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Crazy Love, Crazy Choices

ad report card Credit Crunch

The hottest fight in advertising is about credit-report Web sites.

By Seth Stevenson

Monday, April 6, 2009, at 11:24 AM ET

The Spot: *A guy plays guitar in an Irish-themed bar. He's accompanied by a drummer and a bassist. All three wear kilts. "AnnualCreditReport.com," the guy sings, "the one you can depend upon." He goes on to describe the hazards of signing up with other credit-monitoring Web sites: "Beware of the others. There's always a catch./ They claim to be free, but strings are attached./ Their ads can be funny, so don't be deceived./ Hold onto your money. There's one site you need."*

Do-gooder public-service announcements have long been a part of the advertising landscape. PSAs are often mockably earnest and dorky, but they can serve a useful purpose by alerting you to

important information. Consider this piece Ad Report Card's contribution to the PSA genre. I'm donating this valuable space to spread the word about AnnualCreditReport.com—a wonderfully useful Web site that's currently being promoted by a pair of videos produced by the Federal Trade Commission.

You've no doubt seen the TV ads for a different credit-check site, called FreeCreditReport.com. Those ones where [a sunny-faced, curly-haired dude sings narrative pop songs](#) about the calamities he's endured as a result of his poor credit. This unfortunate fellow is reduced to working in a tacky, pirate-themed restaurant because "some hacker stole my ID"; buying a subcompact jalopy because his "credit was wack"; and living in a basement because of his wife's previous default on a credit card.

These ads have warm, vibrant visuals. (They're directed by Danny Leiner, who's helmed similarly low-key, goofball comedies like [Dude, Where's My Car?](#) and [Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle](#).) They feature an appealing slacker [protagonist](#). But above all, they benefit from a slew of maddeningly catchy songs, executed in a wide variety of genres.

These bouncy tunes were composed by an amateur musician—a guy at the ad agency whose only previous musical success involved a blistering set at the agency's holiday staff party. In an e-mail exchange, he told me he wrote most of the songs in one 48-hour period after "going away with my guitar and a cheap bottle of Chianti." He attributes their impact to the notion that they're written "not from the viewpoint of a company with a product to sell, but from the perspective of a character with a story to tell. So you don't feel like you're being bombarded with an ad message; you just feel like you're getting a glimpse into this guy's life. Which just happens to involve a recurring theme of regret at not having gone to FreeCreditReport.com."

All fine and good. There can be no doubt that these are terrifically effective ads, which is why they continue to be produced and aired. But here's the catch: FreeCreditReport.com is nothing less than a force for heinous evil. It lures you in with its offer of a "free" credit check, but its hidden goal is to enroll you in a service that charges \$15 a month.

(Please wait a moment while I clear my throat, furrow my brow, and look straight into the camera. OK, here goes.)

You can get a truly free, no-strings-attached credit report by directing your browser to AnnualCreditReport.com. I just tried it. It works. (In case you're curious, my credit is unblemished. Though, ironically, I still drive a used subcompact.) You have the right to one free report per year from each of the three major consumer-credit-reporting services. Which means if you stagger them out, you can check your credit, gratis, once every four months. That should be plenty.

The FTC's videos, which parody the FreeCreditReport.com ads, don't have the same glossy production values. The lead actor is less camera-friendly. The songs kind of suck—with clunky lyrics and boring harmonic concepts. But cut these guys a break: The advertising budget for FreeCreditReport.com was more than \$70 million in 2007 and probably even higher in 2008. The annual budget of the entire FTC is less than \$260 million.

The two FTC spots—which between them cost \$100,000 to produce—have been released only on the Web. According to Nat Wood, assistant director of the FTC's Bureau of Consumer Protection, these days it's far more efficient to distribute PSAs online than to try to get them on television. "It's very tough to get PSAs on the air in prime time, where people will see them," says Wood. "Most of what you see in the prime hours are things like ['The More You Know' campaign](#), which the network produces itself, on issues it chooses, cross-promoting its own stars."

I salute the FTC's thrifty, new-media strategy. I also applaud their message. That's why I'm reposting their videos here, in an effort to further their cause.

And that's ... [one to grow on!](#)

Grade: B+. Kudos to the FTC for fighting the good fight. Deductions for severe aesthetic lameness. By the way, there's something I've never understood about the FreeCreditReport.com ads: How exactly would the guy's circumstances change if he'd known in advance that his credit was bad? Until he repairs his credit, he'll still get negged on that car loan for a "cool convertible." And, unless he's a cold and heartless person, you'd expect him to stay with his self-professed "dream girl" even after discovering that her credit was less than stellar. If I ever get him as my waiter at the local pirate restaurant, I'm going to ask him about this.

Is there an ad you love, hate, or can't for the life of you understand? Send your suggestions to adreportcard@gmail.com.

Advanced Search

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

books

Why Write While Israel Burns?

Amos Oz's entrancing paranoia.

By Judith Shulevitz
Monday, April 6, 2009, at 4:43 PM ET

Rhyming Life and Death, the claustrophobic new novella by the famous Israeli novelist Amos Oz, takes place almost entirely inside the head of a famous Israeli novelist, who is named the Author. He, in turn, is confined to a few decrepit blocks near a rundown cultural center in Tel Aviv. He has been invited there by the Good Book Club to participate in a discussion of his work. The prospect fills him with dread, partly because he can't stand the kind of questions asked at such events ("Why do you write? Why do you write the way you do? Are you trying to influence your readers, and if so, how? ... Do you write with a pen or on a computer? And how much, roughly, do you earn from each book?") and partly because he knows that in trying to answer them, he'll pile "lie upon lie."

Arriving early to steel himself, he sips coffee in a café and studies a waitress's buttocks as well as the café's other patrons. Later, stationed on a dais with his fellow panelists, he scans the faces in the audience. In both places, he allays his discomfort by making the clothes, features, and tics of the strangers spread out before him the basis of feverish fantasies about them, as though the act of "picking their pockets" for material arouses him sexually. Over the course of the evening, his creations take on lives of their own. Some enchant him; others hound him. But none offers him escape, because their lives turn out to be even sadder and lonelier than his.

How does a novelist arrive at such an inauspicious view of the creative process? In an introduction to a new anthology of his fiction and journalism, *The Amos Oz Reader*, critic Robert Alter points out that Oz, the *grand homme* of Israeli letters, has been writing in the claustrophobic mode since the beginning of his career close to 50 years ago. You perceive this most clearly in his landscapes, which feel cut off from hope. Oz's first novel, *Elsewhere, Perhaps*, is set on a small kibbutz surrounded by jackals, enemies, and brooding mountains. The kibbutz itself is a warm and magical yet oppressive place, "imagined," in Alter's words, "as a microcosm of the Jewish state." Later novels, as well as Oz's great 2003 memoir, *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, take place in the pre-1948 Jerusalem of his childhood, a city surrounded by hostile armies and filled with premonitions of doom.

Oz's political essays root his paranoid visions in the realities of life in Israel, a state that is itself the result of a problematic creative process. Oz is a Zionist, and he holds that the Jews had no choice but to create Israel. They had nowhere else to go. But having done so, he says, Israelis should not look for forgiveness and accommodation from those they have displaced, at least not in the immediate future. Nor should they seek total victory or total peace. "The best we can expect," he wrote shortly after the Six Day War, "is a process of adaptation and psychological acceptance accompanied by a slow, painful awakening to reality,

burdened with bitterness and deprivation, with shattered dreams and endless suspicions and reservations that, in the way of human wounds, heal slowly and leave permanent scars."

As visions of political reconciliation go, this is a remarkably novelistic one. It casts the nation and its opponents as individual personae, doppelgangers, even, seeing and acknowledging each other with all the tolerance for pain and capacity for mutual recognition that morally complex characters could ever hope to muster. Oz's scenario puts the Middle East peace process in the realm of the imaginary, no less than the triumphalism and pacifism it repudiates. In *Rhyming Life and Death*, on the other hand, Oz calls the imagination into question. What good does it do, really? Can his imaginings ever amount to anything more than solipsistic self-gratification?

There are a lot of ways this book might have turned out. It could have been a rueful, self-congratulatory look back over a career—a *Stardust Memories* in novelistic form. It could have been a knit-browed investigation into the ethics of fiction. Instead, and luckily for us, Oz has boiled it down to a juicily sadistic fable of creation. Grim as the Author's world is, it is also a demonically joyous production. He takes great pleasure in fashioning his characters, but he takes as much pleasure, or more, in wounding them. That is how he brings them to life.

No sooner has the Author named the café waitress Ricky, for instance, than he gives her an unrequited love for a sports-car-driving soccer player named Charlie, who once, quite a while ago, took her to a sea resort and tickled her ear with his tongue, then abandoned her for Lucy, runner-up in the town's Queen of the Waves contest.

Next, the Author overhears two men at the next table discussing the misfortune of one Ovadya Hazzam, a high-living lottery winner now dying of liver cancer. The Author promptly assigns him a catheter attached to an overflowing urine bag and a night nurse who ignores his calls for help in order to chat with a doctor.

The Author's most pitiful creature is an unkempt sixtysomething-year-old whom he calls Arnold Bartok. Bartok "looks like a monkey that has lost most of its fur." Several times during the event, the Author is pretty sure, Bartok sniggers at him. He retaliates by consigning Bartok to life in a windowless cubicle in the company of a paralyzed and abusive mother. Bartok, who seems meant to serve as the Author's double, spends his time philosophizing about sex and death, writing letters to editors, and cleaning out his mother's bedpan.

It is when he wallows in the disgusting that the Author achieves his most vivifying effects. Oz is a poet of sticky things. Ricky leaves a sticky trail on the Author's table when she wipes it with an unclean cloth. A fat and aging matron tries to lure a young poet into bed with a sticky-sweet fruit compote. (Sticky-sweet

jam or compote is mentioned in almost every novel by Oz I've read, and it is almost always given to a boy by an overripe woman.) Nearly every scene features bodily fluids in gas or liquid form. Contemplating the over-effusive organizer of the literary event, the Author tells himself, "You ought take the time to give this character some habits that will fix him in your readers' memory, two or three significant eccentricities." The first eccentricity he thinks of has the man licking stamps and the backs of envelopes lustily, with a "great abundance of saliva."

Are we meant to perceive a theology beneath this grossness? It is the Good Book Club that gets the ball rolling, after all. To anyone familiar with the good book, the Author's appetite for emissions and blemishes suggests a perverse inversion of the ancient priestly hierarchy of purity, a relish for the profane. This is a fallen, unsanctified world, and the Author, like Milton's Satan, seems determined to exploit its sensual possibilities even as he curses its Maker to the skies.

The Author spends much of the latter part of the evening attempting to seduce Rochele Resnik, who read aloud from his new book at the literary event. Rochele might as well be an angel from heaven. A virginal young woman with a braid and a cream cotton dress, she finds more "compassion and grace" in the Author's words than he is aware of having put in them. She is also the only character whose life story the Author doesn't get to invent, the only one who lives outside his head. This grants her the power to take him out of himself and redeem him from his polluted state. The Author, however, is a half-hearted Don Juan. He imagines so many alternate possible endings to the evening that we are never quite sure he makes it into her bed. If he does, the experience has only the faintest redemptive effect.

This being Oz and Israel, the Author's blaspheming has a political as well as theological dimension. Intermittently during the night, he mulls over a photograph that hangs on the wall of the cultural center. It is a portrait of Berl Katznelson, the late Labor leader who was one of Israel's founding fathers, and he looks kindly but crafty, "as though he has just pulled off a coup by devious means." The Author damns Katznelson's handiwork as if it were God's: "This is a bad business, all of it here, ridiculous and terrible."

So what is the point of making things up, if that is what the process yields? It's not just the audience that wants to know. The Author asks himself the question repeatedly. Who needs his inventions, his sad-sack souls, his "shabby fantasies about all kinds of worn-out sex scenes" with frustrated waitresses, lonely readers, and runners-up in a Queen of the Waves contest? Is it possible for the Author to defend the endeavor without deluding himself and lying to everyone else? Isn't Bartok right to scoff?

In 2005, in accepting Germany's Goethe Prize around the time he would have been writing the novella, Oz delivered a powerful apology for the act of imagination: "I believe that imagining the

other is a powerful antidote to fanaticism and hatred. I believe that books that make us imagine the other may make us more immune to the ploys of the devil, including the inner devil, the Mephisto of the heart. ... Imagining the other is not only an aesthetic tool. It is in my view, also a major moral imperative."

But novels have a subtlety that speeches do not, and I think the Author may be a more reliable source than his author on the moral status of imagining the other, especially in the face of a painful reality. I'm inclined to trust the Author's view that there's something less than wholesome about the exercise, something grandiose and deserving of mockery. "To write about things that exist," he says, "to try to capture a colour or smell or sound in words, is a little like playing Schubert when Schubert is in the hall, and perhaps sniggering in the darkness." The most ridiculous thing may be trying to justify oneself in the declarative language of uplift that audiences like to hear. Justification comes, if it comes, provisionally. And it comes privately, perhaps at the end of a long and hellish night. That is when it comes to the Author, at any rate. "Once in a while," he says just before dawn, "it is worth turning on the light to clarify what is going on."

change-o-meter Supplemental Diet

Obama requests \$83 billion in extra spending from Congress, mostly for war funding.

By Chris Wilson

Thursday, April 9, 2009, at 4:41 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.

President Obama will add immigration reform to his overflowing to-do list, tacking the controversial issue somewhere between "rescue the economy" and "create universal health care." Saddled with George W. Bush's last budget for another six months, Obama takes a page from Bush's finance textbook and requests \$75 billion in supplemental war funding but promises to do it correctly next year. Still, more anti-torture measures are a fount of change for a **25 on the Change-o-Meter**.

Today's [news on immigration](#) is mainly a save-the-date notice for later this year. White House officials say Obama will address the topic next month in preparation for a policy fight sometime in the fall. As Obama indicated during the campaign, his plan will include means for undocumented immigrants to become legal citizens. The 'Meter realizes immigration was a pillar of Obama's candidacy and is an issue that needs to be addressed but

wonders whether such a reckless expenditure of political bandwidth is wise if the administration hopes to accomplish anything outside economic recovery measures this year. It awards 15 points for jump-starting immigration reform and withholds 10 as collateral against the risk that overextension will tank Obama's whole change portfolio.

Obama is expected to [request about \\$83 billion in supplemental spending](#) for the fiscal 2009 budget, mostly for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, in an extra-budgetary measure that he has frequently panned Bush for using. Obama has something of an excuse: As [PolitiFact](#) notes, the current budget is a Bush leftover that did not provide adequate funding for the wars in the first place (though one may recall that large parts of that budget were passed after Obama took office). Still, this Bush-made-me-do-it excuse [failed to register](#) with at least a few anti-war Democrats in Congress, as the *Wall Street Journal* notes. The 'Meter deducts five points for the whiff of Bush tactics.

Meanwhile, Reuters [reports](#) that the CIA plans to shut down the so-called "black sites" in foreign countries that were the offsetting for harsh interrogation techniques against terrorism suspects. Obama announced the [discontinuation of the secret prisons](#) shortly after his inauguration, but the 'Meter awards 10 points for another nail in their coffins. More important, the CIA will also no longer contract out interrogations, for which Obama gets another 15 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 Unclenched Fists

Obama makes progress with Iran, but there's no change in cronyism at home.
By Karen Shih
Wednesday, April 8, 2009, at 2:56 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.

President Obama is lying low today after capping his European tour with a surprise visit to Iraq yesterday. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad says he is willing to strike up talks with the United States. In the Justice Department, Obama may finally be breaking from a Bush-era defense tactics. Obama scores a **10 on the Change-o-meter**.

Ahmadinejad said today that he would engage in talks if the United States can play nice—specifically, he said, if it approaches the talks with "honesty, justice and respect." For those who back Obama's talk-therapy approach to international relations, it's the most promising sign yet of a dialogue with Iran, particularly in contrast to Iranian leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's [rejection](#) of Obama's "Happy Persian New Year" message last month. The 'Meter awards 10 points for another baby step toward a constructive relationship with Iran.

When it comes to allocating ambassadors to much friendlier countries, however, Obama appears to be sticking with the traditional Washington formula: [picking friends and donors](#) for the cushiest positions in Western Europe. Among the names circulating for these posts are those who bundled hundreds of thousands of dollars for his campaign and inauguration. While the 'Meter is not so naive as to think there's not reciprocity expected in many big political donations, it's still docking five points for the cronyism that Obama so frequently condemns. (The official nomination list hasn't been released yet, so there's still time to make more merit-based decisions.)

In the Justice Department, there's a [whiff of change](#) after an earlier whiff of good-old [Bush-style nonchange](#). Attorney General Eric Holder told *CBS Evening News* anchor Katie Couric yesterday that the new administration may reverse the use of "state secrets privilege" in at least one case left over from the Bush era. Critics of the use of this blanket defense had been disappointed that Obama continued to invoke the privilege, but this could be a step in the right direction. The Justice Department wouldn't specify the case, so the 'Meter awards a tentative five points until the administration gives more details.

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 Dogfights Ahead

The president's defense secretary proposes slashing expensive new fighter jets from its budget, but a battle looms in Congress.
By Emily Lowe
Tuesday, April 7, 2009, at 4:38 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.

Washington remains Obama-less today as the president stopped unexpectedly in Iraq on his way back from his European jaunt. In the meantime, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates announced major shifts in defense spending priorities, to the dismay of defense contractors and [Top Gun](#) enthusiasts everywhere. But Obama's formerly unstoppable grass-roots network fails to impress, which brings the president down to a **17 on the Change-o-Meter**.

Obama made an [unannounced stop](#) in Iraq after his short visit to Turkey, where [broken hearts](#) appear to be [mending](#). The trip to Baghdad was kept a secret from the press and many of Obama's staff and comes on the heels of the president's promise in Turkey to proceed in Iraq "in a responsible direction." The amorphous change Obama promises seems palpable in Iraq today. (As Air Force One landed in Baghdad, across the city the infamous shoe-throwing journalist [saw his jail time reduced](#).) No major points for a fluffy, [photo-op](#) stop in a theater of war, but the 'Meter will toss in two for the signal that Iraq is still a priority despite the renewed focus on Afghanistan.

Back home, Gates ruffled feathers with his [announcement](#) of an overhaul of defense spending. Gates' proposal involves major cutbacks in weapon and military vehicle production, including halts on the manufacture of the iconic F-22 fighter jet and a flashy new helicopter for POTUS. (Yes, *Top Gun* nerds, technically Goose and Maverick flew an F-14.) Members of Congress are [making the expected noises](#) proportional to the number of F-22-related jobs in their districts. Proposing a plan that could cut jobs in the current economy is certainly daring, particularly when it [pushes down](#) defense stocks in the process. But reorganizing the budget to trim out huge, impractical projects sits right with the 'Meter. (*Slate*'s Fred Kaplan [agrees](#).) The proposal answers Obama's [call](#) for smart, responsible warfare, and he wins 20 points for a significant move in that direction.

While his Cabinet may be listening to his pleas, it seems Obama's former supporters are less attentive. The White House recently dusted off the 13-million-strong campaign juggernaut, now called Organizing for America, to rally up support for Obama's budget. [The result](#) was a measly 214,000 signatures on a letter that garnered little attention on Capitol Hill. OfA's lack of impact may come as a surprise to anyone who thought the youthful energy of the Obama campaign would transfer to the Obama agenda. The 'Meter [knows its history](#) and is less than shocked but still docks Obama five points for his supporters' new mantra: "Yes, We Can—If We Feel Like It."

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

Big Crowds, Few Promises

Obama wows crowds in Europe but comes back largely empty-handed.

By Molly Redden

Monday, April 6, 2009, at 3:15 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.

President Obama spent the last few days speechifying, something he does pretty well. That's not to say his European tour has been an unmitigated success. Powerful oratory mixed with a rejection of American policies adds up to a **27 on the Change-o-Meter**.

Addressing Turkey's Grand National Assembly, Obama stressed that America "is not and never will be at war with Islam" and said he supports Turkey's bid to become part of the European Union. The 'Meter will get to that in a moment, but not before it notes Obama's decision to [avoid condemning the Armenian genocide of 1915](#), which is still the cause for a lot of tension in Turkish politics. As [Christopher Hitchens notes](#) today in *Slate*, Obama's view of this issue used to be much less ambivalent: In 2006, he wrote a letter to the State Department "roundly stating that the occurrence of the Armenian genocide in 1915 'is not an allegation, a personal opinion, or a point of view, but rather a widely documented fact supported by an overwhelming body of historical evidence.' " The truth costs Obama five points on the Change-o-Meter.

Yet the Turkish public was largely pleased with and supportive of Obama. (For evidence, look no further than the baker who [emblazoned a giant baklava](#) with Obama's image.) After eight years of stony relations between Turkey and the United States, that's not insignificant. Americans are pretty [happy with the president's efforts](#) to patch up relations with Muslim populations, even if their feelings about the religion itself are less generous. The 'Meter awards 30 points for the cause.

Obama didn't do so badly in the Czech Republic, either. The nation whose prime minister called Obama's economic recovery plan "[the way to hell](#)" just last week found itself "[transfixed](#)" by Obama's oratory, reports the *New York Times*. That's all fine and good, but it probably still [won't get the United States that missile base it wanted](#) in the country. But the 'Meter will award five points for making nice with [a key player in the world's biggest trading bloc](#).

Speaking before NATO, Obama [failed to rally major European allies](#), such as France and Germany, to pledge troop support in Afghanistan. Last week, individual countries at the G20 summit were also loath to pledge more stimulus money than they already had. The revelation that Obama is not a diplomatic Jesus steals 15 points from the 'Meter.

Back at the ranch, Rasmussen Reports found that [57 percent of Americans support a military response to North Korea's weekend missile launch](#). Sorry, America, but since most experts say North Korea's nuclear capabilities are years away from being truly developed, the 'Meter is going to have to side with Obama on this one. His promise to [aggressively pursue nuclear disarmament](#) is by no means guaranteed to foil North Korea's pursuit of nuclear capabilities, especially if Obama's diplomatically challenged predecessor's efforts are any indication. But coupled with his [pledge to reduce America's own cache of nukes](#), the absence of a knee-jerk military reaction to a bum missile launch pleases the 'Meter. Ten points for Obama. What say you now, [Hillary](#)?

Bonus 'Meter points: Obama worked some "flawless" Czech and Turkish into his speeches—and so far has escaped charges that he accidentally [called himself a doughnut](#). Two 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.

chatterbox

A Beat-Sweetener Sampler

The unreliable narrator's guide to Obama's new team.

By Timothy Noah

Wednesday, April 8, 2009, at 2:27 PM ET

This is the season of the [beat-sweetener](#). A beat-sweetener (some prefer the term [source-greaser](#)) is a gratuitously flattering profile that a reporter writes about a government official in the hope that it will encourage (or, at the very least, not impede) that reporter's access to the official in question. Newspapers and magazines have been full of them, and even the uninitiated may feel they've been reading a lot of dull profiles lately without knowing exactly why. My advice is to adopt a defensive-reader posture and treat *all* profiles of Obama's new team as guilty until proven innocent. If you encounter emollient rhetoric in the first five paragraphs, skip the rest and move on. A beat-sweetener is a meal prepared for someone other than yourself, and there's no reason you should waste precious time ingesting it.

Bloggers have lately been debating the ethics of beat-sweeteners. Atrios [denounced](#) them as an artifact of "elite pristine journalism." Matthew Yglesias [bemoaned](#) "the widespread *social and professional* acceptance of this kind of thing." Ezra Klein [said](#) beat-sweeteners "tend to be positive because, well, the players haven't done anything yet" and defended them as "legitimate profiles with positive side effects." Such gum-beating is symptomatic of contemporary press criticism, which tends to define everything in terms of professional ethics because that's the only normative vocabulary even upstart bloggers feel comfortable with. In so doing, these critics pronounce to be immoral what is merely second-rate. A beat-sweetener is unethical only in the attenuated sense that a passionately devoted artisanal cobbler might regard as unethical a handmade loafer with poor stitching. It's lousy craftsmanship, not an ethical lapse warranting extensive debate. It is also an unwise marketing strategy. At a time when readers are abandoning newspapers and magazines in droves, it hardly behooves reporters to bore them. What's the value of access if you have no public to share it with?

The beat-sweetener, I submit, is best regarded not in a spirit of censure but in a spirit of playful mockery. That's why, at the start of George W. Bush's presidency, I sponsored a [Slate contest](#) inviting readers to submit parody beat-sweeteners of people like Adolf Eichmann and Kim Jong-il. (Click [here](#) for the winners.) This time out, I've created a sampler of real beat-sweeteners: a chart that identifies author, subject, one or more examples of shamelessly flattering writing, one or more examples of less-flattering details that were left out, and links to less-flattering information sources that might serve as antidotes to the praise—a beat-sourer, if you will. I chose my samples carefully, knowing the beat-sweetener designation can be a little indiscriminate. For example, there have been some cavils about Anne Kornblut's [Washington Post profile](#) of White House deputy chief of staff Jim Messina. It may not be the most exciting newspaper profile you'll read in 2009, but it doesn't strike me as excessively kissy-face, and I can't identify any obvious skeletons in Messina's closet that Kornblut left out. Similarly, Louise Story's recent [New York Times profile](#) of Steven Rattner, the Obama administration's unofficial car czar, smells from a distance like a beat-sweetener—Rattner is, among other things, a onetime business reporter for the *Times*, and he's pretty tight with *Times* Publisher Arthur Sulzberger Jr.—but if you take the trouble to read it, you'll find a decently nuanced if unexciting character sketch, neither especially favorable nor especially unfavorable. These profiles flunked my test for an authentic beat-sweetener, which requires the conscious reader to pause, smite his forehead, and ask: "Who the hell wrote this crap? His mother?"

My beat-sweetener survey does not attempt to be comprehensive. Rather, it allows you to sample the variety of pablum that's out there and offers some explanation of how each source-greaser falls short of the usual standards. (See below.)

					<p>In the April 3 "Faith-Based," Michael Sean Winters federal inspectors graded Schwarzhild the president of the complex in the Bronx an "A" on a 100-point scale—a score so bad the buildings now face demolition.</p> <p>In the April 3 "Sports," Charlie P. Pierce originally stated that the 1974 NCAA Tournament took place 25 years ago; Jarrett, then a senior adviser to Obama's campaign and still president of the Habitat Co., declined to answer questions about the group, citing what she calls a "conflict of interest." Habitat's former business partners.</p>
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corrections
Corrections

Friday, April 10, 2009, at 6:53 AM ET

In the April 8 "[Faith-Based](#)," Michael Lukas misidentified the Egyptian sun god Aton as Akhenaton.

In the April 8 "[Today's Papers](#)," Daniel Politi stated that Obama's recent trip to Europe and the Middle East was his first abroad. Obama had previously been to Canada.

In the April 7 "[Jurisprudence](#)," Dan Redman relied on an Associated Press story that incorrectly states that the *Oxford English Dictionary* has a draft entry, yet to be published, in which the definition of marriage includes the phrase "long-term relationships between partners of the same sex." The *OED's* definition of marriage has recognized same-sex marriage since 2000. The fact that the *OED's* entry is headed with the note "Draft revision Mar. 2009" does not mean that that's when the entry first appeared in this form. It means that revisions to the entry—though not related to the same-sex marriage point—were published at that time.

In an April 7 "[XX Factor](#)" post, E.J. Graff originally wrote that she wanted to run up to Burlington, Vt., to kiss every legislator who voted in favor of gay marriage. Vermont legislators work out of the state capital, Montpelier.

Due to a copy-editing error, an April 6 "[Politics](#)" misstated the math behind the St. Petersburg Paradox.

In the April 6 "[Webhead](#)," Christopher Beam misspelled the name of Symantec Security Response.

In an April 6 "[XX Factor](#)" post, Jessica Grose incorrectly stated that a suicidal Twitter user was in San Diego, Calif. She was in San Jose.

In a March 6 "[Jurisprudence](#)," Julian Davis Mortenson said Augusto Pinochet was the ex-dictator of Argentina. He was from Chile.

If you believe you have found an inaccuracy in a Slate story, please send an e-mail to corrections@slate.com, and we will investigate. General comments should be [posted](#) in "The Fray," our reader discussion forum.

culture gabfest
The Culture Gabfest, Empty Calories Edition

Listen to *Slate's* show about the week in culture.
 By Stephen Metcalf, Dana Stevens, and Julia Turner
 Wednesday, April 8, 2009, at 12:04 PM ET

[Listen](#) to *Culture Gabfest No. 31* with Stephen Metcalf, Dana Stevens, and Julia Turner by clicking the arrow on the audio player below:

You can also download the program [here](#), or you can subscribe to the biweekly Culture Gabfest podcast feed in iTunes [here](#).

Get your 14-day free trial from our sponsor Audible.com, which includes a credit for one free audiobook, [here](#). (Audiobook of the week: Cornelia Funke's [Inkheart](#), read by Lynn Redgrave; James L. Swanson's [Manhunt](#), read by Richard Thomas.)

Find the Culturefest Facebook page [here](#). Leave us a note and see what other Culturefest listeners have to say about the latest podcast. Also, help the Culturefesters try Twitter by following the feeds of [Stephen](#), [Dana](#) and [Julia](#).

In this week's Culture Gabfest, our critics discuss the new film *Sugar* and the possible rise of Neo-Neorealism, Levi Johnston's

interview with Tyra Banks, and the war between sugar and high-fructose corn syrup.

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

The official [Web site](#) for the film *Sugar*
A.O. Scott's [article](#) on neo-neorealism in the *New York Times Magazine*
Richard Brody's [argument](#) against Scott's article in *The New Yorker's* film blog (and Scott's [response](#) on NYTimes.org)
[Clips](#) of Levi Johnston's Tyra appearance (via Huffington Post)
Rebecca Traister's [take](#) on the Levi/Tyra interview in *Salon*
[People.com](#) on the Palins' response to Johnston's interview
Kim Severson's [article](#) in the *New York Times* on the return of sugar
SweetSurprise.com, the Corn Refiners Association's [Web site](#) on "The Facts About High Fructose Corn Syrup"
A [summary](#) of the HFCS issues on the blog Neurotopia

Additionally, at the end of the Gabfest, Stephen Metcalf interviews University of California-Berkeley philosopher and neuroscientist [Alva Noë](#) about his new book, [Out of Our Heads: Why You Are Not Your Brain](#).

The Culture Gabfest weekly endorsements:

Dana's pick: blog-of-many-interests [the Sheila Variations](#).
Julia's pick: Short, Web-based cooking videos (in particular, *New York's* [video](#) with Le Bernardin chef Eric Ripert).
Stephen's picks: the food blog [Vegan Yum Yum](#) and Neko Case's album [Fox Confessor Brings the Flood](#).

You can e-mail us at culturefest@slate.com.

Posted on April 8 by Jacob Ganz at 11:44 a.m.

March 25, 2009

Listen to Culture Gabfest No. 30 with Stephen Metcalf, Dana Stevens, and Julia Turner by clicking the arrow on the audio player below:

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Get your 14-day free trial from our sponsor Audible.com, which includes a credit for one free audio book, [here](#). (Audiobook of the week: [Poetry on Record](#).)

In this week's Culture Gabfest, our critics discuss Paul Rudd and Jason Segel's bromance in the new movie *I Love You, Man*; the implications of the Obamas' vegetable garden; and the off-the-

record media listserv JournoList. And as a bonus, Stephen Metcalf interviews David Grann, the author of [The Lost City of Z](#), after the show.

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

The official [Web site](#) for the movie *I Love You, Man*.
Dana Stevens' [Slate review](#) of *I Love You, Man* (where you can also find the Spoiler Special podcast on the movie).
Leslie Fiedler's classic [Love and Death in the American Novel](#), which examines male friendship in American literature.
The *New York Times* [piece on](#) the Obamas' vegetable garden ([see map](#)).
Andrew Martin's *NYT* [article](#) about the state of the sustainable food movement.
Mark Bittman's *NYT* [article](#) about the false belief that organic equals healthy.
Michael Calderone's [article](#) about JournoList on Politico.com.
Reihan Salam's [response](#) to the Politico article on the *Atlantic's* Web site.
Slate's Mickey Kaus [blog](#) entries about the JournoList dust-up.

The Culture Gabfest weekly endorsements:

Dana's pick: the [remarkable](#) work of YouTube Bollywood translation artist [Buffalax](#).
Julia's pick: David Byrne and Brian Eno's album [Everything That Happens Will Happen Today](#).
Stephen's pick: Henri-alban Alain-Fournier's [Le Grande Meaulnes](#).

You can e-mail us, and send us your thoughts on how to pronounce the name of Alain-Fournier's book, at culturefest@slate.com.

Posted on March 25 by Jacob Ganz at 11:26 a.m.

March 11, 2009

Listen to Culture Gabfest No. 29 with Stephen Metcalf, Dana Stevens, and Julia Turner by clicking the arrow on the audio player below:

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*Get your 14-day free trial from our sponsor Audible.com, which includes a credit for one free audio book, [here](#). (Audiobook of the week: Michael Chabon's *Wonder Boys*.)*

In this week's Culture Gabfest, our critics discuss the new movie version of the classic graphic novel [Watchmen](#); Elaine Showalter's new book on the canon of female American writers, [A Jury of Her Peers](#); and a 'tween-style makeover for kiddie cartoon hero Dora the Explorer.

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

Dana Stevens' [Watchmen review](#).
"What if Woody Allen Had Directed *Watchmen*?"—a [slide show](#) on [Slate](#).
Katha Pollitt's [Slate review](#) of *A Jury of Her Peers*.
Laura Miller's [Salon review](#) of *A Jury of Her Peers*.
Katie Roiphe's *New York Times* [review](#) of *A Jury of Her Peers*.
A Washingtonpost.com piece about [Dora the Explorer's makeover](#).
Brendan I. Koerner's *Slate* column about [Dora's rise to power](#).

The Culture Gabfest weekly endorsements:

Dana's pick: Alison Bechdel's graphic novel [Fun Home](#).
Julia's pick: David Segal's segment of the "[My Big Break](#)" episode of *This American Life*.
Stephen's picks: [For Emma, Forever Ago](#) by Bon Iver (however you pronounce it) and [The Queen Is Dead](#) by the Smiths.

You can e-mail us at culturefest@slate.com.

Posted on March 11 by Jacob Ganz at 12:39 p.m.

Feb. 25, 2009

Listen to Culture Gabfest No. 28 with Stephen Metcalf, Dana Stevens, and Julia Turner by clicking the arrow on the audio player below:

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Get your 14-day free trial from our sponsor Audible.com, which includes a credit for one free audio book, [here](#). (Audio book of the week: Steve Martin's Born Standing Up.)

In this week's Culture Gabfest, our critics discuss the Oscars, the rant of CNBC commentator Rick Santelli, the adventures of Octomom, and the Tropicana juice carton revolt.

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

Dana Stevens and *Slate* TV critic Troy Patterson's [discussion](#) of the Oscars.

Julia Turner and Amanda Fortini's [discussion](#) of Oscar fashions.
Ron Rosenbaum's *Slate* [piece](#) on *The Reader*.
Rick Santelli's [CNBC rant](#).
John Dickerson's *Slate* [piece](#) on Santelli's rant and the White House response to it.
A *New York Times* [piece](#) on the Tropicana packaging retraction.
The (possibly fake) Pepsi Co. [branding memo](#) unearthed by Gawker.

The Culture Gabfest weekly endorsements:

Dana's pick: [Ricky Gervais](#)' podcast.
Julia's pick: A tolerable romantic comedy: [Definitely, Maybe](#).
Stephen's pick: The Danny Boyle film [Shallow Grave](#).

You can e-mail us at culturefest@slate.com.

Posted on Feb. 25 at 1:28 p.m. by Julia Turner.

dear prudence It's a Jungle Down There

My lady's natural bikini line will shock my parents during our beach visit. How do I get her to shave?

Thursday, April 9, 2009, at 6:30 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,

Last fall, I met a terrific woman from the Mediterranean who may be "the one." She's beautiful and has a great body that she likes to show off, but she is also very hairy. She never shaved back home, and having now been steeped in years of women's studies in the United States, she has become militant about not conforming to the ideal of hairless womanhood. She can't wait to spend lots of time at my parents' beach house this summer. She has bought a tiny bikini that she plans on wearing, so lots of her pubic hair is guaranteed to be on display. My mom and dad are going to faint. Hair in the armpits? European. Hair on the legs? Granola. But pubic hair all over the place? I've told her she may want to "trim up a bit," but she refuses. What to do, besides hide her from my mom and dad?

—Hairified

Dear Hairified,

If she feels about you the way you feel about her, surely she wants to snatch this opportunity to make a good impression on your parents. Appeal to her vanity: Tell her that if she refuses to trim her undergrowth, your parents' embarrassment will keep them from appreciating her great mind and beautiful figure.

Appeal to her sophistication: Since she's lived a cross-cultural life, she knows that making a small gesture can be all that's needed to keep from muffing a sensitive encounter. Appeal to her affection for you: Explain that if her pubic hair is also her public hair, you're going to want to hide in the bushes.

Emphasize that you are not asking for permanent defoliation, just for an application of depilatory so that when beach time comes around and your neither European nor granola parents see her itsy-bitsy, teeny-weeny bikini, their hair won't stand on end.

—Prudie

Dear Prudence Video: Wife-Free Vacation

Dear Prudence,

I am a college sophomore living in a dormitory. The majority of us engage in small, college-type debauchery (e.g., underage drinking, loud music, minor drug use) that the resident director more or less ignores. The problem is a nosy girl who lives across the hall. She appears to have the entire college rule book memorized and takes a special thrill in reporting people for infractions. Recently, after hearing that a freshman was selling drugs, she went directly to the police. The boy's room was raided, narcotics were found, and he was expelled. He was popular, and now animosity toward her has reached a fever pitch. In response, she has started complaining about individuals in Facebook posts, yelling from her open door about the horrible people in our hall, etc. Her obsession with school code and inability to get along is frightening, and even though I don't smoke or drink, I feel what she's doing is over the line. Do I have justification to complain to the RD, or should I simply try to ignore her and hope that she doesn't decide to watch me too intently?

—Utterly Confused

Dear Utterly Confused,

Some students are pre-med, some are pre-law, and your dorm mate is pre-internal affairs. Although she's wreaking havoc, she also sounds like a sad case with an emotional disorder who may be destined to go through life alienating people—unless she manages to get ahold of power and goes through life destroying people. However, while she may be obsessed with those who violate the rules, surely your campus code has something to say about screaming abuse at people or making ad hominem online attacks. You should go to your resident director to discuss this. You might want to take someone else from the dorm with you so it doesn't sound like a personal vendetta, but don't bring a big group because you don't want to sound like a mob. Describe

specific incidents as dispassionately as possible, and explain how this student has created an atmosphere of hostility and fear. You can express sympathy about what an unhappy person she must be, but explain something needs to be done because her unhappiness is making everyone else miserable.

—Prudie

Dear Prudence,

I am a photographer and was asked by a friend of my mother's to do a photo project. She asked me whether I could take pictures of her demonstrating various ways of committing suicide in black and white, then paint red blood on the prints afterward. I know that this woman has had problems with depression in the past. My mom is her very close friend, and she asked me not to tell my mother about the project. She said this project is to help her work through some issues. Do I do it? Do I tell my mother about this in case her friend is seriously contemplating suicide? Do you think presenting her with images of her own fake suicide will encourage or discourage suicidal thoughts?

—To Shoot or Not To Shoot

Dear To Shoot,

This woman could have gone to a photographer she doesn't know and explained she's taking a conceptual art class on taboo breaking. Instead, she came to the child of her close friend with this macabre project. This is what's known as "a cry for help." It is a sign of how confused her psychological state is that she would involve a young person toward whom she should have some motherly feelings in this disturbing enterprise. If a chronically depressed person wants to rehearse and record various methods of killing herself, then she needs immediate intervention, because her actions are shrieking that she's a suicide risk. You must tell your mother, and your mother should call her friend's therapist. If her friend doesn't have one, your mother should call the [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](https://www.nationalsuicideline.com/) (1-800-273-TALK) for advice on getting her friend some help. Do not feel guilty about telling this secret—that's a burden you should not keep.

—Prudie

Dear Prudie,

I had been dating the man I thought I would spend the rest of my life with for almost two years when his ex-wife told him she was dying of cancer and that he should come back to be with her and their son. She put so much guilt on him that he would hardly talk to me. Then one day she called to tell me they were getting back together! He never had the nerve to tell me. I was devastated and could hardly function for months. It takes too much effort to be mad, so I told him that I forgave him and I hoped he and his son were happy. A month ago, I encountered someone I had known 20 years ago in high school. He is a wonderful person, and I can imagine a future with him. We have been inseparable. The

kicker is that now the man who dumped me realizes that he made a huge mistake because he found out that the ex is not dying—it's just more of her lies and manipulation. I love him more than anything, but I just don't know if I can risk being hurt like that again. Do I go back to him or stay with the new man, who is not the type ever to hurt anyone?

—Back or Forth

Dear Back,

You might want to consider sending a big bouquet to your ex's ex, since she saved you from life with a weak weasel. It is possible to have some sympathy for someone who breaks off a current relationship to go back to a dying former wife, but if she's a well-known manipulator, it would be a good idea to see an x-ray of the tumor before heading home. Every time you consider resuming a relationship with this guy, try recalling the miserable, cowardly way he treated you. You, however, behaved magnanimously, and maybe that's why the gods of romance have shined down on you and brought you this lovely man from your past. You're still emotionally vulnerable, so I suggest you take it slow and steady with your high-school guy—he may be everything you say, but you may be prone to idealizing your beaux. And when your ex begs your forgiveness, remind him you've already forgiven him once, and once was enough.

—Prudie

drink

Not Such a G'Day

How Yellow Tail crushed the Australian wine industry.

By Mike Steinberger

Wednesday, April 8, 2009, at 1:46 PM ET

A few years ago, Australian wines were the hottest around: Consumers couldn't get enough of those strapping shirazes with the quirky names (the Mad Hatter, the Dead Arm, the Ball Buster) and the eye-catching labels. Across all price points, Australia was ascendant. Not anymore: Buyers who used to make a beeline for the Antipodean section of their local wine shops are today waltzing right past it. Depending on who's doing the counting, exports of Australian wines to the United States fell by 15 percent to 26 percent in value last year; whatever the precise figure, the arrows are all pointing sharply downward, and with retailers paring back their Aussie selections in response to the flagging demand, this year threatens more of the same. *Foster's* may be Australian for *beer* (mate); it appears that *screwed* is now Australian for *wine*.

To be sure, vintners everywhere are struggling on account of the global economic crisis, and Australia has been hit especially hard by the gyrations in the financial markets. The Australian dollar surged to a 25-year high against the U.S. dollar last summer, which was a big headache for a wine industry heavily dependent on sales abroad. Unremittingly severe weather has also had devastating consequences. Droughts have ravaged parts of Australian wine country. The recent heat wave and wildfires in Victoria destroyed wineries and damaged a number of vineyards, with as much as 70 percent of the crop lost in some areas. But while the Australians have been victimized by a run of bad luck, their woes are mostly self-generated; they've trashed their own brand, a point many of them now concede.

The biggest problem is that Australia has made itself synonymous in the minds of many drinkers with cut-rate, generic wines. Thanks to industrial giants like Jacob's Creek and Rosemount, Australia has long been a prime source of mass-market chardonnays and shirazes. In recent years, however, it has flooded the planet with discount juice. Much of the credit, or blame, for this can be pinned not on a conglomerate but on a family of Sicilian immigrants in New South Wales. In 2001, Filippo Casella and his son John launched a line of wines called Yellow Tail, whose colorful label featured that iconic Australian, the wallaby. The appealing packaging, combined with the decent quality of the wines and the low price (\$7), proved to be a masterstroke: In just three years, Yellow Tail became the most popular imported wine in the United States, with sales of around 4 million cases annually. (Sales have nearly doubled since, and according to industry analyst Eileen Fredrikson, Yellow Tail today accounts for almost half the Australian wine purchased here.)

However, what was good for Yellow Tail wasn't so great for the Australian wines as a whole. For one thing, Yellow Tail spawned a legion of imitators, and retail shelves were soon crawling with "critter" labels featuring penguins, crocodiles, and other regional fauna. At the same time, Yellow Tail's success prompted rival Australian brands to focus even more of their efforts on the budget category. As a result, consumers came to equate Australia with wines that were flavorful but also cheap and frivolous, a perception that became a major liability when those same consumers got interested in more serious stuff; rather than looking to Oz, they turned to Spain, Italy, and France.

Sales of inexpensive Australian wines (\$12 and under) are still fairly robust, but Australia's dominance in the bargain bins is being challenged now by low-cost producers in countries like Argentina (whose exports to the United States jumped 31 percent last year), Chile, and South Africa. Among industry insiders, it is widely agreed that Australia no longer has a competitive advantage in this segment of the market and that the emphasis on value wines has been a colossal blunder. Paul Henry of the Australian Wine and Brandy Corp., a government-sponsored marketing organization, recently told Reuters that the

days in which Australia led the world in its "ability to produce large volumes of compellingly branded easy-drinking wine" were over. The consensus is that Australia needs to reintroduce itself to consumers—to acquaint them with the quality of Australian *terroir* and with the country's enormous viticultural diversity. The hope is that this will help persuade them to pony up for pricier wines.

