

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

Alan Brinkley

A Life in History

DAVID GREENBERG, MOSHIK TEMKIN,
and MASON B. WILLIAMS, eds.

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Since 2016, says showrunner David Mandel, shown here with *Veep* stars Julia Louis-Dreyfus and Tony Hale (opposite), it has become increasingly difficult for the show to outrun reality.

ing political satire at *Saturday Night Live*. Though he says he wasn't "the best government major," he brought with him the fascination with politics and history that had led him to choose that field of study. Working on *Veep* was a return to these roots, making Mandel a perfect fit to take over the reins from creator Armando Iannucci.

But a show like *Veep* is also technically science fiction—like *The Handmaid's Tale* or *The Man in the High Castle*, it takes place on some alternate timeline, where political history has unfolded differently than in the real world. *Veep*'s universe never had a President Barack Obama (or a President Trump).

Here too, though, Mandel is in his element: a lifelong science-fiction and comic book fan, he keeps a separate apartment at home in Los Angeles just for his nerd memorabilia (his collection includes original artwork by comics greats such as Steve Dit-

With fellow Winthrop House residents Jeff Schaffer '91 and Alec Berg '91, he parlayed his *Lampoon* work into a summer job writing for Comedy Central, where he met Al Franken '73—and by graduation day, Franken (who would, of course, go on to have his own ca-

reer in politics; see "Al Franken: You Can Call Me Senator," March-April 2012, page 31) had offered him a made-to-order job: covering the presidential election with Comedy Central's *InDecision* '92.

From there, Mandel found himself writ-

Off the Shelf

Recent books with Harvard connections

The City-State of Boston: The Rise and Fall of an Atlantic Power, 1630-1865, by Mark Peterson '83, Ph.D. '93 (Princeton, \$39.95). An immense, fresh history of the "city upon a hill" conceives of the place as an independent city-state that was absorbed into the new country that arose around it. Boston's current moment—at once privileged and peculiar—suggests the value of considering its distinctive past in light of powerful, imaginative scholarship, in the deft hands of the author, now at Yale.

Unruly Waters, by Sunil Amrith, Mehra Family professor of South Asian studies (Basic, \$35). Another fresh history, this one on a continental scale, offers possibly grave warnings for the present. The subtitle, "How rains, rivers, coasts, and seas have shaped Asia's history," may remind readers of earlier hydrological approaches to understanding the governance of the most populous part of Earth. Now, says

Amrith (Harvard Portrait, September-October 2017, page 19), a rush to dam the Himalayas and slake urban thirsts portends environmental tragedy and conflict.

A Lot of People Are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy, by Russel Muirhead and Nancy L. Rosenblum (Princeton, \$26.95). What happens to democratic discourse when conspiracy theories are unanchored to theory or the presentation of alleged fact: when they become mere speech acts, boldly amplified? The result is disorienting and dangerous, warn Muirhead, now at Dartmouth, and Rosenblum, whose last work before she assumed research-professor status at Harvard featured in "The Democracy of Everyday Life" (September-October 2016, page 50).

First: An Intimate Portrait of the First Woman Supreme Court Justice, by Evan Thomas '73 (Random House, \$30). The indefatigable author presents *another* in a series of fluidly written, lead-erly biographies—this time, of Sandra Day O'Connor (2009 Radcliffe Institute medal-

ist), "the most powerful...justice of her time." Her nomination, by Ronald Reagan in 1981, and service (through 2006), seem of an era and a spirit a full millennium, and not just a few decades, ago.

The Shape of a Life, by Shing-Tung Yau, Graustein professor of mathematics and professor of physics, with Steve Nadis (Yale, \$28). A personal memoir by the acclaimed geometer, winner of the Fields Medal and National Medal of Science, Crafoord Prize, etc. Though the result is mostly accessible, the subtitle ("One mathematician's search for the universe's hidden geometry") is fair warning of the underlying, mind-worrying problems in string theory, black holes, and other challenges.

Permanent Revolution: The Reformation and the Illiberal Roots of Liberalism, by James Simpson, Loker professor of English (Harvard, \$35). A scholar of late medieval and early modern European literature teases out how the evangelical English Reformation (intolerant, stridently literal, immersed in predestination) touched off a culture of permanent revolution and came to underlie liberalism (free

A show like *Veep* is technically science fiction—it takes place on some alternate timeline....

ko and Gil Kane, as well as Storm Trooper costumes from the original *Star Wars*). His most famous episode on *Seinfeld* drew on his innate nerdiness, as Jerry et al. run into “Bizarro” versions of themselves—their inverse counterparts. (In old *Superman* comics, Bizarro World was a cube-shaped planet where everything is backwards and Superman is evil.)

