

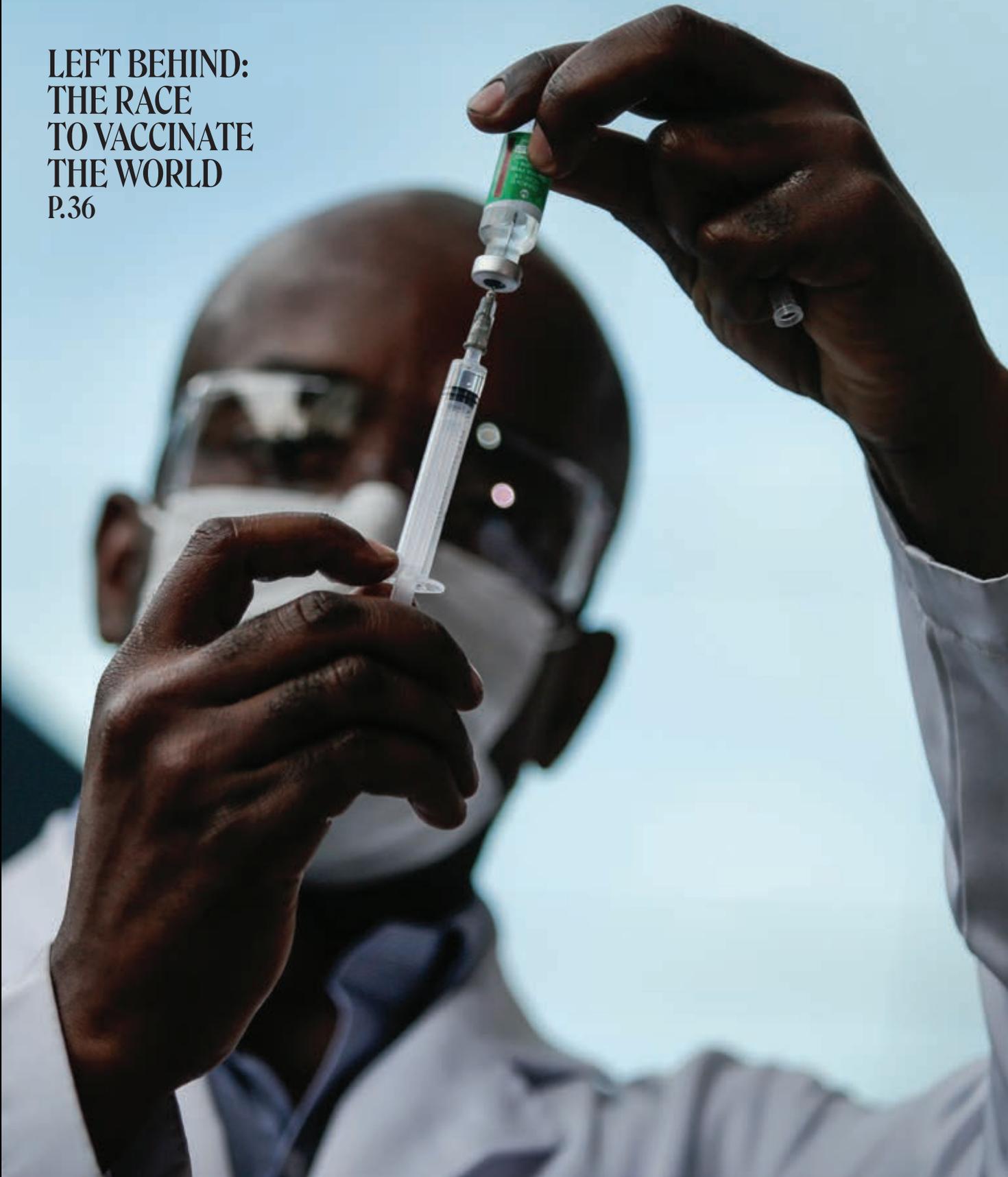
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WORLD

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THE RACE
TO VACCINATE
THE WORLD**
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FORGING AHEAD: "OUR CHILDREN'S BOOK OF THE YEAR GOT LOTS OF ATTENTION ... SURPRISINGLY SO, GIVEN ITS UNABASHED CHRISTIAN CONTENT." —P. 50



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WHAT MADE THIS YEAR’S CHILDREN’S BOOK OF THE YEAR SELECTION HARD?

“We almost bypassed our Book of the Year because it was weird, nonlinear, and ‘literary’ in a way that might seem off-putting to kids. But the story picked us up like an Oklahoma twister. It’s not just for tweens— their parents should read it too.”
—WORLD Senior Writer Janie B. Cheaney

STALLING THE VIRUS

RICHARD MERRIAM/ARCADIA, OKLA.

I found it odd there was no counter-argument on the efficacy of such a rushed-through vaccine. Some medical professionals hold an opposing view on the validity of the trials as well as the vaccine itself, and we would benefit from learning as much as we can before embracing it.

SLIPPING THROUGH THE CRACKS

JAN. 16, P. 52—DENNIS SHANNON/AUBURN, ALA.

This is the most compelling article I have read on the dire consequences of strict laws regarding involuntary commitments. Until lawmakers give family members more power to make decisions for their mentally incapacitated loved ones, this problem will persist.

NANCY B. GRAHAM/RICHMOND, KY.

As a psychiatrist, I regularly see the tragedy of severe, untreated mental illness. But attempting to help people who are not immediately a danger to themselves or others by making decisions in their perceived “best interests” and against their will can lead to abuse of power.

FIRST FREEDOM AGENDAS

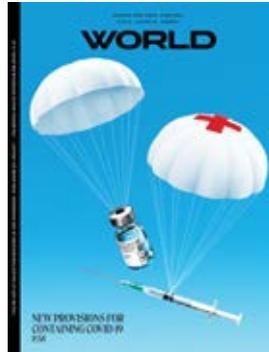
JAN. 16, P. 46—DAVID STAGEBERG/KINGSTON, WASH.

Although the article was in the form of what Joe Biden is going to do regarding international religious freedom, it was good to see something in print espousing some of President Trump’s accomplishments.

GOSPEL-CENTERED POLITICS

JAN. 16, P. 32—JOE VILLANYI/BEAVERCREEK, OHIO

I agree with Erick Erickson that, for some, politics has become a type of religion. But evangelicals who did their civic duty in voting for Trump and his policies as the only viable option were not spiritual dupes who thought he was a saving figure for America’s problems.

**STALLING THE VIRUS**

As a physician being assaulted with patient and medical staff concerns regarding the efficacy and safety of the COVID-19 vaccines, I found your cover story very helpful.

JAN. 16, P. 58—LANCE RADBILL/BIRMINGHAM, ALA.

LETTERS AND COMMENTS

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BREVITY AND CLARITY.

RICHARD FOWLER/CLARKESVILLE, GA.

Erickson says, “Those with different values ... are not my enemy, nor do they want to destroy the country.” Fifty years ago, that might have been true. Today, however, the current differences in values cannot be blended. For example, I believe a Christian cannot compromise on God’s value of human life.

AVOIDING MARTIAL LAW

JAN. 16, P. 72—MICKEY GILES/AUSTIN, TEXAS

Lee Greenwood’s tune is nothing but a memory. We now pledge allegiance to the Banana Republic of America.

SOUL GETS LIFE RIGHT

JAN. 16, P. 23—JOHN BANKS/LAKE ARIEL, PA.

Megan Basham was right to look at the eternal and afterlife motif in her review, but she missed the film’s extended subnarrative of gender dysphoria. The current push for the acceptance of people who are simply “a girl trapped in a boy’s body” made this difficult to miss.

SUNNIE WAGGONER/FOUNTAIN HILLS, ARIZ.

I was disappointed that your review missed the movie’s emphasis on one of the key tenets of Mormonism: “a holding station where souls who have yet to be born prepare for life on Earth.”

CORRECTIONS

Daniel Prude, a mentally ill black man, stopped breathing while police physically restrained him and died in a hospital a week later on March 30 (“2020 News of the Year: Deaths,” Dec. 26, p. 90).

In the movie News of the World, Capt. Jefferson Kyle Kidd takes Johanna to her relatives in Castroville, Texas (“Circuit storyteller,” Jan. 30, p. 27).

READ MORE LETTERS AT WNG.ORG/MAILBAG



Nearly lost history

Remembering God's World Book Club and wondering what might have been

WOULD IT SURPRISE YOU that in the 40-year history of WORLD News Group, for 20 of those years the organization's business was dominated by a division that had almost nothing to do with journalism?

That division hasn't existed within WORLD since 2005 and, even among longtime staff, that part of our history is almost forgotten. It shouldn't be.

We launched God's World Book Club (GWBC) in 1986. Like our God's World News newspapers for kids (launched in 1981), GWBC quickly found a large audience among students at Christian schools and, later, with homeschoolers. Within a few years, the book club was responsible for well over half of the entire organization's revenue, and it continued that way through the late 1990s.

According to Rebecca Cochrane, former manager of GWBC (now managing editor of our student publications), the book club staff evaluated and selected everything from history and biography to fiction and arts & crafts, from Bible resources to classic literature, even curricula. "We provided reading resources chosen to develop awareness, discernment, celebration of good, and worship in young minds and hearts," she reminded me.

**"WE WERE
LOOKING AT THE
WHOLE WORLD,
IN LITERATURE,
THROUGH A
BIBLICAL LENS,
AND HELPING
PEOPLE TO
BE DISCERNING
ABOUT IT."**

Joel Belz told me recently that he always thought of our book club as being closer to the heart of our mission than anything else we did, even though it had nothing to do with news: "We were looking at the whole world, in literature, through a Biblical lens, and helping people to be discerning about it."

Connection to our mission notwithstanding, the book club eventually succumbed to the technological pressures of the early 2000s. When we began hearing from parents and teachers who took our book club recommendations, then purchased those books from Amazon, we knew we couldn't continue for long. Those buyers weren't wrong to do what they did—the same books we recommended and sold were available at Amazon for a much lower price, Amazon delivered the books much more quickly, and Amazon rarely sent the wrong books, as we occasionally did.

It has been 16 years since we closed the book on God's World Book Club. Still, we occasionally wonder whether God will write another chapter in a story that made a difference in thousands of lives. ■

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Cover-up

**Masks help stop the spread,
but they hinder the Church**

IF I'VE ASKED just a dozen people, I must have asked 100. What's the worst part about this pandemic? If you could change just one thing about this miserable year-old plague, what would it be? The overwhelming winner is: the masks!

In this marvelous high-tech age, where we call on a little device no bigger than a box of crayons to do just about anything we ask, are we really reduced to balancing a scrap of fabric across the lower half of our faces in the hope of staving off what we're told is the most threatening health evil of our lifetime?

We can do better.

Let me be emphatically clear. I do not believe, and I am not suggesting here, that the masks now covering 90 percent of all Americans' faces are the result of some vast conspiracy designed to show how subservient we are. My sense is more that some top experts in medicine, science, academia, and politics—when confronted with a genuinely baffling threat to public health—stumbled across one tool that offered potential help. And that one tool also just happened to carry with it some symbolism that should serve as a warning to many people.

Practicing Christians should pay attention. Intentional or otherwise, the wholesale masking of a population has produced a profoundly negative effect on at least three behaviors central to Biblical living: Christians should gather often and committedly. Christians should share the sacraments when they gather. And Christians should sing when they gather!

I am astonished that a number of WORLD readers are reporting to me that it has now been a year—and more—since the churches of which they are members have welcomed them to these practices. It hardly

THE CHURCH HAS ALREADY TAKEN AN INCREDIBLE HIT IN TERMS OF LOST OPPORTUNITY.

matters whether some evil force intended all this for ill. God ordained these practices—and intended them for our nourishment in all kinds of ways. When we begin paying more attention to the demands of civil authorities than we do to God's gentle commands, why should we expect happy results?

There's also the practical side of things. Kindergarten teachers everywhere, for example, report how hard it is to build interpersonal relationships with no more than half a face to share with a 5-year-old in his or her first year of school.

On the other hand, tending the needs of the elderly may be even more challenging. I heard last week from one of my college roommates, now retired in an assisted living center where he also serves as a chaplain to his fellow residents. "The regular Bible study in 'Personal Care' has been canceled," he wrote, "due to COVID. And attendance in the public services is limited to a pianist and the person handling the TV in-house broadcast. COVID has seriously affected pastoral ministries in 'Skilled Care' and 'Memory Support.' A visit requires gowning, gloving, masking, and shielding. It is most difficult for the person I visit to recognize me. And trying to hear me clearly behind masks and shield is a struggle for them. For me, with glasses fogged, reading Scripture is greatly hampered."

Imagine, if you will, what your response might have been if you'd been told the preceding paragraph came from a Muslim nation, where it was commonplace for a regulatory government to make life difficult for Christians. In such a case, I think many of us would scurry to our prayer closets to seek relief for our beleaguered brothers and sisters.

I remind you that I've seen no evidence that the "mask movement" has sinister motives and roots. Good, smart, and qualified people are endorsers of the effectiveness of masks to help slow down this dreadful plague. And yes, millions of people around the world regularly wear masks not to protect themselves but unselfishly to protect others in their homes, schools, workplaces, churches, and other settings. And yes, I personally wear a mask nearly all the time I'm supposed to.

But this mask issue's not a petty matter of fretting and worrying about some possible future consequence. The Church has already taken an incredible hit in terms of lost opportunity to offer ministry and personal care. Those masks have covered up much more than people's faces. ■

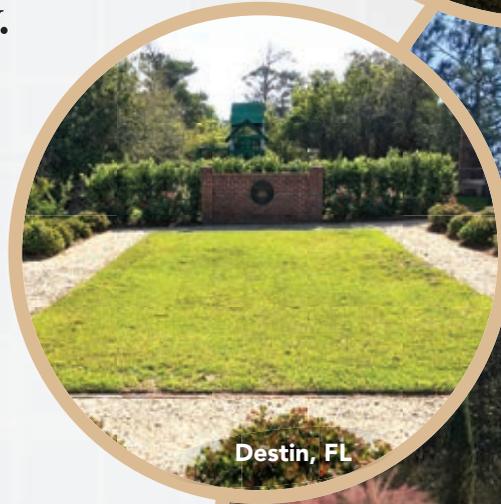
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DISPATCHES

News Analysis By the Numbers Human Race Quotables Quick Takes



Unbottling the pill

Abortion pill groups await Biden administration action to scrap FDA restrictions

by Leah Hickman

PRO-ABORTION GROUPS REJOICED LAST SUMMER when a federal judge blocked the Food and Drug Administration's in-person dispensing requirement for the abortion pill during the pandemic. The organization Hey Jane, which had spent the coronavirus pandemic collecting signatures for a petition to revoke the FDA rules, celebrated the decision on Instagram and announced plans to become the first digital abortion facility in the United States.

Other providers beat them to that goal. The staff at Hey Jane started distributing abortion pills by mail to patients in New York and Washington on Dec. 14. By then, other startups like Just the Pill (based in Minnesota) and Choix (based in California) had already launched. →

Even existing abortion facilities and online pharmacies joined the market.

But a Supreme Court ruling the week before President Joe Biden’s inauguration (the court’s first abortion-related case since Justice Amy Coney Barrett joined) lifted the injunction on the FDA rules, effectively forcing these programs to a halt. Some complied, but others continued.

All eyes turned to the incoming Biden administration, which is likely to scrap for good the in-person distribution requirements for mifepristone. “Some of us hoped it would be really quick,” said Tara Shochet, who works for the pro-abortion group Gynuity Health Projects. But the first days of the administration have come and gone without any FDA action.

Katie Glenn, government affairs counsel at Americans United for Life, said it’s possible for the new FDA under Biden to remove the restrictions immediately. But sidestepping the complete reevaluation process for an FDA drug would be unprecedented and look overtly political. She said that’s why the administration will probably take the slower path and spend a couple of months reevaluating mifepristone and its current safety measures.

For now, the department is waiting for Biden to nominate a commissioner. Glenn said once the administration fills the top roles at the FDA, both sides of the abortion debate could have a better idea of what will happen and when.

“We do know that the Biden administration is supportive of reproductive health in the way that the previous administration was not,” said Shochet, using the pro-abortion euphemism. “But what their timeline is? No idea.” She called it “the No. 1 question that everyone in our field is wondering”—including staffs at the abortion pill startups.

Reactions to the ruling varied. On Jan. 13, Choix displayed a pop-up on its homepage explaining the Supreme Court ruling had forced it to halt services. Into early February, the Choix

website still said the organization could not provide the abortive drugs.

But Hey Jane kept delivering pills to patients after the ruling. A customer service agent confirmed as much via text message on Jan. 19, saying the chances of someone facing legal repercussions for obtaining the abortion pill online in New York or Washington state

are “extremely unlikely.” (Hey Jane did not reply to later attempts to check the status of the program in late January and early February, but the website makes no mention of halting services.)

Both states are among 15 already participating in a Gynuity Health Projects clinical study that allows women to legally sidestep FDA restrictions and obtain the abortion pill by telemedicine from providers licensed in their states. Shochet, who directs the TelAbortion study, said the fact that some startups are still operating in states that offer the study is “not a total coincidence.” Some states limit or prohibit abortion pills via telemedicine. But states like New York and Washington have fewer restrictions on the abortion pill, allowing TelAbortion to operate without a problem. The lax laws don’t give much accountability to operations like Hey Jane.

If the Biden administration removes FDA restrictions on the pills, state laws will determine how each state regulates mifepristone. And the pandemic has already paved the way for at-home abortions by mail. “The genie’s out of the bottle,” said Elisa Wells, co-founder of pro-abortion website Plan C, in a January article at *Marie Claire*. “And once the genie is out of the bottle, it’s really hard to get it back in.” ■



THE PANDEMIC HAS ALREADY PAVED THE WAY FOR AT-HOME ABORTIONS BY MAIL.



\$60M

The amount of cash the U.S. Justice Department has seized in investigating fraudulent Paycheck Protection Program payments.

\$1.1B

Overpayments made as part of the Department of Labor's unemployment insurance program between March and December 2020.

\$156M

The amount the U.S. Small Business Administration loaned to ineligible businesses as part of pandemic relief programs.

\$1.4B

The amount of the federal government's first round of economic impact payments that went to dead people.

WASTED AID



\$11.4 BILLION

THE AMOUNT IN UNEMPLOYMENT BENEFITS involving fraud the state of California has paid out during the COVID-19 pandemic, according to the state's Employment Development Department. That figure is 10 percent of pandemic-related benefits the state has paid. A state audit blamed protocols at the department for not safeguarding benefit payments.



CROWNED

Bucs win second Super Bowl

Quarterback Tom Brady wins another ring and another MVP award

DESPITE OCCURRING in the middle of a pandemic, something familiar happened at the Super Bowl on Feb. 7: Another Tom Brady–led team won the NFL’s title game. Brady, 43, threw three touchdown passes to lead the Tampa Bay Buccaneers past the defending champion Kansas City Chiefs, 31-9. Brady further cemented his status as the most accomplished quarterback of all time with his seventh Super Bowl win. He also earned his fifth Super Bowl MVP award, making him the oldest ever. Brady beat himself for that record: He previously was the oldest Super Bowl MVP after taking the honor at age 39, when his former New England Patriots beat the Atlanta Falcons four years ago. This Super Bowl victory earned the Buccaneers their second NFL title and their first in 18 years. The teams played in front of 22,000 socially distanced fans in Tampa, Fla.

