

COMPLIMENTARY | AUGUST 2025

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MAGAZINE







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## AUGUST AND BIDDING FAREWELL TO A FRIEND

I cannot believe it is already August, the last month of summer. The final hoorah before the kids go back to school and all of the fall activities start up. It feels like this summer has just flown by. But sadly it hasn't been all barbecues and beach days.

I'd like to take a moment to share with our readers that sadly one of our good friends and teammates has passed away. Since day one of this magazine, we have worked exclusively and very closely with our printer, Snyder Printer out of Troy, NY. I have in particular worked with the head of that family-run company, Dona Snyder Reardon. Dona sadly lost her battle with cancer in early July. And it is with such a heavy heart that I share this news. Dona was an incredibly amazing person. She was kind, funny, smart, and hard-working, and she loved her family dearly. She was also a fierce warrior, having fought and beat cancer. I have been working with Dona for over 12 years, and in that time she had become a dear friend. As I sit here and think of her, all I can see is her beautiful smile and her deep laugh while the tears pool in my eyes.

As I'm getting emotional thinking about Dona and her family's loss, it reminds me that we should never take people for granted. We should remember to feel fortunate and lucky to have so many people come into our lives and make an impact. Sadly it sometimes isn't until the people exit our lives (for whatever reason) that we realize the deep impact that they have indeed made. And I find myself lost in thought about the impact that Dona will forever have on my life. I can't imagine what her husband, Tim, or their two sons and Dona's extended family and friends are experiencing right now. My heart is with them.

I know Dona was at peace at the very end, but she will be so deeply missed. As her brother Dean said, he'll take the helm of Snyder Printer and try to make her proud. And I think that's all that we who knew her can try to do, to make her proud in our own way.

To my friend, Dona, you fought so bravely. You were a shining light to so many. You'll forever be missed, but I'm just so grateful for having had you in my life. Never did I imagine all those years ago that seeking a new printer would lead to our friendship. I'm forever grateful for you and you'll always have a place in my heart. Until next time, my friend ...

– Thorunn Kristjansdottir



AUGUST 2025

Who's ready for fair season? We are! Fortunately for all of us, we have a few choices in our amazing region! This ferris wheel was captured at the Dutchess County Fair in Rhinebeck, NY. Happy fair season!

Photo by  
Olivia Valentine

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# WHERE THE CONDOR ONCE ROAMED

- JOHN PAUL PHILIPPE  
& ELVIN RODRIGES

By Leora Armstrong  
info@mainstreetmag.com

*On a warm afternoon I set off to chat with John Paul Philippe, originally from Oklahoma, and Elvin Rodrigues from the Dominican Republic, who now live and work in Sharon, CT. Their life is entwined with land – integrating with birds, wildlife, and native plants and coexisting and respecting the place where they collaborate on their art practice.*

**So, John Paul, you were in the UK for 20 years after growing up in Oklahoma. Were you painting then?**

JP: Yes, in England, I was painting and had gallery representation. I had to live off my art or risk being kicked out as I was on an artist visa. From the start, I worked at *Wallpaper* magazine, styling their sets and designing graphics in the late '80s; it was a significant era to be part of. When raves came along, I embraced them; it felt like a second adolescence. I can't separate how that time influenced my art or my outlook on life, but it was a pivotal and liberating moment. It gave me the confidence to take on work that paid me. When I moved back to the States, I was based in Soho, NYC, creating and designing sculptural, textile, and painting works for Barneys, West Elm, and Neiman Marcus, which I would then develop into collections for them.

**What brought you up to this area?**

JP: This place was a former bird sanctuary owned by the ornithologist John McNeely. He never lived here

full-time; his girlfriends wouldn't stay. This house was his "bird blind," as he called it. When I moved in, the house was primitive and simple. What I now use as my studio – the barn – he used as a research station and a place to assemble and store microlights. He wanted to fly with the birds, so he'd jump off that Red Rock escarpment and fly with his pet Andean condor, Vidor.

**I've been in a microlight – they're like lawnmowers with wings, but it's amazing what you can see from them.**

JP: Right! He used lawn mower engines that he rigged up like *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*. He even mounted Betamax cameras on the wings. He believed he could be a bird, controlling the flight with his feet and cables. Most of the gliders were collapsible so that he could transport them easily. He'd take them apart, carry them up there, come back down, put Vidor in a harness, and fly, landing on that strip over there. Vidor became somewhat notorious around here.

On an earlier trip to North Carolina, while flying over a hollow near Asheville in the Appalachians, he spotted an 1830s sharecropper cabin. He disassembled the cabin, marked every log with blue chalk, loaded it onto a trailer under a tarp, and brought it back here in the '70s. Thank God it didn't rain! He reassembled the cabin where we are now. When he sold the property, it was a semi-private



sale; where he interviewed everyone, and we each submitted private bids. I added five dollars over the asking price and had a wonderful conversation with him; it helped that I knew a lot about birds, and we connected over our shared interest.

Inside the cabin, I love the natural spaces between the horizontal pines. I replaced the original chinking; John had only put mud in there. I oiled the logs and repaired the areas – it's a work in progress on an old house. Initially, the ceiling extended across the entire space, and a small hatch and a ladder were located there. If you look closely at some of the logs, you can see that someone has scratched on them; the house is full of stories. Over here was a little piece of metal that somebody cut out and used to fill a hole. They painted it like a French Tricolor, and I found a hidden block where people probably hid their valuables when you didn't have locks. They also made a split between the upper floor and this fake ceiling so they could shoot out to defend themselves!

John stayed here for eight months after the sale was completed. He was having trouble letting go, but it turned out to be great for me. I learned a great deal from him about the habitat and what he'd done to build the coverts, where birds fly from one perch to another. He also ringed trees all over the property. His focus was woodpeckers, but the dominant species here, depending on the season, is the chickadee. They're nesting now, the first clutch is just starting to fledge and fly off, but they can have up to three clutches in a season.

When I first moved in, the land felt like an empty stage. I kept it up by mowing paths, but there weren't any features or destinations – it was just a way to get from point A to point B. Back then, there were no garden rooms or spaces. When the architect, Edwina Von Dahl, came to visit, we were walking around, and she said, "You've made a path garden."

*We wander through these garden paths marked by arches made from branches, woven through with vines and grasses. Already, the area is filling up with wild clematis, beans, new gourds growing, and birds' nests. If you pause for a moment, you'll see nesting birds everywhere, maneuvering through their little habitats and interacting with the sculptural pieces.*

*Elvin's solar-powered water sculptures are strategically placed throughout the garden, adding a sense of calm while providing essential access for wildlife. Grasses are bound together, forming strong ties that are woven into nests for birds and animal habitats. Between objects, there's a quiet connection as they converse with each other, attached by the birds' invisible flight paths, which feel like drawings in space – as if the bird's flight draws a thread or a line. A constant whirring of wings accompanies the birds as they flit from one place to another.*

JP: So, when Elvin moved here, he started creating more structures that became destinations and 'rooms,' encouraging the wildlife into the sculptures. We edit the native species and grow vegetables. This year's garden theme is 'Eyes;' we reuse everything from last year's grasses, trees, and plants to rebuild fencing and gates, each with an eye. It is about creating something ephemeral, letting impermanence be part of the story.

**I am reminded of Richard Long's walks and Andy Goldsworthy's sculptures, which feature thorns or icicles attached to rocks – work made in the moment, which last only as long as the elements allow. The action of making is the work.**

JP: When you tie the materials together, they become something more – like the bamboo vine sup-



Above: Front porch. Below: *Island*, 2021. Gouache, hessian on panel, 60 x 48 inches. Opposite page, L-R: *Untitled*, 2025, varnished gouache on panel, 12 x 12 inches. *Flounder*, 2023, hessian, emulsified gouache, 48 x 50 inches on panel hanging inside the cabin.

ports on the porch and the circular bird perches woven from vines. Elvin also designed a gate in the vegetable garden – it's so striking that it's worth casting in bronze someday. The oxeye daisies are waking up. Some plants thrive one year but not the next; every day is different, and you never quite know what will surprise you.

In the studio, I mostly work upstairs, often in the morning while Elvin works on the porch. We collaborate while working separately; the aged barn cat sleeps in her box, content with no more comfort than that. In the winter, this porch becomes what we call the "white room." Here is a current hanging piece, *Partition*, made with found objects, ready for an exhibition. We are creating other objects that will be part of the winter installation for *BOX*; they will transform into a *nestBOX* using larger objects for the interior.

*A table is covered with multiple sorted pieces – resin, plaques, and found objects to be used in future work. The shapes repeat themselves across the table, like in one of Philippe's paintings. There are maquettes for exterior sculptures and birdhouses throughout the building.*

ER: You can create outstanding work with these objects. They are so beautiful; they glimmer in the light. I remember making all my toy cars out of sardine tins as a child, and I continue to create work with found pieces.

**This table of objects reminds me of one of your paintings. Does the object itself decide what it will become?**

JP: Sometimes you know you're probably making a gourd into something, but mostly, we're just trying to use what's here and what's happening naturally. Recycling and reusing, letting the place shape the work. We went to Mexico this winter, and we're still processing that experience and what we found. Here's my winter studio upstairs – it's insulated and heated with a wood stove. Mostly, I paint here, using gouache, which has a matte feel, and I always say my palette comes from frozen mud and cardboard!

**Do you collaborate on pieces, or do you each have a separate practice?**

JP: Collaboration is interesting to talk about – we started working together during COVID. I often work on burlap or hessian, which I love as a surface. I used to be very meticulous with it, making sure the edges were clean and everything was precise. But Elvin has a much rougher, freer approach. I'd draw a shape, then leave room and ask him to cut it out. When I came back, it would always be slightly different from what I'd imagined – sometimes better. I prefer not to be there while he's working on his part. We work independently, and that space gives us freedom.

It's like working blind, but in the best way. A lot of trust is involved.

Continued on next page ...





It became a means of communication, not through conversation, but through the work itself. That back-and-forth, that letting go, really shifted how I think about making. You must consider someone else's aesthetic. It's been a life lesson for me, as I was quite solitary about my work. Elvin and I are so different, but we made it happen. Also, I am holding onto things for too long, not letting go. I'm fine with the accessioning; I want to clear out all objects except those with sentimental value or those that are too good to use.

ER: We are constantly reusing, recycling, and rebuilding objects with plant materials, bringing the outside in.

*We wander through the garden, passing orange candelabra lilies that are putting on a spectacular show for butterflies and pollinators, the bee balm quietly awaits its turn.*

JP: With the future show, *birdBOX*, I want to provide people with a narrative that bridges the gap between place and work; guests can walk around the property, see the habitats, and view the outdoor pieces. Here is a dogbane that has a robust fiber in the central stalk, so we're actively cultivating it for weaving. It is tucked in among the sedges, vines, and goldenrod, which can be a garden thug and must be kept in check, to achieve more diversity. This large grass structure was built four years ago by Elvin,

and thatch is added annually. Various animals often inhabit it; as the seasons change, different species move in and out, taking up residence. Sometimes, a possum lives here.

ER: This is probably the last year, as the wood is beginning to get soft; she's tilting a little bit. I want to leave it as it is for another season as the animals' love coming here.

*Little gourd plants are climbing up with last year's gourds already housing new life. Sage, peas, and vines climb over the structures made by Elvin using found wood and materials, some engraved with the markings of insects on dead ash branches. Everything is intertwined here, allowing impermanence to flourish. A giant sugar maple holds court, a hanging piece made with intertwining circles from vines gently moves in the wind, almost speaking as the pieces drift. Some disappear and then reappear, as if they are floating.*

JP: This building was where the Andean condor Vidor lived; it was an aviary. We retained the framework and covered it with pine siding following the roofline, formalizing the space with gravel surrounding; this is our first presentation for the *pineBOX*. The building is bordered by an over three foot tall withy hedge made from intertwined fallen branches. This natural barrier weaves through the trees, forming a sculptural habitat that prevents burning debris and encourages composting of undergrowth and invasive plants. This was going to be a place to store all of my paintings and to have paint racks. Midway through we were standing here on the slab, the walls were up. I was not originally going to put a window in, but the builders said "but you're going to lose your best view." So this window went in. It changed the whole purpose of the space. This soft light entered, and it became a place to share work. The current show named *oddBOX* includes Philip Taffe, Gretchen Carlson, and Janice Provisor. Each show is themed. We are trying to move beyond the conventional gallery paradigm; we don't say that we have openings. You will not receive an artist statement from us. It is a sharing place – you need to visit to understand.



*The tangible smell of pine emanating from the walls hits you as you enter the space. The walls are adorned by local artists. It is both an intimate and generous space, a box within a box.*

JP: When the new work for the next show *birdBOX* is complete, a map of the garden will be made so that visitors can view the 'rooms' as they walk from one sculpture to the next, including a giant bird's nest by Elvin about 20 feet in diameter. Especially with all of Elvin's bird habitats, the space looks different every month.

*Another hanging piece, holding oyster and clam shells, twinkles in the wind, telling a further narrative. This place still feels like a sanctuary, lived in with a soft touch. The artists seem to cohabit with the place, respecting everything that is always there before us. We are just passing through; our time is transitory. Visit JP and Elvin at White Hollow Box to see how to truly live in place, leaving no footprint, and to create work that stands in harmony with what nature has already made. •*

For further information or to see White Hollow Box, email [info@whitehollowbox.com](mailto:info@whitehollowbox.com), [johnpaulphilippesstudio@gmail.com](mailto:johnpaulphilippesstudio@gmail.com), or [elvincebollo94@gmail.com](mailto:elvincebollo94@gmail.com). Visit their website [whitehollowbox.com](http://whitehollowbox.com), or their respective Instagram accounts: @johnpaulphilippe, @elvin1rodriguez, @white\_hollow\_BOX  
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Top: *whitehollowBOX*.

Above, *Partition*, 2025. Resin, Lucite, brass, raffia 8ft x 6ft.

Left: *Tin can barricade*, 2019. Flatten tin cans, wire fencing. 12 x 12 ft hanging above a withy.







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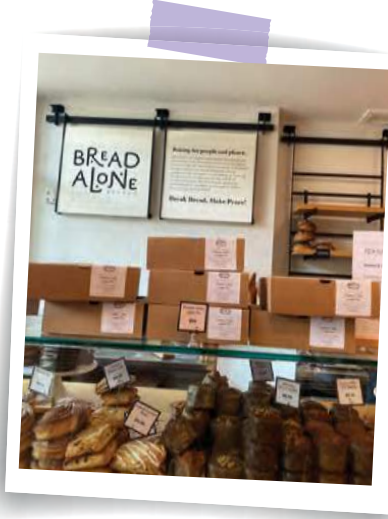
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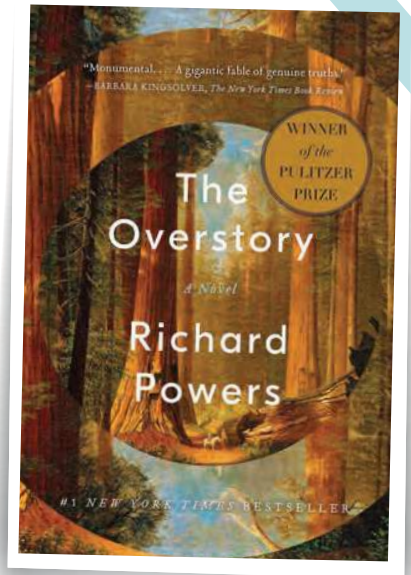


# AUGUST MUSTS *the literary edition*

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## TO READ

***The Overstory* by Richard Powers.** *The Overstory*, written by Richard Powers and published in 2018, is a sweeping tale that follows nine Americans whose individual experiences with trees bring them together to address the destruction of American forests. The novel utilizes intertwined narratives that span multiple generations to explore the themes of environmental activism and humanity's often destructive relationship with nature, and in particular, trees. Throughout the novel, many of the characters' stories intersect through their activism – which is intentional, as it mirrors the interconnected nature of the trees and the forest as whole. While it took me a bit to really get into it, once it grabbed me, I literally could not stop reading. I spent nearly an entire Sunday reading this book. I highly recommend it.



