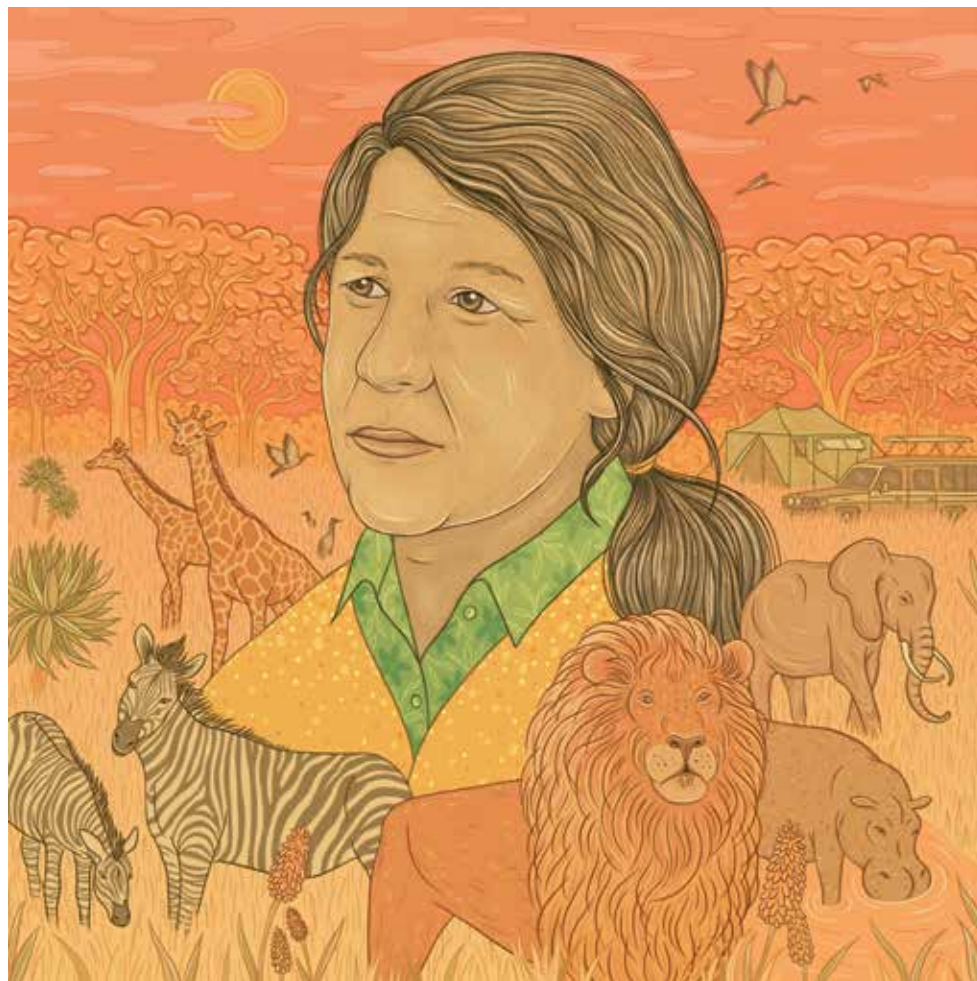


Montage

Art, books, diverse creations



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a dozen books, including a 2013 short-story collection called *Black Diamond*, a volume that prompted the critic for the UK's *The Independent* to call Ingalls "one of the most brilliant practitioners...since Poe" of American Gothic. And in 1986, the British Book Marketing Council named *Mrs. Caliban* one of the 20 best novels written after World War II by a living author. This put Ingalls side by side with John Updike '54, Litt.D. '92, Eudora Welty, and Thomas Pynchon, catapulting her to instant critical notice and acclaim.

"Her work is indelible on the brain," Daniel Handler (perhaps better known by his nom de plume, Lemony Snicket) wrote as he contemplated the task of composing an introduction for *Three Masquerades*, a 2017 Ingalls collection. "It is easy to read and hard to forget." Journalist and fellow author Dan Sheehan notes that her work infuses "quodidian life with a kind of hallucinatory menace...familiar spaces shimmer and degrade." Rivka Galchen, the short-story writer and novelist who provided the introduction for the reprint of *Mrs. Caliban*, observes, "Ingalls's vision is current and ancient at once, and we see this not only in the plots but also in the curious way she handles detail." Her style tends toward the concise, in the form of short stories and novellas.

Binstead's Safari, billed as a novel, clocks in at just over 200 pages. Stan Binstead, a ten-

Fiction from Fairy Tales

The continuing appeal of novelist Rachel Ingalls

by OLIVIA MUNK

RACHEL INGALLS'S 1983 novel *Binstead's Safari* has been reissued by New Directions this February, and that is no surprise: her cult novella *Mrs. Caliban* (1982) attracted renewed interest and a reprint in 2017 when its plot—a lonely housewife named Dorothy falls in love with Larry, a scaly green frog-man—

drew parallels to Guillermo del Toro's *The Shape of Water*, winner of four Academy Awards that year, including Best Picture.

