

Volume 1
October 2022

sonder

everyone has a story

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Pentecost

Steve Griffiths

Remember Me

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Treasure Box

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Essays

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Children of Men: Beauty in Brokenness



front cover

Winslow Homer

Four Boys on a Beach, 1873

Courtesy National Gallery
of Art, Washington

inside front cover

Winslow Homer

The Dinner Horn, 1870

Courtesy National Gallery
of Art, Washington

Masthead

Publisher

Jamie Wilson

Editor in Chief

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Intern

Alex Himebaugh

All Sabo artwork:
Courtesy of Sabo

back cover

Winslow Homer

Dad's Coming!, 1873

Courtesy National Gallery
of Art, Washington

inside back cover

Winslow Homer

Berry Pickers, 1873

Courtesy National Gallery
of Art, Washington

Welcome to Conservatarian Press

Politics is downstream of culture.

When the great Andrew Breitbart said these words just over a decade ago, we lived in a different world. We all knew perfectly well what a woman is. Drag queens did not read queer fairy tales to preschool children in libraries. Abortion was still legal by federal judicial fiat. (We have not lost every battle!) And the dominant culture was, arguably, conservative.

Or was it? Culture is composed of things created by a people: its arts, literature, customs, social institutions, achievements, and history. IN EVERY ONE OF THESE, we are observing active changes made by the left-wing progressive elites – who have seized control of most of our institutions. They own the publishing world, the entertainment industry, the news media, the educational system, large charitable foundations, and online social media. This is not because they outnumber us. It is because they outmaneuvered us. We were asleep, secure in the notion that our culture could not be changed by force.

In this, we were wrong.

We have lost the culture war. But that does not mean the culture war is over. It means that we must mount a counterinsurgency. We must fight back. It will not be fast, and it will not be easy, but it must be done.

The first step is to look at what weapons we do have for mounting this war. We are frighteningly underequipped. We have few writers who can touch the hearts of people; the progressives over time either converted our young writers or discouraged them into quitting. We have few visual artists, and most of these are dismissed as derivative or banal by the wider art world. Liberalism conquered Hollywood. The Daily Wire and a few Christian moviemakers are bravely mounting a counterattack, but they have a very long way to go. We have been reduced largely to homeschooling to protect our children's vulnerable minds and hearts. We have no charitable foundations that are not political think-tanks; while liberal philanthropists fund culture-oriented charities, conservative philanthropists don't seem to realize we even have a conservative culture. We are struggling with social media and making headway, but the liberal culture is still crushingly powerful.

We are desperately underequipped, underfunded, undermanned, and underexperienced.

But we have to start somewhere. Sonder is the first of, I very much hope, many magazine outlets designed to curate and encourage our conservative culture-makers. We are small, but we can grow. We will build an audience for our writers, poets, essayists, visual artists, and even audio artists (music is culture!) And we will help shape and define the now-counterculture that is conservatism, preserving and growing it for our children and their children.

We do have one advantage: Counterculture is, by nature, rebellious. Young people and others seeking to define themselves are drawn to the counterculture – if it is also vibrant, energetic, and interesting.

Let's work together, creators and audience, to give them our counterculture.

What You, the Audience, Can Do to Help

Sonder is free, and we hope to keep it free, at least in its digital form. We need an audience to do this, and the larger, the better. That's because a large audience will enable us to sell advertising, and the largest audience will enable us to tailor advertising to exactly what we think you want to see. So:

- Subscribe
- Share our social media posts
- Tell your friends about us
- Click our advertising links and buy from our advertisers.

If you, dear audience, have stories and songs and talents to share, I encourage you to submit them here. Culture, above all else, is built of people, humans who have inner worlds of beauty and knowledge and stories to share with everyone else. Culture is our mutual connection. I look forward with the greatest excitement to seeing the connections you can bring us, and to the culture at large..

Jamie Wilson
Publisher

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n. the realization that every person on the planet pursues a life as vivid and complex as our own. They each have their own, personal hopes and dreams, virtues and vices, moments of sanity and craziness interwoven in an epic story perpetually playing out around us like Shakespeare in the park, or the café, or the bowling alley, or in church. We may appear only once, as an extra sipping beer in the background, or as a blur of traffic passing on the highway. Or we may command the stage as a tragic hero, or a complex villain, or even as comic relief. Each of these stories are uniquely ours, uniquely human, and they deserve to be told.

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Editor's Note

Make no mistake, the juxtaposition was intentional. Our interview subject for this issue - Sabo - is an artist best known for his insurgent flair and his knack for highlighting the hypocrisy of progressive elites. He isn't known for his painting, but in the last decade, through sheer force of will, he has become one of the most famous artists in America. Few living artists have had as much of an impact on our politics and culture.

Winslow Homer, our Feature Artist for this issue, is perhaps the premier American painter of the nineteenth century. A traditional, self-made man, he taught himself to paint and produced a vast collection of illustrations and vibrant watercolors chronicling American life that stays with us even today. The power and depth of emotion in his work is unrivalled and his focus often turned - as shown in the selections we've placed on and inside our front and back covers - on family.

Superficially, they don't seem to have much in common, but they are both cut from the same cloth. Homer was prolific and underappreciated until late in life. But he had a drive, and an energy and produced close to six hundred paintings before he died in 1910 at the age of seventy-four. Sabo has that same drive and energy to...*just create*. He may not be a gifted painter - yet, anyway, until he puts his mind to it - but his art has the same power along with an uncanny ability to make people stop and think.

We're proud to feature both Sabo and Homer in this inaugural edition of Sonder. And we're also excited to share with you the prose of superb authors like Roy Griffis and Steve Griffiths and John McNichol and, of course, our very own Jamie Wilson.

We sincerely hope you can find something to love inside the magazine, and we look forward to delivering great art and great artists to you for years to come.

Thomas J. Weiss

Editor-in-Chief

DO YOU STILL RECOGNIZE YOUR COUNTRY?

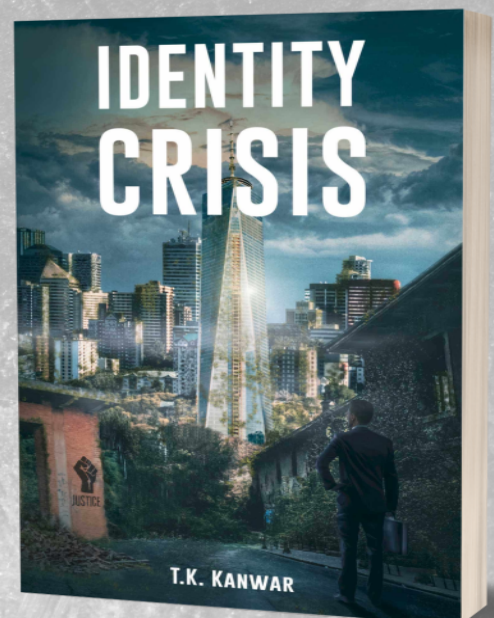
Identity Crisis explores what happens when a culture ignores its history, values, and people to bring about a "progressive utopia."

"[A] book of compelling significance . . . we have been watching the plot of [this] novel play out over the best years of our lives."

-The Epoch Times

The #5 political fiction book in the United States (Amazon Ranking, October 2022) **is now on sale!**

KINDLE EDITION: \$2.99 • PAPERBACK: \$12.95



homer

Roy M. Griffis | Fiction

oy decided he wanted to be a writer at ten, and hasn't looked back since. His most recent novels include the Cthulhu, Amalgamated series, which is "equal parts Terry Pratchett and Mel Brooks," according to Upsream Reviews.

Pentecost

"Lunatics on parade," I hear a voice behind me utter distinctly. It's a voice curiously flat, almost atonal.

"Dr. Markham," I say, turning away from the television to face her. I'm busted, no question, with no way to brazen it out. I was younger then, and hadn't become the skilled liar that life would later encourage me to be. Not that watching television in the lab is expressly forbidden. It's just that Dr. Markham doesn't approve of a division in the attention of her lab assistants.

She glances at the television. "Who is this idiot?" she asks, curious in spite of herself. Curiosity, on her, expresses itself with a straight line above her pale eyebrows and a further deepening of her gaunt cheeks.

"I don't know," I tell her. "It was a toss-up between this guy and a Japanese movie about a radiation infected boy eighty five feet tall."

The small phosphor dot figure rants about the great pyramids, Atlantis, and the Divine Plan.

Dr. Markham listens for a moment. "That kind," she says shortly. "Relying on the writings of Herodotus and his ilk...that's like using Aristotle to prove spontaneous regeneration is a fact."

Having thus dismissed my semi-amusing television harangue, she focuses her attention upon me. Closely upon me.

"How is the subject?"

Beebee is the subject's name. Really, her nameplate reads Betty, but one of the cleaning ladies could never get it straight, no matter how often she was corrected. "How is Betty the Baboon?" the woman would ask. Eventually, we started to log Betty's responses under B.B. I know it's not in keeping with the finest traditions of controlled scientific inquiry, but people do a lot of silly things when they're bored.

"She's fine." I try for a surreptitious glance at my log--not covert enough, as Dr. Markham with her long thin hands lifts the logbook off the counter. "She voided her bladder about 2300," I add lamely.

"Yes."

Why do I get the feeling my very existence is an affront to Dr. Markham? It's not so much that she curls her lip when she speaks to me as the distance with which she seems to regard me. I imagine her holding me out at arm's length, the way she would a parasitic fecal sample.

But it's not just me. It's the way she treats everyone. Everyone around here at least.

Lean, thin, gaunt, she crosses to the monitors. Her naked flanks must look like those of a wolf. From out of nowhere, I'm wondering what her ass would look like if she were nude, walking away from me. I suffer a vision of taut, white, spare, controlled flesh.

I think I've been working nights too long.

"Is that kitten still in there with her?"

Oh, no. Oh, shit. "Yes, ma'am."

Without turning to me, she says, "I don't like the kitten being in there with the subject."

"Dr. Graham thought it was a good idea, a way to further her socialization."

"Yes, I know what Dr. Graham thinks," Dr. Markham replies, atonal as ever, but degrees colder. Cold enough to burn. "I believe it distracts the subject, making our work here more difficult."

I don't want to get in the middle of a pissing contest between two PhD's, especially



since I was the one who let the kitten into the viewing room, allowing Beebee to see her for the first time. Doing my best to project an aural impression of groveling, I reply, "Dr. Graham said that if the kitten came back, I should let Beebee go ahead and play with it."

Dr. Markham shifts the cameras which record Beebee's actions day and night. "Turn that off," she tells me quietly.

I scoot across the false flooring in my desk chair and tap the switch on the TV. I can feel irritation building up. *You're tired*, I warn myself. *Don't say anything stupid*.

Now she has the angle she wants. The view inside the cage is too dark, a mass of greys with a splash of dusty white. I reach over and hit the Starlight switch. It's adapted from the Army nighttime rifle scopes of the same name.

"Thank you," Dr. Markham mutters perfunctorily.

Beebee sleeps sprawled on her side, with her shoulders almost flat on her bed. The kitten sleeps, too, curled up in the space between Beebee's thick forearm and heavy chest. It's a touching sight, even "cute" as one of the interns put it. The kitten, a mash of whites and oranges and browns, mingles her soft downy fur with Beebee's long black hair. A pastoral image, shaded a gentle Starlight scope green.

The kitten, a pet; the subject, a lowland gorilla; and me on watch this evening. And because I am on watch with Dr. Markham's spectral presence beside me, the tableau we view would not be described as trust, or "The Peaceable Kingdom." It might be written up as an example of "mutually shared

territoriality," or if one listened to Dr. Graham's arguments, a case of "higher primate need to establish a social order."

For a time, Dr. Markham watches the monitor. You would think she suspected me, or Beebee, of trying to pull a fast one. Turning away from the screen, Dr. Markham announces, "I'll speak to Dr. Graham about this," and walks swiftly from the room.

"Good night," I tell her back as she closes the door behind her. Damn. She's working late tonight. And most nights.



There's a tap on the viewing window. It startles me, and I jump. "Jesus!"

Beebee pushes her hairy knuckles against the glass again.

"Go to bed, Beebee," I say out loud, futilely.

She looks at me, and cocks her head.

I sign, 'Sleep you.'

She's sleepy, but petulant. I see that she carries the kitten in the crook of one arm--if the intern had seen it, she would have squealed, "Oh, Beebee, you're so cute I can hardly stand it!" With her free hand, Beebee signs slowly, 'Birds.'

By that, she means noises. The noises that came from the camera being activated and guided. Nothing you or I might have noticed, but our lives have never depended upon hearing a predator's footsteps.

But Beebee had lain still when Dr. Markham was watching her.

'You play?' I ask her.

A little impishly, she signs 'Birds.' She knew someone had been watching her, but she didn't want to be bothered. And she knows I never manipulate the camera when she sleeps.

I laugh. 'Sleep you.'

'Hugs.' It's too much. I find my lunch sack, dig out an orange, and open the door to Beebee's room. We tussle for a while, I give her the orange, and send her to bed. She gravely offers her kitten for me to pet. I do, and give the kitten back.

'Sleep,' I tell her.

She ambles toward her bed, and I leave the room, carefully brushing the hairs from my lab coat. If Markham caught me playing with Beebee, it would be my ass. It's an unusual job, but an enjoyable one as lab assistant jobs go. It's better than screwing wires into the skulls of rhesus monkeys, as a friend of mine did for a semester.



The lab meeting starts at 2 p.m. every Thursday afternoon.

Dr. Markham glances up as I enter the room. Her expression tells me amply, 'You're forty minutes late, Phillips.'

"My hematology class ran over," I tell them as I try not to slink to the back of the room. Dr. Graham smiles at me.

"The Cambridge Department of Ethology has made some very substantial advancements with their subject," Dr. Graham is saying. Ethology, the science of animal behavior. What animal behavior has to do with American Sign Language, I'm not sure, but it does pay the bills.

Scatman Crothers (actually, an old and bald doctor so nicknamed by the work-study students) adds, "Their article in the *Journal of Animal Behavior Science* makes some very strong statements about the ability of their subject to conceptualize."

"That's why I think we should make arrangements to bring our two subjects together," Dr. Graham concludes. "I believe we could discover whether our subject's use of ASL is simply a programmed response, or whether it is a vital, useable tool."

Stupid, stupid, I think to myself.

"I disagree," Dr. Markham says unnecessarily. She always disagrees. I suspect she thinks the only way to prove something is to attempt to disprove it completely. "Our subject's responses are clearly conditioned to our rewards of food, or attention. To place two such animals in proximity with one another would be a waste of time."

I find myself in the unaccustomed position of agreeing with Dr. Markham. You take two people, say Germans, whom you

have taught to speak French, put them in a room together, and how will they start to communicate? *Pas en Francais*, you can bet.

When I first came to the project, I knew only a few rudiments of ASL. My grandmother had been deaf, and I had learned some simple signs, enough to get me hired. I had only been at the lab for about a month when they, the amorphous "they" who make decisions like that, decided to put Beebee in social contact with another lowland gorilla. This other gorilla, one who (or that, if we are to argue about pronouns and tenses) had not been taught ASL, would serve as a reference point to gauge Beebee's behavior.

Before it was over, I was so scared and sick that I vomited into a wastebasket. Beebee and the other gorilla, let's call him Chuck, had been placed in a common space that was separated by a set of bars. For a day or two, the animals stayed far from the bars only drawing near to sniff the scent that the other had left behind. The bars were removed the third day.

Chuck moved first. He waddled about his accustomed space, and then began edging nearer the area where the bars had been. After a moment's sniffing, a moment's hesitation, he pushed his way into Beebee's space.

She signed to him.

I remember I said aloud, "Son of a bitch!" She was using ASL to communicate. But Chuck was using something else to make his point.

In all animal life there is some kind of social dominance order, be it based upon colorful plumage, speed, or in the case of primates, size and strength.

Chuck had both. And he began to establish his dominance.

I panicked. Chuck began cuffing and striking Beebee, who retreated, still signing to him. Jesus, I wish I knew what she was trying to say, but I lacked the vocabulary to be able to read her hands. I could go back and watch the tapes, but the sight of that six hundred pound gorilla growling and baring his fangs, throwing Beebee to the ground over and over...I called for the doctors, who were

already present, and ran from the viewing room. I desperately wanted to do something, but I couldn't interrupt the experiment.



Friday night. While many of my chums and their well-shaped chummettes are out studiously killing their brain cells, I sit in a cracked plastic chair in front of the monitors. The comfy chairs have vanished, commandeered for someone's office, no doubt. It's needlessly warm in the operations room. An unseasonal turn of the weather has rendered the heating superfluous, but the thermostat control box is locked, naturally. My Fruit of the Looms are sticking to my cheeks. It's an altogether uncomfortable feeling.

Beebee can't sleep. Her knuckles--black, thick skinned--push every so often against the observation window that exposes her den.

'Baby.'

'Cat.' I sign back.

'Baby,' she figures emphatically.

Baby. She's talking about her kitten. We both know it.

Dr. Graham was the first to begin to communicate with Beebee on an individual level. Dr. Graham, a woman for whom I had no lust, but much admiration, had a baby boy last year. Beebee was astute enough to notice and comment on Dr. Graham's changing size. Dr. Graham, much to Dr. Markham's dismay, had even bared her midriff and allowed Beebee to feel the movements of the unborn infant.

Something about the scene caused it to stand clearly in my memory. Dr. Graham, sitting back against the glass of the observation window, her unbecoming blouse up over the mound of her womb, and Beebee squatting beside her, those very black and very strong hands running long fingers over the pale Nordic flesh. Making noises, signing questions.

Dr. Graham explained as best she could, given Beebee's limited vocabulary. The gorilla

had never been bred. I think that may have been a long-range plan: establish that she can think and sign, breed her, and see if she teaches her offspring ASL.

A few weeks after the birth, Dr. Graham brought her new son to the lab, in a maternal and especially female gesture that nearly moved me to propose to her right there. As she walked through the observation room, Beebee ran up to the window with a speed that surprised me, and rapped on the glass.

'Show.'

"Open the door, please, William," Dr. Graham said to me.

"You can't do that," Dr. Markham said.

"Open the door, please."

The look on Markham's face worried me. She honestly was frightened for Dr. Graham and her child. So it seemed.

"Uh, do you think that's wise?" I offered.