However, premium Australian wines are suffering, too. According to Nielsen, while overall sales of wines costing \$15 and more are up 2 percent in the last year, Australian wines in that category have declined 17 percent. The market for the costliest Australian wines has essentially collapsed. Chuck Hayward of the Jug Shop, a San Francisco retailer with one of the best Australian selections in the country, says his sales of Australian wines costing \$40 and up are off 50 percent. Another merchant, Daniel Posner of Grapes the Wine Co. in White Plains, N.Y., reports a similar fall and says he has cut his Australian inventory by half in recent months—from 135 different wines down to 70.

But then, the problem for top-shelf Australian wines isn't price so much as taste. In the last decade, ultraripe, high-alcohol, extravagantly oaked shirazes from the Barossa Valley and McLaren Vale, regions close to Adelaide, came to dominate the luxury end of the Australian wine market in the United States. It is a rendering of shiraz that Robert Parker happens to adore, and the huge scores that his publication, the *Wine Advocate*, awarded many of the wines made them wildly popular, which encouraged producers to pump out more and more of these purple people-eaters (the ever-decorous Australians refer to them as "leg spreaders") and retailers and importers to load up on them.

But consumers have now soured on this genre. Hayward thinks it is a case of fruit-bomb fatigue—that people ultimately found the wines to be overbearing and tiresome. It didn't help that a lot of these wines seemed to share the same basic profile—sweet, jammy fruit, strong oak influences—and were more or less indistinguishable from one another. It has also been suggested that many of the hulking shirazes were simply overrated. Whatever the case, pricey Australian wines are now the lepers of the fine-wine market, and many oenophiles appear to have written off Australia entirely. "It is a nightmarish situation," says Posner.

It is certainly an unfortunate one, because Australia is capable of producing sensational wines, a point convincingly demonstrated at a Penfolds tasting I attended in New York last fall. Penfolds is Australia's best-known winery and makes its most famous wine, Penfolds Grange, a shiraz that has long been considered among the pre-eminent liquid collectibles. The lunch included the 2002, 1991, and 1990 Grange, all of which were terrific, as well as the 1990 vintage of the Bin 707 Cabernet Sauvignon, another benchmark Australian wine. They also served the Penfolds 1962 Bin 60A Cabernet-Shiraz and the 1967 Bin 7 Cabernet-Shiraz,

two celebrated rarities. Although both were now a little creaky, they were still superb, with as much complexity and nuance as you could hope to find in a wine.

While Penfolds is itself one of the major Australian brands and is owned by an even bigger brand, the Foster's Group (yes, *that* Foster's), it continues to turn out an impressive portfolio. The Grange is a hefty investment—\$250 to \$400 a bottle, depending on the vintage—and the Bin 707 isn't cheap, either, selling for around \$90 to \$100. But Penfolds produces a number of less-expensive bottlings, including one of the wine world's best-kept secrets: the St. Henri Shiraz. Made without any new oak (it can be done!), the St. Henri is a delicious shiraz that can age for decades and easily holds its own against wines from France's Northern Rhone Valley (syrah's heartland). It goes for around \$50 a bottle and should ideally be kept in the cellar for at least a few years; if curiosity pulls the cork, you should decant it for several hours before serving.

Not every Australian wine is big and red: The country also produces excellent dry rieslings. Look for examples from Grosset, Frankland Estate, and Kilikanoon as well as the Penfolds Bin 51 Riesling (\$17) and a favorite of mine, the Leeuwin Estate Art Series Riesling (\$21). Leeuwin, which is in the Margaret River district of Western Australia and also produces well-regarded chardonnays, cabernets, and shirazes, is represented in the United States by Old Bridge Cellars, one of several importers putting an accent on regional diversity and finesse-driven winemaking. While I definitely prefer elegance over power, I find that some of the more restrained Australian wines lack personality; it is almost as if they've had the character leached out of them. Harnessed exuberance is exactly what I want from Australian wines, but achieving that state of equilibrium is evidently not easy. That said, there are some good wines being imported by Old Bridge, as well as the Australian Premium Wine Collection, Epicurean Wines, and Southern Starz.

Surprisingly, some of the best Australian wines I've tasted recently are the handiwork of a pair of Americans, Aspen-based sommelier Richard Betts and his friend Dennis Scholl, an art collector and oenophile. Betts & Scholl, as their label is known, is producing wine in France, California, and Australia. Teaming up with winemaker Christian Canute, one of the leading talents in the Barossa Valley, Betts & Scholl puts out two exemplary grenaches, the O.G. (\$29) and the Chronique (\$49). These are big but balanced wines, full of sunshine and warmth and with a terrific herbal kick that evokes thoughts of Châteauneuf-du-Pape. With an assist from another eminent Australian vintner, Trevor Jones, Betts & Scholl also crafts a very winning riesling (\$29); made in the Eden Valley, in South Australia, it is a crisp, spirited wine with bright fruit and pronounced minerality.

dvd extras

Wauaugh!

Howard the Duck, George Lucas' best movie about a talking duck, finally arrives on DVD.

By Keith Phipps

Tuesday, April 7, 2009, at 6:39 AM ET

Failure goes by many names. Waterloo. The Edsel. The '62 Mets. [Joey](#). These disasters can fairly be called upon to convey calamity on a large scale. But some reputations for failure are undeserved. Here's one: *Howard the Duck*, a synonym for artistic and financial disaster since the premiere of a little-loved movie in late-summer 1986. Released with great fanfare and rejected emphatically by critics and audiences alike, *Howard the Duck* quickly became a favorite target of late-night comics (and even, in one episode, [The Golden Girls](#)). It wasn't available on DVD [until last month](#).

Howard the Duck, the movie, is as bad as you've heard. Actually, it's worse. But its failings as a film have overshadowed the frequently brilliant 1970s comic book that inspired it. Using only the most superficial elements of its source material while discarding most of what made the comic interesting, the film serves as a textbook example of how to turn something into nothing.

Howard, the character, first appeared in a 1973 issue of *Adventure Into Fear*, dropping from another dimension into a story starring the swamp monster Man-Thing and the barbarian warrior Korrek, who emerged from a jar of peanut butter. Clearly, this wasn't the usual comic-book adventure. Nor was its writer the usual comic-book writer. A comics fan from an early age, Steve Gerber was of the generation of 1960s readers who haunted comic books' letters pages, offering colorfully phrased praise and criticism, and then took over the industry in the 1970s. At Marvel, Gerber earned a reputation for inventive characters, new takes on old standbys, and a streak of wicked, self-aware humor that owed as much to Robert Crumb and *Mad* as Stan Lee.

When Gerber died at the age of 60 last year, tributes—including [Grady Hendrix's](#) for *Slate*—stressed that his influence stretched beyond *Howard the Duck*. But there's a reason Howard was his most famous creation: He channeled Gerber's acidic humor, emphasizing satire and philosophical asides over slapstick. His hero may have been a visitor from another dimension, but Gerber didn't dwell on it, using him instead as an acerbic Everyman, always a bit appalled and disappointed by the world around him. He was a stand-in for a generation that grew up believing in '60s idealism only to see it turn into Me Decade self-absorption. Gerber counted existentialist icon Albert Camus among his heroes, and the comic's tagline—"Trapped in a world

he never made!"—doubles as a sendup of Marvel's hyperbolic prose and a statement of philosophical purpose.

Howard was first drawn by Val Mayerick, then Frank Brunner and John Buscema. But it was Gene Colan's art that defined the title. Grounded in illustrative realism, Colan would seem to have no business working on a funny animal book, but the pairing proved inspired. Landing in Cleveland, Howard walked through an instantly recognizable 1970s America filled with urban grime, religious cults, moral crusaders, and spectacle-first politics. One of the comic's best jokes is also its subtlest: Each issue usually contained at least one panel of someone reacting in surprise at encountering a talking duck—followed by Howard's annoyance at their reaction. Yes, he was a duck, but that was beside the point. It was the world around him that was *really* weird.

Howard's duckdom asserted itself most often through his signature exclamation—"Wauaugh!"—part surprised squawk, part *cri de coeur*, and Gerber's stories always gave him plenty of reasons to squawk. Howard's companion in his adventures was Beverly Switzler, a sometime model who takes the duck into her home and heart. Gerber was coy about the exact nature of their relationship, but their squabbles and reconciliations have the lived-in feel of a volatile-but-viable love affair. The comic's early, best issues find the pair dealing with petty jealousies—and the occasional supervillain—while trying to scrape together an honest living in a dishonest world. (In one issue, Howard takes a job as a repo man for a rent-to-own business only to quit in disgust.)

Gerber didn't stick with the comic's initial setup for too long, sometimes to his creation's benefit, sometimes not. An extended road trip found Howard running for president—he didn't win—and Gerber engaging in storylines and formal experiments that varied from brilliant to bizarre to strained. Working, by his own admission, from no grand scheme, Gerber threw in hallucinations, dream sequences, pop-culture parodies, and whatever else he thought he could get away with. Once promoted to the title's editor, he got away with a lot. In "Zen and the Art of Comic Book Writing," an issue easier to admire than enjoy, Gerber throws the plot out the window for an extended, self-reflective essay on his own craft that includes a fourth-wall-breaking conversation with Howard and an "obligatory fight scene" involving a lampshade, a showgirl, and an ostrich.

For such an eccentric creation, Howard found a surprisingly wide audience, earning a mention in a Pretenders song and a daily newspaper strip, an honor previously bestowed only on one other original Marvel creation, Spider-Man. Then, in 1978, Gerber left Marvel, after a conflict that began with corporate politics, editorial battles, and late payments for the newspaper strip and escalated into a full-blown legal fight for the rights to *Howard the Duck*. Marvel handed Howard over to other writers as Gerber waged a public battle for control, at one point even launching a thinly veiled allegory called *Destroyer Duck* with

artist Jack Kirby, who was engaged in his own struggle with Marvel at the time. But by 1986, Gerber and Marvel had come to terms, a settlement kept private but apparently partly tied up with the development of a sure-to-be-blockbuster film produced by high-profile fan George Lucas.

The film hit screens with the credit "Based on the Marvel Comics character 'Howard the Duck' created by Steve Gerber," but as happy endings go, it's pretty miserable. Directed by Willard Hyuck and co-written by Hyuck and Gloria Katz, the writing team behind Lucas' classic *American Graffiti*, the film essentially takes a single joke—he's a duck!—and repeats it for nearly two hours to the accompaniment of explosions. Little of Howard's original personality remains, the depressive tendencies replaced by Catskills-quality wisecracks. In Katz's and Hyuck's hands, he's not a particularly endearing character, and he's an eyesore to boot.

Howard never looks like anything but a little person in an unconvincing Halloween costume, even when he's surrounded with some of the best special effects 1986 dollars could buy.

Yes, that is Tim Robbins. *Howard* is very much a Lucas production, and the sensibilities never mesh. An early scene of Howard working in a sleazy massage parlor maintains a bit of Gerber's humor and a later set piece that takes place in Joe Roma's Cajun Sushi is a positively Gerberian take on '80s culinary fads. But after a while, everything takes a backseat to indifferently staged action set pieces and a special-effects extravaganza in which a Lovecraft-ian beastie attempts to take over the world, with only a duck standing in its way. While a scantily clad Lea Thompson gives a game performance as Beverly—now a struggling member of an all-girl band—her flirtatious relationship with Howard feels creepy. It's one thing for a pen-and-ink woman to have a thing for a sentient duck, quite another when the woman doing the feather-stroking is made of flesh and blood.

The film hollows out Gerber's creation and uses what's left as a vessel for a tacky and trend-chasing would-be crowd-pleaser. In short, Katz and Hyuck didn't get it and still don't. "This is a movie about a duck from outer space," Katz says in a new interview on one of the DVD's bonus features. "It's not supposed to be an existential experience."

Except, of course, it *was* supposed to be exactly that. Comics writer Alan Moore, whose dislike for adaptations of his books has been widely documented, is fond of telling a story about Raymond Chandler. When asked if he worried about Hollywood ruining his books, Chandler replied, "They're not ruined. They're right there on the shelf." But if Gerber's story illustrates anything, it's that Hollywood casts a long and lasting shadow. What little mystique *Howard the Duck* has earned over the years can be traced to its unavailability. That mystique is likely to fade soon after viewers drink in the film's opening scene, which finds

Howard lounging in his Duckworld apartment, reading a copy of *Playduck* beneath a poster for *Splashdance*. It's '80 blockbuster filmmaking at its most thoughtless, all laser beams and quips. Gerber's original, which has been collected and reprinted a couple of times (including last year in a handsome, if expensive, [hardcover](#)), remains as crankily original as ever. More people may know about Howard from his misadventure in filmmaking than his genre-busting adventures in the comics, but, thankfully, the latter are still right there on the shelf.

explainer

Getting High by Going Down

Can oral sex make you fail a drug test?

By Nina Shen Rastogi

Thursday, April 9, 2009, at 7:11 PM ET

A Manhattan cop who tested positive for cocaine claims he got the drugs in his system by performing oral sex on his girlfriend, whom he later discovered was a regular user. The *New York Daily News* [reported](#) yesterday that since the officer voluntarily submitted to the arm-hair drug test, he won't be allowed to return to the force, regardless. Can you really "passively ingest" drugs via cunnilingus?

Yes, but not enough to fail a drug test. You'd have to ingest at least 200 milligrams of cocaine over three months before it could be reliably [detected in your body hair](#). (That's the equivalent of about two lines.) It's unclear exactly how much cocaine comes out in the vaginal secretions of a regular user, but it's likely to be a very small amount.

We do have some equivalent information for men. A 1996 paper suggests that chronic users might excrete a peak level of [0.01 milligrams of cocaine per gram of semen](#) after the consumption of a particularly heavy dose. Since a typical ejaculation contains around two grams of semen, it would take 10,000 precisely timed sexual encounters over that three-month stretch before a nonuser faced any risk of failing a drug test. (According to court records, the cop and his girlfriend had sex "three or four times per week.") The study did point out that "absorption of cocaine from the vagina or rectum is generally efficient," but such a process would be unlikely to generate positive test results (or euphoria) in the partners of cocaine-using males.

Bonus Explainer: Court records in the New York case also said that the couple "would often sweat" during sex. Could skin-to-skin contact have caused a false positive on the exam? It's possible. Cocaine does get secreted in sweat at levels as high as 100 nanograms per milliliter. In theory, that's more than enough for some sweat-tainted arm hair to return a false positive. Yet a good lab would have subjected the test hair to a [thorough](#)

[washing procedure](#), which would have removed any surface contamination and leached out any traces of cocaine or its metabolites that managed to penetrate the outer layers of the hair. In the most stringent testing procedures, the levels of cocaine found in the wash residue are then subtracted from the levels found in the cleansed hair sample, which further reduces the chances of external contamination causing a false positive.

Explainer thanks Ed Cone of ConeChem Research and Bill Thistle of Psychemedics Corp.

Got a question about today's news? [Ask the Explainer](#).

explainer

Heated Controversy

Do firefighters believe 9/11 conspiracy theories?

By Christopher Beam

Wednesday, April 8, 2009, at 5:18 PM ET

In the new season of the FX drama *Rescue Me*, firefighter Franco Rivera [espouses](#) the belief that 9/11 was "an inside job." According to a Sunday [New York Times article](#), the show's writers added this assertion because actor Daniel Sunjata is a "truther"; but the real firefighters on set—who work as script advisers—were offended by his allegations. This got the Explainer wondering: Do any firefighters believe in 9/11 conspiracy theories?

Yes. There's no evidence that firefighters buy into 9/11 conspiracy theories at higher rates than the rest of the population. (A 2007 Zogby poll [found](#) that 26 percent of Americans believe the government "let it happen." A 2006 Scripps-Howard poll found it was [more than a third](#).) But some firemen do believe the government was behind 9/11 and use their status as first responders to draw attention to their statements.

The most common conspiracy theory held by firefighters is that the Twin Towers—as well as a third building, [7 World Trade Center](#)—collapsed not because planes crashed into them but due to a "controlled demolition." On Sept. 11, an NBC reporter [quoted](#) New York Fire Department Chief of Safety Albert Turi as saying he believed there were explosives planted in one of the towers. After the attacks, the New York Fire Department [interviewed](#) firefighters to create an oral history of 9/11. These tapes—which were not [released](#) until 2005—contain [numerous references](#) to explosions heard just before the buildings fell. [Firefighters for 9/11 Truth](#), a Web site started in 2008, says the government destroyed evidence that 7 World Trade Center was blown up and hosts a [petition](#) asking Congress to look into the

possibility that "exotic accelerants" destroyed the buildings. (The National Institute of Standards and Technology, which investigated the collapse of 7 World Trade Center, [concluded](#) that "blast events inside the building did not occur and found no evidence supporting the existence of a blast event.")

Another common theory is that federal agents found three of the planes' four black boxes and then hid or destroyed them because they contained incriminating evidence. Nicholas DeMasi, a firefighter formerly with Engine Company 261 in Queens, [was quoted](#) in a 2003 book saying that he was there when federal agents made the discovery. Another first responder [corroborated](#) his account. Although his allegations are contradicted by [The 9/11 Commission Report](#), which says the boxes were never found, many truthers choose to believe there was a cover-up.

Do other professions marshal their own expertise to poke holes in the official story? Absolutely. [Architects and Engineers for 9/11 Truth](#) point to the physics of the towers' collapse—its "free fall" pace, the "lateral ejection" of steel, the "mid-air pulverization of concrete"—as evidence that they could not have fallen exclusively because of the planes' impact. [Pilots for 9/11 Truth](#) have their own set of theories that focus on the planes' black boxes and flight paths, arguing, for example, that the hijackers of American Airlines Flight 77 would have had to perform an extremely difficult aerial maneuver to hit the Pentagon where they did. [Lawyers for 9/11 Truth](#) conclude that the 9/11 Commission investigation was inadequate. There's also [Scholars for 9/11 Truth and Justice](#) (not to be confused with its rival, Scholars for 9/11 Truth), which tackles scientific aspects of the towers' collapse, such as the alleged residue of explosive materials like [thermate](#) in the dust at Ground Zero. One notable group that does *not* have its own 9/11 truth group is the police force.

Got a question about today's news? [Ask the Explainer](#).

Explainer thanks Mike Berger of 911Truth.org, Mark Fenster of University of Florida, Erik Lawyer of Firefighters for 9/11 Truth, and Barrie Zwicker.

explainer

Why Is Gmail Still in Beta?

It's been around for five years already!

By Juliet Lapidos

Tuesday, April 7, 2009, at 6:33 PM ET

Gmail [turned five on Wednesday, April 1](#). Launched in 2004 as an invitation-only e-mail service, the Google product now has [more than 100 million users](#). Yet it's still in "beta"—a term of art

traditionally reserved for prototype software that's ready for testing. What gives?

Semantics. Usually technology companies keep products in beta for a short period of time—as a transitional phase between "alpha" (when in-house testers or focus groups try out the software) and the official release. Beta releases also tend to be more buggy than the final version. Neither of these qualities accurately describes Gmail (although there was a [worldwide service outage](#) in February); the label is just a way for Google to signal users that they're still tweaking the e-mail service and adding new features. Company spokespeople won't say exactly when Gmail will be out of beta, but apparently there's an "internal checklist" that's lacking in some crucial checkmarks.

Google has decided to leave its product in beta rather than issuing updates in the familiar system of numbered software versions—1.0, 2.0, and so on. Those distinctions make more sense when tech consumers are purchasing software on CD-ROMs or downloading it onto their hard drives. The Google take is that the beta label better conveys the "constant feature refinement" consumers expect from Web-based applications. Of course, the end of Gmail's beta era won't signify the end of feature updates, so for anyone who isn't on the Gmail product team at Google, the distinction means very little. In fact, it may just be a marketing ploy to give Gmail a cutting-edge feel. Even co-founder [Larry Page once admitted](#) that using a beta label for years on end is "arbitrary" and has more to do with "messaging and branding" than a precise reflection of a technical stage of development.

A lengthy beta phase is not exclusive to Gmail. As of September 2008, almost half of Google's products were in beta, including Google Docs and Google Finance. Google News was in beta from its launch in April 2002 until January 2006. (When the Google News creator, Krishna Bharat, [announced the change](#), he noted that the news team had successfully made the product more personal, with e-mail alerts and the option to create personalized pages.) Beta lag is not exclusive to Google, either: Flickr launched in February 2004 as a beta product and retained the label even after Yahoo acquired it in 2005. Then, in 2006, Flickr updated [from beta to "gamma"](#)—a sly joke to indicate that the service is always changing.

Apple deploys the beta label in a more traditional fashion. In March 2008, for example, the company made [iPhone 2.0 beta software](#) available to select developers and customers. That July, it officially [rolled out the update](#) for the general public. And Google doesn't always let its products dither in beta for years on end. The company dropped the beta label from its [Chrome browser after just 14 weeks](#); and the Google search engine spent less than two years in beta after being released in 1997.

The tech community is divided on the issue of protracted beta releases. A ZDNet article from 2005 called out Google and

Flickr for extended use of the label and noted that the practice could blur the line "between prime time and half-baked." Tim O'Reilly, the open-source advocate, has used the term perpetual beta positively as an indication of open-source development processes wherein users are "[treated as co-developers](#)."

Got a question about today's news? [Ask the Explainer](#).

Explainer thanks Jason Freidenfelds of Google.

explainer

It's 11:48 a.m. Do You Know Where Your Missile Is?

Do the North Koreans have more information about their test launch than we do?

By Brian Palmer

Monday, April 6, 2009, at 7:34 PM ET

North Korea [attempted to launch a satellite into orbit](#) with a three-stage missile Sunday. The U.S. Northern Command, which monitored the launch using a global network of radars, satellite-mounted spy cameras, and satellites equipped with infrared sensors, concluded that the satellite fell into the Pacific Ocean. The North Koreans insist that the satellite achieved orbit and is broadcasting patriotic music to the world. Do they have better data than we do, since it's their missile?

Not really. The only unique information the Democratic People's Republic of Korea may have had was performance data broadcast from the missile, more useful in determining why a test failed than whether it failed. For the North Koreans to verify a successful delivery of the satellite into orbit, they would need to observe the skies just like everyone else. Since Pyongyang has access to tracking equipment only within North Korean borders, its view is far more limited than those of other countries—the North Koreans would not have known that the satellite was safely in place until it had passed overhead few times in a stable trajectory over a span of several hours. (The United States, by contrast, gathers information from ground- and sea-based radar devices around the world and could have spotted the satellite within a matter of minutes, no matter where it entered orbit.)

On the other hand, the North Koreans may have had some data on the launch that the West is missing. Broadcasting devices installed on the missile itself send back status reports as the test flight unfolds. In U.S. missile tests, scientists receive these transmissions throughout missile's trajectory, but the North Korean technology is more limited: Since testers cannot easily place receivers outside their borders, the status reports are sent only while the missile remains within a limited range. It's likely that Pyongyang had reports on Sunday about the test missile's

acceleration, vibration, temperature, and pressure at key locations as well as its fuel-pump performance and fuel consumption. But whatever problem caused the missile to fail might have arisen after it had traveled out of reach of the North Korean receivers. (The United States may also have been able to intercept and decode the transmitted data.)

Got a question about today's news? [Ask the Explainer](#).

Explainer thanks Laura Grego and David Wright of the Union of Concerned Scientists and Ivan Oelrich of the Federation of American Scientists.

faith-based Passionate Plays

Gory Easter productions miss an important part of the Gospels.

By Patton Dodd

Thursday, April 9, 2009, at 6:31 AM ET

This Easter weekend, tens of thousands of Christians across the country will turn out for Passion plays, dramatic portrayals focusing on the last week of the life of Jesus Christ. Many are tiny church pageants with casts of 12 disciples, a Jesus of Nazareth, and perhaps a couple of Roman centurions, all wearing bed sheets with nylon ropes tied around their waists. Others, such as the musical *Tetelestai* in Columbus, Ohio, and the *Topeka Passion Play* in Kansas, are semiprofessional events that hosting churches have perfected over the course of multiyear runs. But the most well-attended are Bible spectacles that would make Cecil B. DeMille swoon, featuring immense casts and crews who pull off gritty depictions of first-century capital punishment and Vegas-y musical numbers.

Such shows happen on an epic scale that can be reached only by today's extra-large churches—such as Bellevue Baptist Church and its *Memphis Passion Play*, First Baptist Church and its *Atlanta Passion Play*, and New Life Church and *The Thorn* (in Colorado Springs, Colo., with franchise productions in Minnesota and South Carolina).

Like *The Passion of the Christ*, these productions (most of which predate Mel Gibson's film) focus on the severity of Jesus' suffering in death. The moments of beating and crucifixion are sparse in the Gospel accounts, but modern Passion plays match our culture's taste for visual realism. The audience viscerally experiences each of the 39 lashes delivered onto Jesus' body and each of the four stakes driven into his limbs. Christians have long dwelled on the details of the suffering of Christ, but with

today's theater techniques, nothing has to be left to the imagination.

For New Life Church's *The Thorn*, the Passion is not only about the violence of crucifixion. It's about spiritual violence: the larger story of the forces of good vs. the forces of evil. Like some early medieval Passion plays, according to Columbia University's James Shapiro, *The Thorn* captures the whole sweep of the Bible, seasoned with *Paradise Lost*—we see the fall of Lucifer, the creation, the fall of man, even a bit of the [plagues in Egypt](#) and the exodus of the Hebrews. Then baby Jesus arrives and is presented like [Simba into the Circle of Life](#). Satan and his demons hang around the edges of the production and fill the stage at key moments of the story, especially the betrayal of Jesus (when, according to the Gospel accounts of Luke and John, "Satan entered Judas") and the anguished prayer of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. Muscular angels and demons clash on the margins of center stage, and the outcome of Jesus' journey seems to hang in the balance.

At moments, the experience rivals [Cirque du Soleil](#): Everywhere you look, there are flaming swords, pyrotechnics, and barrel-chested bodies dancing, leaping, flipping across the stage, and swirling down from the rafters. The scale is epic. And with its scenes of the creation of the universe and the fall of Lucifer, so is the story.

But is the Gospel narrative truly an epic tale?

If some church Passion plays suggest so, their creators might have mingled their beloved Scriptures with their beloved stories. Christians cherish a lot of contemporary epics because they are Christ-type stories. On some level(s), *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and even *The Matrix* and grand historical dramas like *Braveheart* say something about what the story of Jesus means. The epic and its basic components—good battling evil, foes of near-equal strength, the whole world at stake—resonate naturally with biblical themes. Many a Sunday sermon has been illustrated with an epic-movie clip.

But it's one thing for an epic to evoke the Jesus story. It's another altogether to make the Jesus story an epic. Epics are audaciously bigger than life, but does any reader of the Gospels get that epic feeling? The Gospel of Mark is no *Lawrence of Arabia*, much less *The Iliad*. (Literary critic Erich Auerbach famously contrasted the "realistic" writing of the Bible with the highly stylized forms of the Greek epic poem.) The elliptical, talky New Testament doesn't present itself in that way—if it did, there might be less discussion about whether its events actually occurred. If, as Christians believe, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were historians, then perhaps plays based on the Gospels should be realistic about more than just blood. Why aim for verisimilitude in violence but not in other historical points? The typical Passion-play Jesus, grinning warmly in his bright white

robe, doesn't tell us much about the first-century Jewish itinerant whose bold, sometimes bewildering stories and proclamations led him to the Passion path.

Churches should also consider other approaches to storytelling. Their ur-story should be not just epic but multiform. To quote writer and preacher Frederick Buechner, the Gospel is "tragedy, comedy, and fairy tale"—it happens on scales that are grand as well as domestic, historic, comic, mythic, realistic.

And there are also other Jesus stories to tell—including the ones Jesus shared. One famous Gospel phrase is (in the Latin Vulgate) *compelle intrare*, meaning "compel them to come in." The words come from a stirring parable Jesus told about a rich man who sends invitations for a fabulous dinner party, only to have no one accept. So the rich man has his servants round up "the poor and crippled and blind and lame," ending his pronouncement with a rhetorical flourish: "Compel them to come in." (St. Augustine co-opted the phrase, making it a theological basis for state-sponsored acts against heretics.)

It's Easter. Spring is here, though the calendar doesn't quite match the weather in many places. With the fast of Lent over, churches hoping to share their beliefs could take Jesus' parable as a suggestion: Throw a dinner. Make it lavish. "Go out to the highways and the hedges," as the rich man said, and invite the poor, the crippled, the blind, the lame. What kind of story would that tell?

faith-based

Why Was Jesus Crucified?

A historical perspective.

By Larry Hurtado

Thursday, April 9, 2009, at 6:31 AM ET

A central statement in traditional Christian creeds is that Jesus was crucified "under Pontius Pilate." But the majority of Christians have only the vaguest sense what the phrase represents, and most non-Christians probably can't imagine why it's such an integral part of Christian faith. "Crucified under Pontius Pilate" provides the Jesus story with its most obvious link to larger human history. [Pilate](#) was a historical figure, the Roman procurator of Judea; he was referred to in other sources of the time and even mentioned in an inscription found at the site of ancient Caesarea in Israel. Linking Jesus' death with Pilate represents the insistence that Jesus was a real person, not merely a figure of myth or legend. More than this, the phrase also communicates concisely some pretty important specifics of that historical event.

For one thing, the statement asserts that Jesus didn't simply die; he was killed. This was a young man's death in pain and public humiliation, not a peaceful end to a long life. Also, this wasn't a mob action. Jesus is said to have been executed, not lynched, and by the duly appointed governmental authority of Roman Judea. There was a hearing of some sort, and the official responsible for civil order and Roman peace and justice condemned Jesus. This means that Pilate found something so serious as to warrant the death penalty.

But this was also a particular kind of death penalty. The Romans had an assortment of means by which to carry out a judicial execution; some, such as beheading, were quicker and less painful than crucifixion. Death by crucifixion was reserved for particular crimes and particular classes. Those with proper Roman citizenship were supposed to be immune from crucifixion, although they might be executed by other means. Crucifixion was commonly regarded as not only frighteningly painful but also the most shameful of deaths. Essentially, it was reserved for those who were perceived as raising their hands against Roman rule or those who in some other way seemed to challenge the social order—for example, slaves who attacked their masters, and insurrectionists, such as the many Jews crucified by Roman Gen. Vespasian in the Jewish rebellion of 66-72.

So the most likely crime for which Jesus was crucified is reflected in the Gospels' account of the charge attached to Jesus' cross: "King of the Jews." That is, either Jesus himself claimed to be the Jewish royal messiah, or his followers put out this claim. That would do to get yourself crucified by the Romans.

Indeed, one criterion that ought to be applied more rigorously in modern scholarly proposals about the "historical Jesus" is what we might call the condition of "crucifiability": You ought to produce a picture of Jesus that accounts for him being crucified. Urging people to be kind to one another, or advocating a more flexible interpretation of Jewish law, or even condemning the [Temple](#) and its leadership—none of these crimes is likely to have led to crucifixion. For example, first-century Jewish historian [Flavius Josephus](#) tells of a man who prophesied against the Temple. Instead of condemning him, the governor decided that he was harmless, although somewhat deranged and annoying to the Temple priests. So, after being flogged, he was released.

The royal-messiah claim would also help explain why Jesus was executed but his followers were not. This wasn't a cell of plotters. Jesus himself was the issue. Furthermore, Pilate took some serious flak for being a bit too violent in his response to Jews and Samaritans who simply demonstrated vigorously against his policies. Pilate probably decided that publicly executing Jesus would snuff out the messianic enthusiasm of his followers without racking up more Jewish bodies than necessary.

Of course, the Gospels also implicate Jewish religious authorities—specifically, the priestly leaders who managed the Jerusalem Temple under franchise from the Roman government. Many scholars, including E.P. Sanders in [Jesus and Judaism](#), conclude that the Temple leaders were likely involved in Jesus coming to the attention of Pilate. After all, the high priest and his retinue held their posts by demonstrating continuing loyalty to Rome. If they judged that Jesus represented some threat to Roman rule, they were obliged to denounce him. Also, it is not so difficult to grant a certain likelihood to the Gospels' claim that the Temple authorities were at least partly motivated by a resentment of Jesus' criticism of their administration of the Temple, as may be reflected in the account of Jesus overturning the tables of the money-changers who operated in the premises under license from the high priest. But Jewish leaders didn't crucify Jesus. "Crucified under Pontius Pilate" points to where that responsibility lies, with the Roman administration.

It's rather clear what St. Paul meant by saying that "the preaching of the cross is foolishness" to most people of his day. As Martin Hengel showed in [Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross](#), Roman-era writers deemed crucifixion the worst imaginable fate, a punishment of unspeakable shamefulness. Celsus, a Roman critic of Christianity, ridiculed Christians for treating as divine someone who had been crucified. A second-century anti-Christian graffito from Rome, well-known among historians who study the time period, depicts a crudely drawn crucified man with a donkey's head; under it stands a human figure, and beneath this is a derisive scrawl: "Alexamenos worships his god."

There was, in short, little to be gained in proclaiming a crucified saviour in that setting in which crucifixion was a grisly reality. Some early Christians tried to avoid reference to Jesus' crucifixion, while others preferred one or another alternate scenario. In one version, in a Christian apocryphal text, the soldiers confuse a bystander with Jesus, crucifying him instead, while Jesus is pictured as laughing at their folly. This idea is likely also reflected later in the Muslim tradition that a person from the crowd was mistakenly crucified as Jesus escaped. Many devout Muslims believe that Jesus was a true prophet, so it is simply inconceivable that God would have allowed him to die such a shameful death. Clearly, at least some early Christians felt the same way.

In fact, Jesus' crucifixion posed a [whole clutch of potential problems](#) for early Christians. It meant that at the origin and heart of their faith was a state execution and that their revered savior had been tried and found guilty by the representative of Roman imperial authority. This likely made a good many people wonder if the Christians weren't some seriously subversive movement. It was, at least, not the sort of group that readily appealed to those who cared about their social standing.

Jesus' crucifixion represented a collision between Jesus and Roman governmental authority, an obvious liability to early Christian efforts to promote their faith. Yet, remarkably, they somehow succeeded. Centuries of subsequent Christian tradition have made the image of the crucified Jesus so familiar that the offensiveness of the event that it portrays has been almost completely lost.

faith-based

A Skeptic's Guide to Passover

Scientific explanations for the parting of the Red Sea, the 10 plagues, and the burning bush.

By Michael Lukas

Wednesday, April 8, 2009, at 6:58 AM ET

For thousands of years, skeptics and believers alike have debated whether the events described in the Passover story—the parting of the Red Sea, the 10 plagues, and the burning bush—actually took place. Roman Jewish historian [Josephus Flavius](#) speculated that the parting of the Red Sea "might be of God's will or of natural origin. Let everyone believe at his own discretion." The skeptic's skeptic, Sigmund Freud, called the Passover story "a pious myth," contending that Moses was a rebellious Egyptian prince who worshiped the sun god Aton and made up the Jewish religion as a political ploy.* In more recent times, scientific explanations of the Passover story range from formula-laden academic papers like ["Modeling the Hydrodynamic Situation of the Exodus"](#) to more popular inquiries such as Cambridge materials scientist Colin Humphreys' [The Miracles of Exodus](#). Whether or not you subscribe to these theories, they beat listening to your little cousin sing the "Four Questions."

As anyone who has seen [The Ten Commandments](#) can attest, the parting of the Red Sea is one of, if not the most, climactic moments in the Passover story. As Exodus describes it:

And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and the Lord caused the sea to go back by a strong east wind all that night, and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided. And the children of Israel went into the midst of the sea upon the dry ground; and the waters were a wall unto them on their right hand, and on their left.

Accepting the biblical account as a "possible 'qualitative' description of an event," Florida State oceanographer Doron Nof set out to investigate whether the parting of the Red Sea is "plausible from a physical point of view." Using a common phenomenon called wind set-down effect, he found that "a northwesterly wind of 20 m/s blowing for 10-14 h is sufficient to

cause a sea level drop of about 2.5m." Such a drop in sea level, Nof speculates, might have exposed an underwater ridge, which the Israelites crossed as if it were dry land. Although the event is plausible, Nof estimated that the likelihood of such a storm occurring in that particular place and time of year is less than once every 2,400 years.

While scientists agree that wind set-down effect could have caused the Red Sea to part as described in the Bible, most biblical scholars and archeologists insist that the Israelites' crossing did not take place at the Red Sea at all. The original Hebrew (*yam suph*), they contend, should be translated as Sea of Reeds, not Red Sea. So where's the Sea of Reeds? It depends whom you ask. In the somewhat specious History Channel documentary *Exodus Decoded*, Simcha Jacobovici (aka the Naked Archaeologist) places the Israelites' crossing in the Bitter Lakes, a reedy marshland north of the Gulf of Suez that was subsumed during the construction of the Suez Canal. For his part, *Walking the Bible* author Bruce Feiler concludes that the Sea of Reeds is Lake Timsah, located halfway between Port Said and Suez. But *The Miracles of Exodus* author Humphreys argues that while the translation of "the Red Sea" may be incorrect, the Sea of Reeds nevertheless refers to the Red Sea, concluding that "there can be little doubt that the Red Sea crossing was made possible by wind setdown at the head of the Gulf of Aqaba."

Before he parted whatever sea it was he parted, the Bible describes Moses and his brother Aaron delivering 10 plagues on the people of Egypt. The Nile turns to blood, all the fish die, frogs are brought forth abundantly, and so on. Drawing on theology, Egyptology, and biology, epidemiologist John Marr developed a "domino theory" to explain each of the 10 plagues in order. Marr believes the plagues were a series of natural disasters and diseases triggered by a bloom of water-borne organisms called dinoflagellates. The dinoflagellates turned the Nile red and killed the frog-eating fish, which in turn caused a population explosion among frogs. The tainted water eventually killed the frogs, causing lice and flies to run rampant, which lead to a number of animal diseases (including African horse sickness) and an outbreak of boils (fancy glanders). This reign of disaster and disease continued through hail, locusts (*Schistocerca gregaria*, to be precise), and sandstorms until the death of the firstborn sons, which Marr thinks was caused by grain infected with mycotoxins. Others, building on Marr's domino theory, argue that the plagues were triggered by the eruption of the Greek island of Santorini, causing a string of disasters such as those that occurred at [Lake Nyos](#), Cameroon, in 1986.

Although not quite as impressive as the plagues or the parting of the Red Sea, Moses' encounter with the burning bush is a pivotal moment in the Passover story and has, for a long time, been the source of much scientific speculation. As the story goes, God speaks to Moses from a burning bush and tells him, "I am come down to deliver [the Israelites] out of the hand of the Egyptians."

Most scientific explanations of the story focus not on the voice of God but on the [description](#) of the bush: "[T]he bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed." Humphreys believes the bush continued to burn because of a natural gas or volcanic vent underneath it. Others have pointed to the work of Norwegian physicist Dag Kristian Dysthe and [his article on the subsurface combustion of organic material in Mali](#), saying the bush could have combusted spontaneously.

As for the voice of God, Hebrew University psychology professor Benny Shanon proposes that Moses was tripping at the time on a hallucinogenic substance similar to [ayahuasca](#). Shanon argues further that the presentation of the Ten Commandments might have been a mass hallucination. "The thunder, lightning and blaring of a trumpet which the Book of Exodus says emanated from Mount Sinai could just have been the imaginings of a people in an altered state of awareness."

By speculating that the voice of God is a hallucination, Shanon, like Freud before him, is attempting to cast doubt on the foundations of monotheism. But not all the explanations of the Passover story are motivated by such ardent secularism. In *The Miracles of Exodus*, Humphreys writes that "a natural explanation of the events of the Exodus doesn't to my mind make them any less miraculous. ... What made certain events miraculous was their timing."

Correction, April 8, 2009: This article originally misidentified the Egyptian sun god Aton as Akhenaton. ([Return to the corrected sentence.](#))

fighting words

Telling the Truth About the Armenian Genocide

We must resist Turkish pressure to distort history.

By Christopher Hitchens

Monday, April 6, 2009, at 11:10 AM ET

Even before President Barack Obama set off on his visit to Turkey this week, there were the usual voices urging him to dilute the principled position that he has so far taken on the Armenian genocide. April is the month in which the Armenian diaspora commemorates the bloody initiation, in 1915, of the Ottoman Empire's campaign to erase its Armenian population. The marking of the occasion takes two forms: Armenian Remembrance Day, on April 24, and the [annual attempt](#) to persuade Congress to name that day as one that abandons weasel wording and officially calls the episode by its right name, which is the word I used above.

Genocide had not been coined in 1915, but the U.S. ambassador in Constantinople, Henry Morgenthau, employed a term that was in some ways more graphic. In his urgent reports to the State Department, conveying on-the-spot dispatches from his consuls, especially in the provinces of Van and Harput, he described the systematic slaughter of the Armenians as "race murder." A vast archive of evidence exists to support this claim. But every year, the deniers and euphemists set to work again, and there are usually enough military-industrial votes to tip the scale in favor of our Turkish client. (Of late, Turkey's opportunist military alliance with Israel has also been good for a few shame-faced Jewish votes as well.)

President Obama comes to this issue with an unusually clear and unambivalent record. In 2006, for example, the U.S. ambassador to Armenia, John Evans, was recalled for employing the word *genocide*. Then-Sen. Obama wrote a letter of complaint to then-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, deploring the State Department's cowardice and roundly stating that the occurrence of the Armenian genocide in 1915 "is not an allegation, a personal opinion, or a point of view, but rather a widely documented fact supported by an overwhelming body of historical evidence." On the campaign trail last year, he amplified this position, [saying](#) that "America deserves a leader who speaks truthfully about the Armenian genocide and responds forcefully to all genocides. I intend to be that president."

For any who might entertain doubt on this score, I would recommend two recent books of exceptional interest and scholarship that both add a good deal of depth and texture to this drama. The first is [Armenian Golgotha: A Memoir of the Armenian Genocide](#), by Grigoris Balakian, and the second is [Rebel Land: Travels Among Turkey's Forgotten Peoples](#), a contemporary account by Christopher de Bellaigue. In addition, we have just learned of shattering corroborative evidence from within the archives of the Turkish state. The Ottoman politician who began the campaign of deportation and extermination, Talat Pasha, left enormous documentation behind him. His family has now given the papers to a Turkish author named [Murat Bardakci](#), who has published a book with the somewhat dry title *The Remaining Documents of Talat Pasha*. One of these "remaining documents" is a cold estimate that during the years 1915 and 1916 alone, a total of 972,000 Armenians simply vanished from the officially kept records of population. (See [Sabrina Tavernise's report](#) in the *New York Times* of March 8, 2009.)

There are those who try to say that the Armenian catastrophe was a regrettable byproduct of the fog of war and of imperial collapse, and this might be partly true of the many more Armenians who were slaughtered at the war's end and after the implosion of Ottomanism. But this is an archive maintained by the government of the day and its chief anti-Armenian politician, and it records in the very early days of World War I a population

decline from 1,256,000 to 284,157. It is very seldom that a regime in its private correspondence confirms almost to an exactitude the claims of its victims.

So what will the deniers say now? The usual routine has been to insinuate that if Congress votes to assert the historic truth, then Turkey will inconvenience the NATO alliance by making trouble on the Iraqi border, denying the use of bases to the U.S. Air Force, or in other unspecified ways. This same kind of unchecked arrogance was on view at the NATO summit last weekend, where the Ankara government [had the nerve to try to hold up the appointment of a serious Danish politician](#), Anders Rasmussen, as the next secretary-general of the alliance, on the grounds that as Denmark's prime minister he had refused to censor Danish newspapers to Muslim satisfaction! It is now being hinted that if either President Obama or the Congress goes ahead with the endorsement of the genocide resolution, Turkey will prove uncooperative on a range of issues, including the normalization of the frontier between Turkey and Armenia and the transit of oil and gas pipelines across the Caucasus.

When the question is phrased in this thuggish way, it can be slyly suggested that Armenia's own best interests are served by joining in the agreement to muddy and distort its own history. Yet how could any state, or any people, agree to abolish their pride and dignity in this way? And the question is not only for Armenians, who are economically hard-pressed by the Turkish closure of the common border. It is for the Turks, whose bravest cultural spokesmen and writers take genuine risks to break the taboo on discussion of the Armenian question. And it is also for Americans, who, having elected a supposedly brave new president, are being told that he—and our Congress too—must agree to collude in a gigantic historical lie. A lie, furthermore, that courageous U.S. diplomacy helped to expose in the first place. This falsification has already gone on long enough and has been justified for reasons of state. It is, among other things, precisely "for reasons of state," in other words for the clear and vital announcement that we can't be bought or intimidated, that April 24, 2009, should become remembered as the date when we affirmed the truth and accepted, as truth-telling does, all the consequences.

Update: In my [last column](#), it seems I may have done an injustice to the government and people of Canada in the matter of George Galloway's canceled visit to that country. For elucidation, please consult the following [blog post](#).

foreigners

Why Israel Will Bomb Iran

The rational argument for an attack.