## where to get a book

Local libraries are true gems in our communities. While you may not have thought about your local library since you were in school, they've continued to support the community in so many ways. Libraries not only provide access to information and resources for free but also promote lifelong learning. They offer a wide range of services, from physical and digital resources, to seminars, events, and other community-based programming. By supporting your local library, you not only contribute to a more informed and connected community, but also support these indispensable institutions. The best way to support your local library is to utilize their resources, so next time you want to read a book, head over to your local library, take a few minutes to sign up for a library card, and check out as many books as your heart desires.



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# The Sultans of Soot

ROB KELLER,  
MASTER SWEEP

By Christine Bates  
info@mainstreetmag.com

## When should homeowners call you about cleaning their chimney?

It's based on how much wood you burn in your stove or fireplace. It's like changing your oil based on mileage. After you burn one and a half cords of wood, you should call me to "sweep" the chimney to remove built-up sticky creosote, which is unburnt, flammable molecules of wood that cling to the inside of the chimney. To have peace of mind many of my clients have their chimneys cleaned every year.

I only clean wood-burning fireplaces, wood-stove chimneys, and chimneys that vent oil furnaces, not propane fireplaces or pellet stoves. It's best to call me now. By fall I'll be booked out for 45 days.

We also repair and replace chimney caps and install chimney liners when required.

## What damages a chimney?

Besides irregular cleaning, burning unseasoned wood is inefficient, smokey, and builds up creosote. I recommend buying split wood a

year ahead of time to make sure it's as dry as possible. There's even an inexpensive wood moisture testing device on Amazon that I use when clients complain about smoke to see if it's the wood's moisture that's causing the problem. At Christmas time tossing wrapping paper, or especially pizza boxes, on top of a roaring fire can ignite the creosote. It's a seasonal danger.

## Do you inspect chimneys?

I'm certified by the National Fire Protection Association to do three levels of inspection. Level one is a cursory look up the chimney with a flashlight and checking out the exterior. Level two uses cameras to examine the interior of the chimney. Now I can do that watching on my phone with a WiFi connection. Level three is the most invasive and only done when serious, structural issues are suspected. This can involve removing parts of the chimney or walls to assess concealed areas. Drones are the next technology we'll be using to look at chimney interiors.

## Ever find odd things in chimneys?

I found a softball on a chimney shelf in Canaan and a golf ball in a Hotchkiss School chimney. Desic-

cated squirrels, mice, and birds are often trapped in chimneys that don't have an animal mesh on top to keep them out.

## Have you ever fallen off a roof?

In 30 years in this business, I've never fallen. You manage your own risk and decide whether a roof is a no go. You consider what could go wrong and work around it. Maybe my college degree in safety management has benefited me. The Sultans of Soot is a licensed, insured home improvement contractor. I'm certified by professional chimney sweep organizations and do continuing education through the National Chimney Sweep Guild.

## Where did the very memorable name Sultans of Soot come from?

I bought this business 30 years ago from some very nice guys who had been teachers at Salisbury School. They named it after Babe Ruth, who was the Sultan of Swat, and the Dire Straits classic rock song the Sultans of Swing.

Above, left: Rob Keller (right) has been the Sultan of Soot for the last 30 years. Tucker Shear (left) is a sultan in training. Photo by Christine Bates.

Above, right: The Sultan of Soot at work sweeping a chimney wearing protective clothing and utilizing motorized brushes, a powerful vacuum, and the all-important drop cloth to leave the home spotless. Photo courtesy of Rob Keller.

Continued on next page ...



**Why did you buy a chimney sweep business?**

After college I had various jobs that involved a lot of travel. After meeting my wife, who's from here, and buying the "Casino" on Lime Rock Road I wanted to run my own local business. Then I saw a business-for-sale ad in the *Lakeville Journal* and made an offer, probably the only one, after doing the numbers and due diligence. The owners gave me a few weeks of training, equipment, and their customer list. I became the new Sultan. This is my thirtieth year in business.

**Who are your customers?**

My clients are residential, commercial, and educational. Everybody from a small antique house to Hotchkiss School to the estates in Millbrook. A large portion of our business is returning customers and then referrals from real estate agents. We really don't do much advertising, and people remember our name. We only put up a site on the Internet about three years ago.

**Why have you been successful?**

I provide peace of mind and have enduring relationships with my customers. You're in someone's home. You need to know how to interact with people. Companies from out of town are hard sell, overcharge, and are often unscrupulous, using fear to upsell services. I have a fixed, simple price per flue for cleaning a chimney and never recommend unnecessary work.

My customers are in eastern Dutchess County, including Millbrook, northwest Connecticut, and the Berkshires. We do up to 800 sweeps a year. My motto is "Work hard, be honest."

Part of our success comes from our ability to figure out the cause of a problem and then find a solution. It's like a riddle. For example, we discovered the kitchen at one Lakeville, CT, restaurant was filling up with smoke because the pizza oven was not getting enough replacement air.

**How much equipment do you have?**

My most important pieces of equipment are drop cloths and a HEPA vacuum with fine filtration to protect the clients' property. Houses, especially in Millbrook, can be spotless and all white.

Next is respirators and safety equipment. Then the cleaning equipment – the flexible rods and brushes that go up the chimney. Something is always wearing out or breaking down.

**What's your greatest weakness?**

Definitely administration – getting out invoices, collecting bills, keeping up with the workload, scheduling appointments. Sometimes people just have to wait. I'm bringing a young apprentice into the business, which I hope will help out with this. He'll also be handling the technology aspects of the business.

**What's the best thing to do if your fire starts smoking?**

The worst thing to do is to turn on any ventilation fans – kitchen, bathroom, etc. – which just makes the lack of oxygen worse. Instead, open windows and doors to get more air into the room. The problem may also be just putting a big log on the fire, which uses up energy and drives out moisture instead of heating up. I always advise using split wood, which burns more efficiently.

**What chimneys are most dangerous?**

Modern chimneys, built conforming to building codes, are much less dangerous than older builds from when the chimney was actually a structural part of the house. Improperly installed wood stoves can present an even bigger problem. Always be sure that your insurance company knows you have a wood stove, and there is a permit and inspection.

**What's great about having your own business? Was there ever a tough time?**

Financially our business has been stable, but there was a time when I wondered if I could physically



continue moving ladders, going up on roofs and hauling equipment around. I'm 67 years old and have a protégé, Tucker Shear, in training to eventually take over the business.

**What do you do for fun?**

I love to tinker with old cars and continue to fix up my house. We love having parties in the "Casino's" double story grand room with its stage, tables, and chairs. I built the bar, and my wife made all the window, wall, and stage curtains. Sometimes we have great, live music – always a good time. ●

*To learn more, call the Sultan of Soot at (860) 435-2269 or visit their website [sultansofsoot.com](http://sultansofsoot.com).*

Chimneys like this one in Hillsdale, NY, often survive even though the house burns down. It's a fun car game to try and spot them. Photo by Christine Bates.





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# Lemon-blueberry

## BARS



By Olivia Valentine with  
Caroline Markonic  
[info@mainstreetmag.com](mailto:info@mainstreetmag.com)

Ooh baby! Who doesn't love the fresh, zesty flavor of lemon paired with sweet, juicy blueberries? These lemon-blueberry bars strike that perfect tart-to-sweet ratio and are an absolute must-bake treat – especially this time of year when blueberries are ripe, plump, and begging to be picked straight off the bush.

In our house, blueberry picking kicks off in early July and lasts through mid-August, and we always find ourselves looking for creative ways to use up our haul. These bars? They're sunshine in dessert form.

Let's talk crust: we flirted with the idea of using a graham cracker base, but ultimately stuck with the classic buttery shortbread crust. And we're so glad we did; it's the perfect firm, golden foundation for the luscious lemon and blueberry filling.

Speaking of that filling, it's bright, it's tangy, and it has just the right touch of sweetness, especially when you dust the top with a snowy layer of powdered sugar. Quick warning: try not to inhale as you take your first bite unless you want to start a powdered sugar coughing fit. It's real. We've been there.

Best of all? These bars are super easy to make. No fancy equipment, no complicated steps – just pure citrusy, berry-filled joy in every bite.

### Ingredients

#### For the crust:

1 cup all-purpose flour  
¼ cup powdered sugar  
½ teaspoon salt  
½ cup (1 stick) cold butter, cut into small pieces  
Dash of vanilla extract

#### For the lemon filling:

Zest from one lemon  
¼ cup fresh lemon juice  
2 large eggs, room temperature  
¾ cup granulated sugar  
2 tablespoons flour  
½ teaspoon baking powder  
1 cup fresh blueberries

#### For the topping:

Extra powdered sugar, for dusting – a must!

### Instructions

Preheat your oven to 350°F. Place the oven rack in the center position. Grease an 8"x8" square pan with butter, then line it with parchment paper, leaving a bit of overhang on the sides for easy lifting.

#### Make the crust

In a medium bowl, whisk together the flour, powdered sugar, and salt. Add a dash of vanilla extract.

Cut the cold butter into small cubes and use a pastry blender (or your fingers) to cut the butter into the flour mixture until coarse crumbs form.

Press the crust mixture evenly into the prepared pan. Bake for 15–20 minutes, or until lightly golden around the edges.

#### Make the filling

While the crust is baking, zest the entire lemon into a large mixing bowl and combine the sugar. By adding the zest to the sugar, it makes more of the oils and gives a stronger lemon flavor. Cut the zested lemon in half and juice it, removing any seeds. Add to the sugar and lemon zest mixture and stir.

Add the eggs and sugar to the bowl and beat the mixture until pale yellow and well combined.

Whisk in the flour and baking powder by hand until just incorporated. Gently fold in the fresh blueberries.

#### Assemble and bake

Pour the lemon-blueberry mixture over the prebaked crust. The crust will still be hot.

Return the pan to the oven and bake for 25–30 minutes, or until the center is set and the edges are just starting to brown.

Let the bars cool completely in the pan. Use the parchment paper to lift them out and onto a cutting board.

Generously dust with powdered sugar and slice into bars. These bars store beautifully in the fridge and are even better chilled the next day. If you can resist them that long, that is! As always, enjoy! •

*Olivia and Caroline are enthusiastic foodies and bakers who are constantly in the kitchen, as well as explorers who create their own adventures in our area – and did we mention they are mother and daughter? Follow Olivia on Instagram to see her many creations at @oliviavalentine.*





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# REAL ESTATE ON THE FRONT PORCH

# Porches are popular



By Christine Bates  
info@mainstreetmag.com

Maybe it started during COVID, when it seemed safer to see friends outside and have groceries delivered, or maybe it was the increasing square-foot price of new construction, but porches have become more popular than ever. According to the National Association of Home Builders, 67.5% of new homes include porches, an all-time national high, including 72% of new builds in New England despite the weather.

Front porches can completely change the look and feel of a home and add curb appeal as well as function. As people want to spend more time outside, porches are becoming larger, with additional features like propane heaters, automatic solar screens, fireplaces, electric fans, and even waterproof televisions and sound systems replacing the solitary porch swing. Porches are even the focus of this year's US Pavilion Exhibition at the 19th International Venice Architecture Biennale.

## Porch pros and cons

Porches add accessible outdoor space, make a home seem more inviting, and add resale value. Some realtors say they are the third most important selling feature, after the kitchen and primary bedroom.

Porches offer weather protection and a place to meet guests or just enjoy life. The photographer Paul Strand carefully studied shadows on his Connecticut porch and Charlie Mingus played his bass all day long on his Los Angeles porch.

Southern-facing porches can reduce summer time utility bills by deflecting direct sun. In commercial settings, a wide porch can add valuable space for extra tables and chairs and a place for people to bring their dog or to smoke. 78% of Millennials say that a front porch is either essential or desirable. You can be outside in nature without leaving home.

There are also drawbacks. Porch roofs darken interior first floor rooms and also limit views. While cooling in the summer, in the winter the warming effect of passive solar on windows is lost. Maintenance and repairs to floors, railings, and spindles exposed to weather is ongoing. They can also

become unsightly outdoor closets if occupants add old, upholstered couches or piles of items for the next yard sale.

## Should you add a porch?

In our tri-corner region, porches, defined as open roofed structures attached to a building, became common in the nineteenth century with its romantic interest in landscape as Victorian revival architecture replaced the austere facades of Federal and colonial buildings.

Look at the porches on Franklin Avenue in Millbrook, NY, in contrast to the stately pre-revolutionary homes in Salisbury and Sharon, CT. Or enjoy the dramatic views of the Hudson River from the porches of painter Frederic Church's Olana.

Millbrook architect James "Jimmy" Crisp, who is the author of *On the Porch*, is an expert on porch design on new builds and renovations. "My family and I eat on our porch almost every night from early spring to late fall. I added a porch to my own house that

Above, left: A renovation by James Crisp of this turn-of-the-century home added "lots" of porches. Photo courtesy of Crisp Architects.

Above, right: Grassland Dessert Café in Lakeville, CT, renovated the former enclosed porch of a vacant Chinese restaurant to provide extra outdoor seating for enjoying an ice cream cone. Photo by Christine Bates.

Continued on next page ..



includes a dining table, sofa, chairs, coffee table, and a porch swing.”

Asked if architects were necessary for porch design, Crisp, not surprisingly, said, “A porch includes structure, and most building departments require stamped plans for any addition that includes structural changes. An architect can design a porch that fits your home and adds value to your property.” Crisp observed that a useful porch should be at least nine feet wide.

Millerton architect Anthony Grammenopoulos pointed out that existing porches can be repurposed and made into sun rooms or, in the case of a large wraparound porch in Lakeville, CT, a portion was converted into a first-floor bedroom and bath with easy access to the porch and the kitchen and ample room left for entertaining al fresco.

Grammenopoulos designed solar-powered roller screens to protect against bugs in the summer, reduce electricity costs by adding shade, and keep snow away from the house. As usual the subject of bears comes up: “Screens are no deterrent to bears. If there’s honey or fish on a table beware! A neighbor friend left some fish on her porch while she went into the kitchen to fetch something else. By the time she came, back the screens were ripped apart, and the fish was in the bear’s belly.”

### Does a porch add value?

Assessors in New York and Connecticut always include the square footage of outdoor space, whether patio, deck or porch, in their appraisal calculations although how much value they assign to these outdoor additions is not clear. A gracious porch adds value while a cluttered, rotted porch with a sagging roof, especially one facing a busy road, does not.

Estimates are that an average homeowner would spend around \$15,000 to add a 200 square-foot porch to their house, with larger ones costing as much as \$50,000. Research shows that the return on investment is about 84% on an average porch addition – one of the higher returns on a home improvement project. The cost is dependent on size, complexity, and materials. This return on investment calculation is less precise than the value of adding a bedroom or redoing a bathroom and depends, in part, on the popularity of porches in the surrounding neighborhood. What is the market standard, and does a porch fit the style of your home? A porch is a significant investment, and the project could take months depending on contractors and permits.

Remember that a front porch creates a first impression and suggests the quality of the home’s interior, much more than landscaping or even the front door. Porches should be decluttered and staged to appeal to buyers with appropriate accents like plants, outdoor furniture, etc. Most importantly, consider how much you will enjoy the front porch while you still live in the home.

### What do realtors and buyers say?

“Porches are such a big part of the charm in Northwest Connecticut – they are more than just an exterior feature,” says Elyse Harney Morris of Elyse Harney Realty. “Whether it’s a classic wrap-around Victorian or a smaller portico, they create this perfect transition between indoors and out. I’ve seen many homeowners add porches over the years, and it always transforms the feel of the home. A good porch becomes a natural extension of your living space – you’re out-



Top: This large Victorian with a wide front porch at 56 Sharon Road is listed for sale at \$1,995,000. Photo by Anne Day courtesy of Elyse Harney Real Estate.

Above, left: Contemporary porches, like this one with a magnificent view, provide shelter without columns. Photo by Christine Bates.

Above, right: With easy access to the kitchen and first floor bedroom, this repurposed porch in Lakeville is all season with solar-powered roll-down screens to protect against insects in the summer and snow in the winter. Photo by Christine Bates.



The porches of Olana, the home designed by Hudson River painter Frederic Church for himself, look out over the Hudson River. Photo by Charlotte Greenough.

side, but still very much at home. It’s where morning tea or coffee, evening chats, and neighborhood hellos all happen. That blend of function and lifestyle is what makes them so special here.”

