Flying high with *The Night Gardener*, *The Secret Keepers*, and *Ugly*—plus 19 other finalists in our annual Children’s Books of the Year reconnaissance.
Chad & Destiny

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Democrat Katrina Lantos Swett is an advocate for human rights regardless of which party she offends

ON THE COVER: Illustration by Krieg Barrie
It’s not easy working alongside the great and prolific writers of WORLD—aspiring as I do to write occasionally. Which is why I set small goals for myself as a “writer.” So here’s a small accomplishment—I’ll celebrate here today: I have managed, with a lot of help, to fill this space in WORLD Magazine for a whole year. We envisioned this space as a spot to update our members on changes here at WORLD, give some behind-the-scenes looks at what’s going on, and help you get to know our people better.

But as I say, what little I do here pales in comparison to more impressive achievements by our real writers:

Joel Belz is the Iron Man of WORLD columnists. In the 30-plus years we’ve published WORLD Magazine, Joel has never missed an issue. By my estimation, he has written more than 1,200 columns. For many years, that meant writing a new column every week, and that was in addition to his editorial and administrative work. To many of us, that column in the opening pages is WORLD Magazine.

Mindy Belz isn’t far behind. Marvin has written nearly 900 columns, along with his extensive contributions throughout the magazine. Like Joel, Marvin has had other responsibilities in addition to writing his column. Unlike Joel, Marvin has not written a column in every issue since he started. Early on, Marvin shared columnist duties with a few others, until he took his now-familiar spot as the regular closing columnist in May 1995.

Joel and Marvin are our longest-serving columnists, but Andrée Seu Peterson (starting in 2000, with nearly 600 columns), and Janie B. Cheaney and Mindy Belz (both starting in 2008, both with more than 200 columns) all have their own impressive records of consistency and thoughtful excellence. Mindy’s contributions, of course, extend well beyond her column and she’s been here since the beginning.

With God’s blessing and the continued support of you members, WORLD will continue printing pages, serving up digital content, producing radio programming, and delivering biblical worldview journalism through any other means available.

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To report, interpret, and illustrate the news in a timely, accurate, enjoyable, and arresting fashion from a perspective committed to the Bible as the inerrant Word of God.

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I had to go back and read the column a second time. It just didn’t seem believable.

What made it worse was that I knew the fellow who had written the account I found so hard to believe. He worked for WORLD magazine.

I was that fellow.

WORLD published the column in question 25 years ago. It was all but unbelievable back then, in 1992. In today’s ugly, bitter, and angry political setting, most WORLD readers would almost certainly say: “That didn’t really happen. That is absolutely not true.”

The story was about Paul Henry, congressman from the 5th District in Michigan. The 5th District had belonged for a number of years to Gerald Ford, but Paul Henry had won four elections there—typically by bigger margins than Ford ever imagined. Paul Henry was the son of Carl F. H. Henry, the founding editor of Christianity Today and a giant in the evangelical Christian community.

The younger Henry tended to be a political moderate. Back then, I wrote, “He’s usually too hopeful for the role of government and too open to what are euphemistically called ‘pluralistic’ influences in public life.” But everyone in his home district in and around Grand Rapids, and in Washington, D.C., knew him to be a man thoughtfully and deeply committed to his Christian faith.

All that came to a poignant focus when Henry learned in 1992 that his opponent for the House seat was Carol Kooistra—a woman who had earlier been a fellow member of the same church in Grand Rapids where Henry held his membership. In fact, he had first introduced her to the whole issue of Christians’ taking an active role in politics. Their paths parted—and then she took him seriously, becoming the Democratic candidate to oppose him in the newly reorganized 3rd District.

By all accounts, it was a model campaign, focused on public policy issues instead of personal matters. The two candidates were friends. They argued vigorously—but civilly.

Then, just two weeks before the election, doctors told Henry that he had a massive brain tumor. It was inoperable, they said, and all but certain to take his life within a few months. In one sense, everything about the campaign took on a new character.

Yet if the campaign until then had indeed been a model of mutual respect, that character was now enhanced. Beth Bandstra, Henry’s campaign manager, credited Kooistra with running a “class act” effort. In a show of fairness that must have been unique nationwide, Kooistra immediately withdrew a planned literature distribution in which she intended to attack Henry’s voting record.

Then, wherever she went, she actually helped distribute Henry’s literature “so that voters could be well informed about both sides when they went to the polls.”

Henry won the next week’s election decisively, was sworn into office for his fifth term in Congress, and served in that office until the cancer ended his life the following July. He was 51.

If U.S. and state politics needed that display of good manners and respect in 1992, how much more today? I can’t imagine a single congressional district in the whole wide country where such a story could unfold.

“I’ve pretty much quit listening to anything political,” one of our staffers here at WORLD told me recently. “It has all gotten so juvenile.”

Yes, indeed. Except that I know a few children who might manage things more capably than so many of those folks right now running our political parties and our local, state, and federal governments.

If I did a column about those kids, you might well call it another case of “fake news.” But I bet that at least you’d read it.

Wherever Kooistra went, she helped distribute Henry’s literature ‘so that voters could be well informed about both sides.’
I mean, I get it. This dude runs away from God and gets swallowed by a giant fish or something and then gets barfed up on the shore.

Am I supposed to believe that? Didn't Pinocchio get swallowed by a whale too?

It's a good question.

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Terrorism aftermath

Forensic experts gather evidence after a Palm Sunday bomb explosion at Mar Girgis Coptic Church in Tanta, Egypt. Muslim militants bombed the church and another in Alexandria, killing at least 45 Coptic Christians and wounding 119 during worship services.
“Right here, boys! Right here! Get your cake, pie, dill pickles, and ice cream! Eat all you can! Be a glutton! Stuff yourselves! It’s all free, boys! It’s all free! Hurry, hurry, hurry, hurry!” —Voiceover in Walt Disney’s Pinocchio (1940)

Greeley, the 2-year-old we brought home from the dog pound just before Christmas, shows signs of having been abused by his last owner. He’s loving, but he startles easily if a person comes up behind him. Sometimes he lies on his back in a “paws up, don’t swat” posture.

Some conservatives who come to Washington become like Greeley. Some have faced enough liberal criticism over the years to make them wary, but D.C. attacks feel like electrocution. Others lionized in their home states face the shock of not being invited to the right cocktail parties.

Both kinds have their character tested in Washington, since they have an easy way to become heroes in The Washington Post (WaPo): Just move left, especially on issues like abortion, and enter the inner ring. Justice Anthony “Flipper” Kennedy is a prime example of responding to the call of the styled.

Character will be crucial in Washington as Donald Trump motors toward the completion of his first 100 days in office. So far he has one big win and one big loss, and the aftereffects of both will give Christian conservatives much to watch and pray for over the next several years.

The win was the confirmation of new Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch, who in Colorado showed the ability to resist peer pressure from other legal whizzes and mediocrats. Evangelicals who reluctantly voted for Trump will hold their breath as the court takes on cases involving religious liberty and abortion.

The loss concerned replacement of Obamacare. Pundits are wondering what kind of deal President Trump might next attempt. Fareed Zakaria of the WaPo and CNN hopes Trump will return to his praise (in The America We Deserve, Renaissance Books, 2000) for Canada’s nationalized, single-payer, no-competition system: “I’m a conservative on most issues but a liberal on this one.”

Kevin Williamson of National Review argues that “great negotiator” Trump was “humiliated” on healthcare and now faces “the inevitable temptation to ‘grow in office.’… Trump being Trump, nobody knows where he’ll be politically the day after tomorrow, but… he was never a conservative.”

Some pundits want the president to fail, but since the election I have not been anti-Trump. I’m pro-America and pray, for the good of the country, that the only president we’ve got will succeed. When Trump, though, says “drain the swamp,” I suspect he has chosen the wrong metaphor.

It’s appropriate in a literal sense: Part of Washington is built on a swamp. During the Civil War the ground north of the Capitol that now supports and surrounds Union Station was a center of alcoholism and prostitution known as Swampoodle. The Washington Nationals baseball club from 1886 through 1889 played at 6,000-capacity Swampoodle Grounds.

But “drain the swamp” as metaphor has a convoluted history. Socialists early in the 20th century called Washington and New York a “capitalist
swamp.” They demanded drainage and said killing a few of its mosquitoes was insufficient. We run the risk of dehumanizing people when we think of them as swamp denizens.

I’d propose a different term for Washington: Pleasure Island, the theme park in Disney’s Pinocchio. The purportedly good news for boys: On the island they get drunk, break windows, draw on the Mona Lisa, and do whatever else they sinfully desire, free of the law or any adult supervision. The bad news: Pleasure Island is a trap, for as the boys act like jackasses, they dehumanize themselves and turn into donkeys.

Since the Pinocchio story originated as an Italian newspaper serial in 1881, it was not about Republicans turning into Democrats, but today’s Washington ethos is like the come-on when the boys arrive at Pleasure Island. Barack Obama’s first year in office brought an $831 billion stimulus package that stimulated government jobs—Stuff yourselves! It’s all free, boys!—but probably prevented or killed more business employment, while shooting up the national debt.

Will President Trump’s first year end up similarly? If changing D.C. culture were a technical feat like draining a swamp, it would be relatively easy: People don’t want to live in swamps. Pleasure Island, though, seems like fun, until the bill comes: As the whip-cracking coachman in Pinocchio tells a boy-becoming-donkey who pleads for mercy, “You boys have had your fun. Now pay for it.”

Along with recording what happens to Obamacare and the federal deficit, WORLD will watch the trend in our political system generally. Doesn’t it seem that the pendulum is taking wider swings each time White House control or legislative power shifts? See how the Senate has gone from requiring 67 votes to cut off a filibuster, to 60, to 51 for some judicial appointments, to 51 for Supreme Court nominees as well.

Will a bare majority soon be all that’s needed for every piece of legislation? If so, the pendulum will swing even wider, and we may end up in a pit. Paws up, Greeley? 😺

---

BY THE NUMBERS

156
The number of emergency sirens—intended for tornadoes and nuclear attacks—a hacker set off in Dallas late on April 7.

175,000
The approximate number of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia who could be affected by the Russian government’s attempt to outlaw the group there.

22
The number of women and girls Boko Haram militants kidnapped in northeast Nigeria in late March, according to local accounts. Nigerian officials denied the reports.

2,000
The approximate number of sexual abuse and exploitation allegations against UN personnel over the last 12 years, according to an Associated Press report.

42
The number of triple-doubles Oklahoma City Thunder guard Russell Westbrook compiled this season, breaking Oscar Robertson’s 55-year-old record.
Lost
Abdul Hamid Youssef lost 25 relatives on April 4 when Syrian President Bashar al-Assad launched an attack on the rebel-held area where Youssef’s family lived. The attack was one of the deadliest in years. The Syrian military has denied using chemical weapons and has blamed the rebels. Youssef and his family were sleeping during the attack. He says he awoke gasping for breath, and soon saw people dropping in the street. In his parent’s house, he found his two brothers dead on the floor, and at his own home he found his wife and twin babies dead, foam on their mouths. A picture of Youssef, cradling his dead babies, went viral on the internet.

Fined
When U.K. citizen Jon Platt took his daughter for vacation in April 2015, he started a nationwide debate. School officials had refused permission for his daughter to go with him to Disney World in Florida, citing compulsory attendance laws. He took her anyway, and the school issued Platt a fine of about $150. Platt sued, citing his 6-year-old’s good attendance record and calling the fine an overreach by a “nanny state.” Two local judges agreed with him, but the local council pushed the case to the British Supreme Court. The court on April 6 overturned the previous decisions and ruled Platt had no right to withdraw his daughter without a valid reason, such as illness.

Accepted
Stanford University accepted Ziad Ahmed after he wrote “#Black Lives Matter” 100 times across his personal application statement to the university. Critics said the acceptance of Ahmed showed a lowering of standards by Stanford. The high schooler published a picture of his personal statement on Twitter and received immediate applause. Some detractors criticized the apparent simplicity of his statement, calling it an insufficient defense of the movement and an example of “virtue signaling.” Admirers said he was bold and his resumé impressive enough for Stanford’s standard. Yale and Princeton have also accepted Ahmed.

Died
Lolis Elie, a lawyer who helped desegregate New Orleans, died on April 4 at age 87. Elie grew up under segregation in Louisiana and left the South at 17, vowing never to return. He served in the Army, where a fellow soldier urged him to pursue law. He went home to earn a law degree and was soon at the vanguard of the movement to integrate public accommodations from lunch counters to shopping districts. Elie helped defend members of a racial equality coalition engaged in lunch counter protests in a case that went to the Supreme Court, and he negotiated desegregation agreements with businessmen.

Died
Don Rickles, a comedian famous for insult comedy, died on April 6 at age 90. Rickles began his comedic career after serving in the Navy in World War II and then failing as an insurance salesman. After struggling to find his niche, his comedy took off around the mid-1960s. He began to interact with his audience more, improvising insults that made even the insulted person laugh. He became popular in Hollywood after insulting Frank Sinatra, making him fall off his chair laughing. To the surprise of critics, Rickles remained popular. He worked until he was in his 80s, running shows at least 75 nights a year even then.
A PERSONAL MESSAGE FROM
GOVERNOR MIKE HUCKABEE

I am excited to be able to share this amazing opportunity with the readers of World Magazine.

On my many trips to Israel, I’ve always been especially drawn to the area around the Sea of Galilee, its natural beauty, and the waterfront where Jesus spent most of his ministry and performed most of his miracles. I first came here as a teenager in 1973, and as many times as I have been here, I never get over just how unique and magnificent the area truly is.

When I saw the plans for Galilee Shores, I immediately understood how rare this opportunity is. Therefore, my wife and I decided to become the first members. A one-of-a-kind Christian retreat and resort at this special seaside location - the very epicenter of where Christianity began - is being developed, featuring a luxurious, 38-suite, state-of-the-art boutique membership resort, with all of the amenities one could dream of. There’s something for everyone in the family. Walk a few steps from your suite and you will be on one of the only sandy beaches on the entire Sea of Galilee.

By becoming an exclusive member at Galilee Shores, you will enjoy membership in perpetuity - a benefit unmatched anywhere else in the world. Just imagine all the ways you can use your membership - make your own annual retreat, gift to family and friends, donate usage to your church or favorite charity, or use it to bring others closer to their faith.

Act now while individual and group memberships are still available. For a limited time, and to an exclusive group in the Christian community in the United States at my request, 15% of the memberships are being offered through a special pre-construction opportunity.

If you’d like to learn more about how you can secure a permanent part of the Holy Land by becoming an exclusive member at Galilee Shores, please call 1.844.GALILEE (1.844.425.4533) or visit GalileeShores.com to request a free 40-page e-book and detailed membership and pricing information, including a special discount available to readers of World Magazine.

I invite you to join me in what is truly a unique, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Blessings to you.
When we assume the power to alter the original public meaning of a statute through the process of interpretation, we assume a power that is not ours.

From the dissenting opinion of Judge DIANE SYKES of the 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Hively v. Ivy Tech, a ruling that changes the meaning of the word sex in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to include sexual orientation in cases of employment discrimination.

‘It is the most consequential decision I ever made.’

Senate Majority Leader MITCH MCCONNELL, R-Ky., on his decision last year not to take up the Supreme Court nomination of Obama nominee Merrick Garland and to state that the president elected in 2016 should fill the open seat on the Supreme Court. The Senate on April 7 approved the nomination of Neil Gorsuch to the seat.

‘It’s like a form of hazing.’

U.S. Supreme Court Justice ELENA KAGAN on one of the duties she’s had as the court’s junior member: open the door when someone knocks during justices’ internal deliberations. After more than six years on the job, Kagan gave the assignment to Justice Neil Gorsuch, who arrived in mid-April.

‘A suicide mission.’

Senate Majority Whip JOHN CORNYN, R-Texas, on Democratic plans to defeat U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas. No Democrat has won a statewide race in Texas since 1994.