Ingalls grew up in Cambridge and graduated from Radcliffe College in 1964. The following year she moved to the United Kingdom, where she had a great-aunt; she has lived there ever since. She has written

ured but irrelevant anthropologist, embarks on a trip to London and East Africa to explore the folklore of mortals who moonlight as lion gods—and to continue his aimless philandering. Thanks to a tidy inheritance, his neglected wife, Millie, tags along. An indulgent three weeks of sightseeing alone in London trans-

forms her; she becomes the center of attention once the couple begin their safari—and quickly enters into an affair with a man who might just be the stuff of myths.

Though there appears to be no intentional connection between del Toro's water god and Mrs. *Caliban's* Larry, the visual vivid-

ness of Ingalls's writing has long been influenced by film, theater, and the sensorial nature of everyday life. Last fall, during an email exchange via her agent, Vivien Green (the novelist was not available to meet, and does not own a phone), Ingalls summarily dismissed any notion that Harvard had influenced her writing, and denied any writing process beyond sitting down with a pen, or sometimes a pencil.

But *Binstead's Safari* was the one exception to the rule. "I wrote 40 pages of it and then left them," she stated. "I didn't go back until a long time afterwards—years afterwards." When she did begin writing again, she wrote more—much more—ending up with 800 pages. With the help of a previous agent, Richard Simon, she began to cut. In the process, she learned a few things: "People don't know what they are talking about when they refer to 'character,' and 'developing character,' and all of that. What I did was to look at what I'd done scene by scene, keep a bit of dialogue, and yank out all the boring people and speech, which came to at least 550 pages." The finished novel, at 218 pages with nary a plot hole, makes the writing adage "Kill your darlings" ring truer than ever.

Although Ingalls read a lot about East African safari culture in sources written by game preserve wardens—people "who knew what they were talking about"—but "nothing written by people who had gone as tourists" (a clear dig at Stan Binstead), she recommends reading folklore, rather than documentaries or nonfiction, alongside her novel. "Read *Grimms' Fairy Tales*, where you can find many stories involving the princess and the frog prince," she suggested, referring to the themes of anthropomorphic metamorphosis that feature prominently in both *Binstead's Safari* and *Mrs. Caliban*. "These fairy tales spread all through Europe—some of them were fireside tales told by women to young girls to warn them against grown-up life in the world outside of the family. But they go deeper than that—they are about the connection between the human and the animal worlds in which we still live." Both Dorothy and Millie blossom when their innate vibrancy, previously dampened by useless husbands, is revealed by lovers who are more than human. These themes echo the maternal warnings Ingalls referenced: dangers lie not in monsters but in men.

As Ingalls's evocation of mythology im-

O P E N B O O K

Entering a New World

has worked as a psychologist at Children's Hospital Boston for 25 years, and in outpatient clinics at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, distilling what she has learned in *When Your Child Is Sick: A Guide to Navigating the Practical and Emotional Challenges of Caring for a Child Who Is Very Ill* (TarcherPerigee, \$16 paper). She proves to be the expert friend and advocate everyone needs: informative, steady, sympathetic, and—if treatment fails—unflinching at the prospect of loss. From the introduction, and then one of the book's embedded examples—a productively distracting story:

I often marveled at the parents' strength as their child's treatments progressed and at the children's resilience as they flourished, despite their illness. I learned how different children are and that what helps one child might not help another. I appreciated the younger children who sometimes protested loudest at what they were expected to endure, and I worked with their parents to discover which simple tools and interventions could transform their understandable outrage and opposition into cooperation, mastery, and pride. I came to admire the adolescents whose lives were so dramatically upset by their illness and treatments and wondered at the range of their responses. I also came to respect the strength and courage of parents.

* * *

The mother of a highly imaginative six-year-old boy named Willie who, she remembered, "fought every medical procedure tooth and nail" became expert at using interactive storytelling with her son during his spinal taps. She began a story and asked Willie questions as the story progressed. One story I remember her telling was how Willie had just learned to jump into the swimming pool holding his

legs so he made a cannonball (the position in which he was now curled up...). She wondered if Willie could see himself running to the side of the pool. Willie nodded. "Are you ready to take the big jump?" "Yes." "I hope you remember to hold your nose as well as your knees as you jump way, way up into the air. And now what's happening?" "I made a giant, huge, enormous splash [big grin], everybody got wet [bigger grin]." While this was going on, the doctor was numbing the area on his back where the spinal tap would be done and beginning the insertion of the needle, which Willie hardly seemed to notice.