By David Samuels

Thursday, April 9, 2009, at 6:13 PM ET

The more Israeli leaders [huff](#) and [puff](#) about their determination to stop Iran's nuclear program, the more sophisticated analysts are inclined to [believe that Israel is bluffing](#). After all, if [George W. Bush refused to provide Israel with the bunker busters and refueling capacity to take out Iran's nukes in 2008](#), the chance that Barack Obama will give Israel the green light anytime soon seems quite remote—this being the same President Obama who greeted North Korea's recent missile launch with a speech outlining his plan to dismantle America's nuclear arsenal on the way to realizing his [dream of a nuclear-free world](#). Israel's performance in the 2006 war in Lebanon was widely depicted as [catastrophic](#), and with Israel's diplomatic standing hitting new lows after the [stomach-turning images of destruction](#) from Gaza, the diplomatic consequences of a successful attack on Iran might be worse than the prospect of military failure. There is also the fact that no one knows exactly where Iran's nuclear assets are.

Many perfectly reasonable people chalk up the rhetorical excesses of both parties to the hot desert sun and assume that nothing particularly awful will happen whether [Iran becomes a nuclear power](#) or not. From a U.S. point of view, at least, there is little reason to doubt the analysis that [a nuclear Iran with a few dozen bombs can be contained at relatively limited cost](#) using the same strategies that successfully constrained an aggressive [Soviet Empire armed with nearly 45,000 nuclear warheads](#) at the height of the Cold War.

What the nuclear optimists miss is that it is not the United States that is directly threatened by the Iranian nuclear program but Israel—and [the calculations that drive our Middle Eastern client state are very different](#) from those that guide the behavior of its superpower patron.

Less sanguine types—who think that Israel isn't bluffing—generally fall into two camps: those who think that the [Israelis are crazy](#) and [require the firm hand of America](#) to restrain them and those who think that the [Iranian leadership lives on a different planet](#) and [will use nuclear weapons against Israel](#). Yet it is not necessary to stipulate that either party is crazy in order to see why an Israeli attack on Iran makes sense.

From the standpoint of [international relations theory](#), the scariest thing about recent Israeli rhetoric is that an attack on Iran lines up quite well with Israel's rational interests as a superpower client.

While Israeli bluster is clearly calculated to push America to take a more aggressive stance toward Iran, that doesn't mean the Israelis won't actually attack if President Obama decides on a policy of engagement that leaves the Iranians with a viable nuclear option. In fact, the more you consider the rationality of an Israeli attack on Iran in the context of Israel's relationship with its superpower patron, the more likely an attack appears. Given Iran's recent technological triumphs, like the [launch of the](#)

[Omid communications satellite](#) earlier this year and the [lack of ambiguity](#) about the aims of the Iranian nuclear program, it is hardly apocalyptic to expect an attack within the next year—assuming that the Russians continue to dither about delivering S-300 surface-to-air missiles to protect Iranian nuclear sites. A stepped-up delivery date for large numbers of S-300 missiles could lead to an earlier attack.

The fact that U.S. and Israeli interests with regard to Iran may diverge in radical ways comes as a surprise to many mainstream analysts because of the tendency among both supporters and opponents of America's "special relationship" with Israel to invoke various forms of mind-bending mumbo-jumbo—from [dimwitted theories about an all-powerful Jewish conspiracy](#) to childlike evocations of the community of democratic values that unites the two countries. While America's embrace of Israel is partially motivated both by shared values and by the lobbying power of an influential minority group, neither [Israel's creaky democratic polity](#) nor the hidden persuasive powers of AIPAC can claim much credit for the [billions of dollars in American military credits](#) that Israel enjoys—a vast corporate welfare program that benefits Pentagon defense contractors as much as it benefits Israel's military.

The key fact of the American-Israeli alliance that most commentators seem eager to elide is that Israel is America's leading ally in the Middle East because it is the most powerful country in the Middle East. Critics of the American-Israeli relationship love to conflate American support for Israel before 1967 with America's support since then by citing statistics for tens of billions of dollars in U.S. military credits and aid given to Israel "since 1948," when the Jewish State was founded. In fact, Israel's rise to becoming a regional superpower was accomplished without any significant help from United States. Israel's surreptitious program to build nuclear weapons was accomplished with the aid of the British and the French, who joined with Israel to seize the Suez Canal from Egypt's rabble-rousing President Gamal Abdel Nasser, and who were then forced to give it back by Dwight D. Eisenhower. The Israeli air force pilots who destroyed the Egyptian, Syrian, and Jordanian air forces on the ground flew French-made Mystère jets—not American-made F-4 Phantoms. The U.S. Congress did not appropriate a single penny to help Israel accommodate an overwhelming influx of Holocaust survivors and poor Jewish refugees from Yemen, Iraq, Egypt, and other Arab countries until 1973—25 years after the founding of the state.

By shattering the old balance of power in the Middle East with its spectacular military victory in the Six Day War, Israel announced itself to America as the reigning military power in the region and as a profoundly destabilizing influence that needed to be contained. The parallels between Israel's rise to superpower-client status in the 1950s and 1960s and the Iranian march toward regional hegemony over the past decade are quite striking. Both Israel circa 1967 and modern-day Iran are non-

Arab states that utilized innovative military tactics to panic the Arabs. Yet where Iran is a non-Arab country with a population of more than 70 million, Israel was and is a tiny non-Arab, non-Muslim country whose small population and seat-of-the-pants style of leadership made even the country's modest colonial ambitions [seem like a stretch](#). In the absence of any fixed plan of expansion, or any long-term plan for dealing with its neighbors, Israel decided to use its excess military power and captured lands as a chit that it could exchange for resources provided from outside the region by its wealthy American patron.

Israel earned its role as an American client with a series of daring military victories won by a tiny embattled country with a shoestring budget and its back against the sea: the capture of the Suez Canal from Nasser in 1956, the audacious victory in 1967, and the development of a nuclear bomb. Yet the terms of the bargain that Israel struck would necessarily relegate such accomplishments to the history books. Israel traded its freedom to engage in high-risk, high-payoff exploits like the Suez Canal adventure or the Six Day War for the comfort of a military and diplomatic guarantee from the wealthiest and most powerful nation in the world. As a regional American client, Israel would draw on the military and diplomatic power of its distant patron in exchange for allowing America to use its control over Israel as leverage with neighboring Arab states.

With each American-brokered peace treaty—from Camp David to the Madrid Conference to Oslo and Annapolis—the United States has been able to hold up its leverage over Israel as both a carrot and a stick to the Arab world. *Do what we want, and we will force the Israelis to behave*. The client-patron relationship between the United States and Israel that allows Washington to control the politics of the Middle East is founded on two pillars: America's ability to deliver concrete accomplishments, like the return of the Sinai to Egypt and the pledge to create a Palestinian state, along with the suggestion that Washington is manfully restraining wilder, [more aggressive Israeli ambitions](#).

The success of the American-Israeli alliance demands that both parties be active partners in a complex dance that involves a lot of play-acting—America pretends to rebuke Israel, just as Israel pretends to be restrained by American intervention from bombing Damascus or seizing the banks of the Euphrates. The instability of the U.S.-Israel relationship is therefore inherent in the terms of a patron-client relationship that requires managing a careful balance of Israeli strength and Israeli weakness. An Israel that runs roughshod over its neighbors is a liability to the United States—just as an Israel that lost the capacity to project destabilizing power throughout the region would quickly become worthless as a client.

A corollary of this basic point is that the weaker and more dependent Israel becomes, the more Israeli interests and American interests are likely to diverge. Stripped of its ability to take independent military action, Israel's value to the United

States can be seen to reside in its ability to give the Golan Heights back to Syria and to carve out a Palestinian state from the remaining territories it captured in 1967—after which it would be left with only the territories of the pre-1967 state to barter for a declining store of U.S. military credits, which Washington might prefer to spend on wooing Iran.

The untenable nature of this strategic calculus gives a cold-eyed academic analyst all the explanation she needs to explain Israel's recent wars against Hezbollah and Hamas, its [assassinations of Iranian nuclear scientists and engineers](#), and its 2007 [attack on the Syrian nuclear reactor](#). Israel's attempts to restore its perceived capacity for game-changing independent military action are directed as much to its American patron as to its neighbors. Israel's current strategic posture was established by former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, who alternated strong, unpredictable military actions like [Operation Defensive Shield](#) and the [final isolation of Yasser Arafat](#) with invocations of the importance of peace and surprising concessions, such as the unilateral Israeli withdrawal from Gaza in 2005. Sharon also took care to balance his close relationship with President Bush with a program of diplomatic outreach to second-tier powers like Russia and India.

An attack on Iran might be risky in dozens of ways, but it would certainly do wonders for restoring Israel's capacity for game-changing military action. The idea that Iran can meaningfully retaliate against Israel through conventional means is more myth than fact. Even without using nuclear weapons, Israel has the capacity to flatten the Iranian economy by [bombing a few strategic oil refineries](#), making a meaningful Iranian counterstroke much [less likely than it first appears](#).

If the 2006 Lebanon war showed the holes in Israel's ability to fight a conventional ground war, it also showed the [ability of the Israeli air force to destroy long-range missiles on the ground](#). Israel's response to fresh barrages of missiles from Hezbollah and Hamas while engaged in a shooting war with Iran would presumably be even less restrained than it has been in the past.

Short of an [Iranian-hostage-rescue-mission-type debacle](#) in which a small Israeli tactical force crashes in the Iranian desert, or a presidential order from Obama to shoot down Israeli planes on their way to [Natanz](#), any Israeli air raid on Iran is likely to succeed in destroying masses of delicate equipment that the Iranians have spent a decade building at enormous cost in time and treasure. It is hard to believe that Iran could quickly or easily replace what it lost. Whether it resulted in delaying Iran's march toward a nuclear bomb by two years, five years, or somewhere in between, the most important result of an Israeli bombing raid would be to punctuate the myth of inevitability that has come to surround the Iranian nuclear project and that has [fueled Iran's rise as a regional hegemon](#).

The idea of a mass public outcry against Israel in the Muslim world is probably also a fiction—given the public backing of the Gulf states and Egypt for Israel's wars against Hezbollah and Hamas. As the only army in the region able to take on Iran and its clients, [Israel has effectively become the hired army of the Sunni Arab states](#) tasked by Washington with the job of protecting America's favorite Middle Eastern tittle—oil.

The parallels between Israel's rise to superpower client status after 1967 and Iran's recent rise offer another strong reason for Israel to act—and act fast. The current [bidding for Iran's favor](#) is alarming to Israel not only because of the [unfriendly proclamations of Iranian leaders](#) but because of what an American rapprochement with Iran signals for the future of Israel's status as an American client. While America would probably benefit by playing Israel and Iran against each other for a while to extract the maximum benefit from both relationships, it is hard to see how America would manage to please both clients simultaneously and quite easy to imagine a world in which Iran—with its influence in Afghanistan and Iraq, its control over Hezbollah and Hamas, and [easy access to leading members of al-Qaida](#)—would be the partner worth pleasing.

Bombing Iran's nuclear facilities is the surest way for Israel to restore the image of strength and unpredictability that made it valuable to the United States after 1967 while also eliminating Iran as a viable partner for America's favor. The fact that this approach may be the international-relations equivalent of keeping your boyfriend by shooting the other cute girl he likes in the head is an indicator of the difference between high-school romance and alliances between states—and hardly an argument for why it won't work. Shorn of its nuclear program and unable to retaliate against Israel through conventional military means, Iran would be shown to be a paper tiger—to the not-so-secret delight of America's Sunni Arab allies in the Gulf. Iran's local clients like Syria and Hamas would be likely to distance themselves from an over-leveraged Persian would-be hegemon whose [ruined nuclear facilities would be visible on Google Earth](#).

The only real downside for Israel of an attack on Iran is Washington's likely response to the anger of the Arab street and the European street, both of which are likely to [express their fierce outrage](#) against Israel and the United States. The price of an Israeli attack on Iran is therefore clear to anyone who reads *Al Ahram* or the *Guardian*: a Palestinian state. It seems fair to say that both Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Ehud Barak see the establishment of some kind of Palestinian state as inevitable and also as posing real security risks to Israel.

Yet, in a perverse way, the idea that the price of an attack on Iran will be the establishment of a Palestinian state makes the logic of such an attack even clearer. Israel's leaders know that the security threats inherent in giving up most of the West Bank will

be greatly augmented or diminished depending on how a Palestinian state is born. A Palestinian state born as the result of Israeli weakness is a much greater danger to Israel than a state born out of Israeli strength. Ariel Sharon was [able to withdraw from Gaza](#) because he defeated Arafat and crushed the second intifada. Desperate to rid themselves of the bad PR and the demographic threat posed by maintaining Israel's hold over the West Bank, Sharon's successors have been unable to find a victory big enough to allow them to retreat. Nor are they able to reconcile themselves to the threat posed by images of a [defeated Israel being forced to withdraw from Hebron and Nablus by triumphant Palestinian militias backed by Iran](#).

The inevitability of a future Palestinian state is the most powerful argument for the inevitability of an Israeli attack on Iran—unless the Iranian nuclear program is stopped by other means. Taking out the Iranian nuclear program is the one obvious avenue by which Israel can turn the debilitating drip-drip-drip of territorial giveaways and international condemnation into a game-changing military victory. Destroying a respectable number of Iranian centrifuges will end Iran's march to regional hegemony and eliminate Israel's chief rival for America's affections while also allowing Israel to gain the legal and demographic benefits of a Palestinian state with a minimum of long-term risk.

Israel's version of a nuclear grand bargain that brings peace to the Middle East may be messier and more violent than what the Obama administration imagines can be accomplished through sanctions, blandishments, and the [invocation of Barack Obama's magic middle name](#). But who can really argue with the idea of trading the Iranian nuclear bomb for a Palestinian state? Saudi Arabia would be happy. Egypt would be happy. Bahrain, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates would be happy. Jordan would be happy. Iraq would be happy. Two-thirds of the Lebanese would be happy. The Palestinians would go about building their state, and Israel would buy itself another 40 years as the only nuclear-armed country in the Middle East. Iran would not be happy.

But who said peace won't have a price?

foreigners Too Busy To Save Darfur

The Obama administration has very few options for solving the crisis in Sudan.
By Shmuel Rosner
Thursday, April 9, 2009, at 12:31 PM ET

Sudan's sovereignty has been violated twice in recent weeks. It was violated physically by an Israeli attempt to find a simple

remedy to a relatively simple problem. It was violated symbolically by the International Criminal Court, which sought and failed to find a simple remedy to a complicated problem, thus making it even more complicated. One sobering lesson can be drawn from these two incidents: In Sudan, as in the Wild West, if you want to shoot, shoot. Talk will get you nowhere.

The stories have already been told by the media: Israel sent airplanes to [destroy convoys](#) traveling through Sudan that were carrying weapons headed to Palestinian radicals in Gaza. The ICC [issued](#) an arrest warrant against Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir—the first such warrant against a sitting head of state—charging him with war crimes and crimes against humanity related to the [ongoing](#) crisis in the Darfur region. Israel's grievances were solved, at least temporarily, by the use of force. The ICC warrant was backed by some words of praise from human rights groups, but it did not solve the problem—instead, it made things "harder," as Director of National Intelligence Dennis Blair put it at a Senate hearing.

Al-Bashir has already established the ineffectiveness of the ICC warrant by [traveling](#) to a host of countries and, more importantly, by demonstrating his ability to retaliate against the core goals of those wanting to bring him to justice: He expelled several aid groups from Darfur and threatened to eliminate all international aid to the war-stricken population within a year.

Nothing less than this reaction should have been expected. While many tend to forget this, preventing genocide involves the most blatant of all international actions: ignoring the sovereignty of a country and imposing a code of conduct on its government. In most cases, the offending party is a government that believes its actions will be crucial to the survival of the regime or the state. Convincing, cajoling, or pressuring is hardly enough when survival—even a false belief that survival is involved—is at stake.

So Washington's newly appointed envoy to Sudan, Scott Gration, [said](#) Saturday that he believes "we are on the brink of a deepening crisis in Darfur." That's the good news. The bad news is that the Obama administration has very few options for dealing with the crisis, very few brakes it can use to halt the wagon skidding toward this "brink." If the United States decides that it needs to back the ICC measure, on understandable moral grounds—as it was trying, subtly, not to do—the Obama team will upset all hope for productive cooperation with the Sudanese government. If it publicly shuns attempts to bring al-Bashir to justice, it will upset the activists hoping to finally take a stand against evil and will make a mockery of the idea of justice.

Not long ago, in a [conference call](#) for Darfur advocates, Jerry Fowler, who runs the Save Darfur Coalition, raised a question: "Why is there a disconnect between how passionately and articulately candidate Obama addressed the issue of Darfur and said that the genocide there is a stain on our souls—and what

President Obama is doing and saying now with millions of lives at stake?" This question is easy to answer: There's always a difference between campaign rhetoric and the actions of the subsequent government. Only a fool, or someone who is extremely naive, believes everything a candidate says.

No doubt Obama was sincere when he spoke out about Darfur—but his predecessor, President George Bush, was just as sincere and just as committed to the cause. He was also just as ineffective. That's because at the core of the crisis is a question that very few are brave enough, sober enough, or cynical enough to answer properly. While the activist can ask, "What should the goal be?"—the answer to which is "stop the genocide"—the president must ask a different question: What is the price the United States would be willing to pay to save what's left of Darfur?

The answer both presidents have given is devastatingly similar: not much.

Washington will occasionally be willing to act against genocide when it has no other urgent matters to deal with (Clinton in Bosnia in the 1990s) but will not act when the president is too busy with other foreign-policy crises (George W. Bush in Iraq) or when he has to weigh the battle against genocide against other important U.S. interests (Obama). This is still much better than what most other countries do—but it's far from enough.

At the end of a long article in a recent issue of *Commentary*, Tod Lindberg [notes](#), "In the extreme case, halting or failing to halt genocide has come down to whether the political will exists within the United States to act." That's a burden not all Americans and very few administrations are willing to shoulder.

Look at the price tag the Obama administration would be asked to pay: Arab nations oppose all the measures meted out against al-Bashir and his government, as was [shown](#) in statements that came out of the Arab League summit in Doha, Qatar, last week. "We stress our solidarity with Sudan and our rejection of the ICC decision against President Omar al-Bashir," Arab leaders declared. Some say they hold this position because they fear they could be next in line; some believe it's because they are concerned about the future stability of the already fragile country. The appalling result is Arab support for a despotic government. But the Obama administration has vowed to improve relations with the Arab world—and hunting down al-Bashir is hardly a good start.

Then there's the issue of China. As Will Inboden [observed](#) last month in *Foreign Policy*: "The two most notable headlines from the Obama administration's China policy thus far consist of pleas to Beijing to finance more U.S. debt and obsequious promises not to press China too much on human rights. This is not an encouraging trajectory." Certainly not if you consider Darfur a priority. We can't hope to pressure Khartoum effectively without

Beijing's cooperation. But the risk involved in making China more cooperative doesn't seem to be one that Washington is willing to take. Not for a while, anyway.

The last option—the so-called "last resort" option—is the use of force. Once upon a time, Vice President Joe Biden supported this path. "I would use American force now," Biden said at a hearing before the Senate foreign relations committee. "I think it's not only time not to take force off the table. I think it's time to put force on the table and use it." Obama himself wasn't as blunt, but he also talked about force. Just not U.S. force. He hoped for a "large, capable U.N.-led and U.N.-funded force with a robust enforcement mandate to stop the killings." What he got instead is a court order that is robust enough to make al-Bashir laugh.

Back in August 2008, the *New Republic's* Richard Just wrote a long, [masterful piece](#) explaining the failure of the campaign to save Darfur. "[W]hen it came to the question of troops," he wrote, "the Darfur activists were split. Many were uncomfortable with the use of force." Eventually, "the movement coalesced around the idea that U.N. troops were the answer. In the wake of the Iraq debacle, the idea of sending U.N. peacekeepers to Darfur represented for many activists a sort of safe compromise—troops would be put on the ground, but American power would not be wielded. It was military action that they could endorse without opening a dissonance in their worldview."

It was a pipe dream—as every student of world affairs could have told them. It's a way for activists to keep their consciences clean, perhaps, more than a serious attempt to stop genocide. And the ICC warrant is no different. Same with the special envoys and global condemnation. It is time to admit that genocide will be stopped in some cases, but only when the United States has no other urgent tasks to deal with.

foreigners

No Nukes? No Thanks.

Obama's odd obsession with universal nuclear disarmament.

By Anne Applebaum

Monday, April 6, 2009, at 8:19 PM ET

Believe me, it is no fun to be the one who rains on the parade, and if nothing else, President Barack Obama's trip to Europe this past week was quite a parade. Or maybe "sold-out concert tour" is the better metaphor. There was a jolly [town-hall meeting in Strasbourg, France](#); a wonderful [encounter between Michelle Obama and Carla Bruni](#); spectacular street scenes in Prague. The world's statesmen fell all over themselves to be photographed

with the American president. (Click [here](#) to watch Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi howling for the president's attention during a photo session—to the immense annoyance of the queen.)

Still, someone has to say it: Some things went well on this trip, and some things went badly. But the centerpiece of the visit, Obama's keynote foreign-policy speech in Prague—leaked in advance, billed as a major statement—was, to put it bluntly, peculiar. He used it to [call for](#) "a world without nuclear weapons" and a new series of arms-control negotiations with Russia. This was not wrong, necessarily, and not evil. But it was strange.

Clearly, the "no nukes" policy is one close to the president's heart. The Prague speech even carried echoes of that most famous of all Obama speeches, the one he made after losing the New Hampshire primary. "There are those who hear talk of a world without nuclear weapons and doubt whether it is worth setting a goal that seems impossible," he told his Czech audience. (Remember "We have been told we cannot do this by a chorus of cynics"?) "When nations and peoples allow themselves to be defined by their differences, the gulf between them widens," he continued. ("We are not as divided as our politics suggests.") He didn't say "Yes, we can" at the end, but he did say "human destiny will be what we make of it," which amounts to the same thing.

The rhetoric was his—as was the idea. Look at his record: One of the few [foreign-policy initiatives](#) to which Obama stuck his name during his brief Senate term was an increase in funding for nuclear nonproliferation. One of the few senatorial trips he managed was a nuclear inspection tour of Russia, Ukraine, and Azerbaijan.

This is all very nice—but as the central plank in an American president's foreign policy, a call for universal nuclear disarmament seems rather beside the point. Apparently, the president's intention is to [lead by example](#): If the United States cuts its own nuclear arsenal and bans testing, others will allegedly follow.

Forgive me for joining the chorus of cynics, but there is no evidence that U.S. nuclear arms reductions have ever inspired others to do the same. All the world's more recent nuclear powers—Israel, India, Pakistan—acquired their weapons well after such talks began more than 40 years ago.

As for the North Koreans, they chose the very day of the Prague speech to launch (unsuccessfully) an experimental missile. In its wake, neither China nor Russia wanted to condemn the launch, since to do so might set a precedent uncomfortable for them. "Every state has the right to the peaceful use of outer space," [said a Russian U.N. envoy](#). His government does want arms-reduction talks, it is true, but only because the Russian nuclear

arsenal is rapidly deteriorating. By agreeing to start them, we've unnecessarily handed over a bargaining chip.

More to the point, nuclear weapons, while terrifying in the abstract, are not an immediate strategic threat to Europe or the United States—even from Iran. Biological weapons are potentially more lethal. Chemical weapons are far cheaper to produce. Within the United States, ordinary bombs and rogue airplanes have already caused plenty of damage.

Conventional weapons, meanwhile, have not gone out of fashion. The most recent use of military force in Europe—the Russian-Georgian conflict of last August—involved tanks and infantry, not nukes. Even if Russia sold its remaining nuclear weapons for scrap metal, Russia's military would still pose a potential threat to its neighbors, just as a China without nukes could still invade Taiwan.

Ridding the world of nuclear weapons would be very nice, in other words, but on its own, it won't alter the international balance of power, stop al-Qaida, or prevent large authoritarian states from invading their smaller neighbors. However unsuccessful it has been so far, the promotion of democracy around the world is, ultimately, the only way to achieve these goals. Besides, however much the French loved Michelle's flowery dress, I'm not sure they have much interest in giving up their *force de frappe*. Ditto the British. And since they don't pose a threat, to us or anyone else, it's not clear to me why we should waste diplomatic capital trying to make them do so.

It could be, of course, that the Prague speech represented a holding pattern: Obama will talk about "no nukes" until he finds a more satisfying idea on which to hang his foreign policy. And if it didn't, all that goodwill, so much in evidence last week, might well go to waste.

gabfest

The Velvet Snuggie Gabfest

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

By Emily Bazelon, John Dickerson, and David Plotz

Friday, April 10, 2009, at 10:48 AM ET

Listen to the Gabfest for April 10 by clicking the arrow on the audio player below:

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

*Get your free 14-day trial membership of Gabfest sponsor Audible.com, which includes a credit for one free audio book, [here](#). This week's suggestions come from listener Peter Blake, who recommends *Into Thin Air and Memoirs of a Geisha*.*

Emily Bazelon, John Dickerson, and David Plotz talk politics. This week: President Obama, gay marriage, and the Justice Department.

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

The Pew Research Center poll showing [the continuing political partisanship](#) of American voters.

The [New York Times poll](#) on the economy.

The Fox News poll that indicates just [5 percent of Americans](#) blame President Obama for the current financial crisis.

The Pew poll from March that shows [11 percent of Americans](#) mistakenly think President Obama is a Muslim.

David chatters about a *Washington Post* [profile of Martha Stewart](#).

Emily talks about [being impersonated](#) on Twitter.

John chatters about President Obama's [response](#) to a question about American exceptionalism.

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

Posted on April 10 by Dale Willman at 10:48 a.m.

April 3, 2009

Listen to the Gabfest for April 3 by clicking the arrow on the audio player below:

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Get your free 14-day trial membership of Gabfest sponsor Audible.com, which includes a credit for one free audio book, [here](#). This week's suggestions for Audible books came from two listeners, both of whom recommend books by Charles Dickens. The first recommendation is for [Bleak House](#), read by David Case. The listener says listening to the book is helping her cope

with pregnancy-induced insomnia. Another listener recommends [Little Dorrit](#).

Emily Bazelon, John Dickerson, and David Plotz talk politics. This week: The auto industry stares into the abyss; President Obama makes an eight-day, five-country tour of Europe; and right-wingers make accusations against Obama appointees Dawn Johnsen and Harold Koh.

Emily mentions an April Fools' story on *Car and Driver* magazine's Web site that said President Obama was [ordering Chevy and Dodge](#) out of [NASCAR](#).

John discusses a *New York Times* article about [stars who use ghostwriters](#) for their Twitter posts.

Emily talks about a *New York Times* [op-ed by Paul Light](#) about the Senate's agonizingly slow confirmation process.

Emily chatters about [David's visit](#) to Comedy Central's *The Colbert Report*, where he discussed his new book, [Good Book](#).

John talks about a bill moving to President Obama's desk that [creates the largest expansion ever](#) of the [AmeriCorps](#) public service program. The \$5.7 billion measure was passed by Congress this week.

David chatters about [a visit last week](#) by Miss Universe, [Dayana Mendoza](#), to the [U.S. military facility](#) at Guantanamo Bay.

The gang gives a special shout out to *Slate V's* Andy Bouvé and his spoof video about "the new Twitter," [Flutter](#).

David also reminds listeners that the Gabfest's latest live show is coming up in Washington, D.C., on May 13. Ticket information can be found on the Web site of the [Sixth and I Historic Synagogue](#).

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

Posted on April 3 by Dale Willman at 11:00 a.m.

March 27, 2009

Listen to the Gabfest for March 27 by clicking the arrow on the audio player below:

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Audible.com, which includes a credit for one free audio book, [here](#). This week's suggestion for an Audible book comes from listener Dave Zobott: The Poet's Corner: The One-and-Only Poetry Book for the Whole Family, edited by John Lithgow and read by Lithgow, Helen Mirren, Susan Sarandon, and many other well-known voices.

Emily Bazelon, John Dickerson, and David Plotz talk politics. This week: the bank bailout, Obama's week on television, and the White House goes green (thumb).

The three talk about the latest [bank bailout bill](#), announced this week. David calls it [a sweet deal](#) for the private investors who will be allowed to participate, because they have so little at risk.

John notes there wasn't one question about the bailout plan at President Obama's news conference this week, and there was [relatively little](#) about foreign policy.

President Obama held an [online town hall](#) this week.

Also this week, the [Republicans released their budget proposal](#). It received little attention, in part, says John, because [it was almost laughable](#)—the proposal was a budget with no numbers, making the party of "no" the party of no ideas.

First lady Michelle Obama has begun [an organic garden](#) on the White House lawn. Emily says that, as Jennifer Reese pointed out on *Slate* this week, a garden is [not a free source of food](#). And David says Americans tend to allow presidents to have "White House follies." He says the garden is little different from President Bush's desire to have [T-ball games](#) on the White House lawn.

Emily chatters about the trailer for the new movie [Where the Wild Things Are](#), due in theaters this fall. She's angry that the movie, directed by [Spike Jonze](#), may spoil the [beloved children's book](#) by leaving nothing to the imagination of future readers.

David talks about the online satirical news Web site the *Onion* and [its recent hire](#) of former CNN news anchor Bobbie Batista. He calls the hire a strange confluence of fantasy and reality.

Posted on March 27 by Dale Willman at 1:43 p.m.

March 20, 2009

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Get your free 14-day trial membership of Gabfest sponsor Audible.com, which includes a credit for one free audio book, [here](#). This week's suggestion for an Audible book comes from Emily, who recommends Housekeeping, by Marilynne Robinson.

Emily Bazelon, Christopher Beam, and John Dickerson talk politics. This week: the AIG bonus mess, Dick Cheney says America is less safe, and Jon Stewart takes Jim Cramer to school.

Emily says she is surprised more people receiving money from [the latest round of bonuses](#) at AIG haven't given them up in light of the level of public outrage over the matter. And she says President Obama is being forced to spend too much political capital on the banking situation. John, meanwhile, explains how the Republicans can gain points: by saying the administration should have made sure no bonuses were being paid before extending [the latest \\$30 billion](#) to AIG.

John wonders whether President Obama's recent round of [public appearances on comedy](#) and [sports shows](#) may open him up to additional criticism for appearing not to take the current financial situation seriously enough.

Former Vice President Dick Cheney says the United States is [not as safe](#) now that Barack Obama is president. Emily says former [President Bush's response](#) to Cheney's comments was much classier.

Jon Stewart takes on MSNBC's Jim Cramer, in a fight scored in favor of Stewart by most observers. However, Chris sides with [Tucker Carlson](#), who says the attack made no sense. Chris says Stewart's argument that he is just an entertainer no longer holds water.

The group discusses the [very public fight](#) among three prominent Republican women.

Emily chatters about a statement by Attorney General Eric Holder this week in which he said the Obama administration would [soon effectively end](#) the Bush administration's regular raids on distributors of medical marijuana.

Chris talks about the rapid growth of so-called [essay mills](#), Web sites where students can purchase term papers from around the world.

John chatters about the new bust in the Oval Office. A bronze [bust of Martin Luther King Jr.](#) has replaced one of British leader Winston Churchill.

Posted on March 20 by Dale Willman at 2:49 p.m.

grieving **The Long Goodbye**

Watching someone you love accept death.

By Meghan O'Rourke

Wednesday, April 8, 2009, at 12:50 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.

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.

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 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*, 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 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 suicidality (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 greenesse? 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 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 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 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.

From: Meghan O'Rourke
Subject: Watching Someone You Love Accept Death
Posted Wednesday, April 8, 2009, at 12:49 PM ET

A few weeks ago, I spoke by phone to [Holly Prigerson](#), a clinical researcher on grief at the Dana Farber Cancer institute at Harvard. She told me something that lodged in my brain. Research has shown that when a terminally ill patient "accepts" her death, the bereaved—her family and friends—typically find their grief more manageable than when a terminally ill patient is in "despair" about her death. It is, of course, difficult to study "grief," because the salient feature of grief is that it's not monolithic or singular; it's personal and variable. That said, there are many universal features of grief, I've discovered from talking to and hearing from others who've seen loved ones die. And one seems to be this, the ameliorating influence of watching your loved one accept his or her death.

Needless to say, witnessing the acceptance is painful in its own right. One conversation stands out to me. It took place at the hospital about 10 days before my mother died. We had taken her there because she woke up one morning in a delirious fever, though she had seemed her usual self the night before. We didn't know it at the time, but her liver had begun to fail. She was in the hospital for six days. For two, it seemed as though she'd never be coherent again. But on the third morning, she woke up clear-headed. A mini-resurrection, I thought; the rock rolled back from the cave. My brother had spent the night on the couch and was serving her breakfast when I got to the hospital. "Hi, Meg," she said cheerily; just to hear her tone—her old loving tone—shook me.

Our conversation took place a few days later. I had stayed overnight with her in the hospital, and I was trying to find a local oncologist so the hospital could release her. At this point, my

mother wanted deeply to go home, but I couldn't get the nurse to give us permission, because my mother's doctor was in New York. What they wouldn't say, but what we knew, was that we needed a local doctor because time was short and more emergencies were bound to occur. It was a Saturday, and the only oncologist around was a doctor named Malefatto. After a silent double take—his name, traced back to Latin roots, sounded a lot like Dr. "Wrongdoing" or Dr. "Badly Done"—I asked the nurse to send him to our room when he did rounds.

Dr. Badly Done turned out to be kind. And he did well something that is easily done badly: He told my mother she had a few days or weeks left to live, a fact she had not quite taken in. It was his job to tell her that she had to decide whether she wanted to become a "hospice patient"—to receive only pain management rather than medicine that might help slow down, say, her liver failure. He said something about "what remained to be done"; my mother misunderstood him and said she didn't want any chemotherapy. He corrected her: "There's really no more chemotherapy we can do," he said. In that moment, I saw my mother realize, anew, what she had realized earlier that fall when her primary doctor told her there were no remaining treatments. "So," she said slowly, "there is nothing left to do?" "No," said Dr. Malefatto. Her face grew still. I could see how strange this was to her, as it was to me. Five days earlier, she'd been walking around, even going to work for an hour. Now she couldn't stand without one of us lifting her. How had we gotten here so fast? Then she looked at me. "I have to call your father and tell him," she said.

Later that day, her four sisters and her mother came to say goodbye. My mother sat in the living room of her hospital "suite," with her legs poking out from her hospital pants, beside potted plastic plants and a 1960s-style Zenith TV. She and her sisters sat and joked and reminisced. My mother had been nervous about the visit beforehand, but now she relaxed. One sister asked my mother what her favorite color was. (Blue.) My grandmother was quiet. At one point, she gave my mother a garden angel and a piece of paper. "I couldn't sleep last night," she said. "And in the middle of the night I remembered this prayer I had taped above your crib when you were a little girl, and I wrote it down for you." My mother often bridled at religious gestures—she was a lapsed Catholic—but now she didn't. She read the prayer and said, "Yes, I remember waking up and looking at this prayer when I was little. I'll put it by my bed."

I was overwhelmed, and I went back to my dad's house to take a run and to let them all be together. When I returned to the hospital, my mother was alone, sitting in bed, looking contemplative. "Hi, Mom," I said. (*How many more times will I say that?* I wondered.) "Wasn't that nice?" she said immediately. I sat at the end of the bed and began to give her a foot massage, which I did a lot in those last three weeks—it helped take her mind off her pain, which increased every day. "I thought so," I

said. "That's why I left for a while." "It *was* nice," she said. "We laughed a lot. I want them to remember me with a sense of humor." She grew quiet. "It was hard to say goodbye to them." She paused and stared at her hands. She had begun to have a pronounced inward quality, a withdrawn beauty, as if she were already on her way to another world; it made her seem even younger than her 55 years. "But not the way you'd think." Then she looked at me and said, "It's good to have time to contemplate the end of your life. I mean, when else do you do it? When do you really think about death?"

"It *is* good?" I asked tentatively, as I rubbed more lavender lotion into her cracked soles.

"It's not what I would have thought," she said. "I'm not afraid. I feel I will still be here." Then she began to talk about what she wanted. She wanted her hospital bed to be in the living room, so she could look out the picture window at things that "would last a long time." She wanted to look at the fir tree on the lawn. And the pond. Just that year, a great blue heron had made a habit of stopping in the pond to fish. We would see him rise up out of the water, his wingspan at once awkward and magnificent. It was nearly Christmas, and she wanted us to buy a tree to be in the room with her bed. She talked about my brothers, and my dad, and said again that she wasn't afraid, though she was sad about "sappy" things.

"Like what?"

"Like Christmas. And my birthday." I took some lavender oil and put it behind her ears. She tilted her chin up like a child so I could sweep her hair back. She loved lavender, and it was supposed to be calming. "I'm sad about the things I have a lot of memories of, of the days when the whole family was together," she continued. "That's why I'm sad about Christmas and my birthday."

I began to cry. Through tears, I said, "I'm going to miss you so much." This is when a moment I keep going back to happened. I thought she would get tears in her eyes or melt in that special way that mothers melt—or, at least, that *she* usually melted—when she saw one of us kids in pain. Instead, she looked at me, and said, "I know," with a quiet calm. She had a funny look on her face, a look I had never quite seen directed at me before, of appraisal and remove. In that moment, I had the sense that she was letting me know something, that she thought I would be OK. This is what happened: Parents died, while children lived, and, in some sense, it was meant to be. Even if we both felt the moment had come too soon. This was not the response I wanted, but the authority of her look stilled me. I wiped away my tears. "I know," she said again.

Now, in the worst moments of grief, my mind often goes back to that night in the hospital as I exhaustedly rubbed her feet. I think of that moment when she said, "I know." And it calms me. Her

voice had the strange motherly knowledge that nothing approximates (except, of course, fatherly knowledge). Even though—or actually *because*—she didn't respond as I'd expected, that moment has become a form of comfort. My mother was giving me a command: Be OK.

After my mother died, many friends recommended Buddhist books to me, among them Gehlek Rinpoche's [*Good Life, Good Death*](#) and Sogyal Rinpoche's [*The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*](#). These books preach nonattachment—the idea (as I take it) that we need to let go rather than clutch—and acceptance of the impermanent state of life. The first I can't really understand, but the second seems crucial to me. At times, Buddhism (as filtered through Western self-help speak) strikes me as cruelly sanctimonious and callous; one routinely encounters the story of the angry cancer-riddled woman who consults a monk, learns to accept her death, and—voilà!—is healed. I have rarely been angrier than I was when I read: "Tibetan Buddhists believe that illnesses like cancer can be a warning, to remind us that we have been neglecting deep aspects of our being, such as our spiritual needs. If we take this warning seriously and change fundamentally the direction of our lives, there is a very real hope for healing not only our body, but our whole being."

At the same time, I do take to heart what a book like *Good Life, Good Death* has to say about what acceptance and a "good death" might be. Its ideas are not novel: Rinpoche mainly counsels acknowledgement of what is taking place and a kind of letting go on the part of both the ill and the soon-to-be-bereaved. This is good advice, though not every temperament is able to heed it, and that's where I get stuck every time. Acceptance isn't necessarily something you can choose off a menu, like eggs instead of French toast. Prigerson, the Harvard researcher, told me that much of the current clinical thinking on grief has concluded that some people are inherently primed to accept their own death with "integrity" (their word, not mine), while others are primed for "despair." Most of us though, she said, are somewhere in the middle, and one question researchers are now focusing on is: How might more of us in the middle learn to accept our deaths? This sounds touchy-feely, but it has, as she pointed out, real consequences for both the dying and the bereaved. For one thing, the terminally ill make clearer decisions about their end-of-life medical care when they have acknowledged their illness; for another, watching them acknowledge their death helps us, in turn, accept it, too. My brothers, father, and I witnessed my mother in traumatic, painful moments I'm sure we'd rather forget. Cancer is not a gentle disease. But in this one regard at least, my mother had what Buddhists and psychologists would call a good death. Which is to say: She accepted it.

"I don't want anyone to be afraid to ask me questions," she told me that night. We had no idea that three days later she would lapse back into a coma-like state and never speak again. How could we? Even in the midst of acceptance, we were always

bargaining for more time. We still lived inside Zeno's Paradox—the idea that if you go halfway toward something over and over, you never actually arrive. Mathematicians call it a paradox, but most of us take it to be a reality until proven otherwise. Or, at least, I did.

human guinea pig Where There's E-Smoke ...

Should I be ostracized for smoking electronic cigarettes?

By Emily Yoffe

Monday, April 6, 2009, at 3:23 PM ET

Barack Obama is under a lot of stress, which must be testing his oft-repeated vow to quit smoking. But no one wants to think of the president of the United States sneaking away from his desk, furtively taking a drag in the Rose Garden, and flicking his butts into Michelle's vegetable patch.

One day, I saw at a mall kiosk the perfect solution for satisfying Obama's cravings while allowing him to remain at work in the Oval Office: [the electronic cigarette](#). It was clear that my patriotic duty as the Human Guinea Pig was to test this device as a proxy for the president. I would try smoking electronically in places that banned the real thing, which meant nearly every place in Washington, D.C., and my neighboring home [county](#), since both have some of the most restrictive smoking laws in the country.

As I approached the [Smoking Everywhere](#) kiosk at Westfield Montgomery mall, the young woman selling e-cigarettes took a deep inhale of one and let out what looked like a cloud of smoke. She was "vaping," the new verb for inhaling the vapor generated by the e-cigarette. People around the world have been vaping since only 2004, when the first e-cig from China's Ruyan Group hit the market. There are now more than a dozen imitators. The e-cigarette contains no tobacco and produces no smoke. Instead, it is an ingenious electronic device that at very fleeting glance looks like the real thing. The "filter" is a receptacle for nicotine suspended in [propylene glycol](#)—the main ingredient in deodorant sticks and artificial smoke machines. This is screwed onto the body of the "cigarette," which is actually a battery and a heating element. When the user sucks on the filter, a nicotine-laced vapor is produced, satisfying a smoker's cravings. A little orange light at the end of the e-cig that illuminates with each inhale adds to the verisimilitude. It is not completely convincing, however. There is no ash or smoke curling from the tip, it never burns down, and it is awkwardly heavy.

The saleswoman handed me a tester. I puffed, and it filled my mouth with a mist that tasted so revolting that three sticks of gum couldn't eradicate it. An electronic-cigarette kit that came with two cigarettes, a charger, and five filter replacements (each was the equivalent of a pack of cigarettes) would cost me \$129, she said. But I felt like a hedge-fund sharpie when I negotiated a discount on this toxic asset to only \$100. (Like others who have been deluded about their financial acumen, I was fleeced: When I got home, I saw I could have ordered the [Smoking Everywhere kit on Amazon for \\$68](#).)

The instruction manual had an epigrammatic Confucian (and confusing) air: "The birth of 'electronic cigarette' is a revolution of mankind's smoking history. Undoubtedly, its birth will bring a gospel to mankind, especially th[e] vast smokers and will have extremely far-reaching impact on human being's lifestyle." I was less concerned about my lifestyle than my life. I had asked the saleswoman how safe the e-cig was, and she assured me that in the five years since it's been introduced, "no one's gotten hurt." She also told me the e-cigarette had FDA approval.

Smoking Everywhere allows you to choose filter cartridges with different levels of nicotine. I selected "none," which meant my e-cig was the buzz-free equivalent of nonalcoholic beer. The cigarette came in flavors such as tobacco, vanilla, mint, and apple. I took the saleswoman's advice that apple was refreshing. If you enjoy spraying Febreze Apple Spice & Delight air freshener in your mouth, this is indeed the flavor for you. Fortunately, as bad as the mist tasted, there was no noticeable odor, and it dissipated almost immediately, and thus didn't create a secondhand vapor problem.

The electronic cigarette is the latest in a line of devices that are supposed to satisfy smokers' cravings while not enveloping bystanders in noxious fumes. The most famous is probably Premier, the smokeless cigarette that R.J. Reynolds thought was going to revolutionize the industry in the 1980s. [Barbarians at the Gate](#) tells the story of how Premier became one of American business's biggest marketing fiascos. Among its problems were that it tasted "like shit" and "smelled like a fart." There have been a few attempts since, but [neither](#) Reynolds' Eclipse nor Philip Morris' Accord has caught on.

I admit I was not the ideal candidate to test the e-cigarette's effectiveness as a smoking substitute, since I've never smoked. OK, I may have surreptitiously had half a dozen pilfered cigarettes in junior high with my friend Merrill. I probably would have become a smoker if it hadn't been for my mother's influence. My mother said cigarettes were her best friend, and she smoked a pack or two of her pals every day for more than more than 50 years, until lung disease forced her to quit. Growing up, it was impossible to imagine her without one in her hand making her moods—*anxious, furious, charming*—manifest. My rebellion was to not be a smoker like her.

In his paean to smoking, *Cigarettes Are Sublime*, literary critic Richard Klein writes that the cigarette is "endowed with magical properties and seductive charms, surrounded by taboos and an air of danger." Journalist Richard Kluger in his Pulitzer Prize-winning history of the tobacco industry, *Ashes to Ashes*, writes of the bewitching power of smoking, "[T]he cigarette is a uniquely intimate possession. ... [S]moking is essentially a physical and highly sensual experience ... the quintessence of cool ... the lazy, sinuous ribbon wafting upward, signaling that the smoker exists." My e-cigarette gave me an inkling of all this, even if the e-cig is decidedly not sublime, and I was signaling only that propylene glycol exists.

