

beyond the three-tined pitchfork!"

Wood tried to quell the criticism, insisting that the couple in the painting weren't Iowans, weren't even necessarily farmers, but simply "the kind of people I fancied should live in that house." His sister, Nan Wood, who had modeled for the painting (with Byron McKeeby, a Cedar Rapids dentist), maintained that her character was not the farmer's wife, but his daughter, "one of those terribly nice and proper girls who get their chief joy in life out of going to Christian Endeavor [a youth group]." For all their public-relations efforts, neither Wood nor his sister seemed able to convince Iowans that the painting wasn't a satire at their expense.

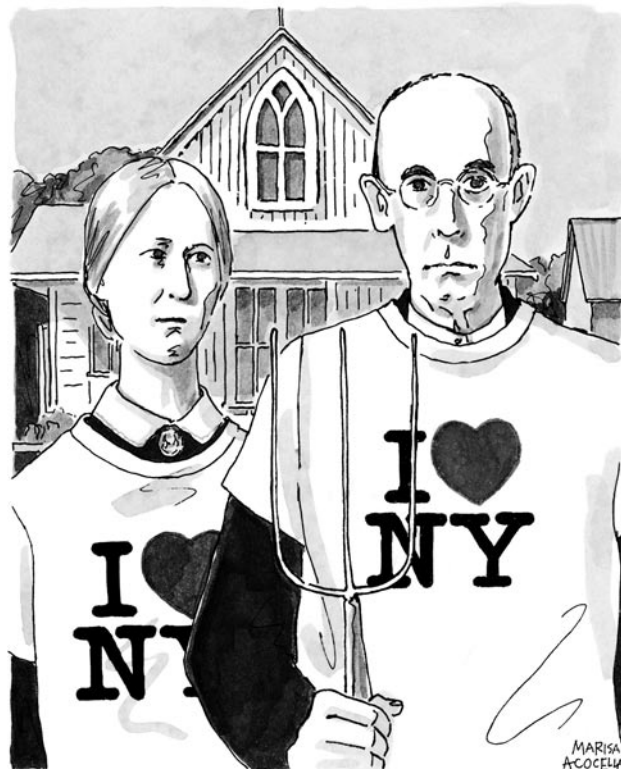
"Maybe those are self-hating Puritan repressive Midwestern people.

In the cultural climate of 1930, that's how lots of people perceived it," Biel explains. "Within a very few years, though, they were wholesome, virtuous, hardworking Middle Americans who exhibited resilience in the thick of the Depression and into World War II." Indeed, by 1935 the meaning of the image had shifted and the couple (whoever they were) became symbols of American virtue—and in 1941 *Fortune* magazine argued that the painting's "don't tread on me character" would make a good war poster. Wood's painting joined works by Woody Guthrie, James Agee and Walker Evans, Theodore Dreiser, and others who, Biel writes, began "to document the lives of 'ordinary' Americans and discover or preserve a usable national past." The painting had become a celebratory—and white—definition of the United States. (In 1942, Gordon Parks, then a photographer for a New Deal agency, posed an African-American woman with a broom and bucket in front of an American flag and called the photograph "American Gothic." It circulated much later, after Parks attained fame.)

The 1950s and '60s ushered in parodies. *American Gothic* played in cereal commercials and Saks Fifth Avenue ads, *The Music Man* and *Green Acres*, and appeared in political cartoons and visual send-ups. After September 11, a Marisa Acocella cartoon



Barbie® and Ken® dolls adopt the *American Gothic* pose in a Hallmark anniversary card (above). In a Marisa Acocella cartoon published in the *New Yorker* just after the 9/11 attacks (right), the couple's faces appear sad and sympathetic rather than stern.



in the *New Yorker* showed "I ♥ NY" T-shirts on the couple; others have used the image to make arguments about subsequent U.S. foreign policy.

These disparate interpretations of the image rely on two constants, Biel contends. The first is that elusive but quintessential "American" element. The second is its transparency. "You get into it and you get out of it very quickly—into something extra-artistic," he says, "something that has nothing to do with the painting,"

Biel started the book, he says, because the couple "nagged him." Writing their history didn't resolve the relationship. "I'm still disturbed that 'we' would want to embrace their self-righteousness, their purity, their certainty, as the essence of America, as who 'we' are at our best," he writes. Or put more simply, "The creepiness of it," he says, "is that it isn't seen as creepy."

