AUTHORITY

ESSAYS ON BEING RIGHT

'A galaxy-brain-level thinker' Torrey Peters

ANDREA LONG CHU

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize in Criticism

Authority

Also by Andrea Long Chu

Females

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To J,
who will always be the boss of me

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Preface

I got the title for this book from Frank Rich, the recovering theater critic, who wrote to me last year to say that, while he had personally wished never to think of *The Phantom of the Opera* again, he admired the authority I had brought to a genre as arcane as musical theater. A few weeks later, my editor at *New York* magazine called to let me know I had won the Pulitzer Prize—news so shocking that I immediately doubted it when we hung up. It turned out she was telling the truth.

This book collects work published between 2018 and 2023. Roughly half of it comprises my freelance book reviews, as well as a series of literary essays I wrote for *n+1*, a little magazine forever dear to my heart. Much of this work centers on themes of desire and disappointment that obsessed me greatly in those days. The other half consists of essays written for *New York* magazine, where I have worked as a critic since 2021. There I have had the enormous privilege of writing five or six longform pieces a year with the time and budget to comprehensively research the topic at hand while benefiting from an ever-deepening relationship with a terrific editor. This, for the reader eager to skip to the end, is the secret of all real authority: money.

I also include here two new essays: "Criticism in a Crisis" and "Authority." The first is a polemic and a statement of purpose; the second is an intellectual history and, I think, a work of political philosophy. Each in its way represents an attempt to *historicize* the peculiar tendency among critics to gnash their teeth over the state of criticism during any given period, including our own. I am hardly the first to point this tendency out, but I have never encountered a serious analysis of it.

With the exception of grammatical errors and a few infelicities of

language—I seem to have used the phrase *Icarian optimism* twice in the span of a year—the old essays appear here as originally published. Here and there, I have restored a sentence that was cut for space. Where irresistible, I have added postscripts. The impulse to tidy up is, as you might expect, hardest to suppress when it comes to work that may now strike the author as juvenilia. "I would not deny being one of those critics who educate themselves in public, but I see no reason why all the haste and waste involved in my self-education should be preserved in a book," wrote the art critic Clement Greenberg. Alas, haste and waste is all there is. If there is any profit in looking back at these essays now, I hope it is because the crooked path I was blazing in those days may now, in the gentler light of dusk, assume the character of a perfect line. Perhaps I was up to something after all.

Brooklyn, New York
April 2024

Authority

Criticism in a Crisis

In the summer of 2023, I was commissioned by the 92nd Street Y, the storied arts center on the Upper East Side, to give a lecture on the state of criticism today. This sounded to me like something Susan Sontag would have done, a thought with which I flattered myself immensely, and as the date approached I began to entertain the notion that I really did have something big and serious to say about how the critic might go about resolving the crisis in criticism that we have heard so much about lately. By *the critic*, I meant myself.

Then a bulldozer tore through a fence across the sea, and within hours Hamas fighters had massacred more than a thousand people in southern Israel. In retaliation for the events of October 7, Israel's far-right government launched a brutal siege of Gaza that, as of this writing, has killed thirty-three thousand people. (The count is almost certainly an underestimate.) It was clear that this was the next bloody phase in Israel's long campaign of occupation and genocide in Palestine—what Rashid Khalidi has called the hundred years' war on the Palestinian people. In the weeks that followed, many writers and artists in the United States who dissented from the overwhelmingly pro-Israel consensus were subject to a swift wave of suppression. The editor of *Artforum*, for whom I wrote two of the pieces in this collection, was fired for publishing a letter of solidarity with the Palestinian people; an award-winning writer exited *The New York Times* after signing a different open letter calling for an end to the occupation; and brave student protesters across the country were doxed, physically threatened, and disparaged by the media, which for weeks seemed to devote itself to regurgitating Israeli propaganda and casting doubt over the "true" death toll in Gaza.