I remember when people smoked in hospital waiting rooms, when airplanes had smoking sections, when the arts and crafts project of choice at summer camp was an ashtray for one's parents. But that was 40 years ago. I was apprehensive about testing whether the e-cig would really allow me to smoke everywhere. As Klein points out, "[T]he discursive performance of smoking has become a form of obscenity." I decided to make my debut performance on Washington's subway system, the Metro. Metro has a zero tolerance approach to the oral fixations of its riders. No eating, drinking, or smoking is allowed—passengers have been [arrested](#) for consuming a single French fry or finishing off a candy bar.

Nervously, I stood in the middle of the subway car, pulled my e-cig out of my purse, took a drag and exhaled. Immediately four older women across from me began murmuring to each other and looking at me disapprovingly. After about a minute, one couldn't stand it anymore. "Are you smoking?" she called to me, making it clear this was a rhetorical question.

I'm sure among the [45 million](#) American adults who smoke there are many who are polite, even abashed about it. But a cigarette (even if it's a fake) has a magic-wand-like power to induce a sense of arrogant insolence in the user. I wanted to vape in her face and say, "What's it to you?" Instead, I smiled and took my e-cig and pretended to put it out on the back of my hand. The ladies immediately went from outrage to fascination. Where did I get it? What is it for?

Next, I tried lighting up in the express line at the grocery store. I thought it was incongruous to have a basket containing arugula and bananas while I smoked, but then I remembered that the president himself is an arugula-loving smoker. As I puffed, the man in front of me turned and stared until finally asking, "Is that a fake cigarette?"

"Why do you say that?" I replied.

"Because it's not real," he responded.

By this time the checker chimed in, "I know where you got that. I saw that at the mall!" and she burst out laughing. Soon everyone in line was laughing at my vaping, which did not exactly give me the feeling of being the quintessence of cool.

One Saturday night my husband and I went out to dinner with friends, and I pulled out my e-cig as we sat at a long banquette. The three of them tried to pretend they didn't know me, but the reaction from the rest of the patrons made me feel like a world-class transgressor. As I took drag after drag, everyone on either side of me stopped their conversation, looked at me in astonishment, then whispered to each other and pointed. It was as if I'd taken out a length of rubber hose, tied it around my arm, and inserted a hypodermic of heroin. Finally the woman at the next table asked the inevitable, "Are you smoking?" I explained it was an e-cigarette. She became excited and said, "I have to get one of these!" I asked if she was a smoker. She wasn't but she explained, "I love it. It's so cool!" Then the waiter came over for our order, saw me, and said, "Sorry. You can't. It's not allowed. You. Oh. Oh, I see. It's a—cool." Finally, I had achieved some quintessence.

My experiments were taking a toll, however. I had to dose myself not only with breath mints but painkillers as well. I worried that my fake cigarette might contain a brew of the greatest hits of Chinese contaminants: [antifreeze](#), [melamine](#), [puffer-fish toxin](#) (or even MSG!), because each time I took a puff a sharp pain ran across the top of my skull. (This eventually became a Pavlovian response, and all I'd have to do was pull the e-cig out of my purse and my head would start throbbing.)

When my family came for a visit, I served them brunch while blowing my e-cig. Their shock made my headaches worthwhile. My sister, a former smoker, quickly realized I was faking. Still, she observed me closely, finally saying, "If you'd been a smoker, it would have developed another side of your personality. The nasty barfly side."

E-cigarette manufacturers like to give the impression that health-monitoring agencies have approved their product. This is not the case. Dr. Jack Henningfield, a professor of psychiatry at Johns Hopkins and a consultant to the World Health Organization on tobacco policy, says WHO calls them an "electronic nicotine delivery system," or ENDS, and unless the manufacturers can prove that their products are safe and effective, WHO is going to want to see an end to ENDS. He says, "It stuns me people would so willingly accept the word of manufacturers from an unregulated industry, claiming their product is safe and pure when they won't tell us what's in it and haven't done the most basic studies."

Dr. Saul Shiffman, an expert on nicotine addiction at the University of Pittsburgh, says the manufacturers are pushing their products as both a way to quit smoking and a way to keep smoking, which is problematic. He echoes Henningfield's safety

concerns, "How do you know what chemicals are being dissolved and conveyed? Or that they're not full of bacteria that [are] setting up residence in your lungs? When you buy this, you're becoming the guinea pig." Exactly! (I was somewhat relieved to see the Ruyan Group paid for a New Zealand researcher to test its product, and he [found it to be safe.](#))

Despite my saleswoman's assurances, the Food and Drug Administration has not approved e-cigarettes and considers them a drug-delivery system. Says an FDA spokeswoman, Rita Chappelle, "As such, it's illegal to sell or market them." Sen. Frank Lautenberg, D-N.J., has called for the agency to pull the e-cigs off the market, a request endorsed by, among others, the American Cancer Society, the American Heart Association, and the American Lung Association. I called Smoking Everywhere to ask about its legal situation, but no one ever got back to me.

Considering the various downsides—bad breath, headaches, the FDA says they're illegal—perhaps the e-cigarette is not the answer to our president's surreptitious vice. So, Mr. Obama, when you're at your desk and you get that insatiable craving, do all of us a favor, stay where you are and pop a piece of nicotine gum.

human nature

Sweet Surrender

Taxing soda to make you stop drinking it.

By William Saletan

Friday, April 10, 2009, at 8:01 AM ET

The food police are closing in on their next target: a soda tax.

New York City's health commissioner, Thomas Frieden, is leading the way. He's the guy who purged [trans fats](#) from the city's restaurants and made them post [calorie counts](#) for menu items. Lately he's been pressuring food companies to remove [salt](#) from their products.

Now he's going after soda. Writing in the [New England Journal of Medicine](#), Frieden and Kelly Brownell, the director of Yale's Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity, propose a [penny-per-ounce excise tax](#) on "sugared beverages." That's nearly \$3 per case. Why so much? Because this tax, unlike the petty junk-food taxes of yesteryear, is designed to hurt. Its purpose is to discourage you from buying soda, on the grounds that soda, like smoking, is bad for you.

Persuading Americans to regulate soda the way we regulate cigarettes won't be easy. Isn't soda a kind of food? Isn't food a good thing? And isn't it a matter of personal choice? Doesn't

taxation to control people's eating behavior cross a fundamental line of liberty?

In their article, Frieden and Brownell methodically attack these objections. Going well beyond science, they lay out a political battle plan for the war on junk food.

Step 1 is to convince us that soda isn't really food. If you think this can't be done, wake up: Frieden has already done it to [trans fats](#). In the *NEJM* article, he and Brownell spurn the notion that soft drinks are sacred because "because people must eat to survive." They tartly observe that "sugared beverages are not necessary for survival."

Step 2 is to associate soda with products we already stigmatize and regulate as harmful. On this point, the authors quote Adam Smith: "Sugar, rum, and tobacco are commodities which are nowhere necessities of life, which are become objects of almost universal consumption, and which are therefore extremely proper subjects of taxation."

Step 3 is to persuade you that one person's soda consumption harms others, thereby transcending personal liberty. The authors write:

The contribution of unhealthful diets to health care costs is already high and is increasing—an estimated \$79 billion is spent annually for overweight and obesity alone—and approximately half of these costs are paid by Medicare and Medicaid, at taxpayers' expense. Diet-related diseases also cost society in terms of decreased work productivity, increased absenteeism, poorer school performance, and reduced fitness on the part of military recruits, among other negative effects.

The Medicare argument is dubious, since, as my colleague Daniel Engber points out, fat people [die younger](#) and thereby save the program years of coverage. But the really cheeky pitch is the one about military recruits. Apparently, Coke is now a menace to national security.

Step 4 is to target kids, because our urge to protect them makes us [more amenable to paternalism](#). "Sugared beverages are marketed extensively to children and adolescents" and "now account for 10 to 15% of the calories consumed by children and adolescents," Frieden and Brownell observe. In fact, soda makers "exploit the cognitive vulnerabilities of young children, who often cannot distinguish a television program from an advertisement." New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg [echoes](#) this plea: "We have to do something to help our children."

Step 5 is to tempt policymakers with cash flow. "A third consideration is revenue generation," the authors note. "A penny-per-ounce excise tax would raise an estimated \$1.2 billion in New York State alone."

Step 6 is to persuade voters that the tax is for their health, not for cash flow. Frieden and Brownell note the political importance of this message: "[A] poll of New York residents found that 52% supported a 'soda tax,' but the number rose to 72% when respondents were told that the revenue would be used for obesity prevention."

Three years ago, I thought the movement to legislate against junk food was politically futile. But that was before the successful assaults on trans fats, calorie counts, and [opening fast-food restaurants](#). Those victories, apparently, were just the appetizers. The next course is behavior modification through taxation. And this article is the recipe.

(Now playing at the [Human Nature blog](#): 1. A drug that cures [stealing](#). 2. Poverty, biology, and [intelligence](#). 3. A black market in [children](#).)

human nature

Deeper Digital Penetration

The expanding invasion of the naked body scanners.

By William Saletan

Wednesday, April 8, 2009, at 7:43 AM ET

The naked body scanners are taking over.

When we first checked in on them [two years ago](#), the scanners, which [see through clothing](#), were being deployed at a single airport. A few months later, they were upgraded to [millimeter-wave](#) technology, which delivered similar images with even less radiation—"10,000 times less than a cell phone transmission," according to the Transportation Security Administration. At the time, TSA [assured](#) us that the scanners would be used only as a "voluntary alternative" to "a more invasive physical pat-down during secondary screening." Only a few passengers, the ones selected for extra scrutiny, would face the scanners. The rest of us could walk through the metal detectors and board our planes.

Surprise! Two months ago, TSA [revised its position](#). It began testing millimeter-wave scans "in the place of the walk-through metal detector at six airports." At these airports, everyone—not just people selected for secondary screening—would face the see-through machines. Anyone who objected would "undergo metal detector screening and a pat-down." You might even get the "[enhanced pat-down](#)," which includes "sensitive areas of the

body that are often used by professional testers and terrorists," such as "the breast and groin areas of females and the groin area of males." Show us your body, or we'll feel you up.

Now the plan is going nationwide. Joe Sharkey of the *New York Times* [reports](#) that TSA "plans to replace the walk-through metal detectors at airport checkpoints with whole-body imaging machines—the kind that provide an image of the naked body." All passengers will "go through the whole-body imager instead of the walk-through metal detector," according to TSA's chief technology officer, and the machines will begin operating soon after orders are placed this summer.

When the scanners first appeared, I endorsed them. When they were upgraded to millimeter-wave technology, I endorsed them again. I gave two reasons. One reason was that a scan was less invasive than a pat-down. The other reason was that TSA promised to blur your face and keep your scan private, so that nobody would ever connect your name to your revealed body. That, I argued, was a sufficient kind of privacy in the age of terrorism.

Now I'm having second thoughts. I still like the technology. It's the people behind it who worry me. Yes, the scan is less invasive than the pat-down. But TSA has just demonstrated its ability and willingness to move the goalposts. When TSA offered pat-downs as the alternative to body scans in secondary screening, the scan sounded pretty good. Now TSA is offering pat-downs as the alternative to body scans in primary screening, and again, the scan sounds better. And if TSA announces tomorrow that pat-downs are the new alternative for all train or bus passengers, body scans will seem preferable there, too. Anywhere we're threatened with pat-downs, we'll settle for body scans. Where does it end?

And what about the content of the scans? Two years ago, I [linked to a scan](#) that seemed to expose [every intimate body contour](#) of TSA's research lab director. TSA argued that the picture was moot because its machines (which at the time used backscatter technology) had been upgraded with a "[privacy algorithm](#)" to obscure such features. But you won't find the phrase *privacy algorithm* on that page anymore; it's been scrubbed. In fact, *privacy algorithm* has [completely disappeared](#) from TSA's Web site. So have the images that used to show a [frontal backscatter image of a male passenger](#). All you can find on TSA's millimeter-wave page are four scans shrunk to a size so tiny you'd need a [magnifying glass](#) to make sense of them. Good luck figuring out how much they show—and why they look nothing like the image depicted in a [video](#) (WMV file) on the TSA site.

Why should I care what the government says or depicts about its latest scanner image or blurring technology, when the technology and the depictions keep changing? The lesson of the escalating body scans, like the escalating pat-downs, is that TSA

will do whatever it thinks it needs to do. Last year, when the agency announced its "enhanced" pat-downs, it [explained](#):

As the ongoing [terror trial in London](#) clearly illustrates, terrorists actively look for ways to manipulate security protocols. Intelligence has also shown for decades, terrorists' manipulation of societal norms to evade detection or use social engineering techniques to their advantage. Terrorists have successfully hidden explosives in these areas. ... TSA developed this pat down as a measure to close the gap on items hidden on sensitive areas of the body.

In other words, any detail omitted by airport screeners—a blurred crotch in the body scan, an untouched groin during the pat-down—becomes a "gap" exploited by terrorists or testers, which must then be closed.

"The enhanced pat-down will be used only after all other screening methods have been used and the alarm remains unresolved," TSA promised last year. It added: "This new procedure will affect a very small percentage of travelers."

Yeah, yeah, yeah. That's what you said about the body scans. Just put on the gloves and get it over with.

(Now playing at the [Human Nature blog](#): 1. Poverty, biology, and [intelligence](#). 2. A black market in [children](#). 3. Repossessing cars by [remote control](#).)

jurisprudence

Czar Obama

The president's incredibly imperialist wielding of executive power.

By Bruce Fein

Thursday, April 9, 2009, at 3:13 PM ET

President Barack Obama's claim to czarlike powers in a perpetual global war against international terrorism has been blunted by a judicial appointee of former President George W. Bush. Last week, in the case *Fadi al Maqaleh*, United States District Judge John D. Bates [denied](#) that President Obama could make suspected "enemy combatants" disappear into the Bagram Theater Internment Facility at Bagram Airfield in Afghanistan without an opportunity for exoneration. (While President Obama has abandoned the term *enemy combatant* for Guantanamo Bay detainees, he has retained the label for detainees held elsewhere.)

Bates' ruling is a welcome check on an emerging pattern of mightily expansive claims of executive authority by the new administration. In early February, President Obama sought another imperial power before the United States Court of Appeals for the 9th Circuit in the case [Mohammed v. Jeppesen Dataplan](#). The complaint alleged that the plaintiffs had been seized by American personnel, taken to airports, stripped, blindfolded, shackled to the floor of a Gulfstream V, and taken to destination countries for torture and harsh incarceration. The District Court dismissed the complaint because then-President Bush and Vice President Cheney argued that state secrets would be exposed if the case were litigated. During oral argument before the 9th Circuit, Obama echoed the state-secrets argument made by Bush and Cheney. Similarly, the president who promised "change" is wielding the tool of state secrets in aiming to dismiss, without the gathering of evidence, challenges to the National Security Agency's Terrorist Surveillance Program, which entailed warrantless phone or e-mail interceptions of American citizens on American soil in contravention of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act of 1978. This defense has failed before Judge Vaughn R. Walker in early rounds of the litigation. And, again, the state-secrets privilege is the administration's response, if ancillary to a defense of retroactive immunity, in a brief filed last week to the [efforts](#) of the Electronic Frontier Foundation to sue Bush administration officials for the NSA's wiretapping.

In principle, President Obama is maintaining that victims of constitutional wrongdoing by the U.S. government should be denied a remedy to prevent the American people and the world at large from learning of the lawlessness perpetrated in the name of national security and exacting political and legal accountability. Thus Mahar Arar, who was tortured by Syrian agents, allegedly with the complicity of U.S. intelligence or immigration agents, has been denied a judicial remedy, again based on the state-secrets rule, to hide the identities of his U.S. government persecutors. Similarly, victims of torture authorized by the president or vice president would encounter the state-secrets bar if they sought redress. Disclosing the methods of torture, the government has argued, might enable al-Qaida detainees to prepare better psychologically or physically to resist the criminal abuse! Such reasoning more befits the pages of [Alexander Solzhenitsyn's Gulag Archipelago](#) than the U.S. Supreme Court opinion in *ex parte Milligan*: "The Constitution of the United States is a law for rulers and people, equally in war and in peace, and covers with the shield of its protection all classes of men, at all times, and under all circumstances. No doctrine, involving more pernicious consequences, was ever invented by the wit of man than that any of its provisions can be suspended during any of the great exigencies of government."

In the Bagram Prison litigation, Judge Bates summoned the observation of Alexander Hamilton writing in *The Federalist* 84: "[C]onfinement of the person, by secretly hurrying him to jail, where his sufferings are unknown or forgotten, is a less public, a

less striking, and therefore a more dangerous engine of arbitrary government." Accordingly, he held that enemy combatant detainees at Bagram who were captured outside Afghanistan and who were not Afghan citizens could challenge the constitutionality of their detentions in federal courts through writs of habeas corpus.

If President Obama had embraced the principles of a republic (which cares about injustice) instead of the arrogance of empire (which admires swagger), neither the habeas corpus nor state-secrets litigation would have been necessary. In the former case, four detainees held at Bagram for six years or more filed petitions in the United States District Court for the District of Columbia assailing the legality of their incarcerations based solely on the president's assertion that they were "enemy combatants." That concept—as defined by President Obama—sweeps far beyond persons accused of directly aiding or participating in hostilities against the United States. It includes persons who "supported hostilities in aid of enemy forces," which might encompass the provision of food, medicines, or trousers. The detainees had been captured in Tunisia, Thailand, Dubai, and an unknown location outside Afghanistan. One was an Afghan citizen, two were Yemenis, and one was Tunisian.

President Obama ratified the following charade to make "enemy combatant" determinations at Bagram, which can be the equivalent of life sentences. The initial judgment is made "in the field." It is reviewed within 75 days, and then at six-month intervals. The reviewing body is the Unlawful Enemy Combatant Review Board, a panel of three commissioned officers. It examines "all relevant information reasonably available." The detainee is denied access to a personal representative or lawyer. He is denied access to the government's evidence. He is denied an opportunity to respond in person. He is limited to submitting a written statement without knowledge of either his accusers or the allegations that must be rebutted. After its sham hearing, the UECRB makes a recommendation by majority vote to the commanding general as to whether the detainee is an "enemy combatant."

The Bagram procedures are descendents of the Spanish Inquisition. The executive branch decrees that "enemy combatant" status justifies detention, enforces the decree through executive detentions, and decides whether its enforcement decisions are correct. That combination was what the Founding Fathers decried as the "very definition of tyranny" in *The Federalist* 47. In addition, the incriminating evidence and accusers are secret. And the judges are military persons the detainee is accused of hoping to kill, which probably compromises their putative impartiality.

President Obama's claim of wartime necessity as justifying constitutional shortcuts is unpersuasive. The United States granted accused war criminals captured in the China Theater a particularized statement of charges and a rigorous adversarial

process, noted by the United States Supreme Court in the 1950 case *Eisentrager v. Johnson*. As regards state secrets, the government can always accept a default judgment, meaning an acceptance of liability for alleged injuries, if it wishes to preserve vital intelligence sources and methods. The government confronts the same choice in criminal cases—i.e., either to disclose classified information necessary for a fair trial or to drop the prosecution.

President Obama pledged to restore the rule of law. But the state-secrets-privilege wars with that promise. It encourages torture, kidnappings, inhumane treatment, and similar abuses, all carried out in the name of fighting international terrorism. That encouragement is compounded by the president's adamant opposition to criminal prosecution of former or current government officials for open and notorious abuses—for example, water-boarding or illegal surveillance. His stances on habeas corpus and state secrets flout twin verities of Justice Louis D. Brandeis: Sunshine is the best disinfectant; and, when the government becomes a lawbreaker, it invites every man to become a law unto himself.

jurisprudence

Noah Webster Gives His Blessing

Dictionaries recognize same-sex marriage—who knew?

By Daniel Redman

Tuesday, April 7, 2009, at 4:26 PM ET

Opponents of gay marriage generally have relied on two authorities, the Bible and the dictionary—the divine word and the defined word. A 2006 friend-of-the-court brief filed on behalf of anti-gay-marriage organizations in a Maryland marriage case cited no fewer than seven dictionaries to make its point. And when the Iowa Supreme Court legalized gay marriage [last week](#), it ignored the state's plea to abide by a dictionary definition that limited marriage to "the legal union of a man and a woman."

But in their latest editions, the dictionaries have begun to switch sides—though until recently, no one seemed to have much noticed. *The American Heritage Dictionary*, *Black's Law Dictionary*, the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and *Webster's* have all added same-sex unions to their definitions of marriage.* The right-wing Web site WorldNetDaily [broke](#) the news in March about *Webster's*, reporting that the dictionary had "resolved the argument" over gay marriage by applying the ancient term "to same-sex duos."

How, exactly, has the wording in the dictionaries changed? *American Heritage* went first, adding this to its definition of

marriage in 2000: "A union between two persons having the customary but usually not the legal force of marriage: a same-sex marriage." In 2003, *Webster's* included in its definition "the state of being united to a person of the same sex in a relationship like that of a traditional marriage." In 2004, in its eighth edition, *Black's* added "same-sex marriage" to its *marriage* entry, recognizing that "same-sex couples have successfully challenged the laws against same-sex marriage" in a number of states. Even more interesting, 2008's *Webster's Contemporary School and Office Dictionary* says nothing gendered about marriage at all. The entry simply states that marriage is "the state of being united to another person as a contractual relationship according to law or custom." And the king of them all, the *Oxford English Dictionary*, since 2000 has included in the definition of marriage the phrase "long-term relationships between partners of the same sex."*

In response to a complaint from a WorldNetDaily reader, *Webster's* brushed off criticism that it was choosing sides with the expanded definition. According to the editor, it was "a simple matter of providing our readers with accurate information about all of the word's current uses." But dictionaries occupy prime social real estate, with significant authority over adjudicating the meaning of words. Courts use them as evidence of societal attitudes and to interpret statutes. Even if dictionary editors aren't trying to put a thumb on the scale, their judgment may soon matter. Dictionaries didn't come up in [Tuesday's vote](#) to approve same-sex marriage by the Vermont state Legislature, but a [recent case](#) filed to challenge the denial of federal recognition to state same-sex marriages could make use of the new definitions.

H.L. Mencken wrote that Noah Webster, paragon of American lexicography, was "not only a pedagogue, but a Calvinist and a foe of democracy." Whether because of his stern outlook or no, ever since he issued his first dictionary in 1806, Americans have held the volumes in awe as impartial arbiters. Historically, the dictionary, like society at large, had a staunchly heterosexual view of marriage. Webster's 1828 dictionary defined marriage as "instituted by God himself for the purpose of preventing the promiscuous intercourse of the sexes, for promoting domestic felicity, and for securing the maintenance and education of children." The 1913 edition continued to cite the New Testament's statement, "Marriage is honorable in all." For context, it also defined *sodomy* as "carnal copulation in a manner against nature, buggery," recommended the Genesis story of Sodom for further reading, and concluded with the aside "can we be more explicit?"

Gay-marriage opponents have capitalized on all of this for decades. In the first same-sex marriage case in the United States, Minnesota's *Baker v. Nelson*, which dates from 1971, the court dismissed the plaintiffs with a wave of *Webster's Third New International* and *Black's Fourth Edition* (as well as the Book of Genesis for good measure). Later that year, in a New York

same-sex marriage suit, a trial court cited *Black's* for the proposition that "[m]arriage is and always has been a contract between a man and a woman." A Kentucky court in *Jones v. Hallahan* in 1973 held that marriage should go by the "common usage," pointing to *Webster's*, *Black's*, and "the Century Dictionary and Encyclopedia."

This doesn't mean that gay-marriage advocates will win now that the dictionary definitions have become more expansive. For judges who adhere to the theory of originalism, interpreting laws and statutes based on what the words in them meant at the time they were written, the latest dictionary editions don't matter for judging the validity of statutes that were drafted in the past. Think Justice Antonin Scalia, who generally likes to stick with the early 20th-century *Webster's Second New International*. For jurists like him, the "common usage" of a word, from the time the law at issue was written, will prevail over newer understandings.

In a decision refusing to allow a Massachusetts-married same-sex couple to divorce in Rhode Island, for example, that state's high court cited four dictionaries older than or from the time of the 1961 divorce statute. The court found that "the primary dictionary definition normally expresses the 'ordinary meaning' of the word being defined." The state of Iowa cited a 1999 dictionary in support of the statute that restricted marriage to a man and a woman. (Until, that is, the court struck the law down.)

But for those judges who are open to the notion that statutory and constitutional meaning can change over time, the dictionary acceptance of same-sex marriage will offer evidence of a shift in public views. Instead of fending off or ignoring the dictionary, gay advocates will be able to cite the new editions in their briefs. The new entries in *Webster's*, *Black's*, and soon the *OED* signal that the idea of same-sex marriage has come of age. The Supreme Court cited an "emerging awareness" that gay people shouldn't be treated like criminals in striking down remaining state sodomy laws in 2003. Now the dictionaries herald the same kind of "emerging awareness" about gay marriage. When you make it into the dictionary, you're no longer novel. You're on your way to becoming ho-hum. Noah Webster presumably would have scratched his Calvinist brow, but his dictionary could very well help same-sex marriage someday become the law of the land.

Correction, April 8, 2009: *The original sentence wrongly stated that the OED's definition of marriage including same-sex marriage is in draft form. The OED's definition of marriage has recognized same-sex marriage since 2000. The fact that the OED's entry is headed with the note "Draft revision Mar. 2009" does not mean that's when the entry first appeared in this form. It means that revisions to the entry—though not related to the same-sex marriage point—were published at that time. ([Return to the corrected sentences.](#))*

16 months while fighting extradition to Spain.* The magistrate who issued Pinochet's arrest warrant? Judge Garzon.

jurisprudence

Spain's Most Wanted: Gonzales in the Dock

What the Spanish prosecutions of Bush administration lawyers really means.

By Julian Davis Mortenson

Monday, April 6, 2009, at 6:21 PM ET

The national-security community is buzzing with the news of [Spain's criminal investigation](#) into allegations of torture at Guantanamo Bay. The investigating magistrate, Baltasar Garzon, is a swashbuckling figure who has played a central role in some of Spain's most celebrated criminal cases. While he is sometimes accused of being a [grandstander](#), it's hard to peg Garzon as soft on terror, given his long record of aggressive and successful criminal investigations of al-Qaida and ETA. The civilian lawyer who filed the criminal complaint may be another story. He evidently served 10 years in a Spanish prison in the 1990s for collaborating with domestic terrorists.

The list of American defendants in the case reads like a [who's who](#) from the good old days of the war on terror: Alberto Gonzales (former attorney general), David Addington (Dick Cheney's former chief of staff), William Haynes (former general counsel of the Department of Defense), Jay Bybee (former head of the Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel), John Yoo (former deputy at the Bybee OLC), and Doug Feith (former undersecretary of defense). The names themselves [are hardly a surprise](#), but it is still shocking to see them laid out on the page of a criminal indictment.

Nobody's been charged with anything yet. The Spanish civil law system allows criminal complaints to be filed by individual civilians, screened by an investigating magistrate like Garzon, and then referred to a prosecutor's office for preliminary assessment. After the prosecutors make their recommendation, an ultimate go/no-go decision on pursuing criminal charges follows. In the Guantanamo case, the process has only just cleared the first screening. That said, the referral makes a full investigation quite likely, and at least one official Spanish source has called eventual charges "highly probable."

This is a big deal. For years, civil rights advocates have sought to prosecute Bush administration officials for their terror policies, both at home and around the world. In some circles, there is still hope that the Obama administration will order its own criminal investigation of the torture issue. But Garzon's decision to refer the charges to the prosecutor makes all this talk suddenly concrete. In Spain such cases are a serious business, a proposition reinforced by the lasting image of Chile's ailing ex-dictator Augusto Pinochet confined to house arrest in Britain for

One other fact in the cart-before-the-horse department: No actual prosecuting can happen until someone arrests the suspects—Spain does not allow trials in absentia. And such arrests are hardly imminent. A State Department spokesman once said it would be "a very cold day in hell" before the United States would extradite three American servicemen to face trial in Spain for alleged war crimes in Iraq. The forecast would have to look similar before the [chief corporate counsel at Chevron](#) or a [tenured Berkeley professor](#) would be shipped to Spain, and hell will likely be clocking zero Kelvin before we extradite a [sitting 9th Circuit judge](#) on charges like these.

Even if the Spanish investigation does move forward, however, warrants for the defendants' arrest are likely to be issued in countries around the world, including at a minimum the signatories to the European Convention on Extradition. That would basically rule out travel for these six men, not just to Old Europe but to most of Eastern Europe, Turkey, and Russia. And it would cast a pretty significant pall over jaunts to other destinations as well.

The consequences are serious, even if none of the defendants is ever brought before a judge. But even if they never step into a Spanish courtroom, what makes the case so important (and some people's reactions to it unexpectedly ambiguous) is a combination of two things: what the defendants are accused of doing and the fact that this is being pushed in Spain, not here.

The charges are leveled against this group of attorneys precisely *as lawyers*: as advisers, adjuncts, and counselors. The complaint does not primarily focus on the suggestion that any of them individually ordered specific acts of torture. Rather, it accuses them of creating an insulating administrative framework to facilitate torture that was planned, ordered, and perpetrated by others. They are responsible, in other words, for creating a maze of legal theories that would both deny review of active torture facilities and protect torturers from punishment after the dirty work was done. One might wryly say they stand accused of providing [material support](#) for torture.

There has always been discomfort over prosecuting lawyers under these circumstances. In principle, we should have no more scruples about nailing legal facilitators than we do about going after the getaway driver in a bank robbery or the spotter working to assist a Serbian sniper over Sarajevo. But we have long balked at the idea of prosecuting lawyers for legal advice. That's one reason the post-World War II "Justice Case" (against German lawyers who created and enforced the legal framework for Nazi atrocities) had to be heard by an American-only tribunal rather than at the multinational Nuremberg proceedings: France and Britain were unwilling to impose criminal sanctions on men who had "merely" done legal work.

The accusations in the Spanish complaint shed light on why some lawyers are queasy about all this: The complaint focuses of course, on the infamous [Aug. 1, 2002](#), "torture memo" and references the associated and mostly unreleased memoranda [authorizing specific "harsh" interrogation techniques](#). This is not surprising: It's hard to find many practicing lawyers who will defend the legal reasoning behind the torture memo—itsself long withdrawn by members of the Bush OLC.

But the criminal charges also target the lawyers' argument that the laws of war do not protect nonstate actors like al-Qaida as combatants in an armed conflict and their attendant advice that the government could avoid judicial review by locating the prison camps in Guantanamo Bay rather than, say, Fort Leavenworth. As it happens, both these arguments were wrong, certainly in the eyes of the Supreme Court. But neither was insane. To be sure, advocating even legally defensible arguments could give rise to criminal culpability if those arguments were used maliciously to cover up atrocities. But proving that on the basis of the public record, under the standard of proof applicable in criminal trials, will be tricky indeed. (Click [here](#) for more on the torture charges.)

A second aspect of the Spanish prosecution troubles even some who are fully onboard with investigating the legacy of Guantanamo. That's the idea that *Spain* would be doing it. There is no question that extraterritorial prosecutions like this one have a well-established basis in legal theory and practice, both domestic and international. It's called "universal jurisdiction," and while controversial in some instances, it applies to the relatively small subset of crimes so universally condemned as to be the concern of all nations wherever they occur. Applying universal jurisdiction, for example, any court in the world—in Belgium, Brazil, or Brunei—could prosecute an American citizen for torturing another American citizen, even in America.

But the legal underpinnings of universal jurisdiction have been described as "a muddy river leading to a muddy lake." Nobody exactly agrees on them, and they stir up some serious sludge. The doctrine itself sits uneasily between two points about which people broadly agree: 1) Justice should be delivered at the local level, by representatives of the community most connected to the moral wrong; and 2) sometimes those communities either can't, or won't, do the hard work that justice requires. In a case like Guantanamo, the exercise of universal jurisdiction typically tries to square this circle by leaving the criminal investigation to the Americans ... unless the Americans aren't doing a good enough job of it. The troubles start with the debate over whether American efforts are good enough.

The Spanish investigation is not premised on universal jurisdiction in its purest form, at least not yet. The proceeding arises primarily because America held five Spanish citizens and residents at Guantanamo, including one who later escaped criminal conviction when Spanish courts found the evidence

procured against him at Guantanamo "totally void." So if the allegations are true, Spain actually has its own dog in this fight: harm done to its citizens by foreign criminals. That leaves this prosecution on substantially the same footing as a U.S. prosecution of the mastermind of the *Cole* bombing in Yemen (because the victims were American) or the recent federal conviction of Chuckie Taylor for perpetrating torture in his father's country of Liberia (because the defendant is American).

But there are also hints in the complaint that the investigation might expand to include non-Spanish victims—including a list of victims from other countries that is dozens of pages long. That would indeed raise the prospect of universal jurisdiction. And that's when the fight would really heat up.

Here's the difficulty: Even the most adamant sovereigntists generally agree that for certain historic crimes, it is appropriate for judgment to be rendered by entities other than the host state: Nazi Germany, the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, now Sudan. But wherever and whenever this is done, the targets and their allies talk of [victor's justice](#), of [politicized prosecutions](#), and of [precooked show trials](#). There is no way around this dynamic, regardless of whether the prosecuting authority is an international tribunal or an independent state. Nor is there any way around the rebound effect: Prosecute the Eichmanns, Milosevics, and Chucky Taylors, and the Addingtons, Bybees, and Yoos may have to fight to show why this sort of exceptionalism shouldn't apply in their cases. And their allegations of politicization may ring hollow as what has become the despot's familiar countermove.

Any way you look at it, the proceedings in Madrid are a reality that will hang over counterterrorist efforts for years to come. Whether that's a good or bad thing, whether it's bravery or overreaching—and perhaps even whether these lawyers were abetting atrocities or just doing their jobs—may ultimately depend on which part of the muddy lake you're swimming in.

Correction, [April 7, 2009](#): The article mistakenly said Augusto Pinochet was Argentina's ailing ex-dictator. ([Return to the corrected sentence.](#))

sidebar

Return to [article](#)

Of course, even if these legal opinions are deemed so baseless as to constitute something like material support for torture, Garzon still has to find that torture in fact occurred at Guantanamo. It doesn't look promising for the accused on that front. After

demanding the extradition of two British citizens to stand trial for acting as al-Qaida operatives in Madrid, Judge Garzon canceled the process once he saw reports from British doctors. He found at the time that the "inhumane conditions" at Guantanamo Bay had so badly damaged the defendants that the "progressive deterioration of their mental condition" rendered them [unfit to participate](#) in their trial.

Nor would anyone envy the defense attorney who had to argue that no torture took place on the island. The charges made about U.S. detention conditions are awful, and more evidence emerges almost weekly. The conceded instances of water-boarding are in some ways the least of it. [Long-term sleep deprivation and extremes of hot and cold](#) for months on end. [Indefinite solitary confinement](#). [Death threats](#) for detainees and their family members. Black-site detainees locked in [coffin-size boxes](#). And that's on top of ordinary physical brutality that almost seems banal in comparison to the more insidious forms of torment. In the wake of Abu Ghraib, the "there's no way we'd do that" instinct no longer has quite the force it once did for many.

moneybox

And It Can't Count on a Bailout

Introducing one company ideally suited *not* to prosper in the Obama era.

By Daniel Gross

Tuesday, April 7, 2009, at 2:58 PM ET

The [Obama portfolio](#), assembled by our compadres at [The Big Money](#), is a set of companies seemingly in tune with the vibe and zeitgeist of the 44th president. Which got me wondering: What would the *un*-Obama portfolio—a set of companies entirely out of step with prevailing moods and trends—look like? The charter member might be a diversified conglomerate, with a name out of a [David Baldacci](#) thriller, whose largest unit manufactures private propeller planes and jets that cater to fat-cat CEOs and hedge-fund magnates. Its second-largest unit might make expensive helicopters for the Pentagon, while other divisions would produce defense- and homeland-security-related hardware, and still others would make products catering to the leisure class, like golf carts. Oh, and it might tap into the capital markets to create a business to lend cash to customers buying all these big-ticket items.

In other words, it might be [Textron](#).

Textron's [businesses](#) include [Cessna](#), a large manufacturer of private planes (40 percent of revenues); [Bell Helicopter](#), which makes the UH-1Y and AH-1Z helicopters for the Pentagon (20 percent of revenues); [Textron Systems](#), a clutch of defense contractors (15 percent of revenues); and [an industrial unit](#) that

produces things like [E-Z-GO](#) golf carts and [turf maintenance vehicles](#) (20 percent). The [finance unit](#) accounts for the rest.

From 2002 to 2006, given the macroeconomic climate and the power structure in Washington, this was a great set of businesses. Money was cheap, the defense budget was growing, and your customers didn't particularly care how much anything cost. Tax policy and the economic culture smiled upon magnates who jetted around the country, played golf, and rented industrial-scale earth-moving machines to landscape their third, fourth, and fifth homes. As this [long-term chart](#) shows, Textron thrived in what I've dubbed the [Dumb Money Era](#).

But the Dumb Money culture began to unwind in 2007, about when Barack Obama stepped onto the national stage. And since then, it's been pretty much all downhill for Textron and its stock, which is off more than 80 percent in the [last year](#). The company now seems almost perfectly suited to get seriously hammered in the post-Bush era. It's diversified, yes, but in exactly the wrong ways. The diversification functions more as deadweight than ballast.

Let us count the ways. Although Cessna just received some unwanted free publicity [courtesy of this nutcase](#), the private aviation business is in the toilet—economically and culturally. In the wake of the bailouts of financial-services and auto companies, private jets owned or chartered by corporations have become a symbol of everything that went wrong. To fly a private plane is to practically announce that you just don't get it. A huge number of high-fliers have been grounded, including accused Madoff-manqué [Allen Stanford](#), who was shocked to discover that ordinary travelers have to remove their shoes when passing through security. In the fourth quarter of 2008, profits at Cessna, Textron's biggest unit, were off 31 percent from 2007. In late January, the company [projected](#) (see Page 6) that deliveries of Citation jets would fall 20 percent in 2009, to 375. But that proved to be too optimistic. Last week, Textron [announced](#) it would further reduce manufacturing production this year at Cessna.

While defense spending, [contrary to most reports](#), is continuing to rise, Defense Secretary Robert Gates [signaled](#) Monday that the Obama Pentagon would do business differently. Gates called for shutting down some expensive programs, like the [F-22 fighter](#) (on which Textron is a subcontractor), relying less on contractors and generally getting tougher on outside providers.

There's more. Textron's industrial business units, which lost money in the fourth quarter of 2008, are expecting a punk 2009, too. Golf courses and resort communities have been hit hard in this downturn. Middle-aged men had more free time last year, but the number of [rounds of golf played fell in 2008](#). And fewer people are buying souped-up lawnmowers. As for the lending business, don't ask. Like so many other institutions, Textron is

now thinking better of the practice of extending credit freely to customers.

In the [fourth quarter](#) of 2008, Textron posted a \$209 million net loss, compared with a \$256 million profit in the fourth quarter of 2007. In January, it said it expects revenues to fall 12 percent this year, to about \$12.5 billion. Last week it [sold off a unit](#) to raise a few hundred million dollars.

Lots of companies have been hurt by financial leverage—tying the company's fortunes to the fortunes of the debt markets. Leverage allows companies to rise higher during good times and causes them to fall harder during tough times. Textron has taken its lumps in finance. But its experience shows that excessive reliance on political and cultural leverage can be just as dangerous.

movies

Observe and Report

The feel-weird comedy of the season!

By Dana Stevens

Thursday, April 9, 2009, at 7:32 PM ET

Observe and Report (Warner Bros.) is messing with my head. Leaving the screening, I was convinced that the movie was a failure, both cloddish in its intentions and inept in its execution, with two or three darkly funny gags and possibly the most disturbing ending to a comedy ever. The next morning, I wondered if I might not be half-wrong. Was it possible that director Jody Hill did have some interesting ideas about teasing out the latent psychosexual sadism of the cop movie—ideas that the studio's fear of unmarketable unpleasantness, or Hill's own mishandling, had kept him from exploring fully and coherently?

Once that door of doubt had been opened, my relation to the movie became totally vertiginous. Who was to say the movie hadn't succeeded on its own bizarre and inscrutable terms? Was it Hill who wasn't sure what movie he wanted to make, or me who wasn't sure what movie I was seeing? Like that brain-eating bug that Ricardo Montalban puts in Chekov's ear in *Star Trek: The Wrath of Khan*, this nasty little comedy is slowly making itself at home in my skull. By the end of the day, I may be blurbing it rapturously for a full-page ad in *Variety*: "The feel-weird comedy of the season!"

One fixed truth I can hang onto in this maelstrom of contradictory reactions to *Observe and Report* is that Seth Rogen is miscast in it. (Or is he? Maybe that miscastness is precisely what Hill intended. Ah, shut up, brain.) As Ronnie Barnhardt, the bipolar and delusional head of security at Forest Ridge Mall, Rogen goes deeper than he ever has—and that's not a good thing. As it turns out, Seth Rogen's actorly depths do not require sonar to be sounded. In fairness to the Rogester, Ronnie Barnhardt is a tough nut to crack. He must be unhinged and pitiable, frightening and funny, morally repellent and yet identifiably human, something like Robert DeNiro's Rupert Pupkin in *The King of Comedy*.

There aren't a lot of actors alive who could play Rupert Pupkin; even DeNiro himself, now in his later, broader phase, might have lost the knack. But there's someone who could have nailed Ronnie Barnhardt for half Seth Rogen's salary: Hill's muse Danny McBride, who appears briefly in *Observe and Report* as a Latino crack dealer. McBride, who played a megalomaniacal tae kwon do instructor in Hill's self-financed debut, *The Foot Fist Way*, and is now starring as a retired baseball player in Hill's HBO series, *Eastbound and Down*, has a knack for seeming at once achingly vulnerable and frighteningly deranged. Rogen can do the vulnerability but not the derangement: His comic center has always been his sanity, the sense he gives of being the lone earthbound pragmatist wryly observing the surrounding folly.

So then, Ronnie Barnhardt. Like the hero of the thematically similar but tonally antithetical [Paul Blart: Mall Cop](#), Ronnie is a failed police-academy student who takes his retail security job far too seriously. But unlike the benign and cuddlesome Blart, Ronnie is also an unapologetic asshole and a scary sonofabitch. He lords his petty authority over his "Special Elite Task Force" of fellow mall cops, the fanatically loyal Dennis (Michael Pena) and gun-crazed identical twins John and Matt Yuen (played, in a nifty casting joke, by gun-crazed identical twins John and Matt Yuan). After a trenchcoated flasher exposes himself to several mall patrons and employees, including Brandi (Anna Faris), the makeup-counter clerk of Ronnie's dreams, Ronnie vows to track down the pantsless offender at all costs. The real cop assigned to the case (a glowering, perfectly cast Ray Liotta) takes

a fancy to the dimwitted Brandi, and he and Ronnie enter into a bitter rivalry to win her affections and catch the flasher.

Observe and Report has already become a movie about which people are staking out positions. On the Daily Beast, *Variety*'s Anne Thompson [calls](#) *Observe and Report* "a realistic indie action comedy" that "deconstructs movie clichés about hero fantasy." Those confidently asserted genre categories suggest a far greater control of tone (and a more cerebral approach) than Jody Hill either achieves or intends. *New York* magazine's Dan Kois makes a [persuasive case](#) that Ronnie's tequila-and-Klonopin-enhanced night of sex with a nearly unconscious Brandi is, by any reasonable standard, rape. I'd argue, a little queasily, that by the unreasonable standards of this movie's alternate moral universe, Brandi's midscene exhortation—"Did I tell you to stop, motherfucker?"—constitutes consent. (It certainly constitutes one of the movie's biggest laugh lines.)

But Kois is right when he points out that whatever you call what Ronnie does to Brandi, it's far from being the most unpleasant act his character engages in. In an interview, Jody Hill has observed that, in focus-group screenings, the scenes that haters called the most offensive were the exact same ones that fans found the funniest. Ronnie's scenes with his falling-down drunk of a mother, played by fearless stage actress Celia Weston, get laughs by taking the dysfunctional-but-loving family trope to places few comedies would dare. ("Remember when I soiled myself the other night?" she asks him tenderly. "You were really there for me.") And while I had trouble locating the chuckles in a scene where Ronnie and his mall-cop pal beat up a group of skateboarding teens while on a drug bender, Hill certainly can't be faulted for pulling his punches.

The final chase scene—you can listen to the "Spoiler Special" podcast above for details—shifts abruptly from uproarious raunch to nauseating gore, then ends on a note of triumph that's curiously out of keeping with the movie's own logic. All along we've been watching Ronnie slowly hoist himself on the petard of his own unchecked aggression. For there to be even a hint of redemption (and depending how you read the last scene, there may be way more than a hint) throws everything that came before into question, and breaks an unwritten contract with the viewer. What's meant (I think) to be a "fuck you" to action-movie conventions reads instead as a "fuck you" to the audience. *Observe and Report* tickets

should come with a free breath mint, because however hard you've been laughing, that ending leaves a seriously bad taste in your mouth.

music box

When Rock Stars Read Edmund Spenser

The eight most pretentious lyrics from the new Decemberists album.