‘I saw a human head once. We were walking and then there was a rocket and people died. I’m trying to forget it, but you can’t forget something like that.’

MOHAMMED SHENI, 14, of Aleppo, Syria, on his memories of the battle in that city.
I'm not going to work with Republicans until they start acting like adults.

North Korea is getting more belligerent and dangerous.

It may be time to respond to Kim Jong Un.

What are you doing, Mr. President? Tomahawks, nukes, a drone strike, SEAL team 6?

Don't be ridiculous...

I'm saying we send in these airport security guys from U.S.A.

The unmasking and spying were caused by a video...

This is a sanctuary city, sir, and we don't listen to Yankee law.

Now hand over our federal funds...

The endangered species on the verge of extinction in California.
Uncovering the truth

It got past the school board. It got past the teachers. But a newly hired principal’s list of academic credentials couldn’t get past the cub reporters of a Pittsburg, Kan., high school. Reporters at The Booster Redux, the school newspaper for Pittsburg High School, discovered that new principal Amy Robertson had gained the job by listing a diploma mill on her resumé. Students published a March 31 article discrediting the principal’s advanced degree from Corllins University, an institution without any accreditation. By April 4, the school board announced that Robertson had resigned.

Them bones

One sure-fire method of finding how many hipsters live in your city: check the price of bones. According to broth-maker Tressa Yellig, the price of beef bones has risen from roughly $1 per pound to $4 per pound in parts of the Pacific Northwest. Yellig, who makes bone broth at her Portland, Ore., company Salt, Fire & Time, says demand for beef bones has been spiking due to an increased interest in making homemade broths and soups. One Virginia farmer told NPR the bones she used to throw away she now packages and sells for $2 per pound.

Leaves thieves

In an official statement released April 4, police in Hamilton, Ontario, asked residents to “remain calm” after thieves made off with a refrigerated trailer containing $45,000 worth of lettuce. Investigators believe the truck was probably stolen April 1 and are asking the public to “lettuce know if you have any tips.”

Unmanned essay

A single word separated Northern Arizona University English major Cailin Jeffers from a better grade on a recent essay. Jeffers says her professor, Anne Scott, marked her down a point on her essay for using the word “mankind” instead of a gender-neutral synonym. In an email about the returned paper, the professor called Jeffers’ language choice a “political and linguistic statement,” but also offered to allow the student to revise the paper in order to earn the point back.

Repeat offender

Everyone near Sonia Bryce of Willenhall, England, knows her favorite song is Ed Sheeran’s “Shape of You.” She won’t let them forget it. Police repeatedly warned her about playing loud music, but that didn’t stop her from blaring the song over loudspeakers on repeat. Police arrested her in March after she disrupted an entire neighborhood for over an hour with the Sheeran hit on a loop blasting from her stereo. In December, a judge had sentenced her to six weeks in jail for the same offense. This time, the judge handed down an eight-week sentence.

Manage your membership: wng.org/membership
Accidental assault

In 2002, the Royal Marines of the United Kingdom accidentally invaded Spain. That revelation came from Alan West, a retired senior officer of the Royal Navy, who acknowledged the incident in a BBC interview in April. West explained that the marines were attempting to stage a landing exercise on Gibraltar, the tiny peninsula south of Spain and controlled by the United Kingdom, when they got lost and invaded a foreign country. “I had a phone call from the military commander saying, ‘Sir, I’m afraid something awful’s happened,’” he told the BBC. “I thought, ‘Goodness me, what?’ And he said, ‘I’m afraid we’ve invaded Spain, but we don’t think they’ve noticed.’” West said he then informed Spanish government officials, who chose to let the misdeed pass.

Royal Marines in the shadow of the Rock of Gibraltar

Baker beware

One potential ingredient in the recipes found in actress Gwyneth Paltrow’s cookbook didn’t make it on the page: salmonella. According to scientists at North Carolina State University, the chicken recipes in Paltrow’s 2015 cookbook, My Father’s Daughter, give home cooks bad directions. The scientists criticized Paltrow in the February edition of the British Food Journal for telling readers to wash raw poultry—an outdated practice—and failing to provide readers with the final temperature for each dish in order to kill bacteria that lead to food poisoning.

Language art?

Hoodlums in Cambridge, England, have tagged a local housing development with graffiti—in Latin. The vandals spray-painted “locus in domos” and “loci populum” on new houses recently erected on the site of a beloved pub. “This is a bit hard to translate,” Cambridge classics professor Mary Beard told the BBC. “But I think what they’re trying to say is that a lovely place has been turned into houses.”
Did You Know?

More Muslims came to Christ in the last 50 years than in the previous 1400 years since Islam began.

The founder of Islam never read the Bible in his own language, and the overwhelming majority of Muslims have never read the Bible.

Thousands of Muslims are coming to Christ and eagerly asking for Bibles, despite the conflicts in the Middle East.

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719-344-5020 (Office)  601-966-2022 (Mobile)

The Arabic Study Bible (ASB) text is based on the timeless Van Dyck faithful translation from the original languages which remains the best and most loved translation.
If you’re over the age of 30, you may never have heard of 13 Reasons Why, a best-selling young adult novel that Netflix has adapted into a hit series. But chances are just about every teenager you know has. In the course of one week, four parents of adolescents called or emailed to ask me about the drama that premiered on March 31, saying their kids and all their kids’ friends are buzzing about it.

It’s little wonder given that, aside from the book’s popularity, plenty of adult critics nationwide have been hailing it, with Salon calling the show “brilliant,” Vanity Fair describing it as “visually genius,” and TV Guide saying it’s “must-see TV” that makes the “best argument in favor of binge-watching.”

Netflix takes the simple but hooky premise—a 17-year-old girl leaves behind cassette recordings for the people she believes caused her to commit suicide—and expands it into a full-blown whydunit complete with conspiracies, double-crosses, and vigilante justice. Instead of occurring over a single night, the intrigue plays out over many harrowing months, giving the story plenty of time to meander into much darker and more distressing territory.

What hasn’t changed is that we still see events play out through the eyes of Clay Jensen (Dylan Minnette), a sweet, shy junior who harbored a crush on his classmate and co-worker Hannah Baker (Katherine Langford). After Hannah kills herself, Clay is stunned to discover she lists him among one of her reasons why. Clay and viewers are kept in suspense until episode 11 of 13, trying to guess what such a good-hearted kid could possibly have done to Hannah. The rest of the
targets on Hannah’s tapes have far less reason to wonder, and much of Netflix’s added plot comes from their machinations to keep their parents and school authorities from uncovering everything from bullying and slander to stalking and rape.

It’s hard to believe high school has changed enough in the 10 years since the novel was published to justify the lives of the characters altering so radically from page to screen. Whereas none of the kids in the book confessed same-sex attraction, now, in yet another example of massive overrepresentation, three of the primary 11 do. The show’s language is similarly amped-up for shock value—scarcely a line of dialogue passes without one of the teens dropping an F-bomb, even when talking to their parents. This profanity is mild, however, compared with verbal attacks leveled at Hannah and other girls, which includes describing them in the foulest terms as sexual receptacles.

While the sex-and-drug fests depicted are, I suspect, vastly overblown from reality, the sickening language probably is true to the experience of many high schoolers. And that brings us to one facet of modern life that isn’t present in 13 Reasons Why. No one—not school administrators, not students, and certainly not any of the parents—professes any sincere faith or religious conviction. Strangely, given the subject matter, the nature of the soul or the possibility of eternity never even comes up. And it’s interesting to note that the godlessness of the town gives it, in its own crude, supposedly inclusive way, a more judgmental outlook than anything in Christian theology.

Throughout, the story takes pains to emphasize that Hannah’s reputation as the school slut is wholly manufactured. But what if it wasn’t? What if, as a lonely, hurting girl, she’d actually done some of the things that sully her reputation? Would her suicide be less tragic? Would she be less deserving of Clay’s love and friendship? By consistently underlining Hannah’s virginity and victimhood, 13 Reasons Why seems to suggest she would.

It may not contain the profanity or graphic sex scenes, but the Bible deals with far grittier realities than teen fiction, offering hope, love, and forgiveness to those who aren’t so pure as Hannah Baker. Promiscuous girls like the woman at the well and Rahab are redeemed and raised to high honors. I wouldn’t advise letting my teens watch 13 Reasons Why, but I would use its popularity as an opportunity to remind them of this.

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**Documentary**

**Five Came Back**


The U.S. government enlisted the five to produce battle films, ranging from documentaries to propaganda. The war changed the directors and their subsequent films. Stevens directed Spencer Tracy–Katharine Hepburn comedies before the war. At the end of the war he filmed the awful scenes at the Dachau concentration camp (the series replays his footage), a record that was used for the Nuremberg trials. Stevens quit making comedies after that.

This no-frills documentary is sometimes plodding, combining war footage (where soldiers let fly a few profanities) and movie footage with commentary from five modern filmmakers: Lawrence Kasdan, Steven Spielberg, Guillermo del Toro, Paul Greengrass, and Francis Ford Coppola. The modern five are mostly reduced to narrators, with a rare moviemaking insight here and there.

The series ends with a quote from Capra about the fundamental goodness of human beings in the face of evil. But an earlier quote is revealing. Of the five, Stevens seemed to have experienced the most trauma, filming D-Day and then the battles for Europe over the next year. When he came upon the Dachau camp, he said, “What kind of creatures are we?” When the starving camp prisoners grabbed at him, “I feel a Nazi,” he said. “That’s a fierce thing to discover within yourself, that which you despise.” At least one of the directors came back from the war with a sense of the darkness of human hearts that contradicted the glitter of Hollywood.

—by EMILY BELZ

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**BOX OFFICE TOP 10**

FOR THE WEEKEND OF APRIL 7-9

according to Box Office Mojo

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<th>Rank</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Studio</th>
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<td>The Boss Baby</td>
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<td>Smurfs: The Lost Village*</td>
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<td>Going in Style*</td>
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<td>Ghost in the Shell*</td>
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<td>Kong: Skull Island*</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>The Case for Christ*</td>
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*Reviewed by WORLD
“Authenticity—
that's what they're after now. Authenticity informed with optimism.”
So declares a character in the charming British drama Their Finest, in regard to creating a wartime propaganda movie that will lift public morale for the war effort. Authenticity is also what Their Finest tries to achieve through a bitter-sweet tale of ordinary citizens enduring the grit and chaos of war through love, laughter, and storytelling.

It’s 1940 in London, and Catrin Cole (Gemma Arterton) is interviewing for a secretarial job at the Ministry of Information’s film division. Instead, she gets hired to write women’s lines for propaganda shorts—or the “slop,” as head writer Tom Buckley (Sam Claflin) dismissively dubs it: “Girl talk, women's dialogue, woof woof.” Buckley then realizes Catrin possesses greater writing skills than just creating lines for women, and soon the pair are working on a full-length film targeting the patriotic heartstrings of British and American moviegoers.

Authenticity and optimism are the effort’s rallying theme, but the cynical, prickly Buckley understands that while war is fought with guns, war is made palatable through cinema, because “stories have structure, purpose, and meaning... unlike life.” So even as air-raid sirens wail and bombs explode outside, Catrin and Buckley bang away on typewriters in the office late into the night, occasionally brushing ceiling debris off their desks. And like the fictional screenplay they craft together, the actual screenplay of Their Finest involves a love triangle, tragedy, female heroism, and a cute, sad-eyed dog.

Some crude language and a brief sex scene give Their Finest an R rating, but it’s otherwise a heartening, enjoyable, finely textured story that will evoke tears of laughter and sympathy. The mostly British cast is endearing, particularly the tender yet laugh-aloud scenes with Bill Nighy, who plays a fading actor whose ego has not yet deflated. It’s a tough balancing act to employ lighthearted comedy and biting wit in a WWII drama without downplaying the serious devastation of war, but Their Finest pulls it off with, yes, authenticity and optimism. —by SOPHIA LEE

On the list of the best caper movies, the clever and funny Dirty Rotten Scoundrels sits near the top. The 1988 hit starring Michael Caine works in part because it doesn't whitewash its characters’ chicanery. But the new heist flick Going in Style, also starring Caine, hands over its wallet to the wealth-redistribution agenda setters, and they rob the film of much of its fun.

In this remake of a 1979 movie by the same name, Caine plays Joe, a steel company retiree. Joe and two former co-workers, his best friends Willie (Morgan Freeman) and Albert (Alan Arkin), face hardships when the steel company freezes pensions to pay off its debts. Joe hatches a plan to stick up the bank handling the company's finances—though only for the amount of money the three stand to lose.

To rationalize its rallying cry that “everyone deserves a piece of the pie” regardless of how they get it, the film spends its capital portraying the system’s victims with extra sympathy: Joe gets an eviction notice, Willie will die without a kidney transplant, and relationships with granddaughters could evaporate. The film mixes in a righteous message: “It’s a culture’s duty to take care of its elderly.” But Joe, Willie, and Albert never seek legitimate assistance. Feeling cheated, they turn directly to crime.

Going in Style (rated PG-13 for drug content, language, and some suggestive material) does have its entertaining moments. The robbery goes haywire, but an elaborate cover-up might get the heisters off. The veteran actors play up their elderly selves, as when Joe, early in the film, hyps the octogenarians’ maturity as an asset to pull off the holdup.

“We have skills, experience,” Joe points out. “And arthritis, gout, and shingles,” Willie groans.

But the movie hits rock bottom when, near the finale, it sends an unmistakable message that young people are expected to aid and abet what duplicitous schemes their elders may concoct.

—by BOB BROWN

See all our movie reviews at wng.org/movies
A recent Pew Research Center poll found 46 percent of American adults saying they felt at least once a week a sense of wonder about the universe. Surprisingly, 24 percent said they seldom or never had that feeling. Another surprise: 24 percent of those who self-identified as Protestant evangelicals said they seldom or never had that feeling.

How can evangelicals not have that feeling when we look at the heavens that declare the glory of God? How can scientists not have that feeling, unless they keep congratulating themselves on how much more we know about the physics of the universe than we did a century ago?

Paul Langacker’s Can the Laws of Physics Be Unified? (Princeton, 2017) presents the standard model (SM) of elementary particles and their interaction—“a mathematically consistent theory that accounts for essentially all aspects of ordinary matter”—but also has the honesty to note that the SM “is very complicated and apparently arbitrary.” He acknowledges that the atoms and molecules we know about display “incredible fine-tuning,” but they “constitute only about 5% of the stuff in the universe.... The remainder is the mysterious dark energy (70%) and dark matter (25%)... one of the most intriguing issues in physics.”

I’m not recommending this book unless you have an advanced knowledge of physics (and I certainly don’t), but it can contribute to our sense of wonder. Teachers at classical Christian schools sometimes have a sense of wonder about “the glory that was Greece.” They shouldn’t. During the centuries before the teachings of Christ partly civilized ancient civilization, city-states acted ruthlessly toward their enemies, as Jennifer Roberts shows in The Plague of War: Athens, Sparta, and the Struggle for Ancient Greece (Oxford, 2017).

For example, the island of Melos, a Spartan colony 80 miles off the Peloponnesian coast, wanted to stay neutral in wars among the city-states, but the strong Athenian army captured the island’s one city, killed all the males of fighting age they could find, and enslaved all the women and children. Roberts summarizes the final result of Greek pride in 371 B.C.: “Only then did the Peloponnesian War really end, but there were no winners, only losers.”

While some praise Athenian democracy, only 10 to 20 percent of residents could vote, since slaves outnumbered citizens. By 317-307 B.C. a general census was showing Attica (Athens and the surrounding region) with 21,000 citizens, 10,000 metics (foreign residents without citizenship), and 400,000 slaves. As Roberts reports, Athenians declared, “It is an eternal law that the strong should rule the weak.”