DIED

Christopher Plummer, the award-winning actor who played Capt. Georg von Trapp in the film *The Sound of Music*, died Feb. 5 at age 91. He tried to get out of his leading role in the 1965 film “about 16 times.” He complained, “What have I done, playing with all these children?” He kept the part because 20th Century Fox threatened to sue him. He later referred to the film as “The Sound of Mucus.” At 82, Plummer became the oldest Academy Award winner for his supporting actor role in *Beginners*. He is one of 24 people to earn the Triple Crown of Acting: an Emmy, a Tony, and an Academy Award. A wife and daughter survive him.

DIED

George P. Shultz, a prominent economist who played a pivotal role in ending the Cold War, died Feb. 6 at age 100. He worked as treasury secretary, labor secretary, and director of the Office of Management and Budget under President Richard Nixon. He later served more than six years as President Ronald Reagan’s secretary of state and negotiated the first treaty to downsize the Soviet Union’s ground-based nuclear weapons. He also successfully brokered an agreement between Israel and Lebanon during Lebanon’s civil war in the 1980s. Shultz received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1989. He is survived by his wife, five children, 11 grandchildren, and nine great-grandchildren.

OVERTHROWN

Military leaders in Myanmar, also known as Burma, arrested government leader Aung San Suu Kyi and others on Feb. 1 in a coup. The military’s television station announced Commander-in-Chief Senior Gen. Min Aung Hlaing had taken charge. Vice President Myint Swe, a former general who led a brutal 2007 crackdown on Buddhist monks, is acting president. The military declared a one-year state of emergency over “election fraud” in a November election that resulted in a landslide victory for Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy party. The military has insisted the coup is legal, but world leaders—including the United States—have denounced it.

“Well, I don’t want to judge them too harshly. I mean my understanding is they’ve been on the case for four days.”

SEN. MARCO RUBIO, R-Fla., reacting to widespread criticism—including from Republicans—that the opening arguments by former President Donald Trump’s legal team in his impeachment trial on Feb. 9 were underwhelming. Trump fired his previous legal team a little over a week before the Senate trial began.

“No, I wasn’t scared, because I wasn’t scared to die.”

LUCILE RANDON, a French nun known as Sister André, who fully recovered from a coronavirus infection just days ahead of her 117th birthday on Feb. 11. The nun from Toulon, France, is the second-oldest person in the world. Her infection was so mild, she told reporters she “didn’t even realize I had it.”

“Perhaps this is the most unforgettable scar on me forever.”

TURSUNAY ZIAWUDUN, a Uyghur woman who spent nine months in China’s internment camps, on the systematic torture and rapes she told the BBC she and other women endured from masked men there. Chinese authorities have interned more than a million ethnic Uyghurs and minorities in the Xinjiang region.

“It seems, according to Twitter, simply acknowledging biological fact is now hateful.”

Focus on the Family President JIM DALY, criticizing Twitter for freezing the account of The Daily Citizen. The Focus-run media outlet had tweeted that President Joe Biden’s transgender nominee for assistant health secretary, Dr. Rachel Levine, is “a man who believes he is a woman.”

“I’m here live, I’m not a cat.”

Presidio County, Texas, attorney ROD PONTON after he accidentally appeared in the form of a kitten in a Zoom call hearing with 394th Judicial District Court Judge Roy B. Ferguson on Feb. 9. A Zoom filter, which Ponton was unsure how to disable, was responsible for the mishap—video of which went viral online.



1

A FROST IN THE DESERT

A RARE COLD SNAP IN ALGERIA created a picture-perfect landscape for some North African photographers—a frozen Sahara Desert. For just the fourth time in 42 years, sand dunes outside of 'Aïn Séfra, Algeria, froze over in January. Local photographer Karim Bouchetata captured scenes of ice crystals accumulating in the ridges of the dunes outside of town. Temperatures in the Atlas Mountains town dropped to 27 degrees Fahrenheit—30 degrees cooler than the average January temperature. Still, this year's frost, while a rarity, pales in comparison to some recent wintry weather: Fifteen inches of snow fell on the desert town in 2018. The year before that, a rare blizzard dropped 3 feet of snow. According to Sky News, temperatures in 'Aïn Séfra, sitting on the northern edge of the Sahara and known as “the gateway to the desert,” average 100 degrees in the summer.

2 TO CATCH A SASQUATCH An Oklahoma representative has introduced a bill into the state Legislature to create a hunting season for the mythical Bigfoot. Republican Justin Humphrey, whose southeastern Oklahoma district hosts a yearly Bigfoot festival, said he hoped establishing a Bigfoot hunting season would increase tourism to the state. “Establishing an actual hunting season and issuing licenses for people who want to hunt Bigfoot will just draw more people to our already beautiful part of the state,” he said in a statement. According to the lawmaker, the bill would allow only for the trapping, not killing, of a Sasquatch.

3 SMELLS LIKE FRANCE Responding to complaints about noises and odors, French Parliament has passed a law designed to preserve France's countryside. According to Minister for Rural Affairs Joël Giraud, the new law will “define and protect the sensory heritage of the French countryside.” For years, France's rural citizens have complained about cosmopolitan French moving out of cities and into their territory. For their part, the new arrivals have complained about their rural neighbors' livestock. In one publicized 2019 case, a new arrival from the city lodged noise complaints about a rooster's early-morning crowing. The new law should make it harder for countryside noise and smell complaints to gain traction. “The rooster cry is a French tradition that needs to be preserved,” Saint-Pierre-d'Oléron Mayor Christophe Sueur told CNN.

4 FISHY FACT-FINDING A lawsuit filed in a federal court in California alleges that Subway's tuna isn't really tuna. In an email to *The Washington Post* in January, one of the lawyers representing the plaintiffs in the case said, “We found that the ingredients were not tuna and not fish.” The lawsuit claims the sandwich chain's tuna is actually a mixture of various nonfish ingredients. Subway has denied the allegations.

5 LIGHTS, CAMERA, HAIRCUT Seeking a way around Ontario's strict lockdown rules, a barber in St. Catharines near Niagara Falls decided to

reopen her storefront as a production studio. Alicia Hirter said the addition of cameras, lighting equipment, and microphones at her Chrome Artistic Barbering shop qualified her to reopen her store and resume cutting hair. According to Hirter, customers may enter her shop to audition for a future podcast or documentary. The audition comes at the cost of \$29 but includes a haircut. So far, Hirter said she's collected a terabyte of data from the auditions. The masquerade prompted an investigation by local officials who, according to media reports, have issued fines against the shop.

6 SPOTTING BIRDS, FINDING LOOT

While tracking a pair of magpies at the edge of a farmer's field in eastern England in September, a birdwatcher found something even more stunning: Celtic gold. After the unnamed man caught the glint of gold on the ground, he picked up what turned out to be a Celtic gold stater, a term for a handmade coin. Nearby, the man found a second coin. He then raced home to retrieve a metal detector. After digging down 18 inches, the birder found a copper vessel filled with nearly 1,300 gold coins. The cache has a value of around \$1.2 million. Historians who examined the coins said they dated back to the first century when the Roman Empire was conquering Britain. One treasure hunting expert in the United Kingdom suggested the location and age of the loot might associate the coins with the famed revolt of the Iceni tribe under the leadership of its queen, Boudicca. "It is possible that they may form a deposit as a 'war chest' for Boudicca's eastern campaigns," *Treasure Hunting* magazine editor Julian Evan-Hart said in a statement.

8 ANTI-GERM HIJINKS A British woman narrowly avoided a sticky pandemic prank set up by a group of local teenagers. Kathy Smith said a small group of boys approached her outside a supermarket in Bradford, England, on Jan. 18 and asked if she wanted some free hand sanitizer. Smith told YorkshireLive she almost fell for the offer. "The lad approached me showing me the bottle of 'sanitizer' asking if I would

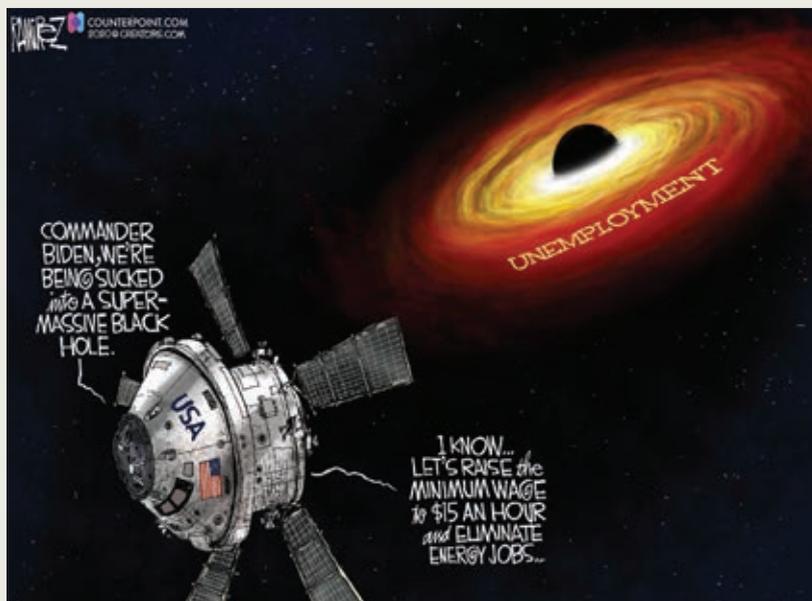


ESTABLISHING
AN ACTUAL
HUNTING SEASON
AND ISSUING
LICENSES FOR
PEOPLE WHO
WANT TO HUNT
BIGFOOT WILL
JUST DRAW MORE
PEOPLE TO OUR
ALREADY
BEAUTIFUL PART
OF THE STATE.



like a free pump," she told the English outlet. "He was eagerly waiting for me to hold my hand out with a massive smile on his face." Laughs from the teens gave Smith pause, and she declined the offer. As she walked away, Smith said the boys began laughing about how the container was actually filled with superglue.

8 LIZARDS IN HIS LUGGAGE One smuggler's plan to traffic dozens of live reptiles into Austria was foiled by sharp customs officials in Vienna Airport on Jan. 20. The 56-year-old man, whom authorities did not name, had stuffed inside his suitcase dozens of endangered chameleons from Tanzania. He managed to hide 74 of the rare animals inside his luggage, tucking them into socks and plastic boxes. But airport officials caught on to his scheme after taking a close look at an X-ray image of the suitcase. Officials said the man intended to sell the chameleons, which have the ability to change their skin color to match their surroundings, on the black market in neighboring Czech Republic for up to \$44,000. "While they would have been well camouflaged in a natural environment, [the lizards] ultimately did not outwit the X-ray machine," noted officials in a press release. The smuggler will likely face a fine of around \$7,000.





The red coat

Take perfection
when you can get it

DOES ANYONE KNOW what perfection looks like—until they see it? We know imperfection well enough: “I expected better.” “It’s not supposed to be this way.” “What am I missing?”

I was missing family, community, even purpose. I knew enough to doubt myself and be wary of expectations. I knew that nothing on this earth lasts forever, good or bad, and that my hope is in heaven (nearer now than ever before). But I was missing gut-level assurance in the pall of winter. I wasn’t getting it, and couldn’t ask for it, because wasn’t simple faith enough?

All this was weighing me down in February 2020 when I went shopping for a coat.

My only shopping options beyond Walmart and Dollar General are over an hour away, so I can’t just drop in at Target or the outlet mall when I have a little extra time. My time comes in chunks, crammed with other errands, and it’s not often I have a chunk of time empty enough simply to shop. When I do, it’s worth an entire afternoon, so that’s why I was negotiating traffic on the south end of town on a day when the high temperature never topped 20 degrees. I would take that time and, Lord willing, come home with a serviceable, warm winter coat that would cost around \$45 and last me the rest of my life.

Perfection was not on my list: just something that would look reasonably stylish and feel warm on a 20-degree day. Also, not fuzzy, shiny, or puffy. At the end of the season my choices would be limited but probably more affordable. And if I couldn’t find anything, oh well. That’s what my life had been lately: underperformance.

**BUT FOR NOW,
A NATURAL,
ORDINARY SIGN
IS A KISS
FROM HEAVEN.**

Nothing at Target. A nice-looking gray fleece-lined knit at Kohl’s: easy care, versatile, might work if they had it in another size ... but they didn’t. The other choice at Kohl’s looked something like what I had in mind—on the hanger, but not on me. While there I tried on a top that told me I was too old for it. (Thanks for the reminder!)

After picking over the outerwear racks at J.C. Penney’s and Marshalls and Ross, it was 5:30, almost dark and bone-chilling cold. Gordmans was last on my list, but halfway there I abruptly remembered it had moved. Not in the direction I was headed—over a mile away by then, and I was in the middle of rush-hour traffic in the most congested part of town.

It took determination to make a long left turn and head back the way I’d come. Past time, by then, to be on my way home. But this far along in my quest, wouldn’t it be a shame to turn back now? Especially since I didn’t know when the next chunk of time would roll my way?

Bless Gordmans for hanging on to their winter stock just a little longer. My eyes fell upon three long racks of outerwear in all sizes: fuzzy, shiny, puffy, and otherwise. Surely there would be something suitable in all this abundance? There was: I tried on five, came down to two. One was canvas with a plush lining, light but warm, three-quarter length, detachable hood in a subdued burgundy color. Practical and versatile, though it almost swallowed me when completely zipped.

The other was deep red, 65 percent wool, black lining, warm but not bulky. Beautifully tailored, in fact: Once on, it complemented rather than overwhelmed me.

Con: It was a little dressier than I was looking for, a little spendier, not quite as versatile.

Pro: The more I looked, the closer it came to perfection.

Moral: When it’s within reach, always reach for perfection.

My life remains imperfect. It will get better and worse by turns. I still struggle with implementing big plans and craving supernatural signs. But for now, a natural, ordinary sign is a kiss from heaven. God sent me a red coat. ■

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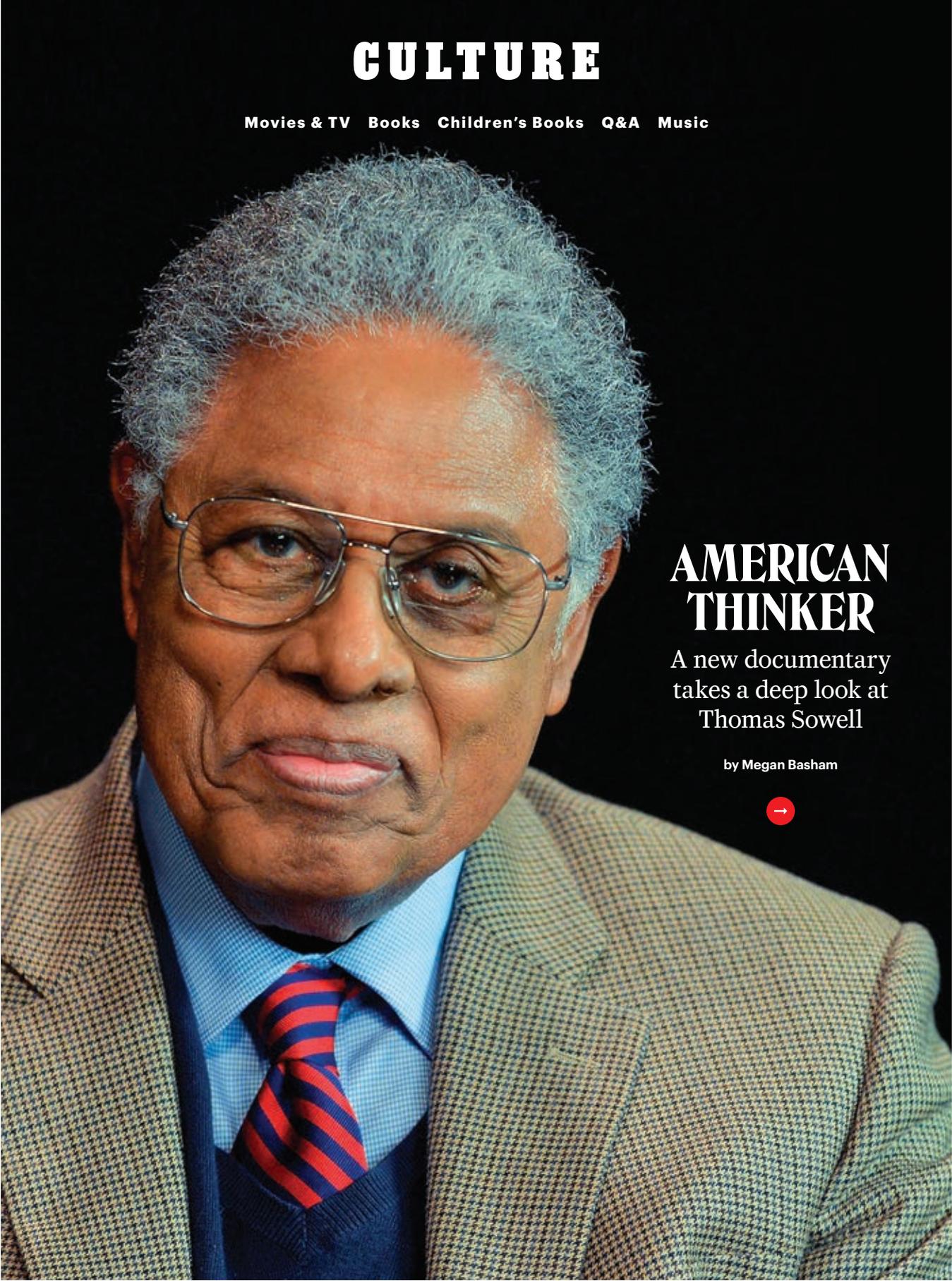
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CULTURE

Movies & TV Books Children's Books Q&A Music

A close-up portrait of Thomas Sowell, an elderly African American man with short, curly grey hair. He is wearing glasses, a blue collared shirt, a red and blue striped tie, and a brown tweed jacket. He is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression.

AMERICAN THINKER

A new documentary takes a deep look at Thomas Sowell

by Megan Basham



IF YOU'RE LOOKING FOR A FILM TO WATCH in honor of Black History Month, you could hardly do better than *Thomas Sowell*, a new documentary on the life of one of America's preeminent intellectuals and, arguably, our greatest living political theorist.

Hosted by *Wall Street Journal* columnist Jason Riley and streaming free right now on YouTube and Amazon Prime, the film is aptly subtitled, *Common Sense in a Senseless World*. It shows how Sowell's early love of books developed into an incisive mind that refused to be taken captive by emotional appeals without backing by hard data. Over a 60-year career,

his commitment to reality over theory, heedless of whom reality might offend, has never wavered to accommodate the times.

Sowell's brand of bracing honesty is so rare these days, it feels like an act of astonishing courage when he points out, "If you have always believed that everyone should play by the same rules and be judged by the same standards, that would've gotten you labeled as a radical 50 years ago, a liberal 25 years ago, and a racist today."

In many ways his journey is similar to that of another great American thinker, Justice Clarence Thomas. Sowell also grew up in the Jim Crow South and spent his early 20s committed to Marxism. But it wasn't reading or debating Republicans that convinced him the left's ideas are harmful to the black community. It was his personal experience in the Department of Labor. What studying under the great conservative economist Milton Friedman couldn't do, working for the federal government did. By the time he was a professor himself, Sowell saw nothing but mischief in the welfare system and policies rooted in identity politics.

While our nation has no shortage of smart economists, the film illustrates what set Sowell apart from so many ivory tower academics: his plain way of speaking. His arguments are as easily understood by the gardener as the grad student. One particularly amusing example comes when conservative talk show host Dave Rubin asks Sowell what changed his mind about liberalism. "Facts," he answers simply.

This is not to say the film has no failings. We can often learn as much about a man and his ideas from his critics as we do from his fans. So it's a shame Riley doesn't spend time with any. And occasionally, he digresses into making his own arguments rather than focusing on his subject.

