



Diamonds in the Rough
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Our latest issue of *Diamonds in the Rough* provides reflections on loss; all essays are tinged with restrictions on freedom and the infliction of uncertainty exaggerated by the pandemic. Our overall theme is perseverance: determination, grace under pressure, and humor characterize the student work included here on themes ranging from death as an Uber ride to a better place to preparing children for the worst, judging jokes that haven't aged well, relinquishing childhood securities to become an adult, learning from literature how to live and how to die, determination in the face of adversity. There's also joy: on listening to Taylor Swift and the necessity of the arts, especially in trying times.

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Essays

The Problem with Friends and Jokes That Did Not Age Well

By Christina Brauer

The plot of the sitcom *Friends* is simple. Six typical all-American young people (Rachel, Monica, Phoebe, Joey, Chandler and Ross) cement their friendship by supporting each other in a tough city, Manhattan. Despite its phenomenal ratings from when the show first aired in 1994 and its reputation for being one of the most successful sitcoms ever, it seems like *Friends* did not quite stand the test of time – there’s nothing typical or all-American about these young people. They’re all white, all middle-class, all cis-gender heterosexuals, unlike the real population of New York. Worse, the group makes jokes at the expense of sexual and racial minorities. There’s no overt racism, but through ten seasons, there are only few people of colour and hardly any ethnic diversity. Even though I am a long-time *Friends* fan, I am now more aware of these critical aspects of the sitcom.

When it comes to the topic of homosexuality and other sexual orientations, *Friends* reveals an essentially unfriendly attitude towards queer people. A lot of people are fed up with homophobe jokes on how Chandler, the funny one who constantly makes sarcastic jokes, appears homosexual to others without them being able to say why. The only reason they can give is that he “has a quality”. Additionally, his father is revealed as being transgender. In one of the latter seasons, the line “Don’t you have a little too much penis to be wearing a dress like that?” uttered by Chandler’s mother and the disrespect it conveys towards another person’s sexuality had me speechless.

Furthermore, Ross’s ex-wife Carol turns out to be a lesbian right at the beginning. However, Carol’s sexuality is only mentioned to be joked about, never to represent a strong queer woman in a mainly straight show. In the first episode of season one, the audience comes to know that Ross, his parents’ favourite child and their pride and joy, has been through an awful divorce. Joey delivers the punchline, “And you never knew she was a lesbian?” – and we are only three minutes into the episode. These jokes were not meant to hurt anyone, but they are tasteless. Another controversial moment on *Friends* is the wedding between Carol and another woman as they do not kiss at the altar. The actresses revealed later on that they were forbidden to do so since two women kissing each other was something the audience would not want to see. In general, it was alright to have a lesbian couple on the show back then – as long as they did not behave like one.

In the episode “The One with the Male Nanny”, Ross fails to accept a man choosing the rather feminine job of being a nanny. He asks said male nanny whether he is gay as if this is the only possible reason for his job choice. The man is everything one looks for in a nanny. He bakes cookies, plays the flute to the baby, entertains it with DIY puppets and is very empathetic. The problem – he is a man. On top of that, he tends to cry more than male stereotypes allow. Ross ends up firing him because he cannot cope with a man being that sensitive. Overall, the show is full of misconceptions of homosexuality and typical male stereotypes. Ross tries to convince his son Ben to play with military action figures rather than with the Barbie-doll Ben

prefers as he is slightly worried that Ben will grow up to be gay. Moreover, dancing is apparently also something a man cannot enjoy without being queer as suggested by Monica's statement "So how goes the dancing? Gay yet?" On the whole, every character on the show seemingly has the urge to assert that they are definitely NOT gay by making fun of each other whenever someone does or wears something that does not scream "I am a straight, stereotypical woman/man!"

Looking at what has been said up to now it is understandable that the modern audience reacts so irritated and negatively towards the insensitivity with which the show deals with this topic particularly under today's circumstances and LGBTQ+ movements. I do not even try to deny that I also cringed at some of these borderline homophobic jokes, like making fun of men in dresses.

Yet, they were broaching the issue of alternate sexualities when only few shows would even mention them, proving they were somewhat ahead of their time. Moreover, the sitcom shows how the six friends are slowly but surely coming to terms with other sexual orientations which realistically represents how people cope with it in real life. At first, Chandler is extremely embarrassed by his transgender father and does not even want to invite him to his wedding. But with the help of his friends, he eventually accepts his father for who he is and makes up with him. Even Ross opens up about having trouble acting sensitive as a guy because his father raised him to be more masculine. This brings up the still very topical issue of toxic masculinity. This is the stereotypical behaviour of a man as expected by society, like being strong and brave and tough. This attitude is harmful to everyone involved as it suppresses "weak" attributes because they are allegedly too feminine such as being overly sensitive and emotional in terms of crying.

Having brought up stereotypical masculinity it is time to talk about the show's rather sexist aspects according to the viewers. Joey is the heart-throb of the group and not the brightest. Tons of people perceive his pick-up lines such as "How you doin'?" to get women into bed as beyond disrespectful. While I agree with what they say I also think the show rather drags these sexist pick-up lines into the mud as both the other main characters and the audience are intended to realise how annoying and idiotic this macho behaviour is.