The Nazis certainly believed in that Athenian “eternal law,” so they murdered 6 million Jews and millions of others. Evgeny Finkel’s Ordinary Jews: Choice and Survival During the Holocaust (Princeton, 2017) shows how those who knew history were doomed not to repeat it. East European Jews for centuries had put up with occasional pogroms where a few were killed but most survived. Many had experienced German occupation toward the end of World War I and trusted Germans, from Europe’s “most civilized nation,” more than they did Russians and Poles. The result: passivity among the majority, until it was too late.

Most also knew their chances of survival in the forests were slim, so they hoped against hope. Others did fight back against overwhelming odds: One young man said, “We are fighting for three lines in the history books to make the world know that the Jewish youth did not go like lambs to the slaughter.” And a few survived because genuine Christians risked their lives to save other children of Abraham. Also, regarding strong ruling weak: Douglas Schoen’s Putin’s Master Plan (Encounter, 2016) describes the new Russian czar’s plan to dominate Europe and central Asia. Schoen proposes a new Marshall Plan for Ukraine, along with improvements in our nuclear capacity and missile defense. —M.O.
FOUR FANTASY NOVELS
reviewed by John Ottinger III

IN CALABRIA Peter S. Beagle
For Italian farmer and poet Claudio Bianchi, solitude and unvarying routine are his greatest desires. Yet when a unicorn suddenly appears almost on his doorstep, Claudio falls in love with her beauty. When a mobster tries to make the beautiful unicorn serve his own wants and needs, Bianchi defends the unicorn, learning that to love is to sacrifice and that beauty is found in communion with others. This novel shows that beauty is more than an idea. Christians understand beauty is made real in Jesus Christ, who often arrives without warning and with unforeseen consequences. (Caution: an affair)

THE BEAR AND THE NIGHTINGALE Katherine Arden
Vasya’s devoutly Orthodox stepmother is destroying the ancient rituals of hearth and home that previously kept the family safe from winter’s terrors. Frightened by her increasingly insane stepmother, Vasya can call upon an ancient power to defeat a vampire and ensure the winter-king’s bear-demon brother remains bound, or watch as everyone she loves dies from winter’s bite. Arden uses her extensive knowledge of Russian folklore and history to craft a tale of a young woman finding her way in a dark and dangerous world.

THE HEART OF WHAT WAS LOST Tad Williams
Duke Isgrimnur has pursued the defeated Norns to their last citadel, but they do not give up. As he besieges them, he confronts questions about the morality of genocide and the price of victory. Meanwhile they confront their inability to change, their nostalgia for lost glory, and their undying hatred of all things human. Williams’ story explores the moral vagaries of war through the eyes of generals and soldiers and explains the ultimate fate of the Norns in this bridge novel between his classic trilogy Memory, Sorrow, and Thorn and his forthcoming The Last King of Osten Ard trilogy.

THE FACEFAKER’S GAME Chandler J. Birch
Trust is elusive for Ashes, an orphan living in the slum of Burroughside, where evil Mr. Ragged runs the gangs and the night is filled with walking terrors. When the rebel Artificers recruit Ashes, he soon discovers magical abilities that may allow him to tip the balance of power. Overthrowing the entrenched Mr. Ragged is more difficult than he expects, and Ashes will have to learn to trust others—even in the face of betrayal. Birch’s debut novel is an exciting adventure tale of likable rogues and evil noblemen. (Cautions: swearing and implied pederasty by an evil character)

AFTERWORD
James Thurber is chiefly known as the American humorist who wrote “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty,” a staple story for high-school English classrooms. A few have gone on to read collections of his columns for The New Yorker, but one of his best but overlooked works is The 13 Clocks. Recently released in a new edition including the original Marc Simont color illustrations (Penguin Classics Deluxe Edition, 2016), this not-quite fairy tale about a prince who saves a princess is, as Neil Gaiman writes in his introduction, full of “magical, wonderful, tasty words.” On one level, it is a predictable fairy tale that any reader of the Brothers Grimm or Hans Christian Andersen would enjoy, but on another, it is a raucous play of words that sounds like poetry, reads like prose, and narrowly skirts the line between the ridiculous and the profound. –J.O.
Faith builders
FOUR CHRISTIAN PICTURE BOOKS reviewed by Emily Whitten

BIBLE BASICS: A BABY BELIEVER COUNTING PRIMER Danielle Hitchen
This board book introduces babies and toddlers to basic Christian truths. Unlike other books that count Bible characters or animals on the ark, Hitchen numbers gospel accounts, fruits of the Spirit, and the like. Short Bible verses appear on many pages, helping little ones become familiar with God's Word. Young children might not understand all the text or symbolic illustrations, but they can enjoy the bold colors, simple shapes, and linguistic repetition. Parents of toddlers may want to talk about the pictures using the text as a springboard rather than reading it outright. A well-designed first catechism. (Ages 0-4)

FOUND: PSALM 23 Sally Lloyd-Jones
Ten years after the first edition of The Jesus Storybook Bible, illustrator Jago breathes new life into the Shepherd's Psalm chapter—this time presenting it in board book format. With warm, sunny tones, he brings a new level of emotion and complexity to the text both parents and children can appreciate. Lloyd-Jones' words aren't literal Bible translations (e.g., she replaces “valley of the shadow of death” with “dark, scary, lonely places”). But fans of her style will find this to be another engaging presentation of God's “Never Stopping, Never Giving Up, Unbreaking, Always and Forever Love.” (Ages 0-4)

WHEN GOD MADE YOU Matthew Paul Turner
A current bestseller at Amazon.com, When God Made You celebrates God's creation of “you” (the reader) with unique gifts and dreams. The language soars at times, but at other times feels clunky. Turner occasionally goes too far in portraying God's pleasure in us (“You being you is God's dream coming true”) without noting our flaws. While the book conveys important truths, the plot remains thin and the ending less than satisfying. Families may still enjoy the overall presentation—especially David Catrow's buoyant, rainbow-colored illustrations. A winsome African-American heroine invites young readers to think about life from her perspective. (Ages 4-8)

PETER MARTYR VERMIGLI Simonetta Carr
Simonetta Carr's Christian Biographies for Young Readers fill an important niche—serious portrayals of Christian heroes in picture book form. Here, Carr describes Protestant Reformer Peter Martyr Vermigli in a straightforward, substantive way. Despite Vermigli's exciting life (including escapes from Roman Catholic authorities), the book isn't very dramatic, but Carr makes Vermigli's theological battles understandable. Rich, earthy illustrations by Joel Spector, numerous woodcut maps, and a timeline add historical context. Overall, an informative look at a lesser-known Reformer from Italy. (Ages 10-up)

AFTERWORD
WORLD named the final book in Andrew Peterson's Wingfeather series its 2014 Children's Book of the Year. A new book set in the same world, Wingfeather Tales (edited by Andrew Peterson, Rabbit Room Press, 2016), fails to live up to the four original offerings: Peterson's own contribution sings, but not his collaborators' poem, novella, and short stories. A more successful collaboration, Different (Tyndale, 2017) by Sally Clarkson and her son, Nathan, tells of a strained relationship. Nathan's mental challenges, including obsessive compulsive disorder and a combative personality, make everyday life difficult. The book touches on practical helps for those with similar burdens, but mother and son focus more on how God meets and changes them in their struggles. Different testifies to God's love working through human weakness: A brush with pornography makes this best suited for teens and adults. —E.W.
“Medi-Share covered me in prayer in ways they didn’t even know.”
— Vanessa

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As you filed your income tax return, you might have read that total U.S. government revenue (federal, state, and local) this year is about $7 trillion. What do we get for all that money?

Oklahoma obstetrician Tom Coburn, 69, along with delivering 4,000 babies, served six years in the U.S. House of Representatives and 10 years in the U.S. Senate, upholding campaign pledges to serve in the House not more than three terms and in the Senate not more than two. (Coburn left the Senate two years early when cancer recurred—he is now in remission.) Fellow Republicans often applauded his protests against government overspending, and then voted to spend more. Democrats called him “Dr. No.”

Coburn is also a member of South Tulsa Baptist Church. Here are edited excerpts from a February interview at his home.

**A lot of people these days are blasting “the media.”** We have a real problem with media. Both the right and the left. They jack people up, create a fight so there’s a story. If you turn on MSNBC, you’ll see all the hair on fire, and if you turn on Fox, you’ll see a criticism of all the hair on fire. Watch Hannity: He’s a cheerleader for Republicans, but Republicans aren’t right all the time.

**What should individual readers and viewers do?** Quit letting people jack you up. Read a conservative paper, read a liberal paper, and decide for yourself. The assumption is we’re going to parrot whatever Fox says and the left is going to parrot whatever MSNBC says. Neither is accurate.

**You are a Christ follower and have been a personal friend of President Obama. That combination might confound some people. What’s our charge?** To love God with all your heart, mind, and soul and love your neighbor as yourself. It doesn’t say don’t love a Democrat. Barack Obama and I agree on very little, but my calling is to love him. I respect him, but we disagree because he’s a socialist in terms of his viewpoint. And, if you get rid of all the political labels and the biases, he’s really a nice man.

**Should Barack Obama stay politically involved?** I think it’s inappropriate because it leads to more division in
our country. He ought to be quiet for a year and not work behind the scenes. I understand he believes fervently in what he believes, but you’ve got to give presidents time to establish their leadership. President Bush 43 set the tone. He didn’t say much until six or seven years out of office. We’re divided enough. We need reconciliation, with leadership that brings us together, not divides us.

Have conservative Christians contributed to our problems? Sure. They need to make sure what they say is accurate, not just reposting stuff.

We’re not hearing a lot about the federal debt. Should we? Millennials are on the hook for paying back a huge debt while trying to establish a family and own a home. When we get back to historical interest rates, which we will, people will quit loaning us money because our interest costs will be about $1.2 trillion a year. It’s an impossible situation that will eventually come unwound, like a pyramid scheme. That’s what’s going on today with politicians refusing to make hard choices because they might not get reelected.

Reelection becomes everything to them? We’re sending to Washington people who get their whole identity out of being a political figure. The majority of government people in Washington are people who are ego-needy, who love to get stroked.

You’ve talked about Social Security. Half of the people collecting Social Security disability are not truly disabled. The Social Security administration moved them into the disability program because that’s another safety net. Consequently, Social Security disability is out of money and borrowing from the Social Security system, which will go bankrupt much sooner than it would have.

We need more oversight? Congress ought to ask about laws passed: Do they work? Are they cost-efficient? There are 68 job-training programs, $18 billion a year. People have gamed the federal government by creating a job-training industry.

So you think we’re in big trouble. How do we cheat history and not go down the same road every other republic known to man has gone down? We’re well down that road now.

How do we put the genie back in the bottle? That’s where a convention of states comes in. A balanced budget amendment won’t fix our country. We need to limit the scope and jurisdiction of the federal government. The founders believed more in the state legislatures than they did the federal government, so they had state legislatures electing senators. When we passed the 17th amendment so senators are elected rather than controlled by their state legislatures, states lost power over Congress.

Should that be undone? Absolutely. Also, when the Senate first started and until the 20th century, filibusters meant you had to have agreement to move forward on anything—which means you forced compromise among disparate views. The founders did that so we wouldn’t have factionalization. Today, the hard-left/press faction wants government to be in control and provide everything for everybody. It and the conservative faction are at loggerheads, because you no longer have forced compromise in Washington and the U.S. Senate.

Is the movement to get rid of the Electoral College significant? That movement says: Majority rules! This country has stayed together because of the Electoral College.

We have a higher percentage of our population in prison than the Chinese, the Russians, and others have. How do we reduce that number? Don’t have stupid incarcerations. We know drug rehab works 70 percent of the time, so we have a lot of drug courts in Oklahoma. If we didn’t, we wouldn’t have enough places to imprison lots of drug users.

How do we reduce the number of abortions? You’re not going to do it through the law. You have to change hearts so they value life, and innocent life more than convenience. The best privilege I had was delivering “oopses.” I delivered the “oops” of one lady who was 53: Her kids were in their 20s, she had a new baby, and it was the best thing that had ever happened in her life. Lots of women came to me with complications from their sterilization: They got pregnant. I never found one who didn’t say this was the best thing that ever happened.

Do you still deliver babies? No, I quit 16 or 18 months ago. The Affordable Care Act got me out of it.

But it was a satisfying line of work? It was the greatest privilege I ever had in my life. Far better than serving in the Senate. To be trusted with physical, emotional, and spiritual care, to be a mentor to people. The greatest thing in the world is to watch a dad’s eyes as his child is born, to watch those tears that well up in this big ole brute when he sees his child. It’s a privilege to be able to experience that.

‘Quit letting people jack you up. Read a conservative paper, read a liberal paper, and decide for yourself’
Symphonies for Easter
MARKING THE HOLIDAY WITH NEW RECORDINGS OF CLASSIC WORKS
by Arsenio Orteza

Despite what the critic Norman Lebrecht calls “consumer saturation,” new recordings of great sacred compositions proliferate apace. Arriving in time for Easter this year are freshly minted renditions of Bruckner’s nine numbered symphonies, Haydn’s The Seven Last Words of Christ, Biber’s complete violin sonatas, and Handel’s Messiah.

Anton Bruckner: 9 Symphonies (Decca) comes courtesy of the maestro Hun-Young Lim and the Korean Symphony Orchestra. It has been a decade or more since the KSO (which recorded the seventh symphony under Jae-Dong Chung), the Suwon Philharmonic (which recorded the third, fourth, sixth, and eighth), and the Jeju Philharmonic (which recorded all nine) gave the world a Korean Bruckner—too long, according to Lim.

“Korean orchestras have a relatively short history,” he told Korea.net in 2013. “For that reason, they have had a very limited repertoire and reshaped a limited range of pieces… Bruckner’s [works] can sound a bit plain and boring at first, but after repeated listens… you will find yourself infatuated by the very melodies and rhythms.”

Recorded live at the Seoul Arts Center from 2014 to 2016, Lim’s interpretations mix various editions of the symphonies, including two apiece by Nowak and Haas. Those interpretations unfold confidently but not brashly (especially the adagios), as if excessive deliberateness or excessive haste would shortchange the “melodies and rhythms” with which Lim is entranced.

The symphonies do not, however, sound circumscribed. Rather, they sound the way one might expect them to coming from an orchestra to whom Bruckner’s daunting complexities represent exciting new challenges. The audiences, punctuating the conclusion of every finale (and the final movement of the finale-free Symphony No. 9) with enthusiastic applause and bravos, obviously received the performances in that spirit.

Unlike Bruckner’s symphonies—19th-century works that reveal their qualities slowly—Haydn’s 18th-century The Seven Last Words of Christ, in keeping with the psychological directness of the Classical age, reveals its qualities right away.

As is often the case with program music, the relationship of the music to the texts is less apparent. Haydn’s settings for utterances that must have been spoken in agony (“Father, forgive them…,” “Mother, behold your son,” “I thirst,” etc.) often feel particularly, almost majestically, joyful. Yet this paradox is one reason the music remains perpetually fascinating.

Les sept dernières paroles du Christ en Croix by the Orchestre de Chambre de Toulouse (Gilles Colliard, conductor) (Klarthe) not only captures these paradoxical characteristics but also elevates them. And the warmth and clarity of its sound, as well as the three-dimensionality of the dynamics, enlivens the musicianship, which is so expert it probably would’ve sounded good under any circumstances.

The sound that the Dutch recording engineer Peter Arts delivers on the five-disc Biber: Mystery Sonatas—The Complete Violin Sonatas by Igor Ruhadze and the Ensemble Violini Capricciosi (Brilliant Classics) is equally clear but drier, the better to bring out the literal tensions resulting from the scordatura tunings that Biber prescribed for 14 of his 15 Mystery (aka Rosary) Sonatas. Ruhadze, having subsumed Biber’s technical difficulties, is free to make his Baroque violin “sing.” He does so with expressiveness and individuality.