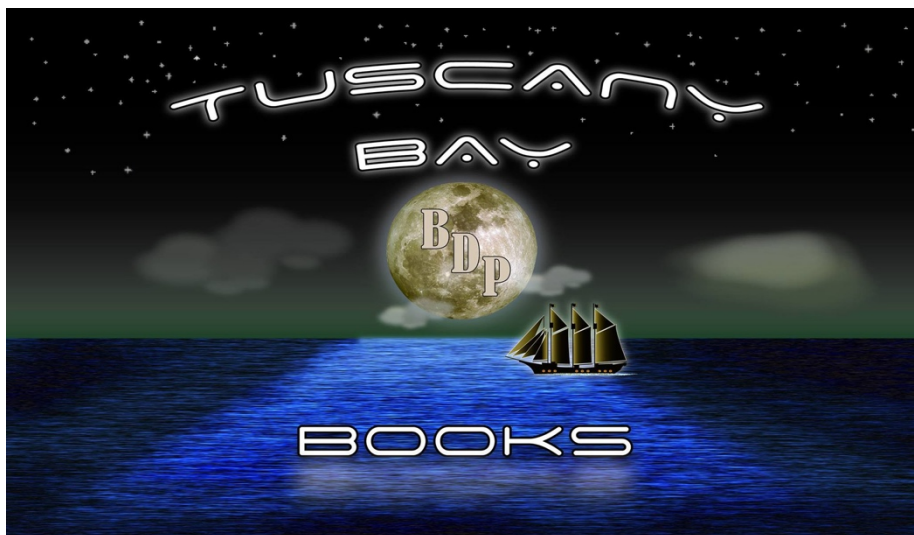
"Open up, Bill."

"Yes, ma'am." I flipped the toggle switch that popped the lock.

Beebee pulled the door open from her side and stood there, waiting.

Dr. Graham walked in, with Dr. Markham right behind her, strangely protective.

A whole lot of Dr. Markham's fervid concern came over me. I switched on all the cameras and began digging in the drawers for the tranquilizing darts and pistol that were supposed to be there beneath the paper clips and memo pads.



I looked at the tapes later. Got the scene from about four angles. I sort of had a sense of what it must be to be God, being able to see the whole picture, not just one particular viewpoint.

Beebee pushed her face close to the infant in Dr. Graham's arms, but didn't touch it.

'Baby,' Dr. Graham told her.

'You?' Beebee asked.

'Me.' Dr. Graham pointed to her abdomen. 'Kicks here? Baby.'

'Touch?'

'No,' Dr. Markham said forcefully.

'Soft,' Dr. Graham said.

Soft it was. She pressed her fingers gently against the baby's arm, stroked the skin, then smelled her fingers. The baby stirred and began to cry.

'Hurt?' Beebee signed in alarm.

Dr. Graham's voice was gentle. "No, Beebee. Food time."

That was how Beebee learned about Baby. Later, Dr. Markham brought in a plastic baby doll and engaged in a futile signing session, proclaiming the doll a baby, and Beebee kept saying 'Not.'

"It's all scent," Dr. Markham swore. "Harlow's early work with infant Rhesus Monkeys looked as if it were for the comfort of the terry cloth mother, but they discovered later it was scent. If we could get a human scent on the doll, she'd call it a baby."

I began to snicker, then started to laugh until my jaw hurt. I could see Dr. Markham imprisoning bunches of small children, boiling them down to get their "scent" and pouring it over the plastic doll. In my mind, she was dressed just like the Wicked Witch of the West.



'Baby.' She calls the cat a baby. Her Baby.

'Sleep,' I tell her. I think we are both growing a bit impatient with one another.

Beebee turns away from the window and shambles back into her den. I've just found my place in my ethology text when the

small clear button on the bottom of the desk-phone flashes. I lift the receiver. "Lab."

"This is Dr. Markham."

"How are you, Dr. Markham?"

"Please send one of the maintenance crew out to the parking lot. That kitten has been run over."

"Oh no!" Pictures in my mind, too vivid: crushed animals on the sides of roads, legs stiff in the air, entrails adhering to the pavement. Replaced by other images: small stray kitten playing by the dumpster out back the first time I'd seen her; the kitten/Baby scratching at the door of Beebee's den to be let in, or let out. Then a tactile memory, nothing visual, just feelings: soft warm fur, tiny uncalloused pads on small feet, wet rough tongue on my thumb.

"Oh, no," I say again. "Doctor, Beebee has been asking for the kitten. What should I do?"

"Tell the subject that the kitten is gone."

"Gone?"

"Yes." Of this, she is certain. "And send one of those cleaning people to remove the kitten."

"Yes, ma'am." I hang up.

I rap on the window. It's rude of me to do, as I usually try to treat Beebee with some courtesy.

Beebee comes out of the darkness expectantly.

And I tell her.



Dr. Markham enters the lab with no attempt to disguise her irritation. Interestingly enough, she's not in her lab whites, but a plain blouse and slacks which make her look really thin. Must be acknowledging it's Friday night.

"What do you need now, Phillips?"

"I think Beebee's sick," I tell her, using a classic bet hedging construction. "Jesus, she might be having a fit." I gesture urgently at the monitors.

Beebee sits in the twilight making truly unearthly noises in a low voice, rocking back and forth. She occasionally raises her voice almost to a shriek, only to begin rocking again.

"What did you tell the subject?"

"Baby gone," I answer honestly.

"Nothing else?"

"No. What else could I say?"

"Something..." Dr. Markham is thinking out loud. "I want you to replay me the tapes of you informing the subject."

"Sure." I switch one of the monitors to playback, and rewind a bit of video.

"Here you go," I tell her. She watches the screen carefully.

The telephone rings. It's Dr. Graham. "Is there any change, Bill?"

"No, ma'am."

Inside my ear, as it were, she repeats my previous description of Beebee's behavior. "And she's still acting that way?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Who is that?" Dr. Markham asks.

I confess.

"Why did you call her?"

Is there anything that makes us hate ourselves more than our own cowardice? "I wanted a second opinion," I answer with a forced smile.

She takes the receiver from my hand. "This is Dr. Markham." She listens for a moment. "But Phillips must have given her some clue with his body language...no, that's not right...it cannot be...because the subject would have to make the conceptual leap between the word 'gone' and the actual meaning of 'dead'...very well, I'll tell it myself!" She jams the handset angrily onto the phone.

"Open the door, Phillips."

"She knows," I say.

"No, she doesn't. It's a tantrum, the way a child would act if we took away a favorite toy."

I thumb the door switch. "You can't lie to her. She knows."

Dr. Markham enters the den, and I say to her back, "You can't tell me that isn't completely typical higher primate mourning behavior."

Dr. Markham doesn't even waste the time to glare at me as the door swings shut behind her.



I won't watch. Part of me wants to peek, to gloat over Dr. Markham's frosty hands gesturing uselessly, but I am very, very angry. I'm thinking about a lot of things. About stupid bastards who drive too fast without paying attention. About stupid bastards like me who just grab some stray animal when they're bored and keep it around for their own amusement. About how little things stupid bastards like me do can really hurt.



She knocks very quietly on the door. When the electronic catch disengages, Dr. Markham steps back into the lab gently.

I don't look at her. Beebee still huddles before me on the monitors.

"She knows." There's a trace of wonder in Dr. Markham's voice. "She understands."

"Yeah. Wisdom increaseth sorrow, huh, Doc?" She hates to be called anything but Dr. Markham. I don't care. "Ain't science wonderful?" I slam shut the logbook and stomp out of the lab.

About fifty feet down the hall, the beauty of the meaningful gesture departs, and in its place comes a realization of the very tangible beauty of the 30 hours a week at minimum wage to help subsidize my education. With a lot of chagrin, I slowly turn around and walk back into the lab.

I'm not sure what I'll find. I hope I'll find Dr. Markham and be able to grovel my way back into my job.

She's not in the lab.

She's in the den, kneeling beside Beebee, a thin white arm around the bulky shoulders of the gorilla. She rocks back and forth with Beebee. Dr. Markham's icy hands are moving.

One hand is over Dr. Markham's heart, making a circular motion. Her other hand is clenched into a fist, thumb extended upward.

"I'm sorry," the woman keeps signing. "I'm sorry."

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Dennis is a graduate of George Mason University, where he studied history and classics, and the NYU Law School. He lives in his hometown of Vernal, UT

Stilicho

There my story lies
In the still air over the harbor at Brindisi,
In the shifting snows of Alpine peaks,
On the chalky range at rivers' end,
On the waves which beat 'gainst Britain's shores,
And in the sun on Byzas' coast,
With its gardens of the mind,
To which the hilly plains roll down from home.

From this expanse, as vast as any starry gulf,
At which abbots gape and moderns yawn,
From this which I bestrode,
My voice calls out to pronounce my love,
For Serena fair and Rome.

Over the victorious cries of Gothic hosts,
And the remonstrance of a pedant's chant,
Over the commanding silence of dead kings' tombs,
And the forgotten sins of power lost,
Over these my voice sounds through,
Of valor and of lessons learned when only truth may hold,
Of a righteous land and kindly God,
Of courage and of noble love,
Which corrupting age could not impeach,
Here public and private right are joined in one.

In what matter does this reverberation hold,
Which neither song nor parchment told?

An ancient temple where nothing had been seen,
Since victorious Pharaoh returned from Hittite throng,
There, the peasants, a token for this life,
Received final emissary from another sky.

In Albion far off, the dragon's claw would bend
In imitation of young Roman arms.

And across the darkened woods of smaller realms,
The grandsons of men who stood at arms,
Would neither know the deeds nor comprehend the art,
But imitate the example set, of a Roman consul,
The final bridge between, our bright world of statesmen gone
And the realm of heroes yet to come

Steve Griffiths | Fiction

Steve hails from the North-West of England, where he's worked in technology and hardware for almost thirty years. He lives in Lancaster with his gorgeous wife Sarah, his awesome son Luke, and two bonkers cats.

Remember Me

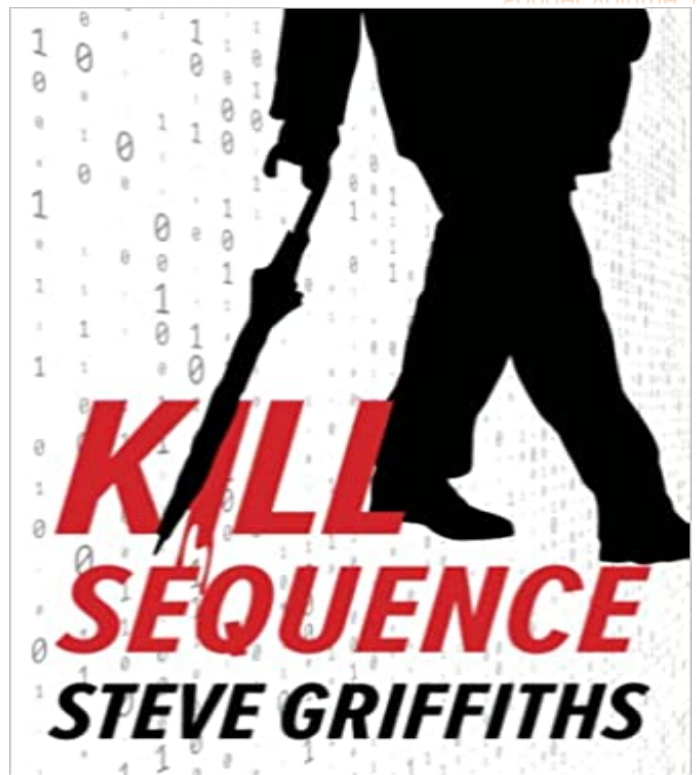
Editor's note: This was too good to throw away. Left on the cutting room floor, it's a 'deleted scene' from Steve's debut thriller, Kill Sequence, published earlier this year by Conservatarian Press. Steve graciously agreed to expand the scene and flesh out Nichelle's character, who may or may not make an appearance in a sequel.

Shawn peeled off I-90 at Schaumburg. He could see the town from the highway. A small strip mall lay in plain sight, just south of the exit. The parking lot was loaded with SUVs and double-cab pickup trucks. He'd never seen so many off-road vehicles on one slab of blacktop.

He parked up in the corner nearest to the highway, tucked under four decorative trees. He had absolutely no idea what kind of trees they were, but they were tall. Some kind of Evergreen. Broad at the base. He liked them fine. He wouldn't object to knowing what they were. They didn't offend him, or anything. These four were particularly useful, too, because they hid his borrowed BMW from the highway.

He got out of the car. Michael was already out, standing near the hood, leaning on his umbrella. Shawn stretched. Took a deep inhalation of warm Illinois air. It tasted clean and fresh and invigorating. Seemed to wash away the airport stank.

Seven stores lined the parking lot. None of which Shawn had much interest in, except the diner at the farthest end. He was thirsty, hungry, and he needed to make plans.



Michael flanked him on the walk across the lot, weaving between gleaming Ford Explorers and careworn Dodge Rams. “How do you propose we get to Kelletsville, old bean?”

Shawn made a beeline for an ATM, a few doors up from the diner. “Maybe a bus? I feel like we’ve stolen too many cars lately.”

“Only the two,” Michael said. “Well, three including Richard Osten’s, but he was dead at the time. And only one in this country.”

“We’ve been here an hour and already we’ve stolen one,” Shawn said. “That’s not nothing.”

He collected two hundred dollars, in twenties, from the ATM, and strolled into the diner. Which was exactly what Shawn had expected, and in the best possible way. Classic Americana. Chrome flashes all over, muscle car art on the walls, vinyl records pinned between them. The set tables were in booths, with red leather benches. At the back of the place, a row of tall stools, fixed to the floor under a long countertop. Behind the counter, the kitchen.

The place was half full, mostly with grizzled working joes, dining alone. There were plenty of empty booths. Shawn found one under the window, with a nice view of the parking lot.

The place was efficient, too. The waitress, all scandalous white teeth and puppy dog head-tilts, introduced herself as Nichelle. She took Shawn's order and came back with his burger and coke in a couple of minutes flat.

She smiled so much. Then she asked him where he was from. He lied and said Australia.

"Australia?" she asked.

Shawn gave her a nod and went for the burger.

"Australia?" she asked again. She put a hand on her hip. Scrutinized Shawn, while he got a messy two-handed hold on lunch.

"Oh dear," Michael said.

Shawn took a bite.

"Naw," she said. "I know that accent. That's not Australian."

Michael shook his head. Shawn chewed burger. Nichelle stayed put, hand still on her hip, smiling beautiful trouble down at him.

Laughing a little, and wagging a finger at Shawn, she said, "You're playing with me. English, right? I spent three years in Manchester. I know that cute mumble of yours. Too damn charming. Love hearing it."

Shawn swallowed. Sipped some coke, and grinned. "Okay. You got me." He took another bite.

Nichelle wasn't done. She asked him what brought him to America. How long he'd been here. How long he was staying. Where he was staying. If he was alone. Shawn lied, and lied, then lied a few more times. Fast lies. Three-word lies, whenever possible.

He hadn't expected this. Hadn't considered such a thing as a loquacious waitress. Not after St. Cristos. This was a whole new ball game. And a worrying one. It was making him visible.

But he was ravenous, and the burger was sensational. Whatever was in the special sauce, it made him happy, and it filled him up.

The diner was filling up, too. So, he thought about making a move. It wasn't just the visibility he was uncomfortable with. He was starting to feel boxed-in.

He thanked Nichelle, and she held his eye for too long, just a second too long, but it was too damn long. He left a big tip and stepped back to the parking lot. Headed for the Beamer.

"What about the waitress? Nichelle? She was chatty as hell. She'll remember me."

"Undoubtedly. She rather liked you, I'd say."

"Not the point. She'll remember me."

"You rather liked her, too, I'll wager."

"She'll remember me."

Nearing the car, Michael stopped walking. Stabbed his umbrella at the ground. "You know, you'll have to let someone in, eventually. You're entitled to friends. Human friends, that is. Friends other than me."

Shawn put his hands on the roof of the car. "Michael. She'll remember me."

Michael sighed. "Well, I don't think we should kill her, if that's what you're thinking."

"Definitely not what I was thinking."

"Relax, old chap. We'll be done here in no time. No time at all."

Relax.

Shawn got in the car. Fired her up.

"Fine. I'll relax. Whatever you say. I'll relax. I'll just go ahead and relax. But I hope you're right."

"Of course, I'm right. Just remain calm, like on the plane. And at the airport. Everything will be fine. This will all go exceedingly smoothly, I assure you. I'm quite positive there's nothing whatsoever to be worried about."

Shawn nudged the gearbox into drive, pulled out of the parking lot, re-joined I-90, and drove west. The highway was quiet. More importantly, there were still no cops. It seemed Michael was right. Nothing to worry about.

Until Michael ruined everything. "The Chicago Police Department has just issued an All-Points Bulletin on Shawn Nash," he said.

Clarity on Culture

In the past, storytellers were often counseled to divorce their political leanings from the story itself. Politics should instead be imbued in the ‘air’ the characters breathe, or the ‘water’ in which they swim. It should be subtle. Understated. Part of the background. And so it was for decades. The best and most popular books and movies and television shows may have hinted at the partisan leanings of their creators, but never, ever shoved them in our faces.

As with most things in our culture, this practice has evolved over time, accelerating after Andrew Breitbart made his famous insight, “politics is downstream of culture.” In their race to capture not only politics but culture, too, it is now rare for writers **not** to overtly nod to one side of the political aisle. And overwhelmingly, those nods are to the left. Be it a ‘Hillary for President’ t-shirt worn



The cast of *Snowflake Mountain*. Image courtesy of Netflix.

by a character on *The Big Bang Theory*, or a Bernie Sanders sticker on a protagonist’s bedroom wall, or the plot of a star-studded Hollywood movie (*Don’t Look Up*), we are now lectured on who the ‘good guys’ are by the progressive votes they cast and issues they champion.

It is so rare to see this custom rejected by creators anywhere in mainstream popular culture that we must take notice when it happens. This is aim of ‘Clarity on Culture,’ to

find those diamonds in the partisan rough that shine through all the gloomy virtue signaling.

Our first offering is notable not for its quality - it is a reality show, after all - but for its premise. The most ironically named of all genres, reality television has been, since its first iteration on MTV in the early 90s, almost entirely made-up. The people who are selected for the cast usually have dreams of making it big in the entertainment industry, and design their performances - and they are performances - to maximize their chances. In this regard, *Snowflake Mountain*, the latest such offering from Netflix, is no different.