By Jody Rosen

Thursday, April 9, 2009, at 6:51 PM ET

The other day, I finally listened to the new Decemberists album, [The Hazards of Love](#), having let the thing sit in my CD pile for as long as possible—until it began to stink up the apartment like a moldering camembert. I don't much care for the Decemberists, the Portland, Ore., quintet led by Colin Meloy. Meloy is a singer-songwriter and self-styled *littérateur* who loves neo-prog-rock song suites, antique poesy, and his own beautiful mind, not in that order. What began on the 2002 debut [Castaways and Cutouts](#) as vaguely entertaining days-of-yore pop—catchy folk-pop songs about prostitutes and pirates and [legionnaires](#)—has become an unbearable exercise in indie high-quirkiness, with each new release deepening the impression that Meloy thinks he's Edmund Spenser or, at least, the only rock singer smart enough to keep a copy of [The Faerie Queene](#) on his bedside plinth.

The previous Decemberists CD, the critically lionized concept album [The Crane Wife](#) (2006), mashed up Japanese folklore and Shakespeare's [The Tempest](#), giving Meloy the opportunity to rhyme [Sycorax with parallax](#). *The Hazards of Love* is a medieval romance about a maiden who is impregnated when a wounded fawn she encounters in an enchanted wood shape-shifts into a demon-lover. The tale also features a forest witch, a rake, a choir of undead children, allusions to Welsh mythology, and lyrics like "what irascible black bart/ Is the father."

There's nothing wrong with such a record per se—I have nothing against musicians dabbling in wacky archaism. There is a noble pop tradition of medievalist gobbledygook: I love me some ["Battle of Evermore"](#) and [adore Joanna Newsom's *Ys*](#), whose flights of pastoral poetry are at least as florid and pretentious as Meloy's. But Led Zeppelin and Joanna Newsom have the courage of their convictions—they're fully emotionally invested in their druids and dream worlds; they mean what they're singing about; they draw you into their fairy tales. Meloy is a gifted composer and arranger; *The Hazards of Love* expertly toggles between chiming folk and hard-rock crescendos. But the whimsy is suffocating, and the reams of verse seem designed mostly to demonstrate book-learning and to flatter an audience of current

and former English majors—[listeners who like their pop songs "literate."](#) As for Meloy's obsession with Edward Gorey-esque black comedy, a trend that continues on the new album's "[The Rake's Song](#)": Stick with [Weill](#) or [Sondheim](#). Or [Tom Waits](#) or [Stephin Merritt](#). Or [Count von Count](#).

To save undergraduates hours in the library stacks puzzling through the runes of *The Hazards of Love*, I herewith (to use a Meloy-ism) offer some Cliff's Notes: an annotated guide to the album's key passages.

1. From "[Hazards of Love 3 \(Revenge!\)](#)"

*Father, I'm not feeling well, the flowers me you fed
Tasted spoiled for suddenly I find that I am dead*

I you assure that object-verb inversion is poetic. Verily.

2. From "[Hazards of Love 1 \(The Prettiest Whistles Won't Wrestle the Thistles Undone\)](#)"

*Fifteen lithesome maidens lay
Along in their bower
Fourteen occupations pay
To pass the idle hour*

I count three vocabulary words in the passage, all of which may appear on Monday's quiz. *Lithesome*: pliant, supple, easily flexed. *Bower*: a lady's boudoir in a medieval castle. *Occupation*: job, vocation; e.g., poetaster.

3. From "[The Queen's Rebuke/The Crossing](#)"

*I'm
Made of bones of the branches
The boughs and the brow-beating light*

Extra credit for alliteration! ++!

4. From "[The Abduction of Margaret](#)"

*All a'gallop with Margaret slung rude 'cross withers
Having clamped her innocent fingers in fetters
This villain must calculate crossing the wild river!*

The echo in these lines of Hamlet's tart rejoinder to Claudius—"Let the galled jade winch, our withers are unwrung" (*Hamlet* III.2.220)—is surely deliberate. One hopes that indie rock go-to-girl Natalie Portman will appear in the video clip for this song, slung 'cross withers as rude as possible.

5. From "[Hazards of Love 4 \(The Drowned\)](#)"

*So tell me now, O tell me this: a river's son, a forest's daughter
A willow wand, a will-o-wisp, our ghosts will wander all of the water*

In the margin of a draft manuscript I have in my possession, the following variant appears, in Meloy's tremulous handwriting:

*O, woe! Whence the Whip-poor-will, the waxwing, the wombat,
the werewolf?*

6. From "[Hazards of Love 1 \(The Prettiest Whistles Won't Wrestle the Thistles Undone\)](#)"

*She, being full of charity,
A credit to her sex
Sought to right the fawn's hind legs
When here her plans were vexed
The tiger shifted strange
The beast began to change*

But was she really a credit to her sex? Wouldn't a more charitable girl have hastened back to the village to fetch a medick, who might have plied the pitiable creature with a syrup of ipecac or performed a healing trepanation? This improvised medical intervention was ill-advised—little wonder the maiden was ravished by a he-beast.

7. From "[Hazards of Love 2 \(Wager All\)](#)"

*And we'll lie 'til the Corn Crake crows
Bereft of the weight of our summer clothes*

Twenty-first-century English translation:

*I'm-a freak you till
Da break-a dawn.*

8. From "[Won't Want For Love \(Margaret in the Taiga\)](#)"

*Mistlethrush, Mistlethrush
Lay me down in the underbrush
My naked feet grow weary with the dusk*

Hold on, the maiden has been bushwhacking all day, shoeless? And only now, at nightfall, are her feet starting to hurt? The poet needs to do some field research. Also, a flat, clear space on the forest floor—bereft, as it were, of shrubbery—is preferable spot for a night's sleep. Underbrush, like bad poetry, sucks.

music box

Kings of Rock

Run-DMC at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

By Jody Rosen

Tuesday, April 7, 2009, at 2:30 PM ET

Run-DMC was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame on Friday night. The hip-hop greats marked the occasion with a surprising gesture: They refused to take a victory lap. Joseph Simmons (Run) and Darryl McDaniels (DMC) had pledged never again to perform under the Run-DMC moniker out of respect for their late DJ, Jam Master Jay, who was murdered in 2002. The Rock Hall induction ceremony has seen many shotgun reunions over the years—some transcendent, some tottering—and this summer, like most, the nation's concert sheds will play host to dozens of reconstituted bands, bashing through back catalogues while a session bassist discretely noodles away at stage right: the replacement for the dead guy. But Run-DMC kept its vow on Friday night. "They tell me I could get Grandmaster Flash [to fill in]," McDaniels told MTV. "But I can get any DJ in the world if I want. It wouldn't be right. I can't replace my drummer."

The dignity of the festivities was further enhanced by, of all people, Eminem, whose [induction speech](#) was touching and astute. Em ticked off Run-DMC's achievements and milestones: first rap act to go platinum, rap's first arena headliners, first rappers on MTV. He pointed to the video for "King of Rock" (1985), which portrayed Run-DMC as musical insurgents, barging into a rock 'n' roll museum "very similar to the one that we're inducting them into tonight." At the time, the song's claim—"I'm the King of Rock/ There is none higher"—seemed like a provocation, pure rap bluster. Today, it looks like reportage: Although not everyone recognized it at the time, the rock era was winding down circa 1985, thanks in no small part to the crew from Hollis, Queens.

They did it by proving that rappers could beat rockers at their own game. While the music of early rap acts like Grandmaster Flash & the Furious Five (the Rock Hall's only previous hip-hop honorees) was an extension of disco—dance music for "party people"—Run-DMC cranked up the volume and the attitude: Bellowing rhymes over walping beats in songs like "[Sucker MCs](#)" and "[Hard Times](#)," the rappers *rocked*, long before they [covered an Aerosmith tune](#). In the "King of Rock" video, Run, D, and Jay are shown snickering at film footage of Buddy Holly, Little Richard, and Jerry Lee Lewis. But the rappers were spiritual cousins to those rock 'n' roll pioneers. Run-DMC's uniform—black leather jackets, black Lee jeans, black fedoras—drew on the iconography of 1950s greasers. And their musical aesthetic was similar to the early rockers—the songs were hard, smart, and tight. Run-DMC is rap's Chuck Berry. Hip-hop may have gotten more sophisticated in the decades since, but [Raising Hell](#) (1986) has never been improved on.

That achievement was largely Jam Master Jay's—he was the architect of Run-DMC's stark, smacking sound, a "drummer" indeed. A valedictory run through "[Peter Piper](#)" or "[My Adidas](#)" on Friday night would have been fun, but the rappers' refusal to play was classy, a fitting tribute to the man who proved that a turntable and drum machine could harness the thrust of a Hall of Fame rhythm section. As DMC boasts in "[Rock Box](#)" (1983), the first and best of the group's rap-rock fusions: "Snap your fingers and clap your hands/ Our DJ's better than all these bands."

Previously: [The finest prom-rockers in the land.](#)

my goodness

Push a Button, Change the World

Do "click to give" sites actually do good?

By Patty Stonesifer and Sandy Stonesifer

Wednesday, April 8, 2009, at 6:58 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,

Are "click to give" sites legitimate? If so, why don't you hear stories about people they have benefited?

Ashleigh

Sandy:

For those of you who don't know what Ashleigh's talking about, "click to give" sites allow individuals to "donate" money by going online and clicking a button. The click leads you to a page with ads, and the advertiser gives money (based on the number of clicks) directly to a charity designated by the site. If you think it sounds too good to be true, you may be right.

The first question is whether your clicks actually lead to donations. One of the most notable "click to give" pages, [the Hunger Site](#), says that user clicks led to [more than 290 tons of food donated last month](#) (4,539,828 clicks). Their early success led to the creation of several other sites, including [the Breast Cancer Site](#), where user clicks led to [203.9 free mammograms in March](#) (7,842,148 clicks). The apparent ease of fundraising in this way has led to a [flood](#) of copy cats offering clickable opportunities to save animals, oceans, and children. While the better-known sites ensure that their sponsors donate 100 percent of revenues to trustworthy charities, smaller sites may not follow the same guidelines.

I found one [business](#) that offers to help charities set up their own sites but only promises them up to 50 percent of the ad revenue generated. Presumably, the business keeps the remainder. Other fledgling sites have trouble directing their ad revenues to effective organizations. [FreePoverty](#), a site created to benefit water distribution efforts, talks explicitly about its difficulty finding a partner organization on its [FAQ page](#): "Due to some unforeseen issues with the organization we previously donated our revenues to ... we are now looking for a decent non-profit organization to collaborate with FreePoverty and its users."

Even though each click may [amount to only a few pennies](#), I would make the most of them by using [CharityUSA's sites](#) (five in total, including both the Hunger Site and the Breast Cancer Site), which donate [100 percent](#) of the corporate sponsor's money to respected charities such as [Feeding America](#) (formerly America's Second Harvest) and [Mercy Corps](#). If you have more time to kill, or rusty vocabulary skills, try [FreeRice](#), an educational game site run by the [U.N. World Food Program](#) and [Harvard's Berkman Center](#) that gives 10 grains of rice to the UNWFP for every question you answer correctly. They've donated more than 62 billion grains of rice in less than two years. Procrastination has never felt so worthwhile.

The second and more complicated question is whether the painlessness of "donating" on these sites is ultimately detrimental to the causes they support. Are people going to "click to give" sites in lieu of taking other action? Is clicking keeping them from actually donating money? My guess is no, but it's a real concern. Even a religious clicker would only net about \$10 a year for any given site. They count you only once per day. Tackling any of these issues is going to take a lot more than that.

Patty:

Ashleigh, "click to give" sites might be the best example of [slacktivism](#): easy and painless acts that allow us to feel we are doing our part to make the world a better place with the least possible mental, physical, or financial exertion. While it's encouraging to see so much creativity being put toward the myriad ways we can change the world without getting up off the couch, I strongly encourage everyone using "click to give" to remember Gandhi's quote: "We must become the change we wish to see in the world." Simply clicking may provide modest incremental benefit, but it isn't going to get us the world we wish to see. You're not off the hook.

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.

other magazines

In Facebook We Trust

New York on our strange devotion to the social network.

By Kara Hodge

Tuesday, April 7, 2009, at 11:56 AM ET

***New York*, April 13**

The [cover story](#) wonders whether Facebook asks for more trust than it deserves. As the company prepares to release new terms of service in response to user uproar about privacy violations, the article reminds readers, "We, the users, are what Facebook is selling." Founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg "believes that more information makes a better world, and a more tolerant one." But, the author argues, "It may not be too hyperbolic to talk about a digital self, as a fourth addition to mind, body, and spirit. It's not the kind of thing that one wants to give away." ... A [feature](#) details the accusations against Marc Dreier, a litigator who "in an age of white-collar villains" might be "the single greatest character of them all." Dreier is under house arrest for "inventing \$700 million in financial assets out of whole cloth, staging fictional conference calls, and impersonating executives."

***Newsweek*, April 13**

In the [cover story](#), Jon Meacham explores why "the Christian God ... is less of a force in American politics and culture than at any other time in recent memory." A recent survey revealed a decline in those who call themselves Christian, from 86 percent in 1990 to 76 percent today, and an increase in the number of agnostics, atheists, and those who claim no religious affiliation. However, Meacham argues, "while the percentage of Christians may be shrinking, rumors of the death of Christianity are greatly exaggerated. Being less Christian does not necessarily mean that America is post-Christian." ... A [profile](#) of Carol Browner, Obama's czar for energy and climate issues, points to "her ability to grow and negotiate compromises with industry," after she spent the 1990s fighting to bring environmental issues to the fore in Washington. Now, "Browner is trying to bring the cabinet agencies she once squabbled with—Energy, Transportation, EPA and so on—under one tent."

***The New Yorker*, April 13**

A [feature](#) surveys the political landscape in Iran and considers the possibility of a change in the country's relationship with the United States. For now, the Obama administration must keep in mind the upcoming presidential election: "If they appear to bend

too much, [President Mahmoud] Ahmadinejad could argue that he has successfully stood up to the United States, strengthening him at the polls." Ahmadinejad's religious nationalism led many Iranians to believe his "ascendance represented the invincibility of clerical rule and the demise of the reformers," though he has styled himself a populist. ... A profile of comedian Katt Williams portrays "a virtuoso ranter and pleader." Williams made a name for himself when he "learned to use physical comedy ... and an outlandish persona ... to make sure that audiences remembered him." However, outrageous behavior offstage—including arriving at a South Carolina hotel wearing a bathrobe—has given some the impression that he is "a comedian gone crazy."

Weekly Standard, April 13

A [feature](#) notes the Obama Cabinet's uniform stance against further regulating abortion. The unanimous view is at odds with the times, "when we've just concluded that every other detail of our economic lives has, since about the time of the surrender of the American embassy in Tehran, been underregulated," and with the multiple perspectives held on the subject by the public. Because of "the honor code that motivates" this view, the author compares it to honor killings in other societies. The attitude toward abortion, he argues, engenders "honor of a comparatively new variety, tied not to 'patriarchy' and the traditional family, but to an interesting cocktail of feminism and upper-middle-class respectability." ... An [article](#) lauds Rep. Mark Kirk as the Republican Party's "best hope in Illinois." Kirk combines likeability with socially moderate views and an "ability to get things done."

Vanity Fair, May 2009

Mark Bowden's [profile](#) of Arthur Ochs Sulzberger Jr. finds the publisher of the *New York Times* and chairman of the New York Times Co. board "scrambling to keep up with interest payments on hundreds of millions in debt" in order to maintain "the flagship of serious newspaper journalism in America." While many associates proclaim their affection for him as a person, few tout Sulzberger's business sense. As heir to the family business, the publisher "chose to be defined by his name, and his father," instead of breaking with tradition to solidify the Times Co.'s future standing. ... James Wolcott [berates](#) the Washington political and media establishment for clinging to old ideologies and talking points. "With Barack Obama as president and the super-happening Michelle Obama as First Lady, you would think a new tone, a new tune, a kicky new jazzitude, would have entered Washington discourse, but it remains a landlocked island unto itself, held captive by its tribal fevers."

poem **"Bombs Rock Cairo"**

By Christian Wiman

Tuesday, April 7, 2009, at 6:36 AM ET

Click the arrow on the audio player to hear Christian Wiman read this poem. You can also [download](#) the recording or [subscribe](#) to Slate's Poetry Podcast on iTunes.

The bumps and hush, the little furtive rustlings
that half-woke me last night wake me now

as

the goateed cheeseman
tells me his son's tongue is pierced
(gleams, pungencies)
slicing with strong displeasure Sardinian Gold.

And that initial chill before I knew going again like a dew
through me as I walk down the dogrun

where the

birdlady
wielding with bad English and old bread
pigeons like a single sinuous body
stretches out her arms and, amid descending wings
and low moans, stands completely still:

drunk kids crawling into the unlit alcove
to smoke and fuck in the small hours.

Tenuous

the hold
she has on them, furious the need she knows
will bring them always eventually within her reach,
a fire of eyes and appetite whipping around her knees
settling fluttering along each outstretched arm
as if to lift her out of this life.

I could almost hear my heart beat ...

Palm trees and eucalyptus, the salt breeze and palpable clouds,
a siren somewhere dying on the mild air
as I head up my street

where the runner pauses,
pearled as if she's spent the night outside,
fine dunes in her legs as she leans
to read the headlines.

politics

U.S. Department of Blogging

What the rest of the government can learn from the TSA.

By Christopher Beam

Thursday, April 9, 2009, at 11:28 PM ET

The Transportation Security Administration might be America's least favorite federal agency. For every discarded 4-ounce bottle, dropped laptop, or missed flight, a furious traveler stands ready to heap abuse on the next TSA employee he sees. And it is the job of Bob Burns, official TSA blogger, to take it.

"Do I get beat up? Oh, yes, definitely," Burns says. "You have to have thick skin and realize that people do need an outlet to vent and get rid of frustrations."

The Transportation Security Administration's blog, [Evolution of Security](#), is everything the TSA is not—lighthearted, informative, responsive, and devoted to the needs and concerns of its customers. It may also be the best model for government to engage citizens over the Web.

Most agency blogs—and [they abound](#)—are little more than a collection of glorified press releases. The Department of Transportation's blog, [Welcome to the Fast Lane](#), helpfully [assures](#) readers that the \$48 billion in stimulus money allocated to the department "could not be in more capable, vigilant hands." The State Department's blog, the unfortunately named [DipNote](#), informs us that President Obama's European trip last week was a roaring success. Thanks to the Office of Citizen Services' [Gov Gab](#), I'm now aware of Alcohol Awareness Month, National Autism Awareness Month, and Sexual Assault Awareness Month—all this month. The "[blog](#)" published by the Office of National Drug Control Policy actually *is* a set of press releases.

Other agencies are mildly more innovative. The U.S. Geological Survey [sent a blogger](#) to the Arctic to watch researchers map the ocean floor. The Energy Department's [Energy Savers](#) is basically a green advice column. ([Who reads those?](#)) The National Parks Foundation went crazy and hosted a [photo contest](#).

But then there's a handful of blogs that actually change the way you look at government. One way is fostering genuine reader interaction. On any given day, Burns may answer questions about [formaldehyde](#), [tin mint cans](#), [frozen monkey heads](#), [pie](#), [exploding chickens](#), or [scabies](#). Original research is part of the job: When some travelers missed their flights last year because their MacBook Airs looked suspicious under an X-ray, Burns [created a video](#) explaining why that's the case. After that, security officers—many of whom read the blog—knew what to

look for. The Library of Congress, meanwhile, has been posting its photo and video archives on Flickr and YouTube and asking readers on its [blog](#) to help tag the material. The worst thing an agency blog can do, on the flipside, is write *at* readers. Cautionary tales include the Environmental Protection Agency's [Greenversations](#) or [Gov Gab](#).

The best government blogs actually *sound* like blogs, too. InfoFarm, the Department of Agriculture's blog, may be the first-ever instance of [government-sponsored snark](#). Peter Orszag's blog for the Office of Management and Budget (as well as his [former CBO blog](#)) is [on-message but goofy](#). TSA's Burns once wrote a post consisting entirely of [poultry puns](#). And LoC blogger Matt Raymond recently took the opportunity to embed a [video of boxing cats](#), solemnly dubbed "a presentation of the Library of Congress."

Another thing agency blogs need: actual power. When Evolution of Security commenters complained about having to remove all electronics from carry-on bags during screening in certain airports, the TSA [put a stop to it](#). When they kvetched about long lines, the agency created a new [express-lane program](#). (They [don't take all suggestions](#). One commenter asked TSA to focus more on invisible supernatural terrorists. Another suggested that the agency ban nail clippers on flights so passengers don't get hit with stray clippings.) The direct line from the comments section to the top brass isn't just good business; it also builds goodwill.

Which brings us to a good govblog's other function: damage control. When TSA officials [detained](#) a Ron Paul organization official in March for carrying too much cash—he was transporting \$4,700 in contributions—the blogosphere went nuts. More embarrassing was a [recording](#) of the incident: The man asked whether he was legally obligated to answer questions, to which one TSA official replied, "You want to play smartass, and I'm not going to play your fucking game."

The TSA blog responded with a staid, press release-y [item](#): "The tone and language used by the TSA employee was inappropriate. TSA holds its employees to the highest professional standards. TSA will continue to investigate this matter and take appropriate action." Normally, Burns signs his posts with the jaunty moniker, "Blogger Bob." This time he played it straight: "Bob." "What I wanted to say was a little bit harsher," he told me. "But that's what was approved."

Commenters railed against Burns and the TSA for the limp response. "Bob, will the TSA tell us what the results of the investigation and any actions taken against the employee?" asked one. "Or will this just be swept under the rug?" But at least these complaints were being lodged not with a faceless entity but with a guy they knew and, for the most part, liked: Bob. And because he had spent so much time building trust, many commenters gave him the benefit of the doubt. Said one: "It is

unusual these days to here [sic] any organization admit that it, or its employees, did something wrong. TSA's official statement above does exactly that. Kudos to the TSA for having the courage to say so." Burns thus serves as a lightning rod—he attracts criticism, but he also helps ground it.

There's no reason the rest of the government Web sites can't do the same thing. Many agency blogs have comments sections—almost all monitored—but few of them try to create a community. The White House blog tries to be more conversational than its press releases, but the conversation is still one-way. When I asked about creating a comments section for the blog, an administration official pointed to the [Open for Questions](#) program, in which the president answers questions in a live streaming town hall. Sure, but that's not the same as a forum that allows users to engage with one another and government officials at the same time.

And if there's one thing the TSA experiment has shown, it's that engagement doesn't sacrifice authority. It enhances it. Obama has made a point of increasing transparency through new media: How about a secretary of blogging?

politics

The Careful Exaggerator

How Obama balances his rhetoric to fit the situation.

By John Dickerson

Tuesday, April 7, 2009, at 6:43 PM ET

As President Obama traveled through Europe, he was a study in nuance. Speaking to a [town hall in Strasbourg, France](#), he admitted American arrogance but also chided Europeans for their casual anti-Americanism. In another context, he quoted his college law professor: "Some are to blame, but all are responsible." [In a town hall](#) with students in Turkey, he pushed for nuance as an end in itself: "In the Muslim world, this notion that somehow everything is the fault of the Israelis lacks balance. There are two sides to every question. ... I say the same thing to my Jewish friends—which is, you have to see the perspective of the Palestinians. Learning to stand in somebody else's shoes, to see through their eyes—that's how peace begins."

Compared with the black-and-white approach of his predecessor, Obama's technique is practically [grisaille](#). Yet while the nuance is intellectually welcome and politically beneficial—[Americans appreciate its display on the world stage](#)—it operates alongside another Obama trait: He's also a nuance-free exaggerator. In Turkey, he told students, "Some of my reporter friends from the States were asking, 'How come you didn't solve everything on this trip?'"

A politician is always on safe ground charging that the press has gone overboard. But no one was asking that question.

Nor was anyone saying what Obama said some people were saying in his [press conference](#) last month: "We did a video, sending a message to the Iranian people and the leadership of the Islamic Republic of Iran. And some people said, 'Well, they did not immediately say that we're eliminating nuclear weapons and stop funding terrorism.'" No one said that. But it helped Obama make his pitch for patience.

Obama exaggerates to free himself from the demands of the news cycle, which he described in France: "In an age of instant gratification, it's tempting to believe that every problem can and should be solved in the span of a week. When these problems aren't solved, we conclude that our efforts to solve them must have been in vain." When it comes to the economy, polls show that people are very patient. What Obama hopes to do though this exaggerated description is make all criticism seem like an irrational rush to judgment.

Often he [plays Aunt Sally](#) for rhetorical effect. He doesn't mischaracterize, exactly, but he exaggerates to bring his point into higher relief—as he did last week when talking about the ongoing threat of terrorism: "Some people say ... if we changed our policies with respect to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or if we were more respectful towards the Muslim world, suddenly these organizations would stop threatening us. That's just not the case."

It is in domestic political battles with Republicans, however, that the president's exaggerations may be sharpest. They are intended to make his opponents look foolish. "Some of what's been said in Congress is that there seems to be a set of folks who just believe that we should do nothing," he said of Republicans during the debate over the stimulus bill. [Almost no one was suggesting that nothing be done](#). Writing in the *Washington Post*, he offered another cartoonish view, saying that his opponents believe "that we can ignore fundamental challenges such as energy independence and the high cost of health care and still expect our economy and our country to thrive."

Obama is not alone. He probably exaggerates no more than a typical politician. Republicans haul out the specter of socialism on the hour, and on the half hour they say Obama wants to turn America into Europe. But Obama [prides himself on considered speech](#), and few politicians have talked and written about improving political dialogue as much as he has. "I am convinced that whenever we exaggerate or ... oversimplify or overstate our case, we lose," he wrote in his second book, *The Audacity of Hope*.

He might be wrong about that one. According to a recent *New York Times*/CBS News poll, Obama is as popular as ever. And his Republican opponents in Congress received their lowest

approval rating in the entire span of history in which that question has been asked. [No exaggeration.](#)

politics

Stress Test

What interview questions did D.E. Shaw ask Larry Summers?

By Christopher Beam

Monday, April 6, 2009, at 7:52 PM ET

As director of the president's National Economic Council, Larry Summers is currently facing the world's biggest math problem. It was encouraging, therefore, to [read](#) in Monday's *New York Times* that, when he applied for a job in 2006 with investment firm D.E. Shaw, "Mr. Summers was asked to solve math puzzles. He passed, and the job was his."

It's hard to imagine Summers being subjected to the same brainteasers that entry-level [quants](#) have to answer. And a White House spokesperson confirmed that it wasn't the same series of questions. But he did have to answer analytical reasoning problems asked by a member of the company's executive committee. What kinds of questions does D.E. Shaw ask?

The New York-based firm is known for its rigorous, numbers-heavy interview process. Most applicants have sterling academic backgrounds. The goal, therefore, is to see if the person can apply the concepts he learned in school to the real world. "The question is, 'Can they get past their white papers?'" says Richard Rusczyk, a former D.E. Shaw trader who conducted dozens of interviews over four years at the firm.

The type of questions most interviewers ask—and those D.E. Shaw is known for—are those with no right answers. Here's an example:

Ten people are bidding on a stock at 90, while 100 people are offering to sell it at 91. What price is the next trade?

Interviewees often say that since there are more sellers than buyers, the sellers get to determine the price. That logic usually yields an answer between 90 and 91. That's exactly wrong. "They're not thinking about what's going on in the real world," says Rusczyk. In reality, when there are more sellers than buyers, the price falls. So the next sale would probably be in the mid- to low 80s.

"Some candidates would say you can't answer that question, because there's no formula," says Rusczyk. "If that makes their heads explode, that's a problem."

The next level of difficulty is the type of question with no answer at all. One such question, which Rusczyk has asked, is the famous [St. Petersburg Paradox](#):

There's a dollar on the table. I'm going to flip a coin. If it comes up heads, I'll double the money. If it comes up heads again, I'll double it again. Whenever it comes up tails, we stop.

But there's a catch: You have to pay a fee to play. How much are you willing to pay?

The answer: infinity. You should theoretically be willing to pay any amount, since the probability on any given flip is that you win 50 cents. (On the first flip, $\$1 \times 1/2 = \0.50 . On the second flip, $\$2 \times 1/4 = \0.50 . On the third, $\$4 \times 1/8 = \0.50 . And so on.) So the potential winnings extend infinitely.

Of course, you can't offer the guy infinity dollars. So the interviewee is forced to either settle on a real world number—as much as the player can afford—or delve into [marginal utility theory](#). Either way, the interviewer gets a sense of how the person's mind works. (This answer is understandably baffling to most people. See philosopher Ian Hacking wrestle with it [here](#).)

The most difficult question of all is the kind that the interviewee must first get wrong before he can get it right. Rusczyk described a question in which the interviewer first explains the concept of a [call option](#). (That's when you have a right but not an obligation to buy a stock.) He then asks a series of six or seven questions about the call option's price based on different market scenarios. The point is to create situations where academic math tells you to do one thing but the market tells you to do another. The ideal candidate follows the market. Eventually, you get to a stage where everyone gets the question wrong. "Then you ask them a leading question, after which they realize their last answer was wrong," says Rusczyk. "They'd then say, 'Where did I go wrong?'"

During his tenure at D.E. Shaw, only three candidates Rusczyk interviewed made it to the last question. "One is a partner [at D.E. Shaw], one took a professorship at Harvard, and one is in business," he says.

Rusczyk argues that these questions, while hypothetical, are very relevant to our current economic challenges. "Within financial markets, one of the big failures was assuming all these mortgages were more or less uncorrelated based on historical data," he says. In other words, models didn't take into account the possibility that housing prices would not keep trending up indefinitely. "That's kind of what the St. Petersburg Paradox is about. Theoretically, [the game] is worth an infinite amount of money. But in the real world, it's not worth infinity."

If the point of D.E. Shaw interviews is to make sure the person can repurpose academic models for the real world, their methodology might serve the Obama administration well. In the meantime, here's another one for Summers:

x = the economy

$x + y$ = the economy not all screwed up

Find y .

Correction, April 7, 2009: Due to a copy-editing error, this article misstated the math behind the St. Petersburg Paradox. ([Return](#) to the corrected sentence.)

recycled

How To Watch the Masters

An expert's guide to watching golf on television.

By Alex Heard

Friday, April 10, 2009, at 11:28 AM ET

Mid-April each year brings with it blooming azaleas and Jim Nantz's soothing intonations at the Masters golf tournament, which began Thursday morning. In a 2002 article reprinted below, Alex Heard extolled the virtues of watching golf from the splendor of your living room. "Physically, going to a tournament is a pain. You'll swelter, get sore feet, spend \$200 on Cokes, and wait in line forever to enter skanky port-a-wees." Watching at home, by contrast, is a restorative pleasure. "On television, you are wherever the action is, and when the action isn't—which can be often—you get to snooze."

There are two ways to watch the Masters. You can be a slug and plop in front of the tube at home, a beer always within reach as you "check out of life" for a weekend. Or you can make the not-inconsiderable, not-inexpensive effort to go to Augusta National to experience, in person, the most storied golf tournament of them all, there to hear the glorious snap of flags in the Georgia breeze, to smell the springtime bounty of grass and azaleas, to thrill to the timeless dramas at Amen Corner.

The choice here is obvious, and given the late date—the Masters starts Thursday and ends Sunday—you probably have urgent questions about logistics: What size television will I need? Should I lie on a couch or stay upright and alert in, say, a wing chair? And the one I hear most often from golf-watching newbies: I don't like beer. Can I smoke pot instead?

Sure you can, buddy! The beauty of watching golf on television is that it's fun, flexible, and requires little in the way of

infrastructure or prep. It's as easy as watching a soaring, hard-hit tee ball—not quite being able to make it out against the backdrop of blue-white sky—and tensing with anticipation as the announcer warns: "Uh-oh, that's going left."

I got serious about watching "the sport of Pings" in the mid-'70s, when I was a skinny teen-ager making an effort to switch summer pastimes from tennis to golf. I sucked, but my flailings were a valuable apprenticeship for being a fan. Like many a disappointed non-athlete, I redirected my energies into a damp, Billy-Crystal-esque appreciation of the game's philosophy, history, and lore—with valuable help from *Golf* and *Golf Digest*, magazines that specialized in baroque tips ("When hitting approach shots, think of yourself as a thirsty Bedouin ... and the green as your bubbling oasis"), maudlin homages to past greats like Walter Hagen, Ben Hogan, and Byron Nelson, and major-tournament previews that made the Masters, U.S. Open, British Open, and PGA sound like do-or-die military crusades.

During that formative period, I saw only one golf tournament in the flesh—the 1977 U.S. Open at Southern Hills Country Club in Tulsa, Okla., won by a workmanlike Hubert Green—a valuable experience in terms of cementing my bond to the televised game. Make no mistake, seeing golf live is worth it, at least once. Watching the pros do their thing up close is as revelatory as seeing a UFO disgorge a platoon of pot-bellied aliens. They hit the ball so much harder and better than you can imagine—or than television's flat two-dimensionality can convey—that you will never again make the mistake of dismissing golf as "not a sport."

But in every other sense, television is better. Physically, going to a tournament is a pain. You'll swelter, get sore feet, spend \$200 on Cokes, and wait in line forever to enter skanky port-a-wees. As the action unfolds, you'll either try to follow the leader, which means spending the day looking at the back of some guy's head and smelling a Very Large Array of armpits, or you'll "stake a claim" to a particular spot on the course and watch the same shot get played 100 times. Distant cheers and cries of "You de man!" serve as a constant taunt that something great is happening—somewhere else.

On television, you are wherever the action is, and when the action isn't—which can be often—you get to snooze. Snooze? Yes. Be not ashamed of yielding to televised golf's soporific power. Stay keen to the drama, but don't be shy about letting the commentary and pace waft you to lotus land during those slow, four-hour Saturdays and Sundays when the also-rans are stumbling by and the announcers are still trying to get excited. Some of my fondest golf-on-TV memories involve me waking up with a startled slurp thanks to a roar from the gallery. I was snoozing on my parents' green-gold shag carpet in Kansas when Jerry Pate hit his historic 72nd-hole five-iron to win the 1976 U.S. Open. I watched Tiger Woods nail down his first Masters

victory in 1997 while napping on the floor of a mildewed ski house in Upstate New York.

Note the "I"—I was alone for these moments, and the most important question you face as a TV golf fan is whether to watch solo or with friends. I happen to fly Lindbergh; you may desire a group scene or even (gasp) a sports bar. All that matters is that you think through your choices. I've watched golf with others, but I tend to get irritated easily, especially by PC comments about Augusta National (yes, it's run by rich white blowhards—get over it), riffs about the color-commentary clichés (these people know the game and explain it well—you should thank them), and wisecracks about clothing styles, à la: "Hey, where are the plaid polyester pants?" (Hyuk hyuk. Try 1975, dumbass.)

Beyond that it's all a matter of attitude. Appreciate the fact that some of the greatest players who ever lived are whapping the pea in your living room. Thrill to the news that, this year, the Masters' overlords have made the course longer and harder to keep up with golf's muscle-strapped youth and 22nd-century equipment. And get ready to put in some serious hours: For the first time, CBS will offer wall-to-wall, ball-to-ball 18-hole coverage on Sunday. It's going to be a wonderful, dramatic, and drowsy afternoon.

recycled

The Two-Minute Haggadah

A Passover service for the impatient.

By Michael Rubiner

Wednesday, April 8, 2009, at 9:51 AM ET

Are you in a rush this Passover? Want to get right to the best part of Seder: the eating? In 2006, Michael Rubiner crafted a two-minute Haggadah that covers all the bases and lets you get right to the meal. The article is reprinted below.

Opening prayers:

Thanks, God, for creating wine. (Drink wine.)

Thanks for creating produce. (Eat parsley.)

Overview: Once we were slaves in Egypt. Now we're free. That's why we're doing this.

Four questions:

1. What's up with the matzoh?
2. What's the deal with horseradish?
3. What's with the dipping of the herbs?
4. What's this whole slouching at the table business?

Answers:

1. When we left Egypt, we were in a hurry. There was no time for making decent bread.
2. Life was bitter, like horseradish.
3. It's called symbolism.
4. Free people get to slouch.

A funny story: Once, these five rabbis talked all night, then it was morning. (*Heat soup now.*)

The four kinds of children and how to deal with them:

Wise child—explain Passover.

Simple child—explain Passover slowly.

Silent child—explain Passover loudly.

Wicked child—browbeat in front of the relatives.

Speaking of children: We hid some matzoh. Whoever finds it gets five bucks.

The story of Passover: It's a long time ago. We're slaves in Egypt. Pharaoh is a nightmare. We cry out for help. God brings plagues upon the Egyptians. We escape, bake some matzoh. God parts the Red Sea. We make it through; the Egyptians aren't so lucky. We wander 40 years in the desert, eat manna, get the Torah, wind up in Israel, get a new temple, enjoy several years without being persecuted again. (*Let brisket cool now.*)

The 10 Plagues: Blood, Frogs, Lice—you name it.

The singing of "Dayenu":

If God had gotten us out of Egypt and not punished our enemies, it would've been enough. If he'd punished our enemies and not parted the Red Sea, it would've been enough.

If he'd parted the Red Sea—(*Remove gefilte fish from refrigerator now.*)

Eat matzoh. Drink more wine. Slouch.

Thanks again, God, for everything.

SERVE MEAL.

slate v

Obama: The Un-Bush

A daily video from *Slate V.*

Thursday, April 9, 2009, at 6:38 PM ET

slate v

Well-Connected (Former) Actress

A daily video from *Slate V*.

Wednesday, April 8, 2009, at 1:12 PM ET

TK

slate v

Dear Prudence: Wife-Free Vacation

A daily video from *Slate V*.

Tuesday, April 7, 2009, at 9:59 AM ET

TK

slate v

Hey, Penny! My Boss Is a Facebook Addict.

A daily video from *Slate V*.

Monday, April 6, 2009, at 9:38 AM ET

TK

technology

Do I Really Have To Join Twitter?

What to do if you're just not that into microblogging but don't want to be left behind.

By Farhad Manjoo

Friday, April 10, 2009, at 1:00 PM ET

Twitter is growing so fast it's sometimes easy to forget that to a lot of people, the concept is completely bizarre. [According to comScore](#), the microblogging site received about 10 million visitors in February—a 700 percent increase over last year. To the initiated, the surge seems justified. Committed Twitterers argue that the 140-character-or-less tweet represents the next great mode of human communication. To vast swaths of the population, though, Twitter is inscrutable: *Wait a minute—you want me to keep a perpetual log of my boring life for all the world to see? What if I just spend my free time watching Golden Girls?*

In other words, it's hard for many to shake the feeling that Twitter is a waste of time. It's not only Luddites who feel this

way; in the last few months, a surprising number of people in the tech industry—people who fancy themselves the earliest of early adopters—have mentioned to me that they have a hard time wrapping their heads around the service. Many float the idea that Twitter is little more than an overhyped, media-driven sensation.

Is Twitter a fad? It's certainly received more than 140 characters of love from the press recently; everywhere you look, [someone in the news is tweeting](#). But the people on TV rarely seem to address something very basic: What's the point of tweeting? And should you do it? I get variations on this question often from readers. Let's say you're a moderately tech-savvy person who takes well to new forms of gabbing—you've got an easy facility with blogs, you log in to Facebook when you need it, you text, you IM, and perhaps you even talk to your friends through Skype. Is it time for you to jump into microblogging, too? Would you be missing out on some important cultural touchstone if you sat out this round of techno-innovation?

The short answer: Eh, go ahead and give it a try if you like, but there's nothing lame about waiting to see whether Twitter pans out.

Much of what we do online has obvious analogues in the past: E-mail and IM replace letters and face-to-face chatting. Blogging is personal pamphleteering. Skype is the new landline. Social networks let us map our real-life connections to the Web. It's not surprising, then, that these new tools deliver obvious social utility—Facebook is the best way to get in touch with old friends, and instant messaging is the quickest way to collaborate with your colleagues across the country. Twitter is different. It's not a faster or easier way of doing something you did in the past, unless you were one of those people who wrote short "quips" on bathroom stalls. It's a totally alien form of communication. Microblogging mixes up features of e-mail, IM, blogs, and social networks to create something not just novel but also confusing, and doing it well takes time and patience. That's not to say it isn't useful; to some people in some situations, Twitter is irreplaceable. But it is not—or, at least, not yet—a necessary way to stay socially relevant in the information age.

As a practical matter, Twitter is a cinch to get into: You sign up, pick a few people to follow, then start typing out your thoughts, making sure to keep each post below the 140-character limit. (There are also some conventions you've got to get used to—[here's a short primer](#).) But Twitter, unlike Facebook, favors one-way connections—you can follow my posts, but I don't have to follow yours. As a result, novice Twitterers are met with instant discouragement—you start out with nobody reading your posts, and because the people you follow don't have to follow you, there's no guarantee that you'll ever convince great numbers of people to listen to what you have to say. Twitter is not a meritocracy; you may be the cleverest quipper in your circle, but celebrities and people in the media inevitably win the most followers. There is no justice in the fact that a banal Twitterer

like [Sen. Claire McCaskill](#) has attracted an audience of more than 19,000. (A [typically riveting McCaskill tweet](#): "Leaving for KC soon. Meeting about American car manufacturing. Then on to Springfield. Press avail there.") But that's how Twitter goes; if you join, be prepared to deal with a lot of people who are undeservedly more popular than yourself.

Slate V: Flutter: The New Twitter

Microblogging, like regular blogging, rewards persistence. Twitter is littered with half-hearted tweets—people who joined the site with dreams of sending out pithy little posts regularly and then drifted away after realizing that keeping up a microblog can be an unrewarding chore. The best Twitterers post a few times a day, but with care—like the best bloggers, they aim for comedy, insight, and drama and to share cool links. They also don't overload their followers. I've dropped people for tweeting too often; more than three times an hour seems excessive.

Does all this sound daunting? It should. Lost in the hype surrounding Twitter is any suggestion that tweeting is not for everyone. Sure, it's easy to join Twitter, but Twittering isn't easy. And it's not instantly rewarding, either. If you're a politician, a celebrity, a marketer, or a journalist, you've likely got very specific goals for Twitter—to sell yourself or a product. Twitter can pay off grandly for these folks; have you heard about the [Korean taco truck in Los Angeles](#) that's built a cult following by [tweeting its roving location to customers](#)? Last month, I pointed out that by connecting companies with their biggest fans, Twitter has also [helped a few people find jobs](#) in this tough economy. So if you're out of work and have nothing else better to do, Twitter might be for you.

But what if you're not selling tacos and you don't care to establish a brand for yourself online? What if you just work in accounting—what can Twitter do for you? This is a harder nut to crack. Some people are fans of the medium itself; they join Twitter not to tweet but to subscribe to streams from [Shaquille O'Neal](#), [John Mayer](#), [John Dickerson](#), and other world-class Twitterers.

But if you're not into that, Twitter doesn't seem to offer much that you can't already get elsewhere—for instance, at Facebook. A few months ago, I urged readers to [join](#) the social network because you could no longer mistake it for a passing craze; Facebook, I argued, is now a permanent part of the culture, as critical to modern society as e-mail and the cell phone. Since then, to much annoyance, Facebook has [redesigned its site to be more Twitter-like](#). These changes diminish Twitter's attractiveness: Are you just looking for a way to occasionally send a mass message to your friends? Facebook, where you've already established a circle of followers, can be a much faster

way of doing so—especially now that it looks so much like Twitter.

Microblogging may not be a fad; there are probably enough people who want to broadcast their thoughts to strangers, and certainly enough people who want to read what these folks have to say, to keep it growing.

But that doesn't mean everyone will be doing it, either. Talking to strangers is strange. It takes a certain type of person to do it well—or even to want to do it. If you're struck with horror at the prospect of telling the world what you ate for dinner, where you're going on vacation, or what you read in the paper this morning—well, that's OK. You're just not that into Twitter, and you're not alone.

sidebar

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Twitter can look a bit clubby to newbies. One reason is that people on Twitter love to talk about Twitter. Another is that the service has adopted cryptic typographical conventions to signal certain kinds of conversations, and figuring out what they mean is not intuitive.

The most common is the @ sign. In tweets, this usually precedes a username, and it basically means you're [talking to or about someone](#). To reply to a tweet from me, you'd begin your post with [@fmanjoo](#). (This doesn't mean that only I see you post—your reply to me is public.)

Another common symbol is the [hash tag](#), #. People use this to say that their tweets are about a specific subject. For instance, when folks were talking about the terrorist attacks in India last year, they included the [#mumbai](#) tag in their tweets so others could follow the conversation. You can find these conversations through [Twitter's search engine](#). Type in [#sxsw](#) and you'll find all the messages about the South by Southwest festival.

One other convention: RT means "re-tweet." Starting a tweet with RT means you're echoing someone else's post to your group of followers. For example, if you liked my colleague John Swansburg's [post about The Cosby Show](#), you'd write, "RT [@swansburg](#) A high water mark of 1980s situation comedy: [http://bit.ly/3NBdl7](#) Nay, situation comedy, period."

technology

YouTube for Artists

The Web video site Vimeo goes after an audience tired of the poorly lit basement aesthetic.

By Farhad Manjoo

Tuesday, April 7, 2009, at 5:54 PM ET

My nomination for the most mesmerizing minute and 34 seconds of video on the Web is nothing more than a meditation on a stretch of power lines as thousands of birds come and go at sunset. What the clip lacks in plot, it makes up for with fantastic production. [Wes Johnson](#), a photographer in Mesa, Ariz., who created the piece, shot the scene with a high-definition camera that allows you make out individual birds as they come and go on the swaying lines. Johnson sets the video to Yann Tiersen's "L'autre Valse d'Amélie," from the [Amélie soundtrack](#), laid down with startling synchronicity to the images.