Furthermore, the group continuously makes fun of Monica, now skinny, being overweight in her past. Even though her friends do not mean to hurt her by accident, one never knows if these words will offend someone no matter how light-hearted the teasing was meant to be in the first place. I especially did not like the message of the episode where it is revealed that Monica had overheard her crush-at-the-time Chandler insulting her because of how she looked. As a result, Monica lost weight just to please him. This is definitely sending out wrong signals to the audience as it promotes changing physically for somebody else instead of solely changing for one's own good. Especially in the case of fat-shaming, *Friends* should have been more sensitive. Viewers who are overweight like Monica once was might feel hurt which is the very reverse of what a comedy show wants to achieve. *Friends* should be a comfort-show one can turn to and get cheered up by whenever they feel down.

Moreover, Lisa Kudrow, who played Phoebe, opened up about her body insecurity and the pressure she felt to be as skinny as her female co-stars. She said, "I just felt like this mountain of a woman next to them". Yet, to my mind, the sitcom itself has little to do with this issue. In the 90s, an almost unhealthy looking skinny figure was in style, also called "heroin chic", particularly in the entertainment industry. Besides that, body positivity movements did not really take off until 2012 with the increase of social media. Thus, of course *Friends* is not that

advanced when it comes to raising awareness for body positivity in comparison to what we know today.

Overall, I definitely agree that *Friends* is not as modern as expected from a show today. But after all, it is 25 years old. A 30-year-old car is already considered a veteran car. So, when applying this rule to the show, *Friends* would almost be antique and needed to get a special label to signalise that it needs to be treated differently than the latest shows. Yet, I do not mind people criticising *Friends* for being politically incorrect. Such criticism proves how much we as a society have learned over the last few decades. In fact, I would be more than worried if viewers just proceeded to watch the show and the offensive jokes that should not go along with our ethics in our educated society would stay unnoticed. Having said that, I still do not understand why people watch *Friends* as if it were a present-day show with advanced ethics that are today's standard because it simply cannot be all that. Anything old has to be consumed with its historical context in mind, even if it is just 25 years old. Besides, relatively recent sitcoms are not that politically correct either. The show "How I Met Your Mother" for example oozes with sexism and "The Big Bang Theory" is full of ethnic stereotypes. At the end of the day, comedy always plays with certain clichés.

In conclusion, *Friends* undoubtedly contains several homophobic and sexist elements like jokes about gay people and fat-shaming as well as a lack of diversity that should not stay unnoticed. In this regard, I am proud of our society and how much we have learned since the show first aired. Nevertheless, it is important to clarify that something can only be as ahead of time as knowledge and time itself allow. Therefore, the expectations viewers have of *Friends* today are simply unrealistic.

Death Is but an Uber Ride to a Better Place

By Adriana Pawlik

Most scientists will tell you that there is no life after death. They argue that the bright light a lot of people report having seen after they have been revived and brought back into the earthly realms is nothing but a figment of the imagination: the brain's attempt to protect us from the terrifying finality that comes with death. According to them, there is no Jesus welcoming us in his kingdom or an already deceased loved one waiting to be reunited with us, nor a new residence for us in the Garden of Eden. Scientific evidence seems to be able to give logical explanations for what happens when people have a near-death experience. The visions they see and sometimes also voices they hear come from residual brain activity. Studies show that cultural norms can have an impact on these experiences as well. The psychiatrist Bruce Greyson states that while Americans mostly describe their near-death experience as entering a tunnel, people from developing nations tend to talk about their experience as entering a well or cave. Does this mean these experiences are nothing but beliefs, expectations coined by the cultural background of each individual, which the brain starts to play automatically, like a movie before a person dies?

While I'm not denying scientific evidence and think it is important to include it in the discussion about the possibility of an afterlife, I also believe that science has a limited ability to explain certain phenomena. Therefore, many people turn to religion or look into spirituality in the hope to find the answers science cannot give them. A topic as controversial and almost off-limits as death and what might come after exceeds the ability of the mind to think logically. Especially in our progressive, western world more often than not, the idea that there could be more than our earthly life is shrugged off as a silly fantasy. In other cultures, like the Mexican one, for example, death is treated as a normal, integral part of life. On the day of the Dead, Mexicans celebrate their dead loved ones with bright costumes and paint their faces with sugar skull make-up. Lots of little sugar skulls serve as a festive decoration, too. They decorate the graves of their dead relatives with magnificent, colorful flowers and candles and bring them food because they believe on this day, their souls return from the other side. In this way, children learn early on that death is nothing to be afraid of. They learn how to deal with death in a healthy way and they also learn that it's not the end of the soul.

Most scientists might deny the existence of an afterlife, but what science does confirm is the fact that everything in the universe is made of energy. The great Albert Einstein once said, "Energy cannot be created or destroyed, it can only be changed from one form to another."

This means, if our souls consist of pure energy, we won't just fade away into nothingness after we die, but actually move on to a different plane of existence. The neurosurgeon Dr. Eben Alexander used to be a non-believer when it came to anything even remotely spiritual. For a rational person like him, life after death was complete nonsense and near-death experiences were a trick of the mind.

That was until he himself had to face death. Due to an E. coli meningitis, Eben Alexander was left in a coma for seven days. During this week, his neocortex, the part of the brain that is responsible for thinking and creating, didn't work at all. From a scientific perspective, it was

absolutely impossible for him to have any conscious experience, and yet, he claims to have been to another reality, a different world of consciousness that doesn't need a functioning brain to exist. The doctors who took care of him had lost all hope that he would ever wake up again, but against all odds, he did. And he came back with a message: There is a life after death. His experience of this other world was so vivid and real, a brain incapable of any kind of activity, could have never come up with imagining a whole new reality.

