Chase, Seth Meyers, and Amy Poehler. But after years behind the scenes, Jost itched to put his stand-up skills to use. The Update desk turned out to be the perfect fit, despite his initial anxieties. "I didn't feel the self-confidence I had on stage as a stand-up at SNL, and that was a hard, hard transition," he says. "I knew that I either had to try and make Weekend Update work, or I would have to go somewhere else to perform." His signature deadpan and smirk, along with his palpable chemistry with co-anchor Michael Che, have helped shape some of the segment's most successful recent moments, from roasting then-candidate Donald Trump's leaked *Access Hollywood* tape to interviewing memorable characters like Kate McKinnon's Angela Merkel.

Another screen comedy challenge that Jost regularly grapples with is specific to *SNL*, which, true to its name and trademark line, airs live. This means Jost and Che have to be strategic when joking about news items that are breaking or still raw, because there isn't a chance for do-overs. There's no shortage of hot topics, from the Harvey Weinstein sexual-abuse scandal to the Trump administration's response to Hurricane Maria's devastation of Puerto Rico. In cases like these, Jost says the trick is to pinpoint who's at fault, either for hypocrisy or abuse of power. "Those are the subjects you're trying to deal with," he explains. "You don't want to collaterally damage victims." He also says it's important to refrain from becoming pedantic or turning the segment into a moral lesson; this means considering whether a joke will land with the audience or only make it appear the show is taking a serious topic lightly. Such comic license can be a burden, Jost says, given how much material there is to choose from, "but it's also really lucky," because it's an opportunity to elevate topics that really matter. It's all about picking and choosing the right jokes for the right issues.

A Novel Take on Eternal Life

Dara Horn breathes life into classical Jewish sources.

by MARINA BOLOTNIKOVA

DARA HORN '99, Ph.D. '06, would never choose to be immortal. In her new novel, *Eternal Life*, this is the problem facing Rachel, a 2,000-year-old Jewish woman who made a bargain with the high priest at the Second Holy Temple: in exchange for the survival of her sick son, she gives up her own death. "What reasons are there for being alive?" Rachel asks herself over the centuries. None of them—to love God; to serve others; to feel joy, to build for the future—has any meaning without the constraints of a normal human lifespan. As she watches her dozens of husbands and children die before she does, her relationship with God comes to feel "sadomasochistic."

Eternal Life might be the most fantastical of Horn's books, but it also emerges most directly from her daily life. "Something I've noticed was that friends of mine with smaller families become very nostalgic as their children grow up and pass milestones," she says. "This is not at all my experience. I'm a mother of four young children, and when you have that many children, you keep going to preschool graduations over and over again. You just keep resetting the clock: 'Oh, it's the first day of kindergarten again!'"

Immortality is not a particularly original subject in literature, but stories of eternal life, she says, "are almost never about fertile women." In her novel, Hannah, a gifted biologist who is researching life extension, discovers that her grandmother Rachel has the telomeres of a teenager. While reading about advances in anti-aging for the book, Horn, who spent her childhood in suburban New Jersey and is now raising her family there, thought back to her own, repetitive domestic experience: "Who in their right mind would want to go through this again and again and again?"

Dara Horn

With Rachel's life spanning Jewish societies—continually dying yet reborn after each disaster—from the Roman Empire to modern Israel, *Eternal Life* reads as a metaphor for Jewish history. The novel also reflects the contrast between the Judaic and American relationships to time, says Horn. "In the United States we have this mythology that your past doesn't matter—that's the premise of the American experiment. The premise of Judaism is exactly the opposite, because the founding mythology of Judaism is that when God gave the Torah to the Israelites at Mount Sinai, it wasn't just that generation of Israelites that was present, but all their future descendants were present. The most important thing in your life happened thousands of years before you were born."

Horn moonlights as a professor of Jewish literature (she has held the Weinstock visiting professorship in Jewish studies at Harvard), and her novels, five in all, have been recognized for their engagement with the texts she has worked on academically,

Photograph by Michael B. Priest

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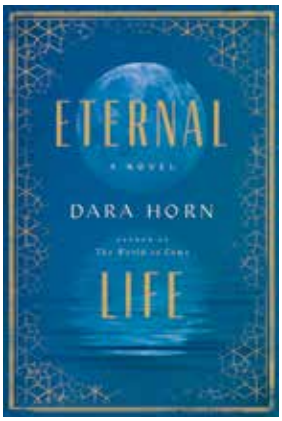
often colliding in funny ways with her modern characters. "The great thing about getting a doctorate was that no one expects you to finish it!" she says. "Every time I would get stuck on my dissertation I would procrastinate by writing my novel, and vice versa, so I never felt like I was doing any work."