Unlike many popular videos online, Johnson's clip—which I found on [Jason Kottke's blog](#)—features no cute children, [ironically profane white rappers](#), nor any other staples of viral video stars. Perhaps that's why the clip didn't make its splash on YouTube. Instead, Johnson posted it to an alternative video-sharing site, the Web's best place to find beautiful videos. It's called [Vimeo](#).

[powerlinersflyers](#) from [wes johnson](#) on [Vimeo](#).

About 73 million people visit YouTube every month, according to the traffic-monitoring firm Compete. Vimeo gets just a tiny fraction of that horde, [fewer than 3 million](#). But the content looks like it comes from the Web's most talented lot. Vimeo attracts a high-art, film-buff set—the kind of people who, when making movies for the Web, pause to consider such virtues as cinematography, framing, music, and composition. You could argue that those concepts don't matter much in the digital world, at least as far as page views are concerned; some of the most popular videos ever to wash up on the shores of the Web—["Numa Numa,"](#) [Laughing Baby,](#) ["Evolution of Dance"](#)—were shot on cheap cameras in uncertain light and are blighted by poor sound. But that's precisely why watching Vimeo is a revelation. The videos here suggest that there is a market on the Web for good old-fashioned quality.

Not every video on Vimeo is amazing, of course. Some are boring or incoherent, and more than a few seem to be trying too hard to be artistic. What's astounding about Vimeo is its high ratio of signal to noise. Most of the videos posted here, even the terrible ones, are at least trying to say something interesting. That's a lot more than can be said of much of what you see on YouTube.

Vimeo has been growing rapidly over the last few months, and nowadays its videos spread widely online. I was originally clued in to Vimeo's rising profile by a recent film called ["The Crisis of Credit Visualized,"](#) by Jonathan Jarvis, a graduate student at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, Calif. Jarvis uses simple diagrams and clear on-screen text to explain the roots of the financial crisis, for the most entertaining and informative 11 minutes I've spent on the Web this year. Jarvis [posted the video on YouTube](#), too, but the higher-quality Vimeo version saw much more action. More than 1.5 million people have watched Jarvis' video on Vimeo; half as many saw it on YouTube.

[The Crisis of Credit Visualized](#) from [Jonathan Jarvis](#) on [Vimeo](#).

Vimeo was founded in the fall of 2004 by filmmaker and Web entrepreneur [Jakob Lodwick](#), who was among [the crew of young men](#) who also started two other great collections of online fun, [CollegeHumor](#) and [BustedTees](#). YouTube launched a few months later but took off immediately on the strength of user-generated viral hits and a smorgasbord of copyrighted clips from TV shows and movies. YouTube, which is now owned by Google and has been sued by Hollywood, has since instituted much stricter rules on the kinds of videos allowed on the site, but [Vimeo's guidelines are even less permissive](#). Vimeo lets you post only videos that you've created yourself; it won't even let you post screen captures from your greatest video-game victories. YouTube allows studios to post movie trailers or clips from TV shows while Vimeo prohibits such commercial videos. Vimeo makes money through ads it posts on the site—though never on the videos—and from a [\\$60-a-year subscription program](#) for people who want to upload more than 500 MB of video files per week. (Vimeo declined to say whether it's profitable; the site's traffic, though, has increased by nearly 700 percent during the last year.)

For many years, Vimeo, like other video sites, languished in obscurity under YouTube's shadow. In 2006, Barry Diller's Internet conglomerate IAC purchased a controlling stake in CollegeHumor, BustedTees, and Vimeo; Lodwick and the company didn't see eye to eye, and in late 2007, [IAC fired him](#). Around that time, Vimeo launched its high-definition service, making it the first big site to offer filmmakers a chance to stream videos that didn't look as if they were shot on a cell phone. Vimeo's timing was just right; high-def cameras were just starting to become more widely available, and people looking for an alternative to YouTube's grainy ghetto began to flock to Vimeo. "We refused to believe that video quality online couldn't be amazing," says [Blake Whitman](#), a community director at Vimeo. "We thought that HD was the future, and we knew it was technically possible—and we got some really incredible filmmakers, motion graphics artists, and animators who were looking for the highest-quality site out there."

In particular, Vimeo began to attract photographers who wanted to stream the sort of footage that wouldn't really work on YouTube. Here's a shining example: On the first warm-weather weekend of 2008, Keith Loutit, a photographer in Australia, planted himself on the ridges overlooking Tamarama Beach, in Sydney. His high-def camera was outfitted with a series of tilt-shift lenses, which produce a shallow depth of field, making a scene resemble [a miniature town](#). The [result](#) is an enchanting landscape that one can watch several times over. (Loutit has made [several other videos in this style](#).)

[Beached from Keith Loutit on Vimeo.](#)

Many of Vimeo's competitors, including YouTube, have since given users the option of posting high-definition videos. Vimeo's continued appeal comes from the atmosphere that developed from this emphasis on good videos. For instance, the staff puts out ideas for filmmakers to tackle on the weekends—things like [creating an homage to your favorite Vimeo video](#) or [making an orchestra out of everyday objects](#). Vimeo's staff also regularly post funny videos of their own.

These efforts make Vimeo seem like a small town, a sensibility that's especially apparent on the comment threads attached to videos. Where YouTube is [notorious](#) for attracting the most inane and vile commenters on the Web, people who respond to Vimeo videos are unbelievably nice. "I won't say you'll never find a negative comment, but in more than two years, I've literally seen 20 negative comments," Whitman says. "And I've watched 50,000 videos easily."

It's unlikely that Vimeo will ever be as big as YouTube, though that's not really its aim. With size comes all kinds of problems—lots of terrible videos, lots of terrible commenters. What Vimeo proves is that online, being well-behind the leader has its benefits. I'll always head to YouTube when I'm looking for the next viral sensation; for the real talent, though, I'll go to Vimeo.

television Not Funny

In the land of one-joke sitcoms, *Parks and Recreation* is king.

By Troy Patterson

Thursday, April 9, 2009, at 8:32 PM ET

Midseason replacements were late to arrive on network television this year, and now spring has brought new sitcoms like so many genetically engineered daffodils. This circumstance has put them at a disadvantage so far as Nielsen ratings go. The snowbound elderly, the seasonal-affective-disorder afflicted, the

black-ice phobic—these and other demographics might have gathered around these lukewarm comedies in the cold. But now the weather's starting to get nice, and these shows offer little incentive to stay inside.

In recent years, in the matter of programming ineptitude, it has been extremely difficult to surpass NBC. Nonetheless, when it comes to sitcoms, ABC has sunk to the occasion so consistently as to suggest a gross personality defect, the latest manifestations of which are *Surviving Suburbia* (Mondays at 9:30 p.m. ET) and *In the Motherhood* (Thursdays at 8 p.m. ET), either of which could conceivably get canceled by the time I finish this paragraph.

Surviving Suburbia, a conventional family sitcom with a wacky neighbor and a weekly moral, combines boring analysis of middle-class boredom with a promotional opportunity for ABC and the whole Walt Disney Co. family. The most recent opened with Bob Saget's character, paterfamilias Steve Patterson—no relation—cuddling with his wife as an episode of ABC's *Dancing With the Stars* twirled off the air. "You should dance with Mommy," said the Patterson daughter. "And you should be in bed," quipped the doofy dad.

The jokes never got any better than that, not even when the girl-moppet later waxed ecstatic about Zac Efron in *High School Musical*. Saget plays Steve like a Larry David with all the edges sanded off. There was an intriguing moment this week where Steve and a neighbor, a strip-club owner, discussed "trading keys," and it seemed for a weird second that the show might take an abrupt detour and emerge as a comic deconstruction of *Swingtown*, CBS's short-lived wife-swapping drama. No such luck: Steve fed some fish, set a curtain on fire, and learned a lesson about honesty, and no one so much as played footsie.

In the Motherhood is somewhat more tolerable—though it's impossible at the moment to imagine what wouldn't be. In keeping with its title, the show, adapted from a Web serial, approaches its central figures, a pack of mommies, as if, in their parenthood, they were enduring a sorority initiation. Jane (Cheryl Hines), a divorcee, has one daughter who sasses her like Roseanne's Darlene and another, an infant, who would be dead if not for the competence of a male nanny played by Horatio Sanz. Her pal Rosemary (Megan Mullally), a semiretired rock chick, says of raising her kids, "TV did pick up a lot of the slack." The least incompetent—and hence the least interesting—of the trio is Jane's sister Emily (Jessica St. Clair), whose well-adjusted nature promises a fine crack-up down the road.

The show rises to mediocrity on the strength of the occasional snappiness of the dialogue: This week, Jane's older daughter embarked for a spot of weekend custody with her father with an empty suitcase in hand, explaining, "He's gonna try and buy my love, and I'm gonna need something to carry it in." The costumes pop with color, and the mood is slightly dark. Jane knocks back

copious volumes of white wine; Rosemary prefers Jell-o shots; their fondest dreams are on the rocks.

Compared with these duds, NBC's *Parks and Recreation* (Thursdays at 8:30 p.m. ET), starring Amy Poehler as a slapstick bureaucrat, looks like *The Office*. It looks even more like the office when compared with *The Office*. Each employs a mockumentary structure and concomitant shaky camerawork (though *P&R*'s quicker cuts induce stronger nausea). Each features a tooting jingle of a theme song (with *P&R*'s sounding like *The Office*'s as covered by Vampire Weekend). Each makes a space for the delicate hotness of actress Rashida Jones. Each centers on a deluded manager frequently backed into corners by clichés and motivational-speak. Heading into a town-hall meeting, Poehler's Leslie tells the camera, "This is where the rubber of government meets the road of actual human beings."

Another character, referencing Leslie's tenacity in trying to turn an abandoned construction site into a park, likens her to "a little dog with a chew toy." The breed would be Labradoodle, such is the bright smile on this dim bulb and her neurotic yapping. This is a civil servant who has yet to be jaded, and the show is just good enough to keep you turning back in to see her unwarranted optimism curdle.

television

Everyone's a Critic

And everyone reviews movies on the *Rotten Tomatoes Show*.

By Troy Patterson

Monday, April 6, 2009, at 6:09 PM ET

Variouly scorned as an agent of the death of the film criticism and hailed as a resource for finding a movie that may be worth not walking out of, [Rotten Tomatoes](#) has been aggregating movie reviews since 1998, long enough to gain distinction as an Internet institution. [Current TV](#), which earned a ton of attention when Al Gore founded it four years ago and perhaps 2 or 3 ounces since, is a Web 2.0 cable channel. "Interactive viewer-created content," inanelly dubbed VC², comprises one-third of its programming. It is the kind of network that will broadcast your Twitter musings during presidential debates. Together, the two entities bring us the inevitable *Rotten Tomatoes Show*, "a show that puts the power of movie reviewing in your hands." Disappointingly, it's only fractionally the abomination a professional critic might hope for.

That's fine. We'll have to get used to not hating the show, as it won't be getting canceled anytime before Armageddon. The business model's too sensible. Movie studios supply perhaps 40 percent of the content in the form of clips while amateur

reviewers—"citizen critics"—provide a similar amount by smirking and cooing into webcams. The producers need only supply two attractive young people to sit on director's chairs in front a green screen and tie the whole thing together.

Thus, your hosts are Brett Ehrlich, who favors hoodies and works a Seth Green thing with some success, and Ellen Fox, who grins wide even when snarking up cute bile and light misanthropy. They project a quick-witted self-irony similar to Joel McHale's on *The Soup* (E!), the reality-show recap program that exults in its own shame at its own trashiness, but with the crucial difference of being sincerely in love with the product they're consuming, both as film buffs and students of camp. They're not authorities but equals. Witness Brett seething with bafflement at the ridiculous conclusion of Nicolas Cage's *Knowing*. "If you saw it, seriously, e-mail me because I wanna talk about it," he said as his e-mail address flashed on-screen.

Despite the hints of Punch and Judy in their flirtily aggressive banter, Ellen and Brett are no Siskel and Ebert. They may quibble over a fine point in an analysis of *Race to Witch Mountain*, but their first duty is to serve as moderators or orchestra conductors or collagists putting a consensus together from the snippets uploaded by their pals out on the Web. Brett—we're all on a first-name basis here—makes reference to "our review," as if speaking on behalf of a labor union or a smiley-faced hive mind. Dispiriting though it is to witness the value of individual critical voices steamrolled so efficiently, it must be conceded that each review comes together with some degree of nuance. And who can resist the nonprofessional who, in reviewing Amy Adams' *Sunshine Cleaning*, did a note-perfect parody of the tremulous gasping to which Adams too often resorts?

Every episode finds the hosts very nearly apologizing for the show's most reductive segments. The less offensive of these is the "Haiku Review of DVD Releases," presented with some faux-Eastern graphics and sound effects that acknowledge the silliness of dispatching *Quantum of Solace* thusly: "James Bond rips off Bourne/ Merely upsetting fans of/ Casino Royale." It's hard to get behind the feature accompanying the weekly box-office report, "Three Word Reviews." Some home-schooled aphorist out there paid to watch *Duplicity* and reported witlessly back with "Way Too Complicated." Though hardly a match for Brett's own capsule summary of the film—"The movie pulled the rug out from under me so many times that by the end I just stopped trying to get back up"—this is still a clear improvement on the reviews [Ben Lyons](#) drools on *At the Movies*, if such a point is worth making in an era when everyone's a critic.

the big idea

What Else Are We Wrong About?

The danger of nuclear proliferation and other possible fallacies.

By Jacob Weisberg

Saturday, April 4, 2009, at 6:56 AM ET

A lot of our premises have turned out to be wrong lately. I'm talking not about evanescent bits of [conventional wisdom](#) that have shifted but about overarching assumptions that were widely shared across the political spectrum—big things that experts and nonexperts agreed about—until they were proved false.

For instance, before 1989, virtually all Sovietologists agreed that the USSR was highly stable. Before 2001, few Middle East scholars worried that the United States was vulnerable to a major terrorist attack. Before 2003, everyone from neocon hawks to French lefties agreed that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. Before 2008, few economists wondered about the fundamental soundness of the American financial system. Popular opinion echoed the expert consensus on each of these points. Those who challenged the groupthink—such as Soviet dissident [Andrei Amalrik](#), renegade counterterrorism expert [John O'Neill](#), former weapons inspector [Scott Ritter](#), and pessimistic economist [Nouriel Roubini](#)—tended to be dismissed as provocateurs, wackos, or (in [Ritter's case](#)) worse.

So at a moment when everything we once assumed seems suddenly up for discussion, it may be worth asking the question: What other big stuff could we be wrong about? I'm looking for issues on which the received wisdom may well be completely right—but deserves a stronger dose of skepticism than it usually gets.

Nuclear proliferation is bad. It seems self-evident that countries joining the nuclear club—India, Pakistan, North Korea, and, perhaps, now Iran—create a greater risk of catastrophic war or accidental launch. But in a famous [1981 paper](#), the political scientist [Kenneth Waltz](#) argued that nuclear rivalries help keep the peace because "they discourage states from starting any wars that might lead to the use of such weapons." In this view, nukes are inherently defensive weapons, and the countries that want them do so for good reason. Waltz argues that joining the nuclear club induces restraint and caution, causing irresponsible regimes to behave more responsibly. In this [video](#), he applies his idea to Iraq (where he joined in believing the WMD fallacy) and North Korea. Waltz's argument that "the slow spread of nuclear weapons will promote peace and reinforce international stability" is buttressed by another: You can't stop nuclear proliferation even if you try.

Climate change will be catastrophic. We all know civilization is doomed if we don't reduce carbon emissions, right? Physicist Freeman Dyson disagrees. Dyson (a strong opponent of nuclear proliferation, by the way) doesn't dispute that human activity is

causing warming. But he [challenges the scientific consensus](#) that warming will be catastrophic. He is [skeptical about climate models](#), which, he has said, "do not begin to describe the real world that we live in." In a [New York Review of Books essay](#), Dyson wrote that warming "is mostly making cold places warmer rather than making hot places hotter." Carbon emissions could make the earth more fertile and prevent harm from a separate phenomenon of global cooling that isn't caused by humans. And if it really turns out that there is a serious problem, genetically engineered carbon-eating trees might fix it.

China is stable. The prevailing academic view of China resembles that of the Soviet Union in the old days, but with far greater measure of admiration. Twenty years after the Tiananmen Square crackdown, the Chinese Communist Party apparatus shows every sign of being in firm control. The economy has continued to grow at 9 percent a year since 1978, fueling China's rise as a global power. There's little sign of opposition. But remember that rising living standards tend to produce political discontent and have driven democratic change throughout most of the rest of East Asia. [Samuel Huntington](#), the late political scientist, argued that regimes become vulnerable at a level of per capita income that China is fast approaching. As its free-market flourishes and access to information grows, it becomes an overwhelming challenge for the CCP to justify its rule and [repress challenges to its legitimacy](#). Why should we assume that China will be immune to demands for democratic change?

Homeownership is better for us. The assumption that owning beats renting has been the basis for American social policy since at least the New Deal, when Congress first [insured and subsidized mortgages](#) through the Federal Housing Administration and Fannie Mae. Over time, the long-standing tax deductibility of interests evolved into a specific mortgage-interest deduction. It's a natural assumption that owners have more of a stake in their communities. But even if that's true, why should it outweigh the obvious disadvantages of homeownership? As many more people have discovered lately, it means taking on [enormous financial risk](#). It encourages community involvement at the expense of [labor-market mobility](#). It encourages longer commutes. And at least one study says it [makes you fat and unhappy](#).

Stocks outperform bonds in the long run. The thesis of Jeremy Siegel's [Stocks for the Long Run](#) has been the most pervasive financial wisdom of recent decades. Siegel uses historical data to show that since 1802, stocks have returned an average of around 7 percent a year, better than any other asset class, with less risk. Others have claimed that stocks outperform bonds for any isolated 20- or 30-year period since the late 1800s. But in a [recent paper](#), two business school professors contend "that stocks are actually more volatile over long horizons." The better performance of stocks might be the product of specific historical circumstances. But if stocks really have outperformed

with lower risk over a long period, that means they've been undervalued relative to other assets. And now that investors recognize the undervaluation, there's no reason it should persist. [This Bloomberg chart](#) shows that as of 2009, the 30-year Treasury index has beaten the chief global stock index for the past 30 years.

Detroit can't compete. No one is optimistic about American carmakers right now. For decades, they've been losing ground to better-built, better-value foreign imports. The Big Three bet against fuel efficiency and smaller cars and lost. The inability of GM and Chrysler to sell recovery plans to the government underscores the notion that Detroit suffers from an incurable malaise. But look: American manufacturing practices have [greatly improved](#) in the past couple of years. The Big Three's labor costs have come way down. Shanghai GM is [China's leading auto manufacturer](#). [Buick recently tied with Ford-built Jaguar](#) in an owner survey as the most reliable car brand. Ford looks as if it might have built the [best mid-size hybrid](#), the 2010 Fusion. There's an argument that Detroit's real problem is its overhang of debt, high health care costs, and pension liabilities—all of which can be fixed through financial restructuring—as opposed to a deep inability to make cars that people want to buy.

We're running out of fossil fuels. When oil spiked at \$147 a barrel last summer, the interesting question seemed to be whether we had enough left for the next 40 years or the next 100. But some people believe we will never run out. An essay Dyson wrote about [scientific heresy](#) tipped me off to Thomas Gold, an Austrian scientist who taught at Cornell and died in 2004. Gold argued that oil and gas weren't fossil fuels derived from decomposed vegetable matter but were, rather, the [products of geological reactions](#) that take place deep underground and leak upward. One experiment conducted by chemists at the Carnegie Institute supports this idea. The scientists found that methane, which is natural gas, could be produced by the interaction of geological elements known to exist miles below the surface of the earth by replicating the pressure and temperature where they're found. As Dyson writes, "The Carnegie Institute experiment shows that there is at least a possibility that Tommy Gold was right and the natural gas reservoirs are fed from deep below." In other words, we might not be running out of gas.

The Cubs will never win the World Series again. Oh, never mind.

the chat room

Facebook Philandering

Dear Prudence on affairs via social networking—and other readers'

quandaries.

Monday, April 6, 2009, at 5:18 PM ET

Emily Yoffe, aka Dear Prudence, is on Washingtonpost.com every Monday at 1 p.m. to chat with readers about their romantic, family, financial, and workplace problems. (Read her Slate columns [here](#).) An unedited transcript of this week's chat follows.

Emily Yoffe: Good afternoon. I look forward to your questions.

Jacksonville, Fla.: My partner of eight years recently joined Facebook and connected online with many old friends, and since then, has been moody, withdrawn, disinterested, etc. with me around the house. She recently went to a 9 p.m. "meeting" at a bar, for which she was overdressed, and conveniently, she also did not pick up her own tab. I asked her then about Facebook, but she does not want me to see her Facebook page and insists that it should be private, although we have several mutual friends who have access to her page. We have had issues in the past with her secrecy, some dishonesty and deceptiveness, which causes me to have some trust issues with her. Am I overreacting to the Facebook thing now or should I be worried about her behavior?

Emily Yoffe: I love the idea of Facebook—this social network that is supposed to bring people together and let everyone you've ever known know what you've eaten for lunch—be a furtive method of cheating. It's more than a clear violation of Facebook etiquette not to let your significant other "friend" you. The problem is not Facebook, it's just a utility your partner is utilizing to cheat.

Arlington, Va.: Dear Pru,

I need your feedback. I am a "woman of size". I have been all of my life. I work out regularly, don't overeat, but here I am. I'm not asking for diet advice. What I need is something different. I need advice on how to deal with the country's hostility towards overweight women. Women of size are not seen as date-worthy, have insurmountable negative connotations associated with them (lazy, slobs, smelly... I'm none of those things!), and are in general treated poorly. Being judged for your looks is the last acceptable form of "prejudice". I guess what I'm most sad about is that this is such a tiny part of who I am, yet never gets overlooked. However, I'm still invisible. So, I guess my question is: how do I overcome my anger at people who feel it's okay to judge me?

Emily Yoffe: First of all, remember you're not alone. Most American are "people of size" so at any workplace or social setting you are hardly going to be the only overweight person. Remember, often the way you are treated is in response to the way you act. You say your weight never gets overlooked, yet you are invisible. This sounds as if you spend a lot of time looking for ways to interpret encounters as being about your weight. I am not saying there is no fat prejudice out there. But if you are comfortable with yourself, and act as if you are, you will notice a lot less hostility.

Broad Run, Va.: Dear Prudence,

I am a parent of a 2-year-old boy. As one of his regular social activities, we take him to a Gymboree-style place.

Recently, at an "open play session" (i.e. multiple age groups), there was an older autistic child, who looked to be about six or seven. (I overheard the parents telling someone that he is autistic.) I've never spent a lot of time around autistic children, but he seemed to have a lot of the mannerisms traditionally attributed to autism (lack of eye contact, unable to control enthusiasm, etc.) My introduction to him was when, out of nowhere, he came running up behind me and started pounding on my back, screaming at the top of his lungs.

Like (I suppose) most people, I'm all for mainstreaming as long as it doesn't put my child at risk. However, the play session seemed to be an ongoing litany of the autistic child shoving down smaller children. Every couple of minutes, crying would start and there would a toddler that had just been shoved to the ground by the autistic boy. While the autistic boy's parents stayed close and interceded after the fact, it almost seemed like the other children were unwitting therapy dolls for their trying to get their child used to other children.

The autistic child's parents saw what was going on, as did the moderator of the place. I felt like my choice was confronting the parents and/or the owner (thus making a scene), picking up my child and leaving (thus making a scene), or spending the entire session glued to my kid in case the much older and larger autistic child came charging at my child so I could step in between them. I chose the last option.

Was there a better option that I missed? If not, did I do the right thing? I understand the other parents' plight and the other boy's need for social interaction, but the boy's parents putting their child in a play situation with much smaller children, and letting him tackle smaller children over and over again, seemed to be pretty thoughtless on their part.

Thanks for your help.

Emily Yoffe: It's important that you understand the painful situation the parents of the autistic child are in. However, it's to no one's benefit to have a child there who cannot behave within the bounds of safety and respect for others. If you want to continue at this place, you should make an appointment with the manager and explain what happened, and say one child can't be a danger to others no matter what the reason. This setting simply may not appropriate for a child with the disabilities of the one you describe. And if you felt this boy could have hurt your toddler, it wouldn't have been making a scene to quietly leave early.

Washington, D.C.: Dear Prudence, I have been dating someone for the past 3 years. He is in his mid-30s and I'm in my early 30s. He is a wonderful, sweet, and caring person. We have a great friendship and share a lot of great memories. My problem is that I while he is deeply in love with me, I'm not sure I feel the same. I love him and enjoy our relationship but don't feel some crazy, teenage-type passion that most people claim that they feel in their romantic relationships. He has asked me to marry him and I'm considering saying yes. I'm a big believer in marriage being about shared values, deep friendship, and of course love. Is it wrong for me to say yes to this proposal? Mind you, I have discussed with him my lack of gushing emotions when it comes toward him but have affirmed my love, respect, trust, and admiration for him. He seems to be OK with our relationship as is and frankly so I'm I. I'm I crazy or do I need help for even considering his proposal?

Emily Yoffe: What are your alternatives? Years of awful dating in a search for someone who sets off (temporary) fireworks? There are many different ways to approach enduring love. Feeling a deep commitment, respect, and admiration sounds pretty darn good. I'm sure a lot of women who would adore a decent partner would read your letter and say, "If you don't want this, I'll take it!" You don't even say that you have experienced the kind of boiling passion in previous relationships that this one lacks. You may not intrinsically be a high-boil person when it comes to love. What you've got sounds awfully good. I say say "Yes."

Washington, D.C.: I have a busy job that requires a lot of interactions with people all day long. I take some exercise classes on the weekend to try to get healthy and relax. I'm really annoyed (unreasonably?) by one or two students in classes who feel that they have to talk incessantly, either to a friend or the instructor, "help" the instructor lead the class, etc. I look forward to these classes as a chance to have a bit of peace and quiet and focus on moving my body. I find the noise from these people really disruptive. One woman said that she just wants to make sure everybody smiles. I thought of saying that everybody would

be smiling if I throttled her but I restrained myself. Are they egotistical narcissists or am I just a grinch?

Emily Yoffe: When someone is doing something annoying—chewing gum, humming, etc.—it's hard not become consumed with this offense to the point that it becomes the only thing you hear. If this is an active class with music, see if you can just tune out the yakkers, or position yourself at the other side of the room. It's also possible that they are annoying everyone else. So after class one day, discuss this with the instructor and see if he or she is willing to put a lid on it.

Philadelphia, Pa.: Hey, Prudie. Don't know what to do here. My boyfriend was married when we met, something he failed to tell me, and we dated many, many months before the truth came out in a terrible and devastating way. He has since divorced, and I've decided to give him a second chance, much to the dismay of others and—I must admit—myself.

The thing is, how the hell do I get past this? We've gotten into some huge fights because I bring up his past lies, and I find myself saying ugly things about him and his ex-wife (who also told me some swell untruths) and doing things to intentionally hurt him. I have claimed immunity sometimes because my transgressions pale in comparison to his; clearly, this is neither functional nor rational behavior.

I know, move on, right? Only I've tried that. Several times. Doesn't work. I've not gotten this guy out of my system, nor do I particularly want to anymore.

How do I work through these issues without turning into a monster? Is it possible to start fresh? Or am I just lying to myself?

Emily Yoffe: What do you mean you've tried moving on and it doesn't work? Has your boyfriend chained you to the bedpost? Of course you can move on if you conclude that is the only way to get out of a mutually destructive relationship. But as you acknowledge, some part of you is enjoying it too much. This issue goes beyond your relationship and is about why you feel compelled to stay—especially when you find yourself acting in ways you despise. It's time for counseling to help you sort this out.

Wash, D.C.: Dear Prudence:

I live in D.C. and get my nails done regularly at a place downtown. I am a "regular" client of one of the technicians, who does a great job. Her English is pretty good, but there are still

some exchanges that I can't quite make out. But, I am pretty sure that sometimes she says very prejudiced things about African Americans. My past experience in southeast Asia (but not in Viet Nam, where she is from) suggests that those cultures may be more comfortable with certain forms of racism than we are. In any case, I'm very uncomfortable. In regular conversation, if someone said what I think she said (not using vile terms, just saying that "they" are all one way or another), I would call them out. But with the language issue, there's always a chance I'm misunderstood. Do I have to stop going there? What can I do?

Emily Yoffe: The next time she says something you think is vile, go ahead and ask her to repeat herself because you weren't sure what she said. If it is vile, then you'll know, and if she says, "Never mind" you can be pretty sure it was vile. Then just tell her that these kinds of comments make you deeply uncomfortable and you just don't want to hear anymore racist remarks—you can add that such comments have no place in the workplace. If she won't stop, there are plenty of other excellent manicurists around.

Providence, R.I.: I am hoping you clear up an argument I have been having with a friend. About 7 months ago, I found out from my doctor (and 2 second opinions) that due to my health, I will never be able to have a child and even attempting will probably kill me. I am coming to grips with this while at the same time 6 couples I know have announced have announced their pregnancies. I am happy for them, but on several occasions, I left quickly after congratulating the couple as I felt I was about to get very emotional in a bad way. I have been told I am acting selfishly by leaving and that I "should be over it by now." Am I wrong to leave if I feel I might cause a scene and take away from a friend's happiness or should I "suck it up" and hope I don't break down?

Upset in R.I.

Emily Yoffe: If your choice is between breaking down and leaving, then yes, you did the right thing to leave while you still had a smile on your face. I often hear from people with fertility problems who think it is the obligation of people who are pregnant or have young children to tiptoe around them. Of course your friends should be sensitive to your situation, but everyone else cannot pretend their lives aren't going on, or make pregnancy and children a verboten topic. It is going to take you time to come to grips with this. Please join a support group for help in coping with this, and to have a place to vent. That should help you eventually be able to stay in the room when the pregnancy announcement is made.

for the "woman of size": Check out the Fat Acceptance movement! It's a wonderful way to work on combating the kind of prejudice you describe, and to connect with other people (mostly women) who have similar experiences. I'm particularly fond of Kate Harding's Shapely Prose blog, but just google Fat Acceptance, and you'll see lots of options.

Emily Yoffe: Good advice, thanks. But I also think the "woman of size" needs ways to think less about her size.

Worried sick: I am not a jealous woman, and I have never checked up on my husband. This weekend I was cleaning out our old bills and took a moment to look at our cell phone charges. There were a few calls and text messages on his phone to a number I did not recognize and at odd times of day. There were enough of these that I looked at his phone to see who it was. The number was not listed and no record of the calls and texts was kept. I called the number this morning from a pay phone and it is a woman I know of. My husband and I talk all the time and he never mentions this woman. Am I over reacting?

Emily Yoffe: Well, you have taken action, but you haven't really reacted yet to the information you've gotten. Maybe it's all perfectly innocent, maybe it's not. But if you want to find out if your husband is being deceitful, you need to come clean about what you've found out. Just lay it out to him the way you laid it out here (try to be as dispassionate as possible) and let him respond. Do not let him twist the discussion into one about your snooping. Admit you snooped, but explain the issue on the table is what your snooping turned up.

Virginia: Dear Prudence: My son goes to a private school that is heavy on parent volunteer involvement. I work full-time as an attorney, and, as a result, don't often have time to volunteer. However, I did volunteer for an event that required a limited number of volunteers. I never heard back from the parent who was coordinating volunteers, so I assumed I wasn't needed. I opened my email this morning to a not very nice email from the aforesaid parent who told me that it was "difficult" because I didn't show up. How should I handle this situation? Thanks.

Emily Yoffe: Be big and take the hit for the miscommunication. Explain you are terribly sorry but that after you sent your email saying you were available you didn't hear back—maybe the email got eaten—and so assumed your help wasn't needed. Say you realize now you should have followed up to double check what was going on. Expect you will be the subject of much disparaging talk in this hothouse world of prep school parent volunteers. Try not to care.

Re: Snooping: "Admit you snooped, but explain the issue on the table is what your snooping turned up."

So snooping is OK as long as you find something?

Emily Yoffe: I know snooping is supposed to be worse than the violations that snooping turns up, but I have a more complicated view. In general I am against snooping. And I think married people still have a right to privacy in their communications. However, in the course of paying bills, etc. you stumble on significant evidence of cheating, well, I think that trumps the expectation of privacy. And I often hear from people whose spouses have cheated in the past, and who are now picking up suspicious signs, and who check the email or cellphone and find what looks like confirmation. And I think following your hunches in those situations is justified.

Re: exercise yammer: Oh, been there! It was a spin class with a participant who "whooped!!" every couple minutes. She either thought she was helping generate enthusiasm or was just drawing attention to herself. Either way, I actually took to wearing earplugs to class! Can you imagine, a class with booming music and having to wear ear plugs? Finally, I talked to the instructor and SHE was annoyed, too. One day I just looked at the whooper and said, "will you knock it off, that's very distracting," taking the brunt of the now-hostility for the rest of the class. One other participant said, "thank you!" I say, tell the talkers that they're distracting you. I'll bet you make a lot of friends in that class doing it.

Emily Yoffe: Good for you. However, there was that case in NY where the whooper wouldn't stop, so the person who asked was driven so insane by the whooping he threw the whooper off the bike. The assault case went to a jury and the thrower was acquitted—no question he did it, but the jury sympathized with him. In case the talkers or whoopers are real jerks, it's best to have the teacher handle it.

I opened my email this morning to a not very nice email from the aforesaid parent who told me that it was "difficult" because I didn't show up.: I disagree with Emily. busy mom should not apologize for SAHM not knowing the basics of communication, organizing, delegating. Mom should return to email saying "sorry I missed the event, but without a firm followup, I can't keep my schedule open for unconfirmed events. My office schedule keeps me busy and I need definite verification of all appointments."

Emily Yoffe: I see your point, the lawyer-mother's kid goes to this school, has play dates and is on sports teams with the child of the volunteer-mother. Send a legalistic note like that and the volunteer-mother will forward it to everyone else to show what a jerk lawyer-mother is. Sometimes it's better to take the hit for the sake of smoothing relations.

Oakton, Va.: Prudence,

On Saturday I was out with my partner, Ted, and his friend, Sally, at a Japanese Steak house. Sitting with us was another couple who we didn't know. We were all getting along well—laughing and having a good time. The husband of the other couple, Joe, asked Ted if he was married. Ted said no. It irked me a bit and he and I spoke about it. I understand that my partner prefers to rally around the it-isn't-anyone-else's-business flag, especially strangers, who ask about our relationship. (We both pass for straight quite often.) Of course, Ted and I aren't married, but we have been partners for 5 years.

Is there a way to address this question that is funny and honest without bringing the party to a halt? (I fear there is self-loathing under this question.)

Mark

Emily Yoffe: There is no need to make a joke when answering this question, nor should a simple, straight answer about being gay bring the party to a halt. I understand your annoyance because in response to the question Ted should have indicated you and said, "Mark and I are partners." You two need to privately work out how you both want to answer this question in social settings in a way that makes you each comfortable.

Baby Blues: Hello:

I'm pregnant with my first child and due in 8 days. My husband and I are thrilled to death and cannot wait to meet the newest member of our family.

My mother is driving me crazy. She and I have never been close—we are essentially like oil and water. She had a vacation planned for this week for quite a while and I thought she understood what that might mean—if the baby comes early, she may not be able to see it for the first couple days (no big deal, we'll still be around and it won't change that much! or so I thought).

She has been calling me daily (very untypical for our relationship) telling me not to deliver until she returns so that she can see her first grandchild within 24 hours of its birth. The message conveyed is very strong—she cares more about how the birth of the child fits into her schedule than what is healthiest and safest for the child and myself.

I'm disgusted. This child will decide when it is ready to make its appearance and will do so at the healthiest time. She doesn't seem to care about this—only how it fits her schedule. I'm trying very hard to be patient with her, but it just makes me so angry and stressed. While this feeling is nothing new for our relationship, I would have hoped that a new, beautiful little life would have had some sort of impact to her superficial, self-centric lifestyle. I know she's excited, but when the first words out of her mouth are me me me, it's really hard to be sympathetic (and not tense). I'm at my wits end.

Emily Yoffe: Has she asked that you tie your legs together to keep the grandkid in until it suits her schedule? As I've said before, dealing with the self-centered, ridiculous demands of one's parents is good training for dealing with such demands when they are issued from one's children. Tell your mother the baby will arrive when it arrives and you don't wish to discuss this any further. If she persists, say, "Mom, this discussion is upsetting to me, so I'm going to get off the phone now, bye" and hang up. Get the book, "The Wizard of Oz and Other Narcissists" for help in drawing boundaries with such a mother.

Email etiquette: For many people including the parent of the high school prep student, please mind a few pieces of e-mail etiquette. Remember that many people have different levels of familiarity with e-mail. One very important feature is that if you expect a response, you should ask for one or note that you expect on in your message. If you expect one in a certain time frame mention it ("I hope to hear from you this weekend", or "If I don't hear from you by Wednesday, I'll assume I'm not needed.") Do not assume people will be on the same wavelength with you. Be very careful to be as clear as possible. Even if it takes a little more space, there are no extra charges for extra text and brevity has caused a huge number of avoidable misunderstandings. Finally, always clearly identify yourself. I don't know everyone's address and smile89@yahoo.com really doesn't tell me who you are.

Emily Yoffe: Good points.

Rockville, Md.: Dear Prudence,

How to politely decline a vacation invitation from my in-laws? They want to pay for a 5-day trip to a local resort. I've been on vacations with them in the past, and it usually means that everything is on their timeline (e.g., when to eat, where to eat, what activities to do). Attempts to go against their timeline have been met with hurt feelings and great disappointment. I do not want to seem ungrateful, but I have a 16-month-old who alas has his own timeline. So, waiting to eat dinner with my in-laws at 8:30 p.m. does not work. Their helpful suggestion of "just give him a snack to tide him over" are anything but. Unfortunately, my husband does not want to cause a rift either. Apparently, years of going along with their timeline has taught him that it's usually the path of least resistance. Thanks for your help!

Emily Yoffe: Now that you have a toddler, you need some new rules for dealing with your in-laws. It is amazing when the people who raised you or your spouse seem to have to have totally forgotten what it's like to have a small child. Probably a resort vacation is not the best place to start the retraining, so just say maybe you will take them up next year when the baby is older. In the meantime, start setting new timelines. Visit for brunch for example, and say dinner doesn't work for you now because the baby has to be in bed by 8:30. For a big celebration, make an exception, otherwise, kindly, but firmly, reset the schedule.

Reston, Va.: I have recently learned that two of my co-workers have been having an affair, probably for at least a year. Apparently, I am one of the last to learn of this. The whole thing has me quite disappointed in their behavior since I know what it's like to grow up in a family where there is unfaithfulness going on, and these two individuals have a combined 4 young children between them. But all that aside, what I have become really grossed out about is that apparently they have been having intimate assignations in a part of our office building where we periodically have training/meetings, but which is otherwise often unoccupied. Any suggestions about what, if anything, I should do?

Emily Yoffe: You may be disappointed and disgusted, but calling in the hazmat team to decontaminate the places where they've coupled is unnecessary. It's good you were the last to know. Now that you do know, unless the affair has a direct impact on you (they are in your department, one supervises the other and it's affecting everyone's work, for example) pretend you don't know.

Emily Yoffe: Thanks, everyone. I look forward to next week's chat.

the dilettante

Bigmouth Strikes Again

Morrissey in middle age.

By Stephen Metcalf

Tuesday, April 7, 2009, at 6:40 AM ET

Morrissey has a new album, and fulfilling reviewerly protocol, *Years of Refusal* is nice listening, though if you don't already have *Viva Hate*, *Your Arsenal*, or the lovely *Vauxhall and I*, I wouldn't start your record collection here. Morrissey will always be—in *excelsis mihi*—Morrissey, but he is now also firmly middle-aged. The fake hearing aid and the pocketful of gladioli are long gone; the croon has audibly softened. (It has softened, truth be told, into a bit of a yodel.) Nonetheless, *Years of Refusal* is competent work, and its finest moments—"Shame Is the Name," "You Were Good in Your Time," and, for sheer Meat Loaf-quality lung work, "It's Not Your Birthday Anymore"—raise again the question that has vexed me since I first heard the Smiths 25 years ago. What is it about this man's voice that breaks my heart?

The first key to puzzling out Morrissey is to ignore Morrissey himself—that is, to separate out the artist not only from the man but from the "Moz," the elaborately coy public construct that has helped turn the reclusive teenage whatsit into a British icon. That Morrissey—the playful, spiteful, celibate, fourth-gender Morrissey—is a lot of fun, and in three decades, he has scarcely given a dull interview. ("You haven't got any evidence of that," he once snapped at a journalist who dared call him human. "I'm actually 40 percent papier-mâché.") Set aside the rejoinders and innuendo, entertaining as they are, and then go one step further and ignore his lyrics. Heresy, I know; Morrissey is the most yearbook-quotable lyricist in the history of the form. ("I dreamt about you last night/ Nearly fell out of bed twice/ You can pin and mount me/ Like a butterfly ...") Don't allow yourself to be beguiled, however, or you will find yourself wandering down a flyblown alley filled with child murder, militant vegetarianism, gender-bending, and Tory-baiting. The man cherishes his obsessions, but it is possible to imagine him without them. It is not possible to imagine Morrissey minus one thing: the suffering once inflicted on him by obscurity.

"I'm sick of being the undiscovered genius," scribbled the 18-year-old Steven Morrissey. "I want fame NOW not when I'm dead." He'd have to linger in the bed-sit five more years. In the meantime, his life consisted of: the dole, writing letters to *New Musical Express*, reading manifestoes with titles like "Men's Liberation" and *The Female Eunuch*, and taking up—and abandoning—the musical instruments traditionally associated with playing rock 'n' roll. At 19, he sang twice, poorly, in a band called the Nosebleeds and, refining his skills of lonely pop

adulation, published two monographs—fanzine one-offs, really—one on James Dean, the other on his beloved New York Dolls. But New Year's Eve, 1979, captures young Morrissey best: As the clock chimed midnight, alone in his bedroom, the 20-year-old Steven ushered in the 1980s by reading *Pride and Prejudice*.

The horror of remaining a sensitive misfit, surrounded by the drabness of Manchester, unappreciated, misunderstood—the sentiment fades quickly into *yadda-yadda*, doesn't it? It's been the interior Muzak of every adolescence since child labor was banned. Yet as an epicene in a tough Irish immigrant community, an obviously creative child in a school without drama, art, or dance classes of any kind, Morrissey came by his *Weltschmerz* honestly. And more important than its specific content is the fact that the attitude survived almost completely intact until the moment he became a star. No competency of any kind ever threatened to pull Morrissey out of his mooncalf reverie; for Morrissey, hopelessness was never a pose. "Anyone less likely to be a pop star from that scene was unimaginable," Tony Wilson, the impresario behind Manchester's Joy Division, has said of him, and who could argue?

Each of the four great British Invasion partnerships began with a mythic encounter, ended in splitsville, and, when the parts proved less than the whole, was trailed by idle speculation. What if Lennon had never befriended McCartney? What if Jagger had taken the later train from Dartford? What if Strummer had said no? Had Johnny Marr never knocked on Steven Morrissey's door, Steven Morrissey would have made something of himself—a DIY brochurist for the local avant-garde?—but he probably would not have been a singer and definitely not a rock star. Marr was four years Morrissey's junior and everything Morrissey wasn't: musical, industrious, perseverant, shrewd. Above all, not being an egomaniac, he knew what a band needed other than himself. "I always had a comprehensive understanding of what it takes emotionally to be a really great singer," he has said. "I always felt it was more than intellect, gimmicks, and stage presence." Marr saw something in Morrissey that no one else had—a peculiar charisma that might yet transfer to the stage. So he visited Morrissey in his bedroom.

That was May of 1982. By January '83, the Smiths were gigging. At their second show, in a Manchester club called the Manhattan, Morrissey concluded the evening by reaching into his back pocket and raining confetti on a delirious crowd. The following May, the band released its first single, "Hand in Glove." It's a solid debut but nothing compared with November's "This Charming Man," one of a handful of perfect A-sides ever produced by such a freshly formed band. Marr's guitar attack is angular, like post-punk, but also graciously melodic; Morrissey's singing has fully evolved, from the nondescript droning of "Hand In Glove," into ... well, into *Morrissey*. "I would go out tonight/ But I haven't got a stitch to we-eeear. ..." No band had ever sounded so good so quickly. The song has not aged a day,

and when I listen to it, neither have I. How did it come together so exquisitely?

Over the years, the emphasis has been misplaced. Yes, the Smiths were a guitar band in the age of the synthesizer; and, true, Morrissey's angst was literate and sly. But Marr's own memory is revealing. "Our very first spark was the Marvelettes," Marr has said. "We very, very consciously wore our girl group, retro, sixties influence on our sleeves. 'Girlfriend in a Coma' is 'Young, Gifted, and Black'—the music of it. You can sing 'Young, Gifted, And Black' over it."

