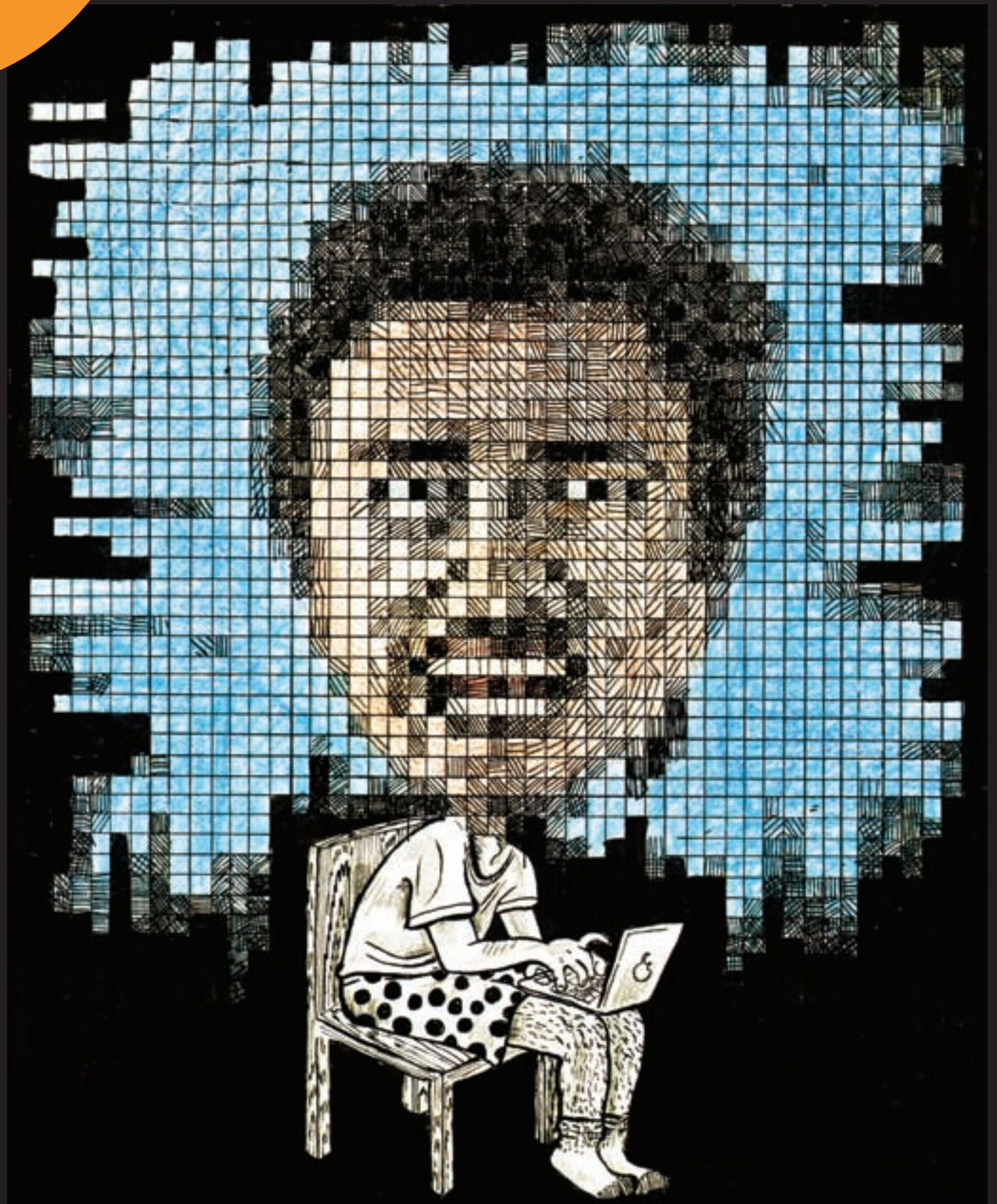


The magazine of the Columbia Spectator
22 September 2011 / vol. 11 issue 2

the
eye

THE EDUCATION OF TAO LIN

by Kaitlin Phillips





Editor in Chief
Amanda Cormier

Managing Editor
Ashton Cooper

Art Director
Cindy Pan

Deputy Editor, Features
Tala Akhavan

Deputy Editor, Lead Story
Jennifer Fearon

Deputy Editor, Online Content
Frances Corry

Senior Design Editor
Cathi Choi

Visuals Editor
Anthony Clay

Eyesites Editor
Margaret Boykin

View From Here Editor
Julia Miller

Interview Editor
Liana Gergely

Features Associates
Nicollette Barsamian
Jon Edelman
Meredith Foster
Molly Speacht
Emma Stein

Multimedia Associate
Paul Hsiao

Business Deputy
Steven Cook

Visuals Staff
Thuto Somo

Production Staff
Nathaniel Braffman
Megan Baker
Allie Carieri
Zack Etheart
Naomi Cohen
Anna Hippee

CopyStaffers
Kat Duh

Head Copy Editor
Emily Handsman

Spectator Editor in Chief
Samuel Roth

Spectator Managing Editor
Michele Cleary

Spectator Publisher
Aditya Mukerjee

Find Us Online:
eye.columbiaspectator.com

follow us on Twitter:
[@TheEyeMag](https://twitter.com/TheEyeMag)

Contact Us:
eye@columbiaspectator.com
Editorial: (212) 854-9547
Advertising: (212) 854-9558

© 2011 The Eye,
Spectator Publishing Company, Inc.



THE EDUCATION OF TAO LIN

The champion of the Internet and
those who love to hate him, pg. 07

by Kaitlin Phillips
cover illustration by Daryl Seitchik
photos courtesy of Tao Lin

CONTENTS

03 EYESITES

FILM

04 **The Dude Abides** Anneliese Cooper

INTERVIEW

05 **A New Face at the Cathedral** Liana Gergely

IDEAS

06 **What if America Stopped Smoking?** Emma Stein

ART

12 **A Look Through the Lens**
Andrea Garcia-Vargas

BOOKS

14 **An Atheistic Education** Maria Castex

VIEW FROM HERE

15 **An Afternoon With Roast Chicken** Julia Miller

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

If you have never heard of Tao Lin, it's really quite OK. I'm actually still sort of wondering why I know his name.

I first heard it two summers ago, while working as an intern at The New York Observer, a publication known for reporting on insider media-literary gossip. (I didn't know this until beginning work there and dozens of my pitches on plebeian topics were rejected—kindly, of course, but rejected nonetheless.)

A writer on staff published a story called “Tao Lin Will Have the Scallops,” a profile of Lin written in the style of Lin. One notable line read:

The Observer said, “I’m going to write a profile of him in a parody of his style.”

The colleague said, “That’s awesome. You’ll nail him. His writing is so terrible.”

Apparently, Lin was a writer who had a viral following on the internet, which had scored him some success in publishing. Like I said, I'd never read any of Lin's work, so the whole thing baffled me and seemed like one of those

literary country clubs to which I'd never be invited.

Since then, I've followed Lin on Tumblr and Twitter, and read articles about him from time to time so that I'm relatively up to speed at the water cooler of the Internet. But I'm pretty sure I still don't get it, despite my avant-garde sympathies and self-affirmation that I am “with it.”

This week, Kaitlin Phillips tries to figure it all out. How does this guy, an unassuming NYU grad with a blog and a habit for annoying people, make a living as a writer? And is it a path that a current college student could potentially follow? Does shameless self-promotion, at a certain point, stop being annoying and become a marketing ploy?

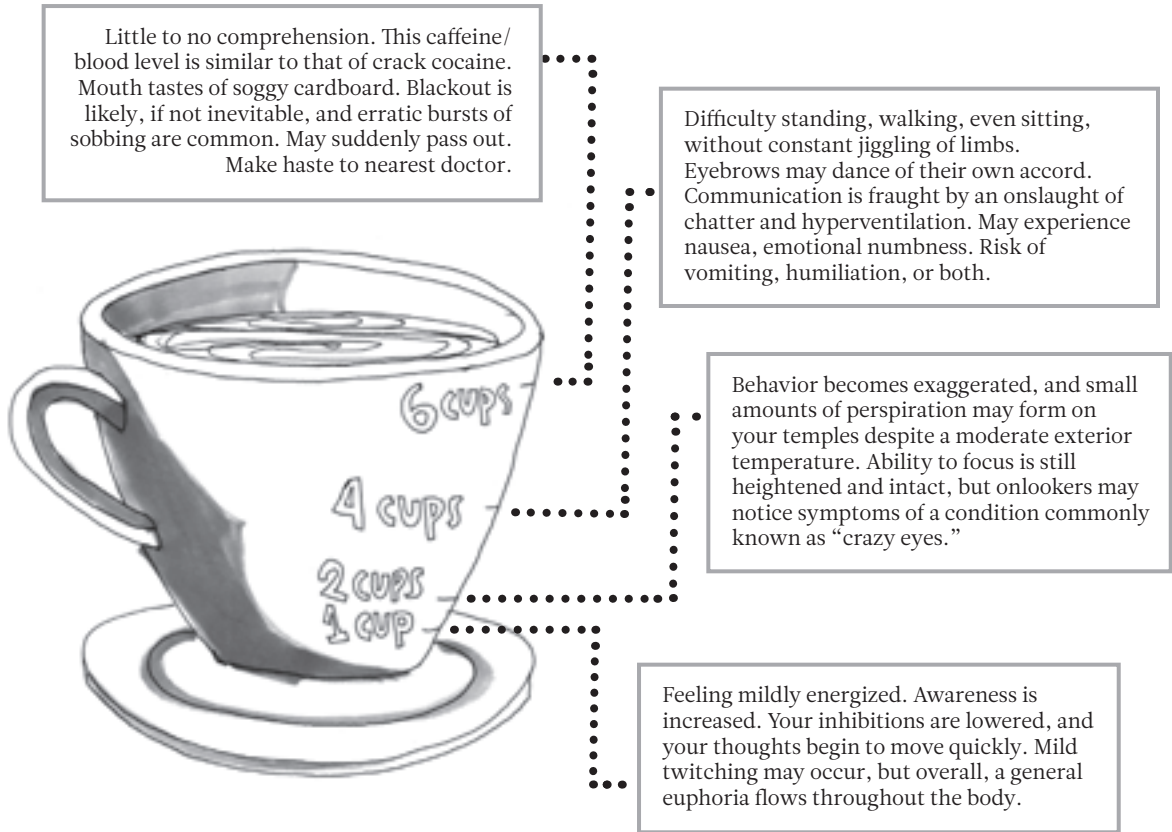
I'm not really sure. But Lin's story inspires a strange sort of hope for awkward writerly types—particularly the ones who feel more comfortable in a Gchat text box than they do a Word document.

