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

architecture

Can Cities Save the Planet?

Scientists are skeptical. Planners are hopeful. The Dutch are pragmatic.

By Witold Rybczynski

Wednesday, December 17, 2008, at 6:58 AM ET

According to Timothy Beatley, an urban-planning professor at the University of Virginia and the author of *Green Urbanism*, the per-capita carbon dioxide emissions of American cities are almost twice as high as those of their European counterparts. Hardly surprising, since European cities are denser and more compact, homes are smaller, and people rely to a far greater extent on mass transit. So if Americans are to significantly reduce their carbon footprint, we will have to do a lot more than

switch to reusable shopping bags and recycle our soda cans. But as a recent conference on "urban design after the age of oil" at the University of Pennsylvania (where I teach) demonstrated, there is something of a disconnect between the global-warming problem and the available solutions.

The problem is easily stated. In 1950, the global emission of carbon dioxide was 6 billion tons a year. Thanks to population growth, urbanization, the expansion of wealth, and massive industrialization around the world, by 2008 this has increased fivefold to 30 billion tons a year. Assuming that nothing is done to reduce emissions, by 2058, they will be 60 billion tons a year. Thus, to reduce global warming, whose effects are already beginning to be felt, it will be necessary to take drastic measures just to stay at the present level, never mind actually making real progress. For example, to reduce the number of coal-fired generating plants, nuclear capacity in the United States will have to be doubled. To reduce car emissions, either Americans will have to drive half as many miles per year or cars will have to be twice as efficient. Buildings will have to use 25 percent less electricity.

The Penn conference featured many speakers proposing changes, large and small, as to how buildings and cities should be designed. The scientists were hard-nosed and slightly scary. Planning consultants were authoritative and self-assured—as planning consultants tend to be. They described new carbon-neutral cities, with wind farms and solar arrays, green roofs and urban farms, far-ranging mass transit, and large-scale water recycling. The Power Point images were mesmerizing. Most of the projects appear to be in the Gulf states. In the present economy, most are, I suspect, on hold.

A word that came up frequently was *holistic*, the implication being that we shouldn't change one thing until we know how it affects everything else. But that is not the way cities develop. The technologies that improved urban life in the past—gas lighting, pressurized water, electricity, streetcars, elevators—were developed separately, each according to its own technological schedule. This autonomy accounted, in large part, for the success of the industrial age. The other implication of *holistic* is that, by taking everything into account, we can control the future. But technologies have always had unintended consequences. Streetcars, for example, which replaced horse-drawn omnibuses and were not only faster but considerably cleaner, also encouraged suburban growth, enabled commercial strips to develop along rights of way, and created amusement parks (Coney Island in New York, Natatorium Park in Spokane, Wash.) as end-of-line destinations. One would expect green technologies to similarly produce unforeseen side effects.

Another thing strikes me about green urbanism. Even assuming that anything at all gets built in the coming economic depression—during the Great Depression of the 1930s, building construction virtually halted—creating new cities and reconfiguring old ones will take many decades. We don't have that much time. On the other hand, Americans' rapid change in driving habits during the gas-price run-up of summer 2008 suggests that people can quickly alter the ways they behave: driving less, walking more, turning down the thermostat, turning off the lights. Yes, we should eventually change the way we build and plan cities, but it might be more effective in the short run to change the way we live in them.

Most of the planners at the Penn conference emphasized technological fixes, but if the point of no return has already been passed in global warming, as some of the scientists at the conference suggested, protective measures are at least as important, not least against the anticipated rise in sea levels. In that regard, I note an interesting news item from the Netherlands. The Dutch Parliament has asked a commission on coastal development to examine the idea of building a massive man-made island in the North Sea. The 31-mile-long island will provide 274,000 acres for housing and farming. Not coincidentally, the so-called Tulip Island (named because of its shape) will also act as a storm-surge barrier. The Dutch, who have managed water in their low-lying country for centuries, are the canaries in the coal mine as far as rising sea levels are concerned. Other coastal cities—and most large cities are on the water—should take note.

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books

Pad Out Your Amazon Wish List

Slate picks the best books of 2008.

Tuesday, December 16, 2008, at 7:40 AM ET

Michael Agger, senior editor

There's a new baby in the apartment this year, so my mind was only fit for the occasional Wodehouse novel. I did read *McCain's Promise*, though—a reprint/expansion of a *Rolling Stone* article by David Foster Wallace, in which the bandanaed one followed McCain during the 2000 campaign. DFW's suicide looms over literary 2008 for me. Even when not reading him, I was glad to know that he was alive, parsing the splendor and darkness of our moment. *McCain's Promise* circles around a Wallace fixation: authenticity. Can a guy who spent six years in a box leverage his commitment to honor in a noncheesy manner that will also make him president? DFW attacks this question in his scorched-earth style. The reader is left with a feeling that all great writing imparts: I should really look at myself and my world more closely.

Emily Bazelon, senior editor

To remind yourself why you are beyond ready for a new president, pick up a copy of Jane Mayer's *The Dark Side*. As a

writer for *The New Yorker*, Mayer served up some of the biggest revelations about how exactly the war on terror became the excuse, after Sept. 11, for a vast expansion of executive power. (She's the reason we first heard of David Addington.) In her book, she breaks additional news and, more crucially, brilliantly synthesizes the history of executive-branch abuses from the last eight years. Mayer builds her case about torture and other nefarious legal doings one careful fact and analytical step at a time—and absolutely damns this waning presidency.

Christopher Beam, political reporter
Most books about the Iraq war have focused on bungled preparation or mind-bending incompetence. Dexter Filkins doesn't set out to moralize—although you could certainly do so after reading *The Forever War*. He instead recounts the overthrow of the Taliban and the invasion and rebuilding of Iraq with a mix of sorrow and inevitability, one devastating vignette at a time. Filkins is best-known for his reporting on the 2004 battle of Fallujah, which provides the book's backbone as well as its most horrific moments. But his view is panoramic. He's watching a Taliban execution on a soccer field. He's accompanying L. Paul Bremer on a smiley tour of a doomed local hospital. He's stepping over body parts at Ground Zero. He's watching American soldiers train Iraqi election officials. He's nearly kidnapped by a source. All without showboating or overdramatizing. The book's title describes the never-ending skirmishes between factions in Afghanistan, where fighters switch sides "like a game of pickup basketball." If one dies, another takes his place. As Obama turns his attention to Afghanistan, *The Forever War* is a bleak reminder of why that war could prove just as quixotic as Iraq.

Christopher Benfey, art critic
Spend some time with Rosamond Purcell's enthralling photographs in *Egg & Nest*, and you might be tempted to become an oologist. Oology is not the science of oohs and ahs but the practice, frowned on in the civilized world, of collecting rare eggs and nests. Most of the photographs were taken at the Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology in Camarillo, Calif., which combines the collections of many Victorian bird enthusiasts. There's a woodpecker's nest in the shape of a wooden shoe, a grackle's nest woven of lace and audiotape, and a nest from Wasilla, Alaska, lined with feathers and fur. Unbearably poignant is a photograph of Martha, the last passenger pigeon, who died in the Cincinnati Zoo on Sept. 1, 1914. You'll even find a definitive answer to the age-old conundrum about the chicken or the egg. Hint: *Ex ovo omnia*.

Torie Bosch, medical editor
We don't just inherit eye color and build from our ancestors—we can also inherit their demons. In the touching and troubling *Stalking Irish Madness*, Patrick Tracey recounts how schizophrenia has tormented his family, afflicting two sisters, an uncle, a grandmother (who had a dentist yank out all of her teeth, hoping it would silence the voices in her head), and a great-great-grandmother. To find out why the Irish are perceived to be particularly vulnerable to insanity, Tracey travels to his ancestral home of Ireland. He searches for distant relatives touched by madness and visits an institution that filled beyond capacity during the potato famine; fairy mounds where, according to legend, otherworldly creatures could steal a man's sanity; and a well whose waters are rumored to heal troubled minds. There may not be a cure for Tracey's sisters, but *Stalking Irish Madness* shares some promising ideas—like encouraging schizophrenics to interact with their voices instead of being terrified of them.

Sara Dickerman, contributor
It's hard to deny the lyric beauty of this year's superchef monographs from Thomas Keller, Grant Achatz, and Heston Blumenthal. But I crave pragmatic advice in the kitchen and so recommend *An Edge in the Kitchen*, by Chad Ward. Ward's knife guide is brash, bossy, and full of good counsel. He dismisses age-old sales techniques about kitchen knives (forget about knife sets!) and points out moderately priced, even cheap, knives for the budget-conscious. Meanwhile, his breakdown of higher-end blades helped me understand all the technical information that I've been dilettante-ishly nodding along to for years. There's a succinct primer on cutting techniques (including the memorable advice to chicken-carving neophytes that it's easy to tell a bird's breast from its back if you picture Mick Jagger strutting onstage). Most important for me, Ward's rah-rah evangelism has emboldened me to take on the daunting task of sharpening my own knives.

Amanda Fortini, contributor
The persona behind *Human Dark With Sugar*, a wonderful collection of poetry by Brenda Shaughnessy, is tough, intelligent, and intense, simultaneously devouring the world's sensual pleasures and keeping them at a distance with a jaunty wit. "I'd go anywhere to leave you but come with me," Shaughnessy writes. Hers is a sharp-elbowed femininity, the sort on display in the late poems of Sylvia Plath, or the early poems of Deborah Garrison, or the novels of Elizabeth Hardwick and Renata Adler—it's a sensibility we haven't seen much in recent years, and it feels bracingly fresh. The poems range over of-the-moment topics like emotional eating, experimental lesbianism, and the frustrating vicissitudes of modern relationships. ("To see you again, isn't love revision?") But Shaughnessy's true subjects are those of nearly all poets, female and male, throughout history: romantic love and the creation of art. This work is ambitious, and its creator is, too: "No one needs an every day poet./ We have desks and their visible dust."

David Greenberg, "History Lesson" columnist

The cliché about Sept. 11 is that "everything changed"—that the attacks on New York and Washington marked a rupture in time and brought on a new era in foreign policy. In *America Between the Wars*, Derek Chollet and Jim Goldgeier provide not just the first historical account of U.S. foreign policy from the fall of the Berlin Wall (Nov. 9, 1989) to 9/11, but also the first revisionist account (revising, that is, the popular wisdom). Where others have seen change, they emphasize continuity. With expertise, literary facility, and a degree of narrative talent not normally found in policy wonks, they explicate all the key issues that emerged after the Cold War and with globalization: terrorism, rogue states, genocide, financial interdependence, and so on. More impressively, they situate their discussion of these issues within a complicated matrix of newly scrambled partisan politics. It's a significant historical contribution.

Melinda Henneberger, contributor
I want to put in a word for my friend Donna Trussell's new collection of poems, *What's Right About What's Wrong*. Each one is a compact little rock of Texas Gothic, thrown hard. (Think Flannery O'Connor in verse, with less God and more rodeo.) Even before Trussell was diagnosed with ovarian cancer in 2001—she got the call telling her to report for surgery while watching the Twin Towers fall—her work, as she says, "tended toward death, death, pet death, sex, love, death." But fierce or yearning, I love these ghosts—like Miss Candace Mayes, who surrendered her place in the last lifeboat off the *Titanic* to a mother who died years later of guilt, in an asylum where "Her hands would climb the trellis. Her feet were never still." Of a daughter never conceived who calls, "[G]ive me your darkest winter, it will be spring to me." And of a poet read posthumously, who can't help asking, "Who are you? What do you do? Tell me, is the sun out?' "

Ann Hulbert, books editor
What better luck than to discover that a writer whose novel you couldn't put down—in fact, got wet-eyed upon finishing—couldn't put down her story, either? In *Home*, Marilynne Robinson has returned to the terrain of *Gilead* (2004). We have crossed the road in Gilead, Iowa, and left the spare upstairs room in which the aging Rev. Ames wrote the letter to his young son that was *Gilead*. Now we inhabit, mostly, the kitchen of the heavily furnished house of his friend, another ailing old man, the Rev. Boughton. Don't let the setting mislead you: This book is the opposite of slow or suffocating. Gilead is a haunting place, a town whose stillness allows spiritual struggle to register in all its dailiness, its raw ungainliness and urgency. Boughton's daughter, Glory, filters the story this time—the story of the prodigal son. It is, as Robinson's inimitable prose will remind you, among the most painful and suspenseful stories there is. Are restless souls, wandering in exile, doomed to feel forsaken forever? Or will they be found?

Christine Kenneally, contributor
You can be as clever as you like about coining words, but invented language usually doesn't take off. Yet for weeks after reading Neal Stephenson's *Anathem*, I couldn't help thinking about the world in terms his characters used. Everywhere "slines" were yapping on their "jeejahs," and I imagined leaving it all to join a "math," or at least doing a little "blithe." Here, the author of the brilliant *Cryptonomicon*, *Snow Crash*, and the behemoth *Baroque Cycle* trilogy imagines a future other-Earth where a group of young scientist-monks discover a parallel universe. *Anathem* is almost too long, but ultimately it's rewarding, and Stephenson is—as ever—equally in love with difficult ideas and the classic pleasures of storytelling. The world he builds is richly visual, its complicated social politics are convincingly detailed, and its cool and conflicted heroes struggle with thrilling intellectual puzzles while they are tested in epic physical adventures.

Adam Kirsch, contributor
The new book of poetry that gave me the most pleasure this year is *Azores*, by David Yezzi. Yezzi writes with insight and elegance about the lives we actually lead—about the ironic balance between violent feeling and regulated behavior that defines adulthood. The book's title sequence describes a sailing trip across the Atlantic that is simultaneously a sexual adventure; like Hart Crane's "Voyages," "Azores" is suffused with the eroticism of the sea. But unlike Crane, Yezzi concludes by recognizing that "we are not suited to live long at sea," that our "lust for water" is countered by a "fidelity to land." The sophistication of Yezzi's language perfectly suits the sophistication of his understanding, and he displays a civilized mastery reminiscent of Philip Larkin and Donald Justice, which no poet of his generation can match.

Juliet Lapidos, assistant editor
I'd never considered traveling to Nantan, Japan. It's far away. Also, I'd never heard of it. Same goes for Pretoria, South Africa, and Torres del Paine, Chile. But thanks to *The Phaidon Atlas of 21st Century World Architecture*, I now have excellent reasons to visit each of these little-known locales: unusual, sometimes eerie, but always stunning modern buildings. In Pretoria, for example, there's House Steenkamp by Elmo Swart. Built to resemble a snail, the private home spirals out of the earth. I imagine that a decagenarian gnome lives there and that he likes to invite passers-by in for tea. Caveat emptor: If you purchase this atlas, you may need to reinforce the legs of your coffee table—it's 800 pages and weighs 14.5 pounds. It's well worth the heavy lifting, however, and the hefty price tag. With pithy descriptions and lavish photographs of 1,037 homes, hotels, museums, and stadiums in 89 countries, the atlas offers a comprehensive account of what starchitects and little-known

firms alike have been up to since the year 2000. See you in Nantan.

Josh Levin, associate editor
There are few clichés more clichéd than those associated with the inspirational sports story: the tough-as-nails coach, the down-on-its-luck town, the big showdown at the championship game. Jere Longman's *The Hurricanes*, an account of a southeast Louisiana high-school football team after Hurricane Katrina, both transcends this formula and capitalizes on its enduring appeal. The tale of a bunch of kids returning home to a sliver of land that's this close to falling into the Gulf of Mexico, shacking up in trailers, and christening their team the Hurricanes works well as a straight-ahead narrative of sports triumph. But it's the accretion of only-in-southeast-Louisiana detail—this is perhaps the year's only football book that includes a 10-page sketch of the life of Cambodian shrimp-boat captains—and Longman's devotion to his remarkable characters, particularly the manic, off-color, empathetic coach Cyril Crutchfield, that makes the story so memorable and haunting.

Dahlia Lithwick, senior editor
Amid a flock of excellent legal books this year, two are really outstanding in my view. The first is Jane Mayer's *The Dark Side*. The second is my former law professor Richard Ford's *The Race Card*. Ford asks a simple question: How can claims of racism—in the courtroom, the media, and casual conversation—be so pervasive in America if so few of us are racists? His answers are provocative: Much of what we call racism is the result of racist decisions made decades ago with respect to housing, education, or urban planning. Cab drivers who refuse to pick up black men may be motivated by factors beyond racial hate—like not wanting to drop someone off in a bad part of town. *The Race Card* advances a debate that has been mired in reductive thinking for decades. You won't agree with Ford on everything. But you may find yourself thinking differently about everything. And that's my definition of a great book.

Timothy Noah, "Chatterbox" columnist
Richard Price's *Lush Life* gave me more reading pleasure than any other book in 2008. The novel is a work both of fiction and of urban archaeology, exploring the three successive civilizations that inhabited Manhattan's Lower East Side during the past century and a half. These are, of course, the upwardly striving Jewish working class; the black and Hispanic underclass; and the youthful white urban pioneers who, in seeking Bohemia, created instead one more enclave of wealth and privilege. Price's conceit is that each successive civilization never fully supplants its predecessor and that the resulting stew of ghosts and living beings is beset by awful misunderstandings and outright violence. It's a wonderful book, teeming with authenticity, sadness, and dark wit.

Troy Patterson, television critic
In the early chapters of *Atmospheric Disturbances*, her debut novel, Rivka Galchen makes like a hardened postmodernist. The narrator is unreliable, and a kind of skewed narratology, a sizing up of how stories shape perception, is the theme. Dr. Leo Liebenstein, a New York psychiatrist, believes that malign forces have replaced his wife with a "simulacrum." "She imitated Rema's Argentine accent perfectly, the halos around the vowels," Leo thinks. (Meanwhile, the novel, with its fantastical bent and philosophical air, evokes the Argentine accent of Borges.) Leo's pursuit of answers leads him to a meteorologist, an academic weatherman who in fact controls the weather and who shares the author's surname. Rather clever. Merely clever. But! But the author turns a structuralist exercise into an exciting workout. The book reads like a tense private-eye thriller set in a languorous, floating Wonderland. I read a couple of other first-rate first novels this year—Jonathan Miles' *Dear American Airlines*, Matthew Quick's *The Silver Linings Playbook*—but Galchen presented the most eye-catching calling card.

Robert Pinsky, poetry editor
John Keats had the most heartbreaking of careers. During his brief life, his unsurpassed poetry—as we now perceive it—earned him more scorn than recognition. He died in poverty, unappreciated by the scholars and critics of his time. All this the world well knows. But none has known well how to apprehend the significance of Keats, his discouragement in life, and his triumph in art, beyond the ordinary approaches of biography or literary criticism—until Stanley Plumly's *Posthumous Keats*. Plumly's passionate, informed understanding of Keats enlarges into a meditation on poetry and death, on a human lifespan and posterity, on the fiery energy of art and the swinish complacency of the world, on disaster and courage. In a world of ephemeral blah-blah, the poet Plumly has written a book to last: worthy of its subject and commensurate with both words of its title.

David Plotz, editor
When Will There Be Good News?, by Kate Atkinson. The title is a joke: There will never be good news. This book is a peculiar experiment: Can you write a warm and fuzzy novel in which there is nothing but misery? Yes, you can! The novel opens with the horrific triple murder of a mother and her children, then graduates to a train wreck, arson, suicide, drowning, kidnapping, con games, and much worse. But Atkinson gives us characters who are so emotionally rich and so decent—despite the awfulness around them—that a story that should have been either blackly comic or heartbreaking is instead entirely heartwarming. Like her last two mysteries, *Case Histories* and *One Good Turn*, this book features the exhausted detective Jackson Brodie, but her greatest creation is Reggie Chase, an autodidact orphan teen with a perfect moral sense and a desperate need for family.

Katie Roiphe, contributor
The book that had the most profound effect on me this year was Susan Sontag's *Reborn: Journals & Notebooks 1947-1963*, edited by her son, David Rieff. The journals are shocking and singular in both the intimacy of their brisk, notelike form and the astonishing personality they reveal. The imperial voice of *Against Interpretation* is here aimed at herself. The critic takes her own personality on as a subject and dissects, often unflatteringly, her own weaknesses. One has to admire the fierceness of will she shows in inventing, improving, and tinkering with herself. She has endless lists of books she should read, ways to improve her behavior. If there was any doubt, the notebooks confirm that the uncompromising intelligence, the unsparing honesty Sontag shows in her work is not a pose or affectation. Her entries give evidence that she is, to her core, as unrelenting and unironic a critic in life as she is in her work. One can't help coming out of these strange and brilliant notebooks with a sense of one's own laziness, one's slack acceptance of one's own comfortable existence.

Jody Rosen, music critic
Some ethnomusicologists' scholarly quests lead them to remote Javanese villages. Roger Bennett and Josh Kun went to Boca Raton, Fla. Children of the 1980s who grew up steeped in pop, punk, and Jewish cultural ambiguity, Kun and Bennett spent eight years searching garage sales to recover a "lost kingdom of sound"—the Jewish pop that slipped between history's cracks: rock-opera Shabbat services, Israeli folkies, mambo pianists who brought Latin-Yiddish fusion to the Catskills and the cruise-ship circuit. The result, *And You Shall Know Us by the Trail of Our Vinyl: The Jewish Past as Told by the Records We Have Loved and Lost*, is the year's most enjoyable popular-music book and one of its most revelatory—part revisionist cultural history, part eye-popping coffee table anthology. Focusing on forgotten figures like Tom Jones-esque cantor Sol Zim, Bennet and Kun expand the narrative of Jewish-American music beyond the Tin Pan Alley-Brill Building axis. And the extraordinary LP cover reproductions remind you how much we're losing as record stores shutter and the music business dissolves into bytes. Has there ever been a more deranged, beautiful album cover than Topol's *War Songs*, in which the Israeli star is pictured crooning into a hand grenade perched atop a microphone stand?

Ron Rosenbaum, "Spectator" columnist
Could Ivan Goncharov's *Oblomov* have prevented the nation's economic collapse? The thought occurred to me when I learned of a new translation (by Marian Schwartz) of the classic 19th-century Russian novel—the beautiful, dreamy ode to indolence. The second one in two years. (The 2006 translation is by Stephen Pearl.) Whatever version you read, you can't help but be captivated by the "rapture" that Tolstoy spoke of when reading and re-reading it, the pure delight in ease and idleness the wastrel landowner Oblomov indulges in, the long-forgotten pleasures of a day spent not getting out of bed. It's the perfect corrective to the hyperactive, overdriven mentality that says one must not only have derivatives of collateralized mortgage obligations, but that one must drive oneself into a frenzy of making derivatives of derivatives of derivatives. All to inflate one's means beyond any capacity for human enjoyment and drive the economy to collapse in the process. If only these people had learned the pleasures of staying in bed that Oblomov offers. The point of pointlessness.

Witold Rybczynski, architecture critic
At 768 large (13 inches x 17 inches) pages, 20 pounds, and a price tag of $200, *Le Corbusier Le Grand* is not for everyone, but if you're interested in architecture, you should at least find a library copy. Le Corbusier was one of the 20th century's greatest architects—if not the greatest. He was everywhere: an artist in 1920s Bohemian Paris, a central figure in the invention of modern architecture, a planner of France's postwar reconstruction, the chief designer of the United Nations building in New York, and architect of the Punjab capital in Nehru's post-Colonial India. This eclectic collection of architectural documents, personal letters, newspaper clippings, snapshots, and travel mementos graphically captures the man, his times, and his work. This book is also, inadvertently, a study is wistful nostalgia—the record of a period when everything appeared new, and everything seemed possible.

Amanda Schaffer, contributor
In *The Myth of Mars and Venus*, Oxford professor Deborah Cameron debunks the widely held view that men and women's speaking styles consign them, in effect, to different planets. Best-selling authors, from John Gray to Deborah Tannen, have promoted this belief; Cameron tells us why many of their claims and others are overblown. In wry, witty prose she details how generalizations about men's and women's verbal abilities have changed over time. In 18th-century England, for instance, men were typically thought to be "more elegant, more polite and more correct" than women. She also analyzes transcripts of males and females in lively conversation to make her case. Most powerfully, she asks why the two-planet myth has gained so much traction when "no group of men and women in history have ever been less different, or less at the mercy of their biology, than those living in Western societies today." Men are from Earth. Women are from Earth. Read this book.

June Thomas, foreign editor
"I have lived on the same page of the *A-Z* all of my adult life," narrator Jamal declares early in Hanif Kureishi's novel *Something To Tell You*. Just as Jamal walks the same London streets every afternoon, Kureishi has been working over the same subjects for the last quarter-century: fathers betraying their

children, and vice versa; assimilation and reconciliation. He's not the most imaginative of writers, but his homing instinct is as rewarding as that of Giorgio Morandi or Michael Apted's *Up* series. Like everything Kureishi has written, there are parts that just don't work—here it's all the sexual relationships and the entire second half—but if you care about the great transitions of our time, you won't find a better exploration of "the days before the working class were considered to be consumerist trash in cheap clothes with writing on them, when they still retained the dignity of doing unpleasant but essential work."

Julia Turner, deputy editor
Laura Bush's life is full of incongruous tidbits—she's an insatiable reader, she killed her high-school boyfriend in a car accident, she was a smoker and a Democrat when she met W—that don't seem to amount to the proper Republican political wife we know today. Curtis Sittenfeld's *American Wife*, a novel about a very Laura-like first lady, offers a satisfying answer for anyone wondering how this nice, bookish girl ended up with a galoot like George. The best section of the book depicts their courtship. Sittenfeld's Bush—called Charlie Blackwell here—is, amazingly, both recognizable and appealing: a bon vivant with flared nostrils, trustworthy (as a mate, anyway) because "he seemed to be someone who found his own flaws endearing and thus concealed nothing." The book is a great read and as interesting a postmortem of the Bush years as any other I've encountered.

Jacob Weisberg, chairman and editor-in-chief of the Slate Group
Netherland is the best new novel I've read, not just in the past year, but since I can remember. Through the eyes of a Dutchman arriving several centuries after the fall of New Amsterdam, Joseph O'Neill illuminates an invisible outer-borough New York, explores the metropolitan psyche after Sept. 11, ponders the poetics of cricket, and brings us an update on the immigrant's American dream. The contained lyricism and honed perfection of his prose makes this a book that can, without absurdity, be compared to *The Great Gatsby*, on which it is strongly modeled. Don't miss the inspired discussion on the ***Slate* "Audio Book Club"** by Stephen Metcalf, Katie Roiphe, and Meghan O'Rourke, three critics who are equal to the material.

*And keep in mind books published this year by **Slate** staffers and contributors:* A Summer of Hummingbirds, *by Christopher Benfey;* Daydream Believers: How a Few Grand Ideas Wrecked American Power, *by Fred Kaplan;* The Modern Element: Essays on Contemporary Poetry, *by Adam Kirsch;* Now the Hell Will Start, *by Brendan I. Koerner;* Reputation: Portraits in Power, *edited by Timothy Noah*; The Bush Tragedy, *by Jacob Weisberg;* Obamamania! The English Language, Barackafied, *edited by Chris Wilson. Click* here *to see a complete list of recent books by **Slate**sters.*

books
Under the Sign of Sontag
The intellectual's greatest project: herself.
By Katie Roiphe
Monday, December 15, 2008, at 6:36 AM ET

If anyone is under the impression that Susan Sontag was, beneath her intellectual brio, just like everyone else, a quick perusal of *Reborn: Journals & Notebooks 1947-1963*, edited by her son, David Rieff, should put that idea to rest. The extraordinary notebooks begin when she is a teenager, heading off to Berkeley, and carry her through her unhappy marriage to Philip Rieff, to Oxford and Paris, and, finally, back to New York. The diaries are shocking, singular, in both the intimacy of their brisk, notelike form and the astonishing personality they reveal.

Sontag does not expend the energy on being charming, or even comprehensible, that most people paradoxically do in their private journals. Her notes are scattered, aphoristic, sharp. There is a seriousness, an almost preternatural lack of humor, to the entries that is both the amazing power and the curiosity of Sontag's thought. The imperial voice of *Against Interpretation* is here aimed at herself. The critic takes her own personality on as a subject and dissects, often unflatteringly, her own weaknesses on the highest and most trivial levels. "I had never realized how bad my posture is," she writes. "It has always been that way. … [I]t's not only that my shoulders + back are round, but that my head is thrust forward." The journals are largely comprised of lists, ways to improve herself, books she should read, chronologies. They give evidence of a fierce and unrelenting campaign to work on herself as an intellectual, as a woman, as a mother. "In the journal," she writes, "I do not just express myself more openly than I could do to any person; I create myself." She was 24 years old.

What is remarkable here is the ferocious will, the conscious and almost unnatural assembly of a persona that rises above and beyond that of ordinary people. The determination she devotes to figuring out who to be, on the most basic and most sophisticated levels, is breathtaking. "Better to know the names of flowers than to confess girlishly that I am ignorant of nature," Sontag writes. There is, in these pages, no sense of a woman comfortable in the world, a woman at ease. "Don't smile so much, sit up straight," she admonishes. "Think about why I bite my nails in the movies." How is it possible that anyone is this self-conscious? And how is it possible that this degree of self-consciousness could be so fruitful?

In fact, there is no other diary I can think of that makes such liberal use of the imperative mood. Sontag is unremitting in her

efforts to transcend her limitations, to imagine a different way of existing. She writes, "Admitting my mistakes, when I have been cheated or taken advantage of—a luxury that should be rarely indulged. People may seem to sympathize, really they despise you a little. Weakness is a contagion, strong people rightly shun the weak." She seems to harbor a secret image of herself as sloppy, idle, and weak that lies somewhere behind her spectacular efforts; she writes of herself over and over as naturally weak and accommodating to other people. The strength we associate with Sontag is an image, it seems, that she labored on, like an essay. In these strange and admirable journals, she feels at times like an alien from another planet who has settled in our midst and is studying our ways: "Most Americans start making love as if they were jumping out a window with their eyes closed." One can't help coming away with a sense of one's own slack acceptance of a comfortable existence.

In the passages about her romantic life, which are the most conventionally human in the journals, Sontag comes across as surprisingly ardent and vulnerable. By her own account, she has a series of relationships with women in which she loves more than she is loved. "H. thinks she is decadent because she has entered into a relationship which neither physically or emotionally interests her. How decadent then am I, who know how she really feels and still want her?" All of the confidence we associate with Sontag, the opinionated force of her personality, crumbles in these associations with women in a manner almost hard to watch. Her descriptions of her affairs are filled with pain and self-contempt: "I can already envisage H's brittle demonstrativeness, my own gaucherie—my idiotic attempts to elicit her love."

The Sontag in these diaries is mesmerizing, brilliant, abrasive, not quite likeable. Rieff mentions that he has not edited extensively and that she never read her journals out loud or intended for other people to read them. This appears to be true. They feel raw, unprocessed, like scribbled notes to herself, which gives them a greater power and immediacy than other, more polished diaries and memoirs that seem to anticipate and cater to their public. They were meant for *her*, and she did not write and move on: Sontag comments in the margins later, like a professor weighing in judgment, on a former self, never leaving herself alone. There is in an important way no difference between her own experience and a particularly absorbing book she might be reading. One can't help but admire the intricate mental apparatus at work: She is writing notes on her notes. These private jottings are, like her famous essays, almost entirely abstract and cerebral: She almost never describes the physical world, what the sky looked like, the smell of orange trees in Seville, or what she and her lover ate for breakfast.

And yet the innumerable tiny details that preoccupy Sontag over the years, the moments when she does describe her relation to the physical world, are revealing. There are a surprising number of entries in which she resolves to bathe more frequently. "Take a bath every day," she writes over and over, which somehow one doesn't imagine reading in the journals of an adult. But bathing is difficult for her; it involves a confrontation with the physical body she finds distressing. She tells us she sometimes falls asleep in her clothes. There is something endearing in this self portrait: the arrogant command of her authorial voice somehow belied by a sweet image of the unworldly woman writer, so uncomfortable with the basic physical demands of life, so flustered by soap and water.

If there was any doubt, the notebooks confirm that the uncompromising intelligence, the unsparing honesty Sontag shows in her work is not a pose or affectation. Her entries give evidence that she is to her core as unrelenting, unironic a critic in life as she is in her work. The harshness and purity and impossibility of her writing carry through into her days. All the weakness she fears in herself, the baroque and excessive self-contempt she feels, is marshaled for the highest cause: She wills herself into a strength of vision and ambition of voice unrivalled in a woman thinker. She writes, "[T]he writer is in love with himself," and so she labors to create a self she can love, to reflect that perfect, arrogant writer's confidence, that necessary narcissism. In his rather beautiful and tormented introduction, Rieff wonders whether he should have published these journals at all, as his mother never made her wishes clear before she died. But the reader, at least, is grateful that he did. The notebooks are invaluable for anyone interested in how the serious and flamboyant intellectual dreamed up her greatest project: herself.

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bushisms

Bushism of the Day

By Jacob Weisberg

Wednesday, December 17, 2008, at 4:06 PM ET

"I've abandoned free-market principles to save the free-market system."—Washington, D.C., Dec. 16, 2008

Click here to see video of Bush's comments. The Bushism is at 1:40.

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

corrections

Corrections

Friday, December 19, 2008, at 7:02 AM ET

In the Dec. 18 "Today's Papers," Daniel Politi stated that Teodoro Garcia Simental is thought to be responsible for most of the gang violence in Mexico. He is principally suspected of the gang activity only in Tijuana.

In the Dec. 17 "What's Up, Doc?" Sydney Spiesel wrote that the FDA decided to prohibit the use of LABAs for pediatric patients and to eliminate any products that don't also include a controller medication. Those were the recommendations of an advisory panel, but the FDA has not yet acted on them.

In the Dec. 15 "Politics," John Dickerson originally misidentified Mitch McConnell as majority leader of the Senate. He is the minority leader.

In the Dec. 13 "The Big Idea," Jacob Weisberg misidentified former Congressman Dan Rostenkowski as a House speaker. Rostenkowski did not hold that office. He also wrote that Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich defeated his predecessor, George Ryan, at the polls. George Ryan did not run for re-election in 2002; instead, it was state Attorney General Jim Ryan who lost to Blagojevich.

In the Dec. 9 "Moneybox," Daniel Gross misidentified hedge-fund manager Bill Ackman as Dan Ackman.

In the Nov. 26 "Art," Christopher Benfey referred to Martin of Tours as a New Testament figure. Martin of Tours lived in the fourth century.

*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, Undead Again Edition

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

By Stephen Metcalf, Dana Stevens, and Julia Turner

Wednesday, December 17, 2008, at 12:26 PM ET

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dec. 3, 2008

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

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

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

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

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

The Culture Gabfest weekly endorsements:

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

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

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

Nov. 19, 2008

Listen to Culture Gabfest No. 21 with Stephen Metcalf, Dana Stevens, and Julia Turner by clicking the arrow on the audio player below:

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

In this week's Culture Gabfest, our critics discuss the Malcolm Gladwell phenomenon, Michelle Obama's role as first lady and mom-in-chief, and the post-Obama buzz kill of Prop 8.

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

Malcolm Gladwell's latest book, *Outliers: The Story of Success*.
Jason Zengerle's article on Malcolm Gladwell in *New York* magazine.
A ***Slate*** "Book Club" about *Outliers*.
Rebecca Traister's article on the "momification" of Michelle Obama in *Salon*.
Slate's article on the Obama marriage.
Slate's "XX Factor" blog post on Michelle, Hillary Clinton, and Sarah Palin.
The Michelle Obama biography that played at the DNC.
A ***Slate*** article comparing the fight over gay marriage with the civil rights movement.
Background info on Prop 8.

The Culture Gabfest weekly endorsements:

Dana's pick: David Garland's *Evening Music* show on WNYC.
Julia's pick: Beyoncé's latest songs, "Single Ladies" and "If I Were a Boy."
Stephen's pick: Charles Mingus' *Mingus Plays Piano*.

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

Posted on Nov. 19 by Amanda Aronczyk at 11:45 a.m.

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culturebox

Lights, Camera, Christmas

The weirdest and worst holiday light displays in America.

By Sara Mosle
Monday, December 15, 2008, at 6:14 PM ET

I'm a sucker for Christmas lights. Ever since I was a kid, it has been a holiday tradition in my family to pile into the station wagon (more recently, the minivan) and drive around for an hour or two to "take in the lights." In my day, my brother and I would roll around in the back seat like empty bottles of soda pop as we slid to find the best view. I wonder if it's as fun for kids today, given that they're strapped into car seats and can barely see out. Maybe this is why in Dallas, at least, you can rent a horse and carriage to drive you around the richer parts of town at night to take in the scenery.

Still, even if my daughter is dozing off in her booster seat, I get a kick out of seeing the old stalwarts: Probably the most famous is the "million-dollar pecan tree," as it's been called ever since I can remember, with its old-fashioned, banana-sized bulbs draped sparingly through its branches. It's no longer particularly impressive. Nowadays, the style—far more expensive—is to cover a tree so completely with tiny lights that its outline, down to every last twig in the highest branches, is set off in brilliant color against the night sky. Other religions—and even nonreligious sentiments—have also gotten into the act: Blue and white lights for Hanukkah are not an uncommon sight, and near my apartment is a twinkling giant American flag (though it's accompanied by a very PC banner, showing people of all races and ethnic backgrounds, advocating for world peace).

But my soft spot, admittedly, is for the comically perverse. And I'm not talking about the usual yard crèches with the incongruous Santa Claus paying homage to the Baby Jesus, or the mere jokesters, who have a reindeer sprawled on their roofs

as if it slipped and fell from Santa's sleigh. I'm talking about those who go to great lengths to take a personal agenda or vendetta and wrap it with a big red bow, especially at a time when having Christmas lights at all is probably not very "green"—unless that is, they're fluorescent or solar-powered.

There was the man who put a Sherman tank in his front yard each holiday, for example, pointing it at the exclusive Dallas Country Club across the street. (The theory was that it was his way of protesting his having never been admitted as a member, but as my Mom put it, expressing the pique of many of his neighbors: "I don't care why he put that tank in his yard—it was inappropriate! A Sherman tank is just not very Christmas-y.") Then there was my brother's neighbor, who had a string of lights in the shape of a reindeer hung upside down from a tree, like a kill after the hunt. From its gut ran a string of small red lights: blood. The guy was a hunter, and I guess this was his idea of NRA-meets-*It's a Wonderful Life*. (He did eventually take the thing down, maybe because someone told him holiday lights shouldn't scare small children.)

But my current favorite, a beloved perennial in Dallas, is the roughly 24-foot-high wooden oil derrick that goes up each year in a yard not too far from my parents' house. Strung with white lights, a green wreath, and big red bow, it bears a large sign that reads, "Peace on Earth, Good *Wells* To Men." OK, so maybe this isn't very appropriate either. Still, every time I drive by, I can't help but smile, even if I'm also shaking my head and thinking, "Only in Texas." Isn't this the point of holiday lights—to spread a little good cheer?

In that spirit, ***Slate*** invites you to send in photos of your own perverse holiday-light favorites. We'll publish the worst—in the best sense of the word!—later this week and next, and reward the person who submits the top photo with a year's free subscription to ***Slate*** and a hearty round of holiday cheer.

Send your photos of bad holiday light displays here.

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dear prudence

Last Will a Testament to Dad's Hostility

How can we convince my sister she's loved even though our father left her nothing?

Thursday, December 18, 2008, at 6:50 AM ET

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

Dear Prudie,
My only sister has harbored feelings her whole life that she was not as loved by our parents as my brother and me. She has seen therapists for this and struggled with these feelings for many years. After we all learned of this as adults, we tried to be as loving and kind to her as possible. So when our father died a few years ago, my brother and I were horrified and baffled to learn that she was indeed excluded from his will! Our mother let us in on this awful secret, and we all conspired with her to ignore the will and never speak of it to anyone, lest our sister find out. Unfortunately, my sister's husband was also in the room when the will was read; he is an attorney and was there to help with legal issues. He agreed to keep this secret to protect our sister. For some unknown reason, in a fit of complete idiocy, this brother-in-law recently spilled the beans and told our dear sister that she was, in fact, never included in our father's will. My sister completely fell apart. Her deepest fears were proved true, and she now does not want to be a part of our family anymore. Our entire family is furious with her husband, and we cannot understand why anyone who loves her would possibly want to reveal anything so hurtful. We have all tried to reassure her that we love her, our father loved her, and that it was all a mistake, but she believes none of it and now feels that our father hated her. What should we say to her now that she knows?

—A Wounded Family

Dear Wounded,
What your father did wasn't a mistake; it was deliberate. Out of a misplaced desire to protect your sister, all of you have forced her to live a kind of *Gaslight* version of family love. She has known all her life something was seriously amiss, yet has always been told it was just her imagination. Then when you learned just how right she was, your family tried to cover with what must have seemed to her like phony, unctuous displays of affection. This reminds me of the days when people diagnosed with illnesses like cancer or multiple sclerosis were considered too delicate to handle the truth, so they were told that what they were experiencing in their bodies wasn't really happening. I know you all did this out of love, but she has been betrayed by you just as painfully as she was betrayed by your father. He sounds like a despicable man, and she deserved to know that. She also deserves to know that she hasn't been crazy since she was a girl, but that she was right—her father hated her. Stop being mad at your brother-in-law; he should never have entered into this pact, it was a violation of his marital vows, and it's good that the truth is out. Now that it is, all of you owe her an apology. Explain you were all so horrified to find out about your father's actions that you made the mistake of trying to cover them up. Ask her forgiveness and say you now understand the best way to show her how much you love her—and you do—is by telling the truth.

—Prudie

Dear Prudence: Overboard on Christmas

Dear Prudence,
My husband has three children from his first marriage. Every year the three of them—now ages 16, 21, and 25—come to my mother's Christmas party and line up on the couch sullenly, grimly, and silently. This rudeness is extremely embarrassing to me in front of my other relatives. Worse, my husband is kind of powerless when it comes to his kids and tends to join them, silent, on the couch. I would just like to have them not come, because I don't think I can make them talk, but this thought distresses my mother no end. What do I do?

—Lumps of Coal

Dear Lumps,
Be grateful you have such a kind, patient mother and work very hard to emulate her. Usually when relations with stepchildren break down to this point, it starts in one of two ways. One, the children refuse to accept the end of their parents' marriage and treat the new spouse as an evil interloper. Or, two, the new stepparent sees the children as unsightly paraphernalia left over from the previous marriage that need to be unloaded. I note that you say nothing about how your efforts to have cordial relations have been rejected. And you refer to these offspring only as his children, never acknowledging that they're also your stepchildren. There is no excuse for their rudeness, and two of them are adults, for goodness' sake. But perhaps they're acting out, and your husband is not stepping in, because you have always made them feel an unwelcome part of their father's new life. Changing the dynamic will not be easy; it may be impossible. But you need to try. Tell your husband you are really sad about how strained relations are between you and his children and that you would like to enlist his help in making things better. Perhaps before your mother's party you can have all of them over for brunch and tell them your hope for the new year is that you can repair your relationship with them. Don't expect much at first, but keep at it. If you're the kind of second wife who can't stand sharing your husband with his kids, give them all some room and let him spend time alone with them during the year. As for the party, just concentrate on the guests you can make conversation with, and stop sending death rays to the sullen group on the couch.

—Prudie

Dear Prudence,
The manager of our department at work has a cat that got sick and is now being treated at a veterinary hospital. The cost is quite high—my boss estimates that it will be more than $2,000. All of us in the department feel sympathy for our boss. Somebody suggested we get a "get well soon" card for the cat and all sign it. Somebody else suggested we all chip in $10 or $20 to help with the vet bills. I'm OK with the card, but I balk at giving money. There's an implied obligation—nobody wants to be seen as the person who will not contribute (especially when it's for the boss). And there are some in the department who do not think this is a worthy cause—they would rather give their charity dollars to causes that benefit people, not animals (or pricey vets). But because we are doing this as a department, they are afraid not to contribute. What is the best way to handle a situation like this?

—Reluctant Giver

Dear Prudence,
Your boss is entitled to spend whatever she wants (I'm going to make a wild leap that your boss is a she) to save her darling puddy cat. However, if the entire department is speaking with the hushed tones of concern you use around someone whose loved one is gravely ill, then your boss is injecting way too much feline drama into the workplace. If we're lucky, our pets' kidneys give out before ours do, and while an owner can decide it's worth it to pay for dialysis for her cat, surely no one else should be expected to help with the tab for the tabby. This is the not what the presidential candidates were referring to when they talked about the health care crisis of the uninsured, or when they said America needs to do more to ensure the well-being of our vets. And it just seems silly to make everyone sign a "get well soon, Sugar Paws" card. Your boss is in distress, so politely inquire occasionally about the prospects for her cat, then move on to more appropriate topics, such as work.

—Prudie

Dear Prudence,
My husband and I have a difficult relationship with his family. There have been years of insulting behavior on the part of my in-laws, directed at not only my husband and me but my parents as well. As a result, we keep our distance while trying, for the sake of our children, to maintain some level of contact. In contrast, we have a great relationship with my family. During Christmas, we divide the holiday and spend Christmas Eve and Christmas Day with alternate families. This year, we are spending Christmas Day with my in-laws, but they just invited themselves to Christmas Eve dinner with my family. The tension will ruin the day, and it doesn't seem fair to my parents, who won't have time alone with the grandchildren. Are we wrong to tell my in-laws, in the nicest way possible, they aren't welcome?

—Out-law

Dear Out-law
The reason awful people so often get their way is that they are willing to do things decent people wouldn't dream of. Sure, they can say they're coming on Christmas Eve, but someone, preferably your husband, has to counter with, "I'm afraid getting together Christmas Eve as well is not going to work. But we very much look forward to seeing you Christmas Day." Then to all the cries of: "Why not?" "We'll bring our own food," "Are you saying we can't see our grandchildren Christmas Eve?" just repeat: "We look forward to spending Christmas with you this

year. We can't get together Christmas Eve." If they throw a fit and cancel altogether, then Merry Christmas! And if they show up at the door Christmas Eve, tell them you simply haven't got the space or the food to accommodate them, and you will see them tomorrow.

—Prudie

Photograph of Prudie by Teresa Castracane.

explainer

Give Me Your Tired, Your Poor, Your Huddled Penguins …

Why would America protect foreign birds?

By Jacob Leibenluft

Thursday, December 18, 2008, at 6:43 PM ET

The African penguin—also known as the jackass penguin—should be officially designated as an endangered species under U.S. law, according to a recommendation announced by the Fish and Wildlife Service on Wednesday. The agency also suggested that another six species of penguins be given "threatened" status. There aren't any species of penguins native to the United States, so why should the government put them on the list?

Because American pollution might be contributing to their deaths. The government has no need to protect penguins on U.S. soil, as the birds have been sighted in North America on only very rare occasions. (One showed up in an Alaskan fishing net in 2002, and another group was spotted by a research cruise in 1976.) But conservation groups say the birds are being threatened by global warming (which is changing their habitat) and the fishing industry (which competes for their prey), and the United States contributes to both of those problems.

Penguins wouldn't be the first nonnative species to be designated for protection under the Endangered Species Act; of the 1,891 plants and animals listed, 574 are exclusively foreign. In many cases, these species are given protected status so as to prevent the illegal purchase of endangered animals (or animal products) from abroad. In the past, penguins have been threatened by hunters: Their skins were once used to make caps and purses, Indian Ocean fishermen used their meat as fishing bait, and their eggs were a popular food item, particularly in Africa. (A 1908 *New York Times* article [PDF], reporting that South African penguin eggs were especially popular in London, explained that the eggs "when boiled and served cold in salad with shrimps or anchovies and cucumbers proves a real delight to the palate.") In 2005, a hoax Web site convinced some that domesticated penguins could be purchased over the Internet—just $1,465 for a macaroni penguin!—but there doesn't appear to be any genuine market today for penguins or penguin products.

Instead, advocates for listing penguins say the move would allow for other protective measures. For example, it might lead to stricter oversight of U.S.-flagged fishing vessels that sail in the Southern Hemisphere. The Fish and Wildlife Service also has an international program that provides money to programs abroad designed to protect species on the U.S. list.

