and local banks have been picking up skittish customers.)

I had visions of Jimmy Stewart welcoming me with a handshake, but at the branch I visited, things looked more like Potterville. The chairs were dirty, and the décor evoked a 1970s-era principal's office. No one greeted me at the door; instead, I sidled up to jeans-clad S., one of several desk workers who hadn't even glanced at me when I walked in. After I said my piece, she slapped a photocopied, text-only printout on the table and told me to look it over. For a brief moment, I felt ridiculously snobby—do I really want wasteful glossy brochures, silly suits, and corporate jargon-filled fawning? But then I read the dinky sheet of paper and learned that not only would I be assessed a charge for online bill payments (a service I take for granted), but that after signing up, I'd have to submit a cancellation request in writing.

I pressed on, only to find numerous service charges. For a basic checking account, Apple slaps you with a $3 monthly maintenance fee regardless of your balance and permits only 8 free withdrawals per month. Even S. shrugged when I asked her why I ought to switch to Apple. She admitted that the ATMs were few and far between (and nonexistent outside the New York City area) but added sullenly that customer service was great.

As I got up to go, astonished that such an institution could possibly flourish, S.'s parting line reminded me why it does: "We are a good bank, a solid bank, no subprimes."

E-Trade

After my Apple experience, I considered the dramatic move of abandoning the traditional brick-and-mortar bank entirely by switching to etrade.com, the online brokerage that also offers checking accounts. All deposits earn interest at a rate of .05 below $5,000, and an impressive .75% for accounts above that amount. Minimum-balance fees are waived with direct deposit, and, holy of holies, all ATM fees are reimbursed. No more $5.50 coffee! But E-Traders have to give up certain simple pleasures, like haggling with a customer service rep in person.

Plus, depositing money is a hassle—you have to mail a check, wire funds, or transfer from another account. To keep my perfect overdraft-free streak going, I need checks to pop up in my account immediately. Sure, I can use direct deposit for my biweekly paychecks from ***Slate***, but what about freelance gigs? Or birthday checks? I may be a child of the Internet age, but I'm not quite ready for E-Trade.

Citibank

The morning after word got out that Citibank might be nationalized, I moseyed on by a branch near my office. When I informed the greeter that I was shopping around for a new checking account, she looked me up and down and then demanded photo ID, a copy of my Social Security card, and other official flotsam. Much as I enjoyed this Soviet-style greeting, I was relieved when she hustled me into the arms of M., her slightly more affable young comrade.

M. lacked F.'s velvet-gloved killer instinct, but he did a fine job selling his product. He whirled me through a dazzling array of "packages" (accounts, for the layman) before delicately nudging me to reveal my net worth. I appreciated his sensitivity and quelled the wild desire to name a fantastic sum. He steered me toward the same basic package I'd seen at the other behemoths, one which serves my needs adequately but lacks zing. Citi has fewer ATMs nationwide than its main competitors, but the ATM fee is just $1.50—lower than the $2 charge at either Bank of America or Chase.

Still, I pushed for more—a toaster? Perhaps a recession special? M. laughed at both suggestions. Then, to mollify my hurt feelings, he began describing "Thank You Points," Citi's check-card reward system that—at my expenditure level—results in the adult version of carnival stuffed animals. Citi's debit card also

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has a program offering frequent-flier miles—but for an airline I dislike.

Just as I was ready to leave, M. offered to check whether my employer has a relationship with Citi. As it turns out, as an employee of the Washington Post Co., I'm eligible for a slightly nicer checking deal, one that normally requires maintaining a $6,000 minimum balance. The main advantage, at least for me, is that the bank waives non-Citi ATM fees. Bingo! (Here it should be noted that other large banks have a similar deal with various companies. At Bank of America, F. searched valiantly for a corporate discount on my behalf, but ours was a star-crossed relationship.)

I headed to the Chase bank across the street to see if they'd be willing to match the deal I'd gotten at Citi. It was crowded, and I ended up waiting for half an hour to see a customer service rep. Would they have paid a little more attention if they'd sensed my potential betrayal? When I finally got in to see a representative, I laid out the terms of the Citi offer and asked if she would be willing to match it to keep my business. She laughed, and told me nope, no way. I must have looked a little sad. "Honestly?" she added. "That's a really great deal." It was tantamount to a blessing: Chase understood that I'd be better off with someone else.

I haven't quite worked up the oomph to switch banks yet—inertia is a powerful force, paperwork is a hassle, and I'm a little leery of handing over all my hard-earned cash to such an unstable institution. But my rational side knows that Citi is, as they say, too big to fail. And if Citi does go under, at least there are plenty of brick-and-mortar branches countrywide where I can bang on teller windows and demand my money back.

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sports nut

The Final Snore

A charmless oligarchy of schools has sucked the excitement out of the NCAA Tournament.

By Charles P. Pierce

Friday, April 3, 2009, at 11:23 AM ET

Thirty-five years ago, I climbed onto a bus in Milwaukee, Wis.* About 19 hours later, I climbed off the bus in Greensboro, N.C., where the Final Four was taking place. In one national semifinal, there was UCLA, which had Bill Walton and had won the previous seven national championships in a row and nine of the previous 10, and North Carolina State, which had David Thompson. The Thompson phenomenon is very hard to explain unless you saw him play, in which case you would believe to this day that a man could fly.

The other semifinal featured Kansas and Marquette, my own alma mater. This game was something of an afterthought; Al McGuire, the genius renegade who coached Marquette, pronounced himself grateful to be playing in "the JV game." He was being kind. Marquette won by a forgettable 13 points. Meanwhile, N.C. State and UCLA played an epic two overtimes. UCLA blew big leads at the end of regulation and in the second overtime and lost, 80-77. This was like feeling the tectonic plates beneath the entire sport shift. UCLA simply won this thing every year. UCLA did not pitch away games that it had wrapped up. Want Reason No. 587 to be grateful that Billy Packer has been sent, well, packing by CBS off to the Old Stick in the Mud Retirement Palace? He's said several times that, in general, he doesn't think that it was much of a game. If you ignore the fact that an entire epoch in the history of the sport had ended almost overnight, he's right.

(For what it's worth, N.C. State drilled Marquette pretty badly for the national championship on Monday night. McGuire picked up two brainless technical fouls right before halftime, and the 76-64 final was the result of extended garbage time at the end.)

The dynastic UCLA period that ended that weekend had not been good for the tournament. The Bruins even managed to win two championships in the Sidney Wicks-Steve Patterson interregnum between the lordly reigns of Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Bill Walton. There was a sense, always, of forgone conclusion to the proceedings. Once UCLA finally lost, though, and its 1975 championship notwithstanding, the tournament cracked wide open. The next five champions were, in order, Indiana, Marquette, Kentucky, Michigan State, and Louisville. There wasn't another repeat winner until Duke went back to back in 1991 and 1992. Why, then, did this year's tournament—which has been one of the most boring on record with one, count it, memorable game, the Villanova-Pittsburgh East Regional final—seem to have about it the musty, fusty aroma of those days when UCLA won it every year? Because instead of UCLA winning it every year, there are now between five and nine UCLAs that can win it every year. It's just as sterile and dynastic as it used to be.

Let us be clear. I'm not alleging a cabal between the NCAA, CBS, and their various corporate suckfish, except to the extent that they have conspired to make the tournament huge. Neither am I one who believes that, if they had managed to put more "mid-majors" into the field, anything much would have changed. The field did not lack anything I noticed, because St. Mary's was left out in favor of Arizona. The trumpeted love for the Cinderella stories always is overblown, anyway, particularly by network shills who otherwise don't want those schools anywhere near their bonanza on the final weekend. The TV ratings are stronger than they ever were. There's no indication that a run by, say, Dayton to the second weekend would have improved them conspicuously. (Recall Packer's graceless treatment of George

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Mason during its run to the Final Four a couple of years back.) People love their Cinderellas not because they provide the illusion that anyone can win this event but because, occasionally, they cover in the early rounds and everyone makes money. (Thank you, Cal-Northridge, by the way.) But, in terms of the tournament's ultimate outcome, the presence of more mid-majors generally means next to nothing by the time you get to the regional finals, which is where the stasis sets in, year after year.

There's no going back, either. This damn thing is a destination event now. In 1974, I recall there being two rows of media at courtside. In 1977, at the Omni in Atlanta, my ticket for the championship game cost nine bucks. Now, the whole Final Four annually is subsumed by that odd lot of suits and haircuts that infests every major sporting event. The luxury-box crowd has come to town, and the event has suffered for that. (That's not even to mention the basketball demimonde of gamblers, hustlers, player pimps, shoe-company panderers, and other grifters in sweat suits who turn up every year. But at least there's a certain raffish charm to those thieves.) The size of the event has rendered it indistinguishable from every other similar event. The Final Four is now the Super Bowl, is now the Derby, and so on. Its grandiosity has rendered it impossible to contain, and that same grandiosity brings with it a demand for consistency, for an easily defined cast of characters, a rack of brand names consonant with the corporate class that's come to run the thing. We are now back in the tedious dynastic years, except that we now have Tudors, Stuarts, and Plantagenets, and not year after year of the House of Windsor. There are no usurpers any more. Four times the predictability and, yes, four times the boredom.

Look at your Final Four this year. Outside Villanova, which is playing better than anyone else at the moment, you've got North Carolina, placidly humming along like the well-heeled conglomerate that it is; UConn, which is trying to get through this tournament two steps ahead of the NCAA enforcement posse; and Michigan State, whose only chance to win this thing is to gum up the game with roller-ball defense, chuck up some three-point shots so as to have rebounds to pursue, and altogether render its games into something that makes me prefer to drive 10-penny nails into my eyeballs than watch. These are all major corporations within what has become the industry of college basketball. In the past 10 years, these four teams have combined to appear 12 times in the Final Four since 2000.

They've won three national championships between them. North Carolina and Michigan State have been in the last weekend simultaneously three times over that span. This isn't parity. It's oligarchy. Its popularity has changed the tournament into something more than it was and less than it should be. The event has grown beyond charm. It has outgrown its soul.

***Correction, April 3, 2009**: The article originally stated that the 1974 NCAA Tournament took place 25 years ago; it took place 35 years ago. (Return to the corrected sentence.)*

technology

The Poor Man's Mac

Microsoft wants you to buy PCs because they're cheaper than Apple products, not because they're better machines.

By Farhad Manjoo

Thursday, April 2, 2009, at 4:21 PM ET

One surefire way of inciting violence among techies is to wonder idly whether Apple computers are really worth their inflated price tags. Mac devotees are sensitive about this subject: Tell a Mac-head that you can't understand why anyone would pay $1,300 for a MacBook when a comparable Dell sells for $900 and you might as well be calling him a vain fool. Who wants to be regarded as paying for style over substance? Then try suggesting to your Windows-loving pal that there's more to choosing a computer than looking for the lowest price. What about ease of use, long-term value, and the sheer pleasure of using a Mac? Now you're calling your Windows friend a cheapskate. Either way, you're asking for a black eye—or, at least, a three-hour earful about why price should or shouldn't matter in your next computer purchase. (The black eye may be preferable.)

Until recently, both Apple and Microsoft have shied away from the price fight. In its "I'm a Mac/I'm a PC" ads, Apple avoids mentioning its machines' higher prices; instead, it takes on Windows' shortcomings. The implication is that if you go for a PC to save money, you'll get what you pay for. I've been chronicling Microsoft's evolving marketing strategy for a few months, and I've been mainly critical. The "Mojave Experiment," which tricked people into trying Vista, didn't exactly inspire confidence in the operating system's standalone merits. And its last big campaign, featuring an ethnically diverse lot declaring that *they* were PCs, came off as the company trying too hard to be cool. Now Microsoft has taken off the gloves. In Web and TV spots that began airing during March Madness, the company is going after what it considers Apple's greatest vulnerability, especially during this economy: Macs are too damned expensive.

The spots are the end result of a challenge that Microsoft's ad agency, Crispin Porter & Bogusky, put to a few telegenic young people in Los Angeles. It offered them between $700 and $2,000 to buy any computer that they wanted and let them keep whatever they didn't spend. In the first ad to air, a pretty, spunky redhead named Lauren is looking for a laptop with a 17-inch screen for less than $1,000. She goes to an Apple store and discovers that only the $999 13-inch MacBook is in her price range. Apple's 17-inch MacBook Pro goes for $2,799, way beyond Lauren's budget. "I'm just not cool enough to be a Mac person," she huffs. Then she goes to Best Buy and finds an HP

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notebook that fits her specs selling for just $699.99. She's elated—"I got everything that I wanted for under $1,000!"

Predictably, Mac partisans have found much to criticize in the spot. They say it appears staged, and they note that Lauren is an actress. Plus, they insist she'll regret buying that cheapo machine—it's terribly slow, has old-model parts, meager battery life, weighs a ton, is packed with annoying trial software, and features Windows Vista Home, the most basic version of Microsoft's operating system. "It is the epitome of what people dislike about PCs," writes *Computerworld*'s Seth Weintraub.

And that suggests the danger here for Microsoft. In the short run, its strategy makes some sense. The ads are well-produced, entertaining, and get across the basic point very well—if you, like Lauren, are on a budget, there are many Macs that you simply can't afford. Today, lots of people are on a budget. Apple's sales, which were flying high last year, have recently begun to show some strain.

But it's a terrible strategy for the long term. What happens when the economy improves? What happens when young, telegenic people in L.A. can once again spend $1,300 or $1,500 or more for a laptop? What will they do when they hear from Lauren that her $700 machine is grindingly slow and that hauling it around is cramping her acting career? By selling people lots of cheap Windows PCs now, Microsoft risks cementing the idea that PCs are cheap. And in the computer business, "cheap" isn't an adjective you want to court. Customers may start to think that paying a bit more will get them something better. And when they can afford to pay more, they will.

Indeed, this is essentially the argument that Mac fans offer when confronted with the idea that Apple's machines are too expensive. Sure, they say, Macs might sometimes induce sticker shock, but that doesn't mean they're inherently much more expensive. It's just that they include a lot of high-quality components as standard features, making for much more powerful machines.

Technologizer's Harry McCracken, a nonpartisan in this fight, runs a regular series that factors this in when comparing Apples with PCs. He picks a sample Mac system, then prices out what rival computers would cost if outfitted with the same features. In October, he found that Apple's new 13-inch aluminum MacBook—which sells for $1,299—was right around the same price as similarly equipped machines by Lenovo and Sony, though more expensive than a machine made by Dell. This week, he did the same comparison for the 17-inch MacBook Pro that Lauren found too expensive. Apple's machine comes with a superfast 2.66 GHz Intel Core 2 Duo processor, two graphics chips, a screen with an LED backlight, and a battery that lasts for eight hours—lots of top-of-the-line features of the sort that someone like Lauren probably doesn't need. When you rig up other laptops similarly, Apple's computer comes out as slightly less expensive than ones from Dell and HP, a bit more than one from Lenovo, and a lot more than a Sony—in the middle of the pack, pricewise. And this analysis neglects the many Apple features that you simply can't get on PCs—the malware-free Mac OS, Apple's stellar reliability and customer service ratings, and the fact that Mac machines seem to live longer (or at least hang on to their resale value better).

Of course, when you've got only $1,000 to spend on a laptop, none of this matters much. Apple's problem isn't that its prices are too high, it's that they're too inflexible. There are certain specs below which it seems reluctant to go, meaning that its entry-level prices are higher compared with those for PCs. You can get a $400 PC notebook, but Steve Jobs has nixed the idea of a cheap Apple portable: "We don't know how to make a $500 computer that's not a piece of junk, and our DNA will not let us ship that," he once said. Still, Apple's pricing scheme could prove difficult to stick to in a prolonged downturn, and it will likely reduce prices slightly if sales slag. At the very least, it could sell that 13-inch white MacBook for $800 instead of $1,000.

At a conference the other day, Steve Ballmer, Microsoft's CEO, argued that the economy had clarified people's views about what they wanted out of their computers, and as a result, Apple's recent gains in market share would be reversed. "I think the tide has really turned in the other direction," he said. "Paying an extra $500 for a computer in this environment—same piece of hardware—paying $500 more to get a logo on it? I think that's a more challenging proposition for the average person than it used to be."

Of course, he's right; selling a logo is tougher these days. What Ballmer forgets, though, is that he, too, is selling a logo. In fact, that's all he's selling. Microsoft doesn't make hardware; it makes Windows, the symbolic face of our machines. And in pushing low prices, Ballmer's newest ads don't tell you any of the great features that the Windows logo might stand for. Does it keep you safe from viruses? Is there an easy way to fix it if it breaks down? Is it environmentally responsible? Does it offer an easy way to make movies? Does it look awesome?

People want that stuff from their computers. When they've got money, they're willing to pay extra for it; that's why Apple dominated the notebook market last year. By focusing only on price, Microsoft is telling us only one thing about the Windows logo: It's what you look for when you're settling.

technology

The Worm That Ate the Web

The latest version of Conficker isn't the first bot to plague the Internet, but it may be the smartest and most sophisticated. And it starts phoning home

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Wednesday.
By Farhad Manjoo
Monday, March 30, 2009, at 5:20 PM ET

Last week, I pulled out my Internet cable, unplugged my USB drives, and searched my Windows machine for Conficker, the astounding computer worm that threatens to wreak global havoc once its latest version begins to phone home for further instructions on April 1. Well, maybe: While security researchers warn that the worm's creators may be planning on conducting fraud or even "information warfare" aimed at disrupting the Internet, nobody knows what terrible deed Conficker will ultimately pull off. What we do know is that Conficker is devilishly smart, terrifically contagious, and evolving. Each time experts discover a way to constrain its spread, its creators release new, more sophisticated versions that can push even further. The latest version, Conficker C, hit the Internet early in March. Estimates aren't precise, but researchers say the worm—in all its variants—has so far infected more than 10 million machines around the world.

Conficker gets into Windows through a security hole that Microsoft fixed last fall. As a result, the worm tends to run rampant on networks where IT guys have been slow to patch people's machines (like at the British Parliament, for instance, which reported a Conficker infection last week). Countries with lots of pirated versions of Windows are also vulnerable, with China, Brazil, Russia, and India among the most Confickered nations. On the other hand, I was lucky—my computer was worm-free. If your machine has been properly patched and protected, there's a good chance it's safe, too. (See Symantec's page on how to detect and remove it.)

But having a safe machine doesn't mean you're safe. Conficker's true aim may be to bring chaos to the Internet, at which point you might feel its wrath even if your computer is OK. When Conficker infects a host, it ensnares it into a botnet—a massive network of computers geared for unsavory ends. Botnets can spew out spam, mount denial-of-service attacks to bring down Web sites, or consume so much bandwidth that they drown out all other network traffic.

Much of the media coverage surrounding Conficker has centered on its go-live date, April Fool's Day. But that's something of a red herring; it's unlikely that anything will blow up on the first. The date is significant only to the *latest version* of Conficker, which is set to go to the Web and check a huge list of sites for files put out by the worm's creators that will instruct the botnet what to do next. But previous versions of Conficker, which are much more common than the latest variant, have been looking for those files for months now. April Fool's Day will only become Conficker Day if its creators chose that day to upload the worm's new instructions.

It's the update files that will determine Conficker's next course of action. At the moment, that's a complete mystery. Even if Conficker amounts to nothing, though, its rise suggests a key vulnerability in the infrastructure of the Internet. By harnessing millions of computers that can be turned to any possible caper, a band of hackers has created a truly dastardly weapon. The big question now is what they'll do with it.

Conficker is far from the Internet's first serious malware attack. But it is perhaps the most well-thought-out and technically cunning ever to hit it big. The word *worm* conjures up something ugly, inelegant, even dumb. Conficker is anything but—it's the Bugatti of worms, every element exquisitely crafted to advance a single goal: in this case, total control of your machine. To read the security reports documenting Conficker's technical details is to be at once astonished and impressed by its professor Moriarty-type planning. The C variant, for instance, includes a subroutine that claws back at any efforts to remove it. It disables Windows services that patch your machine, prevents your computer from loading up into "safe mode" (a key way to fight nasty malware), and continually scans for and shuts down any security programs that might pose a threat—including the most commonly used Conficker-removal programs. (I'm still confident my machine's free of Conficker because my anti-virus program was able to complete its search; if you notice your program shut down almost immediately after it starts, you may have a problem.)

Conficker's most sophisticated routine is what researchers call its "rendezvous" mechanism, the way it reaches back to its creators for further instructions. Every few hours, the worm generates a list of hundreds of new Web domain names; the domain names are nonsensical strings of characters seeded by the current date and time, meaning that they're constantly shifting but can be reproduced by the worm's controllers. In theory, this is how Conficker's authors will tell it what to do next. They'll register one of the domain names, put up a program for Conficker to run, and, boom—millions of machines around the world will be acting in sync.

But you might spot a couple of obvious flaws in this rendezvous mechanism. First, if Conficker is calling up domain names, can't anyone—especially other bad guys—monitor which sites it's connecting to and then upload their own software for Conficker's infected machines to run? Conficker's authors worried about that, too, and cooked up a brilliant counter-mechanism. The worm uses one of the world's most advanced cryptographic algorithms to check all files it downloads from one of those domains; if it doesn't find a digital fingerprint from its authors, Conficker won't run the program.

The second flaw: Can't the Internet's authorities just make sure that no one registers the domain names that Conficker is checking, thereby preventing anyone from sending the worm its marching orders? Indeed, they can. In February, the worldwide

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team of computer security groups who've been fighting Conficker—the self-dubbed Conficker Cabal—announced that they'd worked out a way to determine the pre-generated list of domains that Conficker would connect to. Eventually the cabal got registrars around the world to prevent people from registering those sites.

But that's when researchers spotted the newest Conficker variant, which includes a much-improved updating plan. Instead of generating a list of hundreds of domains, Conficker C creates a new list of 50,000 Web sites to contact every day. Although the Conficker Cabal is trying to prevent registrations on all these domains, registrars around the world will have a much more difficult time monitoring this huge, shifting number of sites. But that's not all: The latest version of Conficker has a completely new way to coordinate the botnet's operations. Rather than contacting domain names, infected machines can band together in a massive peer-to-peer network. This way, each machine can efficiently pass files to its peers in something like the way your high-school orchestra used a phone tree to pass along next week's rehearsal change (or, to get more technical, in the same way people trade movies online via BitTorrent). We've seen peer-to-peer botnets before; in 2007, one of them, the Storm Worm, brought down several anti-spam Web sites. A peer-to-peer-enabled botnet as sophisticated as Conficker would be very difficult to thwart; if it worked well enough, it could well be impossible to shut down.

Who created Conficker? Like much else about the worm, it's completely unknown. Initial speculation settled on Eastern Europeans. The first version of Conficker included code designed to keep Ukraine free of the worm. (If it detected a Ukrainian keyboard, it shut down.) But successive versions have been free of that code. On Sunday, BKIS, a Vietnamese computer security firm, announced that it had found clues in the worm suggesting it was created in China. In February, Microsoft put up a $250,000 reward for any information leading to the arrest and conviction of people responsible for creating Conficker.

But whoever they are, they sure are dangerous. "We must also acknowledge the multiple skill sets that are revealed within the evolving design and implementation of Conficker," wrote security experts at the research group SRI International in a report last week. The researchers added: "Perhaps an even greater threat than what they have done so far, is what they have learned and what they will build next."

But Conficker is also important for what it portends about the inherent difficulties of living in a networked age. Worms feed on bugs—holes in the ever-more-complex operating systems and Web browsers where we live most of our online lives. And because we're never going to get rid of these bugs, bad guys will always be able to find a way in. It's just that now, with the entire Internet as their playground—and with the power to harness all their infected machines into a thinking network—they can cause tremendous harm. Conficker could fizzle. But you can bet that someday, something very much like it will cause a lot of pain.

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television

Andy Richter Comes in From the Rain

Why he's the best late-night-show sidekick of all time.

By Troy Patterson

Tuesday, March 31, 2009, at 12:22 PM ET

Andy Richter—Conan O'Brien's *Late Night* sidekick from 1993 to the year 2000, a writer, actor, and comedian that we'll have to call a funnyman—will be abetting his old boss' silliness when *The Tonight Show* relaunches in June. TV fans were delighted to hear this news, none more so than Richter himself. Earlier this month, he discussed the extended predicament of his career in the manner of John Cusack in *Say Anything* (or, say, anything). "I really do feel like … I've been standing in a storm," he told the *New York Post*. "Someone opened a door and said, 'Get out of the rain.' " The new gig might well be the resolution of all his fruitless searches.

While the word *Everyman* has been tossed around rather loosely for the past 500 years or so, Richter, with his pillowy physique, Illinois inflections, and "Howdy, neighbor!" manner, actually fits the bill. On *Late Night*, he lent a Midwestern common touch—a quality shared, not for nothing, by Johnny Carson and David Letterman—to the antics of Bostonian Conan. On *Andy Richter Controls the Universe*—which puttered along for 19 episodes in 2002 and 2003 and is newly out on DVD—he played a thwarted fiction writer who was dissatisfied (but, crucially, not disgruntled) with his job composing technical manuals for Faceless Conglomerate & Co. On *Andy Barker, P.I.*—which stuck around for all of six episodes in 2007—he played a sunny accountant plunged into a spoof noir; the guy too nice to fight being drafted into service as a private dick. In the *Madagascar* kids films, he gives voice to a lemur.

It seems likely that Richter's averageness is the font of both his artistic successes and his commercial failures. Too square to be hip, too well-kempt for slob comedy, and too principled to pander, Richter exudes a normalness that renders him a misfit. But, though as wholesome as Garrison Keillor on the surface, he is as weird as anybody. In the moments that require his zaniest self, he suggests a subtle Chris Farley, with the crucial difference of seeming to prefer malted milkshakes to speedballs. In this old Conan segment—a joke on tawdry daytime talk shows—what makes his performance as a vainglorious hootchie work is the contrast between the clothes on his soft body (crop top, short shorts) and the polite way he cross his legs. The

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demeanor is both sassy and prim; the dissonance is both droll and goofy.

In *Andy Richter Controls the Universe*, he was at the eye of an absurdist storm. Here, as in *Seinfeld* or *Newhart* or *Operation Shylock*, the creator and the protagonist share a name. The only cosmos the fictional Andy Richter controls is the infinite space under his company-man haircut. Like the heroine of *Ally McBeal*—which briefly overlapped with *Universe* on Fox's schedule—he entertains fanciful visions. Whereas Ally was a full-blown neurotic, modest Andy was but a daydreaming melancholic. In the pilot, plotting to get a grating new office-mate fired by sabotaging his work, Andy hesitates after imagining the consequences for a military-contracting project. He envisages an animated scene of a dud torpedo bouncing off its target and, witnessing this impotence, mermaids singing, each to each. I do not think that they will sing to him.

James Thurber's 1939 story "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" is an obvious influence here, but—and this could make the DVD set a perfect amusement for these times—the show nods frequently to escapist entertainment that touches on the Depression and the years immediately following. There's a bit of Preston Sturges' classy madness to its screwiness and, in the steep skyscraper shots and sheer cleverness, something of the Coen Bros.' (Sturges-indebted) flicks like *Barton Fink*. Set up as a typical workplace comedy—the dramatis personae include an office playboy, a harridan of a female boss, and a cutie-pie receptionist who exists as the object of Andy's affections—the show nonetheless anticipates the unconventional funniness of *Arrested Development* and *30 Rock*. It was fun while it lasted.

So now it's left to Richter, coming in from the cold, to revive the dying art of the late-night-show sidekick. The idiosyncratic Craig Ferguson of *The Late Late Show* pilots a one-man ship. Jay Leno, like David Letterman, relies on his bandleader as a foil. (Since Doc Severinsen led the NBC Orchestra, bandleaders have been figures of seediness for hosts to play off—overly flashy guys imagined to smell of reefer and the perfume of loose women.) Both Jimmy Kimmel and E!'s Chelsea Handler rely on small Hispanic men working blue-collar jobs on their shows—an odd fact that could surely serve as fodder for a 10-page Latino-studies paper—but they are more like paralegals than junior partners. No, Richter must once again take the baton from *Tonight*'s Ed McMahon—assuming that McMahon has not hocked it. But McMahon—an announcer with instincts of an Atlantic City salesman, which he was—acted as a hype man; he was the Danny Ray to Carson's James Brown. Richter, meanwhile, has been and should be the deferential Robin to Conan's absurdist Batman, a Boy Wonder with a Wonderbread deportment. Holy subordinate!