Among the institutions taking a hard pro-war stance was the 92nd Street Y itself, which began life in 1874 as the Young Men's Hebrew Association. On October 8—one day after the Hamas attack—the Y had issued a statement of unconditional support for Israel that spoke ominously of "a time for war and a time for peace." Two weeks later, the Y's leadership abruptly pulled the plug on a book talk with the novelist Viet Thanh Nguyen, whom I happened to have met just the night before, on account of his having signed yet another open letter calling for a cease-fire, this one published in the *London Review of Books* and bearing the names of hundreds of writers, including myself. The decision to disinvite Nguyen made national news and drew swift rebukes from longtime friends of the Y, with several announcing their intention to withdraw from their upcoming events. The entire staff of the Y's Unterberg Poetry Center, including its beloved director of eighteen years, bravely resigned in protest—leaving leadership with little choice but to cancel the center's entire fall slate.

So there I was, trying to think about this fabled crisis in criticism, when a set of real-world crises—concerning the rights of nations and the claims of the soul—became impossible to ignore. I hope the war on Gaza will have done for my generation of writers what the Vietnam War did for earlier generations: that is, it will have shot a beam of moral clarity through a complacent intelligentsia. For what a war like this one asks the left-wing critic to do is to distinguish between a political crisis with clear actors and material stakes, on the one hand, and the self-aggrandizing existential crisis that criticism is always going through, on the other.

We plainly do not lack for the former. The past decade alone has seen the continued militarization of the police, family separations at the border, the criminalization of abortion and gender-affirming health care, a harrowing pandemic, and the literal blotting out of the sun here in New York by wildfires burning hundreds of miles away. And yet what have we been yodeling about here in the Alps of *Kultur*? The idea that young people, besotted with their own identity categories and invented grievances, have gotten a vise grip on the culture industry, which they are blackmailing into making bad movies. The fact that the left itself often cannot resist complaining about "wokeness"—I implicate here some of the essays in this very book—has increasingly struck me as a serious

intellectual failure. It is undoubtedly true that political consciousness is easily commodified in the age of social media; this, we may observe without great controversy or, indeed, effort. But to sound the alarm about a public that is too busy virtue signaling or playing the victim to get around to the serious business of *reading* is to take one's place in the grand parade of idiocies that marches in circles around the sacred cathedral of art. Thus one finds the anti-woke leftist darkly reminding his comrades that it is fascism which aims to aestheticize politics. One dearly wishes he remembered the second half of the Walter Benjamin quote: "Communism replies by politicizing art."

Let us do just that. We may begin by asking whether this supposed crisis in criticism is a historical one. We are certainly *told* that it is. I might have opened my talk at the 92nd Street Y by observing that today's critics are succumbing to the "perdition of egotism"; that they are reducing art to a "statement being made in the form of a work of art"; that they are viewing everything through a "religio-political color-filter"; that they are building their reputations on the "violence and extremity of [their] opposition to other critics"; that they are ossifying "the living tissues of literature"; that they are practicing "little more than a branch of homiletics"; that they are trying to "limit the subject-matter at the disposal of the artist"; that they are demonstrating a "resolute avoidance of shades and distinctions"; that they are getting by on a "sententious, cavalier, dogmatical tone"; and that almost all of them are "amateurs of literature" who are frankly angling to "grow important and formidable at very small expense."

None of these observations, I think, would have been terribly controversial today. Nor would they have been mine: they are taken, in fact, from Cynthia Ozick, Susan Sontag, Northrop Frye, T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, H. L. Mencken, Oscar Wilde, Matthew Arnold, William Hazlitt, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Samuel Johnson, writing in 2007, 1966, 1957, 1932, 1923, 1919, 1891, 1864, 1822, 1817, and 1759, respectively. This illustrious cohort cannot be said to have agreed on much. Yet when they sat down to write about the state of their art, each of them concluded that criticism was in the midst of a terrible crisis that bore the unmistakable signature of their exact historical moment. The same crisis in criticism has been, it seems, a unique product of the rise of the British

newspaper *and* a singular effect of the social alienation that followed the First World War *and* an inescapable feature of the decadence of postwar American capitalism. You will see the problem here: any one of these arguments is fatal to all the others.