Amanda Cormier
eye@columbiaspectator.com

PLEASE DRINK RESPONSIBLY

BY MARGARET BOYKIN

Remember over the summer, when you weaned yourself off caffeine and woke up every morning bright and fresh as a drug-free daisy? No? We don't either. Now that we're back to school and back to Starbucks, here are some warnings they don't include on the mermaid label.



ZENSCAPING PARKS AND RECREATION

BY MARGARET BOYKIN

SAKURAPARK

Located on 122nd Street and Riverside Drive

You want to go there because: it's walking distance from Grant's Tomb (stop by for a quick prayer), and you can generally read in peace without running into anyone from Columbia.

Watch out for: the cherry trees, delivered to parks in New York from Japan in 1912 (fun fact: "Sakura" means cherry blossom in Japanese).

▲▲▲▲▲ PARK RATING

MORNINGSIDEPARK

Located on 110th Street, from Manhattan Avenue to Morningside Drive

You want to go there because: there's an adorable duck pond, and its location allows you to branch out from campus and explore the surrounding Harlem area.

Watch out for: steep stairs, avian violence (those ducks are bold), and crime. The mood can turn from scenic to sketchy pretty fast, so keep it to daylight hours.

▲▲▲▲▲ PARK RATING

RIVERSIDEPARK

Located on Riverside Drive

You want to go there because: it's got everything—a beautiful view of the river, a dinosaur park, places to play soccer. It's also the closest park to campus, and a great place to go running.

Watch out for: everyone you know, and some you don't—for instance, the token creepy homeless man who might show you more than you want to see.

PARK RATING ▲▲▲▲▲

CENTRALPARK

Closest Entrance Located near 110th and Central Park West

You want to go there because: it's Central Park.

It's enormous, there are countless forms of entertainment—a running track, a pool in the summer, tennis courts, boat houses, and water features, to name a few—and it's not as far as you think.

Watch out for: tourists, speedy bicycles, getting lost on your way to the zoo.

PARK RATING ▲▲▲▲▲

YES, YOU REALLY DID SAY THAT

BY MARGARET BOYKIN AND DEATON JONES

The first weeks of classes are always eventful—you're catching up with friends, making impressions on professors, doing the prove-yourself-but-don't-look-like-a-smartass dance... It's a turbulent time. Lucky for you, we were listening, and we heard, we saw, and we repeated—all in 140 characters or less. #enjoy

OverheardAtBarnard

"Don't wave at her. Save seats for our friends." #macroeconomics

Carman4Ever

Symposium is so my life. I mean, erotic love or real love? Like, he wanted to sleep with me but I wasn't down. #coreproblems

SubconsciousSophomore

I have this recurring dream that I'm a Kardashian sister. What would Freud say about that? #keepingupwithpsych

DilemmasInTheDiana

Girl#1: "I don't know, he didn't want to talk to me about lady problems." Girl#2: "What?" Girl#1: "You know, like Women's Rights."

DudeInTheCorner

all human intimacy is rooted in cannibalism. #tootruer

FrenchWithChromeo

"J'ai visité Williamsburg, et j'ai vue beaucoup de hipsters. C'était magnifique!" #OhLaLaOriginal #FrenchConversation

LitProfessor

I mean, I talked to Toni Morrison about it. She didn't get it either. #HenryJames

HamiltonElevator

Lolz. #youareimmobile

The Dude Abides

the little lebowski shop perpetuates a cult

BY ANNELIESE COOPER
PHOTO BY ANNELIESE COOPER

*"In wayfarer's worlds out west was a man,
A man I come not to bury, but to praise,
His name was Geoffrey Lebowski call'd, yet
Not called, excepting by his kin."*

Thus begins Adam Bertocci's "The Two Gentlemen of Lebowski," a re-working in full Shakespearean verse of the Coen brothers' 1998 cult classic *The Big Lebowski*—that now infamous tale of carpet-pissing, kidnapping, pornographers, and nihilism, with a few marmots thrown in for good measure. It was the cover of this unlikely book—a be-sunglassed Bard holding a bowling ball the way Hamlet might a skull—that first caught my eye upon entering The Little Lebowski, a small store near Washington Square Park (215 Thompson St., to be exact) entirely dedicated to the vending of all things Dude: posters, action figures, Hal-loween costumes, jigsaw puzzles—and, of course, quote-emblazoned T-shirts to fill every available nook. These mountains of obscure tchotchkes, from bowling pin salt shakers to bottles of Sioux City Sarsaparilla, seemed more than sufficient to augment even the most meticulous fan's collection. Still, I had to ask: Shakespeare?

Roy Preston, the store's ponytailed co-owner, set me straight from behind the counter: "Shakespeare's famous character was Falstaff, and Falstaff was a portly, white man who liked to drink a lot—and he had the beard." I glanced sidelong at a Jeff Bridges bobblehead and tried to picture pantaloons under its plasticized flap of bathrobe. "It sounds crazy at first, but it's not as far off as you would think," Preston concluded. "I think Falstaff was an Elizabethan Abider." The word instantly rings a bell—a cribbing of the hero's de facto motto, "The Dude abides," plastered on a dozen different items in my periphery—and, though I didn't press for a formal definition, I could only guess that an Abider was a fan, a follower, a through-and-through Lebowskian. What I never would have guessed, though, is that there were so many of them.

Indeed, even a quick Googling turns up thousands of active fansites, enclave after enclave devoted to rehashing favorite quotes, debating the ideal bowling partner (Dude or Donny?) and, of course, ripping on the Eagles—you can even get ordained online as a "Dudeist Priest."

Still, it's one thing to fill out a Lebowski-themed web questionnaire and quite another to patronize a local business. The sheer fact of a theme store's survival—and apparent success—in these dire economic straits is admirable, if not shocking, especially considering that Preston relies solely on word-of-mouth publicity. "I don't do any advertising, and yet people find the store,"



he marveled. Preston reports customers ranging in age from 14 to 70, of all backgrounds and persuasions, even all levels of Lebowski fandom. Though upon opening the store with his partner, Nick Dollak, about a year and a half ago, he anticipated it would be a sort of Abider-filled "man-cave," Preston soon found The Little Lebowski to be an equal-opportunity shopping destination, "because everybody knows somebody that loves the film."

WHAT IS IT ABOUT THIS NOW 12-YEAR-OLD FILM THAT CONTINUES TO INSPIRE SUCH IMPRESSIVE LEVELS OF DEVOTION?

He may not be wrong: Just check the attendance of Lebowski Fest, an ongoing series of fan conventions that began in Louisville, Ky., in 2002. Since then, these Abiders (or "Achievers" as they're also known—a reference to the youth group sponsored by the film's eponymous millionaire) have invaded Chicago, Las Vegas, Seattle, Austin, London, Edinburgh—even New York, this past August.

Of course, learning of both store and Fest begs the inevitable question: What is it about this now 12-year-old film that continues to inspire such impressive levels of devotion? To cite its excellent performances and ever-quotable humor, though certainly accurate, is ultimately a moot point: plenty of well-acted comedies grace Facebook profiles and dorm room walls, but very few inspire such concrete and consistent cult idolatry—a level of canonization the Coens likely never expected when writing their script about a slacker-turned-accidental PI.

"I've been lucky enough to speak with a couple of people who were involved with the making of the film," Preston told me (and several proudly framed pictures around the store confirm), "and

they all seem to say the same thing, which is, 'None of us had any idea that it would ever be as popular as it is. We just did the film as a lark.'"

Perhaps the secret to Lebowski's success lies in that very Dude-esque nonchalance: because Joel and Ethan were unconcerned with smash-hit demographics, they simply made the film they wanted to make, applying their professional-grade filmic talent to a refreshingly unconventional premise—the result, a wacky, cult-ish romp without the camp and sleaze that usually rocket such niche films into pseudo-ironic infamy.

Moreover, this seemingly stony tale is threaded through with near-constant tongue-in-cheek intellectualism, making Lebowski a perennial delight to re-watch—what Preston sees as a pan-Coen trend: "The first time I see one of their films, my response is always the same: 'What the hell was that?' And then I think about it for a little bit, and I go back and watch it again, and I'm like, 'Oh yeah, this is brilliant.'"

"I would say that it isn't uncommon for folks to say that they didn't get it the first or even second time that they watched it," agrees Scott Shuffitt, an organizer for Lebowski Fest. "Right around the third viewing, it starts to sink in. After that, you will find yourself wandering around reciting lines from the film in public, and if someone hears you and responds with a 'the Dude abides'—well, you know that you now have a new friend."