Growing up, she sensed what she describes as a thinness to American Jewish literature. "In the 1980s and '90s, when you told someone you were interested in Jewish literature, they'd hand you a book by Philip Roth. This whole generation of Jewish writers from the last century were really writing more about the first-generation American experience, the experience of Judaism as a social identity. And I was like, 'This is so not what I'm looking for.'" Those authors dwelled on questions about assimilation and authenticity; Horn was uninterested in that conversation (which she calls "annoying"). Since her college and doctoral work, she has come to link this thinness to the disappearance of Hebrew and Yiddish context from contemporary American Jewish writing. "When you're reading modern Hebrew, there are references to ancient Hebrew embedded in the work—you can't avoid it. So many figuresof speech are linked to ancient sources and the commentaries on them."



Horn didn't start writing fiction until the year after college, while on a miserably lonely postgraduate fellowship at the University of Cambridge ("England just wasn't my scene," she says, laughing). She had always been terrified of the genre, until the realization that "books don't come out of nothing"—that they're in conversation with other books—gave her the confidence to make up stories of her own, to fill the gaps in modern Jewish literature.

"When I first started writing my novels, part of my motivation—in the way that you're massively ambitious when you're younger and then realize, 'Oh, that was dumb'—was to 'fix' this problem," she says. "I thought, wouldn't it be cool if we could have this in English? Contemporary stories that bring alive these ancient texts?" And so Horn's 2006 novel *The World to Come*, written while she was avoiding her doctoral work, weaves the life and stories of the Soviet Yiddish writer Der Nister into the present day. Unlike a Jonathan Safran Foer or a Michael Chabon, she fills the void of "Jewish identity" with a deep knowledge of Jewish sources.

Horn's interest in engaging imaginatively with Jewish texts extends to her personal religious practice. "We have a Passover Seder that's extremely epic, where we put up a pyramid in the living room, I wear a pharaoh costume and my husband wears a Moses costume, we have 'plague drops' where stuff falls out of the ceiling, we have a 'hail cannon' that fires Ping-Pong balls into the room, and we have a drone strike for the last plague," she enthuses. "What's important to us," she emphasizes, "is less about the ritual aspects, or that you have to believe *x*, *y*, and *z*. What's important to my family is being invested and creatively engaged with this tradition, which is of a piece with what I'm doing in my books."

She aims to make the Jewish tradition welcoming not just to a Jewish audience, but to a broader readership. "Is everyone going to understand every reference in there? No, but that's not a problem. When I'm reading Salman Rushdie, I'm not sitting here waiting for an explanation of why some character is covering her hair. I don't want to read a book with footnotes—I want to be welcomed into a world."

America's Little Giant

Revisiting the father of the Constitution in an era deeply divided by factionalism

by LINCOLN CAPLAN

Dolley Payne Todd called her soon-to-be husband, just before she met him, "the great, little Madison." She was about to turn 26, a widow who had lost her first husband and their baby son to yellow fever and had been left with their toddler son and a small amount of money. James Madison Jr. was 43, a congressman from Virginia temporarily frustrated by politics, and a gentleman by birth who would soon inherit more than 100 slaves and 4,000 acres. They met in 1794 in Philadelphia, America's temporary capital while Washington, D.C., was being built.

In his estimation, she was "5 feet, 7 inches and three quarters, well proportioned, her features pleasing though not remarkable in form except her mouth which was beautiful in shape and expression." He was three or four inches shorter, physically frail and prone to severe migraines, and deeply introverted. He asked her to marry him because, quite unexpectedly after failing in one previous attempt at courtship and becoming a bookish bachelor, he fell in love with her. She accepted his proposal because he was "the man who of all others I most admire." The marriage, she wrote, would provide "everything that is soothing."

Dolley Madison was the presidentress (as she was called after her husband was elected president in 1808) who made the role of first lady an influential and gracious position as one of the new capital's most ebullient and popular hostesses. She founded a home for orphaned young girls while she and Madison lived in the White House, and as his widow and a beloved public figure, she was made an honorary member of Congress, among other tributes, and chosen to send the first personal telegraph message.

The Three Lives of James Madison: Genius, Partisan, President, by Noah Feldman '92 (Random House, $35.)

In James Madison's public career, spanning four exceptionally productive decades, this private passion of his—what he called "the sentiments of my heart"—is the most visible evidence of the force that fueled him. As Noah Feldman, Frankfurter professor of law, writes in his excellent, authoritative, and lucid reassessment of Madison, "Dol-

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