The film is most insightful when it examines Sowell's softer side, illustrating how even his approach to photography underlines his worldview. Narrowing the camera's diaphragm brings sharper focus and depth, but it also reduces the



**HIS STALWART
COMMITMENT
TO TRUTH
MAKES HIM AN
AMERICAN HERO.**



amount of light. So it is with Sowell's philosophy. "Tom often loses patience with people with sweeping visions: *Here's how we can improve society. Here's a solution to a problem,*" explains friend Steven Pinker. "Tom points out in his political writings there are no solutions, there are only trade-offs."

At times overly reverential, this deep look at Sowell's life shows us, to borrow a metaphor from Ephesians, a mind that resisted being blown about by every new wind of cultural doctrine or ideological fad. His stalwart commitment to truth makes him an American hero and a model for viewers of any ethnicity. ■



Child-centered superheroism

by Bob Brown

In the new movie *We Can Be Heroes* (rated PG), streaming on Netflix, aliens invade Earth and capture the Heroics, the planet's team of superheroes. The Heroics' children, who have their own special powers, must learn to work together because, as Missy (YaYa Gosselin) urges her tween-age sidekicks, "If we want to rescue our parents and save the planet, we're going to need to do it now."

Laudably, the kids learn to see past one another's differences to become a team. But for much of the story, the sidelined parents sit in a cell, watching their kids on a screen and gushing over their heroic deeds.

The message? The real bad guys aren't the tentacled slime-drippers but weak parents who have allowed Earth to become an unsafe place. The Bible (silent on oozy aliens) doesn't wholly disagree, yet teaches, "For all have sinned," including middle schoolers who can levitate. The folly reaches a fever pitch when adult characters fawn, "The next generation is always more evolved" and "The next generation is always an improvement on the last."

A few cautions: a misuse of God's name, mild terror, and Heroics' director Ms. Granada (Priyanka Chopra), who swaggers around in skin-tight (and revealing) clothing.

If I had a superpower, I'd make this film disappear.

BOOK TO BOX OFFICE *Let Him Go* is based on a 2013 novel of the same name by Larry Watson.



FAMILY DRAMA

Let Him Go shows the good and bad

by Marty VanDriel

WHAT WOULD YOU DO TO RESCUE your grandchild from a miserable life with a degenerate criminal family?

In *Let Him Go*, George and Margaret Blackledge (Kevin Costner and Diane Lane) lose their son in a tragic accident, then lose their grandson Jimmy when daughter-in-law Lorna moves away without notice with her new husband and the young boy.

Former lawman George seems content to let Jimmy go, but Margaret won't. The Blackledges soon learn stepfather Donald Webo is a bad man from a bad family.

Blanche Webo, the family matriarch, rules with a strong hand. Her sons are more than willing to enforce her brutal commands.

Director Thomas Bezucha intersperses slow-paced segments with tense, unpredictable scenes in which Costner and Lane make a believable couple.

The film praises the beauty of family bonds but explores the horrors of family being elevated above all else.

But missing from the tale is any ultimate meaning. George laments at his son's grave, "Sometimes that's all life is, Margaret, the list of what we've lost."

Originally released in theaters and now available on streaming platforms, the film is rated R for violence, with some scenes too frightening for younger viewers. Characters do use blasphemous language on occasion.



HIGHEST-GROSSING SUPERHERO FILMS

- 1 ***Avengers: Endgame*** (2019): \$2.8 billion
- 2 ***Avengers: Infinity War*** (2018): \$2 billion
- 3 ***The Avengers*** (2012): \$1.5 billion
- 4 ***Avengers: Age of Ultron*** (2015): \$1.4 billion
- 5 ***Black Panther*** (2018): \$1.3 billion
- 6 ***Iron Man 3*** (2013): \$1.2 billion

WHEN ART AND ARTIFACTS TURN TO SAND

The Dig verges on ancient wisdom but crumbles under modern relativism

by Megan Basham



LIKE THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROJECT at the center of its story, many things seem to lie just beneath the surface in Netflix's new historical film *The Dig*.

At the outset, the film is a straightforward retelling of how a wealthy widow and a blue-collar excavator made an extraordinary discovery that changed our understanding of the so-called "Dark Ages." In an England on the brink of World War II, Edith Pretty (Carey Mulligan) hires amateur archaeologist Basil Brown (Ralph Fiennes) to excavate the mounds on her Suffolk estate. Once they discover an Anglo-Saxon ship buried deep beneath the

REAL-LIFE DIG Basil Brown discovered the site now known as Sutton Hoo, which includes two medieval cemeteries, in 1938.

earth, the credentialed authorities from the British Museum arrive to take over, then take credit for the find.

At first, it seems this is all the film will be about—the wrestling between the deserving oppressed (a woman and a man with no formal education) and the smug, entitled oppressors (the famed scholars). But as the story goes on and that conflict falls by the wayside, much deeper themes emerge. Ultimately, *The Dig* is a meditation on the lessons we take from history and death.

"You always told me your work isn't about the past or even the present. It's for the future," Basil's wife tells him. "So that the next generations can know where they came from. The line that joins them to their forebears." In an age that's blithely tossing aside the art, literature, and insights of civilizations that came before us, there's something deeply comforting in watching Basil and Edith so painstakingly preserve even the smallest medieval artifact. But even more affecting is the film's sense that wisdom comes from contemplating the end of life. "It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart" (Ecclesiastes 7:2).

So it's a bit of a shame that *The Dig*, rated PG-13 for minor language and mildly suggestive scenes, ultimately wastes this gold-minted symbolism on muddy moral waters. In one case, when two characters seem about to embark on at least an emotional (if not physical) affair, we rejoice when circumstance cuts them off at the pass, relieved that a great wrong against a good woman has been averted. Later though, the film asks us to rejoice that an affection-starved newlywed makes a break from her husband for more romantic pastures.

Without a fixed standard, the story crumbles like some of the items the Suffolk team digs up, seeming solid at first before turning to sand. The charm of the first half erodes in the second thanks to relativistic ideas of what constitutes a life well lived. It prevents *The Dig* from having what any good archaeology-themed film should: timeless appeal. ■

BOX OFFICE TOP 10

WEEKEND OF FEB. 5-7, ACCORDING TO BOX OFFICE MOJO. QUANTITY OF **SEXUAL (S)**, **VIOLENT (V)**, AND **FOUL-LANGUAGE (L)** CONTENT ON A 0-10 SCALE, WITH 10 HIGH. FROM KIDS-IN-MIND.COM

S V L

- 1 **The Little Things** R . . 6 7 5
- 2 **The Croods: A New Age** PG 1 3 2
- 3 **The Marksman** PG-13 . .not rated
- 4 **Wonder Woman 1984** PG-13 4 5 3
- 5 **Monster Hunter** PG-13 . .not rated
- 6 **News of the World*** PG-13 1 5 3
- 7 **Promising Young Woman** R 6 6 10
- 8 **The Fellowship of the Ring* (rerelease)** PG-13 . . 7 1
- 9 **Fatale** R 6 7 7
- 10 **The War With Grandpa** PG 2 4 4

*REVIEWED BY WORLD



TOP 10 FOCUS

Tom Hanks has already shown he’s more than capable of carrying an action-heavy film, but *News of the World*—originally in theaters, then to video on demand platforms—proves he can successfully channel his inner Eastwood as well. —from Megan Basham’s review of *News of the World*.



A MODERN GENTLEMAN BURGLAR

New mystery thriller *Lupin* features a thief set on avenging his father

by Sarah Schweinsberg

LUPIN, A FRENCH HEIST DRAMA streaming on Netflix, has struck a chord with audiences. Netflix says the first five episodes of the miniseries are on target to reach 70 million viewers, putting it on par with another recent hit, *The Queen’s Gambit*.

The story follows Assane Diop (played by acclaimed French actor Omar Sy), a clever thief who uses his questionable skill set to right past wrongs. But can end results justify his misdeeds?

As a boy, Assane and his father, Babakar, left Senegal to create a better life in Paris. At first, the father and son’s

circumstances improve as Babakar gets a job chauffeuring Hubert Pellegrini, one of France’s wealthiest and most powerful men.

That is, until a valuable necklace once owned by Marie Antoinette goes missing from Pellegrini’s safe. Police and Pellegrini accuse Babakar of stealing the necklace, and he goes to prison. Overwhelmed with shame, Babakar commits suicide, leaving young Assane Diop to fend for himself.

Twenty-five years later, Diop sets out to avenge his father and prove his innocence. To do that, he will need to expose the corrupt Pellegrini family, but Diop doesn’t have much moral high ground to stand on: He has spent his life perfecting the art of robbery and fraud.

He bases his thieving techniques on Maurice Leblanc’s famous books featuring the fictional Arsène Lupin, the “Gentleman Burglar.” Leblanc published his first Lupin story in 1905. The series grew to 17 novels and 39 novellas about the thief known for using his trickery for good.

Diop tells himself he’s using his gifts for good because the rich owe their money to the poor. Yet he fails to recognize how he has benefited from the prosperity of France’s upper class.

He ultimately concocts a heist he hopes will win back his estranged wife and son and clear his father’s name.

If you lay aside the morality of Diop’s thieving ways, watching how he manages to steal a multimillion-dollar necklace from the Louvre with a team of janitors is entertaining. As is how he trades places with an inmate in prison, or evades police by ordering well-done burgers with no onions.

Lupin was filmed in French, so the American Netflix version is voiced over in English. Rated TV-MA, it includes frequent bad language.

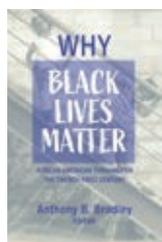
The show’s five-part conclusion, already filmed, will be available this summer. Until then, we’ll have to wonder if the show’s creators will teach Diop that crime, even aimed toward the dirty rich, does not balance the scales of justice.

Racial crossroads

More Black History Month reads

by Marvin Olasky

Why Black Lives Matter (Cascade, 2020) is a collection of thoughtful essays edited by Anthony Bradley, who explains why they do: “Because African Americans



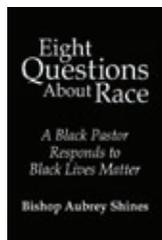
are made in the Image of God.” The last two essays, “The Black Church and Orthodoxy” by Anthony Carter and “The Prosperity Gospel” by Ken Jones, show how black churches are at a theo-

logical crossroads.

To assess the political crossroads I recommend books from the Christian left and the Christian right: **How To Fight Racism** by Jemar Tisby (Zondervan, 2021) and **Eight Questions About Race** by Aubrey Shines (Emancipation Books, 2020). Tisby provides helpful theology in a



chapter on “How To Explain Race and the Image of God” and helpful sociology in “How To Make Friends.” Shines last year led a new group, Conservative Clergy of Color, and notes



that well-intentioned welfare programs “often took the place of black breadwinners and discouraged the formation of stable families.” Result: More than 70 percent of black children are born to unwed mothers.

Both authors emphasize the need for

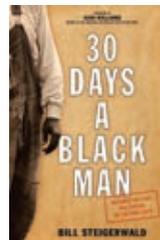
criminal justice reform. Both want better public schools: Tisby rightly emphasizes the need for equitable funding and wants school districts to “redraw their boundaries to include poorer neighborhoods and ones with more students of color.” Shines wants to improve public schools “through competition and accountability. Black parents need the option of sending their children to a charter or private school instead.”

Tisby rightly recommends incorporating lamentation into worship, corporately confessing the sin of racism, and striving to meet people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. He rightly wants us to work for criminal justice reform, send children to integrated schools, and be careful about blindly quoting theologians who were blind to racism. He writes about taking care when quoting not just theologians who advocated racism, like R.L. Dabney, but slaveowners like Jonathan Edwards.

And yet, if white pastors and writers should be careful about whom they quote and honor, so should blacks. Tisby positively quotes Angela Davis, “an academic and an activist who has been involved in Black freedom struggles since the 1960s.” Freedom in one sense, but she was also a Communist Party vice presidential candidate during the 1980s who never apologized for opposing the liberation of the Soviet Union’s slaves.

Shines is worth reading alongside Tisby: Both writers believe that black lives matter, but Shines criticizes the BLM organization because it’s a war-maker, “a political movement properly understood as a blend of black nationalism and Marxism.”

I also learned from Bill Steigerwald’s **30 Days a Black Man** (Lyons Press, 2017). It’s about Ray Sprigle, a white reporter who in 1948 with sun and chemicals darkened his skin and passed as black. He wrote in newspapers about the “bondage—not quite slavery but not quite freedom”—that he witnessed. Among other things, he showed that “separate but equal” was “a brazen, cynical lie.”



Bookmarks



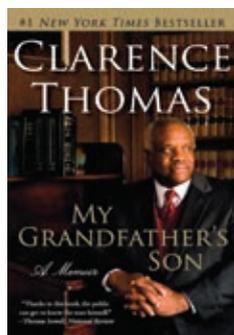
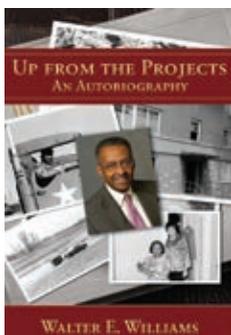
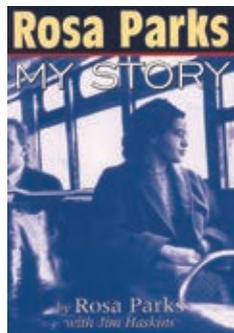
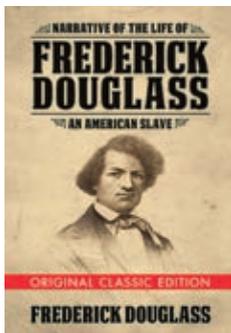
Esau McCaulley wrote **Reading While Black** (IVP, 2020) with conscientious black Christians in mind, especially those struggling to reconcile the Bible’s Good News with the way many white Christians historically used it to oppress them. McCaulley’s subtitle—*African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope*—emphasizes how the Bible is “a work contending for hope.” That’s important, because some black Christians who seek to remain faithful to both orthodox theology and justice advocacy often feel alienated from both progressive and conservative Christian circles.

McCaulley, an Anglican priest and Wheaton professor, argues for “Black ecclesial interpretation”—careful hermeneutic reading of Biblical texts and a persevering faith that the Bible has something specific to say about both salvation and contemporary issues, including policing and black anger. He shows how Christians who are black have something valuable to add to the body of Christ. —Sophia Lee

Lives and memories

Four autobiographies of black Americans

by Emily Whitten



***Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* by Frederick Douglass:** First published in 1845, Douglass' autobiography recounts his harrowing journey from slave to freedman. His earliest memories include horrific mistreatment of slaves and separation from his mother. But Douglass proved resilient, teaching himself to read and mastering skills and a work ethic that would benefit him in freedom. In this account, he avoids the flowery rhetoric of the age, instead writing concise descriptions of the cruelty he saw. A Christian himself, he explains in an appendix that his criticism of Christian slaveholders reveals only their hypocrisy, not any fault in Christianity. Douglass eventually became a leader in the anti-slavery movement and also the first black vice presidential nominee.

***Rosa Parks: My Story* by Rosa Parks:** On Dec. 1, 1955, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white patron on a Montgomery, Ala., city bus. Born in Alabama in 1913, Parks grew up hearing of Ku Klux Klan violence, and later she and her husband worked with an early

version of the NAACP to provide legal justice to victimized blacks through the 1950s. Parks presents herself as a sensible, hard-working woman whose Christian values steeled her to do the right thing when it counted. After the bus incident, others—including Martin Luther King Jr.—joined her in a citywide boycott, sparking challenges to segregation across America. All ages can benefit from this 1992 young readers' account (co-written by Jim Haskins) of the birth of the civil rights movement.

***Up From the Projects* by Walter E. Williams:** As Williams grew up in Philadelphia in the 1930s-40s, his mother held him to high expectations in school. Though he lacked a father, he gained a positive attitude toward work from Jewish businessmen. Christian readers won't appreciate some of his young-adult stories of mischief-making—for example, helping a friend visit a prostitute. But his independent personality later primed him to resist big-government ideologies as a UCLA-trained economist and a professor at George Mason University. Williams writes conversationally, but overall, he doesn't capture the importance of his contributions: For a cleaner, more insightful introduction to his life and work, see the 2014 documentary *Walter Williams: Suffer No Fools*, free on YouTube.

***My Grandfather's Son* by Clarence Thomas:** Since his 1991 appointment to the U.S. Supreme Court, Justice Thomas has served as one of the court's most conservative members—and the least talkative. In this 2007 memoir, Thomas speaks up for both himself and his cherished values, including self-reliance and hard work. Readers meet his tough-minded, occasionally cruel grandfather, who sacrificed to send Thomas to private Catholic schools. We also see Thomas rebel in college, embracing the Black Power movement and temporarily rejecting his Roman Catholic faith. Through personal trials and political pressure, Thomas eventually finds an uneasy home in Ronald Reagan's Republican Party, living out his grandfather's encouragement to “stand up for what you believe in.” The last chapters detail (too extensively) his fight against allegations of sexual misconduct during his Supreme Court nomination.



A STORY TO TELL

A prolific biographer aims to inspire a younger generation of readers through biographies of people who made a difference

**SUSAN
OLASKY
INTERVIEWS
JERI CHASE
FERRIS**

JERI CHASE FERRIS IS THE AUTHOR of 11 biographies for children. She writes especially about minority figures and women. Her 2012 picture book, *Noah Webster and His Words*, won the 2013 Golden Kite Award for Best Nonfiction from the Society of Children's Book Writers & Illustrators. She's also penned biographies of Biddy Mason, arctic explorer Matthew Henson, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and Abigail Adams.

Tell me about your childhood. Well, I grew up in Lincoln, Neb., on the farm. My best friend was my horse. I had an Arabian mare, and my

second-best friend was my duck. I was very introverted and practically lived in the local library on the edge of town. I rode my horse there, and I'd tie her outside while I went in to get my books.

Did you always want to write? I grew up a reader, never thought of writing. In the third grade I wrote what I thought was a wonderful story. I found it recently, and it's really awful. It's filled with grammatical mistakes, spelling mistakes. I remember my third-grade teacher said, You will never be a writer. Today, teachers would never say anything like that to kids, but that really stuck with me.

Were you interested in history? No. I was interested in horses and ducks. I fell in love with history, but it was much later, when I was getting my master's degree in history and education. I began seeing people made history, then I got interested in it. That's why I write about the people who made a difference. Because when kids get into the story of a person, they'll understand what that person did.

What made you interested in writing about women and minority figures? I taught for 30 years in inner-city Los Angeles, and my kids were all black. I looked very seriously for books, for role models for my kids: not just sports figures, but people who have really made a difference in our country, in our world. I couldn't find any. So I took a class in writing at UCLA, and my thesis for the class was a biography of Harriet Tubman. That became my first published book in 1988. It is still in print.

How did that work? I found a publisher that realized there was a need for these books. So I signed a contract for four biographies with this publisher.

How do you decide who to write about? I write about minority figures or women, people who have done great things. If it's a person who's done questionable things, or someone I just don't like, I don't write about that person. I have fallen in love with all of the people I've written about.

Why Noah Webster? He's not a woman or a minority. Why did I write about a



**I WANT KIDS TO
KNOW WHEN THEY
READ ABOUT MY
PEOPLE, MY
PEOPLE MADE
MISTAKES. I MAKE
MISTAKES. KIDS
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THEY CAN GO ON
AND MAKE A
DIFFERENCE IN
OUR WORLD.**



white man? Everybody knows Webster's dictionary, but nobody knows what else Noah Webster did for our country.

You quote Webster saying, "We aren't to think of ourselves as people of one state but as Americans." Why is that important?