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the best policy

The Regulatory Charade

Washington had the power to regulate misbehaving banks. It just refused to use it.

By Eliot Spitzer

Wednesday, April 1, 2009, at 7:10 AM ET

Does it strike you as odd that the American government has invested $115 billion in TARP money alone in Citibank, JPMorgan Chase, and Bank of America, fully 70 percent of their market cap ($164.5 billion, as of March 30), yet we have virtually no say in the management or behavior of these banks? Does it seem even odder that these banks are getting along extremely well with the government regulators who should be picking them apart for having destroyed the economy and financial system?

There is a grand, implicit bargain being struck in our multitrillion-dollar bailout of the financial-services sector. Those in power in D.C. and New York are pretending the bargain is: You give us trillions, and in return, we fix this industry so the economy recovers and this never happens again. In fact, the bargain is much more alarming: Trillions of dollars of taxpayer money will be invested to rescue the banks, without the new owners—taxpayers—being allowed to make any of the necessary changes in structure, senior management, or corporate behavior. In return, the still-private banks will help the D.C. regulators perpetuate the myth that regulators didn't have enough power to prevent the meltdown. In sum, banks get bailed out with virtually no obligations imposed; regulators get more power and a pass on their past failures. The symbiosis of the past decade continues.

We already see regulators, supported by investment and commercial banks, calling for expanded power—specifically the ability to reach hedge funds and other "private equity" with more oversight and to seize institutions that pose systemic risk with greater alacrity.

Each is a worthy regulatory idea. But each is essentially irrelevant to the problems that got us where we are. The new line from Washington and Wall Street is that hamstrung regulators lacked the power to stop malfeasance before the crisis. This is wrong. Washington had enormous power over the misbehaving investment banks, commercial banks, and ratings agencies. It just refused to use that power.

Financial-services companies have been given multiple blank checks, worth hundreds of billions, yet there have been virtually no mandated changes in management, behavior, or lending practices. Nor have bondholders in that sector been required to take a haircut, as they have been elsewhere. GM was required to replace its CEO, Rick Wagoner, and auto company stockholders, bondholders, and unions have all been required to take substantial haircuts.

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In return for the free money, the financial-service companies only have to play along with the face-saving myth: The regulators at the Fed, the FDIC, the OCC, Treasury, OTS, etc. would have done better if only they had had more power over "rogue" free-floating funds of capital—hedge funds and private-equity funds. Hence the call for broader authority.

Now, adding coherence and structure to the crazy quilt of regulators we now have is fine, and something many have sought for a long time. But it is also unrelated to our current predicament.

The bad actors who got us where we are—ratings agencies, commercial banks, and investment banks that participated in the origination and securitization of the bad debt—have been squarely in Washington's regulatory sweet spot. The regulators had all the power they needed to peer deep inside the AIG counterparties to see if there was risk that should have been avoided. And, truth be told, they had that power with AIG as well. Today there is a hue and cry about hedge funds, but it is not hedge funds or private equity funds that are seeking bailouts and taxpayer subsidies.

So the question should be: Where were the regulators, and not only during the Bush administration, but also during the Clinton years? The answer is that they were either blind or willfully avoiding exercising the power they already had. The story is now well told that, from Alan Greenspan and Timothy Geithner at the Fed to Robert Rubin and Larry Summers at Treasury, to Harvey Pitt and Chris Cox at the SEC, regulators avoided the critical issues that were percolating in the financial community. They had the authority to set capital ratios and leverage limits and rap the knuckles of the clearly conflicted rating agencies. But they didn't.

Most of these are genuinely good people, and everybody who has been in a regulatory position has made errors. The issue is not placing blame. But it is understanding the genesis of the problem and ensuring that we find the right policy response. These fully empowered regulators fell into bubble-inducing behavior. They were susceptible to the same groupthink that accepted a faulty premise or theory of the moment, or they simply placed too much faith in the magic of the market. Bubbles and market irrationality happen—even with empowered regulators. Of course, aggressive regulators could have ensured that the bubble didn't last as long or get as dangerous as the last one did.

If regulators already had enough power, the simplistic belief that a smart new law will stop the problem next time is clearly false. Giving the regulators all the powers they now seek would not have changed their behavior. We would still be precisely where we are. We shouldn't forget that Sarbanes-Oxley was supposed to cleanse the markets. More laws will not do it.

Instead of creating new regulations and laws that don't really address the root causes of the crisis, we should look to a simpler but more fundamental way to limit systemic financial risk and simultaneously create a healthier financial marketplace: If it is too big to fail, break it up. We should not let any private institution become so big and central to the financial system that taxpayers become its guarantor. The problem is that this model doesn't fit into the secret grand bargain. On the contrary, the entire premise of the grand bargain is that the companies that were already too big to fail have been allowed to get even bigger. Socializing risk while privatizing gain—which is what having more and bigger "too big to fail" institutions guarantees for the future—doesn't work in the long run. Too big to fail, quite simply, is too big.

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the green lantern

A Pressing Issue

What's the greenest way to keep my clothes looking sharp?

By Nina Shen Rastogi

Monday, March 30, 2009, at 3:46 PM ET

After years of working from home, I just started a new job—one that requires me to look presentable at all times. What's the most eco-friendly way for me to keep my clothes neat and wrinkle-free?

You're right that all that increased wardrobe attention comes at a price. A 2006 study from the University of Cambridge calculated that just 40 percent of the energy that goes into a typical cotton T-shirt over its lifetime is associated with its manufacture and sale—the rest is used for washing, drying, and ironing. If you want to keep this new job, you can't just stop washing your clothes. But you do have a lot of options when it comes to drying and de-wrinkling, and the choices you make can have significant impacts.

Your first consideration: to tumble dry or not to tumble dry? A dryer will get your clothes neat and fluffy, but it'll use a lot of energy in the process. After your fridge, it's likely to be the second-hungriest appliance in the house; dryers are responsible for 4.2 percent (PDF) of the average American home's energy diet, according to the Energy Information Administration's annual outlook report. In 2007, clothes dryers in the United States consumed about as much energy as 13.4 million cars.

A clothesline is generally a better option for those who have the opportunity to use one. Not only does solar drying require zero fuel and cause zero emissions, it also lessens the wear and tear on your garments, allowing you to go longer between replacements. Line-dried clothing can get a little crunchy,

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though—not exactly a boardroom-ready look. Clothesline enthusiasts recommend hanging garments as soon as they come out of the washer: The weight of the water will help pull out any wrinkles. Shake out garments vigorously, smooth them by hand, and try to find a spot that's out of direct sunlight. Apartment-dwellers, don't feel left out: There are plenty of indoor clotheslines for you, too.

If you do decide to use your tumble dryer, there are plenty of things you can do to make the process more efficient. Don't pack your machine too tight, and keep clothes separated by type and weight. Use the moisture-sensor function, which cuts the power as soon as your clothes are dry, and keep the lint filter clean. Most important, take out your clothes as soon as the buzzer rings and keep your hangers at the ready—the longer your stuff sits in a pile, the stiffer the wrinkles.

There's always the option of splitting the difference between your clothesline and your dryer. Get your clothes mostly dry on the line and then toss them in the dryer for a few minutes to tumble out wrinkles, and you'll still manage to cut your energy use significantly. (If wrinkles have already set in, throw in a damp towel.)

However you dry your clothes, you may need to do a little gussying to get them crisp enough for the office. There's always the old trick of hanging your clothes in the bathroom as you shower, letting the steam relax the fabric. (Heat and moisture cause wrinkles; they also smooth them out.) This method has the added benefit of making your shower a little bit greener, since it piggybacks on your wasteful hot water usage. However, as Laura Moser found when she tested travel steamers for ***Slate***, this technique offers less-than-impressive results. A handheld, plug-in steamer will be far more effective and use less water.

But if you need to look really sharp, there's no getting around it: You'll have to haul out your iron. Despite its small size, the average iron pulls a lot of juice. At 1,000 to 1,800 watts, it's about as thirsty for power as a vacuum cleaner. Estimates from the Department of Energy suggest that an hour's worth of ironing draws about one kilowatt-hour of power, but it's unclear whether that figure takes into account the fact that irons typically cycle on and off to maintain a constant temperature. Actual electricity use may be as low as 0.22 kWh per hour. A typical electric dryer, on the other hand, uses about 3.3 kWh over a full 45-minute cycle.*

So long as you're not going overboard, line-drying and the occasional pressing should save a significant amount of energy over a full cycle in the dryer. Just try to do all of your ironing at once, starting with delicate items before cranking up the heat.

Finally, if your new gig has you giddy to go shopping, consider your future energy costs and look for clothes with a lower crumpling threshold. Many green-minded clotheshorses balk at permanent press or easy-care fabrics, but mostly for health reasons—these garments can release small amounts of formaldehyde because of the chemical finishes used to alter the fabric's polymers. Most of the formaldehyde will dissipate after a single washing, but textile finishing remains a resource-intensive process that produces high amounts of effluents. The Green Lantern won't rule out easy-care garments entirely, but it's important to realize that the potential energy savings have a cost on the front end. Better yet, look for office-ready outfits made from lyocell—a recyclable, biodegradable textile, much beloved by sustainability experts, that has the added benefit of being highly wrinkle-resistant.

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.

***Correction, March 30, 2009**: The article originally miscalculated the relevant energy figures. They were calculated as kilowatts, though kilowatt-hours are the appropriate measure. (Watts are a measure of power use at a given moment; kilowatt-hours are a measure of total energy used.) (Return to the corrected paragraph.)*

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the has-been

Bitter Lemons

Lemon populism, the new rage in conservative hypocrisy.

By Bruce Reed

Monday, March 30, 2009, at 12:02 PM ET

In recent months, longtime supporters of a more expansive federal government have lamented that getting stuck with crippled industries like Detroit and the financial sector wasn't exactly what they had in mind. Paul Krugman and Bob Reich both call it lemon socialism—the national takeover of sectors that are not only too big to fail but too failed to want. (This is not to be confused with lemon capitalism, a term coined by Timothy Noah, who was six years ahead of Krugman in seeing the dangers of Davos.)

In the wake of the AIG bonus scandal, lemon socialism is now producing an equally unsatisfying corollary: lemon populism. In the same way that proponents of big government take no pleasure in using it to bail out those who knew better and brought on their own demise, critics of corporate excess can't take much satisfaction that the long-awaited backlash came not because those AIG bonuses went disproportionately to those at the top but because they were paid for with taxpayer dollars. If the only way to rein in executive pay is to lend every company

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$200 billion, America won't have any money left over for pitchforks.

As Washington proved time and again in recent weeks, lemon populism is a remarkably unrewarding phenomenon. Populism has long been an outlet for popular anger and on occasion a constructive one. But while the latest bonuses made Americans plenty mad—even President Obama declared, "I'm as angry as anybody"—the whole AIG episode was more deflating than energizing. After pouring billions down the rathole, Americans think Paul Lynde was right—the rats are winning.

The bitterest aspect of lemon populism is that—like lemon socialism—it does little to address the core problems that make people upset and comes at the cost of real efforts to help the little guy. The political panic that consumed Washington this past month did more to rattle the masses than assuage them. Until Obama put out the fire, the House rush to pass an AIG tax it knew could not pass constitutional muster simultaneously raised private sector fears that government would overreach and the general public's fears that government would be powerless to act in time of crisis.

Populist doubts about the high and mighty are deeply ingrained in the American character. We believe both in striving for success and in playing by the rules, and we are troubled when those ideals collide. We'd rather get rich than get even with the rich, but we insist on responsibility from all. Those competing desires have limited populism's impact as a political movement. Democratic attempts to exploit popular resentment against big institutions, like major corporations, often founder because the same populace feels a healthy skepticism toward other big institutions, like the government. Republican attempts to exploit populist anger toward government often flop when the public sees that the rich and powerful, not the little guy, stand to benefit.

The most successful populists have balanced Americans' dual passion for success and responsibility. Positive populism built on the hope that all Americans can get ahead stands a better chance of stirring the country to collective action than negative populism that depends on sustained anger and resentment. When Bill Clinton raised taxes on the wealthy, he never railed against success, always pointing out that he had nothing against the rich and wouldn't mind being rich himself. President Obama made a similar distinction in his press conference last week, insisting that we should hold those at the top responsible for playing by the rules but not "demonize every investor or entrepreneur who seeks to make a profit."

The trouble with lemon populism, like lemon socialism, is that it speaks to responsibility but can't find room for success. AIG deserves great scorn for helping bring on the financial crisis, then exploiting taxpayers who came to the rescue. But as the Treasury Department recognized in its plan on toxic assets, it will be impossible for banks and the economy to recover—or taxpayers to recoup our vast losses—without someone making money.

With a *Newsweek cover story*, an *Economist* lead editorial, and another what's-the-matter-with-the-masses column from Thomas Frank, populism has emerged as an elite obsession. At the grass roots, however, anger may well miss the elite's intended targets. This weekend, a Democratic legislator in Texas told me that one of his constituents actually showed up at a town hall meeting with a pitchfork. The man was hopping mad, all right—at how much the federal government was spending on the stimulus.

The clearest sign that the recent strain of populism may turn out to be a lemon is how quickly the GOP rushed to embrace it. Conservatives are now running attack ads against AIG bonuses—which is pretty rich, considering that the AIG bailout began under a conservative administration whose guiding economic theory was to reward risk and to lower taxes on high compensation. Republicans aren't running those ads to usher in a new era of equality; they want to poison the well against government action of any kind, from the economy to health care.

Congressional Republicans can do plenty of damage by posing as lemon populists. Still, Obama is better off to keep governing out of hope, not anger. Even when everything around us is coming up lemons, most Americans prefer leaders who can help us make lemonade.

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the spectator

Should We Care What Shakespeare Did in Bed?

The controversy over a sexy new portrait.

By Ron Rosenbaum

Thursday, April 2, 2009, at 6:47 AM ET

Was Shakespeare a hottie? Was Homer a hunk? John Milton: six-pack abs? Dante: hot or not?

You would think, from recent coverage of the portrait newly claimed to be of Shakespeare (a claim front-paged by the *New York Times* early last month) that these are valid literary questions rather than evidence that the culture of celebrity has irretrievably corrupted literature.

Fortunately, the *Times* story was written by the redoubtable John Burns, who included a good dose of skepticism.

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Nonetheless, the piece did quote the promotional brochure that is to accompany an exhibition of the "newly discovered" Shakespeare portrait that opens at the Stratford-on-Avon Shakespeare Center on April 23, the bard's birthday. The quotation tells us everything that is wrong with Shakespearean biography—indeed, with most literary biography—and reminded me of the recent profoundly clueless sexsational controversy over the singularity of Hitler's testicle.

Here is the brochure's heavy-breathing, lubricious description of the so-called "Cobbe portrait" (which belongs to an Irish family named Cobbe):

> This Shakespeare is handsome and glamorous, so how does this change the way we think about him? And do the painting and provenance tell us more about his sexuality, and possibly about the person to whom the sonnets are addressed?

In a word: No. There's nothing wrong with speculating about what Shakespeare looked like nor about what he might have gotten up to in bed. In fact, I'll touch on the latter question a little later in this essay. The problems begin when baseless speculation about the life is used to interpret—and, more often than not, misinterpret—the work.

It has been odd to watch the media all aflutter when our supreme literary genius is revealed to be movie-star handsome and red-carpet ready. He's no longer the pudgy, balding figure we see in the so-called "Droeshout engraving" that appears on the cover of the First Folio, the engraving that most experts, drawing on quotations from those (like fellow poet Ben Jonson) who knew Shakespeare in the flesh, testify is his likeness.

What is remarkable about the fight over this "new" portrait—and it is, indeed, developing into a scholarly shootout—is that one of the leading eminences of British academic Shakespeare, Stanley Wells, general editor of the Oxford Shakespeare series, has lent his name to the venture. It was Wells who spearheaded a press conference unveiling the "Cobbe portrait" as the centerpiece of the upcoming exhibition, which is somewhat grandly called "Shakespeare Found." His support is especially surprising given how quickly and credibly other scholars, such as Oxford's Katherine Duncan-Jones, have presented evidence that the portrait isn't of Shakespeare at all but rather of a Jacobean contemporary, Sir Thomas Overbury. (Duncan-Jones' piece on this subject in the *Times Literary Supplement* is worth clicking on because it presents a portrait that is indubitably Overbury and it looks exactly like the one Wells claims to be of Shakespeare.)

And yet there was Wells putting his imprimatur on the alleged "Shakespeare" portrait at a press conference. And there was Wells, along with two other Shakespeareans, firing back at Duncan-Jones in the letters pages of the *TLS*, dubiously claiming that "independent scientific investigation" supports his claim that the Cobbe portrait depicts Shakespeare. The "science" involved a "tree-ring" study of the wooden frame of the portrait; it hardly needs to be said that no "science" can establish whom a portrait depicts, barring some studio mishap that leaves the subject's DNA all over it.

Wells' unequivocal advocacy is surprising, but it's also easily explained: There is something about the trifecta of fame, sex, and Shakespeare that seems irresistible to scholars, even to someone of Stanley Wells' gravitas.

The whole contretemps reminds me of the recent debate about whether Shakespeare wrote the "Funeral Elegy," a wretched, mind-numbingly sententious, and witless 600-line poem found in a manuscript that had long been gathering dust in an Oxford library. As I recounted in my book *The Shakespeare Wars*, the false (and eventually discredited) claim about the ludicrous elegy was nonetheless a serious matter: If that dreadful work had survived persistent jeers from outsiders such as myself, and definitive debunking by scholars such as Gilles Monsarrat and Brian Vickers, and been taken for authentic, it might have forced us to re-evaluate, through the prism of its rebarbative verse, everything we thought we knew about Shakespeare's attitudes toward life, death, and mortality. We would have had to take the text especially seriously, in fact, because the claim was that it had been written by Shakespeare in 1612, four years before his death, and that he was writing in his own voice—eulogizing a friend—and thus not speaking through a character whose clumsy words could be excused or explained by dramatic irony or some other literary device.

It is perhaps not surprising that the promoters of the wretched elegy initially tried to "sex up" their "discovery" by insinuating that the poem revealed something scandalous about Shakespeare's sex life—perhaps even the identity of the homosexual lover to whom many of the sonnets were supposedly addressed.

The "Shakespeare portrait" brochure makes similar claims, asking whether the new, "hotter" Shakespeare tells us anything about the bard's "sexuality" or "the person to whom the sonnets are addressed," although it's unclear how a portrait could do any such thing. (Are all bisexual men handsome? All heteros ugly?)

There is so little established certainty about Shakespeare's personal traits that it is almost always a reductive and foolish thing to try to read his work through urban legends about his life, or his life through his work. Recently, I tried to make this point in a seminar moderated by Robert Brustein, a great Shakespearean director and author of the just-published *Tainted Muse*. I argued that Homer's works are still considered the greatest in all of literature, and our lack of *any* certain knowledge about him (or her, for all we know) doesn't change that. If we were to learn Homer had a happy or unhappy

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marriage, or favored hermaphrodites, it would change—add or subtract—nothing, zero, from our understanding, our awe, at the grandeur of the *Iliad* or *The Odyssey*.

But the beat goes on, especially when there's some snippet of sex. In fact, Stanley Wells, before he became a promoter of sexy portraits, wrote intelligently on our obsession with Shakespeare's sexual language; he's the author of a thought-provoking book (well, a collection of three lectures) called *Looking for Sex in Shakespeare* that has many judicious things to say on the subject. His first essay is an examination of the way modern, post-Shakespearean sexual connotations are often read into his verse retroactively when the sexual usage of the word or phrase in question was unknown at the time.

He asks whether, for instance, when a dying Cleopatra exclaims "Husband, I come," the contemporary usage of *come* applies. Wells also expresses mixed feelings about Eric Partridge's study *Shakespeare's Bawdy*, one of the first modern explorations of Shakespearean verbal licentiousness. He's genially amused by Partridge's obsessiveness but is aware it can become too grimly single-minded or double-entendre entangled.

Despite his skepticism, however, Wells seems to have been seduced by what I think may be a practical joke on Eric Partridge's part, having to do with Shakespeare's alleged favorite sexual predilection.

Partridge, a polymath independent scholar and linguist who died in 1979, proclaims in *Shakespeare's Bawdy* that he has discovered Shakespeare's secret sexual obsession, an act that Partridge—who is not shy about discussing the most explicit and far reaches of sexuality—says he cannot bring himself to verbalize. It's just too outré.

Partridge says—as if it's a matter of principle or honor for him—that Shakespeare was nothing less than 100 percent heterosexual, but that he had an idiosyncratic and unspeakable heterosexual taste.

And in a hilarious and yet somehow touching passage of sexual bardolatry, Partridge proclaims Shakespeare was not only good in bed but maybe the best there ever was. Shakespeare, Partridge tells us swooningly,

> was an exceedingly knowledgeable amorist, a versatile connoisseur, and a highly artistic, an ingeniously skillful, practitioner of lovemaking who could have taught Ovid more than that facile doctrinaire could have taught him; he evidently knew of, and he practiced, an artifice accessible to few—one that I cannot becomingly mention here, though I felt it obligatory to touch on it, very briefly, in the Glossary.

Wow, a Shakespearean sexual secret that's too hot to handle, hidden in the glossary!

Wells couldn't resist trying to uncover what Shakespeare liked under the covers: "Scouring the Glossary," he writes, for *our* benefit, of course, "to save my readers the trouble of doing so, I have come to the conclusion that [Partridge] means heterosexual anal intercourse, though 'artifice' seems a funny word for it."

It does indeed. And "heterosexual anal intercourse" doesn't seem like something Partridge would find too obscene to relate in ordinary fashion.

And so, momentarily setting aside my strictures against the sexualizing of Shakespearean study (only in order to, as Wells put it, "save my readers the trouble of doing so"), I too scoured Partridge's glossary to discern what exactly it might have been.

I must admit I couldn't figure it out. At first I thought it had to be something more recherché than Wells' solution. But then it occurred to me that Partridge may have been playing a practical joke on his readers, knowing that he could tempt people like Wells and me to abandon momentarily our scholarly scruples and go looking for the naughty bits. It's an eminently successful bit of trickery, one that demonstrates that our continuing preoccupation with Shakespearean sex is an understandable human trait, if often a misleading mode of literary investigation. One has to admire him for it.

Because by planting the seed (so to speak) that there was the solution to some ultimate Shakespearean sexual mystery in his glossary, he managed to make sure that the glossary, which otherwise might have been ignored but was probably the product of years of devotion, was probably the most well-read—and reread—glossary of all time.

Practical jokes aside, these inquiries into Shakespeare's sexual tastes distract us from genuinely difficult-to-resolve question about what Shakespeare's *characters* did or did not do in bed, which seems to me far more important since we are dealing with the greatest poet of love in both its ecstatically erotic and darkest, most self-destructive manifestations.

Here is where Wells gets interesting, I think. In the introduction to *Looking for Sex in Shakespeare*, he has this to say (italics mine):

> Many relationships in Shakespeare's plays may be, but are not necessarily, sexual. Did Hamlet go to bed with Ophelia, as he visibly does in Kenneth Branagh's film? *[Wherein Branagh's*

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Hamlet rolls around with an unsurprisingly naked Kate Winslet's Ophelia.] ... Was Gertrude Claudius's lover before her husband's death? And is Bottom to be assumed to have had sex with Titania?

Now we're talking. You would think, after 400 years, that we would have reached some consensus on these questions, but they are not easy, and the answers shape the way we envision two of Shakespeare's greatest works and six of his most memorable characters. It is in *this* sense that talking about sex in relation to Shakespeare can be illuminating.

Let's set aside the Bottom/Titania question, which I don't think is quite as difficult. Yes, I think they did it. The tone of the scenes following their "wedding" are unmistakably post-coital.

But look at the different *Hamlet*s one gets—the different Shakespeares one gets—depending on how one understands the relationships between Gertrude and Claudius, and Hamlet and Ophelia. Was Shakespeare's vision in his plays misogynist, one that saw women as weak and unprincipled, subject to the whims of desire, abandoning fidelity for the lure of a hottie or someone royally powerful?

Consider first Gertrude and Claudius. Did Claudius kill his brother (Hamlet's father) because he was sleeping with Gertrude already and that heady experience drove him to murder so that he, alone, could possess her? Or did he kill his brother because he *wanted* to sleep with Gertrude? Did her seductive allure and perhaps unconscious encouragement of his designs lead him to fratricide?

Our answers to these questions determine how just Hamlet's suspicions of his mother are. Does his heated denunciation of her alleged licentiousness reflect reality, or does it reflect a more general delusional distrust of women's fidelity? And what are we to think when we compare it with his denunciation of Ophelia, the one that concludes: "Get thee to a nunnery." Is he denouncing her because she slept with him before marriage (which would make him more than a bit hypocritical) or because of a loathing for sexuality itself, even if she didn't?

And why is it so difficult to find any certainty about these questions in the text? Is the ambiguity part of a deliberate design in which Shakespeare prompts us to ask these questions while deliberately withholding the answers? The play, after all, begins with an unanswerable question: "Who's there?" Who indeed is out there in the darkness of the universe that surrounds the battlements of Elsinore castle? All the questions of the play can be seen as variations on that initial question. Who are these women actually, who's there beneath the artifice and costume that Hamlet denounces in that misogynist attack on Ophelia—and women in general—for using makeup and (my favorite sign that Hamlet's view of women is a bit deranged) giving nicknames to pets?

At first glance, the testimony of the ghost might seem to be decisive on the Gertrude and Claudius question. The ghost tells Hamlet that Claudius "won" Gertrude to "his shameful lust" with "witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts." But the time scheme is unclear—does this mean the seduction preceded or followed upon the murder? Was the killing the cause or the effect of the sex?

And is it possible Shakespeare *changed his mind* about his vision of Gertrude, his vision of women in general, in the later Folio version of Hamlet? I spend some time in *The Shakespeare Wars* demonstrating how Shakespeare's (or the play's) attitude toward Gertrude softens in the later Folio version of *Hamlet*, published seven years after Shakespeare's death in 1623, as opposed to the original full-length version of the play published in 1604 (the one known as the "Good Quarto" version).

Did he change his mind about whether Gertrude was a wanton seductress, emblematic of the weakness and wickedness of all women, or merely a frightened and abandoned and powerless queen?

There are hints in small changes, such as the way Hamlet describes her as having a "wicked tongue" in the earlier Quarto and merely an "idle tongue" in the later Folio.

Another subtle change can be found in the scene when, fending off Hamlet's denunciation of her, Gertrude asks Hamlet if he's forgotten who she is. In both versions, he says, "No, you are the Queene, your husband's brother's wife."

In the Quarto he adds, "And would it were not so, you are my mother." In the later Folio he says, "But would you were not so. You are my mother." Thus in the Quarto he tried to disclaim her motherhood, while in the Folio he claims it. In other words, in the Folio it's "would it were not so you are related to that demon Claudius," not "would it were not so you are my mother."

Does the softening of the condemnation of Gertrude imply that in the later version he has less reason to accuse her of adultery before the murder?

But how Hamlet judges the queen, his mother, and how we judge Hamlet's judgment of her (and women in general) may depend on how we answer Stanley Wells' question: Did Hamlet sleep with Ophelia? If he's played the cad with her, he'd have less reason to be self-righteous about his mother. I think the important thing here is that—after centuries of argument and pettifoggery—there is no "correct" answer to these questions about who slept with whom and when. And why is that? Because Shakespeare either couldn't make up his mind himself

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or—more likely—had a preference for indeterminacy, for open-endedness (no pun, etc.), for the possibility of both answers being true or at least intriguing, in which the conclusion one comes to says more about the observer than about the indeterminable "facts" of the case. Just as in quantum physics, where a quantum of energy can be both a wave and/or a particle, a connection between quantum physics and literary ambiguity that scholar Jonathan Bate, author of the forthcoming *Soul of the Age: A Biography of the Mind of William Shakespeare*, first argued in a brilliant *TLS* essay back in 1999.