This is not to say that each successive critic, in presenting a contemporary diagnosis, has been unaware of the chronic character of the disease. "I was complaining not long ago of this prostitution of literary criticism as peculiar to our own times," wrote Hazlitt in 1822, "when I was told that it was just as bad in the time of Pope and Dryden, and indeed worse." But most critics, or at least the ones we still read today, have contented themselves with the simple *noticing* of this pattern, which they either write off as a droll irony of the job or take as validation of their own urge to cry wolf. Consider A. O. Scott in 2016, acknowledging that "in every generation, the majority of critics can be counted on to do it wrong" while also decrying, as if inventing this idea, the "polarized climate of ideological belligerence in which bluster too often substitutes for argument." It is certainly easy to note that criticism has always been in crisis. Yet almost never has this perpetual cycle of amnesia and epiphany led critics to ask whether the purported crisis is *real*, and not just a façade that hides something else. One marvels at this failure of curiosity, especially in a population so preoccupied with itself; one begins to wonder if it really is a failure at all.

It will be necessary to resist the vanity of presentism. When it is claimed today, for instance, that the internet has democratized criticism to a historically unprecedented degree—a worrisome development, given what most critics think of democracy—this certainly *feels* true: one is tempted to say that if Gutenberg made everyone a reader, then Zuckerberg made everyone a writer. But the umbrage taken by the scribbling classes at the putative explosion of opinions online reflects a much older grudge against literacy itself. "All men being supposed able to read, and all readers able to judge, the multitudinous Public, shaped into personal unity by the magic of abstraction, sits nominal despot on the throne of criticism," Coleridge wrote in 1817, but he might as well have been writing for *The Atlantic* last week. The more relevant changes to the profession are the material ones—the decline of print, the merging of the publishing houses, the evaporation of staff writing positions, the pressure

to churn out ad-supported content. And even these are less novel than supposed: Henry James once described the periodicals of his day as a "huge, open mouth which has to be fed."

So we must disaggregate our legitimate fears over the degeneration of legacy media in the digital age from what may be the oldest idea in the history of criticism: the idea that there are simply *too many critics*. No profession has a higher opinion of itself or a lower opinion of its practitioners. "Criticism is a goddess easy of access and forward of advance," wrote Samuel Johnson in 1759, observing that while art takes genius and science takes effort, "every man can exert such judgment as he has upon the works of others." One of the primary tasks of the responsible critic has always been to protect criticism from "the critics"—typically spoken of in the writhing plural. (Alexander Pope called them "half-form'd insects on the banks of Nile.") This typically involves an anxious distinction between criticism, which is an art, and mere "book reviewing," which is a job. Cynthia Ozick has claimed that the critic is like an architect, whereas the reviewer is like a stonemason—as if nothing could be more demeaning to criticism than an association with *labor*. But the sheer volume of abuse to which the lowly book reviewer has been subjected since the eighteenth century is proof enough that criticism has never actually succeeded at insulating itself from the unwashed masses. Its many treatises on proper conduct amount, in retrospect, to a succession of crudely painted NO TRESPASSING signs that imply, above all, the ubiquity of trespassers.

The crisis in criticism thus depends on the mythological figure of the Bad Critic, whose badness must be constantly, hysterically reaffirmed in order to make the good critic look good. To cite the crisis is to participate in a kind of ritual sacrifice, one by which a secret society of serious people may pin its sins on writers with less money or clout. For no critic escapes the pitfalls of moralizing, or restricts herself to the work of art in its purity, or resists the temptation to smuggle in all manner of intellectual contraband; no critic manages to cut out her heart and hide it under the floorboards without leaving a little trail of blood. All that separates the serious critic from the common reviewer is a good mop. In a book of Ozick's from 2000, for instance, we are warned of the "extremist" notion that Jane Austen should be made to endure postcolonial critique simply

because Sir Thomas Bertram happened to own one measly sugar plantation in the West Indies. Yet in the same book, we may read the author's celebrated essay on a shameful stage adaptation of Anne Frank's diary that was guilty of nothing less than the "appropriation" (this very word!) of the memory of the Holocaust. Why the sudden change of tune? Because the second thing comports with Ozick's own politics; the first thing does not.