Ten ‘influencers’ in their late teens or early twenties are promised a luxury trip to a five-star resort where they think the show’s exposure will help build their online brand. Everyone in this diverse group still lives with their parents. Some pride themselves on their ability to ‘party 24/7,’ others on their inability to unload a dishwasher. But instead of arriving at a high-brow hotel where they will be pampered by paid servants, the group arrives at a rugged outdoor camp where they are asked to fend for themselves with the help of two Army veterans and a wilderness expert.

The tasks our snowflakes initially perform are so straightforward as to be laughable for anyone who’s ever gone on even a single camping trip. The ‘punishment’ for the worst-performing contestants is simply to spend a night in a pre-built shelter with a roaring fire, a sleeping bag, and all the cold-weather gear they can wear. At the beginning, even these tasks prove too much for some, who chose to leave, and while a high percentage of the emotions displayed in typical reality shows are fake, you get the sense that the fear here is genuine.

The show’s hosts periodically sprinkle some milquetoast tough love around the camp, at a level appropriate to their audience, and by the end, the group has learned enough to climb a ‘mountain’

Coloradoans would barely recognize as a hill. Along the way, they learn lessons on self-reliance, teamwork, trust, and honesty. As such, Snowflake Mountain is not an earth-shattering addition to the pantheon of popular culture, but it is notable for a few reasons.

The first is politics. Political issues are never discussed at any point in the series. However, since the lessons the snowflakes learn are perceived by many on the left to be 'conservative' in nature, politics is the primary topic of nearly every review, which are uniformly negative. *Time's* hilarious and often contradictory offering says, "there are uncomfortable echoes of racist stereotypes in the welfare queen vein when [survival expert] Joel complains, early on, that the campers 'don't want to earn anything, they just want handouts.'"

Race, like politics, is absent as a theme in the series. Good and bad things happen to people of color as well as those without, but no one suggests these outcomes have anything to do with the participants' immutable characteristics. The snowflakes are treated as individuals, and judged on their individual performances, another practice which has, at some point in the last decade, become 'conservative.'

The *Time* review also seeks to inject other fashionable progressive shibboleths into the mix. "Meanwhile, the framing of the girls as vain, superficial, and materialistic—and a couple of the boys as effeminate, although the show avoids discussing their

sexual orientations—presents an opportunity for viewers to indulge in unacknowledged sexism and homophobia." The only problem? It's not the girls. *Every single cast member* is "vain, superficial and materialistic," at least at the start. And the only hint of sexual orientation is a failed romantic overture between two people we think are probably straight. There is no homophobia to speak of, except in the latent rumblings of Ms. Berman's brain.

In sum, Snowflake Mountain isn't a great reality show, and probably isn't even a good one. But the premise is refreshing, and the creators' steadfast refusal to bow to the woke altar make it a show worthy of consideration. At long last, Netflix has decided to cater to a niche audience: the overwhelming majority of Americans who find the relentless politicization of our culture distasteful. Bravo.



Chris Queen | Essay

Chris bio here

The Neon Cross of the Faithful Family

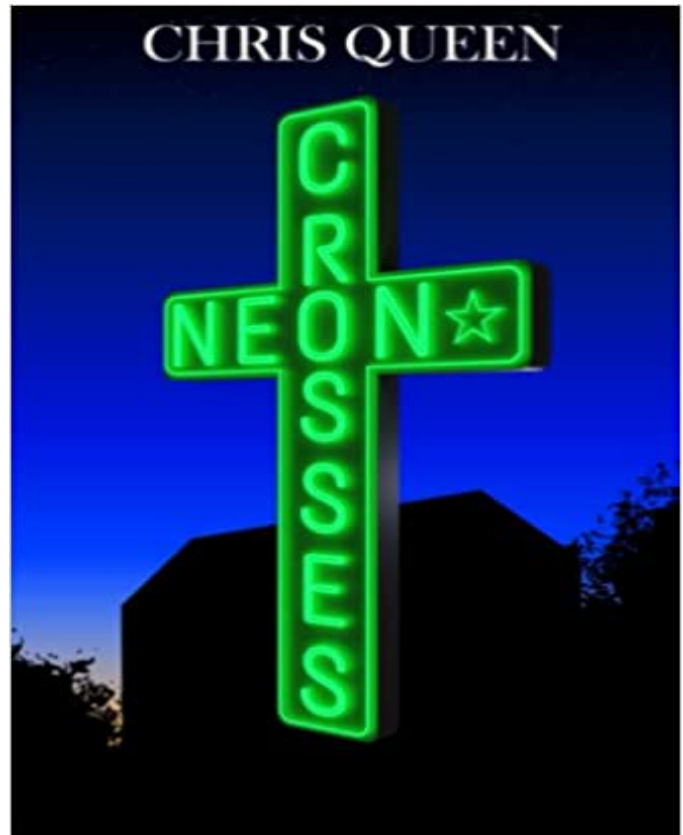
Last year, I shared the gospel with a man who visited the church where I've been a member most of my life, and he and I have become friends. When he was baptized a few weeks later, his ex, the mother of his sons, came to church to support him. She told me that she had seen a difference in him in just a few weeks. The way he treated his young kids and others around him was better; he was more patient and took an interest in his sons' spiritual development.

He told me another time that he had started approaching his job differently as a Christian, and the people who worked with him could see a difference in the way he treated them and the way he interacted with customers. He had begun to shine like a neon cross.

In the year or so since he became a Christian, he and his two sons have driven about an hour to come to church nearly every Sunday. He tells me his boys can't wait to go to church. My friend's faith is playing out in the lives of his kids, co-workers, and customers. He reflects the Apostle Paul's reminder that "at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light."

Individual Christians can make the difference in the world around them and can shine like a light, but a faithful, Bible-believing family can multiply the influence of the individual and glow like a bright neon sign with an unmistakable message.

On Highway 441 on the outskirts of Commerce, Ga., there's a little church, which, if you could assign it an



architectural style, might be Midcentury Baptist. Hardly anybody would fault you if you didn't notice the brick building during the day, but you can't miss it at night.

At some point in its history, this church installed a green neon sign in the shape of a cross with the words JESUS SAVES inside the outline of that cross. It's brilliant marketing for a small country church, and it served as the inspiration for the title of my book *Neon Crosses*, which explores the culture of the American South.

I've often written about how the South is "Christ-haunted," to borrow Flannery O'Connor's phrase. Even those who don't actively practice Christian faith in the South are aware of the effect Christianity has had on the culture — for better and for worse.

For generations, the South has been the most heavily Christian part of the country. It didn't earn the nickname "The Bible Belt" for no reason — for years everybody went to church, and one of the first things you'd learn about a person was where he or she attended.

The influence of Christianity permeates the culture of the South in the figures of speech we use and the music, literature, and

art we generate. Unfortunately, with the proliferation of Christianity and church culture comes hypocritical behavior - churches causing hurt feelings or scandals - and the ridicule of those who don't understand how Christianity shaped the South.

Just like that neon cross serves as a beacon to tell people where they can find hope, the Christian family can serve as an example of how a life of faith can benefit anyone. While it's true that no family is perfect, a family living out its Christian faith has a "certain something" others notice.

You may have seen a family praying together before a meal. It's not the type of behavior you see often, and it's one of the most obvious things that a faithful family might do. Families who put their Christian faith into practice also rally around friends who are going through a rough time. They're the moms and dads who will sit up late into the night with neighbors, just listening and ready to meet the material and spiritual needs of friends.

Faithful families invite their friends to church, and the kids invite the boys and girls in their neighborhood to Vacation Bible School in the summer. In times of heartbreak and sorrow, it's often those families of faith who are the first to say, "What can I do for you?" and mean it.

Jesus tells us in the Sermon on the Mount that His followers are "the light of the world." He commands each one of them to "let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."

Likewise, the Apostle Paul admonishes us to stand out "in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world..." If members of faithful families live out that faith, they'll shine. And people will notice.

Christians have a hope that the world needs, and when families shine that light of hope, it can be contagious. And the way faithful

families shine echoes into eternity. God gave the prophet Daniel a vision in which "those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever."

My pastor's family is a brilliant example of how a faithful family can make a huge, hopeful difference. Almost 10 years ago, he and his wife, who had raised four biological sons, fostered a little boy with special needs. Doctors didn't expect this child to ever walk on his own or speak. That didn't matter to them; with prayer and a commitment to finding the best care possible for this young boy, not only did he defy the doctors' expectations, but their now adopted son runs, jumps on the trampoline, and talks (a little too much). Most importantly, that boy can tell you about how he loves Jesus.

The pastor and writer John Piper once said, "No candle of Gospel light is lit in vain." He's right because the light that the faithful family shines can change hearts and lives. In a world where, in the words of my friend Stephen Kruiser, "what has changed" about our culture "is that a good chunk of America no longer believes in God," that's what so exciting about living out your faith. Like a neon cross at a roadside church, a faithful family can point the way to hope.



**What's
the
one
thing
more
powerful
than
sorcery?**

"Supernatural meets Narnia at Hogwarts."

SABO: Disruptive Art for Good

Sabo burst onto the L.A. art scene in 2014 with his Abortion Barbie posters, which attacked Texas state representative and gubernatorial candidate Wendy Davis – who most people probably don’t even remember now. That’s because in spite of her “heroic” pro-abortion stance and a 13-hour filibuster to block a Texas bill restricting abortion (how old that sounds today!) her star fizzled out quickly in a rain of mockery from Sabo and others.

That’s what good art can do. By calling attention to the true meaning of what Davis was saying, Sabo was able to show the horror that was covered over by Davis’s pretty face and mom-style tennis shoes. And that’s what he keeps doing. Sabo has since papered over half of LA and a few other locations with his street art, going after political figures, media figures, and entertainers with equal zest. He has a few common themes, including calling out the sexual exploitation of children and others in the entertainment industry and the hypocrisy of left-wing figures in much of

what they say. His art (or what some call “vandalization”) often goes viral. Who can forget his Tough-Guy Ted Cruz? Or the posters of figures from Meryl Streep to Hillary Clinton emblazoned with “She Knew” after the Harvey Weinstein case became prominent?

We were fortunate enough to convince Sabo to let us interview him.



EDS: Tell us a little about yourself: who you are, what you do, when you got started, and what you consider your mission to be.

SABO: I got started in about 1999 / 2000. I really ramped things up when we all thought Hillary was going to run in 2008. Art-wise, I started learning my way around creating in the early 1990s. My goals would be to save art from being completely hijacked by the Left. I believe art is the ability to tell a story and that story should never be bound to one way of thinking. I’d hope what I do is neither Right nor Left. I’d hope it would be seen as honest. I also hope to help influence other to do the same. I don’t want to convince



Image courtesy of Sabo.

other artists to become Republicans. I want to convince them to think freely.

EDS: When & how did you become conservative, if that is what you are?

SABO: I'm not sure if I am a conservative. I don't think anyone can really nail down what that means. I'm a patriot. I drink, I cuss, I'm not rich, I like crazy sex ... not very "conservative" in that regard. I believe in privacy, being able to be me (without hurting anyone else that is). There are too many repressed people out there living fake lives in order to fit into some shoe they have no business in. I don't spend any time worrying about that. I'm a patriot. I love my country.

EDS: When did you start doing art? What got you started?

SABO: I wanted to get into advertising, so I found out the best school that taught it and focused on getting accepted. I wound up at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena where they focused on creating from concept to completion, meaning I learned how to push an idea from step one to step done. I became technically and creatively proficient. After years of learning I guess I became an artist.

EDS: How did your experiences in the Marine Corps shape you as an artist?

SABO: I don't believe the Marines really did. I've always been a hard worker, the first one in, last one out kind of guy. If anything, the Marines simply brought me out to California, where I stayed for thirty years. I see the Marines the same way I see college ... a time dedicated and forgotten.

EDS: Why are you so careful about hiding your identity from the public? Have you experienced actual threats or issues with safety?

SABO: I'm not as careful as you think. My face is out there. I used to be more careful and the Secret Service came knocking on my door. I figured at that point "they" knew who I was, so why hide? As far as stalkers and dangerous people, for the most part I've

manage to steer clear of all of that. I have been threatened but no one has followed through as of yet.

EDS: Is it really necessary to hide a traditional or conservative point of view in art?

SABO: I don't think so. Look, speaking your mind is not easy. You can lose a lot. The question is how much are you willing to go through. I believe in the end those who maintain make it out the other side. It's like crossing a Rubicon. Not everyone has it in them to even try, much less do it.

EDS: Why do you think the left dominates the art world?

SABO: Children rebel. It's about this time in a person's life they find themselves on their own, anything that reminds them of rules, parents, structure is the enemy, and the Left is right there to capitalize on that angst. Not to mention the foundation for the Left is set. When a young artist enters the world of creativity, they are greeted by so many people they admire who've already drank the cool aide. They just want to get along, so why fight it? Which begs the question, are they really rebels in the first place?

EDS: Is there a future for free speech in "blue" states?



Image courtesy of Sabo.

SABO: I don't know. If there is one thing I do know, it's that people will suffer in ways that are unreal so long as they get what they want. In the end they'll be told it's the Right who is causing their troubles and they'll believe it. People are a disappointment.

EDS: Is there a future for free speech anywhere?

SABO: Again, I have no idea. All I can do is my part, and then hope I influence

intentions of flying out there to places like Iran and London to put it up.

EDS: What is your favorite piece of art you have created and why?

SABO: I hate sounding like this, but there are a lot of pieces that I like. What makes it something that I like? When I like the idea so much I almost shake producing it. I worry someone else will beat me to it. Not every idea is a great idea, but I generally don't like producing art I don't believe in



Image courtesy of Sabo.

others to question the things around them. I guess people just have to get sick and tired of being sick and tired.

EDS: Amen to that. Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future?

SABO: The more I learn about people, sadly, the more of a pessimist I become. It's sad to see how easily a person can be bought and used. I would like to consider myself more of a realist if anything.

EDS: Where do you generally post your art, and do you foresee ever going nationwide with it in anything beyond small scale?

SABO: I like that I lived in Los Angeles for all those years. It gave me the West Coast to hit at will. I hate flying and I hate hotels, no matter how nice they are. I love sleeping in my own bed. So I keep things local as much as possible. I don't need to rule the world. I have, however, started to want to do art that focuses on world issues, but I have no

100%. If I had to pick a couple, I'd say the Maxine Waters / Halloween Billboard, The "Once upon a time in Pedowood" billboard, and the Obama toilet seat. I love a lot of what I've done. Sorry. ;)

EDS: I love it when you create art that incorporates the real world, like, yes, the Obama toilet seat, or when you plastered over outdoor basketball backboards with the Biden "you ain't black" meme. Why don't we see more artists doing this sort of thing?

SABO: Well, if by that you mean hitting on Democrats, it's because most artist are Democrats and will never criticize their own. If by that you mean the idea of hitting something like a basketball backboard ... those concepts, I believe, are rare. You really have to sit and think about those kinds of creative hits. Such things are what I focused on while at the Art Center College of Design

in Pasadena. There's almost an advertising concept design feel to it.

EDS: I was definitely talking about hitting the more unexpected items like toilets and backboards. Thank you. Decades ago, we were taught that art was meant to be transgressive, challenging the orthodox moral and political views of the day. Today, it seems like the vast majority of the artists in the US just follow the progressive party line. Why haven't more artists joined you in challenging the cultural narrative? Is it a pure economic decision? Cowardice? Both?

SABO: They're just brainwashed, a bunch of leftists. They know if they wake up, they'll lose money, friends, people will hate them. What upside is there for them to do that? Bands won't do it because they'll lose their agents and bookings, Antifa will protest their concerts. Actors won't do it because they'll lose parts and their agents as well. After a while you realize "the rebel" is really just a product, a tool used to push whatever agenda "they" want pushed.

EDS: Certainly that goes along with what Ye West had to say on Tucker Carlson! How would you like to be remembered 50-100 years from now? What work(s) of yours would you like to see next to your name in the history books?

SABO: All of them. I'm currently working on a series of metal signs that I hope last for hundreds of years. I call the series, "American Totem." The thing about being remembered is ... I generally don't care for other artist work, what I care for is their

stories. Their art simply accompanies their life story. I hope I craft a story people can relate to, the struggles and success I've experienced. It wasn't easy and not for the faint of heart. Again, recently I've been working on paintings because I love how paint just seems to last longer than prints and digital can be delete or crash.

EDS: What advice would you give to young, up-and-coming artists trying to strike out in their own in the current climate?

SABO: Just push, always push, and never stop. You'll find yourself hungry, broke, demoralized, in a bad relationship, having to work

countless hours at a job you hate and only have a small amount of time in the day to create ... just create. Every little thing you put together is art for your portfolio. Never stop. Never think something is too small to focus on. Sometimes it's the small things that

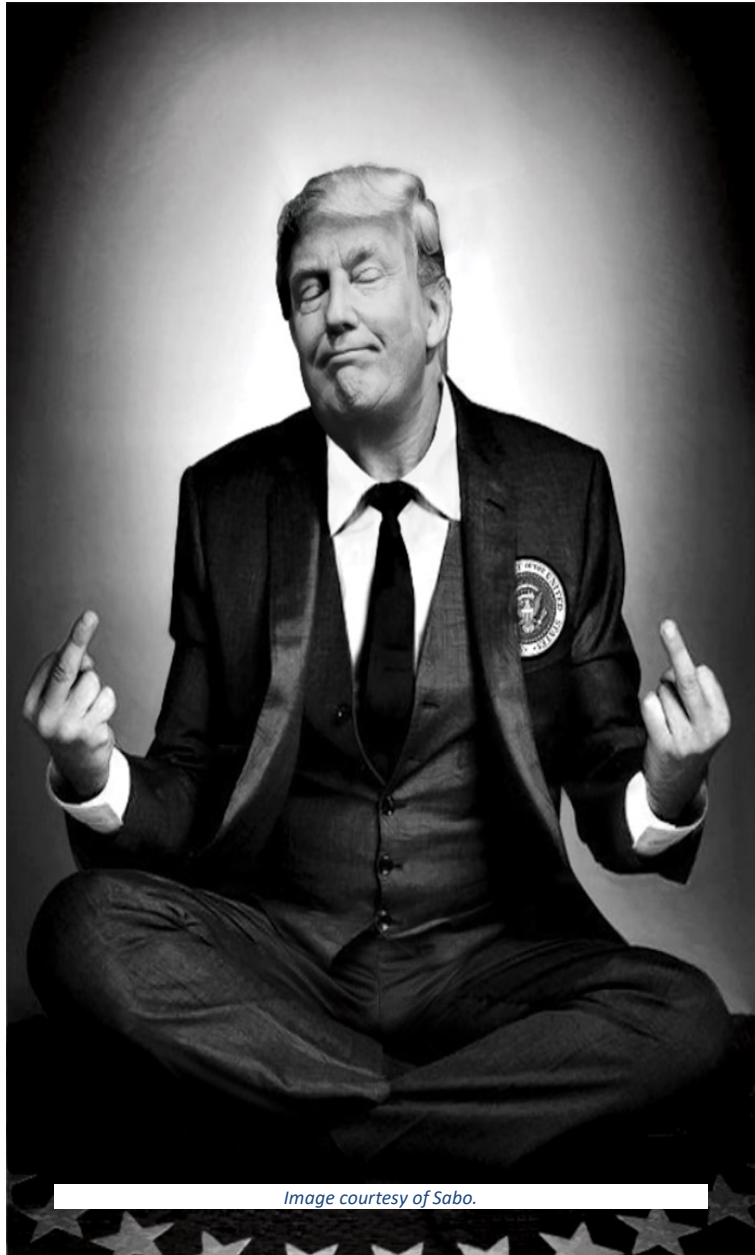




Image courtesy of Sabo.

shine the brightest and you never know what will come of it. Embrace social media but don't let it rule you. There are so many supporters out there that you can reach via social media! Learn to work the media and the press. A good viral headline can go a long way. People will write negative stories about you, don't let that bother you. Fuck 'em!