Perhaps the most important aspect of this indeterminacy, the dueling answers to key questions that Shakespeare seemed to favor (and not just in these "did they or didn't they do it?" duality) and the most important aspect of the fact that we now are faced with dual, or dueling, portraits, is that it reminds us that despite his singularity as literary genius, he was the supreme artist of ambiguity, sexual and poetic. An artist who, in every pun and double-entendre expressed a delight in the way ambiguity (not fuzziness but an array of carefully counter-posed alternative possibilities) deepens and enriches our appreciation of what we would otherwise think of as the strict single-mindedness of reality.

So whether or not the "new" portrait gives us another face of Shakespeare, the controversy over it reminds us that one of the things that makes his work so memorable is that it is so often, so deeply and profoundly, two-faced.

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today's papers

The New, Super-Sized IMF

By Daniel Politi

Friday, April 3, 2009, at 6:39 AM ET

Everyone leads with the agreement reached by the leaders of the world's largest economies to provide new funds to help countries that have been hit hard by the global recession and introduced a host of new oversight measures designed to increase regulation of the financial sector. At the Group of 20 summit meeting in London, leaders agreed to provide $1.1 trillion in loans and guarantees to boost international trade that would greatly increase the International Monetary Fund's coffers. They also vowed to implement new regulations for hedge funds and large financial institutions, as well as a crackdown on tax havens, although these would have to be implemented by individual nations. The *Los Angeles Times* declares that while these measures may not amount to a "new global deal" that President Obama had called for, "the outcome still surprised many observers with its unusually substantive achievements." *USA Today* seconds that sentiment, saying that the "landmark agreement … was more than what experts expected." And the *Washington Post* says that the "consensus was remarkable given the discord that preceded Thursday's meeting."

The *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times* are decidedly less impressed. The *WSJ* says the leaders "deferred many of the trickiest decision or forwarded them to international institutions unaccustomed to the responsibility." While the "measures may ease some pain … many declarations were of principles that have to be followed up" at a later date, notes the paper. The *NYT* points out that "the final accord was far more forceful in addressing the plight of emerging economies … than it was in addressing the deep recession in the largest countries where the crisis began." Critics were quick to note that the agreement was more than a little vague on how the world should tackle some of the root causes of the financial crisis.

Even those who took the glass-is-half-empty view of the G-20 agreement seem to recognize that, at the very least, world leaders would avoid repeating "the failure of a similar gathering in 1933, which was followed by a surge of protectionism that prolonged the Great Depression," notes the *NYT*. In the end, there was no commitment for individual countries to boost their government spending, but that was hardly surprising considering that the "White House had lowered expectations for such a result before the summit," says *USAT*. "These summits are all about managing expectations, and going into this week the expectations were very low," said Edward Alden of the Council on Foreign Relations. "The goal here was to show a united front, and they did that.

Before the summit, France and Germany had been pushing for the world leaders to come up with a new set of regulations for the financial markets. In the end, the nine-page "Leaders' Statement" included vows to crack down on tax havens, impose new regulations on hedge funds, and implement controls on executive pay. French President Nicolas Sarkozy didn't get what he wanted—he had previously called for a global financial regulator—but emphasized that the final agreement shouldn't be seen as a "victory of one camp over another."

Inside, the *WP* notes that the plans to increase financial regulations could take a while to implement and individual countries have no obligation to accept them, so it is the pledge for $1.1 trillion in new loans and guarantees that "will have the most immediate effect." In order to disburse this money, world leaders will rely on the International Monetary Fund, "which emerges from the summit with a vastly redefined and enhanced mission." In addition to the help for emerging economies, the IMF will also be in charge of a $250 billion line of credit that will mostly go to industrialized nations, potentially even the United States. The *WSJ* points out that the IMF will have to take on responsibilities that go beyond its "traditional role, and may require the fund to show more spine in dealing with its largest members than it has managed in the past."

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Everyone points out that markets around the world soared. Many papers credit the 2.8 percent increase in the Dow Jones industrial average to the G-20 meeting, but the *NYT* says stock markets in the United States seemed more influenced by "an arcane change in American accounting regulations that would make it easier for banks to defer writing down the value of their most troubled toxic assets."

The *LAT* and *NYT* front looks at how Obama did in his debut performance as president on the world stage. "Well, I think I did O.K.," Obama said. Most seem to agree. Although he was criticized for appearing a bit distant, the *NYT* points out that he "took pains to project a cheerful, humble image." And he was even able to show off his diplomatic skills, thanks to a disagreement between France and China over whether the group of leaders should recognize a list of tax havens being published by the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development. China was against it, partly because it doesn't belong to the OECD and because it could risk embarrassment since the list might include Hong Kong and Macao. So Obama took each country's leader aside for a small chat and suggested that instead of using the word *recognize*, they should use the word *note*. It may seem ridiculous, but the *LAT* points out that that's "the kind of small dispute that holds up international agreements all the time." The leaders liked Obama's solution, and they all shook hands. "It was not a Middle East peace accord," notes the *NYT*. "But Mr. Obama had his first moment as a statesman."

"All in all, a pretty successful opening-night performance for President Obama on the international economic stage," writes the *WP*'s Steven Pearlstein. "He achieved most of what he wanted while allowing others to claim victory and allowing the United States to shed its Bush-era reputation for inflexibility and heavy-handedness. And by the standards of past summits, this one was full of accomplishment."

The *WP* off-leads a long look at Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner's tenure as head of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York that was reported in conjunction with ProPublica, a nonprofit investigative journalism organization. Geithner and his partners at the New York Fed "missed clear signs of a catastrophe in the making" and spent much of their time trying to solve "narrow mechanical issues in the derivatives market." Geithner wasn't blind to what was happening. Indeed, he often raised concerns that banks were taking on too much risk and ordered a 2006 confidential review that found banks couldn't really understand, and didn't have a scientific way to measure, the risks they were taking. Despite this information, he failed to "act with enough force to blunt the troubles that ensued" and ultimately "relied too much on assurances from senior banking executives that their firms were safe and sound."

The *NYT* continues its tradition of revealing extremely troubling information about what takes place inside immigration detention facilities. We already knew that detainees with advanced illnesses or severe injuries had been ignored and denied treatment, with lethal results. Today, the *NYT* takes a look at the case of Ahmad Tanveer, a 43-year-old Pakistani New Yorker who died in custody but seemed to disappear from the system as soon as he did. Even though civilian activists, the ACLU, and the *NYT* were all trying to get information on the case, it took months for the government to acknowledge that the man had even died. And a supposedly comprehensive list of deaths excludes others who are known to have died while in custody. "We still do not know, and we cannot know, if there are other deaths that have never been disclosed by [Immigration and Customs Enforcement], or that ICE itself knows nothing about," an ACLU lawyer said.

The *WP* fronts news that the House and Senate approved their own versions of a spending plan for 2010 that included Obama's biggest priorities. Lawmakers did make some changes to Obama's budget, cutting out some spending and scaling back his tax-cutting proposals. Overall though, the budget would permit Obama to pursue his plans for health care, education, and energy. The votes were largely along party lines, with 20 Democrats in the House and two in the Senate voting against the measure. Now, negotiators have to resolve the differences between the House and Senate versions, which the *WP* describes as "a prelude to the more difficult choices that will be required to implement Obama's initiatives."

The *NYT* fronts, and everyone covers, news that a federal grand jury charged former Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich, as well as his brother and four advisers, with carrying out a corruption scheme that began even before he took office. In a 75-page indictment, Blagojevich was charged with 16 felonies, including racketeering, extortion, and fraud. The counts against the former governor carry maximum prison terms of five to 20 years each.

The *LAT* points out that New Orleans has been able to escape many aspects of the recession, "thanks to its unique post-Katrina economy." The billions of dollars that the federal government has allocated to help rebuild the city means that construction is going strong, for example. And it turns out that government bureaucracy and inefficiency may have, for once, inadvertently helped New Orleans, because there is still $19 billion of federal reconstruction money that hasn't been spent. "It's totally bizarre," one resident said, "because normally, we're the worst in everything."

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today's papers

Holder: Our Bad, Stevens

By Daniel Politi

Thursday, April 2, 2009, at 6:38 AM ET

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The *New York Times* leads with China adopting a plan to become a world leader in producing hybrid and electric vehicles over the next three years. The plan comes "from the very top of the Chinese government" and could mean very bad news for the struggling Detroit automakers that are already lagging behind on what many consider to be the future of automotive technology. *USA Today* leads with, the *Wall Street Journal* tops its newsbox, and the rest of the papers front the Justice Department's move to drop all charges against former Alaska Sen. Ted Stevens. Attorney General Eric Holder asked that the case be dropped because prosecutors had failed to hand over important information to the defense team. Stevens was the longest-serving Republican in Senate history when he was convicted of seven felony counts for failing to disclose about $250,000 in gifts days before he narrowly lost a re-election bid.

The *Washington Post* and *Los Angeles Times* lead with President Obama's meeting with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev on the eve of the Group of 20 economic summit in London. The leaders announced that they will open negotiations on a new strategic arms-control treaty that could reduce each country's nuclear arsenals by one-third. Obama and Medvedev also agreed they would cooperate on a number of issues, including the nuclear programs in Iran and North Korea. The plan for a missile defense system in Eastern Europe was mostly avoided, and a joint statement pointed out that "differences remain" over the issue. The meeting was described as businesslike, and officials made sure to point out there was no talk about looking into each other's souls. "I think it was a meeting without much intimacy to it, which is a good thing," one Russia expert said. "No one is trying to impress each other."

The *NYT* points out that in announcing its plan for making electric vehicles, "China is making a virtue of a liability." The country is hardly a powerhouse when it comes to auto production, "but by skipping the current technology, China hopes to get a jump on the next." China's goals are certainly ambitious as it hopes to raise its production capacity from 2,100 last year to 500,000 by the end of 2011. The move could also help the country with its severe urban pollution problem, although it won't do much for the country's emissions as a whole since China gets most of its electricity from coal.

The judge overseeing the Stevens trial repeatedly criticized federal prosecutors for concealing information from the defense team and almost declared a mistrial at one point. Recently, the judge held three of the prosecutors, including the head of the public corruption unit, in contempt. After the Justice Department discovered that prosecutors had failed to turn over notes that could have raised doubts about the testimony given by a key witness, Holder "announced that he had had enough," as the *WP* puts it, and ordered an internal investigation. The attorney general said he would not seek a new trial. Legal experts mostly agree the alleged misconduct was serious and Holder did the right thing. Republicans on Capitol Hill were livid. The Republican leader in the Senate, Mitch McConnell, said there is "no question that, if this decision had been made last year, he'd still be in the Senate."

As world leaders converged in London for the G-20 economic summit, Obama tried to start out on a conciliatory note by saying that the United States had "some accounting to do" for its role in sparking the financial crisis. But the battle lines have clearly been drawn. There's the "Merkel-Sarkozy show," as the *LAT* puts it, and "the other dynamic duo," Obama and British Prime Minister Gordon Brown. Obama and Brown tried to downplay their differences; the French and German leaders made it clear there are important disagreements that need to be worked out. "France and Germany will speak with a single voice," French President Nicolas Sarkozy said. To recap, France and Germany want stronger regulation, while the United States and Britain are pushing countries to step up their government spending. Making it clear that they won't allow their demands to be ignored, Sarkozy said that tougher regulation is "nonnegotiable," and Chancellor Angela Merkel said that more fiscal spending "is not a bargaining chip."

Sarkozy said he didn't want to assign blame, but he came very close to it: "The crisis didn't actually spontaneously erupt in Europe." Obama said world leaders should focus on trying to come up with solutions instead of finding someone to blame and warned that the United States is unlikely to return to its role as a "voracious consumer market" and can't act alone "as the engine" for economic growth. The *WP* says Obama's statement "signaled a recognition of a new economic era with a less dominant U.S. role."

Obama and the first lady met with Queen Elizabeth II at Buckingham Palace and gave her an iPod that contained photographs and video of her visit to the United States in 2007, as well as songs. The *WSJ* notes the gift "continued a multimedia theme" for the Obama White House that gave Brown a set of DVDs during his Washington visit, a present that was widely panned by the British press.

USAT got a hold of State Department records that show the top security official at the U.S. Embassy in Iraq didn't punish Blackwater security guards for an unjustified 2005 shooting because he feared it would lower morale among contractors. Investigators said the contractors "failed to justify their actions" and "provided false statements." The 2005 shooting took place two years before Blackwater guards shot and killed 17 Iraqis in Baghdad and is yet another example of the State Department's lack of oversight of security contractors.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is well-known for funding projects around the world to promote health and education. Today, the *NYT* points out that the foundation also acts "as a behind-the-scenes influencer" in popular culture by plunging money and helping to devise story lines for television

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shows like *ER* and *Private Practice*. That role is set to increase now that the foundation has reached a deal with Viacom to carry out what the paper dubs "message placement." Foundations have been trying to get television shows to promote a message for years. "The difference here is the Gates Foundation is paying for this, that they are actually willing to pay for programming," said the head of Common Sense Media.

The *LAT* fronts, and everyone covers, the decision by CBS to cancel *Guiding Lights*, the longest-running drama in broadcasting history. The show has been on the air for almost three-quarters of a century, first on radio before moving to television in 1952. The last episode will air Sept. 18. The soap opera is owned by Procter & Gamble, which said it would try to find a new home for the show. But the decision by CBS "is the latest example of the fragmentation of television," notes the *LAT*, as well as the overall decline of daytime dramas on network television. Ten years ago *Guiding Light* had almost 5 million viewers; this season it was barely more than the 2 million mark.

USAT reports that one April Fools hoax was a bit too close for comfort. Yesterday, *Car and Driver* put up a story that said Obama had ordered Chevrolet and Dodge to get out of NASCAR after this season to save $250 million. The magazine pulled the story and apologized for "going too far" while also noting that it "has a proud tradition of irreverent editorial and we amplify that each year with our April Fool's Day joke." But many weren't laughing. "I've been in this business for more than 30 years," said a public relations representative for Dodge, "and I have never seen a story so irresponsible."

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today's papers

Return of the Insurgency

By Daniel Politi

Wednesday, April 1, 2009, at 6:30 AM ET

The *New York Times* leads with word that militants in Iraq have been rejoining the insurgency in areas that have been relatively free of violence lately. If the insurgency does resurface, it would no doubt be smaller, and many believe there's little danger the country will see the level of violence that was all too common just a few years ago, but that doesn't mean it wouldn't be dangerous. The *Washington Post* leads with word that lawyers in the Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel concluded earlier this year that a pending bill to give Washington, D.C., a vote in the House of Representatives for the first time is unconstitutional. Attorney General Eric Holder, who supports the bill, then asked the solicitor general's office for its opinion, and lawyers there said the legislation could pass a constitutional test.

USA Today leads with a look at some of the first projects funded by the stimulus package and notes that the federal money appears to be creating jobs, as intended. State highway departments have been able to take advantage of the package the quickest by pumping money into "shovel-ready" projects. In an unscientific review of 16 construction projects, the paper found that all of them will start by summer, and the vast majority would not have been carried out without the stimulus cash. The *Wall Street Journal* leads its world-wide newsbox with a look at the challenges awaiting President Obama as he arrived in London yesterday for a series of meetings in the run-up to Thursday's Group of 20 summit. Obama plans to meet with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and Chinese President Hu Jintao today. Meanwhile, in a sign that there could be some drama at the summit, France hinted that President Nicolas Sarkozy could walk out of the meeting if other countries don't agree to a new set of strict rules for the international financial system. The *Los Angeles Times* leads with new figures that show crime has decreased in Los Angeles and other parts of Southern California this year, contradicting many experts who had predicted the economic downturn would lead to an increase in crime. Many other large American cities, including New York and Houston, have also experienced declines in serious crimes this year.

The *NYT* doesn't have any definitive evidence that the insurgency is regrouping, but it brings together several troubling developments that suggest the danger that could be in store for Iraqi citizens at a time when the United States is in the process of decreasing its presence in the country. In the past few weeks, there has been a spate of attacks and assassination attempts that have mostly targeted Iraqis. But the paper points out that these troubling signs also coincide with the emergence of a new weapon in Iraq, a 5-pound grenade that has the ability to penetrate the latest heavily armored vehicle. Military officers say that while the threat is real, the number of jihadi militants has been brought down to fewer than 2,000 from around 3,800. "In most places there isn't an insurgency in Iraq anymore," said an American military intelligence officer. "What we have now is a terrorism problem, and there is going to be a terrorism problem in Iraq for a long time." But others aren't so sure, and leaders of the Awakening movement, mostly former Sunni insurgents who switched sides, say they have seen an increase in jihadi activity in their areas.

The revelation that the Office of Legal Counsel said the D.C. voting rights bill is unconstitutional could complicate its approval in Congress and is likely to embolden critics to challenge the law if it's enacted. Justice Department experts say it's "unusual though not unprecedented" for the solicitor general to give an opinion about a case before it ever reaches the courts. The *WP* points out that Holder's attempt to find a way around the OLC's opinion opens "President Obama's Justice Department to some of the same concerns raised by Democrats during George W. Bush's presidency." Democrats often said that Bush's Justice

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Department had become too politicized and lawyers often found a way to make their opinions fit in with the administration's views.

Even though it seems clear that most of the world isn't ready to follow Obama's lead in approving big stimulus packages, he "is still likely to dominate the discussions" in London, and so far no one has come up with a "clear alternative to his strategy for reviving the world economy," says the *NYT*. One expert tells the *NYT* that the "central paradox" is that while countries around the world have "lost confidence in the U.S. system … everyone is now waiting for the U.S. to bail them out." The *LAT* points out that while "Obama remains nearly as popular as he was during his last European visit … the initial love affair may be cooling somewhat." He is now the face of a country that many blame for plunging the world into a financial crisis.

The *NYT* gets word from administration officials that Obama plans to initiate discussions with Medvedev about drafting a new arms control treaty that could end up reducing the strategic nuclear arsenals in both countries by about one-third, if not more. Officials from both countries say they could agree to reducing their stockpiles to around 1,500 warheads each. Their talks will, of course, encompass much more than arms control, and the *NYT* suggests the reason why officials seem to be emphasizing this part of the equation is that it's one area where both sides seem to agree. The *WP* highlights that the two leaders are expected to release "a broad statement of principles for cooperation" that is meant to be the official opening salvo on improving relations between the two countries.

The *WSJ* points out that as the leaders from the world's economic powers prepare to meet, there is new evidence of how bad the economic situation is around the world. U.S. home prices plunged 19 percent in January compared with a year earlier, and Japan's business-confidence fell to a record low. The Organization for Economic Cooperation projected that the world economy will shrink by 2.75 percent this year, while the World Bank says the contraction will be of 1.7 percent. Both organizations say there will be a deep plunge in world trade: The World Bank says it will be 6.1 percent while the OECD projection is far more pessimistic. "The world economy is in the midst of its deepest and most synchronized recession in our lifetimes," OECD's chief economist wrote.

"This generation," Franklin D. Roosevelt said, "has a rendezvous with destiny." The *WP*'s Harold Meyerson says that "[o]ur generation—at least, its leaders, judging by the likely results of tomorrow's Group of 20 meeting in London—is doing its damnedest to duck anything so momentous." There have been plenty of ideas thrown around, "[b]ut neither global rules nor global stimulus is likely to emerge from tomorrow's G-20 summit," writes Meyerson. "This generation of world leaders has a rendezvous with inadequacy."

The *NYT* fronts another look at the 17 prisoners who are members of China's Uighur Muslim minority and "have become something of a Guantánamo Rorschach test: hapless refugees to some, dangerous plotters to others." By now, their story is well-known, but the paper says there are "signs" that the administration is making progress in reviewing the cases to decide whether the prisoners should be released, maybe in the United States. But while reviewing their files, administration officials seem resigned to the fact that it will be hard to find any definitive answers about who they really are. Federal courts have declared that the evidence against them is more than a little thin, but even after that determination, five former Bush administration officials say there wasn't a concerted effort to find out the truth. "[N]obody was going to go back and look at the facts again," one former official said.

In the *NYT*'s op-ed page, Joseph Stiglitz writes that while Obama's plan to remove toxic assets from banks' balance sheets has been described as a "win-win-win proposal," it's actually a "win-win-lose proposal: the banks win, investors win—and taxpayers lose." Even though the plan purports to determine a price for these toxic assets, the reality is that the market "will not be pricing the toxic assets themselves, but options on those assets." Since the government would insure against almost all the losses, investors have to put a value only on how much they stand to gain, which "is exactly the same as being given an option." The problem is that banks will be properly recapitalized only if the assets are overvalued, meaning that the plan will work only "if and when the taxpayer loses big time." Some are afraid of the government taking over banks, but Obama's approach "is far worse than nationalization: it is ersatz capitalism, the privatizing of gains and the socializing of losses," writes Stiglitz. "It is a 'partnership' in which one partner robs the other."

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today's papers

Government Ready To Split GM in Two

By Daniel Politi

Tuesday, March 31, 2009, at 6:30 AM ET

Most papers continue to lead with the troubles facing General Motors and Chrysler. Yesterday, President Obama delivered what the *New York Times* describes as an "ultimatum" to the troubled automakers warning that they'll be headed for bankruptcy unless they make major changes quickly. GM's shares plunged 25 percent and the Dow Jones industrial average fell 3.3 percent. The *Los Angeles Times* and *Wall Street Journal* point out that if the companies have to go into bankruptcy, the Obama administration wants to divide their "good" and "bad" assets. The "good" assets would form a viable new company that could continue to exist or be sold, and the "bad" assets would be purged. While the *LAT* says that bankruptcy "would be a last

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resort," the *WSJ* notes that it looks increasingly likely that GM "will be forced into filing for bankruptcy protection, sometime in mid-to-late May." *USA Today* says the administration's plan is designed to find a balance between "growing public outrage over corporate bailouts and fear that if the auto industry sinks, it will take millions of jobs and the fragile economy down with it." The *Washington Post* focuses on fears swirling around corporate America that the administration's plan for the automakers, and particularly the ouster of GM's chief executive, Rick Wagoner, means the government is ready to take similar steps with banks that received taxpayer money.

USAT goes high with Obama's plans for the automakers but leads with word that the EPA will announce plans today to monitor the quality of the air outside 62 schools in 22 states. The paper describes it as the "most sweeping effort to determine whether toxic chemicals permeate the air schoolchildren breathe." The investigation comes as a response to a *USAT* investigation published late last year that identified schools where the air appeared to be particularly toxic.

There was a big debate in the White House over whether the president should even mention the bankruptcy option in his public remarks since the mere utterance of the word is enough to send investors and consumers into panic mode. In the end, just as the ouster of Wagoner was designed to make it clear that the administration is serious about forcing change on the automakers, the White House decided it needed to bring up the bankruptcy option to motivate bondholders and the United Auto Workers union to make concessions. "They hopefully will see that they have a pretty stark choice in terms of working something out," Sen. Carl Levin of Michigan tells the *NYT*. "Their option is either to take a haircut or a bath." Yesterday, Fiat's leader said he is eager to reach an agreement with Chrysler.

The *WSJ* has the most detail on what a bankruptcy reorganization would look like for the automakers. Although the paper cautions that none of it is a "done deal," it does point out that "both the government and the auto makers are planning for such an eventuality." The administration wants the "good" assets of GM, made up of brands such as Chevrolet and Cadillac, to operate as an independent company, while the "good" parts of Chrysler would be sold to Fiat. In order for this plan to work for GM, the UAW would have to agree to a new contract that would include significant reductions in benefits. The "tens of billions of dollars in retiree and health-care obligations" that have hobbled GM would be transferred to an "old GM" that would also include the company's underperforming brands.

Warning of the bankruptcy option is certainly a risky move, particularly for a Democratic president, who risks angering one of his party's most important constituencies. In addition, the administration is vulnerable to criticism that it is being much harder on the automakers than the banks that also received taxpayer money. The *WP* highlights that the administration demanded Wagoner's resignation, even though the government doesn't own a stake in GM. The White House has so far demanded a change in leadership in American International Group, Freddie Mac, and Fannie Mae, three companies it controls. But it hasn't required similar changes in other banks in which it owns a smaller stake.

In a front-page analysis, the *LAT* points out that Obama's announcement yesterday "went beyond a desire to be sure tax dollars were not wasted in bailing out struggling companies" and put the administration "in the position of adopting a so-called industrial policy," where the government decides what a company's future should look like. The White House auto task force's report on GM's troubles went as far as to criticize certain models. In a piece inside, the *NYT* notes that Obama "seemed to be saying, what is good for America will have to be good enough for General Motors." Although the government has taken control of a few companies in the past few months, "directing the fate of a vast manufacturing company, one that still looms over the Midwest, is an entirely different kind of enterprise." The *WSJ* says that in its plan to remake GM, the White House isn't just interested in preventing job losses, but also "in pushing other policy prescriptions, in particular creating a 'company of the future' with clean and energy-efficient vehicles." Naturally, conservatives were up in arms yesterday, calling Obama's move a dangerous intrusion into the private sector.

While Obama deals with the economic downturn, he can take comfort in the fact that a *WP poll* shows he still has support among the American people, although it is decreasing. Two-thirds of Americans approve of the job Obama is doing, and around 64 percent say they have confidence in the way Obama is handling the economy, a decrease of eight points since the inauguration. Obama's approval rating among independents has declined six points. In parsing out blame for the current mess, most Americans prefer to focus on corporations, and to a lesser extent consumers and the Bush administration, rather than Obama. But only 52 percent of Americans support the way Obama has handled the federal budget deficit. The *Post* poll found that there is a "bigger partisan divide" over the economy "than the one that occurred 16 years ago after Bill Clinton took office."

That partisan divide has become obvious in Washington, and one of the biggest instigators is a senator who only two months ago seemed poised to enter Obama's Cabinet. "This is not a time when we should stand in our ideological corners and shout at each other," Sen. Judd Gregg said when he accepted the nomination to be commerce secretary. The *Post* points out that now Gregg has turned into the top critic of Obama's budget, saying that it could lead to "bankruptcy for the United States." He also said that a Democratic proposal to use reconciliation, a budget procedure that would allow a measure to pass without significant Republican support, to pass health care reform was

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akin to an "act of violence against the system here in the Senate." (***Slate***'s John Dickerson writes that the administration has now "all but given up even the pretense of bipartisanship" and cites Gregg as the "best measure of how far we've not traveled" in creating a postpartisan Washington.)

The *WP* and *NYT* front news that militants stormed a police academy near Lahore, Pakistan, that led to a daylong battle and left at least 11 people dead and more than 100 wounded. The Punjab province, where the attack took place, is the country's most populous and had been relatively peaceful, but yesterday's attack came around a month after militants in Lahore opened fire on a Sri Lankan cricket team, killing seven people. The attack yesterday was impressive in its intensity and coordination. It was yet another wake-up call that Pakistan's problems aren't confined to the lawless tribal regions and now threaten the entire country.

In the *NYT*'s op-ed page, William Holstein writes that Obama's "stunning decision" to force Wagoner to resign "was based on the wrong set of premises and raises the prospect that the administration will intervene too deeply in the automaker." Wagoner has been instrumental to GM's restructuring, and his deep knowledge of the company, and the industry as a whole, "could simply be lost" while his successor might not be ready to take over. It may have been a smart political move to get rid of Wagoner, but before Obama continues down this path, he needs to recognize the changes GM has made "and strike the right balance in respecting the role of the private sector." Unlike the failed Wall Street banks, GM "consists of real factories where real people make real things," writes Holstein. "As it looks to micromanage an entire industry, let's hope the administration doesn't lose sight of the human side of things."