—JINA MOORE

STEVEN BIEL E-MAIL ADDRESS:
biel@fas.harvard.edu

ROAD TRAFFIC AUGURS ILL

Driving Birds Away

IF YOU WERE a bobolink thinking about breeding, you would avoid laying your eggs within three-quarters of a mile of either side of a busy four-lane highway that runs by Thoreau's Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts, or within a quarter mile of the through street connecting Lincoln to Concord. The 30,000-plus cars, trucks, and motorcycles speeding along Route 2 each weekday, and the 8,000 to 15,000 vehicles on the through street, make noise. That noise—not exhaust stink or the sight of

speeding machines—apparently creates the broad avoidance zone on either side of the road, a wide swath of degraded habitat invisible to passing motorists, where certain birds don't go or don't breed.

Richard T.T. Forman and colleagues studied the impact of different-sized roads on the behavior of grassland birds in a 150-square-mile area along a 15-mile stretch of Route 2, just to the west-northwest of Cambridge, where Forman is professor of advanced environmental studies in the field of landscape ecology at the

Right Now

Harvard Graduate School of Design. This is a middle- to outer-suburban landscape with expanding residential areas in a landscape of forest, wetlands, ponds, streams, and open agricultural fields.

Many species of birds that thrive in open grasslands are now rare in Massachusetts, and some species—the northern harrier and the horned lark—no longer breed in any of the 84 patches of grassland in Forman's study area. Using data that a team of birdwatchers gathered over five years, he concentrated on the bobolink and the eastern meadowlark. Though still present, these two species have been declining as breeders for decades—the same decades in which vehicular traffic has increased at a rate of 3 percent a year.

A quiet road traversed by no more than 8,000 vehicles a day had no effect on the

presence or the regular breeding of his birds (see graph). But the greater traffic of a through street discouraged breeding, and the multi-lane highway drove the birds away entirely.

The edge species, our common backyard birds—the chickadee, let's say—aren't bothered by the racket of cars unless it is brutally loud; nor are egrets and herons, which one may spot in Cambridge intently fishing along the banks of the Charles River.

Forman doesn't know *why* noise bothers grassland birds, but he hypothesizes that it places them in added danger. "When there are eggs on the nest and a cat shows up, or a snake or a hawk, the adult male or female makes an alarm click or call, and the adults freeze and so are not seen," says Forman. "Those alarms are similarly critical when baby birds are fledged and on the ground. If the traffic noise is loud enough, the birds can't hear the alarms." Species with lower-pitched calls are hit the worst because traffic noise is low-pitched. (Work in



Road ecologists such as Richard Forman advocate making passages for animals, over and under highways, that can help restore connectivity. This one has just been constructed under Route 2 near Walden Pond for the use of the fox, the coyote, the mink, the fisher, the raccoon, and other inconvenienced suburbanites. It is, says Forman, the first such underpass built in Massachusetts, the first of four planned, and one of very few in North America.

COURTESY OF RICHARD FORMAN

progress reported to Forman suggests that where there is traffic noise, birds raise their voices and sing louder.)

Mitigating steps can lessen the roar: pave with a more-sound-absorbing surface; redesign tires, engines, and exhaust systems; reduce the proportion of trucks; build low, shrub-covered berms by the roadside; sink the road.

Forman is a pioneering landscape ecologist who became interested in what has recently come to be called road ecology when he realized that, although people knew a lot about the effect of nature on roads (potholes, for instance), they were largely blind to the effect of roads on nature. He is one of two lead authors of a field-establishing book, *Road Ecology: Science and Solutions*, written by 14 transportation specialists, hydrologists, and ecologists, half from academia and half from government. "It's a solution-oriented book," says Forman. "We tried to make it unavoidable by members of the transportation community."