Hardcore skeptics will still find a logical explanation for what happened to Eben Alexander and all the other people who had a similar experience. On the one hand, I can't blame them, but on the other hand, it is rather one-dimensional to assume that there can't be something bigger than us. An incident in my own life proves to me that there is more between heaven and earth than the eyes can see. A few years ago, my mother told me about what happened to me when I was a baby. I was about a few weeks old when my mother began to have dreams about me not breathing anymore. Then one day, when it was usually time for me to be fed, my mother was unsettled because I was still asleep. Driven by this unshakable feeling that something was wrong, she went to check on me. Suddenly, it was as if all the nightmares she had had the days before became reality. My lips were already pale, so she took me into her arms, but I was limp, lifeless. Not having learned how to properly resuscitate a baby, she quickly put me on the changing table and started to move my legs, trying to bring me back, which she did eventually. Anyone would expect a baby that almost died from crib death to cry. But I didn't cry. I opened my eyes and smiled at my mother as if I had seen the most beautiful angel on the other side. Of course, I have no memory of what had happened. What I do know with certainty is that the premonition of my mother saved my life.

Although I don't know if I truly got a glimpse of the afterlife back then, I do have an idea of what it could be like. It's rather a feeling than a vision. However, maybe it will be like everyone says. Maybe there will be a tunnel, a bright light guiding me. Maybe I will meet Jesus or Buddha or any other prophet. Maybe there will be angelic figures awaiting me. Maybe there will be a Garden of Eden, a sort of paradise with breathtaking landscapes and glorious food. Even if none of this will happen, I at least hope to see all of my loved ones again. The thing I'm absolutely sure of is that there will be peace. A sense of unity and unconditional love. I imagine heaven to be a place without judgment or prejudice. A place of freedom and acceptance. This is not to say that death is easy and life here on earth is only a struggle. On the contrary, life is precious and death can be hard and dreadful. Especially for the ones, we leave behind. But I like to believe that anyone would agree that seeing death as taking an Uber ride home makes it a lot less scary.

On Becoming an Adult

By Tina Wolf

“That horrifying moment when you are looking for an adult, but you realise you are an adult. So you look around for an older adult. An adultier adult. Someone better at adulting than you.” (Internet meme, author unknown)

When I was a child, I believed that by the time they turned 30, people had their lives sorted out. At 30, you were a proper adult. Now that I have just turned 40, I know this to be untrue. It is in fact a complete and utter lie. I still look around and think, there are “real adults” and then there is me. Real adults have all their paperwork neatly sorted in different folders marked “insurance” “taxes” or “bills”. I have a big box full of paperwork that gets sorted out just before I have to file my taxes. Real adults track their expenses. I have never done that even though deep down I know I probably should. Real adults dress their age. I most definitely do not – and believe me when I say I have tried! But even in a pinstripe suit, I constantly get asked whether I am the new intern rather than the English teacher when I encounter a new group of serious, besuited German businesspeople at a new company I am meant to teach a course of business English. So I might as well not bother. “Smart casual” is probably as close as it gets.

This is not to say that I cannot be a responsible adult when I need to be. Over ten years of being mostly self-employed have taught me how to be organised (most of the time) and have my paperwork in order – albeit only at the last minute when the Finanzamt starts sending out stern reminders regarding deadlines for tax returns. I had to learn a few painful and expensive lessons along the way though.

Being a mature, competent, functioning adult is not an inborn ability. It must be learned. I learned it by leaving home when I was 18, going to university and living in a shared flat with other students. My parents had given me a solid foundation by teaching me basic survival skills such as cooking, budgeting for life’s necessities and how to sort laundry. I was lucky in this respect; a lot of my fellow first-semester students did not come equipped with those skills. I am sure one incident involving a raw egg in its shell exploding in the microwave could have been avoided, had the person in question come to university with even rudimentary cooking skills. So, should “how to adult” be part of the school curriculum? And what exactly does this involve? Here is my own, by no means exhaustive list of things one should be able to do to survive at university and beyond. One should

1. have learned to cook a few basic meals and know where to shop for ingredients
2. be able to manage with the money available (a tough one, I have to admit, especially when there are all these bookshops around with their tempting displays of the latest novels!)
3. be aware that taxes and health insurance exist and know which other insurances might be useful
4. know how to do laundry and take care of your clothes
5. be able to read a pay slip
6. know how to file taxes

7. at university: be aware of your course requirements; when entering the workforce: know the do's and don'ts of job applications.

I am sure there are many more, but these are a few of the basics and should leave you well-equipped for life. Some of these could and should be taught at schools. If I were in charge of curriculum design, I would include life skills alongside Maths, Sciences, Modern Languages, Literature and all the other subjects, possibly as part of a “Home Economics” course.