Finally, environmental groups argue that placing penguins on the endangered species list could put more pressure on government agencies to cut down on greenhouse-gas emissions. (If climate change threatens an endangered species, the argument goes, government reviews intended to ensure that federal projects don't damage those plants and animals might have to take global warming into account.) There's considerable evidence to suggest that climate change is contributing to shrinking penguin populations, but the Endangered Species Act has never before been used to regulate carbon emissions. Environmental groups hoped that would change with the recent listing of the polar bear, but the U.S. Department of the Interior set forth a rule earlier this month to prevent that interpretation of the act.

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

Explainer thanks Brendan Cummings of the Center for Biological Diversity, Pat Parenteau of the Vermont Law School, and Craig Rieben of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

explainer

The Questions We Never Answered in 2008

Digging through the bottom of the Explainer mailbag.

By Daniel Engber

Wednesday, December 17, 2008, at 6:57 AM ET

The Explainer has completed another year of valuable community service. Over the last 12 months, we've told you how to interrogate a small child and given instructions for turning a human skull into a sweet bong. Regular readers learned how to survive a 47-story fall and why you can't survive falling into a black hole. And we had the final word on whether terrorists really bump fists to say hello.

But, for all that, the column managed to address just a tiny fraction of the 8,500 messages that arrived in our mailbox. Today, as part of our Explainer holiday tradition, we present an assortment of inquiries culled from the voluminous backlog.

Below are the reader questions that ***Slate*** felt ill-equipped or unwilling to answer in 2008.

Once again, we'd like you to let us know which of these unanswered questions is most deserving of an answer. The one that receives the most reader votes will be designated the Explainer Question of the Year for 2008 and will be addressed in an upcoming column.

Click here to vote for the Explainer Question of the Year.

The Explainer's Unanswered Questions From 2008

• What is the most disloyal dog breed?

• Why does some music make you want to shake your butt?

• Could you please explain why it is that squirrels are capable of such amazing athletic feats? What is it about their brains and, to a lesser degree, their bodies that allows it? I watch them at my house and have seen some amazing things.

• Why do women like soup? Is it for perceived health benefits? Is it because it's a quasi-comfort food?

• Is it just me, or do all national anthems the world over, no matter how rich and exotic the culture, seem to sound like European marching-band music? Wouldn't one expect China's national anthem be more "plinky"? Shouldn't Iraq's national anthem sound a little more "Arab-y"?

• I am an 11-year-old boy and girls in my class harass me constantly and I want to file a restraining order against one of them. Is that possible?

• It is a common baseball prank to give someone a cream pie in the face during a TV interview. Where do these cream pies come from? Do baseball teams keep cream pies in the dugout?

• Why don't humans have a mating season?

• When and why did the Communist Chinese change the name of their capital "PEKING" to Bazging? Sorry, I don't know how it is spelled. Thank you.

• My toaster identifies which of the two slots should be used for making a single slice of toast. Why does it make a difference which slot I use?

• If one gets a personal e-mail from a very famous or important person, such as the president, or the queen of England, or the Pope, or Paul McCartney, can that e-mail have monetary value? I guess not. It's just an electronic transmission on a screen. There's no original. There's no way to buy or sell it. Seems a shame tho.

• Does indoor tanning hurt your t--- if you have had a breast silicone implant put in for over 30 years?

• Why do all of the deli guys and food cart guys call me "Boss" (well, me and everyone else)?

• I live in Washington, D.C., and we have very long escalators coming out of the Metro. If I grabbed the handrail when I first step onto the escalator and did not let go until I was at the top, my body would be almost prostrate across the steps. As I go higher on the escalator, I have to readjust the hand that is grabbing the rubber handrail. Why can't the companies that make escalators sync the steps and the handrails so that they go the same speed?

• If you were on a boat, what signs do sharks give if they are hungry and will attack versus if they just want to swim around the boat?

• How did early man deal with growing toe and fingernails?

• If someone with DNA from the Stone Age were born today, would they be normal?

• I have been accused of assault in Ohio. The woman fell over a box in the hall backward, and my brother opened the door, saw her lying there, and started hitting me. I got him down and held him down. It was all over a fight concerning my niece. What do you think will happen?

• I wonder what's going on with Obama's eyes. When he made his keynote address to the Democratic Convention in 2004, I noticed his eyes had a bit of a pretty eyes makeup look. I concluded that it was just the makeup they put on him for the TV cameras. But then yesterday on TV I saw some older footage of Obama and again his eyes had that same pretty look. This was before he was nationally known. I looked carefully and I think that look comes from having long eyelashes. I mentioned this to some other people and they noticed it too. But so then where did those long eyelashes go? Maybe eyelashes get shorter with age. Do they? BUT also I'm wondering if Obama has had his eyelashes shortened. If he has had them shortened, I think that's an excellent idea. Because that long lashes pretty eyes look actually doesn't look so good on a man. At least not if he's running for president.

• During this weekend's football playoff game in Green Bay, the temperature at kickoff was 0 degrees, and by the end of the game was -4 degrees. When players get injured in such weather, do they bother putting ice on the injury? Wouldn't that warm up the injury to 32 degrees?

• Burma's dictator has a chestful of b------- medals. What's up with that, Explainer?

• If there is so much oil in the Middle East, could one missile (such as the ones used to penetrate bunkers and caves) explode deep underground and hypothetically blow up a few countries?

• How can personal coaches justify coaching athletes who are much better than they ever were? If they know so much about how to win, why aren't they competing?

• Can men eat the Activia yogurt that is advertised exclusively to the modern woman in khakis? Will it have the same internal regulatory effects on the male system that are promised for the female bowels? If not, why not?

• Can an average person not in politics get a pardon from the president of the United States? (Possession of forged instrument, October of 1989.)

• Is the stomach normally full of air like a balloon, or is it squeezed flat by the other organs, like a balloon with no air that spreads open as food and water come in? Are the other organs squeezed and compressed like a squeezed sponge, or are they like a sponge not being squeezed? What about the intestines? Are they squeezed flat normally, or are they open like one of those long balloons that magicians make animals out of? I'm trying to get a picture in my mind what the inside of the body normally looks like.

• Please explain the method of formation and origin of black holes. Are they located at the Bermuda Triangle area and why there?

• Who made up the rule that if you wore a shirt all day, went home, and washed it, you can't wear it the next day?

• I live in Chicago, where taxi drivers are constantly talking on their phones. To whom are they talking?

• Why do cockroaches flip over on their backsides when they die? I sprayed RAID into a hole in my wall the other day, and by the next morning I found six cockroaches laid out on my floor, all flipped over and all very dead!

• Why do the women gymnasts walk around between events with that goofy arm-swing gait?

• I am 79 years old. I bring this up first to help explain my question. In the late 1930s or early 1940s, I was looking through an old stack of *Life* magazines, and there was a picture of an old couple sitting on the porch of a cabin (or shack) up in the mountains somewhere in Appalachia, with the notation: "The King and Queen of America?" The small article with the picture stated that if George Washington had become king of the U.S., these two would (under the usual custom) be our king and queen. I have thought of this from time to time, even doubted it. (It might have been part of the propaganda of the time, the Depression years, that we were all equal, etc.) I am dimly aware that George Washington had brothers, and that it is possible that the descent is known. As I remember, it was a lovely picture, the old couple looking out over a valley, with mist, and smoking their corncob pipes. Can you find the picture? Can you tell me whether there was truth in the assertion?

• Why are pandas names doubled? Ling Ling, Tuan Tuan, Yuan Yuan.

• Are the frequently used "jaws of life" really necessary or just big-boy toys for rescuers?

• How long can humans live when they are caught on fire? For example, when a car crashes and explodes turns into a gulf of flames, but humans are alive.

• Hi, I am Anna. I am only 11 years old! My friend told me about this black hole, and I have gotten really scared. I don't want to die! I thought if it didn't happen today, it wasn't going to happen. I did not know nothing about it happening in Spring! I find it unfair that scientists are making a machine that could possibly destroy the entire human race. Me and my friends have cried about the black hole, and I find it really upsetting. There has been barely nothing about it on the news. I am so nervous. I just think I am too young to die—is there any way we could stop it happening?

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Which of these questions is most deserving of an answer? The one that receives the most reader votes will be designated the Explainer Question of the Year for 2008 and will be addressed in an upcoming column.

Click here to vote for the Explainer Question of the Year.

Previous Questions of the Year:

2007: Why don't we drop medical waste and nuclear waste into active volcanoes, the "ultimate high-temperature incinerators"?

2006: Can a bar of soap get dirty, or is it self-cleaning because it's soap?

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Which of these questions is most deserving of an answer?
(surveys)

sidebar

Return to article

Which of these questions is most deserving of an answer?
(surveys)

explainer

Slate's Field Guide to Financial Scams

Ponzis, pyramids, and bucket shops.

By Juliet Lapidos

Tuesday, December 16, 2008, at 6:53 PM ET

Federal agents arrested Bernard Madoff on Thursday and charged him with what may be the biggest scam in Wall Street history. The list of wealthy victims includes Elie Wiesel, Steven Spielberg, and the Gift of Life Foundation. News reports are referring to Madoff's fraud as a "Ponzi scheme." What makes a scheme a Ponzi?

Short-term returns are paid out with cash from new investors. The scheme is named after Charles Ponzi, an Italian immigrant who swindled thousands of New Englanders in the early 1920s. Ponzi claimed he'd found a weakness in the postal system (wherein he'd send agents to buy international postal-reply coupons in Italy on the cheap, exchange them for U.S. stamps at a higher value, then sell them) and promised his investors a 50 percent return in 45 days or a 100 percent profit in twice that time. Initially, Ponzi suckered his friends, who spread the word; then he hired agents to find new investors, creating a frenzy. In one spectacular three-hour period, he took in $1 million, and he averaged $200,000 per day in new investments. For a short time he lived in luxury, buying a mansion in Lexington, Mass., but about six months in, the *Boston Post* started running stories questioning Ponzi's strategy. He was arrested shortly thereafter.

Madoff's scam worked a little differently. Peter J. Henning argued in the *New York Times* that it deserves its own moniker since Madoff 1) preyed exclusively on very wealthy investors and 2) offered steady returns of 10 percent a year rather than a quick, spectacular gain. Still, Madoff seems to have financed his scam in the same basic manner as Ponzi.

A **pyramid scheme** functions like a peer-to-peer version of a Ponzi scheme. Instead of funneling payments to a single person—such as Ponzi or Madoff—investors pass the money among themselves. Each new participant must recruit several others to perpetuate the scheme. Eventually, the pyramid collapses because it gets harder and harder to find fresh blood. As this clever SEC chart demonstrates, a pyramid scheme that starts with six people will, after 11 levels, require more members than the U.S. population and, after 13 levels, more than the world population. Albania learned this the hard way. In the mid-'90s, about two-thirds of the population invested in a series of government-endorsed pyramid schemes. When the schemes failed, Albanians took to the streets and more than 2,000 people died in the ensuing riots.

Lots of schemes are stock-market specific. There's the **pump and dump**, in which the perpetrator boosts the price of a stock through false or exaggerated statements, then sells his position at an artificially inflated level. And **front-running**, in which a broker buys himself shares of a stock right before his brokerage buys a much larger block of shares (or recommends the stock as a good prospect). In the **jitney game**, brokers trade a stock back and forth to give the impression that it's a hot commodity. ***Bucket shop*** is a common term for a brokerage that defrauds its customers, usually by selling worthless or highly speculative stocks that it wants to offload. In Season 2 of *The Sopranos*, Christopher runs a bucket shop, selling phony stocks to senior citizens then pocketing the cash.

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

explainer

Voting With Their Feet

What do Iraqis find so insulting about shoes and feet?

By Brian Palmer

Monday, December 15, 2008, at 5:32 PM ET

During a Sunday press conference in Baghdad, an angry Iraqi journalist hurled insults, and his shoes, at President Bush.

According to the *New York Times*, "Hitting someone with a shoe is considered the supreme insult in Iraq." Why is that?

Because they're so dirty. The degree of insult seems to be an idiosyncratic cultural development, as opposed to one that derives from clear textual sources. There's no particular mention in the Quran or any of the Hadith of shoe-throwing or debasement of enemies by exposing them to feet. And historical origins for the tradition are not easily found. However it started, Arabs—and perhaps Iraqis in particular—throw their shoes to indicate that the target is no better than dirt.

The foot has special meaning in many societies. Most cultures see the act of subjecting another to one's feet or shoes as a sign of superiority. (Former U.N. Ambassador Bill Richardson learned this lesson when he enraged Saddam Hussein in a 1995 meeting by accidentally exposing the soles of his feet to the dictator.) Likewise, it's an act of humility—or even worship—to voluntarily subject oneself to another's feet.

Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist temples all require entrants to remove their shoes. Buddhist temples forbid guests to point their feet at a representation of the Buddha, but adherents do display a deep reverence for the feet of deities. Buddha is often represented by a pair of intricately adorned feet or footprints, and some Hindus worship a footprint believed to belong to the god Vishnu. Many Indians also show respect to their parents or grandparents by touching their feet.

In the ancient Near East, it was traditional to offer guests a basin in which to wash their feet. Under Jewish law, the host could also order a servant to wash a guest's feet, as long as the servant was not a Hebrew. Because of this custom, Christians believe that Jesus intended to show humility and servitude to his disciples when he washed their feet at the Last Supper. (This may be why the global aversion to shoes and feet has less force in the Christian world.)

Meanwhile, political shoe-throwing has become something of a free-speech tradition for the newly liberated Iraqis. As U.S. soldiers pulled down a Saddam Hussein statue in 2003, Iraqis flung shoes at the monument. Former interim President Iyad Allawi was also pelted with shoes while campaigning in 2005. Sunday's press conference isn't even the first time a U.S. president has suffered a shoe-related insult in Iraq. After the Persian Gulf War, Saddam Hussein installed a mosaic of President George H.W. Bush on the floor of the Al-Rasheed Hotel. Hussein delighted in releasing images of foreign dignitaries stepping on Bush's face.

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

faith-based

Mitzvah Mobiles

Celebrating Hanukkah with menorah parades.

By Michael Lukas

Friday, December 19, 2008, at 7:05 AM ET

Twenty-two hundred years ago, a small band of traditionalist Jews called the Maccabees rose up in revolt against their Hellenist ruler, Antiochus IV, who had prohibited the practice of Judaism and desecrated the Temple in Jerusalem by sacrificing pigs at the altar. The relatively minor but much-celebrated holiday of Hanukkah commemorates a miracle that occurred in the aftermath of this revolt, when a small amount of sanctified olive oil burned for eight days straight, giving the Jews time to bless a new batch and reconsecrate the temple. These days, most Jews celebrate Hanukkah by playing dreidel, frying latkes, and lighting menorahs. But in the last 30 years, a new ritual has emerged: the menorah parade. Spearheaded by the Orthodox Chabad Lubavitch movement, which has been in the news a great deal since the Mumbai terrorist attacks, the menorah parade is the biggest thing to hit Hanukkah since Adam Sandler tried to rhyme *gin-and-tonic-ah* with *marijuani-cah*.

Click here for a slide-show essay on Hanukkah's menorah parades.

family

Oy, Hark!

A Jewish parent's guide to Christmas specials.

By Dahlia Lithwick

Wednesday, December 17, 2008, at 3:01 PM ET

If you are a little Jewish kid, Santa Claus does not enter your home via the chimney on Christmas Eve. Instead, he arrives in late fall, usually by way of the Target catalogue and the television set. And if you are a little Jewish kid confronting old St. Nick for the first time via Frosty, Rudolph, Charlie Brown, or the 1966 animated version of *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, you may find yourself with a lot of questions. "Mamma, who is Center and where are my presents?" asked my 3-year-old, rather

randomly, in October. "Mommy, is Santa real?" my 5-year-old asks pretty much daily. In the way of 5-year-old boys everywhere, he follows that one up with "Mom, if Santa and Judah the Maccabee got in a fight, who would win?"

One needn't be virulently anti-Christmas to experience the seasonal anxiety felt by parents who want their children to enjoy the winter holidays while avoiding religious indoctrination. That's what makes parenting Jewish kids at Christmastime such a fraught proposition. Jewish women who as children were whisked away to Jewish vacation resorts in Florida marry Jewish men who hung Hanukkah stockings next to a Hanukkah bush, alongside the plate of gefilte fish they'd left out for Santa. It's hard enough reconciling two deeply held versions of the Jewish holidays. Just try blending two deeply held traditions regarding the noncelebration of Christmas.

I, for instance, grew up in a household that viewed only *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* and *A Charlie Brown Christmas* as acceptable Jewish holiday fare. My husband, on the other hand, tells me he grew up with unfettered access to the whole panoply of animated Christmas specials. When we discussed this for the first time last weekend, I gasped: "They let you watch *Rudolph*?" I confess that I spoke the words as though his family had permitted him to spend his Decembers camped out in a crèche.

Whether you are Christian or Jewish, come Easter and Passover, *The Ten Commandments* represents one-stop entertainment shopping. But there are few winter holiday movies that speak to all religions. So last week I sent out an e-mail and posted on Facebook asking Jewish friends how they decided on the permissibility of the Christmas television specials. The responses were amazing. And also bonkers.

Overwhelmingly, the consensus was this: Jewish kids of my generation were permitted to watch one or all of: *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, and *The Year Without Santa Claus*. Therefore, their children are also allowed to watch them. But ask them why these movies pass muster and prepare for whomping exhibitions of illogic as only the People of the Book can practice it.

I learned this week that there exists an unspoken "no Jesus" rule, a "no Santa" rule (thus no *Rudolph*), a "no saints" rule (thus no *Night before Christmas*), a "no resurrections" rule (even if it's resurrection by proxy; thus no *Frosty*), and also a "no bad music" rule (thus no *Pee-Wee's Playhouse Christmas Special*). Perhaps my favorite e-mail laying out a Unified Theory of Jewish Christmas Viewing drew the line thus: "claymation and puppets, esp. from Europe = yes; cheap animation and pop music, esp. from US = no."

All of these rules would make more sense, of course, were it not for the fact that, as I mentioned above, apparently all Jewish children are permitted to watch *A Charlie Brown Christmas*.

This despite the fact that the classic ends with Linus Van Pelt earnestly reciting from Luke 2:8-14: "Fear not: For behold, I bring unto you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the City of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you."

It nevertheless seems there's something about that poor schlump of a Charlie Brown and his inability to get into the spirit of Christmas (much less receive a single Christmas card) that speaks to the Jewish people. Indeed, if there is a more profoundly Jewish line than Linus' "How can you take a wonderful season like Christmas and turn it into a problem?" I have yet to hear it.

Many Jewish kids I heard from were permitted to watch the Grinch every year, yet somehow nobody (including my parents) is able to explain why this is so. Nearly everyone who wrote to me explained that the Boris Karloff version of the Grinch was "a classic." OK. But dig a little deeper and what surfaces is a universal (and discomfiting) sense that the *Grinch* is a fundamentally Jewish show because the Grinch himself is a fundamentally Jewish character. I got one e-mail that concluded, "Who is more of a Grinch than a grumpy old Jew?" And a Jew with a heart problem no less?

A fair point, perhaps, but why do Jewish parents want to be pushing this peculiarly self-loathing vision of the bitter old Jewish man on their kids? Do we drag our kids to see *The Merchant of Venice*? If anything, the weird Grinch-as-old-Jew notion would seem to suggest that of all things Jewish kids should *not* be watching at Christmastime, the Seussian classic tops the list. But perhaps my colleague Emily Bazelon is right, and Jewish kids like the Grinch because "Without the ending, the movie is the ultimate fantasy for a Jewish kid with a case of Santa/tree/carols envy—Christmas, canceled."

To the panoply of Christmas rejecters and cancellers above, one can readily add the Heat Miser and Snow Miser from *The Year Without Santa*. Again, the show clearly violates the "No Santa" rule, and yet nearly everyone I spoke to grandfathered it in as Jewishly acceptable. Asked why, the response is that the sheer genius of the Heat Miser/Snow Miser musical rivalry redeems any sectarian message. Yet it's hard not to wonder again whether there's something about the grouchy, bitter misers—*misers!*—poised to wreck Christmas that seems to speak to Jewish parents.

Ultimately, most Jewish parents wrestling with what to let their kids watch at Christmastime seemed really to be coping with their own remembered feelings of exclusion. (That's why this may be the single greatest Jewish Christmas song ever written.) It may also explain why little Jewish kids get to watch so many shows in which Christmas almost doesn't happen—or about grouchy people who feel bitterly lacking in the Christmas spirit.

None of this solves any of my own questions about what to tell my children about the sudden appearance-but-not-acceptance of Santa in their lives. Perhaps it is instructive that my 5-year-old's Judah the Maccabee story is a seamless and lengthy narrative of Hasmonean warriors, light sabers, and the spiritually redemptive powers of heat vision, such that tossing a Rudolph or Frosty into the mix will hardly dilute its already syncretic spiritual appeal. This is not so much an argument for the great universalist Teddy Ruxpin Christmas display as a suggestion that the proper non-Christian response to Christmas joy is not to try to block, suppress, or hide from it. Or to limit our kids' Christmas viewing to movies featuring charming yet bitter protagonists bent on blocking, suppressing, or hiding from it.

In my research for this piece, I finally sat down and watched Frosty, Rudolph, and Pee-Wee's Christmas special. And in doing so, I came across a good deal of material that may well have been more familiar to the Maccabee brothers than to Santa. Indeed, Rudolph's immortal words to Hermey the Misfit Elf may be said to poignantly encapsulate 5,000 years of Jewish aspiration: "Goodbye, Hermey. Whatever a dentist is, I hope someday you will be the greatest!"

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fighting words

Three Questions About Rick Warren's Role in the Inauguration

If we must have an officiating priest, surely we can do better than this vulgar huckster.

By Christopher Hitchens

Friday, December 19, 2008, at 11:33 AM ET

It is theoretically possible to make an apparently bigoted remark that is also factually true and morally sound. Thus, when the Rev. Bailey Smith, one of the deputies of the late Jerry Falwell, claimed that "God almighty does not hear the prayer of a Jew," I was in complete agreement with him. This is because I do not believe that there is any supernatural supervisor who lends an ear to any prayer.

In the same way, if someone publicly charges that "Mormonism is a cult," it is impossible to say that the claim by itself is mistaken or untrue. However, if the speaker says that heaven is a real place but that you will not get there if you are Jewish, or that Mormonism is a cult and a false religion but that other churches and faiths are the genuine article, then you know that the bigot has spoken. That's all in a day's work for the wonderful world of the American evangelical community, and one wishes them all the best of luck in their energetic fundraising and their happy-clappy Sunday "Churchianity" mega-feel-good fiestas. However, do we want these weirdos and creeps officiating in any capacity at the inauguration of the next president of the United States?

It is a fact that Rick Warren, pastor of the Saddleback Church in Orange County, Calif., was present at a meeting of the Aspen Institute not long ago and was asked by Lynda Resnick—she of the pomegranate-juice dynasty—if a Jew like herself could expect to be admitted to paradise. Warren publicly told her no. What choice did he have? His own theology says that only those who accept Jesus can hope to be saved. I have just missed the chance to debate on CBS with one of Warren's leading allies and defenders, the Dallas preacherman who calls himself Dr. Robert Jeffress. In the opinion of this learned fellow, even though Mitt Romney "talks about Jesus as his lord and savior, he is not a Christian. Mormonism is not Christianity."

It is also a fact that Rick Warren proclaims as his original mentor a man named Wallie Amos Criswell, who was the inspirational figure in the rightward move of the Southern Baptist Convention in the 1960s. *Rightward* in that time and context meant exactly what you might suspect it did—a cold hostility to any civil rights activism on the part of the churches. Theologically, it also meant the crack-brained idea of "dispensationalist premillennialism," or, in other words, the imminence of planetary death and the corollary joys of the "rapture" that would snatch the true believer into the skies just in time.

In his own " purpose-driven" words, Warren has described the dismal nutbag Criswell as the "greatest American pastor of the 20th century" and has told us of the mystic moment in the 1970s when he himself was granted a laying on of Criswell's hands. (The promise, you may not be startled to hear, was of a large and prosperous congregation in the young man's future.)

I think we are all entitled to ask and to keep asking every member of the Obama transition team until we receive a satisfactory answer, the following questions:

- Will Warren be invited to the solemn ceremony of inauguration without being asked to repudiate what he has directly said to deny salvation to Jews?
- Will he be giving a national invocation without disowning what his mentor said about civil rights and what his leading supporter says about Mormons?
- Will the American people be prayed into the next administration, which will be confronted by a possible nuclear Iran and an already nuclear Pakistan, by a half-educated pulpit-pounder raised in the belief that the Armageddon solution is one to be anticipated with positive glee?

As Barack Obama is gradually learning, his job is to be the president of all Americans at all times. If he likes, he can oppose the idea of marriage for Americans who are homosexual. That's a policy question on which people may and will disagree. However, the man he has chosen to deliver his inaugural invocation is a relentless clerical businessman who raises money

on the proposition that certain Americans—non-Christians, the wrong kind of Christians, homosexuals, nonbelievers—are of less worth and littler virtue than his own lovely flock of redeemed and salvaged and paid-up donors.

This quite simply cannot stand. Is it possible that Obama did not know the ideological background of his latest pastor? The thought seems plausible when one recalls the way in which he tolerated the odious Jeremiah Wright. Or is it possible that he *does* know the background of racism and superstition and sectarianism but thinks (as with Wright) that it might be politically useful in attracting a certain constituency? Either of these choices is pretty awful to contemplate.

A president may by all means use his office to gain re-election, to shore up his existing base, or to attract a new one. But the day of his inauguration is not one of the days on which he should be doing that. It is an event that belongs principally to the voters and to their descendants, who are called to see that a long tradition of peaceful transition is cheerfully upheld, even in those years when the outcome is disputed. I would myself say that it doesn't need a clerical invocation at all, since, to borrow Lincoln's observation about Gettysburg, it has already been consecrated. But if we must have an officiating priest, let it be some dignified old hypocrite with no factional allegiance and not a tree-shaking huckster and publicity seeker who believes that millions of his fellow citizens are hellbound because they do not meet his own low and vulgar standards.

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fighting words

'Tis the Season To Be Incredulous

The moral and aesthetic nightmare of Christmas.

By Christopher Hitchens

Monday, December 15, 2008, at 12:19 PM ET

I had never before been a special fan of that great comedian Phyllis Diller, but she utterly won my heart this week by sending me an envelope that, when opened, contained a torn-off square of brown-bag paper of the kind suitable for latrine duty in an ill-run correctional facility. Duly unfurled, it carried a handwritten salutation reading as follows:

> Money's scarce
> Times are hard
> Here's your f******
> Xmas card

I could not possibly improve on the sentiment, but I don't think it ought to depend on the current austerities. Isn't Christmas a moral and aesthetic nightmare whether or not the days are prosperous?

The late Art Buchwald made himself additionally famous by reprinting a spoof Thanksgiving column that ran unchanged for many decades after its first appearance in the *Herald Tribune*, setting a high threshold of reader tolerance. My own wish is more ambitious: to write an anti-Christmas column that becomes fiercer every year while remaining, in essence, the same. The core objection, which I restate every December at about this time, is that for almost a whole month, the United States—a country constitutionally based on a separation between church and state—turns itself into the cultural and commercial equivalent of a one-party state.

As in such dismal banana republics, the dreary, sinister thing is that the official propaganda is *inescapable*. You go to a train station or an airport, and the image and the music of the Dear Leader are everywhere. You go to a more private place, such as a doctor's office or a store or a restaurant, and the identical tinny, maddening, repetitive ululations are to be heard. So, unless you are fortunate, are the same cheap and mass-produced images and pictures, from snowmen to cribs to reindeer. It becomes more than usually odious to switch on the radio and the television, because certain officially determined "themes" have been programmed into the system. Most objectionable of all, the fanatics force your children to observe the Dear Leader's birthday, and so (this being the especial hallmark of the totalitarian state) you cannot bar your own private door to the hectoring, incessant noise, but must have it literally brought home to you by your offspring. Time that is supposed to be devoted to education is devoted instead to the celebration of mythical events. Originally Christian, this devotional set-aside can now be joined by any other sectarian group with a plausible claim—Hanukkah or Kwanzaa—to a holy day that occurs near enough to the pagan winter solstice.

I have just flung aside my copy of the *Weekly Standard*, a magazine with a generally hardheaded and humorous approach to matters. It contains two seasonal articles that would probably not have made print were it not for the proximity to the said solstice. (To be fair, the same can be said of the article that you are reading, but I claim exemption under the terms of the "to hell with all that" amendment.) In the first example, the gifted Joseph Bottum complains that it's hard to write a new Christmas carol lyric because—well, because the existing model is composed of songs of such illiterate banality! But he presses on heroically with an attempt to compose a fresh carol, while fully admitting that the recently invented tradition of such songs creates an almost oppressive weight of kitsch. (He also complains of the doggerel-like mystifications of carols like "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen" while not daring to state the case at its most damning—as in ridiculous and nasty lines such as "This holy tide of Christmas all others doth deface." Believe me when I say that I know my stuff here and have paid my dues.)

The second essay is a review by Mark Tooley of a terrible-sounding book called *Jesus for President* by a terrible-sounding person named Shane Claiborne. You know the sort of thing very well: Jesus would have been a "human shield" in Baghdad in 2003; the United States is the modern equivalent of the Roman Empire. It's the usual "liberation theology" drivel, whereby everybody except the inhabitants of the democratic West is supposed to abjure violence. (To the question of whether the plan to kill Hitler was moral or not, Claiborne cites no less an authority than the Führer's own secretary to claim that "all hopes for peace were lost" after the 1944 attempt. That, as should be obvious even to the most flickering intelligence, was chiefly because the attempt was a failure. What an idiot!)

But why is a magazine of the intelligentsia doing this to us, and to itself, this month? Tooley wants to prove that the legendary Jesus would have been more judicious and perhaps more neoconservative on these points. How can he hope to know that, or even to guess at it? Suppose we put the question like this: Imagine that conclusive archaeological and textual evidence emerged to prove that the whole story of the birth, life, and death of Jesus of Nazareth was either a delusion or a fabrication? Suppose the mother had admitted shyly that, in fact, she had fallen pregnant for predictable reasons? Suppose we found the post-Calvary body?

Serious Christians, of the sort I have been debating lately, would have no choice but to consider such news as absolutely calamitous. The light of the world would have gone out; the hope of humanity would have been extinguished. (The same obviously would apply to Muslims who couldn't bear the shock of finding that their prophet was fictional or fraudulent.) But I invite you to consider things more lucidly. If all the official stories of monotheism, from Moses to Mormonism, were to be utterly and finally discredited, *we would be exactly where we are now*. All the agonizing questions that we face, from the idea of the good life and our duties to each other to the concept of justice and the enigma of existence itself, would be just as difficult and also just as fascinating. It takes a totalitarian mind-set to claim that only one Bronze Age Palestinian revelation or prophecy or text can be our guide through this labyrinth. If the totalitarians cannot bear to abandon their adoration of their various Dear Leaders, can they not at least arrange to hold their ceremonies in private? Either that or give up the tax-exempt status that must remind them so painfully of the things of this material world.

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foreigners

Breach of Trust

Bernard Madoff's massive fraud will cripple American capitalism.

By Anne Applebaum

Monday, December 15, 2008, at 8:03 PM ET

Scene 1: We are buying an apartment in Warsaw, Poland, sometime in the early 1990s. At every stage of the transaction, both my husband and I have to show up in person, stand in line, and present identity cards. We appear at the notary's office more than once. We appear at the tax office more than once. Finally, we are asked to hand over a briefcase full of dollars. The seller will not accept a bank transfer and does not want to be paid in his country's currency, either.

Scene 2: We are buying a car in Washington, D.C., sometime in the early 2000s. We test-drive a few and tell the dealer which car we want. We hand him a personal check, which he accepts without asking for an identity card. My husband asks if he isn't worried the check will bounce. The dealer laughs, and we drive out of the dealership in a brand-new car.

Two different times, two different places, but above all, two different kinds of capitalism: If Francis Fukuyama, the author of *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*, were writing this article, he would describe the Warsaw of the first scene as a "low trust" culture and the Washington of the second as a "high trust" culture. One could also call them a "place where financial transactions are irritating and time-consuming" and "a place where financial transactions are easy," respectively. Such labels do not last forever, though. In the nearly two decades that have passed since the early 1990s, bank transfers, telephone transactions, and the use of the local currency have all become the norm in Warsaw. The question now is whether American capitalism will also change over the next two decades—and for the worse.

Reading the accounts of the collapse of Bernard L. Madoff Investment Securities, it is impossible not to conclude that it will. The scale of this fraud stretches far beyond anything a car dealer or even the purchaser of an apartment might commit, of course: Among the victims of Madoff's extraordinary pyramid scheme are major banks (BNP Parisbas, Nomura Securities), famous people (Mort Zuckerman), and Madoff's friends from the Palm Beach Country Club. In the wake of Madoff's arrest, charities are going to close, and previously rich people will become poor. Worst of all, everyone who invests anywhere will think just that much harder, take that much longer, demand that much more documentation. And they will do so not only because of Madoff, but because of the subprime lenders, Wall Street investment banks, and Enron fraudsters who have worked so hard to erode our faith in the reliability of our system.

The deeper irony here is that all these schemes were only possible in the first place precisely because we have, until now, lived in a culture with such extraordinarily high levels of trust, a culture in which a customer's bona fides are accepted without question and wealthy people are thought to have earned their money. In our culture, someone like Madoff was trusted precisely because he was rich; because he was a member of the Palm Beach Country Club; because his company worked out of

expensive Manhattan offices, most of which were occupied by people doing real jobs. It occurred to no one that a small group of select insiders was also operating a massive fraud scheme on the 17th floor.

In other cultures—maybe most other cultures—very rich people are suspect by definition. Recently, I met a wealthy Russian and automatically assumed he was the beneficiary of some shady scheme: How else would someone from that part of the world get rich? In fact, he turned out to be the CEO of a Western-owned company in Kiev, Ukraine, and totally above board. But I know why I made the mistake: I still remember—and Russians still remember—the fraudulent "privatization" deals and complex money-laundering operations that created so many Russian billionaires over the last two decades. I also remember the extraordinary saga of the MMM company, which in the 1990s defrauded some 2 million Russians of $1.5 billion, using what will now surely be known as the *second*-largest pyramid scheme of all time. Back then, we thought such blatant fraud could only take place in the lawlessness of the post-Soviet world.

We were wrong. Madoff's pyramid scheme, far broader than anything MMM dreamed up, was made possible by our own tradition of lawfulness. And now he will help bring that tradition down. Here's a prediction: In the coming years, American capitalism will become slower, more cautious, less productive, and less entrepreneurial. We're still a long way from Eastern Europe of the 1990s or from the Latin America or Russia of the present. But maybe not as far as we think.

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gabfest

The Invocation Gabfest

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

By Emily Bazelon, John Dickerson, and David Plotz

Friday, December 19, 2008, at 11:12 AM ET

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

John points out the good stuff at USA.Gov.

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

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

Dec. 12, 2008

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

John talks about how Obama looked when the Blagojevich complaint became public. According to the complaint, Blagojevich was angry that Obama would not play along with his effort to benefit by appointing the next senator. But John says Obama's first public statements concerning Blagojevich left a good deal to be desired.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dec. 5, 2008

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nov. 26, 2008

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

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

Emily Bazelon, John Dickerson, and David Plotz talk politics. This week, they discuss Barack Obama's Cabinet appointments, the financial bailout and other economic woes, and the Obamas' choice of school for their daughters.

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

The Obama transition team officially announced the top slots on its economic team, and the stock market rallied on the news.

Emily says that given the difficult economic situation facing the incoming administration, the transition is taking too long. The others disagree, however, with John saying the transition is moving forward at a breakneck pace, while David says time is needed to make certain that the right people are put in place.

John says that Obama performed well in his first news conferences since the election. He says Obama's answers to questions posed by reporters are full of detail and clearly show that he is listening.

The Obamas have chosen Sidwell Friends School in Washington, D.C., for their daughters. It is John's alma mater. It's also where Chelsea Clinton went to school, along with many other famous children, prompting John to suggest that the school is a good location for high-profile children because it is used to dealing with the significant security concerns these students present.

The Obamas have named family friend Desiree Rogers as the White House social secretary. She will be the first African-American to hold that position.

Emily chatters about the trial of Lori Drew, a woman charged in connection with the death of 13-year-old Megan Meier.

David talks about a short film, *The Civil War in Four Minutes*. The video was produced by the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum and is now available online. David says it is well worth watching.

The show closes with a discussion of a new program in New Haven, Conn., in which owners of hybrid cars can get stickers allowing them to park for free at meters throughout the city.

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 Nov. 26 by Dale Willman at 12:06 p.m.

Nov. 21, 2008

Listen to the Gabfest for Nov. 21 by clicking the arrow on the audio player below:

You can also download the program here, or you

can subscribe to the weekly Gabfest podcast feed in iTunes by clicking here.

Emily Bazelon, John Dickerson, and David Plotz talk politics. This week, the Obama administration begins to take shape, politicians jockey for position, and the Big Three automakers come to Washington.

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

Among the people mentioned as potential Cabinet members are Sen. Hillary Clinton and Arizona Gov. Janet Napolitano. Media reports indicate that former Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle has been selected to become the next Health and Human Services secretary.

The group discusses what it calls the endless speculation over Obama's Cabinet.

There has been a great deal of discussion about the possible nomination of Eric Holder as attorney general. One potential pitfall for such a nomination is Holder's involvement in Bill Clinton's pardon of Marc Rich.

John mentions the so-called "Team of Rivals" approach to forming a Cabinet.

John talks about how President Bush's approval ratings continue to be low, even after the election. He says this is not helping the "Republican brand."

Alaska Sen. Ted Stevens is out, losing a squeaker to Anchorage Mayor Mark Begich. His loss came the same week as his 85th birthday.

California Democratic Rep. Henry A. Waxman has been voted the incoming chairman of the House energy and commerce committee, ousting Rep. John Dingell of Michigan.

Former Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney made headlines this week with his *New York Times* op-ed, "Let Detroit Go Bankrupt."

Emily chatters about a federal court ruling involving five Algerian detainees at Guantanamo Bay. The judge, an appointee of President George H.W. Bush, ruled that the five men have been held unlawfully and should be released.

David discusses the real estate frenzy in Washington, D.C., brought on by the inauguration. Many D.C.-area residents are renting out their homes and apartments for huge amounts to people hoping to visit the capital for the festivities. By some estimates, as many as 4 million people are expected to descend on Washington.

John talks about the resurrection of photographs from *Life* magazine. The photos are now being made available through Google. Among them are several of former NBC correspondent Nancy Dickerson, John's mother.

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 Nov. 21 by Dale Willman at 10:30 a.m.

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hot document

Madoff 'n' Jeff

Bernie Madoff and his accountant made the oddest of couples.

By Bonnie Goldstein

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

From: Bonnie Goldstein

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

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

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

The two companies were, indeed, an odd match. On the Madoff Investment Securities Web site (Pages 2-4), which has now been removed and replaced with a trustee notice, the Wall Street powerhouse boasted of being "one of the first U.S. members of

the London Stock exchange." Friehling led a more provincial life, delightedly relating last year in the "Trusted Professional," a newsletter for certified public accountants, that while touring Europe last year he and his wife foiled potential pickpockets by relying on a prepaid debit card rather than cash (below). "Although the seascape and the historical sites differ dramatically from those in the U.S.," Friehling wrote, "we are all operating in a 21st-century economy. When exiting ruins that are over 2,500 years old, there you find it: the bank ATM!"

Please send suggestions for Hot Document to documents@slate.com.

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

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

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

hot document

A Hold on Holder?

Senators squabble over how soon to hold the confirmation hearing for Obama's attorney-general nominee.

By Bonnie Goldstein

Monday, December 15, 2008, at 3:31 PM ET

From: Bonnie Goldstein

Posted Monday, December 15, 2008, at 3:31 PM ET

Senate judiciary committee Chairman Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., scheduled a confirmation hearing for Eric Holder, President-elect Obama's choice for attorney general, on Jan. 8. The committee's ranking Republican, Sen. Arlen Specter, R-Pa., says that's too soon. On Dec. 10, Specter urged that the hearing be put off until Jan. 26, citing a need to investigate Holder's role (while serving as President Clinton's deputy attorney general) in the 2001 pardon of Marc Rich and the "alleged—and I emphasize alleged—illegal fundraising by Vice President Albert Gore out of the White House" in 1996. Judging from this document request by Specter and other Republican committee members—see below and the following page—Specter would also like to grill Holder about Clinton-era foreign donations to the Democratic Party; the granting of clemency in 1999 to jailed Puerto Rican nationalists; the 2000 Border Patrol raid in which Elian Gonzales was seized from his Miami relatives so he could be returned to his father in Cuba; the 1993 confrontation in Waco, Texas, between the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Branch Davidian sect; and the independent-counsel investigation of and subsequent impeachment proceedings against President Clinton.

Leahy answered Specter's request with a testy three-page letter (see Pages 3-5) hinting broadly that Specter's calendar wasn't too jammed to schedule a 14-day foreign junket prior to the hearing. The Democratic chairman noted that the hearing date had already been changed once to accomodate a planned Republican caucus retreat on Jan. 7. When President Bush named Michael Mukasey to succeed Alberto Gonzales as attorney general, *he* (Leahy) "did not delay in scheduling that hearing" and "received criticism from my side of the aisle" for moving swiftly. Leahy then recited various other instances in recent history when the judiciary committee moved quickly to confirm various attorney generals. In effect, Leahy was telling Specter: *Put a sock in it.*

Please send Hot Document suggestions to documents@slate.com.

Posted Monday, December 15, 2008, at 3:31 PM ET

Posted Monday, December 15, 2008, at 3:31 PM ET

Posted Monday, December 15, 2008, at 3:31 PM ET

Posted Monday, December 15, 2008, at 3:31 PM ET

human nature

Saving Face

Face transplants for the "socially crippled."

By William Saletan

Thursday, December 18, 2008, at 7:41 AM ET

Don't look now, but a woman in Ohio has a new face. And the world has a new kind of medicine: socially necessary surgery.

The operation, announced yesterday at the Cleveland Clinic, was a face transplant from a corpse. Similar procedures have been done three times before, but this was the biggest. Doctors replaced 77 square inches of the patient's face, from her eyelids to her chin. Go look at yourself in the mirror. That's practically the whole you.

Medically, it's a triumph. Transplants used to be mortally necessary and relatively simple: kidneys, livers, hearts. Patients got these surgeries because if they didn't, they'd die. And though the surgeries were risky, the tissues involved were straightforward. The blood vessels that had to be connected were manageable in number and size.

Today, transplantation has advanced to parts that are less vital and sometimes much trickier: ovaries, uteruses, penises, hands, arms, and now faces. As surgeons venture closer to the body's surface, two things happen. The recipient's body becomes more likely to reject the transplant, increasing the need for drugs that suppress the immune system, which in turn raises the risk of infection and cancer. By some estimates, the price can be a decade of life. And the muscles, nerves, and blood vessels involved become ever smaller and more intricate. One doctor involved in the Cleveland transplant calls it "the most complex surgical procedure ever performed."

Then why do it? Why spend hundreds of thousands of dollars and risk a patient's life to fix a nonlethal defect? The Cleveland doctors give three reasons. First, this patient had facial damage that impaired her physical functions. She couldn't eat normally, and she could breathe only through a hole in her windpipe. Second, faces, unlike kidneys, have social functions. "They are essential to our communication with the world," argues Maria Siemionow, the doctor who led the Cleveland team. They convey emotion as well as speech.

Those are good points. Physical function is the traditional purpose of surgery. Social function is a newer concept but makes sense: You need facial muscles to interact with others. We're still talking about functions; they just happen to be social. But then the Cleveland doctors take the next step: They remove functionality from the equation. Having a normal face is socially necessary, they argue, not just because of what your face does, but because of how it looks. Appearance alone can be grounds for a potentially lethal procedure.

Siemionow made this case in a book published last year. People with serious facial damage are "socially crippled in a society that appears to value beauty above all other human characteristics," she wrote. That's what happened to the Cleveland patient. She "was called names and was humiliated," Siemionow told reporters yesterday. "When she was on the street, people were turning their heads." Eric Kodish, the Cleveland Clinic's chief ethicist, added, "Human beings are inherently social creatures. A person who has sustained trauma or other devastation to the face is generally isolated and suffers tremendously." He concluded: "The relief of suffering is at the core of medical ethics and provides abundant moral justification for this procedure."

Yes, suffering cries out for relief. But when the suffering is social and the relief is surgical, where are we going? We're drifting from a standard of necessity rooted in you to a

standard—"socially crippled"—that's dictated by others. And instead of changing them, we're changing and endangering you. The Cleveland doctors say their patient consented freely. They asked her, for example, whether it was she or her family who wanted the transplant. But how free can your choice be when the reason you want it is to escape humiliation?

Art Caplan, an ethicist who used to oppose face transplants, now endorses the Cleveland procedure. "The stigma of severe facial deformity is so enormous, so staggering, that many simply withdraw from society," he writes. "After talking to some people with severe facial disfigurement, I realize it makes ethical sense to offer a form of surgery that might kill the patient, because the suffering of the afflicted is so great that they are willing to risk death." Even if the suffering is social, patients are entitled to decide that ending it is worth that risk.

But if social suffering justifies procedures whose physical risks outweigh their physical benefits, where does that logic end? For Caplan, it goes all the way. "There are no second chances with face transplants—the damage of rejection makes that impossible," he observes. So if a patient risks death for a normal face and loses that face to immune rejection, she might prefer death. "What if someone facing this horrendous prospect—life with no face at all—says no to artificial feeding or breathing?" Caplan asks. "What if they beg for morphine to help them die painlessly and more quickly?" Doctors, he concludes, must "be ready to help that person in any way necessary, including assistance in dying."

I feel for the Cleveland patient. I hope her new face ends her suffering. I just don't want to end up killing her—and calling that her choice—because we made her life hell.

(**Now playing at the Human Nature blog**: *1. Incubators from car parts. 2. Can a* Simpsons *cartoon be child pornography? 3. Banning tobacco for college students.)*

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jurisprudence

Sitting on Great Judges

Where Obama should look when he makes his first appointments to the bench.

By Emily Bazelon and Judith Resnik

Friday, December 19, 2008, at 12:35 PM ET

Next summer, Barack Obama may get to make a Supreme Court appointment. But before then, he'll give us a preview by filling 13 vacant slots on the federal appeals courts.

The appellate picks relate to the higher-profile question of the Supreme Court; Obama can set up judges to elevate later. (George Bush tapped John Roberts for the D.C. Circuit two years before making him chief justice.) But whether or not they get promoted on high, whoever takes the new seats on the various circuits will have a profound effect on the law. The Supreme Court decides fewer than 90 cases a year; the appellate courts hear 60,000 every year.

Since Ronald Reagan, Republican administrations have self-consciously sought to staff those circuits with judges who share their views. Now it's Obama's turn. During the campaign, he cited Earl Warren as a model, signaling that he wanted more judges with experience in other branches of government. A fine direction. But what's needed right now are new circuit judges who are already expert in changing the law.

Obama should look to sitting district court judges who have shown their dedication to opening up the courts as an avenue for redress. If they go up to the appeals courts, these judges will have more impact more quickly than the lawyers or academics lining up for appointments. District court judges know the ins and outs of their particular circuit's legal rules, and they understand how to fashion standards that trial judges can use. They also know the personalities of the circuit judges they'd be serving with, which helps for effectively negotiating on the standard appellate panel of three.

Examples from different parts of the country help to make the point. Myron Thompson is a district judge in Alabama. President Carter chose him in 1980 at the age of 33 in an effort to put a black judge on Alabama's federal trial court. Thompson's opinions on voting rights and on who has standing to bring lawsuits are regularly invoked by other courts. He's also the judge who was undaunted by Alabama Chief Justice Roy Moore when Moore insisted on displaying a massive granite Ten Commandments monument in the courthouse. Thompson ruled that effort a violation of the constitutionally required separation between church and state. The religious right called for Thompson's impeachment, but the 5th Circuit repeatedly upheld his rulings. Like the stone monument, Moore was finally removed from Alabama's court.