The network of public roads in the United States is a huge structure: four million miles of it, carrying a quarter of a billion vehicles. When one considers the avoidance zones surrounding many roads, Forman points out, the road network has an environmental impact on 20 percent of the total land surface of the country. Roads also create barriers to the movement of creatures great and small, from bears to salamanders. This reduction of landscape connectivity is the second big

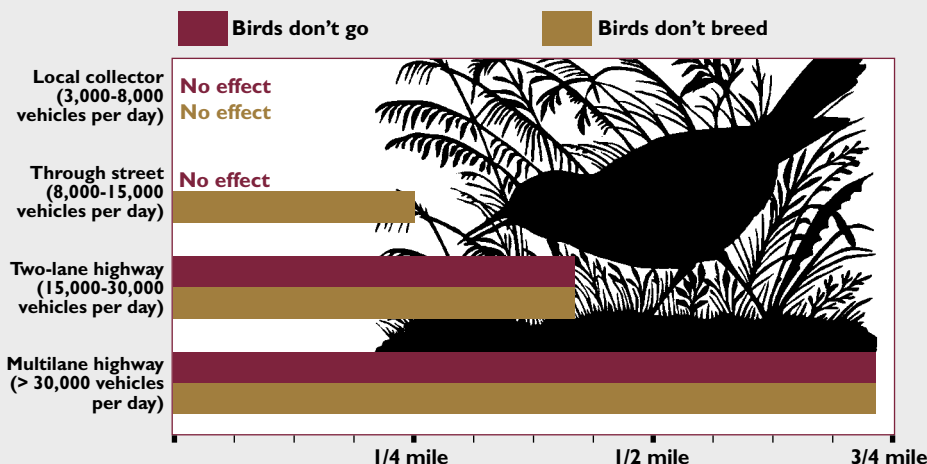
Bobolink



Eastern Meadowlark



Road traffic and grassland birds



SOURCE: R.T.T. Forman, B. Reineking, and A.M. Hersperger, "Road Traffic and Nearby Grassland Bird Patterns in a Suburbanizing Landscape," *Environmental Management* 29 (2002): 782-800; and R.T.T. Forman et al., *Road Ecology: Science and Solutions* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2003).

Graph by Stephen Anderson

Right Now

impact of the road system on wildlife. We have superimposed on our waving fields of grain and purple mountains a grid of interlocking roads that connect points for people but subdivide nature. We have built what Forman characterizes as a “megazoo.” ~CHRISTOPHER REED

RICHARD FORMAN E-MAIL ADDRESS:
rforman@gsd.harvard.edu

VACUUM VIRUS

The Nocebo Effect

IF PEOPLE expect to feel better from a pill or medical treatment, they just might, even if the pill is made of sugar or the treatment is a sham. This kind of response is so well established that researchers regularly use placebos—inert or dummy drugs, classically described as “sugar pills”—in clinical trials to help gauge how much of an active medication’s effectiveness comes from the drug itself.

But placebos have a flip side: some people claim to feel worse after taking the inert chemicals. They complain of headaches, fatigue, insomnia, stomachaches, nausea, dizziness, weakness, and other symptoms—side effects they claim weren’t there, pre-placebo. These ailments are not only real, but can be disabling, and about a quarter of those taking placebos report them, says professor of psychiatry Arthur Barsky, who studies medically unexplained symptoms.

This puzzling phenomenon, the “nocebo” effect (in Latin, *placebo* means “I shall please,” and *nocebo*, “I shall harm”), occurs in large part because people re-label existing ailments as side effects of their medication, according to Barsky. If the effect accompanies dummy drugs, then it generally does the same with active ones. Hence, nocebo effects can contaminate clinical trials, because doctors may attribute to a drug negative side effects that are actually nocebo effects.



A Special Event for

Friends of HARVARD MAGAZINE

An Afternoon of Lilacs
at the Arnold Arboretum

with Peter Del Tredici,
Senior Research Scientist

May 19, 2005

For more information, please contact
Felecia Carter at (617) 496-6694
or felecia_carter@harvard.edu
or visit our website at
www.harvardmagazine.com/friends

WIDENER

biography of a library

Wallace Stegner called its stacks “enchanted”; Barbara Tuchman called it “my Archimedes bathtub, my burning bush”; but to Thomas Wolfe it was a place of “wilderness and despair.” Matthew Battles, Coordinating Editor of the *Harvard Library Bulletin* and author of *Library: an Unquiet History*, has written a book that will appeal to all those with memories of Widener, as well as bibliophiles and lovers of libraries everywhere. With copious illustrations and a wide-ranging narrative, *Widener: Biography of a Library* is the tale of the students, scholars, and staff who give a great library its life.

cloth \$50.00 available from your bookseller
published by the Harvard College Library
distributed by Harvard University Press www.hup.harvard.edu