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today's papers

Last Chance for GM and Chrysler?

By Daniel Politi

Monday, March 30, 2009, at 6:40 AM ET

The *Los Angeles Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* banner, while *USA Today*, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post* lead with, news that the Obama administration forced the head of General Motors, Rick Wagoner, to resign and has put both GM and Chrysler on notice that they won't get another round of federal aid unless they come up with a more aggressive restructuring plan. President Obama is set to announce today that the restructuring plans presented by GM and Chrysler earlier this year didn't go far enough to dig the companies out of their current mess, and he will give them more time, coupled with stricter conditions, to come up with more realistic plans. Administration officials emphasized they're prepared to let the companies fall into bankruptcy.

The *NYT* declares that the decision amounts to "a level of government involvement in business perhaps not seen since the Great Depression" while the *WSJ* points out that it indicates the Treasury Department "intends to wade more deeply than most observers expected into the affairs of the country's largest and oldest car company." The White House will give GM 60 days to come up with a new restructuring plan, while Chrysler will have 30 days to work out an alliance agreement with Italian automaker Fiat. The government will give both companies just enough money to survive that period. If Chrysler and Fiat reach an agreement, the government would be willing to lend Chrysler another $6 billion.

In addition to pushing out Wagoner, the administration's auto task force also said that GM is in the process of replacing most of its board of directors over the next few months. Wagoner has spent his entire career at GM, where he started in 1977, rising to become the company's leader in 2000. In his years as GM's top executive, the automaker "has lost $68 billion while the company's stock has declined by 95%," details the *LAT*. The administration isn't asking Chrysler's chief executive, Robert Nardelli, to resign, because he's only led the automaker since 2007 and is playing a key role in negotiating the deal with Fiat.

To reassure consumers who might be reluctant to buy GM or Chrysler cars, the government intends to guarantee the warranties on new cars for either company. Essentially, the government is telling the companies that in order to become viable businesses, they will need to get significantly more concessions from their employees and creditors. Recognizing that further restructuring will result in more job losses, the president named Edward Montgomery as director for auto recovery, a position the *LAT* describes as "a new executive-branch czar charged with providing support to laid-off auto workers and their families." The *WSJ* declares that the "clearest losers" seem to be the "thousands of bondholders and lenders" to both companies, since the government said it is currently saddled with too much debt that will need to disappear if the automakers are going to have a shot at survival.

The *LAT* points out that by issuing an additional lifeline to the automakers, "the administration appears to be violating the terms of the December loan agreement," which specified that the White House had until March 31 to decide whether the companies had met all the conditions. Under the original agreement, if the companies didn't meet the conditions, they would have a maximum of 60 days to pay back the loans. Giving the companies what is being billed as one last shot shows how the administration has "a deep desire to keep the industry alive and avoid the economic calamity that could come from its collapse, despite the increasingly long odds against it."

The *LAT* fronts a look at how the problems at American International Group extend far beyond the division that traded in exotic financial instruments and includes the company's huge

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business in life insurance and retirement services, which reported an $18 billion quarterly loss this month. AIG's "situation is emblematic of problems across the life insurance industry" that, in the worst of circumstances, could result in a "second financial crisis." Although few think that the problems the insurers are facing are as extreme as those in the banking industry, experts caution that they haven't been looked into as thoroughly, so there's a lot that is still unknown. AIG has been able to get around its problems due to the major infusion of taxpayer cash. Now other insurers are asking for bailout packages of their own, saying that AIG has an unfair competitive advantage.

The *WSJ* notes that after a long period of silence, the Treasury Department finally said it has around $134.5 billion left in its Troubled Asset Relief Program. That means 81 percent of the $700 billion has been committed and suggests the White House won't have to go to Congress for additional funds just yet.

The *NYT* points out that as home values continue to decline, banks are "quietly" starting to refuse to take possession of properties after the foreclosure process, mostly because the associated costs are too high. The "bank walkaways" usually mean the owners are still responsible for keeping up their properties, even if no one expects that more payments will be made on the mortgage. "It is what some of us think is the next wave of the crisis," an expert in foreclosure law tells the paper.

The *WP* fronts a dispatch from Baghdad that notes weekend clashes between Iraqi soldiers and U.S.-backed Sunni fighters could foreshadow a growing insurgency as the Obama administration prepares to withdraw combat troops. In an effort to end two days of violence, Iraqi soldiers backed by American troops carried out an operation in a Baghdad neighborhood to arrest members of the Awakening, the movement made up of former Sunni insurgents that is largely credited with the decrease in violence in Iraq. The clashes began on Saturday when an Awakening leader was arrested, which brought to the forefront simmering tensions between the Sunni fighters and the Shiite central government. Many saw the arrest as a direct attack on the Awakening and say that it's the latest example of how the government is trying to marginalize them rather than incorporate them into the country's security forces. The big fear is that the violence could spread to other areas controlled by the Awakening and might push more Sunni fighters to go underground and join the insurgency.

The *WSJ* reports that a group of Philadelphia tour guides is fighting a City Council plan to force every tour guide to take a history test. Philadelphia's leaders made it illegal to give historical tours without a license, but three guides sued the city, claiming that the law is a violation of the Bill of Rights. The law came about after another tour guide participated in several of these excursions and concluded "that maybe 50% of the tour guides didn't know what the hell they were talking about."

Among the things he overheard was one tour guide saying Ben Franklin had 80 illegitimate children and George Washington is buried in Washington Square.

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tv club

Friday Night Lights, Season 3

Week 11: *FNL* renewed for two more seasons! Plus: Coach's play calling explained.

By Emily Bazelon, Meghan O'Rourke, David Plotz, and Hanna Rosin

Tuesday, March 31, 2009, at 10:27 AM ET

From: Hanna Rosin
To: Emily Bazelon and Meghan O'Rourke
Subject: Week 1: Mass Amnesia Strikes Dillon, Texas
Posted Saturday, January 17, 2009, at 7:01 AM ET

As anyone who has talked or e-mailed with me in the last couple of months knows, my obsession with *Friday Night Lights* has become sort of embarrassing. My husband, David, and I came to the show late, by way of Netflix, but were hooked after Episode 1. We started watching two, three, four in one sitting. It began to seem to me as if these characters were alive and moving around in my world.

David was happy with the football. I was into the drama. I worried about Smash, the sometimes-unstable star running back. I dreamed about Tyra, who was being stalked. When I talked to my own daughter, I flipped my hair back, just as Coach's wife, Tami Taylor, does and paused before delivering nuggets of wisdom. Once or twice, I even called David "Coach."

I was all set to watch Season 3 in real time when I heard, to my horror, that it might not get made. But then NBC cut a weird cost-sharing kind of deal with DirecTV, and the Dillon Panthers are back in business. The episodes have already aired on satellite, but I don't have a dish. So I'm just now settling in for the new season.

But did I miss something? The field lights are on again in Dillon, Texas, but the whole town seems to be suffering from a massive bout of … amnesia. The previous season ended abruptly, after seven episodes got swallowed by the writer's strike. For Season 3, the writers just wipe the slate clean and start again. Murder? What murder? Landry is back to being the high-school sidekick, and we can just forget that whole unfortunate body-dragged-out-of-the-river detour. Tyra got a perm and is running for school

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president. Lyla Garrity's preacher boyfriend, rival to Tim Riggins, has disappeared.

Over the last season, the show was struggling for an identity. It veered from *The ABC Afterschool Special* to *CSI* and then finally found its footing in the last couple of episodes, especially the one where Peter Berg—who directed the movie adaptation of Buzz Bissinger's book *Friday Night Lights* and adapted it for TV—walked on as Tami Taylor's hyper ex-boyfriend. In Season 3, the show is trying on yet another identity. Mrs. Taylor has suddenly turned into Principal Taylor. With her tight suits and her fabulous hair, she is Dillon's own Michelle Rhee, holding meetings, discussing education policy, and generally working too hard. Meanwhile, Coach keeps up the domestic front, making breakfast for Julie with one hand while feeding baby Grace with the other.

This strikes me as a little too close to home, and not in a way I appreciate. The beauty of *Friday Night Lights* is that it managed to make us care about the tiny town of Dillon. It drew us in with football but then sunk us into town life. The show took lots of stock types not usually made for prime time—a car dealer, an arrogant black kid, an ex-star in a wheelchair, a grandma with dementia, a soldier, lots of evangelical Christians—and brought them to life. It was neither sentimental nor mocking, which is a hard thing to pull off.

Now I feel as if I'm looking in a mirror. Tami is a mom juggling work and kids and not doing such a good job. Coach is trying his best at home but screwing up. The only town folk we see in the first episode are Tim's brother and Tyra's sister, drunkenly falling all over each other in a bar—the sorriest, white-trashiest bar you can imagine. Our heart is with Tyra, who, just like the children of the show's upscale fans, is trying to go to college. The final, inspirational scene of the episode takes place in a racquetball court. At least Smash has the good sense to note that it's the whitest sport in America.

That said, *Friday Night Lights* would have to do a lot to lose my loyalty. Just the fact that there was a high-drama plotline centered on the Jumbotron is enough to keep me happy. It's one of the show's great gifts, humor in unexpected places. Like when Tim's brother, looking half drunk as always, tells him Lyla will never respect him because he's a "rebound from Jesus." I'll give this season a chance.

Click here to read the next entry.

From: Emily Bazelon
To: Hanna Rosin and Meghan O'Rourke
Subject: Week 1: Why Doesn't Tami Taylor Have Any Girlfriends?

Posted Monday, January 19, 2009, at 6:58 AM ET

Hey there, Hanna and Meghan,

While we're complaining, isn't this the third year that some of these characters—Tim, Lyla, Tyra—have been seniors? The producers seemed to be dealing with this small lapse in planning by bringing on the soft lighting and lipstick. Tim looks ever more like Matt Dillon in *The Outsiders* (not to sound like that thirtysomething mom who was shagging him in the first season).

But I'm letting these objections go. I fell for this opener once Coach and Mrs. Coach had one of those moments that make their marriage a flawed gem.

You're right, Hanna, that the Taylors seem more like a typical two-career family as we watch Eric tending the baby while Tami comes home at 9:45 at night, tired from her new job as principal. Also, her sermon about how broke the school is descended into liberal pablum (real though it surely could be). But it's all a setup for a sequence that makes this show a not-idealized, and thus actually useful, marriage primer. He tries to sweet-talk her. She says, with tired affection, "Honey, you're just trying to get laid." Then she realizes that he's signed off on a bad English teacher for their daughter Julie and starts hollering at both of them. Oh, how I do love Tami for losing her temper, snapping at her teenager, and yelling loudly enough to wake her baby. And I love the writers for bringing it back around with a follow-up scene in which Mrs. Coach tells her husband she's sorry, and he says, "I could never be mad at my wife. It's that damn principal." Way to compartmentalize.

Much as I appreciate Tami, I'm puzzled by a weird gap in her life: She doesn't have girlfriends. I know that her sister showed up last season, but that doesn't really explain the absence of female friends. In fact, it's a pattern on the show: Julie's friend Lois is more a prop than a character, Lyla never hangs out with other girls, and although Tyra occasionally acts like a big sister to Julie, she doesn't seem to have a close girlfriend, either. Does this seem as strange to you as it does to me? In Lyla's case, I can see it—she often acts like the kind of girl other girls love to hate (and I look forward to dissecting why that's so). But Tami is the kind of largehearted person whom other women would want to befriend. The lack of female friendships on the show has become like a missing tooth for me, especially when you consider the vivid and interesting male friendships (Matt and Landry, Tim and Jason, even Coach and Buddy Garrity). It's revealing in its absence: No matter how good the show's writers are at portraying women—and they are—they're leaving out a key part of our lives.

A question for both of you: What do you think of the surly version of Matt Saracen? I'm starting to feel about him as I felt at

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the end of the fifth Harry Potter book: past ready for the nice boy I thought I knew to come back.

Emily

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From: Meghan O'Rourke
To: Emily Bazelon and Hanna Rosin
Subject: Week 1: Why Matt Saracen Got Surly
Posted Monday, January 19, 2009, at 12:33 PM ET

Hanna, Emily,

For me, the genius of *Friday Night Lights* is the way it captures the texture of everyday life by completely aestheticizing it. The handheld camera, the quick jump-cuts, the moody Explosions in the Sky soundtrack laid over tracking shots of the flat, arid West Texas landscape all add up to a feeling no other TV show gives me. And very few movies, for that matter. Then there's the fact that *FNL*, more than any other show on network TV, tries hard to be about a real place and real people in America. This is no Hollywood stage set; it's not a generic American city or suburb; the characters aren't dealing with their problems against a backdrop of wealth, security, and Marc Jacobs ads. Most are struggling to get by, and at any moment the floor might drop out from under them. In this sense, the show is about a community, not about individuals. Football is an expression of that community.

That's why, Emily, I don't find surly Matt Saracen annoying; I find him heartbreaking. After all, his surliness stems from predicaments that he has no control over: a father in Iraq (how many TV shows bring that up?) and an ailing grandmother he doesn't want to relegate to a nursing home. Like many Americans, he finds himself acting as a caretaker way too young. And because he's not wealthy, when his personal life gets complicated—like when his romance with his grandmother's sexy at-home nurse, Carlotta, goes belly up—he loses it. (OK, I thought that story line was kinda lame; but I was moved by the anger that followed.) But your point about the lack of female friendships on the show is a great one. It's particularly true of Tami. (We do get to see a reasonable amount of Julie and Tyra together, I feel.) Like Julie, I had a principal for a mother, and one thing I always liked was watching all her friendships at the school develop and evolve.

It's also true, Hanna, that the first episode of this season hammers homes its themes—Tami's an overworked principal with a funding problem; Lyla and Riggins are gonna have trouble taking their romance public; and star freshman quarterback J.D. is a threat to good old Matt Saracen. But for now I didn't mind, because there were plenty of moments of fine dialogue, which keep the show feeling alive. Like the scene in which the amiable, manipulative Buddy hands Tami a check and says in his twangy drawl, "Ah've got two words for you: Jumbo … Tron!" (Tami, of course, has just been trying to meet a budget so tight that even chalk is at issue.) Later, at a party, Buddy greets Tami in front of some of the Dillon Panther boosters—who are oohing and aahing over an architectural rendering of the JumboTron—by exclaiming, "Tami Taylor is the brain child behind all this!" Ah, Buddy. You gotta love him. He's almost a caricature—but not.

What keeps a lot of these characters from being caricatures, despite plenty of conventional TV plot points, is that ultimately the show portrays them in the round. Coach Taylor, who has a way with young men that can seem too good to be true, is also often angry and frustrated; caring and sensitive, Lyla is also sometimes an entitled priss; Tim is a fuckup with a heart of gold (at least, at times); and the raw and exposed Julie can be a whiny brat. In this sense, ultimately, I think the story *FNL* is trying to tell is fundamentally responsible, unlike so many stories on TV. When the characters make mistakes, they suffer real consequences. Think of Smash losing his football scholarship. I sometimes think the weakest feature of our entertainment culture is a kind of sentimentality about pain, if that makes sense—an avoidance of the messiness of life that manifests itself in tidy morals and overdramatized melodramas.

But what could make *FNL* better? I'm hoping for more football and atmosphere and fewer overwrought plotlines. Will the J.D./Matt Saracen face-off help this story, do you think? And, finally: Can the writers of the show figure out how to dramatize games without making them seem totally fake? It feels like so often in the last five minutes of an episode we cut to a game-that's-in-its-final-minutes-and-oh-my-God-everyone-is-biting-their-nails …

Meghan

Click here for the next entry.

From: Hanna Rosin
To: Emily Bazelon and Meghan O'Rourke
Subject: Week 1: The Perfect Chaos of Tim Riggins' Living Room
Posted Monday, January 19, 2009, at 3:59 PM ET

That's it, Meghan. What the *Sopranos* accomplished with tight thematic scripts and the *Wire* accomplished with a

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Shakespearean plot, *FNL* pulls off with moody music and some interesting camera work. It's not that these shows transform brutal realities into beauty. They just make them bearable by packaging them in some coherent aesthetic way that calls attention to itself. And the result is very moving.

The inside of Tim Riggins' house, for example, is a place that should never be shown on television. It's a total mess, and not in an artsy Urban Outfitter's catalogue kind of way. There's that bent-up picture of a bikini beer girl by the television and yesterday's dishes and napkins on every surface and nothing in the refrigerator except beer. This is a very depressing state of affairs for a high school kid if you stop to think about it. But whenever we're in there, the camera jerks around from couch to stool to kitchen, in perfect harmony with the chaos around it. So it all feels comfortable and we experience it just the way Riggins would—another day in a moody life.

I think part of the reason Peter Berg doesn't see these characters from such a distance is that he seems deeply sympathetic to their outlook on life, particularly their ideas about the traditional roles of men and women. The men are always being put through tests of their own manhood and decency. The boys have Coach, but hardly any of them has an actual father, so they are pushed into manhood on their own. Almost all of them have to be head of a household before their time, with interesting results. Matt is decent but can't fill the shoes. Riggins is noble but erratic. Smash is dutiful but explosive.

Emily, that insight you had about Tami is so interesting, and it made me see the whole show differently. At first I thought Peter Berg must love women, because they drive all the action and make all the good decisions. Then, after what you said, I realized that for the most part, the women exist only to support the men. They are wives or girlfriends or mothers but don't have many independent relationships outside their own families. Judd Apatow's women are a little like this, too. It's a male-centric view, and helps explain why a Hollywood director would be so in tune with the mores of a small conservative town.

It's also why this season could get interesting. As the principal, Tami is stretching the show in all kinds of ways. Buddy has shed his vulnerability and is back to being the town bully. Coach is stuck in the middle. All kinds of potential for drama.

From: Emily Bazelon
To: Meghan O'Rourke and Hanna Rosin
Subject: Week 2: Would You Let Your Kids Play for Coach Taylor?
Posted Saturday, January 24, 2009, at 7:04 AM ET

Meghan, thank you for reminding me of all the good reasons why Matt Saracen is a heartbreaking nice boy rather than a feel-good one. And now Episode 2 reminds us as well. Matt's grandmother doesn't want to take her medication, and the only way he can make her is to become an emancipated minor so that he can be her legal guardian, instead of the other way around. And then what exactly happens when it's time for him to go to college? No good answer. As, indeed, there wouldn't be.

One of the luxuries of adolescence is that you don't have to assume responsibility for the people in your family. Matt knows what it means to take this on. In the first season, he let Julie see him pretend to be his grandfather so he could sing his grandmother to sleep. Now when she asks whether emancipation means that he gets to "vote and drink and smoke," he brings her down to earth: "No, it means I get to take care of old people."

This is one of the moments that, for me, capture the strength of this show: In Dillon, kids with hard lives and kids with easier ones get a good look at each other, which doesn't happen all that much in our nation's class-segregated high schools. Lyla, Tim, and Tyra had one of those across-the-class-divide moments in this episode, when Lyla tried to get Tim to help himself with his college prospects at a fancy dinner and failed. Tim then came home and sat down in boxers to TV and a beer with Tyra while his brother and her sister snuck in a quickie (off-camera in the bedroom).

I was glad to see that the writers are back to making Tyra and Tim and their weary, beery sense of their own limitations the center of our sympathy. Maybe Tyra will make it out of Dillon, but not by acting like the Zeta girls in *The House Bunny*. And it seems entirely in keeping with Tim's fragile nature that Buddy Garrity could destroy his confidence with a few slashing sentences. Speaking of, one of the honest and realistic assumptions of this show is that when teenagers date, they have sex. So I gave Buddy points when he warned his daughter away from Tim in a speech that ended with "Lyla, are you using protection?"

But enough about character development. Let's talk about some football. I entirely agree, Meghan, that *FNL* generally gives us too little gridiron, not too much. But in this episode, there is a lovely sequence on the field. Coach Taylor is testing Smash before a college tryout, and the former Panther star is cutting and weaving just like old times—until Tim levels him. We hear the crack and thud of the hit, and, for a moment, Smash lies heavy and still on the ground. In this show, when a player goes down, the dots connect to the paralyzing hit that put Jason Street in a wheelchair. But Smash gets up, his rehabilitated knee sound, and it's a moment of blessed relief, because now we can go on rooting for him to regain his chance to … play in college and turn pro? To write the sentence is to remember how long the

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odds are for such an outcome and to rue the role that the dangled dream of professional sports ends up playing for a lot of kids.

Given Jason's broken spine, you can't accuse *Friday Night Lights* of pretending otherwise. But what do we think about the way its best characters revel in the game and make us love it, too? I ask myself the same question when I watch football with my sons knowing that I'd never let them play it. In the nonfiction book on which the show is based, author Buzz Bissinger writes of a player who wasn't examined thoroughly after a groin injury: "He lost the testicle but he did make All-State." There are also kids who play through broken arms, broken ankles, and broken hands and who pop painkillers or Valium. Across the country, high-school football is also associated with a frightening rate of concussions. Would you let Coach Taylor anywhere near your boys?

From: Hanna Rosin
To: Emily Bazelon and Meghan O'Rourke
Subject: Week 2: The Indelible Image of Buddy Garrity Doing Yoga
Posted Monday, January 26, 2009, at 6:31 AM ET

Indeed, Emily. It's a hallelujah moment when we're back to Tim, Tyra, Matt, the lovable, evil Buddy, and all the other things I treasure about *FNL*. This episode made me very hopeful about the rest of the season. I especially liked the Smash subplot and how it ties together what happens on the field with what happens off. Smash, who graduated but lost his college scholarship, is having a hard time remembering how to be Smash. Without the Dillon Panthers, he's just a kid in an Alamo Freeze hat who goes home every night to his mom. And that just about summarizes the driving theme of the show. On the field, class, race, and all the soul-draining realities of life in a small Texas town get benched. But off the field, you can have clear eyes and a full heart and still lose.

Despite their best efforts, Matt, Tyra, and Tim just can't seem to transcend. Instead of gender differences, what's emerging strongly this season is, as Emily points out, class differences. All the couples in the show are divided along class lines, setting up lots of potential for good drama. There's Tyra and Landry, Lyla and Tim, and possibly Julie and Matt again. Emily, you pointed out that great moment in the car where Julie and Matt have such different ideas about what the future holds. Buddy gives us another such moment, when he lectures Lyla about dating Tim: "Tim Riggins going to college is like me teaching yoga classes." (I'm having trouble getting that image out of my mind, of Buddy Garrity teaching yoga classes. Buddy in downward facing dog. Buddy ohm-ing. Buddy saying "namaste" to his ex-wife in a spirit of love and peace.)

Then, of course, there's the absolutely awful moment when Tim orders squab, rare, at the dinner with the new freshman quarterback J.D.'s posh Texas socialite family. This was reminiscent of one of my favorite scenes in *The Wire*, when Bunny Colvin takes Namond and the other kids out to a fancy restaurant, after which they feel ever more alienated from their better selves.

I have high hopes for J.D. in this regard. He turns the Dillon Panthers formula on its head. His father is hellbent on mucking up the field with privilege and influence. He's a serious test for Coach and for Matt. Can't wait to see what happens.

One question, though: Does it seem right to you that Tim Riggins would use the word *schmooze*? Seemed out of place to me. (Ditto their conversations about Google.) It's not that I think he's "retarded," as he puts it. It's just that until now, the show has been intentionally claustrophobic, locking us in the town, never letting us see what's on Tim's TV (unlike, say, Tony Soprano, whose TV is always facing us). So we've been led to believe that Dillon reception doesn't pick up the CW or VH1 or any other channel that might infect teenage lingo.

From: Meghan O'Rourke
To: Hanna Rosin and Emily Bazelon
Subject: Week 2: Is the Show Becoming Too Sentimental?
Posted Monday, January 26, 2009, at 3:19 PM ET

Hanna, Emily,

One thing I've been thinking about is *Friday Night Lights*' distinctive brand of male sentimentality. This show seems singularly designed to make men cry. Its lodestars are comradeship on and off the field ("God, football, and Texas forever," I recall Riggins toasting with Jason Street in the very first episode); a modern blend of paradoxically stoic emotionalism (epitomized by Coach Taylor); and a recurrent, choked-up love of the tough women who make these men's attachment to football possible. This may be the West, but in Dillon, Texas, John Ford's American masculinity has been diluted with a cup of New Man sensitivity.

Take this episode's key scene between Matt Saracen and his grandmother: Debating whether to take his ailing grandmother to an assisted-living home, Matt is shaken when she suddenly tells him how great he was in his last game. She spirals into loving reminiscence:

> "You've always loved football, Matty. I remember when you were two years old you

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were trying to throw a football, and it was bigger than you were. And you were such a sweet baby, such a sweet, sweet baby. But here you are all grown up and taking care of everything. I don't know what I'd do without you. I don't know. Matthew, I love you."

"I know. I love you too, Grandma."

"You're such a good boy."

"If I am, it's only because you raised me."

The scene is very well-played—we haven't talked much about the show's acting yet, it suddenly occurs to me—replete with pauses and tears and a final hug between the two. But the emotion derives from a move in the script that occurs again and again in this series: A man is having a difficult time when his mother, his grandmother, or his wife describes how much it means to her that he is taking care of her, or accomplishing brilliant things on the field, or just plain persevering. Smash has had moments like this with his mom. Coach has moments like this with Tami. And here Matt is reminded of his duty—to take care of his grandma, even though he's 17—when she speaks about his masculine prowess, first as a tough little boy throwing a ball "bigger than you were" and now as a tough teenager trying to navigate another task much bigger than he is.

Friday Night Lights has gotten more sentimental over the years, I think, not less, and it has also embraced its women characters more than ever. (I'm not sure I think they really play second fiddle to the men, Hanna—though they once did.) The show is about relationships now; its investigation of male honor has made a quarter-turn to focus largely on male honor as it pertains to women. (Even wayward Tim Riggins has been domesticated.)

In this regard, the show is far more incantatory than realistic (to borrow Susan Sontag's labels for the two main types of art). That is, it trades on magic and ritual more than on gritty realism, even while it often pretends to be grittily realistic. And so while it does talk about class, unlike many network TV shows, and while it does portray a place that's geographically specific, as I mentioned in my last entry, it's also offering up a highly stylized story that is intended, I think, to serve as an emotional catharsis for men, while winning women over by showing that men really do have feelings, and it's going to translate them into a grammar we can begin to understand.

I like this episode, but it strikes me that we've come a long way from season one, when there was a bit more edge on things. (Remember how it almost seemed that Riggins was racist?)

And we're definitely a long way from Buzz Bissinger's book *Friday Night Lights*, on which the series and the movie are based. That book—so far, at least; I'm only 150 pages in—has plenty of sentimentality about the power of athletic glory to alleviate the mundanity of life off the field. But it also stresses the meanness and nastiness that fuels the talent of so many of the actual Panthers Bissinger met. Not to mention the racism that pervaded the town. On this show, we rarely see that meanness; Riggins used to embody it, but now he's a pussycat, trying on blazers to keep Lyla happy. On the field, it's the team's pure-hearted sportsmanship that makes it so lovable, not any player's manly violence. After all, their locker-room mantra is "Clear eyes, full hearts can't lose." And in Matt Saracen they had a scrappy quarterback underdog who really wanted to be an artist. Even J.D. is small and—can't you see it in those wide eyes?—supersensitive.

I love *FNL*, but sometimes I wonder: Is the show becoming simply too sentimental about its characters?

Meghan

From: Emily Bazelon
To: Hanna Rosin and Meghan O'Rourke
Subject: Week 2: Where in Tarnation Is Jason Street?
Posted Monday, January 26, 2009, at 6:06 PM ET

You're right, Meghan, to call *FNL* on its spreading dollop of sentimentality. Doesn't this often happen with TV shows in later seasons? I'm thinking of *The Wire* (at least Season 5), and probably *The Sopranos*, too. You can see why the writers would be pulled in this direction. The friction of the initial plot line has been played out. As the writers—and the audience—get to know the characters better, do we inevitably want them to become better people? Even if that comes at the price of narrative tension and edge?