Moving toward the middle of the country, another standout judge is Mark Bennett, appointed by Bill Clinton to Iowa's federal trial court. In 2000, the 8th Circuit asked Bennett to hear a set of cases "by designation" (as district judges occasionally do). He showed what a difference he could make by writing a powerful dissent in a case called *Lee v. Kemna*. The question was whether the federal courts could hear claims by a criminal defendant, Remon Lee, about why his alibi witnesses disappeared from court before testifying. Lee asked for just one day to look for them, and later it emerged that they might have been sent away by a court official. Without his witnesses, Lee was convicted and sentenced to life without parole. He lost all his bids to be heard—including at the 8th Circuit, where the other two judges on Bennett's panel voted against him. But Bennett's

brilliant and detailed dissent caught the attention of the Supreme Court, which reversed 6 to 3. In her opinion, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg cited Bennett's argument that the trial judge had assumed that the witnesses had "abandoned" Lee without "a scintilla of evidence or a shred of information."

Our third standout district court judge (who is also a friend and a former ***Slate*** blogger) is Nancy Gertner, a Clinton appointee from Massachusetts. She is an expert on the law of sentencing, pioneering the view that judges should interpret, rather than slavishly apply, the federal sentencing guidelines. Gertner is also a leader on equality law. In one case, she ruled that labeling a person not "a real man" was illegal sex stereotyping and so could be the basis of an employment suit. In case after case, she does the hard and detailed legal work of writing careful opinions to explain the law she is applying.

We could add to this list of district court judges (and we invite others to help round it out, too). Our point is that Obama should include some proven and experienced change-makers among his appellate appointments. As Charlie Savage underscored in the *New York Times* earlier this fall, Bush has appointed more than one-third of the total current federal judiciary. With the aid of his judges, the law of government immunity has grown, shielding from lawsuits more states and their executive officials (and after this term, likely their prosecutors). Meanwhile, the law of liability has shrunk, so that investors trying to show securities violations have a harder time getting into court and then proving their claims. Bush's appointees have also helped narrow opportunities to enforce federal rights, for example against age discrimination or to protect truth-in-lending. And for people who are in detention—seeking asylum, protesting deportation for other reasons, or serving out prison sentences—the paths to federal court are harrowingly slight. Even some Reagan and Bush I judges have written opinions bemoaning the impoverishment of due process, especially for asylum seekers.

On the circuit courts, Bush's influence has been especially strong. In 2001, there were 76 Democratic appointees on the circuit courts and 76 Republican appointees. In January, there will be 63 Democratic appointees and 101 Republican appointees. In percentage terms, the shift is from 50-50 to 62-38. It will take years to bring some of these courts back into balance. But Obama will have a chance right away to alter the composition of the 4th Circuit, based in Richmond, Va., and one of the country's most conservative. Almost two-thirds of the court's active 15 judges are Republican appointees; there are also four vacancies. When Obama fills these open spots and the others around the country, he should look to the district courts for inspiration.

sidebar

Return to article

In 1988, Reagan's Justice Department, headed by Attorney General Edwin Meese, strategized about how to change the courts in the ambitiously titled "The Constitution in the Year 2000: Choices Ahead in Constitutional Interpretation." The working paper targeted legal rules that Meese and his aides wanted to change and how to put on the bench judges who were committed to doing that. As professor Dawn Johnsen has detailed, the Republicans realized much of their vision through targeted appointments.

jurisprudence

Madoff Mercy

How long should the Ponzi schemer go to prison for?

By Harlan J. Protass

Wednesday, December 17, 2008, at 12:25 PM ET

Wall Street's elite are dropping as fast as the financial markets in which they work. As investors sort through the trail of financial wreckage left by Bernard L. Madoff, arrested for a $50 billion Ponzi scheme that may be the largest ever, federal prosecutors are preparing to formally charge him with crimes that could land him in prison for the rest of his life. In June, federal prosecutors in Brooklyn, N.Y., charged former Bear Stearns hedge-fund managers Ralph Cioffi and Matthew Tannin with lying to investors about their funds' true value and prospects. And in September, the FBI revealed that it is investigating the people who ran Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac, Lehman Bros., and AIG, all of which were casualties of this year's market meltdown.

Given today's economic climate, it's hard to feel any pity for these guys. Their reprehensible conduct has crippled the nation's financial system and will cost investors and taxpayers billions. But if you believe that the punishment should fit the crime, a mite of sympathy may be what they deserve. Really.

Most big-time frauds are prosecuted in federal court, where the federal guidelines largely control sentencing. Using a complex set of calculations, those guidelines mechanically sort criminals into one of 43 "offense levels" based on different aspects of their crimes. Higher offense levels reflect more harmful conduct. They also give rise to longer prison terms. Offense-level assignment, in turn, is fixed largely by measuring ostensibly discernible quantities, like the amount of drugs in a narcotics case or, in cases involving fraud, the amount of money lost.

Logically, this makes sense. A drug dealer who sells 10 kilos of cocaine is surely a worse offender and deserving of a longer prison term than someone who sells only 1. Likewise, a corporate executive who steals $50,000 has done less damage, and is generally deserving of a shorter sentence, than one who pockets $500,000.

But when it comes to large-scale frauds involving public companies and their millions of shares, the guidelines' grounding in mathematics sometimes results in sentences that are, quite literally, off the chart. They fall within the realm of prison terms usually reserved for mafia bosses, major international drug lords, cop killers, child molesters, and terrorists.

Remember Jeffrey Skilling—losses to Enron shareholders of more than $1 billion largely determined his 24-year-plus sentence. Or consider WorldCom's former chief, Bernie Ebbers. He got 25 years based principally on the $2.2 billion loss suffered by his company's shareholders. Sure, these men destroyed enormous shareholder value, just as the targets of today's criminal cases allegedly did. But it's hard to contend that they deserved prison terms longer than the average sentence for murder (22 years), kidnapping (14), and sexual abuse (eight).

Tying jail terms to the amount of money lost also puts way too much power in the hands of prosecutors. It gives them the muscle to threaten long prison stretches in order to coerce guilty pleas. If it weren't for the risk of lengthy sentences if convicted, many defendants might opt to test the government's evidence before a jury.

Linking jail time to dollars lost also severs many of the ties to factors courts are supposed to consider when determining and imposing sentences. For example, a relatively short prison term—years, not decades—can be enough to deter prospective financial fraudsters. And economic offenders pose little future threat because they're generally stripped of powers that would permit continued criminal conduct. Also, aren't there more fitting and useful ways to punish the titan fraudsters of Wall Street? Strip them of their wealth. Make them work to pay back those they ripped off or to serve the public good.

The Supreme Court's landmark decision in *United States v. Booker* allowed judges to use good, old-fashioned common sense to reduce radically long sentences produced by the guidelines. And some judges have done that. In 2006, Richard Adelson, former president of Impath Inc., a laboratory services company that collapsed as a result of an accounting fraud, was convicted of securities fraud and filing false documents. The guidelines recommended a life sentence. Instead, a judge sentenced Adelson to 42 months in prison. (A federal appeals court in New York approved that call last week.) Lennox Parris and Lester Parris, co-directors of a New York-based water company, were convicted of securities fraud in connection with a scheme to boost the value of their company's stock with a series of press releases misrepresenting its success in scoring distribution contracts. They were each sentenced earlier this year to five years imprisonment, even though they faced 30 years to life under the guidelines. And this week, the former CEO of reinsurer General Re, Ronald Ferguson, who faced life imprisonment for his role in a rotten deal to artificially inflate the balance sheet of insurance giant AIG, was sentenced to two years in jail.

But honestly, that kind of largesse is rare. Most judges still stick close to the guidelines and the huge sentence recommendations they make for causing huge financial loss. Given that hundreds of billions, if not trillions, were lost on Wall Street this year, we could be talking about a parade of defendants swapping cuff links for handcuffs and facing not years behind bars but decades. That's more punishment than even Bernard Madoff deserves.

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jurisprudence

Lawyers Aren't Special

Why it's legitimate to investigate the Bush lawyers who may have approved war crimes.

By Milan Markovic

Tuesday, December 16, 2008, at 1:01 PM ET

John Yoo and other lawyers who were involved in developing the Bush administration's interrogation policies have been roundly criticized for the shoddy and controversial nature of their legal advice. And yet even some of the critics have rejected the notion that Yoo and his former colleagues should be investigated for their role in the commission of torture and other war crimes. Writing recently in the *Washington Post*, Jack Goldsmith, the lawyer (and now law professor) who repudiated much of Yoo's work at the Office of the Legal Counsel, dismissed calls for further probes for fear that government lawyers would become excessively cautious in offering legal advice. The country is better served by moving on, Goldsmith suggested.

Lawyers are often asked to offer their views on complicated questions with significant real-world consequences, and the idea that offering the wrong answer could implicate an attorney in criminal wrongdoing is a frightening prospect to many in the profession. It is not surprising, therefore, that lawyers are reluctant to condemn fellow lawyers on the basis of the advice that they give.

But attorneys are hardly the only ones who must make difficult decisions in times of war. American soldiers, under the Uniform Code of Military Justice, are duty-bound to obey only lawful orders. Indeed, since the Nuremberg trials, it has been a fundamental precept of international law that soldiers must

disobey orders to commit war crimes. If soldiers are supposed to differentiate between lawful and unlawful orders, why should lawyers, who are trained to know the law, have the privilege of never being held accountable if they advise unlawful conduct?

That stance seems especially unwarranted since lawyers can offer legal advice in such a way as to account for differing points of view when addressing controversial legal issues. In fact, lawyers are mandated to at least consider opposing points of view. They may, moreover, refer to moral and political considerations when advising clients, not purely legal ones. And yet John Yoo and other administration attorneys wrote one-sided arguments about crucial aspects of the coercive interrogation policy. It is perfectly legitimate to ask, given the controversial nature of their conclusions and the importance of their work, why they crafted their arguments in the way that they did.

The United States used to not only investigate attorneys for their role in the perpetuation of war crimes—it used to prosecute them. After World War II, as part of the Nuremberg trials, the United States prosecuted 16 German attorneys and judges for war crimes and crimes against humanity for their role in implementing the "Night and Fog" decree. Three of the defendants in the so-called "Justice Case" held positions in the Ministry of Justice and directly advised the justice minister. These attorneys also drafted laws and rules for the administration of German-occupied lands and the operations of certain special courts. Many of these laws—and the courts themselves—ran afoul of the Geneva Conventions. The German lawyers argued, in their defense, that the Conventions did not apply because their enemies did not subscribe to them. They were ultimately convicted of war crimes and were each sentenced to 10 years in prison. (A more complete discussion of these cases is available here.)

The crimes with which Yoo and others are alleged to have been involved are clearly not of the magnitude of those in wartime Germany. Another key difference between the convicted German attorneys and the Bush lawyers is that the former specifically authorized the commission of war crimes. Nevertheless, British jurist Philippe Sands has plausibly alleged that Yoo and others went beyond advising and specifically approved certain interrogation tactics for use at Guantanamo Bay. Without knowing the full details of the interrogation program, it seems premature to conclude, as Attorney General Michael Mukasey apparently has, that Yoo and others were simply attempting to answer difficult questions about interrogation policy.

We have domestic cases on the books that allow for an attorney to be found criminally liable solely for the legal advice he offers to a client. In 1919, in *Firpo v. United States*, the United States Court of Appeals for the 2nd Circuit instructed: "To advise a client to commit an act which is a crime makes the lawyer an accomplice and at common law he would be an accessory."

Georgetown law professor David Luban has noted an analogous recent precedent from the 7th Circuit, in which an attorney's disruptive litigation tactics implicated him in criminal wrongdoing.

Firpo involved an attorney who was charged as an accomplice in the desertion of a young soldier. The lawyer had advised the soldier to leave New York to live with relatives while he worked to secure the soldier's release on the grounds that the soldier had been too young to enlist. The 2nd Circuit ultimately reversed the attorney's conviction because the prosecution had not proved that the attorney was aware that the soldier was already a deserter when he advised the soldier to flee—the lawyer's knowledge mattered for criminal culpability. But the court as a whole agreed that the key consideration was whether the attorney's advice was intended to assist the soldier in violating the law. It is certainly possible to see the work of Yoo and others in this light—as legal cover for interrogators.

Goldsmith worries that if they fear criminal sanction, government lawyers will shy away from offering potentially controversial legal advice when novel issues arise. But that would misread the role of a government lawyer. Nor is the fear of political division sufficient reason to dismiss the idea of an investigation as counterproductive. If allegations of torture and other crimes against Yoo and other lawyers are handled soberly and responsibly, there is the possibility that the United States will not only be able to heal internal divisions regarding the war on terror but will earn much-needed good will from abroad. Lawyers should be leading the call for a full investigation, not seeking amnesty for their peers before any meaningful attempt to determine the scope of their misconduct.

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life and art

The Wrestler Is Good

A three-time WWE champion explains what Darren Aronofksy's pro-wrestling movie gets right.

By Mick Foley

Thursday, December 18, 2008, at 7:26 PM ET

A couple of years ago, I met with a respected and successful producer who believed that one day, the motion picture industry would finally make a great pro-wrestling movie … and that I was the guy to write it. I had written several books—fiction, nonfiction, and children's—over the course of my 20-plus years as a pro wrestler, which apparently made me a credible candidate for this type of project. But I didn't have high hopes for it. The wrestling business has been the source of more than one critically acclaimed documentary—I was one of the subjects of Barry Blaustein's *Beyond the Mat*—but I worried that my vocation was not respected enough to merit a thoughtful fictional

screen representation. The chances of seeing a great pro-wrestling movie seemed right up there with the likelihood of a Mickey Rourke career renaissance.

You can see why I was pessimistic about Darren Aronofsky's wrestling project. I received an inquiry early on about serving as a consultant but cited the need to "spend time with my family" as a reason to refrain. If I felt like having my name attached to a failure, I figured, I'd write another novel. Casting Rourke in the lead seemed like a mistake. Sure, he had been in some good films a few election cycles ago, and I'll admit to stealing his popcorn-box trick from *Diner* back in '82. But he seemed unlikely to deliver the portrait of a wrestler I wanted.

And so I attended a recent New York screening with a dab of cynicism. Sure, I'd heard the film had been a hit at the Venice Film Festival, that there were shades of *Beyond the Mat*, that Mickey Rourke gave a great performance. I even heard that I was one of his influences in preparing for the role. But what did Hollywood know about my business, anyway? Who had they ever beaten? (As we say in the biz.)

I was hooked within a minute. Within five, I had completely forgotten I was looking at Mickey Rourke. That guy on the screen simply *was* Randy "the Ram" Robinson, a '80s mat icon on a two-decade-long losing streak in the game of life, searching for a way, any way, to fan the dying embers of his career. Rourke somehow makes the pathetic seem heroic and imbues in this sad, broken man a sense of quiet dignity and deep-down decency that makes the prospect of not rooting for him—in both his life and the ring—impossible.

I found great authenticity in so many aspects of Randy's battered psyche. His constant need for acceptance—from his estranged daughter; from his possible love interest, a stripper played by Marisa Tomei (who is wonderful, if a bit shocking for any guy who ever had a crush on her in *My Cousin Vinny*); from a random collection of customers at the deli counter where he works; from his dwindling number of nostalgic wrestling fans—is a theme that many a wrestler will grudgingly admit to connecting with. The scene depicting a poorly attended "Legends Convention" where Randy, a man so proud of his past, is forced not only to accept his present but to take a glimpse at the future, will strike an uncomfortable yet legitimate chord with every wrestling star whose personal appearances have ever been met with a symphony of silence.

I also loved the wrestling scenes. Rourke deserves great credit not only for whipping himself into incredible shape—packing 30 pounds of muscle on for the role—but for doing his wrestling homework. Learning the trade at age 52 could not have been easy, but Rourke's in-ring work is good enough to pass this wrestler's sniff test. No one will ever confuse Randy's clothesline with Stan Hansen's, and the scenes surely benefited from careful editing, but much of what Randy did—his flying "Ram Jam"; a Japanese *enzugiri* kick—actually looks pretty good. Importantly, it doesn't look any better than it should. His first in-ring scene, with a starry-eyed rookie thrilled just to be in the same arena with a former mat legend, looks realistically rudimentary. I could have done without the self-induced bloodletting, especially because it seemed so slow and deliberate, like a magician performing a card trick in slow motion. While such acts are a small but accepted part of the business, you wouldn't often see them at a sparsely attended event like this.

And everyone involved—Rourke, Aronofsky, independent wrestler Necro Butcher, stunt coordinator Douglas Crosby—deserves credit for creating a memorable midmovie bloodbath, a fight involving broken glass, barbed wire, a staple gun, and other implements. Difficult to watch but impossible to forget, the scene shows not only how far Randy has fallen but what lengths he's willing to go to in order to get back in the game. Fights like this do exist, but stars of Randy's magnitude, no matter how faded, don't often venture into matches this extreme.

Aronofsky also achieves an authentic atmosphere in the variety of wrestling venues he showcases. His decision to cast working independent wrestlers and to film at real independent wrestling shows was wise and gives the film a gritty documentary feel. *The Wrestler* also does a wonderful job depicting the backstage camaraderie among Randy's fellow wrestlers, the eclectic blend of muscle heads, dreamers, athletes, and artists who serve as an unlikely support system for Rourke's character.

I have been thinking a lot about *The Wrestler* since that New York screening. Feeling a little guilty. You see, I'm not sure if I should feel so good about a movie that doesn't seem to show my world in a flattering light. The wrestling business as a whole has always reminded me of Dorothy Gale's postgame analysis of her time in Oz: "Some of it was horrible, but most of it was beautiful." We don't get to see much of that beautiful stuff in Aronfsky's film (although we do see shades of it in the opening montage of the Ram's glory days). Still, I didn't find *The Wrestler* to be a downer at all. Sobering at times, but not at all depressing. Despite all the suffering—both physical and emotional—that Rourke's character endures, the movie is sprinkled with moments of genuine warmth and great humor. Indeed, I dare any hardened, grizzled moviegoer not to laugh out loud at Rourke's delicious deli counter dialogue.

I may be in the minority here, but (SPOILER ALERT!) I also felt a certain amount of hope at the movie's end. In the final scene, Randy—who over the course of the film has suffered a heart attack and been told by his doctors to stop wrestling—is back in the ring for a match with an old rival, the Ayatollah. The aging adversaries do their best to overcome the tag team of Father Time and Mother Nature and put on a decent match. By the end of the bout, Randy is clutching his chest and panting for breath. As he leaps from the ropes onto his opponent, the film cuts to black, the credits roll, and we hear Bruce Springsteen's

haunting title tune. Still, I couldn't help but feel that things were going to work out for ol' Randy. Then again, I thought Alan Ladd was just really tired at the end of *Shane*.

Now for the nitpicking. The steroid transaction seemed either a little too convenient (All those substances at once? In the *locker room*?) or like an anabolic homage to Travis Bickel's purchase of enough weaponry to quell a Third World uprising in Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*. And I wish there had been some visible difference in Randy's physique after he underwent heart surgery and gave up 'roids—even if just to illustrate the effectiveness and necessity of those substances in "the Ram's" life.

There was one other minor note of disappointment for me: I never did detect any of myself in the movie. Believe me, I tried. Hey, if you are going to be an influence on a movie, it might as well be a great one like *The Wrestler*. Who knows, maybe I inspired Randy's ratty assortment of faded flannels. And a few people have suggested that I inspired that grisly wrestling scene. But I can claim with a clear conscience that I never used a staple gun on an opponent. Thumbtacks, yes; barbed wire, definitely; but never a staple gun. Maybe one day I will find out I did play some kind of role in the development of one of the great characters in modern movie history. I hope so. Because I kind of feel like I owe Mickey Rourke—you know, for that popcorn trick back in '82.

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moneybox

The *Slate* Bailout Guide

The auto industry gets $17.4 billion. Total federal commitments total more than $5 *trillion*.

By Chris Wilson and Karim Bardeesy

Friday, December 19, 2008, at 11:38 AM ET

Since the economic-stimulus package in February, the federal government has offered more than a dozen multibillion-dollar rescue packages for a variety of industries and people endangered by the financial chaos and the recession. The magnitude of even one of these mega-bailouts is hard enough to grasp—see the "Explainer's" take on the meaning of $700 billion—and combined they represent trillions of dollars in federal commitments. The following ***Slate*** visualization attempts to put the magnitude of these rescue packages in perspective.

How to read this graphic

Think of the rings above as an onion; each ring is an added layer of federal money, such that the combined picture represents the total financial commitment of the U.S. government.

Mouse over the rings or labels to get a description of each bailout. (The ring in question will turn red when you mouse over it or the corresponding label. Pardon the acronyms—it's the only way to squeeze their ungainly names on the page.) In its default setting, the chart displays federal money committed (but not necessarily spent). To see how much of this money is already out the door, just click on "Spent" and watch the rings shrink to the size of expenditures to date.

When the graphic first loads, you see each bailout add on to the previous one in chronological order. To see the whole picture, just click "View All." Hit "Play" to see the animation again.

Methodology

The data for this graphic were gathered from a variety of sources, including the Federal Reserve, ***The Big Money***, and CNBC. Some editorial judgment went into deciding which lending programs and federal guarantees to include in the chart; for example, we don't include total FDIC backing of financial institutions, which the very highest estimates typically do. As these loans are repaid (and new short-term loans are offered), some dollar amounts will fluctuate. Please e-mail ***Slate*** with any suggestions for programs to add or figures to update.

Update, Dec. 19, 8:40 a.m.: President Bush announced today that $17.4 billion in TARP funds will go to General Motors and Chrysler. The Commercial Paper Funding Facility rose to $318.8 billion, according to the Federal Reserve, while outstanding asset-back comemerical paper loans were down to $27.4 billion. The term securities lending facility droped slightly to $182.3 billion.

Update, Dec. 15, 5:33 p.m.: Outstanding federal loans for the Term Securities Lending Facility are down to $185 billion, according to the Federal Reserve, while Asset-Backed Commercial Paper lending stands at $40.8 billion.

Update, Dec. 12, 8:35 a.m.: The Term Auction Facility is now up to $448 billion in dollars spent, while the Commercial Paper Funding Facility rose to $312.4 billion, according to the Federal Reserve.

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moneybox

Big Three, Meet the "Little Eight"

How foreign car factories have transformed the American South.

By Daniel Gross

Saturday, December 13, 2008, at 6:51 PM ET

The central Kentucky town of Georgetown, just north of Lexington, used to be known for the state's two main exports: bourbon and horses. Legend holds that in 1789, somewhere nearby, Elijah Craig, a Baptist minister, distilled the first batch of bourbon in charred oak casks. Thoroughbreds graze and trot

across fenced fields of trim bluegrass on the horse farms that ring much of the city. But in the past 20 years, a different type of horsepower—the kind generated by Camrys, Avalons, and Solaras—has transformed Georgetown from a quiet country town into a booming suburb and export engine. In 1986, Toyota—lured in part by nearly $150 million in tax breaks and other incentives—built a massive manufacturing plant here.

And in the years since, the bucolic landscape has been transformed. The 1,300-acre plant in which Toyota has invested $5.3 billion produces a car roughly every minute. Georgetown's population has doubled. In fields where farmers once grew tobacco and raised cattle, McMansions, apartment complexes, and condominiums have sprouted. A 150,000-square-foot upscale retail center is rising near the Toyota plant, the better to serve its 7,000 employees. "There is no doubt the state's investment in Toyota has repaid itself many times over," says state Sen. Damon Thayer, a Republican who represents Georgetown in the Kentucky General Assembly.

To be sure, the Georgetown plant isn't immune from the problems that have brought America's domestic manufacturers in Detroit to the brink of disaster. It recently furloughed 250 temporary employees and has throttled back production. But Brian Howard, 42, a team leader in painting operations and a 20-year veteran of the plant, is pleased with the way things are going. He enjoys high wages and cheap health insurance—$74 per month for his family. "They've told us for years that they've planned for a rainy day," he said. "Well, it's here and we're still doing well compared to the Big Three."

Time was, the Big Three were the U.S. auto industry. No longer. Over the past two decades, enticed by cheap labor and massive incentives, a second auto industry has emerged: nonunion, Southern-based, and foreign-owned. Large plants, with names of Asian and European carmakers emblazoned upon them, now dot the Southern landscape. By moving aggressively into Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, South Carolina, Georgia, and Texas, foreign manufacturers—call them the "Little Eight"—have transformed the economic geography of the nation's auto industry and the political debate surrounding its future.

To hear the rhetoric wafting down from Capitol Hill of late, you'd think that Toyota, Hyundai, BMW, and the rest are as all-American as Mom and apple pie. And in many ways, they now are. Sen. Mitch McConnell of Kentucky made an impassioned plea on the Senate floor for his colleagues to oppose the $15 billion aid package the House of Representatives had approved for General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler. "Labor costs need to be brought on par with companies like Nissan, Toyota, and Honda—not tomorrow, but immediately," he said. By the weekend, McConnell and fellow anti-bailout Republicans like Richard Shelby of Alabama and Bob Corker of Tennessee had stopped the bailout bill in the Senate.

The Southerners seem to have chosen an especially precipitous time to pick their fight with the Detroit Yankees: Without the money, General Motors and Chrysler have warned that they might be forced to file for bankruptcy protection. Harley Shaiken, a labor economist at the University of California-Berkeley, says a Detroit meltdown, on the eve of Christmas and in the midst of the worst job market in modern memory, "would be a devastating anti-stimulus package."

The anti-bailout lawmakers are all Republicans possessed of a deep-seated antipathy to organized labor and angry at the way the government has bungled the financial bailout. But they and many of their counterparts in the Senate have become experts on the labor practices of foreign manufacturers, because they've seen them up close. The tussle over the bailout has evinced what at first blush may seem a new kind of provincialism that pits Democrats and a few Republicans (like Sen. George Voinovich of Ohio) from heavy union and Big Three states against Republicans from right-to-work states in the old Confederacy. While McConnell & Co. oppose federal subsidies for the Big Three at the federal level, the states from which they hail have generously extended billions of dollars in subsidies to foreign automakers.

But there's a deeper cleavage at work here. Today's Southern solons have watched their local economies blossom thanks to a younger, more-vibrant auto industry unencumbered by the Big Three's legacy costs and union work rules—a sort of anti-Detroit that has the flexibility and ability to turn profits by making the types of cars that Americans actually want to buy.

Of course, the foreign companies are confronting the same difficult market situation as Detroit. Car sales, hammered by a lack of credit and low consumer confidence, are down across the board this year. In November, sales of Toyotas were off 34 percent; today, a financial planner's billboard in Smyrna, Tenn., seeks the business of Nissan employees who are taking the company's buyout offer of up to $125,000. In San Antonio, the Toyota Tundra plant lay idle for three months this fall, though Toyota hasn't laid off anyone. Instead, according to Richard Perez, president and CEO of the Greater San Antonio Chamber of Commerce, Toyota offered the city "a whole bunch of folks who need to get busy." (San Antonio put them to work on beautification projects.) Of course, Toyota has resources to act in a more paternalistic manner—in part because the parent companies aren't saddled with the burdens of providing health care and retirement for workers in home markets.

Despite the downturn, the foreign automakers—and the states in which they operate—are much better situated than Detroit. At a time when the South's core industries, like textiles and apparel, were going offshore, foreign automakers grew to become crucial contributors to the region's economy. Through 2007, Toyota had invested more than $17 billion in 10 U.S. production facilities, which collectively employ more than 36,000 workers. Alabama,

which didn't make a single car in 1995, last year produced 800,000, making it the fifth-largest auto-producing state. Tennessee just landed a $1 billion commitment from Volkswagen to set up a huge new plant in Chattanooga. South Carolina's Upstate section has been remade from a faded textile territory into a thriving 21st-century industrial powerhouse since the arrival of BMW in the 1990s. (The German automaker produces the X5 and X6 crossover coupes in the state.) "BMW offers the best manufacturing jobs in the region," says Republican Rep. Bob Inglis. "They're just a godsend for Upstate South Carolina." One measure of the love Inglis' constituents feel for BMW: On the Greenville Convention and Visitors Bureau Web site, the BMW plant has joined Shoeless Joe Jackson Memorial Park as an attraction.

The arrival of these car companies has had a huge ripple effect. "Every job in auto production supports five other jobs in the economy in steel, tires, rubber, programmers, and auto dealers," says Robert Scott, senior international economist at the Washington, D.C.-based Economic Policy Institute. Toyota's Kentucky operations support 28,000 jobs in the state. In 2007, according to the Association of International Automobile Manufacturers, foreign automakers employed 92,700 workers directly and 574,500 indirectly, accounting for 33 percent of U.S. auto production. By contrast, the Big Three employ about 240,000 workers.

The foreign automakers first came to these shores in the 1980s. Many wanted a foothold in the world's largest consumer market. But in a period when there was rising hostility to imported cars—it wasn't uncommon to see Japanese-made cars destroyed for sport in Michigan in the 1980s—establishing U.S.-based manufacturing plants was a way for Toyota and its peers to defuse international trade tensions, insulate themselves from the swings in the current market, and avoid the impact of any tariffs. And the states in the Southeast had plenty to offer—large tracts of undeveloped land with road, rail, air, and sea access; fewer snow days; and federally subsidized power from the Tennessee Valley Authority.

Above all, these states had longstanding cultures that made it difficult for unions to organize. "When the manufacturers were deciding where to open plants, they chose right-to-work states because they wouldn't have to use union labor," says U.S. Sen. Johnny Isakson of Georgia. Indeed, none of the major auto-assembly plants in the South is unionized. Like so many politicians whose states have benefited from the kindness of these strangers, Isakson now sees the world through the eyes of his new constituents. "Foreign automakers have been operating at gas prices being four, five, six dollars a gallon for years," he says. "The motivation to build fuel-efficient cars has really been around for more than two decades. But the U.S. manufacturers never supported that." (It's worth noting, however, that the senator drives a Ford Escape hybrid.) Many of the region's political leaders are now conversant with such topics as German engineering and Japanese models of continuous improvement, and they can speak chapter and verse on how these new plants are designed with flexibility—i.e., they can adjust production of models depending on consumer tastes and market conditions, whereas Detroit's plants, by and large, can't be retooled as easily to produce different models.

Locating production in areas with no history of car manufacturing was asking foreign companies to take a huge—and expensive—leap of faith. And so, to close the deal, the states began to offer huge financial incentives. In the early 1990s, competition escalated into a new war between the states—only this time the weapons were tax abatements, worker-training grants, and promises to build roads.

Alabama, for one, has forked over nearly $1 billion over the past decade and a half on such incentives. (Much of that sum has been spent on worker training.) But in return Alabama has attracted $7 billion of investment for automakers and suppliers. In the early '90s, the state was starving for investment and high-paying jobs, and so it pulled out all the stops to attract Mercedes-Benz, offering a $253 million incentive package in exchange for a plant that would employ about 1,500 people. When the plant opened in 1993 in the town of Vance, halfway between Tuscaloosa and Birmingham, 70,000 applications were filed for the 1,500 jobs. Little did Mercedes know at the time, but it was kicking off an economic revolution that has rolled like the Crimson Tide to every corner of the state. Auto-parts suppliers followed Mercedes' lead—and so did Honda, Toyota, and Hyundai. "When Alabama first announced it was paying $169,000 per job to attract Mercedes-Benz, everyone felt they were nuts," says Andy Levine, president of DCI, a New York-based firm that specializes in economic-development marketing. "Fifteen years later, it's probably the smartest investment any state has ever made." Indeed, "last year, combined, all these companies supported a payroll of $5.2 billion," says Neal Wade, director of the Alabama Development Office.

And while the Big Three frequently exhibit an air of entitlement when dealing with the state and federal governments—remember the disastrous private-jet caravan when the CEOs came to cry poverty in Washington?—the foreign automakers have gone out of their way to ingratiate themselves with their new hosts. BMW has endowed professorships at Clemson University's new automotive-engineering program. And when Alabama and Louisiana were competing to attract German steel giant ThyssenKrupp, Mercedes-Benz U.S. CEO Bill Taylor flew to Germany on his own dime to make the successful case.

It's hard to overstate the economic impact that a new plant can have. Before Nissan arrived in Smyrna in 1983, it was a sleepy town of about 6,000. Today, many of Smyrna's 40,000 residents are engaged in production of the Nissan Altima, Xterra, and Pathfinder. "Life is more convenient now because of everything that has come here, and the income that people have made

working at the plant has been great," says Bruce Coble, an Assembly of God pastor who moved to Smyrna after Nissan arrived. When we spoke to Coble last week, he was visiting Gold Street Automotive, a repair shop, where the motto is "As Close to Heaven as Your Car Can Get."

Newsweek's *Daniel Stone, Catharine Skipp, Patrick Crowley, Leon Alligood, Frederick Burger, and Temma Ehrenfeld contributed to the story. A version of this article also appears in this week's issue of* Newsweek.

movies

Head of *The Class*

An unassuming French movie that will nail you to your seat.

By Dana Stevens

Thursday, December 18, 2008, at 7:18 PM ET

As the head of the jury at this year's Cannes film festival, Sean Penn announced his intention to make Cannes "the opposite of the Oscars." Maybe Penn is as inspiring a leader as the gay activist he played in *Milk*, or maybe it was just the presence of a lot of smart people on the jury (including French-Iranian graphic novelist Marjane Satrapi and Mexican director Alfonso Cuarón), but the movie that won Cannes' top prize in 2008 fulfills that mandate perfectly. ***The Class*** (Sony Pictures Classics), directed by Laurent Cantet, exemplifies the anti-Oscar aesthetic: It's an unsentimental slice-of-life story, shot on digital film with a cast of unglamorous unknowns. What few moments of suspense it has to offer are almost entirely language-related: Did he really just use that word? In what sense did he mean it? And what purpose *does* the imperfect subjunctive serve, anyway? Yet *The Class* is also one of the few films this year that I'd recommend without reservations to just about anyone. If you've ever sat in a classroom (or stood in front of one), if you're interested in thinking about race, social class, language, loyalty, work—oh, let's just say *life*—this unassuming movie will nail you to your seat.

The Class (in French, the title translates to *Between the Walls*) is based on a book by that title in which François Bégaudeau, a French-language teacher in a Parisian junior high school, documented one school year in his classroom. Cantet's script arose from an intensive workshopping process that gathered 25 adolescents in a room with Bégaudeaufor nine months while three cameras recorded their interaction. These young people aren't quite playing themselves, though some of them do share a first name with their characters. But they're often improvising (from a script by Cantet and Robin Campillo), and their rowdy, overlapping classroom talk sounds so natural, it's impossible to imagine it being memorized or rehearsed.

For all the apparent spontaneity of the dialogue, *The Class* is as cannily structured as a great novel; details that seem random at first gradually coalesce into a richly layered story. As Bégaudeau (playing a character named François Marin) goads the students into becoming their best selves, he uses every tool at his disposal, from sarcasm to affectionate mockery to the Socratic method. His class is a cult of personality in the best sense; seeing how much attention and energy he brings to every moment of their interaction, his students—at least by moments—emerge from the fog of adolescent self-absorption to engage with language and ideas. François is clearly a born teacher, but he's no Mr. Chips, and *The Class* is no *Dead Poets Society*. His rambunctious multiracial students, many of them the children of immigrants, know how to give as good as they get, and one girl in particular, Esmeralda (Esmeralda Ouertani), has a knack for backing her teacher into logical and pedagogical corners.

After one of Esmeralda's ruder outbursts, François takes her to task using language that gets him in trouble with the school administration. Meanwhile, Souleymane (Franck Keita), a Malian student, grows increasingly disruptive over the course of the year. When he violently storms out of class, accidentally injuring another student (and, equally shocking in the context of the school's culture, addresses his teacher with the informal *tu*), Souleymane faces a disciplinary process that may result in his deportation back to Africa. Does François' teaching method, apparently so egalitarian, mask a disturbing authoritarian streak? Did he, in fact, do right by Souleymane and the other kids? The movie's ending is inconclusive—justly and beautifully so. *The Class* chronicles, with great precision, a part of life rarely seen in the movies: the ambivalent love that exists between students and teachers. You walk out of the theater feeling unsettled, curious, and passionate to talk—as if you just spent two hours in the best class you ever took.

movies

Slow & Slower

Jim Carrey looks tired in *Yes Man*.

By Josh Levin
Thursday, December 18, 2008, at 5:45 PM ET

Jim Carrey became the world's most famous comic actor thanks to his stamina for self-torture. *Liar Liar*, a blockbuster from Hollywood's golden age of Carrey exploitation films, plays like a kid-friendly *Hostel*. Carrey falls, he gets up. He punches himself in the face, he gets up. He smashes himself over the head with a toilet seat, he gets up. A decade later, the once impossibly nimble comedian is moving more like Mrs. Fletcher, the fall-prone spokes-codger for the LifeCall medical bracelet. In the first minutes of ***Yes Man*** (Warner Bros.), 46-year-old Carrey smacks into a tray-bearing barmaid and falls creakily to the floor. There's no spryness in this tumble, no hint of the actor's customary Gumby-as-overactor persona. Physical comedians age in dog years, and Jim Carrey is panting heavily.

It's not always fair to compare an actor with his younger self, but *Yes Man*'s photocopied plot makes it hard to avoid. Carrey's latest is essentially a remake of *Liar Liar*—rather than a shyster lawyer cursed to tell the truth, we have a zonked-out loan officer named Carl Allen who decides to spice up his life by saying yes to everything. Carl becomes a "yes man" under the tutelage of a life coach/cult leader (Terence Stamp, who gives the guru the necessary trust-me-I-have-a-British-accent quality) named Terrence Bundley, who tells his acolytes to "gobble up all of life's energies and ... excrete the waste." At once, Carl is a changed man: He says yes to a homeless guy who needs a lift, to a genial elderly neighbor who offers him fellatio, and to a lovely young lady (Zooey Deschanel) who offers him a ride on her scooter.

While Carrey does the doldrums just fine in the movie's morose opening act, he doesn't have quite enough oomph to rev up the happy-go-lucky Carl. There is one scene, when Carl downs a case of Red Bull during an all-night bender, that evokes *Jim Carrey: The Rubbery Years*—the fast talking, the manic twitching, the insistent mugging. But Jim Carrey gulping Red Bull (even fake Red Bull) is like Barry Bonds taking steroids. It's cheating by someone who used to be the best in the business, no enhancements required.

If you find Carrey's latter-day mien too depressing to bear, perhaps it's best to think of *Yes Man* as a Zooey Deschanel vehicle. Despite being forced to inhabit a character infused with *Garden State* levels of quirkiness—she teaches a jogging photography class and plays "The Star-Spangled Banner" on the keytar—Deschanel keeps things light and frothy as Carrey flails away. The singer-actress also gets a chance to show off her pipes, belting out a synth-pop ballad with the refrain "I'm not your late-night booty call." It's my early favorite for Oscar's song of the year—suck it, Bruce Springsteen.

If you want to see Zooey Deschanel sing and act, though, you should probably just listen to She & Him and rent *All the Real Girls*. Despite the charming presence of Deschanel, *Yes Man* can't overcome its pervasive drowsiness or its failure to care about its own high concept. Yes, the guy who says yes to everything doesn't always say yes to everything. When a suicidal fellow, played by Luis Guzmán, asks Carl not to talk him down from the ledge, he ignores the plea and leads a crowd of onlookers in a rendition of Third Eye Blind's "Jumper." How does a one-joke movie forget its only joke? Perhaps *Yes Man*'s writers got confused by the film's tag line, "Yes Is the New No." In honor of that convoluted axiom, here's my one-word review. Should you go see *Yes Man*?: Yes.

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movies

Unexpected Body Slam

The Wrestler is terrific.

By Dana Stevens
Wednesday, December 17, 2008, at 11:56 AM ET

There's an extra thrill that comes from loving a movie you thought you were going to hate. Darren Aronofsky (*Pi*, *Requiem for a Dream*, *The Fountain*) is a director whose intellectual reach tends to exceed his artistic grasp. Though the scope of his ambition may be admirable—*The Fountain* is about nothing less than Hugh Jackman's quest to transcend mortality—Aronofksy's films have always struck me as adolescent fantasies: self-consciously big ideas wrapped in lurid, overcomposed images. So the scruffy, almost accidental beauty of ***The Wrestler*** (Fox Searchlight) comes as even more of a surprise than the greatness of Mickey Rourke's performance. The idea that Rourke, an '80s sex symbol coming off 20 years of Bukowski-esque dissolution, had this in him makes a crazy sort of sense. That Aronofsky had it in *him* is a rebuke to the complacency of viewers who, like me, thought they had his number.

Rourke plays Randy "The Ram" Robinson, a washed-up pro wrestler who works a day job at a supermarket while continuing to ply his trade on weekends in VA halls along the Jersey shore. Though he's lonely, broke, and living in a trailer (that is, when the landlord doesn't lock him out for unpaid rent), the Ram seems to be getting by OK. He trades banter, illegal substances, and ass-whomping tips with his fellow wrestlers (all played marvelously by nonactors from the real-life circuit) and visits his favorite stripper, Cassidy (Marisa Tomei) for chatty lap dances. Then, after a particularly grueling match with the staple-gun-wielding "Necro Butcher" (Dylan Summers), the Ram has a heart attack. Waking up in the hospital, he's told he should never wrestle again. But a certain "Ayatollah" is looking to re-create a legendary 20-year-old match with the Ram, and the flyers are already printed …

Though Randy can't bring himself to stop doing the only thing he's ever been a winner at, he does make some changes in his life: He tries to connect with his estranged daughter Stephanie (Evan Rachel Wood), who, after years of neglect, regards him with a distrust bordering on hatred. He also tentatively pushes for a real relationship with Cassidy, but her resistance to the idea of dating a strip-club customer proves tougher than Necro Butcher's stapler.

Randy's relationships with these two women are what set *The Wrestler* (sparely scripted by Robert Siegel) apart from your standard sports-comeback drama. Wood has definitively made the jump from interesting child star to accomplished adult actress. Though hers is the most underwritten of the three main characters, she shines in her few scenes as the wounded, rageful daughter. And amid all the (granted well-earned) fuss about Rourke's comeback, I hope Marisa Tomei won't be overlooked for what I consider the single best female performance of the year, supporting or otherwise. She's smart, earthy, and astonishingly real in a role that could have foundered in cheap sentimentality. And if we're going to marvel at Rourke's sculpted (and no doubt hormonally augmented) 56-year-old form, how about Tomei's 44-year-old body pole-dancing in a G-string?

I can't think of any movie since *North Dallas Forty* that looks so unflinchingly at the masochism of professional sports. The Ram's brand of wrestling is frankly fake, but no less lethal for that. His body, pumped up by steroids and parched by years of hard living, is a barely functioning wreck aptly assessed by its owner as "an old broken-down piece of meat." The movie also exposes some wrestling tricks, like the razor blade that Randy hides in his wristband to furtively self-inflict wounds during a match. Though the wrestling scenes have a no-holds-barred intensity—Randy and his opponents come at each other with everything from barbed wire to a fan's prosthetic leg—they don't feel voyeuristic or condescending. Leaping from the top rope in lime-green tights may be medically unadvisable and existentially absurd, but it's what the Ram does. It's his art.

After a second viewing, I'm hard-pressed to find a moment in this strangely delicate movie that doesn't play true. Maryse Alberti's handheld camera takes us exactly where we need to be (usually following Rourke around) without drawing attention to its own mobility. The well-placed music—a Guns N' Roses song here, a Springsteen ballad there—feels indigenous to the New Jersey working-class locale. And Rourke holds the whole thing together with a rich, dense performance devoid of vanity or shtick. The Ram is sometimes—often, even—a manipulative, self-pitying man, but Rourke and Aronofsky paint his portrait with a rigorous dignity.

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music box

Top 10 Jazz Albums of 2008

Crowned by one immortal recording.

By Fred Kaplan

Thursday, December 18, 2008, at 6:51 AM ET

The best jazz album of 2008 is such a clear choice—not just a stunning disc of music but a breakthrough in music history—that I will say this: If any jazz critics out there leave it off their Top 10 lists, don't trust another word that they say about anything.

1. The album is Sonny Rollins' *Road Shows, Vol. 1* (on his own label, Doxy Jazz), a collection of live tracks from 1980-2007, and it's one of his three or four best recordings ever. Rollins, the greatest tenor saxophone player around, famously feels uncomfortable in studios; a good night in front of a live crowd beats nearly anything he lays down before a control booth. A fan named Carl Smith has been collecting bootleg tapes of live Rollins concerts for decades, but his overtures to the man went ignored—until the past few years, when the two joined forces. Rollins has been listening to the tapes. It also turns out that he's been recording some of his gigs as well, straight off the mixing board, and he's been listening to those, too. Rollins is deeply self-critical; he likes very little of what he's ever done. The seven tracks on *Road Shows, Vol. 1* are his picks; they're the performances that he could at least tolerate hearing. They include a bravura ballad, "Easy Living":

a dizzyingly intricate solo (from "Blossom," an original that he'd never recorded):

a blowing number ("Tenor Madness"):

and an unusually pensive trio take of "Some Enchanted Evening," with bassist Christian McBride and drummer Roy Haynes, from their 2007 concert at Carnegie Hall. Sound quality isn't great, but that shouldn't deter.

2. Concord Records' series of previously unreleased live sessions from the Monterey Jazz Festival has been strangely uneven, but *Shirley Horn, Live at the 1994 Monterey Jazz Festival* is a classic. Horn, who died in 2005 at the age of 71, was an elegant pianist and a sultry singer—she could make a lyric feel as if it told the story of her life—known, above all, for her slow, simmering way with ballads. There are some of those here:

but also some upbeat swayers:

and bouncy meditations:

Her longtime drummer, Steve Williams, was in typically fine form that day, giving Horn plenty of space, and her bassist, Charles Ables, stretched beyond his usual comping.

3. Frank Kimbrough's *Air* (on Palmetto) is the most remarkable solo jazz piano album in a while. An acolyte of Shirley Horn (see above) and Paul Bley (see below), Kimbrough combines something of the latter's analytic rigor with the former's romantic flourish. He's the pianist for Maria Schneider's jazz orchestra, several Ben Allison bands, and more. But *Air* shows him hitting new strides of virtuosity and wit,

mainly on originals but also with a Monk and an obscure, noirish Ellington.

4. Rudresh Mahanthappa's *Kinsmen* (on Pi Recordings) is one of the most startlingly original jazz albums in years. A young alto-saxophone player and émigré from southern India (and a member of pianist Vijay Iyer's quartet), Mahanthappa has tried to fuse his homeland's rhythms and modern jazz cadences a few times before, with engaging but somewhat monotonous results. Here, though, it works. Teamed with Kadri Golpalnath, an elder who recorded a wild album called *Saxophone Indian Style* a dozen years ago, and the Dakshin Ensemble, Mahanthappa carves out whole new paths. It cooks, it swings:

It sighs:

5. The Carla Bley Big Band's *Appearing Nightly* (Watt/ECM) meshes modern with retro, as the pianist-composer leads her 16-piece band through sumptuous arrangements,

equal parts Gershwin, Ives, and the circus: It's alternately, sometimes all at once, blistering, lyrical, blooming, and wry.

6. Paul Bley's *About Time* (Justin Time) is another in a series of the pioneering pianist's solo improvisations, this one riffing off cascading streams of consciousness—snippets of romantic themes, spontaneous eruptions, and bebop melodies that their originators wouldn't recognize but that they would probably find intriguing, even enchanting. Sorry, there's no 30-second sound bite that captures what he's doing; it's all in the progression … well, OK, here's a sample,

but only because I have to.

7. David Murray and Mal Waldron's *Silence* (Justin Time) offers an odd combination: Murray, a soaring, swooning improviser on tenor sax and bass clarinet who expands the laws of harmonic gravity with derring-do, pitted in duet with Waldron, a sonorous pianist who ekes orchestral colors from 88 keys yet lays down the law on rhythmic structure. Recorded in 2001 (Waldron died the following year), it's a duet of tension and resolution followed by more tension and resolution. On some tracks, it's a grind; on others, a glory; in some cases, a bit of both:

But, all the same, very satisfying.