In 1785 we did not yet have a president. The 13 states were very competitive, very divisive. So Noah was afraid America would fall into 13 pieces. He wrote his first book, *The Blue Back Speller*, because people were spelling words all different ways. He wanted to have a uniformity for American children, for American spellers. He wrote reading books, history books, spelling books, even health books. The dictionary was a 20-year project. All these other things he did first were important in uniting our country.

How do you do your research? I love the research. I always go back to where the person lived. I go to the historical societies. I contact the specialists. For Matthew Henson I contacted the people who knew about Arctic exploration and the people who might have been connected with him.

How about secondary sources? You have to go to primary sources. When I researched the book on the first female Native American doctor, one secondary source said she graduated at the top of her class in medical school. I thought, *Wow, that's terrific. Let me write this down.* Then I thought, *Wait a minute, I better check.* I contacted the medical school, and it had her grades from 1880. She did well, she had 90s, but she was not at the top of her class. If I had copied that other source, I would have been wrong. That's why you have to go to a primary source.

What's one thing you want children to learn from your books? I want kids to know when they read about my people, my people made mistakes. I make mistakes. Kids are gonna make mistakes, but they can go on and make a difference in our world. That's what I want them to get. When I talk to kids about the era of slavery and how slave owners didn't want their slaves to learn to read, I tell them once you know how to →



read, you can learn everything. I really want them to get that.

You sometimes talk to the descendants of your subjects. Biddy Mason was a slave in Mississippi. She walked behind her master’s wagons and ended up in Southern California. She got her freedom and became one of the richest women in Southern California. She didn’t buy silk dresses and big hats and sit home and eat chocolates. She went to the prisons, started schools, and she did everything with open hands. That’s her theme. Because she was a slave, she never learned to read. She had three children and was very involved in getting them to school. Last year, I met her great-great-great-great-granddaughter at the University of Southern California, where I was speaking about Biddy Mason. I met this woman, Dr. Robynn Cox, a professor at USC. It almost made me cry. I thought how proud Biddy would be.

Do you look for ways to highlight the Christian faith of your subjects? Oh, I do. For example, Harriet Tubman brought 300 people safely out of slavery, and someone asked her at the end of her life, How did you do that? And she said, “I went only where the Lord led me.” I thought that was a great comment. And Sojourner Truth—that was not her slave name. After she gained her freedom, she said, “I’m not gonna use my slave name. I am a sojourner. So my name will be Sojourner, but I don’t have a master anymore. I don’t have a last name anymore. I do have a master. God is my master. And His name is Truth.” So that’s where her name came from.

A lot of parents want to tell their children that we live in a great country. And yet when you read about people like Matthew Henson, you see the great injustices done to him. What would you say to parents who don’t understand how you can both show the injustice of the past and also say this is a great country? How do you thread that needle? Well, how do we learn? We learn from our mistakes.

WE FIND OUR PASSION, AND WE DEVELOP THAT PASSION, AND WE USE THAT PASSION TO MAKE THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE.



Those attitudes of the past were definitely mistakes. That was part of our country. We cannot deny it, and we shouldn’t deny it because what we’re doing now is correcting these things. I have a book on Marian Anderson, one of the greatest contraltos of her day. She was not allowed to dine in a restaurant. She was not allowed to ride in a regular elevator. If she was speaking at a conference, she had to go up in the freight elevator. This is unimaginable to us. It really is. And yet these things happened, but she persevered. And what Marian Anderson said at the end of her life was, “What I had was singing.” That’s the title of the book, actually, *What I Had Was Singing*. So we find our passion, and we develop that passion, and we use that passion to make the world a better place.

Do you think if you hadn’t had the experience teaching in inner-city schools, you would have been drawn to stories of the unrecognized and unappreciated? I wouldn’t have seen the lack, the need for the role models for my kids. I’m reading a book right now on race. And a woman in this book said we white people have a “free pass.” I’d never thought of that term before. We have a free pass in our society. These people I write about did not have a free pass in American society. ■



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Heavenly harping

Last year offered memorable collections of an underappreciated instrument

by Arsenio Orteza



Zabaleta performs in 1964.

PERHAPS THE INSTRUMENT that benefited the most from 2020's plethora of classical-music releases was the harp—the very instrument (or a close relative thereof) identified in Revelation 5 as standard equipment of the four beasts and the four-and-twenty elders who fall down in worship before the Lamb.

So if it's a foretaste of glory divine you crave, the cream of the 2020 harp crop is for you.

At the top of the list has to be *The Art of Nicanor Zabaleta* (UMG), a 68-track streaming-only affair that makes clear why many consider Zabaleta, who died in 1993 at age 86, the preeminent harpist of the 20th century.

It's hard to say which was more refined, Zabaleta's taste or his touch. In addition to his fondness for Bach, Mozart, and Handel, *The Art of Nicanor Zabaleta* also

HIGH-PROFILE HARPIST Historians estimate Nicanor Zabaleta sold more than 3 million records, and nearly 30 composers wrote music specifically for him.

showcases the Spanish virtuoso's intimate familiarity with and affection for such under-recorded composers as François Adrien Boieldieu, Germaine Tailleferre, Carl Ditters von Dittersdorf, and Ernesto Halffter.

Yet, incredible though it may seem, the collection could've been better. By drawing exclusively on Zabaleta's many recordings for the Deutsche Grammophon label, it bypasses entirely what may have been his crowning achievement: his 1968 album for Arkiv Produktion, *Hispaniae Musica: Spanische Harfenmusik Des 16. Und 17. Jahrhunderts*. Long out of print but still available from used-vinyl merchants, it evokes the Spanish Renaissance with a vivacity verging on the enchanted.

One 2020 album that captures a similar feeling is *Un'Arpa Straordinaria: Italian Music of the 17th Century for Double Harp* by the five-member Das kleine Kollektive (Ars Produktion). Featuring the harpist Vera Schnider, the violinist Eva Saladin, the soprano Lina López (on six songs), and a repertoire all but lost to posterity, the 16 selections come impressively close to doing for the Italian Renaissance what Zabaleta did for Spain's.

Julia Wacker, Petra Auer, and the Galatea Quartett's *Edgar Allan Poe und Die Harfe* (Ars Produktion), on the other hand, inhabits a world of its own. Hearing Auer read "Annabel Lee," "The Masque of the Red Death" and "The Tell-Tale Heart" in a harp-punctuated German so expressive that you can practically understand what she's saying even if you can't is an experience for which no amount of setup can provide adequate preparation. Wacker and the Quartett also play contemporary works to balance the dreamy and the macabre.

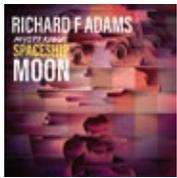
John Thomas: Complete Duos for Piano and Harp, Volume One (Toccata Classics) by the Swiss mother-daughter team Duo Praxedis deserves special mention too. Not only does it contain first recordings (Thompson's *Souvenir du Nord*, his transcriptions of works by Beethoven, Handel, Bizet, and Gounod), it also captures the elegantly vigorous symbiosis of the Praxedis' musicality, which more often than not makes their two instruments sound like one. ■

Playful projects

Noteworthy new or recent releases

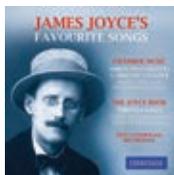
by Arsenio Orteza

Mysterious Spaceship Moon by **Richard F. Adams**: Adams calls this assemblage of twinkling pianos and shimmering synthesizers a “soundtrack to an imaginary 1960s British sci-fi film about imaginary moon people in their imaginary spaceship moon” and a “love letter to post-war, British, cinematic soundtrack music.” But it’s also what Philip Glass might’ve come up with if sometime between *Glassworks* and *Mishima* he’d sequestered himself in a studio with Isao Tomita and Edgar Froese and said,



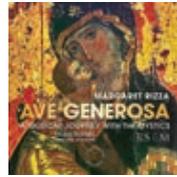
“Forget art, fellas. Let’s have fun!” Not that there aren’t ominously eerie passages—what would a sci-fi soundtrack be without those?—but the overriding sensation is one of playful discovery. And speaking of old school, it sounds great emerging from big speakers.

James Joyce’s Favourite Songs by **Martyn Hill, Meriel Dickinson, Peter Dickinson**: Maybe because his fiction looms so precipitously over the cultural landscape (a “panel of scholars and writers” did declare *Ulysses* the best novel of the 20th century), James Joyce’s poetry has gotten comparatively little attention. Based on these newly compiled 1980s BBC recordings of arrangements of that poetry for solo voice and piano, it deserves more. The soprano Meriel Dickinson’s operatic diction (replete with rolled Rs) doesn’t do it many favors,



but tenor Martyn Hill’s lyrical renditions of G. Molyneux Palmer’s *Chamber Music* settings are, like the poems themselves (and unlike much of Joyce’s fiction), easy to understand. And to like.

Margaret Rizza: Ave Generosa—A Musical Journey With the Mystics by **Gaudete Ensemble, Eamonn Dougan**:



Convivium Records’ website calls this recording of (mostly) ancient Christian texts set to beautiful, original, and reverently sung melodies the “concluding part of Margaret Rizza’s acclaimed trilogy.” It does not, however, identify that trilogy’s other two parts. If one of them is 2012’s *Margaret Rizza: Mysterium Amoris*, also recorded with Eamon Dougan’s Gaudete Ensemble, be forewarned: Nine of this 13-track album’s selections also appear there. So even if these are new recordings (it’s hard to tell), and even if this “Veni Jesu” (unlike the 2012 version) is presented a cappella, the redundancy factor does, if ever so gently, kick in.

Paul Pankert: Connected—Compositions With Live Electronics by **KL-EX-Ensemble**:

The violinist and electronics maven Paul Pankert is both a member of the KL-EX-Ensemble and the composer of these five pieces (three on vinyl). And at times, the resulting subjectivity makes the pieces not rooted in Baroque compositions seem unfinished or, in the case of “Quasi Rondo” (imagine a violinist tuning for 11 minutes), barely begun. But in the harpsichord-centric “Toccata” (rooted in Frescobaldi), the recorder-centric “Pavane” (rooted in Van Eyck), and the sax-centric “Connected II” (Tchaikovsky and Ornette Coleman?), Pankert experiments his way into something rich and strange enough to suggest that, even at his weirdest, he really is onto something.



Encore



Listeners who find their appetites for ancient sacred song whetted by Margaret Rizza’s *Ave Generosa* will be glad to know that **Hildegard von Bingen: Vespers from Her Abbey** has just been given a digital-only rerelease (and remastering) by Alto Records. Originally released in 1997, when “chant” recordings were all the rage, it features a dozen of Hildegard’s many compositions as sung in hauntingly authentic monophony by the Benedictine Nuns of the Abbey of St. Hildegard in Eibingen, Germany.

They’re also sung in authentic Latin, the consonants of which tend to get lost in the softening effects of abbey acoustics on voices that are soft to begin with. The accompanying PDF contains neither lyrics nor translations. But the internet does, and they’re illuminating. But not essential. From melodies that were uncommonly expressive for the 12th century to an elevating purity uncommon in any age, the peace of God, which also surpasseth all understanding, comes through. —A.O.



Be humble

The advice sounds cliché, but there's Biblical wisdom in it

A WHILE AGO, a young Korean American college senior called me asking for career advice. She reminded me a lot of myself when I was her age—ambitious, passionate, confident, yet insecure. She was considering journalism but wasn't sure if writing for a Christian publication might limit her future career path, or if there would be struggles along the way as a minority woman who cares deeply about racial justice. Toward the end of the call, she asked me, "If you could go back in time, what would you tell yourself when you were a graduating college student like me?"

I didn't need to think long: *Be humble*. I still tell myself that to this day: *Be humble*. It might seem abstract, but today as a 33-year-old newlywed journalist, I can't think of anything as practical each day as humility, whether at work, in my marriage, or with friends.

It's advice my parents repeated often to me, from when I was an elementary-school kid proudly bringing home perfect test scores, to when I was a teenager leading my church's youth group, to when I was in college scoring internships at big publications. "Be humble," they reminded me, even as they said they were proud of me. "Yeah, yeah, I'm already really humble," I would respond. My parents' reminders annoyed me in those moments my ego was as high and inflated as a hot air balloon, when my pride purred like a sun-cocooned kitten wanting to be stroked.

Then at age 17, I began a six-year struggle with anorexia—a complex, dehumanizing disease that exposed my deepest insecurities and vanities and brought me to my knees in humiliation. I realized I

**WISDOM IS
INEXTRICABLE FROM
A HUMBLE SPIRIT
THAT LONGS TO LOVE
AND SERVE OTHERS.**

had nothing but a life that wasn't even my own. When I was supposed to be at the prime of my life, I was crying out to God to save me or take me home with a self-shattering recognition that I am more helpless and foolish than the person most contemptuous in my eyes. Only when I reached that point did I realize the unmeasurable grace, love, and mercy of God.

I'll admit it didn't take long after recovering from anorexia to once again measure myself by my own achievements, ideas, and willpower. How hard it is to stay humble! Yet how quick and easy it is to become impatient with others, to climb the tendrils of selfish ambition and vain conceit, to judge and scorn and compare and envy.

As a journalist, I pray often for wisdom and clarity, but sometimes I catch myself wanting wisdom for the wrong reasons—to be smarter and more enlightened than others, to be contrarian and zap "those people" with my intellectual or theological prowess. Yet the Scriptures say "with humility comes wisdom" (Proverbs 11:2). "Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom" (James 3:13).

Wisdom is inextricable from a humble spirit that longs to love and serve others, to do justice and love kindness. I'm not quite there, the same way the Apostle Paul confessed, "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect." But he doesn't stop there. True humility required him to continue: "But I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own" (Philippians 3:12). That means there's a holy discontentment within me, a recognition that I need less of me and more of Christ, to remember that time God took me by the hand that was literally shriveled to bone and skin.

So here's my advice to my younger self, and to the present me: Be humble. When you're feeling proud and self-righteous, be humble. When you're feeling insecure and inadequate, be humble. Humility doesn't mean putting yourself down. It means striving to be like Christ who already lives in you. ■



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BACK OF THE LINE



A healthcare worker checks the identification of people standing in line to receive a dose of the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine at a health clinic in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

DADO GALDIERI/BLOOMBERG
VIA GETTY IMAGES



DEMAND FOR COVID-19 VACCINES IN THE WEST TESTS THE REST

by Mindy Belz



“RUSH VACCINE”

read placards on the plastic-wrapped white boxes rolling off the tarmac at Johannesburg’s O.R. Tambo airport. An overnight flight from the Serum Institute of India brought to South Africa 1 million doses of the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine. Their arrival Feb. 1 was not only the first to reach the country but the first million to reach Africa—a continent of 1.2 billion people.

The boxed vials received a hero’s welcome, with President Cyril Ramaphosa and Health Minister Zweli Mkhize on hand to meet them. Stickers on AstraZeneca boxes read: “May All Be Free From Disease.”

African leaders are in a race to free their countries from the coronavirus spread. South Africa leads the continent

in confirmed cases and deaths, spiked in recent weeks by a new variant that’s more infectious and already has spread to the United States.

Worries about virus mutations, coupled with shortfalls in vaccine production, already are unleashing a vaccine war. While the disease itself knows no boundaries, poor nations face barriers when it comes to accessing vaccines. A European-led plan to create a “humanitarian buffer”—setting aside enough doses to launch vaccination programs in countries that otherwise cannot afford them—is so far failing to deliver.

Vaccines represent new hope everywhere as COVID-19 deaths top 2.2 million globally. That’s nowhere more true than in Africa, where healthcare workers for a year have battled to treat the worst cases of the virus without basic tools. On the best days they work amid

Workers at O.R. Tambo International Airport transfer the first shipment of COVID-19 vaccine to arrive in South Africa.

fragile health systems where piped oxygen is a nearly unheard-of luxury. Their communities already may be compromised by high incidences of tuberculosis and AIDS.

At the peak of one surge in cases last fall, “my hospital neared its COVID ward capacity and prepared to turn away patients due to oxygen scarcity,” reported Jon Fielder, chief executive of African Mission Healthcare who works at two facilities in Kenya, including AIC Kijabi Hospital outside Nairobi.

Now, physicians like Fielder are watching from the sidelines as other parts of the world launch massive vaccination campaigns. “I don’t know where any meaningful amount of vaccine is



**SOUTH AFRICA
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going to come from for months or longer,” he said.

TWO MONTHS AFTER a British grandmother became the first person in the world to receive an approved vaccine, shortfalls are plaguing production and distribution facilities in Europe and North America. Production involves two steps: making the actual vaccine and placing it in vials. For the AstraZeneca vaccine—the vaccine of choice in places like Africa because it only requires refrigeration, not the sub-zero conditions necessary for others—each step can take up to 60 days. Company officials in Europe say they are struggling to complete the first step in quantity.

Forecasters continue to believe that most developed nations will reach mass COVID-19 immunization by the end of this year. But they have downgraded expectations for 84 poor countries, saying most will not achieve mass immunity until late 2022 or even 2023.

That leaves exposed some of the most heavily populated parts of the world, and some of the most restive. Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, and Syria are countries likely waiting more than a year for vaccine doses.

In South America, only Argentina, Chile, and Brazil have vaccination programs underway. Bolivia, Peru, Colombia, and Ecuador could be a year or more away from vaccination coverage, yet are among the countries experiencing some of the highest COVID-19 death rates in the world.

In Africa, only five of 54 countries are likely to see vaccines this year: South Africa, Morocco, Seychelles, Egypt, and Guinea. Apart from clinical trials, only 25 people in all of sub-Saharan Africa had received a COVID-19 vaccine by Feb. 1, according to the World Health Organization (WHO).

Fearing production shortfalls for their own countries, European leaders in late January imposed export restrictions on the Serum Institute of India, the largest vaccine manufacturer in the world and maker of the vaccine developed jointly by AstraZeneca with Oxford University. At the same time, press reports revealed South Africa was paying \$5.25 per dose—more than twice as

much as EU countries reportedly paid AstraZeneca at \$2.19 per dose. That’s after South Africa agreed last year to host clinical trials for the vaccine in a bid to bring down costs.

MONTHS INTO THE PANDEMIC last year, a consortium including the WHO and the European Commission (the European Union’s executive branch) launched COVAX, a platform to speed research for vaccines and prompt equitable distribution. The public-private initiative brought government and global health officials together with financiers, vaccine research firms, and manufacturers to share costs and benefits in the high-risk, fast-paced effort.

The 27-nation European Union and others would finance vaccine developers up front by entering advance purchase agreements, which earned them the right to buy a specified number of vaccine doses within a set time frame. The funding served as those nations’ down payments on the vaccines while at the same time covering the cost of additional vaccines for poor countries.

“This is all about geopolitical cooperation, not competition,” Ursula von der Leyen, president of the European Commission, said last year. “Vaccine nationalism—a ‘my country first’ approach to immunization—can only slow down the global fight against the virus.”

More than 170 countries joined COVAX by September, underwriting nine potential vaccine candidates, including Oxford-AstraZeneca’s and the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine now widely used in the United States.

The Trump administration—having signaled its intent to withdraw from the WHO—did not enlist the United States in COVAX. Separately it helped fund clinical trials and entered purchase agreements with vaccine makers, expenditures totaling about \$4 billion. The European Commission pledged to COVAX \$600 million, and Britain pledged \$750 million. Wealthier countries like Germany, Canada, and others joined COVAX and at the same time made bilateral agreements with vaccine makers for additional doses.

By mid-December, with record development of successful vaccines no

doubt helped by the global effort, COVAX reported it had agreements in place to access nearly 2 billion doses aimed at distribution in the first half of 2021. Von der Leyen on behalf of the 27 EU countries announced purchases from six pharmaceuticals for the European vaccines, plus set-asides of 1.3 billion doses for low-income countries.