New York architect Laurie Kerr, who owns a Dutch Colonial revival home in Millerton, NY, said that the expansive front porch is definitely was a selling feature. “Since it’s south facing, it keeps the downstairs shaded and cool all summer. And we love sitting in the gazebo-like end of it and eating and entertaining there.”

When she built a new home on her property to take advantage of the view, Jennifer Dowley added a contemporary porch to her home. “While not a classic porch, this covered terrace serves the same function: an extension of the house that is perfect for sitting outdoors for meals or just closer to the breezes that blow over the meadow. It’s also a wonderful place to be when it rains.” ●



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# beast coast



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y first real attempt to jump my bike was in 1982. It was a Schwinn Stingray, metallic green with a banana seat, and the instant I pulled up on the bars, the front wheel detached from the frame. It was a disaster.

Fast forward to seventh grade, now atop a Schwinn Predator that I had purchased with proceeds from my paper route. Launching off a foot-tall dirt mound that someone had built near my friend's house, I ended up in the dirt, and the front tire somehow hit me in the back of the head. This was pre-helmet laws, unfortunately, and pre-cell phone cameras, fortunately.

Since then, my bike-handling skills have improved. Following one cross-country mountain bike race in the early 2000s, I committed to learning how to navigate three- or four-foot drops, and although they last for just a fraction of a second, the thrill of being airborne enthralled me. It is, as the late comedian and cyclophile Robin Williams said, "the closest thing to flying."

## Stretching the limits of skill and courage

The prospect of defying gravity is so tantalizing that it can eclipse both injury and common sense. Two seconds

of airtime can't possibly justify risking six months of injury and yet, even last year, I found myself at a downhill bike park, working up the courage to attempt maneuvers that stretched the limits of my skill and courage.

So when Tucker and Peter Shearer agreed to meet up with me for an afternoon of dirt jumping and bike talk, I was hoping to pick their brains for a few pointers. Tucker, now sponsored by Transition Bikes, and Peter, the winner of the Under 20 Maxxis Enduro series last year, have mastered the art of both launching and crashing their bikes, and anyone who tells you that those two feats aren't related isn't trying hard enough. I'd seen their Instagram videos with backflips and suicide no-handers, and, as practitioners of truth in journalism, they had responsibly posted outtakes with devastating crashes that would have crippled this middle-aged weekend warrior.

## Learning to crash

Knowing how to crash is a skill set that they learned through parkour, an offshoot of gymnastics that begins with tumbling and rolling. Peter works as an instructor at Gymnastics Unlimited, but both of them honed their ability to flip, twist, and tumble

at the same time they discovered mountain biking at age 15. What began with innocent rides through the woods progressed to jumps and stunts, enduro racing, and thirty-foot gap jumps at their clandestine training spot, deep in the woods.

## Building their own Shangri-La

That was our destination as I trailed Tucker up an impossibly steep climb, my heart rate shooting into Zone 5 and my gears dropping to the biggest cog. The ground had finally hardened from the spring thaw, and fuzzy fiddleheads unfurled from the duff as we pedaled deep into the woods.

I barely knew what state we were in when Tucker pointed out the jump lines and berms that he and Peter had built into a covert gully, as secluded as they could be in the tri-state area. With nothing but shovels, rakes, and a chainsaw, they had built their own Shangri-La.

Let's start with the premise that everyone's paradise is different. Even an avid mountain biker like myself has little use for the thirty-foot gap jump and even the small kicker that the

Continued on next page ...

Left: Physical-spatial awareness allows both of the Shearers to perform unreal acts of bike handling.

Right: Peter and Tucker Shearer (left to right) in a rare stationary moment.





Above: Tucker, inverted.

Right: Peter carving a turn mid-race during the Eastern States Cup Series, which he ultimately won.

Shearers cleared with ease. My mind was stuck on physics. How does one come to know that if they spend days building a thirty-foot gap jump, that they will, in fact, be able to clear it? As sons of an engineer, I imagined Tucker and Peter using slide rules and calculators, launch angles, and calculus.

#### To clean the jump... or not?

This is all something they could probably have done but didn't. Home-schooled until the ripe ages of fifteen and sixteen, they completed their GEDs and have each taken courses at Northwest Connecticut Community College, as much to reassure themselves that they belonged there as to complete the course work. Peter is continuing his studies there currently, but both are students of the world, figuring it out as they go along, whether that is chimney sweeping (Tucker), plumbing (Peter, soon), bike mechanics (both), or photography (mostly Peter, unless he's airborne, in which case Tucker takes the camera).

So how did they know they could clear that distance? Experience. One jump after another, session after session, even crash after crash. This wasn't the advice I was seeking, but it explains their vision for this retreat: as

a place to develop their skills that provides maximum practice opportunities with minimal pedaling. This might sound counterintuitive or even lazy, but being able to "session" huge jumps allows them to improve exponentially without the cost or time commitment of traveling to lift-serviced mountains.

These kinds of places don't exist much on the East Coast, and for good reason: building them is typically a herculean undertaking. Sink a spade into New England soil, and you're as likely to hit a rock or a root as fresh loam, especially in this tri-state region, where limestone, schist, and gneiss define the hills of the Southern Berkshires. Somehow, though, the Shearers found a deposit of Vermont-style "hero dirt" that made for easy shoveling and, quickly, huge jumps made of rich, tawny soil.

#### Being present in the moment

Looking back on it now, readers should be forgiven for concluding that Tucker and Peter are adrenaline junkies, hucking their bikes into the great beyond. But spending time with them is more of a lesson in mindfulness. Much like a cold plunge, one has no choice but to be present in the moment while mountain biking, and the Shearers are most certainly that.

There are thousands of inputs each moment, with the bike moving on all planes and terrain that is constantly changing. And while they may not have broken out the slide rules and compasses while designing their jumps, I watched them repeat their runs with mathematical precision, cal-

culating weight, speed, humidity, and angles in the sophisticated computers ensheathed in full-face helmets.

I've known the Shearers for a minute now, so to speak. Tucker helped me out with a major upgrade on my gravel bike, and I see Peter about as often as I see my barber. I've been thinking about how to write an article about them for a while, and reading it back now, I feel like I've failed to capture exactly what it is that interests me about them. The first rule of good writing is to "show, don't tell," but in all of my notes, I haven't quite struck on the essence of these guys, so I'll just say it: they are wholesome in a way that is refreshing and pleasing.

The image of them that is seared in my brain from that afternoon of dirt jumping is not of Peter pulling a no-hander or Tucker ripping a berm hard enough to spray mud on me, but of the two of them, shoulder to shoulder, checking out the photos on Peter's camera or laughing at one of Peter's ridiculously catastrophic crashes that he showed me on his iPhone. There is deep brotherly love between these two consummate competitors, and although I was unable to uncover the wellspring of it from a brief afternoon on the trails, it's reassuring to know that it still exists in the world, blossoming in an overlooked gully. •

*Update: Since first writing this article, the Shearers placed third at the North American Enduro Cup; Tucker in the Pro Category, Peter in the Men's 17-18 Category.*

*To learn more about Peter and Tucker Shearer, check them out on Instagram [pshearer110](#) and [@tshearer\\_03](#).*



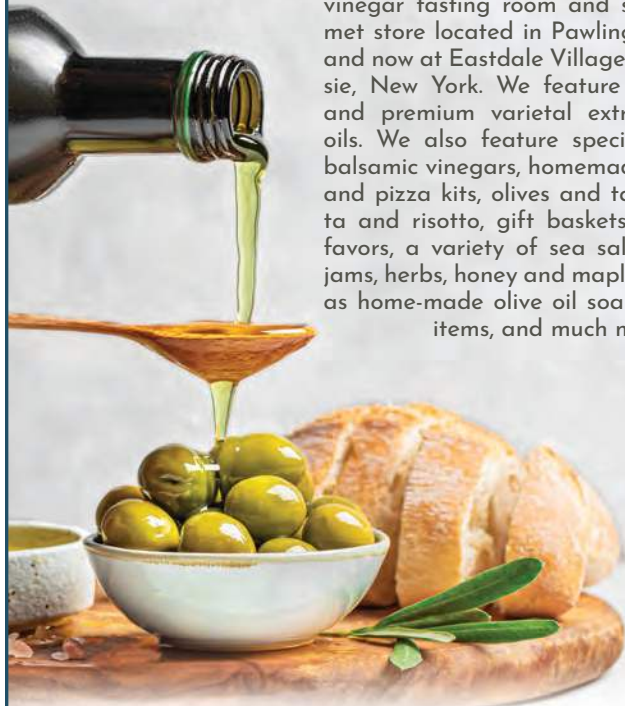




# The Blue Olive

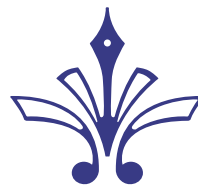
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# WRITING ABOUT WRITING

By CB Wismar  
info@mainstreetmag.com

John Lennon summed it up. “Life is what happens to you when you’re busy making other plans.” Things change when we least expect them, and frankly, we can have no response other than to be swept away in the current.

When these odd machines called computers emerged, it seemed that everyone with access to a keyboard and a mouse suddenly became a writer. Writing became so much easier. No pencils (and erasers) or pens. No paper, carbon paper, or White Out required. Write, delete, edit, hit “save,” hit “print.” This is easy stuff. Anybody can do this.

The timeline of word-processing programs that fomented the revolution now reads like a virtual visit to a software graveyard. Remember Electric Pencil from 1976? Me, neither. Perhaps you weren’t even born yet. How about WordStar in 1978, followed quickly by WordPerfect in 1979? When Microsoft Word was introduced in 1983, it was “game over” for the other programs and all these years later, its dominance is secured.

So, the hypothetical question for your amusement: If everyone is a writer, why do we need writers? Or, another bit of churlish inquiry – If everyone has a “smart phone,” why do we need photographers?

## One at a time

We’ll let the photographer question answer itself. Should you need further insight, direct your attention to the work of such true visual artists as Lazlo Gyorsok, whose incredible work often graces the cover of this publication and whose website can draw the viewer in for hours of breathtaking exploration.

Writing, however, is a different topic, and to find some peace in a troubled world, we did a bit of searching to find out what celebrated wordsmiths have said about the task, the trade, and the tribulations. What

have been their candid thoughts on capturing imagination and observation, forcing them to cohabit in some coherent form and moving them from brain to page?

It may come as a jolt to the system, but there is a difference between writing an email or a text and actually creating a story arc and hammering it into legible shape. It’s lonely work. It can be exhausting. It culminates in letting another set of eyes read and another brain evaluate the product of all that expended effort.

Reporting, journalism, non-fiction, fiction, screenplays, poetry ... the results of the efforts expended end up at the same daunting place. As the work grinds to a conclusion, the “What do you think?” question has the same effect as lighting the fuse on a stick of dynamite ... while still holding it. The pages are pushed forward to a partner, a friend, or an editor and the breath holding begins.

*“We’re past the age of heroes and hero kings. Most of our lives are basically mundane and dull, and it’s up to the writer to find ways to make them interesting.”* – John Updike

Not only is there a painful singularity about “the literary life,” but the pressure to do something helpful? Make things interesting? That adds immense pressure to the game. Updike did a grand job of making life interesting, and if you’ve not spent meaningful time with his exquisite novels or short stories, set aside some quiet time to become introduced.

The “dean of science fiction writers,” Robert Heinlein was quite direct about the writing process:

*“Writing is not necessarily something to be ashamed of but do it in private and wash your hands afterward.”*

As might be suspected, New England’s great naturalist and philosopher, Henry David Thoreau, was inclined to a more genteel approach in commenting on the process. Even though he

was a contemporary and near neighbor of the Alcotts, Thoreau fell into the common practice of addressing the task as a masculine endeavor:

*“Write while the heat is in you. The writer who postpones the recording of his thoughts uses an iron which has cooled to burn a hole with.”*

Be not dissuaded. If writing is a passion, write. Not everything that emanates from your imaginative mind will be profound or dramatic. Forge on, realizing that the challenge is unending.

We can look to the great Ernest Hemingway for consolation whenever the product does not live up to the imagined result:

*“We are all apprentices in a craft where no one ever becomes a master.”*

## The bottom line is ... the bottom line

And, finally, there’s the notion of making the dubious life choice of trying to forge an entire career on the whispers of ideas that disturb sleep, refuse to be banished even with great effort, and lead to hours of frustration occasionally punctuated by flashes of acceptance.

Our dear friend Nat Benchley is an actor and writer of note, having clearly inherited the gene from a long line of celebrated scribes. His grandfather, Robert, was at the head of that parade as a humorist, critic, screenwriter, and actor. Robert’s hijinks as a celebrated member of the Algonquin Round Table were legendary. It was he who provided this candid observation on living the life of a writer:

*“The freelance writer is a man who is paid per piece or per word or perhaps.”*

And, just like that, we’ve both been doing other things ... and life has gone on. One of us should write about it. ●





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# Rob Dyson

By CB Wismar  
info@mainstreetmag.com

In retrospect, it was a fairly straightforward love story. The young man was 14, just coming of age. The object of his affection? A 1931 Model A Ford offered for sale by a local farmer. The price? The princely sum of \$50, which in 1959 was real money to a 14-year-old. It didn't run ... but that was part of the mystique.

Rob Dyson was both inventive and imaginative, and the newly acquired Ford was the first of many, many automotive challenges ... many, many automotive acquisitions.

Over the course of an illustrious career that has been highlighted by legendary wins as a racecar owner and driver, international recognition as a car collector, and high reverence as a philanthropist, Rob has never shied away from a challenge.

The available farm tractor was required to pull that Model A from point of sale to point of overhaul, the family farm in Millbrook, NY. Rob's mechanical career was born through hours poring through every available automobile magazine and reading an impressive stack of books on automobile mechanics. Rebuilding the Model A was the manifestation of all that learning. It was just the beginning.

## Road ... and track

Once bitten by the "racing bug," few find it easy to ignore. In 1974, Rob brought his freshly minted Datsun 510 to Lakeville, CT's Lime Rock Park to compete in Sports Car Club of America's regional races. His win in "Class B Sedans" was the first of five that season, and a career took shape.

Dyson Racing was born and Rob and his wife, Emilie, linked together as their "team" evolved. Their son, Chris has continued the family tradition, becoming a winning driver in international competitions and serving

as sporting director for Dyson Racing. Developing a successful racing team requires more than dedication and talent. It requires building a team of "wrenches," skilled mechanics who prepare cars, keep them running during grueling races, and rebuild them when the unexpected (and unwanted) happens on the course.

While successful racing teams have built teams by attracting talented team members to their headquarters in Charlotte, NC, or Indianapolis, IN, Dyson Racing was built with homegrown talent from Poughkeepsie, NY, including Rob's longtime friend and crew chief, Pat Smith.

## Winning and collecting

Rob Dyson's record as a driver was punctuated by wins on the greatest stages of sports car racing. As an owner and driver, Rob has won SCCA championships, was part of the winning driving team for the 24 hours of Daytona, and competed at Le Mans.

Early on in his career, he decided to retain the cars he raced even as he kept adding newer and faster machines to his stable. With a team of talented mechanics on board, why not maintain the cars that had serviced them so well? A collection was born.

The notion of owning, refreshing, and showing classic racing machines soon extended well beyond the cars Rob himself had raced. Auctions, conversations, and discoveries led to widening the circle of finds. A blown engine in one race meant a car would be retired. To Rob and his team, that only served as a challenge to recover, rebuild, and restore it.

Continued on next page ...



Top: Rob Dyson and Skip Barber.

Above: Rob Dyson's SCCA class winning Datsun 510.

All photos with this article are courtesy of Rob Dyson.



With a long-standing fascination with the legends of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway and the history of the “Indy 500,” Rob became a frequent visitor, able to watch and participate in historic events hosted by the legendary two and one-half mile oval. Deeply engaged in the history of the track, Rob became chairman of the board that managed the track museum ... and was building the museum’s collection.