8. Wynton Marsalis and Willie Nelson's *Two Men With the Blues* (EMI), is sheer delight, a seamless weave of jazz, country, and, above all, lightheaded blues, recorded live at Lincoln Center. Willie's voice has its break points, but he carries the spirit of the songs and he's having such infectious fun. Wynton firms up my long-held impression that he blows his freest jazz trumpet when the setting's most casual:

The whole band is tight and high-spirited.

9. Steven Bernstein's *Diaspora Suite* (Tzadik). This is the fourth and most ambitious Diaspora-themed album by trumpeter-composer Bernstein, on John Zorn's Tzadik label. Not simply "Jewish music," it has influences from everywhere. The first track opens with an electric guitar riff and bongo backup, straight out of Marvin Gaye:

before a klezmer clarinet comes punching in:

But no one strand dominates. Dark, bluesy, and you can dance to it.

10. Jeff Gauthier's *House of Return* (Cryptogramophone) is the year's surprise, a sinuously pleasing blend of rich melancholy, off-centered swing, and hazy blues,

from a quintet that features Gauthier on violin and Nels Cline on electric guitar (who also plays with Bernstein's band). Quirky and loose-cuffed, but there's no kidding around and the playing's airtight.

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other magazines

Tamm I Am

The NSA whistle-blower reveals himself.

By Marc Tracy

Tuesday, December 16, 2008, at 5:07 PM ET

***Newsweek*, Dec. 22**

The cover story profiles former Department of Justice lawyer and whistle-blower Thomas M. Tamm, who reveals "against the advice of his lawyers" that in 2004 he disclosed the Bush administration's secret warrantless wiretapping of U.S. citizens to a *New York Times* reporter. While Tamm could face felony charges and decades of jail time, FBI agent Jason Lawless (really) admitted that he would hesitate to prosecute, lest a jury perceive Tamm as a patriot rather than a traitor. Tamm may have outed himself by sending an e-mail to a Senate aide seeking information about the program from his work computer. "I guess I'm not a very good criminal," he says. **…** In an interview, Pakistan Prime Minister Asif Ali Zardari denies that his country's military intelligence agency has any relationship with

Lashkar-e-Taiba, the terrorist organization that India accuses of executing the "horrific" attacks in Mumbai, India, last month. "Nobody will be allowed to use Pakistan soil for any form of aggression toward any friend or foe," Zardari insists.

***Weekly Standard*, Dec. 22**
The charmingly antiquarian cover story rereads 19th-century Englishman Walter Bagehot on the collapse of the Overend, Gurney, & Co. bank. How can we "be moral in the way we think about money" while also making sure the economy stays afloat? The key is to maintain "strategic ambiguity" about whether a failing bank will be rescued. "Central banking is thus often a high-stakes game of chicken," the author writes. "And sometimes, when banks enter the game insufficiently scared, it will be played out to the end." Here's looking at you, Lehman Bros. **...** An editorial frets over the potential for the growth in Pakistan of homegrown but globally oriented jihadist movements. Unlike Turkey, which has managed to graft official secularism onto its larger narrative, Pakistan remains "just the Muslim alternative to Hindu India" and is therefore especially susceptible to the allure of militant Islamism.

***New York*, Dec. 22**
The magazine's annual Reasons To Love New York package offers undeniable ones ("Because a Legally Blind, Formerly Adulterous Onetime Recreational Coke User Can Be Governor") and doubtful ones ("Because Obama Is One of Us, Despite All That Business About Chicago"). And check out their favorite sentences published about New York this year. **...** One article explores the possibility that Caroline Kennedy, daughter of President John F. Kennedy, may formally request to be named Hillary Clinton's replacement in the U.S. Senate. (She has since done so.) While her fundraising prowess, name recognition, and celebrity quotient are unmatchable, she is unproven in baby-kissing retail politics. But the author says Kennedy is interested for the right reasons: "She genuinely, cornily, wants to advance the ideas the family cares about, and she knows better than most that only so much can be accomplished through symbolism."

***The New Yorker*, Dec. 22 & 29**
The Winter Fiction issue contains stories by Roberto Bolaño and Alice Munro, plus a personal history from Zadie Smith. **...** A dispatch explores the massive popularity in Japan of *keitai shosetsu*: novels written on cell phones and published serially on the Web. For such cutting-edge media, the novels themselves have rather conservative sensibilities: They "purport to be autobiographical and revolve around true love, or, rather, the obstacles to it that have always stood at the core of romantic fiction." **...** While the loss of advertising revenue and the failure to adapt to the Internet are "real enough" problems for the newspaper business, one author maintains that "even as big papers have become less profitable they've arguably become more popular," thanks to the way the blogosphere has "magnified" them. At some point, consumers will have to compensate for this increased use, either by paying up or by tolerating a diminished product.

***The Nation*, Dec. 29**
The cover story indicts the political establishment's "fetishization of the pragmatic" and hopes that Barack Obama will steer clear of it. Those who argue for flexible, technocratic, and nonideological policies as an antidote to the Bush years have committed a "collective category error": George W. Bush's problem was not being in thrall to an ideology; it was being in thrall to his particular ideology. The author cites ideological opponents of the Iraq war as examples of those who let principle trump purported pragmatism only to find themselves having gotten the question right on pragmatism's own terms. "Principle is often pragmatism's guardian." **...** An article challenges Senate Democrats to change the filibuster. In 1975, the cloture requirement was changed from 67 votes to 60; the author now proposes taking it down to 55. "If Democrats allow the sixty-vote filibuster to survive," the author says, "it is because they want to keep it as a convenient way to avoid taking responsibility."

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poem

"Sewage Has Its Say"

By Steven Cramer
Tuesday, December 16, 2008, at 7:04 AM ET

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

Give me roots prying into the joints
of your main waste line, Charmin
thickening her web first to a nest,
then to a dam, and I'll sluice in reverse,

top the basement tub and spill
into a poem! Damn! I've sunken
to new heights! Will you take
a hint and stomach your disgust?

What does *The Thinker* look like
he's doing? How come Luther heard
God's thunderclap of justice via faith
whilst sitting on the privy? You know

where love's pitched his mansion, so don't shower so much. Squeaky clean's for mice. No soap's got enough tallow to wash out the mouth mouthing off.

What made you so ... *nice*? Polite's kind of like death, isn't it? Okay, not quite. But consider this, my sweet kin in excretion: to flies we taste like candy.

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politics

Magical History Tour

George W. Bush's last-ditch attempt to burnish his legacy.

By Christopher Beam

Thursday, December 18, 2008, at 6:31 PM ET

Introspection has never been President Bush's strong suit. "I really do not feel comfortable in the role of analyzing myself," he told Robert Draper in 2007. "I'll try. But I don't spend a lot of time."

As his second term wanes, however, Bush is getting in touch with his inner president. At an event Thursday hosted by the American Enterprise Institute, Bush promised to "share some thoughts about the presidency—you could call it 'reflections by a guy who's headed out of town.' " He has also revisited the ups and downs of his own presidency this month in interviews with ABC and CNN and in speeches at the U.S. Army War College, Texas A&M, and West Point. If journalism is the first rough draft of history, Bush is marking it up with a big red pen.

The tour is going well so far, give or take a shoe. At the Baghdad press conference, he was able to hail the new status of forces agreement between the United States and Iraq as the twilight of the old era and the dawning of a new one. At the U.S. Army War College, he actually listed his foreign-policy accomplishments, including "a vastly upgraded network of homeland defenses," "a revamped intelligence community," and "a strong coalition of more than 90 nations—composing almost half the world—who have committed to combating terror." At West Point, he told a seamless story about how 9/11 led us to invade Afghanistan and then, logically, Iraq. "[W]e offered Saddam Hussein a final chance to peacefully resolve the issue," Bush said. "And when he refused, we acted with a coalition of nations to protect our people—and liberated 25 million Iraqis." Why wait for the memoir? It's all here.

By now, the broad strokes of the Bush legacy refurbishment plan are clear. It rests on three planks:

1) Bush's presidency never deviated from its core principle of promoting freedom.

2) Mistakes were made, but only in unwavering service to this principle.

3) Bush succeeded in making the United States safer.

For Bush, the last point is the most important. A talking point he raises often is the absence of domestic terrorist attacks since 9/11. It's a wobbly leg to stand on. Who's to say what al-Qaida's planning schedule looked like? After all, more than eight years elapsed between Feb. 26, 1993, the first terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, and 9/11. For doubters, Bush provides a short list of foiled plots: "an attempt to bomb fuel tanks at JFK Airport, a plot to blow up airliners bound for the East Coast, a scheme to attack a shopping mall in the Chicago area, and a plan to destroy the tallest skyscraper in Los Angeles."

You can see why Bush is focusing his legacy-polishing on Iraq and security. In those cases, the countervailing evidence is harder to dredge up. Unlike, say, the economy. You can't throw a shoe these days without hitting a piece of horrific economic news, which, fairly or not, will inevitably be part of Bush's legacy. Still, Bush tried to put a happy face on the numbers: "It's hard to argue against 52 uninterrupted months of job growth," Bush said at AEI. Indeed, it is. But there is the small matter of what happened after that.

Bush is also finally admitting some mistakes—something he had trouble doing a few years back. They're relatively minor. "I came in wanting to change the tone of Washington," he said, "and frankly I didn't do a very good job of it." Of course, *he*'s not the culprit. "I have never used my position as president to personally denigrate somebody," he said. The AEI conversation was a polite event, so Katrina, weapons of mass destruction, Abu Ghraib, the Valerie Plame affair, and the U.S. attorney firings never came up.

Bush also offered tips to the incoming president. Make sure information gets to the Oval Office in a timely manner. Let everyone air their views and debate one another, so you've heard all points of view before making a decision. Keep government interference in the market to a minimum. Everyone was too polite to mention that, even according to some fellow conservatives, his administration was marked by poor information flow, little dissent, and government overreach.

The real irony of Bush's rehabilitation project, though, is that he's taken it up even as he insists that only history can judge him. "You can't possibly figure out the history of the Bush presidency," he told Draper. "Until I'm dead." Maybe he feels like a little legacy-burnishing in his last month in office can't

hurt. And maybe there's no contradiction between defending one's actions and acknowledging that they will ultimately be judged by history.

In the here and now, however, this insistence on waiting for the verdict of history has one practical—and, to Bush, appealing—effect: It allows decision-makers to deflect legitimate criticism. If you believe a president's decisions are best judged by long-term outcomes, then by all means let history handle his legacy. But if you think presidents should be judged by their ability to weigh available evidence, ask the right questions, and make intelligent choices based on what they know, then—well, there's no time for judging like the present. Future historians, as well as lame-duck presidents, are free to conclude that you were mistaken.

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politics

Give the New Guy a Break

Obama deserves some time before the media start piling on about the Blagola scandal.

By John Dickerson

Wednesday, December 17, 2008, at 7:10 PM ET

Barack Obama's initial response to the Rod Blagojevich scandal was flaccid. But his current posture seems perfectly reasonable. He has asked for a week before releasing details about his aides' contacts with the governor, and that's what he should get.

Reporters should keep asking questions, of course. Monday's exchange between Obama and John McCormick of the *Chicago Tribune* seemed to be a fine model for the new presidency. McCormick asked about a contradiction in Obama's statements about Blagojevich, and Obama said U.S. Attorney Patrick Fitzgerald asked him to wait until Dec. 22 before saying anything. As nonanswers go, it was fairly straightforward—far preferable to the usual tactic of giving a nonanswer and pretending it is a real answer.

It would be a mistake to assume Obama is acting in bad faith. I know: He's a politician, so maybe it's safe to assume that he's not being completely candid. And Obama's initial answer did have a little weasel in it. But as a general matter, President-elect Obama has tried to meet the press halfway. He's held 11 press conferences since winning the election. (The 12th is tomorrow.) Sure, it'd be nice if the conferences included more than four questions, but that's hardly evidence of bad faith. (Access can sometimes be a head fake—politicians answer a few questions regularly so they don't have to face a protracted engagement, which is harder—but we don't know if this is what Obama is up to.)

There's quite a distance among press management, artful shading, and outright fibbing. Overall, we're still figuring out where the next administration and its leader fall in that continuum. Right now, however, Obama is within the neighborhood of press management—an irritating but necessary part of the dance we'll be doing for the next four years. And reporters are likely to get a chance to ask more questions, and maybe get even better answers, if they don't assume immediately that Obama is trying to game the system.

The other reason the press should give Obama his time to answer is that if it doesn't, it risks undermining the authority it will need when he finally does answer the question. If every nonanswer is described as a failure, then there will be no language to describe a truly meaningful mistake.

What's more, obsessing about the lack of a response from Obama makes things easier for him in a way. It puts pressure on the system, so that any response (no matter how weak or implausible) seems sufficient to the public. Any follow-up questions will seem excessive, just part of the same scandal-mongering instinct that didn't allow him reasonable room to comply with the U.S. attorney's request.

And there's a particular reason follow-up questions are helpful. What's at issue here is not just whether Obama's aides had inappropriate contact with Blagojevich. There is lots of evidence from the complaint that they did not. What I'll be looking for when Obama tells all, as he's promised, is the distance between what the president-elect and his aides said on Dec. 9, after Blago was arrested, and what we learn on Dec. 22. The difference will give us a sense of the incoming group's dissembling index—how easily they veer from the truth when questioned. After taking that first measurement, it will be easier to put their future remarks in context and to know whether this benefit of the doubt is warranted.

There are two items I'd like to know about. After the scandal broke, Obama adviser David Axelrod said that Barack Obama always wanted his friend Valerie Jarrett to serve in the White House. It was a pure act of delusion that Blagojevich would think Obama wanted her to be a senator. But the *Chicago Sun Times* also reported that Rahm Emanuel told Blagojevich Jarrett would like Obama's old seat. What's the truth of this? If Emanuel did suggest her as a candidate, then a gap opens between the truth and the spin. Was Emanuel pushing Jarrett on his own and not letting his new boss know? Or was Obama, in fact, keen for her to be in the Senate? That would make the post-arrest spin look like an effort to dissemble in order to protect Obama and Jarrett from the scandal.

The next matter concerns the president-elect himself. When first asked about the scandal, Obama said, "I was not aware of what was happening," and declined to say any more. On Dec. 22, we can hope to learn how he defined "what was happening." Did he

mean he didn't know the narrow details of how Blagojevich was shaking people down? Or that Blagojevich was shaking people down at all? Or that he didn't know what was happening with his former Senate seat?

Whatever we ultimately learn about what Obama did know, we'll be able to measure it against that initial statement. And that will give us a sense of how much lawyer there is in the president-elect's answers. If Obama ducks all these questions, then my faith was misplaced. Until then, I say, let's give the new guy a break.

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politics

The Green House

The recession is the best thing that could have happened to Barack Obama.

By Christopher Beam

Tuesday, December 16, 2008, at 8:22 PM ET

For President-elect Barack Obama, the sagging economy is the gift that keeps on giving. First, it helped get him elected. Now it's giving him a mandate to spend more than he ever could under normal circumstances.

Nowhere is this more apparent than on climate change. When Obama rolled out his "green team" Monday, he made it clear that he doesn't see saving the environment and saving the economy as incompatible. Quite the opposite: He thinks they're complementary.

Take the example of green buildings: "We know that there are buildings—school buildings, in particular, but I think public buildings generally—that need to be retrofitted to make them more energy-efficient," Obama said. "We will get that money back so that not only are we creating jobs, but we're also making those operations more efficient and saving taxpayers money over the long term." In other words, "green-collar jobs"—jobs created when government policy encourages people to install solar panels or research wind power or "weatherize" homes—are a kind of magic puzzle piece. They'll stimulate the economy in the short term (by creating jobs) and save money in the long term (by reducing emissions and making us more energy-efficient).

That sure *sounds* good. But there are a few complications. For one thing, you may have heard we're in a recession. If people are cutting back on food, clothing, and gas, are they really going to pay *more* for pricey doodads like solar panels and wind turbines? Obama's answer is that they won't have to. He says the efforts will be paid for by revenues generated by a new cap-and-trade bill, which will make energy companies pay for their emissions. Never mind that the last cap-and-trade bill to land in the Senate never gained much traction. Obama promises this one will be more aggressive.

Consumers may also avoid paying more for their energy use because the government is covering it. Obama has pledged to commit $150 billion over 10 years for a "clean energy future"—which includes paying for infrastructure, often the costliest part of alternative energy. The idea is that since the government is paying for the new equipment, energy companies won't pass the costs on to the consumer. (At least, not initially.) So, in theory, you won't have to pay more for electricity.

And even if you did, some economists argue that you won't be for long. As the price of bad, dirty energy goes up, the price of good, clean energy will come down, and "those lines will cross because of economies of scale," says Dan Weiss of the Center for American Progress. In other words, the only reason solar panels and such cost so much is because no one makes them *en masse*. Yet. Not everyone is convinced. "It's not an economy-of-scale problem," says Patrick Michaels of the Cato Institute. "It's a physics problem. … If the sun got hot enough to be an efficient provider to solar energy, we'd burn up."

So can the government really afford to pay for all this? Surely we can't spend and spend without future generations picking up the tab. *Ah, but we can*, say economists on the left.

Newly Nobel-ed economist Paul Krugman has taken the lead in arguing that "the usual rules of economic policy no longer apply." Normally, if you wanted to retrofit a building or weatherize a home, you'd have to get the money from somewhere. The usual way is to increase revenues or reduce spending. No longer. With the economy in freefall and interest rates as low as they can go, the only hope for recovery is to spend—and to err on the side of spending too much.

The best part: Even though we have to borrow money, eventually the government can pay itself back by printing more. Yes, that would devalue the currency and therefore would not be, to use a technical economic term, free. But the way Dean Baker of the Center for Economic and Policy Research sees it, we have to spend the money now, anyway, to stimulate the economy: "It's like what Keynes said: Even if we pay people to dig holes and fill them up again, it's still good." And if we're going to spend, we might as well spend on something that's going to save us—both economically and environmentally—in the long term.

Then there's the problem of regulation. Sure, spending is fun and stimulating and possibly the only thing that will prevent total economic collapse. But regulation can slow growth. How can Obama implement a cap-and-trade plan without hurting the economy? Obama has admitted in the past that cap-and-trade isn't cost-free. After all, the *whole point* is to drive up the cost of electricity. In a debate on Jan. 5, he said, "We have an obligation

to use some of the money that we generate to shield low-income and fixed-income individuals from high electricity prices, but we're also going to have to ask the American people to change how they use energy. Everybody's going to have to change their light bulbs. Everybody's going to have to insulate their homes. And that will be a sacrifice, but it's a sacrifice that we can meet. Over the long term it will generate jobs and businesses and can drive our economy for many decades." That was easy to say last January. It may be a harder sell in the midst of a recession.

Finally, energy efficiency may come at the cost of economic efficiency. Creating a solar panel does not create demand for a solar panel (a fact that Germany is currently learning the hard way). Another way of putting it is to say the economy moves faster than the government: By the time we're done installing all the solar panels, photovoltaic cells will be obsolete. Patrick Michaels likened it to Thomas Jefferson stimulating westward expansion by creating a state-sponsored nationwide network of barge canals. "By the time the barge network was done being built, the steam engine and the railroad would have been invented," Michaels said.

Despite all this, the economy is so desperate that the short-term outlook for Obama's plan is good. Any pledge to create 2.5 million jobs is bound to be popular. And the realignment in the House—particularly Henry Waxman's ouster of John Dingell as chairman of the energy and commerce committee—means he'll have the necessary congressional strength.

But by relying so much on an economic argument to support his green agenda, Obama risks losing momentum if the economy recovers. What happens when we no longer need to keep spending billions of dollars to create new jobs? Obama wants to reduce emissions by 80 percent by 2050. Does that mean the recession has to continue for that long, too?

politics

Blagogate? Chiblago? Hairnet?

Slate readers name the Blagojevich scandal.

By Christopher Beam

Tuesday, December 16, 2008, at 12:06 PM ET

Last week, we solicited nominations for a Rod Blagojevich scandal-naming contest. The results are in, and suggestions fall into a few distinct categories:

- *The ever-popular "-gate" suffix.* Readers suggested "**Blagogate**," "**Blagojegate**," and, for those who suspect we don't know the full extent of the bribery, "**Blo-gate**." "**BidderGate**" is smart but risks confusion with the "guns and religion" fuss. Sadly, these and all other "-gates" were automatically eliminated. Per order of the National Political Scandal Nomenclature Task Force, the suffix has been retired.
- *Random word merging.* "**Chicagovich**" is a little clunky. "**Illiseat**" is clever, but maybe too much so. "**Chiblago**" is oddly inspired but seems better suited to the Broadway musical about the scandal than the scandal itself.
- *Curse words.* "**Bleepgate**" was a popular one and almost caused a reconsideration of the rule against *-gates.* Variations include "**Motherbleepergate**" and "**(expletive deleted)gate**"—a mouthful that would give us typists carpal tunnel.

Finalists:

Honorable mentions: "**Blagerloo**" captures the dramatic finality of it all. "**Blaghorea**" doubles as a commentary on the commentary. "**Blago-smear**" goes out to all the Blagojevich sympathizers in the house. And "**Hairnet**" immortalizes the only thing people will remember about the governor a decade from now: his pompadour.

Second runner-up: "**Pay-Rod**." Good merge of form and function. Doesn't require prior knowledge other than a passing familiarity with the New York Yankees.

First runner-up: **"Coiffuror**." A tribute to the man who has nothing to hide except, as Jon Stewart noted, "whatever is written on his forehead." (Context warning: Also sounds like a Frenchman's response to an inaudible verbal request from Hitler.)

And the winner is … "**Blagola**." *Payola* is synonymous with pay-to-play radio deals. Blagojevich is synonymous with pay-to-play Senate seat deals. Spread the word! *(Submitted by William C. Spruiell)*

politics

When the Shoe Fits

Getting a shoe thrown at him is the best thing that's happened to Bush in a while.

By John Dickerson

Monday, December 15, 2008, at 7:22 PM ET

In the shoe-throwing matter of George Bush vs. Muntader al-Zaidi, there are many questions. Where was the Secret Service? Is this a sign that the freedom Bush wanted to bring to Iraq is

flourishing? Is a shoe-throwing journalist who tries to undermine authority a sabot auteur or a saboteur?

Whatever the answers, it may be the best thing that has happened to Bush in months. This is, of course, a relative statement. Bush will leave office with one of the lowest approval ratings in modern history. His exit is heralded by rebukes from his own party and regular disclosures about policy mistakes, mismanagement, and potential illegalities committed during his tenure.

But my guess is that a lot of Americans will see the shoe al-Zaidi threw but not hear the words he spoke. (He said he was acting on behalf of "the widows, the orphans, and those who were killed in Iraq.") And if they do hear, they won't linger over what he said. They'll marvel at the president's quick reflexes and calm.

Bush brushed off the incident, joking that he saw into his attacker's "sole," a reference to his famous misreading of Vladimir Putin. It's the kind of incident where Bush's no-big-deal attitude, so maddening in other contexts, serves him well. "It was just a bizarre moment," Bush told journalists later on Air Force One. "But I've had other bizarre moments in the presidency." (*Once, I thought there would be weapons of mass destruction in Iraq …*)

At the very least, I suspect a spark of patriotism will kick in when some Americans watch the tape or see al-Zaidi heralded in the streets as a hero. *Hey, you can't throw shoes at our president*, they might say. *Only* we *can throw shoes at our president.* This may test Nixon's theory that presidents benefit from rough treatment by journalists.

The shoe-throwing incident also puts the Iraq war back in the popular conversation in a way it hasn't been for a long time. Familiar battle lines emerged. Both supporters and opponents of the war found in the airborne shoe cathartic expression of their own views. Opponents said: "Not even the people this war was supposed to help view it as a success. Bush is still a pariah in Iraq." Proponents said: "The fact that al-Zaidi felt free enough to throw his shoe shows that this war has been a success. Had he done that to Saddam Hussein, he would have been shot on sight."

But as a whole, the country is still sour on the Iraq war. Nearly 60 percent of Americans think the war was a mistake. Despite the drop in violence over the last months and an agreement with the Iraqis on a timeline for withdrawal, only 49 percent of the country thinks the United States is winning.

Still, the round of Iraq debate spurred by the attack takes place in a period of natural patriotism and respect for the office of the presidency, a mood that might accrue to Bush's benefit. Plus, one of the last images of the 43rd president will be of him graciously welcoming Obama into office. As Obama takes the handoff, he'll naturally extend a certain amount of praise. It's important to his post-partisan posture, and Obama—who has always been personally sympathetic to Bush—is each day gaining an acute appreciation for the complexities that come with the office, including the need to avoid flying footwear.

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politics

Our Fearless Politics

For now, fear is gone from Washington. What will happen when it returns?

By John Dickerson

Monday, December 15, 2008, at 1:27 PM ET

When George Bush ducked shoes hurled at him Sunday at a press conference in Baghdad, it wasn't his only recent experience with defiance. Last week he urged his fellow Republicans to back a $14 billion bailout of the car industry, and they ignored him. We're all familiar with the powerlessness of a lame duck president. But usually there aren't events that so clearly celebrate it. Bush came into office boasting that he knew how to use the political capital of the presidency. Now he's showing us what it looks like to be completely without political capital.

No one is afraid of the big bad W. In fact, the threat level in all of Washington is generally low. Fear, which has always played an important role in focusing the minds of politicians, has dissipated, even as an ever-souring economy and turmoil in South Asia give us all more to be afraid of. Even fear itself, which has been used to justify so much public policy, just isn't what it used to be. Last week, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid warned Republicans who voted against the auto bailout that they would be responsible for tanking the stock market the next day. The Dow closed up 64 points Friday.

Some of this is to be expected. In addition to Bush's twilight status, members of the House are as far from an election as they can be, which makes them less fearful of voters. But there are also factors unique to the new landscape.

Democrats, giddy after years in the wilderness, have big majorities in the House and the Senate—and the freedom that comes with emergency. First they'll shape $1 trillion in stimulus spending. Then, they'll take on Barack Obama's bold public-works programs, health care reform, and energy legislation. Republicans, battered and bruised, have nothing to lose and therefore fear no one. With no clear leader and competing theories for how to rescue the GOP, everyone is acting out.

In less than 40 days, there will be a new sheriff in town. But Obama has promised that hope rather than fear will rule the city.

But not only did Obama run his campaign on hope; he also ran *against* fear as the justifying language of public policy. Michelle Obama articulated it most succinctly: "I am tired of being afraid. I am tired of living in a country where every decision that we've made over the last 10 years wasn't for something but it was because people told us that we had to fear something."

Obama shows no signs of using his popularity to bend people to his will. His temperament is more of a persuader than an arm twister. Drawing on his experience as a community organizer, he will look to build bonds and buy-ins and bridges, not pressure reluctant allies into a forced march. His initial moves all point in this direction: He has put Republicans in his Cabinet and sought their counsel, and asked his aides to do the same. His chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel, known for his toughness, is receiving praise—even from Republicans—for being approachable. Having run on hope, Obama plans to govern on it as well.

This will be a departure from his predecessors. Lyndon Johnson used the whole palette of emotions to set the tone for his presidency—guilt, affection, and ambition—but fear was his most powerful weapon. "I never trust a man unless I have his pecker in my pocket," he once said. When Ronald Reagan fired air traffic controllers in his first term, he increased his leverage because it showed he wasn't afraid to act. When George W. Bush came into office, he preached bipartisan cooperation, but it soon became clear that he was willing to punish those who deviated from the administration line. Because he tried to use fear so aggressively, he was immediately singed: Sen. Jim Jeffords of Vermont bucked at being pressured by the White House and left the party, giving Democrats control of the Senate.

Washington veterans, intimately familiar with the immutable laws of politics, assume that Obama's new approach won't last. Eventually, they think, he'll come up against an immovable object and he'll have to start putting actual heat on his opponents—or pressure on his allies.

And there are already signs that niceness won't cut it. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell* didn't support the car bailout despite presidential pressure—from a fellow Republican no less—and the threat of getting blamed for further endangering the economy and ruining American car manufacturers. He's not the kind of fellow who is going to cave to Obama. Moreover, Republicans can't just agree with Obama all the time, or party activists will get even more cranky. Soon enough, Republicans will stop producing flaccid attacks that only help Obama and start to redefine themselves, and that will mean clashes. Sometimes that will lead to clashes meant purely for public show.

Obama may have to stop following the guidance in Doris Kearns Goodwin's *Team of Rivals*, says one Democratic veteran, and start heeding something closer to Machiavelli's advice that "since love and fear can hardly exist together, if we must choose between them, it is far safer to be feared than loved."

Obama's most powerful weapon is that he comes into office with an enormous mandate. An astounding 67 percent of respondents in a recent *Wall Street Journal*/NBC poll say they have positive feelings about him (45 percent say very positive)—a jump of 10 points from pre-election surveys. And the public is patient. Despite some recent press coverage, there is no revolt in the left wing of his party. Obama will be feared in Washington because he is loved in the country. "It's like gunboat diplomacy," one Washington veteran told me. Opponents surrender or give up the fight because they don't want to risk being on the wrong side of public opinion.

The question for Obama is not likely to be *whether* he uses fear to govern but *how* he does. Maybe he will choose to obliterate Republican opposition by shaming them by name and turning the public against them. But that carries a risk. His popularity is based, in large part, on the promise that he'll make good on his pledge to be a post-partisan change agent. If he looks like too much of a partisan—or aides look too rough acting on his behalf—he'll damage his brand. That's why he barely inserted himself into the Georgia Senate race or the ongoing recount battle in the Minnesota Senate race.

The first inklings about Obama's new approach will appear shortly after he's inaugurated. He will almost certainly be presented with a stimulus package within the first days of his administration. Working out the details of a $1 trillion package rushed through Congress will require the kind of serious deal-making and maneuvering that new presidents usually don't have to engage in so soon. Obama faces risks no matter what he does—the risk of failing to implement his policies if he doesn't knock some heads or the risk of tarnishing his standing if he does. It could be paralyzing—but only if he gives in to fear.

***Correction*, Dec. 15, 2008**: *This article originally misidentified Mitch McConnell as the Senate majority leader. He is the minority leader. (Return to the corrected sentence.)*

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press box

The Digital Slay-Ride

What's killing newspapers is the same thing that killed the slide rule.

By Jack Shafer

Tuesday, December 16, 2008, at 7:48 PM ET

Hardly a day goes by, it seems, without some laid-off or bought-out journalist writing a letter of condolence to himself and his profession. The *Columbia Journalism Review* and the *American*

Journalism Review have harbored these self-pitying fellows, as have newspaper columns and blogs. The Web magazine LA Observed has almost made the unhiring of journalists its beat, with black-bunting dispatches about job cuts at the *Hollywood Reporter*, the L.A. *Daily News*, the *Ventura Star*, and the *Chicago Tribune* in the last month alone.

The genre will only grow, what with newspapers gone over the edge in Albuquerque, N.M., and teetering in Denver; the Tribune Co. chain thrown into bankruptcy; the New York Times Co. borrowing against its skyscraper to cover debt; and other newspaper companies—the Journal Register Co., Lee Enterprises, MediaNews, the McClatchy Co., the Philadelphia dailies—racing to stay ahead of their creditors. The Paper Cuts mashup records 15,471 layoffs and buyouts at U.S. newspapers this year. That doesn't include the magazine industry, which is showing hundreds the door as titles downsize or fold.

The misery of a laid-off or bought-out journalist isn't greater than that of a sacked bond trader, a RIF-ed clerk, or a fired autoworker. The only reason we're so well-informed about journalists' suffering is they have easy access to a megaphone. The underlying cause of their grief can be traced to the same force that has destroyed other professions and industries: digital technology.

Folks giggled at *Wired* founder Louis Rossetto's bombastic formulation in 1993 that the "digital revolution is whipping through our lives like a Bengali typhoon" and upsetting the old order. But Rossetto is getting the last laugh. Wherever digital zeros and ones can dislodge analog processes, they either have or are. Call it a digital slay-ride.

The rise of digital technology isn't the whole story of the current newspaper collapse, of course. Advertising is the lifeblood of newspapers, and it generally falls during recessions—and the current recession is cratering newspaper advertising, as Newsosaur blogger Alan D. Mutter reports.

But newspapers were hemorrhaging before the recession because advertising and reader eyeballs were moving to the Web. Online advertising—a purely digital play—grew faster than advertising on any other new media technology ever recorded. Last year, Web-advertising revenues passed radio-advertising revenues for the first time. The Interactive Advertising Bureau reports (PDF, Page 14) that the growth of Web advertising in its first 13 years eclipses that of both broadcast TV and cable TV in their first 13.

American Journalism Review's John Morton does a good job of finding some good news among the bad for newspapers in the current issue, pointing out that the industry still makes money. But nobody believes that newspapers will regain their lost ground after the recession recedes.

Before we get too weepy about lost journalistic jobs and folded publications, let's ask how often reporters lamented the decline of other industries, products, and services swamped by Rossetto's digital typhoon. Here's a very short list of typhooned jobs for which I wish there were a Paper Cuts-like mashup of losses:

- Bank tellers
- Typewriters
- Typesetting
- Carburetors
- Vacuum tubes
- Slide rules
- Disc jockeys
- Stockbrokers
- Telephone operators
- Yellow pages
- Repair guys
- Bookbinders
- Pimps (displaced by the cell phone and the Web)
- Cassette and reel-to-reel recorders
- VCRs
- Turntables
- Video stores
- Record stores
- Bookstores
- Recording industry
- Courier/messenger services
- Travel agencies
- Print and cinematic porn
- Porn actors
- Stenographers
- Wired telcos
- Drummers
- Toll collectors (slayed by the E-ZPass)
- Book publishing (especially reference works)
- Conventional-watch makers
- "Browse" shopping
- U.S. Postal Service
- Printing-press makers
- Film cameras
- Kodak (and other film-stock makers)

Local television news, feeling the same hurt as newspapers, is likewise making cuts. The *New York Times* reports that the typical late-news program reaches 12 percent of viewers compared with 21 percent from a decade ago and that revenues are down 7 percent. To make ends meet, many stations are giving their exorbitantly paid veteran anchors the heave-ho.

In Washington, D.C., Gannett-owned WUSA-TV is replacing its news crews with multimedia journalists "who will shoot and edit news stories single-handedly," reports the *Washington Post*. Such job-juggling would have been impossible in the analog days. Cameras were heavy, bulky, and complex to operate. You

needed an editing console to create the segment and a telescoping transmitter on top of a van to send images back to the studio. Now the digital technologies of tiny cameras, laptops, editing software, and WiFi connections can do most of the heavy work.

Perhaps the most prescient of all digital prophets was scholar W. Russell Neuman, whose 1991 book, *The Future of the Mass Audience*, saw how the Web would overturn the existing order before the public World Wide Web even existed. The media—newspapers, magazines, TV, radio, cable, motion pictures, games, music, books, newsletters—all resided in separate "unique, noncompetitive" analog silos. Translating and transmitting from one format to another was "an expensive, labor-intensive endeavor," Neuman writes.

By introducing these varied—and often monopolistic—media to a "single, universal, multipurpose network," the digital Web destroyed the old barriers and created new competitive pressures. For end users, viewing last night's Dave Letterman monologue or cruising Craigslist or scanning today's headlines or reading one's inbox or listening to the Timbaland/Cornell collaboration now happens inside the same space. In other words, CBS, the *Times*, Universal Music, Verizon, Blockbuster video, and anybody else who wants your media attention is fighting for your attention (mindshare and dollars) in the same kiosk. It only stands to reason that in today's environment, the daily newspaper—that wonderful, crusty old beast, which I love with all my heart—would take a beating.

Newspapers embraced the new platform when it arrived in the mid-1990s, but they weren't very inventive. All the great innovations in advertising, search, and social networking have come from outside the newspaper industry, which, given its 20 percent margins, it could have afforded to fund. Today, with the Web beating newsprint as a distribution platform and gaining on it as advertising destination, the odds are against conventional newspapers.

It appears to me that most newspapers—by choice or by necessity—have made the "decision to liquidate," to steal the phrase from Philip Meyer's excellent 2004 book, *The Vanishing Newspaper: Saving Journalism in the Information Age*: They're cutting costs, cutting staff, cutting pages, cutting features, cutting quality, and will continue cutting until the last reader and advertiser depart. (Local TV news looks to be following a similar script.)

I keep waiting for one of these distressed, failing newspapers to realize that it has nothing to lose and get a little crazy and create something brand new and brilliant for readers and advertisers. I keep being disappointed.

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That said, I still love the incredibly clever and useful *New York Times* Reader, which belongs on everybody's computer. There's even a beta for the Mac now. I have great hopes for the "Open API" program at the *Times*. I'm also crazy about the *Boston Globe*'s "Big Picture" feature. Adrian Holovaty isn't a newspaper, but he could be. The former Washingtonpost.Newsweek Interactive employee created the data-scrapping EveryBlock.com, which impresses me. What's your favorite 21st-century newspaper innovation? And help me build out my list of analog roadkill with your suggestions. Send correspondence to slate.pressbox@gmail.com. (E-mail may be quoted by name in "The Fray," ***Slate***'s readers' forum; in a future article; or elsewhere unless the writer stipulates otherwise. Permanent disclosure: ***Slate*** is owned by the Washington Post Co.)

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shopping

Rrrrrrrobots!

The search for the ideal animatronic pet.

By Daniel Engber

Tuesday, December 16, 2008, at 7:12 AM ET

I'm 32 years old, I'm not married, and my dogological clock is ticking. For almost a decade now, I've been an armchair pet owner, studying breed lists and taking Web quizzes on what kind of puppy to adopt. Then, during a recent bout of anxiety over my impending menopaws, I volunteered to dog-sit for a friend.

It turns out that a real, live dog is nearly as demanding as a human baby—except a dog never learns to pour its own bowl of cereal. According to my dog-sitting instructions, I was to provide the animal with two meals every day plus three promenades around the block. (Happily, I was spared the unenviable task of brushing her teeth.) Forget drinks after work. Forget that film screening. Forget dinners out. Heck, forget even going into the office.

And so I became aware of my membership in a sad demographic that includes shiftless magazine editors, small children, and senior citizens. We're the sorry lot that adores animals but is too lazy, uncoordinated, or infirm to take care of them.

Fortunately, the modern world has produced something just for us—the robot pet. In theory, an animal constructed of fake fur, plastic limbs, and servos is the perfect substitute for a

demanding, flesh-and-blood companion. But how engaging are these mechanical beasts? I took a stroll down Animoid Row to find out.

In the course of my research, I surveyed a wide spectrum of robot friends—deluxe, automated dinosaurs, joke-telling dogs, and even an original, late-1990s model Furby. To see how they performed in the wild, I conducted and videotaped a series of focus groups with those I deemed most likely to appreciate them: namely, a pair of small children, a kindly grandmother, a live dog, and a guy who was really, really stoned. (No video footage was compiled during the stoner session, so as to avoid harshing effects.)

As much as I enjoyed the exercise, it soon became clear that at every price point, a robot pet can be described by its signature combination of essential robot qualities: It's *annoying*, *disturbing*, *offensive*, *pathetic*, or *scary*—or some mixture thereof. In the end, though, one fake animal whirred and purred his way into my heart.

I present my findings below, in order of price, not value:

Original Furby, Tiger Electronics
Annoying
A decade after it first appeared on the market, the original Furby remains the single-most annoying robot you can find. Thankfully, its antique chassis doesn't allow for autonomous movement—and thus it can be stowed permanently in the corner, facing the wall, with a towel draped over its head. Even so, any sudden movements, sounds, or flashing lights in the vicinity of the Furby may set off a cacophony of ejaculations in a grating and infantile pseudo-language called "furbish." To my surprise, though, the Furby performed admirably in the small-children test. (For a more detailed look at how kids interact—or don't interact—with the Furby, see this implanted-camera study conducted by multimedia artist Natalie Jerimejenko in 2000.)

Recommended for children so young that their faculty of annoyance is not fully developed ($15.50 on eBay; ages 6 and up).

Alive White Tiger Cub, WowWee
Pathetic
The Alive cub toys—available in white tiger, lion, panda, and polar bear models—are to be commended for their cheapness and elegance. The White Tiger is almost exactly what I'm looking for: a cuddly house cat that blinks and meows when you stroke its head but won't get hungry or pee on the sofa. If it weren't for the hum and whir of the animatronic motors, you might even forget, for a moment, that it's not really alive. (On that point, the cub is not alone: I'm now convinced that the invention of a silent motor would be the most dramatic breakthrough in the history of robotics; next to that, artificial intelligence is a trifle.) Another strike against: The cub can move only its mouth and eyes, so it spends most of its time awkwardly keeled over like a stuffed animal with not enough stuffing.

Recommended for anyone, especially the simple-minded or bedridden ($50; ages 3 and up).

Elmo Live, Fisher Price
Annoying / Pathetic / Scary
This throwback to the Ruxpin family of talking teddy bears isn't so much interactive as it is bossy—press a button on his toe, and Elmo Live launches into an interminable game of "Elmo Says." (Warning: No matter how diligently you follow his instructions, Elmo concludes that you've made a mistake and emits a loud buzzing sound to underline the point.) When he's not ordering people around, Elmo tells lame jokes that even my 18-month-old nieces would find condescending, or he performs some form of stuffed-animal calisthenics to an obnoxious soundtrack. He has a tendency, during this and other routines, to work himself into such a lather that he falls over, whereupon the machine defaults to plaintive (and often unheeded) calls for rescue. Focus groups were almost uniformly unimpressed, though Elmo did develop a touching love-hate relationship with the live dog. I'm also prepared to conclude that of every robot tested, Elmo Live is most likely to fall victim to a voodoo spell, brandish a knife, and go on a killing spree.

Recommended for hungry dogs ($60; ages 18 months and up).

Femisapien Humanoid Robot, WowWee
Disturbing / Offensive
After four focus groups and hours of careful study, I still can't make heads or tails of the Femisapien. According to the manufacturer, she's "an independent robot girl!" Which is, I suppose, a quick way of saying that she's a weirdly flirtatious, 15-inch-high, animated figurine with an assertive plastic bosom and a shapely behind. By pointing her hands in different directions, you can trigger a set of increasingly unsettling behavioral programs. In the "fashion pose" function, she does what looks like voguing. Then there's the function where she blows kisses at you. Or the one where she slow-dances with you. Or the one where she converses with you in a series of girlish moans and giggles. (I wouldn't have been surprised to discover an Easter egg function where she gives you a back rub.) So who's the target audience here? For this kind of money, you could get a harem of inflatable dolls.

Recommended for sex-starved male robots ($100; ages 8 and up.).

Wrex the Dawg, WowWee
Annoying / Pathetic / Offensive
Finally, a robot dog! Too bad this one plays like a salty version of Elmo Live, on wheels. The conceit here is that Wrex is a "junkyard dog" made from discarded electrical parts. That's why he's always blurting out vaguely insulting one-liners from his

speakers ("I'd shake your paw, but I don't know where it's been") and why his set of programmed behaviors include "takes a wiz" and "breaks wind." Left to his own devices, he'll drive around the room, muttering at obstacles as he avoids them and occasionally pausing to deliver one of his trademark bits—a melodramatic death scene, for example, followed by a cheeky demand for an Oscar. Every once in a while, he'll suffer a "breakdown" by design and beg you to reset him.

Recommended for not terribly precocious 8-year-olds ($120, ages 8 and up.)

FurReal Friends Biscuit My Lovin' Pup, Hasbro
Pathetic / Disturbing
Biscuit should be the robot pet for me. He's a soft, realistic, life-size dog that tilts his head and whimpers when you scratch under his ears. Put your hand near his nose, and he'll start sniffing and panting. Rub his back, and he'll wag his tail. He even responds to spoken commands like "Sit," "Lie down," and "Beg." (Serious question: Do live-dog owners really order their pets to beg? That's kind of messed up.) Tell him, "Give me your paw," and he'll raise up a furry foot in the most adorable way. He'd be even more adorable if this and every other movement didn't unfold in excruciating slow motion, accompanied by a loud whirring sound. Biscuit's front paws also have a tendency to get stuck under his body, which makes it look as though both his forelegs are broken. And his incessant and pathetic squeals are guaranteed to make you feel uncomfortable before too long. (To be fair, there are many more disturbing robot animals in the world. WowWee, for example, used to produce an animatronic head of a decapitated chimpanzee.)

Recommended for codependent dog lovers ($160; ages 5 and up).

Kota the Triceratops, Playskool
Annoying / Scary
Behold Kota, the Hummer of robot pets. Standing about 2 feet high and more than 3 feet long, this plush dinosaur is likely to be bigger than most of the kids who play with it. It's also likely to scare the bejesus out of them. Kota emits loud bellows as he swivels around a giant head and blinks his fist-sized eyes. He's even got built-in microphones, so he can respond to ambient sounds—which makes it easy to imagine a tit-for-tat of terrified screams and interactive dino-roars. That's too bad, because Kota is also programmed to respond to gentle strokes of his chin, head, and torso. Those brave enough to climb onto his back are rewarded with jungle adventure music and the sound of stomping triceratops feet. But Kota doesn't go anywhere.

Recommended for bratty rich kids who deserve what they get ($270; ages 3 and up).

Pleo, Ugobe
n/a
I guess you get what you pay for. Pleo, an 8-inch-high, automated Camarasaurus, is a pleasure to have around. His movements, slow and steady, are significantly more lifelike than those of his competitors. Like many robot pets, Pleo is programmed to change "moods" over time—but unlike others, his behavioral states are instantly relatable: Sometimes he's curious, wandering across the room of his own accord; at other points he's playful, sleepy, or affectionate. Leave him be, and he's a soothing presence with his deliberate gestures and gentle sounds. Pick him up, and he's cuddly as the White Tiger Cub, despite his rubbery skin. In short, Pleo somehow manages to be neither annoying, disturbing, offensive, pathetic nor scary. I can think of no higher flattery for a robot pet.

Recommended for everyone. Pleo makes the world a better place ($349; ages 8 and up).

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slate fare

Slate's Most-Read Stories

The 10 most popular articles of 2008.

Wednesday, December 17, 2008, at 6:59 AM ET

Most years, when ***Slate*** chronicles its most-read stories, the list is full of froth: In 2005, readers clicked on stories about dogs, beer, and naked ladies; in 2006, it was articles about hail and Whole Foods; last year, Crocs, *The Secret*, *The Sopranos*, and trampy teens. But this year, hard news had its revenge. Our top stories were about the election, the economy, and—in the case of our most-read story, about McCain's fatally incompetent response to the financial meltdown—how the economy decided the election. Below, you'll find a list of the 10 articles and five slide shows that attracted the most readers this year.

10 Most Popular Articles

1. Sept. 24, 2008
   The day John McCain lost the election.
   By Daniel Gross
2. An Affair To Remember
   She was 82. He was 95. They had dementia. They fell in love. And then they started having sex.
   By Melinda Henneberger
3. The 2007 ***Slate*** 60
   The largest American charitable contributions of the year.
   By Rachael Larimore
4. Palin's Campaign vs. McCain's
   When Sarah Palin disagrees with John McCain, it means something. Or does it?
   By John Dickerson

5. *The Wire* Final Season
   Jeffrey Goldberg and David Plotz discuss the final season of *The Wire*.
6. The Condensed Tom Cruise
   Slate reads the new Tom Cruise bio so you don't have to.
   By Juliet Lapidos
7. If Obama Loses, Who Gets Blamed?
   His loss would be disastrous for the media and political establishment.
   By John Dickerson
8. Dead Air
   Why CBS should shutter its news division.
   By Troy Patterson
9. Cheap Gas in Missouri
   What keeps pump prices so low in certain states?
   By Jacob Leibenluft
10. I Beg Your Pardon
    The top prospects for a last act of Bush clemency.
    By Dafna Linzer, ProPublica

Five Most Popular Slide Shows

1. Itsy-Bitsy, Teeny-Weeny
   A brief history of the bikini.
   By Julia Turner
2. The Baby Primary
   Can I get my 5-month-old daughter photographed with every presidential candidate?
   By Darren Garnick
3. Mecca of the Mouse
   A grown man spends five days at Disney World. Without kids.
   By Seth Stevenson
4. 2 Girls 1 Cup 0 Shame
   Watching other people watch the most disgusting video of all time.
   By Michael Agger
5. *The Soiling of Old Glory*
   The photograph that captured Boston's busing crisis: How it was taken, and why it still matters.
   By Louis P. Masur

slate v

Pistol Packin' Grannies

A daily video from ***Slate V***.