So do the featured soloists—particularly the mezzo-soprano Gaia Petrone—on the Salzburger Bachchor’s Händel: Messiah (Gramola). Calling the oratorio Western music’s greatest hit is no overstatement. For anyone of average-or-above culture, the stirring recognizability of the melodies vies with that of the Gershwins’ or The Beatles’ songs. Recorded 274 years after Messiah’s debut, this spirited live Easter 2016 performance imbues the music with a timelessness entirely appropriate to its subject.
ALBUMS BY 2017 ROCK & ROLL HALL OF FAME INDUCTEES
reviewed by Arsenio Orteza

THE JOAN BAEZ BALLAD BOOK Joan Baez
What Joan Baez has to do with rock ‘n’ roll (besides having been one of Bob Dylan’s girlfriends): Without folk, there’d have been no folk-rock, and without Baez’s commitment to traditional ballads in particular, there’d have been less enthusiasm for folk songs in general. This 1972 compilation extracts 23 tales of woe from the five albums that she released from 1960 to 1964, before her commitment to social protest made her strident. Never did she put the Lorelei-like purity of her trembling soprano to better use.

A NEW WORLD RECORD Electric Light Orchestra
Out of the Blue charted higher and Discovery sold better, but this 1976 album is where Jeff Lynne most efficiently realized his goal of imbedding perfect pop hooks in orchestral settings and getting a choir to sing backup. “Telephone Line,” “Livin’ Thing,” and “Do Ya” became U.S. hits. And, if not for the unofficial maximum-three-hits-per-album radio rule, “So Fine” and “Shangri-La” would’ve probably followed suit. “Rockaria!” meanwhile, topped U.K. charts. In it, Beethoven rolls over and tells Chuck Berry the news.

B-MOVIE MATINEE Nile Rodgers
For some reason, the Rock Hall isn’t honoring Rodgers as a member of Chic but with an “Award for Musical Excellence.” So, Chic aside, how musically excellent was he? His rhythm guitar forged a link between late disco and early rap, and he produced practically everyone who was anyone. This 1985 solo outing still sounds lively too. Preferring it to Adventures in the Land of the Good Groove (1983) would be a close call except that Adventures contained “Yum Yum,” his least excellent song, musically or otherwise, ever.

THE ULTIMATE YES: 35TH ANNIVERSARY COLLECTION Yes
The 31-track, U.S. version of this 2004 compilation (2003 and only 21 tracks in the United Kingdom) boils everything that was ever good about Yes down to its essence. It proves that when the eight members receiving Rock Hall honors this year concentrated more on well-structured songs than on untethered virtuosity and other excessively fanciful flights, they could rock plenty. And not only rock, but also sing. Impressive—yea, even lovely—harmonies abound. Even the group’s mid-’80s experiments with funk feel of a piece.

ENCORE
The induction of the Electric Light Orchestra—specifically, the group leader Jeff Lynne, the keyboardist Richard Tandy, and the drummer Bev Bevan—into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame is long overdue. But the inclusion of Roy Wood, who left midway through the band’s second album (long before it hit its multi-platinum stride) is puzzling, especially given the exclusion of the violinist Mik Kaminskit, the cellists Hugh McDowell and Melvyn Gale, and the late bassist-vocalist Kelly Groucutt.

Admittedly, Kaminski, McDowell, and Gale contributed little to the group’s recordings, and they were frequently inaudible onstage (victims of primitive ’70s technology). But their showmanship was as much a part of ELO’s live presentation as the lasers or the famous Tour ’78 spaceship set. And Groucutt, who sang harmonies and occasional lead vocals on the albums and more of both live, was downright crucial. Could Lynne, Tandy, and Bevan have accomplished what they did without him? Maybe. But they didn’t. —A.O.
I’m with Charles Krauthammer on this one: “The world is on fire and we’re chasing rabbit holes,” he declared April 4, the same day of another major chemical weapons attack in Syria and days ahead of another set of deadly attacks by ISIS on unprotected Christians.

For weeks, major American media have been on a hunt to prove Trump advisers colluded with the Russians to influence the U.S. election. This, with no actual evidence the elections were influenced, but never mind, the FBI is investigating. Then we learned former National Security Adviser Susan Rice requested “unmasking” the names in intelligence briefs tied to the Trump campaign, dozens of times. This could be a crime if it turns out Rice used that information to leak anonymously damaging information about the Trump team to the press, but expect months of potentially fruitless congressional investigation.

Meanwhile, can we spend a moment on chemical weapons? Can we review how the Rice-Obama team colluded with the Russians at the cost of Syrian lives?

In August 2013 a UN fact-finding team reported children in Syria were being “killed or publicly executed, crucified, beheaded or stoned to death” by a group calling itself ISIS. President Obama chose that moment to focus instead on the Syrian government’s use of chemical weapons and threatened President Bashar al-Assad’s continued use would constitute a “red line” requiring U.S. intervention.

Assad conclusively crossed that line in August 2013 with a sarin gas attack near Damascus. It killed nearly 1,500 Syrians. Officials briefed the president. The Pentagon took the red line seriously, moving into round-the-clock staffing for a military operation and positioning four U.S. Navy destroyers bearing Tomahawk missiles in the Mediterranean. Fighting forces in Syria took Obama at his word too. Syrian commanders ordered troops back to barracks. ISIS dispersed its fighters to an area around Homs where they took cover in a Crusader-era castle.

Then in a late-night phone call Obama suddenly changed course. He wanted congressional approval, an effort doomed to failure, then asked the UN to set up a committee to account for Syria’s chemical weapons stockpile. Russia would help. And we took the bait. In this way Moscow gained a U.S.-sanctioned new foothold in the Syrian war, Assad made a show of turning over chemical stockpiles to international monitors, and ISIS went on to invade Iraq.

At the time there was little press investigation over the back channels or scruples of the Obama arrangement. A year later the Obama team declared Syria’s chemical weapons stockpile destroyed. When in 2016 intelligence chief James Clapper bucked, telling Congress the Syrian government was in fact continuing to use chemical weapons, the press yawned. The White House apparently did, too.

In a post-election interview three months ago, Rice hailed the Obama administration’s success in removing Syria’s chemical weapons. “We were able to get the Syrian government to voluntarily and verifiably give up its chemical weapons stockpile,” she said ahead of the April chemical attack in Khan Sheikhoun.

We the world have watched as though we can do nothing—while thousands die horrible, suffocating sarin deaths; nearly half a million Syrian lives overall are lost to war; thousands of women and girls are subjected to torture, rape, and sex slavery; refugees overrun the region; and ISIS-brand terrorism spreads. We are numb from ignoring so many unthinkables.

President Trump’s decision to fire upon the air base where the latest gas attack was launched was pivotal simply because it was something. Something out of years of numbing nothing. Trump signaled a willingness to confront Russia for backing Syria. His action suggested he could be moved by human atrocities, and that he can govern in measured, serious ways. These are new developments. Now we will see if he can work with his officials to craft a policy founded on strategic principles (for those see Ambassador Nikki Haley’s UN speeches April 5 and 7). Let’s see a serious press, in turn, willing to investigate Russia’s role in supporting a chemical weapons regime and the Obama team’s collusion in letting that fire burn.
“A MUST-READ FOR ANYONE WANTING TO TAKE BIBLE STUDY SERIOUSLY.”

FRANCIS CHAN, New York Times best-selling author, Crazy Love and Forgotten God

Best-selling author John Piper teaches us how to read the Bible in light of its unique ability to reveal God’s glory in a way that overcomes our spiritual blindness and transforms our hearts.

“I cannot imagine a serious Christian who would not benefit from a thoughtful reading of this book.”


“Reading the Bible Supernaturally will move you to captivated and awestruck worship at the Divine’s plan for his Word as an instrument to magnify his unrivaled glory.”

LOUIE GIGLIO, pastor, Passion City Church, Atlanta; founder, Passion Conferences

“John Piper stokes the urgency of our calling as the church of Jesus Christ to deepen our appreciation for the Word that God uses toward a missional end—his global and eternal glory.”

MICHAEL OH, global executive director, The Lausanne Movement
WORLD’s selection of 2017 Children’s Books of the Year spans three categories: picture books, middle-grade novels, and middle-grade nonfiction. For the past six months six WORLD staffers and advisers have been on the hunt for the Picture Book of the Year—an artistically excellent book that entertains children and points them to the good, the true, and the beautiful. We found many books with lovely illustrations, but finding quality stories was harder.

Our 2017 Picture Book of the Year is *The Night Gardener* by Eric and Terry Fan (Simon and Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2016). It is the story of William, an orphan who lives in the Grimloch orphanage on Grimloch Lane in a grim little town appropriately called Grimloch. The opening sepia-toned spread sets the scene: a rundown street, weary adults, overgrown lawns, and a tiny sign: “Watch for children.”

Then a stranger comes to town. While the town sleeps, the stranger shapes the tree outside the orphanage window into an owl topiary. When William awakes, the tree captivates him. He waits and is not disappointed when a cat topiary appears the next morning. Then a parakeet. As the Night Gardener transforms the trees, the town also comes alive. Children play outside. Cats and birds appear. Grown-ups repair broken things. Families walk, play, and turn awestruck eyes upward to see the latest wonder. One night William meets the Night Gardener, who invites him to work alongside him to transform the trees in the park.

We loved this book for its exquisitely detailed illustrations. The artists use color to reflect the town’s rebirth. In daytime, the clothes, flowers, and trees increasingly pop with color. At night, lanterns brighten what was a previously gloomy town. We loved also the generational connection between the
boy and the Night Gardener and how the older man passed on to the boy his sense of beauty and skill in pruning the trees. This story will appeal to adults and kids of many ages. Young children can enjoy picking out the different animals. Older ones will delight in the period clothes and subtle details. It's a “night” story that isn't scary but inspires imagination.

Thematically the book is rich, especially for Christians who will appreciate the Gardener who transforms lives. We loved how the boy answered the Gardener’s call to mission without expecting recognition in return. As the Gardener does his work, community forms and people start caring about more than their own meager lives—and their lives become abundant as a result. The community includes orphans, different ethnic groups, the elderly—and others who are often excluded.

We also love how the transformation lasted even though the trees eventually lost their leaves and their animal shapes. The book closes with these words: “There was no evidence the Night Gardener had ever been to Grimloch Lane—but the people of the small town were never the same.”

—With reporting by PBOTY committee members Sandy Barwick, Jonathan Boes, Christina Darnell, Pamela Palmer, and Megan Saben

Note: The Night Gardener by the Fan brothers has the same title as a children’s novel by the author interviewed on page 36, Jonathan Auxier.
In seventh grade, my teacher Mrs. Beard called on an unprepared student. “Oh my gosh!” the girl said. That exclamation brought the lesson to a halt. My gosh, Mrs. Beard explained, was a euphemism for another expression she did not say, but wrote on the board: My God! Now, what does the Third Commandment say? (Most of us knew what she was talking about, even if we didn’t have the commandments in numerical order.) What’s the implication? (That we shouldn’t use God’s name in vain or even substitute for it.) Lesson concluded; now back to Texas history.

If Mrs. Beard were around today, I imagine she’d be the subject of a phone call from an irate parent. Today people toss God’s name any and everywhere—even in middle-grade novels. OMG may even be a gateway swearword to other expressions reserved (so far) for teen novels.

“Bad language” divides into two general categories: profanity (misuses of divine things and divine names) and vulgarity (impolite words for anatomy and bodily functions). Young adult literature permits all of it. OMG may even be a gateway swearword to other expressions reserved (so far) for teen novels.

Barriers have come down, and it’s obvious why. Os Guinness in Impossible People observes how “the philosophy of secularism, the process of secularization and the public policy of strict separationism have in effect converged” in the common perception that religion is neither authoritative nor relevant. What was once profane is meaningless and what was once impermissible in polite company is now common, thanks mostly to the internet.

This loosening of restrictions makes its way down to children’s literature. A mother’s satisfaction at seeing her boy’s head bent over a book can shatter when he yells, “I found another bad word!”

What’s the solution? Parents can redlight any book that contains a profanity or vulgarity. Or they can read aloud more, and edit out the problem language as they go. Or they can help their children think through the issue for themselves.

We know that our kids are going to be exposed to all kinds of words at an early age. Our Books of the Year committee loved Every Single Second (see p. 34), but some of us found the use of God’s name as an exclamation problematic. However, as Gene Edward Veith points out in Reading Between the Lines, a fictional character may be profane while the fictional work itself is anything but. Idle swearing may indicate God’s irrelevance. But in Every Single Second, God is not irrelevant: He’s the guiding light of at least one character’s life and the source of hope at the end.

Compare that with one of the most-read series of the last decade, The Hunger Games trilogy. Not a single swearword in all its pages, but God is totally irrelevant to the story, which ends without hope.

Readers of nonfiction must evaluate a book’s truth or accuracy, but readers of fiction must learn a different kind of discernment. Fiction weaves a world and invites readers inside. Some of those worlds may encourage false ideologies or raise fatuous expectations. But if a fictional world is true to human life, it can expand a reader’s understanding of times, places, and people otherwise encountered. If the fictional world is morally sound—in line with the divine law written on every heart—it can show something about goodness. The highest demand fiction can make is asking a reader to determine what is true, good, and beautiful about it.

The increase of “bad words” and other problem elements in children’s literature means kids need to learn discernment earlier than they used to. That’s not a bad thing if it helps equip them for the world in which they’ll bear witness.
A hero’s humility

**Novel of the Year:** *The Secret Keepers* wraps universal themes in a fun, absorbing story

by JANIE B. CHEANEY

In Trenton Lee Stewart’s *The Secret Keepers*, Reuben Pedley, 11, lives with his widowed mother in a modest apartment in the Lower Downs of New Umbra. He spends his summer break exploring the abandoned buildings in his depressed neighborhood. On one of these expeditions he discovers a leather pouch containing an antique watch and winding key. Reuben guesses it’s valuable, but not until his meeting with elderly watchmaker Mrs. Genevieve does he suspect it may have supernatural powers.

In fact, the watch is so powerful that the boss of New Umbra—a mysterious character known as The Smoke—will pay any price and apply any force to get it. Suddenly on the run, Reuben follows clues to a family of lighthouse keepers who have also kept a closely-guarded secret for generations. Within that family Reuben makes two allies who will help him discover the watch’s origin and its power and value to someone who intends to use it for evil. And then, of course, they will have to keep it out of that person’s hands at all costs.

Trenton Lee Stewart established a solid fan base with *The Mysterious Benedict Society* (published in 2008), the story of four gifted children assigned to a secret mission that challenges their character as well as their mental resources. That debut inspired two sequels, a prequel, and a book of puzzles. With *The Secret Keepers*, Stewart leaves the Benedict Society behind but employs the same elements of surprise, suspense, danger, friendship among diverse characters, and sinister secret villains.

A good children’s novel should be one that children enjoy reading, but some winners of the Newbery Award (the world’s oldest and most prestigious kids’ lit honor) come across as “good for you” rather than exciting or absorbing or just plain fun. Authors like Stewart understand that universal themes can be wrapped in humor and adventure (with a light brush of fantasy) and still make a lasting impression. In an interview with *Publishers Weekly*, he identifies the lighthouse in *The Secret Keepers* as a symbol of tension between security and danger and light against darkness. Few children will face the life-threatening challenges of his fictional protagonist, but all will have to choose between risk and safety. They will be able to identify with Reuben, a shy but good-hearted kid who manages to carry the burden of a 500-page
narrative on unassuming shoulders. Like any boy-hero, he makes ignorant mistakes and near-fatal blunders and has to hide almost everything from his mother. But Reuben also possesses enough insight to recognize his own weaknesses and temptations. Another quality that sets him apart is compassion: He would rather see his enemy rehabilitated than destroyed once that enemy is defeated.