The Smiths took that hop-along jaunt of the Marvelettes, the Supremes, Martha and the Vandellas, and draped over it a lifetime—Morrissey's lifetime—of mooncalfing and *Weltschmerz*. The upbeat and the downbeat, [Barry Gordy](#) and [Gide](#), somehow pressed together in the same vinyl groove. The band is urging you to burst through swinging doors; the voice is urging you to return to the safety of your bedroom. Though the singer would desperately like to join the band, he's afraid his identity—delicate and strange as it is—will never survive the transition from hothouse to open air.

Well, it did that, didn't it? Predictably, Morrissey adopted the habits of the rock 'n' roll celebrity. He was tardy, capricious, and hostile to the press. The backlash against him, however, as a diva-vampire who fed on Marr's superior talents, confuses two issues. In musical jargon, it's true, Morrissey never woodshedded—he never submitted his talents to a term of excruciating refinement, as Dylan did on returning from Greenwich Village to Hibbing, as the Beatles famously did in Hamburg. But this does nothing to minimize Morrissey's musical contribution to the Smiths, not only as a lyricist but as a singer. His technical prowess may have been minimal at first—limited to about "six notes" in the middle range, as one producer put it—but his powers of emotional insinuation were vast. These came not out of the closet, not out of the woodshed, but out of the bedroom.

The word recurs frequently in his biography. Marr rescued Morrissey from his "lonely bedroom existence," writes Paula Woods in an introduction to a collection of interviews. On the very entertaining [Morrissey: From Where He Came to Where He Went](#), a pop journalist says, "The recyclings of his early infatuations and obsessions is the extension of the lonely kid in the bedroom. It gave him a kind of comfort as he went out into the world—somehow his bedroom was still with him." Of his legendary debut on *Top of the Pops*, another journalist adds, "It's almost as if you're watching someone through a keyhole, doing this in front of their bedroom mirror."

Rock stars have always told a double lie: I am a superhuman you could never hope to emulate; I am exactly like you. And Morrissey has been careful not to disturb his fans' image of him as a retiring celibate who occasionally bursts from the chrysalis

of his loneliness to sing directly to them—at Wembley. But the voice earns its Dylan-esque claim on our hearts when you remember its original context. 1983, the year of "This Charming Man," is the year the '80s became the '80s. Up until that point, Thatcherism in England and Reaganism in the United States had been little more than hollow promises. Then interest rates fell, the two economies thawed, and spandex was everywhere. It was the year of *Flashdance* at the box office, of "Every Breath You Take" and *Thriller* on the Billboard 100; the year of *Risky Business* and *The Big Chill*.

If this list doesn't make you want to crawl into your [bolt hole](#)—well, you are probably not a Smiths fan. I think the word that best captures the times is *heartless*, as evident in the stupid rictus of Sting's face, circa 1983, as it was in Margaret Thatcher's budget cuts. No wonder Morrissey's voice sounded so fresh, so slyly subversive. As much as he publicly avowed a hatred of Thatcher, culminating in "Margaret at the Guillotine," it was Thatcherism that made Morrissey. The Iron Lady represented a hardness of purpose, a pitilessness that would allow England once again to produce winners. But also, inevitably, losers. And here is the source of Morrissey's originality. Rock singers had blasted the trumpet of Nietzschean triumph before; they had mewed like Keatsian lambs. But before Morrissey, had anyone done both? In the same breath?

"Oh, why am I such a nobody?" asks the lamb, along with the rest of us who feel ground beneath the heel of celebrity and neo-liberalism. "Look at me! I am beautiful! I am famous!" exults the conqueror, who harnesses the energy behind the new ethos. The interplay between dominance and submission, menace and fear, flowering and rotting on the vine, runs through the Smiths' best music without ever hardening into formula. Think of Marr's harrowing guitar sounds in "How Soon Is Now," set against the naked vulnerability of Morrissey's "I am human and I need to be loved." Or the music to "Heaven Knows I'm Miserable Now," which could double as session-men riffs for a Sugar Ray single.

This voice, the voice of the shut-in trembling on the threshold, has moved its admirers the way Dylan's moved people 10 or 15 years older than us. Both comprehended a range of feeling newly permitted the young. What a shame, though, that the wages of our Dylan were never greater than that of the suffering egoist, pining not for peace, justice, or love but for the curative grandeurs of fame, alone in his childhood bedroom.

the green lantern

Are the Yankees Bad for the Environment?

The hidden costs of heading to the stadium.

By Brendan I. Koerner
Thursday, April 9, 2009, at 6:31 AM ET

With the [start](#) of the 2009 baseball season, green-minded sports fans may want to know which spectator sport is most harmful to the environment. Two years ago, the Green Lantern weighed the costs of a trip to the ballpark, the football stadium, and the hockey rink; the column is reprinted below.

I recently attended an NFL game, and was struck by the fact that the stadium lights were on despite a 1 p.m. kickoff time—for the television cameras' benefit, I assume. That got me thinking about how much energy is required to host a major sports event. If I want to be greener about my fandom, should I ditch pro football in favor of a more environmentally friendly sport? And if so, what sport would that be?

The banks of blinding, buzzing metal-halide lights that ring most stadiums certainly look and sound like massive energy hogs. But they're just minor contributors to a game's environmental footprint. The same can be said for the electricity that powers an arena's air conditioner, lights up the JumboTron, and keeps the nacho cheese from congealing into a viscous goop. The energy required to operate a sports venue is fairly minor compared with the energy that fans expend in simply getting to a game—a fact too often overlooked by advocates of [sustainable stadium design](#).

A football stadium that seats approximately 78,000 fans, for example, will consume about 65,000 kilowatt hours of electricity and 35,000 cubic feet of natural gas on game day. In the United States, where roughly half of our electricity still comes from coal, each kilowatt hour of electricity produces an average of 1.55 pounds of carbon dioxide. Natural gas is cleaner per unit: Each cubic foot emits 0.12 pounds of carbon dioxide. Putting on a big-time pigskin game thus ends up pumping around 47.6 metric tons of carbon into the atmosphere—or just 1.35 pounds per fan. For comparison's sake, the average American's carbon footprint is 64.81 pounds per day.

So, gathering 78,000 fans in one relatively compact place seems pretty efficient, right? But keep in mind that a stadium of that size will have something like 19,000 parking spaces. Let's be charitable and assume that all the fans drive standard cars and light trucks, which get an average of 21 miles per gallon. Let's also assume (again, very charitably) that each fan travels 29 miles round trip from home to game, the same distance as the average American's daily commute.

Using the standard Energy Information Administration figure of 19.564 pounds of carbon emitted per gallon of gas, then, all those cars spew out 232.84 metric tons of carbon dioxide. And that's surely a massive underestimation, given that many fans

drive hundreds of miles in tailgate-ready RVs to pull for their beloved team.

Though football games are massive productions, at least they're infrequent—an NFL stadium hosts just eight regular-season contests a season. Professional baseball is much dirtier over the long haul, with each stadium hosting 81 regular-season games a year and drawing an average of 2.66 million fans (vs. about 542,000 fans per NFL stadium). Hockey and basketball are cleaner than baseball mostly because their games take place in smaller venues and they play shorter schedules, thus attracting fewer fans; the average NBA franchise gets 728,037 paying customers per year, while the NHL average is 678,440. Basketball is almost certainly the greener of the two indoor sports, since keeping an ice rink frozen requires more energy than maintaining a hardwood court. (The Lantern didn't even bother to crunch the numbers for NASCAR; any sport that centers around vehicles that get four to six miles per gallon is obviously pretty far from green.)

Since a game's environmental impact has everything to do with transportation, though, it's tough to say which sport is the absolute greenest. Antiquated Fenway Park in Boston is arguably one of the most eco-friendly stadiums in the nation, because of the fact that parking is so scarce and most fans must take public transportation. That gives it a big leg-up on modern counterparts that claim to be green, whether by virtue of their [solar-powered LED boards](#) or their cup-and-bottle recycling programs.

But cutting down on automobiles, of course, is easier said than done, especially in cities with less developed public-transportation options than Boston. Football stadiums have the most trouble, since they require so much land—land that urban centers are often unwilling to spare. New Yorkers will recall the brouhaha that erupted when the Jets proposed [building a stadium](#) on Manhattan's rail-accessible West Side. (The project failed, and the Jets and Giants will keep playing their games in suburban New Jersey.)

If your conscience is really bothering you, yet you can't imagine abandoning football, there are alternatives. May the Lantern humbly suggest you check out the Arena Football League? Fewer fans plus smaller venues equal less environmental impact. Plus, they've got those wacky [rebound nets](#).

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.

the green lantern Energy and Elevators

When people take the elevator, does Earth get the shaft?

By Nina Shen Rastogi

Tuesday, April 7, 2009, at 6:38 AM ET

How much energy do elevators use, anyway? My co-worker is so proud of herself for taking the stairs every day, as if that's going to save the planet ...

Cut her some slack: It's true that if everyone who could take the stairs did take the stairs, we'd see some significant energy savings. Of course, since stair-climbing requires that we expend nine times as much energy as we do standing still, a collective elevator boycott would probably lead us to higher food consumption, which would require more water and fossil fuels and produce more packaging waste.

Before we can go down that rabbit hole, though, we'd need to have a sense of how much juice goes into operating your average elevator bank. That turns out to be a very, very complicated question, the answer to which depends on a large number of variables: For example, how many people ride the elevator? What kind of drive does it use, hydraulic or traction? Is it [geared or gearless](#)? Does the system have the most recent [braking technology](#), which recaptures energy that would otherwise have been lost as heat, funneling it back to the grid? Does it use software that plots out the most efficient route possible for each car?

The differences in energy consumption here can be wide. According to figures provided by elevator manufacturer [Kone](#), a typical hydraulic elevator in a three-story office building uses 3,800 kilowatt-hours per year, or about as much as the average American home uses in [four months](#). A traction elevator in a 10-story building might use about five-and-a-half times as much energy. In a 30-story high-rise, it might be 11-and-a-half times as much.

Even within a single building, not all elevator rides are created equal. In hydraulic elevators, for example, an elevator needs a lot more power to go up than it does to come down. (These systems tend to be used in buildings that are seven stories or shorter.) Trips to the lobby are more efficient, but they're not entirely energy-free: As the car travels down the shaft at a controlled speed, the friction caused by oil passing through the hydraulic valves generates heat, which must then be dissipated by the building's cooling system.

In the traction systems used in taller buildings, counterweighted pulleys raise and lower the cars. These counterweights usually weigh as much as the car itself when loaded to 40 percent capacity. A full car traveling up from the ground floor, then,

requires a significant input of energy since it weighs much more than the counterweight. (Imagine a fat kid and a skinny kid on a seesaw—if the fat kid is on the ground, he'll have to push off with his feet in order to travel upward.) A full car traveling downward, on the other hand, is so much heavier than the counterweight that it can move without much help. So in a typical midrise or high-rise office building, a full car going up uses more energy than a full car going down, and an empty car going down uses more energy than an empty car going up. The system turns out to be most efficient when the car is 40 percent full—i.e., when it's perfectly balanced with the counterweight.

How should you interpret all this information? If you work in a tall building where the stairs aren't an option, you might try to be more efficient by taking only empty cars up to your office and full cars back down to the lobby. On the other hand, if everyone followed that rule of thumb, more people would be riding elevators by themselves and the total number of rides would increase—which would likely end up using more energy overall. In that case, the best strategy would be to minimize trips for everyone by elevator-carpooling with your co-workers.

No matter what you do, though, it's nearly impossible for the average rider to figure out exactly how much energy his or her elevator habit consumes. One way to get a very rough ballpark figure would be to take the total energy used by a building's elevators in a given workday and divide that by the number of tenants. At the request of the Green Lantern, a [ThyssenKrupp](#) consultant ran simulations for typical five-story, 16-story, and 42-story office buildings. In each case, the energy use per tenant came out to about 0.3 kWh. Is that a significant amount of energy? It's about as much as you'd save in four hours by [replacing an incandescent bulb with a CFL](#).

In any case, the elevators in your building will be draining some power no matter what you or your co-workers are doing. Most elevators stay on all day, even if there's no one using them. The average standby power rating is between 0.8 and 2 kilowatts, which can really add up: Analysts at ThyssenKrupp who studied a 16-floor office building in Ohio found that roughly one-third of the elevator bank's daily energy consumption occurred during nonbusiness hours. Keeping elevators well-lit is an issue, too: Bulbs might add 1,750 kWh a year per cab. No word, though, on how much energy it takes to pump in that soothing Muzak.

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.

today's business press

Banks Bounce Back

A summary of what's in the major publications.
Friday, April 10, 2009, at 6:52 AM ET

today's business press

Buffett's Bad Moody's

By Bernhard Warner and Matthew Yeomans
Thursday, April 9, 2009, at 6:29 AM ET

today's papers

Daring To Dream It's Over

Daniel Politi
Friday, April 10, 2009, at 6:43 AM ET

The [Washington Post](#) and [Los Angeles Times](#) lead with a look at a number of indicators that could signal the economy may be starting to [turn around](#). No one is trying to suggest that the pain is anywhere near over, but there's at least some hope that some markets may have [reached bottom](#). Good news from the financial sector, and not-as-bad-as-expected news from retailers, sent stock markets soaring once again, and the Dow Jones industrial average increased 3.14 percent. The [New York Times](#) leads with explosive allegations that some of President Robert Mugabe's cronies are abducting and torturing opposition leaders to push them to [grant amnesty](#) for past crimes. Impressively, these claims don't come from the opposition but rather from senior members of Zimbabwe's ruling party who talked to a local journalist working for the *NYT*.

The [Wall Street Journal](#) leads its world-wide newsbox, with the continuing high-seas standoff near the [coast of Somalia](#). The U.S.-flagged *Maersk Alabama*, a cargo ship that was briefly seized until the crew managed to retake control of the ship, continued on its route as four Somali pirates held the ship's captain hostage in a covered lifeboat that has run out of fuel. The Navy, which has a destroyer on the scene, is trying to get the pirates to release the captain with the help of FBI hostage negotiators. [USA Today](#) leads with a look at how the compensation gap between government workers and private employees is [growing](#), primarily because of benefits. Last year, benefits for public employees increased three times more than for those working in the private sector.

Experts warn that the unemployment rate is still set to increase and will reach double digits this year. But there's hope elsewhere. President Obama's top economic adviser said that even though he could not say when the recession will end, "this sense of free fall ... will be arrested within the next few months." Wells Fargo, one of the country's largest banks, announced that it expects to report record first-quarter profits, news that the *LAT* [says](#) "stunned Wall Street." A report that predicted the nation's

largest banks would likely pass the government's "stress tests" also pushed investors to hit the buy button. Wall Street "reacted as if the news marked a turning point for the battered banking industry, and perhaps the larger economy," notes the *LAT*.

Adding to the optimism, the government reported that exports rose in February for the first time in seven months. Retail sales were down from a year ago, but there are signs that the losses are stabilizing while some retailers are sounding downright optimistic. The *WP* [points out](#) stocks have increased more than 20 percent since their March lows in what the *NYT* [calls](#) "one of the most dizzying bear market rallies in Wall Street history."

Despite all these encouraging signs from the economy, many are warning that the Champagne should be kept in the fridge for now. Experts say that even if the economy has, in fact, reached bottom in several sectors, that doesn't mean recovery is right around the corner. "It's going to be a long, slow 'U' shaped recovery, not a 'V,'" one retail expert [tells the WSJ](#). The *NYT* is by far the most cautious and warns that more deep losses could be right around the corner. "I think this is all setting us up for a new low," an equity strategist tells the *NYT*. "It's not like I'm praying for it to happen, but it's pretty much expected." Companies are likely to report big losses in the first quarter, and even though some banks may sound optimistic, their troubles are nowhere near over. But for now, "investors are setting aside those concerns and grasping good news with vigor," [declares the NYT](#).

Just because some parts of the economy may be recovering doesn't mean the housing market is anywhere near ready to bounce back. Sure, some buyers have been taking advantage of cheap prices to buy homes for the first time or to refinance existing mortgages, but *USAT* [makes it clear](#) that the "unprecedented glut of vacant homes ... will change the real estate landscape for years." Currently around one in nine homes is empty. There are 14 million empty homes, and 9.4 million that are for sale. "From a pure need for shelter, we don't need more homes built for the next several years," a real estate analyst said. Some areas will recover sooner than others, but it might take until 2014 for the country to deal with what is ultimately an unprecedented oversupply of housing. In the meantime, the *NYT* fronts a look at how [squattng](#) has become increasingly popular. Advocacy groups are moving homeless people into foreclosed homes, some of which cost hundreds of thousands of dollars a couple of years ago. For the most part, it seems neighbors and overwhelmed police departments are willing to look the other way for now.

The *WSJ* reports on its latest survey of economists that found most expect the recession to end in [September](#), although unemployment won't decrease until late 2010. One economist explains why the end of the recession doesn't mean the beginning of the recovery by comparing it to a boxing match. "Even if you win the fight," he said, "it's not going to feel as

good when you get out of the ring as when you went in." If the forecasts are accurate, the *WSJ* points out that the unemployment rate is going to hit its highest levels right around the midterm elections, "possibly bad news for Democrats."

Four "Mugabe confidants" told a local journalist, who for obvious reasons isn't named, about how some Mugabe loyalists are obsessed with the [amnesty issue](#), while others seem more interested in using violent tactics to get the opposition to simply quit the government. To recap, the opposition has a majority in Parliament for the first time since Zimbabwe's independence. After an election that was marked by violence, Mugabe and the opposition agreed to a power-sharing deal. Now, "Zimbabwe is in the midst of a treacherous passage from authoritarian rule to an uncertain future," particularly since his cronies know that it's only a matter of time until the 85-year-old will no longer be around to protect them. And once that happens, they have plenty to worry about because Mugabe was never shy about using terror tactics to retain his hold on power. The opposition, of course, isn't willing to voluntarily offer amnesty, so Mugabe's men are trying to push them in that direction the only way they know how: carrying out even more crimes.

The *NYT* fronts, and everyone covers, CIA Director Leon Panetta's announcement yesterday that the agency no longer operates any of its [secret overseas prisons](#) where al-Qaida suspects were tortured during the Bush administration. Panetta also said the agency hasn't taken anyone into custody since he took the job in February. In a statement to employees, Panetta said those who worked in the secret program "should not be investigated, let alone punished" because they were repeatedly assured that what they were doing was legal. The 14 prisoners who were being held in the so-called black sites were transferred to Guantanamo in 2006, but apparently at least some of the secret prisons were still being maintained.

The *WP*'s [Eugene Robinson](#) writes that he knows many Americans are grappling with economic uncertainty and "would rather look forward than revisit the past," but the "business of torture ... is too unspeakable to be left unresolved." The recently released Red Cross report makes it clear that the interrogators tortured prisoners with the help of medical personnel in what amounts to "barbarity with an ugly sheen of bureaucracy." Although some have pushed for some sort of "truth commission" to document all the ways that the Bush administration broke the law, Robinson says that isn't enough. "Torture—even the torture of evil men—is a crime," he writes. "It deserves not just to be known, but to be punished."

today's papers

Obama Dips Toe in Immigration

By Daniel Politi
Thursday, April 9, 2009, at 6:02 AM ET

The *New York Times* leads with word that President Obama will soon start discussing the country's [immigration system](#). Knowing full well that the issue could be particularly controversial during a recession, the administration plans to include discussions about finding a way to legalize the estimated 12 million illegal immigrants currently in the country. The *Los Angeles Times* and the *Wall Street Journal's* world-wide newsbox lead with, while almost everyone else fronts, the high-seas standoff taking place 240 miles off the Somalia port city of Eyl, a known pirate haven. Somali pirates [seized](#) the U.S.-registered *Maersk Alabama* cargo ship. The 20-member crew managed to regain control of the ship within a few hours, but the pirates [fled with the captain](#), a 55-year-old Vermont resident. It marked the first time a U.S.-flagged ship was attacked off the coast of Africa since 1804. Before dawn, the U.S. Navy destroyer Bainbridge arrived at the scene to keep an eye on the situation.

The *Washington Post* leads with a look at how Attorney General Eric Holder "[took a step](#)" toward fulfilling his promise to take politics out of the Justice Department and investigate possible wrongdoing by its employees. Holder named Mary Patrice Brown, a career prosecutor, to head the Office of Professional Responsibility, the department's internal ethics unit. He also named two other career prosecutors to key posts in an attempt to illustrate that he values expertise more than political connections. *USA Today* leads with a look at how the recession may be [good for the environment](#). As offices close and factories cut back on production, many countries have experienced marked declines in carbon dioxide emissions. Some fear that the drop in emissions could give governments and companies an excuse not to invest in technology to decrease carbon output.

The White House plans to talk about its efforts to deal with immigration as "policy reform that controls immigration and makes it an orderly system," [one official said](#). Some officials insist that immigration reform won't take priority over other items in Obama's domestic agenda, namely health care and energy. And congressional sources insist the issue won't be taken up on Capitol Hill until those other domestic priorities are debated. Regardless, the president plans to address immigration next month and bring together advocates on both sides of the issue, including lawmakers, to discuss possible legislation. Many, including Democrats, warn that merely bringing up such an emotional issue during such a deep recession could compromise other items in Obama's agenda. Opponents of legalization for illegal immigrants are downright incredulous that Obama would even mention the issue now. "It just doesn't seem rational that any political leader would say, let's give millions of foreign workers permanent access to U.S. jobs when we have millions of Americans looking for jobs," the executive director of NumbersUSA tells the paper.

The situation off the coast of Somalia involving a ship that was carrying food aid for East Africa is a little confusing as no one is sure exactly what is going on or how the unarmed crew managed to [overpower the pirates](#). The *WSJ* notes that some think the pirates may have been [surprised](#) by the number of people onboard since the United States requires that ships bearing its flag have larger crews than many other countries. It is also clear at least some members of the crew were well-trained. The ship's second in command, Capt. Shane Murphy, who is now in control after the captain was captured, is the son of an instructor at the Massachusetts Maritime Academy who teaches a course on how to prevent pirate attacks. The crew apparently managed to tie up one of the pirates while the rest fled, but he was released in what was ultimately an unsuccessful effort to exchange him for the captain.

The *WP* specifies that this was the sixth attack by Somali pirates this week and one of 66 [so far this year](#). *USAT* [points out](#) that the standoff "handed the Obama administration a new foreign policy dilemma over how to deal with the increasingly brazen raiders." As has been stated many times before, the fundamental problem is that Somalia is a failed state that hasn't had a proper government since 1991, so pirate networks controlled by militias can operate with relative impunity. It's certainly a lucrative operation as pirates are estimated to have received around \$150 million in [ransom payments](#) last year.

The *LAT* fronts a look at how U.S. citizens have been detained by immigration officials and, in some extreme cases, [even deported](#). The piece, a collaboration between the paper and the Center for Investigative Reporting, a nonprofit news organization, makes it clear that it isn't possible to know how often this has happened since no agency keeps track. But anecdotal evidence suggests it is more common than most would suspect since it can often be difficult for some to prove they are, in fact, citizens. And once tagged as an illegal, it's difficult to prove otherwise since immigration detainees don't have a right to a government lawyer. One expert said she knows of eight cases of citizens who were deported and suspects the real number is significantly higher.

The *NYT* off-leads word that ordinary Americans may be able to directly make a profit from the [bank bailouts](#). The administration is pushing several large investment companies to create what the paper dubs "the financial-crisis equivalent of war bonds: bailout funds." These funds would allow Americans to participate, theoretically with as little as a few hundred dollars, in the buying up of toxic assets from banks' balance sheets with a huge government subsidy. This could turn into a smart move, particularly since many have complained that the only ones who would profit from the bailouts are big Wall Street firms, some of whom even had a role in creating the crisis. If things go well and the funds can later sell these assets at a profit, thousands, and perhaps millions, of Americans would make money. But it's risky, because if, as many insist, the assets are overvalued, small

investors could lose all their money. There's no word on how much the Treasury intends to raise from individuals, and it's still in the process of selecting five fund managers to participate in the program.

The *WP* fronts a look at how violent anti-American extremists, including members of the Taliban and al-Qaida, often build their Internet presence through [U.S. Web hosts](#). This trend "appears to be growing," declares the paper. The extremists apparently hate America but they like the cheap, and relatively anonymous, service that many U.S. companies provide to those who want to build a Web site for whatever reason. Some U.S. allies have pushed the government to take a more forceful stance and shut down the offending Web sites as soon as possible. But U.S. intelligence agencies often prefer to keep the sites up so they can be monitored for clues. Besides, U.S. officials say that trying to shut down Web sites can often feel like chasing your own tail, since it's so easy for sites to relocate.

The *WP* and *NYT* front the results of three new studies that found adults have a type of calorie-burning fat, known as [brown fat](#), that was previously believed to exist only in infants. This suggests there could be a new way to [fight obesity](#), although scientists say that is all speculation at the moment. The fat is activated in cold weather and consumes calories while generating heat. It was long believed that infants have the fat, which is also present in rodents, because they can't shiver very well but that it disappeared early in life. But now the studies have shown the fat is present in significant quantities that could theoretically burn lots of calories if activated. Scientists have been able to show that mice lose a significant amount of weight when their brown fat is activated, but they warn it's not yet clear whether humans would have the same reaction.

The *LAT*'s [Rosa Brooks](#), a columnist who has often made an appearance in TP (and who has [blogged](#) on *Slate*'s "XX Factor"), bids farewell to her readers today. Brooks will soon start working at the Pentagon as an adviser to the undersecretary of defense for policy, a job she prefers to think of "as my personal government bailout." In her parting words, Brooks writes that she can't "imagine anything more dangerous than a society in which the news industry has more or less collapsed" and advocates for "a government bailout of journalism." Unless taxpayer dollars are used to fund independent journalism, we'll eventually be left "with nothing in our newspapers but ads, entertainment features and crossword puzzles."

Accompanied by a photograph of a yarmulke-wearing dog, the *NYT* reports that one pet food company is sponsoring a [Seder for dogs](#) to promote its kosher varieties. It's hardly the first of its kind as one man says he's held these types of Seders at pet stores in the past, a fact that many in his congregation don't like. "They say, 'How could you do it for dogs, isn't it sacrilegious?'" he said. "And my answer is, 'We're having fun.'" But Kosher pet food is serious business, particularly during Passover, when

religious Jews work hard to get rid of all traces of grains in their homes. And it's not just food. One pet store owner says that throughout the year she sells lots of yarmulkes and tallits for dogs, which, along with the food, is supplied to "increasingly popular Bark Mitzvahs," where guests have been known to utter "Muzzle Tov."

today's papers

Prosecuting the Prosecutors

By Daniel Politi

Wednesday, April 8, 2009, at 6:29 AM ET

The [Los Angeles Times](#) and the [Wall Street Journal](#)'s world-wide newsbox lead with, while everyone fronts, President Obama's surprise visit to [Baghdad](#) yesterday, where he urged Iraq's leaders to step up their efforts to unite the [country's factions](#). During the four-hour visit, his first to a combat zone as president, Obama met with U.S. soldiers, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, and other Iraqi officials. "It is time for us to transition to the Iraqis," Obama told hundreds of American servicemembers. "They need to take responsibility for their country." The [Washington Post](#) leads with a federal judge dismissing the conviction of former Alaska Sen. Ted Stevens. U.S. District Judge Emmet Sullivan appointed an outside lawyer to investigate the six Justice Department prosecutors who ran the case against Stevens and determine whether they should face [criminal contempt charges](#).

The [New York Times](#) leads with the Vermont Legislature [overriding a veto](#) to a bill that legalizes same-sex marriage. It marked the first time that a state legalized same-sex marriage through its legislature rather than the courts and made Vermont the fourth state to recognize the unions. It marked the second victory in less than a week for proponents of marriage equality—the Iowa Supreme Court legalized marriage between partners of the same sex last Friday—and many are hoping others states could soon follow suit. [USA Today](#) leads with word that \$300 million from the stimulus package will go to [61 housing agencies](#) that have been criticized by auditors at least three times since 2004 for mishandling government money. The money is part of a \$4 billion effort to fix public housing projects, and the government has vowed to keep close tabs on how the money is spent.

Obama's brief stop in Iraq came at a time when a recent spate of bombings has raised uncomfortable questions about whether the recent drop in violence can be [sustained](#). The day before his visit, six car bombs exploded in Baghdad, killing 36 people, and nine more people were killed by another car bomb mere hours before Obama's arrival. There's a [growing fear](#) that unresolved political disputes could spark a new round of intense violence as

different groups vie for power ahead of the withdrawal of most American combat troops.

The trip to Baghdad capped Obama's first trip overseas as president.* In a front-page piece looking at the trip, the *WP* notes that Obama "portrayed a proud but flawed United States, using a refrain of humility and partnership" in order to get other countries to work together on a variety of issues that ranged from the economy to climate change. He received a "celebrity reception" wherever he went, but that didn't help him convince European allies to follow the U.S. example on fiscal spending or Afghanistan. In an analysis piece inside, the *NYT* declares that a grand strategy for the Obama presidency has yet to emerge, "but that may have been the point. Pragmatic, conciliatory, legalistic and incremental, he pushed what might be called, with a notable exception or two, an anti-Bush doctrine." Throughout his trip, Obama emphasized the importance of international institutions and the rule of law to battle terrorism and rogue states, essentially veering "toward a pre-Sept. 11 world order."

Ordinarily, the Justice Department would handle claims of prosecutorial misconduct with its own internal investigation, but the judge made it clear yesterday that after witnessing such "shocking and disturbing" behavior, he couldn't trust the government to properly investigate itself. "In 25 years on the bench, I have never seen anything approaching the mishandling and misconduct that I have seen in this case," Sullivan said. Among the six lawyers that will be investigated are the chief and deputy chief of the Justice Department's public integrity section. Stevens' lawyer didn't hold back on the outrage and said the "government engaged in intentional misconduct" that cost the longest-serving Senate Republican his seat.

At least nine state legislatures are considering allowing marriages between same-sex couples, and the recent victories for gay rights could push them to pass the measures quickly. The *WP* fronts news that the Washington, D.C., Council gave preliminary approval to a measure that would recognize same-sex marriages performed elsewhere. The vote was unanimous. The final vote could come in early May and might quickly make its way to the federal government since Congress has the final say in the city's laws. The *NYT* states that even opponents of marriage equality "recognized the week's developments as a potential watershed moment." But even if all the legislatures currently considering legalizing same-sex marriages approve the measures, there's little chance that it could become a countrywide phenomenon any time soon. Forty-three states have laws prohibiting the unions, of which 29 have constitutional amendments that define marriage as between a man and a woman.

As same-sex couples get more rights in the United States, the *NYT* fronts a look at how gay men and lesbians in Iraq are finding that their newly found freedoms can carry a very high personal cost. Although Iraqis have been able "to enjoy

freedoms unthinkable two years ago," openly gay men are still vulnerable to attacks if they aren't careful to hide their identity. Over the past two months, bodies of "as many as 25 boys and men suspected of being gay" have been discovered in Baghdad's Sadr City, some with "pervert" written on notes that were pinned to their bodies. It seems family members who feel shamed by their gay relatives have been responsible for some of the killings. But Shiite death squads have also carried out some of the killings, and the police have begun a "campaign to clean up the streets and get the beggars and homosexuals off them," as one officer eloquently explained.

The *WSJ* fronts a look at how "cyberspies" from Russia and China, as well as other unnamed countries, have managed to get into the U.S. electrical grid and leave behind software tools that, if activated, could destroy several key components of the network. "If we go to war with them, they will try to turn them on," an intelligence official said. The spying has been discovered across the country, and officials warn that other infrastructure systems, including water, are also vulnerable to spies and attacks. Although terrorist groups could also gain the technical know-how to gain access to the networks, officials say the intrusions have been so sophisticated that Russia and China have to be the main culprits. But, of course, that doesn't necessarily mean that the attacks were sponsored by their governments.

The *WSJ* fronts word that the Treasury Department will offer bailout funds to life-insurance companies, adding a third industry after banks and automakers that will get an infusion of taxpayer dollars. But only insurers that own federally chartered banks will be able to qualify for the program. The move isn't exactly a surprise since the government had said last year that life insurers could be eligible, but it has delayed implementing the move as it focused on other issues. Since that announcement, several life insurers have bought regulated savings and loans in order to be eligible.

Everyone goes inside with news that former Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori was convicted of "crimes against humanity" and sentenced to 25 years in prison. After a 15-month trial, the Peruvian Supreme Court found Fujimori guilty of ordering two massacres in the early 1990s that killed 25 people. He was also convicted of ordering the kidnappings of a journalist and a businessman in 1992. The *WP* highlights that it "marked the first time that an elected head of state has been extradited back to his home country, tried and convicted of human rights violations." Experts in human rights law say Fujimori's conviction could set a precedent for trying other former heads of state for abuses while in power.

In what sounds like a bad April Fools' joke, the *WP* reports that Fox is working on a new reality series that will feature struggling companies that will let employees decide who should get fired in order to cut down on costs. Sadly, *Someone's Gotta Go* is no joke. The show will feature small companies, and each

week a different company will call its employees together and the boss will reveal all relevant information about the employees, such as salary, to help employees make their decision. The *WP*'s Lisa de Moraes was having a hard time believing this was real, but "Fox's reality-series madman/genius" noted that "every time he comes up with one of these trashtastic reality series, we ask the same question: What on Earth would motivate anyone to be on this show?" And he always has the same answer. "They want to be on TV," he said. "Who knows? There's never a shortage."

Correction, April 8, 2009: *This article originally stated that the trip was Obama's first trip abroad. Obama had previously been to Canada. (Return to the [corrected](#) sentence.)*

today's papers

Gates Overhauls Pentagon Budget

By Daniel Politi

Tuesday, April 7, 2009, at 6:31 AM ET

The *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal*'s world-wide newsbox lead with Defense Secretary Robert Gates announcing major changes to the Pentagon budget that would [shift the military's focus](#) away from big, expensive weapons systems so it can dedicate more resources toward fighting irregular or guerilla wars. The budget clocks in at \$534 billion, a 4 percent increase from last year, but involves so many cuts to some of the Pentagon's best-known weapons programs that a big political fight seems almost [inevitable](#). The *Los Angeles Times* leads with the powerful earthquake that hit central Italy yesterday and killed [at least 150 people](#). The historical town of L'Aquila was near the quake's epicenter, and many of its landmarks, including centuries-old churches and buildings, were damaged or destroyed.

USA Today leads with data from the Federal Aviation Administration that show there's been an increase in the number of aircraft that hit [large birds](#). From an average of 323 such collisions in the 1990s, the number increased to 524 per year from 2000 to 2007. Proportionally, the numbers are quite small. In 2007, for example, out of 58 million flights there were 550 instances of airplanes hitting large birds, and only 190 of them caused damage. But the government data only contain a fraction of total collisions since reporting the incidents is voluntary. The *New York Times* leads with a new poll that shows Americans are more [optimistic about the economy](#) since President Obama was inaugurated. Two-thirds of Americans approve of Obama's job performance, and 39 percent of Americans think the country is headed in the right direction, an increase of 24 points since mid-January. Although people are clearly concerned about job losses, 20 percent think the economy is getting better, a 13-point

increase, while 34 percent think it's getting worse, a 20-point decrease. It's common for new presidents to enjoy a honeymoon period, but the "durability" of Obama's support is particularly notable, especially since it comes "at a time when anxiety has gripped households across the country," declares the paper.

The *LAT* says the budget [outlined by Gates](#) yesterday involves the "most sweeping changes in defense spending priorities in decades." Gates said his goal was to change the "priorities of America's defense establishment" by taking money away from weapons that he described as "truly in the exquisite category" while putting more resources into ones that may not exactly be cutting edge, such as drones, but are more appropriate for fighting [unconventional battles](#) in places like Afghanistan. Gates would spend more money on intelligence and surveillance programs while making deep cuts to the U.S. missile defense programs and the Army's Future Combat Systems. The cuts would be felt in a variety of military branches. For example, Gates recommended that production should end on the Air Force's F-22 fighter jets, the C-17 cargo plane, and the Navy's new generation of stealth destroyers.

Gates said he's "just trying to get the irregular guys to have a seat at the table." Indeed, despite the tone of the coverage, it's not as if the Pentagon is suddenly ending all preparations for a conventional war. The *LAT* helpfully [specifies](#) that under Gates' plan, 50 percent of the budget would be used to prepare for conventional threats, while 10 percent would go to irregular warfare, and 40 percent to weapons that could be used in both scenarios.

The *NYT* [points out](#) that previous defense secretaries have been prevented from implementing widespread changes by members of Congress who don't want their constituents to lose jobs. "My hope is that members of Congress will rise above parochial interests and consider what is in the best interest of the nation as a whole," Gates said. Although the *WP* says that the response from Capitol Hill was "restrained" yesterday, there was still some [criticism](#) from key lawmakers.

Besides the specific cuts, Gates made it clear that part of his goal is to overhaul "a procurement process that he and congressional leaders have decried as being too heavily influenced by powerful contractors," [as the WSJ puts it](#). In a separate front-page piece, the *WP* [points out](#) that the budget would "reverse a contracting boom" that began after the Sept. 11 attacks, as Gates wants to replace private contractors with full-time civil servants. "The reduction of nearly one-third of the contractor workforce at the Pentagon is going to be a mortal blow to companies that have built their businesses through outsourcing," a defense consultant [tells the WP](#).

As Italians sifted through the rubble left by the 6.3-magnitude earthquake that hit the mountainous Abruzzo region, attention immediately turned to whether some of the damage could have

been [prevented](#). Last week, a newspaper published a scientist's prediction that a major earthquake was imminent because of the high concentration of radon gas. But many experts disagree that radon gas can be used to effectively [predict earthquakes](#), a position the government seized on as it fought back claims that it should have taken the warnings more seriously. In a piece inside, the *LAT* talks to several experts who say that the theory the Italian scientist used to predict the quake has long been [discredited](#).

The *NYT* and *WP* go inside with the release of a confidential 2007 Red Cross report that found medical officers were intimately involved in the torture of detainees at the CIA [secret prisons](#), which amounted to a "gross breach of medical ethics." The report was posted on the Web site of the *New York Review of Books* last night. The Red Cross said that the [medical professionals](#) "condoned and participated in ill treatment" and sometimes "gave instructions to interrogators to continue, to adjust or to stop particular methods." One law professor said the report amounted to "a disturbing confirmation of our worst fears about medical professionals' involvement in directing and modulating cruel treatment and torture."

Nobody fronts news out of Baghdad, where six car bombs exploded in Shiite neighborhoods yesterday and killed more than 30 people. The *WP* [notes](#) that the "breadth and coordination" of the attacks "bore the hallmarks of a campaign of violence reminiscent of those mounted during Baghdad's bloodiest days in 2006 and 2007." And the *LAT* points out that [the attacks](#) "recalled Baghdad's dark period ... when bombings claimed dozens of lives on any given day."

USAT reports that military researchers used [live pigs](#) to study the connection between roadside bombs and brain injury. During an 11-month study, the researchers put body armor on the pigs, strapped them to Humvee simulators, and blew them up. The research helped the military determine that body armor doesn't make brain injuries worse and is, in fact, critical to surviving explosions.

The *LAT* takes a look at how hip-hop has quickly become [popular in the Middle East](#) as "the vernacular of American rap music and street culture has infiltrated the lives of young people." Although they cite famous American artists, such as Eminem and the late Tupac Shakur, as influences, the lyrics in Middle Eastern rap often have more to do with everyday hardships than sex and money. Palestinians, for example, often rap about life in refugee camps. "It is the rap not of the gangsta and his trove of drugs and half-naked women," notes the *LAT*, "but of brash young men whose defiance coexists with tradition."

today's papers

Obama Dreams of a Nuclear-Free World

By Daniel Politi

Monday, April 6, 2009, at 6:48 AM ET

The papers lead with the repercussions of North Korea's missile test as diplomats spent the day trying to figure out how the world [should respond](#). Meanwhile, President Barack Obama seized the moment and vowed that his government would pursue an [ambitious effort](#) to reduce the number of [nuclear weapons](#) around the world while recognizing that countries have a right to pursue nuclear power for peaceful purposes. In Prague, Obama condemned the launch as "provocative" and said it illustrated "the need for action, not just this afternoon at the U.N. Security Council, but in our determination to prevent the spread of these weapons." Many fear that in launching the three-stage rocket, North Korea was testing its ability to deliver nuclear weapons.

In a piece that gives high marks to Obama's first trans-Atlantic trip, *USA Today* points out that while it was "designed to promote peace and prosperity," the president got a [stark reminder](#) "not only of the complexities of foreign policy, but also of how his plans can be complicated by those seeking to test his young administration." Obama arrived in Turkey last night, and the *Washington Post* notes that North Korea's [missile launch](#) "threatened to overshadow Obama's first visit to a Muslim country as president."

Speaking to a crowd of more than 20,000 in Prague, Obama said that "as the only nuclear power to have used a nuclear weapon, the United States has a moral responsibility to act." He vowed that the United States would lead a new effort to rid the world of nuclear weapons, and he will call for an international summit in Washington to figure out a way to stop the spread of nuclear material. The *Wall Street Journal* hears word that Obama is likely to propose a new [international agency](#) to pursue that goal. Obama said he would seek a ban on nuclear testing and push for the creation of an international nuclear-fuel bank, which the *WSJ* says might be hosted by Kazakhstan, to allow nations to develop nuclear power in a peaceful way. The *New York Times* points out that Obama's [strategy](#) is "based on the idea" that if the United States shows leadership on the nuclear issue, "reluctant allies and partners around the world will be more likely to rewrite nuclear treaties and enforce sanctions against North Korea and Iran."

After meeting for three hours yesterday, the United Nations Security Council could not agree on a statement condemning North Korea's move and diplomats vowed to continue working to come up with a response over the [next few days](#). U.S. officials and several of its allies, including Japan, France, and Britain, say that North Korea's launch was a violation of a 2006 U.N. resolution. And although most members of the Security Council wanted to condemn the launch, Russia and China resisted,

saying they weren't sure North Korea had violated the resolution. The [Los Angeles Times](#) hears word that at least one of the two countries even opposed a statement that would have simply expressed "concern" [over the launch](#).

So was the test successful? Depends on whom you believe. Within hours of the launch, North Korea said it had successfully put a communications satellite into orbit and that it was transmitting patriotic music. But the United States and South Korea said that the rocket didn't put a new satellite into orbit. The *NYT* off-leads with a look at how analysts overwhelmingly called North Korea's launch [a failure](#), which, tied with previous missteps, could "reveal a significant quality control problem in one of the world's most isolated nations." But not everyone is ready to dismiss the launch as yet another embarrassment for the country. The *WP* says that the launch showed North Korea [has made](#) "significant progress in rocket engineering compared with the failed test in 2006 of the same kind of missile." In a piece inside, the *LAT* says that even if the launch didn't meet North Korea's objectives, it still [showed](#) "disturbing progress in that country's pursuit of the ability to deliver a nuclear warhead." One senior Department of Defense official says the Pentagon is now "clearly more worried" about North Korea's capabilities. At the very least, the country has now shown it is able to launch a multistage rocket, which could "bolster its reputation among other states seeking that capability."

The *WP* fronts a look at how the Pentagon has spent lots of time discussing the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah to try to figure out whether some long-term lessons can be learned from the [34-day battle](#). Some within the military contend that the war should be seen as a warning of what could happen if the United States redirects many of its resources to counterinsurgency efforts so that it is better prepared for wars like the ones in Iraq and Afghanistan. Some are warning that if the United States becomes too obsessed with fighting low-intensity guerilla forces, it will leave itself vulnerable to a more conventional force like Hezbollah, which was able to embarrass the Israeli forces. Advocates of the counterinsurgency approach say those pushing most heavily for the lessons learned of 2006 are officers who "are determined to return the Army to a more familiar past, built around preparing for conventional warfare."

The *NYT* fronts an analysis of the administration's attempts to get the Pakistani government and military to put a stronger focus on battling [al-Qaida and the Taliban](#) and notes that some analysts in Pakistan and the United States "are already putting forward apocalyptic timetables for the country." One report said the Pakistani government has somewhere between 6 to 12 months before the situation gets really dangerous, while one guerrilla warfare specialist said the country could be facing internal collapse within six months. But many in Pakistan aren't convinced, and see the warnings as merely an attempt by the United States to pursue its own interests.

Pakistan had another bloody weekend that once again showed how violence in the country is not limited to its lawless tribal areas along the Afghan border. The country suffered three suicide attacks [in 24 hours](#), the deadliest of which came yesterday, when a bomber blew himself up at a Shiite Muslim mosque outside the capital and killed at least 26 people.

Slate's [Daniel Engber](#) may get "intense nausea" from some 3-D movies, but he'd better get used to it, because they don't seem to be going anywhere soon. The *LAT* fronts a look at how movie executives are looking at the big opening weekend for *Monsters vs. Aliens* and reconsidering applying the technology to several of their [upcoming releases](#). There are still few theaters properly equipped with the technology to show the films, but experts say that it's only a matter of time before it becomes more widespread. "*Monsters vs. Aliens* is the BC-AD of the 3-D platform," said the head of Imax Filmed Entertainment. "Fifteen years from now, when people are talking about 3-D, they will talk about the business before *Monsters vs. Aliens* and the business after *Monsters vs. Aliens*. It's the line in the sand." So far, 3-D movies have largely been in the kid-friendly category, but executives say it's only a matter of time before the format starts hitting more adult fare.

today's papers

Here Come the Bombs

By David Sessions

Sunday, April 5, 2009, at 3:33 AM ET

The [New York Times](#) and the [Los Angeles Times](#) lead with, and [Washington Post](#) fronts, the late-breaking news that North Korea launched a long-range missile at about 10:30 p.m. EDT on Saturday night, in open defiance to "the United States, China, and a series of U.N. resolutions," the *NYT* [reports](#). Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates predicted the launch this week and said the administration had no plans to interfere. The *LAT* [quotes](#) President Obama from Prague calling the launch "provocative" and capturing Western leaders' view that the missile test is part of North Korea's well-known nuclear ambitions. The *WP* [adds](#), in a story with a Tokyo dateline, that the missile floated over Japan, but the Japanese government did not deploy its missile-defense system. The rocket's second stage fell into the Pacific Ocean, proving North Korea's ability to successfully launch a multistage weapon.