Wednesday, December 17, 2008, at 2:12 PM ET

slate v

Robo-Pets: A Test-Drive

A daily video from ***Slate V***.

Tuesday, December 16, 2008, at 11:20 AM ET

slate v

Dear Prudence: Overboard on Christmas

A daily video from ***Slate V***.

Monday, December 15, 2008, at 11:45 AM ET

sports nut

What If LeBron James and Wolverine Joined the New York Knicks?

And other fantastical NBA scenarios.

By Neal Pollack

Thursday, December 18, 2008, at 8:04 AM ET

For decades, Marvel Comics has put out a series of "What If" books, postulating alternate realities that might have occurred if Stan Lee had been smoking a different strain of reefer. For instance: "What If Captain America Had Been Elected President?" (ironic). Or: "What If Jane Foster Had Found the Hammer of Thor?" (hottt!). But the still-coolest What If scenario was the first one, from 1977: "What If Spider-Man Joined the Fantastic Four?" That's a question every comic-book fan used to ask every day. It was a dream scenario that justified all the years we'd spent ignoring our actual problems while living in an imaginary reality where we knew the difference between the Green Hulk and the Gray Hulk.

Now the NBA is providing the same service for its equally nerdy, though probably drunker, fans. All season we've endured endless "What If" scenarios from the media figures who are paid to speculate for us by proxy. As anyone who's watched ESPN in the last three months would know, many star NBA players are scheduled to be eligible for free agency in 2010. Dwayne Wade, Chris Bosh, and Amare Stoudemire just might change franchises. But the biggest auction pony, by far, is LeBron James.

LeBron is one of the 10 most famous people in the world, the man of his times, and the greatest basketball player on earth. The prospect that he might change teams would be truly exciting, if it were the offseason and LeBron were actually a free agent. But

it's not, and he won't be on the market for two years. Regardless, James, who last I saw was leading the Cleveland Cavaliers to a 20-4 record (they lost), is being heralded as the hero who will return the New York Knicks to glory. This despite the fact that—and I really can't emphasize this enough—he's not a free agent and currently plays in Cleveland.

Of course, LeBron isn't helping matters by saying stuff like, "You have to stay open-minded if you're a Knicks fan. ... If you guys want to sleep right now and don't wake up until July 1, 2010, then go ahead. It's going to be a big day." Now that's just freaking obnoxious. But the fish eats the worm every time. After LeBron's November visit to Madison Square Garden, the New York tabloids responded predictably, with headlines like "LeBron Likes What Knicks Are Doing" and "LeBron James' Pal Claims Knicks Are Favorites." It's like New Yorkers are waiting for LeBron to invite them to homecoming. The rest of the basketball punditocracy, meanwhile, has become so obsessed with next-decade scenarios that it's like this NBA season doesn't exist. Hear ESPN.com's Bill Simmons, the voice of today's fan: "The NBA's off-court subplots, in many ways, have become just as fun as anything happening on the court. Because of the Internet, sports radio, team blogs, better information guys and everything else, the whole trade/draft/free-agent market has practically evolved into its own sport to follow. ... The Summer of 2010 (it sounds like a blockbuster movie) ties everything we love about that goofy underbelly into one neat package."

In other words, basketball-land has become a real-life Marvel Comics "What If" book. What-Iffing isn't just a comic-book enterprise. The popular simulation site Whatifsports.com—create fake teams made up of your all-time favorite players!—has been enthralling sports nerds, myself included, for nearly a decade. But what's the point of a site like What If Sports now that imaginary basketball has been made real? After all, Simmons' beloved Boston Celtics are the most What If team ever constructed. The Celts, however awesome on the court, exist because of a series of implausible acquisitions that instantly transformed a terrible team into an amazing one: "What If the Timberwolves Dumped Kevin Garnett for Cents on the Dollar?" and "What If the Sonics Decided To Give Away Ray Allen?"

Last year, the NBA officially became a let's-pretend sport, with star players getting traded in the kind of deals that usually happen only in fantasy leagues where half the owners don't pay attention. The Lakers made it to the Finals by What-Ifing Kwame Brown for Pau Gasol. Other GMs tried their own moves—"What If Shaquille O'Neal Teamed Up With Steve Nash," and "What If Jason Kidd Returned to the Mavericks?"—that probably should've remained fictional. What If, no matter what happens, your team still can't get past the Spurs? And this season has already brought its own What If move, as the Pistons and Nuggets imagined a scenario where Chauncey Billups and Allen Iverson switched places. The Billups-Iverson deal actually might've been the first double What If move in NBA history, as Pistons GM Joe Dumars made the trade in part to free up salary cap space ... to maybe, possibly acquire LeBron James in 2010.

Why is What If management endemic to the NBA? It doesn't exist in the NFL, where trades are rare and any player can be cut at any time, not just in the summer of 2010. Major league baseball has been a What If hotbed for a long time, but baseball redemption can come from anywhere, including the minor leagues or Japan. And as the Steinbrenner family can tell you, no free-agent signing guarantees victory. Only in the NBA, the land of small rosters and more-or-less predetermined outcomes, can one or two players make the difference between the Finals and the lottery.

Half the league, it seems, now has What If fever, clearing cap space and punting real-life basketball games on the off-chance LeBron or Wade or Bosh might grace their courts in the 2010-11 season. The 2010 season has reared its head so soon because so many teams have nothing left for which to live. Nearly half the Western Conference is already effectively eliminated from this year's playoffs. The East, while more closely contested, isn't exactly a powder keg of suspense. So mostly we hear about LeBron. Will he go to the Knicks? Won't he go to the Knicks? What kinds of endorsements will emerge? The What If marketers of the NBA certainly wouldn't mind. Then they'd have their dream of LeBron in New York and Kobe in Los Angeles, plus maybe the Celtics and one other good team. The rest of the league would be left to What If bottom-feeding. ESPN.com has already begun running Chad Ford's lottery generator and mock draft so fans of failed teams can have their own pretend scenarios, such as: "What If Ricky Rubio Ran the Point for the Washington Wizards?" Meanwhile, ESPN's "trade machine" keeps the rest of us busy. For instance, I just concocted a deal where LeBron goes to Phoenix in exchange for Grant Hill, Leandro Barbosa, Goran Dragic, Robin Lopez, and Alando Tucker. Personally, I think the Suns would come out quite well in that exchange.

Perhaps everyone is overspeculating because we pretty much know this season's outcome already. The NBA Finals will be a rematch of the What If Lakers and the What If Celtics, and the Celtics are going to win again with their superior defense and incredibly balanced scoring attack. They're just so damn good, with their Fantastic Four and all. But what if Spider-Man joined them? That would be awesome.

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sports nut

Gentlemen, Stop Your Engines

A NASCAR fan makes the case to euthanize stock-car racing.

By Robert Weintraub

Monday, December 15, 2008, at 12:27 PM ET

As the proud owner of a Honda and a Toyota, I've been following the to-bail-or-not-to-bail dance between the federal government and the Big Three automakers from a slight reserve. Forgive me, but as I've worked as a producer on a television show about NASCAR and written lots of articles about the sport in recent years, I'm most concerned about the fate of Jimmie Johnson and Dale Earnhardt Jr. Given the brutal financial climate, I should, out of pure self-interest, support whatever measures will preserve NASCAR. Nevertheless, I can't help but think that Detroit's version of the Troubles is the right time to put the sport out of its misery.

I don't recommend euthanizing NASCAR lightly. This is the sport that gave us sporting icons like Dale Earnhardt, Cale Yarborough, and the King, Richard Petty. I appreciate NASCAR's cutthroat competition, consider it a major sport, and think of the drivers as world-class athletes. But let's face facts—even if Ford, GM, and Chrysler get the cash they want from the taxpayers, they are going to have to pull back heaps of sponsorship dough from stock-car racing. Brian France, the CEO of NASCAR and grand pooh-bah of the sport, wrote a letter to Congress lobbying for the bailout, but that won't be nearly enough to win favor with the automakers, who will be slashing costs with a band saw, not a scalpel.

The Big Three and NASCAR have a symbiotic, deeply intertwined relationship. The adage "Win on Sunday, sell on Monday" has defined the way Detroit views NASCAR—as an extension of its core business. Roughly 75 percent of Sprint Cup teams—NASCAR's top division—drive American brands (the rest are with Toyota), and that percentage increases further down the NASCAR ladder. Beyond outfitting the race teams with chassis and souped-up engines, Ford, GM, and Chrysler provide manpower, technical support, and—the plasma that courses through the sport's veins—sponsorship: at the tracks, at media/marketing events, and everywhere else that NASCAR touches down. There is a simple cause-and-effect in the automaker/motorsports relationship. Poll after poll shows that there's a huge overlap between racing fans and buyers of American cars. Both tend to be fiercely loyal to preferred brands, which is a big reason why NASCAR shot to the top of the sporting food chain not so long ago.

It also stands to reason, then, that as the economy has gone down the toilet, the NASCAR bubble would be one of the first in the sports world to burst. As fewer and fewer domestic autos have sold, interest in NASCAR has declined as well. Meanwhile, the economic crisis has buffeted stock-car racing beyond the travails of the Big Three. According to AdAge, 12 of the sport's 42 full-time rides lack a sponsor with the Daytona 500, the traditional circuit-opener, just two months away. Mergers and cutbacks are the talk of pit road. Race teams have pink-slipped seemingly half of Mooresville, N.C., the home to the majority of the teams. The carnage has totaled roughly 1,000 employees, with many more bracing for the inevitable. Someone who still has a job—for now—with a smaller-level race team put it to me simply: "We're fucked."

It would be one thing if NASCAR were exceptionally strong and this were merely a cyclone to be ridden out in a basement somewhere. But the sport has been leaking oil for some time. Attendance at races dropped drastically in 2008 (in large part because steep gas prices this summer curtailed the RV armada that follows the circuit), and TV ratings declined for the third straight year. The season-ending "Chase" has failed to provide fireworks or closure—if not for the BCS, it would be the worst playoff system in sports. There's also a growing disconnect between racing and its hardcore fan base that began when the Frances stripped races from traditional tracks in Rockingham, N.C., and Darlington, S.C., in favor of places like Kansas and Las Vegas. And the most visible part of NASCAR, the driver corps, has morphed from a crew of heroic-yet-relatable, older, mostly mustachioed hell-raisers to an interchangeable posse of corporate-ready drones fresh out of driver's ed.

Consider Jimmie Johnson, the three-time Sprint Cup champion. Superbly talented, handsome, friendly, and always ready to pump the sponsors, he has received a lukewarm embrace from fans who prefer old-school types like Tony Stewart and Earnhardt Jr. The Tim Duncan of NASCAR, Johnson is excellent but dull. That would be OK if there were enough Kobes and LeBrons to make up for the champ's lack of luster. But Junior is an average driver living off his last name, Stewart can't find Victory Lane and is about to embark on a risky venture owning and fronting his own team (he couldn't have picked a worse year for that), and the rest—feh. Drivers like David Ragan and Denny Hamlin are strong up-and-coming talents, but they bring very little oomph.

But NASCAR's biggest problem isn't fixable with a couple of sexy drivers or a breathless season finale in Miami. The sport can't escape the fact that the internal combustion engine and fossil fuels are technologies on a steep downslope. With hybrids and electrics on the way in, it's hard to see where gas-guzzling, emission-belching stock cars fit in. Unlike the Indy Racing League and Formula 1 (open-wheel racing circuits famous for the Indy 500 and the Monaco Grand Prix, respectively), NASCAR has yet to implement alternative-fuel programs—hell, it only switched to unleaded gasoline last season! Open-wheel racing isn't immune from the economic turmoil (Honda recently announced it was dropping out of F1), but it stands a better chance at survival. Formula 1 and the Indy crowd run machines that are less cars than science experiments, highly engineered equipment that can and will adapt easily to new technologies. Stock cars are just tricked-out Dodges and Chevys—you know, the ones that nobody's buying anymore.

During NASCAR's glory years in the 1990s and early 2000s, gas was cheap, we could kid ourselves into believing it was

plentiful, and those who pointed out the connection between CO_2 and global warming were easily shouted down. The Hummer went from obscure military hardware to pop culture icon. But then Al Gore made a documentary, and politicians started talking about the folly of importing oil from "countries that don't like us very much." In 20 years, are we going to look back and shake our head in wonder that we let such a wasteful, environmentally disastrous "sport" take place?

Or, if you prefer cold-blooded business calculations to tree-huggery, examine the situation from the Big Three's point of view. The automakers' CEOs have already been reamed for flying private jets to D.C. while their companies wither. If the bailout does come through, making a huge expenditure on a diversion like NASCAR would be a jet-style PR disaster. Congress wants those dollars to go toward renewable-energy technology, not mammoth ad displays in the Talladega Speedway infield.

Continuing to fund stock-car racing would be a sign that Detroit simply cannot function in the new century. When and if U.S. automakers come up with a better alternative to their outmoded product, I'll be all for getting them out to racetracks to trade a little paint. But there is an unshakeable anachronistic whiff to NASCAR these days. Like the saber-toothed tiger and the cassette tape, stock cars had their time—but that time is now past. Yes, it flamed out quickly, but that's how Neil Young says it should happen. Detroit's nightmare is an opportunity for NASCAR to do the right thing and suspend operations. Once it goes, we'll probably wonder why it ever existed in the first place.

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technology

How To Blog

Advice from Arianna Huffington, Om Malik, and more of the Web's best pundits.

By Farhad Manjoo

Thursday, December 18, 2008, at 5:36 PM ET

The Huffington Post Complete Guide to Blogging, a new manifesto put together by editors and writers of the most-linked-to blog on the Web, is more than a little self-righteous. Bloggers, here, are the civic superheroes of our age, standing against the tyrannies of the Bush administration and its lumbering, deaf-mute enablers in the Old Media. If you've forgotten about how blogs brought down Trent Lott and how they delivered us from scammy journos like Judy Miller—well, turn here to relive the glory. "Blogging has been the greatest breakthrough in popular journalism since Tom Paine," Arianna Huffington, HuffPo's founder, writes in her introduction. The blogosphere, she adds, is the "most vital news source in the country."

Ordinarily all this bloggy good cheer would be a bit too much to take. But buried in the middle of the *Complete Guide* is, surprise, a complete guide—and a pretty good one, too. Tens of thousands of people start new blogs every day. I'd guess that most don't go into blogging to gain a huge audience, but those who do aim to be the next Kos quickly find disappointment. That's likely because blogging is difficult (I know this from personal experience; my last job was as a blogger), and there are few places that offer tips on how to do it well.

The only trouble with HuffPo's guide is that it's printed on dead trees. So I set out to rectify that problem. I called and e-mailed a half-dozen of my favorite bloggers to ask how they blog so well, and I combined their ideas with the best advice from HuffPo. Behold—my own complete guide to blogging.

Set a schedule. Blog often. Jeff Atwood, who runs the fantastic programming blog Coding Horror, told me that the key to his early success was sticking to a realistic target of six posts a week. HuffPo's editors echo this advice: "If you're serious about blogging, commit to posting at least two to three times a week for thirty days," they say. Posting with such regularity will be tough; you've got other things to do, and writing is a daunting task for most people. But blogging, like exercise, gets easier with practice. The more often you do it, the less onerous it'll feel, and at some point you may even grow to like it.

Don't worry if your posts suck a little. Unless you're Jeffrey Goldberg, your first blog post is unlikely to be perfect. Indeed, a lot of your posts aren't going to be as great as they could be if you spent many hours on them—and that's OK. Felix Salmon, who writes *Portfolio*'s excellent finance blog Market Movers, puts it this way: "Quantity is more important than quality. Don't be scared of being wrong, or inelegant; you have much less of an idea what your readers are going to like than you possibly imagine. So jump right in, put yourself out there." Nearly every blogger I spoke to agreed with this sentiment. If you're trying to gain an audience, you can't afford to worry over every sentence as if it were ... see, I was going to spend 15 minutes thinking of a hilarious and deeply insightful simile there, but, damn it, I'm in blogging mode and need to move on.

Write casually but clearly. This one flows from the last two—the best way to stick to a blogging schedule is to write quickly, and a good way to write quickly is to write as if you're talking to a friend. Marc Ambinder, the political-news maven at the *Atlantic*, told me, "I've found that I tend to write the way I speak. Short, staccato sentences, lots of parentheticals. That annoys purists, but it's uniquely my own voice, and I think it helps to build a connection with the reader." Also remember that your readers want you to get to the point. "Be clear, not cryptic," Salmon says. "Blog readers have neither the time nor the inclination to read between the lines; blogs aren't literature."

Ryan Singel, who writes about security and privacy at Wired.com's Threat Level, offers a great tip on how to accomplish this:

> Start every post with a good first sentence that describes the story you are going to tell. Assume your reader won't get past the first paragraph. Never start with anything like "Sometimes when I hear about stupid things in the news, I just want to hit the wall," or "I haven't written about this in a long time, but today there was a story ..."

And one more thing on the writing: Don't be too wordy. HuffPo says that 800 words is the outer-length limit for a blog post; anything longer will turn people off.

Add something new. This might seem obvious, but new bloggers tend to forget it: Readers aren't going to stick with you unless you give them something they can't find elsewhere. If all you've got to say about Bernie Madoff is that he's a crook and a bastard, why don't you sit on that egg a little longer? If you're coming to blogging from journalism, think about contributing some reporting. "It's really not very hard to pick up the phone or email someone primary to the story," Singel says. "If you do, you can advance the story and you will stand out." Another tactic is to focus on an aspect of the story that few others have noticed. Did you see that Madoff's golf scores were as suspiciously consistent as his investment returns? Now that's interesting, isn't it?

The American Prospect's Ezra Klein, whose politics and public policy blog carries the blogosphere's best slogan—"Momma said wonk you out"—stresses this idea even more: Aim your blogging energies at a narrow topic, he says. Klein's bailiwick is health care policy, about which he regularly offers deep, technical commentary. "That's not to say you have to create a niche blog," he adds. "The specialized posts mix with the generalized posts—in my case, health wonkery rubs elbows with garden variety political punditry—and the two cross-subsidize each other. The rigor of the more technical work gives you credibility in the reader's mind and adds weight to the generalist posts. The generalist posts broaden the blog's potential audience and create access points that new readers wouldn't have if you let the blog become a repository of technical commentary."

Join the bloggy conversation. And link! The only way people will find your blog is through other blogs—and you'll get other blogs to notice you by responding to what they're writing about. Do this both in your blog and in the comments sections of other blogs. Take other people's ideas seriously: Don't just say you love or hate Ezra Klein's post; say why he's right or wrong. Also, try not to steal other people's scoops. And if you do cite another blog's work, give credit prominently. Live by Felix Salmon's maxim: "Be generous: With links, with email replies, with hat-tips."

Don't expect instant fame. Actually, don't expect any fame. There are better ways than blogging to get rich and famous. (I've been hearing good things about a certain Charles Ponzi.) "It's a rapid and stark realization that you probably won't be so much better a writer or political analyst that your opinions on Barack Obama will muscle their way through the chaos and cacophony of the blogosphere," Klein says, "and that's even truer now, with more blogs and more entrenched voices, than it was in 2003, when I began." Several of the bloggers I contacted manage to support themselves mainly or entirely through blogging, but as Jeff Atwood notes, hoping even for that much is akin to hoping to play in the NBA. It happens to some people, but you can't expect that it'll happen to you.

So why should you blog? Because if you do it well for long enough, people—maybe a few hundred, maybe a few thousand, maybe more—will begin to read you. How long will it take to gain that following? You'll probably have to wait a year or more before anyone starts paying attention. If you can't wait that long, stop now. Also keep in mind there are reasons to stick with blogging even if just a handful of people read your work. Writing regularly will boost your ability to express yourself, a boon in any conceivable task, Atwood says.

A few other tips. Om Malik, whose blogging success spawned an entire network of tech blogs, offers two thoughts: 1) Wait at least 15 minutes before publishing something you've written—this will give you enough distance to edit yourself dispassionately; and 2) write everything as if your mom is reading your work, a good way to maintain civility and keep your work comprehensible.

Felix Salmon adds, "Funny is always a good idea" and "always link to primary sources—you'd be astonished how many bloggers don't do this."

Then, from Ryan Singel: "Pictures. Always. People like pretty pictures and there's a surprising number of free photos on the internet." (Tip: Search Flickr for Creative Commons-licensed photos.)

And finally, here's Mike Masnick, who runs the always insightful Techdirt: "When in doubt, write. When really in doubt, ask your readers for their opinions. Don't beg for traffic. Don't worry about traffic. Just write what you're interested in, communicate with others, and enjoy yourself."

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technology

Thanks for the Toilet Paper, My Robot Friends

The TV show *How It's Made* shines a light on our mechanized culture.

By Farhad Manjoo

Tuesday, December 16, 2008, at 10:59 AM ET

Let me tell you how toilet paper is made, though I'll warn you that the story's a little dull. First, recycled paper is shredded and then agitated in warm water for 10 minutes, making a pulp. The pulp is cleaned, bleached, and spread across a flat screen that's passed over a hot dryer. The pulp dries instantly, forming a long, feathery ply of toilet paper just four-thousandths of an inch thick. Meanwhile, strips of cardboard are brushed with glue and wound around a rod to make a cardboard tube. Finally, two plies of the delicate paper are attached and wound on to the tubes, which are then cut into regulation-size TP rolls and shuttled off to be packaged.

So, yes—that sounds about as exciting as an appointment with your accountant. And yet watching toilet paper being produced—as you can see in the clip below from the amazing TV show *How It's Made*—is irresistibly absorbing. The TP factory is completely automated. While human beings oversee the production line, they are largely removed from the operation; from the first stage to the last, toilet paper is made by a series of ingenious machines strung together by a system of conveyors so precise they seem to have been ripped from a gargantuan Rube Goldberg machine. In the back of your mind, you knew something like this was behind your toilet paper (you didn't think people were sewing each sheet by hand)—but who would have guessed that the cardboard tubes ride up to meet the paper on a little elevator of their own?

How It's Made isn't new; the half-hour Canadian program has been airing in the United States on the Discovery Channel since 2001 (it now also runs on the Science Channel), and it has been translated into several languages for broadcast around the world. Over the years, the show has offered a peek into the production of a fantastically random assortment of everyday things—jeans, apple juice, aircraft landing gears, canned corn, bicycle helmets, pipe organs, newspapers, paintballs, artificial eyes, nuts, car engines, suits of armor, kites, wooden ducks, darts, duvets, sardines, gliders, and plantain chips, among a few hundred other objects. I first came upon the show during a bout of insomnia a few years ago—reruns air at odd times—and I've been addicted ever since; plotless and divided into four segments per episode, *How It's Made* is ideal for folks looking to waste time on the couch.

Lately, though, it's been hard to watch the show without pondering the larger news of the day. As we debate the fate of some of the largest manufacturing companies in the United States and worry over the end of a nation in which we "make things," *How It's Made* is a reminder of the relentless drive of automation. The show makes an oxymoron of the term "manufacturing jobs": Only the rarest products require more than a few people to manufacture them, as everything from gummy worms to automobile engines shoots off the line with only the slightest human intervention. Take a look at the production of stackable potato chips, for example. A human hand enters the picture only at the very end—her job is to throw out the few bum chips from the line. Other than that, Pringles go from potato flakes to your mouth without anybody touching a tuber.

How It's Made's production is as streamlined as many of the items it profiles. In each segment, a narrator describes the on-screen action as high-speed cameras focus on key steps in the production line. The voice-over is straightforward and informative, if peppered with groaning puns and one-liners: "You could say that the boomerang is a bit of a *throwback* to primitive times," begins one segment. Or: "Water heaters may look uninspiring, but, inside, they're hot stuff." This disembodied voice is the show's only real human presence. There are no first-person interviews and few identifying labels to indicate what brand of product is being made (or where production is occurring). Even when humans are in the shot, they're kept anonymous—everyone is called "a worker" or "a craftsman." (Much else about the production seems cloaked in mystery. When I asked for an interview with producers, a representative of Productions MAJ, the Montreal-based company that makes *How It's Made*, told me that the firm would consent only if ***Slate*** agreed to give it final review over this story. I declined.)

The series' decision to focus on machine rather than man is the right one—nowhere else can you find such stunning pictures from the undocumented corners of mechanized culture. At its best, *How It's Made* is a celebration of industrial ingenuity; it revels in every well-thought-out idea for how to turn raw material into finished product, especially for crucial but throwaway items like toilet paper, whose production few of us ever consider. The machines make for mesmerizing visuals—they're so precise, so indefatigable, so diligent, so repeatedly perfect. Robots craft air bags and contact lenses perfectly every time, never stopping for a break, never messing up. It's also surprising how much planning seems to have gone into making all the little things we use everyday—who would have known that matchbooks and bubble gum were so complicated?

My favorite *How It's Made* segments peel back the seedier side of modern production. If you ever want to enjoy a picnic again, don't watch this segment on hot dogs, and if you like breakfast, avoid this piece on factory egg production. The most unsettling piece I've seen so far was the one on the hatching of baby chicks. As the tiny creatures get passed along a conveyor as carelessly as any other widget, you witness the seamless blend of animal and machine.

Maybe I'm being too pessimistic about the rise of the machines. Amid all these whirring robots, you do notice some work that only people can manage. Nearly everything about making a car windshield is computerized, but only a highly trained human can spot defects in the glass. Strobe lights also require people—the high-intensity bulbs used in airplanes and emergency vehicles begin with glass tubes that are shaped by skilled glass-blowers. Furniture is also labor-intensive—I counted at least a half-dozen people assisting in the production of a reclining couch. It's possible that soon, robots will be able to make furniture, too—but they'll have a hard time replacing the woman whose job it is to sit on each couch to measure its comfort level. Now, that's the job for me.

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television

Weight Watching

Two shows about formerly fat people.

By Troy Patterson

Wednesday, December 17, 2008, at 5:38 PM ET

BBC America deserves an award for the titles it presents in the documentary series *BBC America Reveals*. I don't mean the programs, which are satisfactory explorations of sensational topics, but the actual titles, which are great specimens of egregious luridity—*My Big Breasts and Me*, *My Small Breasts and I*, *My 100,000 Lovers*, *Sex Change Soldier*, *Brothers and Sisters in Love*, *Britain's Youngest Grannies*, and—steady yourself—*Britain's Worst Teeth*. This month has brought ***Too Fat To Toddle***, though that is something of a misnomer. The children profiled are past the toddling stage—or would be if their thighs weren't so thick.

In common with the other installments of *Reveals*, the show traffics elements of newsmagazine alarmism, pop-anthropological enlightenment, and jubilant voyeurism. "One in four preschool children in the U.K. is overweight or obese," the narrator says at the outset. "Unless the trend changes, our kids could become"—and here was a brief pause with the impact of a sustained drumroll—"*too fat to toddle*." What followed tracked the work of a physician organizing a weight-loss clinic for the under-5 set. His patients included not-so-little Teagan, whose body-mass index "is literally off the scale"; who is seen winded after a half-block's ride on her pretty pink kick scooter; to whom the score, dribbling desolately, shows no mercy. Making like Super Nanny, the good doctor involves the girls and her peers in some edifying games and teaches their parents about portion control and proper exercise. Scenes of confrontation and contrition flit past. Second-act setbacks add tension, as when Teagan, "faced with a potato a quarter of the size she used to get," throws a tantrum at the dinner table. But this is a story of progress, and the children move from scooping cake into their faces by the serving spoon to nibbling cheerfully on fruit kebabs. The final shot sees Teagan in smiling possession of a helium balloon, its silhouette no longer quite so reminiscent of her own.

Good for her. But nothing like this import, with its pseudo-academic tone and veneer of educational programming, could cut it on network television in America. (Its closest peers air on the Discovery Channel's TLC, which brings a clinical tone to such freak shows as *I Eat 33,000 Calories a Day*.) In America, the ideally successful obesity show would noisily feature the promise of salvation, the thrill of competition, and the power of positive thinking, with some sex appeal, product placement, and ritual humiliation thrown into the mix, plus a cathartic weep or two. Thus might we begin to account for the staying power of ***The Biggest Loser*** (NBC), which closed its sixth season on Tuesday night. I was new to the show and not in its target demo—and thus mostly passed those two hours with my mouth open, variously feeling stunned by the inspiring discipline of the contestants, gaping at the intolerable sluggishness of the proceedings, and working through half a pound of guacamole.

The host was Alison Sweeney, an actress whose standing as a three-time winner of *Soap Opera Digest*'s Outstanding Villainess honor belies her wholesome allure and nonthreatening cuteness. Sweeney explained that this latest go-round of *The Biggest Loser* had been a "families" edition featuring both parent-child teams and married couples—"those who were born to it versus those who were sworn to it." They hadn't competed as pairs; that device just enriched the narrative as the contestants first galumphed and then glided through the season's trials. Prizes would go to individuals. Someone would win $100,000. Someone else would win "the Jell-O grand prize" of $250,000. *I* could have become eligible to win $10,000 just by putting the tortilla chips down long enough to send a text message. The crowd favorite seemed to be a North Carolinian named Ed, a professional chef. A taped profile showed him at work in the kitchen, battling temptation as a bowl of penne pasta called its warped siren song via sound effects.

The contestants glimmered with newfound vanity, the men striding the stage in trim trousers, the gals tarted up to a fine sheen. They looked good. How could they not? They had internalized the militancy of their personal trainers. They had sweated and strained as if aspiring Olympians, connived and quarreled as if they were on any another reality show. They had participated in challenges so baroque that they must have burned calories just trying to get their heads around them. Clicking through *The Biggest Loser*'s Web site, I cued up a recent episode and heard Sweeney explain the rules of a "1980s flashback" game: "Each of you will be holding on to a handle attached to a barrel filled with 50 percent of your body weight in water. I will ask a series of '80s trivia questions. If you answer correctly, you get to add water to another person's barrel. ..." The segment involved levers, pulleys, and, all too obviously, the female contestants wearing high bangs and side ponytails.

A little of that farcicality would have gone a long way on the finale, which was mostly dedicated to people stepping on a scale. That the scale itself was highly farcical—it sat atop a pedestal resembling a squat, neon-trimmed ziggurat—could not have mattered to hard-core viewers. We got a winner, a woman who'd dropped a bit more than 100 pounds in a bit more than 200 days. Confetti fell, people doubtlessly hopped on their computers to order *Biggest Loser* exercise DVDs, and America was a special place. However big our asses might get, our dreams of self-improvement will always be larger.

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television

David Gregory's *Meet the Press*

I have a few points to make.

By Troy Patterson

Monday, December 15, 2008, at 3:56 PM ET

Upon reading Mickey Kaus' recent quip about the particular quality of David Gregory's dullness—"Gregory seems not straightforwardly dull, but somehow goofily hollow"—I flinched twice, first at the cruelty of the verdict, then at the keenness of the perception.

With Gregory now on the job as the moderator of ***Meet the Press*** (NBC), the status quo is in good hands. As a White House correspondent, Gregory had a way of confronting the president and his mouthpieces that was sometimes the welcome yap of a tough watchdog but more often the toot-toot of a showboat practicing the pure art of careerism. It feels unfair to say that Gregory is without substance, and yet I'm certain that I watched him host MSNBC's *Race for the White House* at least twice a week during the election season and just as certain that I remember nothing of the program beyond the punch of the graphics and the pep of the tempo.

Then there is the matter of Gregory's most notorious performance, grooving on stage with Karl Rove at the Radio and Television Correspondents' Dinner in 2007. Set aside, if you can, the matter of form—of his dancing like a black stand-up comic's idea of a white guy dancing. Here, Gregory boppingly embodied the coziness of the political class. Hips don't lie—he's delighted to be in the club. Last week, when Tom Brokaw formally announced that the 38-year-old was taking over a show that we're obliged to acknowledge as an institution, Gregory panted with humility while never managing to extinguish the self-regard that animates his on-air presence. This aspect stands in contrast with the projected warmth of his predecessor, the late Tim Russert. It probably makes no difference to the show's content, but the new face of *Meet the Press* wears a contented smirk.

Yesterday, the theme music marched and toodled—it's that automatically stirring John Williams stuff, a score for a floor debate in the Galactic Senate—and Gregory teased the topics: the blockbuster venality of Milorad Blagojevich and the fabulous health of the U.S. economy. In the first segment, the guests were Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan, who should obviously be played by Demi Moore if the Blago farce makes it to the big screen, and Lieutenant Gov. Pat Quinn, whom Alan Arkin might do a good job with. Gregory would cameo as himself in the film and eat up every minute of it.

The questions were perfectly fine. The pace was imperfectly brisk, with Gregory tumbling through his lines at a jarring velocity. For his first flourish of interrogative aggression, he pressed Madigan, who is asking the courts to declare Blagojevich unfit to serve, on her own ambitions. "Would you like to be the senator from Illinois? ... If you were offered it, would you take it?" She brushed these aside, and Gregory said, "Alright." Well, you gotta ask. For a further hit of Blago, Gregory then turned to the day's small panel, which included Chuck Todd, the sharp NBC analyst who gained a notable cult following during the primary season. (Some of us had rooted for Todd to assume the *MTP* gig, but that was an impossible dream. His demonstrated lack of polish as an anchor would disqualify him from the job even if his goatee didn't lower his stock as an authority figure on a major network.)

Dispensing with Blagojevich in an efficient 20 minutes, Gregory turned to the economy in general and the auto industry in particular. He launched questions at a group including some captains of industry, Gov. Jennifer Granholm of Michigan, and Mitt Romney, and again the questions were perfectly fine, except at those points where they didn't exist. At one moment, the Romney-bot emitted some talking points about the hourly costs of making a car in Detroit, and Granholm, rejecting this as sophistry, turned in her seat to gawp in astonishment. The transcript, please:

> ROMNEY: Labor costs, labor costs, legacy costs—labor costs and legacy costs and benefits are $73 an hour.
>
> GOV. GRANHOLM: That's not accurate.
>
> MR. GREGORY: This part of the debate's going to go on.

Not on this show, it isn't. Is it naive to think that this was where the moderator should have stepped in and attempted to achieve some clarity? Oh, probably. Toot-toot.

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the big idea

Political Corruption Smackdown

Which state is the most crooked—Illinois or Louisiana?

By Jacob Weisberg

Saturday, December 13, 2008, at 7:23 AM ET

With the unmasking of Gov. Rod Blagojevich as a kleptocrat of Paraguayan proportion, Illinois now has a real chance—its first in more than a generation—to defeat Louisiana in the NCAA finals of American political corruption.

Illinois boasts some impressive stats. According to data collected by Dick Simpson, a political scientist at the University of Illinois at Chicago, more than 1,000 public officials and business people from Illinois have been convicted in federal corruption cases since 1971. Of those, an astonishing 30 were Chicago aldermen; that's around 20 percent of those elected to the City Council during that period. If Blagojevich ultimately goes to prison, he will become the fourth out of the last eight governors to wear stripes, joining predecessors George Ryan (racketeering, conspiracy, obstruction), Dan Walker (bank fraud), and Otto Kerner (straight-up bribery). If he gets assigned to the U.S. penitentiary in Terre Haute, Ind., Blagojevich could become the first governor to share a cell with a predecessor.*

But don't count Louisiana out. According to statistics compiled by the *Corporate Crime Reporter*, it was No. 1 for the period between 1997 and 2006, with 326 federal corruption convictions. That's a rate of 7.67 per 100,000 residents. Illinois had 524 convictions in the same period, but with a larger population, its rate was only 4.68, which puts it an embarrassing sixth. And Louisiana can boast some impressive streaks. In 2001 Jim Brown became the third consecutive insurance commissioner to be convicted. New Orleans Rep. William Jefferson, who was just defeated for re-election, liked cold, hard cash so much he kept the bundles of bills supplied by a FBI sting operation in his freezer. His brother, sister, and niece recently joined him under indictment.

Illinois' corruption comes out of a tradition of patronage politics—not just the old Democratic machine in Chicago but also a Republican machine in the suburbs. Even as old-school politics have dwindled, however, Illinois scandals have retained their ward-boss flavor. They still tend to revolve around petty, methodical rake-offs from the quotidian operations of government—liquor licenses, elevator inspections, speeding tickets, and, above all, hiring.

The paradigmatic Illinois crook was the Paul Powell, who served as secretary of state in the 1960s. When Powell died, his executor found shoeboxes filled with $800,000 in cash (along with 49 cases of whiskey and two cases of creamed corn) in the Springfield hotel room where he lived. The money had been collected in $5 and $10 increments from applicants who wanted to make sure they passed their driving tests. Under the old Daley machine, city workers had to kick back around 5 percent of their salaries to the ward organization that guaranteed their jobs. When he insisted over a tapped phone line that "you don't just give it away for nothing," Blagojevich, the son-in-law of Alderman Richard Mell, was applying an old precept—though possibly for the first time at a senatorial level.

The Louisiana pathology is slightly different. Wayne Parent, a professor of political science at Louisiana State University, explains that with the discovery of oil and gas around 1912, politicians in the dirt-poor state suddenly controlled a gold mine in tax revenues. "They could spend this money virtually unsupervised," he says, "as long as they threw enough crumbs to the masses to satisfy them—direct, tangible goods like free textbooks and paved roads." This was the formula of populist governors Huey Long, his brother Earl Long, and Edwin Edwards. Louisiana politicians have always liked big bribes for big projects better than crooked little schemes. Edwards, for instance, is serving time for collecting a $400,000 gratuity in exchange for a casino license.

Illinois and Louisiana continue to have different styles of fraud—David Mamet vs. Walker Percy. Illinois' corruption culture tends to be mingy, pedestrian, and shameful. State legislators who sell their votes for $25 cash in an envelope (a scandal of the 1970s) do not tend toward braggadocio. When former Rep. Dan Rostenkowski was caught filching postage stamps from the House post office, he pleaded guilty and apologized for his crimes (and was pardoned by Bill Clinton).*

Louisiana's culture of corruption, by contrast, is flamboyant and shameless. Earl Long once said that Louisiana voters "don't want good government, they want good entertainment." He spent part of his last term in a mental hospital, where his wife had him committed after he took up with stripper Blaze Starr. When Sen. Allen Ellender died in office in 1972, Gov. Edwards didn't try to auction of his seat. He appointed his wife, Elaine, possibly to get her out of town. When Edwards ran for governor in 1983, he said of the incumbent, "If we don't get Dave Treen out of office, there won't be anything left to steal." (He also memorably said Treen was so slow it took him an hour and a half to watch *60 Minutes*.) Raised among figures like these, Louisianans tend to accept corruption as inevitable, to be somewhat proud of it, and to forgive it easily.

In recent years, however, Illinois and Louisiana seem to be copying each other. With Rod Blagojevich and his wife, Patricia—Lady Macbeth of Milwaukee Avenue—Illinois' corruption has gone carnival. And since Katrina, Louisianans seem to have lost their zest for the big heist. There's been no sympathy for those caught siphoning disaster funds. It's going to be a close contest again this year, but I'm betting on the Fighting Illini to claim the national championship.

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

***Correction*, Dec. 15, 2008:** *This article originally stated that Blagojevich defeated Gov. George Ryan at the polls. George Ryan did not run for re-election in 2002; instead, Attorney General Jim Ryan received the Republican nomination and lost to Blagojevich. (Return to the corrected sentence.)*

***Correction*, Dec. 15, 2008**: *This article misidentified former Congressman Dan Rostenkowski as a House Speaker. He did not hold that office. (Return to the corrected sentence.)*

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the dismal science

The Invisible Hand of God

Adam Smith thought competition among religions was a good thing. Does Hanukkah prove him wrong?

By Ray Fisman

Friday, December 19, 2008, at 7:03 AM ET

In a classic *Saturday Night Live* skit from the late 1980s, a bedridden Santa Claus makes an emergency call to his Jewish counterpart, Hanukkah Harry, for some help on Christmas Eve. Harry gallantly hops into a rickety cart pulled by three donkeys (Moische, Herschel, and Shlomo) to deliver presents. But his goodies turn out to be a letdown for a couple of kids who surprise him on his way down the chimney. For Christine, Harry offers up eight pairs of socks (one for each night of Hanukkah), and for Scott, a pair of men's slacks ("They're a little big, but you'll grow into them"). Fortunately for Scott, Christine, and all the other gentile boys and girls, Santa's stomach flu miraculously disappears. At the end of the sketch, he swoops in to save Christmas with Barbie dolls and pellet guns.

But by the time the skit aired, Hanukkah had already become considerably more than a sock-and-slacks affair. As a religious matter, it's a minor holiday, barely observed by Jews in most of the world. Yet in North America it has come to be known as the "Jewish Christmas" and is celebrated with extravagance—in particular, extravagant consumerism. In a recent study, Stanford economists Ran Abramitzky, Liran Einav, and Oren Rigbi argue that this is a natural response by Jews living in America's fiercely competitive religious marketplace. Using survey data on religious observance, the Israeli-American researchers find that it is Jews who are most concerned with assimilation who are most likely to go all out for Hanukkah, as a means of enticing their kids to keep the faith.

The idea of applying economic analysis to spiritual life isn't new. Adam Smith, the great-granddaddy of modern economics, described churches as though they were profit-maximizing firms, and congregants as their customers. Just as competition between Samsung and Sony pushes each company to make better flat-screen monitors at ever-lower prices, Smith felt that clergy in a competitive religious marketplace would provide services with greater "zeal and industry" than religious leaders in places where one faith had a monopoly.

After a lapse of some centuries, economists have rediscovered their religion, and Smith's hypotheses on the benefits of religious competition have been borne out by modern statistical analysis. One recent study compares countries where a single religion has a lock on the market—like France or Italy—with more pluralistic societies like the United States. Almost all Italians identify themselves as Catholic, yet in one survey only half reported attending church at least once a month and the same fraction reported believing in God. The bishops and vicars, the thinking goes, have grown complacent, offering the same tired sermons and Sunday school lessons year after year because they have no competition from rival faiths. By contrast, America is full of megachurches built by marketing-savvy pastors and featuring customer-friendly amenities like day care, cafes, and large-screen TVs, which simulcast electrifying orations to overflow crowds. Apparently, they're more effective at attracting audiences of believers than their Italian counterparts. Nearly 60 percent of Americans attend church monthly, and almost 90 percent report believing in God.

At no time of year do Jews feel more assaulted by other religions than at Christmas. Smith would say that to prevent a loss of market share Judaism should counter with its own holiday merriment. The authors of the study begin with a survey comparing the holiday observances of students in Israel—a country where Jews are largely insulated from outside religious pressures—with students at Stanford University. Only 30 percent of Israelis ranked Hanukkah as a "top three" festival celebrated by their Jewish classmates; at Stanford the figure was more than 95 percent.

Israel differs from the United States in many ways, so the authors also look at how various American Jews celebrate the holidays. They rely on a survey of 5,148 Jewish households from around the United States conducted by a pair of Jewish organizations between 2000 and 2001. The survey included questions on each family's denomination (from Reform, the least religious group, to Orthodox, the most religious), the strength of its Jewish identity, and its holiday observances. For Hanukkah, the surveyors asked during how many of the festival's eight nights the household observed the ritual of lighting candles, a measure of the family's "Hanukkah-intensity."

If Hanukkah celebrations are indeed a bulwark against Christian religious imperialism, then the most active observers of the

"Jewish Christmas" should be those who are vulnerable. The authors of the study (parents all of them) hypothesize that children are most susceptible to Christmas envy, and, indeed, households with children were half as likely to skip Hanukkah candle-lighting as households with no children.

Of course, it's possible that people with kids may use just about anything as an excuse to have a party—birthdays, Valentine's Day, Halloween. So the authors compare Hanukkah with Passover, the springtime festival when Jewish parents face more modest competition from the Easter Bunny. It turns out that having children has no effect on the likelihood of attending a Seder, the traditional meal eaten on the first two nights of Passover. So it seems it *is* competition from Christmas, not just the presence of children, that makes families more likely to celebrate Hanukkah. (The authors parse the data in a number of other ways to further validate their Christmas hypothesis.)

The researchers also analyze the holiday money trail, using county-by-county data on "Jewish Products" expenditures made at a large supermarket chain. In counties where Jews are more outnumbered by Christians—and hence exposed to greater Christmas spending pressures—there is a bigger jump in purchases of Jewish products in December compared with more-Jewish areas, presumably as a result of increased sales of candles, latkes, and other Hanukkah paraphernalia. Jewish expenditures also spike during springtime Passover celebrations, when Jewish shoppers stock up on matzo and kosher wine. But the percentage increase in sales isn't any bigger in Christian-dominated counties than in less Christian counties, again suggesting that Hanukkah celebration correlates with competition from Christmas.

Adam Smith thought of competition—religious or otherwise—as mostly a good thing, and most economists would agree. But one wonders what Smith would make of the Hanukkah boom in America today. Rather than rabbis and synagogues providing better services, a minor holiday largely unrelated to Judaism's core values has earned outsize importance, primarily so parents can bribe their kids into keeping the faith. However, if recent retail numbers are any indication, the current economic climate may put the brakes on some of this year's Christmas extravagance, thereby giving a reprieve to parents of all religious persuasions. Perhaps this will provide an opening to less consumerist approaches to competing for holiday cheer and remind economists that, despite their arguments to the contrary, the spirit of the holidays isn't only about dollars and cents.

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For example, some Jewish parents don't care much if their kids lose their faith, and these families probably just buy Christmas trees and hang stockings rather than putting their energies into Hanukkah celebrations. (My wife, who is Jewish, has childhood memories of Christmas Eve at a relative's house, where her family opened presents under the tree. The local Reform rabbi even stopped by at some point in the evening to take part in the festivities.) So, as an additional test of their hypothesis, the researchers look at the group of survey households that reported a strong identification with the Jewish religion, thus excluding the Christmas-tree Jews. In these Jewish-identified homes, households with kids were only one-quarter as likely to skip candle-lighting as those without children, a much bigger effect of having kids than for the survey respondents overall. (Among survey respondents that reported little association to Judaism, the ones with kids were no more likely to celebrate Hanukkah than those without.)

the green lantern

Do I Have To Throw Out My Christmas Lights?

How to decorate your tree without wasting too much energy.

By Jacob Leibenluft

Tuesday, December 16, 2008, at 10:43 AM ET

I know Christmas lights waste electricity, but I just won't give them up. I've seen these LED lights at the store that claim to save energy, and now I'm wondering if they're really any better than the ones in my closet. Should I chuck my old lights immediately for a new set?

Let's be honest here: No matter how hard you try, your decorative light display is never going to be eco-friendly. (Yes, it's true: The Grinch is greener than Santa Claus.) Still, the Lantern sides with the Energy Savings Trust when it says that a straight condemnation of Christmas lights isn't necessary. If decking the halls is a cherished family tradition, there are ways to mitigate your environmental impact. (The same goes for folks who advocate against lighting Hanukkah candles because they produce a few grams of carbon dioxide. To his fellow celebrants of the Festival of Lights, the Lantern has a simple recommendation: Ditch the paraffin candles for beeswax.)

First, the basics. Old-school incandescent Christmas lights are, indeed, a big energy waster. Turn on a string of hundreds of high-wattage light bulbs and leave them lit for hundreds of hours, and you're using a pretty significant amount of electricity. All told, Christmas lights consume more than six terawatt-hours per year, or something equivalent to the total electricity

consumption of 500,000 homes, according to a report commissioned by the Department of Energy (PDF). To make things worse, incandescent lights burn out pretty quickly, so you're likely to be throwing your lights in the trash every few years.