Veep’s characters are meant to be a dark mirror: Bizarro counterparts to reality. Viewers who followed the exploits of fictional career-politician Selina Meyer, played with profane gusto by Julia Louis-Dreyfus, could depend on her to be just a little less competent and a little more loathsome than her real-world analogs. But as the real world grew more and more surreal, it became harder to maintain that duality.

“One of the reasons we made the deci-

sion to end the show,” Mandel explained, “is just this new reality.” At times, he said, it felt as if they were competing against a different set of writers working on a show called *Trump*. And even though *Veep* had always been strictly nonpartisan, Mandel found himself becoming less and less so in life. “I’ve always been a political person,” he said. “But Trump has made me more political and more activist...all of a sudden I’m donating to attorney-general campaigns in states I’ve never been to.”

Now that *Veep* has shot its last episode—its final season is scheduled to begin airing on March 31—Mandel isn’t sure what his next project will be. In the meantime, he said, dealing with reality will take plenty



COLLEEN HAYES/BO

of his concentration. “I wish we were in an alternate timeline,” he said. “I wish the reason for Trump in the White House could be blamed on some errant time traveler who stepped on the wrong butterfly. I wish we could go back and somehow fix the timeline. But in some ways, that is naive and wishful thinking. We made this mess and we have to fix it.”

will, liberty of conscience, and so on). Academic, but approachable.

Separate: The Story of Plessy v. Ferguson, and America’s Journey from Slavery to Segregation, by Steve Luxenberg ’74 (Norton, \$35). Most writers don’t make a living dwelling on moments of infamy and shame, so it took a veteran journalist to discover an obvious, important narrative: the precedents and people who led the Supreme Court, in 1896, to bless a “separate but equal,” segregated society—for which the dues are still being paid.

The Club: Johnson, Boswell, and the Friends Who Shaped an Age, by Leo Damrosch, Bernbaum professor of literature emeritus (Yale, \$30). The acclaimed biographer of Swift, Blake, Rousseau, and others now delivers a group portrait of the extraordinary “Club” revolving around a circle of astonishingly brilliant late-eighteenth-century friends (also: Gibbon, Adam Smith, Burke...) whose work, lives, and ideas resonate still.

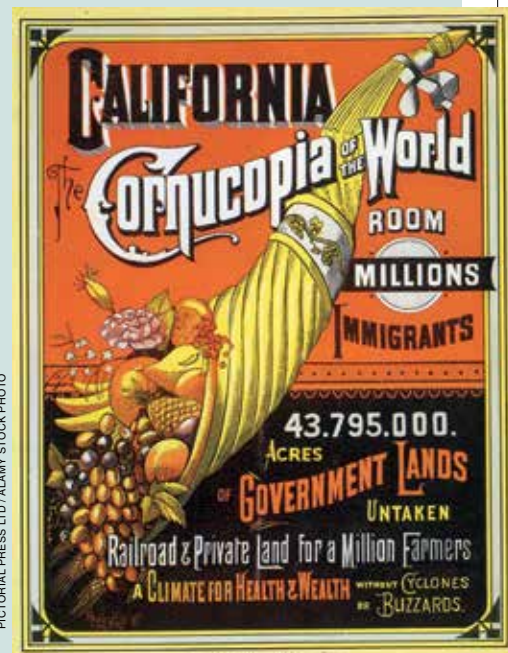
The Poems of T. S. Eliot: Collected and Uncollected Poems, edited by

Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, two volumes, paperback, \$30 and \$25). A door-stopping compendium, with staggeringly voluminous textual history and commentary, justified by the staying power of the poetry by Eliot, A.B. 1910, Litt.D. ’47. For those who really want to know and cherish their T.S.E.

Two-Buck Chuck and the Marlboro Man, by Frank Bergon, Ph.D. ’73 (University of Nevada, \$24.95). A novelist and writer on the American West escorts readers from elsewhere through the actuality and imagery of California’s San Joaquin Valley (with its very diverse population) amid change, cultural and otherwise.

Immigration and Democracy, by Sarah Song ’96 (Oxford, \$34.95). Speaking of California and diverse populations, a Berkeley professor of law and political science examines the philosophical and moral vocabulary for discussing the movement of peoples that gets beyond, and beneath, heated, but facile, rhetoric about “open” or “closed” bor-

ders. “We may not reach agreement on a single solution to the challenges of immigration,” Song writes, “but...we can identify the basic principles that an acceptable solution must satisfy.” The day for doing so seems a long way off—but when it comes, it will be well to have this kind of disciplined thinking available.



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