As a clever paean to the laid-back life—wit and intellectual intrigue that celebrates kicking it with a J and some Credence tapes—the Dude's tale represents the ideal combination for nostalgic Baby Boomers, smart-partying collegiates, and especially self-professed cinephiles like Preston. In fact, he confided, cinephile to cinephile, The Big Lebowski isn't even his preferred Coen brothers flick; that honor goes to the oft-underrated Miller's Crossing. So, why open a store devoted to a second-favorite? Preston answered without hesitation or pretense: "I just wanted to wear a bathrobe all day." That, even I can abide. ●

A New Face at the Cathedral

st. john gets a music makeover

BY LIANA GERGELY
PHOTO COURTESY OF KENT TRITLE

Once called “the brightest star in New York’s choral world” by the *New York Times*, Kent Trittle is starting a Morningside Heights residency as St. John the Divine’s newest director of cathedral music. Trittle brings 30 years of conducting experience, as well as faculty positions at Juilliard and the Manhattan School of Music, to his inaugural year at the cathedral. He regularly plays the organ for the New York Philharmonic and hosts an hour-long radio program on WQXR (105.9) dedicated to choral music. Trittle took some time out from his duties at the cathedral across the street to talk with The Eye about his new position, God, and why college students could use a little bit more choral music in their lives.

What motivated you to leave St. Ignatius and take on this position at St. John the Divine?

The possibility for change came into my life as an opportunity I did not expect. I have a lot of energy—I spent 22 years building a program at St. Ignatius, and I turned 50 last year. So I looked around, and said, “Okay, 50. Do I want to continue what I’m doing, or do something entirely new?” It’s time to change things up and pursue this new opportunity. I’m looking at the music scene at the cathedral and analyzing what the next steps are and where I’d like to take it next.

“COMING TO THE CATHEDRAL IS LIKE A TIME OUT ON A BUSY DAY ... IT FEELS LIKE YOU’RE STEPPING BACK INTO ANOTHER TIME.”

So in terms of that, what are your goals coming into the cathedral? What do you envision changing, or perhaps keeping the same?

There are the existing ensembles, and I’m planning to re-audition the cathedral choir. There is a newly staffed professional ensemble which will perform with the Cathedral choir. It is an ensemble that is top-flight and will be one of the best church choirs in the city, if not the country. We are opening the volunteer choir up to a larger public for participation, and I hope that Columbia kids will be interested!

A significant part of your career has been spent working with college kids at Juilliard and Manhattan School of Music. What impact do you think choral music has on students our age?



Coming to the cathedral is like a time out on a busy day. Walking into a space that feels like Europe, it feels like you’re stepping back into another time. For me, in college, it was just an incredibly peaceful moment. For those who want to just take it in, I think that choral music is soothing and opens up another venue in the world away from the hustle and bustle. It’s a really rewarding outlet. To make music in this special place—it’s unlike anything.

Because you work in religious institutions, do you feel there is a need for more spiritual awareness and practice in the world?

I absolutely think that there is a need for that. As we have our core values as human beings, we should always be asking, “Where is my soul in all the daily happenings of life? Where is my soul in relation to the destruction and suffering that happens in this world? Where is my soul in the things that I want to celebrate in life—whether it be interpersonal relationships or my family?” I think there is a need for people to be able to speak on these things—their core values. Because otherwise, what are we other than just rats running around in a maze?

Is there a place in the choral community at the cathedral for people of other faiths to come and participate?

At St. Ignatius Loyola, where I have been for

many years, I often had people in my choirs of every religious background. And the thing is, they were singing the Mozart “Coronation Mass” and they knew they would have a spiritual experience singing that, even if they weren’t practicing Roman Catholicism. One of the things that is so attractive to me about the Cathedral is that it’s even more liberal in its embrace of other faiths—practitioners and nonpractitioners are all welcome. People of many faiths or no faith—but just people interested in being involved in a place of spirituality.

Dr. James Kowalski, Dean of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, has said that your “ongoing affair with choral music has been a sign of God’s love, and creates a fabulous way to worship God.” Do you agree? Does God have a role in your choral experience?

My view is, the higher power is there. It’s there in music. For example, we are going to be singing Mozart. And Mozart had his own struggles and hardships with God, if you read his letters. In turn, Mozart composed for these sacred texts—so, we are going to be relating his art to these spiritual concepts. By embodying his art, we are able to bring our own awareness to that—whatever that may mean to us. We may have a total agnostic there that says, “Here is what I’m getting out of this experience: Mozart was human and he was genius, and I’m learning about other human beings, and that’s beautiful to me.”

What if America Stopped Smoking?

how quitting could affect the national economy

BY EMMA STEIN

ILLUSTRATION BY THUTO SOMO

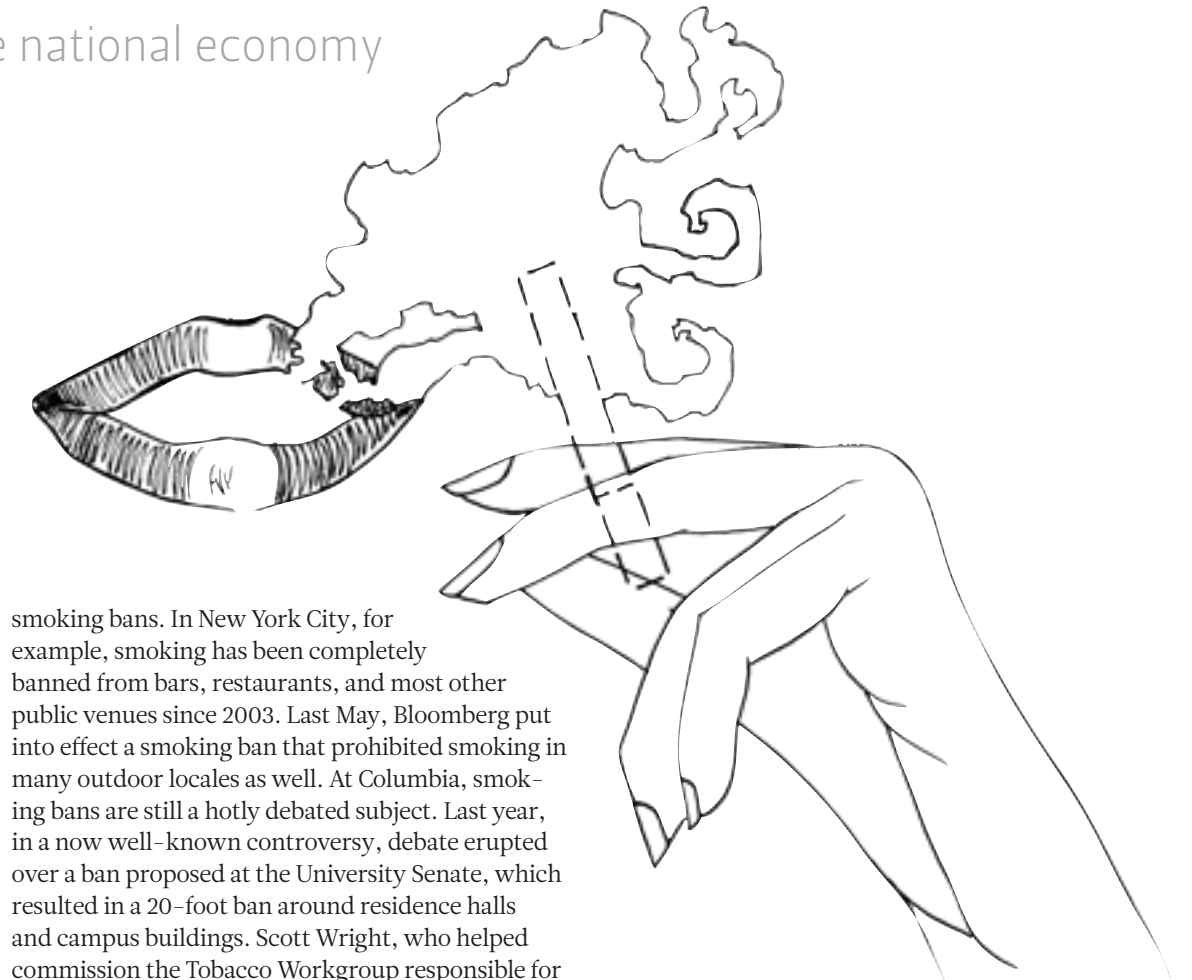
Smoking, the great American pastime of *Mad Men* and housewives alike, has fallen into disfavor. With vigorous anti-smoking campaigns, laws that forbid smoking in more places than they allow, steep taxes on cigarettes, and prohibitive health-care costs, people are realizing that lighting up might not be worth it.

But the flickering scene outside any New York bar tells a different story. A significant number of people still smoke—enough at least to sustain a thriving industry in the United States. Today, about one in five adults smoke, and these smokers are concentrated within certain populations—the poor, the elderly, and the mentally unstable. While other, more educated sectors smoke less than the general population—only 6.3 percent of people with graduate degrees, for instance, engage in the habit.

The pressure to stop, or simply never start, is on. Government-supported anti-smoking information abounds in elementary school classrooms as well as in “Truth” ads on TV, but what would happen if these tactics continue to be successful, so successful that the smoking rate continues to decline? What effects do a decrease in smoking have on our society? These are the questions addressed in *After Tobacco, What Would Happen If Americans Stopped Smoking?*, a new series of studies published by Columbia’s Institute for Social and Economic Research and Policy. It has long been feared that the cessation of smoking would cause widespread upheaval of what is, historically, one of the largest industries in the country. The smoking industry provides more benefits than one might think—there are jobs, donations to charitable causes, and revenue for local businesses like convenience stores. Additionally, fears abound about what complete cessation may do to Social Security, hospitality revenue, and obviously the tobacco industry at large. On the individual level, it is undoubtedly advantageous to quit, but could quitting be detrimental to the national economy?