Newfangled LEDs, on the other hand, do use much less energy than incandescents. According to the DoE report, the average strand of larger incandescent C-7 lights runs at about 92 watts; the LED equivalents run at 2.5 watts. For miniature lights, which dominate the market, incandescent lights aren't quite as bad—with the average strand using 36 watts—but that's still far worse than the average five-watt LED minis. LEDs also last as much as 10 times longer, with an operating life of more than 20,000 hours. That's somewhere in the range of 40 or more Christmases for the LEDs. There's an added (albeit not purely environmental) bonus: LED bulbs don't pose the same fire risk as the incandescent kind. (Unlike compact-fluorescent lamps, which are replacing incandescents in most other contexts, LEDs don't contain mercury, either.)

There are a couple of real problems with LED lights, of course. First, they can be a few dollars more expensive at the front end, with the fanciest strings going for more than $40. (In the long term, they're a money-saver.) Second, LED bulbs—and in particular, the larger ones—often don't burn as brightly as their old-school counterparts. But the Lantern has seen LED designs that look as attractive as any incandescent display; just shop around until you find a color and a brand you're happy with.

So should you let your old lights go out in a blaze of glory or replace them immediately? The downside of buying new lights right away is that you'd be wasting a perfectly good product to buy a lot of plastic shipped in from China. LEDs are also more complicated devices than incandescent bulbs, which means they could require more energy to produce. (Efforts to conduct a full life-cycle analysis [PDF] haven't yet been completed.) But lighting experts are generally confident that the "upstream" impact of producing the bulbs doesn't offset their energy savings.

If you're using larger, power-hungry lights, you should invest in LEDs right away. There's a better case for keeping your incandescent mini-lights until they burn out, particularly if you have an energy-saving brand that runs at a lower wattage. Still, the Lantern thinks switching to miniature LEDs now is the greenest choice. (Scaling down your lights—both in the number of hours you keep them on and in the number of strings you put up—is always a good move, too.) In fact, the only good argument against moving to LEDs as quickly as possible is that more attractive (and perhaps more efficient) lights may be available next season. But isn't that always the problem with buying new gadgets for Christmas?

Is there an environmental quandary that's been keeping you up at night? Send it to ask.the.lantern@gmail.com, and check this space every Tuesday.

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the has-been

The Wisdom of Crowds

The current system of filling Senate vacancies was a bad idea even before Rod Blagojevich ruined it.

By Bruce Reed

Wednesday, December 17, 2008, at 7:59 PM ET

Last Friday, Virginia state legislator Brian Moran resigned his seat to run for governor. By Tuesday, both parties met to choose their nominees to take his place. Although the Virginia House of Delegates has 100 members, and Moran represents just 50,000 registered voters, the new delegate from Virginia's 46th District will be chosen in a Jan. 13 special election.

Around the same time next month, four U.S. Senators—Obama, Biden, Clinton, Salazar—will leave the legislative branch for the executive. Those four were elected to the Senate by states with a combined total of more than 20 million registered voters. But in each instance, their replacement will be chosen by their governor—or replacement governor, as the case may be.

When a House member dies or leaves office early, his or her state promptly calls a special election. But as Ruth Marcus of the *Washington Post* points out, when a senator exits, 39 states hand the power of filling the vacancy to the governor. The four seats opening up next month will be the most in one year since 1962.

That figures, since as political swamps go, Rod Blagojevich is a 100-year flood. But the current system of handpicking Senate replacements is a bad idea even if the governor isn't asking for ransom. Voters are the biggest losers, but they aren't the only ones. The appointment power is a decidedly mixed blessing for governors. And more often than not, it turns out to be a bad deal for the replacements themselves, as well as for whichever political party they and the governors who appointed them represent.

For governors, the downsides of the current system are as clear as a Patrick Fitzgerald criminal complaint. Governors make appointments all the time, but as the state's highest political prize, a Senate vacancy is the ultimate no-win situation: More people want it, and more people will be more upset longer when they don't get it. No matter whom they choose, governors make more enemies than friends (except in rare cases in which they may get the chance to earn both in jail).

Sometimes, the governor is the most upset politician of all—at having to give someone else a job he might well have aspired to himself. Blagojevich rarely let a wiretapped conversation go by without reminding his associates that he might appoint himself to the seat. Fitzgerald could easily have dubbed him Senate Candidate Zero.

While voters rarely reward a governor for making an inspired Senate choice, any decision can backfire and taint his own future. In Alaska, former Gov. Frank Murkowski picked his daughter Lisa for his Senate seat. She won re-election two years later, but her father lost his own re-election bid to Sarah Palin.

The current system persists not because governors crave this power but because whenever the issue arises, the incumbent party is reluctant to give it up. Just this week, Democrats in Springfield cooled on the idea of a special election, for fear that Republicans might have a chance to pick up the seat.

Ironically, if history is any guide, partisan self-interest argues exactly the opposite. In the century since the 17th Amendment provided for direct election to the Senate, about 180 senators have been appointed to fill vacancies. When their appointed terms ran out, those senators met with three fates in equal measure. One-third of them ran for election and lost. One-third ran and won. One-third decided not to run at all. So as a general rule, only one-third of all appointed senators win the voters' blessing in their own right, and half of appointed senators who run for election lose their seats.

By congressional standards, that's an astonishingly low survival rate. By contrast, over the last quarter-century, incumbent senators have won re-election about 87 percent of the time. That's true even in a wave election like 2008, when only four or five incumbents out of 30 lost (pending the outcome in Minnesota). As far as I can tell, there has *never* been a Senate cycle where incumbents lost as many races as they won—not even in the historic wipeouts of 1932, 1958, and 1980. In other words, in an entire century of direct elections, no Senate class has ever done as badly in a single disastrous year as appointed Senators do *on average.*

Even those numbers may understate the odds against replacement players in the Senate. Since World War II, appointed senators who sought election have done still worse, losing 56 percent of the time. At that rate, a political party would actually stand a better chance of winning a Senate race if the governor appointed someone from the other party to fill it.

Well-aware of those odds, governors must choose between picking an interim senator who will not seek re-election (as outgoing Delaware Gov. Ruth Ann Minner did in selecting Ted Kaufman) or trying to figure out which candidate stands the best chance of holding on to the seat by winning statewide (as New York Gov. David Paterson and Colorado Gov. Bill Ritter have pledged to do). Of course, the most effective way to tell who can win statewide is to do exactly what the current system in most states is designed to avoid: Hold an election.

As an electoral matter, then, Senate appointments are all too often self-defeating. The other arguments sometimes made for the status quo are convenience and national emergency. Special elections cost money, although any state crass enough to put a price tag on democracy might want to take into account how much it stands to lose by taking a 2-in-3 chance that appointing a replacement will cost it two years of Senate seniority. Norm Ornstein of the American Enterprise Institute argues that in the event of a terrorist attack, we need the ability to name replacements quickly. But that's hardly an argument to rely on appointed replacements in normal times.

Although Pay-Rod and the Blagola scandal brought it to the nation's attention, the appointments issue is more a question of democratic principle than of one Democrat's lack of it. Most governors faced with a Senate vacancy do the right thing, make perfectly sensible choices, and, as often as not, watch their picks flame out in the next election. Since that pattern has now persisted around the country for a century, it only underscores why the direct election of senators was such a fundamental breakthrough in the first place. When it comes to choosing the people's elected representatives, no intermediary—not legislatures, not governors, not the courts—can come close to speaking for us. The Progressive Era taught us the wisdom of crowds: In a democracy, if there's handpicking to be done, we're better off doing it ourselves.

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the music club

The Music Club

An album for every woman who got caught up in the drama of Hillary C. and Sarah P.

By Robert Christgau, Ann Powers, and Jody Rosen

Friday, December 19, 2008, at 11:23 AM ET

From: Jody Rosen
To: Robert Christgau and Ann Powers
Subject: My Top 10 Albums and Top 25 Singles
Posted Wednesday, December 17, 2008, at 11:45 AM ET

Dear Ann and Bob,

I ended our conversation last year by wondering aloud about the contents of Barack Obama's iPod. We now know that our first black president is also our first rock critic president, with a canonical playlist—*Innervisions*, *Blood on the Tracks*, "Dirt off

Your Shoulder"—that places him squarely in the mainstream of the Pazz & Jop poll votership. Obama himself inspired unnumbered songs this year from across the musical spectrum: bluegrass bands, *conjuntos*, reggaeton MCs, Irish pub rockers, reggae singers, and Ludacris, whose "Politics (Obama Is Here)" included a pre-emptive request for a presidential pardon in case of future incarceration. (Obama also unwittingly wrote a song.) Some of my warmest and fuzziest musical moments of 2008 came from this YouTube and MP3 outpouring, and not just because I've got a crush on Obama. Twenty-first-century technology may have doomed the record business, but it is reviving an old-fashioned kind of musical populism—teleporting us back to the 19th century, when amateur and professional balladeers greeted the news of the day with quick-and-dirty tailor-written songs.

If the Obama ditties left me feeling all gushy about the Folk, my best-of list as usual leans hard toward pop-industrial complex product, with strong showings by the Nashville hit factory, pop divas, overpaid hip-hop producers, and Lil Wayne, who almost single-handedly propped up what was left of the biz in 2008. Here are my favorites:

Albums

1. Girl Talk, *Feed the Animals*
2. Lil Wayne, *Tha Carter III*
3. Jamey Johnson, *That Lonesome Song*
4. Calle 13, *Los De Atrás Vienen Conmigo*
5. Portishead, *Third*
6. Sugarland, *Love on the Inside*
7. Benji Hughes, *A Love Extreme*
8. TV on the Radio, *Dear Science*
9. The Cool Kids, *The Bake Sale*
10. Ashton Shepherd, *Sounds So Good*

Singles

1. Brad Paisley, "Waitin' on a Woman"
2. Lil Wayne, "Lollipop"
3. The Raveonettes, "Aly, Walk With Me"
4. Lee Ann Womack, "Last Call"
5. Usher, "Moving Mountains"
6. Tricky, "Council Estate"
7. T-Pain featuring Lil Wayne, "Can't Believe It"
8. Beyoncé, "If I Were a Boy"
9. The Ting Tings, "That's Not My Name"
10. Busy Signal, "Tic Toc"
11. Ciara featuring Ludacris, "High Price"
12. Beyoncé, "Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)"
13. Lil Wayne, "A Milli"
14. Estelle featuring Kanye West, "American Boy"
15. Keak Da Sneak featuring Prodigy & Alchemist, "That Go" (Remix)
16. Lykke Li, "Little Bit"
17. Maino featuring T.I., Swizz Beatz, Plies, Jadakiss, and Fabolous, "Hi Hater" (Remix)
18. Gnarls Barkley, "Run"
19. Alan Jackson, "Small-Town Southern Man"
20. Little Big Town, "Fine Line"
21. Kylie Minogue, "2 Hearts"
22. Jonas Brothers, "Lovebug"
23. Jay-Z, "Jockin' Jay-Z"
24. James Otto, "Just Got Started Lovin' You"
25. Fall Out Boy featuring Elvis Costello, Brendon Urie, Travis McCoy, Alex DeLeon, and William Beckett, "What a Catch, Donnie"

I found it harder than usual to compile these lists, probably because, for me, 2008 was a so-so musical year. Just look at my No. 1's. Brad Paisley's magnificent ballad "Waitin' on a Woman" is actually three years old—it first appeared on *Time Well Wasted* (2005) but was finally released as a single this year, in a rerecorded version, with added spoken-word hokum by Andy Griffith. Meanwhile, my top album pick, Girl Talk's mashup opus *Feed the Animals*, features snatches of hundreds of songs, few of which were released in 2008.

I decided in the end to choose the records that I enjoyed the most, period—pleasure principle over agonizingly weighted critical judgment. Which is how I arrived at Girl Talk, aka Pittsburgh DJ Gregg Gillis, and his exuberant collages of classic rock, raunchy hip-hop, power ballads, and '80s bubblegum. (Typical segue: Unk into Twisted Sister into Huey Lewis and the News.) Some would have you believe that Gillis' songs say something serious about musical genre or the carnal and the spiritual. And they do say something—just not something serious. Girl Talk is a comedian, really. Beat-matching and pitch-shifting software has taken the technical wizardry out of mashup art, and what's left to Gillis are in-jokes, funny contrasts, a cheeky higher form of fanboyism. In "Let Me See You," he sets up a battle of the sexes showdown between 2 Live Crew's "I Wanna Rock" and MIA's "Boyz": The Miami rappers command "Pop that pussy!"; M.I.A. answers with a schoolyard taunt: "Na na na na na na na na!"

Gillis' signature trick is juxtaposing melodramatic rock instrumentals with filthy hip-hop to underscore the pathos and the silliness and the plain fun that lurks in both gangsta rap and bombastic rock—an equal-opportunity celebration of pop's depths and pop's shallows. The irony is that while Girl Talk's mashups epitomize musical ADD in the iPod era, *Feed the Animals* is an expertly paced and sequenced song suite. Many tracks begin with snippets of the song that ended the previous one, and the whole megillah is framed by the UGK/Outkast song "International Player's Anthem," with the album coming full circle, *Finnegans Wake* style, to end where it began. In other words, *Feed the Animals* hangs together like a traditional album better than most anything else I heard this year. Which may be Gillis' best joke of all.

In my next entry I want to dig deeper into my lists—to talk about TV on the Radio; and the terrific albums by Bristol stalwarts Portishead and Tricky; and my country picks (including Sugarland, whose delicious '70s AOR stylings would sound right at home on a Girl Talk mashup). But for now, a quick word about the Artist of the Year—technically speaking not an artist or even an animate human being, but a computer plug-in.

Historians will look back on 2008 as the year that Antares Auto-Tune pitch correction software achieved pop-music ubiquity. (This fact was underscored recently by the release of Bon Iver's "Woods," which brings cyborg vocal effects into the heretofore T-Painless realm of beardy-indie folk.) The signal auto-tune record of 2008 was Kanye West's *808s and Heartbreak*, a fascinating failure, half-redeemed by some lovely beats but doomed by West's bad singing and banal lyrics. Let's give credit where credit is due, though. It was T-Pain, the perpetually lovelorn strip-club habitué, who led the way, showing that auto-tune could be deployed not merely as a sonic novelty but to enhance vocal expressiveness and increase pathos.

Of course, the biggest robo-pop hit of 2008 was Lil Wayne's "Lollipop," a piece of pop doggerel right up there with "Tutti Frutti" and a brilliant conceptual art stunt, in which Weezy proved he could suppress all the qualities that make him the best rapper alive, ladle auto-tune over a half-hearted blow job conceit, and skyrocket to the top of the charts. *Tha Carter III* is a great record for all the reasons that Lil Wayne's mixtapes have been great: the constant surprise, the outsize wit, the aversion to cliché. But it is Wayne's flow, the virtuoso shadings and variations in mood and tone and timbre, that carried the day for me. He is, hands down, the best vocal stylist in pop: a rapping Sinatra. And while I worry that *T-Wayne*, the Lil Wayne-T-Pain album slated for 2009, may push things a bit too far, for now I get immense pleasure hearing the guy spout gibberish slathered in auto-tune. My favorite Wayne moment of '08 is his verse in T-Pain's "Can't Believe It," 16 bars of unintelligible auto-tuned mumble-rap. I don't know what the hell he's saying, and I don't care.

But enough of my imperfect pitch. Ann, Bob—your turn. What music turned you on, bummed you out, and made you audaciously hopeful in 2008?

Jody

Click here to read the next entry.

From: Ann Powers
To: Robert Christgau and Jody Rosen
Subject: Twilight of the Pop Gods

Posted Thursday, December 18, 2008, at 11:50 AM ET

Hey, fellas—happy to be back with you during these uncertain times.

Thanks, Jody, for starting with that poptimistic recap of the amateur agitprop that made YouTube a tonic during election season. These days, as Shepard Fairey's Obama portrait iconically expressed, hope keeps us sane. The guy with the giant Doberman who lives down my street thought so, too—he stuck a doctored Fairey sticker to his car, with Sarah Palin's mug replacing Barack's. Sort of a Girl Talk-style mashup.

As a new universe dawns for the Folk, though, what we once knew as Pop continues to devolve into a dwarf star. Fairey's image was the most powerful icon of the campaign season, along with Tina Fey's televised impersonations of Palin. No particular song had much impact, unless you count "I Got a Crush … on Obama," and let's be real, that was all about the Obama Girl's, um, image. I can't even remember what Obama's official campaign song was.

The transference of cultural power from the few to the many is a triumph of sorts, but for pop music it also signals a loss. Yes, I'm talking about the monoculture again. As a daily-newspaper critic focused pretty squarely on the mainstream, I'm always looking for what unites—what artists, trends, and sounds form communities in hometowns or across the globe; what potent "product" breaks down social boundaries and cultural prejudices; or more viscerally, what simply makes a listener feel like throwing her arm around another person's shoulder and laughing or crying. You know, like Sugarland!

I guess that makes me old-fashioned. As culture continues to atomize within the archipelago of virtual realities, I'm finding it hard to maintain my dream of pop as an agent of change. Not to be a grumpy Gus, but I need to bring up this year's other historical shift: the economic downturn that's got everyone I know turning in toward themselves in fear.

The sense of retraction that had long overtaken the music biz is now universal. What's that going to mean for music? Maybe a new era of activism, with the Flobots in the lead (the kids sure love them!), or a further transformation of the do-it-yourself punk ethic through affordable technologies—a thousand Bon Ivers blooming. Maybe a 21st-century Woody Guthrie will emerge, countered by an art-for-art's-sake movement based around bedroom studios run by hippies raising their own chickens. Maybe rappers will finally stop proselytizing about overspending on bling, and rockers will find a way to be relevant again. (Sorry, Axl, you really picked a bad year to debut a rock epic.) I'm so curious to see what's going to happen, I almost wish this were the end of 2009.

But back to now, as the goddesses of Labelle said on a comeback album that made my Top 15 list, despite an extraneous Wyclef-produced attempt at a hit. (The Lenny Kravitz material is gorgeous.) I actually found it fairly easy to compile my lists, not because my favorites were so indelible, but because they were so easy to check up on—and to augment. With a Rhapsody subscription and Rex Sorgatz's indispensable "list of lists" (plus that crumpled piece of paper I stole from Bob's desk on a Thanskgiving visit—thanks for turning me on to K'Naan, pal!), I could peruse the picks of myriad tastemakers and consider how they compared with mine.

In the meantime, should we finally all agree to admit that critical consensus is just for the birds? I know journalists are embarrassingly prone to navel-gazing, but the enterprise of thinking and writing hard about music is truly undergoing a revolution. I'm not talking about blogging or even about paring down our thoughts to the size of a Facebook status report. I'm talking about the need to recalibrate our ears and minds to suit a new era, when the combination of easy technical access and reduced means could altogether eradicate pop's role as a unifier.

In November, a major label, Atlantic, announced that its digital sales have surpassed those of physical CDs. That same season, gaming continued to triumph over old-school music consumption via new editions of Rock Band and Guitar Hero. The commercial success of big thinkers Coldplay, Taylor Swift, and Lil Wayne may have been impressive compared with their competition this year, but they're modest in light of a history that includes Garth Brooks, Michael Jackson, and what Axl calls "old Guns." We're living through the twilight of the pop gods.

The space this void creates is, to me, what makes Lil Wayne the logical culture hero for the moment. His relevance goes beyond his wicked flow or his gut-busting rhymes. In any other era, I'd venture to say, he would have been received as a fascinating weirdo—perhaps a 14th member of the Wu-Tang Clan. But Weezy is like the living embodiment of a computer virus. He's infiltrated nearly every corner of the Top 40 (including country, via a couple of surprise appearances with rapper-turned-corndog Kid Rock), and wherever he hits, things go topsy-turvy. His outsider style challenges rap's "hard" masculinity; his free-associative, sometimes devilishly profane lyricism makes shocking seem, if not cuddly, at least kind of cute.

However, I do need to call him out on his caveman attitudes about women and sex. That line about licking the rapper in "Lollipop" gets a giggle, but the carnal encounter the song describes is soulless and starving. Yes, he raps a lot about oral gratification on both sides of the 69, which I guess is progress. But his slobbering exhibits no tenderness; it's just another way of expressing old anxieties about femininity as a snake in the grass (or the bush. Sorry.). Add in T-Pain's somewhat endearingly hapless need to persuade strippers to love him, and you have exactly zero progress when it comes to creating a space within mainstream hip-hop to express healthy sexual love.

Well, that's always been the job of the ladies and the crooning love men—Eric Benet's *Love and Life* is definitely one of my overlooked albums of the year. And then there's Kyp Malone, he of the Lincoln beard and the Coke-bottle glasses, one of the most unlikely sex symbols that indie rock (never really a gold mine for sex symbols) has produced. But Malone closes out TV on the Radio's *Dear Science* with "Lover's Day," a volcanic ode to body rocking that's really pretty embarrassing in its intensity. It's one reason I adore "Dear Science"—that, and so much more.

But more on that later. Gotta go see Metallica rock the Forum, in utter disregard of the waning power of their chosen art.

xakp

Click here to read the next entry.

From: Robert Christgau
To: Ann Powers and Jody Rosen
Subject: My Lists
Posted Thursday, December 18, 2008, at 1:15 PM ET

Just to get them out of the way—with no presumption, for the moment, that they reflect anything but personal musical pleasures I experienced in 2008—my lists. Although I'll eventually go to 25 singles on my Web site—constructing weekly playlists for Rhapsody has me focusing in on more songs as songs than at any time since I stopped dancing at clubs—I'll reverse Jody's procedure and limit those to 10. And because I remain an album-rating machine, I'll expand that list to 20 (out of 70 so far). Ann, who saw an earlier version, may notice that both Girl Talk and K'naan (now down around 22) have dipped. As I keep listening, other things will change—including, I hope, more 2008 albums that vault over some of these. There are always so many.

Albums

1. Franco: *Francophonic*
2. Lil Wayne: *Tha Carter III (Deluxe Edition)*
3. Drive-By Truckers: *Brighter Than Creation's Dark*
4. TV on the Radio: *Dear Science*
5. Coner Oberst: *Coner Oberst*
6. Randy Newman: *Harps and Angels*
7. Les Amazones de Guinee: *Wamato*
8. Hayes Carll: *Trouble in Mind*

9. The Roots: *Rising Down*
10. The Magnetic Fields: *Distortion*
11. Orchestra Baobab: *Made in Dakar*
12. Girl Talk: *Feed the Animals*
13. Raphael Saadiq: *The Way I See It*
14. Los Campesinos!: *Hold On Now, Youngster …*
15. Steinski: *What Does It All Mean: 1983-2006 Retrospective*
16. Robert Forster: *The Evangelist*
17. T.I.: *Paper Trail*
18. Menya: *The Ol' Reach-Around*
19. Jaguar Love: *Jaguar Love*
20. *The Rough Guide to Colombian Street Party*

Singles

1. M.I.A.: "Paper Planes"
2. Lee Dorsey: "Yes We Can Can"
3. Conor Oberst: "I Don't Want To Die (In the Hospital)"
4. Los Campesinos!: "Death to Los Campesinos!"
5. Rihanna: "Disturbia"
6. Mike Doughty: "More Bacon Than the Pan Can Handle"
7. Dan le Sac vs. Scroobius Pip: "Thou Shalt Always Kill"
8. Randy Newman: "Potholes"
9. Drive-By Truckers: "The Righteous Path"
10. Nas: "Black President"

To answer one of Ann's questions, kinda, the Obama song of the year was Allen Toussaint's "Yes We Can Can"—originally a 1970 hit for Lee Dorsey, a much bigger hit for the Pointer Sisters in 1973, smuggled into the Free Sampling Republic by the Treacherous Three in 1982, and in 2008 reprised most prominently by will.i.am on one of those YouTube moments. Old guy that I am, I don't watch music on my computer or anywhere else, but seeing will.i.am's version just once reminded me how much I loved Dorsey's (and the Treacherous Three's, though I'll bet Michelle O. loves the Pointers'), and, therefore, I stuck it atop my singles list out of sheer orneriness. At No. 2, though, because—musically, folks, musically—not even Barack Obama could surpass M.I.A.'s belatedly ubiquitous "Paper Planes." Beyond Lil Wayne, the commercial recognition of her *Kala*, the greatest album of 2007 and probably of the decade, was the story of the year, and M.I.A. did it the postmodern way: placements in two good, if overrated, movies, *Pineapple Express* and *Slumdog Millionaire*, for a song with a cash-register beat underpinning a joyful description of Third World kids stealing tourists' money. Not that many fans of the movies know that, but that's how pop "subversion" works, innit? I was lucky enough to see her "last" concert in Brooklyn in June, an unprecedented spectacle that climaxed with maybe 100 girls and women storming the stage at M.I.A.'s instigation. Pregnant and engaged to some Bronfman, M.I.A. just scored a *Spin* cover story that didn't exactly drip with pearls of wisdom. But that's how …

What does this story say about continuing possibilities of musical communion as the world monetary system heaves and spews? A little—because "Paper Planes" addresses such issues musically and lyrically; because M.I.A.'s (now provisionally abandoned) live manifestation did deliberately incite symbolic shows of panracial and quasi-feminist pleasure and solidarity; because she made a deep, daring record and put it over, utilizing new and not yet utterly hegemonic business models. But great as she and the song and the show all may be, it doesn't tell us all that much. Those stage-storming women getting a memorable taste of empowerment were part of a relatively small socio-cultural subset—at McCarren Pool (which no longer presents music), larger than it would have been at a club in Williamsburg (though they've gotten bigger) but very sub nevertheless. And if Sugarland were to go all Dixie Chicks on Tim Geithner, I doubt the answer would be much different. I've been around too long to believe that pop music can change all that many people's lives at once. Maybe the economic crisis will in turn change that—people are, indeed, hungry for change. But as Ann's lament for the monoculture makes clear, that's not what the current structural models suggest. Plenty of music will be recorded—the hardware is everywhere. But nothing in the YouTube distribution model Jody finds so inspirational encourages the kind of communality and solidarity Ann craves. Other kinds, yes—including some good ones. But not the kind with laughing and crying and, especially, shoulders.

Without elucidating my life theory of why popular music is the greatest of the arts, however, let me insist that, as usual, nearly all my favorite albums burst with *artistic images* of human solidarity. Without naming every one, let me offer a few examples. Flowing up from the past with pre-1980 music that, for the most part, has never been heard this side of the Atlantic, the supreme Congolese guitarist-singer-bandleader Franco Luambo is unmistakable proof of such progressive clichés as unlettered genius, African mother lode, and universal language—none of which are why he tops my list, which is the same reason James Brown's *Star Time* topped my list in 1991. Also on Sterns Africa are the all-woman, all-militia Les Amazones de Guinee, many of whom have been in this 11-piece for 46 years. They sound a lot livelier than dat grump Randy Newman, whose evisceration of the Bush-Cheney regime is no sharper than his eviscerations of his own privilege and who's never better than on a rambling meditation about synapse loss and what a dick his father was. Coner Oberst has never been so lyrical; Stephin Merritt has never been so noisy. Phildelphia's Roots make hip-hop politics beautiful; Atlanta's T.I. makes radio readiness exultant. Los Campesinos! are six wiseass kids from Wales just losing their giddy grip on their band scam; TV on the Radio are five grown-ass men from Brooklyn who lost their purism and found their souls. Scattered through all these records are political meanings implicit and explicit that, in this environment, seem as natural as electric guitars. Even the

painstakingly retro Raphael Saadiq, whose miracle isn't replicating the Motown Sound but writing consistently charming and catchy songs in that style, has one about Katrina. But the meanings are built as well into the way each artist's music mines traditions, forges connections, and licks the collective ear hole.

I have plenty to say about Girl Talk, Auto-Tune, Lil Wayne, all that. Please give me the chance to take up those discussions. But I promised myself that in my first post I'd put in a good word for the most underrated album of the year. I've been playing the Drive-By Truckers' *Brighter Than Creation's Dark* for more than a year—it was one of my last reviews before *Rolling Stone* offed me. It never quits. Anyone who knows the band knows what songwriters Patterson Hood and Mike Cooley can be. Here they're never anything else—they have three songs in the top 25, Lil Wayne only one. Hood's best work is about what Obama calls the middle class—small-time entrepreneurs, the local gay guy, a couple of GIs. Cooley's focus is more countercultural—the rocker's life. The compassion in these songs is never-ending, and the melodies range from better-than-average to unforgettable. Stylistically, however, they're kind of retro boogie, Skynyrd sans soloists, and Hood's rough voice wouldn't pull you in if the words didn't. Maybe that's why they've been shut out in the year-end lists of *Blender*, *Spin*, or *Stone*. It's an outrage nevertheless.

I also really like T-Pain. Jody, where's your sense of humor? Over with porn fan Greg Gillis? (Whom I also like, but with more misgivings.)

Xgau

Click here to read the next entry.

From: Jody Rosen
To: Robert Christgau and Ann Powers
Subject: Pop Stars Are Not M.I.A.
Posted Friday, December 19, 2008, at 11:23 AM ET

Friends,

So much to chew on in your posts. But first I must defend my honor, since Bob has accused me of being humorless and—worse—not liking T-Pain. I gave *Thr33 Ringz* an enthusiastic review in one of those magazines that ignored Drive-By Truckers; had I expanded my albums list to 25, it would have made the cut. "Can't Believe It" is one of the year's great singles (No. 7 on my list), in part because of its swank sound (Pain is a fine producer), but mostly because he rhymes *mansion* with *Wiscansin*. My point was simply that T-Pain doesn't use auto-tune *just* as a novelty fillip (not that there's anything wrong with novelty fillips). He also uses it thematically: His is the voice of a man so stupefied by longing—for pole dancers, it goes without saying—that he has become something less than human. T-Pain was doing this Love Machine 2.0 routine years before self-proclaimed "pop artist" Kanye West, and a lot less pretentiously.

Plus, he rhymes *mansion* with *Wiscansin*.

Since we're on the subject of funny music, I want to give props to the best comical-topical song I heard in 2008, Blake Shelton's "Green," in which a redneck one-ups blue-state locavores. Then there's my pick for underrated album of the year, Benji Hughes' double-CD debut *A Love Extreme*. Hughes is a big guy with an Allman Brothers beard, a way with words, and an ear for melody and the absurd. He's been compared to Beck—he lives in L.A., sings in a drowsy slacker's drawl, and likes lo-fi keyboard sounds. But Hughes isn't a jive-Dadaist like Beck; in addition to hooks and eccentric arrangements, his songs have discernable dramatic situations and emotions. He's at his best when his knack for the droll and the hopelessly romantic overlap, as in "All You've Got To Do Is Fall in Love," a song so tuneful and witty that you half suspect Hughes found it hidden under a trash can in Tin Pan Alley or on a lost Stephin Merritt record:

> Wouldn't it be sweet
> If you could be in love with me
> The way that I'm in love with you?
> It's so easy to do
> All you've got to do is fall in love with me

Of course, Hughes is a niche artist. As is M.I.A., despite her new top-of-the-pops success. As is the indomitable TV on the Radio. But I can't join Ann in lamenting the passing of the pop gods, or the monoculture, because I think the pop gods are doing just fine, and I'm not convinced the monoculture ever existed, except maybe for 10 minutes in 1964.

It's true that Michael Jackson and Garth Brooks sold many more records than today's stars. But does anyone believe that there are fewer pop fans—that fewer people are listening to the music of Lil Wayne and Taylor Swift and Coldplay (and Beyoncé and the Jonas Brothers and Nickelback and Kenny Chesney and …)? Have you had a gander at the song-play stats on their MySpace pages? I just did. Total number of songs streamed on MySpace for the seven artists listed above: 767,612,724. If I'm not mistaken, that's three-quarters of a billion—not quite Henry Paulson bailout numbers, but not too shabby. Throw in the zillion other Internet outlets for streaming audio; and MP3 downloads, legal and not-so; and YouTube; and *Gossip Girl*; and radio; and the seven extant record stores; and the songs that are piped into restaurants and cafes, like the one where I am currently sitting in Brooklyn (shocker: They're playing Bon Iver)—I'd wager that more people are listening to popular music now than ever before. Record companies are doomed, for sure.

But let's not confuse the twilight of Tommy Mottola with the twilight of Mariah Carey.

Today's stars have to be nimbler than in the past, relying not just on records and live performances and videos, but ring tones and sketch-comedy cameos and carefully managed "Stars—They're Just like Us!" appearances and, yes, Guitar Hero and Rock Band. (Video games aren't competition for musicians—they're new promotional venues and revenue streams.) These multiple platforms make the average pop idol's fame bigger than in the past—stardom is writ larger, and spread wider.

As for monoculture: The freaky new modes of music production and consumption merely highlight the balkanization and regionalism that have always existed in the pop audience. And yet: Even though today's teenagers are armed to the teeth with iMachines and space-phones, most of them are having the same old-fashioned Top 40-centric young adulthood we did back in the 20th century. Go ask a bar mitzvah DJ if he isn't sick of playing T-Pain records.

Meanwhile, have you seen this week's *Billboard* Hot 100? Four performers—Beyoncé, Britney, T.I., and Kanye—have two songs each in the Top 10. Monoculture, anyone? The No. 1 song in the country, Beyoncé's "Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)" is a genuine phenomenon. Hate to get all Web-utopian on you again, but enter "Single Ladies" into the YouTube search field and check out the thousands of dance routines, mashups, and bedroom cover versions that pop up. (My favorite, by far, is this one. Get 'em started young!) And these videos offer just a hint of the arms-around-shoulders (and arms-around-other-places) delirium that is touched off every night of the week in dance clubs around the world, when the DJ fires up that preposterously peppy "Single Ladies" beat.

Speaking of dancing: Like Bob, I was touched when M.I.A. invited the women to storm the stage at her show. Powerful tableau. But also, a shtick. She did it at the McCarren Pool show that Bob saw; she did it at the Terminal 5 show that I saw in October of the previous year; she does it at every show. In fact, this is becoming an indie-concert staple. At Girl Talk's New York City show last month, dancing girls swarmed onstage during the first song and stayed there the whole concert, right up through the final strains of Journey's "Faithfully" (video here). I guess this trend makes sense. As Ann put it: the transference of cultural power from the few to the many. And all that. My favorite variation is Arcade Fire's: They end their concerts by descending from the stage *into* the audience, to play a final encore in the middle of the scrum. Smash that fourth wall.

Anyway, I've gone on too long. I'll get into my country faves and the music of the Great Recession in the next round.

Over and out,
J.

From: Ann Powers
To: Robert Christgau and Jody Rosen
Subject: In Defense of Axl Rose
Posted Friday, December 19, 2008, at 12:41 PM ET

Hey, guys,

I feel like an idiot. I'm sorry. The mournful tone of my first missive was inappropriate, and motivated by personal issues—namely, the dissolution of my own internal monoculture during the frenzy of year-end musical cramming—and I totally accept both Jody's admonition that unifying forces in pop still dominate as much as they ever have and Bob's reminder that when we don't have anyone close to hug, we can look to the music itself to help us imagine our way toward one another. And if you hopeful scolders weren't enough, I had the whole fist-pumping, moshing, bellowing crowd at Metallica's Forum show last night to prove that unity in homage to rhythm and noise is far from dead.

Inspired by Bob's reminder that the songs and sounds we love can shore up our dreams even when life chips away at them, I'm taking another look at my lists (the first of which is here; there'll be more at the same spot soon) and thinking about what succor I found in my favorite offerings. There's plenty. Let's start with New York DJ Andy Butler's project Hercules and Love Affair, because disco always makes me feel mighty and real.

I first heard "Blind" while playing the real-life video game of driving around Los Angeles. A tense experience, always, but this music took me somewhere else. Guest angel Antony Hegarty's ethereal croon drew me in, of course, but what really caught me was the track's eclecticism. The beat recalls early house, while swirling strings take us back to Eurodisco and some punchy horns hint at acid jazz. Then there's the song inside the swirl, a romantic tale of spiritual loss straight out of Goethe.

And "Blind" wasn't a fluke—the entire album, which retells the story of the ancient strongman's love for and loss of a young soldier, unfolds in swells of giddiness and sorrow, rage and resolution. I often find today's indie-rock associated dance music to be somewhat callous and superficial, but here is an album that goes deep into history and into the heart.

I expect Antony and the Johnson's next album, *The Crying Light*, to be my first major obsession of 2009. (The band gave one of my favorite performances of 2008, accompanied by strings at Disney Hall.) The one that claimed me in 2008 was the work of a beast, not a bird like Antony. A sexy beast, though, and elegant, too. And damn hilarious, down to that handlebar moustache. Nick Cave remains in his prime at 50, and "Dig!!

Lazarus!! Dig!!" is the best Bad Seeds album since 1986's "Tender Prey." In 20 years, Cave has thoroughly pondered his place in history, and here he addresses it head-on, paying tribute to Dylan and the Velvets, Leonard Cohen and John Berryman without showing any need to top them. The songs are as dirty and overblown as ever, pondering violent sex, mystical love, the meaning of manliness, and the weight of the Judeo-Christian mythos.

But the humor that runs through them—and the pleasure, and in many cases, wrenching beauty—makes them richer than the rants of Cave's younger days. And the utter on-pointness of the Bad Seeds, a band as seasoned as Metallica but far less showy about it, give Cave the sturdiest of bully pulpits from which to declaim. Plus, in the literary manifesto "We Call Upon the Author," he has what may be my favorite advice to writers ever: "Prolix!" he bellows. "Nothing a pair of scissors can't fix!" That's as good as rhyming "mansion" with "Wiscansin."

Cave's album was my favorite "rock" album of the year, I guess, though TV on the Radio and Santogold are both "rock" by any other name, and in certain lights I'd even put Kanye, whom I love on Auto-tune, in that box. I don't want to get into a tedious argument about semantics, and I now know I really need to spend more time with that latest Truckers disc. But I will say that "rock," in its heroic aspect, really seems to be on the skids, despite the fact that monster bands keep releasing albums and some fans keep vitriolically defending them.

Metallica may still be mighty live, but *Death Magnetic* was, to my ears, a somewhat airless exercise, more technically impressive than emotionally galvanizing. AC/DC ruled commercially by producing the musical equivalent of a decent diner meal: *Black Ice* is satisfying on a gut level, but resolutely uninventive. Coldplay, the year's other big rock seller, has turned banality into an art. And then there was *Chinese Democracy*.

I'm one of those nutty critics who actually gives credence to Axl's project (he's a person of ongoing interest around our house—the hubby even wrote a book on the *Use Your Illusion* albums), and I've spent enough time with *Chinese Democracy* to tell you there's some pretty cool stuff in there. But could its release have produced any reaction but a giant sucking sound?

Axl was never that concerned with unifying his audience—he seems to have enjoyed adulation and the power it gave him over certain people, but his complexes have nothing to do with messiahs. He did, however, believe that rock's forcefulness and grandeur could make his voice undeniable. If the commercial disappointment of his long-awaited epic signals anything beyond some bad marketing decisions, it's that classic rock's sometimes inspiring, often exclusionary notion that an ordinary (white, male) striver can serve as prophet and sacrificial god has little traction in a time of a million avatars.

But lest you think I'm growing grim again, let me tell you about one voice that makes no such presumptions and that I love beyond all reason. Martha Wainwright has always been the little sister in a family of daunting extroverts, coming through now and then with an amazing song of her own but often simply simmering in the background. Her second album, the charmingly titled *I Know You're Married But I've Got Feelings Too*, is all about inappropriate emotions and ambitions and what happens to a woman when she refuses to stay in "her place," even in these liberated times.

Too musically polished to catch the fancy of hipsters and too overflowing to attract Norah Jones fans, *I Know You're Married* hasn't found its audience. I wish I could give it to every woman who got caught up in the drama of Hillary C. and Sarah P., or who worries that Britney really will go over the edge, or who wonders if her daughter should be so obsessed with *Twilight*. If anxiety is to become the great theme of the new Depression, women like Wainwright can show us how to approach it. They've been coming to terms with it, and making it into something beautiful, for years.

Ann

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the spectator

Where Are the Jewish Gangsters of Yesteryear?

Or, what we can learn about "respectability" from Bernie Madoff and Meyer Lansky.

By Ron Rosenbaum

Thursday, December 18, 2008, at 7:14 PM ET

Four days before the Bernie Madoff bust, I found myself, through circumstances too complicated to explain, in a Bukharan Kosher restaurant in Queens, eating skewers of lamb, beef, liver, and sweetbreads with a wildly mixed group of guys that included a retired Jewish gangster I'll call Lucky, since most of his rackets involved gambling of some type. Lucky had great stories to tell. He saw himself as the last of a dying breed—"I'm the caboose," he kept saying—a breed that spawned legends like Meyer Lansky, Mickey Cohen, Bugsy Siegel, and Longy Zwillman. He was never a boss, more of an independent operator who specialized in running gambling rackets in South America, street lotteries in Africa, you name it. But it seemed he'd been on speaking terms with—and had stories to tell about—all the icons of the Jewish mafia. He was over 70 but looked like a tough 50 and wore a baseball cap advertising some fighter he was backing, and he fought like a wildman to pick up the tab for the table of eight from a thick roll of big-number bills.

Anyway, the more I read about Bernie Madoff, the more disgusted I am, not just with him but with the whole crowd of country-club suckers he allegedly conned, the phony "gentility" (in every respect) they represent.

It began to seem to me that the whole Bernie Madoff scandal was not about Jews and money but Jews and respectability. (And, by the way, let's cut the crap about Jews and money in the first place. If you look at the history of America, the big money has always been made by criminals of non-Jewish persuasions. The non-Jews who committed genocide to steal the land in the first place. The non-Jews who built up big fortunes through the disgusting and murderous crime of slavery. The non-Jews who built "respectable" old-money fortunes on the broken backs of the wage slaves they exploited. As Balzac famously said, behind every great fortune is a great crime. Old money in America is for the most part just old crime well-varnished by time.)

Still, as I found myself more and more disgusted by the (alleged) crimes of Bernie Madoff, I kept thinking—in light of my encounter with Lucky—"Where are the Jewish gangsters of yesteryear?" These were people an ethnic group could be, well, if not exactly proud of, then certainly not entirely ashamed of. At least Meyer Lansky—or "Hyman Roth," as they called him in the subtly anti-Semitic *Godfather II*—"always made money for his partners." Bernie Madoff, if the charges are to be believed, always *stole* money from *his* partners. (It should be remembered that while the perp was a Jew, oh so many of his victims were, too.)

A great civilization, a great people, is always known by the most brilliant, talented, and learned among them: Einstein, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Leonard Bernstein. But it's also known by the quality of its crooks. (Singer knew *that*.) And as Jewish crooks go, Bernie Madoff would be a sad step down.

What went wrong? If you ask me, the Bernie Madoff scandal was a tragedy of misguided upward mobility—not about Jews and money but about Jews and a sadly imitative notion of status.

Here's the *New York Post* on Bernie and his alleged victims:

> Working the so-called "Jewish circuit" of well-heeled Jews he met at country clubs on Long Island and in Palm Beach, and through his position on the boards of directors of several prominent Jewish institutions, he was entrusted with entire family fortunes.
>
> "The guy was totally respected. ..."

The key words here are *country club* and *respected*. This is a scandal that hinges on a false connection between country-club membership and "respectability." Bernie seems to have preyed on those Jews who worship the false idol of WASP respectability. The sham gentility of country-club life.

Give me a break. Give me a gangster over a golfer any day.

A couple of caveats and a personal confession. First, I don't want to over-romanticize—as some do—Jewish gangsters or gangsters in general. The incomparable Murray Kempton, the greatest writer to grace the pages of newspapers in the past century, had a line about this. Talking to be about the gangsters he knew—and he knew a lot of them (he was pen pals with Carmine "the Snake" Persico when the Snake was in the clink)—he noted that not all of them deserve the raffish, *Guys and Dolls* dignity they are so often endowed with. Here's what Murray said:

> People are very romantic about these guys, but the only thing I've ever learned is that if you talk to gangsters long enough you'll find out they're just as bad as respectable people.

Bada bing! Murray always found the site of contestation, the node of friction, in the way we construe our idols. I loved that inversion of our conventional definition of "respectability."

On the other hand—second caveat—I don't want to hear people, Jews or non-Jews, worrying that we can't talk about Jewish financial crime without arousing cretinous anti-Semites. I think my credentials on this point have been established well enough by the 600-page book I edited on anti-Semitism, *Those Who Forget the Past*. Yes, Bernie's a Jew, and he seems to have stolen a lot of money, but, as I've noted, stealing is not a genetically Jewish crime that Jews should be afraid to talk about. What's worth talking about is how he got away with it. Which is where the fetish of "respectability" comes in.

Here, I'll admit that one reason I want to talk about Jews and respectability is, in part, personal, familial. There were two sides to the family I grew up in. One, my mother's side, the country-club side (some of them, anyway) made clear—in ways subtle and overt—that they looked down on my father, because he couldn't afford—actually, better, wasn't interested in—joining country clubs, much less seeing them as symbols of status and, yes, respectability.

Now, I don't think there's anything wrong per se in Jews wanting to belong to country clubs. They deserve a nice place to feel like they belong and get their children tennis lessons. Sure, some Jewish country clubbers turn themselves into pathetic Ralph Lauren *manqués*. (*Manqué manqués*?) And it's true the Jewish interest in country clubs probably derives from the "gentleman's agreement" anti-Semitism that excluded Jews from WASP clubs, driving some of the more status-anxious to build bigger and better ones—when they weren't lobbying shamelessly for

admission to the very clubs that excluded most of their co-religionists. Nothing wrong with it, human nature across all ethnic groups, I suppose. Yet nothing to brag about, either, in its philistinism.

And Bernie Madoff's M.O., Bernie's milieu, Bernie's happy hunting ground was the country club. Bernie was the King of Clubs. If you read the reports in the *Times* and the *WSJ*, people paid hundreds of thousands of dollars just to join country clubs that would allow them to hobnob with Bernie and the friends of Bernie, sucking up to the second-raters who sit on country-club admissions boards just so they could spend a weekend with Bernie, in the hope he'd let them into his exclusive money club, his ultrarespectable club of clubs: Club Ponzi.

What an inversion, a perversion of true Jewish respectability to imitate the most dull-witted of their WASP brethren. I thought Jews were supposed to respect brains, not golf bags. Shows you how wrong stereotypes can be. Or maybe the wisdom of Abbie Hoffman's aphorism: that Jews have to decide "whether to go for the money or to go for broke."

Give me a Jewish gangster any day. They go for both.

Take Meyer Lansky, or rather "Hyman Roth," Lee Strasberg's version of Lansky in *The Godfather 2*. What is it we like about him? The TV dinner tray! He runs the world's underground financial system, an illicit stock exchange and banking system combined, but what he likes most is the simple life at home in front of the tube with his wife. Sure, he'll enjoy an evening from time to time at one of his luxe Cuban casinos, but country clubs? Please. You knew Meyer Lansky wouldn't care whether he got into this or that Palm Beach Country Club, wouldn't care about hobnobbing with the respectable—i.e., Wall Street-approved—gangsters.

For me, the big question about Bernie, if he's guilty of all he's been accused of, is whether he secretly despised the suckers who fell so easily for his "respectable" scams. Secretly enjoyed creating sham castles in the air for rich losers, thereby exposing their stupidity and the emptiness of their idea of respectability.

Could Bernie have seen though it all, been a kind of Buddha of bogusness, teaching the lame-os a lesson about how worthless their sham respectability was? Or did he buy into it himself? I'd like to believe the former, but I think it's probably the latter.

It made me think of something Lucky mentioned in one of his stories about the old days: the controversy among the Jewish gangster *alte kockers* (old guys) about Mickey Cohen and the Irgun ship.

It seems Mickey Cohen (you know, the L.A. crime boss from the '40s and '50s; he appears in some James Ellroy novels) went around leaning on a lot of respectable and nonrespectable types for money for the Irgun, the Jewish-gangster-favored faction of Zionists in the perilous period of the founding of the state of Israel. It seems Mickey Cohen claimed he'd used the money to buy a ship and fill it full of guns and ammo for the Irgun to fight for survival of the embattled state, but alas—Mickey said—the ship had sunk on its way to Haifa or something.