The Secret Keepers differs from many juvenile novels in another way: Adults are not irrelevant. Off the page for most of the story, Reuben's mother is a vibrant character in her own right. She joins other dependable adults to intervene when the youngster's reach their limits.

While at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, Stewart envisioned writing for adults. He published one moderately successful adult novel, but becoming a father brought him back to his own childhood love of mysteries and puzzles. Writing for children, he soon realized, was “introducing certain things to a reader for the first time.” When he was a child, books like The Chronicles of Narnia transformed his imagination and provided the stuff of endless daydreams. “I never stopped daydreaming,” he confessed in another interview, and the stories spun from those dreams now fire the imaginations of his readers.

### Children’s Novel of the Year Runners-up

#### THE VOYAGE TO MAGICAL NORTH Claire Fayers

Even though they don’t like each other, Brine and Peter, respectively the housemaid and apprentice of a second-rate magician, discover good reason to flee their master together. But adventure looms in the form of the notorious pirate ship Onion and her crew, headed by Captain Cassie O’Peia. The pirates turn out to be the good guys in a conflict with Marfak West, a powerful magician who sees the transcendent power of stories as mere lies and aims to control the narrative in ways that suit his own purpose. Imaginative twists, unpredictable characters, and generous doses of humor make this seafaring adventure a winner.

#### EVERY SINGLE SECOND Tricia Springstubb

At age 12, Nella Sabatini is facing normal changes, like yet another baby brother and a great-grandma getting more difficult with age and a new best friend replacing an old best friend. Only now Nella is beginning to understand how she is shaped by her own history and relationships with family, community, and God. Her world is shaken when someone she knows and loves fatally shoots an innocent black man, throwing Nella’s tight-knit Italian-American neighborhood into conflict with the black community across town. Allowing for some language cautions (see p. 31) this is a sensitive novel that broadens a reader’s understanding of self and others.

#### GHOST Jason Reynolds

Castle Cranshaw, aka “Ghost,” knows he's fast. He also knows he has “a lot of scream inside,” ever since his dad chased him and his mom with a gun. Dad’s in jail, but Ghost is still running. Not until the coach of a neighborhood track team glimpses his potential does he begin to think of goals, but to succeed will take more than speed. This classic sports novel about a kid from the projects is a fast read with a strong takeaway: “You can’t run away from who you are, but what you can do is run toward who you want to be.”

#### THE GOBLIN’S PUZZLE Andrew S. Chilton

The boy has nothing, not even a name, when he sets off with his master’s son on a business trip. Meanwhile, Plain Alice is going about her business when a dragon who mistakes her for Princess Alice seizes her and carries her off. A murder and an encounter with a sarcastic goblin put the boy on an unexpected track that will change his destiny as it converges with both Alices. The goblin gets the best lines in this clever, good-natured quest tale that puts fatalism on a collision course with honor and sagacity. While enjoying the journey, readers will also learn a little logic. —J.B.C.

### HONORABLE MENTIONS

Our selection committee read over 70 middle-grade novels (those directed to readers between the ages of 8 and 13) across a range of genres—realistic contemporary fiction, historical fiction, fantasy, and adventure. In the selection process each of us had to leave some favorite titles behind, but they deserve an honorable mention here. All Rise for the Honorable Perry T. Cook offers a rare look inside a minimum-security prison, as a well-meaning but wrongheaded state employee tries to separate the winsome protagonist from his mother. The Nine Lives of Jacob Tibbs pictures 19th-century seafaring through the eyes of a feline hero who thwarts a mutiny. Paper Wishes experiences Japanese internment during World War II with a traumatized 10-year-old girl. Sophie Quire and the Last Storyguard pits two spirited young people against a story-stealing villain (see interview with author Jonathan Auxier, p. 36). Finally, When the Sea Turned to Silver is a luminous retelling of Chinese legends that link storytelling to life. —J.B.C.
Worldview is your lens on life.

It's how you interpret what happens to you and to the world. It's how you determine what matters when you make decisions.

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Jonathan Auxier is a husband, father, and New York Times best-selling author of young adult fiction, including Sophie Quire and the Last Storyguard. We recently discussed his childhood, writing philosophy, and the influence of his faith on his work.

Q&A: Writer JONATHAN AUXIER says the best children’s stories capture the tension of life’s many thresholds by J.C. DERRICK
Tell me about your childhood. My parents were both really, really big readers. Both of my parents read aloud to us all of the time. My father used to come to our classes once a week and read stories aloud. I was raised in a world of books and storytelling, so it’s not terribly surprising I ended up doing it for a living.

Did you want to be an author from childhood? Even though I loved to read, I wasn’t a very confident writer. I had poor spelling and weak grammar. I wanted to follow in my mother’s footsteps and tell stories visually through art. For most of my childhood, adolescence, and even undergraduate years, I thought I would be an artist or an illustrator of some kind. The problem I ran into: I’m not a terribly good artist. My storytelling ambitions significantly outpaced my actual skill with a pen, so I had to figure out another way to tell the stories inside of me. I bounced around, did a lot of art, theater, and at one point was desperately interested in making movies. It was a matter of finding the right fit for me, and that ended up being children’s fiction.

Is good storytelling a lost art today? I would say the opposite. We in America today are some of the most sophisticated story consumers history has ever seen. Most adults are so exposed to narrative that they’re almost a little inoculated to it. It’s very hard to impress them. This is one of the reasons I love writing for kids, because they don’t have those defenses. They don’t have that very complex network of all these stories that they’ve been exposed to in the past. There’s something so pure and wonderful about the immediacy and the ingenuousness of a child reader. It keeps me honest as a storyteller, because I know simply being clever or demonstrating a certain level of intelligence won’t be enough.

Why do adults like reading children’s books? The children’s books I love the most are not actually about children and childhood. They are very specifically about the end of childhood—those liminal moments when you’re leaving childhood and moving on to something else. They have a sense of loss. There’s a sense that whatever happens in this story is going to be the end of that story, and you’re going to have to leave some things behind as you move on to the rest of your life. That resonates for me over and over again. What is life but a series of thresholds? Your last days of childhood, and then your last days of high school, your last days of university, your last days as a single person, your last day as married people without a kid, and your last day before your kid goes to preschool. The rest of my life is going to be that very complex and bitter exchange where I’m leaving something sweet and wonderful behind in the understanding that I need to take on something ahead of me. When I read a great work of children’s literature, it speaks so directly to that feeling.

What’s been your best writing day? Pretty much without exception I would say all of my writing days are lousy. I love coming up with stories in my head, but it is agony to put it on a page. I don’t like writing, but I love having written. When a thing is done and I get to look at it, that brings me tremendous joy.

What’s been your worst experience as an author? Every author, once in a while, has a no-show event. You are stuck at a table with a stack of books, and it’s you and the bookstore clerk, both feeling embarrassed for each other. Those are an amazing check on the ego.

How does your Christian faith influence your characters and what you’re trying to accomplish? Every book functions as therapy for me. They often involve me taking the things that trouble me the most, the things I’m wrestling with, and I insert those problems directly into my characters. I basically use those characters to help guide me toward some clarity—even if the clarity is that there will be no clarity. A lot of people from different faith backgrounds ask about some of the language I’m using. My first book had a lot of Old Testament imagery. Some of that is working out my immediate, present-tense faith, and some of it is engaging with a literary tradition of the most important work of literature in the Western world and human history.

What’s the role of a Christian author in today’s pluralistic society? I wouldn’t distinguish the role of a Christian storyteller and any storyteller. All artists, storytellers included, have one job: Tell the truth.

What’s your philosophy on darkness in children’s books? I tend to believe kids are tough and robust. They can handle darkness in storytelling. I also believe darkness is essential in storytelling. The only way you can really put true light and true joy and a true path for living in a story is if children or characters of any kind are being faced with actual threats and actual danger.

What’s your next project? I’m finishing up research for my next book, which is about a girl chimney sweep living in the 19th century who finds a monster living inside a chimney. The research is incredibly depressing, because if you know anything about chimney sweeps and the children who worked for them, it is just soul-crushingly sad. My goal is to write a book that contains some of that sad stuff but also a little bit of light.
2017 CHILDREN’S BOOKS of the YEAR

A beautiful true story about one very ugly kid

ROBERT HOGE

UGLY

a memoir

“A jaw-dropping story of resilience, courage and fierce hope.”
—JOAN BAUER,
New York Times bestselling author
“When we come together in groups, we make amazing things. Our admission ticket into these groups is not our thoughts or feelings. Our faces are our tickets. Our faces let us look out and know others and let them know us.” So begins Robert Hoge’s *Ugly: A Memoir*, which our selection committee chose as WORLD’s Children’s Nonfiction Book of the Year.

Hoge was the fifth child of working-class parents in Brisbane, Australia—and his mother didn’t want him. A huge tumor took up half the baby’s face, forcing his eyes apart and robbing him of a nose. His little legs were terribly misshapen. For the first week his mother could not even look at him: She went home from the hospital empty-handed. A month went by while she sorted through her feelings, but every other member of the family voted to bring the baby home, and she did. From then on, “Mom’s love for me grew fast and fierce.” That was Robert’s first big break. Surgeries and struggles followed, but family support never wavered.

If you read the back flap, you’ll know that Robert is a successful adult who’s had an interesting and varied career and is married with two daughters. You’ll also know that he’s still ugly, with a face that would leap out in a crowd and linger in your memory. This memoir is a fast read covering his first 14 years with a remarkable lack of cloying and self-pity, as well as a healthy dose of dry humor.

Having a dad and two older brothers who refused to baby him, Hoge learned early on how to manage juvenile name-calling and insults, but adults could sometimes reduce him to tears. One of his great disappointments in early life was physical limitation: His love of sports and competition seemed stymied by his legs until he discovered lawn bowling, an English game with a long history. A dedicated coach became a mentor, friend, and grandfather figure. Each small victory was another step in self-confidence.

At 14, Hoge faced a life-changing choice, and his decision will stun many readers—especially those at the targeted age level of 10 to 15. He gives no hint that he ever regretted this choice. In years to come, “sometimes people would say to me that I’d managed to do quite well despite my appearance and my disability. And I started to realize that I hadn’t become who I was despite those things. There was just as much chance I had become who I was because of my ugliness and my disability.”

At 14, young people are often obsessed with their looks. Boys as well as girls spend a lot of time, maybe too much, gazing into the mirror to spot everything that’s “wrong”—i.e., not in keeping with the cover image of *Teen Vogue* or *Rolling Stone*. This memoir should give them cause to...
think about outward appearance and inward character. Although Hoge was raised in a Catholic home and school, he does not directly credit Christian faith with making him what he is. It’s unclear whether or not he’s a believer—but his gratitude to parents, siblings, and mentors suggests a balanced and wholesome view of life. He doesn’t indulge in heavy moralizing, letting the comments and actions of certain people in his story speak for themselves.

At the end he gives readers a benchmark for thinking about faces and what lies behind them: All are “uglier than they think. We are all more beautiful too. We all have scars only we can own.”

**AFTERWORD**

_The Radical Book for Kids_ has no bad words and lots of good ones. Baptist pastor Champ Thornton rightly calls his book “an explorer’s guide to the Word of God and the World he has made,” and “a starter kit covering topics like apologetics, theology, hermeneutics, church history, literature, science and Christian living in a way that’s fun and engaging.”

In 67 beautifully designed short chapters, children ages 8 and older encounter challenging topics such as evidences for God and Biblical truth; practical help with memorizing, acquiring wisdom, and cleaning your room; fun stuff to learn, like the Hebrew and Greek alphabets; even Bible-era games. The last chapter, “What to Do When Bad Things Happen,” points them in the right direction for growing up.

“Since God is the least boring person in the universe, there’s more than enough of him to captivate and delight young readers,” says Thornton. _The Radical Book for Kids_ is a gateway to captivation and delight. —J.B.C.
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American pastor jailed in Turkey makes a daring plea to the Trump administration: ‘Please do not leave me here in prison’

by Mindy Belz

Friday, April 7, passed for Andrew Brunson like most of the other 25 Fridays since the American pastor was detained in Turkey six months ago as a “threat to national security.”

Back in October, Brunson, who has lived in Turkey for 23 years, thought he was finally receiving permanent resident status when authorities summoned him to government offices in Izmir. Instead, Ministry of Interior officials detained him for weeks that now have stretched into months—all without offering evidence of the charges against him.

Brunson’s case took a notable turn late in March after U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, in his first official visit to Turkey, met with Brunson’s wife in Ankara and reportedly discussed the case with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

But the length of Brunson’s detention—plus the severity of the pending charges—has church leaders worried about the long-term impact of the case. Brunson’s six-month anniversary also coincides with the start of voting on a nationwide referendum that, if successful, drastically will expand executive power for Erdogan and could lead to further crackdowns on individual, religious, and political freedoms in Turkey, a democracy and NATO member state since 1951.

Several Americans have been deported from the country under a state of emergency following a failed coup last July (see “Caught in a dragnet,” Feb. 4), but Brunson is the only American jailed under the emergency measures. A missionary in Turkey for two decades who with his wife reared three children in the country, he seems an unlikely scapegoat in Turkey’s internal turmoil.

At the time of his arrest, Brunson was serving as pastor of Izmir Resurrection Church and had helped establish a ministry to refugees. Authorities held him for two months without formal charges before a judge last December charged him with “membership in an armed terrorist organization.” The judge has presented no evidence in court or to attorneys to support the charges.

For Brunson months of incarceration in 4 Nolu T Tipi Prison, a forbidding complex on the outskirts of Izmir, came to what many hope could be the beginning of a breakthrough on March 28. That day officials at the U.S. Embassy met him in prison and agreed to release a statement on his behalf.

In it Brunson challenged Turkish and American officials, asking, “Will the Turkish government face no consequence for stubbornly continuing to hold an American citizen as a political prisoner?”

Brunson’s statement continued: “I plead with my government—with the Trump Administration—to fight for me. I ask the State Department to impose sanctions. I appeal to President Trump: Please help me. Let the Turkish government know that you will not cooperate with them in any way until they release me. Please do not leave me here in prison.”

The pastor’s “fight for me” plea became a rallying cry for his supporters worldwide. A petition for his freedom—
OR ME’
launched by the American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ), a Washington-based legal advocacy organization representing him—gained further attention, nearing 250,000 signatures. Brunson’s wife Norine flew to Ankara in anticipation of the Tillerson visit one day before his arrival.

Norine Brunson, herself detained for two weeks with her husband last October before Turkish officials released her, has remained in Izmir to support her husband. Authorities denied her requests to visit Brunson until Dec. 28, when she saw him at the prison, where she learned he had not received letters she’d sent (and that he had assumed she’d been deported). Turkish officials have continued to allow her to visit him periodically, with monitoring, but each time she must petition the government in Ankara for permission.

During one such visit on March 27, Brunson told his wife “he felt the Lord had said I would meet Sec of State Tillerson,” Norine wrote on Facebook. The next day, U.S. officials told her no such meeting would take place. She traveled to Ankara anyway, she wrote, “just in case the Lord opens something up.”

Tillerson arrived in Ankara on March 30. Without specifying how it came about, Norine told supporters she was permitted to meet with the secretary of state, a conversation she said lasted 20 minutes. Tillerson indicated he had spoken with Erdogan about the case and said “an indictment” could be handed down soon in the case, but could not elaborate.

“I do not know what will come of it, considering the sensitive period Turkey is in, but was grateful for the opportunity,” Norine wrote on Facebook.

As in the United States, an indictment would spell out the legal charges against the accused, and perhaps shed light on a case that has appeared to stagnate for six months under a curtain of seeming injustice.

At a joint press conference with Tillerson and his Turkish counterpart, journalists questioned Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu about Brunson. Çavuşoğlu told reporters the court will decide Brunson’s case “after the prosecutor completes the indictment” and said charges against Brunson weren’t initiated by the judiciary or the police, “but upon a complaint from his own translator”—the first time such details about the case had been made public.