BUT AS SHORTFALLS and distribution issues have mounted, calls for equitable vaccine delivery instead turned to panic buying. In addition to the COVAX agreements, Western nations have ordered vaccines far exceeding their populations: Canada, for example, has purchased more than five times what it will need to vaccinate its adult population fully.

At the same time, COVAX lowered the number of expected doses available to member countries and for low-income countries, though it announced Feb. 4 that it aims to start shipping to Africa nearly 90 million doses this month.

Leaving low-income countries in the lurch could threaten vaccination efforts everywhere: Large, unvaccinated populations become breeding grounds for new mutations. Already, say researchers, four vaccines effective against the original virus are proving less successful against a new South African variant, which now makes up 90 percent of all cases in the country.

One week after its arrival, South Africa suspended the use of the AstraZeneca shot on Feb. 7 when a clinical trial showed it gave minimal protection against the new variant. The WHO said it would continue to monitor variants and the need for boosters or adjustments to vaccines—all underscoring the need for more rapid and widespread vaccinations.

Each nation has to invest in COVAX beyond their own need in order to create a stockpile, explained Deepmala Mahla, vice president of humanitarian policy for CARE. The international NGO is partnering with UNICEF to distribute COVAX vaccines in underserved countries and places like the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh. The humanitarian buffer, said Mahla, is key to reaching migrants, refugees, and those living in war zones and contested



TOP: Airport employees unload the first shipment of Russia's Sputnik V COVID-19 vaccine after it arrived in Bolivia. **MIDDLE:** A Moroccan man receives a dose of the COVID-19 vaccine. **BOTTOM:** Empty vials that contained the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine.

border areas. “But right now the humanitarian buffer is zero.”

News of new shipments is a step in the right direction, said Mahla, “but it still needs to be clarified how these allocations will turn into reality.”

Pledges may continue to run against the reality of slow vaccine rollouts. After German Chancellor Angela Merkel appeared ready to bolt from COVAX, AstraZeneca announced it would deliver 9 million additional doses to EU countries. For every 10 Americans vaccinated, only three Germans had received doses. At a Feb. 1 meeting with pharmaceutical executives and EU officials, Merkel called the rollout “a debacle” that could push Germany to go its own way.

For the European Commission, von der Leyen threatened legal action against AstraZeneca over the wording of purchase agreements. She and Merkel also sought an export ban on vaccines leaving Europe for the U.K. (Britain under Brexit reached a separate agreement with AstraZeneca months before the EU did) and on AstraZeneca shipments departing India.

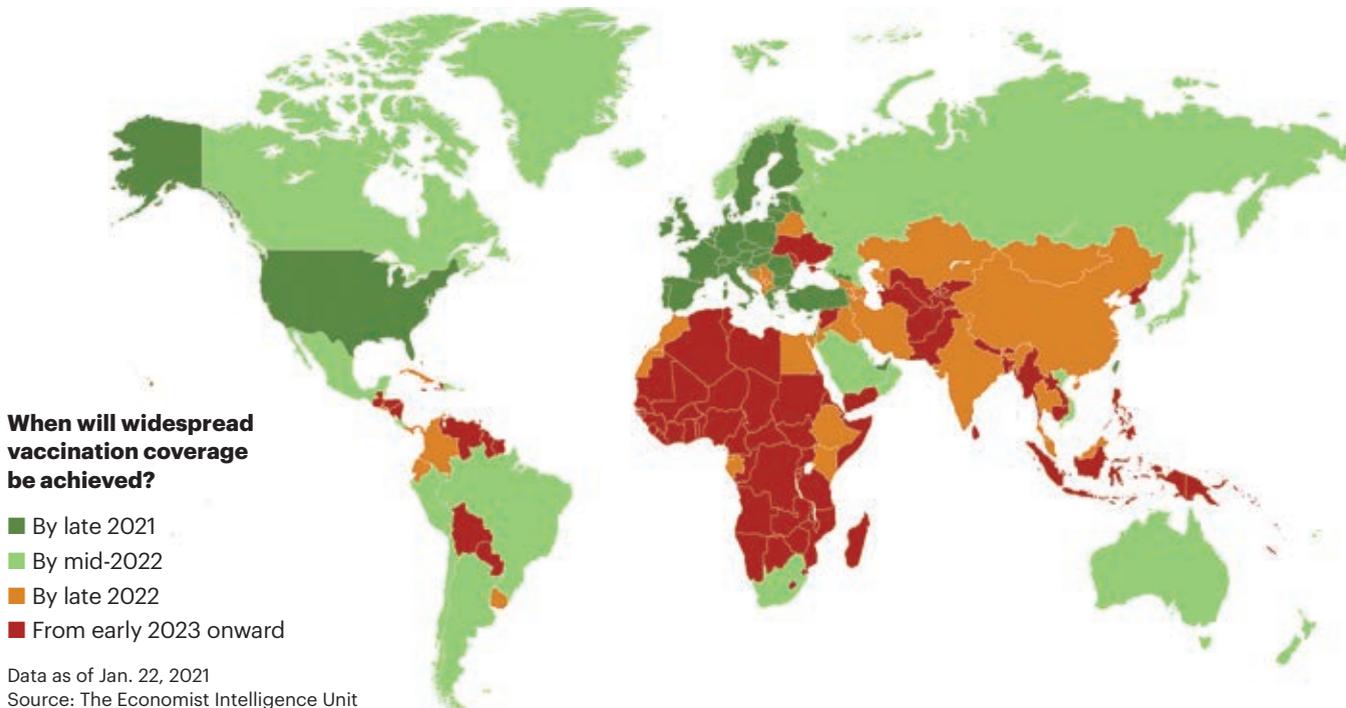
All such tensions are likely to push the COVAX “humanitarian buffer” further off. That’s forced countries feeling left out to look elsewhere for vaccines. China will donate doses of its Sinovac vaccine to Pakistan and the Philippines.

Many countries are looking to Russia and its controversial Sputnik V vaccine. Its phase 3 clinical trials reported in February showed favorable efficacy, though it isn’t yet approved for use in North America or Europe, or authorized by the WHO.

In Africa, Mali and Malawi announced plans to purchase directly from AstraZeneca, putting them further back in line. South Africa will continue its pre-arranged plan to purchase nearly all its vaccines from India, taking only perhaps 10 percent via COVAX.

Despite the shortfalls and dustups, “COVAX is the world’s best and main route for delivering on international vaccine solidarity,” said Ana Pisonero, a spokesperson for the European Commission. She told me plans continue to “help secure 1.3 billion doses” of vaccine for low- and middle-income countries by the end of the year. But she and oth-

Spectrum of treatment: Poorer nations will wait longer for vaccine coverage



ers wouldn't comment on the current status of the humanitarian buffer.

THE COMPETITION among nations for vaccines has clouded the role of NGOs, community-based groups, and mission hospitals—though they are the backbone of healthcare in underdeveloped countries and conflict zones.

Mahla with CARE said the organization is prioritizing those outlets once it has vaccines to work with through UNICEF. “We see ourselves supporting others already in place, and we want to work with community groups, churches, and local NGOs.”

Medical missions organizations I contacted were in the dark about vaccination plans, though they have existing infrastructure and operations to mount campaigns, including in places otherwise hard to reach.

“There has been no news as to a vaccine for COVID being available in South Sudan any time soon,” said Daniel Stephens, a surgeon serving with MRDC International in Juba, South Sudan.

“At the moment we do not have vac-

cines in Zambia,” said Michelle Proctor, a nurse anesthetist with SIM working at Mukinge Mission Hospital in Kasempa. The hospital has seen a rise in COVID-19 cases in recent weeks, and Proctor expects it will be part of a vaccination program “when the government approves and we get vaccines.”

In Kenya, Dr. Fielder said news reports are his only source of information on the arrival of vaccines, though he's been working much of the last year at two of the country's largest mission hospitals treating COVID-19 patients: AIC Kijabe and Maua Methodist Hospital.

But Fielder sees silver linings in Africa's lower-than-expected COVID-19 rate. Part of that may be due to inadequate testing and reporting, plus serious government lockdowns. Fielder also attributes it to outdoor lifestyles in Africa and more youthful populations. Kenya's median age is 20 years old, while the United States' is 38.

Past epidemics and infectious diseases, such as Ebola and HIV/AIDS, have tempered seasoned medical workers in Africa like Fielder. For four years he ran

a U.S.-funded HIV program serving 2,000 patients at Kijabe. He thinks reversing COVID-19 will take deep community-level engagement, and national and international programs.

“A significant community push—similar to the efforts around antiretroviral treatment for HIV—will be necessary to achieve high coverage in the population,” he said. “Just waiting for adults to come to the hospital won't hit the target.”

While childhood vaccination rates across Africa are high, adult vaccination programs “are not routine.”

Another silver lining to waiting at the back of the line may be newer vaccines that could prove more effective. This month it became clear that Johnson & Johnson and Novavax vaccines under trial have performed well against the South African and U.K. variants.

That news will matter most when medical workers see vaccines rolling in boxes from planes and can jab them into their patients' arms. “Supply is the biggest issue,” said Mahla. “If you ask me what keeps me up at night, that is the one.” ■





UNCIVIL UNREST

Law enforcement and former extremists wonder if recent violence means the United States will see a repeat of the domestic terrorism of the 1990s

by EMILY BELZ in Washington

Members of the Last Sons of Liberty, of the boogaloo movement, attend a Jan. 18 rally in Richmond, Va.

CHRIS TUIE/IMAGESPACE/MEDIAPUNCH/IPX VIA AP

A STRANGE SIGHT

grabbed my attention in the middle of Maryland: a convoy of New York Police Department vehicles driving up the interstate with lights blazing. They were returning after providing security for President Joe Biden's inauguration the day before. At a gas station in New Jersey, National Guardsmen knelt to change a tire on their military cargo truck. The Interstate 95 corridor felt like it was on high alert.

The heightened security is continuing for Washington, D.C., even as the NYPD has returned to New York after the inauguration. Local National Guard leadership decided that thousands of troops would remain in the city through the end of March in anticipation of more "civil disturbance." Weeks after the inauguration, barricades remain around the Capitol. Billboards advertise rewards for anyone with information about the Capitol violence of Jan. 6.

Is the simmering tension of watching for more unrest and violence the new normal for the United States? Increasing domestic extremist violence prompted a terror alert from the Department of Homeland Security at the end of January.

Online fringe movements like QAnon, real-life pressures under the coronavirus pandemic, and frustration about a new Democratic presidential administration all create pressure points that violent groups can exploit, according to law enforcement and former members of violent groups. With recent violence from both the political right and left, are Americans seeing a repeat of the domestic extremism of the 1990s? Most people, even if radicalized in groups or online, won't take any violent action, but law enforcement is paying closer attention to the few who might.

A LITTLE OVER 40 YEARS AGO, Kerry Noble gradually became one of those few. In 1977, Noble joined a communal group in the Ozarks as a Bible study teacher. He and his wife hoped for an intense, early-

church-style community in which they could raise their children. But the group devolved into something increasingly violent and apocalyptic that embraced white supremacy: the Covenant, the Sword, and the Arm of the Lord (CSA). He eventually rose to be one of the group's leaders and plotted violence against black and gay people. He says now that "anyone can be deceived" into joining extremist groups.

"It's one thing to have the mob mentality," he told me. "It's a whole other thing to go by yourself like Timothy McVeigh and do something."

Richard Snell, a member of the group, killed a black state trooper and a pawn shop owner who he thought was Jewish. CSA members were involved in the bombing of a natural gas pipeline and the burnings of a synagogue in Indiana and a church in Missouri that approves of homosexuality. Leaders of the group originally hatched the plan for bombing the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, Okla., Noble said, which McVeigh carried out a decade later in 1995.

Noble has examined fringe theories now circulating the internet and thinks they all amount to the same thing: lies people believe because they are unhappy with something in their life.

He and other CSA recruiters looked for someone with IRS problems or who had lost a job to a racial minority: "Then they've got something that we called a hot button," he said. "It's something we could push to make them more and more upset. They didn't



National Guard troops guard the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 13.

research the stuff we threw at them, they just sort of accepted it. It just gives them someone to blame.”

LAW ENFORCEMENT WILL PRIORITIZE domestic extremism after the Capitol riot, according to Michigan State University criminologist Steven Chermak, who has researched extremism and domestic terror from the left and right.

He said sometimes an event like Jan. 6 can be “cathartic” to angry people ready to commit violence, so other incidents die down for a while. But he still sees potential for more violent incidents.

The Capitol breach led to five deaths, 140 injuries to officers defending the building, and two suicides of officers on duty that day. Another person arrested for participating in the riot also committed suicide. That day law enforcement discovered viable pipe bombs at the nearby headquarters for both the Dem-

ocratic National Committee and the Republican National Committee. The FBI recently increased the reward to \$100,000 for information on whoever placed the bombs.

Other politically motivated violence in the last year has included the alleged plot by members of the Wolverine Watchmen militia to kidnap Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer, a Democrat. One of the six men charged in the federal kidnapping conspiracy has pleaded guilty so far, and eight others face state charges. According to law enforcement, the men had gotten as far as building bombs and surveilling the governor’s vacation home before the FBI busted the plot in October.

In March, FBI agents attempted to arrest neo-Nazi-affiliated Timothy Wilson, who allegedly planned to set off a car bomb at a Missouri hospital. He shot himself during a gunfight with FBI agents.

In May, federal authorities arrested a woman in New York who, during protests after the death of George Floyd, allegedly threw a Molotov cocktail



into an NYPD vehicle containing four police officers. The firebomb shattered the windows but didn't fully ignite, sparing the officers.

In June, federal officials arrested members of the "boogaloo" anarchist movement for plotting attacks on police while participating in a Black Lives Matter protest in Las Vegas and planning firebombings of a power substation and U.S. Forest Ranger station.

Federal authorities arrested and charged another boogaloo associate, Steven Carrillo, with the murders of two law enforcement officers and shootings of several others in May and June. Carrillo and the man who allegedly served as his getaway driver met in a Facebook group. In September, federal authorities charged two boogaloo associates with attempting to provide weapons and personnel support to Hamas.

Wray says the FBI describes many boogaloo members and self-identified antifa members as violent anarchists. Anarchists often try to incite violence within protests, as the boogaloo suspect did. Wray also warned that foreign adversaries have been

An Oklahoma City fireman walks near explosion-damaged cars on the north side of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995.

attempting to "piggyback" on the unrest to advance their interests in the United States.

Protesters have also attacked each other, with self-identified antifa affiliate Michael Forest Reinoehl allegedly shooting and killing a Trump supporter, Aaron Danielson, in Portland in August. U.S. marshals shot and killed Reinoehl after, they said, he pulled a gun on them in the course of an attempted arrest.

"You feel that there is a groundswell on both sides ... in terms of violence," said Chermak, the criminologist.

Much attention is focused on the far right. Suspects arrested after the Capitol riot included people sporting QAnon gear, members of the far-right Proud Boys, and other militia groups like the Three Percenters and the Oath Keepers, whose leader had spoken for months about preparing for a civil war.

**“YOU FEEL THAT
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IN TERMS OF
VIOLENCE.”**

Afterward, one of the arrested Proud Boys leaders, Joe Biggs, joined a video stream with other Proud Boys, wearing a baseball cap emblazoned with “FBI.” He was not apologetic and argued Trump supporters were being marginalized.

“It’s only going to get worse,” Biggs said. “That’s what people don’t understand. The more you push the bear, the more you poke the bear, the bear is going to [expletive] come back.”

WHAT LAW ENFORCEMENT CAN’T PREDICT is when online talk will turn into violent action. Most people in fringe groups would never take violent action, but a few might.

“You get on a stump somewhere and start screaming, ‘We need to go blow this up!’” said Tom Farrow, a retired FBI agent who worked a large part of his career in the hills of east Tennessee. “There are a bunch of wackos with swastikas on the sides of their necks that are going to jump up and down, but a lot of people will say, ‘That doesn’t sound right, I’m going to call someone.’”

The FBI relies heavily on direct informants: It doesn’t have the authority to surveil conversations domestically without clear evidence of criminal activity. Investigations start locally, usually with a tip from someone, Farrow said.

“Billy Bob’s wife calls up and says, ‘He’s come home drunk the last time, he’s always at this militia meeting, and they’re talking about blowing up the courthouse,’” he said. “Bingo, that’s something they can sink their teeth into.”

The FBI then opens a time-limited early investigation. Usually an agent getting a tip would go to a

LEFT: Armed members of Oath Keepers prepare for a confrontation with demonstrators in Louisville.

RIGHT: Members of the Georgia Security Force Three Percent militia practice hand-to-hand combat during a field training exercise.





LEFT: Proud Boys attend a Dec. 12 rally in Washington, D.C. RIGHT: Members of Antifa march in Columbus, Ohio, after President Joe Biden was sworn in to office.

supervisor, who might point him to another agent who has informants in that particular group. As the agent builds contacts, it usually starts to become clear whether the subjects are a “drinking club” or into more serious trouble, Farrow said. Then the agency either opens a full investigation or closes it.

About four years ago, Farrow got an unexpected call: The East Tennessee Mountain Militia wanted him to come and speak to their group. He didn’t know anyone in the group but agreed, and showed up to what looked like “church grounds” with a building with classrooms and training facilities. At the time the militia was thinking of its role as supporting government forces if an insurrection came from the left, he said.

The militia members asked him, Do we have anything to fear from the FBI?

Farrow asked if they were planning or advocating the violent overthrow of the government. They said no. *Do you plan on blowing anything up?* They said no. He told them the FBI probably knew the group existed but didn’t care. They were also worried about the FBI confiscating their guns. The fear about gun control or confiscation is one “trip wire” that the Biden administration could stumble over, Farrow says.

While he was working at the FBI, Farrow developed an informant in the Earth Liberation Front,

a violent animal rights group. He thinks its setup is similar to some far-right groups: three or four “hardcore idealists” while others were “just kind of there.”

“The true believers are the ones to watch,” he said.

NOBLE BECAME A TRUE BELIEVER as the Covenant, the Sword, and the Arm of the Lord grew and amassed munitions and supplies to survive in its

Fighting isolation

Before Pastor Bob Pardon became a Christian in 1971, he was part of a violent mob of students that broke into an administrative building at the University of Michigan. They were protesting the administration’s seeming lack of concern over the Vietnam War. Pardon says he got caught up in the “mob mentality” and saw a rioter perch his feet on the president’s desk, as one of the Capitol rioters did in House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s office. Pardon made it out without getting arrested and didn’t remember anyone getting hurt.



Ozarks compound for years. Noble decided to take action to prove his commitment to the cause. In 1984, he had the group's weapons specialist make him a briefcase filled with C-4 and dynamite and fashion a silencer for a .22-caliber pistol.

Noble went to a park in Kansas City one Saturday night with a gun and a plan to shoot gay and black people. But no one was in the park. He then took the briefcase bomb to an adult bookstore but couldn't find a way to leave it without arousing suspicion.

The next day, a Sunday, he carried the bomb into a pro-LGBT church, Metropolitan Community Church. But as he sat down and watched the parishioners fill in, then begin to sing, he said, he began to put a "human face on the enemy." In his book, *Tabernacle of Hate*, he recounted, "Next, I tried to imagine how this one lone incident would start a revolution—and knew that it could not." He left with the briefcase.

"I took it as far as you could without killing people. And it cost me," he told me.

In 1985 the FBI descended on the CSA's heavily armed compound in the Ozarks, and a four-day siege ensued. The group's leaders initially said they would die fighting, but Noble and an FBI negotiator worked out a peaceful surrender.