### Introducing ... the grand marshal

Labor Day weekend has long been the setting for major annual events at Lime Rock Park. Beginning Thursday, August 28, with a majestic parade of classic sports and racing cars starting from the track, winding through back roads through Lakeville and Salisbury, and ending up in Falls Village with a joyful community festival; continuing through practice and qualifying day on Friday; and concluding with two full days of racing on Saturday and Monday, the 43rd historic festival weekend is filled with engaging spectator events.

At the heart of the weekend is “Sunday in the Park,” a grand car show that fills the racetrack with classic and exotic cars brought in from around the country. Each year the day is built around the presentation of a singular collection of beautifully

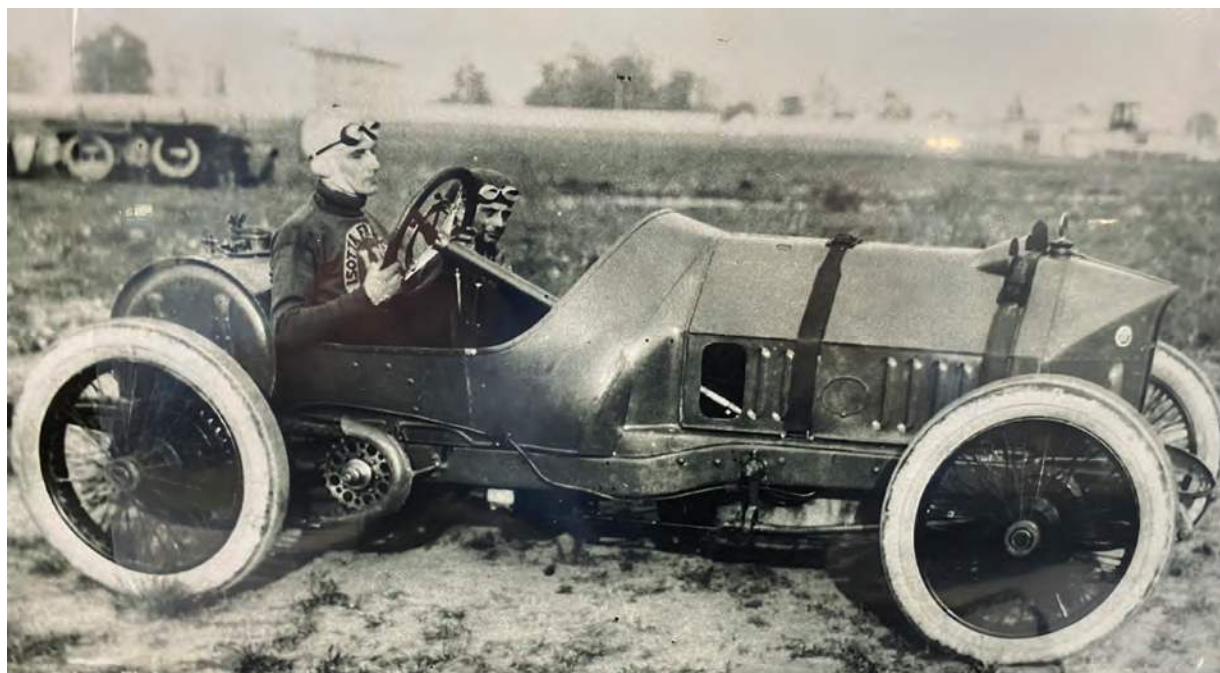
restored cars and recognition of racing giants who have contributed to the sport.

It is fitting that the grand marshal for this year’s Sunday in the Park is Rob Dyson, who will be bringing some of the most stunning cars in his collection to be on view. The “crown jewel” of that collection may be his Porsche 962 with the chassis number 101. It was the first of the legendary 962 series, capable of hitting 215 miles per hour on the long straights of Le Mans and Daytona. Dyson Racing drove the car to a number of impressive wins including Rob’s win at the first GTP race at Lime Rock Park.

Also included in the collection to be shared at Sunday in the Park will be three 100+ year old cars that were raced at the Indianapolis 500, including a 1904 Napier and a 1913 Isotta Fraschini Tipo M.

As Skip Barber noted when announcing Rob’s role in this year’s classic, “As grand marshal, Rob Dyson represents everything this event stands for. He’s a racer, a championship team owner, a mentor, and a lifelong advocate for the sport. He also brought a business-minded approach to motorsports, raising the bar for everyone.”

Not by coincidence, the honored guest for this year will be another towering figure in racing history, David Hobbs. The two will intersect as Rob presents the Number 73 McLaren that Hobbs drove to a fifth-place finish in the 1974 Indianapolis 500.



### The lion in winter

Rob Dyson continues to be fully engaged in the daily workings of Dyson Racing. His intimate knowledge of each of the engineering marvels that make up the collection is most evident when he carries on detailed conversations with the dedicated team who gather each day in Poughkeepsie to perform the painstaking work of disassembling race cars – some over 100 years old – and rebuilding them with care and precision. The fruit of their labors will be most evident at Lime Rock Park on August 31 as thousands of eager fans will get to experience over a century of legendary race cars.

For his contributions as a driver and an owner, Rob was recently awarded a position in the International Motorsports Association Hall of Fame. He joins other pillars of the sport including Dan Gurney, Phil Hill, Stirling Moss, Hurley Haywood, and Parnelli Jones.

A documentary film celebrating 50 years of Dyson Racing achievements and heritage is in production, so the full story will live on. In the meantime, the invitation stands: Visit Sunday in the Park on August 31, bask in the deluge of incredible racing machines, see the “exotic sculptures on wheels” of his collection, and meet Rob Dyson in person. Quite the trifecta for a Labor Day Weekend. •



Top: Isotta Fraschini Top IM that competed in the 1914 Indianapolis 500. Currently being restored by Dyson Racing.

Above: Rob Dyson.

Left, top: Porsche 962. Fully restored car driven by Rob Dyson to victories across the country, including at Lime Rock Park.

Left, bottom: David Hobbs McLaren #73. Car driven by legendary driver and broadcaster David Hobbs, finishing in fifth place in the 1974 Indianapolis 500.





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READING UP ON THE STORY & EVOLUTION OF OBLONG BOOKS

# *Celebrating 50 years as a regional cornerstone*



*A*s the well-loved independent book shop commemorates 50 years in business, founders Dick Hermans and Holly Nelson, as well as Dick's daughter and the store's co-owner Suzanna Hermans, reflect on Oblong Books and its half-century of success. With locations in both Millerton and Rhinebeck, NY, the store's presence and impact in the region has undoubtedly been extraordinary.

By Lindsey Clark  
lindsey@mainstreetmag.com

As a true general bookstore, Suzanna highlights that Oblong stocks just about everything, but that their passions lie in fiction, cookbooks, and children's books. They also offer vinyl, CDs, and a wide variety of charming gift items for readers and non-readers alike. From the moment you step into one of their locations, you can tell that Oblong's atmosphere and legacy is built on inspiring foundations.

## **Where it all started**

When Dick and Holly first met at a People's Bicentennial Commission meeting in 1974, it was certainly no coincidence that their passionate beliefs had brought them together. As Holly recalls, the purpose of the group and its meetings "was to put the emphasis of the bicentennial back on the revolutionary roots of the country, as opposed to the corporate sponsorships."

Eventually, the two began dating, and they started to consider how they could bring Americans closer to those revolutionary roots that started the country. Dick had been working at his father's insurance agency, while Holly was working up in North Adams, MA. "Dick thought a record store, and I thought a bookstore, would really help move the revolution along," reflects Holly. "We were young."

Indeed, though imagining different iterations of this dream, they both wanted to create a place that aligned with their ideals and could better foster these sentiments within the community. Then, a property right in the center of Millerton, NY, where the store demitasse now sits, became available. "We got lucky. We found a little space that was 400 square feet, had been a liquor store, and had shelves. We didn't have to do anything except dust them," jokes Dick.

## **Why "Oblong"?**

In addition to the fortuitous storefront they acquired, it also helped that Millerton was a booming business hub. Not only did the village have a strong diversity of offerings, but it also had a long history of commercial success that drew in patrons from all over the area. This historical slant actually inspired the name of the store.

When Dick and Holly encountered a map of the Millerton area that pictured "The Oblong River," the two became curious about this name in particular and where it came from. Once they dug a little deeper, they found not only the local history behind this word, but their shop's namesake.

As explained on the Oblong Books website, the store was named after a long, narrow strip of land whose ownership had long been disputed between the New York and Connecticut colonies. In the late 1600s, both colonies had conducted a survey to establish a border 20 miles from the Hudson River. When the outcome left a discrepancy of nearly two miles, the result was a long, narrow strip of territory extending from Dutchess through Westchester County. It was dubbed "The Oblong."

Both New York and Connecticut laid claim to The Oblong, yet neither had reliable jurisdiction over the territory, making it an outlaw territory for decades. In 1731, New York was given The Oblong through a treaty, while Connecticut was given the wedge



of land that now sticks out from its southwestern corner. Dick notes that this land given to Connecticut was called “the equivalent lands,” having the exact same acreage as The Oblong. This border agreement was fully ratified in 1857.

### Launching the store & learning the trade

Uniting Dick and Holly’s visions for the store, Oblong would carry both books and music. Dick’s father helped build record racks for LPs and 45s, and they went down to visit wholesaler Bookazine in New York City to start building their stock. They came back with a truck full of books and got started, using an adding machine from 1927 as a cash register and keeping track of everything on three by five index cards.

“We had a little bit of money; Dick had saved some up, but not a whole lot. It was kind of the ‘American Dream’ in some ways, right?” Holly muses. “We just thought, ‘Let’s invest in the kind of future we want to build.’”

With Dick’s background in music and Holly’s enjoyment of reading, the operation soon came together, and the shop opened its doors in mid-October of 1975. To this day, Dick and Holly still remember the first customer they ever had and what she bought. It’s this customer connection that Oblong has been known for since the very beginning. “We just listened to people,” Holly remarks. “The customers came in and asked for stuff. We had good suppliers, so if we didn’t have it, we could find it. It really taught us a lot.”

Holly points out that in the beginning, they didn’t necessarily plan for success, but rather made a plan for what to do if the venture didn’t work out, thinking only a few months ahead while staying open to whatever the universe had in store. “Irving Saperstein said to us, ‘If you’ve made it for one year, you’re good for five,’” Dick recalls.

Indeed, they trusted the process, and it worked: on their second day open, a representative of Rounder Records came into the store, bringing with him a variety of new music and taking Oblong to a new level in terms of genre offerings and overall distinction. They were able to curate an impressive collection, and Dick still has fun checking in new music orders and exploring what customers might buy.

Holly adds that they were also fortunate to have an attainable rent and modest living that kept costs low – even including a stint where they lived off the land in Milan, NY! This approach helped them maintain a pace appropriate for young entrepreneurs, developing their business and honing their craft along the way. Dick quips, “It was really a seat-of-your-pants operation. Every day you came in and said, ‘Okay, what are we gonna learn today?’”

### Curating community connection

A pivotal part of what makes Oblong’s essence so inviting and captivating is the store and staff’s commitment to the community. Oblong has been actively engaged with the community from the beginning, getting involved



Above: Dick at Oblong in April of 1985.

Below, left: Holly and Dick in 2024.

Opposite page, L-R: Suzanna, Dick and Priscilla in front of Oblong in Millerton in 2021.

Dick and Holly in front of current location circa 1990.

All images courtesy of Oblong Books.

with many local groups in Millerton, including the Harlem Valley Rail Trail Association and grassroots environmental organization Hudson Valley GREEN (Grass Roots Energy and Environmental Network).

You can see this community involvement directly reflected in every aspect of Oblong, from its name to the store’s rich local history section. “The knowledge of the region [reflected in the store] is pretty vast,” Holly remarks. “That’s impressive.”

With many former pillars of the community, like Saperstein’s and Terni’s, having left the Millerton stage over the past 50 years, it’s crucial to note the store’s sheer longevity in the region, and what this has come to represent. “This store was founded by people in the community, and it grew organically. There’s no hype about it,” says Dick. “We look at every book that’s published in a year, and we stock the ones we think are interesting.”

Holly highlights that part of what makes Oblong so special is that it creates access to a compelling, cozy atmosphere, full of opportunities,

Continued on next page ...







even for those who might not consider themselves a bookworm. “Our decisions were based on, ‘How do we serve our community? How can our store help give people richer, fuller lives?’ reflects Holly. “Our shareholders are the community.”

She also notes the power of bookstores to bring you beyond the village while also making you glad to be a part of it. Dick adds, “You come in, and it doesn’t matter whether you’ve read a book ever or just wander around.” He clarifies humbly, “I’m not a literary scholar by any stretch, but I kind of know what people like, and I try to respond to what they’re wanting.”

### Relocation, expansion, & growing popularity

In 1981, Oblong Books relocated across the street to the current Cottage + Camp storefront, which had been a men’s apparel store. One of their first employees, Lisa Wright, was hired around this time, and has been with Oblong for over forty years now.

It’s clear that Lisa has left a remarkable impact on Oblong and its legacy: “Tourists will show up in Millerton over the summer and come and ask Lisa what they have to read.

It’s amazing,” says Dick. Holly muses, “She’ll read her way through a genre. Just really valuable.” Suzanna adds, “She is an absolute inspiration to me. She is one of the most amazing readers I’ve ever met.”

Along the way, Dick and Holly’s romantic relationship ended, but they remained in business together for many years after that. Dick married Priscilla Herdman in 1982, and their daughter Suzanna became a familiar face behind the Oblong counter as a child. Although Priscilla has never worked in the store, Suzanna emphasizes her mother’s impact. “She has been pivotal to the store’s success as a support for me and my dad,” says Suzanna. “Both my dad and I met our spouses at the bookstore!”

Holly further underscores Priscilla’s importance to the Oblong mission and success in a variety of ways: “She has definitely helped guide the store and its management (Dick and Suzanna) in a consistently meaningful way,” Holly points out. “The success of any small business is built on the strength of those running it, and Priscilla has helped Dick’s commitment to its principles stay strong, and she has raised an amazing daughter.”

By the late ‘80s, Dick and Holly were hosting their very own radio show on Saturday mornings with WKZE. They also started going to

different bookseller events and conferences, as well as festivals through the radio show.

In 1990, Oblong relocated once more back across the street to its current location at 26 Main Street. Dick and Holly explain how they bought the building in January, spent six months renovating, and then held a party the day before the opening. “People were just so excited, and we got such a sense of community support!” remembers Holly. Dick continues, “Customers helped move the books across the street!”

The children’s part of the store, Oblong Jr., was added in 1994, making the shop a true family destination and adding an extensive selection of kid’s books and toys to the Oblong repertoire.

Throughout the years, a real page was turned as authors began to seek out Oblong, and not just the other way around. From former Governor of New York George Pataki to Joyce Carol Oates to Walter Mosley, the shop began to dabble in hosting big names and witnessing their true community impact first-hand.

### Beginning new chapters

In April 2001, Holly officially retired from the business, and soon after, Dick signed the lease on the Rhinebeck store, which opened later that

year at 6422 Montgomery Street.

The power of the written word, to Holly, is a common thread in the world no matter where you are, and she recognizes how fortunate she was to delve deep into that universal theme during her time at Oblong. “In some ways you never lose that connection,” she observes. “There are always new worlds to discover. That’s the privilege of being able to work with books and writing.”

Holly also underscores that Oblong’s succession plan, with Suzanna being incorporated into the business and becoming a co-owner, has been a huge part of the store’s long-term ability to thrive. Indeed, while Dick never pushed Suzanna to join the business, he finds it incredibly rewarding seeing her be a pivotal part of it now.

“I used to describe our roles in the store as: I could look at any book on the shelf and know what their last book was like, and similar authors, and which customers are likely to enjoy it, and all that kind of stuff. Whereas Dick could look at any book on the shelf and tell you how much we owe the publisher!” Holly laughs. “Suzanna combines both of us in that regard.”

Of course, Suzanna grew up in the store, and would go to Oblong in Millerton every day after school. From the moment she could see over the counter, she worked there, and when she went off to theater school and realized it wasn’t for her, she started working in the store again, realizing that bookselling had been her true passion all along.

### A bookstore as a beacon

Suzanna helped with the Rhinebeck store opening while she was in high school, and when she came back from college, she managed the location. But as the whole business continued to grow, they decided to hire managers for each store. Today, Carissa Unite manages the Millerton location, while Nicole Brinkley manages Rhinebeck’s store.