So there is no keeping politics out of criticism. There is only regulating the flow of traffic. The idea of *art for art's sake*, which continues to enjoy great prestige among the literati today, may give the appearance of tranquil isolationism; in fact, it is a frantic deportation program. One finds an excellent expression of this in the introduction to a slim 1941 volume called *The Intent of the Critic*, edited by Donald Stauffer, a minor literary critic of the midcentury. "When we encounter a writer who is primarily or solely the preacher, the politician, the sociologist, the psychologist, the philosopher, the rhetorician, the salesman, the patron, the blood-relative, or the schoolmate, we must recognize him as such," wrote Stauffer. This is clearly an invitation to paranoia. If a critic says that *Hamlet* is a document of Shakespeare's filial grief, why then, he is an unconscious Freud. If another says that autofiction dramatizes late-capitalist alienation, he is nothing but Marx in Groucho glasses. Nothing less than constant vigilance will keep the bad critic out. If he cannot be physically prevented from writing reviews then he must at least be defined out of existence. "He fails to be a literary critic because his prime interest is not in literature as it exists," wrote Stauffer. "His heart is overseas." That final metaphor is telling: the bad critic, like a homesick soldier who lets the enemy slip behind lines, has forgotten his duty not just to literature but, perhaps, to his country as well.

It would seem absurd to us to claim that the health of the republic turns on one person's review of the latest film or novel. Yet the absurdity of this thought is an ideological accomplishment, not a natural given. It would not have been so absurd in the context of medieval Christianity, where one's response to the beauty of a cathedral, for example, was directly linked with one's place in a spiritual hierarchy, not to mention the divinely mandated political order. Even today, the religious right regularly treats Hollywood like a battleground for the soul of the nation.

This may strike us as illiberal—but that is my point. To the extent that the crisis in criticism has any historical validity at all, it should be understood as a barely sublimated crisis of confidence in liberalism, both as a concrete system of political organization and as a general civic attitude. Adam Gopnik has claimed in its defense that liberalism is a temperament before it is an ideology; a more honest claim is that liberalism is an ideology of good temper. We find it only natural today to rate a critic on the basis of her mental attitude—her poise, her catholicity, her scrupulousness—rather than the ideological content of her judgments. This is the corollary to art for art's sake: *criticism for the sake of criticism*. Hence the paradox of well-regarded critics like James Wood, Zadie Smith, or Adam Kirsch who write with great moral *intensity* but little moral *clarity*. We expect the good critic to leave his own values at the door but not his nose for valuing; we then applaud him for how many other values he can root up without eating them.

Enough of this. We must oppose the scapegoating of the bad critic at every level. I do not mean we should abandon all standards; standards are our whole line of work. It is true that of the criticism being published today, a little is excellent, a little more is adequate, and the lion's share is a dog's breakfast. But bad criticism is bad not because it has been deflowered by political ideology but for all the typical reasons that writing is bad: it is poorly paid, hastily edited, and written mostly by freelancers with so little in the way of financial security, development opportunities, or access to good health care that they may go their entire careers without finding out whether or not they are genuinely untalented. Meanwhile, the vast majority of the advice lobbed their way—that the critic should write with wit, have a sense of tradition, strive to be truthful but prepare to be wrong—is basically identical to the stock advice doled out to *all* writers. Whatever one makes of it, I see little point in rehearsing it. Here is some better advice: *Pay people*. If we really want a "critical mass of critics," as Ozick has called for, then we will have to substantially improve the economic reality of being a critic in this country. That this needs to be stated so emphatically is a sign that it will not happen any time soon. There is no higher truth of criticism than what W. H. Auden once said of his own book reviews: "I wrote them because I needed the money."

We are speaking of the material conditions of being a critic. We

should speak the same way of the critic's objects. The endless debate about whether book reviewing has been too positive or too negative in any given decade is not only a tiresome waste of energy but also a calculated diversion. At heart, it is an objection to the simple fact that *all art originates in the world*. It is never possible to separate the work of art from its "umbilical cord of gold," as Clement Greenberg once put it, nor does the artist herself deserve any special immunity because some corporation decided to publish, produce, or exhibit her work. Indeed, when critics claim that art must be considered "on its own" simply because it is art, they are appealing precisely to the *social* character of art—that is, to its putative status as a protected category within society. I myself have often been characterized as writing "takedowns" of certain authors, a distinction I do not terribly resent. Why shouldn't a book review be personal? It is my understanding that persons are where books come from. My patient copy editors at *New York* have noticed that I like to speak of literature in the past tense—"Dickens wrote," instead of the more standard "Dickens writes." I suspect this is because I am more invested in the material activity of writing than the eternal present of literature. One does not step outside of history just because one is dreaming up a world; no author has ever managed to solve the irritating problem of their own concrete existence. How many reviews could we be spared if we only acknowledged that many novels are really, as Scrooge said to the ghost of Marley, "an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese"?