Noble pleaded guilty to a conspiracy charge and received a five-year sentence. He struggled to rebuild his life after leaving prison. But his marriage survived, and his six children are all grown and out of the house now. He preaches against the white supremacist views he used to hold and has a renewed Christian faith, describing his life as "Christ-centered." He says, after he left "the movement," white supremacists would call him often. He told them, "There is nothing you can tell me that I didn't used to believe."

Noble thinks the Capitol riot will "sober some people up." He remembered that extremist violence quieted down after the FBI broke up his group, but violence returned with a deadly showdown in Ruby Ridge, Idaho, in 1992, then a deadlier event at the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas, in 1993. Then the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 "scared people off, and they went back into the woods for a while." But the attack proved "it doesn't take too many to do some damage." ■

He and his wife Judy have since had a long career working with people trying to leave Christian-influenced cults. They've intervened with members of militia groups and white supremacist churches and have been consultants to the FBI. Bob has found that most members have mixed motives, like chasing women in the group, while only a few are "true believers."

Citing Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* framework, Pardon advises Christians to be involved in culture in healthy ways. He criticizes the "ghetto

mentality," where Christians strive to live separately from anything they perceive as evil. Increasing isolation is a dangerous part of the cults he's worked with, ruining lives in their wake.

That isolation may take the form of online echo chambers. Christian Instagram influencers and QAnon promoters I follow have been pushing their followers to join platforms like Gab, whose less restrictive moderation policies have attracted white nationalists booted off other platforms.

Michigan State University criminol-

ogist Steven Chermak says online rhetoric and conspiracy theories are reminiscent of the domestic terrorism of the 1990s. But movements like QAnon are a "whole different animal" because of "the spread and the burrowing in, and people's access and ability to find like-minded individuals."

As a pastor, Pardon ties belief in conspiracies and cults to a fundamental question: What is objective truth? "Unless there is something outside of us, ... it's going to be extremely difficult to put anything together, because we're all in our corners here." —E.B.

Rare gems among trendy titles

2020 MADE IT EVEN HARDER TO FIND GOOD READS FOR YOUNG MINDS. HERE ARE OUR RECOMMENDATIONS, ALONG WITH RESOURCES FOR THE ADULTS HELPING THEM

by Janie B. Cheaney /// illustration by Krieg Barrie

YEAR 2020 WAS AS INTERESTING IN CHILDREN'S PUBLISHING AS IT WAS EVERYWHERE ELSE. Authors who normally keep a busy schedule of school visits and library conferences found themselves learning to knit or bake or speak to grainy classrooms on a screen. Publishers scrambled to offer free readings and programs for children to watch at home. Creative librarians put together activity packets for homebound kids. ¶ In spite of—or because of—the pandemic, children's publishing remains a tentpole of the industry: Nonfiction sales were up 26 percent over 2019. Critical race theory (CRT) claimed a good share of that percentage. Questionable nonfiction like *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You* immediately became part of school curriculums nationwide with more in the pipeline for 2021. ¶ Another notable 2020 industry event: Penguin Random House (PRH), the world's largest publisher, announced its purchase of the third largest, Simon & Schuster. PRH says it's the best strategy for competing with Amazon. But authors fear all the power residing in two or three major houses will mean less bidding for manuscripts, less diversity among books, and less opportunity for new authors. ¶ Our Children's Book of the Year got lots of attention in the industry—surprisingly so, given its unabashed Christian content. Others on our list kept a lower profile, so we're all the more pleased to recommend them and grateful that good books for kids still show up in print.



Culture clash

BOOK OF THE YEAR: A FANTASTICAL MEMOIR SHEDS SPIRITUAL LIGHT WITH LITERARY MIGHT

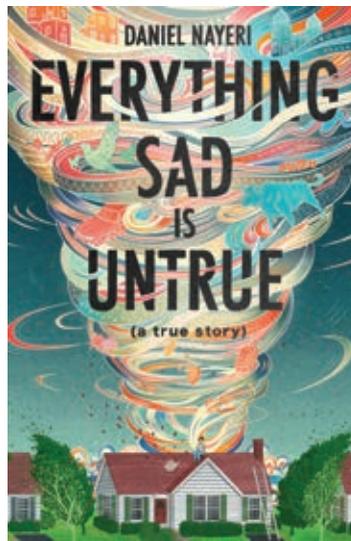
by Janie B. Cheaney

"I AM UGLY AND I SPEAK FUNNY. ... But like you I was made carefully, by a God who loved what he saw."

Daniel Nayeri (whose original, Persian name is Khosrou), begins *Everything Sad Is Untrue (A True Story)* by spinning legends, like Scheherazade of *One Thousand and One Nights*. She told stories to save her life, and perhaps Daniel's motivation is not much different. "You've got my whole life in your hands"—*you* being us, the readers of this weird, disjointed, dreamlike, harsh, beautiful memoir with fictional elements and fantasy. Though born to a wealthy family in Iran, 12-year-old Daniel lives in a crummy house in Edmond, Okla., wearing thrift-shop clothes. His seventh grade classmates regard him as an oddity.

This abrupt reversal came because his mother, Sira, became a Christian while visiting family in London. Sira met Jesus and could not keep Him to herself upon returning to Iran. Tortured and fatwaed by the Islamist government, she had to flee for her life with Daniel and his sister Dina. They were homeless in Abu Dhabi before going to a refugee center in Italy, where Sira relentlessly badgered the U.S. Embassy for sanctuary. Married to a violent abuser (also Persian, and a professing Christian), she faithfully attends church, works a minimum-wage job, and protects her children.

All this happened to Nayeri, who now oversees an imprint of Macmillan Publishers. *Everything Sad Is Untrue* recently won the American Library Association's Michael L. Printz Award



for Excellence in Young Adult Literature. We chose it as our Book of the Year—spanning both the fiction and nonfiction categories—unanimously for its literary value as much as its content.

To bring his own story up to date: Nayeri has never returned to Iran because at age 18 he declared himself a Christian, and conversion is a capital crime there. But he remains close to his mother, who is happily remarried in Pennsylvania, where she writes and translates for various mission groups. "It's a lovely place to have ended up after a story like hers," he told me in an email.

He encourages young writers to "look back on their family stories and try to find the moments of inflection—the time a grandparent moved the whole family from one state to another, or a long-held home over generations, or a person who became the keeper or

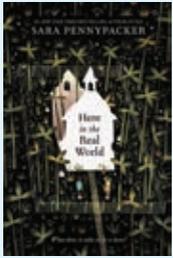
breaker of family traditions. These are great places to start digging." Older generations have a responsibility to share stories, and younger generations are responsible for receiving them: "In the end, the shared story is the only connective tissue they have with one another, and I wish we had a stronger cultural emphasis on helping families strengthen those bonds ... a shared story within a family gives children the benefit of learning from the parents' successes and failures."

The 12-year-old Daniel incorporates myth and legend into his memories, and the nonlinear style may confuse or even frustrate some readers at the beginning. Parents may recoil at some earthy content, such as the bloody slaughter of a bull in the opening chapter or extended observations on the very human phenomenon of eating and pooping. It's a total immersion in clashing cultures, but persistence will pay off.

Nayeri would love to see *Everything Sad* become a reading selection for church book clubs and homeschool groups. To those wondering about the title, he offers this passage from *The Brothers Karamazov*, which appears as an epigraph in the book and parallels his own faith:

"... that in the world's finale, at the moment of eternal harmony, something so precious will come to pass that it will suffice for all hearts, for the comforting of all resentments, for the atonement of all the crimes of humanity, for all the blood that they've shed; that it will make it not only possible to forgive but to justify all that has happened." ■

FICTION RUNNERS-UP



HERE IN THE REAL WORLD by Sara Pennypacker

Eleven-year-old Ware was looking forward to summer vacation at his grandmother's retirement village, hanging out at the pool and reading of knights and chivalry. But a sudden stroke puts her in rehab and Ware at the community center day care. Bye-bye, peaceful summer—until he meets a prickly girl named Jolene at the condemned church lot next door and becomes involved in an unlikely reclamation project. Christian imagery figures largely in this redemption story. Art is the active agent, not the Holy Spirit, whose day has presumably passed. But the creative spirit of the image of God remains. (Ages 10-14)

LEAVING LYMON by Lesa Cline-Ransome

After Lymon's father serves his time at Parchman Farm prison in Mississippi, Lymon hopes he will take to fathering. But Daddy is a musician first, so nightclub gigs take priority. After the boy's beloved Grandpops dies and his contentious grandma succumbs to diabetes, no other option remains but big, noisy Chicago, where Lymon's flighty mother has married a man who has no use for an extra kid. The heartbreak and trauma of Lymon's abandonment are painful, but his faithful, prayerful aunt cares deeply for him. Daddy finally comes through, admitting, "Sometimes even grown folks got growing up to do." (Ages 10-14)



PRAIRIE LOTUS by Linda Sue Park

Hanna Edmons, age 14, is a "half-breed." Even in California she and her Chinese mother were oddities. But now that her widowed father hopes to start a retail business in Dakota Territory, Hanna must decide whether to stay out of sight or try to compel acceptance from provincial townspeople. Her deceased mother's advice is crucial: "You stop thinking about yourself. ... You do things for other people, it fills you up with good feelings, less room for bad ones." Quiet determination wins Hanna a place in the community. (One scene involving an attempted assault may make the novel unsuitable for younger readers.) (Ages 12-15)

THINGS SEEN FROM ABOVE by Shelley Pearsall

After trying and failing to fit in with her fellow sixth graders during lunch period, April Boxler volunteers to monitor fourth grade recess. There she meets Joey Byrd, who occupies his own world and spends recess walking in circles, scuffing up gravel. Though sympathetic, April doesn't understand what a "rare bird" Joey is until the school custodian shows her a breathtaking view from the roof: the striking patterns produced by Joey's artful meandering. When his gifts draw unwelcome attention, April feels called to protect him, even though he may not need protection. Instead, Joey teaches her a wider perspective, "seen from above." (Ages 10-14)



HONORABLE MENTIONS

The committee also recommends *Echo Mountain*, a Depression-era novel of a girl discovering her healing gifts while living off the land. *Orphan Eleven*, set during the same time period, is the lively story of a band of outcasts running away to the circus. In *The Time of Green Magic* a blended family leases an ivy-covered cottage where they learn to bond against a supernatural threat. And *We Could Be Heroes* pairs an autistic boy with an overzealous, hyperactive girl in a partnership that stretches and challenges both.

Beatrix and her books

PICTURE BOOK OF THE YEAR: AN ENGAGING AND WHIMSICAL PICTURE BOOK ILLUMINATES THE LIFE OF A BELOVED CHILDREN'S AUTHOR

by Katie Gaultney

WORLD'S PICTURE BOOK OF THE YEAR for 2020 is *Saving the Countryside* by Linda Elovitz Marshall, illustrated by Ilaria Urbinati (Little Bee Books).

Our committee looked for books that are beautiful (pleasing to the senses), engaging (appealing to children), and wise (Biblically objective). *Saving the Countryside* chronicles how Beatrix Potter (1866-1943) created not only the icon of children's literature, Peter Rabbit, but a legacy extending beyond furry friends on the page. Potter's real-life efforts to preserve England's Lake District—and the farms and animals it hosts—defied Victorian conventions regarding a woman's station.

The book begins with young Beatrix at home in London with her mother, father, and younger brother. They lived an ordinary city life: "Every day, at the same time, they had lessons. Every day, at the same time, they went on walks." But come summertime, they went to the country, and Beatrix experienced freedom.

Then her brother went to school. Beatrix realized that because she was a girl, she wouldn't travel, attend college, or work. She stayed at home and perfected her eye and her art by sketching her pet bunny. She sent her drawings to a publisher—and he, believing she was a man, asked for more. Those drawings became greeting cards, and Potter began earning money.

When a young friend was sick in bed, Potter wrote and illustrated a story for him. Publishers were slow to accept *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, so she published it herself and sold 250 copies. She reprinted it and sold more. Soon a pub-



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lisher struck a deal with her, and Potter's career took off.

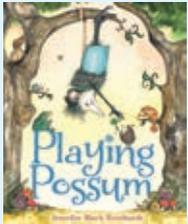
In *Saving the Countryside*, whimsical artwork complements a biography that showcases Potter's determination, philanthropy, and foresight in protecting for future generations the idyllic countryside that inspired her work. Marshall's writing subtly highlights the virtues of perseverance and stewardship of gifts, money, and God's creation. Urbinati's illustrations

reference but don't replicate Potter's delicate, charming tableaux. Browns, purples, and pinks dominate London scenes, and blues, greens, and yellows convey Potter's beloved countryside.

Keen observers may note that Urbinati shows Potter on the dust jacket as a young lady sketching her pet bunny. Removing the book's outer layer reveals an older Potter, proudly clutching one of her books. After reading *Saving the Countryside*, families acquainted with the Beatrix Potter treasury may wish to dust off their copies, while those who haven't yet enjoyed those classic tales will likely find themselves wanting to explore the worlds of Benjamin Bunny, Jemima Puddle-Duck, and Tom Kitten.

Like Beatrix Potter's classic tales, *Saving the Countryside* contains the ingredients of a literary feast: engaging illustrations, elements that appeal to readers and listeners of all ages, and a story families will delight in revisiting. (Ages 4-8) ■

PICTURE BOOK RUNNERS-UP



PLAYING POSSUM by Jennifer Black Reinhardt

Alfred is a very nervous possum—and also lonely. The thought of making new friends triggers his possum reflex: He freezes up and plays dead. Alfred meets Sofia. She’s an armadillo who curls into a ball whenever she feels nervous. Knowing they have something in common helps Alfred unfreeze and Sofia unfurl. They discover other creatures who need “patience, a lot of understanding, and a little forgiveness” to push past their own fears. Reinhardt’s watercolor, ink, and pencil illustrations depict cheerful scenes and lots of details—including a shy chameleon who hides by blending in with his surroundings. (Ages 4-7) —Kristin Chapman

ONE LITTLE BAG: AN AMAZING JOURNEY by Henry Cole

A brown paper lunch bag takes an amazing journey from the forest, through the mill, to a store where a father and son carry it home filled with groceries. The wordless story follows the son as he grows up, reusing the bag at key events along the way. At story’s end, the now-adult son, his wife, and their young son plant a sapling in the bag to honor the grandfather who has died. Since there are no words, the pen-and-ink illustrations do double duty: They chronicle the life of a simple paper bag and celebrate family bonds, showcasing the ordinary moments that make up a well-lived life. (Ages 4-8) —Sandy Barwick

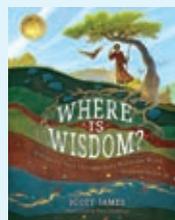


BEAUTIFUL SHADES OF BROWN by Nancy Churnin

Brown was more than a color for Laura Wheeler Waring. It was an array of colors she strived to get just right when painting portraits of family members. She dreamed that one day her paintings would hang on museum walls so others could appreciate the beauty of brown. Waring’s determination helped her push past racial barriers and become an accomplished painter of many African Americans. Today, her artwork hangs in the National Portrait Gallery. Although the text is geared to older readers, Felicia Marshall’s lively illustrations drew our panelists’ younger children into the inspirational story. (Ages 6-10) —Mary Jackson

WHERE IS WISDOM? by Scott James

Scott James uses Job 28 as the basis for this picture book about wisdom. As in Job, the wisdom hunt is like a treasure hunt. Man naturally seeks out crops from the soil, silver, gold, and precious gems from deep in the earth. But there’s a greater treasure—wisdom—and God knows where He has hidden it: “God made all things and set them in their place. He knows right where each treasure is found. He sees everything under heaven and has never lost a thing.” Hein Zaayman’s illustrations borrow from animated movies and Bible cartoons to render abstract ideas—wisdom and treasure—clear and turns the search for them into an action-adventure story, which ends in Christ. (Ages 4-8) —Susan Olasky



A NOTABLE DEATH

Children’s book author and illustrator Mitsumasa Anno died on Dec. 24 at age 94. In 1984 he received the Hans Christian Andersen Medal, an international award for lifetime achievement in children’s literature.

Born in 1926, Anno grew up in western Japan. After serving in the Japanese military at the end of World War II, he traveled widely in Europe, where he learned about Dutch artist M.C. Escher, whose “fool-the-eye” style influenced Anno’s *Alphabet* and *Mysterious Pictures*.

Travel also gave Anno an appreciation for European history and culture. In the wordless *Anno’s Journey*, a lone character on horseback makes his way from one medieval town to another, passing tractors, trains, and donkey carts. Tucked amid the busy street scenes drawn in ink and watercolor are figures from *Sesame Street*, tableaux from famous paintings, and Little Red Riding Hood, among others.

—Susan Olasky

Notable nonfiction

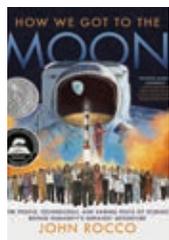
FIVE BOOKS SHOWCASING REAL-LIFE DRAMA

by Janie B. Cheaney

HOW WE GOT TO THE MOON: THE PEOPLE, TECHNOLOGY, AND DARING FEATS OF SCIENCE BEHIND HUMANITY'S GREATEST ADVENTURE

by John Rocco

We know the story, or think we do: The Soviets beat us to space, NASA was born, JFK made a speech, and eight years later Neil Armstrong stepped onto the moon. Most Americans who watched the historic moment on television could not



imagine the countless problems solved to accomplish a feat we now take for granted. In 250 lavishly illustrated pages, John Rocco challenges that complacency. After backtracking to Robert Goddard and the invention of rocketry, the narrative passes quickly over NASA's Mercury and Gemini programs to arrive at Apollo. The story unfolds like a scrapbook, with capsule biographies of key figures from flight director Gene Kranz to seamstress Ellie Foraker. Diagrams and schematics clarify the science, and simple experiments allow readers to test some of those technical solutions for themselves. Much more than a science book, *How We Got to the Moon* is an inspiring story of trial, error, and ultimate triumph for all ages.

ALL THIRTEEN: THE INCREDIBLE CAVE RESCUE OF THE BOYS' THAI SOCCER TEAM

by Christina Soontornvat

In the summer of 2018, the world's attention locked on the Wild Boars soccer team, trapped by floodwaters in Tham Luang cave. The story of how an international ad hoc team of elite military, hobby cavers, and amateur scientists



rescued all 13 is truly incredible. Soontornvat maintains tension even while explaining, in layman's terms, the geology and weather issues that made the rescue such a long shot. Thai culture, religion, and lore play a large part in the narrative as well. Parents should note the prominence given to Buddhist practice and one page explaining the cave as a result of evolution. (*Ages 10 and up*)

ON THE HORIZON: WORLD WAR II REFLECTIONS

by Lois Lowry

Lois Lowry's father was a Navy surgeon during World War II. As a girl she lived briefly in Honolulu (just before the attack on Pearl Harbor) and Tokyo (just after Japan's surrender). These simple, affecting poems show ordinary people



casting their small shadows on history, from a little girl on the beach to a sailor on the USS *Arizona*, from a pilot approaching Hiroshima to a Japanese boy on a tricycle. The path of another

boy, standing outside his family's shop in Tokyo, would eventually cross the author's. Lowry makes no judgments but acknowledges our shared humanity and hopes for a better future. (*Ages 8-12*)

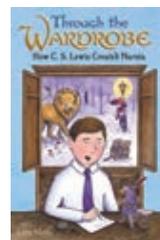
THROUGH THE WARDROBE: HOW C.S.