Above: Oblong staff with Hillary Clinton in 2017.

Right, top: Oblong staff with Stephen and Owen King in 2017.

Right, below: Oblong staff with Salman Rushdie in 2019.

Opposite page: Dick with Oblong's billboard.

As Oblong's buyer, Suzanna uses a digital catalog and sales histories to inform what to carry and how much of which titles to stock. And when it comes to exploring new authors or debuts, Suzanna deeply considers each title, factoring in Oblong's clientele, the content of the book itself, recommendations, marketing, and more. With about 20,000 unique titles in the store – out of millions of books published each year – it's definitely a curation process.

A major facet of Oblong's offerings is its events program. Working with a number of community partners, this side of their work has grown extensively. They've even featured high profile names like Stephen King, Salman Rushdie, and Hillary Clinton.

From the sheer amount of effort required to coordinate a prolific visitor such as Clinton (thanks to events coordinator Helen Seslowsky), to having a signed pre-order campaign with Hilarie Burton Morgan during the height of the pandemic, selling 10,000 copies and shipping each book in-house, Oblong has certainly seen its fair share of pivoting, adapting, and growing with any development that comes their way.

This fall, they're hosting many exciting events, including one with Elizabeth Gilbert. Suzanna explains, "We've grown our reputation nationally with publishers so that they know they can send their authors here, they're gonna have a great time, and they're gonna sell some books."

But just as important to Oblong are the smaller events and the events spotlighting local authors. This has always been incredibly important to their mission, and this overarching community-based sentiment has remained a common thread throughout the decades. "It's really important that your business is for everybody," Suzanna points out.

She also emphasizes Oblong's love of partnership and collaboration with anyone, from teachers to local organizations. "We really do see ourselves as a community center. We partner with local libraries and schools, and we donate to local nonprofits. Our staff lives here and spends their salaries here, so the money circulates right back into our community. That is really critical," she explains. "We also want to be a place to hang out. We're happy to have you, even if you don't have a dollar to spend with us today."

Ultimately, at Oblong, it is truly the people that make the place. Dick, Suzanna, and Holly alike all highlight the connection afforded through and encouraged by the shop over the years, and while each day brings new books,

new patrons, new lessons, and new challenges, one thing is certain.

"Having a bookstore in your community is a really special thing," Suzanna states. Considering the other local bookstores in the region and the area's public libraries, Suzanna truly believes that a rising tide lifts all boats. "Access to literature, to community, that is what books and libraries do, and I'm glad we're contributing to that."

Join Oblong Books in celebrating their 50th Birthday Bash on August 9 from 11am to 4pm! Make your way over to South Center Street in Millerton, NY, for a block party full of fun and celebration for all ages. There will be live music, food trucks, a raffle, and more! •

To learn more about Oblong Books and access their online store, please visit [oblong-books.com](http://oblong-books.com). You can send them an email at [info@oblongbooks.com](mailto:info@oblongbooks.com). Oblong Books is located at 26 Main Street in Millerton, NY, and you can reach this store by calling (518) 789-3797. Oblong Books is also located at 6422 Montgomery Street in Rhinebeck, NY, and you can reach this store by calling (845) 876-0500.







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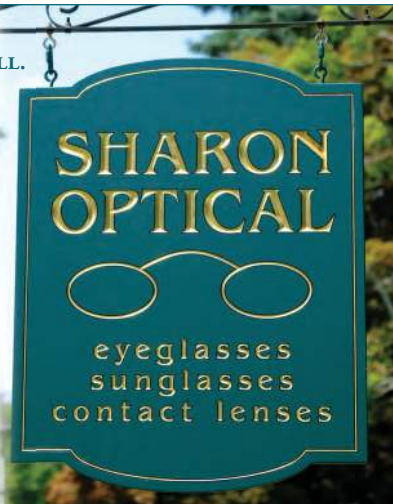
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# Mahar Real Estate:

*Offering a local, client-focused real estate experience that's here to stay*

By Abby Audenino  
abby@mainstreetmag.com

Mahar Real Estate, founded in August of 2024 and based in Hudson City Centre in Hudson, NY, is operating with the polish and purpose of a well-established firm. After years in the industry, founder Daniel “Dan” Mahar launched the company to offer a grounded, client-focused experience rooted in local knowledge.

“Too many brokerages have become what I call ‘showroom brokerages,’ with fancy offices and glossy listings in the window, but no one actually inside,” Dan says. “Selling real estate is not like selling a showroom car. You cannot park a house in a window and expect it to speak for itself. You need to know the people, the block, the stories, and the setting.”

That mindset is shaped by Dan’s own roots. Born and raised in Claverack, NY, a graduate of Taconic Hills and later Pace University, he brings a mix of local insight and life experience from comedy to hospitality to business that gives him an edge. “I came back home with big ideas and a work ethic I do not shut off,” he says. “I know the streets that flood, the views that sell, and the contractor who will actually call you back. Mahar Real Estate is not built on gimmicks or trends. It is built on trust, hustle, and a deep understanding of what makes the Hudson Valley special.”

## Championing growth and brand recognition

As of July 9, Mahar Real Estate was ranked in the top 20 percent (57th

out of 277) of brokerages in the Hudson Valley/Catskill Region and in the top 22 percent (116th out of 523) of brokerages in the Capital Region, with just over \$7.5 million in closed volume.

Mahar Real Estate’s pending sales have exceeded \$5 million, bringing the company to roughly \$12 million just midway through the year. Future business has extended into 2027, with Mahar Real Estate securing a multi-town development and future hotel project located just outside of Hudson, NY. While these numbers are impressive and reflect the work ethic of the team at Mahar Real Estate, for Mahar, growth isn’t just based around sales and numbers.

“We’ve built brand recognition from the ground up. People see the ‘M’ signs, they follow our listings, and they reach out directly. Our office at Hudson City Centre has become a true working hub – clients come in, attorneys walk over, lenders, title companies and tradespeople stop by,” he shares. “I wanted to build something real, rooted, and local. Something where the lights were on, the doors were open, and the agents were working. We’re earning trust, and that’s the foundation for everything else.”

## A strong team with ties to the Hudson Valley

When Mahar first started Mahar Real Estate, he was a one-man show. After getting the agency off the ground, he began cultivating his team. Everyone on the Mahar Real Estate team brings more than just a license to the table – they bring real-world experience and deep ties to the Hudson Valley.

Erin Shepherd has been licensed for five years and is the go-to for families and first-time buyers in the Hudson Valley and Capital Region. She’s currently ranked 398th out of 3,000 agents in the Capital Region, which places her in the 13th percentile.

Charlie Brassard – dubbed “Commercial Charlie” by the team at Mahar Real Estate – initially trained at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, NY, and applies his culinary



expertise to specialize in business properties. Putting his well-known fried chicken on display, he successfully brought the community together with a fundraiser for the Columbia County Recovery Kitchen.

Carrie Dandrige blends hospitality, staging, and short-term rental expertise with three years of experience. Nick Legname has 15 years of experience in residential construction, giving buyers a builder’s perspective. Michelle Camacho is known for her local knowledge and direct, empathetic approach. Art Frick brings his tech and project management background, plus firsthand experience renovating his own home, to the real estate world.

“We don’t play dress up. We work, answer calls, show up early, and stay late. We’re not outsourcing the soul of the business. If we don’t know the answer, we will find it,” Mahar says. “Our focus is on the locals – first-time buyers, working families, and business owners trying to get a foothold. While some firms chase luxury, our goal is to include everyone. Some people only buy or sell one house during their entire lives, and it’s a serious transaction. You can’t enter something like that untrained. That’s not just a marketing strategy, it’s a mission.”

## Running a sustainable brokerage in 2026

Mahar believes that the world of real estate is moving past the “era of filters and facades.” Thanks to the Internet,

buyers and sellers are not only more skeptical than ever before, but also more informed.

“What they want now is reliability – someone who knows what they’re doing, where they’re doing it, and why they’re doing it,” he explains. “Our goal is to continue to serve our community and show up for the people who live here.”

Mahar Real Estate does have plans to expand in the near future – they aim to operate from Poughkeepsie to Saratoga on both sides of the Hudson River and as far east as Massachusetts – but they don’t want to expand at the cost of diverting from their primary purpose, which is serving the local community. For Mahar, sustainability isn’t about scaling endlessly, but about staying relevant, respected, and real.

“We’ll do that by continuing to invest in people, not just marketing. The more we help locals stay local and build long-term trust, the more we future-proof our business,” he explains. “We’re not trying to be everywhere. We’re trying to be right here, in our community, for the long haul.” ●

*To learn more about Mahar Real Estate, visit their website [maharrealstate.com](http://maharrealstate.com), contact them via email [d.mahar@maharrealstate.com](mailto:d.mahar@maharrealstate.com) or via phone at (518) 249-7402, follow them on Instagram @maharrealstateny, or visit them at 1 Hudson City Centre, STE 304C, Hudson, NY.*







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# Indie romance authors & the always altering universe of BookTok:

APPROACHING TROPES, COVER DESIGNS, & PIRACY IN TODAY'S DIGITAL LANDSCAPE

By Lindsey Clark  
lindsey@mainstreetmag.com

When August rolls around, I get to thinking about books. It simply can't be helped – in past years, I've written about Romance Awareness Month and Read-A-Romance Month for our August issue, highlighting a vast selection of independent authors and their writing processes. Last year, I even expanded this inquiry to encompass plenty of other roles in the online book community, from readers and influencers to photographers and PR. So naturally, when the weather gets warm, my mind wanders to the book world.

My goal in previous articles was to understand the indie romance community and learn why so many people are not just captivated and engaged by this romance-centric literary space, but are also eager to dedicate their lives and careers to this genre, whether that be in the independent publishing sphere or not.

The writing and publishing environment in general has witnessed some significant changes since my last exploration into the subject. It feels crucial now more than ever to delve deeper into these evolving complexities in the industry – primarily, the ever-changing popular preferences, cover design trends, and the evolution of copyright issues and generative artificial intelligence – to assess how independent authors experience and navigate them.

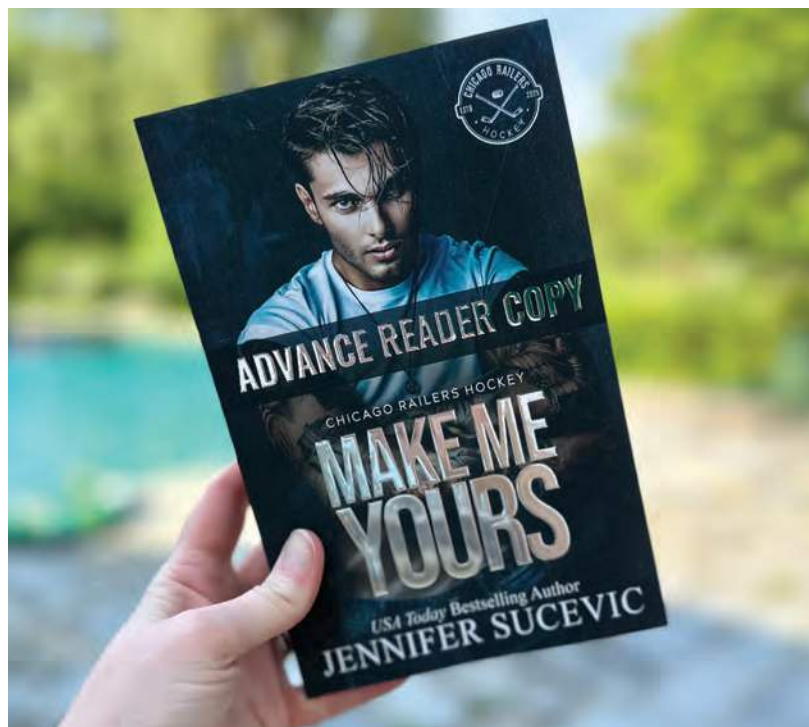
## Diving back into the book community

If you've ever found yourself on "BookTok" – the side of TikTok that's all about books and readers – it's likely you've noticed how often popular opinion shifts and changes, creating a constant ebb and flow of what's trending and what readers are looking for at any given moment. As with any genre, romance fans each have their own specific preferences, especially when it comes to tropes (or, fictional themes and relationship dynamics) leaving authors occupied with far more than just the words on the page.

*USA Today* bestselling independent romance author Jennifer Sucevic, who started out in the historical romance realm before making the shift to contemporary themes, has witnessed the rise of this new online literary atmosphere. Having published her first book on Amazon in 2015, Jennifer explains how when she began writing sports romance about ten years ago, it was because it called to her as both a reader and author: "At the time, I didn't even know what a trope was. I just followed my instincts and wrote the kind of stories that pulled me in as a reader."

Soon, though, as the community began to transform, placing more emphasis on tropes, Jennifer says, "I realized many of the dynamics I gravitated toward have names – enemies to lovers, fake dating, he falls first and harder, and more."

Now, it's common for an indie romance author to use these tropes as a way to draw readers in, using catchy phrases and recognizable trope names to promote their books and signal to readers what kind of story they can expect.



For Jennifer, the knowledge of these expectations has been difficult to navigate. "In the past few years, trends seem to have become even more important, and they shift faster than ever," she observes. "Instead of simply writing the story I want to tell, I now find myself thinking about the tropes and scenes readers are actively seeking out."

For award-winning, *USA Today* and *Wall Street Journal* bestselling author Brighton Walsh, though, knowing what tropes readers like can serve as a helpful guide during the writing process. "Having more direct access to what readers are loving and raving about has allowed me to think of how I could insert similar situations or feels into the books I'm writing, which has led me to crafting more bingeable, buzzworthy books."

Brighton, who has had several of her own titles go viral on TikTok and



This page: Bestselling author Jennifer Sucevic has been writing and publishing for 10+ years. Her most current release is *Make Me Yours*, which releases in early August. The cover image above shows her foiled cover while the graphic to the left shows all three variations of the cover for this book. Photos and images courtesy of Jennifer Sucevic.



Continued on page 41 ..





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earn the “Best of BookTok” tag on Amazon, explains that it’s not about merely going along with fads, but rather keeping a close eye on what sort of books are garnering attention and aligning these details with her own authorial interests.

“I don’t usually focus on what’s trending because that comes and goes. But if I’m writing a series with four books, I’m going to do everything I can to put the hottest-at-the-moment trope(s) in book one,” Brighton explains. “I’m going to pick something that I think has commercial appeal, of course, but I’m not going to write something I don’t care for just because it’s the hot trend at the moment.”

### The ever-changing tide of trends

*USA Today* and Amazon #1 bestselling author Kandi Steiner has been an independent author for 11 years, so much like Jennifer, she’s been in the career long enough to witness the industry’s consistent state of evolution. “The only constant is change,” she muses. “EVERYTHING changes – what tropes and vibes are popular, book cover trends, which authors are ‘hot.’”

Kandi’s books often originate from “flashes” of ideas that develop over time in her phone’s notes app, and she tries to hold off on trend-based thinking until the book itself is already done.

“It wouldn’t work for me to think about what readers want and try to write that. It just isn’t how my brain works,” she clarifies. “But I DO think about it after the book is written – how can I market this? What would

BookTok love about this book? How do I get them to take a chance on me as a writer?”

Independent romance author Jagger Cole has a very similar approach, letting inspiration strike in the form of random thoughts which, inevitably, end up in one of the “eleven billion notes” on his phone.

While he doesn’t necessarily seek out the dark romantic, normally mafia-esque tropes that he writes, Jagger admits, “A huge part of writing genre fiction, especially as an indie author, is that you absolutely do need to give people what they want to read. And yes, sometimes that means pulling your book a little more in the direction of a current trend in tropes or subgenres.”

He also points out the need to be careful about reviews, which can impact the creative process. It’s no surprise that Jennifer, Kandi, and Brighton also have their own limits when it comes to reviews and how much they can read them.

“Even with the good reviews, I tend to kind of gloss over them when it comes to being influenced by them. Otherwise, you’ll get a situation where you fixate on that one reviewer who really wanted a clown in the book,” Jagger jokes. “So, all of a sudden, all of your books involve clowns, and 99.9999% of your readers are very confused about it, because none of them ever even remotely asked for clowns.”