I am talking about what Fredric Jameson in 1981 called the "scandal of the extrinsic"—the way that a material "accident" can leave a formal mark on a work of art. His example was the late nineteenth-century transition from the three-volume lending-library novel to the cheaper one-volume format, and the consequent modification of the "inner form" of the English novel as such. (We might also think of the three-act structure of the American sitcom, an artifact of an obsolete advertising model that nonetheless continues to exert significant narrative force even on streaming platforms.) Jameson's famous maxim—"Always historicize!"—remains fine advice for any critic today, albeit with an important addendum. The history of criticism itself attests to just how easy it is for the critic to lapse into *false* historicism—namely, the belief that

the present age must be uniquely disastrous just because it is ours. This is really an evolved form of presentism; it has no interest in history other than as a dark backdrop for its glittering narcissism. We may amend the maxim accordingly: *Always historicize—but only if you have to!* Providence there may be in the fall of every sparrow, but history is more discriminating. It takes real historical knowledge and (can it be?) real political values to tell a genuinely new development from the cheap novelties peddled by the social catastrophists.

When I say that the critic must have values, I mean this in both senses of the phrase: the critic cannot *help* but have moral and political beliefs, and therefore he must give serious thought to what he actually believes. Anyone who claims to have no horse in the great derby of American political life is either lying or misinformed about himself; either way, the public has a right to know which horse is his. "Not only should the critic realize the necessity of coordinating his esthetic values with values in all other spheres of life, but he has a duty in a democracy to tell the public what they are," wrote Auden in 1941. "If I find, for instance, that he believes in automatic progress I shall no more trust him than I would trust a philosopher who liked Brahms." This is a small ask, though many critics have historically perceived it as a grave affront. One does not have to require that every critic annually release her moral tax returns in order to claim that, minimally, the reading public has a right to judge her by her actual, sincerely held values and not just by how politely she applies them in the company of strangers.

Now I am not saying that the critic's values must be leftist ones if she is to be recognizable as a critic. The tools of criticism are equally available to the right and the left—in fact, criticism is dominated by the center in the United States, at least in its public, journalistic form—and I see no reason to try to isolate some radical germ within criticism in order to define this fact away. I came of age in an academic literary field littered with inflated political claims; one could not swing a dead white man around campus without hitting a scholar who was purporting to extract the revolution in vitro from the work of some German filmmaker or queer performance artist. This involved, among other things, a basic ignorance of the public sphere, which even the most civic-minded academics still tend to imagine rather as European monks once imagined

the elephant. In truth, there is nothing inherently emancipatory, empowering, or even particularly enlightening about criticism. By insisting on the generic radicalism of "critical thinking," the academic critic hopes to spare herself the labor of defending her actual political beliefs. If only! I myself desire a robust culture of left criticism, both inside and outside the academy, and I have tried to contribute to one over the years. But I have done this not because I believe that all critics should be leftists but because I think leftist values like prison abolition or the right to change sex are substantively superior to others, and I think everyone—critic or no—should agree with me.

Still, I have occasionally been accused, even by others who share my politics, of reducing the work of art to a ship's manifest of ideas. Why bother refuting this? It is true that I tend to treat a novel like an argument, which I am told amounts to riding roughshod over the delicate nuances of fictionality. When a character decides to bomb a hospital and when a journalist advocates for the bombing of a hospital, these are surely different things, and neither of them is a bomb. But I strenuously object to the claim that novels are somehow *more* complex than ideas, on the grounds that the latter can nominally be expressed in plain descriptive prose. It is a rather pernicious form of commodity fetishism, one that can blind even the best critic to the fact that authors very often do have easily identified and reasonably coherent ideologies. I am amazed at how often we labor to suppress the *living character of ideas*, which flow through the same obscure affective channels that fiction writers never tire of claiming for themselves. (To them, I say: Stop reducing ideas to novels!)