LEWIS CREATED NARNIA

by Lina Maslo

Many Christians are familiar with the life of C.S. Lewis and some of his early inspirations. While telling that story at

a grade-school level, this picture-book biography incorporates plenty of detail in illustration and text. The narrative of his early years includes such memories as the wardrobe carved by his grandfather, the miniature garden made by his



brother, and the "Squirrel Nutkin" illustrations later described by Lewis as the awakening of his spiritual imagination. After his conversion Lewis returned to the imaginative life of his boyhood, and the wardrobe reappeared. Narnia fans will be fascinated. (*Ages 6 and up*)

WHEN STARS ARE SCATTERED

by Victoria Jamieson and Omar Mohamed

After the Somalian civil wars of the 1990s, Omar Mohamed and his special-needs brother Hassan waited for years in Dadaab refugee camp (Kenya) for something to happen. Terrorists killed their father, but their mother might still be alive, and Omar's dream was to find her and emigrate to the West.



As the years passed, his troubles sometimes overwhelmed him. But when challenged to count his blessings, friends and community bolstered his hope. The graphic-novel format is perfect for communicating the plight of refugees to American children. A devout Muslim, Omar is grateful to all, including Christians, who helped him realize his dream.

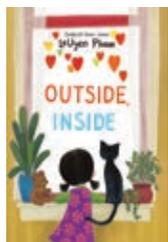
Seeing past and present

GOOD BOOKS FOR KIDS ON RACE AND HISTORY

by Emily Whitten

OUTSIDE, INSIDE by LeUyen Pham

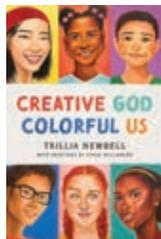
Caldecott-winning artist Pham presents a heartwarming take on the COVID-19 pandemic, helping children see their place in the worldwide, historic event. The book's narrator begins by snuggling her cat and watching through the window as disease forces those on the street to go inside. Vietnamese-born Pham then captures the highs and lows of quarantine life with warm, sentimental spreads of resilient children and families around the world. (Ages 3-6)



CREATIVE GOD, COLORFUL US

by Trillia Newbell

The author of *God's Very Good Idea* traces God's plan of redemption for people from every tribe, tongue, and nation. Cheerful illustrations complement the friendly text, as Newbell follows the problem of racism to its root: man's fall. She then unpacks how Christ cleanses and equips His people, through His Word, to love their neighbors no matter their skin color. Each chapter closes with a simple, creative activity, making the book a good choice for devotional use by families and churches. (Ages 6-12)



RESCUE ON THE RIVER by Marianne Hering and Sheila Seifert

For young chapter book lovers, the Imagination Station's three-book story arc on

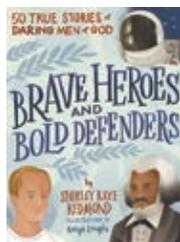
the Civil War provides an age-appropriate introduction to anti-slavery heroes like Abraham Lincoln and Harriet Tubman. In the series' Civil War book from 2019, *Rescue on the River*, young time-travelers Beth and Patrick meet Harriet Tubman and help a young slave escape to Canada. Characters often pray for help and emphasize Christian values. (Ages 7-9)



BRAVE HEROES AND BOLD DEFENDERS

by Shirley Raye Redmond

Redmond's 2020 picture book helps young readers see God's family as ethnically diverse throughout history. Redmond includes simple, one-page descriptions paired with portrait-style illustrations of Christian men from centuries past, like John Knox, and modern Christians from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds. One caution: Redmond published her biography of Ravi Zacharias before recent revelations of his abuse of women. For heroines of the faith, see Redmond's *Courageous World Changers*. (Ages 8-10)



ATTACKED AT SEA by Michael J. Tougias and Alison O'Leary

Tougias (*The Finest Hours*) teamed last October with O'Leary for the World War II disaster book, *Attacked at Sea*. The book starts slowly and characters aren't always admirable (lying, revenge). How-



ever, Tougias and O'Leary present German enemies fairly and Christian faith positively. Once the action starts, readers will be hooked. (Ages 9-14)

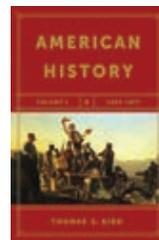
REFLECTIONS BY ROSA PARKS by Rosa Parks and Gregory J. Reed

In lieu of recent biased teen history books that distort civil rights leaders, families with older teens might consider this book. While Parks shares some controversial opinions (such as her approval of Malcolm X), she also explains how Christian faith shaped her moral vision. Middle readers and up might also see *Rosa Parks: My Story*, reviewed on p. 27.



AMERICAN HISTORY by Thomas S. Kidd

Christian families and teens who want a clear-eyed understanding of race and history should consider this book. A 2019 WORLD Book of the Year, the 600-plus page textbook gives a detailed Christian perspective on America's past that avoids idolizing or unfairly demonizing America's leaders. WORLD editor in chief Marvin Olasky says it's his "overall favorite [history book] for smart high-school-age students or college survey courses."

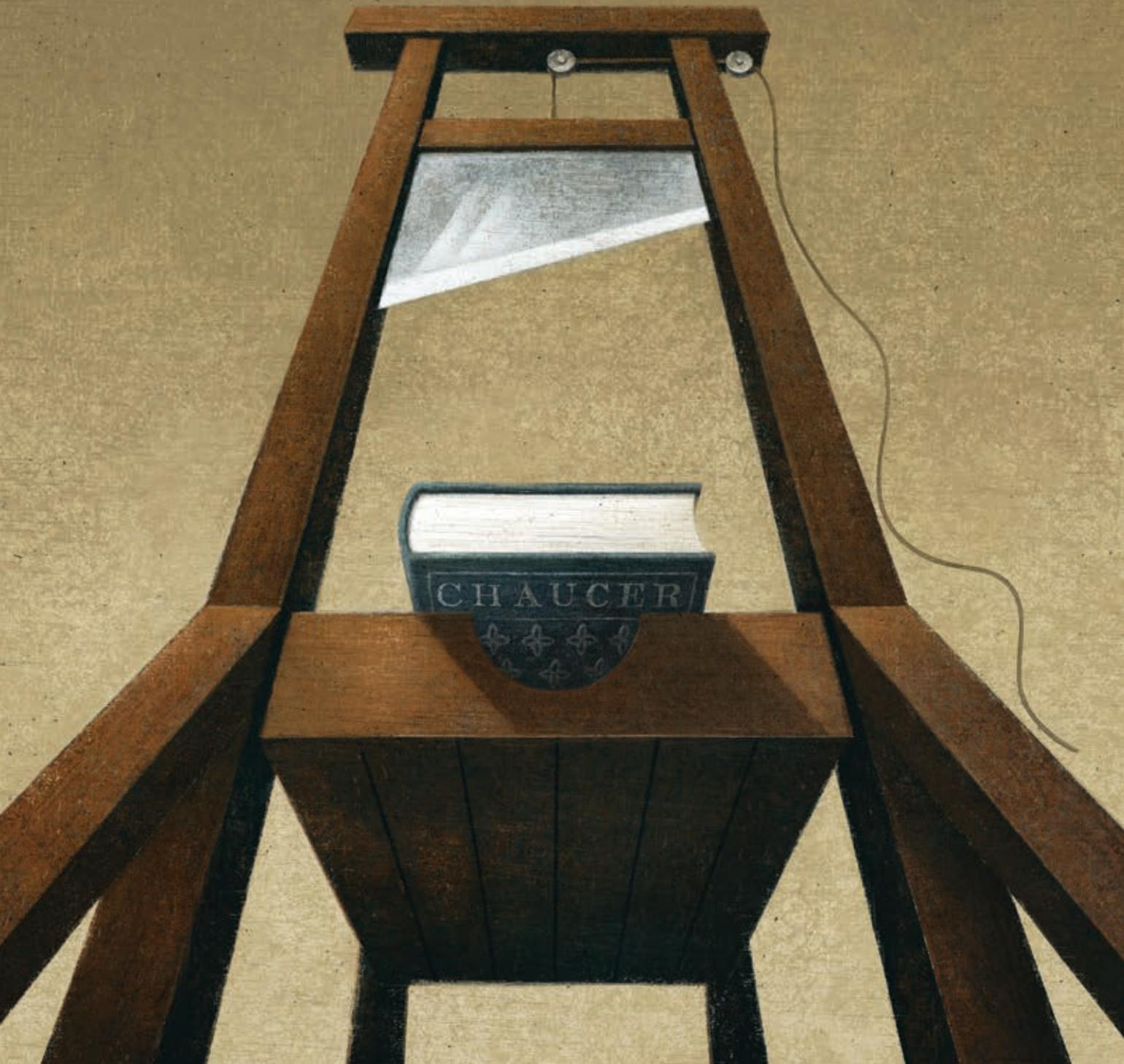


CHILDREN'S BOOKS OF THE YEAR

Canceling the classics

A NEW MOVEMENT AIMS TO MARGINALIZE BOOKS
SHOWCASING THE "WHITE LENS"

by Janie B. Cheaney // illustration by Krieg Barrie



THEY CAME FOR CHAUCER.

Late last January, the U.K.'s University of Leicester sent out a staff email proposing that authors prior to the year 1500 be dropped from the English curriculum to make room for "a selection of modules on race, ethnicity, sexuality and diversity, a decolonised curriculum and new employability modules." That would put Geoffrey Chaucer, Sir Thomas Malory, and *Beowulf* on the chopping block. Just what students expect from an English degree, Micah Mattix wryly observed at *The American Conservative*: "politics and vocational training."

In spite of strident protests, the proposal is still on the table. If it goes into effect, there's another brick removed from the wall of Western culture for the sake of contemporary relevance. Also for the sake of future English majors who can't navigate "Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote."

The university administration insisted it was not removing Chaucer because of his "whiteness." The same can't be said of educators here in the United States, where #DisruptTexts has quickly gone from hashtag to movement. On its website, #DisruptTexts is described as "a crowdsourced, grassroots effort *by teachers for teachers* to challenge the traditional canon in order to create a more inclusive, representative, and equitable language arts curriculum that our students deserve."

The influence of these teachers is significant: They speak at conferences, write for publications, and have the ear of organizations like the International Literacy Association and the National Council of Teachers of English. They are recruited by publishers to promote diverse literature for children. They insist that "disrupting" does not mean book-banning but elevating authors of all races, genders, religions, and sexual orientations to a platform previously dominated by whites.

Opening the floor to diverse views is a reasonable, even praiseworthy, objective. Often, though, the implementation means either shouting down historical

voices or putting them under a social justice microscope. Writing in *School Library Journal*, novelist Padma Venkatraman recognizes the literary excellence of the classics. But, she argues, justice demands we relegate them to social studies classrooms, "where inherent ideas of inequity are exposed and examined; where *Huckleberry Finn* may be viewed as an example of literature that showcases the white lens." Students should not read classic texts as literature, or even as valuable insight into the faults and virtues of the past, but as analytical challenges: to dissect the subtle and unsubtle underpinnings of white supremacy.

The American Library Association's decision to rename its Laura Ingalls Wilder Award, as condemnation of the racism depicted in the Little House series, alarmed traditionalists. Perhaps it shouldn't have: *Huckleberry Finn* has been under fire for decades from both left and right. But educators now look askance at modern classics. Ten years ago, *The Catcher in the Rye* was still considered a countercultural must-read—now, it's the glorification of a whiny, privileged white kid. *The Great Gatsby* likewise: mopey, privileged white grown-

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ups. *To Kill a Mockingbird* was on every high-school reading list. Now it's a problematic example of the white-savior narrative. Protest novels like *Brave New World*, 1984, and even *The Handmaid's Tale* (only yesterday standing tall in the resistance against Donald Trump) are all too white. Whatever their virtues, they must be pushed aside to make room for diverse voices. "The subtle complexities of literature are being reduced to the crude clanking of 'intersectional' power struggles," wrote Meghan Cox Gurdon in *The Wall Street Journal*.

Whatever an author's faults, classic fiction offers readers a chance to experience lives beyond their own narrow experience and limited perspective—to expand imagination and deepen the soul. When fiction is about justifying a creed or movement, we call it propaganda. When it's about *living*, in all of life's complexity, conflict, and conundrum, we call it art. The value of art lies in touching the eternal, not amplifying the present.

Alan Jacobs calls this "personal density" in his most recent book, *Breaking Bread With the Dead*. "A book becomes a classic for you in part because of its power to compel you to hear something that you not only hadn't thought of but might not believe, or might not want to believe. In this sense a book can become very much like a friend."

Jacobs cites a Frederick Douglass speech, "The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro," as an example of how to think constructively of past sins. Douglass acknowledged he could not, as a former slave, uncritically admire his country's Founders. Yet, "for the good they did, and the principles they contended for, I will unite with you to honor their memory." While detesting their tolerance of a wretched institution, Douglass could sort out the good and work toward the better. This, writes Jacobs, "is a model of negotiating with the past in a way that gives charity and honesty equal weight."

Charity and honesty are virtues worth developing when it comes to literature—virtues canceled by overzealous reformers. ■

Critical theory... for kids?

NEW TITLE RELEASES SHOW THE SPREADING INFLUENCE
OF A CONTROVERSIAL ACADEMIC FRAMEWORK

by Janie B. Cheaney

“CRITICAL THEORY” is the umbrella term for various branches of academic thought that grew out of 1980s post-modernism. A basic tenet of critical theory: All the arts and social sciences—and to some extent hard sciences—can be understood as a vast scheme of oppression by a privileged group (chiefly straight white males). Children’s literature largely escaped the influence of critical theory until 2017, when the push for youth activism opened the floodgates. Here are several examples.

Postcolonialism, the most venerable form of critical theory, casts Western civilization as the oppressor of the globe. The young-reader adaptation of Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz’s *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States*, published in 2019 to wide acclaim, narrows that view to the story of Native American persecution by whites and their “Christian god.” The book joins Howard Zinn’s *People’s History* as a standard school text.

Critical race theory, or CRT, examines the history of black slavery and discrimination in the United States. Advocates like Ta-Nehisi Coates and Ibram X. Kendi have topped the best-seller lists for years, but the death of George Floyd gave their work new urgency. *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You* is a young-reader edition of Kendi’s *Stamped From the Beginning*. Co-author Jason Reynolds, a popular children’s novelist, “remixed” Kendi’s CRT perspective on America into an informal history for middle grades. Though its accuracy is sometimes in question, its influence may be huge:

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WHAT IT TEACHES.**

Classroom modules, a shorter version for younger grades, and a series of Netflix documentaries are in the works.

“**Feminisms**” refers to the range of university women’s studies, from liberal to radical. In 2017 #MeToo became part of the lexicon, soon sifting down to young adult literature. 2020 saw an increase in high-profile novels about sexual abuse for middle graders. *Fighting Words* by Kimberly Brubaker Bradley, *Chirp* by Kate Messner, and *A Game of Fox and Squirrels* by Jenn Reese are tactful and well-written, and all include

sympathetic male characters. But the latter two also feature lesbian relationships and subtle indictments of “toxic masculinity.”

“**Queer studies**” covers the LGBTQ spectrum in academia. Children’s publishing has seen a surge of novels featuring homosexual, bisexual, nonbinary, and transgender characters as protagonists. Until a few years ago, the “Rights Report,” a regular feature of the *Publishers Weekly Children’s Bookshelf* newsletter, listed perhaps two such projects per month. Now five or six is the norm.

Disability and fat studies is the latest critical theory frontier, represented in pop culture by the body positivity movement. *Publishers Weekly* recently recommended 15 recent or upcoming body-positive titles, including *The (Other) F Word* and *Every Body Shines: 16 Stories About Living Fabulously Fat*.

Critical theory is problematic, perhaps more for what it leaves out than what it teaches. Oppression has sown tragedy the world over—not exclusively by the West. Men in power often take advantage of the vulnerable (as do powerful women). Savagery marked white and Native American relations, on both sides. Slavery and Jim Crow have blighted American history, but the civil rights movement created a platform for progress. Body positivity is one thing; unhealthy habits are another. There’s plenty in American history and culture to criticize, but critical theory casts a pall of blame more defeatist than progressive. ■

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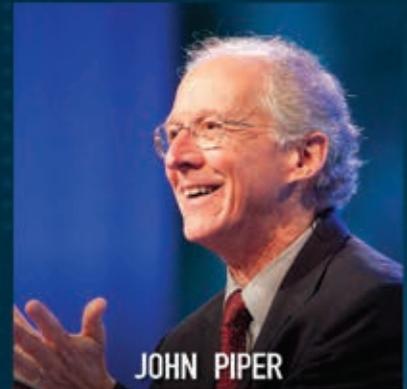
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Pastor D.J. Soto as an avatar and wearing a headset

A CONGREGATION OF AVATARS

Pioneering pastors are using virtual reality to reach an unconventional group of people

by Juliana Chan Erikson

IN THE 21 MINUTES that his virtual reality Sunday service was still functioning, Pastor Bill Willenbrock had to shush a group talking in the back of the room, ask a small wolf to get off the pulpit, and kick out a doppelgänger yelling obscenities. Minutes later, his virtual reality church world crashed, leaving about 20 attendees (including this reporter) frozen in their pews.

Bringing the gospel to virtual reality has not been easy. →

Willenbrock, aka “PastorBrock,” is one of a small group of pastors ministering to the wild universe of virtual reality, or VR for short. Thanks in large part to the coronavirus pandemic and falling prices of VR headsets, virtual reality is becoming a literal reality in many people’s lives. Today offices have meetings in VR, seniors use VR headsets to go skiing in the Alps, and researchers suggest VR may have therapeutic benefits. Pastors like Willenbrock hope VR can also help them spread the gospel among gamers and other web users.

For two months, I periodically donned a VR headset in front of my computer and spent time exploring four Christian ministries that call the metaverse their home. Churches that meet in virtual reality allow users, represented by digital characters known as “avatars,” to walk through “worlds” designed to look like churches. Avatars can sit in a pew, listen to a preacher, and talk with each other afterward—all without the need for masks, social distancing, or Zoom.

VR may be a visually dazzling new platform for a church service, but fans say the unpredictable interactions with people are what make it alluring.

Willenbrock, who also pastors the real-life Faith Lutheran Church (Missouri Synod) in Whitehall, Mich., says he was initially drawn to VR last year after watching a video of a YouTuber walk through VRChat, a VR social media platform, and listen to random people “overshare” about their divorces and traumatic situations. Willenbrock noticed that once people found they could be completely anonymous in VR, they felt free to tell a stranger their most personal problems. He imagined the influence a Christian could have and thought, “I gotta get in there.”

Willenbrock downloaded VRChat in May 2019 and by the end of the summer was explaining the gospel to people in virtual reality. Then he set up a Discord server—a digital bulletin board for gamers or VR users to meet and chat—and the prayer requests came in. People



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shared about suicide attempts, depression, anxiety, and personal problems they would tell no one else in real life.

The wounded, reckless, foul-mouthed, and wandering all seem part and parcel of the VR church experience. Willenbrock accepts them all. Sometimes he’s rewarded with rich spiritual conversations. Other times, trolls eject him from his own virtual church. He has been so prolific at evangelizing random avatars in the metaverse that D.J. Soto, the pastor of another virtual reality-based congregation, has called Willenbrock the “Billy Graham of VRChat.”

“People ask me, ‘What’s a pastor doing in VRChat?’ I tell them, Jesus hung out with prostitutes, I get to hang out with you degenerates,” Willenbrock jokes.

Soto is no ministry slouch either. His Virtual Reality Church—the first church to exist solely in VR—hosts a couple of hundred avatars every Sunday across three different VR platforms. At a service held in VRChat, I walked through



FAR LEFT: Avatars in a virtual space created by Cornerstone Church stand next to the communion table before service. **CENTER:** Pastor Willenbrock as an avatar. **RIGHT:** Reporter Juliana Chan Erikson visits a virtual church using an Oculus VR headset.

a big wooden door and entered a room with purple floors and purple pews. Some of the two dozen fellow church attendees looked like miniature dolls: One was a young man with large white wings, and another came as a trash can. Soto opened with a prayer: “Thank you for each of these avatars. We know each of these avatars represents a person, so we pray for them.”