### Judging a book by its cover

While tropes are certainly a major factor in the evolution of trends, cover

design has led to front-and-center discourse in the community. What’s popular for cover design has not only developed significantly over the years, but it’s an intensely pivotal part of the job.

Kandi explains the broader culture shift with romance covers quite aptly, discussing how model covers, which display real, romantic-looking people, were popular and well-loved by readers for a long time. She attributes this to the fact that readers were proud to show off their covers, signalling to the world that they were reading romance and that it was their right, welcoming the question, “Whoa, what are you reading?”

She continues, “But then, as TikTok began to embrace the book community, I think especially young women readers found that attention to be too much. They wanted to be able to read at the pool or beach, on the train or plane, or in the same room with their grandmother without people raising eyebrows and wondering what they were reading.”

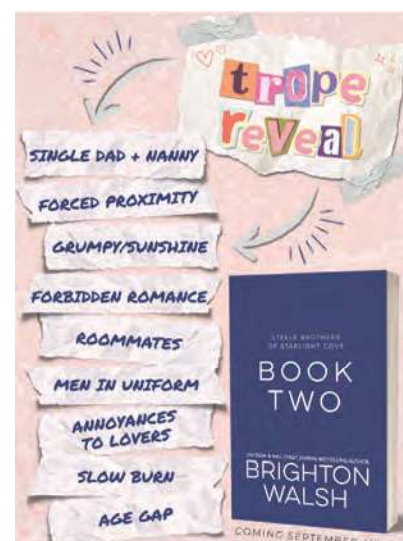
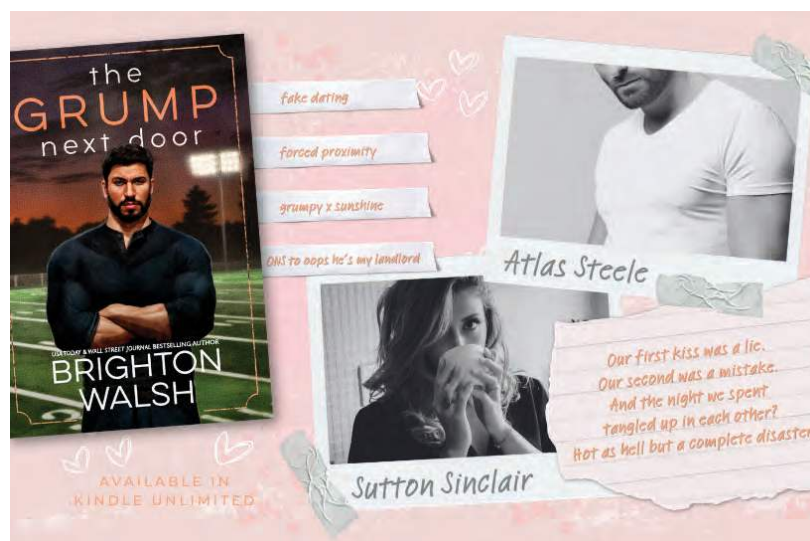
Kandi has fully embraced the ever-expanding options for covers. “No matter what the trends do, I just remind myself to have fun and lean into it. Some of my favorite covers might never have been born if I’d just decided to stick to what I knew.”

Jennifer seconds this, noting how important it is to make that investment for readers and deliver something special for them. Today, a cover

Continued on page 43 ...



This page: Bestselling author Brighton Walsh most recent release, *The Grump Next Door*, released earlier this summer to much acclaim. On this page you can see Brighton’s covers for the book along with promotional graphics for it and book #2 in the series. Directly above is one of her promo graphics for a special edition cover. Photos and images courtesy of Brighton Walsh.







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might feature a model, a cartoon, an illustration, an object, or be otherwise considered “discreet.” Authors might also offer special editions featuring foiled dust jackets, sprayed edges, and custom interiors.

“It’s exciting to have that creative freedom, but it also adds pressure,” Jennifer points out. “With so many beautiful designs flooding the market, choosing the right cover style is more important than ever. You want a design that fits the story and resonates with your target audience, but you also need it to stand out in an oversaturated genre.”

Although picking the right cover model to capture a character’s essence is still a huge part of Jennifer’s (as well as Kandi’s, Brighton’s, and Jagger’s) work, she’s also been collaborating with artists in recent years to make custom artwork for her books, which shows just how hand-in-hand these creative pursuits really are. “There’s something really special about seeing characters brought to life in a specific scene. It adds a whole new dimension to the story,” she muses.

### Giving readers the best of both worlds

In many ways, trends for tropes apply in a very similar way to covers. Jagger, because he writes in the darker romantic niche, explains how he tries to hit the same notes readers will be

expecting when designing his own covers as he would in the actual content of his books – thorny roses, fire, or shattered glass might appear on the alternate covers of his dark mafia books, for example.

Indie romance author AK Landow, who I interviewed for our first investigation into the genre in 2023, explains that as a rom-com writer, she’s had to lean into the cover expectations for that niche – bright colors, illustrated designs, and a playful vibe – to signal to readers what they can expect. “I’m finding my illustrated covers are bringing in a whole different group of readers,” she says. “On social media, they will not assume it’s a rom-com unless it’s illustrated.”

Jagger also observes that a big reason for the change in cover preferences over the years has been TikTok algorithms censoring content that appears too risqué. “I still mostly release books with model covers, because that works for me,” he explains. “But I love that it’s always changing. It keeps things fresh and encourages creativity and new ways of thinking, and that’s always a good thing.”

Brighton was a photographer and graphic designer before becoming a full-time author, giving her particularly sharp insight into this side of the work. “When I was traditionally published, I was at the whims of the publisher and had to follow what they commissioned,” she shares. “But with my self-published books, I’m able to adjust to those trends and alter when possible.”

However, with the emergence of the discreet and illustrated cover options, Brighton wants to ensure that this trend isn’t reinforcing the shame and misogyny often experienced by the community. “I do believe we’ve slipped backward a bit in cover style. Many romance readers are ashamed to show off what they’re reading, which I think contributed to the boom of both illustrated and discreet cover design styles,” she posits.



“On a personal level, I don’t love that. Not the designs – I actually quite like them and have many for my shelves! But when those designs come because of shame, I hate that,” she clarifies.

Indie romance author Maggie Rawdon, who was also interviewed in our first piece on the topic, explains that at the end of the day, cover design should be all about listening to your heart. She exclaims, “I’ve found that no matter which kind of cover you pick – model, illustrated, or discreet – someone will hate it and let you know about it, so in a world where there is no pleasing everyone, do the thing that makes your creative heart happy!”

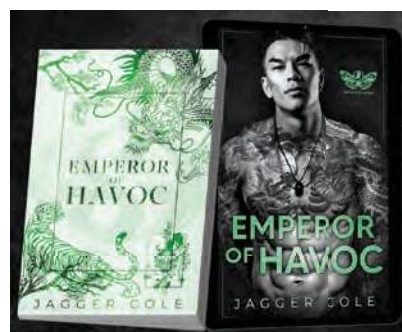
### Protecting intellectual property

Another significant responsibility for indie authors isn’t about creation at all, but rather protecting the integrity of what they’ve written and the

This page: Bestselling author Kandi Steiner has written quite a number of books in her 10+ year writing career. Photos by Jack Hamm, courtesy of Kandi Steiner.

Continued on next page ..





This page: Jagger Cole's books usually have a level of darker subject matter that have mafia connections. He tries to incorporate various elements from each book into his covers, whether that be his model or discreet covers. All images courtesy of Jagger Cole.

fictional worlds they've developed and shared with readers. From writing and editing, to designing and marketing, independently published authors juggle a variety of responsibilities, running their own business at every level. While many in the community are able to hire folks to help them with PR, personal assistance, and more, the brand itself, and the ability to protect said brand against piracy, is yet another worry on authors' minds.

When it comes to piracy, many opt to hire a service that monitors the web for pirated copies of their books. This service can then send cease and desist letters to get these versions removed from the internet. Brighton shares that she's had over 35,000 takedown notices sent through the service she hires. "Amazon has been known to remove Kindle Unlimited books because of being posted on pirate sites, but otherwise, I don't concern myself with it," she says.

Kandi remarks that for a short period of time, every book she published to KU would be pirated and sold on Apple Books, jeopardizing her KU enrollment. While she was able to fill out a form through Apple to have these pirated versions taken down, she finds piracy more concerning when it comes from readers themselves. "It's very discouraging, especially because I offer my books in affordable programs like Kindle Unlimited, as well as run sales on them all the time. I also offer many freebies throughout the year," she explains. "I just try to focus on the amazing readers who support me and how thankful I am for them."

Jennifer takes a similar approach to the issue, striving to focus on what she can control and refraining from hiring a takedown service. She describes, "I'd rather focus my energy on the amazing, supportive readers who continue to show up and make this career possible."

AK, who has had many of her own works pirated, explains that unfortunately, "Pirating is part of this process. The more popular a book is, the more it's pirated." She affirms, "If a time comes when Amazon gives me an issue about pirated copies, I know I've done all I can to protect against it."

Having previously been a professional musician, Jagger witnessed this issue in the music industry firsthand. "I came up while Napster and online file sharing was almost literally burning the music industry as it then existed to the ground. It's changed a lot since then. But we all still listen to music. We all still buy music. The same goes for books," he asserts.

### What about AI?

Jagger points out that from the sheer amount of AI-written books flooding the market, to the AI book covers trained on stolen, copyrighted material, the emergence of generative AI comes with a ton of ethical and intellectual property concerns. He even notes that he's started to worry about being accused of AI in his own work.

"Do you write and release books at a rapid pace, because you're working your ass off writing ten hours a day, five days a week? Must be AI. Do you use em dashes? Totally AI," he quips. "So now, I'm actively altering my writing voice to not sound like the plagiarism machine that probably trained itself off of my writing voice."

Indeed, Brighton adds that while the future of AI is unknown, what is for certain is that her books, along with every other author she knows, were used to train AI systems without permission. But she will always stick with human art: "I will continue to be committed to hiring voice actors for my audiobooks and artists for my commissioned artwork because having that human touch is important to me."

It's true: you'll be hard-pressed to find a machine that can achieve what real human perspective and emotion can. Following suit with Brighton, Kandi affirms her commitment to human voices and artists, emphasizing, "I think art IS human and that's what makes it so special."

The complexity and depth of the indie romance community is certainly built on these authentic, personal foundations, and while the genre itself, online trends, and the independent publishing landscape will continue to evolve, one thing remains certain. "There will always be a demand for stories written with genuine emotion and a human touch," asserts Jennifer. "And that's something AI can't replicate." ●

*If you'd like to read the full interviews with Jennifer Sucevic, Brighton Walsh, Kandi Steiner, and Jagger Cole, as well as follow-up interviews with AK Landow and Maggie Rawdon, you can find them on our website [mainstreetmag.com](http://mainstreetmag.com). Here you'll also find the authors' socials and more info!*



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# BOOK CLUBS: *A brief history and why they've stood the test of time*

By Abby Audenino  
[abby@mainstreetmag.com](mailto:abby@mainstreetmag.com)

Born out of a desire to spend more time in third places – locations separate from home (first place) or work (second place) – this year, in the midst of winter, Lindsey and I created a book club with a few of her friends from high school. Part of the reason we started a book club was that we are all bookworms and recent grads between the ages of 22 and 23 years old who were searching for a low stakes, academic hobby that included other people.

Naturally, the best option was to create a book club.

We typically meet once per month, where we spend a few hours in The White Hart in Salisbury, CT, drinking coffee and snacking on delicious pastries while we discuss the themes of the book, share our thoughts on the writing style, and ultimately, choose another book to read for the following month.

## A rich history of joining together to discuss literature

The history of book clubs can be traced back to the 19th century. An article from *JSTOR Daily*, an online magazine meant to bring academic research to a wider audience, traces the origins of book clubs back to the women's clubs of the late-19th century. Women's clubs emerged out of the progressive movements and were predominantly composed of white women from the middle and upper classes.

"One of the first such societies – Sorosis – was founded in 1868, when several female columnists were barred from a New York Press Club event honoring Charles Dickens," author Pamela Burger writes in "Women's Groups and the Rise of the Book Club."

"Journalist Jane Cunningham Croly, who created the club with a circle of professional female colleagues, took the name from a botanical term: Sorosis refers to a type of fruit formed from an aggregate of flowers," Burger continues. "Inspired by Sorosis and the New England Women's Club in Boston, women across the nation

began forming similar societies, from the still-running Ladies' Literary Club of Ypsilanti, Michigan (1878), to the Ladies' Reading Club of Houston (1885)."

But women's groups and book clubs provided more than just a way to join together to discuss a common subject. In a time where women were not expected, and even often discouraged, from pursuing any kind of higher education, these groups promoted female education via lectures, discussed readings, and even written reports.

"May Alden Ward, writing in 1906, detailed how these clubs promoted female education: They offered scholarships for women's colleges, opened public libraries, and even raised money to create a girls' trade school in New York," Burger writes. "Women's clubs were also active in political and social reform. Ward states that these societies created 'better schools, better surroundings, better industrial conditions, and better laws ... the club movement is a beneficent influence in the United States.'"

Women's clubs were also centered around self-development, or what was referred to as "self-culture," which was based on improving personal, intellectual, and moral character. The women's clubs of this time period allowed women to focus on personal

betterment through academic work, and this idea of self-improvement via reading and discussing remains one of the reasons why people create book clubs today.

## About my book club

Each book club has its own unique structure, and we created a few guidelines to inform our book choices and ensure that everyone was included in the book selection process. We used a Google Form so that everyone could submit three books that fit within these guidelines: must be fiction, be a reasonable length to complete in a month, not have romance as the only plot point, and preferably be considered a modern classic or be otherwise well regarded.

After submitting our book club picks, we created another Google Form in which we ranked the picks from the ones we wanted to read the most to the ones we wanted to read the least based on the summaries of the books. This was a remarkably effective way for us all to decide which books we were the most interested in as a group and gave us a good starting point.

Continued on next page ...



We kicked off our book club by reading *Giovanni's Room* by James Baldwin, a 1956 novel that centers around the life of an American man living in Paris as he processes the complicated feelings regarding his relationships with the other men in his life, particularly Giovanni, an Italian bartender who he meets in a Parisian gay bar. We all agreed that this was a fantastic read, and it was a great way to ease back into analyzing texts from an academic point of view (in addition to a casual reader point of view).

Other books we have read in our book club include *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith, her debut novel, published in 2000, which centers around the lives of two wartime friends, Bangladeshi Samad Iqbal and Englishman Archie Jones, and later around their families and children living in London; *James* by Perceival Everett (which won the 2024 Kirkus Prize, the National Book Award for Fiction, and the 2025 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction), a reimagining of the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain but from the perspective of Huckleberry's friend, Jim, who is an escaped slave; *Martyr!* by Kaveh Akbar, the 2024 debut from the Iranian-American poet, which centers around Cyrus, a queer Iranian-American dealing with the loss of his parents and the concept of martyrdom; and *If We Were Villains* by M.L. Rio, a 2017 novel centering around a murder mystery surrounding Oliver Marks, a former actor at the fictional Dellecher Shakespeare conservatory that takes place during his final year at the college.

Being a part of this book club allowed me to not only read more, but also to read novels that I ordinarily would not have chosen. In turn, book club provided me with a social space that empowered me to engage in intellectual conversation in which everyone brings their own unique perspectives to the table, therefore

broadening my thought processes and allowing me to view the book from alternative perspectives. For many, this is part of the reason they join book clubs as well.