As I said earlier, as a child I thought all the adults I was surrounded by had their lives sorted out and knew what they were doing. Now I know better. “Fake it till you make it” is definitely a brilliant tactic to employ. This is not to say that we should be stuck in some sort of Peter Pan life of never growing up. At some point, we all need to grow up and take charge of our own lives. Being a student at university is perfect for testing the waters, taking first steps towards complete independence without having full adult responsibilities. There is no-one to tell you to hand in your homework or go to bed at a sensible time and it is up to you to learn what does and does not work. But overall, the consequences are not quite as catastrophic as missing mortgage payments or not going to work. That said, there is still room for indulging your inner child even as an adult. The trick is to know when this is appropriate and when it is not. As an adult, I can still enjoy Disney movies or watch *Die Sendung Mit Der Maus*. I can still wear a band t-shirt, just not to the office (though I have to refer to my earlier point re: pinstripe suits here.) It is entirely possible to jump in puddles and file your taxes on the same day. As C. S. Lewis put it: “When I became a man, I put away childish things, including the fear of childishness and the desire to be very grown up.”¹

As an adult, you do not have to have it together all the time. Let's be honest here: nobody does. But you should have your life together at least most of the time. Having health insurance and being in control of one's finances are two vital skills one should have. Being able to cook and keep a reasonably clean house are a further two – being able to conduct microbiological studies in your fridge is probably not something one should aim for. Keep those in the lab where they belong. But other than that, enjoy being an adult whilst rocking that pinstripe combined with Converse, just like David Tennant in his role as the 10th Doctor! “There's no point being grown-up if you can't be childish sometimes,”² after all.

1 Lewis, C. S.. “On Three Ways of Writing for Children.” *On Stories: And Other Essays on Literature*. Harvest Books 2002

2 „Robot“. *Doctor Who*. Performance by Tom Baker. Season 12. Episode 12.1 BBC 1974/75

The Fortunes of Reading Literature

By Ronja Iding

In Jayne Anne Philip's own words, "Literature can teach us how to live before we live, and how to die before we die." Philip's point is that literature teaches us how to live without having to live and how to die without having to die. Through literature we can live many lives and experience many different life standards. We are even able to skip the negative parts of each life and focus on the good parts, but if we do not skip the negative parts, we are able to learn. We can adapt, and we are able to see different perspectives, which can lead to becoming a better person in reality – or a worse one.

I agree that literature is able to teach us these things, but in order to learn them we as the readers have to put in our fair share of listening and understanding. Keeping an open mind while reading is the most important thing a reader must do. Because if we did not keep an open mind, we would not be able to learn or understand the story that is being told.

An example of where I had to keep an open mind to learn is *Cobra Kai*. The thought of Johnny Lawrence becoming the main character, and that resulting in me seeing life through his eyes was not appealing to me at first. Being a fan of *The Karate Kid* as a child resulted in me developing a strong dislike for Johnny Lawrence. In *The Karate Kid* Johnny was the bad guy, the bully, the guy who thought too highly of himself and treated everybody else horribly. In *Cobra Kai* he still has that guy inside of him, but as always, the more you watch the more you understand why he became this person. The backstory always explains why a character became the way he is, but it does not justify it. Nonetheless, I started liking Johnny the more I got to know him. At this point, waiting for season 4, I am fond of him, and I respect him as a person.

I respect him because he is a person who follows what they say. He only speaks when he feels strongly about something and then he acts. Johnny is a karate teacher; in the show he provides the lives of his students with meaning. He turns their lives, and along with them his own life around. But most importantly, Johnny Lawrence has a heart of gold; he cares about other people. However, I am not so sure if he cares about himself – he has not been taught to do so.

Many characters in literature are complex and almost every character shows us a reason to accept them. Everybody who has ever read a piece of literature or watched a movie knows how true this statement is. Literature is made for us to sink into other perspectives, live through events along with characters we love or hate and see the world through their eyes. In a way we become part of the story and get attached to certain characters. We live through other characters, and we die through them, too, or we see someone die through their eyes. Literature makes it possible for us to experience someone else's heartbreak without having to feel broken ourselves.

By reading a book we enter another world with characters that do not exist in our world, no matter how much we want them to. They are not real. But they can feel very real while reading the book. We can pretend that they are real during the process of reading. We get to meet them and grow fond of them or form some kind of bond. This results in us feeling what

they feel, but in a mild way. It does not hurt us the way it hurts them if something horrible happens.

And then, of course, there is always the possibility of closing a book and escaping from the heartbreak that might be happening in there, even if it is just momentarily.

In conclusion, literature teaches us about life and death in a way that we can cope with. Most of the things I learned about come from literature because I am only 19 years old. I have not experienced a lot myself yet. I tend to look for literature when I want to learn about things in a less brutal way. It is a perfect way to learn to accept life and death because they are real and sooner or later, we are all going to experience them.

Prepare Kids for the Worst

By Corinna Schroll

In her article *Schools should heed calls to do lockdown drills without traumatizing kids instead of abolishing them* (The Conversation, 12.02.2020), Associate Professor of Criminal Justice Jaclyn Schildkraut writes about the importance of lockdown drills at schools in the US.

She mentions a report that suggests lockdown drills should not be a surprise, involve realistic details, or include kids. Some people even call for the abolishing of lockdown drills.

While Schildkraut agrees with the report that these drills shouldn't be traumatizing to children, she argues children should still be included in lockdown drills to practice for a real school shooting. Given the deaths of four students in a November 30, 2021 shooting by a fifteen-year-old, such drills are essential. They save lives.

She makes the distinction between lockdown exercises as opposed to lockdown drills. In exercises, there may be someone pretending to be an active shooter with a toy weapon as well as a few students covered in fake blood who pretend to be wounded. These exercises seem over the top and needlessly terrifying for everyone partaking in them. The lockdown drills are a practice to prepare the children without traumatizing them. Kids don't need to be exposed to the blood and screams of their fellow students, even as an act. Schildkraut writes that "nobody sets schools on fire during fire drills to make them seem realistic. Instead, everyone practices how to respond so that it's easier to do the right thing in frightening situations."