The best way out of the mush pit, I suppose, is to introduce new characters, who in turn introduce new friction. That's what J.D. is all about this season. If you're right that there's a puppy dog lurking behind his wide eyes, then the show is in trouble. On the other hand, if he's merely a two-dimensional touchdown-throwing automaton, that's going to be awfully pat—the Matt vs. J.D. contest will be good, humble working-class vs. evil, proud, and rich. I hope we get something more interesting than that.

In the meantime, a complaint from me that I see a reader in "the Fray" shares: Why does this show keep flunking TV Drama 101 by tossing characters without explanation? First Waverly, Smash's bipolar girlfriend, disappears. Now Jason Street, whom we last saw begging an appealing waitress to have his baby after

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a one-night stand, is AWOL. What gives? Will Jason show up later this season, child in hand?

One more thing for this week: Another Frayster who says he (I think *he*) wrote for the show in the first season reports that Tami initially did have a girlfriend, played by Maggie Wheeler. But she got cut. More here. And more from us next week.

From: Meghan O'Rourke
To: Hanna Rosin and Emily Bazelon
Subject: Week 3: The Small Muscles Around Kyle Chandler's Eyes and Mouth
Posted Saturday, January 31, 2009, at 6:45 AM ET

I'm glad that you pulled out that comment from the "Fray," Emily. I've wondered the same thing about why the show so baldly ditches characters. Another one to add to the list: Landry's nerd-cool girlfriend. Whatever happened to her? Meanwhile, we know from entertainment news that the actors who play Street (Scott Porter) and Smash (played by Gaius Charles Williams) are going to leave the show, but I presume the writers will stage their exits with more grace.

At last, though, the season is swinging into gear. There's conflict. Tami and Eric's strong bond is fraying under the pressure of balancing work and home. He: "You know who I miss? The coach's wife." She: "You know who I'd like to meet? The principal's husband." There's love. How sweet are Matt Saracen and Julie? Somehow their romance got more real this time around. I find her much less annoying and more credible in her big-eyed, pouting awkwardness. E.g., that moment where she timidly says "We don't have to talk about football… or not." There's football. Again with the game being decided in a close call in the last 20 seconds?

Plus, Tami finally has a friend. Or does she? At the butcher counter of the supermarket, she's befriended by Katie McCoy, J.D.'s mother, wife of Joe—the man I love to hate. (I think I'd watch this season just for the catharsis of watching Coach Taylor stick it to Joe. Kyle Chandler is brilliant in these scenes—check out the way the small muscles around his eyes and mouth move.) It's not clear whether Katie is working Tami just as Joe has been trying to work Eric, plying him with scotch and cigars to no avail. Eric takes the cynical view; he thinks Tami's being "played." Tami protests. Hanna, Emily, I wonder what you two think—is this a friendship in the bud, or a cynical play for power?

In either case, what's interesting to me is that it does seem more plausible for Tami and Katie to develop a friendship than for Joe and Eric to. As unalike as they are, Tami and Katie have something to offer each other. The women may be divided by class, but they connect subtly and intuitively, it seems, over understanding just how the other has to negotiate delicately around her husband to get what she wants for herself and her kids. As different as these marriages are, this, at least, seems alike. Even Tami, who has so much authority with Eric, has to push back in all sorts of ways. Take their argument about the football team's barbecue. It reminded me how new Tami's life as a working mom is: She complains to Eric about the team coming into the house and "messing up my floors" and "clogging up my toilet." That *my* is so telling. The long shadow of domesticated female identity falls over it. … Or am I reading too much into it?

Finally, I was struck by how many scenes in this episode take place between two people. The party scene, the football game, and the fabulous, cringe-inducing scene when Lyla laughs at Mindy for using *Finding Nemo* as a bridal vow are exceptions, of course. But otherwise the show takes place in dyads, as if homing in on relationships rather than community as a whole. I wonder if this will extend through the show.

Curious to hear your thoughts.

Meghan

From: Emily Bazelon
To: Hanna Rosin and Meghan O'Rourke
Subject: Week 3: Deciphering the Bronzed Diaper
Posted Monday, February 2, 2009, at 7:18 AM ET

Yes, Meghan, Tami *is* being played by Katie McCoy. In part because she wants to be. I found their pairing off all too recognizable: They have that spark two women get when they see something in each other that they want and don't have. Their friendship, or maybe it will prove an infatuation, is a trying-on of identity. So, yes, Katie is using Tami to entrench her son's status on the team and to show off her wealth. And Tami refuses to notice, because it suits her purposes not to. A party at Katie's house means no clogged toilets at Tami's (and, oh yes, that *my* rang in my ears, too). I particularly loved the moment when Tami enters Katie's glittering, ostentatious house and her new friend and hostess puts an arm around her waist and they sail off together into the living room in their evening dresses, husbands trailing after them. It captured exactly how women are made girlish by mutual crushes.

Tami's falling for Katie would be harmless enough if it weren't clashing with her husband's interests. It's that willingness to clash that's new, isn't it? And captured so well by that great

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exchange you quoted. The Taylors haven't just become a two-career couple. They're a couple with jobs that are at loggerheads.

The Tami-Katie spark was connected, for me, with the Lyla-Mindy debacle, in part because both of these dyads cut across class, a theme we've been discussing. Tami and Katie are flirtingly using each other; Lyla and Mindy miss each other completely, in a way that causes real pain. How *could* Lyla have laughed at those poor, sweet *Finding Nemo* wedding vows? I mean, really. Then again, Lyla is completely out of her element, sitting there with two sisters and a mother who present a fiercely united front, at least to other people. Maybe she was nervous and blew it. Or maybe she wanted to hurt them because she envies their sisterhood.

And now a few questions, for you and for our readers. What happened at the end of that football game? Did Matt really fumble, or did he get a bad call—after all, it looked to me like he was in the end zone with control of the ball before he was hit. And was the pounding Matt took during the game just the show's latest realist depiction of the perils of football, or were we supposed to suspect that J.D.'s father had somehow induced the other team to take out QB 1? (I'm probably being paranoid, but the camera work had a sinister element to it.) Last thing: When J.D. catches Matt and Julie making fun of his trophies and comes back with that too-perfect zinger about how his parents also bronzed his diapers, is he just trying to make them feel small and stupid? Or is he also distancing himself from his parents and their pushy football worship? I couldn't quite decide how to read him in that moment.

From: Hanna Rosin
To: Emily Bazelon and Meghan O'Rourke
Subject: Week 3: Malcolm Gladwell Comes to Dillon
Posted Monday, February 2, 2009, at 11:01 AM ET

I read the relationship between Tami and Katie differently. Katie is obviously awful, with her blather about the Atkins diet and being a "connector." She is obviously playing Tami, as much for her husband's sake as for her own. And the fact that Tami doesn't see this is a sign that her judgment is off. Until this season, Tami has been the moral compass for her family and for the show. But now she's distracted. She's cutting corners, ducking out of her domestic responsibilities. She's worried about those clogged toilets, because her cup is full, and she can't handle one more thing.

I empathize. When I'm in that too-much-work-too-many-kids-mode, I, too, lose it over minor housekeeping infractions. But it does not bode well for Dillon. When Tami is off, so is everything else. I read this episode as not so much about friendship, expedient or otherwise, as about missed connections. Tami is not picking up on Katie's cues. Lyla can't connect with Mindy and Billy. Tim Riggins does not make it on time to meet his date. And Saracen doesn't quite get that touchdown. The center is not holding in Dillon.

In David Simon's scripts for *The Wire*, money always crushes love, loyalty, family, neighborhood, and everything in its path. Something like that is going on here. Money is wreaking havoc in Dillon: the boosters' money for the JumboTron, the McCoy money, those copper wires that are hypnotizing Billy and making him corrupt poor Tim. (In *The Wire*, Bubs was always hunting down copper.) The result is the closing scene, which shows the very un-neighborly Dillon ritual of planting "for sale" signs on the coach's lawn after he loses the game.

I don't know what will triumph in the end: money or love. Emily, I couldn't tell either whether J.D. was pissed or chagrined or ironic in that last scene, so I can't tell if he's our villain or just a victim of his overbearing father. I'll bet on one thing though: Things do not end well for Billy Riggins.

From: Meghan O'Rourke
To: Emily Bazelon and Hanna Rosin
Subject: Week 3: Helicopter Parenting
Posted Monday, February 2, 2009, at 4:05 PM ET

Hanna, Emily,

I thought J.D. was trying to make a joke that didn't come off. It's my guess, too, that we're not supposed to be able to read his reaction, because he's not sure himself. He's angry, but he also sees the ridiculousness of his parents' shrine to him. One thing we haven't discussed: With the McCoys comes the *FNL*'s first depiction of that modern affliction known as helicopter parenting. I suppose, to be accurate, that Joe is actually a more specific type: a form of stage parent, the obsessed parent-coach. Here is a parent who is helping drive his son into developing his talents but who also just might drive him crazy by pushing too hard.

This introduces a new theme for *FNL*, right? Until now, over-involvement wasn't a problem for any of the parents on the show. In fact, the parenting problems all had to do with moms and dads who were notably absent (in the case of Matt and Tim, say). Tami and Eric are attentive parents. So is Smash's mom. But you couldn't call them helicopter parents, that breed of nervously hovering perfectionists who busily cram their children's schedules with activities and lessons. In this case, that finicky sense of entitlement projected by Joe is associated, we're meant to feel, with his wealth, to get back to what you brought

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up, Hanna, about money and love. Katie, too. I'm curious to know how far the sports parenting issues will go. Is J.D. going to crack up? Or is Joe creating a sports equivalent of Mozart with all his proud pushing? I suspect the first, mainly because Joe is portrayed as such a jerk. (This dilemma might be more interesting if the writers had let Joe be a more complex figure—but maybe the whole point is these types are caricatures, almost.)

Meghan

From: Hanna Rosin
To: Emily Bazelon and Meghan O'Rourke
Subject: Week 4: Eric Taylor, Molder of Men
Posted Saturday, February 7, 2009, at 7:11 AM ET

This opening comment is aimed more at the producers of *Friday Night Lights* than at both of you: Tami is a stabilizing force in this crazy world, and there is only so much more of her fumbling and humiliation I can take. This episode ruminates on the ancient male art of mentoring, and particularly being a "molder of men," as Tami puts it to her husband. Tami tries to access this secret world with disastrous results. She knows that Buddy Garrity just played golf with the superintendent of schools, who is making the final decision on what to do with the JumboTron money. So on the advice of the wily Katie McCoy, she finds out where the superintendent has breakfast and pays a visit. "Wear your hair down," Katie tells her. "Wear it down."

Tami shows up in a fetching sunset-colored tank with her fabulous hair down. The superintendent is friendly enough but not overly so, and Tami pushes her luck. She scooches into his booth and immediately starts hammering him about having all the "information" and being "understaffed" and drill, drill, drill. This is not the giggly seduction scene Katie was hinting at. The whole exchange goes south quickly, and a few scenes later, the new JumboTron is announced. My husband and I had a very Venus/Mars moment over this scene. David says the superintendent was against her from the start. I say he was just friendly enough that she could have turned him if she'd played it exactly right. But I can't be annoyed at her, because playing it right—Katie McCoy's way—would have meant smiling coyly and batting her eyelashes in a very un-Tami fashion.

David, meanwhile, choked up at a scene that played out exactly the opposite way. Eric brings Smash to a big Texas university for a walk-on, but then the coach there says he doesn't have time to see him that day. Eric plays it perfectly. He finds just the right words to win over the coach and just the right words to send Smash soaring onto the field. David was so moved by the speech aimed at Smash that he watched it two more times.

In a show that so highly values male honor, being a "molder of men" is a serious compliment. Actual fatherhood in this show is secondary to the art of shaping a fine young man. We get a glimpse into the fragile nature of male bonding when Eric asks J.D. to say something about himself, and J.D. comes up with résumé boilerplate—"I set goals and I achieve them"—making it hard for Eric to connect.

It's a delicate process, and also one that traditionally excludes women. When, last season, Julie tried to make her young smarmy English teacher into a mentor, Tami almost accused him of statutory rape. You are right, Meghan, that the women are quickly domesticating the men on this show. But that dynamic is not buying them any more freedom. As principal, Tami can't find her bearings. She still seems herself only in that moment when she's in the bar with Eric, telling him he's a molder of men and how sexy she finds that. To which he responds: "I'll tell you what. I'll have to ruminate on that a bit longer, because you find it so damned sexy."

I want more for Tami, but in that moment I can't help but feel that some kind of order is restored.

A question for both of you: Are you buying Matt Saracen's mom as a character? She seems so improbable to me.

From: Emily Bazelon
To: Meghan O'Rourke and Hanna Rosin
Subject: Week 4: What's the Deal With Saracen's Mom?
Posted Monday, February 9, 2009, at 6:52 AM ET

I'm on Mars with David: I think the superintendent was dead set against Tami, too. The battle over the JumboTron is a fight she shouldn't have picked—not as a new principal who clearly has no political capital, because it's a fight she couldn't win. There's a practical reason for this that in my mind blurs her moral claim here: The donors gave earmarked funds, whatever Tami's technical authority to ignore their wishes. And there's also, of course, the larger metaphorical meaning of the JumboTron: Dillon is about football first. In *Friday Night Lights* the book, this primacy makes itself similarly felt. The real school that's a model for Dillon High spends more on medical supplies for football players than on teaching supplies for English teachers. And the head of the English department makes two-thirds the salary of the football coach, who also gets the free use of a new car.

Hopeless as Tami's plea is, Katie coaxes her to try by instructing that "nobody likes an angry woman." It's Tami's anger that's making her fumble and bumble. That's hard for us to watch, I

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think, because it brings up a lot of baggage about women in authority being seen as bitches. Tami remembers Katie's words and tells the superintendent, "I'm not angry," but her voice is full of righteous indignation, so he can't hear her.

Before my inner feminist erupted, however, I reminded myself that Tami was to blame, too, for playing the politics wrong. She blew her honeymoon on a lost cause. (Here's hoping Obama doesn't make the same rookie mistake.) That's why it rings false when Eric tells her that she was right, unconvincingly contradicting himself from a couple of episodes ago.

I don't share your despair, though, because Tami is already bouncing back. She used the JumboTron announcement to do what she should have done from the get go: co-opt Buddy Garrity into raising the kind of money she needs by making him host a silent auction for the school at his car dealership. You can't beat Dillon's football fat cats if you're Tami. You have to join them.

Meanwhile, even as Eric is being valorized in this episode—that lingering shot of the "Coach Eric Taylor" sign on his door was for anyone who missed the theme—he doesn't entirely live up to his billing. Yes, he gets big points for getting Smash to college. (Since I am still caught up in the glory of last Sunday's Super Bowl—how about that game!—I'm feeling kindlier toward the idea of Smash playing college ball, though I reserve the right to come to my senses and start worrying about his brain getting battered.) But what is Eric thinking by dividing quarterback duties between Matt and J.D., and running a different offense for each? It's baby-splitting, and it bodes badly. I'm betting against the Panthers in the next game. Related point of ongoing frustration: The writers seem to have settled back into portraying J.D. as robotic and empty-headed, the boy with Xbox between his ears.

Matt, by too-obvious contrast, is ever the thoughtful, winsome struggler. You're right, Hanna, that his mother is a disappointment. I was happy to meet Shelby because she's played by one of my favorite actresses from *Deadwood*. But I don't believe in her character, either. Where's the sordid underbelly—the lack of caring, or mental illness, or selfishness that would help us understand why she left her child? Knowing that Matt's dad is a jerk only makes her act of abandonment less explicable. And so I'm waiting for the bitter reality check: I was ready for Shelby to start to disappoint by not showing up as promised to take Matt's grandmother to the doctor. But there she was, right on time. I don't buy the pat self-redemption, and I hope the show goes deeper and darker.

From: Meghan O'Rourke

To: Emily Bazelon and Hanna Rosin
Subject: Week 4: Can a Boy Who Doesn't Eat Chicken-Fried Steak Really Be QB1?
Posted Monday, February 9, 2009, at 12:28 PM ET

After reading your entries, Hanna and Emily, I am left with a big, unanswerable question many others have asked before: Why is this show not more popular? It's smart and sharp. Yet it's also extremely watchable. (In contrast, say, to *The Wire*, another critical darling that never quite made it to the big time. That show required a lot more of the viewer than *Friday Night Lights* does.) Over the past two seasons in particular, *FNL* has made an effort to reach out to both male and female viewers: It may address male honor and epitomize modern male sentimentality, as you and I have both mentioned, Hanna. But it also offers up a buffet of romantic conflict that ought to sate the appetite of the most stereotypically girly viewer. A good chunk of the show is about teenage *amour*, bad cafeteria food, and cute boys, for God's sake! Just see the Tyra-Cash-Landry love triangle this week.

Does the mere mention of football turn viewers away? Is the show trying to be all things to all people—and failing in the process? Or has NBC just flubbed it by scheduling it on Friday nights? I have another theory, but there's absolutely no evidence for it. Sometimes I think *FNL* hasn't reached a huge audience because it doesn't appeal to the ironic hipster sensibility that turns shows like *Summer Heights High* or *Flight of the Conchords* into word-of-mouth hits—it's too earnest to ignite that YouTube viral transmission. Anyway, I'm curious to know what you (and our readers) think, because in general it seems to me that good TV has a way of making itself known and getting watched.

Back to our regularly scheduled programming: Yes, Hanna, I find Matt's mom too good to be true. And the writers seem to know it, because they are hardly even trying to give her interesting lines. She's like a relentless optimist's idea of a deadbeat mom. And, Emily, I agree with you about Tami: She flubbed the JumboTron wars by choosing to wage the wrong skirmish in the larger battle. Those were earmarked funds. She's got to figure out a way to guilt the boosters into giving her money; she can't just demand it.

Meanwhile, I find myself in agreement with Mindy for once: That Cash sure is a fine lookin' cowboy. In this episode, Tyra's a kind of parallel to Tami: Both are struggling and making some bad decisions. In Tyra's case, it's ditching geeky sweetheart Landry—who clearly adores her—after his dental surgery in order to make out with Cash, a bad boy with big blue eyes and a love-me attitude. Cash doesn't wear his heart on his Western shirt sleeve as Landry does; he wears his charm, whirling into town with the rodeo and impressing the audience with his staying power in the prestigious bronc event. (Rodeo neophytes:

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Check out the wonderful chapter about it in Gretel Ehrlich's *The Solace of Open Spaces*, a stunning meditation on the West.)

Tyra falls hard for Cash's routine. "Billy never mentioned that Mindy's little sister turned into a goddess," he whispers to her at the bar. Cash is an archetype, but the writers sketch him well, refusing to let him seem too obviously dangerous. Even I fell victim to his spell, wondering fruitlessly whether—this time!—the bad boy might be tamed. If we need a warning that he won't, I think, it comes in the barbecue scene at Tyra's house. Billy Riggins—an old friend of Cash's—is recalling what a good baseball player Cash was in high school. Cash laughs it off, turns to Tyra, and, with a devil-may-care drawl, says, "Baseball's too slow and boring … right now I like to ride broncs in the rodeo. Yee-haw!" Like any good come-on line, the charge is all in the delivery, and it works on Tyra. But (just like Tami) she's misreading the politics of the situation—in this case, the sexual politics. Right?

Meanwhile, Emily, I don't think I agree that Taylor's embracing the spread offense is a form of baby-splitting. It seems pragmatic, if perhaps a little softhearted. But how can Eric not be softhearted about Matt? He is so winsome, and he's worked his ass off. The other thing is that J.D. is such a wuss, still. Part of being a quarterback, on this show, is being a leader—and how can J.D. be a leader when he's still a follower? He's not even rebellious enough to eat fried food, for Christ's sake. ("My dad won't let me," he says.) How's being Daddy's Little Boy going to inspire his teammates? J.D. may have the skills but is going to have to get some gumption before he takes this team as far as it can go.

Though, yeah, it'll probably go wrong. For the sake of drama, at least.

Curious to hear your thoughts …

Meghan

From: Hanna Rosin
To: Emily Bazelon and Meghan O'Rourke
Subject: Week 4: I'll Take the Brooding Drunk Over the Sweet-Talking Pill-Popper
Posted Monday, February 9, 2009, at 5:56 PM ET

Meghan, I agree with your wild-card theory. I've always thought the show doesn't touch a nerve because it's too straightforwardly sentimental. Or, at least, it's a strange hybrid of sentimental and sophisticated. The themes are not so different from middlebrow dreck like, say, *Touched by an Angel*—honor, heart, the power of inspiration, staying optimistic in the face of bad odds. The show is hardly ever knowing. Hannah Montana is also a TV teenager, but she would be an alien dropped into this version of America. And when the show goes dark, it's on Oprah's themes—missing fathers, serious illness, divorce. Yet, there is something about the show that transmits "art" and makes it inaccessible. It's not tidy, for example, either in its camerawork or the way it closes its themes. It insists on complicating its heroes and villains, as we've discussed, which is why we like it.

I demurely disagree about Cash, however. He's an archetype, but one that *Brokeback Mountain* has ruined for me forever. To me, Cash just screams male stripper—the name alone conjures up visions of dollars tucked in briefs. I did not fail to notice that the episode pretty much ditched Tim Riggins, as if there were only room for one male hottie at a time. And I'll take the brooding drunk over the sweet-talking pill-popper any day.

On an unrelated note, anyone notice how much actual cash is floating around Dillon? Lets start a running list of the items the good citizens of a real Dillon could probably never afford. I'll start:

1. Lyla's wardrobe
2. Julie's wardrobe
3. Tami's fabulous hair
4. The McCoy house, located in Dillon's fashionable McMansion district
5. Landry's 15" Mac laptop (with wifi hookup)
6. Landry's electric guitar and amp

From: Meghan O'Rourke
To: Emily Bazelon and Hanna Rosin
Subject: Week 4: Dillon's McMansion District Located!
Posted Tuesday, February 10, 2009, at 10:30 AM ET

Hanna,

Well, if I had to *choose* between Tim Riggins and Cash, I'd go for the brooding drunk, too. In any case, your *Brokeback Mountain* reference has shamed me out of my crush. I always fall too easily for the glib talkers.

Meanwhile, though, it looks like Dillon's real-life counterpart *does* have a McMansion district. Welcome to the McCoy home. It even has a hobby room for his trophies.

Meghan

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From: Emily Bazelon
To: Hanna Rosin and Meghan O'Rourke
Subject: Week 5: It's Official—Matt Saracen Has Broken My Heart
Posted Saturday, February 14, 2009, at 6:51 AM ET

Smart mail from a reader named Josh about *FNL*'s popularity, or lack thereof: He points out that the show got not a single ad spot during the Super Bowl, when NBC had a captive audience of many millions of football fans. If you're right, Meghan and Hanna, that on-screen complexity and the taking of hard lumps explain why *FNL* hasn't found a mass audience, then the character who is most to blame is Matt Saracen. Watching him in this last episode nearly broke my heart. The QB baby-splitting went poorly, as threatened. Dillon won the game, but barely, and when Matt walks off the field and the world around him goes silent, as if he were underwater, we know that he's done.

Coach Taylor drives to Matt's house (plenty of peeling paint here, to contrast with the McCoy mansion) on the painful errand of demoting him. Coach doesn't say much, and nothing at all of comfort: For all the ways this show adores Eric, he regularly comes up short on words and compassion at crucial moments. (Another bitter, not-for-everyone layer of complexity.) Matt doesn't say much, either. He just looks stricken. When his grandma and Shelby ask Matt whether he's OK, he tells them yes. Then we watch him stand by the door outside, 17, alone, lonely, and cut up inside. It's a scene that makes me want to wall off my own smaller boys from adolescence.

As I muttered curses at Coach Taylor, my husband reminded me that players don't have a right to their spots. J.D. has the magic arm. Matt just has heart and a work ethic. State championship or not, he's been revealed as the kid who only made QB 1 because of Jason Street's accident. Matt sees it this way himself: He tells Shelby as much in a later scene. What kills me about this narrative is that it's too harsh. Matt has been a smart, clutch quarterback. And yet his self-doubt is inevitable. By stripping Matt of his leadership role in the middle of his senior year, Coach has called into question the whole arc of Matt's rise. (Even as Coach knows as well as we do that this is a kid who's got no one to help see him through the disappointment.) Ann, I love your points about Eric and Tami over on XX Factor, but though Eric is prepared to lose the JumboTron fight, he sure isn't prepared to risk his season. Or, more accurately perhaps, the Wrath of the Boosters that would come with benching J.D., win or lose.

The big question now is whether Matt has lost his job for good or whether there's a cinematic comeback in his future. The realistic plot line would be for J.D. to succeed at QB 1—or succeed well enough to keep the job. That would make Matt's story that much more painful but also pretty singular. I am trying to think of a sports icon from movie or TV who falls and stays fallen so that the drama isn't about redemption on the field but the quotidian small moments of going on with life. *The Wrestler* might be such a movie, though I doubt a grown up Matt Saracen will have much in common with Randy "The Ram" Robinson. At least I hope not. A parlor game: Who are these *FNL* teenagers going to be when they grow up, if the show's ratings were ever to let them? Does Tim stop drinking long enough to open his own construction company? (He's got Buddy's sales line down, anyway.) Does Lyla leave Dillon for college and become a radio host? And what about Matt, whom I mostly picture as a gentle father throwing a football to his own boys?

If I'm being sentimental—and I realize I'm so absorbed by Matt's troubles that I've ignored Julie's tattoo and the four stooges' house-buying—the show this time isn't. After Eric's visit, we see Matt and Landry pulling up to school in the morning, just as they did when they were sophomore losers in the beginning of the first season. Matt looks out his window and sees J.D. Landry looks out and sees Tyra with Cash. They're back where they started two years ago.

From: Meghan O'Rourke
To: Emily Bazelon and Hanna Rosin
Subject: Week 5: Jason Street Is Back—and He Needs To Make Some Money, Quick
Posted Monday, February 16, 2009, at 7:05 AM ET

I agree, Emily: This episode is pretty unsentimental. In fact, it's probably the best of the season so far. Partly that's because it begins with football rather than ending with it, loosening up what had come to seem like a predictable structure. One key result is that the episode can follow out plot points having to do with the team: In this case, it follows Matt's sense of failure and disappointment and Coach Taylor's need to address the fact that, as the game announcer put it, J.D. McCoy has turned out to be "the real deal." I'm always happiest when the show has more football and less necking on it.

I liked how the writers intertwined Matt's disappointment with the reappearance of Jason Street. Street is suffering from a disappointment, too, reminding us that even great quarterbacks go on to suffer. Street, of course, was paralyzed from the waist down in an accident that the first season revolved around; now he's had another accident: He got a girl pregnant in a one-night stand. He has a son. It's turning out to be the central joy of his life. And unlike so many guys his age—who'd be in college—he's facing the concrete pressures of needing to make money. You called Street and his pals the "Four Stooges," Emily, and I get why, because this episode treats them as goofballs: Riggins, Street, and Herc sit around trying to figure out how to make

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some bucks quick. I love the scene in which Jason is trying to think of something simple that everyone needs. ("A sharp pencil," Herc says unhelpfully.)

It's almost shticky, but what keeps it from being too much so is the quite poignant reality underlying the slacker riffing. They don't just want money; they need money. And it's not all that clear that they can get it. The scene at the bank when Street and Herc are trying to get a loan and Tim and Billy fail to show up—because they don't have the cash they promised they have—is brutal. Street uses the word *dumbass* to describe Billy and Tim, but that's putting it gently. You see how people with good intentions easily cross to the wrong side of the law.