The *Washington Post* leads with delays in the "landmark" \$1.4 billion in aid that the U.S. government pledged to Mexico for its large-scale fight against drug traffickers. Congress appropriated the first \$400 million last June, but by December, only \$197 million had been dispersed—only two small projects have been completed. Mexican President Felipe Calderón has doubled his

defense budget and deployed 45,000 troops in the most ambitious effort to control Mexico's drug cartels in history. Calderón and others previously involved in the partnership see the delays as an example of the way "the U.S. government, while praising Calderón as a courageous crime-fighter, is leaving him hanging out to dry."

As protestors raged outside in Strausbourg, France, President Obama stressed to NATO leaders that defeating al-Qaida should be the primary goal in Afghanistan, overshadowing even important human rights outcomes the NATO nations hope to encourage. The administration has increasingly seen a need to create limited, reachable goals in the deteriorating country and hoped to include European leaders in the planned troop increases. Europe committed only 5,000 troops compared with the United States' planned increase of 30,000, and 3,000 of those will be deployed only temporarily. The *NYT* sees it as a "brushing aside" of Obama's requests, but the *WP* [calls](#) the small commitment "a sweeping demonstration of support for the new administration's leadership."

Another *WP* story takes an aerial view of Obama's European tour so far, [lengthily dissecting](#) the "sharp change in tone" that characterized the president's dealings with G20 leaders last week. Several experts weigh in on the president's "tone," noting that, on issues like Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Israel-Palestine conflict, Obama has changed the style a lot more than the substance.

The *NYT* [digs into](#) the final days of Jiverly Wong, the gunman who killed 13 at a civics center in Binghamton, N.Y., on Friday. There were "hints of mounting frustration and evidence of premeditation" before what increasingly looks like a recession-fueled rampage. Wong had lost his job and was living on \$200 a week in unemployment benefits, frustrated with his poor English and his inability to find financial stability. The *LAT* also [fronts](#) a follow-up story on the Binghamton shootings, landing a few quotes from members of the killer's family.

A heartbreaking front-page *NYT* story [calls attention](#) to child trafficking in China, most of it fueled by families so desperate to produce a male heir that they'll steal someone else's if they have to. "A girl is just not as good as a son," says one Chinese tea farmer who recently paid \$3,500 for an abducted boy. "It doesn't matter how much money you have. If you don't have a son, you are not as good as other people who have one." Anguished Chinese parents find the police indifferent—even when they obtain video footage of their children being abducted—because opening missing-person reports is institutionally discouraged. Beijing has also shut down parents' groups who have tried to call attention to the issue.

The *LAT* off-lead [has an](#) equally unsettling revelation and this one a lot closer to home: The FBI suspects a ring of serial killers disguising themselves as long-haul truckers in the killings of

"hundreds of prostitutes, hitchhikers and stranded motorists." A series of unsolved murders along Interstate 40 in Oklahoma led to the creation of the Highway Serial Killings Initiative, which now has information on more than 500 female crime victims. Investigators speculate that the nature of trucking—mobility, lack of oversight, access to victims—makes it an ideal cover for mass killers.

The *WP* Sunday "Style" section [excavates](#) American suspicion of do-gooding celebrities, especially stars who make multiple highly publicized attempts to adopt foreign children. Some celebrities—Madonna for example—are so culturally associated with self-indulgent behavior that we're hesitant to believe they'll do *anything* without an ulterior motive. "Throw in photos of [Madonna] in sunglasses, camouflage cargo pants and layered T-shirts against the backdrop of an impoverished Malawi as she searches for an orphan to adopt, and the stench of self-aggrandizement is nearly overwhelming." When stars *are* sincerely interested in making the world a better place, their celebrity can be more of a punishment than anything.

The *NYT* briefly [profiles](#) Matt Muro, creator of the blog "[People Who Sit in the Disability Seats When I'm Standing on My Crutches](#)." Muro started the blog when, temporarily on crutches, he needed a way to channel his outrage at healthy commuters who occupy reserved seats on New York subway trains.

today's papers

No Strings Attached

By Jesse Stanchak

Saturday, April 4, 2009, at 6:27 AM ET

The *Washington Post* [leads](#) with word that the White House is quietly working to help companies [circumvent restrictions](#) on federal bailout money. The *New York Times* [leads](#) with the unemployment rate hitting 8.5 percent nationwide, the highest level in more than 25 years. The *Los Angeles Times* [leads](#) with a gunman killing 13 people and wounding four others at an immigration-services center in Binghamton, N.Y., before taking his own life. The *Wall Street Journal* [leads](#) with reports that President Barack Obama is planning to lift some restrictions on travel to Cuba.

The White House says it doesn't think companies will accept federal bailout money if the cash comes with restrictions, such as limits on executive pay. In order to get around the strings put in place by Congress, the White House is planning to distribute bailout money to shell companies, which will then hand it over to the intended recipients. The paper says most members of Congress had no idea this was happening, although it doesn't look like there's much lawmakers could have done about the

situation in any case. Some legal experts are convinced, however, that these financial end-runs won't hold up in court.

The economy shed 663,000 jobs last month, dimming hopes that the economy might be starting to turn around. In January, Obama said he thought unemployment would hit 8.9 percent by year's end, a target that now seems to be within easy reach. The *NYT* mentions that some experts are now calling for a second stimulus package to account for the deepening recession. The *LAT*'s [analysis](#) is a just little more positive, noting patches of good news like increased consumer spending and orders for manufactured goods. The *WSJ* points out that many analysts actually [expected](#) unemployment numbers to be much worse. The *WP* just [teases](#) its economic coverage above the fold.

At about 10:30 a.m. yesterday, a 42-year-old Vietnamese immigrant reportedly barricaded the back door of the American Civic Association in Binghamton. He then walked around to the front door, opened fire without warning and held 37 survivors hostage for three hours before apparently killing himself. The *LAT*'s coverage has more background information on the shooter, a man identified as both Jiverly Voong and Jiverly Wong. The shooter is known to have ties to the ACA center, but none of the papers can establish a motive for the shootings. The *NYT* [focuses](#) on constructing a narrative, building a nearly blow-by-blow account of the rampage.

Americans with family living in Cuba will be able to travel freely to the island nation once Obama rescinds certain travel restrictions. They will also be allowed to send unlimited funds to relatives living there. Obama cannot lift the trade embargo against Cuba by himself, and the White House says he has no plans to ask Congress to do so. The *WSJ* also reports that no specific diplomatic actions are planned between the U.S. and Cuba.

The *NYT* and the *LAT* both front their coverage of an Iowa Supreme Court decision that will allow the state's same-sex couples to marry. Iowa is the third state to legalize gay marriage through its court system but is the first Midwestern state to do so. The court ruled unanimously that a law defining marriage as being between one man and one woman violates the equal protection clause of the state's constitution. The *LAT* notes that the decision may help gay rights advocates in California overturn the gay marriage ban known as Proposition 8. The *WP* [teases](#) its Iowa decision coverage under the fold.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates is planning to announce cost-saving [overhauls](#) of several major defense programs, according to the *WP*'s off-lead story. Five months ago, Pentagon officials tried to get the new administration to lock into a 14 percent Defense spending increase. The administration balked at the request, and now Gates finds himself in the unenviable position of trying to pry funds loose from Pentagon projects. The paper

says that nothing is set in stone just yet, but the Army's long-troubled Future Combat Systems project is expected to see major cuts. Other items that may get scaled back include aircraft carriers, a communications satellite program, and elements of missile-defense plans that aren't living up to expectations.

Congressional Democrats agree with Obama's budget priorities, but they're concerned about the pace of his agenda, [writes](#) the *LAT*. The paper reports that the language used in the recently passed budget resolution shows that lawmakers are worried that the administration will try to do too much too quickly, incurring significant political costs for vulnerable members. The paper says lawmakers are at an impasse, unable to deny Obama but not able to fully endorse his plans either.

The *WP* [fronts](#) its coverage of Obama's meetings with European leaders on the 60th anniversary of NATO's founding. Obama has been lobbying Europe's leadership to aid the United States in pursuing a new military strategy in Afghanistan and Pakistan. While leaders like French President Nicolas Sarkozy and German Chancellor Angela Merkel have expressed admiration for Obama's plans, they've backed away from any sort of commitment to send more troops. Instead, Sarkozy says France will accept custody of a prisoner from the Guantanamo Bay detention facility.

South Carolina Gov. Mark Sanford will finally accept federal stimulus money, [reports](#) the *NYT*. The paper says Sanford's original refusal to accept the money raised his profile among Republicans nationwide, but it also angered many of his constituents back home.

When a company wants to give a product street cred, a graffiti artist named Mister Cartoon is one of the first people they call, [says](#) the *LAT*. The interesting thing about the profile is that Cartoon's story isn't the kind of overnight, rags-to-riches script that usually gets tacked onto urban artists who gain a corporate following. This is a story about a guy who aggressively cultivated a personal brand that's been building steam for 15 years.

Inside, the *WP* [notes](#) that federally controlled mortgage giants Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac will pay \$210 million in bonuses to 7,600 employees over the next 18 months.

Just in time for Passover, the *LAT* [reports](#) on the booming market for kosher alcoholic beverages. Now observant Jews can have their tequila and keep their dietary laws, too.

Just an FYI: If you're looking for a new business name, anything with the word *monster* in it is already taken. The *WSJ* [explores](#) how an audio-cable company managed to vigorously defend its 70-plus trademarks on a fairly common word.

Google's plan to make millions of orphaned books available online has some academics and public interest groups [up in arms](#), according to the *NYT*. Critics say that a settlement between Google and authors and publishers grants the company too much power over a valuable and diverse body of work.

The LAT [runs](#) a feature on the tradition of folding palm branches into intricate works of art for Palm Sunday.

tv club

***Friday Night Lights*, Season 3**

Week 12: You win some, you lose some.

By Emily Bazelon, Meghan O'Rourke, David Plotz, and Hanna Rosin

Tuesday, April 7, 2009, at 12:11 PM 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 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 the end of the fifth Harry Potter book: past ready for the nice boy I thought I knew to come back.

Emily

Click [here](#) to read the next entry.

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 home 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 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

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

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 Bissing 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

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 unlike 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

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 flirtily 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

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

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:

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

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

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

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 McCoy's 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?

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?

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?

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 teathed 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](#)

[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?)

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.

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 through 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?

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 ruining 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

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

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*

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 skeezy dive of a bar, the terrified object of threatening male attention. Mindy, meanwhile, is using the skeezy 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 shackled 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

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.

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

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

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

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. Crazy.

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

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.

something I need to see again. So, any ideas? Ladies? Readers? What can they pull out of their hats to keep us watching?

Also, this episode really played like the penultimate, with lots of sentiment and heavy silences. I absolutely loved Landry as Tyra's editor. He reads a draft of her college essay and proclaims it the equivalent of a "five-page needlepoint pillow." That's definitely a line I will steal. Also this one, for rewrite: "dig deeper, and fastly." My husband, David, thought Tyra's recitation of the final, soaring draft was cheesy, but I thought it was a perfect send-off for this show. "Two years ago I was afraid of wanting anything," she begins, and ends with how now she can't stop wanting.

There are also lots of beautiful pauses throughout the game: stops and starts, slow-motion passes, and of course the field goal that seals the game. The other team is in all black, the devils you can't beat. The locker room is dead silent for a few seconds, and then you hear only breathing. And then the final scene, in which Riggins walks through the field as if it's a graveyard, head down, dragging his feet, stopping to gently place down his cleats. It left me wanting maybe one last teary goodbye, but not necessarily two more whole seasons.

From: Hanna Rosin
To: Emily Bazelon and Meghan O'Rourke
Subject: Week 12: How Do They Go on for Two More Seasons After This?
Posted Saturday, April 4, 2009, at 6:56 AM ET

Turns out I was entirely wrong about the Joe-hits-J.D. subplot. It does not go the after-school-special route but in fact takes a brave and unexpected turn. The episode opens with Eric and Tami agonizing over what to do about it. Tami decides to report Joe to child protective services. When they show up at the McCoy McMansion, Joe is unrepentant ("I want a lawyer present"), Katie is furious, and J.D. is shellshocked. Not one of them is grateful to Tami, and we are left not really knowing whether Tami was right or just buckling to bureaucratic pressure.

From: Emily Bazelon
To: Meghan O'Rourke and Hanna Rosin
Subject: Week 12: Swimming in Nostalgia
Posted Monday, April 6, 2009, at 6:54 AM ET

J.D. spends the rest of the episode in confusion—distracted, angry, tepidly defiant. Mostly he walks around stiffly like a zombie, glaring and saying little. In my view, he is not the most dynamic actor, so does not move us with his stifled rage. Compare him, for example, with Matt Saracen's version of restrained emotion. Grandma Lorraine thinks it's crazy for him to go to Chicago for art school, which he desperately wants to do. "It was just an idea I had for a minute," he says, which is, of course, not true—heartbreakingly not true. He reminds me—and forgive me this dopey analogy—of Charlie in [Lauren Child's](#) Charlie and Lola kids books. He is the patient, loving, pitch-perfect caretaker who is not supposed to be in that role but nonetheless rises to the occasion every time.

I got lost in the soundtrack this week because of all those stops and starts and slo-mos, and also because why fight the welling of emotion brought on by the music? This episode really wrapped the season and the show in the nostalgia theme we've talked about before. Tim, especially, is the Ghost of High School Past, smiling beatifically on the bus to state; refusing to talk about college when Matt asks him; offering up, instead, "Last game, seven"; and tossing the Frisbee in the dark under the dome of the Texas state Capitol.

The real problem this points to is the future of the show. The McCoy's are the main drama for next season, but I'm not all that attached to any of them. Lila and Tim are going to San Antonio State. Landry, Tyra, and Matt are out. Who are we left with? Julie, I guess. Buddy. The Gossip Girl. Billy Riggins, who outdoes himself in this episode by pissing in the sink. Not

The kids are saying goodbye to their lives up until now, and we're saying goodbye to them and also, of course, to our own high-school selves. The good adults are the ones who just step out of the kids' way. Lyla announces to her father that she's going to San Antonio State with Tim. "And we're probably going to get a place together. It's kind of like the whole Vanderbilt thing was fate, you know." This is a terrible idea, but Buddy doesn't say so. Lorraine heads in the opposite and wrong direction when she forces Matt to pretend that art school is just a passing thought. But later, sitting in the stands with Julie, she says, "I don't want to be the one to hold him back from anything."

I just can't stand the thought of losing him." Julie answers, "Me too," and, of course, she is speaking for all of us.

So in answer to your question about the next two seasons, Hanna, well, I guess I'd rather just concentrate on the long, sweet goodbye. Maybe the show will jump-start itself with some new talent. (Reader e-mail tells me that Tyra and Lyla will be gone.) But while I'm curious about what comes next, I'm not expecting much.

The lawyer in me says that Tami and Eric were right to think they didn't have a choice about calling Child Protective Services on the McCoys. Principals and coaches, like teachers, are mandated reporters, which means that if they have a credible suspicion of child abuse, they have to report it. If there's wiggle room here, it would be in the definition of abuse in the Texas statute—whether hitting a 15-year-old, for the first time, as far as the Taylors know, constitutes abuse. I'd imagine the answer is yes, and even if the bureaucracy seems invasive and ugly in this case, those rules probably (I hope) help more kids than they hurt. And let's not forget: Joe accuses Eric of starting the fire when he placed the call, but it's Joe who did the slugging.

My other favorite bit of dialogue—and, yes, five pages of needlepoint is an instant editor's classic—also comes from Tyra and Landry's college-essay duet. It's sappy, but, hey, it's clear you've got to let yourself go with that mood to make it through this ending. Tyra says, "Two years ago I had enough hate in my heart to stop a friggin' car."

"What changed?" Landry asks. And Tyra answers, "Jason Street got paralyzed." This is unusual for TV, isn't it—to assume the audience knows exactly what's meant by invoking a character who's no longer part of the action? But it seemed right. I remembered Tyra going to see Jason in the hospital even though, as she told him, they weren't friends. And since Jason's accident is the show's emotional source, it belonged here as the coda to all the nostalgia.

You know, we haven't talked football yet. Were you ready for the Panthers to lose, even a teeny bit rooting against them? Did you see it coming that Matt would finish out the season back at QB1? I was surprised by how little satisfaction I took from it. I did love Eric's closing speech about his champions and Tim's gift of his cleats to the field. But then, as I said, I decided to go with the welling of the music and the tears.

From: Meghan O'Rourke
To: Emily Bazelon and Hanna Rosin
Subject: Week 12: The Evolution of Tyra Collette

Posted Monday, April 6, 2009, at 11:29 AM ET

I cringed when Tyra began reading her final essay out loud: It was a little cheesy, cheesier, at least, than her fabulous outburst in the car with Landry, where she surprisingly says, "Two years ago I had enough hate in my heart to start a freakin' car." (Emily, I think she says "start," not "stop.") That sentence conveyed that power of ignition so many teenagers carry in their hearts but have no clue how to use. By contrast, her finished essay seemed more stylized, written, and less authentic. (Hmm, note to self—was Kerouac right about revision?) But I gave in, as you suggest we must, Emily. For one thing, she is 18, for God's sake. For another, for Tyra to let herself say these things is itself a development, a surprise. The language becomes surprising in *her* mouth. Just think back to the mouthy, sassy girl she was when the show started.

This exchange between Landry and Tyra underscores one of the strengths of the show: character development. Too often, characters on network TV change suddenly (and unbelievably) as writers search for plot twists. But on *FNL*, as one of our readers pointed out in a recent e-mail, there is a "fictional authenticity," an internal narrative coherence. Tyra might have started out as a slightly different character—a bad girl casually sleeping with Riggins, not valuing herself highly—but, as she points out, she evolved, and the evolution was the result of events like Street's injury and how they affected her. We could've presumed this, but we never quite *knew* it, and it's satisfying to come into contact with Tyra's own sense of her inner world.

I can't help feeling that Tami and Eric made the wrong decision, but I recognize they were in a bind. Here's where the show allows a pleasing complexity by not making a lesson out of the dilemma. Or if there is a lesson, I guess we could say it's this: You're screwed either way. As a public educator, if you do what the law requires you to do, a kid who should be with his family could get taken away. If you don't do it, you could lose your job (and, perhaps worse, find out you made the wrong call). I left this episode feeling that it's Katie McCoy who's in part not doing what she should be doing. Joe is a jerk and ultimately to blame, but she does not stand up to him, which has given him a sense of increased permission.

But it was the sounds and sights that touched me in this episode. Saracen and Riggins standing alone on the field in Austin being interviewed by sportscasters, empty seats looming around them like promises that can be broken. Later, the two of them walking past the Capitol building in the dark, flipping a wet Frisbee back and forth, Riggins' voice deepening as he says, "You know what I mean?" to Matt, who's asked him if he's "excited" about going to San Antonio State. (Riggins' answer: He's just trying to think about the game. He's trying not to get that far ahead of himself. What he doesn't say but we hear anyway: He's not excited. *This*

time is one of the most important of his life. And it's almost over. He's never going to play football with such personal need again. He's going to grow apart from the girl he loves. He'll become someone who's lost the promise that's currently folded around him, promise designed to bloom briefly and fall away.)

Or J.D. bouncing off the field in pique at halftime, acting like the spoiled, privileged kid he still is. All season, I kept wondering: How on earth can J.D. become a leader—as quarterbacks must be—if he is still such a prissy poppa's boy? The downside of being told you're talented your whole life—the downside of private coaches and tutelage—can be that you have no sense of generosity. J.D. believes the team is failing him and never pauses to ask whether he is failing the team. Stepping back for a moment, you could see J.D. as a timely critique of the CEO model of leadership—the idea that a leader is so important to a team he or she deserves outsize recompense and adulation. It doesn't work so well here on the field against the Titans.

Other moments: Eric's eyes moving as he watched the Titans' final kick pass through the goalposts. Tami waiting for Eric to come out to the bus after the game, kissing him, and then watching him as he walks away. You could see the whole history of their relationship there. The way they fell in love as teenagers and somehow toughed it out through their 20s. How uncertain they are about their own future, still, with one girl not far off from college and another not even in pre-K yet.

And yes, Hanna, that moment you already mentioned, when Riggins puts down his cleats on that field and walks away. The camera lingers on the open, empty field, leaving us with only the sound of passing traffic in our ears.

From: Hanna Rosin
To: Emily Bazelon and Meghan O'Rourke
Subject: Week 12: You Win Some, You Lose Some
Posted Tuesday, April 7, 2009, at 12:11 PM ET

"You're screwed either way," as you wrote, Meghan, or you're blessed either way. That's both the message of Tyra's essay and of this episode. There's another moment I loved that we haven't mentioned. On the night before the game, both Tami and Eric are too nervous to sleep. They go out on the balcony and look out into the night. Eric is seeking comfort from Tami and she says, "Well, you're gonna win."

And then she pauses, and the wind blows. For a moment you're left thinking that her words will have the magic power they often do, and they *will* win the game. And then she finishes.

"Or you're gonna lose."

This could be seen as extreme pessimism, almost cruelty on her part to feed him realism when what he needs is inspiration. And it's a break from her usual mode of support. But it's perfectly suited to this episode, when everything hangs in the balance, not just the football game but the futures of these kids we've grown to love. Tyra's essay runs along these same lines. Before Street's accident, she was of the "you're screwed either way" mindset. After it, she realized that being screwed was not her particular fate; anyone could be screwed or blessed, so you might as well choose to be blessed. And as you point out, Meghan, this is what makes this show great—the characters evolve and in most cases improve, but not so predictably that they don't always seem vulnerable to fate or failure. (An aside here: *Slate's* Seth Stevenson points out one life-changing event Tyra failed to discuss with Landry: her near-rape and then the accidental murder of a man. But we all conspire in wanting to forget that unfortunate string of events.)

Many of our readers who've already seen it have written to warn me that I will be stunned by the final episode, and particularly by who is staying and who is leaving Dillon. I've heard nothing but glowing things about it, so I will excuse myself now and go watch.

war stories

Gates Follows Through

The Pentagon is finally cutting expensive weapons programs it doesn't need.

By Fred Kaplan

Monday, April 6, 2009, at 6:27 PM ET

This is remarkable: In his [budget address](#) today, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates actually did what he has said he'd do for some time now—killed or slashed a bunch of weapons programs that don't fill the needs of modern warfare, vastly boosted spending for weapons that do, and took the first steps toward truly reforming the way the Pentagon does business.

For instance:

- He really did recommend halting production of the [F-22 Raptor](#) stealth fighter aircraft at its current level of 187 planes—against the wishes of the Air Force brass, most of whom are former fighter pilots who cherish this Cold War relic above all other programs, even though it has never been used in any of the wars we've been fighting the past few years.

- He eased out the Navy's [DDG-1000](#) stealth destroyer, ending the program with its third ship, to be funded next year, and instead restarted the older but still quite capable DDG-51.
- He canceled the most baroque and expensive components of the Army's [Future Combat Systems](#) program and called for a re-evaluation of what kinds of weapons the Army needs in general.
- He also killed two of the most troubled programs in the Missile Defense Agency, the Airborne Laser aircraft and the Multiple Kill Vehicle, cutting the overall agency budget by \$1.4 billion, about 15 percent of its total budget (a pittance, but a deeper cut than any other secretary or Congress has ordered since the program began).

At the same time:

- He requested a \$2 billion increase for drones such as Predators, which have dramatically improved intelligence and counterterrorism efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, increasing their deployed numbers by 62 percent (by 127 percent compared with a year ago).
- He more than doubled the purchase of F-35 Joint Strike Fighters—the smaller, slightly cheaper stealth aircraft—from 14 in 2009 to 30 in 2010 (way too many, in my mind, given the problems with this program, too, but perhaps Gates felt he needed to compensate politically for killing the F-22).
- He boosted the fiscal year 2010 purchase of Littoral Combat Ships, for counterinsurgency operations to coastal regions, from two ships to three.
- He added money for helicopter pilots and maintenance crews, *theater* missile-defense (against short-range missile attacks on the battlefield), aerial-refueling planes, and the training of more experts in cyberdefense.
- To protect the all-volunteer armed forces, he added \$11 billion to fund the expansion of the Army and Marines, \$400 million for additional medical research, \$300 million for care of the war-wounded, \$200 million more for child care and spousal support—and, moreover, he put these sorts of programs in the baseline defense budget. (Before, they were part of ad hoc programs in the war-emergency supplementals and therefore without institutional protection—or, as Gates put it, they were bureaucratically "homeless"—in the political competition for scarce dollars.)

In a press briefing this afternoon, Gates insisted that these changes were driven not by budget restraints or by directives from outside the Defense Department but, rather, by his own sense of a need to "rebalance" the Pentagon's programs—"to institutionalize and enhance our capabilities to fight the wars we

are in today and the scenarios we are most likely to face in the years ahead."

Some weapons need to be modernized, he allowed, to provide a "hedge" against future threats. But even here, he said, "goals should be tied to the actual and prospective capabilities of known future adversaries—not by what might be technologically feasible for a potential adversary given unlimited time and resources."

Thus he slashed a number of naval programs because, as he put it, the "healthy margin of dominance at sea provided by America's existing battle fleet makes it possible and prudent to slow production." He stopped production of the C-17 cargo-transport plane because the department's "analysis concludes that we have enough C-17s with the 205 already in the force and currently in production." He wants to overhaul the Future Combat Systems program because its underlying premise—that lightweight vehicles equipped with computer technology can compensate for heavier armor—was invalidated by the lessons of combat in Iraq and Afghanistan.

This budget will not go down easily in the Pentagon or in Congress. The F-22, the DDG-1000, and the Future Combat Systems are the favored systems by much of the Air Force, Navy, and Army brass, respectively. (It may not be coincidence that he's going after all three services equally; at least he can't be accused of chumming up with one at the expense of the others.) The F-22 in particular is also a favorite of many legislators—the result of politically shrewd subcontracting that spread out production of the plane to key districts in 46 states.

Contracting is another area that Gates is seeking to reform. He wants to slash the corps of service contractors, who come from the defense industry, and to replace them with civil-service professionals, 13,000 of whom he wants to hire next year, expanding to 30,000 new officials over the next five years.

After Gates was confirmed as George W. Bush's defense secretary in December 2006, he gave [several speeches](#) outlining major reforms that his successor should undertake—in weapons procurement, promotion policy, and the whole careerist culture inside the Pentagon. (With only two years in office, combined with a plateful of crises in Iraq and elsewhere, he knew he wouldn't have time to take those steps himself.) When he stayed on at Barack Obama's request, and thus became his own successor, many wondered whether he would turn his words into action.

With this budget, he has begun to do just that.

war stories

How Do You Solve a Problem Like Kim Jong-il?

Stop playing his game.

By Fred Kaplan

Monday, April 6, 2009, at 2:03 PM ET

What to do with this shrewd lunatic Kim Jong-il? The North Korean dictator test-fired a missile over the weekend—defying the brow-furrowed finger-wagging of the "international community"—only to watch the rocket sputter into the ocean before it could complete its trajectory.

The temptation is either to thwack this pint-size tyrant on the side of his head—impose fierce sanctions, deploy the gunboats, send out some mind-messing agit-prop that undermines his rule—or, better still, to ignore him, to start treating his threats and bluster as the empty antics of a desperate thug.

This was, after all, North Korea's third failed test of a long-range missile—out of three attempts—in the last 11 years. And yet the world continues to speak of its military prowess in the gravest of tones.

The catch, of course, is that [the last time](#) one of his missiles went poof—on the Fourth of July, 2006, an event of much fanfare, when the rocket fizzled and crashed a mere 35 seconds after blastoff—Kim Jong-il recaptured the world's attention three months later by [successfully testing an atom bomb](#). As far as nukes go, it produced a teeny explosion—a half-kiloton, much less than the (already less than mighty) 3 or 4 kilotons that his scientists had predicted—but, by any measure, North Korea had to be regarded as a nuclear-armed state. That colors our perceptions, and properly so.

However, it will be years, probably many years, before Kim can translate this status into real military power—that is, before he can miniaturize a bomb to fit inside a missile's nosecone, a much more challenging feat than the one, which he has yet to achieve, of merely getting the missile to fly from launch pad to target.

It's worth looking back at the events surrounding Kim's last missile test, the July 4 fizzle of 2006—as the past weekend's spectacle amounts to an eerie replay.

As happened this time around, the North Korean rocket of three years ago sat on its launch pad for weeks, during which time all the major regional powers—not just the United States, but Russia, Japan, South Korea, and especially China—begged and cajoled Kim Jong-il to call off the test. Like this time, the pressure had no effect. Kim gleefully thumbed his nose at us all.

The most interesting part of the story, though, was what happened afterward: nothing. Neither Kim's defiance nor his technical belly flop made any dent on anyone's subsequent behavior or strategy.

A few months later, after Kim detonated an A-bomb in a test chamber, the powers stepped into action, bringing a resolution of condemnation before the U.N. Security Council, which approved the measure unanimously—but, again, to little effect. The resolution had no enforcement clause; no penalties were imposed.

The strange mix of high drama, tense showdown, then limp backpedaling has been going on for decades, and it stems from two immovable facts—the nature of the North Korean regime and China's vital interest in keeping the regime from imploding.

As Scott Snyder notes in his superb book [Negotiating on the Edge](#), Kim Jong-il—like his father, Kim Il-sung, before him—views his nation as a "guerrilla state" and his position in the world as "a guerrilla fighter who has nothing to lose and yet faces the prospect of losing everything." Both Kims have regarded North Korea as "a shrimp among whales" whose survival is best ensured by weaving a perpetual backdrop of "drama and catastrophe" to distract the whales—the larger powers around them—and play them off one another.

Nukes and missiles are the only bargaining chips that Kim possesses; his brutal regime and self-imposed isolation have kept the country impoverished. However, every time the larger powers bellow about the North Korean threat or seek to impose penalties through harsh U.N. resolutions, they play into his game—they lavish him with the attention that he needs both to negotiate for goodies diplomatically and to justify his totalitarian reign at home.

This is why it's so tempting to ignore Kim's games—but also why it might be dangerous to do so. He requires the "drama and catastrophe"; his regime would probably collapse without them. And so, if the United States and the other major powers paid no attention to, say, his missile test, he would raise the stakes, do something more outrageous, then raise the ante on that as well, until we did pay attention—until we had to.

In this sense, tangling with North Korea is like playing highway chicken with a wild but calculating kid who visibly throws his steering wheel out the window, forcing the other, more responsible driver to veer off the road.

China is the one country that could crack the rod. Nearly all North Korea's trade comes through China, which also supplies Pyongyang with a great deal of aid and investment. Yet Beijing's leaders are so expansive with their largess, and so lax in their discipline, because they know—and Kim knows that they

know—that if Kim's regime begins to collapse, tens of millions of North Koreans will rush across the Chinese border, creating a humanitarian crisis beyond Beijing's resources and possibly destabilizing that corner of China as well.

North Korea's antics also serve China's interests in a strategic sense as well. As long as U.S. military forces in East Asia are focused on countering a North Korean threat to South Korea and Japan, they will be less focused on countering Chinese pressure on Taiwan.

This is why, even after Pyongyang exploded an atomic bomb, China took no real action against its ally, apart from voting for the Security Council's (nonbinding) resolution of condemnation. And that incident was cause for much more worry than last weekend's rocket launch (which may or may not have carried a satellite, which was not flung into orbit in any case). Even a few hours after the launch, as President Barack Obama was calling for a Security Council session and harsh penalties, China's spokesmen were downplaying the event as no big deal.

Sanctions or other economic penalties are toothless unless China joins in, and this time, as before, there's no reason to believe it will.

As for military action, the last three presidents—both Bushes and Bill Clinton in between—have weighed the option very seriously. In the 1994 crisis over North Korea's steps toward reprocessing plutonium, Clinton came much closer to mounting an attack than most people realize. However, each time, the Joint Chiefs of Staff's calculations—that we didn't know the location of North Korea's nuclear facilities and that, if Kim retaliated against South Korea or Japan, millions of civilians could die—held force at bay.

It is possible to deal diplomatically with North Korea. Snyder lists the rules in his book. President Clinton's top officials, after a few flustered efforts, figured out how to play the game; as a result, they negotiated the [Agreed Framework](#) of 1995, which, for all its limitations, locked up Pyongyang's plutonium for the next decade. Clinton was on the verge of negotiating a ban on missiles when his term ran out. This was the deal that Colin Powell wanted to pick up where Clinton left off—until his boss, George W. Bush, made it clear he wanted to defeat evil, not negotiate with it. As a result, the Agreed Framework unraveled, and North Korea reprocessed the plutonium, tested an A-bomb, and kept developing—and exporting—missiles. When Bush finally let Condoleezza Rice resume talks in the middle of his second term, an accord was easy to reach—but it was also full of holes. And that's the hard spot we're backed up against today.

Whatever President Obama does, he should not go rushing off to the negotiating tables. Despite its failure, the rocket launch did violate a U.N. resolution warning North Korea not to launch any more missiles, and the reaction cannot be a reward. However,

Obama should also resist mounting a long and ambitious campaign to stiffen the sanctions already in place—unless he can get the Chinese to agree beforehand that they'll go along. Too many times, U.S. officials have labeled some North Korean action as "unacceptable"—only to accept it in the end, thus making all future warnings still less credible.

The best thing right now is to spend as little time as possible on this subject, then drop it. We have a lot more important things on our plate than North Korea's puny bomb and flaccid missiles. As Daniel Sneider, associate director of the Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center at Stanford University, said of the missile launch in a phone conversation today, "This is not the action of a strong state—this is the action of a weak state." Obama should behave accordingly.

So yes, issue a condemnation in the Security Council to show one and all (especially the Japanese, who are sensitive about missiles flying over their territory) that we take this seriously. After that, send a message to North Korea's foreign ministry that we're ready to resume the six-party talks and to throw in a lot of incentives if Pyongyang is ready to change course—but that the next step must be theirs, not ours. It's time to stop playing their game.

webhead

I See You Typing

Spying on someone by hacking into his webcam is disturbingly easy. Why don't more people do it?

By Christopher Beam

Monday, April 6, 2009, at 5:09 PM ET

The China-based cyber-spy network known as "GhostNet" is a [sophisticated group of hackers](#) capable of logging its victims' keystrokes, stealing their documents, capturing images from their screens—and staring creepily at them through their webcams.

In a [report](#) released last month, Canadian researchers concluded that GhostNet has cracked at least 1,295 computers in 103 different countries, specifically targeting the Dalai Lama and other Tibetan activists and officials. Stealing documents and logging keystrokes—that I understand. You can get all sorts of useful information reading someone's e-mail or looking at their bank records. But peeking at them through their Web cameras? That seems creepy even by the standards of shady cyber-spying rings. It's one thing to read the Dalai Lama's IM conversations. It's another to actually watch him LOL.

GhostNet might be the most prominent example yet of webcam infiltration, but it's certainly not the first. The practice dates back to 1998, when a group of hackers calling itself the Cult of the Dead Cow designed a piece of software that, when downloaded onto a computer, let someone control the machine remotely. Anything you could do sitting at your desk, they could do thousands of miles away, from creating documents to playing MP3s to popping open the disk drive. They dubbed the program [Back Orifice](#)—a twist on Microsoft's [BackOffice](#). The authors "were not malicious guys," says Frank Heidt, CEO of Leviathan Security. "They thought it was funny as hell."

Webcam scams do occur, though they're far less common than other types of online extortion. In 2004, four hackers in Spain were [arrested](#) after threatening to post candid webcam videos online unless their victims paid up. In 2008, a Canadian man [told](#) young girls that he had nude pictures of them and would post them on the Internet unless they posed for him again.

Governments and businesses have adapted. For example, the Department of Defense has regulations about where you can carry a laptop. And unlike the most advanced [computer worms](#), this isn't a threat that's constantly evolving to outpace security measures.

Since Back Orifice hit the market, the basic methods of cyber-peeping haven't changed much: Just get your target to download an e-mail attachment or click a link that triggers an automatic download, activate the camera, then sit back and watch. "Writing the malware is a total triviality" even for middling programmers, Heidt says. Back Orifice is still available for download, and beginners can find instructions on how to write their own programs with a simple Google search. Or you can just [take a college course on how to do it](#).

What's changed is the prevalence of cameras. You can't buy an Apple laptop these days without a built-in camera. Even Sony's [smallest notebook](#) has a webcam. Sometimes they're practically invisible: The MacBook Air's built-in camera is "so smartly integrated, you hardly notice it's there," [brags](#) Apple. That said, almost all laptops have a light that turns on whenever the camera is on—a feature that hackers can't disable since it's controlled electronically, not programmatically.

Still, webcam espionage isn't very common. Most scammers are interested in money, and video of someone's slack-jawed mug isn't going to yield much cash. "Most stuff you'd capture on a camera, they've already posted on Facebook," says Kevin Haley of Symantec Security Response. * Even if you did have hundreds of hours of video and audio capturing someone's conversations, it's a lot harder to index and search than written information. (Some programs solve this problem by activating the camera [only if they sense movement](#).) If it's profit the hacker wants, the contents of the computer are much more valuable than whatever's happening in front of it.

If someone hacks into a webcam, therefore, it's usually a targeted attack. Pure creepiness is one motivation. A 15-year-old girl in Texas [reported](#) in 2004 that a hacker who took over her computer would eject the disk drive and say things like, "I like your shirt."

Then there's spying on people you'd like to keep an eye on, such as, say, your spouse. One could see this being useful for private investigators, though PIs I spoke with say they don't know of anyone hacking into webcams as part of their work. "The technology is there for it to happen," says Charles McLaughlin, a PI in Andover, Mass. "But in the private sector, although there are some characters willing to break the law, most reputable PIs don't." You might get away with it if you install the spyware on your own computer—say, the one in the bedroom—but even that gets into shady legal territory.

More threatening than video is audio. By accessing a computer's microphone, you turn the computer into a bug. It's also more clandestine than video, since the microphone is always on and there's usually no light to tip you off when it's recording. "The mic thing worries me a lot more," says Chris Wysopal of the security firm Veracode. "Unless you can lip-read, [video alone] isn't that useful."

So how do you prevent someone from spying on you? The usual Internet hygiene applies. Don't click the weird attachment your computer-illiterate relatives send you, update your antivirus software regularly, and so forth. If you want to be *really* cautious, the best solution is the simplest: Put a piece of tape over the camera. It may be the laptop equivalent of the tinfoil hat, but it's the only way to absolutely guarantee privacy. The microphone is trickier, since you can't tape it up. You can disable it, though, by plugging a converter or some other cord into the computer's microphone jack, which turns off the internal mic.

But ultimately, there's only so much you can do. Vulnerability is a fact of cyber life: Anytime you open a portal to the outside world, it makes intrusion possible. The problem is when we don't even know the portal exists, or are only dimly aware of it. There's a general rule that you shouldn't write anything in an e-mail that you wouldn't want shared with the world. Perhaps the same should apply to dancing in your underwear while your laptop is watching.

Correction, April 6, 2009: This article originally misspelled the name of Symantec Security Response. ([Return](#) to the corrected sentence.)

xx factor xxtra

Crazy Love, Crazy Choices

Why on earth do women stay in abusive relationships?

By Linda Hirshman

Wednesday, April 8, 2009, at 11:41 AM ET

Earlier this spring, when pop singer Rihanna [went back to the man who allegedly beat her](#), the blogs were full of objections to blaming the "victim." It just makes women feel bad to say, "Why doesn't she leave?" feminist commentator Amanda Marcotte [wrote](#) in her blog. Indeed, she continues, "every time we ask that, we are engaging in batterer assistance ourselves." Shouldn't we be focusing on the abusers? Well, not exactly. Old-style feminism would say "the personal is the political," as long-time columnist Katha Pollitt put it in her own tale of personal sexual betrayal, [Learning To Drive: And Other Life Stories](#). A social movement that passed political judgment on a subject as intimate as domestic violence may be tough on the victim, but, as Pollitt concluded, "at least it offered a perspective." The alternative, she warned, is that "These days anything is feminist as long as you 'choose' it ... no matter how dangerous or silly or servile or self-destructive it is."

Leslie Morgan Steiner's new memoir about her four-year relationship with an abuser, [Crazy Love](#), is a textbook illustration of just how dangerous and destructive such a choice can be. Steiner describes in detail her relationship with her ex-husband, who choked her, punched her, held a gun to her head, knocked her down the concrete steps, and regularly slapped her around for four years. The somewhat fictionalized memoir (Steiner says she changed some identifying details and combined some characters) follows earlier essays in which she chronicled her anorexia and financial dependence. In this latest episode of bad choices, her future husband gave her clear warning. Once when they were having sex, long before they got engaged, he choked her until she almost passed out and informed her that he "owned" her before he came. Still, she made herself available for the hurting. Since the relationship ends when he walks out of their apartment after three years of marriage, we never know if she would have left on her own.

In the press kit for *Crazy Love*, Steiner says it's easy to see why she married someone who choked her on a regular basis. She was, she says, "kind, insecure and desperate for intimacy. ... It is not difficult to understand why anyone ... could become trapped in an intimate manipulative relationship." She also relentlessly reminds the reader that she is a WASP of impeccable ancestry and therefore an improbable abuse victim. "All my family is blond," Steiner writes. "I do not look the part." Her abuser was blond, too. It was the first thing she noticed about him. She also acknowledges that she should have picked up on the warnings he littered behind him.

Steiner is wrong: It is difficult to understand why she stayed in this awful relationship, given that she was not risking starvation and had no children with her abuser. Which is why, no matter how many times Steiner and Marcotte and the others tell them not to, *people keep asking the question*. And it's terribly important to do exactly that. Asking why women participate in destructive relationships is a mark of respect. The amazing thing is that, four decades after the birth of feminism, we are still arguing about it.

And so after reading this book, I find myself rooting around for my old-style feminism, Birkenstocks and all. The current love affair with understanding stops feminists from calling victims on taking responsibility for their own well-being. For centuries, Western culture has assumed that, no matter how "kind" they are, given adequate information, people can be trusted to look after themselves. Democracy itself rests on that assumption. The closest Steiner comes to a recognition of this principle is, tellingly, when she's addressing another victim of domestic violence. "No one can treat you like this if you don't let them," she tells a woman whose male companion raises his fists to her on the street. It's four months after Steiner's own husband has walked out, and she can finally give a stranger the message she seems never to have applied to herself.

Crazy Love made me think again about *Learning To Drive* and the debate when it was published in 2007 over how a smart and independent feminist like Katha Pollitt got involved in a hurtful, unfaithful relationship. Infidelity is not the same as four years of beatings, but Pollitt does describe her ex as a "liar, a cheat, a maniac, manipulator and psychopath."

Like Steiner, Pollitt also has an old-fashioned explanation. In her case, it's an antique version of romantic love. Like Madame Bovary, Pollitt read too many novels and gave her heart to an old-fashioned "bounder." The first things she noticed about her future betrayer were his "panama hat" and his "romantically long and threadbare overcoat." She writes, "All he had to do was introduce himself, and half an hour later I was on fire: I was like a flame in fog." At the time, Pollitt uncharacteristically forgot how this would end in a novel; Madame Bovary ends up lying on the floor, clutching a vial of rat poison.

Unlike Steiner in *Crazy Love*, Pollitt uses her very powerful mind to address how she, and many others, let herself become the victim of her Lothario's relentless womanizing. "All my adult life," she writes, "I had wanted to rescue women—but I had also felt superior to the ones I tried to help. ... I had not taken my own advice either. The truth was I was ... just like them."

Still, she never really answers the question: Why do women's self-destructive fantasies drown out the warnings that years of old-style feminism have alerted us to? As Pollitt puts it, when will women's psychology catch up with their material

conditions? Must we assume that they are natural, inevitable victims?

I refuse to accept this bleak assessment, the soft bigotry of low feminism. Michelle Goldberg's new book *[The Means of Reproduction: Sex, Power, and the Future of the World](#)*, is about the struggle to bring sexual self-determination to women who really were powerless. It includes the story of 11-year-old Anne, who got wind of her impending genital circumcision and walked 25 miles through the Kenyan bush at night to reach a Girls Rescue Center. Anne was not a columnist, or a blonde. But she heard a rumor of liberation and followed that rumor into the woods.

Another lesson: Women should be able to look after one another. At one point, in her effort to figure out what to do, Steiner researches abuse. An expert on domestic violence tells her that no man he'd ever studied had stopped being violent. No one he worked with in the field would ever say "this one is done. He'll never abuse anyone again." Four months after her husband nearly killed her, Steiner saw him kissing the hair of his new girlfriend at a party. She silently turned away. Will we be reading the girlfriend's memoir next?

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