

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

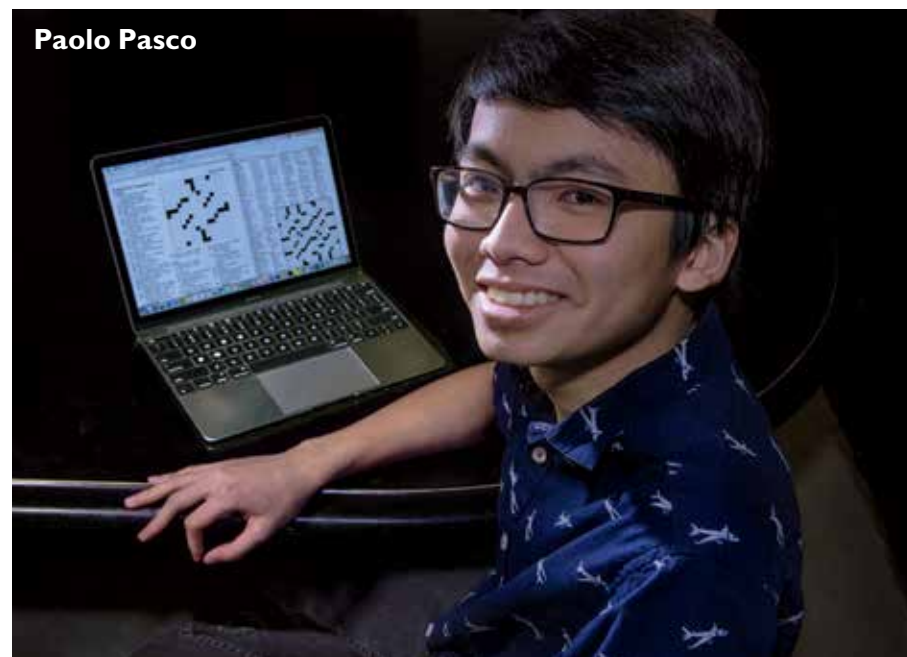
PAOLO PASCO '23 was still a high-school freshman when he learned that one of his crossword puzzles had been accepted for publication by *The New York Times*. “I was just getting out of gym class,” he recalls, “and I saw the subject line ‘crossword yes’ from the *Times* in my inbox. And then, well, I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



Paolo Pasco

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best about puzzle-making, and it drives his own approach: “I want to expand the audience,” he says.

A Filipino American who grew up in San Diego, he doesn't fit the typical profile for crossword-puzzle enthusiasts: the traditional target audience is mostly older and whiter. But he and others of his generation want to diversify the puzzle world. He recalls building crosswords for BuzzFeed in 2015—“and that was great, because I could throw [*Guardians of the Galaxy* star] ‘Chris Pratt’ in, and no one would care.” Pasco has also worked answers like “emotional labor,” “imposter syndrome,” and “money diary” into his puzzles, building his voice as a puzzle-maker for younger readers plugged into popular culture: “I take something that's generally seen as very stuffy, high-class,

and artsy, I throw a bunch of Kardashian references and memes into it, and kind of let the culture wars happen.”

At any given time during the school year, Pasco is working on at least one puzzle. Depending on how heavy his course load feels, the process can take between one day and one week. He uses a notebook to hash out theme ideas, but also compiles word lists in the notes section on his iPhone. “It's definitely not an intentional research process,” he explains. “A puzzle is formed from clues built up over time.” He tries to avoid using answers that are too “crosswordy,” words rarely used by people who don't solve (and build) crossword puzzles: “épée,” which has many vowels, is a good example. Once he has developed the clues, Pasco uses an iPhone app called Crossfire that helps build grids and suggests shorter

“filler words” that don't necessarily pertain to the puzzle's theme. At the end of the construction process, he likes to have a tester from the online community complete his crossword to make sure the difficulty level is reasonable, and the clues are solvable.

Creating clues that outlast the current moment is another challenge, at least in designing puzzles for the *Times*. Submissions must be made by mail, and there is a four-to-six-week wait to hear back. Plus, Will Shortz prefers evergreen crosswords that won't go stale if he decides to include them in future puzzle books. “Really early on,” Pasco says, “I sent [Shortz] one with the word ‘sharknado,’ and he rejected it because he



Visit harvardmag.com to test your puzzle prowess on a crossword Paolo Pasco crafted for Harvard Magazine readers.