EDS: And just out of curiosity: if you were to choose a dream team for both Republican and Democrat tickets for the 2024 presidential race, who would you choose and why?

SABO: I wish President Trump wasn't so old. Some at that age I'd love to think could just relax and enjoy life, but a man like that loves the fight so ... I'd hope for Trump / DeSantis. I think Trump did an excellent job the four years he was in. Were it not for the

Left burning down buildings and "resisting" for four years, it would have been an amazing time. Covid struck, but that's another story. I wonder about DeSantis and pray he's not Skull and Bones, an establishment shill. I'd really have to think who besides him.



Enlightening and encouraging! We really appreciate Sabo taking the time to do this for us and for our readers. He has also been kind enough to do a book cover for our sister company, Conservatarian Press; watch for *Teahouse of the Hidden Moon* by Keith Korman, coming soon!

You can find Sabo's work at his website, [Unsavory Agents](http://UnsavoryAgents.com).

Jamie bio here.

A Mother's Justice

On the third day, Javier found the dying jaguar, the thin moans and coughs leading him through a dense clump of ferns onto a loamy bed. She lay there panting. A trail of blood behind her showed that she had managed to come a long way before her legs gave out.

"Ay, chiquita, what did they do to you?" She still had the strength to hiss as he crept closer, pulling out a canteen and his first-aid kit. By the looks of her, she was beyond medical aid, but he poured a few drops of warm water on her dry tongue and was gratified to see her lap weakly at it.

"That's right, fight if you can. Let me see what can be done." Slowly, he moved his hand toward her face, letting her get accustomed to his smell. She had to accept him if he were to help; she had razors in her paws and mouth, and even in her condition could still strike out at him. While it was unlikely she could do too much harm, bacteria and other foul things in such an injury could make it difficult indeed to complete his quest.

Which was - had been - finding her. But she was supposed to return alive, gentled and tamed to his touch.

The jaguar exhaled a small bubble of blood from her nose. It popped, sprinkling red dots over the grass. There was no time left for gentle, patient bonding - it had to be now. It would be harder with a dying cat, but if he were to have any chance at all to examine her wound before she died, he had to do it. It was the only mercy he had to give her.

Pouring a little more water over her tongue and mouth, Javier leaned forward, gently touching her black ears, stroking downward to her skull, and digging through her thick black fur to reach the skin. It took skin-to-skin contact. Gently, he stroked her

skin, dripping just a drop of the contents of the vial around his neck, hoping ~~it~~ was enough of the hechicero's oil to leech into her --

- Pain. Ripping through his abdomen, searing into his body, he was torn in half.

His breath caught. Momentarily blinded and deafened by the sudden agony, he ripped his hand away, but the bond, tenuous though it was, could not be easily broken. He had meant to share the jaguar's pain, but he had not anticipated how terrible it was; though he was still whole, he writhed and suffered with her. He did not feel himself drop to the loam, panting along with her, trying to control the pain.

"Morphine," he groaned. She needed morphine. He tried to focus on the bond enough to tell her that she should be calm, she might feel a sharp pain but not so bad, that it would ease her pain. He could not tell whether she understood. Her pain overwhelmed everything, even her fear; she had hissed only out of habit. In truth, she had been gentled by her wound. He had nothing to fear.

Still half-blinded by the agony, he scrambled through the medical kit, looking for the single-use syringe containing the drug. It was fortunate that Sonja was the sort to prepare initiates thoroughly; by himself, he would never have thought of bringing morphine. Cheap, effective, fast. Gritting his teeth against the nausea that suddenly set in, he rolled to one side, finding the pulse on the inside of her foreleg, sliding the point in. She didn't even jerk away. She couldn't feel it through the other pain. He depressed the plunger all the way; she needed every drop.

And then he waited, letting the tears slip from his eyes - whether from pain or from pity, he could not tell.

Slowly, like a ragged raw veil, the pain pulled away, letting Javier focus, sit up, look at his new friend. Her breathing had calmed, though a thin trickle of blood slid away from one nostril. She opened an eye and regarded him calmly and curiously. More water, he thought, and dribbled it onto her tongue

until it seemed that she was at least more comfortable.

She was magnificent, one of the rarer black jaguars. She looked dark here in the tall undergrowth, but he knew that in sunlight, the darker rosette spots would show clearly on her glistening fur. She was - had been - a very healthy girl, heavily muscled under that dense, silky coat, with paws the size of dinner plates and sharp white teeth.

"Let me see what they did to you, chiquita." He drifted his fingers along her flank, searching for the wound. Between her back legs, he found it. It was terrible. She could not survive it, he saw.

Worse. "Oh, madrecita, they took your babies."



He stayed with her until she breathed her last, sometime in the afternoon. While she was yet alive, he probed at her memory, her feelings. He needed to know who or what had ripped open her womb, whether the cubs could still be alive. She resisted for a long time, yowling for him to leave her alone, but when she finally understood that he wanted to protect her young, she gave in. The vision he had from her dark cat's eyes was the one he had feared: a grinning skull carrying a stick with another skull on it, and men with sharp skinning knives. "Cara de muerto," he muttered. It would be them. The muertistas.

They had always been around, with their death's head masks and celebration of La Santa Muerte, she who had long ago been Mictecacihuatl. Only recently, however, were they embraced by the cartels. Things had changed. Little shrines were suddenly everywhere, along the hidden turns of the narcocorredo, at desert

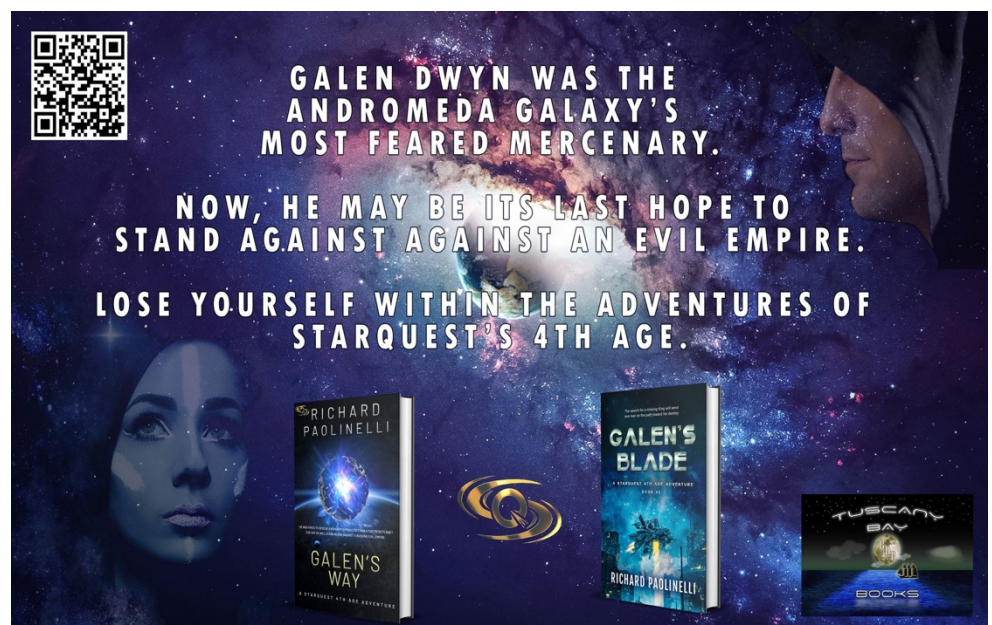
watering holes, on the poor corners of Mexico City, tucked into dense jungle.

If it were only their proliferation, there would be no problem. The Catholics did not like them, and the death imagery was startling to the tourists, but otherwise they were relatively harmless worshipers of a death goddess who had died herself long ago. But lately things had changed. The narcos had moved from sacrificing tequila and tobacco to slitting throats and cutting out hearts, old Aztec style. Bodies were found on altars, hushed up by the policía.

Somewhere, something ancient was uncurling into the world, something that had been worshipped by the Nahuatl and the Inca, the Maya and the dog-people. She danced in the night jungles, bones rattling beneath her virginal white gown, luring children to their deaths in the rivers and ocean or bestowing the kiss of death to unsuspecting travelers mesmerized by her sudden appearance.

Or so the pedlars who moved among the smaller villages claimed. No one he knew had seen the Santa Muerte or her other form La Llorena, even his cuāuhocēōtl friends and companions.

But her human followers were just as deadly as she, whether she was real or not. And now they had taken living newborn jaguars - something that he could not allow.



He would find them, even if this was not what he'd promised the *madrecita*.

It took only an hour or so to dig a shallow grave. He would not leave her beautiful body to be taken by scavengers, rendered into a ragged corpse, nor could he bring himself to skin her and take her hide himself. The bottom he lined with palm leaves, reserving others to cover her. At last, he pushed her in as gently as he could manage, bending to kiss her cold forehead and stroke her soft fur one last time. She would have been a magnificent companion.

When he finished covering her with earth, he pulled rocks and heavy logs on top of the loose dirt, then unzipped his shorts and peed in a wide circle around the grave. Hopefully, the scent of man would deter predators and others. At last, he packed away his belongings and began tracing the blood trail the *madrecita* had left.

He kept only one thing: a small vial of her blood. It would be a necessary part of tracking the young who were ripped away from her.



Following a trail in the deep jungle north of Rio de Coatzacoalcos was tricky. The ground and trees and vines were thick with insects and lizards that were drawn to the blood, obscuring and sometimes destroying the path. The oppressive humidity washed away markings even without the sporadic rainstorms, and often enough the sleek *madrecita* had slipped underneath dense undergrowth Javier had to hack his way through. By the time the moon rose, he had trouble making out the trail. It was time for the spell.

The *cuāuhocēlotl* had a very few spells that could be used without a feline companion, and *quitte* was one of the useful ones – mix the blood of an initiate with the blood of that he seeks to find. It would be tricky to use it to locate the babies, but he had been wise enough to take blood from the *madrecita*'s womb, which should be close enough. He knelt and chanted for a moment – old Nahuatl, a language all but dead.

The spirits here were hostile, he felt. They must have some memory of old evils the Mexica had visited upon the areas south of the empire, though that was five hundred years or more away. As he spoke, they pressed in, snaking into his awareness, bitterly hating him and his words. He shook them away. The *cuāuhocēlotl* had changed over the centuries, and his mission was as much to help the descendants of the Mixtecs and Zapotecs as his own people, but the spirits did not understand that. They had been weakened by time, though, and their efforts were like the fluttering of bird wings around his head.

It took longer than it should have, but soon enough the blood was blended, just a few drops from his palm mixed with the jaguar's, thinned with anticoagulants to keep it liquid in a pendant container. He sealed it, shook it gently, and dangled it from its chain. It remained still for a moment, then began to move, first clockwise and then counter, at last swinging forward and back. Northwest to southeast, roughly, he thought. He slipped the pendant on, where it felt warm against his skin, and checked his compass. Close enough.

Moments later, over slick rocks and around ravines and hilly outcrops, he came upon the place where the *madrecita* had been cut open. It was a wide clearing, the grass trampled and muddied by the passing of many feet, and he smelled the rank remnants of human sweat, onions, and manure – they had brought mules, he thought. At least ten men had been here, and for several days. Little had been left behind. The remains of a cook fire was in the center, scorched bones and plastic half-buried in ash, and to one side a neat hole for middens and excrement had been buried. He grimaced. The fecal matter of one of the men he tracked might be of use – but the men might also have parted ways. He had no time for a false trail. Better to continue following the birth blood. It had led him here, at any rate.

He smiled when he found a trail to the south. Several men traveling with pack animals did not share the stealth of an

injured female jaguar, and the path was clear and wide and marked with manure here and there. They'd had to machete through some of the plants, too, and it was clear that they used the same path leaving as had brought them there.

And why wouldn't they? It was clear that they had no reason to think they might be hunted or tracked. It was also clear that their only purpose seemed to be the jaguar. That was unusual, to say the least. What business did the death cult have with the cats? They were held in reverence, yes, but there was no overlap between the people of the obsidian god and those of Mictlān.

Javier shook his head. It made no sense. He shoved his hand deep into his pockets for a 5-Hour Energy drink, a precious resource his sister shipped to him regularly from her home in California; he stashed the empty bottle in another pocket for later disposal or reuse. That and some beef jerky would keep him going for a while yet. The killers had about a day on him, he thought, had probably broken camp early that morning, and they were not in a hurry. He was gaining pretty fast.

His legs and feet ached after hours stumbling over hard terrain and he was growing close to the Coatzacoalcos River when he heard men arguing. He traveled a little further before he realized they were arguing in several languages: Spanish, English, and what he thought was Zapotec, though he did not speak that language well. He crouched to listen, clutching the tracking pendant and willing the blood to lend him the hearing of a jaguar.

Whether the blood helped him or through some trick of the wind or terrain, the words did grow clearer. The American – or so Javier thought the English-speaking man – was intent on heading toward the Olmec ruins in San Lorenzo Tenochtitlan. The Spanish speakers were talking about a boat or boats, and the Zapotec – guides, it seemed – were insisting on being paid. After a few moments, he realized there was also a keening, a thin wailing sound that underlaid the argument.

Except it wasn't a sound.

He shivered. It was the distress of the cubs, two of them. They were cold and frightened and hungry – healthy, he thought. They wanted their mother. They did not like these people, these strange-smelling humans who had possession of them. They were in a bag, dark like the womb but foul-smelling, and it was hard for them to breathe or stay awake.

Javier was only an initiate. He should not be able to feel the thoughts of the cubs. Perhaps it was some residual effect of bonding with their mother? Regardless, he was grateful for it. He closed everything off from his mind except that keening, drew it close, anchored it in his mind so that he could follow it. One cub was stronger than the other, so he latched onto its mind, touching and soothing its thoughts, comforting it as best he could.

Shots rang from the trail ahead. Then silence before a few muttered comments. The American voice spoke again. "Move. Now." Other voices grumbled – more Zapotec, he thought – and there was rustling, then the sounds of a machete biting through undergrowth.

The cubs fell silent. The distress, he thought, put them to sleep, as happens sometimes with human babies. He held the thin strand connecting him with the stronger cub close, though, and sensed that the little one was comforted a bit by that touch.

After a few moments, he rose and slipped down the path. Perhaps two hundred yards along, he found the bodies of three men, one with a skull mask. It was a real human skull, and a fresh one. He was with his god now, Javier thought with a grimace. A little further, a side trail branched out, the foliage freshly cut, taking a more or less straight route toward San Lorenzo. The sounds of cutting and cursing were still audible, though relatively faint. He stood and listened for a few moments, making out a few words. The group were not moving anymore; it sounded like they were making camp.

“Take advantage of . . . moon . . . spirits . . . thank La Flaca . . . tomorrow is better. . . “

La Flaca, he thought, the skinny girl. Just another name for La Santa Muerte. Of course some of them were death-followers.

He slipped his cell phone from another pocket – thank the Lord for whoever invented cargo pants - and turned it on. This close to the industrial sections of the river, he should have coverage – yes. The map showed he was less than five miles from San Lorenzo, and that the machete trail –

Did not lead there. It headed off on a tangent, to the west and right around the hillside. Javier shook his head and crept into the undergrowth, concealing himself carefully. He desperately needed rest; the chase for the jaguar and then the subsequent search for the killers had exhausted his body, while the spell from earlier had drained his spirit. Besides, the killers were also resting. They would not get far if he napped for an hour.



He napped for at least four and was awakened by the sun shining through a gap in the undergrowth. Cursing himself, he sat up and drank some water, chewed a stick or two of jerky, and listened. The sounds of cutting were long gone, but something was still not right.

It took him a minute to realize there were no sounds at all. The birds, the wind, even the insects rustling grass by crawling through the undergrowth – everything was as silent as death.

It was cold, too. Not bone-chilling, but certainly colder than it should have been here. He realized after a moment that it was growing colder too, slowly but surely. Quietly, he stood, then froze for a moment in case something was listening.

Nothing. Just the cold.

He grabbed his pack and slung it to his back, then slipped out of the little weedy area. The machete-cut trail was still there, but it seemed that the branches and vines were already growing back. He glanced toward the three dead men behind him.

They were stripped clean of flesh, leaving only naked skeletons behind to inhabit their clothing.

“Madre de dios,” he mouthed, and crossed himself before moving on.

It was clear within minutes that the plants were regrowing quickly, and their pace was accelerating as the temperature dropped. Soon he found it was necessary to force his way through the snaking tendrils and unfolding leaves, then to pull out his own machete and hack a path. The vines jerked back as they were severed, hissing back to the edges like snakes. His fresh cuts were not regrowing. He wondered if it were an enchantment on the machetes that had originally cut through here, then shook his head. It didn’t matter. Clearly, he was dealing with a powerful sorcerer, and he would be wise to head back and try to seek out a different jaguar for bonding. Whoever heard of a *cuāuhocēlotl* bonded with a newborn kitten?