If that makes me an ideologue, so be it. I do not think I write in the spirit of polite debate. There is no reason to insist on a false mutuality of reader and writer: it is odd, and probably not very ethical, to insist to the passenger that she is the one flying the plane. What the critic always knows for sure about her readers is that they are not, at this very moment, reading the book under consideration; they are reading her review of it. These are the only readers worth writing for: one's own. I do not write to persuade the reader; I write to give her a chance to experience herself as the subject of thought, as if I am reading aloud what is already written on the inside of her own skull. I agree with the late Peter Schjeldahl that the everyday business of the critic lies in conveying

certain "heightened states of mind." Indeed, if our digital age has shown us anything, it is not that everyone's a critic; it is that actually *being* a critic is, for most people and certainly for most critics, an experience of anxiety, resentment, distress, and failure. If I have made that experience a bit more tolerable, then I have done my job.

That said, I cannot bring myself to endorse that long tradition within criticism, going back at least to the nineteenth century, which says that the critic is an artist in her own right, and not merely a handmaiden to the arts. "Criticism is really creative in the highest sense of the word," wrote Oscar Wilde in 1891. "The critic occupies the same relation to the work of art that he criticizes as the artist does to the visible world of form and color." This idea remains popular among critics today—especially, I think, professional reviewers, who resent the perennial accusation that they are barnacles and parasites—and I do think it is notionally true, in the sense that prose cannot do without style, and style will always be available for aesthetic evaluation. But the irony of this claim, which is a transparent bid to increase the prestige of criticism with the public, is that it locates the critic's worth in the formal qualities of her prose rather than her judgments. It betrays, in other words, a basic lack of confidence in criticism as a genre of assertive prose, one whose primary aim is to actually communicate actual ideas. The young Sontag was so enamored of the flight to abstraction in modernist painting that she sometimes supposed that criticism could participate in modernism itself. But this could not be: the critic always had to assume the possibility of meaning, even as the modernist realized he *didn't*. (This is what made him a modernist!)

If criticism really is an art, then it is the lowest and most concrete of all the arts. I am personally inclined to think of it as one of the higher crafts. It is, perhaps, a nobler instance of what Matthew Arnold called the "journeyman-work of literature"—dictionaries, translations, and the like. It may be beautiful; it *must* be functional. "Criticism can talk, and all the arts are dumb," wrote Northrop Frye, who happened to be an excellent writer of similes. "The axiom of criticism must be, not that the poet does not know what he is talking about, but that he cannot talk about what he knows." This is why, if it is a choice between left-wing art and left-wing criticism, I will choose the latter every time. One recalls

what Baldwin said of the protest novel: that we receive "a very definite thrill of virtue from the fact that we are reading such a book at all." The problem of much (though not all) "political" art is very often that the artist is trying too hard to be her own critic, premasticating the work so that all we have to do is swallow. Let us make this our motto instead: *Art for art's sake—and criticism for the sake of everything else*. This seems more than fair to me. I am not advocating that we push criticism to the margins in the name of respecting the artist's vast natural freedom. I am saying that art's autonomy, as a social convention, necessarily depends on the critic's responsibility to the outside world. Art need not mean anything in itself—but only because the critic works to ensure that it will mean something for *us*.

This is the supreme task of the critic: to restore the work of art to its original worldliness. The artist creates by *removing* something from the world; the critic's job is to *put it back*. I am speaking of the difference between eternity and history, leisure and work, exchange-value and use-value. The artist is free to ascend the brightest heaven of invention if he wishes—it is up to the critic to pull him down to earth again. This means that the good critics and the bad critics cannot be told apart by looking at their fingernails: they are all down in the mud, every last one of them. The genuinely good critic, I think, must know the difference between an existential crisis, whose elements may be freely swapped around without any appreciable effect on the whole, and an actual historical event, whose meaning emerges from the gritty particularity of its parts. This is only possible in practice, and never just in theory.