There were always rumors, according to Lucky, that there never *was* a ship, that Mickey Cohen kept the money for himself—pulled a Bernie. Lucky didn't believe it. Honor among thieves. There was a ship. He was sure.

I hope it's true. I really think there *is* a difference between the disreputable but colorful and—in their own way—honorable Jewish gangsters and someone like Bernie. As that Jewish folksinger Zimmerman wrote, "When you live outside the law you must be honest." A lesson about true respectability that Bernie seems never to have learned. A lesson the old time Jewish gangsters could teach us.

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the undercover economist

On the Dole, but Not Doleful

Unemployment benefits do encourage joblessness. But that may not be a bad thing.

By Tim Harford

Saturday, December 13, 2008, at 7:22 AM ET

To most thoughtful people, unemployment benefits embody a painful trade-off. They are the mark of a civilized society, clubbing together to provide assistance to those in need. They are also, regrettably, an incentive to remain unemployed. At their worst, unemployment benefits pay people to watch daytime television. They are particularly pernicious if the skills of the jobless decay and unemployment becomes unemployability. Yet, at their best, they are a life-saver.

In balancing these two effects, it's hardly surprising that different societies have adopted very different systems. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, member governments spent an average of 0.75 percent of gross domestic product on unemployment benefits in 2006. France spent nearly twice this sum, and Germany almost three times as much, while the United States spent one-third of the average, and the United Kingdom just more than a quarter. Germany spent more than 10 times as much as the United Kingdom, relative to GDP.

Paying people to stay out of work is an example of that increasingly familiar phenomenon "moral hazard." But moral hazard can be more fearsome in the theorist's imagination than it

is in reality. Do unemployment benefits really encourage people to duck work? Unfortunately, the evidence suggests that they do: Increases in benefits have repeatedly been linked with longer periods between jobs.

But new research from Raj Chetty, a young Berkeley economist, suggests that moral hazard may not be why more generous benefits seem to lead to more unemployment. Chetty realized that unemployment benefits do not merely pay people to stay out of work; they also protect them from having to rush into an unsuitable job. It is nothing to celebrate if unemployed engineers cannot afford to spend three months finding a job for which they are qualified but are forced to work as real estate agents to put food on the table. A longer gap between jobs is sometimes preferable.

This is an interesting theory, but distinguishing between moral hazard and the effect of having some cash on hand is tough. Chetty looked at sharp breaks in the unemployment-insurance rules in the United States, comparing one state's rules with another's or examining moments when the rules changed. One suggestive finding is that when unemployment insurance becomes more generous, not everybody lingers on benefits. The median job-loser in the United States has $200 when he loses his job and is unlikely to be able to borrow much, but some people have plenty of money in the bank when they find themselves unemployed. Chetty found that those with savings do not take any longer to find a job when paid more generous benefits, while those with little in the kitty when they lose their jobs do. This suggests that those without their own cash reserves are using unemployment benefits to buy themselves time to find the right job.

Of course, there may be many differences between people with savings and those without, so this merely suggests that Chetty is on to something. But there are other clues—for instance, Chetty and two colleagues looked at the system in Austria, where severance pay is due to anyone employed for more than three years. By looking at—for example—a factory closure in which lots of staff are fired simultaneously, they could treat severance pay almost as a randomized experiment. Those lucky enough to get severance pay spent more time looking for a new job, despite the fact that severance pay provides no direct incentive to stay out of work.

Unemployment benefits do encourage unemployment in the short term, but that may not be a bad thing.

today's business press

Could Detroit Get Bailout and Bankruptcy?

By Bernhard Warner
Friday, December 19, 2008, at 6:15 AM ET

today's papers

White House Might Push Bankruptcy on Automakers

By Daniel Politi
Friday, December 19, 2008, at 6:46 AM ET

The *New York Times* and *Washington Post* lead with the White House announcement that it's considering forcing an "orderly" bankruptcy of Chrysler and General Motors. In announcing that the administration was "very close" to reaching a decision on the automakers, the White House press secretary acknowledged that officials are considering a managed bankruptcy as an option. But both papers hear from administration officials that bankruptcy is unlikely and is seen more as a last resort option that would become a reality only if no agreement can be reached with the automakers. The *Wall Street Journal* leads its world-wide newsbox with word that President-elect Barack Obama will nominate Rep. Hilda Solis of California, a free-trade skeptic, as his labor secretary and Ron Kirk, a champion of free trade, as his trade representative. The picks illustrate how the Democratic Party is split in the battle over free trade.

USA Today leads with a look at how mortgage rates have fallen to lows not seen since the 1960s. The average 30-year fixed-rate mortgage fell to 5.19 percent this week, the lowest it has been since Freddie Mac started to issue its weekly mortgage market survey in 1971. While the low rates don't appear to be motivating new buyers just yet, they have led to a surge in refinancing, which tripled in the past month. Experts say homeowners should act now because rates aren't likely to get much lower. The *Los Angeles Times* leads locally and goes high with news that federal regulators have adopted sweeping new rules for the credit card industry. The rules, which take effect in July 2010, would forbid credit card companies from increasing interest rates on existing balances and require a 21-day grace period before late fees could be charged. Some worry that these new rules could lead banks to tighten credit during a recession, but consumer advocates insist more regulation is needed to address the unfair and deceptive practices that have become increasingly common in the industry.

When the possibility of a bankruptcy became big news—and GM's shares took a dive—after it was mentioned in the morning news conference, the White House came back in the afternoon to emphasize that it's merely one of the many alternatives that are being discussed. The *WP* says that while President Bush has frequently been following Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson's lead during the financial crisis, things will be different with the automakers. Bush is apparently being presented with all the

options and will make the final decision. As of now, officials are optimistic that they'll be able to extract concessions from the automakers without going to bankruptcy court. The mere mention of bankruptcy came as a surprise to GM officials, reports the *NYT*.

Although no one mentions it explicitly, raising the possibility of a bankruptcy could have merely been part of a negotiating tactic to get more concessions out of the automakers, who have repeatedly said they don't see Chapter 11 as a viable option. The *NYT* states that if the automakers' unions feel they can get a better deal from President-elect Barack Obama, "they are likely to stall negotiations and settle for a shorter-term loan." But the *WP* says Obama's transition team has been in close contact with the Bush administration throughout the discussions and generally agrees on what to do about the automakers.

The *WSJ* points out that the future of the automakers "appeared to be increasingly tied to their weakened financing arms." One possibility for restructuring involves a change in the ownership stakes of GMAC, which is currently divided between GM and an investor group led by Chrysler's parent, Cerberus.

Remember how yesterday's *WSJ* said that Chrysler and GM had reignited merger talks? It now looks like that's not true. The *NYT* reports that a GM spokesman said the two companies haven't held any talks since late October. The *WSJ* mentions this denial in the last sentence of its story about the ongoing discussions over the automakers' rescue. This marks the second time in as many days that the *WSJ* has taken back the crux of one of its stories in an understated fashion. Yesterday, the *WSJ* announced in its corrections box that, contrary to what it had claimed a day earlier, the timing of the arrest of Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich wasn't affected by an article in the *Chicago Tribune*, according to a spokesman for the FBI. Of course reporters can make mistakes, but when new information contradicts the main point of an article, shouldn't the paper devote more than a few words in a corrections box or at the end of a story to set the record straight?

Everyone gives big play to former president Bill Clinton's release of the list of donors to his foundation. The list reveals that, by the *WP*'s calculation, Clinton has received between $75 million and $165 million from foreign governments and state-sponsored agencies. The list of more than 200,000 patrons who have given almost $500 million included several that could raise a number of potential conflicts for Sen. Hillary Clinton if she's confirmed as secretary of state. Saudi Arabia and aid agencies in Australia and the Dominican Republic gave somewhere between $10 million and $25 million, while a number of other countries, including Brunei, Kuwait, Qatar, and Taiwan, gave more than $1 million each. Among the donors is also a businessman with close ties to a former military ruler of Nigeria, a convicted class-action lawyer, and an aluminum trader who is the subject of a federal grand-jury investigation.

The former president had always refused to release his donor list, but did so after Obama made it a requirement to nominate his wife as secretary of state. Although most of his biggest contributors were already known, the amounts they donated had never been disclosed. Assuming Clinton becomes secretary of state, the former president will have to disclose any new donations once a year and would submit donations for review by ethics officials in the State Department. But as the *WSJ* notes, it's less than clear what kind of obligation the former president would be under to reject donations that the State Department rules might be inappropriate.

The *WP* off-leads, and the *WSJ* mentions, word that Obama's team is crafting a stimulus package that could reach $850 billion in spending and tax cuts over the next two years. The current plan that is being worked on would be worth between $670 and $770 billion, but aides say it could quickly reach $850 billion, or about 6 percent of the nation's economy. Obama's team is apparently working hard to keep the package below the trillion-dollar mark, but even $850 billion might prove too large for many lawmakers. Although many economists say an effective stimulus package has to be close to $1 trillion, House Democrats say that the more fiscally conservative members of their party will refuse to support anything beyond $600 billion.

The *WSJ*'s Gerald Seib says Obama is "giving the country two administrations for the price of one." While Obama's first round of high-profile appointments were heavy on Washington veterans who are seen as largely moderate, the second wave include "the kind of folks who look like the fabled 'agents of change' promised in the campaign." These newer faces are concentrated in areas of energy and the environment, signaling that's where Obama wants to implement changes, while he stuck with known commodities in the economics and national security fields to signal continuity in a time of war and an economic crisis.

The *NYT*, *LAT*, and *USAT* manage to include late-breaking news that W. Mark Felt, better known as "Deep Throat," died yesterday. Felt was the FBI's associate director during the Watergate scandal and became "the most famous anonymous source in American history" (*NYT*) when he helped guide the *WP*'s Pulitzer Prize-winning investigation into the break-in and conspiracy that brought down President Richard Nixon. When Felt decided to identify himself as Deep Throat in *Vanity Fair*, he ended a mystery that had kept people guessing for more than 30 years. He was 95.

With all the recent talk about Caroline Kennedy's interest in the New York Senate seat, the *WP*'s Charles Krauthammer reminds us that the daughter of John F. Kennedy isn't "alone in her sense of entitlement." In a plan that is eerily similar to what JFK did with his Senate seat when he was elected president, Vice President-elect Joe Biden's seat will be filled by a previously unknown person who everyone knows was put in place to keep

the spot free for two years until Biden's son returns from Iraq. "In light of the pending dynastic disposition of the New York and Delaware Senate seats, the Illinois way is almost refreshing," writes Krauthammer. "At least Gov. Rod Blagojevich (allegedly) made Barack Obama's seat democratically open to all. Just register the highest bid, eBay-style."

Obama defended the choice of megachurch pastor Rick Warren to deliver the invocation at his inauguration, saying that while he disagrees with many of the pastor's views, there should be room for "dialogue." At a news conference, Obama characterized himself as a "fierce advocate of equality for gay and lesbian Americans" and said it's important "to be able to create an atmosphere … where we can disagree without being disagreeable." Many gay rights supporters and liberals in general are furious about the selection of Warren, a supporter of Proposition 8, the measure that outlawed same-sex marriages in California. As was the case yesterday, too, the papers characterize the opposition to Warren as if it were merely an issue about a policy difference on marriage, but it's hardly that simple.

Warren has gone as far as to compare "same-sex marriage to incest, pedophilia and polygamy," writes Joe Solmonese, the president of the Human Rights Campaign, in the *WP*. "He may cloak himself in media-friendly happy talk that plays well on television, but he stands steadfastly against any measure of equality for LGBT Americans." Picking Warren "sends a chilling message" and makes gay rights supporters "question the promises that Barack Obama made in his historic quest to be president," writes Solmonese. "We pray we weren't misled."

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today's papers

A Comeback for Saddam's Baath Party?

By Daniel Politi

Thursday, December 18, 2008, at 6:39 AM ET

The *New York Times* leads with word that "up to 35" officials, including four generals, from Iraq's Ministry of the Interior have been arrested, and some have been accused of trying to reconstitute Saddam Hussein's Baath Party. There's talk that some of them were in the early stages of planning a coup, but details are scant. The *Washington Post* leads with Chrysler's announcement that it will suspend production at its 30 U.S. factories for one month beginning Friday. The automaker was already planning to stop production for two weeks, but extended the production halt in order to save cash at a time when it's struggling to survive and Washington has yet to award the company the billions of dollars in loans it says it needs to continue operating. "If I were a Chrysler worker, I'd be worried that the plant won't reopen," an industry analyst said.

USA Today leads with an analysis of the federal government's first ratings of nursing homes that found nonprofit homes generally provide better care. The new ratings system assigns homes one to five stars based on a complicated formula that takes into account several factors. Overall, 27 percent of for-profit homes were given one star, while 13 percent of nonprofit homes received the same rating. Also, 19 percent of nonprofit homes received five stars, compared with only 9 percent of for-profit homes. The *Wall Street Journal* leads with President-elect Barack Obama's choice of a veteran regulator to lead the Securities and Exchange Commission. Mary Schapiro, the chief executive of the National Association of Securities Dealers, will take over an agency that has been under heavy criticism lately for failing to prevent the financial crisis and not catching Bernard Madoff's alleged Ponzi scheme. In addition, Obama will nominate Rep. Ray LaHood, an Illinois Republican, to head the Department of Transportation. The *Los Angeles Times* leads locally and goes high with a look at Teodoro Garcia Simental, one of Mexico's most feared crime bosses. Even though he's thought to be responsible for most of the gang-related violence that has been plaguing Tijuana*, most people have no idea what he looks like, and many police officers and prosecutors don't even dare utter his name for fear of reprisal.

While the arrests in Iraq show how Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has been trying to protect himself from political rivals, critics are quick to claim that he's using arrests as a tool to consolidate his power. Talk of potential coups in Iraq is increasing these days with a little more than a month to go before provincial elections, but it's far from clear whether any of the supposed plans are serious. Still, Iraqi officials insist that those arrested, two of whom appeared on the "most wanted" deck of cards that became famous during the invasion, were involved in widespread political corruption. The interior minister hasn't been implicated, but Maliki could very well see him as a threat because he has kept himself busy trying to expand his secular party.

In a piece inside, the *LAT* confirms the arrests, which it says included "up to six" generals in the Interior Ministry, and hears word that all those arrested were police officials accused of being affiliated with Al Awda, or the Return, an offshoot of the Baath Party. In the past, Shiite politicians have used claims of membership in the Baath Party to conveniently "settle political or personal scores," says the *LAT*.

Production cuts are now widespread throughout the auto industry and hardly limited to the Big Three. Honda and Toyota have also announced cuts as the downturn in the economy coupled with the credit crunch have been devastating auto sales. While the White House has made it clear it wants to help the U.S. auto industry after the Senate failed to approve a package of

loans, negotiations continue. The administration wants to come to an agreement with automakers before Christmas, but no one knows whether all the details can be worked out by then. In a piece inside, the *NYT* says that Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson has effectively become the "auto czar" envisioned in the bill that passed the House.

While Paulson and his team carefully examine the automakers' financials and negotiations continue in Washington, the *WSJ* gets word that Chrysler and General Motors are once again talking about a merger. Cerberus Capital Management, which owns Chrysler, apparently took the initiative to restart the talks in a move that could be a way to show Washington it is serious about helping to restructure the industry. Cerberus has so far rejected pressure to put more money in Chrysler but now is signaling that it could give away some of its stakes in the automaker as part of a restructuring deal.

The portrait that the *LAT* paints of Teodoro Garcia Simental seems ripped out of a movie. He apparently loves to dissolve his victims in lye and is so ruthless that he has killed people at parties, "laughing at their stunned reactions." Garcia runs a vast criminal network that is largely funded by kidnappings and extortion. Despite his notoriety, few people know what he looks like because Mexican authorities don't publicize his picture. "That tells you that you don't want to be the one responsible for putting Teo's picture in public," an American law enforcement source tells the paper. "There's no future in it."

The *WSJ* fronts a detailed look at Harry Markopolos and his "nearly decadelong campaign" to convince the SEC that Madoff wasn't being honest about his investment strategy. Markopolos, who used to work for a Madoff rival, became convinced that something wasn't right in 1999 and in early 2000 shared his concerns with the SEC's office in Boston. Although a staff member at the SEC's Boston office took a deep interest in Markopolos' allegations, capturing the interest of officials in New York appeared to be an insurmountable challenge. Markopolos continued to press his case over and over again until an investigation was finally opened in 2006. And while the SEC found that Madoff was misleading investors and that he violated technical rules, investigators failed to dig deeper and missed a clear opportunity to discover Madoff's alleged Ponzi scheme.

The *LAT* and *NYT* both dedicate stories in their inside pages to news that the Rev. Rick Warren, author of *The Purpose-Driven Life*, will deliver the invocation at Obama's inauguration. The *NYT* says that the role positions Warren "to succeed Billy Graham as the nation's pre-eminent minister." The choice immediately raised the ire of gay rights groups that are angry about Warren's support for California's Proposition 8, which banned same-sex marriages. The director of a gay rights organization characterized the decision to include Warren in the inauguration as a "slap in the face to millions of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people who donated for, worked for and helped elect Barack Obama president."

The *WSJ* gives big front-page play to OPEC's decision to reduce production by 2.2 million barrels a day, or 7 percent—the cartel's biggest cut ever. Although the reduction was more than expected, it didn't stop the plunge in oil prices, which fell 8 percent yesterday and closed at $40.06 a barrel. The decreasing prices are good news for countries dealing with a recession but a horrible development for oil producers that have seen prices fall by more than two-thirds since July.

The greenback also took a beating yesterday, notes the *WP*. After a month of gains, the dollar suffered huge losses yesterday and fell to a 13-year low against the Japanese yen. Investors are fleeing from the dollar out of fear that it will be dropping in value due to the Fed's plans to print money in order to stimulate the economy. A plunge in the value of the dollar is good news for U.S. exporters but could make it more difficult for the economies of Europe and Japan to recover since their exports would be more expensive for American consumers.

The *LAT*'s Rosa Brooks, who contributes to ***Slate***'s "XX Factor" blog, says that it's easy to understand why the journalist who threw his shoes at Bush "became an instant hero around much of the globe." In that highly symbolic act, Muntadhar al-Zaidi expressed the anger that many people feel. This anger is not just about Bush but also about a general feeling of powerlessness that makes people feel they need to do something extreme in order to make a point. Throwing a shoe is not exactly nonviolent resistance. "But if Zaidi inspires a new global trend of shoe throwing, I'll take that over bomb throwing any day."

***Correction*, Dec. 18, 2008:** *This article originally stated that Teodoro Garcia Simental is thought to be responsible for most of the gang violence in Mexico. He is principally suspected of the gang activity only in Tijuana. (Return to the corrected sentence.)*

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today's papers

The End of the Fed as We Know It

By Daniel Politi

Wednesday, December 17, 2008, at 6:37 AM ET

The Federal Reserve threw up its hands and officially "exhausted its most fundamental tool for managing the economy," as the *Washington Post* puts it. The central bank cut its benchmark interest rate to as low as zero and announced that it would aggressively move to implement new programs to fight the recession. The Fed went further than many expected and cut its target for the overnight federal funds rate from 1 percent to a

range of zero percent to 0.25 percent. The *Wall Street Journal* also points out that the discount rate, which is the interest rate that banks have to pay on loans they receive from the Fed, will drop to half a percentage point, "a level last seen in the 1940s." What does this mean? "For the foreseeable future, interest rates are nearly meaningless as a tool of economic policy," the *Los Angeles Times* bluntly states. The *New York Times* and *LAT* both say the announcements mean that the Fed has now officially entered a new era.

Although it may be shocking and historic that the Fed would cut a key interest rate from 1 percent to nearly zero percent, the truth is that the move is largely symbolic. For weeks, the federal funds rate has been trending far below the 1 percent target. The "difficulty in managing the rate may be one reason the Fed, for the first time, gave a range for its rate target," notes *USA Today*. "They're at such a low level that it's gotten really hard to control the funds rate," an economist tells the *WP*. "This cut is essentially saying 'Let's get this over with.' " In an accompanying statement, the Fed made it clear that it's ready to use unconventional means to help American consumers and businesses get credit. Investors liked what they heard and sent the Dow Jones industrial average up 4.2 percent.

In its statement, the Fed made it clear that it won't be shy about printing money to thaw the frozen credit markets. Essentially, "the Fed is stepping in as a substitute for banks and other lenders and acting more like a bank itself," the *NYT* helpfully explains. In normal times, the Fed can spur spending by lowering its official rate. But this hasn't been working well for months because even though the official rates are low, banks remain fearful about lending money. The Fed now says it is ready to expand efforts to buy mortgage-related securities and is exploring whether to purchase long-term Treasury bonds, which could help lower long-term borrowing costs.

The *WSJ* says Fed officials came to their decision after two days of meetings where lots of time was devoted to other steps the central bank could take to fight the recession. Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke spent much of his academic career studying these questions, "and the Fed is now employing almost every prescription he laid out in the past," notes the *WSJ*. Of course, the new strategy carries risks. There's no guarantee that it will work, and, as an added bonus, it could create higher inflation. But officials aren't too worried about that now, particularly since the consumer price index plunged 1.7 percent in November, a new record. The dollar fell sharply yesterday for the second straight day, which, as the *NYT* points out, reflects a fear that there could soon be lots of freshly printed dollars in the markets.

President-elect Barack Obama used the Fed's announcement as an opportunity to tout a massive stimulus package. "We are running out of the traditional ammunition that's used in a recession, which is to lower interest rates," Obama said. "It is critical that the other branches of government step up, and that's why the economic recovery plan is so essential."

While the rapidly declining prices have brought about fears that the nation will fall into a deflationary spiral, the *NYT*'s David Leonhardt says the trend could actually help ease the pain of the recession. The reason for this is what economists call the "sticky-wage theory," which says that businesses won't cut wages during an economic downturn. Pursuing such a move is seen as such a big morale killer that most executives prefer to lay off workers. Although workers are likely to take indirect pay cuts, the drop in prices means real income of those lucky enough to still have jobs won't be dropping too much and could "soften the blow" of the recession for many American families.

In another sign of the toll that the recession is taking on Americans, the *WP* reports that welfare rolls are surging for the first time since the system was redefined more than a decade ago. This trend is notable because welfare rolls usually don't see much increase during economic downturns. Now, welfare rolls are climbing in at least a dozen states. Some think this means that "welfare will awaken from years as a political issue so sleepy that President-elect Barack Obama did not mention it during his campaign," notes the *Post*. When welfare was redefined, a lot of emphasis was placed on finding jobs, but now many of those applying for assistance are people who used to live a comfortable middle-class existence and can't find work at all. Many of those signing up for welfare "shouldn't be receiving assistance if there [were] jobs out there," one Maryland official said. "The problem is, what we are seeing here is something that looks more like 1936 than 1996." Not surprisingly, several states decided to use the welfare money for other purposes during the economic boom and now risk running out of funds.

The Securities and Exchange Commission acknowledged yesterday that it had been warned several times about red flags in Bernard Madoff's investments but failed to uncover what could end up being the largest financial fraud in history. The SEC will immediately open an internal investigation to try to figure out why it failed to investigate these warnings. In a front-page piece, the *WSJ* notes the investigation will examine the relationship between a former official at the agency and Madoff's niece. The former official, who headed one of the teams that looked into the investment firm, married Madoff's niece last year. But a representative of the former official says their relationship began "years after" his examination of Madoff.

The *NYT* gets word that the White House has written up more than a dozen memos to help guide Obama if an international crisis breaks out before he gets a chance to settle into the Oval Office. The contingency plans lay out several possible scenarios, including a cyber-attack and a North Korean nuclear explosion, and outline steps that Obama could consider. These contingency plans are on top of the dozens of memos that the Bush administration has drafted to outline issues that Obama's team

will have to deal with when it gets to the White House. Administration officials are careful to emphasize that they're just trying to be helpful and in no way intend to dictate policy. "It's not exhaustive, and it's not exclusive, and it's not prescriptive," a White House spokesman said. Members of Obama's team appreciate the effort that Bush is making to ensure a smooth transition in a time of war. "This doesn't absolve the Bush administration of some of their judgments they've made over the years, but this is the right thing to do," one Democrat said.

Things aren't so lovey-dovey in other parts of the transition. The *WSJ* notes that transition officials are already discussing how to undo several Bush measures relating to abortion and reproductive health. While several issues are being discussed, it's still not clear which Obama will prioritize, but it seems to be a safe bet that one of his first actions will be to lift Bush's limits on embryonic stem-cell research. Abortion-related issues could be thornier since the president-elect has suggested he wants to strike a middle ground.

When the country says goodbye "to its sports-obsessed president who doesn't like tough questions," it will welcome "another sports-obsessed president who doesn't like tough questions," writes the *Post*'s Dana Milbank. When Obama introduced his pick for Education secretary, there was lots of talk about basketball but, taking several cues from the Bush playbook, the president-elect refused to answer any questions about the scandal that has engulfed Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich.

"I have no sympathy for Madoff," writes the *NYT*'s Thomas Friedman. "But the fact is, his alleged Ponzi scheme was only slightly more outrageous than the 'legal' scheme that Wall Street was running, fueled by cheap credit, low standards and high greed." After all, it was legal for banks to give risky mortgages to people who couldn't afford them, bundle a group of them into bonds, and then receive premium ratings for these bonds. "If that isn't a pyramid scheme, what is?"

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today's papers

Jews Hit Hard by Madoff Scheme

By Daniel Politi

Tuesday, December 16, 2008, at 6:37 AM ET

The *New York Times* leads, and *USA Today* goes across its front page, with news that Caroline Kennedy is officially seeking to replace Hillary Clinton in the Senate. The daughter of President John F. Kennedy made a number of telephone calls to prominent New York Democrats yesterday, including Gov. David Paterson, expressing interest in the seat that was once held by her uncle, Robert F. Kennedy. Paterson insists he hasn't made a decision yet, but people close to the governor say it looks like Kennedy "has emerged as clear front-runner," reports the *NYT*. The *Wall Street Journal* leads its world-wide newsbox with the Illinois State House voting unanimously to begin impeachment proceedings against Gov. Rod Blagojevich. A bipartisan impeachment committee will begin meeting today and will gather evidence of any official misconduct.

The *Los Angeles Times* leads with a look at how Bernard Madoff's alleged Ponzi scheme has hit Southern California's Jewish community particularly hard. Hollywood mogul Jeffrey Katzenberg has been added to the list of victims, which also includes some of California's biggest Jewish foundations. The *Washington Post* leads with a new poll that shows two-thirds of Americans are optimistic about U.S. prospects in Iraq, which marks quite a change from recent years. Still, most continue to believe the war is not worth fighting and that U.S. troops should be withdrawn within 16 months, as President-elect Obama has promised. While most Americans support the war in Afghanistan, a majority believe it isn't going well. Overall, Americans' opinions of the wars "appear to largely dovetail with the views expressed by Obama," notes the *Post*.

Kennedy has shied away from public view throughout most of her life, but she catapulted herself into the political scene almost a year ago when she endorsed Barack Obama and compared him to her father in the heated Democratic primary. She was then part of Obama's vice-presidential search committee and was deeply involved in vetting potential candidates. Kennedy has hired political insiders to help and plans to visit parts of upstate New York in a move that the *NYT* notes "carries an unmistakable echo" of Clinton's "listening tour" that launched her campaign in 2000. Sen. Edward Kennedy, who is battling brain cancer, has apparently been encouraging his niece to seek the seat.

Although the battle for the Senate seat was already heated, the fact that Kennedy is now in the running has transformed the "competition into a much splashier affair, filled with visions of Camelot-on-the-Hudson and competition between two powerful clans: the Kennedys and the Cuomos," notes the *LAT*. New York Attorney General Andrew Cuomo is also interested in the seat. (Trivia lovers might remember that Cuomo went through a messy divorce with one of Kennedy's cousins in 2003.) While Kennedy clearly has name recognition going for her, some are openly wondering whether she's qualified. But as of now, Paterson seems to believe she could be a strong candidate who has enough connections to raise the money needed to win in 2010 to finish out Clinton's term and again in 2012. Besides, appointing Kennedy could clearly be good for Paterson, who came into office after Eliot Spitzer resigned and must run on his own in two years. "The upside of her candidacy is that the 2010 ballot will read Kennedy-Paterson," an anonymous Paterson adviser tells the *NYT*. "David craves national attention and money. If you connect the dots, it leads to her."

Although Madoff's victims that have been identified so far "are a diverse lot," news that Jewish organizations have suffered huge losses suggests "a so-called affinity scam, in which members of a perpetrator's ethnic or religious group are targeted," notes the *LAT*. And it's not just in California. The Jewish Federation of Greater Washington, for example, said it had $10 million invested with Madoff. "In the Jewish world, we've just taken a major, central player, and introduced fear and uncertainty all over the system," the president of a group that studies Jewish philanthropy tells the *WSJ*. "It's like finding out your brother is a murderer." Foundations across the country will suffer from the Madoff's scheme, and some, including the JEHT Foundation, have already announced they'll be closing down. And as the *NYT* details in its front page, the nonprofits that depended on money from the affected foundations are struggling to figure out whether they'll be able to make ends meet without their usual benefactors.

The Madoff scandal is the "latest black eye" for the Securities and Exchange Commission, notes the *NYT*. As the *WP* details in its business pages, financial advisers have long been raising doubts about Madoff's practices and one letter sent to the SEC in 1999 accused him of running a Ponzi scheme. But despite all these red flags, the SEC conducted its first full examination of Madoff's investment business last week.

Still, the SEC is hardly alone in having missed the red flags. In a detailed look at Madoff's operations, the *WSJ* says that now that more experts have started picking apart his investment strategy, it's becoming increasingly clear that the banks and investment advisers who directed clients to Madoff should have known that something wasn't quite kosher. Although his strategy made sense on its face, it would have been impossible to carry out with the amount of money he was managing. The *WSJ* does an admirable job of explaining complicated financial transactions, but one of the obvious red flags is that the trades Madoff claimed to be doing simply weren't showing up in the options market. Investors who asked were told the firm carried out trades "over the counter," away from official exchanges, but it's unclear whether that market is big enough to support the kind of volumes that Madoff was reporting. Plus, investment experts should have known that while the options strategy Madoff used can typically provide a safe, steady investment in the long-run, it would normally not produce gains in a declining market. But Madoff always seemed to be able to pull off small gains each month for his clients.

While the Illinois State House began the process to impeach Blagojevich, Obama announced that his team's review of contacts with the governor didn't find anything improper but said he won't release the report until next week at the request of federal investigators. "I would ask for your patience because I do not want to interfere with an ongoing investigation," Obama said. Lawyers say U.S. Attorney Patrick Fitzgerald can't force the president-elect to stay silent, and some speculate Obama's team simply wants to release the report on Christmas week to make sure it doesn't get much coverage.

In transition news, everyone notes that Obama will nominate Arne Duncan, the Chicago schools chief, as his education secretary. Duncan is widely seen as a compromise choice because he's someone who hasn't been shy about punishing underperforming schools while keeping relatively good relations with teachers. Duncan has been friends with Obama for more than a decade. In addition, there's word that Obama has chosen Sen. Ken Salazar of Colorado to lead the Interior Department.

The *LAT*, *WP*, and *NYT* front a look at how the Iraqi journalist who threw his shoes at Bush on Sunday has become an overnight celebrity in much of the Middle East. The *LAT* calls Muntadar al-Zaidi, the Middle East's "own version of Joe the Plumber." Some Iraqis have been quick to express their displeasure at Zaidi for his failure to respect a guest. But many in the Middle East see Zaidi as a hero and there were demonstrations in Iraq to demand his release. The television network that employs Zaidi posted his picture on a corner of the screen for much of the day and demanded his release. As the *LAT* details, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki is now in a no-win situation. If he chooses to come down hard on the 29-year-old journalist, he would anger many and turn Zaidi into a martyr, but to simply set him free would amount to ignoring a very public act of aggression on a visiting head of state.

Procrastinators rejoice! If you've put off buying an airline ticket for the holidays, you could be in luck. *USAT* reports that the recession has caused such a plunge in holiday travel that airlines are now offering discounts after more than a year of increasing fares. "I haven't seen a holiday season like this since 9/11," one expert said.

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today's papers

Bush Shows Off Ducking Skills

By Daniel Politi

Monday, December 15, 2008, at 6:33 AM ET

The *Los Angeles Times*, *USA Today*, and the *Wall Street Journal*'s world-wide newsbox lead with (and the *Washington Post* devotes its top nonlocal spot to) President Bush's unannounced trip to Iraq. On Bush's fourth, and almost certainly last, visit to the country that will play a key role in defining his legacy, the president praised the new security pact as a sign of progress but warned that the "war is not over." Before flying off to Afghanistan, Bush got a firsthand taste of the anger many Iraqis feel toward him, when, during a news conference, an Iraqi journalist threw his shoes at the president. The president managed to duck just in time and wasn't injured.

The *New York Times* leads with a look at how states are running out of money to pay the growing number of unemployment claims and how some are already turning to the federal government for help or are increasing taxes on businesses. Funds to pay unemployment benefits could run out in 30 states over the next few months, while Indiana and Michigan are already borrowing money from the federal government to make up for shortfalls in their funds.

"This is a gift from the Iraqis. This is the farewell kiss, you dog!" Muntader al-Zaidi, a reporter with the al-Baghdadia television network, shouted as he threw the first shoe. "This is from the widows, the orphans and those who were killed in Iraq!" Zaidi said as he threw his other shoe. Iraqi security guards wrestled Zaidi to the ground and removed him from the room. Throwing a shoe at someone is considered the worst possible insult in Iraq. The *NYT* points out that the Iraqi guards "kicked him and beat him" until "he was crying like a woman," as another Iraqi TV reporter put it. The president quickly joked about the incident: "All I can report is it is a size 10." But there was no getting around the fact that the caught-on-camera moment would be replayed across the world. It immediately became the defining moment of a trip that was supposed to highlight the security improvements in the war-torn nation.

Although Bush's trip was still planned with the same level of secrecy that marked his previous visits to Iraq, the *NYT* and *LAT* note that in a sign of the improved security conditions, the president's jet landed in broad daylight, and he didn't stay confined to military bases and the Green Zone. But in what could also be seen as a sign of how the situation in Afghanistan has deteriorated while Iraq has improved, the *WP* points out that "the veil of secrecy for the Afghanistan leg was even more opaque than that for Iraq."

On his way to Afghanistan, Bush said the United States is implementing many of the same policies there as what helped bring progress to Iraq. The president said the mission in Afghanistan was "the same" as that in Iraq because the goal is to help the "young democracy develop the institutions so it can survive on its own" while denying "a safe haven for al-Qaida."

States are supposed to build up their unemployment funds during healthy economic times. But the fact that more than two dozen state funds could become insolvent in the next few months suggests that many failed to plan for a rainy day. And states that have been keeping unemployment tax rates at artificially low rates are being particularly hard-hit now. The funding shortfall puts states in a difficult position: Many already have huge deficits, and anything they borrow from the federal government has to be paid back.

The pain resulting from the increasing unemployment rate is spreading and is leading a growing number of homeowners to go into foreclosure, reports *USAT*. As opposed to last year, when foreclosures were largely driven by homeowners who took on risky loans, almost half of all foreclosures on conventional mortgages are now the result of unemployment. This is leading to worries that the housing market will take longer to recover, since growing unemployment could lead to even more foreclosures next year.

The *NYT* and *WSJ* front a look at the growing number of victims of what may be the largest Ponzi scheme in history. The list of prominent figures who plunged money into Bernard Madoff's investment firm now includes magnate Mortimer Zuckerman and Sen. Frank Lautenberg of New Jersey. In addition, the foundation of Nobel laureate and holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel and a charity run by Steven Spielberg also had money in Madoff's firm. The scandal also began to reverberate around the world as several European banks announced their clients could face billions of dollars in losses. Banks and financial advisers that sent money to Madoff could soon face lawsuits from angry clients who will question whether they knew enough about how Madoff ran his operations. Meanwhile, authorities are trying to figure out how one person could have operated such a huge scheme for so long. When Madoff was arrested after he apparently told his sons about the scheme, he told authorities that he acted entirely on his own to carry out the scheme that he said lost around $50 billion.

The *WP* fronts a look at how a last-minute change in the language of the $700 billion bailout package may end up making it more difficult for the government to make sure that companies that receive money from the government adhere to limits on executive compensation. At the behest of the Bush administration, lawmakers changed a sentence in the plan to specify that only firms that received money through selling their toxic assets to the government would be subject to penalties for breaking the rules on executive compensation. Now that the Treasury Department has decided to inject capital directly into the troubled firms many worry that there is no enforcement mechanism to make sure companies stick to the limits on executive compensation.

The *WSJ* fronts word that Google has approached major Internet service providers with a proposal to give faster access to the company's content on the Web. This is merely the latest example of the way the issue known as network neutrality is losing some of its biggest backers. Only two years ago, some of the biggest companies in the industry, including Yahoo, Microsoft, and Google, seemed determined to protect network neutrality. But now, these companies, along with some prominent Internet scholars, have switched tracks and are working on deals that would provide faster access to their Web sites. President-elect Barack Obama spoke up about defending network neutrality during the campaign, but some of his technology advisers are among those who have changed their view on the issue.

Shopaholics are having a harder time than usual keeping their credit cards inside their wallets during this holiday season, notes the *WSJ*. The holidays are always difficult for compulsive buyers, but the huge sales of this season mean that many are finding it impossible to keep their spending in check. The growth of Internet commerce, coupled with a constant barrage of too-good-to-be-true offers makes it easier for shopaholics to go on spending binges they'll later regret. And some stores seem to be courting compulsive buyers to spend more than they can afford. Saks Fifth Avenue, for example, offered 12 months of no interest and no payments for those who spend $2,000 in one day, a deal that one expert says is like "a crack dealer saying, 'Come here, try a sample.' "

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today's papers

New New Deal No Big Deal?

By Joshua Kucera

Sunday, December 14, 2008, at 3:44 AM ET

The *New York Times* leads with a leaked federal government history of the U.S. reconstruction effort in Iraq, and the conclusions, unsurprisingly, are grim. The *Washington Post* leads with an analysis of President-elect Barack Obama's ambitious "New New Deal" infrastructure construction plan, which may not be as transformative as he suggests given that so many of the projects are for routine repairs of already existing roads and bridges. The *Los Angeles Times* leads with a news analysis arguing that whatever "change" Obama may bring as president, he will be stymied by a Congress that is reactive, bitterly partisan, and causes as much harm as good.

The reconstruction history, "Hard Lessons: The Iraq Reconstruction Experience," totals 514 pages and was compiled by the Office of the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, led by Republican lawyer Stuart W. Bowen Jr. The *Times* piece—which was a collaboration with the investigative journalism group ProPublica—has some rich detail. In one 2003 episode, Donald Rumsfeld asks how much reconstruction was going to cost, and hears that it could reach into the billions. " 'My friend,' Mr. Rumsfeld replied, 'if you think we're going to spend a billion dollars of our money over there, you are sadly mistaken.' " The story notes that the United States has so far spent about $50 billion in taxpayer money on Iraq reconstruction. And for all that, "the rebuilding effort never did much more than restore what was destroyed during the invasion and the convulsive looting that followed." And there are lessons to be learned: "The incoming Obama administration's rebuilding experts are expected to focus on smaller-scale projects and emphasize political and economic reform. Still, such programs do not address one of the history's main contentions: that the reconstruction effort has failed because no single agency in the United States government has responsibility for the job." The story is curiously short for a Sunday piece with such a large scope, but if you want more, the *Times* has posted the entire draft report on its Web site.

The infrastructure package will have to be started quickly to bring relief to the ailing economy. But that haste will mean the government will have to favor already existing proposals to fix up current infrastructure, rather than building "the stuff of history" like high-speed trains, creating "a clear tension between the need to create jobs fast and the desire for a lasting legacy," the *Post* writes. Plenty of people quoted in the story, including an unnamed Obama aide, argue that you can do both: start the repair projects quickly and then start to identify more ambitious long-term projects for the second phase. "But that plan assumes that there will be enough money, political will and public support left over after an initial burst of spending to fuel broader investments," the paper responds.

"Polarized, beset by crises, and preoccupied with ideological and regional politics, this Congress followed a pattern all too familiar in the past decade. It railed and wrangled over the nation's toughest problems, but in the end failed to advance solutions," the *LAT* writes. It unfortunately doesn't advance this argument much beyond that, noting the recent poor performances of Congress in dealing with the financial crisis and auto industry bailout, and offering a couple of contextless quotes from pundits: "The real question is: Will Congress be Congress and slow things down, muck things up and muck things up with too much local politics?" asks one.

The *Post* has a terrific front-page story on an Iranian case of eye-for-an-eye justice. A young woman who turned down a suitor for marriage was attacked by the spurned man, who blinded and disfigured her by throwing acid in her face. But she won an unusual court case against him: She convinced the judge to sentence him to five drops of sulfuric acid in each eye. The sentence, however, has yet to be carried out.

A Colombian shrimp fisherman was arrested last month and is accused of building as many as 20 submarines designed to ferry cocaine from Colombia to Mexico and Central America, the *LAT* reports. Colombian police have nicknamed him "Captain Nemo," and a DEA official said the use of submarines in drug smuggling has increased exponentially over the past few years. While the current smuggling boats are fairly small craft, officials worry it could get more serious. "Will they take it to the next level—a fully submersible craft, unmanned with remote guidance capability?" the *LAT*'s fed asked. "The latter has a lot more agencies than just DEA concerned."

Also on the colorful crime beat, the *NYT* reefers a fun story in the Styles section on a gang of Serbian jewel thieves who have stolen gems worth more than $132 million in Dubai, Switzerland, Japan, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Spain, and Monaco. Police have called them "Pink Panthers," and they're

now suspected in a heist at a legendary Paris jewelry story earlier this month that netted more than $100 million more.

We've all made the same mistake. A correction in the *NYT*: "An article last Sunday about the film adaptation of the novel 'The Reader' misspelled the German expression that means coming to terms with the past. It is Vergangenheitsbewältigung, not Vergangenheitsbewaltigung."

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today's papers

New Lease on Auto Loan

By Jesse Stanchak

Saturday, December 13, 2008, at 6:36 AM ET

The *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times* all lead with (and the *Wall Street Journal* fronts) the White House offering a little bit of hope for the auto industry by saying it will provide loans to keep American automakers afloat into 2009.

The White House had repeatedly refused to get involved with the auto industry's flagging fortunes. But with Congress at an impasse, the administration says it will allow some of the $700 billion dollar fund that was approved to bail out financial companies to be spent shoring up the auto industry. The White House hasn't said how much money it will lend or what the conditions will be. It also hasn't ruled out bankruptcy for one or more of the auto companies.

As the *LAT* notes, Senate Republicans used debate over the loan bill as an excuse to decry the wages and benefits paid to union auto employees. The Republicans argued that union contracts keep American automakers from being competitive. The *NYT* has an interesting spin on the conflict between Republican Sen. Robert Corker of Tennessee and United Automobile Workers President Ron Gettelfinger. The two men faced each other down on Thursday, with Corker demanding the union scale back wages and benefits while Gettelfinger insisted compensation couldn't be cut until after next year. The paper declares them both winners after a fashion—even though neither man got what he wanted and the deal fell apart. Instead, the buck gets passed to the White House and now both men get to claim a moral victory for their side.

General Motors has said it will idle its plants in the United States and Canada for at least part of the first quarter of 2009. The company says it could run out of money without a loan this month from the government.

The *WSJ* fronts the ongoing fallout from the revelation that Bernard Madoff's investment securities company was in fact a $50 billion Ponzi scheme, making it the biggest fraud in financial history. Banks, hedge funds, institutions, and individuals alike may have lost everything they'd invested in Madoff's firm. The paper focuses on the investors who were caught up in the scheme, many of whom were previously among the very wealthy. The paper notes that part of Madoff's way of marketing his firm was by word-of-mouth in certain well-to-do social circles, especially in Jewish communities.

Thousands of people—everyone from senior citizens to Jewish charities to the New York Mets—had money in Madoff's firm. Many of Madoff's clients had done business with him for years and had gradually trusted him with all their savings, says the *NYT*. Now it's unlikely that any of them will ever see that money again.

The impact of the scandal isn't fully understood yet, according to the *NYT*, but investor confidence in hedge funds is expected to take a big hit. Coming out of the crisis, investors will likely demand much more transparency from fund managers.

How it is possible that one man was able to defraud so many people out of so much money? Investigators haven't released key details yet, such as what happened to the money and whether or not Madoff acted alone, but the *NYT* says that the unusual structure of Madoff's organization may have helped shield him from scrutiny. Madoff's firm was investigated by the SEC in 1992, and there have a few bouts of suspicion from different quarters since, but no one ever accused Madoff of wrongdoing. A series of odd accounting maneuvers may have helped Madoff keep investors and regulators in the dark. Trust is also a factor. Most Ponzi schemes are short-lived and make a lot of crazy promises about easy money. Madoff provided high, but not unreasonable, returns on investments for more than 30 years. Clients who wanted their money were paid promptly. He never gave anyone a reason to doubt him.

The *WP* alone goes under the fold with the resignation of John Harris, the top aide to Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich. The paper takes Harris' resignation as a sign that he's cooperating with federal investigators building a case against Blagojevich for charges including plotting to sell an appointment to President-elect Barack Obama's former Senate seat. Harris' cooperation may be necessary, since some analysts think investigators pulled the ripcord a little too soon on the investigation and may not have the evidence needed to make charges stick.

The *WP* devotes much of its front page to a feature on the status of girls in India. Especially in poorer regions, girls must often work at home while their brothers go to school. Education efforts by the government mean that many girls now get at least a little schooling, often just enough to make them aware of the inequity of their situation.

The U.S. military is helping several African nations train their security forces to fight Islamic militants, as part of a broad effort to combat terrorism on the continent. The *NYT* focuses in on the impoverished nation of Mali, whose 10,000-man army is having a hard time coping with the sudden influx of radical Islamic terrorists into the country's sparsely populated northern desert region. The United States is also working to fund employment and education programs, in order to stem radical recruitment efforts.

The *WP* reports that the Vatican released its first authoritative statement on thorny reproductive issues in more than two decades. The teachings aren't especially new, however. They echo less formal pronouncements that have been coming out St. Peter's for years and they cover familiar ground. The dictum condemns some reproductive treatments as well as stem cell use and cloning. The paper gingerly notes that it's hard to say what impact the statement will have in America, since many American Catholics regularly disregard church reproductive teachings, such as the prohibition on birth control.

Obama won't be able to move into Blair House, the White House's official guest residence, until Jan. 15, the *NYT* reports. Obama had wanted to move in before Jan. 5 so that his daughters could begin school on time, but the Bush administration says unspecified commitments for the space will keep it from being available early.

The *LAT* combines a piece on the decline of corporate sponsorship in surfing with a discussion of the dangers of riding big waves.

What's that you say? There's an outdoor Russian beauty pageant? Complete with swimsuits? In December? And the whole thing is just a big rally for a pro-Kremlin nationalist youth group? Do go on, *LAT*, do go on …

The Washington area has an amusing (if slightly gross) problem with its ginko trees, as this year's anti-stink efforts have failed miserably. The *WP* describes the odor perfectly in oenophilic terms as, "strong notes of unwashed feet and Diaper Genie, with noticeable hints of spoiled butter."

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war stories

What Obama Could Learn From America's Greatest Unknown Nuclear Strategist

Get out of the hothouse from time to time.

By Fred Kaplan

Monday, December 15, 2008, at 7:06 PM ET

The phone call came this morning: My old professor, William Weed Kaufmann, who had been ailing for some time, died a few hours earlier, in his sleep, at the age of 90.

Kaufmann was one of those shadowy figures of the Cold War era, unknown to the public but deeply influential in the strange subculture of military planning and nuclear strategy.

From 1961 to 1981, he spent two days a week teaching graduate students at MIT's political science department; the other three days he served as special assistant to every secretary of defense from John F. Kennedy's to Jimmy Carter's. Before that, in the late 1950s, he was an analyst at the RAND Corp., the Air Force-sponsored think tank where ideas about war in the nuclear age were coined—and Kaufmann did much of the coining.