I do agree with Schildkraut: There is no need to reenact a scenario that is already traumatizing in such a realistic manner that someone may actually be injured. Teachers as well as students have been injured by fake rubber ammunition during these lockdown exercises before.

I work part-time in a primary school and have been responsible for a group of children during a fire drill before. Some kids stayed calm, but others became very anxious and struggled to keep a clear mind. While these drills prepare children for a real fire, the procedures do not need to be more anxiety-inducing by making them more realistic. I don't want to imagine what a school shooting "reenactment" with false firearms and some students pretending to be dying might do to the psyche of children.

But abolishing the lockdown drills entirely would leave children unprepared for a real school shooting. This could potentially lead to more deaths if the children do not know how to act in this situation of crisis – they might even end up running into the shooter when they're trying to get themselves to safety. Teachers may lose control over the situation when the students have never practiced the safety measures of a lockdown.

There once was a false lockdown when I went to secondary school, which was caused by a nearby construction worker accidentally cutting a cable. Our teacher kept calm, and so did we as we followed her instructions. But later I heard that especially the younger students had all gone into a panic and started crying instead of listening to their teachers' instructions. School

shootings may not be as frequent in Germany as they are in the US, but this false lockdown is an example of why lockdown drills themselves are so important.

As Schildkraut puts it herself, “Building confidence enhances the ability to do what’s needed during an emergency, our research indicates.” If you are prepared for an emergency, responding correctly is much easier than when you are caught off guard. This benefit outweighs the possible downsides.

Another important point Schildkraut mentions is “that only preparing teachers for lockdowns is short-sighted”. Teachers might be killed by a shooter, and in that situation, their students must be able to make decisions on their own. Preparing both teachers and students empowers both groups, enabling all to survive.

Schildkraut closes with the idea that “(...) kids should be prepared, but also that drills don’t have to be scary to be effective.” I fully endorse this conclusion, as I too believe that preparing children for the worst can only help to keep them safe. But these preparations must be age-appropriate and as little traumatizing as possible. Children deserve to have a peaceful childhood but should be prepared for the real world, especially in a country where the general population is allowed to carry firearms. If lockdown drills help children to act with a clearer mind and more confidence in a life-threatening situation, the drills are important and should not be abolished.

Showcasing the Brilliance of Taylor Swift's Storytelling – A Snippet of “champagne problems”

By Katja Kramer

In Taylor Swift's own words, songwriting can be a way of “preserving memories” (Swift, 2019). You can find that concept realized in numerous songs of hers that are either known or rumored to be composed of autobiographical elements, like “Dear John” or “Mr. Perfectly Fine.” However, besides her talent to preserve actual chapters in her life by transforming them into remarkable lyrics, the American singer-songwriter has exceptional *storytelling* skills, which may have always been obvious, but which she has never demonstrated more clearly and beautifully than in the shape of her two recent studio albums *folklore* and *evermore* that contain songs that pull the audience into mesmerizing worlds with relatable characters, telling captivating stories.

Though there are also other significant factors, like the variety of different genres explored by her in the course of her career or her vocal performance, that make Swift's music popular, her exceptional talent in terms of songwriting is what makes her stand out for a lot of people — people who go as far as calling Taylor Swift “a queen when it comes to writing absolutely iconic bridges” (Pontes, 2020). Whenever I hear somebody swoon over her songwriting, I agree without hesitation. Even though there is a number of people who object that Swift often revisits the same motifs by frequently singing about failed relationships and heartbreak, I do not see why writing about topics that a large part of the audience relates to and enjoys hearing Swift's powerfully verbalized perspective on should be considered an issue — it rather brings people together and shows that they are never alone when they feel a certain type of way.

Though a song traditionally consists of other essential parts as well, critics often like to accentuate the bridges written by Swift. According to the general definition, in music, a bridge is “a contrasting section that prepares for the return of the original material section” (Wikipedia, 2021). Typically, there is an obvious change in terms of the speed or other significant traits of the melody. However, *in the given context*, one can use one of Swift's bridges to primarily showcase her outstanding songwriting and storytelling skills — regardless of whether the part of the song that is discussed is a bridge, a verse, an outro or else.

When people talk about her bridges, for many of Swift's listeners those that she wrote for “All Too Well,” “Getaway Car” or “Cardigan,” to name a few, very often rank among the best. To name another brilliant example — “champagne problems,” which is a song Swift's boyfriend Joe Alwyn co-wrote with her for her ninth studio album *evermore*. She herself has said that the song is about “longtime college sweethearts [that] had very different plans for the same night, one to end it and one who brought a ring” (Twersky, 2020). So basically, the lyrics tell the fictional story of a proposal rejected by the first-person speaker. But this is not all of it — many believe it is safe to say that the speaker struggles with her mental health (Andaloro, 2020), which is very likely *why* she feels like she cannot be with her beloved, and I fully agree that there is a lot of evidence that supports that view, especially when taking a close look at the bridge. It is the lyrics in its entirety that makes listening to the song an emotionally moving experience; nonetheless, as stated by countless people around me *and on*

the internet, the bridge is what really makes “champagne problems” the masterpiece that people from different places all over the world consider it to be.