Kathryn Neckerman, co-editor of *After Tobacco*, suggests that the consequences would not be completely disastrous, and that recent government bans and taxation may not be creating as much upheaval as one might think. “People worry that this kind of big policy change would have a big downside, that small businesses like restaurants or convenience stores would be hurt, or Social Security costs would go way up, or cigarette smuggling and other kinds of crime would rise.” However, Neckerman contends that, “the book finds the impact is likely to be limited. Some people would be hurt economically—tobacco farmers, people who work in cigarette factories or tobacco stores. ... The impact on health care costs and Social Security is small and very, very gradual.”

However, in much of the country, the push to end smoking continues with increasingly strict



smoking bans. In New York City, for example, smoking has been completely banned from bars, restaurants, and most other public venues since 2003. Last May, Bloomberg put into effect a smoking ban that prohibited smoking in many outdoor locales as well. At Columbia, smoking bans are still a hotly debated subject. Last year, in a now well-known controversy, debate erupted over a ban proposed at the University Senate, which resulted in a 20-foot ban around residence halls and campus buildings. Scott Wright, who helped commission the Tobacco Workgroup responsible for discussing the ban, found most people at Columbia were open to it. In fact, he said that, in a move typical to Columbia, “the predominant opinion of those who did not favor a ban did not favor administrative heavy handedness.”

Modifications to smoking policy here, he argues, have been gradual. “In the time since I have come to Columbia, there have been changes. People used to be able to smoke in residential halls, then it was every other floor,” Wright says. “Then we eliminated it from corridor-style buildings. Eventually the law was passed that said they had to be non-smoking.” Other restrictions, like the bans now in place, are the natural extension of that and most people seem to be fine with it.

Some have voiced fears that stricter bans could have some negative consequences, such as alienating smokers in the workforce and forcing smokers off-campus to unsafe locations to smoke. Wright does acknowledge this, but says smokers are slow to voice their opinions. “We did studies, we had focus groups. No one showed up. Honestly, no one seemed to really care.”

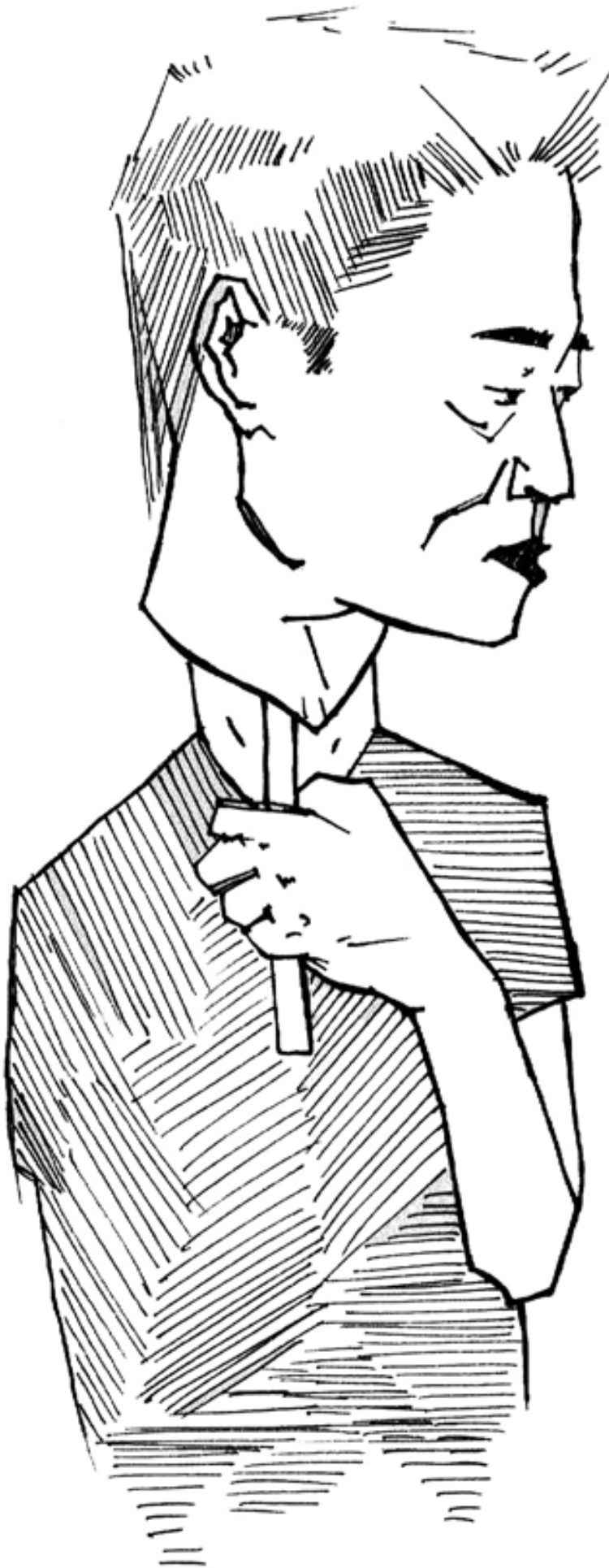
When smokers do care, it may not be in the way one expects. Mark Cohen, a professor at Columbia Business School, is one of the biggest supporters of a full ban and was a smoker himself. “I used to be a heavy smoker,” he says. “I was fortunate enough to be able to quit. Had smoking been banned from Columbia’s campus long ago, while I was a student, I probably would never have become a smoker.” Cohen is dissatisfied with last year’s resolution, calling it a “half-measure,” and claiming that a straw poll taken last year suggests that there

“HAD SMOKING BEEN BANNED FROM COLUMBIA’S CAMPUS LONG AGO, WHILE I WAS A STUDENT, I PROBABLY WOULD NEVER HAVE BECOME A SMOKER.”

would be wide support for a full ban. This Friday, he intends to bring the issue before the University Senate, and believes the issue of a full smoking ban will be decided sometime in October.

Despite what efforts Columbia may make to prohibit, or not prohibit smoking, it still seems almost inevitable that the number of smokers will continue to diminish. The smoking rate in NYC hovers far below the nation’s average at only 16 percent, as people are deterred by bans and steep taxation. Despite the concerns, Peter Bearman, the director of ISERP and co-editor of the book, contends that a reduction in smoking would not be a bad thing. “No one knew if there would be really deleterious consequences to the lives and economies of many people if there was a continued radical reduction in smoking,” says Bearman. “The book discovers that there would not be such deleterious consequences, and that in many instances, local economies would even flourish if reliance on tobacco products was lessened.” ●

THE EDUCATION OF TAO LIN



the champion of the
Internet and those who
love to hate him

by Katilin Phillips

illustration by Thuto Somo

photos courtesy of Tao Lin

On Jan. 2, Tao Lin uploaded a home video titled “wedding | 27 nov 2010,” shot entirely on a handheld MacBook Pro, to his Vimeo account. The footage, most shot from a single angle, is of a large craggy clergyman filling out paperwork at a desk, unaware that he is being filmed by an embedded camera. Lasting an inordinate nine minutes, it ends in the parking lot of a Las Vegas wedding chapel. The video is pretty boring. As of last week, it has been watched 4, 141 times.

The footage was linked, as an addendum a few hours after publication, in the article “Tao Lin and Megan Boyle Get Married,” a scoop secured by Thought Catalog editor Brandon Scott Gorrell. Thought Catalog is a blog known, since its launch in 2010, for catchy memoir-style pieces by post-collegiate writers—28-year-old Lin was an early writer solicited by the site, brought in with other young-and-popular bloggers known for their established internet followings. Lin had recommended that Gorrell write for the site, and the latter had maintained close ties with his friend, who has, at that time and since, been a subject—but never darling—of the literary world.

His position as such is oft examined, usually in juxtaposition with his diffusive Internet presence—the apparatus seemingly responsible for his rise to avant-garde literary fame. Many critics, and fellow bloggers, ask “why?,” but perhaps the more pertinent line of inquiry is “how?”

A month after the announcement, Thought Catalog ran a piece by Lin called “How to Get Married in Las Vegas”: “Be in your late 20s and idly alienated, living off a royalty check that’ll last two more months, when you meet an attractive girl in her mid 20s...” Personal subject matter is par for the course with Lin, who tends to style both his existence and his work around full-frontal honesty. Case in point: one can also find Lin’s “Every Time I’ve Had Sex with Megan Boyle, Pt. 1 of ?,” or Boyle’s “Everyone I’ve Had Sex With” on the internet. Or in his

fiction, large amounts of which are thinly-veiled roman a clef, where we read his Gchat conversations and emails.

In his Thought Catalog piece, Lin goes on to note that he and Boyle had an “earnest” discussion of whether or not to get married that “lasts fifty seconds.” They wonder if the marriage will be “good for our brands, as depressed writers.” Sincerity is always up for grabs in Lin’s life and writing—he forces the reader to wade through a tone that, while forthright, always remains vaguely ironic, a contradiction exasperated by his flat prose. It’s true that affect-light, low-brow mumblecore and minimalism can work for a while as an aesthetic, but eventually, the spectator and reader is left wanting for authenticity, either from the man or from his work.

This contradiction—opaque over-sharing—is inherent to the ire and fascination that Lin, and his work, inspire. You can know all the surface details of his characters and his life and still not quite get it. Did he actually have an “earnest” talk about his wedding for “fifty seconds”? Is he genuine with his public?

The wedding video is interesting precisely because the camera provides a rare opportunity for us to see the couple caught off guard, something that never quite happens on the page or the computer screen. In an attempt to make small talk, the undoubtedly genuine officiator exposes, as perhaps only a Midwesterner can, the ethereality of their “brand”—to these New Yorkers a lifestyle, to the outsider, a career:

“What do you guys do back there?”

Lin answers first, in his de facto mumbled delivery, but without pause, “writer.”