But more to the point (for I don't mean to write a reminiscence or an obit), the evolution in Kaufmann's thinking, especially after he left the corridors of power, holds a lesson for those on Team Obama—including the president-elect himself—preparing to immerse themselves in the maze.

When Bill Kaufmann started thinking about the Bomb, Soviet-American tensions were near their peak. A lot of people seriously believed that a nuclear war was possible, even likely. And the U.S. Strategic Air Command's plan for such a war was, to put it simply, insane. If the Soviet Union invaded Western Europe, SAC's actual, official, and *only* plan was to launch its entire atomic arsenal—3,423 nuclear bombs, packing a total of 7,487 megatons of explosive power—against every major urban, industrial, and military target in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and Communist China. The official estimate held that the attack would kill 285 million Russians and Chinese, severely injure 40 million more, and wreak incalculable casualties from radioactive fallout.

This was the plan, assuming that the Soviets invaded only with conventional armies, that they did not drop a single one of their atomic bombs first.

Quite apart from moral considerations, the plan made no strategic sense. The attack would almost certainly fail to destroy *all* of the Soviets' nuclear weapons. Facing such a huge (and quite visible) onslaught of bombers and missiles, the Soviets would strike back—perhaps pre-emptively—and kill millions in the United States and Western Europe. It wasn't just mass murder; it was suicide.

So, Kaufmann (along with a few others at RAND) came up with an alternative, which they he called a "counterforce" strategy. If the Soviets invaded Western Europe (a scenario for which the United States at the time had no conventional defense), we should drop a relatively small number of nuclear bombs on the Soviet Union—hitting only their strategic military targets

(bomber bases, missile sites, submarine pens, etc.)—and keep the rest of our arsenal on alert but at invulnerable locations (on submarines at sea or in underground missile silos). The president should then tell the Soviet premier: If you don't retreat, we will fire these remaining weapons against your cities. The idea was to try to "manage" the nuclear war, to keep the damages "limited."

Some of Kaufmann's colleagues—most notably Herman Kahn, the intellectual model for Dr. Strangelove—adopted the counterforce logic with exuberance. (In his book *Thinking About the Unthinkable*, Kahn spelled out 44 "rungs of escalation" from "Ostensible Crisis" to "Spasm or Insensate War," with in-between rungs including "Harassing Acts of Violence," "Barely Nuclear War," "Local Nuclear War—Exemplary," and "Slow-Motion Countercity War.")

Kaufmann was the exact opposite of Kahn in style and temperament. He viewed counterforce as a strategy strictly of desperation—a *possible* way to keep things from getting totally out of control in case war broke out.

But then Kaufmann came into the Pentagon during the reign of Robert McNamara (who hired almost all of his "whiz kids" from RAND). McNamara had received SAC's briefing on the official war plan—which horrified him—before hearing Kaufmann outline counterforce. McNamara found Kaufmann's ideas positively liberal by comparison—and ordered SAC to incorporate them into its nuclear-war plan.

At this point, a different logic took over. It was one thing to propose the idea as a principle and another to translate it into policy. The more you deal with the details of a concept, the more real it seems. And the more secretive the details (and there were few documents more secret than the nuclear-war plan), the more this cloistered setting comes to resemble a hothouse, unexposed to the air of any outside scrutiny.

"It's the king's game," Kaufmann once told me, with a reedy chuckle, in explaining the allure of this inner sanctum.

But then, in the early '80s, when Ronald Reagan came to office, Kaufmann got out of the hothouse (nobody asked him to stay on), and he suddenly saw his old world from a fresh perspective.

In the intense ambience of RAND or the Pentagon, he told me, "it was easy to get caught up in the whole nuclear business. You could eat and breathe the stuff. … Then you'd move away from it for a while, look at it from a distance, and think, 'God, that's a crazy world.' "

Even on the theory's own level, flaws stood out blaringly. In one conversation we had around this time, he listed several problems: "How do you get your surveillance and post-attack reconnaissance? How do you know what's been hit and what's left? How do you end the war? How do you get the two sides together?"

Kaufmann and most of his like-minded colleagues had always held some of these reservations about the concept, but they stuck to it, again, as an alternative to the instant holocaust of the pre-1960s nuclear-war plan.

The novelty—and shock—of the Reagan administration, especially in its first term, was that, for the first time, high-level officials were talking about "limited nuclear options" and "prevailing" in a "protracted nuclear war" in public and with gusto, as if the notions were *real* and even appealing.

At this point, ensconced at the Brookings Institution, Kaufmann became an outspoken critic of defense planning and policies, attacking the feasibility of the nuclear notions and calling for a 50 percent reduction in the military budget.

Gradually, he abandoned the ideas about nuclear war that he'd once practically invented. They "may sound reasonable—or may not, depending on your viewpoint," he once told me, "but they have no operational substance. … My guess is they're just not worth the trouble, even assuming they are feasible, which I question."

The Cold War and preoccupations with nuclear-war strategy are, of course, long over. So what lessons does Kaufmann's evolution hold for the incoming Obama administration? Every subculture, especially every bureaucratized subculture, has a set of unquestioned assumptions—bits of "conventional wisdom," as John Kenneth Galbraith once called them. The key to preserving one's sanity and wisdom is not to fall prey to their assumptions, not to fear sounding stupid by questioning them—to stay an inside player without losing a common-sense outsider's perspective.

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well-traveled

The Pervert's Grand Tour

Little death in Venice: The covert Casanova tour.

By Tony Perrottet

Friday, December 19, 2008, at 11:01 AM ET

From: Tony Perrottet
Subject: In Search of the Secretum
Posted Monday, December 15, 2008, at 6:37 AM ET

Sex has always been the unspoken inspiration for travel.

In Homer's *Odyssey*, the first travel book in history, Ulysses, the hero, spends more time in the arms of comely nymphs and enchantresses than actually under sail. Medieval pilgrims were notorious for spicing up their religious devotions with riotous fornication. By the 19th century, the erotic obsession had spilled from the bordellos and bars to suffuse the whole sightseeing agenda, creating a secret itinerary across Europe. For dirty-minded tourists, no visit to Paris was complete without a visit to the *Enfer*, or Hell, section of the National Library, where banned pornographic books from the Renaissance onward were conveniently hidden. The highlight of southern Italy was the ancient Roman brothels of Pompeii and their frescoes demonstrating sexual positions. Nobody had "done" Venice without visiting Casanova's prison cell or Provence without admiring the dungeon of the Marquis de Sade. In fact, the discerning traveler was spoiled for choice: Europe's major museums all had their off-limits rooms containing saucy relics, and every noble family boasted its private cabinet of naughty artifacts.

While researching my book on salacious history, *Napoleon's Privates: 2,500 Years of History Unzipped*, I realized that this deviant itinerary could still be traced through the underbelly of Europe—in short, a Pervert's Grand Tour. I'd always avoided the most popular attractions of Britain, France, and Italy, but this was an inspiring prospect: I would pick three "official" destinations and seek out some tasteful historical filth.

And I knew just the place to start.

Oh, Behave! The Wicked British Museum

Sexual imagery is so ubiquitous these days that only the most lurid display can raise an eyebrow, but there is still something deliciously furtive about tracking down a Victorian cache of "obscene objects"—the British Museum's once-forbidden Secretum.

The prospect had me as wide-eyed as a schoolboy as I made a beeline through the drizzling rain to that hallowed institution in the heart of old London. Once inside, wandering the stolid Georgian corridors of the King's Library, I fantasized that pulling a book from one of the mahogany shelves would open a secret passageway to a cave of sinful treats—the private collection, perhaps, of Sir Richard Burton, first translator of the Kama Sutra; or Henry Spencer Ashbee, author of the Victorian porn classic *My Secret Life*; or even Sir William Hardman, "genial connoisseur of smut."

The reality was slightly less Merchant Ivory, but in my feverish state, nothing could disappoint. After muttering my name into to an intercom, I was ushered into a waiting room by a little old lady, then pointed down some gloomy stairs into the storage areas. The public face of the British Museum immediately dissolved: Marble splendor was replaced by institutional gray. The corridors were shabby, the paint chipped, and windows grimy in that *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* sort of way. Things were getting interesting.

Waiting for me was a young curator—Liz Gatti, a fashionable urbanite with an understated nose piercing, looking like a Marc Jacobs emissary now lost in *Bleak House*.

"We get a lot of inquiries about the Secretum," she began, as I signed the visitors' book. "But I'm afraid you'll be disappointed. There's hardly anything left!"

"Oh, that's not important," I said with what I hoped was sober aplomb.

We followed a corridor lined with antique wooden cabinets, each marked with a bronze number plaque, until we stopped in front of 55. This was it. The dreaded Cupboard 55 was the last known resting place of the Secretum.

"No whiff of brimstone," I joked. Ms. Gatti looked at me askance, then pulled out a fistful of keys.

The Museum Secretum was officially created in 1865, at the height of Victorian sexual hysteria, to protect the more impressionable public—women, children, and the working class—from the moral perils of erotica. At the time, boatloads full of archaeological finds were arriving from abroad, and these revealed the exuberant carnal habits of classical cultures. Excavations in the ancient Roman cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum, for example, included eye-popping images of uninhibited pagan copulation in every gender combination, the same images that had once graced every bedroom, street, tavern, and brothel of antiquity. Such guilt-free sex, it was decided in London, should be locked safely behind closed doors. (Naples, the city closest to the Pompeii dig, already had a Secretum in its Bourbon Museum; known as the *Gabineto Segreto*, or Secret Cabinet, it was created in 1819.) According to former curator Dr. David Gaimster, London's Secretum soon housed 1,100 objects. Only gentleman scholars deemed qualified to interpret such dangerous imagery could gain access.

As one would expect, the Secretum soon took on an underground cachet, luring a steady stream of randy tourists, dilettantes, and voyeurs, who would seek permission from the official "keeper of the Secretum" for a private session with the relics. The 434 phallic objects donated by an oddball collector named George Witt, a former medical doctor who had made a fortune in Australia as a banker, were a particular draw. Witt was convinced that all ancient religions had begun with phallus worship, and he amassed a huge array of examples to prove his thesis. Also in the dark and dingy storage room were a series of graphic Italian engravings from the 1500s called "The Positions," illustrating pornographic verse by Pietro Aretino;

ancient Greek drinking cups adorned with explicit sex scenes; a replica chastity belt; antique condoms; a statue of the god Pan fornicating with a she-goat; and exotic erotica from the colonies, especially India and the Far East.

Wicked items were still being added as late as 1953, but finally, in the more permissive atmosphere of the 1960s, the Secretum collection was gradually redistributed to other parts of the museum. From the 1980s, its remaining relics were kept in Cupboard 55, which today is under the management of the Department of Prehistory and Europe. I naturally assumed that anything still confined to the cupboard at such a late date must be pretty darned offensive. And since the British Museum's entire storage collection is open to the public by appointment on weekday afternoons, I applied to have a peek.

I actually held my breath as Ms. Gatti creaked open the doors like a vampire's casket. Blinking in the half-light, I made out rows of peculiar items that looked a bit like dreidels. I peered closer. "Egad," I said, mystified. They *were* dreidels.

"Everything has been moved about," Liz explained. "Today we use this cupboard to mostly house Judaica." This was deflating and disturbing news: It turns out that most of the last items had been redistributed in 2005. "There was no logic to the Secretum," she added. "Modern curators believe it's important to keep items within their cultural context. Keeping 'immoral' objects together in one place was a false premise."

But is there nothing here from the former collection? I pleaded.

"Well …" she said hesitantly, fingering the keys. "A few bits and bobs."

That was when she cracked open the doors to Cupboard 54. And there, embedded in neat rows of clinically white, acid-free foam, was a selection of pastel-colored wax penises. These miniature ornaments were used in the late 1700s as votive offerings in a village in southern Italy, hung by the peasantry on the walls of Catholic churches as fertility symbols. They had been collected by Sir William Hamilton, who had been posted as the British envoy extraordinary to the court of Naples during the Napoleonic wars (and whose wife, Lady Hamilton, famously ran off with Lord Nelson).

Another foam sheet held ancient Roman rings and charms decorated with erect male members, laid out in neat rows like bright insects caught by a collector.

"Most of the supposedly 'obscene' items in the Secretum were not originally created to be titillating," Liz explained. "These were everyday objects for the ancient Romans. The phallic imagery was actually used for good luck and safety. Even the Roman kids wore little rings with phalluses engraved upon them."

My eye was drawn to the last display—four soft strips that turned out to be condoms from the 18th century. These pioneer contraceptives were handcrafted from animal intestines, but the result was very attractive. In a nice design touch, they were tied at the open end by little pink silk ribbons.

"They're like works of art," I marveled.

Finally, taking a deep breath, I stepped back onto the polished parquet of the real world. As a parting gift, Liz gave me a printout of items that had once been in the Secretum and were now on permanent public display. I searched throughout the galleries and identified many of the items that were once too immoral to be seen—a classical roll call of satyrs, sodomites, hermaphrodites, and maenads, women driven to a sexual frenzy. In one cabinet, a woman was passionately copulating with a horse; in the next, a young girl was "tending *phalloi*," pouring seed over a series of erections like gnomes in a garden.

All very impressive—but somehow, under the bright lights of the regular museum, it wasn't quite the same.

From: Tony Perrottet
Subject: The Devil's Playground
Posted Tuesday, December 16, 2008, at 7:32 AM ET

You should never visit the Marquis de Sade's castle on a pretty summer's day. No, to appreciate the site, you need an atmosphere of infernal darkness, with torrential rain and howling wind. At least, that's what I told myself as I tried to find the place while blinded by a brutal thunderstorm. I'd been soaked to the bone just walking to the car-rental agency. Now, with lightning darting about my cobalt-blue Picasso (yes, a Picasso—some sort of Citroën), I had to pull over for the 20th time to make sense of the road map. Sade's castle is in a little village called Lacoste, only 25 miles east of Avignon in Provence, which is supposed to be southern France's most seductive idyll of lavender fields, vineyards, and quaint B&Bs. But paradise certainly wasn't behaving as advertised today. I might as well have wandered into the opening sequence of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, en route to the Annual Transylvanian Convention.

At last, a sign to Lacoste protruded from the murk. I parked by a medieval fortress wall; ahead lay a stone arch engraved with the words *Le Portail des Chèvres*, the Goats' Gate, the entrance to the upper part of the village. The marquis's old stomping ground

was as welcoming as Salem on a witch-trial day. The houses were shuttered, so I walked cautiously up a steep alley, trying not to slip on the uneven cobblestones as the rain gushed in a channel between my feet, then I climbed a trail littered with weeds and loose chunks of masonry. And there, crouching like a wolf in the mist, was the Château Sade. It still appeared to be half ruin, with a veil of crumbling outer walls, yet the core has been renovated to a habitable state—the ideal haunted refuge, you could imagine, for a deranged monk or bestial aristocrat from one of Sade's pornographic classics like *120 Days of Sodom*. At the very least, a Dungeons & Dragons computer game designer.

Au contraire. I climbed the wet stone steps and banged on the wooden door, but I was answered by grim silence. No lights shone in the windows.

I would have to come back to meet the new lord of the lair, Pierre Cardin.

France has always been a hot destination for literary tourists: The land is lousy with shrines like Victor Hugo's apartment in central Paris or Balzac's cottage in Passy, where even the author's old teapot is revered like a piece of the true cross. But only a certain type of traveler is lured to this corner of Provence, where the château of Donatien Alphonse François, Marquis de Sade, still looms in decaying grandeur. This 42-room redoubt was Sade's most beloved residence. He visited it often as a child, and after his father gave it to him as a wedding present in 1763, he lived here for long stretches of his 20s and 30s—his feral prime. The château soon became the core of his fertile imaginative life. As biographer Francine du Plessix Gray points out in her classic *At Home With the Marquis de Sade*, its position hovering above the village fed Sade's outdated fantasies of feudal inviolability, where he could act out his rabid carnal desires with no fear of reprisal. Even while he was in prison, the château remained a font of inspiration for Sade's grisly literary works—a Walden Pond for the polymorphously perverse.

Essentially, the château was the mise-en-scène for some of his more outrageous real-life escapades. To take one example, it became the setting of a light-hearted romp dubbed by biographers "The Little-Girls Episode." At the end of 1774, the charismatic, 34-year-old marquis came to winter at Lacoste with his family and a string of fresh-faced household servants he'd hired in Lyon, including five unsuspecting virgins. These were intended to supplement his more knowing staff, such as the lovely housekeeper Gothon, whom Sade had hired because she sported "the sweetest ass ever to leave Switzerland," and the studly male valet Latour, by whom Sade liked to be sodomized while prostitutes watched and cavorted. For the next six weeks, Sade dedicated himself to corrupting the captive minors. As far as historians can discern, he held them hostage in the château's dungeon, forcing them to act out scenes from pornographic literature as well as Sade's own intricately stage-managed sexual rituals. (A control freak, Sade like to choreograph every detail: As a character complains in one of his comic fictions, "Let's please put some order into these orgies!") Modern French wives are legendarily indulgent of their husbands' peccadilloes, but Sade's wife, Pélagie, took spousal freedom to new levels by overseeing this marathon debauch, keeping the five girls compliant, and then hushing up the ensuing scandal. When the police came knocking, she helped bribe the outraged parents and spirit the girls, decidedly damaged goods, away to convents.

Pondering this edifying tale, I puddle-jumped through the castle's former moat and climbed in the pelting rain up to the wild plateau of Sade's old estate. This was once a splendid garden and orchard, where the dashing young marquis and his three children would frolic on summer days. (He was, by all accounts, a devoted father, with a fondness for playacting and games like hide-and-seek and musical chairs.) Now, there were loopy artworks installed on the grounds, including some fairly gross sexual cartoons painted on panels by a Russian artist and a few surreal sculptures—a giant fly, a human finger the size of a tree trunk, and an enormous skull, its eye socket filled with pinkish rainwater.

But the most striking piece, perched on a strategic precipice, was a shiny, new bronze sculpture of the Divine Marquis himself. Erected in the summer of 2008, it displays Sade's bewigged 18th-century head surrounded by a cage—Sade the perpetual prisoner. After being seized by police during a night raid in 1777, he spent most of his life in prisons and nuthouses, including 13 years in the Bastille and 11 in Charenton Asylum, the setting for the film *Quills*. Both proved futile efforts to censor his literary outpourings.

Some 40 years after Sade's death, poet Baudelaire wrote that if a statue of Sade were ever erected, thousands would come to lay flowers at its feet. Well, the crowds might have been thin on this rainy day in October, but there's no question that the marquis can bring in the fans. His presence in Lacoste 250 years ago has given the village a notoriety it might otherwise lack. And what began as a trickle of a few lecherous pilgrims has escalated exponentially since the Château Sade was snapped up by—of all people—Pierre Cardin, the elderly haute couturier based in Paris.

The billionaire fashion icon was evidently tickled by the Sade connection when he purchased the decrepit castle seven years ago for a nominal 1 million francs, including 70 acres of the estate and an oil painting of the marquis. In the village, rumors flew: Some said Cardin was related to Sade; others whispered that Cardin is bisexual and thus wanted to vindicate the broad-minded writer's memory; still others alleged he was looking for some mythical Sade family treasure. Since then, Cardin has renovated the château as his holiday residence and has started an annual summer arts festival on the grounds, luring crowds from Paris and the Riviera. (Cardin's Web site presents it as an

homage to Sade, who loved the theater and used to stage plays on the estate. And Cardin has certainly caused more tumult in Lacoste than anyone since Sade himself: In recent years, the fashion designer has been buying many of the village's historic structures in a real-estate grab along the lines of Ted Turner in Montana. The reaction among some villagers has been violent. Lacoste is being torn apart by a miniature civil war with a viciousness that only the French can manage.

You could almost imagine the ghost of the marquis pirouetting in glee.

I wanted to stay in Lacoste for several days to see how Sade's mischievous legacy was playing out, so I'd booked a room above the Café de France, the only lodging available off-season. When I pushed open the door, four farmers were hunched over a wooden table, ripping into roast chickens like gourmandizing Orcs, the one missing a leg pausing to shoot me a scowl. The barman also eyed me suspiciously, then led me up a dark, creaking stairway that smelled of last month's cooking oil.

As I sat sodden and hungry in my freezing garret, staring out at the ghoulish fog, I had to wonder if this was really Provence, and if so, what century.

It seemed to be less Brueghel and more Hieronymus Bosch.

From: Tony Perrottet
Subject: The Marquis de Sade Is Dead! Long Live Pierre Cardin!
Posted Wednesday, December 17, 2008, at 7:01 AM ET

"Oh, he loved Lacoste did the Marquis de Sade. He adored it! Every time he was on the run, he came back here. And Cardin, he loves the place, too."

Finn Mac Eoin, wild-haired gardener and local poet, was showing me around the renovation work under way in the Marquis de Sade's old village, which is being funded by Parisian fashion king Pierre Cardin. Suddenly, carried away with the grand ambition of it all, he stopped and decided to orate a celebratory poem. "I call this one 'Resurrection,' " he said, striking a mock-heroic pose like a Shakespearean actor on the tiles. "It's dedicated to Cardin." Raising one hand, a knee up on a medieval wall, Mac Eoin swept back his curly hair and pronounced in a rolling Irish brogue:

> Up from ancient ruins in Phoenix flight,
> Domain de Sade Pierre'd before my very eyes—
> Stone by stone this titan feat rose and rose
> beyond a dream
> Where lark and passing cloud can meet …

Mac Eoin pointed with a flourish to another picturesque hilltop village, Bonnieux, in the distance, for centuries Lacoste's bitter Catholic enemy.

> Now, a beacon on this once Lacoste'd hill has
> Far-off Bonnieux put to shame. And soon the
> moon it will.

"Cardin's got that poem up on his wall in the château," Mac Eoin exulted. "Right next to the Marquis de Sade's portrait."

A villager stuck his head out of the window to see what all the noise was about, then, seeing it was Mac Eoin, pulled his head back with a snort of disgust.

"Ah, they hate me here," Mac Eoin chortled. "They fuckin' hate me! I don't care. Friends make you weak. Enemies make you strong! I'll make 'em hate me more."

That next morning in Lacoste, things had livened up in every sense. When I creaked open the shutters of my garret in the Café de France, the fog from the day before was rapidly burning off to reveal the sorts of views that would make an Impressionist drool. Lacoste, I now discovered, floats above the region called the Lubéron like a hot-air balloon, with sweeping vistas across verdant fields and succulent orchards. In the distance was Mount Ventoux, whose peak looks snowcapped but is actually bare white limestone.

So, this was the mythic Provence of Peter Mayle memoirs, beloved by British retirees and anyone with a passion for produce markets and renovating farmhouses.

Fine for some. But I prefer a bit of drama in my paradise, and Lacoste was delivering the goods. By 9 a.m., the village—which had been deserted the day before in the Gothic deluge—was ringing with activity. Construction workers were everywhere, scurrying like ants along the Rue Basse, Lower Street, where in the last year Cardin has purchased a dozen buildings, bringing his total to more than 25. On all the work permits, I noticed Pierre Cardin's name had been crossed out by hand, and little slogans scribbled in—"*Sauvez Votre Village*," Save Your Village.

Lacoste has always had a contrarian streak. It was a Protestant village in a sea of Catholics, and more recently, it was run by a Communist mayor for 50 years. Now many of the villagers are revolting again—against Cardin's renovations. In an inevitable conflation, the billionaire in the marquis's manor is being denounced as a haughty "neo-feudal" overlord trying to turn

back the clock to prerevolutionary days. It's a theme that has delighted newspapers like *Le Figaro* and French TV. But not everyone in Lacoste is ready to light torches and storm the château. A minority view sees Cardin as saving the village from provincial stagnation. When the designer first arrived, several villagers actually donated houses for Cardin to renovate, saying they had been in the family for generations, but they could no longer maintain them. Others have approached him on the sly, aware that they could get up to three times market rate for ramshackle properties.

By chance, I was getting this positive view first, from Finn Mac Eoin, a one-man PR team for Cardin.

"I'm pro-Cardin, and I'm pro the Marquis de Sade," Mac Eoin declared, swearing that he had read every word Sade had ever written. (This is quite something; even some leading biographers admit they have never been able to slog through the deadening litany of carnal horrors.) "People don't know shit about the Marquis de Sade," he said. "They come here and they tell me, 'Oh, do you know he killed his wife and cut out her heart?' Such crap! So much misinformation. He loved his wife! She was like Florence fucking Nightingale to him. Everyone wants to see blood. Everyone wants to add to the rumors."

Certainly, there are subtleties to the marquis's life that get lost in the sensation. As biographer du Plessix Gray points out, he should perhaps be termed "a nonviolent sadist." He never drew blood in his rituals, preferring to use psychological torture. He denounced the death penalty, was never in a duel or even went hunting. The very word *sadism* was not coined until the 1880s, more than 60 years after his death, and anyway, Sade was probably more of a masochist: He liked to be whipped, often demanding hundreds of lashes to provoke his erections. A lot of French aristocrats were at least as deranged.

"So what if de Sade was a rapist and a murderer?" Mac Eoin railed. "You can't judge him by our modern standards."

Mac Eoin's wife was patiently making breakfast throughout this tirade. I asked her if she shared his passion for the Marquis de Sade. "I think it's good in a marriage to have different interests," she said sweetly.

Mac Eoin took me out into the warm autumn sunshine to visit charming old houses that Cardin had renovated into gallery spaces, and two mansions destined for hotels: one five-star, the other budget. The marquis would surely have approved of Lacoste's artsy new life as host to Cardin's summer theater festival; he was passionate about the stage, and his dearest wish was to be recognized not as a pornographer but as a playwright. Come to think of it, he would have approved of Cardin's profession, too, since he was obsessive about fashion. His prison letters are filled with demands for trendy new stockings, shoes, and suits. ("Send me a little prune-colored riding coat," Sade ordered his wife in 1781, "with a suede vest and trousers, something fresh and light but specifically *not* made of linen." In the same letter, he requests a suit that is "Paris Mud in hue—a fashionable color this year—with a few silver trimmings, but definitely not silver braid.")

Everything in the new Lacoste is cashing in on the Sadist theme. We peered into the Cardin-owned Café de Sade, where a fortune was being spent to raise the antique ceilings. And we looked in at the new grocery, the Boulangerie du Marquis, which Cardin had taken over from its former owner and expanded. "This used to be such a shitty grocer," Mac Eoin scoffed. "The owner didn't even bake her own bread!"

When I learned that Cardin had even opened a boutique gift store named after the Divine Marquis, my imagination ran riot. Would it be a high-end sex shop for the dominatrix and fetishist? Would it stock Sade's favorite accessories, like the hand-carved dildos he particularly liked for his auto-erotic rites, or his beloved enema syringes, which bore tasteful engravings of men kneeling in worship before plump buttocks? At least it could offer some books from the marquis' secret library, I thought, classics like *The Fornications of Priests and Nuns*, or antique illustrated editions of his own phantasmagoric works, which were once passed secretly among the cognoscenti.

No such luck. Instead, when I entered the cool stone cavern that is the Boutique le Moulin de Sade, I was confronted with an array of gourmet food: foie gras, jams, pâtés, and honeys. When I quizzed the elderly shopkeeper about Sadist souvenirs, she gave me a bookmark bearing his profile.

The truth is, Sade would probably have been delighted. He was a fervent gourmand who loved Provençal delicacies like quail stuffed with grape leaves, cream of chard soups, and luscious jams. He once demanded that his wife send him a chocolate cake black "as the devil's ass is blackened by smoke." Fine food appears in all his writings about orgies, inspiring the participants to fits of lust. As one character notes, "Our cocks are never so stiff as when we've just completed a sumptuous feast."

Which, I guess, is a more direct way of saying that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach.

From: Tony Perrottet
Subject: The Curse of the Château Sade
Posted Thursday, December 18, 2008, at 3:15 PM ET

Every afternoon, I climbed up the castle steps and banged on the

wooden door, hoping that Pierre Cardin might show me around the Marquis de Sade's dungeon, but the only answer was a dismal silence. The chatelain was still in Paris—he liked to visit only in summer, it seemed—so I tried to hang out with the rebellious villagers.

This was something of a challenge. After four days, I had become a familiar face in Lacoste, where the off-season population is only around 60 souls. Even the crustiest of the locals, *les Costains*, huddled outside the Café de France like illiterate goatherds, didn't shoot me quite as many scowls. And yet their world seemed remote and impenetrable. I was desperate to know what these former Communists thought of their two celebrity château owners, the Marquis de Sade and Cardin. But how would I get past their Gallic suspicion of outsiders—me, an interloper from that citadel of capitalism, Manhattan?

Then, in the Cardin-owned store, I noticed a flimsy little book on the history of Lacoste, filled with murky photographs and obscure old censuses. As I flicked through the pages, I froze in shock: There in the tax list of 1608 was my own name, *Antoyne Perrottet*. My family moniker had been, until now, fairly obscure, so this seemed quite a coincidence. From the Middle Ages, it turned out, a whole bunch of Perrottets were clustered together in this tiny village—about 10 extended families. Wackiest of all, in 1806, one André Perrottet was the mayor of Lacoste at the height of Napoleon's glory.

Now, I've never been one for roots tours, but the idea that my forebears made up a good percentage of the local citizenry at the time of the Marquis de Sade put a whole new spin on things. All of a sudden, the village's history was personal. I had a blood connection. *Zut alors*, I was a *Costain* myself, give or take two centuries.

Now that I had my Gallic credentials—*one of the Perrottets*, mon ami, *used to be mayor under Napoleon!*—I considered I had an instant entree to stop people in the street and ask their opinions. (Luckily, Finn Mac Eoin had already pointed out many of the more vocal anti-Cardin figures around town: "See that feller? He's an antichrist. Him? Fucking antichrist.") Suddenly, everyone was happy to talk. I ran into two weather-beaten farmers unloading firewood from a truck and quickly introduced myself. "Ugh, Cardin!" spat one, Jacques Trophemus. "He's a megalomaniac! What does he want with all these houses? One home, yes. But 26? There's more to life than money!" He said the village life was being gutted by Cardin, who offers people far above market rate for their homes. Old people can't turn down the offer. Young people can't afford to live here. "These streets used to be filled with children playing! Where are they now?" He waved a hand theatrically. "The village is dead!" True *Costains*, he said, were even boycotting Cardin's new *boulangerie*, buying their bread from faraway villages.

This was obviously a feud in deadly earnest—but I soon found that interviewing the anti-Cardin forces was not entirely unpleasant. Usually, it involved sitting on a sunny terrace and quaffing wine while railing against the modern world. When I sought out Yves Ronchí, founder of an anti-Cardin group called the Association for the Harmonious Development of Lacoste, he turned out to be a vigneron in an old farmhouse. He came up from the cellar in wet rubber boots and purple hands, as if he'd just been stomping grapes. "This country is supposed to stand for liberty, equality, fraternity," he complained. "That is why we fought the revolution! But the rich today have taken on a new sense of privilege. They ignore laws and trample our democratic rights."

Ronchí took my business card and rubbed his straggly beard. He soon dug out a topographical map from his desk. "Did you know there is a village called Perrottet near here?" Instantly, we were old friends. He took me downstairs to see his great chrome vats of the latest harvest, and I tried the fresh red—an excellent drop, I thought. "Look, I don't mind Pierre Cardin personally," Ronchí confided. "It's what he represents, the sort of society. It's all about money, empty words, appearances. He is pouring a fortune into renovating these buildings, but the result is *bricolage*—a rushed job, makeshift, not serious. When you look inside, there is no character. Just empty space."

I had to admire the town's stubborn resistance to change, even though some feel they've become *fanatiques*. It reminded me of the Groucho Marx song "Whatever It Is, I'm Against It!" Perhaps the phrase should be on Lacoste's coat of arms. Still, sometimes it did seem a little extreme. Cécile Lendfors, a 30-ish artist who grew up in the village, told me that she was just waiting for the day the couturier keels over and croaks.

"I've bought a nice bottle of champagne to open when I get the news," she declared. "Cardin's 86. He'll die before I do. I'm waiting for the day!"

When French TV journalists asked Pierre Cardin earlier in 2008 why he was buying up Lacoste, he adopted a provocative tone: "For my pleasure," he said coolly. Still, he has often seemed a little baffled by the villagers' reaction.

Things have clearly gone downhill for a feudal overlord.

Back in the 18th century, the Marquis de Sade could do no wrong in Lacoste. When he'd arrived in 1765, at the age of 23, the pink-cheeked *Costain* yokels danced and sang for the lovely woman on his arm: "Oh, the happy news. … Our marquis has married a young beauty. There she is! There she is!" The beauty turned out to be one of the most noted prostitutes in Paris, but the *Costains* took no offense. In fact, none of his regular scandals seemed to faze the villagers; it was really no less than was expected of a red-blooded French aristocrat. Sade took care to procure his victims from faraway cities, a considerate gesture to the locals.

So, the villagers continued to warn him about police raids and assist his many white-knuckle escapes. On one occasion, he hid in the château roof; several times, he disappeared into the wild countryside of Provence.

Of course, the arrangement came to an end on the night of Aug. 26, 1777, when 10 policemen managed a 4 a.m. raid on the château and carried Sade away in shackles. He would never return: During the Revolution, a mob sacked the castle. It was not led by loyal *Costains*, of course, but radicals from the nearby town of Apt. Sade was devastated when he learned. "No more Lacoste for me!" he wrote. "What a loss! It is beyond words. … I'm in despair!" Broke, he was soon forced to sell the castle.

He was less upset at never seeing his faithful villagers again. "I've come to the conclusion that all *Costains* are beggars fit for the wheel," he wrote in a 1776 letter, "and one day I'll surely prove my contempt for them. … I assure you that if they were to be roasted one after another, I'd furnish the kindling without batting an eyelash." The outburst came after the father of one of his victims had burst into his château and tried to murder him by firing a pistol inches from his chest. The shot misfired, but the culprit had wandered the village for days, drunk on local wine, until the marquis had to bribe him to leave. Rather than form a lynch mob, the villagers had reacted with a Gallic shrug.

In fact, it's tempting to think that the ghost of the marquis has come back to plague the peasantry. After all, he has effectively skewed the village's fate through his notoriety alone. Without Sade, there'd be no Cardin dragging them into the modern world.

Now how would the Divine Marquis punish me, a direct descendent after all?

On my last night, I managed to get myself invited to a bacchanal in a remote farmhouse, where hundreds of Provençal hipsters converged to listen to live music around open fires, guzzle *vin rouge*, and gorge on fresh cheese. No hardship there. But the next morning, after only three hours' sleep, I had to drive back to Avignon. Under my windshield was an envelope: Finn Mac Eoin had left me a farewell poem.

It was called, appropriately, "Wine":

> Then what of morn, should all of night be chaste?
> The wine has gone and but the hourglass filled.

Sade was poised to take his revenge. I somehow managed to navigate my overpriced rental car back to a gas station and had just filled up the tank when I noticed a little sticker: "*DIESEL SEULEMENT*." Oh, *merde*, I realized. Wrong fuel. The station attendant patiently advised me that if I now tried to drive the car on regular gasoline, the engine would implode. Three excruciating hours later, my car was on a trailer, and I was sitting beside a crusty mechanic who told me all about how he was going to come to New York and run the marathon, and maybe he could visit me and even stay?

When I checked my credit card statement back home, I'd been charged an extra $400 for that little Provençal screw-up. I guess Sade got me where it really hurts.

From: Tony Perrottet
Subject: The Casanova Tour of Venice
Posted Friday, December 19, 2008, at 11:01 AM ET

With her bouffant red hair, thick-rimmed spectacles, and puffy overcoat, my guide, Luciana, hardly seemed Casanova's type as she clomped up the sumptuous Golden Staircase of the Doge's Palace in Venice. But then she paused, slipped open her coat, and dipped a hand coquettishly down her plunging neckline to produce a small key on a silver chain. This she inserted with a flourish into the wall, opening a hidden panel.

"*Signori* and *signore*," she whispered huskily. "Welcome to the Secret Tour of the Doge's Palace. There will be no bags permitted. No photographs. No video."

The half-dozen of us on the tour nodded obediently. Luciana, now coat-free, was instantly transformed into Sophia Loren in one of her later films—say, *The Priest's Wife*—and she beckoned us to enter. A crowd of milling tourists could only stare in slack-jawed envy as we, the chosen ones, stepped into the netherworld. As we passed, Luciana touched us each lightly on the hair, counting our numbers, then stepped inside to lock the door behind us, slipping the key with a smile back into her magnificent *décolletage*.

The Venetians certainly know how to stage a secret tour. At the Doge's Palace, the sumptuous nerve center of the old Republic of Venice, a special behind-the-scenes visit includes Casanova's prison cells. But it's difficult to learn about the trip, it's almost impossible to book, and then it's highly likely to be canceled on a whim. As a result, the mounting tension leaves travelers half-crazed and panting for more.

An illicit atmosphere goes with the territory in Venice, which flourished for over 10 centuries as the erotic capital of Europe. Fabulously wealthy, sexually permissive, the whole city qualified as a beautiful red-light district by the late 1700s. Travelers flocked here from around Europe to cruise the canals

with alluring local courtesans and beefy gondoliers. They flirted at masked balls, gamboled in the bordellos, and flocked to the nunneries where aristocratic convent girls would entertain foreign gents with musical concerts and sparkling conversation, then offer intimate favors for a modest fee.

Nobody sums up the lascivious pleasures of this era more than Giacomo Girolamo Casanova, the prototype playboy who cut a virtual swath through the willing female population of Venice. He has been so mythologized in literature and film (most recently in a hokey 2005 Heath Ledger vehicle, *Casanova*) that many people now assume him to be fictional character. In fact, he lived from 1725 to 1798, and most of his operatic love affairs—his passions for milkmaids and princesses, his *ménage à trios* with noble sisters under the nose of their father, his liaison with a female singer who was masquerading as a castrato, his seduction of his own illegitimate daughter—have been documented by historians. (Incidentally, Casanova was born 15 years before the Marquis de Sade; the pair never met, although they had a mutual friend in Rome, a cardinal who seduced high-society ladies in the catacombs of the Vatican.) Casanova's many other achievements put Hugh Hefner to shame. He was the ultimate self-made man: the handsome son of two poor actors, he used his wit, charm, and *joie de vivre* to insinuate himself into the highest courts of Europe. Today, few realize that Casanova was also a translator of *The Iliad*, a successful theater director, a violin virtuoso, a spy, and creator of the French lottery. He debated with Voltaire and Benjamin Franklin and worked on one of Mozart's librettos. He penned a history of Poland as well as arcane mathematical treatises, a science-fiction novel, and a proto-feminist pamphlet.

Strangely, Venice prefers not to celebrate its most famous son, as if it is still rather ashamed of his reckless, wastrel ways. The only memorial is a plaque in the alley where he was born (nobody knows in which house). Which is why his prison cell in the Doge's Palace—where he was thrown in 1755, then escaped in spectacular fashion—has unusual status. It's the only place undeniably connected to the adventurer's fantastical life.

I felt like I was clambering about inside a galleon. Luciana led us up dark stairs and into corridors made of raw wooden planks, which began to shudder and sway as if we were at sea. The route to Casanova's cell ran through the original offices of the republic's most powerful bureaucrats. One door led to the chancellor's little no-frills cubicle; it was made with special hinges to create an airtight fit in order to prevent eavesdropping. Next came the State Inquisitor's Room. Then the Torture Room, where prisoners had their arms tied behind their backs and were dropped from ropes.

It was through these dismal corridors that the 31-year-old Casanova was led after being arrested in his rooms on a hot July night in 1755. He had been denounced to the Inquisition for "irreligious behavior," but the real motive for the arrest was evidently to tame his overactive libido. Over the years, he had made many enemies by seducing the wives of powerful men; he had recently been courting a young lady fancied by a grand inquisitor. Now Casanova, who was never told of the trumped-up charges against him or the length of his sentence, was thrown into a cell in *I Piombi*, "the Leads"—so named because they were located beneath the prison's lead roof, which broiled in summer and froze in winter.

Climbing up into this attic, our little group became as hushed as if we were entering a cathedral. We stooped through a tiny doorway into a tight box; the floor, walls, and ceilings were dark planks encrusted with metal studs around an opaque window. Fixed near the door was a garroting machine, handy for quick executions.

"*Alora*," Luciana breathed sadly as we crouched inside. "This was Casanova's *first* cell. You can imagine what it was like for a man like him to be trapped here! He couldn't even stand up straight. He was attacked by fleas constantly and tormented by boredom. In the heat, he could do nothing but sit stark naked, sweating. So he decided to escape, even though nobody had ever succeeded from the Doge's Palace before."

We all crouched as Luciana enthusiastically related the Great Venetian Breakout. Plan A, begun in this very cell, was an embarrassing flop. Casanova got hold of an iron bolt left by some workmen, and he began to dig through the floorboards. But after months of painful labor, the guards decided to do their amiable prisoner a favor and transfer him to a nicer cell. The tunnel was discovered. "But it was just as well," Luciana said. "Directly below us is the grand inquisitor's chamber. Casanova was about to break through the ceiling! He would have destroyed a Tintoretto fresco."

We filed into Casanova's second cell, which had slightly better ventilation and light, to hear about Plan B. Aware that he was being closely watched, Casanova slipped the iron pike, which he had somehow kept, to the prisoner in the next cell—a disgraced monk named Marin Balbi—and put him to work on the ceiling. At midnight on Oct. 31, 1756—Casanova had by now spent 15 months and five days in prison—the odd couple were ready to make their break. The monk scrambled up through the ceiling, broke into Casanova's cell, and pulled him up. They then dislodged some lead tiles to get onto the palace roof itself, 200 feet above the darkened San Marco Square. After nearly plunging to their deaths, the pair managed to get back inside another window using ropes made from torn sheets. But when they slunk down the Golden Staircase, they discovered, to their horror, that the main palace gate was locked from the outside.

This was when Casanova's fashion sense came to the rescue. In a bag around his neck, he was carrying the flamboyant party clothes he had worn on the night he was arrested—a lace-trimmed silk coat, ruffled shirt, tricorn hat with long feather—

and now he put them back on. Glimpsing this chic man-about-town in the grille, a guard assumed it was a rich visitor accidentally caught inside after visiting hours, and he opened the door. Casanova elbowed past and scampered for the first gondola. "The escape made Casanova famous, but he would not return to our beloved city for 18 years," Luciana sighed, as if mourning on behalf of Venetian womanhood. "When he returned, it was to a hero's welcome. Even the inquisitors wanted to know how he did it!"

"*Signore and signori*," Luciana said in conclusion back at the Golden Staircase. "You, too, have escaped from the Doge's Palace! And perhaps you have learned that Giacomo Casanova was more than just a famous lover. He was a man of action, too."

When I emerged back out in San Marco Square, it took a while for my eyes to adjust to the sunshine and crowds. What now, to honor the memory of this Venetian demigod? I considered going to the Cantina do Spade, a restaurant housed in a former bordello, where the patriotic owner tells any diner who will listen that "Casanova was the greatest fucker in history," or to the convent of Murano Island, where he once lured the ravishing young nun "M.M." away for a tryst in a gondola. But my own short stay in prison gave me the answer. I decided to sit in the sun and read his autobiography, *The Story of My Life*. In his 50s, flat broke, Casanova took a position as a librarian in a castle near Prague, where he knocked out some 3,500 manuscript pages. His carnal adventures—122 affairs—take up only about one-third of the final 12-volume memoir, but they are the most energetically written pages and have always drawn the most eager attention. "I have devoted my life to the pursuit of pleasure," he declares without the slightest regret, and then he recounts why in hilarious, captivating detail. These tales would be published in uncensored form only in 1966, in time for the sexual revolution.

Well, I thought, maybe our view of Casanova as history's ultimate playboy is a little one-dimensional, since it ignores his other achievements. But it's hard to feel sorry for the guy.

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what's up, doc?

Breathing Trouble

The FDA's new restrictions on some asthma medications.

By Sydney Spiesel

Wednesday, December 17, 2008, at 12:21 PM ET

Question: In a dramatic move, an FDA advisory panel has recommended the elimination or restriction of a group of asthma medicines—long-acting beta-agonists—that many patients with severe asthma have come to depend on. While "controller" drugs like steroids stop the inflammation that leads to asthma attacks, patients use short-acting ("rescue") beta-agonists like albuterol for immediate relief of the tightness and wheezing of acute attacks. For more severe cases of asthma, patients are often given long-acting beta-agonists, like Serevent and Foradil, that relieve the sense of tightness throughout the day (though they aren't intended for use in an acute attack). These are the medications addressed by the FDA panel's nonbinding (but usually followed) recommendations. Why do they want to restrict the use of medicines that seem so effective for treating this chronic disease?

Rationale: The introduction of long-acting beta-agonists, like Serevent and Foradil, was greeted with great enthusiasm. These powerfully effective new drugs substantially improve quality of life for asthma sufferers and cut down on acute flare-ups. Unfortunately, that enthusiasm decreased when a number of studies (recently reviewed in one of the few papers not directly paid for by a drug company) raised serious questions about the safety of these medicines, especially for children and especially for the forms that don't contain a steroid controller medicine in addition to the LABA. Because of these concerns, the advisory panel has recommended that the FDA prohibit the use of LABAs for pediatric patients and to eliminate any products that don't also include a controller medication.*

Background: During an attack, asthma sufferers have difficulty breathing in and out (especially out) as their air passages increasingly tighten, stiffen, and become plugged with mucus. The mainstay of asthma treatment is a controller medication that stops the harmful process at its beginning. They're generally safe, but they work slowly and don't provide immediate relief. For that, we turn to short-acting beta-2 agonist "rescue" medications. But these drugs have no effect on the inflammation that causes the mess in the first place. Plus, overuse of beta-agonists is itself dangerous: It can weaken their effectiveness and tempt patients to use their controller medications less frequently so the underlying cause of the asthma isn't adequately addressed. Furthermore, beta-agonist medications directly stimulate heart muscles, sometimes leading to dangerous abnormal heart rhythms.

Findings: How risky are LABA medications? The question is hard to answer with certainty, but in two large studies (about 26,000 subjects total), there were almost four times as many deaths in patients treated with LABA medications as in those treated with placebos. In these studies, the risk of death for patients treated with a LABA drug was more than one in 1,000, whereas the risk of an asthma death in patients treated with a placebo was less than one in 4,000. These numbers may seem small, but they are nevertheless alarming, as the period of the studies was relatively short. (One study lasted 12 weeks, the other 28.) It is likely that the risk over time would be greater for typical patients with severe asthma who need a long course of treatment. Adding an inhaled steroid "controller" medication to the LABA mitigated the risk.

Conclusion: Was the panel's decision a wise one? Well, yes—mostly. When uncombined with a steroid, the danger of LABAs, though not huge, is clear, so expecting patients to switch over to the combined form makes sense. The combination forms will be as effective and a little bit safer—and the benefit (in quality of life) for adults with severe asthma is clear. I am a little less convinced that banning even the combination products for children across the board is a good idea. These medications should not be casually used for childhood asthmatics, but some children suffer from an extremely severe form of the disease, resulting in very bad quality of life. It seems to me that the small degree of increased risk is well-balanced by the dramatic improvement these medicines can provide. Still better would be the introduction of new and more effective, yet still very safe, treatments for this difficult disease. Sadly, these are still out of our grasp.

***Correction*, Dec. 19, 2008:** *This article originally stated that the FDA decided to prohibit the use of LABAs for pediatric patients and to eliminate any products that don't also include a controller medication. Those were the recommendations of an advisory panel, but the FDA has not yet acted on them. (Return to the corrected sentence.)*

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sidebar

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Inhaled steroids have a very good safety record but in severe cases are sometimes not powerful enough. In that case, we often need to turn to oral steroids, generally very safe if taken occasionally and for short periods of time but distinctly riskier when they need to be given continuously for a long time. Doctors need to balance the risk of extended oral steroid use against the dangers inherent in severe asthma itself.

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