But he could not leave the babies to be misused. Nor could he break his promise to their mother. He continued forward, hacking until his arm grew sore.

Soon enough, he became aware that it was not only his own honor and compassion that drove him forward. A tiny mewling voice wailed in the back of his head, a little thing, a new thing. It cried out for want of food, of comfort, of its mother.

It was the stronger cub, and he realized with joy and a little chagrin that it had somehow bonded with him already. Though it was too young to truly communicate, he could at least track it, and was no longer bound to this difficult enchanted path. When he saw a break in the vines uphill, he slipped through it and sought out an easier route.

He found one quickly – a nearly dry stream bed that led down into a ravine, going roughly the same direction he was being pulled. Making his way through the stones and debris was slow going, but he picked up speed rapidly as he moved



through, soon enough leaping from stone to stone as nimbly as a cat.

He also noticed that his senses were keener – he could smell humans in the air blowing down from his old path, and soon heard the distant sounds of men walking – no longer slashing, so they had apparently broken into a clearer section. Rain, too, was in the air, though he saw no clouds through the branches high above his head; he hoped it would hold off until he found a path other than this streambed. He did not want to be caught here when the flooding began.

Sonja had told the initiates that this might happen when they bonded with a jaguar – the sharpening of senses, the sudden grace, the strength. They had sat cross-legged, the four of them, before the middle-aged woman in the bright-painted wooden chair. She was naked except for a flower in her hair and leather ties on her wrists and ankles, her hair greying but still sleek and healthy, and her jaguar Micté curled around her feet, head on her knees. She spoke halting Spanish; she was of the Chichimeca, though she claimed a Yaqui grandmother was responsible for her height, and was used to speaking her own tongue.

“The jaguar, she lends you her sewa, her soul, when you join blood. This gives you gifts beyond those of men.” Absently, she stroked Micté, threading her fingers into the jaguar’s golden fur, and the beast snuggled close to her. “It is not just a companion you are taking. It is a mating, of sorts. Your friend, she becomes your gemela, closer than a brother or sister. You share thoughts, when you choose, and you must take care to not lose yourself in her mind. You must

remember always that you are human, one of the People. And she must remember that she is ocelotl. But you are in harmony, overlaid worlds of human and beast. With the closest harmony, you will even become nahual, taking her shape and strength and enhancing it with your knowledge and cunning.”

This was, Javier thought, the sharing of souls. He plunged into it joyfully, and the cub’s whimpering eased in his mind, growing comforted as it felt a companion closer than its own mother.

His strides became longer and surer as he moved forward, at last taking on a sleek, loping stride as he leapt from stone to stone, ignoring slick moss and jagged edges. The streambed jagged to the north, away from his goal, but at last he spotted a pathway up, littered not with stones and damp grass, but with roots and vines providing handholds. Rain had started to fall, and the way grew slicker, but his mind took on the rhythms of nature, and he found little trouble making his way up the steep hill.

So enchanted was he by the joining that he nearly missed the sentry posted at the top of the hill. The man was dressed in jeans and a thin, dirty white shirt. His feet were encased in long-toed vaquero boots – botas picudas, of all things – and his mouth formed an O as Javier appeared in front of him.

Javier didn’t hesitate. He pounced on the man, pushing him into the weeds and tumbling down the hill in a loose-limbed tangle. It was over almost immediately. The sentry’s head hit a rock hard. His eyes rolled up and his body loosened.

Luck. Pure luck, and Javier had lost his head. He cursed quietly as he froze, listening for companions. The smell of this man was rich in his nostrils, his rough breathing loud, and Javier silently moved back, sniffing for others.

At last, he caught scent of other humans – distant. He was unable to properly gauge distances with his newly enhanced senses, but he was certain they were not within shouting distance. He relaxed a little,

then tied up his prisoner with a roll of duct tape he found in the man's pack, completing his work with a strip across the mouth. He hoped it was enough. As the man started moving again, struggling for consciousness, he stripped the boots away and tossed them into the branches of a nearby tree, where the long hooked toes caught fast. Only a fool would follow him through the jungle without proper footgear, even these foolish things.

The man carried an AK-47 that had been cheaply plated with gold; the plating was wearing thin where the rifle rubbed against the carrier's body. He shook his head and slung it on his back. He had not anticipated needing a firearm when he went hunting a jaguar, but now he thought it would probably be useful. He checked the magazine - fully loaded. He had been lucky indeed.

Finally, he dumped out the pack and, squatting, sorted through its contents. He removed the satellite phone battery and took the walkie-talkie, then stuffed his mouth with the man's supply of jerky. He had not realized how hungry he was. Several bottles of water went into his own pack, though he considerately left one for the bound man. There were several little baggies of marijuana and white powders, and he opened each and scattered the contents around, ignoring his prisoner's groans. Flares, matches, a little more ammo, and a flashlight joined the water in his pack and pockets. The man didn't have sleeping gear, so Javier guessed he would return to a base camp in the evening. Good. Wriggling out of his bonds and finding his boots should take plenty of time.

He stood and met the angry eyes of the sentry. "Vaya con dios, señor," he said with a grin. "Your boots are in the tree. Thank you for the water and jerky. They went for a good cause." Ignoring the enraged bleat that came from behind the tape, he turned away and strode through the undergrowth, aiming directly for the men he could scent - and the cub he could sense.

Only a moment later, while still in earshot of his earlier prisoner, he stumbled over stones in the ground. It was an ancient

road crafted from white rock, once wide and flat but now tumbled and cracked in many places. Still, there was enough left to cut a path through the jungle. And it led directly to where the cub called for him.

Then he felt it - a frisson in the air, a sharpness that cut through everything. It held within it the chill of the grave. Magic, again, and not benign or kind magic. The sun was entirely hidden now, and the rain picked up, quickly soaking him in icy water. Javier crossed himself again, pulling out a rosary and kissing it. This, he thought, was the American's doing - the man who had insisted on heading to the ruins, and who had apparently murdered the men he'd found earlier.

Javier moved faster, which he found surprisingly easy to do. As he drew closer to the cub, he moved more gracefully, his boot-clad feet finding purchase on even the slickest stones, and his senses sharpened. Soon enough he was making out words.

"-tie it down securely. We don't -"

"-pero, señor, no creo que-"

"-argue with me, or you'll go the way of Simón-"

A shot rang out, and Javier flinched, then relaxed. He was not as close to the cub as his senses were telling him, certainly not in firing range. He heard a babble of voices, then shot - shot - shot. Crashing through undergrowth, and another shot. And then silence.

The American's voice. "Damn." And then he began to chant, a sound that uncurled in his soul, a staining, oily blackness that stank. The air grew colder, and his clothes felt as if they were freezing to his body.

The cub's keening voice in his head grew loud, and Javier ran. He swallowed against the sudden nausea that threatened to bring up all that jerky from earlier. He wrapped his rosary around his wrist and hand and immediately felt better, though not entirely comforted. Suddenly the jungle ended, and he burst into a clearing.

Before him stood a ruin, though not one of the magnificent monuments of the Aztec or Maya. This was a lower structure,

squat and wide, more a mastaba than a pyramid, and it was incredibly old. Its stones were crumbling from the stress of weather and the veinlike vines that surrounded it; in fact, he suspected the crisscrossing vegetation was all that held it together. It crouched there, perhaps twenty feet high, carved with grinning, dancing skeletons, and below it was a hole soiled with the blood of the man who lay in it. He glimpsed another body to his left, a man who had fallen, half-reclining, into the trees and bushes at the edge of a cleared area, and he could smell more. The chanting came from the hole. Gritting his teeth, he shoved the body aside and slipped inside.

It was dark, lit only by a light in the distance, and slippery with mud and slime. The sides were rounded, not square, and ribbed with roots and stone. He could not help thinking it looked like a woman's privates. Touching the walls on both sides for balance, he stepped gingerly forward, closing on the chanter.

He was not lucky. As he approached the light, he realized the chanter was facing him. Between them was a stone altar that looked as ancient as the pyramid, and on the altar lay the priest, his throat slit and dripping blood into the channels cut down either side. At his feet were two struggling little forms, one black and one tawny. The cubs. The American was dressed in khaki, looking for all the world as if he were on safari, but in one hand he held a knife of black obsidian. It was a museum-quality piece. Javier felt waves of evil emanating from it. He clenched the rosary tightly.

"Señor, I do not know who you are or what you are doing, but it is wrong."

The man laughed, then pulled out a pistol and shot, point-blank, hitting Javier in the collarbone and shattering two of the vials he wore around his neck. He was cold and hot at the same time, the bullet searing a path through his chest, and he dropped like a stone. He felt a crunch around the wound; glass shards had been driven into his flesh. Immediately, his connection to the

little cub vanished, and the black kitten yowled in distress.

"Asshole. You're the one who's been following me and making the natives restless. No matter. There's enough here to bring me eternal life – the gateways—" he motioned toward the jaguars – and the key." He motioned at the dead priest.

"You are – what – killing them? Sacrificing them?" Javier managed to mumble through lips gone numb. Something strange happened as his blood trickled out and blended with the vials, but he could not focus.

"What, the people or the cats? Not that it matters. They're not important. This is about the greater good. MY greater good." He chuckled. Javier would have thought him insane if he could think right now. "So now I need to start over. I guess you're one of those kwawho things, the guys who bond with jags? Your blood might help. Not so sure the muertisto priest was as faithful as he pretended." The man stepped around the altar, the blade in his hand.

Javier closed his eyes. Something was moving over his body, shaping its shape to him – and his shape to its own. He shivered, smelling the American draw closer. His fingers sprouted razors, and he groaned. It only hurts once, Sonja had said. Tracking the American with his ears and nose, he swiped upward.

"Son of a bitch!" the man yelled, stumbling back. Javier opened his eyes. Things looked different – colors were not right, and he could see heat rising from the man, his torch, the kittens struggling on the altar. His kittens. Slowly but deliberately, he sat up, then crouched on all fours. His sleek fur glistened, glowing purple at the tip of each black hair, and he pounced.

His new shape was hungry.

The True Book Bans

"There is more than one way to burn a book. And the world is full of people running about with lit matches." --Ray Bradbury

We hear plenty today about censorship – primarily how the right is censoring the left. This despite the left’s pressuring Amazon into not carrying, at least for a while, Abigail Shrier’s *Irreversible Damage*, which simply told the stories of young people who had gone through gender changes and regretted it – or trying to cancel J.K. Rowling for *Wrongthink* – or Johnny the Walrus.

But whatevs. Censorship, book bans, and any other barriers between books and readers aren’t necessarily the problem, or not the entire problem. For instance, who actually chooses books: to publish, to put in libraries, to assign in schools and universities, to put on bookstore shelves, to review?

With at least 500,000 and up to (if you include self-publishers) 4 million books being published in English in a year, you, the reader, are not sifting through every single book to find the One Book you want to read. These books are brought to you. Or not brought to you, if the books have been banned or censored by government or private parties.

Types of Censorship or Book Bans

Censorship and book banning is intended to prevent a book from being read, either ready by anyone or read by a certain group, like children. You can censor books in several ways, including but not limited to the following:

- Blocking a book’s publication.
- Blocking a book’s distribution.
- Blocking a book’s purchase by consumers.

- Stealing or “losing” books from the library.
- Deliberately shelving books in the wrong area.
- Taking books from the children’s area and shelving them in the adult section.
- Refusing to carry (bookstores) or purchase (libraries) a book for reasons other than the book’s salability, popularity, or appropriateness to the bookstore or library. (This one’s a bit slippery, but it’s arguable that a book listed in the top 10 lists should generally be carried by general-interest libraries or bookstores of at least medium size.)

As Bradbury said above, there’s more than one way to burn a book.

However, lots of things that aren’t censorship are being called censorship.

Complaining that a book is not appropriate for your child’s library – not censorship.

Refusing to publish a book – for any reason.

For a private citizen, refusing to purchase a book for any reason.

Saying a book is not good – or tweeting it’s not good – or giving it a bad review.

Going to a school board and complaining that your child’s library book contains porn – definitely not censorship.

What Happens to Banned Books?

Because Western culture finds book banning to be, in general, repulsive, being banned is not all bad. Mostly, when books are banned and the media makes that known, banned books take off in sales. It’s the forbidden-fruit effect: when a book’s banned, the reader wants to know why. This, unsurprisingly, makes it tempting to game the system, either by artificially getting your book banned, playing up even the most minor attack on your book as a banning, or

writing into your book things that are sure to be controversial.

I'm not accusing anyone of any of these things, but there have been some sus moves in this area. I mean, why would you knowingly include even a single frame of obvious child porn in your graphic novel AT ALL – let alone a graphic novel intended for children to read? People go to jail for child porn, even when it's drawn in comic style. Why include unnecessary extraneous explicit sex in your YA novel – a novel you know will be shelved in school libraries?

These seem like unnecessary risks – except if your book is banned, that means sales, and there's nothing publishers like better than sales.

Think about who chooses the books you read – and no, it's not you. The writer has to write the book and either publish it himself in the jungle of self-publishing, or he has to get a publisher to accept it. The publisher may or may not promote the book they've contracted. If they promote it, they might go all-out, or they might just kinda halfheartedly make some social media posts. It has to be listed reasonably prominently at Amazon or another online bookstore, or it needs to be findable at your local bookseller. The books you choose to purchase are, in fact, books that have been brought to your attention in these ways.

When a book is “banned”, either legitimately or through some method marketers call censorship today, it gets a fastpass through all of that. Librarians fawn over it; bookstores feature it prominently. Lots of people find it – and lots of people buy it to see what all the fuss is.

One might expect industry professionals to be responsible about which books they publish or promote or purchase, regardless of their “banned” status. One might expect children's book publishers and buyers to be especially responsible. They aren't. Some are driven by ideological concerns – it's an LGBT+ book so let's get that underrepresented group on the shelves! Others closer to the top of the food

chain are driven by sheer profit with no moral or artistic underpinning.

So books that probably shouldn't see the light of day are not only published, but praised. What about other books that get ignored – books that may tell fresh new stories and explore new ideas?

Well, unfortunately, we are living in a time of artistic cowardice.

The Ye/Tucker Interview

Yesterday (October 6, 2022) I watched Tucker Carlson interview Ye (Kanye) West. Well, really, I watched West talk while Carlson occasionally made noises and very occasionally asked a question. It was stunning – a man being as completely honest as he could about his life, his beliefs, and – most importantly to me – his interactions with the elements blocking creativity in his life. Many of his stories were fascinating, but one in particular stood out to me: the Money Man. West spoke of having dinner with Josh Kushner, who owned 10% interest (West owned 5%) in one of Kanye's artistic endeavors – and the absolute sense of entitlement with which Kushner spoke of his ownership.

I've seen or heard about this before, though few seem to address it. In New York, the final decision to publish or not publish a book is made by the Money Men – the managers and MBAs who run marketing, legal, and finance – not the editors or publishers. Once it was common to publish a book simply because of its artistic merit; today it is nearly unheard of. And the attitude of the Money Men? It's one of complete entitlement – an assumption that they know all there is to know about the publishing business because they have the purse-strings.



I also saw this in Jordan Peele's movie *Get Out* – while most critics spoke of this movie as anti-racist, I saw something very different. I saw an artist whose experience in Hollywood has been the appropriation of his creativity by the Money Men – a man who knew others wanted to, in effect, wear his skin. To take his strength. To speak through his art and vision. While I don't in general agree with Peele's politics, oh I completely recognized his message there.

This is where artists of all sorts are today: in a very real way, being expected to prostitute their art for the sake of fame and finance.

But what does this have to do with banned books and artistic cowardice?

Everything.

According to the Money Men, art **MUST** have a message. And since art must have a message, they reason, it needs to be **THEIR** message. Hence, money only flows to those who espouse the correct messages.

Who can blame artists who, though they may feel agnostic about politics, are tempted by cash to tweak their stories just a bit to put out the correct message?

Especially when the reward for staying true to themselves is obscurity? Especially when the punishment for tweaking a bit to the other side is to be labeled a racist, homophobe, bigot, crazy, criminal, traitor, Nazi, fascist, monster?

I can. I will blame them. Art is about truth and authenticity. West is, if nothing else, true to himself. It takes a lot of guts to keep the faith as he has. I'm fortunate to

have met numerous artists like him, and every single one is amazing. When an artist ceases being true to himself, he ceases to be an artist. He's just a skilled hack at best, a puppet or tool at worst.

The reason we see an enormous amount of liberal-leaning art is not because art is by nature liberal. We are seeing an enormous amount of liberal art because the Money Men want liberal art, so that's what gets funded. And that art often betrays and undermines the truth that should be its foundation. That, I suspect, is why so much contemporary art is so ugly.

Back to Banning Books – or Pre-Banning

So anyway, when a book is “banned,” the publicists take this fact and run, and the “banned” book becomes more popular than ever. What's the problem with being banned, then?

Well, there isn't one, not today. Once upon a time, those who wrote banned books were in mortal danger. By writing their truths, they risked being jailed, or beaten by a mob, or potentially even being murdered. The most recent example of this is Salman Rushdie; the fatwa on his head resulted in a very real physical attack that put him in the hospital. **THAT** is a writer courageous enough to speak truth.

Contrast this with oft-challenged contemporary novels like “*Gender Queer*” and “*Lawn Boy*.” Despite the protestations of the books' supporters that these books are necessary to encourage young LGBT+ people, they both also contain disturbing and explicit sexual content. Few parents would argue that books with explicit sex belong in school libraries or in the children's section of libraries and bookstores. Yet there's an enormous fight over these books right now, and in many cases the fight is being weaponized in political campaigns. How is it that politicians and teachers and librarians are fighting to put pornographic

material in front of children – and often winning?

The books themselves are doing well. Every time there's a new ban, the authors tweet about it; the company publicizes it; and consumers buy the book. It's a good business model, I guess, that works out better when the threat of imminent physical danger is removed from the author and the book's proponents.

And who is making the decision to get these books to the public – even the one that shows, cartoon-style, a ten-year-old boy performing oral sex on a grown man? You know the answer to that: a whole chain of people. And it's about money as well as message.

Is removing certain books from where children can view them banning? Or is it being a responsible adult? Who gets to make the decision about what is appropriate for your child.

What about books that AREN'T making it onto the shelves? When is the last time you saw a great boy's adventure novel published? I mean a new one, not the classics. When is the last time you saw patriotic historical novels in the kid's section at your local bookstore? Or in the promo stacks – that's where you have a pile of books with one prominently displayed on a stand – at the store? Or advertised, like, anywhere? Yes, you see a few of these types of books – but what are most of the books you see?