Then Boyle, “writers.”

“I’m sorry?”

Boyle speaks up, “Writers. We’re both writers.”

“Writers! ...” His eyebrows shoot up.

“For some publication... Or...?”

The publishing jeremiad

A peripheral Google search on the state of American publishing does not leave one wanting for information. The jeremiad goes something like this: people aren’t reading (and therefore aren’t buying books); or, if they are reading, they’re buying books from the evil booksellers’ industrial complex—die Amazon!; or they’re too stupid to read “difficult” books (the vampire industrial complex, anyone?). Or really, the problem is that there are more writers than there are readers, therefore hacks are flooding the market (and the internet) with slush fiction—die bloggers!

But despite everything always being worse than it once was, books are still written, published, and read, sometimes through the classic channels, and sometimes not. It will always be the case that beneath all this fear-mongering are stories of individual writers getting their work out there against the odds. Which brings us to another jeremiad altogether: the one angled at Tao Lin—the writer everyone loves to hate. Drawing conclusions about Lin’s merit, literary or otherwise, is not that interesting (and has been done: see *The London Review of Books* and *Gawker*, respectively).

What is fascinating is the story of a painfully awkward boy who, during his sophomore year at

NYU, wrote a “100,100 word novel,” looked up the literary agents of all his favorite authors, and sent out his manuscript, only to be universally rejected. The nineteen-year-old kid that not only went on to publish one book a year, every year since graduating in 2005 with a degree in journalism (two books of poetry, a short-story collection, a novella, and two novels), but also scores of short stories, essays, poems, annotated drawings, and posts published on the internet. The young man who decided to be a full-time writer despite what the system, and its appropriate channels, told him. The writer that came to rely solely on the internet and creative posturing to supplement the attention, audience, and monetary support he failed to gain in the print medium.

This is the story behind the creation of a one-man public relations machine that allowed him the position he holds today, as a fairly recognizable internet personality and full-time writer that, as *The Wall Street Journal* announced in August, will be writing, six years after graduating from college, his third novel, his first for a major publishing house, for which he landed a \$50,000 advance. It is a story of an anomaly of the publishing world, an example of a person who made it work in that vast landscape outside the system—that ambiguous space we all fall into after graduation.

It is, above all else, a tale of painfully loud ambition from a very shy person. This contradiction lends a certain narrative ambiguity: for all the action is filtered by cable, all intent hidden behind a stoic face. When I interviewed Lin in late August, he was polite, sweet even, though uncomfortable about being questioned, and rarely offered elaborate explanations. Both he and his wife, whom Lin suggested I interview, were genuine and open about their choices. But neither could speak to the

sources of their ambition—in many ways they are, in real life, oddly disconnected from the people they appear to be online, in that they are normal and unassuming, their speech peppered with “likes” and “ums.”

It was a very different impression than the one I’d held since May—after my initial interaction with Lin—an impression of a sharp, advantageous businessman, one that is called to memory anytime I sift through his astounding, excursive internet presence.

Prose and Twitterverse

I first ran into Lin, as one does, on the internet. Before that point, I knew only that he was an oft-hated, little read, potentially autistic, Asian-American writer that got famous on *Gawker*, that he had inspired a parody-profile of himself written in his style at *The New York Observer*, and that he wrote seemingly indecipherable tweets. I had not read his books, nor did I know what he was famous for exactly: only his name, his profession, and his questionable repute. For a writer whose books are printed in batches of roughly 3,000 (this is Tao’s estimate; Melville House, the small New York-based publisher that has handled his career up until recently, would specify only that each of his works has gone through reprintings, but no more than five per work), this would seem like a lot of information.

I was working at n+1 magazine. It was a job at which, for no apparent reason (read: errant intern), I started a Twitter account, @nplusinterns, “for” the magazine. I soon began spending the better part of each day tweeting at literary people, under the persona of a composite group of interns (“Good gossip is like Rumsfeld’s unknown unknowns. We don’t even know what we want

to know”). The umbrella of the parent organization helped bolster interest, and soon I had quite a few followers. In May, when *New York Magazine* ran the Wesley Yang cover story “Paper Tigers: What happens to all Asian-American overachievers when the test-taking ends?,” I took to Twitter, asking why @tao_lin hadn’t been asked to write it.

This was a blatant, superficial ploy: Lin has over 6,500 followers on Twitter, mention of this question on his account would potentially blow up my own. But something else happened entirely, because Lin replied, in a seemingly spontaneous move, wondering if “we” wanted to create a Tao Lin intern Twitter account. Within an hour I was Tao Lin’s “intern.” Over the next few weeks, I gave out the password to other Columbia undergraduates and we tweeted anything we wanted, from jokes about spilling his lattes to blanket laments about our wasted youth. I did not meet Lin, nor did we communicate except for by the occasional message on Twitter.

My being a “fan” was markedly beside the point—the crux of Lin’s public relations know-how is the internalization of the maxim “all press is good press”—as was any altruism directed at him. It was quite the accident that I ended up adding yet another thread to the massive, storied tapestry that is the Tao Lin Media Machine. As I found out later, I wasn’t even the first. Lin has been “hiring” young “fans” to do everything from creating Tumblrs to stickinger downtown Manhattan since 2007 (these *Richard Yates* stickers, the title of his second novel, became sort of iconic, and one can find them in café restrooms all over the city).

The undergrad

Tao Lin enjoys describing his undergradu-



time that he finished all the stories in *Bed*. He was also learning about “the literary world”: the summer after he graduated, Lin gave the publishing world another chance. “I sent emails to agents of writers I liked. Two wanted to represent me. One of them was Curtis Sittenfeld’s agent. In retrospect, I should have gone with her.” Instead he chose an “awkward, nervous middle-aged guy,” mostly out of pity, but also comfort.

“I FELT THAT I COULD MAKE AN ASS OUT OF MYSELF BECAUSE I DIDN’T THINK IT COULD POSSIBLY AFFECT MY LIFE.”

Though a recent college graduate, Lin wasn’t focused on gainful employment, believing that his agent would sell *Bed* and he could begin his career as a writer. He stepped up his writing regimen, something he has been known for ever since (writing for an average of six to ten hours a day), and maintained relative isolation. That summer he completed his first poetry collection and submitted it to a first book contest. But in September, things began to fall apart. As he was no longer a student, he lost his job at the NYU library. Having run out of money, he found a job on Craigslist as a personal assistant. He moved into an apartment on Wall Street. Though he won the contest, which would result in his first publication, *you are a little bit happier than i am*, that fall, this success was overshadowed by a larger, and in Lin’s mind, crippling failure—by November the manuscript for

Bed had been rejected by twenty editors.

Both Lin and his agent began to feel desperate. “The only period I was thinking I’m going to make a ton of money and not get a job was before the editors’ rejected *Bed*. After that I had no hopes.” Quiet resignation would define Lin’s mind space for much of the next three years, though, importantly, not his activities.

Writing for hipsters

It was in fact a resignation to making less money, and not a move to choose a different career path. Tao Lin was going to be a writer, and write he did. His first three years out of college are marked by their tenacious, discursive productivity. In fact, from his output during this period, it is hard to tell he lost hope at all.

Lin began to slowly diversify his online presence, and published his stories in popular online magazines like 3:AM and Noon. One such story would turn into his first novel, *Eeeee Eee Eeee*, which he had begun to work on, slowly, after finishing *Bed*. He would only give the work his full attention after his first big break: in the spring of 2006, almost one full year out of college, Melville House announced they would take *Bed*. Lin had since quit his job as a personal assistant. In March he started working at the New York Society Library. Bored of having a job and wanting to focus on writing, he quit after three months. That summer, bolstered by the success of *Bed* and with more free time, Lin finished his novel. By the fall, after seeing the manuscript of his novel, they promised to publish both works simultaneously, in May 2007.

WITHIN AN HOUR I WAS TAO LIN’S “INTERN.”

On the surface, Lin was experiencing rather enviable success, with three works coming out less than two years after college graduation, particularly for a writer who chose to begin his second novel with this vignette:

“I’ve only had the opportunity to hold a hamster once,” said Dakota Fanning on Gmail chat. “Its paws were so tiny. I think I cried a little.”

“I saw a hamster eating its babies,” said Haley Joel Osment. “I wanted to give it a high-five. But it didn’t know what a high-five is.”

He’s not necessarily kidding when he said, in an online interview, that he relies on a readership of “hipsters, depressed teenagers, depressed vegans, happy but sensitive teenagers ... all college students.”

He also realizes the fiscal limitations of such an audience—the reality of which taints the success of this period for Lin. Though his relationship with Melville House has allowed Lin to publish consistently, year after year, starting at a young age, it has also kept him relatively impoverished. For each book published by Melville he “got only \$500 to \$1500 in advances.”

It was in the summer of 2006 that Lin began shoplifting full-time, an experience he later turned into the novella *Shoplifting From American Apparel* (now available for purchase at Urban Outfitters). He also moved around a lot, leaving New York in August and moving back to Florida,



where he grew up. By October, he was living in rural Pennsylvania. In February 2007, he moved back to New York, a few months before the release of his books, he spent that time in various apartments in Manhattan and Brooklyn. On the second anniversary of his graduation from college, May 2007, Lin had three books in circulation. He also ran out of money. In August, he started working part-time at Angelica Kitchen and moved to Brooklyn, where he has stayed ever since.

By the summer of 2007, Lin was convinced that he would “have jobs for the next four to five years.” He stopped caring about ever making money from books and decided to let “Melville publish whatever they wanted.” In early 2008, needing the promised \$1,000 advance and feeling like “he had no choice,” Lin signed the contract for his second novel, *Richard Yates*.