Meanwhile, Matt's mom is driving me crazy, but I guess the poor guy needs something good in his life. She's eerily thoughtful just as Tami starts to flip out and become oddly uptight—coming down hard on Tyra in ways that alienate her and flipping out at her daughter, Julie, for getting a tattoo on her ankle. The writing here is excellent: I flashed back to when I got a second ear piercing without telling my mom and she flipped out. I think she said exactly what Tami did: that I'd ruined and disfigured my body. Twenty years later, I can see the scene from both mom and daughter's perspective: to Julie, who's desperately seeking autonomy, her mom's nervousness looks square and hypocritical—from her perspective, it's just a tattoo and "it doesn't mean anything." But for Tami, Julie's mini-rebellion seems as if it's part of a larger slide to … she doesn't know what, and that's precisely what's terrifying. She has to assume it does mean something. Or does she? This was a moment when I wished we could see Tami with a friend, because you kind of think the friend might give Tami a hug and say, "Your daughter's going to be OK." Because Julie is: She isn't giving off all the other signs of unhappiness that would seem to trigger real concern. She just wants to feel that she's got some control over her own life—even if she doesn't fully.

From: Hanna Rosin
To: Emily Bazelon and Meghan O'Rourke
Subject: Week 5: As Dark as the Bloodiest *Sopranos* Episode
Posted Monday, February 16, 2009, at 10:28 AM ET

I also loved this episode, but boy, was it dark. I continue to marvel at how subtly the show ties what's happening on the field to what's happening off it. Emily, I too was struck by how Eric, for maybe the first time, consistently came up short in this episode. Usually he can pull out just the right words to smooth over a painful situation. But with Matt, as you point out, it's not working. He tries to comfort Matt, but first Mom interrupts, then Grandma interrupts. Later, in the locker room, Matt himself makes it clear he isn't having it. "Good talk, coach," he says sardonically.

In fact, the "good talk" in this episode is the one Riggins keeps delivering in a cynical salesman mode. Like a character from a George Saunders story, Riggins spews some weird sales line he picked up from Buddy, about how when the rats leave a sinking market, "the true visionaries come in." Riggins seems surprised to hear the words coming out of his mouth and even more surprised that they work. "I'm a true visionary!" Billy says and then hands over the money for the house that the Four Stooges want to flip. And, of course, we all know, although they don't, that this will lead to disaster. The boys just fight over the money and the house, and the mother of Street's child is horrified, not comforted. Plus, they'll never sell that house. It's as if when Eric chose money and success (J.D.) over heart (Matt), the consequences of that decision rippled all over town.

The whole episode had a very Paul Auster feel. One fleeting thing—an unearned pile of money, a one-night stand, a tattoo, a suddenly paralyzed teammate—can change your entire life. Accident and coincidence are more powerful than any God-driven holistic narrative. My favorite moment is when they cut from the meth dealer shooting at the Riggins truck straight to Jason babbling to his new little boy. There is no happy script. Life can be a little random and scary, and it can all turn on a dime. This is why those ominous radio announcers—"If they lose this one, they can kiss this season goodbye"—really get under your skin. One missed pass by one 17-year-old should never mean so much, but in Dillon, it does.

The episode almost felt as dark to me as the bloodiest *Sopranos* episode. Except for the *Touched by a Mom* subtheme we've all complained about. Thank God for Herc, who's man enough to handle anything. I love when he calls everyone "ladies." Also: "Babies love vaginas. It's like looking at a postcard." Who writes those great lines?

From: Emily Bazelon
To: Hanna Rosin and Meghan O'Rourke
Subject: Week 5: A Coach's Theory of Coaches' Wives
Posted Monday, February 16, 2009, at 1:50 PM ET

Hanna, that's such a good point about the power of random and fleeting moments to wreak havoc on this show. I think that's a theme common to many of the best HBO dramas as well. Maybe it's a life truth that a TV show is particularly well-suited to reveal. There's much more pressure on movies, with their two-hour arcs, to depict larger-than-life incidents and tell a story as if it's complete and whole. And often that constraint gives short

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shrift to the power of the random and to the frayed threads that make up so much of lived experience.

But I don't really buy your idea that on *FNL* the central conflict between good and evil is also between heart vs. money. That seems too simple. J.D. isn't a potentially brilliant quarterback because he's rich. Yes, his parents paid for extra coaching, but mostly, J.D. has God-given talent. Smash's similar talent comes with working-class roots, and it looks like he's on his way to success, and we're meant to celebrate that. Money is a source of corruption—Tim and Billy's copper wire theft—but it's also the vehicle for redemption—Jason's attempt to channel those ill-gotten gains into his house-buying scheme. If he fails, I don't think it will be because the show treats money as inherently corrupt. It'll be because money is painfully out of reach. And money vs. heart leaves out other deep currents on *FNL*—like athletic prowess and also the religious belief represented by all those pregame prayer circles.

A couple of observations from readers before I sign off. My friend Ruben Castaneda points out that for all its subtle treatment of black-white race relations, *FNL* has had only a few, not wholly developed, Hispanic characters. That's especially too bad for a show about Texas. From reader Greg Mays, one more thought about why Tami has no girlfriends. He writes, "As the husband of a coach's wife, I have a theory: It's tough to have any real friends in the school-student circle as the coach's wife because you have to be watchful of their intentions to influence your husband. … Also, if my wife is representative, there is a population of coaches' wives who are coaches' wives because they are more likely to have male friends than female." I'm not sure that last part describes Tami, but I could imagine it does other Mrs. Coaches.

And hey, Meghan, I have the same double pierce story, from seventh grade. My parents drew a straight line: earring to mohawk to drugs to jail. They didn't come to their senses as quickly as Tami, either.

From: Hanna Rosin
To: Emily Bazelon and Meghan O'Rourke
Subject: Week 6: The Best Awkward TV Teenage Kiss I've Ever Seen
Posted Saturday, February 21, 2009, at 7:18 AM ET

FNL has always operated on the opposite principle of most teenage shows. It's about teenagers, but it isn't actually written for them, which might explain why it's not more popular, as fellow fan and writer Ruth Samuelson pointed out to me. Take the role of parents, for example. In most American shows about teenagers, the parents are not really relevant. They might leave a ham sandwich on the table or some milk in the fridge, but basically, their role is to let the kids wallow in their own histrionics. But in *FNL*, the parents drive all the action. When they *are* absent, they are *really* absent, as in gone off to war, or deadbeat, turning their kids into old souls who have to endure alone.

Finally, in Episode 6, we get a break from all that. This one is all about teenagers letting go, which results in some fine *OC*-style interludes. Riggins cruises around town in a *Dazed and Confused* mode, showing J.D. all the hot spots in Dillon where he can get laid. J.D. gets drunk, and Julie and Matt go to the lake—*all the way to the lake*, if you know what I mean. "This is the first Saturday I can wake up not having to think about everything I did wrong," he says. Then, after some splashing and rolling around, Julie gets home after the newspaper boy has already made his rounds and sneaks in the door. We're bracing for Tami to march out of her bedroom screaming and yelling and waving a jilbab in her daughter's face, but nothing like that happens. Tami does not even stir in her bed, for all we know. The tattoo caused an uproar, but the virginity left in peace.

Let's just linger here some more since Emily, you particularly have worried so much about Matt Saracen. Matty shows up at Julie's house in Landry's car. He and Julie share the best awkward TV teenage kiss I've ever seen, followed by a most convincing stretch of post-coital bliss, which carries through to Sunday morning church. And Matt's improbable mother is nowhere to be seen. For one dreamy weekend, being orphaned and benched has its benefits.

The ur-parent of the show, meanwhile, goes off the deep end. First, J.D.'s dad whisks his son out of the locker room after a victory to go celebrate with mom at Applebee's instead of letting him celebrate with the team. Then, after J.D. gets drunk, his dad forces him to apologize to Coach Taylor in church for disappointing the coach and the team. He is proving himself to be the stage parent from hell and making the option of having no dad at all look better and better.

The show has always been thoughtful on the subject of parenting, contrasting the coach's tight family with the lost orphans of Dillon. The addition of the McCoys complicates things, since they make concerned parents look like nightmares. And here, we get the final twist, where the Dillon orphans get to shine.

Actually, the final twist comes with the very sweet scene where Jason Street sings "Hole in My Bucket" over the phone to his son, who is at that very moment driving away from him. This is imperfect, patch-it-together parenting (like the song says). And it's not really working, but it might someday. (Pay attention, Bristol Palin.)

So, speaking of imperfect, is that kid Cash's son or not?

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From: Emily Bazelon
To: Hanna Rosin and Meghan O'Rourke
Subject: Week 6: A Defense of the Most Overbearing Dad Ever
Posted Monday, February 23, 2009, at 7:03 AM ET

Yes, the kids took over the show this week, and what did we get? Sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll.

Sex. I also loved the Julie and Matt kiss and actually the whole thing: the unceremonious, post-hotdogs roll by the campfire and the blissful aftermath. For one thing, Matt deserves a weekend of sweetness. For another, I'm happy to see teenage sex as neither airbrushed and eroticized nor an emotional crack-up. Sometimes, 16- and 17- year-olds just lovingly sleep together. Maybe Tami didn't wake up and freak out because she doesn't have to. Though she did pick up on the shy, pleased Sunday-morning glances that Julie and Matt exchanged in church, which signaled to me what you suggested, too: Dream weekends don't last.

Drugs. Can I stick up for J.D.'s dad for a minute without sending myself to Dillon detention? He is indeed the smarmy, overbearing stage dad, so caricatured I can barely watch him. But if Tim Riggins wanted to take my ninth-grader out to get drunk and who knows what else, I might cart him home, too. It's all well and good for Coach Taylor to encourage Riggins to mentor J.D. To loosen this kid up, Eric is willing to keep quiet about J.D.'s naked mile sprint and whatever hijinks Riggins comes up with, it seems. I'm not sure I can blame Annoying Applebee's McCoy for resisting. If acceptance on the football team means getting shitfaced at age 14, then maybe that's a reason unto itself that a freshman shouldn't be quarterback. Best part of the J.D. party scene, however: Lyla as Tim's long-suffering sidekick, shouldering J.D.'s weight so she can help drag him out of harm's way.

Rock 'n' roll: Landry and his band light up the garage. Or rather, they fail to light it up, in spite of their acned-splendor, until Devin, the cute freshman, comes along. She's got the guitar skills, the green cardigan, the sneakers, and the pink lip gloss. And she's got Landry's number. She tells him all his songs are about the same thing, the same girl. It's time to get over that Tyra, for the sake of the music. Hanna, what do you make of it that in this teen-driven episode, the character keenly passing judgment is the ninth-grade upstart?

You asked, meanwhile, about Cash and his baby mama and their sad toddler. Yep, that's his kid (don't you think?), and Tyra is demonstrating a willful detachment from reality by believing otherwise. I'm sorry Meghan is out this week (don't worry, readers; she'll be back next week), because you are both more interested in Cash than I am. I just can't get past how much he looks like Jon Voigt in *Midnight Cowboy*. And besides, don't we know how this story comes out? Won't Tyra fall out of this relationship bruised, callused, and less likely to make it to college? The only glimmer of brain activity I saw in this plotline was the moment in which Julie made fun of her, and Tyra remembered that was the kind of joke that Landry used to make. Ditch the lying cowboy already.

The contrast to Cash comes when Jason sings to his baby, in that scene you've already mentioned. I loved the cuts to Herc and Billy and Tim while Jason cooed. It reminded me of a point Meghan made a few weeks ago about *FNL*'s distinctive brand of male sentimentality. There's Jason, putting himself on the line for his kid even as that child moves farther from him, mile after mile. Jason is the show's tragedy. Can he also somehow pull off its redemption? Or would that be unworthy of this show?

From: Hanna Rosin
To: Emily Bazelon and Meghan O'Rourke
Subject: Week 6: I Would Rather Raise a Kid Like Riggins Than One Like J.D.
Posted Monday, February 23, 2009, at 1:02 PM ET

This is an argument we have in my household all the time and which will come to full boil when our children are teenagers. I would rather raise a kid like Riggins than one like J.D. In my book, parental oppression is a crime, not quite on order with negligence—but still. (My mother calls me like five times a day, just to give you the source.) As I was relishing the awkward teenage sex scene between Matt and Julie, which we've discussed, David (my husband) was having a very overprotective paternal reaction: His view is that Matt slept with Julie to get back at Coach. Coach took away what mattered most to Matt, so Matt got his revenge by doing the same. I think this is crazy dad talk—teens in love don't need any extra motive to have sex, especially not on a sunny day by the lake—but it gives you a window into our differences.

As for Devin, what an excellent point. I hadn't quite noticed that Devin had become Tami in miniature, dispensing wise looks from behind her hipster glasses. Like any city girl, I have a soft spot for these cute misfit girls with a heart of gold (we just watched *Nick and Norah's Infinite Playlist* last night—Norah is one, too). But I do have one complaint. Every few episodes, the show introduces a character who looks like she strolled straight out of a walk-up in Park Slope, Brooklyn (the Riggins' old neighbor, Landry's last girlfriend). I know, I know, Texas is cooler than I think. But can't we aim for a little authenticity?

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From: Emily Bazelon
To: Hanna Rosin and Meghan O'Rourke
Subject: Week 6: Sad, Lonely Tim Riggins
Posted Monday, February 23, 2009, at 3:12 PM ET

But, Hanna, you're defending Riggins' leading of J.D. down the drinking path by talking about Matt and Julie sleeping together. With the emphasis on *together*, because it all looked completely mutual to me. (If David really thinks otherwise, then I hear you about your upcoming battles; maybe my husband didn't have that crazy dad moment because we don't have girls.) But my main point is that sex and drugs are different. For teenagers as well as for adults. I mean, I love Riggins, and I'd pick him over J.D., too. But then I'd work on his six-pack habit, which looks like a symptom of loneliness and depression most of the time. Whereas Matt and Julie—that looks like a good thing in need only of the intervention of a condom.

One more point: Last week, I wrote about a reader's frustration with the show's lack of Hispanic characters. Reader Sean Mabey points out another lapse: "During the first season, Smash's friends were exclusively black and he was at odds (to put it nicely) with Riggins. Fast forward two years, and you don't see Smash in the company of another black guy for the entire third season and who's in the car with him on the way to A&M? Riggins." Hmm.

From: Hanna Rosin
To: Emily Bazelon and Meghan O'Rourke
Subject: Week 6: All the Boys on This Show Have Gone Soft
Posted Monday, February 23, 2009, at 4:09 PM ET

You're right to distinguish between Julie and Matt's roll in the hay and Riggins' drinking. But let's forget about his bad habit for a moment and concentrate on what he was trying to accomplish that night with J.D. The way J.D. and his dad are operating, J.D. is a menace to the team. His dad is in it only for his son and does not want him to be contaminated by the rest of them. This is ugly, mercenary behavior and the worst of football. It's the opposite of what Coach Taylor wants for the team. So Riggins was subverting Mr. McCoy's influence in the only way he knows how. And there's precedent in Riggins' humanitarian party missions—remember the time he saved Julie from that skeazy guy at a party? Once again, Riggins is sacrificing himself for someone else's sake and getting no credit.

As for Smash and Riggins—you are absolutely right. This is more proof of the point Meghan has made. Riggins used to have a dangerous, almost racist edge. Now he's gone soft, as have all the boys on the show. Matty kicking those boxes is the most male aggression we've gotten this season.

From: David Plotz
To: Emily Bazelon, Meghan O'Rourke, and Hanna Rosin
Subject: Week 6: The "Matt Slept With Julie To Get Back at Coach" Theory—a Rebuttal
Posted Monday, February 23, 2009, at 5:33 PM ET

Allow me a brief rebuttal to my beloved wife's post about Matt and Julie's trip to the lake. Hanna wrote of me: "His view is that Matt slept with Julie to get back at Coach."

Uh, no. A few nights ago when we were discussing the episode, I said, in the spirit of marital helpfulness: "Hey, Hanna, don't you think that one possible interpretation of that scene is that subconsciously, Matt sleeps with Julie in order to take the thing most precious to Coach Taylor, his daughter's virginity, because Coach Taylor has taken a thing precious to him, the job as QB1?"

Note: I did not say that that was what *I* believed, because I don't believe it. I happen to think the lake tryst was lovely. It didn't set any of my paternal protectiveness neurons ablaze. That revenge scenario was merely speculative and playful. I thought Hanna might throw it out there to enliven the dialogue. Instead, she exploited it to slander me, her innocent husband.

And while I'm fixating on that paragraph, Hanna, please tell me you were kidding when you wrote: "I would rather raise a kid like Riggins than one like J.D."

From: Meghan O'Rourke
To: Emily Bazelon and Hanna Rosin
Subject: Week 7: Is Joe McCoy Making His Son Into the Next Todd Marinovich?
Posted Saturday, February 28, 2009, at 7:28 AM ET

I have tons to say about this rich and textured episode—how could you not be moved by Landry baring his soul to Tami after Devin tells him his kiss just proved to her she's a lesbian? ("I seem to have some kind of repellent," he stutters.) Or by the Four Stooges' ongoing adventures—and misadventures—in house flipping?

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But first I want to pose a question one of my friends asked about J.D.: Is *FNL* setting him up to be a future Todd Marinovich? Marinovich, as football fans will remember, was a vaunted quarterback who was micromanaged by his dad from birth. Like Joe McCoy, Marv Marinovich scheduled his son's every minute and meal. "I had a captive audience. … I told him when to eat, what to eat, when to go to bed, when to get up, when to work out, how to work out," Marv told *Sports Illustrated*. Here's a passage from an earlier *SI* piece about Todd:

> He has never eaten a Big Mac or an Oreo or a Ding Dong. When he went to birthday parties as a kid, he would take his own cake and ice cream to avoid sugar and refined white flour. He would eat homemade catsup, prepared with honey. He did consume beef but not the kind injected with hormones. He ate only unprocessed dairy products. He teethed on frozen kidney. When Todd was one month old, Marv was already working on his son's physical conditioning. He stretched his hamstrings. Pushups were next. Marv invented a game in which Todd would try to lift a medicine ball onto a kitchen counter. Marv also put him on a balance beam. Both activities grew easier when Todd learned to walk. There was a football in Todd's crib from day one. "Not a real NFL ball," says Marv. "That would be sick; it was a stuffed ball."

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Marinovich started to fall apart when he got to college—and out of reach of his father. His performance was inconsistent. Eventually he was arrested for cocaine possession. He left USC for the NFL but didn't make good there, either. He ended up in all sorts of legal trouble. In one detail that strikes me as particularly sad, he was arrested for suspected possession of drug paraphernalia, after trying to make his escape on a kid's bike, and told the police that his occupation was "anarchist."

And who wouldn't be one, if your dad had been flexing your hamstrings in the cradle? (Being called five times a day suddenly may not look so bad, Hanna.) Is this where we're supposed to think J.D. is headed?

Because, certainly, he's being squashed under his father's thumb—or fist. If Joe began to lose it in the last episode—and I can't agree, Emily, that hauling his son out the way he did is good parenting; kids fuck up, especially kids under as much pressure as J.D.—then he *really* lost it in this episode. Early on, Joe pulls J.D. off the practice field to yell at him, causing Coach Taylor to intercede and ask him to leave J.D. alone. And then during that week's game, Joe gets worked up as J.D. throws some incompletes and at halftime flips out at his son. Taylor intercedes again, telling Joe, "You yelling at him is not going to help. … Give him some breathing room." Then Taylor tries to perk J.D. up with some well-meaning exposition about how his own dad used to expect a lot from him on the field. It doesn't work. J.D. has Stockholm syndrome. He looks blankly at Taylor and says: "My dad—he just wants me to do my best. He just wants me to succeed is all."

This is another way football can hurt—not through concussions but through repercussions: the repercussions that come when a parent can't see how his ambitions are warping his child's own sense of adventure and risk. I feel for J.D. And I feel for Taylor, who hasn't figured how to handle this situation—and whose professional life may be threatened if he speaks honestly. Joe has the power of money and influence behind him.

Meanwhile, I wanted to talk about Buddy and his brood; their aborted road trip was perfectly pitched. Buddy is annoying in all the recognizable ways an affectionate but clueless dad can be ("You look like a hippie!" he says to Tabitha in the airport), and the kids are annoying in all the ways that clueless kids can be, whining and kvetching at all moments. And: Street is heading to New York; Riggins is applying to college—what do you make of all this change in Dillon?

(P.S.: I totally cried when Riggins was watching Coach Taylor and Billy describe his toughness and fortitude. Talk about male sentimentality.)

From: Hanna Rosin
To: Emily Bazelon and Meghan O'Rourke
Subject: Week 7: "She Uses V-a-a-a-a-seline …"
Posted Monday, March 2, 2009, at 6:43 AM ET

Teethed on frozen kidney? Wow, that is stunning, and it makes my hair stand on end. In my friend Margaret Talbot's great story about prodigy athletes, she concludes it's mostly cold corporate sponsors piling on the pressure. And one imagines the old Soviet Olympic mill (and now the Chinese one) would eat kids alive. But there's a particular pathos when it's the parents doing the pushing. The stories about those young Chinese gymnasts who didn't make the cut were heartbreaking. But at least they had parents to go home to. In J.D.'s case, the parental love is entirely contingent on his performance, or at least he perceives it that way. "He's not mad at me?" J.D. anxiously asks his mother, because her smiling face is no comfort if he can't answer that question.

One reader suggested that Riggins may be jealous of J.D.'s relationship with his dad. And there may be a hint of that in his disdain. But it's hard for me to imagine. In answer to my

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husband's question of last week: Yes, I would absolutely rather raise a son like Riggins than one like J.D. It's just too painful to watch that empty performance machine of a boy, one who's afraid of his own shadow. And as Meghan points out, those boys with no center spin out of control eventually. David, remember who else in our life used to endlessly ask a version of that question: "Are you mad at me?" (Answer: Stephen Glass.)

So, yes, football can destroy men. But this episode also ran in the opposite direction, reminding us of the many ways in which football can make heroes of losers. Fullback Jamarcus never told his parents he plays football, because he knows they won't let him. Then he gets into trouble at school and, in speaking to his parents, Tami lets it slip. Until this point Tami has been telling Coach to butt out, this is the principal's prerogative. But finally she realizes how her husband can impose the discipline better in this case. She explains to Jamarcus' parents how she's seen her husband "empower" and "inspire" boys through football. And also how her husband will make Jamarcus "regret the day" he ever set another kid's hair on fire or misbehaved in school. The parents had been thinking of football as a frivolous distraction, and Tami successfully reframes it as Jamarcus' salvation.

Then there's the moving scene with Riggins that you mentioned, Meghan. Riggins' life, which always seems so chaotic, turns into one of those Olympic athlete fables on screen. Billy is so articulate in praising his brother, and Coach uses that word I love hearing him say—"fortitude." We are reminded that football can make these boys into their best selves. In Riggins' case, it's his ticket out, but not in a crass way. He's using it reluctantly, so he won't get burned the way Smash did. Football even works magic on those bratty Garrity kids, who finally get into the game and stop torturing Buddy.

As for everyone leaving Dillon: They make it seem so far away and impossible. Street is going to New York? Why not stop in Austin first, just to acclimate? And then Landry, who's going to that mythical college where all the hottest co-eds fall for nerds. It's so dreamy, it just perpetuates the sense that life after the Dillon Panthers is a fantasy.

Except for Devin. Boy, do I love that girl. "She uses V-a-a-a-a-seline." That's a great song she steals, and it's nice to hear a girl sing it. And I love the way she delivers those platitudes—"Tomorrow's a brand new day"— in that flat nasal voice of hers. I'd follow her out of Dillon.

From: Emily Bazelon
To: Meghan O'Rourke and Hanna Rosin
Subject: Week 7: Why Is Lyla All Blush and No Bite This Season?
Posted Monday, March 2, 2009, at 12:57 PM ET

Well, you have together so thoroughly thumped J.D.'s dad that there's not much left for me to lay into. He is written to be indefensible, and you're right that there are real sports dads who spin completely out of control and damage their kids. (They don't restrict themselves to sons who play football, either: In women's tennis, there's the unforgettable father of Jennifer Capriati.) Nobody sympathizes with these people because they are parental wrecking balls.

I will say, though, that I think child prodigies pose a real dilemma for families, one that I'm glad to be spared. When kids have outsize, amazing talent, parents can nurture it and deprive them of being normal, or they can shrug it off and leave their children's potential untapped. Mr. McCoy is clearly mixing up nurture with self-deluded suffocation. Still, I read J.D.'s line about how his dad just wants him to do his best a little differently than you did, Meghan. On some level, J.D. is right—his father does want him to succeed. It's just that he wants it in a way that's utterly self-serving. I wish the character had some hint of subtlety so we could do more than just whack him. And J.D. still just seems like a blank.

Meghan, I'm glad you brought up Buddy and that sad little divorced-dad road trip. Here's a dad who over three seasons has gone from buffoon to repentant loser to make-amends struggler. The moment in which he lashes out at his kids and then flees weeping down the road should melt the heart of even a bitterly divorced mom, I would think.

But I had mixed feelings about the scene between Buddy and Lyla that follows. It was written to be touching. She says, "Dad, you've still got me," and he tells her that means a lot. But what's up with how Lyla is all blush and no bite this season? She patiently helps Riggins with the once-and-nevermore drunken J.D. She nobly stands by her father while her siblings refuse to forgive his previous sins. And then at the end of this episode, there's that close-up, wide-eyed scene between her and Jason, in which she selflessly tells him how great he'll do as a sports agent in New York as their knees touch and they sway together in the night.

I was taken with that shot for what it says about the capacity of post-breakup friendship. In fact, one by one, I went for each of these scenes of stalwart, good-girl Lyla. But rolled together, they made me miss her sharp, smart, and smug side. I wonder, too, about turning this strong and flawed female character into the beloved helpmate of every man in her life. When was the last time we heard about Lyla's college plans? Is the turn her role has taken part of the rose-colored softening Meghan has legitimately complained of—*FNL* maybe anticipating its own sunset by rubbing out its mean streak? I dunno. But I sure am grateful for Devin and her not-melodic Vaseline lyrics. (Though I have a reality-check quibble like the one you raised, Hanna: Would a 14-year-old in small-town Texas really come out as a lesbian without missing a garage-band beat?)

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From: Meghan O'Rourke
To: Emily Bazelon and Hanna Rosin
Subject: Week 7: Was That Scene Between Lyla and Street Maudlin or Touching?
Updated Monday, March 2, 2009, at 2:55 PM ET

Emily, you're totally right that Joe McCoy wants "the best" for his boy in a ham-fisted way. Check. The problem is that he is convinced he knows best—and we all know what happens when father knows best: Children rebel.

Meanwhile, Lyla. I haven't until now minded Lyla's good-girl shtick—in part because she and Tim have had their flare-ups. She seems to be in one of those calm phases teenagers do sometimes go through. She's got a boyfriend. She's waiting to find out about college. (Or is she in? I can't remember. I guess that's a bad sign.) She does seem to have no real female friends—which reminds me of the apt point you made about the relative friendlessness of her adult counterpart, Tami. And it reminds me, too, of how much sharper the bite of this show was early on: Remember when all the girls in school were mean to Lyla because she was sleeping with Riggins after Street's injury? But when you think about it, back then, Lyla was striving even harder to be a helpmeet. She was saccharine in her desire for things to be "all right" after Street's injury; I think back to all those heartbreaking scenes in the hospital where she was coaxing him to be chipper about the future, and his surly face showed us that he knew the future she imagined would never come.

But that's exactly why the scene between her and Street, sitting together in the twilight, touched me. It did have that post-breakup sense of loss—the loss that accompanies getting used to things, accommodation, and plain old growing up. Just a few short years ago, they couldn't even look at each other: Street was so mad at her, and Lyla was so disappointed that her fantasy of their life together had fallen apart.

It would be kind of funny if now she ditched Riggins to sleep with J.D. Somehow, I doubt that's going to happen.

And, yes, Emily, I did wonder if Devin would feel comfortable coming out to Landry. Then again, she referred to it as her "secret." So I assume it was Landry's goofy, sincere openness that made her feel safe.