For who is to say if the critic is right? The rest of us, of course. The only measure of judgment is *more judgment*: that is what it means to try to live together with other human beings. It is to them—to everyone else—that the critic owes her allegiance, not to art or the state or even the abstract totality of society. And sometimes, overseas is precisely where her heart belongs.

2024

I

Hanya's Boys

By the time you finish reading *A Little Life*, you will have spent a whole book waiting for a man to kill himself. The novel, the second from the author Hanya Yanagihara, begins as a light chronicle of male friendship among four college graduates in New York City before narrowing its focus to Jude, a corporate litigator whose decades-long struggle to repress a childhood of unrelenting torments—he was raised by pedophiles in a monastery, kidnapped and prostituted in motels, molested by counselors at an orphanage, kidnapped again, tortured, raped, starved, and run over with a car—ends in his suicide.

An unlikely beach read with a gothic riptide, *A Little Life* became a massive bestseller in 2015. Critics lavished praise on the book, with one declaring it the long-awaited "great gay novel" for its unsparing approach to Jude, who falls in love with his male best friend. (An unexpected pan in *The New York Review of Books* prompted an indignant letter from Yanagihara's editor.) *A Little Life* would go on to win the Kirkus Prize and was a finalist for the National Book Award and the Man Booker Prize; it has since been adapted for the stage by the celebrated director Ivo van Hove, and last month, readers of *The New York Times* nominated it next to finalists like *Beloved* and *1984* for best book of the past 125 years.

But Yanagihara's motivations remained mysterious. The author was born in Los Angeles to a third-generation Hawaiian Japanese father and a Seoul-born Korean mother; her father, a hematologist-oncologist, moved the family around the country for work. She has lived in Manhattan since her twenties, but her heart is in Tokyo and Hawaii. (She has called the last "the closest thing that Asian Americans have to Harlem.") Her first novel, *The People in the Trees*, about a doctor who discovers im-

mortality on an island paradise, was well but quietly received in 2013. That book featured homosexuality and pedophilia; not until *A Little Life* would these be revealed as consistent preoccupations. *The People in the Trees* took Yanagihara eighteen years to write, off and on, during which time she worked as a publicist, book editor, and magazine writer. *A Little Life*, which she wrote while an editor at large at *Condé Nast Traveler*, took only eighteen months.

How to explain this novel's success? The critic Parul Sehgal recently suggested *A Little Life* as a prominent example of the "trauma plot"—fiction that uses a traumatic backstory as a shortcut to narrative. It's easy to see Jude as a "vivified DSM entry" perfectly crafted to appeal to "a world infatuated with victimhood." But Jude hates words like *abuse* and *disabled* and refuses to see a therapist for most of the novel, while Yanagihara has skeptically compared talk therapy to "scooping out your brain and placing it into someone else's cupped palms to prod at." (Jude's sickest torturer turns out to be a psychiatrist.) More compelling about *A Little Life*—and vexing and disturbing—is the author's omnipresence in the novel, not just as the "perverse intelligence" behind Jude's trauma, in the words of another critic, but as the possessive presence keeping him, against all odds, alive. *A Little Life* was rightly called a love story; what critics missed was that its author was one of the lovers.

This is Yanagihara's guiding principle: if true misery exists, then so might true love. That simple idea, childlike in its brutality, informs all her fiction. The author appears unable, or unwilling, to conceive love outside of life support; without suffering, the inherent monstrosity of love—its greed, its destructiveness—cannot be justified. This notion is inchoate in *The People in the Trees*, which features several characters kept on the brink of death and ends with a rapist's declaration of love. In *A Little Life*, it blossoms into the anguished figure of Jude and the saintlike circle of friends who adore him. In Yanagihara's new novel, *To Paradise*, which tells three tales of people fleeing one broken utopia for another, the misery principle has become airborne, passing aerosol-like from person to person while retaining its essential purpose—to allow the author to insert herself as a sinister kind of caretaker, poisoning her characters in order to nurse them lovingly back to health.

Two years after *A Little Life* was published, Yanagihara joined *T* magazine, *The New York Times*' monthly style insert, as editor. She has called the