The Gawker game

The narrative of the impoverished, struggling writer at the whim of the submission and rejection cycle is not new. What is abnormal, and what Lin referenced only after prodding (and, interestingly, almost not at all in the profile he wrote of himself in *The Stranger* last year), were the peripheral activities he was engaged in during this time—activities that account for his success these last few months.

The game he undertook was over-exposure—a risky fiscal business, as strategies go. Over the course of seven years, in a brazen refusal to act as one ought to, Lin wielded a fierce mix of volition, creativity, and stubborn output. And, against the odds, it worked.

The most oft-told tale of his activities is that of the notoriety he gained as a source of great ire for Gawker, a New York-based, snark-heavy gossip website. It was in June 2007—Lin was still living off shoplifting, and had released his books to little notice—that he rather brazenly plastered the

door of the headquarters with stickers promoting his work. He sent the site enough self-promotional emails to inspire a post that referred to him “as probably the most annoying person we’ve ever dealt with.” But Lin views the situation as wholly logical:

“At the time, I had no connection with the literary world. I didn’t know anyone. So I felt that I could make an ass out of myself because I didn’t think it could possibly affect my life... If I wrote for Gawker I would want some person like me to put myself out there to be made fun of. I’m fine with it. I like Gawker. I think it benefits both of us.”

THEY SEEM TO BE IN A POSITION WHERE, IF THEY GET FAMOUS AT ALL, IT WILL BE IN SPITE OF THEIR WRITING.

The post currently has 29,000 hits. One year and two months after the Gawker post, Lin “sold 60 percent of the royalties to my next novel in 10 percent shares to six different people for \$2,000 per share. People gave me \$2,000 to receive 10 percent of my U.S. royalties for my next novel for the rest of their life, every six months, as I get royalty checks from my publisher.” The move was covered by a swath of popular news outlets. He took the \$12,000, quit the restaurant, and decided to “never get another job for the rest of my life.”

Friends with benefits

Thus began the second phase of Lin’s literary life, as a full-time writer: 2008 to present. For Lin, being a writer had a lot to do with being a blogger. This is due in part because of a keen awareness that even if his books won’t keep him afloat, fame might. Internalizing this reality has given Lin quite



the algorithm for a particular brand of success, for he doesn't attract the limelight as much as he continually, systematically jumps in front of it (as with Gawker) or, when that fails, creates his own.

In 2008, Lin founded a small online and print press, Muumuu House, which publishes a select number of generationally similar writers. Brandon Scott Gorrell, the editor that leaked the marriage story, got his job at Thought Catalog per the recommendation of Lin—who published Gorrell's first poetry collection at Muumuu House. His friendship with Gorrell is typical for Lin, in that it is primarily writerly, mostly viral, and if anything, altruistic—Lin publishes much of his friends' writing and seems intent on allowing them to piggyback on his coattails whenever possible.

Last year Lin and Boyle launched the film company MDMAfilms, which, as is so topically suggested, tends to feature movies of them taking drugs. Mumblecore, a film about their relationship that cumulates with some of the wedding video, is a surprisingly poignant, fascinating, and, seemingly, sincere look into their lives.

These pet projects are funded by Lin himself. For Lin is famous now, in an internet sort of way. 6,853 people currently follow him on Twitter. On average, 22,200 people search his name in Google each month. Blackbook, The New York Observer, Nylon, and New York Magazine have all profiled him, the latter announcing him the "New Lit Boy" of New York in 2009. The London Review of Books and The New York Times each reviewed *Richard Yates*.

He has been able to sustain a consistent freelancing presence since 2009, working up from 3:AM and Noon to writing for The Poetry Foundation, The New York Observer, and The Believer (he recently conducted an interview). After publishing one of Lin's fiction stories, VICE offered Lin a column earlier this year. He pitched "Drug-Related Photoshop Art," and the magazine, known for its hipster-kitsch style, picked it up. A typical

post: "Dumbledore Levitating Valium, Adderall, Seroquel."

Much of his success, however, is not literary, rather it is his ability to maintain two things: his fan base, the cultivation of which is an operation facilitated primarily by his Tumblr (and now Twitter), and relevancy to the fickle media machine of literary New York. Lin plays impressive hardball. As a fan of Tao's, you can easily have a personal connection. He holds contests on his Tumblr ("discern what drug i'm 'on' contest first 5 correct answers receive richard yates free," to which 106 comments were made). In July 2010, he let fans vote on the outfit he was to wear to a photo shoot for Nylon. The post received 658 comments. He hangs out in the comment sections of almost any article written about him. He can often be found on 4chan message boards. His number and e-mail are available online. These relationships are fairly symbiotic—the reader is allowed input in a space wouldn't otherwise (imagine Philip Roth being available on Gchat!) and Lin manages to coax them into reaffirming their interest in him.

His current Twitter and Tumblr reigns were preceded by a MySpace profile, which Lin deleted in 2009. In fact he sold the URL, a de facto move for Lin since he started writing full time, and a business move that has been sustained by an ability to leverage his fame. The account sold for \$8,100. Such schemes are just the tip of the iceberg, for Lin can make "\$700 a month from selling stupid things on my blog." In one such YouTube video he auctions off "an outline of my book tour. It includes a key for what drugs I did on what day." He adds, with a straight face, "This seems really valuable to my future biographers." He isn't kidding about the drugs—you can watch the video of a California reading where he stops after two minutes, and then read about it on Thought Catalog, in the essay "How to Give a Reading on Mushrooms."

In 2009, an anonymous donor gave him

\$12,800, stipulating only that he not reveal his/her identity. In June of this year, a man he met on Twitter lent him \$6,000—Lin wrote up a contract, which photocopied and blogged on his Tumblr, that stipulates repayment in full, plus compound interest, courtesy of the "Tao Bank."

When I met with Megan Boyle, she joked that Lin wanted me to know they'd made a porn video. I asked if they'd be willing to put it online. She didn't miss a beat, "If we could get money for it."

The Tao Lin model

Tao Lin got famous in a small corner of the internet and, for now, he spends his days maintaining that position. He is the first to admit the frustration involved, as someone who relies on the internet for his well-being (as well as royalty checks from Melville House every six months, to the tune of \$6,000 to \$8,000), knowing that "no one thing makes a big difference." I asked for an example. He mentioned the surprise he felt when, after the recent Times article on Bebe Zeva, the young internet blogger starring in the third feature of MDMAfilms, "only two copies of the DVD sold. It only sold two."

In talking with his wife, she admits up front that the film company costs "a lot more money than what we gain." Muumuu House doesn't turn a profit either.

In Lin's mind this is proof of the failure of "The Tao Lin Model": "It's bad. I had jobs from 2005 to late 2008. If selling shares from my novel hadn't worked, I would have had a job for another year. Then I got lucky with someone giving me money." Lin argues that writers should just "focus on getting a literary agent and having them sell your books."

But Lin's cynicism hides an inherent contradiction: the classical publishing model he's postulating failed him right at the beginning of his career, because he wasn't the classical model of a writer. As Noah Cicero, one of the Muumuu House gang, aptly pointed out in an email, he and Lin are "writers that aren't writing normal things, like things about vampires or things that would go in The Paris Review." They seem to be in a position where, if they get famous at all, it will be in spite of their writing.

Tao Lin will never write for The New Yorker (though he used to submit to them, but no longer will at "that level," and, this summer, posted the rejection of some cover art he sent in), nor for Time (he did spoof the cover profile written on Jonathan Franzen—"Great American Novelist"—for The Stranger, with himself as the cover subject), nor for The New York Times (they gave a rather scathing review of his second novel *Richard Yates* but did run the piece on Bebe in The Sunday Styles).

In other words, he will never be recognized, lauded, or understood by middle-aged craggy men working Las Vegas "desk weddings."

However, he will, to a small group of people, fame and money aside, be known as the guy who helped them find their place as writers. And he will remain, for the time being, as the only guy who, in the middle of a crisis in the book business, not only invented The Tao Lin Model, but got it to work. ●

"IT'S VERY DIFFICULT TO SAY ONE THING THAT SUMS UP ALL OF PHOTOGRAPHY TODAY ... IT'S BETTER TO HIGHLIGHT THE DIVERSITY OF STYLES AND TRAINING THAT IS HAPPENING."



GEORGE GEORGIOU



VIVIANE SASSEN



MOYRA DAVEY

A Look Through the Lens

moma's take on the future of photography

BY ANDREA GARCIA-VARGAS
PHOTOS COURTESY OF MOMA

It's been almost 200 years since the first photograph was taken, but it was only a little over 20 years ago that the first digital camera saw light. Now people trade in Polaroids, dark rooms, and photographic film for the convenience of the click of a button and a two-minute computer upload. These changes are established trends in the medium—so much so that showing digital work at major art institutions is no longer a question, but rather a standard.

Cries that the transition to digital is a threat to the art, a mark of its cheapening, now seem outmoded, passé. Still, the question remains, if museum-caliber photography can include a screen shot or a grainy blurred image, what criteria can we use to determine a "good" photo, and what separates the artist from

the amateur? Has the proliferation of pocket-friendly super-sleek cameras, and, furthermore, camera-clad smartphones, inherently changed the medium? Have we entered an age of digital, never again to return to the careful captures and chemicals of traditional photography? In contemporary photography, has analog met its doom?

In order to find some answers, I went straight to the source—Museum of Modern Art photography department curatorial fellow Dan Leers. In organizing this year's upcoming "New Photography" exhibition, Leers aimed at diversity and a far-reaching scope in his selection of what's new in the contemporary art scene. Since 1985, the exhibition has shown 75 photographers from over 12 different countries, and this year's manifestation follows in that tradition. Leers has purposefully selected six artists diverse in age, nationality, and origin. Not only are their backgrounds divergent, but so are their photographic practices.