From: Emily Bazelon

To: Meghan O'Rourke and Hanna Rosin
Subject: Week 8: Jason Street Makes a Brand-New Start of It—in Old New York!
Posted Saturday, March 7, 2009, at 6:30 AM ET

The can't-miss theme this week is the journey. Jason and Tim hit Manhattan. Tyra takes off for the rodeo circuit with Cash. Tami journeys to a new house, at least in her imagination. The bundling works, I think. The contrast between Tim as loving sidekick and Cash as casual no-goodnik points up the worth of each relationship. The line that captures the bond between Jason and Tim: "Texas forever." I knew it was coming, and I wanted to hear it, anyway. Less welcome is "He's a cowboy," which Tyra's mom says to send her off with Cash, when really it's the reason she shouldn't leave her college interviews behind. What kind of boyfriend talks you into going away with him by saying he'll *try* to be faithful?

A second, underlying theme this week is about making the big pitch. Tami (egged on, of course, by Katie McCoy) tries to sell a new, grand house to Eric. Matt tries to convince Coach to let him play wide receiver, with Julie's help making the case. These bids build to Jason, who pulls off the sale of his young lifetime. Actually, it's Tim's idea to persuade Jason's former teammate to sign with the sports agent Jason hopes to work for. Since the guy has just summarily dismissed the boys from his office, Tim's plan is a display of the fortitude Eric praised on the football field, translated to the world of business. Maybe this kid *will* make it in college.

When Jason wins the job and then shows up at Erin's door and asks, before anything else, to hold his baby—well, it sounds soapy as I write it out, but in the moment, it felt to me wholly earned. We've seen Jason as savvy salesman before, on Buddy's car lot and in the house-flipping deal. Now he's performing in a bigger venue with the same blend of naivete and determination. I appreciated the acting—the set of Jason's chin, the veins in his forehead and neck. I also liked the way the script deals with his paralysis. We've grown accustomed to the shots of Jason sitting when everyone around him is standing. In this episode, we see a shot of Tim helping Jason out of the car into his wheelchair, and the camera lingers on his dangling legs, just long enough. It drives home Jason's own analysis, in a bad moment on the New York sidewalk, of the pity his wheelchair evokes. What did you guys make of the New York visit? Is it one of the more ingenious moves of the season, or am I falling for melodrama?

I was also taken with Tami and Eric and their house-buying tempest. It seemed prescient, even, as recession fear deepens around us. Tami wants a nicer, bigger house for all the natural reasons. She keeps pointing to the backyard that Gracie Bell would have to play in. Since yards have factored heavily into every home-buying or rental decision my husband and I have made since our kids were toddlers, I sympathized.

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But I sympathized more with Eric when he told his wife that much as he would love to give her and their kids and himself this house, they can't have it. Maybe the mortgage is straight-up too high—it's not entirely clear. Instead, what's unmistakable is the anxiety Eric knows he would feel by making a purchase that would give his family no financial wiggle room. We see his internal conflict, and it's laced with gender politics. Eric frames the decision in terms of what he can and can't give Tami, even though she's working now, too. He clearly wants to be a husband who can fulfill his wife's material desires. At the same time, he calls her back to what really matters to their family. They are together, whether they live in a three-bedroom split-level or have a kitchen with granite countertops and a stone fireplace. "I don't need this house," Tami tells him, like a woman sprung from a trance. They take each other's hands and dance away from the real estate agents, like escapees. I see the father-knows-best aspect of their marriage. But as ever, I care so much more about the spark (after all those years!) and their evanescent, playful spirit. They're a walking rejoinder to the excesses of feminist dogma.

Cash and Tyra, on the other hand, are a reminder of the continuing relevance of that old story: the girl who is reaching higher, only to be yanked back to earth by her cowboy man.

From: Hanna Rosin
To: Emily Bazelon and Meghan O'Rourke
Subject: Week 8: The Mother of All Crying Scenes
Posted Monday, March 9, 2009, at 6:52 AM ET

Emily, the current I saw running though all the plot twists you describe is the different ways men and women make decisions. In this episode, the two key women—Tami and Tyra—are focused on relationships, pursuing conversation and connection above all else. Meanwhile, the men—Jason, Matt, Eric—go for hard results. In the end, the women don't exactly get what they want, while the men do.

Tami keeps pestering Eric to have a "conversation" with her about the house. "We are having a conversation!" Eric answers. By which he means she asked and he told her "No!" But she keeps it up, waking him in the middle of the night. "OK, can I turn the light off?" My favorite moment is when they are all sitting around the dinner table with Matt. Julie is haranguing Eric about making Matt wide receiver. Tami is haranguing him about the house. Finally, he gets sick of it. "All right, let's go," he says to Matt, who has just proposed they run 10 plays outside to test him. If he gets them all, Eric has to think about making him wide receiver. The boys skip out of all the talk and solve their problems with cold, hard stats and football.

Now, you can reasonably argue that Eric was right about that house. Maybe they couldn't afford it. But the point is how quickly Tami caved during the second visit. She blinked once then said, "I don't need this house" and declared her life full enough with Jules and Gracie Bell and her husband. It's as if all along, all she wanted was for Eric to hear her out and walk through the process with her, and that was all.

Meghan, you've outlined this dynamic before: A man is having a hard time, and then one of the show's tough women describes how much it means that he is taking care of her. The result is that she creates a safe space for his emotions—the "show's distinctive brand of male sentimentality," you called it. A version of that happens here. Tami is suddenly called back to her responsibility as wife and mother, and that soothes her, and him. In Tami's case, she doesn't sacrifice much. She still does have a great family and a pretty decent house. But Tyra is doing the same thing, no? She, too, is opting to take care of Cash, who has convinced her what a tough time he has alone on the road. But in her case it's fatal. Maybe Tami was telling Tyra one lesson but showing her another. This is why the validating of the wifely duties on *FNL* always grates on me.

Now as for male sentimentality, this episode wins the prize.

Here we have the mother of all crying scenes. Tim Riggins' lovable mug, usually adored by the camera, is in this episode contorted into a blotchy mess as he watches his friend finally get his lady. He is sad and happy all at once, but mostly he is mush. Yet his male sentimentality is acceptable because he has, throughout the episode, acted in a manly, honorable way. Tim is what you want in a wife. He doesn't wake up Jason in the middle of the night. He doesn't want conversation; in fact, he mostly speaks in three-word sentences. But what he does do is deliver concrete solutions: Go to Paul Stuart. Leave Paul Stuart. Buy two suits, two shirts, two ties. Get Wendell to sign with the agent. Now go get your girl. And, unlike Tyra, Jason doesn't have to choose between the girl and his future; he gets them both.

As for whether I liked the New York diversion: It's always good when characters get pushed into a new location. The famous *Sopranos* Pine Barren episode, when Christopher and Paulie go to the woods to kill the Russian, set the bar really high on this kind of plot twist. The New York diversion wasn't that good, but it did take on the question of Life after Dillon. And at least they didn't just drop Street.

From: Meghan O'Rourke
To: Emily Bazelon and Hanna Rosin
Subject: Week 8: Will Tyra End Up Dancing at the Landing Strip?

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Posted Monday, March 9, 2009, at 2:48 PM ET

It's funny, I'm less bothered by the "father knows best" (as Emily aptly put it) aspect of Eric and Tami's marriage than either of you. Hanna, you say that the quickness with which Tami caved to Eric grated on you. You connected it to Tyra's wishy-washiness. And I take the point, but I read this scene differently: The episode, I thought, was trying to draw a distinction between Tami's compromise and Tyra's. After all, a feminist marriage/partnership isn't one in which the woman gets her own way all the time or even digs in her heels to make a point. It's one where you learn to hear when your partner is giving you good advice—acting as a counterweight. And Tami was getting overexcited about something impractical. This is what's so hard about relationships: learning when a "we" is more important than an "I."

In this case, there was no way Eric could feel like part of the "we" if they bought the house, because, as he sees it, he has almost no job security. At the same time, though, he doesn't handle it well at first, going rigid instead of just trying to talk to Tami. I actually like this scene, because Tami got what she really wanted: Eric's attention, his willingness to enter the fantasy with her for a second, his ability to make her feel it is a partnership even when he can't give her what she really wants. If she says she doesn't "need" the house to make him feel better—well, that's part of what keeps their spark alive, isn't it? And he does it too, at least a bit.

Meanwhile, on the N.Y.-Texas front—the Riggins/Street trip to the Big Apple has a gimmicky feel, but the show pulls it off. The sequence about trying to buy a suit at Paul Stuart illustrates so much about how easy it is to feel like a pie-eyed outsider in moneyed New York. I remember feeling similarly as a teenager sometimes, even though I grew up in Brooklyn. My parents were teachers, and I went to few fancy stores until I was an adult; sometimes I still get nervous in them, and I love how the show brought that feeling to the fore.

"Why would you want to leave Texas?" Riggins asks Street in disbelief after Jason reveals his grand plan to head to the Big Apple. It's a measure of the show's success that the statement can be taken at face value (who would want to leave this place with its deep comradeship and warm football-filled nights?) and heard from an ironic distance (who wouldn't want to leave this place, with its flat landscape and its sense of being isolated from larger opportunities?).

Tyra is in danger of falling subject to that isolation. I think the writers are going to save her in the end, but it would be *Wire*-like of them to sacrifice her to apathy and lassitude; if this were *The Wire*, we'd see her three seasons from now dancing at the Landing Strip, unable to excavate herself from the world where she grew up, despite her smarts and her desires.

Ugh, how annoying Joe McCoy is! He defines smarmy and pushy. Most Joes come in a less obvious form, but from now on I'm going to be playing a parlor game with my acquaintances and colleagues. Which ones are Erics, and which ones are Joes? Eric, after all, is the model of cooperation underneath all that brusqueness. Joe, by contrast, epitomizes self-serving deafness to the needs of others.

Meanwhile, anyone notice how tall all the women on this show are?

From: Emily Bazelon
To: Meghan O'Rourke and Hanna Rosin
Subject: Week 8: Tim Riggins Would Make a Great Wife
Posted Monday, March 9, 2009, at 4:06 PM ET

Hanna, yes, Tim is like a wife, but of the rare sort who knows when it's time to be an ex-wife. Like Lyla in the previous episode, he is helping Jason by letting him go. His mush face is what it feels like to watch an old, irreplaceable friend walk away from you. For the first time, the show is recognizing that these teenagers have to grow up. Meghan, I can totally see Tyra gone bad at 20, swinging around a Landing Strip pole. When I was ruing her decision to ditch school, my husband pointed out that what the show got right was why. In her *FNL* world, it's a choice that makes sense. Tyra's mom is the ultimate underminer: She is constantly upping the man-pressure and tearing down college. Tami is there for Tyra, but in this episode, she was a realist about the results of that college interview at a moment when Tyra needed a cheerleader. Then there was the interview itself. Am I being an adult scold here, or did Tyra blow it the minute she kept the college counselor waiting by saying she had to take a call on her cell phone (from Cash, natch)? Big forces, little choices—they add up to more than Tyra can push up the hill.

Meanwhile, Julie. A friend of mine has been ranting that she's a "whiny self-indulgent twit." Hanna, you make her part of your girl-talky-talk trope for telling Eric to let Matt try wide receiver. But I like Julie this season. In that dinner-table scene, I thought she pulled off assertive rather than whiny or petulant. Plus, she's right. Eric's brusqueness was too brusque. He needed his women to reel him back from the brink of unreasonable. OK, maybe the male-female power dynamic wasn't quite even-steven this episode. But if you take Tyra out of the picture for a sec, it's close.

From: Hanna Rosin

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To: Emily Bazelon and Meghan O'Rourke
Subject: Week 9: Is Matt Saracen's Grandma Like Tony Soprano's Mom?
Posted Saturday, March 14, 2009, at 7:18 AM ET

There is rock bottom, and then there is drunk and half-naked on the couch with only the cardboard beer fraulein as his companion. Yes, Mindy dumped him, so Billy was forced to fold beer lady in half and seat her at the coffee table, no doubt having poured out his heart to her before he fell asleep. This episode features a few such postcards from the underside. The saddest is Tyra as Lolita, trapped in the Tropicana Motel in Dallas, sitting poolside in the rain, trying not to cry on the phone with Landry.

Back at Dillon High, Buddy has announced some good news: a national TV network (NBC—ha!) has chosen to broadcast the game on Friday night. The development allows for some nice comparisons between life on TV and life lived in Dillon. The TV type who shows up at Dillon High has slicked-back hair and speaks in a sportscaster patter, even when the cameras are turned off. Meanwhile, Lorraine Saracen's house is looking especially like the set of a Horton Foote play. Matt falls asleep on the couch watching a cooking show that could not possibly be aired in the year 2009. The screen shot shows some flat dull brownies baked in the kind of dented pan I sometimes borrow from my mother-in-law. The camera lingers on the tinfoil holding together the antennae on Lorraine's wood-paneled TV.

We've discussed before how the show intentionally locks Dillon out of pop culture or any TV references. This episode plays that up. Coach is annoyed the network is showing up, because he knows it will make the fans act like baboons and his players lose focus. Of course, they pull through in the end, only because of the commitment and fortitude of the honorable Matt Saracen.

The life in Dillon/life on TV contrast reminded me of a point Susan Faludi makes in *Stiffed*, her 1999 book about American manhood. The men of the World War II generation were raised in what she calls the "Ernie Pyle ideal of heroically selfless manhood." They were taught to be brave and heroic and take one for the team. But for various reasons, they failed to pass these lessons on to their baby boomer sons. Instead they got their models from "ornamental culture"—TV, movies, and celebrity culture, which peddle a primping cartoon of manhood, unmoored from the old patriarchy.

In this episode, the Dillon Panthers and especially Matt represent the prelapsarian age, when men knew how to be men. Matt, who knows how to sacrifice, takes hit after hit, and it pays off. Those TV trucks parked outside the school and the slick newscaster represent the world outside, where everyone just wants to be famous. Eric sees them, and he rolls his eyes.

Overall, this episode was a little soap operatic and heavy on relationship drama (Tyra and Cash, Billy and Mindy, Lyla and Tim). But what saves it, as always, are the small moments—Tyra walking out the back door of that saloon, Mindy teaching Lyla how to dance. In an interview with the AV Club, Taylor Kitsch, who plays Riggins, talks about how much the actors improvise. This gives a certain spontaneity to the show, so that even when the soap plot veers into its happy ending, the show can breathe.

Buddy hears the knock at the door: "Let's see. It's not your mother, and I don't have any friends," he says to a hidden Lyla. "I bet I know." Then Riggins apologizes to Lyla, sweetly, wholeheartedly, four times (most women would have buckled after three). Whether or not these particular lines were improvised I have no idea. But they pass in such a funny, lighthearted way that we let Tim's dubious redemption slide.

The one character I'm having increasing trouble with is Lorraine. What are we supposed to make of her? Is she selfish? Manipulative like Tony Soprano's mom? Really losing it?

From: Emily Bazelon
To: Meghan O'Rourke and Hanna Rosin
Subject: Week 9: Loser Boyfriends, Now in Three Convenient Sizes: Small, Medium, and Large
Posted Monday, March 16, 2009, at 6:48 AM ET

Hanna and Meghan,

The problem with Lorraine Saracen is that she moves in and out of her dementia expertly. Alzheimer's does cloud the brain at some times and not others, but not on a schedule that dovetails with a TV show plot. I believe Lorraine's anger and discomfort with Shelby. Paranoia and fear of a particular person—in my experience, especially an unfamiliar caregiver—often accompany the disease.

But I didn't believe in Grandma's utter lack of sympathy this week with Matt's bid to go to college. That's a trump card when played against any grandparent who is in her right mind and most who are not. A grandmother might manipulate her way into persuading her grandchild to stick around, but Lorraine goes right at him. I guess the show gets points, in an after-school-special sort of way, for dramatizing the plight of a teenager whose future is constrained by his family responsibilities. But Lorraine is being written too as selfish and Shelby too virtuous. I had the same thought about Mickey Rourke's character when I saw *The Wrestler*. When deadbeat parents are portrayed as only kind and decent, if bumbling, one wonders about how they

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managed to walk away from their kids in the past. I know, I know, people change. But do they really go from abandonment to being entirely upstanding and reliable? Rourke, at least, fails his daughter once in the movie; Shelby, so far, is all saccharine concern for Matt.

Meanwhile, this episode is a meditation on the loser boyfriend, in sizes small, medium, and large. Riggins, of course, is the minor, forgivable version. His transgressions are really only against himself, and then he still offers Lyla his Apology in Four Movements. Riggins' trajectory on this show can be measured in the distance he has traveled since the last time Lyla kicked him out of her car. (Remember, first-season loyalists? Hint: His devotion to Jason wasn't foremost in his mind.)

The midsize loser boyfriend is Billy. He peels himself off the couch, blotchy and blurry-eyed, and raps on Mindy's window to tell her that she can go back to work at the Landing Strip, no questions asked. Is her fight for the right to pole dance a victory for womanhood? Well, yes, maybe it is. Mindy won't be one of those wives who takes the off-ramp out of her career and into dependency on a man who can't stay employed. She'll get to dance into her dotage. Hmm, now I am back to *The Wrestler*, and Marisa Tomei trying to sell a lap dance to a bunch of barely of-age boys. Clearly, I need to see more movies.

Cash, of course, is the rotten louse of the episode. This all felt a little staged to me, and, Meghan, you were right that *FNL* is too soft-hearted to rub Tyra out like *The Wire* would have. A couple of moments mollified me, though. The first was Landry's face when he hears that Tyra's excuse for skipping school is that her aunt is sick: He's heard that one before—the night he got his wisdom teeth out and Tyra was a no-show—and it underscores the degree to which he is her forever crushed-out keeper. Also satisfying: Eric's deft handling of Cash at the crucial moment, standing between him and Tami as she helped Tyra into the car. My husband thought Cash would have taken a swing, but I disagreed, because of the way Eric fills the screen. He's one bull that Cash won't ride.

Hanna, your analogy between Tyra and Lolita threw me at first, because our Tropicana Motel girl is 17 and looks 20. Pre-rescue, as she sat alone in the bar where Cash left her surrounded by skanky men, I flashed unwillingly to Jodie Foster in *The Accused*. But Tyra does shrink into a younger girl in the back of the Taylors' car, with her teary "yes, ma'am" in response to Tami's questions. It's all very sobering, I know, but I couldn't let go of Tami and Eric's lost night away together. Those fluffy white hotel robes! No wonder good principals are hard to find.

From: Meghan O'Rourke

To: Hanna Rosin and Emily Bazelon
Subject: Week 9: Don't You Miss Smash?
Posted Monday, March 16, 2009, at 12:33 PM ET

Yes, Dillon, Texas, has succumbed to the spell of a bad moon. Things get screwy and sad in this episode for pretty much everyone, from Eric and Tami to the kids—Tyra and Lyla and Mindy and the hapless "men" in their lives. In this episode, men fail and women turn their backs, one way or another. Even Matt is "failing" his grandmother, who suddenly wants assurances he'll be around to take care of her. (Emily, I agree: This new selfishness seemed a stretch; though I don't know much about dementia, and perhaps it could take this form.)

From a certain perspective, you could read this as an inverted object lesson in the danger of attachment. The object of your affection will never conform to the mood lighting of your inner fantasies. Of course, then there's "Sunny," as I now call Matt's earnest mom. Blond, elfin, soft-spoken, she's like the dream-mom lonely kids conjure up before they go to sleep, hoping she'll come rescue them from the dreariness that is life.

Which makes me wish we could see or hear from Matt's dad again. The show was brave to introduce Iraq as a topic in an earlier season (when we met Matt's dad in between tours overseas). And it's too bad the show won't make good on that introduction by letting us really get to know Matt's enlisted father. According to Faludi's theories of masculinity, he's the real deal, not an example of "ornamental bravery." Someone who looked male but turned out to be ornamental is Cash, that pill-popping, smile-flashing fraud. There's a lot of latent old-fashioned chivalry in the writing of this episode: Cash's big crime is letting other guys leer at his gal while he goes after money. (I wonder if this, too, is not an object lesson—a subliminal message to all the male breadwinners who privilege work and forget to spend any time taking care of the little lady. OK, probably not, but we could read it that way.)

This episode is certainly soap operatic—it's positively sudsy, in fact. But I did like the depiction of that awkward car ride home with Tyra, silence settling over everyone like a toxic cloud, all the shifting and twitching of being in a speeding vehicle eager to get home. You can see Tyra is shaken and will still grimace years later when, crossing a street, she happens to think back to this moment.

It's this moment, though, that also led me to suspect teenagers may hate this show. I have an enduring belief that I would have loved it back when I was 14. But I'm beginning to suspect I would've just thought it was "dumb." Not that I actually would have had any opinions, because my parents were busy making sure I was a permanent nerd: We had no TV at home. And *this*, it occurs to me some nights, must really be why I love *Friday*

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Night Lights. The show puts me in touch with an imagined teenage self I can relate to better than I now can to my real teenage self. In other words: Does this show capture something about being a teenager that a real live teenage girl can relate to? (*Yes, and its name is Tim Riggins*, says a little voice in my head.) Or does it cater to nostalgic adults like me, who want, for a moment, to feel that old sense of yearning entwined with the promise of old ideas like honor and grace?

Hanna, Emily, what do you think?

I confess: For me, the show lost something—a levity, a playfulness, a social depth—when it lost Smash.

From: Hanna Rosin
To: Emily Bazelon and Meghan O'Rourke
Subject: Week 9: Pole Dancing as Feminist Liberation
Posted Monday, March 16, 2009, at 6:17 PM ET

Definitely nostalgic adults, I would say. With its teenagers burdened by heavy responsibilities, the show conforms to a line ***Slate***'s founding editor, Michael Kinsley, once used to describe Al Gore: "an old person's idea of a young person." One fan, Ruth Samuelson, wrote to say she interviewed football players from the school where the show was originally shot. They were all pretty lukewarm about the show and preferred MTV's *Two-A-Days*. Also, *FNL* is apparently one of the most popular among "affluent viewers," which can't be teenagers.

That said, I love your point, Meghan, about Shelby/Sunny—that she is an orphan's fantasy of a mother. This would explain her flatness, her angelic nature, and Matt's near-muteness. It would also attribute to the show a genuine child's-eye view.

One thought I had reading your descriptions of Mindy and Tyra: For the first time, Tyra fails where Mindy succeeds. Tyra is a victim in that skeevy dive of a bar, the terrified object of threatening male attention. Mindy, meanwhile, is using the skeevy bar as the source of her feminist liberation.

Now, all you die-hard fans, check out these rumors of two more seasons, and begin to ask yourselves the relevant questions: Can Tyra, Riggins, and Lyla all flunk senior year? Can they really shoot half of the next season in San Antonio, where Riggins apparently will be? Is J.D. man enough to inherit the drama?

From: Meghan O'Rourke
To: Emily Bazelon and Hanna Rosin
Subject: Week 10: The Best Conversation About Teen Sex I've Ever Seen on TV
Posted Saturday, March 21, 2009, at 9:26 AM ET

This episode is all about daddy's little girls: Julie, Lyla, and J.D. "I just feel like it's different now … like I'm not daddy's little girl anymore," Julie says to Lyla after she's had sex with Matt. And, worse, been caught lying in bed afterward by her own father, complete with telltale crooning singer-songwriter on in the background. "Yeah," Lyla says, knowingly, though she doesn't spell out just what she knows. She's further down the path than her younger schoolmate. Unlike Julie, she's a daddy's little girl who really no longer has her daddy; she had to pick Buddy up from jail after he beat an associate to a pulp at the Landing Strip and caused an alleged $30,000 worth of damage. ("It's not even worth that much," Buddy complains.) Now Lyla's not just having sex with Riggins. She's shacked up with him, playing house in a home that has a poster of a bikini-clad girl bearing beer tacked to the wall. (By the way, I love that the scene between Lyla and Julie takes place as the two girls brush their teeth together in the Taylors' bathroom: soulful confession, *scrunch-scrunch-scrunch*. That brought me back.)

Then, of course, there's J.D., a girl in boy's clothing. (According to the show's gender lexicon, at least.) He goes to a party, where a perfectly coiffed redhead—more Gossip Girl than rally girl, I thought—asks him whether he wants an "appletini." "I don't drink," he stutters in response; she flirtatiously responds, "Well how about some milk? That could be your thing. A young … wholesome … milk-drinking … quarterback." Never has milk sounded so dirty. Madison (that's her name) is a sure thing, or so we're meant to think. All too soon, though, J.D. is breaking things off with her because—surprise, surprise—his father told him to. But he makes the crucial mistake of breaking up with her outside the team bus with the whole team watching. Riggins collars him. And, finally, the show explicitly deals with something I mentioned a while back, something that Joe McCoy just doesn't seem to get: As quarterback, J.D. is supposed to inspire and motivate his teammates. And there's no way he's going to seem like a leader to them when he's being dad-whipped. As Riggins puts it, "You know what's good before a game? Gettin' laid. A lot." J.D. says that's not going to be happening. And Riggins goes for the jugular: "How do you expect any of these guys to man up for you if you can't do that on your own? … You know you're a leader right? Start acting like one."

The sexual politics aren't very progressive, I guess, but on the other hand you could say that the idea of finding your own path, away from your parents and into *your* life, is the leitmotif of the episode and the girls actually do a better job of it. Both Lyla and Julie face a similar dilemma to J.D.'s: They have to choose

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whether to bow to their parents' wishes or be themselves. And they "man up" more than J.D. does: Lyla gets in Buddy's face when he calls her a "spoiled little brat" for running away from him to Riggins. Julie prickles when her mom says, "Your dad told me what happened at Matt's," but then she figures out how to get what she really needs. The truth is, she *wants* to talk to her mom about sex; she just doesn't want to be talked to like a child while the conversation takes place.

I thought this episode really captured that treacherous ground where parents and adolescents get stuck in a quagmire neither really wants to be in. Tami's face when she's asking Julie about birth control is a mess of supportive sympathy and heartbreak. She finally tells Julie what she really feels, not judgmentally, but humanly: "I wanted you to wait … because I wanted to protect you." And Julie says, "I didn't want to disappoint you." This was the best conversation about teen sex I've ever seen on TV, for sure. (And I think we wouldn't have seen one like this on the first season of the show, which was more male-oriented.) Do you two agree? Or did you have different feelings about this episode?

There's so much more to touch on—Matt and Coach Taylor, Landry and Tyra (and the wonderful Giving Tree sermon). But let me end with a question. Don't the writers kinda lay it on thick when Eric gets ejected from the game and Wade has to take over? Within about 30 seconds, the announcer is praising Wade's "inspired play calling" and then, after one touchdown, lauding him as "a bright and shining star on the Dylan football horizon." Tension between Wade and Eric (and, more to the point, Joe McCoy and Eric) has only been rising. Is this thick impasto of writerly praise foreshadowing of things to come? We're almost at the season's close, after all.

From: Hanna Rosin
To: Emily Bazelon and Meghan O'Rourke
Subject: Week 10: Tyra Is Totally the Kid From *The Giving Tree*
Posted Monday, March 23, 2009, at 6:56 AM ET

I agree, this episode is really interesting on the subject of female sexuality. The show bravely pairs two variations on the theme: daughters having sex and strippers. Julie has sex; Lyla shacks up with Riggins and is horrified by her dad's behavior at the Landing Strip, although just last episode, she was drinking and dancing with one of its performers. It's not all that progressive to group drifting daughters and pole dancers, as you say, Meghan, but mostly it's sex as seen from a father's point of view. That scene where Eric walks in on Julie and Matt in bed was so perfectly played and shot. "Ahh! Dad! Get out!" we hear as he's walking out the door. Also the later scene at the Taylor house where Eric wants to kill Matt but instead takes out all of his aggression on his grill.

The scene between Buddy and Lyla, meanwhile, unfolds almost like a lover's quarrel:

> "Don't touch me," she says and runs into her room to start packing so she can move in with Riggins.
>
> "Please don't leave me!" he yells to her.

I imagine it must be near impossible for a father to come to terms with his daughter having sex. A mom of a teenage boy once told me that after her son had sex, their relationship changed forever; to her, it was more of a parting than him leaving for college. But it was all sadness, with none of the muffled rage and disgust the men seem to feel. This might be stretching it, but I felt like Devin, the cute lesbian oracle, was voicing the subconscious of the dads in this episode when she said to Landry, "You're like a prostitute. But you don't get paid."