Let's go harder-core.

When is the last time you saw a novel featuring frackers as the good guys? When is the last time you saw a novel really digging into abortion and treating the unborn baby as a human being? How many meet-cute rom-coms take place at a Tea Party rally? Have you ever seen a MAGA protagonist? An environmental activist villain? Or a covenant marriage presented as a positive thing?



Image courtesy of Sabo.

I've seen all these – but not one, not a single one, out of New York, or in a bookstore, or in a library. They are independently published, and the authors, who are true and authentic artists, struggle in obscurity. The Money Men have no interest in them.

These are the true banned books.

ohn bio here.

Treasure Box

I finish the story and close the book.

My little girl smiles beside me on the couch. She loves the story of Captain Bree and her Lady pirates.

I've got a plan, of course. I project corporate plans for a living, so I've always got a plan. And knowing little Portia the way I do, I know she's going to ask me in 3...2...1...

"Daddy, are pirates real?"

I smile, and pretend to think for a second or two before I answer. "Sure. In fact, there used to be a bunch of 'em around here, years and years ago."

She waits. I can almost see the thoughts bubbling in her head like new morning coffee.

"Did they bury any treasure?"

I smile wider. "I think so."



When we were little, Mom liked to make treasure boxes for us. Old cardboard boxes decorated with crayon designs and our names written on the side in the fancy, curly letters she loved to draw. The boxes were made to hold our favorite toys. Of course, in the house run by a very practical mom, 'favorite' meant anything we wanted to keep safe. If I liked one of the crappy McDonald's toys or my little green soldiers, I knew that they had to go in the treasure box or risk getting tossed by a mom who was just as pragmatic as she was whimsical.

As the years passed the treasure box got fuller, like one of those popsicle-stick buildings you keep adding levels to until it got about waist high. Over time I figured out that the cardboard-box that held my treasures was going to get too full, so I grabbed a slightly larger box from the back of the local variety store and replaced it. I even counterfeited the letters and designs on the side.

And when that box got full, I replaced it again. An even bigger box completely with new counterfeit letters.

In retrospect Mom probably had an inkling something was up. My box got bigger as the years passed while my sister's stayed the same size. But Mom had quite a few bigger fish to fry by the time I was nine and the box was nearly as big as I was.

They say hindsight's 20/20, and they're right. Now I can see just how few of those toys I actually played with. Very few actually meant anything to me. Truth was, I just didn't like to throw things away. I hated being pulled from something I'd bonded to, however briefly.



My own daughter thumps down the stairs, bringing me out of my reverie.

"Is this it, Daddy? Is this it? Is it?"

I smile, and look at the rumpled piece of paper she's found in the attic. She's good- she found it without any difficulty and only a few minor directions. Still right where I left it six months ago, I'd hidden it after I printed it out on special paper, poured a little coffee on it, and burned the edges with a match to make it look old and aged. It's got dotted lines, trees, rocks and hills drawn on it, ending at an X in the top right hand corner.

She looks again at another section of the paper. When I was finishing up the drawing of the map, I filled the empty space on the parchment with a phrase ancient mapmakers used to mark unknown territory.

"Daddy, what's this?" she says, pointing. Without waiting for my help, she starts reading my attempt at calligraphy. "Here there be...monsters. Are there monsters out there?" She's excited, not scared, her eyes shining and her little hands gripping the paper tighter.

"No, hon. No monsters today."



Mom got the cancer when I was nine. Well, she had it a long time before, but we didn't learn about it until I was nine. Right after my ninth birthday party and right

before Dad decided that turning forty meant he had a God-given right to ditch us and get married to a different lady from his work.

Mom, she passed when I was eleven. The cancer ripped and tore her up without pity or mercy, an unhurried, grinding thing with teeth that gnawed and gnashed her insides at a steady pace, slowed but never stopped by every medical procedure known to man and payable by her insurance plan.

She was given six months to live, but fought and fought, stretching out her fight to two years. A year into it she came back to the religion grandma and grandpa raised her in.



“It’s funny, Rick,” Mom had said to me from her hospital bed, tubes sticking out of her, her long blond hair gone but her eyes still a bright blue when she was awake, “funny how seeing the finish line changes everything you thought was important.”

Simply put, Dad wasn’t available. So after Mom died we moved in with my aunt and uncle, Mom’s brother Don and his wife, Allie. They’d always been religious, but different from Mom. When Mom came back to the Church, Nia and I had to get up earlier on Sundays and joined the Sunday night youth group. But after we moved in with Don and Allie we stopped going to St. James Catholic and started going to Victory Bible Baptist Fellowship Temple with them on Sundays. No more Mass, adoration and incense. Instead of an altar and a choir, now on Sunday mornings, Sunday night and Wednesday evenings we watched grownups dance in front of a big TV set and a rock band, and then listened while the preacher yelled at us.

I know I should have liked it. I think I did a pretty good job of pretending. My sister Nia didn’t.

Uncle Don and aunt Allie were also big on family. Uncle Don had a good job, so we went to Six Flags, camping trips, the works. But never Disneyland; uncle Don hated the magic in the cartoons and the stuff he said Disney supported. I got on okay with my two cousins, Micah and Sheba. Nia sucked up their attention like a sponge, and did all right

with aunt Allie. But she didn’t like uncle Don much, especially when he wouldn’t let us go trick-or-treating.

My aunt and uncle were big on school too. Uncle Don hated the public school system, so he put us in the private Christian academy attached to the Baptist church. The uniform sucked and I hated doing homework. But we both learned a lot academically, especially Nia. I helped her with her math and showed her how to deal with bullies, but I couldn’t help her with uncle Don. He was tough for anyone to deal with, really, if you didn’t give him what he wanted. There were only so many tools I had in my box, and some places I really couldn’t give Nia any direction because I was lost myself.



“Where now, Daddy?”

My little girl Portia is five. She still has that sense of wonder and magical belief most of us lose by Middle School. She’s also a classic sanguine temperament, which is a nice way of saying that while she’s usually up for anything, she can also be a little drama queen.

But for now she’s just Portia. All big smiles, spontaneous hugs, and bobbing blond curls. When I read her Peter Pan a year ago, she wanted a blue dress like Wendy’s. When I read her a kid’s version of Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream, she spent hours the next day looking at every blooming plant in the vacant lot for a love-in-idleness flower like Oberon the fairy king used to make a love potion.

So I got ready six months in advance for Captain Bree and the Lady Pirates.

Portia is tugging on my left hand, urging me out of the garage and down to the driveway. I carry the two shovels in my right hand as we head out. One of them is big with a black metal blade and a long wooden handle made dark by years of sweat from my hands and Uncle Don’s before me. The other shovel is small and made of bright yellow plastic. Light as a feather and snug between my index and middle fingers, it’s better suited to the beach rather than digging in a vacant lot.

Even in a spot that was dug up, reburied and seeded six months ago.

I'll give her the tools, but she's still going to need help. And I'll give her that, too.



"You sure about this?" I asked.

Nia had been going a little bit nutty since she went to one of the Bible clubs at school. I'm not saying there's anything wrong with reading your Bible. But she started comparing what she heard in the club with what folks said earlier in history. When they didn't add up, she started talking to Father Wilson over at St. James more, and that made aunt Allie worried. Worried more that Uncle Don would find out than anything else.

Nia took things to a whole new level, though, when we went to one of the young people's conferences with her Catholic friends that summer. Uncle Don didn't like the Catholic Church one bit, but he let us go anyway. My guess was because it was his only chance to get rid of us for a few days that summer. Nia had gone to be with her friends and get away from uncle Don. I'd gone because I had a crush on one of Nia's friends. I was sixteen, Nia was fourteen, and her friend Judy was fifteen. Perfect.

Once I got there...well, that's a bigger story for another day. Short version: It took. I saw in one weekend that all the stuff Mom got into at the end wasn't just for little kids and old people, and I ended up liking it just fine enough to keep doing it on my own.

But Nia, Nia stuck with it. Big time.

But she didn't stick with her boyfriend.

"I broke up with him," she said two weeks after we got back.

"How come?" I asked, not really caring all that much about her love life. My own wasn't doing so great. Judy and I went out a few times that summer before she dropped me. Nia's boyfriend had been a nice enough guy, but at the moment she broke the news to me I was more interested in beating the high score on Air Sea Battle, my eyes glued to the TV while she lay on the couch behind me reading a book.

"Why bother?" she said, "I'm not ever gonna get married."

Huh?



"Are you sure, Daddy?"

Portia's face looks like there's no way in Heaven or on Earth she is going to trust the next thing I say. I've walked down the path with her, following the drawings I made six months ago on the battered paper I got from the Office Stuff store. We've followed the dotted lines as it wound around rough drawings of trees and piles of rocks.

There was only one trail when I drew the map six months ago. But we've reached a point where the trail splits in two. The trail on the right is new, the one on the left is well-worn.

Crap. This shouldn't stress me out, but for some reason it does, bringing back something fear-filled and nameless in my head.

I push it down and say a little word to St. Joseph. He was apparently the patron Saint of dads before Gregory Peck movies, The Cosby Show and Homer Simpson came along and made every real dad in the universe look either inadequate or like idiots.

I speak, fully intending for her to go left with me. But something totally different comes out of my mouth.

"Which way do you think, hon?" I say, looking at the map with her.

"I wanna go that way," she says, pointing right.

It's not the way. I know. Or, more accurately, I ought to know, since I drew this fripping map- thing.

But maybe...

"Let's try it out, then, hon. If it doesn't work, if we lose our way, then we have to come back and start over. Deal?"

She smiles and skips off down the recent path, matted down with grass and dandelions.



"But, Nia, we didn't mean for this to happen!"

My aunt and uncle sat with Nia, trying to save her. I was almost nineteen, and sat on the other side of her, kitty-corner on the other couch.

“Calphurnia,” uncle Don said, using my sister’s full name for the first time I can remember, “we know what your mother did to you, dragging off to St. James near the end of her life. But we never thought you’d want to stay Catholic. That’s...well...we were ready for if you...if you turned Democrat, or...something. That we were ready for. But this? Joining...this?”

Nia said, “I still want to go. When I turn eighteen next year, I want to go and be a postulant.”

She reached over and took my hand.

I held uncle Don’s gaze and gave Nia’s hand a squeeze, even though I thought she was nuts. I didn’t know why she wanted to be a nun. No way would I want to be a priest. But I was still willing to stand with her against uncle Don and aunt Allie, whatever the cause. It was the principal of the thing; a way to tell them what I thought of all the missed trick-or-treat nights, or the visits we never made to Santa Claus, or the dances I missed out on in high school. I held her hand, trying to look firm, but not defiant. That was a line I wouldn’t cross. Defiance made Uncle Don a little crazy. More than a little, really.

My aunt and uncle started talking again, both at once. Aunt Allie said something about child molesters, idolaters and worshipping Mary while uncle Don slung Bible verses. Our cousins were upstairs, I knew, listening. Uncle Don and aunt Allie had pulled many Catholics from the Church; they never thought someone in their lives would choose to go back to it, much less be a nun. Worse, be the kind of nun walled away from the world in a cloistered convent.

Watching Don and Allie during the fight, I got a little flash of insight.

I didn’t realize until then how much Mom and her brother Don both disagreed and agreed at the same time. Mom went liberal left to tick off her folks. Uncle Don stayed conservative, but left the Church and became

the kind of a Bible-thumper who tries to save every Catholic from the clutches of the pope.

At that moment in the middle of the verbal firestorm in Uncle Don’s living room, I make a promise to myself: I’m going to love my kids so much they’re not going to try and hurt me by rejecting me, or what I think is important.



“Oh, this isn’t it!”

She’s gotten lost. Well, lost as you could get in a tree-filled vacant lot. I could get us back on track in about one minute, but something in me says that’d blow everything. I want nothing more than to take her by the arm and make her go onto the path, but I know I have to hold my breath and do this different if I want it to come out right.

“Hon, if we went off track, maybe we should...”

“NO! It’s THIS WAY!”

I hold back, breathing in like they taught me to do in the Dad’s group. Since I was nine, I didn’t have a dad. I had a Mom and an uncle. Mom meant best. My uncle meant to make me something I’m not. Both had good intentions. But they aren’t me.

“Hon, what say we check the map?”

She plunks down, crosses her arms and sulks. I wonder if six months of waiting for me to be the perfect dad is going to evaporate here and now into some awful memory that she’s going to tell her shrink about years from now.

No.

Breathe. Talk. Pray. Just a little.

Sit down near her, out of her space.

She spins cross-legged on her bottom to face the other direction. Arms folded, frowny-face pointed away from me.

After a few minutes, she stands up.

“Let’s check the map again,” she says, as if it was her idea to go back to the map and I was the one who kept things from moving forward.

I smile. We look, she points. We backtrack and are back on track in five minutes.

Five more minutes and we're at the tree that forms a great, big Y near the middle of the lot.

On the map, X marks the spot.

On the ground, there's no visible sign anyone has been here. The grass has been growing in an even spread under the tree for at least six months.

We start digging.



"So, how come?" I ask. We were walking downtown. Allie and Don were letting us go down here more and more. It got us out of the house and away from their kids.

"It was that conference, Rick. I saw something different, not like it was at St. James. More kind've like what Mrs. Sample used to say she felt at Woodstock before she retired."

I chuckled. Mrs. Sample was the ditsiest English teacher I ever had, and probably ever will have. Something about old hippies still wishing it was the 60s always seemed pathetic to me.

"I liked it too, Nia. But it didn't make me wanna give up girls forever."

She shrugged. We kept walking.

"Nia, you, know, I gotta ask if..."

"I'm not a lezzie Yorick."

Yorick. My full name. Nia only uses it when she's ticked at me. When she starts talking again, her voice has that small edge it gets when she's really, really angry but keeping a lid on it. "Don and Allie already tried to pray out the gay in me. I told them over and over again it's not there. But they just can't see any other reason why I'd want to be a nun."

I didn't get why she was doing this either, but I couldn't help admire how she was standing her ground. Home life had gotten more and more tense with uncle Don. When you have something he wants, he can be sunny, happy, smiley, the best friend you ever had. Someone joked once that with that great, big smile of his, he could talk the pope into missing Mass on Sunday for a Baptist barbeque.

But there's another side to him most folks don't see. If Mom ever saw it, she never talked about it. But I heard grandpa talk about it once. Back when I was little he told me the story about how he tried grounding uncle Don back when he was a teen, and the kind of rage and revenge uncle Don could take. Grandpa was an ex-marine, six-three and about 250 pounds. Uncle Don was a foot shorter and at least a hundred pounds lighter. But grandpa still sounded scared as the rum-and-coke loosened his tongue and memory.

Something in uncle Don scared Grandpa. I'd seen it just a bit now and then, but more and more lately. It'd scared me. I wondered what it'd been like for Nia.

"So, if you like boys, Nia, why give 'em up?"

"I just love this more, Rick. If you don't get it, you don't get it, and that's fine. It means you're not supposed to do it. It's like...when you dumped Sandy a few weeks back. You still liked her. You just liked Emma more, right? It's like that."

Yeah, I guess.

"You sure you're not just doing this to tick off Don and Allie?"

She thought for a bit. "Maybe," she said, shrugging her shoulders. "Maybe some."



We dig for a while. My watch says it takes about eight minutes, but it seems like a long, happy memory, like your first kiss or sitting in a new car.

"How deep is it?" she asks after the first four or five shovelfuls. I could have gotten to the bottom in about a dozen big scoops, but I want this to last.



I'm still nineteen, a week from turning twenty. I looked at my watch. I was back at St.



James, the small, mini-Cathedral in the center of town. The inside was all ancient brown wooden pews, slender stone pillars, smooth marble floors, and the pungent scent of incense wafting through the air. I'd spent the last fifteen minutes sitting in the pews, studying the hidden and subtle details in the fourteen stained-glass windows- beautiful works of art that looked like shapeless blobs unless you see them from inside the Church with the sun shining through.

Then the organ started playing loud, melodious chords as the main doors of the church opened. A line of a dozen smiling girls with shining eyes dressed in white gowns with hands folded in prayer entered, taking the careful, measured steps of a bride to the altar at the front of the Church. They walked in a slow line, beautiful young ladies of different shapes and sizes, all with joyous expressions beneath their veils, moving past relatives and friends who smiled and wept.

One by one, the girls came up and took the arms of their fathers, brothers, or other men who would give them away. When Nia arrived my eyes widened. She wore a white gown like all the rest, but she looked so much more lovely than any of them. She smiled at me as she took my arm and I walked her down the aisle.

At the end I released her and she knelt with the other girls in a line at the communion rail. I could tell from the back of her head that she was looking steadily up at

the crucifix, and I could imagine her expression.

I knew I shouldn't choke up, but I did. Standing in the front pew beside a father who wouldn't remove the sour expression on his face, I felt happy and sad. I was elated that she was joyful and worried she was doing something that could derail her life, all at the same time.



Portia and I are still digging. And digging. After eight minutes of it I get worried. What if it's not there? What if someone came along earlier and unburied it? What if a stray dog saw the disturbed earth and dug it up, and some kid took the...

[CLUNK]

Portia squeals with delight when her little plastic shovel hits the corner of the wooden chest. I help her, only partly feigning my own excitement as I use my hands and the metal shovel blade to scrape the rest of the dirt away.



After it was over, the girls all stood and faced us. My sister Calphurnia, now Sister Joan of the Joy of the Lord, looked clean, fresh, beautiful and new as any virgin bride. She'd spoken her vows, the Mass had continued, and she'd taken her first Communion as a married woman. The girls left in a line but I didn't see them. I saw only her and her bright, happy eyes as she left with the women who will be her sisters for the rest of her life.

I wondered what Uncle Don was doing at this moment. He had berated her the night before she left, going quickly from smiling, happy and his signature aw shucks way of convincing folks to breathing fire and brimstone, telling her she would miss out on everything from college sororities to 'relations' (his word) with her husband to the gift of Heaven itself if she kept on her current course. Hallelujah.

He couldn't, wouldn't understand how she could give all that up to live in a cloister.

He couldn't see that she gave up a four-year college sorority for sisters who would be with her forever. Or give up having a mortal husband for one that would never hurt her, bully her or disappoint her.