The work of Moyra Davey, George Georgiou, Deana Lawson, Doug Rickard, Viviane Sassen, and Zhang Dali gives an extremely expansive look at not only contemporary, but international photography.

One thing is for sure—the state of the medium today is no longer burdened by a strict divide between analog and digital. Leers believes that although many artists are increasingly going digital to bypass cumbersome chemical processing and editing, traditional forms of photography haven't completely been shucked. In fact, digital's established rise in popularity has created a new backlash of analog practice.

"Some artists do it because that's the way they've always done it, but others because of a conscious rebuttal to digital movement," Leers tells me over the phone. "That being said, plenty of artists who've always done analog have gone onto digital media and are achieving results with which they are happy." An older form of photography is now a new innovation. "I don't think analog's photography is closed. There are many photographers applying and using analog photography to great ends," Leers says.

For this reason, Leers has chosen to include both analog and digital in the exhibition. "It's very difficult to say one thing that sums up all of photography today," Leers says. "It's better to highlight the



DEANA LAWSON

WHILE CRITICS, CURATORS, AND HISTORIANS WILL ULTIMATELY BE THE ASSIGNORS OF ARTISTIC VALUE, MINTURN ACKNOWLEDGES THAT DIGITALIZATION DOES NOT MEAN DEVALUATION OF A CERTAIN HUMAN ELEMENT IN PHOTOGRAPHY.



DOUG RICKARD

diversity of styles and training that is happening.”

While Leers aims to highlight a diversity in photographic practice, he also acknowledges that, “there is a predominance of digital work happening today in the photography world.” The work of San Francisco-based artist Doug Rickard is a good example of an embrace of digital technologies in photography. In his pieces for “New Photography,” he uses Google Maps to capture digital images of the most poverty-ridden, drug-addicted sectors of urban areas from Dallas to the Bronx. “He’s commenting on the ubiquity of digital images going on the web and also on issues of privacy and race and poverty,” says Leers. By simply capturing images that are not of his own creation, Rickard also challenges notions of authorship in the digital age.

Moyra Davey’s practice addresses the strange juxtaposition that arises when digital and analog are literally layered on top of one another. Moyra takes her own C-prints of quotidian objects, folds them, and mails them to friends in order to let the images accrue postage, stamps, and handwritten addresses. The physicality of the signs of postage creates a striking contrast to digital communication and the digital

image itself. “You have this very conscious analog element in the work, and its intention is that these are things you could never have in an e-mail correspondence,” Leers says.

While this type of work has long been institutionalized at museums like MoMA, it has also now been historicized. Kent Minturn, a lecturer in Columbia’s art history department has closely studied the transition from analog to digital, and, importantly, the effects of that shift. If “New Photography” shows anything, it’s that the divide between analog and digital is no longer the most pertinent issue.

Contemporary practice often ignores the imperative to treat a photograph as one would treat a traditional painting—an image enclosed in a frame. For the most part, analog stayed within these confines of presentation and therefore asserted a certain amount of quality and value in the photographic print. Digital dramatically changes our frame. Digitization means that one photograph can be reprinted hundreds of times for a nominal cost or simply uploaded for free. It also means that anyone, no matter their skill level or artistic aspirations, can take creative ownership of thousands of images. Minturn calls this phenomenon

“the vernacularization of photography.” While he neither condemns nor heralds this trend, he explains that it calls into question what is art and what isn’t.

“Museums still have to think about what makes this photograph different,” says Minturn. “Why is it special? Is it an unlimited print, or is there only one copy of it?” The idea of the photograph as a one-of-a-kind work of art, and therefore a highly valuable entity, is all but defunct. We must now consider the ways that mass proliferation necessarily affects our perception of a photographic work and its value.

While critics, curators, and historians will ultimately be the assignors of artistic value, Minturn acknowledges that digitalization does not mean devaluation of a certain human element in photography. Today, printing pictures from film seems as foreign to most people as carrying around a daguerreotype with a velvet screen, but that doesn’t mean we’ve stopped amassing and valuing images. The transition from scrapbooks to Facebook albums doesn’t mean that our interaction with the images necessarily changes. “There’s also the intimate personal side [to photography],” says Minturn. “And I don’t think that’s ever going to go away in the age of digital.” ●

An Atheistic Education

richard dawkins writes a children's book

BY MARIA CASTEX

ILLUSTRATION BY CECILIA CHEN

Richard Dawkins, the evolutionary biologist and atheist icon best known for titles *The Selfish Gene* (1976) and *The God Delusion* (2006), will soon add another line to his resume: children's author.

His newest book, *The Magic of Reality: How We Know What's Really True*, is set for release on Oct. 4. It is a collaboration between Dawkins and artist Dave McKean that aims to explain a wide range of natural phenomena. But the children's book, in its quest to provide answers, seems only to continue to raise questions that plague the discussion over the role of faith in education: Is the presence of faith education within a secular public school system inherently proselytic? Would not the unilateral promotion of any singular set of beliefs, whether religious or scientific, be worth questioning?

Books for children and young adults that champion a scientific worldview are not a new concept. In 1990, Dan Barker and Brian Strassburg published *Maybe Yes, Maybe No*, an illustrated "guide for young skeptics." In one section, a 10-year-old girl decides to check out a claim, made by her friends, that ghosts are moving the kitchen dishes. The book is less of an attack on religious thought, and more of a call for kids to question the supernatural: ESP, UFOs, astrology, and horoscopes, for example.

In 1993, Ellen Jackson took a more pointed approach, publishing *The Tree of Life: The Wonders of Evolution*. The illustrated book was aimed at very small children, as sort of an analog to the illustrated biblical tales that populate shelves of Sunday Schools. The concepts, then, were appropriately simplified: you won't find a mention of proto-Darwinism or sexual selection in this tome.

Dawkins has always been a strong advocate for science education. In 2006, Dawkins was quoted in *The Guardian* as saying that "the enlightenment is under threat." He went on: "it is no longer enough just to get on and do science. We have to devote a significant proportion of our time and resources to defending it from deliberate attack from organized ignorance."

However, many take issue with Dawkins' absolute distinction between enlightenment—understanding of the world through reason alone—and religion. Columbia College senior and InterVarsity Christian Fellowship President Derek Turner says that in his view, faith and reason can coexist, but, "there may be a distinction between the two in the sense that a person must decide which of the two will be their absolute standard. [Although] I think reason can take you very close to God, you'll

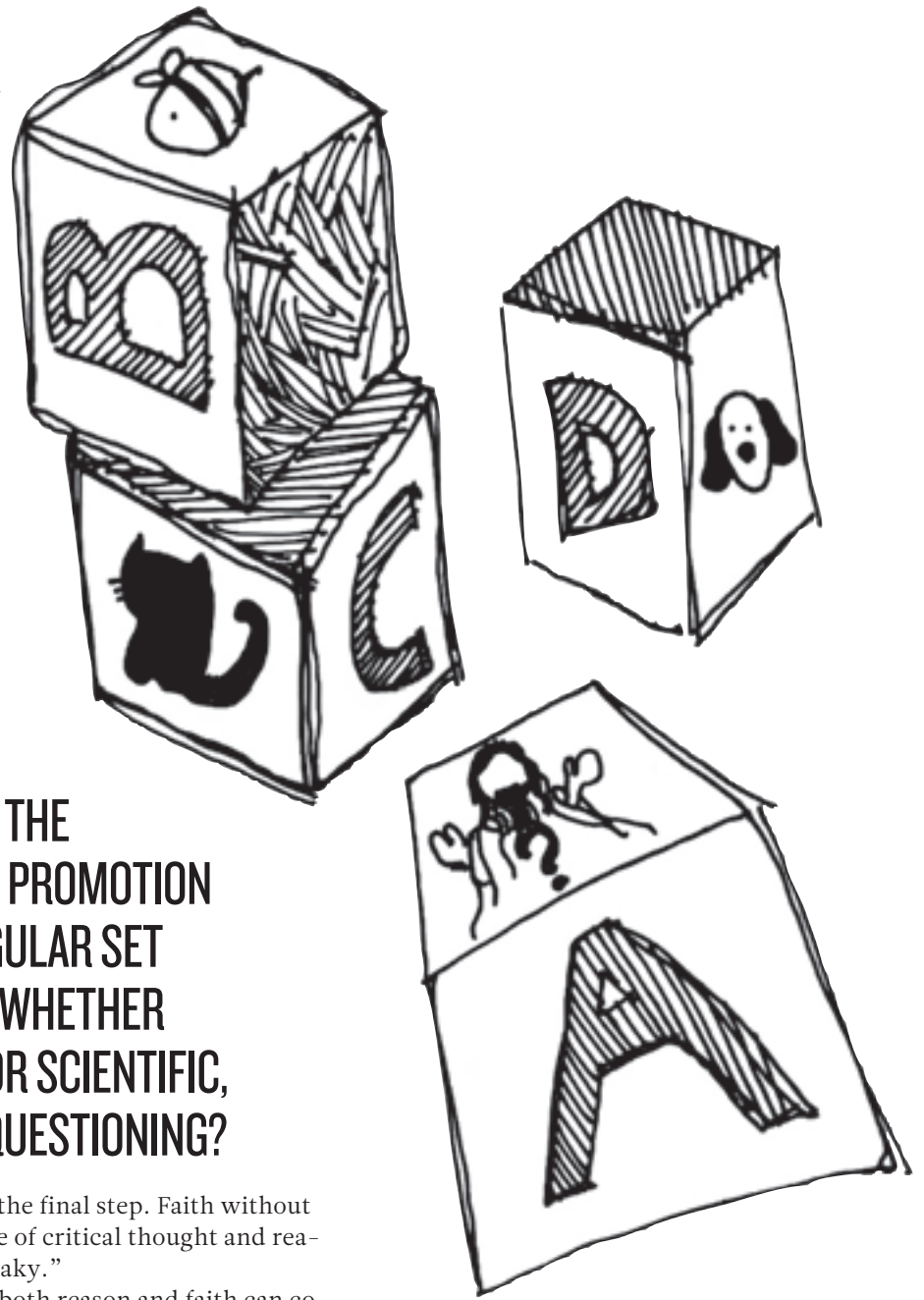
WOULD NOT THE UNILATERAL PROMOTION OF ANY SINGULAR SET OF BELIEFS, WHETHER RELIGIOUS OR SCIENTIFIC, BE WORTH QUESTIONING?

need faith to take the final step. Faith without supplementary use of critical thought and reason can be very shaky."