Standing on the blue stage while preaching on the book of Colossians, Pastor D.J. looks like a computerized version of himself—dark, short-cropped hair, glasses, and casual jeans. His preaching style is similarly casual. “You can do the pious thing, you can do the discipline thing. But man, when it comes to the spiritual life, when it comes to how God knows you, you can be as devoted and disciplined as you want, but it’s not going to help you,” he tells the avatars.

Rather than shouting “Amen” or clapping during the sermon, well-behaved avatars who like what they hear

can push a button on their VR controls that sends a dozen emojis upward. Some release hearts, happy faces, or clapping hands. Those who aren’t happy can push a button that creates a portal—an oval-shaped mist—and in seconds exit the church for a different world.

Attendees at another virtual church, CHVRCH+, walked through a thick digital forest before arriving at a faithful re-creation of First Miami Presbyterian Church (PCUSA), the Florida-based, real-life church of Pastor Christopher Benek. Although his virtual world looks like a church, Benek emphasizes that his ministry isn’t a replacement for a physical church.

CHVRCH+ recently lost its VR world developer, so its meetings are currently on hiatus. But at a virtual service I attended last year, Benek appeared as an animated version of his real self, with yellow hair, black ball cap, and a torso so straight you could measure it with a ruler. He spoke to an avatar—Link from Nintendo’s Legend of Zelda game fran-

chise—about baptism. In real life, Link is Almog, a 28-year-old who professed faith in Christ recently but hadn’t been able to attend physical church due to pandemic restrictions. Benek said he’d be happy to baptize him, but only in person. Technology does have its limits.

All the pastors I spoke to take church theology and ordinances seriously, but each has a different perspective on how that should look in virtual reality. Soto of VR Church conducts baptisms in VR, but others say such religious rites must remain in the physical realm. Benek and Willenbrock hold Bible studies and pray and minister to people in VR, but because both belong to denominations that reserve communion and baptism for their in-person churches, they do not conduct them in virtual spaces.

Jason Poling is another pastor who hosts a “VR campus” of his in-person church, Cornerstone Church in Yuba City, Calif. He says he feels everyone is “building the plane in midair” when it comes to developing a theology for →

virtual reality. Since his Evangelical Free denomination allows him the freedom to decide about virtual ordinances, he says he's on the fence. "Before the pandemic only a few churches were promoting a lot of these virtual realities, but now, everyone's really bending," he said. He has told VR congregants they can take communion using elements in their homes, he said.

John Dyer, assistant professor of theological studies at Dallas Theological Seminary, says when it comes to spiritual guidelines for virtual reality, the bottom line is never forgetting the person behind the avatar. "All of it is real and all of it matters, whether it's in VR or not." Dyer sees parallels in how the Apostle Paul addresses churches "virtually" through letters, but he adds that even then, Paul reserved some topics for in-person meetings. He believes Christians should think likewise when it comes to virtual reality worship.

"Church doesn't have to mean pews. It doesn't have to be Sundays either," said Dyer. "But if your only Christian experience is mediated by technology and you don't share that part of your life with others in real life, then it can be unhealthy."

People who've joined these VR Christian communities say the relationships they've developed there are hard to replicate in real life. Yvonne, a shut-in for the last 15 years who attends Poling's VR campus, said going to church as an avatar allows her to have conversations where "you don't see race, and you learn about people through the way they talk." James, who attends Willenbrock's fellowship, said he's thrilled to have found a place where atheists and Christians can talk without feeling judged.

Dyer predicts the VR tech trend will only last for about five years, until people move on to better technology. He says that shouldn't be surprising. Christians also set up ministries in Second Life, another online virtual world that had its heyday in the early 2000s. Now, Second Life has faded into obscurity. The same may happen with VRChat.

But even if virtual worlds pass away, Christians will never stop finding ways to reach the unreached. ■



FRIENDS FOR LIFE

Greg and Jackie Samuels fell in love at Bible school before making the surprising discovery that one of them was not a true Christian

by Charissa Koh

19TH IN A SERIES ON LONG MARRIAGES

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ACKIE RICKS GREW UP IN A CHURCHGOING FAMILY of nine in the inner city of Washington, D.C. After high school, she enrolled at Cedine Bible Institute in rural Spring City, Tenn. When her parents drove her to campus in 1978, a young man there named Greg Samuels gave them directions to the right building. Greg, 24, had become a Christian while listening to a radio broadcast a few years before and arrived at Cedine excited to study the Bible. He saw Jackie in the car and thought little of it. But when he left,

Jackie's mother told her, "You're going to marry him."

Jackie protested. But not long after that, she and Greg struck up a conversation at an evangelism event. They began talking regularly about all sorts of topics and became friends. A year later, she called her mother and told her she liked Greg. They married in 1980.

The couple moved to Atlanta, Ga., for Greg to study theology at Carver Bible Institute. Jackie enjoyed learning to cook and meeting ladies at church. They had three daughters between 1982 and 1988—but by 1985, Greg, working multiple jobs and struggling to cover expenses, decided he needed a career change. So he joined the Army—and then told Jackie, who became upset. "I thought that was the craziest thing," she recalled. "I enjoyed Atlanta. I'd met a lot of friends."

That wasn't the only tension they felt. Early in their marriage, the Samuels sensed a difference between them. Greg was more interested in spiritual things than was Jackie, who faithfully attended church but never read her Bible or prayed. Greg remembers encouraging Jackie to do God's will but finding she "always wanted to do what she wanted to do instead of what the Lord would have her to do." A couple of years in, Greg understood that Jackie did not have a personal relationship with God. He resolved that fact would not change his love and care for her. "To me, because I'm a Christian husband, that's my duty," he said.

By 2007, the Samuels were stationed in Colorado. Greg and their daughters were each dealing with their own challenges, and Jackie, 48, felt her inability to solve their problems. One day as she listened to a pastor on the radio addressing the importance of godly mothers, Jackie felt convicted of her failure to be one. "That day I invited Jesus into my heart and life," she said. "It was like a burden just lifted off of me. It was just so much peace." She apologized to her daughters for not being a godly mother, and in response, two of them, one in her 20s and one a teenager, became Christians too. Jackie told Greg the news, and he remembers his

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BEFORE WE GOT MARRIED, WE WERE FRIENDS, AND THAT FRIENDSHIP HAS CONTINUED.

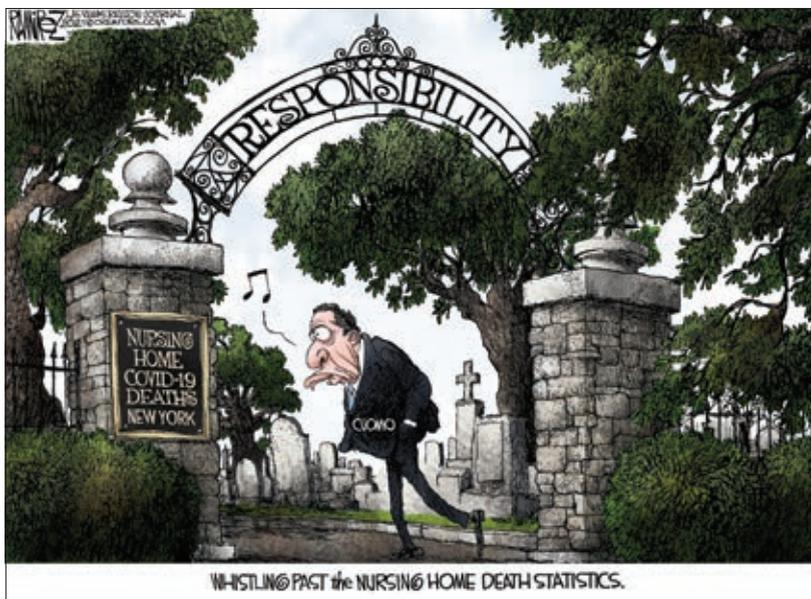
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response: "I was grateful, but I was still going to watch her."

Seeing change in Jackie's life was difficult at first, Greg says, because she was already a "morally good person." But over time he saw spiritual fruit develop. She wanted to read the Bible and join Bible studies with others. She became more patient instead of quick-tempered. She wanted to serve ladies in the church and share the gospel with unbelievers. As time passed, he became fully convinced her conversion was genuine.

Now, Greg says, "She's really concerned with what God wants her to do."

In 2013, Greg retired from the Army as a sergeant first class, and he and Jackie began serving at Cedine's retreat center for couples. Today, they arrange retreat speakers, manage the audiovisuals, and provide friendship and support for attendees. In their free time, the Samuels visit nearby Pigeon Forge, walk outside, and go on cruises. Jackie, 61, loves having a friend who will be there and pray for her through good times and bad. Greg, 67, says, "Before we got married, we were friends, and that friendship has continued. ... It just seems like we've always been married." ■



SERVING THOSE WHO SERVED

One Vietnam War veteran found healing by honoring other vets

by Sharon Dierberger in the Twin Cities

SEVENTH IN A SERIES ON WAR VETERANS



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LYING 70 FEET ABOVE THE TREE LINE, helicopter crew chief and machine gunner Jerry Kyser saw North Vietnamese soldiers on the ground fire rocket-propelled grenades toward him.

“RPG!” he yelled into his mic. The pilot of the UH-1 Huey quickly veered upward, and the explosive missiles passed directly underneath the skids. Kyser’s heart thudded.

Now 75 years old, Kyser recalls those days: “We had an attitude we were invincible. We were the good guys.” But during two tours of duty from 1968 to 1970 in the Vietnam War, as part of the 1st Aviation Brigade he’d seen helicopters go down, survived one crash, retrieved comrades killed in action, machine-gunned enemies, and had shrapnel pierce his foot. He made it home with his life—and psychological wounds. Healing those wounds took a supernatural heart change and a reorientation of his life mission.

The day he finished his second tour of duty, Kyser saw the helicopter he’d flown in blown up by an enemy rocket while parked nearby. Within the week, he found himself back in college in North Dakota, trying to reconcile the peaceful campus with the life-and-death combat situations he’d left behind. He struggled to fit in and suffered flashbacks.

For years after finishing college, Kyser bounced from job to job

and tried to figure out why life was so hard. His emotions were volatile. Doctors checked him for Agent Orange poisoning. They evaluated him for schizophrenia. Nothing could pinpoint the heart of his issues.

Internally, he wrestled with submitting to authority, recollecting a bad experience with a colonel he’d had in Vietnam. Kyser also resented World War II and Korean War veterans. Many had treated him and other Vietnam combatants derisively. “I even got into a fist fight with one because he called us a bunch of killers,” he says.

In 1976 he married Jana, a widow dealing with trauma of her own. She’d become an alcoholic after her first husband, a Vietnam vet who had returned from the war angry and abusive, drowned during a family vacation.



But several years into her marriage to Jerry, Jana became a Christian and quit drinking. Her transformation sparked a spiritual awakening in Jerry, who also surrendered to Jesus. Through deep conversations and Bible study, they began helping each other deal with past issues. Jana encouraged Jerry to seek more help, and eventually doctors diagnosed him with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Giving his life to Christ and learning about PTSD and its effect on hundreds of thousands of veterans helped Kyser look beyond himself. After 9/11, he became an advocate for Vietnam vets, eventually becoming the president of Minnesota Vietnam Veterans of America.

While serving fellow veterans, he realized something else: Focusing on others softened his feelings of resentment toward earlier war vets.

As he and Jana prayed daily for God to heal, guide, and bless them, they met people who introduced them to the Honor Flight Network, a national nonprofit that takes veterans free to Washington, D.C., to visit their respective war memorials. In 2008, the Kysers started Honor Flight Twin Cities and began taking local veterans, mostly from WWII and the Korean War, on trips to the U.S. capital.

On the Honor Flights, the veterans realize their sacrifices haven't been forgotten. They talk about experiences during the war—sometimes for the first time—and often rekindle relationships or strike up new ones with fellow travelers. They get “mail call,” where Jerry delivers prearranged letters from the veterans' loved ones thanking them for their service. In Washington, they

receive a hero's welcome and visit their monument—the World War II Memorial or the Korean War Veterans Memorial.

Jerry comes from eight generations of military men, with relatives who served in the French and Indian War, the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, the Civil War, the Spanish-American War, and World War I. His father served under Gen. George Patton in WWII. The Kysers' daughter was an Air Force cadet and married a Marine Corps pilot.

Jerry speaks about the veterans in his Honor Flight program with great respect and has befriended many. He meets regularly with one World War II vet, 99-year-old Bernie Holritz (see “Adjusting to bigger plans,” Oct. 24, 2020), whom Kyser considers a spiritual mentor. Each week they study the Bible together and pray.

After finding Christ, Jerry says, nothing has given him greater purpose and joy than honoring men and women from other wars who share his love of country. He revels in helping them tell their stories. He speaks with pride about his wife, who's been integral in their work: “She's the two-star general. I'm just a sergeant.”

Jana notes that God has taken away Jerry's bitterness. “Doing these Honor Flights was a healing mission for Jerry. He was giving honor to these men and women who hadn't treated the Vietnam vets very well.”

Since 2008, the Kysers have taken 22 trips with over 2,000 mostly WWII and Korean War vets. In addition to leading Honor Flights, Jerry arranges military jet flyovers for ceremonies honoring veterans. He continues to raise money for homeless vet organizations, military appreciation days, commemorative military airports, and other veteran causes.

The Honor Flights are on pause for now, but once the COVID-19 pandemic subsides, the Kysers plan to resume them. As the number of World War II veterans decreases, they will focus more on Korean War and Vietnam servicemen and women. With about 350,000 veterans still living in Minnesota, most of whom haven't yet been on an Honor Flight, the Kysers have many more missions ahead. ■



“Apportioned as He wills”

What of life’s inequalities?

UPON ENTRY INTO WORLD WAR I, the U.S. military needed to know in a hurry who among its recruits were officer material and who were more sergeant-cook material. So they devised a test for measuring intelligence.

For reasons known only to Him, God has gifted people differently in intellectual and other abilities (1 Corinthians 12:11). I have often thought that if everyone in the world had my gift set, we would all live in caves and wear banana leaves. I am good at sentence diagramming, pie crust, knowing what my husband is thinking, and whistling tunes through my teeth. I am hopeless at computers.

One discovers one’s relative place in the world through a series of hard knocks. My high-school graduating class of 75 girls was 95 percent French Canadian. But the valedictorian was Diane Wigglesworth, the salutatorian was Linda Manning, and third in GPA was Ann Suffoletto—not a Canuck among them.

Now our nation is engaged in a massive drive for “equity”—by which is meant not equal opportunity but equal outcomes. We insist that every human being should have the right to be a doctor, lawyer, and Indian chief. Boys should have the option to be girls, and girls to switch their sex to boys.

But what if this is a totally misguided attempt, to the tune of the billions in monetary and emotional capital that we have expended in social programs and in tearing ourselves apart? As the Lord once peremptorily said in a different connection, “What is in your mind shall never happen” (Ezekiel 20:32).

It will never happen for a reason: God “made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the

GOD’S BIG IDEA IS THAT OUR VERY LIMITATIONS ARE DESIGNED TO DRAW US TO HIM IF WE LET THEM.

face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him” (Acts 17:26-27).

This is key. God’s big idea is that our very limitations (I will never play first violin for the London Philharmonic Orchestra or point guard for the Celtics) are designed to draw us to Him if we let them. They are the built-in humility fosterers we need. For a man will seek after God when he feels his lowliness and not when he feels his superiority.

“Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass” (James 1:9-11).

The drive to be a “this” when God made you a “that” is only envy, envy being the fetid wellspring of every kind of evil social system down through history. A hundred years of Communism has killed a hundred million people.

God’s way is not to insist on being what one is not, but to be the best version of what one *is*. “Fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you” (2 Timothy 1:6), as Paul said to Timothy.

And the strategies that work best to level the social playing field and enhance our chances are still the time-honored bourgeois qualities of hard work, politeness, being on time, going above the call of duty, living within our means, avoiding debt, getting married before having children, and virtuous living. For solutions to life’s persistent inequalities, we will not do better than that.

In our saner moments, we would want things just the way God arranged them—the most gifted athletes to be athletes, the most gifted surgeons to be surgeons, the wisest leaders to be our policymakers. You don’t want the guy who graduated 159th in a class of 160 to operate on your brain.

“Godliness with contentment is great gain, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content” (1 Timothy 6:6-8).

To understand this life is not all there is: That’s the great secret of the ages that the Christian must proclaim to all the world. ■



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Life under Biden

The Bible calls for faithful living even in tough conditions

JOE BIDEN BEGAN his presidency with talk of “unity.” If by that he meant *join us in tribalistic politics and aborting babies*, of course we just say no. But if it means recognizing that all of us with contrasting worldviews live in the same country and hope to be at peace with each other, and that Christians should be faithful to Christ while seeking the welfare of the country where God has placed us (Jeremiah 29), we should go for that.

Godly people in ancient Israel aspired to theological and governmental unity: Our situation is more like that of Daniel, Esther, and Paul, all of whom faced hard choices. All authority comes from God, but Jesus told us to render to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s. Lest we think Jesus was ironically telling us that nothing is Caesar’s, Paul told Roman Christians living under godless tyrants to be subject to those authorities and pay taxes, “not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience” (Romans 13:5). Paul told Thessalonians “to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs ... so that you may walk properly before outsiders” (1 Thessalonians 4:11-12).

WORLD over the decades has tried to transcend partisanship. We reported the downsides of Bill Clinton’s social policies and immoral sociability, but his last year in office was also the last year the United States didn’t run a deficit. (A Republican Congress helped.) I was an informal adviser to George W. Bush when he was governor of Texas, but just before he became president I told him WORLD would zing him at times—and we did. We reported Barack Obama’s

LET US KEEP CALM AND DRINK THE CUP, EVEN THOUGH IT WILL PROBABLY BE BITTER.

bad policies and said both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump were unfit to be president.

Those who want Christians to declare war on the Biden administration might quote Jesus saying, “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matthew 10:34). But the context of that verse is familial, not political: Matthew 10:35 speaks of divisions among close relatives. Exegetical books like *Hard Sayings of the Bible* note that unbelievers often respond to Christ with hostility, but Christians should not be the aggressors: Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God” (Matthew 5:9).

Jesus taught that “all who take the sword will perish by the sword.” He said in the Gethsemane garden: “Put your sword into its sheath; shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?” (Matthew 26:52, John 18:11). God has placed us in the United States during the Biden administration, as He placed Daniel in Babylon during the Nebuchadnezzar administration, Christians in Rome under Nero—and now our brothers and sisters in China under Xi Jinping. Let us keep calm and drink the cup, even though it will probably be bitter.

By my choice of comparisons, you can see I’m pessimistic about what will happen in Washington under President Biden. We’ll face tough judgment calls and political battles, but we should concentrate on repelling aggression, preserving life, and seeking peace without surrender. Let’s study Mark 9:50, John 14:27, John 16:33, and Acts 10:36, and remember that Christians can do much regardless of who is president. For example, since U.S. abortions peaked in 1990, pro-abortion Democrats have occupied the White House more than half the time, but the number of abortions has fallen by almost half, with the decline occurring during each administration.

Hardship might help the cause of Christ. One more abortion reference: During the Trump era it was easy to cheer White House pro-life pronouncements, even as pro-abortion forces pushed ahead with do-it-yourself chemical abortions. Now, maybe more Christians will volunteer at pregnancy resource centers instead of centering our hopes on government grants. Maybe we’ll think harder about justice questions, remembering that justice without compassion is just ice. Maybe we’ll remember that compassion—literally, suffering with those in need—is not an option: All who follow the Bible are called to it. ■

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