Beginning the bridge with “Your Midas touch on the Chevy door / November flush and your flannel cure” (ll. 1-2), Swift makes a reference to a figure in Greek mythology that turned “everything he touched into gold” (*The Free Dictionary*) — which can be understood as the speaker talking about the way her partner had the ability to make everything better, to make every moment they shared more precious. When she got cold (l. 2: “November flush”), he put a piece of his clothing — made of “flannel” (l. 2) — around her, warming her up. The speaker goes on recalling a joke she made in response to her partner telling her that the “dorm [they lived in at college] was once a madhouse” (l. 3), saying that it was “made for [her]” (l. 4). Swift uses this method of storytelling to give the listeners an insight into how comfortable the speaker felt around her beloved — so comfortable that she even joked about her mental health struggles.

“How evergreen, our group of friends / Don’t think we’ll say that word again” (ll. 5-6), Swift sings and the audience wonders what “word” it is that they will never say again. It could be “evergreen,” it could be “friends,” but it might as well be “our”. While there might be critics who will say that this concept is confusing, I say it is clever. Because in the end, it almost does not matter which of the words the line refers to, for the message remains the same — whatever group of friends they used to be part of, this group will no longer be what it once was.

To me, “And soon they’ll have the nerve to deck the halls / That we once walked through” (ll. 7-8) is a particularly amazing line for one major reason — I did not notice it or the meaning behind it the first time that I listened to the song, but when I *did*, I was stunned by how creatively Taylor Swift put one’s lack of understanding for how the world around you keeps spinning while you are heartbroken into words. Although she does that so subtly, Swift still manages to get the speaker’s emotional state across; giving an insight into how resentful, in a way, the speaker feels inside when taking a look at other people’s lives. The couple in the song has just broken up, they are each suffering in their own way, and *yet*, people have the “nerve” (l. 7) to go on with *their* lives — which is absolutely normal of course, but in that moment when you feel broken, you simply cannot understand how everything around you just keeps going.

In the further course of the bridge, the speaker looks back on how she realized she could no longer stay with her partner (l. 10: “I never was ready”), as he, on the other hand, was begging her to stay (l. 12: “’Til someone’s on their knees”). Before expressing her assurance that everything will work out eventually for her now-*ex*-lover (l. 16: “But you’ll find the real thing instead”) with finality, she thinks of how she got called “fucked in her head” (l. 15) by people for not accepting the proposal. That remark leads back to her hinted mental illness, the origin of which is rather unclear. While she felt comfortable enough joking about her struggles with her former partner, remarks like these are clearly linked to hurt when commented on by somebody else. Even if that very comment was unintentional and the ones it was made by did not mean to refer to her actual mental health — perhaps being unaware of her struggles, even — it does not leave the speaker unaffected.

People who cannot or do not want to relate to Taylor Swift and do not enjoy her music can make all sorts of points. They can criticize that her music deals with a limited range of topics, — though one can easily refute that argument by listing songs like “The Best Day,” which Swift wrote for her mother, or “seven”, which is about the innocence of childhood and

touches upon the topic of domestic violence — they can say that they simply prefer a genre different from the ones explored by her, or whatever else people find to pass criticism on. What cannot be denied is that Swift’s songs reach an astonishingly broad audience that *does* relate to her lyrics, pulling at people’s heartstrings, while time and time again leading to admiration and the wish for even more powerfully written songs, more albums, more stories. Honestly speaking, judging from the *bridges* she constructs — “champagne problems” being one of them — one might think Taylor Swift has a professional degree in architecture. Her songwriting is *one* amazing element of her music, but the aspect of *storytelling* that she has brought to another level in her recent albums is a whole different form of art that makes Swift’s music so popular and her one of the greatest artists of this generation.

Song “Champagne Problems” by Taylor Swift:

(...)

- 1 Your Midas touch on the Chevy door
November flush and your flannel cure
“This dorm was once a madhouse”
I made a joke, “Well, it’s made for me”
- 5 How evergreen, our group of friends
Don’t think we’ll say that word again
And soon they’ll have the nerve to deck the halls
That we once walked through
One for the money, two for the show
- 10 I never was ready, so I watch you go
Sometimes you just don’t know the answer
’Til someone’s on their knees and asks you
“She would’ve made such a lovely bride
What a shame she’s fucked in her head,” they said
- 15 But you’ll find the real thing instead
She’ll patch up your tapestry that I shred
(...)

for full lyrics, see: <https://www.musixmatch.com/lyrics/Taylor-Swift/champagne-problems>

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Let's Keep a Light on for the Arts

By Tina Wolf

It is my firm belief that the arts are a crucial part of human existence. Tom Pauls, German actor and cabaret artist, has claimed that theatre isn't merely "system-relevant", rather it is so much more than just that. It is "life-relevant." I agree. Humans need visual art and storytelling and music and dance. We are not on this planet to just eat, sleep and work. From sitting around a campfire in prehistoric times, telling stories, to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, to the ballads of later centuries and modern-day poetry slams and YouTube "Storytime" videos, humans have always told each other stories and it is only through stories that we experience what it means to be truly human. A functioning democracy needs the arts to ask the hard, unpopular questions and hold a mirror up to society

The arts have always been chronically underfunded, even before the pandemic struck at the beginning of 2020. This has become even more painfully apparent in the current situation, where many venues are struggling to keep afloat financially. Tours have had to be postponed and performances cancelled. Around 1.7 million people work in the creative industry in Germany. 34 million people attended the theatre and concert performances in 2019; 114 million people went to see an exhibition at a museum ¹. The arts, apart from their cultural importance, are worth a lot of money and keep many people employed. The pandemic has put an abrupt stop to this, and a lot of smaller venues are struggling massively. Venues have had to put up with restrictions such as reduced audience capacities due to social distancing rules. Extra security had to be employed to check test certificates, disinfectant needed to be bought and signs made. All of this means extra expense for theatres already operating with a very tight margin even before corona.