At least, that's how Ni...how Joan put it just before she left, uncle Don shouting Bible verses loud enough for the whole street to hear. She was ready, though, and used the printout from MapQuest she'd prepared ahead of time to walk the fifteen miles to my college apartment downtown. She'd bested uncle Don and what he stood for. Now she walked out the door, hands still folded. She was ready to start her new life, one she would love the rest of her life and that Don would never see the use or point of.



Reverently as a priest with the Sacrament, we lift the box from the dirt where I buried it six months before, each of us with two hands on either side of it.

We lay it down next to the hole. It looks old, with wood grain and dark metal framing on the side. She wants to open it, but waits for the ok from me. I smile, nod my head, and she starts tearing at the latch.

It comes away, and the lid creaks open at her touch with pretended age.

Portia doesn't squeal. She's silent, her hand over her mouth in awe.

The hinged chest was empty when I bought it at a garage sale for a dollar. Now it's full, shining with plastic gold coins, glass diamond necklaces, painted emeralds and rubies, rings, and a host of other treasures from the dollar store I visited on a business trip to Seattle.

They would mean nothing to most people. A silly bunch of diversions to put in a birthday party loot bag, forgotten ten seconds after the party is over.

But to my daughter and I today? It's treasure.

Priceless treasure.

Each piece of cheap costume jewelry is transformed as soon as Portia sees it and reverently lifts it out of the chest, changed into a beautiful memory that we'll hopefully recall forever.

And whatever monsters may ravage us, harm us, or try to block us. Whatever form they take, human or otherwise, these treasures won't be taken from us. They will be with us forever.

Hallelujah.

DO YOU STILL RECOGNIZE YOUR COUNTRY?

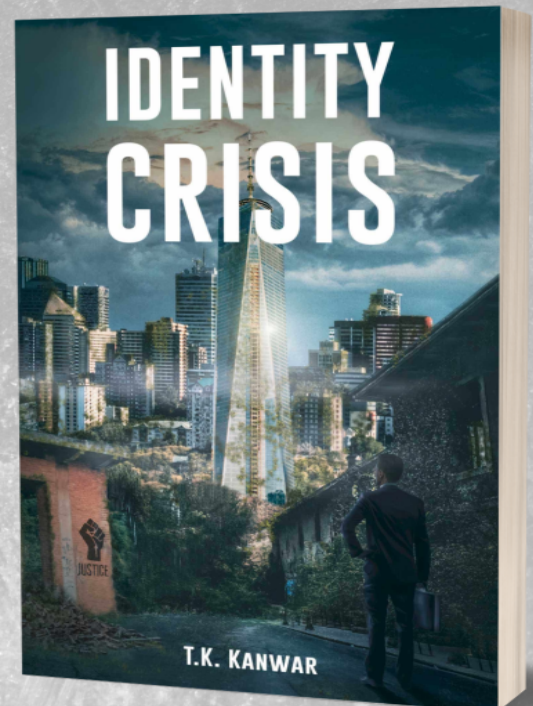
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The Value of Family in Middle-earth

Editor's note: for readability purposes, the footnotes originally included in this essay have been removed. The entire essay, including footnotes, can be found on our website: conservatarianpress.com.

The study of Tolkien and his works has expanded into an entire academic field of its own. There is almost no end to the topics that scholars have mined from his three major writings, as well as the dozens of other Tolkien works published since his death in 1973. Those aiming for less lofty intellectual heights can also find plenty to examine in Middle-earth, however. One fruitful topic that seems mostly untouched is the role of family in Tolkien's world. Two families, in particular, are of paramount importance during the time of the War of the Ring: those of Théoden and of Denethor. But before delving into the ruling houses of Rohan and Gondor, respectively, it's worthwhile to look at several other crucial late-Third Age characters' households for some context.

The Fellowship and Family

The Fellowship of the Ring is the central grouping in LotR. This band of brothers is tasked with enabling Frodo to destroy the One Ring before the Dark Lord Sauron can retrieve it, which would augment his already great power and permit him easily to conquer all of Middle-earth. The Fellowship consists of a wizard (Gandalf), two Men (Aragorn and Boromir), four Hobbits (Frodo, Sam, Merry and Pippin), one Elf (Legolas) and one Dwarf (Gimli). The family backstory of several of these

individuals is provided by Tolkien and proves important to the Quest. **T**

Frodo is arguably the main character of the entire story. In the end, with much help, he does get the Ring of Power to Mordor, where it can be destroyed in the lava of volcanic Mount Doom. (A task which, serendipitously, is actually performed by the debased creature Gollum.) Those who have read the book or seen the movies know that Frodo is broken by the experience, and ultimately sails to Valinor with Gandalf and departing Elves to gain some measure of healing before death.

Far less known are the sad facts of Frodo's early life. He was orphaned when his parents Drogo Baggins and Primula Brandybuck drowned in a boating accident. For a time, Frodo was taken in by his mother's side of the family, until he was adopted, at an unspecified young age, by his much older cousin Bilbo, who acted as his uncle. Bilbo made Frodo his heir, and left him his home of Bag End; Frodo "loved the old hobbit dearly." So after the horrible childhood trauma of losing both his parents, Frodo was rescued by a loving, if distinctly odd (for a Hobbit), family member.

The other main heroic character in LotR is Aragorn. He, too, had a tragic childhood. His father Arathorn II, the leader of the Dúnedain (descendants of the long-lost northern Númenorean kingdom of Arnor), was killed in battle with Orcs when Aragorn was only two years old. Aragorn and his mother Gilraen were then brought to live with the Elves in Rivendell, and its leader, Elrond, treated the boy as one of his own sons. So, like Frodo, Aragorn was rescued by an older, if much more removed, relative—Elrond being the brother of Elros, the first king of Númenor, from whom Aragorn could trace descent across millennia. Both of them found substitute families, if you will, and this is no mere literary device of parallelism. The characters of both the intrepid Hobbit and the regal Man who would be, and did become, king owe much to their adoption into upright

and loving families following the breaking of their birth ones.

Though Tolkien makes much of “blood” and genetic background, one’s fate is not simply pre-determined by nature. Nurture is very important, both morally and pragmatically. Frodo learned Elvish, and a great deal of history, from his uncle Bilbo—who of course had spent much time with them in Rivendell during, and after, the quest of Erebor. This proved invaluable for the younger Hobbit to understand the background—and danger—of the Ring. Knowing some Elvish also came in handy more than once on the trek to Mordor. Also thanks to Bilbo, Frodo was familiar with Dwarves. A small sword named “Sting” which the older Hobbit gave his heir proved invaluable as well; not only did Frodo wield it at key points, but his batman and friend Samwise Gamgee used it to rescue him from Orcs in Mordor. More important than linguistic abilities, historical and diplomatic expertise, and weaponry, however, was the fact that Bilbo taught Frodo to have a heart, to care for others, to exhibit empathy. The last saved Middle-earth, for had Frodo not allowed Gollum to accompany him and Sam after the sundering of the Fellowship, or had he “cut his throat,” as the Ring-bearer threatened to do, then Sauron would have won—because Gollum would not have been around to take the Ring from Frodo and then fall into the fires of Mount Doom, destroying both himself and it. Years earlier Bilbo, too, had the chance to kill Gollum—but chose not to. The mercy of Hobbits in dealing with that loathsome, but pitiable, creature, was instrumental in saving Middle-earth. Mercy triumphs over judgment (James 2:13)!

Aragorn’s upbringing in Rivendell was similar, if done in a higher register—as befits Elendil’s heir and the future ruler of the Reunited Kingdom of Gondor and Arnor: Aragorn II, who would rule as King Elessar. Aragorn’s grandfather Arador was captured and killed by trolls only one year after his parents were married. A year later his father, Arathorn, was killed by Orcs in battle. Aragorn probably did not even remember his father. But Gilraen lost her husband after

only two years of marriage, which undoubtedly caused her much pain and sorrow. Eventually, once Aragorn became the wandering Ranger and lived largely away from Rivendell, she returned to the Dúnedain of Eriador, living by herself. She saw her son one last time only before she died, “aged by care,” unable to “face the darkness of our time that gathers upon Middle-earth.” Aragorn thus lived 18 years in the house of Elrond, then spent the next three decades “labour[ing] in the cause against Sauron.”

He befriended Gandalf, rode and fought with both the Rohirrim and the forces of Gondor, and traveled far into the East and South “uncovering the plots and the devices of the servants of Sauron.” No doubt the young Man’s training include Elven, and perhaps Númenorean, combat drills. Tolkien says that these tasks made him “the most hardy of living Men,” yet he was also “elven-wise.” Being of Númenorean extraction, Aragorn had Elvish ancestry, which granted longer life than that of ordinary Men. But that was no certainty of uprightness—noble Númenoreans had fallen into evil more than once. Again, it was not genetics so much as his upbringing by his adoptive father, Elrond, that made him different from all other Middle-earth Men.

Like Frodo, Aragorn learned the Elvish language; though to a much greater degree, being taught to speak it fluently by Elrond, his natural sons and Aragorn’s battle companions Elladan and Elrohir, and other Elves. Since Rivendell was primarily a center of lore and learning, the orphaned Man was taught a vast amount of history, not just the earlier Third Age but the Second, as well—far more than Bilbo, who did not dwell in Imladris (what the Elves called Rivendell) and who was not a potential ruler of most of Middle-earth. Indeed, when Elrond presented to Aragorn the heirlooms of his house—the ring of First Age Barahir, the shards of the sword Narsil, and the Sceptre of Annúminas—the young Man would not have understood these objects’ importance unless he had a firm grasp on his world’s history. Elrond, however, while loving, was a stern father figure. The Sceptre he held back, telling

Aragorn he needed to earn it; that “the test will be hard and long” and “many years of trial lie before you.”

The highest hurdle Elrond set for Elrond was earning the right to marry his daughter, Arwen, although the two were already in love: “She shall not be the bride of any Man less than the King of both Gondor and Arnor.” A high standard indeed! Even then, Elrond referred to Aragorn as “my son,” for he clearly loved him. But since Aragorn had such a key role to play in the war against Sauron and ordering the coming Dominion of Men, the Elf Lord had to set him almost impossible tasks. Of course Aragorn responded—and, after much toil, succeeded. That happened in no small measure because “Elrond took the place of his father and came to love him as a son of his own.”

The only other member of the Fellowship who suffered loss of a parent (that we know for sure) was Boromir of Gondor. His mother, Finduilas, died when he was 10 and his brother Faramir was five. His father, Denethor, was the grim but effective Steward of Gondor. Denethor loved Boromir more, it seems, than his brother, and so the elder son did not lack a father figure, unlike the young Frodo and Aragorn.

What of the rest of the Fellowship? Legolas was the son of Thranduil, the ruler of the Elven kingdom of northern Mirkwood. There is no mention anywhere in any of Tolkien’s writing of Legolas’ mother. Likewise for Gimli, son of Glóin. The other three Hobbits on the Quest—Samwise Gamgee, Meriadoc Brandybuck, and Peregrin Took—all grew up with intact families. The final member of this august group was, of course, the wizard Gandalf. But he was a veiled Maia, an angelic being sent to help the peoples of Middle-earth in their struggle against Sauron; and so the issue of family is irrelevant in his case.

Family and Father Figures in LotR

There is a sense in which the Fellowship itself could well be deemed a substitute family in its own right. Although

all Nine Walkers were only together for two months, intense bonds of camaraderie were formed. After the War ended with Sauron’s defeat and Aragorn’s coronation, “the hobbits still remained in Minas Tirith, with Legolas and Gimli; for Aragorn was loth for the fellowship to be dissolved.” Of course, we later find out that he was waiting for the Elves to arrive, with his bride-to-be, Arwen. After their marriage the new King of Gondor and Arnor, with the appropriate entourage, journeys to Edoras to bear the body of King Théoden home. Finally, at Orthanc/Isengard, following a meeting with the Ent Treebeard, Aragorn announced “here then at last comes the ending of the Fellowship of the Ring.” Legolas dragged Gimli off to see Fangorn Forest and then travel to their homes in the north, and Gandalf departed from the four Hobbits near the borders of the Shire—which they had to liberate from the petty tyranny of Saruman and his henchmen. Almost two years later, Frodo would leave Middle-earth with Gandalf, Elrond, Galadriel and many other Elves, for Valinor. The White Wizard then tells Sam, Merry and Pippin—who had come to bid Frodo farewell—that “here, at last, dear friends, on the shores of the Sea comes the end of our Fellowship in Middle-earth. Go in peace! I will not say: do not weep; for not all tears are an evil.” There are, indeed, friends who stick closer than a brother (Proverbs 18:24), and the Fellowship of the Ring exemplifies that saying.

Brothers and a sister dominate the tale of perhaps the two most sorrowful, but also significant, families of the late Third Age: those of the King of Rohan and the Steward of Gondor. “We are given some insight into the process by which the will of men is misdirected in the contrasting fates of Théoden and Denethor.” Théoden was the 17th King of the Mark, as the Rohirrim called their land. His wife Elfhild died giving birth to their son Théodred, presumably in their first year of marriage. Two years later Théoden became king, but never remarried. His sister Théodwyn died shortly after her husband, Éomund, was slain in battle with Orcs. The king then adopted her son Éomer

and daughter Éowyn, “calling them son and daughter.” They were ages 11 and seven, respectively, at the time; Théodred was 24. Fourteen years later, at age 41, he was killed by Saruman’s Orcs, at the by-then evil wizard’s express orders, at the First Battle of the Ford of Isen. Théoden’s depression at the loss of his only son no doubt contributed to his bewitchment by Saruman via Gríma Wormtongue—although that had begun even before the death of the king’s son. A week later, Gandalf (along with Aragorn, Legolas and Gimli) came to Eodras, Rohan’s capital, and healed Théoden.

Despite the loss of his biological son, Rohan’s king clearly loved, and was loved by, his adopted son and daughter. Examples of that abound. Éowyn helps him to walk as Gandalf’s healing takes effect. It is Éomer who brings Théoden his sword. The king tells the wizard “I owe much to Éomer.” Théoden names his foster-son his successor and calls on his adoptive daughter to rule in his place while the men are at war. Seeing that Éomer has survived the Battle of Helm’s Deep, the king is overjoyed. Later, when gathering Rohan’s forces to ride to Gondor’s aid, Théoden calls Éomer “my son;” likewise when he tells the younger man to lead the charge of the Rohirrim against the legions besieging Minas Tirith. As he lays dying heroically during the Battle of the Pelennor Fields, he (once again) names Éomer the next ruler of Rohan. When Éowyn is at death’s door after killing the Witch-King (with a bit of help from Merry’s Númenorean blade), Gandalf observes that “she was doomed to wait upon an old man, whom she loved as a father, and watch him falling into a mean dishonoured dotage....” After being healed by Aragorn, she asks about Théoden. Her brother tells her “he lies now in great honour in the Citadel of Gondor.” Éowyn replies “that is grievous.... And yet it is good beyond all that I dared to hope in the dark days....”

The love between Théoden and his adopted children is clearly deep. But this king also acts as a father-figure to another person: Merry Brandybuck.” Théoden invites the Hobbit to ride with him as his esquire—

whereupon Merry responds by “drawing from its black sheath his small bright blade. Filled suddenly with love for this old man, he knelt on one knee, and took his hand and kissed it. ‘May I lay the sword of Meriadoc of the Shire on your lap, Théoden King?’ he cried. ‘Receive my service, if you will.’ ‘Gladly I will take it, said the king; and laying his long old hands upon the brown hair of the hobbit, he blessed him. ‘Rise now, Meriadoc, esquire of Rohan.... Take your sword and bear it unto good fortune!’ ‘As a father you shall be to me,’ said Merry. ‘For a little while,’ said Théoden.”

Whether the king uttered that last statement because of his advanced age (69), or because he had a foreshadowing of his death, we do not know. But within a week he would be dead, killed by Sauron’s greatest servant, the Witch-King—who would in turn be slain by Merry and Éowyn. But as the latter swooned upon stabbing him, it was the Hobbit who last spoke to Théoden before he died, weeping while he did so. The king tells Merry to think of him when he smokes his pipe. At the Houses of Healing, after the battle, Merry remembers this and says ‘I shan’t ever be able to smoke again without thinking of him...’ But Aragorn reminds the Hobbit “Smoke then and think of him!... Though your service to him was brief, it should be a memory glad and honourable....”

Théoden King both gave and elicited love to his family, whether natural or adoptive, and even to someone who was not of Men. He is everyone’s favorite grandfather, one of “vigorous and martial spirit, and a great horseman.” People risked death for him because they loved him. Gandalf had to cure Théoden of the poison, both real and literal, with which Gríma had infused him at Saruman’s behest, but it is doubtful that his inspirational rally and heroic death would have happened with only the wizard’s help. The tender mercies and solicitude of Éomer, Éowyn and Merry—even if but for a brief time—also empowered Théoden to overcome the loss of his wife and his only son, to be able to tell Merry before he died “I go now to my fathers. And even in

their mighty company I shall not now be ashamed." Greater love has no one than this, to lay one's life down for friends, family and subjects.

The Steward of Gondor is a quite different figure from the ruler of Rohan, as Gandalf points out to Pippin just before they enter the Hall of Kings in Minas Tirith. "Théoden is a kindly old man. Denethor is of another sort, proud and subtle, a man of far greater lineage and power, though he is not called a king." Put aside, dear reader, the buffoonish lunatic of Peter Jackson's *The Return of the King*—a role which John Noble did portray admirably. "Denethor II was a proud man, tall, valiant, and more kingly than any man that had appeared in Gondor for many lives of men; and he was wise, also, and far-sighted, and learned in lore." So when he "became Steward (2984) he proved a masterful lord, holding the rule of all things in his own hand. He listened to counsel, and then followed his own mind. He had married late (2976) taking as wife Finduilas, daughter of Adrahil of Dol Amroth. She was a lady of great beauty and gentle heart, but before twelve years had passed she died. Denethor loved her, in his fashion, more dearly than any other, unless it were the elder of the sons that she bore him.... After her death Denethor became more grim and silent than before...." Denethor had married at age 46 and lost his wife when he was 58. He would live to 89, still healthy in body to the end—if not entirely in mind. This is, after all the man who in his 80s slept in his armor and with his sword. How could he do this? Because, as Gandalf said, "He is not as other men of this time, Pippin, and...by some chance the blood of Westrenesse runs nearly true in him; as it does in his other son, Faramir, and yet did not in Boromir whom he loved best."