Çavuşoğlu stated: “During this process, we have assisted him in accessing the consulate, meeting his family, private talks with his wife, and providing books that he wanted, including the Bible. We will continue to do so. The court will make a decision on him after the prosecutor completes the indictment. It is not a process that the judiciary and the police initiated themselves, but upon a complaint from his own translator. We are also waiting for the judiciary to make a decision immediately. This is not a political process, nor is it a step against the U.S.”

For his part, Tillerson “wanted to make sure he met with Mrs. Brunson to share the most recent information he had on Pastor Brunson’s case,” an unidentified State Department official told the Reuters news service. “The secretary committed to staying in touch with Mrs. Brunson regarding the case moving forward,” the official said.

The day after the joint press conference and Tillerson’s meeting with Brunson’s wife, at least seven Turkish news outlets, including the patrician English-language Hürriyet Daily News, carried stories about the case.

“I think this is a good step in the right direction,” said Aykan Erdemir, a former member of the Turkish Parliament and now senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies in Washington. Erdogan has released some journalists and others who have been jailed for months in the run-up to this month’s referendum, Erdemir said: “This really is the right time to pressure Ankara.”

Asked what it might take to secure Brunson’s release, the former opposition politician said: “There should be no carrot! It is clear that a U.S. pastor is framed and imprisoned on bogus charges, and with little or no due process, and this is embarrassing for Turkey, a NATO ally. Ankara should release Pastor Brunson, not because it will get something in return, but to save itself from embarrassment.”

Another analyst in Turkey, who is not identified due to the ongoing threats to security for those making public statements, said, “At this point both local and expat Christians remain unsure how this case is going to impact the church here, short- or long-term.”

Erdogan has sought to increase his authority and silence perceived opponents since facing down a coup attempt last
summer. The president blamed the attempted ouster on a movement started by onetime ally Fethullah Gülen, a Muslim leader living in self-imposed exile in rural Pennsylvania. Erdogan declared a state of emergency following the coup attempt, and his regime subsequently has arrested tens of thousands of civilians—including teachers, police, public officials, and religious leaders.

Adding to the pressure to restrict freedoms: the war next door in Syria, where Turkey has taken an active military role plus a hard line publicly against ISIS, or Islamic State. Nearly 3 million Syrian refugees currently reside in Turkey.

The Pentagon angered the Erdogan government a month ago when it sent additional troops to Syria-Turkey border areas to train and serve alongside the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a Kurdish-led rebel coalition Erdogan opposes. Despite the serious strains, Tillerson reiterated a strong U.S.-Turkey relationship, saying “there is no space” between Turkey and the United States in a mutual commitment to defeat ISIS.

Protests and propaganda were ramping up ahead of the April 16 referendum, which promises to drastically expand the powers of the presidency and end Turkey’s parliamentary system. Under it, the president—not Parliament—would appoint Cabinet ministers and the president would appoint two-thirds of the country’s senior judges. The president could pass certain laws by decree and use a state of emergency to dissolve Parliament. With opponents referring to the measure as “democide,” Erdogan has banked on international voting among a large Turkish diaspora, where early balloting began outside Turkey April 5. In the Netherlands, for example, 250,000 dual citizens of Turkish descent are eligible to vote, but Dutch and German officials have been vocal in opposing the referendum.

While the government’s future remains uncertain and Brunson continues in prison, his church faces a deadline: The landlord for the rented space in Izmir, nervous over the high-profile case, has asked the congregation to vacate the building by the end of April. Norine Brunson and others, in turn, have launched a campaign (including a GoFundMe web page) to purchase the building so the congregation may use it permanently.

The church’s current location, say congregants, is ideal, a two-story yellow building fronting a central street with many pedestrians and easy access to mass transit. Resurrection, or Dirilis in Turkish, keeps its gate and shutters open, with New Testaments and other literature waiting in shelves that sit on two open window ledges. The church gives away hundreds of volumes this way, and passersby also often stop in for conversation or prayer.

Brunson is ordained in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC), and the couple serves with Partners In Harvest. Church officers I contacted about the case, including EPC stated clerk Jeff Jeremiah, referred questions to ACLJ. Last month the advocacy group called for the U.S. government to “take a more active role in fighting for Pastor Andrew’s release.” In a statement released April 7—the six-month anniversary of Brunson’s imprisonment—senior counsel CeCe Heil called for continued public pressure, as Brunson lives on in a Turkish prison cell built for eight that at times has held 22 prisoners, all Muslims.

### TIMELINE

2016 JULY 21 | President Erdogan announces state of emergency

OCT. 7 | Brunsons detained under deportation orders in Izmir by Turkey’s Interior Ministry

OCT. 19 | Norine Brunson released

DEC. 9 | In Andrew Brunson’s first court appearance, judge orders him imprisoned on charges of “membership in an armed terrorist organization”

DEC. 28 | Andrew allowed first prison visit with wife Norine

DEC. 29 | Turkish court denies initial appeal in the case

DEC. 30 | U.S. Embassy officials allowed to meet Andrew in prison for the first time

DEC. 31 | New Year’s Eve mass shooter at Istanbul’s Reina nightclub kills 39 people

2017 JAN. 2 | Justice Ministry announces 41,326 “terrorism suspects” arrested thus far in Gülenist Movement probe following the failed 2016 coup

FEB. 11 | Uzbek national Abdulkadir Masharipov, arraigned in the Istanbul nightclub massacre, testifies before a Turkish court: “My purpose was to kill Christians”

FEB. 13 | Turkey’s highest court blocks the deportation order pending against American Christian David Byle, allowing him to remain in the country at least temporarily

MARCH 31 | U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson meets Norine Brunson, telling her “an indictment” in her husband’s case is expected soon

APRIL 5 | Early voting begins abroad for April 16 referendum to expand presidential powers

APRIL 7 | Andrew Brunson completes six months in prison
Rent-a-womb

Gay men use money and political clout, and claim surrogate moms are unattached to the babies they carry

BY MARY JACKSON in San Francisco
The 10th-floor ballroom of San Francisco’s Marines’ Memorial Club & Hotel has high, coffered ceilings and baroque-style drapes and chandeliers. As 250 men in business casual filled the room early this year for the city’s fourth annual “Surrogacy Conference and Expo,” all eyes were on four female panelists at the front. The topic: how gay men can have babies using surrogates.

The men want biological children, and surrogacy—along with in vitro fertilization (IVF)—promises a method by which they can have them. But many of the countries that used to permit the practice now ban it. That makes the United States one of the few countries to allow commercial surrogacy and California the state with the most-surrogacy-friendly laws. If homosexual activists get their way, more states will follow California’s lead and adopt similar laws and “ethical guidelines.”

Surrogacy is costly—typically more than $150,000—but even men with money must still find donor eggs and a “gestational surrogate”: That’s a woman willing to “rent” her womb by becoming pregnant and giving birth to a child unrelated genetically to her. In San Francisco, money and eggs are easy to come by, but finding a surrogate is by far the biggest roadblock according to one conference attendee—a gay man four years into the IVF process with his partner.

The roadblock is becoming bigger as an unusual alliance of conservatives and women’s rights groups opposes commercial surrogacy. In recent years The Center for Bioethics and Culture (CBC) has produced a documentary, Breeders, and launched internationally the “Stop Surrogacy Now” campaign: CBC has collected more than 6,000 signatures from leading Catholic, evangelical, feminist, and liberal activists who consider surrogacy a human rights violation that exploits women and children.

At San Francisco’s Surrogacy Expo, hosts encouraged men to “shop around” for a surrogate. Event sponsors—dozens of West Coast fertility clinics, egg banks, and surrogacy agencies—set up displays explaining their services. Breakout sessions included information on budgeting, creating “optimal” embryos, and surrogate compensation. “The wall you are up against is that you don’t have a uterus,” one of the female panelists said, drawing laughter.

In 2011 the Society for Assisted Reproductive Technology (SART) reported 1,593 babies born in the United States to gestational surrogates, as tracked by its member clinics. This is up from 1,353 in 2009, and 738 in 2004. These numbers are likely much higher since many surrogate births go unreported.

Still, surrogacy carries risks for intended parents (IPs) and women. Many IPs remember the 1986 Baby M case, where biological father William Stern and his wife battled for custody with surrogate Mary Beth Whitehead, the baby’s biological mother. That messy case, along with IVF improvements, initiated a shift from “traditional” surrogacy to gestational surrogacy, where the surrogate has no genetic connection to the baby. Surrogacy advocates believe women are less likely to become attached if they carry a baby who began life in a lab using donor or would-be parents’ eggs and sperm. One panelist in San Francisco reassured the audience that fears of a surrogate attaching to the baby are misplaced: “Those fears don’t exist. They exist in our minds.”
But maternal attachment is hard to predict, especially when dealing with a woman’s most intimate experience. California gestational surrogate Melissa Cook last year filed a lawsuit against the biological father of the triplets she was carrying after he demanded she abort one of them. She had signed a 75-page contract permitting him to “reduce” a multiple pregnancy and now faces financial ruin for her refusal. Cook told The New York Post, “I bonded with these kids.”

Many states, including New York, Indiana, and Michigan, ban commercial surrogacy, while other states either have laws prohibiting compensation or contracts, or no laws at all. California is unique because it allows for paid surrogate contracts that give IPs legal, full-custody rights to the child prior to birth. That’s different from adoption, where birth mothers give up parental rights only after children are born.

Kids as commodities

Catholics have clear teaching opposing IVF and surrogacy. Evangelicals aren’t as clear. Some accept surrogates helping infertile heterosexual couples have biological children, provided they do not have abortions. The CBC’s Jennifer Lahl said many couples tell her they received their pastors’ consent and even sought financial support from their congregations.

But have those who applaud use of surrogates thought it through? Children born to surrogate mothers are more likely to suffer emotional problems, according to a 2013 University of Cambridge study. Jessica Kern was “devastated” at age 17 when she learned from her medical records that she was “bought” for $10,000 in a traditional surrogacy arrangement. She describes an abusive upbringing and further rejection after she met her biological mother. At a recent CBC event, Kern said many people tell her “you should just be grateful you’re here … as if that makes it all OK and we shouldn’t look deeper into these issues.”

Looking deeper leads some to point the finger at the unregulated surrogacy agencies brokering deals involving little screening and lots of cash. Surrogacy forums are filled with warnings of fraudulent agencies and individuals. In 2013 the owners of Modesto-based SurroGenesis pleaded guilty to defrauding clients of millions of dollars, leaving some IPs unable to pay already-pregnant surrogates. In another case, Los Angeles–based Planet Hospital founder “Rudy” Rupak pleaded guilty in March to stealing millions from IPs in an international surrogacy arrangement.
The internet is now littered with ads seeking women in states that allow paid surrogacy: “Earn up to $67,000!” “Guaranteed speedy match!” “Perfect for my college loans,” and “Surrogacy helped our Military Family buy a home.”

The surrogacy agencies placing these ads are unregulated. Some agencies pop up for a few months and then disappear. Many fail to screen would-be parents. Scandals and fraud are rampant. In 2012, authorities caught San Diego surrogacy broker Theresa Erickson running an international baby-selling ring. She told NBC San Diego her case represented the “tip of the iceberg” of a corrupt industry.

Men Having Babies, the nonprofit that hosts surrogacy conferences, recently drafted “ethical guidelines” that will purportedly rein in abuses. The guidelines proclaim a woman’s right to act as a surrogate and call for uniform laws establishing enforceable contracts between surrogates and “intended parents.” At one New York City conference, state legislator Brad Hoylman, a gay father, encouraged “iron-clad, enforceable agreements.” He told men, “The more we press our political leaders, the more willing they will be to consider it.”

But iron-clad, enforceable agreements often put women and babies at risk. The Center for Bioethics and Culture’s Jennifer Lahl says too often “things go terribly wrong.” Some surrogates suffer health problems. Some IPs bully them. One 41-page redacted contract, sent by a California surrogate, required her to “substantially reduce” soda and processed and fast-food intake: She had to get permission for hair dye, herbal supplements, and routine teeth cleaning. The contract gave IPs the legal right to “make all fetal reduction decisions,” including “therapeutic” abortion, killing one or two triplets, and killing children in the womb “for any medical reason, or if there is any indication of any physical or neurological defect or abnormality.”

Heather Rice decided to try commercial surrogacy after seeing an ad on a parenting website. At 19, the Arizona single mother of two was working two low-paying jobs. She wanted to stay home with her children. Rice’s first experience was “amazing”—she conceived easily and birthed twin girls for a couple, earning $1,750 a month. “I thought, I can do this again,” she said in a phone interview.

But Rice’s second experience for an infertile, heterosexual couple turned bitter. She miscarried twice—the second baby, a girl diagnosed with Down syndrome, died at 31 weeks. Rice’s third pregnancy for the couple was twin boys. One died at 8 weeks. Then a routine 20-week ultrasound revealed the other boy had a rare brain cleft. During the ultrasound, Rice says, “Mom just got up and left the room.”

Rice’s mothering instincts kicked in when the genetic mother called her a week later and told her to abort: “To her it was just an embryo made in a lab. To me it was a living, kicking, moving human being inside of me.” Naming the boy “M.J.” Rice hired a lawyer and began researching his condition, feeling hopeful after talking with brain experts and sending them medical scans.

At 28 weeks the boy’s cleft had closed in what Rice called “a miracle from God.” The parents indicated they wanted him, saying they had set up a nursery and bought baby clothes, but when Rice went into labor, the mother never showed up at the hospital. Rice called the father crying and begging him to come see the boy and cut the cord. He came, cut the cord, and took the baby.

Rice, now 32, has no idea what happened to “M.J.” She recently found the couple on Facebook but saw no trace of him. She suspects they decided on adoption. Especially on Mother’s Day, the day “M.J.” was born, Rice wonders, “Is he hungry? Is he dirty? Is he OK?” She says, “I’m still determined to find him one day.”

These cases and others reveal the market for children often crosses national borders. Many couples come to the United States for babies, while others seek to cut costs by traveling to poorer countries where impoverished women rent their wombs for a meager sum, often living in crowded dormitories far from home during pregnancy. Last year, authorities arrested an Australian broker who charged IPs $50,000 while paying Cambodian surrogates $400 a month and promising $6,000 more when they give up the babies after birth.

Children are often lost in the mix. In 2014, an Australian couple paid a Thai surrogate to birth twins but abandoned one born with Down syndrome. Another recent case, dubbed “the baby factory,” involves a 24-year-old Japanese businessman who fathered more than a dozen children using different Thai surrogates. He reportedly desired to father hundreds more.

Nations famous for “fertility tourism”—including India, Nepal, Cambodia, and Thailand—have recently banned commercial surrogacy. Government officials admit to exploitation of poor women and a lack of safety and oversight. Lahl says, “The world is closing its borders… but we say, ‘Come to California! Buy the baby of your dreams!’” —M.J.
ON A FEBRUARY MORNING at the U.S. Capitol, lawmakers, ambassadors, and advocates gathered to award the Lantos Human Rights Prize to Vian Dakhil, a young, articulate member of Iraq’s parliament whose 2014 cries for help drew the world’s attention to ISIS atrocities.

Dakhil’s advocacy for fellow Yazidis had made her ISIS’ most wanted woman, but her nationality almost kept her from attending the event in her honor: As an Iraqi national, she was barred from entering the United States under President Donald Trump’s recently issued travel ban.

Katrina Lantos Swett, president of the Lantos Foundation, later called it “the height of irony” that the ban would block “one of ISIS’ most effective and ardent foes.” Dakhil eventually received a waiver to attend the event—a process the administration created to address situations like her’s—but Swett urged event attendees to consider what an “America First” policy could mean for human rights.

Some conservative observers might dismiss Swett’s Trump criticism, since she’s a Democrat, but Swett has crafted a reputation as a forceful and fiercely independent advocate for human rights—and specifically international religious freedom. Swett spent the Obama years often urging the administration to be more active and challenging congressional Democrats to do the same.