I'm a trained stage manager and stage electrician, so the entertainment industry is very close to my heart. I've been following the situation here in Germany and in the UK very closely, and let's just say it's truly dire. So many of my former colleagues and so many venues are struggling. As an avid photographer, I love taking photographs at concerts. All the pictures of live gigs I have taken over the course of the last two years were taken at Schlachtgarten Krefeld, where the dedicated, brilliant teams of the Kulturrampe Krefeld and the Schlachthof have teamed up with a wide variety of bands to allow us to enjoy at least some live music in these difficult times. Those concerts have been a highlight for me during the first corona summer, when nobody knew what was going to happen and we had just come out of the first lockdown. They were a lifeline a year later, when it felt at times as if this pandemic would never end.

And yes, I know, why should we bother helping the entertainment sector at a time when the health sector is creaking under the strain and the education system is collapsing? Because stories and music are medicine, too, not for the body but for the soul. The motto of the concert series was "Kein Rock 'n' Roll ist auch keine Lösung" and I think that just about sums it up. So please consider supporting the arts in the coming months if you can. Buy a ticket, buy a pint at the bar, and don't shout at the stressed-out person telling you that the show has had to be postponed again or even cancelled completely. Let's keep a light on for all those working in the arts and entertainment industry right now. One day, this pandemic will be over, and we

will have to adjust to a new, post-pandemic normal, assess the damages, repair, and re-group. We will need the arts then, more than ever, to make sense of these times and what corona has done to us as individuals and as a society.

1 „Corona-Pandemie: “Eine Welt ohne Theater? Unmöglich!” *Deutsche Welle*.
<https://www.dw.com/de/corona-pandemie-eine-welt-ohne-theater-unm%C3%B6glich/a-53515568> last accessed 29 December 2021

Determination – The Key to Reaching Your Goal

By Evelin Edel

In Leonardo da Vinci's own words "Obstacles cannot stop me; determination brings down any obstacle.", he means that every goal can be fulfilled if you put your mind to it. My interpretation of Da Vinci's quote is that he suggests that even when people say, "your goal is unrealistic" or "you will just get hurt", you can ignore them as long as your determination remains strong. People who doubt ability cannot hinder a determined person. Although Da Vinci was a famous painter, and he was referring to difficulties in painting, his words apply to many trying situations like wanting to get a job, avoiding alcohol, or sticking to a sports plan. Da Vinci implies that to reach a goal one has set for oneself; it is not as important to be in a good physical state as it is to be determined. If you have determination, you are going to reach your goal, even if there will be obstacles or people who try to stop you.

I acknowledge Da Vinci's view and would go as far as saying that determination begins in your mind. To reach a goal, you have to be in the right state of mind. Therefore, you need to burn your goal into your mind. If I want to swim a new personal record in the 1500 m freestyle, it is one thing to have enough muscle mass to drag myself through the water, but it is a whole other thing to have the mental strength to torture myself through almost 17 minutes of racing. I visualize every single detail of my race before I jump into the water. By doing so, I know that I am mentally prepared and strong enough to set a new personal record. I think about my start, my turns, and my stroke count for 17 minutes straight. During his time, nothing else matters. I cannot allow myself to be distracted from the cheering crowd or the girls who swim in the lanes next to me. I only focus on myself and my race. This is the only way to feel good while racing and to set a personal record. Determination is the key aspect you need to have to reach any goal.

Having just argued that determination is the only way to reach your goal, let us now turn our attention to what happens if you do not feel a strong desire to reach it. Being tired mentally and physically is normal. It is human to feel weak sometimes, and it happens to each one of us. By claiming this, I say that feeling weak is an obstacle that is going to show up in the process of chasing your goal. There are many obstacles in my process of preparing for a competition. One time, I do not feel motivated to drag myself through the water. The other time, I do not want to swim fast at a competition because I feel exhausted. Although I am in good physical shape, I unconsciously tell myself that I will not swim a personal best time. My mind is an obstacle for me at this moment. If my mind and determination are not present, I am unfocused, and I will not be swimming a personal record. My mind is blocking me. This is an obstacle that is not going to disappear because I am not determined enough to bypass it.

The upshot of all this is that Leonardo da Vinci's quote is timeless, and the plain truth. Obstacles, mental and physical ones, will stop you on your way to reaching your goal if you do not burn for it. Your physique is not important to chase a goal. Mental stability and determination are the key aspects to reaching a goal; they bring down any obstacle. I am convinced of this because my own experience in competitive swimming has proven it to me. My physique does not matter if I want to swim a personal best time. I need to be determined and tell myself that I will swim the best.

On Separating the Artist from the Work

By Léa Michaud

In France in 2020, a big debate arose when director Roman Polanski received the César for best director. Polanski was tried in 1977 for the sexual abuse of a minor and the US courts have upheld 6 charges including rape. He fled the United States for France. Today he is still considered as a fugitive in the United States, but he can circulate freely in France, Poland and Switzerland. A lot of celebrities reacted, and two opinions were created after his nomination: those who supported the director, signing a petition because they considered his films as masterpieces and those who boycotted him and his works. A French documentary writer said: “Unless we were able to separate Polanski in time, at the time, from his future victims, we should now separate the man from the artist. Great.” So, why we should separate the artist from the work?