O P E N B O O K

An Empiricist on Art

Prisoners rehearse and perform *The Tempest* behind walls. People reportedly queued on the New York docks in 1841 awaiting the ship bearing the final chapter of Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop* to find out Little Nell's fate. A granddaughter churns out “abstract impressionist” paintings. What do these examples—arrayed by Boston College psychology professor Ellen Winner '69, Ph.D. '78, RI '99—have in common, and how do they function? Those are the subjects of her simply, but provocatively, titled *How Art Works: A Psychological Exploration* (Oxford, \$29.95). It moves beyond philosophy and aesthetics to social science, to “unpack what art does to us—how we experience art.” Continuing beyond her introductory list:

These strange behaviors we call art are as old as humans. As early as *Homo sapiens*, and long before there was science, there was art. Archeologists have found ochre clay incised with decoration from 99,000 years ago, musical instruments from over 35,000 years ago, and masterful figurative paintings on the Chauvet cave walls from 30,000 years ago. There has never been a culture without one or more forms of art—though not all cultures have had a word for art. Anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss placed art above science, describing the work of the painter, poet, and composer as well as the myths and symbols of prim-

itive humans as “if not as a superior form of knowledge, at any rate as the most fundamental form of knowledge, and the only one that we all have in common; knowledge in the scientific sense is merely the sharpened edge of this other knowledge.” In modern, literate societies, there is no end to wondering about “art” and “the arts.” What makes something art? Do two-year-old Olivia's paintings count? If I say that *Harry Potter* is a greater novel than *War and Peace*, is this just a subjective opinion, or could I be proven wrong? Are the primitive-looking paintings of Jean-Michel Basquiat that sell for millions something any child could have

made? If a revered painting turns out to be a forgery, does it become less good? Does the sorrow we feel when we read about the death of Little Nell have the same quality as the sorrow we feel when someone we know dies? Did reading about Little Nell make us better, more empathetic people? Do we make our children smarter by enrolling them in music lessons?...

Over the centuries, philosophers have tried (and failed) to define art. Psychologists (perhaps wisely) ask a somewhat different question: not “what is it,” but rather what do people think it is. And this is an empirical question.



didn't feel like it had staying power." Many younger puzzle-solvers, on the other hand, want their crosswords to reflect the movies, music, and news they follow, and sites like *American Values Club*, a reincarnation of *The Onion*'s now-defunct crossword feature, have cropped up to satisfy them.

That divergence hints at a larger tension in the crossword world, as a younger, more ethnically diverse indie scene emerges. "The norm" in many crosswords, Pasco says, "is lots of *Lord of the Rings* clues, lots of baseball clues, and lots of things that [older white men] would be expected to know. It's really homogeneous." He's especially excited about organizations like The Inkubator, which publishes bimonthly crossword puzzles created by women. In more traditional crosswords, he says, "there are always these references to old opera stars or golf, and those are somehow okay, but if you include one reference to a rapper, everyone's all up in arms." He intends to continue to raise consciousness about different parts of culture through his own puzzles. "When you clue the same words in the same ways, it kind of reinforces what parts of culture are worth knowing about."

Funny Because It's True

Showrunner David Mandel guides the final season of Veep—and finds himself politicized.

by S.I. ROSENBAUM

FOR DAVID MANDEL '92, filming the final season of HBO's political comedy *Veep* was a race against reality. For seven seasons—the last four with Mandel at the helm as showrunner—*Veep* had made its name as a jet-black satire, sending up the foibles of American government by painting its characters as just slightly more craven and corrupt, racist and ruthless, than real-life Beltway politicians.

Then in 2016, Donald Trump became president-elect, and, Mandel says, "All the rules changed." Suddenly, he and the show's writers had to worry about accidentally predicting—or being one-upped by—the actions of a real-world White House that made their fictional version look tame.

"If you look back at *Veep*, things that seem

outrageous or scandalous within the show—well, either they seem mild now, or they've come to pass," Mandel said recently on the phone from California. "We did an entire [story line] about the president accidentally tweeting something and blaming the Chinese" in a previous season, he added, "and now it seems we had a time machine."

If anyone could handle the increasing absurdity in American politics, though, it's probably Mandel: he'd honed his satirical edge as a writer for *Saturday Night Live*, *Seinfeld*, and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, where he was also a director and an executive producer. And his background in merging politics and humor runs deep. As an undergraduate, he balanced a course load as a government concentrator with a workload at the *Lampoon*.

ALAN BRINKLEY

A Life in History



edited by
DAVID GREENBERG, MOSHIK TEMKIN,
and MASON B. WILLIAMS

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