“There’s no Republican position and there is no Democratic position on international religious freedom,” said Swett, age 61, who served on the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) from 2012 to 2016. “It absolutely transcends party lines.”

As some Democrats de-emphasize traditional human rights—often in favor of LGBT concerns—and Republicans face pressure not to criticize a GOP White House, Swett’s example of independence shows it is possible to put policy over politics.
“She was the very opposite of a partisan or an ideologue,” said conservative Princeton University professor Robert P. George, who served as the USCIRF chairman in alternating years with Swett. “I did not have a different vision from Katrina, and she didn’t have a different vision from me. We were the same.”

HARROWING FAMILY HISTORY cultivated Swett’s passion for human rights. Her Hungarian parents, Tom and Annette Lantos, both lost most of their families in the Holocaust. After escaping a slave labor camp, her father hid in a safe house established by Raoul Wallenberg, the famed Swedish diplomat who saved as many as 100,000 Hungarian Jews. Her mother slipped out of Hungary with a “protective passport”—another Wallenberg rescue effort. The couple reconnected after the war, married in 1950, and settled in California.

The Lantoses regularly took their two daughters abroad and, often around the dinner table, instilled a sense of optimism about life and a conviction that one person can make a difference. This produced tangible results: Katrina and her sister Annette took it upon themselves to rebuild the family and had a combined 17 children.

Swett attributes her “double education” at home and school for rapidly preparing her for college. After skipping high school, she earned a political science degree from Yale University at age 18, graduated from law school 2½ years later, and landed on the staff of then-Sen. Joe Biden at age 21.

Four years later, Tom Lantos became the first and only Holocaust survivor to win a seat in Congress. He would go on to help found the Congressional Human Rights Caucus—renamed the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission after his death—and chair the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

“Her father was a great man,” said Elliott Abrams, a former Reagan administration official who frequently worked with Lantos on human rights issues.

Step into Swett’s office in downtown Concord, N.H., and it takes only seconds to see how much the legacies of father and daughter intertwine. Atop a bookcase sit separate photos of her father shaking hands with Bill Clinton and Barack Obama—near a photo of her smiling parents with Condoleezza Rice. Her mother’s Holocaust-era ID card sits on a shelf. On the wall hangs a painted portrait of her father casting an adoring glance at his wife.

Swett flashed one of her frequent smiles and said she has her father “looking down on me from every corner of my office. He keeps me flying straight.”

Following her father’s 2008 death, Swett, her mother, and her sister launched the Lantos Foundation for Human Rights and Justice to continue advancing causes around the globe. The foundation uses three primary means to do so: The Lantos Congressional Fellows program provides mentoring and support for about 10 young human rights activists each year; the Front Line Fund awards grants to small organizations and individuals doing unheralded work; the Lantos Prize for Human Rights annually honors a person for outstanding advocacy—like Vian Dakhil.

“We like to think we punch above our weight,” Swett said before taking me on a tour of her orderly office. She explained her father’s love for animals and the significance of the Wallenberg portrait hanging beside her desk and read a framed letter Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu sent to recognize a Lantos statue unveiled last year in Israel.

The family’s political connections have aided the foundation’s growth, but Swett’s persistent work has swiftly turned the organization into a respected human rights institution.

FOR MANY YEARS DEMOCRATS took a strong role in advocating for human rights—both at home and abroad. Among his many international battles, Lantos frequently criticized abuses in China, spoke out against Communism,
and steadfastly supported Israel. On the domestic front, Democratic Rep. Chuck Schumer—now the Senate minority leader—introduced the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, which President Bill Clinton later signed into law.

The tide turned after 9/11, when wars in Iraq and Afghanistan created a fear of over-engagement, especially among Democrats. During the Obama presidency, Republicans more often championed traditional human rights, while many Democrats seemed to pull back from them.

Some observers cite a reluctance to criticize one’s own president as the prime cause for the shift, but Swett sees issues that won’t be solved with a Republican in the White House. She said the Iraq War and the rise of LGBT activism have caused some to back away from global human rights issues—especially religious freedom. “Sometimes,” she said, “Democrats hear religious freedom and they transpose it into this domestic context where they may feel that religious freedom claims conflict with what they view as robust protection of civil rights for everybody in our society.”

Swett argues the hesitancy on international issues is unnecessary: Democrats and Republicans can and should agree on, among other things, the danger of blasphemy laws and the economic and security benefits of promoting freedom of speech, religion, and conscience. She said the Obama administration often took the right positions, but then didn’t back them up with policies.

“Rhetoric is always easier than policy,” Swett said. She named Reps. Anna Eshoo, D-Calif., Jim McGovern, D-Mass., and House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., as consistent advocates, but said, “It pains me that in some instances leaders in my party are not leading the charge any longer on human rights.”

Swett would know. USCIRF’s mandate requires it to collect facts and offer independent policy recommendations to the president, the secretary of state, and Congress on religious freedom issues—putting commissioners in close contact with policymakers.

Swett charted an aggressive course on the issues, calling out oppressive governments and even joining with six other commissioners who each offered to take 100 of the 1,000 lashes the Saudi Arabian government sentenced to a liberal blogger. In 2015, Swett supported USCIRF’s call for the U.S. government to recognize ISIS genocide against all affected groups—in the face of pressure to name only Yazidis.

Her independence at times ran afield of other Democratic-appointed commissioners who wanted to mitigate criticism of the Obama administration and move USCIRF from nonpartisan to bipartisan—including Republican and Democratic staffs. Swett was at times the lone Democrat voting with four Republicans on the nine-member commission.

“Katrina wouldn’t have it—she just wouldn’t vote a party line,” Abrams said. “She voted her conscience all the time.”

Principled stands don’t come without risk: As a political appointee, Swett could be less likely to receive a future appointment. (Her husband, former U.S. Rep. Richard Swett, was a Clinton-appointed ambassador to Denmark.) But Swett said she didn’t find it difficult: “If I felt it was the right thing to do, it never bothered me to ally with Republican colleagues.”

Some international religious freedom advocates credit Swett with saving the commission. They say the reforms she helped defeat would have rendered the body impotent.

Former U.S. Rep. Frank Wolf, who served for 27 years with Lantos, wrote the 1998 legislation that created USCIRF and called Swett one of the best commissioners the body has ever had: “She’s a tribute to her dad. I think her father would be very proud.”

Katrina Lantos Swett recalls her father as a proud and patriotic Hungarian before his country turned against him. After watching his mother and close friends die in the Holocaust—at the hands of both Nazis and Hungarian sympathizers—Lantos became a religious agnostic upon his immigration to the United States.

“He had become a hunted animal because he was a young Jewish man,” Swett said. He later rediscovered his Jewish identity but was “not eager to raise his two daughters in any particular religion.”

One day, young Katrina sent chills up her mother’s spine when she wished the family happy new year—in the fall. Her parents explained it wasn’t a new year, but the little girl insisted otherwise. That day was Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish new year no one had ever told Katrina existed.

Mother Annette Lantos eventually joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. She read Bible stories to her daughters but showed deference to her husband’s wishes.

As a young adult, Swett also became a Mormon and went on to raise her seven children in both religious traditions. —J.C.D.
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Riding by faith

DESPITE THE DANGERS, SOME BULL RIDERS AND BIG-WAVE SURFERS FIND A SENSE OF CALLING IN THEIR SPORT

by Jill Nelson in San Clemente, Calif.

The world’s deadliest surf breaks often have names screaming “danger”: Jaws in Maui, Teahupoo (“sever the head”) in Tahiti, and the shark-infested Dungeons in South Africa are among the Top 10. In the Professional Bull Riders circuit, the names of bovine beasts are no less terrifying: Pearl Harbor, Spotted Demon, and Inferno.

The culture of belt buckles and bull ropes seems worlds apart from that of wetsuits and board leashes, but legendary rides and close encounters with death are realities in both occupations. The two cultures merged when 23-year-old Zane Cook hit a slump in his professional bull riding career and his agent proposed a unique way for the Oklahoma native to gain a fresh perspective: surf lessons in Southern California with former professional surfer Bryan Jennings.

Jennings, now a filmmaker and founder of Walking on Water surf ministry, saw an opportunity both to connect bull riders to big-wave surfers and to make a documentary, Surfers and Cowboys. He invited Cook and two of his bull-riding buddies to Hawaii to spend time with three professional surfers, including 35-year-old Aaron Gold. “They’re both risking their lives to do what they love,” Jennings told me during the March premiere of the film in San Clemente, Calif.
The film’s timing was providential: During a surfing competition at Jaws on Jan. 15, 2016, Gold made the book of Guinness World Records for riding the biggest wave ever paddled into—a jaw-dropping 63 feet from trough to crest. Four months later, he almost died during a wipeout in Fiji, which created opportunities to talk about how God uses life’s challenges—a meaningful message for the struggling, young bull rider.

Critics of both sports say the athletes take unnecessary risks. Big-wave surfers are often pushed 20 to 50 feet underwater and may only have 20 seconds to reorient their bodies, find the surface, and catch their breath before the next wave pummels them. Mix strong currents with coral reefs and rocks, and it’s not surprising that at least seven big-wave surfers have died in the past 25 years.

A similar level of danger lurks in the arenas of the rodeo circuits. A 2011 study published in the Clinical Journal of Sport Medicine cited 11 fatalities and 16 catastrophic or severe injuries from bull riding between 1989 and 2009. Riders have only eight seconds to showcase their skills, but events can take a deadly turn after the chute opens. Risks include being trampled by a 1,500- to 2,000-pound bull, getting impaled by the bull’s horns, and slamming into arena infrastructure.

Cook speaks of his sense of calling: “When you love to ride bulls as much as I do, you block all that fear out of your mind. You know your purpose and what you want to achieve... Dreams are scary, but you have to chase them anyways.” Cook was 12 when he told his parents he wanted to ride a bull. His mom said no, but his dad believed a quick trip on the back of a massive wild animal would put an end to his son’s childhood dream. He was wrong, but both parents now support Cook’s passion.

Gold, a Hawaii native, was also around 12 when he rode a 7-foot wave at Waimea Bay on Oahu’s North Shore and decided to become a big-wave surfer: “Despite the risks involved in doing what we do, my family and I know without a doubt that surfing is the gift and calling that God has placed on my life.”

A surfing wipeout in Fiji last year turned life-threatening when Gold was held underwater, was hit hard by a second wave, and blacked out, facedown in the water. A friend pulled him onto a rescue sled and administered CPR. After close to a minute, Gold began breathing again, but didn’t regain consciousness for another two minutes.

“I’ve been in critical situations when time slows down and you pray, wondering if it’s your time and being OK with that. I didn’t get that moment this time,” Gold explained, noting a deep sense of God’s purpose and plan when he regained consciousness.

Both men take precautions. Despite the rodeo world’s slow efforts to adopt helmet requirements, Cook’s father made protective headgear mandatory for his son. Gold rarely surfs without an inflatable vest and consistently trains to improve his lung capacity.

But these precautions offer limited assurances, and Gold’s wife, who was interviewed in the documentary, offered good advice for those related to extreme risk-takers: “If your husband is in a dangerous career path, all you can do is pray.”

Aaron Gold rides the wave that got him into Guinness World Records.
Cybersecurity typically protects digital devices from malicious software. But new research suggests devices such as smartphones, fitness trackers, and even autonomous vehicles could be vulnerable to hacking via sound waves.

Researchers at the University of Michigan found that by using specific acoustic tones they could trick the tiny sensors known as accelerometers—devices that measure the change of an object’s speed in three dimensions—into giving false readings.

With an inexpensive speaker, the researchers fooled a Fitbit fitness tracker into registering thousands of phony steps. They used a smartphone’s own speaker to play a music file containing malicious tones, which allowed them to hack into the phone’s accelerometer controlling a toy car.

Tricking the sensors into delivering false signals in these devices challenges basic assumptions about hardware security, the team told University of Michigan News.

“We trust our senses and we use them to make decisions,” said Timothy Trippel, a doctoral student in computer science and engineering and lead author of a forthcoming paper on the research. “If autonomous systems can’t trust their senses, then the security and reliability of those systems will fail.”

The Michigan researchers have proposed both hardware and software updates to defend against such acoustic vulnerabilities.

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### SUNSHINE POTENTIAL

If you’ve ever considered solar power for your home but rejected the idea because you don’t live in Arizona (or some other sunny location), Google wants you to think again.

**Project Sunroof**, launched by Google in 2015 to help people answer the question, “Does solar power make sense on my rooftop?” now has data from every state, with approximately 60 million buildings analyzed. Leaving aside the question of solar power’s ability to outperform fossil fuels, Project Sunroof is revealing interesting data about the viability of solar energy on rooftops based on the total sunlight available to homes and businesses across the United States.

According to Project Sunroof, more than 90 percent of homes in Hawaii, Arizona, and New Mexico are technically viable for solar power. Sixty percent of homes in Pennsylvania, Maine, and Minnesota are viable. Nationwide, 79 percent of all rooftops analyzed have enough unshaded area for solar panels.

The city with the most solar potential: Houston, with enough sunlight to produce 18,940 gigawatt-hours per year—enough to power 1.7 million homes. —M.C.

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### HAPPY HAULING

Truck drivers work odd hours, driving for long stretches at a time, including at night. For truckers in northern Europe, where Arctic winters mean even daytime hours are dark, the lack of light can affect both driving performance and mood.

Researchers at European truck manufacturer Daimler found that the shape of most truck cabs limits the amount of natural light that shines inside. They wanted to learn if adding artificial daylight to cabs would have a positive influence on drivers. At a site in Rovaniemi, Finland, test drivers simulated two weeks of winter driving—the first week driving in cabs equipped with conventional lighting and the second week in cabs fitted with a module that emits artificial sunlight with a concentration on the blue end of the spectrum.

In post-test interviews, the drivers reported their moods significantly improved when using the artificial daylight system, and onboard cab data showed their driving performance also improved. According to Daimler, the drivers said that while using the artificial daylight, they found the space inside the cab to be more pleasant. —M.C.
When California Attorney General Xavier Becerra charged pro-life activists David Daleiden and Sandra Merritt with 15 felony counts for their undercover investigation of Planned Parenthood and other pro-abortion forces, even the Los Angeles Times balked.

Over the past year, the newspaper has scorned Daleiden’s Center for Medical Progress (CMP) for its videos showing Planned Parenthood officials callously discussing prices for the remains of aborted children.

Still, the paper’s editorial board scolded Becerra for pressing criminal charges against Daleiden and Merritt for using methods often praised in other undercover investigations.

For example, the editors noted the paper has supported animal rights groups’ undercover exposés of practices at California farms. In 2015, local officials pressed animal cruelty charges against a Fresno poultry worker after the group Mercy for Animals released an undercover video shot at the farm.

The activists with hidden cameras didn’t face charges.

In CMP’s case, Daleiden and Merritt recorded conversations with individuals in pro-abortion groups in an attempt to expose the illegal sale of aborted baby parts. Since California is one of 11 states where both parties must consent to recording private conversations, the attorney general contends the pair violated the law.

Daleiden’s attorney says since the recorded conversations occurred in crowded public settings, the discussions weren’t confidential.

Officials at Planned Parenthood hailed the charges against the pro-life pair, but pro-abortion groups have used similar undercover tactics against pro-life groups for years.

In Florida and Virginia, undercover activists used hidden cameras to record conversations at pregnancy care centers. When a reporter from the website Vice asked one activist how she faked pregnancy when visiting the centers, the activist bragged she brought urine from pregnant women.

In California, the abortion giant NARAL conducted a yearlong undercover investigation of dozens of pregnancy care centers in California. The group underscored its workers didn’t record conversations. Instead, NARAL trained volunteers to visit care centers and ask questions about abortion. After the visits, the volunteers (reportedly including at least one teenager) wrote down their versions of encounters.