Boromir was 10 and Faramir five when their mother died. The older son grew up into a warrior first-and-foremost; he cared little for learning. He had not married before his death at age 41, pierced by orc arrows while protecting Merry and Pippin. Faramir was quite adept at battle himself, although he

"read the hearts of men as shrewdly as his father, but what he read moved him sooner to pity than to scorn. He was gentle in bearing, and a lover of lore and music, and therefore by many in those days his courage was judged less than his brother's. But it was not so, except that he did not seek glory in danger without a purpose.... Yet between the brothers there was great love, and had been since childhood, when Boromir was the helper and protector of Faramir. No jealousy or rivalry had arisen between them since, for their father's favour or for the praise of men."

However, it was clear that their father had come to prefer Boromir. Gandalf, again, to Pippin: Denethor "loved him greatly: too much, perhaps; and the more so because they were unlike." The wizard at another point observes that Boromir was the son "whom he [Denethor] loved best." When Gandalf and Pippin arrive at Gondor's capital, the Steward has already learned of his elder son's death; he then expresses regrets that he didn't send Faramir, instead, to the Council of Elrond—both when the wizard and Hobbit first show up, and again in a military strategy meeting. Denethor says he wishes the brothers' places had been exchanged, for "Boromir was loyal to me and no wizard's pupil." Denethor then sends Faramir to lead what is, in effect, a suicidal sortie against Sauron's forces encroaching on Gondor's eastern border. Faramir tells him "if I should return, think better of me." His father replies "that depends on the manner of your return." As he is leaving the hall, Gandalf tries to soften the blow, telling him "your father loves you, Faramir, and will remember it before the end."

Not long after this Denethor, in speaking to Pippin, reveals his mindset—marking perhaps the key difference between him and Théoden. Speaking of Sauron, the Steward opines that "He uses others as his weapons. So do all great lords, if they are wise, Master Halving. Or why should I sit here in my tower and think, and watch, and wait, spending even my sons?" Men, even his own blood, are but pawns or knights for him to

move about the chessboard. Although Denethor (like Boromir) is correct in thinking that Gondor is the main defense of the West against Sauron's armies, that does not give him *carte blanche* to dispose of others in such a cavalier fashion. His realpolitik is untempered by any drop of love or concern for those around him—at least until it is too late.

Pippin almost cracked Denethor's stone visage when he offered fealty to him at their first meeting. After telling the Steward the account of Boromir's death, and being rebuked by Denethor who asked "how did you escape, and yet he did not, so mighty a man as he was?" the Hobbit offered his service. "Pippin drew forth his small sword and laid it at Denethor's feet. A pale smile, like a gleam of cold sun on a winter's morning, passed over the old man's face; but he bent his head and held out his hand.... 'Give me the weapon! he said.' Pippin lifted it and presented the hilt to him.... 'Take the hilt,' said Gandalf, 'and speak after the Lord, if you are resolved on this.' 'I am,' said Pippin. The old man laid the sword along his lap, and Pippin put his hand to the hilt, and said slowly after Denethor: 'Here do I swear fealty and service to Gondor, and to the Lord and Steward of this realm...in peace or in war, in living or dying, from this hour henceforth, until my lord release me, or death take me, or the world end....' 'And this do I hear, Denethor son of Ecthelion, Lord of Gondor, Steward of the High King, and I will not forget it, nor fail to reward that which is given: fealty with love, valour with honour, oath-breaking with vengeance.' Then Pippin received his sword back and put it in its sheath." Contrast this with Merry's fealty to Théoden. Here there is no talk of love, or Denethor being a father-figure to Pippin. The Steward is flattered and almost amused. But most of all he sees this as a way to gather intelligence from the Hobbit; for his very command to his new vassal is to tell him of the Fellowship and Boromir's death. Pippin is but a political pawn to Denethor, it seems; not a *de facto* member of his household, as Merry was to Rohan's king.

When Faramir is brought back from his mission seemingly mortally wounded, Denethor's descent into madness accelerates. We learn later, of course, that the primary reason for the Steward's deadly despair is that he has, for years, been looking into the palantír, the "seeing stone," of Minas Tirith. This crystal ball linked to one that Sauron had

obtained when his forces took the Gondorian city of Minas Ithil years earlier. Denethor gained much knowledge, and his mind and will were too powerful to Sauron to take over; but the Dark Lord manipulated the data, if you will, feeding the Steward "fake news" and convincing him that the forces arrayed against Gondor were undefeatable. But the final straw that broke the intelligent and proud Steward was the loss, as it seemed, of his only remaining family member. Denethor "went to Faramir and sat beside him without speaking, but the face of the Lord was grey, more deathlike than his son's." Denethor "gave no longer any heed to the defence." Pippin "saw tears on that once fearless face, more unbearable than wrath." Denethor finally spoke and told the Hobbit "I sent my son forth, unthanked, unblessed, out into needless peril, and here he lies with poison in his veins." He then says he will cremate himself and his son on a funeral pyre, that "we will burn like the heathen kings." The Steward then dismisses Pippin: "my life is broken." Pippin goes and finds Gandalf, who arrives in time to save Faramir, but not Denethor—who dies in flames, grasping the palantír.

There are key differences between Denethor, Lord and Steward of Gondor, and Théoden, King of Rohan. The former is of much greater ancestry, and commands a larger, more powerful, and older kingdom. Denethor and Gondor represent nascent monotheism, Théoden and Rohan northern European paganism. The Steward rules by respect, the King by affection. But there is one striking similarity: both suffered intense personal losses of wives and sons. Yet these two important rulers dealt with those losses in dissimilar ways. "Exercising his will to the service of fellowship, [Théoden] reasserts his

natural excellence, kingly courage, and leadership. In contrast, Denethor, having chosen to keep to his own use a power too great for him, a power beyond his stewardship, lusts for more. He mourns his son Boromir less than he does the loss of the power that Boromir would have given him. Consequently, not only does the particular virtue of his kind, courage and loyalty, wither in him, but ultimately his nature itself is corrupted and, mad, he attempts to destroy his faithful son, Faramir.”

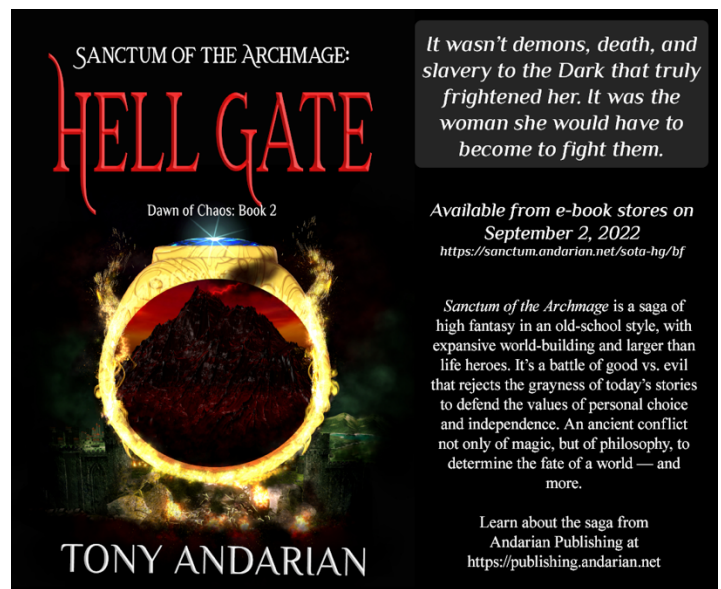
Ultimately, “Théoden faces the end of the world with courage, and dies a hero, whereas Denethor faces the end of the world with despair, and dies a proud and pitiable fool.”

Fellowship Becomes Family

Creating family via fellowship appears to be crucial in Tolkien’s Middle-earth. The Fellowship of the Ring is one example. The adoptive families of the Ringbearer Frodo, the royal heir Aragorn, and King Théoden are others. All depended, more than anything else, on love. All also exemplified other key elements of St. Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 13: patience, kindness, humility, honoring others, trust.

Denethor’s ruling house of Gondor, however, lacked many of these attributes. Although admirable in many ways—notably bravery, in standing as the front line of defense for all of Middle-earth against Sauron and his hordes—Denethor, even with his gift of prophecy via the palantir, proved to have nothing. By the time he rediscovered that he loved Faramir, it was too late. Denethor’s purely politically pragmatic Stewardship would be replaced by a ruling household that would prove capable of showing mercy as well as judgment, that of Aragorn II Elessar—in which, ironically, Denethor’s son Faramir would be a key member.

At the end of Peter Jackson’s *The Return of the King*, Frodo, when narrating the Hobbits’ return to the Shire from Gondor, describes the Fellowship of the Ring as “eternally bound by friendship and love.” In examining three prominent families in Tolkien’s tale—Théoden’s, Denethor’s and the Fellowship itself—it is apparent that in Middle-earth, as in our world, the greatest attribute is love. Rohan’s ruling house, and the company created to help Frodo destroy the Ring, showed this. Alas for Denethor, his house did not. And therein lies all the difference.



A Megafan's Review of *Rings of Power*

I am a Tolkien megafan. I read *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings* when I was nine, when my fifth-grade teacher got me library privileges to the adult section (for which I will forever be grateful!) I read *The Silmarillion* when I was ten, and by the time I was thirteen I'd re-read the entire series nine times. I drive my children crazy quoting the books; I own and have read the 12-volume *History of Middle Earth*; I base my writing philosophy in part on "On Fairy-Stories" and the idea of eucatastrophe; my sole online game is *Lord of the Rings Online*, which I've played for a decade; I take online courses examining the entire opus. And of course I've seen the movies over and over.

TL;DR: I love Tolkien and everything related to his magnificent Middle Earth.

As a megafan, the Amazon approach to the stories worried me more than a little. Of course I want more content set in Middle Earth. But Amazon approached the stories with the attitude of "we're spending a fortune so we want a *Game of Thrones*." Well, I didn't particularly care for *GoT*, either the books or the show. Too dark, too dismal, too sexy, too bloody, too shocking, sometimes too little story – and far too much of the animal side of human nature. I like superversion, the idea that stories should uplift the greatness in humanity rather than dwell on the darkness.

I was even more dismayed when Amazon fired Tom Shippey, hands down the most respected Tolkien expert in academia – and an academic who has not gone woke – in favor of listening to the lore experts and fans at *TheOneRing.net*. It's not that I don't like TOR, but their qualifications are far inferior to Shippey's.

So now I've seen the first three episodes, and – hm. It's not quite as bad as I had feared, though it is far from doing justice to the original story.

Amazon's version is told from the mostly nonintersecting points of view of several main characters: the elves Galadriel and Elrond Half-Elven, whose stories diverge early on; Nori Brandyfoot, a young Harfoot girl and one of a band of proto-hobbits; and the lovers Bronwyn and Arondir, a human healer and an elf warrior (incidentally cast with a reasonably talented black actor, Ismael Cruz Córdova, which is canonically okay because he's a silvan, not high, elf; Tolkien spoke of some of these elves as svart, or dark). Dwarves are brought in with a visit to Moria – at this time a thriving underground kingdom – by Elrond. These story threads are of uneven quality.

Galadriel, as depicted by RoP, is a warrior princess, not the wise sorceress she has become in *Lord of the Rings*. Okay . . . as a daughter of the house of Finarfin, she would likely have had training in battle and leadership, so that's not beyond possibility. Also, according to Tolkien himself, she was "the only female to stand tall in those days," i.e., the only female leader of the elven rebellion against the godlike Valar. BUT in the source material, she was a queen, not a fierce warrior, and frankly the change in her character weakens her. Galadriel was Tolkien's most outstanding example of true feminine power – a woman whose personal wisdom and insight qualify her to rule over others. Changing her into, you know, a sword-wielding badass chick who is such a poor leader that her followers abandon her at a critical moment kind of weakens the character.

Worse, her story thread is boring. Morfydd Clark, the actress portraying Galadriel, has none of the charisma of Cate Blanchett, who played Galadriel in the Peter Jackson movies. Her emotional range so far ranges from impatient to enraged. I don't think I've seen her character smile once or take pleasure in anything, giving

her a one-dimensional feel. Seemingly undefeatable, she beats up mounds of orcs and at least one troll, and, when not killing monsters, stalks around, angrily impatient she can't attack Sauron – who hasn't been seen for hundreds of years. And then she jumps off a boat that was just arriving at the Blessed Lands of the Valar, Valinor – and attempts to swim back hundreds of miles to Middle Earth? Ridiculous. Even if her mighty Elf powers gave her the ability to do this, she had nothing to drink or eat with her. She would have perished within a day or two.

Elrond is much better. Played by the talented Robert Aramayo, this youngish (though already over a thousand years old) version of the character is upbeat and optimistic, a clever diplomat and wise counselor. His best scenes are when he visits the Dwarves in Moria, participating in a rock-breaking contest (sanctified by the Dwarven god Aule) for the right to remain and then having dinner with Durin IV and his charming wife Disa – the first depiction of a female Dwarf in any Tolkien film.

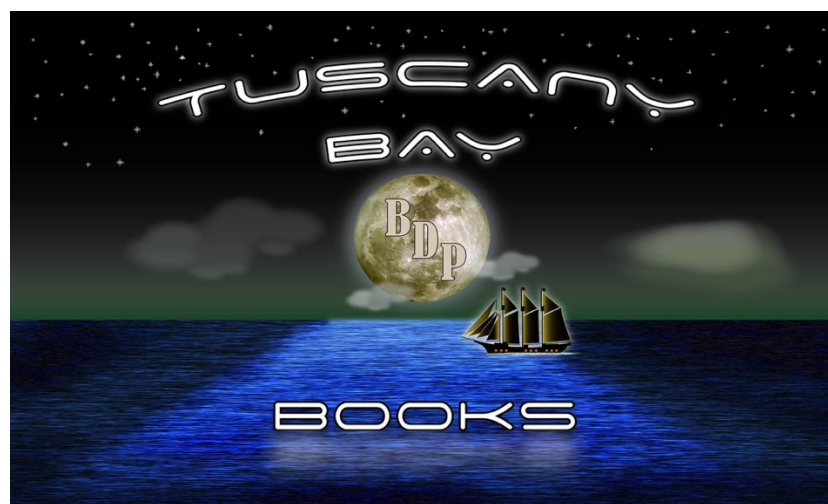
In other segments, Nori Brandyfoot cares for a strange Man who fell to earth – Sauron? Gandalf? Tom Bombadil? – Bronwyn comes to terms with an Orc invasion in the Human Southlands (later to be Mordor, I think) Arondir investigates the Orc tunnels to disastrous ends, and Galadriel and the mysterious shipwrecked human Haldir are rescued by the Numenorean Elendil, a human who will later found the nation of Gondor.

The stellar performance of an often-mentioned “character” must also be noted: the land of Middle Earth. Peter Jackson's movies stunned fans with the beauty he created bringing Middle Earth to life; if anything, the Amazon series outdoes Jackson, though it is largely derivative of his work and the art from the online game. The cinematography of light and dark when the Trees of the Valar were killed by Morgoth was just breathtaking. Aerial shots of Elven and Numenorean cities are

picture-perfect, and the art and architecture of everything from Elven bowers to Morian tunnels will make you want to pause and get a closer look.

Despite its visual beauty, however, the overall show is lacking. The pace is too slow, and the characters seem to have an overabundance of sincere urgency that feels weirdly undirected. The sweetness and charm of Tolkien's original stories is missing entirely, and there's not really a sense of danger and dread all about as there was in the Peter Jackson films – this despite some terrifying scenes with orcs. Additionally, the story thus far commits the greatest sin: it is boring. The characters have no dimension to them (other than Elrond and Durin IV) and one has no sense that they are “alive.” I have the feeling that so much attention was paid to visual effects and checking off woke boxes that the storytelling was ignored, or taken for granted. This is always a mistake. The story is the foundation, and without it, everything else fails.

Perhaps the story will improve over the course of the next five episodes. Perhaps the writers will come to their senses and make Galadriel more interesting, fix the pacing, and find a way to incorporate the utter charm of Middle Earth back into the story. However, already the creators are blaming criticisms of the show on racism sexism bigotry lalalala – which is a shame. The story is redeemable. It just needs better writers.



Children of Men: Beauty in Brokenness

Far too many children today grow up missing a father or mother. For those who think the American family is breaking down and want to address this problem, it can be tempting to shame single parents for having kids. As a result, some who advocate for families end up criticizing families who are less than perfect. This behavior feeds into the antifamily idea that a child is a burden. *Children of Men* breaks down this lie. By imagining a world without any children, the film opens our eyes to the gift they truly are.

Absence makes the heart grow fonder, and *Children of Men* takes this idea to the extreme. In this world, no children have been born in 20 years because all women have mysteriously become infertile. However, a woman named Kee is an exception. Kee doesn't even know which of the men she last slept impregnated her, but the movie chooses not to focus on Kee's promiscuity. Everyone's desperation allows them to recognize the value of her child without any other baggage. Even Luke, a character who tries to use Kee's baby for political purposes, can see it. He says, "I was carrying the baby up the stairs. I started crying. I'd forgotten what they look like. They're so beautiful. They're so tiny." With children all around us, it's easy to take them for granted, but Luke shows us the reaction we should all have towards them—awe.

Children, despite the sacrifice they require, ultimately lift people up rather than weigh them down. Kee's child brings her out of a place of despair. Kee had previously contemplated suicide, but "Then the baby kicked! I feel it. Little bastard was alive. And I feel it. And me too. I am alive." This hope also spreads to Theo, the main character of the movie. The baby's birth



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makes him laugh with joy despite his previous claim that "Even if they discovered the cure for infertility, it doesn't matter. Too late. World went to shit." Seeing the baby in the flesh changes not only his mind but his life, bringing him out of the cynical outlook he had lived through before.

This child also brings hope to the rest of the world. While trying to escape to safety, Theo, Kee and the baby get stuck in a warzone. As they try to leave, people notice the child. Gunshots gradually fade into the background as the baby's cries take over. People instinctively step back to make a path. A soldier points his gun at Kee but, when he sees her baby, soon replaces it with an encouraging hand on her shoulder. For this moment, this baby is able to create peace where no adult could. As shown through this powerful scene, children are good for society no matter the kind of families they come from.

I'm not saying broken families aren't a problem. And I'm not saying parents don't have a duty to give their children the best family possible. But a failure in this does not make the family itself a failure. It's easy to get so obsessed with the ideal family that we miss the beauty in the broken ones.

Submission Guidelines

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