This is so different from how Tami handled Julie. I absolutely loved their talk, so much that I want to tape it and play it back to my daughter when the time comes, because surely I won't handle it so deftly. "Do you love Matt?" she asks. That is so absolutely the right thing to ask first, both because it's the important question and because it proves she respects how Julie made her decision. Then she smiles, twice, despite herself. I don't think, Meghan, that the last part about wanting her to wait is her "true feeling." I think that's the Everymom feeling—the difficulty of letting go. Her true feeling is in her smiles. She can't help but be happy for Julie. I also love that speech she gave afterward, about not having to do it every time.

One thing we haven't talked enough about: This show is so good at conveying meaning through silence and gesture. There's Eric's twitch, of course, but this episode was a veritable ballet of twinned gestures: McCoy drinking milk cuts to Buddy drinking whisky. Julie and Lyla brush their teeth, then Tami and Eric brush. Julie can't look at her dad during that car ride; Matt can't look at him in the locker room. Then when J.D.'s dad wants to make a point to his son on the basketball court, he yells, "Look at me!" three times. McCoy is not subtle enough for gestures, as opposed to Eric, who has a beautiful one when he walks out of Matt's house and tensely flips his hat.

I liked Eric losing his temper in the end. It had a very "we are all sinners" feel. The episode began with Buddy losing his temper and Eric restraining himself, just as he had in the previous episode when he didn't hit Cash. Badgering the ref was a proxy, I think, for throttling Matt, or Julie, or Buddy; better to lose your temper in the game than in your house. As for Wade's rising—that did seem abrupt, and a setup for McCoy feuds to come.

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I do need to mention *The Giving Tree*. I have always found that the oddest, most depressing children's book. It is such a raw take on the selfless nature of parenting (much like the first few pages of Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*). It also has the same problem as *FNL*: It seems to be written much more for adults than children. I hate reading it and can almost never get through it without choking up, for the sake of my future, bitter, empty-nest self. I'm glad Landry threw it at Tyra. She deserved it.

From: Emily Bazelon
To: Hanna Rosin and Meghan O'Rourke
Subject: Week 10: Don't Forget the Great Sex Talk From Season 1
Posted Monday, March 23, 2009, at 4:49 PM ET

This was my favorite episode of the season. I kept admiring the craft: the short, tight scenes between different pairs of characters and the deft segues you mentioned, Hanna. (One more: the opening cut from Tyra in her car to the football players in theirs.) You can feel the care the writers are taking, and it's especially appreciated because they have only a few more hours to wind up the season.

I think Tami's true feelings about Julie are two contradictory things at once: She wanted her daughter to wait, and she's shakily relieved that Julie had sex in a way that won't damage her. Along with all the reasons you've both given for mounting this scene on a pedestal for its honesty and feeling, we get to see Tami's evolution about this subject, and for all the right reasons.

In the first season, Tami was all fiery mama bear after she spotted Matt buying condoms in the supermarket. (Watch it here at the nine-minute mark.) She confronted Julie, who tried to shrug off sex as "just putting one body part into another body part." Tami told her that thinking like that was evidence that Julie wasn't ready. She said that at 15, Julie wasn't allowed to have sex. And she warned her daughter that if she went ahead anyway, she could be hurt, and she could become hard. Now it's two years later. Julie is 17. She's not an adult, but she's a lot closer. We can see from their scenes together that she and Matt do love each other. She's not fooling herself. And she's not cavalier and pretend-sophisticated with her mom: She's shy and embarrassed but also sober. They talk about condoms—hallelujah, the parent-child birth-control conversation that went inexplicably missing in *Juno*.

Meghan, I've been mulling your great question last week, about whether we'd like *FNL* if we were Tyra and Julie and Lyla's age, by trying to commune with my 17-year-old self. Who really knows, of course, but my best guess is that I would have cherished Julie and Matt's relationship (along with, yes, all things Tim Riggins). I've been wondering, though, how I would have felt about Tami. She is wise, strong, sexual—a model of a mom, in a lot of ways. Even her lapses and freakouts mostly serve to make her more human.

As a fellow mom, I can't get enough of Tami. But as a teenage daughter? I dunno. I might have found Tami too good to take. If that's what your mom was really like, what would you find to despise in her, and don't teenage girls need to do that to their moms in some contained but significant way? When Julie tries to rebel or complain, a la her tattoo a few weeks ago, the scenes often don't really come off. But in this episode, my Tami doubts melted away because she put every ounce of her goodness and mettle to such excellent use.

Meanwhile, Katie McCoy showed some mettle, too. For the first time, she's standing up to her husband for turning J.D. into a daddy's boy. Meghan, you talked about Lyla and Julie manning up by finding a way to do what they want and go their own way. "Man up, Matt" is what Julie said when her guy suggested meeting her at the movies instead of coming to pick her up and face her dad. Here I think we're seeing Katie man up—a welcome break in the McCoy facade.

What about Tim Riggins, though? He's in guy's guy mode when he tells J.D. to man up, but his own manliness is increasingly bathed in soft light and dulcet tones. That parting shot of Tim and Lyla on the couch, after Tim quietly tells Buddy to please leave (note the "please") is a teenage fantasy that's both compelling and self-serious. The girl with the fallen father turns to the boyfriend whom she has reformed, and lo, he comes through for her. The children throw over the fathers and shack up, and they get to do it more in sorrow than in anger. Even Eric has lost it. What does this mean for how the season wraps up, I wonder?

From: Meghan O'Rourke
To: Emily Bazelon and Hanna Rosin
Subject: Week 10: The Joy and Melancholy of Being a High-School Senior
Posted Tuesday, March 24, 2009, at 7:07 AM ET

This might have been my favorite episode, too. I may read the Eric scene differently—he loses his temper and gets ejected. But that seemed morally and ethically appropriate. The refs were being shady and dishonest. And in Texas, after all, there's a long history of men losing their tempers and taking justice into their own hands when the circumstances (usually corruption) call for it. The problem is that we're not in the ethic system of the Old West anymore; we're in the new West, where new money rules the day. And Eric's moral righteousness opened a window up for Wade to show his stuff. And Wade, of course, is the property of

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Joe McCoy, rich guy. And I worry that the show is opening up a space here. A very purposeful one: The old codes of male honor aren't enough to get you by anymore. You need to pander to the power structure, too. We'll see what happens, but that's clearly not the last we'll hear about Wade.

Meanwhile, everyone is growing up and preparing to move on. Somehow, this episode really caught the flavor of senior-year joy and melancholy: the way that suddenly you feel adult, replete in the new sensations of independence, and at the same time feel the pangs of change. A new life is just around the corner for a lot of these people—even if it's just the new life of being post-high school in Dillon, without a job. I spent this past week in West Texas, a couple of hundred miles from the real place that Buzz Bissinger wrote about in *Friday Night Lights*; the seniors in town had been getting their acceptance letters, and you could feel that same sense of nervy excitement around them. Things were going to change. I remember that feeling, and I was wondering if every Dairy Queen blizzard must suddenly seem a little sweeter.

Emily, I totally agree about Tami and my teenage self. You hit the nail on the head. That's precisely the part of the show that would have been hard for me to watch. She is so easy to relate to, so powerful and real, and I am not sure I would have *wanted* to all the time. When you're 17, you need to carve out a little cave to be in, separate from parents. And seeing parents be that involved—seeing yourself through their eyes—would have made me squirm. You don't want to see yourself through your parents' eyes at that age (or at least I didn't) because you have conflicting desires: You want to grow up and be your own agent in the world, but you also still want to be their little girl. Just like Julie says.

I think this season has made her a more sympathetic and interesting character. Which is important, because if the show does get picked up again, she'll have to play a larger part in it, I figure. Meanwhile—I guess Tyra redeemed herself for a bit, but I, too, was glad that Landry gave it to her with that *Giving Tree* speech. The show, though, indulged in one of its cheesiest moments this episode: the shot of Tyra watching Landry and his band play, where the lights of the bar cross her face, and she smiles. One of the few moments where it was too much, too obvious.

From: Emily Bazelon
To: Meghan O'Rourke and Hanna Rosin
Subject: Week 11: This Does Not Bode Well for Season 4
Posted Saturday, March 28, 2009, at 7:41 AM ET

Rain, wind, tears, smeared mascara—*FNL* drenched itself in emotion and storm this week. The big end-of-season nemesis is Joe, who clashes with Eric, J.D., and (go, sister) Katie. As I've said before, I wish that Joe weren't so flatly and predictably villainous. The heart vs. money dichotomy you set up awhile back, Hanna, feels overdetermined here.

Still, I believed Joe's explosion of rage against his son, the desperate pummeling in the parking lot as the rain poured from the post-game skies. Joe has always been tightly wound, coiled around his obsession with J.D.'s talent, and it made sense that he would lose it after J.D. won the big game by ignoring his father's insistent, unwanted instructions. Eric and Tami, of course, are called on to come to the rescue. It turns out that springing Tyra from Cash's clutches a couple of weeks ago was just a warm-up. Now, as Joe stalks off into the night, Tami comforts Katie, whose perfect life is running down her face with her makeup, while Eric listens to J.D. admit that he can't abide his father.

Is it unfair of me to complain that J.D. talks only in clichés? "Nothing I do is ever good enough for him" and "I can't take it anymore" and "Is it my fault?" OK, I think I am being unfair, because a kid in such a situation might say exactly those things—that's why they're clichés, after all. I do think, though, that the show missed a serious character-development opportunity in J.D. I don't know if it's a failure of acting or writing or the two in combination, but to me he's still two-dimensional. The one exception this week was the flash of his wide and startled eyes when his father barked and glared at him from the front of the car after hearing that he'd been Romeo-ing Madison at practice. For a second, J.D. was fawnlike and real to me. But then he went back to texting gossip girl Madison, who, Meghan is right, seems like a hottie from a different show—one I don't want to watch—and I lost interest again.

This does not bode well for a potential fourth season. I'd rather go to college with Tim (and Lyla and Tyra, fingers crossed) than hang out in Dillon with the McCoys. What do you think, though, about a more immediate question: Did Katie and J.D. overreact by deciding not to go home to Joe? If this is the first time he hit his kid, as Katie implied, should they go back and try to get Joe into an anger-management class rather than contemplate splitting up their family? Or should the show take a stand against what might become a cycle of violence by cutting Joe off?

Matt, meanwhile, has the weight of his grandmother's illness pressing down on him. A few weeks ago, I complained that Lorraine's senility turned on and off too conveniently, but in this episode, when she opens the door of a moving car and falls out and then screams out in anger and panic for the slippers that are already on her feet, the scene captured memories of my grandfather's tormenting slide into Alzheimer's. The phase when he didn't know us was terrible because it was numbing; the phase preceding it was terrible because it was raw with rage and

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sorrow. I'm almost ready to forgive the writers for Shelby's implausible Return of the Prodigal Mother out of relief that Matt has an adult to turn to as Lorraine declines.

Tyra's mom is also busy redeeming herself this week, and good for her: It was time for Angela to come through for her kid already. The reassurance she gave Tyra wasn't beyond her ken. She didn't say, "Let me pay for your SAT tutor" or even "Let me drive you to the test." She said, "You surprise me." She told Tyra to "keep reaching" while being a bit inchoate about where that reaching might lead. It made sense to me that Angela could offer this reassurance after Tyra planned and executed her sister Mindy's bridal shower. If Tyra is reaching for a future that's better than the Landing Strip, she's doing it without turning her back on her family. The increasingly real chance that she might have to move on from Dillon is bathing her scenes in pathos. This can get cheesy, as Meghan pointed out last week. But I forgave it in Tyra's scene with Angela. What did you think?

One more question: What did you think of Eric's lie to Tami when she asked him if he knew that the boosters were tinkering with the line for bisecting Dillon into two high-school districts in order to keep the football team together? At first I was leery of this plot line dropped in out of nowhere, but then the tension between Tami and Eric, as coach vs. principal, drew me in. Eric is putting his team first, as I guess he has to, and Tami is thinking about what's best for the school as an educational institution, since Dillon is eligible for more state per-pupil funding only if it approves the redistricting. We've been here before with the JumboTron; this time, Tami has become wiser and Eric more morally conflicted. I'm not sure why the football team shouldn't be grandfathered in on one side of the line—what's to be gained by breaking it up? But Eric isn't making that argument. He's just slinking out of the boosters' meeting, and avoiding looking his wife in the eye. Trouble in Taylor paradise of an intriguing kind.

From: Meghan O'Rourke
To: Emily Bazelon and Hanna Rosin
Subject: Week 11: This Show Makes Me Cry More Reliably Than Chopping Onions
Posted Monday, March 30, 2009, at 6:46 AM ET

Certainly, there was a lot of Drama-with-a-capital-D in this episode; you could feel the writers revving up for the end of the season. (And, potentially, for the end of the show.)

In the past, I've also wished Joe were less two-dimensional, Emily. But I did believe him in this episode. Perhaps more than in any other episode. The tension ratchets up turn by turn, as he gets more and more incensed that J.D. *just won't listen to him.* Not only do you get a sense of how invested in J.D. he is; you see how difficult it is for him to register that J.D. is a distinct person with a soul of his own, rather than a mold into which Joe can pour all his notions of success. How could Joe have been a more interesting character? I think the writers should have given him more of a past. Nothing too cheesy or obvious, mind you—we don't want to find out that he would've been a pro player but for the last-minute knee injury, *yada-yada-yada*. But you can imagine a scene with Eric over whiskey that would've revealed a little more texture—that little something that saves a character from being a caricature.

Though I confess: I thought it was funny when Joe called Madison a "plague" and said she was a "negative influence." She's certainly a negative influence on the show. With her drippy sexual come-ons and spoiled self-concern, she doesn't exude much charisma, and I get restless whenever she comes into view.

Otherwise, this episode had two remarkable set pieces. Maybe even three. The Alzheimer's scene you mentioned, Emily; the Landing Strip tea party/bridal party; and Tim Riggins trying to get Lyla out of bed.

The Alzheimer's scene was painful to watch. The woman who plays Matt's grandmother was excellent. In the to-do about the slippers, she let the panic and flat rage in her voice escalate both shockingly and subtly—a tall order. The writers also beautifully (or perhaps I mean poignantly) convey the confusion one feels in navigating the ethics of caretaking. What is the "right" thing to do? How do you keep an ill person safe in her own home when she is not even aware of how she can hurt herself? Answering these question drives a wedge between Matt and his mother, if only briefly, as it does for so many family members. Matt is so busy trying to be a parent to his grandmother, he doesn't know how to sit back and let his mother be his parent—as she, in fact, is.

Speaking of role reversal: It's saturnalia for good-girl Lyla and bad-boy Riggins. Partway through the episode, Lyla ties one on with Mindy and Tim's brother, drinking beer and playing video games like there's no tomorrow. In fact, the next morning, she doesn't want to get out of bed to go to school. Tim tries to get her out of bed but can't. He looks like an anxious dad for a moment—more sheep than wolf. (By the way, does Tim call Lyla "beer-wolf" when he tries to wake her? I couldn't hear the line.) Meanwhile, his brother is trying to register for a "leaf-blower" in a scene that was perhaps played for a slightly too broad comedy, as were moments of the bridal tea party. This was redeemed for me, at least, by the scene between Angela and Tyra you already mentioned, Emily. I watched it on a night I, like Tyra, was feeling a little mopey and low, and I teared up. (*FNL* makes me cry more reliably than chopping onions does.) What really seemed accurate was the way that Angela told Tyra that Tyra surprised her. "I have no idea what's going to happen to

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you," she tells Tyra, before consoling her that one day she *would* realize many of her dreams. I think Tyra *is* surprising, and that quality of unpredictability, of different possible selves within a larger whole, is what I like best about her character. I buy that Angela sees all this about Tyra and that she likes it, even if she is sometimes threatened by it, too, and less able to be supportive. This is not a case of like mother, like daughter.

From: Hanna Rosin
To: Emily Bazelon and Meghan O'Rourke
Subject: Week 11: The Truly Tedious Beatification of Tim Riggins
Posted Monday, March 30, 2009, at 2:22 PM ET

I was somewhat less taken with this episode than either of you. For me, the show is at its best when it holds relationships—and football games, for that matter—in tension. In this episode, the writers let too many of those tensions go. Once, Tim Riggins and Lyla were each ambivalent, for different reasons. He loved her in some inexplicable way and also ditched her in the hallways. She loved and hated him all at once. Now they are a settled couple and not all that interesting. The role reversal is OK for one episode, but Lyla is not believable as a permanent "beer wolf," or whatever he calls her. And the beatification of Tim Riggins has become truly tedious. He's now the guy who brings her to church and gives her dad "good, sound advice." Yawn. For the first time, I feel bored when he comes on the screen

I feel the same way about the Joe development. It's not that his explosion isn't believable; his need for control is so closely tied to his rage. It's just that I find the time before the explosion more interesting. After it happens, everything unfolds in the predictable way: J.D. unloads to Eric, Mom's mascara is smeared, cue to "abusive husband" subplot. I would have preferred to let it coast for a while with some interim developments—a background story, as you suggested, Meghan; a scene of him confronting minx Madison's dad at the country club; some more abusive shouting from the stands.

The one exception here is Matt and his grandma. As you said, Meghan, the Alzheimer's panic scene unfolded in such a subtle yet urgent way that it felt wholly organic. And what comes after it is not at all settled. A teenager torn between his love for his grandma and the reality of her illness is not a common screen dilemma. Despite what he said, I still have a hard time imagining Matt giving his grandma up. And if he does, I will still be drawn into the drama of it.

On the lighter side, I keep coming back to Tyra's concept of "man points." She tells Landry he loses a lot of man points for suggesting she slice the cucumber thinner for the tea sandwiches. He responds that he should earn some back because he's now in a legitimate band. This is a very useful way of viewing the world, but I need help working it out. Does Billy get man points or lose them for waving that giant leaf blower around? What about for putting on that sexy teddy in the last scene at the bridal shower? Tim is clearly bleeding man points in my book, but maybe for one of you he is rapidly gaining them.

Maybe this has utility in a Paul Fussell way, as a guide through the American class system. Arugula in the victory garden: more or fewer man points for Barack Obama? Your answer clearly depends on whether you're a beer party or a tea party type.

From: Emily Bazelon
To: Meghan O'Rourke and Hanna Rosin
Subject: Week 11: Coach Taylor's Bizarre Play Calling
Posted Monday, March 30, 2009, at 5:44 PM ET

Hanna, I dunno about Tyra's system of man points. I mean, what am I missing here, because I don't see how this is different from the usual yardstick of masculine cool. Landry loses points for being fussy and wins them for being onstage in the band with the rockin' gig. If Billy had pulled off the leaf blower thing with a slick swagger, then maybe, maybe. But he got laughed at, so he loses. Tim gets man points in this episode only for his powerful blocking and running on the field. And Obama got them last week only for telling the country that he has a hard job and these are hard times. Arugula, *nyet*.

Speaking of football, I was puzzled by the episode a few weeks ago, when Coach goes for it on fourth-and-12 instead of punting—the latter seemed like the much more obvious call. In this episode, was there any reason Eric would have gone for two after the TD—given that it was raining like crazy, the team hadn't done it all year (according to the announcers), and J.D. is a frosh quarterback? Coach's call seemed blatantly orchestrated to set up Joe's explosion. Why not kick the extra point?

Then I remembered that in *Friday Night Lights* the nonfiction book, the team that the Dillon Panthers are based on finishes the season with a record equal to a rival team. Only one of them can go to state. And so the coaches meet at a central location *for a coin-tossing ritual*. This is what the rules called for. Craziness.

One other football point reaching back to last week's episode: Meghan and I both thought that Coach Taylor got ejected from that game because he lost it. I got several e-mails from readers who thought that coach blew up deliberately to rally the team behind his display of passion. My husband thought so, too. I'm not convinced, because of the speech Eric made to the team

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about keeping their heads down, because he seemed frantic when he called Wade from his cell phone after getting tossed, and because it's just not in Eric's DNA to deliberately act like one of the kids. Can anyone out there settle this definitively?

From: Emily Bazelon
To: Meghan O'Rourke and Hanna Rosin
Subject: Week 11: *FNL* Renewed for Two More Seasons! Plus: Coach's Play Calling Explained.
Posted Tuesday, March 31, 2009, at 10:27 AM ET

Party in *FNL* land! NBC and DirecTV announced a deal on Monday for two more seasons, 13 episodes each. But wait—aren't Matt, Tim, Tyra, Lyla, and Landry all graduating? This should be interesting.

More cause for celebration: Gregg Easterbrook, formerly ***Slate***'s "Tuesday Morning Quarterback" columnist, thoroughly vindicates Coach Taylor's decisions to go for it on fourth down a couple of weeks ago against Arnette Meade and to go for the two-point conversion last week. Gregg writes:

> SuperCoach Eric Taylor went for it on fourth and 7 from the opponents' 38, leading by three, 50 seconds remaining, opponent of out timeouts. This is a classic maroon-zone tactical dilemma—too far for a field goal attempt, too close to punt. Getting a first down wins the game. Punting probably results in a touchback, bringing the ball back to the 20, and then Arnett Meade must move 60 yards in 45 seconds for a decent kick to tie. A failed pass on fourth down (given that the clock would stop on change of possession) places the ball at the 38, meaning Arnett Meade must still move 40 yards in 45 seconds for a decent kick to tie—still unlikely to happen. Thus a failed fourth down try doesn't really surrender that much. Most coaches do the conservative thing to avoid blame, so most coaches would punt in this situation. But the risk of going for it is not that high; the Miami Dolphins clinched a playoff birth this season by going for it in a very similar maroon zone situation.
>
> As to the question of going for the win rather than a PAT for overtime: Pro coaches usually kick in this situation, but high-school coaches usually go for the win partly because high-school kids tend to collapse of fatigue in overtime. About 60 percent of high-school attempts for two are successful, so going for two can be a higher percentage decision than the 50/50 chance of going to overtime. Also, Texas public high schools use the NCAA overtime format in which teams alternate possessions at the opposing 25. In pouring rain, it's hard to gain 25 yards. The coach knows it could be a multiple-session overtime in which his kids would tire and anything could happen. Three yards to win or lose is a decent gamble.

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war stories

The Return of Statecraft

How Obama proved his mettle at the G20 summit.
By Fred Kaplan
Thursday, April 2, 2009, at 6:49 PM ET

Vast multinational conferences, like the G20 summit in London, are useful mainly for the "bilaterals"—the one-on-one side-room conversations—and, in these forums, President Barack Obama is living up to high expectations.

Which is to say, the United States seems to be returning to diplomatic basics—a development that in the wake of the last eight years is practically revolutionary.

Take Obama's meeting on April 1 with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, which produced an unusually substantive 19-paragraph joint statement laying out a broad but specific agenda—all stemming from a cleareyed, even somewhat steely grasp of what international relations are all about.

"What I believe we began today," Obama said at a joint press conference afterward, "is a very constructive dialogue that will allow us to work on issues of *mutual interest*."

The italics are mine, but a "senior administration official" also drew attention to the phrase in a background press briefing and contrasted the approach with George W. Bush's first meeting with a Russian president, after which he proclaimed that he'd looked into Vladimir Putin's eyes and seen his soul.

The Medvedev meeting, then, marked the occasion when Obama officially pushed that "reset button." The move was recognized as such by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who noted a "new atmosphere of trust," stemming not just from personal camaraderie—which, he said, creates only "the illusion of good relations"—but from recognition of "mutual interests" and a

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"readiness to listen to each other." Lavrov added, "We missed this much in the past years."

Former Bush aides have told me that their boss got a bad rap for his remark about Putin's eyes and soul. When he made the comment on his first trip to Europe in June 2001, he had decided to scrap the Anti-Ballistic-Missile Treaty so that he could build a missile-defense system. He felt he had to assure Putin that the decision was not aimed at Russia, which at the time was extraordinarily weak; he also wanted to cultivate Russia as a counterweight to China. In short, Bush's remark was driven, these officials said, by motives of grand strategy.

Maybe so, but that only makes his statement seem daffier. Did Bush believe that chumming up to Putin, treating him like a "good man," would melt his resistance and lure him to our side? The only question is whether, deep inside, the ex-KGB spy gaped at Bush's naiveté or bristled at his condescension.

What Putin would have been keener to hear at that moment—what all leaders with an understanding of history and the requirements of their office want to know in diplomatic dealings generally—is what was on the table that could serve his nation's interests.

At his press conference on Wednesday, Obama emphasized that the United States and Russia have serious differences and that he wouldn't paper over them; from the start, he told Medvedev to forget about recognition of Abkhazia or South Ossetia as independent states, and he protested the beating of prominent human rights activist Lev Ponomaryov. But Obama also said he wouldn't let those differences get in the way of vital matters—such as nuclear proliferation, counterterrorism, regional conflicts, and international trade—where cooperation could promote (again) the interests of both countries.

The only thing remarkable about this sentiment is that compared with policy statements of just a few months ago, it's so remarkable.

Bush's diplomacy tended to the black and white: I get along with you, or I don't; you're with us, or you're against us; you're a terrorist, or you're opposed to terrorists. This approach led—and, in general, leads—to disaster not because it's moralistic, but because it so egregiously misapprehends the world and leaves us with so little leverage to affect it.

For instance, Obama will almost certainly open up talks with Syria as a means of isolating Iran and cutting off both countries' links with Hezbollah. Bush always opposed any contact—and vetoed efforts by some of his top officials to go that route—because Syria supported terrorists. By this argument, had someone with this view been president during World War II, the United States wouldn't have struck up an alliance with the Soviet Union against Nazi Germany on the grounds that Stalin wasn't much less evil than Hitler—and we would have faced catastrophic defeat in our high moral dudgeon.

This is, in part, why Obama has abandoned the phrase "global war on terror." It implies that all terrorist movements form a single bloc of equal weight and danger; and it therefore prevents us from even contemplating the notion of splitting the movements apart or playing off one against the others. One definition of skillful diplomacy is to unite allies and divide enemies; Bush's pronouncements tended to do the precise opposite.

To the extent that Bush racked up some successes in his last two years, it was because he abandoned his precepts. The "surge" in Iraq achieved as much as it did (in tactical military terms, anyway) because it coincided with a new strategy that forged alliances with Sunni insurgents—former enemies—in the interest of defeating a larger common enemy. (Too bad the war's first four years killed so many people and tore up so much of the country.) The North Koreans agreed to halt their plutonium reprocessing because Bush finally agreed to hold serious negotiations. (Too bad they built and tested a nuclear weapon in the time that he refused to negotiate as a matter of misplaced principle.)

American leaders and diplomats have long struggled with the tension between their interests and ideals. Bush finessed the issue by pretending that the tension didn't exist. In his second inaugural address, he declared that our interests and ideals coincided, invoking an appealing but empty syllogism: Tyranny sires terrorism; terrorism threatens our security; therefore, promoting democracy enhances our security; hence, our interests and our ideals are one. The problem was that terrorism is a tactic, not an enemy, and democracy is not necessarily a cure for it in any case. (Hamas won fair and free elections in the Palestinian territories—elections that Bush insisted on, over the advice of many, on the premise that Hamas *couldn't* win the election *because* terrorism and democracy were incompatible.)

Obama seems to be aware of the tension between interests and ideals without letting it paralyze policymaking. In this sense, he is like most presidents in American history—and his foreign policy, or for the moment his approach to foreign policy, signals a restoration of what was once called *statecraft*: literally, the art of conducting the affairs of state. The term has always implied a meshing of interests and ideals with reality while navigating the shoals of a dangerous world. Leaders can try to reshape an agenda, but they can't toss away maps or ignore laws of physics to get there. They have to deal with the world as it is, and that's what Obama seems to be doing.

It doesn't mean he'll succeed. His focus on interests suggests he understands that some nations' interests conflict with ours and might be impervious to reconciliation, no matter how fervent the

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diplomatic effort. The test of his presidency may lie in what he does when a conflict of this sort sparks a crisis.

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