#### Why book clubs have stood the test of time

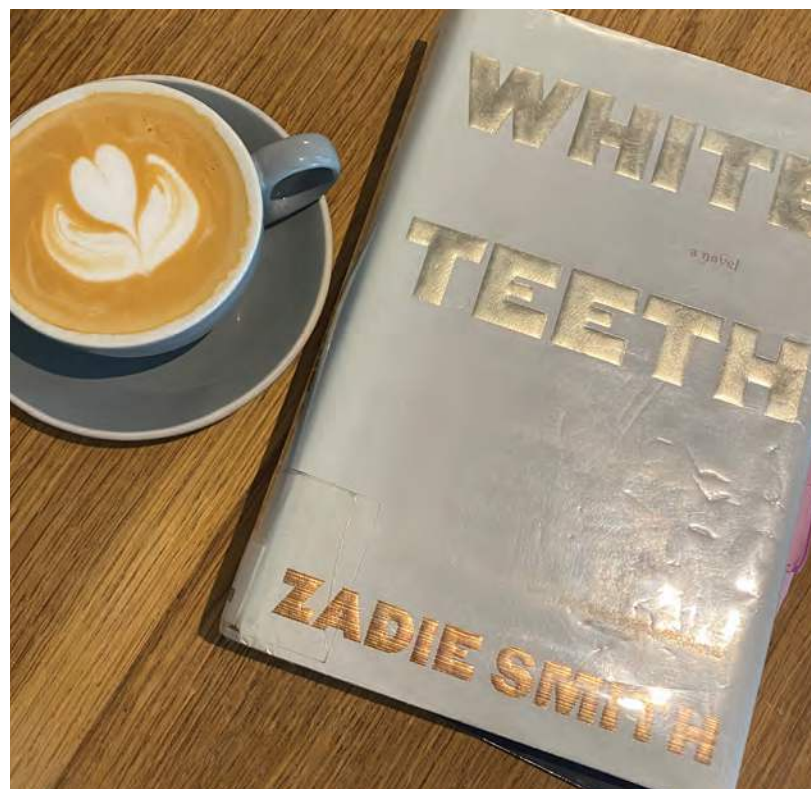
"Women's Groups and the Rise of the Book Club," credits the modern book club boom in part to Oprah Winfrey's book club segment on her self-titled television show in 1996.

"Oprah's Book Club established a template for millions of women to follow: A few friends discuss the monthly selection over dinner, share personal stories, and give empathic interpretations of the text. R. Mark Hall calls the popularization of this model the 'Oprahfication of literacy,'" Burger writes. "Literature, according to the Oprah formula, is a vehicle for learning about oneself. Books have 'lessons,' the novels' characters are potential 'friends,' and reading is a transformational act."

For Kristen Fischetti, an elementary school principal, joining a book club stemmed out of a desire to form deeper connections with friends. "As an avid reader, joining a group of other people who love to read is both inspiring and enjoyable, especially when they are dear friends. It adds another layer to the connections that we already share," she explained.

Kristen's book club – mostly made up of women from the Pine Plains, NY, community – meets once every four to six weeks either at a member's house or at a public place where they also have dinner together. Whoever hosts that month is in charge of choosing the book, and they typically incorporate a food theme that is either related to the book in some way or random, depending on the book's themes. "Everyone brings a dish to share based on the theme. It adds to the fun," she said.

Their book club doesn't have any specific guidelines, other than to discuss the book at some point during the evening. "We share feedback on



the book choice, give opinions about our recommendation (or not) of the book, and discuss events within the book. We share the joy of reading together. I've read genres that I wouldn't have read before if it weren't for the book chosen."

Besides being exposed to books that she wouldn't necessarily choose on her own, Kristen believes that the best part of book club is the time spent together with friends. "It's so important to find time to do what you love with people you enjoy spending time with. Women easily lose themselves in the many roles we have throughout our days, so to take one night to talk about a book, eat good food, and laugh a lot – who wouldn't want that?"

Amanda Zick, who also runs a book club in Pine Plains, NY, started her book club with her friend Bethany in 2016. Amanda and Bethany were previously in another book club that was, "well-established, but somewhat exclusive and not open to expanding and adding many new members." She and Bethany had several mutual friends that had never participated in a book club because of the "intimidation factor," so they decided to create their own club to add new people to their book discussions.

Amanda's club meets roughly every five to six weeks, and the location and book selection rotates throughout the

group, with the same person picking a book and hosting in the same month. Her club has no parameters around book picks, which are allowed to be any genre and any length.

"We try to respect each other's time and availability, however, so we tend not to pick epically long books (anything over 500 pages). We tend not to choose new releases either, as many of us rely on the library and new releases always have long wait lists," she explained.

Amanda's book club hasn't changed much since its inception. Although they've had some members come and go, they average six to eight members per meeting. "I think the secret is not being too rigid and ensuring that we have some flexibility. If there are too many rules or too much pressure, people will lose interest or stop showing up."

Other than talking about books with other bookish folks, Amanda's favorite part of book club is, "getting people together face-to-face in our local area. Book clubs are a great way to encourage IRL (in real life) relationships that have become more scarce in the digital age." ●



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## GILDED MOON FRAMING



# A new chapter at Lakeville Books & Stationery

By Abby Audenino  
abby@mainstreetmag.com

The idea for Lakeville Books & Stationery was born out of the desire to once again have a bookstore nearby. Owner Darryl Peck and his family had recently moved back to Lakeville, CT, from Georgia (where they run another bookstore, Righton Books), and were shocked to see how few retail stores there were on the main streets of Lakeville and Salisbury. In a two-fold effort to fulfill their own desire for a bookstore in their hometown and bring back brick-and-mortar retail to Main Street in Lakeville, Darryl and his family purchased a vintage 1880 building, completely renovated it, and opened its doors within the first week of April of 2025.

## Immediate growth

“During the first three weeks, almost everyone who came in asked us where the novels or the children’s books were, so we very quickly decided that an expansion would be necessary,” Darryl mused.

Less than three months after opening, Lakeville Books & Stationery expanded, renovating the upstairs of the building to house more than 7,000 additional books in fiction, children’s, biographies, history, young adult, and more.

## A family affair

Lakeville Books & Stationery is a true family business, with Darryl and his wife, Anne, running the store, and their daughter, Alice, serving as the general manager. Darryl started his retail career in New York City and has sold a variety of different products in stores small, big, and international. Harboring an interest in cooking for most of his life, Darryl hand-picked the 600+ cookbooks that line the shelves in the newly renovated upstairs.

Anne grew up in Georgia and was “dashing off thank you letters and other polite correspondence from the time she could print with a pencil.” She has a degree in architecture, worked in the interior design sector for many years, and is now a local real estate agent – all of which have informed her selections of architecture and home books on the shelves at Lakeville Books & Stationery.

Alice is a Northwest Corner native and serves as the store’s general manager. She loves Formula One and visiting Lime Rock Park, so she curates the store’s broad automotive section. She has also been collecting notebooks since childhood and enjoys curating the store’s stationery offerings.

## On the shelves

Lakeville Books & Stationery is a general interest bookstore, with an extensive collection of books that cover a variety of subjects, from interiors, gardening, architecture, design, automobiles, photography, and cooking, alongside the classic categories of fiction, literature, nonfiction, and memoirs.

Continued on next page...







For fine writing needs, Lakeville Books & Stationery stocks a variety of stationery, notecards, greeting cards, notebooks, and journals from brands around the world, as well as globally sourced writing utensils. Also on the shelves, you can find jigsaw puzzles, art supplies, games, and more.

### Seasons of change

After years of owning and operating a bookstore, Darryl has learned what it takes to curate a great selection of books. “We have a very deep selection of beautifully illustrated books on art design, photography, and automobiles. We’re invested and committed to offering a big selection that covers many different topics.” On the day I stopped by in early July, he was getting ready to sift through the fall catalogs – encompassing over 20,000 books! – to decide what titles to bring to the Lakeville Books & Stationery shelves this autumn.

Darryl grew up browsing at Rizzoli Bookstore on 57th Street in Manhattan, so when he founded Righton

Books in St. Simons Island, GA, his goal was to make it a mini-Rizzoli of sorts. That idea received very positive feedback and turned out to be incredibly successful, so he endeavored to create the same experience in Lakeville.

“I think the biggest advantage is that we know our neighbors. Even though we were away for a bit, all of our friends are still here,” Darryl notes. “It helps that a lot of what we have to do in a bookstore is talk to our customers and neighbors, so we discuss the history of our community, the things going on now. We know Lakeville well.”

### Browse online too

One of the most important things to Darryl was ensuring that Lakeville Books & Stationery had an accessible, extensive website to support book buying regardless of your location. The Lakeville Books & Stationery website is updated daily and shows what books and products are in stock in real time.

“If you want to know if we have a book on our shelves before you come

visit, go to our website,” he says. “It’s an easy way to support small businesses like ours instead of other online retailers.”

### Next steps

Darryl and his family haven’t stopped for a minute since they began renovating Lakeville Books & Stationery, and they don’t plan to stop now. Coming up, Darryl hopes to host events in the bookstore in conjunction with local authors and libraries.

“We haven’t stopped for a minute since over a year ago, but now we can catch our breath a little bit,” Darryl says. “We’ve been here in Lakeville for a long time and have seen it change. Supporting small, local businesses is more important than ever and we’re grateful that our community has been so responsive. We’re just getting started.” •

*To learn more about Lakeville Books & Stationery, visit them in-store at 329 Main Street, Lakeville, CT, online at [lakevillebooks.com](http://lakevillebooks.com), or on Instagram @lakevillebooks.*





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AN EXHIBITION AT THE ATHENS CULTURAL CENTER EXPLORES THE CONCEPT OF 'GODDESS'

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By Dominique DeVito  
info@mainstreetmag.com

When Niva Dorell was approached by the Athens Cultural Center to curate an exhibition around the theme of 'goddess,' she was of course intrigued. "There were so many directions it could go," she says when I catch up with her to talk about the show and her role in it. Her first task, she knew, was to distill her thinking around the theme.

"For me," Niva explains, "'goddess' is a powerful energy; the source of all things: creation, creativity, femme energy. Creation of the world." Not exactly a narrow focus. How would Niva lasso the many directions possible and curate such an exhibition?

## Leave it to Niva

It's clear why the ACC reached out to Niva to bring the goddess theme to life in its beautiful space on 2nd Street in the heart of Athens, NY. Niva grew up in Philadelphia, earned a BA at Temple University, and headed to Los Angeles, where she earned an MFA at the University of Southern California. Her graduate thesis short film, *KINGS*, won Showtime's Black Filmmakers Grant, and her filmmaking and screenwriting career took off.

After decades in Los Angeles, with a successful and established career, Niva

was craving something she describes as "essentially opposite." Her East Coast roots were calling. After a stint at the Vermont Studio Center in Johnson, VT, surrounded by "nature and mountains; it was so conducive to writing – and this was in January," she exclaims – "it was super cold!" – Niva knew she needed a fresh start.

She wanted to be close to New York City but still have a rural experience. She moved to Durham in Greene County in 2014, and in 2016, she went to Catskill. She's been there ever since.

## Taking to the arts scene in Catskill

Niva was the visual arts director at the Greene County Council of the Arts (now CREATE Council on the Arts), where she ran the gallery and produced events that coincided with each exhibition – the biggest being the Patricia Field ArtFashion show (co-produced with Michele Saunders) in 2017. It drew more than 600 people.

"Being the visual arts director at GCCA was a great way to get to know the area through the arts scene," she says. Though she had never curated before that experience, Niva grew up in the art world. "My mother was a prolific artist," she shares, "and I learned early that she was not to be disturbed in her studio. My sister is also an artist. Curating," she says, "is another way of communicating. There are lots of parallels between the visual juxtapositions of a gallery show and

film editing. And I love collaborating," she says with a big smile and enthusiasm. "I bring that collaborative spirit from the film world to the projects I'm doing here."

Niva researched and refined, reached out and reacted. She explored the theme with fellow creatives in her large circle. She relied on the perspectives of many, and made special reference to the assistance of Portia Munson; Molly Stinchfield; Sara Kay (a "rock star curator," according to Niva); and, at the ACC, executive director Jacob Miller, president and head of the programming committee Becky Hart, and programming committee member Erin Dziedzic. It takes a vision, and it takes a village. Always.

"The programming committee commissioned the show with Niva because she's a consummate storyteller," Becky Hart says. "Throughout the development of the exhibition, her ideas and vision would expand, center on something, and then contract into a more distilled idea."

Erin Dziedzic echoes that sentiment, and adds, "The thoughtfully selected breadth of work engages with the theme of goddess in its many interpretations."

## The Athens Cultural Center

Staging a show that's as broad and open for interpretation as this one says something about the gallery, too. The Athens Cultural Center is its own bearer of vision. Founded in 2003,

the ACC's mission is, "to nurture an appreciation of art and culture and uplift creative voices in a welcoming place for all."

The ACC offers a true wealth of programming for the community. It has classes in not just art, but also music and local lore like honey extraction. There are programs for all ages, including toddlers.

Becky bought her Athens house in 2017. During the pandemic, she left her role as curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Denver Art Museum, moved here to be closer to her family, and was soon drawn to the area's cultural diversity. As president of the ACC, she is committed to the space serving as a gathering place for local arts and community activities.

Erin was introduced to the ACC by Becky, and says she was "immediately inspired by the dynamic exhibitions she and the organization were presenting." A recent transplant from Kansas City, MO, where she was director of curatorial affairs at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art for over a decade, Erin loves Athens for its "rich cultural landscape, where one moment you can be admiring the Hudson River and the next, engaged in a thoughtful conversation about art

Continued on next page ...



or visiting an artist's studio."

### How did the Goddess exhibition come to be?

For Becky, it harkens back to a drawing by Beatrice Wood from the 1920s that she and her friends found to be goddess-like. "The next moment," she says, "we were talking about who and what the 21st-century goddess was, and the show concept was born."

For Erin, she was immediately intrigued by the possibilities. "'Goddess' can refer to mythological figures like Athena or Isis. It can also be archetypal – a symbolic embodiment of feminine energy or an ideal or personal expression of empowerment," she explains. In this show, she shares, "We sought to honor both its shared traditions and deeply individual interpretations."

### Goddess and the ACC

*Goddess: Origins of Wonder* will feature over 30 works by over a dozen artists in a range of mediums – paintings, sculpture, prints, installations, and videos. It's described on the ACC website as a show that "explores creation in its most sacred form – the act of bringing something new into existence, whether it be life, art, or transformation. In this exhibition, the word 'goddess' means not a mythical figure but a living presence – a maker of worlds, a bearer of vision, a powerful deity guardian that shapes, dreams, and manifests. ... Collectively, it aims to be a tribute to the origins of all things: the wonder born from the divine femme that resides in all of us,

an energy to be honored, revered, and treated with ultimate respect."

If you've never been, the Cultural Center is housed in a former storefront built in the 1870s, just steps away from the Hudson River. In addition to the collection of free and paid classes, events, exhibitions, and performances, the ACC hosts an annual Victorian stroll in Athens that the whole town participates in.

There is also a summer music series that supports local and regional musicians from the greater Hudson Valley. All the concerts are free. The remaining concerts for this summer are on August 16 (featuring The Goddess Party), and September 20 (featuring The Big Takeover). They are scheduled to take place at the beautiful Athens Riverfront Park.

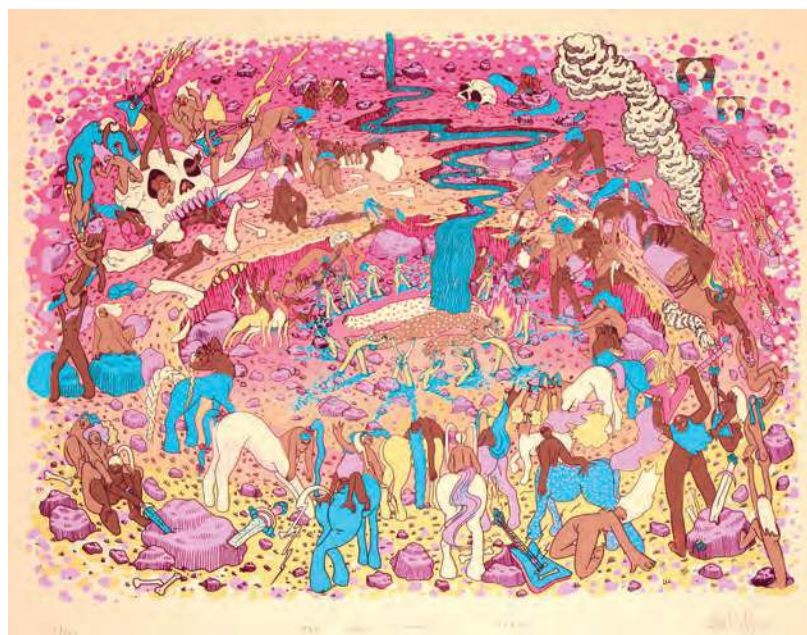
Another popular event is the annual members' exhibition, "One Foot Square." It's a show of small works at affordable prices, offering visitors the opportunity to purchase art for their own collections or to give as gifts. (Learn more at [athensculturalcenter.org](http://athensculturalcenter.org).)