SASI/ISTOCK

plies, she looks to stories in all forms to inspire her work, though she is cautious about divulging details. “A lot of what other people do in their ‘reading time’ I have spent on entertainment, particularly theater, ballet, and opera,” she explained. Drawn to “great stories in a different form,” she admires playwrights like Shakespeare and Ibsen, but denied any notion that either theater or poetry—another love—has significantly shaped her authorial sensibilities.

What advice, if any, would she give writers? “Just look around you. Notice how the world is, how it should be, how it isn’t. Have some friends, have a family. All of those can go into a book. Above all, read a lot.” She also recommended attending live art and observ-

ing its process of storytelling: “Go to literary sources which are not books, such as film and theater, and anything else which deals with the same themes as books.”

Ingalls cited Isak Dinesen’s *Out of Africa* as a possible point of reference for the setting of *Binstead’s Safari*. And yet, “I can’t really talk about how I see things, because when I sit down to write, I don’t actually see at all—it just comes out, and I can’t explain that, or talk about it, really.” It is her works that do the explaining—their frank assertion that folklore and mythology are, as Ingalls said, “the basic stories of our lives,” that rebirth and transformation are possible even in death, and that the least obvious answer is usually the inevitable one.

Remaking the Grid

Paolo Pasco and the art of making crosswords

by OSET BABÜR

PAOLO PASCO '23 was still a high-school freshman when he learned that one of his crossword puzzles had been accepted for publication by *The New York Times*. “I was just getting out of gym class,” he recalls, “and I saw the subject line ‘crossword yes’ from the *Times* in my inbox. And then, well, I had to go to French class.”

Pasco is now halfway through his freshman year in the College and considering a concentration in computer science. He has had 12 puzzles published in the *Times*, and several others in *The Wall Street Journal*, BuzzFeed, and the crossword-specific *American Values Club*. He also publishes puzzles regularly on his own blog, *Grids These Days*.

His fascination began early. As a child,

he picked up a book of sudoku puzzles; after finishing it, he found himself working through the Dell Magazine puzzle books sold in drugstores. In eighth grade, he got a book of *New York Times* crossword editor Will Shortz’s favorite puzzles and solved them. Crosswords are “more than a straight-up boring trivia-recall thing that people expect,” he says. By the end of middle school, Pasco was building his own crosswords and collaborating with other members of the puzzle community through websites like Reddit, Twitter, and Cruciverb, an online forum where puzzle-lovers trade tips and collaborate. These puzzle forums “mostly flare up when the *New York Times* crossword comes out, and people discuss it,” he explains. “You wouldn’t think it exists until you looked into it, but these tiny subcultures have these entire threads. It’s wild.”

Online communities meet in person at events like the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament or Lollapuzzoola. At Lollapuzzoola, moderators push competitors to use the crossword format in unexpected ways; Pasco describes a challenge modeled after the game “Red Light, Green Light,” as well as crossword grids shaped like stop signs or split across two sides of a sheet of paper. Such quirkiness is what Pasco loves

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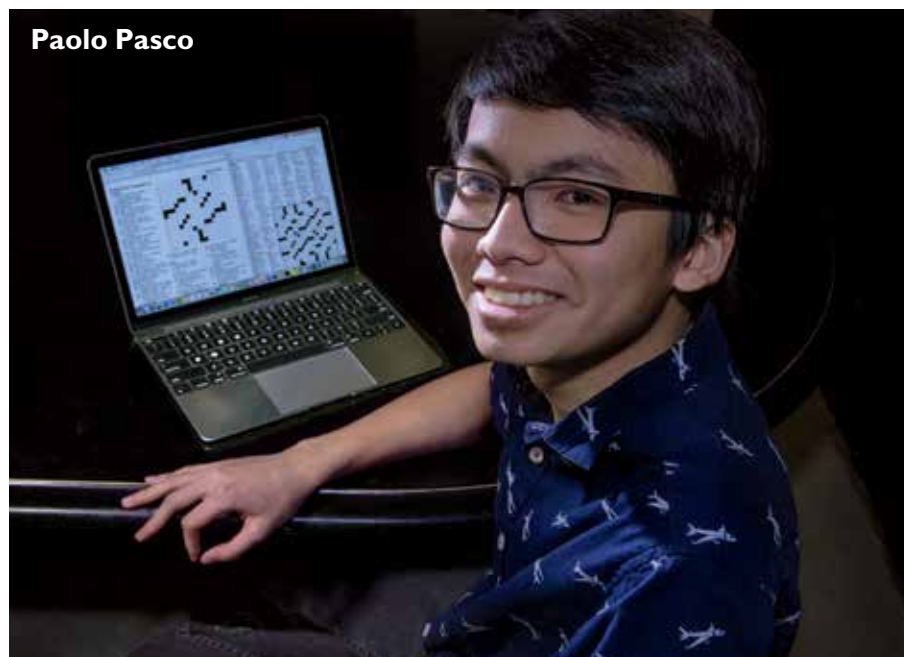
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Paolo Pasco