NARAL used the self-reported accounts to claim pregnancy care centers regularly lie to women. Among the complaints: 70 percent of the pro-life workers called the fetus a baby. The report lamented that when women asked about their options, “the response from CPCs was frightening in its consistency: ‘You should have a baby no matter what.’”

Though NARAL didn’t record the California encounters, the group used the one-sided accounts from unnamed sources successfully: The California Legislature passed a bill mandating pregnancy care centers tell pregnant women about free abortions available through the state’s Medicaid program.

When it comes to CMP, California’s attorney general—who has received donations from Planned Parenthood’s political arm—was far more outraged over the purported invasion of privacy than the possible illegal practices involving unborn children.

One of the CMP videos showed Deborah Nucatola—a California abortionist and medical services director for Planned Parenthood—describing how abortionists try to kill an unborn child while leaving his or her organs intact for fetal tissue companies.

So while undercover videos of farm workers force-feeding ducks led California to ban the production and sale of fatty duck liver, apparently the same mercy doesn’t apply to unborn children.

“We’ve been very good at getting lung, heart, liver...so I’m not going to crush that part,” Nucatola said in the video. “I’m going to basically crush below, I’m going to crush above, and I’m going to see if I can get it all intact.” ©
Check box change-up
A TAX FORM BOX TRANSITIONS FROM PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGNS TO PEDIATRIC RESEARCH

by Charles Horton

On your federal income tax Form 1040, there’s a box right under your Social Security number. It allows you to check if you (or your spouse, if filing jointly) want to contribute $3 to the presidential election campaign. One eagle-eyed WORLD reader was reading the 1040 instructions—“This fund helps pay for Presidential election campaigns…”—and noticed this sentence at the end: “The fund also helps pay for pediatric medical research.”

What kind of research? she wondered. And how did this change come about?

The good news first: The research itself appears innocuous. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) explains online that the money goes to study childhood cancers and structural birth defects (as opposed to those caused by external sources, like thalidomide) at a genetic level. The 2014 law funding the research—Gabriella Miller Kids First Research Act—is named after a 10-year-old girl who died of brain cancer in 2013, hence the emphasis on understanding cancer in children. Children with cleft palates or hearing loss may also benefit from research projects her namesake law currently funds.

Miller died shortly after the 2013 government shutdown. She wrote a plea for “less talk, more action,” which was published shortly after she died. That shutdown, which pitted Republican attempts to avoid funding Obamacare against Democrats’ insistence on an all-or-nothing budget vote, found a human face in Miller. While her death had nothing to do with the government shutdown, each side blamed the other for the NIH’s 16 days without money for its cancer studies.

So why did the law divert money from the Presidential Election Campaign Fund? In the polarized atmosphere of post-shutdown Washington, the House majority leader at the time, Rep. Eric Cantor, R-Va., came up with a way to provide money for a popular, bipartisan cause without raising taxes: redirect to the NIH all money the campaign fund would have spent on party nominating conventions—about $12 million annually for the next 10 years.

While the law defunded party nominating conventions, the income tax checkoff continues to fund presidential campaigns for candidates who refuse all private donations. All major presidential candidates from 1976 to 2004 took the deal—even Ross Perot, running as an independent in 1996—but John McCain’s 2008 bid marked the last time a candidate from any party accepted such a grant in the general election. The amount candidates pass up reflects how much money they can now raise on their own. According to the Federal Election Commission, Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton each turned down $96.1 million.

Since both major campaigns refused the fund’s money, and since conventions can no longer receive it, the fund handed out only $1.1 million in the 2016 election cycle—a steep drop from the $239 million it issued in 2000, and less even than it gave Lyndon LaRouche in 2004. The money it gave the NIH in 2016 funded 10 pediatric research projects: less talk and more action, indeed. ©
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’Topping the Top 50’

MARCH 18  The article bemoaning the quality of the Top 50 Christian best-sellers is a small window into a huge problem. We have turned American Christianity into a business, churning out mediocre books, music, movies, speakers, and trinkets for the ever-willing faithful to purchase.

—ANTHONY BROOKS / Leesburg, Ga.

’Understanding America’

MARCH 18  Thank you for bringing Hillbilly Elegy to my attention. It’s painful reading in many parts but also a much-needed reality check.

—JENNIFER EASON on Facebook

J.D. Vance’s observations were enlightening, and I found the narrative entertaining.

—CHARLES BURGE on wng.org

’History and ideology’

MARCH 18  Thanks to Marvin Olasky for once again drawing our attention to the ruthless and godless ideology behind progressivism. German National Socialists and Soviet Communists used those ideas to justify murdering millions of people, and similar thinking prompts some to argue that “climate deniers” should be incarcerated.

—GREG BROWNING on wng.org

’A writer at work’

MARCH 18  Thank you for introducing us to John R. Erickson’s Hank the Cowdog series. The books are great, but the audiobooks are a real treat. My kids crack up over Hank’s antics, and sometimes I’m the one laughing the loudest.

—MIRANDA SHELDON / Dixon, Calif.

’The Shack’

MARCH 18  The Shack is heresy and a tool of the devil. If anyone wants to know God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, he should study the Bible.

—BARBARA PETERS on Facebook

I really don’t see what the big deal is. The Shack is fiction and not to be taken literally.

—CHRISTIAN SMITH on Facebook

What a shame that man has to make God human, apart from Christ, and try to remake Him in man’s image. I prefer to view God as awesome, high and lifted up, rather than squeezeable and homely.

—SUE WILSON on wng.org

I went to the film expecting it to trample my conservative Christian views, but it presented our triune God as all-knowing, all-powerful, and ever-present while still caring for His children. Let’s embrace the film and those who have the questions it raises.

—CHAD LAMB / Pendleton, Ind.

We truly are in a battle against evil, and I think on a basic level Trump understands this. The battle is against our society’s elite, humanists who put themselves in opposition to God. We should pray for Trump and his team.

—DANIEL R. GREENE / Selah, Wash.

’A heart for the brokenhearted’

MARCH 18  This article is great in describing the Funks’ faithfulness. Alaska is like its own country, majestic and serene, but human devastation is rampant.

—WILLIAM PECK on Facebook

Another beautifully written story by Sophia Lee. Forget the false health and wealth gospel; the Funks’ ministry is what true faith in Christ looks like.

—DEBORAH M. O’BRIEN on wng.org

The Funks’ story reminds us that God is always in the messiness of our lives.

—CHERYL SCRIVENS on wng.org

’Where have all the biscuits gone?’

MARCH 18  Christians can relate to the way Donald Trump behaved when confronted with today’s media, Hollywood, and academia. Here are three glaring examples of the behavior that will incur God’s wrath: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life.

—SUE WILSON on wng.org

By all means, the Trump administration should hold the media accountable, but it could have done so thoughtfully and respectfully, not with anger and pettiness, or by using its own biscuits to get journalists to say what the White House wants.

—SIMEON ANDREWS on wng.org

This is so different from the Western approach. I had infections after the births of my children; maybe this kind of care (without guilt) would have been helpful.

—WANDA HENDRIX CHANEY on Facebook

’New baby? Just relax’

MARCH 18  It’s wonderful that Chinese culture values mothers enough to make sure they have time to recover, are well-nourished, and have plenty of help. I would love to know if this practice affects the rate of postpartum depression.

—ANGELA WALLS on Facebook

This is so different from the Western approach. I had infections after the births of my children; maybe this kind of care (without guilt) would have been helpful.

—WANDA HENDRIX CHANEY on Facebook

’A choice to rejoice’

MARCH 18  It is a simple but profound
truth: Rejoicing is a choice. Puritan Samuel Ward wrote, “Life is not to be numbered by its hours, but measured by cheerfulness.” When life so slows down with hardship, I think we are better able to see what God has given.

—Diane Telian / Ann Arbor, Mich.

I have many health problems, including a slow-growing cancer. For many decades now, I have chosen joy, perhaps because I have found God faithful in big and little ways and have learned to be content.

—Donna D. Haxton on Facebook

‘Iraq’s grisly liberation’

March 18 Thank you. Mindy Belz’s detailed descriptions of the carnage helped me understand what these people are going through.

—Martin Franke on wng.org

This article was heartbreaking, insightful, and informative. I wish our country would help the Iraqi Christians in their time of great trouble.

—Kathy Barrett / Gaston, Ind.

‘System for sinners’

March 18 Kudos to Joel Belz for this excellent column. I hope never again to use the word “capitalism” without adding the adjective “democratic.”


Michael Novak’s characterizations of socialism for saints and democratic capitalism for sinners is true. The same applies to political systems: A constitutional republic based on Biblical principles is, thus far, the only political system that works for sinners. May God help us to preserve it.

—David R. Johnson / Morris, Ill.

‘Classically classical’

March 18 Experimental classical music would repulse me. I have always preferred music with clearly developed beauty, harmony, and structure. Perhaps this is simply what the Bulgarians are saying. Let us pray that artists today discover the source of hope and purpose that could bring life into their art.

—Ron Purcell / Prescott Valley, Ariz.

Read more Mailbag letters at wng.org
When I get together with Natalie, we keep it real. Natalie is a literalist, by her own description. It’s not that figures of speech and euphemisms elude her (she went to Harvard), but rather that she loves the language too much not to take you at your word. Once a person said to her in response to a dinner invitation, “I’m not sure I will be able to make it.” Natalie replied, “When will you know?” He then had to get real too: “I mean I won’t be coming.”

C.S. Lewis describes his first-ever meeting, as a youth, with his professor Kirk in Surrey, England, whom he had erroneously been led to believe was gushy and sentimental:

“I began to ‘make conversation’ in the deplorable manner which I had acquired at those evening parties.... I said I was surprised at the ‘scenery’ of Surrey; it was much ‘wilder’ than I had expected.

“Stop!” shouted Kirk, with a suddenness that made me jump. ‘What do you mean by wildness and what grounds had you for not expecting it?’

“I replied I don’t know what, still ‘making conversation.’ As answer after answer was torn to shreds it at last dawned upon me that he really wanted to know. He was not making conversation, nor joking, nor snubbing me; he wanted to know. I was stung into attempting a real answer. A few passes sufficed to show that I had no clear and distinct idea corresponding to the word ‘wildness,’ and that, insofar as I had any idea at all, ‘wildness’ was a singularly inept word. ‘Do you not see then,’ concluded the Great Knock, ‘that your remark was meaningless?’

“I prepared to sulk a little, assuming that the subject would now be dropped. Never was I more mistaken in my life. Having analyzed my terms, Kirk was proceeding to deal with my proposition as a whole” (“Surprised by Joy”).

Ah, why can’t all life be like that?

A young woman I know did her college freshman year in California and then had to return to Philadelphia because she couldn’t take the over-politeness. She is now quite at home on a campus in a sea of East Coast brashness.

The East Coast is not altogether free of divergence between the verbal and the hidden subtext, of course. After all, New York gave us Annie Hall and the balcony scene:

Alvy Singer: “So, did you do those photographs in there?” Annie: “Yeah, I sort of dabble around” (“I dabble? Listen to me—what a jerk.”) Alvy Singer: “They’re wonderful. They have a ... quality...” (“You’re a great-looking girl!”) Annie: “Well I would like to take a serious photography course.” (“He probably thinks I’m a yo-yo.”) Alvy Singer: “Photography is interesting...it’s a new art form, and a set of aesthetic criteria has not emerged yet.” (“I don’t know what I’m saying. She senses I’m shallow.”)

You always see someone you know at Aldi market. Recently I noticed two obvious acquaintances come cart to cart in the aisle, which I knew would require some degree of social acknowledgment. The exchange evidently went on a little longer than either woman had wanted, and in the end they were trading phone numbers: Let’s do lunch. I felt certain they would never use them.

For me, a pet peeve is radio talk shows where every caller asks the poor host, ‘How are you?’

My husband discovered early in our marriage that my way of arriving at understanding of an issue is to play the devil’s advocate, which I prefer to call the Socratic method. He hasn’t enjoyed that about me but at least no longer takes it as hostility.

Treat others as we would want them to treat us. I live with two men over 87. One makes pronouncements on the weather all day long. We do not live to please ourselves (Romans 15:1). The tongue is for speaking praise, for encouraging, and for letting our yes be yes and no be no. With some we love with literalness and precision. With others it would be hateful to be too precise.
A miraculous existence
GOD'S FINGERPRINTS ARE EVERYWHERE

In *A Big Bang in a Little Room*, Zeeya Merali describes the consensus among science’s biggest brains: “The notion that a god made our universe is several rungs on the wackiness ladder above the idea that it was made by aliens.” Nevertheless, Merali describes herself as both a believer in God and the holder of an Ivy League Ph.D. in theoretical physics, so she asks a good question: If God desired to send us a message, how would He do it?

Thirty-two years ago Carl Sagan’s novel *Contact* included speculation about finding a code in the digits of pi, which starts out 3.14159 and keeps going forever—but no one’s found it. Others said God might encode a message within the human genome—but that would be useful only for creatures on this planet. Merali suggests a message embedded in background radiation, so any sufficiently advanced creatures anywhere in the universe could perceive it. (Astronomers learn about distant galaxies and galaxy clusters by mapping tiny radiation wrinkles.)

The time to engrave such a message in the sky would be at the moment of creation, Merali writes: “Think of it like drawing a smiley face in marker on a balloon straight out of the package. Blow up the balloon and the picture stretches with the rubber. In the same way, as the cosmos rapidly inflated, its creator’s message would shine out across the whole sky.” She says no one has found such a message thus far, thus disappointing those who believe in God.

No such message? With respect for Merali, who writes charmingly, I think she’s wrong, for three reasons.

First, we live on a Goldilocks “just right” planet within a Goldilocks universe. The “RTB Design Compendium” at reasons.org lists nearly 1,500 features of the universe and Earth that must fall within narrow ranges to allow for the possibility of life, and then advanced life.

For example: We need a particular composition of the Earth's core and atmosphere, a particular Earth axis tilt and rotation speed, particular capillary action and surface tension, and so on.

We exist because of things most of us know nothing about: cosmic ray protons, intergalactic hydrogen gas clouds, molecular hydrogen formed by supernova eruptions, etc. If one loose definition of *miracle* is “a highly improbable or extraordinary event,” look at the likelihood of simple bacteria being able to survive anywhere in the universe apart from divine action: 1 chance in 10 followed by 556 zeros. What about the likelihood of advanced life? One chance in 10 followed by 1,054 zeros.

In February’s Super Bowl the New England Patriots trailed by 25 points with 17 minutes and 7 seconds left in the game. They managed to tie the game and win it in overtime: Headlines proclaimed “a miracle comeback.” But what if the Patriots had trailed by 8,216 points and needed to score one touchdown (plus two extra points) in every one of those 1,027 seconds left in the game? That gives us a sense of the unlikeliness of our existence purely through material causes—and we’d have to multiply that physical improbability/impossibility by about a trillion. (That’s why some atheistic scientists grab on to the wacky multiverse theory.)

The second proof of God’s existence: 20th-century theodicy. Decisions by three atheists—Mao, Stalin, and Hitler—led to 100 million deaths. Some people say that shows a merciful God does not exist, but we should flip the surmise: Atheism kills, and we’ve seen since the 1930s what happens when we worship human gods. (Yes, some “Christians” have also murdered, in smaller quantities, but they also claimed god-like status.) God warns us throughout the Bible that sin has consequences: Should we consider Him a liar because He tells the truth?

Why don’t we wake up every morning and realize our existence is miraculous? Maybe because so much noise surrounds us. But here’s a third reason to believe in God: I’ve met some men in their 20s whose thinking as teens was so destructive that it looked as if they would soon be dead, imprisoned, or traitorous. I was one of them. But “the steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end”—and the Bible tells me so.

God has sent a message, not in background radiation but in our existence, our history, and in what should be our daily reading.
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