The opening of the Goddess exhibition will reflect the ACC's and Niva's senses of joy and inclusion. Keeping with Niva's propensity for creating events around her exhibitions, she invited The Goddess Party – an all-female musical group led by Shana Falana – to perform at the opening of the Goddess show on August 1. The Goddess Party will perform outside the gallery, and the date happens to be "First Friday" in Athens, so the street will be closed for pedestrians, and the town's other businesses will be open late. It'll be a party in Athens.

And for those who don't know, there's a ferry that takes people back and forth across the Hudson River from Hudson to Athens, passing the famous Hudson-Athens Lighthouse on the way. The ferry ride itself is magical on a summer night and costs just \$5 each way! (Learn more at [hudsonferry.co](http://hudsonferry.co).)

### It comes back to creation

When I ask Niva if her idea of 'goddess' changed through organizing the exhibition, she says "Yes!" without hesitation: "It's been influenced by



the artists and the conversations. My vision of the show and theme have expanded," she explains, noting, "the collection of artists and art in the show is really exciting. It comes back to creation: of the world, nature, people, ideas – creativity itself – a surging energy that's powerful and positive and should be respected and revered, and that is in everyone."

And for the audience? "My hope is that after seeing the show people will think about what 'goddess' means to them," she says, "and what and who the goddesses are in their own lives. I hope they will look at nature reverentially and feel moved and inspired."

### Be there

Erin sums it up well: "Artists respond to the world around them – and right now, we need some goddess energy."

I know I am eager to experience Niva's vision come to life in *Goddess: Origins of Wonder*. I'll see you at the Athens Cultural Center on August 1. If you learn about this after the opening, the show will be up for six weeks. When you've seen it, your comments will be most welcome.

Where will Niva be once the show has opened? "On vacation!" she exclaims, though of course that's never all there is. "I'm currently fundraising for a short film that I'm producing and directing," she says, "as well as developing a television show and rewriting a screenplay." •

*Explore what "goddess" says to (and about) you through the works on display at the Athens Cultural Center, 24 Second Street, Athens, NY. August 1 – September 14, 2025. [athensculturalcenter.org](http://athensculturalcenter.org).*



Top: Amaryllis Flowers - *The Main Event*.

Above: Katherine Bowling, *The Last Tree*.

Left: Ntangou Badila, *Cardiovascular*.

Previous page:

From L-R: Alisa Sikelianos-Carter, *Treasure Feeding Her Spirit*. Amaryllis Flowers - *party animal*. Ntangou Badila, *Cells* horizontal.





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# THIS CAN'T BE REAL

By Jesse DeGroodt  
info@mainstreetmag.com

*A frog in a well cannot conceive of the ocean.*

— Zhuangzi

What if you could see in four colors? Birds possess that ability, the capacity to see in not only the trichromatic spectrum enabled by the red, blue, and green cones that we are limited to in our human eyes, but also in ultraviolet, which we do not. Yet even that leaves birds as pikers out in the great wide world, where butterflies, for instance, flit from place to place along with their 15 different photoreceptors. Can you even imagine what they might be seeing? One thing's for certain: We are not all seeing things quite the same way. Turns out, none of us see the same thing the same way even when we are all looking at the same thing. Why?

## Amoeba-level IQ

That sort of thing, over time, has oftentimes made me feel like Zhuangzi's frog, fully aware that tons of stuff is going on over my head and everywhere else around me, yet without the foggiest idea what it could be and no real way, that I've yet to discover anyhow, of knowing what it is I don't know or that might even be possible to know. One of my scalawag buds

might step in at this juncture to point out that could be tied to an amoeba-level IQ, which I would happily cop to at times, but this requires a more convoluted explanation than that simplistic approach.

## Is this a simulation?

Contrary to the character I'm playing in this elegant, quixotic, oft-times ridiculous little drama of ours, I'm not even sure where to start here, so let's go with this: Do we live in a computer simulation?

My knee jerk reaction to that? Good grief, let's hope so.

As a towheaded little beast wandering about with my never-very-far-away question box, I was occasionally given to wondering why I could only see something clearly when I looked straight at it, while the rest of what occupied my field of vision became evermore indistinct until eventually dissolving into obscurity and ultimately completely out of sight. In more recent times, this would yield to certain questions, such as, what if what you see only renders when you look at it? Why would/how could that be? How would I know for certain that even what I might think I am seeing with absolute clarity is what's happening in the first place?

## A butterfly dream

This leads me back to Zhuangzi (aka Chuang Tzu and a quintillion other interpretations of his name) and

his famous butterfly dream. For the unfamiliar:

*"Once upon a time, I, Chuang Tzu, dreamed that I was a butterfly flying around and enjoying myself. I had no idea that I was Chuang Tzu. Then suddenly I woke up and I was Chuang Tzu again. But I couldn't tell if I was Chuang Tzu dreaming to be a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming to be Chuang Tzu now. There must be some difference between Chuang Tzu and a butterfly!"*

Oh, boy. If someone possessing the acumen of Zhuangzi couldn't wrap his head around this, how is little ol' country boy me supposed to tell if I'm dreaming or awake, in some "real" world or something else entirely?

And then, with the digitization of our entire lives, along came this bit of tomfoolery to add more questions: Click [HERE](#) to verify you are not a fire hydrant. Or a cheese puff disguised as a fire hydrant. Or a fire hydrant disguised as a human being eating a cheese puff.

C'mon! Stop toying with me.

Since apparently you are so damn smart, I know you know that I am a fallible being, while you are ... what are you? Are you simply a collection of electronic impulses trained to fire

Continued on next page ...



in the order necessary to compile and pose that harrowing question of my "humanity?" Or is there more of you behind, or perhaps embedded, in those electronic impulses that just posed that little puzzler, while you knew the answer all along?

Promise me that no one here expects this to devolve into yet another banal discussion on artificial intelligence. Ugh.

### Would aliens feel like the frog?

Let's try this one on for size. Naturally, we anthropomorphize when it comes to the human conception of aliens from outer-outer-outer space, but I'd be willing to bet that's a fool's errand. Why? Let's say you're one of those aliens and find yourself suddenly plopped in the middle of Dutchess County. The humans you might encounter would undoubtedly be off-putting enough, but what if your first encounter was with a mastodon? Or a velociraptor? How about a colorful mantis shrimp?

Once upon a time, Carl Sagan, as a guest on *The Tonight Show*, was asked by host Johnny Carson (this should give a clue or two of how once-upon-a-time this was) what scientist-aliens sailing along in their spaceship would require to make Earth – or any other planet – appear worthy of a stop. Sagan opined that "an implication of intelligent design" would likely be required to pique their interest. As this is not something easily discerned of the planet Earth from, let's say, 25,000 miles out, chances are the aliens would step outside for a smoke break and that spaceship would continue sailing along, 100% oblivious as to what it had just missed, no different than Zhuangzi's frog.

### Is it still FOMO if you're not aware you're missing something?

We are all that spaceship and those aliens, zinging about, ping-ponging off this and that, unsure if we're missing something or even if there's some-

thing to be missed. There are far too many questions. About everything.

When the movie, *The Matrix*, showed up in the late '90s, "hogwash" was my immediate reaction. Let's say that in the interim, I've washed that hog and attempted to fine-tune why so little is what it seems, in the process beginning to pay close attention to things that folks such as Donald Hoffman, Rizwan Virk, and Nick Bostrom have to say in regards to this whole living-in-a-computer-simulation thing.

The 2003 Nick Bostrom *Philosophical Quarterly* article, "Are You Living in a Computer Simulation?", argues that it is quite probable, suggesting that one of these three must be true: One, human civilizations are likely to go extinct before reaching a "posthuman" stage capable of creating ancestor simulations. Two, posthuman civilizations are unlikely to run many ancestor simulations. Three, we are almost certainly living in a computer simulation.

If nothing else, this set of observations provoked the world of philosophy into having a think about the "natural world." Critics of Bostrom's simulation argument have pointed out that, if indeed true, it in fact cannot be a sound argument based on the fact that, for one, it can't be tested, which leads me to wonder, through what means do we go about verifying that what we open our eyes to each day is real?

### Consciousness

To Donald Hoffman, a professor emeritus in the Department of Cognitive Sciences at the University of California, Irvine, "neural correlates of consciousness ... are a minimal collection of neural events or mechanisms that is highly correlated with a specific conscious experience, such as an itch or a headache."

In "Consciousness and the Interface Theory of Perception," he quotes Thomas Huxley, writing in 1866, "How it is that anything so remarkable as a state of consciousness comes about as a result of irritating nervous

tissue, is just as unaccountable as the appearance of Djinn when Aladdin rubbed his lamp."

Boiled down, Brad Hook explains in "Donald Hoffman's Concepts Simplified: Understanding Reality and Perception," "Hoffman's main idea is that what we perceive is not the objective reality but a simplified user interface created by our brains. Imagine your computer desktop: the icons you see are not the actual files or programs but simplified representations that make it easier for you to interact with the system. Similarly, our sensory experiences are like icons on a desktop, providing a useful but simplified view of the underlying reality. ... We perceive what is useful for our survival and reproduction, not what is necessarily true."

### It's a 50/50 on the simulation

In a 2020 article, *Scientific American* declared the odds we are living inside a simulation at "about 50-50." Paraphrasing astrophysicist and director of the Hayden Planetarium, Neil deGrasse Tyson, the magazine would note that if this were the case, "the simulation would most likely create perceptions of reality on demand rather than simulate all of reality all the time – much like a video game optimized to render only the parts of a scene visible to a player."

Four years later, *Scientific American* was back to proclaim "we will never know if we live in a computer simulation." As it deemed that question unknowable, the more interesting question from the magazine's viewpoint was, "Can we model the universe as a computer simulation?" This, the thinking went, would lead

to a more scientific approach to the question. Some of us might ask, is that even possible?

To hear MIT computer scientist and video game developer Rizwan Virk tell it, the example of Schrödinger's cat helps point the way to the understanding that we are living in a computer simulation. Virk points out that quantum indeterminacy, or "the idea that a particle is in one of multiple states and you don't know until you observe the particle," is behind it.

The gist of the cat's dilemma, so to speak, is that it has been placed inside a box with poisonous materials, but it's anyone's guess whether the cat is alive or dead, but instead inhabits both states, until, that is, the box is opened and the answer revealed.

In Virk's eyes, this tells us the universe renders only that which needs to be observed. Are we, when all is said and done, Zhuangzi's frog in the well? •

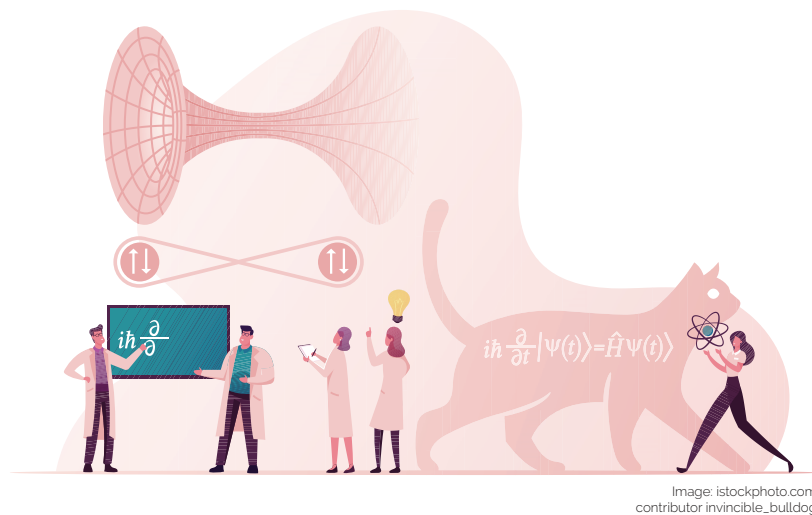


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## NorthEast-Millerton Library

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[nemillertonlibrary.org](http://nemillertonlibrary.org)

Chartered in 1927 as the Millerton Free Library, the NorthEast-Millerton Library was created by a group of citizens and PTA members that thought Millerton needed a library. Although the library has changed locations a few times since its inception, it has been located at the current location on Main Street since 1975. In 2008, it was renamed the NorthEast-Millerton Library. In addition to its 30,000 plus physical and digital items, the NorthEast-Millerton Library also offers access to adult and children's programs; Wi-Fi; computers; copying; faxing; scanning; a seed library; free recycling of batteries, ink cartridges, and glasses; 3D printing; exhibit space; and more. "Our patrons say the library is 'warm and welcoming,' and is 'a great resource,' where community members can 'explore, create, and dream,'" says Rhiannon Leo-Jameson, the director for the North-East Millerton Library. "We are in the process of gathering community input for our long-range plan to help guide the future of the library. We are looking forward to hearing what our community has to say. If you are interested in completing a survey, please visit the library or our website."



## Merritt Bookstore

57 Front Street, Millbrook, NY. [kira@merrittbookstore.com](mailto:kira@merrittbookstore.com).  
[merrittbooks.com](http://merrittbooks.com)

Merritt Bookstore was founded by Scott Meyer in the early 1980s and changed hands to the current owner, Kira Wizner, after Scott's passing in 2015. Both owners' love of books have fueled the creation and revision of the shop. Initially started as a book and toy store, Merritt Bookstore has an ever-changing selection of toys and goodies, a solid foundation of classics, and a rotating selection of new books from large and small publishers and presses alike. "We curate our entire store – books, gifts, games, puzzles, and toys – with love, and infuse humor when necessary," says Kira. "We thrive on the relationships we have with customers and the scope of books we offer. Being a part of a community of readers and welcoming new people is very rewarding. Knowing people and what they read, and being able to anticipate what they may want to read next." Going forward, Kira endeavors to continue nurturing relationships with current readers and young readers. Merritt Bookstore also hopes to work with the local schools and libraries, "to bring people together with books, authors, ideas, writing, and all things literary."



## Douglas Library

108 Main Street, North Canaan, CT. [douglaslibrary@comcast.net](mailto:douglaslibrary@comcast.net).  
[douglaslibrarycanaan.org](http://douglaslibrarycanaan.org)

The Douglas Library has been a part of North Canaan since 1821, when it was first established by Mr. William Douglas. The library still has the original volumes that were first purchased to create the library. In addition, the library offers a fantastic collection for a small library, as well as downloadable offerings from Libby and Hoopla for library card holders, Wi-Fi, and quiet places to work and study. Douglas Library is also home to the Pease Natural History Museum, which was established in 1925 by local businessman, Charlie Pease. The Museum houses a collection of birds, wood mammals, butterflies, raptors, arrowheads, and more. The upstairs also features several rooms of books for sale! Douglas Library is a welcoming place in the heart of Canaan, that caters to patrons of all ages! For more information about upcoming events, story hour, and book group information, check out Douglas Library's website.



## David M. Hunt

63 Main Street, Falls Village, CT. [dmhuntlibrary@gmail.com](mailto:dmhuntlibrary@gmail.com).  
[huntlibrary.org](http://huntlibrary.org)

David M. Hunt Library was founded in 1891 by the Hunt sisters, Wealthy Ann and Catherine. These earliest and key benefactors had a vision: "That it be a house of learning fitted to the wants of our youth and the high purpose of promoting the intelligence and welfare of this community." The David M. Hunt Library has an extensive collection of books and other materials to borrow, as well as programming for all ages – including summer reading, art exhibitions, book talks, and after-school programs – print/copy/scanning services, remote work space, technology help, free Wi-Fi, and a place for the community to gather. For over 125 years, the library has been the cultural hub of the Falls Village community and an educational center. "Our staff loves seeing people enjoying the library and connecting with their community," says executive director Meg Sher. "We are always trying to find new ways to meet the needs of the Falls Village community. In the past few years, we've added half-day and after school programs to meet childcare needs. We also debuted home delivery last year. We find needs and fill them!"





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