Lately I’ve been shocked to learn the truth about artist Picasso. This world-famous artist, always taught in schools and praised by the media, was a sexual predator. A man who raped almost every woman he painted, a man who was physically and psychologically violent, a man admired the world over. Even though I consider myself a feminist and one trying to learn as much as possible about abuse of women, I only just found out about Picasso’s acts of cruelty. Why aren’t more people talking about this problem? Thousands of celebrities and artists are convicted of or likely to have done something unacceptable. They are complicit in crime, animal abuse, racism, homophobia and so on. However, I fail to understand how some people can always support these artists on the pretext that they have a talent or that they are known. Do these people think about the harm that these artists have done to their victims and how painful it must be for them, that the person who hurt them so much have so much visibility?

A few years ago, I loved actor and singer Ansel Elgort. In 2018, he was charged and confessed to sexually assaulting an underage fan. After these revelations, I stopped following this actor on the social media and stopped listening to this music. I put myself in his victim’s shoes and wondered how difficult it must be to see his attacker on TV, in the movies or even hear him on the radio. Following these revelations, he was canceled and silenced but what was my surprise to see him appear in a movie again as a lead role.

We know it, we live in a patriarchal, white and heteronormative society and this society supports criminals. Things have changed slightly: thanks to the “me too” movement, many celebrity crimes have come to light. But it is still hard to immediately believe the woman who was the victim. How could a good, successful and rich man do that? So, it must be the woman who lies to get success and money, or she sought it out. People and media prefer to blame the victim rather than the aggressor.

I think the new generation tends to separate the artist from the work more because of the cancel culture. It is easy today, thanks to social media, to cancel a person or work that has done, said or written something wrong. The movie *Mulan*, released in 2020, was boycotted because some scenes were filmed in the Chinese region of Xinjiang, where Beijing is accused of violations of the rights of Uyghurs.

However, generation X or even Y tend to separate the artist from the work because it is not the work that has committed their crimes. I think on the one hand they are right but admiring the works of criminals gives them visibility. The work represents the artist and defines him. So, by admiring the work you admire the artist.

Often the crimes are not considered serious enough. I am talking about crimes such as rape, sexual harassment or racism. However, if Hitler or a jihadist exhibited works it would be appalling, which makes sense. But I find it unacceptable to judge an artist and his works without taking into consideration his behavior toward other human beings.

Short Stories

Wanderlust or How I Feel Glued to My Place

By Ann-Katrin van Loosen

She stood there as long as she could remember. That small but big street light. Like a tall gentleman with a hat.

At day her light is off, invisible like the stars. Still, they are always up there. No matter the darkness or a storm, light always keeps humanity company.

On bright summer days, the trees will protect the street light with their shadows. Which is really nice because her metal could get really hot. And on dull winter days, sometimes human in cosy coats would visit her and bring knitted scarves; she liked the colourful ones the most. In those moments the birds watch from their seats in the treetops, hoping for the kind ones among the two-legged giants to leave them a handful of delicious seeds.

The street light likes to watch too. She likes to keep watch on those who walk through the park. Those who will hasten past her but also those who will lie down and savour the sun. Sometimes nibbling on small foods making the street light wish to know how these treats taste.

The next lamp is far away. So the street light would get sad sometimes, wishing to be able to talk and share her observations with them. But then she will be greeted by the singing birds or one of the bunnies that hop through the park. On lucky days she'll even be greeted by lively dogs, wagging their little tails so much that it looks like they will take off any moment, like a helicopter. And on rare days, on the bench across from her, a lazy cat will doze off in the comfort of the sun.

And when the little but big street light watches the humans leave at the end of the day, she asks herself what the outside world looks like. How far must the land stretch behind the sundown? Does it have more water than the small pond in this place? Where foreign ducks will idle away their days.

Seeing how the blue sky stretches so far above the park, there must be a lot of other wonderful places full of life.

„Oh how I wish I could be able to travel the world!“ thinks the small but big street light to herself.

Last Word

Three Tips for Handling Pandemic Doldrums

By Melissa Knox-Raab

(1) *Find a complete escape.* Read a thriller or travel. I spent a week in the remotest area of France I could find, surrounded by roomfuls of art, books, cats and two very reclusive friends, who devote their lives to reading, painting, designing and sculpting. We took a single trip to a grocery store in heavy-duty masks, walked dogs in a setting reminiscent of Sherwood Forest, fed donkeys cauliflower greens, and ate five-course candlelit dinners consisting in a garlicky soup decorated with crème fraîche, a series of salads, a cheese course, and chocolate. Conversations ranged from mystics to revolution, in other words, topics normally outside my range.

(2) *Write a poem a day.* On anything. I suggest starting with an object. Five lines on one of the following: the way it looks, the way it sounds, the way it feels, the way it smells or the way it tastes.

(3) *Cook a favorite (but very easy) meal.* A delightful vegan recipe involves nothing more than olive oil, a few bell peppers, a few cloves of garlic, and a few sprigs of fresh rosemary. Slice in two or three large pieces each pepper and remove seeds; peel garlic. Arrange in baking dish lightly greased with olive oil, with the garlic cloves tucked under the peppers. Insert in oven at highest setting until the peppers are black—charred. Remove and set on tile to cool; cover with aluminum foil if you like. When cool, peel off the charred skin and arrange in serving dish; add olive oil and sprigs of rosemary. Serve with fresh baguette and a glass of Prosecco or red wine.

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