The belief that both reason and faith can co-exist has caused many to wonder, and rightly so, how big of a distinction should be made between religious and secular indoctrination such as Dawkins'. A subtitle like *How We Know What's Really True* implies a degree of certainty and infallibility that may be interpreted as atheistic arrogance. The question of whether scientific fact can be taught as an infallible truth, seems of little importance to Dawkins.

Turner believes secularism is taught in public schools as a universally-accepted worldview. "I believe [secular humanism] is just as much of a worldview as a Christian one, and thus it cannot be presented as neutral," Turner says. "A public school system that understood that and communicated that to students would be ideal. Let the students develop on their own—don't tell them to be secular humanists for the same reason you wouldn't tell them to be Christian."

In his book, *Does God Belong in Public Schools?* (2005), constitutional expert and Columbia Law School Professor Kent Greenawalt argues that students ought to be taught more about religion—both its contributions and



shortcomings—especially in courses in history. "To do otherwise," he writes, "is to present a seriously distorted picture of society and indirectly to be other than neutral in presenting secularism and religion."

Sarah Ngu, a senior at Columbia College and president of Columbia's Veritas Forum, believes there should be a balance that schools aim for, at the very least. "It's about understanding different forms of truth," she says. According to Ngu—who with the Veritas Forum seeks to provide answers to life's hardest questions through discourse between all types of world views—fear of any ideology, whether religious or secular, is "symptomatic of a fear of [all] conversation," and the desire to push aside one worldview completely seems to stem from fear.

Ngu, an American studies/political science major, says she believes that all ideas and arguments are worthy of consideration. "Let all ideas come to the table," she says. "If you have nothing to fear then let these ideas stand for themselves. Let people have these conversations." ●



An Afternoon With Roast Chicken

cooking and common ground

BY JULIA MILLER
ILLUSTRATION BY CINDY PAN

The kitchen of 14 Robbey Lane had not changed much from its original Levittown arrangement and aesthetic: tiled eggshell-white with linoleum and papered with a black-and-silver print borrowed from a mid-century modern thrust to catch light and split it open. A far cry from the techno-stainless-self-closing-steel-coffee-auto-bread-toasting whathaveyou that constitutes the modern cooking experience. No, this room was hardly the place Generation X wants to pressure cook its kale chips or salamander its quinoa.

Then, I was an exuberant ten-year-old, to whom an afternoon spent inside was more like 25 to life at Alcatraz, and she was a woman whose best years were long behind her, leaving a future of age and its cruelties. That we had almost nothing to talk about was obvious, but made almost painful by the visiting hours my mother requested of me that afternoon. This translated into an encounter of dramatic silence, punctuated by unoffensive remarks. I probably said something like: “There’s a fork underneath the refrigerator.” A long time later, she added that “The porch is lovely in the summa.” My Brooklyn-raised grandmother tended to speak when my glance wandered from our plenary at hand and out into the modest backyard. I longed for its greener pastures; “Lovely indeed,” I thought, given it was the only place to snag a breeze during a Long Island summer in a house sans air conditioning.

Wheelchair-bound in split-level, the kitchen

was the easiest place to spend a relatively normal afternoon liberated from the uncertainties of her immobility, and the only place we had in common. She suggested I help her with dinner.

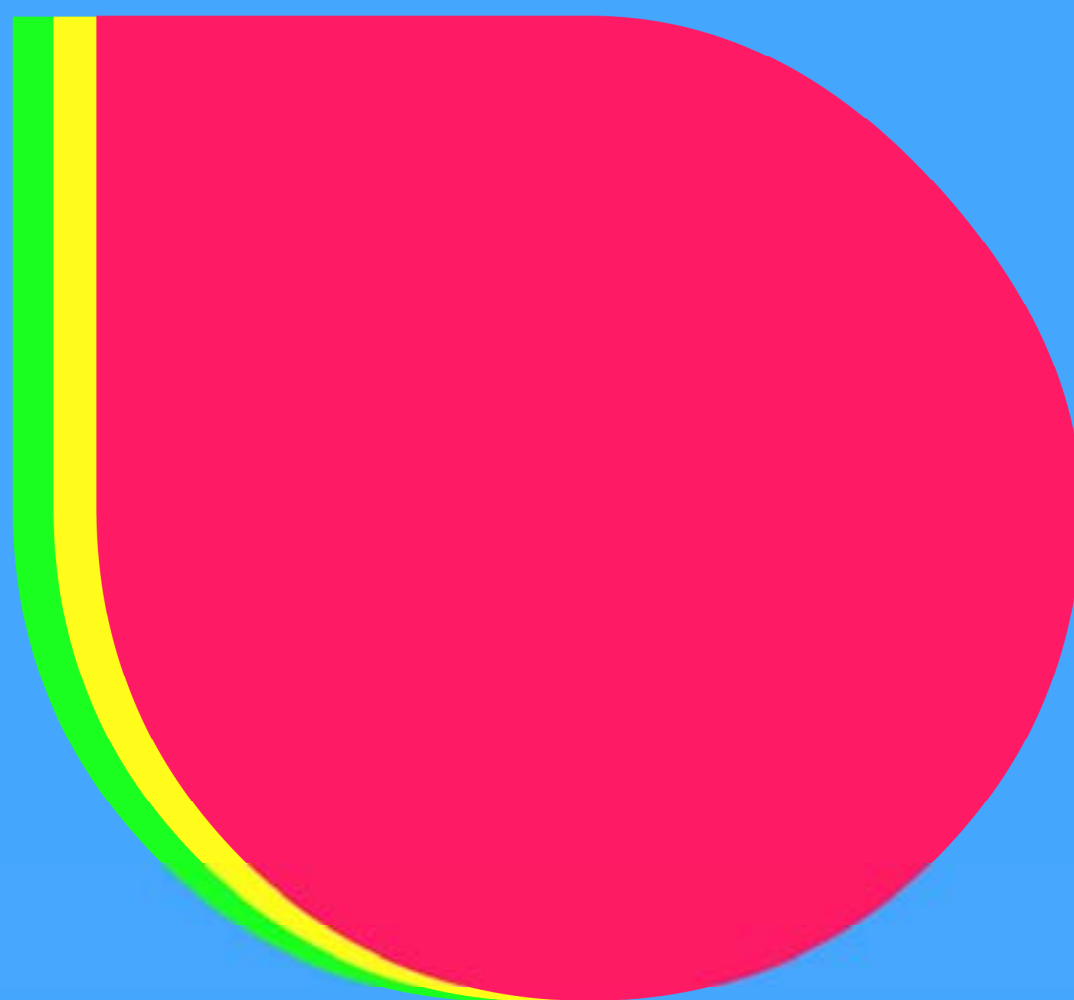
The chicken, prepared for us by the kosher butcher of course, would be soaked first to release the flesh. Drained and dried, it was then coated with seasoning, oil, and butter. She offered me the pepper corns and a meat mallet, instructing me to smack them into a powder so that they could be mixed with the salt and rubbed onto the skin. This sort of task, by design, marshaled my thirsty, age-typical anxious attention, and I could execute it enthusiastically and well. She laughed at the vigor of my great pummeling swings—the mallet was too heavy to be wielded gracefully. When I finished, she mixed the salt and pepper with finely-chopped rosemary, thyme and parsley and brushed it onto the skin with oil to be grilled in a cast-iron pan with melted butter and lemon.

Once the chicken had browned, another pan would be stacked onto the bird and then baked in the oven with shallots and fortified Chablis. Unfortunately, this vessel was of an old-fashioned technology, and its attendant follies forced me to assume the very-much unwanted responsibility of keeping a close eye on the chicken’s progress, and just about when my youthful patience was on its last leg, the roast was ready to serve. We eyed the glistening, steaming dish on its trivet, gleeful in its completeness and splendor. Just then, my mother returned to release me from my duties, at least for the foreseeable afternoon. A quick glance at the chicken, and then back at my grandmother, she expressed silent deference and in my im-

TO STRETCH A BANAL INGREDIENT INTO A DISH, TO ACCUMULATE A DIVERSITY OF ELEMENTS INTO SOMETHING HARMONIOUS AND COMPLEX, IS AN ACHIEVEMENT PAID FOR WITH INTELLIGENCE AND PRACTICE.

mature excitement and misestimation of the moment, I bolted for the door.

A fine roast chicken is a peculiar art, whose success is hard to come by. To superimpose flavor onto the otherwise bland, tasteless piece of meat is an easy task accomplished in just a few short condiments, but to stretch a banal ingredient into a dish, to accumulate a diversity of elements into something harmonious and complex, is an achievement paid for with intelligence and practice. Though by the time I came into her life she had long sailed past times of happiness and unconditional affection, in this dish it was clear that she was able to isolate and preserve a delicate sensibility for cooking that could survive the persistent menace of her disabilities, as well as function as a mediator between her conceptions and mine. ●



Work for The Eye.

We're looking for writers, photographers,
illustrators, and web designers.

For more information, e-mail us at
eye@columbiaspectator.com